

The Longest Journey

Act 4 Symphony



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Act 4 ~ Prelude



Ghost of Ages Past ~ Part 2

An animosity is present among the different tribes. No surprise, as a tug of war between two cartels is underway in this particular city, both vying for dominance over **infrastructure and markets**. Similar to the cartels, **two tribes are at each other's throat**. Sciurini, the rightful natives around these parts of the Hatori lands, and Lupus newcomers, driven away from their own home more to the east. Each cartel took one ethnic group under its wing, promising them a semblance of safety. For a price, of course.

In a dark alley, an outsider moves as silent as the night. A man not native to these lands, neither Sciurini nor Lupus. He comes to a stop at an empty plot, remnant of a burned-down novel. Out of the shadows, four members of the Lupus Tribe surround him.

“Grimald?” one asks, a weapon ready in case the answer is not favorable.

“That would be me.”

“You brought your part of the bargain?”

Grimald reaches under his coat and throws a bag to the man in charge. **“Feel free to count.”**

The man catching the bag takes a look inside. Gold sparkles through the night, reflected in his eyes. An instant greed is noticeable from the men, daring thoughts dwelling in the corners of their mind. What if they would take it all and run with the booty? A bag of coin like this could serve for a while. Not that they would ever dare to, all thoughts of betrayal kept as nothing more than fantasies. None would openly contemplate to oppose the cartel, all thoughts of greed kept as a mere what-if. **They wouldn't make it far, and their fate would be worse than death.**

The cartel flunky hands over the bag to one of his henchmen. **“When should we begin?”**

“As soon as you deliver that coin to your boss. Your employers don't pay for sitting around.”

“Anything else you need?”

“Only what's in the contract. You smuggle weapons and drugs into Bournesse, while your cartel can happily expand its territory. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“If I may ask, who is our real employer?”

“You may ask, but you won't hear an answer.”

The man shrugs his shoulders. Well, **he could try. As long as they're paid, it doesn't really matter who offers the coin.**

...

With the deal concluded, the group disappears back into the shadows, leaving Grimald behind.

“And another job done,” he brushes some dirt from his clothes. A typical cramp runs through his main hand, tightening his fingers. These thugs always pick such filthy areas for their gatherings. A burned down house? What an annoying spot with so much soot around. Gets his outfit dirty.

The picture comes together, all pawns moving into place. Today was yet another step closer to the inevitable downfall of both sides of the playing board. This cartel will help destabilize Bournesse, while false clues will be left behind. Gleaze is behind their

handiwork. The opposing cartel in this city will take the same job, only with both sides reversed.

Grimald shakes his head while sighing. What a bunch of shortsighted fools, these thugs and their leaders. They should all know they're part of a larger, shady plan. They should understand well enough events will mirror what happened in their own ancestral lands. Yet, even if they understand, like leeches, they simply move in and suck whatever host they can latch on dry of life.

Working with them always leaves such a desire to wash his hands of their filth. Their mere existence serves as proof this world is a lost cause. Corrupt to the core. It would be much better if it started all over again, next time done correctly from the very beginning.

He walks away, heading towards an alley. This was his final meeting for the night. Both cartels know what to do. Now, he only needs to return and wait for the next pawn to be moved into place.

However, the man takes a turn, heading into a nearby building. With ghastly silence, he ascends the stairs.

A subtle moaning reaches his ears from the top floor. Probably a whore and her client. Too bad for them, he noticed their presence during the meeting. His code of work does not allow for witnesses. Any loose ends must be dealt with. These two likely picked up parts of his conversation. Grimald has no idea how much, and **it frankly doesn't matter. They need to go anyway.**

He could simply send in a shadow puppet and be done with it, but there's joy to be found **in carrying out a work yourself. And let's face it. This whore is likely to be associated with** the cartel. Another maggot living as a parasite. Taking her out will help make up for having to deal with these demented locusts.

Grimald stares around the corner.

A young girl leans against the wooden wall. She has one leg raised, held up by the arm of the boy right in front. His pants are down, while her underwear hangs on an ankle. The girl moans while her young partner takes her.

The children reach orgasm, falling down **in each other's arms to recover.**

The boy gasps for needed air while making a vow. “I’ll take you out of here, Olive! Away from all these bad people. Away from the cartel. I promise!”

“But it will be dangerous. Where will we run to?”

“Anywhere that isn’t here! Don’t worry. I’ll find us food and shelter. Then we can start a family.”

The young couple exchanges kisses, unaware of the presence around the corner. A presence who simply turns around and heads downstairs.

Grimald silently leaves the building.

*

A door creaks when he enters his current hideout. Nothing fancy. A room in a small inn, paid for as a regular traveler. Same spot he has been in for a couple days now, until his business in this town will be done.

He looks into the single mirror when unbuttoning his shirt. He should shave himself tomorrow. Some of these hairs on his chin stick out. Always that same spot which grows just a little faster than the rest for some reason. Not that he would change anything about it. All a natural part of who he is.

Grimald lies down onto the bed, staring at the ceiling. What a bizarre day again. Sure have been plenty of those recently. His code of work involving no loose ends at all **doesn’t** seem like much of a code anymore.

A rustling makes him turn, whispering into the night.

“Shh... Go back to sleep. It’s late already.” He brushes through the hair of a vulpes girl, shushing her back to sleep. The same girl who pursued him from all the way in Bournesse. The same one he shared a room with ever since. The same one who is three months pregnant with his child.

Holding an arm around her, the monster-turned-man falls asleep.

*

An air of tumultuousness fills the tavern when Grimald enters. He has an important meeting in here. A key piece for the coming war.

He passes a couple men, gambling in the corner while drinking alcohol.

“Dammit Odwin, I’ll score your entire salary next time!”

“Bring it on,” the young man places his next bet on the table.

Grimald pays no heed to the gamblers and sits down at a round table with one man already present. He greets him while grabbing a chair. “Harald Beaumont? What a pleasure to meet you.”

“I have no idea why,” the man fitting the name snorts while grabbing a leg of chicken to consume, tearing off a piece of flesh with no attention to manners.

“How could I not look forward to this meeting? Right in front of me sits the man who started the Hatori Tribe Wars, and eventually brought an end to them.”

Harald takes another bite from his chicken, sucking in the chicken’s skin still hanging from his mouth. “Only half of that statement is true.”

“Which half?” his conversational partner smiles.

Harald doesn’t answer, only unrecognizable garbling leaves his mouth.

“You see,” Grimald continues, “the way I look at it, it doesn’t really matter in the end. All which matters are your military successes, and the intent behind your participation in the war. And let’s face it, successes were had.”

Harald wipes his mouth again, taking a drink. “What do you presume to know about my intent?”

“Guilt. You wish to end bloodshed as fast and efficient as possible. And you are not afraid to use novel techniques to acquire that goal. Anything which can give you an edge. I respect that.”

The mug of alcohol is firmly bashed onto the table, some spilling out, when Harald shares his own thoughts. “And now you wish me to join in another war? No, I don’t see what you could offer me.”

Grimald casually answers with his morbid offer. “A place to die.”

The one-eyed man looks right at his conversation partner for a couple seconds. A hearty laugh breaks the silence, in need of another drink. Meanwhile, Grimald continues.

“Other than what I already offered, hmm... You know what? I’ll just state it out in the open. People are going to die, soon. A lot of them. And innocent civilians will be among them, deliberately targeted.”

Harald’s mug lowers again, all joyful mood from earlier lost. While the man in front doesn’t hold back in his choice of words.

“Yes, I’m certain you don’t like what I said. But I can’t change this outcome either. I too have someone above me who hands down orders. See, that’s the problem. If you don’t carry out the task, I’ll have to find someone else who will. After taking you and your fellow men in this tavern out, naturally. Since you know too much already.”

Grimald doesn’t hide his typical smug expression, adding more. “Let’s face it, this world is filled with scum who couldn’t give a shit less about the lives they claim. Even worse, openly take joy in it and increase the body count for sheer plundering and raping fun. Finding a replacement won’t be very hard. Isn’t that how all noble protectors of the people eventually become a force of thugs, happy to stamp down on the faces of the same people they’re supposed to protect, blindly following orders?”

“I don’t like threats,” Harald grumbles, visibly annoyed.

“That was not a threat. Only a simple fact.”

“Get to the point.”

“If you don’t pick up this fight, then someone else will. Who do you expect will get this war done and over with faster and more efficiently? With least amount of casualties? You? Or whoever you hand the responsibility on a silver platter?”

The tall mercenary leader shoves his plate of chicken aside. His hunger is ruined. “Who are you? Who is this Master tugging your leash? And what are your goals?”

Grimald takes an empty mug himself and pours out alcohol. “Ah, what if I told you, we were behind the uprising in Gleaze which started it all? And we encouraged the flood of refugees into the Hatori lands, with the singular purpose of starting a war to bring them all to ruin?”

He lifts his mug to give a toast to his own words, taking a drink right after.

A large fist bashes on the table. From behind Harald, Odwin turns around, ready to back up his commander. That commander eases his lieutenant to keep his cool. Everything is under control, for now.

“*You started it all?!*” Harald turns back to the man in front, disbelief written on his face.

“Indeed, we did. I personally arranged for the incident which lit the entire house on fire. You should know which one I’m talking about. The pillaging of Hiraga.”

Harald’s disbelief turns to disgust. Few remember where the Tribes’ conflict started. How it began in Hiraga when a harmless village was raped, slaughtered and looted by a large group of angry refugees who fled the civil war in Gleaze. But this guy knows.

“Though, as I said,” Grimald adds. “Decisions came from above. The Master of our Order.”

“The Union?” Harald asks.

A loud laugh fills the tavern. “Oh no, not that pitiful joke of a construct. The Union is nothing more than a disposable tool. Every higher-up a puppet dancing to an unseen Master. Exactly like you were, during the uprising.”

Harald grits his teeth, about ready to reach forward and drag this stranger onto the table for answers. “What the fuck do you mean?!” he demands clarification.

“Do you honestly believe a fresh, young upstart was sent on pure merit to stop an uprising which could escalate into civil war? You were *chosen*, Harald. Handpicked for the job. Exactly because your tendency to go soft was well known.”

Grimald sneers mockingly. “You were a sock puppet.”

Harald reaches for his weapon, yet doesn’t draw. There’s something odd about this irritating pest. An aura of threat hangs around him. And did that shadow of his arm over the table just move unnaturally?! “Where can I find this Order you’re a part of?” he asks, biting away his anger.

“Ah, see, that I can respect as much. The desire to end it all. But you can’t end anything if you don’t know who we are. Or *what we are*.” Grimald places down a piece of parchment on the table.

“What’s this?” the mercenary leader asks.

“A magical contract. Forbidden magic. Blood magic. Let’s make a deal, with our lives at stake. You join our fight. And in return, I will lift the veil about us.”

He reforms his typical, confident grin. “Let’s find out if you can really put a stop to us.”

*

Why did he do this? No matter how much Grimald ponders on his actions in that tavern, he simply can’t come to an answer. He had him already. He had Harald simply by playing the card of lessening casualties. The man would have accepted the job to become his special task-force, for no other reason than to let nobody else grab the spot and abuse it.

And yet, he told him about his Order. About the Faceless. About how all is hidden in Eralthyr. Inside that tavern, he went against the orders of their Master. And he doesn’t feel particularly bad about it at all.

Only confused. Why did he do as much? That was relevant information he handed out like candy. Actual weapons which could harm them lie hidden in Eralthyr. Could it be, a part of him *wants* someone to stop them? Is that why he unlocked the door leading to that possibility, as small as it may be?

...

“I’m back,” Grimald announces his presence.

“Welcome back,” the vulpes reaches out for him, hugging the father of her child. She gives him a kiss. Not just any, but a lover’s kiss.

“I brought us a good meal for the night,” he places down an order of groceries and meat.

“I’ll get started on it,” she smiles.

“Let me handle the knife. I don’t like you running around with a blade in your hands.”

She laughs in response. “I’m not going to slip and fall.”

“An accident can happen quickly,” he reaches his arms around her, caressing the girl’s growing bulge. “You are in no condition to take risks.”

“You sound like my father, overly cautious.”

Grimald mumbles. “I’m *not* like your father. He’s an annoying man, with annoying questions.”

The young woman grins at his moping. She introduced him to her father a while ago, when she found out about her pregnancy. Dragged him all the way to Sakai. Both men didn't get along all that well, yet her father accepted her choice.

"He sure was older than I expected," he can't help give a verbal jab to the man.

"Devoted to his business, Father only married late in life, with a much younger woman," she explains why she was such a late-comer from her father's perspective, and why he only had one wife.

Grimald has to admit defeat on this issue, considering his own age compared to the mother of his child. "I guess, I can't really criticize him there."

He starts cutting the vegetables while she prepares to clean the meat.

"What's that?" the woman heads towards a roll of parchment he brought along.

She unfolds it after cleaning her hands and takes a curious look. Grimald doesn't seem to mind and continues with the vegetables. "Plans for a howitzer prototype," he explains casually.

"Oh, what's that? It looks like a tube."

"It is a tube, of metal. Black powder goes at the back. Light it on fire, and it should propel a bunch of shrapnel out of the barrel."

"It's a weapon?!" she asks, worried.

Grimald pauses his knife, observing the vegetables in front. "Yeah. It's a weapon." He continues cutting vegetables, keeping his eyes away from her. "It's only a prototype. Might not work at all."

It will work. He knows. The theory behind it makes sense. Maybe a couple adjustments here and there to this model Harald gave him, originally acquired from a genius leporid metal-smith during the Tribe Wars. Though it came too late to influence that conflict, and the original designer of these plans didn't live to see the end of the war regardless. Doesn't matter, Grimald will make it work. Not that he can say as much.

"This is part of your plans?" she asks with a sad tone.

And this is why he can't mention it will work. She doesn't want it to. "Don't forget the meat," he tries to change topic, yet she doesn't let go.

"You're planning something dark, aren't you? You can't hide it from me."

“Then why are you still with me?” he returns a question.

“I carry your child. I want our child to have a father. I believe in you! But there’s something consuming you.”

Grimald resumes cutting vegetables, his tone of voice not annoyed. It’s far from the first time she tries this topic. “In that case, I’m almost gone,” he mumbles. “Since long before I met you. Long before I can remember.”

A pair of arms reach around him, her face seeking the comfort of his back. Words whispered with confidence, only for the man to hear. “You’re still here, somewhere deep inside. I know it. You can be saved!”

He sighs while placing down the knife, turning around to face her. “And you wish to save me? Drag me back towards the light?”

Her golden eyes peer straight into his, closing only to let her lips give the answer.

*

A week later. Grimald sits down against a tree, observing the town in peace and quiet. Until a single individual breaks the silence.

“Took me a while to find you. Why are you not in town?”

It’s a woman. The Faceless he met before. The one who always asks for a report.

“Eh, the view is better here. And I can hear the birds sing, with a gentle stream of water in the background.”

She responds annoyed. “I was waiting for you at the agreed upon place.”

“Not my problem. What do you think about the view?”

The woman observes for a short moment, giving her singular thought. “It’s a town.”

Grimald shakes his head... What else did he expect? He finally looks up at her. “Oh, a new face?”

“A recent acquisition.”

“Not bad looking. She’s from Bournesse, I see. You’re going around almost as much as I do.”

“Just doing my tasks, as instructed.”

He rolls his eyes, repeatedly opening and closing his mouth like a fish, as if he just heard an automaton give a pre-chewed response. “Of course, just doing as instructed. What else? So, what was her name?”

“Does it matter?” the female Faceless asks.

“You insinuate it doesn’t matter. Yet, why do you always go for such pretty women whenever you have a choice?”

The woman doesn’t hesitate, casually replying as a matter of fact. “They are handy. Easier to manipulate others.”

Grimald shakes his head again at another disappointment. “Is that really all there is to it? You are so boring.”

Their conversation grinds to a halt. Until she eventually breaks the silence, sitting on a tiny wall next to the streaming river.

“Lynette. That was her name. Lyn for close acquaintances,” she folds her legs, the natural charm of the woman she wears radiating all around.

Her fellow Faceless nods approvingly. “A matching name for a fiery daughter of Bournesse.”

“The Master wishes to know about the preparations for our vessel.”

He can only roll his eyes again at her quick flip into plain business mode. “Preparations are doing fine. The theory is completely worked out now, and I managed to extract pristine blood. In other words, all according to plan and right on schedule. Same conclusion as always. Once construction is complete, we can commence our practical experiments. Which will still take years, naturally, where every couple months you pester me routinely about progress. So I can return the same boring reply. And I believe this is the part where I ask how you are doing on your end?”

“The hunt for an Alma skin proved to be challenging. I haven’t found a suitable one yet. It will take time.”

Grimald shrugs his shoulders. Whatever. They have time aplenty. When being over ten-thousand years old, one starts to see the flow of time in a different light. “No point in going to the Spire then, if you can’t get your hands on a capable druid. What’s the holdup?”

“Too few with a strong enough bloodline left. Their powers are too weak for our desired specifications. And the Master doesn’t like taking risks with the Alma. As the only keepers of information harmful to us, they should be kept in the dark about our actions. I can’t move among them easily.”

“A couple years more or less won’t make a difference. Preparing the vessel will take a while either way.”

“I have a plan already,” the woman brags with a rare flare of smug emotion.

“Oh? A plan, from *you*? Now I’m intrigued.”

She’s clearly annoyed by his choice of words, though keeps her cool, confident in her plan. “I will target the nearest siren grove and create an incident the druids can’t ignore. Obviously, without leaving a trace back to us.”

“The Southern Grove? I admit, that plan could work, if your incident is potent enough.” With the contract the Alma have, binding them to the groves, they won’t remain seated in their few cities when one turns to chaos. Definitely, a competent druid who shall be sent to investigate. Big question left is how such chaos will be born.

“I’ll corrupt the Matriarch. Turn her into a chimera. Then have her turn on the grove and annihilate them.”

Grimald chuckles at what he hears. “What did she ever do to earn such scorn?”

No answer comes straight away, only an eerie silence. The woman stares at her nails, observing them closely, removing a speck of dust. Only after plenty of time passed she finally states her reasons, more talk-active than she has ever been before.

“I’ve always wanted a siren in my collection. For years I searched around, given the opportunity. For months I worked to target that one specimen I desired above all. Thought I had acquired the most attractive of them all. Then *she* showed up right after and made all my work obsolete.”

A resentment lingers when she gives a name to match the identity. “Helena of the South.”

Grimald bursts out in laughter, slapping on his leg. “*Hah!* Envy?! Of all possible emotions to stick around, it had to be that one?! So unfortunate. I always knew there was more behind your preference in skins.”

The woman doesn't contradict him, only left stating her personal plans for the future. "I will mold that bitch with the largest and most hideous harpy I can find and erase her bloated existence from this world, together with her entire grove! And I'll do it slow enough to enjoy it like a juicy feast. Then my skin will be most beautiful once more."

Grimald refrains from mentioning the existence of three other groves. Surely, she didn't investigate them all? Chances are, she's deluding herself. Though he keeps his chosen words to simple advice. "Don't lose yourself into your fun and games."

"That would be *your* mistake to make."

The woman places her feet back on the ground and stands up, putting some air into her curls with a swing of her arms. She seeks to leave.

Before she goes, Grimald throws out one more question. "Have I... changed?"

She doesn't bother looking back, walking away. "You've always been different."

Though her presence is already gone, he turns to where she stood, lifting a single finger. "You know, I like that Lynette skin. You should wear her more often. She has what you lack. Personality."

*

Grimald heads back to town. His business is done in here. It's time to move on, always more work to do. He really could pack up and just leave right here, right now. But that would mean leaving *her* behind. And that thought is undesirable.

He comes to a stop. To his side is a small shrine to Justice. A young woman sits down in front of it, conveying her wishes in silence. It's the vulpes he shares a roof with. The one he can't leave.

"What are you doing?" he asks, curious.

The woman already knew he was next to her. She felt his presence. "I'm praying for you. Asking Justice to offer redemption."

"You believe in Cloegandr?"

"Of course, I do," she smiles at him.

“No, you misunderstand,” he **shakes his head**. “I don’t mean whether he’s real or not. I mean, you believe he actually cares?”

“Certainly, He does. Justice will listen. And if there is even a tiny amount of good somewhere left in your heart, which I know there is, He will grant redemption if we don’t forsake him and what He stands for.”

Grimald stares at the statue. The God he disavowed. “I have forsaken him long ago.”

The woman reaches for his hand. “But I haven’t. And I won’t forsake you.”

He has no idea what to do or say. Only conclusion he **knows, is that he can’t shake** off that hand clinging to him. While her following words echo in his ears.

“I’ll save you, one way or the other!”

*

Around half a year passed. Grimald waits outside, staring at the sunset. Behind him is the house he rented, where currently a childbirth is underway.

Fingers twiddle nervously. Why is this taking so long? How much longer will he have to wait here before it’s possible to hold his own child?

“I’ll save you,” she said. Does he really deserve to be saved? Nah, not after all which already happened. But maybe... Maybe this world does? Maybe they didn’t know as much as they once thought.

He already worked out a method to spare her, and their child, from the Eternal Night. Though perhaps... they shouldn’t carry on with their plan to begin with?

He can hear the young woman. Sounds like she’s in pain. Is childbirth that difficult? She looked forward to it so much. He can also hear the doctors. So much shouting. They should shut up and do their work instead. She is the one suffering to put their child into this world, not them!

Yes, she is willing to suffer, to give birth to a new life into this world. It only proves how much value she attaches to this existence. To be fair, weren’t they once similar? Trying everything they could to cling to life? To this world? When did that stop? When did their search twist into a vengeance for the act of Creation itself? Now, they only want to tear

down. Kick down the tower of cards in a fit of rage. Becoming an immortal god is only a side-product at this point.

He *could* sabotage it... Put a stop to their plans. He can't fight the Master, not on his own. That said, Grimald is the mind behind it all. They don't know how to make the vessel a reality. That's how he already intended to have her and their child included as survivors. To be merged together with them, becoming Agmus, destruction itself.

He could stop it instead. Isn't that what she wants him to do? Give up on their dark plans, whatever they may be? All it will take is adjust the formula again. Another simple change. None will easily suspect anything, as to suspect means admitting there is personality left in them. A personality capable of going against instructions.

Yes... Give the world a chance. Maybe it's not so bad an existence? After all, it gave birth to her, and soon to their child. He should...

Grimald stands up. What's going on in there?! He hasn't heard her for a while now, while the doctors are all the louder. Maybe it's over, and their child is born? If so, he should hear crying any moment now. A baby's fresh tears of entering into a harsh world it will learn to love.

However, there's only the doctors. They sound panicked. Yet, their voices fade too.

Grimald wants to open the door. Curious, worried, anxious, nervous, tense, a plethora of different emotions he thought gone. Though there is no need to open the door. It already opens, a single man appearing before him. A doctor. He looks... worn. Tired. Afraid.

"I... I'm sorry."

Sorry? What for? What is this guy babbling about?

"We tried to save her. We couldn't."

Something snaps inside of Grimald. He understands the meaning of those words, yet he is left incapable of responding. That same line constantly repeats itself in his mind.

They couldn't save her.

It repeats, though it doesn't fully sink in. He refuses to let it.

"The child?" he asks. Why doesn't he hear crying?

"We... tried to, but the child was already gone before she..."

Grimald stares into emptiness. He doesn't respond, only capable of turning around.

...

With slow paces, he walks away into the sunset.

She gave everything she had. And this world rejected her. It rejected their child.

Teeth grit hard against each other, grinding. A fire of growing rage consumes Grimald.

If this is how it is meant to be, he rejects this world instead.

Curse this world!

Fuck it right into oblivion!

There is no justice to be found in this rotten pit of misery.

Their plan was wrong. Become Agmus, and live forever as one? No... It should all burn.

All of Creation was a mistake. It never should have been. The world must burn. His comrades, as a part of this world, must all burn. As should he.

...

The doctor doesn't know what to say, only capable of watching a broken father stumble away. Until his assistant calls him back inside.

"Doctor! Come quick! I believe there's another! Maybe if we're fast enough..."

The man heads back inside, closing the door, processing what his assistant just said. Then he makes up his mind.

"Grab the incision tool!"

Act 4 ~ Chapter 1



Days of Yesteryear

The hoe lands into the ground for the last time. Conrad stops to wipe sweat running from his brow. That's enough field work for today. Time to resume work on the farm's shed. A part of the roof still needs fixing.

Lisette gathers bundles of straw while he places the ladder. Once on the roof, he takes over the bundle she lifts up.

"I forgot the bucket of clay," he utters, annoyed. "Where did I place that damn thing?"

"I'll fetch it," Lisette replies. She knows where the bucket is. Without clay to harden around the straw, that roof won't survive the first good gush of wind.

The girl searches around. Wait, wasn't that bucket next to the main building? Maybe she doesn't actually have a clue where it is in the end.

"Cloe, over there! It's right next to the water pit."

Lisette looks where her father points. Oh yeah, now she remembers. She last used it to fetch more water to make the clay wet this morning.

The girl lifts the bucket with both hands. This wet clay sure is heavy! Almost out of breath, she reaches the ladder. Now what? Should she try and climb it to offer the bucket to her father? **That's going to be difficult.**

"Thanks, Cloe, just leave it there. I'll come get it."

Lisette takes a seat, recovering from fatigue. Farm work sure is tiring. This is what Mother always did when she was young? Impressive.

The girl no longer bats an eyelid at the name used to address her. Cloe. Her mother's name. **It's okay, she understands. If her being Cloe makes life better for her father, then she will happily be Cloe for him.**

She takes a look at a small mound near the back of the farm. Father avoids that area. She figured out by now what that mound must be. The old, worn marker is hard to misunderstand. **That's a grave. Likely for her grandparents. This is after all the farm where Conrad and Cloe grew up. A part of her own history she never got to know until recently.**

A full six months passed since that day Conrad left Sakai. Since that day he turned his back onto his cause. Lisette was the only one who noticed him leave, in the dark of night. She followed **him all the way here, to her parents' home. He never said a single word during the journey. It's like Lisette wasn't there. Or maybe, it's better to say, her father wasn't there.** When she tried to talk to him, the girl was only left staring into empty eyes.

Only here did he first open his mouth, the same day they arrived. A simple name left his lips.

Cloe.

That's who she is to him. Cloe. Back on their farm, living in the past.

Conrad slaps down more clay, binding straw to the roof. **"Got to be done before Father and Mother return. They will be happy to see we've handled the farm well all on our own."**

Lisette smiles at him. Yes, when Father and Mother return. That must be why he avoids the grave at the back. As long as he is happy. The story changes occasionally. Sometimes, he describes they're out to town to fetch supplies. Sometimes, he mentions they visit relatives. Yesterday, it was them helping out the Baudet family. She had no idea who those

were, carefully inquiring. Turned out they were the neighbors. They too are long gone. She knows as much from the few folks passing along.

The farm was in horrible shape when they arrived. No wonder, considering how long it has been abandoned. Okay, not fully abandoned all the time. Bandits no doubt claimed it as a home at some point. But those were **driven out by her father's rebellion. Ironically, it's** those thugs hanging around for years which prevented the place from being completely ruined. Restoration work was first on the agenda. By now, the main building is practically fixed. And the farm fields are almost ready for tilling. This shed is the biggest mess still remaining, though **it's coming along steadily.**

Lisette reaches for her pocket and pulls out the old flute. She's not great at playing it. Still, every time she does, her father seems to feel a lot better. More motivated, more relaxed.

Conrad stops placing down hay when he hears the familiar melody. A smile forms on his face, and he continues work, enjoying every note sent his way.

Thoughts about **these long six months fly through the girl's mind as she plays. She sent** a letter to Sakai. The others know where they are. She also knows by now what must have happened that night. Not any details, only that Eris never returned, while Selena went missing. **It's hard not to put one and two together.** Something must have happened on that trip to the Woods. And those two were caught up in it, including her newborn little brother.

"We have visitors," she stops playing and stands up.

Conrad looks to his back. Oh yeah, they do have guests. He comes down from the ladder and heads to the water well to clean his hands from clay.

Lisette is first to greet their new arrivals. **"Hello."**

The newcomers are Karl and Cherry.

"It's been a while. Working on the shed, I see. Good progress?" Karl asks.

Conrad joins his daughter to offer his own greeting. **"Good to see you again. Yeah, it's going fast and steady. Should be finished in a week's worth. I see you brought someone else with you this time."**

It's not the first time Karl is here. Previously, he brought Primrose along. Now, **he's got** Cherry accompanying him.

“Yes, this is my wife-to-be, Cherry.”

Conrad gives her a greeting. He doesn't recognize her, as he doesn't recognize anyone. He only knows Karl because the man has been here before to visit. Conrad thinks of him as a travelling diplomat, who spent the night here once, and now regularly returns as a sign of friendship.

“Oh, tall-ear tribe?” he notices the fluffy tail. “I didn't notice at first, since she has no...” He cuts his own words short. Partially, because it would be rude to mention, understanding she must have gone through hard times. Though equally because the topic stirs undesirable feelings within him. Latent memories which would rather lay dormant. So he quickly changes topic. “I see she's expecting. Congratulations. Fortunate times ahead.”

Karl places an arm around Cherry, a proud smile on his face. “She's six months in. I can feel the stress already. Never thought I would become a father again... Or a husband, for that matter.”

“You're staying over?” Conrad offers a place to sleep.

“Oh no, we're only passing through. Work, you know. It never ends.”

“Isn't that a sad truth... But I do enjoy a day's hard work at times. Feels gratifying. At least, you'll stay around for dinner? I insist.”

“Sure, we gladly take you up on your offer.”

“Alright then. I'll go prepare a meal right away. Cloe, could you keep our guests entertained?”

Lisette nods while her father heads into the house.

...

“Don't worry about it,” Karl gives her a pat on the shoulder. “He'll recover eventually. I've seen this before, among our troops. And during the siege of my home city... They always come back to us. It only takes time.”

Though Lisette knows they don't have unlimited time. “How's it going?” she asks.

“Adrian brought our troops to the walls of Ramona. They're laying siege now.”

He took over the Restoration Rebellion. The path to the heart of Gleaze wasn't very arduous, benefiting from the Union's decline, while their own troops were high on victory.

However, that rush slowly dissipates. And now they're stuck at Ramona, settled into a siege, where momentum finally left the Rebellion.

"Honestly, if nothing changes fast, I doubt we can keep the movement going. The troops' icons are gone, our streak of victories has run its course, and many wish to return to their own homelands."

Why stay and fight for a land and people not their own? With the Hatori Tribes and Bournesse restored, experiencing an economic boom as their unique cultures are revitalized once more, many wish to return home **and become a part of that boom. It's all** fine and dandy to fight for others out of ideals, as long as those ideals live strong within their leadership, though their leader went missing half a year ago. And their Envoy of Cloegandr disappeared with him.

It was a deliberate choice of Adrian. Karl agreed with his plan. Conrad and Kalina had become a duo of victory. Without his leadership, those victories would eventually cease. As they did once the siege commenced. It was better to have Kalina disappear together with their commander, keeping her in Sakai secretly where she can live in peace.

The alternative was to keep her around, yet damage her status as an icon of swift and miraculous victory. Adrian preferred the first option, in hopes that one day Conrad would return to pick up the banner. She could return with him, restoring much needed vigor to **their movement in the process. Alas, that day hasn't come yet, while the Restoration runs** out of steam.

"I believe he'll get there in time," Karl insists. "I still believe. All of us do."

As much as it pains him to admit, he and Adrian may be capable leaders, they're still no valid replacement. Neither of them would have dared to attack Sagara, let alone, succeed in it. Neither would have successfully led the defense in Milgard. **It's an unforgiving** position. To be so close, yet always one step short of where one wants to be. However, they *can* keep the house together for a short while, until the man they placed their belief in returns.

"Any news about Eris and Selena?" Lisette asks.

"Sadly, no. I've sent multiple search parties into the Woods, and none found anything. The barrier makes it extra difficult. We don't even know if what happened was before or

behind the barrier. We managed to establish contact with the outpost a while ago, but they **don't know anything either. Only that** Conrad and Eris never arrived. Neither have they seen Selena.”

Lisette peers at the ground. Maybe it could help **her father's condition** if they knew what happened, though **it seems they still don't have a clue.**

“Regardless, I'm certain **what weighs down on your father is more than** only their loss. No doubt, ghosts from the past will weigh on him as much, piling up for years already. This was one incident too many. We all have our limits. I know I reached mine at some point in the past. It made me almost give up on life, as I already had **on finding happiness again.**”

“**What changed?**” she asks, hoping to catch a clue how to help her father.

Karl hugs Cherry close, the girl placing her cheek against him. “**She dragged me out.**” The man gives his young wife a pat on the back. “**Go on. I believe it's a good time now.**”

Cherry steps closer to Lisette and offers her an object, wrapped in cloth.

“**What's this?**”

“**It's my sister's dagger. It was left behind in Sakai.**”

Karl explains why this came along their trip. “**It's Cherry's idea. You can think of it as her way of believing he'll come back. Maybe one of those ghosts can help him return to us.**”

“I've mentioned Carrot before,” Lisette takes the dagger. “**Father hyperventilates when I do.**”

“**That's a good sign,**” Karl assures her. “**Means the truth still resides within him, somewhere deep. It will reveal itself when the time is right. Once it does, it will come as a shock to him. Be ready to offer a shoulder.**”

“**But, the Rebellion...?**”

“**We'll keep it together for as long as needed.**”

*

It's late in the evening. Karl and Cherry already **moved on after dinner. While he's** in the area, Karl will organize a supply convoy for the army from the city of Florant. They will head back to the siege afterwards.

Lisette finished playing the flute, placing it down while staring at the hearth.

“You’ve always been so good with the flute,” Conrad mentions. “In contrast with poor me.”

His daughter doesn’t reply straight away. Those words actually hurt more than she expected. “You’re the one who taught me,” she sighs, captivated by sparks of fire making her feel nostalgic.

Conrad chuckles at her response. “I did? You are the one who taught me, remember? I suck at playing.” He notices she isn’t in the mood, so the man stands up and throws a couple logs on for the night. “I’ll go get some sleep. It’s been a tiring day. Tomorrow, the roof should be finished. Then we can fix the floor.”

“How were they like?” Lisette suddenly asks.

Conrad doesn’t know what to answer. Who is she talking about?

“Mother and Father.”

“Cloe, what kind of question is that?” An uncomfortable confusion looms over Conrad’s face. Why did she speak in the past?

Lisette notices his expression and softens her words, turning them away from past tense. “If you have to describe them, what words would you choose?”

Still an awkward question, though one Conrad is more comfortable with. How would he describe them? Hmm... He never quite gave any thought to it. “Mother is kind. Sometimes too kind. She goes soft on us, didn’t want you to do hard physical labor. She also worries a lot, yeah, definitely a worrywart. Father is the opposite. He’s stubborn and feels no parent should be too kind to their children. We will appreciate it later on in life, he often says. I cried once, when our dog died. Mother hugged me, while Father told me I should hold it in and be strong. He had me dig the pit to bury her.”

Confusion returns to him. Why is he talking about this as if he would to someone who never knew their parents? Still, he keeps the thought to the back of his mind, not daring to touch upon it. “Mother and Father kept each other in balance. They were a good match.”

Why is he talking in past tense now? Conrad holds his head, a sudden headache forming. He really should find sleep right away, he begins to talk nonsense. This happens far too often lately.

*

Lisette stops staring into the hearth. She should go to sleep as well, it's been an hour already since her father went to bed.

The girl walks closer to his bed with silent footsteps and opens the divider curtain offering privacy. As always, she can easily notice he is troubled. Half-awake while half-asleep. Lost in nightmares.

She opens her shirt, slowly undressing, eyes not shifting from her father.

His own eyes open, sensing her presence.

The white-with-blue dress glides over her shoulders, down her back. The girl stands naked, a gentle glow of the hearth reaching her. A subtle work of shadows cast by the fire emphasizes her feminine nudity while she steps out of her dress.

He never mentioned anything about her clothes, or his own for that matter. Conrad **knows, they don't make sense. Why does she have expensive merchant's clothes? Why does he have an equally rich outfit?** He never dared to question much about it. A gift from their parents... **Yes, that's all it is. All it must be.**

Conrad reaches out for Lisette, touching her bosom. She sits down on the bed, leaning towards him.

They shouldn't do this. That's the one matter Mother is always stern about. He and Cloe should not be nude around each other. **It would be inappropriate. Another topic he can't do anything other than shove it to the back of his mind.**

His face seeks out her breasts, cheek resting on her chest. Lisette cradles her father, humming a tune. The same one she played earlier.

The girl's eyes glide to the side of the bed while she caresses him. Right there, underneath the bed, is a simple object hidden. One she bought a week ago from a traveling merchant, no idea even why. A pigskin. The weirdest set of thoughts ran through her mind before contacting the merchant. The strangest kind of response from her own body, heart beating and nerves tense. Yet, she bought it. Not that it found any use. It probably never will.

For nothing more will happen. He will seek comfort in her arms, occasionally a tear rolling down, while she soothes him until they fall asleep. Nothing more. Same as any night before, ever since they arrived at the farm.

*

Lisette puts on her dress. When she notices her father's stare, she returns him a smile. This is an equal part of their routine. He wakes up in the morning, and has no idea what led to having spent the night hugged by a naked "Cloe". Always eased right after, when she offers that beautiful smile, affirming nothing wrong happened for the entire night.

"You're... becoming a woman," he mentions.

Lisette pauses as she pulls up her dress, staring down at her own budding breasts. They're still tiny, though a shape shows some initial form now, since about six months ago. Holding the dress with one hand, she seeks out her femininity with the other, squishing in her own softness. She never paid much attention to it, but yeah, she's really a girl now.

She removes her hand, breasts revealed once more from a sideways angle. Like tiny hills, they poke forward from her chest. Her father tries to turn away, though she can notice him awkwardly peek from the corner of his eyes. It makes her dally, stay in this position of being only half-dressed. Patiently waiting.

"I'm not a child anymore," she answers, holding her body in visible position. "My breasts are growing. My hips are a little wider. And I bleed now. I'm a girl."

With a humored grin she finally pulls her dress up.

*

Before heading out to resume work, Lisette reaches for a document. It's a letter, left behind by Karl yesterday. A part of her wanted to open it right away, another part decided on stalling. It's from Primrose. These letters often come with mixed feelings.

Unable to stall any longer, she opens the seal.

Dear Lisette,

I hope life has not been too hard on the farm. Is your father doing better? I pray every day for better times to return.

We've been stuck in Gleaze, but don't worry! It's honestly not very dangerous. The siege simply means sitting around a lot, doing nothing. So boring! I sometimes wish there was more to do. There might be, soon. Adrian mentioned they won't be able to keep morale up for long anymore. He's planning an attack on the city to try and take it by force, get a fire going again for our cause!

I've caught rumors he wants to send me to the Spire, to formally ask for help, and stay there to convince them if necessary. But help is unlikely, as stories go there's a Union army on the way to siege them instead! Won't work, I know. The Spire can handle itself. They need to look after their students. I think Adrian just wants me away from his planned attack of the city, to not upset your father when he returns. And he will return!

Anyway, I'll go and ask, but I definitely won't stay at the Spire! I'll quickly head back to join the attack. I can't disappoint your father. When he comes back, I want him to praise me and pat my head. He-he, that was embarrassing to write, but I did it anyway. Don't tell him I wrote that!!

Don't worry about the others. Roderik looks after Luna, keeps her company a lot. I wish I could go see Kalina, but she's in Sakai now. Oh, that means she is safe, so it's okay!
You should see Karl these days. Well, I guess you see him when he hands over this letter. Always looking out for Cherry. It's so cute! They make a great couple. She is so happy to carry his child. Makes me wish I had a child. Maybe soon, when we are finally all together again!

That's my number one wish right now. That we can all be together!

*With love,
Primrose.*

Lisette's expression softens when she reads the letter. Long enough her friend needed two papers to write it all on. That said, this letter is a good example why she was hesitant to open and read it. As much as Primrose's feelings are heartwarming, they're equally a cause of worry. Adrian plans an attack? Karl didn't mention that, and he must have known. Morale must be dropping faster than she thought, to leave them with no other option than an all-or-nothing gamble. Makes her realize time runs short.

"A letter?" Conrad asks.

"From Primrose."

Her father takes a peek at the contents before Lisette can hide it. "A siege in Gleaze?" he asks worried. "I hope Charlotte and Celeste are okay."

Lisette turns quickly to her father. Those names he mentioned...

Conrad reaches for his head, another acute headache present. Why did he just say those names...? "I'm going outside. Need fresh air."

With her father gone, Lisette grabs the dagger Cherry handed over. She so wants to believe in her friend's words, that this object may help one way or another, but how? Uncertain, she carries it with her outside.

*

He slaps on the last handful of mud to contain the straw. "There, all done. Our shed has a roof again."

With it only being noon, there's enough time remaining to start work on the floor.

Conrad descends the ladder, yet stops when he reaches the ground. He looks into the distance. "We've got guests again."

Definitely not Karl and Cherry. A small group of four heads towards them, rowdy and armed.

...

“What can we do for you?” he asks as the newcomers approach the farm.

“We’re searching around for a nice place to stay.”

He observes all four. They carry swords, even if they don’t look like soldiers. Where did they acquire those weapons from?

“We don’t have enough room inside the main building, but if you don’t mind giving a hand with the shed, work will be done before nightfall.” He points at a bale of straw used for the roof. “There’s enough left to make a soft bottom to sleep on, and the roof is all new. Will definitely protect against the elements.”

He would rather not have these folks hang around, though courtesy and hospitality require offering them a chance, as long as they’re willing to provide help with the shed. A good test of character.

A test they instantly fail.

“Look man, we’re only searching for a place to sleep. Not work.”

Another one joins his buddy in the same sentiment. “I’m not sleeping on any straw. Don’t you have a bed inside? Why not show some manners and have your guests take the nicer accommodations.”

If they showed plenty manners of their own, that would have been an option. Main concern now is to not escalate this into violence. Not with all four of them armed.

One of the group peers right at Lisette. “Nice daughter you have there. I don’t mind if she stays with us to warm the night.”

Conrad takes a step aside. The axe for logging is right inside the shed, next to the door. All it takes is one more step... “Cloe will sleep alone. I can offer the shed, together with a meal. No more.”

One of the men steps closer towards the girl.

Her father quickly cuts off the path, axe in hand. “I don’t appreciate her being approached. The offer for the shed still stands. If that is not good enough, I will have to ask you to leave.”

“Too bad for you, that’s not what we were paid for,” the group’s leader reaches for his own weapon.

“Can we take the girl?” one of his henchmen asks.

“Our contract says to leave him alive. Never said a thing about the girl. Bring her to the house and tie her on the bed. But don’t kill her yet. I prefer to stick it in when they’re still warm.”

Conrad lifts the axe higher. One against four with only an axe to chop wood is almost suicide, though maybe he can threaten them out of this! Even with their superior numbers, one of those guys could always go down. Might be enough to sway them out of this confrontation.

Though their spoken words were ominous, causing Conrad to inquire about them. “What contract are you talking about? Who set this up?! What for?!”

The leader draws his sword, all three flunkies following in his tracks. “No idea what you’ve done to upset someone with so much coin, only how you obviously fucked with the wrong guy. He even told us to drop his name. Definitely a grudge involved, or maybe a woman? Who knows?”

He approaches Conrad, not very worried about a single axe. “His name’s Grimald. Paid us to harass you. To put a fire under your ass, he said.”

Fists tighten around the axe’s wooden shaft. An instinctual rage lights up at the mere mention of that name. Conrad isn’t even left with enough time for a single thought as one of the henchmen tried to encircle, now reaching for Lisette.

The axe swings down, knocking the thug’s weapon away. Conrad immediately smashes the axe’s wooden back into the man’s face, followed by a swing of the metal head.

Blood splatters around, reaching the other three.

Conrad is left in shock.

He killed him...?

And it happened so easily?

He anticipated the man’s dodge and adjusted the axe accordingly, hitting him right in the neck with the sharp edge.

But... How?

...

“Get him!” the leader orders.

All three throw themselves at the man still left in shock, catching him off guard. Conrad is forcibly brought to his knees, bashed to the ground. Left disarmed.

With the situation seemingly under control, one of the hired goons turns focus towards Lisette. What should she do? Summon Diana? Her spirits would make short work of these goons. Still, how would her father respond to seeing Diana again, such a recognizable symbol of the war they fought? If he faces another shock, he might never recover!

Maybe as a result of what Cherry told the girl yesterday, or maybe purely on instinct, she makes a choice.

“Papa!” Lisette shouts out, grabbing Carrot’s dagger and unsheathing it. The girl throws the weapon right at her father’s feet.

Without any hesitation, Conrad latches onto the weapon and instantly turns it upwards, stabbing behind him with pinpoint precision.

*

Lisette sits on her knees. In front of her stands the sole survivor of the adult men. Her father, covered in blood, still clinging to the dagger. All three remaining hired thugs were disposed with lethal efficiency.

Conrad stares at the dagger. He recognizes it, a name popping into his mind. Carrot. Immediately followed by another intense headache, forcing him down onto the ground.

What’s going on?! What happened?! He just took out four men, their blood and corpses right in front of him. And it all happened so quick, so skilled, so... **experienced**. His body moved on pure muscle memory and impulse, trained like an automaton to deal death.

What is he? An assassin? A murderer? Or... a soldier?

Breathing grows heavier, memories flashing before his eyes in rapid succession. It’s all coming back to him. A loud scream of agony echoes over the farm.

Grimald... Again! Once more he forced his way into Conrad’s life and tried to strip him of what he has! That *rotten bastard!*

All he can see is blood. All he can feel is anger, rage, fury. Beating from within like a powerful drum, turning stronger with every loud thump. It consumes all other emotions like a raging inferno.

The dagger is **stabbed into the ground with force. It doesn't matter how many of these scum pave the way. He'll take them all out! Take *him* out! Even if it's the last thing he does!** Even if he has to abandon all else in existence! *Curse it all! Curse this fucked up world! And curse that faceless rot which took control over his life!*

The moment is upon him. The choice Grimald mentioned. All it takes is one more curse. One more rejection of this world. And Conrad will have chosen the path of a villain. With only one steeled conviction left. To forsake the entire world, as he has already forsaken his ideals. Grimald wanted a villain to carry out his task? He can have him, only to be consumed by his own creation!

Yes... Curse this foul worl...

"Papa!"

A voice? He can hear someone call **for him. It sounds so distant. He can't even** recognize **where it's** coming from. All before his eyes is nothing but a mixture of black and blood-red.

"Papa! Come back!"

There it is again. What is he to do? All he has to do is reach out for that rage, and acquire power. The power to beat his nemesis. And she wants him to stop? To turn back? *Why? Not that it matters now. It's too late. He already drowns* in this overwhelming, raw emotion. It took full control of his body. There's no more turning back. All he can do is take that single step forward and reach out.

"Papa! Please, come back to us!"

Huh... He can hear it more clearly now? There's something else here, within this dark void. Something other than his rage, or that voice. A presence. A small light dances before his eyes. **Where has he seen this before? Oh, right. These are his daughter's spirits, the other five joining.** All six flutter around him, slowly and gentle. Like fiery butterflies, spreading the warmth of summer with their ethereal wings wherever they go.

They're so pretty. It's as if he can hear them whisper kind and strangely familiar words. Somehow he knows. They call for him, seek to guide him. All he has to do is follow them, and they will lead him to the origin of that voice.

The rage slowly subsides, beating drum turning increasingly distant as Conrad follows the lights. Until his vision finally returns, and the man is left staring at the person he mistakenly called Cloe for six months.

“Lisette...?”

The girl cries tears of happiness.

Finally... Finally, her father returned to her.

*

Embers flicker in the farm's hearth. Conrad sits quietly before the fire, legs pulled up. Small and fragile in appearance. Next to him sits Lisette, clinging to her father's arm, offering what little support she can. She has a good idea what happened six months ago, what brought him to the brink of insanity. He explained her with trembling words.

“It's not your fault,” she says.

“It is my fault. I failed them. I even took a life.”

“*You didn't know!*” Lisette yells in a sudden burst of emotion, then calming down again. “You didn't know who the contract belonged to.”

It doesn't matter to Conrad. He's still responsible for Selena's loss. How she was tricked into a blood contract, he has no idea. He can't blame her for it. He fell prey to such a contract himself once. She was innocent, left with no way out. While he is guilty. Attacking Grimald while he held the contract above fire was no different than if Conrad burned it himself.

Lisette doesn't really know what else to say. There are no guilty among her friends and family in any of what she heard. Only victims. The entire story certainly left her depressed. She had a good idea already what fate became of Eris and Selena, though hearing it confirmed does hit hard. Eyes are still red with tears. Though she's relieved the truth finally came out. Better to know what happened, than to live in uncertainty.

The girl seeks comfort in her father's arms. He doesn't push her away, in need of comfort himself. Conrad understands how close he was to lose himself into fury. Only one small step removed. His daughter managed to drag him back towards that indecisive middle ground. Far removed from a hero, yet at least not a villain either.

"There's a letter. I believe you should read it," she cries in his arms.

He looks to the side. That's the letter his daughter read this morning. He reaches out and first examines the signee. From Primrose. Of course, she would... That girl must be so worried.

Eyes glide over the letter's contents. Unlike this morning, his mind doesn't reject most of the message, all details sinking in. So Adrian and Karl are holding up, having successfully brought the troops to Ramona's doorstep. Still, time runs out...

"You should help them," Lisette wipes her eyes. "They wait for your return."

Her father nods. He understands. Yet, does he even deserve to go back? "I don't know if I can do this anymore. I just don't know."

"I know you can. Look at the letter. Everyone believes in you!"

That much he understands. But how? How can anyone still place faith in him?

"What if the roles were reversed?" Lisette whispers. "Would you still believe in me?"

"Of course I would, you're..." Oh... So that's why. She's his daughter. Believing in her comes naturally. It must be similar for them. One needs no reason to believe. That is what makes it a belief to begin with. "Do you think they hate me?" he asks.

Lisette doesn't need to wonder long on who her father asks about. Those he loved and lost. While her answer needs no thought at all. "No. They will all understand what happened. I know, because I would feel the same in their place."

Conrad's thoughts move back to that one detail he hasn't been able to let go off ever since finding out. The motive for the Faceless. The answer to the one question they sought. "Do you believe I could ever meet them again?"

Lisette wraps her arms closer around her father, full confidence radiating from her. "I'm certain you will!" She lifts up her face, bringing it close to her father, rubbing cheek against cheek, stating her simple reason. "I don't care what the Faceless concluded. They were wrong!"

“What if they’re not? Then it would take a miracle to ever see them again. And miracles don’t exist...”

Lisette places her forehead against her father’s, staring him straight in the eyes. Six spirits float around her. “Miracles *do* exist. That’s why I’m even here.”

Conrad wants to offer a rebuttal, though he can’t. She is right. What happened in that temple a decade ago can only be described as a miracle. Maybe... she really is right? And there’s still hope? Maybe the Faceless were wrong?

“I’m sorry for taking so long,” he concludes.

Lisette smiles at his words. He’s really back, and won’t leave them alone anymore.

“You look exactly like your mother,” he murmurs, brushing her hair.

Lisette leans closer, pressing her body against her father. The girl’s breath flows over his face, forehead still on his. She doesn’t want to let go. “How was life here with Mama?”

“She would kick me for telling you this, but you know the storage closet over there? Once, when she opened it, a mouse jumped out. You should have seen her dash outside of the house like it was on fire, screaming our parents into a panic.”

“Did they get mad?” she asks, heavy mood lifting even if only a little.

“Kind of. They were more embarrassed, really, their private moment interrupted. I still remember Father bouncing around to hop in his pants, giving chase after Cloe to find out what had her so riled up.”

It occurred in their last week on the farm. One of many memories Conrad feels like sharing. About Cloe, and about Lisette’s grandparents. To let the girl know about a part of him which is now lost to time.

*

A couple hours passed. Conrad heads to bed, undressed and ready to pull the sheets over him. He has a lot to think about, and a lot to do come tomorrow. This will be his last stay in this bed, for who knows how long. Will he ever even come back?

Dark thoughts still lurk aplenty in his thoughts, though Lisette managed to drive them into a corner, manageable for now. It will still be a hard, lonely night, alone with himself.

The worst kind of company when brooding on a heavy burden. Still, she gave him the strength to carry on, made him aware there is still a lot to lose in this world. **He shouldn't abandon his quest, he shouldn't give up on those he still has left.** Regardless, this is definitely not a night he looks forward to.

The curtain slides open unexpectedly. Lisette stares at her father. She clearly hesitates, uncertain what action to take. Hands pause twice when reaching for her dress. Then she makes up her mind.

“Lisette... You don't have to...”

She knows. There's another bed available. Conrad must have expected her to choose that one, now he recovered his memory. Though he should remember why she chose this one. Remember what she did in this bed, every night for six months long. Yes, there's no need to comfort him at night anymore, to cuddle the bad thoughts away into a dark corner of the mind. He can manage now, after facing reality once more. However, a lack of need doesn't mean she can't do it anyway...

She keenly observes her father, reaching for the lowest button on her outfit. Fingers pop it open, though her top is still kept firmly closed by three more buttons.

Slowly, she moves upwards, towards the second button, pausing **to take in her father's** response.

Conrad doesn't openly protest. He knows where this will lead. She will undress, go naked. Then she will hug him to sleep. That's how it always went here. A memory which is too hard to ever voice, but one he will forever be grateful for. She played the role of Cloe for him. And the thought she might do it again is nothing less than alluring.

That said, should he really **allow her to do it? She's not Cloe, but his own daughter.** It would definitely be inappropriate. Then again, what is one more time, after six months already? **Yes, just for this one time more... It might be okay.**

The girl's fingers pop open the second button, reaching for the third. A first cautious glimpse of joy reaches her father, as she read his surrender to her charm right from his face. And open it goes. Only one more button left, holding her front together.

The room is so silent Conrad can hear her breath rise in excitement, while his own comes to a stop. Any moment now, that last button could go. Yet, she painstakingly keeps it in

position, carefully observing where her father's eyes are aimed. Only once she confirmed they are firmly fixated on that button, does Lisette open it with a sudden snap.

Conrad inhales at the sight of her dress opening, texture gliding smooth as silk down her shoulders. A pair of budding breasts push themselves free, moving harder up and down at their sudden reveal. Two pointy bits stand on top her soft cushions, pointing forward.

Lisette waits a couple seconds, to process the emotion coursing through her. This is exactly like last time, and all those days before, for a total of **six months**. Yet, it's so different, now she knows her father returned to her. The girl lowers her arms, and lets the dress drop onto the ground, stepping out of it.

First her fingertips, then the palm of her hand... She puts her weight onto the bed. A single knee ascends the sheets as she takes place in front of Conrad.

Without saying a word, sitting on her knees, she opens her arms.

...

Lisette breathes out her built-up tension. Her father just took place between her arms, resting his head on her bosom. Yes, this is how it should be. The girl instantly knows she made the right choice by stepping into his bed. Together with the weight of his body, she can equally feel the weight of his burden. The man in her arms feels so vulnerable, more so than she is. Her tiny body offers shelter from the harsh world, a safe harbor from the storm.

"Did Mama do this?" she asks.

Conrad seeks out her heartbeat with his ear, cheek pressed against her breasts. **"She did," he answers. Uncertain how far he should go with an explanation.** Regardless, how could he deny her? When his precious girl is willing to bare herself naked before him. **"Your mother was my first actual experience. When I was a boy around your age, without a clue about girls. And as little a clue about myself... She held me like this, and taught me an all-new world."**

He really shouldn't go further in his explanation. Even so... **"The moment I explored her body, and she explored mine, it was truly... amazing."**

Lisette responds by caressing her father, offering an affectionate proposal. **"Papa, you wish to explore me? Explore my body?"**

See, this is why he shouldn't have explained. Look what happened. Now she makes an offer so tempting he will always regret rejecting it. "Lisette, I... I don't know if... You're my daughter."

Yes, his daughter. As long as he clings to that single word, he can prevent his emotions and desires from running out of control. As long as that simple fact is retained in his mind.

However, that daughter has different plans, gently blowing the most soothing of temptations in his ear. "I can be Mama for you, if you prefer?"

Her father's resistance is instantly brought close to the point of shattering. What does she mean? She will still play that same role as previous days? Even though his mind has already come back to the present?

Lisette doesn't wait for that mind to settle and further whispers into his ear.

"Brother... Do you wish for my love?"

The point of shattering is instantly left behind. Only a short gasp remaining from Lisette as Conrad pushes his face harder into her chest.

Her voice... Those mannerisms... What is this sudden burst of nostalgia? It's like he went back in time, and Cloe actually sits here before him, cuddling, inviting him as she did so many times. Even though he knows she is Lisette, she exudes an aura of her mother.

He knows it's wrong for them to be like this. So wrong, yet it feels so right.

His nose breathes in. Even her subtle scent resembles Cloe's. How did he never notice his little girl exudes such alluring pheromones? Her body actively tempts him to experience her.

"Cloe..." he can't help get lost in nostalgia. Even if it's only for this short moment, he wants nothing more but to taste Cloe in all her charms.

Conrad's tongue licks over her breasts. Her tissue guides his mouth through its increasing softness, inviting him to go further until the softest spot has been reached. A spot where his lips find a slightly different-textured ring. His tongue traces it around, coating the sides of her nipple. To then take it all in his mouth.

The shape of her breast, the taste of her nipple. This touch of her fingers through his hair, telling him to satiate all lust for as long as he desires... All of it resembles Cloe.

A faint moan brushes past his ear. A moan which won't be satisfied until both breasts are covered in his saliva.

Lisette never felt a man hunger for her before. Now, she enjoys a taste of his mouth sucking on her skin, lips pulling on her nipple, and teeth sinking into her soft breast. It leaves her body in deep thrills, a whimpered breath charming his ears.

With one hand still stuck on her father's head, pushing him into her chest, the other now heads down to do some exploring herself. In search of a specific spot. The hard erection pointing at her. The moment she reaches it, Conrad's mouth plops free from her breast, to take in needed air at her provided stimulus.

Her saliva-covered nipples rise further in their own erection while she explores his meat. Though the girl doesn't give him the opportunity to fuse with her tits again. She pushes her father backwards, to let her eyes go down, between his legs.

Her own hunger takes over. Lisette lowers between her father's legs, curious. Intrigued by what she has seen before, but never up close. So this is what entered her friends? What made them gasp for air and heave in joy?

A first lick follows on his penis. A quick flick over the bottom. What a peculiar part of the body. This sack hanging beneath is so soft and vulnerable. The girl lets her tongue glide onto it, going up along the hard shaft, until she reaches the tip.

A different taste catches attention. She scooped up some kind of liquid. It came out of his tip. Is this what makes babies? Before she knows it, Lisette already lets the penis glide into her mouth, lips pressed around. She suckles it like a candy stick.

"Cloe..." Conrad has his eyes closed, enjoying the roleplay carried out. Those wild tufts of hair he brushes through, they are no different from his sister's. The manner in which she suckles, seeking to draw forth more of his pre-cum, sends shock-waves through his body.

For six months, he hasn't enjoyed the fruit of lust. Now, his little girl's lips gliding over his skin, her mouth covering his manhood, and her tongue caressing his tip, is nothing less than a release of pent-up frustration.

Lisette makes a tiny jump of surprise, though holds her father's penis inside. He orgasms into her mouth. She knows what to do, has seen and heard it before by her friends.

The girl licks her lips. She didn't spill a drop.

Conrad breathes hard, recovering. All that half year worth of sexual frustration gone. It really should be time to sleep now. They already went far beyond what usually happens at these times of night. Going any further would be far from appropriate, even more so than the line they already crossed. She is still his daughter. Though he is grateful for the nostalgia trip she offered him.

Lisette lies down, legs on top of each other, sideways. The unseen presence between them lures his attention like a predator about to catch prey.

“Papa... I feel so hot... I can't hold it anymore...”

Conrad swallows at what lies right before his eyes. Her pussy leaks onto the sheets, even if he can't see it directly. The stains are visible, the run of fluid down her lower thigh onto the bed. Her own finger dips into that hidden honey-trap, returning with a string of goodness attached to it.

She stares at him with a pleading.

The man sits on his knees, drawn to her sweet trap. He is left swallowing his own built-up saliva. He shouldn't cross this line. Lisette already bleeds. It would be far too dangerous! She could get pregnant.

No, what is he thinking?! It doesn't even matter if she bleeds or not. She is his daughter, regardless.

A jolt runs through his penis, as it gradually rises after the previous orgasm. He knows her eyes are glued to it, lighting up. They only make the transformation happen faster.

Lisette's mouth opens to take in needed air when she notices the erection point right at her, renewed in vigor. The pair of fingers she dipped into her own fluid now find her mouth, licking them in the tumultuous hunger which overtakes her.

“My body feels so strange...”

Her roleplay is finished, desires too strong. She can't be Cloe anymore. It wouldn't feel right. That's not the name she wants to hear from her father's mouth. Not right now. With her fingers cleaned, she turns completely onto her back, facing her father. Both the girl's hands find a spot above her head in total surrender to the moment. They clench into the sheets. It only emphasizes how her body is openly offered.

“Papa... This spot,” her upper thigh begins to move, slowly rubbing, smearing with her leaking fluid.

Conrad can't even reply, only left staring at his daughter's legs opening for him. While her lust-drowned words offer him the only reason why.

“I need you, Papa... In here. Please...?”

A thick gush runs forth from her slit in anticipation, thighs already rising to guide her father into her embrace of carnal love.

For a short moment, the girl's gaze shifts to the side of the bed, where a single object is hidden. The one she bought for this particular situation. With a quick tug, she reveals the pigskin. The moment has come, even if she never expected it to.

Her father recognizes what she holds lightly between her fingers. “You... bought this? For us?” he asks.

His daughter nods with an affirmative moan. When did these feelings start appearing? She has no idea. All she does know, naked before a particular man, is how one matching desire burns strong within her. “I've wanted to do this for so long...”

Her fingers loosen, the pigskin sliding from the bed onto the ground. Dropped. A gasp leaves her mouth at the act and what it signifies. Lust-drowned eyes staring at her father while the welcoming gap between her legs widens that extra bit more.

“Love me, Papa.”

Lisette's gaze of pure sexual thirst bestows her father with gratitude when he lowers over her. The girl's legs already welcome him, sliding their skin against him with open affection and hunger for his touch. To lead his erection towards her overflowing vagina. Where she shall love and caress him without any barrier left between them, to be tucked in her raw warmth and bathed in her natural fluids. As father and incestual daughter, locked in their own embrace of incestuous, all-natural sex.

The girl's chest pushes upwards when his penis pushes itself into her slit. She gapes for air, all strength fading when her father seeks to nibble on her lower lip. Her mouth immediately opens, inviting his tongue to explore every spot inside. A frothy slipping of saliva only interrupted by what short time it takes to change angles of their fused lips.

“Nn~...” she lets her complete appreciation for a passionate kiss reach the four corners of the room. Legs don’t stop as they constantly adjust to shower the man between with affection.

Their mouths separate for a needed search for air when his penis slides against her crevasse. **Lisette’s eyes search for her father’s, joy radiating from within. She** equally knows. This relationship should not be consumed. Especially now her period started. **Last time was weeks ago. She shouldn’t... It’s far too risky to make a baby. Yet, even so...**

The girl reaches with her arms around him, bringing her mouth to his ear.

“Please, Papa... Love me.”

She gapes in delight when she finally can feel that hot sausage she secretly longed for be grasped by her pussy. A subtle moan released for every bit of skin she can feel slip deeper.

“Lisette...”

She answers with another sweet moan. That name is what she truly wanted to hear. One which makes her grip tighten. Proof he wants *her* in this moment, his own daughter.

Her eyes don’t leave his when the bed begins to creak from the man’s weight repeatedly coming down. Only gratitude is visible in them. Gratitude that he came back to her. That he chose to love her.

Lisette’s lower leg bashes into the wall. Their shared bed isn’t too big, not really meant for two. Though she doesn’t mind. Every time she can hear that bash, it’s only because the man on top shoves her legs aside again. A repeating pattern, whenever he drives that smeared cock down to enter her all over again.

Even if a part of the girl **still can’t believe it, she** finally has sex with her father. An act she secretly desired more than once before. No matter how much she desired, her imagination could never match the real deal. That much is proven right now.

Wondrous. Mouthwatering. Luscious. Lewd. Overpowering. Solacing.

So many words she could use, to describe how it feels to be taken in the flesh by the man she trusts most. Some of those feelings almost seem contradictory, yet they are valid all the same.

Even though the girl holds so much power in her hands through her spirits, she never felt so dominated before. Her entire body surrendered for nothing else than to be taken,

enjoyed, tasted, and possibly impregnated by her own father. And it makes enchanting thrills of lust gush up like a fountain.

This should never end, though she knows it will. And Lisette has a good idea how. Her father will ejaculate sperm, preferably inside of her. Where exactly would it go? She doesn't really know. Somewhere inside her belly, the place where babies grow. The place where their baby might grow.

Conrad slows down to a crawl, observing his own cock slowly dragged back. Plenty of signs of Lisette's love smothered all over. The most loving pair of eyes bless him with approval, aware what the consequences could be if they consume their love till the very end, openly inviting him to do so. Then he drives it in equally slow, releasing all pleasure for her to hear. Marveling at the sight of it all disappearing into his little girl.

Her thighs warm his sides as they warm his heart. A constant presence to blanket his body with love and approval.

A combined moan reaches all corners of the house. That moment of ejaculation has come, exactly where the girl hoped it would. Buried at the deepest point inside of her. Arms wrap tight to reward her father for his preferred choice. While plenty of seed pours out within a loving daughter's warm and fertile womb.

*

Lisette wakes up and rolls closer to her father. "Morning," she greets him.

"Had a good night?" he asks.

"It felt like you were still inside of me," she giggles.

"I just slept with my daughter. Maybe I'm cut out for the life of an aristocrat."

Lisette doesn't really understand the joke, though she offers her own thoughts on the matter without restraint. "I loved every moment of it. We should sleep together more often. A lot more often."

"Well, sleeping wouldn't be too difficult," he laughs.

She returns a little knock on his shoulder. "You know what I mean. You should... love me."

“I do,” he kisses her.

...

Lisette is only half dressed when she can feel Conrad grab around her, kissing her in the neck. “We’re going back?” she asks, eyes closed to savor his lips on her skin.

“Yeah, eventually,” he stops kissing. “But I have a place to visit first. Alone.”

He reaches out for her breasts. “You really are growing up. Such a lovely girl.”

Lisette’s arm seeks out her father behind her. “You’ll come back to me?” she asks.

“I will, once I find what I seek. Promise.”

Act 4 ~ Chapter 2



A Sleeping Princess

Conrad arrives in front of the Misty Woods. He has a destination in mind, though he doesn't know how to reach there. All he does know, is that it lies beyond these woods, in the Alma lands. How he is to pass the barrier, he has no idea. With luck, he stumbles upon a scout from the outpost. If not, he'll just have to rely on a miracle.

Lisette went with him all the way to Sakai, where she will wait for his return. It's too dangerous to send her to Gleaze on her own. A letter was sent to inform Adrian he can expect Conrad in the near future, if all goes well. However, only after his solo journey is a success.

This *must* be done, there's no way around it. For as much as Conrad utterly hates his nemesis, he cannot deny what the monster-turned-man said. A competent leader must either walk the path of a hero, or that of a villain. If he is to beat the Faceless leader, and Grimald afterwards, he must choose a path and walk it to its natural outcome. One of those

paths is not an option. Not to him. It would be a betrayal of all those he cares for. Which only leaves one other option open.

Though how to get there? He needs conviction, first and foremost. To actually believe in the ideals and Virtues their movement stands for. Such is, however, not an easy task. One cannot simply start to believe, not wholeheartedly. To accomplish such, Conrad needs answers first. Answers, and one other goal. A path to redemption.

Which only shifts the problem though, as his sought for answers and redemption **aren't** exactly straightforward to acquire either. That said, he does have a hint. For the answers part, at least. Hence, the need to pass the Misty Woods. A journey he must carry out alone, for it is a journey to discover himself.

To pick up the Restoration Rebellion before these goals are accomplished would only lead to the same mistakes all over again.

*

The day is still young, plenty of time to spend inside the Woods. Footsteps bring him deeper and deeper. **Won't be long now before he reaches the foggy barrier. His first stop is close, he can sense it. Another task which must be done.**

...

The trees open up for a hidden spot inside the Woods. With mid-summer shining its glory all around, flowers are in full bloom.

The man stops, taking in the beauty of this place. This definitely didn't look similar six months ago. The open patch of forest is nothing short of breathtaking. While a pleasant odor lures him forward towards the bed of flowers.

Towards the place he buried Eris.

Conrad falls on his knees and seeks contact with the ground. He caresses it as if touching the girl underneath. **"It took me half a year, but I'm finally here again. I failed at protecting you, my love. For that, I can never ask forgiveness. I equally failed at protecting our son. Another sin I will carry with me for the rest of my life."**

He takes a moment to gather his thoughts, his determination.

“I promise, I will right what is wrong in this world. I will stop those seeking to destroy it, stop the one who claimed your loving existence under the sun. You will always be with me. **And I will never regret the day you came into my life.**”

He stands up again, wiping tears with the back of his hand. **“I have to move on now. I’ll see you again soon.”**

With a lingering stare, Conrad moves on towards his next stop. From here, it should be to the west.

...

His heart beats faster. This is the meeting he feared the most. With every tree he passes, Conrad has to take a renewed breath to keep himself going. As much as his body wants to turn around, **the man’s** heart and mind can only tread forward.

Strength leaves him when he reaches his destination. Legs and arms shiver, lips quivering. **“I’m so sorry,”** he lowers before Selena. **“I never should have ran. I never should have left you here, all alone.”**

Her condition is bad after six months of exposure to the elements. Yet, she is untouched by predators. The reason why is already clear to Conrad. To his side, he can spot a glimpse of a fur coat through the foliage. **It’s the pair of wolves.**

“Thank you, for guarding her,” he offers his gratitude to the animals.

He has no rational basis for believing as much, yet he does it anyway. These animals, maybe even the forest itself, protected her body. Preserved her. **Why? He doesn’t know.** Maybe they remembered the girl? **Or maybe they followed Eris’ will?**

He grasps his arms around Selena, lifting her up. **“Let’s go. I know a much better spot.”**

Carrying her like a princess, he heads back towards the open patch, bathing in sunlight and covered by flowers. Conrad places her down and starts to dig, right next to Eris.

“You won’t have to be alone anymore. Neither of you have to be.”

He firmly believes Eris would have wanted this. She wouldn’t blame Selena for what happened. And if their spirit is somewhere out there, maybe this will act as a means to assure Selena she has nothing to feel sorry for. They were both **victims to Grimald’s** schemes. Why his nemesis chose these two specifically to target, he has no idea. Though **that’s a problem to solve later.**

Once the grave is dug, he crawls inside with Selena, holding her in his arms. The man rocks her like a baby. His lips move, starting to sing a song with a low timbre.

One he knows very well, for he heard it many times before.

One he stopped believing in, many years ago.

One he now wants to believe in once more.

The Hymn for the Fallen.

*A tree stands tall,
Bark worn through climb;
Never even knew,
It would all fade with time.*

*By a child once grew,
Through stumble and fall;
Only to find at the top,
Our ancestors' call.*

*A new nursery rhyme,
Left at the roots of this pine;
Reach up for their hand,
Home of yours and mine.*

...

Morning. Conrad wakes up on top of both graves. It was already late, thus he considered it best to spend the night here. Deeper inside the forest, away from the open patch, would have been better protected against the chill of night. Though he couldn't leave them, both girls resting here. He didn't notice the wolves had shown up during the night to share their warmth.

"I really don't deserve such special treatment," he pets the animals.

Now what? He's done here, in need of moving forward. Next on the agenda is to cross the barrier, somehow. A whole different kind of fear paralyses his muscles. What if he can't?

Conrad stands up regardless. **Even if he can't, he still has to try. No matter how often it takes.** What he seeks is on the other side of these Woods.

One of the wolves howls, drawing attention.

Conrad looks back towards the animal, and notices a single light. **"A spirit?"**

Is it one of Lisette's? **Definitely the same** ethereal type. However, **she's not here?** How could one of her spirits be here? No, while a same type, **that's not one of hers. They all have slightly different colors. And this one is again a different shade. It's a bright yellow, like the sun.**

"What do you want from me?" he asks. **"I don't understand."** It buzzes around him, as if it wants to convey a meaning. But what?

The same wolf from earlier howls again, then it approaches, digging its teeth into **Conrad's pants. The animal tugs with strength.**

"Alright already, I get it. I'm coming."

The wolf lets go. He understood **the message, the spirit's warm hue leading the way.**

"Where are you taking me?" Conrad wonders out loud.

...

For almost an hour now, he was walking through the Woods, following the light. Sometimes it stops, to let him catch up. Always in sight, darting around, growing increasingly energetic. If that's an indicator of reaching the destination, he must be close.

Conrad stops. **"Here?"** he looks around.

He knows this place, remembers it. How could he not? It's a cave. A bear cave to be more precise. The spot where he first made love with Eris. Where she asked him to make a cub together, in the presence of Mommy-Bear and her two brats.

He walks into the cave, following the light. The bear may still be around, yet he's not worried. **The wolves obviously didn't attack him for whatever reason. Unlikely,** the bear would be any different. Besides, the **spirit's goal is obvious. To lead him inside.**

A curious growl makes hairs on Conrad's arm stand up. The bear is here alright, awake. On that same spot as before. Her cubs are around as well, definitely larger than they were back then, with a third one on the way. They all stare at him in curiosity. One of the cubs crawls up to approach, a wet nose poking into Conrad's leg with force. The animals are calm, as if they understand what he is here for, even though the man himself doesn't yet.

Until Conrad's mouth falls open, all thoughts ceasing.

It can't be...

Legs feel heavy as lead from disbelief, while he forces them onward, until he reaches the mother-bear.

Right there, hidden beside her, is an existence which doesn't belong.

A boy, only just over six months old.

"Odwin...?"

The child begins to cry. Conrad falls down before him and picks him up, holding the boy close to his chest.

"Odwin... It's me. Daddy!"

How did this happen? How did such a young boy get here?! Did the mother-bear pick him up and nurture him with milk? A moment of fear enters Conrad. If she took his son in, would she recognize him as her own cub? She might grow angry if he tries to take his son out of here.

The bear nudges against his hip.

"You want me to go?"

Conrad steps backwards, tears rolling over his eyes from happiness, holding his son close.

He's alive! Little Odwin was alive all this time!

Walking under the sun again, he can spot the wolves turn away. Their task, similar to the bear's, is done.

Only now does the full picture form in Conrad's mind. So *that's* what must have happened... They all played a role in this.

Selena must have carried his son away into the Woods during Grimald's attack on Eris. After she lost all hope her contract would not end with bloodshed, she ran with the baby,

hoping to save him. That's how the boy managed to escape the burning wagon and Grimald's blade. Once Selena died, the wolves brought the child here, for the bear to nurture. While they looked after Selena's body for Conrad's eventual return.

Now what to do? As overjoyed he is to have his son back alive and healthy, he can't nurture him for long. Not out here, in the Woods. He can offer food through his rations, a six-months old kid should be capable of consuming those. And liquids shouldn't be an issue either. For a short while, at least. Even so, walking around with a kid this young does make his journey a lot more difficult. Should he go back to town?

The same light which led him to the bear cave beckons attention, forming a constant figure eight ahead.

"You want me to follow again?" he asks.

The light dances quicker, answering. It moves forward, waiting for him.

"Alright. You returned my son to me, I'll trust you."

*

Another half hour passed. The morning turned halfway noon already. The direction he heads in is north-west. **The barrier can't be far now.**

To put strength behind his thoughts, the first hints of fog already show up.

"I hope you have a plan to lead me through this fog," Conrad hopes for the best. That is still the biggest obstacle forward. Still, at this point, he has no difficulty believing in miracles anymore.

The fog grows denser. It should happen any moment now, the point where he will be sent back to the entrance of the Misty Woods. The light suddenly halts, hanging in place.

"Do I, uh, need to do anything?"

Conrad searches around. **Oh, that's** one of the roads right there. He can see it, to his right. Did they already get sent back? No, this place feels strangely familiar. **And it's** definitely not the entrance.

The light begins to shine brighter, a golden hue coloring all foliage nearby. Conrad takes a step backward. Not out of fear, only because he doesn't want to disturb what is happening.

This glow... Now he remembers! It's similar to what happened when Eris tuned the Woods. In fact, this is the exact same spot! This location forms the knot of ley-lines running through the forest.

The glow of magic stops, and the spirit energetically turns around Conrad.

"Alright. Let's move on. I'm right behind you."

The light leads him first to the road, then heading further towards the exit. The fog is as dense as last time, in fact, he can barely see the spirit, its light eventually disappearing entirely.

Is its job done? He can simply follow the road at this point. Going straight ahead in this dense fog is an annoyance for sure, yet doable by following the edge as a guideline. By now, he knows there are no side roads veering off anyway.

...

The mist lowers in density. It won't be long now before he reaches the exit. The biggest obstacle should be crossed. Finding his destination is only a matter of time at this point. Though with such a young child in his arms, that time better comes fast.

The fog dissipates and Conrad comes to a stop. In front of him is an unexpected sight. He reached the exit alright, already capable of seeing the beautiful and mystical lands of the Alma stretch out. That familiar long river which flows past a large cliff-face, reaching all the way to the horizon and beyond, sparkles under light of the sun. The same giant mushroom grove as last time towers in the distance. And in front of him is the spirit light which guided him once more.

However, the light is not alone.

A neigh announces an unexpected presence, waiting for Conrad.

"So we meet again," the man murmurs, slowly walking closer.

The unicorn lowers its head, manes flowing in the gentle breeze. Is it okay to touch him?

Conrad reaches out, touching the animal. A snort of the unicorn assures him there's no need to hesitate.

“You were called here by the light?” he asks the animal.

Silvermoon turns his head, observing the young child.

“That’s my pride. He’ll grow up to become a capable man. If you’re okay with it, I would like to entrust our fate to you.”

Silvermoon gives a gentle snort again and turns around, facing the exit of the Woods. With the light which guided them both disappearing back into the Woods, it’s time to go.

*

Hooves stamp onto the steppes, carrying Conrad and his son with remarkable speed. It feels like the animal has massive amounts of reserves, not stopping for a moment to catch his breath. There are no reins to guide him, yet the steed shoots forward like an arrow in one direction. He knows where to go, where to escort the guests under his care.

Without wagons to pull and at a non-stop, breathtaking gallop, their destination should show up on the horizon before nightfall.

...

A large grove looms ahead. Exactly what Conrad had in mind as his expected next stop. Tall and wide trees, a type of oak, make up the area as far as the eye can see. Silvermoon comes to a halt and waits for Conrad to get off.

“Thanks. That was an amazing ride,” he pats the shoulder of the animal.

Silvermoon lowers his head and starts to graze, filling up on energy.

Conrad heads into the grove, carrying his baby-boy. Without much **undergrowth**, it’s easy to walk. Even if not a lot of light reaches down from the **thick canopy**. It doesn’t take long before he realizes they’re being watched.

Curious eyes stare down at this unfamiliar guest into the grove. The eyes come from the natives to this large patch of greenery.

Their unannounced guest raises his voice, loud enough to hear, though not loud enough to be threatening. “**I am Conrad, leader of the Restoration Rebellion. Husband to Eris of House Faynore, a daughter to the Watcher of Eralthyr. I seek hospitality for this innocent**

child, our son. And I seek an audience with the Matriarch of the Western Grove, Sylvië of the West!”

*

He sits down on a wooden platform. Crawling up here took some balancing on a roped bridge. **Thankfully, he didn't have to carry his son up here. The sirens already brought the child into the tree village through use of a carrying bag around the chest.** Handing the boy back to Conrad once he managed to climb up here.

A young girl swoops down in elegance from a higher layer of canopy. **“My apologies for our limited accommodations,”** she greets him.

“Sylvië. It's a pleasure to see you again.”

“The pleasure is mine,” she smiles. Sylvië carries a similar bag around her chest. She removes it once standing on the same platform as Conrad, showing it with motherly pride, held between her wings. **“This is my daughter.”**

Conrad takes a look at the sleeping bundle of cuteness. She's about the same age as his son, which makes sense, as this daughter was conceived during the night Eralthyr turned into a giant union of siren and alma, a city-wide orgy of lust and reproductive sex from dusk till dawn.

The young child opens her eyes for a short moment, staring at the man. Only to cry immediately after.

“That's definitely Roderik's eyes she has there.”

“Yes, looks like your apprentice won. Though I wouldn't mind if you wish to even the score,” Sylvië flirts with a hard to mistake expression, gently rocking her baby.

She takes a closer **look at Conrad's son.** **“Oh, your baby-boy has strong fortitude, I can already sense as much.”**

Conrad has no idea how her senses work, though he has no reason to not believe the siren at her word. **“He was nurtured by a bear for six months,”** he clarifies.

Sylvië **doesn't** actually seem very surprised at his words. **“That would explain what I sense. Don't worry, he's in good health and his growth will suffer not.”**

As long as he is surrounded by other people now, who speak language in both tongue and body, the boy will not experience negative effects from an early six-month stay in the wild.

Sylvië takes a seat on a downy rest area, placing her child against her breast. The girl immediately stops crying when she tastes warm milk of her mother. **“Come, let him join. I’ll feed your son. What is his name?”**

“Odwin.”

Conrad places the boy against her other breast. Sylvië is quite eager to receive him, not used at all to seeing baby-boys. **It doesn’t take long before he begins suckling**, further lifting the already cheery mood of the siren.

“Your son is so energetic. He has a vigorous suckle, much like his father,” she openly flirts with Conrad. Her wings blanket both children, protecting them with care from all outside influence.

“They’re cute together,” Conrad smiles, finally at ease his son is safe. Plenty of sirens around who can provide sustenance and have experience with raising children.

“Perhaps they are destined to become a romantic couple,” Sylvië chuckles. **“We could bring them together when they’re older, and my daughter requires a first mate.”**

“Sure, sounds like a good coming-of-age gift.”

“You are free to stay here for as long as you would like. Though our accommodations are quite modest, as you can see. We have rest areas for any druid who comes to visit us, often for diplomatic reasons. However, **I’m sure you understand, we don’t really require the same kind of rope-ways and bridges as in Eralthyr.”**

The man nods. Makes perfect sense. This is their home. No druids generally live here, only as a short-term guest if they do come. He won’t complain. **“This is the perfect place,”** he eases her mind. **“I couldn’t ask for a better foster-mother for my son. I’m happy to sleep anywhere, even on the ground if that’s preferable.”**

“Oh no, that won’t be necessary. We have plenty of soft, warm nests available,” Sylvië grins at him. **“My own nest, with my own company, for one.”**

She turns more serious. Aware Conrad’s visit here cannot be for a simple vacation. The circumstances behind this boy growing up among bears already indicates life has not been

kind to this man and his immediate surroundings. “You are on an important journey. A journey which decides one’s life, and possibly that of many others. I can tell. What can I help you with?”

“I’m here for the Abyss.”

Sylvië’s eyebrows turn to surprise for a short moment. That was not an answer she expected. She quickly accepts it nonetheless. “I see. I will personally guide you there tomorrow.”

She won’t ask what his reasons are, or what he seeks down there. Neither will she try to dissuade him from descending down a place she doesn’t even know for certain if it actually has a bottom. This is the man’s quest. If he has to go, she will not stop him.

...

That night, Conrad rests inside Sylvië’s nest, as she so graciously offered. Though nothing happened between the two. The siren wouldn’t want to distract him from the quest he took upon himself. Tomorrow, an arduous task awaits him. She cannot tire him now through sexual escapades, as much as she desires to.

“Eris is gone...” he suddenly utters.

“I know,” Sylvië replies.

“And she wasn’t the only one,” he adds.

The siren gets up from her nest and sits down, knees bent, lower legs right next to her thighs. “Come, rest here.” The girl pats on her offered lap.

Conrad doesn’t really know how to respond at first, though eventually gives in. He moves closer and rests his head on her soft thighs. Tiny fingers hidden under plumage gently seek out the man’s face.

“I could read it from your expression,” she whispers. “When you tried to fall asleep.” Sympathy is written all over her body. She does not know how it happened, only that it must have struck this man hard.

“Eldrin is going to hate me when he finds out,” Conrad stares at her pretty face from below.

“He will already know. Alma have a strong bond with their children. They instantly know if one is lost.”

Her words fill Conrad with dread, thus she tries to ease him with honesty and truth.

“He will be upset for certain, yet **he won’t resent. That’s** not the kind of man Eldrin is. He will only require **time to grieve.**” Hidden hands within her wings caress the man on her lap while she further eases his mind. **“Eris followed her own choice.** Her father will respect that. Do not fear facing him, for **I will go with you when the time comes.**”

Conrad closes his eyes. That does sound assuring. Truly amazing, how a young girl can have such maturity and control. She can even soothe his worries through simply words, make him no longer afraid to face the grandfather of young Odwin. And yet, this girl is still only fourteen. **Maybe it’s a siren thing? Or maybe it’s** merely her own personal strength, which gives her the capability to become Matriarch at this youthful age.

Wings spread out over him, forming a warm blanket. The prettiest voice of all Groves begins to sing a bedtime song, lulling the man to forget his worries and enjoy a good **night’s** sleep on top of the finest bed Sylviè can offer. Her own lap.

And Conrad falls asleep, listening to her beautiful melody. For tomorrow, he will face the most important crossroads of a lifetime.

Act 4 ~ Chapter 3



The First Myth

Sylvië lands near the edge of the Western Grove. Conrad walks up to her. Ahead of him lies an all different landscape than the lush green of her home. A deep scar runs over the **steppes**. He **can't even** look down yet, and he already knows this has to be the Abyss. Its depth makes him dizzy simply by standing here, nearby. Sylvië once said she tried to reach the bottom yet never made it. Only a miracle brought her back to the surface. How he is ever going to reach, the man has no idea. **Regardless...** Reach, he will.

Sylvië hugs Conrad from behind. “I will come here every morning and every evening, until your **return**. **Even if it takes a lifetime**. Then I shall guide you back to our shared nest.”

Conrad turns around and holds her in his arms. “**Thanks**. You are a treasure among jewels. I *will* **return to you**.”

She's nervous, he can see it. As much as the girl tries to hide it, she is afraid he will never return. He adds some extra words meant to cheer her up.

“Remember what you said yesterday? About your daughter being Roderik’s?”

She looks up, confused why he suddenly brings that up.

“When I come back from the Abyss, I feel like taking you up on that offer to even the score.”

Sylvie can only smile, forgetting about her worries. “That’s a promise then,” she agrees.

“Trust me, I’m not skipping out on that one,” he gives her a kiss on the forehead.

Conrad double-checks his rations and water supply and heads out. Ready to descend down into the Abyss.

To obtain what he seeks, and to finally reach the **hero’s** path.

With this as the only option he could think of, to acquire the answer he needs, to the one question which matters most.

What happens when we die?

He must know. Without that answer, he cannot move on. And to find it, he has to follow in the footsteps of a myth involving a man from Bournesse a thousand years ago. In order to seek an audience with a far older legend.

To seek out what slumbers in the center of the world since the beginning of time.

To stand in front of The First Myth.

To meet his Maker.

*

Rocks crumble as Conrad lowers down the Abyss. It’s been what, eight days now? Hard to gain a good grasp on passing of time down here. A quick peek over the ridge down below gives the same impression as all days before. Not a single hint of a bottom.

Sunlight only reaches for a faint amount. Thankfully, the chasm is littered with some kind of crystal or gems. They’re a shade of purple and emit a subtle glow. Not much, though enough to light the way.

“My eyes are going to hurt so bad when I return back under the sun.”

It will certainly take time to adjust to normal light conditions again. Right now, he feels more like a half-blind mole stuck underground.

...

Another ridge. Another moment to catch a breather. The terrain has plenty of these. For the last four nights, he slept or rested on similar narrow ridges. For as much as sleep is possible under current conditions. Not that he is all that scared of heights, but damn, that was a close call last night. Almost rolled over in his sleep and fell down the edge. All he could do was try and stay glued to the cliff. It was *that* narrow a sleeping spot.

His foot searches for another place to find a semblance of steady ground. It feels like any moment the rock he holds on could break or crumble and only the dark depths below await.

...

Another ridge, welcomed by more deep breaths. Arms and legs feel heavy as lead. He needs a short recovery. Not too long, though. Only enough to take a ration for much needed **energy. Maybe a drink too. Strangely enough, it's the food** which proves to be his biggest concern. He expected water to run out first.

A source of liquid is still present. He brought a large animal bladder's worth of liquid with him, hung on his back. That has not much left by now, as all this physical exercise consumes plenty of moisture. Though **there's always his own bladder, which he made use of from the beginning, only using actual water to make up the gap sufficiently enough to keep himself going.**

Three small jugs are hung to his belt. They contain urine, combined with a special type of plant. It filters out toxins, absorbing them into its fiber, leaving only clean moisture. Well, clean with a bad taste and a higher amount of calcium. Definitely not for leisurely consumption. Three jugs is enough to use one a day and benefit from the filtering effect. Kidneys still ache for more liquid though, but they'll manage.

Food on the other hand is becoming a problem. He brought rations for his trip, though **there aren't many left. And his constant climbing consumes a crap-ton of calories. He can't** risk his fingers or arms giving under his weight, not under these harsh conditions. Skimping on calorie intake is not an option.

There's a purple crystal on this ridge, emitting a soft glow. Good, means he can actually see what he's doing, without a need to fumble around in the dark. Dropping even a single ration would be disastrous

The man's mood quickly sinks into his shoes. A count of his inventory brought up a serious problem.

"Half the amount... Damn. That's not good."

Another stare into the Abyss confirms what he already knew. No bottom in sight yet. The faint glow of purple crystals simply keeps going down.

"Of all places to choose as a sleeping spot, why did it have to be down here?"

The myth he told so often to Cloe certainly didn't mention their nation's hero climbing down for so long. It was barely a footnote. Whoever compiled the story should have spent more time on it. He could have used the extra preparation. Then again, who would ever expect a suicidal lunatic to try and accomplish the same feat?

With only half his supplies left, a cold fact settles into Conrad mind. Going any deeper means there's no way back. At least, not via the same path he came down.

The man takes a deep breath and blows out all air from his lungs. Alright, there's no going back then, as simple as that. He *must* reach his destination. Whatever comes after will be a worry once he arrives there.

"Sure would be great timing for one of those spirits to show up now."

Would at a minimum be an assurance he's on the right path. Sylvie once encountered a spirit during her failed attempt at reaching the bottom, alas, he hasn't seen a single one yet. Still, her story fills him with confidence this has to be the right spot. This place *has* to be special.

...

It's increasingly harder to climb down. Ridges are fewer and further between. Every muscle in his body aches, in dire need of recovery. A headache starts to form, sign of dehydration. Another day must have passed by now. The man is at his physical limit. He almost passed out earlier.

"Time for drastic choices," he tries to humor himself.

His body will give in soon enough if he continues. And with terrain growing increasingly harder to descend, there's only one option he can think of, as turning back is certainly not an alternative.

Conrad stands up, leaning with his back against the wall. "This better work.."

It likely won't. However, what other choice does he have at this point?

"This is fucking crazy," he closes his eyes.

Memories from his life flash through his mind. They all focus on the people he knew and loves.

"If any of you can hear me, I want you to know, I miss you all so much. I was never worthy of your love. But I hope for this short moment, you can lend me the courage I need."

Heartbeat calms down, breathing begins to relax.

The man lets go of the rock wall. Whether a result of his call or not, he already found the needed resolve through his precious memories.

With a determined step forward, he treads into the dark void, making a leap of faith.

*

The void seems to go on forever. Conrad can feel himself falling, yet he can't make out anything. Even the crystals no longer exist at this depth. Though there's no light at all, it is strangely warm. How much time passed since the jump, he has no idea. Whatever happens now is no longer in his hands. The only thoughts which remain are focused on those who brought him here, to this moment in his life.

Huh, the warmth moves around? How odd.

Conrad opens his eyes and can only give a smile at what he spots. Another spirit darts around him, joining his fall. Not the same one which led him through the Misty Woods and called upon Silvermoon. Not one of Lisette's either. Yet another subtle difference in hue, its presence as heartwarming as the heat it radiates.

He *did* make the right choice.

Suddenly, the light expands, blanketing the man. Conrad closes his eyes again, blinded by a bright flash.

*

Where is he? How long has he been down here? Is this even the Abyss? Conrad tries to open his eyes, though they have a hard time adjusting to the massive difference in light. He can feel steady ground. Does that mean he reached the bottom?

A quick pat follows all over his body. No pain, no broken bones or injuries. Actually, he **can't even** feel his sore muscles anymore. "I'm... alive?"

A low but powerful voice answers from all around, shaking Conrad to the core with its presence.

"You are not."

He searches around, confused. Where did that come from?! He **can't pinpoint** the origin of that voice at all. Like it came **from everywhere at once**. So, he's not alive? He didn't **actually survive the fall**? Does that mean...? "I'm dead?"

The voice answers without hesitation, sending chills right into Conrad's bones.

"You are neither alive, nor dead. You are caught in the moment of transition."

"Who are you?" Conrad asks, meeker than he intended. Something about that voice humbles him, makes him feel tiny in comparison.

The voice answers in vibrations **which reach up to Conrad's deepest core**.

"We are known under many names. The World Shaper, The Origin... I am The First One, Cloegandr."

Conrad finally notices the presence before him. That presence was there all along. The man **didn't notice only because he was looking at far too small a scale**. Now he peers upwards, he can spot the all-towering figure in front of a puny man. And all that man can do is fall on his knees, all strength gone. He never felt so insignificant, so powerless. And yet he can only recognize a glimpse through that bright light.

Gigantic eyes stare down onto the man from the blinding aura all around. There are so many! Three pair in particular tower far above the others. The first of those three speaks the powerful but noble voice.

"We are one. I am many. I debated. We reached consensus."

Conrad instantly knows. All those eyes, they are the Virtues. And those far above him are the main three. Life, Valor and Justice. The one who addressed him up to now was Life. Valor takes over with a simple, short demand.

“State your question before us.”

Question...? Right, he is here for a reason. Somehow, he expects the God to already know what his question is. And still, He asks for it. **That’s** actually comforting, in a sense. Some confidence returns to Conrad. **Maybe that’s the entire point behind asking a mortal man to state his question, to make him feel like he can actually have a productive talk with a deity.**

“Our world is in turmoil. I seek to end that turmoil, to restore harmony. But I can’t carry on without knowing the answer. What happens when we die?”

Life does not hesitate to answer.

“Your mortal life ends. Such is the path of any mortal.”

That’s it? It just ends? Conrad can’t really process what he heard. Were the Faceless correct all along? Is there no hope left? His head shakes no. If that’s true, then how is he even here?! Sure, he’s in some kind of transition, but isn’t he supposed to not be alive anymore?!

The man calms down. Wait... **That’s right, didn’t Life use the word transition earlier? If there really is nothing, what is he transitioning to?**

The voice of Justice lets itself be heard, as powerful as the other two.

“You are not the first to ask that question. We granted the same answer.”

“The Faceless...” Conrad murmurs. Yes, they asked before. That’s how the story goes.

“Correct. That name is how you know them.”

Conrad puts aside his question for now. With the Creator right before him, he might as well try his hand. **“They seek the return of Agmus, The Destroyer! Please, you must stop them!”**

The three Prime Virtues don’t answer straight away. They seem to communicate among themselves. Conrad patiently and anxiously waits until they reach a new consensus, voiced by Justice in a single word.

“Why?”

Conrad can't believe what he just heard. Why?! Isn't the reason obvious?! "All of existence is at stake! They will end it all!"

Life takes over, answering for the whole.

"All that is must come to an end. Perhaps, we are no different."

Valor adds to that statement.

"Didn't you state so yourself, earlier? You seek to stop them, restore harmony. That harmony would only be temporary. Eventually, it too shall end."

"But, we are your creation! What was the point of it all? Why even bring me here?"

There is a strange attitude among the Prime Virtues. As if their own confidence in their conclusion is in doubt.

"You were brought here at their request," Life answers the last part, why this man is even here in front of his Maker, stuck between life and death.

Their request? Who is He talking about?

Another voice suddenly catches the mortal in front of his God totally off guard.

"Conrad. It has been a while."

...

He doesn't dare look. Could it be?! That voice, he remembers it as if it was only yesterday!

A man walks past, giving a welcoming tap on Conrad's shoulder. All the leader of the rebellion can do is stutter in shock, mouth opening to voice his thoughts yet unable to produce any sound. A single tear already runs down his face, more quickly following.

"It's good to see you again," Odwin stands before his apprentice of over a decade ago.

"How...?"

"As He said, He is many. Once we passed away, we returned to where we came from. This is our home now."

"So, everyone is here?" Conrad's emotions flare up, voice choking up.

"Most of us," another voice appears. A woman.

"Mira..." Conrad whispers in nostalgia.

She joins Odwin, holding him side by side. “Don’t mind Cloegandr,” she chuckles. “He can be a little stoic and moody, and to be completely honest, He’s not the best of speakers. But He is fair, and will grant us the time to talk.”

Conrad stares up towards his God. The Prime Virtues peer down on him in silence. They don’t seem intent on interrupting his reunion with old friends. “The others? Are they here? I need to…” he asks.

“Not everyone is here,” Odwin answers. “But don’t worry, they have always been by your side. They will come home, eventually.”

“The spirits?” Conrad asks.

Odwin nods. “Yes. Four answered your call for redemption inside the temple, the night your daughter was born. One joined the day after. And one more sought your presence over a year ago.”

Conrad doesn’t need to guess. They are Lisette’s spirits. Helmine, Annette, Charlotte and Celeste as the first four. Cloe was the fifth. Carrot joined a decade later. They left this home, to breathe life into his daughter and become the source behind Diana’s power.

The man can only feel the greatest of relief. They’re doing fine! “But, Cloegandr said there is nothing after life?”

Odwin shakes his head, teaching his apprentice another lesson. “You are too quick with jumping to conclusions. That’s only your interpretation of His words, not what He actually said. Your mortal life ends. So did mine and Mira’s. We no longer are a part of the physical world. We are spirits now. A different kind of existence. Your enemies made that same mistake ten-thousand years ago.”

“And Eris and Selena?”

“They are not here either. After guiding you towards this place, they didn’t want to come home yet.”

So, it was them after all? They led him here?!

Tears keep running down Conrad’s cheeks. He can’t stop the salty flow anymore. It’s obvious Mira wants to come closer to comfort him, though she keeps her distance, offering words instead.

“This is a different kind of existence, and a good one. We are free to love, to talk, to wander around. I can assure you, there’s far more than only this place of overly-bright light. You could say, all our memories and imaginations survive and can manifest here. Your parents are here as well, we’ve met them plenty of times. Though I’ll already add, they won’t show up to meet you, and we will keep our distance from you.”

Odwin takes over from her. “We all agree you still have a task to do. It’s not your time yet to join us. We shouldn’t make you too comfortable around here, or you might lose the will to leave.”

Conrad can only feel confused about his task. “What? How? Cloegandr doesn’t seem interested in the fate of our world?” Wouldn’t that task be to stop the Faceless? He takes a look again upwards, facing the God. That same calm stare returns to him. Still, once more, something feels off about the deity. What could it be?

“You could say, He lost his fire,” Odwin explains. The man points at a part in the distance, belonging to the large body of the deity. It’s hard to notice, though Conrad believes he found an oddity. There’s a gap where something should be.

“He lost a Virtue?” he concludes.

“Spirit,” Odwin explains. “Spirit was lost a thousand years ago.”

A picture starts to form for Conrad. The legend of the Lion of Bournesse... He took out a smaller head in a miraculous act, however a mere mortal managed to do it. Or why this God even allowed it to happen. Maybe it was meant in a same manner a parent chooses to occasionally throw a game for the benefit of their child, to encourage them to not give up and keep trying to aim high? Or maybe there was some greater plan behind all of it? Or perhaps there was far more to the legend. Who knows? Regardless, his God lost a Virtue that day.

“Can’t Cloegandr regenerate Spirit? Or reattach?”

“He could. The problem is, that would require the will to do so.”

Conrad carefully observes the deity again. Now, he finally understands what he felt was so off. That confidence which radiated when he first heard the voice faded. Without Spirit, the God lost His will, the fire in his belly. The World Shaper is now no longer recovering in the center of the world, but trapped in it. Like a man lost to depression, stuck in His room.

“And that’s why he doubts his own Creation?”

Mira nods at Conrad. He correctly understood the problem. And the fact this world gradually lost its faith in their deity didn’t help, as Mira explains.

“All life was born from Cloegandr, as the myths go. We are part of His recovery process after the cosmic battle against the Destroyer. We live our lives, build up experiences, and spread vitality by having children. Then our mortal bodies die and our spirit returns to our Maker, sharing it all with Him while strengthening His existence. Sadly, we also share the bad parts. Many lost faith in Him right at the moment it is needed most, which only makes the lack of Spirit worse.”

Conrad is lost in thought. The situation is far worse than he could have expected. There’s more than only the Faceless to deal with. Now, **there’s a God who needs his** fiery spirit restored. However, there is hope left. Cloegandr may be a God astray, He can still be bargained with. The mere fact Conrad is here, at the request of Mira, Odwin, and countless others, is proof of that.

Odwin nods approvingly at his former apprentice. Their job is done here. His apprentice acquired what he came looking for, and already made a decision. It’s up to him now. Both spirits disappear into the light.

Conrad takes in air while squeezing a couple times in his fist. To try and bargain with the God of Creation. Not really what he ever expected to do.

“Kalina. She is the vessel, isn’t she?”

“Correct,” Life answers.

“How can I save her?”

“You cannot.”

A trembling sigh follows. Though confidence returns steadily to Conrad. **“I will prove Creation was worth it, if I am granted the chance to!”**

The Prime Virtues seem to communicate among each other again, joined by the Lesser Virtues, and probably all once-mortal spirits now a part of this ethereal realm.

“Debate. No consensus,” Life concludes the typical outcome whenever the spirits, a part of Himself, brought up the same topic.

Conrad raises his voice. “Somewhere within, you wish to be proven wrong! Isn’t that why you agreed to bring me here? Why you listened to their voices?” Anyone stuck in depression wishes for help. Outside help, for they mistakenly feel they can’t do it on their own. Though many are in denial of their state of mind or condition.

“Perhaps you are correct,” Justice replies, immediately joined by Valor.

“Though why would we place such a burden onto another?”

Conrad doesn’t waver. The man is confident in his answer. “You are one, and you are many. Those many placed their trust in me, asking for this audience. Some of them even left your side to go save my daughter and help us in our quest. Even so, they are all a part of you. Which means somewhere deep inside, you still believe Creation has value. Let me prove it to you! **If you can’t trust me, then** I ask you to trust them instead!”

The Prime Virtues take longer to debate.

Eventually, all three rise up tall, their confidence restored to how it was when Conrad first heard their voice. Life states their conclusion.

“Consensus reached. We will grant you one opportunity. Use it wisely.”

All light brightens, forcing Conrad to shield his eyes, closing them afterwards.

Their meeting is over.

A mortal successfully made a bargain with a God.

*

Conrad gasps for air. Where is he?!

The night feels chilly. He can spot the starry sky stretch out, blanketing the night with awe. The man is left staring at the wonder of it all. Every single one of those lights filling the sky, how many would there be in total? Far too many to count. Truly, a greater miracle than the cosmos itself does not exist. How did he never realize? Miracles *do* exist. In fact, we can see one every night.

He chuckles at his own thoughts. Okay, so we can only see it when **it’s not cloudy**.

The man crawls back on his feet. Beside him is the Abyss. He’s back at the surface. His body feels different, as if he still needs to grow used to it. Like a new sword which needs

some wielding before one can use it as an extended part of the arm. An overwhelming sense courses through his veins. He feels invigorated. Like he was never so certain about anything in his life. A path laid itself out for him, and he chose to walk it. Now he made his first step, all others follow easily. Confident. With conviction.

He knows what needs doing.

...

A fluttering of wings descends next to Conrad. He faces the newcomer. **“Sylvië. It’s good to see you again. I have returned.”**

She needs not ask if he acquired what was sought for. She can see it instantly, carved in his expression, radiating from his body. As if he is a different man, reborn. For the first time in her life, the siren is lost for words.

Conrad steps closer to her, arms wrapping around. **“God, you look irresistible under moonlight.”**

She smiles, lost in his embrace, finally finding her words once more. **“Welcome back. You had me worried.”**

...

Sylvië leads him back into the Western Grove. Apparently, he has been gone for longer than he expected.

“You kept me waiting for three full weeks.”

Did his sense of time get misled so badly by the descent down the Abyss? Or was he brought to this point in time? For those weeks, Sylvië fulfilled her promise, waiting for him every morning and evening. Until tonight, when she received a vision. A call to come once more to the Abyss, in the middle of the night, where she found Conrad.

The man fiddles with his necklace while he enters the habituated part of the Grove. **Helmine’s beads still adorn his neck. He is not left with only nostalgia anymore when touching them.** He feels joy, for her spirit lives on. They all do! What more joyous news could he ever ask for?

A different kind of gem joined the necklace. One which was not there during his descent. **It wasn’t even there when he bargained with his Maker. Only once he awoke at the surface had a bright red gem joined the beads.** Conrad knows what it is. That same voice, once more

turned powerful and noble, explained him when all turned to white and his granted audience was over.

It is his one granted opportunity. He can make a wish upon this red gem, and Cloegandr will make it reality. Though Conrad has to choose his wish carefully. This is his test. The challenge he took onto himself. To prove the worth of Creation.

He could wish for Cloegandr to solve all problems with the Faceless. And he would fail the test right then and there. To do so would be akin to absolving himself of any and all responsibility, handing it over onto the shoulders of another. There is no respect to be found in such an act. It would prove nothing, other than an inability to walk on his own legs, unable to become the master of his own destiny.

What he should do with this granted wish, Conrad has no idea yet. All he knows, is that an opportunity will present itself, at some point.

“We have returned,” Sylvië breaks the silence.

*

A song reaches far into the Grove. A single girl's vocal harmony dominates, while a subdued chorus accompanies her from all around.

Sylvië rises onto Conrad's lap. His hands never leave her waist as he lies down, caressing her, cautiously so as not to obstruct her song. Her hymn is an ode to lust, a constant underlying hunger present through the occasional tremble, a lascivious breath, or a subtle change in pitch.

The girl's wings rise up, over her head, stretching out their feathers tall and wide. Countless eyes all around peer through the Grove's canopies, all a part of the shared experience. All aimed at Sylvië's love-nest, where she sings her passion for the man underneath.

Another subtle vibrato colors her voice like it colors her cheeks, when his hands leave her waist and grasp for her breasts. Another soft moan interspersed when she slowly rotates her hips over the cock buried inside. A couple gasps from their audience thrown in for good measure when they notice their young **matriarch's** milk flow down.

Conrad doesn't pay much mind to all eyes on them. Too captivated by the siren performing a fertile dance of promiscuity on his lap.

Her song comes to an end, the background chorus taking over as their main vocal shifts from ethereal song dedicated to Life into a carnal celebration of sex. Her hips pick up speed, rotating majestically for the entire Grove to enjoy. Her intake and release of air a luscious addition to the chorus.

Conrad lifts up his upper body, reaching around Sylvië with vigor. A high-pitched release of sexual satisfaction adds to the tension around them, the audience increasingly lost in their own yearning for a union of man and woman.

Some spectators are unable to contain themselves, flying down to the love-nest to enjoy a closer view of the action. Conflicted in their desire to join, though unwilling to interrupt the gorgeous display of their youngest matriarch ever so lost yet in control during her tribute to Life.

Their breathing almost synchronizes with Sylvië's heaving for oxygen. Gazes of fascination in doubt on whether to take in her beautiful body in constant, fluent motion. Or to long for that cylindrical slab of hard meat in its blanket of flexible skin, massaging itself into the perfect fit of a loving vagina.

Sylvië's wings first wrap tight around Conrad while her crescendo of lustful bliss reaches their audience. To then spread open wide to bask in the afterglow of cum settling in her fertile womb.

She stares with affection into the eyes of the man who claimed her fertility. No real lottery tonight. Only his ticket is the sole entry. A promise of an assured win, with only her greatest prize on offer.

Conrad wraps his arms around her waist, drawing the girl to his chest. **"Our night in Eralthyr was great, but I have to admit, to experience your love in your own nest is something special."**

A couple quick kisses are exchanged, strangely enough more embarrassing to do for both of them in front of their audience than the act of sex.

Her reply follows shortly after. **"We know what is at stake. Our Groves' future is in your hands. That's why you and your companions are always welcome among our people."**

She follows up with another kiss, longer and more passionate, before she speaks words more private. **“That’s why you and your family are always welcome to share my nest, my wings, and my love.”**

...

Sylvië places down her knees and lifts up her hips. The nearest couple sirens gasp, one rubbing her legs in a craze of horniness, when they can lay their eyes on that glistening cock leaving their matriarch. Reluctant, until with a sudden pop, **it flops out. The girl’s pussy** closes up instantly, only still connected by a thin string of cum.

Sitting on her knees, she places her forehead on Conrad’s. She reaches for a piece of unknown fruit offered by one of the other sirens.

“My sisters appear to suffer from desire after our act of reproductive mating. If you feel up to the task, perhaps you could ease their suffering?”

She takes a good bite out of the fruit, kissing Conrad afterwards. Juice and succulent flesh from the fruit exchanged through their connected mouths, some running down the sides.

Sylvië licks her lips when disconnecting, **hovering close to Conrad’s face.** **“This fruit strengthens our desires, as it equally strengthens our vitality. You will last for the entire night.”**

Conrad observes the half-eaten fruit. **It’s a natural aphrodisiac, quick in its effects.** He can already feel his erection grow wild, from deep within his body a restless drive welling up. A craving to fuck. All because of one bite? Its taste is strangely reminiscent, memory pulling up a match from not that long ago. When he was in Eralthyr, to share an orgy where plenty of wine was shared as well. That wine must have been made from this fruit.

He takes over the fruit and bites a large chunk out of it. Reaching for the back of Sylvië’s head, he pauses to let her process what he will do. Then he pushes her mouth onto his, to partake in the source of unbridled lust. Her tongue instantly dives into his mouth, together with a muffled giggle of joy, eagerly sucking up the **fruit’s** fluids.

The girl’s own eyes already turned crazed with an impatient hankering. The fruit’s effects are as quick to work on her kind as they are on Conrad. Only one message radiates

from her every being, indicating her sisters will have to wait a while longer for their share of love. Because Sylvië can only thirst for another good, hard fuck.

*

Conrad opens his eyes.

“Had a good night’s sleep?” Sylvië blankets him with a wing.

“About five minutes of sleep. But I certainly had a magical night.”

She seeks to cuddle in his arms, pressing her face and body closer, rubbing her cheek over his chest. “Your score is successfully settled. I can sense it already.”

Conrad hugs the siren tight, whispering in her ear. “Life was filled with joy ever since I returned last night, and now you added one more reason. I must say, one aspect is easy with sirens.”

“Oh?” she wonders what that might be.

“Thinking up names. We can already exclude half the choices. You know, with them all being daughters.”

Sylvië chuckles at his words, offering a joyous counter. “That might be true, yet you’ll have many names to think up after last night.”

“How many do you estimate?”

She tilts her head, making a quick estimate. “Definitely over half. We are very fertile, and you had no competition at all.”

Conrad whistles his amazement of the task ahead. Yeah, that will be plenty of names after the amount he made the rounds with. “You think they’ll want me back?”

The siren laughs at his silly question. “Your entire family is always welcome in our loving arms and nests.”

*

The city of Eralthyr rises on the horizon. Conrad dreaded this moment not very long ago. Now, after his rebirth, he fears not. Though it does pain him to soon confront a grieving father with reality.

The entire city stares in disbelief at the rider entering the safety of their walls. Never have they seen a man make a dashing entrance on a unicorn before. Conrad remembers the path through the city, all the way to the top level. Though he **still doesn't have reins to give** directions to his unlikely steed. For now, he manages with simple vocals. The animal seems to understand him well enough.

The temple to Cloegandr at the top shows up, carving of the Prime Virtues welcoming him. It's a sight filling the man with ease, very different from last time, when he could only feel emptiness. Likewise, the large stone siren protecting the city fills him with confidence. **While he can't spot her**, Sylvië did as promised and followed him. She should be around here, somewhere.

Conrad enters through the gateway, heading towards the man who already heard of his arrival. The Watcher of Eralthyr. **Eris' father.**

"I seek an audience."

Eldrin shakes his head. The man's eyes are red, his expression pained. **"No, please go! I cannot proceed with this. Leave, and take your fight with you!"**

Conrad finds comfort in the words Sylvië assured him with before his descend into the Abyss. The man will be upset and grieve, though **he won't resent.** **"Eldrin! I must speak with you. This is important."**

"I already know my precious daughter is gone," the Watcher laments in sorrow. **"Leave us in peace to deal with her loss. I cannot accept you as a guest."**

A gentle wind gushes when Sylvië lands from wherever she kept her presence hidden. **"I already brought him here as my guest, Eldrin. Unless my presence is equally undesired?"**

The man's lips quiver, sighing at the siren. **"Very well. I cannot deny a Matriarch of the Groves access to our city. But why must you do this to me? Have I not suffered enough?!"**

Sylvië throws him a gentle grin. **"Think, Eldrin. He is here. Understand what that means."**

The Watcher tries to get his mind working, though it's a hard task with all emotional weight burdening him. What does the young Matriarch mean, he is here? Of course he is, he can see Conrad with **his own eyes. Why does that...?**

Eldrin stops his line of thought.

Conrad is here...

How?

"How did you pass the Misty Woods?"

There are no druids on the other side, or anywhere nearby. The outpost is gone. He pulled them back a couple months **after sensing Eris' loss. And with Eris gone, there is nobody left to guide anyone through. How did Conrad reach here?**

"Because she led me here. Your daughter."

Only confusion is left on **the grieving father's** face. He simply **can't grasp it. If this is a joke, it's a cruel one. Yet, what other possibility is there for Conrad to pass? Someone had to tune the Woods. Eris was lost on the other side, he could sense as much. Regardless... "I know why you are here, what you seek of me... I cannot offer it. I already gave up one of two most precious lives in my existence. Don't ask me to sacrifice more."**

From behind him, Melisande runs closer. **"Father, you must listen! I believe their words about my sister."**

"Go back inside, dear! I don't want to lose you too. Don't listen to his words!"

Conrad heads towards Sylvië. She carries a large bundle on her chest. One is her own child. The other is a young boy. Conrad takes the boy in his arms and offers him to the Watcher of Eralthyr.

The man has no idea what happens. Why is Conrad shoving a child in his arms?

"This is your grandson, Odwin. Eris' legacy."

Eldrin is left staring at the child in his arms. A fragile whimper leaves his mouth. He can recognize her in the boy.

"I swear on my ancestors and all which is good! The spirit of Eris led me here, like she similarly led my ride."

Right... The unicorn. The Watcher **hadn't even** noticed yet, too lost in his grief.

“He speaks truth,” Sylvië joins. “Your daughter led him to our Grove, carried on the back of Silvermoon, where this man went down the Abyss and returned to us after three weeks. I have experienced a **vision of the World Shaper myself.**”

Eldrin is lost for words. What he hears sounds too amazing to be true. Yet, he so wants it to be true.

The Watcher hands the child back to Conrad. “**I... I need to sleep on this.**”

A subtle nod from Sylvië aimed at Conrad makes him accept the proposal. This is exactly as last time he was here. Eldrin already accepted his presence, only too stubborn to admit it without seeking the mental support of his lost wife and daughter.

As much as The Watcher grieves for the loss of a daughter, he still has another daughter and a grandson who need a future. That future cannot exist for as long as the Faceless are out there.

A servant already steps closer after Eldrin signaled him. The servant addresses their new guest. “**I will show you to your guest quarters. As last time, you have our total hospitality.**”

Act 4 ~ Chapter 4



A Hero Reborn

The siege of Ramona is close to reaching its end. Rumors are abound the attack order can come any moment. The mood is tense among the rebels, morale far from its peak. Where did their leader go, who brought them the miracles of Sagara and Milgard? Where is their Envoy, who predicted those miracles? If an attack happens now, it would be without an **oracle's** prediction, without Divine Providence. Some see bad omens everywhere they look, while others try to cling to last-minute hope. Maybe they will show up, right before or during the battle? To make a heroic entrance, like told in stories! However, that hope shines increasingly dim.

It doesn't help roles are reversed from last time. Now, the Union can benefit from safety of its walls, while the rebels will have to crack those walls open or smash themselves right into ruin against them.

Only the core of mercenaries doesn't particularly care. The Gold Serpents. They gamble and drink as always. If this is to be their last fight, so be it. Such is the life of a mercenary.

Primrose seeks out the logistics group. She doesn't have anything to do at the moment, done with her preparations, so she might as well make herself useful here. Adrian suggested to take some time to rest, though her mind can't find peace anyway.

He certainly wasn't happy to see her return so suddenly from the Spire. The girl's guess he sent her away from this coming battlefield on purpose was as good as confirmed. Regardless, she couldn't stay at the Spire. She can fight! How could she ever face Conrad when he returns if she were to cower away? Their enemy must be beaten. For him, for the Tribes, for all those they lost along the way.

Logistics is hard at work preparing supplies, delivering them to the front. Others set up a larger triage camp for the expected influx of injured. Maybe she can offer a hand here?

Primrose notices two familiar faces and approaches them. "Can I help?"

Cherry didn't hear or see her approach, but she can already deduce what the young mage is here for. "We need more clean cloth. You could help me carry. I'll be right back, Tama."

The felis girl nods when Cherry and Primrose leave together.

Honestly, Primrose is already glad to see Cherry will be here, in the rear guard of the camp, together with both felis siblings. With this being an offensive, it shouldn't be very dangerous out here, as long as they don't lose the battle.

Arriving at the supply wagons, Primrose picks out a bundle of cloth to be used for bandages. Then she stops. Cherry grabbed her robe's maw and holds on to it, trying to find the right words.

There's no need for words, as the young mage already understands what her friend wants to ask, what causes that frown of worry on her face. "Karl will lead the cavalry, surrounded by the biggest and strongest. I'll help keep an eye on him. You stay here and help the injured, okay? So Karl won't be worried."

Cherry nods uncertain. "You be careful too," she answers.

Primrose gives her a hug, trying to ease her own worries in the process.

*

From further away, Adrian observes the girls. He sighs at the handful that is Primrose. What is he to do with her? Truly, **such a handful. If she isn't running off on her own, she** simply heads back on her own volition. Would be so much easier if she had stayed at the Spire like initially planned. Now the girl is **here, he can't really keep her from the battle** either. She would simply disobey and run off into action to do her thing regardless. In that case, **it's better to incorporate her into his plans. At least, then he'll know where to look out for her. He can't risk Conrad returning only to find another of his wives lost to him.** And return he will, someday.

Quite a misfortune Primrose couldn't convince the Spire to send help, even if he expected as much already. So the rumors about an army forming to siege their magic institute **were true. Understandable they can't leave their home** and students undefended. Not that the Union really has a chance of taking the Spire, though **that's not their goal** either. To have the rebels stuck here with only two options is definitely what the Union has in mind. Either he has to attack the city without backup, or he sends help to the Spire to free up their hands, but meanwhile risk an offensive from Ramona right here. The city would definitely go on the offensive when a part of his forces are distracted, weeks away from here.

At least he shouldn't **have to deal with a Faceless**, probably. Or so he hopes. He has no idea what happened which caused Conrad to seek isolation, though as far as Adrian knows, **that unholy alliance with Grimald isn't broken yet. And isn't he the official Archduke here?** Doubtful the Faceless would not use their low numbers to good measure by overlapping **each other's territory.** Thus, the Faceless in charge here shouldn't attack them, if he's even present to begin with. Regardless, **that doesn't mean Ramona isn't a hard nut to crack.**

Preferably, while avoiding civilian casualties, or goodwill for their rebellion would be gone in an instant. Many among their own troops want to see Ramona liberated from Union control, **not decimated. Yet another reason why a continued siege can't carry on.** The people would starve eventually.

Adrian blows out air in frustration while forcing himself onward. Leading an army is one task he has confidence in, yet driving forth a movement is another altogether. All he knows is that delaying is no longer possible. A couple deserters already appeared, and more will

leave in greater amounts. Odds aren't great for a victory right now, a coin toss, really. And they will only grow worse as time goes on.

"Just win. How hard can it be?"

*

"Forward!" Adrian yells to the men under his command.

Troops march right towards the white wall of Ramona. The wagonburg accompanies them, making up part of the front line. They will provide a movable barrier for arrows, protecting the infantry, while offering a heightened spot to attack the wall's defenders.

"Line up along the moat!"

The wagons aren't pulled by horses. Archers would take them out easily, and the horses' corpses would only obstruct further movement. Instead, infantry push the wagons from behind the safety of its wooden construct. The grasslands of Gleaze aren't a particularly hard terrain to cross, and swamps don't exist here.

Fire arrows land on the wagons in an attempt to set them ablaze. Adrian is not concerned about the fire potential. His vanguard sets up right next to the moat, so access to water to douse the flames isn't an issue.

"Focus on the artillery!" he shouts.

A couple enemy towers have a ballista on top. Not a particularly big one, yet strong enough to smash through a wagon. One such projectile already drives through a wooden corner, sending wood and splinters around in every direction. The city won't have a large supply in ammunition for their ballistae. Still, each hit is one too many.

"Throw the oil!"

Jugs of oil are lit and thrown onto the walls where a ballista is located. Most don't reach the top. That's okay regardless. A layer of thick oil clings to the wall, fire spreading out. It would be an impossible task to take out the crew anyway, as the defenders would instantly replace them. Likewise, it will be hard to set the ballistae themselves on fire for the same reason the wagonburg can hold against fire arrows. So obstruction is the quickest and

easiest path to take. The oil a particular mixture which creates lots of smoke, obscuring the ballistae's aim.

A large projectile flies through the dark smoke, missing a wagon. It flew way too high, hitting empty ground instead. The effect already shows, precious and limited ammo wasted in increasing amounts.

Adrian stands behind the front line, right next to a marked barrel. "Put it safely inside a wagon for now. And keep an eye on it," he hands out orders.

A small group of men approaches him, drawing attention. "Sir! We volunteer for the task! Grant us the honor to join you!"

"I already have enough men for this," he answers.

"With all due respect, Sir, everything hinges on this task. There's no such thing as enough."

Another one backs up his colleague. "We are all from Gleaze, Sir! We're like you! I'm sure you understand how we feel!"

A third one joins in. "This is our chance to take back our home!"

Adrian takes a couple seconds to decide. "Alright. You're in! Get yourselves ready."

He can't deny their words. No assurance is enough when dealing with odds like these. And he does understand their spirit, finding comfort in it. He remembers how it felt to come here with Conrad after their military career was over. How it hurt to see the state of his home country. It wasn't hard to find volunteers for the job he has in mind. That's also why he will personally be a part of this mission.

...

"All wagons are in position, Sir, and the ballistae are obscured in their aim!"

"Proceed as planned! Bring in the bulwark!"

The city has several entryways via bridges, all of them with a drop-bridge section near the gate, pulled up since the siege began. The Union employed a similar strategy as the rebels did in Milgard. They placed plenty of wooden fortifications onto the regular part of the bridge. Obstructions, meant to make access to the pulled-up bridge harder to accomplish without breaking formation.

A trio of specialized wagons is brought forward. They each seek out a bridge spanning the front line. Adrian only plans to break through on one location, but three should keep the enemy guessing where he set his true sights. And give him the option to switch if necessary.

The specialized wagons have an overhanging roof, covered in shields and metal plates. Anything usable the rebels could scrap together and which can act as a potent defensive layer. Men quickly work from underneath the relative safety of the wagons' overhang to destroy and push all barricades into the moat. Arrows land to try and stop them, hardly any capable of breaking through.

Right underneath the protective barrier are multiple boys or men of short stature. They work on the top level of the wagon, ducked underneath, dousing any flaming arrow which makes it through, or readjusting the shields if necessary, when heavy objects such as rocks are thrown down on them. Roderik is among them.

“They are using hooks!” a mercenary yells out a warning.

Defenders try to hook the wagons in an attempt to pull them into the moat. Removing the hooks as quickly as possible turns into another task for those underneath the shields.

“Cut the rope!” one yells in panic.

“We can't! It's a damn chain!”

One of the wagons moves dangerously close to the moat, first wheel already slipping down.

“Abandon!” the local leader calls it a lost cause, aware the wagon can't be recovered anymore. Getting their men out in time is all they can do.

Adrian tries to keep his growing frustration in check. The men shouldn't see him annoyed at the loss of a wagon. That's one possible option for an attack vector out of the picture. Though the other two managed to clear the path to the drawbridge. The hardest part is now to come.

“Bring out the howitzers! Open fire!”

The mercenaries' artillery pieces are brought outside the wagons at the front and turned towards the wall's battlement. Loud, explosive roaring marks the firing of shrapnel at the wall's defenders. It won't be very effective. Most of the shrapnel will either bounce off the

wall or fly too high into the air. The psychological effect is what Adrian is really after. With each thunder of a new salvo, defenders instinctively cower in fear, afraid of projectiles they can't even see coming. However, the effect won't last. The Union's troops will eventually figure out the artillery attacks aren't very effective at this range and angle. That's why the howitzers are only used now, when there's an important task to do.

"Get that bridge down!" Adrian extends his arm and points out the bridge on the right, the one offering least resistance.

The mercenaries use their own set of hooks, some attached to rope or chain while others are at the end of a long pole. They try to anchor them over the top edge of the drawbridge with intent to forcefully drag it down. Its chains, or wherever those chains are attached to the wooden bridge, can only take so much brute force before it gives.

"They are trying to undo our hooks!" a mercenary reports to Adrian.

Defenders throw rocks down, cracking the poles in the process.

Adrian can feel stress and frustration rise. The howitzers are not enough to prevent the enemy from countering in time. He needs to act fast before they run out of hooks.

"Primrose, you're up!"

The man jumps down himself to back her up. He can't risk the girl taking an arrow. Not because of her crucial role now, simply because of two reasons. One is how he wouldn't be able to face Conrad anymore. The other is how he has known her for a while now himself. He wouldn't want anything to happen to one of their group. The youngsters in particular should not be confronted with another sad loss.

He grabs a pair of shields and takes up position right next to the mage, one shield to cover himself, and one held before the young vulpes. Another man does the same to her other side. She can't use her dagger's physical barrier with this task, and will need focus to properly carry it out while protecting herself and both men at her side from the coming temperature change.

Heat builds up from the staff, the young mage tapping into energies from the embedded gems. Yet, she doesn't fire. Instead, she keeps adding heat while holding it in place, creating a large fireball, carefully managing temperature and composition in it.

Men around her carry large **kites, throwing them into the air. There's not enough wind** to keep them afloat, especially with their heavy cargo, yet **Primrose's heat source creates** enough updraft to lift the kites in the air. Ropes are quickly burned to ash from heat, though **that's where her strong focus comes into play. She balances heat disproportionately** within the fireball, shifting constantly, to keep the kites from veering off in the wrong direction, **pushing the kites higher and towards the city's wall.**

She has no time to waste. Their cargo starts to catch fire, a barrel on each kite. Enemy archers try to shoot them down, yet **their arrows can't** create enough holes fast enough.

The fireball is finally blasted off, exploding above the gate, well in reach to catch the kites and their cargo in the blast. A downpour of fiery oil descends on the drawbridge's protecting battlement. Even after the fireball dissipates, the oil sticks everywhere, forcing defenders to fall back for a longer time.

Adrian shouts his next order. **"Now! Get that damn bridge down!"**

The men at the front feel reinvigorated. The bridge is basically left undefended! Hooks reattach around the top.

From deeper in the mercenaries' camp, a pair of large beasts are brought forward, carrying a metal harness. A duo of giant rhinos, recovered after the battle of Milgard. The chained hooks are attached to the harness and the beasts begin to pull with all their might, feet digging in the ground.

Archers from other wall sections try to take out the rhinos, quick to find out how hard it is to penetrate through heavy armor on top of thick hide, how it feels to be on the animals' opposing side.

The drawbridge creaks and screeches under heavy duress as it slowly comes down. Hooks drive deeper into wood from the massive force they have to take, splinters flying around. **Until the bridge's own chains give in and snap open.**

With a loud bang, the draw-bridge slams into the ground.

Adrian forms a cautious smile while tightening his fist. Maybe that coin toss is going to work out in his favor after all. **"Time to kindly knock on the door!" he gives the next order.**

...

Panicked yells resound from behind the walls. The Union troops can already recognize what heads their way. Another one of their own tools, now in hands of the rebels. The huge ram which breached Milgard.

The same tremors and echoes which plagued hearts and souls in Milgard now haunt **Ramona's defenders. A repeating beat of war reaches** all the way through the city when the ram sends shock-waves into the reinforced gate. With oil still lit on the **gate's** top section, **the mercenaries don't have to worry much about any retaliatory** attacks from above.

"Enemy counterattack!" a mercenary signals to Adrian.

He noticed what is happening. A cavalry charge is incoming from the right flank. They must have opened another drawbridge from further ahead. Goal of the oncoming force is simple. To take out the ram, push it into the moat at any cost. Adrian expected as much. He even anticipated the direction they would come from. The right flank the ram is located at, left most vulnerable on purpose.

He orders a horn to give a signal, and Karl sets out with his own cavalry to intercept the **Union's task force**. Primrose sits in front of him, sharing the same horse. Defeating the enemy cavalry **isn't necessary, only holding them at bay long enough. The** enemy should fall back once the gate is opened and their task to take out the ram in time failed.

*

Archers along the wall open fire at Karl and his men. They ignore the archers and head straight to their target. The sooner to close the distance, the better. The enemy **wouldn't** risk firing when both sides are caught in close combat.

A ballista from further to the side takes aim, unobstructed by smoke. A fired piece of wood flies through man and horse alike, digging deep into the ground. Pieces of dirt reach Karl and Primrose. The man continues without loss of determination. Merely another reason on top to reach their target quickly.

They can't lose this fight. They aren't allowed to lose! Other than the break-down of their movement, a loss would spell an immediate counterattack from the enemy at the rear lines. The same lines where Cherry helps with the injured. Karl **can't allow that to happen.**

Before the cavalry meets each other head-on like a pair of walls smashing together, Karl and a couple guards break off to flank. He'll focus on allowing Primrose to provide fire blasts to break the enemy's formation. She can't fire large ones, as her dagger is needed to block archers, though they should be a big help to gain the upper hand regardless.

*

With a loud crack, the gate's cross-section splinters under power of the ram and both doors open.

Adrian joins the front. He can hear the horn of the enemy, calling back their cavalry to reinforce the inside of the city.

"Push!" he throws his own weight behind the ram and starts pushing it forward.

The gate needs to make room for his men. Pushing the ram forward also helps with breaking the defenders' line of pikes ready to meet them.

Weapons cross as direct infantry combat breaks out. Sending in a rhino sure would have been a great help for this part. Unfortunately, **the mercenaries don't know the exact formula** for what liquid was used to enrage the animals. Without a directed target, **there's** too much risk of the beasts turning against the mercenaries when thrown into a close-range scuffle.

Still, hope grows within Adrian. They managed to breach the gate! All is going according to **plan without major deviations. There's only one task remaining**, and then the coin flip should land in his favor.

*

Wounded are brought to the back of the triage camp. **The felis siblings and Cherry don't** have to take care of them directly, that is the task of whoever has skills in medicine or surgery. Instead, the young ones help out with carrying herbs, preparing new beds and aiding the doctors as best they can.

Cherry takes a quick look at the castle. She can spot the cavalry retreat after their task was done. Karl must have been among them. Did he return safely? If so, he won't stay out of danger. He will lead his men to join Adrian's forces inside the castle. Establishing a foothold now the gate is breached will be the primary objective.

A fireball blasts at the battlement near the gate. A good sign. That means her friend is still alive. She must be supporting the troops as they make their entry, providing cover.

"Cherry! We need more bandages!"

The girl turns around. She barely heard Tama under the constant low noise of battle in her damaged ears, even though she shouted. Too much noise to actually pick up the words.

"Bandages!" Tama repeats.

"I'll bring them!" Cherry answers after reading Tama's lips.

Supplies aren't very far from here, between the front line and the triage center, where both can gather what they need. The girl supports her pregnant belly while she makes her way towards the nearest supply wagon. No need to run. Tama didn't wait till the last minute to ask for more.

Cherry carefully climbs in the wagon, searching through the stacks. Herbs... No need for those yet. Another box with instruments for the doctors. Nope, no need for those either. **"Ah, here they are,"** she finds the right box, filled with white cloth. **"Huh, what's this?"** she suddenly finds her attention caught by another object.

From between the cloth, a piece of folded paper slips out. She picks it up, curious if it's some kind of inventory or a note for whoever is to use these supplies.

Her eyes blink at what she can instantly recognize. **"What is this doing here?"**

It's a letter. And not just any letter, she knows the sender's name on it well enough. This is from Lisette. What is this doing inside a supply wagon?

Curious, and with a growing hint of nervousness, Cherry reads the contents.

Her father recovered his memory? That's good news. Apparently, he seeks to return to the front, but has an important task to accomplish first. Adrian and Karl will be glad to hear this. However, why was this letter here?

The girl's thoughts linger...

Hiding the letter again, she opens the cover of the wagon and descends, not carrying any supplies. In fact, she heads in the other direction than the triage center, towards the front. Her eyes scan around in a hurry, keenly observing all she can. Until she reaches a part of the camp where a small group of men stands separate from the others, talking to each other. **The girl's** entire attention is focused on their lips.

And she suddenly runs.

*

Adrian took cover inside a local gate house together with a couple men. He curses out loud. They're cut off! The enemy held the line better than expected and had him separated from the main group. For now, they can prevent the gate house being overrun by barricading the door. Still, **he can't order the troops from here, and this place won't last.** This could turn bad.

"Don't stick your head out!" he yells at Roderik.

Damn that kid. What the fuck is wrong with these folks?! They never listen like good youngsters and stay where it's safe. Damn idiot ran right behind him into the fray, now stuck inside the same building. Brave, but foolish.

Roderik smashes a mirror inside the gate house and uses it to safely peek out a tiny window. **"They're coming with a wooden beam!"** he shouts at Adrian.

"Brace the door!" Adrian puts his entire weight onto the barricade, others joining in. A shock-wave shakes through his body when the beam hits the door. They can hold for now, though the barricade won't last. **"What's going on at the gate?! How are we doing?"** he yells at Roderik.

The boy changes window, holding up the mirror. **"We got backup!"** he yells with renewed joy.

*

Karl sends his horse through the gate, escorted by a segment of his cavalry. He turns the horse sideways. Right in front of him still sits Primrose. A fireball forms at the tip of her staff while she holds it to the enemy line of spears ahead.

“Don’t make it too big!” Karl warns her.

She should never have to lower her physical barrier in this environment, constantly protecting against arrows. And scaring the horse with too much fire in this enclosed passage would equally be a bad idea. With her heightened position, Primrose can blast her fireball over their allies, breaking the enemy line. A follow-up crossbow bolt from Karl takes out the local commander. Then the rest of his cavalry rushes into the opened gap.

“The Union’s falling back!” Roderik proclaims an incoming victory.

Adrian grows renewed confidence on his face. As deaf that mage can be to others’ requests and orders, she does make for a reliable ally. Though maybe he should blame Karl for her unplanned entrance this time. Still, it was a good call of the man to take her along into the city.

“Alright kid, you stay here. We need the entrance open at all times. If it’s at risk of collapse to the enemy, let someone blow a horn.”

That should keep Roderik out of further trouble.

*

The wagonburg rolls into the city, taking up strategic spots to cover the infantry. Some enemy defenders will have sought refuge inside houses, though **that’s fine. As long as they’re out of the game plan.** Dealing with them can come later.

Roderik can spot the wagons pass the gate one by one. With each subsequent wagon, his motivation reaches higher levels. They’re doing this! Even without his mentor, they can **get the job done! Conrad will be so proud when he returns. He’ll tell him all about how he was part of the barricade cleanup, and held his ground in here with Adrian. Maybe he’ll receive a new reward? A horse this time! Finally, his own steed!**

The boy looks through the window.

Huh? What is *she* doing here? Wasn’t that Cherry? Why would she run into the city?

Oh, that's bad! **This place is far too dangerous for her!** Enemies could be hiding anywhere during an urban assault, willing to lash out to even an unarmed girl in panic. What should he do? Carry out his task to keep an eye on the gate? Or follow her?

Roderik tightens the grip around his short sword. Too bad for his **task, he can't abandon** one of their own!

*

The final job looms ahead. If they breach the inner wall, the city is as good as theirs. And Adrian has a plan to make it happen. A large grate **in the city's canal** separates the inner halve from the outer halve. That will be their entry point to the inner parts of the city.

A pair of wagonburg carriages head straight to Adrian and line up close to the canal. The grate is right ahead of them. One of the wagons is filled with the special task-force to carry out the mission.

Their orders quickly handed out. **"Defenses are light. They** expect us near the gate rather than over here. This is our best chance! Drag those barrels in place before they figure out **what we're doing!"**

Karl arrives in time with Primrose on his horse to see the first barrel get unloaded. He knows the plan. They will blow up the **canal's** grate with the howitzers' black powder. Meanwhile, his cavalry and most of the troops create a diversion by focusing on the actual gate and connecting paths.

The **man looks around. Did he just hear...? Nah, that can't be.**

Then he quickly turns to the road he came from. He heard it again!

"Cherry?!"

What is she doing here?! This area is far too dangerous!

In the middle of the road stands a pregnant girl, waving around to gather attention. She called for Karl, shouting his name.

He wants to rush to her, **an arrow already missing her at a hair's width.** The girl **doesn't** back down and keeps waving, out of breath, trying to get a message across. She stands dangerously close to a deep alcove, not a clue if anyone is hiding inside.

A flash to her side is followed by metal screeching against metal. Roderik successfully deflected a pike aiming for the girl, coming from a panicked Union soldier hiding in the alcove. With a quick swing, the boy slices the head from the pike with his enchantment. The disarmed soldier staggers backwards, running away. Before any archers can open fire again, Roderik grabs for Cherry's **hand**. In a split-second, he uses all his trained experience to decide on a good hiding spot for them in this urban environment, stamped into his head by his mentor. The boy settles on the deep alcove, now abandoned, dragging the girl inside.

Karl turns to Adrian and yells. He understood Cherry's **message**. "*We got traitors!*"

Adrian responds just in time, parrying a jab from his own task-force. He counters instantly with a lethal strike.

Karl staggers his horse to dodge a bolt, the animal taking the hit.

Primrose **doesn't really understand what is going on**. **Aren't those their own men**, coming from their own wagon? Why did one fire at them?!

The horse goes down, Karl reaching around Primrose to cover her fall. With a dislocated shoulder and a head bruise, he stands up without hesitation, ready to take the incoming traitors.

The startled mage is lost on where to aim. She forms a fireball, yet **doesn't really** have a clue where to send it.

Karl quickly reaches for her wrist and yanks the staff up with force, right before she fires it. The ball of flames flies off into the air, hitting the nearby wall. "**Don't blast the barrels!**" **he warns her**. "**The wagons are loaded with black powder!**"

Only now does Primrose notice the red-marked barrels. She almost blew up the entire area by accident, them included! Adjusting her approach, reality finally settling in they are being attacked by traitors, the girl stamps her staff against the ground. She creates a firewall on the ground to separate the few people she can trust from everyone else.

Thoughts flash through Adrian's mind. Their plan to blow up the grate is rapidly falling apart. And together with it, that coin flip begins to roll onto the wrong side. The traitors are cut off by Primrose, yet enemy archers already appear on the wall, ready to take aim at them.

It's all over... He couldn't do it. The man can feel hope sink rapidly. When Conrad returns, it will be to a shattered rebellion. Adrian probably won't even have the opportunity to apologize to him. This spot right here will be their end. He shouldn't have brought those men along who asked to, the damn back-stabbers! He should have stuck to his original choice... Sadly, there are no second chances on a battlefield.

His sword lowers, about ready to give up. He's too far away from Primrose. She can't cover him with her dagger's barrier, and the archers are too spread out to take them all out in a single blast. Neither can the enemy miss at this range. It's over.

...

The attack doesn't come. Confused, Adrian can only notice the archers are distracted. They stare into the distance, seemingly confused themselves. They have no idea what they stare at...

*

The sun shines down from high up in the blue sky. Children from a neighboring farm peer curious at the display far ahead of them. They can spot Ramona from here, as a miniature castle rising on the horizon.

"I'm telling you, the city is being attacked!" the youngest son insists.

"Nah, that's only the regular siege," the oldest answers.

Their sister throws in her own opinion. "But there's smoke, see? Maybe the rebels really did attack?"

It's hard to make out from this distance. They could recognize faint traces of movement, though can hardly make out anything.

Regardless, the youngest doesn't back down in his opinion. "I swear! I saw a group of horses earlier. It's definitely an attack!"

Their mother sticks her head out of the farm's doorway, shouting at her children. "Enough with lazing around! Go help your father in the barn."

The mother takes a glimpse into the distance herself. Yeah, that does appear like a fight broke out. Whatever, that's none of their business. They're merely farmers. The rebels

don't harm them, and the city obviously won't either. Whoever wins is none of her concern. She did hear the tales of Divine Providence guiding the rebels, and strange magic and myth of olden times fighting on their side, but surely those stories are a bunch of bollocks. No matter how much you look at it, that's a normal set of armies clashing over there.

The woman folds her arms in annoyance. Didn't she just tell them to go help Father?! Why are those obstinate brats still out there looking at a stupid battle? Never do they bloody listen and do what they're told from the start.

"Look! What's that?" her daughter turned around, pointing away from the battle.

The girl's siblings aren't very interested at first, yet their curiosity gains the better of them and they turn to face away from the ongoing conflict.

"Whoa! Yeah, what is that?" the youngest jumps energetically up and down.

Their mother angrily leaves the farm, ready to shout at her disobedient brood. Their silly attempt to delay having to work won't pay off. "I told you to go help your father! When I tell you something, you'll damn well..."

Her voice trails off, fading away into an incomprehensible mumble. Her own mouth falls open in disbelief when she stares in the direction her children point to.

Uncertain what to make of it all, the worried mother rushes forward, grabbing her youngest over the shoulder while dragging her daughter by the arm. She yells at the son as they run to their farm house. "Run inside! Now!"

She has only spoken the words when a vast shadow flows over the farm, blocking off light from the sun.

*

The shadow glides over the farm lands, covers the green grasslands of Gleaze, blankets the hills. It heads in only one direction, straight towards the city on the horizon. Straight towards the clash of war.

Over the lush grass, a single rider crosses the flat-lands. He as well is headed right towards the castle town. White manes flow in the wind while his steed dashes forward at a speed higher than a regular horse. A large and slender horn decorates the animal's head.

Conrad rides on Silvermoon, Kalina sitting in front all dressed up in her ceremonial armor. A large standard of the Gold Serpents flows through the sky, cleaving it majestically. **The standard's long pole held firmly in the man's hand**, his back is straightened, shoulders broad and filled with strength.

The shadow approaches fearless from right behind, like a wave about to consume the light of day. It rushes past the man, faster even than the unicorn, seeking out a shared destination.

Conrad needs not face up. Instead, he looks straight forward, at the City of Marble drawing closer. Confidence adorns his face. He already knows what followed him all the way here from the Alma lands.

He brought along the tempest.

*

A clear and beautiful voice sings through the sky. Immediately, the tempest responds and a giant wing of harpies breaks formation, swooping down towards the city as a vanguard.

Union soldiers and rebels alike stare at the sky, none left unshaken by the newcomers to the battlefield. The dark cloud of harpies spanning far and wide descends to join the assault.

The vanguard reaches their target, claws and beaks strong enough to tear leather and crush bones. Union soldiers cry out in horror when they realize who that target is. Mercenaries cheer out shouts of imminent victory at the same realization. Remaining rebels can only feel awe as they grasp they have just been blessed with another miracle. Citizens of Ramona peek through their windows, understanding that rumors were true, and the rebels *are* favored by myth and legend, proving the righteousness of their cause.

Conrad rushes straight through the rebels' **camp, heralded by** countless voices of any and all he passes.

"They're back! Our Envoy is back! Our leader finally returned!"

Some shout out their joy. Some run in pursuit to share in this moment of triumph. Some are left weeping in renewed hope and rejuvenated faith in their cause, falling on their knees.

Another singing voice joins the previous one. The rest of the tempest follows the vanguard, spreading out over the entire city. Their prime targets are the soldiers on the walls.

With the Brood-Mother gone, the sirens regained control over the harpies. The animals **can't distinguish between friend and foe**, though with fine precision, the sirens guide entire flights to strike down through nothing but song.

Archers try and take aim, yet **there's** simply far too many. With so many targets, full power of the tempest can come to its strengths easily, none of their numbers wasted.

"The women! Aim at the winged women!" a Union commander tries to gain control.

Though his efforts are futile. Arrows take flight, while a song already directs a large swathe of wings and claws to provide cover, instantly followed by a counterattack.

*

Karl has no idea what he stares at. A large flight of mythical beasts flooded over the wall nearby, leaving not a single archer standing after their pass. All he knows is that the enemy appears to be the focus of this winged onslaught.

Adrian recognizes what descended upon the battlefield. A tempest, even larger than the one they encountered on their trip to Eralthyr. He remembers the enchanting song guiding them. The man laughs. A single chuckle at first, followed by a hearty roar of renewed hope. **"He fucking did it!"** he turns to Karl.

There's only one man he can think of who can be responsible for this. Only one who would come here from beyond the Misty Woods. How he pulled it off, Adrian has no idea. But it has to be him!

"Conrad's back!"

With his fighting spirit reinvigorated and enemy archers gone, Adrian runs forward, reaching the barrels of black powder. He picks up a pair and heads to the grate.

Karl steps forward, patting Roderik on the back. **“Come on, kid! Let’s do this!”**

With a nod to Primrose, she knows to stay with Cherry to keep her safe, while they head out to help Adrian with placing down barrels. As many as they can.

...

“Back off! Further!” Adrian shouts at his group, increasing distance from the stack of barrels.

With a pat on her head, he hands the next step over to the young mage. **“Give them some fancy fireworks to celebrate!”**

A wide grin decorates Primrose’s face. She too understood what the arrival of the tempest means. Her mood is as sky-high as the sirens flying safely above the harpies. **“Leave it to me!”** she aims her staff.

When it comes to blowing shit up, she has full confidence in her abilities. Dagger already lifted to protect against the incoming heat.

...

Conrad can easily hear the large explosion sending shock-waves all around. A horn signals the mercenaries it’s time to enter the breach and mop up the scraps the tempest leaves for them.

He turns to the men and women who followed him from all the way inside the camp. **“Anyone who wishes to become part of legend, follow me!”**

He already knows where to lead them. While Sylvië takes out the main bulk of the enemy army, and Adrian cleans up the leftovers hiding throughout the city **where the harpies can’t** reach, he will head towards a specific temple. Where a secret passage leads all the way into **the castle’s central** tower. A passage he once fled through. The perfect entry point to take quick and complete control of Ramona.

To finish the liberation of Gleaze.

Act 4 ~ Chapter 5



Path of the Hero

The Gold Serpents flag is planted at the top of the castle tower, visible from the entire city. **Up in the sky, the tempest circles around, a serene siren's song reaching all corners of Ramona.** The harpies leave a hole in their formation, right in the middle. Bright rays of the sun shine through, covering the tower and the pair holding the flag, blanketing Kalina and Conrad.

Once Conrad finished his victory speech, the tempest takes on a traveling formation and flies off.

Assigned cleaning crews are still hard at work to remove bodies from the city. All of them have plenty of armed guards, as there might be Union soldiers hiding within houses or other buildings. Many already surrendered voluntarily.

Captives are released under certain conditions. Few will seek to fight again in the future, not after what they witnessed here. And whoever does head deeper into Union territory, by

now only Uskandar left, will no doubt spread many tales which will leave no heart or mind untouched.

Conrad personally addresses a new group of captives to be released. **“After removing the Union’s colors, you are promised safe passage. Anyone who desires medical treatment can visit our designated triage center outside the city. Funeral services for the fallen will be held right before nightfall. You are invited to attend and offer your wishes for a safe journey to any fallen comrades.”**

The captives stare at each other confused. They can simply go? Their attention quickly turns back towards the company surrounding Conrad. A divine envoy, a mage, and a mythical siren who just landed to favor the rebel leader with her presence. They just don’t know what to believe or conclude anymore. The world feels like an entirely different place than the one they used to know.

With the released prisoners on their way, Sylvië addresses Conrad while gently rocking her child carried over her chest. **“Before coming down, I noticed our guests approach the city. They will be here soon.”**

“Right. Our first moment of rest since the battle ended. Let’s go welcome them.”

Before Conrad walks off, he first turns to Primrose. Now they have time, he can’t forget about a very important task which simply must be done. He takes a knee before the girl and grabs her by her naked shoulders. **“Sorry for everything as of late. My return, these words, it should all have happened far earlier.”** He gives her a tight hug, meanwhile patting the girl on the head. **“I’ll never leave you again.”**

Primrose’s tail swipes continuously in joy, rubbing her cheek against his while refusing to let go. The girl is in constant doubt on whether to cry or to grin.

When standing up again, Conrad gives her a wink. **“As you hoped for in the letter, I didn’t forget the head-pat.”**

Forget about crying or grinning. The girl now turns red like a tomato, hiding her face with both hands, ears drooping low. He read the letter meant for Lisette!

With a hearty laugh, Conrad heads out to meet their arriving guests, joining up with Adrian and Karl. **“Well done, you two. I guess I owe you equally an apology for leaving without notice.”**

“Don’t mention it,” Karl is first to reply. “We all need a break sometimes.”

“I almost screwed up,” Adrian feels down. “If I had known you would be arriving, this battle could have waited a day longer.” They know by now thanks to Cherry a letter was sent, though the traitors got their hands on it first and kept the information from Adrian. “The bastards must have hoped the attack would happen soon, so they had an opportunity to take out the remaining leadership while our main commander was absent, sending the entire offensive into chaos.”

“You didn’t screw up,” Conrad answers. “We won in the end. That’s what matters. And you two held it all together for half a year, basically taking care of Gleaze on your own. Nothing to feel bad about.”

*

The released captives from earlier only started to recover from all weirdness they witnessed, and they’re already confronted with more unknown sights. The rebels themselves don’t respond much different, curious about more newcomers.

Alma troops ride into the camp on the back of wild horses. The foreign origin of the troops is instantly noticeable by their small bird wings as ears.

One of them does not ride on a wild horse, instead sitting sideways on a red stag. A young girl Conrad remembers well enough, as does Adrian. Only Karl hasn’t seen her before.

Melisande, the sister of Eris.

Conrad is first to formally greet the expected newcomers. “Welcome, Legion of the Stag. Your aid is greatly appreciated and will be a great boon to our movement. These are my left and right hand, Adrian and Karl.”

The Legion’s leader descends and walks towards his new commander. “It’s an honor to take a stand against the Eternal Night,” he exchanges greetings with them all, before introducing their Legion’s icon. “This is our Patron Spirit, and his bonded Consort, Melisande of House Faynore, daughter to the Watcher of Eralthyr.”

Every Alma legion has an animal which serves as a Patron Spirit, a mascot of sorts. For this legion, it’s the red stag. Those with status take care of the animal and become its

handler, known as a Consort. Eldrin is one of those individuals, part of the Legion of the Dire Wolf. This Legion has Melisande as that individual of status.

Eldrin was staunchly against his solely remaining daughter coming here, though she insisted. In the end, he respected her choice, even if **he still doesn't like it at all.**

Conrad gives a nod to one of his lieutenants. **"Adrian, could you assist the honorable Consort with placing her feet on the ground?"**

Adrian heads over towards the stag, uncertain if the animal will keep its calm. This does not look like an easily tamed ride at all. And that large set of antlers could make for nasty injuries.

Melisande recognizes him, giving a little nod with a grin. She lifts her arm like a lady, hand available to reach for.

"Milady," Adrian plays along and grabs her hand, lifting the girl onto the ground.

The stag bumps its antler into his side.

"Did I do it wrong?" he asks.

"Don't worry about Pebbles," she answers. "He's only a little jealous at times."

"Pebbles...?" Adrian chuckles at what is quite a cute name for a Patron Spirit.

Another poke of the antler pushes into his ribs.

"Ow! I get it already. Nice name, much status."

Melisande tries to contain her laughter.

From deeper in the military convoy, another girl climbs out of a wagon. **"I'm back,"** Lisette says hello to Adrian and Karl. She instantly heads afterwards to her friends waiting further behind. It has been a while since she saw Roderik, Primrose and Luna.

...

With introductions behind them, Karl brings up the part he was curious about since yesterday. **"So, about our winged temptresses and their flock of minions, where did those go?"**

Sylvie does her typical unexpected entrance and drops down next to Conrad, instantly placing a wing around his back to showcase their intimacy. **"My sisters will lead the harpy tempest back to their own lands. My child and I will stay with the father."**

Karl tries to make sense of her words, eyes flashing around from Sylvië to Conrad and ending on the child.

“Oh, congratulations. I didn’t know,” he addresses his commander.

Sylvië smiles at the misunderstanding. She winks at the young Roderik, beckoning him to come closer, giving the boy an affectionate kiss on the cheek. *“This, is the father of my first daughter.”*

Roderik’s mouth opens in surprise, instantly turning towards the child to take a closer look.

“Oh, my mistake,” Karl tries not to wonder how the heck Roderik managed to seduce a living myth. **“I wrongly assumed the child was my superior commander’s.”**

Sylvië reaches for her belly, smiling towards Conrad. **“You weren’t completely wrong. He is the father of our coming daughter.”**

Conrad shrugs at Karl. Better to just accept it. Siren family matters can grow complicated. He turns the conversation back onto topic. **“Anyway, Sylvië will stay here. If we have need of the tempest, she can fly back to her homeland to gather them. Think about all those harpies. That’s a ton of animals who all need food, and therefore access to their natural habitat. We can’t have them hanging around here.”**

Karl understands. He states the main reason himself. **“Restoring the stability of our natural habitats has always been a big part of the entire point behind our Restoration Rebellion. Makes sense they will go back.”**

Melisande steps forward after listening in to their conversation and adds another reason for the tempest to return. **“Harpies wouldn’t feel at home here regardless. Many beings you would call mythological are to be found behind the Misty Woods for a reason. It has to do with the ley-lines all flowing together in one specific location. They are drawn to those energies. Possibly even partially feed on them. It’s hard to explain to who isn’t a druid.”**

One individual understands well enough. Conrad. That knot where all ley-lines connect, it has to be the Abyss. Or rather, that divine spring of life hidden at the bottom. The harpies and many other beings must naturally seek closeness.

“I assume our siren Matriarch doesn’t need a tent of her own?” Karl asks the obvious.

“That won’t be necessary,” she answers.

Adrian coughs to draw attention. “While we’re all together, I’ll add that we should probably send assistance to the Spire. They have an enemy army on the way to lay siege.”

“Don’t worry about the Spire,” Conrad answers. “The tempest already sent the Union force routing on the way here. I doubt they will try to siege again, especially since we already took Ramona.”

*

Conrad sighs deep as he faces the hardest task left to do, yet one he cannot delay any longer. Ahead, he can spot Roderik hang around Luna. The boy is obviously trying to cheer her up. No point in waiting further, so time to get this done.

“Hey. Do you have some time for a talk?”

Luna’s mood sours instantly. She can already guess what topic will be brought up. With clear hesitation, she stands up.

“Want me to come along?” Roderik asks her.

The girl shakes her head. “I’ll be okay.”

“Alright then. I’ll wait here for you.”

Conrad has to admit, his apprentice has grown up. The young man handles this in a mature way, trying to be of assistance, while not forcing himself on her. Simply let her know he’ll be there if she needs a shoulder. Those two may have gotten a lot closer these last six months. Makes sense. Time never stands still, even in one’s absence. Especially, in one’s absence.

...

This spot should do for a private talk. Nobody around to disturb them or listen in.

“My sister is gone? With Eris?” Luna asks. There’s fear in her eyes. Somewhere inside, Luna already knows the answer, now standing at the precipice of her worst nightmare being confirmed.

Conrad rubs his forehead. This is far harder than expected. “They both left our world. But they’re not gone to us forever!”

He stressed the last part, even if it may have come across as desperate hope. How can he get the message across so she accepts it? The girl's face already turns to a pained grimace. He doesn't wait for her thoughts to turn to fresh grief, quickly adding more words.

"I met their spirits, and the spirits of others I thought I would never see again." He explains everything that happened to Selena and Eris. How they passed on, and how he reunited with them. Whether she believes him or not, he can't even guess.

...

Tears run down Luna's cheeks. Her worst nightmare turned into harsh reality.

"Selena saved my son," Conrad tries to contain his own emotion. "Melisande has seen him, she can confirm parts of the story. He's still with his grandfather until the war is over. And I'm certain your sister equally tried to protect you from Grimald by taking the blood contract burden on herself."

That's what any sibling would do. That's what it means to be family.

"But in the end, I'm as much responsible for what happened to her as Grimald."

Luna chokes up on her crying, wiping her eyes. "Selena wouldn't want me to blame you," she replies meekly.

Conrad believes her. Selena wouldn't seek to blame, or she would not have appeared in spirit form to help him.

"So, you really met her?" the girl seeks confirmation, trying to gain a semblance of control over her emotions.

"I did. Her, and Eris. They guided me past the Misty Woods. Remember how we couldn't pass? Only Eris could from this side of the Woods. She guided me through. And your sister helped me to reach my destination down the Abyss. Lisette can confirm."

Lisette knows Conrad's solo trip beyond the Woods happened after both already passed away. Maybe she can help Luna find some reason to believe him.

"Selena didn't do anything bad?" a meek voice asks him.

Conrad grabs Luna by her shoulders, lowering himself before the girl.

"Look me in the eyes. Selena did nothing wrong. She tried to make the best out of a horrible mess of a situation. That's what I firmly believe. I know it to be true!"

He never considered how Luna might feel about the loss of Eris. How she might be **conflicted about the role of her sister through the blood contract. No, she shouldn't have** to feel bad at all. His words are truth. Proof exists **in how Eris doesn't blame her. Why else** would her wolf friends look after Selena's body? Her spirit must have asked them to.

Luna nods, wiping more tears. She regained some control over them through those last words. And maybe Conrad is right, and she *will* meet her again someday? The story sounds strangely believable enough, after all which happened. **"I can meet my sister again, right?"** she seeks confirmation.

"Absolutely! We will, someday. But she wouldn't want us to rush through our lives in haste."

Behind the girl, Conrad can spot Roderik **keep an eye on them. It's obvious he's worried. Not that he doesn't trust his mentor, or blames him for what happened.** Only that the tension he can see is far from desirable. It makes the boy want to step closer right away and give her a hug. For now, he patiently waits as promised.

Luna walks away with her head held low. Conrad gives a quick nod towards Roderik. He said what had to be said, and can only leave the aftermath to him.

*

The funeral pyre blows embers through the night, dancing to the familiar hymn. It is accompanied by an unusually large crowd. **More crowds are present at the city's temples,** where an accompanying ceremony is held. Many feel in the right mood to find a connection with not only the souls of the departed, but equally their ancestors and their traditions.

As promised, the released captives were free to participate, and plenty made use of that opportunity. Even though they formed their own group, understandably removed from the rebels, they share this moment together. For tonight, at least, there is no room for animosity.

This time, unlike the victory at Milgard, Conrad is no different. Standing close to the pyre, his own thoughts move from the past all the way to the present. The heavy weight feels lifted from **his shoulders. For the first time, he doesn't feel isolated during a moment**

as this. Now, he is a part of something larger than him, larger than life. Together with everyone around him.

Without needing to look, he can sense another pair joined. The last two remaining who **weren't present**, while still in his thoughts. Luna and Roderik.

She joins in silence, eyes still a shade of red from recent flow of tears. For both her and Conrad, this moment is more than only the send-off for the fallen. It's the formal farewell for two who were close to them, and will no longer walk this world. Though Luna as well can feel a load fall from her shoulders. Someday, they will meet again. Then they will have the chat of a lifetime.

Her presence also signifies another fact, one specifically important to Conrad. That she is here, choosing a spot next to him, means she let go of a grudge if there was one. Another relief to him, as grudges are often even heavier on the one holding them, than the person they are aimed at. He understands that all too well.

*

Most of the ritual ceremonies have concluded. The fires will **burn till morning**. It's late, though not late enough to find sleep. Few seem to be in a mood for sleep either way.

"Tired?" Conrad asks Kalina.

She shakes her head, yet yawns right after. Definitely tired. She had plenty of work to do for the entire ceremony. An icon cannot be absent at times like these. Still, her job is about done. Might be a good idea to gather the girls and escort them to the safety of their private space for the night.

...

He walks through the mercenaries' camp. The other girls should be here as far as he knows. Still plenty of folks left in the camp, mostly guards, and the injured in the triage center together **with the current shift of doctors and assistants**. **Illness and injury don't** take a break simply because of a night like this, even if most of the troops are out there, near the fire or in the city. To honor death, and to celebrate life.

"Ah, there they are," he guides Kalina to come with him.

Lisette and Primrose sit on a wagon **near the Commander's tent**, facing upwards at the starry sky. They sit on either side of Sylvië, kept warm by her wings covering their back.

"Girls' talk?" Conrad asks.

"Sylvië explained us all about flying through the sky, or through the night," Lisette answers.

"And how she doesn't fly into a tree while it's dark," Primrose adds.

The siren laughs at the mage's choice of words. **"We have good night sight,"** she explains.

"I wish I could fly," Primrose mopes.

Conrad refrains from stating she might be too heavy to lift by Sylvië. That would no doubt evoke a swift kick to the shins. **Besides, he wouldn't want to ruin Primrose's dreams of flight.** Not that he knows how much a siren can lift anyway. **Who knows? Maybe that's actually possible.** **"Someday, you could invent levitation magic,"** he tries to keep the dream alive.

Primrose picks up her mood and stares in awe at the starry sky. Yeah, maybe she *could* invent levitation? Wind magic is definitely not her strength. Maybe through an enchantment? Oh! An enchanted cape! That would look cool, spreading it out wide with both arms to fly. Or maybe she could sit on a floating object? What could work, **though...?** It has to be light and portable. A broom, maybe? All kinds of possibilities fly through her imagination.

"The baby's hungry?" Kalina asks when a cry lets its presence be known from the bundle on Sylvië's chest.

"She is," Sylvië smiles, removing some of the bundle's cloth and placing her daughter to her breast. The crying immediately stops as the baby siren found what she wants.

Conrad can feel the growing fatigue fade. What a peaceful scene. This is how every day and night should be filled.

"What's her name?" Kalina asks.

"Alicia of the West," a proud mother names her daughter.

"That's a pretty name!"

Traditionally, sirens look after their children on their own. Few ever meet their fathers. **An arrangement that wouldn't work** for any tribe or country across the continent. A father's hand is too important to miss in one's life. Exactly how Conrad remembers his parents, they kept a balance among each other. And that's how they raised their children, each conveying important parts of life, a different perspective.

Without one of these halves, that balance is gone, often with disastrous consequences. Too often leading towards a life lost to gambling, addictions, crime, or simply any lack of ambition. However, sirens are the exception, as they never had that other half in their communities. They are naturally attuned to this way of life. Though their lifestyle comes with problems of its own, such as their dependence on the druids or others for reproduction.

A siren's name is a business of the mother. Nobody else has a say, their name granted once the child turns a year old. Though this case too is an exception. This little girl had the opportunity to meet her father, thus her father played a role in her name. A siren grows up under care of the Grove, such is tradition, so it shall be for Alicia. Yet, **that doesn't mean** Sylvië will deprive two specific male outsiders to the Grove, two she took a liking to, from spending all time they want with their daughters.

The children's attention changes from the sky towards the mother feeding her daughter. That mother well aware she suddenly became the center of focus.

Minutes pass, and Sylvië stops feeding, her daughter already falling asleep after a small burp. The pleased mother addresses everyone present. **"I'll be getting some sleep myself, or there won't be any at all. This girl will wake me up again in a couple hours."**

When she passes Conrad, she stops and lowers her voice so the others can't hear. **"If you're worried, there's always a certain druid you could ask..."**

He doesn't reply, processing her words. He didn't even realize himself until now, aware she's right on point. When he watched her earlier, a certain worry was hidden in the back of his mind. How did she pick up on it? Is it only Sylvië, or do all sirens have such developed senses and ability to read people?

Conrad stares at the sky himself. Yeah, better have **his worries eased... Or confirmed.** He pats on Kalina's back. "Time for you to also enjoy rest, little girl. You can't fool me with all that yawning. Off you go, into the tent."

Unable to deny her own tiredness, Kalina already dozes off as she walks into the tent.

"Lisette, could I have a moment?" Conrad asks immediately after.

His daughter responds confused, wondering what he needs of her. The girl hops off the wagon and follows her father into the night.

...

"Curious?" Sylvië asks the only remaining individual.

Primrose tilts her head ambiguously, pulling on one of her ears to get a hair tuft in place.

Yeah, she's curious. More so, she feels **troubled herself.** There's an **unease inside of her body, all over, and she doesn't really understand why or what caused it.** Only that it wasn't present when looking at the sky earlier. When exactly did it rise? Maybe **she's** merely tired and needs sleep herself?

Sylvië leans closer and blows gently in the ear of Primrose. "Why don't you follow them? Their conversation might be of interest."

*

Lisette follows in silence. She already developed a good idea where they are going, and for what reason. She has to admit, this has been on her mind as much lately, especially today.

The father-daughter pair comes to a stop in **front of a tent.** It's part of the triage center or hospice, meant for patients who can walk and visit, to have themselves checked out. Melisande is inside, gone right to work after arriving. Though she already has a visitor.

"Oh, a patient already? **Sorry for intruding,**" Conrad comes to a stop inside the entrance. "The guard let me in, so I thought you weren't actively busy yet."

The guard must have been confused on what to do when the highest-ranking commander appeared. Just let him in seemed best.

"I don't mind," Karl answers, already inside the tent.

He's here with Cherry, the latter resting on a bed while Melisande offers her a medical examination.

Conrad doesn't ask their reason for being here out of discretion. Lisette on the other hand can't help show her mixture of curiosity and worry. Why is Cherry here? Is something wrong with her?

Thoughts which don't go unnoticed by Karl, already offering her an explanation. "It's only a routine checkup of Cherry and our baby. You know, with all that happened. It must have been stressful on her body."

Lisette lets some of her worry go. Only a routine check? Nothing bad then... Cherry is obviously fine. Meanwhile, Conrad keeps his mouth, unwilling to sour the mood for both Cherry and his daughter. He understands well enough what brought Karl here. The man must be worried about complications, or heightened risk of a miscarriage. Personal memories remind him well enough what can go wrong when stress levels and exertion peak far beyond normal. And with Cherry running straight into battle to warn Karl about a bunch of backstabbers, one never knows about possible consequences.

...

"Your child is in good health," Melisande breaks the ice with a cheery smile.

Enough stress for two drops from Karl's shoulders at her words, followed by a quick cuddle with his expecting wife. Further followed by some release of frustration. "I'm very grateful you care so much, but never rush into battle again. That's the last place I want you to be."

"You were in danger," Cherry answers.

"I don't care! You and our child are far more important."

The young mother-to-be isn't very convinced. From her perspective, that importance part applies to Karl as much. Though she feels all warm and fuzzy to hear his words. One slight worry does remain in her mind, however. "What if, when we grow old, your family..."

She finds it hard to ask, unable to truly voice her concern. She is the one who encouraged him to start a new family. And now she is the one left with certain doubts... Though Karl understands the message.

“They will accept you with open arms. Cherry, I love my first wife. I love my son.” He lifts the girl’s chin, staring her in the eyes at close distance. “Exactly like how I love you and our little one. When that moment comes, a long, long time from now, I will happily introduce you to them. And they will welcome you as a part of our grander family.”

There’s no need at all for Cherry to worry about confronting his former wife once they leave this world. Karl has full confidence in his words.

Only after their intimate moment does the man actually realize his superior officer came in here for unknown reasons. “You needed me?” Karl asks.

“Nah, we’re here for Melisande.” After intruding on Karl and Cherry’s privacy, Conrad doesn’t feel like hiding his own reasons for being here. “It’s sort of similar, really.”

Karl frowns as he tries to decipher his commander’s words. Similar? Does that mean...? “She’s expecting?”

“Well, we don’t know yet. And it’s kind of complicated.” Once more, Conrad is cautious with his words. Not for privacy reasons, only because he doesn’t want to worry his daughter.

“Please, lie down here,” Melisande takes over.

Lisette does as instructed, feeling increasingly nervous. The next few moments could have a big impact on her life. A thought she quickly scratches from her mind. It would actually be what happened when she took on the role of Cloe for that last time which would impact her life. Not that she regrets sleeping with her father, yet she still can’t shake nervousness for some reason. Her legs feel so weak, and her fingers actually shake, now the moment of truth is near. Why does her chest feel so tight?

Conrad’s hand reaches for her, trying to soften that shaking, his thumb caressing her palm. No matter the outcome, she will still be his precious daughter. Whether she carries his child or not isn’t really what he’s worried about.

...

Melisande wears that same smile from earlier when she gives her verdict. “Congratulations! You’re expecting a little boy or girl.”

The tiny hand in Conrad’s palm softens, trembling dissipating.

A couple tears roll down as Lisette reaches out for her father. “Papa! We’re getting a baby!” That tight feeling in her chest is gone. Stress suddenly left her body and mind, blown wide away. She received her outcome, and she wouldn’t change it for anything in the world.

Conrad returns her hug and can’t hide his own joy at the news. Though his worries aren’t exactly gone, on the contrary. They just stuck their heads up all the taller.

...

Lisette went back with Cherry to their tents, leaving Conrad and Karl inside the tent with Melisande.

“Are there going to be troubles? I mean, I’m the father. Won’t that complicate matters?”

Conrad’s question doesn’t come unexpected to Karl. As a former noble, he’s not a stranger to the concept of a relationship born out of incest. Still, the full picture **isn’t** clear to Melisande. She really should know as their doctor.

“If I may clarify,” Karl adds, “Lisette’s mother was already family. They were twins.”

Conrad nods, his own hands now commence shaking. This new child will be born out of second-generation incest. That’s generally known as a pretty bad idea. He really should have given that more thought before allowing lust to completely control him and consume a relationship with Lisette. Admittedly, he was in a weakened state of mind at the time. Even so...

“I understand your worries,” Melisande answers, “but there’s nothing to lose sleep over. What I could detect earlier now makes sense after hearing your story.”

Confusion forms on Conrad’s face. What she could detect? Was there anything unusual about Lisette?

“Last time I met her, in Eralthyr, when Father taught her how to more efficiently use her spirits, those spirits always took residence inside her chest. Now, they moved to her womb. There must be meaning behind that.”

“So, you believe the child will be okay?”

“I’m confident. I could feel a warm energy radiate from her spirits, engulfing the new life within. They will be fine.”

Conrad sinks down onto the patient’s bed. What a relief to hear.

*

Primrose is first to return to their tent for the night. She did as Sylvië advised her to. Follow Conrad and Lisette. From outside the tent, she could pick up a part of their conversation. It left her silent. What is she to make of this feeling? How should she even describe it?

Empty?

The girl rubs over her arms. Sure is turning chilly. Quite early.

Her eyes scan around in growing confusion. Is it growing darker in here?

Primrose can feel fear peak when suddenly she can spot the dark corner of the tent come alive. She quickly wants to reach for her staff, though she left it in the first compartment!

“Calm down,” a cold voice speaks from the dark corner. A pair of eyes appear first, followed by the body of Grimald. “I’m not here to harm you, or anyone else.”

“You hurt my friends!”

She blurted that out on instinct. Was it really a good idea to possibly antagonize him? Shouldn’t she try and buy time for help to arrive? Too late now. Emotions were ahead of her, scorning Grimald for the loss of Selena and Eris.

“I wish you would believe me when I say, I didn’t have another choice,” he answers.

“Why are you here?” Primrose tries to hide the shivering in her voice. Her heart beats fast, adrenaline boosted. Should she try and run?

“I’m here for you...” Grimald closes his mouth, losing himself in thought for a while. Mind made up, he seems to shift focus. “That man has been doing quite well. I do believe he has what it takes now to tackle the final challenge, hard it will still be. I would have expected him to walk the path of a villain, but...”

“He would never do that!” she interrupts.

“So it turned out. All fine with me, really. As I told him six months ago, I don’t care what path he chooses. As long as he walks one.”

Grimald takes another step closer, further out of the corner’s shadow. Light shines on his face, making him appear like a normal man. His tone softens, losing its typical arrogance. “You know that feeling when all falls into place after lots of effort to put the

pieces together? I'm sure you do, a mage of your caliber. It left me wondering about the world to come, when that last obstacle is gone. And... I find myself in a strange bind."

Grimald pauses, as if he still tries to figure out his own motivations. "Ever since I met you, my interest has been caught. Would you like to know why? You strongly remind me of someone. Strange, really. It took me a while to figure out what to make of it all."

He tilts his head, thinking more deeply. "Actually, I still don't know what to make of it. Only that, maybe, it's not a bad idea to keep you around?"

"I don't know what you mean," Primrose responds.

"There's no need to. You'll find out eventually. All I'm curious about is if you are capable of accepting me."

"I don't like you. I *hate* you!" Another outburst of emotion she immediately regrets. Definitely not a good idea to antagonize him further.

Grimald doesn't respond in anger. "Hate is such a harsh word. I understand. You are emotionally hurt by the loss of your friends. These matters take time." He pulls up an object and rolls it around with his fingers. Grimald stares at it with a strange sense of sadness.

"What's that?" she asks.

"A ring. I once intended to give it to someone, on what was to be a day of joy." He places down the object within hand reach of Primrose and shoves it forward. "I'll leave it in your possession for now."

"Why?"

"Consider it a token of trust. And a tool. There's a small enchantment on it. I'm certain you can figure it out easily. A gift for when you ever run into trouble. Dead people can't make up their mind, and that would be a shame."

He steps back, into the shadow. "I do hope you can come to accept me, in due time."

...

The shadow recedes, temperature returning back to normal. Grimald is gone. Before Primrose remains the one object he left behind. The girl reaches out for it.

A pretty, enchanted ring.

He was right. She does easily grasp the type of enchantment.

Unsure what happened and why, the girl stashes it away.

...

The tent opens and Lisette enters with Conrad. Primrose can still see the relief on his face. She knows well enough why, picked up that part of their conversation in the triage center. He is happy to hear his daughter's child will be in good health.

"Missed anything while we were gone?" the happy father asks.

"No, nothing," Primrose answers with her best attempt at a cheery voice.

For now, she will keep this meeting to herself. The ring's enchantment is of no immediate threat. And she wouldn't want to burden Conrad by bringing up his nemesis. Not now, after he can smile so genuinely from happiness at becoming a father once more. That smile should not be undone. While the fear of losing him again like those horrible six months is too much to bear.

*

A week passed since the liberation of Ramona. Messengers spread far and wide across the continent to declare Gleaze as an independent country once more. Today is the first day for Conrad to take his tasks into the castle itself, no longer within the camp outside the city's gates. Right when he thought finally some time would present itself to explore the castle and relive memories, he's naturally stuck with more tasks to do from as soon as early dawn.

"What's next on the agenda?" he yawns.

Cherry gives the man a list while he takes a seat on a chair inside the throne room. Conrad won't take the throne itself, as that would be inappropriate. It should remain empty for the actual ruler of Gleaze. He is merely acting as a temporary leader.

Eyes glide down the list making up the document. Renovation work is scratched off, already arranged. Oh, looks like some candidates stepped forward to take a bid at the throne. "Are they ready for a meeting?" he asks.

"They wait outside."

"Alright, let's get this over with. Could you hand me the family tree documents?"

Audiences... Always the most annoying part of a job. So much easier when he can just stamp a document or hand out an order and be done with it. Easier, and definitely faster. Written petitions would be so much quicker to deal with, if only most people would know how to write. Then there's the kind of tasks stuck on decorum like flies on horse dung. Next item on the agenda definitely qualifies as the latter.

A stranger walks into the throne room and bows before the current, temporary ruler. A middle-class merchant is Conrad's first impression.

The merchant opens his mouth. "Honorable Steward. I heard you are searching for relatives to our beloved, former Queen."

"And you are such a relative?"

"I most certainly am."

"Do you have any proof of that claim?"

"I have a document which carries the Royal Seal."

Conrad takes the document and paces around the room, observing it closely. It does have a seal, stamped by the father of Queen Celeste, recognizing this merchant as one of his bastard sons. "Alright, that will be all then," he concludes.

The merchant seems confused. That's it?! No further questions? No immediate installment onto the throne?

"We'll take your claim into consideration for the duration of our search, I'm certain you understand these matters take a decent amount of time, and we have to give others the chance to step forward," Conrad clarifies.

...

Once the merchant left, Conrad sits down again, scratching the name off the list. Definitely a fraud. The seal looks real enough, yet can be forged with enough connections, which a wealthy merchant certainly would have.

Biggest strike against the man's claim is his date of birth. Judging from the merchant's official age, he must have been conceived when Celeste's father was out on one of his many adventures across the ocean. The one he never came back from. He still remembers her telling that tale of her father's last journey. A different sort of tales about divine fertility

would be told about any man who can conceive children back at home from all the way across the ocean. Nah, this merchant was definitely a fraud.

“Next!” he calls out.

...

A deep sigh leaves Conrad’s chest. What a waste of time this has been. Can’t these jesters come up with better stories to unduly claim the throne? Another one just left, describing herself as the actual Princess Charlotte, with the one everyone knew supposedly being a doppelganger for security reasons.

Would actually be hilarious if it didn’t hit so close to his personal feelings. Now, it only left a sour taste in his mouth. To claim Charlotte’s identity is no different than stepping on her. Too bad for the impostor, she was dealing with someone who knew Charlotte as privately as her mother.

“Next!”

That came out with more anger in his tone than expected. Better get those emotions under control again. Who knows what sleazy goon they send in this time? Very likely just another fraud.

Sitting down, head leaning on his fist, Conrad observes the next individual on the list to ask for an audience. Definitely low class. Almost beggar-level of poor, judging by the old rags he wears. Not that old, maybe a couple years younger than Conrad, not by many.

“Another candidate for the throne?” he tries to hide a tone of sarcasm.

“No, Sir. With all respect for the Throne, I do not seek it.”

“Oh?” Conrad grows curious. “What brings you here?” Worst case scenario, it’s merely a pointless request. But hey, it’s different than dealing with frauds.

“I wish to join Gleaze’s honorable heavy cavalry.”

Conrad doesn’t really know what to answer right away. That’s an odd request. First time anyone asks to join the cavalry in such a manner. Heavy cavalry is a high bar to enter though. Nobility or a distinguished military career is usually required. Exceptions did exist, such as the Queen herself, in charge of her Royal Legion. Still, it’s in the nature of exceptions they are, well... rare.

“Why do you seek to join?”

Qualifications are probably a bigger stumble block, though he **can't help** his curiosity. Someone of such low class being ambitious and seeking higher ranks isn't out of the ordinary. That said, they usually pick feasible methods. A beggar hopping straight into heavy cavalry gear among the higher classes hardly qualifies as feasible.

The young man doesn't hesitate to answer. **"To restore the honor of my family."**

"What can you tell me about your family?" Conrad can notice the young man clench his fist in anger, muscles tensing over his body.

"They were set up! Falsely accused of planning a coup against the Throne. Names smeared through mud. Most were executed for **crimes they never committed.**" The man lifts his head, staring right at the Acting Steward. **"I seek** to clear their name, restore their honor, and revive our House's crest!"

Discomfort descends over Conrad. **Smeared for a coup? Could it be this young man is...?**

His eyes shift behind the beggar, towards the door. Another individual peeks past a gap, guards trying to stop her.

"Your sister?" Conrad asks.

The young man looks behind him and freezes up, noticing she might have gotten herself in trouble with the guards. Quickly-growing panic is instantly visible from all over his body.

"Let her in!" Conrad orders the guards.

The door opens further and she walks in, uncertain and afraid. An apologetic glance turned towards her brother for creating this mess. She's almost her brother's age. A year or so apart.

"My apologies!" the young man bows down lower, trying to salvage the situation.

"It's okay. I'm not high on decorum anyway, and nothing is more important than family." In honesty, Conrad only wanted to take a closer look at her. And what he sees only grows his suspicions about the nature of their background. Though all that dirt on their faces and their rags does make it harder to estimate. **"How old are you two?"**

"I'm twenty-two. My sister is one year younger."

Which would match the timeline Conrad has in mind. **"You looked after her for thirteen years..."** he mumbles.

The young man looks surprised at those words. How did the Acting Steward know the date it all went wrong for their family?!

“Can you tell me about the plot to frame your House?” Conrad already knows, both siblings can tell from his stern expression. What he wants to know is not the incident itself, but more specifically the identity of these two. He has to know if his guess is accurate.

“They found a letter, detailing an assassination conspiracy with the former Queen and Princess as target.” Emotions return to the man, outing his grievances with passion. “It was all a lie! My father... Father did sometimes make dubious decisions, driven by an overabundance of pride. He cheated in that year’s tournament and was duly stripped of two titles. Regardless, he would never have stooped to assassination of the Throne! He would never have sought to bring harm to Gleaze!”

“I believe you,” Conrad answers calm.

So his guess is confirmed. That discomfort from earlier makes his hairs stand on end. These two are the children he once hid from, inside the animal-trophy room of their house. The room they played hide and seek in. That same day he was to bring them all to ruin. Similar to how Annette’s family was brought to ruin. Now, these two are all that’s left of their household.

“How did you manage to survive?” They weren’t executed like the rest of their family, too young at the time. Yet, life must have been hard.

“Former servants looked after us.”

Conrad sighs. So those servants *did* get along well with their masters. His impression back then wasn’t wrong. Thankfully, it wasn’t. Or these two likely wouldn’t have been here to tell the tale. “You can ride a horse?”

“I can, Steward.”

“You can fight?”

The young man lifts his head again, confidence and pride radiating from his words. “One of our former servants who took us in was a regular sparring partner to Father. He taught me, firmly believing one day we could regain our honor.”

Conrad reaches for the documents Cherry brought earlier, before these meetings began, picking out one in particular. The family tree of Celeste. “**You are distant** relatives to the Royal Family.”

The siblings look at each other. He knows that much? They didn’t even state their House’s identity.

“We are...” the older brother admits.

“And you are aware we currently search for a replacement to sit on that empty throne over there?”

“I am,” he looks down.

“You are not interested?”

“**With all due** respect, I’m not, honorable **Steward.**” The man doesn’t seem very eager to talk about these matters. His interest in the Throne does seem genuinely non-existent.

“**Why is that?**” Conrad doesn’t intend to leave the answer unknown.

“I cannot face my ancestors without regaining our honor with my own hands. Likewise, I cannot restore our House without earning the right to bear our crest first. And I can only earn those by showing valor in current times of upset. **The Throne is none of my concern.**”

The room turns silent while Conrad considers what action to take, as much as he ponders on the long-lasting consequences of his actions back then. How many others are out there he doesn’t even know had their lives turned upside down? If they even have their mortal lives left...

“Karl!” he suddenly calls out.

The man appears from the **Secretary’s** quarters at the side, ready to receive orders.

“**Write down my decree.** I’ll give it the stamp afterwards. **The Queen’s Legion will be reformed, effective immediately.** In absence of a ruler, this young man will take over command. Their duty will be to maintain peace in the capital during our current times of war and strife, and intercept any potential threat by their own assessment. Nothing too difficult for a new and aspiring leader, while offering opportunity to show initiative.”

“To lead a Legion traditionally requires one of high status or **accomplishments,**” Karl mentions casually as he writes down.

“Yes, that would be required. Grant them an official crest and fitting title. I’m sure there’s a certain family crest in our archives which would fit them well enough.”

Karl nods, understanding what he is to do.

The siblings are too baffled by this turn of events to really process what the Acting Steward just granted them.

...

Once the pair left the room, Conrad tries to shake off the last remaining discomfort.

“Those two kids actually made it...” he shows a first cautious grin. Then he turns to Karl and Cherry inside the Secretary’s quarters. **“Call off the search for a replacement for now. If luck is willing, I’ve found our candidate.”**

*

With all duties finally done for the day, Conrad wanders around the castle freely for the first time since liberating the city. Every corner, every hallway, he remembers them all. Every area of the castle is filled with ghosts from the past. The runic inscriptions are still present on every entryway, even if they lost their source of power.

He walks into the garden. This is where Charlotte ran around in her red dress, horribly failing to blend in with the environment. And that bench over there in the middle of the garden, is where he danced with her, where she openly flirted and asked for his physical attention. Where Celeste spotted them, while pretending not to know.

“What a pair they were.”

Few mothers would take their own daughter into a bedroom to share the same man. Thinking about it, Celeste was quite the eccentric parent.

“Not that I’m much different.”

Conrad enters the building again, through the entrance leading into the ballroom. It’s practically empty. Few parties must have been held here ever since. Maybe none?

As he ascends the stairs, he can’t help but conclude his state of mind is very different now than it was when he first commenced his journey, or when he came to this city to pay his respects. There was so much grieve in him, and so much boiled-up anger. At least, that

last part is gone now. And it feels so much better to remember these places without that beating drum of anger vexing him into a trance of blinded vengeance.

Grimald will still pay, yes. That remained unchanged. Though he will pay to answer for his crimes. No longer out of a desire to simply burn **down all he's involved with**.

...

Paces come to a stop at a closed door. Would it be unlocked?

The handle turns, and the room behind stretches out. A once luxurious room, now filled with dust and cobwebs. A single cloth spinner and sewing kit still stand untouched since the last time the owner of this room used them. When she poured heart and soul into crafting a blue-and-white blanket for a mercenary boy.

"Ah, Papa?" a voice asks from the open door.

Conrad snaps out of his reminiscing, noticing Lisette at the door.

"The guards told me you were upstairs," she explains her reason for being here.

"You were searching for me?"

"Not specifically," she shuffles her legs. **"I just... wanted to hang out. You know this room?"**

"It's Charlotte's."

Lisette enters and looks around, careful to avoid the cobwebs. She instantly draws a connection with the sewing tools and the blanket. **"Pretty room,"** she gives her thoughts. All it needs is a good cleaning. The furniture is in good condition, and definitely luxurious.

"You should see Celeste's. That room is in a league of its own." If the beautiful ceiling is still there, that is, **and those lacquered walls with fine sculpting aren't damaged.** Who knows what might have happened over a decade.

"Sure. I'm curious to take a look," Lisette smiles cautiously.

A small light appears from her belly, twirling around the room.

"Oh, it came out of its own," she wonders.

The spirit hangs around the spinning wheel, then moving to the bed, until it stops in front of Conrad.

"This one's definitely Charlotte," he reaches out for the light.

"You sure?"

He knows. Hands carefully clasp around the light, its warmth sinking through his skin. He brings the light closer to his chest, whispering words to it too silent for Lisette to hear. It's definitely that cheeky princess. How did he never notice before? That familiar warmth is so hers, feeling right at home in the castle...

"Let's go," Conrad turns to Lisette, the spirit returning to her. "I'll show you Celeste's room."

...

"Whoa!" Lisette steps into the bedroom of the former Queen.

She's afraid to actually step further, in case she were to accidentally step on something precious. Everything is a treasure in here.

Conrad smiles when entering. It feels great to see this place survived the passing of time. It was kept in excellent condition, and the beautiful ceiling with Cloegandr in stained glass is still present in all its majesty. Only one difference is noticeable from back then, and that difference has everything to do with Conrad himself. When he last slept here, that rear elevated half of the circular room was just too tall for him to peer over. Now, he can observe the higher floor easily.

"Go on, don't be afraid to take a look," he encourages his daughter to not hold back.

She quickly loses her reserved attitude and curiously darts around, pointing out every detail. Look at that gorgeous fireplace design! Or that fine carving of the closet! "Oh, wow..." she stares to the ceiling once reaching the higher floor, turning around in place while looking up. "You slept in here?"

Conrad observes the bed in silence. Last time he saw it, Celeste's lifeless body rested on it. Thoughts shift away, trying to pick up his mood. "Damn right, I did. Softest bed I ever had."

Well, from the ones that aren't a lap pillow, or a breast pillow, or... You get the point. It was the combination of mother and daughter which made this bed so memorable, really.

Lisette plops down on it, testing out the softness. Definitely in a class of its own. Meanwhile, more spirits appear from her, searching out the room. So many years ago, Conrad once concluded Cloe and Annette would have loved to see this room. Now, they finally have the chance to.

...

The father-daughter pair turned silent. She lies on the bed, observing the ceiling, while Conrad does the same in equal silence. He knows there's an important matter on his daughter's mind. What could it be? Should he straight-out ask her?

"Lisette. If there's anything on your mind, I'm always here for you."

"Mmm..."

That's what he expected. If it was easy to talk about, she would have done so already. If only he had a clue what it could be.

Another light appears from Lisette's womb, different from Charlotte's or the others curiously examining the room. It buzzes around, until it hangs before Conrad.

"Who would that be?" his daughter asks.

"Any guesses?" he asks.

Lisette can only come up with one answer, considering the room they are in. "Queen Celeste?"

Conrad nods with a grin, holding the spirit close. That's definitely Celeste. Once more, he can instantly tell. Whenever he slept at her side, it felt like he was sheltered by her mature presence. Somehow, that spirit radiates the same aura. He was so blind not to notice until now...

"Is she talking to you?" Lisette asks.

"I don't know..." her father laments he can't talk to spirits. Though it does appear she tries to get a message across. Celeste's spirit constantly shifts between father and daughter.

Lisette sits upright on the bed, curious.

"Ah..." Conrad notices a change.

Cloe's spirit has joined, together with the former Queen intermittently flying between man and girl. Both spirits come to a stop. Cloe's in front of Lisette's lips, while Celeste is in front of Conrad's. Followed by a quick dart where they switch positions. Then back once more.

"Are they...?" he wonders if he figured out what these two try to convey.

The moment his eyes meet Lisette's, her father knows he got it right. The girl is in a daze, a pair of fingers touching her own lips.

Conrad stands up and steps before his daughter.

"Eh...?" she only now notices, dragged back out of her daydream. Why is her father standing so close, bending down? Is he...

All words fade when her lips connect with his. The spirits patiently wait, as if they observe the pair. Only after those lips separate do they energetically return to Lisette's womb. Their point was made.

"You wanted me to?" Conrad asks.

Lisette turns red, facing away. She doesn't deny his assumption.

"I see. Sorry for not noticing it sooner," he concludes.

Still turned away, she speaks with fragile words. "I thought it was a one-time thing... You know, because..." Because they were never intimate anymore after that one time she healed his mental wounds.

Conrad sighs. Looks like he made another blunder. His arms reach around the girl and lift her up.

"What are you doing?!" she asks, startled.

He plops her down, further on the bed. It creaks as his own weight falls on top, leaning over his daughter. "I'm going to make sweet, steaming love with my little girl. That's what I'm going to do. Right here, and right now."

Before she can process his words, the man's lips already connect, his hands seeking out her body.

A fool, yes, that's what he has been again. He should have known, after how happy she was to carry his child. Back at the homestead was the last time he made love to her. That one night they shared a bed together in more than a mere embrace. **It didn't happen again since. Of course she was worried he might have considered it a mistake. That he shouldn't have slept with his own daughter. That it would thus never happen again.**

A mistake which should be immediately rectified, in the best way possible. By stripping her naked to shower the girl in both physical and emotional love.

*

Conrad reaches for his clothes and hands over Lisette's. "God, that felt good." He stretches out, breathing in deeply. What a great afternoon this is, and what an equally great fuck they just shared.

"Papa... Does that mean we can...?"

He jumps onto the bed half-dressed, grabbing his daughter while rolling around over the sheets they stained only moments ago. Both laugh out loud in joy. "It means we should do this a lot more often," he cuddles her close, giving her a quick kiss. "You know... Make love, have sex, make more babies after our current one is born."

Lisette giggles as she playfully begins to wrestle with her father. Turning towards laughter when he lifts her up in the air and gives the girl a swing around.

"Let's go search for the others," he resumes with putting on clothes. "I've got some places to show them."

*

Roderik stands in silence near the statue outside the city marking the spot where the Gold Serpents from a decade ago were slaughtered. He knows who passed away at the spot he stares at. Conrad told him as much earlier.

Luna holds onto the boy's hand, waiting patiently in silence, returning the silent support he gave her before. Lisette and Primrose stand next to Conrad after offering their respects.

"There are many bad memories here," the man eventually breaks the silence, tapping on his apprentice's shoulder in comfort. "But there are also good ones. You were too young to remember, yet this is where you spent almost the entire first year of your life. The time you shared with your parents."

The minimalist statue will be replaced with an impressive memorial to victims of the entire war back then. For all who suffered from the real perpetrators behind the coup. The truth will be engraved on an elaborate plaque to stand the test of time.

...

Next stop is the old temple to Justice, now in the first stage of undergoing much-needed renovation work.

Conrad places an arm around his daughter this time. **“This is where you were born. Where a miracle happened, and spirits breathed life into you.”** He takes the children inside the building, guiding them through his memories. **“That table over there is where your mother worked hard to bring you into this world.”**

It’s also where he was forced to abandon her, though this tour should be an uplifting one. Not one of sadness.

“Could it be?” an old voice draws attention.

Conrad turns around and notices a man approach him. He doesn’t recognize him at first, quick to draw the connection afterwards.

The man reaches for Conrad’s hands, still in disbelief. **“I knew it,”** he concludes. **“You are the one who came asking about the priest and his wife. When was it, two years ago?”**

“Not two years yet, around a year and a half. We’re getting there, though,” he answers.

“Who would have known that random stranger from back then would return with an entire army.” The man shakes Conrad’s arm in gratitude, tears starting to form on his wrinkled face. **“I don’t know how to thank you. At first, I was worried when war entered our doorstep. But then, in the midst of battle, it was like the ire of the Creator chose your side. That was when I knew... All would be right once more.”**

The man takes a quick glimpse towards the temple, various spots in dire need of a touch-up. **“We have turned our backs to our ancestry for too long, forsaken and betrayed the efforts of who came before us. No longer!”**

“I’m glad to hear it,” Conrad answers. **“You wouldn’t happen to know if the colosseum is still around?”**

The old man smiles while nodding. **“If that’s your next destination, you’re in luck. That place is relatively untouched. The Union used it as a training barracks.”**

Roderik’s eyes already light up at the mention of their next destination.

*

The old man was right. This place was left intact, not even the typical vandalism which plagued the rest of the monuments present.

Roderik stares around in awe at the old tribunes.

“You fought in here?” Lisette asks.

“I most certainly did. And I won.” Conrad points at an engraved spot underneath a large monument decorating the side, where the royal tribune is located. “Sadly, they didn’t mark down the youth tournament’s winner. But they certainly did for the main event’s Champion.”

Roderik falls down on his knees, staring closely at the name. That’s his father’s name right there! Eternalized on a monument!

“Once all returns to normal, this colosseum will see bouts of valor once more.” Conrad pokes with his shoulder at Primrose, as she has been strangely quiet. “Maybe we should encourage them to add a mage championship as well?”

Then again, that might be dangerous. Using a dull sword is always an option, though how is one going to dull the effect of a fireball?

Primrose doesn’t respond other than a soft mumble.

Roderik stands up again and turns to his mentor. “Someday, my name will stand on here. Right next to my father’s!”

Conrad gives him a fist bump in the shoulder. “That’s the spirit! You can expect me to go extra hard on your next training.”

The boy will succeed. There’s no doubt about it. Someday, Roderik will fight to inherit the title of Champion of Valor, and when that day comes, he will win.

*

Adrian paces around the mercenary camp. He’s in charge of all happenings outside the city’s walls, though that is not what’s on his mind right now. He reads through a diary. After a couple more paces, he sits down at the same bench he started from, turning another page while blowing air past his lips in growing frustration.

A shadow drops onto the diary, making him shift attention upwards.

“You appear troubled,” a girl innocently observes his state of mind. It’s Melisande, currently taking a break. By now, the triage center doesn’t have many patients in constant need of help anymore, allowing her more time for herself.

“Yeah, I’m just trying to crack the code. If there is one, and that’s a pretty big if.”

Melisande’s eyes glide over the text written in sloppy handwriting. “Oh, The Sleeping Princess?”

“You know it?” Adrian wonders, unfamiliar with the name.

“An old fairy-tale. So old it originates from before our country closed itself off. Mother often read it for us. It was my favorite.” She turns her attention to Adrian again with growing curiosity. “Trying to find something? A secret message?”

Adrian gives her a better look at the book, flipping through its pages. “It’s Selena’s diary. She was learning together with Cherry how to read and write, and this diary was her method of practice. It ends with her penning down that fairy-tale. A secret message is what we’re hoping for. Conrad believes there must be one.”

The man blows out more air. He can’t find anything. It’s understandable his friend wants to believe she was caught up in Grimald’s plan for an actual reason, yet he doesn’t really have any proof either. True, they know from the diary Selena was snooping around for information about Sagara, and Grimald does seem like the type to hit two birds with one stone. Again, there’s no proof or indication she actually got anything worthwhile. And if she did, there’s no guarantee at all she would write it down.

“Why would she choose a diary?” Melisande asks.

“What led us to Eralthyr was a diary. So she may have taken inspiration from it. I don’t know. Feels like reaching for straws to me.”

“When out of options, straws are better than nothing,” Melisande answers optimistically.

“True. Still doesn’t make it any easier to find out if there’s something on the other end of that straw. Certainly doesn’t help Selena still learned how to write. Plenty of natural mistakes exist. Lots of grammatical faults and even skipped words.”

Completely normal for one still learning the written language. And there’s no pattern to any of it either. If there is, her random, natural mistakes don’t make it easy to find.

“Selena...” Melisanda loses some of her cheeriness.

“Ah... Yeah, she uh...” How should he explain this?

“I know, and about her connection with my sister. My sympathies.”

“Likewise. It must feel complicated, to know what happened.” Adrian tries to be cautious with his choice of words. Completely avoiding the topic seems too late.

“That’s okay. I don’t blame Selena for what happened. They were both victims.”

Adrian nods, relieved to hear her conclusion.

The girl picks up her mood again, offering to do the same for Adrian. “Want a cup of herbal tea? Helps to increase focus.”

“Sure, why not? I’ll take any help at this point.”

When the girl stops hunching over his book and steps backwards, his eyes are frozen solid at her face. She’s so similar... Eris took after her father, while Melisande definitely takes after her mother. She has that exact same, beautiful face which enchanted Adrian in the Spire. Only younger.

His gaze lingers in her direction as she walks off to bring that herbal tea. Only now does he notice she isn’t wearing her typical coat used when working with patients.

Once she is out of sight does he snap back out of his daydream. “What is it with Alma and their choice of private outfits?”

She really is no different than her sister in that sense, both in work ethic and in sense of fashion. That outfit is straight up unusual for a girl so young, yet strangely fitting for a people of druids in tune with Life.

She wears a white, flimsy tunic. It leaves most of her shoulders and back exposed, covering her bottom with a short loincloth. At the front, it rests on her delicate chest features, running down into a similarly short and narrow loincloth. Her outfit’s sides are practically left wide-open, only obstructed in their continuous reveal of smooth skin by a single pair of thin laces around the waist to hold the front and back flaps of cloth together. Bared hips and thighs easily peek out, a complete lack of any underwear not to be mistaken. Both legs are bare, with small sandals covering her feet.

Not as scandalous as her sister, while not far off either.

Adrian shakes off his thoughts. He’s not into children.

...

Melisande returns shortly after, carrying a plate with two cups of tea. **“Ginseng tea with honey. Brought one for myself too,” she grins.**

Adrian takes a sniff first. Not bad at all. And the color looks appetizing, a rich gold, followed by the first sip. **“It’s good.”**

Melisande hides her flattered self by taking a sip of her own. Once more, the man is lost in the moment, staring at her face. That girl is definitely similar to her mother...

“Hm?” Melisande stops drinking, curious why she is the sudden center of attention.

“Uh, sorry. I was only dreaming away.”

“You mind if I sit here?” she gestures at a seat in front of Adrian. Not that she waits for an answer, already plopping down with a radiant expression when taking another sip. **“I love tea. Ginseng with honey was Mother’s favorite.”**

Her bared legs are neatly pressed together, descending from underneath her tunic towards the ground in slender majesty. A single strong curve at the knee joint as she sits down, folding her legs. **Adrian’s eyes glide up from her feet, past her knees,** towards the roundness of her girly thighs and hips. Outer sides of naked skin even more visible now as the front loincloth sinks between her upper legs in a slow caress, a place where only his imagination can dig deeper.

“Is it too hot?” she asks out of the blue.

The man blinks twice, turning back to his cup of tea, startled. **“No, sorry... It’s just, you look a lot like your mother.”**

“I meant the tea,” she hides a short flare of amusement, turning serious afterwards. “I couldn’t help but notice, you said that with pain written on your face.”

Her words are like a stab with a dagger, confronting him with reality. It’s more than only her looks. He is bothered by a related topic. Her mother. Involving far more than merely his own feelings.

“Maybe I can help alleviate what bothers you?” the girl proposes in kindness.

Adrian can’t help but be impressed how she is so similar to her sister in that area. Even during her off-time she looks out for others as a doctor. *Maybe he should bring it up?* Get

this off his chest. Besides, she deserves to know. This girl has the right to. “Something happened when we visited the Spire, and... You remind me of it.”

“You met Mother’s impostor,” Melisande calmly answers before drinking from her tea.

The man faces up, startled again at her sudden words. “You know?!”

“Eris let us know what happened through a letter.”

She lowers the tea cup to have it rest on her thighs, a warmth radiating from her face.

“Mother truly is blessed, to be loved by many.”

An embarrassed sigh leaves Adrian’s mouth. She knows *that* too?! Maybe it’s her warm reception, yet he can actually see some comedy in it. “Well, I was a womanizer, always chasing skirts. Married ones in particular. So your mother would fit, even if I didn’t succeed. Don’t tell Eldrin.”

“Father already knows,” a joined chuckle brightens the mood.

“I never really cared much about the skirts I chased. Until that day. Her looks and mannerisms were... captivating. Ever since, I can’t seem to care about other women anymore.”

He stares down into his tea’s golden charm, murmuring. “I’m sorry...”

“For what?” Melisande asks.

This is the topic which hurts most when trying to interact with this girl. Not only that she looks so similar, her mannerisms being the same, or how her voice sounds alike. But especially this one topic he broods on right now. “I delivered the fatal blow. I know she was an impostor. I know, yet... She still had your mother’s appearance, her body.”

Melisande places down the cup and reaches out for Adrian’s hands, squatting down before him. The sun basks the girl from above, shining down her tunic’s cleavage. “Thank you,” she stares right at Adrian. “You saved Mother. Restored her honor. Finally freed from the villain who maimed and defiled her. Thanks to you, she could finally return to our Creator at peace, where we can one day meet her again.”

Adrian doesn’t know how to respond, mind locked in a trance. All he can do is stare at a couple tears of gratitude rolling down her face, dropping onto her chest, only to disappear as they seek out the inner contour of her breasts.

...

How much time passed since they sat here like this? He has no idea. Minutes? Only now does he look up again, away from the captivating lure of her cleavage, to see **the girl's** tears have long since dried, replaced by a welcoming smile.

He **doesn't** get it. **What is happening to him? She is not her...** Not her mother.

Melisande lets go of his hands and brushes through her luscious curls, followed by a quick flutter of her peculiar ears. She adjusts her tunic as she stands up to let in some fresh air. For a short moment, he can see a little more of what is already quite revealing. The girl then turns sideways, giving him a full profile shot of her widely exposed sides, a bountiful plenty of pale skin with all matching curves visible from top to bottom. Knee of her closest leg with a slight bend, feminine and slender while appearing soft as pudding. Seconds pass in seductive silence. Is she fooling around with him?

The girl picks up her empty cup, leaving Adrian with her parting words before heading back to her patients. **"About that diary... What little I read was exactly the same as how Mother told us the story, word for word. I guess someone who isn't familiar with the story wouldn't know. Maybe the answer is to be found in the difference between her own writings, and the story she copied?"**

...

As Melisande disappears behind some tents, Adrian is lost in thoughts.

With vigor, he suddenly rises, reaching for the diary. And off he goes, towards the city, in search of the Royal Library.

*

Conrad returns into the Queen's private bedroom. Lisette was already here since after the tour finished, resting. She currently sits **in front of Celeste's mirror**, only dressed in her natural beauty, with a similar pose as the former Queen often held on that same seat. As another similarity, a clear view is offered of the side of her closest breast, only difference that her budding mammary is still early development, while suppleness is nevertheless as **potent in the lure of a man's gaze**. **The young expecting mother is** using a brush to tidy her hair. Not that it changes much, still as wild as ever. Well, okay, maybe a tiny bit less.

Doesn't matter, he won't let that slip from his tongue. No, he'll stick true to one of life's big lessons. Never stick your nose in the affairs of a girl when she sits in front of a mirror.

Instead, he heads to the large balcony connecting with the room that was once Charlotte's.

That room is currently used by Kalina. A cleaning crew was sent to remove all dust and network of cobwebs. Took them a couple hours. The result is marvelous, the place returned as good as new.

The sun is about to set, its last rays shining onto the white walls of the city. They are far removed from the pretty scenery which once was, though the city will return to that iconic picture inspiring young and old minds alike once more. Today was another step closer.

Flapping of wings no longer surprises Conrad. "Evening," he greets Sylvië.

"You don't seem surprised by my entrance?"

"I had this feeling once I walked onto the balcony. If there's one spot in the city you would notice me, it's up here, among the tallest parts around. And you girls do like high places." In addition, she does have good night sight, by her own words.

Sylvië can't argue with that. Curious, she peers into the luxurious room. "Oh, this room is very different from any I have seen before."

"Come on in," he places an arm around her waist.

Sylvië wastes no time once inside to look around. She gapes at the beauty of the ceiling, depicting Cloegandr.

"I guess you like it," Conrad laughs.

"It's so beautiful!"

"If you want, you can sleep underneath that pretty ceiling."

"Usually, I'm the one tempting," she jokes in return.

She'll definitely accept his offer, already placing her naked rear down on the bed to test out how people here in Gleaze sleep. "Bouncy," she approves instantly, a flirty undertone present.

A soft knock on the door beckons attention.

"We have a guest," Sylvië seems entertained and right at home already.

The door opens and Primrose enters. Conrad already expected the knock to be hers. She was informed this would be their sleeping quarters for the night, not the typical tent. That makes everyone present now for the coming night.

The young mage wanders around the room, curious about the same décor which caught Sylvië's attention. **She has to admit, this place definitely fills the definition of a Queen's bedroom.** Though her thoughts quickly shift away, back to what bothered her for a while now. That same empty feeling. What could it be?

Sylvië stands up from the bed and heads to Lisette, still at the mirror, increasingly annoyed one of her strands of hair constantly springs upwards again. **"Prettying yourself for another night of passion with your father?"**

Lisette turns red, not denying the siren's words.

Sylvië observes the entire room as she continues. **"I understand. I can sense the nature of who used to live and sleep here. It lingers in every tiny part of the room, in every decoration. This place belonged to one who loved life, and lived it to the fullest. It would be a waste to simply sleep our night in here away."**

The one man in the room can only remain silent. That description sounds about right. This room was the only place Celeste could be herself. And there was no lack of passion when it came to that.

The siren Matriarch glances at the downtrodden Primrose before resuming her words, folding a wing around Lisette to reach for her exposed belly. **"Isn't it a shame we can experience the thrill of becoming pregnant only once every cycle? Wouldn't you want to live through it again? The moment your father drives his cock deep into your womb and fills it with the gift of Life?"**

The brush in Lisette's hand lowers, the girl lost in dreams. That stubborn tuft of hair is already forgotten at the wonderful imagery Sylvië brings up.

Primrose is left staring at the heated floor, lost in her own thoughts. That brooding feeling just grew worse. **She didn't even notice** the siren approached her next.

"Is something wrong?" Conrad asks, noticing his little vulpes is not her typical self, as she hasn't been for the entire day already.

The girl doesn't know what to answer. Wrong? Maybe? She doesn't even know herself.

“This girl feels left out,” Sylvië seeks out one of Primrose’s fluffy ears, playing around with it by using the tiny hands hidden in her wings.

Conrad gives an apologetic gesture to the mage. “I understand. Sorry for being away for half a year. I wouldn’t want to miss you for that long either. Even a single day is far too long.”

Sylvië lets her wings lower, seeking out the upper hem of Primrose’s robe. Her feathers slide against soft skin of breast tissue. “True, she missed you. But there is another reason why she feels left out.”

Conrad keeps his mouth shut. When it comes to reading people, this winged temptress is a natural talent. A genius, similar to how Primrose is one in magic. Right now, he only seeks to know what that other reason is she speaks of, for it causes that sad frown on his lusty fox.

“There are three young wives in this room. Your wives. While this same room only contains two fresh mothers. Mothers who carry the fruit of their love. *Your fruit.*”

Sylvië’s wings push the cloth down, lifting the naked breasts of Primrose. A gentle flow of white liquid runs over the siren’s feathers through spontaneous lactation. The vulpes’ tail slowly waggles from rapidly growing lust. She finally begins to understand the source of her own emptiness, as Sylvië puts it into words.

“This girl has been thinking lately, what a shame it would be, if this warm fluid can’t serve its actual purpose. To nourish her own gift of Life. A gift she wants to share with you.”

Conrad puts the puzzle together in an instant. Is that what bothered her?

The siren lowers her face towards Primrose’s neck and inhales deeply through her nose, taking in all abundant pheromones. “This girl turned fertile during your absence, and her body just begs to be taken, fully ready to receive a man’s gift.”

That tail starts to waggle more quickly as the young Matriarch offers a proposal.

“Maybe it’s time to grant her what she desires?”

A squeak of surprise mixed with rapidly growing excitement leaves Primrose’s mouth when she is lifted up by a pair of strong arms. They carry her straight towards the bed. The girl loses all strength at Conrad’s chosen words.

“The only regret I have about us, is how I **can’t fulfill** your wish to become a mother every day all over **again.**”

Repeated kisses shower him in gratitude after he plops her down onto the soft bed. A **happiness to a degree he hasn’t seen before has overcome the girl. Finally, she can have** what she wished for all the way back when she first seduced him into her embrace. All frustrations of being a late-bloomer instantly erased at the prospect she can finally grant him the gift of her womb.

*

Conrad turns onto his back, satisfied. What a night this has been. All three girls in the room are left resting under the subtle glow of a couple candles.

Three mothers. Somehow, it feels very fitting for this room and who used to live here. Her spirit will no doubt be satisfied this place received some happy times again, rather than give shelter to those who sought her demise.

“Spirits...” he utters to himself, so silent nobody heard it.

It’s so easy to recognize them now. Though where would Eris and Selena be? Odwin said they didn’t come home yet, that they left. Clearly not with a grudge, as they guided him to the Abyss. Though what happened afterwards? Do they have some kind of task they feel still needs doing? It did take a couple months for Carrot to manifest as a spirit. Maybe it **simply takes them a while to travel around in that form? Not that he’s worried. Whatever** their reasons may be, they definitely know what they are doing.

...

Thoughts drift to the girl in the room sharing their balcony. A single line echoes through his memories, first heard when meeting his Maker. When asking how to save Kalina.

“*You cannot.*”

Even though Conrad knows now what these spirits stand for, how death is not the end, **he still doesn’t want to give up on her.** She’s definitely the vessel for the Faceless’ **plans.** What would happen to her if the enemy are successful? Would she die once Agmus, the

Destroyer, is born? And what happens if the Faceless can be stopped in time? Would she live on as a failed vessel? Or...

He doesn't know, and right now there's no way of knowing. That girl is such a mystery.

Conrad reaches for the necklace, holding the gift of Cloegandr. A single wish. Another big mystery. What is he to use this for?

He closes his eyes and tries to find some sleep.

The path he is on should lead him to those answers eventually.

Act 4 ~ Chapter 6



The Chamber

The troops prepare themselves for the march towards Uskandar. The final destination of the war, to seek an end where it all must have begun in the shadows. Wagons are being loaded while horses are already prepared. Only the triage center is late to pack up, waiting till the last moment.

A young mage bounces left and right energetically, humming while skipping her feet.

“Don’t forget, take it easy now,” Conrad insists. “No taking risks in combat. And no running off to who knows where against everyone’s advice.”

Primrose’s head bounces up and down in agreement, ears standing tall while her tail prances around like a poodle in heat.

Melisande can’t hide her good mood either at her patient being in such high spirits. This is the best part of her job, when she can deliver good news. No lack of new mothers during

wartime, yet not all of them come with such happy feelings. “Anything else I can help with?” she asks.

“Actually, there’s one other matter,” Conrad gets her attention.

That night where he got Primrose pregnant, when they first shared the former Queen’s bedtime quarters, his thoughts strayed to Kalina in the neighboring room. A memory returned to him, one suppressed because it goes back to a painful and recent time of his life. A memory involving Eris. Which doesn’t make it easy to bring this up with her sister.

“When that tragic incident happened in the Misty Woods, half a year ago, I remember your sister sought to order a specific type of herb or some kind of substance. One which could only be found in your homeland. I don’t know what it was for. Only that it involved Kalina, somehow.”

Though the girl is in good health. Eris did say it wasn’t urgent or anything serious at all. Now that memory came back, he can’t really forget about it either way.

“Do you know what for?” Melisande asks.

“Sadly, no. I was hoping you could identify what that was all about.”

“Oh! I remember!” Primrose suddenly interrupts. The girl can feel all attention aimed right at her, expectations rising. Her enthusiasm begins to wither, uncertain now if she can live up to those expectations. She has some knowledge, though Eris didn’t exactly give all details to her. “It had to do with Kalina’s fertility. I don’t really know what. Something about it being in stasis or whatever?”

“Stasis?” Melisande responds confused. “Could you bring her here?”

“Sure, I’ll have her escorted over,” Conrad signals a guard.

...

Melisande scans her new patient, focusing on areas related to fertility. Her expression slowly turns to more confusion. “How weird. You’re right, it does feel like some kind of stasis.”

“What’s going on?” Conrad asks for clarification.

“She should be fertile, but she isn’t. And it’s not natural, even though it feels natural. Very weird.”

Primrose throws out another line she remembers from half a year ago. “Oh yeah, Eris also mentioned how it resembles how you people deal with growth, or what was it again?”

“Wild-growth,” Melisande clarifies. “It’s a rare illness where body tissue grows out of control and causes all kinds of issues. Usually fatal when not treated.” The girl instantly changes her tone, realizing the severity of her words. “Oh, don’t worry, this is not wild-growth. She’s in good health other than this strange condition. It only feels similar to how we treat wild-growth. By isolating parts of the body.”

Conrad calms down. So it isn’t serious after all. “And that’s why Eris needed a specific herb local to your lands?”

Melisande nods, growing increasingly certain about her diagnosis, grasping what her sister intended on trying as a cure. “Yes, that would be from a particularly old rooted dryad. Plenty of those in Flower-Tree Nursery. That part is easy to acquire. Ideally, we’ll also need an earth spirit to help carry out the procedure. Any spirit user will do.”

They have a couple among the Alma troops, so that shouldn’t be an issue either. And there’s always Lisette. While technically hers aren’t earth spirits, they are very likely capable of the same procedure. Wouldn’t that be how they keep Lisette’s child healthy? Certainly, it shows they can affect the body.

“Oh, but, wasn’t there that alarm?” Primrose brings up an unsettling topic.

The alarm. How could he forget about that?! Conrad is certain now this is far more important than merely Kalina’s fertility. He always assumed there was a reason why Eris and Selena were targeted specifically. Grimald is not the type to waste opportunities. If he wanted to simply shock Conrad into choosing the path of a villain, there were other options. Options which wouldn’t leave his target so devastated for six months. Grimald took a calculated risk there. He must have had his reasons. Eris *must* have touched on a truth nobody was supposed to find out.

“This knowledge could be dangerous,” he feels the need to warn Melisande. “It cost your sister her life, I’m certain of it.” He’ll definitely have to increase the guards around her. She might already know too much. If they try and go after that ingredient, Grimald could try to silence her as he did her sister.

“I don’t expect that to be a problem,” Melisande answers. “There’s no need for me to go myself to Flower - Tree Nursery, or to leave this army.”

Even if it were dangerous, she wouldn’t drop this either way. That her sister paid with her life to find out this information is all the more reason she can’t let it go. She *must* get her hands on that herb.

And Conrad has to admit, the girl does have a point. Any druid can pass the Misty Woods. Conveniently, they have an entire Alma legion here. Sending a **delegation** won’t be difficult, while Melisande can safely stay.

“Besides, the cat is out of the bag,” she adds, placing a single finger on her lip. “Is that how the saying goes?”

Conrad frowns at the meaning of her words, pondering on them. She does have a point again. Taking out Eris was similar to taking out the only druid on this side of the Woods. It would have been impossible for anyone else to acquire the correct ingredient, or even identify it. Now, on the other hand, it would be really hard to cover up this information with Conrad himself already knowing about it. And there are plenty of druids from the Legion of the Stag who can fetch the herb.

“There wasn’t any alarm now either,” Primrose throws her own thoughts into the conversation again.

“Also true. These things only appear to trigger once.” In that case, Grimald may not even know they just found out again. Conrad can feel confidence rise. They are onto something important here. And this time, luck seems to be on their side.

“Alright, let’s do this,” he makes up his mind. “I know just the right person to acquire that ingredient, safe and quickly.”

One far better suited to the task than even a member of the Legion, someone who knows where to go and can reach there in record time, with no Faceless who can easily sneak up.

*

“Be careful,” Conrad holds Sylvië of the West close.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be safe high up in the blue sky, where no arrow can reach.”

“Trust nobody, okay? Even if you see someone you know, and they approach you, don’t...”

Sylvië silences Conrad with a quick connecting of her lips. With a wet plop they separate again. “I won’t trust anyone but the people closest to me, and I’ll fly without rest. The weather is great for long-distance flight.”

She takes two steps backwards and gives her parting smile. Then the siren heads off into the sky. Destination straight towards Eralthyr, not landing for anyone other than Eldrin. There, she will leave a note detailing Melisande’s ingredient request. Luckily, it’s still morning, so she should arrive within the span of two days, around nightfall tomorrow.

The day after, she should be heading back already. Eldrin will no doubt send out a team to gather the ingredient during the night. It’s marked as an emergency, after all. Thankfully, it’s hard to miss an entire army of this size when Sylvië comes back, and she knows where they are heading and are expected to be by then.

Secrecy is important for this mission. Grimald has a network of spies all around the continent. If they send a druid delegation, chances are he’ll find out one way or the other what’s on their shopping list. However, a single siren flying off at seemingly random, exactly as she always does, shouldn’t raise any eyebrows.

*

A week passed. The Gold Serpents are located outside of a large town in Uskandar. Local garrison surrendered two days ago, when the army marched onto their doorstep. Didn’t actually take a fight at all, even if they had a sizable force. Stories spread far and wide how the Restoration Rebellion is backed by divinity. Plenty locals feared a similar storm of claws would descend onto their town as was reported about Ramona.

It certainly helped how Sylvië returned that day to deliver the herb. Her gracious flight over the town, high enough to not be targeted, certainly sent a shock-wave through the defender’s ranks. All stories were instantly proven true in their minds and imagination. Surrender immediately followed.

Easy victory without a single hurdle to cross. Or so Conrad thought.

“We’ve got another batch of patients on our hands,” Karl hands over another report.

Conrad bashes his fist onto the table. “Damn those idiots! I specifically told them not to eat from local storages!” The man tries to calm down again. What’s done is done. No point in growing antsy about it. “How are preparations going?” he asks Karl.

“The last bags are loaded now. It will all be burned outside town.”

“Good. Make sure to do it far enough away and out of the wind. You never know. Any idea what caused it?”

Melisande steps forward, giving her own report. “Not yet. It’s some kind of poisoning, but we haven’t been able to find a sample of the poison itself. Without knowing what we’re dealing with, it will be hard to derive an antidote.”

“Can’t we just try a bunch?” Conrad throws out a random idea.

“No. That would lead to a lot of fatalities. The wrong antidote can enforce the poison, rather than cure it.”

The man sighs. At least it’s not a contagious disease. Anyone suffering from the ailment is doing so by their own fault.

Cherry enters the room with an aura which spells more bad news. “You have to come quick! There’s something wrong with Adrian and Roderik.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake...”

*

The bitter stench of vomit hangs around the room like a swarm of pesky mosquitoes around one’s bed at a time of fatigue.

Karl praises Cherry for informing them about the pair of new patients stupid enough to eat from contaminated food. Adrian and Roderik.

The latter fills a bucket with more puke, gushing it out with impressive force.

Adrian tries to contain his own vomit at the sight of his fellow idiot. “Dude, watch where you’re splattering that stuff.” Some of it definitely didn’t reach the bucket.

“Same symptoms as the others,” Melisande confirms. “Vomiting, nausea, the usual. Did you eat anything local?” she asks the pair of newly afflicted.

“Cake. We found it in the kitchen.” The mere thought of more cake in his current condition makes Adrian’s stomach turn.

“I told you not to eat anything from local storage,” Conrad laments the serious lack of listening to good advice. It’s such a basic concept. Never eat from the kitchen you just conquered. Beyond stupid. Wouldn’t be the first time food storages are poisoned by the defenders before they flee or surrender. All food needs to be tested on animals before it can be consumed.

“It wasn’t from local storage. We acquired it from the kitchen, ready to eat,” Adrian tries to rebuke. “Roderik ate it too.”

“No shit,” Conrad observes his apprentice about to fill the bucket some more.

A guard arrives, delivering a new report. Karl reads it and states out loud the contents. “We have the former kitchen chef in custody. He was trying to sneak out of town, disguised as one of the hatori who are returning to their own lands.”

“Disguised as a hatori?” Conrad lifts an eyebrow. What kind of comedy scene is he supposed to imagine?

“Indeed. Someone recognized him in exchange of a good amount of coin.”

Somehow, Conrad expects that coin to be overpaid. How hard can it be to recognize a guy with faked hatori ears and tail? “Let’s go find out what he has to say,” he concludes. At least they have a clue which could lead them to an antidote.

The man turns to the pair vomiting up the room. “Don’t worry, everything will be fine soon enough. Right?”

Melisande backs up his words with her typical cheeriness. “Sure. Once we know the right poison, I’m confident I can prepare an antidote.”

Would be so much easier if she could scan the poison’s composition with her magic sight. Alas, that only works for identifying living beings. While diseases are a form of life, poison certainly isn’t.

“Endure for a short while longer,” Karl throws in his own concern, pulling up his nose at another fresh load of vomit, this time entering Adrian’s bucket.

*

“You certain about this?” Conrad asks Adrian.

“Yeah, I’m coming along,” the man stumbles while holding his aching stomach.

Conrad won’t stop him. He was pretty lighthearted about it all with Roderik around, though their condition is honestly not good at all. Fatalities **haven’t** occurred yet among the afflicted, yet **that won’t stay for much longer**. Still, he **can’t exactly say that before the** boy. Adrian definitely knows, on the other hand. Which is why he wants to come along.

That, and to avoid the smell of fresh puke.

...

“We’re here to see the prisoner,” Karl addresses the guards. He looks past the men. What’s going on over there? Why are they dragging a body over the ground?

“Um... I’m afraid I have bad news,” the guard doesn’t know where to begin.

*

“Great. This is just great,” Conrad stares at a dead body on the ground. “Any other chefs around trying to masquerade as hatori?”

Karl scratches his stubble before delivering the bad news. “Sadly, no. You’re looking at the only one.”

“He tried to escape and reached for my weapon,” one of the guards offers meekly.

Conrad lifts a hand to the man, signaling he can go. Exactly like before, what’s done is done. No point to be pissed about it. This is merely one of those days... “Did he have any possessions?”

The guard heads to the stash of confiscated goods and comes back with a single small pouch. “Only this.”

Conrad opens it and stares at the contents. Completely empty.

Adrian reaches for his knees and bends over, holding his stomach. “Damn, not again...” he complains, spilling contents on the floor for the prison’s cleaning crew to deal with.

...

Returning to his temporary office, Conrad throws the empty pouch onto the table. What a waste of time. There's no other choice than to keep searching until an alternative presents itself. Hopefully, in time to save lives.

"That's from the culprit?" Melisande asks.

"More like suspect. But yeah, should be his. If only it weren't empty."

The girl reaches for the pouch, going over the list of symptoms while lost in her own world. "Diarrhea, dizziness, nausea, vomiting, confusion..." She opens the pouch more and searches the cloth for traces of any substance.

Her actions quickly evoke a warning from the man in charge. "Careful! I don't want our medic getting sick next. If it works through skin..."

The girl brings up the pouch to her nose and sniffs. A possible conclusion begins to form. "Wisteria...?"

Conrad rises from his seat, hope returning rapidly. "You know what it held?"

"It smells like wisteria. And there are remnants of a fine powder in the pouch. Ground wisteria could have been used to poison the kitchen and storage. The symptoms would match."

"Can you cure it?!"

"Yes, if it really is wisteria. Does it grow anywhere in town?" She must know with more certainty.

Conrad searches around for help. He's not exactly a botanist. What the heck's a wisteria to begin with? A flower? A weed? Some kind of seed?

"I've seen a mansion with wisteria flowers," Karl answers.

Fist tighten in success. Of course! There's always the retired aristocrat to know about matters like fancy flowers.

Melisande reaches for a piece of parchment on the table and writes down a short list. "I need this nut oil and these two roots. They aren't hard to find."

Adrian jumps up in joy. Finally! Relief for his suffering will come soon!

With a loud moving of intestines, the man reaches for his belly and rushes out to the nearest outhouse.

*

The sun already set when calm returns to the sick ward. Enough antidote was prepared for all the afflicted and distributed hours ago.

“I believe my stomach is better now,” Adrian mumbles to Melisande. He hasn’t vomited in a while, and nausea definitely improves. Looks like the antidote works.

“It will take a couple days for the poison to completely leave your body, but there’s no more immediate danger.”

“It’s so hot now,” Roderik gasps for air, sweating like a worker in the midst of a desert sun.

“That’s a side-effect of the antidote doing its job. You only have a slight fever, really. However, your sense of temperature is confused, making it appear worse than it is. It will pass later in the night. For now, just don’t forget to drink a lot.”

“Alright then,” Conrad determines the situation is under control. “I’ll leave you two to Melisande and Luna. Try and find some rest.”

“And no more cake,” Karl laughs as they head out of the room.

*

Hours ticked by. Luna gives a signal to Melisande. Roderik finally fell asleep. He’ll be fine by morning come.

Adrian sighs when Melisande places a wet cloth on his forehead to lighten the man’s burden.

“Too cold?” she asks in a low voice as not to wake up the other patient.

“Nah, feels great. Only embarrassing, this entire ordeal.”

“Why is that?” she chuckles. “Because you ate cake you really shouldn’t have?”

“Yeah... That too.”

“So? Was it good cake?”

Adrian can’t contain a chuckle of his own at her question. “Decent. I had better. Definitely not worth all of this hassle.”

“You like cake?”

“Mom used to make the best of apple cake. Haven’t eaten any since...” Adrian stops speaking, thoughts flashing back to his past. A part of his life he never shared with anyone. Eyes stare into Melisande’s, realizing she patiently waits for the rest of his story. Would it be okay to tell her? She’s a doctor, which makes it sort of different. Yeah, a mental doctor in this case.

He blows out hot air and resigns himself to stem her caring curiosity. “Haven’t eaten any since she and Pops died. I come from a merchant family. Had a good business, coin came in well enough. One night, we were robbed by roaming hatori who fled their own lands. I hid under the bed. Could hear every word of their resentment towards my parents, their envy of what we had. Even though my old folks worked hard for it, till late every night.”

Melisande listens in silence, hand resting on the wet cloth. She can imagine the story. Many of her patients have similar tales which haunt them to this day. It’s painful to hear every time all over again. Reminds her of what happened with her own mother and sister. And how many others can easily relate to her pain.

“I hid like a coward,” Adrian’s voice turns to bitterness, “and did nothing when I heard their screams and saw their bodies fall down in blood, one after the other.” He notices the pained frown on Melisande’s face and tries to shift out of his bitter tone with a sigh. “That’s when I joined the army. Basically, to look for repentance through an honorable death, I guess.”

Thankfully, his friend in the army didn’t let it come so far. That, and the fact he slept with his former commander’s wife, which promptly earned him a reassignment towards the safe outskirts of Bournesse when the cheated husband developed accurate suspicions.

The girl remains silent, her thoughts still stuck on the story.

Until a flick of a finger on the forehead brings her back with a small jump. With an attempt at humor, Adrian tries to follow up. “I know it’s not the most engaging story, but don’t fall asleep on me now.”

A sudden panic overcomes Melisande. Was she being rude? Did he take it wrong? She really didn’t fall asleep at all, on the contrary!

A subdued laugh from the man in front eases her mind. “Hah. Finally got you to stop being Miss Perfect.”

“So, the story is...?”

“Sadly, it’s all true. Don’t worry about it. Those events are far in the past now. I only turned somewhat sentimental about my old folks when seeing that apple cake, you know? Not really a topic I usually bring up.” His hand reaches out for hers, lightly touching the back of her palm. “Aren’t you the same? With what your family went through?”

Melisande picks up her confident attitude, doing some playful teasing of her own. “I thought you were great at picking up girls? That approach needs work.”

“Hey! You know I’m not into kids.”

Her playfulness fades, replaced by a genuine question. “I’m still a child?”

Adrian doesn’t really know what to answer as he stares into her irises. Is she? Is she not? No matter how he looks at it, there’s only one correct answer, though it doesn’t really satisfy him. “In some sense, you definitely are, but...”

“But?”

Their eyes shift away. Adrian turns aside, confused. While Melisande takes the cloth from his forehead and renews its wetness. As she places it on again, she grins at her patient. “Apple cake, right? I can make some. If you didn’t develop a distaste for cake after this ordeal... And if mine would be good enough.”

“I’m pretty certain I can handle another cake.”

...

From the other side of the room, Luna rests with her face on her arms while she looks at the couple. The girl can’t help but show joy in what she heard.

*

“Revived!” Adrian paces around the breakfast table.

Roderik meanwhile still stuffs himself with honey-covered bread.

Melisande repeats her advice before she heads back to her practitioner's tent, already aware it will go ignored. "Careful! Your stomach is still weak. Better to take a light meal for now, like Adrian did."

The boy keeps stuffing even more, mumbling almost inaudible how he can handle it with ease.

Adrian shrugs at the stomach-failure disaster in the making and turns to Conrad. "We depart later today?"

"Yeah, if there are no other mishaps in our schedule, such as people who really should know better than eating from a poisoned storage."

"Kitchen," Adrian corrects him with a haughty lifted finger. "Anyway, I've got something important to show you. About that personal task you gave me."

Conrad's interest is immediately drawn, yet he doesn't voice it. Not here, out in the open, where spies might hang around. A simple nod will do, while practically dragging his friend out of the room.

...

Away from anyone or anything, the man asks what burns right at the forefront of his mind. "You decoded the diary?"

"The diary exists out of two parts. Selena's own writings, and a story called The Sleeping Princess."

Conrad already knows the story was inside the diary, though hearing that name again drives a pain through his heart. She wanted to be a princess one day, even had a plan in mind for it.

"It took me a while to analyze her normal mistake patterns, by comparing her older writings with newer ones, including some documents Cherry still had from when they practiced together. There's a difference in her error patterns between those two parts."

Adrian shows another book he brought along. "This is the actual story of The Sleeping Princess. It's the same throughout the continent practically word for word. She copied it from a book. And those mistakes, minus her normal type of errors, are the key to what we look for."

So she *did* stumble upon actual information through her snooping throughout the city of Sakai! Conrad can feel his energy rise. Her efforts won't be for naught!

Adrian takes a small bookmark from the diary and hands it over. "This is what I could form with all the deliberate mistakes she coded in."

Conrad takes the bookmark and reads the words aloud. Words once whispered to Selena by a man in hiding, right before she was caught.

"The divine maiden's virgin blood."

"It could also be the virgin maiden's divine blood," Adrian clarifies he isn't really sure about the order. "Hard to know for certain."

"Doesn't matter," Conrad answers. "I have a guess already what it could be." He reaches for the hand of Adrian with both his own, clasping around. "Thanks! This means a whole lot to me."

It's not only that he acquired the answer to a question which plagued him for a while now. More importantly, it means not wasting what Selena brought home for him. Not throwing aside what Grimald took her out for. Another piece of information paid for with life itself.

...

"Excuse me?" a girl's voice asks for attention.

Conrad looks up and notices Melisande stand further back where he came from. Her hands are stained with blood.

"What's wrong?!" both men instantly panic and shout out simultaneously.

The girl smiles innocently while lifting her bloodied hands like she just went slasher-mayhem with a scalpel on an unfortunate victim. "Nothing wrong at all. You should come and see."

...

When they reach her practitioner's tent, Melisande winks at Adrian while holding her hand out to stop him from entering. "Privacy. This is about another girl."

He wants to argue Conrad can go in just fine, though he stops. That other girl must be related to the man's personal affairs. At least Adrian knows there's nothing bad going on.

Conrad steps into the tent, joined by Melisande. Inside, he finds Kalina, resting on a piece of clean cloth on the examination bed.

“The herbal treatment was a success,” the druid girl proclaims. The origin of that blood is instantly clear. Kalina looks around, confused. Not sure why she was bleeding between her legs. “It turned out to be a kind of stasis as we expected. That effect has now been undone.” She turns to her patient and tries to comfort her this blood is nothing unusual. “You’re a healthy, fertile girl now.”

Conrad approaches and brushes through Kalina’s raven-black hair. “Does it hurt?”

“A little...”

“That will go over soon. I’m certain Melisande can explain all about this.”

Or one of the other girls, if she has her hands busy... Or stained with blood.

*

It’s already late at night when the supply caravan arrives at Sagara. Everyone joined the trip from Uskandar. Conrad wouldn’t leave anyone close to him behind, possibly in reach of Grimald or his superior. Not with what he has planned in here, where risk of another alarm going off always exists.

“Has the Spire delegation arrived yet?” Conrad asks the fortress’ gate guards.

“They have, Sir. Earlier today.”

Perfect. That means he won’t have to wait any longer.

Nobody asks a question as they walk through the fortress’ hallways. Everyone already knows where they are headed. A set of guards accompanies them, all of them armed with blood-enchanted weapons provided by Primrose. The maximum amount she could craft during their trip. A precautionary measure.

Their entire group descends down the long set of stairs, heading deeper and deeper. The atmosphere weighs down on everyone. They will finally find out what lies hidden deep underneath Sagara.

“This smell...” the siren mentions.

Conrad can't smell it yet, though he knows what she must be talking about. The stench of death is always present around that room.

The last set of stairs is left behind. A familiar face awaits them in the small area before the mysterious door. Gerald, mentor of Primrose and current Headmaster of the Spire.

“Welcome! I’ve eagerly awaited your arrival.” Multiple attempts were ongoing to break the seal. As expected, none were successful. **“I can’t think of any method to crack this seal without the key catalyst. Nothing ever worked. You sure about this?”** Gerald asks, curious what Conrad has in mind.

The answer comes with confidence. **“Tonight will be different.”**

The guards take up position around the room, securing it in case a Faceless were to show up. Meanwhile, Conrad hands a jar to the Headmaster.

“What’s this?”

“Our catalyst.”

Gerald takes a closer look at the contents. What is this stuff? **“It looks like blood.”**

“It is blood. A particular type, from a particular individual. That’s the catalyst.”

The **divine maiden’s virgin blood**. Or possibly, the **virgin maiden’s divine blood**. It doesn’t really matter. **Blood of the vessel of what is to become a God. Not just any, but the type which was sealed away, deliberately put in stasis so it could never be acquired under normal circumstances.**

The menstrual blood of Kalina.

...

Gerald takes a deep breath and prepares himself. **Breaking a seal this complex won’t be easy, even with the right catalyst.** He dips his fingers in the blood and places them on the seal. The **man’s** face instantly changes. The Headmaster can feel it. The door already responds to him. Or rather, to the catalyst. How Conrad found the correct one, he has no idea, though correct it is! That much became obvious to him already.

Primrose waits with baited breath. She too can see the door respond, its energies flowing rapid, seeking out the master key to unlock it. Whatever lies in that huge cavity behind the door will soon be revealed.

Energies flow through Gerald's staff. The man's hands shake together with the staff as he has to use all strength to keep it under control.

A gem from his staff bursts into pieces. A second one cracks, power completely drained. Gerald's expression changes. He bites his lips, trying his best to keep it together. Until suddenly, a large release of energy blasts through the room, strong enough to make everyone step backward.

"What happened?!" Conrad asks

The Headmaster observes his staff. All gems in it either broken or dimmed. "It's the correct catalyst. Sadly, the seal is still unbroken. I could feel the energies scan me, seep into my every being."

"An attack?" Adrian asks.

"No, another part of the process. I believe it was trying to identify me. Explore my energies, examine my blood. Test if I was allowed to enter this room." He turns dejected towards the others, his staff completely useless. "It rejected me. I did not pass its qualifications."

"What are those qualifications?" Conrad asks.

"I don't know. Probably my identity itself."

"No strangers allowed," Karl murmurs his conclusion.

Now what? They are so close! They have the catalyst, brought to them at the cost of Eris' and Selena's life! There has to be a method.... But what?

"I'll try," an uncertain voice quivers with stress. Primrose steps forward, uncertain how she's even going to do this. Regardless, she has to try.

"It's pointless," Gerald tries to assuage her. "It will reject you as another outsider."

"I've done the impossible before," she takes another step, looking at her former Mentor. "I undid a blood-magic tracking enchantment without even knowing how, because it shouldn't have actually worked. I used blood-magic to craft my own enchantments, even though I never crafted any before."

The girl is right. She has done things which boggle the mind. Acts even she doesn't understand how they were possible.

"Even so, this is on an entirely different scale. It won't accept an outsider."

“I must try.”

Gerald turns to the others in the room for their unspoken opinion. The man eventually sighs and steps aside. **“Let me give you an explanation first of what I went through. Maybe it will help.”**

Primrose cautiously smiles at her Mentor, feeling the pressure of defying his authority and the weight of what she is about to attempt.

The pair converses among each other while Gerald shares his experiences. Then he guides Primrose to the door, gesturing towards the jug.

The girl dips her fingers like her Mentor did and places them on the door. Once more, she can feel its energies respond. So far so good, exactly like last time. The real challenge comes now.

Her staff begins to shake similar to Gerald’s. Its gems burn bright, power contained within drained rapidly. The Headmaster wants to stop her already, yet Conrad reaches for his arm, telling him to wait and observe.

She’s holding it together. Somehow, she manages to direct the energies. Where Gerald had to use all his strength as an adult male to keep his focus and posture, she manages as a young girl. A feat which can only mean one conclusion.

The door does not instantly reject her.

A gem burns out, others radiating brighter to compensate. Another follows, its color dimming. Yet, no cracks. No shattering of gems follows.

Conrad can feel the same sensation welling up as everyone else in the room. She could **pull it off! As long as she doesn’t run out of power** before the process is finished, she could actually break the seal!

The last but one gem fades, leaving only one to burn all reserves it has remaining. Until a sudden flash brightens the room for only an instant.

...

Primrose breathes heavily. Her body is drained, her staff emptied. **However...**

She did it!

For a reason she doesn’t understand at all, the door’s seal accepted her request to enter. It treated her as an insider.

Glyphs on the double door glow bright. A series of mechanisms can be heard unlocking. And the door opens.

*

The revolting odor of death flows from within. It makes everyone present nauseous. What happened in here to cause such a strong stench?!

Conrad takes Primrose's shoulder and guides her back. "You stay here, with the others and the guards. We'll go check it out first."

The girl wants to protest, be there at his side, even if her energy is so drained she can barely stand.

He hugs the vulpes mage and whispers in her ear. **"You've done it once more, love. Leave the rest to us."**

Sylvië takes over, hugging Primrose in her wings while guiding her to the ground to find needed rest. Conrad is right. These children should not go in there. Not yet. The source of that smell should not be witnessed by any of them.

...

Conrad, Adrian and Karl draw their swords before entering. Gerald joins them. While his staff is used up, the Headmaster still has his ability to create enchantments. Meanwhile, the guards will stay with the children. Thankfully, no alarm went off at all. Though if Primrose was truly successful, that does make a strange kind of sense. Why would an alarm go off if one who is recognized to enter activated the door?

There's no light inside. Only a pair of torches brought along by Karl and Gerald illuminates the way.

The men have to contain their stomach contents from leaving. Source of the odor no longer a secret. As is the fate of all those guards and children who were led in here, together with Kalina. Four large piles of half-mummified corpses adorn the room with their grueling presence.

"All victims the seal was built upon," Gerald concludes in a somber tone.

This is what they were all afraid of. All eye-witnesses only mentioned groups of children going in. Never any who were seen leaving.

“Remnants of a ritual,” the Headmaster points with his torch.

A large magic circle fills the center of the room. The piles of corpses are connected to it.

“Any idea what it was for?” Adrian asks.

“Can’t say at a glance. Only that it’s blood-magic, and an extremely high-grade version of it. This must have been last activated at least around two years ago, though I can still detect lingering energies everywhere. It’s all over the place! Far beyond remarkable...”

The Headmaster is clearly impressed by what he sees, deeply so. **“To have remnant energies for so long... Its scale may be smaller than the circle underneath the Spire, but its composition must be... unparalleled. Stretching beyond our theoretical summit.”**

“There’s a bookcase to the side,” Karl points out with his own torch.

The Headmaster moves towards it, curious what the books may describe. His face lights up with awe when he browses through them. **“They are notes and remarks by the one who crafted this circle! A man named Grimald.”**

That name instantly catches Conrad’s attention. He quickly joins Gerald to search through the books.

“Oh! This is how they made the vessel. Look! This picture depicts the circle.” The Headmaster shows the book to Conrad, detailing what he can understand of its writings. **“They used a pure, unspoiled child as a vessel, infusing it with divine blood...?”** he flips the page, eager to find out more. **“Only one accepted the divine blood. Then they corrupted it by ritually sacrificing all those who were still alive, to create their perfect vessel. Ready to be fueled by death and decay.”**

The man closes the book with a dusty slap. He knows enough. The smell here is too revolting to hang around for much longer. The sacrifices required for what was accomplished too stomach-turning. Though one question does stick in his mind. **“Where did they acquire divine blood from to start the process?”**

...

Karl took distance from the others, heading further into the brooding darkness. He suddenly stops, peering upwards. Strength leaves him at what he witnesses, a subtle

vibrato of growing humbleness present in his voice. “Uh, guys? I don’t know how to say **this, but...** You have to see this.”

The others join him, an extra torch raised to light what fills the vast cavity. Only a fraction of it is visible, yet already dominates the area, taller than the light can reach.

Adrian utters his disbelief. “**Is that the head of a giant dragon? That thing’s monstrously huge!**”

“No,” Conrad replies **strangely calm**. “That’s no dragon.”

He already **understood what they observe**. The answer to Gerald’s question.

They discovered the resting place where a giant head lies in stasis.

...

The one missing Virtue.

...

Spirit.

Act 4 ~ Chapter 7



The Final Stretch

After cleaning up the chamber to make it bearable to spend more than ten minutes inside, a week was spent by Gerald and Primrose to comb through every nook and corner, hoping to find more details about the workings of that circle and significance of the lost Virtue.

Primrose rolls around a pebble with her foot while she takes a break, brooding on a particular topic.

“If there’s something on your mind, maybe an old mentor can help?”

The girl hesitates at Gerald’s words, not really sure how to voice her concerns. “I’m so confused. Why did it work? I can’t figure it out.”

Gerald closes the book he was reading after placing a bookmark and lays it down on the table. He follows the wall in slow pace, observing all leftover documents. “How you managed to break the seal, I can’t answer either. By all rights, it should have been impossible. That said, the fact is that you did. And as a result, we now have access to all this

information and made a discovery far more important than any before in all of our historical records.”

A lost Virtue. At least, that’s what Conrad described that giant as. He could even name it. Spirit. What must have happened to that man for him to know? Gerald has no idea, though he does trust his judgement. Just look at the size alone. No ancient dragon on record ever came remotely close to this.

And far more so, there’s a regality radiating from the head, even in this state of dormant separation. It’s alive with magical energies. So much of it he couldn’t even detect them at first, too vast to grasp for his mortal senses. Melisande described it as the sole source of the ley-line she felt underneath this barren, lifeless landscape.

That young druid had it right. He finally understands now what ley-lines truly are. The flow of energy connecting all life towards its Creator. An asomatous river, like an invisible blood vessel, turning all which lives into a part of a grander, single organism. Singular, yet an almost infinite plurality.

Gerald places his hand on the magic door which sealed this secret for so long. “I understand your worries. It’s always difficult to discover sides of ourselves we don’t recognize in the mirror. At such times, always remember that none of us are any different. We all carry strangers within us. And sometimes, we suddenly find ourselves eye to eye with one such unknown face.”

He is no different. Gerald often participated in ceremonies dedicated to Cloegandr. That said, was he ever truly a believer? He doesn’t really know the answer to that question. What he does know is this discovery inside the basement, which made him meet such a stranger within him. A shade he never could see in the mirror before. The part of his existence which connects him to everyone and everything else. A measure of divinity hiding inside his core being, the hidden hand of his Maker.

“I did use forbidden magic again,” Primrose mumbles. “Then, and before that already.” She never really spent much thought about it, though after discovering that unknown part of herself, it did come more to the forefront of her mind. She broke the code of the Spire. A code the entire continent follows. Maybe that’s a part of this unknown face slumbering inside of her? Who knows what else could follow?

“As Headmaster of the Spire, I retroactively grant you permission for your use of blood-magic in the past, and for a while longer in the future.” He turns to Primrose and makes an attempt at sounding more upbeat, even though the topic matter isn’t exactly positive. “Let’s face it, we’re dealing with exceptional circumstances. Not every day do we face a coming cataclysm of the size these Faceless want to carry out. I doubt any former Headmaster in the entire history of our Order would disagree if I say it’s completely okay to bend the rules a little.”

He walks closer and takes a seat next to Primrose, continuing his words with a laugh. “Just a little though. Let’s not start making our own avatars of destruction. I trust you won’t?”

The girl can’t hide a cautious laugh of her own, feeling somewhat better about herself.

...

Conrad walks into the chamber, joining them at their table. “Anything new?”

“We’ve confirmed what was assumed already. They extracted blood from Spirit and put it into their test subjects to see who accepted it. Then they used the remaining children to corrupt the vessel and seal the door.”

Everything else follows what was already known back when coming out of the Compendium Labyrinth in Eralthyr. The vessel slowly fills up with destructive energies in order to fuel it, until the critical point will be reached.

Conrad understands this much, yet there’s one characteristic to the vessel he doesn’t really grasp yet. “Why does that dark ball of energy appear every time to suck up the Faceless once they are defeated?”

Kalina is the vessel, he knows that much. It’s like she sucks up the Faceless exactly how she would that chaos. Why would they make her like that? Isn’t taking control of the vessel at the end of it all their goal?

“That piqued my interest as much, and I believe we found the answer,” Gerald looks around for a book on the table. “Early on in our investigation, we noticed a particular detail. Though it took us until today to figure out what it likely means.” The Headmaster opens the book and points at a drawing. “This is the magic circle on the ground, used for creation of the vessel.”

Conrad looks at the circle from the book and tries to compare it with the giant one inside the room. Not that easy to acquire a good picture because of its size and location. **“Yeah, looks the same,”** he answers.

“Ah, but it isn’t,” Gerald waggles his finger like a teacher who outsmarted a student.

Conrad frowns as he tries to compare the picture with the real deal. No matter how much he tries, **that’s the exact same circle.**

The Headmaster places down his finger on a tiny part of the drawing. **“Notice this tiny line?”**

Conrad’s frown doesn’t change. He can see the line. **It’s right there! What is this guy getting at?**

Gerald explains with the giddiness of a child talking about their favorite mythical beast. **“That’s not actually a regular line. It’s a long and incredibly tiny inscription. The formula is written down right here in the book. Now, if we compare this picture to the actual inscription on the floor...”**

He gets off his seat with energy and heads to the corresponding part of the circle, beckoning Conrad to come take a look. **“... It’s different!”**

The frown finally dissipates. The Headmaster is right! **Damn, that’s some** seriously small inscription. He has to lower **on his knees to actually be able to even see it’s there.** In fact, this entire circle seems to be filled with similar inscriptions. These two went over it all in the course of only **one week? That’s amazing speed!**

“And this is the only part which is different? What is it for?”

“It’s the only difference. A last-minute alteration, not written down by the creator of this circle. Not even in later documents which seem to be from after the ritual was completed do we find any references to a change.” Gerald lowers his voice to whispering levels. **“It was not to be known. A tiny adjustment, kept as a secret by the architect.”**

What the man hints at starts to sink in for Conrad. The key lies with that architect. The Master of this chamber. Grimald.

Conrad paces around, nodding as he turns more confident in his conclusion. Grimald made this, though he had orders from one above him. The entire reason why he’s backstabbing his supposed allies, and that screaming of his name in betrayal by the first

Faceless they beat, it all makes more sense now. He secretly altered the circle, carrying out a plan of his own! **“What is the architect trying to accomplish? What is the change for?”**

“That, we don’t know yet for certain. What you mentioned earlier is likely related. The vessel consumes his fellow Faceless once defeated. **That can’t be** originally intended. What is written down described this should happen, eventually. But only at the end, once the vessel is complete. Then, they were to join it while retaining their mind, thus gaining control.”

“He’s taking out his competition to become the sole mind in control,” Conrad nods.

“That’s our assumption, yes.”

“Is there any information on how to stop this plan?”

Gerald loses his excited mood. **“None.”**

*

The flag of the Gold Serpents pushes forward, driving through the enemy army. Ranks are already scattered, the will to fight broken. One of few actual battles encountered in Uskandar will soon reach its end, the outcome already decided.

The Restoration Rebellion is halfway through the country where the Union has its roots. More resistance was expected than actually met, which Conrad does not consider a fortunate outcome.

“Don’t push too hard. Focus on the cavalry!” he shouts his orders.

It’s a hard tactical decision to make, as he tries to take strategic outcome into consideration. He still remembers how hard Bournesse fought in their last stand against Gleaze. A balance should be found between scattering the enemy ranks they encounter quick and efficiently, while leaving them with a sense an escape is still possible. Grant their enemy a comfort in knowing the end of the Union does not mean the end of their lives and livelihoods. Or they will fight all the harder once that final stand comes. With how little opposition they encountered, Conrad can only assume the opposing side is betting all their forces on that final encounter, piling up a massive army around the Uskandar capital, Faramund.

The Union's retreat left deep scars across the country. Farms, villages, entire towns were burned to the ground in their wake. With morale and a significant amount of the citizens' loyalty lost, they have nothing to lose by using scorched-earth tactics. On the contrary, considering what the ultimate end goal is of the Faceless in charge, this is more icing on the cake to harvest an extra amount of last-minute chaos.

How far the vessel already has come? Conrad has no idea. All he can hope is that this last stretch before the finish line isn't enough to fill their unholy cup to laud the birth of a god.

In addition, the enemy's tactic denies local resources to the rebels and creates a bureaucratic and logistical nightmare to deal with. The amount of injured, homeless and starving locals unfortunate enough to get caught up in the Union's retreat caused plenty of sleepless nights in how to deal with their issues.

One silver lining to it all is that it helps avoid what Conrad feared the most. The reason he chose Kalina to be his Envoy of Cloegandr. To avoid retaliation of the rebels against what many still wrongfully perceive as their former oppressors. Those present here can now see the harsh truth with their own eyes. That those they harbored grudges against are no less victims by a small subset of fanatics and their few Masters.

"The enemy cavalry breaks off earlier than anticipated! They are fleeing north-east!"

Conrad curses at the news. **That's where a village lies!** If the fleeing forces reach, no doubt anyone in their path will be cut down to create more hassle for the pursuers. **"Cut them off! Do not let them reach the village!"**

Though he can already see with his own eyes his order is no longer possible. Their own cavalry won't catch up in time. Numerous alternatives flash through his mind. Which one offers best chances for a favorable outcome?

"Let's go! We'll warn the people ourselves!" he pats on the neck of Silvermoon.

The unicorn heads off as fast as he can. When it comes to speed, he'll catch up easily with the Union's cavalry and overtake them. If Conrad can make it first to the village, he can warn people to barricade themselves inside!

...

He should catch up with the fleeing troops soon. He can see them ride over a hill. There's enough time left, the village is still a small distance removed from there. Behind him,

Conrad can see Karl with his cavalry in pursuit. **They'll take longer** to catch up, while they are close enough the Union **can't linger in the village.**

At worst, the enemy can throw some torches on houses and stab anyone they pass. His warning should avoid plenty of casualties if he can only get there first! He knows it's a risk. **Most villagers won't pick up a weapon,** though a radical from inside the settlement could take a shot at him. Yet, there's no alternative. **This is the path he chose to walk.**

The Union disappears behind the hill as Silvermoon ascends with rapid pace.

The man's attention is suddenly caught to the unexpected. Conrad can already hear the clash of weapons behind the hill. Did the villagers openly join the rebels? They wouldn't stand a chance against cavalry!

As he reaches the hill, he can spot the source of conflict. A pair of banners wave through the air, catching the Union off guard. The banners are never seen before by Conrad, though he can instantly identify them.

They are the Legion of the Bear and the Legion of the Dire Wolf, each accompanied by their Consort, one of them well known. The Watcher of Eralthyr.

*

A large wolf stands at the front, Eldrin right next to it, hand resting on the animal. Conrad can hardly believe the man can stay so calm next to the beast. He fought two dire wolves before, that memory still vivid in his mind. Their cunning and strength was not to be underestimated.

The wolf's teeth are all visible, as if it gives a warning this newcomer better pay his respects.

"Calm down, girl. The fight is over," Eldrin rubs her fur without fear.

Conrad decides on using Eldrin's military title, rather than Watcher. That would seem most fitting in this scenario. **"Honorable Consort, it's a pleasure to see you again."**

Eldrin steps forward to shake hands. **"Looks like we arrived in time to catch a part of the action."**

Conrad already knew more legions were coming from the **Alma's various cities**. It took Eldrin a while to get them all on board. More are present throughout the pushing border to reinforce other territories and flanks.

“The Bear and Falcon will help secure the moving border as we push on. The Tortoise will aid in logistics, protecting supply lines.”

Conrad nods. That should definitely help secure their final offensive.

Eldrin will return with his Legion, only here to escort the rest of their troops to the front-line. The homeland should never be left undefended for long. The **Alma don't exactly** have a large standing army. Though there is one other important task he is assigned with during his return trip.

“I received your news. You found the missing Virtue? I'm looking forward to meet Him.”

“The Spire's earth mages are hard at work right now to get Him to the surface. It should take them a week or two.”

“Remarkable speed for such an endeavor.”

Conrad can only agree. Knowing how deep the chamber is, the earth mages have to be very competent to open a path wide enough for such a giant to pass. Energy reserves were their biggest worry and the reason why it would usually take a lot longer. Three of the large **crystals on top the Spire's towers have been relocated to Sagara to act as their power source**. Two more will be used to help with transport once at the surface.

“You can count on us,” Eldrin answers with confidence. **“We won't let anyone get their hands on Spirit. A cargo of this importance should always have a suitable escort, even in safe territory. Though I must ask, are you certain the World Shaper will accept our gift?”**

“He will.” Conrad is certain of it. Cloegandr will accept His lost Virtue. True, the World Shaper currently **doesn't have the motivation to head out** of His resting place, exactly because the God lost this particular Virtue. That said, anyone who locks themselves in their room from depression won't reject a gift placed right at their front door.

The main challenge is to get that gift there, at the Abyss. To escort Spirit past the Misty Woods in particular is the biggest hurdle. That path through the forest is not nearly wide enough. Thankfully, Sylvië feels confident they can get enough sirens and harpies together

to give the head an airlift if the endeavor only lasts a short distance, aided by the Spire's mages. It will still be a titan's effort requiring much preparation.

Eldrin signals to one of his accompanying wagons. A pair of familiar faces and a single servant are brought before both men.

Conrad **instantly steps forward and takes his son from the servant's arms**, right into his own. **The man's** face turns to brightness. Only a little while longer, and they will not have to be separated anymore.

"I'll take him back home with me **until the war is over,**" Eldrin remarks. "But I thought it would be nice to offer my grandson this opportunity to meet **his father.**"

The other pair of familiar faces are Olive and Pepper, each carrying their own child.

Eldrin quickly explains their presence. "These two asked to come along when we picked up supplies in Sakai as planned. They apparently have their children's father here, and wish to spend their time with him for this last stretch. I hope that **father is still in good health.**"

"He is, don't worry," Conrad wipes the worry from both mothers' faces.

They peer into the distance where the main bulk of the mercenaries arrive. That father will be right among them.

"I also wish to see my daughter before I leave again," Eldrin turns more somber.

Conrad can already guess what the man has on his mind. He considers it his last chance to ever see her. "You still don't believe we'll succeed?" he asks the Consort.

"Honestly? No. I still doubt prophecy can be changed."

"And yet, you are here."

The man overlooks his own troops, sighing. "True. Doubt is not absolute by definition. Trust me, I really want to believe you can pull it off. As a minimum comfort, I can move on knowing we tried."

"I can't pull it off," Conrad answers with a laugh. "But thankfully, I'm not alone."

*

With the fighting over, Adrian goes through the checklist in his mind. Pay was distributed. Guards have their orders, as do scout patrols. Supplies brought by Eldrin's forces were transferred and stashed. What else is there to do?

Conrad left with the Legion of the Dire Wolf as they head towards Sakai for their escort mission. He won't go along for the entire distance, only gone for a couple days. He didn't want them to go through this relatively short stretch of territory right at the front line on their own, taking a sizable amount of troops with him as additional backup.

Which leaves Adrian in charge of the front line until his return. No large offensive is planned, though a counter attack is always possible, albeit unlikely with the consolidation tactic used by the enemy.

He peers into the distance, towards the horizon. "The capital should be visible in a couple weeks' march. Almost at the end."

Karl stands next to him, looking at the same line as far as the eye can see. "Let's not grow too sentimental. A clear head on a firm set of shoulders at all times."

Adrian gives him a slap on the back. "Loosen up, man. Think positive. Once we're done, aren't you marrying Cherry?"

"See, that's the kind of talk I prefer to avoid before a battle. We reached this far alive already, let's keep it that way. I prefer not to make a mistake because my mind is somewhere else at a crucial moment."

Speaking of Cherry, the girl passes them with a couple documents. Her pregnant belly is easily visible, as are her eyes flicking towards the child's father with sparkles of love in them.

Adrian tries to contain his laughter when he notices Karl's stoic attitude can't help cave to her youthful charms, recomposing himself with a cough.

...

"Yeah, I'll marry her," Karl eventually breaks the silence. "Of course, I will. She's the reason I feel no fear, even though we're supposedly facing the end of the world." While at the same time she is the reason he fears. Not afraid to face a cataclysm he learned the truth of a while ago, now afraid to lose her, never to see her again.

“How about you?” Karl deflects. “Not interested in scoring some ass before we reach the end of the road? If we fail, that’s it, you know? No more to be had. Who knows, maybe you’ll even learn to love again. Never too late to start a family.”

Now it’s Adrian’s turn to shift into uncomfortable silence. Love again? Start a family? What is there to think about that? “I... don’t know anymore. Never really thought about starting a family.”

“Not interested?”

“That’s not it. Only that I wasn’t actively searching.” What would even be the point to someone who joined the army to find a place to die? Even after that changed, thanks to his friendship with Conrad, a family was never at the front of his mind. “It sounded like one of those matters which just happen, you know? Poof! And suddenly it falls into your lap out of the blue sky. Only, it never did...”

“And now you already accepted it never will,” Karl answers for him.

Cherry passes once more after delivering the documents, waving like a child to Karl for all rough mercenaries to see, without a hint of embarrassment. He simply smiles and waves back.

“I was very much like you, until not very long ago. Now look at me. I’m waving like a dork at the beautiful girl who carries my child. I learned to love again, and acquired love from her in return. Never say never.”

“Yeah, but who would fulfill that role for me?”

“Surely, you’re interested in *someone*?” Karl insists. “Even if it’s only lust for now. It’s a start. Or haven’t you gotten over that fraud from within the Spire yet?”

Adrian sighs once more. His conclusion arrived back at the starting point of their discussion. “I don’t know anymore.”

Cherry winks at Karl, waiting in front of their shared tent with an air of romantic passion surrounding her.

“Think about it a while longer,” Karl gives his parting words to Adrian, beginning to walk towards Cherry. “My girl is calling for me.”

*

Adrian walks through the camp, lingering on that conversation. “Uh, I get a headache of this,” he grumbles.

He needs a distraction, and fast. Luckily, he already found one. Roderik stands further ahead, fiddling with a single feather in his hands. It’s the plume he received from Sylvië, the one used to sign a blood contract in the Compendium Labyrinth. Still one of three treasures to the boy, as it always will be. The other two his parents’ handkerchief, and a necklace from the man who took him in.

“Hey, Roderik!” he calls out to him from further ahead. “Want to spar?”

“Sure,” the kid instantly responds, eager to test his skills.

...

“Your wives are watching,” Adrian blocks a strike.

“I know,” Roderik answers without turning his head. He won’t be distracted that easily anymore.

A trio of girls cheer on the fight. Olive and Pepper, holding their children, joined by Luna.

Adrian gives a quick jab, dodged by the nimble footwork of Roderik. “Nice dodge... Did you talk to them about Luna?”

“Thanks. Yeah, I told them I wish to take Luna into our family.”

Adrian is impressed by how much the boy has grown since they last sparred. Lately, there hasn’t been all that much opportunity to have a mock fight. They should do this more often. Good training, fine distraction, and a bonding moment of palls. “How did they respond?” he asks.

“They started making plans for the wedding ceremony already.”

Adrian laughs out loud, barely deflecting a strike from his sparring opponent in his humored state.

Roderik takes a step back, taking the time to talk more serious, pausing their duel. He speaks for everyone to hear. “I’ll wait until the war is over. Then we marry in celebration.”

Adrian can see Olive reach for Luna’s hand, giving it a little approving squeeze. The girl about to join their family is visibly enamored, no doubt looking forward to what dress she might wear. Though hints of sad feelings are present as well, at the knowledge her sister cannot be physically present.

The man lowers his sword in turn, asking Roderik a question. “How does it feel to be a father?”

The young father forms a bodacious grin, eyes burning with fire. “The best ever! Invigorating!” His sword lashes out with speed. Adrian has to use all his years’ worth of experience to block the unexpected swing in time.

“Good moves, kid,” he bides time to recover his footing with another question. “Aren’t you going to send them back to Sakai for our coming battle?”

Roderik thinks deep about the question, and comes up with the same answer as when he thought about it himself earlier. “No. I feel the same as Olive and Pepper. There’s not much point in going back. If we lose, the Faceless will succeed in their plan. How would they be safe anywhere else?”

The young man has a point, Adrian has to admit. There would be no purpose in hiding anywhere.

Roderik lifts his arm and aims it at his family. “I would rather have them here with me, and gain strength out of their presence. Strength to do what needs to be done. Strength to bring an end to this war, and give them a better future.”

Adrian has no reply, stunned by the mature words thrown at him.

Roderik wastes no time and tries once more, striking with the swiftness of a young boy.

“Fucking ass!” Adrian wants to curse. That damn brat!

“Ha-ha! That’s a win!” Roderik lifts his arms in the air, parading before his cheering family.

“Alright, you win,” Adrian admits defeat. “Better prepare yourself for next time. I won’t fall for that twice.”

“Only need to win once in a battle,” the cheerful winner repeats one of the lessons he learned from Conrad. Then he turns serious again, that sense of maturity returning. “See? That’s why I want them near. Fighting for someone makes you stronger.”

The man shakes his head. What is this? Reversed roles of who should be mentoring who? Yet, he can’t deny that was a fair win. And the kid definitely had plenty more presence in their fight compared to last time. Apparently, some of that comes from his family? Yeah, somehow, he can believe it.

*

Adrian looks up to the sky, sitting down on the ground. What a strange day. What was supposed to be a distraction in the form of a duel only became more of the same topic.

“Being lazy?” a soft voice calls for him. Melisande takes place in front of him. She carries a plate with both hands. **“Apple cake. Remember?”**

She doesn't squat down, choosing to bend over instead. Her tunic falls down from gravity, what was hidden beneath now visible behind the plate of apple cake, emphasized by that same tug of gravity.

“Want a good taste of my precious cake?” she speaks with more open innuendo than a young girl should.

Adrian swallows when he reaches out, hand aiming for the cake while eyes linger at the offered opportunity above.

“I had to protect this plate along the way from various rough folks,” she laughs while standing upwards again. **“And far from easy to find all the right ingredients in an army.”**

As he brings the cake to his mouth, Melisande tries to hide her growing insecurity. Will he like it? Would it taste any good? With her changes in posture, he can now see her in profile. Chest moving forward and backwards as she breathes, soft flesh from subtle and youthful side-boob **constantly revealed by her dress'** complete lack of adequate covering other than the pair of straps around her waist. Her curly hair brushes over a shoulder in a gentle swoop. Seeking out her back which smoothly curves into her waist. Curving once more to her round rear, perfectly hugged by the paper-thin tunic. As always, underwear tempts through its absence, no band from panties present to break her sideways nudity.

She observes him closely from the corner of her eyes. Panic begins to form on her face when she can see him freeze up. **“Ah... If it tastes bad...”**

Adrian quickly shakes off his thoughts, forcing eyes away from her alluring sides and his imagination of what lies beneath the loincloth portion of her outfit. **“No, it tastes good, actually. Very good.”** Now he has the state of mind to actually notice, yeah, this is exactly how he remembers apple cake to be. What a strange nostalgia this taste wells up. **“It's like**

Mom used to make. With some texture to the apple left. And the right amount of sweetness.”

Melisande breathes out, letting go of her stress. Phew, her cake received the seal of approval. She sits down on the ground herself and takes a piece from the plate to nibble on in girly bites.

“Could you tell me about your mother?” Adrian asks, afraid to look at her.

Melisande pulls up her legs, folding one arm around her thighs while she eats with the other. “I learned to bake cake from Mother.” She instantly laughs at her words. “Well, I actually forgot how to make it, to be honest. Too long ago. But I found the recipe again last year. It’s the right taste, so I believe I got it right.”

The loincloth held underneath her pulled-up legs starts to slip, gliding from underneath her arm. Until it completely slips out and falls onto the ground. With both the girl’s legs in their current position, Adrian can see her bared thighs for their entire length.

He should let her know. Or at the least, he should definitely turn away.

Right as the man’s mouth opens to warn about her exposure, the girl moves her legs, fidgeting around, one thigh slips against the other just enough to see her flesh give and adjust. Any words he had in mind to speak come to a premature halt, locked in time. Only that vision of soft, rubbing skin remains, with right in the middle something tightly pressed between her thighs. Her symbol of girlhood. The shape of a peach, firmly hugged on both sides.

“Mother was great at cooking. She was also a respected druid, one of the best.”

Adrian wants to slap himself. What the heck is he doing?! He’s staring at a girl’s exposed parts! And she’s only a child! Just look at that perfect, young part of her body. Not a single hair visible. He swallows as her legs fidget more, round lips down there adjusting themselves to retain that perfect hug.

“Father could complain she was persistent and stubborn. But Mother always laughed he was the stubborn one.” Melisande lets out a small nostalgic gasp. She placed her cheek on her knee and looks right at Adrian. “You fell in love with Mother, right?”

Adrian doesn't notice her stare, too captured by what he can spot from her pulled-up legs. He answers with uncertainty. "I'm pretty certain I did, yeah. Even if I don't really know what love is."

Yet, he wants to believe that was it. So much more intense than anything else ever was.

"First time?" she chuckles.

"Probably..."

"How did it feel?" her tone has a delicate teasing to it. The girl's legs sway, just barely noticeable. Left to right and back, while she still rests her head on them. The peach dances dangerously seductive, like a magic spell tempting with the natural talent of a succubus.

Adrian answers her question with a monotonous tone, too entranced. "It was... a kind of desire so strong I couldn't resist."

"Desire?" she whispers.

"I wished to see her face. To have her charming presence. To hear the melody of her voice. Some of it pure. To see her safe and happy. While some of it..."

"Hmm?" she asks for more specific details.

"Some of it filled with nothing but raw lust."

Melisande giggles at his words. "Sounds like love to me. Don't worry. You'll find that exact same feeling again for someone, eventually. Maybe sooner than you think?"

"So it seems..."

The girl's hand moves from underneath her pulled up legs, heading lower. Her palm stops, blatantly covering her revealed privates.

Adrian turns red as a lobster, facing away. A stuttering mess leaves his mouth. She knew he was watching! She definitely knew! How long has she known?!

Her legs come down, the girl taking a happy bite out of her cake. Only to fumble with her other hand, trying to catch a part which broke off and fell down, caught right into her tunic. The hand digs in, searching for that lost piece as her own face flushes red at what wasn't planned to happen at all.

Her movements pause. There it is, a decent-sized chunk of cake. Slowly, she pulls it back out. "It was stuck between the cloth and my breasts," the redness from her cheeks doesn't fade.

Adrian's eyes are glued where she found the cake. Right in her valley where he can see a subtle outline grant feminine shape to her tunic. Unexpectedly, words leave his lips he didn't even prepare or think about. "Did you ever love...?"

Melisande grins as she closely observes the piece of cake she salvaged as a treasure from her body's comforts. Then she places it in front of Adrian's mouth, tempting him to taste it.

His mouth opens, the flavor of cake enters his mouth as she pushes it in. He can swear, there's a very subtle difference noticeable. Surely, it must be his imagination. It can't be her breasts' sweat. Right? Or is it?

She utters with a teasing sparkle in her eyes. "Maybe... I have an interest in matters of love?"

And the girl stands up, wiping crumbs from her tunic. Her eyes remain locked with his for as long as possible while she turns around. Then she runs away with petite steps, light as a feather, arms held out wide.

...

"Hot damn..." Adrian sighs, his body on fire as it has only been few times before. "How is this supposed to make me stronger? I only feel more confused." He leans backwards, staring at the sky. The first stars begin to show. "Confused, and so fucking turned on."

*

Adrian wakes up with bags underneath his eyes. What a night. He barely got any sleep at all. Lust haunted every corner of his dreams, yet no dream could satisfy him. Not after what she treated him with, dangled before his eyes like the juiciest peach before a horny rabbit.

He rubs his eyes... No, that's not how the saying goes. Whatever. It's morning, time to get up and forget this feeling.

The man stretches before he walks through the camp. Most are still asleep, apparently. Figures. Not everyone had a young and sweet nightmare on their mind to keep themselves awake with.

This thing in his pants is still erect and sensitive as fuck. Oh well, should get better after taking a good leak. First thing to do in the morning for any gentleman is to enjoy a good piss in the wild.

As the weeds are watered, Adrian's attention shifts to his side. There's a strange banging going on. Is it one of the horses cut loose? Wouldn't be the first time one wasn't fastened properly and got himself stuck between a wagon or whatever.

He shakes the last bit of piss around and closes his pants, seeking out the noise.

"Ah, come on..."

He shouldn't have looked. It's those felis siblings Conrad picked up once. They're inside the narrow space between a pair of wagons. The girl leans against a wagon, standing on one foot's toes, bashing her other leg repeatedly into the wagon in front as she makes love with her brother. Every time he drives into the girl, her foot slams against the wood shortly after.

Adrian turns around. Great for them they're having fun at this early hour of the morning, though definitely not what he needs right now. That erection which was about to subside is already returning with a vengeance.

Dammit, they are both children. What is it with him lately?!

Grumbling, he heads towards his tent. Maybe he can find some last-minute shut-eye there to try and forget. The man passes Roderik's tent. He already shakes his head, trying to ignore what he can hear inside.

The tent opens and Olive exits, about to seek fresh air to start her morning routine. "Morning," she greets Adrian.

Adrian greets her in return, doing his best to ignore the scenery he can spot behind her, where the proud mother's daughter takes their shared man between her legs.

Better to walk onward and forget about it. This never happened. He just met Olive and said good morning. There was definitely not the sound of a young girl moaning, nor the display of her legs dangling in mid-air with yesterday's sparring partner humping her like a trained hamster.

...

Finally. The safety of his tent. Enough of these temptations of particularly young and tender flesh. Nope, only his tent, and an empty bed. Maybe some alcohol too. It might help with falling asleep. Really should have done that much earlier last night, rather than sit there staring at the starry sky like a dumb teenager who just discovered the charms of the opposite sex.

Adrian plops down on his bed, finding relief. Until a female voice breaks his mood.

“Mm... Karl...”

The blond man rolls his eyes. Oh, for fuck’s sake. Is there no escaping this? Now he can hear Cherry from the neighboring tent. Why is everyone in this camp in a mood to fuck all of a sudden?!

“Alright already! I get the message!” He stands up with vigor and walks out of the tent in quick paces. Fine! Have it your way! If nature itself conspires against you, there’s no other option left. “How many times do I have to repeat it, I’m not into children!”

He’s been too long without any. Simple as that. How long has it been since last time he had a woman? Over six months? Way too long. Now look at the result!

The comfort wagons come into view. They as well have a busy morning, multiple couples visible even outside the wagons. “I should simply fuck this frustration right away! Preferably with a busty female, tall and with wide hips. With a mature voice to celebrate our joy. One with...”

His paces come to a stop, words trailing off into the distance, observing the women as they are in unison with a man.

Once more, he shakes his head in defeat. What has that girl done to him?

Adrian turns around and walks away.

*

Primrose rolls around on her bedding. What a sad night, without Conrad to hug and cuddle up to. Hopefully, the days pass soon so he quickly returns back to her.

The girl yawns from fatigue and pulls the covers higher. It's going to be one of those lazy days, where crawling out of bed is as difficult as resisting one's favorite dessert after being forced to eat the regular same old for far too long.

Movement to her side signals either Lisette or Kalina heading out to take a morning pee. Doesn't matter who it is, as the other girl is quick to follow in the first's footsteps.

Not Primrose though. Oh no. This blanket feels far too warm to leave. Even if she does kind of feel the need to take a pee. But not yet! Only after she grows tired of that fuzzy warmth belonging to the bedding and her own tail she holds on to. Which will only be when she really can't hold it in anymore.

Shortly after, both girls come back.

Lisette whispers to Kalina. "Let's go wash ourselves inside one of the comfort wagons, they have a sealed-off area. Then we don't wake Primrose."

Oh, what a great idea, Primrose has to admit in her half-asleep state. Now she can get the extra rest her baby needs. Well, okay, Lisette is also pregnant. But still, all the rest her baby needs! That sounds like a great excuse to lazy around under the covers.

Thoughts dose off as sleep sets in. That desire to pee isn't going to win any time soon at this rate. Until her ears pick up more noise again, an annoyed twitch running through them. Did either of them forget something? A blanket maybe? The comfort wagons should have enough of those.

Is that someone yelling? Sounds like the guard in front of their tent. Why is his voice turning distant? Is it that stupid kid again who always streaks around naked while annoying everyone, until someone gives him a spank?

Rustling enters the tent while Primrose pulls the covers higher, all the way over her head. So damn annoying! Can't people be silent in the morning!

"Is this really the right tent?" a male voice whispers.

"There's only one kid in here, can't be anyone else. Hurry up, now the guard is still distracted!"

Confusion sets in for Primrose. What is happening? Who are these people?! Her hand reaches for her staff, though it's too late. The covers are firmly wrapped around her and the girl can feel herself get overpowered, a strong-smelling substance held over her nose.

The girl's head spins around from vertigo, and all turns to black. Only one fading line still reaches her ears.

“Put her in the bag and let's get out of here before they notice!”

*

Adrian leaves the camp and seeks out the privacy of a small group of trees with undergrowth. Great spot to cool his head, surrounded by the greenery of nature. Would be even better if there's a source of fresh water in here. The refreshing chill of water running down his hair, yeah, that wouldn't be bad at all. Certainly would wash the last remaining bits of fatigue right out of his body.

The man stops. He's not alone in here, seeking the solace of nature. Someone hums a fancy tune. Cheery, and definitely girly. In fact, he's pretty certain he can recognize that voice.

Adrian peeks past a tree. Yeah, that's what he expected alright. Though the scenery is definitely more charming than anticipated.

Melisande sits on her knees, playing with a squirrel. The animal darts around on its four legs, fluffy tail as big as the rest of its body. The girl giggles when it scoots up her arm and dashes around her shoulders.

She resumes her hummed tune after grabbing the animal with both hands. Standing up, she begins to dance while her squirrel partner joins her song with its chipper calls for continued attention.

Adrian can't help feel his fatigue receding. No need for that water anymore, it seems. This spectacle is more than enough to start a day on the right footing.

Melisande stops dancing, turning into his direction.

“Oh, sorry,” Adrian steps forward. “Didn't mean to watch in silence.” Interrupting her would have felt like such a sin. Though he has a hard time voicing those words, so the man changes the topic before she can ask. “You have good eyes to know I was there. Or ears.”

She does have those peculiar wing-shaped ears. He has no idea how good those are at picking up sound.

Melisande gives her ears a quick flutter. Then she sits down on her knees again, petting the squirrel. “This little one noticed you,” she gives away the secret it was neither of those guesses.

Adrian walks closer, stopping at double arm’s distance to not frighten the animal, lowering himself. “Right... Alma. You can link with animals. Can you folks all do that?”

“No, only some of us. Eris and I received this gift from our mother.”

Melisande cocks her head, offering a question with a tone that betrays she hopes for an interesting answer. “What were you doing here?”

“I, uh... had a sleepless night thanks to a certain someone. So I thought about seeking refreshment in here. You know, clear my head.”

“Did it work?”

Adrian shakes his head ambiguously. “Kind of? Until I met that certain someone again.”

Melisande hides her grin as she bows down to cuddle the squirrel.

“So, who is this fellow?” Adrian asks. “A very distant relative of Olive and Pepper?” She should know who they are, having seen them before with Roderik.

Melisande chuckles while brushing the animal’s fur. “Maybe? Very distant, in that case.”

“You think he’ll like me?”

Melisande holds out her hands, offering the squirrel. “Give it a try.”

Cautiously, Adrian crawls closer. Is this rodent going to bite in his hand? That would explain her humored expression. Yup, definitely going to bite with its teeth strong enough to crack nuts. Yet, he doesn’t stop and reaches out. Disappointing that smile on her face is not an option. If he has to take a bite in return, so be it. She could always treat it afterwards to prevent an infection.

“Whoa...” the man gasps, taking over the animal without receiving a bite. “Well shit. I never expected it to trust me.” He gives it a couple brushes. Definitely cleaner hair than one would expect from a wild animal. Few clits too. This small bugger keeps itself in good condition. “I guess, it’s probably more that he trusts you,” he corrects his earlier statement.

Adrian hands the squirrel back to Melisande. It instantly darts up her arm again, taking place on her shoulder. **“Can you talk with him?”**

“No. Only observe through his senses when close enough.”

Adrian points at the animal and pokes fun at it. **“Hah! You’re not noble enough to talk to.”** That’s how Eris described it, whatever that may mean. And Melisande nods, so she seems to agree.

The squirrel scoots underneath her armpit, making Melisande giggle as it tickles. Then the furry animal dives underneath her tunic, seeking the warmth of a girl.

She squirms, trying to reach for the squirrel, joyous laughter scattering around the nearby greenery as she can’t contain all tickles running through.

Adrian’s laugh ends at the first tone, vision captured by the animal diving underneath her budding breasts, pushing them upwards as it passes, until one pops out of her outfit.

The squirrel sticks its head out in front of her cleavage, poking its nose into this particularly soft flesh, a single lick following over its skin.

Melisande’s laughter subsides when she finally manages to latch on to the small rascal, lifting him out of her developing children’s bosom. **“That spot is not for you,”** she lifts it up, pretending to give the animal a weak scolding. A short exchange of her eyes follows towards Adrian.

He noticed, vision drawn lower again right afterwards. Her breast is still exposed, lifted up by the cloth underneath, band of her tunic rolled down her shoulder. The girl doesn’t seem to mind at all, and neither is she in a particular hurry to fix her outfit. Her face is still as cheerful as when he first came here.

She places the animal down and reaches for her tunic’s band, slowly placing it back on her shoulder. Only afterwards does she casually take the piece of cloth stuck underneath her breast and lifts it in place, calm but emphasized. Joy still decorates her face as if nothing unordinary happened.

Satisfied with playing, the squirrel heads off into the nearest tree.

Adrian tries to find words to pick up their conversation again. What should he bring up? Anything but staying silent. Not after what just happened. **“How does it feel to be a part of an army?”**

Was that a good question? Sounds more like a mood breaker. Still, now he got it out, he's actually curious to hear her answer, clarifying his question. "You know, with you being a druid. You'll see plenty of dark sides to us." In fact, she no doubt already did see plenty of grueling scenes. Dealing with the aftermath is basically her job description.

Melisande doesn't lose her mood at the question. Her answer needs no thinking. "My job is sort of similar to the comfort wagons' girls. They deal with mental health, and I deal in physical health. About the horrors we cure? It's exactly as the animals around us. They all fight for survival, even the naughty squirrel from earlier. What we do here is no different. I'm glad I came here to follow in the footsteps of my sister. Only now do I fully understand the words Father once said."

Melisande searches into her memories, pulling out a specific set of lines. "The future is never built on a foundation of peace. The past is proof our ancestors came out victorious through strife and hardship. While the present is a never-ending struggle to find out who can lay the next stone. The moment we cease to compete, is the moment we give up on living."

Adrian ponders over her words, letting them sink in. "Wise words," he praises both the girl and her father.

...

Melisande suddenly looks up, her expression changing.

"What's wrong?" Adrian asks.

"Others entered among the trees. Four guards. The squirrel from earlier can spot them, nearby."

Adrian scans around. The animal is nowhere to be seen. Looks like it left this tree to seek out its furry companions. "They're only guards?" he is confused. What could possibly make her concerned about their camp's guards?

"They act strange, carrying a large bag. And..." She suddenly turns frightened. "The bag moved! Someone is inside!"

Adrian quickly jumps up, drawing his blade. "Stay back," he whispers, heading into the direction she looks at.

*

He reaches the spot. Those are guards alright, or at least the correct uniform. Either they are frauds, or they're bought-out traitors, **one way or the other**. Though he can't place their faces. Probably frauds.

They're about to load the bag onto a single wagon, the same type the mercenaries use for supplies. They will make their escape soon, which means **he can't delay**. That bag is not big at all. Definitely not an adult in there. However, **Melisande was right, that's the shape of a body**.

"What's going on here?!" he steps up, sword at the ready. **There's still a small chance** this all has a fine explanation he would love listening to, though those odds drop sharply. The men respond aggressive.

Adrian doesn't hesitate and rushes in. They are obviously enemies. Anyone else would have recognized **him as one of their top commanders**. **There's only three**, and both others are still occupied with the bag. He can take them!

Swords cross. Should he activate an enchantment? There might be more of them later on. Still, waiting comes with different risks, thus Adrian activates his armor-piercing.

The blade of an enemy's sword falls to the ground, severed by the enchanted sword. He left the wielder alive. He wants answers, what they were trying to accomplish. And he has no idea which one of these goons is the ringleader.

"Fuck! This guy uses magic!" the fraudulent guard steps back after losing his weapon.

The other two quickly back off.

Two... Adrian curses while peering around. With the one he disarmed earlier, that's three men. Melisande mentioned four! **Where's the fourth one?!**

"Put down that weapon!" a male's voice shouts to him from behind.

Adrian turns around and notices the missing guard. Stuck in his grasp and threatened by a blade is the young druid.

She stares at Adrian apologetically. How foolish, to run into this guy in a panic. If only **the fighting hadn't scared off most of the nearby animals**, she would have indirectly spotted him approach.

The enchanted sword drops to the ground.

“Smart move,” the ringleader threatening Melisande smirks.

*

Adrian kicks the cage he was just dropped in. Surprisingly sturdy for such a simple construct.

“Stop kicking, or I cut that leg a foot shorter!” one of the guards threatens.

Immediately after, Melisande is pushed into the same cage. They’re stuck as captives. These thugs didn’t waste any time, making use of their disguise to ride away with the supply wagon, carrying their captives inside. Until they reached this spot where they could hide the wagon and stuff the captives inside a quickly but sturdily made cage, constructed within an abandoned bear cave.

“I’m sorry,” Melisande repeats again, some tears still in her eyes.

“No need. We’ll get out of here, don’t you worry.” Though he has no idea how. The guy he disarmed now carries his weapon.

Said bandit meanwhile tries out the sword. “That magic stuff doesn’t work anymore. Maybe we’re using it wrong? Would be neat if we could learn to use it ourselves.”

“We can always ask later. Let’s deal with what we’re paid for first.”

That’s probably the only reason they took Adrian with them. They are interested in his supposed magic, or maybe they also recognized that type of weapon as belonging to one in a leadership position and want to see plenty of coin to have him returned. Or find out any information he has, that could be a lucrative option too.

“Let’s put the girl in her cage,” the ringleader pokes at the bag.

Adrian gets his fears confirmed when he sees Primrose appear from underneath the cover, her blanket still wrapped around. So they *did* kidnap one of the girls. But why?! To coerce?

“What’s this shit?!” the ringleader responds after he notices Primrose. “That’s not the right girl!”

“But she was the only one inside?!” his accomplice grumbles.

“Are you certain you entered the right tent?” The leader grumbles in frustration. “What a fuck-up! Does this look like an Uskandar chick to you? She has bloody fox ears!”

“Like I said, she was the only one inside! We didn’t have time to politely ask!”

Adrian listens in on their conversation. They got the wrong one? An Uskandar girl was their actual target. That could only be Kalina. Fine if events don’t follow the enemy’s plans, though this situation is still dire. They just abducted the wrong girl and are all pissed about it. They might as well end her right there.

“What do we do with this chick then?” one of the frauds voices Adrian’s worst concern.

The ringleader shakes his head in anger. “Fuck! We won’t get another great opportunity like this with their commander gone!” He nods towards the second cage in the bear cave. “Stuff her in there for now. Who knows, maybe she has value if she was in that same tent.”

Adrian breathes a sigh of relief. They have some time for now.

The bandit leader grumbles and heads out of the cave. “I’ll go look for our contact and ask what to do now.”

*

Primrose was dumped into the second cage, opposing the one containing Adrian and Melisande. She isn’t moving, though they can spot her chest move up and down, so she’s alive. Stench lingers from the blanket they threw in with her. Probably what caused her to be knocked out. If so, she should wake up soon enough.

“Any luck?” Adrian whispers to Melisande.

“I’m sorry, no. There are none around.” She tried to look around for an animal which could answer her call, yet there’s none. “This forest is too small,” she wants to apologize again.

Adrian reaches for her hands, grabbing them. “Hey, don’t feel bad about it. If there are no suitable animals, there aren’t any. Simple as that.”

The rock surface they sit on isn’t exactly a great location to start using vines either. Her magic won’t be of much help in here. Maybe Primrose can help, once she wakes up.

A soft moan indicates their last hope doing exactly that. Primrose rubs her eyes while she tries to take in her surroundings.

Adrian indicates her to be quiet. Better not to get the remaining three bandits' attention.

Reality settles in for the startled mage as she realizes the perilous nature of their surroundings. How she got here, she can't really remember. How to get back out is the only real question remaining. She doesn't have her staff, nor her dagger. She can't really use any magic without a suitable catalyst. Isn't there any other option?

The girl squeezes her fist. There *is* one option open to her. However, **it's a very risky one**, a great unknown...

"What do we do with the chicks if they're useless?" one of the bandits asks from further ahead around their campfire.

"I don't know. Sell them?"

"I would rather get out of here," the third one suggests. "We shouldn't have accepted this job. It stinks! I say we off them and get the fuck out."

"Let's not be too hasty and wait for our leader to return."

"But what if he doesn't return?" the second one now also starts to doubt. "If we wait here too long, they'll find us eventually. I don't want to face an angry army!"

Primrose makes up her mind. No matter how much risk there is, a chance for success is still better than being stuck here to await almost certain death. Though what she's about to do doesn't exactly alleviate much fear. On the contrary, her heart already beats faster at the mere thought.

She reaches for the inner pocket of her robe. A single, small object hidden within.

A ring.

She can feel dark magical energies emanate from the tiny gem it holds. A type of magic **she shouldn't know**. **And yet**, she can activate it, of that she is certain. All it will take is to let some energy run through the inscribed rune to trigger it.

Before her thoughts end, the deed is already done. An itch appears on her wrist, combined with a red spot. She recognizes this type of magic well enough. The same kind of tracking she found on Conrad's arm once. **Vile and twisted in source**.

Now, they only have to wait and hope for the best.

*

Adrian knows. She activated something. He could see it in her mannerisms, in the fear of her golden eyes. He has no idea what, only how it frightened Primrose.

...

“What are you up to?” one of the bandits asks.

“To fuck that fox-eared cunt. I’ve always had a thing for their kind, and that one has a juicy pair of mighty-fine tits for her age.”

“Don’t beat her up too bad. We want her alive, for now.”

The bandit walks deeper into the cave, heading towards the cages. He stops before Adrian and Melisande’s. “Hope you enjoy the show,” he grins.

The man’s grin fades, disbelief left on his face. He feels at his neck, realizing only now blood runs down from it. A stream which rapidly runs as his neck opens further. With a dull thud, his body falls to the ground. Neither of his friends can hear him, as they are already turned into fresh corpses.

Adrian can feel freezing chills run over his body. Outside the cage stands one of their worst nightmares. The monster called Grimald.

The Faceless first observes the pair stuck in the same cage. Disgust fills his face, aimed at Melisande. “Another Alma. Of course,” he casually opens his mouth.

Adrian takes up a protective posture in front of her, no idea how he can ever fight off this creeping death standing outside their cage.

“Ah, how cute. Trying to defend her,” Grimald puts an obviously faked grin on his mug. “Rest assured, I have no interest in silencing another druid. Too many around already to clean them all up. That ship sailed a while ago. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have an appointment with a Lady. I suggest you keep your mouth shut, or I might lose my temper.”

He ignores Adrian and Melisande and turns to Primrose, phasing through her prison. “You called for me, relied on my help. I’m pleased,” he sits down in front of Primrose, smile a more genuine. “Decided to entertain my proposal to accept me?”

“What do you mean? I must know more before I can decide,” Primrose answers, voice filled with fear.

“You are aware what we are going to do, yes?”

She nods without delay, afraid to upset Grimald.

“And you know how, I assume?”

“Through a vessel.” How much can she reveal? Definitely nothing about the chamber. What they found out in Eralthyr should be okay, he purposely helped them reach there. “You’ll fill it with chaos, and then take control at the end when the transformation sets in.”

Grimald gives a coquettish clap in approval. “As expected, you figured that much out. To be fair, I guess a lot was written down in the Compendium Labyrinth.” He tilts his head, rubbing his chin. “Yeah, I see your point. You should know a little more to be able to truly make up your mind. Very well. It’s not like it can be stopped at this point.”

Grimald loses his grin and starts to explain, showing his sincerity through a stern look. “The original plan was for all of us called Faceless to meld as one mind and take control over the transforming vessel, as you correctly assumed. That plan changed because of... reasons. Now, I seek a different goal, through a slightly different method. I will stand alone in control. And all of you are to be erased, for a new world to be born. I will become Destroyer *and* Creator all in one body. To shape a world anew without suffering, without pain, without conflict, **without death.**”

Primrose grabs all her courage to answer his declaration. “It would be a stagnant world. Nobody would truly be alive.”

“Nonsense,” Grimald brushes her off instantly with his returned smug grin. “I’m sure you would understand my point of view if you only give me a chance.” He reaches for Primrose’s hands, grabbing their warmth with his cold fingers. “If only you accept me.”

Her voice quivers, the chill of his presence seeping into her body. “What does it mean to accept you?”

He lets go, aware he sends chills into the girl. “You could say, I recently changed my mind once more. Those golden beacons of irises you have, and that always groomed red-brown fur, even that face of yours. They all remind me of someone. As a result, I feel

strangely compelled to give you a chance. Join me, together as one mind. I am willing to share it all with you. Only you. Together, we can build our new world, raise our children as the start of that new world. A far better one.”

The girl doesn't even realize she shakes her head, repeating her determination. “I won't abandon my friends.”

Grimald ponders, contemplating on her words with open expression. “Alright. Maybe I can try and keep a couple of your friends around? One, or two? Consider it another gift, after that ring. Can't make promises though. Trying to protect anyone from Agmus' natural aura as I deconstruct the existing world will be challenging. But I can promise to try.”

Primrose takes a deep breath. “I... I need time.”

Grimald wants to reach for her hand once more, visibly pleased, though he refrains, remembering the chill he sent through her earlier. “I will give you time. There's enough time left, until the last pawn falls. A pawn I sadly cannot beat on my own. I am more than willing to wait until that day for your favorable decision.”

He stands up, placing down a key with a single flower right next to it. And he phases out of the cage. “Don't worry about these thugs' leader. My puppet already discovered him and their contact. Neither will ever bother you again to secure the vessel for their Master. The last pawn. My Order's superior. I do prefer him not to get his hands on it.”

With those final words, Grimald disappears into the dark corners of the cave.

...

Primrose takes multiple deep breaths, trying to calm down her heartbeat. Then she picks up the key and opens the lock. On the ground rests the one flower left behind. The girl observes it, and then walks out, stepping on it to free her friends.

*

Karl rushes around the camp, giving orders to multiple scouts. Where did they go? Something is definitely wrong. They need more eyes out there, and fast!

“Sir, over there!” one of the scouts about to head out points into the distance.

Karl both curses and rejoices at the sight of all missing individuals returning. As they approach, he lifts his hands in a criticizing manner, trying to keep his cool. “I believe I deserve a damn good explanation where you lot ran off to! Also, welcome back.”

“Agreed. We need to talk,” Adrian drags him into the Commander’s tent.

...

“Alright, let me get this straight. You summoned Grimald to break free. And he tried to make a deal with you?”

Primrose nods.

Karl scratches through his hair at the story he just heard.

“He gave me this ring after sneaking into the camp, some time ago. I didn’t want to worry anyone because it was basically a harmless ring.”

“It’s a tracking object?” Karl inquires.

“Yes, but only when activated, and one-time use.”

“So, it’s gone now?”

“I removed the tracking already,” she nods again.

“Why would he contact you specifically?” Adrian asks.

Karl is first to answer. “Isn’t that obvious? He fancies her.”

Adrian falls silent, thinking back on all he witnessed. “Yeah, okay. Dumb question.”

“I... I’m not...” Primrose tries to get some words in, not really sure how to voice it.

Adrian lifts his arm and gives her a thumbs up. “It’s okay, we both know. Nobody here will ever suspect you to take his offer.”

“It was a good call to use the ring,” Karl backs up Adrian’s words. “I wouldn’t want to be the poor sap who has to tell our Commander one of his precious wives was kidnapped when he comes back.”

A first smile returns to Primrose.

“Right then,” Karl returns to regular business. “We really should consider increased levels of security. In particular around the inner circle of the camp where the children go. This should not be allowed to happen again.”

The man turns to the still timid vulpes. “And next time a Faceless sneaks into our camp for a private meeting, do let us know, okay?”

Primrose obediently nods.

*

Adrian sighs as he walks around the camp. Definitely more guards around already. Took a while to really calm down Primrose and assure her nobody has an issue with what happened anymore. In the end, that ring did save their asses, albeit in quite the unexpected way. And she did pry more information out of him. Always good to know the motive of your enemies. Makes them more predictable.

“I’ll take these,” he reaches for a single tree in the middle of their camp, plucking a couple nuts. Not that their army has a shortage of food thanks to their unique rations, though variety in taste is always appreciated. At times, you want something crunchy to chew on. That’s what makes for the best snacks.

He stares upwards. A sparse amount of clouds here and there, with countless stars visible everywhere else in the night sky. Plenty others in the camp spend their time stargazing. Not much to do at this late hour of evening.

The horses are all grouped together near the edge of the camp. It’s the spot with least amount of people hanging around, only a set of guards to keep an eye on the horses. No surprise he ended up here. Few would know, he regularly spends free time among the horses on a daily basis.

Adrian’s vision is caught by a girly silhouette. He instantly recognizes her contours. Melisande. She plays with rodents again, a pair of squirrels this time. Looks like that one from earlier today snuck into the camp and brought a friend or a mate. She holds one in her arms while the other ascends to her shoulder, curiously poking into her hair.

Charming. That’s the best way Adrian can describe the scene. Though he won’t make the same mistake again as this morning by being too absorbed, only left staring. Instead, he simply walks up to her.

“Hey there. Working on your squirrel-whispering skills?”

“Squirrel-whispering skills?” she asks humored.

“You know, training them to fetch items and stuff. Could be lucrative to have them collect dropped coin.”

Adrian takes one of the nuts he picked earlier from a pocket and offers it to the rodent sitting on her shoulder. The animal sniffs it first to examine the goods, to promptly chomp down afterwards with appetite. “Dang, this little bugger sure knows how to stuff himself.”

“His mate is curious too,” Melisande hugs the second squirrel, trying to get attention from Adrian.

“Oh, you want a crunchy too? Alright, for this once,” Adrian reaches for another nut. “This is my last one. Better savor it.”

The animals nibble at rapid speeds, sometimes pausing to take in their environment. Then they resume feasting on the nut. It goes down surprisingly quick. Those teeth have to be potent.

“I’m sorry about today,” Melisande looks down to the ground, mood souring.

“Hey, remember what I told you earlier?” Adrian leans forward so she can see his face. “No apologizing if you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“But if I…”

“Yeah, yeah,” he cuts off her words with a single finger placed on her lips. “I know what you’re about to say. If only you didn’t get caught. You gave me a good line of wisdom today, learned from your father. Well, let me give you one in return.”

Melisande looks up, curious what he’s about to say.

“Whenever something goes wrong, there’s always enough blame going around for nobody to be left out. So no need to hog it all to yourself every time.”

Adrian can see her ponder on those words, so he drives the point home with an example. “I could have noticed right away one of those thugs was missing. That part was my share in the total clump of mistakes, not yours. That’s life. We fuck up bad at times.” Her mood starts to improve. Time to deliver the finishing touch and wipe that frown away completely. “If it makes you feel better, you could always bribe me with more of that cake.”

There we go. Her smile returned, attention shifting back to her pet animals, using her thumb to rub one under the chin. “Why did you come here? I mean, this part of camp,” she asks.

“Probably same reason you are here. I like being around the horses. Always the most relaxing spot in the entire camp.”

Many would pick the comfort wagons as their choice of relaxation. But that’s not the kind of relaxing Adrian means. Those would be thrilling, or exciting. While this is a place for peace and quiet. A place to be alone. Though on this occasion he doesn’t mind not being alone.

“Why the horses?” she asks curiously. “There are other places quiet and peaceful. Such as the supply wagons.”

Adrian rubs his cheek. Should he let her know? “Alright, I’ll give away the secret. Don’t tell anyone, okay?”

“A secret?” her eyes light up.

“The world’s biggest.”

“I want to know,” she grins.

...

“It’s the manure.”

The squirrels look around in confusion when Melisande bursts out in laughter. Then they calm down again, shifting position on which one rests in her arms and which one takes her shoulder.

Meanwhile, Adrian explains his secret. “No, seriously! Manure. But not too strong. Only enough to prickle the nose.”

“Prickle the nose?”

Adrian takes in the air through his nose. “Yeah. Smell that? It’s present, but not overpowering. Like a wisp of nature’s incense.”

He takes a deep breath and decides on sharing a part of his past with her. “As you know, my family were merchants. We had our own horses to pull a pair of goods wagons. Naturally, we had our own stables for them. It was my job to take care of the animals and clean the stables.” He takes another sniff of nature’s incense. “This smell reminds me of the best of times at home. When I worked hard to scrub the floor, or pretended to, while being lazy and resting in the hay. Or...”

His voice trails off, vision looking far into the distance.

“Or?” Melisande asks. “You told me you would share your secret.”

Adrian sighs. Women. Tell them one word and they’ll never forget it. “Where I experienced my first date,” he answers.

“Oh? Who was she?” the girl’s eyes sparkle up again at juicy gossip.

“The neighbor’s wife.”

“Wife?!” she tries to contain her laughter.

“They were only married for a week. She was almost single!”

The atmosphere begins to change, all lingering gloom gone, together with the aura of solitude. She wants to hear more, spend more time together. Adrian has to admit, even if this is such a private part of his life, it’s surprisingly fun to talk about. Fun, and a little naughty.

“You seduced her?” Melisande feels that same sense of naughty.

“Kind of? Admittedly, it was more she who led me there.”

“Did you two... do it?”

Adrian flaps his mouth like a fish, trying to find the right words. “Uh... Yeah. She dragged me down into the hay pile of our stables. It was my first time. I was only a kid at the time, about your age.” His voice turns nostalgic, speaking about precious memories. “It was clumsy, didn’t last long, and without a clue what I was doing. And it was magical all the same.”

Huh... He only now realized. That neighbor’s wife made the ignorant kid he was feel as if life never could get any better. Maybe that’s what he tried to pursue by chasing married women’s skirts? To experience that same rush again. Though no sexual experience could ever match in the end. “This smell... It reminds me of better days. Furthest away from a battlefield it can ever get.”

...

The pair fell silent. Not that the mood turned sour, on the contrary. They simply enjoy the peace and quiet this place has to offer.

Among the horses stands a single white unicorn. He slowly steps forward, heading to Melisande. She notices and lifts her free hand not holding the squirrels, placing it on Silvermoon’s head. Adrian can see the same scene play out as Eris once did when first

meeting this steed, the girl's forehead seeking contact right underneath his horn. She communicates with him.

A tear starts to roll down the girl's cheek, more coming down like soft raindrops. Adrian grows worried. What are they talking about?!

"You okay?" he asks concerned after she breaks contact with Silvermoon.

The girl wipes her eyes. "He told me about what happened. How he met my sister. How her spirit called him towards the Misty Woods, guided him. He said he knew I would come here, because she told him I would."

"Eris left a message for you?"

Melisande nods, sniffing while trying to stop her tears. "That I shouldn't cry, because she will always be around."

Adrian reaches for Melisande's shoulder, wrapping his arm around her back. He picks up a single tear with his finger. "Well, you're crying now."

Melisande chuckles twice through her tears. "I'll stop soon enough."

Only now does Adrian realize he holds his arm around her, though he doesn't let go. All that experience with women does have some advantage. Her body language easily indicates she doesn't want his arm gone, leaning into him instead.

"Pretty nice guy, this unicorn. He must be popular with the ladies."

Silvermoon snorts at the man's joke and pushes his head closer towards Melisande again.

"What is it?" she asks, establishing contact once more.

"What's he talking about now?"

"You," she grins.

"Not anything bad, I hope?"

Melisande breaks contact once more, laughing. "Nothing too embarrassing."

That's not very promising.

Silvermoon snorts again and turns around, heading back to grab a meal.

"He basically said you were a nice guy too."

Adrian nods. Yeah, he probably did. But that humored, smug face reveals she's definitely leaving parts out of that conversation.

...

The pair walks along the horse stationing area, side by side.

“Those squirrels really like you. Maybe they’ll come along?” One of them pokes its nose into his arm, then jumping onto it. “They don’t carry sickness, right?”

“I don’t know,” she pretends to ponder. “Nah, they are healthy and don’t have parasites.”

Adrian can feel her presence into his side. She leans into him again, even as they walk.

Somewhat uncertain, Melisande brings up a different topic. “So, that shadow man. He likes the mage girl?”

“Primrose? Yeah, so it seems.”

“He loves her?”

Adrian wonders hard about a surprisingly difficult question, petting the squirrel as he gathers his thoughts. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s more of a platonic thing? Maybe she reminds him of a long-lost daughter? From what I could hear in their conversation, I honestly don’t believe even he himself has it figured out.”

“You’re not worried he might show up again, out of the shadows like in that cave?” The image of him phasing through the cage was ghastly. It sent shivers through Melisande. That, and the entire aura around him. He felt so detached from nature, cut off from the ley-lines all around them.

Adrian feels confident in his reply. “Grimald showing up again? Nah, I’m not worried. Not anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“Up to now, that guy has been an enigma. A magical trickster.”

Grimald caused the chaos which led Adrian’s family to demise. He sent their countries into war. He also led them to Eralthyr, by revealing the existence of Eris. It was Grimald who guided them to the right path which led to the Spire, giving Adrian the chance to set Melisande’s mother free. And it was equally him who claimed the life of this girl’s sister, together with Selena’s.

“Always, we danced to that guy’s tune. Even without knowing it, since many years ago. Maybe even our entire lives. To be honest, that creep scared me more than the battle to come.”

“And that changed?” she asks.

“Yeah, because of what happened today. He always was a flawless monster, toying with mere mortals for his schemes. So it seemed to me. But today? Today, he fell for the charm of a single girl, and was used by her instead. He’s no longer infallible.” Adrian picks up the squirrel and whispers to it, loud enough for Melisande to hear. “Take my advice, girls are scary.”

Melisande laughs at his words. The squirrel in her arms jumps into her tunic as a result, seeking the protective shelter of her breasts. She doesn’t respond, allowing the animal to seek her out. “I’m a girl too, you know?”

Adrian can see the rodent squirm underneath her tunic, pushing out the cloth. Plenty of usually sun-sheltered flesh visible. “Trust me, I noticed. And a particularly charming one.”

“Charming?” she turns to him, noticing his eyes peer down her outfit.

“Very charming. With a hint of lewd.”

To make a point, the squirrel in her tunic pops its head up from within her cleavage. It sniffs her chest all over.

“Ha-ha... That tickles! Stop it!” She reaches for the animal and drags it out, pretending to be angry at it with a cutesy face. “You little rascal, you’re the same one who tried before! As I said, that spot is not for you.”

“So, for who is it then?” Adrian blurts out.

The man instantly turns awkward. What did he just ask without thinking first?!

Melisande doesn’t immediately reply, staring at the man in self-reflecting curiosity. Her composure only returns shortly after. “You wish to know?”

Now Adrian is the one left without an immediate answer.

The pair of squirrels suddenly break the silence, curiously staring to the side.

“Do you hear that?” he asks.

Melisande nods, taking a step closer to the large pile of hay meant for the horses. Adrian wants to stop her once he figures out what caught their attention, though it’s already too

late. She peeks towards the other side, a short burst of excitement running through her, which she tries to contain with a hand over her mouth.

Adrian peeks over her head. Yup, that's what he thought already, though he had no idea who it would be. "Those two again," he murmurs. The same felis pair he spotted before, when too high on hormones and pointlessly trying to avoid stimulation.

"You've seen them before?" she asks, not steering her eyes away. Caught in the adventure of secretly enjoying a glimpse of what should remain unknown.

"Yeah, not the first time." He's seen them go further than this, actually. For now, the siblings only cuddle in the hay. "They really should pick a better spot." Luckily, not many in their forces know these two are blood related. For most, it would only seem like two kids from the same tribe making out.

"They're so cute together," Melisande is completely lost in the moment, joined by one of her squirrels at the shoulder to peek.

"Cute, yeah. And bold, so out in the open where a guard could spot them... Or we..."

Melisande finally turns away from the scene. "There's nothing to be shy of. Isn't it only natural?"

Adrian has to admit, she does have a point, considering her background as a druid. They do have that monthly orgy thing going. Privacy in sexual matters is probably not much of a concern to them. So making out in a pile of hay? Why not?

"It's beautiful, to love someone," she adds. "Aren't they beautiful?"

Adrian takes another glimpse at the felis duo. The boy is lost in the embrace of his sister, licking her neck while she openly enjoys his tongue. Feelings they can only share because they are equally close in heart. "Yeah. They are," attention shifts back to Melisande, staring at her. "Very beautiful..."

...

A full minute passes. One squirrel pokes its nose towards Melisande's cheek, curious why she doesn't move. The other one tilts its head towards Adrian, who is equally frozen. Only movement is a single finger of the girl, pulling at the top of her tunic to let in air. While a lustful background harmony reaches their ears from the other side of the hay pile where a pair of felis explore each other.

Until Melisande breaks their silent enchantment. **“You still wish to know who they are for?”**

The finger on her tunic pulls down that extra bit more. Any further, and a darker colored ring would be visible. She doesn't wait for an answer and reaches out with her other hand, offering it to the man in front. All he has to do, is reach for her.

Adrian has no control over his body. His muscles move on their own volition, his mind only snapping back to reality when he feels the soft palm of Melisande. His body doesn't even respond when she tugs while falling backwards, and he simply tips over to follow her path.

The cushion of hay gives as much as it needs. The girl's lips are only a mere finger's width away from his. Instinctively, he wants to pull back, yet her arm prevents him from leaving her embrace.

How odd... She's only a girl, a mere child in the transformation to adulthood. He could easily stand up if he wants to. Like he could easily have prevented her from dragging him down. Yet, his body doesn't respond. It's like he is enchanted by her magic.

“Melisande, I...”

She seals his mouth by the subtle touch of her lips barely touching his. **“Melissa,”** the girl corrects him. That's how her sister called her. How her father and mother know her in private.

“Melissa...” he repeats, already forgotten what he was about to say, too absorbed by what it means to call her that name.

The girl grins, eyes twinkling. This is how it should be. It feels right to have him use that name. Makes her heart flutter all the more.

He has no idea what to do or say. What is this bewildered sensation? It's like he's a little boy all over again, without a clue on what to do.

A sudden bump to his side knocks some sense back into him. **“No, go away,”** he mumbles to the red stag which pokes at him. **“Now is not a good time, Bubbles. Be jealous somewhere else.”**

The animal snorts hot air at the couple, causing Melisande to giggle when her hair is blown in her face.

“It’s Pebbles,” she corrects him, shielding her cleavage in case the stag gets any wrong ideas. She stares right at Adrian.

“This is not for any squirrels, nor for a patron spirit.”

Adrian pushes the animal aside, focus caught on the girl, the arm over her breast removed. Slowly, he reaches for a band of her tunic, where his hand lingers. Is it okay to pull down? Should he?

Her palm accompanies his, gently nudging him across her shoulder, holding onto the band. Her gaze is proof enough he needs not hold back. A playful spark present, edges of her mouth curled upwards.

“This... is only for you,” she whispers. The band comes down, joined by the other one she tugs down herself with a light touch.

Adrian is left speechless. What is wrong with him? She’s almost flat. Not quite, but almost. The complete opposite of what he chased his entire life. And yet, she has the most gorgeous chest he has ever seen. So lithe and fragile.

His thumb seeks contact, gliding across the surface. So baby-soft and smooth, without the tiniest scar or sign of aging on her milky flesh. **“Magnificent,” he whispers in awe.**

She reaches for the buttons on his shirt, opening them one by one, that playful expression unchanging. A flutter of curiosity flows through her ears when she can touch his bared chest, tracing an old scar. **“Where did you get this?” she asks, eager to hear the parts of his life she can see carved into his body.**

“The army. It was our first mission, my first battle. Almost messed up. I had him pinned down, but didn’t notice the knife in his offhand in time. Took three weeks to heal.”

“And this?”

“Older, from back at home. A horse kicked when I was changing its shoes, the nail only in halfway. Barely dodged a full hit. The metal still left a cut.”

Each scar is the story of a lifetime to Melisande. People on this side of the Misty Woods must live so rough, to get scars at such an early age. Rough, and wild. Her fingertip traces them all, as if doing so makes it easier to imagine the stories he tells, living through them in her mind. Each one an exciting adventure lived at the edge of a knife.

Moans from the felis girl reach to this side of the pile. The young couple explored enough, and now turned towards the embrace of sex, caught in the fiery prongs of lust. Melisande knows Adrian can hear them. She stops exploring his body and rests both hands next to her head, onto the hay. An inviting expression charms him with an unspoken **invitation. Go on...** You know who they belong to. **Not the squirrels', and not the horses'**.

She is all his.

Adrian gropes her chest with a childish innocence, like he never touched breasts before. To be fair, he never did touch such a modest size. **"So smooth..."**

His pants have grown far too small. He was always driven by the thought of taking another's woman. This time, he is glad she isn't. For the first time in his life, he gets to experience a virgin, still untouched, as if she was always meant for him. And it's an experience which blows all others away.

Adrian pushes down the tunic, a first kiss landing between her breasts. A follow-up of kisses descends, after making a sidetrack towards the soft bottom of her left breast, heading down over **the girl's** belly.

This part is so different as well. **Slender but pudgy?** How odd... **A tummy which is** basically a marshmallow of squishiness. With only a single imperfection in its elegant curves, which is her belly button. And even that is just perfect.

An aroma tugs at him with invisible strings. He so wants to head down further, to what other marvels from her young body await. Though **he hesitates. Afraid to go down. He'll lose control if he does. His entire being knows, there won't be a way back from this if he** descends down that luscious slope. Forever trapped by the girl in front.

Her palms seek his cheeks. They feel so warm, with no calluses at all. Yet another **difference... Then** her palms continue further. Once more, she seeks to guide him, nudging him towards her tunic.

Adrian's heart beats like he's about to enter battle. Could it be?

She hooks **her own outfit's** cloth with her thumbs by the pair of thin laces around her waist, and pushes it down even more. An expanding curve caught all **of the man's** attention. The cloth passed her waist, heading down the hill that makes her hips. Round hips, with **the perkiness of a children's bum** already luring his fingers.

Adrian's eyes are burned onto the top line of her tunic as it descends, where every bit more of skin is revealed.

Her belly is completely visible, though the line doesn't stop, lowering agonizingly slow.

No hair? Of course she wouldn't have hair... Yet, that is definitely her pubic area gradually revealing itself, turning into another soft cushion. A tiny one, at the front, where the juiciest of fruits awaits. The source of her sweet aroma. The girl's peach, showing its tightly-pressed line, similar to how it shows its tender flesh.

And she stops, giving the man his time to take in her beauty.

This... This tops everything, standing alone at the peak of the mountain. He always thought he had seen it all, everything the female sex has to offer. How wrong he was... Every part of his body has to restrain itself to not immediately push her down into the hay and take her. There simply are no words to describe that area between her thighs. None he could come up with would do her justice.

With force, he drags down the tunic over her legs. Melisande holds them closed so he can more easily remove that annoying barrier between them. His own pants come down afterwards. She inhales deeply when his erection is revealed. It needed air. Stuck inside his pants was simply too painful.

Adrian lowers his face between her legs. She rests them on his shoulders, granting the man access. The aroma strengthens as his breath reaches her pussy. A quick kiss appreciates her beauty, then his mouth satiates itself with her leaking fruit.

Her pubic area is just as spongy as it looks, giving to the push of his mouth and nose. Melisande's moan joins Tama's on the other side of the hay pile. Her brush through his blond hair is one of encouraging affection. By all means, don't let that tongue stop. Seek her, claim her. Her entire existence is for only this man to take.

Adrian's nose drives through her cleft, which seals right after to perfectly hide any bit of pink underneath. Followed by his tongue doing the same, upwards this time. Scooping up the sticky goodness spilling forth.

The light weight on his shoulders from her legs only drives the point home how young she is, which only further pushes his erection to its limit. Thighs so warm and comforting, it already makes him salivate at the thought of taking place between them.

Adrian rises, seeking out her face. **“Melissa..”** he asks for her lips, kissing her straight after, sharing a taste of her own nectar.

His tongue searches every part of her mouth. Her impatient reciprocation makes his weight drop down on her, seeking as much physical contact as possible. He wants to taste her saliva, feel her breath through her nose, experience her tits against his chest, squish that delightful belly into his own, and feel her arms and legs wrapped around. All of it combined. Nothing less will do.

A shivering runs through her body. Not one of fear, but of pure, limitless desire. She just felt his cock push between her legs. Her longing for more instantly follows with unmistakable conviction when he endures her pussy grinding against him. A wet trail left behind by her peach everywhere it rubs its lips around.

A cutesy squeal reaches as far as the felis couple when Melisande feels her lower lips part when her **cleft’s** meat is split apart.

Adrian instantly slows, carefully pushing. Not to hurt the girl beneath, and so they both can carve this memory into their minds. The moment he claims her depths as his own, the moment she receives a hard, throbbing cock for the first time. Every bit deeper provides an increase in pure delight. Until the girl can feel his body push into her pubic area, pressing its spongy **cushion to the limit with only the man’s hair caught between.**

“Ha-h...” she exhales at the weirdest and wondrous sensation of his hair tickling her pussy. Her lower belly feels burning hot from a foreign object, the touch of a living being inside of her. And the delightful rub of rough, masculine leather against soft, feminine skin.

Her legs move with the man as he repeats that sensation in quickening pace. Moan turning more pronounced, matched by the one coming from the other side, as if they somehow communicate. Both couples aware of each other’s presence, and enjoying their shared consumption of the body’s senses brought to their highest peak.

Every time her body takes Adrian’s weight, a new rush of bliss shoots through her mind. Every thrust driven into the girl beneath, he can only pull back to do it all over again, aware he is now forever trapped in her cocoon of slippery, moist depths. No other woman or girl will ever do.

Her mouth doesn't let go, kissing non-stop. Not innocent, but passionate and wild, her tongue rolling around his, teeth sometimes bumping in the lusty waves of sex coursing through their bodies. Only separating occasionally to latch on again right after. The wet plop of saliva a joy to her restless ears.

The hay prickles her back, which only adds to the overall sensation. Feet coming down temporarily to grind through the hay, scooping some up as she lifts them again into the air **to merrily bounce at Adrian's efforts.**

A guard passes, a glimpse thrown their way. Her vagina squeezes tight around Adrian. **They are being seen... Everyone should know who he is, like** they equally know their main healer of the camp. The girl simply closes her eyes and focuses back to the man in her embrace. If she is spotted with a man between her legs, so be it. There is no shame to be found in sharing the art of love with someone. The natural passion of mating. The act of intimate reproduction. Only beauty. Though she knows now there is one other impression equally valid. Pleasure. The height of sexual satisfaction.

The girl's body presses tight. The passing guard takes one slower step to not miss this spectacle. The instant her legs tighten, one stretched out, the other not far behind. Her back arched, chest as tightly pressed as her strength allows. Mouth still locked as the surge of orgasm freezes their tongues in their current knot.

Her entire body shivers, loosening, only to shiver again. Her vocal chords reach out with equal pulses, intermittently disappearing to then return with a gasp.

Adrian has one arm around her bum, shoving her airtight. Those same vibrations run through his own body, his cock throbbing as it pumps up fertile seed. Every gush he can sense leaving his body matched by a contraction of her vagina, as her body seeks to milk him for every drop.

Holding her in the hay while they catch their breath, the man is left with only one simple yet honest conclusion.

Little girls truly are amazing.

Act 4 ~ Chapter 8



Quiet Before a Storm

Conrad is lost in thought. In the distance, right over the horizon, awaits their final challenge. Tomorrow, they should reach the capital, Faramund, and the battle to end it all will begin.

Their assumptions about Grimald were accurate. That much was confirmed by the unlikely meeting between Primrose and their nemesis. The difference in scripture within **Sagara's magic circle**, compared to the original design concept, has been uncovered.

No wonder the Faceless they beat along the way felt panicked and betrayed once Kalina appeared to absorb their essence. They knew instantly something was wrong. That their architect, Grimald, had back-stabbed them. **They won't ever become immortal. Instead, they were nothing more than mere fuel for the traitor's ascendancy into godhood.**

Cut off from the ley-lines as a result of their decayed body and mind, their spirits can't even sustain themselves anymore, nor can they return to their Maker. Erasure is the only fate left. The cruelest of all fates.

However, the last one, their nameless leader, is an obstacle even Grimald can't defeat on his own. That leader must either be too powerful, or already aware a traitor turned his back to their original plan. Possibly both. Maybe that's why this remaining obstacle tried to secure the vessel to make it his own again? Though his goons took Primrose by mistake.

It doesn't matter. That obstacle has to be overcome. As long as this chaos of war lasts, Kalina approaches her final form, her final role as vessel to destruction. Every second counts, if it's not already too late. Be it the remaining Faceless sitting on the Union's proverbial throne in Faramund, or the unknown that is Grimald, they both have to go. The order doesn't matter. All Conrad knows, is that he can feel it in his bones everything will be decided in the coming battle.

Yes, it all makes sense now, why Grimald dragged them along this journey. Though their shared path in taking out the Union's puppet masters will lead to a split soon. One big problem remains, however, other than the Faceless themselves. That problem is Kalina. Whether it be the original plan of the Faceless, or Grimald's rendition, they both rely on her. With no idea left to Conrad how complete she already is as a vessel. She is the key to it all.

Most would consider the rational choice to take. Eliminate the vessel. All it would take is a single blade, and a single second. It's a choice Conrad will not even contemplate. That path will remain overgrown with nothing less than an unsurpassable jungle. He made a promise to Cloegandr to prove the value of Creation. He will not back-stab that promise by deliberately and directly claiming an innocent life. Neither would it accomplish anything in the long term, as long as those two remaining Faceless exist.

Right now, the powers of Life have the vessel in their hands and the enemy on the ropes. A chance actually exists they can beat them. If they let this chance slip by focusing on elimination of the vessel, the remaining Faceless will hide into the shadows once more, not to be seen again for hundreds, maybe even thousands of years. When they can start all over again, having learned from their mistakes.

Though there is yet another reason to spare her.

Conrad turns to the side, where he can see the girl in question play with her doll. He can only feel warmth at the childish innocence of this vessel of impending doom.

The primary reason he won't take Kalina's life is a far more personal one. Waging war and sending troops into battle is one matter. All troubles and suffering created by the fallout of shifting the world's balance once more through rebellion is yet another. He can deal with either. He will bear those burdens. Yet, knowingly take the life of one close to him? One he considers to be family by now? No, not in an eternity of time.

"You cannot."

Once more, those words Cloegandr left him with echo through Conrad's mind. You cannot save her. Those words have to be wrong. Or maybe misunderstood? Regardless, he will not give up on her. Even now he knows what happens after death, understanding her spirit will live on if only they win the coming battle, he will not accept that single line. Such is the nature of life, what it means to care for someone.

Kalina comes up to Conrad and shows her doll.

"Oh, you got her a new outfit?"

"Cherry made it!" she speaks with joy.

"That's a nice dress. Did you thank Cherry for her gift?"

"I did!"

Conrad gives her a good rub over her hair, turning it wild while she yells out in amusement. "Alright, you're a good girl. Let's think about a return gift together after the next battle, okay?"

"Are you going to fight again?" Her expression turned to moping. The thought of another battle obviously makes her gloomy.

"Yeah, sadly. But the good news is, it's the final one. Then this war will end, and we can go back home."

"Home?"

Hmm. Conrad wonders if it was a good idea to bring up that topic. Does she even have a home? Doubtful her parents are even alive at this point. The Faceless don't deal in loose

ends. “You can come back with us, as a part of our family. Together with Primrose, and Lisette.”

“And Cherry and Tama?”

Technically, Cherry will be Karl’s family. And Tama has her brother. Actually, where would those felis end up? Maybe he can arrange them a home as well? Yeah, that sounds nice. Somewhere nearby.

“Sure, they can always come over and play.”

“And the feather lady?”

That’s another one who is hard to judge. Though Conrad can’t imagine her flying off into yonder without ever coming back. Besides, he’s got a kid with her. If necessary, he’ll visit them himself.

“Yup! Sylvië will visit for certain.” Probably, by dropping down from the sky at the most unexpected moment, all naked, while acting completely casual about it. Sounds like her alright.

“Then she can sing for us! And teach us!”

“That would be nice indeed,” Conrad remembers the times she sang for him. Not the first girl who did. All of them treasured memories. He’ll skip out on the singing himself though. Learning to play the flute was challenging enough with his lack of talent. Song would be a disaster of epic proportions. Let’s not start a war so soon after the current one ends.

The man’s mood plummets. This topic brought up Sylvië again. Now he’s worried about her. He really doesn’t like those solo trips to her homeland. Not for as long as conflict rages on. At least she doesn’t have her child to worry about. The baby-girl is with Olive and Pepper, waiting for her mother’s return.

A wet touch reaches his cheek, drawing Conrad back to the present. “Huh?” he feels at the area, some wetness lingering.

“That was to cheer you up,” Kalina hides her face behind her doll.

Did she just kiss him?

“That’s what the others do,” she murmurs, uncertain if it worked.

Conrad recomposes himself and gives her a wink, reaching for her cheek to give her a kiss in return.

She instantly giggles when feeling his short stubble.

“Damn right, those work. Now you can feel it yourself!” he laughs.

The man stands up, lifting the girl and swinging her around in the air. “Want to go for a walk?”

The cheers he can hear are a clear yes, thus Conrad places her on his shoulders, bending through his legs to carefully head out of the tent with his passenger.

One more day... Then her fate will be determined, together with the war's outcome. What a cruel life this girl must have led. How she can't remember her past is both a curse and a blessing. That scene he witnessed down in Sagara's chamber is not one she should ever remember.

It's a strange feeling, to know he has such a key behind all this conflict sitting on his shoulders. Yet, all he wants to wish for right now, is that tomorrow when the day ends, she can sit on his shoulders once more. To bounce her legs up and down while messing up his hair.

One more day... And he will have to keep his promise to Cloegandr, one way or the other. Though how can he prove the value of Creation? No such opportune moment has appeared so far. What could possibly do the trick?

Conrad glances at his necklace, where the gem granted to him by the World Shaper still hangs among colored beads. If only he knew when to use it, or where. Why do gods in both reality and stories always have to speak in riddles?

*

Mercenaries raise their beer to their Commander. Cheers are thrown at him when they spot the pair walk through the camp.

“Come join us for a drink!”

“Maybe some gambling?!” another throws out.

Conrad shakes with his hand to reject their offer. **“Nah, I’ll have to pass this time. As you can see, I’m doing hard escort work here.”**

The men laugh out loud at their top officer parading around a child on his shoulders, their icon of victory. Then they return to their regular business, drinking, sparring and gambling.

No further work needs doing. All preparations were made for tomorrow. To decide the fate of all which exists. All that lives, as much as all that ever lived. To win and gain survival, or to lose and fade into non-existence, not even to be remembered by history, as there **won’t** be anyone left to write history. While few know what is really at stake, they all know this will be one to be sung and written down in legends, if only they win.

Conrad looks around at his troops. The largest army he has ever seen. They will need it for **what awaits them. Even now, Grimald’s words don’t really leave him. No matter how large the army, they can’t win without the right leadership.**

Every individual in this army knows, there won’t be a siege. Their Commander **can’t risk** that approach, even if it would be safest from a tactical perspective. Not with this ticking clock on his shoulders. A siege would last a year or longer. Far too long for the vessel to gain power. A full-out assault it shall be, hard and fast.

They all know, and still there’s a serenity among the troops. As if victory is already guaranteed. The typical stress before a fight is completely absent. None fear tomorrow’s outcome, even if **fate were to deem it they can’t see that outcome with their own mortal eyes anymore. Because they know now. That there’s more to this world than the eye can see. That their legends and myths aren’t** merely fairy-tales. Their ancestors are actually out there, and if these warriors enter battle to not come out anymore, they know those ancestors will await them with pride.

Conrad takes a look at one of the banners decorating their camp. The large multi-headed beast sitting on a pile of gold. Now, he can only recognize Cloegandr in its imagery. What a strangely fitting banner his suggestion of over a decade ago has become.

...

They pass a group sitting near the edge of the camp. He stops to take in their presence. They are not actually part of their army. These folks are from the lands of man, most from

Gleaze and some from Bournesse. They eat rations, many of them quite curious about this particular food they haven't seen before.

Poor saps.

That's the main thought on Conrad's mind. These people are left without a home, now this land shifts back to its original role and leadership. To be a home for the people of Uskandar, Kalina's people. Many here don't even have any possessions anymore, burned down by retreating Union troops. They were lucky to escape with their lives intact. Not everyone shared that luck.

These refugees will go back to the southern countries they originally came from. Though for now, Conrad has taken them in. With the end to the war approaching, he can spare resources for cases like these. Meanwhile, they can receive medical care if necessary, food to fill their stomach, or simply a safe spot to sleep.

He turns and walks among them. Curious gazes instantly turn to him. These people have no idea how to respond. They are aware he is the highest-ranking officer, in charge of this entire army. Likewise, they have knowledge of the girl on his shoulders, the Divine Envoy. A silence is all which surrounds the pair.

Conrad stops before the supply table holding their rations. He grabs one of them and takes a bite.

A gasp reaches his ears from a nearby refugee. He has no need to wonder why. No commander would ever risk taking random food among a bunch of strangers who don't even belong to his army. Even if they knew he doesn't entertain an increased luxury in meals, they would still question why he would choose to walk among them, let alone, share a meal.

"If you need more, let me know. We've got plenty left," he addresses the refugees.

"Thank you, Milord. We have enough to fill our bellies," one picks up the courage to answer.

"I'm not a lord," Conrad laughs. "But I'll take the compliment."

He grabs another ration and hands it to Kalina. Her tiny hands reach around and bring the tasty stick which looks like dried honey to her mouth, happily nibbling on it.

"Careful not to spill. Food is precious," he gives her a parent's advice.

Conrad looks around him, trying to identify what is on his mind. “No alcohol or entertainment?”

“We can’t ask for more...” one mumbles.

“Nonsense! I’ll have booze delivered and sets of dice and cards. May as well enjoy ourselves.”

As he intends to leave again, a woman finds the courage to address him. “Will the war end soon?”

Conrad faces her and leaves the answer to his chosen Envoy in a lighthearted voice. “Hey, Kalina. What do you say? When does the war end?”

“Tomorrow!”

More gasps come from all around the refugee group. Tomorrow?! So soon!

“There you have it, right from the mouth of the Envoy of Cloegandr. Tomorrow, it all ends.”

These folks will be fine. There’s an opposing side to every coin. War is no different. Where a lot was lost, there are also plenty of opportunities to build anew. Economies that start up, buildings and farms which need constructing. Or forming of new militias to deal with remnant radicals and bandits. There’s always a path left to take for whoever is willing. Everyone here already proved by lasting this long they have what it takes. They will thrive under circumstances better than the ones they lived under.

*

The girl on Conrad’s shoulders suddenly calls out as they tour the camp. “Cherry!”

They both wave at each other, Kalina reaching out to lock hands with her friend.

“Going for a walk?” Karl asks his Commander, accompanying Cherry.

“Yeah, just casually strolling around. Nothing else to do.”

“It’s a good night, with good company,” Karl receives Cherry at his side again.

“So, what are you two going to do after tomorrow?” Conrad asks.

“Hoh, after the war? I guess, we’ll go build ourselves a home for our growing family.”

Karl grins as he can feel Cherry squeeze harder.

“Any idea where?” his Commander asks.

“Yeah, we’ve talked about it already. Neither of us have other relatives that we know of anymore, so I’m thinking about returning to Bournesse to start a winery. After I formally take Cherry as my wife, naturally.”

“I hope we’re invited?” Conrad asks.

“I can’t leave out my former Commander on our wedding. Let’s face it, that would be bad etiquette.”

Both girls squeal at each other at the prospect of a marriage ceremony.

“I won’t forget to bring a gift then. For etiquette,” Conrad laughs. “Guess I should buy one already for the coming birth as well.”

“Actually, there’s something we would like to give you,” Karl changes topic.

Cherry picks an object from her pouch and offers it to Conrad. One which she offered before already and tends to shift hands between these two.

“Carrot’s dagger,” the recipient whispers. “You sure? I gave it to her a couple days ago to keep herself safe.”

“We both feel you should have this for tomorrow, you know, keep it at your side. It may come in handy. Oh, but it will need a charge.”

The enchantments on it are worn out by now, Conrad can see it on the lack of runes. “I’ll gladly accept it until the battle is over. I’ll have Primrose give it a makeover. But only on one condition.”

Conrad peers at the young leporid, receiving curious stares in return. What could he ask for?

“You don’t rush to the front line like you did in Gleaze.”

“But... That was...” she stumbles over her words, resigning herself to that one condition. “I promise.”

Conrad takes the dagger and places it at his side. “Deal. I’ll take this fine blade into battle then. Give it another legacy to its growing list. And I assure you, I’ll keep my promise to Carrot.”

The little stumps on Cherry’s head twitch in curiosity. What promise?

“I promised her to save your Tribe. Can’t fulfill that entirely without winning tomorrow. And I intend to keep my promises.”

Karl prepares to leave. “Alright then. We’ve done what we came to do. Time for us to enjoy some sleep. We have a big day ahead of us tomorrow.”

Cherry reaches for his hand, fingers locking as they walk to their shared love-nest for the night.

*

“Don’t bump your head,” Conrad warns Kalina before they enter a well-guarded supply tent.

Inside, a girl sleeps with her head on the table. A staff rests against the stand next to her, and a dagger for enchantments lies on top of the table.

“Looks like she takes a nap,” he whispers, hinting Kalina to keep quiet.

A large selection of weapons stands in the tent. They’re all enchanted. A small selection still needs work.

Conrad unfastens the dagger and his own sword, placing them on the table, next to **Adrian’s**. Primrose will know what to do with them. Then he grabs the old blanket she always uses for this work, the one Charlotte made, and adjusts it to cover **the girl’s** shoulders again.

At the side of the tent, he can recognize **a single short spear. That’s Selena’s. It still** receives an enchantment every time Primrose does this work, not once skipped. And he’s not about to break her habit. Not for this last time. In fact, seeing that spear still in good condition and ready for battle is strangely comforting.

The man’s hand slides against the weapon as a greeting, and he walks out again to let the foxy mage have her needed nap.

*

“Who do you think we’ll run into next?” he asks.

“Roderik!”

“You sound certain. How come?”

Kalina points right ahead.

“Oh...”

Roderik is right there. Accompanied by his growing harem. Pepper holds her baby girl, while Olive carries two in a special carrying bag. Her own son, and Sylvie’s daughter, who she looks after for a couple days. Roderik takes over the girl from Pepper’s arms, making funny faces at the child.

“Don’t scare the poor kid,” Conrad joins him. “Anyone would get nightmares from that mug.”

“Pfft, she likes it!” Roderik doesn’t stop and makes another face.

Crying fills the night when the child responds.

“That was only because she’s hungry,” he hands over his daughter back to Pepper.

“She just drank before we came here,” the young mother answers.

A complex expression rises on Roderik’s face. It can probably be best described as the ‘Please, don’t embarrass me in front of my mentor!’ look.

“What will you folks do after this is all over?” Conrad asks, curious to hear their plans for the future.

Olive is first to respond in a straightforward way. “Find ourselves a home and love my husband.”

A slightly embarrassed yet proud grin decorates Roderik’s face. He’s totally onboard with that plan.

“And raise a lot of children,” Pepper adds.

The young father of her child nods enthusiastically and with total approval.

“I’ll uh...” Luna begins shy, encouraged by Olive’s smile to speak her mind. “I’ll join their family... and...”

“We’ll marry,” Roderik grabs Luna’s hand.

She turns all red, not denying his words.

“Any idea where to call home?” Conrad asks.

Roderik thinks on his mentor's question. That's one they haven't thought much about yet. "We don't know yet. Somewhere with good climate for Luna's lungs. Maybe we'll remain in Sakai?"

Conrad is impressed his apprentice took Luna's condition in mind when considering the options for a home to their growing family. He really is growing up to be a fine young man. Capable, reliable and with a good sense of morals. Still a bit of a goof at times, though that's normal at his age. He wizens up whenever needed.

"And once the tournament opens up again in Gleaze, I'll earn myself a spot on that monument, next to Father's name!" Roderik speaks with confidence, turning more subdued right after. "It will open up again, the tournament, right?"

"Damn right, it will. I'll arrange for it myself if I have to. Let's face it, I have a reputation and suitable connections now."

How hard can it be to convince the next ruler of Gleaze to start up their traditional tournament again? Prodding for it probably won't even be required. And Roderik definitely has the right to participate as a registered citizen of Gleaze. The son of the ruling Champion, no less. They'll accept his entry, even if he lives in Sakai. Traditionally, the tournament was only for whoever had an aristocratic title, but eh, with his connections they'll make an exception. Or simply elevate him into the required rank.

"What will *you* do?" the boy asks his mentor.

Now there's a question Conrad struggled with lately. What to do once the war is over? "Marry Primrose and Lisette, obviously. And take in this little one," he rubs through Kalina's hair. But where? And what after that? "Maybe we'll have more than one spot to call home, and travel around based on the season? That sounds nice. I'll see what the others say about the idea."

Very likely they won't have an issue with it. Lisette and Kalina will follow wherever he goes. And Primrose? She's the type who likes travel. That kind of individual who changes decor of her room every season because it always looks better that way, until the next season comes along.

"Did you hear? I beat Adrian in our duel the other day," Roderik suddenly brags.

“So I heard. I’m impressed.” Adrian moped about it for several days. It was hard not to know. Not that Roderik managed to repeat his feat, but hey, a win is a win. Definitely shows his growth.

Conrad lifts up Kalina from his shoulders and places her down. “Why don’t you watch with the other girls? We’re going to have a match.”

Roderik boasts a smug look. Time to add another feat to his roster! In front of his wives, naturally.

...

Olive cheers up her husband with a hug. The other girls still giggle at the loss.

“Don’t let it get you down,” Conrad puts the training sword aside. “You put a good amount of pressure on me. I can see why Adrian lost after dropping his guard. You’re really jumping up quick in skill.”

It’s not a lie. He can see the boy improve with every fight. That kind of progress is usually rare. He’s actually starting to recognize aspects of the kid’s father in his fighting style. Whether that’s because of his family line, or what Conrad can pass on as an intermediary, he doesn’t really know. Regardless, those buds are there alright. At this rate, it really won’t be long before that perfect win ratio of the mentor has to take a first loss. Champion material indeed. This kid will craft his own legends.

*

Kalina reaches for Conrad’s hand as they walk on. There aren’t many places left to visit, with a child accompanying him at least. Still, this one is definitely on the list. The horses’ staging area.

“Hey there, buddy. Hope you’re not too bored here.”

Silvermoon gives a quick blow of hot air over Conrad’s face and shifts attention to the young girl, allowing her to pet him.

Her hands seek out the unicorn’s manes, fiddling around like a cat with a new toy. “They’re so soft!” she squeaks, laughing afterwards when she receives a lick.

“What are your thoughts?” Conrad asks. “Will we be okay tomorrow?”

Silvermoon tilts his head, poking with his horn into Conrad's side.

"Yeah, I know. Stupid question." He reaches out for the animal and gives a couple gentle pats on the neck.

Kalina grabs for nearby feed and offers it, happy to see the unicorn eat from her hands.

"I guess we will part ways afterwards. Your herd will be waiting for your return. But if I'm good enough, I'll be counting on you for one last ride." Conrad looks to the side, staring at the dark horizon where the starry sky disappears into the night's void. "What lies right beyond that sky is what we were brought together for, I'm certain of it."

A bump makes Conrad turn back to the horses. Silvermoon gave a nudge with his head, resting it on the man's shoulder. That man picks up his mood and gives the animal another encouraging pat.

"Alright then. Good to see you're on board."

...

As they want to walk away, he stops at a pair of familiar voices he can hear behind a giant hay stack. Kalina walks past and takes a peek, making Conrad quickly follow up and stop her in the nick of time.

"Shh," he whispers to her. "Let's not disturb them."

The girl peeks curiously. She knows both individuals well enough, though she doesn't understand much about what they're here for, or even doing.

Melisande rests in Adrian's arms, both completely naked. Only other companions are the nearby horses looking at them, and a pair of squirrels darting around the naked pair.

Her voice gently reaches over the romantic silence. "Do you believe Father would be happy to hear he has another grandchild coming?"

Adrian gives a kiss in Melisande's blonde curls, slowly fondling her round rear on his lap. "We're destined to find out. From what happened last time he received similar news, he'll be grumpy, fret his hair over the loss of his daughter's innocence, worry about her choice of man, and then decide to spend the night sleeping on it."

Melisande chuckles at his words. That sounds like her father alright.

"In the end, he'll be a happy man who can't wait to hold his new grandchild," Adrian adds.

The girl shifts her hand over his chest, caressing him. That too sounds about right, and she can't wait to see her father's face on that day.

"So, what are your thoughts?" Adrian suddenly brings up a different topic, humored.

She looks up at him, curious what he asks about.

"That subtle prickle in the nose. Starting to like it?"

Melisande laughs with the joy of a child. Right... That topic. Nature's incense. "It's growing on me," she hovers right in front of his lips, mood turning into open temptation.

...

Conrad grabs Kalina's shoulder and gently turns her away. "Let's leave them to their moment together." A smirk adorns his face. Could it finally be? Adrian is cured of his married-wife syndrome?

Kalina waves to her friend Tama as she passes them with her brother in tow, held by the hand, guiding him to that same hay stack for some good loving.

Time to head back inside the tent. Might be a good idea to spend the remaining evening with his wives now, they should return soon or already be there.

*

Lisette enters the Commander's tent, about to greet Kalina. The girl quickly stops, containing her voice.

Kalina hasn't noticed her yet, too occupied with peeking into the second compartment, clinging onto her doll.

Lisette tiptoes right next to her and squats down. "Busted!" she whispers in her target's ear.

A jump-scare runs through the girl, quickly calmed down by Lisette when she places her arm around her. She peeks into the second compartment herself. "You know what they are doing?" she asks.

Kalina shakes her head, joining Lisette with secretly observing the display. What they look at is not exactly an unfamiliar scenery to Conrad's daughter. And Kalina must have heard it before, though she probably kept her curiosity in check, until today.

Conrad is hard at work massaging his cock into Primrose's vagina, taking her from behind while she stands on her knees. Tail bouncing together with the girl's entire body every time the adult man slaps into her. A low vibrato is present in Primrose's moans, whenever the cock reaches for full depth. She shifts into an erotic squeak when he grabs her lush tail and gives it a good tug.

"Where does that go?" Kalina asks.

Lisette has no need to inquire what she asks about. The girl places a hand on her friend's lower belly, sliding down to the right spot. "In here, all the way."

The Uskandar girl dreams away at the thought. How is that possible? But it clearly is, as she can see it happen right there, with Primrose. "Why?" she now asks.

"Because it feels good," Lisette hugs her closer, caressing the girl's lower belly. "Don't you feel anything when watching? Down there?"

Kalina is too shy to answer straight away, her reply indirect. "You too?"

Lisette nods with a grin. "I can feel the itch too." Her eyes turn naughty, grin widening in the smugness of a cunning plan. With her lips touching her friend's ear, she offers her proposal. Red eyes of Kalina begin to glimmer with intrigue, yet afraid to give an answer.

...

The tent's divider separating both compartments opens. Conrad's daughter walks into the room. "I brought a guest," she casually remarks.

Kalina holds hands with her, staring towards the ground, eyes regularly flicking to the lewd scene on the bed.

Conrad bashes into Primrose one last time and fills her up with full devotion. The mage girl aware an unusual face is present during her moment of ecstasy, she quickly turns red, yet there's no resisting the sheer pleasure pumped into her, arched back seeking Conrad while she rises higher on her knees, spilling her typical barrage of milk around.

After a couple deep breaths, Conrad pulls out and takes in both newcomers. "Hey..." he doesn't really know what to say.

Lisette being here is nothing odd, as she shares his bed as a nightly routine by now. That other girl still holding her doll on the other hand is a first. That girl's eyes firmly focused on the weird, fleshy object slowly turning all floppy between his legs.

The naughty daughter winks at her father. **“She was curious, so I dragged her along. You know, so she doesn’t feel left out.”**

Kalina now stares at Primrose, lying down on the bed, dreaming away in a daze of post-sex bliss. **She looks so at peace... All shyness completely forgotten** in the powerful afterglow. The inner side of her thighs are all sticky wet, more leaking from the spot where Conrad drove his manhood into her only moments earlier.

Lisette heads to the bed, joining her father. With a couple flicks of her fingers, the buttons of her dress open and she steps out after letting it fall to the ground, not hiding a smidgen of her body.

“I don’t know if she wants to...” Conrad isn’t certain about their unusual spectator, though his daughter already crawls over his lap.

“Don’t worry, Papa. She felt itchy down there, when watching you in secret.” Her arm reaches out, guiding her **father’s hand between her legs.** **“Itchy... Right here. Right, Kalina?”**

The girl returns a shy nod, staring at Lisette who now **reaches for her father’s penis,** giving good strokes to it. **Conrad’s daughter leans closer to her father, lips hovering before his.** The shape of his cock massaged in her hand makes her flick her tongue over her lips, so close **she wets her father’s in the process.**

With renewed vigor, the erection resumes, and Lisette lifts herself up in glee, placing the tip in place. Where she holds it for a while to let Kalina take in what happens. Another slow rub emphasizes the entire shaft for her young spectator, its meaty texture frothing in her palm. **Then she slowly sits down, taking in her father’s meat still wet with Primrose’s love juice.** The erotic tension in the room so silent their spectator can actually hear that meat slip in.

“Mmm~” she doesn’t hide how good it feels to take in a raw cock, rotating her hips around at the deepest point.

Primrose places her feet down from the bed, finally in a state of mind to grasp what is going on, still breathing hard in recovery. To her side is Lisette, riding her father, like she does every night. In front is Kalina, observing them in growing fascination. **“Oh...”** she figures out the full picture why the girl was brought in here.

She slips off the bed and heads to her friend on the floor. Remnants of fresh cum still visible around her pussy, a small clump leaking out as she stands up, mixed with her own lubrication. Kalina doesn't know anymore where to look first when the mage girl sits down next to her. "So, you're curious?" Primrose asks.

Another subtle nod follows. Yeah, she's curious. Increasingly so.

Primrose's hand descends towards Kalina's girlhood, reaching underneath the skirt of her dress. She glides over her panties.

Kalina clings harder to her doll at the sudden stimulus.

"Can you see their fluids?" the mage asks.

"Yeah..." She can see them cling to Conrad's penis, like she could see it leak out earlier from Primrose.

"Can you feel those same fluids down here?"

"Ah~..." the ash-colored girl moans when Primrose dips her finger into her entrance. Yeah, she can feel similar fluids leave her as a constant, gentle stream.

"That's to make it all slippery. So it can slide in so much easier. Like this..."

Another gasp follows when the finger gradually disappears down Kalina's tunnel.

"Can you imagine it going in and out?"

The girl's red eyes are glued to the area where Lisette grinds over her father's penis, an alluring expression aimed her way from the girl on top, encouraging while overflowing with desire. Yeah, she can imagine it easily going in and out, exactly as it does with Lisette.

"Doesn't it look fun?" Primrose breathes in the curious girl's ear.

To help make the point, Lisette throws her head backwards, gaping in ecstasy. Shifting the pace to a slow crawl while she sensually keeps her hips moving in expert rotation.

"Ah... Papa... I feel so good."

Kalina is thrilled by what she sees. Fun doesn't even begin to describe this display. Her own pussy leaks like crazy, hips moving to mimic Lisette, caressing Primrose's hand while rubbing her insides over her finger.

However, the mage has other plans. She stops Kalina, and pulls down the girl's panties. "Come," the vulpes offers.

Kalina cautiously crawls on **her busty friend's** thigh. A new thrill instantly makes her shiver, hips moving at the touch of naked skin, grinding over **Primrose's** upper leg.

The Uskandar girl has no idea what consumes her, or anyone else in this room. All she **knows is that she doesn't want it to stop. Her face seeks the heartbeat of Primrose, diving between her well-rounded tits. They are so weirdly soothing. And so squishy... And milk comes out...**

Her fingers latch on, giving a squeeze, causing more to spill forth. **Warm... The girl's** mouth reaches for the nipple from Primrose, and she begins to suckle on it, vision focused at the corner of her eyes to not lose sight of Lisette and Conrad.

How weird. It's like she's being pampered by a doting mother, lost to her bared bosom. A sensation so comforting and assuring. While her lower half is the complete opposite, matching the fiery passion playing out on the bed.

"Look, she is almost done," Primrose whispers in Kalina's ear.

The girl stops drinking for a second to process the underlying meaning of those words, resuming the flow of nutrition once she understood.

Lisette is about to finish, whatever that may mean. And then... Then... She doesn't even dare think the exact words.

"Mm... Papa... I'm about to..."

Conrad admires his daughter while she rides his lap, feeling her sink all the way over his cock, taking it in as deep as she can. His little girl is about to orgasm, and he can only follow. Holding onto her butt cheeks, he presses her closer, lifting his own hips upwards, no longer feeling any restraint about the presence of a third individual during the carnal love of his own daughter.

Kalina lets go of Primrose's nipple, warm milk spilling out of her mouth as she forgets to swallow. Entranced by Lisette surrendering herself to the delirious pumping of pleasure into her pregnant womb.

Her inhaling and exhaling is loud enough to reach the entire tent, while Lisette rests for **a couple seconds on her father's** chest. Then she gets off. For Kalina, it appears as if more and more penis just keeps coming out of the girl's vagina, until the outer end finally flops out with a drip of cum still salivating for her moist embrace.

Lisette sits down on the bed, facing her curious friend. **She doesn't close her legs,** slightly opened so the girl clinging to her doll can witness the aftermath. As filled with that white stuff as Primrose was, her lower area smothered with it.

A small nudge encourages Kalina to stand.

"Go on... Your turn, if you wish," Primrose utters in her ear.

Kalina stands up, uncertain. Primrose reaches for her dress and pulls it over the girl's head, dropping it to the ground.

Conrad doesn't really know what to do. It's all up to her now. All up to the girl with grey-blue skin, entirely in the nude. Though he does have to admit, the sight of her girlhood does not leave him untouched. The young and inexperienced aura of a virgin girl clinging to a **child's doll, her loss of innocence visible in the shiny gloss of fresh lubrication** coating her inner thighs, proof of her thirsting for a first raw cock.

She takes a single step forward, causing him to hold out his hand. The girl reaches and crawls onto the bed. A strange aroma present on it, which instantly works on her mind and body, causing more of that lubrication to appear. A thin string stretches down onto the bed, still connected to her entrance, with a larger drop descending it.

Her eyes ask the man what to do, begging him to take away that irresistible itch.

"Kalina. Do you want me to?" he asks.

"Mm," she nods. **Shy, yet determined.** Yes, please, teach her all about what she witnessed. Let her experience that same deliriousness which consumed her friends. Let her share in the lure of that afterglow.

Conrad takes a pillow and places it down. **"Here, let your hips lie on this."**

She crawls over the pillow and lies down, clinging hard to her doll in both tension and excitement. The girl knows. She has her rear elevated towards him. The reason why is no longer a mystery. Primrose had a similar pose, where he took her from the rear. This will be the same, only while lying down. Belly pressed onto the bed, so her back can arch more over the pillow to offer the still sealed strip of her vagina.

A warmth drops down over her when Conrad takes place, his body-heat radiating towards the girl. An encouraging nod from Primrose lets her know she can simply stay there and enjoy the coming ride.

Kalina squeezes around her doll when a hot presence pokes between her butt cheeks, **seeking out her vagina's entrance.** Conrad drags his tip over her tightened slit first, meanwhile massaging the pair of cheeks he will soon enjoy up to their fullest cushioning.

"Don't worry. It's going to feel great," Lisette lies herself down on the bed to observe the pair, hand reaching for Kalina. Primrose joins from the other side, reaching for the girl's arm to give her an encouraging rub.

Her voice leaks out when Conrad lets gravity do the work. She's tight, squeezing her own vagina closed similar to how she squeezes her doll. Though **there's no stopping the adult man digging in.** Once he can't go any deeper, Conrad waits to let her get used to this all new experience. Equally in need to keep control over his own senses and not immediately pour her full of cum at the strong grip trying to milk him from base to tip.

"See?" Lisette enjoys the display. **"I told you it could go in all the way."**

Conrad can feel her muscles finally loosening. Her vagina is no longer tense, no longer trying to obstruct entry. Now, it curiously wraps around, with a hint of an all-different emotion inside. A subtle frothing from her own hips indicates her rising hunger. This hot thing inside of her is no longer only strange, foreign, hard and a bit frightening. It still is all of those, yet now that rod wiggling inside of her also feels increasingly desirable.

Conrad pulls back and drives himself back in. Not too fast, so she can grow used to it. **The fact she is a vessel to a god of destruction doesn't even register anymore for the man.** She is simply a girl. A very pretty, very curious and very sexual girl. And he is more than willing to be her target of curiosity.

The bed creaks, the pillow giving with every thrust downwards. Her breathing shifts into a luscious craving. The rod penetrating her, **it's so thick and burning hot...** She can hear her own cheeks give as the man slaps into them, increasingly harder, increasingly rapid. **It's** like she receives a spanking for being a bad girl, yet it feels so different, so much better. Only left with desire to be spanked more. Harder. Faster. She would be his bad girl all day and night long, if only he would punish her like this.

So this has to be it... That tantalizing word, attributed to an alluring activity. A word she occasionally heard about before. What mercenaries could talk about outside the tent. What her friends enjoyed in their secret world that was this compartment at night. The origin of

all those enticing fleshy noises and earthly gasps she regularly heard. That mysterious and appetizing word she never really knew the meaning of.

Sex.

And right now, she's partaking in that activity, partaking in sex. No longer a world hidden to her, but one which opened up to become a part of. To get lost in those same fleshy noises and earthly gasps.

Kalina bites in the sheets when Conrad gives a good stir to help open up her walls more. Not that she really needs it anymore, as her vagina already lost all its tenseness, now eager to flex itself to every angle and twist the man behind her desires, though still equally tight in grip. Juices froth forth around her entrance, spilling onto the pillow beneath, salivating at the prospect of this cock driving itself deeper into her over and over again.

"No need to hold in or be shy," Primrose advises. "Just enjoy yourself. Let it all out."

"Nn~" A nasal moan begins to match the rhythm of Conrad's thrusts. That burning feeling where he connects with her only grows stronger while her own body turns into an oven. Mind no longer in control, a thirst growing ever fierce.

Her tiny body gapes for oxygen. How she loves to hear her own body slapped hard and repeatedly. If only she could also see that slab of meat force itself into her, like it did with the others. **How great that would be...** Though all regrets are already gone at the weight of Conrad banging into her with quickening pace and with enough manly force to dominate every being of the small girl beneath him.

With both friends holding onto her, and her doll for added company, Kalina gasps in her first ever orgasm as the man shoves in and dumps his full load right into her virgin womb.

*

Conrad leaves the tent after getting dressed. As expected, he can't really catch any sleep. Not with the importance of the final challenge which lies in front of them. Though those three girls did an excellent job of easing his mind, strengthening it at the same time. The rebellion can't fail tomorrow. He won't allow it to. As long as the people close to him can see the day after, he'll happily give up his own future if necessary. As much as life has been

hard on him, he can't deny, he has equally been blessed with the love and friendship of great people. How foolish he has been, to only realize that now, no longer drunk on a need for vengeance.

He heads to the river running next to the camp. Always a good spot to set up their tents. It runs straight past the horses' staging area. Quick and easy access to clean water, naturally with the horses placed downstream in case one decides to use it as a toilet. Also makes for a good defensive feature, protecting an entire flank from being easily raided, as the river is too deep and wide for horses to run through. Any potential attacker would have to swim or use rafts. The water does require cooking for use in the mercenaries' kitchen, though is otherwise perfect for a quick wash. And that's what Conrad is here for.

Without sleep, he has his body and mental condition to keep in mind. As a leader, he must function with quick thinking and reflexes intact. And experience taught him water works wonders, no matter what temperature it has. Nothing like a fine chill to fire up a body's functions. While warm water is great for relaxing tense muscles. Truly, nature's salve regardless in what package it comes.

"Going to take a dip?" a girl's voice breaks the peaceful silence. It's Lisette, unable to find sleep herself.

"Yeah, I felt like getting soaked. Too bad there's no hot-pot or oil bath here, so a regular river will have to do." He really would enjoy one of those right now. "You're free to join," he invites Lisette, though she probably won't. His daughter doesn't particularly enjoy cold water.

"Actually, there's something I wanted to show you."

Conrad just finished undressing, now tying his shirt around his waist to give this moment the decency it deserves. If his daughter has a topic on her mind, he is all ears.

The girl guides a hand over her belly, a light appearing from inside when the spirits reveal their presence. Her father can feel a peace and calm come over him. They *did* permanently move from her chest to her womb, the reason behind that change a comforting one.

The spirits come out to fly around, buzzing in the night like bright, colored fireflies.

Lisette smiles at her father. He already noticed what she wanted to show him, from the very moment her spirits appeared. His expression is one which matches, a nostalgic joy present.

“Eris and Selena,” he murmurs.

Two more joined the group, a total of nine now float around him. He can even identify them all at this point. Not that he would know them by color, though ever since his return from the Abyss, the presence they radiate would not go unrecognized.

He reaches out, holding one of the lights in his hand. This one’s Annette. He knows instantly. This spirit has her style of welcoming warmth, flashes of the girl coursing through his mind so vivid she might as well be physically here.

Another one enters his second hand. This one’s definitely Helmine. Playful and innocent, held equally close to his heart.

A third one appears, drawing attention, reached out for in turn. **“You’ll always be my naughty bunny,”** he whispers to Carrot’s spirit.

The trio dart around again, changing place with the newcomers, Eris and Selena.

Conrad brings them together in his hands, guiding them to his chest. **“Thanks,** for all you’ve done. I wouldn’t be here without you. I’m so glad to feel your presence again. If only I could truly hold you all in my arms again. Nothing would make me happier.”

He reaches out for another, yet quickly freezes, confused.

Who is this?

He does not know this spirit. It is kind and... youthful? However, he does not recognize this warmth, this presence. More confusion quickly settles in. Wait a moment. He counted nine earlier. There should only be eight. Who is this ninth?

The spirits return to Lisette, flying around her. They seem to try and get a message across.

She turns to her father, joy radiating from her. **“Papa. I have** a gift for you. From **everyone.”** She moves her hands together, activating her magic as a spirit user.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” her father worries. **She’ll have to fight tomorrow.** Sure, she has more spirits now, he has no idea how much difference that makes. Even so, **shouldn’t she save her energy? And what’s up with that extra spirit?**

“Don’t worry. They all want you to know.”

The man **calms down**. Okay, if that’s their wish. He has no reason to doubt his loved ones.

Water starts to form, surprisingly easy. Maybe that addition of more spirits does make a huge difference. Both Lisette’s stamina and Diana’s power did seem to scale with each spirit who joined before.

A girly shape forms before Conrad, the one he recognizes. Diana. Though it doesn’t stop there. The shape continues to mold, more and more details forming in her appearance.

With a last plop of water droplets, Lisette finished casting and Diana’s new form floats in the air.

Conrad gasps in amazement. So much detail... It’s like she’s a real person! Her eyes blink, turning around while she observes the area like a real individual would. Water strands of the finest thinness form her eyelashes. Subtle constant changes in her expression and body language perfectly mimic a real girl.

No, what is he saying, ‘mimic’? She doesn’t mimic anything. She actually is a girl!

“This is...?”

Her mouth moves, though no sound comes out. Regardless, the syllables are easy to read. She offers her name. “Diana.”

That unknown spirit has taken foreground, shining brightest among the nine. She slowly hovers closer.

“Eris and Selena arranged for this,” Lisette explains. “It’s why they took a while to manifest. They needed to guide the ninth, so all of them could nurture her.”

Nurture? Conrad doesn’t understand it at all. His hand reaches out in growing curiosity as Diana approaches. She’s beautiful. Even though she is made out of water, every detail is visible, every curve looks natural. Slender arms, gorgeous thighs, even the thin bump of a collar bone is present. There is something strangely familiar about her body. That shape of her breasts and size of her nipples... Those proportions of her waist and rear... They all feel so familiar. That tantalizing triangle making up her pubic mound, it sends thrills through Conrad’s body... It looks so real, juicy and attractive.

Still, where has he seen this girl before? He definitely has.

His hand touches her cheek. Not cold at all. The spirits heat her body, just right for a girl. How can water have this texture and supple firmness? **It's subtly different**, yet very much resembles a real cheek's skin.

...

And he finally understands what the spirits worked so hard for to make a reality. How they did it? He has no idea. A miracle, one could call it. The identity of this ninth spirit now known to him. Of course, she would seem so familiar to him, how could she not?

Her mouth moves once more when the watery girl hugs him with affection, forming two more unspoken syllables.

"Papa."

Conrad wraps his arms around her, embracing his long lost daughter he never even got to meet once.

Annette's unborn child.

Act 4 ~ Chapter 9



The Lion of Bournesse

The city of Faramund rises up over the horizon. An outline of typical Uskandar architecture adorns the city. Multiple ziggurats make up the official buildings, largest one towering far above the protective walls. It's the main building, seat of the Union's ruler. The location where the Faceless in command should reside. The menace overseeing the concentrated troops threatening all of existence. Obelisk-shaped guard towers line up around the city's walls as obstacles to reach that menace. Some obelisks don't have their typical pyramidion at the top, instead exhibiting a flat surface housing a siege weapon.

Attacking the city is only possible from the front. It has been built with its back facing a large lake for defensive reasons. A deep moat runs around, drawing water from the lake. Only three entrances exist into the city, each with a drawbridge.

Conrad's troops line up, out of reach of the city's defenders. Kalina sits in front of him, donned in her ceremonial armor.

“Their consolidation strategy certainly paid off,” Karl says.

While the Restoration Rebellion’s numbers are nothing less than impressive, the remaining Union forces aren’t a slouch either. To make it worse, the enemy has the defensive position.

“So many they don’t even all fit in the city,” Adrian adds.

Entire legions are situated outside the city’s walls. No doubt, more await behind. Neither of them are really surprised, their superior commander included. Normal tactic would be to hide behind the walls, though not with these numbers. Besides, the enemy has another reason to have troops out in the open.

“That’s a crap-ton of battle rhinos,” Adrian peers into the distance, trying to estimate a count and quickly giving up.

“They do live in these lands. Must be their entire force,” Conrad answers.

“Explains why we didn’t encounter any on the way here.”

The animals are that other reason to not hole up. Beasts like these are most effective when they can thrash around freely. Having them locked behind walls would be more than only a waste, but an actual hindrance to the defending army.

Adrian can’t help feel some sympathy for the enemy troops outside defensive cover. “I wonder what those guys must feel like, to be out there in front of the walls. Got to be plenty of envy for whoever can sit behind”

“Let’s hope that works in our favor and they lose morale quickly,” Karl responds.

Conrad hopes the same, though he doubts such a fortunate outcome. Radomir already commanded a lot of respect and particularly fear from his troops. Doubtful this Faceless leader would be any different. Even Grimald doesn’t underestimate him, carrying out his deceit through the hand of a third party. That’s all the proof needed these troops will obey orders.

That vanguard’s role is simple. They are not meant to survive. Only to soften up the rebels, keep them occupied long enough to wear them down while siege weapons will take aim. Maybe even lure them into a bad tactical decision.

“Let’s get this over with,” he gives a pat to Silvermoon.

The unicorn turns and rides majestically across the front line. Conrad holds his banner high while making certain the entire army can see their Envoy. His determined voice flows over the troops like a powerful wave.

“Behind us lies temporary peace and safety! Before us lies the domain of death and chaos!”

“For our peoples to see the light of day, we will valiantly tread into the dark of night!”

“For our sons and daughters to prosper, we will fearlessly mock the face of death!”

“For our ancestors to welcome us with pride, we shall conquer and bend chaos to our will!”

Silvermoon turns around, following the front line again. Conrad lifts the banner as tall he can while giving his speech. All eyes and ears glued upon him.

“Listen! Can you hear the rustling of the wind? It is the combined voice of our ancestors, who watered the land with their own blood, so it could be tilled for prosperity!”

“Watch! Can you see the flow of the grass? It is the cascading wave flowing from the shores, where our forefathers weathered the greatest storms and deepest oceans, for nothing less than to conquer the far unknown!”

Silvermoon comes to a stop at the middle, his rider facing the entire army.

“They are here! All around us! For it is *our* time to choose, *our* time to join them into deciding the very course of history! Do we cower in fear in a tiny corner of the world, ever fading? Or do we boldly step forward, right into the heart of chaos, to mercilessly stab it whole and claim its territory for our own!”

A loud battle-cry erupts from the rebel army, pumped up with adrenaline.

“Today, to end the war, we will fight once more in devotion to Life!”

“Today, we shall become the striking hand of Valor!”

“Today, we restore the dominion of Justice!”

The army repeatedly shouts out with vigor, stamping their weapons against shield or into the ground, to send shock-waves into the hearts of the enemy.

Conrad gives a light tap on Kalina’s shoulder. With her best voice, she shouts out her rehearsed line.

“As granted by Divine Providence, the war shall end today, and Life will stand ever victorious!”

A roaring thunder of cheers follows her declaration, a war cry of any and all who shall never bend or break, reaching all the way to Faramund.

Conrad turns to face his sworn enemy. He never felt as confident as he does right now. Yes, the vast majority of people always prefer to cower and live increasingly on their knees behind a false sense of temporary peace. True, few dare to choose the frightening and paralyzing act of having to take a firm stand against injustice, and upset the comforting order of their daily routine. However, the men and women behind him are nothing less than the best and bravest their generations have to offer. They have what it takes to face any hardship, and not only survive, but come out on top of the world! What is there left to fear, with them by his side?

*

The infantry marches, led by Adrian. Lines of Uskandar lance men dressed in heavy armor take the front. Their long lance in one hand, a large shield in the other. Their rhythm is synchronized perfection, sending vibrations into the ground. Behind them are Alma troops to provide support.

Conrad hands over Kalina to a rider so she can seek the safety of the inner areas of their army. Meanwhile, he observes the charge.

“Their Rhinos aren’t moving yet,” Karl remarks.

“So it seems. The Union prepares their own infantry to meet the incoming wave.”

“Artillery fire has commenced!” a mercenary shouts.

Conrad bites his lip. That’s earlier than expected. Their artillery’s range is impressive.

A mixture of ballistae and trebuchets fire from the towers. They shouldn’t have a huge amount of ammunition, though each volley is capable of inflicting severe damage.

...

Adrian keeps his cool while rocks and projectiles fly at rapid speeds. One smashes into the front line to his right, causing carnage. **“Reform and hold the line!” he orders.**

A piece of rock forms an arch, headed right towards him. Men all around pick up their shields instinctively, though no shield can resist the incoming mass. The blond man simply marches on.

The rock scatters into pieces, flying in all directions. An invisible barrier took the hit. A mage from the Spire observes his dagger. That one hit took out a vast chunk of **his gem's** reserves. Other mages among the marching troops try and protect their assigned section, **though it's impossible to cover them all.**

...

Conrad waves around. **"Bring in the wagons. We have no time to waste!"**

That front line won't hold up against the artillery hits for long. They can manage for now, yet **those attacks should take a toll on their mages' supply of energy.** He does have a means of dealing with the artillery, though they need to get closer first. In particular those rhinos are an obstacle which needs to go.

The wagonburg moves out. A large set of wagons heading in pursuit of the marching infantry. Their tops filled with Hatori archers and a couple shield bearers. Waves of arrows are launched from both sides to meet the other.

"Artillery focuses on our wagons," Karl remarks.

Though that is a part of their task, to draw fire as big, juicy-looking targets. If morale were to break among the **front-line troops, it would be disastrous.** At least they don't have to worry temporarily about the artillery, now the wagons draw fire.

"Keep them moving!" Conrad shouts an order, immediately followed by a raised flag to signal the wagons they should stay mobile.

A ballista shot flies straight through a wagon, crippling it and creating a gruesome scene. **The others carry on, hoping the next shot doesn't reach them.**

...

The infantry clash, front line of trained Uskandar troops dropping to a knee to let two rows of pikes from behind them pass. The wall stabs fiercely. Then the front line steps forward, readying themselves for another jab right after.

“*Target!*” Adrian points out a single enemy commander. Javelin throwers instantly take aim, showering the indicated area. Arrows continuously fly overhead from either the enemy troops in front or the allied wagons behind.

*

“**Why aren’t** we using our damn rhinos!” a local Union commander grumbles.

Already bad enough they have to stand out here, facing such a large force while the rest can hide behind the walls. What are those assholes in the back waiting for?! Just send those damn beasts out already!

He blinks at a sprinkle of water falling down. Now it bloody rains on top! Muddy terrain can be a bitch for his armored troops.

“**It’s not rain, Sir!**” one of his men calls out. He points at the opposing army where a mage sends a spray of water into the air, drizzling down over them.

“**What the fuck is that guy doing? Take him out!**” The commander really can’t see any point to this. Still, **it can’t be good, whatever they are trying. Better not** take any risks. He can already see pools of water form on the ground.

Arrows try and aim for the mage, though his barrier prevents them from landing. The man stops anyway, his job done.

The wall of infantry opens up temporarily for another individual to pass through. A different mage steps forward, shielding herself while she slams her staff into the ground, sparks flying off. In an instant, a large group of Union soldiers fall to the ground when a heavy dose of directed electricity shoots through the soggy ground beneath their feet in an arc, spreading out over the water.

More magic support appears as a frost ball blasts off from one of the wagons, flying over **the infantry’s heads**. It detonates among the enemy archers in the back, causing chaos. Additional magic projectiles follow from other wagons.

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“Damn! They really aren’t using their rhinos, even when they’re pressured,” Conrad curses, noticing another ballista score a hit.

“Shall I lead the cavalry?” Karl suggests.

Conrad considers his options. The enemy line shows cracks yet still holds due to the large number of troops. They will cave soon enough under pressure from the mages, but meanwhile that equally holds true for his own troops. The artillery weighs down on them and barriers increasingly start to fail. He could send out the cavalry, though the enemy will try to match them with their own, creating a stalemate. Which still leaves those damn rhinos sitting at the back, screwing up his plans through simple inaction!

A scout’s horn draws his attention before a decision can be made. Conrad turns to his side. That horn indicated incoming movement. Friend or foe?!

Where the call came from, a **single legion’s flag appears** over the hill, flanking the battlefield. A flag which Conrad instantly remembers.

The man **shakes his head in disbelief**. “What the heck are *they* doing here?!” Though he can’t stop grinning at those damn, proud fools. For the first time in his life, happy to see them.

More flags appear on the horizon from behind the leading banner. A couple at first, followed by countless more. **Colorful, brandishing various households’ crests. Similar crests adorn their heavy armors, a unique helmet on each.** None cower in the rear, instead lining up right at the front of an entire battalion of heavy cavalry. The White Chrysanthemum right next to the Golden Lion.

Lances are lowered, and the newcomers take up speed. A slow trot at first, announcing their presence to the Union as proper battle decorum demands, to then pick up momentum. **The remnant of Bournesse and Gleaze’s nobility charges into battle, eager to perform their role as they always should have.** To be a beacon of courage for their citizens, while those citizens follow the colorful households leading them, riding under a single legion’s banner. Once scrapped due to lack of leadership, recently reformed under Gleaze’s future ruler.

The Queen’s Royal Legion.

“Go!” Conrad quickly signals to Karl. “Ride with them into victory!”

Karl heads off, well aware who that **newcomer's** banner belongs to, signaling his own cavalry. **“Don't let them have all the glory! Charge!”**

The man has no intention of bothering the **heavy cavalry**. **They're** trained and **experienced enough to fight on their own**. It's clear from their trajectory they plow right towards the main bulk of the enemy army.

“Typical aristocrats,” Karl jokes. Performing a mad rush at the enemy, what else? He should know, he was one of them in past times. Though **he'll take their diversion**. It's a godsend, drawing the **Union's cavalry** into action by sheer armored force. Which means the path is clear for his real target, the rhinos.

Artillery is too late to turn to the Queen's Legion, too cumbersome. Union archers change focus and fire at the heavy cavalry, yet **most arrows can't find a place to land, bouncing off from men and horses'** unique sets of armor.

Union cavalry is forced into a counter to avoid their infantry from being overrun, men and horses smashing into each other like hammers driving lances forward with brutal strength.

The Queen's Legion doesn't stop, taking out as many enemies along the way as they can while carving a path to the panicked archers.

Karl can see it unfold by the shattering of **the enemy's** formations. His own troops encounter little resistance. From his heightened position, he can spot Adrian lead the reinvigorated infantry march. The pressure applied is great enough to shift the battle and cause Union troops to gradually retreat, losing hope.

“Let's hunt ourselves large game!” Karl shouts, ordering his troops to activate their enchantments.

A combination of spears, swords and arrows shine with armor-piercing runes. Plenty more available now, **thanks to the Spire's efforts before the battle began**. The first arrows fly through the air, drilling through the animals with ease. Using the nimbleness of his trusty light cavalry, Karl drives the first **enchanted sword through a rhino's side**.

*

Conrad nods approvingly at the tide of battle. They're making gains! Adrian can handle the soldiers, together with their unexpected allies, while Karl can handle the rhinos. Biggest priority now is to take out the siege weapons at the top of the towers. The ballistae in particular are the prime target, as they have a primitive yet effective stone roof above them with plenty of armed guards, probably constructed in haste as a shelter against the rumored harpies.

A special wagon rides forward, carrying a covered platform, pulled by multiple armored horses. They ride as close to the front line as possible. Now that the line has firmly pushed forward, and the largest threat to the wagon in the form of the rhinos has been dealt with, the time has come to bring a key piece into action.

The **special wagon's** cover is removed, revealing a large crystal with nine mages around it, including Primrose and her former mentor, Headmaster Gerald.

Artillery takes aim at them, instantly realizing the threat. The first ballista fires, missing **the wagon. A second's projectile turns to splinters at the combined defensive barrier** of multiple mages.

Gerald, Primrose and three **more tap from the crystal taken from the Spire's Tower of Domination**, channeling their energies into a combined spell. About to show the power which secured the independence of the Spire for so long. In the air above them, a large heat source manifests. Their escorting mages establish a protective barrier to prevent the wagon from catching fire due to all heat building up.

A searing blast shoots off towards the nearest tower, defenders throwing themselves to the lower levels in desperation. A loud shock-wave and matching light bursts in the sky, sending a blinding flare out while it blows the entire top of the obelisk into rubble. A second projectile is already prepared, seeking out the next. Enough stored energy inside the blasts to reduce the siege weapons to cinders.

Cheers and gasps of awe echo all around Conrad. He can't help but be stunned himself. Those towers don't stand a chance!

Yet, this is no time to stand here and be impressed! Conrad lifts a signal to one of his men. A unique horn's echo reaches far and wide, followed up by a similar horn far in the distance, and a third even further.

With the battle outside about decided, enemy ranks left scattered, it's time to crack the city itself.

More chants of battle reach his ears as they can all see what approaches. The dark cloud in the distance is no longer a secret to most present. Even the Union should have heard of what happened in Gleaze.

“Forward!” Conrad gives the order, all remaining troops other than those protecting the logistics moving right towards Faramund. With the siege weapons and rhinos dealt with, the path is clear.

Overhead, the loud storm of flapping wings overpowers the cries for battle and the thundering of hooves. The tempest takes the lead, diving onto the city's walls and remaining towers while guided by the sirens' song.

*

The city's commander can notice his troops lose morale as the storm of claws rages.

“Keep calm and hold position!” They knew this was going to happen eventually. That's why they took precautions. *“Open fire!”*

A recognizable set of auditory blasts reaches Conrad's ears. Are those howitzers?!

Salvos shoot into the sky from well-guarded locations inside the city. A same type of howitzer as the mercenaries' spreads shrapnel through the skies.

“Identify the handlers! Aim for the ones that sing!” the commander tries to re-establish control.

The howitzers have effect, their wide-shot shrapnel not finding it hard to hit targets. While claws and beaks can't do much to disable the howitzer, only take out its operators. These operators quick to hide into nearby constructs providing cover when targeted.

The Union commander shouts fiercely. *“Grab more black powder from the storage if necessary! Don't allow yourselves to run out!”*

The man quickly seeks refuge from the harpies behind his guards, underneath a protective stone covering of the main storage. *“Curse those creatures!”*

Still, his counter-offensive works! Their attacks have thinned. The beasts must be afraid of the howitzers' loud blasts. Gaps are already visible, revealing the sky.

One of his men suddenly catches his attention. **“Commander! Arrows! They shoot arrows at us.”**

The man takes a look where his subordinate points. A single arrow landed inside the inner court near the main black powder storage. **It's covered in** burning oil. Another one lands. **“Ignore them! They** only take blind potshots over the wall!”

A sudden, loud explosion nearby catches attention, making the men duck when pieces reach all the way near them.

“What the fuck was that?!” the commander yells.

“They took out one of our howitzer emplacements!”

The man overlooks the aftermath of the explosion. What a stroke of bad luck. One of those fire arrows must have hit a black powder barrel. **“No matter! Carry on and focus on those damn, rotten birds!”** They have enough emplacements left. Regrettable to lose one, though they should be okay as long as they keep the others.

Another fire arrow lands near the main storage, closer than the previous. It doesn't faze the man. The main storage has a baked-tile roof. **It can't** catch fire and is more than strong enough to take an arrow.

“What are so many regular birds doing here?” a soldier asks.

“They're only hawks,” the commander answers. **“Ignore them! Must be part of those damn harpies.”**

Another explosion makes the men duck.

“Bloody heck! They hit another one?!” How can his troops be so damn unlucky? What are the odds to hit a stupid, small barrel of black powder? And the rebels did it twice already!

He only finished the thought and a third howitzer emplacement is promptly blown to smithereens. Mind turns to panic. This is not random anymore...

Another fire arrow lands, right next to the main storage, shots creeping closer and closer.

“Oh shit...” the commander murmurs, noticing the closest hawk flies off.

Melisande stands next to Lisette, protected by infantry against any lingering Union soldiers. They don't have to worry about archers as the tempest still keeps the nearby wall clean of them, even under shrapnel fire.

The girl is in deep focus, together with several other Alma druids. "Five arm-lengths ahead, underneath a tiled roof," Melisande informs her accompanying archer, channeling the vision of a hawk for her fire-trajectory spotting.

Lisette reaches for an arrow, dipping it in oil and holding it in a torch to set the projectile on fire. She activates the armor piercing rune and prepares to fire.

Tiled roof or not, this one will be a banger.

...

A giant explosion lights up the sky, pieces flying beyond the walls. The main black-powder storage is gone. An increasingly rapid sequence of smaller blasts follow as the other spotters finish their job. The tempest instantly responds, sealing the gap in the sky once more. No more under threat from shrapnel and no more need to let arrows pass.

...

Silvermoon dashes up to Lisette, her father holding out his hand.

"Great job! Let's go!" He lifts his daughter onto their ride, and Conrad heads off.

*

Karl lets Primrose from his horse, noticing Conrad is right behind him with Lisette. Roderik approaches on his own ride, skilled enough to handle a horse by now.

Conrad reaches for his pocket and lifts out his old flute, blowing a tone on it as hard he can.

A trio of sirens descends from the skies, Sylvië among them. They seek out the children.

"Grab on tight," Sylvië winks at Roderik.

The boy doesn't really know where to grab at first, simply hugging her naked body tight around her boobs while trying to keep his thoughts towards the job to be done.

"Don't worry, I'll keep them safe," Sylvië assures Conrad.

“You too! Be careful out there!”

She nods and flies off with her two sisters, each carrying a child, just light enough they can handle the extra load.

Roderik is reminded of his adventure with the wyrm when he sees the ground increasingly **further down**. He **can't wait** to have his feet on steady ground again. Heights **really aren't his** preference.

A wing of harpies shelters them from vision and potential arrows while the trio is lifted over the drawbridge, onto the other side where the gatehouse stands.

“The gatehouse is sealed!” Sylvië warns. Union troops locked themselves in, probably barricading the door against any harpies coming in. Nothing which **can't be solved**.

Primrose wraps her legs around the siren carrying her, so she can let go temporarily to hold out her dagger for heat protection. With the other hand, she builds up energy in her staff, blasting a condensed fireball at the barricaded entrance. Sylvië's **song of war** fills the sky immediately after, a wing of harpies slamming themselves through the opened entrance.

“The gatehouse is secured,” she sends the remaining harpies back out.

The sirens land, placing their living cargo on the ground. Sylvië heads into the gatehouse with them.

Both carried girls try not to look at the carnage the harpies who were sent in earlier left behind.

“Don't go outside now!” Sylvië warns as a constant stream of wings blocks the entrance.

Roderik nods. Those animals only follow general directions. They can't really differentiate between friend and foe. Sticking his head out now would be a really bad idea.

“How do we lower the bridge?” Lisette asks. There's a mechanism with two rotating wheels, though it seems locked. A strange wooden emplacement covers them, like some kind of brace. They have no idea how to remove it.

Roderik doesn't want to waste any time on this. The longer they take, the more casualties will fall. He grabs his sword and activates his rune. **“If we can't remove it, then we chop it into firewood!”**

“Don't break the mechanism!” Primrose squeaks out in panic.

Roderik slashes at the wooden frame, carefully avoiding the rotating wheels. As she said, destroying those would be a pretty bad idea.

“Done!”

Lisette reaches for the first wheel while Roderik takes care of the other wheel’s brace. The bridge rolls down as the first wheel spins, slamming into the ground. Only a portcullis and the sturdy reinforced gate itself are left as obstacles, though they only have to deal with the portcullis. That should be the second wheel.

“Hurry up!” Sylvië warns them. **“The enemy will know by now what we’re doing.”**

The girls try to rotate the second wheel. However, **they can’t get any movement in it.**

“I’ll do it!” Roderik grabs hold, bracing his feet into the ground.

With a cry for strength, the boy’s muscles tense, dragging at the wheel as hard he can. Sylvië gasps in suspense and a hint of awe at the father of her first daughter, when she can see the wheel start to move, slowly, but surely.

The portcullis raises, revealing the wooden gate.

“Easy!” Roderik takes deep breaths for air, trying not to show how his arms tremble from exertion.

Sylvië wants to give him a tight squeeze with how adorable he is, though **there’s sadly** no time.

*

A fireball blasts off into the sky from the gatehouse. A signal from Primrose they are ready.

Headmaster Gerald taps into the large crystal, taking aim at the wooden gate. He’ll have to infuse the right amount of energy. Too much, and the entire gatehouse and bridge would be blown up with it. Too little, and it won’t crack the gate. Though that’s still preferable over harming his young ex-student.

The blast flies over the rebels, soaring towards the gate. The wooden doors crack wide-open into pieces from the resulting explosion.

Adrian's infantry is first to rush in, followed by cavalry and multiple wagons. The city has been successfully breached. "Great job, kids!" he runs into the gatehouse, checking on the safety of their infiltration team. "Don't worry. We got this in the bag!"

They have the numbers and superior morale. And it's about time for Diana to do her thing. This is the stage they kept her in reserve for, save for an unforeseen emergency. Only a matter of time to take the city.

"No giant wurm this time?" Roderik cautiously asks.

Adrian wants to deny the possibility, yet he can't. He knows well enough the enemy still has their biggest unknown in play. But surely, it would be too soon for...

...

The man's thoughts freeze. He just witnessed a wagon fly past the gatehouse.

"Ah, shit..." That's far sooner than expected. They only broke through the gate!

A wave of troops now fly past. What the heck is going on out there?! Some kind of wind magic?

As he steps out of the gatehouse, Karl and Conrad ride through the gate, equally curious what just caused all chaos.

...

Ahead of them stands a single being. Not really a man anymore, or a woman for that matter. Only a creature. A monster, straight out of nightmares.

One of two remaining nemeses.

One Grimald wouldn't challenge on his own.

The nameless leader of the madness consuming this world.

And he doesn't bother wearing a skin, for he has no need of one.

A group of rebels wants to attack this strange creature of darkness. The Faceless prepares his arm for a swipe, body shifting in shape, arm turning grotesque. A wave of darkness plows the men straight into carnage, throwing what remains into the air like measly toys.

His army may have faltered, but he won't.

*

Conrad jumps off his steed and rushes in, trying to close the distance. He quickly dodges, throwing himself aside, when a shadow swoops towards his attack path over the ground. Black spikes graze the man when he rolls over the ground, tearing his maw and slicing the surface of his skin.

Adrian and Karl follow in his footsteps, creating a distraction while shadow now reaches for them instead.

A ball of fire explodes on the ground next to the pair. Adrian and Karl can feel the heat and resulting shock-wave, both forced to the ground.

Karl takes a quick glance at Primrose. She just saved their asses. The shadow of the building next to them started to come alive, parts of it still struggling from the resulting explosion. **“He can control the nearby shadows!”** he shouts out. **“Stay away from them!”**

Whether their opponent actually controls them, or moves a part of his body through them, he has no idea. Doesn't matter, as the outcome is the same.

Adrian looks around in growing worry. **Stay away?! They're surrounded** by buildings! **This is the worst possible spot!** If Primrose hadn't lit up the ground with her blast, that monster would have got to them already!

Conrad takes his chance while the Faceless is focused on the others. **He's close!** He can take a stab at him! The blood-magic enchantment activates and the man thrusts his blade forward.

A shadow swipe follows, knocking Conrad back to the ground.

It didn't work? He definitely hit! Yet, the Faceless didn't even respond, or try to dodge for that matter.

He observes his own enchanted weapon. **There's a red glow emanating from it.** What does that mean?

A similarly colored arrow is placed before the string of a bow, readied by Lisette. She activated the same enchantment, aiming right for the Faceless' head. **Her target notices in time,** cold eyes shifting from Conrad's red blade towards the red-glowing arrow.

The arrow is released, seeking out its target. Everyone can see it pierce right between the eyes, flying straight through the shadowy form.

“We got him!” Roderik yells from next to Lisette.

Then the boy loses his sudden rush of victory. Confusion settles in. She definitely had him. That went right through his shapeless mug! **And he didn't adjust his shape at all, it actually hit!** Yet, **there's no scream of pain. Not even a twitch in his form.**

The shadow reaches out and crushes the arrow stuck in a building behind him.

"We need to get out of here!" Karl yells. "Our weapons are useless and we're sitting ducks!"

Conrad crawls up as fast as he can. Karl is right about this spot. They need to draw the fight somewhere else. Too many shadows around here. But where to, and how?! **This fuck isn't going to let them** simply walk out now they entered his domain!

Shadows come alive all around, an attack incoming on a larger scale than the previous. Conrad can even notice his own shadow move eerily. Any moment now, spikes or any other kind of deadly blade will shoot out and impale, slice or crush them all at once.

A wing of harpies swoops down at the shadow. The Faceless loses his temper for the first time, changing focus at the annoyance blocking his sight. The buildings' shadows reach out like giant claws, retaliating at the harpies. Chaos descends all around as bodies fall down from the sky, littering the area. Conrad searches around, trying to make sense of what occurs. A harpy has a wing clipped, diving towards Lisette while its claws and beak search for anything to lash out at. Its head cut off last-second by Roderik.

Another one falls down, incapable of separating friend or foe, heading to Primrose. It lands on her barrier, thrashing around wild. The girl screams while she ducks, trying to avoid the claws from reaching over her magical shield, until Silvermoon knocks it down with his horn.

A cry of battle reaches over the storm of violence when armored horses stampede through the entrance, lances aimed at both the Faceless and the few harpies scattered around in confusion. **Crest of the Queen's Legion waves among them as the heavy cavalry fills the center.**

"Watch out for the shadows!" Conrad yells at their leader, his candidate to become ruler of Gleaze.

The young man rides up to Conrad, helping him reach Silvermoon.

"We need to lure him out in the open!" Conrad adds.

Both of them duck while a single horse flies past in two severed halves.

The **leader of the Queen's Legion** quickly nods. Better get everyone out of here, and fast! Their distraction lasted long enough.

The horn for retreat blows and the men ride out of the gate. Conrad can spot his lieutenants pick up Roderik and Lisette, so he reaches for Primrose instead. The girl releases a bright light from her staff to help cover their retreat, pushing back the encroaching shadows.

Another red-glowing arrow flies at the Faceless. Once more he refuses to dodge, crushing the arrow the moment it impacts.

...

Conrad observes his red-glowing sword. Its enchantment will run out soon. However, similar to his first stab, **those arrows did nothing. Do they even work?! No... They** have to work! Why else would this glow exist? The Faceless must be causing this, somehow. Marking them, so he knows where they are. That means they *must* work! Why else would he do that? Why waste time to crush those arrows and not just leave them lying around?!

The entire gatehouse is dismantled in fury when **the Union's** supreme leader slashes through it, stepping out of the city. His form shapes, dashing forward at rapid speed. It's like they deal with a dark version of Diana, about to direct his rage at the retreating army which dared to foolishly challenge him.

A blue shape flashes past Conrad, intercepting the incoming attack. Blades of water clash with blades of darkness. Lisette summoned Diana to help their retreat.

A storm of brutality throws up earth, stone and wood while they collide repeatedly. **Diana's body takes a slice yet instantly reshapes.** Her own blades drive through the Faceless, yet **can't find anything tangible other than his physicalized parts meant as weaponry. They are right at each other's throat,** while stuck in a stalemate.

A loud call of fury reverberates when the nameless leader had enough. He is not like his fellow Faceless. He has no peers. No other Faceless could ever use their body like he can, all hiding behind skins like cowards. He will show these impudent mortals what a true master of the shapeless form is capable of!

His form adjusts, changing tactic, drawing power from the large shadow of the entire section of wall behind him. His size looms over the open area in front of the city. A wave of death which will flood over an entire army in one swoop, leaving not even a blade of grass left in his wake. This measly life-form of water thwarting him can never match his might!

A giant wall of darkness smashes into Diana, completely splattering her aside.

...

Conrad looks behind him, witnessing the void-tsunami headed their way. No matter how fast they run, no matter what direction, there's **no escape**. **Primrose's staff** and the sun high up in the sky are not nearly enough anymore to cover the area in sufficient light to stop him. They're about to be swallowed up by sheer overwhelming power!

...

A sudden blinding light sears overhead. Gerald and his mages aimed their crystal-tapped blast right at the wave. Debris and dirt flies all around from the following explosion, knocking down multiple riders.

Conrad tumbles over the ground as he is caught in the blast, covering Primrose during the fall. A giant hole is left behind in the wave of darkness, temporarily receding. **The Spire's mages** successfully bought them time, **but... What for? What can they possibly do** against this ultimate monster?! In the distance, he can catch a glimpse of Diana reforming, **lingering near the city's wall for whatever she's up to. Focusing for some reason?** However, what could she possibly do against this towering might and presence?

The Faceless reshapes, already preparing to unleash his fury. All who were spared death by intervention of a last-moment blast from the crystal now left to stare at the inevitable outcome anyway. In the end, there's no hope against this wall of death, hundreds of blades forming into spears to impale everyone who fell from the shock-wave, all at once.

Right as the attack comes, a different giant returns onto the **mortal's playground**. A massive barrier of water descends from the skies, blocking the incoming attacks. With giant butterfly wings of water, formed from vast quantities of liquid absorbed from the moat, Diana stands between the fleeing army and their undead nightmare. Her gaze finds Conrad for a short instance, determined. Then she blends into the thick wall of water, appearing on the other side as she turns around by molding her body back to front. Her vast

water reserves are a constant shape-shift of blades to counter the attacks sent out repeatedly to take down the men now behind her.

Conrad stares up in amazement at the clash of titans. However, she can only protect them... **Diana needs a weapon. Something she can use to inflict actual harm!**

He turns his vision to his red-glowing weapon, taking a deep breath, determined.

“Diana! Use this!” he shouts out as loud as he can. With as much strength as the man can muster, he flings his sword through the air.

It really doesn't matter who ends this. Conrad's fight stopped being about vengeance ever since his fall into the Abyss. If he can help Diana to end this and save the others by letting go of his sword, that is all which matters.

A whip of water extends from her giant butterfly form, latching around the sword. The whip instantly swipes across the nameless leader, driving the enchanted blade through her **opponent's giant midsection. It doesn't seem** to have an immediate effect, though Conrad wants to believe. That red glow has to be there for a reason! He's afraid of those weapons, always keeping an eye on them, even **if it doesn't seem like it.**

The Faceless reaches out for the glowing blade, trying to crack it.

“It works!” Conrad shouts to his confused comrades. **“It must work!”** See?! He's focusing on it, trying to take it out! He fears the blade!

...

Karl tries to stand up as one of the men **downed in the blast earlier. How's Roderik**, who he was carrying on his horse? Where are the others? A quick search can find them while the mighty clash goes on to his side. Everyone seems alive so far.

Shouting reaches him. That's from Conrad. What is he yelling about? He can't hear it under that constant clash of violence they face.

“Whoa!” he quickly steps back.

A black spike pierced the earth, bypassing Diana's **constantly shape**-shifting form while still deflected into the ground, as she keeps wrestling around the dark void which is her opponent. Large clumps of earth repeatedly swung into the air as a result of their storm of brutality. Karl can only be in awe at their spectacle.

Though a peculiar detail suddenly catches his attention. **What's that? A tiny red glow is swung around by her. An enchanted weapon?**

The glow stops, enchantment expired.

Karl turns to the distance where their camp resides. **That's where Cherry is... They won't be able to run. Cherry doesn't even know what is going on...**

The man grips hard on the handle of his sword, red glow appearing. With a powerful swing, he throws it, instantly grabbed by Diana.

"Use your enchantments!" he yells out to all others he can find. "Lend them to her!"

Roderik is first to respond, followed by Adrian, throwing their swords after activating the enchantment. The blades join Diana's wielded weaponry. Lisette fires arrows, one after the other. Water plucks them out of midair, jabbing them repeatedly into the nameless leader. A growing arsenal of glowing weapons jab, thrust and slice at rapid speeds. Yet, her opponent is unfazed, focusing on her blades, trying to break or smash them all.

Silvermoon stands up, shaking off the dirt from his fall. He has a couple bruises, though nothing is broken.

"We're out of weapons," Conrad breathes for air, patting his trusty ride.

He only has Carrot's dagger left. From what he can witness, that's the only enchanted weapon remaining. It shouldn't be used for the Union's leader. There's still one last obstacle after this. Grimald. If he uses the dagger here, they will truly have nothing left.

Silvermoon gives a snort right into Conrad's face. Then he turns around, dashing off towards the camp.

"What are you...?" Conrad wants to ask, though it doesn't matter. He'll have his reasons. Now is the time to regroup with the others.

...

More blades run out of juice. More are broken by the Faceless while he tries to wear or batter them all down.

"Is it working?" Adrian asks with growing worry, rejoining the others.

Conrad points right ahead, nodding. **"It is!"**

Diana's attacks have an effect. He can begin to see it. That massive void she fends off with all her power shrinks, slow at first, yet picking up speed. Small, the effect of every hit individually may be. Regardless, all-together it's starting to bear down on their mighty foe.

Diana however equally begins to feel the strain of taking on such a cumbersome form. The girl's expression shows fatigue, increasingly more does her opponent succeed at fending off her attacks.

*

Melisande peers into the distance, a typhoon of emotions coursing through her. What is she to make of that massive battle scene? Just what exactly are they facing? Is Adrian out there? Is he in good health?!

The girl clenches her chest, terrified at the conflict. Her father's words echo through her mind.

"The Eternal Night will fall upon us all. Prophecy cannot be altered."

Is this the moment? Or only the prelude of what is to come?

"She's going to protect us, right?" Luna walks up to her, accompanied by Cherry. "Diana is not going to lose, right?" Luna desperately seeks confirmation of what she wishes to be true, incapable of facing away from the epic struggle.

Until Cherry tugs at Melisande's tunic. "Look! Over there!"

Melisande's ears flutter. She picked up a neigh, noticing what Cherry points at. Silvermoon runs through the camp, seemingly searching around for someone. Until he finds what is sought for, stopping in front of the young druid.

"You wish to talk? You need our help?" she places her hand on his head, establishing communication.

The girl's face frowns. The unicorn's thoughts are so hard to follow, hard to form a picture of. Rapid and chaotic, driven by haste. What is he trying to ask of her? "A weapon?" she asks. "But I don't know of a weapon. And it has to be hidden...?"

The unicorn tugs at her tunic, insisting. Sadly, she has no idea what he asks for. There are many weapons around. Which one does he mean? And what does it need to be hidden

for?! How would they even accomplish that? Melisande feels growing panic, not making any sense of this.

Luna suddenly interrupt. “I believe I know what he means.” **Cautiously, as she’s** far from certain. Still, what else could Silvermoon possibly ask for?

“And I know how to hide it!” **Cherry** joins her.

Both girls dash off, leaving Melisande confused. Frightened, she turns to the battle. Where a large water explosion spreads large amounts of vapor and a dense downpour of liquid all around.

*

Conrad can feel the water soak through his clothes. Diana finished what she could do, wearing the Faceless down into his original form, too weakened to keep his over-sized one. Though it took most of her energy. All excess water taken from the moat has been shed in a massive burst, showering the entire battlefield.

She drops down, panting from fatigue, unable to maintain her form. The spirits return to Lisette.

The Union leader struggles, his body refusing to listen with the same precision as before, unable to regain his indomitable self. A seething rage radiates from his entire being. He mastered this form! How could it be beaten! Even keeping his current shape takes effort now. How utterly humiliating!

“*Catch!*” **Adrian** throws a broken sword at the closest individual to their nemesis.

Conrad reaches for it midair. A red glow emanates from it, one of the few blades still enchanted. Broken, but functional. He runs at full speed towards his target, closing the distance. With a shout to gather strength, Conrad rams the broken chunk forward, aiming **for the enemy’s face**.

The blade stops, **the man’s** wrist held in a shadowed claw, his weapon not reaching its target. No matter how hard Conrad tries, his strength is not enough. Slowly, the blade is shoved aside, together with his arm, a counterattack preparing.

A pointy tip passes right next to Conrad's face. Not from the Faceless leader, but from further behind his shadowy body. The tip glows a fierce red, dug through the back of the enemy's shapeless skull.

Grimald shoves his blade hard, twisting it with mad strength after leaping from the shadow cast by his own boss, waiting for the opportune moment.

The nameless leader knocks Conrad aside, reaching for the enchanted blade sticking through his own face, snapping it in half.

Grimald backs off, taking aim. A pair of small crossbow bolts fly at his last obstacle to godhood, fired from a wrist-mounted device. Each dart colored that same shade of red. The first flies straight through his target's eye, the other misses its main mark and heads for the upper chest. Through a quick sidestep, the bolt is dodged while the nameless shadow opens his mouth for the first time.

"You treacherous scum! I knew it!"

...

Conrad crawls back up, feeling a bump in his back. Silvermoon returned. The man's gaze moves towards a thin package attached to the saddle. It's wrapped in bandages for some reason.

Finally, confidence returns.

...

Grimald falls to the ground after taking a hit from a shadow spike. It failed... His plan failed! This is turning bad rapidly! Should he use his puppet? No, that thing wouldn't last a second against their leader. His attacks more than capable enough to harm his own kind. What about the last bolt ready in his wrist-mounted crossbow?! Though his enemy will simply dodge it without a good distraction. Besides, he already gave him what should have been a deadly jab. *Why didn't it work?!*

Grimald's eyes widen as he finally realizes the reality he finds himself in, the trick his leader has played this entire time. If only he realized earlier, then this would be over already! That arrogant asshole is more cunning than he gave him credit for. Now, Grimald is the one left crawling on the ground.

He can spot Conrad run closer, carrying something elongated in his hand. Maybe that's the distraction he hoped for? No... It doesn't matter. Even with one enchanted bolt left and that trick figured out, he still wouldn't know where to exactly aim it.

...

The nameless leader noticed the foolish man rushing towards him. What a desperate idiot. They don't even have enchanted weapons anymore. Though perhaps he should play it safe, and not underestimate them any longer? Look how far they have driven him.

A spike begins to form, ready to impale Conrad.

The leader shields his eyes. A bright light shines from behind the approaching man, coming from a young mage's staff, all energy focused right at him, blinding his eyes.

And the nameless shadow feels a sudden, sharp thud.

A single blade pierced through his chest.

Bandages unwrap from around the pointy tip, revealing a bright, red glow from a fresh enchantment.

Selena's spear struck him right in the chest.

"How...?" the leader's stoked voice gasps.

How did this man know where to strike? When he had adjusted the composition of his body to hide the location of his true face this entire time?

"You dodged," Conrad gashes the spear around while his target screams, jamming it back in right after.

He dodged the second bolt of Grimald. When he was too arrogant to dodge anything else. That gave away the true spot to strike. The spear twists around, ripping his enemy's insides.

Loud vibrations of a scream echo through the battlefield as the nameless leader perishes. A black ball of energy already forms, to claim the once almighty foe as prey. He thrashes around, trying to grasp at anything to prevent oblivion, even a single blade of grass. Nothing works. Despair sets in as a void nothing other than a pure black draws him in mercilessly.

*

Grimald can't believe it. They really took him down? He struggles upright, reaching for his injury. It's been a long time since he felt such pain. Even in this moment of crucial importance, he didn't shift away from this face. His identity.

He witnesses the struggle. It's a tough customer to draw in, yet the vessel will succeed and acquire what it thirsts for. He made it to succeed. Any attempt to fight off the outcome is futile. Looks like he didn't need that final bolt, though maybe he should fire it anyway, purely for spite and mockery.

Behind Conrad, he can spot Primrose. Ah, yes... Soon, she will accept him, and they will shape a new world together. He still hasn't figured out what even motivates his decision. Eh, no matter. He's always been the odd one out among their group.

He stumbles forward, reaching out for her. Come... It will happen any moment now. If that strangely intriguing girl is to survive, she can't dally and must quickly join his side. He will protect her. Keep her safe.

Grimald's mind turns to confusion. Why is she stepping backwards after noticing him? What is that expression on her face? No, she can't deny him. That's not how this is supposed to go. Why does she hold her belly? Protecting herself? Why?!

He stops, body cramping up at feelings he does not understand.

So, that's why...

A dull click reaches his ears. Before Grimald even understands what is happening, a bolt flies through the sky, accidentally fired from his cramped fingers.

...

The scream of the nameless shadow stops. Only a dark ball remains, his essence completely absorbed. All Faceless other than one are now contained inside. To be nothing but fuel for the one remaining's unbridled ambition, now his hour is at hand.

It begins.

The Eternal Night.

*

Conrad has no attention to spare for Grimald anymore. Nor is he concerned with the birth of Agmus taking place as the ball joins with the last remaining Faceless to crown him God.

Instead, the man can only run, stumble, to what is right ahead of him. Right in front of his eyes. Towards his little mage.

The girl falls on her knees, all strength lost. Her robe turns red as a stream of fleeting life soaks it in fresh blood. All she can do is stare down, where a metal bolt dug itself deep into her chest. An instinctual fear sets in, making her body feel hot as fire, while it slowly loses warmth, until only the cold of death shall remain.

Conrad wraps his arms around, preventing her from falling. His lips tremble, his voice quivers. *What should he do?! What can he say? Should he pull out the crossbow bolt? But...*

They both know. There's no recovering from this injury. She's still among the living, yet already lost to life.

Her mouth moves, trying to get words across. A short gasp signals the last beat of her heart. Then air flows out slowly when the last breath follows. Her golden eyes rapidly dim, all muscles relaxing to never move again, turning her body limp.

Conrad's tears fall down on her chest. This can't be happening! They were in their moment of triumph! The man faces around in shocked grief. Anyone, anything that can help! *Please!* Not another one... **Don't take away another one!**

Yet, nobody can help. He is left with his only recourse. To hope for a miracle, begging for one, to restore her fiery passion. He's not worthy of a miracle, though his loved ones all certainly are. Primrose is.

"Please, give her life! Take my own if you must!"

While all of existence faces its final moments, all Conrad can do is to ask one small and selfless wish, unaware he even made it. To save the single person in front of his eyes, lying in his arms, even if it takes his own life to pay for it. He will gladly offer it to her.

...

A warm glow illuminates the dying girl. It originates from the one gift Conrad brought back from his visit down the Abyss.

He made his one granted wish.

The stone melts and drops on the girl, joining her blood, mixing with it. The man holds his breath in rising hope when he can see what appears like time unwinding. Lost blood flows back to her injury, the bolt starts to shove backwards, pushed out while flesh rapidly regenerates. Until the metal rod falls down onto the ground, not even a speck of red left on it.

With a tremor in her body and a sudden, loud gasp, Primrose breathes for life.

Conrad hugs her tight, unable to hide more tears. Tears of happiness this time.

Now she's among the living once more, his senses return to the challenge ahead.

*

Grimald screams to hold it together. He cannot falter now! Yet, something is wrong! This was supposed to be over already. When he merged with the ball of dark energy, the transformation should have been near instantaneous. So why is he struggling to contain these energies!

Did he make a mistake in the formula? No, not him. The formula was perfection, he knows it to be true!

The vessel then? Is something wrong with the vessel? She was complete, even before this battle began, only waiting for the last Faceless to trigger the transformation. **Maybe...** Could it be? Was she no longer pure?!

His teeth grit. Those accursed **Alma!** **That's why the one in the Woods had to go!** She knew what she should not have known! Then too many found out anyway. One of them must have broken the seal on the vessel! She's no longer pure, carrying an additional life inside. That additional soul now ruins the transformation!

No matter. He can keep it together! It will only last longer, and take a lot more effort. **They can't stop him anymore. The aura of Agmus** already surrounds him. None can even touch it without disintegrating into oblivion. They are too late! If only he regains control!

*

Conrad is left staring helplessly. He can find the others, though none have an idea on what to do. The ground itself disappears around the void surrounding Grimald. A dark pillar extends ever higher into the sky, consuming both air and light. A single harpy flies too close as the void begins to expand, wing disintegrating on contact and the rest quickly following.

All around, people and animals flee in panic. Fallen horses try to stand up, dragging themselves forward. The tempest above spreads out, making room for what will feast at the very fabric of the universe itself. Mortal men and beasts have no more place in this fight.

Conrad lifts up Primrose and carries her away. He needs to reach Silvermoon and place her on top. He can get her out! Where are the others? Are they all running?! What about Kalina? Is she okay?! Still somewhere inside that void? He wants to believe, she can still be saved!

His footsteps stumble over the ground while tremors shake the surface, unable to even stay upright when vibrations become too much. The earth trembles beneath his feet.

While a single voice calls out to him.

*

Eldrin observes the far horizon, holding his grandson in his arms. The man sighs in defeat. In the far distance, he can notice a dark pillar rise up. “It’s all over...” he pulls his eyes away from what lies ahead, preferring his last moments to be spent with his grandson.

As he assumed, prophecy was unavoidable. The Eternal Night has fallen. Soon, it shall cover the entire world, leaving not even earth, ocean or the starry sky in its wake. The end of all things is upon them.

At least, they tried. He can pass with a clear conscience. If only he could have spent more time with this young life in his arms. If only he could see his daughter one last time. The man turns around, walking towards the family graveyard. That is where his wife rests. That shall be where he passes.

The man’s footsteps halt in their tracks. A low trembling shakes the entire city. Giant redwoods sway as their roots are tugged. Earth spirits buzz around, antsy and energetic.

“Could it be?”

The Watcher of Eralthyr turns around once more, staring into the void. Where a bright flash blankets the sky.

*

A low voice Conrad remembers very well flows through his mind.

“You would give up your moment of triumph to save a single girl?”

He looks at the stone around his neck, its power expended. Who knows what he could have wished for to save the day? **“I did. And I do not regret it.”**

“Even when your world is at stake?”

Conrad needs not think about this question. The entire world? When it comes to his loved ones, the answer is simple.

“She is my world.”

The darkness expands as Grimald starts to gain a grip on his new powers. Any moment now, the void will consume Conrad. Running at this point is futile. Did he fail in his test? Did he fail his loved ones? **Even now, knowing there is no escape, he can’t help but cover** Primrose as they are about to be swallowed up by oblivion. Even if it means she lives a second longer, it will have been worth all effort.

“Consider your promise fulfilled.”

A rift shoots through the ground, reaching from far beyond the horizon. With a sudden tremor to shake the world itself, the earth cracks wide open underneath Conrad and the fleeing troops. To his surprise, **he doesn’t fall down. An aura** rises from deep beneath, extending out all around. It feels as if various invisible hands reach out and grasp for him, holding him safe. The aura covers the land and air like a blanket, colliding with the void, warding it off.

Primrose can’t believe what she finds when her eyes finally open. A presence she can’t even compare rises from the ground, as the First One awakens from his slumber. The oldest

giant breaks the surface, instantly towering above all else. The origin of the aura, Life, is quickly followed by the other Prime Virtues.

Valor breaks free from the earth and joins Life. The ground splits further, creating a wide chasm as far as the eye can see, when Justice is third to rise, lifting Conrad and Primrose, among many others, high up into the air.

The ground beneath turns smaller and smaller while the clouds approach. With a massive displacement of air, the layer of clouds separates while Conrad soars through the sky.

There should not be enough air up here. It should be far too cold. Yet, he and all others lifted up are unharmed, held on to by Life's blanketing aura. He needs not fear, as the origin of all invisible hands reaching around are no longer a mystery. Conrad's parents are among them, similar to how the spirits of Odwin and Mira protect their son further down the long neck of Justice. Friend or foe, rebel or Union, man or beast, it matters not. The aura shields them all.

Right beneath the clouds, where the Lesser Virtues reside, a single difference exists from the Cloegandr met down in the Abyss. That missing gap is no longer present. Instead, a once lost Virtue now helps keep the Eternal Night at bay.

Spirit has returned to the World Shaper, while both Gods from creation myth face off once more.

...

Valor, true to His name, is first to strike. The skies are ripped asunder with incomparable force as He smashes into the wall of darkness. Unafraid of Agmus' all-devouring counter-aura, He cleaves it in half with a flash too bright for anyone to keep their eyes open. Released energies more than sufficient to instantly vaporize everything tangible far beyond, if Life's aura wouldn't be there to protect them. The Prime Virtue soaks up the returned damage from Agmus with righteous fury, sending shock-waves far beyond every corner of the world.

Life instantly claims the won territory as His own, denying Agmus a path of return.

Conrad can feel his stomach flutter as Justice descends, to seek out the man at the center of it all, Grimald. With no other intent than to loom in front of him and judge.

...

Grimald can easily notice the Third approach. He screams out in denial and rage. How dare he! How dare this god show up and thwart his plans! After denying them piece of mind ten-thousand years ago! After ripping *her* out of this world! After denying him the chance to even see their child! He refuses to go down, clinging to every trace of power he can while the deities clash.

...

Conrad reaches for his one remaining weapon. **Carrot's dagger. He draws it and jumps** forth as Justice has brought him right before Grimald. His arch-nemesis sneers at him in growing hatred while reaching for the blade to fend it off. Both men struggle for control, neither able to dominate the other.

Conrad shouts at him as loud he can. **"Don't do it!"**

Grimald's grip doesn't relent, barely registering the man's words.

"I understand, Grimald! I really do! But you must stop! You will truly lose everything! You will lose your own soul! You will lose *her*!"

...

Faintly, the words sink into the mind of his nemesis, though they only evoke more rage. **What is he talking about? He already lost her... This world rejected her! This god abandoned them!**

Grimald sinks his nails into Conrad's hand, trying to push away the enchanted dagger. It won't claim him! He won't allow it! Not at this last second will all he worked for since ten-thousand years ago be snatched away! He will create a better world! One without suffering! One where *she* could have lived!

He has no need for this rotten world, for there might as well not even be one to begin with.

She was his world!

Grimald's attention suddenly shifts behind Conrad.

It's that girl... The mage. Wasn't she gone? Didn't he accidentally shoot her? Why is she alive?

His eyes widen. A pair of spirits hold the girl, safeguarding her, like all others are safeguarded. The youngest of those spirits looks exactly like the girl, practically identical. The other, who stares at him in sadness, is none other than...

His mouth opens in disbelief.

“Amaryllis...” he mutters.

And the last Faceless finally understands.

...

The monster-turned-**man can't draw his vision from them, shifting between the pair** of spirits and the mortal girl they safeguard, experiencing a flood of the wildest emotions. A wave of realizations shakes his very core.

How wrong they were, so long ago. How misguided.

Memories flood into his mind while he is drawn to the gaze of the girl he shared his life with. Memories of what once was.

Visions form as the young spirit next to her calls out to her father. Visions of what could have been.

And finally, an image settles of the mortal girl they both hug. An image of what still is.

Grimald's hands soften around Conrad's.

The world should not be destroyed. It must not be rebuilt. Therefore, he should go. He must be erased, like all Faceless who went before him. Too detached from his Creator. Unable to be saved. Yet, there is no alternative. Creation was worth it, for a very simple reason.

She exists in it.

His other daughter still exists in it.

...

Right when Grimald can feel the dagger tear his own existence apart, condemning him to oblivion, he can spot in his last moments how Amaryllis suddenly smiles, holding out her open hand to him.

She knows what happened at this very moment.

The man called Grimald has been judged.

Act 4 ~ Epilogue



Foundations of Old

Exactly a decade passed since the First Myth rose from the earth and the Great War ended. A decade since an important chapter closed in the life of a boy who grew up to restore the world to its former harmony.

The lands of the continent have returned to their old lives for the most part, still enjoying an economic boom reaching to all corners of civilization. The once powerful cartels trafficking in the most innocent of life now nothing but a scary fairy-tale for children. There will always be thugs and thieves in the world, though they are once more forced to hide and cower in a small corner.

Monuments have been restored, temples rebuilt, with acts of vandalism practically reduced to zero. Like bandits, there will always be those who feel nothing but envy and resentment, eternal radicals with a mission to watch the world burn, to tear it all down into the nihilism which already consumed them. Yet, none have the power to walk openly and

accomplish their goals in a world where the roots of culture have grown firmly into the earth, to embrace **one's legacy** which brought them to the present, rather than reject it.

Generally speaking, the world is in balance.

*

Conrad paces around the garden, taking in the warmth of the late summer's sun. Their family's villa forms the background decor. He plucks a flower from a nearby garden bush, twirling it in his fingers. A fine odor originates from its colored crown. A pair of dogs run up to him, barking energetically, jumping their front legs on his waist.

"I know, you already smell what I brought along." He reaches for a pouch and gives them the meat inside. The animals bark with joy, chomping down as if their life depends on it. "Slow down for once. Enjoy the taste."

It doesn't take long for the first to finish eating, and the dog comes slobbering all over its master's hand in gratitude.

"Ugh, now I have to wash my hands again. Thanks a lot, buddy," Conrad laughs.

He really doesn't mind at all. Only proof how happy the animals are. And willing to share their happiness with him. That's how dogs work. He is family to them. That's why he always preferred dogs over cats, though the latter do have their unique charms.

He places the picked flower between his teeth and washes his hands in a nearby stone basin of water, a girl's statue decorating the middle. After a quick shake to swipe most water off, he moves on.

The man squats down, placing the flower on a small monument close to the main building of their villa. "Hope you're doing good today," Conrad rubs a piece of moss from the monument. "Autumn approaches, so we'll be moving soon. Don't you worry. We'll be back next summer."

The monument is where his parents were once buried by his own hands. The family villa built over the homestead's farm. Only the shed he finished with Lisette on the day he recovered his painful memories remains. It's a storage now for the gardening tools.

...

Almost finished with his walk through the garden, Conrad heads towards the glass pavilion. Always a fine end to his routine walk, to stand underneath its dome, surrounded by dianthus bushes still in full bloom. The round pavilion is made of colorful sections of stained glass, depicting various myths involving Cloegandr, his own country's independence myth among them. The inspiration for its design came from the ceiling of the Queen's room in Ramona.

Near the entrance to the pavilion, Conrad finds his first sign of life other than himself. A young woman peeks into the glass dome. A member of the Felis Tribe, once picked up together with her brother by Conrad after losing their parents.

"Are they messing around again?" he whispers to her, following her stare.

Tama nods amused, her cat's tail swinging around as proof of a good mood.

Inside the pavilion, Conrad finds the usual pair he already expected to be present. Two children in the midst of enjoying each other's sex. "They're really going at it," he whispers to Tama.

Both of them silently walk away from the pavilion to give the children their privacy.

"You believe they are serious about each other?" she asks.

"They better be." He won't allow them to escape their responsibilities. If they form a sexual relationship, they will have to deal with the consequences. "Still, that shouldn't be an issue," he adds.

Tama's firstborn was raised well by her parents, the felis siblings. And that boy her firstborn had sex with definitely knows his responsibilities, Conrad personally took care of that. The boy is his own son after all, Eris' child.

After the Great War ended, the felis pair didn't have a home to return to. Thus, Conrad gave them one. They look after the villa when the owners move around every season, keeping it in good condition for when Conrad's family returns each summer. A garden and villa this large always needs caretakers. He treated them as family during these years. Though at the rate those two children hump each other like hamsters every day, they'll be family for real soon enough.

The pair of adults enter the main building. Tama heads into a room to the side, where she takes place behind a large spinning wheel. It was brought over from a particular room in Gleaze's castle, to see service once more.

*

Conrad heads upstairs, passing a couple children while they dart down the stairs. **“No running on the stairs!”** he warns them. **“And Mira, hold the handrail!”**

The trio of young brats instantly change their pace, walking down after their father's scolding. Then they go join Tama to try and convince her to put work aside and play.

Conrad sighs while shaking his head. Those three in particular always give their summertime nanny such a handful.

At the top of the stairs, he pauses. A pedestal stands near the wall. It carries two books, two diaries. One is Harald's, the other Selena's. One which helped start his adventure, and one which helped bring it to an end. Similarly, a pair of weapons decorate the wall above. The Spire asked more than once if they could safeguard these relics. Sure, eventually. After Conrad has gone to meet his Maker again. No earlier will these legendary blades leave his possession. **Carrot's dagger and Selena's spear.**

From the first floor, he peers through the window into the distance. He can see the wine orchard in the far distance, just outside the homestead. It belongs to Karl and Cherry. Their winery makes good business lately, increasingly more locations ordering from their stock. Most recent was a supply contract to Milgard.

Conrad reaches for the old beads still adorning his neck. He held his promise to make that town thrive once more. **Wasn't particularly** hard to use his influence after the war to pull the necessary chords. Milgard is no longer a military fort, restored into a tranquil town surrounded by purple fields of lavender. That old mill still stands up to this day.

Tonight, Karl and Cherry will come over with their growing family. To offer the first bottle of their newest type of wine to celebrate. Tomorrow, Karl will take his family to Arnesse for the same reason. Visiting his first wife and son, to inform them of the happy news Cherry expects their fourth addition to the family.

...

“Hey,” an arm reaches around his neck while Conrad stares nostalgically out the window, a kiss on the cheek following right after.

Even if he wouldn't recognize the voice, he would still know who called his attention. Her skin has that typical greyish-blue, or would that be blueish-grey? He still hasn't really figured that one out.

He gives Kalina a kiss on the lips in return.

“What do you think?” she asks, parading around to make her dress flutter. “Do I look fat in this?”

Conrad gets a naughty smirk on his face. “Well, you're eight months pregnant. Wouldn't any dress have that effect?” She doesn't have the time to frown, as he already reaches out for her, holding the young woman close, feeling her belly. “You look great, love, as always. And this big belly here? Simply adorable.”

His teasing from earlier is already forgiven and forgotten.

Kalina's presence in this household is another miracle. During the battle ten years ago, he had no idea what to expect in the aftermath. Only capable of hoping she would be there, lying on the ground asleep, as every time before when she turned into that void-ball. Though no guarantee existed she would ever return.

To his relief, she was there at the end, after Agmus was gone and the World Shaper went back into slumber. Though Conrad always had the impression she was never supposed to return among the living. From her personal account, he knows she experienced a state very similar to his own, after falling into the Abyss. Locked in the transition of life into death. Maybe the aura of Life reached out to her in time?

In the end, Cloegandr was right. Conrad couldn't save her. But He could.

Her home country turned into quite the tourist attraction. The people of Uskandar embraced the tourists, catering to their needs as a profession. A large scar tears through their land, left behind by Cloegandr's rise, now simply known as The Chasm. Natives built large temple complexes dedicated to the Prime Virtues, and smaller temples along the entire Chasm for every Lesser Virtue. The entire row forms a long pilgrimage route many

wish to take at least once in their lifetime, with enough inns and tourist shops to meet demand.

*

Conrad passes an open door. Inside the room, Primrose feeds her third baby. The child is covered in a blue-and-white blanket with chrysanthemum motif. Old and worn by now, **with areas patched up by Tama's** sewing skills, though still plenty usable. Next to Primrose is a small bed, where her second sleeps, a three-year-old boy.

"That kid loves to sleep," he whispers.

"Like his father, spending lots of time in bed."

"For a different reason," Conrad winks.

She tries not to laugh too loud, spilling some milk in the process.

Conrad rubs the baby's cheek in silence as the child resumes drinking.

Primrose hasn't changed all that much these ten years, other than size. She still prefers that typical style of expensive Hatori clothing, in the form of a seductive robe held up only around her upper arms. It's even more a miracle now her supple puppies don't pop out all the time. Though this time they actually are, or she wouldn't be able to feed her child. He never actually asked if she uses magic to keep her robe so low without having it slip down. Some matters are better left a mystery. Makes it even more alluring.

This girl is the main reason their family moves around every season. She's not exactly good at staying around at the same spot for very long. They are here for summer, while during springtime they live at the Spire, where Primrose acts as a guest mentor and researcher.

Gerald is still Headmaster, always eager to welcome them. He's done a good job of steering their institute back to what it should be, a suitable place to foster the Lesser Virtues of Wisdom, Diligence, and Integrity. As always, every country tried to gain the Spire's favor. None succeeded, as Gerald will not harm the regained neutrality of their institute.

Rumors go the man has his eyes on Primrose to someday follow in his footsteps as Headmaster. Hopefully, she acquired more of a capacity to stay in one location by then.

Conrad reaches for an object inside the bed of his sleeping son. An old doll stares back at him. “Maybe we should give this one a new stuffing?”

It’s Kalina’s doll, from when she was younger. Now, plenty of playmates’ hands have dragged it all over the continent. Definitely could use a patch-up, so it can see many more sights.

“Heading off?” Primrose asks.

“Time to relax. You know where to find me,” he winks.

“You’ll already have company,” she smiles in return.

*

Conrad heads back to the first floor, seeking out **the villa’s** bathing area.

Lisette enjoys a vulpes specialty, an oil bath. It’s a deep version, reaching up to her waist.

Next to the oil bath, a hand waves at Conrad from inside a leporid hot-pot. Conrad approaches and laughs when the girl bathing inside gets his clothes typically wet. Source of wetness is not only the water from the hot-pot, but equally the girl herself. Diana, the **only one who hasn’t physically changed over the years.**

A water elemental inside a hot-pot. **It’s kind of a strange sight.**

“**Looking hot,**” Conrad makes his best attempt at a pun. Actually, not only does she look hot, she actually feels quite hot, taking in additional temperature of the fire underneath.

All spirits are still present inside of her, occasionally switching who takes center stage, shifting into a suitable appearance. Cloe already takes over, her wild hair perfectly matched by her watery body. Already dragging her brother into the hot-pot with her.

When they will return to their Maker, nobody really knows, and he doesn’t feel like ever asking. To have this opportunity to spend time with them physically, even if not in their original body, is more than he could ever ask for. Communication was kind of a struggle at first, **you know, with the lack of vocal chords. That’s why** he learned lip-reading from Cherry, so that hurdle was solved.

The peculiar existence that is **Diana can't keep her shape for the entire day**, though close enough. During early afternoon, Lisette summons her to share her life with the others. Then she and all other spirits inside the same body can last until late evening to equally **share Conrad's bed**, returning afterwards inside Lisette to rest. Diana has enough control over her body's molecules to **prevent losing water to the bed's sheets**. **Thankfully**, or that would turn into a mess fast.

...

"Ah, this feels so great," Lisette closes her eyes and enjoys the thick oils warming her body.

Her father can only agree. It does make for an excellent pass-time and source of relaxation. Does need a regular bath or a **hot-pot afterwards**, **but hey, that's an** additional benefit.

Thankfully, he won't have to miss out once they make their seasonal move come **autumn**. That's when they head north, towards Sakai, residing within the luxury brothel.

Primrose's grandfather is still around. Admittedly, he's too old now to look after the establishment. Edelweiss and Passiflora take on the duties while the actual owners aren't around. No shortage of oil baths in Vulpes territory, now the Tribes experience a cultural boom again. And that large, cracked hot-pot has seen a recent replacement.

With its beautiful, artistic screens everywhere, two particular pieces do look out of place in the brothel. **The paintings Selena made in her... quite** peculiar style. Out of place, yet more precious than any other art piece. Primrose is working on her own masterpiece, interested in picking up her cultural heritage. An interest well-appreciated by her grandfather.

Roderik took residence in the Vulpes Tribe capital, together with his family. Olive runs a school, aided by Pepper and Luna. In her free time, Luna studies the stars, sometimes taking their students along.

Roderik **is not always present**, running a mercenary group. **There's not much action** out there in the current world, only the occasional dire wolf hunt or taking out a forming bandit group are part of their tasks. He regularly hangs up the Gold Serpents banner though, to

visit his family. They are nothing less than proud of his exploits, believing that someday the world will need men like him once more. They are probably right.

Their entire family went to visit Gleaze last year, when the Championship to Valor was held for the first time since the war. Conrad didn't need to convince the current ruler, leader of the Queen's Legion, to reinstate the championship. The man already intended on doing so.

Naturally, Roderik's name joined his father's.

*

The door opens as Kalina enters, some of the family's brats rushing past her into the bathroom to wash off all dirt. "We have a visitor," she introduces a newcomer to their estate.

Conrad needs not guess who dropped by. He already knows the only individual who would not announce anything in advance and simply plop out of the sky at random.

"Hello! Missed me?" Sylvië enters. "I've brought my oldest daughters."

The siren looks around curiously while two more enter. One is her first daughter, fathered by Roderik. The other is her second, fathered by Conrad. Be it far from the first time Sylvië arrives unexpectedly and dragged a family member along, she has never actually been inside the bathing area.

"Is this oil?" she asks, intrigued by the strange bath Lisette rests in.

"Why not join us? This place is built more than big enough," Conrad invites their siren visitors.

Lisette backs him up with another quite erotic sigh. "Ah... The oil feels so~ good..."

Sylvië can't hide her curiosity, dipping her wing inside the strange substance. "I wonder what this would do to my feathers." Her decision has basically been made already. She'll know before the day is over.

"So, about our competition," Conrad mentions a particular topic.

Sylvië grins, answering as truthfully as she can. "I have no idea this time if you won or Roderik."

Conrad frowns. There goes his bet. It will be hard to keep score at this point.

Roderik is the only other partner Sylvië entertains and regularly visits. How she manages to find his whereabouts whenever he is out on his mercenary duties, nobody has any idea.

The sirens have plans for the future. Sylvië's **firstborn** was selected very recently to become matriarch of a new colony. **The Southern Grove has been absent of sirens' songs for far too long. That's why she is here.** To announce the honor bestowed on her oldest daughter, and to celebrate with **those she considers part of the Grove's family.**

Conrad visits them every winter, traditionally taking Roderik with his family along. The Misty Woods are still sealed to protect the lands of the Alma from being overrun. The druids are not very numerous, with only a couple cities. If they were to open up for everyone, it would likely spell doom for them long term.

The Woods, however, are no issue for whoever can pass. And Conrad does have a druid present right here in this bathing room. Albeit in a watery form, his loving wife Eris is still around and more than capable of guiding them past the magic barrier, providing entrance **to the wide steppes. Wouldn't be the first time they encounter Silvermoon's herd along the way, in fact, it's pretty much the norm.**

During visits, some time is spent in the Western Grove, though most of it in Eralthyr.

Conrad can't help but smirk when thinking back on all these years of being a part in the monthly incarnation of the mutually benefiting contract between sirens and druids. Always an excellent time of the year.

Evidently, **that's the season they visit Adrian, Melisande, and Eldrin. Ah yes, the** Watcher of Eralthyr. Headaches were had by the poor man when he heard the joyous news of his daughter returning home after the war with two extra additions to the family. A man around her arm, and their first child already in her womb. As expected, he accepted her choice in company **and definitely didn't complain the day he could hold his second** grandchild for the first time.

The man's face was equally one to remember when he met Diana. The Watcher may always be stuck on decorum, yet it broke down so easily when his lost daughter took shape in front of his very own eyes.

Their life is a simple one, rarely leaving the walls of the city. Both Adrian and Melisande perform administrative tasks, assisting her father in running the city. Though simple is sometimes most desirable. That said, **Conrad does know plans are made by Adrian's family,** to set out on a new trip of adventure, and whatever rabbit holes they may encounter along the way.

...

Cloe throws herself onto her brother inside the hot-pot, a quick succession of shapeshifts following as all girls inside want a piece of the man. **It's quite obvious they're** in the mood for some good physical loving, their shared body more than capable of it. An offer Conrad won't reject.

"So much fun? Don't leave me out," Primrose joins the room.

...

Over the edge of the pot, while hugged tight already as all spirits vie over who gets to claim him next, Conrad can see the sirens explore the strange intricacies of an oil bath. And all around are nothing but happy faces. Some in their early twenties, some in their teens, and some even younger. And the man feels true peace of mind. Knowing they have an entire world to explore, a long future ahead of them, and an entire past to discover.

This room is filled with a mixture of peoples from all over the continent, while their individual nations have restored after the war to be a home for their own. Nations that once fought alongside each other, now returned to separate entities with separate goals.

And Conrad is completely fine with that outcome. For it is the world as it should be. Not a place which submits on their knees to safety and stagnation, but seeks to challenge and discover instead. Not a world that laments what it had to endure, but one which respects the past, for it brought us the present. A world where a shared spirit always exists, making man and woman, parent and child, feel they have a life worth living, and a people worth protecting.

Yes, competition is what this world returned to. Hatori Tribe versus Hatori Tribe, Gleaze versus Bournesse.

Sometimes through open war.

Sometimes in peace.

But the best of times, through a staunch yet amicable rivalry,
To pull each other forward into a shared journey towards the future.

May the journey never end...