

Chapter LXXVI: Resolution of the Final Regret

I ran as fast as my legs would carry me, breath puffing in the air, thick, humid wind on my face, with water sloshing around my shins. The bleak sky cast the whole street in tones of gray and muted pastels, turning every stop sign a pale maroon and every brick a brackish brown. A sense of urgency pushed me forward against the tide trying to carry me away, and I struggled against it, knowing that too much hung in the balance.

Wave, my armband announced, and the whole world rumbled around me as the water surged in from the bay, sweeping along everything in its path.

It would sweep me along, too. Drown me beneath the water, bash me against a building. I wasn't a Brute, I wouldn't survive that.

I was out of position. There was no place for me to bunker down, to take cover, only — I spotted it at the last possible second — a sturdy traffic light, pole thick and metal and held by the concrete of the sidewalk.

I whirled about and lunged for it, too far for my arms, and the phantom limb in my prosthetic latched on, curling around the pole with a grip like iron. Just in time for the wave to reach me.

My grip faltered. Water splashed against my face, pushing itself up my nose and into my mouth, and I sputtered against it as I kept my phantom limb wrapped as tight as I could around the traffic light. Even with the extra strength it afforded me, the extra reach, the ghostly fingers almost slipped off, that was how strong the wave was.

But it passed, and my feet set back on the ground, safe. I was alive. Uninjured. I had survived the wave.

A litany of names sounded in my ear, unrecognizable. The ones who didn't survive.

There was nothing I could do for them. I couldn't afford to stop, so I didn't. I ran again, racing towards — my armband flashed yellow — the library, where an Endbringer shelter was tucked away just for days like this one.

The world whirled about me, and I arrived just in time to find Leviathan already there. His claws were ripping into the vault-like door that protected the shelter, tearing out great gouges with shrill, metallic *clangs*.

My bugs descended on him en masse, looking for every weakness they could, but nothing they did accomplished anything. Leviathan ignored them all, sparing them only enough attention to kill them with a burst of pressurized water, and then he went back to attacking the door.

Mister Gladly was inside there, I knew. A man some part of me still despised for how callously he had dismissed me, how he had abandoned me, even when the Trio's cruelties were right in front of his face.

I wasn't Mister Gladly.

My feet carried me across the distance, and I leapt through the air to land on Leviathan's back, just above his tail. One hand wrapped around his torso to hold on, digging my fingers into his wounds for leverage, and the other found my knife, pulled it from its sheath, and flicked the nano-thorns on. With all my strength, I plunged my Last Resort into his back, squinting against the spray of dust that flew from the cut as the blade sank into his flesh.

Something slammed into me and carried me off his back, yanking me away. I rolled to my feet, water dripping off my shoulders, but Leviathan ignored me and reached down. With a single, mighty pull, he ripped the shelter door off of its hinges and tossed it away.

I ran towards him again, determined to stop him, whatever it took. Someone inside the shelter screamed.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaaaaathach!”

I stumbled over the grass and caught myself just before I could fall. The gathered host ignored me entirely, as though I wasn't even there.

What?

“Let us settle this now, for once and all!” a familiar voice bellowed. “Come meet me here on this path of feats, and we shall see which of us is the greater warrior!”

What?

I looked around, baffled, at the young men around me, most of them bare-chested and wearing not much more than a skirt and a pair of boots. They were each of them strapped with swords, shields, and carrying spears, and they all had wild hair and tribal symbols painted over their skin in varying colors.

Where...?

The blue sky shone above, bright and cloudless. The grass beneath me was green and rich, and the plateau we stood atop dipped sharply nearby, sharply enough that a careless tumble would almost surely be fatal.

Just where the hell was I?

I pushed through the crowd of warriors, and they parted without giving me much more than a glance. None of them thought to comment on my appearance, on my clothes, or even on my glasses. It was like I was just a spectator, a ghost that none of them really saw.

When I reached the front of the group, I found myself looking at the back of a familiar head of strawberry blonde hair. Across from her, another army parted to let through a young man, a boy, really, who couldn't have been more than maybe sixteen, and even that was probably pushing it. He had long, dark hair, bright red eyes, and his grin —

“Cúchulainn?”

And if I took about ten years off of the Servant we met in Fuyuki, it was indeed him. He dressed more like Connla had, and he carried a sword instead of a staff or spear, but the face, the way he held himself, and that grin were all the same.

“She sends her Hound to face me?” asked Aífe, sounding insulted.

“Teach don’t fight just anyone, you know,” Cúchulainn said, and he sounded so *young*. “You’re gonna have to get through me, first.”

“...Then I’ll simply go through you.”

They sprang at each other, exchanging a dozen fast blows in the blink of an eye as their swords rang out with each clash, and just as I had every other time I saw her fight, I struggled to keep up with Aífe’s speed. Even Cúchulainn looked like he was having a bit of trouble, if the look of concentration on his face was any indication.

But this wasn’t her fastest. It wasn’t her strongest. I had already seen her at her best, and I could tell that this just wasn’t it.

They separated with one final clash. Cúchulainn panted from the effort, taking in great, heaving breaths, but Aífe was just as calm and collected as she had been before they started fighting.

“You have potential,” Aífe told him, offering her praise objectively. “You will one day grow into a formidable warrior, a hero whose name is never forgotten.”

Cúchulainn grinned. “Ya don’t say! High praise comin’ from a warrior as strong as you are!”

“Unfortunately for you,” Aífe went on, “that day isn’t today.”

She leapt at him, crossing the distance as though she had teleported, and Cúchulainn threw up his sword in a hasty block.

“Bruud gine.”

An awful, ear-splitting metallic shriek rent the air, and the blade of Cúchulainn’s sword snapped off at the base as Aífe’s came down on his like a hammer, leaving him holding nothing but the hilt. The force of the blow even knocked him off his feet and to the ground, where he landed on his ass. He stared down at the handle, surprised.

“Today,” Aífe said, “you’re still an untrained brat.”

Cúchulainn suddenly turned his head towards the drop, and he pointed behind her, exclaiming, “Oh no! Your horses and chariot are falling down the glenn! They’re gonna die for sure!”

“What?”

Aífe turned almost reflexively, brow furrowing as she looked where he pointed. Behind her, Cúchulainn grinned and leapt to his feet. He swung his arms open wide and came up behind her, poised to pin her arms to her sides.

I knew enough about the myths to know what was coming next.

“Aífe!”

But I needn't have bothered. Just as he was ready to pounce, the tip of her sword found his throat, jutting out from under her arm, and he stopped cold. The grin fell from his face as he stared down at the blade threatening certain death.

“Life for life, O Cúchulainn.”

He swallowed. The bobbing of his throat pressed his skin against the tip of her sword, and a trickle of blood pooled there, dribbling down his neck.

“Your three demands,” Cúchulainn said. “Name them.”

Aífe smiled. “Henceforth, you will fight all duels honorably, never afterwards oppose your teacher's will, and never wield your spear against your own blood.”

Cúchulainn grimaced, but wasn't in any position to object to her demands. “I promise it all thus.”

The tip of Aífe's sword left his throat. “Go back to your teacher,” said Aífe. “Let her know that I will be waiting for the day she is willing to face me herself again.”

Cúchulainn bowed his head and retreated, defeated, to disappear back into the crowd of warriors that made up his side's army. Aífe watched him go, her expression a strange mix between bitter and satisfied.

“Super Action Mom!” a familiar voice called just then.

“Aífe!” Ritsuka's voice echoed.

The two of them pushed their way through the crowd and eventually made it all the way to the front as Aífe turned around towards them. Her eyes found me first, and then moved over to the twins, thoughtful.

“How curious,” she said. “And just how is it that the three of you happen to be here?”

“Three of us?” the twins said in stereo, and then only just seemed to realize I was there, too.

“Senpai!”

“Ritsuka, Rika,” I greeted them. I turned back to Aífe. “I'm wondering that myself.”

“What?” Rika's head swiveled about, and she even stood on her tiptoes so she could try and look over the heads of the crowd. “Hey, where's Mash?”

“Unless I miss my mark, she won't be joining us,” said Aífe. Her lips pursed. “What is the last thing each of you remembers?”

The twins blinked, bemused. It seemed they hadn't quite cottoned on to what was happening just yet.

“I was dreaming,” I answered, “about...” The battle against Leviathan, or the first one, at least, although I think there might have been a few things that didn’t fit. Like my Last Resort being there, four years too early. “...something that happened a long time ago.”

Something that Aífe and I apparently had in common tonight, it seemed. After all, that fight with Cúchulainn had already happened over two-thousand years ago. It was quite literally ancient history.

“Eh?” said Rika. “U-um... Yeah, I guess I was dreaming? I don’t remember what about, though.”

“Me, neither,” Ritsuka agreed. “I don’t...think it was anything bad? If it was, I guess I should be glad I don’t remember it.”

“That would explain it, then,” said Aífe. “I don’t know why now and why this dream in particular, however. This isn’t much more than a guilty fantasy I imagine up on occasion.”

Rika blinked. “Eh?”

“Hang on,” said Ritsuka, “does that mean we’re —”

“In Aífe’s dream, yes,” I answered him. “Because we all share her contract, so we’re all connected to her. That’s why Mash isn’t here with us, because she doesn’t have the kind of connection with Aífe that we do.”

That also meant no Arash or Emiya or anyone else. We were here with Aífe alone, and maybe anyone she conjured up in her imagination to help us out.

I wasn’t holding my metaphorical breath.

“Not that this isn’t cool and all,” said Rika, “because this is pretty awesome, being in Super Action Mom’s dream, but how do we get out of here? This place might be a nice change of pace from Chaldea, but there ain’t exactly a Ritz for us to stay in.”

“Will we just...wake up when Aífe does?” Ritsuka added.

My lips pursed. I didn’t have a good answer for that, because I honestly didn’t know for sure. I wanted to say that there was no way we’d be stuck in here indefinitely, but Servants didn’t exactly follow the same rules as regular people.

“No,” said Aífe. “Servants don’t sleep the way normal humans do, remember? With all of us in here, we’re essentially trapped inside my dream.”

“Forever?” Rika squeaked.

Aífe huffed. “Of course not. Don’t be so dramatic. We should be able to end the dream if we solve the root cause behind it, and then we can all go back to sleeping the way we were before.”

“Or wake up?” Rika asked hopefully.

Aífe nodded. “Or wake up, if it winds up taking us that long.”

“Well then, what are we waiting for?” asked Rika “Let’s get this gravy train rolling! What do we need to do to finish this dream of yours? Beat up Cú? I owe him a punch to the face!”

Aífe grimaced and looked behind her, where Cúchulainn had been a minute ago, and I was startled to discover that not only had he disappeared entirely, but so had the rest of the warriors who had been gathered on the hilltops to do battle. As though they weren’t any more substantial than a puff of air, they had vanished, one and all. We were completely and utterly alone.

When had that happened? Had I just gotten so used to having my bugs around to keep track of everything that I’d really gotten that inattentive? Or maybe it was just the fact that this was still technically a dream, so my attention slid off of things more easily than it did in the real world.

“Whoa,” said Rika. “Where’d everyone go?”

“They disappeared,” Ritsuka murmured.

“If it was that simple, it should already have ended,” said Aífe. “So then, the root issue of this dream must be something else, not my loss that day to Cúchulainn.”

What else could it be, though? Her loss to Cúchulainn was the single most pivotal moment in her life. It had literally changed her fate and sent her down a different course, if those memories of her life I’d been seeing in my dreams were at all accurate. There wasn’t anything else that remained unresolved, even by the time of her death.

...No, that wasn’t entirely right, was it? There was one other thing.

“Could it be...Connla?” I asked quietly.

Aífe stiffened, and her face shuttered completely, leaving behind a cold mask.

“Him? That brat? Why would he...” Rika spied the expression on Aífe’s face and finally snapped her mouth shut. She changed tacks. “Okay, so say it *is* Connla. Do we gotta go somewhere special or something?”

“Connla died far from here,” Aífe answered stonily. “If we could find a boat, we might be able to reach the site of his battle with the Hound. However...”

It wouldn’t be a short trip. Not when we had to go hundreds of miles to reach our destination.

“How long would that take, exactly?”

Aífe’s lips drew into a grimace. I took that to mean “hours or days,” which could be a bit of a problem, because I really didn’t want to think about us being stuck in this dream for that long. Not when we’d just gotten Marie back, and not when that would mean hooking the lot of us up to IVs and catheters.

How inconvenient it was that this whole episode hadn’t waited a week or two to happen, after Marie had gotten settled and found her feet again.

“This is a dream, isn’t it?” asked Ritsuka. “So doesn’t that mean that time and distance are kind of...well, meaningless?”

“Yeah!” said Rika. “I had a dream once where I swam across the ocean —”

“She was on the swim team our first year of high school,” Ritsuka offered as explanation. It actually did help contextualize things a little.

“— and I made it all the way to Newfoundland before I woke up!”

Aífe’s brow furrowed. “Isn’t Newfoundland on the *east* coast of —”

“The point she’s trying to make,” I said, “is that dreams don’t have to follow the logic of the real world, so we could theoretically walk for a few minutes and find ourselves where we need to go.”

Theoretically. Of course, how that sort of thing worked in a *Servant’s* dream, and even more to the point, in a dream where four minds were connected and all of them lucid enough to recognize things like the laws of physics, that was another problem that we might have to confront. It was entirely possible that the mere fact we were all here would reinforce what we knew of as the structure of reality.

It was equally possible that the logic of Aífe’s era would assert itself and the twins and I would suddenly find ourselves capable of superhuman feats of strength and agility. I was actually kind of hoping for that one. It would make getting through this quicker and easier.

Aífe folded her arms and hummed thoughtfully.

“Do we have anything to lose by trying?” asked Ritsuka.

“No, I suppose we don’t,” she admitted. “Very well, then. We’ll try walking first.”

“You should take the lead,” I told her. “Since it’s your dream, you being in charge of the direction might make it quicker to get there.”

“I mean, she’s also the only one who knows where we actually need to go,” Ritsuka pointed out.

Embarrassingly, I’d missed that part on the first pass.

“That, too.”

“Both well-made points.” Aífe’s head swiveled about, and her lips stayed frowning and her brow furrowed as she cast her gaze over the scenery. If she was looking for some kind of sign or symbol that would tell her which direction she needed to go, she didn’t tell us what it was, and eventually, a frustrated huff of air hissed out of her nostrils. “I suppose, in that case, it really doesn’t matter which way we go, does it? For all the difference it will make, it may as well be the correct one.”

“Dream logic!” Rika waved her jazz hands. Aífe’s cheek twitched.

“Let’s get this over with,” she said brusquely, “and see what this dream has in store for us.”

She picked a seemingly random direction and started walking, and us three Masters hurried along behind her. It struck me just then that she didn't have Gáe Bolg with her, but instead wielded a plain wooden spear with a metal head, and strapped to her waist was the sword she'd used to defeat Cúchulainn earlier.

I didn't recall a specific moment when she'd received that famous spear herself in the previous dreams. Was it something she'd always had and just hadn't used at this point, or had she never had it in the first place and only got it as a Servant because the legends said she should?

We'd probably find out soon enough, in any case.

The sun stayed high as we walked through the grassy field and rolling hills, and although the terrain was recognizable as somewhere on the British Isles, I didn't have the first clue where. Were we in Scotland? Ireland? Or were we somewhere else entirely? This far back in history, none of the landmarks that I might have used to place us even existed yet, and I wasn't enough of an expert in British geography to figure it out from the rock formations.

"This place is pretty," Rika commented, looking about as we walked. "Hey, Super Action Mom. You grew up here, right?"

"Not in this exact spot," said Aífe, "but close enough, yes."

"Man, it looked a lot different back before people built asphalt roads and skyscrapers, didn't it? Kinda sad, when you think about it."

Aífe huffed a short breath out of her nose, not quite a snort. "You think so? It's true, the unrestrained beauty of the natural world is pleasant to look at, but your asphalt roads and skyscrapers have their own charm, as well."

"What do you mean?" asked Ritsuka.

"The condition of man is to always crave advancement," Aífe answered. "The betterment of the self, the improvement of his condition, the expanding of his limits. All people crave that feeling of conquest, of victory — for me, over any challenge that stood in my way. For others, over the very laws of nature themselves."

Philosophy? From Aífe? Was she ever going to stop surprising me?

"I don't know about that," said Ritsuka. "I think plenty of people just want to be able to live comfortably. To just be able to be happy in their day to day lives."

"And those sorts of people are able to live in such a manner because of people like me," said Aífe. "People who refused to accept their own limitations and rejected the idea of an imposed destiny. The world would still be under the yoke of the old gods, defined by their whims and caprices, if mankind hadn't rejected that comfort in favor of carving their own path into the world."

She sounded almost proud as she finished with, "Long ago, humanity decided to refuse to stand in the shadows of their gods, much as I refused to stand in my sister's. Your modern world wouldn't exist if not for those who looked at what they had and declared that it wasn't enough."

“That sort of thinking also led to some pretty bad things, too,” I told her. “War. Famine. Genocide. *Slavery*. A lot of innocent people died because someone saw their land and decided he wanted it. Six million Jews were among them. So were about two-hundred-thousand Chinese civilians.”

I was simplifying things by quite a bit, but I thought my point was clear enough.

“Wait,” said Ritsuka, “you’re talking about —”

“Yes,” I cut him off. “I understand it’s a touchy subject in Japan, but no amount of silence and wishful thinking is going to change the fact that it happened.”

His mouth snapped shut with a *click*.

“The mindset itself is not inherently good or evil, even if it becomes greed or a lust for power in some people.” Aífe hummed. “Perhaps this isn’t the best time or place to be discussing philosophy, though.”

At one point in my life, I might have pushed the issue. For now, though, I saw the olive branch for what it was and accepted it.

“Probably not, no.”

Some time passed. It might have been hours, but it felt like minutes, and with the sun stubbornly staying in the same place above us, there was no way to be sure. Eventually, however, as we crested another hill...

“Whoa!” said Rika. “Who are these hunks?”

...we were met by three young men carrying weapons, all dressed as the others had been when Aífe had her brief battle with Cúchulainn. None of them could be older than seventeen, and with the same red hair and imposing heights, they all looked similar enough that they *had* to be related. One held in his hands a spear, one a longsword, and the third a pair of shortswords.

They were all also shredded. Lean and athletic, I was pretty sure I could wash my clothes on their abs, or if I was feeling particularly adventurous, grate some cheese.

“You don’t recognize them?” Aífe asked.

“Nope!” said Rika. “I think I’d remember meeting guys this hot! Which calendar did they walk off from?”

“Are we supposed to recognize them?” Ritsuka asked.

“I suppose you just arrived too late to see them get cut down,” said Aífe mildly. She addressed the three men in front of us. “Cire, Bire, Blaicne —”

“Gezundheit,” Rika interjected blithely. Aífe ignored her.

“— why are you three here?”

“Sorry, Teacher,” said the tallest with the spear. “It’s nothing personal.”

“Except it kinda is,” said the one with the pair of shortswords. “We love you too much to make it easy on you.”

“That’s why,” the third said, “on these fields and hills where we trained and slept and bled under your tutelage...”

The tallest grinned. “We’re gonna make you go through us, if you want to reach the end of this road!”

Aífe was silent for a breath or two, and then she let out a quiet sigh. “You boys,” she began lowly, “that’s exactly the sort of thing I’d expect out of my students.” She hefted her own spear. “Never be content with your current limits. Always push yourself to greater heights. Face every challenge that stands in front of you with your whole strength. I definitely instilled that sort of attitude in everyone who trained under me. However...”

Instantly, the three brothers leapt back, raising their weapons defensively as though she had just delivered some terrible threat.

“...you never got to finish your training under me.”

It was over in a flash. My eyes weren’t even fast enough to see the individual movements, that was how quickly it ended. Just...one moment, she was standing still, and the next, all three brothers fell to the ground, defeated, as blood spurted from their wounds. Aífe flicked her spear, and a few droplets flew off of the blade to land on the grass.

“D-damn,” the tallest groaned. His weapon had been snapped in half, leaving him holding three feet of useless wood. “Th-that quickly...”

“As expected of Teach!” The second rasped a pained chuckle, spreadeagle in the dirt. “She really took us apart...like it was nothing!”

“M-man,” said the third, wistful. “I miss those days. If only we’d been better warriors, then maybe...”

“No,” Aífe told them. “The fault of your defeat lies with your teacher. I wasn’t ready for my sister to have found such a promising disciple, and as such, I failed to prepare any of you to face him. My mistake cost you three your lives.”

The second laughed again, wheezing. “That’s also just like Teach! That sense of responsibility...”

The first sighed. “That’s why we stayed to learn under you.”

“We weren’t cut out to be the greatest warriors of Eire,” said the third. “But still... The greatest warrior woman in the world... The woman who broke every single one of her limitations without fail... Out of admiration, we came to learn under you, and that...”

“Yeah,” said the second.

“I agree,” said the first. “Teacher, even if we lost, even if we died...”

“We don’t regret a single minute of it,” said the third.

And then they were gone, like dust in the wind. Even their blood had vanished, leaving nothing of them behind.

“You three,” Aífe said quietly, her fists clenched tight, “you don’t have any idea just what you were really capable of, do you? You never had the chance to see it. You died too early.”

“Aífe,” Rika began, “are you...”

Aífe straightened. “I’m beginning to see the shape of this adventure we’re on,” she said, pretending Rika hadn’t spoken. “Come, Master. Let’s get this farce over and done with.”

The twins shared a look, and then turned to me, and yeah, I could see it, too. Anyone with eyes could tell that Aífe wasn’t completely unaffected by what had just happened, and maybe letting her bottle it up wasn’t the healthiest way of doing things.

But Aífe wasn’t the sort to start sharing if we pushed her on it. She was likelier to get angry and clam up even tighter, and that wouldn’t solve anything either.

We were going to have to let her come to us on this one.

“We’re still following your lead, Aífe,” I said to her.

She huffed a short laugh. “Yes, I suppose you are.”

She started walking again, and after a moment of hesitation on the twins’ part, we followed after her in silence, broken only by the swish of the grass about our feet as we trampled it. How much longer we kept walking, I couldn’t say. Not to beat a dead horse, but time was funny in a dream, and if I let my focus drift too much and stopped paying attention to my surroundings, we didn’t walk so much as teleport between moments of lucidity.

That was just as trippy as it sounded.

At some point, we crested another hill, leading down into a narrow, treacherous path, and standing in front of that path as though to guard the way was a house.

“Onii-chan,” said Rika, “I’m not hallucinating, am I?”

“No,” he answered.

“Because that’s a house,” she went on, “and it’s just...there. In the middle of nowhere.”

“I know, Rika,” he said. “I see it, too.”

Except it wasn’t just a house, because that would be too tame. No, it was a full-on, European style mansion made of red brick that looked like it had been ripped straight out of Victorian London. Tall, rectangular windows dominated the front of it, and capping off its third storey was a sloped roof made of black tiles.

Compared to the richest of the rich, it was downright modest, but it was at least twice the size of the house I'd grown up in, spent my childhood in, and eventually left behind, and it had no business being out here in the middle of the — Scottish, I was assuming — Highlands.

The thing that made it feel even more out of place was what stood behind it, because down the path that it was guarding, at the very end, there stood a castle. A curtain wall barred the way, and beyond that, overlooking a sheer cliff, a towering spire reached towards the heavens.

I remembered something about the ruins of a castle on the Isle of Skye off of Scotland, supposedly the site where Dún Scáith had once stood. The dangerous, narrow pathway, the towering stone castle situated on a bluff...it all fit. The only thing that didn't was the red brick mansion that was serving as some kind of extended gatehouse.

"I'm going to assume," I began, addressing Aífe, "that the mansion there has some meaning to you?"

"After a fashion," she said. "I...had thought that this would be... But no. This is something else entirely."

Definitely words I wanted to hear coming out of her mouth here.

"Is it dangerous?"

She huffed. "No more than any other such place would be. No, I expect the real danger is going to be the person inside of it."

"Someone *lives* there?" Rika asked, surprised.

Did she think it was just for show?

"Another student of mine."

"I...didn't think they built houses like that, back in your time," said Ritsuka.

"They didn't," said Aífe. "Do you think, Master, that you are the first person to ever meet me as a Servant, rather than a living human? That you are the only students I have taken on after my death?"

"When you put it that way..." said Ritsuka.

"So who is it?" asked Rika. "Must've been pretty impressive to catch your eye, Super Action Mom."

Aífe hummed, noncommittal. "I suppose so."

She started walking again, heading for the mansion, and the rest of us hurried to follow. We actually had to take it slow so we didn't slip and roll down the hill, because beyond the house and the narrow path was a steep and sudden drop that looked to go on for miles. None of us were keen on testing exactly what would happen if we fell down that jagged slope and died, even if this *was* just a dream.

That was a good instinct for the twins to have. Just because it wasn't "real" didn't mean it couldn't hurt you.

When we reached the tall, narrow, black-lacquered door to the mansion, Aife didn't even bother knocking. She just reached for the knob and twisted it open to a chorus of squeaks from the hinges.

The inside was...actually pretty nice. Tasteful and opulent without being gaudy or gauche, it could have passed for the home of anyone in the upper middle class. It reminded me of the Barnes' home, in that sense, or what I remembered of it, at least. It was the house of someone who did well for themselves but wasn't tossing money at every status symbol they could get their hands on.

In front of us, a staircase led to the next floor up, but immediately on the left, the hallway opened up into a parlor, and in that parlor, there was a small table with a single chair. Sitting in that chair was a young man, barely my age, if that, with his legs crossed and a steaming teacup in his hand.

"Oh," he said pleasantly as he took another sip of his tea. "You're here."

"We are," said Aife, "*Hero of the Winter Crisis*."

The man in the chair smiled, and the way it crinkled his eyes and pulled at the muscles in his cheeks highlighted the parts of his face that looked more Japanese. It was all the more incongruent with the bright blue of his eyes.

"You had to choose the most unflattering of epithets, didn't you?" he lamented.

"Sounded pretty cool to me," said Rika.

"Because you didn't hear it in Old Irish," the man said. "The word she used for 'crisis' can also mean 'bad time,' in the same sense as 'you showed up at a bad time.' She makes it sound like I popped in while she was in the shower."

"Not for lack of interest," Aife said dryly. "I was not blind to your attentions. Perhaps if your eye had wandered less you might have gone further faster."

"You're a very attractive woman," the man told her, "and I was never a monk. My 'wandering eye' didn't slow down my training by *that* much, though."

Aife huffed a short breath. "Whoever said I was talking about your training? Or have you forgotten that it was the teacher's job to instruct her students in *all* the aspects of being a man?"

Wait, what?

"Oh my god," Rika whispered. "Are they *flirting*?"

It...looked like they might be, actually. I felt like I was watching a pair of old friends catch up after years apart, with an added dash of sexual tension, and it was a stark departure from the three young men we'd faced earlier.

The man shook his head, chuckling lightly.

"It's been a while, Aife," he said. "Although I suppose, for a Heroic Spirit, time takes on an entirely different meaning, doesn't it?"

“It does. For me, my time with you has already ended, and yet it seems like only yesterday that we worked together.”

“So,” the man said, suddenly solemn, “that would mean...technically, you’d already know...”

“It doesn’t work like that,” Aífe told him. “It wouldn’t change anything either. After all, you’re not actually here, are you? You’re a manifestation of my regrets. No matter how much you look like him, you’re nothing more than my mental image of what he was like.”

He sighed. “Well, I suppose nothing I could say would change your mind on that front, would it? I certainly *feel* real enough — but that is also something you would expect me to say, isn’t it?”

“Existentialism always was your favorite philosophy,” Aífe replied wryly.

He smiled tightly. “That would be a yes.”

He took one final sip of his tea, and then he set the cup down and stood. Shockingly, he was actually quite tall — taller than me, in fact, although not by more than a few inches — and as he moved, my eyes caught on to the shift of his muscles beneath his clothing. Well-built. Athletic, like those guys from before, without being overly muscular. His pretty boy face belied the physicality of his physique, which meant he was probably a lot more dangerous than he looked.

Carefully, he took off his pair of glasses and set them down next to his teacup.

“I suppose there’s no escaping it then, is there?”

“Why else would you be here in this place, at this time?” Aífe countered.

He shook his head, resigned.

“And that’s a no.”

He held out his hand, and in his grip appeared a spear, long and ominous —

“Holy...!” Rika swore. “That’s...!”

— and a familiar shade of blood red.

Aífe’s lips pulled back from her teeth. “Now I *know* you’re not the real deal. There’s no way you could have that spear, not ever!”

The man tilted his head a little. “Maybe you don’t remember all of it after all. It’s true, even the best replicas can’t quite compare to the originals without the bones of a sea monster to form a base, but ash wood is a perfectly acceptable substitute, if you’re willing to lose a little of the lethality.” He smiled, but it had a dangerous edge to it. “More importantly, it’s more than adequate against an ordinary spear like the one you’re wielding right now.”

Aífe's foot shifted, and my eyes jerked towards it as I recognized it for what it was: retreat. Because he had something of a point, and at least the three of us knew it. I didn't know how good he actually was, but if he could hold his own against her, then that spear could make up all the difference.

Surreptitiously, I checked my hand. Three red Command Spells glared starkly from my pale skin. I wondered if I could actually use the real things in this dream or if these were just a representation.

"Master," said Aífe seriously, "step back. Mash isn't here to protect any of you from a stray blow."

"H-hey," said Rika, "isn't there a rule about fighting inside the house? Because this place looks too nice to get ripped to shreds!"

"Seeing as it's my house," the man said mildly, "I think I'm the authority on what can and can't happen in it, don't you agree? In any case, yes, you might want to take a few steps back. I don't think either of us intends on pulling any punches."

The twins looked at me, uncertain.

"Let's go back to the front door," I told them. "Just in case."

In case we had to beat a hasty retreat if things got too hot for us to handle.

The stranger did us the courtesy of waiting for the three of us to back away to the front door. We were still close enough to lend a hand via a spell or two if we had to, but it gave them enough space that we should be safe enough.

"Now then," said the stranger, "let me show you just how much I've improved since our last spar."

And then he swept one foot across the floor, and a series of runes lit up like Christmas lights.