

Refracted Light

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/22354786) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/22354786>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Categories:	F/F , Gen , M/M
Fandom:	Tales of Zestiria
Relationships:	Alisha Diphda/Rose , Mikleo/Sorey (Tales of Zestiria) , Rose & Sorey (Tales of Zestiria) , Alisha Diphda & Sorey , possibly other background relationships - Relationship
Characters:	Mikleo (Tales of Zestiria) , Sorey (Tales of Zestiria) , Rose (Tales of Zestiria) , Lailah (Tales of Zestiria) , Edna (Tales of Zestiria) , Alisha Diphda , Zaveid (Tales of Series) , Dezel (Tales of Zestiria) , not tagging anyone besides the party because the entire cast is here
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe , Some elements borrowed from the anime , Roleswap , assassin!Alisha , princess!rose , Not PRIMARILY shippy
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Squireswap AU
Stats:	Published: 2020-01-22 Updated: 2022-09-06 Words: 12,571 Chapters: 6/?

Refracted Light

by [usernameapathy](#)

Summary

The Age of Chaos has come, and malevolence threatens to engulf the world. Against it stands an untested new Shepherd and his allies both seraphim and human. Among the latter are an unconventional princess-knight and an assassin with a pure soul...

...who may not be quite who you remember them being.

Notes

I've been toying with this idea for a while now, and I think it's about ready to start. I can pretty much guarantee that this won't update as often as my Berseria fics, but I wanted to make sure I at least got the prologue up for the TOZ fifth anniversary.

While I had the idea independently (and I'm going to try to avoid rereading it for the foreseeable future to help make sure do my own thing), I would be extremely remiss if I didn't give a shout out to the existing fic I found for this AU concept, [Exposed voice, exposed heart](#) by [Melphis_Amekia](#), which has definitely provided some inspiration.

Also, one note in advance: the premise does NOT mean this is going to be a simple substitution fic. The canon story may wind up going pretty off the rails. (Which is one of the reasons why I can't guarantee frequent updates - it takes time to work out ramifications.)

- Inspired by [Exposed voice, exposed heart](#) by [orphan_account](#)

Prologue

She stood at the edge of the roof, hands clasped, and stared out over the streets of Ladylake. Those streets were all but deserted - dawn's first light had yet to touch the horizon, and those people of the city who lived at night had returned to their homes - but she found it comforting. The guild owed no allegiance to any land, had traveled all over the world, but Ladylake would always be *her* city, and at times like this it was possible to pretend it was still the same. In the daytime you couldn't escape the listlessness in the streets, the spark missing from behind the eyes of the people. Even now, with the Sacred Blade Festival approaching for the first time in years...

She closed her eyes briefly. Thinking about the festival was less than helpful. The part of her that treasured the contents of the book hanging at her hip, that held to hope in the old stories no matter how often Felice and Talfryn gently teased her about it, wanted to believe in the legend of the festival, in a chance for hope and redemption for not just her city but the whole world. But the part of her that led the Scattered Bones couldn't help but wonder: did the princess herself believe? Or had she just pressed for the festival's return in some cynical attempt to advance her own personal agenda? Every year, the world grew darker, and yet the seraphim remained silent. And as long as that was the case -

A gust of wind ruffled the edge of her hood, and with it she sensed both the approach and the identity of the man who had joined her on the roof. "Eguille."

"Boss," the older man replied. He came to her side, but focused on her rather than the city. "Are you still thinking about the contract?"

"Yes." She sighed. With many other members of the guild she couldn't let her mask drop, but she knew that Eguille could always be relied upon. Not just to accomplish his missions, but to remain unaffected by the awareness that his leader was, so often, just an uncertain young woman beset by so many doubts. "There are... a number of unanswered questions."

"Are you sure it's a good idea to put Lunarre on answering them?" Questioning her decisions was another thing they could only do in private, yet it too brought her no end of relief. "He's always been a loose cannon, and we both know he's been getting worse."

"I know, but I fear I have no choice. We're going to be stretched very thin with the festival and he's our best tracker by far. We need some answers. What's she really doing when she leaves the city?" Unconsciously, one hand reached down to her side, seeking the comforting feel of the Celestial Record. "Everything about her is a contradiction. She's distantly removed from the throne and supposed to be unwilling to ever act like a princess, yet she's also said to feel far more of a sense of duty to Hyland than the rest of the royal family put together. An idealist surrounded by cynics, or a fanatic surrounded by pragmatists. I just don't know."

The conversation from that afternoon came back to her again.

"The princess is known as one of the most consistent anti-war voices in the government. Are you saying that's only a mask?"

Chancellor Bartlow sighed heavily. "If only it was a mask, she'd be easier to deal with. Her Highness truly believes in her ideals, and in a different time they would be admirable, but the degree she's willing to take them to is sheer madness. She would let Hyland and all its people burn rather than compromise her precious purity in even the slightest way."

The note of disgust in his voice was hard to ignore, and again she felt a certain suspicion for the man seated before her. But the enmity between the chancellor and the princess was hardly a secret, and it didn't inherently make his concerns invalid. "Still, though. Treason? You sincerely believe she would go that far?"

"For someone who holds war in such disdain, any other measure is considered justifiable. To her mind, helping Rolance conquer us, no matter how much continuing devastation it causes, is the lesser evil next to a longer conflict. Particular when she may already have hidden ties to the empire."

She exchanged a glance with Eguille. His face was hidden behind his metal mask, but he gave a single nod. The view of war was one that was very familiar to her own heart, and these supposed connections still needed investigation, but neither of them could disagree with Bartlow's assessment of what even a clear-cut victory could mean. After centuries of conflict between the empire of Rolance and the kingdom of Hyland, conquest would just guarantee continued resistance, suffering, and loss of life. Maybe even worse than open war, terrible a prospect though it was.

"Your concerns are serious ones, Chancellor," she told her prospective employer. "For the Scattered Bones, though, taking a life is not a mission we undertake lightly. Honor demands that we investigate further before accepting your contract."

Bartlow offered a practiced smile. "Of course. Your famed integrity is one of the reasons the council has turned to you rather than some group of petty cutthroats. I only ask that you make your decision as quickly as possible."

"If Princess Rose is not stopped soon, I cannot even think of the tragedy that could occur."

In the east, the sky had begun to lighten ever so subtly. She took a last moment to look over the city, reminding herself of what was at stake here. All of those people, just living their lives, even in a world grown more and more uncertain with each passing year. She had a duty to protect them - even, if necessary, from their own leaders.

"I suppose standing around up here will solve nothing. We should get back to the others."

Eguille paused. "You're sure you're okay, Boss?"

"I don't believe I have the time to be anything else." Alisha doffed her assassin's mask, closed her eyes for a moment to focus, and put on the one she wore as leader of the Sparrowfeathers merchant's guild. "Come on. It's going to be a busy day."

Awakening

Chapter Notes

So I've decided to try something a little different with this fic. I've kept thinking that for web serial writing, it doesn't entirely make sense to follow a print media format of chapter divisions where each chapter has a bunch of different scenes - instead, I want to try uploading each scene as I finish it as its own "chapter", so that readers get updates a lot more regularly. I do NOT know if this will actually read well, though, so I'm very much interested in feedback as the story goes along.

Darkness.

Then-

"-ey. Are you all right?"

At the sound of the voice, Rose raised herself off the ground with one arm and cracked an eye open, wincing as another brief twinge went through her head. The speaker was a boy - no, a young man, it was just his expression that made him look boyish - with tousled brown hair. He wore a couple of clips with feathers attached to his ears, but his clothes otherwise seemed simple and homespun. She had no idea who he was.

Or where she was.

"What hit me...?"

The young man turned to look at the air beside him for a moment, then back at her. "It looks like you fell from up there."

She glanced around at the ruined shrine, the details coming back to her. "Right. I was in a forest, and I found a tunnel into here, and then... I remember a whole bunch of lightning-"

As she sat up, she abruptly halted. Where she could normally feel the weight of both daggers strapped to the back of her tabard, now she could only detect one. Realizing more clearly she had absolutely no clue what was going on - and noticing what looked like a sword hanging from the stranger's belt - she groped around on the floor with one hand, but could find nothing.

Damn. Still, it shouldn't be a big deal. She'd trained to fight just as well with one of them as two. *Still, Mal's gonna kill me over this.* And she couldn't totally blame her; the blade was as much of a family heriloom as her armor-

"Looking for something?"

There was nothing alarming on the young man's face, only guileless concern. She also noticed, with a moment's more observation, that the sword he was wearing actually seemed to be made of... wood, of all things. *Why would someone way out here have a ceremonial sword? Weird.*

"It's nothing. Hey, you got a name?"

"Huh? Oh, I'm Sorey. What's yours?" He cocked his head a moment, then reached out a hand. "Oh - right! Can you stand?"

For a moment Rose just stared at the proffered hand. She'd never bothered to waste much time on official portraits, but she'd at least thought her custom uniform was fairly recognizable, to say nothing of the black crystal armor. *I must really be out in the sticks.*

Accepting Sorey's hand, she rose carefully to her feet. Nothing seemed broken or even especially bruised. "I'm Rose. Rose-" She hesitated. The idea that he was only pretending not to recognize her seemed completely ridiculous staring at that boyish face, but she couldn't totally rule out the possibility. Especially with that creepy feeling of being followed she'd never been able to identify the cause for, all through the forest... "Rose Monmouth. I'm a knight of Hyland. Nice to meetcha."

Sorey grinned widely. "I've never met a knight before. Nice to meet you too! So, what brings you up here?"

"Uh-" This time it wasn't suspicion that kept her mouth shut so much as embarrassment. *I still can't believe I'm even doing this. I can't imagine telling anyone else.*

"If you don't want to say, that's okay. I know we just met." His head turned in the direction of the air besides him again.

Rose shook her head. "Nah, it's not that. It's just kind of a long story." And, okay, yes, an embarrassing one, but that wasn't the point. "There somewhere around here where I can rest up first?"

"You could come to my village. Elysia. It's not that far," Sorey said with a smile. Then he turned and walked several feet away. His voice lowered, but Rose could still hear him as he spoke to... the air, *again*? "She doesn't seem like a bad person to me. And I can't just abandon someone in need."

"Uh... who are you talking to?"

Sorey turned back and shook his head. "Oh, right! It's nothing. C'mon, I think this is the way back to the surface."

Rose stared as he turned and began climbing a stairs. *What a weirdo. Or... is he...*

No way. No way. I'm not even going there. (Even though it was why she'd come here in the first place - No. Ugh.)

She shook her head and began following the weird young man out of the ruins.

A Princess Missing...

Chapter Summary

With Rose absent in Elysia, questions continue to be asked in the capital.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Bad news, Boss. It's confirmed, or at least as confirmed as it gets before the official announcement. General Sinclair intends to take an early retirement at the end of this month. Officially to spend more time with his family."

Eguille's face was grim. Alisha couldn't blame him. "Which would make Landon the senior commander of Hyland's army." Neither of them had to spell out what that meant. Sinclair had been involved in enough of the last skirmishes with Rolance to know what war was like even for the victor, but Landon's reputation clearly painted him as a glory hound whose only concern was victories that would advance his career. No matter how many people had to die for it.

Damn it. With everything that's happening in the world, why do they have to-

She rested her chin on one hand. "I don't suppose there's any chance it actually *was* his own idea?"

Felice leaned back against the crate behind her. "It should be easy to find out." They'd chosen to meet in a rented warehouse rather than a proper hideout this time to keep an especially low profile. With only days before the Sacred Blade Festival begun, the guard was taking extra steps to make sure Ladylake looked its best, at least on the surface. And with both faces of the guild involved so heavily with the festival, it was more important than ever to keep a clear distance between them. "His daughter's housekeeper is a regular customer. Shouldn't be hard to get her talking about what she knows."

Alisha nodded. "All right. In the meantime, Rosh, take squad 2 up to Fort Girone and keep an eye on things. I want to stay very aware of any messages going between the army and the capital... especially considering our current job."

And with that, she couldn't put it off anymore. She turned her attention back to the parchment canvas rolled out on their makeshift table.

Even a minor member of Hyland's royal family had dozens of official portraits and their imitations to choose from, but Alisha had selected this one because it seemed the most... honest. Unlike the various depictions of Princess Rose perched stiffly in formal dress scattered around, this one had her looking relaxed in her custom red-and-black tabard,

flanked by a handful of other young men and women. The street vendor who'd been selling them said the original hung in the knights' barracks rather than Rountabel Palace or some other elite structure.

She glanced only briefly at the other knights' features - the guild was doing some digging into the ones who were still alive, but the most interesting thing was probably just that the princess had insisted on posing with them at all - before focusing on Rose. Even in this monochrome charcoal drawing that stole the red from her hair and the blue from her eyes, it was clear she lacked most of the distinctive features of the Diphda family, taking far more after her late commoner mother. (Alisha hadn't voiced the thought aloud, but she'd wondered during her follow-up meetings with Bartlow's agent if that was one reason she seemed to irritate the council on such a basic level, beyond that of her politics...)

She *was* pretty, though, moreso than many of the more blatantly decorative members of the nobility. The amusedly expressive smile was part of it, and even in black-and-white the gaze was striking, but Alisha also suspected the effect would be stronger in person than in a portrait. From everything they'd found out so far, Rose struck her as the kind of person who threw everything she had into life, and that was something that she thought the world could use more of.

Unfortunately, it might also be part of the problem in this case...

"Do we know yet whether it's true that she stopped the council from issuing an order to draft soldiers to assist with the plague in Marlind?" she asked. She was somewhat suspicious of the story, but given the princess's aggressively pacifistic politics it was certainly at least possible.

Eguille shook his head. "The council doesn't maintain any notes of their meetings, even secret ones. Or so our patron says." He smiled sardonically. "It's almost like they have something to hide."

Alisha frowned. "Everyone has something to hide. The question is what is *she* hiding?" Sitting up straighter, she clasped her hands together. "She doesn't really believe in any of the old stories. All of the accounts we've found agree on that much, at least. And she certainly doesn't have good relationships with the leadership of Hyland's Church." She sighed. "Not that I can entirely blame her for that." All accounts also agreed that Archbishop Nathael wouldn't be capable of true faith if a seraph punched him in the face. "So why did she fight so hard to hold the Sacred Blade Festival for the first time in years? And why would she then just *disappear*, only a week before it began?"

They were the same questions she had asked before, and she was still waiting on answers. She glanced at Eguille. "Still no reports from Lunarre, I assume?"

"Where would he even report in from? No one lives up in those mountains." *Except fairy tales*, he conspicuously avoided saying, but Alisha still felt the words sting.

"And that's why we need to be certain she's actually going there." And not, say, to Rolance. For the hundredth time, she wished she could have spared someone else besides Lunarre to track the princess. She wanted to believe in him, especially given how often she herself was conflicted over the Scattered Bones' mission - not just in this instance, but at all times. But

still, she did know her people well enough to realize that a purely observational mission when dealing with a potential target would... test him.

Another sigh. *You can't keep second-guessing yourself. You need to keep on doing all that you can. Especially if she is what Bartlow says she is.*

The meeting broke up shortly afterward. Felice and Talfryn would take their people out to join up with the main Sparrowfeathers caravan, which would move into the city as soon as the bureaucracy had finished double-checking their application to work the festival. She and Eguille would linger a bit longer, then join them.

As the other guild members filed out, Eguille came up to see her staring at the charcoal portrait again. "I haven't seen you this tense about a job in a while. I know this can't be easy, targeting someone who's taken such major steps to..." He glanced at the book attached to her hip. "Well, you know."

Alisha shook her head. "It's not that. I've been inside enough sanctuaries that were *anything* but - I have no tolerance left for those who would abuse the people's faith for their own selfish ambitions." Not that she was happy about it, but... "It's more that... I wish I could have faith in *her*. So many people look at the state of the world these days and do nothing, or worse, think only of how they can gain from it even if it means making things worse. So few are trying to make it better."

"We are," he reminded her.

"I'm doing my best. But it would be... reassuring, to think that someone like her, someone who could just lead a safe and privileged life away from all this, could actually be choosing to be doing something to try and make things better as well. The problem is... what her definition of wanting to make things better just means hurting more people?"

There was silence for a moment, then Eguille gestured with his head towards the door. "Come on. We can worry more about this when we actually know where she is. For now, we should get back to those clerks before Vanders and his con operation can get the fountain square stalls reserved."

Alisha smiled. "I'd like to think Ladylake remembers the quality of his goods enough that we don't need to worry about that." Still, she rolled up the parchment and put into a satchel before following him out the door. But not before she paused and took one more look into the enigmatic eyes of Rose's portrait.

Where are you, really?

Who are you, really?

"Are you entirely certain this is wise, sir? Part of the reason the council hired the Scattered Bones is because they're supposed to be above this kind of thing."

Lord Bartlow let himself stare out the window of his study for a moment longer before turning his chair back to look at Niall. Unlike the way most underlings would have sounded when questioning his decisions, the aide's voice was entirely level. He'd been in the lord chancellor's service for long enough - and in enough... *delicate* situations - that he knew his advice could come freely. It was one reason Bartlow trusted him to handle negotiations like the one he was reporting on.

"True. But on the other hand, it's important to take advantage of opportunities as they arise. Any violence befalling Rose within the city, no matter how wild the possibility of linking it to us, might still make some of the common rabble suspicious. But if our headstrong princess-knight should simply... fail to return from another of her ill-advised solo expeditions into the wilderness... Well, there would hardly be anything surprising about that, would there?"

He rested his elbows on his desk and steepled his fingers. "You're sure the man is both willing and capable?"

Niall frowned slightly and brushed an imaginary fleck of dust from his spotless purple jacket sleeve. "Willing to ignore his guild's orders and assassinate the princess? Yes... almost too *much* so. As I said, he struck me as a tad... unstable. I'm not sure we can rely on him to actually succeed at killing her." There was a touch of professional distaste in his voice; though he didn't dirty his hands with such things personally, Niall had acted more than once as Bartlow's agent in eliminating particularly dangerous obstacles to Hyland's interests.

The chancellor took advantage of his own profession, and offered a reassuring smile. "As I said, it's a matter of opportunities. It works best for our purposes if she fails to return from the mountains, but the rest of this Mister Lunarre's peers will still be waiting if she does. And by that time, our own preparations for her festival should be complete as well. To say nothing of a certain ongoing plague a certain idealist would be honor-bound to assist with..." He exhaled. "It's been a long time coming, but with any luck, by this time next month the danger that girl poses to our nation should be nothing more than an unpleasant memory.

"And then we can get back to giving the people what they truly need."

Chapter End Notes

BTW, Niall is the name I've given to the council's unnamed-in-canon flunky who spies on Sorey and co early in the game. There will be a couple of unnamed bit parts like this getting slightly larger roles/expanded scenes in this story; I'll do my best to make it clear who's who.

A Village Missing...

Chapter Summary

Rose spends a few days in a strange mountain village.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"So, you settled in okay?"

Rose turned from where she'd let herself sprawl on the small house's rug (it wasn't the most ladylike posture, but no one was gonna gripe at her about that *here*) to see Sorey shut the door behind him. "Yeah, it's nice. So, your talk with your grandfather went... okay, right?"

Sorey grinned sheepishly. "Well... Gramps was a little surprised, for sure, but I knew he'd be fine with letting you stay for a few days in the end. Elysia never gets visitors from the world below, but that doesn't mean we've forgotten our manners." He paused. "Also, technically he's not my grandfather. Gramps is just what we - I - call him, since he's raised me all my life. I guess Elysia in general did, really."

"Huh." There were a couple of things to unpack there - not least the implication that there were in fact more people living in this oddly empty "village" besides Sorey and his unseen 'gramps' - but she didn't want to go *there* right now, especially with both fatigue and hunger nagging at her. So she instead chose to follow up the simplest option. "What do you mean 'the world below'?"

"You know, the land that lies below the mountaintops. Where you come from."

Rose furrowed her brow. "You make it sound like you've never left this mountain."

Sorey shook his head. "I've thought about doing it sometime, sure. I'd love to travel around and explore ruins all over the world. That's kind of a hobby of mine, like I told you earlier."

Her mouth twitched. "You sound like my friend Clem. She was *crazy* about exploring the ruins in both our hometowns. Never really got the whole thing myself..." Though as she shrugged, the thought again came to her: *But you are here **now**, aren't you?*

Later, after a surprisingly delicious meal (and one where, again, it was a relief to just *eat* without having to worry about decorum and protocol and what-not), Sorey took up the earlier conversational thread again. "So, your hometown has ruins in it? You said you were from Hyland, right?"

"Yeah. Ladylake, the capital, to be exact-

"Like in the legend of the Lady of the Lake and the Sacred Blade?!"

Rose blinked. "You - you've heard of that?" Even by what she had already come to conclude were Sorey's usual exuberant and excitable standards, it'd been a real outburst. "All the way up here?"

Sorey beamed. "Of course! There's whole chapters all about it in the Celestial Record!"

"The heck? You've read that too?"

The young man reached into one of the pouches at his belt and pulled out a small black book, bearing both a familiar symbol on the cover and the clear signs of extensive rereading. "All the time! Wait, 'too'? Does that mean you...?"

She pulled out her own, much more pristine-looking copy. "Clem gave me a copy a couple of years ago for my birthday. Honestly, I never really paid much attention to it, not until..."

She bit her lip. For a moment there was silence, and she waited for Sorey to press her, but he kept silent.

Am I really going to just... talk about this?

But then again, am I ever going to find a less judgmental audience?

"If you've never been below this mountain, then... you don't know about the calamities, do you?"

Sorey looked concerned. "Calamities?"

"Storms, floods, diseases, droughts... all sorts of disasters have been happening all over the world. They've been getting worse and worse over the last few years. Nobody knows why, but there's all kinds of panic about an 'Age of Chaos'. I've... tried to roll my eyes at the doomsaying, but things really are taking a toll. People are suffering." She swallowed. "Dying.

"Like I told you, I'm a knight. If people are causing problems, I can try and deal with it. I can fight them, or talk to them, or something. But what am I supposed to do about a tornado? It's... All over the continent there are people who think the best way to deal with the chaos is starting wars to steal other people's stuff, and that's so frigging *stupid*, but also - part of me keeps thinking, at least that's something I *can* actually try to stop! But this other - stuff...

She shook her head and waved her Celestial Record. "I don't know if I believe everything in this book, about Shepherds and seraphim and all that. Honestly, it - it kind of gives me the creeps, the idea that there are these powers out there that humans can't see or know about. You know? But... I don't know, if I can't help, I want to try and find some way to... Gah, this is hard to talk about, but you know what I'm saying, right?" She shrugged. "Of course, almost everyone back in Ladylake just laughs at the idea."

Sorey recoiled. "That's awful! What about your friend Clem?"

Rose looked down at the floor. A fringe of hair fell forward into her eyes, but she didn't mind; it was easier not to look at anything that way. "...She's dead. One of those disasters I talked about wiped out her whole town not long ago." She held up a hand as he opened his mouth for some kind of sympathetic platitude. "She's not the only friend I've lost, and I'm not the only one who's lost people. The world is *not* a nice place right now."

Sorey sat back slowly. "So that's why... Look, I don't know about Shepherds, although I did find a glove in those ruins earlier with the Shepherd's crest on it. But what you said about the idea of seraphim creeping you out... I know the Celestial Record talks about people revering 'that which they don't understand', but it also says that long ago humans and seraphim lived in harmony together. Maybe some of them would just like to meet you."

She gave him a skeptical glance. That had almost sounded like he was speaking from personal-

Nope. Not thinking too hard about that right now.

"Huh. Well, I guess we can talk more about this tomorrow. I think I'm gonna hit the hay now, so to speak. I don't know how long I was out in those ruins earlier today, but I do know it's been forever since I got an actual good night's sleep."

Sorey scratched his head, embarrassed. "Yeah, sorry, I didn't mean to keep you up talking."

"You apologize way too much, you know that?"

"Sorr- uh, yeah." Another sheepish head-scratching gesture. "You can take the bed, I'm fine just staying out here for tonight. You want to go out and try and get some materials for your return trip tomorrow?"

"Sure. Night."

They did just that the next morning, engaging in relatively little serious conversation as they hunted down a handful of prickleboars. It was a side of Sorey that Rose hadn't quite expected to see; despite the good-natured ingenuity, he was quite capable of surviving in the wild. Probably more than she was, really. For all her missions and excursions she had to admit that she didn't exactly love the wilderness.

But it also puzzled (and mildly freaked out) her even more. Sorey kept speaking as if there were plenty of other people living in Elysia, but where *were* they? The village seemed like it was missing everything - shops, craftsmen, and inhabitants - but then where had all the buildings come from? Sorey was definitely weird but he wasn't *nuts*. And sure, it might have been her imagination, but there had been feelings all day like someone was nearby, watching her...

At one point, she finally just snapped. "All right, I'm getting fed up with this! If anyone's out there, you can go ahead and just speak up now, okay?"

A very brief pause-

"...a-and *show* yourself too, I mean! The visibility part is very important!"

Sorey looked at her with another of his slightly embarrassed grins as the silence lingered. At least it wasn't the "you're crazy" look she had expected.

(Though she wasn't sure if his opinion was all that reassuring there...)

The feeling of watched never really went away, but she didn't bother trying to comment on it again. Partly because she probably just looked like a frigging idiot, but also because... well, it might also be her imagination, but it wasn't nearly as creepy a feeling of observation as the sinister presence she'd felt tailing her through the "Forest of Perdition" below.

Besides, if there were seraphim here and **Sorey** was friends with them, they couldn't be *that* scary...

Mikleo studied the dagger carefully as he made his way towards Elysia's gate. He had next-to-no firsthand experience with the things - nobody in the village bothered to make them when seraphic artes could serve better for just about any potential purpose, and even the kitchen knives were really only ever used by Sorey. But as cultural artifacts they'd come up at least a few times in the Celestial Record, so he still felt pretty confident in his assessment. In its functional yet elegant design - and slightly outdated aesthetic, suggestive of a pre-Death Age origin - it seemed very much in keeping with the rest of Rose's equipment. (Not that he'd really expected anyone else to have dropped a dagger in those ruins, but still).

Of course, that made the crest on the hilt - one that he'd seen way *more* than a few times in the Celestial Record - very curious indeed...

A part of him was a little surprised he wasn't more relieved that the human girl was leaving today. For a while there he'd been really convinced that Rose being there would bring some kind of trouble down on Elysia. After all, when had Sorey just rushing in without thinking things through *not* made a mess? (Okay, it **had** probably been his own fault when they'd tried rappeling down into the sunken shrine to the north that one time. And they wouldn't have met Rose in the first place if he hadn't been the one to step on those weakened flagstones in the Mount Mabinogio ruins. And- But still, it was *usually* Sorey's fault.)

Plus, while he'd be an enormous jerk to begrudge his best friend spending some time with a new friend, it was a little... annoying just how much time Sorey had spent exclusively around her these last few days.

But to be fair, they couldn't exactly spend time together as a trio when Rose could neither see nor hear him, and he'd been surprised how much that fact stuck with him. The way she seemed mildly-to-heavily freaked out by the idea that "invisible" seraphim could be hanging around was a *little* funny, yeah. He'd actually had to team up with Kyme and Mason to lay down the law when a few of the village's less-mannerly residents had proposed rearranging her things when her back was turned as a prank.

But it was also more than a little sad, because Rose *was* a good person. She seemed brave and determined and a little offbeat, and despite everything the elders had always said about humans, she barely gave off any malevolence at all. It didn't seem right that any knowledge or interaction between them could only go one way. It was enough to make him understand a little better the way Sorey felt, when he talked about how much he wished the world could go back to the ancient times when all humans and seraphim coexisted.

And it reminded him of part of the conversation he'd had with Gramps before venturing into the ruins to find the knife...

"You sure have mellowed on her, huh, Gramps? When Sorey first showed up with a human in tow it looked for a moment like you really meant to read him the riot act."

The old seraph shrugged and smiled. "I suppose I was just being a bit of an old fogey who doesn't like to see his kids grow up. I always knew this day would come."

Mikleo frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Sorey is a child of two worlds, Mikleo. He has both the capacity and desire to serve a bridge between human and seraph. Yet he's spent his entire life living only in our realm. He was born a human. It's only natural that one day he would venture forth to live out his days in their world."

Mikleo's frown deepened. "Sorey, going to live among humans? No offense, Gramps, but are you nuts? He'd get eaten alive! You know what he's like - he doesn't know anything about them, or the way they live! I mean, can you imagine him trying to use... what's it called... 'money'...?"

And besides, I'd... He shook his head.

*Barely visible under his bushy eyebrows, Gramps's eyes twinkled. "Well now, I never said I expected him to go there **alone**..."*

His mind came back to the present as he approached the gate. Thanks to the low-level wind artes that someone always had running, even from this distance he could hear the tailing edges of the conversation between Sorey and their guest. Once again, and inevitably, his friend seemed to be having difficulty with the idea that what was totally normal for him seemed super-nice to anyone else.

"...no, really, it was nothing."

"You're way too modest," Rose replied. "Sure, most people would *say* they'd help a stranger without knowing anything about them, but actually *doing* it? Let's just say I'm kinda skeptical." Her gauntled hands interworked together for a moment. "I mean... I did kinda lie to you right at the start, you know."

Mikleo strained to listen more closely. *What does **that** mean?*

Sorey asked the same question, and Rose gave a nervous-looking smile. "Uh, yeah, my name... My surname isn't Monmouth. It's Diphda. Rose Diphda."

(Sorey seemed to miss the reference. Unsurprisingly.)

"As in... the secondary branch of the Royal Family of Hyland."

Even this far out Sorey's surprise was visible. "Whoa, you're royalty?"

Rose shrugged. "In a technical sense. I'm only eleventh in line to the throne. Twelfth in a few months, when my aunt has her second baby. I should have told you right away, but... my mentor always told me to be careful with how much I gave away about myself, and, well..."

Sorey shook his head. "I understand. You were just being careful."

Mikleo could make out Rose's frown. "I was being paranoid. I know we've only known each other a few days, but I could tell pretty much from the very start that you're a good guy. And..." She shrugged again. "Look. I still don't know if I believe there are seraphim here in Elysia," (a couple of the onlooking villagers exchanged amused looks), "and I dunno if one old glove is enough to make me start believing in fairy tales. But we're not holding the Sacred Blade Festival because everyone believes it's literally true, we're holding it because it reminds us what's important to the people of Ladylake. And whether they're legendary heroes or not, Ladylake could use more good guys in general. Like you."

She looked down. "I don't want to pressure you into anything. But if you can make it... Well. I hope I'll see you there."

Sorey looked a bit dumbstruck as she set off through the gate and down the slope, back to the world of humans. Arriving on the scene, Mikleo tapped his friend on the shoulder.

"Invited to a festival by a princess? Bet you weren't expecting *that* to happen this morning."

Sorey turned around. "Mikleo!" He spotted the dagger. "What's that?"

"Gramps sent me back into the ruins to look for clues about Rose, and I found this." He handed it over. "Check out the hilt - that's the royal crest of Hyland. It looks like Rose really is royalty."

Sorey's face fell. "This belongs to her? Why didn't you get here sooner? I could have given it back!" He turned and looked through the gate, but the human girl was already out of sight. "Should I go after her?"

Mikleo smiled and clapped him on the shoulder. "No need to go rushing off. I'm sure you can catch up to her later."

And indeed, soon they would do just that.

...But not under the circumstances any of them had expected.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was an absolute nightmare to write. Updates should come much more frequently from now on, barring IRL developments.

Meeting with Masks

Chapter Summary

As the Sacred Blade Festival begins, Alisha meets Rose and Sorey.

Chapter Notes

So I was really hoping the one-year hiatus mark would light a fire under me and get me to finally update this fic. It didn't, but something else did. Hopefully updates will never take this long again.

"Boss!"

The sudden gust of air past her face woke Alisha moments before the outcry could have.

"Boss! You up?"

She lifted her head groggily from the tent's desk and turned to face Talfryn, a little embarrassed. "I actually hadn't realized I was asleep in the first place."

She had stayed up late the past night, working and worrying. The former had been part of the continuing preparations for the Sparrowfeathers' role in the finale of the festival, while the latter had been driven by Felice's report: General Sinclair was indeed retiring in favor of Landon. Worse, he didn't seem to have been pressured into it, but was simply tired after a long career spent in military service. She couldn't blame him, but... *One more voice of reason gone.*

Of course, right now her priority had to be the guild's public face. She truly did want to do her best for Ladylake's people, after all, whatever was going on behind the festival's scenes. Standing, she stretched. "All right, we'll get moving shortly. Anything to report?"

"That's just it." Talfryn's expression was unusually grim. "The princess came back last night. No warning or anything."

What?

"The whole city's talking about it. Apparently important people are either really relieved or really frustrated that she isn't going to miss her own festival." The wry tone in his voice left no doubt which category their nominal employer fell into.

"And Lunarre?"

Talfryn shook his head. "No sign of him." He frowned. "You don't suppose she-"

"Not unprovoked." Alisha wasn't quite certain why that belief seemed so firm in her mind, but it was. Though that didn't necessarily mean things were any less... concerning.

She rubbed a hand across her face to shake the sleep out of her eyes and surreptitiously sniffed at her sleeve as she did so. It didn't seem any worse the wear for having been slept in overnight, and that settled it.

She pushed the tent flap aside and waved Eguille over. "I'm going on ahead. You can take charge here, all right?"

"Sure. You heading to the market stall?"

"Yes. I don't know whether it'll actually matter, but I want to listen to what people are saying firsthand." The Scattered Bones weren't supposed to have attachments to any particular place or nation, but still... Ladylake was the city where she'd been born (probably), and she *needed* to know what was going to happen with this festival.

And with Princess Rose.

"Are you sure you won't reconsider this?"

Rose grunted as she pulled the black crystal greave onto her left leg. "Which part? The market tour or the outfit?"

"I was referring to the market tour, but we can certainly discuss the outfit as well if you want." Maltran wore the pursed-lips expression she often did in these one-on-one chats, but Rose could still detect the faint hint of a smile in her mentor's voice. "If not an actual dress, you could at least try wearing a dress *uniform* for once. As opposed to Rolance's national colors."

Rose smoothed out her tabard. "Okay, one, they don't get to copyright red and black, and two, even if they did this whole thing is supposed to be about building bridges in the first place." She stood up. "And three, Mal, *you* look great as always, but I absolutely can't do justice to that neckline and we both know it." She put on a contemplative look. "I suppose we could always have me abdicate and make Ian a princess..."

Maltran smiled slightly, this time on her actual face. "Don't think you can frighten me into changing the subject. Like you said, the Sacred Blade Festival is very important to your goals. I would have thought making certain all of the preparations are in order would be more important than strolling through the marketplace, especially after your trip into the mountains."

Rose met her gaze. "That's just it. When I got to know Sorey up there, he had a whole different view on the whole seraphim myth. Weird, kinda creepy, but also? Nice. I'm not

going to build anything just standing behind an altar giving speeches. I want to talk to people up close. Get a feel for what they're thinking, you know? I know there won't be time for a lot of it, but it's gotta be better than just waiting in the sanctuary looking decorative."

"So... basically you still just don't like standing still."

Rose grinned. "Guilty as charged."

Alisha felt a little bit of her inner tension loosening up amid the carnival atmosphere. The last year Ladylake had actually held the festival, the guild hadn't had a chance to make it - it still hadn't been that long since... everything... happened in Pendrago, and they'd still been putting the pieces back together. That made it longer than she cared to think. Just the sight of the colorful confetti drifting over the chattering crowds brought her memories back a long time. Back to when they'd still been the Windriders and everything at least had seemed so much simpler.

Of course, she still paid attention to the chatter. Princess Rose's surprise return to the capital remained big news - love her or hate her, the people certainly paid a lot more attention to the so-called "princess-knight" than most of her higher-ranked but far duller relatives - and with her close involvement with the festival, she was an especially relevant topic.

Unfortunately, that meant Alisha didn't quite pick up on it when the various mutterings took on a much more immediate and surprised turn...

"Hey there!"

She looked up from the sampling of goods the guild's market stall was displaying and did an immediate double-take. The face before her was the precise duplicate of the charcoal drawing from the warehouse, only much more colorful. In every sense of the word. Rose's hair was actually a bit of a duller red than the official portraits generally portrayed it as, but those striking blue eyes were an exact fit. And she'd certainly been right about how much more animated the princess seemed as an actual person...

"Y-Your Highness! I'm sorry, is there something I can help you with-"

Rose laughed and held up a hand. "Relax! I was the one who signed your guild up for catering duties for the festival, so the least you can do is drop the formalities." She held out a hand. "You're Alisha, right? I've heard a lot of good things about you and the Sparrowfeathers."

Alisha mentally shook herself as she shook Rose's hand. ***Focus!*** *You've been wanting to know just who she is for all this time. This is your chance. Remember, you have a duty here.* "I've heard quite a bit about you as well, Your Highness. You were the one who pushed for reinstating the festival in the first place, right?"

Rose rolled her eyes. "It's Rose. One syllable. Rooose. It's not that hard. But yeah, that was me." She paused and cocked her head. "Huh... You know, you're exactly the way you were

described, you know that?"

Alisha blinked uncertainly. "And... how exactly was I described?"

"Oh, you know, young woman running a merchant guild with the seriousness of someone twice her age." There was a certain false innocence to Rose's tone, but Alisha suspected it didn't prove anything one way or another about her honesty - because it was also the sort of tone you were *supposed* to pick up on. "Why, how did you think you were described?"

"Rose!" Alisha's head turned at the outcry before she could come up with a response, and she promptly did a second double-take. It wasn't often that her childhood hero came walking up to her stall. Her father had gladly helped feed her fascination with Lady Maltran - he'd always dreamed himself of having a chance to test his strength against the famous Blue Valkyrie, after all - but it actually went all the way back to the orphanage, before she'd even met the guild, when Hyland's most famous knight had just been making her name as a teenager herself.

Of course, up close the legend seemed a little different than she'd always imagined. More... irritated-looking, for certain.

"I did ask you to stick by my side, if nothing else," Maltran told Rose in a long-suffering voice. She caught sight of Alisha and turned, bowing slightly. "Ah, Miss Alisha of the Sparrowfeathers, I believe? You have my gratitude for your assistance. This festival means a great deal to the princess."

Alisha blushed. "Th-thank you, Lady Maltran! It's a honor to be praised by the kingdom's knight-preceptor. We'll certainly do our best."

Rose grinned. "Looks like you've got another fan, Mal-"

The ringing of bells in the direction of the sanctuary cut her off, and she exchanged a glance with her teacher. "Whoops. I'd love to stay and chat more, but I can't exactly miss the main event. Like you were saying before, it *is* kinda important to my goals." (Alisha's brow furrowed.) "Maybe we'll get a chance to speak again after the ceremony. Assuming, of course, someone doesn't actually pull the sword out..."

No sooner had the two of them departed than another voice called out to Alisha, this one more masculine, more familiar, and rather *less* pleasant.

"That seemed like quite a good rapport you seemed to be striking with Her Highness. Is that normal, in your profession?"

Alisha turned. Bartlow's blond flunky, his face wearing a grin and his purple suit still immaculately spotless despite the crowds and confetti, stepped out from behind a corner. "No more unusual than conversing with an employer's agent so obviously, Mister - Niall, wasn't it?"

The man's face darkened slightly. She wasn't certain if it had been the feigned uncertainty over his name or the mundane title for someone who was probably nobility in his own right, but either way, though the impulse had been regrettably petty of her, she still couldn't help but find it satisfying. "Indeed. His Excellency the Chancellor had a request for clarification about the contract. Do you plan on fulfilling it at the festival today?"

Alisha shook her head. "I still need more time to work out the details. Why?"

Niall put a smile back on. "As I said, His Excellency requested clarification. It's... possible that we may ultimately decide to cancel your contract. You'll still receive an appropriate fee to cover the expenses you've already incurred, of course."

Alisha frowned. *What does **that** mean?*

"By the way," he continued. "I noticed several of your fellow guild members had some difficulty getting a wagon across the causeway, but I haven't seen that long-haired fellow at all today. What was his name... a Mister Lunarre, I believe? I certainly hope he's all right."

Ending the conversation had seemed like a good idea anyway, but it became more so when she spotted Eguille's tall figure through the thinning crowd. She bowed her head quickly. "I'm certain he is. Good day, Mister Niall."

As she stepped away from the stall, Eguille waved the junior guild member who'd accompanied him forward to take her place. He stepped next to her and spoke in a low voice. "There's a rumor going around that there's been some kind of a disturbance at the princess's manor. She's not there, but the city guard has supposedly been dispatched."

Alisha clenched her fists. "Damn."

"Alisha?" (The fact that he didn't call her boss was a sure sign of concern.)

"Our employer's go-between there just expressed both a surprising amount of interest in Lunarre's whereabouts and some uncertainty over whether we'd need to fulfill the contract." Though she wasn't entirely certain that there was a direct connection, not that it was necessarily reassuring. One thing they'd observed about Bartlow was that, for all his skepticism about the Sacred Blade Festival, he'd been surprisingly involved in planning it... "Get the Ayns, Rosh, and our gear. I have a very bad feeling about this."

As she and the others approached over the rooftops, Alisha still held out hope that it was some kind of misunderstanding. The festival did tend to occasionally cause trouble with visitors in particular; she herself had witnessed a rather disgraceful scene of two mercenaries brawling in front of a cheering crowd earlier.

But Lunarre's words quickly put a stop to that.

"...Oh, I'm going to enjoy this! A fitting end for worms who dared to wriggle at a god!"

What?

A dagger from one of the Ayn twins - she wasn't certain which one - thudded into the ground, halting Lunarre right before he could strike at the brown-haired young man he was attacking. The guild's tracker looked up in shock (he wasn't even wearing his mask), and for some reason Alisha felt an urge to flinch. There was something... feral about the man, more so than she'd even seen before.

Or maybe her disgust was just coloring her perceptions.

"You've been warned, Lunarre," she said through her mask. Two of the other Scattered Bones jumped down to flank him, while Eguille restrained the other combatant.

"Boss! No, I swear, I was just playing with them-"

The second dagger went right through his calf, and he halted with a scream. Alisha wasn't at *all* certain that had been necessary - otherwise she would have thrown it herself; it still wasn't her preferred use of a weapon but five years' practice was certainly reliable enough - but she didn't blame the others for wanting to make a strong statement. Even without Lunarre's apparent violation of her orders, this had been attempted murder in its purest sense. No higher purpose. No attempt at any greater good or saving of lives. Just a common killing in the street.

Exactly what she dreaded them becoming every day.

"You've forgotten the code of the Scattered Bones, Lunarre. You're all out of second chances." She nodded, and the men flanking Lunarre lifted him up as he bobbed his head in apparent silent resignation.

The young man spoke up. "Who are you? Why are you after Rose?"

"We're not, at the moment." Eguille turned his hood slightly to look in her direction, and Alisha gave him a nod. "Lunarre exceeded his orders. The princess is not a target."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"We have our honor," Eguille told him.

Alisha hesitated, then - "Princess Rose has more than one enemy, and assassination is not their only weapon." *Or so I suspect, at least...* "If you're truly concerned about her, I suggest you worry less about who we are and what we do and instead hurry to the pedestal where the Sacred Blade is kept."

The young man sounded even more puzzled than before. "Why are you telling me this?"

The mask rendered her voice hollow as it always did, but Alisha still heard the ghost of a little girl who'd dreamed of becoming a knight to match the Valkyries speaking. "Honor."

That was the only explanation she offered to Eguille and the others' puzzled looks as they subsequently regrouped and shucked their assassins' gear. Meeting Rose had hardly cleared

up her concerns about the contract either way - this incident had been a matter of guild discipline, nothing more. The princess's actual fate was still very much up in the air. Yet something had prompted her to go ahead and interfere against whatever Bartlow's secondary scheme at the Rite of the Warrior was. Maybe it had been admiration of how some random young man - armed with what, if she hadn't misjudged her eyes, had been a *wooden* sword - had gone up against a trained assassin to protect Rose. Maybe she just simply didn't like the chancellor, even if his actions were ultimately for the greater good.

Maybe she wanted to make sure she had that second conversation later.

Regardless, the guild ultimately didn't need to know her motives anymore than she did in order to trust in them. The fallout was handled swiftly. Most of the group would head for the sanctuary to resume catering for the ceremony proper, while Eguille and Rosh would turn Lunarre over to the city guard. Out of respect for the years he'd served with them, they'd simply identify him as the culprit in a street brawl, just enough to keep him locked up for the remainder of the festival. But she'd made it clear that he was to never come near the guild - or Rose, or Bartlow and his agents - again.

Alisha wasn't certain about that decision, but... she couldn't make another. There'd been a long moment, once she'd taken off her mask, where she'd stared into his face, trying to come up with something to say. But there was nothing. He'd failed, indisputably and indefensibly, betraying everything it meant to be one of the Scattered Bones. But she'd failed, too. Every day she knew how hard it was to walk the line the guild followed, the paradox that was committing murder to save lives. She'd known Lunarre was struggling and she'd pushed it aside, even sent him into situations where it'd be worse. Why? Because he hadn't been with them since Pendrago, and so wasn't truly part of the guild? Or just because she wasn't strong enough?

Those thoughts consumed her so much that it wasn't until right before she arrived at the sanctuary that it occurred to her.

Who's the 'them' he was referring to?

She couldn't think too much about it when she was at the sanctuary, though, thanks to one of the odder moments of her double life...

"So this guy's in a bit of a bind, Boss."

She kept a carefully polite smile on her face as she looked at the very same young man the guild had just rescued a little earlier, standing next to Talfryn. His eyes widened slightly. "You're the boss he mentioned?"

"That's right. My name's Alisha. Is there a problem?"

He chuckled. "Sorry - I was just surprised at how young you were." He suddenly winced, rubbed his side, and glared over to his left, but Alisha saw nothing in that direction. "Oh, right - I'm Sorey."

"Pleased to meet you, Sorey." She offered her hand, and he shook it. She couldn't help but notice his glove as she did so. The mark of the Shepherd always turned up in a fair number of places around the time of the festival, but it was a little surprising to see on someone who clearly wasn't from Ladylake.

*I wonder which of our competitors managed to sell **that**.*

Or is it possible that he actually believes...?

She shook the thought away. "So, as I understand it, you'd like to get in to see the pedestal?"

"Yes! Rose could be-" A sudden but lengthy pause. "I-I mean, if you can help me out, it'd really make my day!" (Talfryn gave Alisha a faintly embarrassed look.)

Alisha put her hand to her chin. "We could probably get you past the guards, but it wouldn't be cheap."

Talfryn grinned. "No kidding. These guys seem to need more grease on their palms every time. Kind of funny considering we're having a heat wave."

Sorey frowned slightly. "How much?"

Alisha held up a hand. "Oh, don't worry, we'll take care of it."

Talfryn looked over at her. "Uh... we will?"

She leaned next to him to speak quietly enough that Sorey couldn't hear. "We can't very well charge him to do what we want him to do anyway, can we?"

"Yeah, but merchants who don't want any money? He's not exactly going to buy that..."

"I don't really have much on me right now," Sorey spoke up, "but I can pay you back later, if you want." He appeared to exchange a glance with the air, before continuing "I have something on me that might work."

The sanctuary bell rang again, drawing all of their attentions for a moment. Alisha turned back to Sorey and held out her hand again. "Very well, we'll consider this an IOU for now. If we hurry, there should still be some good seats left."

Once they were through negotiating with the guard - who, true to Talfryn's predictions, charged an outright larcenous thousand gald (exactly the sort of business practice the Sparrowfeathers conspicuously did not engage in) - Alisha considered following Sorey in.

But only briefly. Certainly, they needed festival staff outside as well as within, and someone did need to remain outside to make contact with Eguille and Rosh when they returned (as it happened, the handover of Lunarre to the city guards went off without a problem). But it didn't have to be her, and she was able to admit as much to herself. The real reason was much more... personal.

As much as she valued the memories of the Festival in general, the thought of actually witnessing the Rite of the Warrior made her feel hollow inside, gave an extra weight at her side even though she'd left the Celestial Record in one of the wagons today. It'd been easy to thrill to the stories of the Shepherd and the Lady of the Lake as a little girl, still thinking as all children did no matter their circumstances that the world was a magical place. But now, in a world that was growing more chaotic every year - rumors of war, and tornadoes levelling entire towns, and even the heat wave that Talfryn had joked about killing off crops - the thought of standing there, faking applause each time some well-intentioned knight failed to pull the sword from the stone...

It hurt. As did the thought of cheerful, exuberant Rose trying to come up with a speech that would somehow spin the inevitable failures into a moral victory for Hyland. Or - much worse - already having such a speech planned as part of some ulterior motive...

So she stayed outside. Far away enough, in fact, that it took her a moment to register the fragments of conversation as a crowd spilled out, unexpectedly quickly, later that afternoon.

"-couldn't believe my eyes-"

"-power of a seraph-?"

"-thought those fires would take us all-"

"-pulled out the sword, just like the legend said!"

"-see him and the princess? Sure looks like a bit of a history there-!"

"-a real Shepherd, here in front of us-!"

"-the princess and the Shepherd-"

"-Shepherd-"

What?

What?!

Alisha finally spotted Talfryn near the back of the crowd, just ahead of the soldiers shooing everyone out, and caught his arm as soon as they were far enough away. "Talfryn, what happened in there?"

He looked pale. "Boss... we may have a problem." And he told her. And all Alisha could think of was one phrase.

"So why did she fight so hard to hold the Sacred Blade Festival for the first time in years?"

No. That's madness. She thought back to the young woman she'd met in the marketplace, and there was no way she could imagine her creating a false Shepherd to win over the populace. But at the same time, it had been a conversation lasting all of five minutes. That wasn't

enough. Not for her inner doubts, and so *certainly* not enough for the leader of the Scattered Bones to make a decision that could affect the lives of millions.

...

She looked at Talfryn again. "Round up everybody. I have a mission and I need to give you all instructions."

Meeting without Masks

Chapter Summary

Alisha meets Rose for a second time. Now with more honesty, and also violence.

Chapter Notes

This fic is not dead! Just on hiatus for over a year. Again.

I intend to post updates much more frequently from now on (the next chapter is mostly written already), but I will not blame anyone for being skeptical of that promise.

Night had fallen on Ladylake hard - harder than usual, it seemed to Rose. Then again, maybe it was just the memory of how bright and clear the day of the festival had been that was contrasting with the darkness now.

Or at least how bright and clear it'd been before all hell had broken loose at the ceremony...

She looked out the half-closed curtains of her room in the manor at the fog drifting from the lake and through the streets, and instinctively repressed a shiver. There was no one to see her, of course, but the habit was hard to break. For years she'd been able to deny any unsettlement at those creepy songs and poems about the Lady of the Lake walking through the mist on nights like these, but mainly that had been because she knew they weren't real. That was *way* less certain after the day she'd had.

Of course, if the legends were truer than she'd thought, then she really didn't need to worry about the Lady of the Lake. And besides, she wouldn't be out there in the night, but *right here in the manor*.

"Sheesh."

She sat back on the bed and glanced around the room. She'd always tried to keep it neater than was, strictly speaking, her personal inclination - less because of all the lectures about just How A Princess Should Behave than to avoid inconveniencing Genni and the rest of the staff - but right now it was maybe a little less sightly than it should. Books littered every available surface, apart from the chair with her gear and the other one with the giant (and mostly unrelated) plush. After what had happened at Griel she'd avoided looking at most of Clem's old possessions for the longest time, apart from the Record. But she needed to know more about just how one treated a sick Shepherd.

If that was even what Sorey *was*.

But it's not like she had any other ideas about what he could be.

As it happened, there had been various references in the books to the aftereffects of making a pact with a seraph. They were pretty much harmless in the long run, but the pactee would need watching over for a few days. And after Bartlow and his goons had shown up immediately following the riot - not that she or Maltran had expected anything else - she felt a lot more comfortable making sure *she'd* be the one doing that.

Mal had objected, of course. So had the others. And if the rest of her squad hadn't been out of the capital she might have agreed to just checking him into an inn. But, well, they weren't. And she was *not* being paranoid.

...Especially not given what she'd just noticed.

The guard patrolling outside is way late for making another lap. Dammit, it is too late at night for this crap. Pushing off the bed, she made for the armor and blades draped over the chair.

Alisha pressed one hand against the unconscious guard's neck, felt the steady pulse there, and sighed in relief.

Not that one could ever entirely judge these things. She'd had training in field medicine back in the old days, but it was an unreliable art; even professional doctors couldn't always judge someone's condition with accuracy. But all she could try and do was the best she could, and right now she needed to keep moving forward. Even - especially - when her own people disagreed.

"I'm going in alone."

"But, Boss-"

"I'm going in alone. This is not an assassination. I still haven't decided whether or not we're taking the council's contract. But I do need to investigate just... what happened today at the ceremony in more detail." She glanced around at the others - Rosh scowling, the Ayn twins both wearing near-identical frowns - before meeting Eguille's gaze. "Please trust me on this."

A reluctant nod. "But if you don't come out, we're coming in."

Shaking the memory off, she rose from her crouch and sprung lightly towards the fence at the back of the patio. She'd observed the manor before night fell, and decided it was probably the easiest point to penetrate. Physically it was much easier to scale than the walls surrounding the rest of the courtyard. And unlike the two guards stationed at the front gate, there'd only been a single one on patrol here.

She frowned to herself. Just three guards for a princess of the realm. Admittedly they all had the white tassels of the Rountabel palace knights dangling from their helmets rather than the

blue of common soldiers, but still, it was a remarkably low protection detail for even a secondary member of the royal family. She couldn't but wonder if Chancellor Bartlow had had something to do with this, too...

She tested the front door - not locked, though it wouldn't have mattered much if it had been given the nearby unlit and unlatched windows - and slipped inside. The foolishness of all this struck her for the first time as she made her way down a dark hallway. On a normal job, she wouldn't even consider going in like this until she had all the available information. A layout, at least, was absolutely essential - and now even more than normal, she couldn't mess this up. She *couldn't*.

But at least the basic layout of the manor was most likely the same as many others she'd been in. There'd probably be no more than three bedrooms - a guest room, a shared servants' quarters, and the main room - and the main room would be relatively easy to identify. (She thought for a moment that she'd want to visit the guest room, too, but dismissed the idea, as she had when it occurred to her earlier in the day. If there were answers it'd be easier, especially for her, to judge them coming from Princess Rose, not this supposed Shepherd. She knew her own weaknesses too well there).

As it happened the main room was easy enough to find, both from the royal crest of Hyland carved above the door and the suit of armor standing next to it. Sized for an admittedly-smallish man - and not, so far as she could tell in the little light that filtered through the windows, made from the famous black crystal - it obviously wasn't Rose's, but it also was definitely not ceremonial. Nor, she observed with a smile behind her mask, was the spear it was holding.

It had been a long time since she'd actually wielded a spear in combat - they weren't very practical on missions - but she'd kept up her practice for a reason.

Holding it in one hand, she eased the door open, then did a double-take. Rose's room was an *absolute disaster*. Books lay everywhere, her bedsheets were half-crumpled on the floor, and what Alisha recognized after a moment as an ancient Normin Kuddlee stuffed toy took up an entire chair. As she stepped inside, that last one occupied her attention for a bit longer than the rest - both because of how rare and almost-forgotten they were, and because the giant pink plush didn't really seem like the princess's style - and that was probably why it took her just that bit longer to realize that there was no one in the room.

At least until the closet door opened.

The masked woman turned a lot faster than Rose was expecting. One moment she'd been edging out, twin short swords in hand, and the next a spear - a spear! - was jabbing directly at her face. She quickly jerked one blade up and turned it aside, and sparks rang through the dark room. The flash gave her a momentary better glimpse at the assassin's mask, and inwardly she swallowed.

Outwardly, of course, was another thing entirely.

"Oh, whoa, Scattered Bones? Nice! I guess Bartlow finally decided to pay out the big bucks, huh?"

"I'm not here for him." The voice rang out hollowly through the mask, but there was definitely something familiar about it. Rose lifted an eyebrow and feigned towards the assassin, who ignored it. "I'm only here with questions."

"In the middle of the night, dressed as an assassin. Riiight."

The woman lunged forward, and her spear's end twirled through the air, sending a stack of books flying. Rose took advantage to slash with both blades, but the assassin caught them both on her haft and slashed her spearhead at Rose in turn. She caught it on one greave and stared into the eyes half-visible through the mask's slits.

Yep, definitely familiar.

"What happened at the Sacred Blade Festival?"

"Huh?"

"What happened at the Sacred Blade Festival?" The assassin slashed her spear through another arc that took out more of poor Clem's books. "Why did you create a false Shepherd? Are you seeking to use the people of Hyland's faith to manipulate them into surrendering to Rolance?"

"Is *that* why you're after me?" Maybe it was the audible bafflement in her voice, but Rose noticed the assassin seemed to hesitate at that. She took advantage to launch a counterattack, driving her back towards the door, but it only lasted for a moment before the other woman's superior reach pressed her back again.

"You fight better than I expected, Your Highness."

"Oh, really? Thanks!" Rose shifted towards the right, then flung her left-hand blade in a graceful arc that struck right against her opponent's spear, jarring it from her hands... or that was the plan, anyway. Instead it simply went through a pathetic sort of half-loop before thudding to the ground. She could have sworn the masked figure rolled her eyes at that. "And *you* fight an awful lot like an inferior version of my master. Which is kind of disappointing given the stories about the Scattered Bones, but not too surprising in this case. I figured you for a fangirl this afternoon, after all."

The assassin tensed slightly at that, but said nothing as she leveled her spear for another jab. Rose ducked past and swung, continuing "I mean, come on, you didn't really think I'd be fooled just by that mask-!"

Her blade whooshed just past it, and she managed to bring up another armored forearm to block as the assassin swung again in recovery. "...And that probably would have sounded better if I'd actually managed to knock it off. Oh well."

The other woman again locked eyes with her from behind her mask. "You're not afraid of me at all, are you?"

Rose grinned. "Maybe a little. But you said you're not here to kill me. And I'm pretty sure you're smart enough to figure out that I'm not going to create a fake Shepherd in pursuit of my political agenda or whatever. Until today I didn't even think that Shepherds were a thing, and honestly I'm still creeped out by the whole idea of seraphim.

"And as for surrendering to Rolance because I'm not stupid enough to want to start another frigging war that won't do anything except get a few more thousand people killed while the world is falling apart" - her voice increasingly lost the bantering tone in favor of genuine anger - "I *know* you're smarter than that.

"Right, Alisha?"

Alisha stopped. Sighed inaudibly. And pulled back, lowering her spear to her side.

She should have been furious at letting Rose catch on the way she had. At how she'd let her feelings get the better of her even now, on such an important mission, where above all else she'd have to succeed. For the sake of so many people...

But honestly, she didn't feel that way. Rose may not have been what she was expecting from a princess (to put it lightly), but if anything that just made it more compelling when she actually did speak seriously.

And besides...

She kept her voice neutral as she reached for the mask with one hand. "May I ask what gave me away?"

Rose shrugged, though she still had one sword drawn as she did so. "It wasn't particularly hard. You have a *really* memorable voice. I mean, seriously..."

Alisha actually felt herself blush for a moment at that, and was glad the hood and the darkness still kept her face mostly shielded as she pulled the mask off. Rose blinked. "I am surprised you're not trying to bluff it off, though. You... really are not what I was expecting from an assassin."

"The Scattered Bones don't accept our targets based on money alone. We have a purpose: to strike down those who would harm others before they can. To save as many lives as possible by taking one." She knelt to set the spear down, though she kept one hand on the dagger sheathed at her back (a dagger that, unlike Rose, she actually knew how to throw) as she did. "I don't know yet if I believe you about the Shepherd, but I do believe that you're doing more than anyone else in Hyland to stop another war from breaking out. So I'm speaking to you now, without my mask, to let you know: we'll be watching."

"Watching?"

"For the next few days, the guild and I will see what you and this supposed Shepherd Sorey do. If he's truly a force for good or not. Because if he's not..."

Rose made a face. "Geez, 'subtle' isn't your thing, is it? But all right. You can do whatever. I'm used to people thinking the worst about me. Kind of comes with the title." As Alisha began backing towards the exit, though, she added "But hey, you called him 'Sorey' - you've actually met, haven't you? What did you think of him, past all the scary Masked Assassin For Good stuff?"

Alisha felt her mouth curve up slightly, and was again glad that the hood still hid it. "He seemed... nice, actually."

"Huh." Rose put one gauntleted hand to her chin. "The word I was looking for was closer to 'weird', but... I guess the same goes for you, so maybe you're not so bad either." She grinned. "See you back in the market. Alisha of the Sparrowfeathers."

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!