**Blood, Spirit, Hatred**

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could, BAMF Women, Because they don't have a choice, Post-Fire Emblem Fates: Conquest, Explicit Language, Cultural Differences, Racism, Spot all the pop culture references and win a prize! (OK not really), response fic, Cynical take on Conquest by a cynical history nerd, Mental Health Issues, Character Study, Sociocultural Study, Fictional Religion & Theology, Original Mythology, Religious Conflict, Stealth Crossover, Female Protagonist, Mutual Pining, Not Actually Unrequited Love, Master/Servant, Internal Conflict, Romantic Friendship, Eventual Romance, Coming of Age, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Shyness, Identity Issues, Personal Growth, Sexuality Crisis, Sexual Tension, Sexual Confusion, Forgiveness, King Leon | Leo, Seven Deadly Sins, Paranoia, Unhealthy Relationships, Unhealthy Coping Mechanisms, Sex Addiction, Obsessive Behavior, Demonic Possession, It's more heavy influence or some weird symbiosis on a couple of levels, Domestic Violence, Male Antagonist, Canon Bisexual Character, Female Antagonist, Self-Doubt, Regret, Bisexual Female Character(s), Established Relationship, Relationship Issues, Trust Issues, Semi-Required Lust, Temptation, Conflict of Interests, Jealousy, Isolation, Self-Esteem Issues, Depression, Power Dynamics, Suicidal Thoughts, Heroes to Villains, Dimension Travel, Pre-Canon, Irony, Friends to Enemies, Betrayal, Insanity, Dysfunctional Family, Denial, Psychological Drama, Coping, Love Triangles, Survivor Guilt, Cynicism, Power Imbalance, Uneasy Allies, Scheming, Hatred, Treachery, Bad Advice, Gaslighting, Manipulative Relationship, Mentor/Protégé, Misogyny, Murder, Abuse of Authority, Mass Death, Rape, Child Murder, Brainwashing, Psychological Torture, Non-Consensual Drug Use, Non-Consensual Violence, Loss of Control

Stats:
Published: 2017-01-08 Updated: 2019-06-22 Chapters: 26/? Words: 150566

Blood, Spirit, Hatred

by Sharyrazade

Summary

"Listen, I don't care who you are or what your angle is! The bastards murdered Lord Ryoma, Lady Hinoka, and Lord Takumi, but they will NOT take her from me! Hoshido needs her! I need her!"

Conquest AU: In the darkest hour of her liege, country, and herself, Hana's grief and rage lead her to call upon a mysterious, otherworldly force for the power to protect a grief-stricken Sakura from the victorious Nohrian army, becoming renowned for her daring and courage while making herself a marked woman in the eye of the world's self-proclaimed rulers.
Meanwhile, a prince's grief and despair turn into a legendary lust for power and a princess struggles to find wisdom- and herself in the face of losing nearly everything save her dearest friend.

How will this fated trio impact this conflict that has ensnared the world? And what of the conflicts of the past? And those of other worlds even?

Notes

....Why oh, why did I write this? Oh, wait, I know, because Sakura suffered so much during that route (All of my "Fuck you, Hans" take them!) and Rae_chan's absolutely heartrending AU, this is basically self-medication. Is it a worse world than if my girl Hana just left well enough alone? Maybe, maybe not, but like I have as one of the tags, be aware that this is NOT happy shit in the least which a good third of you are going to hate me for, but nonetheless...

BTW, since I intend this to feel as much like a novelization of an FE game in general, I made a soundtrack/playlist and an * or a series thereof indicates an (entirely optional) cue to start/end a track, for example:

*Coming Demise (FE: Fates OST)

- Inspired by Fallen Angel by Rae_chan
- Inspired by A Brighter Dark by DeathDealer_Inc2
In the void of Hana's mind, her thoughts swam and thrashed like so many agitated and equally-famished piranhas. Ever since the debacle at Fort Jinya, she and her fellow retainer Subaki had been prisoners of the victorious Nohrian army, they and the late Queen Mikoto's retainer Yukimura surviving despite the Nohrians' reneged-upon promise to spare the remaining defenders. To add insult to injury, after taking the Great Wall of Suzanoh and discovering Prince Takumi's body, some of the Nohrian soldiers dragged the princess and her retainers to gawk at the prince's body, taunting Sakura until she broke into tears and fled into the nearby woods and placed his body towards the capital as a warning to the Hoshidans. And they have the gall to call us "savages" and heathens!"

To the surprise of both the princess' retainers, they had been treated humanely, if not well during their captivity. However, the fact that their accommodations had been moved to the dungeons of Castle Shirasagi seemed to take away some of this pretense of civility; after all, they had executed Yukimura just last night for "backtalk" using a horrific Nohrian device to slowly break his neck and spine and the increasingly nasty taunts by the guards as to the Hoshidans' ultimate fate had stoked Hana's anger further and further, but Subaki attempted to take the jabs in stride.

"Come now, Hana." he insisted. "It could always be worse."

"No it couldn't, you idiot!" snapped Hana. "Lady Sakura is still missing, these Nohrian bastards are marauding about, and gods only know what they're going to do with us!"

"Hey, pretty boy." insisted one of the guards on duty, unlocking the cell. "Our commander wants to talk to you for a bit."

"See, Hana. I'm sure all we need do is establish a rapport with them and-"

The second guard struck the pegasus knight in the abdomen with the handle of his axe. "Quit your yammering and save it for the boss!" he scolded.

Whatever they were discussing, Hana had scarcely little recollection of it due to one strangely intrusive voice, not her own or anyone with whom she was familiar, but an extremely persistent one none the less. Ever since Sakura's disappearance, she had heard said voice, more of a disgruntled mumbling than anything else fairly consistently, becoming clearer and clearer. Hana had attributed it either to despair or her increasingly questioning her own sanity, but for the first time, it had become distinguishable as a distinct sound, communicating words and phrases to her.

"My child, what ails you so?" inquired the mystery figure, his intended fatherly tone barely masking the naked contempt in his voice. "Is it the despair and destruction which surrounds you?"

"What do you care?" Hana muttered bitterly, turning over on her cot. "You don't know me."

"But I do know that pain you feel. I know it quite well. That sting of betrayal, that pain of the loss of all one calls dear, the murderous folly of your kin- the human race. Tell, me girl: If this Sakura was endangered, what would you do to protect her?"

"Wait, what do you know? Is Lady Sakura in trouble?!"
Hana shot upright, desperately awaiting more news of her liege.

"It seems the Nohrians intend to do away with Hoshido's royals after all - to the last man, woman, and child." droned the voice. "After all, what better way to crush a people's spirit and will to resist once and for all but to deny them a symbol around which to rally?"

"No, no, NO!" cried Hana in anguish. "Listen, I don't care who you are or what your angle is! The bastards murdered Lord Ryoma, Lady Hinoka, and Lord Takumi, but they will NOT take her from me! Hoshido needs her! I need her!"

"And you should not doubt their intentions for one second. The wielder - or should I say, usurper of, the Yato and her merry band are in the throne room right now, threatening to finish the job! And look at what their 'conversations' with your fellow retainer look like!"

Pressing herself against the bars, Hana cried out at the sight of the five Nohrian guards kicking and spitting on Subaki, their commander shooing them back slightly before bringing down his axe on the prisoner's neck.

"Hey look!" he shouted, kicking Subaki's lifeless body. "A good savage!"

Already a woman on the edge, this act and the amused reaction by the guards saw Hana's anger explode, culminating in an upset which would go down in infamy in Nohrian military history.

"What do I have to do?" asked Hana resolutely. "What do you need me to do to protect Lady Sakura?"

"My smiths have already forged you one of the finest blades in all the worlds." replied the figure with a not-insignificant hint of satisfaction. "All you must do is use the fear, the anger, and the hatred of their empire's victims along with your own."

After the guards had finished having their laugh from Subaki's murder, their commander noticed something amiss; an odd, purple light emanating from one of the prisoner's cells.

"What the hell is that?" the commander asked. "Muller, go check it out."

Reluctantly following his superior's order, the pikeman inched towards the cell. Just as the occupant came into his sight, he gave a quick yelp of terror before all hell broke loose in the dungeons. The cell exploding in a sickly purple haze, Hana sprung forth, pinning Muller to the nearby wall while deftly seizing one of the knives on his belt, driving the blade several times into his torso faster than any of his comrades could have ever thought possible. Scarcely looking at the guard approaching to her right, Hana hurled another of the blades at the Nohrian's face, the knife making contact with his throat, causing him to suffocate on his own blood and the horrible purple smoke emanating from the wound.

"W-what are you idiots waiting for!?!" squeaked the commander, a far cry from his earlier bravado.
"K-kill her!"

The two pikemen advancing on the swordswoman as if going to their own execution, from a heretofore absent scabbard, Hana, a faint red gleam in her right eye, unsheathed a regal, unnaturally brilliant blade, faint, black wisps of smoke trailing off the edge. With one fine, smooth motion, Hana swept through the two pikemen, both of them spending the last milliseconds of their life futilely nursing several deep cuts across their bodies.

Now less than half a meter from the axeman, the commander feebly raised his weapon in a vain attempt to defend himself. To his surprise, Hana snatched the weapon from his hand, effortlessly snapping the handle over her knee before delivering a punch which sent the Nohrian to the ground.

"Wh-what are you doing!?!" he plead, futilely backing away. "Stop it, you crazy little bitch! Stop!"

Summoning an increasingly powerful spire of that sickly, purple flame from her blade, Hana, from the pleas to his screams of terror and pain, ignored the guard commander, directing the flame onto the Nohrian; several seconds later, literally the only remaining trace of the man's presence, let alone existence, was a considerable scorch mark where he once sat.

True, Hana got a perverse sort of pleasure from her handiwork this time, but the presence of her fellow retainer's defiled remains and the danger in which her beloved liege found herself dampened this considerably.

"I'll be back for you, you smug, lovable idiot." Hana promised, sheathing her blade for the time being. "But Lady Sakura is in danger."
Chapter Summary

The victorious Nohrian army have secured Castle Shirasagi save for the throne room and one rebellious, grief-stricken princess. While Nohrian princess Corinne and her allies expect a difficult battle, what attacked them as they closed in on Sakura was not so much an enemy as a force of nature...

Chapter Notes

This...didn't feel good to write. Nonetheless, it is the pivotal event here, so it is really important. BTW, if this sounds implausible from a gameplay perspective, just picture Hana's inventory/skill set as such:

- Lv. 40
  with
- a Regal Blade (from FE7; same used by the Lloyd morph)
- Draconic Hex
- Dragonskin
- Duelist's Blow
- Astra
- Swordfaire
- Defensetaker
  and
- With S-support levels of bonuses with Sakura

Apart from the "mysterious voice" granted skills, that's actually pretty close to how I play Hana in game.

*End of All - Land (FE14 OST)*

**Advent: One Winged Angel (FFVII: Advent Children OST) (The whole thing syncs up pretty well TBH)**

***Princess Zelda's Rescue [Orchestrated] (The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past OST)***

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stalking the castle's ruins, single-minded in her purpose, Hana, while angrier than she had ever been or would be in her life, could still think somewhat clearly about her situation. Realizing full well that the castle armory would have been ransacked by this point, Hana still possessed the foresight to rest by the armory and collect a few of the remaining staves. The Nohrian guards assigned to the corridors however, were not allowed to get terribly comfortable. What appeared a human-sized-slash-shaped wisp of that horrible purple flame dashing through the corridors faster than the human eye could reasonably perceive, inflicting either horrible wounds with her blade or those same sickly
flames. The Hoshidan dying had largely already either been disposed of or about to have been dealt with as such. However, the survivors among the steadily climbing Nohrian casualties would later swear than the thing which had attacked them was not and could not have been human.

*Closing in on the Hoshidan princess' position with her vanguard having fought off wave upon wave of the translucent enemies, Corinne could see the end of her difficult, bloody path not far ahead. This has to be the end, she thought tiredly, narrowly dodging one of the ghostly arrows sent flying at her head.

"All I ever wanted...was my big sister back!" shouted the princess, those same purple flames emanating from her person and weapon. "Instead...you destroyed my family...you destroyed my country....for what? FOR WHAT?!"

"Hold on, Sakura." said Corrine, eyes downcast. "I'll set your spirit free..."

"Corrine, why do you hesitate!?!" Prince Xander shouted over the general chaos and his right-hand woman cleaving through two of the phantoms with her axe. "Move! We have to end this!"

Leaping to her side to avoid another arrow, Corrine complied with the request, the blade Siegfried sending a beam of pure darkness at Sakura. As the beam closed in at three meters or so, something most unexpected happened. A wall of the purple flame shot up immediately in the beam's path, the projectile dissolving harmlessly into the fire. They had all seen these ghostly waters behave unnaturally, but pillars of flame was something new. Prince Leo, tactician extraordinaire, was the first to notice something unwelcome from the ruined rafters; a new combatant possibly?*

**"Corrine, get back!" he shouted, the songstress Azura yanking her dear friend backwards with all her strength. Why exactly she reacted so quickly was about to become painfully clear. With a great quake, the building shook upon the figure's landing, it surrounding itself with seven pillars of the sickly purple flames, all serving as shields for the princess and deadly barriers for the Nohrian army. As the first three columns of flame waned, the figure revealed itself as a human, a girl really, no older than sixteen, the irises of her usually brown eyes colored red, shooting them all an expression of pure hatred for which no words were required; its message of All who raise a weapon to my Lady Sakura deserve death and death alone was abundantly clear.

"What, who is-" Corrine stuttered. "Is that-"

"Dammit, pull back!" ordered Xander. "It's too dangerous to continue the advance like this!"

Unsheathing the Regal Blade, smoke still wafting from its tip, exactly what happened next for Hana was a horrifically violent blur: The traitoress or the Nohrian warlord-prince; both of them their father's good little minions through and through? Either way, it made no difference to Hana who went first; they both intended Sakura harm and no amount of pleading or begging for forgiveness would save them from her blade.

Her swings wild but focused and precise with an inhuman amount of force behind them, before the battle became a complete bloodstained frenzy in her mind, she sprung back several meters, pushing her princess out of harm's way before springing forward to meet the enemy. The specifics were blurry in her mind's eye later on, but she did remember well one of the prince's retainers, a man slightly older than her, futilely attempted to defend his liege from Hana's sword before being overpowered and cut down by the blade in question. In spite of the otherworldly amount of fear,
rage, and hatred driving every slash, thrust, and burst of flame from her, Hana would have to give the prince his credit after the battle; he was probably the only one of the Nohrians who neither hesitated nor attempted to flee against her blade. Even as Hana slew his steed out from under his legs, the prince continued to meet her blows with swings and parries of his own. Fatally burning an enraged mage attempting to throw off her concentration, Hana, once again showing the preternatural awareness of her surroundings, sidestepped the second retainer's, the woman's, attempt to bring down an axe on her head and, momentarily springing a few meters into the air, struck downward with her katana, driving the blade through the woman's back with all the force she could muster. At this one act (as well as Hana taunting him by shaking her blood from the blade), the prince lost his composure, beginning to swing his own sword furiously and recklessly at Hana, the swordswoman dodging the slashes as effortlessly as she shrugged off the prince's roars and curses at her. Of course, this loss of composure proved shortly to be his undoing.

Yes, with one of their champions and his retainers no more, the Nohrian army, along with its commander, were forced into a disorganized retreat and Hana dashed forward with the silent encouragement of her princess and her new "friend" driving her onward. In the course of this rout, while a few of their physical fighters, mainly lance-wielders, managed a decent fight here and there, the stragglers fell namelessly before the swordswoman's blade, using an occasional wall of flames to drive them into a more favorable position. While her mind had been almost completely blanked by rage and hatred by this point, Hana noticed something interesting; besides the eldest Nohrian prince and the traitoress, the only other opponent to give her a decent, even good fight, was an absolutely livid woman, her hair as red as the blood staining her armor, managing to hold Hana off for several blows (even throwing her off-balance for a nanosecond) before Hana sent her to the ground by smacking her with the hilt of her blade.

One thing Hoshido's greatest (and likely only remaining by this point) swordswoman could notice and remember very well amidst the carnage was the desperation of the azure songstress, once again starting up that infernal song, that very same song which made her head throb. Her latest prey, the (apparently) mortally-wounded Nohrian prince and his fallen retainer no longer a problem either for her or Sakura, Hana dragged her blade parallel to the ground for a meter or so, sending a geyser of the sickly flame rushing towards the woman. How fortuitous was it that the wielder of the Yato herself blocking Hana's attack and not without some difficulty?

Leaping over the carnage inflicted by her own hand, Hana bought all of her weight and power crashing down on the dragon princess, the fury behind her slashes and strikes against this enemy rivaled only by those delivered against the fallen crown prince. Corrine, managing to regain her footing and locking the swordswoman's blade with her own, attempted to reason with her opponent.

"You're Sakura's retainer, the woman!" she exclaimed, struggling to hold her own against Hana's might. "Please, you have to listen!"

"Shut up, you murdering, traitorous bitch!" Hana spat, her eyes twinkling with a particular venom. "Back at Fort Jinya, I told you I'd kill you, remember?! Right before you set your murdering goons on my troops? So I suppose Queen Mikoto, Lord Ryoma, Lady Hinoka, AND Prince Takumi weren't enough for you?!

"Listen to me! You don't have to do this!" Sakura isn't hers-"

"HOW DARE YOU speak as if you care about her! And yes, I do! We've both chosen our paths and I know exactly where yours ends! If your 'family' is truly so important to you, let me allow you to join them in whatever foul hell you Nohrians call afterlife!"
The princess had no reason to doubt Hana's sincerity; their clash had already left her more than a little fatigued and could not deny the reality that their casualty rate had become truly catastrophic. Just as she felt her guard about to shatter from the relentless attacks, Corrine noticed something most unusual and more than a little disturbing. Having subtly disengaged from their battle, it took Corrine several moments to directly place Hana's location before her heart sank into her stomach. One of the great pillars supporting the throne room was hanging precariously from its position some four stories above their general position and there stood Hana at the midway point in the rafters, smirking down at Corrine as she slashed the pillar vertically, sending it tumbling downwards at the shattered remnants of her army.

"Lady Corrine, move!" urged Jakob's dignified, yet panicked voice, shoving the princess out from the pillar's path.

Faithfully serving her to the end, Jakob successfully defended his lady from the falling column, but the ashen-haired princess had little time to register her shock and grief. As per the swordswoman's intent, the pillar had caught itself stably on the rock walls a few meters down the stairwell, blocking the path to Sakura for all but the most determined and acrobatic members of Corrine's devastated vanguard, not to mention her more immediate problem of Hana leaping with a downward stab to continue her assault, narrowly missing her opponent's heart. After parrying the first several blows after she returned to her feet, Corrine noticed something odd about her opponent's tactics; apparently, Hana was often forgoing slashes and thrusts at Corrine's vitals in favor of slashing at the exposed skin on her legs and arms, inflicting superficial, but still bloody wounds. While the princess was inclined to ignore these non-life-threatening wounds and continue fighting, after several more rounds of parrying, slashing at, and chasing Hana, Corrine noticed, ever so slowly, her strength fading, taking refuge in another blade lock with Hana.

"So, I take it you want me to kill you first, right?" taunted Hana nastily.

"What?" Corrine panted.

"You're both going to die here tonight anyway, so I figured you wanted me to kill you first instead of your songstress. Don't get me wrong, I can always do her first."

The dragon princess' red eyes suddenly began to shine with a fury rivaled only by those of Hana.

"NO!" she roared. "Crazy bitch! I'll tear your throat out!"

Even through the deep, blood-soaked haze that was her memory of the event, Hana remembered well her second duel with Corrine to be a truly intense and exhilarating battle. Pushing Hana back a meter or so, Corrine darted forth, slashing and thrusting wildly at Hana from every angle she could reasonably reach without endangering herself. Hana for her part, still managed to parry or dodge all of them, but the princess did manage to throw off Hana's balance and concentration a number of times during that minute in which they clashed.

However, Corrine's mistake was putting more distance between the two swordswomen for another charge, Hana taking this opportunity to summon a fireball of that sickly purple flame and send it hurtling at the snowy-haired princess, the burst catching her in the stomach and sending her flying backwards several meters up the stairwell, stopping just short of colliding with one of the pillars. Stopping her melody abruptly, the songstress dashed over to her friend, immediately beginning to apply some sort of solvent to Corrine's wounds.
"Don't overexert yourself!" Azura plead. "I know it looks bad, but we can always-

"Don't be silly!" Corrine responded tiredly, staggering to her feet and hoisting her Shadow Yato defiantly. "I can still fight...I have to fight. Otherwise...their sacrifices will have been... Azura, look out!"

Like an especially-deadly and enraged arrow, Corrine saw Hana sail through the air, the purple flames trailing behind her and that otherworldly blade in front, directed straight at the azure-haired songstress. Lacking any sort of energy to block Hana with her own blade, Corrine reacted purely on instinct, grasping Azura and shielding her with her own body, Hana's sword catching her right lower back with a pained shriek before both women collapsed to the ground.

Surrounded by the sights and sounds of the dying and the dead, as well as that ubiquitous coppery smell one associates with any mass bloodletting, Hana looked down at the main target for her revenge, blood staining her white-and-silver armor quiteprominently before Hana kicked the Yato from her hand. She was reasonably satisfied with the woman's state, having inflicted her with fairly grievous wounds which no normal human being could be expected to survive. But Hana had more pressing concerns than the affairs of corpses and those soon to be such; the reason she had accepted such terrible power to begin with. With that same nimbleness and acrobatic gait shown in the corridors, Hana traversed the stairwell deftly, leaping over and navigating both preexisting obstacles and the ones there of her own creation, be they (formerly) living or not.

At the foot of the great stairwell, Hana found her liege still quite distressed, the purple flames still emanating from her, chanting her grievances with the dragon princess like mantras.

"You killed them..."Sakura droned impassionately. "You killed them all!...Mother...Ryoma...Takumi...Hinoka...You left us!...You left me!...All alone..."

Her own flames disappearing from her person, Hana took her best friend in her arms, holding onto her for dear life.

"Lady Sakura!" Hana implored. "Lady Sakura! Sakura! Don't worry, I'm here!"

"You killed them...you killed them all..."

"Lady Sakura! I am your sword and your shield! Anyone who means you harm has to go through me! Not even the gods could stop me!"

"Left me...All alone...I'm all alone now..."

Now on the verge of tears, both from the depth of the sorrow in her beloved liege's heart and the sheer emotional intensity of the situation, Hana swore an oath to her dear friend.

"Lady Sakura! Sakura, you're never alone!" she promised. "As long as I live and breathe, I will always be at your side! You're my world! Even though the entire world may be against us, you and I, we'll get through it together! Hoshido needs you, Lady Sakura! I need you, Sakura!"

***With Hana finishing these words, the horrible purple flames dissipated entirely, the ghostly bow vanished into the ether, and (most of all to Hana's delight) the princess' irises returned to their natural brown.

"W-what happened?" asked a particularly-disoriented Sakura. "Wh-what have I been doing?! Where am ?!"
"Shhhh." urged Hana. "You're alright now, milady. They can't hurt you anymore. I won't allow it."

"Please Hana, just hold me."

And so the two girls stood silently for several minutes, the princess resting silently in her champion's embrace, both of them wordlessly giving thanks to everyone and everything possible that they still had someone in this world. Three or so minutes in, Hana experienced a most unwelcome intrusion, one which was promptly rebuffed.

"Wonderful, my child, wonderful!" praised the voice, more than a little pleased with the carnage. "But this is no time to rest. The Nohrians are still-"

"Yeah, thanks for the help, buddy." Hana thought serenely. "But you can sod off now. Lady Sakura is safe for now, I can take it from here. Your job is done."

"What-"

"Didn't I make it clear the first time? Sod. Off. Don't ruin this for me."

While there was certainly a great deal of business to take care of in the battle's aftermath (not least of which and most immediate would be evading a vengeful Nohrian army), apart from this little intrusion, the young ladies were free to simply enjoy the presence of the other for a few more minutes.

Chapter End Notes

Yeesh, I told you, this was going to get pretty brutal. And it only gets better from here. Did I say better? I meant, "so much fucking worse."

*Looks at chapter title* Unwinged Devil, huh? So I guess you've already got a pretty good idea what I was listening to at Hana's entrance scene? If you've been the internet equivalent of living under a rock for the past 10 years or so, what's the opposite of a devil? And what is the phrase "Unwinged Angel" literally one syllable away from? Exactly. Didn't do it on purpose, just kind of happened.

Also, you might be wondering about the "savages" and "heathens" comments from a lot of Nohrians. Come on, if you're (especially) American/Canadian/Australian, you know what this is, but it was my attempt to give a little balance to the fact that a number of Hoshidan characters get crapped on (but then again, some of my faves like Oboro or Takumi get it worse, so maybe I just notice it more) for the "Nohrian scum" comments and the like as it makes them somehow morally "corrupt."

While you COULD call it bigotry, what do you really expect? Suddenly invading someone else's country brutally then frequently reneging (intentionally or not, it's cold comfort to the dead/their families) on your promises not to horribly slaughter POWs/non-combatants doesn't exactly show a great deal of common respect among Nohr for the Hoshidans either. I just didn't think it needed to be made as explicit as things like "the only good savage (Hoshidan) is a dead one!" and the like.
And no, you are not seeing things; I DID shamelessly change the last track because-well, you can kinda guess by how much I’ve written about their world by now.
The Prince's Despair

Chapter Summary

After the mysterious slaughter in Castle Shirasagi's ruined throne room, one would not even need two hands on which to count the Nohrian survivors, Prince Leo, contrary to his own expectations, being one of them. Already teetering on the brink from the deaths of Xander and Elise, the loss of one more dear to him than life itself is truly earth-shattering. Now, with all of Nohr howling for revenge against the Hoshidans and their "demon" and Camilla lacking in any desire or psychological ability to be queen, a mysterious benefactor seeks to "aid" Leo in his quest to become a strong ruler...

Chapter Notes

Aaaaaand here's how I go about becoming one of, if not the most hated writers in this entire fandom.

Nothing against Leo at all, it's just he's the most likely candidate for this; a dark magic-wielding prince with an inferiority complex and frustration at his relative powerlessness exacerbated by circumstance who is canonically acknowledged to be into occult-related activities. Actually, I'm pretty sure Leo IS a reference to the past FE character I have in mind. Their names have the same etymology and really similar pronunciation. Hell, in Japanese, their names are literally one katakana apart.

*Lyon [Remastered] (FE8 OST)

**Coming Demise (FE14 OST)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

HOW DARE SHE! THAT MISERABLE, UNGRATEFUL, LITTLE INSECT! THAT IS JUST LIKE HER KIND! WHERE IN ALL THE WORLDS DOES SHE FIND THE GALL TO SPEAK TO A GOD IN SUCH A MANNER! But it is ultimately little matter. Humans are weak-minded, weak-willed beasts. Puppets merely awaiting a master! Surely there are far more cooperative beasts of burden than her.

* He had always been somewhat of a frail child, somewhat less so as an adult, but still nothing compared to Xander, Camilla, or even Corrine. While the healers had been instructed to give he, Camilla, and Corrine priority in treatment for their injuries, his relatively frail constitution and the extent of his injuries had convinced most of the healers on duty that he was in fact, unlikely to survive his wounds and moved him to the appropriate wing of the commandeered Hoshidan temple. To the surprise of many outside of himself, two days after the defeat against Princess Sakura her
gods-only-know-what-that-thing-was, Leo, albeit with the help of a cane, managed to rise from his bed and greet his surviving siblings in the antechamber.

"Oh, Leo!" exclaimed Camilla, rising from her chair with some difficulty before smothering the prince with her embrace. "Baby brother, I was so worried about you! Those mean old healers were saying that-

"Yes, Sister, I am aware." replied the prince, nudging his half-sister away. "I was in and out of consciousness, but I got most of it."

The dragon princess smiled, extending her non-heavily bandaged arm over Leo's shoulder.

"Yes, it's good to see you." confirmed Corrine with her equally gentle-smile. "Are you hungry? I could make us something to eat."

"The rations were nothing special, but I've got something in my stomach." answered Leo, shrugging off the concern. "There's no time for me to wallow in self-pity. There are still things to take care of. Where are Odin and Niles-"

The sisters and Azura suddenly became stiff and silent, their eyes downcast as Leo suddenly recalled the fates of his two loyal retainers. After Xander's retainer, the mystery man Laslow had fallen to Sakura's entity, the theatrical mage set off towards the mercenary's killer in a white, completely-and-utterly-serious rage, furiously (and futilely) hurling spells at the being before it took his life with those horrible purple flames. Niles for his part, defended the prince to his last breath; even picking up a blade after the entity slashed his own bow in two for a last clash. Indeed, after reviewing the scene repeatedly in his dreams and mind's eye, Leo had come to the conclusion that, even though he was severely wounded by the same attack, the dashing rogue had literally saved his life by shielding Leo with his own body.

But even more heartrending for all involved were respective fates of their family's eldest and youngest member respectively.

"I'd never seen Xander that angry before in my life." Corrine remarked, still avoiding eye contact with the remaining prince. "It was like he was an entirely different person."

"At least he was able to die with Siegfried in his hand." replied Leo bitterly. "What in the seven hells was that thing?! What kind of monster kills a child in cold blood just to get to me?!"

Camilla frowned. "I'm sorry, Brother." she answered, perhaps even more dejectedly than her siblings. "I didn't get a good look at what attacked me. The only reason I still live was the armor across my abdomen."

Turning to Azura for a sign of nonverbal support, Corrine ultimately remained silent, unsure as to whether or not the truth of the matter would inflame passions further or lessen them.

"And I ask you all again." Leo inquired, his tone dangerous and icy. "What kind of monster slaughters a child in cold blood just to get to us?!"

"What kind of monster kills a child in cold blood, Sire?" asked one of the sentries, leaning against his lance. "I was with the first response team the next morning. We found a black-haired child in the throne room on the brink of death. Deep cuts from a sword by the look of it. Fucking Hoshidan savages. I'm actually starting to agree with some of the guys that the only good one of them is a dead one."
At the words "black-haired child" and "throne room," Leo's heart sank into his stomach, the void consuming any possible optimism remaining in him. Tossing the cane, Leo set off for the rest of the makeshift triage wing as fast as he could manage, dragging his left leg behind him when need be. It was truly disheartening and morbid to race through what had become a morgue for their friends, comrades, and even family members, but Leo's single-minded focus was one particular woman, a woman to whom his insights had truly given a new lease on life. Winded and red-faced, Leo reached the one of the chambers serving as a makeshift surgical facility, his worst fears as to the patient's identity confirmed by her dark hair, pale skin, and very distinct markings on her face. Pushing the healers aside, Leo raced to her side, stroking her cheek and mouthing futile pleas for the fellow mage to open her eyes.

"Milord." said one of the healers, a woman scarcely older than he. "I'm afraid there's nothing left we can do for this child-"

"Get out, all of you." ordered Leo, his voice cracking. "GET THE FUCK OUT! NOW!"

The healers scared away with this verbal display, Leo fell to his knees and took Nyx's cold, lifeless hand as he began to sob, something he as a young child swore he would never do in public, if at all. He could deal with having lost his father; truth be told, as far as Leo's suspicions, the thing which he had devolved into was pretty much the equivalent to the king's psychological state before Xander and Corrine put him out of his misery. Painful as it had been, if it had ended there, he could have dealt with losing Xander and Elise with time as well. But that fate had been cruel enough to take the woman he loved from him, well that was simply too much. While the understanding Corrine, Elise, and possibly Camilla may have given their blessing, Leo knew fully well that Xander and the remainder of the court would not have approved of his romance with Nyx, not least of which due to her child-like appearance and social status, both of which were of no matter to the prince. No, he had fallen in love with her razor-sharp mind and her wise, introspective soul, the couple having spent many a late night discussing in depth everything from politics to philosophy and even the nature of the world and life in general.

Blinking through the moisture, Leo, with his free hand, wiped the tears from his eyes. "Xander and Elise are dead...because I was weak." he said heavily. "You're dead...because I was weak. I'm sick of losing people I love because of my weakness! I'm through with it! Whatever it takes, I'll become stronger! Stronger than Xander, stronger than Corrine, even stronger than Father!"

Swallowing deeply, the prince clutched his lost love's hand even harder. "I swear to you, that the weakling I was in your life is dead." he promised. "I swear, for everyone, I'll hunt down and wipe that...thing from the face of the earth if it's the last thing I do! Even if I have to destroy this whole damnable country and everyone in it!"

Even outside of the sick, hazy, disassociated feeling using said "gift" had granted her, Hana extremely was grateful to be rid of the otherworldly powers for another reason; it had literally made her sick using it. After taking the Yato, Siegfried, and Brynhildr from their fallen enemies (she knew full well she'd be unable to use the former two, but did so simply to keep them out of Nohr's hands) and spirited Sakura out of the capital under the noses of a Nohrian army under heightened alert, once they had reached the nearby woods, Hana became violently ill, literally vomiting more than once as Sakura dragged her to a nearby cave, insisting she get off her feet in spite of the swordswoman's protests.

For two days after the battle, through Hana's fever, dizziness, and a complete inability to keep anything down save for water, Sakura spent her time nursing her retainer back to health, armed only with a bow and some arrows Hana had taken from a very unfortunate Nohrian sentry. By the night
of the second day, Hana was well enough that the princess would not immediately insist she lie back down.

"Are you alright, Lady Sakura?" Hana groaned, sitting up and sweeping the washcloth (technically a piece of a Nohrian tunic) from her forehead. "I don't want you to push yourself too hard."

"Wh-what are you worried about me for?" replied Sakura, her tone betraying no small degree of surprise. "You've barely been able to stand for the past couple of days!"

The swordswoman beamed, taking Sakura's hand in hers. "Thank you, Lady Sakura, I mean it." she replied softly. "But that's what I live for! I'd never be able to forgive myself if something happened to you on my account."

"I just don't want anything to happen to you either, Hana. Please don't leave me alone in a world like this one."

"Not even in my nightmares! I already told you, I'd take on the entire Nohrian army if it meant protecting you. And I would win too!"

"Yes, they are quite ferocious, are they not?"

"Yes, and speaking of the Nohrian army and protecting you, Lady Sakura, there's no way I can keep you near the capital in good conscience. Since word will have gotten out about the throne room by now, they'll have literally every Nohrian soldier in the country after you! I know a place, my home province. It's a good distance north from here and Nohrian control over the area is weak, where it exists at all."

"V-very well. I hate to leave the people at the mercy of those brutes, but I'm not going to be of use to anyone dead."

In spite of his insistence upon doing otherwise, Corrine was quite worried about her brother and made no secret of this. Ever since his flight from the antechamber yesterday, Leo had been utterly silent, refusing any food, drink, or human contact whatsoever. Of course, she was willing to give him his time he needed to grieve, but his reaction to the passing of the diminutive sorceress in particular bewildered the dragon princess.

"I don't get it." she admitted finally. "Just going by their personalities and interests, I'd have assumed that Leo considered her an intellectual equal, but-

"Perhaps they were lovers?" suggested Azura as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"It's very possible now that you mention it. But I don't really see why they would feel the need to be so...cautious about their romance."

"You mean like us, Corrine?"

"Fair point."

The prince for his part, knew fully well what he was doing, he simply chose not to confide in his sisters. When they and the priests had laid Xander, his would-be-queen, and Elise to rest several hours after Leo's rise from his would-be deathbed, he was of course, out of sorts. However, after his return from an unexplained outing (which left him both visibly red-eyed and smelling strongly of
smoke, as if having spent hours before a funeral pyre) at well past two in the morning, Nohr's surviving prince had secluded himself in his chambers, emerging solely to scavenge for some select tomes and notes around the camp.

Of course, Leo would have loved a confidant, preferably an older male one somewhat close to his own age. But this was complicated, or rather made impossible by the loss of Xander and his two loyal retainers, he reminded himself bitterly. As for his sisters and stepsister, Leo could intellectually see Corrine understanding his plight, but he viscerally doubted it severely. Azura was distant and aloof as always; the only other human being she would even open up to somewhat being Corrine. Of all these options, Leo was most inclined towards Camilla. However, while Camilla was extremely empathetic towards his feelings, it was always on the level of a mother towards her children, being her baby brother as opposed to a man trapped by his own limitations and weaknesses.

No, the one person whose counsel he truly longed for was no longer of this world in any sense, Leo having disposed of her lifeless body exactly in the manner as Nyx had prescribed. Indeed, as implied by his surrounding himself with her various tomes, notes, and journals, the grieving prince reminisced about their intellectual and philosophical discussions fondly, even about the awkward laughs they had shared on more than one occasion.

Yes, both by circumstance, his distant and proud personality, as well as his own preconceived notions, Leo truly felt completely and utterly isolated from any sort of human connection, only compounded upon by his own powerlessness. After several minutes of wallowing in these thoughts, Leo, as if by fate by how natural it seemed, was suddenly taken back to a conversation he and Nyx had shared after stealing away to the scenic shore of a certain Hoshidan lake as they gazed up at the stars.

"Yes, it's possible, but I would recommend against even trying highly." Nyx's high, but stern voice echoed in his head. "Communicating with beings from other worlds and even possibly being given new powers for your trouble, I mean. But remember, that there are things in this world, in this universe, which simply refuse to be controlled, something to which I am a living monument."

While two of the three sentences of Nyx's words he'd recalled were in fact, warnings, the prince's despair and overwhelming sense of impotence were so strong by this point, that he simply refused to heed them. I will become strong enough to control these powers, he told himself resolutely, as he spent hours pouring through his late lover's tomes, notes, and diaries. I must! Finally, by well past two that morning, Leo had found what he had searched for obsessively; in the back of one of Nyx's oldest, most decrepit books, he'd located the diagrams detailing the intricate glyphs to be placed at the four cardinal directions, as well as the incantations in some ancient, almost-certainly dead language required. The spell apparently called either for the glyphs to be carved into stone or inscribed onto the ground in chalk or ash. Fortunately, the latter was in considerable supply in the temple, as the Nohrians had little if any use for it. Spending ten minutes collecting ash from around the temple and another ten constructing the glyphs at the exact northern, southern, western, and eastern ends of his temporary chamber, Leo began to chant the incantation, his eyes following the text and his lips giving as close an approximation as possible.

Partaking in the ritual for some thirty minutes, the prince, while disappointed with his apparent lack of progress or results, did not allow himself to be discouraged. After all, some of these spells could take months, if not years to perform correctly. Resolving to attempt it again the following two nights, Leo retired to bed. While he was reasonably sure the spell had not had its intended function at least for the first night, more than once before he drifted off, the prince could swear he was hearing some sort of mumbling, its source a human-like (but not exactly human either) voice and sounding none too pleased.
The next morning, Leo did in fact, rise to join his sisters for a meal and outwardly, seemed (to the relif particularly of Corrine and Camilla) to at least be partially returning to his old self, but even so, the eldest princess could sense something not quite right about his behavior, something she made clear in pulling aside her surviving retainer.

"I hate to be a bother, dear Selena." began Camilla, stroking the redhead's cheek. "But please do let me know if you notice anything...unusual about my brother's behavior. He insists everything is fine, but-"

"No, I'm glad to do it." answered Selena, her normally prickly tone contrite and guilty.

Indeed, there was something quite unusual about the prince's behavior, namely his fixation upon the recovery of some stone, relatively-pristine tablets from the temple and surrounding city and their return to his chambers. It was a small task for a Nohrian prince to requisition a Hoshidan apprentice mason's tools, particularly when flanked by an armed retinue of soldiers with very loose rules of engagement. Carving the tablets on the other hand, was a frustrating adventure all its own. But as everyone was away at supper, Leo would receive some help from a most unexpected party.

"Gunter, shouldn't you be with the others?" inquired Leo guiltily, sitting on one of the tablets as to conceal it.

"Actually, Lady Corrine sent me for you, milord." replied the old knight dutifully. "But I noticed you seem to be having a bit of trouble with a project of yours. Perhaps I could be of assistance?"

"No, really, I'm fine."

"Oh, come now. My father was a master mason himself and I picked up more than a bit before I left to start my training."

Leo was very hesitant to accept the old knight's help for a number of reasons. Selena had been tailing him all day and did Corrine have an idea of what he was trying to do? And finally, the spell required the caster himself to carve the glyphs into the stone. Then again, Leo reasoned, he did need a good deal more help than he was at first willing to admit and he could always finish the almost-complete runes himself. "Alright, Gunter." he said. "I would appreciate your help greatly."

For a fraction of a second even, Leo could have sworn the knight had flashed a very uncharacteristic and sinister smirk. "I would be honored, milord." Gunter replied.

With Gunter's aid, the prince had managed to complete the runes by a little after midnight, thereafter spending several minutes adjusting them to their proper position. This time, Leo had spent at least an hour on his chanting of the incantation, but to no avail, much to his frustration and disappointment. Maybe this particular spell was forgotten for a reason, he thought bitterly as he retired to bed. Upon awakening the third morning, Leo was on some level, now aware of the habitually mumbling, human-sounding voice. His first inclination was to attribute it to Azura and Corrine (or more likely, Camilla and Selena) being inappropriately affectionate with each other for the time and place, but once again, the voice was too distant-sounding to be emanating from the temple.

By the third day, Camilla, Corrine, and Leo had agreed to return to Windmire at the request of Duke Toscana, the head of the regency council. But all three of his sisters (outside of having their friends, allies, and even Xander and Elise slaughtered by that entity) were struggling with issues of their own.
Camilla had already sent word back to the duke informing of her intent to abdicate her right to the throne and, while still her affectionate self, was somehow more distant. Azura was hesitant about leaving Hoshido, the adopted home she had (indirectly) already done so much damage to, under the auspices of Nohrian forces to be reorganized as a formal occupation army. The ever-gentle Corrine struggled with this dilemma just as much as her dear friend, but after much deliberation, decided to petition the duke for some sort of high-ranking position in the force.

He had known Camilla to always be somehow aloof to the possibility of becoming queen someday, but with her formal abdication, the reality of the situation was now not just staring Prince Leo straight in the face, it was mocking him, taunting him. It was no longer simply optional, for the sake of his own peace of mind, that he do so, he needed to become as powerful as he could to see to Nohr's continued stability and its newfound gains. Leo reminded himself of this constantly, obsessively as he cautiously, almost lovingly carved the glyphs with chalk according to the diagrams at the four cardinal directions of his chamber. If he required aid from otherworldly beings, than so be it.

Actually completing his task before noon, Leo, as not to raise the suspicions of Gunter or Selena any further, actually returned to his usual functions of their impromptu garrison, taking inventory of weapons and items and (most heart-breakingly) keeping a detailed record of the casualties. "Xander, Elise, Nyx, my love." he told himself as resolutely as he had ever so done. "Your sacrifices will not be in vain, I promise."

As the last of the Nohrian survivors and support personnel turned in for the early morning departure, in the minutes before midnight, Leo stepped over to the center of his chamber and took a deep breath. It has to work this time, it just has to, he told himself as he sat down to begin his chanting. For the first five or so repetitions of the incantation, the prince retained a relatively neutral, even intonation. However, as his recitation became more and more natural, his approach changed; whether consciously or not, Leo began to inject every word of the incantation with all of his pain, fear, fury, and sorrow, not simply from the past week or so, but from his entire life. Indeed, as he became more and more lost in the mantra, the passage of minutes mattered little as his words began to suffocate the temple's clean air. His memory of the exact moment was extremely hazy, when it existed at all, but at some point during the night, that very familiar, otherworldly voice made its presence known to him and very unambiguously so.**

"Are you-" said Leo, the exact same existential terror he'd experienced at the sight of Princess Sakura's entity returning. "Are you from another world?"

"Yes, one could say that." replied the voice, the thinly-veiled contempt enmeshed with a sort of anticipation. "What seems to ail you so, my boy?"

"If you really can help me, I want- No, I need to become stronger. Stronger than my brother, stronger than Corrine, even stronger than my father!"

"What are you willing to do?"

"Anything! It's just that important! I'm a weakling of a prince who cannot even protect the tome entrusted to him by his fathers! I cannot be such a king!"

"A tome, you say? Very well, open your eyes."

Complying with the order, the prince opened his eyes and recoiled at the sight in front of him; a burst of sickly purple flame suddenly appeared in front of him. Fading away as abruptly as it had
appeared, in its place lay an obviously quite old, yet immaculately maintained tome decorated with intricate, illegible (to Leo) runes.

"A wise young prince, a learned man much like yourself, once used the knowledge contained in this tome to save his country and those he loved from a horrible fate." explained the voice half-truthfully. "It is called Naglfar and with it, untold power and secrets of the worlds will be yours."

"Thank you, O Wise One." replied the prince, his upper body dipping into a short bow. "I shall treasure it always. But I feel...hesitant about being entrusted with such an immense power. If it would please you, may I seek your continued guidance about its secrets and those of other worlds?"

"The beginnings of wisdom are to accept one's limitations. I would be honored to become your mentor, Prince Leo."

Chapter End Notes

Naglfar:
Description: Leo only. A cursed tome of immense power from the Outrealm. Said to overflow the pride and lust for power of its original wielder.
Chapter Summary

With Camilla's abdication of her right to be queen, the dukes of Nohr's Regency Council get more than they bargained for as old enemies reconcile (or at least learn to tolerate each other) as the opportunity for even greater gains make themselves apparent with Leo's imminent reign...

Chapter Notes

And here we are with another chapter! Thanks for the feedback, all! No matter how well I could write it, I did NOT expect this to be an even remotely popular premise, so I'm glad somebody is liking it so far.

You may be wondering exactly (or you may already know) why Gunter specifically asked to help Leo with his ritual last chapter, but the old knight is playing a bigger role than he lets on. Yes, you'll get a sense of what exactly it is. No, Leo was not imagining that malicious smirk. And maybe this next part will clear up a bit.

And finally, our first Tellius/Path of Radiance/Radiant Dawn references! Outside of the feral serum, yes, I did have the Bengion senators in mind when writing the regency council part. Specifically: Duke Matteo = Lekain in the sense that he's a terminally smug and corrupt, horribly racist mass murderer, but not exactly the chessmaster he likes to see himself as.

*The Mind of Izuka (FE10 OST)

**Stragagem in Black Armor (FE9 OST)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As far back in his life as he could remember, there was nothing Hans despised more than others failing to show him the respect that he felt due. As a boy, he'd beaten another boy bloody for composing an insulting rhyme about him. At twelve, he took his first life when a petty, but well-to-do merchant decided to get a smart mouth. But being subordinate to this old buzzard was probably the greatest insult of all. This old buzzard who would be dead, should be dead had he his way. This is the same old goat I threw into a motherfucking canyon, for gods' sake, he told himself irritably. The serious, borderline fatal wounds he'd taken in battle with the dragon brat's army were nothing compared to the damage to his pride.

"How much longer is it to wherever the hell we're going?" the berserker barked savagely, his foul mood only contributed to by his unease on horseback. "I swear, if I don't get off this thing soon-"
"Why don't you calm yourself, boy?" sneered Gunter calmly. "Besides, our destination is just over the horizon, so if you'd stop behaving like a child for five minutes, the journey would be over sooner."

"Who are you calling 'boy'?! Do I need to remind you who threw your wrinkled arse into the Bottomless Canyon to begin with?!"

"And do I need to remind you who found you on the brink of death from your magic burns, gave you first aid, and told you exactly which crevice in Shirasagi to hide lest you join the other Nohrian casualties? Not to mention who it was that absconded from the throne room after the battle to retrieve your sorry carcass? So yes, I do believe you owe me at least a sliver of respect."

Now Hans was not exactly the sharpest blade on the rack by any means, but he had not come as far as he had in life without a sharp, well-attuned, animalistic instinct for his own survival and self-preservation. While he would have liked very much to continue this exchange, his instincts made it clear to him that he was in no physical condition whatsoever for a rematch with the old knight with the unusually-sharp silver blade on his hip and an eerie sort of calmness to his words and wisely decided to change the subject.

"So wait, if pretty much everyone who went into the savages' throne room bit it, how'd you walk out?" he asked, his tone betraying a genuine, uncharacteristic curiosity.

The old knight gave an expression halfway between a genuinely-amused smile and a smirk. "Oh, I have my ways," he assured. "You needn't worry about that. What you would do well to focus on however, is the new world our future king is about to usher in; where men like you will be acknowledged and given their due respect. Coincidentally, that cart your steed is pulling is intimately related to that new order."

"So, wait, what IS in this cart I've been pulling behind me for the past four days anyway?"

"Trust me, my friend. All will be made clear very shortly."

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Every inch of his body sore, Keaton finally awoke in a dark, isolated chamber in a certain temple in the Hoshidan capital. He was not exactly certain how long he had been unconscious (although given that his stomach was growling absolute murder at him, he could surmise it had been three days or so), but he did have quite a clear recollection of the chaotic, bloodstained frenzy that was the battle in Shirasagi's throne room before he blacked out himself. Yep, pretty sure of one thing, he told himself. While it did not move like it at all, the mysterious enemy that had come to Princess Sakura's rescue was in fact, a human being. Or at the very least, so human-shaped and sized to the point where discerning any difference was simply splitting hairs. Not that his wolf-like senses of sight, hearing, and smell did much good as far as hitting Sakura's protector; she (or it) moved so quickly and gracefully compared to his wild, powerful, but ultimately slow swings, that even his wolf form could do little in the way of relieving Prince Leo and his embattled surviving retainer before he was ultimately overpowered and the fact that he had awoken in what amounted to a morgue for many of his old companions did not say much good about the battle's outcome.

His stomach and body as a whole still quite sore, Keaton was still able to walk and stand much to his relief. As he closed his eyes for a wolfish yawn, he was abruptly interrupted by the very distinct and uncomfortable sensation of a length of twine fastened around his neck from behind, struggling against the pressure on his windpipe in an attempt to fight against, growl and curse at the assailant.
"If you wish to live, you'll not make a sound." threatened the unseen assailant. "Even if you do, this lance of mine by my feet will make short work of you. Nod your head once if you understand."

No, the sounds and scents of the man gave away his identity quite easily to the wolfskin, Keaton registering his identity with no small degree of shock. Cognizant of the knight's long-time ties both to the Nohrian royal family and Corrine, Keaton nodded his head once compliantly, hoping to negotiate with him (or failing that, rip out his throat) once he felt less threatened. But the old knight was not keen on allowing such a possibility; as Gunter drove a syringe of some sort into his not-quite lupine neck, Keaton felt his strength and will to resist drain away as he slipped back into unconsciousness.

Just over the horizon lay an abandoned Hoshidan fortress commandeered by a Nohrian detachment. But Hans noticed a couple of extremely odd things for a Nohrian outpost, namely the skeleton force (as if no more than a security detachment) on duty and the state of complete and utter disrepair. Dismounting his own steed, Gunter was greeted by a short, squat, middle-aged man with greasy black hair and an expression of perpetual paranoia. "Hans, I would like you to meet Sir Konrad." introduced the knight. "One of Iago's finest chemists and right-hands before his untimely demise."

"Please, please, relax sir." implored Konrad in his nasally, inexplicably untoward-sounding voice. "We shall relieve you of your cargo now. Yes, Sir Gunter was quite specific about the lovely specimen he'd encountered."

Finally dismounting the horse (to the relief of both parties), the brute merely scoffed at the despicable little reed of a man as his guards wheeled off the cart and cage into one of the side entrances of the fort.

"Wait, you've got me moving livestock?!" Hans demanded indignantly. "You really are just trying to humiliate me, aren't you old man?"

"Once again, Hans; patience." implored Gunter. "Sir Konrad's chefs have prepared us, at his own expense mind you, some of the finest imported Nohrian delicacies. I believe the show after supper will be one to remember."

"Well, alright. I haven't had a decent meal in months; I can't stand this crap the savages eat morning, noon, and night."

After several more days unconscious, Keaton finally dragged himself to his feet, shielding his still quite-sensitive eyes from the dungeon's dim light. In said dim light however, he was able to make out two quite unpleasant individuals gawking at him as though he were some sort of freak show. However, the familiarity of the third individual was arguably even less so.

"You! I knew it!" he growled accusatorially. "What's your angle, old man?! What will Corrine say when she learns what you've done?!"

"Oh, stuff it, you great mangy furball." replied Gunter, the extremely harsh tone new to the wolfskin's ears. "And for your information, it won't matter a damn what that naive, blue-blooded brat thinks, because you'll never be leaving this place. You've got such an important part to play, after all."

The old knight stepping forward into the light to meet him wearing an equally-new expression of sheer condescension and contempt, Keaton ineffectually snapped and clawed at him in absolute rage.

"I ought to rip your black heart out for this." the wolfskin threatened. "Go on! Let me out of this
cage! I dare you!"

"So you want to kill?" inquired Gunter facetiously. "To maim and rend? Then by all means, we shall release you. But first-

Taking the cue for his own part in the twisted drama, with an expression of maniac glee, Konrad drove a syringe into one of Keaton's exposed veins, withdrawing as to avoid being strangled in retaliation.

"What is this?!" demanded Keaton angrily. "What did this little runt do to me?!"

"Yeah, what DID the runt do to him anyway?" inquired Hans. "It better be entertaining though."

"Oh, I do believe you'll be entertained, Sir Hans." the old knight answered, listlessly tossing a stolen Beaststone in his left hand.

This particular dungeon overlooked a depression in the structure which as of late, had been enclosed with stone, circular seating and the floor coated with a not-significant layer of sand. Heart racing, sweating profusely, and his mind becoming increasingly blank with rage and hatred at this betrayal, as the crane and pulley carefully lowered his enclosure into the makeshift arena, Keaton was ready, willing and able to tear the bars from their base should the opportunity arise, yet in the back of his mind, feared greatly what would happen in the event he somehow managed to transform. Then again, he wondered if he would even get a say in the matter.

Ringing a large bell repeatedly, the mad scientist smirked. "Anyone who wishes to audition for that promotion and raise," simpered Konrad. "Here is your test..."

The gates to his front and rear being raised, the absolute last straw for Keaton was the Nohrian soldiers flanking him, their expressions and body language ranging from those of youthful bravado and confidence to abject terror. His werewolf form weakening the cage greatly, the wolfskin burst forth, furiously and mindlessly charging, clawing and biting into the mass of flesh and steel before him.

While Gunter watched the ensuing carnage with a detached expression and Konrad furiously scribbled notes, Hans observed Keaton's rage with the joy and awe of a child treated to a shopping spree in the most expensive toy store to ever exist. The blades, lances, and axes glancing off the wolfskin and the arrows even shattering, Keaton clawed and rent through the Nohrian regulars, dealing all sorts of gruesome and generally-fatal wounds to them. While his charge was too enraptured by the butchery to notice or care either way, the old knight recognized none of his former comrade's sarcastic wit which took no holiday during battle, noting only feral roars, growls, and howling as he made increasingly short work of the conscripts brave, foolish, or unfortunate enough to challenge him.

The survivors breaking into a disorganized, blood-soaked retreat, Keaton pounced upon a wounded, terrified archer attempting to escape his wrath, relieving him of several of his organs in the space of a couple of seconds. Still, such carnage did little to prevent the guests of honor from voicing their thoughts.

"This..." began Hans at last. "is fucking awesome! The best thing I've seen since I've been in this hellhole of a country!"

"So, what state should his mind be in after this?" inquired Gunter, feigning his ignorance of the
"And what of his transformation ability?"

"Oh, no, his mind is gone." replied Konrad, tone somewhere between awe, pride, and fear. "He is remaining as such for the rest of his days...Of course, his lifespan will be shortened considerably, but for that sort of power at our disposal..."*

With Keaton disemboweling the last of the soldiers on the arena's western side, he spontaneously turned to pursue the few, terrified survivors on the other end of the coliseum. Gunter simply scoffed at this lackluster display. "Amateurs." he said dismissively, leaping over the railing into the arena, much to Konrad's confusion and terror. The wolfskin had already started on the rest of his cornered prey once his unusually sensitive ears picked up the knight's landing, abruptly turning around to find the man responsible for his plight.

Apparently, the foul potion had not dulled the wolfskin's instinct for avenging injury, one of his torturers standing before him defiantly, almost arrogantly. Starting off into an enraged dash on all fours, at five or so meters, Keaton, claws and what remained of his mind ready for more bloodshed, sprang towards the old knight. Gunter, showing no sign of distress or even flinching as the massive, airborne beast closed in, simply drew the brilliant, golden-hilted blade from its sheath, slashing the wolfskin at a forty-five degree angle, sending him tumbling harmlessly off to the knight's side.

Keaton's breathing having become hurried and shallow at the grievous wounds inflicted by the blade, he could only offer some defiant, ineffective growls and attempts to raise his right claw once more before Gunter closed in, driving the sword through his heart with a downward stab. "So sorry, my friend." thought the knight mockingly, sweeping the blood from his weapon with a flourish. "But it simply would not do to leave even the possibility of loose ends open."

While his specimen had been disposed of and the young, ambitious casualties put to shame by the veteran and his mysterious new blade, Konrad remained quite pleased with himself, scribbling more notes about the test subjects' performance and muttering to himself about the need for "more specimens." Meanwhile, Hans was absolutely ecstatic at the bloodshed and the mettle shown by the old knight. "So you're one of us after all!" he shouted congratulatorily. "I admit, I misjudged you, old man!"

"You'd not be the first, boy." thought Gunter darkly. "Nor will you be the last."

**"And we proud sons of Nohr will let the savages know once and for all." regaled Duke Matteo of Toscana. "That we will not stand for this treachery, this perfidy that they have shown towards our brave soldiers! All their heathen talk of 'honor' has been exposed as nothing more than fig leaf for their kind's inscrutable duplicity! Let it be known that under the wise guidance of our king-to-be, we will avenge the murders most foul of valiant King Garon, our dashing crown prince, and beloved princess!"

Departing from one of Castle Krakenburg's many balconies to rapturous cheers and applause, Duke Toscana had found he'd grown into the role of the head of the regency council quite nicely in the space of a couple of weeks. Of course, he'd been as shocked as any of the other nobles to learn the news, what with the war against the Hoshidan barbarians proceeding so well to the point of their capital falling and having done away with most of their royal brats. According to reports from the officers deployed to the city, the youngest, a girl really, had apparently made use of some sort of their sorcery to call a demon of some sort from the underworld to slaughter Prince Xander's vanguard.
Was it true or simply a case of unwashed, superstitious rubes letting their tiny little minds play tricks on them? It was honestly little matter as far as the duke was concerned, as the immediate threat of a power vacuum or even rebellion outright from those uppity eastern nobles, was dealt with.

However, it was far from an everyday occurrence to have a realm's line of succession almost gutted entirely and while they and their own vassals made up the most powerful noble faction in the kingdom, none of them were exactly powerful, influential, or beloved enough to keep the situation stable in the long term. To this end, the four dukes met in their fallen king’s war room, actually having been absent its master for sometime now.

"Godsdammit, Matteo!" scolded Duke Guillaume of Lorraine. "Must you rile the commoners so?"

"Does he really have a choice?" asked Duke Albrecht of Bayern rhetorically. "Or perhaps you’d care to explain to them how and why exactly we defeated the savages in the war they'd been assured victory against for decades, but managed to suffer the single worst, most one-sided defeat in Nohrian military history? Oh, and that the survival of their wretched princess is still inciting their rabble against us? They would storm the castle and hang him, and hang us from the nearest tree! Now maybe, if Princess Camilla was in a position of power and broke the news, we could-"

Duke Durante of Carinthia sighed longingly. "Oh, Lady Camilla!" he began dreamily. "Surely you could calm this unruly lot with your melodious voice, your kind heart, and your luscious, supple-

The three remaining men groaned disapprovingly at the dandy's flights of fancy, Duke Lorraine rolling his eyes.


"Enough of this prattle, you feckless idiots!" screeched Duke Matteo, pacing the room lengthwise as he tried to collect his thoughts. "Now it's clear that this is not an ideal situation, but with some patience, foresight, and a little luck, we should be alright. We will receive Prince-Regent Leo and his entourage any day now, and if we make a good impression, we should be able to keep our own...interests secure in the meantime and for many years to come."

Many would naturally attribute Duke Toscana's position as head of the regency council due simply to an accident of birth, but this was only partially true. Matteo was no fool by any means, possessing a sharp, predatory mind and having an intimate knowledge of human nature and how to manipulate it. Of course, his hands were not exactly clean in this whole affair either, some choice farmland occupied by the heathens bordering his own lands had long caught his eye. But playing the right role at the right time could have its benefits, to be sure.

"What we need to do is show our support for the new king." remarked the duke seriously. "He’s a formidable one of course, but even he can't do it all by himself. It would be best to prove our own indispensability to his reign early on. After all, we've already got a good friend in his inner circle."

"And what of the war?" inquired Duke Carinthia. "They may not be civilized, but they cannot possibly be this stupid or suicidal."

"Oh, the savages can hang for all I care!" spat Duke Toscana. "Actually, these anti-banditry operations could work out for us in the long run. My farms, your textile mills, Albrecht's mines...."
Hmm, yes...These savages and their prideful ways could benefit us all quite handsomely..."
Chapter Summary

En route to Mutsu Province, Hana and Sakura have their first battle with Nohr since Shirasagi and gain a new ally in the process, Corrine assigns Kaze to a new, long-term mission, and in the mountains of Hoshido, against all odds, two disgraced, reviled, and hunted retainers to a fallen prince continue their their fight against the occupier as a desperate Hinoka seeks out any and all possible aid.

Chapter Notes

*His Father's Son (FE9 OST)
**The Enemy Approaches (FE9 OST)
***Defensive Battle (FE9 OST)
****Holding Your Own (FE9 OST)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Where is he?!” demanded the gruff male voice once more, another blow landing. "Your general, di Medici?!”

"You despicable savages will never get a word out of me!” the Nohrian officer protested indignantly. "Subject me to whatever vile atrocities and tortures you wish, it makes no difference!"

"Vile atrocities,' eh? You Nohrians would know all about those, wouldn't you? And as far as tortures, if I was going to torture you to death, you'd know it VERY well by now. Do you know how much trouble you were to capture? Besides, even a degenerate like you is worth more to us alive than dead...for now anyway."

"Saizo, what is this really accomplishing?” inquired the softer, female voice. "You have continued as such for the past twelve hours and what do we have to show for it?"

"Well Kagero, we tried it your way for the first four hours and how much did that get us?"

"Why do you uppity heathens continue to deny the inevitable?! Even your wretched prince knew when it was hopeless."

Kagero knew the man better than any other soul alive, and seeing the white-hot anger in Saizo's remaining eye, she knew well that the Nohrian officer had just signed his own death warrant. Surely enough, without a word, Saizo brandished one of the knives from his belt, driving it into the man's throat and dragging it sideways with all his might, the Nohrian's blood painting the cave floor in front of him. "Lord Leo...avenge us..." he rasped before expiring.
"Well, that's another one." said Kagero, no small hint of annoyance in her tone. "The fifth one in a month. I thought we were trying to get information out of them?"

"And we are." confirmed Saizo, etching a fourth notch on a wooden tablet before replacing it in his bag. "They just made the choice not to be cooperative with us. And I made the choice to cut their godsdamned throats because of it."

"We can't continue like this indefinitely, Saizo. We need an actual plan. What, did you think you were going to take on the entire Nohrian army yourself?"

"Of course not! But what did you really think we were going to do once you agreed to continue our fight with me after that black day? After what those Nohrian animals did to Orochi and Reina at Cheve, you would have to be out of your fucking mind to think I'd have just left you at their mercy!"

Kagero closed her eyes, reminiscing grimly about the reports about the incident Prince Takumi had delivered before his own murder by Nohrian troops celebrating their victory. The kunoichi was a woman who prided herself on her unflappability no matter what the situation, but such horrific reports corroborated by tens of survivor accounts made even her slightly ill; indeed, the nights were few where Kagero would not suffer terrible nightmares over her best friend since childhood suffering such a death. While she intellectually and emotionally attempted to take refuge in the fact that (by her reckoning) a good half Nohr's soldiers and officers alike did not really consider they as Hoshidans, to be even really human, viscerally and instinctually, the kunoichi had to be explicitly reminded several times that their mission was to "retrieve Lady Corrine" and not "slaughter every Nohrian on the battlefield," even by Lord Ryoma.

"Saizo, I'm sorry." she conceded. "I was so wrapped up in the situation, everything that had to be done and taken into account, that I didn't even think about how difficult this must be for you."

The flame-haired ninja gave a slight shrug. "Seriously, don't worry about it." he said dismissively. "After the first week or so of wanting to turn one of these blades on myself for failing Lord Ryoma, I got to the point where I figured that they'd do more good turned on some Nohrian officers."

"But my point remains. If we are to do this and come anywhere close to succeeding, we need support, we need allies, we need leadership."

Hinoka had taken more than her share of lives and taken little joy in so doing, but killing those two in the process of their escape simply felt good.

Listlessly poking at the fire with a nearby stick, the princess awaited the last remaining member of her "war council," if it could worthily be called such. "Well, milady." began the officer, Fujimoto. "Our supply situation looks about the same as did this morning. Which is to say, absolutely dismal."

Hinoka sighed, half from exasperation and half from frustration. "Fifteen who can hold a weapon
outside of us three with two weapons apiece ranging from moderately used to literally falling apart, and enough food to last a couple of weeks more at the very most." she listed off. "I never thought this part of war could be so frustrating!"

"Oh, come now, Lady Hinoka." Azama quipped whimsically, their collective desperation making his trademark sarcasm noticeably less apparent. "The worst that can happen is that we all die horribly."

"No, it's not." remarked the remaining officer, Hakumura grimly, resolutely sharpening the blade he'd taken off a dead Nohrian officer. "It's really not."

Stirring from her sleep, the absentminded archer yawned lightly before injecting herself into the conversation. "Sorry, what were we talking about again?" Setsuna inquired sleepily. "I must have dozed off at some point."

Smiling softly at the younger woman, the princess ran a hand through her hair. "Don't worry about it, Setsuna." she replied gently and as calmly as she could manage. "Go back to sleep."

"But I want to help, Lady Hinoka."

"But none of this would have been possible without you, baby."

To the astonishment of nearly everyone who met her, Setsuna, for all her airheadedness, clumsiness, and flights of fancy, was actually one of the most dangerous women in Hoshido. During their brief captivity, one of the guards had become a little too leery with her beloved liege for the archer's liking. By that night, Setsuna had managed to undo the ropes binding her wrists and free her fellow retainer before strangling the would-be predator as the Nohrians were distracted and terrified by the otherworldly sounds (and occasional sights) emanating from the castle, allowing them to free their liege and surviving comrades and all simply with a broken bowstring at her disposal.

"But all is not lost, milady." resumed Fujimoto. "A few Nohrians we interrogated mentioned a considerable supply convoy of weapons, armor, and assorted goods en route to the capital from Windmire. It should be passing near this forest in a week or so."

"Do you think us mere bandits, good sir?" inquired a quite-displeased Azama. "Because what you are suggesting is little more than banditry; most unbefitting a proud warrior of Hoshido, no?"

"We don't have much choice, Azama." Hinoka reminded sternly, stroking the once-again dozing Setsuna's hair. "We'll ambush the convoy, take what we need and distribute what we can't use to the people. With any luck, we should be able to make it north where we can figure something out."

Since his return to Krakenburg, Leo had settled into one of his old established habits of rummaging nightly through the castle's considerable libraries. No longer hobbled by either his cane or his father's prohibition on entering many rooms. What the prince could not deny was that much of what was new to him, while not necessarily pleasant, was never uninteresting.

"Hmph, good riddance to such a reprobate." muttered the prince, flipping through some of Iago's notes. "What the devil is this Konrad prattling on about anyway?"

"A reprobate though he may have been," began Leo's otherworldly mentor. "can you truly say that such knowledge could not be...useful in the right circumstances?"

"Hmm, of course it could be but I have my doubts about whether or not it should be done."
"But you are the chosen prince! The one destined to save Nohr from ruin with your strength and wisdom! Iago used said knowledge only as such because he was a reprobate, but your moral fiber and prudence will make great things possible."

In instances like these, Leo would be truly torn, finding his own morals and most deeply-held desires locked in battle constantly. While Iago was in fact, a reprobate for whom any death, no matter how painful and torturous, would be far better than he deserved and he was delving into some truly twisted things which the prince would have scarcely thought possible, his mentor's case about what exactly could be accomplished with such things in the right hands was sounding more and more appealing.

"You know what, you're correct." conceded the prince. "Thank you, Wise One, I always enjoy our conversations. And I think I will at least entertain this Konrad fellow, at least go to his laboratory and hear him out."

While she was (in a sense) home as well, Corrine found herself with fewer and fewer refuges. Granted, she'd heard the stories, but now she was only starting to get acquainted with just how toxic and treacherous the domain of politics, let alone those of Castle Krakenburg, could be, particularly concerning Leo's new right-hand men. She could tolerate the unpleasant Duke Bayern, the perpetually scowling and angry Duke Guillaume, hell, despite being completely and utterly uninterested either by the man or his proposals, she could even deal with Duke Durante and his constant amorous advances. But there was just something truly odious, truly malevolent about their leader, Duke Matteo of Toscana, that made the dragon princess feel like bathing even by being in his presence.

Yes, Corrine despaired at the fact that her allies in the new court were few and far in between as well. Camilla of course, was as adoring and doting as ever, but seemed increasingly prone to bouts of overpowering depression and Leo, never exactly the warmest fellow around, had become even more reclusive and inscrutable, burying himself in his research and council meetings, almost as if consciously avoiding her. Nonetheless, Corrine still managed an exhausted, sleepy smile for the individual she trusted and adored above all others as she shifted her lithe frame and frazzled azure locks off the dragon princess' body and into her arms.

"What is it with your obsession with my breasts?" Corrine inquired, half-giggling. "I swear, you're just like a baby!"

"They're just really nice, do you blame me?" asked Azura playfully in response. "Besides, it's a good reminder that you're not the only one who can bite when she's in the mood."

Giggling even further, the princess scarcely needing the prompting of her lover's fingers in her ashen hair to plant another kiss on her lips, afterwards taking several seconds simply to adore the other woman. Camilla was often called the most beautiful woman in the kingdom and Corrine (not without some awkwardness and discomfort) could, on a physical level, admit this. But as far as she was concerned, the woman in her arms with whom she enjoyed the post-coital glow, was truly in body, mind, and soul, the most beautiful creature ever to live and most beautiful creature who will ever live. Gods, what did I do to deserve a girlfriend like her, Corrine would often find herself thinking.

But much as always with their little dalliances, the real world had an irritating way of creeping back into the little world which they had carved out for themselves.

"Does Leo seem at all...different to you?" inquired the songstress. "I cannot point out exactly how or why, but something just seems kind of off with him."
"Well, he's under a lot of stress, isn't he?" replied Corrine, instinctively pulling Azura closer. "But yes, I do see what you mean. I just assumed it would pass, but while he claims to be fine, he just seems off. He seems to be avoiding me and when that's not possible, he's just been looking at me differently ever since Shirasagi."

"And he refuses to talk to anyone about it? Anyone at all?"

"Leo's never exactly been a chatterbox and he's usually too proud to mention something that's bothering him until it becomes a real issue."

"I see..."

From the one of sleepy contentment previously shared with her lover, Azura's expression shifted to one of mild concern. "Now that I think about it, he's been treating me differently as well." she remarked.

"Really?" her girlfriend responded. "How so?"

"Well, like you already said, it's as if he avoids most human contact if at all possible. But with me, on the occasions where he does, I swear he looks at me...oddly as well. I want to say it's contempt or resentment, or even...envy possibly? Then again, I ask myself, why exactly would he be jealous of me? He literally has the world at his fingers."

"Even though I've asked him a thousand times about it, he still won't tell me if anything is wrong or not. I'm just worried about him, that's all."

"Do you have anyone who could keep an eye on him for you. If so, you'd better find them fast; for whatever reason, he and Matteo are leaving for Hoshido tomorrow morning."

"Actually, yes I do. He may not be exactly thrilled about the destination, but tailing people without their knowledge is one of his specialties."

Under normal circumstances, Hana's home province of Mutsu would not usually be more than a week's ride away. Perhaps two if one was required to travel slowly for whatever reason. However, these were not normal circumstances, seeing as the swordswoman and her liege were obliged, much to Hana's frustration, to double back and trace circular routes more often than not as to avoid the odd Nohrian patrol. Still, the four and a half weeks of traveling had left the princess in more of an appreciative mood than she.

"It may sound selfish at a time like this." began Sakura wistfully, appreciating the late summer colors. "B-but I'm just glad that I can be here, alive with you to appreciate this kind of thing, Hana."

"Naturally, I feel the same, Lady Sakura." Hana replied, wearing a weary smile. "There is still much beauty in the world, even in times like these."

"And the people here are just as lovely too! And so hospitable! Remember when that big storm was about to hit us a couple of weeks ago? The village elder insisted we stay with them even with Nohr almost on top of them!"

"Well, northerners are known for two things; hearty cooking and hospitality."
Hana grimaced as a burned-out hamlet came into view, completely devoid of human life upon closer inspection. "Hospitable even to a fault." Hana finished grimly, instinctively clenching her blade tightly. Sakura, wishing to pay her respects to the Nohrians' latest victims, the swordswoman conceded, urging her along after a quick series of prayers. Something was wrong, very wrong and Hana could almost smell it. Continuing down the road another hour or so, by nightfall, Hana's acute sense of danger had been vindicated, the smoke from a couple of fires and the semi-inebriated whoops and shouts of celebration giving away the culprits of the earlier massacre.

Silently urging the princess behind a nearby thicket, Hana drew the Regal Blade, ready for action at a moment's notice. Almost immediately, a very sharp, powerful, but distinctly feminine screech of disgust pierced the night air. "And let me say it again!" Rinkah shouted. "Anything you want to put in my mouth, I'm going to rip off!"

"Come on!" plead one of the Nohrian pikemen drunkenly. "Why you gotta be like that? The guys in the other unit said these savage bitches are supposed to be easy!"

"Oh, ho! That's it, little man!"

With a mighty swing of her club, Rinkah sent the pikeman tumbling to the ground, soon to be deceased from his severe head trauma.

"Commander!" cried another Nohrian. "We've got a situation!"

"The savage is turning out not to be so harmless!" reported a third. "We need backup!"

The pikemen and two horsemen forming up, their commander, the higher-ranked rider scoffed. "So it looks like this uppity sow REALLY doesn't know her place!" he remarked haughtily. "Men! Do whatever you see fit to this savage slut to avenge poor Hasler! We're all gonna be rich once we bring her head to Lord Matteo!"

Alternating between audibly and semi-audibly cursing as she fell back, taking in her encirclement, fortunately for Rinkah, in the process of doing so, she walked past a certain thicket, into which she was dragged by Hana. "Who the-" she began. "Wait, Hana, Princess? You're alive?! But how?!"

Shushing Rinkah harshly, the swordswoman nodded to her princess as the signal to ready some arrows. "Keep your voice down! That doesn't matter right now!" insisted Hana. "How many are there?"

"Including that guy I just brained, about eighteen." Rinkah recalled. "You got a big plan or something?"

"Nothing too big. We can't go around them, so we'll just have to go through them! Fortunately, there aren't that many and their training and equipment seem basic at best. Just get me to their commander and protect Lady Sakura while I'm dealing with him. Once I do that, this lot should turn back into the mob they really are."***

Under the cover of the nearby foliage, Hana, Sakura, and Rinkah made their way out from under their initial refuge. At her retainer's signal, the princess let loose three more shafts at the Nohrian troop.

***"We've got bowmen!" cried the rider. "You three on me! I'll mow 'em down!"

"I've got this guy." said Hana steadfastly. "And one of the pikemen. Sound good?"
"Best thing I've heard in months." answered Rinkah with a smirk, her usual fire back in her demeanor.

Exactly as she promised, Hana did in fact, have the horsemans's charge well in hand. As his steed galloped in at ten meters and closing, Hana deftly maneuvered off to his right, relieving him of his dominant weapon arm as he fell from the mount before driving her blade through an exploit in his armor, ending his struggle once and for all. The swordswoman dealing with the spearman just as deftly, as (contrary to her initial appraisal) four other Nohrians closed in, Rinkah leaped in to cover Hana, bringing the combined force of her strength and existing inertia down onto his skull. The Flame Tribeswoman and retainer making short work of the three remaining pikemen and axeman, Hana motioned for her liege.

"Alright, Lady Sakura." she began. "I'm going to need you to do the same thing and then we're going to get away from this position as fast as possible."

"I understand." the princess responded, just as resolutely as she drew back her bowstring, letting fly a few more arrows.

Rinkah abruptly darting off towards their pre-designated position, Sakura fired three more arrows as to drive home the ruse further before Hana dragged her into a run.

"Where are those godsdamned archers?!" shouted one of the remaining Nohrians.

"Alright, they're coming northwards!" replied a second.

"Alright, then form up and move out!" cried a third. "They're not escaping this time!"

As the Nohrians closed in on an (contrary to their own appraisals) unoccupied position, under the cover of a forested position well-ahead of them, Hana motioned to her two companions to halt as the shimmering armor of a Paladin reflected against what dim light was available, the rider himself apparently handing down orders to one of his subordinates.

"Their commander!" she remarked. "He's guarded by a group of five. Lady Sakura, fire some more arrows at them. I'll take care of the rest!"

"Of course!" replied Sakura. "But won't that be r-really dangerous for you?!"

"Lady Sakura, please! What most people call 'dangerous' I call a training exercise!"

Even contrary to her own expectations with the weapon, after loosing several of her remaining arrows at the group, the princess managed to hit an exposed patch of skin on the second pikeman’s torso, sending him on one knee and his comrades in their general direction. While Sakura had watched her retainer practice her bladework at length, the speed and grace with which she managed to dispatch the Nohrians bearing down on their position, while extremely bloody, had a certain beauty to it, she thought. Of course, the performer of the dance of death did not exactly hurt her view of it as such either.***

The swordswoman herself closing in on the enemy commander was (rightfully so) quite terrifying for the enemy commander as well as his steed.

****"What are you doing?!" he demanded, regaining control of his steed. "I am Alfonzo, finest
"You could have spared me the fancy introduction." Hana remarked boredly. "All I see is another dead Nohrian bandit. I've made plenty of them tonight."

"How dare you, savage?!" he spat. "You insolent little c-"

With a kick of the steed's flanks, the beast descended on Hana's position with a pace to match his master's rage. Effortlessly blocking the incoming sword with her own, Hana used the inertia to push herself upwards and relieve the enemy commander of his head thanks to a graceful slash and an exploit in his armor, sheathing her blade with a flourish as she landed.****

The riderless horse lacking its now-burning-in-one-of-the-campfires war standard darting towards the survivors was, exactly as Hana had predicted, enough to see the seven remaining Nohrians into a disorganized rout, Rinkah and (particularly terrifyingly for them) Hana herding them against a cliff wall, their weapons drawn on them.

"So wait, what do we do with these guys now?" Rinkah asked. "I mean, it's not like we can take 'em prisoner-"

Without a word, Hana turned her blade on the first Nohrian, sending him to his death with a deep slash, doing away with his comrade to her left in a similar fashion.

"Hana, what are you doing?!!" cried Sakura. "Stop this at once!"

"Lady Sakura, we don't have a choice!" reminded the swordswoman bitterly, running another of the former pikemen through as Rinkah dealt with another. "They've seen your face and I heard their commander speaking as if he was familiar with one of Nohr's dukes! Besides, this is way too close to Mutsu for me to just let them go!"

"Or you could always just, you know, blind them." Rinkah reminded the princess in a very-matter-of-fact tone. "Even if they did find help, there's no way they'd be able to retrace their route."

Grimacing, Sakura relented, no small amount of displeasure in her expression. "V-very well. You have a point." she conceded. "But I take no pleasure in it."

Once the remaining enemy troops had been dealt with, Hana and Rinkah helped themselves to the camp's stores of provisions, Hana distributing water with (of course) Sakura receiving preference. As per the fiery tribeswoman's request, Hana relayed the whole sordid tale, from Fort Jinya and Hans' massacre(s), to their separation and assorted Nohrian atrocities, and finally, the battle with Corrine and Prince Xander in the Shirasagi throne room and their flight from the capital.

"That....was one hell of a story." Rinkah conceded. "It's not that I don't believe you, it just seems that the rumors were more fact than fiction."

Finishing a large gulp of water, Hana shot the other princess a quizzical glance. "What are you talking about?" she asked, somewhere between concern and anticipation.

"The Ice and Wind Tribes also have heard similar reports about Nohr's conduct ever since the war picked up, giving more credence to the other rumors that have been spreading in the past month or so."

Sakura swallowed nervously, aware on some level that this was not good news. "Oh, my." she said
meekly. "Wh-what sort of rumors?"

Rinkah's expression turned steely and contemplative. "Pretty much all of the tribes have been experiencing odd disappearances of their members with some regularity." she reported grimly. "It was just a few individuals here and there at first, but now it's gotten to the point where entire families and clans will just vanish into thin air."

"Any connections you guys know of?" inquired Hana, already half-sure of the response she was about to receive.

"Nohr. They all seem to be connected to Nohr somehow, whether through its criminals and assorted scum acting of their own accord or its army and tax collectors, the biggest rashes of them seem to be with its army however. Since he's trying to stay on their good side, Kilma of the Ice Tribe has been trying to squash the rumors among his own people, but the others aren't having it. Hell, the Wolf skin are said to almost be on the warpath; most of them are convinced Nohr kidnapped their chief for gods-only-know-what kind of sinister purposes. Since we're technically neutral, Father thought to have me investigate the rumors before someone starts a bloodbath. As you can see, that didn't work out so well."

Taking in all this information, Hana sighed with exasperation and exhaustion. Everybody knew that the Nohrian national character was more than a little...proud, so to speak and Hoshido was their blood enemy, so such treatment, while outrageous, was not exactly unsurprising. But why on earth would Nohr pick such fights with the other nations on the continent? Were they not about to have a new king with new ministers and policies? Whatever the case may have been, it was looking more and more like she, Sakura, and some other nations may have an enemy in common.

"Let's rest for a little while then press onward, it's not that much farther to Mutsu." Hana insisted. "Once we get to Tagajō, we can talk to my uncle and brother and see what we can figure out."

"Good suggestion!" congratulated Rinkah. "Father's always been tight with Lord Tomokane. I'm sure we'll be able to work something out. But with that said, you may be better off just leaving me behind."

"Why would we ever do that?!" asked a wounded Sakura.

Rinkah gave a grimace. "Well, you know how they operate." she reminded. "I'm basically marked for death now anyway."

"Hello!" called Hana incredulously. "The both of us are marked for death too! Certainly even more so than you!"

Chapter End Notes

Because what's a more romantic way to spend three weeks in hiding with your ex than kidnapping and interrogating officers from an invading army? And addressing the elephant in the room known as Cheve. The big, rapey, mass-murdering-of-your-own-people elephant in the room?

Also, I'm pretty proud that this chapter gave me an opportunity to do some
worldbuilding with the tribal and inter-tribal politics. After all, Hana and Sakura will need allies going into this thing and...you guys already got that I'm an Ike fan, right?
Flower Crown

Chapter Summary

Sakura and Hana grow ever closer as the swordswoman attempts to formulate a plan with her uncle Tomokane and brother Takeshi as the embers of resistance smoulder on across Hoshido, causing Leo to make a decision from which there may be no turning back. Meanwhile, in Windmire, his completely unexpected (and unwanted) marriage proposal aside, Corrine cannot help but notice something inexplicably sinister about Prince Regent Leo's obsessive new hobby - his flower garden.

Chapter Notes

*Blumenkranz [Music box ver.]

**Memory of Mom (FE9 OST)

***Puzzling Truth (FE9 OST)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hunting had been particularly bad with the war on and all. Hell, he'd even had to cross over to Nohr to continue to ply his trade with any regularity. However, Daichi found that certain Nohrian bigwigs, from Duke Bayern and his superior Duke Toscana to that creepy little man Konrad, would pay top gold for any Wind Tribe member unfortunate or stupid enough to wander into the grasp of him and his men. The latter two would pay even better for any kitsune survivors for whatever reason, living of course, so that made his job somewhat more difficult, but the payoff made the trouble all worthwhile. Better all those country bumpkins starve than him, Daichi always told himself.

"Finally, I can see it!" remarked the poacher's right-hand man. "The convoy! Looks like a good night of boozing and whoring for us!"

"For how difficult these four mangy bastards were to capture, the payment better be as good as that prick was promising." remarked Daichi brusquely

The men of the "hunting" party pursing their eyes against the setting sun for a better view of the convoy, a lone Nohrian rider approached their leader, examining the cages with a sneer.

"So I guess it was too much for the likes of you to even come up with a decent haul, eh?" said the Nohrian disdainfully. "Lord Matteo will be most disappointed."

"Fuck you, the rest are in tow." Daichi shot back. "Don't worry, your duke will get...whatever it is he hell he wants with these guys."

"Tch! You'd best learn to still your tongue in the presence of your betters, savage! Had you no official business with the duke, you'd already be introduced to the business end of my blade!"
Daichi's sidekick gave a light yawn. "Can we get this over with?" he whined. "More than anything I just want a bed and since the innkeepers are going to jack up-"

The man's complaints were abruptly silenced by an arrow to the throat, apparently from the elevated vegetation overlooking the pass.

The bandit cursing profusely as he motioned his men into some semblance of a battle formation, the Nohrian rider was in absolute shock. "Savages!" he cried. "We have savages attacking at the-"

The man was abruptly thrown from his steed by the ethereal outline of a rabbit, sending the beast into a panicked retreat away from the battlefield. As the rider drew his blade, desperately seeking out an opponent amidst the chaos of the poachers scrambling to take up defensive positions, he continued his display of bravado. "Come out, you cowardly vermin!" he shouted. "Face me like men instead of the-"

Much like Daichi's right-hand man, the Nohrian was silenced with an arrow to the throat, falling to one knee as the breath left his body with some resistance from him. However, the woman who had fired the deadly projectile, from her thicket hideaway, seemed quite pleased with herself.

"Oh, did I do that?" asked Setsuna mockingly, her lips curling into a lazy smile as she recalled the rider's taunts.

"Just beautiful! I could kiss you for that!" answered a beaming Hinoka, pecking the other woman on the lips. "I'll be right back! This shouldn't take long at all!"

As her ragtag group of escaped prisoners-of-war, surviving stragglers, and her own retainers engaged the bandits with the goal of gaining complete control over the pass, the warrior princess had designated one primary objective for herself; take out the enemy commander so as to demoralize and disorganize the bandit group. From there, the pass would be theirs and the Nohrian supply convoy easy pickings from there. The systematic Nohrian culling of pegasi after the capital's fall had, in a sense, left Hinoka at a disadvantage, not unlike fighting with a missing limb. While she was in fact, considerably less mobile, the bandit snipers were far less of a threat and by extension, she far more a threat to them.

But where was the enemy commander? Hinoka knew she saw and heard one of them conversing with-slash-being berated by one of the Nohrians. After a brief clash in which she speared one of the opposing sellswords in the face, Hinoka realized him to be a guard for a man. A man with sickly, greedy eyes and hair crimson as hers. A man who seemed less-than-pleased to see her.

"Oh, crap!" swore Daichi. "The Nohrians were supposed to have killed you!"

"Well, I'm alive and they didn't." the princess shot back through gritted teeth, twirling her spear menacingly. "And just what do you scum think you're doing anyway?"

"Just trying to make a living. Nothing personal. Wait a second...the Nohrians are coming! If I bring you to Matteo, I'll be the richest man in Hoshidan history!"

"Well, all the money in the world isn't going to be doing you much good where I'm about to send you!"
Daichi cursed his earlier eagerness to go on the hunt, as he'd left his club back at the hideout. While possession of weapons by "savages" was a summarily-capital offense as far as the occupation force was concerned, he'd wished he had possessed the foresight to chance it this time as he found himself facing the princess with a less-than-ideal weapon. Nonetheless, muttering the incantation scrawled on the scroll, the bandit sent a large, ethereal serpent sailing through the air at the spearwoman. Expecting this well in advance, Hinoka sprung gracefully into the air, easily avoiding the snake outline and, as she came down to earth, lodged her naginata in the bandit's chest cavity, causing him to hack up quite a bit of blood as he fell on his back.

"My beautiful reward..." Daichi croaked before expiring.

Sweeping the blood from the spear with a flourish, Hinoka readied the weapon once more. "Alright, who's next!?" she challenged.

"Er...Lady Hinoka...." replied Azama, looking quite distressed and utterly-serious. "We have a bit of a problem."

The cause of the monk's distress soon became apparent. While the princess had expected the convoy to be somewhat defended, what accompanied the convoy's rear was an entire column of Nohrian forces, with a heavy emphasis upon armor and cavalry, the latter closing fast as to complete the encirclement. From the Nohrian lines rode forth one of their paladins (a commander judging by his personalized armor and weapon), a permanent expression of cruel contempt visible under his helm and bushy, greenish-black mustache.

"Listen up, you sorry heathens!" he demanded arrogantly. "I am Pietro, one of the great kingdom of Nohr's strongest, most decorated generals! Now, if it were up to me, you swine would all be slaughtered like the vermin you are where you stand, as banditry is a capital offense without exception!"

"Without exception, you say? Then what of the rampant banditry committed by Nohrian forces since the war's beginning?" barbed Azama to murmurs of general agreement among the Hoshidan survivors. "To say nothing of the outrages committed against women and girls-"

The Nohrian general apparently took this (technically not untrue) barb as a great slight: Twirling the flame-red lance in his right hand, Pietro pointed its equally-fiery tip at the man to Azama's left, the poor soul immediately bursting into flames, his comrades and enemies alike grimacing at the pained, impotent, minute-long screams before he finally and mercifully expired.

"Care to impugn the honor of Nohr's brave soldiers any further, savage? Because I can make it last longer than that," he spat. "As I said previously, I'd see you slaughtered like the vermin you are were it up to me, but that is not the case today-"

"Wait, why is that?" inquired Hinoka. "What do you know?!"

"Impudent little-" sputtered a scandalized Pietro, shifting his steed to face the princess. "Didn't the beasts who whelped you teach you not to interrupt your betters! I ought to-"

"That's enough, Pietro. I can take it from here."

Dismounting the wyvern on which his escort had bought him, as Prince Leo came into focus, Hinoka felt somewhat more relief. She'd dealt somewhat with the prince and, while not exactly a
warm, kind man, she knew him to be stern, but generally fair. Nonetheless, there was something particularly disconcerting about his gait, tone of voice, and (particularly) the tome he clutched in his right arm as if it were his firstborn. "Really now, Princess Hinoka?" he said condescendingly. "My sisters spare your sorry life and this is how you repay our fair kingdom? With banditry such as this?"

"Well, you're not really giving us much choice, now are you?" the princess said through gritted teeth, ignoring the slight in the interest of her troops. "As far as I know, you've shown no interest in peace even though we're on our knees with Nohr's blade at our necks."

"So you truly intend to do this? Very well, and here I was-"

An unconsciously-summoned barrier blocked an arrow sent hurtling at Leo's chestplate, the prince conjured a ball of sickly-purple flame in his hand, sending it at the thicket from which it came. Stomping over to the projectile's origin, Leo scoffed with contempt as he kicked the woman who had fired it, picking up the weakened archer by her neck. "Well, what do we have here?" he said viciously. "I guess since you're all worthless in a straight-up fight, you savages inevitably resort to perfidy such as this. Perhaps proper recompense would be to drain her life itself from her body?"

Setsuna quite transparently in great pain from the dark magic draining her strength, Hinoka turned to her other retainer, his apprehensive tone met with her pleading one. "Wait!" she called, setting her spear down. "Lay down your weapons, everyone! Please, just don't hurt them! Don't hurt her!"

The Hoshidan survivors following suit, Leo scoffed at this display. "Why should I?" he replied coldly. "What's to stop me from putting her empty little head on a pike outside your capital to serve as a warning against further treachery from you people?"

"Please!" plead Hinoka, on the brink of tears. "She's all I have left, please just let her go!"

"Once again, what are you willing to offer in exchange for her life?"

"Me! I'll go as your hostage!"

The survivors murmuring among themselves in in confusion and concern, the monk tugged on Hinoka's collar. "Lady Hinoka, what are you thinking?!" Azama whispered urgently. "I realize that this has been difficult on you, but-"

"I know what I'm doing!" she insisted. "He's just putting on a show for his people. Once we're away from all these prying eyes, we'll actually have a chance to discuss an end to the war!"

"If you insist, milady. I shall do my best to keep Setsuna and this lot out of trouble in your absence."

"Very well." said the prince, abruptly dropping Setsuna to the ground. "Away with you, wench! Out of my sight! Before I change my mind!"

"But..." sputtered the archer, desperate to catch her breath. "Lady Hinoka..."

"Do what he says, Setsuna." the fiery princess said grimly. "Azama and I will be back for you in no time."

Taking several tentative steps toward the thick wood nearby, the archer turned balefully back towards her beloved liege and confidant, requiring several close calls with blasts from the prince's
new tome to follow suit and actually flee into the forest. "Now, princess." resumed Leo, casually approaching her. "We have just one more order of business."

"What's that? I don't understand." she responded.

Grabbing Hinoka by the nape of the neck, Leo, producing a syringe of some sort from his belt, jabbed her neck with the device, the princess quickly losing her balance before just as abruptly losing consciousness. "Matteo, send for Konrad and his men." the prince commanded. "It's not far and I'm not exactly sure I've done this correctly."

"At once, milord." said the duke dutifully. "Much as I may dislike him."

"Pietro! As you were! Dispose of these insolent savages at once!"

A crooked grin crept onto the paladin's face. "Your wish is my command, milord." he replied gleefully.

The flame-haired princess had been a warrior for some time now; the smell of death, of the dying and dead, while never exactly pleasant, was not an unfamiliar one. But there was just something that this dungeon reeked of, oddly familiar, but uniquely sinister, that made the hairs on the back of Hinoka's neck stand on end as soon as she came to, her accommodations a literal cage being gawked over by two quite unpleasant men.

"That meatheaded brute raved about what he witnessed down here, milord." remarked the first man, tall, thin, his haughty face fixed into a permanent scowl. "Are you absolutely sure-"

"Of course he is." responded the second man, bent and stocky with a low, nasally, sinister tone. "Lord Leo would not miss such an occasion for the world...After all, we almost never capture such a specimen..."

"Konrad speaks the truth, Duke Toscana." stated a third man, his voice stern, commanding, cold, and all too familiar to the princess.

"You!" Hinoka shouted accusatorially. "What did you do to me?! Where am I?! What did you do to my troops?!"

The Nohrian prince coming into focus better for Hinoka, the blond young man scoffed dismissively. "It's simple." Leo stated coldly. "Your roaches made the mistake of exposing themselves to the light, so I exterminated them to the last man. Isn't that what you do with this sort of vermin?"

"What?!" Hinoka cried, her heart sinking into her stomach. "You bastard! You promised they wouldn't be harmed!"

"No, I promised that I'd let the stupid little bint with the droopy eyelids free. You begged me for her worthless little life."

Shock, disgust, outrage, relief, and confusion all attacked Hinoka at once. Shock, disgust and outrage at the murderous treachery of her opposite number, the prince, relief at the news that at least one of her troops (incidentally, the most precious one to her) had escaped with their lives, and perhaps most of all, confusion at the source of this past perfidy and present abuse to which the princess was now subject.
"I don't understand it." she conceded. "Your father, I would expect this kind of thing from, but you? When she was with us, Corrine would talk about how kind and gentle you were."

The prince chuckled mirthlessly. "That's the interesting thing about getting older, is it not?" Leo posed rhetorically. "Whatever became of him at the end, I realized Father possessed more wisdom about the world than I had ever given him credit for. He knew that because this world is so cruel, the only thing you can avoid being taken advantage of is to show it cruelty in return."

"So that's the lesson you learned from so much time with someone as idealistic and gentle as Corrine? You know, when we met at Izumo and even outside of the castle, you were always kind of arrogant, but I got the sense that you were a decent person deep down. How do you go from that to this?"

An otherworldly purple ember briefly sparking in his right palm, Leo held the arm outstretched as if to grasp something, choking the breath from the princess for several seconds before she fell sputtering to her knees. "Shut the fuck up!" roared the prince. "How dare you judge me! You can't possibly know what I'm going through!"

"Er, milord." said Konrad fearfully, clearly afraid of being on the wrong end of the prince's new powers. "With all due respect, I must implore you to make a decision; this serum is very temperature sensitive..."

"Yes, of course." replied Leo gratefully as his incensed tone would allow as he took the syringe from his hands. "Thank you, Konrad."

The Hoshidan princess still weakened from both the sedative and Leo's punishment, remained on her knees, her shackled arm hanging lazily at her left. As Leo altered his line of sight between the syringe in his hand and the shackle holding Hinoka's arm, Leo was once again conflicted. This kind of thing had its origins in Iago's foul research (hence why a degenerate like Konrad was so eager to test it on a living soul) and injecting Hinoka with the serum could very well kill her, at the very least doing severe psychological damage to her. But the benefits of mastering such applications on humans could be almost limitless! Besides, Leo wondered, would Hinoka and her country's witch doctors really be doing much different with him were he at their mercy?

"I fail to see why you are hesitating, my boy." Leo's mentor whispered. "Her arm is right there...."

"I know, I know!" Leo insisted. "It's just..."

"Oh no, she almost certainly helped her sister to murder Xander, Elise, and all of your companions." lied the voice. "Listen to her hypocrisy, lecturing you about 'compassion!' Your beloved Corrine and Camilla spare her sorry life, only to repay them by helping Sakura with her murderous treachery! Is there a more vile creature in all the worlds?"

*Of course! Leo thought finally. It all made sense now! Of course Nohr's hereditary enemy would be inscrutably wily and duplicitous to call demons to do their dirty work in a desperate attempt to stave off their inevitable destruction! And not only that, thought Leo, this bitch had the audacity, the sheer, unadulterated gall to appeal to Corrine's kindness and naivete to help pull it off! And that, in Leo's mind, was the unforgivable part; death outright or any sort of torturous death found in the annals of Nohrian history were too good for Hinoka, only this serum would do. If she lived, she'd live, performing a valuable service for Nohr in the process. If she died, she died, Leo thought savagely,
yanking the princess to the edge of her accommodations with the chain.

Leo driving the syringe into the vein with considerably more force than necessary, he took a sort of grim pleasure in seeing the sickly, coppery serum leave the syringe and flow into the princess' body.

"What the hell did you do to me?!" she demanded. "Did you inject me with something?!"

"What does it matter to you?" responded Leo coldly. "Besides, you supposedly spent damn near all of your life trying to 'protect' Corrine from us. Now, this serum will let you protect Corrine from her actual enemies."

"What is this?..."

Already becoming violently dizzy and ill, the serum sent Hinoka to the cage floor in a fetal position, her breathing so light as to be almost inaudible, the three men attempting to discern such signs of life for the next few minutes.

"Is she-" began Matteo.

"It's possible, but she should not be." reassured Konrad, taking her pulse.

"If that's the case, then she really is even more of a duplicitous, cowardly weakling than I'd thought." Leo remarked savagely, staring down at the princess, kicking her. "Konrad, dispose of her however you dispose of dead savages."

These dismissive, dehumanizing words seemed to have a mildly enervating effect on Hinoka. Her breathing becoming slightly stronger and displaying mild tremors, the princess began to mutter lightly. "Ryoma...Takumi...Sakura..." she began lightly. "Ryoma...Takumi...Sakura..."

The researcher ecstatic at his "treatment" seeming to have the desired effect, as much as he would have disliked admitting it, Leo found himself more than a little intrigued as the princess continued reciting the names of her siblings like a mantra for a good five minutes in a low, distraught voice. However, her breath becoming stronger, Hinoka's voice eventually reached a pitch more mournfully infuriated as opposed to simply mournful. "Ryoma...Takumi...Sakura...." she continued. "RYOMA! TAKUMI! SAKURA!"

Her bloodshot, feral-seeming eyes shooting open, Hinoka sprang to her feet, screaming, grasping, and clawing wildly at her two tormentors, catching the off-guard Konrad by the throat, cutting off his airway for several seconds before Leo momentarily subdued her with a weak blast from Naglfar. This did little to deter her, as she momentarily went back on the attack, grasping and clawing futilely through the cage bars.

"What in the gods' name is wrong with her?!" inquired Duke Toscana. "It's as if she's a madwoman!"

"It seems the experiment was a success..." Konrad remarked with a nasally giggle, massaging his sore neck "It seems the feral serum WILL work on humans, even without transformation ability after all..."

For his part, the prince was more than a little impressed, giving the scene a self-satisfied smirk. This was, righteousness, this was justice, he thought to himself.

"Excellent work, Konrad." congratulated Leo. "I'll personally see to it you'll not want for any of your
"Oh, I'm not worthy of such flattery, milord." remarked the "scientist" obsequiously. "But I and all Nohr will be eternally grateful for your patronage."

"I have just one question: Can this...thing be utilized for military purposes?"

Particularly in light of recent events, the return of their probably one of their most famous native daughters to the province of Mutsu was a cause for celebration in a year which had bought little in the way of such. Especially heartening to the average person was the safe return of their princess, long-feared slain at Nohrian hands. However, in the lord's manor in the town of Tagajō, the atmosphere was truly ecstatic with joy.

"Oh, Hana!" cried a middle-aged woman, her unkempt, graying brown hair somewhat irritating her daughter in her embrace. "Thank the gods you're alive! I've been so worried, especially with the news from the capital! You're not hurt, are you?"

"Thank you, Mother." gasped Hana, semi-suffocating from her mother's grasp. "But I'm fine. Lady Sakura is safe and I can still fight, so I'm going to be alright."

A slightly older man with hair entirely greyed and a stony, but kind countenance, beamed at the swordswoman and the princess. "As was I, Hana, milady." he replied serenely. "Well met, Princess Sakura, how long has it been? You and my niece have grown into strong, courageous young women of whom all Hoshido can be proud."

"Oh, no." replied a half-scandalized Sakura. "It was all Hana's doing. Were it not for her, I would surely be-"

"Hey!" called out a tall, lithe man, his jet-black hair braided into a topknot. "There's my little sis! And Lady Sakura! It truly is a miracle!"

Affectionately ruffling the hair on Hana's scalp, the man exchanged a couple of playful punches with the swordswoman. "You know, Father and Uncle Tomokane always said you were destined to accomplish great things, and here you are! Rescuing our fair princess from the marauding Nohrian bastards! I call that something to go down in Hoshidan history!"

"Oh, you and your dramatic embellishments, Takeshi!" Hana barbed in return. "This is my duty! I was just doing my job!"

"Hey, Hana." interjected Rinkah, her tone somehow more neutral. "Mind giving giving me some introductions here? I'm kind of out of the loop."

"Oh, right! Of course!"

"You've already met my uncle." began Hana, gesturing at her respective family members. "My mother Akiko and my brother Takeshi."

The elder woman gave a tired, faint smile of recognition as her son continued. "Well, well, I get to meet the infamous Princess Rinkah?!" said Takeshi, his tone, while jocular, still managing to betray some awe. "Come to seek my hand in marriage?"

Rinkah scoffed, rolling her eyes. "In your dreams, guy." she retorted.
"Well, good! Because the wife would kill me otherwise!"**

With Hana more accustomed to her brother's sense of humor and Rinkah still unimpressed by it, Sakura nonetheless, managed a tired giggle much to Hana's relief.

"Ah, if it isn't Lady Rinkah." resumed Tomokane. "It's been years, hasn't it? How is Kikai?"

"He's concerned. Very concerned." said Rinkah urgently. "Concerned enough to send me here to investigate. About what Nohr's up to, about the rumors of strange disappearances among the tribes spreading like wildfire."

Stroking his beard contemplatively, Tomokane's expression quickly turned to one of grave concern. "Oh, dear." he said. "Perhaps we'd better discuss this in my study, away from any possible prying ears."

"Good idea," piped up Hana. "Besides, Uncle, there's something we need to discuss sooner rather than later and it's related to Rinkah's plight."

"Very well." replied the manor's lord. "Lady Sakura, this is sounding like it may be a matter of concern for you, as well."

"Actually, it's been a long day, and I'm q-quite tired-" began the younger princess sheepishly. "If it's alright with you all-"

"Ah, say no more, milady. Mother, could I ask you to show Sakura to my old room and remain with her for a while? This shouldn't take long at all."

Akiko beamed, her expression noticeably strengthened by the news of her daughter's good health. "Of course, dear." she replied serenely. "If that's alright with our princess."

"Of course, ma'am!" answered Sakura. "I-I'm just a guest in your home."

"So sorry to inconvenience you, Mother." said Hana. "If it's necessary, one of my old blades is in-"

"It shouldn't be!" cried an offended Takeshi. "With the war and all, I've got men patrolling the manor grounds day and night."

Their uncle having already departed for his study upstairs, the samurai took the opportunity to catch up further with his little sister. "So, how's that lovable son of a bitch Hinata doing anyway?" he inquired.

Hana closed her eyes, gritting her teeth. "He died an honorable death defending his liege and fellow retainer from the Nohrian army." the swordswoman reported bitterly.

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear that. At the very least, he went out with his honor. Hope he got to take a few of the arrogant bastards with him as well."

From the deflated tone with which her brother replied, Hana knew it was a wise choice to omit the gory details surrounding his old friend's death; apparently, a group eight or so Nohrians got in in their heads that Hinata spent his final moments leering at one of "their women." The fact that they gouged out Hinata's eyes before putting him out of his misery was the least of his concerns. They even got
kudos from that bald, murdering degenerate, Hana fumed internally!

***As the trio entered Tomokane's study and Rinkah explained her father's grave concerns about the situation with Nohr and the tribes, the lord of the manor returned to his earlier grave countenance. "Hm, that does bode ill." he confirmed seriously.

"It's not like I had a choice." Hana uncharacteristically snapped. "It was either them or us and you've heard what they've been doing to the neighboring provinces!"

"And don't forget, Hana and Princess Sakura saved my life." Rinkah defended. "If it weren't for them, right now I'd be-"

"Do not misunderstand me, Hana, I'm not blaming you." confirmed the older gentleman, contemplatively stroking his beard. "You carried out your duty to your liege to the best of your ability in difficult circumstances. Even more disconcerting to me is Rinkah's report. If even being aware of it, her status was not even enough to deter these brigands from attempting to outrage her and their commander spoke the truth, it sounds as if influential players in Nohr are offering bounties to their soldiers for these killings."

"Why are you surprised by that at all, Uncle?" Takeshi asked scornfully, turning to the princess. "No offense, but they consider you guys in tribes to be on an even lower level than us Hoshidans."

Rinkah grimaced. "No apology is required." she replied matter-of-factly. "Because it's true. You know how they keep calling and treating you all like animals of some kind or another? Yeah, we're exactly insects to them; animals can at least be useful to them for a little while. Although, a few are in denial about this, assuming that we'll be raised up by helping them tear you guys down. Poor deluded bastards."

Retiring to his desk chair, the manor's lord linked his fingers, focusing intently. "With this in mind, we must be prepared to defend ourselves further. Even after the capital's fall and their prince's rise, Nohr has shown little interest even in a punishing peace settlement." said Tomokane resolutely. "Takeshi! Gather up your finest men and order the most able to devise a new training regimen! Have your most trusted scouts scour the province for any weapons and usable materials. This cannot wait until morning!"

"At once, Uncle!" replied the samurai proudly.

"Hana." he continued urgently. "All of Nohr will have heard of Princess Sakura's escape and will doubtlessly be howling for her blood. If protecting her is your first priority, then you must seriously consider taking her outside the country. Depending upon how things develop with Nohr, you will likely have to go abroad and seek the aid of the tribes and remaining neutral nations. Even though it's going to be kind of lean this year, don't worry about the harvest."

Hana beamed confidently. "Of course!" she answered, her tone matching her expression. "I'd do anything to protect her! Also, I can help with the harvest. You're short-handed anyway."

"If you do have to take Sakura outside of Hoshido, that actually works well for me." affirmed Rinkah. "It's highly doubtful Nohr would attack the Flame Tribe lands outright and I have to give my report to Father anyway."

As Tomokane dismissed the trio and Rinkah retired to meditate, Takeshi, before setting off on his mission, decided to offer his sister some advice in his trademark manner. "Hey, you still like cute
things, right? he inquired.

"Of course, why do you ask?" replied Hana as her brother had suddenly sprouted a third eye.

"Well, then go get her, champ!" he insisted with a wink. "You know, the one you had Mother look after during the meeting."

Hana's face turned red as her palms as she grabbed her brother aggressively by the shoulders. "What in the world are you talking about?!" she said indignantly.

"Oh, come on, Hana." her brother continued in a tone managing to mix levity and seriousness. "Mother, Uncle, and I have always known you were a little....different from the other girls. And I don't mean the sword thing either."

"Alright, fine! I admit it! I like women! You happy now?!"

"It's not so much about me being happy; you're my baby sister! Since we've all lost so much, I just want you to gain something from all this."

"It's not that simple, you idiot! Sakura is my liege, my best friend! I can't just- What about the family-"

"If you're worried about the family name, don't be, because I've got giving Father an heir or three well in hand. Besides, It's pretty clear she likes you anyway."

Releasing her brother without another word, Hana started back to her old room, a hundred different thoughts racing through her head at once. Of course that idiot thinks it's so easy! He's Father's heir! He literally just took a local girl whom he'd always had a crush on as his wife, and he could do that! With a master and a servant, let alone childhood friends of the same sex, (while not exactly frowned upon by virtue of their culture and social class) it was entirely different!

Hana sliding back the screen door to her old room, she gave a slight blush to find Sakura and her mother chatting away like old friends.

"So polite, ladylike and charming, isn't she?" Akiko inquired, passing her daughter.

"Y-yes, she is, Mother." Hana replied uncharacteristically sheepishly.

"So, Hana." began the princess. "What did you, your brother, and Rinkah talk about with your uncle?"

Free from prying ears, Hana gave a slightly sanitized version of her conversations with Takeshi and her uncle, omitting the conversations about the Battle of the Great Wall and Rinkah's description of the common Nohrian worldview.

"More running?" the princess asked. "B-but so many people are still suffering here!"

"Milady, I admire your spirit greatly, but we may not have much choice." plead Hana. "And besides, Rinkah has to report to her father anyway, and it's not like we'll be able to hold out against Nohr without help. Besides, even they won't pursue you into the tribes' lands."

"I suppose you're right, Hana. But if what Rinkah says is true, do you really think there will be
another w-war?"

"As far as I know, Lady Sakura, the war is still on."

Blowing out the lantern in search of some much-needed sleep, the room illuminated only by the moonlight, Sakura noticed something troubling her; her retainer lying in on the floor as to impede the entrance.

"Hana, what are you doing?" she asked gingerly, seeking not to second-guess her guardian.

"Oh, this?" replied Hana as she stretched. "Something Saizo drilled into all of us when we're protecting someone. It's to impede potential intruders."

"But you'd be sleeping on the floor! This is your room!"

"I'll be fine, Lady Sakura! I've slept on the ground and given you our bags, remember?"

"W-well, why don't you sleep up here with me, Hana?"

"No, I couldn't do that-"

"Hana, I insist. If you don't, I'll just come down there with you."

Blood flow quickening throughout her body, Hana blushed deeply as her two dueling inner voices put forth suggestions.

"Come on, what's the harm? You used to do it all the time!"

"Yeah, when you were children!"

A few moments more of this (increasingly explicit) bickering with herself and Sakura looking so serene and inviting, Hana's choice was clear as she took up the invitation, taking a place at the opposite end of the futon. "Oh, fuck it, you only live once." she told herself.

The next morning, after Hana had completed her sword training, she found it to be quite helpful to keep both her mind and body occupied by something not related to the war. Helping with the harvest even seemed to lift Sakura's dour spirits somewhat. But nonetheless, this was not exactly foolproof. At noon or so, Hana placing down a basket of grain, noticed something, behind a great oak tree, her liege weeping. Racing to her side, Hana took the princess in her arms. "Lady Sakura!" she exclaimed. "What's wrong?"

Sakura sniffed. "Oh, Hana, I'm so sorry you had to see me like this!" she said, wiping some of the tears from her eyes.

"Don't apologize to me, Sakura! Just tell me what's wrong!"

"It's-it's just when I think about Ryoma, Hinoka, and Takumi, I just think- M-maybe if I were stronger, I could have prevented this. I could have saved at least someone's life!"

"Sakura, listen to me! You are strong! Probably the strongest person I know! Being strong isn't just about being powerful, it's about having the courage to get up and keep going no matter what the world throws at you!"

"Oh, Hana..." the princess said once more. "I can't be queen! What kind of a princess runs away
from her own people when they need her most? I don't deserve any kind of crown."

"Oh, Sakura..." the swordswoman said balefully, checking their surroundings. "Wait right here! Don't go anywhere."

Fortuitously, the clearing possessed a variety of flowers and suitable branches for such a project. Gathering several flowers, the swordswoman took some loose strings from the old rags she wore for the harvest and bound them onto the semi-circular branches, fashioning a crown of sorts. After ten minutes or so, Hana returned to the great oak, her liege awaiting exactly as she'd instructed, the princess beaming at the gesture. "Ta-dah!" Hana introduced proudly.

"Oh, Hana, it's beautiful!" the princess replied. "Thank you!"

Placing the crown of flowers on her head, Hana smiled just as proudly.

"Fuck Nohr!" she remarked. "No matter what anyone says, you'll always be my queen, Sakura."

Normally recoiling at salty language, whether from her brothers or Hana herself, Sakura managed a genuine smile, followed by a giggle of joy.

"That's what I like to see!" Hana said with an even wider smile.

None of the members of the former regency council were exactly pleasant to deal with for Corrine, but the sheer arrogance and toxicity of his personality made Duke Matteo of Toscana truly one of the most sickening individuals in Krakenburg, in Windmire, and probably the world, even for the princess' forgiving nature.

"I don't know milady." said the duke said airily. "The prince-regent absolutely adores you, but Albrecht, my man on the ground, agrees with the consensus."

"And what might that be?" inquired Corrine, bracing for some nastiness or another.

"That for all your prowess with the blade, that you have a reputation for being soft on the savages."

"Must you honestly refer to them as such?"

"See. This is exactly what I mean! The reports of you going out of your way to avoid inflicting casualties upon them are numberless! I even remember the times you protested Sir Hans dealing with the vermin as they ought to be dealt with!"

It was true, she told herself bitterly. Countless innocent lives had been lost in her misguided attempts to bring peace by enabling naked aggression and ruthless, murderous powermongering for so long. Hell, she'd even unable to keep literal criminals from terrorizing innocents in the name of Nohr so long as they were useful to her "father."

"Look, Duke Matteo." she said wearily. "I don't like you, and you certainly do not like me. But we both have an interest in building something better from the ashes of this war."

"Oh, fine, fine." conceded Matteo, eager not to have his motives probed any further. "I suppose I can work something out, see if he has an opening."

"Thank you! I promise, you will not regret this!"
"But let me make one thing clear, milady. There'll be no special treatment for you this time around. You will follow the directives handed down to you both by Albrecht and the prince to the letter. Oh, and speaking of Lord Leo, he wishes to see you in his garden as soon as possible."

"Hmm? What about?"

"I merely follow orders, milady."

Matteo taking his leave much to Corrine's relief, as the princess made her way to her "brother's" study, she wondered what could have possibly merited such an indirect formality. Still, the facility annexed to Leo's study was a sight to behold, almost dreamlike with its pane glass ceilings and exotic flora. For the past two months or so, Leo had been ordering exotic plants from across the continent, forming a personal greenhouse of sorts. As it helped him deal with his newfound stress and losses of Xander, Elise, and (presumably if Azura's suspicion was correct) Nyx, Corrine approved of his new hobby immensely. Finding the garden's master tending to a particularly rare type of Hoshidan tree, Corrine tapped him on the shoulder. "You wanted to see me, Leo?" she asked.

*Turning from his project to face her, the prince gave one of the few genuine smiles he had in months. "Ah, Corrine." he said peacefully. "You came."

"Of course, I did, why wouldn't I? Gods, Leo, I'd heard about this place, but it really is so beautiful."

"Indeed, it's almost dreamlike. Of course, both things could be said about something else here."

"What do you mean- Oh-"

Strolling casually over to some nearby bushes, Leo began to trim, ever-so-gently, some spare branches. "Yes, the garden is beautiful." he repeated. "But it is also a lot of hard work. It must be cultivated, watched, and nurtured. People are much the same way."

As he made his way to a very iconic Hoshidan tree however, his expression turned to one of subtle, inexplicable darkness as he removed a cherry blossom from its branch and the flower which (oddly enough) almost seemed to be guarding it with its stem and petals. "But there are sometimes things which must be removed," he continued, an ever-so-slight hint of murderous rage in his tone as he tore both cherry blossom and flower to shreds before burning them in his palm. "So that the rest of the garden can thrive or even survive at all."

His expression abruptly flipping back to one of levity, Leo approached the silver-haired princess, producing a bouquet of roses from behind a bush. "And these, are for you." he said presenting the bundle to Corrine.

"Oh, Leo, they're beautiful!" marveled the princess. "But why?"

"Corrine, I've something to ask you. You are fond of me, yes?"

"Of course, Leo! You're one of my favorite people in the whole world. Why would you even ask that?"

"Because there's something I've been thinking long and hard about. I know we've had a most...unusual relationship, but I must confess something."
Corrine felt her heart leap into her throat as the prince produced a small square box from some compartment or another on his armor. Oh, gods, she thought. He can't really mean that?

"Corrine, I would be most honored if you would become my queen." the prince said proudly, opening the box to reveal one of the finest, most substantive diamond rings she'd ever seen in her life. "Because I am wildly, madly in love with you."

Corrine swore she could hear her heart skip a beat. While everyone knew that there was no blood relation, they had in fact, been raised as brother and sister. Furthermore, in Nohrian culture, especially among nobles, it was simply not done for a lady to turn down a proposal such as this with phrases along the lines of "I just don't like you that way." or "I just don't like any man that way."

Seeing the great length to which he had gone and the emotional investment which he had placed in the occasion, the dragon princess resolved to let him down easy.

"Oh, Leo." she began tentatively. "This is so wonderful! You're so wonderful! But I'm sorry, I can't marry you."

"Is it because we're siblings?" he said, disappointment audible in his face and tone. "Everyone knows that you're 'adopted,' everyone! You're worried about the rumors and slanders, I get that. Well, when I'm king, I'll have any tongues who want to slander my queen fucking ripped out and-"

"I'm so, so, so sorry, Leo, but-"

Abruptly turning from his would-be bride, the prince closed his eyes in furious contemplation. "I see." he said tersely. "So there's someone else?"

"No, that's not it!" protested Corrine.

"I'm not a fool, Corrine. Please...just leave me be for now."

Taking her leave of her "brother," the princess felt a dark cloud of guilt hanging over the rest of her day as she left the future king to his solitude. Leo for his part, would have simply returned to his garden to wallow in his sorrow if not for one innocuous feature of it. Both the reflecting pond and the slow drip drip drip of the miniature waterfall seemed to be inexplicably taunting him for whatever reason. As if teasing him about something dear which it had taken from him and would never ever give back. A minute more of this was too much for the prince, roaring in fury as he hurled one of the considerably-sized rocks into the pond.

Chapter End Notes

Since I'm down a good number of the main cast members just by the sheer nature of this AU premise, I thought "screw it, I'll just use some of the capturable units" for assorted bandits, scum, lowlifes, and chapter "bosses." Also, yes, that's basically what (in)famous Nintendo character I think Daichi is on the level of. Like with Hana, it didn't start out as a reference, but when I wrote Hinoka's line to Setsuna (FFS, I had her quoting Steve Urkel before I noticed) and read it back, I just had to follow through with it. Also, unlike a lot of people, I don't really have anything against Azama (I actually enjoyed his "designated troll" role), but I just can't write for him and have it sound unique because- Well, if you've played Tales of the Abyss or consumed any of the related media, you know damn well who he comes out sounding like.
I know I said the chapter titles are (mostly) named for tracks from FE OSTs, but I'll make exceptions for songs with which I'm absolutely obsessed with and are appropriate for major characters; Since apparently when Hana gets a certain dragon's help, she's basically Sephiroth, an irregularly named chapter about Leo, well.... As implied before, I am in fact, obsessed with this song and the character it represents in its own series. Oh, please, purify me mommy! But that's beside the point right now.

It's also me being a language nerd, since Blumenkranz can be read as "flower wreath" or "flower crown." Another reference to Hana and Sakura being adorable. Also referring to Leo's twin obsessions with becoming more powerful and hatred for Sakura ("Whether I like it or not, I must pursue the enemy") and Hana by extension. While Corrine (correctly) considered it part of his behavior becoming more and more bizarre, you can all recognize the symbolism of Leo ripping a sakura leaf to shreds and the flower that seems to be protecting it.

Funnily enough, Sapphire's English cover of the song, as opposed to the sinister implications with Leo, matches pretty well Hana serenading singing to serenading Sakura about their situation.

Finally, you see why I added one of the tags. Corrine tried to let him down gently, what with her being in lesbians with Azura, but what did you really expect? Look at who I have Leo carrying a torch for and look at his new boss. Of course he's getting Anankosblocked!
Who's the Terrorist?

Chapter Summary

Leo sends the feared and hated Nohrian general, Pietro the Savagekiller, to Hoshido to as part of his directives "for the suppression of all banditry and terrorism in the new eastern territories," Kaze learns first hand that trust once lost, is nigh-impossible to regain, Corrine becomes more and more disillusioned with Nohr's civil and military bureaucracies, Flora's frustration with her father's intransigence comes to a boil, and the time for Hana to decide whether to defend her home or spirit her liege away to parts unknown approaches rapidly.

Chapter Notes

Another day, another chapter irregularly titled after a song with which I'm obsessed. Also known as the theme of the entire fic basically. Technically, this title would fit best with Takumi or especially Scarlet, but yeeeaah, fuck you Hans. Fuck you even worse than your brother from another mother Valter.

But anyway, while the entire technically song fits our three (so far) leading ladies (Hana, Sakura, and Rinkah), I felt for this situation, the one of the three verses fits each of them particularly well.
- 1st verse = Hana ("You're killing us like you've killed our ancestors, you want me to go to the law, what for?! You're the witness, the lawyer and the judge! If you're my judge, I'll be sentenced to death!"")
- 2nd verse = Sakura ("You've killed my loved ones, now I'm all alone. My parents driven out, but I will remain to shout out! I'm not against peace, peace is against me. It's going to destroy me, erase my culture.")
- 3rd verse = Rinkah ("You see our blood like that of dogs. NOT EVEN! When dogs die, they receive sympathy, so our blood is not as valuable as a dog's. NO! My blood is valuable and I will continue defending myself even if you call me a terrorist")

Really, if you just put "DAM - Who's the Terrorist?" into your search engine of choice and look up the lyrics, it'll be really obvious, but anyway:

*Phendrana Drifts [Remastered] (Metroid Prime OST)

**Hidden Sorrow (Tales of Symphonia OST)

***Misery in Hand (FE14 OST)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Alright, form up, you lot!" cried the staff officer. "Sir Pietro will be arriving any second!"

Those clad in the purple-black armor, regular or not, who required any further instruction could be counted on one hand, organizing themselves into perfect, single-file rows as to await their prince and
his general, Pietro the Savagekiller. As the great doors of Krakenburg creaked open, the prince-regent had at his side a severe-looking man some forty years of age, his spotless black armor and immaculately trimmed mustache contrasting with his scarred visage. "I trust they are to your liking, milord?" he inquired.

"Excellently done, Pietro. Send my regards to your staff." congratulated Leo. "The men I've allotted you should be more than enough to deal with this rabble aligned against us, but it seems that more than a few of Mikoto's rats have failed to accept the inevitability of the situation. I trust you are up for the task?"

The knight cracked a crooked grin, giving a light bow. "Not to worry, my liege." he assured. "I live for this sort of thing, after all. You are of course, well aware of how I received my sobriquet."

"That's precisely why you're just the man for the job, Pietro. If things should however, take an unforeseen turn, just send word back. Hans and his men are stationed at the border to provide reinforcement where necessary."

"Milord, you wound me! That you should think so lowly of my skill that I would require a common bandit to come to my rescue! No, for your coronation gift, I shall bring you the brat's head and the scalps of any foolish enough to follow her into this abyss."

"But Father, please!" plead Flora. "We cannot afford any longer to ignore these whispers about Nohr!"

The Ice Tribe chief's expression curled into a scowl. "Again with this nonsense, girl?!!" growled Kilma. "Need I remind you about our situation regarding Windmire? About how you spent years there as a literal hostage to keep me in line? We are already on the thinnest of ice possible with them and with Prince Leo ascending to the throne, we have a golden opportunity to prove our loyalty to them! If those old fools Fuga and Kikai want to get their peoples slaughtered to the last man, woman, and child by Nohr over hearsay, that is their problem, but I'll be damned if I'll risk the survival of our people over some high-and-mighty Hoshidan propaganda!"

"Father, this is no longer about 'kernels' of truth to said rumors! Entire clans do not just vanish into thin air of their own accord!"

"We are not having this conversation again, Flora! I'm aware of how difficult it must be for you to lose your sister. It is even more difficult for me losing my daughter. But we cannot afford to go off on some fanciful, foolhardy quest against Windmire purely due to your grudge against them which we can scarcely afford. You know fully well how they deal with any sort of insubordination."

"With all due respect, Father, if you wish to see grudges against Nohr among our people, my feelings towards them do not even register by comparison."

Flora sighed in frustration as her father's expression remained stony and resolute. "Flora, I do not care about the wild-eyed, fanciful stories the Hoshidans and Flame Tribe have cooked up to save their own skins, but there will be no betrayal of Nohr as long as I am chief, and that is final. Do you understand, Flora?"

"Yes, Father." Flora lied. "I understand."

"And don't even think about going behind my back by sending that little puppy dog of yours, whatever his name is, on some fanciful quest to look for proof which does not exist."

"Yes, Father."
As Flora exited her father's dwelling with a light bow, she took several steps before acknowledging the figure lounging against an evergreen tree. "So I suppose you heard all that?" she inquired, knowing well the answer.

The figure, a rugged, somewhat-scarred man her own age with lime-green hair, merely scoffed with disgust. "Stubborn old bastard's going to be the death of us all." he remarked. "How many times have you had that exact conversation with him? And the kidnappings ALWAYS pick up regardless."

"Florian, Father just wants what's best for the tribe."

"So do you! We both know damned well that Nohr is behind these disappearances. Gods only know what kind fucked-up motives are behind them!"

"Even so, he is correct about one thing; even if we are against his unquestioning quiescence to them, any rash actions we take could very well lead to disaster, Florian."

"What, you don't trust me, the Champion of the Ice Tribe, to protect you?"

"No, it's just I don't trust you to defend all of our people everywhere. Nohr's resources far outstrip what we could even dream of scraping together and as much as you like to think otherwise, you're NOT invincible. Let's face it, you've always been kind of careless."

Florian gave a toothy grin. "Haven't been to Mount Garou lately, have you?" he inquired half-facetiously. "You know Lupina, their acting chieftainess? She's been spitting fire for weeks now; she's damn near ready to take her entire pack and storm Windmire for what they've done to her brother. And you say I'M unnaturally hot-headed."

"Oh, dear." Flora remarked heavily, her face curling into a pensive expression not-unlike that of her father. "What did they do to him?"

"No one knows for sure. A bunch of rumors mainly. All anyone knows is that it can't be anything good. While I obviously don't have any proof, I'd bet my best blade it's got something to do with all the disappearances as of late."

Flora shut her eyes tight, attempting to process all the disparate information into some sort of reasonable plan of action. She'd never been at all passion-driven like her sister, but methodical, careful, and calculating. Yes, her father had a very good point about their tense situation with their overlords and that any retribution for insubordination would be swift and brutal, particularly after the mercy they had been shown in the past year alone. However, the exact same rumor about the modus operandi of the supposed perpetrators and victims alike does not simply spread across an entire continent among very disparate peoples in the space of a couple of months without a good deal of truth behind said rumor, a fact which Flora could not ignore in good conscience or the interest of the tribe.

"Father will send me to Windmire to represent him at Prince Leo's coronation." she informed at last. "I figure we could manage a detour or three on our return trip."

The hero grinned mischievously. "Well, well, how devious of you, good girl Flora!" he barbed. "I approve."
"Yes, and if it's absolutely necessary, we should be able to slip pretty easily past Nohrian lines into Hoshido. It will be dangerous, but-"

"Sounds good to me!"

"Finally, if I'm unable to talk to her before, during, or after the coronation festivities, if all else fails, if word from the merchants' guild is true, we should be able to find Lady Corrine in-"

Florian's expression turned stony and hateful at the mention of, his counterpart, the Nohrian champion's name. "Fuck her." he spat. "Fuck her, we can do this without the bitch."

Flora simply rolled her eyes at her childhood friend's mule-headedness. "In case you hadn't noticed, our status with the Nohrians is not so high to begin with." she reminded condescendingly. "Particularly mine. Lady Corrine is our only link to that world and probably our best chance to find out some of its dirty secrets. And you just dislike her because you lost to her, Florian."

"So I can't dislike her for that reason too? Need I remind you about her tendency towards indulging monsters so long as she shares some twisted 'familial' affection for said monster? Like that bitter, twisted, power-hungry old shell of a man named Garon?"

"Yes, I kind of agree with you, but come on, be rational: What would you have really done in her position?"

"The very second I got strong enough, I'd somehow get him alone in the woods, run him through with the best sword I could get my hands on and never look back! Judging by some of the rumors about the last years of his life, it would have been doing him a kindness; a mercy killing."

"Florian-"

"That whole country is about to collapse in on itself due to its own corruption; a demon like him doesn't run or ruin a country like that all on his own. You mark my words, Flora: She's gotten too used to the monster-indulging act and will do it again. Mark. My. Fucking. Words."

The hero rising up and stalking away from his shade, Flora meditated on the harsh words of her tribesman. Surely a man so cruel and almost-inhumanly ruthless in the highest heights of power could only be a (at the very most) once-in-a-lifetime curse?*

"But Duke Guillaume, I truly do not see the need for this kind of thing!" plead Corrine "Is it not needlessly cruel?"

The duke jingled once more the considerable bag of gold handed to him by a fellow Nohrian noble as his narrow, angular face contorted towards the princess in disbelief as the expressions of eight young Hoshidans chained and manacled behind him ranged from scowls of defiance to those of depressed resignation. The four women however, all wore expressions of abject terror and despair.

"I really do not believe you understand the game, milady." said the duke with contempt, attaching the sack to his belt. "I am providing a good for my fellow landowners which will stimulate the economy, bringing more benefit to our people and country. How could you be opposed to that?"

"I'm not! Never! But how can you-"

"And need I remind you how these arrogant savages so selfishly refused to share their bounty with
us Nohrians? As far as I'm concerned, we are owed such compensation for their intransigence and hubris. And besides, it's not like there's any shortage of them. Remember during the war, however many we killed, there were always five more to replace them? And look at it this way: They would certainly be doing the exact same thing to us were we in their position, if not worse. And besides, the ones we put to work in Nohr will at least get some culture in them unlike these poor unwashed slobs."

As if grasping at an invisible neck, Corrine gestured in frustration before sighing aggressively. "Can you at least ensure they'll be treated humanely?" she inquired.

The duke shot the princess a confused, it's-really-not-my-problem sort of glare. "Yeah, I'm sure." he fibbed. "Now if that'll be all, milady, I have more very important business to attend to."

Deciding it wise to leave before she said something she could not take back, the princess collected Azura and showed them out of the commandeered estate. After the incident in Leo's garden two weeks prior, Corrine had actually looked forward to her assignment in Hoshido, the prince's moodiness and thinly-veiled hostility towards his azure-haired stepsister becoming just that oppressive. While granted the rank of general and theoretically only second in rank to Dukes Toscana and Bayern, ever since her arrival, Corrine had found her efforts to make the occupation somewhat less harsh on the average Hoshidan were seemingly blocked at every turn; from attempting (and failing miserably) to keep the list of capital crimes confined to truly heinous acts such as murder to the mundane things such as maintaining morale ("I hope I get transferred soon." went a common complaint among her troops. "The general is such a buzzkill! I hear Sirs Pietro and Hans don't give a rip about what you do to the savages!" went another), everything at play seemed to be working against her.

Already well-aware of her presence, the green-haired ninja made an abrupt about face, giving Corrine a light bow. "Lady Corrine." greeted Kaze. "How went your meeting? I would have been there myself, but as you're already aware, people like me...aren't really allowed in places like this."

"The duke continued his buying and selling of Hoshidan slaves as she plead against it." Azura replied for her girlfriend, uncharacteristically bluntly. "How do you think it went?"

"Azura!" protested a scandalized Corrine.

"That's exactly what it was, Corrine. There's no way we can whitewash this."

Kaze shut his eyes briefly, meditating on his thoughts. True, Lady Corrine had saved his life, putting her own on the line to do so and he genuinely did believe in her ideals about how the world should work. But the rest of the kingdom, on the other hand, was a different story: He could deal with some of the comments ("Does it do tricks?") , but constantly being referred to as "it" or "pet savage" was quite grating, to say the least, to say nothing of the fact that there was little, if anything he could say to those who outranked him in protest.

"Yes, it is...unfortunate, milady." Kaze stated. "I was not aware that such attitudes were so prevalent and once again for my earlier incompetence. It was almost as if Prince Leo expected to be followed."

Corrine managed a weary smile and sighed. "You needn't apologize, Kaze." she said. "You did the best that you could with what you had available. If only Leo knew; he would put a stop to all this."
"It would be wise to keep a log of such abuses." said Azura grimly. "If the reports come from you, Leo will have no choice and since we'll be in Windmire for his coronation soon, it is particularly imperative."

"Lady Corrine, if it pleases you, I would like to search the area around which I lost track of Prince Leo for any clues as to his activities."

As she strode about the Hoshidan capital with her two companions in tow, Corrine took some slight solace in the beginnings of some reconstruction efforts to the heavily-damaged city. However, something inescapable inevitably dampened any hopefulness in the dragon princess as she took in the average person's expression. Without fail, gone were the contented, lively, serene expressions she had witnessed when she was first welcomed home by her mother. In their stead, the average man, woman, and even child now wore expressions betraying some combination of despair, terror, dread, resignation, and anger, one or two being the most prominent depending upon the individual, violent anger particularly common among those who dared face her. These however, were rare, as the consequences for failing to "show proper respect to ones superiors" could be very harsh, illustrated quite well as the trio reached the city square.

As a crowd of Hoshidans read-slash-viewed a series of large, brand-new signposts with a mixture of worry among all and silent indignation among many, overlooked proudly by a smug, spectacled man, his new finery among his deprived contemporaries quite ostentatious. "Ah, well met, general." he greeted in his slightly-higher-than-average tone. "Come to appreciate my fine calligraphy?"

"Well, the illustrations are naturally for the rabble, but my own flair on the new directives' text will truly put the fear of the gods into these savages."

"Wait, what directives?" inquired Kaze, having a sneaking suspicion he was already aware of the answer.

Triumphantly handing the princess a copy of a scroll, Corrine unfurled it, her expression dismayed before finally gasping in shock. "Directives for the suppression of banditry in the eastern territories." recited the disheartened princess.

Exactly as implied by the description, the directives essentially amounted to an indefinite institution of martial law, the text underscoring a series of crude illustrations of a (presumably) Hoshidan man with a conical straw hat, buck teeth, and slits for eyes engaging in some sort of offense, an arrow pointing right to another illustration indicating soldiers, obviously Nohrian ones, carrying out some sort of penalty towards the caricature, at mildest heavy public flogging or forcible amputation of limbs, but generally showing the Hoshidan caricature being executed somehow, simple beheading or hanging the mildest of the methods. A couple of the illustrations even illustrated offenses shown to be punished by the Nohrian figures surrounded by executed bodies next to a burning village.

"Yes, these are going to be going to be quite apparent, even for the dimmest of this lot." Senno bragged proudly. "And Duke Matteo is so very generous in my compensation as well! Why, he even let me help myself to what remained of the old hag's simpering little puppy dog, Yukimura's study."
"So because the people around you are about to starve, you consider yourself their better because the gluttons throw you some table scraps now and again?" inquired Azura, her eyes narrowing dangerously. "You do realize that you're on the same level for them as a horse or an ox, correct? A disposable beast of burden, nothing more."

"Tch! How rude! Princess, can you not control your woman better than this, particularly in public?!"

While aware of them on some level, Corrine was far too preoccupied and troubled by something very significant at the bottom of the scroll, even to defend her mother and lover from these slights. "This...is Leo's seal!" she said, pained disbelief dripping from her every syllable.

"Well of course, milady." Senno answered, his tone as if it were questioning her sanity. "Who else would have approved it?"

"No, I don't believe it. Leo would never approve of such pointless cruelty, let alone endorse it."

As their tome-hungry "ally" took his leave, Corrine took out her earlier frustrations on the scroll as she tore it to shreds, letting the scraps fall at her feet.

"I don't believe it." she repeated as if starting a mantra, turning to Kaze. "This is the same Leo who spared you and the dancers in Cyrenis against Father's orders. I'm supposed to believe that he would order such butchery? No, it must be Matteo and his cohorts distorting the situation to him! So, yes Kaze, you have my permission to search for any and all information surrounding his last visit here."

The green ninja gave another short bow. "Thank you for this chance to redeem myself, milady." he said appreciatively. "I shall start on my task at once."

As Kaze vanished into the crowd, hellbent upon finding any trace of the prince's presence and activities in Hoshido over the past few months, Azura resisted the urge to sigh in exasperation, her blank stare the only indication of her troubles. Did she want to believe that this was all a horrific misunderstanding and that her stepbrother was nothing more than a pawn in the schemes of decadent, exploitative nobles to reduce millions upon millions of innocents to virtual serfdom or worse? Of course, not least of her reasons due to the relief it would cause her beloved Corrine that this conundrum could be rectified even somewhat easily. However, Azura also knew Leo to be an immensely intelligent, strong-willed and proud individual who absolutely despised the idea of others having his fate in their hands. Perhaps the tragedies of her early life had permanently burned a strong pessimistic streak into her psyche, but Azura was willing to accept the one thing about which her girlfriend was transparently in denial; that ever since Shirasagi, Leo had changed and not for the better but she knew well that she would have to do quite a bit of detective work, particularly in the most remote reaches and oldest, most decrepit tomes in Krakenburg's library for even circumstantial evidence that her hunch was steering her in the right direction.

Two-and-a-half weeks, he told himself angrily. Two-and-a-half weeks since he'd irreparably sundered one of the two relationships which provided him any real sort of comfort and grounding in his old world, thought Nohr's future king. How could he have missed that?! Sure, Corrine was always a bit...unusual, but she was unusual in a lot of ways. Apart from his own admitted ineptitude at courting, there was really only one complicating variable which he could identify, namely the stuck-up, self-important, azure-haired homewrecker the rest of the world called his stepsister, doubtlessly filling Corrine's head with all sorts of nonsense. Nonsense about the world and how it works, nonsense about (which in hindsight, turned out to be correct) their father, nonsense about
him. What could she possibly have that I lack?!

No, while he'd hoped for and even successfully sought the counsel of the veteran knight Gunter on occasion and with his complete and utter mistrust (if not outright contempt) for the members of his former regency council, the deaths of Xander, Niles, Odin, and even in extreme cases, his father, left him but one option for older (presumably, judging by its voice) male guidance and advice in life, he reminded himself bitterly. The inhumanly-knowledgeable, wise entity with whom he could sit about his study or library and speak feverishly and chat into the wee hours of the morning, discussing new ideas of other worlds.

No doubt spurred on by the dragon princess' rejection of his proposal, Leo curiously enough, found himself to be like his father in another most-unexpected way, namely in his choice of self-medication. Even had he not heard the lurid tales of his father's many concubines and lived through the tail-end of the bloody consequences, it was hardly surprising that he never lacked women, be they of common or lesser-noble birth, to warm his bed and request them he did, in a nightly, vigorous effort to fill the cold, twin voids in his heart. Reasonably attractive to stunningly beautiful and from all corners of the land, in spite of their touch and his effort, none of the ladies, even had they been so interested, could manage to fill said voids inside of him; more than anything, he'd lusted for Nyx's sharp mind and her indomitable spirit and lusted after Corrine's uniquely gentle soul and kindness rather than her body. Then again, this last part about the princess was not nearly as true as he liked to tell himself at times.

Late one night however, feeling worn-out by his meetings with the nobility (Duke Toscana in particular), exhausted by his coronation rehearsals, and obsessively having poured over the information in his new tome and related notes in his study, Leo, in a henceforth-unknown-to-him moment of fatigued vulnerability, did something he had not done since he was a child, creaking open the door to his sister's bedchamber.

"Camilla...Cammy..." he whispered. "Are you still up?"

Leo received his answer rather quickly as the princess gracefully (of course!) lifted her frame from the four-poster bed, smiling softly and with no small trace of relief at her brother. "You haven't called me that in years..." she cooed. "What's wrong, baby brother? You can't sleep?"

**"No, I cannot. But more than that, I just feel so overwhelmed with everything going on. Losing Elise and Xander, becoming king, having to deal with vultures like Duke Matteo, and Corrine being- I just don't know how I'm going to deal with it! I just feel as if no one truly wants me for me! As though I'm not a worthy man in my own right, but just a substitute for Xander!"

Gods, it should be a crime for any living being to be that stunning, that beautiful, Leo thought as the princess embraced him, as if hoping to atone for months of neglect. "I don't know who it was that broke your heart, but just know one thing, baby brother." Camilla reassured softly. "You are an amazing, wonderful, strong, intelligent man, not simply because of who your brother or father are, but because of who YOU are. Any woman would be SO lucky to have you."

"A woman like you, perhaps?" said Leo thoughtlessly.

Camilla giggled. "So you do have a type after all!" she teased.

"Camilla...Cammy, I know I haven't asked this since I was a child, but can I sleep with you tonight? If it makes you uncomfortable-"

"Oh, you wound me, Brother! Of course you can!"
"Holy- That actually worked!" he thought incredulously.**

Apparently, whether by his body heat or mere presence, Leo had a calming effect upon his beloved sister's troubled mind, the princess drifting off to sleep in mere minutes, her light, dainty snores tipping off the prince. Surrounded by her embrace, titillated by that, pleasant, lilac perfume his sister loved so very much, and nestled in her bosom, for the first time in months, Leo felt genuinely serene and secure, his troubles with the Hoshidans, Matteo and his minions, and Corrine all seeming to (at least temporarily) melt into the ether. The only thing which could ruin this even momentarily was his realization of the certainty that she had held Selena in this exact matter, post-coital or not. Selena, that contemptible, disgusting bitch, he thought harshly. My sister deserves worlds better than her!

When the morning came, Leo was not especially perturbed Camilla's absence. In fact, when he got out of the bed, the prince had a newfound spring in his step, a good bit of his confidence which had withered under the pressure of the past few months. He was wonderful, strong, and amazing, he told himself proudly. Why shouldn't any woman want to be with him, let alone his queen? As he strolled through courtyard's morning mist, Leo took scarce notice of a certain scantily-dressed castle guard until he noticed her swearing to herself irritably about something or another.

"You there!" Leo said authoritatively. "What seems to be the problem? I don't think I've seen you around here before."

"Oh, it's nothing, milord!" the blonde woman protested, her tone abruptly switching to a girlish, air-headed one. "I was just transferred back to the capital about eight months ago, and a little country mouse like me still isn't quite used to the big city! Is that a problem?"

"No, not at all."

Without another word, Leo dragged the woman forward, forcefully kissing her and slipping his tongue into her mouth. The only pushback he received being the blonde leaning into the gesture, the prince began to massage her toned abdomen, teasing her with his free hand. Was this woman suitable for a consort, a queen? Of course not, Leo reminded himself. But a kept woman, good fuck to take his mind off of the nonsense he had to deal with? Of course. Meanwhile, the blonde actually found herself grateful for Leo's forcible suppression of her ecstatic moans with his mouth, her temptation to vocalize her thoughts being very great.

"Yes, a crown prince!" Charlotte thought. "Fucking score!"

Having spent the past four days staking out the pass and general area where the Nohrian general they called "the Savagekiller" had last plied his bloody trade, while it was somewhat of a remote destination, Kaze was certain that he was onto something about the prince's activities during his last visit. While any trace of the slaughter had been long since dealt with by scavengers human or beast, every so often, the green ninja noticed something peculiar, the occasional Nohrian personnel of not-insignificant rank coming and going from a certain abandoned posting near the country's border with Nohr. However, it was only after the third night during which he witnessed Duke Matteo of Toscana emerging from the facility with his bodyguards, that he became sure that there was something to the abandoned fortress. After all, had the duke not accompanied Prince Leo on his last visit to the country?

By the fifth night of his vigil, Kaze found the already-light security detachment short-staffed enough for his taste and decided it well past time to begin his infiltration. His clothing specifically designed to blend in with the forest, the ninja hugged the wall of greenery as he waited for his chance. Granted,
simply judging by their posture and weaponry, Kaze could surmise that the two sentries on duty were new, conscripts probably. While he could have easily dealt with them should the need arise, unlike others, the green ninja actually did try his damnedest to practice the principles his lady preached, so it was a relief to see the one soldier drag off his fellow to gawk at some sight or another, Kaze thought as he slipped by the light of the exterior torches and into the fortress.

The outpost was a fairly standard Hoshidan design of the past few centuries. Kaze knew well that he, barring any truly radically-unexpected traps, could infiltrate such a building half-asleep. As part of his training, his brother would actually practice infiltration under the sway of assorted intoxicants, dangerously-low levels of sleep included, the ninja recalled nostalgically. But where first to look? It stood to reason that records and sleeping quarters would be on the upper floors, but there was something about the dungeons, a sort of faint-but-very-unpleasant smell unlike anything Kaze had ever encountered which eventually led him down to the dungeons.

As befitting a dungeon, the basement proved cold, dank, wet, and in fairly poor repair while still remaining usable. Nonetheless, the green ninja operated in far less comfortable confines, so he got to work discovering anything amiss, navigating with his hand to the walls and the torchlight which he took great care to avoid. After several minutes of stalking and observing the dungeon, Kaze noticed something unusual. Even after months the war, the dungeon, while not exactly bursting, was still populated by a number of individuals in quite differing degrees of healthiness, ranging from perfectly healthy (yet terrified, furious, or resigned to their fates) to those looking as if a light breeze would do them in. A good third of them were visibly Hoshidan as given away by their tattered garb and generally-darker hair and eyes, while he could not identify the remaining prisoners with a mere glance. However, a few of them were still healthy and of strong enough presence of mind to identify him.

"Well, well, if it isn't the traitor Saizo!" rasped a hard voice, belonging to a somewhat older man. "Your new masters finally get sick of your 'pet savage' act and send you to join us other animals for the slaughter?"

Kaze's heart skipped a beat as he turned to face the cell, reflexively grasping one of his blades in hand. "Wait, Toyokuni?" he inquired. "What are you doing here, the war is over!"

Rising from the floor to face Kaze, the voice's owner revealed himself as a somewhat-built man with black-brown hair some thirty years of age, the visible signs of abuse and malnutrition having added a good fifteen years to his visage. "Exactly what I said, traitor." Toyokuni remarked harshly. "We're all just beasts waiting for the slaughter; something your friends let us know each and every day. Yeah, it's not much of a life, but at least it usually doesn't last that long."

"This must be a mistake! The war is over! These must be criminals of some sort. I'm sure if Prince Leo knew, such treatment would-"

"Oh, wake the fuck up, Greenie! See a lot hardened criminals here? How much danger to society can underweight, half-starved women and children be to the mighty, courageous Nohrian army anyway? If anything, your new buddies are far more a danger to them. And speaking of which, even if there were any Nohrian broads crazy enough to wander around these parts, do really think any of us men who even looked at her would live long enough to be put in here?"

"Alright! You've made your point! Look, I know you never liked me, even when we were children, but there is something very odd going on in this ruin and I suspect Nohr's prince may have some involvement! It is a matter of life and death, I assure you!"
The imprisoned ninja's expression turned pensive and troubled. "Something weird going on, you say?" resumed Toyokuni, his tone noticeably softer. "It's common knowledge around here that some fucked-up things are going on. No one can say exactly what they are, just that they can't be anything good."

"Oh, gods." Kaze remarked apprehensively. "Do you have any ideas yourself?"

"No clue. Just that when they come to take you from your cell, you don't come back. Ever. The pleading and pained screams coming either from this floor or upstairs make it obvious that it's nothing fun. Did you notice that sick, coppery smell when you came down here? Like what I imagine poisoned blood to smell like, just a lot more pungent."

"Of course, how could I not?"

"It doesn't smell like anything that belongs inside any kind of living thing, let alone a human being. I'm sure whatever this shit is is related to how those people are being tortured here, but it's just conjecture on my part."

"And Prince Leo?"

"You think the likes of him would slum around down here? No, you'd have more luck trying to find out about that creepy, greasy little bent-over fuck who runs this place. Never got his name, something that started with a 'Ko-' sound, but you'll notice him if you come across him. He supposedly has your prince's ear, but he may just have been rambling."

"Thank you, Toyokuni, you've been very helpful. Is that all that comes to mind?"

"Actually, a few months back, I heard the sick fuck and one of the Nohrian bigshots, some kind of noble or another, bringing a woman down here, said sick fuck referring to her as his 'masterpiece.' Around here, the sounds of someone being tortured are little more than background noise, but that woman's screams sounded really familiar for some reason. I KNOW I've heard her voice before, I just can't place it."

"Is she still here?"

"You can look, but I wouldn't count on it. Instead, try the-"

The sounds of shoes clapping against the stone steps to the dungeon and several voices (most notably, one of them being unusually-simpering and nasally) broke the dim silence. "And speaking of the devils." said Toyokuni exasperatedly. "Unless you want to actually join us in here, I'd make myself scarce if I were you. Not even the 'pet savage' act will save you if you get caught in here!"

"Understood." Kaze replied, giving a light bow. "Thank you for the information, my good man."

"Fuck you too, traitor!"

Vanishing into the shadows as the voices grew stronger, Kaze could not call the mission a failure, but would not exactly call it a success either. True, he had come very close to discovering some extremely questionable things done with the blessing or tacit approval of the highest echelons in Windmire (not exactly a new thing), but he'd failed to ascertain whether or not Leo was somehow involved in the goings on, let alone directing them. Further investigation of the man Toyokuni so abusively (but aptly if his suspicions were correct) termed was absolutely imperative, Kaze told himself, and that, Lady Corrine would be interested for sure.
"Another job well done." thought Pietro smugly as he witnessed the Hoshidan town he'd ordered destroyed burning in the distance, his troops no doubt getting their blades, lances, and axes warmed up for the main attraction. Ever since the very start of his military career, he'd always loved his job of cutting down savages and why not? His country needed his skills and he was damned good at it. Be they from the Ice Tribe, the Wind, or the mangy pack on Mount Garou, he and his custom-forged Flame Lance had earned accolades from the Nohrian public and even King Garon more often than not for some twenty-five years now, he had fought the savages wherever he'd been so ordered and relished doing so.

Peeking from behind one of the tent's flaps, a staff officer piped up gingerly, as if not to wake some great, aggressive legendary beast. "Sir Pietro." he began, peeking his head from behind the flap. "Some of the subcommanders were wondering about any potential alterations to the battle plan. Not that I have a problem with them, of course, but since the scouts are reporting the savages look to be using a town called Mizusawa to our northeast as a stronghold and-"

The paladin snorted with derision. "What's there to change?" he remarked arrogantly. "A standard cavalry charge will be more than enough to crush these bugs. If it's truly so dangerous, the armor and wyverns will clean up any remaining resistance."

"Yes, of course, sir. Brilliant, as always!"

Pietro had grown quite used to brown-nosing subordinates seeking either some sort of advancement or (as was more likely) to save their own skins from his temper. They were replaceable, he was not and everyone from the prince-regent down knew it. But the one thing he had not and could never grow used to was the Hoshidan savages actually having the gall to see themselves as equals to Nohr! Oh, yes, just like this and every other engagement during the war, he looked forward greatly to the day when these heathens would be so cowed and subdued that even the most hot-headed among this pack of cattle would never again have the temerity to look at even a Nohrian beggar cross-eyed.

Outside the town hall of the now-virtually-deserted town of Mizusawa, in the dead of night, Lord Tomokane, surrounded by his war council, reviewed the map of the area and associated figurines indicative of the Nohrian situation and their own grimly. The enemy had deployed three legions from their occupying armies to lay waste to Mutsu and end the resistance in "their" lands once and for all. The forces he hadn't amassed, while considerable and adequately trained and equipped, were far from enough to inflict a decisive defeat against the occupiers, let alone drive them from Hoshido altogether. "You there!" he said finally to the quartermaster. "What does our material situation look like?"

The quartermaster sighed. "In addition to the men, all of them decently-equipped, we have twenty horses, thirty-one pegasi, three ballistae, and enough food and water to hold out for a week if all goes well." he reported. "Worst case scenario, we could be out in two or three days."

"That'll be all. Dismissed."

At this report, the other lords began to chatter among themselves apprehensively; now aware of just how desperate their desperate situation truly was. "Well, what now, Tomokane?" inquired Lord Hirakata of Dewa. "If you seriously believe we can push them back like this, you've lost your mind."

"You really think I wasn't aware of that?!" Tomokane shot back. "I don't know about you gentlemen, but I volunteered for this fully ready and willing to die to protect my country, my people, and my family. No, we 'win' here by inflicting enough damage on the bastards that our people can live to fight another day and minimize the damage they do to the north."
"And how do you propose we do that, Lord Mutsu?" asked Lord Terumono of Shimotsuke, sounding somewhat more heartened. "My spearmen are good, but not good enough to make up a five-to-one numerical inferiority."

"It's fairly simple once you break it down."

Tomokane grouped the blue figurines into a roughly square-shaped formation around the outline of the town, the bulk of the spearmen placed toward the southern and western flanks, defending the archers placed behind them. "This butcher the Nohrians call 'Savagekiller' was trained as a cavalry commander, no?" he began, motioning some of the red figurines as to mimic a charge on the town. "Therefore, it stands to reason that he'll go with what he knows and try to break our lines with several waves of cavalry charges. It is absolutely imperative that they hold as long as possible."

"So we blunt their charges with our spearmen!" said Lord Kamatari of Echigo exclaimed in much the same manner as a child cracking a particularly difficult problem. "And the archers and balistae whittle their cavalry down as much as possible!"

"Exactly, Kamatari. Since the mountains behind us block any easy land approaches, the archers to the north will only have to deal with wyverns knowing our enemy. With a ballista turned their direction, they should be able to handle most of it. Meanwhile, the swordsmen, including myself, will deal with any breaches in our lines and protect the archers. It will only let us break out if we're extremely fortunate, but it will let us inflict one hell of a black eye against them."

The other lords' murmurs indicated somewhat more confidence in their odds now that a man of Tomokane's known tactical acumen had articulated a plan. On some level or another, the men all knew this to be a suicide mission, but the brutality meted out to them by Nohr deserved such a spectacular response. With this in mind, the air around the men became significantly less apprehensive. Of course they were all aware that they were going to die, some of them more horrifically than others, but their commander had given them heart, that this would be more of a last stand and less of a culling of the animals their enemy saw them as.

"If any of you want to leave now, I'm not going to execute you for desertion." Tomokane prefaced hardly. "But if you want to go out defending your families and your homeland while showing these Nohrian bastards what we northerners are made of, then you've come to the right place!"

Contrary to his expectations, none of the five lords crowded around the table departed, but responded to his appeal with sustained shouts of enthusiasm and defiance towards Nohr and its prince-regent. He'd always been said to be unusually charismatic, but this surprised him. Dismissing the lords to prepare and motivate their own troops for the inevitable clash, Tomokane motioned for one of the pegasus knights, a young lady not much older than Hana, handing her four letters.

"Tsukiyama, your unit must get at least one of these messages to my nephew and sister as soon as possible." the lord informed urgently. "It is more vital than either of our lives, do you understand this?"

The young woman nodded. "Yes, sir!" she confirmed. "We'll guard them with our lives!"

"Excellent! But you musn't return to this place. If I've not sent word by a week from tomorrow morning, expect the worst and know that Takeshi is now Lord of Mutsu and your commander. Contrary to popular belief, I'm still just a regent. Oh, and one more thing."
Tomokane produced a string of four vials of a violet, sickly-looking liquid. "For if either you or any of your women get shot down by Nohr," he informed grimly. "I've heard not even the gods themselves could have concocted something fouler-tasting, but you won't suffer at the very least."

"Of course." Tsukiyama replied knowingly, her tone mirroring that of her superior. "It's not like we would risk capture by those bastards anyway."

"There!" Hana exclaimed proudly as she lifted the last bundle onto a horse-drawn cart. "That's the last of it, Mother!"

Akiko smiled sadly, embracing her daughter. "Stay safe now, dear."

"I could say the same to you, Mother! I know it's barely been a month and I'm already leaving you all again-"

"Oh, don't worry about this old girl, Hana. Go, do what you need to do and protect the princess."

The evening's chilly autumn air was already slightly colder than usual, prompting Hana to rearrange one of the spare blades under her coat as an excuse to free her dominant hand from the cold. How could she not be nervous? The swordswoman knew damn well what would happen to her hometown and family if the Nohrian forces intercepted them, let alone under the command of a general whose brutality and relish of slaughtering "savages" like them was likely rivaled only by Hans. Managing a confident smile for her liege, Hana exhaled with particular exasperation. True, it did not feel good at all leaving her family, her mother particularly, as scurrying refugees in their own homeland, but on every level of her being she knew, only to be reminded by the grateful, adoring gaze the redheaded princess reserved for her; Sakura and her safety came first. All she could do for her part was to trust Takeshi and his men to keep the northern routes free of Nohrians, bandits, and Nohrian bandits and her uncle and his men to defend Mizusawa with everything they have and give them all time to escape Nohr's wrath.

"By the way, Hana, there's something I've been meaning to give you for an emergency and I believe this qualifies," said Akiko, removing a bundle of gold from the satchel on her shoulder. "Your inheritance."

Taking the sack of gold in her hand, Hana recoiled slightly. "Mother, I can't accept this." she protested. "There must be around fifty thousand gold in here!"

"Technically, it's eighty thousand. And I insist you take it. I've already given Takeshi his half and you'll both need it far more than I will."

"Just between us, Mother. I actually hadn't given this much thought; I just always thought I'd off some Nohrian commander and take his if we really needed the gold. He almost certainly stole it anyway."

Normally, the older woman would have been horrified by such an admission from her daughter, but the accumulated stress of the situation prompted Akiko to simply giggle proudly at this suggestion. Inching forward for one last embrace, mother and daughter both took notice of the sudden fireworks display over the province, the shell scattering red fragments across the night sky.

"The signal!" Akiko exclaimed, hugging Hana briefly. "Good luck and stay safe!"

With these words, one of the guards, a swordsman from Takeshi's unit helped her onto the the cart,
the driver urging his oxen onward with a crack of his whip.

Her mother's caravan shortly vanishing beyond the horizon, Hana turned to her two companions to start their own journey.

"So where exactly is the Flame Tribe's main village?" she inquired. "I know it's way south from here, but apart from that, I've got no idea."

"Near a mountain range at the southern end of the Bottomless Canyon." answered Rinkah, the pride at her people's tenacity apparent. "I can't describe it that well, but once we're in the area, I'll take it from there."

"So if we stay near the canyon's general area, we should be fine, right?" inquired Sakura, somewhat more spiritedly than usual.

Rinkah nodded. "Exactly." she confirmed. "I don't feel great about being slowed down by the forests, but sticking to the main roads would mean certain death."

"Keep in mind that their cavalry they're so proud of and their armor will both be almost worthless if the woods are dense enough." Hana reminded, her tone almost hungry in a sense. "Leave THAT to me. The Nohrian habit of advancing in small groups for maximum mobility actually works to our advantage more than anyone else."

To a man, the defenders of the now-deserted town of Mizusawa expressed some expression of latent nervous energy, be it toying with their weapons slightly, being unusually alert for anything living thing piercing the night's unnatural calm, or simply fidgeting. How could they not be? A last stand against a better-equipped foe vastly outnumbering them upon which the lives of their nearly all of their friends and families depended is never something one goes into without significant tension. Even their commander, renowned as a loyal samurai and fierce warrior, even in his advanced age, nervously twirled one of his late brother-in-law's most cherished blades, perhaps as one last, unconscious training regimen before the white-hot fury of Nohr, of its vengeful prince, inevitably rained down on them.

Only having been in their encampment for two weeks, while it went mostly unspoken, there was an undeniable air to the town not unlike a pack of condemned criminals awaiting their particularly gruesome executions. Perhaps because the comparison surmised the defenders' situation at in the town perfectly; there was to be no retreat, no surrender. They all knew fully well that no quarter would be given nor received, but neither would it be asked for, for any quarter of the sort would be the very same offered to slaves.

Finally, as their general completed the hundredth revolution of his blade, the telltale sound of a distant mass of galloping hooves shattered the night's calm, particularly from the south. "They're here!" exclaimed Tomokane, tossing his sheath to the ground. "Make one last check of your equipment!"

The torch on the watchtower immediately to the general's south lit up, followed shortly thereafter by its counterparts at pre-selected points across town. As the ghost town roared to life with the meticulously rehearsed actions of the defenders, it would not be an exaggeration to say the Battle of Mizusawa was now in full swing and the spearmen on the southern flank would not have to wait long for their part in the action. Barely a minute after becoming audible, the first wave of Nohrian cavalry descended upon the southern flank. Lightly-to-moderately-armored, the cavalrmen shouted
and whooped with their lances and blades held high, a wall of man, beast, and metal.

Having been in their position himself more than once, Tomokane read the minds of the men facing down the horde. "Don't break, don't break! DON'T BREAK!" he demanded. "That's exactly what they're counting on!"

Abruptly, as the mass of steel and flesh closed in to draw first blood, the Nohrian line shattered on the Hoshidan spears; some of the beasts were impaled, done in on the enemy's wall of pointed metal, some were wounded to varying degrees of severity as they made panicked attempts to escape the carnage. Others simply refused to charge into certain death, more often than not tossing their less-skilled riders from their saddles. The survivors of the charge still in any condition to fight made another attempt to breach the wall of spearpoints on foot, a few eventually managing to break through in a vain attempt to reach the archers. From these attempts, Tomokane and his swordsmen took their cue to engage, shortly cutting down the exhausted and dismounted horsemen.

With the other melee fighters having swept up the encroaching knights, the back lines broke into celebration around the repulsed Nohrian charge.

"We shouldn't get too comfortable yet!" cautioned one of the archers, well-aware that another charge was imminent. "They're making another pass!"

"Exactly!" barked Terumono, "Once more!"

Exactly as they'd rehearsed for, the Nohrian cavalry charged once more, hoping to overwhelm their lines with sheer force and speed and once more, man and beast fell namelessly against the spearpoints as they broke into a disorganized retreat, this time pursued and cut down by spearman and swordsman alike as they futilely attempted to regroup and staunch the hemorrhaging in their cavalry line. The next hour bought three more cavalry charges against the southern flank, the last of which only marginally more successful due to the deployment of heavy armored knights, but casualties still remained better than their pre-battle prognoses. The news bought to Tomokane from the runners left him somewhat more cautiously optimistic as well. To the east, the Nohrians had the idea of supporting another charge with their wyverns which Lord Echigo's archers had inflicted devastating losses upon on two separate occasions. To the west, the Nohrian effort was severely hampered by the hills and the use of a few well-timed-and-placed ballista bolts throwing their lines into chaos, even taking out a unit commander or two.

With the cavalry charges abating, any tactician worth their salt knew that a change in tactics from one's preferred methods signaled either desperation, recognition of their ineffectiveness, or a complete lack of options. Nonetheless, as the first hail of Nohrian arrows descended upon the spearmen of the south flank, Tomokane knew that this change in tactics could either turn for them or against them very quickly. Some men struggled to raise their shields in time and succumbed, while others narrowly avoided death, shielding both themselves and their comrades from the deadly rain.

Having endured a second volley of Nohrian arrows, the rear line of northern spearmen carried off their dead and wounded prepared to defend against another cavalry charge. Even with all the carnage around him, Tomokane gave a satisfied smirk as two fireworks lit up the Nohrian archers' positions in the southern skies, the slowly-descending airborne fragments illuminating the target areas for the ballistae and catapults.

Over the tumult of the battle, one of the bloodied scouts dismounted his winged steed, almost tripping over himself to address his superiors.

"We've been ambushed by axemen in the southwestern woods!" the pegasus knight warned. "Scores of them! I think they're trying to outflank us!"
"Calm down, man!" demanded Terumono, placing the spear on his back in favor of his blade. "What are your losses like?"

"I'm the only survivor, sirs!"

The regent of Mutsu cursed to himself as he strapped some satchels of the old medicinal solutions to his belt. An ambush of powerful Nohrian axe-wielders now could very well throw the entire southern flank into complete chaos. "Kagemusha, Hagiwara, Hiraoka!" demanded Tomokane of his three officers. "Gather your best men and blades! Be back here in two minutes!"

As the three officers dutifully vocalized their understanding of the order and scattered, the other lord looked at his comrade in disbelief. "You're not actually going to lead them yourselves, are you?" inquired Teramoto.

"All men die someday." Tomokane reminded him steelily. "Better to do so on your own terms and take as many of the bastards with you as possible. Besides, even though I'm not as quick as I used to be, I'm still a better swordsman than almost all of these whelps."

Generally a man of comfortable-yet-not-extravagant tastes, one of the few creature comforts Pietro allowed himself on campaign was a leisurely breakfast every morning. Even a man as powerful as him needed a decent start to his day to function at his best after all. But when the general was to receive word about what he assumed to be the conclusion of a well-executed campaign, his leisurely breakfast became anything but, particularly for the poor bastard assigned to his staff.

"Ah, greetings, Levaux." he said, uncharacteristically pleasantly. "I trust you have some dead savages to report on?"

Levaux's entire being, particularly his face, visibly betrayed a sense of existential dread. "Yes, sir, there were plenty of enemy casualties."

"You sound as though you're not telling me something. What's truly the worst it could be?"

Much in the same fashion one hands the world's largest steak to a starving bear while covered in bacon grease, the staff officer handed over the latest situation report from the front. The paladin seemed somewhat underwhelmed, but generally satisfied with the estimates of the Hoshidan casualties. However, reaching the the estimates of their own losses caused him to reflexively spit the lemon he was eating a good distance away.

"What in the gods' name is this!?" he said incredulously. "This must be a mistake! HOW can our losses be this high!"

"We- we- well-" stammered Levaux, teeth audibly chattering. "Sir, you- you- said that a standard cavalry charge would s- suffice!"

"AND?!!"

"Our archers, w-wyverns, and cav- cavalry are taking more- Oh, please, Sir Pietro, I beg of you! Have mercy! I've a wife and children! I'm all they have!"

"Oh, please you simpering coward! Killing you would be far too wasteful, even were I so inclined.
By the way, you were trained as a horseman as well, correct?"

"Y-yes, sir."

"Alright then."

Picking up the fiery spear which never left his side, Pietro casually took several paces forward before stabbing the man through right shin with all his might, a second thereafter triggering the weapon's magic, rendering the staff officer's screams audible throughout most of the camp. Stopping the minor conflagration and removing the weapon after a few seconds more of this torture, Levaux's right leg from the knee down was left a withered, mangled shell of its former self, the paladin driving his steel-toed boot into the man's stomach repeatedly. "Go on! Get out of here! Tell them to ready my horse!" he demanded. "It looks like it's up to me to clean up the mess you idiots have made!"

"A- at once, sir!" whined the officer as he began to crawl towards the camp, his voice unnaturally high with pain.

After kicking the man several more times to give him a boost towards the other officers, the paladin growled with frustration. If you want something done right, you really do have to do it yourself, he thought angrily. But that shouldn't mean that has to extend to even a most rudimentary task like killing savages! As far as Pietro was concerned, any Nohrian boy old enough to hold a weapon was old enough to do so and do it proudly.

In the hours after the failed nighttime charges, the defenders of Mizusawa continued to inflict disproportionate casualties on the occupiers as pikemen, axeman, and wyvern alike fell namelessly throughout the morning. While noticeably more difficult to do so, the northerners even managed to mostly hold their lines against the Nohrian heavy knights and cavalry through the afternoon and night, but not without significant casualties.

However, by the end of the battle's second night, the tide was clearly beginning to turn in favor of Nohr. Against the expectations of all the Hoshidan commanders, the enemy made a renewed effort with their wyvern-mounted troops to break through their lines, entire units of the riders being sent on virtual suicide missions to damage and destroy the ballistae and any archers within their grasp. While Kamatari was among the fallen archers, the western flank managed to stabilize itself after being pushed back into the town at around one that morning. With forces drawn from the eastern flank to put out the figurative and literal fires set by Nohr, by sunrise, said flank had all but collapsed and its commander Hirakata burned to death in a cluster of houses alongside ten of his men; now all that remained for the survivors were increasingly futile attempts to patch their devastated line or join their comrades in the south and west and pray for relief.

Yes, as their numbers dwindled further, the defenders of what remained of Mizusawa fought with ever-increasing ferocity and desperation, realizing to a man that there was no escape nor victory by this point; the only 'victory' being to inflict as much damage on the occupier as humanly possible. But as their defensive ring grew ever smaller, their losses growing, and with more and more Nohrian forces bearing down upon them, something even more extraordinary came to pass thanks to the Nohrian commander as his troops made way for his stallion.

"Keeping those weapons raised will be the last mistake you ever make, heathens." spat the commander arrogantly. "I am Pietro! The greatest living Nohrian general! Who commands this pack of bandits?!!"

Due either to fatigue, desperation, optimism, or some toxic, inexplicable mixture of both, Tomokane motioned for what remained of his battered, but still defiant forces to lower their weapons. If this was
going where he expected it to, while they would not be able to defeat them by any means, he was reasonably certain he could deprive Noh of one of its most admittedly-skilled and most influential generals.***"I am the man you seek, butcher!" he declared. "Tomokane of Mutsu, whose courageous and selfless men inflicted the greatest defeat on your wretched empire since the battle at Castle Shirasagi!"

This defiance elicited a combination of outraged, surprised, and even fearful reactions from the soldiers protecting the general, prompting them back with a raised hand, the paladin merely sneering at his opposite number. "Well, you savages are known for your arrogance, after all, but even you lot can appreciate the sanctity of a duel." he snarled. "I propose a trial by single combat, nary an ounce of our strength held back! Since I am a man of honor, if I should fall, my troops shall fall back to meet you another day on the battlefield!"

"Very well, I accept."

The Hoshidan survivors chattered among themselves confusedly as their surviving commanders conversed. "Hold on!" Teramono whispered urgently. "You can't seriously be considering this?!"

"Like I said earlier, we're going to die anyway." Tomokane reminded grimly. "This way, I can at least do some real damage to Nohr before I do."

Pietro flashed a hungry, sinister grin. Why would he ever entertain honoring any agreement made with beasts like them? It was no different than hunting with birdcalls as far as he was concerned. This way at least, he could finally see some action. The two generals facing off at a fifteen-meter distance, the paladin set his steed into a gallop sending two bursts of flame with his lance as he closed in on the old man. Tomokane for his part, age having mostly shorn him of his legendary reaction time, watched the trajectory of the Nohrian's attacks and steed, deftly avoiding his intended incineration. With Pietro on top of him in mere seconds, Tomokane took the chance to sidestep an impaling attack and removed the steed's head with one upward diagonal slash, sending his foe tumbling from the beast's body.

After stabilizing himself from the fall, there was a flicker of desperation in the Nohrian general's eyes as he realized the blood seeping from the abdominal gash on his armor belonged to him as opposed to his fallen mount. As he struggled to his feet, Pietro launched three more of the bursts of flame; as they were noticeably less disciplined than those he had shot from horseback, his counterpart dodged them handily as he closed in with his blade. After the seconds which seemed to take an age, Pietro staggered to his feet just in time to avoid the vertical slash aimed at him and engaged the Hoshidan in a clash of mutual slashes, thrusts, and parries.

As the Nohrian general was being pushed back, his abdominal wound still gaping, the observers had worried-slash-hoped that he would succumb either to the blood loss or his foe's blade in fairly short order. Nonetheless, Pietro, utilizing his noticeable advantage in reach during another clash, took the opportunity to use the grip as a blunt weapon to momentarily stun Tomokane before impaling him through the chest cavity, his desperate expression turning proud once more as he eyed his latest victim hatefully. The Hoshidan commander however, could not muster the breath to defy him with last words of his own.

"Hana...Takeshi..." he thought. "I'm so proud.... of the both of you...I'll be sure to tell your father all about you...when I see him..."
The hateful expression on the face of the "Savagekiller" turned absolutely ravenous as he activated the weapon's magic, treating his opponent to a protracted, tortuous death before he finally removed the weapon half a minute later and collapsed to his knees, attempting to staunch the bleeding with one of his gauntlets.

"Sir Pietro is wounded!" cried one of his staff officers. "Get a healer over here, now!"

The staff officer began to strip off the general's chest plate over his superior's incensed mutterings and cursing to himself. "Stupid animal!" he raged. "If I had my best steed, I would have roasted that obnoxious old goat without a scratch on me!"

"Sir, please." insisted the officer, his eyes widening momentarily at the amount of blood loss as he began to cut his undershirt away. "You must calm down! A healer will be here momentarily, but in the meantime-"

"Sir Pietro." interrupted a second staff officer. "There is still the matter of the enemy survivors. They are completely surrounded by our troops, but-

"What do the fuck do you think your orders are?!" Pietro ranted. "Slaughter them all like the fucking beasts they are!"

Chapter End Notes

For a while now, I'd kind of wondered what a Fire Emblem game where most of the game is you fighting what amounts to a guerilla war against an occupier. Yes, yes, I remember the Dawn Brigade and I guess the first part with the Greil Mercenaries against Daein counts, but you know what I mean; an occupying force hell-bent on actually exterminating your party as opposed to an extremely corrupt occupation army. Also, about the unit nomenclature, some are pretty transparent like spearman/pikeman (Soldiers/Spear Fighters) or axeman (Fighters/Berserkers), but some might require some clarification such as:

Heavy cavalry/related terminology = Great Knights
Heavy armor = Generals
Cavalry = Knights/Paladins

Maybe it was obvious, but I still felt compelled to clarify anyway to prevent as much confusion as possible.

I'd heard some people complaining about how this wasn't really explored with Kaze, and I agree somewhat. My take on it however, was trying to have him square his devotion to Corrine and his belief in her ideals while she serves a country where most of the people see him as subhuman, hence the "pet savage" jokes/serious comments.

And that leads me into the elephant in the room which I want to deal with prematurely, because I know it's going to come up sooner or later: I know a lot of my readers are probably thinking, "Gee Sharyrazade, don't you think you're overdoing the whole racism thing?" And no, I honestly don't think so and here's my reasoning:

X, an obviously-European country/people wants to conquer/subjugate, Y, an obviously-non-European people/country + X is already unusually militaristic with a history of
devaluing non-X lives = Taken together, some EXTREMELY ugly implications (on a number of levels) about how X is going to treat a Y completely at their mercy.

Finally, not gonna lie: That part with Leo and Camilla was more than a little awkward to write. The rational, reasonable part of me is all like to Leo "Dude, WTF you doing, you sick fuck?!!" but the other part of me doesn't want to blame him because, well Camilla.
Burning Ambition

Chapter Summary

As Leo is crowned under the name Leonard the Thirteenth, one of his first acts is to receive a Hoshidan delegation seeking an end to the war, the talks however, not going nearly as well as the foreign nobles had hoped. Led by Gunter, commander of his Royal Guard, the old knight is assisted in his duties by generals Pietro and Hans, the scourges of the "anti-banditry operations" in Hoshido and the mysterious wyvern lord Lady Rose, a relative newcomer to the court who has gained the new king's favor with her superhuman strength, this group coming to be known as the Four Horsemen, Nohr's four most powerful generals are a crucial part of Leo's plan to avenge the "national humiliation" at Shirasagi and break the "savages" once and for all time...

Chapter Notes

Also known as Chapter 8: "How many Game of Thrones/A Song of Ice and Fire references can I shoehorn into a single chapter and still have it feel somewhat natural?"
Also, it shouldn't be that big a surprise what I was listening to when writing Leo here.

Finally, we get to the survivor of the Awakening trio and it's an interesting thing for me: He's just puts everything he's got into whatever it is he does and he's so hammy about it, Owain/Odin just always makes me smile. Inigo/Laslow on the other hand....well, I didn't hate him by any means, I just wasn't as blown away by him (Funny thing is, I absolutely adore Soleil; see Owain's enthusiasm and it doesn't hurt that we have, uh, similar tastes, as it were) as I was apparently supposed to be.

Oddly enough, I've always found Severa/Selena to be the most interesting character of the three, particularly to write about from a psychological/emotional standpoint, and she was ALWAYS a really polarizing character outside of the Japanese fandom.

Sooooo, yeah, remember how I said if you were a Leo fan, there's like a 70-plus percent chance you'd hate my guts before this thing ends? Unless of course, you're also a fan of another king (I mean, I actually found him kind of charismatic, his own murderously batshit, shoelace-eating insanity aside) from this series who I have in mind.

Then again, this should surprise absolutely no one: I like Hana, I like Ike. If Hana's role here is along the lines of Ike and Sakura is the princess she saves from Nohr/Daein, it would stand to reason that, in this equation, Leo would be.....

*Burning Ambition (FE9 OST)*

**A Lannister Always Pays His Debts (Ramin Djwadi)**

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As the day for the coronation arrived at long last, the entirety of Nohr was abuzz with chatter about
the direction the new king would take, even before Prince Leo formally ascended the throne. Indeed, in Windmire, one could almost cut the anticipation in the air with a blade.

"With the eyes of your fathers and people turned to you with hope and pride," announced the head priest over the kneeling prince. "I here thereby dub thee, Prince Leo, His Majesty King Leonard of Nohr, thirteenth of his name. May the Dusk Dragon watch over you and smile upon your every endeavor!"

As the nobles and commoners alike gathered before the castle applauded and cheered rapturously, her mistress engaged (however on a noticeably more subdued level) as well, Selena simply rolled her eyes at the rabble; she was a woman with many problems and questions, and was not keen on adding court intrigue among their ranks overseen by a king who, at best, she knew for a fact to dislike her greatly. Such problems and questions included (but were by no means limited to) what the hell is wrong with this guy? What exactly was going on in his mind that he was even worse about elevating murderous scumbags to positions of power than his father? What the hell was that old buzzard Gunter doing during the last battle in Shirasagi? Granted, she'd been hit in the head really hard, an injury which took her out of the battle, to say nothing of consciousness, fairly early on, but she was damn near certain he had been not been present once everything had started going to hell nor did the phantoms pay him any real attention. And now he's Leo's right-hand man after the exact same incident that made the icy, reclusive prince king? No, there was something seriously wrong with this, and Selena knew that she was going to have to get to the bottom of this sooner or later.

One of the questions which she still struggled with nightly however, was why the everloving fuck did those two absolute idiots have to go play the hero? That enraged, ridiculously-powerful...thing was quite transparently after Prince Xander and Lady Corrine, the rest of them an afterthought at best, so why did he basically throw herself in front of its blade? His other retainer, the woman's behavior, at least made sense to her knowledge; Selena knew for a fact that said retainer and Xander had been fucking for some time before they both found themselves on the wrong end of that weird blade, but Las- Oh, screw it, she thought angrily, why even bother with the charade anymore? But Inigo? For all she knew, maybe he wanted the prince to fuck him too, he was objectively, a really attractive man.

Not that Selena was exactly inclined, let alone had any standing, to mock her late companion for such inclinations. "Oh, gods, Luci." she thought often. "I'm so, so, so sorry." And not even about Camilla. Does falling in love/lust with your employer technically count as cheating on your employer-cum-lover if you're supposed to be an entirely different person? Even in her one refuge, in the arms of and at the mercy of the masterful tongue and digits of this graceful, statuesque princess-No, this goddess, Selena still struggled mightily with the conflicting and complimentary guilt complexes towards these two women upon whom she'd come so heavily to rely.

Still feeling as snug and as reasonably secure as she ever had wrapped in the princess' luxurious bed and her lover's bust, that same nagging feeling that Selena had been unable to shake since the old knight had shot her a threatening glare of smug contempt at the coronation, shattered this illusion and got the better of her. "Lady Camilla." she began hesitantly. "Does your brother seem different to you somehow? I mean, since we got back to the castle."

"Why of course, dear Selena." the princess replied distantly. "Being king is quite stressful, after all."

"No, I mean something truly alarming. Things you could have never seen him saying or doing before well, it happened."

On one level, Camilla would have liked instinctively to dismiss her beloved retainer's concern out of
hand. However, she was, as her childhood experiences required her to be to survive, far too intelligent and far too good at reading people not to notice some immensely troubling changes in Leo's demeanor, including some not-at-all-brotherly comments from time to time and his treatment of Selena's very existence as some sort of personal sleight. At one point last month, a particularly distressed Leo half-jokingly suggested that she become his queen with all that would entail. In general, Nohrian nobility would let a lot slide, not losing their heads over a discreet bit of buggery or even (while looked somewhat less kindly upon) a discreet bit of sapphism every now and again. But brothers and sisters, even with only one parent in common? That stain would be nigh-impossible to wash out, even for a generally-permissive lot like them.

Sitting up on the bed, Selena recoiled at its comparative coldness betrayed by the absence of the third member of their little arrangement. "Something you always took for granted but didn't really appreciate until it was gone yet, still expect it to be there," she opined thoughtlessly. "It's a lot like losing a limb, so I've heard."

The princess gave one of her serene smiles, this one somewhere between wistfulness and lust, leaning towards the former. "I wouldn't exactly say you never appreciated dear Beruka," she recalled sadly. "At times, you two could just be best of friends, so to speak."

"Oh, yeah, only because you put us up to it, milady! In fact, we were always-"

Selena realized exactly what she was reminiscing about before one of the guilt complexes overwhelmed her once more.

"I know no amount of apologizing will make up for it or bring her back." prefaced Selena depressedly. "But once again, Lady Camilla, I'm sorry. If I had just been a little stronger, maybe-"

"Don't be." insisted Camilla, a bit more sternly than she'd intended. "Selena sweetie, there was nothing you could have done. There was nothing any of us outside of Corrine or possibly Xander could have done."

"Yeah, but even still, they well...lost."

"Exactly."

Springing back onto the bed, Camilla took her beloved's lips in her own for another decadent display of affection. "I simply couldn't bear to lose my darling redhead," the princess half-teased, half-sighed. "So do be careful for me, won't you, Selena?"

Selena forced a confident smile. "I will." she promised tersely.

The flame-haired interloper turned on her side to feign sleep, as if unable to face (one of) the object(s) of her affection and desire, only now realizing why she'd agreed to take on any multitude of missions from her mistress away from the castle these past months. Burying herself in work to deal with her own emotional problems, neglecting those she claimed to care about in the process, doing fuck all to stop the world from going to hell even if it were in her power? Godsdammit, I'm just like her after all, Severa thought with disgust, the one thing I told myself I would never do as long as I live!

While only for a few hours now, ever since that afternoon in the courtyard, some four months after his life had changed forever, Leo (or Leonard if you prefer) had found himself just as stately and powerful as his fathers before him. Many a time he had seen his father seated upon the throne, the
boy watching him in a sort of envious awe which he later extended to Xander for his status as heir apparent. But now that he had reached said heights of power, seated on the throne himself, in many ways, the king felt just as empty as he had after Shirasagi and Nyx's death, more in some ways. Neither the adoring praise of the crowds nor the intimate touch of any of his women (even Charlotte!) could fill the void in his soul which only seemed to be growing deeper and deeper now that Corrine seemed to be consciously avoiding him.

Idiot! What did you really think would happen, you unbelievable idiot, he thought harshly. Just springing that kind of thing out of nowhere without even dropping any sort of hint to your intentions?! Apart from Camilla, there was really only one individual to whom he could really turn to for emotional support and an intellectual equal or, much as it hurt his pride to acknowledge, an intellectual superior. On his first night as king, Leo found himself to once again (outside of a habit for self-medication with sex) be more like his father than he would have ever thought possible.

"Wise One!" the king beseeched to the empty throne room. "I know you are here, Wise One! I can sense your presence!"

Perhaps as though to toy with him, the otherworldly being waited a good minute before responding. "What seems to be the problem?" he asked, his tone as close to glee as Leo had ever heard. "Is something not to your liking, Your Majesty?"

Under any other circumstances, were his frame of mind even slightly different, Leo would have wondered seriously if the emphasis on those last two words was mocking. Nonetheless, he continued his plea.

"I seek your wise counsel." Leo resumed rising from the throne and going down on bended knee. "Surely, there must have been other kings in other worlds who have been faced with the exact same dilemmas as my Nohr is currently."

"Oh, yes, how could I?! I almost forgot!" Leo's mentor exclaimed, his tone of mock surprise apparent to only one of the conversation's participants. "You have taken up the blade in earnest, no? Allow me to present you with a gift for this momentous occasion."

"Oh, I could not possibly accept it. You have been far too generous already, Wise One."

"Oh, no, I insist! You will be needing all the strength you have for the trials ahead."

Exactly as with Naglfar, a burst of the same sickly purple flame materialized at the foot of the throne's steps. When it momentarily vanished, in its place was a very peculiar sword. Whether due to its size, easily as long as he was tall, the sharp, serrated blade which almost hurt Leo to look at, let alone imagine being struck by, or being tipped by what appeared to be an axe-like blade, Leo was sure that he had never laid eyes on a weapon such as this, it's mere presence overflowing with power. Perhaps the most interesting thing to him when he did step down and pick up the blade, while it was not exactly light, was not nearly as heavy as the king had expected it to be as he held it proudly to the sky.

"It's...marvelous!" he raved. "I can feel the power! Now THIS is a weapon worthy of a king!"

"That sword, Gurgurant, was wielded by a great and mighty king who bought honor and glory to his people and abject destruction to his enemies. " the voice half- lied. "Much like that legendary king,
master it and you will surely do the same to your enemy."

"Once again, thank you, O Wise One. I shall put this to good use!"

"I should also implore you to gather your most loyal and powerful subordinates, for I have much-needed gifts for them as well."

"You mentioned that I would need such strength as well. What do you mean by that?"

"It is exactly as you remarked about their princess; the Hoshidan insects do not seek to accept their defeat, but to overturn the verdict through perfidy and chicanery and abusing your hospitality. You must not be deceived by their lies and talk of peace!"

"I knew it! I knew it! I knew they were plotting against me! They have been from the very beginning!"

"It may be risky, but there is a way to have them let their guard down without leaving them any escape possible. Let alone escape to rally their fellow insects against you."

To call the winter's mountain air chilly would be an understatement, to put it lightly. But whether due to his extensive endurance training, his higher-than-average body temperature, or these two factors working in common, the cold, until it became truly threatening to life and limb, did not bother Saizo in the least. What stung worse than any winter wind could ever do however, was the supineness and passivity displayed towards Nohr by many of his countrymen and fellow ninja clans, and no walls nor complimentary tea could or would take that sting away.

"How many times do I have to say this?!!" Saizo raged, almost having lifted himself off the cushion provided him. "The only peace they have any interest in offering us is the type of 'peace' offered to corpses and slaves!"

"Do you seriously believe us not to be aware of this, boy?" inquired Lord Suzuki, taking another swig of his sake. "It's quite transparent that Nohr holds all of the cards. Meanwhile our stores of essentials dwindle daily, to say nothing of the 'taxes' they collect from us regularly."

"Most unlike your father, you are a hotheaded fool, Saizo the Fifth." admonished Lord Miyoshi. "Their new king is said to be most unlike his father. He cannot possibly wish to continue this war, but what you're proposing would only ensure he does."

"Well as long as he can't or won't keep his thugs from raping, pillaging, and slaughtering their way across Hoshido, they may as well still be at war with us!" spat Saizo. "Do you seriously intend to tell me that you are all willing to roll over like trained dogs, waiting for that murderer to scratch your bellies in hopes that he doesn't cut them open?"

The nine other heads of the country's ninja clans remained silent; one or two staring off into space as if preoccupied with something while the rest glared at the young upstart with contempt. Hoping against hope for some last minute change of heart, after a good half-minute, the outlier gave a dismissive huff. "That's what I thought." Saizo scoffed, rising from the seat offered him. "Thanks for nothing."

As he made his stomping, scowling exit from the meeting hall, the surly ninja was joined shortly by his companion, appropriately enough seeming to appear as if from thin air. "So I guess you heard all that, huh?" Saizo inquired, having cooled off somewhat. "Stupid old fools. What do they really think
those bastards are going to do with all of us once they get done with the country's 'respectable' society?"

"I suspect that their thoughts on the matter would change if it was one of their wives, daughters, or sisters Nohrian officers encouraged their men to treat even worse than the most wretched streetwalker." replied Kagero grimly. "So is this changing anything?"

"Fuck no, of course not!"

Defiant as he was about resisting the invasion, on several levels, Saizo realized well that their situation was not favorable at all. Just judging by past years, this winter was shaping up to be a particularly cold one and the Nohrian habit of feeding their forces with Hoshidan harvests did not bode well for anyone on the continent's eastern half. That evening at the inn, in possession of a considerable amount of Nohrian gold, Saizo decided to kill two birds with one stone as far as the cold and his frustration were concerned, at which Kagero simply rolled her eyes.

"I always hated it when you drank." she remarked sternly. "In fact, I still do; you just don't metabolize it well."

Throwing back another cup of the rice wine, Saizo glowered at his companion. "Why thank you for your concern, Mother," he replied dismissively. "First of all, I'm a grown man. I'll drink whatever I damn well please. Besides, it's sake, it's not even that strong anyway."

"Yeah, and a hard man like you strikes me more as the shōchū type anyway." remarked a deep-voiced, middle-aged man with a patch over his left eye and right arm in a sling. "But it's your life, not mine."

Saizo immediately dropped the cup. "What the hell? Oishi?!" exclaimed Saizo. "How the hell are you still alive?! You were fighting in the capital's streets last I heard!"

The ronin smirked proudly. "Even though those Nohrians might like killing, they didn't know how difficult I am to kill." he boasted, taking the seat next to the ninja, taking a swig of the bottle on his belt. "Still don't."

"So I take it you heard the news about Lord-"

"Of course I did! What the fuck do you think I've- we've been doing for the past six months anyway?"

"Wait, 'we'?"

"Exactly."

Saizo turned to his counterpart, completely and utterly lost as the brunette gave a genuine, soft smile, the first one for months, if not years. "There's a reason Nohrian troops and officers alike call these mountains a 'wretched hive of scum and savages,' you know." Kagero explained. "It's also the very same reason why most of their casualties are suffered in here as well."

"Exactly." replied Oishi contentedly. "While the casualties were horrendous, me and forty-six other guys from my old unit made our way out here to continue the fight and avenge Lord Ryoma. And it's not just us who are out for Nohrian blood by any means."
"You could say that again." came a voice, this one harsh and feminine. "Truer fucking words were never spoken."

The voice belonged to a muscular, hard-faced kunoichi with shoulder-length brown hair, slightly younger than the fallen prince's retainers, her most prominent trait the deep, freshly-healed scar across her throat.

"I always knew you were tenacious, Chinatsu." remarked Kagero, more than a little impressed. "But that battle in the capital was something else to survive, even for you."

Chinatsu scowled reflexively. "It's not so much 'surviving' as being dragged forward by hatred for people who deserve to be such." she replied. "But I know damned well that the likes of us are some dangerous enemies to make."

As their old comrades went to talk tactics with their respective groups, Saizo gave his counterpart an uncharacteristically soft expression. "You're pretty fucking amazing, you know that?" he said.

Kagero swept back some of her raven hair out of her face. "Yes, I know."

"And you lost HOW many men again?!" Hans taunted, his scarred face twisted with glee his coworker's humbling.

Still clutching the site of the wound on his abdomen, Pietro muttered inconclusively about estimates and soldiers missing-in-action. He was fairly sure the brute King Leo insisted on referring to as his equal could scarcely count, but he was not going to give the bandit the satisfaction of admitting he'd lost a good half of the men the king had allotted him, a horse, and a good deal of his blood to that uppity old savage.

"So I guess the great 'Savagekiller' is getting a bit rusty, eh?" Hans taunted further. "I'm sure the king will find someone decent to take your place-"

"At least the last time, I 'lost,' I could actually walk away from the fight." snapped the paladin. "And didn't have to be carted away like some pathetic, wounded animal."

Intellectually and rhetorically checkmated by this response, Hans merely shot his counterpart a hateful glare. Even as the two senior-most commanders assigned to the east, second only to Matteo himself, there was little love lost between the two men; known to dislike each other, the only thing which they really had in common was their approach to the "savages," and even so, there was still considerable disagreement about their exact methods. So why on earth was the king demanding their shared presence in his throne room? He had even dispatched Gunter, head of his royal guard, to receive them outside.

"It's about time, gentlemen." the old knight scolded. "We wouldn't want to keep His Majesty waiting, now would we?"

*The great doors to the throne room creaking open, the king motioned listlessly for the visibly-foreign slaves to clear the way for his generals. As they reached the foot of the throne's steps, the three men went down on one knee (Pietro wincing briefly) before being shortly motioned to their feet. "Well, gentlemen." began Leo airily. "I suppose you are questioning why exactly I have summoned you, no?*
Pietro winced once more, not so much from his wounded abdomen, but his wounded pride, at which the king gave a dispassionate chuckle. "You needn't worry, good sirs, you've done nothing wrong." Leo reassured. "In fact, this is an occasion for celebration. But as our first order of business, I must introduce you to your new colleague, your new sister-in-arms."

"Erm, 'sister,' my liege?" inquired Pietro, the feigned humility clearly stifling him on several levels.

Rising from his throne, Leo simply clapped twice, his expression turning cruel and proud. "Konrad!" he demanded. "Introduce these gentlemen to our new friend!"

Upon closer inspection, the least-astute of the trio noticed the questionable scientist huddled off in a shadowy corner, however, all eyes in the room were soon on its latest occupant. Crossing the threshold, gait disciplined and inhumanly stiff, the figure was clad head-to-toe in armor blacker than the darkest night, the only flesh visible being her lips and lower face. Taking her place at Pietro's left, even the steely paladin was slightly unnerved by the lack of audible respiration.

"This, gentlemen," began Leo smugly. "is Lady Rose. One of the, if not THE strongest woman in the kingdom's history to serve Nohr. A wyvern tamer and axewoman without peer. And you four, are my Four Horsemen, my strongest and most loyal generals. Your names will be forever etched into Nohr's heroic sagas; the heroes who led the effort to extinguish the threat of the Hoshidan savages once and for all and made clear to them that their only options are to kneel voluntarily before me, kneel before me in chains, or be exterminated."

Leo began to pace the throne's platform lengthwise. "But my Four Horsemen cannot, will not, be forced to carry out their heroic deeds with ratty old weapons." he remarked, reaching behind the throne, momentarily producing a silver-studded spear with a point of unparalleled sharpness, a sickly-green gemstone protected by sharp fringes joining the shaft and point. Walking up to Gunter, the king turned the weapon horizontally, presenting it to the old knight. "This is Gae Bolg." Leo introduced. "A legendary spear of untold power."

"Thank you, milord." Gunter answered with a light bow, already quite aware of the weapon's origins and knowing it'd make a fine counterpart to his otherworldly blade.

Briefly returning to the throne, Leo did the same with another weapon, an intricate, double-edged blade with a sinister-looking red gem at the hilt's center. Once again, he flipped it horizontally and presented it to Pietro. "The Loptyr Sword." introduced the king. "This blade was also forged with extremely powerful magic. A perfect fit for a man of your tastes and abilities."

"You are most gracious, Your Majesty." Pietro thanked, less with humility and more distracted fixation on the blade and its eerie, yet intoxicating power.

Again, Leo returned to his throne, returning to his generals with an axe of with a brilliant, almost-chrome sheen of silver and royal blue finish on the handle, handing it off to the newcomer without a word shared between them. Finally returning to collect the last of the weapons, repeated the ritual, once more flipping the weapon, an axe overlaid with shimmering gold and even sharper than the one presented to the enigmatic Rose, presenting the weapon to Hans. "Finally, this is the Thunder Axe, Armads." the king informed the already transfixed bandit. "I can promise you that this is the finest axe in this world."

"This...is fucking amazing!" the brute marveled, taking the weapon in his axe hand. "You there,
slave! Er- Do you mind, sire?"

"Of course not, my friend. They're disposable, after all."

Wearing a wicked grin, Hans called once more for the collared young man, his eyes burning with impotent defiance. "What do you require of me, Master?" the Hoshidan growled through gritted teeth.

"Just hold still for a second." the bandit demanded, momentarily felling the youth with a deep, diagonal slash across his neck and chest.

Absolutely intoxicated with this power granted him, Hans turned the malevolent glare onto his latest victim's fellow slaves huddled together in a nearby corner, the seven of them returning expressions of absolute, defiant contempt or sheer, unadulterated terror. As the room's most prolific butcher of defenseless men, women, and children alike once again indulged his passion on the helpless captives, the fact that the weather outside had turned stormy was paid little mind by the others. The old knight, on the other hand, noticed that every deadly blow of the axe coincided with a particularly violent thunderclap.

Once one of his generals had his fill (for the time being) of innocent blood, Leo kicked their sole survivor, a girl not much older than Elise would have been, quivering next to his throne in terror. "Clean this up, you worthless bitch!" he snarled at the Hoshidan, who weepily steeled herself to dispose of her newfound friends.

Taking to his throne once again, Leo wore an expression of proud contentment at his Four Horsemen gathered here; one for each of the cardinal directions. But the three outside of Gunter would be subject to one final test of their loyalty and devotion to his cause before they would be approved for their deployment to bring his brand of iron-fisted order to Hoshido. "By the by, in a couple of weeks' time, an infestation of rats will be troubling us." Leo remarked distantly, as if speaking of some utterly trifling matter. "For all his faults, Duke Toscana is renowned for his ability to plan get-togethers, but I trust you three will see fit to deal with the vermin when the time comes, hm?"*

The Ice Tribe champion was not a particularly prolific dreamer and for that, he was grateful. As the majority of his dreams invariably drifted back to when he was a young boy, to the single defining incident in Florian's life; the impetus for his quest to become the most powerful guardian of his people in their history and his burning hatred for Nohr. Inevitably, said dreams always started the same way.

"Father!" his younger self would call over the whoops and shouts of the marauding Nohrian soldiers.

"Florian, run!" his father would implore as his axe sent a Nohrian knight and his steed to meet their maker, cognizant and accepting of his inevitable demise. "Run as fast and far as away as you can and don't look back!"

Now for a boy of no more than four, the chaos and carnage of scores of his tribe's men and fellow boys being butchered, slashed, stabbed, chopped, burned alive, and trampled underfoot was far too much to deal with and run he did. But his morbid curiosity and love of his father eventually got the better of him, turning back only to encounter the Nohrian paladin, the demon who had haunted him
his entire life; his cruel sneer, immaculate greenish-black mustache, and blood-red lance giving him the appearance of an evil spirit straight from the tribe's folklore. Sometimes the knight would make an arrogant remark, others he'd simply hoist the polearm to strike; Florian's mind's eye had replayed the scene so many times, he was unsure exactly which had actually occurred. But the next part was crystal clear and, horrifying as it was, still made a part of him swell with pride.

"Nohrian bastard!" his father would roar, deftly cutting through several of the knight's minions. "Get away from my son!"

As his father struck at the knight, leaving a grazing wound in the process, one other detail still stood out to Florian plain as day; the horrific sights, sounds, and smell of burning flesh and hair were permanently imprinted on his mind's eye as he witnessed his father impaled on the wicked lance and with the unnatural flame eventually subsiding, using his mangled body and the last ounce of strength left in him to shield his son from the massacre.

"FATHER, NO!" screamed Florian as he awoke in a cold sweat, his eyes affixed to the ceiling of a particularly ramshackle Windmire inn.

As he took a minute to get his hurried breathing under control, the tribe's heir looked on with concern from her own bed.

"Are you alright?" Flora inquired gingerly. "You've been tossing and turning for the past hour."

"I'm fine." lied Florian defensively. "I was just having a bad dream, that's all. Nothing to be concerned about."

"Well, if you're sure, I won't push you about it further."

"In fact, I'm so fine, I'm going to go start my morning workout. Right now."

As the champion slammed the door behind him, Flora sighed. She, being nobody's fool, knew her old friend was most certainly not fine. While her father had tried his very damnedest to keep the affair hushed up as much as possible, the mysterious, "unexplained" disappearance of three hundred men and boys (including Florian's father, uncles, and brothers) of the tribe after a Nohrian "punitive expedition" some twenty years prior, the fact that the Ice Tribe's middle-aged members tended to hold the strongest grudges against Nohr, the champion's insatiable grudge against Nohr and anything to with it and being raised by his mother and aunts entirely told Flora everything she needed to know.

Of course it galled her to see anyone, particularly a childhood friend, in this much pain. However, knowing even better that Florian was also likely the most stubborn man alive, he would vehemently recoil and decline to talk about it until he was damned good and ready to do so and with such a vital mission of theirs on which the window was closing quickly, there was little to be gained from tension between the two. Traditionally in Nohr, for three days after a king's coronation, the city's people would be allowed (controlled) access to the castle grounds to partake in the festivities. With nobles from across the land (and often outside of it) up to the royal family flocking to Windmire to pay their tribute to the new monarch. However, by the morning of the third day, Flora began to despair as Corrine was nowhere to be found.

The "help" around Castle Krakenburg, ostensibly placed to keep order and aid the festival-goers, were less-than-helpful to the pair. Flora simply rolling her eyes as she presented her father's seal to the guard for the third time in three days. "You know full well who I am." Flora remarked shortly. "I
served the royal family for years AND showed you this crest twice already."

The guard on duty sneered at this show of defiance. "Well, I'm sorry, little lady." he said condescendingly. "But as a general rule, we don't allow your kind to mingle with members of high society, or even our dregs, so it must have slipped my mind."

Florian shot the watchman an angry, challenging glare as he and Flora were eventually admitted, maintaining the expression as he hesitantly handed over his weapons. After a good minute of scanning the crowds with a particular eye on the nobles, Flora sighed in resignation. "I have to at least try to find Lady Corrine or even Lady Azura." she said at last. "It should not take me more than a couple of hours. Are you sure you can stay out of trouble for that long?"

"Come on, Flora!" he admonished. "All the bullshit and slanders these Nohrian idiots spread about us, you really think I'm stupid enough to start something?"

"Stupid, no. Perhaps not the sharpest blade on the rack, but not stupid. Temperamental, yes."

It was far from an unfounded concern on the part of Flora. Unsurprisingly, Florian disliked dealing with Nohrians immensely and they generally reciprocated, the men in particular. Ever since they had reached the fringes of Nohrian "civilization" as the light flurries they called "snowstorms" started to pick up, Flora had lost count of the times she had had to either verbally or even physically restrain her companion from rising to rhetorical bait set by the kingdom's more belligerent denizens. She had to give the champion his credit; ever since he had begun dealing with Nohr, he had learned to let the petty offenses such as refusal of services or exorbitant charges for said services and goods usually slide without incident. But the challenges to their humanity, particularly the use of the word "savage" and talk of them being slaughtered like animals, left even the persuasive, charismatic Flora struggling to talk him down.

With this in mind and relieved of his sword and axe (but not without a couple of blades hidden in his armor; unsurprisingly, the champion never traveled completely unarmed, particularly among Nohrians), in the absence of his friend, Florian explicitly made it a point to avoid interaction with the festivalgoers, not even solely due to his dislike for their country and army; the pure decadence of the occasion was simply off-putting to Florian in a way he could not articulate. From the commoners eating and drinking as if there were no tomorrow, to the nobles blowing smoke up each others' arses, to the obnoxious blonde woman flaunting her expensive furs and jewelry to both, he felt that unease almost as fundamentally as his desire to avenge his murdered kin.

However, after an hour of meandering and sulking about and separation from Flora, the Ice Tribe's champion noticed something quite interesting about a conversation held between an unpleasantly-familiar voice and a noble in a certain alcove away from the festivities. "-truly is nothing personal on my part." came the first voice. "Business is business, you see. But Matteo can simply not be seen colluding with...well, your sort, but rest assured, his money is still good and will find its way to your coffers."

"Hey, gold is gold." replied the second voice, lazily arrogant. "Civilized, 'savage,' it doesn't give a damn. "How'd the Wind Tribals treat you? Some of my boys may have scuffed up a few of the women a bit, if you get my meaning, but we got you the merchandise in working order. Well, most of it, anyway."

"Excellent. Konrad is extremely interested in the innate magical properties of their casters. He thinks he can accomplish some w- Well, 'wonderful' may not be the right term, but you understand my point."
"Whatever, long as we get paid. Just don't ask us to try to retrieve any more merchandise from Mount Garou. Some of the boys tried there and ran into the head bitch in charge and her pack. It...wasn't pretty from what the survivor told me."

"I'd actually have suggested the Kitsune if that country it weren't so damned dangerous for you lot. After that number the princess did on them, they'd fetch you a far higher price than the average Hoshidan savage, I'm sure. Hell, I bet Konrad would pay you five times his normal rate at least."

"True, but when I bought up the possibility to some of my hands, they weren't exactly sold on the cost-benefit equation for that one. Now, if you'd start putting out bounties on those Hoshidan bandits you seem to be having such a problem with."

"You must be even more reckless than you are greedy. Need I remind you who are to have tactical and operational command over there very shortly? True, that bandit's one of the nastiest pieces of work on the continent, but Pietro? Well, you'd better be spending every spare minute praying to whatever you people hold sacred that you don't get in his way. Trust me, he'd be far more a danger to you and your men than the savages."

"Thanks for the heads up, but I think we can handle ourselves."

Giving himself some distance as to not make his eavesdropping apparent, Florian noticed the nobleman departing as their conversation concluded. Quite transparently some Nohrian bigshot or another, who, how, or what he was held no interest for the champion. No, the identity and activity of his "fellow" tribesman was of far more interest. Like a tiger on the hunt, he crept up on the man slowly, at the last second grabbing him by the collar of his silk shirt, pinning him to the wall of an old guard house.

"Bela, you slaving, traitorous motherfucker!" he raged. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't fucking gut you right here and now!"

His lithe-yet-muscular frame still no match for Florian's brawn, the man gave his old rival a self-satisfied smirk through his purple bangs. "It's simple, really." Bela responded calmly. "Chief Kilma likes and trusts me far more than he ever did you."

"Even when I tell him what you and your boys have been up to? That you're trafficking other tribals AND your own people for whatever sick shit Nohr is doing?!"

"Oh, Florian, you simple man. Whose word do you really think he'll trust? The word of the urbane, traveled, diplomat with years of experience and charisma or the musclebound, hotheaded problem child who has been eyefucking his daughter literally every day since he was thirteen years old?"

Slamming the man once again against the wall, with his free hand, Florian drew one of the concealed daggers in his armor, holding it threateningly to the other man's throat.

"That's got nothing to do with this and you know it, bastard!" he scolded.

"Oh, but I think it does, little man." taunted Bela once more. "The chief dislikes you for a reason, you know. You can't even follow a simple direction like 'no fighting' in the city. Yes, I do believe that a charming, intelligent lady like Flora deserves a charming, intelligent man like...well, not you. I believe we both know whom I'm talking about."
It was quite a gamble on Bela's part, as men have been killed for less in less-heated situations. Nonetheless, it seemed to have paid off, as the Ice Tribe's champion released him and sheathed the blade, yet never released his murderous glare. "Your Nohrian masters saved you this time." he said threateningly. "Next time we meet when you're not hiding behind their skirts, I WILL fucking kill you, understand?"

Bela gave that same smug grin, which Florian found so punchable during their childhood rivalry and even to this day. "I look forward to it, friend." he drawled facetiously. "But I do believe you've chosen the losing side. I'll be sure to tell her all about your stupid choices once I've bedded her myself."

As his rival sauntered off, Florian resisted a strong temptation to hurl one of the large rocks nearby at Bela's head. Whatever he did, whatever he said, that man apparently made it his life's mission to antagonize him and he did it well. What did he really think Nohr was going to do with him once he stopped being useful, Florian wondered angrily. Did he seriously believe that bullshit like the chief or is he just trying to enrich himself, even if it meant damn near destroying some tribes?

Chewing listlessly on a reed as he marched alongside the caravan of nobles, the *ronin* (there had been a lot of those created as of late) Hidehara, against his own wishes, retained a stony countenance as he accompanied this pathetic bunch meandering through hostile territory and an even-more hostile population, just waiting to throw themselves at the Nohrian king's feet, praying for whatever punishing terms he would give them. Having spent the past three weeks trekking through a country where constant verbal abuse (however, attempts at other types of abuse were not uncommon either) denigrating them as subhuman was not only tolerated, but encouraged by the powers that be in Nohr only incensed the now-masterless samurai even further and as the night fell and he paid attention to the camp's conversations, he realized that even those who spoke of the importance of peace at all costs with the enemy were displeased with this state of affairs.

"Who the hell do these Nohrians think they are anyway?!" said one proud lord, sounding more than a little tipsy. "Making us crawl like worms to them to beg for whatever scraps they offer?!"

"Milord, I believe the towns we've passed with the 'savages not welcome' signs indicate the general mindset at play." remarked his retainer. "That or they're attempting to provoke us into giving them an excuse to finish us off once and for all."

"They're human beings just like us." replied a second lord. "They've taken so heavy of material losses, they couldn't possibly want to continue this war."

Eventually tuning out this banter after a few more minutes, Hidehara opted to retire to the edge of the nearby woods for his nightly meditation, figuring that the other guards and his fellow *ronin* could pick up the slack. However, his attempts to clear his mind were interrupted by another set of problems which he could not help but overhear.

"That's another one, milord." reported a *ronin*. "That's the third one in two days. Only this one was after Lady Raicho. I apologize for not having dealt with him sooner -"

"Don't apologize." insisted the third lord. "If you hadn't been there when you were, I shudder to think what would have happened. Let me help you with this pervert's corpse."

"Milord, I couldn't-"
"No, I insist. Gods only know how this could spiral out of control even if the likes of Duke Toscana don't make make it out to be something sinister."

What exactly did their immediate future hold anyway? Even despite his repeated attempts to clear his mind of any attachments, Hidehara found his attempts to resume meditation coming to naught; his instinct and finely-honed sense of danger was telling him there was something very, very wrong with this situation the Nohrian king had invited them into, but if he was not even sure himself that there was something amiss, how would he convince the lords and with no ironclad evidence?

As he absentmindedly stared at the snow piling up on one of the windowsills in Castle Krakenburg's great hall, Lord Yoshimitsu of Izumi halfheartedly picked and prodded at the plate of Nohrian delicacies before him, occasionally withering under the steely glare of his host, King Leonard, seated immediately to his left. Even among the Nohrians attending the feast, there was a palpable, yet inexplicable sense of tension about them, not unlike the night before a great battle.

The Hoshidan lord sighed, forcing down a few bites of potato as not to offend his hosts. Ever since he'd proposed such a summit with the new king, the Lord of Izumi had received very polarized reactions from his fellows, ranging from being called a coward and a traitor to a visionary and peacemaker. Yoshimitsu himself had no great love for the kingdom; being a border province, his people had probably suffered some of the worst excesses and atrocities of Nohrian occupation, but as the enemy's demands took their toll on harvest yields and their "punitive raids" on the fields and countryside, as winter approached and people across Hoshido began to look leaner and leaner, more and more of the nobles eventually came over to his way of thinking.

Ever since he'd arrived with his caravan in Nohr and the capital region in particular, in spite of all the degradation and humiliations to which his party had been subjected, Yoshimitsu had gone far out of his way to be a gracious guest (and seeing that his own people did so to the best of his ability), never speaking out of turn, accepting the disgusting Nohrian delicacies he'd been offered, indulging Leonard's proud, self-righteous monologues and even indulging the airy banalities of his kept woman.

"Oh, I almost forgot, Lord Izumi." resumed Leo dangerously. "Did I ever tell you the story of House Strom? It's one of the first things every Nohrian noble learns when he or she first takes on their responsibilities."

"No, milord, I can't say I've heard it." answered Yoshimitsu cautiously, reasonably certain he was not going to like what he was about to hear.

"Really, you haven't?" interjected the blonde, clad in her decadent finery. "Milord just adores this story and he tells it so well, too!"

The king made an exaggerated clearing of his throat, as if signalling for both Charlotte and his guest to hold their tongues. "In the very earliest days of Nohr, there was a noble house who considered themselves my fathers' equal, if not their superior." he began distantly, staring intently off into space himself. "But the Stroms were their vassals and they repeatedly refused to behave as such, do you know what happened to them?"

"King Leonard, I already told you." Yoshimitsu replied, more shortly than he'd intended it to sound. "I've never heard this story in my life."

"The founder of our dynasty took his finest, most loyal men and marched on Castle Strom and
slaughtered the family to the last man, woman, and child. Such is the price of insolence, pride, and disloyalty. But this was not only to punish the Stroms by blotting their name out of history apart from this tale; it also serves as a cautionary tale to this day about the wages of arrogance and treachery."

In light of this previous *faux pas*, Yoshimitsu wisely opted to remain silent at this tale; was this a threat, meant to keep them from becoming just too ambitious when the peace negotiations did come? Of course it was a threat, he told himself. Nonetheless, things had gone as well as could have been so far expected, and all Yoshimitsu could do was hope and pray nothing derailed the proceedings, but he was unsure whether or not the king's next course of action was a good sign or not: Rising from his seat at the center of the head table, Leo stretched with a contented sigh, helping the blonde to her feet with an outstretched hand.

"You know, I'm just not that hungry." said Leo distantly, giving the woman an abrupt, discreet slap on her backside. "Charlotte, let us retire to my chambers. I tire of this."

The woman blushed slightly. "An excellent suggestion, milord!" Charlotte responded, her tone somehow striking the Hoshidan as insincere on some level.

"Er, King Leonard, I apologize if I seemed disrespectful about your anecdote." interjected Yoshimitsu. "But I truly had not heard of House Strom before your riveting introduction. I trust the negotiations will begin first thing in the morning?"

The king smiled in such a manner that the gesture caused no small degree of discomfort to Yoshimitsu on a visceral level. "Of course." Leo said. "You have my word."

As the king and his woman departed the table, shortly leaving the great hall behind them, Lord Izumi could have sworn for a second that Leonard and the man at the end of the table, a raven-haired, middle-aged man with a angular, proud expression, exchanged knowing, conspiratorial glances with each other. Turning to his bodyguard, Yoshimitsu lowered his voice: "Did something seem kind of off about that interaction for you?"

"Perhaps." Hidehara replied, now very conscious of the dagger hidden in his boot for such an occasion. "If it pleases you, milord, I'll talk it over with the other guards after dinner."

"Thank you."

**As the string band began to play a "traditional Nohrian song," the music low and heavy, (which sounded more like a requiem to the lord), Yoshimitsu could not help but notice the armored, axe-wielding figure stationed motionlessly at the left side of the great doors. *Something* or another about his, her, or its stance was uncannily and uncomfortably familiar to him. Perhaps it was simply due to his status as one of Hoshido's foremost spear instructors back in his day that he thought he could recognize individuals by their idle and combat stances. the only thing which could take his focus off of the armored figure was a hulking Nohrian spontaneously rising to his feet, making his way to the great doors. Instinctively and increasingly uncomfortable with this, the lord rose from his seat as well, reaching the remainder of the tables before the man closed and blocked off the doors.

Clearing his throat much in the same manner as his king to halt the music, the duke, the sole remaining figure at the head table, raised his wine glass in a toast. "I am so sorry that we have been remiss in our duties as hosts." began Duke Matteo insincerely. "Therefore, I feel it only appropriate that we dedicate this gift to you sav- er, Hoshidans, our new friends and partners in peace."

Rushing to his lord's side, Hidehara cursed to himself as all hell abruptly broke out in the great hall: It
had struck him as odd that the Nohrian feastgoers were all men of decent physical shape aged sixteen to thirty-five and he now knew exactly why. At once and to a man, the Nohrians began to turn on their Hoshidan counterparts with their concealed daggers and blades stashed under the tables. At once, one of the Nohrians descended upon the heavily-pregnant Lady Kaede of Ise, stabbing her savagely in the abdomen repeatedly before slashing her throat. Before he could rise and draw his own concealed blade, her husband, Lord Tokuhei had his throat slashed almost to the bone, but not without a struggle.

Those who managed to escape the first half of the ambush instinctively scrambled for the great doors, hoping against hope to unblock the obstruction and escape with their lives. Those poor souls herded towards the doors by the assassins were almost at once butchered like so many stampeding pigs by the armored figure, screaming in crazed anguish as she (Yoshimitsu was now certain that the figure was a woman after hearing the voice) swung her axe wildly and a bald, burly man who wore an expression of absolute bliss as he slaughtered man, woman, and child alike.

As he dragged his liege from the carnage and back towards the the head table, Hidehara for his part, actually managed to take out a few of the assassins, but in the complete and utter bloody chaos of the situation, his plan to take Nohrian weapons from the dead and distribute them among his fellow ronin fell through, largely due to the lack of both things. Even in spite of his best efforts, the hulking sadist was on Lord Izumi far faster than his size would have implied.

"The king sends his regards." Hans said, eyes lit up with hateful glee as he drove the knife into the Hoshidan lord's chest cavity.

As the life drained from Yoshimitsu, he felt a sense of overwhelming despair; not that he was about to be reunited with the ancestors and many, if not most of his people, but a sense of overwhelming despair for the living and what their "partners in peace" had in store for Hoshido's future.

As he casually sipped his fine wine, leisurely watching the troops and two of the king's Four Horsemen finish off their guests, Duke Toscana congratulated himself on another job well done. He had told King Leonard that he was the absolute master at planning upscale get-togethers and he had not disappointed.

As part of her duties in her lady's absence, one of the duties Selena gradually took on was the preparation of the princess' dinners every now and again, particularly on a special occasion such as her returning from a considerable absence, such as tomorrow evening. True, the ingredients were expensive and time-consuming to acquire, costing an entire day out and a two weeks' pay, but this planned dinner, whether she'd intended it to be romantic or not, had the redhead feeling good, taking scarce notice of the commotion as she approached Krakenburg's grounds.

"Lady Selena, I must insist you turn back!" said one of the guards, a pikeman urgently.

"Hell, no!" she responded angrily. "I've been on my feet all damn day, what do you expect me to do?"

"The savage delegation! It was a ruse for an attempt on His Majesty's life! Sir Pietro and his men are dealing with the stragglers right now."

"Yeah, I can take care of myself."

Of course, Selena, being the cynical woman she was, did not believe a word of the bullshit Pietro had told his men. But as she took in the sights of the Hoshidan camp sites, she could scarcely believe her own eyes either: Bodies being hanged, burned, flayed alive among other things; for putting down
an "assassination attempt," Selena noticed an unusual number of the bodies in such states being those of women and children and an unusual dearth of weapons. Now she had seen some fucked-up things in her time, probably more fucked-up things than most people her age (or any age) would see, but THIS, this was even too much for her, and in plain view for anyone to see? The fact that they were led by one of Leo's right-hand men, Pietro, told Selena that her hunch about the new king and his change in disposition was more than just a hunch. But who in a position to do anything about it would actually listen to her?

Chapter End Notes

Class: King Nohr
Description: Leonard, the ambitious and ruthless king of Nohr. Values power above all else. Wields tomes and blades in battle with equal mastery.

Gurgurant:
Description: Leo only. A mighty and wicked blade from the Outrealm. Said to overflow with the madness and lust for power of its original owner.

Gae Bolg:
Description: Gunter only. A mighty lance from the Outrealm. Said to bear a powerful curse.

Armads:
Description: Hans only. A mighty, pilfered axe from the Outrealm. Immensely powerful, but Hans is incapable of wielding its full potential, as if its previous masters fight against him.

Basilikos:
Description: Rose only. An immensely powerful axe from the Outrealm. Said to be used by those somehow imprisoned in their own bodies.

Rex Hasta:
Description: Rose only. An immensely powerful lance from the Outrealm. Said to be used by those somehow imprisoned in their own bodies.

Loptyr Sword:
Description: Pietro only. A cursed, wicked blade from the Outrealm. Said to be accordingly empowered by the pride and hatred in the heart of its wielder.
Flame Chief Kikai

Chapter Summary

Shaking off their Nohrian pursuers at long last, Sakura, Rinkah, and Hana arrive in the lands of the Flame Tribe, Rinkah's guests receiving a good deal of news about the outside world, most of it bad, some of it good. Meanwhile, as Saizo plots a strike at the heart of the occupation economy and meets a familiar but unwelcome face, Selena musters up the courage to confront Corrine about Leo's dark deeds.

Chapter Notes

*Goron City (The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time OST)
**Lion King Caineghis (FE9 OST)
***Puzzling Truth (FE9 OST)
****At the Pub (Remix) (Final Fantasy Tactics Advance OST)
*****Condemnation (FE14 OST)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After three-and-a-half weeks of tracking and backtracking across occupied Hoshido, It proved another hike of three days and halfway up another peak to the main village of the Flame Tribe; a considerable settlement carved out of the side of a great mountain was incredible to both of the Hoshidan women, but this was tertiary to Hana's main concern.

"Ugh, it's so freakin' hot up here!" complained Hana, wiping the sweat from her brow using one of the last dry patches on her overshirt. "How do you people live like this?!"

Rinkah gave the swordswoman an odd sort of glance. "What are you on about?" she inquired. "It's a little warm at worst. But then again, you're wearing that armor, so that might have something to do with it."

"And don't forget." piped up Sakura. "If y-you don't mind me, saying so, Hana's from the north as well, so she's probably more comfortable in the cold."

Hana beamed at the princess. "Of course not, milady!" she replied, her tone somewhat more energetic. "You've actually got it exactly right!"

Rinkah glanced back at the pair quizzically. Not that she really cared either way, but exactly what kind of relationship did Sakura have with her retainer anyway? Granted, she knew them to be childhood friends, but they were just a bit too close and generally touchy-feely for Rinkah to have left it at that.
"Anyway, it's not much further to the village." she informed. "If you're hot out here, don't worry; it's a lot cooler inside."

*With her luck with the area, as they entered the mountainside, Hana half expected the village to be more molten hellscape than habitable settlement. While the abundance of rock-based architecture was slightly off-putting at first, any structural curiosities were quickly put to rest by Rinkah's promises; it was inexplicably quite comfortable in here in comparison to the mountain's exterior.

"Lady Rinkah! Our princess has returned to us at long last!" cried one particularly effusive tribesman.

The air in town was naturally festive at the return of their future chieftainess, particularly seeing the rumors which had spread like wildfire across the tribes about Nohr's deeds. Sakura actually having some passing familiarity with the tribe's customs, Hana simply took in the sights and sounds of the town, becoming particularly fascinated with the wealth and diversity of blacksmithing techniques on very prominent display.

"It's so lively..." marveled Sakura, noticeable sadness in her tone. "Everyone seems to have their place and purpose, not worrying about the world around them."

"Looks can be deceiving." Rinkah reminded. "Notice all the weapons being forged? Anyway, we're almost to Father's place."

Another few minutes of traipsing across narrow pathways and parapets bought the trio to a small, artificially-carved mesa in what would have been the town square, a great, earthen, spherical dwelling situated at its center. Rinkah bowed her head as she entered the domicile, her two companions following suit, shortly emerging in a large, circular, open-air chamber, a great flame at its center, overseen by a large, proud-looking man of fifty or so, his flame-red hair trailing behind him like a lion's mane. Standing up with some effort, his stony expression cracked somewhat to give his daughter and heir a smile.

**"Ah, Rinkah, my daughter!" he said. "I knew you would return to me in good health!"

Rinkah flashed a knowing smile at the pair. "Well, I had a bit of help, to say the least." she informed. "Father, I know you've met Princess Sakura once as a child, but this is the retainer of hers I sent word back about."

"I am Hana of Mutsu, Lady Sakura's retainer and protector." the swordswoman introduced with a light bow. "Daughter of Musashi and Akiko; it's an honor to meet you."

The chief gave a toothy grin, followed shortly by a jovial bellow. "A warrior of Mutsu!?!" he exclaimed. "It truly is Tomokane's niece! Welcome, courageous warrior. I am Kikai, chief of the Flame Tribe! You are already acquainted with my daughter, for which you and your liege both have the eternal gratitude of myself and our people."

"No need to thank me." Hana said humbly. "I was just protecting my homeland and my liege."

"Hm, something wrong, Sakura?" Rinkah inquired, taking notice of the princess' shirking body language.

"N-no, it's nothing." she protested meekly. "It's just-"
By this point, the princess was almost in tears. "I am eternally grateful for your hospitality, Chief Kikai." Sakura resumed. "B-but I just couldn't bear to cause you and Rinkah any more trouble than I a-already am. I've heard what many of your people have to say about us. A-about me."

At this Kikai's expression settled somewhere between one of concern and one of confusion. "Whatever do you mean by that, my child?" he inquired, turning his head slightly.

"A-about how they'd b-be better off with Nohr and that w-we just want to enslave you for ourselves! I swear on Mother's grave, sir, it's not true!"

By now, the chief's countenance had turned kind and fatherly, Kikai merely chuckling softly. "Oh, let such slanders against our dear friends trouble you no longer, daughter of Sumeragi." he reassured warmly. "They are merely the grumblings of a small, but vocal minority. No one can tell precisely when or where this whispering campaign started, but rest assured, the vast majority are not deceived by any means."

"Three guesses where it came from." Hana whispered bitterly to Rinkah. "First two don't count."

"Truly?!" replied Sakura, having regained a good deal of her composure.

"Yes, truly. In fact, probably now more than ever, we understand fully well what Nohrian mastery would mean for us. Which reminds me, you two will have been without news for some time now. Rinkah, retrieve our guests some cushions!"*

Rinkah returning with cushions, the tribe's heir gave her father an abridged summary of her findings; knowing her father well, Rinkah did correctly report his state of mind and lasting concerns to Hana's uncle.

"How long as it been since you two escaped the castle?" the chief asked, his tone noticeably grimmer.**

"Let's see, it was back in the summer." began Hana, recalling their itinerary. "But we first traveled to Mutsu...so about six months?"

"Yes, that sounds right." Sakura confirmed. "Why?"

Kikai shut his eyes in meditation. "The world has changed a good deal." he informed. "And not for the better."

Sipping some piping-hot tea he'd set aside, the chieftain took a deep breath. "Alright, first of all, let me start with this, since it concerns all of us the most." he prefaced tiredly. "Nohr has a new king, Leonard. Goes by Leonard the Thirteenth, to be precise. His father died under...murky circumstances after the capital's fall. Personally, I don't give a damn if a dragon ate him, I'm just glad the bastard's dead."

"Wait a second, Leonard...." Sakura piped up, apparently unsure whether to be worried or guardedly optimistic. "That name sounds familiar..."

Kikai downed some more tea, this time quite a considerable amount of it. "It should. He and his older
sister were the only two survivors of Garon's biological children, those actually eligible to succeed him, after Shirasagi, said sister waiving her right to the throne pretty early on."

Upon hearing this name and familial situation, a part of Hana wanted to kick herself. "Dammit!" she swore. "He was right there, almost dead! I knew I should have cut his fucking throat when I had the chance!"

While Rinkah glowered at Hana for this outburst in front of the chief, the man for whom she took offense was nonplussed. "I can't say I disagree with you there." remarked Kikai. "And that gets me to his minions; from what we've gathered, damn near all of Nohr is abuzz with the 'four heroes' Leonard has promoted to send to Hoshido and break any and all resistance to his rule, his Four Horsemen, his most powerful and loyal generals, one for each cardinal direction."

"Oh, my!" interjected Sakura, dreading the news of one figure in particular. "Do w-we know anything about them?"

"Let me start with the one we know the least about; supposedly from the east, one of his 'horsemen' is a wyvern knight named Rose. No one knows anything about her beyond her name and that she just showed up at Krakenburg one day a couple of months after Shirasagi fell, gaining Leonard's favor with her inhuman strength. Apparently, some Nohrians say that 'Rose' doesn't even exist, that she's really a demon trapped inside a suit of armor, made to do Leonard's bidding."

"Could they actually do that?" Rinkah asked, a skeptical eye cast upon her father.

"Honestly, I don't know, child. I would like to say it's impossible, but given that Leonard has reportedly been a prodigy at that kind of magic for years and our people invariably reporting tortured, horrible screams wherever she and her unit make camp at night..."}

Kikai shook his head as if to expel the thought, diagramming a northward point in the accumulated ash. "Hailing from the north, we have Sir Gunter." he informed. "Their leader and commander of Leonard's royal guard. Once again, my sources weren't able to get much about him apart from being an older gentleman and veteran knight of some renown because he's just so damned reclusive, not even what he looks like. Although, we were able to find out something interesting straight from the horse's mouth and those of his adoring fans."

"Now that you mention it, I'd actually heard that name in passing when Kaze and I were captured, but didn't think anything of it." his daughter remarked. "What's so interesting about him?"

The chief gave a conspiratorial glance around the domicile, as if on some level expecting to be eavesdropped upon. "That Leonard credits him with saving his life after the 'massacre by wild savages' at Shirasagi's throne room. The exact details, of course, change depending upon who tells the story, but that element remains constant."

"I didn't see any old men there." interjected Hana, now able to be considerably freer about her role in the princess' rescue. "At least as far as appearance is concerned, everyone there I killed or wounded ranged from about fifteen to thirty or so years old."

Carving a point in the westward fringes of the ash, the chief winced slightly before resuming his introductions. "From the western sands, we have Hans." he introduced with disdain. "We don't
know anything about his past apart from him being literally a criminal of the worst sort before his being 'reformed,' but his present and immediate past are well known to Hoshidans.

Choking back a flood of tears once more, Sakura nestled herself in Hana's grasp as the swordswoman scowled. "That fucker's sorry life is mine." Hana growled. "It won't be soon, but I promise you all that the last thing he sees is going to be my blade cutting or stabbing some vital organ of his."

"Let's hope the spirits smile on your efforts, daughter of Musashi."

Finally, Kikai diagrammed yet another point, southward relative to the others. "Now the only reason we in the tribes have this much information about the guy is because we've dealt with him the most," prefaced the chief. "But lastly, from the south, we have Pietro, a Nohrian general who's known as the 'Savagekiller.' You can imagine how he received such a title from his countrymen. And he apparently loves his job just as much as he hates us 'savages.'"

His expressions and tones betraying either contempt, curiosity, or a combination of the two when introducing the other "horsemen," Hana noticed something interesting; the Flame Tribe's chief seemed to express an ever-so-slight hint of fear when introducing the general. Sakura, on the other hand, was troubled by something else.

"Wh-what exactly do they mean by, 'savages,' Chief Kikai?" inquired Sakura sheepishly. "And why does he hate them so much?"

"Basically, any non-Nohrian; means their humanity is, shall we say, flexible, meaning you can do whatever horrible shit you feel like to them depending upon their position." informed Rinkah bluntly, gesturing as if to mimic a descending hierarchy. "Supposedly, it's not official, but you've got Nohrians at the top obviously, people like Nestrans and Chevois a good deal below them, way further down, you've got Hoshidans, and at the very bottom...well, you guys are higher up than us, but not by much. They don't all think like this by any means, but enough Nohrians do that it's an actual threat to our people's survival."

Kikai nodded sadly. "Sharp as her tongue is, my daughter speaks the truth, more or less." he conceded. "And as for Pietro, there are many theories behind his hatred, but we cannot be certain about any of them. Perhaps it's a coincidence, but his very first command posting, which he volunteered for, by the way, was one of Nohr's 'punitive expeditions' against the Ice Tribe about twenty years ago saw he and his men slaughter some three hundred men and boys in cold blood, but as I said, it could be nothing."

While still noticeably distressed, the red-haired princess' visage showed a trace of outrage. "That's horrible...."

Kikai exhaled sharply. "You speak the truth as well, child."

"Which brings me to my final point. Rinkah has surely bought you up to speed with what we know about the mass disappearances among ours and other peoples. The scale and consistency of said disappearances leads me to no longer believe that these are mere coincidences, nor merely the actions of rouge elements within the Nohrian government. Whatever vile purposes these abductions serve, I cannot say, but it is clearly something of great value to Windmire.***

"Father, wait!" Rinkah began, her expression betraying her grave concern. "Are you saying what I
"I think you're saying?"

The chief sipped some more of his previously-neglected tea. "Not necessarily; I'm not Lupina after all. I'm well aware that Nohr has coveted our homeland's resources for ages now and would relish the excuse to destroy us. No, I'm saying that I'm going to call a conference of the other tribal leaders, and then if and when we decide-"

"If you do decide in favor of punishing Nohr, let me know and I'll join you." interrupted Hana brazenly. "We and a lot of other people have got some unfinished business with the bastards as well and my brother still has a good number of men and materials at his disposal in the north."

Kikai chuckled fondly, said chuckling growing into joyous, bellowing laughter before long. "Oh, I like you, Hana of Mutsu!" he conceded, almost in tears of joy. "After everything you've been through, most people would have already turned and run with their tails between their legs, and I could scarcely blame them! It takes a special blend of confidence, power and reckless courage with just a hint of madness to take Nohr on head-on like you do! In fact, your deeds and friendship with Princess Sakura remind me of back in our day when my shadow single-handedly held off seventy-five raging Nohrian axemen so that I could get my wounded self to safety!"

"W-wait, your shadow fought Nohr?" inquired Sakura gently. "I don't understand."

"Father's right-hand man and bodyguard, Amagi." explained Rinkah, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "He's been such for so long, that he's often compared to-"

"-a shadow trailing a man." boomed a voice from the dwelling's shadowy corners.

At this, Hana and Sakura reflexively sprang from their cushions, turning behind them to find a hulking, middle-aged man with a wild mane of black hair obscuring most of his head. "I apologize for startling our honored guests, but duties are duties."

"No, you needn't apologize." Hana answered cordially. "Like Chief Kikai said, I'm exactly the same way with her!"

Both Kikai and Amagi shared a good, nostalgic chuckle at this, the former finally rising from his cross-legged stance. "As I said already, we are eternally in your debt that my daughter has not ended up, at best, as a pelt for some Nohrian noble." the chief confirmed cordially. "Princess Sakura, Lady Hana, you are welcome to refuge with us as long as long as you please."

"Once again, thank you from the bottom of my heart, Chief Kikai." Sakura said, bowing at the waist.

As Rinkah escorted Sakura from the dwelling, intent on giving her guests a complete tour of the city, the shadowy giant Amagi spoke up just as Hana was about to join them. "Wait, daughter of Musashi." he began.

"Hm, something wrong?" inquired Hana, her spirits noticeably higher.

"I can tell already that's a fine blade you carry with you, but if you truly wish to forge a weapon truly effective in protecting the princess, against King Leonard's sorcery, and especially one that will make short work of his pet bandit, ask Rinkah to take you across town, ask for an older woman named..."
Kirigamine, my sister. It will not be exactly easy, but seeing what you've gone through already, I've no doubt you could do it."

"Alright, Kirigamine, got it! So your sister is a blacksmith of renown?"

"She is very skilled, but not exactly. In our culture, the blacksmithing arts are passed down from mother to daughter, but my niece- But that's a story for another day; one I've no right to tell."

"Of course! I'll make your sister and niece proud!"

At the young ladies' departure, the old warriors shared a knowing, nostalgic smile. "It really is just like old times, isn't it?" inquired the chief fondly.

"It could end up better, it could end up worse." his shadow replied. "But we've got to work tirelessly for the former and prepare for the latter."

"And who says young people these days lack initiative?!"

In spite of all her new (often rather frustrating) duties, Leo's responsibilities as king, and the sheer tension and awkwardness of his rejected marriage proposal hanging over their heads, Corrine found Leo's adjustment to his new role and his resulting comfort (at least in his study) in it quite fitting. While it did not hurt that the time apart had apparently been good for his earlier passive-aggressive sulking, the princess could not deny that his hair slightly lengthened and new penchant for fine white garments made him rather attractive. Not that she would have sex with him, of course, but she could certainly understand why he would have all of these women throwing themselves at him; and not simply due to his status either.

Leo however, seemed to be more interested in the gift which he was presenting to her, proudly displaying the slightly-curved, obsidian-hued, silver blade before sheathing it and presenting the weapon to Corrine. "I had been meaning to give you this earlier, but you know how things are." he said with a dapper smirk.

"Thank you, Leo, it's wonderful!" thanked Corrine. "But you shouldn't have gone to all this trouble. This can't have been exactly cheap."

"Nonsense! Only the best for my dear sisters! Of course, this should do until I get you your Yato back. And I will get it back, I promise you that."

Given that the legendary Hoshidan sword had been with her for so long and through so much, it was not surprising that its chosen wielder felt somehow exposed without it, making do with whatever was available at the time and place. While she wished to (if only as a formality) dissuade the king from going to the trouble, some instinct of hers told Corrine it wise to drop the topic, taking her leave of Leo's study.

After a few minutes (well outside earshot of Leo's study), Corrine could not shake the feeling of somehow being watched. Well within the confines of the castle and with her new blade, the princess chose to write it off as nothing until a voice knocked her from her figurative trance. "Milady, I've news from Hoshido." came Kaze's voice from nowhere apparently detectable. Corrine let out a yelp as she turned around to find Kaze mere paces from her.

"Kaze, you scared the hell out of me!" she scolded.

"I apologize, Lady Corrine, but stealth is as natural as breathing to me by this point in my life." the ninja responded. "You still wish to hear of my findings, yes?"
"Oh, go ahead."

"I was unable to determine whether or not the king was engaged in anything, shall we say, unusual, during his recent sojourns to Hoshido. But given the extent of the country, personal involvement on his part appears highly unlikely."

Awaiting the news with bated breath, the princess mentally breathed a sigh of relief. "That's good news." Corrine responded with a smile. "You sound as if you had something more to say, Kaze."

"Unfortunately, yes I do." the green ninja confirmed. "At one or more sites in Hoshido, there are apparently a good number of individuals, civilians from what I could tell, still being held in captivity for some unknown purpose. Whatever it is, it is far from pleasant and, if one of the inmates was to be believed, probably fatal more often than not."

"What! The war's been over for months! I'm sure once Leo hears about this, he'll-"

"Before you confront him about that, milady, I also heard of a man described as a, and I quote, 'creepy, greasy little bent-over fuck' who seems to have some high-level involvement in these activities. His name supposedly begins with a 'Ko-' but I was unable to determine anything further than that."

"Hmm, now that you mention it, that description DOES sound at least kind of familiar."

"I can investigate the matter further for you, Lady Corrine. Perhaps the source I spoke with was mistaken?"

"Thank you, Kaze. I will keep an eye out for him as well. But I do know that this whole affair has Duke Toscana's stench all over it."

"Would you like me to, er- 'take care' of him, milady?"

"Well, I WOULD like it, but no, he's not to be touched. I feel naming-and-shaming him and his cronies would be the best course of action; as the evidence acquired would force Leo's hand."

"Your wish is my command. He shall not be touched. With that, I shall take my leave: I dislike lingering around the nobles for too long."

"I could say the same, Kaze."

Corrine feeling somewhat better than she had since arriving in at Krakenburg several days prior, her remaining strong emotion was not so much relief (which was also present) but puzzlement at the note affixed to the door of her chambers by a dagger:

- Be at the Horsehead tavern, just outside the slums, at midnight tonight. Make sure you aren't followed. If you can't memorize this note, take it with you. If so, destroy it. I'll be sitting at the bar pretty much all night.

Unsigned and with the ink still fairly fresh, Corrine was able to deduce fairly quickly that its author must be one of the castle's long-term residents, as no one else would be allowed direct access to this area without her or possibly Azura's approval. Extremely confident in her martial abilities, even venturing into the slums was not a terrifying prospect for the princess; contrary to many nobles, she
adored interacting with the common people, but with the deadline a mere two-and-a-half hours away, Corrine decided to respect the wishes of the note's author.

Even in spite of her rather mysterious origins, her deeds during the war and service to Nohr had unsurprisingly earned her widespread acclaim among all classes of people, common and noble alike. However, unlike her brother had lately taken to doing, Corrine did not revel in regaling the common people with lurid tales of her exploits against the Hoshidans, for a number of reasons.

"Princess! Tell us all about how you cut down five hundred screaming savages trying to cross the border!" begged one boy.

"No, tell us about the time you slew the evil banshee who ate Nohrian babies then killed a savage war chief by throwing him from their wall!" plead another.

"Princess, thank you so much for saving my papa from the savages! He and mama both swear they were seconds away from roasting and eating him alive!" thanked a little girl.

"Princess, are all the horrible, disgusting things savages do to their women true? Gods, I'd sooner take my own life than have one of those beasts even look at me!" a young woman said melodramatically.

"What does it feel like to kill one of them, milady? My brothers over there tell me savages don't have souls, so does it feel different to kill them?" asked a young man, adolescent but not old enough for the army.

Hard as she may try to avoid many of these inquiries, some occasions and audiences were simply not conducive to this approach; at such times, evasive non-answers had to suffice. Corrine understood that they had been enemies with Hoshido for some time now, but was such language truly necessary? The princess pondered this for some time, arriving at the tavern's entrance before she knew it. Judging by the rancor inside, her mystery contact's fear of being overheard would be largely assuaged.

****The air heavy with the din of conversation (some rowdier than others) and some sort of smoke or another, as Corrine, unfamiliar with the location, took in the rustic sights and sounds of the tavern as she searched for the bar. Little did she expect, that at least one of the conversations would actually relate to her mystery contact's business as well.

"What was with those fires a couple of weeks back by the castle? Is everything alright?"

"The king and Duke Toscana will burn for what they've done and we'll be lucky if the gods don't take us with them!"

"Oh, shut up! You can't really believe those stupid rumors spread by bleeding-heart savage-lovers?!"

"Civilized or not, there's not a people on the continent, and probably the world who don't honor the right of hospitality. Harming guests you invited, let alone killing them simply isn't done."

Several seconds of scanning the room saw the dragon princess locate a familiar face looking even surlier than usual, giving her a nod of general acknowledgement from the only occupied stool by the bar. Taking the stool to the redhead's left, Corrine waited awkwardly for some sort of confirmation or denial.
"So you showed, huh?" Selena said distantly. "I'm actually a little surprised."

"Well, why wouldn't I come?" the princess asked, shooting her a perplexed glare.

"Because you're about to hear some things you aren't going to be exactly thrilled by."

Turning to the barkeep, the prickly retainer scowled at him, placing a hundred gold's worth of coins onto the bar. "Hey, here's a hundred gold." Selena insisted. "Get lost for a few minutes, would you?"

"How dare you, wench?!" sneered the bartender in return. "Last I checked, this is MY establishment, not yours!"

The inter-dimensional traveler smiled with all the sweetness of a hungry lioness toward a wounded gazelle as she removed several more coins from her pouch. "For five hundred gold, you'd let me fuck your wife on this bar right in front of you; better than you ever could at that." Selena barbed confidently. "Would half of that convince you to get lost?"

Sweeping up and pocketing the coins, the barkeep sulked away, muttering something about reviewing his stock in the cellar and something about Selena's mother Corrine didn't catch. "That was kind of harsh of you, wasn't it?" she inquired.

"It's the truth, isn't it?" the redhead replied. "Besides, I don't need him listening in on this."

"By the way, what was so important and secretive that you couldn't just approach me in the castle to talk about?"

Selena's expression turned grave, absolutely devoid of the slightly-malicious playfulness shown with the barkeep. "Alright, you've said it yourself you've noticed your brother has changed since Shirasagi, right?" she began.

"Well, of course," the princess confirmed. "Wouldn't something like that change anybody? And to say nothing of having all that new responsibility thrust upon him."

"Ugh, that's not the point! The point is that he's changed even more than you could ever imagine and not for the better. You know that delegation of Hoshidan nobles that passed through here a few weeks back? The ones trying to wave a white flag?"

"Yes, it was shameful. I understand their pain at all their country has been through, but using the cover of a peace conference to carry out an assassination attempt against Leo is just unconscionable."

Perhaps from herself more than she cared to admit as well, Severa never reacted well to people being intentionally obtuse and Selena was no different in that regard. But due in no small part to the imminent threat posed by the king, this particular instance left her increasingly angry. "Hmm, from what I saw, an awful lot of unarmed men, women and children were slaughtered for foiling an 'assassination attempt.' she said, her tone almost mocking of Corrine as took a sack she'd bought with her and emptied it onto the bar.

Spilled out onto the bar was a considerable collection of obviously-Hoshidan daggers and knives in varying states of repair, notably blood-stained. However, contrary to Corrine's expectations, it was
the handles which were bloodied as opposed to the edges and very few of the edges were in such a state.

"That...could be anything." Corrine reassured herself as much as Selena. "And how do you know that they're from those nobles anyway? They could be war trophies for all you know!"

"Oh, really?" said Selena with disbelief. "Checked the great hall as of late? Just ask the maids, or better yet, your brother's slaves about just how much blood and how many organs they had to clean up after the king's minions got done with his 'guests.' Why else do you think he made damn sure that both you and Lady Camilla were away from this 'peace conference' of his? Hell, it took literally weeks to get all of it from the walls and ceilings!"

The dragon princess shot Selena a horrified, offended expression. "Selena, I'm disappointed in you." she scolded as if telling off a rumormongering schoolgirl. "I know you were never Leo's greatest fan, but to slander him with these vile, gutter rumors at a time when both he and Nohr need it least-

"Princess, I need to ask you a question."

"What is it?"

Resting her chin on her right fist, the redhead continued. "So when he finishes in your mouth, does he make you swallow too?" Selena deadpanned. "You know, just out of curiosity."

Shocked, dismayed, and offended by the retainer's assertions and insinuations about the character of both herself and her adoptive brother, Corrine reacted instinctively, slapping Selena with considerably more force than she'd intended. "How dare you!" she raged. "Leo was right, you ARE disgusting!"

Beginning to sweep the weapons back into her sack, to the surprise of both women, Selena (perhaps mostly satisfied having got her quip in) remained fairly calm. "I was being kind of facetious, but the point stands." she insisted. "That you either can't or won't take his cock out of your mouth long enough to notice that there's something seriously wrong with this man!"

"Don't be absurd! There's nothing wrong with him! He's just under a lot of pressure right now, as I said! In a few month's time after he's settled in, he'll be back to his old self and this will all be a bad, stressful memory."

Having finished recollecting the weapons into her sack, the redhead rose from her barstool with a huff. "Fine, be that way. I'll just get to the bottom of this myself, without your help." Selena insisted before taking a few paces. "By the way, the crack about you sucking him off isn't as facetious as you like to think it is. You know when he's with his wenches, half the time he's fucking you in that inflated head of his, right? Only reason it's not all the time is because the other half it's Lady Camilla he's fucking up there.****

As Selena took her leave of the tavern, struggling somewhat to bring the sack through the doorway, Corrine felt her cheeks flush in indignation. How dare she, the princess thought. How dare she drag her out here and attempt to poison her mind against some of the only family she had remaining with the worst lies possible?! Simmering and fuming all the way back to the castle, back in her chambers, Corrine even paid Azura little noticed, merely stripping off her armor and crawling into their bed with nary a word. The songstress, at last looking up from her dusty and quite- hefty tome, turned to the sulking Corrine, her golden eyes filled with worry and concern. "Is something wrong, Corrine?" she inquired gently. "Something to do with that note on the door?"
Cursing to herself about forgetting to destroy the note, the snowy-haired warrior shifted slightly. "It's nothing, really." she insisted bitterly. "Someone spreading vile slanders about Leo."

"About the Hoshidan nobles the other week?"

"Wait, how did you- Never mind, what are you reading? It looks ancient."

"It's a collection of old Nohrian folktales. Particularly about the First Dragons and their dealings with humans."

"I never took you for much of a folktale woman."

"I'm not, I'm just looking- Never mind, it's not important."

Not surprisingly, there was scarcely a closer pair of young women in the whole kingdom. Both Corrine and Azura, as a general rule, felt comfortable discussing almost anything with one another. However, for this one matter particularly, a potential minefield for both their bond and lives in general, both the lovers felt more than a little hesitant to discuss what was actually on their minds.

Apart from those who knew him closely, one talent of Saizo the Fifth which came as a surprise was his skill at amateur cartography, this particular hillside hideout in the hinterlands near the Nohrian border covered wall-to-wall in assorted maps and charts detailing known Nohrian economic installations erected since the capital's fall. As part of the "taxes" levied against their new charges, more often than not, Nohrian commanders and/or nobles had a series of farms and plantations erected and demanded tribute of "savage" men and boys from towns and villages across the countryside to work on said installations for sixteen to twenty hours a day; all for little-to-nonexistent compensation, of course.

Never a happy man by any means, at this, the ninja could not help but smirk. The last stand of Lord Tomokane of Mutsu and his men, despite all of the occupiers' attempts to hush it up, had already gone down in Hoshidan history as a symbol of defiance in the darkest night and cruelest winter. With this sort of ammunition, and his associates operating throughout the land, Saizo knew that the countryside would be blazing in revolt by this time next year, perhaps even sooner.

So engrossed in his plotting and planning, it was slightly unnerving for him not to have noticed his companion entering the hideaway, but even more interesting was the that eye-patched ronin was accompanying her. "What's wrong?" inquired Saizo. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"It's what I can't see that's bothering me." Kagero informed bluntly. "Or hear, for that matter. But every instinct I have is telling me that someone's observing this place. I even dragged this drunken sod up here since you didn't want to be bothered all day."

"No, I get that same sense too." confirmed Oishi, grip on his katana slung over his left shoulder ready to draw. "I'm obviously not as skilled at this as you two are, but yeah, I see what she means."

Saizo rolled his remaining eye. "Oh, fine! If it will keep you from losing your heads."

Emerging from the cavern, Saizo overlooked a scene of snow-capped, sloping greenery, heavily-wooded, but not so much that it was impossible to move without being heard. All his senses working in tandem, the ninja attempted to discern any other presence over the cold, bitter winds. "Now, where did you feel like you were being watched the most strongly?" he inquired. "Was it back towards the main path or."
"If I knew that, I'd have wasted the fucker already!" snarled Oishi.

"Besides, if we are being watched, it's certain he's moving around." Kagero reminded.

The ronin scowled. "Fine, you two can play with the ghost or whatever it is. I'm going back to the village before I freeze up here."

Even in spite of everything going on in the world, strolling through these serene forests together with the moon brightly shining down on them, under any other circumstances would have been soothing, if not well... romantic. Still, Saizo was a business-minded man, through and through, something the pair both knew well. With Kagero having mentioned movement, his ears reflexively began to search for anything out of the ordinary. Oh, yes, Saizo was definitely feeling that exact same sentiment described by his two companions and after a minute of the wind blowing, then dying down, he got an idea.

At the next wind gust died out, Saizo reflexively threw one of his knives at the tree branch directly up and to his left, noticing a very familiar voice muttering pained curses as its owner dropped from the branch, stabilizing himself after a wobbly landing on his feet. "Well, well, look what the new masters dragged in." Saizo sneered, drawing his katana on the figure staggering to his feet. "Surprised you had the gall to show your face here. What happened, did your masters get sick of your preening pet savage routine?"

Finally regaining his footing, Kaze assumed a defensive stance as he prepared to attempt reason with his twin. "Brother, you have to listen to me." he plead, being more careful than he'd ever been in his life not to make any sudden movements or reach for any of his blades. "Lady Corrine has me on an extremely important mission, it's about the king-"

Saizo scowled viciously, drawing a blade with his free hand. "You think I give a fuck about what that traitoress has to say?!" he raged. "Or the so-called 'man' who betrays both his country and kin just for pussy?!"

Whether simply from adrenaline due to the situation or actual offense, Kaze became slightly more belligerent as well, ready to draw at a nanosecond's notice. "Lady Corrine isn't like that!" he protested angrily, only afterward becoming aware of the double entendre. "It wasn't like that! King Leonard's acting strangely and we believe it has something to do with Duke Matt-"

"Why would you think I care about your masters' little errands or petty feuds either?!"

"Because it directly concerns you too! If Prince Ryoma told you to-"

Normally quite severe in her countenance anyway, Kagero's subtle change in expression to the green ninja was perfectly described as one of you-just-fucked-up-big-time. As sure as the sun rose in the east, Saizo's eye flared at his twin. "You fucking DARE to speak that name?!" he roared, attempting to bring down the blade on Kaze's head.

Deftly dodging the overhead slash, Kaze momentarily considered attempting to continue reasoning with his brother before thinking better of it, what with Saizo almost immediately on top of him, the dragon princess' retainer narrowly avoiding three separate slashes and a thrust aimed at his abdomen. No, Kaze knew that he would have to inflict some not-insignificant wounds on his brother before he...
would even consider listening to what he had to say.

Retreating to a nearby sturdy branch some two meters overhead, Kaze took the brief reprieve as an opportunity to aim three of his knives at his attacker's lower extremities. Saizo however, hardened by years upon years of harsh physical training and sheer rage, was once again shortly in striking distance, dismembering a number of smaller branches far too close to his own feet for Kaze's comfort and fled up the improvised mountain path in search of more defensible terrain. "Brother, I understand how you're feeling, but you must listen!" he implored, gambling that at least one of his remaining knives would make contact.

Needless to say, the pleas fell on deaf ears; the green ninja was certain he saw one of his knives lodged in his brother's right thigh, yet continuing on as if it were not there. Cursing to himself as his one remaining weapon sank in, Kaze drew his own blade, a sword of fine Nohrian steel. "What, our 'savage' tools aren't good enough for you anymore?!" Saizo spat, throwing all the force he could muster at the other man, who nearly buckled under the pressure. Kaze knew damned well this could not continue indefinitely; Saizo was physically quite a bit stronger than him and always had been; no, his best chance was to find more manageable terrain and wait for the angry ninja to tire himself out, but this was easier said than done: His brother's slashes, thrusts, and blocks were not quite as quick as his, but he compensated with pure power behind the strikes.

It was not an ideal situation at all and he was (as he had been the entire fight) on the defensive, but for a few moments, Kaze was convinced that the altercation was settling into a semi-predictable rhythm. However, the terrain behind him did not feel like cooperating; the snow throwing off his footing as it was, the terrain sloping upwards was not exactly conductive to defending himself from his enraged brother. Parrying three more of Saizo's slashes, a momentary slip up of footing saw the next blow saw the Nohrian blade knocked from Kaze's hands through the frigid air, Kaze grunting in pain at the older twin's follow-up slash across his right leg and abdomen, sending him tumbling into the ravine below.

His clothing and light armor scraping against the ice and rocks below the surface, almost immediately after getting his bearings, Kaze found his brother's blade pointed to his neck, its owner wearing an expression of absolute rage and contempt. "Anything to say, traitor?" he said, the blankness of his tone contrasting unnervingly with his hateful countenance.

"Just make it quick." the younger twin requested contritely, scarcely able to blame his brother for his hatred.****

Shutting his eyes as he waited for the finishing blow to come, Kaze was perplexed by its absence. His twin would call him somewhat naive, but he knew damned well that a man being stabbed through his throat sounded nothing like "Saizo, wait!"

Kaze opened his eyes to the puzzling sight of Kagero standing over him as well, stilling his twin's wrist with her own hand. Saizo however, was less-than-pleased with his companion. "Are you fucking kidding me?!" he raged. "Have you forgotten what he's done?! What his Nohrian masters have done?! All the horrible shit they've done to us 'savages' in the name of their 'birthright'?!"

"Not for one second." Kagero answered steelily. "In fact, it haunts me. However, because of what he's been up to, he's more useful to us alive than dead."

While his hateful expression remained, Kaze could see the gears working in his brother's head. To
his astonishment, the elder twin lowered and re-sheathed his blade. "Fine, see if I care." Saizo said angrily, turning away from the pair. "But when, not if, he betrays us again, you only have yourself to blame."

With his brother sulking away and Kagero applying a solvent to his wounds, Kaze gave her an appreciative smile. "Really, Kagero, you have my thanks." he said gratefully. "If you hadn't been here-"

"You'd be dead." Kagero interrupted coldly, beginning to bind his hands. "I didn't save you out of the goodness of my heart. If you didn't have something I want more than anything else, I'd have let him finish you off."

"Wait, what is that?"

"Information. Information about Nohr's high nobility and assorted power players. Information in particular about a specific noble involved in a specific atrocity of theirs."

Chapter End Notes

Okay, yes, I had the Goron City from Ocarina of Time stuck in my head while writing the part about the Flame Tribe...until I got to the part about Rinkah's (who always struck me as somehow feline, just not to the extent of, say, Lethe who she reminds me of) dad with all the lion imagery I used and that he's a "sub-human" "savage" leader and Crimea's Hoshido's ally. Once again, Hana = Ike, Sakura = Elincia. It's not a big mystery. By the way, the Flame Tribe members are all named after Japanese volcanoes, whether active (Kikai) or not (Amagi, Kirigamine).

Yes, yes, I remember the Telius games too, but the "Sure-they-invaded-our-country-and-enslaved-us-but-we'd-be-better-off-with-them-because-at-least-they're-not-(X)s" sentiment doesn't really work when both of your groups are at the absolute rock-bottom of your mutual enemy's caste-in-all-but-name system, now does it?

And speaking of FE9/10, technically, only one of Leo's Four Horsemen, Pietro, is an original character and he barely even counts since he's me referencing a Path of Radiance character pretty blatantly. But what about Rose, you may ask? Come on, you know pretty damned well who she is, especially if you finished/or almost so or seen Path of Radiance.

Finally, I'm probably going to get some flack for the portrayal of Corrine, but I think the naivete about court politics is justifiable and she canonically is slow to understand something; while a lot of innocent people and combatants needlessly lose their lives in war, as Hana and Kagero know, sometimes certain motherfuckers just need to die.
Chapter Summary

Hana's stint as Kirigamine's apprentice blacksmith is interrupted by Chief Kikai's visions of horror and hope, as well as her liege's stubborn determination to rescue her nephew from Cheve's occupiers. Meanwhile, Gunter's grudging protege makes himself useful to King Leonard through his underworld connections and the Ice Tribe's sojourners foil some of the lowlifes preying upon the people of the Hoshidan countryside.

Chapter Notes

*The Mining Town - Akzeriuth (Tales of the Abyss OST)

**Shadows Materialize (FE9 OST)

***Condemnation (FE14 OST)

****Holding Your Own (FE9 OST)

*****Victory United (FE9 OST)

******A Grave Fate (FE9 OST)

*******Move Out! (FE9 OST)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"And I tell you once again." scolded the old knight. "His Majesty's orders were most indequate: Wipe that entire wretched family out root and branch. I've no doubt that even the likes of Duke Bayern can handle the girl, but this-"

"And I'M telling you that they can handle it!" protested Hans, already quite annoyed with his superior. "My buddy Tarba didn't get known as the most ruthless bandit out west on talk alone, after all. Besides, it's just snuffing out some brat barely old enough to be away from his mother's tit! How hard could it really be?"

"And you're not the least bit concerned about the volatile situation your involvement would create in that area? Because the last I heard, there are still a great many people there who'd love nothing more than your head as a trophy."

"I've already shown you what I think of those 'people.' They're cockroaches as far as I'm concerned, just easier to kill. Besides, I'm not going to be involved as far as they know."

As they prowled the frosty confines of Krakenburg's castle grounds like a pair of cat burglars, Gunter had to admit; he was actually marginally impressed by the uncharacteristic level of foresight and
cunning his charge was putting into this plan. Granted, said plan was towards butchering a little boy, his caregiver, and likely anyone in the immediate vicinity, but the complete and utter moral bankruptcy and depravity aside, for Hans, it was progress.

"Very well." the veteran conceded, all his paternal sternness apparent. "But tell your friend not to expect any help from the occupation forces should they run into trouble."

"It's like I said, killing some brat is child's play for this group." insisted Hans proudly. "Hell, he'd be insulted if you even suggested they'd need it!"

*Unsurprisingly as members of the Ice Tribe, winters to the south were a trifle, if not pleasantly mild for the pair. However, both Flora and Florian could definitely understand why Hoshidans would not feel the same way about this winter particularly. While the larger cities were generally manageable (that is, until the food shortages and their resulting unrest bought the inevitably-violent Nohrian crackdowns), the heavy "taxes" levied by their conquerors were proving truly devastating to people in the countryside. As the days turned to a couple of weeks, the champion had increasing difficulty suppressing his unease at the recurring sight of the gaunt, emaciated Hoshidans disposing of their dead in massive funeral pyres outside their villages, huddling by the flames not only to mourn their lost friends and loved ones, but for the warmth emitted from them, as coal was considered "wasted on savages" by the Nohrians.

"This is just fucking awful." Florian mourned as they passed the third such pyre that day. "I mean, some years were better than others, but we've always managed to get by without things like this."

"So did they." Flora replied grimly. "And keep in mind that their population is at least fifty times greater than ours. At least it was the last I checked."

"You know, if those bastards are in such need of arable land, wouldn't it just make more sense to put more resources into the cultivation of what they have instead of their military and stealing from their neighbors? I may not know a lot, but I know war and know it's pretty damned expensive and only gets more expensive the bigger the scale."

Flora snorted derisively at this argument. "Duke Toscana's lands on the border are probably some of the best wheat-growing lands on the continent. It's no coincidence he and his minions intentionally dedicate most of their land to crops like cotton and flax while under-planting edible crops."

The sun inching over the western horizon and with the bitter winds appearing to make this night particularly inhospitable, Flora insisted on making camp; some of the less-compromised structures of a burned-out village looking particularly inviting. The champion, while somewhat uncomfortable, agreed, knowing that even for a people like them, exposure could still kill. In the settlement itself however, the cause for his discomfort became apparent even to Flora, mouthing a silent prayer for the massacre's victims, many of them slain in the process of preparing their dead for burial. While the setting sun gave her increasingly little light to see him with, Flora knew her friend well enough to feel him fuming.

"You know, they love that word 'savage' so much, but it's shit like this." he snarled bitterly as he paced the epicenter of the bloodletting. "It's shit like this that makes convinces me that they're the real savages every time. Even I'm not, of all people, going to prevent Nohrians from dealing with their dead as they see fit, let alone massacre them for daring to do so! That's simply not done!"

"Florian..." she answered heavily. "I admire your spirit, I really do. But there's nothing more we can
do for them."

"Yes, there is. I'll finish it myself. There must be a shovel or something around here somewhere and it's not a huge village anyway."

"Do you know how long that- Take one of the lanterns. I'll light some torches for you to find your way back."

Unsurprisingly, it was well into the night once Florian had finished laying the villagers to rest. With the moon not being visible that particular night, neither of the pair had a decent orientation for the time of day. Either way, the Ice Tribe's champion was exhausted, stumbling through the ruined town guided by Flora's lanterns, eventually coming to rest in the hollowed-out domicile.

"What are you doing?" he inquired tiredly, curling up on a large cushion in considerable disrepair. "Is that what you've been doing the whole time I was gone?"

"Practicing magic and yes." Flora responded shortly, summoning another burst of conventional flame in her palm and directing it at a cracked pot lying outside the house. "I would have liked to have spoken with Lady Corrine, but I seem to have just missed her."

Florian's smug grin shortly transitioned to a deep yawn. "Told you the bitch wouldn't help." he said, no small hint of satisfaction in his tone. "If she's anything like the other Nohrian bimbos, she's bought into the 'Oooh-he's-so-handsome-and-charismatic-he-can't-possibly-be-up-to-no-good' bullshit about their new king."

"Perhaps that's true. Nonetheless, she did leave me some books and a golden seal as a token of appreciation."

"What do you even use those for anyway?"

"They're spellbooks, Florian. Not that you've ever seen much use for either spells or books."

"Hey! I handle my business, you handle yours, alright? And speaking of your business, where exactly are we heading?"

"The Wind Tribe's lands. You mentioned something that I wanted to confirm with my own eyes. From here, it's roughly two or so days to the Eternal Stairway and we're already making better time than I expected. Two days assuming nothing impedes us further, that is."*

Of course, fate was not to be so kind to the pair. After a light breakfast, they departed the razed village, roughly following the main path southward, with deviations for Florian's insistence on throwing off any possible pursuers. **But pursuits were not the issue, so much as the "toll collectors" along the main road, a collection of scruffy, rugged men armed with an assortment of weapons, manning a series of improvised fortifications. "Well, look what we have here!" said one of the bandits hungrily. "You know, there's a toll for locals and travelers all the same.""

"Oh, fine." Flora conceded. "How much is it?"

The bandit subcommander scratched his bruised chin in mock contemplation. "Depends. How much you got?"
Before Flora could answer either way, her companion aggressively stepped forward to challenge the brigands. "You really think I haven't seen this exact scam plenty of times?" he asked rhetorically. "See this blade on my belt and axe on my back? Fuck off before they make you fuck off."

At this display of defiance, several of the raiders held back, discussing the outsider's willingness to carry through with his threats, sending one of their number back down the road. Six of the brigands' newcomers however, took this opportunity to scowl, taunt, and gesture threateningly at Florian.

"You've done it now, boy!" threatened one of the bandits, his own axe held threateningly to the sky. "You've gone and got the boss involved!"

"Yeah!" confirmed a second brigand. "He doesn't take any shit from the likes of you savages!"

"Wait a minute." interjected a third. "I've never actually seen the boss in person."

"Yeah, I don't really care. Fuck your boss, too."

Florian and the third newcomer however, did not need to wait long to be introduced to the boss, a sturdily-built, immensely ugly man with ash-grey skin and a prominent chin standing atop the improvised parapet. "Well, well, it seems like we've got a deadbeat here!" said the boss.

"More like some dead brigands if you don't get out of our way right now." replied Florian coldly.

Flora pulled him back slightly, leaning into her companion. "What do you think you're doing?!" she whispered angrily. "We're outnumbered at least fifteen-to-one!"

"It's twenty-to-one actually and I KNOW I can take these wastes of skin. Look at how poor their positioning is and the fact that they're bandits doesn't suggest great morale or discipline either. Just deal with any bowmen who show up and keep me from getting too banged-up if needed. I'll handle the rest."

Taking stock of their situation to find them not completely surrounded, Flora gave a resigned sigh. Of course she did not like these odds at all, but Florian did not have his title for nothing, possessing an almost preternatural instinct for combat. With this in mind, Flora began to mentally select her targets, sizing up the ones Florian would likely go after or vice versa. But the bandit chief however, seemed to be amused by this display.

"Hah, this interloper is just too much!" said the chief, suppressing his laughter. "But since I, the great Gazak, am a merciful soul, I'll let you pay your toll with that fine piece of arse next to you! You needn't worry. Me and the boys will take goooood care of her."**

Understandably, this was the absolute last straw for Flora. "Alright." she whispered, her tone noticeably irritated. "I've had it with him. Start killing these motherfuckers."

"With pleasure!" Florian answered confidently.***

As she watched the champion spontaneously charge the line of axemen, almost immediately felling one while killing another with an overhead sweep which scattered his fellows, it always intrigued Flora just how wild and untamed, but effective Florian's fighting style was, nothing like her own. While used by Nohrians as a horrible, dehumanizing slur, if one viewed the Ice Tribe's champion in battle, his movements so natural and fluid as befitting a dance, one of the adjectives which could
come to mind was "savage," and the bandits' boss seemed to be one of them.

"What are you idiots doing?!" scolded Gazak, climbing hurriedly from his perch and in a panic at having lost six men already. "Don't let him through!"

As the two axemen attempting to ambush Florian from behind were incinerated by her hand, futilely attempting to extinguish the flames, Flora took this as her clue to relieve her companion. While the spheres of flame she summoned were not exactly enough to see the fortifications erupt in flame altogether, the damage done to the improvised guard towers were enough to compromise them severely, sending the eight assigned bowmen to their deaths either by the flames or (more likely) gravity and/or an incensed Florian.

As they breached the makeshift guard post, Florian scanned the woods on either side of the pair, knowing fully well that the boss likely fled into one of the would-be-green expanses. From the woods to their immediate right however, Flora noticed something extremely odd about several of the barren trunks. "Florian, look out!" she called, sending several fireballs into the woods, a number of the trunks (and the bandits waiting in ambush behind them) bursting into flames.

Marveling at the chief's daughter's efficiency, Florian nodded in approval. "Alright! We work better together than you thought, don't we?"

"Fair enough." she conceded just before the champion dashed off to engage the scattered, disorganized, and often-burning axemen.

Although she'd foiled her second ambush in the space of a few minutes, Flora was still irked that the bandit chief had somehow managed to escape. "How many was that?" she inquired shortly.

"At my count thirty, why?" responded Florian breathlessly.

"Their leader's scattered like the scared child he is. Where the hell is he?"

His eyes following the tracks up a nearby hill, dominated by an old, run-down manor apparently serving as their hideout, Florian gave a grin of half-demented anticipation. "I've got an idea where." he said hungrily.

"Florian, wait!" cautioned Flora to no avail. "You know I'm not nearly as fast as you- dammit!"

These stupid fucks simply don't learn, do they, wondered Florian. While the gently-sloping hill was dotted by barren trees which should have theoretically provided decent cover (or at least concealment) and vantage points for sharpshooters, the bandits still lacked any real formation, relying upon a human wave of seven men supported by a couple of sharpshooters to overwhelm Florian, much to the same effect as their comrades at the beginning of the battle, the champion not fighting against the terrain, but fighting with it to gain even more of an advantage.

After having dealt with this last ambush and making his way to the summit, Florian was almost amused, but more disgusted, to find the big bad bandit chief Gazak literally shoving one of the two remaining archers towards certain death in a vain attempt to save, or at least extend slightly, his own wretched life. ****Springing to their position, Florian's blade made short work of the sharpshooters, turning a stony, hateful gaze toward one of the ugliest men, in visage or spirit, he'd ever laid eyes upon. Despite the sharp, silver axe in his right hand, the bandit inched backward several paces. "Hey, hey, you're a tough, reasonable guy, right? I'm sure we can come to an understanding of some kind!"
"Depends." Florian remarked shortly, already well aware of the course of action he was taking.

"Since we're both tough, manly men, I think we can come to an understanding about that feisty piece of arse you've been-"

"You know what? I was just going to cut your throat before you opened that sewer of yours. But now, I think I'm going to cut something else off too. Go on, take the first swing with that axe of yours. I'm going to enjoy this."

Recognizing the abandoned manor was too great a distance for him to make a run for it (and even then, that would only do him so much good), Gazak took the champion up on his semi-facetious offer, hoping against hope for a lucky strike. Needless to say, Florian dodged the axeman's heavy strike handily and instinctively. While his counter did not exactly follow through with the threatened emasculation, piercing the bandit's stomach with his blade, followed by a devastating upward cut extending to his neck, Florian knew this was more than enough to rid the world of one more lowlife, as the bandit's terrified, lifeless corpse rolled down the hillside, prompting a surprised, slightly-disgusted feminine scream several seconds later.

Reclining against one of the barren trees, Florian gave a confident half-smirk at the appearance of a winded, slightly-annoyed Flora. "I got you a present." he barbed.

Flora rolled her eyes. "I noticed." she remarked, less-than-amused. "But I must apologize for doubting you, Florian. That is, until I saw your mind for tactics firsthand."

"Hey! What's that mean?! You didn't trust my mind before-" 

The pair were suddenly interrupted by a faint rattling noise emanating from the ruined manor with equally-faint (apparent) screams and pleas for help. "What was that?" inquired Flora, grasping one of her knives. "It was coming from the abandoned manor. Do you think they have more associates inside?"

"Possibly, but I wouldn't count on it." remarked Florian, sheathing his sword in favor of one of his concealed knives. "Stay behind me just in case."

Negotiating the makeshift impediments to the manor of somewhat-higher quality, the Ice Tribe's warriors breached the mansion entryway to some relief. While it was in fact (perhaps not surprisingly) a pigsty, Flora could breath a sigh of relief that her companion had finished off the bandits. But this relief turned quickly to disgust once they discovered the vicinity of the living quarters and one of the servants' quarters blocked off as an improvised cell, the three young Hoshidan women, aged around fourteen to twenty-five, all beaten, bruised and gagged with their clothing in varying states of disrepair, all looking absolutely terrified under the (understandable) expectation that Florian had come to kill them. At this sight, Flora was well-convinced that her companion was far savvier in dealing with the likes of Gazak than she had previously given him credit for as well.

Slowly approaching the eldest of the trio, making his bare hands conspicuously visible, Florian attempted to assuage their terror. "It's alright, it's alright." he repeated gently. "We're here to help you."

With one heave, Florian broke the chain binding the woman to the wall and removed the gag from her mouth. "Flora, can you heal her?" asked the champion. "I'll free the others."
As Flora raised one of her staves over the eldest woman, she threw her hands up one last time in terror before her bruises receded. "You're- You're not here to finish us off?" she inquired cautiously, as if one wrong word would see them renege on such charity.

"Of course not." replied Flora, her tone almost motherly. "We heard you calling for help after we dealt with those bandits."

Forcing herself into Flora's embrace, the woman began to sob. "Oh, thank you!" she wept. "I owe you my life, literally! It's just when I saw your companion dressed as he is I assumed he was Nohrian and since he fights with an axe-

Florian scoffed as he broke the third woman's chain. "Fight like them? If anything, they stole the art of axe fighting from us!"

The woman glanced perplexedly at her rescuers. "So you're not Nohrian?"

"Technically, no we are not." Flora confirmed. "We're of the Ice Tribe. I am Flora, the chief's daughter."

With her conciliatory questioning, Flora was able to eventually coax out of the eldest woman that they had been abducted by Gazak's bandit gang some months ago from a nearby village, the brigands finishing off almost all of their fellow abductees once it became clear that they were in quite a bind. None too keen on allowing the trio to be preyed upon by any more predators, the Ice Tribe's warriors escorted them back to their village, received by the elder, an old man by the name of Okamura and his volunteer guards.

"Once again, you two have our eternal thanks for returning our daughters to us." said Okamura, his hardened face clearly desperate for good news. "We don't have much, but I insist you stay for supper."

"Oh, no, we couldn't. We're in quite a hurry anyway." said Flora graciously. "But you should really be thanking Florian; It's thanks to his foolhardy courage that I can give you my word; those bandits will never trouble your village again."

"Hey!" Florian interjected, his tone with more than a bit of whining to it. "I told you I knew what I was doing, didn't I?!"

The elderly man managed a smile, probably the first he'd had in months, at the pair's banter. The chieftainess-in-waiting however, was more than a little curious about the implications behind bandit gangs having the run over much of the Hoshidan countryside. "Wait a minute." she resumed seriously. "I was under the impression that the occupation forces punished brigandry quite harshly indeed. In fact, it was a capital offense the last I heard."

Okamura scowled at the hypocrisy inherent in the Nohrian occupation. "No, gods forbid they go after actual brigands that aren't inconveniencing them. We must do that ourselves." he remarked bitterly. "For them, 'banditry' means whatever the hell they want it to mean at that moment, especially giving aid and comfort to the resistance fighters."

Florian instinctively perked up at the mention of like-minded souls. "Resistance fighters? Against Nohr?"

"Yes, Windmire considers these 'bandits' the worst of the lot. Even admitting to have seen them makes you liable for immediate execution, especially with forces under the command of the
'Savagekiller,' one of Nohr's generals and a vile, vile man. And speaking of him and the resistance, the northern provinces, especially Mutsu, have been a magnet for young hotheads and those who have lost family to the occupation."

While Florian knew her well enough not to yet expect a committed plan of action, he could sense the gears in Flora's head turning. For her part, Flora knew it was essential to see the lands of the Wind Tribe first-hand and speak with Chief Fuga if at all possible before she committed to a course of action. Even so, Flora was cautiously optimistic with what knowledge she had so far gathered. Having grown up on the Nohrian periphery, she had of course, heard endlessly about the "entitlement" and "decadence" of the "eastern savages," but these indomitable Hoshidans were giving her something with which to potentially work. Now there was but one last person to whom to bring evidence of King Leonard's almost-certain depredations on the tribe. If her hunches were correct and her father listened at long last, all the better. If he continued in his obstinate path....well, she really did not want to think about that possibility.****

Roughly two weeks after their arrival in Rinkah's hometown, the trio's members had taken to their new roles granted them by circumstance with varying degrees of intensity, each in line with her own personality. Sakura, being herself and in a foreign land, was not surprisingly skittish and overly diplomatic. Nonetheless, most of the elders and middle-aged members of the tribe were well-disposed to her courtesy and genuine interest in their customs, the occasional dirty look shot her and Hana's way notwithstanding; indeed, one young man's cry of "Go back to where you came from! We don't like your kind around here, slavers!" was humbled very quickly by Hana and Rinkah bearing down on him and, according to the latter, the chief and his shadow both harshly scolding him at length later on.

Of course, there was still one matter on which Hana and the princess did not see eye-to-eye, as made clear during a dinner to commemorate their arrival a week earlier.

"I cannot say about Princess Hinoka," Kikai informed dryly. "but Princess Corrine is alive and well, that much we can confirm. Whether or not this is a good thing or not is up for debate."

"Really!?!" Sakura piped up, in noticeably better spirits. "That's-"

The tribesmen and women seated in the circle chattered among themselves, expressions and tones of voice varying wildly. But it was the other outsider who made her opinion the most apparent, rising from her place in the circle and storming from the domicile in a huff.

Unable to find her dear friend anywhere inside the town itself, Sakura, purely on a whim, decided to try the immediate exterior of the settlement. As luck would have it, she shortly located Hana resting against a nearby rock face, staring up at the moon with an expression somewhere between anger and wistfulness. "Hana..." the princess began apologetically. "I'm sorry..."

"You've got nothing to apologize for, milady." Hana answered, unusually distantly. "I was just never a big fan of someone who's caused you this much pain over your lifetime anyway, and the fact that she'd even dare to point that stolen sword at you."

"I know, I know! I know how much pain she's caused you, how much pain she's caused my people, how much pain she's caused me, and that she surrounds herself with horrible, horrible men. But she's still Mother's daughter. My sister. I-I just can't bring myself to hate her like you can. She's just so-"

"What? Naive? Stupid? Completely without ability to judge others' character?"
Abruptly coming over to embrace the princess, the swordswoman's gaze lost some of its coldness. "I already told you that you're my everything." she reminded. "I went through hell and some of Nohr's most powerful fighters to protect you. If you think I won't do so as many times as necessary to protect you, and do so proudly-"

Sakura smiled, a tear welling up in her eye. "And I wouldn't trade that for anything!" she said. "I wouldn't trade you for anything, Hana! But please, if a way exists at all, please try not to hurt her..."

"Alright, I'll try. You have my word on that. However, if she raises a weapon to you ever again, or even mentions doing so, I won't think twice about ending her. Fair?"

"Y-yes, that's entirely fair."

Whether due to the incident at the dinner or in spite of it, the next morning, Hana sought something more to occupy her mind with, being robbed of her other consolation prize in that her other nemesis still drew breath, seeking out Rinkah for one very important task. "Old lady Kirigamine?" she inquired with a yawn. "Sure, but any reason in particular?"

"Your father's shadow referred me to her." informed Hana.

"Oh, that. Well, Amagi told you that we learn these arts from our mothers, correct? There's no guarantee that she'll even help you."

The swordswoman gave Rinkah a slight scowl, unsheathing the mysterious blade and holding it to the sky. "I don't have a choice; I have to try. I'm confident enough in my skills with the blade, but I need something that can stand up to Leonard's magic."

Deciding not to belabor the point any further, Rinkah relented, scrawling a quick note for the still-sleeping Sakura as she and Hana were off. On the very outskirts of the village lay a dwelling shaped not unlike Chief Kikai's, merely less grand in proportion and at ground level. As the pair bowed into the dwelling, greeted by a woman around sixty or so, her long black hair ridden with streaks of gray and her face heavy with sadness. "Yo, Kirigamine." said Rinkah casually. "This is the girl Amagi must have told you about, Hana."

"Yes, I am." Hana confirmed with a light bow, taken aback by how casually Rinkah addressed her elder. "Hana of Mutsu, Princess Sakura's retainer. It's an honor."

The old woman smiled kindly. "Hmm, yes." she muttered to herself. "I do see that fire in your eyes. Tell me child, what do you know of these arts?"

"I can maintain and repair my own weapons, but nothing outside of that."

"Show me your blade."

Somewhat hesitantly, Hana unsheathed her weapon, presenting it blade-side up to Kirigamine, who took the blade in her own hands, examining it by the light of the fire. "Oh, yes, this is a fine weapon," she confirmed, returning it to the swordswoman. "unlike any I've ever seen. Yet it feels somehow....off. As if it were forged for a puppet of some kind."

"I have no reason to dispute that, ma'am." Hana replied, unsure herself about the weapon's origins. "But can you teach me how to make it into something more suited to my needs? If I'm going to protect Sak- the princess from King Leonard and his minions, I'll need something I can trust with my life and hers."
"Yes, but I must warn you that this will not be an easy path."

"Nothing worthwhile I've ever done has been easy. Why would I let that stop me?"

And easy it would not be, given the swordswoman's known intolerance for heat. Nonetheless, for the next month or so, every morning after her sword practice, Hana left at dawn to act as Kirigamine's apprentice blacksmith, toiling until sunset to refine her skills in the art. The sheer physical exertion, she could deal with, but for Hana, by far the most trying experience was the heat in which the Flame Tribe's forges functioned, her headband absolutely drenched within minutes of her first time merely watching the older woman at her trade. By the middle of her first week however, Hana, ever the tenacious one, settled into a reasonably-familiar routine ("The flames are not a tool!" once insisted the master memorably. "They are an extension of yourself"), stripping down to her smallclothes when her usual garb became too cumbersome, particularly when the time came for her to work the forge herself, her distinctive Hoshidan take on the tribe's mainstay weapons becoming a topic of mild interest in town.

But naturally, much as she'd promised the princess, Hana was never exactly alone in her ordeal either, the gentle princess checking in throughout the day to bring her champion cool washcloths and buckets of drinking water. Interestingly, on more than one occasion, the swordswoman was actually sure she'd noticed Sakura unusually flushed (despite having spent literal seconds in Kirigamine's home) when speaking with her.

Finally, one night after her fifth week as an apprentice, Hana, dismissed by her master and treated to a distinctly-salty-sweet concoction, was finally able to sit down in the common room, satisfied with another day's work. Kiragimine gave a vaguely-maternal smile to the younger woman. "I'm impressed." she conceded. "Damn near all of our young men who try what you did would have washed out by now."

Hana grinned, perhaps somewhat deliriously. "Well what can I say? Unless I'm explicitly ordered to do so, quitting at something just isn't in my nature."

"I actually think you're ready to forge the blade you seek."

Stepping over to an altar off to the side of the room, from it Kirigamine removed a brilliant, shimmering ruby about the size of Hana's clenched fist.

"Wow, it's incredible!" said a mesmerized Hana. "I can feel the magical power coming from it!"

"You should be." the older woman said proudly. "While you'll need its counterparts, a sapphire and an emerald with the same properties, if you collect all three, you'll be able to forge a blade strong against magic users. So be sure to keep an eye out for them during your travels."

"Of course! But how did you get it, master?"

Kirigamine's expression suddenly turned heavy and sorrowful. "Well, when he proposed to me, my late husband gave it to me. I had actually intended to give it to my own daughter as a wedding present, but it was not to be."

Hana scowled in disgust. "Let me guess, Nohr."

"Nothing gets by you, child."

"That is just so typical of them! We 'savages' have something that they tell themselves we're not
'worthy' to have, then try to take it anyway! It makes me sick! In fact-

"HANA!" came the princess' voice. "HANA, THERE'S A PROBLEM!"

The winded Sakura bowed her head as to enter the dwelling, panting as she caught her breath.

"Whatever could be wrong, Princess Sakura?" inquired Kirigamine, her apprentice reflexively clenching her blade and rushing to the princess' side.

"It's Chief Kikai!" she reported breathlessly. "He says it's urgent! Sent Rinkah and I!"

"Well, let's go!" insisted Hana. "Master?"

Kirigamine yawned. "My brother won't let anything happen to the chief." she insisted confidently. "It's late and this old woman needs her rest."

Hurriedly making their way back to the chief's residence, Hana and Sakura were met at the halfway point by Rinkah, explaining that her father was a pyromancer, the best the tribe had seen in centuries, whose predictions were known for having an extremely high rate of accuracy.

"O-oh my." stammered Sakura fearfully. "Wh-what could he have seen?"

"I don't know." her Flame Tribe counterpart replied grimly. "I'd seen this kind of thing before, but never with the screams and convulsing..."

By the time they reached the chief's dwelling, while he was no longer convulsing on the floor, being tended to by Amagi, he still appeared quite shaken from his ordeal, his cold sweat and blank expression having not yet broken. "So you return, my daughter," he said balefully. "And Princess Sakura, good. This concerns you almost as much as it does us. Come on, gather 'round!"

******Uneasily, the three young women all took seats around the elder, Rinkah speaking first, vocalizing the group's shared concerns. "Father...what exactly did you see?" she asked gingerly. "I mean, I'd seen you talking before or even grasping at things, but you scared the hell out of me just then."

Gulping back some more of the drinking water, Kikai grimaced. "I'm scared, as well, my child." he conceded. "I saw, I heard, I felt...terrible, terrible things. I saw our people being maimed, tortured in the cruelest, most terrible ways. I heard their screams, begging their captors for a quick and merciful death, and the sick sons of bitches who treated them like cattle to be bought and sold! I felt their pain, as if I was having the flesh torn from my very bones."

Sakura was almost in tears by this point, Hana attempting to retain a steely expression, but her eyes betrayed some distress as well. Rinkah however, looked downright worried, an expression unlike either of the Hoshidans had ever seen on her. "I apologize if this question is inappropriate to ask among Hoshidans, but it is truly urgent that I know." resumed Kikai. "Did your eldest brother have a wife? Any concubines or mistresses?"

The princess suddenly perked up at the mention of her brother. "No, not to my knowledge." she informed wistfully. "But recently before the war, he would occasionally disappear for months on end. When I would ask him about it, he would say he was on exercises with the army, so I cannot say exactly."
The focused expression the chief wore upon his meeting them for the first time had largely returned. "Princess Sakura, you must listen to me very carefully. A family member of yours, your nephew and his grandmother for that matter, are both in grave danger. Wicked men are after their lives and will do anything to take them, particularly the boy's."

"My- nephew?"

Hana and Rinkah shot each other confused glances. Both were reasonably certain that they would have known if Prince Ryoma had a son, particularly given the Hoshidan succession laws. "Wait, Chief Kikai." Hana interrupted. "I may not be exactly the most informed person around; hell, I just spent six months on the run from Nohr. But I'm pretty sure I would have known about Lord Ryoma having a son, since he would be next in line to the throne after him. Now are you absolutely certain about this?"

Kikai closed his eyes in contemplation. "As certain as I am that I just witnessed hundreds of my people being tortured and murdered by Nohr. But I do not blame you for doubting me; I would be suspicious as well. But perhaps the boy is in seclusion precisely because of his status? Perhaps King Leonard has a vendetta against the princess?"

"Where is he?" inquired Sakura, a steely resoluteness in both her tone and eyes. "Where is my nephew?"

"I know its in or near a city somewhere in the area, but-"

The chief exhaled tiredly. "There's good news and bad news about that." he began. "The good news is that we have a secret passageway that can get you to the general area in a timely manner. The bad news is, the area, the Principality of Cheve, has something in common with your own country."

"Cheve?!" exclaimed Hana incredulously, standing up in outrage. "With all due respect, are you friggin' kidding me?! If you think I'm going to risk her life-"

"Hana, that's enough." said Sakura, the sternness in her tone a marked change. "I-I've made my decision. We are going to Cheve and we are going to save my nephew's life."******

Kikai somehow managed a tired smile. "Just in case you doubt my sincerity, daughter of Musashi-Rinkah! You are going with them to rescue the boy! I want you to unearth as much evidence of Nohr's dark dealings as possible, as I'm now certain that their war effort is intimately connected with these outrages against our people. I've already sent a small scouting party ahead, some of my best men; once you've returned the child and his grandmother, I will finally call that conference of the tribal chieftains."

"Got it." Rinkah confirmed. "I can't wait to crack some slaver skulls while we're at it either."

Kikai's grin turned mischievous and conspiratorial. "The Nohrians insist that the Chevois do not exist as a separate people and their country is merely a rogue province of their kingdom, but a notoriously-restive province constantly teetering on the brink of revolt. Princess Sakura, I believe your champion will be particularly interested in this fact."

Nonetheless, with her duty and life's mission being the protection of the princess, Hana was understandably still-lukewarm on this plan. "Chief Kikai, I see just one teeny-tiny flaw in this plan." she began shortly. "You are honestly suggesting that I take Lady Sakura to a location swarming with
Nohrian forces. Even if we take every precaution to remain undetected, it's almost a suicide mission!"

"Normally, I would agree with your assessment." conceded Kikai. "If you were traveling as the exiled Princess Sakura and her protector, Hana of Mutsu, that is."

"Indeed, sometimes the best place to hide is in plain sight." added Amagi, apparently having spirited himself from the shadows and carrying a number of items of (well-preserved at that) exotic clothing. "Back during my youthful travels, I gathered all manner of exotic garb from across the world. I was never what one would call a 'fashion enthusiast,' so I collected them as gifts to be given. I believe this is as good a time as any to give them away."

"This...may actually work." said Rinkah incredulously, examining the strange garments. "With these, a change in hairstyle and a mildly-convincing foreign accent, even the most educated, well-traveled Nohrian would likely be none the wiser, to say nothing of the average slob."

Inspecting the thick, woolen, belted tunic and matching boots, Hana had to concede that these garments were unlike anything she had ever seen on this continent. While still not exactly thrilled with the plan, she knew fully well that Sakura, despite her timid exterior, was an immensely-strong willed young lady, perhaps even more so than she, nigh-impossible to dissuade from a course of action once she'd truly set her heart and mind on it. Besides, upon closer inspection, Hana noticed that she could quite easily (in addition to the weapon at her hips) stow a few extra weapons and/or helpful pieces of equipment within the tunic's confines. "Your wish is my command, milady." the swordsman conceded distractedly, contemplating how exactly she would outfit her miniature armory. "We can leave whenever you're ready, but give me a couple of hours to acquire some tools."

Sakura smiled at her, Hana's spirits bolstered even further by the sheer confidence and purpose behind the gesture. "Gather whatever you need, Hana. I trust your judgement completely and utterly."******

While a man of fine, expensive tastes and had been such for his entire life, there was one thing which Duke Durante of Carinthia had, much to his surprise, come to find even more gratifying than all of his other vices. The pure despair, terror and deferential loathing the savages wore on their faces upon beholding him, the children scattering before him, older among them ushering away wives and daughters in his presence was truly intoxicating on a number of levels. There truly was nothing like holding the power of life and death over this sorry lot, he'd come to realize, their survival dependent entirely upon his or their cooperation, punishments such as flogging or amputation among the least severe of sentences he was empowered to order. Hell, at times when he was feeling particularly vindictive, the duke only needed to accuse their men of leering at (or worse) a member of the gaggle of maids accompanying him in his travels; the mere accusation of such impropriety on the part of the savages was more often than not sufficient to enrage his guards into gratuitously violent action against the "perpetrator," half the time not even requiring his explicit orders to do so.

Duke Carinthia chuckled fondly as he recalled the fate one young savage buck of around sixteen who had the gall to even look at him, let alone Francine, one of his favorite maids. The initiative shown by the new additions to his guard company was admirable, he thought. Needless to say, the duke found it more than a little amusing that after beating him half to death, his men had taken the initiative to relieve the savage of his eyes (among other external organs shoved down his throat) before making an example of him in the town square.

As he prowled the streets of the savages' capital, strutting about like the proud tomcat he was, Durante smirked arrogantly, giving an appropriately-matching chuckle. When the time came to learn about such matters, as far as he knew, most every Nohrian boy learned that the savages were to a
man, degenerate brutes driven only by their basest, most depraved sexual urges which they would love nothing more than to turn on the civilized women (especially Nohrian) of the world. As far as he was concerned, he was doing the women of this country a favor!

To have a notorious predator like the Nohrian duke designate one as a "favorite" of his was not exactly a shining honor, but with the death of her husband and brothers in the war, Hatsuyo could at least put food on the table for her sons and this was not the only way she could count herself as more fortunate than many (if not all) of the other girls around the establishment: Horrible, often-permanent injuries and bruises all across their bodies being far too common, more often than not, her "coworkers" were simply murdered outright by an incensed Nohrian patron or disappeared.

Understandably, Hatsuyo had been hesitant about following the letter's directions instructing her to meet its author in this alley, but to her surprise, she was met by a woman some ten years her junior and with an uncanny resemblance to her if she were to pull the bangs from her right eye. "Wait a second!" began Hatsuyo, more optimistically than she'd been in months "You're one of Prin-"

Kagero shushed her, pushing a considerable bag of gold into the older woman's hands. "How far is your home from this point?" she inquired urgently.

"Five minutes at most, why?"

"Go back there, collect only the absolute necessities. Wake your children, tell them to do the same. Once you've done that, make for the city's west gate as quickly as you can; around there, you'll find my associate, a woman with a prominent scar across her neck. She'll take care of you from there and get you to relative safety from Nohr."

"Generous as you are beautiful, milady. But why?"

"In about four hours, all hell is about to break loose around here. You don't want to be anywhere near the city when that happens."

While not exactly unsurprising with what she'd gone through, the one thing Kagero thought she would never in her life witness was another human being shedding tears at being handed a sack containing a considerable amount of gold. "Ah, you're too kind." the older woman sniffled. "Oh, gods, what would Kentaro say if he could see me now?! I'm a disgrace!"

Hatsuyo immediately found her shoulders steadied by the younger woman's firm grip. "You did what you had to do to survive and provide for your boys." Kagero reassured. "You've nothing to be ashamed of."

"You think he would understand?"

"I know he would. I can't say I knew the man from any other, but I know for a fact he laid down his life to give you and your sons a chance to get through this."

Letting out several more sobs, Hatsuyo nonetheless managed a grateful smile. "What can I ever do to repay you?"

"I already have the information I need about the predatory reprobate, so I won't make you relieve your ordeal." said Kagero sternly. "What you can do to repay me, however, is follow the instructions I gave you: Gather your sons and bare essentials, make for the western gate, and find my associate, the scarred woman. Do you need me to repeat myself?"
"No, I understand. Thank you, young lady."

Even in the best of times, the services provided by the ladies of a certain establishment in the Hoshidan capital were acknowledged to be a necessary evil. In times like these however? Much the same, particularly for those who had lost husbands, brothers, sons, and friends to their overlords to provide for their loved ones or even survive; for the past several months however, it had also taken on a new sense of urgency, doubling as an effort (of questionable success) to shield their "savage" sisters from the sexual violence which their "betters" encouraged their men to see and treat as mere sport.

It was less-than-surprising that Nohrian bigshots would demand special treatment at such establishments as theirs. Hell, a count-slash-company commander of theirs had attempted to set fire to the house and received a literal slap on the wrist by General Pietro for his trouble. Even so, some of their patrons were simply so insufferable, that involuntary facial reactions to their obnoxiousness were not unheard of.

"Good evening, Duke Carinthia." greeted the madam politely, concealing her scowl with a paper fan. "The usual, I presume?"

"You presume correctly, Himiko, my good lady," said Duke Durante smugly, slipping off his noble's attire and leaning into the white cotton *yukata* held up for him by the two servant girls.

"Of course; Hatsuyo awaits you in her usual quarters."

Others like those bores Guillaume or Albrecht would focus primarily on trifles such as "training exercises" or "proper exploitation of new resources" and Duke Carinthia would pay lip service to these duties of his (while pawning most of the duty off onto his servants) as well. However, the main attraction for the dandy among the "savages" was among his favorite pastimes; namely having his way with as many of the locals as he damned well pleased, whether they liked it or not. With his own countrywomen requiring some more finesse, at least that he make a half-hearted attempt at seduction, the duke felt so much more at ease that he did not even have to bother with the pretense among these heathen strumpets. After all, he made this very clear to the men he commanded, and if there was one thing that he was not, it was a hypocrite, the duke thought with more than a little self-satisfaction.

Durante smirked at the vocal reaction of one of the servant girls to his amorous pinch; more so the older one, no more than fifteen herself, quietly scolding the girl for making a scene. As they shortly reached the suite on the far end of the hallway, the older girl gave a shallow bow. "Miss Hatsuyo will see you now, milord." said the older girl, pulling back the sliding *Shōji*. "If you require anything else, just call."

As the servant girl slid the *Shōji* back, the duke chuckled lasciviously. The room, dimly-lit and smelling strongly of incense, the room was typically laid out in the style which these savages loved so very much, lightly furnished, of course, but the futon in the center was all he really required for his business, a fact he was reminded of only too well by the warmth of human flesh pressed up behind him. "It's been too long, milord." came a husky, feminine voice.

"I agree, Hatsuyo." said the noble with a smirk. Granted, she was a savage and a whore at that, but she was damn good at what she did, not easily disposed of once she’d served her purpose for him. "So, shall we?"
"You've no doubt had such a stressful day. Why don't we spice things up a bit?"

"Oh, I like spicing up!"

"As do I, milord."

Leading him onto the futon, the woman pushed him down. "Don't move." she commanded sensually, beginning to bind his wrists with a length of twine, anchoring it on the strange chest several paces away. Durante had never seriously considered the possibility, but such an arrangement could actually be somehow gratifying. As "Hatsuyo" strolled casually over to his legs, he thought the slight pinprick somehow strange, but put it out of his mind; his judgement was impacted even more negatively by lust than usual.

Sitting his torso upright, the woman closed in once more behind him. "Are you ready?" she asked breathily.

"Oh, yes!" cried the duke.

"Good."

Immediately, one of the strong, distinctly-feminine hands wrapped around his mouth, a distinctly-sharp, metallic point at his throat, Durante's muffled, confused, and terrified babbling not carrying beyond the room. "What was that? I'm not Hatsuyo?" introduced the woman, a tone of mock surprise in her voice. "Exactly. That's not oil on your legs either, but a temporary paralyzing agent inside of them, and I, am the vengeance of every 'savage' woman and girl the likes of you has ever outraged!"

Kagero dug the point of her knife in ever-so-slightly-more, not enough to puncture his skin, but enough to drive the point home. "I know all about you, Duke Carinthia." she informed threateningly. "I know all about your twisted hobbies, even among your own people, even among the lower nobles. You call yourself the gift of the gods to women, but you are absolutely disgusting, you know that? I wonder how your men would feel about this if they knew? Or that you're simply using the murderous hypocrisy you Nohrians swim in to encourage sexual violence against us 'heathen' women and cover up your own crimes?"

Even though he could not see her eyes, Durante could feel the sheer hatred from the kuniochi's glare. Were he able to see them, he would have known what any and all responses would have gotten him. "Oh, that's right." resumed Kagero, her voice as dangerous as her glare. "You were one of the Nohrian commanders at Cheve, no? One of your fellow commanders a bald, equally-as-disgusting-as-yourself fuck?"

By this point, the duke was absolutely frantic, his assailant's hand muting his pathetic (and false) denials and screams. "Since you seem to be so fond of mutilating Hoshidan men in such a way or ordering it done, let's see how you like it. Better yet, you can discuss it with some of your victims in the afterlife. I'm sure they're just dying to see you." threatened Kagero, the knife's point abruptly falling from his neck towards his stomach and gradually lower. "And THIS is for Orochi and Lady Reina!"

A despairing, pained scream (or at least a muffled version of such) shattered the nighttime's relative calm as Kagero dealt an extremely personal injury to the duke before slitting his throat nearly to the
bone. She did not have long before the duke's body was discovered and Kagero did not find corpses to be particularly pleasant company. Disposing of the (less-than-she'd expected) bloody yukata, Kagero leapt from the open window, her associate waiting with one of her own bodysuits in the back alley.

"Eeesh, I'll remember never to make you angry." remarked Saizo, reflexively crossing one leg over the other.

Having finished dressing herself, Kagero smiled mischievously. "You'd better." she half-teased as the pair began their mad dash down the alleyway.

Oh, yes, once the Nohrian forces discovered one of their highest-ranking figures with his throat cut and relieved of his proudest achievement, there would be hell to pay. But even a hothead like Saizo the Fifth knew that this was not the place for a fight; even if they weren't hopelessly weak in the capital, the fact that Nohr could and would sweep up their civilians in retaking the city led him to dismiss it even as a fanciful plan. No, Saizo and his fellows, the reviled, hunted, dregs of the new "eastern territories" were intent on picking and choosing the time and place for their first battle against the occupiers; one which would put Nohr at a noticeable disadvantage to compensate for their lack of numbers.

Chapter End Notes

Ruby of Power:
Description: A brilliant gem of great magic power and unknown origins. Required to craft a blade effective against a certain king.

So, you can probably guess what I was playing obsessively circa 2005-6, huh? Oh, Flora's reclassed herself to a Sage now in case I made that ambiguous. She is shown to be a pretty powerful mage in her own right, so I just decided to take that to its logical conclusion outside of the maid BS.

So in my end notes last chapter, remember how I said, like Hana and Kagero (and Flora for that matter) know, some motherfuckers just simply need to die? I hope I got it across that Duke Durante was one of the motherfuckers in question. As for what exactly Kagero did to him, come on, is it really that big a mystery? Was it pointlessly cruel, (IMHO, no, not really given what he's been up to) even for an anti-heroine?
Think about the symbolism behind such a mutilation and look at the one tag I have about Orochi. BTW, as far as I'm concerned, the Nohrian commanders at Cheve were/are basically Ted Bundy with complete impunity, just one of them completely lacking the intelligence and charisma for it but still having the exact same issues with women.
White Light

Chapter Summary

In Cheve, Sakura, in a certain tavern, reunites with a family member whose existence was previously completely unknown to her as one of Hans' old raiding buddies sent to deal with the boy receives an unwelcome surprise in the persons of Hana and Rinkah. Meanwhile, Kaze receives an offer he'd be most wise not to refuse and an unexpected culprit proves to be just as much a bane to the occupation force as Hana herself.

Chapter Notes

*Dreaming of Home (FE9 OST)

**For Victory (FE9 OST)

***A Vow of Unity (Tales of Vesperia OST)

****White Light - Superfly [Music box ver.] (Tales of Zestiria OST)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dragging his motley, ragtag group of thieves, bandits, thugs, and general ne'er-do-wells ever eastward at a steady pace, the bandit chief Tarba almost salivated at the payout an old associate (having moved up considerably in the world as of late) had contracted him for. It almost seemed too good to be true on some level; slaughtering some boy, his crazy old bat of a grandmother, and anyone else stupid enough to get in their way was not exactly a hard night's work. And with no meddling from do-gooder authorities? It was almost too good to be true, would have been too good to be true were the source not (reasonably) trustworthy. While he would admit to being greedy and occasionally less-than-scrupulous, Tarba was cleverer than most of his associates; however, the only way he could see a job as simple as this going awry was some sort of demon (he was never a man concerned with otherworldly things) rising from the underworld and slaughtering him and his crew.

"How much further to Cheve, boss?" moaned one of the bandits.

"'Bout another week." answered a second thug for him. "Isn't that place, particularly the capital, supposed to be a pretty tough area?"

"You're worrying for nothing, idiot!" scolded Tarba. "Those worms can glower at us Nohrians all they like, but trust me; they've been shown who's boss once and for all. Besides, who's going to stick his neck out for that lot, anyway, especially this stupid old broad?"

As the Nohrian barracks-slash-weapons depot erupted into flames in the distance, the oil fires illuminating the clear nighttime sky, a certain retainer smiled her trademark lazy smile. That would certainly put a damper on their operations; Shinano was a good distance from the capital, requiring the occupiers to trek the men and materials all the way from their homeland to repair it, if they chose
to do so. Setsuna could not help but chuckle a bit; even from this hill, well away from the site of her
subterfuge, she could have sworn to herself that the Nohrians' screams were still audible, even from
such a distance.

In deference to her liege and the love of her life, Setsuna was initially inclined to honor the terms set
down by Nohr's new king, despite the princess' spiriting away to gods-knew-where for gods-knew-
what purpose. Said inclination lasted all of twelve hours until she'd stumbled into the nearby town
after the "Savagekiller" and his men got through with it: The complete and utter slaughter of the
townpeople, immediately after self-righteously scolding them for their "banditry" was infuriating
enough, but the absolute last straw for her was witnessing the charred, mutilated heads of her
comrades-in-arms, Azama included, impaled on pikes outside of the settlement's gates.

Contrary to the impression her first impression gave one, Setsuna was by no means stupid: If her
princess lived still, she knew fully well that Nohr would use her activities as an excuse to horribly
mistreat her, if not murder her outright. To that end, she simply went well out of her way not to have
said activities traceable back to her. As far as the Nohrians were concerned, perhaps she was the
perpetrator, perhaps not, but only she could tell for sure. When she fled to Owari Province shortly
after her separation from Hinoka, the archer's procured rags and demeanor were just as much
weapons as the bow with which she waged a one-woman assassination campaign against Nohrian
commanders and any nobles foolish to wander into her hunting grounds. When the enemy's military
governor forbid possession of bows by "savages" like herself on pain of death, even some stray
bowstring would serve as a weapon in a pinch; Setsuna was familiar enough with the structure,
weight, and physics of the weapon to fashion her own.

Wearing that same lazy smile, Setsuna wondered about a long-term approach. Despite the now-
frantic efforts to suppress news of any problems, she'd heard that the country's north was an absolute
hotbed of resistance with several lords supposedly on the brink of open revolt. While her own home
province of Tosa lay far to the south, it was also a stronghold for the occupiers and it was not out of
the question that Nohr would have consciously sought out her family to exterminate them. But all
was not lost by any means; rumor had it that the north of Hoshido was an absolute hotbed of armed
resistance - perhaps they could be of assistance?

It was absolute murder navigating those caves in her new, strange garments, but Hana (or rather, Ilha
the traveling mercenary) had to give Chief Kikai and his forebears their credit; for all their love of
ridiculously-sweltering heat and inaccessible dwellings, they knew their mountain, its surrounding
land, and the resulting exploits like she knew a sword. Three days of traversing a loosely-connected
series of caves had bought them a good way into Nohrian territory itself. Rinkah's chance encounter
with one of the Wolfskin's acting chieftainess' messengers told the trio that their destination was
about another five days with a brisk pace. As they stopped for rest at a small village's inn one night,
Hana's protective streak (and her attempts to reconcile it with her new identity) took over at Rinkah's
suggestion that they hasten their pace.

"Lady Sa-" Hana caught herself before resuming. "Lady Battsetseg, are you alright with that?"

Sakura nodded. "Yes, we must." she confirmed. "We'll have to slip out before sunrise as well, just to
be safe."

"Good to see you agree with me!"

The trio turning in shortly for their early morning, Hana did not find herself sleeping particularly well
that night. A good deal past midnight, the swordswoman understood the source of her unease well as
she was awakened by a sharp, piercing scream, followed by some ruffling and soft sobbing.

*Kicking the blankets away, Hana rushed to her lady's side at once, the princess cradling an intricately-crafted bow of an indeterminate material. "T-takumi, I'm s-so s-sorry." she sobbed.

"Lady Sakura!" the swordswoman exclaimed as quietly as she possibly could. "Are you hurt?!"

"It's just Takumi..." Sakura confirmed through the tears. "I c-couldn't do anything f-for him... And they...they just-"

The princess clutching her fallen brother's bow and sobbing further, Hana shut her eyes and gritted her teeth. "Do you remember what I told you?" she asked bitterly. "If that's what it means to be 'civilized,' than their 'civilization' is nothing I want anything to do with! The nerve of them! Looking down on us as 'savages,' as not even human, while behaving so disgracefully!"

Wiping away her tears, Sakura sat up, her crimson hair frazzled by the constant tossing and turning. "C-can I sleep w-with you tonight, Hana?" she inquired, unsure exactly why she was so flushed. "I-I mean, in your b-bed."

Hana beamed at her lady. "Sure you can! I'm always there for you!"

Sweeping the princess up and carrying her a couple of paces to her own bed, Hana had to consciously stop herself from literally pecking Sakura on the forehead or even lips. Dammit woman, focus! Gently laying Sakura down on the mattress, the swordswoman joined her lady shortly, shifting the better part of the blanket onto the princess. "Good night, Lady-

Hana was abruptly interrupted by Sakura's soft, dainty snoring, her body having unconsciously snuggled up to her protector. With a calm, satisfied smile, Hana herself could scarcely help drifting shortly off to sleep as well.*

True to her liege's word, the trio rose in the pre-dawn hours, slinging back their meager possessions as they prepared to make for the Chevois capital. However, the one constant throughout their stay, the man in his mid-twenties pacing the lobby anxiously, seemed to have scarcely closed his eyes since their arrival. "This is not good, this is not good..." he repeated anxiously.

Against Hana's non-verbal cues to the contrary, the princess took an interest in the obviously-distressed man. "Er, are you alright, sir?" she asked gingerly.

Perhaps unexpectedly for a man of his stature, even the well-built fellow's disheveled, dirty-blond hair betrayed his unease, abruptly turning his attention to the swordswoman. "You! Excuse me, ma'am! Did I mishear you earlier? You said you were a mercenary, no?"

"Depends." Hana answered tersely, ready to draw at a nanosecond's notice. "Who are you and what are you after?"

"Of course! Where are my manners?! I am Tristan, a knight of Cheve. Or rather, was, a knight of Cheve before- That's not important right now. I need you to escort me to the forests at the foothills of Montagne Noire. About a day's hike southwest from here. I assure you, you can name your price once we get to our destination."
Hana fixed a suspicious gaze on the man. "Why are you so intent on having us follow you there? You're a knight, can't you protect yourself?"

"Look, some comrades of mine are in trouble!" insisted Tristan, now noticeably irritated with the "mercenary." "They will die if I don't get these supplies to them soon, and that's if the Nohrian bastards don't finish them first!"

Turning to the princess, Hana's expression, while softening somewhat, was still rather stern and disapproving. "Well, milady, since I'm in your employ, so to speak, shall we take this fellow's request?"

"Y-yes." Sakura confirmed. "We've seen so much needless death and destruction. If we can even help these people, j-just a little even, I want to do so."

"And besides, 'Ilha," interjected Rinkah with what the swordswoman could swear was a wink. "it's on the way to the capital anyway, so what's the harm?"

Already more than a little tense being deep inside enemy territory lacking any sort of support system whatsoever, Hana, her hands tied, gave an exasperated sigh. "Alright, alright." she conceded. "But any funny business out of him, and I swear-"

"That's fair enough." conceded Tristan in return.

Exiting the inn, as the man retrieved a cart, obviously designed to be driven by a beast of burden of some kind, filled to the brim with varying provisions, Hana was somewhat more convinced of the knight's sincerity. While she'd not admit it openly, she became significantly more so at the sight of Tristan dragging the cart with the yoke on his own shoulders, running well-ahead of his escorts on more than one occasion. Unsurprisingly, by noon, he'd worn himself out considerably; during their brief respite under the shade of a tree, Sakura nearly had to force the water he clearly and desperately needed down his gullet. Rinkah, on the other hand, was not so much caring as curious towards him.

"You know, I've been meaning to ask you something for hours now." she began, choosing her words with considerably more care than she was used to. "I thought Nohr considered you Chevois their 'brother people' or some such crap? Don't they?"

Sitting upright, the knight responded with a harsh scowl, his focus not so much on the Flame Tribeswoman as the ruined village and dismembered "bandits" made an example of outside its gates. "A lot of fucking good that's doing us, huh?" Tristan snarled. "That horseshit about us 'civilized brother peoples' standing as one against the 'heathens' flies out the door the very second we defy or criticize them, or even when it becomes inconvenient for them, then we're just another pack of the 'savages' they so loathe."

"There's that word again." Sakura interjected sadly.

Turning to Rinkah, the swordswoman's gaze remained stony. "You were right. It's not just us."

As he grabbed his knees, Tristan, while mostly maintaining his hateful, steely gaze, his body language somehow betrayed his lingering unease as he continued. "And it gets even worse." he cautioned. "My cousin- most courageous woman ever to live- probably more so than any man, too. But here's the thing; she was too brave for her own good. In the eyes of our 'civilized brothers,' she committed a sin, or rather, a couple of 'sins,' completely and utterly irredeemable, too good for even
"While Nohr's obviously been trying to keep it quiet, Cheve's pretty famous for their resistance to Windmire." remarked Rinkah. "I'm assuming your cousin fought them, as well?"

"Yes, she did, but that wasn't her truly unforgivable crime."

The knight returned to his feet, making a couple of tentative steps for his provisions. "Well, I've got a good idea now why they seem to be so fixated on the sex lives of us Chevois men. Probably any man they don't consider one of 'theirs,' too." said Tristan cryptically. "Fucking disgusting. Those Nohrians are the real savages if you ask me."

"W-what exactly do you mean by t-that?" inquired Sakura, with an inkling of the answer she was about to receive but dreading it anyway.

Tristan simply returned that distant, disassociated stare for several seconds, ambling over and checking the provisions for his comrades momentarily. "We should get going."

For dragging along an implement made for a beast of burden powered only by his own strength, the knight had a phenomenal amount of stamina. It was not surprising that Sakura spent most of their journey trailing him considerably, but even Hana and Rinkah struggled to keep up with him more often than not. Contrary to Tristan's expectations, the group managed to reach the foothills in question before sunset, due in no small part to his inhuman determination, the exact, lightly-wooded path to which the knight led them on a ridge overlooking the countryside below. Upon observing the view, Hana felt her stomach twist into knots as she realized why exactly Tristan required her "mercenary" services. The ridge overlooked, along with a few razed settlements, a number of Nohrian encampments, apparently in formation for a siege.

"Oh, that's what you meant by 'if the Nohrian bastards don't finish them first.'" the swordswoman conceded, somewhat more trust for him gained as a result of their enemy in common.

"What else could it have meant?" asked Tristan irritably as he began unloading the cart. "Yes, I must get these provisions to my comrades and the fort higher up."

Hana glowered at him incredulously. "How?! From here on, the path is way too exposed! You'd be easy prey for the Nohrian siege engines and flyers."

Rinkah, already aware of his solution, smiled mischievously at the knight. "Oh, I get it now." she remarked, more than a little impressed with him. "If even Father or I were unaware exactly how far the systems reached, Nohr would have no clue."

"Exactly." confirmed Tristan. "It's not exactly convenient, but we've been using the caves to slip back in and out behind them."

"You know what, let me help you with those." insisted Hana. "Once we get to your stronghold, I can take a look at your position. See if I can make any recommendations."

Yes, the narrow twists and turns of the caves were not exactly easy to navigate, even with the complementary sparks Rinkah summoned to light the way. But as Tristan reminded them, that was
much the point. While he and his troops couldn't use it to break out in any reasonable number, neither could the Nohrians use it to assault their position, as it would take literal ages to transport all the men and necessary equipment (and that was only counting the supplies that would fit!) up through the caves. By the time the party reached the site of the fortifications, the sun had completely retreated from the horizon; with Rinkah's fingers too singed even for her tolerance, the moon provided their only real source of light.

"Holy- He actually did it!" cried one of the sentries. "Sir Tristan's back! With provisions at that!"

"You're damn right I did!" boasted the knight, tossing a loaf of bread to the watchman and his fellows. "Now open up the gate so everyone else can eat! I've got someone the commander would like to talk to as well!"

Unsurprisingly for a ragtag, half-starved skeleton force, Tristan received a hero's welcome at his relief of the siege, the alleged mercenary whom he had hired receiving more than a bit of this adoration after the knight had explained her role. Led into the interior of the old fort, the trio were, alongside Tristan, ushered into a dilapidated old study, a middle-aged man with a patch over his right eye rising from his desk, wearing a proud, fatherly grin. "Well I'll be damned." he said. "You actually pulled it off! You were always my most promising squire, but I was honestly skeptical even you could manage it."

"Thank you, sir, but it would have not been possible without the help of this woman here, Ilha." he remarked humbly, gesturing towards Hana. "Were it not for her and her party, I would have almost certainly been intercepted and slaughtered by Nohr."

"Well ma'am, on behalf of myself and all my troops, you have my sincere and heartfelt thanks." said the commander gratefully. "I am Karol, a knight of Cheve and onetime commander of the princely family's guard."

"Oh no, it was nothing." conceded Hana. "If anything, you should be thanking my employer, Lady Battsetseg. Since my duty is to see her safe, I was actually ready to leave your man to his fate."

All eyes on her, Sakura attempted to obscure her blushing with one of the garment's heavy sleeves. "O-oh no." she protested meekly. "We would have never gotten up the mountain so quickly were it not for our f-friend Tagh here."

The veteran knight smiled wryly. "Even though you're not from around here, you seem to know your way behind Nohrian lines." he remarked perceptively. "Might it be possible for you do something about those siege engines of theirs? We don't have any archers of our own left, so using them ourselves is out of the question. The problem is that they're keeping our wyverns grounded."

Hana sighed tiredly. "Depends. I didn't get a good look at their positions coming up here, but what can you tell me?"

"Along with their besieging troops, they've got several ballistae and storehouses, more than a few of them are filled with oil from what I understand."

"Filled with oil, huh....I think I could work with that, and worst case scenario, I should be able to figure it out even if we don't have a Bowman."

The knight clasped his hands in anticipation. "Perfect! Tristan, you accompany them, that's an order! I'll send for Joan and Claudette to meet you by the mouth of the cave!"

His subordinate nodded dutifully. "Of course, sir." he confirmed. "I literally owe these women my
To say that no one in their party could wield a bow was technically untrue, Hana thought uncomfortably. However, that very same young woman would no doubt object strongly to what the swordswoman had in mind concerning the presence of flammable liquids and what were essentially giant bows. As they reached the cave's mouth, the group was greeted (in the most technical sense of the term) by a wiry, surly-looking brunette some twenty years old, her lance longer than even her limbs and frowned. "Well, well, if it isn't the golden boy, Sir Tristan," she sneered. "Slayer of Nohrians and Bringer of Life Itself!"

"Oh, come now, Joan!" implored the knight tiredly. "We've got a mission and respected guests. Don't you suppose we could tone down the passive-aggressive rancor a bit?"

As if on cue to clarify that the feud was nothing out of the ordinary, a young woman of seventeen, her resemblance to Joan somewhat offset by a slightly chubbier frame and being a head shorter, spoke up. "Don't mind them." she insisted to a worried Sakura. "My sister and Sir Tristan were...involved some time ago and it was not an amicable parting. With that said, she's still the best guide we have; only our father knew these mountains better."

A group of six individuals with their weapons armor and general equipment was not exactly a spacious fit to descend the mountain via the caves. Nonetheless, it was far quicker a descent without assorted provisions and items becoming snagged on the cave features and generally misplaced, but not without time for apparently-innocuous small talk.

"So you and your sister both are fighting Nohr?" inquired Rinkah, more than a little impressed with their grit. "Is that common among Chevois women?"

Joan gave an invisible scowl of disgust at their enemy. "Well, this isn't really an everyday situation, now is it?" she snapped rhetorically. "But no, it's not common, especially not these days."

"With the Nohrians, you can see actual, burning hatred for us, possibly even more so than for our men." confirmed Claudette sadly. "Before I joined my sister, I'd lost count of how many times I'd have my friends coming to me in tears about the horrible things they'd been called. 'Slant-loving' so-and-sos and such garbage."

Reaching the foothills once again, the group carefully skirted the treeline along the ridge, Hana spending a good forty-five minutes scoping out appropriate vantage points before being ushered back into the foliage by Joan. Nonetheless, after about an hour of this reconnaissance, on the very tip of the ridge facing a destroyed village, the swordswoman gave her appraisal of the situation. "I hate to break it to you guys, but you're kind of screwed." informed Hana, cushioning the blow as much as possible.

Joan scoffed with derision. "Tell us something we weren't already aware of!"

"Everybody knows they rely heavily on armor and cavalry," added Claudette. "The terrain is bad for both, but my wind magic could only hold them off for so long."

"Now, if we had a Bowman," Tristan began absentmindedly. "or anyone decent with a ballista for that matter, we could do some actual damage to them."
Apparently, the demure princess was in possession either of an unusually-keen sense of hearing with an ability to tone out background noise, a preternatural sense for sensing distress, or some combination of these. "Erm, do you all hear that?" she inquired.

"What's that, milady?" Hana piped up. "What did you hear?"

"It sounds like someone arguing."

It was such a shame that the execution hood did little, if anything at all, to muffle the voice of the condemned. Such thoughts doubtlessly ran through the minds of all the members of the Nohrian unit assigned to patrol this particular sector, not least of which their commander as he scowled from horseback at the soon-to-be-corpse's excuses.

"For the millionth time!" came the slightly-nasally female voice. "I was just giving a customer a demonstration of some wares! Can't a gal make an honest profit anymore?"

The commander mimicked the scowl of his erstwhile superior and mentor. "There is and can only be one penalty for providing aid and comfort to savages." he sneered, his voice unnaturally high and dangerous. "And that is death, without exception."

"How is it aiding or comforting just to TALK about bows?!"

"Sir Reinhard," whined one of the pikemen. "why are we even bothering with the spectacle? Why can't we just waste this fat sow and be done with."

The soldier abruptly received a mouth full of dirt courtesy of a sturdy, trunk-like leg "accidentally" extended by the condemned woman, her guilty grin still invisible under the hood. "Whoops."

The paladin scoffed at the excuse as well. "It is exactly due to that sort of antisocial attitude," growled Reinhard dangerously. "why high command insist that bandits like you must be made an example of. The only thing worse than a savage who doesn't know its place is the civilized man who gives it aid and comfort!"

Both physically and intellectually, Candace was a quicker woman than most gave her credit for, far more adept then average at examining situations under duress particularly. Taking into account the sound of boots and horseshoes on the cobblestone path and the heavy armor clanking ahead of her, she weighed her options, recalling that the majority of the day's bloodletting and resulting destruction had taken place near the town square, quite a ways back.

"Can I ask you guys a question?" she inquired, disarmingly as possible given the situation. "Since I'm not a Nohrian gal myself, I wouldn't know. How much marching practice do you all get?"

"What are you prattling on about, woman?" the paladin growled. "Far more than the average plebeian, such as yourself no doubt."

"Well, you MIIIGHT need it about now."

As certain as she could be of the position of the pikeman behind her as she possibly could be,
Candace seized the opportunity created by their failure to bind her ankles and drove her right steel-heeled boot into the man's crotch with every ounce of her considerable strength. As he fell to his knees, shouting, writhing, and cursing in pain, Reinhard was so startled by the abrupt noise that he scarcely had time to react to the prisoner barrelling into his steed's side, knocking both man and horse on their side.

Cursing at both his anger and the pain of being weighed down under the beast outweighing him considerably, Reinhard managed to sputter out an enraged order. "What are you waiting for, idiots?! Kill the bitch!"

A couple of revolutions of the neck ridding her of the hood, exactly as Candace expected, one of the armored knights in front of her prepared to swing his axe in the general direction of her neck. The questionable saleswoman exploited the gap in intention and conscious response time and slid under the weapon's path, tripping up the other armored knight before setting off into a dash, a brief rain of Nohrian arrows failing miserably to hit their mark as she disappeared into the maze of ruins. The paladin, was absolutely livid, whether at this act of defiance or the complete lack of initiative shown by his men.

"Sir Reinhard! Are you alright?" inquired a second pikeman, apparently unsure whether to help move the distressed equine from his superior. "The criminal has-

Dragging himself out from under his steed, the knight glowered at his subordinates. "TM AWARE OF THAT!" he raged, drawing his blade. "Spread out! Standard pursuit formation! She can't have gotten far!"

While said trait having weakened considerably from the time she was a girl, a persistent impulsive streak Candace possessed had landed her in trouble on more than one occasion and she was hoping against hope that this was not one of those times. She knew the layout of the town quite well, having spent several weeks there plying her wares, but the great amount of debris and detritus created by the Nohrian "renovations" was playing havoc with her usually-sterling sense of direction, having narrowly avoided three separate patrols in the past fifteen minutes while being scarcely any closer to safety.

As she approached the plaza recognizable as the town's marketplace, a point unsurprisingly at its direct center, Candace began to breathe somewhat easier; it would not be an easy escape, but she had gained a significant victory in finding a specific point of orientation. Then again, the plaza was constructed in such a manner that the debris from the earlier carnage had blocked off most of her potential routes outside the settlement and this somehow managed to be the least of the rogue's problems as her pursuers had blocked off any escape routes, led by their very angry commander closing in on a very trapped Candace.

"Capital offense one: Giving aid and comfort to savages through trafficking illicit materials," began Reinhard through gritted teeth, as if reciting from a manual of sorts as he drew his blade. "Capital offense two: Striking one of His Majesty's soldiers. Capital offense three: Striking one of His Majesty's officers. Capital offense four: Perverting the due course of justice. Capital offense five: Pissing ME OFF!"

"Soooooo there's no chance of playing this off as some big, unfortunate misunderstanding?" probed Candace.

Shutting her eyes as if it would somehow cushion the killing blow, to Candace's shock, it did not come and the only roars coming from the paladin were shouts of pain followed by the clanging of
Nohrian steel against the cobblestones; upon opening her eyes, the grey merchant witnessed Reinhard, his sword arm severed at the elbow, using a dagger in his remaining hand to futilely attempt to repel a woman wielding a brilliant blade before being run through by her, the swordswoman dealing shortly with his sword-wielding bodyguards as if it was natural as breathing.

"You alright?" inquired Hana. "You're not wounded?"

"Well, yeah, I'm awesome!" she replied. "You just saved old Candace from a really bad turn!"

Cutting the bonds around her wrists, Hana's attention turned to the two Nohrian horsemen getting ready to run them down. "Pick up something to defend yourself with if you're able." she instructed urgently. "Otherwise this will have been for nothing!"

Claudette's wind magic having torn their armor to shreds, the combined might of Hana, Rinkah, and their Chevois comrades had done quite the number on the occupiers; twenty-three casualties with fourteen fatalities to be precise, the princess' designated target none the worse for the wear. This is not to say that she was entirely pleased, given Tristan and Joan circling the battlefield like birds of prey, systematically cutting the throats of any Nohrian survivors.

"Is that truly necessary?" Sakura inquired. "Th-they're no threat any longer."

Over a string of insults and curses directed at her by the man, Joan bought down her axe on the throat of Nohrian pikeman, silencing him for good. "That's exactly why it's necessary." she insisted darkly. "They're not a threat any longer. And they never will be to anyone again."

Her protector, on the other hand, was in considerably better spirits, having witnessed Candace at least wound a Nohrian with a scavenged bow. "Anything this one can do for you, just name it!" insisted the portly rogue, still ecstatic with relief. "You've got my thanks, Miss... you know, I never exactly got your name."

"It's not important." remarked Hana. "What is important: Can you use a bow?"

"Shit yeah, I can! Is that it?!"

"Well, you'll see."

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Apparently, the western extremity of the Nohrian encampment was lightly-manned, seeming to expect a frontal assault from the mountain passes and stationing their forces accordingly. And this worked for Hana just fine, she, Rinkah, Joan, Tristan, Joan and Candace having dealt with the skeleton force guarding the ballista quite handily and with no unusual alarm on the part of their comrades. Having taken stock of the Nohrian positions and supply depots as best she could manage, in the dirt, Hana diagrammed the points she estimated would be most effective, as far as their cost-to-damage ratio and their limited number of projectiles were concerned.

"I'm not exactly some master tactician," the swordswoman informed, unusually candidly. "but my old commander did teach me the basics before he was- well, murdered."

Removing a ball of what appeared to be a grayish clay from her bag, Rinkah smirked. "If you really want a show, wrap the bolts in fabric and place some of this on 'em. It's delayed-ignition clay; starts up a fire pretty much anytime you need it. Just get it near a catalyst like oil and a significant force of impact."
"Oh, man," began Tristan, sounding genuinely excited for the first time since the trio had encountered him. "what I wouldn't give to be able to see the look on Leonard's face when he gets the news!"

"Well, someone's still got to aim the damned thing!" remarked Candace.

"I can find my way pretty much anywhere with the sun, moon, and stars alone." replied Joan bluntly. "Just leave that part to me. You just worry about firing it."

It did not exactly feel good for Hana to hide exactly what they were doing (although just from context clues alone, she reasoned the princess must have had some idea) from her lady, from her best friend and one of the few people she had left in the world. Nonetheless, Sakura did her part regardless, not simply by patching up their scrapes, but by aiding Hana in tearing spare fabric into suitable bundles for Rinkah's use, all having an unspoken agreement to allow the Flame Tribe scion exclusive use of what could be an extremely dangerous substance in untrained hands.

Finally, Tristan, Rinkah, and Hana loaded the first bolt into the ballista, aiding Joan and Candace in aiming the device with their own physical power "A few more degrees counterclockwise." instructed the master scout. "It's going to drop a bit in flight, so-

"I know, I know!" scolded the rouge. "Geez, you'd think I'd never shot a bow before!"

Hana beamed morbidly. "That's exactly why we saved you. We've got five bolts. Let's make each one count!"

Joan specifically diagramming out the exact angles and rotations on the dirt next to the machine for subsequent salvos, after Candace sent the first bolt off into the night sky, the results were underwhelming for more than a few. "Well, I knew this was a long shot." remarked Tristan grimly. "We'll figure something else out-

"Wait a second." interrupted Claudette, standing on her toes as if to confirm what she'd sensed. "Do you smell that?"

Hana smiled that same off-putting smile as she confirmed she did as well. "It's smoke."

"And you know exactly what they say about smoke!" answered Rinkah, her take on Hana's grin somehow less-disturbed.

While only having worked together a few hours, the motley group had ironed out the plan to strike back at their mutual oppressor into not merely a science, but an art; Tristan, Hana, and Rinkah loading the bolts into the machine, Joan directing the ballista's reorientation and Candace sending the bolts off to strike (and hopefully ignite) Hana's designated targets. Within a few minutes, the Nohrian installations and camps in the distance had been engulfed in a very visible firestorm; and judging intensity and spread of the blaze, at least two of the supply depots had been ignited.

"Alright, congratulations everyone!" said the swordswoman, considerably more cheerful than she'd been in months. "That should do it!"

"But we still have one left!" Tristan pointed out. "Ah, hell, not like it really matters."
"And that blaze over there is the perfect chance to cover our escape!" insisted Candace, before turning to Rinkah urgently. "Set that last bolt against the ballista!"

Rinkah gave her an incredulous glance. "Why, what are you planning?"

"Just do it, alright!"

And made their escape the group did, but the Nohrian army was loathe to let any sort of sleight go unanswered and this was no exception: As they ascended the foothills towards the forest line, Hana, Tristan, Joan, and Rinkah made short work of the small cavalry detachment sent to pursue and destroy them, shortly thereafter a considerable contingent of infantry and armor amassing on their former position near the ballista.

"We must have lost a good minute on that scheme of yours!" Rinkah scolded. "What on earth was that for?!"

Drawing back the string of her scavenged bow, Candace let loose another arrow at the very conspicuously-placed bolt placed against the ballista, the firestorm now engulfing the machine, their former position and the enemy forming up. "That." she answered with a self-satisfied smirk.

"Needless to say, the Chevois members of the party were absolutely delirious with joy at this blow against the occupier and their comrades back at the mountain fortress were no exception, Tristan, Joan, and Claudette receiving a hero's welcome upon their return, the former insisting that their four foreign allies receive their accolades as well. The princess however, despite Hana's repeated inquiries about a problem, remained utterly silent for hours after the conflagration. The commander on the other hand, was quite pleased, his office feeling more like a study than execution chamber for the first time in months.

"That will give Leonard something to chew on over his porridge in the morning." said Karol smugly. "Once again, Lady Ilha, thank you. Your aid has proven invaluable. Whatever your price is, you name it."

"Just a few beds if you can spare them." Hana replied, her voice devoid of much of its natural energy. "It's been a really long night, we're all exhausted, and I have to get Lady Battsetseg to the capital as soon as possible."

"Since you're going to the capital anyway and Nohr will be after all of our heads especially, we should stop by my aunt's tavern." suggested Tristan. "It's probably the safest place in the capital to lay low if you're on Nohr's bad side and I have to speak with her anyway."

"Sounds good to me!" interjected Candace. "I can't stay in Cheve as is and I need somewhere I can actually think about Candace's next big thing."

Hana glared cynically at the rogue. "You know for how much you talk," she began. "you've never actually told us what it is you do."

"Oh, this and that to make ends meet." answered Candace evasively. "But mainly I find things, people, you name it."**

As his brother was fond of reminding him, Kaze was in fact, he and Kagero's prisoner and he was treated as such. While not denied the food or water the mountain village could spare, his movement was severely limited to a sufficient-yet-run-down shack on the edge of town, guarded at all hours by
one of their associates. While a man who chafed in captivity by nature, it did not take the green ninja long to comprehend that such an arrangement was just as much to keep him confined, as well as protect him (or rather, his information) from the villagers. While having seen neither hide nor hair of his twin for weeks now, one of his associates was slightly less so, given away by her very flat, distinct intonation.

"Welcome back!" greeted Oishi. "I take it it's your handiwork Nohr is losing its collective mind over?"

"Indeed."

"While it's not nearly enough, I can assure you that Hoshidan women and girls will at least sleep a little more soundly."

"Probably Nohrian women and girls for that matter too. That fucking sick bastard. Whatever you did to him, I'm certain he deserved worse than it."

"Yes, he did, but I was pressed for time, so I gave him a fairly quick, but ironic death. Enough small talk. Just unlock the shack."

The door to the shack creaking open, sunlight flooded into the structure, obscuring the two silhouettes from Kaze's unadjusted eyes. "Well, I'll be right here," confirmed Oishi. "if he tries anything, well, you know."

Moving forward slightly before being impeded by his manacled leg, Kaze managed a weak smile of appreciation. "It's been a while." he said. "Oishi is correct about Duke Carinthia; he is- er, was a despicable excuse for a human being. In fact, Lady Corrine had been meaning to investigate."

Her neutral expression not exactly one of warmth to begin with, Kagero's expression turned downright hostile. "But she didn't, did she?" she retorted savagely. "Your saintly Lady Corrine knew all about him, but was loathe to deal with creatures like him the only way that you can. But what else is new for her?"

"Kagero, it wasn't like that-"

"I'm getting ahead of myself. This isn't about me or Orochi or even your brother. It's about you."

"Me?"

"Yes, Lord Hattori wishes to speak to you. He thinks you may have some more use for us yet."

"Oh dear."

Surely enough, with her own blade as well as that of Oishi, Kagero "escorted" Kaze to the great hall which, oddly enough, was populated exclusively by one older man with a shaved head and quite lifelike prosthetic right arm and his four bodyguards, the former giving a tired sort of smirk. "Honestly surprised you had the gall to show your face around these parts." he jabbed facetiously.

"Well, I did not exactly get much choice in the matter." Kaze replied, apparently unaware of the jest. Dismissing Kagero and Oishi, the Hattori patriarch rose from his cushion, checking one last time if the green ninja had escaped his binds before sitting on his feet a good two meters from Kaze. "Well, I suppose Kagero will have told you why I summoned you here." he said, his cracked lips curling
into a slight smile. "A real wild mare, that one."

Kaze gave a slight bow of acknowledgement and respect. "Yes, you required some information from me."

Hattori's aged visage quickly shed any levity. "Listen, from what your father told me and what I'd seen, I'd always known you to be a sharp boy." he prefaced seriously. "A little naive, sure, but a sharp boy nonetheless. My point is, that since the other old buzzards on the council are too busy pissing themselves in fear of Nohr or their own godsdamned shadows, we need the information you have to make this show of force something spectacular- something that will make clear to everyone that the Nohrians aren't invincible."

Kaze's first instinct was to be scandalized at the suggestion before remembering some of his life choices, squashing the inclination as he so did. "Lord Hattori, you realize that I have sworn a solemn and lifelong oath to Lady Corrine," replied Kaze weakly, clearly realizing he was on thin ice here. "a princess of Nohr and a general in its army. If you're asking me to wage war on or collaborate with the kingdom's enemies-"

"I'm not 'asking' you," informed the old ninja dangerously, his expression somehow jovially threatening. "I'm telling you that the information gathered from your reconnaissance is going to help us disrupt Nohr's requisitions of Hoshidan slave labor."

"What?! What sort of slanderous accusation is that?!"

The wizened ninja patriarch gave a smug, malevolent smirk. "Remember how I said you were naive? You're about to learn some...interesting things about your new masters and how they're actually operating. None of them are things you'll enjoy."

Of course, Kaze became reflexively defensive at this slight against his chosen cause and beloved liege. However, Corrine's own beloved's not-untrue words calling Duke Guillaume a literal slave trader haunted him, the unspoken implication that there was a significant market among the rich and powerful in Nohr. Surely it couldn't hurt to just investigate, to play along for a bit and determine the truth of the matter?

Just the day before, Hana would have insisted that their group be up with the sun as to cover as much ground as possible before Nohrian patrols would be out in earnest. However, their return to the fortress was well after one that morning and with Karol deploying their fliers to mop up the Nohrian stragglers and harass any possible reinforcements, the princess' protector surmised that they could afford to rest after the operation. Bare as the bed was, it was always a nice change of pace from sleeping with nothing but one of their bags for comfort. In fact, it was such that Hana found herself sleeping well past nine that morning, shortly after waking, checking on the still-sleeping Sakura as usual.

It was not long at all before she, Sakura, Rinkah, and Candace encountered the Chevois champion, looking rather ragged, but still quite pleased with himself. "Thanks to you lot, we've got them on the run from the area." remarked Tristan proudly. "I'd hate to be the poor sod who has to break the news in Windmire!"

"So you're all ready?" inquired Hana.

The knight grinned. "Of course! By the way, we've got some supplies we need to deliver to the
capital. You ladies mind riding in the wagon? It'll cut our travel time by about half and Joan's a damn good horsewoman, so it won't be that uncomfortable.

Naturally, with the urgency insisted upon by both the rogue and the princess especially, none of them were going to decline, piling dutifully (but not without some difficulty) into the wagon. "Now fair warning ladies," began Joan gruffly. "We're in kind of a hurry, so it's not exactly going to be a joyride. If any of you have a problem with that, get off now."

"Would you just go already?!" implored Candace.

Perhaps it was a control thing, but Hana almost always disliked relying on any method of getting around outside of her own two legs. But even she had to admit that riding in this wagon was not as uncomfortable an experience as she'd been anticipating; Joan was better at this than the swordswoman had given her credit for and the journey was not exactly made any less pleasant by Sakura routinely grasping onto Hana in order to stabilize herself. And speaking of the princess, some interesting conversations were had that night around the campfire as she finally broke her silence.

"What's with her?" inquired Joan carelessly, finishing off half a loaf of bread and the last of her drinking water.

Listlessly stirring at her soup, Sakura sighed heavily. "I understand th-that they've treated you all t-terribly," she prefaced guiltily. "B-but was what we d-did back there truly n-needed? It's just s-such a horrible way to die, burning."

"This...will not end well." thought Candace, already preoccupied with her savior from certain death and her fighting style.

The older brunette scowled at the princess, perhaps even more harshly than she would Tristan. "I consider it an occupational hazard." Joan said coldly. "Don't make a habit of invading other peoples' countries if you don't want to risk being burned alive. Besides, why don't you ask the bastards if it was 'necessary' that they literally skinned my father and uncles alive and left them to die impaled on pikes outside the capital? Or how about when they found my brother with his old unit's crest and hanged every soul in his village? Or how about when-"

"Joan, that's quite enough." insisted Tristan, considerably more stern with her then any of them had heard previously.

"Oh, shut up, Sir High-and-Mighty. It honestly astonishes me that you don't reflexively drive your axe into the cock of every Nohrian you kill after what the animals did to your cousin. And what of your nephew?! You know a lot of them say that Nohr should just round up everyone like that, so to speak, and just slaughter them all, man, woman, and child, right? Far as I'm concerned, they're only good when dead. And we're their 'little brother' as it were! Just imagine how you'd feel if you were one of those poor Hoshidan bastards!"

But alas, the princess and her protector had no need to imagine, the former sniffling and beginning to tear up as she nestled herself in Hana's breast. "Why don't you just take his advice and shut up?" spat Hana.

"What are you, her bitch or something?" snapped Joan before rising to her feet. "I can't deal with this
As his ex-lover stomped off in a huff, Tristan lowered his voice and gaze. "Pay her no mind." he implored gently. "She's a good person, she's just lost a lot to the Nohrians. More than most of us, in fact. Hell, her little sister's all she's really got left."

While Sakura quickly regained her composure, the topic proved sensitive enough that she did not press it further, allowing the matter to drop and the knight to turn in for the night himself, Hana urging Rinkah and the princess to the wagon to sleep as she dealt with the fire, an unexpected party still huddled around the weakening flame.

"That Joan's a bit of a bitch, huh?" inquired Candace, knowing full well the answer.

"That's a lot like saying that water is 'a bit' wet, isn't it?" asked Hana in response.

Sitting down before the dying flame, the swordswoman gave a huff of fatigue. "You know, I thought you'd have gone to sleep by now."

"Eh, this old gal's just got something on her mind." the rogue remarked carelessly. "That was some pretty fancy swordplay you showed against Nohr, huh? Pretty damn good if I say so myself."

"What of it?"

"Well, I've been around enough to recognize that style of swordplay and its substyes to boot. Maybe you're not from as far away a land as you say you are?"

Almost immediately, nearly imperceptibly to even a keen eye like hers, Candace found the blade which had saved her life last night rested against her shoulder, its edge dangerously close to her neck. "I swear by whatever you hold sacred," Hana began menacingly. "If you ever breathe even a word about this to anyone, anyone at all-"

"Woah, slow your roll!" Candace insisted, gingerly nudging the weapon away from her throat, Hana almost immediately replacing it. "What's the problem?! I'm just telling you what I saw!"

"My one and only goal is to protect my lady: Why wouldn't scum like you sell me out to Nohr to save your own skin? Better question: Why should I not just cut your throat and leave you in a ditch somewhere?"

"Because it wouldn't help me one damn bit even if I did!" Candace exclaimed, now noticeably annoyed. "No matter what you may have done to make them mad, you can't be in anywhere near as much shit as Candace is with them! I know you heard that Nohrian douchebag's whole spiel about all the reasons they're after my head. And that was before I burned a whole mess of their supplies and troops alive! King Lenny himself couldn't even pardon that, not that he would!"

Chuckling slightly at the irony of having saved, in the space of a year, the lives of the two most-wanted individuals for whose blood Nohr was currently howling or would soon be so, Hana removed her weapon from Candace's throat. "I can't argue with that." she conceded. "You realize that promise stands, right? Put her in danger, whether by your words or actions, and your life is forfeit."

"Oh, that's fair enough. That gal, what was her name again- Battsetseg, is real important to you,
Hana gave a genuine, yet wistful smile. "She means more to me than life itself."

Her foul mood apparently not something one sleeps off, Joan roused them all from their slumber fairly early on, the moon still visible as the sun began to creep over the horizon. Despite none of them being particularly pleased with Joan (Rinkah's argument with her nearly coming to blows), as none had any desire to linger in a fairly-exposed position and risk an encounter with vengeful Nohrian forces, they had little choice but to comply with her directives. For all her distracted, haphazard driving, Joan had lost little of her effectiveness, seeing as the group managed to reach the capital's outer gates by nightfall.

"You must be a madwoman!" Rinkah scolded. "I swear, I almost died a few times back there!"

"How is it my problem you can't keep your balance to save your life?" asked Joan derisively. "I've got to go distribute this stuff, so I can't babysit you four any longer.***

"I'll show you to my aunt's tavern." said Tristan apologetically, as though for his comrade's rudeness. "As well as relative safety, we can get beds and a good meal to boot."

In no small part due to what she was used to, Hana was rather intrigued by the unusual street layouts and building styles. She'd never been herself (now having no desire to do so outside of claiming the heads of Leonard and his bandit enforcer), but from the second-hand descriptions given by her uncle and brother, it was reasonably similar to Nohrian architecture, but somehow seemed more...warm and hospitable than described by the late regent of Mutsu.

"Hey, it's Sir Tristan!" called one man.

"They actually did it!" exclaimed another man. "I was sure they'd all been slaughtered!"

"I heard the other day a whole damn army of the bastards went up in flames!" said one woman excitedly. "Serves them right, it does!"

"I can't put my finger on why exactly," began Sakura. "but the people here feel so warm and welcoming."

"Yeah, that would usually be the case for us." Tristan replied, shooting a hateful glare at a small group Nohrian pikemen patrolling disinterestedly. "But you guys don't exactly have a lot in common with other 'visitors' of ours, if you get my meaning."

Tristan shuttering the group away from the occupier's sentries just to be safe, a burning question remained with one of their group's members nonetheless: "I know Hoshidan and Nohrian towns and cities all have names," Rinkah began. "so what's this city called again?"

"Cheve." remarked Tristan casually, as if it no more interesting than the water he drank this morning.

Needless to say for all the of women, the country and capital city sharing the same name was a new concept for them.

Not surprisingly given his questionable activities, the route on which Tristan led them was increasingly circular and prone to backtracking, a technique Hana knew well and appreciated. It took
a good hour and a half of this, but shortly thereafter, the knight led motley group to a rather run-down, but still homely section of town, shortly thereafter leading the women to a little alcove of a building inconspicuously squirreled away. "And this," he introduced. "is Polaire. One of the gathering places for people, like us, as it were."

The quiet, yet still relatively-lively atmosphere, rustic decor, and distinct smell of home-cooked meals gave even individuals as hypervigilant as Tristan or (had become by necessity) Hana cause to relax a bit. However, some parts of the bar were a bit too lively for some of its employees, given the two burly, scarred men harassing the teenage barmaid.

"Come on!" plead the first man. "Everybody knows by now you Chevois broads will even fuck savages, so what's so bad about coming with me and the boys for a good time?"

"I told you a thousand times, sir." said the dirty-blond girl, nearly in tears by this point. "Either buy something or please leave. You're disturbing the other customers."

"Well, you know you can make this all go away if you let us work over, er-, talk to your boss for a bit." threatened the second man, a dull-grey bandage wrapped around his eye socket.

"And I told you as well, Miss Victoria has not been feeling well all day, so she's been turning away any visitors."**

Perhaps whether due to the girl's resemblance in mannerisms to Sakura or her hatred for bandits preying on the common people, Hana, drawing one of her concealed knives, stormed up to the one-eyed brigand and, after tapping him on the shoulder, pointed the blade directly in his face. "Nice bandage." she said mockingly. "How about I even out that ugly face of yours if you and your buddy don't stop harassing the young lady?"

Despite the blade literally a hair away from his nose, Tarba managed a hearty, derisive laugh. "Oh, yeah girly! You and what army?!"

Almost immediately, the tavern's occupants to the last man and woman, drew their concealable (usually blades) weapons, training them on one of the bandits; in addition to Rinkah who was pretty much always ready for a scrap, Tristan had drawn a dagger Hana had never even seen him mention, let alone use. Tarba may have been many things: Arrogant, greedy, and generally unscrupulous, but the one thing he was not, was foolish-slash-suicidal. The bandit chief knew when he'd been beat.

"Come on, let's get out of here." he snarled to his underling.

Tense as the standoff was, the establishment went back to normal very quickly, its patrons keen on getting back to whatever business they may have had. The barmaid, Maria on the other hand, was exceptionally grateful to the newcomers their champion had bought around. "Whatever you want." she said with a smile. "It's on me."

"What exactly you got to eat around here, anyway?" inquired Candace, taking a seat at the bar. "Someone's girlfriend was being a bitch and wouldn't let me eat this morning."

Sakura however, seemed increasingly lost in thought; after several minutes staring aimlessly about the tavern, retired outside, her protector shortly by her side as the two young ladies gazed at the stars.

"Lady Sakura, what's the matter?" asked Hana worriedly. "You've never exactly been a chatterbox, but you've barely said a word since we left the fortress."
"This world...is c-cruel, isn't it Hana?" the princess inquired balefully. "We've seen so much pointless cruelty and f-for what? Why? Whose life can we say has really been made better for it?"

"It's unfortunate, but it's just the way it is, isn't it?"

"M-maybe it d-doesn't have to be after all?"

Giving her full and undivided attention to her dearest, most cherished friend, Sakura took Hana's hand in hers, that very particular-to-Sakura gaze of fierce determination in her eyes. "I don't care what anybody says about it. If it's naive or p-pointless, I'm going to change it! I'm going to do everything in my power to make it so!"

Embracing the princess, Hana's eyes twinkled, yet held still some degree of sadness and bitterness. "Oh, Sakura, it's a beautiful vision, just like your soul! But if you really believe our enemy, who don't even see us as human-"

"I understand f-fully well that Nohr has no intention of leaving us in peace, ever. Until something changes profoundly in their worldview. I thought we had a ch-chance after the war, but whatever he may have once been, King Leonard is a vile and horrible man who brings out the absolute worst in his country. I-if my road to a better world for my nephew and people ends at his g-grave then I'll see him removed from his throne, one way or a-another. The very last thing it will be is easy, so Hana, i-if you-"

Hana gently pressed a silencing index finger to the princess' lips. "I told you probably a million times already. I don't care what your path brings or how difficult it is. I don't care if the entire world ends up damning me or praising me, I. Will. Always. Be. By. Your. Side."

Overcome with joy, both at the emotional outpouring and her newfound sense of purpose, Sakura threw herself into her protector's embrace, yet could not help but notice a figure standing very conspicuously, a woman. "That was truly a wonderful speech, young lady." she said proudly.

Emerging from the shadows, the figure revealed herself to be a woman of around sixty with graying-blonde hair and an expression shorn of its youthful ferocity by both the toll of years and repeated tragedy. "I am Victoria, but you may know me as Tristan's aunt and the owner of this establishment."

"I'm so s-sorry!" apologized Sakura. "I had no idea you were there!"

The elderly woman gave a warm, motherly smile. "Pay it no mind, child. I implore you, to come inside. There is someone very dear to me I'd you to meet. Dear to both of us, in fact."

"I'd like to meet this person too." Hana interjected. "Where she goes, I go. It's just that simple."

Victoria smiled the same smile. "I'd have no problem with that. In fact, I think he'd like that too."

While generally inclined to be as suspicious as possible in any situation whatsoever where Sakura's security could even possibly be compromised, the old woman was just so disarmingly genuine that even Hana's guard was down somewhat. Nonetheless, before she led them to the back of the tavern and up a well-concealed staircase, Hana managed to drag Rinkah and (because she simply would not get lost) Candace with her back to the living quarters. As Victoria unlocked a door, the group found themselves in a sparsely-decorated, yet comfortable living area, shortly greeted by an energetic blond boy no older than two years old or so, bounding energetically before embracing his grandmother's
"Leg. "Mamie!" greeted the boy cheerfully as Victoria picked him up.

"This is my grandson, Shiro." she introduced nostalgically. "Shiro, there's someone I'd like you to meet. This is your auntie, Sakura."

As her eyes met the boy's, the princess' eyes lit up, almost in tears of joy and relief that she saw those of her eldest brother, Shiro giggling as Victoria passed the child to his aunt's arms. "Hello, Shiro..." said Sakura gently. "How are you? I'm your auntie, Sakura."

Victoria allowed herself a considerably fuller smile than she had in ages. "Just as kind and polite as your brother said." she marveled.

"You knew my brother?"

"Yes, given what he had with my daughter, he was much like a son to me, particularly since I lost my boys."

Hana also felt a swirling mess of emotions: Anger that she'd been so careless, relief that their mission was over, adoration at just how adorably at ease Sakura felt with her nephew, and confusion as to how exactly Victoria had found them out. "Well, I guess there's no use pretending to be someone I'm not anymore." conceded Hana. "I am Hana of Mutsu, Princess Sakura's retainer and protector."

Victoria gave a nod of acknowledgement. "Yes, he mentioned you as well, young lady. As I recall, he actually called you his finest student of the blade."

"Well, the flames don't lie." said Rinkah proudly. "Of course, you could always have a pyromancer bad at it, but that's an entirely different matter."

"See, told you Candace could find anyone or anything!" exclaimed Candace, equally as proudly. "Thank you, Candace once again." said Victoria. "I'll have your gold in a bit."

"Wait a second!" interrupted Hana. "I seem to remember us saving you from Nohr."

Candace shrugged her shoulders. "Eh, Tomato, tom-ah-to! The point is, I found you lot, isn't it?!"

It stood to reason that after that humiliating incident at the tavern, Tarba would be fuming. In Nohr, westerners were known as a particularly proud lot and the bandit chief exceptionally so. At their shanty camp on the eastern outskirts of town, his men knew this well, and were tipped off something had happened by their boss' foul mood.

"So any news on the job, boss?" inquired one of the brigands. "We thought we'd had the brat's whereabouts pinned down but-"

"Of course we do!" Tarba interrupted savagely. "Send out the call! We attack tonight!"

"Tonight?! Boss are you sure?! Everyone's just getting settled in-"

"Want me to send you in as a human shield? Of course I'm sure! 'Know their place' my eye socket! I'll teach these Chevois worms to disrespect me!"

The past hour having seen her princess playing with her nephew and bonding with the tavern
mistress as if they were long-lost family, in the brief respite Shiro had given his aunt by tiring them both to exhaustion, Hana's conversations with the old woman did not prove nearly as comforting to either party.

"I really am grateful for your recollections of Lord Ryoma." said Hana gratefully. "For Sakura's sake as well. But what of your daughter? I've never heard you say a word about her. She was clearly very important to the both of you."

Immediately, Hana regretted her breaching the topic, as she noticed a good deal of the newfound light leave the older woman's eyes. "Ah, yes my Scarlet was a very spirited woman." she sniffed. "Always stood up for what she believed in, defending those weaker than her, even as a girl-

At this, Victoria began to weep openly. "Oh, gods, my poor baby!" she wailed. "I'd not even wish that on Leonard, let alone his loved ones!"

Wiping away her tears, Victoria forced a clearly-quite-painful smile. "Oh, gods, I apologize for that. I'm far too old for such displays."

"I feel like I should be apologizing, really," replied Hana contritely.

"That sneering, taunting face I see every time I close my eyes, it haunts me, you know? I'd have already killed him myself had he the misfortune to be assigned around here. That bald Nohrian giant with the beady, hateful little eyes, scarred face, and cruel sneer..."

Immediately and reflexively, Hana's expression curled into one of disgust for the one individual she'd held in more contempt than Corrine or even Leonard. "Oh, yes, I'm QUITE familiar with his work." Hana replied bitterly. "He either murdered my troops to the last man or ordered it done after we'd capitulated as per their demands. That would have been despicable enough, but he forced me, my late fellow retainer, my old commander, and Sakura to watch as they were butchered!"

"My word!" exclaimed Victoria. "So it's not just us! He truly is a beast wearing human skin!"

"A beast has the excuse of not knowing any better. He just doesn't give a damn about anything outside of his own sick desires! Now, I may not have known your daughter, but just from what you've told me, she had more courage, moral or otherwise, in her little finger than anyone in that whole wretched kingdom of theirs."

The experience of meeting a kindred spirit and reminiscing about her daughter overwhelmed Victoria, embracing Hana as if for dear life. "It's not going to be soon," prefaced Hana, loosening the older woman's grip slightly. "but I promise you that someday, his sorry excuse for a life is mine. When I do end him, it's not just going to be for my men, but for Lady Sakura, your daughter, and certainly a bunch of other daughters as well!"

Her eyes still reddened, Victoria managed a dignified, wistful smile at Hana's promise.

Pondering what exactly their next course of action would be, Hana pondered a great number of things, not least of which was something Tristan mentioned. "I realize that this isn't something you like talking about and just say so if you don't want to," she prefaced cautiously. "but Tristan mentioned some 'unforgivable sin' your daughter committed in the eyes of the Nohrians that wasn't fighting against them. What did he mean by that?"
Victoria gestured at the boy napping on his sleeping aunt's chest. "His father and giving birth to him." she answered grimly.

And speaking of Tristan, there sounded the very-distinct sound of a winded individual scrambling up the staircase, finally emerging and looking very worried. "Aunt Victoria, we've got a problem!" he warned breathlessly. "A big problem!"

Chapter End Notes

I thought my obsession with this game/universe/song would have tapered off by this point, but apparently not. The chapter isn't really a Tales of Zestiria reference, so much as a reference to the character introduced in this chapter (which the title is a reference to; even if you don't understand Japanese color nouns/adjectives, it's not exactly a big surprise), not to mention that I basically consider AmaLee's cover of White Light to basically be Sakura's character theme from this point on and, once again, a Sapphire cover of the song may as well be Hana serenading her.

Also pay attention to the music box versions of the themes; exactly three characters have them for the purpose of this story.

BTW, I already know Candace has actual (cut) voice files in-game, but I hear her with Amber Nash's Pam Poovey voice and there's nothing you can show/tell me to convince me otherwise.

Finally, you have me indulging in more language nerdery, seeing as "Ilha" translates to "flower" in Manchu and "Battsetseg" is Khalka Mongolian for "unbreakable flower," since Sakura is wearing a noblewoman's deel. Much in the sense of the rest of her people, Rinkah's alias her, Tagh, is Uyghur (and a bunch of other Turkic languages) for "volcano/mountain" and I apparently imagine Shiro as Eurasian for whatever reason.
The Enemy Approaches!

Chapter Summary

With the occupation forces ordered to turn a blind eye for the time being, Tarba's bandit horde descends on Cheve in pursuit of young Shiro's blood, prompting Hana, Rinkah, and Tristan into action while Sakura and Candace support them, preparing to defend Victoria and Shiro both and a profoundly disturbing experience accompanying his brother's raiding party leaves Kaze questioning even his devotion to Corrine and her cause.

Chapter Notes

*Plight! (FE9 OST)
*A Battle and a Beginning (FE9 OST)
***Holding Your Own (FE9 OST)
****Victory United (FE9 OST)
*****Untold Despair (Tales of Symphonia OST)
******The Devoted (FE10 OST)
*******Battle of Pride (FE10 OST)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The city streets running red with blood and the night air filled with the screams and pleas of hapless citizens and the bandits' whooping, this time, Tarba could not help but smirk at the destruction he was visiting upon these insolent sods. True, the western sands were harsh and taking what others had was a well-established way of life and had been as long as anyone could remember. But this time? As far as the bandit chief was concerned, this lot deserved the suffering visited upon them, but nonetheless, Tarba retained his trademark pragmatism.

"Well, that district was a wash, boss." reported one of his minions, sweeping some blood from his axe.

"We're tearing apart this entire city if need be!" he ordered in response. "But make it clear to them; they can hand over the slant bastard or they can die."

*What little color remained drained from the tavern mistress' face as Victoria set down the telescope, cursing to herself as she paced the length of her observation perch. From the interior, Sakura looked on worriedly, her nephew and the target of the bandits' wrath dozing innocently in her arms as Hana, Rinkah, and Tristan wore steely, intensely-focused expressions, well aware their night was about to get very interesting.
"Fuck, the Nohrian bastards haven't had enough of our blood yet?" asked the knight outragedly. "We've been giving it to them better than usual as of late, but-
"
"No, they don't seem to be Nohrian regulars." informed Victoria, clutching a solitary arrow with a piece of parchment looped around it. "Way too undisciplined, no discernible formation, and this."

As Hana unfurled the letter, Rinkah's and her own expressions immediately twisted to mirror the disgusted expression of Tristan as Victoria recited from the paper. "We'll find him sooner or later; hand over the half-savage bastard or else!"

Tearing the letter to pieces, Victoria's visage turned to one of steely defiance. "This boy's all I've got left in this world. They'll have to kill me first. I will not make it easy, that's for certain."

Sakura, mirroring the old woman's expression, turned to the warriors. "Hana, you know what has to be done."

"Of course!" Hana replied with one of the few genuine grins she'd given in months. "Take out their leader and they'll scatter like the bugs they are!"

"Aren't you worried about the Nohrians intervening?" inquired Rinkah. "Not that that's really going to stop me; I've wanted a crack at scum like them for a while now. Besides, a girl like me named after an ancient heroine of our people refusing to take on slavers? Don't think so!"

"I'd be surprised if they did." interjected Tristan. "Thanks to Sir Karol and his stalwarts, they only have a skeleton force to keep order at this point in time. Nonetheless, I'll get word to Joan; she and I will aid you while our flyers keep watch for reinforcements. I'd join them, but my old friend Heath needs his rest tonight."

With their roles set, Hana nonetheless made sure that everyone was going to pull their respective weight. "You!" she said harshly gesturing at Candace. "Twenty-five thousand gold, protect these three with your life! That's not hyperbole."

"Yes ma'am!" replied Candace. "Just say the word and I'm on that turret as well!"

Tristan and Rinkah already taking their leave for the field of battle, Hana was abruptly halted by someone tugging on the hem of her borrowed tunic. "What's wrong, milady?" she inquired.

"Promise me you'll be careful, Hana." said the princess seriously. "I don't want to lose any more people important to me."

"That's a promise!"

**Exiting the tavern, the trio did not exactly have to search for signs of trouble. The smoke, flames, and the shouts and pleas from the citizens for mercy. "Which direction did most of them come from?" asked Hana, drawing her blade.

"The northwest, it seems." replied Tristan, doing the same. "I'll meet up with Joan and create a diversion."
"We'll take out their leader and any stragglers!" confirmed Rinkah.

With precious little support, either from her princess in the form of healing of her Chevois allies drawing the bandits away from the tavern (naturally, she was still not sold entirely on relying on Candace) or those defending it, Hana had already decided their best bet was for her to end the bandit chief quickly and scatter the rest to whatever sewers they crawled out from. She and Rinkah following the street west for a couple of minutes, they did not have to wait long to find trouble; a group of twelve or so bandits pillaging, marauding, and terrorizing young and old, men, and children alike, a defiant-but-clearly-outmatched pair of young men with worn-down blades facing down the predators. "Rinkah, get them away from those people!" ordered Hana, drawing her blade. "I'll deal with this lot!"

"Got it!" confirmed her rugged sister-in-arms before, with a flying leap, caving in the skull of one bandit attempting to carry away a young woman, readying to defend her from his three comrades.

While still terrified and assured of their own untimely deaths, the cornered young men managed scowls of defiance and ferocity, getting into combat stances to at least give a decent fight in defense of their homes and families. What an alarming, but ultimately-welcome surprise it must have been for them! Their steadily-closing crescent formation, brute force, and sheer numbers proved no match for Hana, the brigands ultimately falling dead to the last (save for one temporarily spared) in a haze of steel and blood spatter. "Where's your boss?" demanded Hana coldly, the blade's tip pointed at the survivor's neck.

"You killed them! You killed them all!" sputtered the bandit, nervously dragging himself (and the gaping wound where his right leg formerly rested) backwards. "You bitch!"

"Last chance. Where's your boss?"

"I don't know!"

Running the survivor through, Hana, after throwing one of her knives at the back of a bandit attacking Rinkah, turned to the young men. "You two alright?" she inquired. "Any injuries?"

"Outside of possibly overdosing on adrenaline, no." confirmed the first. "Thanks for that, by the way. Owe you our lives, we do."

"You were interrogating that cutthroat about their boss, right?" remarked the second. "I overheard a few of them mentioning the river up north like it was significant."

Hana beamed, knowing her mission was somewhat more clear. "No, thank YOU."

Dashing over to aid Rinkah, the swordswoman found she'd barely needed it, having already disposed of two of the brigands, the last of them Hana impaling on her blade. Sweeping some blood from the edge, she resheathed her weapon. "Sir Tristan will have some of his men coming around in short order." she informed. "Do you two think you can keep these cutthroats out of here until they do?"

Looking around at the compromised edifices of wood and stone, as well as the dead bandits' arms, the older of the gentlemen looked somehow optimistic. "Yeah, I think so." he replied. "We'll treat some injuries and see what we can manage."
Still without a good idea of just how many bandits there were besieging the city, Hana knew that this could not continue lest the entire area be turned to rubble. To this end, instead of simply seeking out and slaughtering the brigands, she and Rinkah attempted something new with a group of stragglers. The warrior princess drawing a group of four of the cutthroats out, she very consciously dealt with the other three, ignoring the last until Hana saw fit to deal with him her own way. "Where's your boss?" the swordswoman demanded once more, one of her knives imprinting very conspicuously on the soft flesh of his throat.

"Fuck you, uppity cunt!" swore the brigand, still with more than enough sense to try to break free from such a hold with brute force alone.

"I really think you might want to tell her where your boss is." Rinkah interjected nonchalantly.

Hana tightened her grip on the upper half of the man's face. "Last chance to tell me where your boss is. Just between us, I think you might want to listen to the nice lady."

"FUCK! YOU!"

Tiring of this nonsense, Hana dragged the blade across the foulmouthed bandit's throat with all her might, letting him futilely struggle for several more seconds before said struggles became increasingly weak, ceasing entirely before long. "This isn't working like I thought it would."

the swordswoman remarked, dropping the soon-to-be corpse. "At this rate, we might not have much choice but to take them all out."

"Maybe the element of surprise just wasn't on our side?" suggested Rinkah with a shrug. "Let's try getting one of them isolated from his buddies."

Hana had to concede to Rinkah one thing; while she wasn't exactly a fan of the approach, her half-instinct-driven approach did have something to show for it. Isolated from his fellows, lured away by the jingle of a not-insignificant bag of gold, a young bandit, a boy really, followed his ears down an alleyway, unaware of the presence of either woman until it was far too late. "If you know what's good for you," Hana began darkly. "you'll tell me where your boss is."

The young man shrieked in the vain hope of his comrades coming to his rescue. "I don't want to die!" he simpered. "Whatever you want! Take it!"

"What my friend said." interjected Rinkah dangerously. "Where's your boss?"

"He's holed up in the old town hall building across the river!" informed the youth. "A big, burly guy with a bandage over his eye socket! You can't miss him!"

While the young man was shortly released, he now found Hana's blade pointed at his throat. "You've been very helpful." the swordswoman confirmed. "Now if you know what's even better for you, you won't even look at that axe of yours on the ground, leave this city as fast as your skinny legs will carry you and never return."

The bandit (understandably) began to visibly tremble, the bag of gold still in his hand. "Can I at least keep."

"Fine," Rinkah said as she rolled her eyes. "It's not like I was going to get anything more useful out of it."
The young bandit scurrying off exactly as Hana had instructed, the swordswoman beamed hungrily. "You ready to remove some lowlifes?" she inquired.

Rinkah returned the expression. "Born ready." she confirmed before they took off.

"Say, what is the story behind your name anyway? The legend, I mean."

"Supposedly, ages ago, before anyone could remember, some arsehole warlord from the west got it in his head to conquer the continent. Our people told him where to shove it and he was supposed to have captured them to feed them all to a dragon to make an example of them to the other 'savages.' So my great-great-great-great-whatever, she was said to have gone into the crater herself to slay the dragon."

Fascinated by the Flame Tribe's legend for whatever reason, Hana would have inquired further were it not for the immediately pressing task of eliminating the bandit chief and any of his hangers-on and her princess' explicit order to protect her nephew's life in so doing. To this end, the pair continued north, taking out any bandit stragglers or the few foolish enough to molest the people of the city with them in eye or earshot. With the river and old town hall building both immediately apparent, as they stood before the bridge, Hana turned to her comrade. "You know the plan?" she asked confidently.

"Yep!" Rinkah confirmed, a knowing smile curling onto her lips. "Besides, I think your way of taking out trash is a lot flashier than mine. Makes a better psychological impact that way, you know?"

Crossing the river, Hana and Rinkah continued for a good half minute, taking refuge in a thicket overseeing the hilly path as soon as voices became audible, one of them a very familiar voice barking commands at his subordinates quite crossly. Tarba's retinue passing the greenery with nary a hint of anything amiss from any one of them, as soon as the brigand chief's voice was audibly to their left, the pair sprang from their concealment, Rinkah bludgeoning one of the two sellswords into unconsciousness as Hana trained her blade on the one-eyed bandit as the other woman covered her.

***"You know, I've been wondering something, not that it's going to change your fate." Hana prefaced, a twinge of genuine, morbid curiosity in her tone. "What kind of sick animal takes gold to murder a little boy and his grandmother?"

"Tch! You again, uppity savage cunt!" spat the brigand. "Your kind really are stupid as they say! Gold is gold! What else is there to it?!"

"You know what, I'm actually sorry I asked. Do the world a favor and die, now."

His fighting style relying more on brute strength than any sort of finesse or tactics, Hana actually saw fit to humor Tarba a bit, the head of his axe only managing to graze her tunic's sleeve a bit before she gracefully pivoted, driving her blade through the bandit's back and chest cavity, twisting a bit for good measure. "Hans, you lying motherfucker!" he rasped. "You said this'd be easy gold..."

Removing the blade, Hana pivoted once more, removing the bandit chief's head from its shoulders.

***In the heat of combat, Rinkah, getting wind of the battle's outcome from the outburst, merely smirked at the ten or so brigands and the reinforcements they'd called in. "I think my friend has something to inform you about." she informed smugly.

"That's right." interjected Hana, gesticulating with her sword before tossing Tarba's head before the crowd. "This is your boss! Or what's left of him, anyway. Unless you want some of what he got,
you'll leave this town and never steal so much as a crumb of bread again as long as you live!"

At the spectacle of the severed head of their boss, easily the most powerful member of their outfit, the group began to chatter among themselves in tones ranging from terrified to outraged.

"This can't stand! The bitch killed the boss!" protested one brigand.

"Yeah, like it wasn't even shit!" exclaimed another. "I'm outta here! No job is worth dying, especially not like this!"

"I'm with him!" interjected a third. "If she offed the boss that easy, what chance do any of us have?!"

After several seconds of stunned, terrified silence, the gathered crowd of brigands, dropping their weapons and most of their loot, thinned considerably, sending out frantic, every-man-for-himself calls to their surviving associates. The few who remained, let alone standing before Hana and Rinkah, were driven off both by their lack of support and the fierce gaze the women shot their way.

****The horde of bandits thinning and most of the chaos having ceased, the city's terrified residents slowly emerged, showering their saviors with rapturous cheering. "Well done." congratulated Joan uncharacteristically. "You actually succeeded in getting the scum to scatter."

Hana beamed. "Well, we couldn't have done it without you two either!" she replied.

"Eh, they weren't so tough." Rinkah interjected dismissively. "A good workout more than anything."

"Indeed, you've all done well." came a familiar voice. "I'd expect no less from my two finest fighters and the saviors of my garrison."

Immediately standing at attention, Tristan's posture reflexively corrected, against the dictates of his fatigue. "Well met, Sir Karol." he began respectfully. "Did the enemy trouble you? I'd been concerned that they'd try to reinforce the bandits."

"No, not around the capital." informed the elder knight. "With that said, let us return to Polaire. I've something to discuss with your aunt."

All five exhausted as they returned to the tavern, Hana was immediately greeted by the princess throwing herself into her grasp, squealing with delighted relief.

"Hey, what am I, charcoal?" inquired Rinkah facetiously.

Meanwhile, the knight turned immediately to the tavern mistress. "Victoria, I think we may have a problem." he informed heavily, motioning to remove one of the bandits' arrows from his belt. "I do not think it prudent for you or the boy to remain in Cheve for the time being."

"Yes, you mean that horrible note." she replied in a matching tone. "So what if this boy is a half 'savage'? I'm not afraid to admit it. He's my flesh and blood before anything else."

"Aunt Victoria, we've been concerned that this attack on the city was done with the tacit approval of Windmire, or even at their explicit order. Meaning that Shiro's life will be in danger as long as he remains within Nohr's reach."

Prepared for such an eventuality, the Flame Tribe's princess' ears perked up. "We can take care of
that." she said proudly. "It's a bit of a hike to our homeland, but Nohr won't be able to touch him or you under Father's protection."

Victoria gave a tired, yet hopeful smile. "I suppose I don't have much of a choice. I'll make preparations immediately. We should be ready in a few days' time."

Finally, Candace seemed to be in the process of acquiring a new client, much to Hana's displeasure. "Excuse me, M-Miss Candace." she began. "You said you c-could find anything or anyone, no?"

"That's right!" the beaming rogue replied. "If this gal can't find it, it can't be found!"

"I n-need you to find someone. It's my sister. She has flame-red hair, is tall and lithe, and about twenty-four years old. I-I'm not even sure if she's even still alive and it I'm s-sure it will be terribly dangerous for you, so you can name your price-"

"Hmm, I've got a pretty good idea who you're talking about already. Well, if she is still kicking, Candace will leave no stone unturned to find her!"

In spite of her princess' grateful smile, Hana turned to Rinkah with a grim expression. "You got all that?" she whispered conspiratorially."You know what I'm getting at-"

"Don't worry." answered Rinkah, matching Hana's tone. "My cousins, Daisen and Hakone, were already sent by Father. Best damn scouts in the entire tribe and they're technically MY subordinates. Any funny business out of our new friend, especially related to Nohr-"

Rinkah pantomimed a cut across her throat.

"It really is nothing personal. Sakura's just too trusting for her own good and looking out for her is why I live and breathe."

In spite of all the utter bullshit she'd had to deal with over the past several months and even more of it on the immediate horizon, it was a strange sensation. For the first time since she'd embraced the princess in Shirasagi's throne room surrounded by the Nohrian dead and dying of her own making, Hana felt genuinely hopeful.****

In the week leading up to whatever assignment his brother and the elder had for him, Kaze tended to give the other members of the Hattori clan a wide berth for a number of reasons; none of the ninja, more than a few of them he'd actually trained with as a younger man, were exactly happy to see him. He could deal with the snide remarks and the "traitor" comments, since they were true more often than not. Even less of a bother to him were the strike during sparring when his opponent would "accidentally" strike him a bit too strongly for a practice bout. He could even deal with taking meals and sleeping well afield of his erstwhile countrymen even if they would have him; it was for his own safety as well. But the only things which genuinely troubled him about the situation were his few exchanges with a particularly surly kunoichi.

"Let me make one thing absolutely clear," began Chinatsu harshly. "the one and only reason you're not dead by my hand is because Grandfather insisted you'd be helpful on this mission."
"Yes, I understand that, Chinatsu." answered the green ninja tiredly. "But we're allies for the time being, can we at least remain civil with one another for that time?"

The kunoichi scowled, wounded as if the man had affronted her very being. "So you're even TALKING like them now?! Wow, what other 'values' of your Nohrian brothers have you taken on?"

"That's not what I-

"Maybe your attitude to us 'savage' whores too? After all, we're not 'real' women or even human fucking beings, not like your prim-and-proper, virtuous Nohrian lasses."

While having no love for Kaze whatsoever, the superior officer overseeing the sparring had heard enough. "That's enough, Chinatsu." said the master, a man in his early forties.

Prior to stalking off, the scarred woman glared at the ninja with a harshness rivaled by that his brother had shown him.

Late that night, after most of the camp had turned in, Kaze silently returned to the camp, keen on making amends with the scarred kunoichi. Perhaps it was a poor idea in and of itself, stalking a ninja encampment after dark, let alone one where one's presence was grudgingly tolerated at best, but their exchange had just left such a bad taste in his mouth that he felt compelled to apologize. With that said, it was more than a little jarring to find her dozing by one of the watch posts, mumbling and jerking in her sleep, occasionally swiping with an imaginary knife at an imaginary enemy.

"Chinatsu?" he began tentatively, to which the woman simply mumbled illegibly.

"Ngh...." she muttered. "Get away from me, you bastards....Get away....GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM ME!....What kind of superior people....Not men...."

Lord Hattori may have been correct about his relative naiveté, but even he could put two and two together. His heart sinking into his stomach, Kaze, needless to say, left for his own encampment feeling ten times worse than he had upon setting out. Indeed, the few hours of less-than-restful sleep and even the dawn meeting demanded by his twin were welcome respites from having to dwell on how many times Chinatsu's ordeal must have repeated itself across the land.

"So where exactly are we going, Brother?" asked the green ninja. "I was interrogated earlier briefly, but-

Saizo interrupted with a dark chuckle, as if getting some grim satisfaction from the answer. "Well, it's supposed to be one of the most difficult ones to attack out of all the ones they've set up in Hoshido."

"What exactly have 'they' set up in Hoshido?"

"You'll see, Brother."

Following his twin on an arduous hike (Kaze suspected strongly he was making it purposefully difficult) into the wooded highlands lasting most of the day, by sunset, the ninjas ultimately arrived at some expansive, largely-open air facility flanked by extensive wooden fencing and Nohrian soldiers armed unusually from Kaze's experiences; a few bows, but generally with short swords and whips.
The facility in question was officially a plantation for some crop or another situated on a plateau, surrounded by forests and sloping hills. Kaze had heard of Nohrian commanders requisitioning Hoshidan manpower from the countryside, but none of that could have prepared him for what he witnessed with his brother on their last-minute reconnaissance mission. The sight of his erstwhile countrymen forced into all manner of backbreaking labor, scarcely afforded any nourishment or reprieve and subject to all manner of abuse horrified and profoundly disturbed him.

"Hey! Stop slacking off, swine!" spat one of the watchmen, punching a young man to the ground with his gauntlet.

"It's my father, sir," explained the young man contritely. "He's always been sickly. If only I could get him some water-"

The guard and his nearby fellow exchanged disbelieving glances before laughing cruelly, the second guard drawing his short sword to dispose of both father and son. "Plenty more where that came from, eh?" barbed the first guard, lightly kicking the corpse of the young man.

"Yeah, unfortunately!" replied his fellow watchman nastily. "But won't Sir Nichol get cross if we kill too many too quickly?"

"Nah. He said himself they breed like vermin, which there are always way too many of. And trust me, I know vermin: My 'pa dealt with 'em for a living before he passed."

"Well, like father, like son. Sure, I'll trust your judgement on this."

Very close to being literally sick to his stomach, Kaze just then had a horrifying realization. Terms like "savages," "heathens," "soulless vermin," or "dirty yellow devils," he had always always been able to dismiss as the rough equivalent of "Nohrian bastard" or the countless permutations thereof, but now? It had only just dawned on him that many, if not most of the men alongside whom he'd fought and bled against his own country did honestly and truly consider Hoshidans to be subhuman, the cold-blooded killing of them to be given no more thought than that of a pig or a chicken. While this was ostensibly an agricultural facility, Kaze could not shake the feeling that the sinister plantation was somehow....ranch-like.

"This...is..." Kaze trailed off, his expression drained of any color whatsoever. "This...can't be..."

"Yes, take a good fucking look, Brother." sneered Saizo. "This is what your wise, benevolent new masters really think of you and people like us. Insomuch as we're 'people' to them, anyway."

Reflexively clutching two of the blades on his belt, Kaze's despair turned shortly to simmering outrage, and not towards the man whom had bought him there either. True, he scarcely even needed to factor in the princess' certain lack of approval of such atrocities. "Where is he?" Kaze asked harshly. "This Nichol, I mean."

The elder twin snickered nastily. "Oh, no you don't!" he insisted. "You really think we'd trust you with taking out a high-ranking target like him? Especially when there's a fifty percent chance you'll squeal anyway and his superior's relieved him of command for the night? No, YOU, get to go after his lapdog, some reedy, collaborating little fuck named Senno. He watches over the 'savages' for his masters here."

Well aware of the sort of man Senno was, Kaze, already unusually gentle for practicing such a violent trade by nature, was fine with this. Indeed, recalling his last encounter with the man in the
capital, a part of him was actually looking forward to ending him. "Understood." he confirmed.

Without another word, Saizo vanished, clearly intent on taking the life of the commander in question, Kaze caught more of the exchange, a young woman, apparently the daughter-slash-sister of the deceased expressing her outrage at the act before being slapped to the ground by the first guard. "You two!" he bellowed. "Take this bitch to the back and teach her some manners!"

At the knowing, sinister chuckles and explicit taunts delivered by the two underlings, Kaze rose from his position, well-aware that for someone like him, even looking at a Nohrian soldier the wrong way could be (and often was) a literal death sentence, but that scarcely mattered. He knew Lady Corrine well enough to know that even though he could count the Nohrian officers on one hand who would actually punish such behavior, his lady was one of them. And that was just too bad for those three, he thought, preparing to aim one of his throwing knives at their leader.*****

He was not an especially old man, just south of forty himself, but Duke Guillaume was always surprised at how much age could relatively mellow certain individuals. His surviving fellow alum of King Leonard's regency council, Duke Albrecht, as a fiery younger man, had literally snapped an Ice tribal's neck with his bare hand for failing to address him as "Lord Albrecht," but now? It was remarkable (and more than a little disturbing to him) to see such a terror as a young man as a distinguished gentleman sipping evening tea to unwind after a long day with some small talk.

"So I take it you heard about Durante, eh?" he inquired disinterestedly. "Dreadful what those savages did to him. You know they cut off his-"

"Yes, I know, we all do." answered Guillaume, somehow equally as interested. "But let's be honest with ourselves; is it really a surprise that the organ he was so very proud of and got him into so much trouble in life was ultimately the death of him? It's...fitting in a macabre sense."

"I suppose you have a point there."

The duke's study resting at the top of a tower about a story and-a-half off the ground, Duke Lorraine glanced curiously down at the livestock being worked within inches of their lives for the benefit of Nohr. "Did you ever consider selling off some of this rabble?" he inquired. "I know more than a few bluebloods who'd just love to have a resource like this at their disposal."

The older duke scoffed. "What of it? The nobility's always had its fools with more money than sense. Besides, it's not even worth it for agriculture and housekeeping; you have to keep the savages under armed guard at all times. In case you hadn't noticed, it's pretty easy to station my own men or sellswords at the mine's entrance. Worst case scenario, they just bring them mine down on their empty heads to keep order."

"Rumor has it the king has a menagerie of them for menial tasks above the maids. Maybe it will become a fashion statement of sorts?"

"I swear, Guillaume, you and your money grubbing-"

Rapping frantically at the great wooden door, a solitary soldier broke down the door, quite transparently panicked. "Lord Albrecht, we have trouble!" he reported breathlessly. "Savages! A horde of them are besieging us from the woods! Casualties are already high and climbing!"
Springing to his feet immediately, the duke scowled. "What?! How?!" he inquired outragedly. "I suppose if you want something done right, you really do- Go to the stables! Tell them to ready my horse!"

"Yes, sir!"

Placing one of the daggers on his belt, the older man paid scarce attention to Guillaume until he reached the stone steps. "I suggest you make yourself scarce." he advised harshly. "There's a route back by the stables set up for such an occasion. All of the 'ranches' have one."

"Oh, trust me, I will, my friend," confirmed Guillaume shamelessly. "But are you sure these rabble can't handle it themselves? Why risk your life on such a worthless endeavor?"

"Because those savages need to be taught what happens when you trifle with a member of House Ravenstein. I may not be the 'fiery-haired devil' of my youth anymore, but I assure you, I'm dangerous enough."

Having been able to avoid any encounters with the Nohrians so far, Kaze had hoped to keep his involvement in the matter to a minimum by eliminating Senno and getting out without much fanfare or notice. However, by the time the sun had mostly retreated from the sky, this would prove too problematic. "Matsuiro and his men got held up!" informed Chinatsu harshly, obviously not thrilled with her substitute as she dealt an extremely personal injury to a dying Nohrian. "You'll have to take his place."

"Understood." Kaze confirmed once again. "What do you require of me?"

"Up past this next checkpoint, there's a considerable enclosure where they keep their 'livestock' for assorted tasks." informed another ninja, the disgust apparent in his tone. "Take out the sentries and ballistaman on the southeastern platforms. Once we raise enough hell, that traitorous fuck- er, Senno, will have no choice but to come out."

He may have been comparatively naive compared to his brother or Kagero, but even Kaze was savvy enough to pick up on the not-so-veiled insult that was redirected at Senno at the last moment. Nonetheless, the sooner he helped put an end to this particular atrocity, the sooner he could report back to Lady Corrine, as he was almost certain this was related to the 'creepy, greasy little bent-over fuck' Toyokuni had remarked upon.

Stealing past the checkpoint as if it were like breathing, Kaze shortly found himself the aforementioned enclosure of fencing, the masses of "livestock" being overseen by a number of quite-surly-looking Nohrian soldiers, all clad in that same helmet with visor and armed either with whips, spears, or short swords. "We'll all be killed soon...." remarked a middle-aged Hoshidan man balefully, his tone as resigned and grey as the rags the "cattle" were given to wear.

"Have you seen a ballista around here anywhere?" Kaze whispered in return.

"On one of those platforms. I forget exactly which one."

"Thank you, you've been most helpful."

Kaze was being sincere when he thanked the man for his directions. The enclosure was overseen by a number of platforms raised about a two stories above the ground. Unfortunately, the entire facility (naturally during the nighttime) was quite poorly-lit save for the pathways and select points. With no
better place to start and supposedly having a very short amount of time before a bloodbath began in earnest, Kaze shortly made his way to the nearest platform, feeling around shortly for the ladder to take him upwards. As luck would have it, this was exactly the platform hosting the ballista and its operator. Unfortunately, it also played host to his three guards, boredly shooting the breeze among them. With no better options, Kaze crept up behind the balistaman, left hand clasped over his mouth and blade to his throat. "Please, just pretend to be sleeping." he plead. "This will all be over soon."

Even more unfortunately, the balistaman did not see fit to cooperate with Kaze's efforts to keep bloodshed to a minimum."****

Struggling mightily and eventually wriggling his head free, the ballistaman began alerting his fellow guards. "****"Savages! We've got savages attacking inside the ranch!"

Escaping Kaze's grip even further, he began to stagger to the platform's edge, frantically ringing the bell before slipping from the platform and falling to his death. Kaze cursed to himself as the spearmen descended on him angrily. Looks like there's no avoiding it, he thought exasperatedly.

Meanwhile, in the enclosure, select members of the soon-to-be-slaughtered Hoshidan crowd revealed their true identity, raining their throwing knives in the general direction of their oppressors, other incognito ninjas taking the fight directly to the guards among as the civilians fled from both the chaos and their would-be executioners alike. Other teams of the assassins took axes and picks to the fencing while others unearthed caches of weapons at select points around and outside of the enclosure. "Come on!" Chinatsu encouraged, tossing out weapons to anyone able to bear them as she sent another blade soaring into a Nohrian chest cavity. "You're gonna die anyway, you might as well die standing with a weapon in your hand!"

Having dealt with his own guards, Kaze, taking in the chaos now surrounding him, looked around for any hint of his target, noticing some hastily-lit torches and shouts of panic emanating from a small, poorly-staffed encampment to the west. As good an indication as any towards Senno's position, Kaze slid down the ladder, unfortunately finding himself in the middle of a Nohrian skirmishing line. After several hastily-avoided stabs, thrusts, and jabs, Kaze was able to disengage from the madness and disappear into the night.

Shortly thereafter, across the defiled plateau, Senno stalked towards the enclosure, his sellswords in tow, (his benefactors would never dream of allowing him command over Nohrian troops, not that they would actually obey him even if their lives depended on it) muttering angrily about the interruptions to his research.

As they neared one of the guard towers, the battle quite clearly having turned against Nohr, Senno scowled at the mercenary captain. "This looks like it could get ugly." his opportunistic employer remarked on the obvious. "Once again, just like we discussed.*****

"You got it, boss." the mercenary captain confirmed, his four underlings flanking their employer in a square formation. "Any targets of opportunity go down, but we're here to cover you while you lay down the hurt."

"I'm afraid that's not going to work out, you reprobate." Kaze's voice boomed from an indeterminate location.***

With this, one of the green ninja's knives found its way into the mercenary captain's throat, Kaze shortly emerging from the tower to take out a second mercenary. As the other sellswords gave chase and engaged Kaze, Senno gave a self-satisfied grin. "I am a 'reprobate,' truly?" he inquired. "The way I see it, for all your high-minded posturing, there's no difference between us. I joined with the winning side to gain knowledge, you joined with the winning side to gain well...has your princess
done away with that mouthy bitch yet?"

Shrugging off the thrusts and slashes from the hired swords as easily as he did their curses, Kaze was still able to retort as he engaged them with his own blade. "We're nothing alike!" he spat. "You not only turn a blind eye to their crimes, you help the likes of Duke Toscana to enslave, oppress, and murder innocents!"

While the ninja had done away with another one of his mercenaries in the interim, Senno still seemed somewhat amused by Kaze's insistence against what was a truism for him. "Alright, we're nothing alike." he conceded facetiously, leafing through the tome in his left hand. "And Nohrians, their nobles in particular, are quite generous to their friends."

His expression turned downright maniacal at the conclusion of this monologue. "Allow me to give you a demonstration of that generosity!"

Of course, while it was quite dark, Kaze could not help but notice the literal electricity crackling in the atmosphere, even before it became quite oppressive. Only his highly-attuned reflexes prevented him from being incinerated like the two sellswords by the sickly black lightning which had singed a considerable area of the impromptu battlefield. Well aware he could not allow Senno to get off another attack like that, let alone signal for reinforcements, sheathing his sword back, Kaze was on his enemy almost immediately, disturbing even himself with the ultimately fatal flurry of stabs and slashes he'd delivered to the collaborator. "No...please no!" croaked Senno as he expired. "Lord Nichol...save me..."**

Delivering another cut across his throat for good measure, despite having concluded this mission quite handily and gained even more information which would be of use to the princess, Kaze remained haunted by the turncoat's monologue and what it said about his motives. Was his motivation to side with Corrine, her ideals, her kindness, even her saving of his life notwithstanding, truly as pure and knightly as he'd been telling himself all this time? Or was there another more primal, visceral instinct driving him to remain at her side, forsaking even his kin and country, even as his country scorned and despised him? Putting it out of his head, at least for the time being, Kaze could tell himself with certainty that he'd helped stop a great atrocity and gained more knowledge his lady would be most interested to hear.

"But what would it really stop?" he found himself reflexively thinking. "What good would she really do?"

Shaking his head violently as if to dismiss the thought, Kaze vanished into the night once more, hoping to avoid any of the night's comrades-in-arms.

From the time when he was a small child, Duke Albrecht had always hated forests and this hatred had only grown since the beginning of his military career. What's really the point of them being this close together, he wondered angrily. They only serve to inconvenience him and aid treachery against his people! "And you're certain it was here?" he inquired harshly.

"Yes, sir." replied his adjutant, adjusting the sheath on his belt nervously. "The savages' ambush was here, I'm certain of it. Count Champagne took his men and rode north along this path to give chase, but-"

Duke Bayern scoffed. "Arrogant fool. Like we haven't had enough losses already?"

His adjutant blowing his horn to signal for more reinforcements, the duke and his retinue of five cavalymen rode forth, hoping against hope for the signs of some sort of struggle or, even better,
masses of dead Hoshidans. Following the path for a good three minutes, in the distance, a clearing was coming into view, albeit obscured by both the night and the cover from the forest. But something was...off about the situation in a way he could not quite place, as first tipped off by the panicked whinny of horses having thrown two of his men from their steeds before darting off into the night.

"What the devil is this about?" the nobleman asked, wishing for nothing more than to be back in his tower.

Struggling to his feet, one of the calvarlymen felt the ground tentatively near his ankles, eventually grabbing hold of something. "What is this, wire?" he inquired. "What's it doing out here?"

"Beats me." the second cavalryman responded as he rose again, the fall having left him visibly worse for the wear. "Maybe it's a-"

Quite immediately, he was interrupted by a thrown blade lodged in his throat, falling to the ground as he struggled not to suffocate on his own blood. "Sir!" called his comrade. "Basso's collapsed, something's wrong-"

The second cavalryman screamed in agony as a second thrown blade found its way into into his left eye, collapsing to the ground himself as well.

The duke's adjutant drew his sword at the shrieks of agony as well, ready to kick his steed's flanks and charge down the inevitable assailant. "Milord, be prepared! There are enemies."

He as well was silenced by a thrown knife to the throat as the panicked steed shortly threw its dying master from its back. Needless to say, Duke Bayern was not pleased, drawing his own weapon, a great axe, with a flourish. "You there!" he gestured to the survivor. "Ride on in front of me! We'll reach the count's forces soon."

"At once, milord-AUGH!"

While his surroundings were not nearly bright enough for him to make out exactly what had happened to the surviving horseman, the duke was able to make out his silhouette struggling to its feet, shortly thereafter forced to the ground by some weapon or another. "Cowardly heathens!" spat Albrecht, none too keen on betraying the increasing existential dread he felt. "Stop relying on craven tricks and face me like men!"

******A deep, gravelly, quite-obviously-masculine voice chuckled evilly. "Oh, sure, we're the cowards." Saizo remarked coldly. "Duke Albrecht! You will pay for your crimes against Hoshido and her people with your sorry life! I, Saizo the Fifth, sentence you to death in their name!"

Only able to rely on his (also weakening with age) hearing to orient himself, the duke nonetheless saw fit to maintain the facade with a familiar refrain. "You savages raise livestock for slaughter, no?" he answered haughtily. "Then what crime is there in actual people raising cattle for their own good? I'd refrained on remarking on it to my subordinates openly, but my assignment here has proven my men right. You lot really ARE fit for nothing more than to be slaves!"

"So now we're literally cattle to you Nohrians, eh? But I think you're forgetting one thing about cattle. Even though you might not think much of them, they still have horns. Just like your count and his men up ahead learned the hard way."

"I tire of this nonsense, die!"
Kicking his steeds flanks intent on charging down the young upstart, the duke had expected, judging simply by the direction of the audial cues, there to be at least some telltale sign of movement of some sort, detecting a distinct lack of human flesh, bone, and muscle connecting with his axe. What an unpleasant shock it was to hear the ninja's voice from the entirely opposite direction.

"You missed. Badly." taunted Saizo.

With this, a blade struck Albrecht in the side of the chest quite forcefully, the force more than sufficient to knock him from the horse. While his lighter armor allowed him to return to his feet somewhat more easily amidst the chaos, he cursed to himself as he noticed the warm liquid pooling at the site of his injury. Seeking to end this quickly as to deal with an almost-certainly-fatal-if-not-treated wound and expecting some kind of treachery, the old duke, the searing pain on the left side of his body notwithstanding, managed an overhead strike in a crescent-shaped pattern, again connecting only with the dirt path below.

"Hi." the ninja taunted once more, now audibly closer.

Now quite able to hear his attacker (and his heart pounding) quite readily, Albrecht was now hell-bent on turning around to gain some stock of the situation, but was immediately interrupted by a horrible, shooting pain on the left side of his back, its source coming into focus as a Hoshidan blade protruding from the front of his chest.

"Bye." mocked Saizo for the final time.

The blade removed from his body, Albrecht fell forward to his knees, shortly falling prone. The gaping, profusely-bleeding wound now undeniably terminal, the duke used what little strength remained in him to inch towards the medicinal salve lying on the ground about a meter away. "I...can't...lose...to...this...heathen....scum!" he protested weakly.*****

Quite consciously taking the vial, before he vanished, leaving his target to expire of his grievous injuries, Saizo smirked at this the twin satisfactions of a completed mission and the Nohrian blueblood learning some humility- the hard way. "Yeah, well I guess you'd better get used to it."

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Chapter End Notes

No, me calling the facility a "ranch" isn't simply a case of Insistent Terminology, nor is what Duke Albrecht (or that his weapon of choice is an axe) was like as a young man a coincidence either. But if you know the context of the non-Fire Emblem track, what little subtlety remains goes out the window. On the flip side, it probably was an unintentional reference, but the fact that I decided on Senno attacking Kaze with the Goetia tome from Awakening....well the green ninja had the good sense not to use items, at least I can say that much in his defense.
A Grave Fate

Chapter Summary

In the face of the assassinations of Dukes Bayern and Carinthia and King Leonard's increasing impatience with the rapidly-deteriorating situation in the "new eastern territories" and other (particularly the botched assassination of young Prince Shiro) failures, the remaining alumni of the regency council, and Konrad hedge their bets as Camilla reveals the most beloved, closely-guarded secret of her elder brother and his eccentric retainer to Selena.

Chapter Notes

*A Grave Fate (FE9 OST)

**Along the Beach (Tales of Symphonia OST)

***The Mind of Izuka (FE10 OST)

HOW DARE THEY?! HOW FUCKING DARE THEY?! Of course, he was enraged by this turn of events, this scheme. In fact, his charge notwithstanding, he was literally always enraged at humans and the depths of selfish depravity to which they would sink. But this? This was absolutely unconscionable, even by their abysmally-low standards!

It truly had been a battle for the ages; standing with their king, heroic old Dheginsea in a final stand against the motley collection of heretics, hotheads, and arrogant beorc seeking to overturn the goddess’ judgement itself. Now Kali, a Black Dragon warrior of Goldoa, found himself sprawled onto the cold ground of an unfamiliar land, every inch of his body burning with pain, his last memory being of the beorc gentleman with Altina's blade striking him.

However, the one thing in which he took comfort was the presence and survival of his brother, Surya, while somewhat worse for wear than he, his leaf-green hair matted with assorted debris, was still alive and mere paces from his position. Gingerly, Kali dragged himself over to his twin, checking for a pulse and finding it to his great relief. "Surya." he called. "Brother, are you alright?"

Groaning in pain, the younger brother slowly opened his eyes, just as confused as his twin. "Brother, where are we?" he inquired. "This isn't the tower."

"I've no idea. But we've got to find someone; a fellow tribesman, another laguz, even a beorc who knows what the hell he's doing and where we are would be better than this."

"Is that wise? I can barely stand, let alone transform to defend myself."

"I'm much the same, but we cannot simply stay here. If we do so, we will die; I'm as sure of that as the goddess herself."
"Wait a second! Brother, what's that? Did you hear that?"

"Damn, you may be even worse off than I'd thought!"

*Even had he a fraction of his strength with which to resist, the elder of the dragon brothers would have done well to heed the warning; with these words, a thick mesh net ensnared the twins, Kali struggling against the trap to the detriment of his remaining vitality.

"We've got them, milord!" called one of the soldiers, among the several clad in purple-black armor.

"Don't get too close!" instructed another soldier over Kali's curses and graphic threats of equally-graphic violence.

"Oh, shut up, you coward!" scolded a man, quite clearly his superior as demonstrated by both his casual language and fine clothing.

His subordinate stilling his tongue unlike his quarry, as he drove the sedative-laden syringe into Kali and Surya respectively, Duke Guillaume could scarcely believe that the ramblings about other worlds of his liege had some validity to them after all. Like every child on the continent, he'd heard tales of the legendary Dragon's Gate, but to actually have it confirmed was something else entirely. Nonetheless, Duke Lorraine was a very practical man, even in a time of war. Thanks to the king, Konrad had more gold than he knew what to do with and always welcomed more specimens and the duke was looking for an insurance policy to keep himself in said king's good graces. Perhaps a *quid pro quo* of sorts was in the making?*

**Perhaps due in no small part to the method's relative rarity in her home world, Selena was not a fan of travel by ship, let alone the sea in general. For Camilla however, she would endure it and do so with as close to a smile as she could manage. True, the cool ocean breeze was not unpleasant, but a man casting an extremely-large shadow, probably the largest in the world, had been putting a damper on her voyage as well. Leo had never liked her, Selena could deal with that; a lot of people disliked her. In fact, she could also deal with the outright hatred the most powerful man in the world held for her, despite her lady's continued adoration of her younger brother. But there was something truly monstrous, truly unnatural about the murderous venom even the king's mere gaze communicated, that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. The very last thing she was some shrinking violet, but the pure hostility and borderline madness in said gazes even made her consciously avoid him whenever possible. Not that she actually had anyone to confide in about these concerns.

"Do you like the sea, Selena?" inquired the princess.

"Not especially, but I don't hate it." replied Selena, lazily lounging on the ship's railing.

"I just adore the sea, especially in this kind of weather. The skies and waters are so clear and peaceful, no?"

"Yeah, they are."

Of course, the mysterious retainer knew her lady well enough to detect any nervousness and evasiveness, and this instance was no exception. "Lady Camilla, where exactly are we going?"

The smile with which Camilla responded, while serene and motherly as always, betrayed an ever-so-slight hint of unease. "Notre Sagesse, of course."
Selena tilted her head in confusion. "That's kind of an odd choice for a holiday, isn't it?" she asked.

Her lover chuckled fondly. "Nothing gets past you, does it Selena, my dear?" Camilla replied distantly. "Yes, it is, but sometimes one just feels like a change of scenery."

As they disembarked from at the port that evening, Selena noticed a number of oddities surrounding the princess' behavior, not least of which was her dismissal of any security outside of herself, the circular route across town on which she insisted, and her conscious avoidance of the occupation troops, finally culminating in an exchange in an alleyway well into town. "Lady Camilla, is there something wrong?" she inquired urgently. "You've been behaving strangely for hours now, especially since we got into town."

Turning abruptly on her heel, Camilla's expression turned to one of complete and utter seriousness. "Do you love me, Selena?" asked the princess in response. "Enough that you would do anything for me?"

"Of course I do! What kind of question is that?!"

"Then I need you to promise me, to swear on both of our lives, that you'll never breath a word of what we're doing or why we're here, to anyone. Not to Azura, not even to Corrine, and especially not to my brother."

"Yes, I swear it. Not a word about it leaves my lips. But I have no idea WHY we're here in the first place, milady."

"You'll see."

Several more minutes of walking took the couple to the very edge of the port town, well away from any prying eyes. From there, the princess led her beloved retainer further up a rocky, sloping hillside, a few more minutes of traversing this inconvenient terrain finding them facing a grotto sequestered away in the hillside. While she would not have noticed it at first glance, a sanctuary lay beyond the unassuming arches, its entryway overseen by a kindly-looking elderly woman in plain black clothing. "Ah, welcome back, milady." the woman greeted. "It has been too long."

"Well, things have been rather...busy as of late," reminded Camilla sadly. "but it is always nice to see you as always, Sister Agnes. I trust he's doing well?"

The old woman smiled softly. "But of course. Naturally, you'll want to see him with your own eyes."

The princess noticeably towering over her, Selena had no need to lower her head as she entered the ancient monastery, the intricate masonry and solemn, dignified atmosphere of the interior more than a little familiar to her. No, it couldn't be, she told herself incredulously. And the architecture was not the only thing about which she was mildly confused. "You've been dancing around it for hours, milady." prefaced Selena crossly. "What exactly are we doing here anyway?"

The traveler shortly received an answer to her question, however far less directly than she was expecting. No, Selena's answer came in the form of Sister Agnes emerging from one of the interior corridors holding a toddler, no older than a year or so, in her arms, Camilla beaming fondly at the boy before picking him up herself, ruffling his teal hair affectionately. "And how is Auntie Camilla's brave, strong boy today?" the princess babbled, bringing a rare bout of laughter from the lad's inexplicably-serious visage.
Her nephew having tuckered himself out for the most part, Camilla turned to her champion, eyes heavy with concern. "And now you know." she said, her tone somewhere between relief and worry. "My brother's most precious secret - this Selena, is my nephew, Siegbert."

"Your...nephew?!"

She knew that Krakenburg, like any castle, had its secrets and certainly more of them. Nonetheless, the boy's very existence and the secrecy under which he was raised, did confirm a good deal for Selena. "Knew it all along," she remarked, attempting to play down her own sense of vindication. "From the very beginning, I knew your brother and his retainer were fucking-"

Selena gave the nun an apologetic wince. "Sorry."

Agnes merely smiled graciously, recalling her memory of the young parents. "Prince Xander was never a particularly happy man. Despite her mannerisms to the contrary, Lady Peri was even less so than he," she remarked wistfully. "Oh, but when those two were with the boy! How that all changed! It was not exactly an easy birth, but I must say; I had never seen such joy on either of their faces the first time they held young Siegbert in their arms!"

Abruptly shaken from the nostalgia of her brother, Camilla read the slightly-quizzical expression on her redhead's face. "Father did not approve of their affair in the least."

"Wait a second, he must have had a million - well, bastards." the interloper replied indignantly. "Where did he get off forcing your nephew away from his parents?!"

The princess' expression turned downcast. "That's just it, sweetie." Camilla resumed sadly. "Myself and Sister Agnes included, there are very few who know that Peri, was in fact, legitimately his wife and my sister-in-law."

"Therefore..." began Selena quizzically, hoping to receive an answer from her lady.

"By the succession law in place, it would mean that I'm holding the rightful king of Nohr in my arms while my brother is actually a pretender - a usurper."

As the pieces of the puzzle all mentally clicked into place, Selena got absolutely no gratification from solving it whatsoever, her stomach twisting instead into particularly anxious knots. She had absolutely no reason to doubt her lady's account, therefore she knew fully well that the boy's life (as well as those anywhere near him) were in grave and immediate danger should his existence become known to Krakenburg's new master. She had no doubt that Mad King Leonard would snuff out her life on the slightest provocation and relish doing so; Selena was not one hundred percent certain that he would go so far to dispose of his own flesh and blood, but the aforementioned inhumanly-hateful stares and increasingly odd behavior made it very likely indeed, to say nothing of his minions.

He was a proud man by his own admission and (much like any good Nohrian should) viewed the savages as, at best, a resource to be exploited and then disposed of when no longer required. But before anything else, Duke Matteo of Toscana's training had been primarily as a diplomat, which required often holding one's tongue and paying one's host's insincere compliments (or in his case, outright deceptions more often than not) when one may be thinking the exact opposite. Still, it did not exactly hurt that said savage addressed him man-to-man, even if his legs were killing him from sitting on the cushions.

"Lord Kentaro, I must commend your dedication and loyalty." said the duke. "With our troubles with
your northern neighbors, most nations would look for any and all opportunities to escape our alliance."

The young man sitting across from Matteo, his visage somehow both Youthfully optimistic and hardened, gave a light bow with his neck. "It would be our honor to remain your allies." he said dutifully. "The tribal heathens scarcely know what's good for them, but I look forward to many years of cooperation with the great King Leonard of Nohr. But before I sign this treaty of cooperation, I want to confirm our conditions one last time."

From his robes, Matteo produced a letter, emblazoned with his liege's seal and began to recite his take on Mokushu's main demands. "Izumo is as good as your territory as far as we are concerned. If you so choose, the Wind Tribe savages as well, but we'd advise against that for the time being, at least until our other 'friends' have mostly dealt with them. And finally-"

In contrast to his youthful, almost-innocent expression, the young daimyo's countenance turned vicious. "The absolute annihilation of the treacherous Saizo clan." he finished for Matteo. "For the cowardly, cold-blooded murder of my father, only such a punishment can be fitting. And we can count on the aid of the Nohrian army for pest control?"

"Of course. And as we in Nohr are not exactly running a poorhouse, if your young men require some targets against which to sharpen their skills, as well as their blades, feel free to-"

"Yes, yes, whatever you need."

After giving his own signature, Matteo literally bit his cheeks to keep from conceding his absolute glee at the diplomatic coup. Stupid savages! Do they even read the entire treaties, he wondered smugly. Of course, said treaties with these vermin were more akin to suggestions as opposed to binding agreements; in other words, the second the terms became an inconvenience for Windmire, the treaties ceased to be worth the paper upon which they were printed. Surely, he had to have put one over that smug old buzzard knight this time!

When Kali awoke several days later from whatever vile substance that beorc injected him with, while slightly more of his strength had returned, he took no comfort in this fact. Restrained in an unusually-warm cell with bars of stronger steel than he'd ever seen in his centuries overlooking an open-air area, the warrior found himself cursing once more his lack of strength to transform and rip the bars in two, as well as the humans who had imprisoned him like some sort of beast.

Indeed, the one thing which gave him even the slightest comfort was the cell adjacent to his, visible by a gap in the bricks just wide enough for a man to peer through.

"This is not good, this is not good, this is not good." chanted Surya worriedly, as if a mantra to transport them back home. "Where are we now, Brother?"

"Once again, I have no idea." replied the elder twin. "But like you said, it can't be anywhere good."

"Are we going to die, Kali?"

"I don't think so, at least not yet. They wouldn't have gone to all the trouble of bringing us up to this tower if they just wanted to kill us."

"I know it's considered childish to say so but, damn it, Brother! I'm scared!"

Kali smiled benevolently at his twin, reaching to sweep the hair from his eyes like when they were children before his impediment by the brick barrier. "Don't worry, Surya." he reassured. "If it comes
down to it, I'll protect you, just like when we were boys."

"Really?!" answered Surya, some of the old spark returning to his gaze.

"Of course. Even though the blue-haired beorc and the journey here took most of my strength, I know my body. By this time tomorrow, I should be able to transform and-"

"Be quiet! Someone's coming!"

Surely enough, Surya's famously sensitive ears had detected a conversation coming from the stairwell leading up to the tower, Kali shortly picking up on it as well.

"-the harm in it? It's not like the beasts are likely to survive it anyway." came a deep, cruel voice.

"But still, my debacle for the king's coronation present was almost as bad as Pietro's, so I am not complaining about this."

"While you are not a man of science yourself, Duke Parma," came a simpering, nasal voice. "I'm glad you've come to see the benefits of my research. After all, His Majesty is said to consider wyverns quite majestic."

Unlocked by the soldier standing guard on the other side, from the room's only entrance emerged a pale, greasy-haired man, his tone of voice even more unpleasant than his appearance. To his right stood a man, tall, blond and muscular, clad in decadent robes of red, an appropriately-luxurious dagger on his hip.

"Sir Konrad, have you need of the specimens?" inquired one of the axemen on guard apprehensively. "Because we may-"

"Just the weaker one will do for now." interrupted the researcher. "Duke Alexei's tribute to the king is long overdue."

"Idiot!" growled the duke. "Are you trying to ruin my reputation entirely? You've got your gold, now bring me what you've promised!"

Kali would have bristled at this slight, but the casual, dehumanizing language and his brother's pleading gaze back at him as he was led to the room's center told him that nothing good could come of this encounter. But exactly how bad, was to be the most appalling thing he'd ever had the misfortune to witness in his life.

"What are you doing?" asked Surya feebly, struggling slightly against the soldiers and his bonds. "Please, don't touch me with that."

"Oh, you silly subhumans and your squeamishness." said Konrad, pushing a syringe of some horrible, purple liquid into the younger twin's neck. "Be proud! You're making a great sacrifice for great progress."***

*At this slur and attack on his brother, Kali would have loved nothing more than to rip the bars from their foundation and disembowel the disgusting little human and his patron, but was interrupted by something apart from the bars, that was impassable: Almost immediately after his injection, Surya fell to his knees and began to scream in absolute agony, as though every nerve in his body were pierced by white-hot needles. Even the "scientist's" expression of absolute glee could not tear his eyes from
the sight of his brother's torment, Surya momentarily glancing balefully at his brother, the older twin futilely grasping for him from between the bars. Almost unbelievably, Surya's body was enveloped by a sickly-purple aura, his screams and pleas for reprieve becoming somehow more intense as a series of sickly crunching noises echoed throughout the tower.

As the screams transitioned to feral roars of pain, the purple aura and sickly crunching both subsided and Kali, upon seeing the end result, came to the horrified realization that the great, half-story high, black wyvern now attempting to escape his captors' chains, was in fact, his brother, scarcely paying the noble any mind as he helplessly reached for his twin one last time.

"It's absolutely marvelous!" congratulated the the duke. "He's marvelous! I'll have Matteo's position once I present this to King Leonard!"

"While he's a bit...unruly, I'm sure it's nothing an old wyvern champion like you cannot handle."

As one of the soldiers was maimed affixing the great harness to Surya, the duke tossed a considerable bag of gold at Konrad's feet. "That's twice your asking price!" he informed joyfully, saddling up on the new mount.

As the noble dragon-napped his twin, forcing him off into the unfamiliar skies, Kali's sadness and despair at the loss of his brother and his home blended seamlessly into one new and very familiar sensation. It was rumored that had the Mad King's War not ended when it had, their king would have destroyed Daein for this exact same crime against their people and his kin. Now, Kali understood on every level exactly how his liege must have been feeling, the only thing saving that...butcher's windpipe from being crushed in his grip were the guards pulling Kali's free arm off him.

"So King Leonard, huh?" began the warrior, sounding slightly-crazed from the rage and despair. "Once I get out of here, I'm going rescue my brother and burn EVERY LAST FUCKING ONE of you humans."

Konrad chuckled smugly as he produced yet another syringe, injecting Kali himself with some sort of bright-red solution. "Once you get out of here, you'll be a fine servant for His Majesty." he simpered. "Or rather, a weapon. After all, if the savages become too uppity..."

Konrad simply punctuated this thought with a sinister, knowing chuckle as the Goldoan warrior fell to his knees, feverish and dizzy. Damn them, he thought as he passed out, Damn them all! "Somehow, someway. I'll see you saved, Surya."
Reeling and alarmed by the blows delivered by a "defeated" enemy, King Leonard recalls three of his horsemen to his citadel to plan their next move; a punitive raid against the Flame Tribe, intending to deploy Rose and Corrine, along with a new "ally" of theirs. In a section of the castle library off-limits to all but the royal family, Azura makes a baffling, yet ultimately-significant discovery about Nohr's mysterious past.

Chapter Notes

*Stealth Sneak (Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets [PS2/NGC/Xbox] OST)
**Stragagem in Black Armor (FE9 OST)
***At the Pub [Remix] (Final Fantasy Tactics Advance OST)
****Deepest Woods (Tales of Symphonia OST)
*****Miserable Spectacle (Tales of the Abyss OST)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It went without saying that Castle Krakenburg possessed a library to put almost any other collection in the world to shame. However, there was one genre which said library saw little in the way of; ancient folklore. When pressed about it, those in the know (and unlikely to speak about the topic to anyone else, not least of whom their king), they would generally claim their people were above such (in the words of Duke Toscana, "infantile superstitions") things. However, Azura knew for a fact that, while dispositions varied by individual, the supernatural played a not-insignificant role in the Nohrian worldview. If no one would help her, she would simply have to help herself.

After a month straight of fruitless inquiries, the mysterious princess knew she lacked any other option save for investigating the only section of the library left unexplored; the wing forbidden to all but Nohrian kings (and the rare crown prince). Unfortunately, it was not exactly in a state of disuse; she'd witnessed Leo emerging from it many times, seeming even less-pleased to see her than usual. It went without saying that if he noticed some of his favorite tomes missing, the consequences could very well be deadly for her. Nonetheless, the information contained in there could very well be the key to determining what (if anything) was wrong with the king and rectifying the problem. With this in mind, late that night, well-satisfied that both Corrine (fortunately for Azura, her lover snored) and especially the king were asleep, she set out for the library with but a lantern, a rucksack, and the knife contained at the bottom as a last resort.

The castle library had quite the different atmosphere at night. The dignified, towering mahogany shelves, rather than inspiring awe, inspired dread, knowing fully well their potential to hide predators or worse, a king's minions with authorization to protect his secrets with deadly force. She never exactly considered herself especially courageous, but Azura could admit to herself that she was more
than a little frightened without Corrine's protection. Nonetheless, she pressed on, recovering the key stowed behind a false book on one of the librarian's shelves and stalked towards the southwestern edge of the library, now very, very conscious of just how noisy her footsteps were.

Unlocking the chain restricting the door and carefully setting it down behind a shelf, Azura braced herself for what awaited her beyond. Ever so gently pushing back the ancient door, it came as little surprise to her that the forbidden wing was cavernous and dusty, having been scarcely used for centuries apart from Leo. What came as less welcome however, was the genuinely oppressive atmosphere in the area, as if much of the breath had been sucked from her lungs. On a whim, Azura removed a few tomes from their places (on the shelf's edges; far easier to remember) and, from what she witnessed, found them forbidden for good reason: Their pages were lined with directions on creating all sorts of horrible potions and spells, some of which even began to make her sick from their mere description. But while shuttered away in this wing of the library, these tomes were a couple of centuries old at the very most. No, the information which she sought would only be contained in the most ancient of texts.

Two hours of increasingly unpleasant searches saw Azura visibly disturbed, yet no closer to the truth behind Corrine's beloved king and his change in behavior. But this would all change with her examination of the very rear of the wing, discovering a number of tomes, centuries-old and literally falling apart more often than not, one in particular titled Heroic Chronicles. Taking great care not to sneeze from the dust kicked up, Azura could tell, both from the antiquated expressions and age of the paper, that this was an extremely old text, at least eight hundred years old, yet miraculously, still legible for the modern kingdom's (literate) inhabitants.

Skimming over the first few pages, the songstress was able to gain little from the retelling of ancient, long-forgotten Nohrian myths and legends, save for one and, coincidentally, it was concerning a topic Azura was extremely interested in, quietly reciting from the yellow, worn pages. "The First Dragon, Selenos, has always been most pleased with the valorous, those who strive endlessly against heathenry and their disgusting iniquities. And no man has been more beloved of the Lunar Dragon than the great-"

Tantalizingly and frustratingly enough, the page was torn, whether by age or by conscious design, cutting off the information about the figure patronized by the dragon and this page was not an isolated incident: In the descriptions of the horrendously-violent military campaigns and plundering raids and atrocities (including the massacre of an entire noble house of his followers for the defiance of one member!) ordered on the following pages, any instances of a name where there had clearly been before were deliberately expunged from the text. Curiously enough, the locations described by their features seemed to correspond with the deserts on the continent's southwest. Wasn't Hans supposed to be from that region? It would certainly explain a lot, she thought half-facetiously.*

Closing the tome and placing it in her bag, Azura then turned to the deceptively-titled Hymns of Praise, an equally-old tome which the exiled princess expected to be rather mundane until she actually opened it. The majority of the hymns were meaningless to her, clearly written and for an entirely different time, place, and culture. The fact that an enigmatic "king" and his bloody escapades were the subject of a good half of the hymns was interesting, to put it lightly, but a couple of the hymns proved oddly prescient to Azura's subconscious as she repeated:

"Woe be to the heathens!" began Azura fearfully. "For their fates are thus:

In the north, our king's shade brings them righteous terror!

In the south, Lord Selenos' loyal servant feasts on their wretched bones!
In the east, they shall be humbled, their hateful winds dying on our blades, made our slaves in their golden land!"

Granted, she had no clue whatsoever the first line meant, but Azura could not help but on some level, to speculate on a connection to the present-day. But it was only the hymn contained on the very last page (and upon closer inspection, the first as well) that sent a chill's down the princess' spine.

"O King of Thieves," she repeated once more. "O Demon King, O King of Darkness. O King, you rule all!"

This one reads like a prayer, almost liturgical, thought the princess, stowing the ancient tome in her bag. That name, Selenos, was mentioned again. Could the "king of thieves" be referring to the figure beloved by the dragon? It was not out of the question by any means at all and the fact that it was explicitly designated as a First Dragon-

Azura would have investigated the shelves further if not for the very audible footsteps from the other room. Feeling her heart leap into her stomach, the songstress collected her effects and made a hurried pace for the door, quietly as she could possibly manage, hoping, praying that the late-night visitor was not one of the king's servants or even worse, the lord of the castle himself.

Clearing the threshold with the source of the footsteps still in the distance, Azura cursed to herself as she recalled the chain barricading the door, going down on her hands and knees in an attempt to locate exactly where she'd placed it. The oddly-heavy footsteps only becoming clearer, the princess, finally locating the iron implement, wiped her hands, increasingly moist with perspiration, on the side of her nightgown, struggling even further not to make any more noise with the chains.

Gently, gradually, and with as little noise as humanly possibly, Azura gradually began returning the door to its (apparently) unmolested state, remaining oddly-cool until she fumbled with and dropped the key to the lock, anxiously patting the floor around her in search of it as the footsteps became very, very apparent, finally replacing the lock to its original position before, a literal second later, discovering the source of the footsteps emerging from behind a nearby shelf.

"Ngh, Lady Azura, is that you?" Charlotte groaned sleepily.

"Oh, Charlotte!" she exclaimed, still not as relieved as she would have liked to be. "You surprised me! What brings you down here at this hour?"

"Milord sent me to collect a few books of his he left down here. He'd have done it himself, but you know how he gets when he's doing his meditations in his study or garden; he gets really pissy until he gets to do so again."

"Did...he say what the books were about by any chance?"

Charlotte gave a yawn far too bellowing for such a (n apparently) dainty woman. "I dunno. Some kind of spellbooks or something about potions. Speaking of which, why are you here at this ungodly hour anyway?"

While technically not face-to-face with an enforcer of the king’s, Azura’s relief was not nearly what she'd expected it to be; she had not, after all, prepared an excuse for any of his mistresses or concubines. Nonetheless, Charlotte's skimpy, low-cut nightgown (she was almost certain Leo had "suggested" for her), their close proximity, and her not-negligible knowledge of Nohrian cultural
quirks, left the azure princess an audacious, but (if successful) possibly effective escape if her acting skills were up to the task.

Smirking coyly, Azura lightly touched the base of the blonde's left breast, circling just as lightly. "You know, Charlotte," she began airily. "you're an extremely attractive woman. Corrine thinks so too, you know."

"What the-" replied Charlotte, not as hostile as either had expected. "Are you coming onto me?"

"And if I am?"

Recoiling slightly, the blonde was exceptionally grateful the lantern's light hid her slight blush. "But what about Lady Corrine-"

"Oh, what about her?" asked Azura noncommittally, the words tasting like pure poison as they left her lips. "The king is really fond of the two of you, you know. Not so much myself. Maybe I could make myself scarce for a night and let you three- get to know each other a little better? I'm sure he wouldn't mind at all if you and Corrine did so as long as you let him in on the fun at some point. Just for your information, Corrine really loves it when you bite her-"

"Excuse me a second, milady."

Turning away from the princess, Charlotte took several hurried steps to the other end of the shelf, her breathing somewhat heavier than she had expected, due not least to how...intriguing she was finding the proposal from the songstress. Yeah, both she and Corrine were attractive, everybody knew that! It was also an open secret that she and Corrine were lovers. If that was your thing, it's your thing, she thought. But the idea of actually sleeping with her, even if only for the king's gratification? What if she ended up enjoying it? What if her family and (especially) parents found out somehow? What if it got out with those hicks in her hometown?! Gods knew her father had enough problems without this possibility hanging over his head.

"Er, Lady Azura-" resumed Charlotte, scarcely aware she was talking to the night air for a good five seconds.

Having eluded Charlotte and made her way back to the library entrance, Azura allowed herself an audible sigh of relief. Had she discerned what, if anything exactly, ailed Leo and how best to deal with it? Not exactly. Had she made possibly a very important discovery about the origins and original purpose of the king's lost tome and a very particularly-Nohrian obsession? Of course. Whatever the case may have been, Azura knew one thing and knew it well; whenever she could manage to wrestle Corrine away from her commitments and King Leonard's countless prying eyes and ears, it was well-past time to introduce her beloved to the missing element in this equation; to search for any possible clues remaining in Hoshido or there alike. It should still be possible, after all. Just somewhat more difficult.

**"And there it was," Matteo "explained" to his enraptured audience of nobles and common servants alike. "the wickedest thing I'd ever witnessed in my life, what the Flame Tribe and Hoshidan savages especially hold as their 'hолiest' of rites."

The crowd chattered among itself with some odd mixture of terror and fury among them as they awaited the duke's enlightened thoughts on their enemy.
"Their priest would take the living child, a babe really, and place it in the downward-sloping hands of one of their idols, a woman from what I saw, over a burning brazier." Duke Toscana continued, his libel well-rehearsed. "From there, its limbs would contract and face crack into a sick grin as it burned alive and fell into the fire, thus pleasing their gods."

"OH, GODS, WHY?!" shrieked a maid, on the brink of tears. "WHY?!"

Matteo shut his eyes, ostensibly in contemplation. "Their parents do it to beg favor from their gods, naturally. For a good harvest, for the health of their royals, to punish Nohr and the like."

A particularly outraged nobleman's fury made him seem a head larger than his actual size. "That's the most disgusting thing I've ever heard!" he raged. "They really are nothing but beasts wearing human skins!"

The knight captain beside him gestured in agreement. "Why do we even let these animals exist on our continent anyway?! Whatever we could even fathom doing to them, the savages deserve even worse!"

His expression somewhere between fatigue and mournfully contemplative, Duke Matteo gave no indication of the smug self-satisfaction and relief he received from the outrage of his peers. Unlike most of his contemporaries, the manipulative duke, instead of simply accepting them as immutable facts of life, actually gave conscious thought to the fixations and prejudices running rampant in Nohrian society. Of course, his only real concerns surrounding these were neither moral nor intellectual, but practical; after all, how better to leverage power, influence, and material gain, as well as taking focus off of the boondoggles he'd found himself involved in as of late? If the army commanders and their men took their outrage at "savage" practices out on their new charges to the east? Well, that was the savages' problem, not his own.

Elsewhere in the castle, a pair of the king's horsemen prowled the cavernous halls, the true outlier being recalled from his duties and evacuated posthaste as to confer with the king as to their new strategy. "So what exactly are these 'ranches' for anyway?" inquired Hans disinterestedly. "Doesn't it just make more sense to have the savages as slaves outright?"

The old knight bristled at the use of the term for a number of reasons, not least of which was the fact that his grudging protege had no right whatsoever to be casting aspersions in that direction. "I can't say for sure." Gunter lied, his expression stony as ever.

"Whatever, it's not my problem. I'm just glad that preening blue-blood twit Albrecht got what was coming to him."

"That may be the most sense I've ever heard you speak, come to think of it."

Inching ever closer to the audience chamber, Gunter, his senses already fairly sharp (even without his very peculiar aid) for a man of his age, took notice of Konrad muttering to himself with glee, the jet-black living suit of armor known as Rose remaining utterly still and silent, leaving even Hans mildly disturbed. "So, he's fucking her, right?" he inquired. "Because that would actually make sense."

The "scientist" gave an exaggerated, extremely-audible scoff at this remark. "Please! My masterpiece is far too precious for such vulgar purposes!" he simpered offendedly. "Not that I would expect the likes of you to understand."

As they continued along towards their parting ways, the bandit, well-satisfied that they were out of
his earshot, continued. "You know, it would actually be a lot less creepy if that were the case."

Reflexively, the left corner of Gunter's face twitched in discomfort. "Actually, I take it back." he conceded. "What you just said- THAT is the most sense I've ever heard you make."

The palpable haze of sheer discomfort Konrad bought to even the likes of the brigand lifted mostly, Hans smirked malevolently. "Oh, and speaking of broads, you're going to love who I talked up to the king." he remarked giddily. "A buddy of mine's little girl. Of course, he probably just wants to fuck her too, but if she's anything like her old man-"

Punctuating this thought with a chuckle equally sinister, the old knight simply rolled his eyes. "Oh, joy." he remarked dryly.**

Not too far away in the king's study, Corrine, while not yet having heard back from Kaze, was nonetheless in a somewhat volatile emotional state. "She just doesn't understand like you do!" whined Corrine, her head nestled in the king's lap. "Matteo is just horrible, Pietro even more so, and the men will barely-"

The princess stopped herself from impugning Nohrian honor even further as she choked back sobs, the monarch stroking her hair affectionately. Having spent a great deal of time fantasizing about his adopted sister in an extremely similar position to this (among others) one, Leo shifted his left leg quite conspicuously as to minimize any physical clues to his actual thoughts. "There, there," he reassured, the gentleness in his tone somehow more unsettling than its common cruelty. "I realize this can't have been easy for you at all, but worry not. A couple of your sisters-in-arms will help you with that burden."

Lifting her snowy head from his lap, Corrine raised a confused eyebrow. "Wait, you said 'sisters,' right?"

The king chuckled arrogantly. "I understand your confusion, Corrine, but I have an audience with them in ten minutes' time. If you'd care to join me, all shall be made clear."

Of course accepting the offer, not even due to her obligations solely, Corrine made her way down to the corridors approaching the audience chamber ahead of her king. True, she'd never exactly been a fan of the catacomb-like architecture of much of the castle, but it was at least momentarily improved by one of her encounters, scarcely avoiding a collision with a pale, dark-haired woman her own age (if not somewhat older) wearing tattered, revealing clothing and a semi-permanent scowl, which she would have been attractive if not for in truth. "What do you want?" she snarled. "If you're another one of those blue-bloods coming to give me grief-"

"Oh, no I'm not." Corrine insisted. "It's just I've been called-"

The woman wrinkled her brow at the princess. "Oh, yeah." she remarked. "I know you now. You're that princess, the king's bitch, right?"

Whether in embarrassment at her assertions or surprise at her foul language, Corrine blushed. "That's- I'm not-"

Fortunately, she was rescued from the situation by a stony, familiar face. "Oh, Gunter!" she exclaimed. "It's been far too long!"
"Indeed it has, Lady Corrine." confirmed the old knight. "But this is not the time for pleasantries; His Majesty is surely waiting on us."

Hurried into the audience chamber, the unpleasant brunette apparently got a smirk out of Corrine down on one knee for the king. Either unwitting or apathetic to the dynamic, the monarch motioned both the women to their feet, retiring to his throne shortly. "Well, I'm not going to lie to you," he prefaced. "Our military situation is...not the best right now, but I believe your skills, Corrine, will be necessary in the coming months."

"Thank you, sire." answered the princess, still chafing at the formality required with a man she'd grown up with. "But what exactly is the problem?"

The expression with which the young king responded was one of delirious anticipation and hunger, and none too settling. "The Flame Tribe savages are on the warpath. They've been raiding our supply convoys and lines for months now."

Corrine's expression turned to one of shock and confusion. "What, why?" she inquired. "Did something happen? I thought they were at peace or at least neutral-"

Leonard gestured dismissively. "The 'why' is of no import. What is important, is that I've seen fit to approve a punitive expedition to one of their major settlements in the eastern mountains."

The raven-haired woman nodded in agreement. "Perfect! Who exactly do I have to kill?"

The king's silent, smirking response even made Corrine slightly uncomfortable. "In good time, Ira. In good time. You two will, of course, be in positions of command, but first, allow me to introduce your new superior officer."

At the sound of the monarch's listless clapping, two servants dragged open the great doors secluding the audience chamber. As if on cue, clad head-to-toe in her armor of darker than the blackest night, the enigmatic Rose marched forth with her unnatural gait, giving no hint of acknowledgement as she halted about ten paces from Leonard's throne. "Ira, Corrine, this is Rose, easily the strongest of my Four Horsemen." he introduced. "She'll be your commanding officer. That alone should tell you how important I consider this task."

She was a woman who went out of her way to try to see the best in people, true. However, perhaps it was her inhuman movements or lack of audible (as far as she could tell) respiration, that made the snowy-haired princess' skin crawl at the sight or even mere presence of Rose. Still, whatever body shape and posture she could have discerned from the her stance, made Corrine find Rose somehow...familiar on some level or another."

"H-Hello there," Corrine began, suppressing a grimace as she extended her hand. "I'm Corrine. How do you do, Lady Rose?"

The princess' awkward attempt at an introduction provoked a complete and utter lack of reaction, or even acknowledgement of her presence. "Okay...not the most talkative person around..."

"Save your breath, milady," said a high-ranking soldier, lazing against one of the pillars. "Lady Rose never speaks unless its absolutely necessary. I'm Armin, by the way; her adjutant."

A moderately-tall, gangly man with messy dark hair, Armin's expression appeared to be one of permanent boredom more than anything. "Gods, this'll be awful." he remarked offhandedly. "Weeks, if not months away from home, cold, and irrationally-murderous heathens."
"Hoo, boy." thought Corrine, shaking his hand. "This is going to be one long assignment."

As his new colleague turned to stomp from the chamber, Gunter thought, rather uncharacteristically, it appropriate to regale his liege with his rather-odd sense of humor: Pantomiming drawing a polearm, he shortly thereafter pantomimed stabbing himself in the stomach with his lance, letting himself lean over to the side as far as his armor would allow him without actually falling, waiting until Ira was well out of earshot. "Well, milord?" he inquired, somewhat less-severely than usual.

"Yes, her attitude could easily wear thin after a short while." confirmed Leo, well-aware of the joke. 
"But would it not be interesting to see the likes of her and Pietro clash?"

"I suppose. But we already have a mad dog in our ranks. Do we really need a rabid bitch as well?"

"That is a fair point, but nonetheless, they both have their uses."

The group's spiriting of Shiro and Victoria out of the Chevois capital actually proceeded so smoothly, that it had concerned Karol, Tristan, and Hana alike that the ease of which was in fact, a Nohrian ruse to draw them out and exterminate them. The preparations had taken somewhat longer, four days in fact, than the tavern mistress had predicted, what with all her prior commitments. Nonetheless, one particularly-helpful member of the merchant's guild perhaps said it best the night before their departure. "You, your daughter, Sir Tristan, you've all done so much for us and our country." he reassured, putting the finishing touches on one of his finest models of wagon. "Most of us don't give one whit who your grandson's father is. He's your blood through and through, so that makes him one of us, period. Rest assured, show me a man taken in by Nohr's lies, and I'll show you a man with very few friends."

Perhaps it robbed them of the element of surprise somewhat, but a week after Hana and Rinkah's successful decapitation of the bandit horde and its chief, their caravan departed under the cover of darkness, Karol, his preeminent squire and their men riding reconnaissance, the swordswoman dividing her attention between her liege, the boy, Victoria, and the effective-yet-questionable rogue. While obviously not able to travel as quickly as Joan would have liked given some of her passengers, with the two warriors intimidating the soldiers manning the isolated, undermanned checkpoints into silent submission, they had made better time than she'd expected, five days seeing them within striking distance of the Flame Tribe homeland.

The discovery of a town, and one with a negligible Nohrian presence where it existed at all, at that, was a relief to all involved, not least of whom Victoria (ever tried keeping a toddler in a half-decent mood anywhere, let alone a less-than-comfortable wagon?) and her grandson.

"So far, so good." Tristan reported, wiping some sweat from his forehead where his helm would have normally covered. "Sir Karol and some of his men are performing a delaying action, so we should be more or less in the clear."

"Finally!" Hana exclaimed. "I can't wait to return these heavy clothes to the Sir Amagi!"

Normally a rather serious woman herself, Rinkah cracked a smile. "Speaking of which, this was the town I designated for Daisen and Hakone as our meeting place."

Joan scoffed at this relief, rolling her eyes as she fiddled with an assortment of tools. "No, don't mind me. Just go, eat, drink, be merry."

The knight grinned a wry grin. "Good idea, Joan. Besides, at the tavern, we can get a good night's
rest and prepare for the morning."

Retrieving Victoria, Shiro and Candace and the princess from their discussion, Hana took Tristan's lead as far as behavior when one arrives in a Chevois town not ones own, the swordswoman silently taking mental notes as the hardy knight negotiated a decent price with the inn-slash-tavern's keeper, handing him a small sack of questionably-acquired gold. "Order whatever you'd like." he insisted with a cheeky grin. "Good old King Leonard's paying for it, anyway."

***Sakura inquiring about a warm, sweet Chevois beverage as she continued to discuss the finer points of her contract with Candace, in the seat opposite her, Hana was simply relieved just to be off her feet for a while, what with Joan being a stern (but effective) taskmistress. While this particular establishment was somewhat noisier and larger than Polaire, it still possessed much of the same homely charm, what with the rustic decor and the smell of the countryside's delicacies wafting from the kitchen. While keeping a wary ear on the portly rogue and steering the conversation away from possibly-too-sensitive topics from the princess' discussions with Victoria, for the first time in what seemed like ages, the intense swordswoman felt as if she could actually relax, if even momentarily.

"By the way," said Victoria at last, removing a bundle of cloth from a pocket inside her shirt, handing it to Hana. "your compensation for getting rid of the bandits. I'd intended to give it to my daughter once he'd make an honest woman out of her but-"

Momentarily questioning whether or not she'd made clear whether her mercenary guise was just that, Hana unwrapped the bundle, silently gasping at its contents; an emerald, roughly the size of her clenched fist and radiating magical power, exactly like the ruby Kirigamine had presented her. "No, I couldn't possibly accept this." Hana replied halfheartedly, still feeling somewhat guilty over their last conversation.

Victoria smirked darkly. "No, I insist. It's your payment for offing those lowlifes. Consider it an advance on your payment for the life of another lowlife in King Leonard's service we discussed."

Fate allowed Hana about another hour of this respite before her heart leapt in surprise at Rinkah tapping her on the shoulder. "You know," she began eyeing the direction of the exit. "we've got some business to discuss ourselves, don't we?"

Being constantly reminded what exactly this business was by Candace's mere presence, Hana agreed. "Of course. We'll just be a second, milady."

Leading Hana to a fountain not far from the tavern, two figures, quite transparently members of the Flame Tribe, gestured to them in acknowledgement. The woman, possessing fiery red hair similar to Kikai, a sharp club placed conspicuously on her belt. "Well, well," she began with a sly, but genuine smile. "if it isn't the terror of Nohr I've heard so much about! It's a pleasure. I'm Hakone, by the way."

"I wish I could say the same," answered a grimacing Hana. "but that's not so since both Rinkah and I need something of you."

The woman gave an exaggerated stretch of her limbs with a yawn to match. "Don't worry. My little cousin told us all about it. You need us to tail some rogue?"

Hana nodded affirmatively. "Since you'll be travelling with her, I don't think it should be a problem."
she said gravely. "We just need some insurance in case she ends up trying to sell us out to Nohr."

Daisen, a bronzed mountain of a man with wild white hair resembling a snowy peak, flashed a
toothy smile. "Just leave it to us!" his voice boomed confidently. "Yeah, I admit my sis is the brains,
but when I'm tracking, nothing gets by me!"

The swordsman managed a slight smile of relief. "Alright, great!" she replied. "You two must
have come a long way. Come back to the tavern, I'll pay for whatever you're eating."

"Now that's what I like to hear!" exclaimed the friendly giant.

"Hey now," warned Rinkah. "within reason. Let's not abuse the lady's hospitality."

By the time the party returned to the tavern and the brother and sister had settled into their
complementary nourishment, the air in the tavern had, somehow, inexplicably and subtly changed, as
though charged with a sort of seething electricity. Perhaps as they were seated within earshot of the
bar itself, the princess and her party were sensing the worst of it. "Er, are those gentlemen having a
problem?" inquired Sakura gently.

Gulping down the last of his ale, Tristan gave a noncommittal sort of half-shrug. "It's none of our
business." he remarked dismissively.

***But that judgement was subject to revision very shortly, courtesy of a certain patron. "Alright,
you've had enough, you drunken souse." growled the barman, cleaning one of the mugs a bit too
aggressively. "Go home before I throw you out myself."

Helping himself to his (also-displeased) neighbor's drink, said souse wobbled on his bar stool slightly
as he continued. "All I'm sayin' is maybe it's not so bad?" he slurred. "Besides, don't they keep talkin'
about how we're their 'little brother' and whatnot? At least we're not savages, so that's gotta -hic-
count fer somethin?"

"Come on, you can't seriously believe that crap!" raged another patron, slamming his mug against his
table. "After everything Nohr's done to us over the years?!!"

"Maybe we should -hic- be tryin' to get in better with Nohr, you know? I mean, sooner they catch
those crooks who went n' murdered all those troops, the better, right?"

With the other patrons becoming eerily silent at the drunk's apologism for their oppressor- their
slavemasters-in-all-but-name, really, the atmosphere became downright hostile at his obsequious,
fawning praise for them, even the most gentle among them wishing it possible to hate the man to
death.

"Oh, gods." remarked Victoria tiredly. "I do NOT need this."

"Let the drunk ramble." insisted Tristan through gritted teeth.

The souse continued ramble, apparently unwitting (or simply not caring) just how deep a hole he was
digging. "Like the bandits with their 'uprising' rot, I mean, we got it pretty good. Still, it couldn' hurt
to encourage our womenfolk to be a bit more like them -hic- Nohrian lasses, y'know? Not like that
one uppity cunt from the capital who got the idea in her sick, savage-lovin' head. Far as I'm
concerned, Sir Hans an' his boys gave the -hic- bitch waaaaaaaaaaaaayyyyyy better than she deserved.
Nothin' worse than a savage-lovin' bitch, right boys?"

By this point a considerable crowd had forsaken whatever had concerned their attention previously, instead turning their ire on the mouthy drunk, muttering hatefully among themselves or training their downright murderous gazes as something of a final warning. While the barman and his immediate neighbors had either abandoned him to his fate or joined the mob-in-waiting, perhaps unsurprisingly, the knight and his aunt had taken positions at its head.

Finishing off another mug, the drunk, almost unbelievably, continued still. "Cause fucking savages is well- -hic- a lot like fuckin' animals, y'know? Word has it the cunt bought this big, ugly savage buck wit' her from gods-know-where. Care about Cheve, hah! If'n she really cared about her country, the savage-loving, rice-burning whore wouldn't have bought her buck 'round these parts anyway! Gods only know how many innocent civilized maidens who had 'emselves forced on by the ugly mother-

Almost as surprising to the gathered crowd that the drunken souse had not yet been harmed was the identity of the the one who'd raised the first hand to him. Indeed, it was surprising to the perpetrator herself. In an instant, a fist sent the drunk tumbling from his stool and to the floor with a bloody nose. Unable to remember extending an arm, at the sight of the extremity extended into a fist, its owner was momentarily horrified. "Oh goodness!" Sakura exclaimed at the sight of the man on the floor, struggling to reorient himself. "I'm s-"

Thinking about her actions for a fraction of a second, Sakura resumed. "Y-you know. Actually, I'm not sorry."

Her protector turned to Tristan and Rinkah, both silently assenting with Hana that their party'd had enough excitement for the night. Nonetheless, as the swordswoman escorted Sakura back to her room, both Victoria and her nephew alike managed a proud grin as the rest of the crowd broke into cheers of celebration.

****Even after all these decades, appreciating the heavens, be it a sunrise, a sunset, or the stars above, was the one thing that never failed to calm the worried, troubled heart of the old woodcutter Edouard, no matter what the world saw fit to send his way. Whether being priced out of their modest, yet comfortable home in the capital by greedy speculating nobles, being forced to take up the occupation of an itinerant woodcutter as with his family in tow, or having thrown his back out a couple of years back, decidedly ending his days plying his trade, it scarcely mattered. Of course, this was not to say he was exactly dissatisfied with his life as the years in this central Nohrian village had been good to him, he and his wife having welcomed three more children into their lives and become pillars of the community in spite of his...eccentricity.

Giving a satisfied sigh as the sun slowly crept beneath the horizon, Edouard placed a protective, affectionate arm around the shoulder of his younger son, Jean. "I'm going to the tavern with the guys." he informed. "Tell your mother I should be back around the usual time. Michel should be back any minute; he'll help you finish up."

The burly, blond young man gave an energetic smile to the father he now towered over. "Er, you feeling alright, 'pa?" he asked, somehow ill at ease with the physical affection.

"I was just thinking- promise me you'll never go into the army, son."

"Why would I ever do that? I've got to help you and Michel and look after 'ma and the girls. I'm sure King Leonard will understand."

"Good man."
With the passing of his father, Edouard had, as a young man, inherited a not-insignificant sum of gold. Not enough to be considered rich by any means, but comfortable certainly. On a whim which would end up changing his life and general worldview forever, he, against the warnings of friends and family alike, decided to use that money to strike out and spend five years traveling to all but the most remote and isolated corners of the continent, working odd jobs and taking care to interact with the people he encountered, even with the shrill warnings of what horrific fates would await him still ringing in his ears. What he found and experienced over those years...complicated severely the worldview in which he (and all his peers for that matter) had been submerged his whole life, to say the least.

Meeting up with his three closest friends, Marcel, the hunter, Rickard, the blacksmith, and Amsel, the fisherman, Edouard made their way to what was indisputably the center of the social world of common Nohrians (and all of the continent's western nations for that matter), the local tavern.

***The four men taking their usual seat at four or five paces from the bar and ordering their usual fare of tavern nourishment, with the first round of ale, the usual topics of banter were inevitably breached.

"So, my boy Lucien just got his leave from the army." informed Rickard proudly, his brown-grey beard dripping with the liquor.

"Hurrah!" congratulated Amsel, raising his glass in a toast. "Let's hope he's done us all proud by offing his share of bucks!"

Edouard rolled his eyes. "I'm glad your boy is alright," he said flatly. "I really am, but do we really have to talk about this right now?"

Marcel's sunken, sallow eyes narrowed into mocking slits. "Oh, that's right, I forgot," he began. "Ed just hates it when you kill his little pets."

The table erupted with uproarious laughter and glass clinking, which Edouard ignored outside of truly grievous instances; they were his friends, true, but they were still in fact, men of their time, place, and culture. Then again, he had been subjected to a lot worse for his "eccentricity," so perhaps he was simply used to minimizing it.

"All I'm saying," insisted Edouard conciliatorially. "is that for all their foreignness, they're not really that different from us."

"Alright, Ed." said Marcel, utterly serious. "How much of this stuff have you had? You didn't come earlier and have a few?"

Turning to the bearded giant, Edouard continued his reasoning. "If Lucien had been killed in battle, you'd be devastated and angry, right?"

"Of course!" exclaimed Rickard, a glint of rage in his eyes.

"Well, don't you think they feel the same way when their sons get killed?"

This time, the blacksmith rolled his eyes. "That's way different!" he insisted forcefully. "You know how savages are, they breed like rats! Losing a son is like losing a toenail to them!"

"Not that the bucks can or will control themselves." Amsel chimed in smugly. "That's why there are always so many of them. You know they'll fuck literally anything, right?"
Edouard sipped his ale patiently as his friends shared another hearty laugh. "By the way, Amsel," he resumed. "were your parents that thrilled about your marriage to Marie?"

The fisherman scoffed. "Of course they weren't!" he responded as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Especially since her father was some bigshot merchant; to him, people like us are the scum of the earth!"

"But you two didn't let that stop you, now did you? Now, if you were to wake up tomorrow morning and learn that she was not actually Nohrian at all, but a 'savage,' would that really change anything? Would that change the decades you spent together or the fact that you have four children you love with all your hearts? Would you disown her? Disown them?"

Slamming his mug to the table, Amsel's glare at the old woodcutter was almost murderous. A rather anxious man by nature, Marcel's eyes raced around the table for an out, knowing his friend was not only walking, but dancing on thin ice. "Say, Ed, have you tried the sausage?" he remarked disarmingly. "A lot of people say it's spicier than last year."

Taking a bite of the meat to humor his friend, Edouard took another sip of ale to help the flesh down his gullet. "I don't get this, I really don't." he said calmly, preparing his rhetorical question. "What do we really gain, what purpose does it really serve, constantly demeaning and dehumanizing these people?"

"Well, we know some of us don't really care," began Rickard, his hostility now barely even concealed. "But for us normal people, loyal subjects of His Majesty, being a savage-lover is the worst insult possible. Doubly so for the womenfolk."

The retired woodcutter shrugged his shoulders. "Just because I don't go around roaring about how I hate other people's kids, does that mean I love my children any less?" he opined. "Besides, you know how people are; they trade, they move around, they fuck, and are damn good at all three. Hell, by this point, most of us Nohrians, if not all, are probably at least part-'savage' as you put it-

***As if the breath was stolen from their very lungs, the entire tavern went deathly silent, all eyes present and not at the table turned on the eccentric woodsman; as if he'd uttered the vilest blasphemy imaginable, the kind of blasphemy for which cutting out ones tongue before his slow, torturous death is seen as merciful. Indeed, a large plurality of the patrons wore expressions making Amsel's seem downright jolly by comparison. After several, exceptionally-tense seconds where one could almost taste the collective bloodlust of the taverngoers, the barkeep finally stepped forth to the table and, while not shooting them a glare of deathly hatred, was none too pleased.

"I'm going to have to ask you to leave." the bartender said dangerously. "All of you gentlemen."

"Why?" inquired Edouard, his only defiance in his nonchalance. "We've done nothing wrong, we were just having a convers-"

"I'm not going to ask you again." he repeated, just as menacingly. "I don't know what kind of den of iniquity you think you're in, but this establishment does not serve the likes of you savage-lovers."

Rising from his seat to meet the barman's challenge, Edouard, taller than the noticeably-younger man by about a head, looked around, taking stock of the hostile, borderline-murderous gazes trained on him. Still keen on the idea of spoiling his future grandchildren, Edouard placed the coins the group
owed for the meal before storming out, his graying, weathered head held high.

Unbeknownst to his friends, as they walked back towards their respective domiciles, Marcel hung back slightly to make sure they had not been followed. Two of them however, took an especially brisk pace to avoid dealing with the old woodcutter.

"That was a fucking disgrace!" raged Amsel. "Never have I been so humiliated in my life! His fathers must be rolling in their graves! Mine too for that matter! For even associating with him!"

While of course, irritated and humiliated by the ordeal, the blacksmith seemed to have cooled off slightly. "Don't misunderstand me, Ed's a great guy." Rickard prefaced shortly. "Just ask and he'd give you the shirt of his back, he would. But, I swear, this savage-loving with him-"

Letting the pair go their own way, Edouard, in his attempt to recenter himself, endeavored simply to pay attention to the hypnotic chirping of the crickets. But the timid hunter had other plans. "Back at the tavern," he began. "what was that all about? Yeah, everyone knows that you're 'different,' but come on-"

"Because it is bullshit and Amsel knows it on some level. You all do." Edouard replied curtly. "If you woke up tomorrow morning and learned that you were one of those 'savages' you despise so much, would it really change anything about you? Would the sun really stop rising in the east?"

By this point, even the mild hunter raised an irritated eyebrow at his old friend. "If, 'if,' 'if,' that's all you're ever concerned with, isn't it?" he asked crossly. "Did you ever once stop to think about how many doors your 'advocacy' has closed for your family? Or once stopped to think about the kind of effect it would have on your kids?"

Edouard began to bear down on the noticeably-smaller man, his angered expression only scarcely communicating the depths of his outrage. "That's exactly why I do it!" he almost shouted. "You know what my father was like, and my mother too for that matter. All those years ago, I promised myself that I'd never, ever let my children grow up with that kind of poison in their souls! No matter who I had to piss off to do it."

"Well, Ed, for all your Pollyanna nonsense, the rest of us have to live in a little thing called society-the real world! Things have always been like this with the savages and probably always will. So what's the point in trying to prevent the inevitable?"

"But listen to yourself-"

"Give up, Ed! I don't care if one of your daughters was fucking the king himself! What difference are YOU really going to make? Maybe you should just let sleeping dogs lie like the rest of us do."

Using the better part of his mental discipline and self-control to prevent him from saying something he'd regret, Edouard bade his friend farewell, taking off down the path to the family home sitting at the forest's edge. The moon's light was more than enough to keep him from becoming disoriented, even with the scarce torches lining the path. But as the dwelling came into view, Edouard heard something that made his blood run cold at the hulking figure (figuratively and literally) darkening the family's doorstep

"Well general," began the voice of Michel, sounding unusually timid. "I mean, my father's going to be returning momentarily and- Oh, speak of the devil-"
Already a profoundly disturbing man, Hans smiled a smile unusually disturbing in its insincerity. "Oh, if it isn't the man of the house!" he remarked. "The king sends his regards and this token of his appreciation."

His eyeballs seemed to be getting quite a workout tonight, rolling them once more. "Good evening, general." Edouard forced. "I send King Leonard and Charlotte my regards as well. But I already told, you; I'm not interested in your blood gold. Besides, I'm sure you have business to attend to which I'm keeping you from, so-"

"As a matter of fact, I do. His Majesty has sent me to deal with some dangerous savages in the east, so until next time!"

Already having had a rotten outing, the old woodcutter scarcely needed another unwelcome visit from the the king's errand boy. He had no proof of his suspicions (apart from the dried blood caked on the sack of gold), but every instinct he had told Edouard this man was one of the wickedest souls he'd ever encountered in his life. Of course, they lived in the sort of culture where, even with incontrovertible evidence, impugning a genuine "Nohrian hero" was probably the second-worst offense possible. He should know, given he had spent the better portion of his life committing the worst possible sin.

"Did you answer the door?" asked Edouard accusatorially, a wary eye turned on his youngest daughter. "Even when they told you whose men they were?"

Youngest daughter Josephine, a lass of fourteen, turned her eyes to the ground in shame. "I apologize, Father." she said meekly. "But they said it was an urgent matter-"

His gaze stony-yet-caring, the family patriarch reiterated. "Jo, I repeat; never, I mean, never answer the door for that man or any of his cronies without me or at least one of your brothers present."

*****

It was safe to say that very few, if any of the average Nohrians assigned to pacify the eastern territories exactly enjoyed the job; an extremely-dangerous, underappreciated job, the only bonus pay being what one could/would take from the savages, all the boyhood games of Knights and Savages being little preparation for the sheer brutality of the affair. Nonetheless, it was always somehow cathartic to blow of some steam every now and again, such as on a certain, thunder-heavy night inside a central Hoshidan town swelled with refugees from elsewhere in the country. As bandits having recently killed a Nohrian officer and hanging his body (the "Death to Nohr, Long Live Princess Sakura!" signage affixed to his neck made the motive relatively unambiguous) from a tree branch outside of town, their superiors thought a show of force in the area wise, ordering one of the king's Four Horsemen to the area. But as the oil fires blazed and the screams shattered the night, one of the commanders seemed oddly concerned with casualties.

"Damn any man who sympathizes with savages!" bellowed Hans viciously. "I've come to kill savages, godsdammit, and it's good and honorable to do so! Kill 'em all! Nits make lice!"

Having slaughtered more living beings here than he'd ever even killed in his few battles, Mathias' axe fell from his grasp as he fell to his hands and knees, hoping desperately, praying for the shrieks and screams to end, the horrible images burned into his eyelids to pass. No matter the exhortations of his fellows, he just couldn't do it; he just couldn't bring himself to mutilate one of his victims in such a manner, or at all for that matter. If they thought of him as less of a man, less of a Nohrian, so be it. More than anything, he just wanted to go home.
"Hey, man, you alright?" asked Joachim, extending his free hand to his friend. "Something's been off about you for hours now."

"I just can't do this shit anymore!" Mathias confessed as he rose to his feet, consciously "forgetting" his axe.

His friend however, shuttered him urgently away from the chaos. "What the hell are you doing?!" he demanded. "You don't want people to think you're some kind of savage-lover, do you?! You know how dangerous that kind of talk is?! In my old unit, the commander would literally roast you alive for saying shit like that! Now quick, before the general comes around, take a couple of the ears I collected-"

"I don't care anymore." answered Mathias despondently. "There were women and kids, man! Pregnant women! And we just- I just-"

"What's the big deal?" asked Frank, another unitmate of theirs leaning lazily against his blood-stained blade. "The savages would be doing the exact same thing and worse to us if they, gods forbid, ever invaded Nohr! The way I see it, we're just getting a head start on defending ourselves. Just like the general said, 'nits make lice,' right?"

"If you ever find yourself having talked a good game around the guys, but can't follow through when the time comes," advised Henk, one of Joachim's fellow pikemen. "just imagine any woman you've ever cared for in your life, your mother, sister, lady friend, whoever, being cornered by a pack of marauding savage bucks during their inevitable invasion of Nohr."

The older spearman gestured proudly at the assorted, macabre trophies attached to his armor he'd collected from slain Hoshidans that night. "Works every time." he assured. "In fact, I'm actually seriously considering boiling the skin off some buck's skull and sending it back to the wife as a souvenir."

"Do you mind me saying something?" inquired Mathias, feigning thoughtfulness. "You're disgusting, you know that?"

Henk rolled his eyes at the greenhorn and his idealism, and, while the swordsman quite clearly had no need of the extra motivation himself, Frank shuddered with disgust at the image posited by the veteran.

"Makes me literally want to vomit, that thought. If those disgusting vermin ever got their hands on one of my sisters or even my mother, I'd put them out of their misery myself; it's the least I could do as a half-decent brother or son. Remember one thing well, boys; no true Nohrian lass or lady would ever allow herself to be defiled by the eyes or anything else of a savage for that matter! And the disgusting, diseased, stupid cunt who lets one of those.... things rut her? Deserves whatever she gets."

"You could say that again, brother!" replied a second axeman, looking quite pleased with himself from all the "savage" scalps he'd collected that night. "The one and only thing worse than a savage that doesn't know its place is a civilized blood traitor! If I ever have a daughter, she'll get the same message as my sisters got; death is always preferable to being defiled by savages, no exceptions."

Completely defeated in mind, body, and spirit alike, Mathias, doing his very damnedest not to bring
any further shame upon his family name, simply retreated into one of the countless burned-out husks, curling himself into a fetal position and anticipated eagerly the end of the shrieks of pain and anguish, whether in reality or confined to the prison that his own head had become.

Chapter End Notes

Emerald of Courage:
Description: A brilliant gem of great magic power and unknown origins. Required to craft a blade effective against a certain king.

Because one third-to-one-half of a fandom already despises me anyway (or will/would once this work was discovered anyway), I figured "What the hell, what's another one-third-to-half of another fandom?" Namely, Leo's new subordinate. And speaking of King Dick, er- Leo, you may have noticed something about one of the additional tags, and on the off chance that I was too subtle about what the other characters represent for him:

Pride: Basically everybody, really
Wrath: Basically any Hoshidan, especially Hana and Sakura before anyone else though
Envy: Selena, Azura, Xander and Siegbert
Lust: Charlotte, especially Camilla and Corrine
Gluttony: Not so much for food, but knowledge/power he's not supposed to have
Greed: Arguably the women in his life not named Camilla or Corrine; overlaps with lust obviously
Sloth: Interestingly enough, the one that a little more of would actually do him some good. Life Fiber Dragon and Gunter as intellectual/emotional sloth than anything

Why would members of another fandom hate me for this chapter, you may ask? Because a character I introduced here is a pretty blatant reference to/parody of another beloved "protagonist" who, at the notion spending a tens of hours with her and her miserable bitchitude, made me want to take a very long drive off of a very short pier...in the middle of a hurricane with the windows rolled down. I can tolerate her in small doses over a long period of time, but I could also say the exact same thing about mercury; I'm not exactly going out of my way to expose myself to it either. And speaking of said series, if you know the context behind the fourth track I listed, it becomes even less subtle than Saizo leading an attack against a literal human ranch, especially taking into account the two tavern scenes and Sakura's experience versus Edouard's.

And speaking of making myself a lightning rod for hate, here's where I throw any subtlety out the window; i.e. a popular game among Nohrian boys being Knights and Savages, Hans almost directly quoting this wonderful gentleman here (I just noticed that their names even have the same root) and exhorting his men to emulate his murderous handiwork.

And if the subplot with the gentle Mathias makes you uncomfortable, good. Because it's point is to illustrate just how malevolent and corrosive that 'neighbors-as-subhuman-savages-and-or-resources-to-be-exploited' mindset really is. Hell, look at Frank; this is a
guy who openly brags about slaughtering and mutilating defenseless women and children but what sends him into an outraged rant is even the idea of a "savage" touching his mom/sisters/female relations/countrywomen in general.

Also on a related note, why is it you may ask, that I chose to make an OC out of Charlotte's dad specifically, as one who will publicly and openly stand up to the likes of Frank and their bullshit even though his reputation suffers considerably for it?

Finally, please, please, PLEASE pay attention to the (fictional) lore: It's not just a throwaway detail.
Chapter Summary

The undeclared Nohrian siege of Mount Garou becomes intolerable for its chieftainess and her people, leading to an arrangement allowing Fuga to retaliate for months of Nohrian slaving raids while Florian, much to the surprise of everyone (himself included) comes to a fitting conclusion from an old Wind Tribe legend.

Chapter Notes

*Kakariko Village (The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess OST)

**The Demon Thief (The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess OST)

***Brave General, Brave King (FE9 OST)

****The Devoted (F10 OST)

*****Battle of Pride (FE10 OST)

******Victory United (FE9 OST)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*At long last arriving in the dusty, windswept main settlement of the Wind Tribe, while never having been herself, Flora could not help but sense a certain inexplicable desolation to the environs. Perhaps it was due to the able-bodied young men shuttering away those weaker than them at the intrusion of the outsiders or the posted sentries taking even less kindly to Florian than even a few Nohrian locales, after their being received by the tribe's chieftain, Flora was largely vindicated in these observations.

"I apologize for my people seeming unusually...on edge as of late," began Fuga. "But we've generally been protected by both our neighbors and our relative isolation from time immemorial and these slavers have been taking even more of a toll on us than the other tribes."

"You'd think being fellow 'savages' would break some of the tension." remarked Florian darkly. "But no such luck."

Fuga scratched the dome of his immaculate head in irritation. "You might think so, but no. No offense at all to our honored guests, but your background may actually have seen some of my people give you a harder time than you deserve."

"I actually wished to discuss that with you, Chief Fuga." Flora interjected. "My companion tells me of a certain tribesman of ours by the name of Bela and his band of ne'er-do-wells with tacit Nohrian support may be behind many of your current woes."
Judging by his reflexive expression and derisive scoff, the chieftain was well aware of the rogue and his activities. "He thin with that long, stringy purple hair? Your companion is sharper than he appears," remarked Fuga with a scowl. "Yes, I've encountered him in passing. What relation has he to you?"

"He's my father's most trusted advisor." said Flora gravely. "In fact, his trust in Bela is so unshakable, he actually wishes me to be his bride."

Fuga's eyes dropped. "Oh, gods, that does bode ill for us. That would explain how he and his men keep inflicting such heavy casualties on our warriors; not to mention the fact that we keep recovering brand-new Nohrian weapons from them."

None too keen on discussing the single most irritating individual in his life, Florian actually saw it preferable to indirectly discuss the pivotal event in his life than bring up Bela. "Chief Fuga, would you happen to know anything about a certain type of Nohrian weapon?" he inquired respectfully. "A lance that can shoot flames, obviously wielded by an individual with considerable magical and riding ability."

As if these words working together formed a key for a lock in his memory, the Wind Tribe chieftain's eyes lit up, but with a twinge of hesitation in them nonetheless. "As a matter of fact, I do. It's an extremely old story from our people and not everyone takes it at face value," he prefaced. "but are you still interested?"

Florian quite obviously desperate for any information even remotely connected to his nemesis, gave his lady a pleading, almost childish gaze. Flora, for her part, responded with a resigned expression. "Oh, fine, why not?"

The tribal elder cleared his throat. **"Alright," he began. "ages ago, there was a horseman from the western deserts out on the farthest reaches of the continent. Exactly what his name was is lost to history, but all agree he was a man possessed with unnatural skill with the blade, wicked magical power, and limitless ambition. Desiring to place the entirety of the continent under his rule, he and his followers cut a bloody swath across the land, either assimilating or destroying the scattered principalities of the north and west with ruthless efficiency."**

"But what does this have to do with any of the tribes?" Flora interrupted to her companion nudging her disapprovingly.

Doubtlessly having anticipated this very question, Fuga cleared his throat once more before the crux of the story. "For those who displeased him or showed any hint of dissension, there was nothing even resembling mercy. For one of the tribes that refused to submit their sacred mountain to him, he was said to have fed the lot of them to a dragon to make an example to the other 'heathens' out of them. To the north, he was said to have projected a mounted phantom of himself to terrorize the restive tribes into submission. Not even his own followers were safe; for supposedly fomenting an uprising against him, he marched on the lands of a noble house and had them slaughtered. Not even the women or children were spared. We were always smaller in number compared to yours and the Flame Tribe. Some ascribed that fact to this man."**

"What happened to this warlord?" inquired Florian breathlessly.

"Unsurprisingly, no one is quite sure. Some say he was killed in battle. By a tribe known as the Sun Tribe probably. Others say his empire collapsed into assorted squabbling states. Others still say he and his followers cursed his descendants to finish his work before he and his inner circle were
dragged into another world, a twisted mirror of our own during a ritual."

While the anticipation was visible in the eyes of her companion, Flora raised a suspicious eyebrow. "Chief Fuga," she prefaced politely. "I may have been privy to an unusual degree of information during my time in Krakenburg, but I've never heard or read of a 'Sun Tribe' in my life."

"Fuga's expression turned oddly conciliatory. "Well as I said, it's a very old story." he reminded, much of the heaviness from his earlier tone gone. "A very old story not everyone takes at face value, let alone believes. As for myself, I have my own theories about the identity of-"

As though recalling some deep-seated taboo, the chief abruptly halted his ramblings. "My son and I have business to attend to shortly and will be away from here for some time. It's already dark; make yourselves comfortable as long as you need."

"Oh, no, we couldn't impose." insisted Flora, well-aware of the complications the chief's impending absence could cause them. "Besides, we must be making haste back to Father."

"Well, if you're certain. Give the stubborn old bastard my regards when you see him."

Bidding the chief farewell, Flora led her protector to the foot of a butte a good distance away from the settlement before igniting a bundle of sticks with her magic. The prospect of being ambushed by angry members of the Wind Tribe was clearly on her mind. Florian however, had other concerns. "So, that was some story, eh?" he began, poking at the flames with a stray stick.

"Yes, it was." Flora confirmed distantly, still preoccupied with some matter or another. "I'm still fairly certain I'd have known about another major tribe, even within the distant past."

"But even so, didn't the part about the 'mounted phantom' or whatever sound at least kind of familiar?"

Finally turning her attention to her companion, Flora expressed her approximate interest by rolling her eyes. "Like Chief Fuga said, it's a very old story." she cautioned. "One that he's not sure himself is true."

By this point, given how much of his emotional energy had been tied up in his hypothesis (not to mention his affections for the woman), Florian started to become rather irritated. "Doesn't that sound even a little like the legend of Arminius to you?" he inquired. "When a monster was slaughtering our people and driving them from the holy ground, he braved the temple and killed it? Some people describe the monster as a phantom horseman!"

"Florian, I know you want to connect it to Nohr and- that monster, but-"

"Of course it's related to them! Who the fuck else would it be?!"

Now fairly irritated herself, Flora growled in frustration. "Be realistic about this, Florian!" she snapped. "How many Nohrians really think of us- our history, our legends, as something worthy of study? Most of them don't even see us as human beings! No, to pattern his entire appearance and fighting style off of an ancient tribal legend, even as an act of psychological warfare, he would have to be an extremely strange Nohrian on a number of levels."
"You know what? Fine!" raged Florian, throwing a tarp over himself as a makeshift blanket. "Think whatever you want, Flora! But I can guarantee you that they're more related than you want to admit."

Her companion's back now figuratively and literally turned to her, Flora, still occupied with a decision that had concerned her for months now, decided to let the matter drop, beginning to scribble a letter against one of her spellbooks. Going off of a "feeling" was not and never would be solid ground for making monumental decisions such like that. Decisions which could and would affect their entire nation. Why else had she been defying, deceiving her father to traipse around the continent while half of it was literally a war zone, she wondered. To collect evidence either vindicating or quashing her suspicions about Bela, King Leonard and the Nohrian court, and what they truly intended for the tribe. Given the complete and utter absence of any Sun Tribe from the folklore of Nohr or their own people, the possibilities for their disappearance ranged from utterly natural and mundane to absolutely horrifying, portending ill for any and all who stood in the kingdom's way.

Still, she had to give Florian his due; she had no reason to dispute the authenticity of the figure from the champion's recurring nightmare and it was extremely unusual that his battlefield persona matched up almost precisely with the demon of legend. Even so, what kind of Nohrian was that well-versed in the tribe's folklore, let alone obsessed with the phantom (or possibly those who supposedly suffered under its wrath) enough to pattern his armor, weapon, and fighting style after it that precisely?*

Ungrateful Chevois bastards, thought Nichol bitterly, ruining what precious little time allotted him for leave. What did they really expect the savages would be doing to them had they, their Nohrian brothers, not been selflessly shielding them from the beasts all these centuries? Exactly how many more times would he and his men have to clarify the consequences, he wondered proudly at the sight of his men having finished impaling some twenty rebels and lining the road into town with the pikes containing the dying and the dead. Nonetheless, the wyvern lord was given scarce little time to enjoy this reprieve before the mundane dreariness of work intruded once again.

"A letter, sir!" reported a rider, not even bothering to dismount. "It's been given even higher priority than my life itself!"

Scanning the parchment briefly and spotting his superior's seal, Nichol's black heart leapt in fear at the notion that the Savagekiller himself would see fit to contact him directly. Unfurling the parchment, Nichol breathed an audible sigh of relief as a cursory examination revealed the letter to not directly concern him.

"To my reasonably-competent subordinate, Sir Nichol. By order of His Majesty himself, you and your vanguard are to be recalled immediately to the homeland in preparation for cleansing operations against the mangy pack infesting Mount Garou."

Nichol shrugged noncommittally. Perhaps his lost leave needn't have been necessarily a complete loss? Even if he did not go down in the annals of Nohrian history with an epithet like his superior for overseeing the end of an age-old pestilence plaguing the kingdom, the bluebloods would still pay decent gold for their pelts, even if command didn't see fit to issue bounties this time.

"And finally ma'am," reported the Wolfskin scout wearily, gesturing at the crude map. "the Nohrians have stationed armor formations at select choke points along certain narrow passages to prevent any real movement or escape. Apparently, they're looking to starve us into submission."

***The scout's superior, a rugged, fierce-looking woman in her late twenties with wild, dark-brown
hair, gave an audible scowl at the obvious pessimism in his tone. "So what?" she inquired belligerently. "You'd see me go crawling to Leonard with my tail between my legs? Fuck no! You all know damn well where that gets the likes of us! I only see one way and one way alone out of this."

"But Chief!" interjected a second member of her council. "From the reports, the Nohrians have all the cards in their hands! Attacking with such little preparation could be a disaster!"

The chieftaness raised a bushy, skeptical eyebrow at him, doubtlessly with her brother and gods-only-knew whatever vile tortures he'd endured at their enemy's hand in mind. "And waiting even further wouldn't be? Besides, it's not true to say they have all the cards."

Finally joining the meeting from his position sulking against the cave wall, for the first time in months, Fuga managed a smile. "I actually have to concur with you, Lupina." he conceded, his grin somehow more disturbed than he'd intended. "It has been a disaster that we've waited this long to deal with them. Whatever you need, we'll do what we can."

Lupina smirked hungrily at this promise. "Well, would you mind letting me have a bite of him, if you know what I mean?"

Hayato visibly blushing, Fuga's expression turned sour. "Yes, I would. My son is probably our most talented mage and the only one I'd trust with something so important."

"Oh, lighten up, old man!" scolded the chieftainess. "I was just kidding- mostly."

Their Wind Tribe guests and her subcommanders dispersing to rally their warriors, the chieftaness was abruptly impeded by one of her lieutenants as she approached the mouth of her cave command post. "Lupina, please." he said solemnly, his eyes pleading even through his wild, teal hair and muscular frame. "Let me take care of this one."

The wild woman scoffed, straightening out her tunic's collar. "Please, you think I'd miss my chance to give some of these bastards what they deserve, Fen? Hell, it's part way my fault for not trusting my instincts and acting sooner against them."

The wolfskin warrior, Fenrir gave a fatigued sigh for one of his oldest friends. "I know you're still spitting mad. Keaton may as well have- er, might as well, be my brother too. I just think you might be letting that anger cloud your judgement. That's something we just can't afford. It'll be dangerous, even for you and gods know they'll be expecting you-"

"Good. Let them expect. It's not going to save 'em anyway."

It went without saying, for both the besiegers and the besieged alike, that any break out attempt would come at night; for all the rampant contempt possessed for their enemy, the Nohrian regular and officer alike had to concede his nighttime vision and senses in general were far superior to their human ones. On one hand, the attackers lit their checkpoints and encampments with torches, however, this deficit in low-light vision also extended to the Wolfskin's allies.

"Godsdamnit." swore the middle-aged warrior under his breath. "At least it isn't raining. Hey, kid; Ever fought Nohrians before?"

Hayato exhaled sharply. "Yeah, once." he recalled. "You don't like the dark, Taketora?"
"It's not so much that I don't like it. I just can't see well in it."

"Heh heh, yeah, that's it with me too."

"Although, I've got the easy part, protecting you lot. Our furry friends down there are going to be doing most of the leg work."

The position of the Wind Tribe mages, along with their protectors, was that of a forested ridge overlooking the mountain path; with enough cover to (mostly) mask their presence with just enough space for the five mages, including their diminutive commander, to aim. Of course it was nerve-wracking, his second, actual battle ever. Between the naive Nohrian princess and his adoptive father, he could be reasonably assured no harm would be allowed to come to him. But this was quite the escalation in stakes, as Hayato was well aware, what with the Nohrian slavers preying on the tribe in recent months. Indeed, it was actually a relief to see the signal, a single brilliant fireball hurtling fruitlessly toward the moon, and get into position to cast.

"Fuck, we've got savages!" cried one Nohrian pikemen as the furious lupine creatures began streaming from the foliage, rending, tearing, and slashing at any enemy stragglers. Some reiteration of this was repeated ad nauseam until their armor began to plug the hemorrhaging lines, beating back any attempts to infiltrate their lines. "Now!" Hayato cried, he and his fellow mages tuning out the inherent distractions to the best of their ability, sending a motley assortment of translucent creatures of the Zodiac and miniaturized natural phenomena to ravage their armor.

"Mages!" cried an enemy axeman. "We're taking fire from that ridge up there!"

Cursing to himself, Hayato commanded another salvo to disperse the incoming Nohrian infantry reinforcements as a caster some ten years his senior sent three incoming wyvern riders and their mounts crashing to the earth with a massive fireball. "Hayato!" the man cried. "You still have that tome you got off that Nohrian sorcerer?!

"Of course, Hayubasa!" he replied, scanning the path for their next target.

"The wolves will be fine! Cast it at that enemy storehouse over there! I can smell oil!"

Given that everyone and their mothers had heard of the drubbing the enemy received in Cheve as of late, the diminutive prodigy had a good idea what the senior mage was thinking, leafing through the pages inscribed in the tome, his chants calling a cyclone from the void to scatter the building's contents (along with the poor sods who happened to be in the immediate area) across the camp. For his part, it was quite counterintuitive for Hayubasa to ignore the bowmen nearby. Nonetheless, he so did, peppering the immediate vicinity of the ruined storehouse with an assortment of fireballs. While not taking immediately, a number of localized infernos began to spring up around the encampment, quickly turning it into a maelstrom of flame and panicked Nohrian stragglers attempting to escape the blaze to varying degrees of success.

Momentarily reveling in his coup, the veteran mage, while well-aware of the risks (and being fully prepared to take them), ultimately paid a hefty price for ignoring his instincts, taking an arrow to the chest, the shaft penetrating his ribcage and lung, rendering breathing, let alone standing and casting, a Herculean task.

Hayubasa collapsing to the ground with a defiant curse, Hayato, purely off of instinct, dispatched the bowman before tending to his fellow mage. "Hayubasa!" he cried, covering his retreat with another miniaturized tornado. "Oh, gods, this is bad- We need a healer over here, now!"
"We're pulling out!" announced Taketora, drawing his blade. "Any casters who can still stand, fall back! Everyone else, on me!"

Astonishingly enough to the lad, Hayubasa, now deprived of the flame tome, began to weakly recite from one of his scrolls, hacking up blood after his ethereal dragon ravaged the terrified and angry Nohrians ascending the ridge. "I'm done, kid." he said weakly. "I'm gonna do what I can for these guys, but-"

"But you can't-" Hayato protested almost as weakly. "You can't just-"

"Listen, you've gotta fall back! The chief's gonna have my butt in the next life too if anything happens to you!"

As badly as it sat with him, the young mage swallowed in spite of himself, casting an apologetic glance at his senior over the din of battle before retreating with the rest of the casters present. He'd had his first real taste of war tonight and Hayato had not particularly enjoyed it; all the training and casting practice in the world could never have truly prepared him for the sheer chaos and carnage of an actual battlefield. While he was sure there would be nightmares to come about this and other experiences, one thing and one thing alone would keep him moving forward; the prospect of the living hell to which King Leonard and his people would subject the tribe's surviving members, should they even be allowed to continue existing for the "crime" of inconveniencing them.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!" swore a terrified Nohrian pikeman, heart and eyes both racing anxiously. "I swear I just heard one of 'em around here! The savages!"

While their culture was such that the cavalrymen received the most prestige by merit of their specialty, the common Nohrian footsoldiers were firm believers in the adage of "safety in numbers" and they had to be, given how much enemy territory there was. With this said, it was perhaps unsurprising that this particular patrol group of eight, evenly divided into pikemen and axe-wielders, scarcely could foresee what the wooded crag had in store for them.

"What the hell are you on about?" inquired a bored-looking axeman irritably. "There's nothing here! I swear, cowards like you are a worse threat to the unit than the savages."

"I say we should just burn the entire godsdamned mountain with them on it." suggested a second pikeman. "Do you think we have enough casters to pull it off?"

A second axeman shrugged, only taking notice of the enraged, gleaming eyes the instant it was far too late. "I dunno, maybe." he remarked. "I'd think we'd need- Oh, fuck!-"

In the blink of an eye, a massive wall of flesh and fur pounced with all its might on the poor slob, breaking his neck with the sheer force of its blow before rending and tearing a few unsightly gashes on the poor slob's person and turning its attention to his terrified comrades. The most striking things about the beast accosting them, apparently a sort of lupine brown bear easily taller than two large men, were its piercing, blood-red eyes trained on them. And of course, its razor-sharp fangs and claws, easily long as a grown man's forearm and visibly stained with human, almost-certainly-Nohrian, blood.

The pikeman repeated his profane incantation, clutching his spear for dear (and extremely fleeting) life. "Casters!" he plead. "We need support."

For all of his many years and many battles, Fuga still turned away, shutting his eyes and grimacing at
the sheer one-sided carnage dealt to their mutual enemy. After several seconds, as the terrified screams and pleas for help ceased, the old chief emerged from the thicket, taking care not to pay too much mind to the butchery dealt out by his junior. "Gods, Lupina! You enjoy this way too much!" he complained

Abruptly shifting back to her human form with a flash of light, the chieftainess grinned toothily and shrugged. "Hey, can you really blame me? Besides, I already told you; we get a little...strange without a decent fight every now and again."

"No, I can't say I do."

In the distance, yet another explosion, this one particularly deafening, destroyed what little calm remained in the evening mountain air, the flames illuminating another Nohrian checkpoint or installation, it was impossible to tell from this point.

"Well, that sounds like our cue." remarked Fuga with a smirk. "I, of course, don't need to remind you."

"Just go link up with your warriors and keep a look out for reinforcements." insisted Lupina hungrily. "We'll take care of the rest."

Dismissing himself with a bow at the neck, Fuga and his small retinue departed to join the rest of the Wind Tribe formations.

Starting down the narrow mountain path, Lupina met up with her own vanguard; seven of her most trusted, battle-hardened warriors. "Well, we've just made horsemeat of another Nohrian heavy cavalry detachment." reported Fenrir. "That should be the last of them. What now?"

"Half of you on Fenrir and follow his lead." the chieftainess ordered steelily. "The rest of you, watch my tail and try not to get in my way."

Momentarily pondering among themselves how exactly they divided an odd number of warriors, Lupina's cold expression decided for them, Fenrir deciding it wise to assign the three most-senior to his lady as she dealt with the commander.

It never ceased to amaze Lupina how much crap these people required to bring with them to wage war, given hers were a famously hardy and resourceful people. In any extended campaign, this necessity also, more often than not, proved their downfall. In these conditions, her wolfish senses alone would have made hunting the Nohrian commander child's play. But with three of her most tested fighters? It was no wonder they'd come across the count's camp within an hour or so, positioning themselves among some greenery just outside the stables.

"-has me taking orders from a glorified street urchin and his bandit!" raged a haughty voice. "As if my family's contributions to Nohr over the centuries have meant nothing!"

"Milord, please keep your voice down!" plead one of his aides. "The enemy's senses are-"

"Oh, you can't possibly believe that rot about their 'superhuman senses!' Nothing more than filthy, self-righteous, heathen savages! I'll send for more reinforcements first thing tomorrow and we'll crush them, just we've always done with the insects."
The chieftainess' red eyes narrowed into slits. "Oh, ho! I think I recognize this douchebag!" she remarked amusedly.

"Really, milady?" inquired a graying warrior.

"Yep, Count Francis of Nice. He's made a damn fortune skinning our brothers and sisters and selling their pelts to the highest bidder."

"Bastard!"

"I know how you feel, but his pompous arse is mine. On my signal, you and the others are going for the horses and the mages, the bowmen, anyone who can attack at a distance."

True, even among Wolfskin, it took a very special sort of individual to truly appreciate just how symphonic the orgy of destruction left in the wake of a well-planned assault by her people. However, even with a relatively minor production as this one, Lupina never ceased to appreciate that particular tune. Her warriors bursting forth from their concealment, rending havoc upon terrified and/or outraged Nohrian man and beast alike, the chieftainess, with that very particular and offensive fragrance worn by the count assaulting her senses, took it as her cue to his position, transforming into the her beast form with a brilliant flash.

Barrelling forth as quickly as her limbs would take her, Lupina laid waste to whatever lay in her path as though it were soggy paper of an especially-poor quality, the rare Nohrian weapon or spell to (almost always on a fluke) come in contact with her of no more a bother than a snowflake on a hot day. Curiously enough for the one-woman trail of abject destruction that she had torn through the camp, the chieftainess, after dealing his vanguard a series of unpleasant, painful, and very-fatal injuries, decided to toy with the greedy count a bit by transforming back.

"Hi, there." she remarked, fangs bared with an evil smirk. "Remember us?"

"N-n-not in my-life..." sputtered Francis, feeling very vulnerable even in his ornate general's armor. "Y-you m-must b-b-be mistaken!"

"Oh, no, it's no mistake. I NEVER forget poachers of my people. Particularly tubs of Nohrian lard like yourself. So you've made quite a bit off the lives and skins of us wolves, eh? Why don't we see how much YOURS fetches?"

"G-guards! K-k-kill her!"

The three pikemen, no mere common footsoldiers themselves to be assigned to a count's guard, had scarce little time to ponder their poor career moves as they were gored, rent, and torn by the enraged Wolfskin chieftainess, their specialized lances meant to counter her people may as well have been sticks for all the good they did. Much like his subordinates' Beastkillers, the thick plate armor worn by the count did just as little to save his own hide. Indeed, even were the Nohrians able to send a party to retrieve their wounded and dead, locating Count Nice's remains would have been impossible.*****

Exhausted, but accomplished, Lupina smiled as she returned to her humanoid form, knowing that many of her people hunted and murdered to sate the greed of Nohrian nobles could finally rest in peace. There was still much to do of course, many scalps to claim, to say nothing of Mad King Leonard's, but In the odd, macabre serenity of the utterly-demolished Nohrian count's camp, Lupina
was heartened by the victorious howls of her warriors echoing across the mountains and their new ally's report.

"This camp looks like it was struck by a cyclone after passing over a blacksmithing town!" remarked Fuga, shielding his adoptive son's eyes. "And I take it you dealt with Count Nice?"

"Yeah, he's right over there," said Lupina half-facetiously. "and there, and there, and there, and there, and there. And I take it the Nohrians didn't harass you with reinforcements?"

The old warrior returned the self-satisfied smirk. "The enemy is in full retreat. It wasn't easy and they'll be back and spitting mad, but it's been a good night."

Removing his hand from Hayato's eyes momentarily, Fuga recalled something of the utmost importance. "That reminds me!" he said urgently. "Kikai has been trying to get a hold of you for months now!"

"Oh, yeah, that summit he's been going on about, right?" answered Lupina. "So the old gasbag's actually considering some kind of joint action against Nohr? About damn time too!"

"Yes, we'll no doubt need their help as well, but his daughter has supposedly developed a rapport of sorts with Princess Sakura. With that said, sooner or later, we'll need to take some of the pressure off those poor bastards."

"Fenrir can more than handle defense of the homeland. And I'll see what I can do about gathering up some raiding parties behind their lines."

The chieftainess smirked lewdly, halfway directed at the boy. "And speaking of things I can do-"

"No." denied Fuga flatly.

"Oh, come on!" plead Lupina. "You know, a lot of boys his age go through that liking-older-"

"No."

Hayato was grateful the moonlight as the sole major light source hid his red face from both his father and the would-be-predator, whose interest he was finding rather...intriguing.

"A-actually, Father." Hayato stammered.

"No." denied Fuga once again.

Chapter End Notes

You know how I urged you to pay attention to the lore in the last chapter's end notes? About how it wasn't just a collection of throwaway details? Like how Leo mentioned Nohr's first king Reyne'd a vassal and his entire family for (allegedly) rising up against him? And here I go, just absolutely, brutally murdering any and all subtlety about the topic given my description of Nohr's founder and his deeds, as well as this being a fanfic
for a Nintendo series.

Also, exactly like Pietro, Kikai (and Amagi for that matter), or "Rose," Lupina is only an OC in the most technical sense; because as you probably caught onto already, she's literally Tibarn from POR/RD, just as a wolf-lady and bigger flirt.
The Second Act

Chapter Summary

Tensions on the continent continue to boil as long-hunted "savages" prepare to convene, an orphaned prince returns to his homeland, two ambitious young lords prepare for war with or against the land's hegemon and its schemes, and a heroine begins, for the first time, to question her liege and their less-than-professional relationship.

Chapter Notes

* Ambient blizzard sounds
** The Mind of Izuka (FE10 OST)
*** Know Thy Enemy (Shogun 2: Total War OST)
**** Prince of Darkness (FE15 OST)
***** Stables (The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild OST)
****** Vow (FE9 OST)

*How on earth did they manage this, the savages, wondered Lothar, swearing he could scarcely feel his fingers as they circled like vultures. Of course, for the seventy or so Nohrian survivors of the engagement, he was perhaps among the fortunate to have kept all his extremities. Not that it was going to help them, given their tattered-to-nonexistent weaponry and complete, utter encirclement.

"And here he comes now," muttered his war buddy Luca. "the head-buck-in-charge."

Their commander dismounting his stallion and removing the strange, demonic-looking helmet from his head, the accumulated frost on his stubble only making his stony appearance somehow more inhuman, he scanned the line of their humbled, pitiful "betters" for any hint of defiance. "So, I suppose you still think you're SUCH big men, right?" scolded Takeshi, one hand locked on his blade. "Well, let me tell you; there's a HUGE difference between killing defenseless old men, women, and children and motivated, trained warriors. But you know that now, right?"

Half of the prisoners shot the young lord expressions of impotent rage or contempt, while the rest looked around the inhospitable taiga aimlessly, as if it would grant their wish to be anywhere else on the planet. Except for one outlier about ten paces down from Lothar and Luca. "Fuck you, savages! Long live King Leonard! Long live Nohr!"

Naturally responding to such provocation, Takeshi seemed to somehow glide over to the soldier with more than a whiff of alcohol on his breath. "Something you want to say?"

The man swallowed, as though some part of him was aware of what a horrible idea this was. "Yeah, I got somthin' to say." he slurred. "Fuck you and fuck this whole godsdammed country! You bucks
are all worthless fuckin' pigs who exist to -hic- prey on our womenfolk. Your wives, mothers, sisters, daughters- whatever, are only good for-

Already incensed enough by the cold and his unit's material situation (to say nothing of the Nohrians' previous conduct), Takeshi required little further provocation to drive the hilt of his blade into the man's mouth with every ounce of his strength, sending the drunk tumbling to the frozen ground, shortly feeling around for his missing teeth.

"Hm, what's this?" inquired one of Takeshi's adjutants, picking up the rucksack the drunk was clutching. Upon showing the contents to his superior, both vocalized their disgust to find a collection of severed human ears, quite obviously taken from their butchered countrymen.

"You think this is fucking funny?!" Takeshi bellowed, prowling up and down the line, unconsciously picking out his blade's next target. "You think this is fucking cute?! The great and valorous, civilized Nohrians cutting trophies from the innocents you've butchered?! Everyone knows you're a bunch of arrogant bastards, but this?! This is-"

Perhaps unwisely turning his back to the pack of prisoners, Takeshi sighed in exasperation and rage, turning to his adjutants once again. "You want to do this, Kanemasa?" he inquired, well-aware they were of the same mind. "I mean, it's your family's lands, after all."

"It'd be my pleasure." answered the senior lord, drawing his own weapon as he descended on the line of terrified Nohrians.

His late uncle had drilled it into his own and his sister's heads that war was not a pleasant experience by any means at all. Nonetheless, he'd largely become inured to the sights and sounds of the bloodshed required to fight an asymmetrical war on one's own soil, be it from previous atrocities, outright battles, or retaliation for said atrocities, there were times when it was just advantageous to let their enemy's screams, pleas, and curses fall into the background, to be paid no more mind than the sound of the wind blowing, pulling his adjutant off to the side as if nothing were amiss.

"I swear, this material situation will be the death of us, Kuramoto." he groused.

"Figuratively or literally?" asked Kuramoto.

"Same difference. I can't really sharpen my blade with rocks and dirt, now can I? We managed to salvage all we could from Kubota- that was pretty fucked up what they did to those people, huh?"

"No, I concur completely. I thank the gods we didn't have any of the enemy in our hands. I wouldn't have been able to control myself after seeing that."

Leaning against a bare tree, Kuramoto sighed wistfully. "Perhaps once this is all over, Prince Ryoma's son will lead us to a brighter future?" he opined.

Whether from the cold or genuine displeasure, Takeshi's expression was frozen in an expression of extreme irritation. "I do hope that's your famous sense of humor at work, Kuramoto." he growled. "Because that's not fucking funny and you know-"

Kuramoto appeared genuinely offended. "Commander, I assure you that I jest not. Have you not heard the stories spreading like wildfire among the commoners?"
"What stories?"

"About the courageous, daring princess, still but a girl, really, who slips into enemy territory, not only to rescue her nephew and his grandmother from certain death, but gives Nohr a massive black eye in the process."

True, over the past several months, Takeshi had been too occupied with all the concerns and intricacies of commanding a guerilla campaign, often with little or no help from their fellow fighters. But at this, even his increasingly-cold heart and colder body were warmed by the folktales spread by the commoners, knowing that if the princess was alive and well, a certain individual would be right by her side. "That baby sister of mine." he thought, a nostalgic smile curling on his lips.*

While he may have been a mere company commander, Pepin had big dreams for someone of his status. He'd killed more savages during his last few deployments than a lot of guys did their entire careers, but he never seemed to get any recognition for said zealous application of his work. But could that be set to change? **At first, he doubted it, Pepin considering it some sort of convoluted practical joke him being sent out to this wretched hellhole of a fortress out in the backwoods of savage country. But the establishment's rather disconcerting master seemed to have a genuine proposal for him.

"Ah, welcome, welcome, Sir Pepin." greeted Konrad. "I trust the ride out here was smooth?"

"As smooth as it could be," the surly knight answered. "seeing as the savages have been sniping at us for the past two weeks and just sink back into the godsdammed forest."

"Of course, I have it on good authority that the king will approve a large-scale movement of troops to finally put this wretched lot in their place, once and for all. I simply have minor request for you and your unit, Sir Pepin."

"What's that?"

Konrad smirked wickedly. "I simply require your momentary help with a little experiment of mine. I assure you, once it succeeds, you will share in the glory."

"Sounds good to me!" Pepin exclaimed. "What is it?"

Ushering the knight to the center of the room, Konrad removed the black tarp covering a small cage, its occupant, a man with flame-red hair, looking none too pleased with the situation. In fact, his expression carried a hint of madness. "Is this...your experiment?" Pepin inquired dully, unwisely poking the cage's occupant. "What is it? A savage or something?"

"Why don't you touch me again and see what happens?" Kali snarled, his expression communicating perfectly the murderous hatred he felt. "Go on, I dare you. Do it."

Konrad's expression however, communicated his very particular sort of sick, sadistic glee. "One could say that, I suppose...." he teased.

"So what do you need me to do?"

Apparently, it was possible for Konrad's expression to become even uglier than its default state, his joy almost orgasmic in its malevolence. "Oh, I simply need you and your men to take him along during your duties." he said as innocently as a wicked soul like he could possibly muster.

"So, what?" resumed Pepin. "I have to feed it, right?"
From his workstation, Konrad slid a small chest over to the unscrupulous knight. "Only this serum injected once a week. It shall be the only nourishment required."

"Alright!"

Lowering his head to face his new charge, Pepin wore a smug grin. "Well, whatever the hell you are, look's like you're gonna be my ticket to all the gold, girls, and glory I can stand!"

"Fuck you!" Kali snarled. "I swear, you're the VERY first thing I'm going to kill the second I get out of here."

"Ah, save it for the savages."**

***For, Taira, general of Mokushu, his path in service of his daimyo had been set well before his own birth, that of his father, that of his father, and so on. He belonged to a family whose members had served the ruling house from time immemorial. Most had been unremarkable, some flawed but otherwise decent men, and a few complete and utter reprobates (who were generally restrained either by the other nobles or their own vices and ambitions on occasion) and his clan had served them all for ages, any complaints only made with the closest of intimates and never in public. And while he nonetheless swelled with pride at the his beloved (figurative) sons forming up in steady, disciplined rows, as he inspected the troops alongside his liege from a balcony, the sheer audacity and incoherence of the young lord's intended course of action made him seriously consider breaking this tradition.

"Milord, once again I must inquire," he said urgently, almost pleading with the younger man. "Are you absolutely positive about this course of action?"

The young, ambitious daimyo scowled at his servant as if to ask are you utterly stupid? "I have never been more certain of such a course in my entire life." insisted Kentaro.

"But sire; for centuries- millennia even, Izumo has scarcely even raised a weapon to any other power, particularly our own land. Why spoil centuries of neighborly relations now?"

Watching his hosts march off to their camps and ultimately into battle, Kentaro, placing his hands behind his back began to pace about the balcony. "Because the world is changing, Taira," he said hungrily. "King Leonard, the great king of Nohr is seeing to that. No longer will the weaklings of the world be given free reign to strut about as if they were worth something. They will either submit to the strong- or be destroyed."

"But milord! Where could the honor in that possibly be?"

"As I said, the world is fundamentally changing. In this world, there will be peoples who eat, or are eaten. You would see Mokushu swallowed up by its enemies? Thrown into anarchy like how the tribals live?"

"Of course not! But-"

The younger man raised a dismissive hand. "You have my orders; away with you! By the by, Taira, you'd best get used to some of our Nohrian friends' ways becoming more popular in the coming years."

Departing to join his men on the front, partially due to his orders and his increasing frustration with his liege, silently, Taira fumed. Not so much from the disgraceful order, but the sheer obsequiousness Lord Kentaro was showing towards Leonard. "Friends?" he thought angrily. He'd always been
somewhat of an arrogant child, but this was becoming insufferable; everyone knew that those people-that kingdom, did not see the world in terms of its allies, equals, and partners- he was not particularly well-traveled compared to most other nobles, but he had been around more than enough to know that the Nohrian mindset divided the world into two categories and two categories only; slaves and enemies. It had only been a passing thought every now and again, but Taira was becoming increasingly concerned that his lord was leading his people down the path of becoming the former to Nohr.***

"What?!" Corrine exclaimed incredulously. "No, I don't believe you, Kaze! That kind of cruelty-and Leo would never let-"

"I'm afraid it's all true, milady." reported Kaze guiltily, his gaze downcast. "I believe 'ranches,' they're called. The higher nobility particularly, seem to see them as a convenient method of filling their own pockets while technically fulfilling their duties to the crown."

"No- that can't be-"

While always kind of a cold individual and having witnessed a distinct change in his demeanor in recent months and not for the better, Corrine could simply not process the notion of her beloved brother actually, truly giving his explicit assent to such atrocities, grotesque even by the standards of this war.

"It seems we lack any other option." said Azura grimly. "I will discuss the matter with him on your behalf."

The princess smiled wistfully at the azure maiden, cupping her cheek before taking Azura's lips in her own. "I won't be long, I promise. Ira won't be a problem, and I think Armin and I will be a good influence on Rose."

In contrast to it's usual gentleness, Corrine's expression turned to one of steely determination when turning to Kaze. "Protect her with your life, Kaze."

"Your wish is my command, milady."

As the princess departed with at the head of the army's caravan to join Rose and Armin, both of her intimates shared an inexplicable sinking feeling in the pit of their stomachs, the ninja's wound only exacerbated by the sight of the lovers kissing. "So what exactly ARE we going to do about the-you know, issue?"

"I...I wish I could tell you, Kaze." Azura answered blankly. "I really do."

While any day was a day enhanced by the absence of Duke Toscana, and his original collaborators were increasingly fewer, he still possessed enough hangers-on and sycophants to make life difficult around the castle without Corrine to shield them from the worst of the subterfuge and backstabbing. Azura's liking to the castle's library had created a refuge of sorts for the exiled ninja as well.

"Do you enjoy folklore, Kaze?" she inquired, turning her face up from a hefty tome.

"Erm, not particularly, Lady Azura," he prefaced. "but I can definitely see why people hold onto these tales."

"Any from your region stick out in your mind?"
Furrowing his brow in contemplation, the green ninja tapped his chin. "Hm, my father actually had a story he was quite fond of; about our family actually. Of course, I'm certain it's not true but-"

"Would you mind telling me?"

"Truthfully, I don't remember much of it. The basic idea is that long ago, the original ancestor of the ninja clans pledged his allegiance to the sun and fought in a great battle to save the world from eternal night. I told you, it wasn't much-"

"That's actually very interesting. Thank you, Kaze."

With her suspicions in mind, Azura nonetheless, before the day was out, had to confront the elephant in the room. Granted, as a rule, physicians are generally not forthcoming with their patients' maladies, particularly the personal physicians of kings. However, Azura's relationships gave her just enough influence to, if done just right, to pry some information from the doctor which he would usually be less-than-forthcoming, particularly in the main hall of the castle. "Excuse me, Sir Fedor?" began the songstress. "I realize that this is not usually done, but Co- Lady Corrine requested it of me."

"Hm, Lady Azura." Fedor responded with mild surprise. "What troubles you?"

"You're his physician, are you not? Have you noticed anything... amiss about the king's health as of late?"

Scratching his balding head in contemplation, the doctor pondered it a moment. "It's funny you should ask, milady. Princess Camilla actually made the exact same inquiry before departing on her holiday."

Azura raised an irritated eyebrow. "And?"

"Exactly what I told her, milady. His Majesty is actually the picture of health. It's really quite a miracle, seeing the extent of his injuries after he was attacked by that...thing. I've seen stronger men crippled for life from less."

"I see...thank you, Sir Fedor."

Nonetheless, relatively healthy individuals, particularly those of mostly-sound mind, do not generally spend minutes glaring daggers- as if wishing it possible to hate them to death, at another party for minutes on end. Especially in the presence of a host of sycophants and one of his women with a meal fit for a king before him. Truth be told, at dinner that night, Azura actually hesitated to partake, half-expecting some sort of poison or another. Kaze, while perhaps naive, was by no means stupid, took notice of this as well. "What exactly did you do to him, again?" he inquired gingerly, glancing sideways at the angry monarch.

Azura put off answering for a second or two. "Exist." she responded half-facetiously. "But there is something which I must do, immediately after this."

Kaze grimaced. "And you're sure you'll be alright?"

"No, I'm not."

"Because Lady Corrine did explicitly instruct me to protect you with my life."

Truth be told, it was simply an empty expression of solidarity on Kaze's part; his standing in this
kingdom fragile enough as it was, he knew damned well should the worst-case scenario occur, he would be, quite literally, signing his death warrant by carrying out his lady's orders. And even then, that was assuming it was actually possible to even wound or impede Leonard; if even a fraction of the rumors were true about his powers, even raising a hand (let alone a weapon) against him would likely lead to his very violent and painful end.

Nonetheless, the green ninja steeled himself for what was to come, dutifully tailing Azura as she awaited the dissipation of crowd of nobles and servants (and Charlotte) to whatever the hell concerned them. Azura, having said knowledge from leaked from one of said blonde's more inebriated moments, knew that Leonard had taken a liking to meditating in the throne room before retiring to his study or bed.

Despite her stealthy guardian, Azura inhaled deeply, anxiously pushing open those grand, ancient doors to the cavernous throne room. Surely enough, there sat Leonard, legs crossed in front of his ancestral throne, facing the entrance with a blank expression, shortly turning to one of irritation. "What do you want?" he said crossly as he rose to a natural stance.

Perhaps against her better judgement, Azura decided to close the distance between them and leave the relative safety of the doorway; after all, the king was far more perceptive than most and an air of even-false confidence could not harm her case. "Erm- King Leonard," she began. "Leo- Corrine wished me to discuss something with you- she tasked me with it before her departure."

The monarch rolled his eyes. "What? What are you bothering me about now?"

"Well...Corrine has it on good authority that the ar- some nobles and segments of the army have constructed these facilities across Hoshido- ranches, I believe they're called."

"And?"

"She also has it on good authority that the people there are subject to all sorts of horrible, horrible cruelties-"

"Once more, what do you expect me to do about it? Duke Guillaume insisted it was the best way to maximize resource yield and he kind of dragged Matteo along too."

Noticing that very-apparent sinking feeling in her chest, Azura was cautious in her word choice. "You don't sound surprised by this, sire. Surely, you cannot approve of such butchery-"

However, Leonard scowled at this entreaty, whether from the patronizing nature or the familiar tone, Azura was unsure. "Yes, that is how the system works." he snarled. "I receive proposals from my peons and I approve or reject them. Why would you THINK I'd be surprised or disapproving of the ranches?"

"But Corrine was so distraught by-"

"Corrine ought not to concern herself with matters she knows nothing about. And you, 'dear sister,' ought to concern yourself with keeping your lies from my court!"

"But."

"Away, away with you!"

"I see...Well, by your leave, sire."
Turning away from the king (again, against her better judgement), Azura could very nearly feel Corrine’s heart shattering for her; she’d known Leo- Leonard had changed considerably in the past several months, but this? Actively receiving (literally!) atrocious proposals from his nobles and generals AND signing off on them, knowing the human consequences fully well? Perhaps it was time, Azura thought to herself. Perhaps she had a chance after all to save him?

"Yooooou...are the ocean's gray waves..."

His expression contorting to suggest an explosion of rage was imminent, Leonard was not pleased at all, having (somehow) closed much of this distance between them. "WHAT did you say?" he demanded, physically turning the woman to face him.

"N-nothing, milord." Azura fibbed poorly.

"DON'T YOU FUCKING LIE TO ME!"

****A sickly purple flame enveloping his entire right arm, Leonard grasped Azura's neck, literally lifting her a ways off the floor. As Azura struggled in vain to breathe, the complete, utter hatred and rage in the normally distant eyes shook her to her very soul. "WHAT did I tell you about lying?! I have had it UP TO HERE with your coy attempts to undermine me and my reign- and to poison Corrine against me!"

Azura’s attempts to struggle and protest her innocence only seemed to infuriate the king even further. "I am not threatening- I am PROMISING you- If I ever, EVER, learn about any more of your little intrigues, I will choke the life from you with my bare hand!"

The azure maiden now starting to become somewhat lightheaded, she found her legs kicking in a vain attempt to escape Leonard’s death grip, only to harden his fury.

"WITH MY BARE HAND!"

Releasing her after what seemed like an age, the songstress dropped to her hands and knees, sputtering and gasping for air as the king stomped from the throne room.**** The second he was satisfied of his absence, Kaze began attending to Azura, searching for any wounds in need of treatment. "Lady Azura, are you alright?" he demanded contritely. "We must get you-"

Her vocal cords still a bit sore, Azura held up a dainty hand to the ninja. "I'm fine, I'm fine." she insisted hoarsely.

"By the gods, what was that?!"

"I don't know- I just know it's bad- even worse than I thought."

This time, it was not simply Hana's insistence upon tracking and backtracking to throw off potential pursuers that had cost the group a week and a half, but Rinkah's. Although she was somewhat more nonchalant about the Nohrians' prospects of tracking them ("It's really easy to get lost if you didn't grow up around here."), the loss of speed caused by the country's utter unsuitability for wagon travel and Tristan parting ways with the group to take the fight back to his homeland was more than compensated for.

Still, the boy and his grandmother for whom to all this trouble they had gone, scarcely seemed to mind; indeed, Sakura herself, never a particularly jovial young lady (and even less so these days),
absolutely adored the opportunity to enjoy her nephew's company, to say nothing of her tales of her eldest brother's daring romance with the equally-daring knight. Every time her princess' lips curled into a smile or hearing her gentle, dainty laughter only brightened Hana's day each time she'd experienced them. And even apart from that, she couldn't complain; while the terrain was becoming more and more rugged as they neared some of the range's foothills, at least it was not insufferably hot.

By sunset on their tenth day in the Flame Tribe's lands, with a watchtower manned by some of Amagi's men in sight, Rinkah sent up a flare over their direction to signal their return. "Oh, Lady Rinkah!" exclaimed their commander. "It's a genuine miracle you're alive!"

"Luck only has a bit to do with it." she bragged, throwing a gaze of acknowledgement at Hana. "We got through this on pure skill."

The commander bowed his head dutifully. "Of course, you all must be exhausted; we've prepared accommodations for you at the lodge just up the road."

Victoria smiled. "Thank you, young man. To be sure, the little one is grateful as well."

"And finally, Princess Sakura," resumed the commander. "the chief insists there's someone you'll be very interested to meet by the lodge; it's an urgent matter."

Sakura held her hand to her chest in mild surprise as Hana glared at the commander suspiciously. "Th-thank you, sir."

*****

The women continuing up the path for a good half hour, off to the roadside was a great structure which was essentially a great tent, the grounds attended to by a small, mixed group of Flame Tribesmen and Tribeswomen, one of the former setting her club on her belt in respect. "Ah, Lady Rinkah!" she exclaimed. "We've been expecting you."

"So Unzen's already filled you lot in, of course." said Rinkah presumptuously, gesturing to Victoria and her grandson. "Just help me get these two settled in."

"Right away, ma'am. Any preference for supper?"

"Let me think about it- I mean, we've got a pretty diverse group, after all."

As Rinkah and the tribeswoman departed for the short walk to the lodging, Sakura sighed. "It seems so peaceful around here." she remarked guiltily. "I-it almost makes me feel like-"

*****

Hana could definitely sympathize, but was somehow still slightly unnerved- as if she were being watched. "But what did the guard commander mean by Chief Kikai wanting us to meet someone?"

"Princess, Milady." sounded a rather neutral-sounding, feminine voice.

Immediately looking over her shoulder, Hana felt her heart leap into her throat at the woman whom had (apparently) simply materialized behind her. "Oh, Kagero!" Sakura squealed, throwing herself into the older woman's arms. "Y-you're alright!"

"Well, I have had better days, but also worse." she reported.
"Hey, what am I? Diced kelp?"

With a small puff of solid white smoke, the fifth head of the Saizo clan materialized at Hana's side, considerably less impressed after the second time. "Saizo." the swordswoman acknowledged neutrally. "Well met."

"Not doing too bad yourself. I guess it is true what they say about northerners, after all."

*****Now nearly on the brink of tears of joy, Sakura nonetheless held firm. "Oh, gods," she sniffled. "you're alright! W-when I heard about the capital, I-I'd feared the worst--"

Perhaps unprofessionally, as if a surrogate older sister, Kagero gave the princess a couple of affectionate pats on the head before releasing her as her counterpart scowled at the memory that continued to sting him. "It...has been quite a journey, to put it lightly. But yes, we live and breathe still."

"Of course, I've got to give that wily old goat Kikai his due as well." Saizo admitted. "I hate council nonsense, but he knows a good lure when he hears it; otherwise, I'd have never left Hoshido proper while those vile 'ranches' still--"

Emerging from the massive tent, Victoria, Shiro in arm still, gave a puzzled expression at the commotion audible from the interior. "Hm, what's going on?" she inquired. "Are they friends of yours?"

Sakura smiled lightly. "M-miss Victoria. I'd like you to meet Saizo and Kagero." she introduced shakily. "This is Shiro; m-my nephew."

Already having studied the child's face and eyes, the angry ninja was astonished, yet on some level, not surprised. "Well, I'll be damned- the rumors were true."

At once falling to bended knee before both the young aunt and nephew, Kagero was the first to speak. "Young Lord Shiro, Princess Sakura. As long as I draw breath, my blade is yours to command as you see fit. Even should it cost me my life."

Saizo scoffed. "Same; however, I don't plan on doing any dying anytime soon, princess. Not until every last Nohrian butcher is expelled from Hoshido; even if I have to burn their whole godsdamned country to the ground to do it."

Of course, it was an exceptionally emotional moment for all parties concerned, even if the surly ninja would never admit it, even under torture. Even young Shiro expressed his (appropriately) childlike approval with a smile, grasping for the cowlick protruding from Saizo's head, succeeding after his fourth attempt, at least momentarily.

Victoria smiled fondly. "He likes you two, I can tell."
On Black Hearts

Chapter Summary

Gunter and Flora both make fateful decisions as the former shows his hand to Selena while the former steels herself to do what must be done for the survival of her people.

Chapter Notes

*Venturers' Colony (Tales of Symphonia OST)
**Talk About Sylvan (Tales of Symphonia OST)
***On Black Wings (FE9 OST)
****Ambient desert sounds
*****Omen of the Bloody Moon (The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild OST)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*Having been raised himself in a small town of a village-dwelling people, Florian did not exactly begrudge the adventurer's hamlet for its size; barely a log cabin inn in the mountains with a merchant or two. No, he actually begrudged Flora and the semi-suicidal Chevois expatriate and his wyvern for even considering her proposal. And he more questioned Flora's sanity than anything.

"Yes, that's a fair price." Flora conceded, finally worn down by five minutes of haggling. "That includes the hazard pay, as well."

"Isn't this kinda dangerous?" Florian inquired, unusually sheepishly.

The entrepreneur, a man in his late thirties with a receding hairline and massive facial scarring, simply smiled. "You needn't worry about it!" he insisted, patting the great beast on the neck affectionately. "Old Haar would carry armored teams into battle; and he's still practically in his prime!"

"No, I mean, apart from that. As far as the Nohrians are concerned, if I weren't with her, me even having these weapons on me would be a capital offense, no questions asked. I can only imagine that they say the same about non-Nohrians having 'war-making implements' in their possession."

The ex-knight gave Flora a questioning stare. "You know ma'am, your boyfriend doesn't seem too big on the idea."

Flora sighed, already having far too much on her mind to nitpick about their precise relationship. "I honestly cannot imagine why; this is urgent business."
As their ride required a few more minutes to ready his mount for three passengers as opposed to the usual one or two, so did Florian require a few more minutes of convincing and cajoling in order to actually join Flora on the beast's back. While his position seated behind her saw him clinging onto Flora's waist for dear life (before the tail end of the reigns were passed back), any appeal of the experience was soon to evaporate. "Alright," said the wyvern's master excitedly. "we're off in five-

"Actually, can we get a little bit of-" stammered Florian.

"Four!"

"It's just I'm feeling-"

"Three!"

"Alright, now you're just being-"

"Two!"

"Are you even listening to me, you crazy son of-"

"One!"

"Not yet-"

"And we're off!"

"FUUUUUUUUUUUCCCCCCCCCCCCKKKKKKKK YOUUUUUUU!"

The great winged beast lifting off from its perch, for the Ice Tribe's champion, the next several hours proved an interesting mixture of complaining, physically clinging to Flora, and cowering. At the wind whipping against his face and the sound of the wyvern's wings, Florian had actually resolved to keep his eyes shut, to treat the experience as though it were an exceptionally-unpleasant dream. This remained viable for all of thirty seconds before their pilot and his friend made a steep dive, the wind forcing his eyes open to reveal that the trio was well above the ground to the point where individual people or buildings were no longer visible. The sheer noisiness of the affair made it such that only his screams of terror and curses made it to the ears of Flora or the pilot alike, Florian simply wishing, praying for the ordeal to come to an end.

**By the time they had touched down in a forested clearing, the sun was well past the horizon, Florian having gathered that about six or seven hours of pure unadulterated terror had elapsed. Taking the very first opportunity to dismount the beast, Florian took a few staggering steps before crumbling to his hands and knees, panting and heaving as if his life depended on it. "Exactly as we agreed," said Flora, handing over a not-insignificant sack of gold. "the other half upon arrival. I would invite you to our camp, but this area is quite dangerous."

"Don't worry about it!" the pilot said conciliatorily. "You know what they say-

The older man looked concernedly upon Florian retching and vomiting. "Is...your boyfriend going to be alright?"

"Yes, he should be."

Holding one of her first-aid staves over her guardian, the flecks of light sprinkled over him, Florian's
expression communicating profound gratitude. "Thanks." he said hoarsely.

"Didn't know you were afraid of heights."

"Ha! That's ridiculous! I'm not afraid of heights. I'm afraid of falling from them, there's a difference."

"You seemed fine when we were in the mountains."

"That's a bit different, as I didn't HAVE to look down."

Bidding the daring ex-knight farewell, the pair set out to find a suitable spot (that the enemy would not already have been attracted to) for their camp. "Since I obviously didn't get a good look, where exactly ARE we anyway?" Florian inquired, a hint of bitterness in his tone.

"Hoshido," replied Flora in a very matter-of-fact tone. "The far southwest of it, to be precise."

"Right near the Flame Tribe lands? You ever been?"

Flora shut her eyes in contemplation. "There's a first time for everything, no? Besides, I think you'll be rather pleased with this detour."

He may not have been the sharpest axe in the forge, true, but Florian knew his old friend well enough to recognize the gears turning in her head, not to mention the hint of anxiety her expression had betrayed. "Let's make camp soon." she insisted. "I need to write a letter to someone back home."

What about and to whom, Florian asked of himself. Granted, he could not write himself; he'd never had any need. Apart from her father, the stubborn old chief, Florian supposed she could be probing for potential allies in...whatever the hell it was exactly that they were doing here, but even among their own people, they also had more than their share of potential enemies as well.**

***He may have pledged his blade to the highest bidder, true, but Marcellus was not exactly a man lacking loyalty or familial ties. Perhaps it was their manacled kinsmen and kinswomen shooting them glares of pleading despair or utter, murderous hatred, but something just rubbed him the wrong way about this endeavor; even in spite of the countless times the boss, a man whose judgement he thought the world of, explained it as good and necessary.

"Thanks for your help once again." said the Nohrian officer, handing over a significant sack of gold. "Sir Konrad sends his regards as well; he's been very pleased with the merchandise thus far."

Listening to the coinage jingling, a smug, serpentine smile crawled over Bela's lips. "Any time, my friend." he said. "As long as your gold's good, that is."

"Well, it's Sir Konrad's gold and at least a good bit of it comes from the royal treasury, so-"

The Nohrian shrugged, poking the rearmost slave's ankle with his spear to spur him on. "Alright you lot, get a move on! Sir Konrad wants you alive, but that doesn't mean we can't rough you up a bit!"

Their kinsmen and kinswomen being hauled away for whatever foul purpose the Nohrians could contrive, Marcellus felt the knot in his stomach tighten further; it unnerved him somehow that they'd made an a good industry out of selling the members of other tribes to whatever horrible fates awaited them, but to do so with their own people? "Boss, I've been thinking about something lately."

Bela scoffed haughtily. "That would be a first, now wouldn't it?"
Ignoring the insult, his subordinate continued. "Do you ever wonder WHAT exactly it is those Nohrians are going to do to the people we- y'know, sell to 'em?"

"Why should it? If they're weak enough to get themselves caught, it's more there problem than ours."

"But still, if they-"

Stashing away the gold on his belt, Bela gave his minion an are-you-a-complete-fool sort of scowl. "Maybe this fact didn't get through to you. In this world, those with the gold, make the rules. Would you want to be in those poor sods' place right now? The way I see it, we're just protecting ourselves. So what if we get filthy rich in the process? You want to be like those poor, stupid bastards in the Flame Tribe?"

Marcellus gave a resigned sigh. "No, boss. No I don't."

He could stomach being lectured by the elders, with a false, respectful expression and humility ringing even more falsely. But it truly irritated Bela to be questioned by his subordinates, his minions, men who had pledged to follow his directives for better or for worse. And why shouldn't he be? After all, he was really doing this for them, he told himself. What sort of fate would those hotheads like that musclebound dolt really be leading their people into by opposing Nohr? And if some of his tribesmen and tribeswomen needed to disappear as tribute every now and again, then that was a price he was willing to pay to move up in the world.***

For all his duties as the king's right-hand man, commander of his royal guard, and his "savior," Gunter in truth, loved nothing more than any excuse whatsoever to be free of the castle. Whether due to the imposing architecture, nobles putting on airs at every possible opportunity, or the simply eerie, oppressive atmosphere (which one gave varying degrees of notice due to a series of personal factors) which hung over it like a perennial fog, the old knight would, could, and did take any opportunity to be free of the castle grounds.

Of course, there were occasions where his dislikes seemed to conspire to make his days even worse; this time in the form of an older gentleman, around his age minus a few years, his armor quite a bit lighter than Gunter's, his blue eyes possessing an odd sort of innocence that the decades had not managed to revoke. "Really, I must thank you for the kind words you put in for me in front of His Majesty." the man continued.

"Oh, think nothing of it, Sir Bohdan." Gunter remarked distantly, secretly quite amused by a man thanking him for an assignment which would certainly result in his death. "I simply believe you are the right man at the right time. Your exploits are legend, after all. Your presence will surely be a great boon to morale."

"Oh, you're too kind, Sir Gunter. Even during our days as squires all those years ago, your words and deeds alike have always carried a good deal of weight."

"So, my understanding is that you are to retire soon."

Bohdan closed his eyes, as if to savor the memories to be made. "Yes, immediately after this task from His Majesty. I've made some tentative plans to join my brother on his estate; he wants me to teach his grandsons the bow."

Once more, Gunter's stony expression masked the complete, utter contempt he felt for his comrade; who exactly did this man think he was kidding exactly? Long had he despised these noble-born knights who earnestly believed in this utter tripe; that their true purpose was to defend the weak and
uphold knightly virtue at war and in peace. To defend and protect the honor of the higher nobility who saw them as simple tools of enforcement- to plunder and settle scores with their enemies. In that sense, Gunter actually preferred the likes of Duke Guillaume (that utter money-grubbing rat), as there was no self-delusion behind their motives. Not that this would save him, by any means. His revenge was still far from complete, after all. And as for his old colleague, that contemptible sycophant? Well, Gunter was just fine with his willingness to give his life for Mad King Leonard's megalomania. Gods knew the natives would see to it that he lost his life doing so.

The other knight chuckled as he reminisced fondly. "Rest assured, my old friend. I'll whip these whelps into shape!"

Gunter smiled blankly. "I'm certain you will." he lied.

The exceptionally distinct, particularly-coppery smell one associates with any mass bloodletting assaulted the old knight's nostrils as he surveyed the ruined throne room. Or what remained of it, anyway. Even without his friend's active participation, that young lady managed to do quite the number on this lot, he thought with a grim sense of satisfaction. Truth be told, it concerned him particularly little this time; he and war did go way back, after all. And death followed war like dawn followed night; he had little concern for this motley collection of outcasts and rejects. Although as he approached one very distinctive figure, the blond giant in princely armor felled by a blade wound through his shoulder, Gunter could not stop himself from scoffing.

Any other observer would likely be struck by the sheer tragic beauty of the troubled prince and his troubled lover (the wound through her back almost identical to his interestingly enough) linking hands, taking their dying breaths together amidst the utter carnage and chaos surrounding them. Gunter however, could simply scowl, giving him a couple of ineffectual kicks to the chest. Even beasts will (usually) show compassion to their mates, he thought viciously. "Tell me, where was this 'compassion' for your father's countless victims?" asked the old knight contemptuously.

But business had to come before pleasure, Gunter reminded himself; time was of the essence and he’d lost enough of it back in the corridors, saving another beast from the consequences of his life of depravity. Negotiating his fallen comrades, at his impediment by the great pillar, the old knight summoned a burst of purple flame through his forearm, shattering an easily man-sized hole through the column. Well-past the halfway point, Gunter’s finally sighted one of his targets splayed on his back, leg crushed by his decapitated steed and his breathing shallow. "I could actually kill him right here," he thought, standing over his country's (barely) surviving prince. "Just cut his throat. No one would be any the wiser."

Of course, Gunter ultimately decided against it; after all what use is revenge against a long-dead man? Particularly if his ilk are just going to continue about their merry, depraved ways? Besides, his master still required a male of that lineage for gods-only-knew-what-exactly, but said male’s dire straits made him question the wisdom of his initial order. "Erm, milord," he began gingerly, as if addressing an active, sentient volcano. "the extent of the prince's wounds make me-"

"Continue as ordered, human." growled a voice, simmering with rage.

"But milord, she's not exactly a normal 'human' by any means and I don't think he'll-"

"DO IT, WORM!"

Defeated, the old knight could only continue in his orders; it made sense, come to think of it; he had after all, spent the better part of the past seventeen years as a sort of glorified babysitter and he would be just as insistent were their positions reversed, he reflected as he ascended the steps.
Precisely as he'd expected, Corrine, while obviously unconscious and with a great deal of blood loss, was in better condition than his other target. Lifting the princess and placing her on the cold marble of the stairs, Gunter knelt down and cut away the fabric obscuring the wound on her lower back, producing a potent, sweet-smelling (needless to say, very rare and very expensive) elixir from his belt, undoing the cork and applying the liquid to the site of the wound. "There we are." he remarked. "Good as new with a bit of time." Ever since he'd been a squire and (and certainly far before that point, to be sure) he'd known regular soldiers, knights, and nobles alike to often take such concoctions internally to treat their wounds; it would work in a pinch, to be sure, but the effectiveness would certainly not be maximized.

Of course, even were he so inclined, the extent of his other target's injuries absolutely precluded such a course of treatment, only made even clearer by the considerable amount of pooled blood sent spilling from the prince's tattered chest protector upon its removal. Nonetheless, his new liege's breathing shallow-but-still-present, the old knight knelt down and got to work, taking care to apply his other elixir just so that the sites of obvious arterial damage would be given priority. Upon expending the liquid and allowing it to settle in a bit, Gunter found the prince's breathing to have somewhat stabilized and the worst of the hemorrhaging staunched, yet the continued blood loss made one thing clear; he was not exactly out of the woods by any means. The others were still in comparatively decent shape and could be retrieved later; hell, the songstress was merely unconscious. "Up we go, sire." he said with a grunt, scooping the prince into his arms. "Let's go present you to your people- again."

The small scouting team sent to investigate the horrific, otherworldly sounds coming from the castle and reports of odd, post-battle casualties could only imagine the horror that waited them as they approached those great doors. "Sir Gunter!" exclaimed the worried-looking leader. "Thank the gods you're alive! I'd heard-"

"I don't care what you'd heard." the old knight interrupted crossly, already well-aware of the evening's events. "Just get this young man to the healers as soon as possible."

His second-in-command's eyes widened. "Oh, gods, Prince Leo!" he remarked distraughtly. "Does this mean that-"

"I couldn't tell you." Gunter lied. "I simply found him like this after the battle. He lives still, but-"

The leader bowed his head in affirmation. "Right away, sir. You there!" he barked to one of his subordinates Your vulneraries! Now! The savages won't get away with this!"

The soldiers having commandeered a cart, as they hauled their prince away to the medics, Gunter's solemn, ever-stony expression gave little, if any hint to his actual thoughts. Now it's about to become truly interesting, he remarked to himself.

Disembarking from the ship after the crew had moored the vessel, Selena, as the princess' protector, would scout the immediate area ahead of time, and tonight was only different thanks to the chilly, maritime air and light-but-ominous fog obscuring the port. Exhaling sharply, the mercenary took the opportunity for a brief respite; she'd barely slept the entire journey back from Notre Sagesse with everything on her mind and she relished any and all opportunities to rest her weary eyes.

With all this in mind, Selena would not have otherwise ignored the light pattering of footsteps, almost certainly belonging to a dockhand. "Hey, boy!" she growled. "Go home to your parents! I've got this taken care of."

The interloper was instead met the sound of a very-distinct-and-familiar throat clearing, her heart
leaping into her throat at the fact that it originated from behind her. Yet some of the edge was taken off as she realized the figure's identity. "Oh, it's just you? What is it you want?"

Despite the man's liege, the age difference and inevitable toll the decades would have taken on his body made Selena fairly certain of her ability to overpower him; besides, it was simply not common at all for a king to use his right-hand as an assassin.

"Secrets are interesting things, no?" Gunter remarked mysteriously. "Despite best efforts to the contrary, they still have a way of getting out."

On a number of levels, any and all relief Selena felt at the lurker's identity evaporated at that moment, if for no other reason than the sheer number of secrets she had been trusted to keep, nonetheless opting to keep up her prickly facade. "Look, if those blueblood vultures sent you to hassle me about my relationship with Lady Camilla-"

The old knight snorted derisively. "Please!" he insisted impatiently. "I don't care about that; exactly how tawdry do you take my interests to be? No, I speak of secrets which could tear a realm apart if divulged."

Now exceptionally conscious of each beat her heart took, Selena knew fully well the knight was either probing her for information, or bluffing in the hope of getting her to divulge something and there was almost no good way for this to end. Or perhaps he was simply toying with her? Trying to inflict psychological and emotional pain on her for the hell of it? Nonetheless, the fiery mercenary resolved not to give him the satisfaction. "Look, buddy," she began combatively, closing the distance between them somewhat. "I don't think you exactly appreciate who you're trying to mess with. My father was the greatest swordsman ever to live in his country and my mother...was just as great a knight in hers. So if you think this is going to be an easy hit, old man-"

In his expression however, Selena probably saw the first hint of emotion she'd ever seen. "Let me tell you something, wench," he growled. "only fools, braggarts, and foolish braggarts try to intimidate others with their lineages. "There are powers in this world of which you or I cannot even conceive. For example-"

His arm suddenly enveloped by an eerie, purple flame, Gunter's right gauntlet shot out towards Selena's neck, lifting her into the air as far as his arm would allow, with no more difficulty than if she were a rag doll. As she felt the oxygen being cut off to her system, Selena found her efforts to escape and/or loosen his grip around her throat come to nothing. In fact, her resistance actually seemed to be tightening the old knight's grip. "Can your beloved princess manage THIS?" he inquired nastily. Once again, Selena's impotent attempts at rebuttal and escape only seemed to worsen her situation, by this point, his vacant, normally-disinterested eyes shimmering with an uncharacteristic malice. "Or perhaps I should just snap your pretty little bastard neck right here and now? Complete the set, hm?"

Just when she was sure she was about to lose consciousness, just as abruptly as he'd started, the knight released Selena, dropping her to her hands and knees, sputtering and gasping for breath, the purple flame dismissed to the void. "No, but then I would be depriving myself of another example of one of the few joys I have left in life. The minds of the hopelessly deluded never cease to amuse. Ah, well. By your leave."

Selena's system was far too busy attempting to correct itself with badly-needed oxygen for her to pay too much attention to the old knight's departure. But with a few moments, did take stock of the situation; it was now clear that Gunter, the old veteran she'd dismissed and ignored, was far more savvy and far more dangerous than she had at first appreciated, somehow aware of a couple of her closely-guarded secrets about her origins. Hell, he was probably as dangerous as his king by this
point! Still, his utter aloofness concerning any threats to Leonard's rule and any possible pretenders, as well as her having kept the princess' secret, the whole reason for her "holiday" to the island nation, led Selena to consider this a victory. A Pyrrhic one, but a victory nonetheless. But was he really correct in having so little faith in even the possibility of linage having an influence? Selena could never say this to be the case for certain.

**** It was not exactly an easy life to be certain; the deserts were, by nature, unforgiving, deadly to the uninitiated and careless at all hours, day or night. Not to mention for these nomadic pastoralists, an epidemic could prove disastrous for livestock and man alike, perhaps possibly eliminating the unfortunate pack or tribe to be hit with a significant enough plague. Nonetheless, for these proud, independent people, it was a life all the same. Why bother with concerning oneself with what lie beyond those dunes when the vast desert was a world in and of itself? But for a couple of shepherds awaiting the return of their flock on one particular windy night, there was just something unusual about the one constant in their skies.

"Hey, stop staring at it, you lazy ass." scolded the first shepherd, poking his counterpart with his cane. "The sheep are going to wander off. It'll be there tomorrow night too."

"Can't." said the second blankly. "Don't you think there's something weird about it? It's beautiful, but...weird, I can't say exactly why."

"Will you come off it?! There's nothing weird about the moon-“****

***** Upon looking at it for himself, the second shepherd knew he was telling himself a damned lie. He knew he'd caught a glimpse of it earlier and he knew it hadn't been that weird red color just a couple of hours ago. Or had it been? Of course, neither of the men could ignore the massive beam of red light which shot down from the celestial body, apparently striking the oasis not far from the encampment.

"Wh-what the hell was that?!” asked the first shepherd, clinging to his friend.

"Don't be a coward! It was just...a trick of the light, yeah, that's it."

"Are you really sure it was such a good idea to send those two daughters of yours to draw water?"

"Yes, because we both know damn well that water to drink is far more important than whatever superstitious nonsense you've cooked up. Besides, maybe that kind of initiative will finally see a husband in the picture for at least one of them."

However, as the beam from the blood moon struck the oasis and the twin mystics discovered the consequences, two of the world's guardians were immediately alerted to these developments; one exceptionally wary, the other just as fascinated.

Chapter End Notes

I know a lot of people (for gameplay reasons or otherwise) aren't exactly fond of him, but I actually thought Gunter was a pretty interesting old dude for being an inversion of the treacherous knight archetype, compared to say, Orson. He didn't have any malice at all towards Erika and Ephraim; he just betrayed them due to being batshit insane with grief. Gunter however, when put in the exact same situation, still continues to serve
nobles he secretly despises. Needless to say, this opens up the possibility for a lot of mischief.

Also, Florian's (other) nemesis, Bela, isn't really a reference to Naesala; their actions are pretty similar (plus I thought his sinister-sounding theme was appropriate for him), but as you can see, when tyrants, be they named Lekain or Leonard, have a figurative loaded gun pointed at his people's collective head, their motivations are VERY different.
Rising Morale

Chapter Summary

Corrine's youthful, undaunted optimism (to say nothing of her attempts at bonding with her colleagues) is stopped cold- not only by the weather, the local Flame Tribe clans prepare for the inevitable Nohrian assault on one of their holiest sites, and just before taking care of business, the respite offered to Chief Kikai's guests provides an opportunity to socialize, unwind- as well as reflect upon just how very strange their mutual enemy truly has become over the ages.

Chapter Notes

*Shrine (The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild OST)
**Untold Despair (Tales of Symphonia OST)
***Mountain Village (The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask OST)
****Ambient blizzard sounds
*****Doomed Mission/The Ing Attack (Metroid Prime 2: Echoes OST)
******For Victory (FE9 OST)
*******Caineghis, King of Lions (FE10 OST)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

_The young upstart sighed in frustration at his elders. "And I plea to you once again," he reiterated. "there are a number of things simply...untoward about the power Selenos is offering this young man!"

One of the elder dragons scoffed. "What concern of it is yours, hatchling? Loyalty in exchange for our aid has always been an essential part of our dealings with humans. I swear, you young ones reach a couple thousand years, think they've got it all figured out."

"I'm well aware of that, Sir Hudatos. However, you cannot earnestly believe that any human, even an unusually-powerful one, has any business with this kind of power. I would go so far as to say that it doesn't belong in our world."

"Ha! Again with the exaggeration! He probably learned it from those two hags that raised him."

The upstart was becoming rather annoyed, yet still remained calm, essential for making his case. "Or Sir Puros; do you disagree that Selenos has changed recently?"

The second elder remained silent, as if briefly lost in thought. "I always took it as him blowing off steam, but he HAS carried through with his threat to abandon council meetings as of late."
The third elder, while not to the extent of his counterpart, still remained skeptical. "Suppose Selenos is behaving untowardly in his dealings with the humans. What exactly does the young one propose to do about it? It's not as if he'll simply join us for a friendly chat."

By now, the upstart was beginning to feel some optimism; as though the elders were somewhat more open to his proposal. "Of course, Sir Anemos, I do not intend you all to take me solely at my word. Lord Moro, I appeal to you directly for a dispensation; allow me to prove, without a doubt, that the power Selenos is granting this youth simply does not belong in this world. Allow me to journey beyond this world and prove the origin of these evil powers."

The great Astral Dragon remained silent for a moment at this request. "Hmm...that is not a request I can grant lightly, my child. However, since it is YOU making the request, knowing fully well the complications..."

"Oh, come on!" groused Hudatos. "You can't seriously be considering this-"

"Very well, I accept your plea. With this said, I shall summon Selenos to hear his side shortly. However, you know the laws better than any of your kin."

"Of course, milord." said the youth respectfully. "I'm well-aware of the potential disasters that come of meddling in the affairs of other worlds."

"May fortune favor you, young Anankos."

**Having made their camp on a ridge just outside of the heavy forests of southern Hoshido, Candace and the Flame Tribe's twin warriors and their search for hide or hair of Princess Hinoka, while never perceived as an endeavor with a high chance of success to begin with, was nonetheless one they were all duty-bound (or at least contract-bound) to carry it out to the best of their ability. However, the months-old rumors of an impending conflict and one particular sight informed one of the twins of a fundamental desire- to avoid capture by the Nohrians at all costs.**

"What the...what the everloving fuck is this?!" Daisen inquired, outrage flaring in his voice and eyes at once.

"It's one of them 'ranches' those Nohrian bigshots seem to be pretty fond of setting up." informed Candace grimly.

Daisen's grip on the club at his side became almost painful as he witnessed a pair of those oddly-clad Nohrian soldiers calmly and coldly slaughter the mass of "livestock" for some imagined offense or another. "I thought it was just them being arrogant fucks- but this is just sick!"

Candace shrugged lightly. "Never said it ain't, but-"

"What do you really think we can do about it right now?" Hakone posed irritably. "I know you want to storm in first and ask questions later, but-"

"But-"

"The only thing you would succeed in doing is getting ourselves and a good number of those people killed. We've got our orders; find some sign of Princess Hinoka. Now after that, we'll see."

Her twin kicked a clump of dirt in impotent rage. "Fine, you've got a point, sis." he conceded bitterly. "But when that day comes, I don't care if I have to blow myself up, those fuckers aren't taking ME alive."
Even as her twin companions settled into an unsettled sleep, Candace could not help but notice something untoward—shrieks of pain and anguished even more acute than the ones emanating from the ranch—instead, the screams, a woman's from the sound of them emanating from the Nohrian camp down the road from the ranch. She had been around enough to know that this could not be—and was impossible to be a sign of anything good at all. But not even the inquisitive bandit could have foreseen just how relevant said screaming fits would be to their mission and all of their fates.**

***While he'd quite a bit of practice by this point in time, the gloves favored by his tribesmen in this region irritated Naeba a good deal at first. He'd no clue how the crazy bastards in the Ice Tribe did it, as their homeland was supposed to be even more forbidding. Nonetheless, people will go to great lengths for their religious beliefs and members of his nation were no different.

He hailed from quite a ways south himself, near the Flame Tribe's main settlement, but marital and familial ties had bought him north to the White Mountain and the surrounding peaks; where the "end" of winter simply meant a stop to the worst of the blizzards—usually. But then again, Naeba thought as he observed the few trails from his perch—an outcropping overlooking the the white, hostile terrain below, this could actually work to their advantage.

"My inspection is complete, sir!" reported his adjutant dutifully.

"At ease, Meakan. How go our preparations?"

The young man swallowed nervously. "Well, since we'll have blunted most of the enemy's advantages with the terrain, we should be in a good position to hold them off. We should, anyway."

"Wait, why only 'should'? What do our supply stockpiles look like by now?"

"Not good, sir. Not good at all. As we both know, armies march and defend on their stomachs, but what of the people they protect?"

Naeba cursed to himself; given the temple located on Mount Haku itself was the center of tribal religion in this area (and a natural fortress at that), it stood to reason that Nohr would covet it for the mineral resources (just as always), so morale was high in spite of the conditions. But scores of volunteers from town, the only settlement of any size on the mountain, both young and middle-aged, in addition to trained warriors, created its own problems. Ever since he'd joined his wife and her family out here, even on the coldest nights, the sound of the wind comforted him, even on the bitterest of nights. But now? Naeba could only hear its harshness mocking him and the desperation of their people.

"Detach an escort party from our main body, bows and casters mainly," commanded Naeba. "Have them escort the women, the children, and elderly to the temple. Anyone unable to fight. They should be able to survive until we can either stop the Nohrian advance, help can arrive from the south, or both."

"But sir?!" inquired Maekan incredulously. "Have you no faith in our warriors? You'd rather throw material and men at a journey like this instead of halting the enemy? Besides, it would be a death march in these conditions!"

The elder raised a judging eyebrow. "And leaving them to fall under Nohrian control would not be? Or even worse?"

The look of terror and disgust upon the face of his subcommander, as well as the light bow at the waist, told Naeba his orders would be carried out to the letter.
She'd had scarce little exposure to it, thank the gods, but a mere couple of days in the southeastern mountains reminded Corrine of one very important thing- she absolutely despised snow and freezing weather. No elixir, no covering, no shelter, no secret recipe seemed to make a difference, exactly as with the Ice Tribe. Perhaps it had something to do with the whole dragon thing?

Both she and other Nohrian commanders had previous experience with well-trained, highly-motivated enemies with (usual) numerical superiority, true. But in conditions like these? At the foot of the range, it was still freaking spring! And the narrow approaches, poor footing, and literally-freezing weather all took a toll, to say nothing of the terrain advantage held by the enemy.

Of course, one thing had no other option but to make her blood run hot- even with her muscles sluggish from the cold, the inevitable first meeting of the enemy in battle; the tribe's skirmish-scouting party having holed up in an abandoned hamlet a good two stories above the beaten path saw the Nohrian forces at a disadvantage, to say the least. An almost-continuous hail of arrows, spells, and massive snowballs (or the occasional boulder disguised as such) deployed to block escape routes, all conspired to make the affair far costlier in casualties than it should have been; even as Corrine dispatched warrior after warrior, their space to maneuver only seemed to lessen.

In fact, the only reason they managed a breakout when they did was a courageously-foolhardy maneuver by Ira where she broke through one of the frozen barriers, leaping up and beginning to hack and slash at the bowmen and casters with her concealed blade, giving the rest of the unit the chance to start up the other path, dealing with their counterparts on the opposing outcropping.

As the enemy was vanquished and the adrenaline ceased flooding her system, even over the men's celebrations, Corrine was, once again, made very aware of the sound of her teeth chattering at the cold, cursing to herself that the sun (for all its visibility, which was almost nonexistent) seemed largely past the horizon.

"How much longer til we reach where we're going, princess?" inquired one pikeman, holstering his weapon in favor of a knife.

"I-I couldn't tell you." she said honestly. "Sir Armin insisted we were to advance at full speed- what the hell are you doing, soldier?!"

Crouched over a deceased Flame Tribe warrior, the pikeman began to hack away at the deceased's face as he muttered assorted curses and slurs. "Fucking fanatics," he said, finally settling on gouging out his still-opened eyes. "Just making it so they can't go onto their spirit world, princess. Animals have it coming, far as I'm concerned. Y'know they pray to their 'god,' so that he'll drag his scaly arse out of their mountain and burn us all to death, right?"

"Yep," agreed another soldier, his "necklace" of trophies lined with severed ears. "it's even worse with the rice-grubbing slants. They think if they kill one of us, they get a whole harem of Nohrian virgins in the afterlife! No wonder my brothers over there and their buddies cut off the savages' pricks after they waste 'em!"

Corrine sighed, physically and psychologically exhausted by the conditions as well as their ambiguous situation regarding an advance. "I'd better not catch either of you doing anything like this again." she threatened halfheartedly.

The enemy's dignity or all of their lives? Perhaps it was the cold getting to her, but even for Corrine,
this time, it was little choice; however, the sight of four of her men holding down a severely-wounded, immobile warrior, one of them literally attempting to forcibly extract a gold tooth from his mouth, disgusted (for a number of reasons) her more than anything, driving her blade through the poor bastard's heart in an act of mercy.

Her colleague, on the other hand, was probably an even more prolific pillager than the men under her command; when the princess accosted Ira, she was in the process of literally severing a warrior's lifeless finger in pursuit of the ring on it. "What do you want?" the brunette asked nastily. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

"Aren't you cold at all?" inquired Corrine, recoiling in horror at her counterpart's tattered excuse for clothing.

"Nope, not at all."

"Anyway, that's not important right now. There's no way we can continue on, we'll have to make camp here for the night."

Irritated at being interrupted and her quarry failing to slide from the severed extremity, Ira's nostrils flared. "Why the fuck shouldn't we? That Armin prick said 'with all due speed,' right? Besides, we've got at least an hour before sundown, how much farther can this village really be?"

"And if they have another ambush waiting for us? You really want to risk being pinned down AND exposed like we just were? At night, no less?"

***Ira gave a huff of defeat. "Fine, fine, we'll do it YOUR way."****

For all the complaints about her leadership, one of the things for which Corrine was genuinely revered was her down-to-earth nature, thinking nothing of dining with her soldiers or helping to set up camp; granted, given the poor taste her previous interactions with Ira had left in her mouth and the very immediate prospect of a warm fire, made this not especially selfless on her part. Fortunately, the huts and lean-tos erected by the previous occupants made this go somewhat more smoothly, setting aside a few of the former for treatment of the wounded. By the time the sun had retreated under the horizon, her unit had managed to erect a makeshift encampment; if the enemy marshaled the forces to overrun it, they were likely out of luck, but shelter and heat in these conditions proved figurative and literal lifesavers for many, as the harsh winds only seemed to pick up the darker it became.

Shrouded in a blanket and entranced by the barely-audible crinkling of the fire before her, Corrine tried simply to physically separate herself from the horrid conditions, instead focusing on the positives that would come of her completing the mission. "Want the rest of my soup, princess?"

"No thank you -hachoo-!" answered Corrine "I'm just not hungry."

The soldier sitting directly across from the fellow scowled at him. "You're just giving food away?" he asked dismissively. "We've got to make this last, you know. Gods only know how long the resupply column will take getting up here. We could basically end up eating each other before that happens."

The face of the man directly to his left suddenly lit up. "Hey, speaking of which, why don't we tell some savage stories?! You know, take our minds off of it?"

The men murmured in general agreement. "Good idea, Weber." said his neighbor to the right.
"Revel's always got some good ones."

****The man sitting directly opposite Corrine (noticed by the princess only due to a slightly-larger-than-average-frame and his bushy black eyebrows), stood up and cleared his throat dramatically.***** "Alright, a buddy of mine's stepbrother in slant country saw it all with his own eyes about six or so months ago," prefaced Revel just as dramatically. "The guy's brigade was pursuing some of the rats into some little podunk village and the surrounding woods. Everything's normal so far, right? So the locals start getting uppity and our boys take care of business in response. Needless to say, THOSE savages won't be bothering the decent people of the world ever again."

Whether due to actual, wholehearted agreement with the actions, a face-saving measure due to the implicit peer pressure, delirium from the early onset of hypothermia, or some combination of the factors, the most of the nine non-Corrine souls around the fire chuckled with varying degrees of sincerity, Revel resuming after a pause to indulge his vanity before continuing. "Anyway, so they make camp and everything's going fine. Boring, but normal. For three days, no news was good news. But on the third night, a full moon-"

"Oh, gods, what, what?" whined the soldier to Corrine's right, reflexively invading her personal space. "What happened?!"

The storyteller grinned darkly. "Well, in the middle of the night, their commander was woken by a horrible screech. He thought it was just an owl or something; cause it damn sure wasn't something that a normal human could make. But then, just before he could go back to his tent- on the overlooking hills and in the woods- Savages! Savages everywhere! Hundreds of them, thousands of them! Cursing, raving, foaming at the mouth! 'Oh, gods, we need backup, they're everywhere!' cried one his swordsmen before a savage pounced on him, ripped his beating heart from his body and devoured it whole! His buddy next to him cut down a bunch of 'em before they managed to overrun him- few seconds later, all that was left was a pile of bones, his armor and sword!"

Muttering and chattering fearfully, a couple of the men looked to be well on their way to being physically ill; Revel perhaps was getting some sort of twisted amusement out of concocting the most lurid story possible. "It was the most horrible thing the guy had ever seen!" he exclaimed. "After our guys could fight any longer, savages feasting on their flesh and guts, gouging out still-living men's eyes, raping, tearing off flesh, laughing and rejoicing as they did it!"*****

Seating himself back down to the terrified murmurs of his fellows, Revel crossed his arms. "Yep, just like dear old dad always said. It's gonna be either them or us," he said assuredly.

The soldier to Corrine's left scoffed and rolled his eyes. "Bull-fucking-shit." he remarked, most underwhelmed by the tale. "You guys believed him? Really?"

Needless to say, such an observation did not earn the man much favor among his fellows.

"What the fuck, Metzger?!"

"What'd he say that was so wrong?"

"You some kinda savage-lover, Metzger?!"

"Why don't we drop him in the middle of savage country! See how he feels then!"
"It sounds pretty mundane for what those animals usually get up to to me."

"What's so unbelievable about it?"

Metzger growled in frustration, counting off his reasons with his fingers. "Since I have a brain and choose to use it. Sure, it was believable until he got to the flesh-eating, raping part. After that, just- ugh- and that he got it third-hand? Come on!"

The dirty, irritated glances at Metzger notwithstanding, it was perhaps unsurprising that once Ira's adjutant made his rounds, handing out assignments, Metzger was "volunteered" by his fellows for signal duty; namely, remaining awake for the better part of the night, in the freezing cold, tending to signal fires to beacon reinforcements.

******Chief Kikai's impending summit by the mountainside saw the chance for Hana and Sakura to meet new faces, as well as reunite with old ones, all of them rather interesting. "So, you're back." greeted Kikai with a wide grin. "And in one piece too!"

"It's just like I told you, Chief Kikai," Hana answered sunnily, handing off the odd, foreign garb back to Amagi. "She gives me an order, I follow through."

"Y-yes," confirmed Sakura mousily, her eyes darting about the representatives of the various peoples as opposed to their hosts. "Hana's e-extremely dependable. I-I'd rely on no one else b-before her."

Uttering his first word to a non-Kikai soul in weeks, Amagi raised an eyebrow. "Something troubling you, young one?"

"N-not at all, S-sir Amagi-" fibbed Sakura.

Rinkah however, noticing the general positions of the other representatives and the general direction of Sakura's gazes, spoke up. "If you're still worried about those two fuckers from when you first came around, don't be." she insisted. "Trust me, nearly all of these guys and gals have even less love for Nohr than you or Hana."

Indeed, confirmation of this was forthcoming within minutes as Flora and her guardian made the rounds in the course of their introductions. "Princess Sakura," she began formally. "I am Flora, heiress of the Ice Tribe. This is my man, Florian. He's the only reason I've survived this journey so far."

Mildly taken aback at how she'd been known without any sort of introduction, Sakura nonetheless politely bowed. "A p-lease to meet you, Lady Flora." she picked up timidly. "This is-"

Florian, on the other hand, seemed to be at least somewhat familiar with Sakura's protector. "So are the rumors true?" he inquired, a childlike anticipation in his tone. "Did you really burn a whole Nohrian army alive?"

"Technically, yes," Hana replied, as if he was inquiring about her having a second head. "but it was more a team effort with-"

The normally-sullen Florian's face lit up as he shook the swordswoman's hand "Oh, man! You are my freaking hero, woman! It's been my life's dream to give those bastards a black eye like that! Say, I've been hearing some Nohrians talking about how their army in your capital was destroyed by some kind of 'demon' little less than a year ago. By any chance, was that also-"
"Yeah, it was. But I don't think you'd believe me if I told you the whole story. I scarcely even believe it."

Sakura and Flora remaining in the vicinity while breaking off into a separate conversation, Florian chuckled giddily. "You must be a living legend in your country!"

Hana simply shrugged. "I was just doing my job." she half-fibbed. "It was only kind of personal; they wanted to take Lady Sakura from us and that was unacceptable."

Florian's expression was now drained of any of its previous levity. "Well, it's real personal for me. Who'd they take from you before?"

"My father, my uncle, a good part of the population of my home province."

Florian scrunched his eyebrows. "I feel you there, same here. Except with me, it was a bunch of men and boys from our town, all of my father's brothers, and my own, older and younger alike. I'll spare you the gory details, but I was the only survivor. So, yeah, it's real personal for me."

Hana lurched backward slightly. "Oh, gods, it really IS personal! If I were you, I don't think I'd be able stop myself from killing every Nohrian I came across."

Florian smirked darkly. "Well, it's an acquired skill, to say the least. But there's one Nohrian I insist on killing, even if it's the very last thing I do; their commander, that horseman in the demonic black armor. That fucker's sorry excuse for a life is mine, no questions asked."

The swordswoman nodded, a very particular individual in mind. "I can respect that. There are some people in the world who just need killing."

However, not all the introductions proceeded so smoothly; Tristan dismounting his wyvern's back in a nearby clearing, Hana gave a respectful nod of acknowledgement as she and her lady passed by. "So you know these weirdos?" Lupina inquired. "They're supposed to have Nohr running for their mothers with their tails between their legs? They don't look so tough."

"Yes, and for your information, I literally owe these 'weirdos' my life. My aunt would say the exact same."

Motioning the pair over, Sakura, while somehow hesitant, followed suit. "Ladies, this is Lupina, Chieftainess of the Wolfskin." introduced Tristan. "She might look scary, but she's usually harmless."

Lupina grinned toothily. "Until you harm my people, that is." she corrected, extending one of her large, vaguely paw-like hands. "And you must be the princess."

"Y-yes," Sakura confirmed, unsure how exactly to respond to the gesture. "Th-this is Hana, my w-woman."

Glancing up and down Hana's lithe, muscular frame (in a manner that made the princess somewhat uncomfortable), the chieftainess seemed slightly impressed. "Well, I guess you Hoshidans aren't as soft as we've thought you are, huh?"

The swordswoman, already in a rather tense mood, scowled at the dismissive remark and Tristan
rolled his eyes. "Come on, Lupina, show a little class." he insisted tiredly, tossing a large slab of roasted meat to a very grateful Heath. "Apart from us, they're almost certainly the people who've been fighting Nohr the hardest."

The wolfish woman scoffed. "Heh, classless? 'Classless' would be me pointing out a term we often put after 'Hoshidan' can mean a cat- among other things."

While the comment went well over Sakura's head, Hana's face reddened slightly at the insulting comparison.

The afternoon also held reunions with old acquaintances as well; given all that was transpiring, those caught up in their own conversations scarcely noticed a lone pegasus touching down, its master, a slight man of twenty or so with soft features and narrow eyes, dismounting the beast and thanking the stablekeepers for their help.

"Princess Sakura," he began politely. "it is truly a relief to see you alive and well."

With this Hana, squealed in delight, embracing the man as if she were her own brother. "Jun! I've been so worried!"

The man chuckled, tousling the swordswoman's locks. "I could have said the same, but maybe I didn't need to; you've just shot up since I last saw you!"

"Erm, Hana..." began Sakura apprehensively (perhaps somewhat jealously as well). "Who is-"

The man suddenly winced, recalling his breach of etiquette, going down on his knee. "Oh, of course, where are my manners. I am Junichiro, Lord Takeshi's man. I was sent to represent him before Chief Kikai."

"Yeah, Jun's really helped a lot over the years." Hana informed. "He's basically my brother too!"

Sakura swallowed nervously. "Oh, yes. O-of course."

Rinkah calling over the princess for advice on gastronomical accommodations for their Hoshidan guests, Sakura reluctantly humored her fiery counterpart briefly. For all her unconscious jealousy of the man, it was, interestingly enough, completely superfluous for one very specific reason. Inquiring about her mother, brother, and the state of Mutsu after her departure, a good deal of the light left Junichiro's expression as he recalled the tales of much hardship and loss, particularly for the common people upon whom the Nohrians would take out most of their frustrations. To say nothing of the bloodthirsty Nohrian folk hero and the actual fate ("Those other guys were right; the Nohrians ARE the real savages in this!") of her uncle and his ragged band of survivors.

"So I suppose there's no chance of you coming back to Mutsu with us?" Junichiro inquired.

"What do you think?" Hana asked distractedly, three-fourth's of her focus on the red-haired princess conversing with Rinkah and the chefs in the distance. "Of course I'm not leaving her side!"

Junichiro sighed tiredly. "Well, I knew that much before I even asked. You really do look at her like I would, well-"

"Yeah; it's just like if I called you away from my brother's side to help the resistance here."
While it was something both were quite tight-lipped about, Hana and her brother's retainer shared
one thing- or situation, in common. "I suppose that's one of the possible dangers for people like us, so
to speak." said Junichiro. "Or in our situation, I should say."

Hana sighed. "You could say that again." she answered sourly. "You had it easy; you didn't
basically grow up with my brother."

"Maybe, maybe not. Takeshi never saw me in that way, as it were. Yayoi's a wonderful woman
whose given him wonderful children and I wish them all the best. But the princess on the other
hand..."

Recalling his business with the head of the Saizo clan, Junichiro bade his surrogate sister-slash-
fellow-sufferer farewell and set off for the other side of the camp. Hana requesting her regards sent to
her only remaining biological family, she quickly went to rejoin Sakura.

With the sun starting to dip in the west, the lodge's impromptu mess hall provided even more
opportunities for shared revelations; Lupina wished to pay her regards to the aunt of Tristan's in
question, Florian's lady was repeatedly forced to prevent him from berating the Flame Tribe cooks,
while Rinkah took a much-needed break from scolding said cooks. Much as most who met him, the
chiefness was rather impressed by Shiro. "Aww, look at this little guy!" she cooed, playfully
ruffling his blond locks. "Why'd you hafta flee from Cheve? Who could hate a face like this?"

Victoria sighed blankly. "Well..."

While omitting the absolute worst of ordeal, Victoria relayed the whole sordid tale of her daughter,
the "sins" she'd committed with the prince and daring to give birth to their son and how their Nohrian
"older brothers" saw fit to repay an "uppity cunt" like her; to say nothing of the abuse heaped on young Shiro (and by extension, those like him) for the "crime" of having the wrong father. While
Sakura was quite distressed, only having heard a truncated version from Hana, the expressions from
the other guests betrayed some combination of shock, horror, disgust, and confusion, more often than
not leaning in one of the four directions.

"That's abominable!" Flora remarked. "And they would just come into your establishment and say
things like that?"

"I'd asked Father countless times how a people comes to this way of thinking." Rinkah interjected.
"He could never give me an answer- told me that's probably how they've always seen us 'savages'
around them."

"Are these people from another freakin' planet?!" raged Lupina. "How the fuck does any healthy,
sane person think like this?! Let alone a country full of them?! And who the fuck even cares who
your nephew's father was anyway?!"

Florian shrugged, his own expression one of cold, silent fury. "Beats me," he remarked tersely. "But
that would explain a lot if they were- now, if we COULD prove they were invaders from another
world, maybe we could muster the stomach to finally-"

Horrified enough by Victoria's tales, Flora's turned her gaze to her guardian, her own expression one
of disgust and disappointment, made clear with a single word of admonition. "Florian!"

"What?!" the champion protested, unusually defensive given his general brashness. "We were all
thinking it! I just did it out loud!"
Still not feeling particularly charitable to the country or its people given the news bought by Junichiro, Hana crossed her arms across her chestplate. "I may not be the most well-informed girl, but I'm sure I'd have known about something like that in Hoshido. So would my uncle- he never said a word about it either way. Yeah, it'd be different, to have a non-Hoshidan parent, sure. But not really anything to get worked up over."

"Agreed." said Flora. "Plenty of our tribe's members have Nohrian ancestry, interestingly enough."

"That would not surprise me at all, seeing you would be considered somewhat closer to them culturally." boomed Amagi's voice from a shadowy corner (while the others recoiled, Hana and Sakura had long since ceased paying it any mind). "The same as we with Hoshido; hell, we'd probably have died out long ago had we not been."

A very distinct, derisive scoff emanated from the rafters of the great tent. "What'd you really expect from a people who think the world should be grovelling at their feet?" asked Saizo harshly.

Taking into account that skulking in the supports of others' accommodations was quite rude, his counterpart dismounted from her perch, landing gracefully at Hana's side. "If none of us know, perhaps it could be some vestigial cultural oddity?" Kagero suggested.

Amagi began to stroke his wild, bushy beard. "I suppose, young lady..." he began tentatively. "That's the only thing I can see, realistically. But the trait would have to be very old indeed. And to hold onto it that zealously for that long...?"

No sooner than each group member had managed to distance themselves from the rather disconcerting conversation and the great tent, did the very distinct sound of a gong echoing through the twilight sky sound across the impromptu campground. A respite of several seconds saw the sound repeat, along with Rinkah seeking out her Hoshidan counterpart, looking rather annoyed.

"Come on, you guys!" she insisted. "That was the signal to gather!"

"Oh, of course!" Sakura exclaimed apologetically.

"Lead the way." Hana responded.

Surely enough, exactly as predicted, the guests had begun to assemble under the great tent, seated atop one of the cushions lined up in single-file rows, Kikai, obviously, was seated at the head of the room, his shadow remaining worthy of his epithet at his side. His counterparts of the other tribes being seated near him, Hana and Sakura, having little experience with the Flame Tribe's formal matters, took three of the empty cushions next to the Wolfskin chieftainess- much to her annoyance.

"Aw, geez, not you two again!" she hissed irritably.

"I-I'm sorry, ma'am," Sakura began. "But-"

"There was no space anywhere else!" Hana shot back. "Anyway, we were just following her lead-"

"Will you three be quiet?!" scolded Rinkah. "Father's about to start speaking!"

Rising from the cushion, the flame chief cleared his throat. "Greetings, my friends! You have all traveled a great distance to answer my plea and I thank you for that fact! However, I wish I could call this a happy occasion, but this is not so, as we have a grave, grave threat to our nations to discuss."
"Yeah, fuck King Leonard! Fuck Nohr!" called one of Lupina's guards near the entrance, shortly being forcibly reseated by his fellows.

Visibly annoyed by the interruption, Kikai continued nonetheless. "From time immemorial, the Kingdom of Nohr has been somewhat of a...trying neighbor, to say the very least. But recently, said conduct has gone from merely belligerent, to simply monstrous. From their unprovoked invasion and reduction of our Hoshidan friends to literal slavery, to the abduction of entire clans from all our tribes for gods-only-know-what vile purposes, said behavior in recent months, despite all efforts to convince them to desist, has just escalated to the point of being completely intolerable."

"You could say that again!" cried one of Fuga's guards, earning him a rebuke from his superior.

However, Kikai, now truly in his element, paid it little mind. "It would be their business and their business alone if the Nohrians wished simply to venerate their new king, Leonard, as though he were a living god. However, that said king has made the attitude of himself and his nation to we 'savages' completely clear- submission or death. It would be little exaggeration to say their kingdom sees no allies or equals, only slaves or enemies, living or not. I cannot speak for the rest of you, but I have no interest in being a slave or a corpse simply for living in my homeland, tending to my people, practicing my religion- exactly as my fathers and mothers did before me!"

This declaration earned the chief a rousing cheer from the crowd, even those such as Flora and Fuga, who generally kept their subordinates on a tight leash, ceasing to even try calming the situation after several seconds.

When the cheer finally died down, Saizo, seeming oddly imposing (later revealed to have been standing on the backs of one of his subordinates), spoke. "And don't think it's going to be some cushy household servitude either." he remarked, outrage simmering beneath his tone. "What you have to look forward to is being literal livestock for them- at best!"

The crowd murmured in concern, terror, and outrage before simmering down several seconds later, the Ice Tribe's resident hothead apparently with a similar idea in his head, took the opportunity to expound upon his life's mission. "Let me tell you a little something about Nohrian 'heroism' from a boy who lived it- and just barely." said Florian, literally shivering with rage. "It's the kind of thing you only survive by playing dead among your slaughtered kinsmen. That horrid smell of burning hair and flesh-"

At this the crowd grew even more raucous with murmurs of disbelief, disgust, and shouts of outrage recalling similar indignities inflicted by the kingdom against themselves and their kin, even reaching the point where Kikai instructed his shadow to deliver several strikes to the gong at his side to drown out the din and restore order. "One thing however, has become painfully clear." continued Kikai. "Against our common enemy, we must either stand together, united to remove the threat to our nations and lives once and for all; or perish separately. Therefore, with these acts of war in mind, in the interest of securing a future- any future at all, for our children, I propose the creation of a formal alliance directed against the Kingdom of Nohr!"

Seating himself once more, the crowd broke once more into a round of raucous cheers, occasionally interspersed with taunts and curses directed at their obviously-absent mutual enemy. "We are on the cusp of a new day for our peoples, my esteemed guests. But I must urgently request your designated representatives come meet with me, as we have exceptionally-important business to discuss; while there will be war- a war which has been forced upon us, in time, tonight, my servants shall see you fed well, my friends!"
Explicitly called out by the conclusion of Kikai's speech, Sakura and her swordswoman shortly heeded the request and proceeded outside to the rear of the great structure; unsurprisingly, the other individuals in question, Flora and Florian, Fuga, Lupina, Tristan, Junichiro, Saizo and Kagero, had already gathered, assembled in a semi-circle before Kikai.

"Wow, Father!" said Rinkah proudly. "You really killed it with that speech!"

Kikai grinned tiredly. "Well I should have, seeing how much work it was to organize." he remarked. "But I must ask one last time and confirm; you are all committed to this course of action, yes?"

"You have my word, old friend." confirmed Fuga. "We may not be able to do much given our current situation, but we'll aid wherever we can."

"Bring it on." said Lupina, baring her teeth. "About time you lot took my advice, if I do say so myself."

"Hey, we've been fighting them for years already!" Tristan reminded. "So, of course we're in."

Her bodyguard almost quivering with anticipation, Flora's expression however, remained solemn. "Yes, our nation is united and ready to throw off Nohr's yoke." she half-lied.

"We either win or we die." Junichiro confirmed direly. "Let's choose the former, shall we?"

Kagero giving a murmur of confirmation, her counterpart slammed his fist against his palm. "Exactly." answered Saizo. "After we've dealt with this infestation, I'm gonna personally burn Windmire to the ground."

"Well, milady?" inquired Hana, as if waiting for a response.

Sakura felt her heart leap into her chest, particularly at the prospect of being deferred to on such a monumental, world-changing (one way or the other) decision. "Y-you're a-asking m-me?"

"Well, of course, why would we not?" inquired Kagero. "The princess regent must assent to any official acts of state, no?"

She'd not sought out such a lofty position, true- fate had simply thrust said role upon the young lady. And after all, with great power comes great responsibility, as she well knew. A gentle, sheltered person such as Sakura of course, feared greatly all the things which could possibly go wrong. Nonetheless, the horrible suffering she'd witnessed her own people subjected to, as well as others and her vow made with Hana concerning King Leonard's reign of terror back in Cheve, steeled her on, inhaling deeply. "V-very well." she confirmed. "We will do e-everything w-we can to-

The girl swallowed nervously, knowing that, for better or for worse, this was a line that could not be uncrossed. "r-remove the t-threat from Nohr."

Precisely as the (other) enamored Hoshidan retainer had pointed out, with this pact, the die was cast; the alliance forged here would either rip out the heart of the empire threatening them all in victory or face complete, utter annihilation. Nonetheless, with this palpable tension in the air, it felt as if a certain weight was lifted from their collective shoulders; there was a certain heartening feeling to ancient, discordant nations putting aside their differences to meet a mutual and mortal threat to their freedom and (more often than not) very lives. But even before fighting started in earnest, there were still a number of practical issues to be worked out.
rather unassuming save for the white shroud surrounding him, sighed in a combination of anxiety and anticipation before the ancient stone gate; a portal supposed to have been constructed by Lord Moro himself to keep in contact with the dragons of other worlds.

As tiny and fragile as they were, it was not exactly surprising that taking on a human form felt somehow...constricting to members of a certain draconic race, or any of them for that matter. However, it could not be denied that using such a form expended considerably less energy than that of their true forms. For the sake of journeying across the sea of space and time, he would shift back to his true form shortly after entering the gate. Taking a deep breath, as though about to plunge from a great height, Anankos took a couple of tentative steps towards the great energy field before his keen hearing detected a branch snapping underfoot, said foot not belonging to himself.

Turning to investigate the source of the noise, the foot's owner shortly revealed itself; an (apparent) pale, raven-haired young woman of thirty or so, her usually-radiant visage clouded with sorrow. "So...you're truly doing this...?" she inquired sadly. "Once you step through that gate, anything can happen..."

Anankos sighed. "I have no choice, Amaterasu." he reiterated. "If I did not truly feel that man, your brother's pet, was a danger to this world, I would stay here. But I must make my case- Lord Moro and the elders require proof of this otherworldly evil and so proof I will find."

"I see...Anankos, I apologize- for the council meeting. For not vouching for you, I mean."

"Hm, what do you mean?"

"I...failed to support you because I did not want to believe it, but you are correct. My brother- Selenos- he HAS changed. He was always passionate, true. You know that just as well as I do."

Heh, our debates and exchanges were always lively, no?"

"Yes, they were. But lately...he's been so sullen, secretive, and angry...I admit to fearing him greatly."

"And that's precisely the point of this little journey of mine. For all his flaws, I've always known Selenos to be a reasonable soul. Even if I do not find what I am looking for, I'm sure that once he appears before the elders and receives a stern talking-to, he'll see the error of his ways and we can put this all behind us."

"I hope you're correct...for all our sakes."

But the goddess would not need to travel worlds to witness firsthand what was so disconcerting to her fellow about her brother's 'pet', if you will.

He'd had a hard life, true. But while there was much hardship on these dunes, there was also much joy and camaraderie as well. The old village chief's heart wept not only for the horrible fates awaiting his people- the screams and pleas of men, women, and children alike, the galloping of the other tribe's steeds running down their crops and young alike. No, what hurt the chief, a warrior of renown in his youth, was his complete and utter powerlessness to stop any of it.

Nonetheless, clad in his tattered old armor and his old, but well-kept blade, the chief emerged from his dwelling, intent on leading a final stand against the marauders. "Alright, you bastards!" he challenged. "How 'bout you pick on some warriors instead of-"

The old chief was interrupted by his dwelling exploding in a mass of dark, purple flame, some
possession of his or another acting as shrapnel to knock him on his stomach. Wounded, but still well enough to resist, the old man staggered to his hands and knees, only oriented by the imminent whinny of a solid black stallion and his master; he could not exactly get a good look at the man, but was well aware of the cruelty dripping from each and every syllable he uttered. "Heh, stupid old fool!" he scolded, dismounting his steed. "Did you really think you would stand a chance of resisting us?!"

One of his brown leather boots kicking the old chief in the face, the old warrior, landing on his backside, blade in hand, got a better look at his assailant; that he was considerably younger was a given (Twenty? Thirty years old? He could not really tell), but the most striking thing about their leader was not his great size (several heads taller than a normal man, in fact), nor the malevolent silver trident in his hand, but the pure malice and lust for power in his wicked yellow eyes.

"You bastard!" the old chief wheezed. "W-what makes you- What gives you the right?!

The giant laughed evilly. "You don't appreciate just who I am, do you?"

Stomping over to the old chief, the brute kicked the blade from his reach before impaling him through the chest. "Once again, those with power, rule. Those who don't obey- or they die."

As the breath gradually left his lungs as a result of the injury, the old chief mourned that his people, young and old alike, should suffer such a fate, wondering what trick of the gods saw them cross paths with such a man- no, such a demon.

Chapter End Notes

Once again, Rinkah just looked/looks oddly feline to me (and acts kinda like Lethe) so her dad being lionesque was just a natural progression for me. Also, I hope I demonstrated something about the cultural differences at play and how they can and often do play THE deciding factor in these kind of interactions. Anyway, I've given you my (not especially positive) interpretation of the who and what of Nohrian culture, but not the why. (If you recognize the source of/context of Metroid track, I think it's pretty clear how exactly they generally see the neighbors)
The Absent One

Chapter Summary

The goings-on of other worlds long ago cast a long shadow over the world as the last Flame Tribe strongholds on Mount Haku fall to Nohr, the alliance attempts to hammer out a strategy to deal with their mutual enemy, and Camilla endangers herself in her attempt to cure what, if anything, ails her beloved brother in a most unexpected manner...

Chapter Notes

*Hymn of Time [Remix] (The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time OST)
**Mountain Village (The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask OST)
***Altar of Aether [Temple Grounds] (Metroid Prime 2: Echoes OST)
****Miserable Spectacle (Tales of the Abyss OST)
*****Misery in Hand (FE14 OST)
******Stealth Sneak (Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets OST) [GC/PS2/Xbox]
*******Majora's Theme [Orchestrated Remix] (The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask OST)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*Contrary to what some had said about him, those who praised him, condemned him, or didn't give a damn about him in the least, he was no god or deity. He was simply an unusual man with an unusual skillset (and an inexplicably long lifespan) who loved his land, its people, and their gods. A man who would go to any lengths to protect them. However, this day found him in the presence of a very particular deity- a goddess, in fact, who had summoned him to her temple for a very particular purpose.

"Milady," he said respectfully, going down on one knee. "you summoned me? Is there something amiss?"

The goddess' sapphire eyes shone with sadness and concern. "Oh, great hero of this land, conqueror of countless evils, there is a matter which has even managed to confound we gods."

"Hm?"

"As you know, my domain concerns all that is, has been, and will be. However, something has troubled me as of late- your fated enemy, the scourge of this land...has simply vanished from time. Or rather, vanished from this land's past, present, or future."
“Wait, is that even possible, milady?”

"Apparently so."

The goddess paced about the chamber's length anxiously, which her champion felt instinctively. "What is his name?" he requested. "Milady, allow me to track the fiend, wherever he may be, so that I may end him."

The deity placed a consoling hand upon his shoulder. "Unfortunately, neither of those things I can allow. Even we are bound by fate and must not intervene in yours. I would search for him myself, but the consequences of meddling in the affairs of other worlds, especially for a god-"

Nevertheless, she gave a light, wistful smile of relief. "However, I do have one task for you- one that will allow you to project your spirit to other worlds and seek out those worthy of your valor. Particularly worlds lacking the means to resist your adversary."

"Understood. Your wish is my command. But I do not understand one thing, milady. If he is my fated enemy and a scourge, why will you not allow me to pursue him?"

Her expression turned heavy and troubled once more. "Because I need you here, in this world. To deal with- well, you're familiar with- well, them..."

It was no surprise he'd been a restless child, prone to bouts of general sleeplessness; hell, that very same restlessness and watching his father and uncle spar countless nights only fueled his fascination with the blade and his desire to surpass them both. Gazing up at the stars, half-heartedly listening to his dying fire, ironically enough, by this point in time, even well-before having a wife and children of his own, Lord Takeshi was able to admit to himself that despite all of his childish taunting to the contrary, the one individual he'd underestimated all these years, had in fact, surpassed him in skill with the blade. With everything she had been through, with all of the enemies she had made by this time, how could she not have long since done so?

Still, thoughts of his father, uncle, and little sister swirling about his mind, there was one particular saying- a mantra really- repeated at length during the lifetime of his father and his brother Tomokane both. So engrossed was he in pondering its meaning, that (while obviously aware of his presence if for no other reason than his pegasus) he scarcely acknowledged the present of his most devoted servant.

Dismounting the beast, Junichi knelt before his lord, scruffy hair matting his visage momentarily. "Lord Takeshi." he acknowledged dutifully. "Chief Kikai's-

"A sword wields no strength unless the hand that holds it has courage." the young lord recited. "That saying hold any meaning for you, Jun?"

"I've never heard it in my life, milord. Why?"

"It's just a mantra my father and uncle always repeated. I remember asking him about it a few years ago- said he didn't know either. Told me it was just something his father always said and his father and so on. As long as anyone could remember, he said."

Rising from his spot, Takeshi made an exaggerated noise as he stretched his muscles. "So, Chief Kikai's summit, go on."
"It's just as I was saying, Lord Takeshi. I made contact with Lady Hana and Princess Sakura and I can confirm they're both alive and well."

"Oh, thank the gods. It will be a load off Mother's mind to hear, that's for sure as well."

"As far as the meeting itself, while there was some tension initially, the representatives managed to make real progress towards a broad anti-Nohr alliance. But understandably, the tribal leaders wish us to do some significant damage to the enemy's troop strength before any joint operations."

Takeshi growled in frustration. "Oh, that just fucking figures." he muttered bitterly. "It's not like we haven't been spending the past seven months bleeding them white across Mutsu!"

"Erm, Lord Takeshi..."

"Oh, of course, Jun. At ease. Flying for hours on end to report to me? You must be absolutely exhausted."

"Thank you, milord. By your leave."

Junichiro retiring to his tent, his lord sighed in a combination of frustration and anticipation. How much more did these new allies of theirs really expect them to do to the Nohrians anyway? Their resources, particularly at a time like this, had limits too. Nonetheless, as perilous as the times ahead were to be, it was also exceptionally exciting as well, only made possible by Princess Sakura and his baby sister's daring. Perhaps courage truly was the key after all?

Well away from the merriment and celebrations of their new alliance, its leaders knew that there was still much to be worked out and urgently so. The level of damage required done to Nohr's troop strength, communication and coordination difficulties, among many other concerns were discussed surrounding a great map of the continent in Kikai's tent. While Junichiro had set off almost immediately to relay the news to his lord, this was not exactly settling for the man who had made such an affair possible.

"That will do for truly urgent matters, yes." the Flame chief conceded. "However, for more mundane matters? Communication between our forces? We simply cannot just rely on sending birds to and fro. The Nohrians will learn to intercept them fairly quickly."

Her companion so obsessed with the tactical minutiae that he'd neglected some of the basics of warfare, one of the quietest members of the Hoshidan delegation had an epiphany from one of her many conversations with the dispossessed. "Fireworks." Kagero assuredly. "The army would use them all the time to send messages, illuminate target areas, and so on. Lord Tomokane and his men used them to great effect against the Nohrians. Of course, they've been somewhat difficult to produce as of late, but-"

Rinkah smiled mischievously. "I think we can help with that, eh, Father?"

Kikai sighed in resignation. "I suppose they'll have to do for now." he conceded. "At least until we can get more freedom of action."

Spurred on by his conversation with his aunt and Sakura, Tristan thought it wise to raise another henceforth-neglected issue. "King Leonard, his minions, and kingdom are our common enemy, that goes without saying," the knight reiterated. "But what of their toadies, hangers-on, and general opportunists? They won't defeat us alone without their master, but that's not to say they won't be a
headache."

"A mighty one at that." Fuga added with no small degree of concern. "Even without the rumors my
scouts have been recalling from the south, a band of well-organized, well-trained cutthroats is
causing us no end of problems. I'm afraid we won't be much use to the overall war effort until the
bulk of our warriors are freed from them."

Well-aware of the reign of terror his vulture of a rival was inflicting upon the other tribes, Florian's
expression flared. "So what? We just kill 'em all, right?" he challenged. "Twenty-five of my best
men. That's all I'll need."

"Such an undertaking would require resources which we cannot spare." Flora reminded coldly.
"Instead, I'll see the condemned to outlawry; deprive them of half their men without a single casualty
of our own. THEN we eliminate them."

Lupina grinned one of her trademark toothy grins. "Sounds good to me! Besides, we might just beat
you to 'em if they're dumb enough to come poking around our country again."

And there was of course, the unavoidable discussion concerning the general amount of damage each
involved nation would have to do to Nohr's manpower to make their plan even remotely viable.
"Since the capital when they declared their 'victory," Saizo began bitterly, motioning the figures
across the eastern half of the map restlessly. "I figure we'll have done about...maybe two-and-a-half
armies of theirs worth of damage. Either killed or wounded badly enough to be useless to their war."

"How long will it take them to replace those losses?" inquired Kikai.

"To replace the men or raise an effective fighting force?" asked Kagero in return. "Conceivably, they
could just conscript every third or fourth male and stick a spear in his hands pretty quickly. For the
latter, several months is a good estimate. For some of the higher-quality units, double that."

As someone hailing from a country and region which had (in addition to having done their enemy a
great deal of damage already) suffered horribly at Nohrian hands, Flora was not exactly surprised at
the icy glare Hana shot her way. "I know what you're thinking, and it's not like that." she explained
contritely. "It would be no large feat for the Nohrians to overwhelm us with sheer numbers alone."

"Or they could, you know, just starve us out." Florian added boredly, his mind obviously in a very
dark place as of late.

And speaking of the Nohrians, a very concerned-looking messenger whispered in Kikai's ear, the
chief shortly mirroring the expression before cursing to himself. "I've an urgent matter to see to
concerning the war." he announced. "Let us continue this meeting once the sun rises. Eat, rest, do as
you please until my return."

"Once again, you are too courteous, Chief Kikai." Flora prefaced. "However, we must set off for our
country at once."

"Understood; stay safe, Lady Flora."

The two travelers were well afield of the encampment, well out of earshot when Florian finally
vocalized the burning question in his mind. "Why did you lie to Chief Kikai?" he asked. "And all of
them? Because you know damn well your father-"

"I know." she answered grimly, keeping a brisk pace and consciously turned away from Florian.
"But how could you promise all of them that we'd join their war-"

At that moment, Florian made a horrifying realization. A horrifying realization of just what his childhood friend had been psychologically preparing herself for this whole trip. What she had been preparing herself for to ensure the survival of their people as anything more than Nohrian chattel at best. "Oh, gods, Flora-" he began. "You're not really-"

Quickening his step, Florian quickly caught up with her, taking her by the shoulders and forcing Flora to face him. "Yes, I am." she confirmed, no other explanation of her intentions required. "This King Leonard is a power-mad tyrant. Our future is simply not secure in either of their hands- I don't have a choice."

"Yes, you do! If this is the only way...let me do it!"

"Florian, this is my respons-"

"People expect this from me! Me and the old bastard have never, ever gotten along!"

"Florian...I appreciate the gesture...but you've already done so much for me- more than I could ever hope to repay. I'm not going to push this burden onto you as well."

Loathe to show any weakness at all, the Ice Tribe's champion shut his eyes, hell-bent on holding back empathetic tears for which his dearest friend was setting herself up. "You know, for someone so smart," Florian remarked finally. "you can be really stupid sometimes."

"Call it what you like, but that's not going to change the facts on the ground or my mind. So I can count on your support?"

"....Always. You know that, Flora...if even you say that war is our only option...things must be even worse than I'd thought."

Given her frigid surroundings and her apparent complete lack of biological protection from said conditions, it probably was not surprising that Corrine's dreams took her to an island- a warm, lush, tropical paradise with endless white sand beaches and crystal clear seas. Also given for whom she was enduring said discomfort, it was also little surprise with whom she frolicked on said beach. Was his torso always that sculpted, she hazily wondered to herself. And those legs! It was difficult to tell under all that armor, but Corrine knew one thing damned well- he was utterly ripped!

"Corrine! Wait up!"

"Hee hee, come get me, 'Your Majesty!'"

One thing that should have tipped her off that this was an exceptionally vivid dream (not that she really cared) was the fact that she owned no such swimsuit and she could never see herself wearing something so revealing! To say nothing of her abrupt loss of time, transitioning into a vacant dance studio, the warm twilight streaming in on Corrine and her flamboyant, low-cut red dress, her lord clad in a pair of crisp slacks and a slightly unbuttoned dress shirt, standing a bit more than arm's length from her with a confident smirk.

"Might I have this dance?"

Corrine giggled coyly. "Naturally, my king." she answered huskily. "Anything else you fancy to have?"
Taking her hand and twirling Corrine a couple of times before dipping her, the king returned her mischievous expression. "As a matter of fact, yes there is..."

Meanwhile in the real world, in one of the officer's huts, Ira continued nudging Corrine awake from behind, ignoring the gasps under the other woman's breath. "Yo, princess! Wake up!" she scolded. "The storm's let up! We're moving out!"

Abruptly jolted awake, upon realizing her surroundings were not in fact, that of the beautiful island, a mortified Corrine abruptly pulled her hand away from her waist before turning to her colleague. "Oh, of course! L-let's go!"

"Well, it looks like someone slept well last night."

**Blushing at either the accumulated heat within her, the cold as it made contact with her skin, or some combination, attempted to put the (counterintuitively) rather-pleasant dream from her head. It was just a dream, she insisted to herself. It meant nothing!**

"Our scouts just reported back." Ira reported. "The savages are held up in a village a bit west along the main path."

Corrine sighed in fatigued relief; the end of this ordeal was finally in sight, at least for these people. There was no way the Flame Tribe would want to continue hostilities after a loss like this. "What does our approach look like?" she inquired.

"Straight, overlooked by ridges. I don't like it. Armin's troops are on the other side of the damn mountain and the wyverns hate this cold almost as much as you."

"Well, it looks like we don't have much choice. Send the armor out in front and archers covering them. If it gets too hot, have them fall back."

***The morning sun and frigid air against his face did little to disturb Madarao and his pre-battle meditation. Why should it have? When little more than three decades of more or less continuous physical, psychological, and spiritual training, much of it under the chief's shadow himself, saw him correctly described as probably the Flame Tribe's mightiest warrior apart from those two. As was expected of him, as the guardian of the tribe's temple on Mount Haku.***

No, the honor of disturbing his his meditation went to the breathless runner who'd made his way to the temple summit. "S-Sentinel..." he began breathlessly. "The Nohrians...have broken through! Town probably...already...fallen."

Rising to his feet, Madarao shook the accumulated snow from his utterly hairless head."So they are inevitably coming this way?"

"Y-yes sir! Lord Naeba...leading refugees...to the temple..."

"Nohrian bastards..." growled the guardian. "Stay safe, Brother..."

Even in the days of the even-more-fragmented tribes and principalities, from time immemorial, the continent's inhabitants, for all their differences, had one mutually understood and implicitly-agreed-upon norm regarding conflict- places of worship and sacred sites were simply and utterly off-limits for targeting, quartering of soldiers, exploitation of natural resources, and so on. To break this norm would see one sentenced to outlawry- a **de facto** death sentence the very second one returned to whatever part of civilization they called home; that is of course, if they survived the wrath of those
who considered the sites holy in the first place.

But also as long as anyone could remember, there had been one nation that not only ignored or disputed the prohibition on any number of grounds, but actively sought out the destruction and defilement of these sacred sites, as if their very existence was an affront to their collective honor and sense of decency. That nation, of course, the very same one currently marching on one of their three sacred peaks for gods-only-knew-what purpose. Why exactly they compulsively engaged in such sacrilegious behavior was an utter mystery, even to the Nohrians they'd captured and interrogated.***

**After a morning of bloody battles along the path (not at all helped by the settlement lying east from their camp), Corrine and Ira's battered forces had routed the defenders of the pass and the nearby town. Exactly as predicted, the enemy lie in wait for their approach, raining down arrows and spears the very second the first Nohrian vanguard advanced, being virtually annihilated in the process by the warriors along the path. This would not have been so devastating had the enemy not held back their own casters until the armor arrived, for whom they were easy prey, covered by both their bow-wielding allies and their melee fighters below. Indeed, had Corrine not, after the destruction of her own guard detail, sprung up to the right ridge to cut (and tear, and rip, and claw) a bloody swath through their casters, the casualties would have been even higher.**

She'd witnessed more death and bloodshed than she had in months and, upon she and Ira entering the town square, looked forward to nothing more than some downtime, preferably in Azura's (or her king's) arms. "As you can see," Corrine continued to explain to the town's elder. "your warriors have been routed and our comrades are hunting stragglers. Please, show some sense and order them to lay down their arms!"

His wizened visage managing a scowl, the old man simply spat at Corrine's feet. "You've got some nerve defiling this mountain, Nohrian slime!" he scolded. "We all know damn well if the situation were reversed, you'd not stop until we were wiped out!"

Ira, having none of the old man's disobedience, grabbed the front of his tunic and raised that odd, forearm-mounted blade of hers to his neck. "I don't think you understand the position you're in, you senile old bastard." she threatened. "Call off your hordes or else-"

"Or else what? You'll kill me, wench? Go ahead! I've lived a full life!"

*Ira grinned a wicked smile at the young man- a boy of no older than nine or so, really- successfully attempting to break free from his grandmother's hold. "No, leave him alone, you Nohrian witch!" he cried, making an ineffectual attempt to charge her down. Ira however, simply extended her leg slightly to send the lad to the ground, grasping him by the nape of his neck.

The old man reared up to attack Ira himself. "What are you-"

The town overlooked a steep cliff; so steep in fact was the overlook, that the ground below was completely obscured by low-hanging cloud cover. Two of her minions roughly restraining the elder, Ira, taking care not to choke the boy (to death), took several exaggerated steps towards the cliff face, dangling the boy over the edge. "This little guy gets a little flying lesson."

At this, even Corrine had to put her foot down. "Stop that! Stop that right now! What on earth do you think-"

Ira scowled even more strongly than usual in response. "I know what I'm doing, you softhearted
bitch! I'm not killing anyone. HE is."

Now Corrine had half a mind to attack Ira, but this dilemma was nothing compared to the chief weighing one of his people's holiest sites against the terrified, sobbing pleas of his grandson. "Five seconds to make up your mind." the brunette threatened, visibly loosening her grip. "One...two...three...four...fi"

"Alright! I'll tell-"

The boy's horrified screams as he plummeted to his demise were audible for quite a ways. She had worked with some utterly reprehensible individuals, true, but Corrine stood mouth agape at the woman who had literally murdered an old man's grandson in front of his face." "What...what have you done...?" the princess asked blankly.

"Too bad, so sad." scoffed Ira.

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Climbing atop one of the dwellings, Corrine's counterpart seemed far less subdued than usual as she addressed her soldiers. "My brave soldiers! You've traversed this frozen hell in the name king and country and fought brilliantly!"

The gathered crowd of soldiers whooped and cheered at the rousing speech. "Now, these insolent insects- these vermin who stole the lives of so many of our comrades for nothing, are on their knees!"

The cheers reached a fever pitch as the crowd became increasingly unruly; Ira's conclusion was simply adding fuel to a preexisting fire. "It is not simply understandable- I BEG you to treat these beasts as they actually deserve! As a great man once said, nits make lice, so do your duty for your people and do away with both!"

That sinking feeling in the pit of Corrine's stomach was becoming more and more oppressive, leading her to confront her counterpart immediately as the crowd dispersed. "What do you think you're doing?!!" she demanded. "Do you know how delicate this situation is?!!"

Ira rolled her eyes. "It's called 'morale-building." she informed boredly, snatching a gem from the now-deceased elder. "You might want to consider it sometime."

Exactly as she had feared, what Ira considered a simple exercise in team building, was naturally, a complete and utter bloody nightmare for the remaining townspeople, the shrieks of anguish and terror, the horrific sounds, sights, and smells continuing to haunt her for years to come.

Of course she was inclined to stop it, even with force if need be. And to her credit, she actually did rescue a pair of terrified housewives (for all the good it did) from a gang of her own soldiers. However, the sheer brutality of the affair, from the orgy of all manners of violent dismemberment of old men, women, and children, living and dead, the spontaneous, random fires set to structures and living beings alike, to the countless acts of interpersonal violence perpetrated against the townspeople, all began to exhaust her even further on all levels.

Perhaps it was between the mages herding many of the old women and children into the nearby stream before using their lightning tomes on the water (and having a grand old time doing so) or the soldiers setting the little boy on fire and forcing him to run until he could no longer. Or perhaps it was the fifth gang rape she'd witnessed but been utterly powerless to do anything about due to putting out figurative (and literal) fires elsewhere, but at some point fairly early on during the massacre, Corrine simply broke down, curling into the fetal position behind a burnt-out dwelling, hoping- praying to make the horrific sensations fade away. Of course, even amidst all this chaos, her predicament was still noticed by her own soldiers.
"Princess, what's wrong?" a pikeman inquired, the gentleness of his tone contrasting with the collection of dismembered, bloody body parts. "Are you okay? Should I get a healer?"

"I-I'm fine." she lied shakily, coming to her feet just as so. "I'm just- W-what the hell are those?!"

The soldier pawed one of his twisted trophies curiously. "Oh, this?" he remarked as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "Killed some buck for it after he tried to attack Jensen. And this one, well I didn't technically kill him for it, just killed him afterwards. And this one, I cut off his-"

"I KNOW WHAT IT IS!" Corrine spat at him. "So help me, I'm this close to executing you myself for this disgrace!"

The soldier shrugged boredly. "C'mon, princess. What kind of commander executes their whole unit?"

"Wait, the WHOLE unit?"

"Yeah, unless you're Sir Piet-"

The pikeman shook his head violently. "Forget I said that last part, milady. Just thinking out loud."

Interestingly enough, by the time the sun had retreated mostly behind the horizon, the carnage had largely died out. Then again, this was due in no small part to the fact that the town was utterly depopulated, nearly all its inhabitants lying butchered in the snow or their own homes, in varying states of bodily integrity and dress. Helping themselves to the remaining spoils, especially of food and drink, morale was in fact, higher than it had been for the past week. Corrine, well out of the way of the festivities, simply sat in front of a campfire, gazing blankly at the inferno in a vain attempt to process what she'd just experienced. War was a hideous thing, true. But the princess was forcing herself to wonder- was the treatment of the people of Cheve and Hoshido simply a pair of isolated incidents or a symptom of something ingrained far more deeply?****

Being a rather selfish individual, it was surprising the person she wanted to see the most had actually sought her out. "Hey, why aren't you celebrating?" Ira inquired "Don't tell me you're sobbing over your pets. Bought you some rum. Kristoph was passing around cups of it- sure, he just wants into my skirts, but drink is drink."

The princess grudgingly accepted the vessel, only to recoil in shock and disgust at the realization that it was literally a hollowed-out human skull, allowing it to drop to the ground. "Go away, you butcher..." Corrine scowled tiredly. "Give me one good reason I shouldn't ram this sword through your chest."

Ira rolled her eyes once again, placing a hand on her hip. "Alright, I'll give you a damned good one- how would it look for your beloved king if you were disobeying his direct orders in killing a fellow Nohrian, and an officer, at that- all because of what? Some worthless savages? Giving them a taste of things they probably do to each other for sport? I don't think so!"

Corrine swore to herself, knowing the rogue had her checkmated; her heart and mind both were a nigh-incomprehensible jumble of her general kindness and instinct to preserve human life and her conscious inclinations to carry out her duties honorably and well. Combined with just how sexually-charged her relationship with her adopted brother had become, it was no wonder the princess' heart and mind were a mess. "Fuck you, go away..." she snarled.

Ira simply shrugged. "Alright, have it your way. Just don't sleep too late. That 'temple' of theirs is
within striking distance and if we can take that, we can end this."

But much like her other promises, this one was not to be kept. Corrine was awakened first of all by the frigid winds picking up, blowing snow into the tent she'd erected. She attempted to ignore this and return to sleep before her attention was seized by Ira's boot in her back. "Hey, princess!" she called. "Bird from Armin just came; the savages are trying to reinforce their temple!"

Rising to find it still very much nighttime (or early morning) with the lull in the snowstorm having ceased, Corrine glared impotently at her fellow commander as she collected her blade and meager possessions, including the cape she'd wrap herself in for some protection. "Stop looking so sour!" Ira chided, a vague hint of playfulness in her tone. "We intercept their stragglers, their temple falls, and they learn to never fuck with us again."

"Fine, let's end this." Corrine conceded bitterly.

In spite of the frigid conditions and being awakened several hours early for a march, the soldiers under the joint command of Corrine and Ira were in fairly high spirits, due in no small part to the imminent completion of their mission and yesterday's "celebration." Unsurprisingly, this was remarked upon by their subordinates.

"Hey, what's wrong with the princess anyway?"

"No idea. She's been like that for hours."

"I dunno. Lady problems, I guess?"

Just as unsurprising (to anyone paying attention, anyway) should have been the increasing desperation of the enemy, the skirmishers deployed along the treacherous passes just as much scouts as suicide attackers attempting to finish the job their comrades and attrition could not. Then again, there was some self-awareness among the men marching on the temple, albeit very limited.

"I don't see what the problem is." remarked one axeman, driving his weapon into the back of his fallen enemy attempting to crawl away. "The savages want to die, we want to kill them. What's the problem there?!"

"There is none." a second confirmed. "It'd make their lives and ours so much easier if they'd just give up, but they don't, so-"

Being exceptionally-tempted to smack the pair marching behind her, Corrine gave scarce thought to the possibly impact her foul mood was having upon her troops, but a couple of hours of fast-past marching in these forbidding conditions was doing a number on morale as well.

"How much longer to this temple, ma'am?" whined one of Ira's men, attempting to use one of his pauldrons as a makeshift pillow.

The blizzard would have wiped away any prints left behind pretty quickly, but given the scouts' reports and her own sense of direction, Ira was fairly certain. "Just ahead." she insisted.

Apparently, there were only two approaches to the temple on Mount Haku with any real capacity and Ira's hunch that they were on one of them proved correct by the scattered Flame Tribe warriors laying in ambush, as well as (oddly enough), the great snowballs being rolled down the incline in a last ditch-attempt to impede the Nohrians; of course, by this point, these measures were like trying to bandage a brain hemorrhage.

As Corrine and her vanguard negotiated the incline, on the horizon, the great structure came into
focus at last, smoke from its many pyres wafting off into the darkened sky, the column of war refugees before it and their torches illuminating much of the approach. Then again, there was something else of exceptional importance impeding them; a man, quite visibly middle-aged, his powerful frame only barely obscured by his bulky winter clothing and looking none too pleased with the intruders.

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"So you murdering, raping Nohrian filth really DO have this little respect for the sacred?!" the man spat, jabbing his great club against the ground for emphasis. "You've defiled this holy mountain long enough! I, Naeba, will kill you all!"

"Princess, look out!" cried one of the pikemen, knocking Corrine from her position, only to have the warrior cave in his head, helmet and all, in a single blow, jabbing the hilt of his weapon into his sword-wielding comrade's stomach will all the power he could muster, momentarily stunning him before inflicting a similarly catastrophic injury.

"Alright, you asked for it, boy!" spat an axeman, his five comrades forming up to surround him.

Springing to her feet, Corrine attempted to hold the men back, Naeba's power being transparently obvious to her. "No, wait! Fall back!"

Blocking a pair of incoming spears as though they were mere sticks, the warrior, as though somehow clairvoyant, sidestepped just in time to avoid a blade in his back and, with a great cry, performed a 360-degree flourish of his weapon knocking most of the men to the ground dead or with a grievous injury before springing onto the chest of the prone spearman, snapping his neck with his boot.

Just having watched his brother-in-arms perish without getting in a single blow, the second axeman lost his nerve, attempting to scurry away. "Waaah! I don't want to die!"

"That's what THEY SAID!" Naeba roared, coming in for another flying leap, only to have his attack blunted by Corrine's brilliant, obsidian blade. She'd never admit it to even Azura, but she was, at that moment, having more than a little difficulty blunting the attack. Slipping away, the princess managed to press the offensive, any angle of slashes or thrusts possible, she would use. Somehow, the man was managing to parry or dodge them all! Or at the very least, he was so furious, that the minor cuts she'd managed proved nothing to him. The second time he came in for an overhead strike, Corrine, still not exactly used to fighting in these boots, lost her footing as she blocked his strike. While his hit glanced off, Naeba did manage to raise his weapon and deliver a not-insignificant strike to her temple, sending her tumbling quite a ways.

Had he been using all of his strength, it was apparent to Corrine that she would not have survived the attack. The fact that she was only rather disoriented with a splitting headache had her considering herself fortunate. Frightened, tired, angry, and in the only real danger she'd been in for months, as Naeba swooped in for what he intended as a killing blow, the princess with a great shriek, she reflexively transformed her free right hand into a silvery, claw-like appendage, spearing the warrior through his chest.

Suspended for a few seconds before the limb returned to its regular dimensions, Naeba, well-aware that his mission had been a failure, hacked up a considerable amount of blood before falling to his knees. "Damn...I'm sorry...everyone..." he croaked. "Protect...the temple...Madarao..."*****

Corrine's head throbbing and breathing still heavy and anxious as the warrior's ceased to be audible, Ira ended it beyond any shadow of a doubt, jamming one of the discarded spears into his heart. "Good riddance." she said coldly.
Meanwhile, Corrine staggered to her feet, attempting to reorient herself to the situation, the raucous, celebratory cheers not helping her headache at all. "Oh, gods, my head..." she moaned.

"Princess!" the axeman began, awe on his face. "You saved my life!"

"Yeah, that was some excellent savage arse-kicking, eh?" interjected a bowman, scratching his ear with the snapped weapon.

Meanwhile, Ira conversed with one of her subordinates, looking none too pleased. "What part of 'nits make lice' don't you understand?" she snarled. "Deal with them."

"Understood, milady." he replied dutifully.

The increasingly-adulatory and numerous crowd notwithstanding, inching forward, Corrine was still able to get a glimpse of Ira's men "dealing" with the Flame Tribe refugees; the freezing, emaciated old men, women, and children being stabbed, slashed, cut, incinerated or impaled by the soldiers, their ineffectual pleas for mercy only seeming to spur them on further.

Appropriately enough, Corrine's body and mind seemed to be in a similar place; falling to her hands and knees, Corrine retched and vomited as the voices became fainter as she drifted in and out of consciousness.

"Hey, she's sick!"

"Well, that buck hit her in the head pretty hard, didn't he?"

"Someone, go get a healer, you idiots!"

Ira on the other hand, seemed fairly aloof from the commotion. "What do you mean we can't attack the temple?!" she raged. "We've won! It falls and we're off this frozen hellhole!"

"We just don't have the forces to spare, milady." her adjutant reminded dully. "Sir Armin's forces are closing in by the minute. The savages won't last the week, I promise you."

Ira growled in frustration. "Fine, but don't think I'm letting him hog all the credit for this. We did most of the work, after all."

As popular as it may have been among their cousins (and hell, the beorc) across their home continent, the one lesson his Kali's father had attempted to imprint upon him; never to hold all members of a group culpable for the sins of a few. The old bastard was so naive as to almost be senile, Kali thought bitterly, still constrained by his literal cage and taunted, implicitly and explicitly, by his "host."

"Say, why don't you come over here?" Kali asked disarmingly, attempting in vain to mask his homicidal rage. "All that talk of tearing your flesh off was just venting, you know?"

Paying no attention to the burning Hoshidan hamlet and its inhabitants dealt with in all sorts of unpleasant manners, Pepin hoisted his trousers once more, refastening the twine used as a makeshift belt. "Why, you gonna take care of this?" he inquired half-facetiously, punctuating his statement with an unpleasant chuckle. "No offense, but I love the ladies and they love me."

While his expression remained somehow neutral, Kali's mind's voice was furious. *How fucking DARE he?! Fucking joking?! After what he did to that girl AND her little sister?! "Why do you treat other people like this?"* he inquired, furious, but still genuinely curious. "Don't you- er, humans have
any group solidarity?"

The crooked knight snorted derisively, as if his mother had been insulted. "As if the only people worth a damn on this continent have to explain ourselves to you!" he exclaimed. "But just between us, they ain't people, so it doesn't count."

Now having done away with any and all pretense of amicability, Kali's expression flared. "You know what, fuck you and fuck your people. You humans are all the same anyway. I promise to the Goddess herself I'm killing you the second I get out of here."

"Yeah, right! That'll be the day!"

For wildly diverging reasons, the night the de facto lady of the castle returned proved a relief for a number of figures in the Nohrian capital; the king himself, obviously, being chief among these. "Gods, I missed you so much!" he exclaimed, rising from his throne to embrace her. "Where have you been all these weeks?"

"I had some urgent business to take care of." Camilla answered evasively. "Not to worry, sweetie."

"I understand, Cammy." he responded, an inexplicable hint of darkness in his tone. "I've matters to attend to, as well. Some extended tantrum by Pietro or another requires my presence at the front."

"Please, stay safe, brother."

Very few inhabitants, if any, had ever discussed it at any real length, but it was as if there was some sort of miasma in the air surrounding the castle that made it exceptionally difficult to be truthful with others, especially concerning difficult ones; growing up in its confines, one learned to either excel in deception or suffer whatever consequences came your way. Hell, she'd witnessed (and participated in) so much figurative-and-literal backstabbing in her day, it was sometimes difficult to tell where the lies ended and the truth began.

The few outsiders allowed within its confines, seemed to be less-affected by the aforementioned air; whether they were originally evasive (or deceptive of others outright) personalities to begin with or not. Kaze was of course, overwhelmed with guilt at the other week's show of utter impotence in the face of his lady's command. "Once again, milady, I apologize profusely." he repeated.

Azura gave one of her rare, albeit-wistful smiles for the ninja. "Please, give it no more thought, Kaze." she plead.

Nonetheless, her expression suddenly turned dire. "Besides- had he- the king, truly wanted me dead, there wouldn't have been anything you could have done."

"Surely, there must be something I can do! Something to atone for such a failure, anything!"

"Actually, there is something you can do for me, something you can retrieve; but I must warn you, it will be exceedingly dangerous."

"Just name it."

Azura swallowed nervously. "I'm not even sure they still exist, but in Hoshido-"

******And the absent dragon princess' chambers were not the only places to see intrigues that evening. Late that night, long after she was damned sure each of the castle's regulars, common and noble alike, had turned in, Camilla, her evening robe feeling very lacking among the drafty corridors,
set out, down several stories to a place in the castle she'd not frequented for years.

Granted, she'd been more of a voracious reader as a young girl—long before becoming a woman swept her up in the backbiting life of a high-ranking Nohrian noblewoman. But upon returning and taking in the great, ancient stacks of books casting their long shadows across the immaculate stone floors, Camilla was struck by how little the particularly cavernous atmosphere of the library had changed, even the moonlight shining in from the odd window seeming somehow cold and sterile.

Nonetheless, there was a very particular wing of the library— one forbidden to all but the reigning king, which held any promise, distant as it may have been, to discern if there was any hope at all to see the last of her blood siblings turned from an increasingly-dark path. But the royal Nohrian collection held a great many curiosities, more than enough to intrigue rather curious individuals.**** "Oh, princess," scowled a very familiar, unpleasant voice. "what brings you to the library at this hour?"

Camilla's heart leapt as she almost dropped the lantern in her hand to the ground. Turning abruptly on her heel, the princess' shock was not assuaged in the least by his identity. But maintaining one's face in her life was essential. "Oh, Duke Toscana." she remarked neutrally. "I could ask you the same. I'd expect Lady Desdemona's bed to be rather cold without you at her side."

Matteo scoffed dismissively at the mention of the duchess. "Well, THAT'S never been an issue for her. And besides, you know fully well the only reason we wed is due to Father's wishes. Damnable gold-digger. But my question remains; what brings you here?"

The princess gave a rather insincere smile. "I was just looking for a collection of folktales and legends from our land's history." she half-lied. "Selena wished me to read her a story, you see."

The duke audibly stopped himself from chuckling. "Princess, don't tell me you actually believe the rot contained in those? Of the First Dragons and whatnot?"

"Well, some must ring more true than others." she answered honestly. "You know how people are. But what concern is it of yours, Lord Matteo?"

"You're absolutely correct, it's none of my concern. I really don't care whether they're fantasies and exaggerations concocted to make children eat their vegetables or if they're going return to the world tomorrow. With that said- well, you know what my actual concerns are."

Apparently having irritated him enough to drive him from the library, as Matteo turned to depart, Camilla seriously considered simply doing away with the noxious duke before deciding better of it. He may not have been loved at all, but he would certainly be missed, complicating a great many matters further. Nonetheless, Camilla continued on her search, seeking out the hidden key Azura had previously mentioned. It had taken a bit of time for her to locate it (actually a positive in case Matteo decided to hold back and eavesdrop), but she did in fact, locate the key enter the wing of the library under lock and chain.

With no idea where to start in the slightest, Camilla sighed, simply picking a tome at random and hoping against hope for some sort of obscure miracle cure for her brother. About half an hour of searching proved both informative, yet disappointing nonetheless; of course, she had no such luck in discovering any sort of medical treatment. In fact, it was the exact opposite, seeing that the vast majority of the information concerned deeds of bloodletting ages ago ("Moon Tribe?" she asked herself. "What the devil...?") or terrible, wicked magic and potions designed to inflict infinite variations of suffering- and ultimately death. It was little surprise their forefathers decided to keep such information literally locked away, she thought grimly. She was never (especially) magically inclined in comparison to her siblings, but another half-hour of exposure to the tomes, still in search
of some miracle elixir, actually made the princess slightly ill, not only at the descriptions and depictions of horrible suffering either.

Still, she'd had Selena scour every other shelf in the library- there had to be SOMETHING helpful on these shelves! There just had to be, Camilla swore to herself, her eyelids growing heavy as she slouched against the nearby wall...

"Oh, you're still here? I thought I told you to take care of it..."

"OH, GODS! CAMMY, WHY?!"

"Take a good look, girl. We win or we die. Look at what happens to this game's losers."

"Oh, gods! Mother!"

"You...you...you worthless...little girl..."

"Lady Camilla, stand back! The scene is far too dangerous for a lass, especially royalty!"

"...I'm sorry, milady...there was nothing we could have done...for either of them...He'd just lost too much blood...and her heart was..."

It was not exactly a nightmare of an experience. It was far too organized and cohesive. Just as vividly, if not moreso than when she'd experienced them, as she "rested," Camilla was forced to relive all of the absolute worst moments of her life, the emotional pain magnified tenfold. All throughout, there was an audible (to varying levels), distorted, masculine, demonic laughter echoing, seeming to escalate with the intensity of memories of her own suffering. At some point, between her fourth reliving of chasing down and slashing a half-sibling's throat and her third "discovery" of her mangled mother on death's door, despite the lack of control she had, the princess felt the overwhelming urge to simply crawl into a ball, close her eyes, and simply not awaken. "Please...just end...She'll...Corrine will be fine...and I can see them again..."

She would have only fallen deeper into this odd abyss between the waking world and dreams if not for the timely intervention of someone else who didn't quite belong in their world. "Hey! Lady Camilla! Wake up!"

Eyes shooting open, Camilla, reflexively (and inexplicably) removing her form from the wall, turned her head and gave a tired smile. "Oh, Selena..." she said, more fatigued than when she'd closed her eyes. "What brings you down here?"

"Well, I couldn't sleep and went for a walk. Noticed you weren't in bed, so I went looking for you. Out in the corridors, I heard you sobbing, moaning, and screaming."

"I see...thank you, Selena. I must have dozed off for a bit. Silly me."

The redhead crocked her head sideways, crossing her arms under her nightshirt's bust. "Wait, what WERE you dreaming about, anyway?" she inquired. "I thought you were being murdered in here or something!"

"Oh, n-nothing in particular."

Finally rising from the chair, Camilla took a few unsteady steps before collapsing to her hands and knees, her breath heavy and hurried. "Lady Camilla!" Selena exclaimed, lowering herself to help the princess up. "Are you sure you're alright?!"
Through frazzled lilac locks, the princess gave a weak smile. "Just a little dizzy." she half-fibbed. "I'm not feeling too well, Selena. Could you help me to my chambers? I should be fine in the morning."

Selena did not mind having to help the princess back to her bed in the least. Hell, she readily took any possible excuse to be more physical than usual with her stunning employer, even when the princess herself did not take the initiative. Still, any enjoyment the interloper could have gotten from Camilla clinging to her person was overshadowed by her dread at what could have done this to probably the second-strongest woman she knew- without leaving a scratch on her while leaving her both ill and very disturbed. However, something had become clear as day to Selena; that there was something (or someone, for all she knew) really, really, powerful and really, really, REALLY fucking evil in that restricted wing of the library. Maybe that's why King Leonard spent so much time there, she wondered to herself half-seriously.

*******The inhospitable terrain, hostile wildlife, and barren, rocky landscape surrounding the tower in question were scarcely a deterrent for the devotees in question. In fact, the trials required for their pilgrimage to the sacred site had actually for centuries, inspired the tribe's faithful, man, woman, and child alike, said suffering only strengthening their connection to the divine. Besides, the sheer power emanating from the site inherently repelled the heathens, save for occasional patrols from the execrable neighboring kingdom- those foolish enough to remain even briefly lost their minds (if they were fortunate); and their lives even more frequently.

That was not to say that the patrols sent out by the neighbors lacked any utility however. As one hapless young pikeman, coming to his senses after his forcible ingestion of some vile sedative solution, would soon learn; forcing his eyes open, while (terrifyingly enough) lacking the strength to move his limbs, motion and creaking of wheels beneath him was indicative of his unwilling transport in a cart of some kind, his best friend and war buddy Artur unconscious and even immobile than he; once the cart finally stopped, enough of the sedative had worn off to allow some movement of his neck.

Finding himself in the midst of a crowd of the enemy- his country's mortal one from across the mountains, would have been terrifying enough. But there was something...eerie, something oddly untoward about the whole affair, due perhaps in no small part due to the massive crowd (more than he could make out; but easily in the hundreds or even thousands) seeming utterly entranced by something to do with the great tower, their focus shortly shifting to the man at their collective center, standing atop a great altar of sorts. The young soldier could scarcely make him out, but his peripheral vision told him he was wearing some sort of ceremonial garb, this assumption only strengthened by his invocation.

"O Great Spirit of Chaos!" he bellowed, raising his staff to the sky. "Cleansing Destruction Itself! Just as we all pray for the return of the Absent One to scour this wicked world clean, we curse the perfidious heathens for their disbelief and futile attempts to impede your majesty! We, your humble servants, offer you these sacrifices as tribute!"

As the crowd began humming their ominous chant in unison, the soldier swallowed nervously; he knew fully well that he and Artur were about to die, and that was without the priest descending on the cart, ceremonial knife drawn. Seething at his utter helplessness as he was dragged to the wicked altar by one of the acolytes, the young pikeman winced in solidarity with his friend as the wicked priest slashed his throat, having consciously positioned him so that his blood would flow quickly to the ground. He could deal with the idea and practice of death, even his own; he was a soldier, after all, but what was about to transpire was, without a doubt, the wickedest spectacle he would ever lay eyes upon: With absolutely no warning whatsoever, the members of the crowd systematically, almost
mechanically turned on their neighbor, their own copies of the ceremonial knives drawn; father slew son, mother slashed daughter's throat, husband killed wife, brother killed brother; any and all possible combinations were at play for the sick orgy of bloodshed as before long, the cracked, dry ground surrounding the tower was literally submerged in human blood. "THIS is our sacrifice to you, Spirit of Chaos!" the priest said manically, ramming the bloody knife into the soldier's throat. "You have demanded blood from the heathen and faithful alike, now drink of this offering!"

Of course, he was in tremendous, unparalleled pain and took scarce notice of the depraved priest slaying his last surviving acolyte; fully prepared to meet his ancestors in the next life, the young soldier could scarcely help but notice however, the earth quaking for a couple of seconds. Was this what it truly felt like to die? Because the atmosphere now was one of overwhelming dread and hopelessness, wondering if even the gods were hopeless before such a force.

As the strength to even keep his eyelids open waned, he'd hoped the entity he saw being knelt before was a hallucination bought on by blood loss; even counting what he'd just witnessed, this creature was quite literally, the wickedest thing he had ever laid eyes upon; some malevolent, purple demon standing literally a story-and-a-half (at least) high with razor-sharp claws and equally-sharp prehensile protrusions from its wrist. Truth was, he'd actually wished himself fortunate enough to be done in by the deep, guttural laugh than be subjected to the spectacle.

"You do me honor with this sacrifice." the demon spoke at last. "You have done well, my servant."

"Oh, Great Spirit!" the priest answered, the awe still shining through his ceremonial mask. "The honor is all mine!"

"He's still not returned? Ah, well, I'm certain we can give these insects quite the 'game' they're looking for."

"Of course, O Chaotic One!"

"Rest assured, you WILL be rewarded, my servant."

With this, the demon reared back, its maw, that of some monstrous, horrible insect, opening up and consuming the priest whole. At this spectacle, as the life drained from him, the soldier spent his very last seconds giving profuse thanks to the gods that he was expiring before the monstrosity could turn its attention to him.

The entity released however, was rather pleased. In fact, it was overjoyed, giving an unhinged, wicked laugh at the zeal of its followers. It would not be an immediate thing, of course. Strength takes time to recover after all those centuries under a seal, particularly one forged by that contemptible wench they called a "goddess" and her errand boy. However, to be sure, those heathens who'd spurned it and those four great human-loving dolts would be made to pay and pay dearly.

Chapter End Notes

So, Takeshi's retainer/Hana's surrogate big brother is in the EXACT same situation as she is vis a vie Sakura, political intrigue with Camilla and Matteo, civilian massacres throwing gas on the flame (so to speak), and Corrine's having Madonna-themed sex dreams about Leo. Certainly an eclectic mix of content, huh? And how about that cult? BTW, the first track I linked to, technically is not called "Hymn of Time," but it should
be, since that was literally what the BGM for the temple in question was.
Sir Bohdan attempts to whip his men into shape for the inevitable clashes with the Hoshidan resistance, Kentaro's armies wipe Izumo from the map, and Leo takes part in a ritual as old as Nohrian identity itself as Hana is torn between pulling her weight among the Hoshidan faction of the alliance and her duty to Sakura.

*Shrine (The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild OST)*

**Thunderstorm ambience**

***For the Daimyo (Shogun 2: Total War OST)*

****Puzzling Truth (FE9 OST)*

*****Move Out! (FE9 OST)*

******Mamoritai ~White Wishes~ [Music box ver.] - (BOA/Tales of Graces OST)*

*******Horizon - Eri Sugai*

********Priest of the Dark Order [Orchestrated] (The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past OST)*

*Contrary to the warnings of the now-absent young upstart, the preliminary questioning by the council had not revealed anything untoward thus far; perhaps not exactly nice by human standards, but nothing genuinely alarming.*

"Brother...please..." Amaterasu plead, somewhat to the annoyance of the elders. "If there's something wrong...anything at all...you can tell us."

Internally, the Lunar Dragon was simmering with outrage at this inquest into his actions, his use of his chosen human. However, he remained civil still. "Sister, Lord Moro, I can assure you that this is all a great misunderstanding." Selenos lied. "And may I ask how said misunderstanding reached this point?"

"Never you mind, whelp!" growled Hudatos. "Your behavior as of late has been rubbing a LOT of us the wrong way!"

"Perhaps indelicately put, but Hudatos has a point, young one." Moro added. "This system of ours depends upon cooperation between our kind. Without it, this world likely would not survive. I would encourage you to reflect upon that before our next council meeting."
The moon dragon gave a huff of belligerence. "Fine, if you insist, Lord Moro."

"Yes, I do in fact, insist."*

While vocally giving his assent, Selenos still seethed in rage at these old fossils questioning him-undermining him. Where did they get off, these ancient hypocrites?! Tut-tutting at him for following the laws set out by them concerning his odd human with the even-odder birthmark on his hand. He was simply being honest with himself about his motives! Granted, while Selenos did not respect or even particularly like humans, he knew fully well that they had their uses; their world even more so, especially when one did not wish to be paid particular attention.

Manifesting on some forsaken spit of land, well away from the gates, Selenos' roar may very well have shaken the earth for all he knew, but he was damned sure who must have put the thought into the heads of those old fossils. Jealous little whelp! But that was no matter- none of it was, seeing as an old friend, manifesting as an average, unassuming young human male, approached the moon dragon with concern; it may have been humiliating to be forced into a human form, but it did consume far less energy outside the astral plane.

"Selenos..." he inquired gingerly. "Are you alright? I know the council can be...trying at times, but-"

"I'm fine, Wiris!" he lied. "Say, I want to call in that favor you owe me."

"Of course, friend! What is it?"

"I need the help of you and your forge- I want to bequeath some gifts onto the humans."

"A token of your bond, I presume? How very altruistic of you!"

"May I tag along? Offer some suggestions here and there?"

"Naturally."

After that showing of being humiliated in front of the council, Selenos' fortunes had done an abrupt turn, all thanks to his old "friend." Of course, Wiris was a damned trusting fool, but his forge was second-to-none in their own world- probably others as well.

While his prowess in battle was legendary- he'd correctly been credited with never having lost a battle in the course of his long, distinguished career, the discipline imposed by the Nohrian general Bohdan was rather...unpopular, not simply due to his tendency towards barking commands and expecting compliance- no, that was to be expected from a man in his position. It was more the content of the orders which ruffled a good many feathers.

"You there! Put that back!"

"Stand up straight!"

"Let the lad free, now!"

"Unhand her before I have you flogged!"

**While the common soldiers bore the brunt of his reprimands, Bohdan, despite his status as a lower noble, was not exactly beloved by the other bluebloods in positions of authority. Just as unsurprisingly, the truest outcasts in the equation took to his regimen of discipline the least kindly of all, such as after a pre-mess inspection in a certain camp, deep in the south of enemy territory.
"Why the fuck would you even bother with this?" Hans groused boredly. "They're just savages! Let the men have a little-"

Bohdan glared a focused, intense glare at the bandit, silencing even an arrogant brute like him. "I know you do not care," the knight began, utter contempt for his "fellow" commander dripping from every syllable. "but the first and most important rule of warfare; never underestimate one's enemy. I have a policy to punish any man I hear using that very word for one very specific reason."

The lout tilted his scarred, shaved head sideways in confusion. "That...the rumors are true...?" Hans answered dully. "And you really are half-savage after all?"

Already a man of heavily-lidded eyes and also obscured by the general darkness created by the storm, the bandit scarcely noticed Bohdan rolling his eyes. "Because when you disregard his humanity completely, you necessarily underestimate an enemy and his abilities! Many of the men have this notion that this is a grand adventure, no different than hunting deer or pheasant- it is not."

"There's no real difference between hunting savages and hunting game! They're not smart and really only any good dead! This is why people say you're one of them, you know!"

The knight growled in frustration. "If you insist. However, it is a grave mistake to view one's enemy as operating on base instinct. There are things other than simple survival, gratification or fear that men will fight, kill, and die for-"

"Whatever. I just know it's a damn good thing that us civilized folk aren't afraid of a fucking thing-"

A particularly violent thunderclap shattered the relative calm of the evening. This would have been startling enough, even if a bolt of lightning had not struck the tree trunk Hans had passed literal seconds before, falling onto an unfortunate underling and crushing his leg.

The bandit chuckled, a sort of nervous bravado behind the expression. "I...think I'm gonna go find my tent or something. Swear to the gods, those damned things follow me around-"

A hint of a smirk inched across the old knight's face. "Oh, ho!" he exclaimed. "Is one of the king's mighty, respected four horsemen afraid of a little thunder?"

"W-wha, fuck no!" Hans insisted far too strongly. "I've just...got a respect for it...Yeah, that's it, a respect for it!"**

Perhaps even more interesting than the crack in his (technical) superior's chest-beating, hyper-masculine facade; Bohdan could have sworn that one of the brief rumbles of thunder strongly resembled a deep-voiced man uttering "Damn! Missed again!"

***Despite the mountain passes in the northern highlands, the occupation and ultimate subjugation of Izumo was not exactly a lengthy affair; their western neighbors and cultural kin at least had the means and material to give significant, continuing resistance to their Nohrian patron. The small, isolated levies and sellswords able to be raised in such a short amount of time proved little in the way of the storm of man, beast, and steel descending upon the tiny land. Indeed, the campaign concluded within four days, the neighboring warlord entering the decadent castle and surrounding town as though it were a military target at sundown of the fourth day.

Already having been made aware of some trace of the news, until he witnessed his people slaughtered by enemy blades and spears, the lord of the castle had held onto some vain hope that this was some kind of sick, elaborate practical joke. Once this had been disproven beyond any shadow of a doubt by the invasion of his manor and slaughter of his guards by the invaders, the duke was not
pleased in the slightest. "Wh-what is this, Lord Kentaro?" Izana uttered as he shuddered with rage, any of his usual levity absent. "Is this some sick joke?!"

Removing his helm, Kentaro swept the matted hair from his face with a flourish; whether the flamboyant duke was muttering curses under his breath or incantations was of little concern to him, the smirk on his lips giving away the utter contempt he felt for his counterpart. "The only joke here is you, Grand Duke Izana." he remarked haughtily. "And your pathetic little country, of course."

Energy starting to pool unconsciously in his fingertips, the normally-cheery Izana was now apoplectic. "You- you- Did Nohr put you up to this?!!" he demanded "Answer me!"

Granted, it was an action he was going to take anyway, but the increasing belligerence of the duke gave Kentaro the excuse to remove one of his late father's daggers from the sheath on his thigh, calmly driving the weapon into Izana's chest cavity, twisting the handle about for good measure. "Well, if you simply MUST know," he teased. "not really. King Leonard just made it clear just how the world is changing. Decadence like this has no place in the world to come."

Sputtering and cursing at the younger man, even as he fell to the ground, Izana took his last breaths attempting to mutter out an incantation- to punish the young upstart for this crime against his people, only to be choked by the blood welling up in his respiratory system.

Settling himself down on the ducal throne, the young daimyo seemed quite content with his handiwork, daydreaming about his great realm to come before being interrupted by the guard captain clearing his throat and kneeling. "Er...Lord Kentaro." the guard began, most of his energy spent masking his sheer discomfort at the whole affair. "We've just received word from General Taira. The bandits around the capital have thrown down their arms!"

"Excellent work." he said distantly. "Send a bird back to the general- tell him to dispose of the rats. Oh, and make it clear to the peasants- business as usual. For their own good, I mean."***

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The temperature of the water and it hugging the better portion of her body, all of it left the princess feeling far more relaxed than she'd been in months- perhaps ever, given her naturally-anxious disposition. Then again, her company in the hot spring could have had something to do with that, said company crowding her from behind. "Lady Sakura! Do you want me to rub your back?" chirped the exceptionally familiar voice.

A serene smile crept over Sakura's face. "I'd love that, Hana."

It was little surprise to learn the swordswoman's fingers proved just as, if not more nimble than her footwork, a ghost of a shameless moan dying on Sakura's lips. "Hmm, you like that, Sakura?" came the voice, somewhat throatier than its usual intonation. "You're just SO tense!"

"O-of course I am." the princess confirmed breathlessly, silently hoping- praying for her servant and her fingers to become somewhat more...exploratory.

Her mind's eye becoming somewhat cloudy, Sakura's vision came back into focus, finding herself out of the water, moisture dripping from her form, naked as the day she was born, facing the collection of neatly-folded towels seeking to correct this. However, a certain party seemed to have other plans- namely in answering those hopes and prayers, her light footsteps ghosting across the room, an even more explicit moan escaping the princess' lips at the lips and teeth on her clavicle and the fingers pinching at her nipples.
"I'm sorry, Sakura, I just can't control myself anymore!"

Her champion physically turning her around, (her lithe, muscled, equally-naked form actually secondary to her notice), to face her, Sakura saw that familiar kindness and intensity looking back at her in Hana's eyes. However, now, there was something new there- a hungry, feral glint in her gaze, said gaze fueling that same desire welling up inside her as well. What came next came naturally as breathing; gently moving some of the swordswoman's wet brunette locks to the side, as their lips finally did meet, it was as though they were caught up in a world entirely their own, completely removed from the princess' usual anxiety and introversion as her tongue explored her beloved's mouth. For that moment, there was no war, no Nohr, no death or destruction, no standing warrants on their lives, or even any other souls; simply two women finally able to be entirely honest with their feelings for each other.

Several seconds of vigorous kissing saw Sakura pull back, panting for breath as a mischievous smile came over Hana's lips. "I'm going to make you feel SOOOO good, Sakura." she teased, briefly running her eyes up and down the princess' form.

"Oh, gods, please Hana!" she emoted.

"Yo! Wake up!" Rinkah called. "We've got a meeting."

"...Mmm, Hana..." Sakura moaned, shifting slightly on her bed.

"Hey!"

The princess was jolted awake from her pleasant dream by Rinkah's poking. While having the good fortune to be turned away from her friend, Sakura was absolutely mortified at where she'd let her fingers drift, nonetheless rising to her feet, self-consciously smoothing her skirt. "Oh, o-of course!" she emoted, her face still quite red. "L-lead the way."

Sakura swallowed nervously at the subject of her next question. "Rinkah, H-hana isn't-"

"She's already on her way with the other Hoshidans."

"She's already on her way with the other Hoshidans."

After the sheer shock had worn off, Sakura's embarrassment turned shortly to despair and dread at the implications of said dream; unsurprisingly, the young lady's dreams were never especially pleasant. In fact, she could scarcely remember having any good dreams- particularly prominent in her mind's eye being her brother's beaten, discolored body suspended by the neck from the great wall, their Nohrian friends thinking it the most hilarious thing in the world. Or his retainer being cornered by a gang of incensed enemy soldiers who proceeded to gouge out his eyes and hang him by the neck on the nearest tree- after violently removing a very particular part of his anatomy and forcing it down his throat.

Her dream last night, on the other hand? On an entirely different, very pleasant level, the princess' head clouded with a heady mixture of contentedness, ecstasy, guilt, and dread. Of course, she utterly adored Hana- her oldest, dearest friend. Her kindness, her devotion, her loyalty, her beauty, her courage. But was her affection for the swordswoman really like that, she wondered guiltily. What if she really was some kind of pervert who lusted after her best friend-slash-servant? What if, by some slip of the tongue, Hana found out and thought she was disgusting for it? Truth be told, in spite of everything she'd been through, the thought of losing Hana terrified her most of all; facing off against an evil (possibly demonically-inspired) empire paled in comparison.

Perhaps sensing her distress, Rinkah said little along their walk to the chief's tent, occasionally muttering "Knew it, I knew it" or something to that same effect.
It was not surprising that the chief of the Flame Tribe had not been having a stellar week, as it was not exactly easy to do so given the news he'd received, both at home and from abroad. In fact, his expression betrayed a combination of outrage, sorrow, and fear. "Rinkah, Princess Sakura, good." he said tiredly, quite visibly exhausted. "The situation has changed, and it's not good news."

****Returning to the great map of the continent at the center of his tent, Kikai moved several of the figurines across the eastern regions. "I'm going to start with what's probably the biggest complication." he began, a concerned glance in the direction of his immaculately-shaved counterpart in Fuga. "We've received word that forces from Mokushu have swept into Izumo; this wasn't a skirmish so much as a full-scale invasion- and they don't seem intent on leaving any time soon, if at all."

Save for the stoic Amagi and Kagero, the meeting's participants chattered among themselves in some combination of confusion, concern and dread (or in the case of a surly ninja, in an unsurprised-yet-displeased manner) before Kikai made an exaggerated clearing of his throat to calm the din.

"Wait, why?" Hana inquired, more confused than outraged. "Have they ever even looked crossly at another country, let alone fought them?"

"Why do you think?" Saizo huffed. "That obnoxious little princeling Kentaro has always been too big for his britches; now he's taking it out on the neighbors. That would be all of it except-"

"We have several troubling reports from our own sources as well." Kagero finished for him. "Namely, the solid-black-clad soldiers accompanying Mokushu's troops, preventing any retreats, suppressing any possible resistance in the cities and countryside, and so on."

"And you're absolutely certain they were NOT from Mokushu?" asked Fuga worriedly.

The kunoichi looked at him gravely. "I'd stake my life on it. Their accents, equipment, tactics, and body language were all too different. And they were reportedly rather...lax concerning casualties among the people of Izumo."

His expression and intonation stony as always, even the unflappable Amagi could not help but be somehow concerned. "With all that in mind, it sounds as though the Nohrian Royal Guard was acting as a sort of auxiliary force. It would explain the solid-black armor as well- and does one of King Leonard's 'four horsemen' not wear a very similar suit of armor?"

Saizo smirked a semi-demented sort of smirk of self-satisfaction. "So, it's pretty clear who's really calling the shots in that arrangement, huh?"

The swordswoman sighed tiredly. "Great, like we didn't have enough problems right now."

Needless to say, the Wind Tribe's chief was exceptionally-concerned, given the toll Bela's group of bandits had already done on his people. "Is this going to be a problem?" Fuga inquired, massaging his temples. "The Nohrians pulling more minions against us?"

"Not a chance." Tristan insisted. "Nohr's pretty much burned all of their bridges by this point, to the extent they ever existed; Notre Sagsse wouldn't be any help anyway even if they didn't just want to be left alone. Nestra, I guess, but I don't think they'd be a reliable ally, because- well, like Chief Kikai said about our Nohrian friends- slaves, enemies, and corpses only. Never equals or allies."

"Nonetheless, this does complicate matters a good deal." Kikai conceded gravely, looking angrier with himself than anyone else. "Because we don't really- oh, sod it!"
"In case you had not gathered it from our preoccupation," Amagi resumed for him, his tone revealing an ever-so-slight hint of worry. "our people's stronghold on Mount Haku fell to the Nohrians earlier this week, our temple and all. Our warriors resisted valiantly to the best of their ability, but-"

His chief interrupted the shadow, slamming his fist against the table in frustration. "They'd requested reinforcements from us four months ago!" growled Kikai. "And I just- I didn't- And those reports from the survivors? Good, merciful gods above-"

"Father...you were working with the best information you had...this isn't your fault."

The sight of the powerful, dynamic chief who'd organized this whole meeting and the wider alliance on the brink of breaking down, being consoled by his daughter caused a good bit of concern among the other representatives, one of the more loquacious leaders remarking on the obvious. "Oh, fuck and I thought WE had a reason to fight the bastards to the death!" said Lupina, running an anxious palm through her hair. "I honestly think that's even more of an insult than what they do to us!"

"So, wait a second," Hana interjected. "is it possible Nohr would attack the rest of your temples? I mean, from how I heard Rinkah describe the mountain, it sounds like a natural fortress."

"It's probable, even." Fuga acknowledged. "Our own temple is situated atop a great mesa; it's easy to defend and visibility is amazing in every direction."

Sakura's concern for their new allies from the west had apparently outgrown her still-considerable embarrassment and self-consciousness concerning her protector. "W-wait, shouldn't we send s-someone after them?" she inquired. "Lady Flora a-and her man, I mean."

"Lass has a point." conceded Lupina. "Then again, you know how your mouthy swordswoman described the settlement on Mount Haku? Multiply that by ten for the Ice Tribe."

"But the fact remains that the momentum is still in the enemy's favor." Tristan reminded gravely. "And this news tips it even further."****

Kagero gave a nod of acknowledgement. "Indeed, there's no getting around it; we need to break the back of the main Nohrian force in our own country."

"Which means basically rebuilding an army...from scratch..." Hana interjected, somehow incredulous. "Right under the enemy's nose..."

For the first time in several days, Kikai's expression seemed somehow hopeful. "You have the mind of a commander, daughter of Musashi. For the time being, the amount of help we can give may be limited, but if I can get in touch with that niece and nephew of mine...we could likely provide some good intelligence on the enemy."

An unreasonably-tough man, Saizo was still generally a fair one, nonetheless. "You shouldn't discount the other ninja clans either." he conceded. "Who knows? Maybe this news will actually light a fire under those old fools to join in the fight."

"I think we've all seen enough to realize one thing." began Amagi distantly. "However strong our enemy likes to think themselves, they have just as many weaknesses, if not more."**

****Somehow, the previously-dismal air- one of an imminent execution, in the meeting seemed to have somewhat abated with these points made. While not out of the woods by any means at all, the articulation of a reasonable, albeit difficult path forward to their mutual enemy's castration (or
destruction) and the preservation of their own survival was doubtlessly heartening. "I KNOW I can get a considerable force around here under Nohr's nose." said Lupina proudly. "Provided you lot distract them, of course."

The swordswoman beamed. "That'll be music to my brother's ears!" she reminded. "I'll send a bird to him as soon as possible."

"I'll have to send word to my brother on Tate, as well, seeing as he's their sentinel." remarked Amagi. "As soon as matters are settled there, I'll whip some of these whelps into shape- help replace some of our losses to the Nohrians."

Tristan grinned, an expression somewhere between hopeful and mildly-disturbed. "You know how our Nohrian 'older brother' calls us unnecessarily 'quarrelsome,' right? Well, the fact is, that free, reasonably-content and fed people don't revolt- and Sir Karol tells me this is only going to become more acute."

His spirit now bolstered considerably, Kikai nodded resolutely. "Excellent." he confirmed. "It seems we have a rough plan of action after all! Take care of what needs taking care of! We'll meet back here to go over the specifics- Nohr think's they've already won, ha!"*****

The guests scattered to go about their specific business; particularly getting in touch with their own subordinates. Hana, as per her promise, was one of them- until the two ninjas, about thirty paces removed from Kikai's tent, pulled her off to the side of the path.

"So you're going to contact Lord Takeshi, correct?" inquired Saizo impatiently. "Because we've got something to discuss."

"Of course." replied Hana. "What else would I be doing?!"

The ninja's scarred expression seemed to somehow turn even stonier. "You know the four Nohrian dukes we're talking about? They served as regents after you rescued the princess."

Scratching her chin absentmindedly, the swordswoman searched her memory. "In passing, maybe." she recalled. "I heard one of them mentioned by a Nohrian commander once- he was supposed to be offering bounties for "savages" caught alive."

"That'd be their leader, Duke Matteo of Toscana." Saizo informed contemptuously. "Slimy fuck of a man if there ever was one. His buddies are Guillaume of Lorraine, Durante of Carinthia, and Albrecht of Bayern. Or, rather, those last two were his buddies."

"Either way, we've punished their two colleagues, both for their iniquities and to cripple the enemy's war effort as much as possible." informed Kagero, typically serious.

From his rucksack, Saizo produced a slightly-cracked bottle of an expensive elixir. "Guess it's a trophy of sorts- proof I actually pulled it off." he remarked, unusually blankly. "Killed Albrecht during a raid on one of his 'ranches.' He bawled like a baby when I took it from him. It was pathetic."

"I'm not particularly proud of the guise I used to do so," Kagero prefaced, somehow harsher than usual. "but I disposed of Duke Durante shortly prior to Saizo's battle. I was unable to retrieve a trophy from him since- well, I left his most treasured possession shoved down his throat- send a message, you see."
Hana smiled. "Good for you two!" she congratulated. "Finally, someone pays them back! But I kind of get the impression you two just didn't want to brag to me."

"Good, you get it." remarked Saizo shortly. "Since our 'friends' from Nohr have a habit of butchering royal retainers and that girl Princess Hinoka seems to love so much is gods-only-know-where, that leaves you, by default, with a pretty high rank."

"Come on, you two!" she goaded. "You both know fully well my entire job- my life's mission- is to defend Lady Sakura."

"We're not saying you have to help us in this effort if you don't want to-" Kagero prefaced gently.

"But it wouldn't it look kind of bad for a high-ranking noblewoman- one of the most celebrated resistance fighter's little sister at that- not to really pull her weight?" Saizo inquired.

With all her brother was doing- and with all these two were doing as well to resist the enemy, even against impossible odds did, truth be told, eat away at Hana's conscience more than a bit. The princess was of course, the most important thing in the world to her; nothing else even came close. But a part of Hana could nevertheless not help but wonder; was she simply using Sakura as an excuse not to do her part when all of Hoshido needed everyone who could help? Kikai did say she had a tactician's mind, after all.

"I'll think about it." she half-fibbed.

It was not technically an untruth, she told herself. She would see how things developed and, if circumstances permitted, maybe she could collect her own pound of flesh from the rapacious nobles of a particularly rapacious power. Then again, there were really, really freaking evil things in their world- things from which she did not feel right not protecting Sakura with her very life at every possible second.

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Every day, she followed the routine set out for her without fail; awaken at dawn, perform the purification rituals before praying to the gods, and provide the ritual offerings. Indeed, thirteen-year old Himiko and the other inhabitants of a long-neglected shrine in the western capital (the ancient one- as opposed to the modern, more-or-less-completely destroyed), it was as if the war had scarcely touched this corner of the country- until that one fateful day in particular.

A bell announcing the arrival of a weary traveler, the head priest, purely off of instinct, swore to himself, peeking from behind the pagoda in search of the miko. "Himiko-chan, I need you to feed the fish today."

"Oh, of course!"

Given that this traveler seemed particularly out of sorts and the shrine's long history of treating the sick and wounded, it was little surprise that his brother priests had prepared a futon for the man in the oratory hall, the figure shrouded simply in an old, patched cloak, the priest handing him a cup of hot tea.

"Are you well, friend?" he inquired.

"Not especially." he grumbled, inching the cloak further over his visage.

"Well...can I get you anything? Do anything for you?"

"Yes, as matter of fact, you can."
A man of letters and somewhat sheltered, the priest however knew that nothing good could come of the soldiers clad in purple-black armor crowding the hall, holding the junior priests at the points of blades, spears, and axes.****** "You can die."

From his robed hand, the stranger's gauntlet proceeded to emit a wave of overwhelming, suffocating darkness, literally stealing the breath from the hapless cleric's very lungs as he fell to his knees, desperately struggling for any air at all. "Milord!" said the captain. "What shall we do with the other savages?"

The man scoffed as he removed the hood revealing his neck length blond hair and cold, cruel eyes. "Are my orders truly so incomprehensible? The same order I must have given a thousand times by now!"

"Oh, right! Of course, my king!"

The force of eight soldiers dealing with their charges- either through impaling or cutting their throats, the perpetually-disgruntled king summoned a sphere of dark purple fire in his hand, blasting a hole in the shrine wall. "Well, you dullards? Are you coming or do I have to drag you?"

Of course, Himiko had heard the screams, the pleas for mercy and the occasional explosion. Remote as the possibility and terrified as she was, Himiko had one thing made clear that this was still very much a possibility- that wicked men may come one day, seeking the power of the gods enshrined there. Quivering, trembling with fear, the lass nonetheless took the bow hidden away before the doors in the main hall just for this very purpose.

Attempting (with some success) to still her racing mind and heart and steady her aim, Himiko focused not on her clammy hands or thumping heart, or even the pattering of the boots encroaching ever closer on the sanctuary. While it may have been surprising to see the group led by a man not much older than she, the sheer aloofness and contempt his mere gaze communicated shortly killed any sort of relief she may have felt.

"Y-you are trespassing!" she threatened, as menacingly as she could possibly manage. "Y-you're trespassing on s-sacred ground! Leave at once!"

While the soldiers chuckled, their intonation somewhere between amused and sinister, their leader, a blond man of nineteen or so clad in intricate dark armor, still remained aloof from his subordinates. "So I DID have the right site!" he exclaimed, giving a dismissive glance at his immediate subordinate. "Johanson! How devoted are you to my rule?!!"

The pikeman straightened up at this attention paid by his king immediately. "I-I would die for you, milord." he stammered. "Just say the word."

The king smirked wickedly. "It's interesting you should say that."

With this, an orb of electricity shot forth from Leonard's outstretched hand, dispersing as it impacted against the ceiling; Himiko was (for the time being) unharmed, yet rattled; his subordinates were not so fortunate, those relatively fortunate perishing instantly. In spite of the obvious mismatch in power between the two, the girl felt her resolve nonetheless stiffen, as if all her predecessors stood alongside her.

"I-I won't ask again!" she threatened. "L-leave or I'll shoot!"

It would not have surprised the lass to learn the man, for all his obvious magical power, was
somewhat unstable, seeing as he'd just murdered several of his own men in cold blood. This perception was not helped in the least by his pause to give a hearty, sinister laugh at this show of defiance. "You really have no idea who I am, worm?!" he declared incredulously. "Leonard the Thirteenth, the greatest king of the greatest kingdom of Nohr?! The master of this continent?!”

Closing the distance between them, Leonard knocked the weapon from Himiko's hand effortlessly, lifting her from the ground as his grip tightened around her neck. "I know all about you heathen savages and your ill-gotten 'peace' and 'prosperity.'” he ranted. "I don't know by what trick of the gods you gained it, but I WILL gain this power for my own and create a new world under my guidance! And you can know that YOU were fortunate enough to die today, rather than living to see indolent savages like you lowered to your rightful place!"

Of course, even prior to the girl's body growing limp, he knew damn well that he was not in fact, killing some nameless teenage shrine maiden. He was no fool, after all. She was simply a stand-in for the other, ever-elusive target of his wrath. It did not concern every waking moment of his, true, but the king could honestly not see a figure more deserving of his wrath than she; if there was, he'd yet to encounter her.********

Chapter End Notes

Kudos and comments are, as always, appreciated!
Flora starts on the preparations for her coup, Charlotte hosts, and the Flame Tribe survivors of the Mount Haku siege settle into their new "lives."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Well, he had in fact, narrowed down his search for the source of said wicked power- the very same as represented by Selenos' human, to a very small cluster of worlds. And what Anankos learned since was not encouraging in the slightest. Throughout the ages he surveyed, his conversations with the guardian spirits of the worlds' in question all revealed the bearer of said malevolent power, whoever he may be, to be blessed by gods, to the point where even they were helpless against its bearer. Even after revealing his true form and extent of his powers, even his own kin in these worlds- other dragons warned him against seeking out the source of the malice, let alone confronting him. How could one being, let alone a human, have so much power flowing inside of him, to the point where the hands of gods were tied?*

Kind and intelligent by nature, Anankos was also something of a worrywart, prone to getting lost in his own thoughts; this just so happened to be one of those times. What if his own power- even with those of the other dragons, was truly no match for the human in question? What if Selenos was not simply being obstinate, but maliciously guiding his charge down such a path, empowering him further? Was there any hope at all to purge this evil from their world?

In the sea of time and space, the traveler between the worlds was drowning in his own anxiety before...**a certain epiphany; all the chaos of the assorted worlds colliding and interacting suddenly went silent, his own mind just as still before being flooded with a soft, divine melody, resonating just as clearly as if he'd heard it with his own ears. ("Oh, weary traveler from distant lands! A great evil from one of our sister worlds has put yours in grave danger! A being of hatred and rage threatening even we gods.")  He could not exactly make out the lyrics, but the gentle woman's voice stilled his anxiety, filling his heart and mind with hope and, most of all, a renewed sense of urgency and purpose ("But there is still hope yet; the spirit of my champion has found the one who'd stand against the demon!") Of course! It all made sense now! Even if Selenos had unleashed the incarnation of hatred and rage into their world, there was still hope! His own polite nature implored him to seek out the woman and thank her profusely, said message also made clear that there was also precious little time to waste- to aid the humans ("Nonetheless, you must make haste- locate treasures of the three virtues and the cornerstone and return them to your own world- after that, the rest will become clear to all.") in their oncoming struggle against the tyrant.**

***Being as careful a soul as she was, Flora would have of course preferred that this letter be delivered in person to her "uncle," given the sensitive, certainly explosive information contained therein. Nonetheless, Flora jotted down her thoughts, the sounds of Florian roughhousing with some of his men acting as background noise.

"Dear Uncle, are you well? I suppose that's a foolish question given the circumstances. We all have precious little time for pleasantries, so I will be blunt with my questions. Has Bela fallen out of favor
with my father at all? Has Father's mindset budged, even in the slightest? If not, then we truly are out of time; as the others are already planning their efforts against the enemy."

Guiltily, Flora exhaled, affording herself a brief pause before she finished the letter. "This is not a conflict we can afford to be on the wrong side of. If Father truly is so obstinate, we have no other choice but to carry out the 'plan' we had previously discussed."

Signing her name and sealing the letter, Flora rose from her resting place to close in on the impromptu wrestling match, which quite fortunately, was wrapping up, her own man looking rather pleased with herself.

"Alright, good match, everyone!" Florian exclaimed, throwing a friendly arm across the shoulder of a young man as they approached the previously-drawn water.

"You really think so?" the youth inquired, bright green eyes sparkling in admiration of his hero.

"Yeah, I really do, Var. You've really grown strong these past few years."

Clearing her throat, Flora spoke. "Varius, a word?"

"Hm, sure, Lady Flora, what's wrong?"

Extending the letter to the youth, the heiress' visage seemed even more dire than usual. "Florian trusts you with his life, so I'm choosing to do so as well." she said. "See that this letter gets to Sir Hadrian as soon as possible. Speak of it to no one, guard it with your life."

The young man, a boy, really nodded confidently, his sweat-strewn blond locks only seeming to emphasize his upbeat expression. "Yes, ma'am!" he confirmed. "I'll do just that!"

The lad gathering up his associates for their ultimate departure and return home, a rare smile crept over Florian's lips. "That Var's a good kid, huh?" he remarked proudly.

"Well, he learned from the best, didn't he?" replied Flora, somewhat more at ease. "You're his idol, you know?"

The tribe's champion chuckled fondly, recalling the training, both combat and physically-oriented, over the years. While a stern (but ultimately fair) leader with little tolerance for nonsense, Florian, despite many of the discomfort many of the elders had with him, was genuinely revered by his warriors not only for his strength and valor, but for his treatment of them as an adoptive family of sorts, from the lowliest recruit to those nearly equal to him in strength like Varius. Given Florian's past- the gory details of which he had in common with many of his men, this was not surprising.

"You know, you'd actually make a pretty good father someday." remarked Flora carelessly, face coloring slightly as she recognized the possible implications of such a statement.

Florian chuckled nervously. "Really? You think so?" he answered, somehow awkwardly.***

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****Gods love them, she loved them too- they had literally created her AND been there for her when no one else in that hick town of theirs ("What, Ed? Your girl think she's too GOOD for us?") would have even given her the time of day, but at the same time, Charlotte could not help but cringe. They were just so embarrassing at times! For fuck's sake, she had spent years cultivating the image of NOT being some uncultured, backwoods hayseed! Still, a part of Charlotte felt it was her own fault
for using her pull with the king to arrange such a tour of the castle. All the noblewoman's finery in
the world could not account for the inopportune nature of prurient teenage interests.

"The gallery must be **soooooo** dignified and romantic!" insisted Josephine.

"No, no!" insisted Jean impatiently. "We gotta see the dungeons! They say if you listen closely, you
can hear the ghosts of the people who died there! Some people say you can hear a man's voice pretty
clearly!"

"Jean, that's just a stupid myth!" Charlotte insisted. "It's just like the rumors about people going
insane just living here!"

"I dunno about that." remarked one of the guards. "My cousin spent ten years on dungeon duty; guy
was sharp as a nail, but when he got out? Mad as a hatter, that one. Wouldn't stop ranting about the
'almighty power' and 'calamities.' Pretty damned sad."

"Oh, come on!" insisted the second guard. "People say literally any old place is haunted! You can't
seriously buy into that stuff?!!"

"Speaking of the gallery, you know it's haunted too, right?" remarked a third guard. "The horseman
from one of the very first paintings? Yeah, it follows you around the gallery, through the other
paintings! Seen it with my own eyes."

Jean, always kind of an oblivious lad, spoke next. "Oh, man, that's so cool! I wish 'Pa could be here
to see this!"

Reflexively, Charlotte's mother and sister winced, knowing how explosive a combination could and
would be. "Oh, yeah!" remarked a fourth guard to Charlotte's rear mischievously. "Isn't he even a
bigger savage-lover than the princess?"

The burly blond youth's turned his ire on the guard. "Hey! Don't talk about him like that! He's a
better man than you'll ever be!"

"Jean, settle down!" insisted Charlotte, now rather irate.

The second guard shrugged his shoulders. "Kid, you gotta learn that people'll call thing's what they
are; people think your 'pa is a savage-lover? Up to him to change it."

"For real!" said the fourth guard, completely in agreement. "If I had his kind of pull in the castle, I
wouldn't be wasting my time trying to speak for savages who'd roast and eat me alive as thanks! I'd
be all-"

Charlotte briefly considered the possibility that the man groping her backside was a stress-induced
hallucination. Given the utter fiasco this visit had become, it was not out of the question.
Nonetheless, the short distance between the two and the general tack of the conversation led her to
believe against it; even were it not, she was honestly desperate to heave the second guard over her
shoulder and slam him to the ground if it would end the affair early.****

"Oh my goodness!" she exclaimed airily. "What happened?! Are you alright?!"

"Ow...my head..." moaned the groping guard.

Charlotte's expression matching her actual mood as she turned to the squad's leader, she continued in
that same vein. "Will you not see your comrade to the infirmary?"

"Erm, uh- yes, of course, Lady Charlotte! I apologize, but we will have to escort you all out."

Her siblings may have been groaning in disappointment, but inwardly, Charlotte was breathing a sigh of relief. She respected the man and thought the world of him, but the fact was that her father's particular eccentricity had closed a lot of doors for the family. She was doing this for their own good! Even if she had to wear a mask she absolutely fucking despised.

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"How many times do we have to say it, worms!" spat the faceless Nohrian soldier, whipping one of the tribesmen back to his unsteady feet. "Breaks are for exactly one minute, on the hour!"

Exhausted and dehydrated (more than a few looking as though they'd one foot in the grave already) as they all were, this provided more than enough incentive for the gaunt, emaciated Flame Tribe members to return to their grueling, dangerous work, to say nothing of their young precariously suspended in cages above the lava pools, Futago cursing to himself as he (yet again) cut his palm on a piece of some ore demanded by the Nohrians, tearing some stray fabric from his ragged clothes in an attempt to stanch the bleeding.

Contrary to what one may have expected from the often frigid exterior, the Mount Haku temple was actually situated on top of and inside a semi-active volcano, the temple interior extending a decent way into the mountain. And exactly as their would-be masters in Nohr had long suspected, home to a great deal of mineral wealth. For all his time (it could not have been terribly long seeing as he was still alive) forced to extract minerals by hand at literal blade/spear-point from one of his people's holiest sites, Futago, in all his four decades in the world, could not comprehend one thing; what exactly goes through the average Nohrian mind, let alone their rulers, to see this as even remotely acceptable? Sure, he was just as aware as anyone else of their lurid “savage” obsession, but defiling another people's sacred sites with slave labor and (on a good day) gratuitous murder for noncompliance? Even in his wildest, angriest, revenge-driven dreams concerning the country, doing such a thing never once occurred to Futago. It simply was beyond the pale!

"Hey, old timer!" sneered a second guard, poking Futago with his spear. "Your collection quota's looking kind of low!"

"There's no more ore here!" Futago insisted, as calmly as any man could in such a situation. "If I had some of my tools, maybe I- Fuck!"

The second soldier laughed nastily at this suggestion as he continued to pierce the older man's ankle with his weapon to the point of drawing blood. "Yeah, right! You savages would love that, I bet! Like we're REALLY gonna trust you with things that could easily be turned into weapons?!"

Futago cursed to himself once again; he had a point there. Whoever the hell was in charge here may have been evil and (as expected) arrogant, but he was not stupid by any means; while the enslaved, embittered worshipers at Mount Haku may have had a fairly short life expectancy, any of the Nohrians who'd left their weapons unattended, even for a moment or two, would have an even shorter one.

Of course, this life expectancy was entirely dependent upon the relative goodwill (or lack thereof) shown by their captors, as illustrated when a frail, elderly man collapsed against the rock wall, heaving and gasping for breath. "W-water!" he gasped hoarsely. "P-please! Water!"

The nearby guard, rather incensed already, sheathed his whip in favor of the short sword on his belt, dragging the old man to his unsteady feet. "Who the fuck are you to demand ANYTHING from us,
savage?!” he spat.

Forcing the poor old bastard onto a rock wrists-first, the outraged guard, heaved his blade with all his might, severing both his hands at the wrist. Now severely dehydrated and bleeding profusely, forced to his feet, he stumbled listlessly for several steps, only to have that same Nohrian force him over to the bridge and into the pool of lava below. For all his ailments, at the very least, his suffering ended fairly quickly if his halted screams were anything to go by. "There's your fucking water..." growled the soldier. "What the fuck are you all looking at?! Get back to work before your brats join him!"*****

He knew fully well he'd not live to see it; too much was working against him, given the intensity of the labor, the lack of provisions, the high cost of failure to meet one's quota, and the fact that they were slave labor- chattel assigned to work literally to death inside a volcano. But one thing gave Futago any satisfaction whatsoever with his plight; that crimes such as the siege-massacre of the sacred mountain and defilement of its temple would be neither forgiven nor forgotten by his fellow tribesmen and women.

Pacing in his study that fateful evening, Grand Prince Micheal, known as a wise and patient statesman at home and abroad, wrestled with his instincts versus what he (or was reasonably sure, at least) he knew about the world at large. The arrogance literally dripped off the page; who was this desert bandit- this king of thieves- to demand the submission of his country or face its destruction?! He would not tolerate it! And neither would any of the other nobles for that matter! There was nothing worthwhile in those deserts and never would be!

"Milord," inquired his scribe, peeking in from the doorway. "have you made your decision? Shall we ignore the desert rabble-"

"Send word to Nantes and the surrounding lords," the grand prince insisted sternly. "Instruct them to bolster their defenses and be ready for battle. I'll send some of my own troops to reinforce them."

"Understood, milord. Anything else?"

"Yes; we'll end this banditry nonsense once and for all."

Chapter End Notes

*Dragon (The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild OST)

**Message from the Goddess (The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword OST)

***Overlooking the Great Ocean (Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles OST)

****Magi is Everything (Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles OST)

*****Magmoor Caverns Ambience (Metroid Prime OST)
Chapter Summary

Despite the self-proclaimed Nohrian leadership of the "civilized" nations, the dealings of the neighbors provide interesting insight into the political situation as Corrine has an interesting reunion with her king, Guillaume (figuratively and literally) seals his fate, and a most unusual unit under an even more unusual commander wreaks havoc on Nohrian forces...

Chapter Notes

Oh yeah, the flashbacks are (generally) in chronological order, but I give a pretty big warning/giveaway when they're not.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Truth is, despite the sharp, shooting pain through his right leg- an poisoned arrow wound informing him it was in fact so- it still did not feel quite real to Grand Prince Micheal as he struggled to extract himself from the ruins of the grand temple, dragging his blade along with his leg. His beloved city and people crushed under hoof and heel by these desert barbarians. How it happened, he was not truly sure. He'd heard of this tribe- how they fought less like even the most disciplined of armies and more like demons and their wanton brutality meted out to the subjugated lands. Even when he sent his eldest son Roland to blunt their advance (for all the good it did, seeing as he'd not heard back from him or his retainers) on the capital.

But only when he managed to drag himself to by the ruins of the great fountain, did the reality of the situation become truly clear to the prince- the bodies of his three remaining sons impaled upon pikes surrounded by those of their fateful retainers- was the sheer hopelessness of the situation made clear for Micheal, the poisoned arrow may as well have been through his heart instead.

Even before he could process the horrific sight before him, let alone mourn for his butchered sons, there sounded a great clap of thunder- greater than he'd ever heard in all his fifty-five years, reflexively turning around at the whimmying of a giant black stallion.*If the beast was intimidating, his master was terrifying; a giant clad in black armor, his most striking features his oddly-blackened skin, the mane of flame red-hair trailing behind him, and beady, yellow eyes full of pride and malice. He'd heard tales from the refugees, common and noble alike, but this man truly did look like a demon.

"You...you did this..." Michael stammered blankly. "You...demon king!"

**The stallion's master chuckled viciously at the old man attempting to raise his blade in righteous fury. "I take it you enjoyed the little show my men put on for you?" he sneered. "This is truly all the greatest city in the world- this Cheve- could offer in the way of resistance? Pathetic! It almost makes me think the rest of your measly country isn't even worth crushing- almost!"

Whether from the poison, outrage, or both Michael was becoming increasingly belligerent.
"You...bastard...!" he said weakly, advancing on the horseman weakly, shortly lowering his arms to catch his breath.

This display simply earned a bought of cruel laughter from the warlord. "Listen here, you pathetic, shriveled old wretch!" he demanded. "You've got moments left to live- you and all your people will quiver in awe and terror whenever they hear my name from this day forward! Soon, once I've destroyed that so-called 'sun temple' in the east, I will rule this continent- and the world!"

The man-demon was very pleased with himself, as evidenced by his deep, malicious laughter as he hurled his trident into one of the still-twitching victims. "And none of you insects can do a thing to stop me- none of you!"

As the right hand of the grand prince, Lord Mayor Enrico of Trieste, as he was not technically a diplomat, had a good deal more freedom of action and speech, even where it would perhaps be unwise. In the confines of a rather comfortable carriage racing through the Nohrian countryside, was perhaps one of those places. "A nation of thieves, liars, and murderers." remarked the mayor. "They are now and always have been."

The prince winced, in no small part due to the sheer impropriety of the remark. Nestrans were known for their passion, but particularly for guests on a diplomatic mission, such language was uncalled for. "Oh, come now, Enrico!" exclaimed Grand Prince Nicolao. "Is that truly appropriate?"

"Because it's true! What, sire; are you afraid they're listening, is that it?"

Part of it was his training as a diplomat and his naturally-polite disposition, but another part of it was so- Mayor Enrico had known him too well for too many years not to see the apprehension in his expression. Even by the standards of nobles, the Nohrians consistently put on self-important airs and that one with the sallow, angular face- that duke was known to have eyes and ears in his employ across the country. "Even so, I still don't believe that kind of language is constructive." the prince said carefully, stroking his beard nervously. "After all, you've seen what happens to the nations that get on their bad side- the Chevois, the Hoshidans, the Flame Tribe-"

"Exactly my point!" retorted Enrico. "Their entire foreign policy consists of forcing us all to play pretend at the point of a blade! Occasionally stabbing or goring one of us to make a point. You say that this visit is essential to keep us on their good side, no? But what about when the day comes where we're suddenly not? What ensures that we're not next?"

Apart from the rumbling of the carriage, the galloping of the horses, and the chirping of the crickets, the environs remained largely silent. Truth be told, he had no answer for the very good, pointed questions asked by his old friend- no answers he liked, anyway. In spite of himself and his country's situation, the old prince managed a wry smile. "I remember your optimism when you first became my right hand." he remarked. "Now? Gods, you actually sound a bit like those Sagecios fellows!"

The mayor scoffed. "Yeah, if a creepy cult of assassins like that actually existed. It's just a myth and you know it, Nicolao."

"Assassins obsessed with death makes sense on some level, no?"

"Yeah, but their own deaths too? Come on!"

***As questionable-to-nonexistent as his moral fiber was, Duke Matteo did not see the fascination many of his fellow nobles had with the enslavement of the savages. He could understand why
Guillaume would be fixated upon selling of them, since he'd go to any length to dirty his hands if he could make some gold off it, but why exactly there was a market escaped him. By nature, they'd only do the bare minimum amount of work to avoid being maimed and/or killed- being manipulative as he was, Matteo knew fully well that people worked best when they actually wanted something- or he was able to convince them that they wanted it. Nonetheless, his fellow ex-regent was unremarkable apart from his monumental avarice, to the point where it had caused him a number of headaches previously.

It was therefore appropriate that Matteo would accompany Guillaume out into the provinces on occasion- to keep him out of too much trouble. Then again, the thing about manipulation was that one's targets did not always behave as one wished, the duke rolling his eyes at the his counterpart's sordid transaction.

"And I'm assuring you, Duke Lucca!" implored Guillaume, gesturing as though he was actually taking offense. "This merchandise is among some of my finest! Each one of these bucks will do the work of seven farmhands or common laborers easily! Tell you what- I'll even throw in my newest catch's sisters, no extra charge. If anything, it's a bonus for you, if you get my meaning."

The twenty or so Hoshidans bound and manacled trailing behind the two nobles were not exactly pleased with their new occupation, seeing as they, by definition as slaves, had no say in their ultimate fates. Duke Roderico of Lucca, a older, portly gentleman, was rather tempted by the offer. "Hm, you drive a hard bargain, Guillaume- very well! If you've ever need of the extra men, send a bird to my man Ludvico and he should get you set up." he confirmed, placing a large sack of gold on the post of a nearby fence. "In the meantime, Andreas! Show these swine to the yard of the servants quarters- we'll figure something out."

Sighing resignedly, the knight Andreas, a man in his early thirties of above-average size, took the leash on the yoke of the slave at the head of the line, earning him a glare of intense enmity. "Fucking Nohrian bastard." he swore, punctuating his sentence by spitting at the knight's feet. "You even LOOK at one of my sisters-"

"It's just a job- it's nothing personal." he reiterated tiredly.

The vineyards and farms of Lucca's expansive noble estates, while outwardly beautiful, with many of its men abroad for the war effort, had taken on somewhat more of a sinister turn as of late. At least once every half hour, Matteo was sure he'd heard the very distinct cracking of whips, to the point where he was wondering if he was hallucinating. And civilized or savage, he had no real desire to see a man's back literally torn open from the flagellation he'd suffered, and finally, if he heard the word "boy" one more time, he felt liable to tear his hair out.

"I hope you're happy." Matteo remarked crossly. "This was a complete waste of time- we could have been doing something productive with this time."

Jingling the sack of gold, his counterpart was in fact, quite pleased with himself. "Maybe it wasn't productive for you." he retorted smugly. "Besides, we've got the bulk of the duke's levy at our disposal. Surely you can't tell me that's not useful!"

Matteo rubbed his chin in contemplation. "Hm, you've got a point there. But it still doesn't change the fact that you're a gold-grubbing reprobate who'd sell his own mother for coin."

Guillaume rolled his eyes. "Why must you be such a killjoy, my friend?"

"Hah, 'killjoy'! I've been called worse by better men than you."
Guillaume chuckled. "Like what, a cuckold?"

Matteo's face twisted in humiliated rage. "Yes, like a cuckold." he informed through gritted teeth. "Now if you'll excuse me, once we reach the inn, I've a few letters to write." ***

She would not be home for at least tomorrow morning, the king knew damn well. Nonetheless, in the absence of his dear Corrine, King Leonard nonetheless, had a suitable replacement in his chambers for the time being, said substitute having a grand old time with herself moaning and writhing on top of him before she came once again, even a woman of the duchess' incredible stamina worn out, collapsing in his embrace momentarily before recoiling- neither of them were exactly affectionate lovers following the main event.

His luxurious, kingly bed becoming somewhat lighter with his partner going to the washbasin and smoothing her frazzled hair, the king was a firm believer in giving credit where credit was due- on the rare occasions where he saw it merited, anyway. "I must say," he remarked, stretching his arms with a yawn. "that was excellent as always, Lady Desdemona. I'll never understand what exactly is wrong with Matteo that he can keep his hands off you."

Sashaying back to the foot of her king's bed, the duchess gave a wry grin. "Well, everyone has their own theories." she remarked lightly. "I have a few myself, but no actual proof."

"So does he just prefer boys to women?"

"I couldn't tell you, milord; come to think of it, I've never actually seen him express interest in anyone, really- apart from his own 'brilliance' of course."

While not to the degree of another beauty of Krakenburg obviously, Desdemona was a taller, pale, curvaceous woman in her early-to-mid thirties, silver hair cascading down to the small of her back. Given his very interesting (and borderline-to-outright incestuous) tastes in women, it was little surprise that the duchess quickly became one of his favorite bedmates. Of course, she also had something else in common with Corrine.

"I'd still LOVE to bring Princess Camilla to one of our little romps." she remarked airily, lounging on the bed at her king's outstretched feet. "Gods, I'd kill for a chance to fuck her."

Leonard chuckled darkly, recalling his sister's right-hand woman and their shared, preexisting dislike. "Wouldn't we all, wouldn't we all?"

Desdemona craned her neck to look up at her king. "Something on your mind, milord?"

"Nothing you need concern yourself with- the savages and whatnot. But I suppose one can no more fault them than one faults a beast for acting like...a beast. I can however, fault my gold-grubbing minions with more avarice than sense."

"Ah, I see."

Well, damn, thought the duchess. That wasn't really anything her husband-in-name-only was not aware of- however, the fact that their king was becoming rather annoyed by Duke Guillaume's greed, could be very useful to him. Or at least, knowing that the king and Duke Toscana were on the same page on the matter could be helpful. Then again, Desdemona had a very reliable method for prying information from otherwise tight-lipped individuals- mainly men, but one never really knew. Gods knew she could use some more relief.

Crawling coyly to her lord like some sort of sickly feline, Desdemona gave a wicked smirk. "I've just
been such a naughty girl, my king! Won't you see fit to punish me?"

The king returned the expression. "Get over here, you slutty little minx and I'll punish you!"

The two-and-a-half weeks on the road to return to the castle had been trying on Corrine for a number of reasons, not least of which were the vile memories from Mount Haku assaulting her mind's eye whenever she'd closed her eyes. The pained, tortured screams and sounds of men, women, and children alike being dismembered and mutilated had largely become background noise by this point. However, nightmarish as the experience was, when she closed her eyes to sleep were the truly the most trying hours, the images being more vivid than she'd experienced. Honestly, Corrine could not decide which were more horrifying; the dream where she'd watched a group of her men having a grand old time burning a little boy and his sister alive as they begged her to save them or the ones were she was an active, enthusiastic participant in the massacres.

And this was only compounded upon by the hero's welcome she and her men received as they toured the towns en route to the castle, the rapturous, adoring cheers showered upon her by the men, women, and children alike. While Ira and most of her men enthusiastically received such praise from the masses, Corrine simply shirked guiltily away, the pleas for tales of how she'd slaughtered "savages" constantly ringing in her ears. Hell, she'd even vomited at the sight of a group of her own soldiers (rather successfully judging by their exhilarated expressions) attempting to pick up a group of village girls with their mutilated "trophies" and exaggerated tales of their masculine daring.

Yes, it was truly a relief to be out of the spotlight for her "heroism" which she knew damned well she did not deserve. And when the guards, after what seemed like ages, dragged those great doors open, it was even more of a relief to find the azure maiden throwing herself in Corrine's embrace. "I-I'm sorry." Azura remarked emotionally. "I just hadn't seen you in so long."

The princess managed a weary smile. "Don't mention it." she remarked, fatigue apparent in her voice. "I just want to go back to our room and sleep."

Azura gave one of her rare, heartfelt smiles. "Whatever you wish, my love."

Her girlfriend's sweet, soothing voice was, as always, music to Corrine's ears and, when she returned to her bed after what seemed like ages, falling asleep almost immediately as her head hit the pillow. And slept well she did- for the first time in weeks, Azura's dainty fingers massaging her scalp affectionately as she so did. Yes, Corrine slept quite well indeed, perhaps dreaming even more pleasantly...

Sunlight streaming in on her face, Corrine's system finally saw fit to rouse her from her sleep, stretching her arm with a yawn, unintentionally nudging the bed's other occupant.

"Ah, I see you slept well, Corrine, my darling." he remarked, stroking her snowy locks, one of his exceptionally-rare smiles on his face.

Corrine returned the expression. "Of course! How could I not?" she chirped, stroking his cheek in return. "My king- my kind, intelligent, sexy husband."

"Well, I've got nothing on you, my love."

Corrine chuckled in response, her lips meeting those very familiar ones in a light, chaste, gentle kiss- quite the contrast from their night together. Not surprisingly for a father-to-be, the king massaged his queen's midsection affectionately, giving an (even rarer) playful chuckle. "It still doesn't feel real to
"Well, it is real, and it's amazing." answered Corrine, just as dreamily. "Just like every moment of being your queen."

Perhaps in the expectation of going a second round, the royal couple's lips met once again, the gesture noticeably more intense, their hands wandering the contours of the other's body before the king pulled back. "You know, we should really think about our son's name before we practice making his little brother or sister."

Corrine smirked. "Or our daughter, Leo."

"Fair point, my treasure."

Whatever their immediate intent, it was interrupted by the royal guard rapping at their chamber's door. "Milord! Milord!" called the guard, his rapping seeming even more obnoxious at this early hour.

The king growled. "Fine, enter."

The door creaking behind him, the faceless, black-clad soldier bowed in apology. "So sorry, Your Majesties." he began contritely. "But there are certain matters which require your attention- Sir Pietro...is a bit of a prima donna concerning his accommodations in the dungeon. He insists that he need look presentable for his final appeals."

Leonard scowled. "He'll deal with what he's been given." he remarked coldly. "Times like this, I wish I could delegate this kind of thing to Duke Toscana- before his tragic balcony accident, anyway."

The soldier then turned to the queen. "Oh, Queen Corrine, the sav-"

The soldier audibly choked back the bile in his throat before resuming. "-Hoshidan delegation arrived earlier this morning. And their queen, something or another, sends her regards as well."

"Hinoka." Corrine corrected sternly.

The soldier shrugged. "With all due respect, milady, the sav- they kind of all look the same to me." he explained.

"Enough of this, you fool!" growled the king. "Send word to the maids to draw a bath and prepare my wife's finery. I shall deal with Pietro and his appeals in the meantime."

"At once, milord."

The king pecked his queen on the cheek as the guard scurried obediently away to relay his lord's directives. Yes, it had been a long, bloody road with much hardship and loss, but she could genuinely say her life was as close to perfect as she could have ever expected. It was almost too good to be true, in fact...

Corrine opened her eyes once more, only to turn her gaze guiltily away from the figure actually stroking her locks. "Good morning, Corrine." Azura said softly. "Did you sleep well, my treasure?"

"Oh, Azura." the princess remarked, sounding somehow disappointed."Y-yeah, I slept great."
Refreshed, but still rather unnerved, Corrine rose from the bed, stepping over to the wash basin to clean her face. Azura meanwhile, crocked her neck in confusion. "Something wrong?"

"Fine, everything's great." she lied, rubbing the wash cloth across her face. "Slept like a log, in fact!"

Confused, relieved, guilty, and sexually frustrated all at once, Corrine became increasingly annoyed at the rapping (so THAT's where it came from!) on the door to their chamber. "What?! Come in already!"

Curiously enough, precisely as in the dream, a soldier of the royal guard took this as his cue to enter. "Princess, His Majesty requests your presence in the throne room as soon as possible." he reported dutifully. "He's rather insistent that you come alone."

"Alright, thank you." answered Corrine neutrally.

As the guard took his leave, almost immediately, there was a distinct spring in the princess' step as she bounded over to the lovers' shared wardrobe. While keeping her feelings close to her figurative vest, Azura was far too observant not to notice her change in demeanor. "Well, you seem a bit more chipper." she observed, a strong hint of jealousy audible in her tone. "I wonder why that could be?"

"Oh, come on, Azura! He's the king!" Corrine insisted a bit too vigorously. "I mean, if he calls, I can't just tell him no, now can I? Besides, I never took you for the jealous type at all."

"I-I'm not, I'm really not, it's just-"

Azura sighed heavily as her girlfriend was apparently modeling a black evening gown against her own frame. "We tell each other everything, right?"

Corrine looked at her lover as though she'd been struck in the back of the head a second before. "O-oh, of course, Azura!" she fibbed. "What's the problem?"

"Nothing, it's nothing. It's just- you would tell me if something was troubling you, right?"

"Naturally!"

Immediately, after the exchange concluded, the words you godsdamned liar flowed through her mind. Of course, she told her girlfriend everything that concerned her! Everything except the fact that her men celebrated their victory against the "savages" with a gratuitous orgy of mass slaughter, rape, and pillage- yet again. This time however, she lacked even the excuse of being a subordinate- these were her own troops she failed to keep in line! To say nothing of her semi-incestuous, unprofessional lust for the man she called her brother becoming overpowering.

It was not long before Corrine simply decided upon her regular armor as sufficient for her audience with the king; she had noticeably more leeway with him than most, and with the matter at hand and his demands, it also provided the opportunity for her to raise certain...issues with Leonard, particularly. The great throne room doors dragged open by the obviously-eastern slaves (she still could not believe he would approve of such things!), Corrine, upon taking several steps before her king and his throne, was mildly distracted by just how...commanding the king had become. Knowing him as an uptight, studious bookworm from her youth, he had truly taken to the role fate had forced on him- in fact, going down on one knee for him (having his measurements taken by a tailor before her arrival), momentarily sent her mind, among other things, racing with possibilities.

"Your Majesty." Corrine remarked, a forced neutrality in her tone. "You summoned me?"
The king's normally sullen face lit up considerably. "Ah, Corrine!" he answered. "Just the woman I wanted to see!"

Leonard scowled at the tailor and Hoshidan slaves in that order. "Away with you!" he demanded. "That goes doubly for you two vermin!"

Much like as though operated by some kind of switch, her adopted brother's demeanor switched immediately. "The men and court alike have been singing your praises for your heroism on the savages' mountain." he informed proudly. "Sir Armin, Lady Rose- to the extent she speaks at all, anyway- all praise your performance against that filth. Even Pietro sends his regards- grudgingly, no doubt, but still."

Corrine winced at the mention of the horrors for which she bore partial responsibility, to say nothing of what the approval of butchers like Pietro said about her. "Th-thank you, milord." she said.

The king gave one of his rare, genuine smiles. "Oh, Corrine, no need to be so formal when it's just us! 'Leo' is fine!"

Turning her head up to meet his gaze, Corrine smiled lightly as well. "Thank you, Leo."

"I have been quite impressed with your performance as well- even more so with your effect on the morale of the troops."

Truth be told, given her track record and the massacre(s) on Mount Haku, this endorsement, while somewhat soothing considering the source, did not exactly fill her with confidence. But there was more still.

"You'll not have to accept if you're opposed," resumed Leonard. "but in light of your proven heroism, I'd like to promote you as one of my generals."

****Corrine felt her heart skip a beat at this, the culmination of her misguided ambitions staring at her with its (very attractive) face. "T-thank you, Leo; you've already done so much to fuck me- done so much for me already." she remarked, face coloring slightly at the Freudian slip.

The king took several steps back to his throne, producing from behind it the ceremonial trident (now that she thought about it, Corrine scarcely noticed just how omnipresent the trident motif in Nohrian symbolism was), a weapon of still-immaculate condition. Tapping her shoulder with one of the blunt edges of the weapon, the monarch spoke. "For all your heroic deeds in the name of the Kingdom of Nohr and martial aptitude, I, Leonard the Thirteenth, solemnly elevate you, Lady Corrine, to the ranks of His Majesty's generals, with all the powers and privileges of that station. Please rise."

Complying with the command and rising to her feet, Corrine, as trying as the past year had been, felt some shred of optimism for the first time in many months now. No longer would the other commanders, noble or not, be allowed to simply dismiss her input concerning the treatment of the subjugated peoples as the ramblings of some naive blueblood. Even Matteo's bag of tricks would be weakened significantly. Of course, there were still other outstanding issues.

"By the by, Corrine." the king remarked. "in a month's time, I'm hosting an assortment of foreign dignitaries at a gala. I understand the punitive expedition was trying, but if you'd do me the honor, I'd love for you to accompany me."

"Yes, I'd love to!" the princess blurted out, her justification to Azura still ringing in her mind. "Go with you, I mean."

Leonard clasped his hand in anticipation. "Wonderful, just wonderful! Of course, your armor simply
will not do for such an occasion; the seamstresses will fashion something worthy for you! That will be all, Corrine."

Taking her leave from the throne room, Corrine, almost as though intoxicated, found her mind swimming with the possibilities her new position had opened up. Indeed, in light all of the pain and suffering her choice on that fateful day had resulted in, there did genuinely seem to be a light at the end of the tunnel. So lost in fantasy was she, did Corrine scarcely notice that several minutes had actually passed until she literally bumped into Azura.

"Oh, Corrine!" she exclaimed. "What did the king want?"

Corrine felt her mood deflate slightly at being bought back to reality. "Oh, nothing." she lied reflexively. "Just work stuff. Leo actually was so impressed by me, he made me one of his generals."

Azura's face lit up. "Oh, that's wonderful, Corrine! You're really moving up in the world, aren't you?"

Corrine chuckled nervously. "Yeah, I am, aren't I?"

As her lover spoke on, Corrine found herself arguing with that nagging little voice in the back of her mind. It wasn't really being unfaithful to Azura, she reassured herself. It was simply a work thing! A diplomatic event! What wrong could there be in that? She was a member of high society, after all!

Was it possible that she was letting her emotions run away with her? Being seduced by the pomp and power of the throne? It was possible, she conceded. But then again, as they passed the gallery of the country's previous queens and the full wall mirror, Corrine paused briefly, allowing herself to fantasize about herself in the queenly finery.

"Corrine?" Azura remarked. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, it's nothing!"****

In a certain ancient temple in Notre Sagesse, well outside the relatively (for the chain of islands, anyway) bustling hub of the capital, gathered a rather unusual group of extremely devoted individuals. While gathering to discuss everything of import- politics, religion, the war on the mainland and their country's mortal enemy, while inconvenienced, was by no means defeated.

But for members of this unusual order, the true attraction was the wisdom of their captain and his mystic visions- increasingly powerful as of late. "I implore you, my brother." plead an awestruck young man of sixteen or so. "Tell the story again- of your first vision, I mean."

Seated at the northern end of the temple, Paul, the captain- a stern-faced man in his mid-30s with a piercing gaze, stood up and cleared his throat. "Very well." he remarked, his booming voice playing well off the temple's acoustics. "As you all know, I was something of a sickly child. By the time I was seventeen, my condition became even worse, to the point where my mother and father feared for my life. No doctor or medicine on the islands seemed to help. In fact, my condition seemed to deteriorate even more. In their desperation, Mother and Father gathered up every bit of gold they could muster- to send me away to a doctor on the mainland who could help. The physician said neither he nor his colleagues had ever seen anything like it. Not even the famed Nestran hot springs helped. At a loss, that well-meaning soul directed Father and I to a healer in that wretched kingdom of night."

The ruined temple became absolutely, utterly silent as their leader approached the climax of the story- the most fascinating, captivating part. "When we set foot on Nohrian soil, my health began to decline
even further." continued Paul. "When I would close my eyes to sleep at night, I would see and hear
horrible visions- demons and monsters terrorizing the innocent, the foulest of foul, unholy beasts
ravaging the land, draining what life remained from me, it seemed. Needless to say, these were quite
taxing. In fact, by our second night, I expected fully to take my last breath that country."

A hint of a triumphant smirk crept over Paul's face. "By the third night, I dreaded sleeping- once I
finally did however, I found myself surrounded by a horde of the wickedest, shadowy creatures
laughing- taunting me as their very presence robbed me of what little life remained. The greatest and
most terrible of them all towered over his fellows with a head of horns. I'd despaired of whatever fate
these monsters had prepared for me when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a glint of light- a young
man or an older boy- I couldn't exactly tell- appeared, hoisting a shimmering blade above his head.
The demons fled in terror as this blade's light dissolved them and drove their master back to whatever
foul pit he came. The light overwhelmed everything but the silhouette of the hero and his blade- and
then I heard her voice- that's when I knew the Goddess had sent her messenger to save me- that I still
had a mission in this world."

No matter how many times their captain spoke of it, the tale of his rescue from the demon horde by
the Goddess and her messenger- the lad wielding the sword that drove darkness away and slew
demons- it never failed to receive the same reaction of absolute awe. "When I awoke, it was as
though the life had returned to me- I was healed." Paul concluded. "Of course, the very first thing I
did was wake Father- I was not going to remain in that land of demons a second longer than
necessary. And that kingdom is demonic, do not misunderstand that."

Despite hearing the tale of the Goddess and the shimmering warrior from his own hero, the lad's
expression darkened somehow. "The only problem is the demon spawn bringing their evil to our
country." he complained.

"Yeah!" concurred another youth. "And the sniveling old cowards- the council of so-called 'wise
men' doing nothing!"

The Captain smiled darkly. "But that is why we are here, no? What our order is for?" he reminded.
"Besides, the Goddess and her herald never leave the faithful without hope- in this world, I can feel
his spirit- that very same one the diabolical king fears and hates above all else."

*****

Prim, proper, and (ironically enough) cautious to a fault generally, Lord Kojuro of Sanuki
could not help but curse profusely to himself at the situation he'd led his loyal retainers into- disarmed
and into the hands of their hated enemy. Gentle and easygoing, even by Hoshidan standards, Lord
Kojuro could neither abide the devastation strewn about his family's lands nor the Nohrians' murder
of his beloved elder brother, the province's previous lord. Both his father and brother had lain down
their lives to fight the enemy, so he felt it only right to aid his people in their hour of need.

"Well, well, well," remarked the Nohrian commander nastily, a burly axeman some twenty-five
years of age. "Looks like you've made a bit of a wrong turn, boy."

His twenty-five or so subordinates chuckled in unison, varying degrees of malice and/or fear in their
given intonations. The new Lord of Sanuki merely spoke the truth. "No, we just seem to have gotten
a bit off-track with our equipment." he remarked, still bristling at the Nohrian habit of referring to any
Hoshidan male as "boy."

"Technically, milord is correct." remarked one of Kojuro's commanders, bound to his own spear.

The Nohrian mage to his left scowled at the man. "Hey, shut the fuck up, swine! If you stop giving
us lip and accept your deaths like men, we won't make painful- maybe."
Meanwhile, one of the enemy's spearmen, quite obviously a green recruit from his disconcerted body language, finally vocalized his discomfort. "Hey g-guys," he began. "I-isn't this kinda th-that Black B-band's turf?"

As childish as it may have seemed, this was in fact, the ultimate goal of Lord Sanuki— to seek out the semi-legendary rural army that had sprung up in the Hoshidan countryside to combat the invaders—and add his resources to their own. While they obviously would not be victorious on their own, it would prove a mighty headache for their tormentors. Not to mention taking some of the heat off those tough, crazy bastards in the north.

The commander growled in frustration. "Come on, don't be stupid, Bauer!" he ordered. "That's just a myth the savages tell themselves to—"

Said commander was abruptly silenced with an arrow to the throat, as was his right-hand boredly holding the lantern. "The commander's down!" cried one of the pikemen. "We're under attack!"

"Someone light the signal fires before—"*****

In the flurry of arrow fire and the sounds of combat illuminated only by the moon's light in the forest clearing, Kojuro and his retainers were abruptly knocked to the ground in the chaos. Fully expecting to be finished off by the enemy, Kojuro was shocked that the figure that tackled him to the ground had a very familiar accent. "Get down and stay down!" he ordered.

Before the lord could inquire further, he felt the figure's weight leave his body, apparently taking off to do battle.

Now it was, of course, quite dark, but after a minute-and-a-half, the chaos had seemed to have largely died down, a couple of figures lighting lamps to survey the battlefield. Truth was, Kojuro had thought he was in the afterlife before the voices were revealed, by careful discernment, to be Hoshidan. "Hey, these guys are alright too!" called one of the combatants, untying the lord from his binds. "Your instincts were spot-on, ma'am!"

"Wait, what's going on here?" Kojuro inquired, both confused and relieved.

As the figure came closer into focus, Kojuro could scarcely believe his eyes at the commander—the woman gesturing to finish off the wounded enemy—and her identity. "Wait, you can't be—"

The commander crooked her head sideways. "Oh, hey there," Setsuna remarked vacantly. "Long time, no see, huh?"

"Setsuna?! Lady Setsuna of Tosa?!"

"Yup, the one and only."

Helping the lord to his feet, Setsuna swiped a bit of the dust from the dumbstruck lord's armor. It still boggled Kojuro's mind that his erstwhile fiance, the lazy, anxious, teenage noblewoman, had come to command this force terrorizing the occupier. "H-how?" he inquired. "I'd heard you were serving the p-princess—"

Setsuna shrugged, perhaps an unconscious response to the wounded Nohrians being dealt with. "Yeah, I am- but it's a real long story," she remarked. "But we gotta, you know, clear out of here before the Nohrians figure out anything and scavenge anything useful."
"A-a-and this 'Black Band?"

"I dunno. It started with me and it just kinda snowballed from there."

While their engagement may not have worked out, Kojuro genuinely wished the absentminded noblewoman well- recalling her as he knew her in her previous life, the lord managed a proud smile. "I must say, you've become quite a brave young lady, Setsuna." he remarked.

Setsuna chuckled. "Oh, no." she said modestly. "You think I'M brave? Believe me, you ain't seen nothing- I know people WAY braver. Worked with them too."

There was something truly hypnotic about the crackling and sparking of the fire in the nighttime air, especially when contrasting against the assorted sounds of the nighttime. Yatsunasa had known that from the very first time he'd watched his father create one. This only became more so once the chilly autumns which the northern principalities were famous arrived; particularly in the winter where the flames could very well stand between one and an early, very unpleasant grave.

Perhaps this fascination was hereditary; as long as anyone could remember, the men in his family had been mystics in some way, shape, or form. And as far as the young man could tell (or could even conceive), they always would be. Truth be told, that suited him just fine. Let those soft southerners or plateau-dwelling easterners concern themselves with whatever new toys of theirs. Hell, or even the tribes out in the deserts of the far west and their constant warfare worked for this example; the people of the north truly were a different breed.

His elder brother and father having done their part for the harvest and exhausted as such, the responsibility fell upon Yatsunasa to see the flame die a natural death tonight; this was considered a prestigious position, particularly for someone as young as Yatsunasa's seventeen. Then again, it WAS an exceptionally-boring task and the lad DID like his sleep after all...

When Yatsunasa came to, he was understandably, very alarmed; his environment utterly still and silent, air heavy with mist and his visibility limited at best, bizarrely enough, the ground itself seemed to be enveloped in it. The only thing visible in the distance was an ornate castle- an ornate, yet very-familiar castle which he was sure did not exist in any of the eastern lands.

Most apparent of all however, was the very imminent presence of a spectral, skeletal figure, clad in armor from head to toe, silent, but apparently staring very intently at Yatsunasa. Naturally made very uncomfortable by this, the lad took several steps backwards before tripping over something, shortly revealed as a blade of some sort or another. While he was a mystic by training, Yatsunasa knew a bit more than the basics of using a sword; certainly enough to defend himself or others. It was almost as though the specter was beckoning him, challenging him to take up the blade.

Still scared out of his mind and not sure exactly what else to do to escape this weird realm, Yatsunasa got to his feet and raised the blade over his head, a bellow of belligerence masking his attempt at an overhead strike on the spirit. Of course, for his trouble, the entity promptly knocked him on his backside, nary a scratch on its form.

"Your technique was sloppy, your footwork was atrocious, and your spacing was laughable." the figure spoke at last. "Had this been an actual battle, your life would be forfeit. But that was not your worst mistake."

"Well, excuse me!" remarked Yatsunasa in response, some of the edge apparently taken off by the being finally speaking. "What would that be, Mister god-of-war?!"
The entity's gaze seemed to grow even more intense. "I could sense the hesitation in your mind, body, and spirit alike; a sword wields no strength unless the hand that holds it has courage! Remember those words! Make them a part of your very being!"

"But why?! Where am I?! And most of all, who the hell are you?!"

"My name is of no import; what is important is that your world- and everyone in it, is in mortal danger."

"Wait, how?! And what are you talking about?!"

"My fated nemesis- a demon thief and sorcerer of great and terrible power- has absconded from the pages of history, I believe, to haunt this world and turn it into his domain. More than a few have the strength, but I've detected none- no man with both the sense and valor as well, to stand against him through the eons of your world."

"Okay, but where do I come into this?!"

"Milady requires me in my own world. To deal with an especially pernicious demon and the sect of fanatics it commands. Therefore, it is not possible for me to physically travel the worlds to end this demon thief."

"Well, when you say it like that, it sounds as if you're not giving me much choice."

If it were at all possible for the skeletal champion to give any facial expression, Yatsunasa suspected it would have been a sly grin. "Precisely. I sense great power resting in you and your blood. But that alone is not sufficient. Take up the blade- practice as though your world's fate depended upon it, both in dreams and the waking world- grow wise as you live out your days- and most of all, recall what I said of the sword! It will be an arduous road, but at its end, my spirit will have a proper successor in this world- and give it hope against the dark lord."

Twirling some of his light-brown hair absentmindedly, Yatsunasa had to admit that this was quite a bit to take in. He would have liked to characterize it as a mere dream- or even a particularly vivid vision. But the sheer dignity- the sheer gravitas and valor radiating from the entity sparked some instinct of his, something he could not quite shake, beckoning him towards becoming the war god's apprentice. How could any man refuse giving his world hope against a demon king? "Very well." the lad said at last. "What do I have to do?"

The spirit gave a nod of acknowledgement. "Excellent! First of all, tell me; I am aware you come from a family of mystics, but who taught you the sword?"

"No one. I taught myself."

"Alright, I can work with this... Let us begin! I will learn you swordplay befitting of a hero!"

Chapter End Notes

Class: Nohr Queen
Description: Corrine, an adopted princess of the Kingdom of Nohr and acclaimed war heroine. Beloved by Leonard. Wields blades and dragonstones.
*This isn't

**Even a surprise

***Deepest Woods (Tales of Symphonia OST)

****Premonition (FE14 OST)

*****Forest ambience

******Hidden Skill Training [Remix] (The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess OST)
Interlude

Chapter Summary

A pair of interludes concerning the origins of the present conflict set millennia before the names "Nohr" or "Hoshido" were ever uttered- one in a world far away, and the other quite near.

Chapter Notes

Anyway, I hope this clears up a lot of ambiguity about the world I'd imagined, which, honestly, was of my own design. But we're to a point where said ambiguities can't really be denied any longer.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tapping his fingers against his throne's armrest nervously, the young king glared intensely at the envoy. "Well?" he demanded impatiently.

Turning his gaze away, the messenger could not bear to face the sovereign. "I...apologize, milord." he began gingerly. "But nothing."

Slamming his fist against the throne, the king growled in exasperation. "Damn it all!" he swore. "We've tried following the advice of the farmers, scholars, and mystics all! Nothing!"

The messenger bowed apologetically. "M-milord, if it would please you, feel free to s-spill my blood. If it would end this drought, I'd gladly-"

*The ruler waved his hand dismissively. "No, that would be utterly barbaric." he insisted. "And completely ineffective- more befitting of those fanatics across the mountains."

Rising from his throne, the king began to pace the width of the chamber anxiously. If it were a challenge that could be identified and met- whether a plague, a marauding enemy, or anything else, that would be a surmountable challenge. All of these at once, on the other hand? Well, perhaps "marauding" was not quite the right term for this enemy.

"Speaking of which, have you heard tell of the zealots?" asked the monarch, his fierce, green eyes giving little indication of his concern.

"I can't say I have, sire. Which is unsettling- my father would tell tales of his fierce battles with the tribes back in his day. These days, we hear or see nothing from them. I don't like it. I don't like it in the slightest."

"Damn."

Massaging his temples, the king sighed tiredly. "That will be all, my good man. I've business to attend to myself."
Retiring to the atrium atop the castle, the king engaged in what had become a morning ritual for him, bowing before the marble effigies of the gods and ancestors alike before mouthing a prayer for their aid- ironically enough, in his youth, he had absolutely no use for religion in the slightest, privately sneering at his father and grandfather alike for their fastidious adherence to said rites. But as the crown weighed heavier upon his head and the kingdom's distress continued to mount, he'd become acutely aware of just how powerless even the most powerful man in the world could be in the face of such forces.

With that said, there was also business to attend to with his three most important generals- one for each of the cardinal directions; making his way to his secondary study- his strategy room, the king was met by the three officers standing at attention, the monarch raising his hand in as if to dismiss them. "That will do, gentlemen." he began, taking the seat at the head of the table. "Let us start with you, Tudhaliya; what of the western frontier?"

The general, a rather short, stocky fellow, nodded dutifully. "My liege, precisely as you've commanded, I've deployed my finest unit and finest commander to oversee the garrison. Some of the men are a bit...restless and wondering why we've devoted such a commitment to these lands, but it is unimportant."

"Is that so...?" the king inquired, less-than-amused. "Labarna, what of the south?"

The general grimaced. "Apart from the drought, sire?" he asked, genuinely unsure of his king's intention in asking. "The beasts are more aggressive as of late, but nothing to report apart from that."

The other two men did not envy their fellow general- having responsibility for the northern highlands. "And the north, Hattusili?" asked the king finally, fingers tapping against the table in irritation.

The remaining general, a thin, gaunt man, swallowed nervously. "We've not seen any significant activity from the tribes for years, milord." the general reported, just as nervously. "They are up to something, sire- I'd stake my life on it."

The monarch cursed to himself. In his father's reign, they'd seen a significant incursion of the fanatics- he'd been little more than a boy when he'd taken part in the campaign to repel them. Since that time, they'd been fairly quiet, engaging in skirmishes with the border guards from time to time. But then again, there was a reason why his fathers had declared anyone practicing their dark rites inside the kingdom's lands subject to outlawry.

"If it should please you, my king," resumed Labarna. "I could dispatch envoys to request aid from abroad. The mask-worshipers are odd, true, but they're not fanatics. They can be reasoned with."

The monarch gave a derisive huff. "They'll have their own problems." he reminded. "And need I remind you that our kingdom is not just the greatest in the world, but the ONLY kingdom left in the world. The southerners are a city-state by this point and the swamp-dwellers supposedly have a king, but the last time anyone heard from them was in my grandfather's time."

Leaving his seat at the head of the table, the king paced about the room irritably, halting before the north-facing window, scowling at that damned tower jutting out into the sky from the highlands. No one had any real recollection of when the cursed thing had actually been constructed- only that it had been present for the past millennium at the very least, and most likely for far longer. And also from time immemorial, it held the well-deserved reputation for playing host to the most wicked and
sinister of rites- to what end exactly, only the fanatics worshiping there knew; but within his own kingdom, attempting to practice said rites was and had been for ages, a capital crime for good reason.

"What an eyesore that cursed tower is!" exclaimed the king. "It's cast a vile shadow over this land for far too long!"

Labarna, the youngest of the generals, spoke first. "Milord, why not simply destroy it?"

The king snorted, half in amusement and half in contempt. "If I had an army ready for every time my fathers tried to bring that thing down...we'd have toppled it ages ago! You know what I mean! It's size notwithstanding, the zealots have some sorcery that makes it immune to conventional methods of destruction. And even then, we all know they would fight to the last man, woman, and child to protect it."

Hattusili spoke up next. "With all due respect, my liege," he prefaced fearfully. "that description makes it sound more like a temple. Perhaps it's not what's on the outside, but what's inside of it?"

The general shuddered. "It kind of makes me wish the Hero of Eons would return and destroy whatever it is."

Labarna scoffed in derision. "Please! You can't tell me you believe that old wives tale! No man could possibly live that long! That alone makes it nonsense!"

For all his underlings' squabbles, the king could not help but find himself wishing for that hero of old to return and topple the tower- or even better, destroy whatever it was that made the fanatics dwelling around it so...fanatical.

Alright, he would admit to being a coward- Lord Hanno of Atria was not a man who believed in deceiving himself and a great many things did frighten him. However, this pilgrimage of sorts- to pay their respects to the new lord of these lands- was rather...unsettling for a number of reasons. It was not simply the unnaturally-blank expressions worn by the sentries or fact that they'd entered the considerable camp in the midst of the sacrificing of a considerable number of captives. No, even the air itself surrounding this man seemed heavier- more difficult to breathe.

"Mezentius, my f-friend." he stammered, wincing at the pained, final shrieks of another sacrifice, almost certainly their (theoretical) countrymen. "M-must we truly do this? I mean, s-surely some lowborn envoys would suffice?!"

Lord Mezentius of Vizpul, a man of around thirty-five, turned his cruel, angular face towards his counterpart, huffing dismissively. "Stupid AND cowardly is no way to go through life, Hanno." he scoffed. "We are simply making a good impression- nothing more, nothing less."

"But still? Your father's blade? His most prized possession? The same one he claims to have been granted by the gods?"

"Yes, it is magnificent- a fitting welcoming gift for this world's new ruler, no?"

"I suppose, but-"

"But nothing!"
In the bundle Mezentius carried close to his chest was a brilliant, obsidian-tinged longsword, the hilt inlaid with a jewel black as the night itself. The encampment itself was actually little more than an encampment of large felt tents, select areas fenced off for livestock. Naturally, the largest, grandest tent sat at the center, surrounded by black-armored warriors wielding an assortment of weapons, such as the two who crossed their spears to block the lords' passage. "Name." grunted the man on the left.

"Mezentius, Lord of Vizpul," the noble recited, producing some strange emblem attached to the cord around his neck. "And my companion, Hanno of Atria."

As though somehow entranced to do so synchronized, the guards removed their weapons to their original position. "Enter." growled the man on the right.

When they first crossed into the tent, the first thing that struck Hanno was the sickly odor of a particular type of incense, the billowing smoke being only enough to actually impede his visibility slightly. Upon closer inspection, the cowardly lord could make out an assortment of tomes and assorted ingredients used for gods-only-knew-what. But it did seem that the rumors concerning this man's vast sorcerous powers were true.

Shuffling forward a bit, Mezentius cleared his throat slightly. "Great Lord of the West!" he began, his best theatrically-dramatic voice at work. "I, Mezentius of Vizpul, have traveled far to pledge fealty to the king of shadows! Please, accept this blade- the finest in these lands- as a token of my loyalty!"

**Once the master of this camp came into focus, Hanno's first instinct was to run for his life. Granted, he was a coward, but he knew for a fact that braver men than he would have the same reaction; standing at least four heads above even the tallest man he'd ever encountered, this king of thieves, clad in long black robes, possessed a fiery mane of red hair and wicked, yellow eyes full of ambition. At this display before him, the demon grinned sinisterly, his teeth contrasting unnaturally against his ashen skin. "It's about time you showed up." he remarked lazily, taking the bundle into his hands. "It saved me the trouble of hunting you down."

Unwrapping the weapon, the warlord, while mildly impressed at the shimmering, blackish-purple glow and power radiating from it, ultimately did not seem as taken with it as the elder lord of Vizpul. "Interesting..." he remarked less-than-truthfully. "What is the story behind this weapon?"

"Of course, milord! It was granted to my father by the gods themselves! I was never much a swordsman, nor a collector; I thought this would be an appropriate gift for this world's new ruler."

The giant gave a hearty, wicked laugh. "Oh, I like you, Mezentius! But what ails your companion?"

"Cowardice." Mezentius answered bluntly. "Among other vices."

The demon warlord trained a gaze of murderous contempt on Hanno. "Are you a man or a mouse?" he inquired harshly. "I swear, the likes of you would hide under the skirts of some uppity wench if they thought it'd save their worthless lives."

While not exactly warm, the warlord turned his somewhat-less-harsh expression back to Mezentius. "Now, I still believe we've business to which to attend. So tell me- does this blade have a name?"

"N-not that I know of, milord." answered Mezentius, now thinking it rather odd that a blade of such storied origins did not. "Why do you ask?"

"I've become rather well-acquainted with the parlance of these lands and I've come up with a
wonderful name for this weapon."

The demon warlord smiled evilly, his white teeth seeming even more of an unnatural contrast. "I will call this blade 'Victorious Peace' - a weapon befitting of my new world."

Chapter End Notes

*Ikana Castle [Orchestrated] (The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask OST) **
The Devoted

Chapter Summary

The council members of Notre Sagesse scheme, Oishi has an interesting encounter with a Nohrian general, and Hana taking a chance to strike back at their enemy and live up to her father and uncle grieves her princess greatly.

Chapter Notes

Reinfleche:
Description: Bohdan only. A unique bow of unparalleled quality handcrafted by Bohdan to his specifications.

Sakura's Charm:
Description: Hana only. An intricate, wooden charm, hand-carved by Princess Sakura for good luck.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As much as it pained him to admit, the affair with Selenos and his pet human was no longer a trifling affair, Hudatos could concede privately. Particularly since said human and his fanatic followers had set a trap on earth for Keravnos, allowing their god-king to slay their kinsman with his new blade. While the young upstart may have been vindicated in his suspicion of the moon dragon, he was vindicated somewhat as well- Hudatos had always been against granting the humans any more power than absolutely necessary. And of course, one utter, damned fool had to put all of them- and the world- in jeopardy!

"And why precisely did Selenos inquire for your help- for your forge?" inquired Moro, his patient, fatherly tone unusually adversarial.

"H-he wished to bequeath aid on a group of humans." Wiris stammered guiltily. "A token of his good will, he said."

"And this did not sound at all untoward to you?" inquired Puros, somehow even more incensed.

"No, Sir Puros."

Hudatos growled in frustration. "So he never ONCE mentioned wishing to do away with Keravnos?!" the water dragon raged. "Or the rest of us for that matter?!"

"No, he did not."

"AND YOU WERE STUPID ENOUGH TO BELIEVE HIM?!"

"Hudatos!" interrupted Moro decisively. "That's quite enough."

A gentle soul who loved nothing more than to help those in need and practice his craft, the Rainbow
Dragon could scarcely bring himself to face his fellows. He had little experience with humans, true, but he'd never expected his creations to be turned against his own kind. After all, they were symbols of the bonds between dragons and men, not so much weapons. But a human who cared only for power and acquiring more of it? It was entirely possible, he admitted, but he'd never heard of such a thing.

"It's clear to all of us that you have behaved irresponsibly, Wiris." Moro resumed, his tone noticeably less confrontational. "But from what I have heard, you genuinely knew nothing of Selenos' designs."

"Yes, I agree, Lord Moro." answered Wiris contritely.

"Therefore, I think it's appropriate that you be confined to the world of men- to guide your creations into the proper hands."

"And if you even put a single claw out of line-" threatened Hudatos.

"No, I understand, sirs. I misjudged them completely- it is only fitting that my punishment should be to study the humans and correct my mistakes."

"I wish you well, hatchling."

With all this business taken care of, the Astral Dragon turned to the one of them closest to the main players in this drama. "So you'll have heard all that, lass?" asked Moro. "We can no longer afford to simply rest on our laurels and await Anankos' return. Seek him out with all your strength- if need be, you have my permission to do so in other worlds."

"Yes, I understand, Lord Moro." replied Amaterasu dutifully. "I bear some responsibility for our predicament as well."

*It stunned Sakura (and Hana to a far lesser degree) that what was once a meeting ground a mere two weeks prior was already seeing the very real outline of massive fortification overlooking the entrance to the mountain passes. In fact, the nervous energy surrounding the site was simply too much for an already-anxious young woman like Sakura; however, an expression of that nervous energy had actually revealed her to have an unusual knack for carving intricate wooden charms, the quantity of the trinkets only seeming to increase with her anxiety. "Yep, it is quite amazing!" said Kikai proudly. "Even if the bastards get through this one, they'll still have several more to deal with!"

"They won't get through it, Father." answered Rinkah, attempting to be stern-yet-comforting. "I'll make sure of that too, if I have to."

With the formality of sealing the alliance well behind them, the assorted factions of the set out to salvage their respective situations in their own countries; Fuga and his retinue had departed northeast to see to the situation concerning Bela's band and the complications from Mokushu's invasion of Izumo. Tristan, while doubtlessly concerned with the situation in his own country, decided to depart with the many of the Hoshidans to a training site in the country's north, well out of Nohr's (comfortable or safe) reach. "I'll send a bird once I've arrived." he reminded. "I'll have some of my men send word to Sir Carol and the grand prince once I've arrived, Aunt Victoria."

The older woman nodded dutifully, the boy on her lap only vaguely aware of the utter seriousness of the situation. "Understood," she replied gravely. "Stay safe, Tristan."
And speaking of scurrying about, their short-lived reunion notwithstanding, the princess found her brother's dutiful (and in one case, irritable) retainers to have spent days making all manner of preparations before she awoke one morning to find a caravan of several wagons in tow, Kagero giving inaudible directions to the subordinate ninjas.

"Well, ma'am, by your leave," informed Saizo dutifully. "We're off to the northern training grounds. It won't be an easy journey, but we'll manage."

Sakura paused briefly, still not used to having this kind of authority delegated to her. "Ah, of course." she replied. "Very well."

Inexplicably for the moment, Saizo seemed to gaze off into space. "You ready too?"

"Yeah, I am."

Sakura felt her heart sink into her stomach at the realization of the voice's owner taking tentative steps towards the ninjas, a rucksack over her back and her brunette locks styled into a topknot. "Hana." she began fearfully.

**The swordswoman turned to face her beloved lady, her gaze guiltily turned away from the princess' anguished eyes. "My father, my uncle, Takeshi, Jun- they either gave or are giving everything they have when Hoshido was in need." Hana explained. "I could never live with myself if I didn't too!"

"I-I see." replied Sakura, rather neutrally for a young lady whose second-worst fear had just been realized. "Th-that's very dutiful of you, Hana."

The swordswoman grimaced. "But just say so, and I'll drop everything and be back at your side at once!"

Much as the princess might have dreaded this outcome, knowing Hana as well as she did, Sakura was not especially surprised by this outcome. While the person she cherished most, the princess also knew her to be probably the most intense, downright-stubborn soul she knew. "N-no, I understand, Hana." she clarified.

From around her neck, Sakura produced an intricately-carved, comma-like wooden charm, inlaid with an amber core, placing the necklace around her swordswoman. "I-I made this for you." she informed sheepishly. "F-for good luck. Just promise you'll come back to me safe, Hana."

Overcome with emotion of varying kinds, Hana passionately embraced her oldest, dearest friend. "I promise you I will, Sakura." she declared, beaming.**

Watching Hana disappear behind the horizon with the caravan, as was her nature, Sakura could not help but worry for her swordswoman- her friend. Despite being in the presence of her brother's most powerful handpicked warriors, despite her own almost-inhuman skill with the blade, the princess still felt her stomach twist in to anxious knots. But considering that one dream and her...confusion regarding her servant, Sakura was forced to wonder something. "Maybe...this will be good for me...?" she told herself, optimistically-but-weakly.

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It may have been just an ordinary bird's call for most of his countrymen from the king down to the lowliest peasant. However, Lord Valerian- one of the so-called "Seven Wise Men" who held much of the real power in Notre Sagesse- utterly dreaded hearing the cawing of the Nohrian ravens sent to...
darken the windows of his study. More precisely, he dreaded receiving the letters emblazoned with the seals of the country's assorted noble families, especially from one Duke Toscana.

Unfurling the paper, Valerian, having looked over the letter once, sighed in fatigue and frustration before cursing to himself.

"With all this in mind, in the interest of future and fruitful cooperation between our two lands, there is a certain problem which must be seen to and dealt with- a problem you may know as Sir Cornilescu, the Captain, the seventh member of your council, or what have you. Should this brute and his cult of fanatics continue about their merry way, I cannot guarantee that our brave soldiers stationed there will hesitate in taking...appropriate measures to deal with them if you will not."

Of course, that's just like him, Valerian thought tiredly, taking note of the thinly-veiled threat to ravage the islands should the cult of an ancient, obscure goddess not be destroyed in a timely manner. Pacing the width of his study anxiously, the sage wracked his brain, attempting to figure out a solution to this intractable problem. But truth be told, he supposed it was inevitable; this cult- this "legion" having gained much strength in recent years and having their islands occupied by the very country their leader denounced constantly as demonic- some conflict was bound to come!

Of course, this was only compounded upon by the popular appeal held by the cult among the lower and upper classes alike. Spending a good deal of time on charitable efforts for the destitute- as well as their "punishments" of Nohrian soldiers who took a liking to roughing up the weak or who simply could not (or would not) take "no" for an answer when dealing with the local lasses. He had no proof of it, but rumor had it that the price of admission into the cult was to assassinate a Nohrian. Given the well-publicized instance of one of its members sneaking into one of their Nohrian "protector's" strongholds, knifing its commander to death in his sleep and escaping before anyone noticed anything amiss (leaving the blade in his chest, to boot!), those with Valerian's sympathies were rather on edge, to say the least.

Ironically, the very fact of his heritage- his late mother being Nohrian- which had made sense for his fellows to delegate entreating with the kingdom to him- was actually proving a noose around his own neck and that of his country. He was familiar enough with the kingdom and how its nobles did business to know that these veiled threats were not idle.

"You've been moping up here for a while now." came a voice. "We expected you for brunch nearly an hour ago, Valerian!"

"Oh, gods, Marius!" he exclaimed, hand across his terrified heart. "Don't startle me like that! I thought you were one of those fanatics for a second!"

"Come now, my friend! You're worried about those cultists? Truly?"

"My concern is well founded, Marius. Our 'elder brother' has become rather fed up with this 'legion' and their antics."

"By whose authority?"

Valerian produced the handwritten letter from the Nohrian court with a grimace. "Duke Toscana, that's whose authority- acting in the name of King Leonard, remember?"

At the confirmation of these dire straits, any color drained from the portly sage's expression. "Oh, gods," he remarked grimly. "It seems we're in more danger than I'd thought."
The normally-haggard, worried visage of Valerian turned stony and harsh "Indeed. The only option remaining to us is to cut the head off of the snake- Cornilesescu has to die."

"But Valerian- the killing of another council member? It's simply not done! And from the practical side, his followers would declare an open war on us AND Windmire!"

"I know that! But what other choice do we have, Marius?! Exactly, none! The thing about fanatics is that they WON'T listen to reason! The only thing that can be done about fanatics is to either restrain them- or kill them."

Despite his vitriol towards the Captain and his followers and the fact that religion never had any real influence on his life, Valerian was not anti-religion or belief by any means. His fellow council member and his followers may have well just been speaking a language from another world for all he got from it- what with all their talk of their Nohrian 'older brother' being (figuratively or literally, he'd never exactly divined) spawned from demons, their worship of an ancient, obscure goddess he'd never even heard of and their veneration of a legendary, almost-certainly-fictitious hero as her avenging angel.

However, in the world of politics and diplomacy, there was one language that every soul either understood innately or came to do so very soon- that of violence. And for a certain sage in a certain island country in the south, that was a language both his enemies and "allies" knew very, very well.

*The term "tomboy" was not exactly an inapt one for Hana- combined with her having traveled a great deal with her princess already, it was little surprise that the swordswoman would adapt to camp life fairly easily. Exactly as when she'd accompanied Sakura and the army, Hana, as far as she was aware, was the first to awaken for her practice and the last to go to sleep- even with Kagero interceding on her behalf, at first, this caused a not-small amount of tension with the other ladies in their own tent and the neighboring ones.

"UGHHHH!" groaned a dark-haired, haggard-looking woman slightly older than her late one night. "Every godsdammed night! Every godsdammed morning! What is your problem, you freak?!"

Hana did little to take this challenge lying down, sliding her weapon under the cot as she shot the woman a hostile look. "What does it look like I'm doing? Training!" she shot back. "You know putting in a little extra effort wouldn't kill you, Hashi."

"There's a difference between being diligent and being insane." added the woman across from Hana, letting her chestnut hair from its bun.

"And this bitch is clearly insane!" continued Hashi. "In fact-"

Smacking Hashi's cot with a walking staff, was a rather displeased, fatigued-looking kunoichi. "Leave her to her practice, Sanami." commanded Kagero sternly.

Hashi dragging herself up from the tent floor, she scowled in annoyance. "But ma'am..." she whined.

Kagero's expression turned even steelier; to the point where all of the tent's occupants could see or otherwise sense it. "I'd encourage you all to emulate her a bit more." she remarked, lacking any hint of levity whatsoever. "I know you are ALL well aware of what those Nohrian animals do to...people- women like us, as a rule. Barring the extremely lucky."

However, this rather quickly came to be recognized as no more obtrusive (or possible to stop) than the crickets chirping or rain falling. Some took more kindly than this to others, particularly after a long day's drills.
For all her admitted eccentricity, for more than a few, this initial tension did in fact, help to break the ice. Sticking the practice blade into the ground after a number of drills, Hana, relaxing against a nearby tree with a bottle of milk (something she’d taken a liking to during her time in Cheve—extremely unusual for a Hoshidan to drink with any regularity), she took only scarce notice of a fellow comrade approaching her; a wiry woman in her early twenties with flame-red hair and a pensive expression.

"E-excuse me, milady." she spoke at last. "Lady Hana? Of Mutsu?"

Vaguely familiar with the voice and its owner, Hana turned to the woman with a smile of satisfied fatigue. "I'm not any higher than you here." she reminded. "Just Hana is fine!"

"Oh, o-of course. Thank you, Hana." replied the woman. "Someone very dear to me- my older cousin, in fact- mentioned to me one of his letters that his fellow retainer was a young woman named Hana- a swordswoman- Did you by any chance, know him?"

Hana's stomach twisted into knots of guilt and anger at the familiar, familial features of the woman. "Yes, I did." she admitted. "Irritating, but a good man all the same."

"H-have you had any contact with him as of late?"

"Dead." Hana admitted bitterly, his constant abuse and the delusionally-civil face he kept up towards his tormentors still grating on her. "Murdered by Nohrians. But I figure you could say that about a lot of people."

The young woman, while crestfallen, did not seem to be especially shocked by this revelation. "Oh, I see." she remarked sadly, choking back a tear. "Truth be told, I can't say I'm surprised. When his letters stopped coming, I'd held out some hope, but when I heard about the capital too-"

The woman took a moment to collect herself. "Sorry about that- It was just."

Hana scowled guiltily, more at herself. "I know it can't bring him back," she prefaced bitterly. "but if it makes you feel any better at all, his murderers paid for it with their sorry lives. And I'm sure that smug, crazy bastard saved a LOT of people's lives- including my own- by taking all of that abuse on himself."

The woman stepped back, sniffling to suppress a few more tears. "Yes, that sounds like my cousin, Subaki. Eccentric, but a kind, decent man nonetheless."

"Once again, I apologize-"

The woman smiled sadly- the first time Hana had ever seen her do so. "No need." she replied. "On the contrary, I should be thanking you."

Then again, not all of the swordswoman's encounters at the camp were this heady by any means. There were some small victories here and there.

"I don't know what that blowhard Takeshi is getting at." sneered one lord, some twenty years old. "Sending his baby sister to playact here while we're trying not to end up Nohr's slaves at best. What a coward!"

While hacking away at the target dummy, Hana did in fact, notice the insults to her and her brother both. "Oh, if it isn't Lord Katsuhira of Ise." she growled. "Tell me- how many Nohrians have you
killed? Personally, I stopped counting after fifty or so."

His two companions murmured in rough agreement after giving it some thought. "Yeah, she's got you there, Katsu." admitted his first companion.

While tempted to make a fantastic account of his masculine daring, the wind was taken out of the braggart's sails as he could scarcely concoct a fabrication. "None." he conceded dejectedly.

Hana's brow wrinkled in irritation. "Exactly, so shut up."

With that said, given the dire material circumstances and extreme stakes at play, it was little surprise that virtually no one was exactly in a good mood. At the insistence of Saizo and the other commanders that the populace was to get priority with their accumulated foodstuffs, while understandable, was not particularly good for morale. And the severe ninja was an equally stern drill instructor.

"Fuck this." groaned one young man.

"Everyone always knew the guy had huge stick up his ass, but come on!" moaned a second, not much more than a boy himself.

"Oh, quit complaining!" demanded a third. "You think we're going to stick it to the Nohrian fucks just by bitching and moaning?! Of course not!"

Yes, no one was exactly having a good time at the site; military training was, by its very definition, difficult and exhausting. An intense, borderline-obsessive man like Saizo as a drill master only making things even harsher, half by design. Nonetheless, there was a certain occupant of the camp, pleasant, but already somehow eccentric, was making herself known more and more through said eccentricity. While a bit unusual, the fact that she was a young woman, was far from unprecedented for the country or their dire straits. Even her seemingly boundless energy for practicing and drills on a rather meager diet of rice, fish, and some vegetables every now and again, suggested a rather unusual metabolism.

That said, there were in fact, other ways Hana made clear that she was something else entirely- on a completely different level than almost anyone present- such as one early morning's yumi drills involving targets levitated and moved about by magic.

"Alright, not bad, not bad." congratulated the instructor, a man in his early forties. "But not great either."

Purely on a whim on her way across camp, Hana's attention was caught by the targets still levitating. "Excuse me, Sir Yosuke." she interrupted politely. "I saw your targets levitating there- would you mind if I gave it a try?"

Yosuke rubbed his chin with a tired sigh; he, like the rest of them, had a long day ahead. "Sure, I suppose." he conceded. "Only because you're Lord Musashi's little girl though."

With ten targets levitated at about sixty paces afield, as Hana was handed one of the wooden training bows and ten arrows at her side, the crowd, eager to get onto their next task, was none too eager about this blatant display of nepotism. Of course, they were all utterly silent as Hana struck all ten of the targets dead center, scarcely able to believe their eyes. Staring at the spectacle with his mouth briefly agape, Yosuke mouthed something to himself before gesturing at the mages controlling the targets. "Do that again." he insisted. "Beginner's luck."
The mages altering the position and even flight path of the targets again, Yosuke gestured for the swordswoman to knock back another of the projectiles.

"Yeah, beginner's luck!"

"No way she pulls it off again!"

"I dunno, you guys-"

Once again, complete silence reigned as Hana effortlessly- almost purely off instinct- struck all ten of the targets center mass. Those who'd had years of preexisting training with the bow were even more bewildered; an art requiring a not-insignificant deal of strength, said individuals knew well. Hana, while not exactly a twig in stature, was not particularly visibly muscled either. And the hand-eye coordination and familiarity with the weapon required- men had devoted their entire lives to the weapon and never achieved such feats.

"Again." requested Yosuke blankly, his gesture to the mages becoming even more complex. "That was impressive, young Lady Hana. But I simply must ask that you repeat that task."

By this point, the mages were altering height, position, flight speed and even direction. Even the most well-wishing onlookers were now unsure as to how exactly how their archery phenom was going to accomplish this feat. But accomplish it, Hana did- truth be told, she was unsure how exactly she'd accomplished it.

"Well, sorry to hold you up like that!" she chirped, returning the training yumi to Yosuke.

The crowd gathered to witness the spectacle had doubled by the time Hana had finished downing the archery targets; each of the spectators remained silent in disbelief, awe, fear, or some combination of these as they cleared a path for her, only one of its members- a stocky Hoshidan man in his late twenties- manage the courage to approach her as she was far afield of the spectators. "H-how did you do that?!" he inquired reverently. "My father- best damned archer I ever saw- never even got close to that! He spent his entire life training with that thing!"

"I don't know what to tell you." Hana answered honestly. "My father and uncle taught me how to use a sword and I prefer it- but I just picked it up and did it, you know?"

"You must have been practicing literally every day of your life to do that!"

"Actually, no. The only other time I ever even remember touching a bow was when I was...maybe three or so."

For now out of the way of their mutual enemy's reach and given just how despised a kingdom Nohr had become, Hoshidans were far from the only people to take this golden opportunity to train up their fighters for the inevitable counteroffensive. The truth of the matter was that representatives from every corner of the continent were at the site at the foot of Hoshido's northwestern peaks. Even in spite of all this activity, Hana still possessed some rather mundane methods of unwinding when not in training; one of them was just as simple as to take a bit of down time and whistle absentmindedly, reclining against a tree or a post.

This habit went mostly unnoticed by the camp's other inhabitants and Hana herself actually. Until the day where she found herself whistling against a post, attracting a very unusual visitor. "Oh, hi there!" greeted the swordswoman. "You lost, girl?"
The horse whinnied contentedly, affectionately nuzzling the rather confused Hana. A great, silver bay mare, running a hand through her mane, the swordswoman could concede that this was the most beautiful non-human creature she’d ever come across. "Hey, your master must be missing you, huh?!"

And surely enough, a rather worried-looking man-in his early thirties whose body language, armor, and presence among Nohr's hereditary enemy betrayed his origins as Chevois-appeared, his expression becoming visibly more relaxed at the sight of the mare's safety. "Oh, thank the gods, young Miss!" he said gratefully. "I was wondering where she'd gotten to!"

"Oh!" Hana remarked. "It was no problem! She actually kinda snuck up on me!"

While the mare was also quite fond of her master, she was nonetheless, somehow disappointed to be away from Hana for whatever reason. "Are you particularly fond of animals, young lady?" inquired the knight.

"Hm, no, not especially, why?"

"Because Llamrei here seems to adore you!"

The beast whinnying affectionately as she nuzzled the swordswoman once more, Hana genuinely had no idea why her new equine friend had taken such a liking to her. Apparently, neither did the knight, introducing himself as Felician, seem to have much in the way of an answer. "I couldn't tell you either," he admitted. "She's normally not a fan of strangers. Hell, it even took a couple of years for Llamrei to get comfortable with me!"

"Huh, how about that?" Hana remarked.

"Say, what was that melody you were whistling?"

"I don't know. I didn't think about it, it just kinda came to me."*

But what had truly set the unusual swordswoman on the path of legends came one day when she, driven from her usual practice spots by circumstances, Hana found herself practicing the blade against a series of training dummies by the tent of her superiors, quite clearly engaged in a meeting of some kind. Hana had paid it little mind until a few hours in when the arguments began to be recognizable as increasingly heated and circular.

"It's just our luck- that Saizo bastard decides to fuck us by taking away most of his ninjas for gods-only-know what kind of errand!" raged one of the voices.

"It's not like it would have done us much good." came a second voice dourly. "For the millionth time, we need something with close to their mobility, but with more striking power."

"Saizo's companion? Yeah, I wouldn't exactly mind if she decided to fuck me over, if you get my meaning." remarked a third.

"But more power won't exactly help us deal with those guard towers as quickly as we need!" insisted the fourth.

"Gods, this is going nowhere." complained a fifth voice. "At a time where we can least afford it."

Having listened to a good nine-tenths of the argument, Hana initially conceded them all to have at
least decent, if not good points. Now by this point in her opinion, the owners of the third and fifth voices were the only ones making sense or delivering relevant, sensible information. Audacious as it was, the argument was irritating the swordswoman so much, that she actually interrupted the meeting, taking several seconds to be noticed in the tent. "Hey, excuse me, sirs-

The elder commander, a scarred man in fifties with a patch over his left eye, was not exactly pleased. "Lass, this doesn't concern you." he said shortly.

The man to his left, a built man in his early forties or so, scowled. "Yeah, girl. Can't you see old Ken here is bloviating about-"

The man immediately across from him, a scarred, scrawny man in his thirties, gave an exaggerated cough. "At least he's proposing something instead of just complaining!"

The argument starting in earnest once again, Hana got some solace from the fact that the owner of the fifth voice seemed at least somewhat sympathetic. The four-man quarrel only became more vitriolic before Hana, a minute in, rather noisily ran her bare fist through a nearby empty container of tightly-packed bamboo. "Listen!" she almost shouted. "Sir, you said you needed a unit with mobility- that can strike in the enemy's rear- but armed more heavily than how the ninjas fight."

The gray-bearded commander, while not hostile, was somehow skeptical. "Ideally, yes. But we currently lack such a unit."

"Then let me form it." insisted Hana to their surprise. "You don't have one, so let me train the unit. Between what my uncle, my brother, and Lord Yukimura taught me, I think I can figure most of it out. I'll even lead it in battle!"

It was certainly unusual; a soldier- a young woman at that- growing so fed up with her superiors' bickering that she would storm into a strategy meeting and offer to form a unit precisely as they needed. But then again, Hana was by no means ordinary and these were by no means ordinary times- the evening before an execution on a massive scale- both figuratively and literally.

At last, the fifth voice's owner, a slightly-tall, man of average build in his early thirties, spoke up. "What could it hurt?" he remarked, sweeping some of his sweaty black locks from his brow. "We've got some extra supplies and equipment lying around."

The senior commander grimaced. "Alright, fine." he conceded. "I'll give you three weeks from tomorrow morning and see what you've done with it, lass. I wouldn't approve this otherwise, but your pedigree- just don't disappoint."

Hana smiled hungrily at this challenge. "You don't need to worry, sir!"

Dismissed from the tent, Hana, rather audacious by nature, scarcely knew what had possessed her to go that far. Perhaps it was those old fools and their prideful bickering when the utter annihilation of Hoshido was a very real, very probable outcome, but the swordswoman was still quite unsure. Then again, she'd little time to ponder it as the youngest of the tent's occupants was sent after her.

***"Excuse me!" he called, struggling to balance the scrolls in his arms. "You're Hana of Mutsu, daughter of Musashi, correct?"

"Yes, that's correct." she confirmed. "You were at that meeting earlier, I didn't get your name-"

"Oh, of course! I'm Hideaki. I'm actually a commoner- but probably the best damn swordsman in my
entire province!"

Hana beamed. "I don't care about that! I just care that you're here to help me train this unit and save our country!"

"Excellent! And speaking of which-"

Hideaki swore to himself as the scrolls dropped against the earth and he struggled to recollect them. 
"-just take the time to memorize as much of these manuals as possible. Before you go to sleep or something. Your uncle will probably have gone over the basics, so it won't be hard."

"Thank you, Hideaki." she answered, gathering the manuals into her rucksack. "But what I need you to do is to gather pretty much any Hoshidan- no matter their specialty- who isn't already attached to a unit. Anyone you think will be good for what we're doing, center of the camp, tomorrow morning at dawn!"

"Exactly what I was thinking."

Apparently, Hideaki had a reputation for dependability despite his common background and young age and Hana agreed. The following morning- a wet, misty one- Hideaki, accompanied by his wife, a willowy swordswoman he'd introduced as Haruka, had delivered on his promise, delivering some thirty souls before at the training ground in the center of the camp. There was no rhyme or reason to those selected, whether by specialty, sex, appearance, or any other criteria, although the stocky archer and Subaki's cousin were present. Hideaki's contemporaries, even his wife, doubted if it was possible to turn this random assortment of individuals into a unit at all- elite or otherwise. But nonetheless, Hana, strolling up and down the line of recruits, made her pitch.

"I see you wondering why you've all been dragged from your cots and this ungodly hour, even by a soldier's standard." she began neutrally, little hint given to the fire burning inside her. "As you can no doubt see and hear, your country is in grave danger. Every soul here is giving their all to save their own people from a 'life' of slavery or worse! Well, you're going to be giving your all, and then some!"

Jamming her sheath into the ground for emphasis as she paused briefly, the swordswoman continued her monologue. "I've been given the task to turn this lot into an actual fighting unit that will make even the most swaggering Nohrian butchers run screaming for their mothers! And I will see it through! You will be worked past your limits, your old selves smashed and rebuilt! You will grow to hate me because I'm tough on you, but in time, you will learn that I am fair too! If that does not appeal to you, you can leave now. But if you want to be a part of something that will even give that evil tyrant- Mad King Leonard- nightmares, you're in the right place!"

Truth be told, Hana had made her improvised monologue as truthful- and terrifying- as possible. But perhaps it was a testament to just how desperate the situation was, who was delivering the speech, or both, but not one soul took the out before the intense swordswoman's training program began in earnest.***

*****

It was less the sting of defeat that bothered Oishi or the losses inflicted on his men or even his own impending (likely very slow and painful) violent death- no, what truly wrenched at even the grizzled heart of the old samurai was the inevitable atrocities which were sure to be visited upon the refugee column that were fleeing behind their now shattered lines- given the systematic Nohrian codification of the eastern peoples (his own people the subject of particular venom) as literally sub-human, such treatment was more or less inevitable- while their Nohrian friends got quite a laugh from the habit, many Hoshidans, combatants and civilian alike, often preferred taking their own lives.
to coming under Nohrian domination for several very good reasons.

Oishi however, was not one of these souls, having promised himself and others that he would go out taking as many of the murdering bastards down with him as humanly possible- blades, spears, clubs, poisons, Nohrian weapons; hell, even a rock or a stick if need be, he would make use of. Hands bound behind his back and ankles bound together with twine, the beaten, bruised Oishi was marched through the enemy camp, jeered, spit on, and cursed at- it was not uncommon for some officers to be forced to restrain their subordinates from tearing him to pieces.

"You should have known your place, swine!"

"You'll wish you'd never been born when we're done with you, savage!"

"Your skull'll make a good goblet, boy!"

All of this, he could take (admittedly some of the more graphic threats had him slightly rattled) in stride- he did not exactly enjoy the mental images of what horrible death awaited him, but concern for his life- as always for a warrior of his class- was tertiary at the very most. Therefore, it was more puzzling than terrifying when he, as the vanquished enemy commander, was brought before the tent at the center of the enemy's camp, from the dwelling emerging an older man- some sixty years of age- clad in fine treated leather armor, quite clearly their commander.

One of the guards driving his steel-toed boot into the back of Oishi's knees, the other placed his spear at the back of the samurai's neck. "Watch your tongue in front of the general, boy." he spat. "I'd be glad to cut it out, if you don't."

"Alright, that'll do, soldier." insisted the commander.

"But General Bohdan...!" whined the subordinate. "I can't really let this...thing's show of disrespect go unpunished!"

"You can and you will, soldier. That will do."

The pikeman returning to his post with a venomous huff, Oishi was rather perplexed by the Nohrian admonishing his subordinate for this particular offense; intellectually, he realized it was possible, but the sheer cognitive dissonance of a Nohrian commander rebuking one of his men for the abuse of a "savage" forced Oishi to momentarily question his own sanity.

Removing the leather canteen from his belt, the general gave a satisfied exhale as he stretched. "So sorry about that." he apologized, gesturing the flask in Oishi's direction. "You must be parched. Would you like some water?"

The samurai scowled before spitting at his captor's feet. "Why? You poison it?" snarled Oishi.

"What? No, of course not."

"Even so, we all know you Nohrians love poisoning wells, streams, the like. And gods help the people who complain about it!"

Recalling his time in country, Bohdan had little response to this save to mutter a curse to himself at the veracity of the accounts. Nonetheless, he had no intention of allowing his underlings to make good on any of their threats, and decided to steer the conversation elsewhere. "That was an interesting use of delaying tactics you made use of." he complimented. "I truly did not expect you all
to follow it up with your pincers emerging from the woods!"

While the compliment was genuine, Oishi scoffed at it nonetheless. "Really?" he remarked incredulously. "I would have expected you Nohrians to start ranting and raving about our 'dishonorable savage' tactics."

"Oh, come now! I-"

While he may have been getting on in years, Bohdan knew once again he'd found himself checkmated by the younger commander; while the mindset had been around from time immemorial, perhaps the most famous proponents of such reactions to enemy innovations in recent years was one of his own erstwhile, misbegotten students in horsemanship; a skilled commander and horseman to be sure, but nowhere near as infallible as he (or his admirers for that matter) liked to think himself-then again, his promiscuous use of his specialized, magical, fiery lance tended to mute most of his critics.

"If you really want to break the ice with me," continued Oishi, now genuinely curious. "answer a question I've had for some time now."

"As long as they're not secrets of His Majesty's army, of course."

The samurai's brow wrinkled. "Are you really, you know, like us, so to speak?" he inquired. "What you people call 'half-savage'? Just from how I hear your men talk about it, I'd assumed it's the worst insult you could call a Nohrian."

Bohdan crossed his arms against his chestplate. For all of his tactical and martial ability, he was genuinely more impressed with how sharp his younger counterpart's mind remained, even in such a stressful situation. "It's a possibility, I'm certain," he prefaced sternly. "but no, not to my knowledge anyway. But you would be correct in that assertion, yes."

"So how the fuck did you manage to get to your position?"

"Skill, practice, and a bit of luck, I suppose."

Bohdan sighed tiredly. "Look, lad." he resumed. "You dislike me, my liege, and country. I understand that. You also do not trust me or my land-"

"Damned right I don't!" Oishi shot back. "Anyone who does trust Nohr ends up with a knife in their back- if they're lucky."

"Fair, fair enough. What would you say if I were to offer to release you and so that you could see your refugees to safety?"

Oishi looked at the man as though he were speaking about purple clouds offering to take him to the moon. "I would say that I don't trust you arrogant, backstabbing Nohrian maniacs for one second. How stupid do you think I am?!"

"Think about it- the unit you've commanded has been destroyed, along with most of your weapons and equipment being either lost or captured. Your survivors are scattered across the general area. You have no way of posing an actual threat to myself or my men for...I'd say a couple of months, at the VERY least. So why would I not? I shall offer you a fortnight to get your charges out of harms way and not a second longer."
This point gave Oishi pause; of course he was expecting some sort of treachery or another and he had no reason whatsoever to trust the Nohrian; his country did, after all, have a well-deserved reputation for (among other things, such as wanton brutality) perfidy. But then again, the general was making a very good point about his capabilities or lack thereof and he was the kind of man who was unusually-skilled at procuring or improvising weapons...

"Alright, alright, you've got yourself a deal." he conceded bitterly, still somehow incredulous at Bohdan's offer. "But I swear to whatever the fuck you people hold sacred, if you go back on this, I'll personally-"

"You need not be concerned about that." replied the old horseman, realizing just how foolish those words sounded as they left his lips. "The only use I have for a soldier who thinks himself too good to follow my orders is as a living target for my bow."

And speaking of which, from one of the tents, a Nohrian grunt shortly emerged from one of the (apparently blacksmithing) tents holding a spear with a glowing, red-hot point in his gauntleted fist, looking very pleased with himself. "General," he began giddily. "we voted on it and come up with an awesome way to deal with it-"

"You will take this man out to the outskirts of camp, remove his bounds, and release him at once." commanded Bohdan. "He is to be neither pursued nor harmed.

"You will take this man out to the outskirts of camp, remove his bounds, and release him at once."

The soldier wore an expression somewhere between outrage, disappointment, and confusion. "That's funny, general! I thought you said-"

"You heard me correctly, soldier. I am a man of my word; this man shall be released at the edge of camp and neither pursued nor harmed."

The pikeman conversed his two fellows surrounding him, confirming that they had heard the order too. "But, sir! It's just-"

Bohdan's expression turned harsh and stony. "That is an order. A direct one. Would you prefer to take it up with the horsewhip? Or my bow?"

The grunt glowered at the old samurai, apparently wishing it possible to melt him with his hatred. "The general's a savage-lover, so you've gotten away with it for now, boy" growled the soldier, forcing Oishi outside of the tent. "But I promise you that next time- Oh, ho, next time?! That will be fun, won't it?"

"Could say the same." snarled Oishi. "Know how many buddies and men of mine I've seen you fucks mutilate? I'll be sure to introduce your filthy, diseased little cock to your throat before I cut it."

The soldier roared, kicking the Hoshidan to the ground before drawing his knife. "Alright, you asked for it, you fucking-"

His fellows held him back, exerting no small amount of energy to do so. "Don't do it! It's just trying to piss you off."

"It's not worth it, man!" plead the second.

His rage having somewhat subsided, the soldier sheathed his knife, dragging Oishi back to his feet, huffily continuing his mission without another word. At the camp's outskirts, the irate grunt only drew the tool again to force the samurai to his knees, cutting the the binds before kicking him to the
ground. "Next time, boy..." he threatened, his two buddies ushering him back towards the camp.

Tapping and pinching his body as if to awaken himself from a dream, Oishi found himself wondering just what the fuck had happened, the utter cognitive dissonance almost overwhelming his gratitude to be alive. Paradoxically, this Bohdan seemed to be a decent enough man, highly-placed in Nohrian society; then again, his men, for all his martial ability, seemed to see him as a freak of nature for it. Still, Oishi had better things to worry about in the meantime- namely, protecting as many of his people as possible from their marauding neighbors. Still, the grizzled old samurai could not help but wonder. Who the fuck creates a society like theirs- the Nohrians? To what end was it created? And perhaps most of all- how on earth did said society become so fucked up?

The pleas for mercy and shouts of pain had long since become little more than background noise for the devotees of the god-emperor from the western sands, the bloodstained ceremonial altar in his throne room being stained once more with the blood of several sacrifices, their deity looking on the scene with a smug sort of amusement, the golden, triangular birthmark on his ashen left hand very conspicuously visible.

Over the years, damned near everything they as a society had undertaken- every raid, every war, every drop of heathen blood shed or principalities and tribes destroyed- all of it was as a sort of ritual to honor the king of shadows. But these sacrifices presented to him in his sanctuary, the holiest site in the entire empire? They never ceased to be a spectacle that captured the hearts, minds, and souls of the people, holding them at rapt, fanatic attention.

"Oh, King of Thieves!" cried the head priest. "I trust this heathen blood shed has been to your liking?"

The "god" smirked, correcting his giant frame's posture from its slouching position slightly. "Yes, I suppose." he said coyly. "But something troubles me still."

The vast crowd awaiting their god-emperor's words with bated breath, he gave a wicked smile. "Did I not call their god to earth and prove my supremacy?" Did I not kill their god himself?" he inquired rhetorically. "Their insolence insults me. Therefore, I bid my children; remember what they did to you and to blot out the name of the thunder-worshipers utterly from heaven and earth."

The crowd of worshipers remained entranced, almost as though meditating- obsessing on the words, the thief king taking the time to turn to his scribe-priest. "Take down a letter to the remaining heathens." he commanded.

"At once, milord. Any particular stipulations?"

"Oh, same old, same old. Submission or utter destruction, the usual."

Chapter End Notes

*For Victory (FE9 OST)

**Mamoritai ~ White Wishes [Music box ver.] - (BOA/Tales of Graces OST)

***With Us! (FE9 OST)

****Deception (Shogun 2: Total War OST)
Trial of Wisdom (Я сошла с ума)

Chapter Summary

Having (however reluctantly) given her blessing to Hana’s request to train with the other Hoshidan resistance members, an unusually-anxious Sakura experiences even more unusual dreams about a mysterious woman before confiding in a kindred spirit neither of them could have expected.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Truth be told, Amaterasu had no real ideas on how or where to begin her search for her world-sojourning kin. Honestly, he could have been anywhere in the cosmos by this point in time. Nonetheless, reasonably certain she’d searched every corner of their world, the goddess had taken to frequenting the Dragon’s Gate, hoping against hope for him to emerge from the portal to little avail.

Just when, after years of awaiting his return, when she was literally seconds away from beginning that long, treacherous journey across the worlds, the gate elicited a sustained surge of energy, spewing forth an Anankos (in a human form to preserve energy) looking rather fatigued, but quite pleased with himself, clutching an assortment of jewels; a ruby, a sapphire, and an emerald most prominent.

"Oh, Anankos!" she exclaimed. "Are you hurt?! I'd almost despaired of seeing you again!"

Panting heavily, the dragon looked up at her hopefully. "I'm fine, Amaterasu; just a little tired. That's not important- how are things in this world?"

The solar dragon, also in her human form, turned her eyes downward. "Kervanos...was struck down...by my brother's pet." she informed balefully. "And his people..."

His senior by several thousands of years, the thunder dragon was probably the most powerful of them apart from Lord Moro himself. Anankos was stunned, horrified, and fearful all at once. As to the fate of his people- his devotees, Amaterasu did not even need to finish the sentence for him to divine their fate. Fatigued as he was, Anankos released a great cry of rage and frustration. "WHY?" he demanded, slamming his fist against the ground. "What's the point...of having all this power...if we can't even...protect our peoples?! Our world?!

Amaterasu knelt down to face him, one of her uniquely-kind, reassuring smiles on her face. "I know things look dire," she conceded. "but all is not yet lost. Now what were these treasures you strove so hard to collect?"

Catching his breath, Anankos seemed to calm down somewhat. "These treasures...and cornerstone when forged into a blade...have the power to destroy evil- Selenos' human."

"And do we just distribute them to-"

"No! Not just any human! Use your magic...help them create trials..."

Overjoyed to reunite with one of her only two confidants, Amaterasu helped the dragon's human
form to his feet, subconsciously muttering a prayer she'd heard from devotees countless times over the past few decades. "Eyes of a beast, fierce, unyielding, and brave to enemies, kind, patient and loyal to her allies." she began. "We beseech you, Great Lady of the Sun, send her to deliver us from this terror and fear!"

"What...exactly was that?" inquired Anankos, having been out of the loop, to say the very least.

"Oh! It's a prayer mortals will often say as of late- the Prayer of the White She-wolf. Hold any particular meaning for you?"

"No, I cannot say it does."

With that said, Anankos mulled over the words; knowing humans, they could be, for whatever reason, beseeching Amaterasu for a literal white she-wolf. Nonetheless, were they not speaking literally...this could be very important information to have as far as unusual humans are concerned.

"...kura...me....Sakura....Can you hear....Can you hear me, Sakura...?" came the soft-yet-distressed young woman's voice. "...ger...in grave danger...your world..."

With a start, Sakura awoke, not an unusual occurrence these days. Despite her being protected by literally legions of the Flame Tribe's greatest warriors in the heart of their holiest stronghold, the truth was there was only one warrior whose presence could still the princess' anxious heart and remove that sinking feeling in her stomach. Was she alright? Was she cold? Tired? Hungry? All of these things were naturally on the mind of Sakura, an anxious young lady by nature.

Her keen senses well-aware of the movement, Rinkah stirred awake as well, rubbing her eyes lightly. "Ngh, what's wrong?" she inquired, not actually rising from her own cushion.


Given everything she'd been through the past year or so, few would blame the princess for being slightly...disturbed, but even with that said, she knew fully well that hearing voices was not a good sign by any stretch of the imagination. Ironically, a part of herself had actually convinced her that the time apart from Hana would actually be good for them both, considering the very...interesting feelings stirred for her in the past several months.

"It's j-just a phase, I'm s-sure." she lied to herself more than once. "I'll g-grow out of it! Yeah!"

Gods knew she'd tried to suppress the emotions such as those stirred by that one (extraordinarily pleasant) dream- and become more and more miserable and anxious for it. But when she'd closed her eyes to go to sleep, she would see Hana's smile, hear her voice comforting the princess or her energetic laughter or the gentle smell of her hair or the fragrance from the soaps she'd use...and feel an even guiltier pleasure in so doing.

Still, Sakura had convinced herself that her plan was working in a sense- she'd not heard the woman's voice for a week and was reasonably sure she'd not given any of any hints of unusual anxiety- this was of course, until she'd had another exceptionally pleasant dream concerning her swordswoman, this one making the hot spring one before the conference look as platonic as their childhood playtime by comparison. When she awoke this time, panting and soaking wet all over, Sakura, after those precious few seconds of an afterglow, felt even dirtier than usual. With a depressed sigh, the princess admitted one thing to herself- she was not going to solve this problem of hers by working it out herself- she was going to have to confer with someone older and wiser-sooner, rather than later, she resolved. But who could she really ask? There was really only one
woman who she could even fathom (and she knew to be like that, as it were) asking for advice on this matter and no one had any idea where she was, assuming she was even still alive!

Still rather ill-at ease in such discussions around Rinkah, Kirigamine being more Hana's mentor than anything else, and Kikai running himself ragged with assorted tasks, Sakura, even in spite of her mental rehearsals of such a conversations, had actually despaired of locating such a confidant. That is until, she had lingered behind Rinkah that afternoon as they returned to the chief's domicile, paying scarce notice to the figure meditating on an outcropping. "The beginnings of wisdom, Daughter of Sumeragi," Amagi's voice boomed. "are to call things what they are."

While she'd grown used to his unobtrusive nature, Sakura felt her heart nearly leap from her chest this time. Then again, she had been rather distracted for weeks now. "Oh! Sir Amagi! I d-didn't notice you there!" she exclaimed.

"Pay it no mind, child. You seem troubled. Come, tell me what vexes you."

With a defeated sigh, Sakura approached the giant and sat beside him. Was he truly clairvoyant? Or was her distress so telegraphed? "I-I've just been wondering something, Sir Amagi. "And i-if I'm prying, j-just say so, but-"

"But what?"

Taking a deep breath, Sakura spoke at last. "W-w-what exactly is your r-relationship to Chief Kikai?" she inquired. "D-do you have some familial relation?"

Breaking his stance, the shadow scratched his wild, bushy beard. "No, but I'd actually call him my brother before anything- even closer than that, really."

Sakura's face colored slightly. "Oh, y-your wife must b-be jealous!"

Now having a far better idea of where the young lady was coming from, Amagi decided to steer the conversation while dispensing some relevant advice.

"Don't have one. I've never had any interest in taking a wife or having children- still don't and I'm old enough to say I never will. Besides, I've got my responsibilities, my warriors, Rinkah- and her father, obviously."

The giant stood up at last, taking several steps to walk away before speaking. "I would lay my life down for that man without a second thought. He need only say the word."

"Please, don't do that." Sakura implored. "Chief Kikai and Rinkah both would mourn you the rest of their lives."

Amagi smiled knowingly. "I could say the same about your woman, Princess Sakura."

The mountain of a man setting off to do gods-only-knew-what, Sakura, while somewhat heartened, was still rather worried- losing Hana, particularly because of these...desires becoming known was the thing that, without a doubt, terrified her most. Even anything she could imagine from the cruel, warped mind of King Leonard or his cruel, warped kingdom paled in comparison.

Being rather lost in thought, Sakura barely touched the supper her hosts had put out for her, but after
mulling over the exchange with Amagi for several hours, by the time she'd settled down to sleep, the
princess had come to a conclusion- whatever their relationship was fated to look like, Sakura could
not or would no longer deny that she needed Hana, whatever may come of that.

Interestingly enough, Sakura slept more soundly than she had for weeks- since Hana's departure.
And even more interesting was the message from the mysterious young woman- no longer disjointed
and fragmentary, but as loud and clear as though she were right beside the princess.

"Sakura..." came the voice, kind yet troubled. "Can you hear me, Sakura? Please, heed my call!
Your world, and everyone in it, is in grave danger, Sakura!"

In the (unusually-silent) presence of his loyal courtiers, allies, and eldest son-slash-heir, Lord
Ugayafukiaezu of Yamato finished his silent reading of the letter (or rather, ultimatum) from their
new western neighbor. "Do these people believe that they're gods?" he asked incredulously, unsure
as to whether or not the question was rhetorical.

"It would seem so, Father." remarked Prince Jimmu. "Or at the very least, close enough to it."

"With all due respect, Lord Yamato," interjected Lord Abiko of Fusa. "if they truly thought
themselves divine, they wouldn't bother with an ultimatum."

Another lord, bulky and scraggily-haired, as if calling to mind a bear, huffed in derision. "How do
you know that, Lord Fusa?" he inquired shortly. "They could simply be braggarts talking a big
game!"

A third lord, scrawny and wide-eyed, slapped his palm to his visage. "Your mouth always runs faster
than your brain, Lord Higo." he complained. "Or at least-"

The bear-like man's nostrils flared as he menaced his fellow. "At least we don't need to hide behind
craven tricks like you buzzards, Osumi!"

Another noble, a middle-aged woman with heavy-set eyelids, covered her mouth as to disguise her
sneer. "When all you have is a hammer, after all..."

"Oh, shut up, Himiko, you half-senile old bat!" roared Lord Higo. "Maybe if you backwoods
fanatics relied less on your witchcraft and more on-"

"You take that back right now!"

Despite being at the head of one of the greatest noble houses with the most expansive lands with the
most resources in all the eastern lands, Ugayafukiaezu sighed in exasperation at the depressingly-
common spectacle of argument his meetings with fellow nobles often degenerated into. From time
immemorial, everyone knew that the eastern peoples were not a nation so much as a scattered
collection of somewhat-related peoples. As expected, they did not always see eye-to-eye, to say the
least. Now, at a time when they could least afford it, it was even less opportune.

Turning to his son with a nod, the younger man struck the great gong several times as to drown out
the overlapping arguments. It took a couple of minutes for them to die down completely, but when
they did, Ugayafukiaezu cleared his throat to continue. "I know a lot of you think me an optimistic
fool like my father before me," he prefaced. "but I do genuinely think we can work together for our
own good- even for the survival of our given peoples."

"So what would you have us do, Ugayafukiaezu?" inquired Lord Osumi. "Fight these western
zealots head-on?"
"If it comes to that, yes." confirmed Lord Yamato. "I will go to meet with this emperor of theirs- see if I can’t soften his position a bit. Jimmu will oversee my court until my return, but-

"Until then?" interrupted Lord Higo shortly.

Ugayafukiaezu closed his eyes in contemplation. "If we wish for peace, we must prepare for war. To do otherwise would be not only negligent, but an atrocity against our descendants."

The meeting of the eastern nobles finally dismissing, one lord pulled aside one of his fellows, both of whom were rather quiet, pessimistic, and having stayed largely out of the brouhaha. "Oh, by the way, Masazane." interjected Lord Ujiyuki of Iyo. "I never found that gift for you. Would some hemlock flavoring for your sake do? I can easily acquire enough for yourself, your family, your servants."

Lord Masazane, not exactly a Pollyanna himself, raised an eyebrow. "That's a bit of a grim an assessment, don't you think, old friend?" he inquired.

"It's a realistic assessment; you know out west, they call us unusually quarrelsome and fractious? Yeah, they do that because it's true as you well know."

"Just going off of what I've heard, I don't like our odds either- my Izumo, after all, produces more food than anything- but we have to try still. Lord Yamato was correct in that our descendants would never forgive us for not giving it our all."

Lord Iyo scoffed, still considering his offer rather generous considering their new neighbor was more accurately described as a fanatical cult masquerading as an empire and ruled by a literal demon king. "Now, I suppose, if we had an army made up of those crazy bastards from up north...that MIGHT be a different story."

Chapter End Notes

In case I'm being too subtle (Ha! Good one!), was it pretty clear by this point who exactly is trying to communicate with Sakura by now?
Nemesis

Chapter Summary

In a certain Nohrian town, Florian at long last, puts a name to the face of the demon that has haunted him his entire life while Paul's most trusted follower and right-hand-man, seeks out the Spirit of the Hero his captain is certain has manifested itself in their world.

Chapter Notes

Okay, now that I think about it, Pietro isn't JUST a 63'd Petrine, he's actually way worse.
Then again, if you recognize that last quote from him, about their neighbors, that might be a given.

But anyway, the reason this update took so long is that this chapter and the next were originally one chapter, and walls of text are NEVER fun to try to scale, let alone proofread. I've really gotta learn to get a handle on these chapter lengths, to make it more digestible for me to write and readers alike. Guess this is what I get for writing tired.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

*One of the trials of being a businessman of any kind was the restocking of one's supply; it scarcely mattered what one sold, whether foodstuffs or precious metals, it was not optional. For Duke Guillaume of Lorraine, such travails- with armed retinues of raised from his own levies and the odd sellsword here and there- were even more essential. After all, his particular product, he could not simply use even the lowliest, most wretched Nohrian beggars to replenish his stock, whether illicitly or not. He may have been exceptionally greedy, but Duke Lorraine was by no means stupid- even suggesting the proposal, let alone going through with it, would likely see him literally torn to pieces by his countrymen. Yes, it was dangerous and extremely inconvenient, but also so very profitable, he thought dreamily.

"Milord, the last of your wagon train has been outfitted." reported the soldier. "This SHOULD last you the entire trip, but with those savages- you never know. Just send a bird back and we'll get what we can to you."

"Thank you," said the duke, semi-sincerely, tossing the soldier a small-but-considerable bag of gold. "that's for you. Anyway, we shouldn't be more than a month at most."

"Understood! But I'll send back word that you need the rest of your levy on standby, milord."

"Excellent."*

**It was not only for his captain nor fellow members of the legion, but Horace gave one of his rare smiles as he put the finishing touches on his fresco; depicting a young man clad in brilliant green
stomping an enraged, vaguely-humanoid porcine demon (feebly clutching a Nohrian trident to boot) underfoot, his brilliant, shimmering blade hoisted to deliver the killing blow to the beast; it was probably the most intricate thing he'd ever created save for tributes to the Goddess herself. Finding it time to let the paint dry anyway, Horace, noting the rapping at the door of his modest seaside home, thought welcomed the exalted visitors. "Oh, Captain! Madame Helena!" he greeted. "To what do I owe this honor?"

Accompanied by a dark-haired, intense-looking woman in her early thirties, the captain carried a wooden chest under his right arm. "The honor is all ours, Brother Horace." Paul said, seeming even more solemn than usual. "May we come in?"

"Of course! Of course!"

Turning to the fresco on prominent display, the dour woman gave a serene smile. "Paul raves about your artistic talent." she informed proudly. "But you truly have outdone yourself this time."

Paul gave some hint of a smile- as little of one as he was wont to do. "Indeed, my brother. And it is most fortuitous that you should complete this now- one could say destiny."

Handling the chest as though it were some religious relic, the captain presented it to his host. "You inquired about my visions the other week." he reminded solemnly. "About how they were becoming stronger with each passing day."

"Yes, of course." confirmed Horace. "Perhaps it has something to do with the chest?"

"As a matter of fact, yes it does; it's here- in our world- the hero's spirit. I can sense it just as strongly as you standing in front of me, my friend."

Helena smiled proudly, rather uncharacteristically for such a serious woman. "Paul and I have been working ceaselessly on this for months now."

"It's true." her husband confirmed. "It is so important in fact, that I would only trust you, my right-hand man, to personally carry out this task."

"Of course, I understand, Captain." answered Horace dutifully. "But what exactly is this task?"

Paul's profile retained that stern, steely gaze for which he was (in)famous. "Locate the one who carries the hero's spirit in this world- whoever and wherever he may be- and relay the contents of this chest. I figure by that time, the legion will be strong and unencumbered by the traitors and occupiers to finally join the battle in earnest."

"Captain, Madame Helena, you both honor me greatly." Horace answered. "The danger on the continent does not concern me- I can more than take care of myself and others. But how shall I recognize that great spirit?"

"After all this time you've spent in contemplation, the answer is obvious." reminded Helena kindly. "Trust the Goddess. She will guide you to her champion's spirit."

"This is of course an urgent matter." Paul reminded. "But take some time to prepare provisions for your journey; I'd rather this be done slowly and right than quickly and end in failure."

Well into his thirties, even as a child, Horace had never been an especially excitable individual, preferring the confines of archives and libraries for nearly his entire life. However, his captain, the
leader of the order who he was certain would one day soon see their islands relieved from the cruel yoke of their "concerned elder brothers" tasking him to seek out the carrier of the Spirit of the Hero, their most revered figure save the Goddess herself, was the opportunity of countless lifetimes.**

***Having sent Varius well ahead of them a month ago, while it was not exactly an easy journey, Flora was fairly pleased with how good of time she and her guardian were making. Indeed, just yesterday, they had set foot back on Nohrian soil. As they settled (as much as could reasonably be expected) into the southern fortress town of Pula, Flora knew there was not much relaxation in her immediate future, knowing full well that she had a number of letters to compose, not least of whom to her father. While she and Florian had arrived early that morning, it took them until around noon to actually acquire accommodations (Even after showing her crest as proof of her identity and mission, "We don't serve your kind here" or some variation thereof was maddeningly common) to rest for the night.

Already having completed much of his workout, Florian, gazing boredly at the ceiling as he lazed on the bed, groaned in frustration. "How many of those are you gonna have to write?" he inquired boredly.

"This is the last one." she informed, somehow shortly. "Just giving notice of our return to Father."

While his expression was invisible to the heiress, Florian's gaze communicated some uncharacteristic concern. "He's not getting-"

"Only what he needs to know." preempted Flora, perhaps able to sense the anxiety in his tone. "I could actually afford to have this one intercepted, if that tells you anything."

"That's good."

But perhaps this was too optimistic an assessment of his day for the hotheaded warrior. Later that afternoon, Flora insisted upon going into the town square to patronize the markets, much to her companion's dismay. "You know damn well these Nohrian vultures are going to gouge you, come on!" complained Florian.

"Yes, probably." Flora conceded. "But I'm good at cooking and it helps to take my mind off everything that's going on."

"Fine, fine. If that's what you want to do." he conceded boredly.

***Beginning to wander aimlessly about the square, as he passed the center of the square, out of the corner of his eye, Florian noticed something that made his heart skip a beat. "No, it can't be-" he reassured himself, turning towards the figure, now coming into focus as a great equestrian statue. It's great size nor loving attention paid to its design and upkeep were the the things that struck Florian most about the wicked figure- rather the small, beady, hateful eyes, the demonic, black armor, and the lance, it's tip adorned with bronze and gold as though to simulate the ignition of flame at the tip- were what caused Florian to gawk absentmindedly at the statue for several seconds, scarcely taking notice of the trio of Nohrian girls- not much younger than himself, really- gathering near him, giggling and gazing upon the statue with awe.

"Gods, isn't Sir Pietro just SO dreamy?!" came the voice of the first, a blonde of about eighteen.

"And brave too!" came the voice of the second, a brunette about a year her junior. "I can't even imagine even looking at a savage, let alone protecting us like he does!"

"Yeah, I guess." came the voice of the third, her pale skin and long, stringy black hair largely hiding
her expression. "He'd be more attractive if he'd just stop scowling all the time, though."

His mind's eye still full of his brothers' and father's horrible deaths and of the horrible smells of burning and hair flesh, Florian, still blankly staring at the statue, forcibly reliving most horrible, pivotal event in his life, the girls' conversation fading in and out of his notice.

"Hey, you!" came the voice of the eldest girl at last. "Settle something for us; isn't Sir Pietro just such a man?!

"Who...?" Florian asked blankly.

The young lady scoffed. "You know, Sir Pietro! Probably Nohr's greatest hero apart from the princess! Honestly, I think he's better, since he just loves protecting us from those vile savages-

Mouthing the name to himself several times, it was as though a light switch went off in Florian's mind. Everything made perfect sense now! But likewise, purely as an instinctive reaction, the champion could hardly bear the vapid Nohrian woman lionizing his crimes- purely without thought, Florian drove his elbow into the woman's face, sending her to the ground behind him.

"Ow!" she exclaimed, massaging her bruised jaw. "What do you think-?"

With a great roar, Florian sprang onto the woman, pinning her down as he began and continued to smash the face of the lass in with his gauntleted fist, punctuating each of the blows with some, audible or not, expression of unbridled fury being expressed, the words "stupid" or "bitch" (or some variation thereof) appearing periodically. Now naturally, the blonde's companions were horrified by this display.

"Help, help, HELP!" cried the brunette, she and her companion futilely attempting to pull the enraged Florian away. "This lunatic is about to kill our friend!"

****Flora prided herself on being especially perceptive, but it took her a couple of moments to snap her from haggling with the vegetable dealer to notice the rather rowdy crowd gathering in the town square. "What on earth...?" she muttered to herself, the sinking feeling in her stomach becoming stronger and stronger the more aggressive the crowd became.

Pushing and nudging her way through the crowd, as she struggled to get a glimpse at the events occurring, Flora found her worst fears validated; the sight of the statue of "the Savagekiller," the woman being beaten to a bloody pulp now being tended to by her companions and concerned onlookers, and Florian, one of his knives drawn, at the center of a steadily-closing ring of aggressive-looking Nohrian men of varying ages told her everything she needed to know.

"The fuck is this?!" demanded one of the men, tapping a stick of considerable heft against his non-dominant hand.

"Sir Pietro's statue set it off?!" spat another man. "Sounds like a savage to me!"

"Of course it is!" cried a third.

"Get over here and I'll show you Nohrian animals savage!" bellowed Florian.

A fourth man, flanked by his two companions, chuckled sinisterly. "You've made a BIG mistake, boy!"
The fifth shared his evil expression. "We all know what this buck was after this lass for!"

To say the situation was already bad was the understatement of her life, as Flora knew very damned well. Florian was extraordinarily strong, but against an angry mob of men in a Nohrian garrison town? Not even he could fight his way out of this situation. Scanning the environment, for something- anything she could use as a diversion.

When the crowd was at its most ornery and she'd just about despaired at finding solution to this mess, Flora spotted a possible diversion; for some reason, bales of hay and harvested wheat alike were being suspended in baskets above a collection of abandoned stalls. Initially, she'd actually been kind of irritated that the oil merchants had taken the day off, but now, as she was mouthing an incantation, she thanked the gods they had not been so.

Just as the mob was about to descend on Florian in earnest, the heiress' summoned fire had set ablaze the materials suspended above the stalls, providing incoming tinder for an even greater conflagration.

"F-Fire!" called a middle-aged woman.

The blaze immediately starting to the rear of the unruly crowd had the intended effect of scattering them, Flora, none too happy with her bodyguard, pushed her way to his position. "Flora!" he exclaimed. "I was just- she was-"

"We have to go, now." she demanded sternly, catching the advance guard from the garrison nearby out of the corner of her eye.

"But-"

"NOW!"

It was of course, quite a chaotic affair, the pair almost becoming separated on more than one occasion amidst the madness and a couple of members (Flora scalding them beyond repair as well eventually) of the mob spying him and attempting to gather up another one, but the two managed to escape the city limits within the hour, Flora insisting they continue deeper into the nearby woods for a few hours at least. By sundown, well satisfied they were no longer being pursued, Flora saw a clearing fit for making camp, but curiously enough, remained silent with her protector ever since they escaped the city.****

"Oh, come on!" Florian exclaimed at last. "What's with the silent treatment?!"

Setting a (contained) fire with her magic, Flora gave an exasperated huff. "What you did was stupid, dangerous, and nearly got you killed. What on earth were you thinking?"

Florian's fists clenched so tightly that he could feel the blood being deprived to his knuckles. "You didn't hear those stupid, airheaded bitches going on and on about him, praising that- I saw him..."

Flora cocked her head sideways. "Saw who?" she remarked carelessly, immediately regretting it as she already knew the answer.

"You know, HIM! That butcher- no, that monster who's haunted my dreams ever since I was a little kid! Who murdered my father and brothers! I even know his name now...Pietro."

"That statue? And you're certain it was of him?"
"YES! For fuck's sake, Flora! As much as I might have wanted to, I can't forget that...thing! I won't be able to do so as long as I live!"

Flora took a deep breath. Now everything about their time in the garrison town was making sense, she thought. Torn between wanting to express her sympathies and her very practical, dutiful mindset, Flora chose her words carefully. "Even so Florian..." she began gently. "That was not one of your better ideas...I mean, you know how men in this country are about Nohrian women..."

The champion's nostrils flared as he consciously made his body language more imposing. "I know that!" he insisted. "And I fucking KNOW I I wasn't thinking! It was just a reflex! But come on, Flora! If you had even the smallest chance to take revenge for Felicia's death, are you telling me you wouldn't?!

Once again, Flora remained silent for several seconds, genuinely challenged by this dilemma, eyes shut in contemplation. "I couldn't tell you." she admitted in a very manner-of-fact tone. "That option may very well not be available to me. In some sense, you may be more fortunate than I am. Just promise me that you'll never do anything that reckless and stupid again."

"Don't worry, Flora, I don't intend to die anytime in the near future for one reason; even if it's the very last thing I do on this earth, I promise you, the gods, and all the ancestors that I'm ending that bastard's life."

While somewhat calmed down, Flora began to look upon her champion with increasing concern as he meditated in front of the fire. For his part, Florian began to silently mouth the name of his tormentor that had destroyed so many lives (his own especially) as though it were the vilest curse imaginable and he were in some danger of forgetting it. Melodramatic as the promise may seem to some, he truly did mean every word of it- he would be the one to end the life of the "Savagekiller," even if it cost him his own life in the process.

****For a man who (supposedly) had eyes and ears across the country, if not the continent, the fact that Matteo kept said information so close to his vest rendered it practically useless for anyone but himself, Pietro thought irritably. His dinnertime entertainment- a detachment of those mangy wolf prisoners being herded into a pit disposed of by a few of his mages and their fire tomes- did not even seem to lift this cloud of irritation.

But then again, the famed knight was not without his own sources of information, as the head of one of the reconnaissance detachments, a young man barely even twenty, could attest to. "Sir Pietro!" he began dutifully. "We've detected unusual measures taken by the savages in the north! Several banned gatherings, stockpiles of weapons, and so on. It could be a coincidence- a lot of the men wanted to engage them, but-"

Pietro scoffed irritably. "Did any of their leaders have bright purple hair and a demeanor that would get even a Nohrian gutted alive were he to run his mouth off?"

"No, sir."

"Then you haven't met Duke Toscana's pet tribal and his gang. If it were my decision, he would have been a pile of ash ages ago, but alas."

Rising from his seat, Pietro began to pace about his camp site, as though lost in contemplation, much to the confusion of the young officer. "Um, Sir Pietro..." he began gingerly, wary of the knight's legendarily short fuse. "Do we engage them or-"
"No, not yet." ordered Pietro coldly. "We need to tranquilize our 'neighbors.' Those blue-blooded nitwits ought to remain in ignorance about matters which they know nothing. Let the savages wait. Opportunities will certainly come our way too."

For whatever reason, the sheer detachment of his superior's tone chilled the young messenger to the bone, even if the workings of the great knight's mind were as inscrutable as ever. For his part, Pietro still could not believe it. The savages may have been many things—viscous, dim-witted, slovenly, dirty, and lascivious, but as far as he knew, not inherently suicidal. What on earth could possess them to stand against the greatest kingdom and the greatest people their world had known or would ever know, and their greatest knight?*****

Chapter End Notes

*Shadows Materialize (FE9 OST)

**Seaside ambience

***The Frontier Fortress (Tales of the Abyss OST)

****Crisis (Tales of the Abyss OST)

*****Stratagem in Black Armor (FE9 OST)

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