

There was an awed hush in the corridor as she approached, clad in robes of scarlet and ivory. Her head of blue hair bobbed its way down the hall, and the woman was seemingly unconcerned with the slight bows and quietened tones that followed her as she moved.

Spring had blossomed in Lycia, the bittersweet coda to a winter of war. Flowers were blooming in every glade and field from the south coast all the way up to the Sacaen border, yet their growth was ill-gotten. This spring had been spurred by a grisly rainfall; that of men and beasts felled in the maddening battles waged by King Zephiel of Bern against the entire world of men.

It was in this aftermath that Lilina of Ostia moved with a humbled grace. She knew the efforts made by those showing reverence to her were the instincts of good men and women who were simply unsure how to respond to her presence. She was royalty; already accustomed to the prostration. However, to complicate matters, the soft-faced Princess was engaged at once in two phases of a seemingly conflicted nature: first mourning, then bliss.

Hector of Ostia had been felled in battle early on in the Lycian campaign, scattering the League's leadership and delaying co-ordinated response. However, his sacrifice had allowed for a vital retreat of large-scale forces, men that would become essential after they had regrouped. These tactical terms used by the Etrurian Generals did nothing to allay Lilina's sorrow at the man's loss, however – before he was a General, before he was Military Regent of Lycia, before he was Marquess of Ostia...

He had been her father.

Still his deep-lunged laughter rang in her ears, and the pleasant prickling of his great beard remained known to her fingertips every time she was inevitably reminded of his absence, be it through the sight of a sentry hefting a great axe – the size of which he would have certainly belittled – or in the smell of mead and meat that wafted from Castle Pherae's kitchens and dining halls. Or, she noticed as the pang tore through her chest again, at the sight of her host in this home away from home. Lord Eliwood of Pherae was making his own way through his domain at a measured pace, long blue robes doing much to give him height beyond his already impressive dimensions.

"Ah." The friendly older man regarded Lilina fondly as she approached. "My dear! How does the morning find you?"

"Well, my lord," she replied. "And you?"

The Pheraen gave a warm smile. "I recover more with each new sunrise. It is as though my illness passes with the fog of war itself."

Truly, the ruby-haired man looked notably better than he had mere days ago. Struck down with a debilitating illness for the vast majority of the war; the veteran knight had nonetheless gone on to formulate many of the great stratagems needed to turn the tide of the conflict. Colour had now returned to his cheeks and a glimmer to his eyes, and his posture no longer stooped with the impossibility of staying upright.

"However, Lilina," Eliwood chuckled, "you should not be calling anyone 'my lord', least of all me. The entire continent is in your debt."

Lilina slowed her step slightly to walk alongside him. "I'm sorry, my lord- Eliwood," she giggled abashedly. "Force of habit. I imagine I'll always be that timid little mage-in-training whenever I come back here."

Eliwood gave a good-natured laugh, and for a time the two walked together in silence. Lilina suspected, though she could not confirm, that they were headed to the same diplomatic gathering, the same hive of meetings with representatives and delegates of every state in the Lycian League and beyond. Around them, the grateful optimism of post-war life made itself known in laughing students that rushed between classes and sentries that chattered openly, preferring the rebuke of a commanding officer well over the destitution of frontline combat that had been their reality barely two months ago.

A familiar face and fellow Anima magic practitioner, Lugh, nodded to Lilina happily as he passed, though she noticed that he avoided the gaze of the Marquess beside her. Eliwood was known to all as a gentleman without peer whose generosity and warmth knew no ends, however his more tragic reputation tended to precede him – especially in the eyes of those who did not know him well.

It was then that Eliwood stopped mid-step and severed the silence with a question, one that Lilina had been expecting sooner.

“May I see it again?”

Lilina turned to face him and broke a smile, diligently rising her right hand to the lord. There, adorning the fourth finger, was a simple band of rich, lustrous gold. It was devoid of superfluous markings or engravings, but it had been adorned with a glimmering, delicately inlaid red gemstone. The older man breathed a contented sigh of satisfaction as he beheld the ring, taking in the fullness of its promise.

This was the form her bliss took to contrast her mourning; mere days ago, Eliwood’s son Roy, her childhood friend and fellow student, had asked to take her hand in marriage. For Lilina, who had always been smitten by the young man, it was as though she had ascended to a dreamscape. Eliwood, evidently delighted to see his family growing again, looked at the band of proposal happily... but with no small degree of sadness in the lines of his face.

“You made him a very happy man, you know,” Eliwood breathed solemnly. “Your father.”

Lilina felt her chest grow heavier, though it was a peaceful sort of sadness – the tales of their legendary friendship assured her that Eliwood was one of very few who felt the loss as keenly as she did. “He used to laugh about it at parties,” she reminisced, “don’t let that red-headed stooge sweep you in, or his son either!” Her face fell. “All bluster, I know.”

The lord placed a weathered hand on her shoulder; a hand that, Lilina found, was still capable of giving great comfort. “He was a proud man, old Bluebeard,” he said wistfully in turn. “However, he was as quick to love as he was to bluster. I’m sure he’d be so proud of you, Lilina. Just as I am.”

She nodded, and raised her head once more, looking into the earnest eyes of the older man. She could see the hope in them laid bare, as well as the sorrow that dragged them downcast. They conveyed the knowledge of what loss – true loss – felt like.

In time, they arrived at the castle’s Great hall, their path coming to rest upon the now-familiar sight of the great oak board that had been placed at the front of the space, where it directed nobles hither, to and fro between meetings. A cluster of representatives had just now adjourned their meeting for an early lunch, and before this chattering assembly of overpaid statesmen stood, upright and splendid, the glorious form of Mage General Cecilia of Etruria. She held court like a king, locks of myrtle green and purple raiment of faith falling from shoulders more precisely postured than any likeness cast in bronze or plaster.

As a representative of Etruria, which had technically been the victorious state in the war, Cecilia had been given full authority over the diplomatic proceedings, given her universally respected position as a teacher of the realm. More recently, however, her name had come to be spoken with a more feared tone, as the one who taught the Etrurian Army's forward commander everything he knew.

That she would be here, in Pherae, representing the interests of the powerful Etrurian state was natural; she had the position, the history and the knowledge needed to ensure a just outcome. The more interesting presence, or lack thereof, was the very boy she had tutored. Eliwood and Lilina were struck by the gaping empty space next to her – their Roy, the 'young lion' who had led Etrurian forces to victory against Zephiel and Bern, was not to be found at his post by her side – where he was, by all visiting parties, expected to be.

"Lady Lilina, Lord Eliwood," Cecilia called, the woman bowing politely as they entered. "Well met."

"Mage General." Eliwood returned the greeting.

"Teacher!" Lilina broke from the Marquess' side and shattered the formality of the group's meeting, falling into the warm embrace of the valkyrie's welcome. "How goes it?"

"All is well," she replied. "The Western Isles will be satisfied if our current ties are maintained. As for Ilia, they are demanding the presence of anima mages in the winter, with fire tomes to ensure year-round growth on their farms." She gave a beleaguered sigh. "I'm trying to explain to them that it doesn't quite work that way."

"I have faith!" Lilina exclaimed good-naturedly. "If you can teach someone like me, you could teach them!"

"You were always an exceptional student, Lilina," Cecilia responded without any hesitation, having evidently learned from years of diplomacy not to take a noble's self-deprecation at face value. "However, the arrival of Bern's delegation has slowed everything to a standstill. It is a bad day for Roy to be absent from the negotiations."

"About that," Eliwood inquired softly. "Do you know where he is?"

"I was going to ask you the same," Cecilia admitted. "He is not in his quarters. I had Saul check."

"But then... where?" Lilina wondered out loud, probing her memory for anything out of the ordinary Roy might have said to her before they parted ways in the morning. "And why?"

"Thank you, Cecilia," Eliwood spoke firmly. "I shall find him and make sure he's fit to continue."

The two set off back down the hall after the Mage General thanked them in turn, transitioning from the polished wood and mahogany of the castle's meeting rooms into the cordial furnishings of Castle Pherae's living quarters. They briefly reconnoitred Roy's room; true to Cecilia's word, the door was flung wide open and its space completely empty. The Etrurian priest Saul loitered by the exposed doorframe, reclined against its shape and chatting amiably to a soft-faced retainer of one of the visiting delegations. She seemed to be tolerating him, although she was obviously hoping for someone with more authority to appear and have her sent to another duty. The slick acolyte seemed to be in no such hurry as his voice continued to carry well past the ears of the woman he intended to charm and drifted into the hallway.

"I don't envy her," Lilina jibed. "That Saul kept trying me until the minute Roy proposed,"

Eliwood forced back a chuckle. "Back in my day, the lech wore green. Follow me, I think I know where Roy might be."

They rounded the corner, and after a few more moments reached Eliwood's own quarters. Lilina felt slightly awkward to be entering the spacious bedroom of her future father-in-law, but followed Eliwood to a burnished brass lever on the far side of the room.

The handle was ornately engraved, clearly older than any one occupant of the castle, and it protruded from a shimmering white wooden door, itself decorated with floral carvings. Lilina held her breath; Roy had told her of the chamber beyond, but she had never seen it for herself. Eliwood turned the latch delicately, feeling the mechanism give way and the white wood swing outward on its hinges.

"Only he and I have a key," Eliwood said, smiling knowingly. "Come now. If he came here... I'm beginning to think he may need us."

Lilina gulped and followed him through. The chamber beyond was lined on both sides by mirrored closets, causing the reflections of the two to extend in infinite layers beyond their sight. Only one such compartment was open, and in the single exposed cache Lilina caught a glimpse of a cerulean dress suspended on a large wooden frame. It had been maintained recently; not a single thread was out of place or frayed, and accoutrements such as a thin sash of celeste blue was delicately laid over the simulated neck and shoulders of the frame. *The implements of a dancer*, the girl thought.

Eliwood halted at the other end of the hall. The new door that awaited them on the other side was shut too, and though Eliwood had his fingers wrapped around its cool brass handle, he hesitated in completing the movement. Sighing softly, he seemed to rethink the motion and let his hand fall off the mechanism, instead turning to face Lilina and craning his neck. She caught his meaning, tiptoed to the door and, after a moment of her own contemplation, knocked on the wooden frame three times. A strained silence permeated the air.

"Roy, darling," she called out, as softly and as reassuringly as she could. "Are you in there?"

There was another moment's silence before, to the relief of both, the young lord's voice replied hesitantly. "L-Lilina? Is that you?"

Something was wrong, this much Lilina could tell immediately. This was not the first time she had heard Roy stammer; in fact, he had tripped over his words a half-dozen times or more during his proposal. It was more the complete lack of agency in his voice – all the armies of Bern hadn't robbed control from him the way this had.

"Yes, it's me," she replied, her tone all honey. "Are you alright?"

"I-ah... how did you... please, don't come in!"

"Lord Eliwood is with me," Lilina said softly. "Just us. We promise."

"F-father too?"

"Yes, Roy," he now added, taking on a tone in his voice that Lilina had never heard; in time, she would come to realise that it was the tone of a man trying to be both father and mother. "We're here. Is everything alright? Can we come in?"

"I don't... this is..."

“Roy,” Lilina said. “I don’t know what it is, but I promise you, we’re going to try and help. Can we please come in and see you?”

There was a brief quiet before the vulnerable voice returned. “...do you promise?”

“Yes,” Eliwood breathed through the doorframe without hesitation.

“Of course, my flame,” Lilina said soothingly.

“Oh... okay, just... please, don’t be shocked. I don’t... it’s not my fault.”

Fiancée and father shot one last worried glance at each other before Lilina put her effort into the handle, and swung the door open slowly to reveal the last room beyond.

The high-ceilinged room had eight exact sides, an octagonal shape with mirrors on six sides, and a tall window opposite the door. It was obvious immediately to Lilina that this was a fitting and dressing room to match the long walk-in wardrobe they had just passed. Glorious white sunlight was filtering through the thin curtains, illuminating the huddled mass of a person on the floor.

Roy may have been dressed in the royal Pheraen blue and gold that his blood and advanced station demanded, but right now the boy could not have looked more vulnerable. Crumpled on the tiles beneath, hugging himself with strained arms, the boy looked up at his family with a pathetic expression as they took in the tapestry of his upset. Lilina gasped, and Eliwood’s eyes became wide with worry as they noticed the peculiar elements of the familiar picture.

Roy’s eyes burned a deep vermillion, the cool control of their usual oceanic hue all but vanished in wild red gashes of colour. The bone and tendons of his hands were prominently visible as he clutched at the hem of his own uniform, as though too much muscle had been covered with too little flesh. Moreso, thin, leathery spots of aquamarine freckled the bare white skin of his arms, appearing at seemingly random intervals all the way from his wrists up to his neck. His body was hunched over, the shape of his back arched with inhuman musculature, and his face carried a strong red flush in his cheeks, evidently suffering from a feverish temperature, although Lilina imagined his humiliation would not be helping his shade. His hands tried in vain to cover the last, and most overtly noticeable change, but they could not – the ears adorning either side of the young man’s face had been stretched outward to animalistic lengths, pointing at top and bottom to long reptilian ends where pink skin became pale scales. They twitched gently as Roy flexed them, consciously or not.

“I don’t- I don’t know what’s happened...” Roy confessed, evidently on the verge of embarrassed tears as the full extent of his predicament dawned on the visitors.

Lilina immediately dashed to Roy’s side and dropped to join him on the floor, pressing her forehead to his reassuringly as her svelte fingers wrapped affectionately around him through thick tufts of vibrant red hair. Eliwood said nothing, shock still on his features as an old anxiety, once thought years vanished, wormed its way slowly into his heart.

He had a Dragonson.

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Lilina’s fingers gently pried at the thin, membranous ear-tips as they quivered in the warm spring air that filtered through the now slightly-opened window. Roy seemed comfortable with her probing, inquisitive touches even as he tried to calm down from the panic of his predicament.

“This must be...” Roy wracked his brain. “Some kind of hex. Elder magic.”

"I've never heard of this, though." The mage added her voice of expertise. "Even among dark practitioners, this is... a strange malediction."

"What do you think, father?"

Roy's question snapped Eliwood out of his reverie. He had been going over, in his head, any number of explanations that might give succour to the boy. He chose his words carefully, stifling away dangerous truths from a violent past. "What matters, is how we react to and fix the problem."

"Yes," Roy concurred, his usual steadfastness entering his voice. "If this is elder magic, there are any number of magicians who could help us." He thought over the options. "Could we call for Saul, perhaps? Or Hugh?"

"Now hold, Roy," Eliwood quickly interjected, not wanting to let false hope rise in his son. "We must be careful as to who knows about this. If it is not a hex, and the wrong man had seen it..."

"You think...?"

"I have known many Marquesses who are too quick to judge," Eliwood clarified.

"But if not some kind of curse, what could it be?" Lilina pondered, as she now traced the scaly lines of Roy's arms with her fingernail, his eyes following her movements. "What could cause a human to develop these kinds of growths?"

Eliwood waited a moment before answering, hoping he would not have to confront the truth at hand. "Is it possible that this is a side effect of using the Divine Weapons?" The youths considered the option as Eliwood continued, feeling old vulnerabilities sweep through him. "Those artefacts have incredible history fighting dragons... perhaps some kind of ancient magic was transposed into you from their use?"

"I would... hope not." Roy struggled to stomach the idea. "That severely reduces the amount of options we have for fixing me."

The father was keen to reach the crux of his plan. "Exactly. So we ask someone who knows. Was there anyone among your army who had expertise on dragons?"

Roy turned to Lilina inquisitively. "I saw Sophia just here in Pherae the other day," Lilina suggested. "I imagine she's left by now, however."

The boy nodded. "Assuming she has... there's Fae, but... she's back home in Arcadia. The Nabata desert."

Eliwood shook his head. "Too far. It would take weeks for anyone to reach her."

"Weeks?" Roy realised. "No. My presence is expected – at the negotiations! If any of this is to mean anything, I need to –" he doubled over again in renewed pain and discomfort, as his hands clenched and unclenched in strong convulsion. A long, choked sob of shock erupted from the young man as he clutched himself, his heart pounding in his chest and a screeching fury in his head as his skin pulled and his attention waned. He bared his teeth as they ground together, trying to distract from the agony, and panic overcame him, his eyes blazing a glowing vermilion with the flash of excruciating anger.

"Roy?" Lilina asked, her concern renewing and her voice rising to its own panicked pitch. "Are you –"

"Get... away!" Roy warned her, the outburst more snarl than speech. "I- I can't..."

A deep, guttural growl rumbled at the back of his throat and in every word he spoke. Roy's agonised concerns intensified as the scales slowly spread across his skin, watching the pallor and texture of his arms be slowly consumed by the creeping dominance of the draconian edges. Roy rose to his feet – and was horrified as his stance had changed, his centre of gravity seemingly altered by the threat of this transfiguration.

“My child!” Eliwood stood before the boy, causing Roy to refocus his vision. His father had a benign smile on his face, though he seemed nervous – there was the slightest hint of hesitation in his movements, if only the slightest hint. Taking three delicate but firm steps forward, the father took his son in his arms, closing the embrace around him gently.

“You don't need to do that,” he breathed. “You don't need to. It's just us in here.”

The way the Marquess spoke – no, transferred – the meaning of these words into Roy's psyche immediately caused a reaction. The boy's immediate and involuntary impulse was struggle, lashing out against his father's hold, crude anger igniting at what seemed like an attempt to silence him. Eliwood, however, merely took hold of his son's hand and solidly grasped it, as though he'd been expecting the resistance.

“There's nothing to worry about. Not here. Not today.”

They were the words of a younger man, a promise made in confidence, and Lilina felt like she shouldn't be hearing them.

“I'm here, Ni- Roy. I'm here.”

At last, Roy's breathing began to slow as his father's embrace calmed him. The boy's feet slowly slipped from solid footing and the older man picked up the slack. They sunk to the floor together, Eliwood taking the majority of Roy's weight to keep his son from falling, just as he had when he'd first taught Roy how to walk. When they separated, he found his son's scared eyes struggling to find the right mix of gratefulness and confusion. The advanced nature of his transformation had reversed, if only slightly; the boy's state returned to how it had been before his panic had urged on further change.

“Lord Eliwood, that was... incredible,” Lilina breathed. “How on Earth did you know how to do that?”

He glanced at her, hoping the girl would not catch the telling glimpse of memory behind his eyes, before he found himself unable to meet the challenge of her gaze and he turned back to his son.

“Are you alright, Roy? Are you feeling better?”

The shell-shocked swordsman held his gnarled hand to his chest, feeling the percussive rioting of his heart slow to normalcy. “I don't know what... that was.”

“I imagine your panic spurred further transformation,” Eliwood informed without missing a beat.

“You need to try and stay calm. Just remember, in here with you it's just me, and her.” He gestured to Lilina as she returned to Roy's side, satisfied that the storm of his rage had passed. “For now, you stay here. Do not be concerned about the meetings.” And with that, Eliwood had become the benevolent statesman once again. “I will put out that you have a contagion, and send for every diplomatic representative of Pherae to report to the castle.”

“But, father,” Roy croaked through his still-dry throat. “I had a meeting...”

“Not anymore you don't,” Eliwood retorted, before raising his eyebrow quizzically. “Unless...”

“Yes,” the lordling sighed, dreading the delivery of this news. “Head of state. Today. This morning.”

“Damn,” the Marquess swore. “Who was it?”

Roy struggled to deliver the news. “It was Bern. Queen Guinivere.”

Eliwood muttered a significantly worse expletive than his previous. “Alright,” he began with a sigh as he pulled himself back to his feet. “I’ll have to go talk to her, then. Is she...?”

His son nodded. “I granted them access to the gallery.”

“I’ll be there, then,” Eliwood offered his hand to Lilina. “And you, my dear?”

“I’m going to see if our dragon expert is still in town,” the mage informed them, rising to her own two feet. “If not, what then?”

“One problem at a time, children,” Eliwood said sternly, turning to leave. “Will you be alright here, Roy?”

Roy nodded. “I can do this. And besides...” He revealed his hand, fingers safely wrapped around the emerald handle of the magnificent sword holstered at his waist. The ultimate weapon used by man in their savage war with dragonkind, the glorious Sword of Seals pulsed with light as it judged Roy’s touch. “This blade isn’t rejecting me. So there’s hope for me yet.” He flashed a smile – laden with worry, but daring to hope.

“That’s the kind of strength we need,” Eliwood chuckled, as he turned the handle leading back out into the mirrored hallway, before swinging the door open and leaving it for Lilina to exit through.

“We’ll be back as soon as we can, Roy,” she promised, and after a last glance of reassurance between them, the boy was left alone in the room. He gripped the binding blade desperately, deep insecurity welling up inside him. With his family gone, all Roy had to trust was the judgement of a champion long dead – the ancient hero Hartmut’s will acting through his weapon. And it was Roy’s only desire, suspense rattling his ribcage with every second, that the blade did not suddenly decide to reject him outright.

That his humanity, which had won him his now-happy life, was not slowly trickling away.

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Lilina reached the end of the mirrored hallway, and opened the door which led back into Eliwood’s quarters.

“Ah.” She realised to ask, “should we lock it behind us, Lord...?” she trailed off as she turned to face her benefactor, and found the man had stopped in his tracks.

He was staring at the cerulean dress she had glimpsed in the open closet, a range of emotions evident on his face. Lilina could make out sadness, and worry, and frustration immediately, but beyond them, there was reverence, and longing, and pride lurking just under the surface. It was as though something had sent him spiralling into memories long put aside. His hand clutched at an object within his robe, just over his heart.

“Lord Eliwood?”

Again, he was forced from his silent promises. “...Yes! Lilina, we should lock it. Roy has a key himself, and I’d sooner trust bandits with my privacy than some of the socialites in this castle...”

Eliwood's voice receded as he moved to lock the door once they had exited, and as the white wooden frame closed Lilina stole her own glance at the dress with its dancer's wear, feeling a sense of heavy significance at the sight of it. And yet, she could swear, there was the tinkling of laughter surrounding it, a gentle sigh of levity that imbued Lilina with fresh determination to see this hardship through.

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As Eliwood rounded the corner to the gallery, he was greeted by its guardian. The noble sniper Klein, son of his old friends Pent and Louise of Etruria, immediately strode up to meet the Marquess. His posture was fixed in respectful reverence.

"Well met, Klein. How goes the day?"

"Well, sire," the straightforward archer replied, "I think too many people are being let in."

"She is the Queen of Bern. We couldn't exactly have her wait in the meeting room."

"Aye, milord," Klein countered. "But the other two? Don't get me wrong, they fought as hard as anyone, but if the other nobles caught wind..."

"That, my boy," Eliwood answered, gesturing to the figure resting to the side of the gallery's entrance, "is why she's here."

Leaning against the wall, the woman showed little reaction aside from turning to look at them. The swordmaster was known to Eliwood; she was Fir, daughter of his old comrades Bartre and Karla. However, he had not seen the girl in the years between her birth and her introduction to him at the end of the war, and so Eliwood had been surprised. She was steadfast, and serious, and yet her face belied a softness and caring for those she had grown attached to. Truth be told, she bore an uncanny resemblance to another great woman from Eliwood's life; indeed, between her lethal swordsmanship, piercing dark eyes and hair, and turquoise battle-dress, the Marquess had many times almost addressed her as Lyndis. Eliwood cursed himself again for his habit of seeing the past in people that were all too present.

Both men nodded at her respectfully, and she in turn gave a brief salute and went back to watching the hall.

"Is the Queen still inside?" Eliwood asked.

"Yes, milord. Along with my sister." Klein tutted briefly with concern. "Says she's 'getting all she can before father arrives'. I hope she isn't giving them trouble."

"I wouldn't worry about that," the Marquess said, brushing past Klein to enter the gallery, "to please one's parents is a common concern."

Eliwood stepped through the boundary into the room beyond. A vast, sealed rectangular space, this main enclosure of Castle Pherae's reliquary usually played host to some of the region's numerous examples of excellence in artistry. An ordinary visit to this place would allow for the viewing of breathtaking canvasses painted by masters past, present and emerging. Mighty sculptures which celebrated heroes of history and myth, artefacts preserved from the ancient and arcane history of Elibe. All that, however, had been moved out of the room and stored safely elsewhere. White as the fresh canvas on a new easel, the room was blank and bare.

Save for the eight pedestals that rose from the floor.

On each column, placed and positioned with the utmost care, were the weapons that stopped the world. Having gathered them throughout the conflict to better combat the dragon soldiers in Bern's army, Roy had brought these weapons of the fabled Eight Generals home to Pherae with Etruria's permission. The former Mage General Pent and Archbishop Yoder were coming to discuss how best to re-seal them – and truth be told, Eliwood would be glad to see them gone. He felt scared to even breathe among their collective presence, the immense pressure of their power placing the entire space into what felt like a void. The man's head pounded and his hair stood on end as he felt the aura of their fury calling out for war. He looked them over, familiar and unfamiliar, as he entered.

The shimmering Murgleis and Maltet. The noble Forblaze and Aureola. The dread Apocalypse and Eckesachs. The Armads.

Durandal.

Eliwood swallowed ancient fear, staring the blazing sword down even as it beckoned to him, promising him once again the power to protect his loved ones.

If he would just draw it from its waiting.

Every inch of the blade, from its ornately crafted crimson cross-guard, to the draconic central relief of its hilt, to the endless black valley that ran its length, was intimately familiar. Knowing its dips and its contours, he knew also that picking the thing up would just as effortless to him today as it had been twenty years ago. Eliwood, thus, couldn't help but be grateful when he was pulled from this invasion of his mind by the enthusiastic greeting of a familiar cleric.

"Lord Eliwood!" Clarine, Pent and Louise's pampered daughter. The blonde girl, every inch as beautiful as her brother was handsome, carried an armful of notes and observations on the weapons compiled for her scholarly father. He returned her greeting, and the young maiden took this as an invitation to talk at him excitedly. "How are you today? I'm doing wonderfully! I think I saw the Maltet start to frost over its column earlier. Father will be so pleased –"

She was interrupted by the impatient clearing of a throat from across the room. Catching herself and remembering her manners, Clarine clamped a hand over her mouth and ducked out of the way apologetically as an unfamiliar woman approached Eliwood.

The new entrant was a militaristic figure, layered from neck to toe in plates of royal scarlet and gold. Her eyes conveyed respect despite her stoic exterior, and even in his heyday Eliwood might've looked slouched compared to the spectacular rigidity of her stance at-attention. Based on Roy's descriptions, this woman could only be one person.

"You must be Captain Melady." Eliwood acknowledged her with a salute traditional to Pherae's allies. "Ah, forgive me. I believe it is Dragon General, now. Roy has told me much of your prowess."

"You honour me, milord," she replied. "It was a pleasure to serve under your son, and on behalf of the Queen, it is an honour to be welcome in your home."

Well used to such pleasantries, Eliwood bowed slightly in thanks, before remembering to address the delicate matter of a battle Roy had told him about. "I was..." his words tread on thin ice, the topic a deeply sensitive one. "Informed of your husband's loss. You have my condolences."

Melady lowered her head in sorrow, but kept her composure effortlessly. "Thank you, Lord Eliwood. Bern is poorer for his death, but greater for his example. May his flight now never end."

Behind her, the lady-in-waiting Elen also bowed her head, repeating the mantra.

Eliwood looked beyond these women to sight the third. Though she was shorter than both of her retainers, the turned back of Queen Guinivere projected presence beyond its form. Her flaxen hair stood out layered over her royal scarlet dress, the richness of the space she occupied leaving nothing to chance.

With a subtle motion, Melady reclaimed his attention, drawing his focus gently to the rapier suspended at his side. Swallowing his pride for Roy, Eliwood began to undo the strap keeping the weapon in place in order to relinquish it to the bodyguard.

"Melady, that will not be necessary." The young Queen's voice was as gentle as it was unexpected.

"But, Your Highness..."

"The Marquess is in his home. His authority is ours to yield to."

Voicing an unneeded apology, Melady stepped aside and allowed Eliwood to pass. Dutifully, he took his steps, heels echoing in the vast hall, and arrived alongside the young queen, sharing briefly in her view. Her eyes were locked on the Eckesachs, melancholy memory flooding her expression as she beheld the sceptre's inert form. Its last wielder had been her brother, the late King Zephiel of Bern.

"Tell me, Lord Eliwood," Guinivere began, her tone even, "as the man hosting them, what do you see when you look at these weapons?"

Eliwood glanced once more at the Durandal, remembered slick blood running down its edge. The secret pain of a conflict that had been fought in shadow. "Tragedy," he replied. "Endless tragedy."

Guinivere nodded in silent agreement, allowing her gaze to break from the weapon at last and turning to face her benefactor. "It is good to see you, Lord Eliwood." Her solemn expression curved upwards in a slight, grateful smile. "And in peacetime, no less!"

Eliwood smiled sweetly in return, before remembering his standing. Silently cursing, the older man began to stoop to one knee as he stammered, "Your Highness Queen Guinivere of Bern, it is my honour as Marquess--"

"Th-there is no need for that, either." The Queen stopped him conscientiously, embarrassed by the overwhelmingly formal display. "Bern can no longer afford to view places like Pherae as... underfoot." As Eliwood straightened back up, Guinivere surprised him by extending her hand, an adult gesture made with little to no pretence of her royalty.

"It seems," she said, "we both stand here on behalf of our loved ones."

He took her hand and shook it firmly, letting her lead the movement. "I am sorry for your loss, Your Highness."

She nodded gratefully. "Zephiel was my brother, and I loved him dearly," she began, before the emotion of youth crept into her voice. "But I am glad... he is... at peace. In rest, he is free from the madness that claimed him."

For the first time in a long while, Eliwood was robbed of words. He could think of nothing to say that would sound genuine; after all, his own son had been the one to cut the madman down, and now their names were sung as hero and villain in every tavern throughout Lycia. He was grateful, then, that Guinivere did not insist on further memorialising, and instead cut to the core of the matter.

"So, Lord Eliwood. Why are you standing here in your son's place?"

Truth be told, the man had armed himself with an excuse, but had long lost the desire to use it. "I'm sorry, Your Highness," he began. "But I'm afraid I cannot say much. It would be wrong to sully the goodwill Roy has built with you by offering the same half-baked excuse the others are getting."

As though she had been expecting such an ambiguous response, Guinivere gave a smile through pursed lips. "And what can you tell me that Roy himself cannot, milord?"

"Only that there is a very important, and very unexpected," Eliwood replied, pausing to breathe in sharply. "Issue of familial importance currently taking place. To see you now, he would not be able to exercise the quality of judgement we expect from him."

"Then when?"

Eliwood gulped. Despite her diminutive size, respectful tone and sweet demeanour, Guinivere had the natural instincts of Bern's fiercely proud rulers. "I cannot say, Your Highness. However, you have my word that you will be the first one he sees when matters are resolved."

At this her sullied tone evaporated, and the lovely young woman with her regal bearing was back. "Very well, Lord Eliwood!" She beamed. "We will wait. Melady, Elen, I think we might investigate those lovely gardens we saw on the way in."

"An excellent choice," Eliwood concurred, relieved to have avoided further questioning. "If you find my retainer Rebecca along the path, have her explain the ranunculus varieties to you. She is quite proud."

"I think I shall," Guinivere replied, casting a last look back at her felled brother's weapon before Eliwood opened the door leading back out for them. As she left, however, she turned to face her Pheraen host.

"Lord Eliwood – would you please come and find me when Roy is available?"

"Of course," he replied, giving a gentle, courtly bow. "In fact, I shall find you on the hour to give you updates. If you require something urgently, we will be in my quarters."

Giving thanks and bidding farewell, the royal party departed the hall for the gardens. Breathing a sigh of thankful, exhausted relief, Eliwood waited a minute or so for the royals to be well on their way down, and then made for the fitting-room – the flight of urgency now in his step.

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The young master dared to look up as the white door opened, and then allowed his expression to light up as a delicate, amethystine woman was quietly ushered into the room by his fiancée.

"Sophia!" Roy called out, unable to hide the relief evident in his voice as he leapt to his feet.

"Ah... Roy..." the soft-spoken girl responded. "It is... good to see you... again."

"She was standing in the middle of the town square, in full view," Lilina laughed. "I don't know how, Sophia, but I suspect you knew you would be needed."

The door then opened again, and ushering himself through as quietly as he could came the Marquess himself. "We have to make this quick," Eliwood declared as he began walking towards the assembly. "Did anyone see you two?"

“Yes, but just one,” Lilina all but sang. “I ran into Lugh again on the way back, but I took care of it. He’s outside your quarters, milor- Eliwood. I gave him an Elfire tome and told him not to let anyone in.”

“Good!” Eliwood strode forward. “We have a little while. I was able to get Guinivere to wait, but time is of the essence. She is the Queen of Bern, after all –”

He stopped in his tracks as he beheld Sophia properly for the first time. “Roy,” he began, ancient recognition twinkling in his eyes, “this woman is a dragon.”

“Father!” Roy retorted. “Her name is Sophia, and I would trust her with my life if need be. Half-dragon she may be, but she was of vital importance throughout the conflict. Sophia, this is my father Eliwood, the Marquess of Pherae. You must forgive –”

“There is... nothing to forgive...” Sophia seemed to drift forward, long dress trailing behind her in wraithlike patterns as she moved towards the older man, a rare glimmer of wonder in her expression. “He merely... remembers. It is good... to finally see you again. *Ixeheh.*”

The last word made the Marquess’ blood run cold. “How did you...”

Sophia, enigmatic as always, turned back to the young couple. “Roy... your symptoms are... common.” She swept forward and seemed to examine him with eyes that had transitioned in an instant from weary and soporific to piercing and intense. “For one of your... lineage.”

“My... lineage?” Roy asked quizzically, turning first to Lilina, who shot him a sheepish glance and turned the gaze back unto the father.

“Right,” Eliwood sighed, running a weathered hand through his hair. “I get it. You’re punishing me for not telling him sooner.” he mumbled this as if he was speaking to someone, but his eyes did not direct the comment towards anyone present.

“Father?” Roy now stood before his lord parent, back straight and posture fixed in respect, eyes full of curious pleading.

“Alright,” the older man spoke, resigned. “Do you remember those old tales people told about Lord Hector and I?”

“Of course,” Roy replied with a patient nod. “With the Black Fang, and the then-Marquess of Laus. You, Lord Hector, and the Lady Lyndis of Caelin uncovered the plot and tore the whole conspiracy out by the roots.”

“A flattering way to put it.” Eliwood’s voice was distant. “But there was another conspirator we... don’t like to talk about. A blackheart named Nergal. And he was chasing two people; a young bard named Nils, and his sister...”

Eliwood was unable to stop himself from reaching out and touching the tender skin of his son’s cheek. “A dancer, named Ninian.”

Roy’s breath was shallow. “Mother..?”

He took Roy’s hand in his own, before turning to Lilina and offering her his other. “This is a confession long overdue.”

The girl in question shook her head softly, having made the realisation herself already. “This is for the two of you.”

Eliwood smiled and started towards another room off to the side, Roy following hesitantly. The two women watched them go, Lilina casting a last smile of reassurance at her fiancé as he turned to look at her from the doorway, nervous determination spread across his features. The door closed behind them, and then the mirrored room was silent save for the distant thrum of activity that graced the now-peaceful land of Pherae. Lilina took a few steps towards the room's only window, warm daylight filtering in through the thin white curtains, and gave a contented sigh.

"Why not... go with them?" Sophia asked, the lilac woman not moving.

"Father told me the story years ago," Lilina confessed, smiling at the memory. "Though, he did not tell me that the Lady Ninian was of the dragons. However, seeing Roy as he is now... it was easy enough to assume. Father always made sure to mention the dragons. He was never one to resist a tall tale..." Her voice lowered a touch. "Truth be told, I always thought he was fibbing... until I saw the Divine Weapons. Exactly as he described them."

"And you did not... tell Roy? About his father... his mother?"

"No," Lilina replied, her eyes drifting to the door. "I swore to myself that if both were alive by war's end, I would let Lord Eliwood be the one to tell him." The Ostian ran a finger down the gauzy fabric of the curtains, opening the fold ever so slightly as to see the full splendour of Castle Pherae's radiant gardens outside. "Now that I know, I am glad I decided so. She was theirs, after all. Father always laughed that big laugh of his. 'That Eliwood couldn't have asked for better,' he said. 'Their boy was blessed to have them.'"

Silence reigned at this, long silence as the ghost of Hector's words drifted through the space, as both women thought of the miracles that had led to the unique jeopardy of this situation.

Then it was Sophia's turn to sigh, her voice turning to a sonorous hum barely audible to Lilina. The younger woman turned to face the half-dragon, and found her swaying slightly on the spot, eyes closed, wrapped in her song with its decidedly optimistic tone filling the air in long gasps of far-off music.

"Is that a smile I see, Sophia?" Lilina asked, giggling. "Now that is a rare sight!"

"It is a rare thing..." Sophia concurred, eyes opening to look out with promise upon the window, to the sky beyond. "Imagine it... good news...! For dragons!"

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When Roy emerged, lord father at his side, he did so with tear-stained eyes and unable to hide a smile of very obvious relief. The two women rose and turned to meet the Pheraen pair, emotional remnants of their counsel still at play in the tone and control of Roy's voice, as well the red flush in his cheeks.

"S-so," he stammered, grinning despite his still-glassy eyes. "Mother was a dragon."

"A half-dragon..." Sophia corrected before Eliwood had the chance to. "She was not... much different from myself. Do not think of her... too differently."

"So, Sophia," Lilina jibed, "as the one who has to put up with him, what kind of oddities should I be prepared for? Is he going to breathe fire if he doesn't get his way?"

Responding to the humour as cheerfully as the shy woman could, Sophia smiled weakly. "Roy is a unique creature... he is a child of his father's flame, but his mother... was an ice dragon. Use of the flametongue... will be impossible."

Lilina gave an exasperated chuckle as Roy squirmed. "I was just joking, Sophia..."

"At certain times, and in certain places..." Sophia continued. "He will be able... to see glimpses of things... before they happen. He may even... be able to feel the emotions and thoughts of others... as they occur. But only when the environment is... rich with Quintessence..."

"I see," Roy pondered, worried she was softening the blow for potential problems – ones equal to or worse than his current predicament.

"Oh..." Sophia realised. "And you will be able... to access... the Vestibule."

Eliwood and Lilina asked almost in unison. "The Vestibule?"

"Yes..." Sophia murmured. "It is a repository for... the knowledge... and memories of dragonkind. Wherever quintessence flows... The Vestibule is friend to all dragons..."

Intrigued, Roy stepped closer to the lilac-clad girl. "Can you show me?"

A small mote of flickering, pellucid light suddenly appeared between Sophia's fingers.

"Roy, are you sure this is a good idea?" Lilina asked nervously. Eliwood said nothing, but it was all he could do to not reach for his rapier as the enigmatic magic swelled and pulsed between the woman's fingers. Some of his instincts, fearful of elder magic, had not faded with the years.

"These are tests I must pass," Roy said, his usual determination entering his voice. "And I trust you, Sophia. Show me."

The half-dragon nodded, and released her hold on the sorcerous sphere.

A flash, and suddenly the party was engulfed in stone. Dust and echoes settled around as the four scanned their new surroundings with eager eyes. Small saplings that sprung from gaps in eroded sandstone tiles crumpled under the feet of all four, the dim temple clearly given in to age and dereliction.

"Where... are we?" Lilina asked, stepping out and tracing a tiny blue glyph in the air. The simple lines of magic connected and manifested as a sphere of controlled, broiling flame that sprung into her hand. She waved the orange light around, only to voice her consternation when it threw no new light upon the environment.

"You are in... my memory." Sophia's voice rang from the darkness, and the implications of her speech left naught but silence hanging in the air. New sounds began to filter through the decrepit groaning of the stone shrine, sounds beyond the echoing trickle of water and the occasional crumbling of something in the shadows. The vibrato of steel and footfalls, heavy hooves and whinnies, cries of pain and shouts rich with adrenaline now seeped into the environment, desperate sounds of conflict which sent a shivering breath of mortality down the spines of those present.

"I know this battle," Eliwood gasped, fearful memory making itself apparent on his features. "I could never forget the sound. Why have you brought us here? Would you hurt my son?" The older knight located Sophia in the darkness, her lavender hair now ever-so-slightly visible in the thin offerings of

light which descended in measured rays from the day outside. Eliwood advanced on the dragon girl, his concern turning to panic as traumatic familiarity threatened to overwhelm him.

"Father, please be calm. Sophia is just trying to –" Roy attempted to halt his father with a calm appeal, but the Marquess' advance continued unabated.

"She has brought us to a terrible place. Enemies everywhere! Take us back!" He attempted to grab Sophia's arm as he demanded this, only to recoil with shock when his sturdy hand passed straight through her skin like mist rolling over a cliff.

"Father..." Roy's voice came again. "Sophia is over here."

Eliwood wheeled around to see his son still standing beside the same woman, with Lilina also present, both standing around Sophia in a stance that was equal parts company and protection. The older lord now glanced between the woman flanked by his loved ones and the identical person, only metres apart.

"Please, Sophia," Roy now inquired, "why did you bring us –"

A great beating on the stone door at the edge of the space brought them alive with panic. Roy drew his resplendent blade in a flash of shining steel and Lilina flipped open her spellbook by instinct. Eliwood, too, dashed with speed unbecoming of a man his age to a recess in the wall by the door, weathered palm resting upon the pommel of his rapier. Sophia, perhaps tellingly, did nothing.

Sweat began to burden Eliwood's brow. The beating continued.

"Who is that, Sophia?" Roy asked, the tension in his voice audible through gritted teeth. She remained silent.

There was a great crash as the would-be intruder now threw themselves against the door and the entranceway shifted perilously inward, opened by a third at least.

"Sophia," Lilina began, a heavy drop of sweat trickling down her cheek. "Even though we're in your memory, can they... see us?"

A second crashing of weight on stone, and the door ground against its frame once again, the vast majority of its passage completed.

"Can they hurt us?" Lilina asked, panic in her voice as she began to trace a rune in the air before her.

"Yes." The other girl's reply was simple.

That was all Eliwood needed. When the final break came and light flooded through from outside as the door swung inward on antique hinges, the aging lord leapt from his nook in the temple, rapier drawn faster than the eye could see, and delivered a vicious sideswipe at the new entrant. When the swing was completed Eliwood froze, his total silence suspending all motion within the structure.

Seconds passed in agonising slowness.

"...Father?" Roy finally asked, nervously.

"Huh," returned a voice, familiar and yet new to the scene. "...It's just an old ruin."

A sword-tip appeared first, then a whole body stepped right through Eliwood's form, the two bodies crossing over each other as the newcomer entered. The strange thing was, the visitor didn't seem

very new at all – dressed in rich blue tones lined with silvers and golds, a great sweeping cape, and sporting a head of vibrant crimson hair.

“Anything in there, Eliwood?!” Came a cry from outside the temple.

“Oh...” Lilina gasped. “This is...”

“No,” the intruder cried back as he kept his sword at the ready, but took a few furtive glances around the dusty interior. “Not that I can see...”

The older Eliwood in the doorway now turned, revealing the harrowed face of a man who had just seen a reflection of years past. The Sophia he had been unable to touch in the darkness now stirred, causing his younger form to jump with surprise.

“Arch...sage?” the Sophia of the past asked tentatively.

“Who are you?” Eliwood the younger demanded, the sternness and wariness of combat giving way to curiosity.

“You’re... not...” the Sophia who talked, in vast contrast to the two Eliwoods who occupied the space, was barely changed in age from the one who had brought them here. “The Archsage... are you? Um... I’m sorry for... my mistake.” The lavender girl turned to recede into the temple, thin dress trailing behind her as she regressed into the dimness.

“W-wait!” the fresh-faced Eliwood cried, throwing out a hand to stop her. “Who in the –”

“I’m... from Arcadia,” she explained, returning as quickly as she had deigned to leave. “I wanted to speak to... the Archsage... um... but... he’s not here... is he?”

The younger lord calmed, now that he seemed to finally have the girl’s confidence. “No, he’s not.”

“So, this is before the blackheart was defeated...” Lilina mused, as the younger Eliwood and the Sophia of the past conversed.

“Then that means, this is...” Roy’s eyes glimmered in realisation.

The girl delicately reached across, took the younger Eliwood’s empty left hand and placed a protective charm within, before closing his fingers. “We want... you all... to do your best...” She began to recede again, this time backing into the darkness of the temple with her eyes facing the visitor. “For the future... please don’t lose...”

“The Dread Isle,” Lilina whispered, “twenty years ago. Where our fathers fought Nergal.”

“That means, at this point,” Roy’s breath shuddered as he took it, “mother was dead.”

“To your father...” The Sophia of the present elaborated from between the engaged couple, “this was... painful reality. To you, Roy... it is a... demonstration... of the breadth of memories residing in the Vestibule...”

All eyes watched in amazement as the Sophia of the past backed up until she reached the Sophia of the present, whereupon she assumed a position where their forms perfectly overlapped one another. “If the light is strong enough... it can dispel... darkness.” This last prophetic whisper, spoken by both, carried through the air, entering the ears of all present, before – to the eyes of the younger Eliwood – she simply vanished, and empty space rushed in to fill the void left by her form.

“She’s gone,” the visitor gasped out loud, voice dripping with startled confusion. “What a mysterious girl.”

The young lord turned to face the entrance through which he had initially come, walking towards it even as he examined the resisting charm given to him by the strange woman; he stuffed the ornament into his pocket and faced the sunshine of the world outside determinedly. The older Eliwood, unknowingly before him, crouched slightly so that he was at eye level with himself. The gaze between the two connected, blue eyes sharing an anguish that still cut even years apart. These were both men who had lost their love.

“Please,” the older Eliwood grumbled to his younger self as he approached. “When she comes back... treasure every moment you have with her.”

Wordlessly, silently, the visiting boy slid once more through the form of his future self and returned to the doorway. There was then a deafening rush, a sonic boom that rattled the structure as three white blurs blasted past the ruin, catching the lordling by surprise and having him raise his arms to protect his eyes from the sudden kicking up of dust and debris.

“Eliwood!” called a woman’s voice from outside the view of the party.

“Lyn!” he shouted back as he cleared his lungs. “Did Mark give them the okay to go that far forward?!”

“Yes!” came the resolute response. “Battalion of sages coming up – the sisters are going to take them out early!”

“I’ll mount up,” the redhead responded. “I can help out.”

“Good!” Lyn cried back as she passed him, a flash of turquoise at full sprint. “Hector is closing in from the North – we’re drawing the noose around that Morph’s neck!”

He nodded grimly, and whistled – the pounding beat of his stallion’s approach rang out, and the man stepped outside to best guide the animal to him. As it stopped before the lord and he raised one leg to step onto the strong leather saddle, Eliwood the younger paused. He cast a last glimpse into the derelict structure, unknowingly staring once more into the eyes of self and son.

And then, with a charging cry and a thundering of hooves, the glorious man was gone – another flash, and the memory vanished with him. The four stood once more in the mirrored fitting-room, gentle white curtains swaying softly in the breeze, the distant sounds of laughter and labour carrying on the winds.

“All dragons...” Sophia began, taking Roy’s hand speaking softly to him, “can pull memories like that... from the Vestibule. If you... choose... to put them there.”

“But,” Lilina started, “we could not interact with the memory.”

“No,” the lavender girl concurred softly. “It is... only a memory.”

“But you said...” she seemed confused. “None of us were hurt.”

Sophia’s gaze turned to their last participant. “Look again.”

All three sets of eyes now turned to Eliwood, still crouched, still facing outwards towards where he had seen himself in his prime.

“Father...” Roy began.

“Lord Eliwood...” Lilina murmured.

“I’m alright, children,” he said decisively, rising to his feet with the slightest sign of a struggle. “See? My eyes are dry.” He smiled and turned, walking back to them with a sad smile. “It just took me by surprise, that’s all.” He placed his hands on shoulders, one each on Roy’s and Lilina’s, sharing a laugh with them.

“It is good... that you understand.” Sophia cooed, an enigmatic sigh issuing forth from her lips.

“Some humans who... see themselves... in the Vestibule... become lost in the past.”

“Once I saw him, I just had to make sure of one thing,” Eliwood growled, “that the upstart took what was about to happen seriously.”

The dragon girl blinked. “And?”

Eliwood’s smile turned to a grin. “He did.”

A upwards curve, as rare as it was slight, graced Sophia’s features as she nodded in agreement, before turning back to the man’s son. “Now, do you see? There are gifts... which happen with dragonhood... even as slight as yours...”

“And...” Roy piped up, holding out his clawed talons. “And this?”

“Ah...” Sophia realised. “Simple... you are pubescent.”

“H-hey,” Roy stammered, his face deepening several shades of crimson. “I just w-want to get rid of this so I can... pretend to be normal.”

“Roy.” Lilina slipped her hands into his, soft skin against strong scales. “You are normal. This is normal. Our normal. And I’m here for it.”

Turning to lock eyes with his fiancée, the young lord’s appreciation blossomed into beauty as he nuzzled his cheek against hers – sensitive eartips twitching as they brushed past the girl’s hair – and he shared a kiss with his beloved. Lilina leaned in to reciprocate, but as their lips locked, she broke the contact as soon as she was satisfied Roy had the reassurance he needed. The woman then retrieved a handkerchief and promptly wiped her mouth, to Roy’s horror.

“Ah,” she groaned, recoiling at the taste. “Sulphur.”

“That settles it,” Roy’s demeanour immediately became stern, albeit with cheeks burning red, as he faced Sophia. “How do we fix this?”

The amethystine Sophia gave off a brief, tinkling laugh. “That is easy... we just need a Dragonstone. Sealing your dragon form within... will maintain your human form as it was... and also protect you from going... berserk...”

Roy shuddered at the memory of the loss of control he’d felt earlier. “I don’t want to feel that ever again...”

“You don’t need to be ashamed of it, Roy,” Eliwood attempted comfort. “When I first brought your mother home to this castle, she had similar fits on days before I had to leave... and on nights she dreamed about her brother.” The man’s brow was burdened with difficult memories. “It got easier as she adjusted, but...”

“Of course!” Lilina realised. “That’s how you knew how to calm Roy down earlier!”

Eliwood merely nodded, and Roy, not wanting to burden his loved ones with similar hardship, turned his look into one of pleading. “Do you happen to have one? A Dragonstone?”

The dragon woman hesitated, then shook her head regretfully. “There are... many in Arcadia... but... that is too far away. I don’t even... have one for myself...”

The uncomfortable silence that followed this confession reigned for several elongated seconds.

“Roy,” Lilina suggested, “What about my ring? You said...”

Roy’s reptilian ears pricked to attention. “Of course! That could be it! Sophia, here!”

“Hold on,” Eliwood interrupted as the other two converged on Lilina’s placement. “The engagement ring? What of it?”

“Our friend, the Manakete Fae, gave me the stone in that ring before leaving for Arcadia!” Roy explained excitedly. “She told me I’d need it. When I asked why, she just laughed and said it was ‘Fae’s secret’. I just thought she was egging me to propose, but maybe...”

Sophia hummed as she appraised the inlaid scarlet gem with finger and feeling. “It is indeed a Dragonstone,” she began, to a brief excited murmur, “but unfortunately... unsuitable. It is... too small by half... even for a quarter-dragon like yourself...”

“Blast,” Roy hissed, using the tame expletive as surrogate for one much harsher. “That Fae. Is she playing a trick on me?”

Eliwood exhaustedly took a seat which rested a few feet away. “Hold a moment,” the Marquess now interjected. “He needs a Dragonstone, preferably with an ice affinity, and suitable to hold the energy of someone who’s a quarter-dragon?”

Sophia smiled sweetly as she turned to face him. “Yes, *Ixehen*.”

The Marquess winced. “Again,” he breathed, “how do you know that –”

“That’s it!” Lilina burst out, the right illumination clearly having occurred in her incredible brain. “All that matters is if it was originally a full stone.”

Roy looked between fiancée, father and friend, and found himself completely unable to track the conversation. “Someone help me out here,” he pleaded. “Tell me what’s going on.”

Eliwood sighed and dug a hand into his robe, clutching something just above his chest and withdrawing it, exposing the thing to the assembled party. Sophia gasped as it emerged; a thing of supreme delicacy and beauty, it was a gemstone suspended from a silver chain. The links of the necklace gave off the tinkling of soft, malleable metal. At the pendant’s core, a radiant cyan jewel glimmered in layers of fine splendour atop its sterling relief, its colour and its verve promising comfort and safety.

“Is that...” Roy breathed.

Eliwood nodded solemnly, his gaze transfixed by the thing even now. “Your mother’s Dragonstone. I’ve... I’ve worn it since the day she gave it to me. After she performed the ritual.”

“Will it work, Sophia?” Lilina inquired as the shaman approached. “Can it be done?”

Clasping the thing between slender fingers and sighing with fulfilment, Sophia closed her eyes and gasped contentedly as she felt the Dragonstone's magic course through her veins.

"She was so loving..." Sophia mused, "and so wise... she knew this would happen... and so used a full stone... despite herself only being half-dragon," she turned to Roy. "There is... enough space within for your energy also. It will mingle... with hers eternally... sharing... subsisting..."

Roy felt tears crowd his eyelids as Sophia completed the sentence. "Sacred to one another."

"Are you... are you alright with that, father?" Roy asked as he continued to stare mournfully at the pendant.

Eliwood chuckled forcefully, the motion a thing born of frustration and mounting sadness. "In death, just as in life, she was never mine to keep," he squeezed the words out, choking back a pained hiccup as he drew the silver chain from around his neck and entrusted the keepsake purely to Sophia. "I will give what I must give."

"Eliwood..." Lilina intoned, as Sophia turned to Roy and gently hung the pendant around his neck. The cerulean crystal shone mysteriously, as if expressing happiness.

"Shall we... begin?" Sophia asked, holding out her hand to the Pheraen prince.

Roy hesitated, casting a glance over to his father, the man slumped in his seat. Eliwood's entire posture, usually so straight, was ever so slightly craned in crestfallen sadness. His hand still hovered over his chest, feeling the absence of the weight that evidently had become part of his very form.

"Hold on, Sophia," he quietly advised. "I want to start this right."

Breathing and taking two decisive steps forward, he reached the foot of the chair upon which his father rested. He did not look up, lost in silent anguishes, and so the son extended a hand to him, the sight of the scaly extremity shaking Eliwood from his stupor and causing the man to look up at his progeny.

"Father," Roy offered, smiling. "Let's go see her, together."

"What do you mean?"

"Sophia," Roy asked, "there would be memories of my mother in there, right?"

"I wouldn't think so," Eliwood murmured. "She never mentioned this Vestibule to me. Let's not have this go on longer than it needs to."

"Try reaching out..." Sophia advised Roy. "Focus on the memory of your mother... not her portrait... not her words... just your memories of her. Let the Dragonstone... guide... your feeling."

Closing his eyes and following the sonorous sound of Sophia's voice, Roy cupped his hands as the periphery of his consciousness was pulled, tugged, in the direction of a neural sensation which began to flood the light behind his eyes.

"We should perform the ritual," Eliwood suggested, trying to hide the resurgent hurt crossing his features with impatience. "We don't have time to wait around."

"Lord Eliwood, please," Lilina replied, as a wispy ball of gossamer memory began to materialise in the young prince's cupped hands. "He's just trying to find something. For you."

“He doesn’t need to!” he snapped, rising from his chair suddenly and striding over to whether the others defiantly stood. “There’s nothing there! She never mentioned any of this to me! There’s no place for me in this world of dragons anymore!”

“Please, *Ixehen*,” Sophia pleaded as Roy struggled to maintain the memory in his fingers. “Stay calm...”

“For the last time!” Eliwood cried, wheeling around to face her. “HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT NAME?!”

There was a flash of blinding white light as Roy released the memory.

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Coughing into one scaled palm, the young lord brought himself to bear. Roy had not been expecting the release of the memory to be quite so physical, and so he was doubled over in a crouching position, trying to restore air to the compressed vacuum of his winded lungs. He looked around, glancing at familiar sights – the airy, open enclosure of Castle Pherae’s central living space, so familiar and warm, and yet so distant.

The walls were covered in old paintings now relocated to alternate hallways and enclosures, and aside from the elegant stone carvings atop the fireplace everything seemed coloured differently, as though the entire place was just slightly less touched by age. He found his father, and his lover, and his fellow dragonkin in the space, only to find all three staring, transfixed in wonderment, at the figure whose presence transformed the centre of the room.

Finding her, Roy blinked back tears of disbelief.

His mother stood before him. Wreathed in cyan and white, the woman’s presence cut itself out from reality in the strange aura of prescience and otherworldly beauty that projected out from her cerulean form. The dragon Ninian, graceful even in deep contemplation, stared with sad and conflicted eyes at a now-familiar object that she held close to her chest, the sharp vermilion of her irises meeting the rich blue glow of a magic crystal encased in silver.

Roy delicately tiptoed his way over to his father, who beheld the image of his late beloved wordlessly, speech neither possible nor warranted as tears silently slid trails down his cheeks. Feeling sudden sadness well in his heart, Roy slipped his hand into Eliwood’s, who squeezed back tightly as both watched on in awe.

There then came the click of a lock, and the creaking shift of a heavy oak door on its hinges, and in strode Eliwood the younger once more. Wearing silver armour and face burdened with sweat and battle, he strode without pause over to his wife. Pulling off his gloves as he approached, the freed flesh of his hands took Ninian gently by her shoulders and then moved to settle comfortably over the cleft of her chest, hands over heart as he nuzzled his face affectionately into hers.

“I came as quickly as I could,” he breathed, heart quick on the heels of his speech. “Are you okay?”

“Mm-hmm,” Ninian murmured, breathing a large sigh of relief as she relaxed into his embrace. “I’m sorry... that I worried you.”

“Ninian,” her young husband said, stepping around the woman so that she now faced him. “I trust you not to lose control,” he said, tipping the woman’s chin upwards with his fingertips. “I didn’t think this Dragonstone ordeal was necessary at all.”

"I know," Ninian said softly, unable to help herself from grabbing one of Eliwood's arms in both of hers. "I just... I still worry. When you go out to fight bandits, and what if you... what if I'm suddenly... alone."

"My love, this is Elibe," the man chuckled. "There will always be bandits." He locked the gaze of his azure eyes with her scarlet ones. "But they'll never get the best of me, and after they're dealt with I'll always come back to look after you. That's a promise."

Brushing a stray strand of cerulean hair from her face with two dexterous fingers, Eliwood pressed his lips to hers, a kiss led from the heart which resonated in Ninian's own loving core. The moment suspended the breaths of those watching as white sunlight seemed to crown the moment in the glories of its offered radiance.

When they parted, they gazed at each other for a moment more until Eliwood coughed lightly, laughing as he did so. "Sulphur," he guffawed, causing his wife to giggle in turn as he turned away to clear the igneous taste from his mouth.

"At least that's going to stop," Ninian smiled. "Nothing but normal, now."

"Ninian," Eliwood gasped, turning to her again and pulling her head gently into his chest. "I didn't fall in love with a girl playing pretend. You were perfect to me then, and that hasn't changed." He stroked her hair as it fell against the heroic silver breastplate he wore. "We make our own normal. And I'll be here for every second of it."

Sniffing back a tear, Ninian placed her hands on either side of her husband's head and held him with all the softness and treasuring her fingers could muster before taking the pendant with its silver chain, lifting it over his head and laying it around his neck. Eliwood's skin prickled at the sudden introduction of the cool steel necklace to his flesh, and his hands touched the thing with the greatest of delicacy. His eyes darted from woman to wearable, and widened at the dawning of his realisation.

"Is this...?" he gasped.

She nodded. "It is. I performed the ritual an hour ago."

An audible breath expelled itself from the young Eliwood's diaphragm as he took in the full gravity of the stone suspended around his neck. "It's beautiful," he breathed.

"It is part of me," Ninian whispered, sinking into the warmth of his side.

"I know," Eliwood replied, wrapping an arm around her waist. "That is what makes it so."

A long silence passed, in which the young couple simply took solace in the presence of the other – and the splendour of the day – before the woman asked:

"Will you look after it for me?"

"Me?" Eliwood asked. "But should you need it, and I'm not there?"

"I need you," Ninian answered, "long before I need it."

The young Marquess let the thing fall again from his hand to his chest. "Then I will wear it. Always."

Now it was Ninian's turn to chuckle. "Or until it's needed again?"

"Yes," Eliwood promised. "Until then."

Ninian flung her arms around her husband's neck, happiness making itself known in every expression her body could produce.

"Thank you," she whispered, "*lxehen*."

Closing his own arms around his beloved, Eliwood the younger completed his embrace, and the memory flashed out of existence with it.

--

Again finding themselves in the octagonal fitting-room, with daylight giving way to early afternoon, there was silence among the four save some sniffing and hands wiping at eyes weighed down with heavy sentiment.

"That was... that was..." Lilina struggled out between heavings of her chest.

"I," Eliwood realised, "I'd forgotten that."

By now Roy hugged his father's arm childishly, his bearing and status as feared and respected General of Lycia forgotten, at least for the moment.

"Did... she ever tell you what it meant?" Sophia dared to ask, kind eyes beckoning answers from the tearful Marquess.

"Yes," he breathed, lost in memory. "Dragon language often... can't be heard by human ears. Or spoken by our tongue." He swallowed. "*lxehen* is an informal, poetic word... not even. A letter, at most, in their tongue. It means..." he choked back a fresh sob at the thought.

Roy and Lilina looked to Sophia, who obliged.

"Commonly interpreted..." the lilac woman breathed, "as 'beautiful red flame'."

Looking up from his flood of emotions, Eliwood looked confused. "But I never heard... of this... Vestibule. Why? We did not keep secrets..."

Sophia held out her hand, and another wisp of memory materialised between the woman's fingers. "The Vestibule is not just memories... it is knowledge... emotions. The Scouring proved... that no human could be trusted with access..." she then gave the other three a knowing glance. "But Ninian... was never concerned with tradition. It's likely she didn't tell you... because..."

The pleading eyes of all three begged for her next words.

It gave Sophia genuine delight to say them. "Because she wanted your love... to speak for itself."

Sophia flung her arms out in either direction, and the sliver of demonstrative energy in her fingers erupted into a glittering array of many small blue baubles of energy which dimmed the room as they glowed, surrounding the four in a latticework of light that mapped a life of memories above their heads.

"Lord Eliwood..." Sophia added. "Ninian placed hundreds of memories into the Vestibule. All of them... glimpses... of the happy life she shared with you."

Sights were vaguely visible in the surface of each memory, each one a chronicle of a time spent in beautiful togetherness. In one, a glimpse of Eliwood's ascension ceremony. In another, their wedding. There was Hector's birthday, the year he had finally tied the knot. There was Ninian at an end of year feast, sipping white wine in the sunlight as a visiting Farina talked her ear off. There was

the day Rebecca had grazed a bleeding Eliwood with a stray arrow. There was a night of joy and dancing and love spent in Lyn's care at Castle Caelin. There was Eliwood stealing food from the kitchens for his pregnant wife as she giggled from the doorway. There was the night of tears as lady Eleanora joined her dear Elbert in rest.

There was Roy. His birth, his anointing, his infant laughter audible even through the thick immaterial fabric of the memories that promised them.

"You mean..."

"Yes..." Sophia added, smiling softly. "All of Elibe's dragons know you... as *Ixehe*. Your marriage, your child, your life with her... have been watched and celebrated by dragons all throughout this wounded world."

"You mean," Roy breathed, "All these dragons already know... about my father and I?"

Sophia nodded, tears stinging even the edges of her eyes. "You boys, her blessings... you are so, so much more loved than you know..."

--

Many years ago, in the utopian desert city of Arcadia, dragonkin hugged one another by the hundreds in euphoria as, within the collective memory they witnessed, Ninian and Eliwood held their newborn baby close. Their exhaustion was forgotten on the faces of the young couple, erased by the presence of complete and ebullient love, and as the boy wailed his first sounds, his clarion-call to a world that, unbeknownst to him, had prayed without end for his safe arrival, there was nothing but relief. Joy that this Dragonson, product of love between two worlds, was securely held by the lord who now seemed more saviour than man, and safely delivered by the woman who seemed more Goddess than woman. The dragons of Elibe danced that night.

Mere months ago, in the solemn Dragon Temple in Bern, the fire dragon Jahn was dying. His vision blurred between haze and clarity as he continued to watch the boy... no, the infant who had dealt his mortal blow. Hartmut's sword sheathed at his side. Feigning a look of sadness. The human who had completed the job started by their deceitful race a millennium ago. Tapping into the Vestibule with the last of his strength to leave his dying moments as proof of human savagery, he instead saw hundreds of glimmers of cerulean, memories left by a dragon who had lived whilst he had slumbered. He let them play, the film of their memories decorating the canvas behind his fading eyes as he began to understand the irony of his death. Perhaps he had been wrong. Perhaps fate had selected this boy, with his dragon mother and human father, to be his end – just to make sure he knew that. A loose smile graced his lips as the mother sang to her newborn in the memory, her words giving way to dreamings. Perhaps it would not be so bad to rest also, Jahn thought, as the warrior closed his eyes and let the woman's song lull him to one final sleep.

A few days ago, in Arcadia once more, a small, childlike Manakete – in truth centuries old – sat against a stone wall with another dragon. The girl, Fae, and the pale woman, herself a dragon, watched with blank eyes of green and lilac as the memory played before them. A red-haired man chased a cyan-haired woman through gardens piled high with ripe hanging fruit and aromatic, blooming flowers, a paradise of growth in springtime. After ambushing her around a corner, he grappled her playfully around the waist and lifted her high into the air as she chirped with laughter and love.

"Got you!" The man jibed, planting a series of kisses on her face.

"Ixehen!" she yelped between fresh boughs of laughter. "Put me down!"

"You see, Idunn?" the childlike Manakete asked her empty-expressed companion. "This is love."

The slightest glimmer of humanity flashed across the damaged woman's face. "Love? But... human... dragon..."

"That's what Fae thought!" Fae replied enthusiastically. "But then Fae saw this. And met Roy. So now Fae thinks anything is possible."

"Love..." Idunn echoed, voice distant upon the air. "I... like it..."

--

Roy cradled a memory between his fingers, plucked from the air as he, and Lilina, and Eliwood struggled to take in the extent of the knowledge now familiar to them. This particular memory displayed no preview of happiness, only a window with rain pounding against the thick glass.

"Ah..." Sophia added. "That memory... perhaps not yet."

Roy continued to gaze into it. "Why not?"

"It is sad..." Sophia quietly admitted. "And we have... shed many tears today."

"Roy..." Eliwood now interjected, naught but love and thankfulness in his eyes. "You don't have to. Not for me."

Lilina stood by Roy's side as ever, arms wrapped reassuringly around one of his.

"Sophia, would you say," he asked, "that this is among the saddest of her gifts?"

She merely nodded.

Roy gave another sad smile, then looked between the members of his family. "Then let's see it now," he said, "so it can never hurt us."

At the encouraging nod of fiancée and father, he released the memory, letting it surround them.

It was night. That much was immediately apparent. Warm candlelight radiated outwards, circles within circles of slight golden heat flickering with fleeting gentleness at the top of their wax constructs. The soft static of rain filled the air, fat droplets of midwinter pounding down upon the roof of stone – and, sure enough, the rippled and shaped glass of the bedroom window. The three visitors found themselves in Eliwood's bedchamber, years ago, as husband and wife lay apart in the bed.

Ninian was awake, though her head was bowed and her rich eyes sullen, lacking the glimmer of life they had held in the previous memory. Her cheeks were slightly sunken and her frame thin, nightgown loose around her form as she lay in bed next to Eliwood. The man in question was asleep, under neither sheet nor spell as he lay on the fully made bed, having not even bothered in his exhaustion to change out of the clothes his position demanded. His boots lay discarded at the foot of his bed, a sheaf of official papers were strewn about his side, and an unfinished tray of tepid foodstuffs had been shoved onto his side table. No, the only thing that the sleeping man clutched to in his rest was his baby, the infant Roy cradled in his arms as he slept.

“Aren’t they beautiful?” she asked. Her voice sounded as though it was spoken through a thick haze of semi-solid air, a musk which dampened her speech and yet brought out the rich sentiment in her voice. “I wish I didn’t have to leave.”

She paused a moment before continuing. “Roy,” she said, causing a shiver to run down the listening boy’s spine. “You are... everything to us. You are proof that our love happened, and you are every joy and every happy minute we could have ever asked for.” Tears began to slide down the emaciated woman’s eyes as she watched her two loves sleep. “He knows I can see glimpses. Of the future,” she said, running a finger down Eliwood’s burdened brow affectionately, watching it relax at her touch. “I catch emotions as they rush towards me from what is yet to be. He knows this, and he asks me, every night. Just before bed. “Is it tomorrow, my love?” There’s always the same fear in his voice, the same knot that softly tugs undone when I reply. “No, my dear. Not tomorrow.””

Ninian’s soft face fell as her mood darkened. “But I know that one day, very soon, there will only be silence for me to glimpse,” she breathed this, a whisper laden with bravery in the face of fear. “No feelings for me to discern from a future where I am no longer present. I will see nothing, nothing at all in the day to come, and then, as now, when he asks me, “is it tomorrow, my love?” I shall reply,”

The woman closed her eyes, and smiled. “No, my dear,” she rehearsed. “Not tomorrow.”

Turning to leave the confines of the bed, the woman gingerly climbed down from the mattress, pointed toe first – the intuition of the dancer leading her motion even in this advanced hour. She made a few delicate twirls as she ventured out barefoot onto the floor – flourishing once more to a music only she heard, as her legs propelled her in the sanctuary of her dance. She whittled minutes away in motions that were graceful despite her diminished strength, and she only stuttered to a halt as her eyes caught sight of something. She halted, and the visiting Roy froze, as piercing the veil, Ninian’s scarlet eyes looked into his.

“Roy,” she breathed, “is that you?” immediately her face scrunched as tears resurfaced to her face.

“Mother...” Roy whispered, stepping forward. “Can she...?”

“I can see you,” the dragon squeezed out between tears. “I cannot hear you... but I know it’s you. You’re my Roy.” Stepping back, her tears broke in fresh swathes as she now recognised the man standing next to her son. Her form shook in delighted shudders. “And... Eli... my love! You’re here too...” She was unable to hide her joy as she realised the meaning of the vision. “You did it...” she whispered. “He’s safe... you... you made it right.”

Eliwood nodded through his own downpour. “I tried,” he whispered. “I tried.”

Ninian then turned and seemed to catch sight of Lilina as she clung to her fiancé. “And who are you?” she asked joyfully, craning down to lock eyes with the girl. “Come to take my boy away, have you?” Unable to hold back, she held a hand over her own eyes and sobbed openly into it, red-faced wails of pained crying that carved tear-trails down face and fingers. “Well, he loves you, so I love you too...”

Focusing now on her distant family, separated by time and memory, who all sobbed alongside her, she sank slowly down onto her knees with the weight of her tears. Now all clutching each other with Roy at the centre, the three smiling as fresh rivulets of running sorrow forced them to the ground in sorrow. They formed a bundle of tempered hearts on the floor as they cried in tandem with the woman who had humbled all of them.

“My love,” Eliwood began.

“My host,” Lilina continued.

“My mother,” Roy completed. “We love you.”

Ninian’s ears pricked as she seemed to catch these words, and these words alone. Though it could not have seemed possible, yet more massive and sudden droplets formed at the edges of her eyes as the words reverberated through her being. She smiled and reached out, flinging her arms as best she could around the huddled three. And though she could not grasp them, could not squeeze them, could not give them the full reassurance of her form, everyone could’ve sworn they felt *something*.

“I love you too,” Ninian gasped. “So, so much.” The mother, wife, and gift leaned over and kissed each of them on their foreheads. “And I’ll be waiting for you.”

And all three, eyes closed, promises uttered and hearts pounding with contented bliss, did not even notice as the memory came to an end, and the room faded back in around them.

They only broke from their reverie as, with a crash, the fitting-room door was beaten down, the barrier collapsing in a cascade of splintered wood.

“Lord Eliwood! Roy!” Came the seriously distraught voice of Guinivere of Bern as she strode through the door, Melady at her side – who had the young mage Lugh lifted high into the air by his collar, the boy grabbing at the tome he had clearly been quite promptly disarmed of. The Queen stepped forward, looking about the room. “I have been kept waiting quite long enough –”

At last she looked down, and there found the last thing she expected. Three of Lycia’s most powerful people – the dignified Marquess Eliwood of Pherae, and his son, Lord General Roy, along with the most respected Princess of Ostia, Lilina, were a bundled heap on the floor. The trio were a mess of arms and robes, faces deep shades of flushed crimson and swollen eyes bled dry of tears. They looked up at her with the simplest looks of surprise, seemingly less concerned with her entry than they were with whatever process of resolution she had just intruded upon.

“Am I...” The Queen stumbled on her words, as the slack-jawed Melady lowered the struggling mage to the ground. “Am I interrupting something?”

Laughing through the wet jumble of tears on his face, Roy pulled himself out of the stack of his family and rose to his feet. It was only as he did so that Guinivere, with a start, noticed the overt oddness of his features, the reptilian ears with their long probing points and thick-fingered, scaly hands. Despite this the boy’s smile was genuine as he extended an earnest hand to greet her, ceremony clearly not on his mind.

“I am sorry to have kept you waiting, your highness,” he said, sheepishly grinning through an embarrassed blush. “As you can see, the day I am having is most odd.”

“I- I can see.” Guinivere smiled respectfully, though she could not help but hesitate as she glared at his lizardlike hands.

“Oh, don’t be afraid of those,” Roy laughed. “It’s not a contagion, or a hex.” The young lord gave a grateful look back to his father. “My mother was half-dragon, that’s all. It’s just some growing pains.”

“Roy...!” Lilina gasped with surprise.

The boy shrugged. "What's the point of hiding it, at least to my friends?" He turned back to the Queen. "You caught us just as we are about to seal this part of me," he pulled at one earlobe with a draconic nail, "away in my mother's Dragonstone."

Guinivere, far from wanting to appear phased, kept her posture straight. "I... I see," she confirmed, looking the Pheraen up and down. "And you're... sure that you're not going to lose yourself?" her voice lowered a touch. "Like my brother?"

After thinking for a moment, Roy reached to a sturgeon leather belt which made its way around his waist and undid the thing, feeling the great weight of the Sword of Seals come free. He took the scabbard in his hand and offered the brilliant weapon, handle-first, to the young regent.

"Go on," he encouraged. "You'll be able to."

Hesitantly placing both of her hands on the weapon, the blonde pulled the thing free with a metallic click as the blade left its housing. There, resplendent in silver and gold with the brilliant ruby of the Fire Emblem at the core of its crossguard, the Sword of Seals generated its own heat and light. A miniature sun posing as mere steel. The weapon's power flowed through the young Queen, ancient energies interacting with her skin and giving focus to her eyes and nerves.

"Well?" Roy asked her, arms spread. "Do you feel the urge to strike me down?"

Guinivere focused on him, trying to interpret the blade's will, but felt nothing. That powerful energy which would have compelled its wielder to hunt the enemy of man now lay silent, unmoving, still. Roy was mere man, yet not fully. Either way, Hartmut's weapon hungered not for his end.

"It is poetry," the Queen offered, handing the weapon back to its rightful owner. "My brother sought to return the world to dragons, believing humans to be incapable of goodness..." She held Roy's hand for a moment, running her own finger down his arm from scale to skin, and back again. "Yet here you are, union of dragon and man, leading the way forward." She let go, and closed her mind, accepting the thought within herself. "It is right that Zephiel was freed by you."

"Guinivere..." Roy pondered, as the young Queen turned and made her way back to her crimson retainer. "So, you don't mind?"

The woman stopped a moment, then turned back to face them. "You know, there is an old legend," she mused, "that Hartmut himself fell in love with a dragon." She giggled as she took in the sight of father and son, both waiting on her every word with the same heroic stare of courtesy and attention. "Hartmut the Champion, Eliwood of Pherae..." She directed her gaze upwards. "Who would I be if I questioned the feelings of such heroes?"

And with that question hanging in the air, the Queen bowed, turned on her heel, and accepted Melady's hand as they stepped back out through the ruined doorway.

All three expelled a breath they hadn't realised they had been holding. Eliwood and Lilina both moved to catch Roy, whose knees had almost buckled after having to suspend his fear. Sophia, who had been quietly standing off to the side, now gingerly stepped up to the boy, propped up on his feet by his family, and offered him her hand again.

"Now, son of Ninian..." she offered. "Shall we begin?"

Roy clutched his mother's Dragonstone with one hand, and took Sophia's with his other.

"Yes," he spoke, through laughter. "Please help me, Sophia."

--

Roy's hands, a pair of distinctly human hands, settled on Lilina's shoulders, their reassuring touch then shifting forward to grace the core of her chest. Smiling at the familiarity of the motion, the woman squeezed Roy's fingers with her own, the circuit completing above her beating heart.

"Are you regretting saying yes, yet?" he joked, his finger brushing over the engagement ring.

"No," Lilina laughed. "Not yet. But, I'm glad you've made it clear that you won't make it easy for me."

"Well," Roy offered as he planted two fond kisses into her rich seams of blue hair. "The more difficulties we get out of the way early, the better. We have an entire lifetime to make ours."

Around the woman's neck he suspended the silver chain. It was a delicate thing, the links of it falling in thin piles, but from its pendant there came only strength and serenity. The magnificent cerulean gemstone, flowing with the ancient energy of dragonkind, shimmered at its core with unnatural light. Occasionally, a flicker of flaming crimson surged its way through the crystalline colour like lightning in the night sky.

"Oh, Roy," Lilina gasped, emotion flooding her as the jewel crowned her through its placement. "I will wear it, always."

"My love," Roy said, trying on the words his father had mantled, and finding that they fit. "I want to be... your equal. Somehow." He began his own words, as he now stepped forward so that he faced his love, and had her eyes in his. "I must grow strong enough to carry all things we'll need as we grow old." He squeezed her hands. "I have to become smart enough to understand all those wonders that you like to read to me about as we lie together," he breathed, cheeks tinged pink with the joys of confession. "I have to make my heart grow big enough to house all that I feel for you, a cup that fills more with each passing second," He pressed his forehead against hers. "I have to make myself worthy," he said, "of all the blessings I was given on that day you told me that you love me."

Lilina withdrew one soft hand, and with it stroked her fiancé's cheek. "You already are," she whispered, and closed the distance between their lips.

"That taste..." she giggled after they parted. "Roy."

--

"Are you... sad to see it go?"

Sophia's question made Eliwood jolt. He was leaning against the fitting-room wall next to the window, the rich golden seams of sunset filtering in through the thin curtains.

Reaching again for the absent weight around his neck, Eliwood scoffed at his own motion. "Yes, I am," he said. "But I promised her. I will wear it until it is needed again." He stared into the dragon girl's rich violet eyes, seeing the knowing within them. "And for my own son to need it... it seems to have been fully written from the start."

She offered the Marquess another sad smile. "She always did care most... about her family," Sophia reminded. "You most of all, *Ixeheh*... When will you... next go and see her?"

“Only when Roy and Lilina wish to,” Eliwood said, nodding to himself. “I will not allow myself to grow drunk on a world of sweet dreams. Besides,” he added, seeking approval in Sophia’s gaze. “The memories of her from my own eyes are the ones that matter most to me.”

Sophia nodded, satisfied, and turned to leave.

“Sophia, one last question.”

She turned. “Yes, *Ixehen*?”

“The ring,” Eliwood demanded. “Why would that Manakete give Roy and Lilina an unsuitable Dragonstone?”

A sly smile spread across her features. “Why indeed...?” she asked with cheek. “Why would one give two lovers... two children of flame, no less... a Dragonstone not even big enough for a quarter-dragon...?”

Eliwood’s eyes widened as he grasped the meaning of her suggestion. “Perhaps...” Sophia mused, “Fae is seeing further ahead than any of us...”

“Dragons,” he spat the word out exasperatedly, shaking his head.

“Just make sure... that you don’t let it slip by accident...” Sophia finished. “It is their lesson to learn then... just as it was yours today...”

“Yes, yes, I understand,” Eliwood swore, straightening up and stretching the muscles in his back. He cast a glance over to where Roy and Lilina had just re-entered the fitting-room.

He watched as the two lovers conversed with Queen Guinivere, herself having come back to see them of her own accord. There was mirth shared between them, words and hands that flittered with love and trust forged only in the caverns and vestibules of the heart. Eliwood felt proud to watch them. But most of all, he felt proud to behold Roy. His son – the most precious reality of his life and marriage, every beauty and gift of his union with Ninian made flesh. He carried their heart and their history, and rose above it. He was keeper of their flame, and yet he burned ever brighter, cutting the darkness, giving warmth eternal and love to all.

“Father!”

It took Eliwood a moment to realise that his son was calling him over. Letting a genuine smile dance its way across the weathered lines of his face, Eliwood of Pherae strode over to where the future waited.

“Are you sure you’re alright with this, Lord Eliwood?” Lilina asked.

“Of course,” the Marquess confirmed. “I would’ve done it myself years ago if I’d known there was a way.”

“And you, Queen Guinivere?” Roy asked their other guest.

“Zephiel believed humans should have been wiped from Elibe so that dragons may rule,” she spoke. “I think that... compromise is possible.” She turned to Roy and smiled. “So Bern will help wherever it can. I swear it.”

Roy nodded, then turned to the last woman of the assembly, still on the outskirts of the room.

“Sophia!” he cried. “Come and join us!”

“Ah... I’m f-fine...” the shy woman stammered, “really.”

“Come on over!” Lilina offered encouragement. “None of this was possible without you.”

Wordlessly and awkwardly – but thankfully, the usually-graceful dragon hobbled her way over to the assembled lords as they waited, not sure where to stand until Eliwood gratefully offered her a place standing next to him. Letting a rare smile break out, she took it, and the two stood behind Roy, with Lilina on his right and Guinivere on his left as Roy began to speak, a message directed into the aether.

“Dragons,” he began. “Dragons of Elibe. My name is Roy of Pherae, and I’ve just learned today that a lot of you know who I am.” His smile radiated outward, attempting eye contact with a thousand unseen audients. “My mother was Ninian, daughter of Aenir, and my father...” He glanced up at the proud Eliwood. “I’m told you know him as *Ixeheh*.”

Eliwood merely nodded, letting his and Ninian’s love speak for itself.

“Today I learned of my true heritage,” Roy added. “And it’s been... incredible to witness this history, and be audience to these miracles.” He gestured to the women on either side of him. “And so, with these Goddesses as witness, as the son of a human and a dragon, I feel it is my duty to enshrine the sanctuary that my mother knew in her life here.”

Roy straightened his back and strengthened his smile as he made the announcement he now felt he’d been waiting a lifetime to make. “Whilst my father and I are heads of this state,” he began, “so shall Pherae be a sanctuary for any all dragons who wish to come in peace, and share our bread, and our waters, and our miracles, and our loves.”

At this moment, Guinivere stepped forward. “Additionally,” she announced, the harshness of a Bern ruler replaced with purest sympathy. “On my name as Queen Guinivere of Bern, my state, too, shall be the home of any dragon who wishes once more to scale its mountains and soar its heights. If you come seeking the peace of home, we welcome you.”

Now Lilina came forward. “And I am Lilina of Ostia,” she offered, “I am to be married to Roy in the coming months.” She took a breath, building her courage. “We cherish each other, and if the effort to unite Lycia succeeds, then I will be his Queen eternal as he becomes Lycia’s first united King.”

She closed her eyes softly and grabbed Roy’s hand, feeling the ring clasped between the bare skin of their fingers, its precious promise surging from their fingertips to the core of their feeling.

“I love Roy so much,” Lilina confessed in a rush of shuddering heat. “He is a gift to me and to his father and to anyone he meets. An-and should Lycia become our gift, to ward and to shield from harm...” She opened her eyes, feeling the words come to her. “Then we promise any of you... you will be behind that shield, and you shall share in our love.”

Feeling naught but exquisite peace, Roy wiped a stray tear from his eye as he concluded. “We are here,” he stated. “And we’ll be waiting.”

And with that, all watched on as Roy clasped his hands together, feeling his emotion coalesce into tangible beauty, and produce a single shimmering sphere of crimson gossamer memory – the moment forever preserved in time. And with that, the Dragonson reached and placed this first memory, this membranous sliver of sublime magic, into the great living soul of dragons.

As the message reverberated in the great well of memories, Roy was aware of his father's hand on his shoulder, and his fiancée's fingers around his own. And on the wind, a flash of cerulean, and the briefest hint of dancing laughter. It made Roy smile, as he realised that her laughing was right.

There was, after all, so much to be happy about.