

Dark age of Camelot

A Spaniard
in Albion
BOOK II



THE SHADOW
AND THE CROWN
By Losnoopy

Sir Los Ortiz has earned everything he never wanted—titles, riches, the favor of the Crown, and a future worth living for.

But when a misunderstanding leaves his friend Willow publicly humiliated at a royal celebration, Los is forced to choose between the life he is building and a person he refuses to abandon.

To remain silent would preserve all that he has built.

To speak may cost him everything.

His choice brings him into open conflict with the court, the King's Champion, and the father of the woman he cares most about—placing his honor, his position, and his future on the line.

Sometimes slaying a dragon is the easy part.

The harder battle is not letting the world tell you who your friends can be. And what you are willing to sacrifice for those you care about.

Dark Age of Camelot: A Spaniard in Albion

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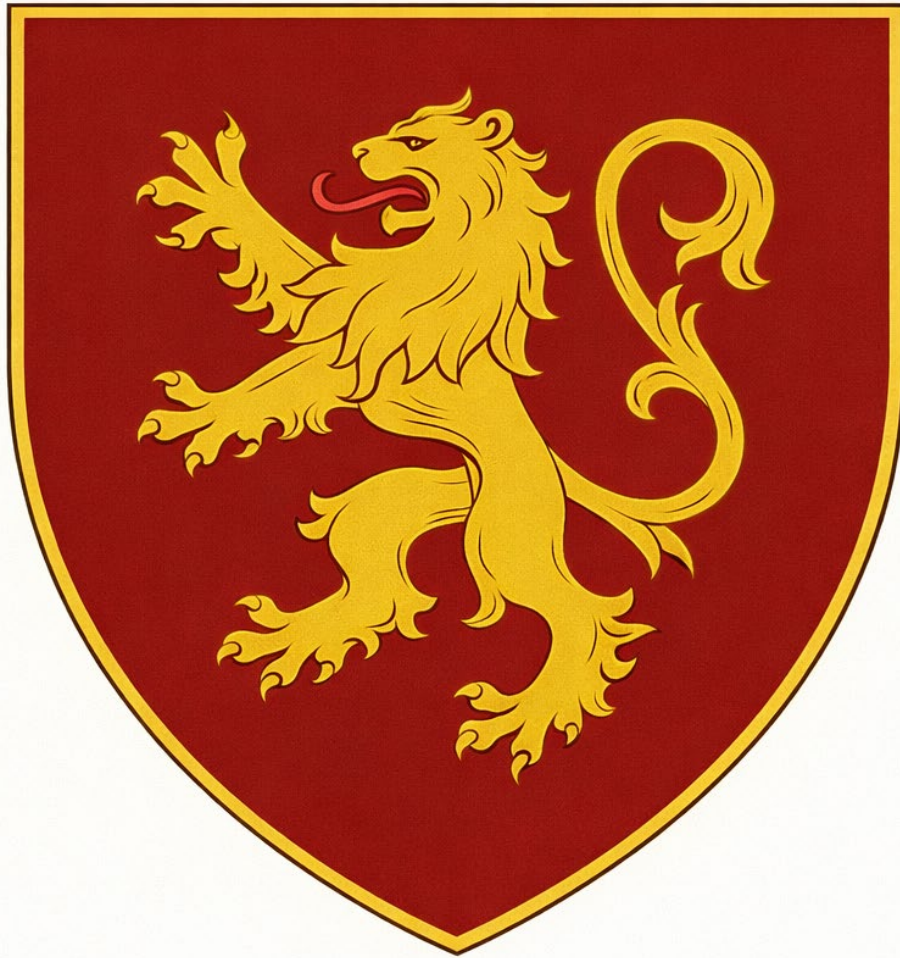
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- No Dragons were harmed in the making of this book. But there should have been.
- As for the Paladins, Clerics, Scouts, Armsmen, Mercenaries, Wizards, Sorcerers, Cabalists, Theurgist, and unfortunate villagers involved. They knew what they signed up for. As for the Midgardians, they got what they deserved, for being Mids.
- All Chants were performed by the Vienna Paladins Boys' Choir. A Boys' choir with a Priestly touch.
- This story contains scenes of light banter, poor life choices, emotionally compromised individuals, questionable diplomacy, and at least one Spaniard who should not be allowed around emotionally vulnerable women. Reader discretion is advised.
- Any resemblance to NPCs or Mobs you remember from your adventuring days is purely coincidental. Except for Nob the Stable Boy, that was intentional.
- No names were changed to protect the Innocent. Charges are still pending against some characters. Care was taken to be respectful to players portrayed in this story.
- Special thanks to our sponsor Tungstenman. When your armor has to stand up to a Dragon and still look good on a date. Tungsten armor is the armor for you.
- Lastly, again thanks to the Guild of Shadows for performing nearly all of the stunt work in this novel. Without them, this work would not have been possible. Special thanks to Eduparms for portraying Sir Amren in the sparring scene. Your restraint while swinging prevented fatalities among the stunt doubles.

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Book II – The Shadow and the Crown

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Prologue — The Comfort of Silk and Stone

Los woke to silence.

Not the cold dry, breathing silence of the catacombs beneath Camelot's church—where dust-covered stone offered no comfort and echoes never quite died—but a gentler stillness, broken only by the distant creak of wood and the muted murmur of a city already stirring.

He lay still for a moment, somehow it felt wrong, and somehow it felt... like home, like Toledo.

The bed beneath him was soft. Too soft. Real linens, clean and heavy, pulled up to his chest. His back did not ache against cold stone. His breath did not fog in the air. No chill crept through his bones.

Sunlight brushed the edge of the room, pale and warm, slipping in through tall windows draped in fine cloth. The ceiling above him was smooth plaster, not rough-hewn rock. The smell was wrong too—clean soap, polished wood, and faint incense instead of damp earth and old wax.

Los exhaled slowly.

"A real bed again," he murmured, half to himself.

It had been a long time since he'd slept in one.

He stretched, testing himself. No stiffness. No sharp pains from sleeping curled against stone. He felt... rested. Whole. Refreshed in a way that made him uneasy.

Comfort had always been temporary in his life recently. It was something borrowed, never owned.

He sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed, bare feet sinking into a thick woven rug. For a moment, he simply sat there, hands resting on his knees, staring at nothing in particular.

Back where I started, he thought. Only now I'm not just a hidalgo, now I'm a caballero, and possibly soon, an ambassador.

The thought unsettled him more than he cared to admit.

After dressing simply—shirt, trousers, boots—he crossed the room and pushed open the tall glass doors that looked out over the embassy’s rear porch.

The morning air hit him at once. Cool, clean, alive.

Below, Camelot was already in motion.

Los leaned against the windowsill, arms folded loosely, watching soldiers gather near the Church of Saint George.

Movement caught his eye.

Across the narrow street, beneath the church’s shadow, Prox was tightening the straps of his armor, humming under his breath as he worked. His sword rested against the wall beside him, clean and familiar. Nearby, Romao adjusted the baldric of his greatsword, cloak already pinned back for marching.

They were ready.

Los frowned.

No one had come for him.

He pushed away from the window and descended the embassy steps, crossing the street toward them. Prox looked up first and broke into a grin.

“Morning,” he called. “Thought you might sleep in for once.”

Romao’s gaze flicked over him, sharp and assessing. Then his expression softened. “You look rested.”

Los stopped a few paces from them. “Why did no one come to get me?”

The question cut through the morning bustle.

Prox and Romao exchanged a glance.

Romao answered carefully. “Because... it would have been inappropriate.”

“Inappropriate,” Los repeated.

Prox shrugged. "Once you're an ambassador, you don't march out with an army. Not against Midgard. It looks like Hispania declaring war."

Los's jaw tightened. "It is not official yet."

Romao studied him. "Not yet."

"Then I am still a Paladin of the Church," Los said. "And no one has told me otherwise."

Prox's grin widened. "That so?"

"That's so."

Romao nodded once. "Then we'll wait."

"For how long?" Los asked.

Prox jerked his chin toward the door behind Los. "Long enough for you to grab your gear."

Los hesitated.

For a heartbeat, he thought of the bed behind him. The clean sheets. The quiet. The life that waited if he stayed where he was supposed to stay.

Then he smiled—a small, crooked thing.

"Romao, get us three horses, on me, and give me a moment."

He turned and went back inside.

The room felt different now. Smaller. Temporary.

He crossed it in three strides and reached for his armor instead of the fine coat laid out nearby. Leather creaked. Steel caught the light as he lifted it. The familiar weight settled into his hands, grounding him.

When he stepped back out onto the porch, fully armed, Prox laughed.

"There he is."

Romao nodded once, approval unspoken but clear as he held the reins of the horses.

Together, they turned toward the road.

Los cast one last glance back at the embassy—its clean lines, its comfort, its promise.

Then he stepped off the porch and joined his brothers as Albion marched to war.

The bed would still be there when he returned.

If he returned.

Chapter XXX — The Battle for Ellan Vannin

Albion Frontier – The Shadow of the Mile Gate

The wind whipped cold across the hills of Ellan Vannin, tugging at Endrond's cloak as he crouched beneath the sloping stone lip of the Mile Gate. Far ahead, the haze of twilight was pierced by distant movement—shields gleaming, war banners rippling, and the slow, methodical drum of boots against frost-crusting earth.

They were coming.

His keen eyes scanned the valley as he tried to decipher their numbers. The Midgardian vanguard had breached the edge of the valley. Dozens of Thanes, Runemasters, and Berserkers pressed forward in a tight wedge. Endrond swallowed hard. His post—a humble tower nestled just behind the Albion Mile Gate—would not withstand such force unaided. If Sir Rex didn't arrive soon, the gate would fall... and then so would he.

He took the stone stairs two at a time and dashed across the frost-bitten slope toward the outpost.

From the southern road thundered Albion's answer: a force of Paladins, Armsmen, Casters, and Scouts, their banners flying bold against a darkening sky. At their head rode Knight Commander Sir Rex astride a white warhorse, armor gleaming beneath the sun's last rays.

Endrond jogged forward, breathing hard. "Sir," he said, saluting with a clenched fist over his chest. "The Midgardians have breached the far valley. I counted over forty Thanes and spellcasters already. Berserkers and warriors among them."

Rex frowned. "And how many archers did you see?"

"Too few to worry us—but their wedge is tight. They mean to break through."

Sir Rex turned his horse slowly, to scan the terrain. The field beyond the gate sloped slightly downward—open enough for a false display of weakness, narrow enough for a retreat under the cover of fire.

He nodded once. "We form up beyond the gate."

"Sir?" Endrond blinked.

"We hold the field," Rex said. "Let them think we're spread thin. The gate is our hammer. If they strike, they'll strike against stone."

He raised his gauntleted hand, voice cutting through the wind.

"Archers and casters to the wall! Shield line, forward! We hold until Rhett arrives—or we die with our backs to Albion!"

The horn blew—one long note that rolled down the valley like thunder—and men moved.

Endrond fell in beside the casters and other scouts, nocking an arrow. He imaged he could feel the earth trembled beneath his feet. Across the valley, lightning crawled through the clouds. He exhaled once, steadying himself.

This is either going to be one long day, or a very short one.

The Albion Mile Gate

The wind was colder now. It hissed through every chink in the wall of armor as the Paladins and Armsmen formed ranks beyond the gate. Frost crackled under their boots.

Angela Burns strode to the center, her blonde hair bound tightly beneath her helm, her armor unmarred. She had placed herself between two seasoned knights, a Paladin and an Armsman, and raised her chin with more courage than certainty as they moved forward as a wall.

Every breath echoed in her ears.

Her sisters were not here. Her guild, not yet truly formed, had only four members. But if she stood tall today... Orchid Fair would be remembered.

She whispered to herself, steadying her nerves:

"Eight names on the roster. That's all I need. Just four more. Just hold the line."

The wall of Albion defenders gleamed—shields interlocked, halberds braced. The archers and casters lined the parapets behind them, ready to rain fire once the clash began.

But Sir Rhett, Rex's lieutenant, and the second force had not yet arrived.

The Midgardians advanced slowly, cautiously. Bolts of lightning and streaks of sickly green burst from their ranks as Thanes, Runemasters, and Shamans began their work. A surge of electricity cracked against the wall, and Angela barely raised her shield in time to absorb the shock. Her arms rang with pain, her breath caught.

To her right, a powerful Thane brought a lightning strike crashing down on an Armsman, throwing him backward with a cry of agony. Another lightning strike dropped a Paladin to his knees, his helm cracked and sparking.

Angela froze, terror clawing at her chest as her comrades fell.

This is it. This is real. This is war...

For a heartbeat, everything stilled. Then the horns of Midgard blared through the narrow valley.

A hand touched her shoulder, steadying her. It was Romao. He stepped into the gap left by the fallen Armsman, his greatsword already drawn. On her other side, Los stepped through the line, then a few paces ahead, and Prox took the place left vacant by the fallen Paladin. He gave Angela a grin and a quick nod.

Her brother Paladins were here.

Then came the whisper of rot—foul and sickening—a cloud of plague conjured by a Shaman that swept through their line. Angela choked, her lungs constricting.

In front of them, Sir Los stabbed his greatsword into the earth. His voice rose, firm and clear:

Scutum Animae, protege, Domine, spiritum meum contra omne malum. (Shield of the Soul, protect, O Lord, my spirit against all evil.)

Light burst from the ground, a golden shield radiating from his prayer. The worst of the miasma passed over them. She could breathe again.

Then the charge came.

The Midgardians surged, Albion's scouts' reports proven wrong, very wrong—the army was larger than expected. Yet Los did not retreat. He turned to the shield wall and called out, "HOLD."

He drew a deep breath of cold air, placed his hand over his chest—over the ring—and began to chant.

Then he met the charge head-on, his greatsword sweeping in a brutal arc that caught a Norseman mid-stride. Angela watched him fight for a moment, stunned. His stance was strange—his movements tight, compact, like a man trained in halls, not fields. In the church catacombs, she realized. That's where rumors said he had been living before being knighted. That's where he must have trained. But she had no time to dwell on it.

Inspired by his courage, Angela tapped her shield with her sword and roared, "Orchid Fair!" as she threw herself into the clash.

Steel rang. Cries rose. Angela ducked—but too late. A two-handed hammer slammed into her shield, the impact cracking bone and sending her spinning. Lightning burst across her armor as she struck the ground.

Before she could scream, vines of bramble erupted from the soil, binding her legs.
No—no—no—

Pain clouded her thoughts, but her discipline held. She drew a breath, chanted through clenched teeth:

Scutum Elementale, muni me, Domine, praesidio contra vires naturae. (Elemental Shield, fortify me, O Lord, with protection against the forces of nature.)

Light flared around her; the vines shriveled and fell away. She hacked free the broken shield with a dagger, seized her sword, and met the next Norseman's charge. One desperate thrust, a gasp, and he collapsed into her. She pushed him off, breath ragged as she tried to stand.

Then her whole world went sideways.

A massive hand clamped around her neck, lifting her off the ground as though she were a doll.

A Troll—seven feet tall and furious. It roared as her feet kicked in the air. Her sword slipped from her grasp; her broken arm flailed uselessly.

She gasped, choking, the edges of her vision darkening.
This is how I die...

Then the Troll's eyes rolled back. It shuddered once, mouth gaping—then fell to the earth with a crash.

Behind it stood Los, chest heaving, his greatsword still sunk to the hilt.

He seized her good arm and yanked her to her feet.

"Go!"

She blinked, still choking for air. "What—?"

"GO!" he barked again, pointing toward the gate.

She gasped, coughed, nearly fell—he caught her, steadied her—and then her legs found their footing. Blood ran from her shattered arm as she stumbled toward the gate, not looking back.

Behind her, Los stood alone, his sword still buried in the Troll's back. He planted a boot on its spine and wrenched at the hilt, straining to free it. The blade would not budge.

Then movement at his flank. Romao and Prox closed in beside him, bloodied but unbroken. Romao's blade flashed, cutting down a Norseman as the warrior lunged to strike Los from behind.

"You didn't think we'd let you finish this without us?" Romao grinned.

Los drew Angela's sword from the ground. "Go, I will cover you!"

"Go?" Prox shouted over the din. "We just got here!"

"Jes, go! Now!" Los snapped.

Romao shouted back. "We fight together..."

"...or we die together," Prox finished.

Side by side, the three of them helped cover the retreat while Albion's line fell back.

From the battered wall, Endrond loosed arrow after arrow, guarding the wounded as they were dragged through the gate.

As individual acts of heroism up and down the collapsing line kept it from becoming a rout.

The field was lost—but the gate held. And with it, Albion.

The Mile Gate – Just After the Battle

Angela lay still upon the healer's cot beneath a battered canopy of canvas and wood. The scent of poultices, ash, and old sweat filled the air. Her arm throbbed beneath a clean bandage, but her vision was steady again.

Across from her, Alucard stood with a damp cloth, wiping blood from his hands.

"You're lucky," he said, tone calm, practiced. "I was able to summon a blessing to mend your arm. The bruises will fade and it will ache for a while, but others were in greater need of healing than you."

Angela said nothing. She simply looked away, ashamed of being among the wounded.

"You should rest."

"I will once I have some answers," she muttered as she looked back over at him. "The knight who saved us... from the Ranger. Did you ever learn if he lived?"

Alucard looked at her a moment, then poured fresh water into a basin.

"He lived. Just barely. After surviving the Ranger, he had to fight through Fellwoods to return to the keep. He is also the same one who saved you from the Troll."

Angela blinked. "It was the same person? Both times?"

Alucard nodded then offered. "If you wish to know his name."

Angela sat up slowly. Her voice was almost a whisper. "What is it?"

"Sir Los Ortiz," Alucard replied as he continued to prepare for the next patient.

The name landed like a blow to her pride.

Him again.

She lay back, jaw tight, her heart louder than the throbbing in her skull.

Then her eyes closed, not to sleep but to stop herself from thinking any further.

Outside the Mile Gate – After the Skirmish

The three Paladins walked slowly along the edge of the battlefield, their armor dented, cloaks torn, each step heavy. The sun hung low behind them, casting long shadows over churned, blood-soaked earth.

Los carried a bundle in his hand, wrapped in a scrap of linen from his torn cloak. Inside: a bent and bloodied sword.

Romao glanced at it. "You've been carrying that since the retreat. You planning on keeping it?"

Los shook his head. "It's not mine."

"Any idea whose it is?" Romao asked.

"I picked it up when I helped one of the wounded. A girl. She left it behind when she withdrew behind the gate. I... borrowed it."

Prox peeled the cloth back. "Well, I'll be," he grinned. "That orchid crest? That's hers."

"Angela Burns," Romao confirmed. "Yeah, I've seen that crest before. She was at the front. Took a hammer blow. You're the reason she made it out."

Los's brows knitted as he studied the ruined blade.

"I am not familiar with her."

Romao smiled knowingly. "Her family is noble—and rich. She's Lady Triss's protégé."

"I didn't know Lady Triss had a protégé," Los said as he continued to study the blade.

"That's because she has no time for her. She has to spend all her time on you." Romao laughed.

Prox nodded. "Still. She'll want it back."

"I could return it," Romao offered slyly. "She's very beautiful."

Los looked up, shrugging a shoulder. "I wouldn't know, she was wearing a helmet."

Prox smirked at Romao. "Better if he does it."

Chapter XXXI — Evening Prayers

Camelot — Evening Prayers

The great bells of St. George's Church tolled softly in the evening air. Inside, flickering candlelight warmed the vast stone nave, where saints gazed down from stained-glass windows and incense hung like mist among the high arches. And beneath the glow of the altar, Angela in solemn prayer.

"Lord of Light, why do you test my patience and my soul with him?
Why do You torment me with his careless deeds and the honor he does not deserve?
Why do so many praise him—lifting him above those who are faithful, who obey, who understand what it means to serve?
Why *him*, Lord?"

Her voice faltered. She bowed her head lower.

"Forgive me for my weakness. Forgive me my hunger to be more. And forgive me, above all, the feelings I hold toward my fellow Paladin."

As she whispered her final *Amen*, the soft echo of boots disturbed the stillness.

It was Lady Triss.

She emerged from the shadows of the aisle. Her presence was as firm as the armor she so often wore, though softened in that moment by the concern in her gaze. She watched her student with a discerning eye—the tension in her shoulders, the stiffness in her injured arm, and the storm still raging just behind those serene features.

"You let him get to you," Lady Triss said gently.

Angela kept her head bowed in silence.

"You need to learn to accept your fellow Paladin for who and what he is."

"An ass is what he is," Angela replied at once, then sighed. "Forgive me. My lady. It's just that... he is utterly infuriating." She scowled.

Triss said nothing—only raised an elegant eyebrow.

Angela continued, her voice low and tight. "At the battle outside the Albion Mile Gate. A troll was fighting me. Before I could kill it, Los struck it down."

"And likely saved your life," Triss said knowingly.

Angela's scowl deepened. "The troll was my opponent. I neither asked for nor required his help."

Triss stepped closer and gently took Angela's bandaged arm. "Come," she said, guiding the younger woman to sit on a nearby pew.

Angela rested her head against her mistress's shoulder, the weight of the day catching up with her at last. Her voice cracked.

"He's always there... butting into my fights. Watching my back like I'm not good enough. Like I'm weak." She paused only for a moment. "I hate him for it."

Tears welled in her eyes, but she clenched them shut. She would not cry. Not in front of Lady Triss.

The older woman stroked her hair with steady fingers.

"Los is arrogant, overconfident, and at times boorish," she said. "But I have never known a Paladin with a bigger heart. One day, perhaps, you will see it too."

Unseen by either of them, in the deep shadow of the north transept, Los stood frozen.

He had entered quietly, sword in hand, intending only to ask where he might find the maiden to whom it belonged. But the moment he saw her kneeling there, bathed in the golden glow of the altar, the thought left him.

She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen—*not* for her face or form, but for the stillness of her prayer: strength softened by weariness, fire tempered by grace.

He smiled despite himself.

Angela... of course she is. She must be. No other soul beneath Heaven could bear that name so perfectly—no other name could belong to the vision before him.

Los pressed a hand to his chest, to the ring beneath his shirt, as if to steady his heart lest it betray him. He watched her a moment longer, entranced. Her lips moved, but her words were too soft to reach him.

Then came another voice.

Lady Triss.

And then Angela's—clear, sharp, merciless.

"An ass... infuriating... I hate him..."

Each word landed like a blow to his heart.

He looked down at the sword in his hands—the one he had carried from the battlefield, the one he had hoped to return not merely with honor but as a gesture of respect.

Lady Triss spoke in his defense, but the wound had already found its mark.

She hates me.

Without a sound, he stepped back into the dark, the transept doors closing softly behind him.

All I did was save her life... Why does she hate me so?

Across the street, the lights of the Spanish Embassy flickered behind frosted glass. Los passed beneath them without a word, his shadow swallowed by stone.

The Yard of House Burns – The Next Morning

Angela's sword cracked against the post again and again, each strike sharper than the last.

How dare he?

Her swings grew wild, her rhythm breaking.

He doesn't even train with the rest of us—

CRACK. The blade buried itself deep in the wood.

"Careful," came that voice. "I hear those posts are dangerous opponents."

Angela spun, teeth clenched.

Los stood at the edge of the yard. Romao grinning beside him.

"I came to return jour sword, I... borrowed it." Los said, unwrapping it. "My sword got unfortunately stuck in a Troll."

Angela frowned at the bent blade, but took it graciously. "Thank you."

"If jou wish," Los added, "I can help jou with jour swing."

"I'm fine." She replied dismissively.

But Los was already stepping into the yard, hefting a wooden greatsword and testing its weight.

"Oh, you wish to spar?" Angela asked flatly as she switched to a wooden practice sword.

"If jou feel up to it," Los said. "I will not hold back. I am juse to real combat."

He had chosen his words poorly. Angela heard it not as humility, but as insult—a dismissal of her experience.

She scowled at him. "Good."

From the balcony, Amaranthia and Tamara watched as the two began.

Angela lunged—and took a hilt to the head.

Tamara shouted, "I'll kill him!" as she tried to climb over the balcony rail to get at him.

"Wait," Amaranthia said, grabbing her sister's arm. "This is Angela's fight."

Los offered his hand to help her up, but she refused it, choosing instead to stand on her own.

She lunged again. Los side-stepped and struck.

Again she fell. Again he offered his hand. Again she refused.

He moved with the ease of someone who had trained in shadows—his rhythm strange, unpredictable. Angela was still learning to carry the weight of a greatsword. He had learned to kill with it.

Each fall deepened her fury.

Until finally—she screamed in frustration and threw the blade aside, grabbing instead a shield and sword, and turned back to him.

“Now,” she growled. “Try that again.”

This time she blocked. Parried. Drove him back.

Los pivoted and slipped around her guard—striking her again. Another fall.

Then she came alive, attacking him with everything she had. Blocking. Moving. Striking so fast he barely kept up.

At last, she slammed the shield into his chest—stunning him, and sending him sprawling into the dust.

Romao cheered. “There we go!”

But Angela wasn’t finished.

She struck him with her wooden blade.

Then an uppercut strike drove him flat on his back, still dazed.

She leapt atop him, straddling his chest, shield raised high in both hands—

For a breath, she meant it.

“Angela!”

Her father’s voice—sharp, commanding.

She froze, breath ragged.

“Inside. Now!”

She screamed again, then stormed off into the house, the fire in her chest still burning.

Sir Los was still a bit disoriented when Lord Burns helped him up. “My apologies for my daughter.”

“She has her mother’s spirit,” her father added quietly.

“She is young and impetuous.” Los said, trying to be gracious as he got to his feet, rubbing his chin, unaware of how close she came to ending him. “But such is life.” He said with a grin.

Upstairs – Angela’s Chambers

“I am *not* impetuous!” Angela shouted.

Tamara rolled her eyes, hauling her sister inside. “Let it go, before Father hears you.”

Amaranthia dabbed lavender oil on the bruise forming at Angela’s temple. “Oh, Angela...” she said before Tamara stepped in and healed the wound as best as she could.

Angela smirked. “The gash I gave him will scar.”

Then she went into the next room to take a bath as her sisters chatted.

“Which guild do you think he’ll join?” Amaranthia asked.

“Knights Templar or maybe Arthurian Knights,” Tamara guessed.

“What about Orchid Fair?” Amaranthia asked, as if it was a real suggestion.

“You’re joking. Right?” Tamara scoffed.

“If we had a famous knight like Sir Los,” Amaranthia reasoned, “It would help us form the guild, and draw attention to us from the court. They would have to take us seriously.”

Angela paused and gave her words serious thought.

Tamara shook her head, “Can you imagine that arrogant ass joining a guild called *Orchid Fair*?”

“I’ve been thinking of changing the emblem. Maybe a Latin cross.” Angela said in a softer tone.

“I like the lion,” Tamara retorted. “Reminds me of our House.”

Angela dressed slowly, her expression thoughtful. When she rejoined them, her voice had that calm edge to it.

“What is his one weakness?” she asked.

"Praise?" Amaranthia tried.

"Treasure?" Tamara offered.

Angela smiled faintly. "Women."

They both paused.

"It's the weakness all men share," she smiled knowingly.

Chapter XXXII — The Fourth

The Castilian Embassy – Camelot, Albion

Midday shone brightly through stained glass, casting colorful shapes and colors across the stone walls of the embassy. Los sat at his new desk, fingers steepled beneath his chin, his eyes resting somewhere between thought and fatigue.

Romao lounged in one of the fine leather chairs like a cat in the sun, while Prox stood nearby, running a finger along the spines of the many books lining the shelves. The office was modest in size but richly appointed—clearly once meant for a diplomat. Its heavy wooden furniture and deep carpets lent it the air of an old scholar's retreat.

Prox pulled a book free from the shelf and weighed it in his hands.

"Huh," he said. "This one looks impressive."

Los glanced over, barely reacting.

"Ah. Jes."

Prox turned the book slightly, admiring the binding. "It must be expensive."

"It is," Los said simply.

He read the title aloud, the Castilian precise, unadorned:

*El Arte de las Posturas e de los Tratamientos,
por Don Juan Trumpo.*

"What's it about?" Prox asked.

"It is an excellent book on trade, contracts, and negotiation." Los replied a bit bored.

Prox nodded. "Sounds useful."

"Jes," Los remarked. "Though difficult to read."

"Why's that?"

"The print is very small," he said flatly. "As if the author had very tiny hands."

Prox laughed despite himself.

Then the conversation drifted to the elephant in the room.

"So... all that time," Romao said, "you were sleeping in the catacombs?"

Los nodded faintly, his gaze not lifting.

Prox crossed his arms. "Why didn't you come to us? That's why you got so sick, isn't it?"

Los didn't answer. His eyes settled on the polished grain of the desk, as if it might whisper the right words.

Romao glanced around the room then mused, "Well... you've got a real bed now. An ambassador's bed. How does it feel?"

Los exhaled slowly. "Soft," he said at last. "Very... soft."

Romao smirked. "Careful. You'll get used to it."

Los didn't smile as he stared off into nothing in particular.

Romao shifted in his chair, studying him more closely now. "So," he said casually, "what are you going to do with it?"

Los blinked. "With what?"

Romao spread his hands. "Your new treasure. Dragon hoard. A truly obscene amount of coin, if the rumors are even half right."

Prox glanced over. "He's got a point. Most people don't come back from killing a dragon without such wealth turning into a very loud problem."

Los leaned back slightly. "What would *jou* do with it?" he asked, turning to Romao.

Romao didn't answer right away. His expression changed—not excited, but thoughtful. Calculating.

"My family are merchants," he said at last. "Always have been. Rome, Genoa, the old routes along the coast. Grain, silk, alum, wine. Good trade, but conservative." He paused, then smiled faintly. "Too conservative."

Los watched him now.

"With capital like that," Romao continued, warming to the idea, "you don't hoard it. You use it. You buy ships first. Two, maybe three. Not war galleys—cargo. Then new routes. Northern tin. Iberian wool. Levantine spices when the ports open again."

Prox whistled softly. "That's... ambitious."

Romao shrugged. "If you do it right, it's very profitable. The Medici didn't become the Medici by sitting on gold. Neither did the Dandolo. And to be the first house in Rome to truly rival the northern trade families?" He laughed quietly. "It would change everything."

Silence followed for a moment as Los considered the possibilities.

Then he looked back at Romao. "If that is what you would do," he said evenly, "then let's do that."

Romao blinked. "Do what?"

"Back your family," Los replied. "We figure out what they need. Ships. Routes. Letters of credit. I cover the capital."

Romao's breath caught. "You're serious."

"Jes."

"For a percentage?" Romao asked cautiously.

Los nodded. "Jes commensurate to the risk."

Prox stared. "You've thought about this."

Los shrugged. "Gold does me little just sitting around, better to invest."

Romao stood abruptly. "Do you know what this would do for me? For my family?"

Los met his eyes. "Jes."

Romao swallowed. "Then... thank you."

Los shook his head once. "Don't thank me just yet. We'll have to work out the details."

Romao stood there—half disbelief, half awe. His mind already a thousand miles away in ports like Genoa, Venice, Ancona.

Then a knock came at the embassy door.

Without looking, Los motioned toward Prox. "See who it is."

Prox bowed like a servant. "As you wish Ambassador." He said mockingly with a grin.

"It's not official jet." Los called after him.

He returned a moment later with another humorously formal bow. "You have a visitor, Sir Ambassador."

Angela stepped through the doorway.

Though they had sparred just the day before, word had already spread. In the barracks, she had earned a nickname—Fihri. Fiery. No one dared say it to her face.

"*Ambassadeur Ortiz*," she began smoothly, the French catching the light in her voice.

"*Merci de me recevoir aujourd'hui*."

Her tone was poised, almost diplomatic.

Los blinked, glancing toward Romao.

Romao raised an eyebrow. "Don't look at me. I only caught half of it."

Angela turned back to Los. "You don't speak Frankish?"

Prox snorted from the corner. "Los barely speaks English."

Los shot him a glare. "It is close enough to Castilian to catch a word or two," he said evenly.

Angela let out a small sigh. "I see." Her English came more gently this time, less ceremony, more person. "Sir Los, I'd like to apologize. For how I acted when you returned my sword."

She paused, then added, "Thank you. And... I'm sorry about your chin."

Los rubbed it reflexively. "All healed. My cleric is skilled."

Angela blinked. "You have a cleric?"

"Jes. Bunk McHeal," he said flatly.

"I hear you and Julia are making a fine team," he added.

Romao snickered. Los blinked.

Angela frowned, puzzled. Then Prox smirked. Romao couldn't help himself: "Jou...Lia."

Los gave them both a deadly stare. "Knock it off, jou two."

This only made them laugh harder.

Angela rolled her eyes, but smiled despite herself.

"Yes," she continued, "Julia and I are working well together. Also, my sisters and I are forming a guild."

"Ah, Orchid Fair," Los said knowingly. "How is it coming along?"

"We have four members so far—Julia, my sisters, and myself. But for official recognition we need eight."

She hesitated for just a moment. "We were wondering, Los... Sir Los... if you would consider joining us."

She met his gaze, searching his face for the answer before he spoke.

"With you, we'd have five," she added, hopeful.

"Seven," Romao chimed in.

Prox grinned. "He's right. Where he goes, we go."

Angela blinked in surprise, then smiled in earnest.

Los gave a small nod. "I would be honored to join jour guild. But... the emblem?"

"We're changing it," Angela said quickly. "Something more refined. A cross."

Los leaned forward. "Then jou have three new members. Meet us at the Guild Register tomorrow morning. Jou will have four."

Angela's eyes lit up. "Truly?"

He nodded. "Truly."

She beamed, offered a curtsy more out of joy than formality, and left in a rush to tell her sisters the news.

The door clicked shut behind her.

Romao looked to Los. "So... who's the fourth?"

Los smirked. "Bunk McStuffy."

Prox laughed. "You're bringing your cleric?"

Los shrugged. "Where I go... he'd better."

House Burns – The Sisters' Quarters

Angela burst through the upstairs door with all the subtlety of a charging lion. The scent of lavender oil, parchment, and afternoon baking hung in the air as Tamara and Amaranthia both looked up from the sewing table. Julia was seated near the window, polishing her mace with slow, deliberate strokes.

"Well?" Tamara asked, already on her feet.

Angela dropped her satchel unceremoniously, her golden hair still tousled from the wind, and gave a sharp, shining smile. "He said yes."

Amaranthia gasped. "Sir Los?!"

"And Romao and Proximo," Angela nodded. "All three of them. And he promised a fourth person as well."

"McHeal I suspect," Julia added, "He comes from a prestigious family of healers. Los did well in getting such a Cleric assigned to him."

Tamara clapped her hands. "That makes eight! That's enough to register officially!"

"We're to meet them at the Guild Register tomorrow morning," Angela continued, pacing now. "So, please—for the love of all things proper—wear something that doesn't make us look like flower girls at a temple fair."

"We're Orchid *Fair*," Amaranthia teased.

"We're Paladins and spellcasters, not petals," Angela said. "And I'm tired of that lion sitting down in our emblem. It's going to be a cross. Black, bold, and upright."

Julia stood, her tone bright but grounded. "Then let's make this guild real."

The Castilian Embassy – Early Morning

The library door creaked open, and Bunk McHeal stepped inside, adjusting the straps on his white surcoat, which was already immaculate. His blue eyes gleamed in the shaft of sunlight spilling through the window.

Los stood at the far end of the room, arms folded, posture rigid. Romao and Prox lounged nearby, a pitcher of cider between them.

"Sir Los," Bunk said with a respectful incline of the head. "You summoned me?"

"I did," Los said plainly, motioning for him to come closer. "I have a question. We did not have time to speak jesterday."

Bunk nodded. "Ask."

"Why were jou not at Ellan Vannin? When we made our stand at the Mile Gate. I nearly died." Los said accusingly, a touch of mockery in his voice.

Bunk blinked. "You look good for a man who nearly died." He quipped, "But if you must know, I was tending the wounded from the battle. Orders from Lady Winchell. I was told you would not be there."

Romao sipped from a cup. "You missed quite the bloodbath."

"I do not seek battle or glory," Bunk replied. "I serve the wounded." His speech was dry and factual.

"Today," Los said, stepping forward, "jour duty is to serve me."

Bunk straightened, taking an even more formal stance. "Sir?"

"So formal—it's Los, jus Los." His tone casual and friendly.

Bunk raised an eyebrow.

"We are joining a guild. Orchid Fair. And jou are coming with us."

Bunk looked confused. "A guild?"

"A righteous one," Romao added, stretching. "Led by three very capable women."

"And beautiful," Prox muttered.

"Focused," Los corrected. "Angela Burns leads it. Julia is among them."

Bunk cleared his throat. "Angela Burns—the one who tried to cave your skull in?"

Romao laughed aloud.

"She had her reasons," Romao teased.

Bunk adjusted his surcoat. "Does the guild have an emblem?"

"A cross," Los answered. "Refined. Clean."

Bunk paused. "Not a flower?"

"No."

"...Then I suppose I have no objection."

Prox clapped his shoulder. "Knew you'd come around."

The Guild Registry – Camelot Proper

The Grand Hall of Records stood at the heart of Camelot, just to the right of the King's Great Hall. Its marble floors worn smooth by generations of adventurers' boots. It was not grand or tall, but served its purpose well. Inside, some of the banners of Albion's sanctioned guilds adorned the stone walls—each a mark of valor and permanence.

Behind a thick oaken table sat the register clerk, a thin man with a quill longer than his nose and an expression that suggested a chronic distaste for joy.

Angela stood at the front, flanked by Tamara, Amaranthia, and Julia. They were radiant in their guild tabards—newly tailored white and crimson with a golden cross emblem stitched where the lion once sat.

"Orchid Fair," the clerk read, sliding his glasses down his nose. "Formerly a social circle. Requesting elevation to sanctioned adventuring guild. Eight members?"

Angela nodded proudly.

"Names?"

"Angela Elizabeth Burns," she said clearly.

"Tamara Fiona Burns."

"Amaranthia Meredith Burns."

"Julia Ashwell of Caer Ulfwych."

He scribbled.

A beat passed before another voice spoke behind them.

"Los Ortiz de Seville," he said, stepping forward.

The clerk glanced up. "Ah. The Lone Paladin. Or is it the Epic Paladin?"

Los met his gaze with a quiet nod.

"Romao Aurelius Casanova."

Romao gave a playful salute.

"Proximo Decimus Magnus."

Prox gave a slight bow.

"And," Los finished, "Bunk McHeal."

Bunk nodded, "Bunk Lee McHeal."

The clerk's pen scratched furiously. "All eight accounted for. And the fee..."

Angela handed over the gold piece with pride.

"Then with everything in order..."

He stamped the scroll with the seal of Albion. "The Guild of Orchid Fair is hereby granted sanction, rights of arms, by the seal of Albion, and registration under the code of Camelot."

He looked up. "Congratulations."

Angela turned, her blue eyes gleaming with pride.

Los offered a small, respectful nod.

The guild was now real.

Formed not from shared bloodlines or regional vows—but by new friendships.

The cross now flew beside the lion emblem of her House.

The story of Orchid Fair had just begun.

Lady Triss – The Citadel of Camelot, Overlooking the Square

The great stone corridor of the Citadel stretched behind her, lined with tapestries of battles long past. The Round Table had just adjourned—another session of noble tongues, flattery, veiled threats, and the ever-pressing weight of politics. Triss stepped from the threshold into the late morning sun, the cool wind tugging gently at the hem of her cloak.

From the steps outside the Citadel doors, she paused.

Across the square, the doors of the guild register opened wide. Eight figures emerged—four young men, four young women, all laughing, talking, radiant in the sharp white and crimson of newly-stitched tabards. And at their center, the emblem gleamed unmistakably in the sunlight:

A golden cross, bold and upright, sewn where a seated lion or delicate orchid might once have stood.

Angela was first to step out the door, her head high, flanked by her sisters and Julia. Triss's gaze softened. She had seen the girl come into the Order brittle with pride and too eager to prove her worth.

Now, she walked with the bearing of a leader—not yet refined, but full of promise and hope.

Romao and Prox trailed behind, all boisterous confidence. She could hear their laughter even from where she stood. Bunk, solemn and upright, followed behind them. And Los, ever the quiet one, walked last—his steps even, his gaze thoughtful.

For a moment, Triss said nothing. She only watched.

They were children, she thought. Children finding their place in this world.

A smile touched her lips.

Angela glanced upward at that moment, just for a heartbeat—and Triss knew she'd seen her.

She gave a small, measured nod.

Angela returned it.

The moment passed, but the meaning held.

Lady Triss was proud of her protégé... and prouder still of her son. Even if he never knew.

Angela – House Burns, Late Evening

The fire had burned low in the hearth, its last embers flickering gold and red across the floor of Angela's chamber. Her sisters had long since gone to bed, the house fallen quiet beneath the hush of night. But Angela remained awake, sitting on the edge of her window-sill in a silken robe, gazing out at the Camelot skyline.

She held the old guild patch in her hand—embroidered with an orchid in delicate shades of red and greens. A flower her mother had loved. A symbol of refinement, of gentle power.

She turned it over slowly in her fingers, then set it on the sill, it was to be a shoulder patch or perhaps something over their hearts on their tabards. But now...

On her folded tabard, gleamed a newly stitched cross of gold thread where once a lion had sat.

Orchid Fair was no longer just a name. It was a banner. A purpose. A future.

Angela leaned her head against the cool glass of the window and exhaled deeply. Los had said yes. Romao and Prox, too. And even that stiff-necked cleric.

She smiled despite herself.

Not petals, she thought. *Steel. Fire. Faith.*

Then, quieter still, she whispered into the silence:

"Let them laugh. Let them underestimate us. But let them see us."

Los – Castilian Embassy, Midnight

The candle on Los's desk guttered once, then flared brighter as he fed it a sliver of wax. The embassy was silent, its corridors empty save for the occasional creak of wood settling with the night.

He sat alone, half-shrouded in darkness, his armor polished and set aside. Before him lay a scroll—a copy of the guild charter—with all eight names written in deliberate hand.

He traced his thumb over the seal of Albion. Then the golden cross the guild had chosen. A strange thing, this feeling. Not duty. Not victory. Something heavier. And somehow, lighter.

Belonging.

He leaned back in the chair, fingers steeped once again beneath his chin.

"I did not come to Camelot for this," he said quietly.

But here he was.

Los slowly brought his hand up to the ring he wore about his neck, as he looked at the scroll again.

One was a memory. The other, a beginning.

Outside the embassy window, the bell tower struck midnight.

Los smiled faintly.

Eight of us, he thought. Eight names. One cross.

He let the candle burn down to its base and whispered softly in his own tongue:

"Dios me perdone si me desvíó de mi propósito."

The Guildhall – Morning Light

Angela pushed open the arched door of the old stone estate just west of the Camelot Chapel. Ivy curled along the outer walls, and pale yellow light streamed through dust-speckled windows. Inside, the halls echoed with potential—bare floors, long-forgotten banners folded into corners, and a hearth waiting to be lit.

Tamara and Amaranthia followed close behind, each lugging armfuls of tabards, bedding, and provisions. Julia entered last, her mace slung at her side and a small sack of coin in her hand.

"It's perfect," Angela whispered. "Ours."

"Drafty," Tamara replied, "but sturdy. The bones are good."

"Everything smells like old knights," Amaranthia added, wrinkling her nose.

"Then let's fill it with new ones," Angela said. She strode forward, purpose burning in her eyes.

"This is where Orchid Fair begins."

Tamara swept her arm across the space. "Kitchen, war room, and enough bunks for a dozen."

"We'll need them," Amaranthia said. "We've had three inquiries already. One of them's a Minstrel."

"A minstrel?" Julia grinned. "We'll be unstoppable."

Angela nodded, jaw tight with resolve. "We'll shape them. Train them. The way the Orders don't."

Tamara leaned in, whispering, "And maybe one day, outshine them."

Angela didn't smile. But she didn't deny it either.

Chapter XXXIII — The Scout and the Quiet One

Camelot

The door creaked open and in walked Jestec and Hollia, their armor dusty from the road. Los spotted them before they saw him and crossed the room smiling.

"Your timing is perfect," he said, grinning.

Jestec raised a brow. "You again? You need help slaying another dragon —more giants, perhaps?"

"Perhaps," Los said slyly. "Come. I have a guild. We have food. Beds. Purpose."

Hollia hesitated. "What's the catch?"

"No catch, trust me," Los said.

They looked at one another, then clasped hands with Los. "Alright," Jestec said. "Show us the banner."

The Mind Behind the Curtain – Baldric's Study

Lord Baldric read the notice again: "Orchid Fair Guild Registered with Eight Members. Badge Approved. Headquarters Established."

His wine was untouched.

"...Los formed a guild," he muttered.

He set the parchment down. He leaned back

"Very well," he murmured. "You wish to play at leadership. At legacy."

He smiled.

"Then let's see how you handle consequences."

He would bide his time.

And when an opportunity arose, he would strike.

The Meager Meal

Willow sat quietly at the far end of the long dining hall, her back to the wall, hunched in the corner of the table where no one else chose to sit. Before her sat a meager meal—no more than what was given to all recruits and castoffs who found their way into the barracks. A small loaf of coarse bread. A shallow bowl of thin soup. Just enough to survive on. Nothing more.

She didn't complain. She never did. What little coin she had went to maintaining her gear. Food came second. It always had.

The double doors opened as Sergeant Brad Bradford entered, his boots striking heavily against the stone floor, flanked by a few of his men. The room hadn't been quiet, but his voice still cut through the noise.

"Well, look who's here," he bellowed with mock cheer. "The ugly little scout who can't pull her weight."

A few heads turned. Willow didn't flinch. She didn't look up. Her face remained neutral—cold, unreadable, the same frozen mask she always wore.

Bradford sneered. He knew she wouldn't answer. She never did. And he hated her for it.

"I'm talking to you!" he roared, stepping closer, fury rising at her continued silence.

She didn't move, just dipped her spoon into the soup with quiet precision.

With a sudden motion, Bradford struck the bowl, sending it sailing into the nearby wall where it exploded in a splash of broth and ceramic shards. A few chuckles rose from his cronies. Willow blinked, but her face showed nothing. Her hand simply paused mid-motion, fingers tightening on the last piece of bread.

That's when Chloe walked in.

The room shifted.

She was everything Willow wasn't—tall, confident, clean, with warm brown hair and bright blue eyes. Popular, well-dressed even in scout leathers, and trailed by a gaggle of fellow scouts who hung on her words.

She had just entered in time to witness the act.

"Leave her alone, Brad," Chloe snapped, using his first name like a slap, no title, no respect.

The room fell quieter.

Bradford's jaw clenched. He wanted to snap back, but Chloe wasn't just pretty—she was respected. Her family held status, enough to make her dangerous to anger publicly.

"She wants to eat," he barked back, "she's going to speak! Scouts have to talk! If they can't report what they see, they're worthless!"

His voice echoed harshly off the walls.

Chloe didn't blink. "You think it makes you a big man, picking on little Willow?" Her voice dripped with disdain. She didn't wait for a response. With a turn of her heel, she walked off, her entourage trailing behind like the tide following the moon.

Bradford turned to find Willow again, ready to retort. But the corner was empty.

She was gone.

All she had taken with her was what was left of her bread, the only part of her meal he hadn't ruined.

Bradford's hands balled into fists. Chloe had stolen his prey. He'd get that girl to speak one way or another. Or he'd make sure she quit.

Willow didn't go far. She slipped back into the barracks unseen, climbing into the high beams where she'd made her hidden bed—a nest in the rafters where no one else bothered her.

She nibbled the bread slowly, chewing each bite with mechanical quiet. Half of it she ate. The other half she wrapped and tucked away in her pack.

Tomorrow, she'd be at Sursbrooke, watching the coast. Food would be even scarcer there, and she was already hungry.

But hunger was a familiar companion. It never asked questions.

And like always, she remained silent.

Camelot Barracks – Chloe

The next morning, Chloe adjusted the straps of her harness as Lieutenant Rydderac reviewed the assignment scroll. The early morning sun slanted through the barracks windows, catching in her brown hair and highlighting the quiet patience in her blue eyes.

"You'll meet with some adventurers at Caer Sursbrooke," Rydderac said. "They are being asked to look into the Isolationists stirring up trouble out there. You will scout for them."

Chloe nodded.

"They asked for someone quiet, quick, and good with a bow." He handed over the scroll. "That's you."

"When do I leave?" she asked.

"Now. They will be waiting for you to arrive at Caer Sursbrooke before they set out. You know the region. I know you will do a fine job."

Chloe saluted softly and turned to go.

"Careful out there," Rydderac added, almost fondly.

Chloe smiled faintly and slipped out the northern gate, just as Los was entering through the eastern entrance.

Camelot Barracks – Midmorning

As Angela handled the new recruits and the new guild hall, Los had some unfinished business that had been gnawing at him. It had been bothering him since that day in the forest. Had he hallucinated it? Did the Lurikeen vanish before his eyes, or was he just in such a daze from its attack he could not see straight? And then again at the Hibernian Mile Gate. And after hearing some mercenaries complaining about stealthers at the tavern he had discretely asked about it, and the answer shocked him. Now he headed to the Barracks to see for himself.

Los strode into the Scout Wing, the din of training recruits echoing across the yard. A scout—a young lad with a shock of red hair and a ill-fitting helmet—nearly ran into him.

“Jou!” Los called.

The boy stopped. “Sir?”

“I am told Scouts can vanish into thin air,” Los said, “show me.”

The boy blinked. “You mean stealth?”

“Jes. Show me,” He said waving his arm, motioning him to proceed.

With a hesitant nod, the boy stepped back. “Watch.”

He closed his eyes, shifted his stance—and vanished. Or nearly so.

At a distance, he was gone. Up close, a faint shimmer of movement—a shade, like a faint dark ghost—was all that remained.

Los stepped forward, narrowing his eyes. “Incredible...”

The boy reappeared. “Only certain classes are trained in it. Scouts like me. Infiltrators too.”

Los was already turning toward the command office. “Then I will learn it as well.”

Scout Command Office

Lieutenant Kaherdin leaned back in his chair, arms crossed. An older man with a hawk nose and the permanent smirk of someone long past caring.

"You want to learn stealth," he repeated.

"I do."

"You're a Paladin. You use chants and faith, not shadows and sleight."

Los stood firm. "I've seen a Lurikeen vanish mid-fight, and a Celt do the same. If Albion has the same power, I want to juse it."

Kaherdin chuckled. "Would you teach me jour chants, then?"

Los frowned. "That is different."

"It's not," Kaherdin said, waving a hand. "This is ours. You lot get your miracles. We get our tricks. Everyone has their place."

"I am not asking for magic. I am asking for training."

"You're not getting either," the Lieutenant snapped. Then his smirk returned. "But I'll tell you what—since you're so determined..."

He pulled out a parchment, dipped a quill, and scratched a name.

"There's a scout stationed west of Caer Sursbrooke. Name's Willow. I will write orders for her to teach you."

Los narrowed his eyes. "She can teach me to vanish like jour Scouts?"

He handed Los the parchment with exaggerated care. "Good luck, Paladin."

As Los turned to leave, Kaherdin watched him go with quiet amusement.

If Los found Willow—which he was not likely to do, much as he hated the runt—she was very good at hiding. But if he did, she would not speak to him. She never spoke to anyone.

Good luck trying to learn a thing from a mute he laughed to himself.

Los left at once, he was not needed at the guild hall, and there were no new missions from the Church. It was the perfect opportunity to pursue this.

Turning invisible, how easy it would be to explore or move across the frontier. His limited understanding of how it worked clouded his judgement, but soon he would learn.

Chapter XXXIV — Steps in Silence

The Scout and the Orchid

Orchid Fair Guildhall – Camelot, Albion

The guildhall of Orchid Fair still smelled of fresh polish and recently unpacked linens. Morning light slanted through high windows, catching dust motes in the air as Julia moved through the entry hall with her usual quick, clerical energy—ledger in one hand, quill in the other.

The front door creaked open, and a young man stepped inside.

He looked about seventeen, tall for his age but not yet filled out. His hair was a tousled brown, and his eyes were bright blue—he was so familiar looking that Julia blinked in surprise. For a heartbeat, she thought it *was* Los.

Then she realized: younger, leaner, clothes slightly travel-worn, and his armor mismatched—half standard-issue Scout, half hand-repaired with leather lacing. A bow rested across his back, and a short sword hung at his hip.

“Excuse me,” he said, brushing the dust off his boots at the threshold. “Is Sir Los here?”

Julia offered a polite smile, stepping forward. “I’m afraid not. I have not seen him all morning. Is it urgent?”

The young man hesitated. “Sort of. Just... I’d heard he was part of this guild. Orchid Fair, right?”

“Yes.” She set down her ledger. “Can I help you?”

He looked around the high-vaulted room. “Is this guild only for Paladins and Clerics? I heard rumors.”

Julia chuckled softly. “Not at all. We’ve already welcomed an Armsman and a Minstrel. We’re open to any class willing to fight with honor.”

The boy relaxed a bit. “Good. That’s good. I’m Lucin.” He paused, then added, “Scout.”

“Lucin,” Julia repeated with a nod. “Well met. I’m Julia, a cleric.” She tilted her head slightly. “What brought you here? Just to find Sir Los?”

Lucin hesitated. "Sort of. I heard stories about someone named 'Fihri.' A Lady Paladin who almost... um... caved Sir Los's head in during a sparring match?"

A voice echoed from the stairs above. "That's *not* what happened."

Lucin turned to see a young woman descending the steps in light training leathers, her golden-blond hair tied back. She moved with casual command, her gaze firm, her posture proud.

It was Angela Burns, Guildmaster of Orchid Fair.

"I was there," she continued, stepping onto the floor. "It was a simple sparring match. No one's head was in danger."

Lucin gave a sheepish smile. "Didn't mean offense. Just... the guys at the barracks said Sir Los never stood a chance."

Angela's eyebrow twitched. "He held his own."

Julia smirked faintly, turning away to hide it.

Lucin straightened. "So... are *you* Fihri?"

Angela gave him a look. "No. I am Angela Burns. I'm the Guildmaster."

"Oh." Lucin blinked. "But they said—"

"'Fihri' is a nickname," Julia offered, her tone teasing now. "It started after the match. Some of the initiates started calling her that too."

Angela folded her arms. "And it is *not* catching on."

Just then, Tamara Burns wandered in from the hallway, sipping from a clay cup of hot tea. She caught the tail end of the conversation and grinned wickedly.

"Oh, it's catching on," she said. "Fihri suits you. Has a heroic ring. Fihri Burns."

Angela narrowed her eyes. "I swear to Arawn, Tamara—"

Tamara raised her hands in mock surrender, but the mischief didn't leave her face.

Lucin cleared his throat. "Actually... I did come here to warn Sir Los. About something."

Angela's expression softened. "What is it?"

"The Lieutenant—Kaherdin. He sent Los to find a scout named Willow. Told him she'd teach him how to stealth." He hesitated. "That's... not going to happen."

Angela tilted her head. "Because Paladins don't stealth?"

Lucin nodded. "Yes, that. And also because Willow's mute. Doesn't talk to anyone. And she's really good at hiding. Half the time, even the barracks doesn't know where she is."

Angela ran a hand down her face. "Ugh. He really *is* an idiot sometimes."

Lucin's face went slightly red. "Sorry. I just thought he should know. He's... he seems like someone worth respecting. That fight with the Troll? The bandits? Slaying a Dragon. I wanted to warn him, but he'd already left the barracks."

Angela exhaled slowly, then looked him over again. "Lucin. You admire him?"

He nodded. "He fights like he means it. And he doesn't treat people like they're less than him. I respect that."

A slow smile crept onto Angela's lips. "Well then. Welcome to Orchid Fair."

Lucin blinked. "Really?"

Julia stepped forward, smiling. "We're glad to have you. I'll take you through induction and show you the guild hall."

Angela turned to head upstairs again, but Tamara smirked and called after her.

"Fihri's got a fan club now."

Angela raised one hand in a dismissive wave. "If I hear that name one more time, I'm making *you* spar with me next."

Tamara just sipped her tea and grinned.

As Julia led Lucin deeper into the guildhall, the young scout looked back once toward the stairs where Angela had disappeared. His brow furrowed thoughtfully, then relaxed.

If that is who Sir Los fought... it is no wonder he lost.

Orchid Fair Guildhall – The War Room, Midday

The war room was quiet—too quiet.

Sunlight filtered through slanted shutters, striping the wooden floor and long map table in alternating bands of gold and shadow. A large, half-finished tapestry of Albion's southern frontiers hung against one wall, forgotten, and at the head of the room sat two young men who had long since run out of things to say.

Proximo slumped back in one of the carved chairs, flipping a dagger lazily between his fingers with the idle skill of someone who might actually be dangerous if he tried.

Romao sat sideways in his own chair, boot up on the table's edge, chewing on the last of an apple with the dead-eyed boredom of a lion caged too long.

"No missions today," Prox muttered.

"No brawls. No drills." Romao squinted at the ceiling. "No one even insulted me in the hallway."

Prox twirled the dagger. "You want me to insult you? I'm bored enough."

Romao grunted. "Save it for training. I like my ears unperforated."

The door creaked open.

Angela stepped in, clutching a folded report in one hand, her hairband keeping her hair out of her face, but giving her a more girlish look than noble. Her eyes flicked from one lounging Paladin to the other with faint disapproval. "You two look like you're plotting the collapse of civilization."

Prox perked up. "We're actually debating whether Romao's ego can fit through the front door unaided."

Romao tossed his apple core into a nearby bin with a perfect arc. "Unclear. We haven't tested the upper limit."

Angela sighed and approached the table. "And Los isn't here."

"We noticed," Romao said. "Did he vanish?"

"Not exactly," she said, pulling out a chair. "He's headed out to Caer Sursbrooke. Got it in his head he wants to learn how to stealth."

Both men blinked at her.

Romao sat up straighter. "Los? Stealth?"

"He does know he wears plate armor, right?" Prox added.

Angela nodded dryly. "Apparently he's not aware. And Lieutenant Kaherdin thought it would be funny to send him out to Caer Sursbrooke to find a scout named Willow to teach him."

Romao leaned forward, suddenly interested. "Wait—Willow? *Mute Willow?*"

Angela gave him a sharp look. "You know her?"

Prox raised an eyebrow. "We have heard of her, the mute scout that hangs out west of Caer Sursbrooke watching the coast."

Romao chuckled. "Some of the scouts think she's going to snap one day and slit the sergeant's throat. The one that is always picking on her"

"She might," Angela murmured. "Bradford's a walking infestation."

Romao crossed his arms. "So, Los wants to learn stealth from someone who doesn't talk, and who he probably can't find? I wish I were there to watch—it would be pure comedy."

Angela shrugged. "That's our Sir Los. Noble. Stubborn. Predictably unpredictable."

"Speaking of predictably unpredictable," Prox said, narrowing his eyes at her with mock suspicion. "We've been hearing something."

Angela paused, wary. "What?"

Romao gave her a knowing grin. "A name."

She straightened. "What name?"

"Fihri," Romao said, voice smug.

Angela's brow furrowed. "*How—?!*"

"It's been going around," Prox said, clearly pleased. "You spar with one knight, knock him on his back once, and suddenly you're a legend."

Angela groaned and rubbed her temples. "I didn't even *win* that spar."

Romao leaned back, lacing his fingers behind his head. "Doesn't matter. He's a Paladin, you're a girl. You look fierce. People fill in the rest."

"I hate the name and besides I am a Paladin too!" Angela muttered.

Prox grinned. "Yes, but it does suit you."

Angela threw the rolled parchment at him, and he caught it effortlessly. "Remind me why I let either of you in this guild."

Romao winked. "Because you needed someone pretty to balance out your terrifying aura."

Angela gave him a deadpan stare.

Romao threw his hands up. "Joking! Only joking!"

Angela sighed, sinking back into her chair. "I wonder if Los knows that's what they're calling me."

Prox looked thoughtful. "Could work to our advantage."

"How?"

"Let the myth build. Fihri Burns, Guildmaster of Orchid Fair. Sir Los, the Epic Paladin. People love stories. And Orchid Fair's getting some."

Angela glanced toward the high windows, sunlight flickering on the edge of the map.

Maybe they were.

And maybe it was worth the embarrassment.

The Garden of Quiet Wounds

Abbey Gardens – Camelot, Late Afternoon

The sun hung low over Camelot, casting long rays through the stained-glass windows of the Abbey and bathing the inner cloister garden in soft golden hues. Lavender spilled over the flagstones, and the hum of bees drifted on the breeze. A fountain murmured quietly in the corner, the gentle trickle of water echoing beneath stone arches.

Angela Burns sat on a carved bench near the ivy wall. A breeze lifted loose strands of her hair as she stared out toward the flowerbeds, not really seeing them.

Lady Triss approached with her usual silent grace, a folded missive in hand, boots barely scuffing the stone. "You summoned me?"

Angela blinked, then stood reflexively, brushing her palms on her trousers. "I—no, not summoned. I just asked if you had a moment."

Triss arched an eyebrow but gave a faint nod, settling beside her. "You look troubled."

Angela hesitated. "I heard something today. About Los."

At that, Triss's expression shifted—barely, but Angela caught it. "Go on."

"He left for *Caer Sursbrooke*," Angela said, folding her arms. "Apparently, he wants to learn how to stealth."

A pause. Then Triss blinked once. "He's a Paladin."

"I know."

Triss looked away, toward the blooming foxglove. "That... is not something someone like him can be taught."

Angela gave a dry smile. "No. It's not. But that's not the part that bothers me."

Triss tilted her head.

"He was sent to learn from a scout named Willow. A mute. Never speaks to anyone."

Understanding flickered in Triss's eyes. "Willow of Cornwall. I remember the name."

"Lieutenant Kaherdin wrote out an order for her to teach him. He told Los he could find her west of *Sursbrooke*," Angela said. Her voice dropped. "Knowing full well she wouldn't be able to teach him."

Triss's jaw tightened. "And Los...?"

"Left with nothing but the scroll and his heart on his sleeve," Angela said. "You know how he is."

Triss exhaled slowly, fingers folding the parchment tighter in her lap. "He reminds me of someone."

Angela turned her head slightly. "Who?"

A pause.

Triss said quietly. "His father."

That silenced them both for a moment. A pigeon fluttered onto the far balustrade, cooing absently.

Triss turned to look at her. "Why are you telling me this?"

Angela hesitated. "Because I thought you'd want to know. And because people keep laughing behind his back."

Triss's gaze drifted to the rippling water of the fountain. Her voice, when it came, was soft.

"There are two kinds of knights, Angela. Those who think their armor makes them invincible—and those who believe their good intention makes them invincible. Los is the latter."

Angela looked at her. "You care for him."

Triss's lips parted, then closed. Finally, she said, "I respect him."

Angela didn't press. She just nodded. "Should I intervene?"

Triss's eyes narrowed slightly. "No. Let him follow this thread. Even if it began as a joke. He has to learn not to trust so easily."

Angela gave a faint smile. "You sound like a mother."

"I just care about him, like you," Triss said as her eyes trailed off to some distant place.

They sat in silence a moment longer. The sky was beginning to tint rose.

As Triss rose to leave, she glanced down at Angela. "Keep an eye on him. And if Willow truly tries to teach him... maybe it will be good for them both."

Angela smiled, but it was guarded. "He's lucky to have you."

Triss turned away. "He's lucky to have you as well."

The fountain whispered between them as Triss disappeared through the cloister arch.

Angela sat alone a while longer, watching petals fall into the pool.

Camelot Barracks, Scout Wing – Late Afternoon

The halls of the Defenders of Albion were dim with what daylight found its way in, the buzz of daytime training replaced by distant laughter from the mess and the low clatter of evening dice games. Down one quieter corridor, at the Scout Wing's administrative offices, a door creaked open with a soft but unmistakable sound.

Lady Triss stepped through, her boots clicking with deliberate measure upon the flagstones. Her gold-trimmed ivory cloak stirred slightly behind her, a subtle echo of her mood—controlled, but gathering force.

Lieutenant Kaherdin sat behind his desk, hunched slightly over a map of the northern border. His blond hair was tied back neatly, and a goblet of watered wine stood half-finished near his elbow. The moment he looked up, his expression shifted—from annoyance, to caution.

"Lady Triss," he said, rising slowly. "I wasn't aware we had—"

"You were not," she interrupted, her tone clipped but calm. "Sit."

Kaherdin hesitated, then obeyed.

She stepped forward, planting a leather-gloved hands behind her back. "I've just come from speaking with Lady Angela."

Kaherdin's eyes narrowed. "A promising Paladin, I'm told."

"She is. And she has informed me of a report I confirmed through other means: that you sent Sir Los Ortiz—my Paladin—to a mute Scout who, as I understand it cannot read, with written orders... as a joke."

He leaned back slightly, masking his reaction with an airy shrug. "It wasn't a *joke*, my lady. It was a lesson. The boy's pride is enormous, and his desire to walk in Scouts boots? Absurd."

Lady Triss's voice dropped in temperature. "You endangered the morale of two people in one stroke. One, a Paladin who risked his life at Ellan Vannin. The other, a mute girl you seem to take pleasure in mistreating. That, Lieutenant, is cowardice."

Kaherdin's jaw tensed. "The Paladin asked to learn something that isn't his place. I showed him—"

"You showed him *nothing*," Triss snapped, her voice now cutting glass. "And what you do with your scouts is your concern. But involve one of my Paladins in your petty games again—"

The lieutenant looked away, face stony. "And now what? You'll make him a Scout? And perhaps next you will teach the Mute Chants and make her a Paladin; I will gladly give her over to the Order."

Lady Triss was not amused. "If you ever *again* play games with my Paladins' lives or dignity, I will have your rank stripped and your name recorded among those who abuse their command."

She stared him down for a moment.

"Is that clear, Lieutenant Kaherdin?"

He nodded once, his mouth thin. "Crystal."

Lady Triss turned, cloak swirling behind her like a curtain falling. But as she reached the doorway, she paused.

"You may mock devotion, Kaherdin. But you'd be wise to remember, it is not armor or shields that make a Paladin feared."

She glanced over her shoulder. "It is that we bring light to dark places."

Then she was gone, her steps echoing with the full weight of command.

Caer Sursbrooke– Willow and the Paladin

The forest around Caer Sursbrooke was dense with early autumn green, where the wind whispered through high branches and crows circled above like wary sentries. Los stepped through the tree line just outside the watchtower, his polished silver armor glinting in shafts of afternoon light. He paused to scan for movement, his brow furrowed.

A voice called from nearby, both warm and friendly:
"Looking for someone?"

He turned. A young scout stood by the edge of the underbrush. Slim, sure-footed, and draped in quiet leathers, grey in color and rather stylish in cut. Her brown hair was tied back tight, and her bow rested easily against her shoulder.

"I am looking for Willow," Los said. "A scout—are you her?"

The girl raised an eyebrow. "I'm Chloe. Willow's... quieter." She gestured out toward the woods with a nod. "See that tree? Big one. Branches like antlers."

Los followed her gaze to a towering oak.

"She's up there. Probably heard you clanking through the grass already."

Los winced. "Am I really so loud?"

Chloe smirked. "You're a walking bell tower. I'd take you to her, but I'm meeting a group of adventurers headed north. Isolationist trouble."

She started off, then called over her shoulder: "Good luck."

—

Los trudged through the undergrowth toward the great oak tree, each step crunching softly, each motion ringing faintly from his armor despite his efforts to walk lightly. He peered upward.

"Willow?" he called, raising a hand.

High above, a pair of eyes widened. A slim figure pressed itself flat against the tree's upper branches, heart pounding. How did he know her name? What was he doing here?

"Willow!" he called again, more insistently. "Lieutenant Kaherdin sent me!"

The girl groaned inwardly and ducked around to the far side of the trunk, hoping somehow he'd take the hint. But no—his voice rose again, earnest and clear.

"I need jour help—please."

With a sharp exhale, Willow nimbly made her way down the tree and dropped lightly onto the moss. Her eyes flicked left and right. No enemies, but still—he was loud enough to bring them if they were near.

Her short orange hair was tangled and uneven, and a large X-shaped scar slashed across her right cheek—jagged, unmistakable, and earned. She looked both shy and nervous all at once.

"Ah! Thank jou," Los said, stepping forward, scroll in hand. "I have orders. Kaherdin said jou could teach me to... vanish. Like Scouts do."

Willow's eyes locked onto the parchment, then looked away in rising panic. She didn't read. Couldn't. Her fingers curled around the edge of the scroll, as if meaning might transfer through touch. It didn't.

And this man—this polished and handsome Paladin—was asking *her* for instruction?

She touched her cheek self-consciously, fingers covering the X-shaped scar that slashed across the right side of her face. She turned slightly away.

"I know it is sudden," Los said gently, "but can jou help me?"

Willow didn't respond. Her eyes flicked to his shoulders, his chest, his hips. The armor. Gods, it was loud. Every movement a herald of his position. She moved her arm in a smooth arc, pointing at him, then rolled her wrist and pointed again.

Los tilted his head. "What—like this?" He raised an arm and let it clink.

She nodded quickly, then pointed to her ear.

He paused... then nodded in understanding. "Ah. Too loud."

She pulled a small patch of leather from her pouch and sliced it silently with a small blade. Taking one piece at a time, she wedged the leather between joints in his armor—his elbow, his shoulder. Her hands were quick, nimble.

Los raised his arm again. The sound had dulled considerably compared to a moment ago. "Jes..." he murmured. "That is better."

She gave a slight nod, then stepped back.

Los looked to her again. "So... jou will teach me?"

Willow hesitated, then pointed to the sun—high and westward—and waved her hand downward in a slow arc.

Los narrowed his eyes. "Tomorrow?"

She pointed at him, then mimed walking, then pointed toward Sursbrooke.

"Tomorrow," Los repeated, understanding dawning. "At Sursbrooke?"

She nodded.

Los smiled faintly. "I will be there. And thank jou, Willow."

He turned and began to walk back toward the keep, armor still clanging, just slightly less now.

Willow stood in place a moment longer, still watching. Then she looked down at her hand, at the leather remnants, and sighed.

The Paladin wanted *her* help.

And tomorrow... he'd return.

Caer Sursbrooke– Steps in Silence

Morning Mist

The fog over Caer Sursbrooke clung low to the earth, swirling in the quiet alleys and around the stone walls of the keep. Birds stirred in the trees beyond the parapets, and the faint call of distant gulls echoed from the northern coast. Los arrived at the outer courtyard just as the sun began to break through the haze, throwing long shafts of gold across the frost-crusting cobbles.

He looked tired. His eyes were rimmed with red, his steps slow but measured. The silver of his armor still caught the light, but the ornate flourishes that once marked its shoulders and bracers were noticeably slimmed, streamlined.

"Didn't expect to see you here this early."

He turned to see Chloe stepping through the gate from the northern field, bow slung over her back and her quiver light with use. She looked alert and composed, though a faint sheen of sweat clung to her brow.

"Chloe," Los said with a nod. "Did you finish your mission?"

She gave a light shrug. "Yeah. Isolationists are more disorganized than dangerous. They scattered before we made contact. A few scuffles, no injuries."

"Jes... good," he said, stifling a yawn.

Chloe raised an eyebrow, then gave him a more pointed look. "You look like you haven't slept."

"I did not," Los admitted, rubbing at his temple. "I spent the night with a leatherworker. And then an armorsmith."

Chloe blinked. "Why?"

"To quiet this," he said, gesturing to his armor. "Willow told me it was too loud. She would not teach how you scouts stealth to me unless I fixed it."

He shifted his stance and moved one arm, rotating the shoulder. Where once the joints would have clanked sharply, there was only a dull whisper of movement.

Curious, Chloe stepped closer. "You modified plate armor... in one night?"

"The leather smith added leather between the joints. Then an armor smith helped me remove the flourishes and trim the excess weight. It is not as pretty now, but it does not make a lot of sound anymore."

Chloe circled him, studying the changes. The armor was indeed leaner—less decorated, more utilitarian. Still somehow noble in form, but now it moved more like studded leather than steel.

"You're serious about this, you want to learn to stealth?" she said quietly.

Los nodded. "Jes."

She looked at him sidelong. "So she told you to quiet your armor?"

He nodded again. "She did not speak. But she showed me." He paused. "She is... afraid noise would draw danger."

Chloe's expression shifted slightly. "Los... Willow isn't afraid of noise."

He looked confused. "Then...?"

"She doesn't speak. Not ever. She's a mute."

Los's eyes dropped. "A mute Scout?"

"Yes," Chloe said. "Well, she can speak—or so people in Cornwall say. But she won't. Hasn't for years. Not since well... She is an Orphan and she was alone after her parents died, they say she lived on her own from age 12, until a party of scouts found her. She was half starved and would not speak to anyone." She stopped herself. "Anyway, don't take it personally."

He frowned, the wind lifting the white cloak behind him. "But... how can she teach me if she cannot speak?"

Chloe gave him a look that was half amusement, half challenge. "She'll find a way. If she agreed to help you, that is."

Los glanced away, clearly turning it over in his mind. He opened his mouth as if to speak, then paused. "But she has to teach me, Lieutenant Kaherdin wrote orders for her to help me."

Chloe shook her head. "Lieutenant Kaherdin knows Willow can't read. Sending you with written orders? It wasn't a mistake—it was cruel. He wanted to make both of you look foolish."

She rested a hand lightly on his arm. "Good luck, Paladin." Then she stepped past him toward the keep. "I have a report to give Lord Sursbrooke."

And with that, she disappeared into the stone halls, leaving Los alone in the morning light.

He turned back toward the courtyard gate, his boots silent on the stone. He looked out across the mist-draped fields beyond, scanning for any sign of movement—any glimmer of blaze orange hair in the wind.

Willow would come. She said she would.

One way or another he would learn stealth, or at least, be stealthy.

Chapter XXXV — The Shadow and the Cross

Caer Sursbrooke Courtyard, Morning

The sun had barely cleared the treetops when Willow crept along the shadowed edge of Caer Sursbrooke's outer wall. She moved like wind through reeds—silent, swift, unseen by any of the guards posted along the battlements above.

She hadn't expected him to be here. She'd hoped—quietly, foolishly—that he would forget. That he'd assume she'd vanished like mist, like she always did when things became too much.

But there he was.

Sir Los stood near the stables, just outside the keep's east gate, the early light spilling over his frame like gilded fire. He looked tired, but upright. Serious, but patient. His hands were clasped behind his back like a soldier at rest. His eyes were scanning the edge of the tree line.

Willow's heart sank.

Then her eyes narrowed.

His armor.

Gone were the gleaming, filigreed shoulders and the bright, polished joints. What he wore now was slimmer, quieter, padded with leather. And while still silver, it bore scuffing and soot stains from hard handling.

He'd listened.

He had actually listened.

She stepped from the shadows with reluctant purpose. He turned instantly.

"Willow," he said, smiling faintly. "Jou came."

She nodded once, slowly, and took a few steps closer—then froze. Her eyes darted from his chestplate to the sun above, then back again. Her face twisted in something between alarm and frustration.

"What is it?" Los asked, puzzled.

She exhaled sharply through her nose and stepped forward. She pointed at his armor—then the sun—then her own eyes. She mimed shielding her gaze and squinting.

He frowned. "Too bright?"

She gave a small, sharp nod.

He looked down at the steel plates. "But... I made it quiet..."

She reached for her satchel and pulled out a bit of charcoal. With quick, almost irritated motions, she sketched on a bit of parchment—an outline of him standing among trees. His armor flared like a beacon, lines cutting across the natural shapes. Then she shaded it—made the figure dark, blending into the backdrop.

Los leaned over it. "Ah..." he said slowly. "Jes. I understand now."

He looked up. "We need to dye it."

Willow blinked in surprise.

"Can you help me find someone?" he asked. "An alchemist? Or a tanner?"

She nodded.

The Dye and the Deal

Inside the modest alchemist's shop tucked next to the base of the gatehouse, the smell of crushed herbs and damp chalk filled the air. Shelves sagged with jars of powders, dried leaves, and glowing tinctures.

"Armor dye?" the old man rasped, adjusting his goggles. "Haven't had a request like that since... well, since the last war. Want it black or dark green?"

"Black," Los said. "Or as close to it as you can make."

The alchemist nodded. "It'll take half an hour to boil down. Then it needs to sit and dry. You want it permanent?"

Los glanced at Willow.

She gave a curt nod.

"Permanent," he confirmed.

As the man shuffled away to gather ingredients, Los turned to Willow. "While we wait... would you join me for a meal?"

Willow froze.

"Anything you want," Los said, soft but earnest. "The hall should be serving breakfast still. I will pay."

She didn't move.

"I owe you," he added.

Slowly, she nodded.

The Surprising Meal

The mess hall of Caer Sursbrooke was already bustling with off-duty guards and weary travelers when they entered. Willow kept her hood drawn and gaze low as she followed Los to the long tables. A cook behind the stone serving counter raised an eyebrow when Los began.

"Anything she wants," he said, opening his coin pouch. "Let her choose."

Willow glanced around. Then, hesitantly, she pointed: roasted potatoes, salted fish, stewed carrots, barley bread, and two eggs. Then porridge. Then apples. Then more bread. Then meat pie.

Los's eyebrows climbed steadily.

They sat in a corner near the hearth. Willow wasted no time. She began to eat with swift, efficient bites—controlled, but fast. Not ravenous. Not undignified. But hungry. Deeply, quietly hungry.

Los watched for a moment, then smiled. "Was there anything else you would like to try?"

She paused briefly, meeting his eyes, and for just a second... there was a flicker of happiness in hers. A glint. She took another bite.

When they finished, she leaned back, visibly calmer. Her hands no longer shook. Her eyes no longer darted. She had not eaten so well in all her life. She signed to him thank you.

Los stood and offered his hand.

"We still have work to do."

The First Steps into Shadow

The alchemist had applied the dye and hung the armor on hooks outside to dry. It no longer gleamed—it shimmered faintly like dark stone, dull and shadowy.

Willow gave an approving nod.

They moved outside the keep, into the edge of the surrounding forest. The wind was low, the branches above creaking softly. Dappled sunlight patterned the earth.

Willow knelt and motioned for Los to do the same.

Then the lesson began.

She showed him how to bend his knees, how to keep his center of gravity low. She gestured to his boots—how to roll his feet from heel to toe. She used sticks to demonstrate sight lines, stones to mark sound traps like dry leaves or broken twigs. She moved through the trees like a breath of air, then motioned for him to follow.

Los tried. And failed.

He snapped a branch. She winced. He stepped too wide. She shook her head. He leaned on a tree, and bark peeled off.

He groaned. "I am trying."

She exhaled. Then she tapped her chest twice, pointed to him, and nodded. He understood: "I know."

And so they tried again.

And again.

Until the sun began to dip low, and Los—wary but smiling—stepped from behind a tree without a single leaf crackling beneath his boot.

Willow raised one eyebrow in surprise.

He bowed. "Jes. Teach me more."

The Guildhall – Evening Briefing

Candlelight danced across maps—and tension.

Angela stood motionless, her eyes sweeping the parchment-strewn war table. One report bore the signs of haste: rain-smearred ink and a jagged black scrawl—swords crossed in ink, bold and ominous.

Tamara read aloud, voice steady—too steady.

"Scout report. Northern frontier. A Paladin sighted. Shadowed armor. Fast. Silent. No insignia. Appears. Attacks. Vanishes immediately after."

She swallowed, eyes flicking once to Angela before returning to the parchment.

"Four kills witnessed. Midgard troll. Hibernian champion. An elven scout. A dwarf—Valkyrie by the marks of her kit."

She paused. The candle hissed.

"A witness claims the Paladin came out of the trees like a wraith. No footfall. No warning. Just a quick attack, then gone."

A young scout near the door cleared his throat, uneasy. "Some say he's working with a scout. But... I've never heard of a Paladin teaming up with a Scout before."

Romao leaned back slowly, color draining from his face. "No..."

Angela's head snapped toward him. "Romao."

He didn't look at her. His eyes were on the map like it had betrayed him.

"It couldn't be," he repeated.

Angela's voice sharpened. "Couldn't be *what*?"

Romao hesitated—then said it like a prayer he didn't want answered.

"The Knight."

He paused.

"Could it be... Los?"

Angela blinked once. "Anything is possible."

But doubt sat under the words like iron.

"For almost a week," Julia murmured. "And we've heard nothing."

Angela's gaze stayed on the frontier line—dark ink, darker implications.

"If he's not back in three days..." she said, and her voice went very calm, "...we send someone."

The room fell still.

The candlelight flickered.

And the shadows stretched across the map like fingers.

For one quiet moment, Angela thought—without meaning to:

Where could you be?

The Forest Road – Outside Camelot

The trail was quiet beneath the pale morning light.

Los rode slowly, upright despite exhaustion. His armor had changed—its silver dulled by black dye, joints wrapped in leather. It whispered rather than rang.

Beside him, Willow rode a shaggy mare, taut and wary like a feral cat trying to hold on.

“Thank jou,” Los said softly. “For jour patience.”

She glanced at him from under her hood and nodded.

They reached the Camelot stables just before the midnight bells. No words. Just another nod.

Then she slipped from her horse and vanished into the night as if she had never been.

Los’s tired eyes watched her go. Then he headed home himself.

The Castilian Embassy – Midnight

Los slipped through the back door, too tired to notice the shift in the shadows.

A hand gripped his wrist. A twist, a pivot—and he was slammed against the stone wall. A knife gleamed beneath his chin.

“Who are jou?” Los snapped.

The man’s voice was calm, clipped, and tinged with Castilian precision.

“Embajador?”

Los switched tongues. “¿Quién eres?”

"Soy Ramón de Vivar. Enviado por Castilla. Soy su secretario y ayo."

The figure stepped back and adjusted his lapels, revealing a tailored coat with hidden blades. His eyes were cold, measuring.

Los scowled. "Jou nearly broke my arm."

Ramón shrugged with polite indifference. "Forgive me. I thought you were a thief."

"Well... I'm not."

He sniffed the air faintly. "No. But you do smell like one. Shall I draw you a bath, Ambassador?"

"Jes, please," Los groaned. "I could juse one."

As Ramón helped him out of his armor with practiced hands, he continued in a formal tone:

"I serve Castille. My duty is to protect the embassy—and its Ambassador—from all threats, against the Crown or... private. You are now a representative of the Crown Don Lorenzo. I was sent to be your aid, your tutor, and your shield."

"So my appointment is confirmed."

"Of course."

Los eased into the steaming tub with a sigh. His limbs sank beneath the surface, the heat chasing the last chill from his bones.

"Jou seem a capable fellow," he murmured.

"I have many talents," Ramón said. "Shall I handle anything else tonight?"

"No, thank jou. I will go straight to bed. Much to do in the morning."

"As you wish, Ambassador."

Defenders of Albion – Scout Wing

Lieutenant Kaherdin sat at his desk, quill tapping against a rolled border map. His head snapped up at the near-silent creak of the door.

Willow stood inside the office, her gaze like a drawn blade. In her hand: the parchment he had sent Los with—orders she could not read.

She stepped forward and slammed it on his desk making him flinch.

Then he sneered. "So he found you, did he? You little gutter rat."
He leaned back in his chair, forcing a smile that didn't reach his eyes.
"Have a nice chat with your new Paladin friend? Teach him how to skulk in the shadows?"

He looked down at the parchment, then back up, voice dropping to a hiss.
"You can't even read it. Can you."

His eyes narrowed at her.

Willow didn't blink.

She turned and walked out. No slam. No sound.
And Kaherdin reached—shaking—for his wine.

Better lock my door tonight.

Castilian Embassy – Morning

Sunlight spilled through the stained glass, painting the kitchen in warm amber and rose. Ramón set a tray before Los: spiced eggs with garlic and peppers, crusty bread, and a tisane strong enough to challenge a knight.

Los inhaled deeply and dug in like a starving man.
"I must go," he said between bites. "My guild—my friends—they'll want to kill me."

Ramón raised a brow. "Interesting friends you keep, Don Lorenzo."

"Please, never juse that name openly. Here I am called Sir Los." He gave no further explanation.

"As you wish... Don Los."

"Jour my aid? My assistant?" Los asked, peering at him over the rim of his cup.

"Yes, Ambassador."

Los nodded once, as if a decision had just been made. "Good. I have a special project for jou—quiet work. Discreet. No one outside this house needs to know."

Ramón tilted his head. "A matter of diplomacy?"

"In a way." Los tore off a piece of bread. "I found out a friend of mine can't read. I want to know how common that is here. Especially in the poorer quarters."

Ramón's lips curved faintly. "Very common, Ambassador. Even in this great city."

"Truly?" Los paused mid-bite. "How do people live? Send messages? Learn?"

"Don Los, not everyone has had the privilege of a noble's education as you have."

Los looked out the window at the city. "Then maybe it's something I should fix."

Ramón's brow lifted. "That will take time... and coin."

Los leaned back, a spark of resolve in his eyes. "I have both. And I'd rather spend them on something worthwhile. But first, I start with Willow."

With that, he rose, slinging his cloak over one shoulder. "We'll speak more on this later. For now, I have to see the Guild—before they come here looking for me."

Ramón bowed slightly. "If I may, Ambassador... advise your friends to use the front door."

Orchid Fair Guildhall – Midday

The war room buzzed. Recruits passed in and out, carrying bows, tallying arrows, reviewing maps. Angela stood at the central table, organizing patrols.

"Angela," came a voice from the doorway.

She turned.

Her arms crossed immediately. "You absolute idiot. Where have you been?"

"I know," Los said, stepping inside. "I should have sent word."

"I nearly sent Romao after you."

"You should have," Romao added, entering with Prox behind him. "We figured you'd either died or defected."

"Did you take a vow of silence?" Prox teased.

Los smirked. "No. But my new valet might silence you if you try sneaking in."

Prox blinked. "You have a valet?"

"Well, a Secretary. Very sharp. Very fast. Trust me—front door only. And knock."

Angela shook her head. Her mouth twitched—but she masked the smile.

"Well," she said softly. "Welcome back."

"Jes. And when we have time," Los added, "I'd like to go over what I learned."

He gave her a tired grin.

"I call it... *Paladin stealth*."

Angela snorted. "For now, we have work to do, patrols to organize, assignments to post."

She was too busy for Los's nonsense.

Los nodded.

And as she turned back to the map, he looked at her, warmth in his expression.

I missed jou too.

Orchid Fair Guildhall – Late Evening

The guildhall had quieted.

Most of the recruits had filtered out, maps rolled, orders posted. Only a few candles remained lit along the stone walls, flickering softly, casting long shadows over the benches and banners. Outside the high arched window, faint music drifted from the street—a gentle lute melody and the echo of laughter.

Angela stood alone at the war table, her hand resting lightly on the edge. She had not moved in some time.

Footsteps padded softly behind her. She didn't turn.

"Do jou hear it," Los said gently.

She let out a breath. "Hear what?"

He walked over to the window and opened it, the music floating in on the gentle breeze. It was soft, it was slow, and it caught her off guard.

She glanced up.

He nodded toward the window. "There's music. A clear night. And jus jou and I." he paused and smiled as he looked towards the window. "Would jou join me for a dance?"

Angela blinked. "A dance? Right now?"

Los smiled faintly. "Jes please, if jou would care to join me."

She hesitated—arms still crossed, posture stiff with command. "I'm not good at these things."

"Dancing?" he asked.

"No. Letting my guard down."

Los extended a hand. Not formally, not like a courtier—just honestly, like someone reaching for something they didn't want to drop.

"Then let me guard jou, just for a moment."

Angela stared at the offered hand. Her lips parted. Then slowly—almost against her better judgment—she placed her hand in his.

He guided her into a loose sway, feet barely moving. The music from the street played softly through the window, and for once, she let herself listen.

"Jou know," he murmured, eyes on hers, "when jou smile—not the court smile, but the real one—it is truly beautiful, deeply beautiful, like an angel's sigh."

Angela flushed. "That's absurd."

"I'm absurd," he agreed easily. "But I mean it."

Her gaze flicked away—but only briefly. "Why now?"

"Because this is the first time jou're not surrounded by scrolls or swords and other people. And because I..."

He hesitated—searching for the words, then gave up on them entirely.

Instead, he reached up gently, brushing a loose strand of hair from her cheek. His fingers lingered, soft against her skin, and then caressed the side of her face—his thumb resting just below her cheekbone.

"Because, Angela... jou are truly wonderful."

He looked deep into her eyes as he said it—no jest, no mask, only honesty.

She looked up at him, truly looked. And in that moment, she didn't feel like Lady Angela of House Burns, or a Paladin, or Guildmaster of Orchid Fair.

She felt like a woman—she felt truly seen.

His hand tightened slightly on hers. His voice was quieter now. "Thank jou, for sharing this moment with me."

Angela's breath caught.

He wasn't just looking at her.

He was seeing her.

Not the title. Not the duty. Her.

She stepped in closer, resting her head lightly against his chest. He closed his eyes as his hand gently settled at her back.

No more words were needed.

Orchid Fair Guildhall – Moments Later

The door closed behind him with a soft *click*.

Angela stood still in the center of the guildhall, hand falling slowly to her side where his had just been. The faint echo of the music still drifted through the open window, though it sounded farther now—fainter, like a dream slipping past the edge of waking.

Her heart was beating too fast.

She didn't move. Not right away.

Instead, she listened—to the silence between notes. The space he had left behind. The stillness pressing in around her like a held breath.

Then she exhaled.

Slowly, she crossed the stone floor and sat on the edge of the long war table, fingers trailing across the old wood worn smooth by years of maps, orders, arguments, and plans. So many plans.

But nothing in her life had prepared her for *this*.

Not a duel. Not diplomacy. Not war. Not even the weight of her station.

She touched her cheek where his hand had been, then her chest—just lightly, as if checking to see if her heart had stayed behind in his arms.

"Idiot," she whispered softly, but there was no venom in it. Just a breath of laughter, tinged with something far more dangerous.

Affection.

Her gaze wandered to the candlelight dancing on the stone walls. It no longer looked like war flicker. It looked like warmth.

Like something she hadn't let herself want in a long time.

He'd seen her. Not the armor. Not the title. *Her*.
And the most disarming part—he hadn't asked her to give any of it up.

That was the most disarming part of all.

She leaned back on her hands, looking up at the wooden beams above. For the first time in weeks, her shoulders began to unclench.

Maybe she didn't have to carry it all alone.

Maybe, just maybe... she didn't *want* to.

A breeze stirred the edge of the open window, carrying the last notes of the lute through the hall like a promise not quite spoken.

Angela smiled.

A real one, this time.

And it felt like *hers*.

Outside – Nightfall

The streets of Camelot lay quiet beneath the moonlight, the stones still warm from the day's sun. Los walked slowly, hands tucked into his cloak, head slightly bowed.

The music had faded behind him, but not the moment.

Her head against his chest. Her breath steady. That feeling of *rightness*. Of peace.

He reached up and touched the front of his shirt. Gripping the silver ring beneath it, it was warm from his skin, and somehow heavy.

Risa's ring, simple, unadorned, loved.

"I didn't forget you," he whispered. "I never will."

His voice cracked—just a little.

He held the ring tight, pressing it to his heart.

"But... she smiled at me tonight. And for the first time in a long while, I smiled back."

He stopped walking, looked up at the sky—at the stars.

"Forgive me."

The wind stirred faintly, like breath against his cheek.

Then he released his grip on his shirt, on her ring, and continued walking—shoulders straighter, steps firmer than before.

Not forgetting.

Just somehow, moving forward.

Chapter XXXVI — The Student

Defenders of Albion – Barracks Yard, Next Day, Late Morning

The clang of steel rang across the yard, punctuated by grunts and the thud of practice blows. Willow sat cross-legged on the low wall near the archery butts, a whetstone in one hand and her dagger in the other. She worked with quiet focus, eyes flicking now and then to the sparring soldiers.

A young page in the King's livery picked his way across the yard, scanning faces. When he spotted her, he hesitated, then approached like a man nearing a sleeping wolf. The large X shaped scar on the side of her face made her look especially scary to the young messenger.

"Uh... you're... Willow, yes?"

She glanced up, expression unreadable, and nodded once.

"I've a message. From the Castilian Embassy." He cleared his throat, reading from memory. "*Sir Los requests your presence in the embassy library at noon. There will be lunch... and lessons.*"

Her hand paused mid-stroke over the dagger's edge. She tilted her head, narrowing her eyes at the boy like she was trying to determine if this was a trap or a joke.

"Er... he said 'to teach you to read,'" the messenger added, as if that would help.

Willow stared at him for a long beat, then slid the dagger into its sheath, hopped off the wall, and started walking toward the gate without a sound.

"Does that mean you'll come?" the boy called after her.

She didn't turn; she didn't say a word. The boy exhaled in relief and muttered that his job was to deliver the message, nothing more, "Glad that's done," he said, before hurrying away.

Castilian Embassy – Second Floor Library

The clatter upstairs was enough to make Los abandon his tisane. He took the steps two at a time, hand already on the hilt of his sword, and burst into the library. Ramón was there, calm but firm, pinning a small, wiry figure to the carpet. Her arm was wrenched up behind her back, a thin blade lying inches from her outstretched fingers.

"I caught it sneaking through the window," Ramón said dryly, like he was discussing the weather.

Los stepped forward quickly. "Ramón, this is Willow."

Ramón arched a brow but released her. She didn't thank him, she just glared at him and kicked him square in the shin.

Ramón winced slightly.

"Willow!" Los barked, more out of surprise than anger.

She looked at him with the most innocent *what?* expression imaginable.

"Your... guest, Ambassador?"

"Jes," Los said firmly. "A friend."

Ramón inclined his head, maintaining a professional composure, though Los didn't miss the faintest glint of displeasure in his eyes. "Very well. I will fetch refreshments." He withdrew without another word.

When they were alone, Los sighed. "Next time, juse the front door. He's a very capable man, and I'd rather not have him tossing jou on the floor again."

Willow only shrugged and glanced around the library—walls lined with books from floor to ceiling, the late morning light turning the leather bindings to gold.

Los gestured toward the oak table in the center of the room. "Come. We'll start with jour letters. Jou learn them, jou'll never have to rely on anyone else to read for jou again."

She eyed the chair like it was a trap, then slowly took it.

He slid a worn parchment and quill toward her.

"First," he said, drawing the letter A with slow precision, "we start here."

Her gaze followed his strokes, and when she copied it, her hand trembled just slightly. He went over letter after letter with her, taking his time. She didn't speak, but Los could see the questions in her eyes, and the spark of understanding when she got one right.

It was slow work. Quiet work. But it mattered.

After the lesson was over, he invited her to return again, every day at noon, and they would learn a little more.

She nodded.

Then he reminded her, "The front door, you understand, *jes?*"

She narrowed her eyes.

Los just shook his head as he walked her out the front door.

Like a guest.

Like a friend.

Writing Lessons Day Two.

Castilian Embassy – Second Floor Hallway

By the time noon rolled around the next day, Los was halfway to the library when he heard it again—a scuffle. Briefer this time, but no less spirited.

He rounded the corner to find Ramón holding Willow aloft by the back of her shirt like a misbehaving cat. Her feet dangled and kicked uselessly in the air. She was swiping at him, trying to land a punch, but he kept her at perfect arm's length, his face calm and mildly annoyed.

Los stopped, exhaled, and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Put her down, Ramón."

Ramón complied, setting her gently on her feet. Willow paused just long enough to narrow her eyes at him—then promptly kicked him in the shin. Again.

Ramón winced slightly, a flicker of irritation crossing his otherwise unshakable composure.

Los covered his face with one hand. "We talked about the *front* door..."

Willow looked at him with an expression that said, *What? He started it.*

Castilian Embassy – Library, Afternoon

Los sat across from Willow at the oak table, yesterday's parchment still laid out. "Let's see what you remember from yesterday."

She gave him a sideways look, picked up the quill, and began copying the letters he pointed to. Her strokes were a little crooked, but he could see she remembered the shapes.

"Bueno," he nodded. "Today, we add a few more."
He drew several new letters beneath the old ones, pronouncing each slowly, watching her mouth the sounds without making a noise.

After a short while, he tapped the quill against the page. "Now... words. Small ones."
He pointed and sounded them out as he wrote: **MAP. BOW. HAT. ALE.**
Willow's eyes lit with faint recognition — each was something from her life. She copied them with more care than she had the letters.

When they finished, he leaned back, satisfied — only to notice her writing something without prompting. She slid the parchment toward him.

In uneven but perfectly readable letters, it read: **DOOR.**

Los blinked at her.

Then he chuckled. "Jes, juse the front door!"
Willow only shrugged, the faintest ghost of a smirk tugging at her lips.

Castilian Embassy – Library, Lessons Day Three

By noon on the third day, Los was already expecting it... but he stepped into the hall and stopped dead.

Ramón stood there holding Willow upside down by one ankle, as casually as if she were a sack of grain. She had her arms folded across her chest like she was making a point, glaring at him from her inverted vantage point.

"Really?" Los asked flatly.

"She came in through the window... again," Ramón said, tone perfectly dry.

He lowered her until her boots touched the floor. She landed lightly, straightened—then, without missing a beat, kicked him in the shin.

This time, Ramón didn't even flinch.

Willow frowned, glancing down at her boot as if checking for damage. Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. Ramón, without looking at her, gave the faintest tap to his shin under his trousers—just enough for Los to catch the metallic *clink* of his hidden greaves—and moved on as though nothing had happened.

Willow glared at him then took her seat without prompting this time, quill in hand before Los even sat across from her.

"Progress," he said, a hint of surprise in his tone.

He slid yesterday's parchment forward. "First — review."

Willow worked through the letters and words they'd covered so far. A few shaky lines, but nothing forgotten.

"Bueno. Now we make sentences," Los said, dipping the quill.

He wrote deliberately: **I have a bow. The map is old. Ale is good.**

Willow read each one under her breath, lips moving, brows drawing in concentration. She copied them carefully, glancing up to make sure she'd gotten it right.

Then she hesitated, moving the quill between her fingers. Without asking, she wrote her own sentence: **The door is locked.**

Los looked at her. "Again with the door? Jes it is locked, jou have to knock and Ramón

will let you in.”
Willow scowled.

He leaned back, smirking. “Maybe tomorrow, we write about windows instead, hm? But today, I want you to write one more word.”

He wrote very carefully this time. **Willow.**
She studied the word he had written, then, as she mouthed it, realization dawned. She pointed at herself. Me?

“Jes Willow, that is your name.”

Willow scrawled it very carefully as if the word were precious.

When he gave his approval that she had done it correctly, she hugged him.

Writing Lesson – Day Four

By noon on the fourth day, Los lingered by the stairs, waiting for the usual scuffle—boots scraping, a grunt, the thud of someone hitting the floor.

Nothing.

Frowning, he made his way down the hall toward the library, catching only the faint, deliberate sound of something crunching.

He pushed the door open slowly.

There, in the wide sill of the open second-floor window, sat Ramón, calm as a priest at prayer. Beside him, cross-legged and unusually still, was Willow. Both held half-eaten apples.

Willow met Los’s gaze with an expression that was equal parts surrender and resignation. Ramón didn’t even look over; he just took another bite.

Los arched a brow. “Should I even ask?”

"No, Ambassador," Ramón said evenly, rising to his feet. He crossed toward the sideboard, then paused and glanced back. "And Ambassador—she will be using the back door from now on."

Willow dropped her eyes to the floor, took one last bite, and slid down from the sill. She followed Los to the table without a word, the day's lesson already waiting.

Los set two plates—bread, cheese, and apples—before unrolling a fresh sheet of parchment. "Today," he said, "we make sentences jou can juse. Things jou want to say."

Willow tilted her head, curious despite herself.

He wrote in neat block letters: **I am Willow.** Then said, "Now jou."

She copied it, lips moving silently as she sounded it out in her head.

Next, he wrote: **I am hungry.**

Her mouth twitched, almost a smile. She wrote that one quickly, then held it up with a little flash of pride.

Los raised a brow. "Very good... now jou try one."

Willow hesitated, then bent over the parchment and wrote slowly, every letter deliberate. She slid it back to him: **Thank you.**

Something softened in his eyes. "Jou are welcome," he said quietly. And he meant it.

Where is Los?

Angela found Lucin in the guild courtyard, checking the fletching on a bundle of arrows.

"Where is Los?" she asked.

Lucin looked up from his work. "Sir Los?"

"Yes, *Sir Los*. Where is he, Lucin?"

Lucin hesitated just long enough to make her narrow her eyes. "He is... at the Brass Lantern."

Angela's lips pressed into a thin line. "The Brass Lantern." She arched a brow.

"What is he doing there?"

"He's... having a drink," Lucin said carefully.

Angela's gaze sharpened. "Isn't that the tavern with the—"

"Yes, my lady," Lucin cut in, still even-voiced. "It is."

Angela's hands curled into fists at her sides. "A Paladin of the realm. In *that* place."

Lucin's eyes went back to the arrow in his hand, offering nothing more.

Angela turned for the gate, each step clipped and certain. "Thank you, Lucin."

"Of course, my lady," he said, though his tone carried the faintest undertone: *Best you see for yourself.*

The Tavern Incident

The moment Angela stepped into the ill-reputed tavern, she saw him.

Sitting in a corner booth like a king at court, that infuriating smile tugging at his lips. Around him, several women in low-cut dresses leaned close, laughter spilling over the table like cheap wine. One had a hand on his shoulder. Another traced a finger along the rim of his mug.

Her jaw tightened. She was halfway across the floor before she realized she was moving.

"Get your hands off him," she snapped, the words sharper than steel.

The nearest woman turned, eyes flashing. "Who are you to—"

"I said, *off!*" Angela's voice cut through the chatter, her hand already pulling the woman back.

That did it. Chairs scraped, mugs sloshed, and the tavern's low rumble flared into a dozen sharp voices. The woman shoved Angela. A table tipped. The fight began. In short order women, tables, and chairs overturned.

Through the rising chaos, Los made his way to the door, mug still in hand, only stopping long enough to hand the mug—with a grin—to a grateful but confused customer entering the establishment.

Angela didn't notice. She was too busy ducking a thrown mug and shoving a red-haired woman over a chair.

"Enough!"

The voice cracked over the room like a whip.

Then a hand reached out, Angela felt it—fingers like a steel trap clamping onto her ear.

She yelped. "Release me at once! I'm a Lady! You can't treat me like this!"

The Madam of the house, a large woman named Margaret—tall, broad-shouldered, her hair pinned in a no-nonsense knot—didn't slow her stride as she dragged Angela toward a door at the back.

"When you *act* like one," Margaret said dryly, "I'll treat you as one."

Angela sputtered, half-tripping over a stool. "You have no right—"

"I have every right," she said, shoving the door open to the back room with her free hand. "You come into *my* house, start fights with *my* girls, and think your title will shield you? Sit."

The door slammed shut behind them, muting the noise outside. Angela straightened her tunic, chin high. "If your 'girls' weren't draping themselves over my—" She stopped herself. "Over Sir Los, there'd have been no trouble."

Margaret's eyes narrowed. "Draping themselves, were they? You think I'd let any of my girls waste time on a man who has no interest in them?"

Angela blinked. "Excuse me?"

The Madam leaned forward on the table between them, her voice low but steady. "Every woman in that room dotes on him because of what he's done for their children. He started a school here, quiet-like. Paid for books, tutors, gear. Got their boys training with armsmen, their girls apprenticed to mages, even some of their children studying to be Friars. He tells them it's just to keep the streets safer, but we know better. He's giving

them a way out. It is not often we see him down here. Usually, we just see his man Ramón handling things, but the girls all know it is Los behind it all."

Angela opened her mouth, closed it again.

Margaret's expression softened, just slightly. "He's not interested in my girls. Anyone with eyes can see he's already in love with someone else. We all assumed it was you."

Angela felt heat rise to her cheeks, a sharp, unexpected flush. "That's— that's absurd."

Margaret only smirked, straightening. "If you say so. But if you don't claim him, my girls will try. Can't say I'd blame them."

Angela stood, suddenly desperate for the air outside. But as the Madam opened the door and the tavern noise rushed back in, her anger had shifted. It was no longer pointed at the women.

It was pointed at herself—because for all her fine words about honor and service, Los had been living it under her nose, in ways she had never even imagined.

"I'm sorry, about the fight... it won't happen again."

After the Lantern

The Castilian Embassy — Late Afternoon

The embassy's heavy oak door opened to the warm scent of parchment, ink, and the faint spice of Ramón's cologne.

"Lady Burns," he said with a bow, his voice smooth but his eyes flicking with mild surprise. "You honor us."

"I need to speak with Sir Los," she said, her tone clipped but not cold.

Ramón inclined his head. "Of course. He is in his study. This way, please."

The corridors were quiet, lined with dark wood panels and tapestries. Ramón led her to a tall door near the end of the hall, knocked once, and opened it without waiting for a reply.

"Ambassador, Lady Angela wishes to see you."

Los was at his desk, leaning over a spread of ledgers and hand-drawn maps. A quill rested in his fingers, the ink still wet from the last line he'd written. He glanced up, pretending to be surprised as he rose.

"Angela," he said, acting as though she had not just caught him a little while ago at the Brass Lantern.

He hesitated, then with a faint grin tried, "*Une journée très... beau, no?*"

Angela blinked.

Ramón exhaled softly, lifting a hand as if to halt a duel. "*Une très belle journée, madame,*" he said in flawless Frankish, accent perfect.

Angela's eyes flicked to him, impressed. "You speak it beautifully."

Ramón inclined his head. "Thank you."

Los frowned. "Isn't that what I said?"

Ramón didn't blink. "Close. You almost had it that time, Ambassador."

Angela hid a smile behind her glove. Then she composed herself as Ramón stood just outside the door.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

The words came sharp and uninvited, stopping him mid-stride as he made to approach her.

He blinked. "Tell jou... what?"

Her jaw tightened. "About the school."

Something shifted in his expression — not guilt, not fear, but a measured pause, as though he were weighing whether to answer or to deflect.

"It is nothing," he said at last. "A small thing. Not worth—"

"Not worth telling me? Not worth letting me know that while I've been worrying about recruitment lists and training schedules, you've been changing lives in half the city?" She stepped closer, her voice low but fierce. "Do you know what it felt like to walk into that place and hear *her* tell me who you are, what you have been doing?"

Los sighed, leaning back against the edge of his desk, arms folding loosely across his chest. "I did not do it for credit, Angela. I did it because it needed doing."

"I'm not asking about credit," she said. "I'm asking for trust."

That landed. His gaze softened, the faintest crease appearing between his brows. He set the quill aside, as if putting down the last barrier between them.

"I did not tell jou," he said slowly, "because the fewer people knew, the safer those children would be. And... perhaps... because I liked keeping something that was mine alone. No politics. No court. No guild ledger."

Angela's anger was still there, but something else was threading through it now — understanding, and maybe a hint of hurt.

"You're part of my guild, Los. You're my..." She hesitated, searching for the right word. "...my friend. I should have known."

He tilted his head, studying her. "And if jou had known, what then?"

She held his gaze. "Then I would have stood beside you there. Not stormed in like a jealous fool."

The corner of his mouth tugged upward, just a little. "You made quite an entrance, though."

She rolled her eyes, but the heat in her voice had cooled. "Don't make me find out where you are from Lucin again."

Los chuckled, low in his chest. "Then I will have to make sure jou always know where I am."

Ramón, still by the door, cleared his throat discreetly. "Shall I bring wine?"

Angela answered without looking away from Los. "Yes. And bring enough for two."

Chapter XXXVII — The Squire

The Long Ride South

The rain had weakened to a thin silver mist by the time Los and Shinano reached the old oak stump outside of Cotswold. The frontier lay behind them like a fading bruise—memories of blood in the snow, the metallic tang of Midgard steel, and Kyleigh’s soft, terrified breaths as she bled out *twice*.

Shinano rode easy in the saddle, tall and broad as any Highlander, helm bouncing lazily against his hip.

Los rode stiff, shoulders tight, jaw set.

“She’ll get over it,” Shinano said, voice warm and booming as always. He always sounded like a man telling a joke, even when he wasn’t.

Los groaned. “Jes... I know. Maybe.”

“No, ye don’t know,” Shinano chuckled. “Ceilahieden, God love ‘er, she’ll stew for a week. Maybe two. Then she’ll remember we *won* that fight.”

Los threw both hands up. “This is what I was trying to tell her! We live. *They* died. Kyleigh breathes. This is the part that matters.”

Shinano laughed, a deep Highland laugh.

“Aye! And ye dragged her back twice! Middle of a scrap, no less. Ye think just anyone can pull a cleric out o’ death like that?”

Los glanced down at his reins. “She never seems to appreciate the skill that takes.”

“She appreciates it,” Shinano said gently. “She just doesn’t... show it. She carries every life on ‘er shoulders. Yours included.”

Los huffed. “She said if I run off again, she will never let me join another patrol.”

Shinano barked another laugh. “Los, she says that every blasted patrol! ‘If Los runs off ONE more time—’ And yet there ye are, next week, back with us.”

Los frowned. “No, no—this time she meant it.”

“Aye, lad,” Shinano grinned and sighed. “She means it every time.”

Los let out a reluctant laugh.

The mist clung to the fields as they reached the crossing east of Cotswold, the point where their roads split—Shinano north toward Ludlow, Los west toward Camelot.

Shinano reined in, turning his big Highlander frame in the saddle. His voice lowered the way it only did when he was serious:

“Rest, Los. For once in yer life.”

A soft, older-brother kind of smile followed. Then he nudged his horse and trotted off, humming some tune Ceilahieden would probably scold him for singing off-key. Minstrels, he laughed to himself.

Los watched him disappear into the trees.

Only then did he exhale.

Ceilahieden’s anger still lingered like smoke in the back of his mind. She never seemed to understand how he fought—how a Paladin with a great sword *had* to fight.

A shield Paladin guarded the people.
A great sword was for charging the enemy.

This was obvious.

Simple.

True.

And yet...
It always made Ceilahieden look at him like he was a storm she couldn’t control.

Los sighed, then nudged his horse toward Camelot—

The Boy

The road quieted after Shinano vanished into the trees.
Los rode on alone, the air still damp with the last of the morning mist.

Ahead, by a low fence at the edge of a Cotswold farm, a farmer and his son waited—
clearly having spotted him from afar.

Kennard leaned forward, whispering urgently to his father:

“Da... it’s him. The Epic Paladin.”

Los felt his stomach twist.

Oh Light, not that again.

The father straightened as Los approached, pushing off the fence and smoothing his tunic.

“Sir Ortiz?” he called out, voice edged with disbelief. “By all the saints—is it truly you?”

Los lifted a gloved hand in greeting.

“Jes. I am he,” he said, and added quickly, “And please—*Los* is fine.”

Kennard didn’t hear him; the boy was practically vibrating.

The father cleared his throat. “My lad here’s heard tales of you from the guards in Prydwen. Talks of you more than sleep, I think. Says if he ever met you, he’d ask to be your squire proper.”

Kennard tried to stand at attention.

It looked more like he was bracing for a lightning strike.

Los opened his mouth to politely decline—

—and stopped.

He had no squire.

He’d never even thought about taking one.

And the boy’s eyes were shining so bright it almost hurt to look at them.

He leaned a little in his saddle.

"Jou wish to follow me?" Los asked politely.

"Yes, sir!" Kennard blurted, voice cracking with excitement.

Los smiled despite himself. "Jou are what, fourteen?"

Kennard straightened. "Nearly fifteen!"
A lie so bad even the chickens bawked.

"He's fourteen," his father said, squeezing the boy's shoulder, "but he's big for his years. Strong, works hard, and he's got a good heart. We'd be honored if you took him—only if you've no other lad in your service already."

Los hesitated.

A long breath.
A familiar ache.
Responsibility always hit him in the ribs first.

Then he nodded.

"I will take him. He can stay at the Orchid Fair guild hall."

Kennard lit up like he'd been handed a crown.
His father gave heartfelt thanks.

Los straightened in the saddle, trying not to think too hard about the weight he'd just accepted.

Or the myth the boy believed he was following.

The Warning

The Orchid Fair Guildhall

The hall doors swung open the moment Los arrived.
Julia was already there—somehow, she always *knew* when a friend returned.

"Oh!" she gasped, eyes immediately dropping to the boy beside him. "And who's this?"

Kennard tried to bow but nearly toppled forward under the weight of his pack.

Los cleared his throat. "This is Kennard Gloyw. My—"

He hesitated just a beat.

"—my squire."

Julia's eyes went wide, then wider, and then she beamed like it was the best news she'd heard in weeks.

"Well then!" she declared, sweeping the boy inside. "Welcome to the Orchid Fair, Kennard! You'll want a bunk, a meal, a proper cloak, and—oh Saints—have you *ever* seen a guild hall before?"

Kennard shook his head so quickly his hair nearly flew off.

Julia laughed and ushered him inside, already talking a mile a minute.

That left Angela.

Standing by the staircase.

Arms folded.

Staring at Los.

He knew that look.

He feared that look.

"Angela?" he said cautiously.

She didn't answer. She just grabbed his sleeve and pulled him into the war room.

Once the door clicked shut behind them, she let out a breath that sounded very close to exasperation she refused to let become a sigh.

"Are you out of your mind?" she whispered—because yelling wasn't her way, not with him.

Los blinked. "What?"

"You're barely home from the frontier," she said, voice agitated despite her iron posture, "and you've taken on a *boy*? A squire?"

Los frowned, defensive. "He needs guidance."

"He needs safety," Angela shot back. "And you—Los, you can barely keep *yourself* safe."

He stiffened. "I always come back."

"That's not the same as being careful!" she snapped, and the words came out too loud. She stopped, swallowed, lowered her voice again. "You run toward every blade you see. You leap into danger like you're immune to death."

Los opened his mouth—closed it, then forced out a breath.

His fists curled slightly. The number of times he tried at Death... maybe he was immune to it.

"He wants to learn," he said definitely.

"He wants to be *you*," Angela whispered.

Los's jaw tightened. Something wounded flickered behind his eyes.

"Is being me so bad?"

Something in Angela broke a little at that.

She stepped closer—not touching him, but close enough that he could feel her warmth.

"Sometimes... yes," she murmured.

She didn't say why.

She didn't need to.

Because Angela saw Los more clearly than anyone else did.

She saw the danger he craved.

The rest he never took.

The weight he carried alone.

The curse he believed he bore.

And now—now there was a child walking behind him, trying so hard to match his stride.

Angela exhaled, softening.

"Just... be careful, Los," she said. "For his sake. And yours."

Los nodded, though he didn't know if he could promise anything she asked.

When they returned to the common hall, Julia had already sat Kennard by the hearth, feeding him stew, telling him stories of the guild's early days.

Kennard looked up at Los with the unguarded trust of a child.

Los managed to smile back.

Camelot — Church of St. George

The chapel courtyard bustled with acolytes polishing shields and carrying buckets of sand—until Lady Triss stepped into view. Then the world seemed to pull itself taut.

She saw Los first.

Then the boy trailing in his shadow, trying to match the long Paladin stride with half-sized boots.

Her jaw tightened.

The moment Los turned, she crossed the stones in three long strides and caught him—not by the arm, not by the shoulder, but by the wrist, the way a trainer snatches a colt before it bolts into traffic.

"Walk with me," she said.

It wasn't a request.

Kennard froze as she pulled Los around the corner, out of earshot.

Triss didn't raise her voice.

She didn't need to—she carried command like it was welded to her bones.

"You cannot take on a squire."

The words were quiet. Sharp as broken glass.

"Not yet."

Los blinked, caught off-guard. "Why not?"

Her eyes flared. "Because you are only eighteen, Los."

He opened his mouth, but she wasn't finished.

"You have not steadied yourself," she said, low but fierce. "You are still learning what you are. A Knight. A Paladin of the Light. A young man still half-bleeding from every battle."

She jerked her chin in Kennard's direction.

"And *that* boy is a child."

Los bristled. "He learns quickly."

"This is not sword drills," she snapped. "This is *life and death*. The squire's failures become yours. His wounds become yours. His death becomes yours to bear—*forever*."

Something flickered in her eyes then.
Something old. Something she swallowed down.

She softened—not much, just enough to sound almost human beneath the armor.

"Los... you do not understand the weight you are asking to carry."

Los lifted his chin, pride tightening his voice.
"It will be fine. I can do this."

Triss closed her eyes.

Just a breath.
Just enough to hide the worry.

When she opened them again, the steel was back.

"God help you," she whispered.

Months of Peace

For a little while, the world was kind.

Los trained Kennard in the churchyard behind St. George's, under the shadow of saints carved in stone.

He corrected the boy's footwork with patient taps of his boot.

He adjusted the angle of Kennard's shield with two fingers, murmuring:

"No, no—like this. Let the blow slide, not land."

When Kennard winced beneath Los's blows, he taught him how to breathe through the pain, slow and steady, like drawing light into battered lungs.

He took the boy walking through Cotswold and Prydwen and the rolling edges of Snowdonia, letting him try his hand at some of the lesser menaces of Albion — Brownies and River Spritelings.

"Know where jou are," Los said.

"Then jou will know where jou must go if jou get into trouble."

Kennard drank in every word.

When a River Drake chased Kennard up a tree, Los could not help but laugh and remember his own early days.

On patrol, when farmers or soldiers or stable hands recognized Los and nodded or bowed—or simply clapped him on the shoulder with a grateful grin—Kennard looked like he might lift off the ground from pride alone.

The boy glowed.

The father glowed too, standing at his fence each time they passed, waving them off with the mixture of hope and fear only a parent can hold in the same breath.

In the afternoons, when the yard was too crowded or the weather turned foul, Los sat Kennard at a table with a stub of charcoal and scraps of parchment.

He started with letters.

Then quickly went on to words that mattered.

MAP.
NORTH.
WAIT.
DANGER.

"When you can read these," Los said, tapping the page, "you will live longer."

Kennard learned quickly. Too quickly, maybe. He practiced the words until his fingers smudged black and his tongue moved silently with the shapes. In time, he would have him reading books.

Los watched him and told himself this was normal.
This was what training was supposed to look like.

And Los—
Light help him—
Los started to believe he was doing right.

He caught himself watching Kennard run drills with a quiet, private pride.

He started buying the boy better boots.
A sturdier cloak.

He made sure he had plenty to eat.

Always checking in with Julia, who had begun treating the boy like a little brother.

Los found himself laughing again—
small, unexpected laughs when the boy stumbled and popped back up grinning, or
when he tried to imitate Los's accent and failed spectacularly.

For a while, the legend did not matter.
The expectations did not matter.
The weight of the world seemed lighter.

Because Kennard believed in him.
Not the Epic Paladin.
Just... *him*.

And Los let himself believe—just for a moment—that he could do right by that trust.

That he could teach someone safely.

That he could do more than kill, and watch others die.

Just for a moment, the story was one of peace.

Chapter XXXVIII — Odin's Gate

Orchid Fair Guildhall — Morning

Morning crept into the guildhall slowly.

Not with bells or shouts, but with the quiet sounds of life resuming: the scrape of a bench being moved, the faint hiss of a kettle heating in Julia's kitchen, the low murmur of voices drifting up from the street beyond the shutters. Somewhere in the rafters, a pigeon shuffled and settled.

Los stood near the long table, fastening the straps of his armor. The leather was cool beneath his fingers, still faintly scented with oil and smoke. His greatsword leaned nearby, familiar weight, familiar promise.

For a moment, everything felt... ordinary.

Los was fastening the last strap of his armor when he felt it.

Not a sound.
Not movement.

Just attention.

He glanced toward the doorway.

Kennard stood there, already dressed, boots laced too tight, cloak folded over one arm as if he were the one about to ride out. He looked like a boy trying very hard not to be in the way.

Los smiled despite himself. "You've been awake awhile."

Kennard nodded. "Julia said you were leaving early."

Los tested the strap once more, then reached for his gloves. "I am."

"Where to?" the boy asked.

Los hesitated just long enough for the truth to matter.

"On patrol," he said. "North."

Kennard's eyes widened. "Midgard?"

"Jes."

"With Orchid Fair?" the boy asked hopefully.

Los shook his head. "With Dark Auspice."

Kennard straightened at once. "Can I come?"

The question came too fast, too practiced. The hope was already built.

Los turned fully then and stepped closer. He reached out and mussed Kennard's hair, deliberately gentle, almost fatherly.

"No," he said softly. "Not this time."

Kennard swallowed. "Why not?"

"They barely let *me* go with them," Los said with a crooked smile, almost apologetic. "I doubt they would let me bring *jou* along as well."

The boy nodded, trying to accept it.

Los crouched to his level. "Jou stay here. Train. Study. Listen to Julia."

"Yes, sir," Kennard said automatically.

Los smiled. "Good. That means *jou* will be stronger when I return."

Kennard nodded again — he would not let Los down.

As Los straightened, Julia appeared from the side hall with a folded cloak over her arm.

"Are you ready?" she asked, then glanced at Kennard. "And you — you're up early."

"He's being responsible," Los said with a nod towards his squire.

Julia arched a brow. "Miracles do happen."

Los took his cloak from Julia.

"I will be back soon."

"I know," she said — the way one does when they hope.

Kennard stood straighter. "I'll train hard."

Los nodded once. "I expect nothing less."

Then he left the Hall, stepping out the door, and onto his next adventure.

Kennard lingered a moment after Los was gone, staring at the door as if it might open again.

"Why isn't Sir Los going with the guild?" he asked quietly.

Julia knelt in front of him, meeting his eyes. Her voice was gentle, but firm.

"Because Dark Auspice doesn't have a Paladin of their own," she said. "And they've worked with Sir Los long enough to trust him."

She smiled, just a little.

"Orchid Fair has plenty of Paladins today," she added. "We can spare him for while."

Kennard nodded slowly.

Even other guilds relied on Sir Los.

Maybe someday, they would rely on him too.

Outside the Guildhall

Dark Auspice waited in the street like they always did — loose, relaxed, and dangerous.

Shinano leaned against a post, arms folded, helm already hanging from his belt. When he saw Los, his grin split wide.

"Look at him," Shinano boomed. "All polished. All serious. Did ye say goodbye to the lad?"

Los smirked. "Behave."

Kyleigh smiled as she approached, tired eyes brightening. "Good to see you, Los."

"Always good to see you as well," he sighed.

Ceilahieden stood a few paces back, checking straps, adjusting gear with deliberate precision. She didn't look at him until the others were mounted.

Then she turned to him.

"If you run off again," she said calmly, "I *will* leave you behind this time."

Los opened his mouth.

She raised a hand. "I mean it Los."

Shinano chuckled. "She's in a mood today."

Ceilahieden didn't look away from Los. "You stay where I can see you. And you move when I tell you to."

Los nodded. "Jes."

Kyleigh mounted. Shinano swung into his saddle. The rhythm of the patrol settled into place like an old song.

Ceilahieden turned her horse toward the eastern gate of Camelot.

"Let's move."

And with one last glance back at the guildhall doors — at the quiet safety he was leaving behind — he rode after them.

Midgard Frontier — Near the Cave Mouth

The forest felt wrong.

Los felt it before he saw anything—sap crushed under hurried boots, the faint copper bite carried on cold air. The trail curved gently downhill, snow thinning to slush beneath

the trees. Shinano took the lead, humming softly, Ceilahieden right behind him, eyes scanning shadows.

Los drifted back, habit more than intent. He always liked to bring up the rear. Gave him that extra moment before he entered combat to evaluate the situation and respond to it.

Then—he saw them, shades, shadows in the fog and snow.

Four shapes stood near the stone mouth of a cave, backs half-turned, silhouettes broken by drifting mist. They weren't moving much. Waiting, perhaps. Resting. One leaned on a staff. Another adjusted a strap. None of them were watching the trail.

Los turned and sprinted toward them before the moment could pass.

His body in motion while his mind worked quickly.

Shaman. Thane? Warrior? And for sure a Berserker.

The Shaman first. Always first.

His muted armor nearer to silent on frost-damp earth. He was already chanting beneath his breath, hoping the wind was enough to cover the sound of his approach, of his chants, low, steady, the familiar hum that gave strength in his bones. He did not look back. He did not hesitate.

He moved.

The first strike landed clean between the Shaman's shoulders. Surprise did the rest. The sword connected, she made to raise her staff, she never finished the motion. Then the second blow—steel driving breath and life out of her at once. She was dead in an instant, before the others knew he was upon them.

Then the Thane shouted—too late.

Los pivoted without thinking. The Thane was closer, younger looking. Easier he thought. Los closed the distance and cut him down in a tight exchange of steel and panic, the Thane falling hard and wrong.

The others, weapons now out, and already swinging at him with fire in their chests as they attacked.

The Berserker came at him screaming, axes flashing. Los braced, took the hit, let the pain pass through him and did not stop. He answered with timing instead of force, riding the openings as they appeared. The Berserker fell next, blood steaming on the cold ground.

The Warrior was last.

He was already striking at Los, causing him to stumble as he turned to face him—the warrior's shield up, sword in motion, eyes sharp. No panic. No shouting. Just grim focus.

This one had determination burning in him. And his blows were taking their toll.

Los called the on the Light, not as prayer, but as refusal. A blessing he had learned as a reward for his many victories in the frontier:

Dolorem Nego. To ignore pain.

It was enough to keep him in the fight.

They circled in the churned snow, boots grinding, steel whispering as blades tested distance. The Warrior struck hard and clean, forcing Los back a step, then another. The impact rang up Los's arm and into his shoulder, numbness blooming where he didn't want it.

Los answered with patience instead of force—sliding blows, refusing angles, waiting. He felt his breath shorten. Felt the edge creep closer, that thin place where stamina runs out before will does.

The Warrior pressed him there.

A shield slam caught Los off-balance. Pain flared white along his ribs. For a heartbeat, he staggered—stunned, and in that heartbeat, he knew: *If there had been one more of them, this would end differently.*

The pain dulled, dragged down beneath his skin. He followed it shortly after with.

Devotio abnegata, To selflessly devote.

Another blessing he had learned as a reward, forcing his body to keep pace with his will.

The Warrior saw the shift. Tried to break him before it settled.

But he was too late.

Los stepped inside the next swing, steel scraping steel, and drove forward with everything he had left. The Warrior fell hard, breath tearing out of him, sword slipping from his grasp into the snow.

Los stood over him for a moment longer than necessary—chest heaving, hands shaking just enough to notice.

Then it was done.

When it ended, the silence came hard, but earned.

Four bodies. One Paladin still standing. No cheers. No triumph. Just the sudden awareness of how loud his own breathing was.

Los wiped his blade and stepped back, already feeling the weight of what he'd done settling into his shoulders. The risk he had taken. How close he had come to death this time.

Behind him, the cave mouth yawned open, dangerous and patient.

He did not look at it again, he had to get back to the group, he was too injured to take on another fight, and the cave mouth was no place to rest.

That is when Ceilahieden and the other caught up to him.

"What in the world were you thinking?" Ceilahieden snapped as she surveyed the scene.

Los opened his mouth.

Closed it.

Then taking a breath, he knew he needed.

"I saw them," he said finally, tired. "They were standing there, not paying attention."

"You ran off alone," she said, fury tight and controlled. "Again."

"They hadn't seen us jet."

"That doesn't matter! We could have taken them together, as a group!"

Shinano looked at the bodies, then at Los. Slowly, his expression changed—both awe, and pride. “Four, no wonder they call you epic.”

Ceilahieden rounded on him. “Don’t.”

Someone feeding his ego was the last thing she needed right now.

Los leaned on his blade as Kyleigh checked him for injuries—and there were several—and began healing him.

“If I had jelled to jou, they would have gotten into the cave mouth and we would have had a harder time of it,” he said. “I—”

Ceilahieden cut him off. “You don’t get to run off and risk your life whenever you like. We need you with us, not running off alone seeking glory.” She scolded him.

Los nodded. Once. Then hung his head.

“Jes, I know.”

She stared at him a long moment, then turned away sharply.

“This is the last time,” she said. “Next time you pull this, you’re not coming with us. I don’t care how good you think you are.”

Los didn’t argue.

He never did.

Shinano clapped a hand on Los’s shoulder as he shook his head.
“That—was epic.”

Orchard Fair Training Yard — Late Morning

Prox did not train like Los.

There was no poetry to it. No quiet speeches. No metaphors about light or breath or knowing your terrain.

There was dirt. Sweat. Repetition.

"Again."

Kennard raised his shield too slowly. Prox's blade tapped the rim and slid past, knocking the edge aside.

"Dead," Prox said flatly. "Again."

Kennard reset, jaw tight, breathing hard.

They'd been at it since Los left that morning.

Kennard liked Prox. He did. But Prox didn't *feel* like Sir Los.

Prox moved closer, lowering his voice so the other trainees couldn't hear.

"You keep trying to copy him."

Kennard blinked. "I— I'm not."

"You are," Prox said. "You keep waiting for something clever to happen."

He stepped in and knocked Kennard's shield aside again — gentler this time.

"Los doesn't fight clever," Prox continued. "He fights *early*."

Kennard frowned. "But he always—"

"—wins?" Prox finished. "No. He doesn't."

That landed harder than any blow.

Kennard straightened. "I heard he killed two Midgardians alone."

Prox exhaled through his nose. Not annoyed. Just tired.

"Yeah," he said. "I heard that too."

Kennard hesitated. "So... he was better than they were?"

Prox shook his head. "No. He's *luckier*. And faster to act."

He stood and met the boy's eyes.

"And luck eventually runs out."

Kennard didn't like that answer.

"But Sir Los always comes back," he said. "Everyone says so."

Prox's jaw tightened — just a fraction.

"Everyone says that," he agreed. "Including him."

He sheathed his blade and crossed his arms.

"Los survives because he accepts pain faster than most people accept fear. That's not a skill you want."

Kennard swallowed. "Then why do people follow him?"

Prox considered that.

"Because when things go wrong," he said slowly, "he moves. Not after. Not when it's safe. He moves even when it's *too late*."

He stepped closer, placing two fingers against Kennard's chest.

"But listen to me, lad. This part matters."

Kennard nodded.

"You don't become Los by charging first," Prox said. "You become him by knowing when *not* to."

Kennard's brow furrowed. "But if I hesitate—"

"You live," Prox said. "And living lets you learn."

There was a silence then. The sound of steel elsewhere in the yard. Laughter. Life continuing.

Kennard nodded slowly.

"I understand," he said.

But Prox knew — immediately — that he didn't.

Because the boy's eyes weren't clearer.

They were brighter.

Camelot — Orchid Fair Guildhall

The story arrived before Los did.

By the time he stepped through the guildhall doors, boots still stained with road and dirt clinging to his cloak, voices were already buzzing.

"Four of them."

"Alone."

"They say he didn't even flinch."

Los slowed.

Prox leaned against the far table, arms crossed, listening with narrowed eyes. Julia sat near the hearth, brows drawn tight, already worried about how this new story would affect the boy. Kennard stood near her, frozen in place.

Angela turned as Los entered.

Her gaze went straight to his face.

"You're hurt," she said.

"I'm fine," Los replied.

Kennard broke free then, nearly tripping over his own boots as he hurried towards him.

"Sir Los—!"

Los caught him by the shoulder before he could collide fully. "Easy," he said gently.

The boy's eyes were shining.

"They said you killed four Mids," Kennard breathed. "Four. All by yourself!"

Los felt something tighten in his chest.

"I did," he said with a tired smile.

"That's incredible," the boy said, voice shaking with awe. "I want to fight like that someday."

The room had gone quiet.

Angela watched Los closely now.

He looked at Kennard—really looked at him—and saw not a squire, not a future knight.

Just a boy.

"It is not something to want," Los said quietly.

Kennard blinked, confused. "But you won."

Los shook his head. "I survived."

Prox stepped in then, clapping a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Go help Julia, Lad, let Sir Los get settled."

Kennard hesitated, then obeyed—reluctantly.

Angela waited until he was out of earshot.

Then she asked, softly, "What really happened?"

Los met her eyes.

"I killed 4 Mids," he said, "I lived, they died, what else is there to say?"

Later — Kennard

That night, Kennard lay awake staring at the ceiling beams above his bunk.

Four Mids.

Alone.

The way the story spread made it sound easy. Clean. As if Sir Los had simply decided they would die.

Kennard smiled to himself in the dark.

If Sir Los could do that—

He can do anything.

The Ask

Kennard had been doing well.

Too well, maybe.

Quick with the shield drills, eager in the sparring ring, soaking up every word Los gave him as though it were scripture. Even Lady Triss had grudgingly admitted the boy had promise. Angela hadn't said it aloud, but she worried—quietly, the way she always worried over Los.

They were inventorying the guild storeroom when it finally came.

Los was checking straps and weathered leather, tightening buckles by habit, when he felt the boy hovering just a little too close. Kennard tried—and failed—to hide his excitement, shifting his weight from foot to foot like a hound straining against the leash.

"Sir—Los," Kennard corrected quickly, trying to sound grown. "When... when will we go north?"

Los stilled.

"North?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

"To the frontier," Kennard said, eyes bright. "To Odin's Gate. To Midgard. Where you go to fight. Where all the stories happened."

Los's stomach dipped.

He had known this was coming. He had hoped to stall it—months, if he could. Years, if the Light were kind.

"Kennard," he said carefully, "jou are learning. But the frontier is not a training ground. It is chaos. It is—"

"—where you became a legend," the boy finished, blurting it with embarrassing honesty.

Los froze.

The boy swallowed, suddenly aware he'd said too much. "I've heard the tales. Everyone in Camelot has. The dragon. The giants. The warbands. The way you saved Kyleigh in the snow. Sir... I want to see it. I want to see how you do it."

The words struck like a soft blade—gentle, but cutting all the same.

"Kennard," Los tried again, quieter now. "Midgard is dangerous. I will not let jou be hurt."

"I won't be," Kennard said at once. "I'll stay close. I'll listen. I promise. You always come back, don't you? You always win. So if I'm with you... I'll be safe."

That one hurt more than the rest.

Because Los knew the truth.

He didn't always win.
He'd just always survived.

And in that moment—Light help him—he wanted to give the boy the legend he believed in. Just once. Before reality had a chance to steal it away.

Los exhaled slowly.

"Jes," he said at last, hesitantly. "Jes. We will go north."

Kennard lit up like the dawn.

Los turned back to the crate at his feet and reached inside. When he straightened, he held a shield—plain, scarred, heavy for the boy's arms. He adjusted the straps himself, fitting it to the boy's arm with practiced, gentle hands.

"This is not for glory," Los said. "This is so we make it home."

Kennard nodded solemnly. What he heard was not what Los had meant. What he heard was we will be fighting together—side by side.

Then Los handed him a sword. Short. Real. Weighted for use, not ceremony.

The boy's breath caught.

"Jou will do everything I tell jou," Los said. "If I tell jou to run, jou run. If I tell jou to hide, jou hide."

"Yes, Sir," Kennard said, pride shaking in his voice.

Los mussed the boy's hair, smiling that crooked smile of his, the one that always made hard things seem lighter than they were.

"Now go, pack our gear, and make ready for the trip up north."

With that, Kennard rushed off. He knew exactly what to pack, and how. Los had trained him well—and this time, he would be going with him.

From the doorway, Angela had been watching the whole time.

"You don't have to do this," she said quietly.

Los looked up, surprised to find her there.

"I will keep him safe," he said.

She studied his face for a long moment. He looked afraid. Uncertain. Then she nodded once.

"Then bring him back," she said. "With stories. Not scars."

Los nodded. And placed a hand on her shoulder before he headed off to join his Squire. Giving her that crooked grin of his—as if to say it would be fine, even if he didn't believe it.

The Road to Odin's Gate

Los took the long road towards Odins Gate. It helped center his mind, and he hoped it might cool the boy's youthful excitement as well.

From Camelot to Castle Sauvage.

From Sauvage to Caer Benowyc.

From Benowyc, they took a boat across the water toward Odin's Gate.

The further north they went the colder the air grew.

The stone turned blue with frost.

And somewhere deep inside Los, he could feel the danger increase.

He would keep the boy safe. A short trip, a look around, then home.

He had made fruitless trips before—days spent wandering without incident, paths empty, danger observed rather than met.

Ill luck. Ill timing.

This time he would do the same. By choice.

And in doing so, he would keep the boy safe.

Wandering

They did not hurry.

Los kept them off the main paths, favoring broken ground and tree lines, teaching Kennard how to read the land the way one reads a face.

"Snow lies," he said, pausing to crouch near a patch of disturbed frost. "It tells you where someone was. Not where they are."

Kennard nodded, eyes fixed on the ground, trying to see what Los saw.

They moved slowly, Los stopping often—not because he had to, but because he wanted Kennard to learn when *not* to move. He showed him how to test the wind with two fingers, how to listen for the wrong kind of quiet, how to rest without sitting, how to stand without being seen.

"Never stand on a ridge," Los said, guiding the boy down from a rise with a hand at his shoulder. "Never silhouette yourself against the sky."

Kennard adjusted immediately, careful, serious. He was good at this. Better than Los had been when he started.

They crossed streams half-frozen and narrow enough to step over. Los made Kennard watch the water before crossing, pointing out where the ice looked solid and where it thinned to treachery.

"Cold kills slower than steel," Los said. "But it kills more people."

By midday they reached a stand of firs overlooking a distant rise. They had crossed half of Odin's Gate, its frozen forbidding landscape all around them now.

Kennard stared.

"It's so cold," he breathed.

Los smiled despite himself. "That's why we keep moving."

They proceeded onward, deeper into the Norse frontier.

Los chose a place to rest where the ground dipped and the trees closed in. He had Kennard eat, drink, adjust straps, and check his boots. Then he made the boy repeat the steps again, slower this time.

"Habit saves you when thinking fails," Los said.

Kennard practiced drawing his sword and shield without clatter. He stumbled once, caught himself, flushed with embarrassment.

"Again," Los said, not unkindly.

They wandered like that for hours—never straying far, never staying long. Los let Kennard take point for short stretches, watching him with a hawk's eye, correcting quietly when needed.

Once, they heard voices in the distance.

Los froze instantly, raising a fist. Kennard stopped at once, heart pounding, eyes wide.

Los eased them back the way they had come, slow and deliberate, until the sounds faded.

Kennard let out a breath he'd been holding.

"You did well," Los said. "Jou listened."

Kennard grinned, pride blooming warm in his chest.

They never drew steel.

And for a time, that felt like victory enough.

They turned back toward the tree line that would take them south again, Los angling them away from the open rise of Odin's Gate.

"One more thing," Los said as they walked. "If jou ever hear fighting ahead—"

"I stop," Kennard said quickly. "I hide. I wait."

Los nodded. "Good. And if I do not come back?"

Kennard hesitated.

"Then jou wait longer," Los said. "Fear passes. Impatience gets people killed."

Kennard swallowed and nodded again.

They were moving well. Too well, maybe. The land felt quiet in the way it sometimes did when nothing had noticed you yet. Los let himself breathe, just a little.

Then a sound came.

And that was when everything went wrong.

A shout—sharp, a Norse patrol had discovered them.

Los reacted instantly, training snapping into place before thought could slow him.

"Run!" he shouted, already turning. "Into the trees. We lose them in the brush and circle back!"

He spurred forward, crashing through low branches, boots pounding frozen earth. He did not look behind him.

Of course Kennard was there.

He had been all day.

Los moved fast—born fast, trained fast, blessed fast—slipping between trunks, cutting angles, trusting the boy to keep up the way he always had.

Too many heartbeats passed.

Los heard only one set of footsteps.

His blood went cold.

He slowed and spun, sword half-drawn.

“Kennard?”

The trees stood empty.

No answering breath. No boots. No voice.

Just the wind through the pines.

Los did not shout.

He moved instead, every sense tightening, like something precious was already gone and he was the last to know. He moved in a wide arc through the trees, boots placed with care, breath measured, sword loose in his hand.

He listened.

Branches whispered. Snow shifted. Somewhere far off, a raven cried and went silent.

“Kennard,” he breathed—not a call, just a name released into the cold.

Nothing answered.

Los widened the circle.

Then he stopped.

There, in a small hollow between pines, the body lay where it had fallen. Kennard was face down, one arm bent wrong beneath him, cloak dark and stiff where blood had soaked through.

A three-man Midgardian patrol stood around him.

They were not looting.

They were not celebrating.

They were waiting.

Spread out. Weapons ready. Eyes scanning every approach, every shadow. One watched the trail Los had gone down. Another faced the opposite rise. The last stood off to the side, back to the body, guarding it like bait. They had left an approach, an obvious way to attack them.

Then he noticed it, a 4th set of foot prints, stopped by the body.

A shadowblade.

A Trap.

Los felt it then—the full, crushing weight of it.

They were not careless.

They were ready.

And for the first time in a long while, Los knew with absolute certainty that if he stepped forward now, he would die. Not because he lacked skill. Not because he lacked courage.

Because the odds were no longer tilted by haste or fear or timing.

They had taken all of that away.

Los stayed where he was.

Every instinct screamed at him to move. To charge. To burn himself out on steel and fury and give the boy something like justice.

But Kennard was already dead.

And charging would only add another body to the snow.

Los swallowed hard and forced himself to breathe.

Slowly, silently, he backed away.

He waited.

Time stretched. The Midgardians murmured to one another, low and sharp. At last—when the cold grew deeper and the moment passed—they moved on, melting back into the trees.

Los did not follow.

It was already too late, he could no longer bring the boy back.

So he waited longer.

Only when the forest settled again—when the land itself seemed to exhale—did he step forward.

He knelt beside the body.

Up close, Kennard looked impossibly small. Younger than he had any right to be. Los slid his sword back into its sheath with shaking hands and reached out, careful, as if the boy might still feel it.

"I am here," he whispered, the words breaking as soon as they left his mouth. "I am here now."

He gathered Kennard up, cradling him against his chest, one arm beneath the shoulders, the other supporting legs that would never run again. Blood soaked into Los's cloak, no longer warm.

"Kennard," he said hoarsely. "What have I done."

His forehead rested against the boy's.

"I am sorry," Los murmured. "I am so sorry."

There was no answer.

Los stood slowly, Kennard's weight heavy and final in his arms, and turned back toward the south—toward home, toward consequences, toward the boy's father, Lady Triss, and Angela.

Behind him, the snow began to fall again, heavy and indifferent, erasing their tracks, erasing every sign they had ever been there.

Chapter XXXIX — The Tears we shed in Silence

The Return

The world was cold.

Colder than Los remembered it ever being—cold enough to sink into bone and stay there. Each step bit deeper than the last as he carried the boy back toward the ship. Kennard lay wrapped in Los's cloak, a makeshift burial shroud pulled close, as though warmth might still matter.

Los did not hurry.

He sailed south without urgency, without ceremony. The boy was laid with care. Every strap was checked. Every fold set straight. Los said nothing. He did not pray. He did not ask the Light for answers, or mercy, or forgiveness.

He simply went south.

He did not stop at Caer Benowyc.

He did not slow near Boldiam.

He did not turn toward Renaris.

He went straight to Castle Sauvage.

From there he took a cart and a horse, tying his own mount behind it, and turned inland toward the small farm the boy had once called home. The road stretched long and quiet ahead of him, as he walked beside the cart the entire way.

In a land long accustomed to death, word usually traveled faster than men.

For once, Los arrived first.

Gronyr Gloyw was tending his field when he saw him coming from a distance—a lone knight walking beside a cart, head bowed, pace steady. He paused, watching, not yet understanding. His wife joined him moments later, shading her eyes, both of them squinting to make sense of what they were seeing.

Then they saw Los's face.

The hollow look of a man already buried by grief.

And then they saw the shroud.

Gronyr's wife made a sound—small, broken—before she reached the cart. Gronyr held her as they stood there, staring, as though refusing to name what lay before them.

"What have you done?" Gronyr demanded, his voice cracking as he reached out and touched the covered head of his son. "What have you done to my boy?"

Los stood still.

"I thought I could..." His voice failed him. He swallowed. "I thought I could keep him safe."

Mrs. Gloyw cradled Kennard's head through the cloth, rocking as if he were still small enough to be soothed. Los stepped back, as though struck.

He fumbled at his belt and pulled free his coin pouch—heavy, worn—and tried to hand it to Mr. Gloyw.

"For jour family," he said quietly.

Gronyr knocked it from his grasp.

"I don't want yer money!" he shouted. "I want my son! He was supposed to be a knight! He wanted to be like *you!*"

"I know," Los said. His voice was barely there.

"My son," Gronyr said again, collapsing beside his wife. "My only son." His words dissolved into grief. "You were supposed to keep him safe. He was supposed to become a knight..."

Los bent, retrieved the pouch from the dirt, and placed it gently in the back of the cart beside Kennard's body.

Then he climbed onto the driver's bench.

Without a word, he took up the reins and set the cart moving—slowly, deliberately—back toward Camelot.

The Gloyws cried out, reaching for their son, for Los, for anything that might stop what was happening. Gronyr grabbed at Los's arm, but Los shook him off—not roughly, not gently. Just enough to keep going.

They followed.

Down the road. Past neighbors drawn by the sight of a knight driving a cart draped in white. Past people who saw the shroud and understood. On through Cotswold. To Camelot. Kennard's parents searched every face for help, for someone to stop Los from taking their boy away.

But no one did.

And when they reached the gates of the great city, even the guards stepped aside.

The Church of St. George

Los did not stop until he reached the Church of St. George.

The Gloyws followed helplessly as he carried the boy inside, boots echoing against the stone. He laid Kennard carefully upon a pew near the aisle, adjusting the shroud as though the boy were merely sleeping.

Acolytes froze.

"Sir— you can't—" one began, hurrying forward. "You can't lay a body there."

Los looked at him once.

"Find a coffin," he said evenly. "One fit for a knight. Have it brought here."

The acolyte hesitated. "Sir, that requires—"

"Tell the carpenter to send the bill to the Embassy," Los continued. "Now."

Something in his voice—flat, exhausted, final—cut the protest short. The acolyte swallowed and hurried away.

Los turned and walked through the side door into the small graveyard beside the church. He crossed to the crypt, took a shovel from its rack, chose a patch of ground near the inner wall, and began to dig.

Another acolyte ran to him. "Sir! You can't do this. You need permission!"

Los did not answer.

He dug.

The soil was heavy, damp from recent rain. Each thrust of the shovel landed with dull finality. The Gloyws stood at the edge of the yard, watching as the knight who had brought their son home now carved a place for him with his own hands.

Lady Fridwulf arrived breathless, robes gathered tight as she surveyed the scene.

"Los," she said sharply. "Only knights and nobles may be buried within the city walls. The boy must be laid to rest outside."

Los did not pause.

She stepped closer. "There is no place for him here."

"Then give him mine," Los said, without looking up. "And when my time comes, bury me outside the city. Or in a ditch."

Lady Fridwulf recoiled as if struck.

She turned sharply to one of the acolytes. "Find Lady Triss. Find Lord Prydwen. This must be stopped."

By the time Lady Triss arrived, the hole was already deep, and a coffin—ornate, polished, fit for a knight or a lord—stood waiting inside the church.

She approached the edge of the grave.

"Los," she said quietly. "You have to stop."

He did not respond.

"Los," she tried again.

And still nothing.

Even the Bishop was summoned, old and grave, his voice gentle but firm. "My son, he will have a proper burial. Outside the city. I give you my word."

Los kept digging.

No one tried further to stop him.

A crowd gathered—knights, clergy, the commons—silent witnesses to the sight of a Knight carving penance into sacred ground.

When Romao and Prox arrived, Prox moved at once toward the crypt.

Romao caught his arm.

"No," he said quietly. "He has to do this himself."

Prox nodded.

And so they stood—two brothers-in-arms—keeping vigil while Los dug a grave meant not just for the boy, but for part of himself.

The Aftermath

Kennard was buried with all the ceremony that could be mustered in the moment.

No squire had ever been laid to rest so well.

Lords and Ladies stood beside Knights and guildmasters. Commoners of every station passed before the ornate coffin, bowing their heads, offering quiet words to the Gloyws. The churchyard was full in a way it rarely was—for a boy who had never held title, never worn spurs.

Sir Los took no part.

When the coffin was lowered, it was Los alone who took the shovel and covered it with the sacred earth of the churchyard. No prayers. No words. Just the steady sound of dirt striking wood until there was nothing left to see.

Long after the crowd dispersed—long after the Gloyws were led home by friends—Los remained.

He sat at the graveside as the light faded, the shovel resting where he had dropped it. Dirt streaked his hands, his sleeves, his face. He did not move.

That was where Angela found him.

She had ridden from Caerwent the moment the news reached her. Having left everything she was doing unfinished. She needed to see it with her own eyes.

“Los,” she said, disbelief breaking through her composure. “What have you done?”

He did not look up.

The ground he sat on was sacred—reserved for nobles, for Knights. For people who mattered in the way the world understood. Not Squires who had never even learned to shave.

“I gave him my grave,” Los said quietly.

The words were flat. Final.

Angela felt it then—the depth of the loss, the way it had carved him hollow. Slowly, she lowered herself beside him, the fine fabric of her clothes darkening with soil.

After a long while, she asked the question no one else had dared.

“What happened?”

“There were four of them,” Los answered.

She hesitated. Then, without thought—

“Why didn’t you just kill them,” she asked, “like you did before?”

Los folded in on himself, pressing his forehead into his knees. His hands trembled, as they wrapping around his legs, as if he was trying to hold himself together.

Because they were ready.
Because we were not.
Because I cannot always—

The words stayed locked behind his teeth.

He had no answer he could give.

Angela understood then. Not all at once—but enough.

She reached for the shovel and set it aside, clearing the space between them. Then she took his hand, holding it firmly, as if to keep him from slipping any further away.

Tomorrow, there would be consequences.

Tonight, she would stay beside him as long as he needed.

Chapter XL — The Knight, the Lady, and the Troll

The Week Off

The rain had slackened sometime before dawn, leaving Camelot smelling of wet stone and smoke. It had been some weeks since the burial, long enough for outrage to cool and accounts to be settled. Los had been made to pay a remittance to the Church to allow Kennard to remain buried there—and to give his word never again to violate the sanctity of the churchyard.

Inside the Orchid Fair guildhall, the great hearth burned low, its light playing over empty chairs and half-folded maps. Angela sat at the long table with sleeves rolled, ink on her fingers, dispatches stacked like small ramparts before her.

The door opened without ceremony.

"If it's Los," she said without looking up, "I'm armed."

"It isn't," came a calm voice.

Angela lifted her head. "Lady Triss," she said, surprised.

The Paladin commander stepped in with a damp travel cloak and a small satchel of letters. Her gaze slid past Angela to the courtyard window, where Los was visible through the glass—helping two squires mend a shattered shield brace, patient as a monk and just as stubborn.

"You could've sent a runner," Angela said.

"I could have," Triss replied. She watched him a moment longer. "He looks tired."

"He's always tired," Angela said, turning back to her maps.

"That isn't something to admire." Triss set the satchel down. "He needs rest. He reminds me of a man who doesn't know how to live unless something's breaking around him."

As if summoned, Los came through the side door into the guild hall, brushing rain from his hair. "If you're talking about me—I didn't do it this time. Whatever it was. I think. Maybe."

Triss shook her head. "I was telling Angela you look worn thin."

"I can rest when I'm dead," he said with a grin that didn't reach his tired eyes.

"That isn't funny."

Silence stretched. Angela took a breath and let the air move again. "She's right. You've carried enough for now, Los. Take a week. No patrols, no petitions. Go find the edge of the map and stare at it."

"A week," he echoed, leaning on the doorframe. "What would I do with such freedom?"

"Breathe," Angela said.

He nodded once. "Then I'll ride north—the Midgard frontier. A little wandering will do me good."

Triss frowned. "Alone?"

"I am very stealthy," he said, his crooked grin reaching his sapphire eyes this time. "Just me and the trees."

Angela met Triss's look and gave a small shrug. "Time to himself might be the one thing that keeps him out of trouble. Just don't go getting yourself killed," she added, softer.

"I shall endeavor not to disappoint you." He took his cloak and sword from the hooks on the wall, bowed lightly, and left.

Triss watched the door until the echo faded. "He laughs at death."

Angela gathered the dispatches into a neat pile. "Then maybe this time, death will have to laugh back."

A soft knock came at the door. Tamara and Amaranthia stepped in, travel cloaks still powdered with rain.

"You're up early," Angela said.

"So are you," Tamara replied. "Los just told us he is taking a week off. You might consider the same."

"And who runs the guild if I do?" Angela shot back, a bit tired rather than sharp.

Amaranthia lifted a brow. "We founded Orchid Fair together, remember? Not so you could die of exhaustion in its service."

Angela leaned back, exhaling. "Fine. A holiday." She glanced at the map. "I'll take a patrol through Cornwall—old forts, coastal roads. Trees and sunlight instead of parchment and complaints."

"You call that a holiday," Tamara said, smiling.

"I call it quiet."

And so, before the week was out, the roads split: Los riding north toward the frozen frontier, Angela south toward green valleys and the sea—both reaching for rest by moving straight into danger, and pretending to hope to find none.

Near the Shoreline

The Midgard frontier was cold as memory. Odin's Gate stretched in iron cliffs and snow-choked passes, where wind carved old prayers into stone. Los traveled light: a white cloak, bread, blade; no banner. He slept beneath pines, woke with frost in his hair, and let silence sand his thoughts down to something usable.

On the first morning in Odin's Gate, he felt it, sensed it—He leaned against a tree and listened to footsteps approaching from the other side—light, not heavy like a troll or dwarf. When they were about ten paces out, he stepped from the cover of the tree into the path, there she was, half-mist and cold metal: a Valkyrie, pale armor clean as winter, her braid snapping like a gold banner in the wind. She quickly drew her sword and brought her shield to bear.

Los set his greatsword's point in the frost, and silently bowed.

Not in courtesy. In acknowledgment.

This was what he had truly come for. Not for rest. Not for peace. For this. For the reckoning he had failed to make before. For Kennard. For the four who had walked away while a boy lay dead in the snow.

He wanted blood. He wanted it badly enough that it twisted something inside him and made him afraid.

She didn't hesitate, she tapped the edge of her blade against the side of her shield, then charged straight toward him.

Los did not meet her.

He let her pass within a hand's breadth, turned with her momentum, and brought the flat of his blade down across her backside—hard enough to sting, not to wound. Not playful or mocking.

But a statement.

I decide when you die.

She stumbled, fury flaring where surprise had been. She spun back on him, shouting something sharp in Norse

Then it began in earnest.

Steel met steel.

They moved like mirrored storms—strike, parry, prayer, recovery. Her sword flashed in silver arcs; his blade replied in patient sweeps. Blessing met blessing, light devouring light, wounds closing as fast as they opened until pain became irrelevant and endurance the only language left.

Time thinned.

Breath ghosted in white plumes. Snow shivered off fir boughs with each collision. At last skill—not miracle—tilted the scale. Los turned a thrust aside, caught her shield with a twist, and landed a blow hard enough to send her sprawling to the ground. He pinned her there, breathing hard, the world reduced to the tip of a blade at her chest.

"Surrender," he said in a commanding voice.

Take it.

Take it, jou Norse bitch.

Take the chance your people never gave the boy.

Her jaw tightened. She spat in the snow beside him.

“Dra til helvete, Paladin.”

Go to hell.

For a heartbeat, he did nothing.

In that pause lived everything he did not want to be.

Then he struck.

There was no prayer. No Light. No absolution. Just steel doing what steel was made to do.

When it was finished, Los knelt there longer than necessary, staring at what he had done. His hands shook—not from exertion, but from the knowledge that part of him had wanted this. Had been waiting for it.

He quickly cleaned his blade in the snow.

“For jou, Kennard,” he said quietly, voice rough and ugly.

The wind carried his words away without caring.

Los did not linger.

He turned from the body and moved on at once, angling deeper into the frontier, as he always did after a fight—before thought could catch up, before grief or memory could take hold.

He did not feel better.

He only felt—empty.

And that frightened him more than the cold.

Odins gate

He found his horse hidden among the trees, but chose to walk with it instead of ride, following the northern coast. The sea hurled salt against the rocks and the light went bruised-purple as the day waxed on. That was when he smelled it—something rich and warm and impossible out here.

He followed the scent into a hollow where smoke rose from a low fire. A massive shape hunched beside it, stirring a black pot with what seemed like a giant ladle. The troll glanced up, wide-shouldered, eyes small and steady.

Los tied his horse and moved closer, hand on his hilt. He would let the troll make the first move, as was his way.

The troll blinked once, ladled stew into a wooden bowl, and held it out.

Los hesitated, sniffed, tasted. Salt and fat and something green. Then cautiously sat cross-legged by the fire and finished the bowl in silence. The troll grinned and poured him another.

"Gracias," Los said around a mouthful.

The troll's grin widened, but he said nothing.

They ate until the pot was empty and their bellies full. Wind worried the fire. The sea kept breathing.

For the first time since losing Kennard, Los smiled—deep, relaxed, at peace. A smile so real it reached his sapphire eyes.

He felt unburdened, unthreatened. In a way, lost and out of place without the hate he had come with. The fire was warm, the sea a soft rhythm in the dark. He leaned back, meaning only to rest his eyes—and drifted into sleep before he knew it.

He woke to the crackle of the fire being coaxed back to life.

The sky had gone pearl-grey, snow still whispering against the rocks. The troll crouched nearby, humming low, stirring the embers with a branch.

Los blinked, surprised by the warmth still on his hands. He must have slept through the whole night—something he hadn't done in weeks.

"Morning," he said, voice rough.

The troll yawned and smiled. Then he retrieved something he had been making on the fire: Fried bread. But due to the way the Troll had grabbed it between its fingers, it had a hole punched in the center. This seemed to cause it to be more evenly cooked.

Los rose, brushed off his cloak, and began tightening the straps on his armor. His horse was a few paces off, nosing at the snow for grass.

His host offered the confection to him and Los gingerly took it, sampling it.

It was sweet, somewhat fluffy, and so very good.

"Jou cook breakfast too?" he asked.

The troll shrugged as he retrieved one for himself.

"Forgive me, I have no introduced myself, and jou have been so hospitable. I am Los. Los Ortiz."

"Tim." The creature smiled.

"Der Troll."

"Jes," Los smiled. "I can see that."

When Los turned to check the saddle, he noticed the troll was packing up camp—rolling his blanket, tying the bundle to a stout little pony he had not taken much notice of before.

Los paused. "Jou heading somewhere?"

Tim nodded once, the motion slow and sure.

"Ah. Then I'll let jou finish."

He cinched the last strap, adjusted the bridle. When he looked up again, Tim was standing beside him, everything packed and ready, waiting.

Los frowned. "I'm going in search of adventure and challenges."

Tim only smiled.

"I'm roaming the frontier," Los said. "Hunting. Training. Dangerous work. Jou know"

Tim gave another nod, unbothered.

Los sighed, unable to keep the corner of his mouth from twitching. "Fine."

This was going to change his plans; he could not go about slaying Norsemen and Trolls while traveling with his new companion. He would have to find something else to entertain himself.

Los chuckled. "This es mi caballo, his name is Blanco. It means white, because... he is"

Tim's grin widened.

"And jour horse?... Pony?"

Tim looked at his diminutive horse and it at him, confused.

"I see." Los nodded, well then...

And so they went off together into the snow—the knight, the troll, and a pony yet to be named—in search of adventure at the edge of the world.

The Frontier — Later

They were riding along a broken ridge when the sound reached them.

A cry—ragged, hoarse, chased by something heavier. The scrape of boots on stone. Breath tearing loose from lungs already spent.

Los reined in at once.

Ahead, three Norsemen broke from the tree line below, stumbling uphill through crusted snow. One was bleeding badly, favoring a leg that barely held him. Behind them, the brush exploded outward.

Fenrir.

Not one or two.

But a small pack.

White as snow, shoulders rolling low, breath steaming as they ran.

The Norse saw Los ahead, high on his mount.

They nearly froze as despair took hold.

A Paladin on the ridge.

Death ahead.

Death behind.

Los did not slow.

He drove Blanco forward and attacked from the saddle before the Fenrir reached the rise, the steel in his hand moved like a part of him. He did not shout. He simply called on the Light as he met the first Fenrir head-on, blade biting deep into fur and bone.

The impact turned the beast aside in a spray of blood and snow. It also unhorsed the Paladin, who quickly found his feet and continued the fight.

Behind him, Tim stopped at the ridge.

The Norse scrambled past him without thinking, hands grasping at his cloak, voices breaking.

"Tim—help us!"

The wounded man collapsed hard, white-faced, blood soaking his boot. Tim knelt at once and set his hands there, broad fingers steady, murmuring something too low to hear.

The other two turned back toward Los and the Fenrir.

Shields came up as they watched him fight.

Los moved with a brutal economy—no flourish, no hesitation. One Fenrir fell shrieking, the second snapping at him even as it died, jaws closing on empty air where his leg had been a heartbeat before.

When it was done, the ridge went quiet again, the pack had died as they lived: together.

Los wiped his blade once in the snow and turned back.

The two Norse flinched, shields still raised.

He stopped a few paces away.

"Are jou hurt?" he asked them.

They stared at him, baffled.

Behind them, Tim finished binding the wound with Eir's blessing. He looked up and smiled. "He will be ok."

The injured man's breathing eased.

The shields lowered—slowly, cautiously.

"Vhat is this?" one of them asked Tim, voice raw. "Are you—are you vith him?"

Tim glanced at Los, then back at them.

"Ja."

That seemed to confuse them more than anything else.

Los crouched, checked the binding, then stood. "Fenrir are dangerous in packs," he said calmly. "Jou were lucky we heard jou."

Lucky.

The word hung there, strange and weightless.

They thanked him—awkwardly, uncertain whether they were allowed to. Los helped the wounded man to his feet and Tim steadied him until he could stand.

"Best jou come with us. We will see jou safely to within sight of Bledmeer."

The group nodded, but stayed close to Tim in case the Paladin changed his mind and turned on them.

Together, they walked as far as the next rise—far enough that the towers of Bledmeer Faste cut the sky.

There, Los stopped.

"Stay on the road," he said. "Jou should be safe from here."

Then he turned away.

Tim followed.

Behind them, the three Norse stood watching as the Paladin and the troll rode off together into the snow—leaving confusion where fear had been.

And a story they would tell for a generation.

Chapter XLI — Homecoming and Rumors

Friends

Los and Tim spent the remainder of the week doing much the same—wandering the frontier, never lingering long, answering trouble when it called and moving on before many questions could be asked. Fenrir packs. A trapped hunter. A patrol lost in bad weather. Always the same pattern from those they aided: Confusion, acceptance, and the pair moving on.

When it was time for Los to turn south, Tim rode with him to the edge of Odin's Gate.

The wind came hard off the cliffs. Snow hissed across stone.

"Farevell, Master," Tim said simply.

"Until we meet again," Los replied.

Tim pulled Los into a crushing embrace.

Los stiffened, then let out a short breathless laugh. "Tim—Tim, jou are crushing me."

Tim loosened his arms at once. "Sorry, Master."

When Tim let go, Los stepped back and looked over his new friend—big, earnest, still smiling as if the world had never given him reason not to.

"I am going to miss jou," he said quietly.

Tim smiled, wide and uncomplicated. "Ja."

Los nodded once, then gave that crooked grin of his.

They separated without ceremony. Tim turned back into the white without looking over his shoulder, his pony following along as always.

The week had not gone as planned.
But somehow, Los felt... better.

Home Again

Camelot Stables

By the time he reached Camelot, winter had begun to loosen its grip. Snowmelt darkened the streets, banners hung clean again above the square, and the air smelled of wet stone instead of smoke. He reached the stables just before sundown, Blanco weary but sure-footed, tack crusted with northern salt.

"is it true?"

Angela stood in the stable doorway, still in travel gear, hair pulled back, cloak unfastened. Her tone was light—but her eyes were watching him carefully.

He loosened Blanco's girth without turning. "Depends what you heard."

"They say you've been roaming Midgard," she said, stepping closer. "With a troll."

He nodded. "That part's true."

Angela folded her arms. "I leave you alone for one week and you make a troll your pet."

Los said mildly. "He's not my pet. His name's Tim."

She stared at him. "Tim?"

"Jes."

There was a long pause.

Then, despite herself, her mouth twitched. "The troll's name is Tim."

"Jes Tim," Los said. "A shaman but also a fine cook."

That earned a breath of laughter before she caught it. "And where is your friend now?"

"Still north. With his pony, Bill."

Her brow creased. "He named his pony Bill?"

"Well," Los said. "I named the pony Bill, I wanted to name it William, but Tim objected, and we settled on Bill."

She pinched the bridge of her nose. "Of course you did."

For a moment they stood there, the familiar quiet settling between them.

Then Los spoke again, "So how was Cornwall?"

"Cornwall was fog and bandits," she shrugged. "And a Theurgist meddling with the spirits of the dead at an old church ruin. I thought a week away would feel like rest."

"And?"

"It just reminded me how much work there is," she admitted.

Los nodded. "Then we both failed at resting."

"Looks that way," she said, stepping aside as he led Blanco past. "Welcome home, Los."

He paused, one hand still on the reins.

"It's good to be home," he said.

Then, softer—as if a whisper—

"I missed jou too."

Late that night, long after the church had gone still, Lady Triss sat alone in her room at the Cathedral. A single candle burned beside a frontier report she hadn't intended to read twice.

Most of it was routine. Patrol movements. Fenrir sightings. A note about worsening weather near Odin's Gate.

At the bottom, almost a side note:

Sir Los sighted in Odin's Gate.

Accompanied by a troll.

Observed engaging Fenrir packs and other frontier threats.

The pair were seen treating wounded and providing food to those in need.

Motive unclear.

Triss set the parchment down.

For a long moment, she said nothing.

Then, quietly, she smiled.

"Of course," she murmured. "Of course you would make friends with a troll."

The candlelight wavered, softening the lines of command and duty into something older, gentler. For just a breath, she allowed herself to be proud—not of victories or legends, but of kindness done where no one was meant to see it.

Then the moment passed.

She snuffed the flame, and called it a night.

The Saracen

The road to Berkstead

The road through the frontier ran thin and uneven, bordered by trees and low grass. Albion patrols between Caer Berkstead and Caer Benowyc were rare here. Hibernian and Midgard raiders rarer still. And yet the place still had a habit of producing surprises.

He had promised to assist some guildies on a patrol around Caer Berkstead, and was headed there to meet them.

Los kept his eyes peeled, and used the landscape the way Willow had taught him, to keep from being spotted from a distance.

Ahead, just off the road, a figure leaned against the trunk of an old tree, half-swallowed by shadow. Tall. Broad-shouldered. Waiting—but not hiding.

Los slowed at once.

The figure turned and stepped into the road, taking a wide stance, arms folded over his chest. His armor was black; his cloak was yellow with a black lion's head. Across his back hung a greatsword—a large curved blade, the like of which Los had not seen since he left...

Los's hand went to his sword at once, out of habit.

Then he stopped several paces away.

"Moor," Los said aloud, the word leaving him before he could stop it.

The man's expression didn't harden. If anything, it softened.

"Saracen," he corrected calmly.

His voice was distinctly Iberian Arab.

"What are you doing here?" Los said accusingly.

"Same as you. Serving God."

"Which God?" Los said, his eyes narrowing as his hand began to close on the hilt of his blade.

The man answered by kissing his thumb, then crossing himself, left to right, with his Thumb and index finger crossed, in the Mozarabic way.

Los instinctively raised his hand.

Three fingers touched his forehead.

His thumb traced a small circle over his heart.

Then his hand rested flat against his chest.

Then whispered "Que Dios viva en mi corazón."

"The Lord our God." He replied solemnly. Then after a pause, a bit confused. "Toledano? You must be Sir Los, but I thought you were from Sevilla."

"I am from Sevilla. But I was raised in Toledo. Brought up in the church of San Lucas."

"Ah."

"I did not know there were any Saracen this far north." Los said with a bit of curiosity as his stance relaxed. His arms likewise folding over his chest when not gesturing.

The Saracen smiled faintly. "There are some."

"And you are a Paladin?"

"I am."

The Saracen's smile widened just a fraction. "That is usually the part that surprises people."

Los hesitated, "Jes, it is rare. What can I do for jou Saracen?"

"Darkhawk, please."

"Forgive me, and please, jus call me Los.

Darkhawk shifted his weight and began gesturing as he spoke, somehow to Los it felt like home. "I won't keep you long. I wanted to see for myself if the stories were true."

"And?" Los asked.

"I thought you would be taller."

Los laughed "Jes the way they tell stories I would expect me to be taller too."

Darkhawk laughed along with him.

Then his gaze drifted — just briefly — to Los's sword.

The distinctive black steel.

"A fine blade," he said. "Rare to see the Raven Clan steel take that color."

Los followed his look. "It works well enough."

Darkhawk nodded. "Well enough to slay a dragon I was told. My Guildmaster would like to meet you someday. Her name is Kimbirli of Arthurian Knights."

Los raised an eyebrow. "I have heard the name."

"She also has a Raven Clan sword," Darkhawk said. "Steel in color, a blue flame when held by a righteous hand. She wishes to know if you would be willing to trade with her. She believes the black blade will better suit her armor, and the steel yours."

Los tilted his head. "It is magic, like this one?"

"It is, every bit as magic, it even has been known to explode with cold magic."

"So, mine is not the only one," Los replied softly.

"An equal blade for an equal trade?"

Darkhawk nodded "That is her hope, but she can offer more if you like."

Los shook his head, "Treasure I have, good will on the other hand. Tell her to come to the Embassy in two days, we can exchange blades then."

"I will let her know. She will be grateful... Los."

Then the Paladin nodded once "until we meet again."

"Until then," Los replied.

Then he watched until the Saracen was gone.

With a breath he touched his chest again — not in prayer.

In acknowledgment.

Orchid Fair Guildhall – Late Morning, Camelot

The guild had been busy, taking assignments and coordinating patrols.

Angela had been busy trying to get Los to help her with the administration of the guild, but all he seemed to be good at was swinging his sword and inspiring others by helping people in the field. While good for recruitment, did nothing to help her run the guild.

He was also good at disappearing in inopportune moments.

A sharp knock rattled the front door of the Orchid Fair guildhall.

Tamara Burns looked up from her ledger by the hearth, brows rising. "That's no merchant," she muttered, standing and brushing parchment dust from her skirt. The sound of horses shuffling and a jingle of finely polished tack echoed through the narrow lane beyond.

She pulled open the door.

A royal courier stood beneath the lintel, clad in blue and crimson livery, a rolled scroll in one gloved hand and a seal pouch in the other. His steed, a gray charger bearing the crown's sigil, waited just behind him.

"For Lady Angela Burns of the Guild Orchid Fair," he intoned, offering the scroll.

Tamara blinked, then let out a low whistle.

"Well then."

She took the scroll with a raised brow and turned toward the stairs.

"Fihri!" she called. "A letter just came for you! You'll want to read this one"

Upstairs, Angela stepped out from the war room, wiping charcoal from her hands. "If it's more patrol requests, tell them to shove it in a scroll case and drop it in the moat."

Tamara grinned. "I don't think it is a Patrol request this time."

Angela froze halfway down the stair. "What then?"

Tamara held up the scroll with a flourish. "This one has the seal of the King himself."

Orchid Fair Common Room

The letter lay unrolled on the long table in the common room, its golden filigree catching the sunlight. Angela stood at its head, reading aloud.

His Royal Majesty extends invitation to Lady Angela Burns, Paladin of Albion and Guildmaster of Orchid Fair, and to her honored companions. To attend the Beltane Festivities in the King's Great Hall.

She lowered the letter and stared for a long moment.

"They invited the whole guild," she murmured.

Los, standing near the hearth in his travel-worn tunic, tilted his head. "Jou seem surprised."

Angela looked up at him. "I am. Beltane may be a market parade, but an invitation to court to celebrate it—normally guilds like Knights of Camelot, Knights Templar, and Arthurian Knights get an invite. They don't just send invites to upstart guilds unless someone noticed us."

She smiled faintly, brushing a lock of blonde hair behind her ear. "This is good, Los. Very good. It means we're being seen."

Los nodded.

"Speaking of Arthurian Knights," he said mildly. "I met one of their Paladins the other day, a Saracen."

Angela glanced at him sharply. "Darkhawk?"

"Jes, that is what he said his name was. He wanted to talk with me about exchanging my Raven Clan sword with his Guildmaster. Said it would go better with her armor than the one she had."

Angela stopped breathing for a heartbeat.

"Kimbirli, Guildmaster of Arthurian Knights wants to trade swords with you?"

"Jes, we met at the embassy this morning and traded blades," he confirmed.

"I have never seen a Highland woman look so... regal. A true warrior's bearing."

Angela did not move. The way he spoke—easy, unguarded—was how one might describe a fellow soldier, not a Guildmaster whose name commanded respect in every hall of Camelot.

"You *traded* swords," she said slowly, "with Kimbirli, the Guildmaster of the Arthurian Knights?"

He shrugged. "Jou keep repeating everything I say."

Angela exhaled, something between awe and exasperation.

"You really have no sense of scale, do you?" she said at last.

Los smiled faintly. "I try not to."

She studied him for a moment longer, then shook her head—half fond, half weary.

"You realize," she said, turning back to the letter on the table, "that this is exactly why the court is paying attention to us."

Los blinked. "Because I trade swords with people?"

"Because people have taken notice of *you*." She replied. "People that matter."

She tapped the parchment lightly.

"This invitation didn't come out of nowhere."

Los folded his arms, thoughtful. "Jou were likely invited anyway. House Burns is an important house."

Angela nodded. "True. My father always receives an invitation. I usually attend with him. And *you* would have been invited too—Knight of the Church, dragon slayer, and as Ambassador from Castile, I am sure an invitation is waiting for you there as we speak."

He gave a small smile. "I am sure it is in the hands of my secretary."

Angela's gaze drifted back to the letter. "Because now we're not going alone. We go as a guild. Julia, Romao, Prox, and Bunk, if we can convince him to go." She paused, considering the list.

"And the others?" Los asked

"I wish they could, but that is not how it works. They will expect just Nobles, Knights, Paladins, Clerics. The Others will have to be left behind."

Los nodded. He understood how court worked, much as he pretended not to.

Then Los looked down at his rather plain clothes. They simply would not do if he wanted to impress anyone at court. He could always wear the Kings colors at court, His King, in Hispania. But then he would not be representing Orchid Fair and he owed Angela that.

"I will need new attire."

Angela's brow arched. "You mean not re-dyed scout-survivor chic?"

He smirked. "Something finer. A noble outfit. I have an idea."

She folded her arms. "Oh?"

"A red cloak," he said thoughtfully. "Red tabard. And on the breast... a golden Rampant Lion. With a white shirt under."

Angela blinked. "You mean my house crest?"

He met her eyes. "Jes. My family's lion is gold, on blue. But gold on red suits this place... this cause. It would go better with everyone else in Guild colors. I wish to wear it—not as mine, but in honor of jou. For all jou have done for the guild, for all of us."

Angela was quiet a moment. "That's... an odd choice. You could wear your own."

"I could," he admitted. "But then I would stand out, and worse stand apart from the Guild. I would wear jour house not as heritage... but in honor."

Her lips parted slightly, caught between reply and reverence. She knew what it would mean for him to wear it.

"...Alright," she said quietly. "I will ask my father, but for now you have my permission. Just don't upstage me."

Los gave a courtly bow. "Impossible."

Angela rolled her eyes, then smiled. "Come on. We'll need to visit the tailor. And God help us, the perfumers too. Beltane isn't a battlefield—but it is *war*."

Los followed her to the door, the letter still resting on the table behind them. The golden wax seal of the King glinted softly in the light.

The Orchid Fair would go to court.

And the world would watch.

The Merchant's Plaza

Camelot Marketplace – Early Afternoon

The sun was bright over Camelot's plaza, and the air buzzed with preparations. Silken tents fluttered along the stone arcades, merchants from the outlying fiefs shouting the price of dyed fabrics, citrus fruits, and polished silver. Musicians rehearsed snatches of festival songs, and pages darted past with baskets of ribbons and garlands.

Los moved through the crowd like a man on a mission, his new crimson half-cloak billowing just enough to mark him as someone of growing note. The edges of his red tabard were embroidered subtly, the symbol of the Rampant Lion in deep gold resting proud across his chest. In one hand he held a list—tailor, cobbler, perfumer—and in the other, a heavy leather pouch of coin.

He barely noticed the slim figure stepping out of a shop until he almost collided with her.

He stopped just short, eyes widening slightly.
"Willow!"

She looked up. Her hair was a little wilder than usual, and her shoulders lifted faintly in surprise.

"I haven't seen you in weeks," he said, smiling despite the rush in his voice. "I've missed... training with you. But I've had to prepare for tonight."

Her head tilted.

Los gestured to the plaza, the ribbon-strewn stalls, the bustle.
"The Beltane Festivities. In the King's Hall. Orchid Fair was invited."
He moved to step past, then paused.

"I'll see you there," he said with a faint smile—words spoken without weight, a slip of the tongue.

But to her, they carried everything.

Willow blinked.
Then nodded.

And in the shadow of the market, Cadens watched and listened.

Los vanished into the bustle of Camelot, unaware he'd just rewritten someone else's evening with a single, misplaced phrase.

He hadn't invited her.

Not really. Not intentionally.

But the words were said.

And once spoken, they could not be taken back.

And for Willow—who had never been invited to anything—it was enough.

Chapter XLII — The Beltane Misunderstanding

The Vault

Camelot Vault Keeper's Office – Late Afternoon

The vault was quiet and cool, carved from old stone beneath the city. A bearded clerk looked up as Willow entered, clutching a worn parchment chit.

"Name?" he asked flatly.

She passed him the note.

"Ah." He nodded. "Willow. I remember you."

He vanished briefly behind a thick iron gate and returned with a chest smaller than a footlocker.

"Untouched, just as you left it," he said, setting it down.

Willow nodded once.

He gave a softer look then and stepped away, letting her kneel beside it with some privacy.

She opened the chest carefully.

Inside was little: an old ribbon, a wood-handled comb, a single sketch of her parents—her father standing tall, her mother radiant in a simple but beautiful wedding dress of soft white linen with gentle trim.

Beneath it, folded carefully and wrapped in cedar paper, was the dress.

Willow pulled it out.

It smelled of time.

It was too big for her tiny frame.

But it was the only thing she had.

And she would not go to the King's Hall dressed as a scout.

The Bath

Chloe's Apartment – Dusk

Unlike other scouts—many of whom were poor and lived in the barracks like Willow—Chloe had means, and her own apartment in Camelot.

A knock came at the door. A moment later Chloe opened it to find Willow standing silently outside, a backpack clutched tightly to her chest. With her free hand, Willow gestured toward her tangled hair.

Chloe blinked. Then she grinned.

“Willow—you want me to help you with your hair?”

Willow nodded once.

Chloe lit up like a firework. “Is it for tonight? The festival?”

Willow made a small, hesitant gesture—not quite yes, not quite no.

Chloe didn't notice. She took Willow's hand at once.

“Come in. Sit. We're going to make you glow.”

She filled a bath with warm rosewater, added crushed mint, and worked through the tangles in Willow's hair with gentle, patient fingers.

Willow sat still as stone, eyes downcast, hands curled in her lap as though she feared even breathing might ruin the moment.

Chloe kept chatting, oblivious to the misunderstanding.

“Wait till the others see you. No one's going to believe it.”

She wrapped Willow's hair in a soft cloth and handed her a worn but clean towel.

“You will look so lovely, Willow,” Chloe said, smiling.

Willow said nothing.

But her eyes shone.

The Dress

Chloe's Apartment – Later

Alone in the spare room, Willow stood before a cracked mirror.

The dress was a full size too large—the waist loose, the shoulders slipping. She pulled at the strings to tighten it as much as she could, cinched it behind her back, and moving the sleeves to her elbows. The hem pooled over her boots, but she didn't care.

Her short hair, freshly washed and brushed, fell in long waves almost to her shoulders, like flickering firelight.

She had no jewelry. No perfume. Just a faded old wedding dress and her boots.

And with that—

She left.

Sneaking out the window, unseen, unheard.

The Walk to the Citadel

Camelot Streets and Citadel Steps – Evening

The city was ablaze with torches and music as Willow made her way through the evening streets. She stayed to the side, out of crowds, her hands clutching the folds of her dress.

Children laughed as they ran by. Couples danced in the squares. Knights did last-minute polishing of their armor.

No one noticed the slim girl in the too-large dress slipping between shadows.

Until she reached the gates.

There, the Citadel rose, tall and grand, lit by lanterns and guarded by soldiers in full formal gear.

The *King's Hall* beyond the steps was a mighty edifice with banners fluttering overhead.

Willow hesitated.

The guards didn't pay her any attention. They barely looked.

And yet to her it felt like the whole realm had turned to watch.

Her boots barely shown from under the folds of her mother's gown as she stepped forward. Eyes down, hands tight at her sides.

She had no invitation.

Only a hope,

And the words:

I'll see you there.

Courtyard to the Kings Hall

The honor guard gleamed in the golden light of the setting sun. Their halberds upright, their livery crisp in quarters of red and blue. Polished steel caught the warmth of the spring day like mirrors reflecting fire, and behind their formation stood their architect—Sergeant Brad Bradford. Broad of shoulder and severe of face, he wore his pride like armor. His men were sharp because *he* was sharp. It was Beltane, the festival of abundance and thanks, and tonight's celebration would be perfect.

Guests arrived in a steady stream—Knights of Camelot, Templars, Lords and Ladies in silks and finery. Among them, guilds both famous and rising. One such rising star was Orchid Fair, a band of adventurers growing in renown. Angela Burns, daughter of Lord Burns and Guildmaster of Orchid Fair, led them in. But it was Los Ortiz, the Castilian Ambassador and a known hero, who drew the eye.

Bradford held his tongue. He kept his posture. But his gaze hardened at the sight of the foreigner. To him, the Orchid Fair Guild was a parade of misfits—Spaniards, Italians, outcasts, peasants. And he especially hated Los. Not just because he was foreign. Not just because he was respected. But because he was kind to Willow.

Bradford's lip curled.

Then, across the courtyard, he saw her.

Willow.

She moved through the light like a ghost—silent, slight, and out of place. Her faded white dress—her mother's old wedding gown—hung awkwardly over her small frame. Her leather boots peeked out from beneath the hem. Her hair was combed and clean. But her scarred face was unreadable, expressionless, as always.

"What are *you* doing here?" Bradford barked. "The *servants* enter from the back!"

She stopped, staring up at him without flinching. She was used to this.

"Shoo, you little rat," he sneered, stepping forward and raising the haft of his halberd like he might strike. "Be gone you little gutter snipe."

She did not move. She just waited.

By the wall behind her, Endrond had paused, observing the scene. With a furrowed brow, he turned away and jogged to the tavern where Cadens sat nursing a drink.

"I just saw something strange," Endrond said as he entered. "Willow. In a dress."

Cadens barely looked up. "Los invited her. I heard him myself."

"What? I didn't see him out there and Bradford's tearing into her again."

Chloe, seated nearby with the other scouts, slammed her cup on the table. "*Suddenly her asking me to help wash her hair makes sense.* But if that Spaniard set her up—if this is a joke—he's dead."

She stood, and the others stood with her. Scouts. Infiltrators. Even a few peasants followed. Word travels quickly in taverns, and nothing drew a crowd like trouble.

By the time they reached the courtyard, Willow had turned around.

Los was not coming. She had misunderstood.

Her shoulders fell as she stepped away.

"Come on, Willow," Chloe said, reaching her. "You were invited and we're here to escort you."

Willow blinked, surprised—but nodded. The crowd around her grew, giving her strength she didn't expect. She turned, took a deep breath, and began walking back toward the entrance—toward the guards.

Bradford turned to find the girl again. This time with a mob at her back.

He stepped forward, halberd held horizontal to block the way. "I told you to *leave*, you ugly little goblin!" he shouted. "And take your friends with you!"

"She was invited," Chloe shot back. "By Sir Los."

"And who would invite *you*?" he growled.

"No one, but Los invited Willow" Cadens stepped forward. "I heard him myself."

Bradford sneered. "Then where is he? He didn't inform the Guard. She's not on the list."

He made a threatening motion again—but Cadens caught the halberd shaft with one hand. His other rested near a dagger at his belt.

"Then go inside and get him."

Inside the King's Hall, music played. The nobility mingled. Food flowed, until one of the guards burst through the doors, wide-eyed and out of breath.

"Sir! There is a disturbance outside the gate!"

Captain Ryder turned on his heel. "*What?*"

"The scarred scout girl—she tried to enter! There's a mob—commoners attacking the King's Guard!"

The King's gaze snapped toward the commotion. His expression twisted with displeasure.

Los turned pale.

"Oh no..." he muttered, realizing what had happened. He had told Willow, "*I will see you there.*" He had meant *later*. She had taken it to mean *at the celebration*.

"Your Majesty," he hurriedly said, bowing low, "I believe this is... my doing."

Angela stared daggers at him. "*What did you do now?*" she hissed.

"If you permit me," Los continued, "I will correct the... misunderstanding."

"Do so," said the King sternly. "Immediately."

At the gates, chaos had broken out.

Only two guards remained blocking the door. The others wrestled with scouts and infiltrators. Sergeant Bradford was pinned to the ground, seven people holding him, Cadens among them with a dagger at his throat.

"*What have I done...*" Los muttered as he and Ryder arrived.

"Cease this at once!" barked Ryder.

But Los raised a hand. "The King said I could handle this," as he stepped forward.

"Forgive me," he said gently, facing the mob. "There has been a... a slight misunderstanding."

"You bet there has!" Chloe snapped.

Los ignored her, turning instead to Willow. Her eyes were wide as he extended a hand to her.

"Willow is my guest this evening," he said softly. "I failed to inform the Guard. That was my error."

She hesitated... then placed her hand in his as he guided her past the guards.

Gasps echoed.

He turned to the crowd.

"The guards were only doing their duty. Please—let us not mar the evening any further."

Cadens, now standing, approached Los, staring at him like he wanted to cut his throat.

Los met his gaze, then slipped his coin purse from his belt as he turned away. "Don't you peoples have better things to do tonight?" he said, loud and dismissive.

It was a performance—a show for the benefit of those who thought the crowd beneath them. But the act was not over yet.

Cadens began to move on him, anger flashing—until Los turned and pressed the purse discreetly into his hand.

Cadens felt the weight of it. Paused. Then grinned. "He's right. Let's not ruin the festivities."

Chloe stepped forward, ready to object, when Cadens grabbed her arm and flashed the purse as he steered her away.

Endrond caught on fast. "Back to the tavern!" he called. "Drinks are on the Spaniard!"

Inside the hall, silence fell as Los walked Willow before the King.

Captain Ryder stiffened. The royal herald looked appalled. What should he even say? *Lady? Commoner? Scout?*

Los answered the question himself. Standing tall, he bowed low and proclaimed clearly:

"Jour Majesty. I present to you Willow—my friend, and my mentor."

Willow bowed, awkward but sincere.

The King said nothing for a moment. Then, simply... nodded.

Gasps spread among the crowd. Whispers followed. But Los turned toward the musicians, signaling them to begin again.

And together, he and Willow stepped onto the dance floor—beneath the fire-lit banners of the festival.

Chapter XLIII — A Dance Beneath the Banners

A Dance Beneath the Banners

The festival – The Dance

The music swelled—a graceful, lilting tune played on flutes and lutes beneath the vaulted ceiling of the King’s Hall. The gathered nobles parted with murmurs and sidelong glances, some curious, others appalled. But none dared speak above the notes of the melody.

Sir Los guided Willow gently into the open space.

Her hand in his felt small, hesitant. But she did not resist, though her every movement was guarded—like a creature that had known only pursuit and shadows, now pulled into the center of a flame.

“Jou look lovely,” he whispered, so only she could hear. “Ignore them. Tonight, let us enjoy the evening.”

Willow didn’t speak. She couldn’t. Her throat was tight, her heart a frantic drum inside her chest. The dress itched. Her boots were all wrong. Her scar burned with the stares it attracted. But still... she did not pull away.

Los bowed slightly, inviting her to begin.

She stepped forward—clumsily at first, but he steadied her. His lead was light but firm. A gentle palm on her back, his other hand holding hers.

They moved across the floor slowly, awkwardly, then with rhythm.

Whispers grew louder. Princess Constantina nearly fainted from scandal. A noblewoman gasped when Willow stumbled once, but Los caught her. He didn’t mock. He simply smiled.

Willow's Perspective

She didn't belong here.

The stone floor felt too smooth. The walls too tall. The lights too bright. She could still feel Sergeant Bradford's words echoing in her ears. *Ugly little goblin. Rat. Gutter snipe.*

But Los had spoken differently. *Friend. Mentor.*

No one had ever called her that before.

She watched his face as they danced—warm eyes, kind smile, oblivious to how hard it was to be seen. Truly *seen*.

People stared at her. Judged her. But she was used to that. What she wasn't used to... was standing in the center of it, not as a mistake, but as someone invited.

I will see you tonight, he had said. And now he had.

Willow didn't know how to breathe. She focused on his steps. Left, right, pivot. Follow.

Then her hand tightened in his. Just once. That was enough.

Lord Baldric's Reaction

From across the floor, Lord Baldric stood with arms folded beneath his heavy cloak, his black-and-gold crest faintly visible in the torchlight. His eyes narrowed behind his wine cup, watching the scene unfold with icy disdain.

Beside him, the Lords of Benowyc and Sursbrooke murmured about protocol.

"A scout? A mute?" one hissed. "He dances with her like she were a queen."

"A disgrace," said another. "Is she even of age?"

Lord Baldric said nothing at first. He simply sipped his wine, the corner of his mouth twitching downward. His mind worked quickly.

This will stain him, he thought. Good.

He could already see the whispers forming—gossip among the minor Houses, disapproval among the purists. And Los had given them a gift: a public spectacle, wrapped in foreign charm and peasant embarrassment.

“Let him dance with rats,” Baldric finally said, voice low. “It only shows us where he belongs.”

Still, a tightness formed in his jaw because no matter how much he hated the boy—no matter how clearly beneath him he believed Los to be—the applause that followed their dance grated like a blade in his ear.

Some clapped. Some smiled.

And Baldric hated that even more.

Angela Burns – The Fire Beneath the Gilding

Angela stood still as stone near the columned edge of the King’s Hall, her red-and-white gilded cloak pooling behind her like a lioness at rest. But rest was a lie. Inside her, a wildfire smoldered.

She had watched every step.

From the moment the guard burst in talking of riots, to the King's glare, to *Los—her Los*—volunteering to “handle” the situation.

Angela’s jaw clenched.

She knew the man was a whirlwind of gallantry and chaos, but she hadn’t expected this.

And now, here he was... leading *Willow—mute, scarred, leather-booted Willow*—onto the polished stone floor of Camelot’s grandest hall. The girl in the ill-fitting dress looked like a ghost in a ballroom, floating just behind reality.

But the worst part?

Los made her real.

Angela's eyes followed them, her expression unmoving, regal even. But in her mind, she reeled. *He called her his mentor? In front of the King? In front of all of Camelot?*

The nobles whispered. Lords scowled. One of the ladies muttered something horrid. But Angela heard none of it. Her thoughts churned too loudly.

He didn't even tell me.

Not about the invitation. Not about the dance. Not about any of it.

And yet...

She watched him guide Willow across the floor with care. Not pity. Not performance. *Respect.*

The fire in her chest flared.

Fool, she thought. You absolute fool. You're going to make everyone hate you.

And yet...

When she looked at Willow's face—her tightly controlled fear giving way to something uncertain, maybe even hope—Angela's fury cracked. Just a little.

Because she remembered the first time someone had seen *her*. Not the daughter of Lord Burns. Not the young noble Paladin. Just *Angela*. And that someone had been Los too.

Angela closed her eyes for half a breath. Then opened them with steel.

She could hate him later. She would scold him later. *Hard*. But not now, not in front of other.

Because somehow, that fool had just challenged the entire court—and made it look like a waltz.

And even Angela had to admit:

He danced like a hero.

Romao Casanova – A Toast to Chaos

Romao Casanova stood near the banquet table, a goblet of dark wine in hand and an amused smirk tugging at one corner of his mouth. His guild cloak swayed gently as he leaned back against one of the marble columns, eyes flicking toward the center of the hall.

"Well, well... would you look at *that*," he muttered, mostly to himself.

The hall had gone silent just moments earlier, pierced only by the sound of that fool of a guard shouting about peasant uprisings and a scarred scout. Then in marched Los with all the misplaced confidence of a man storming a siege with nothing but a smile and an apology.

And now?

Now the Spanish knight was *dancing* with Willow.

Willow.

Romao shook his head slowly, not out of disapproval, but in half-delighted disbelief. "Only Los," he murmured in his thick Roman accent. "Only *that bastardo* could turn an accidental insult into a royal scene and somehow come out looking noble."

He glanced toward the nobles gathered at the periphery—tight jaws, raised brows, curled lips. The King had nodded, though barely. The Chancellor looked like he'd swallowed his own tongue.

Romao took another sip of his wine.

This is going to be fun.

"Bravissimo, fratello," he whispered toward the dance floor. "Bravissimo."

The music played on. Willow, awkward and tiny in her faded gown, had begun to find the rhythm. Los led with grace, of course. He always did.

Romao saw Angela across the hall—stiff, furious, regal. She was watching with the expression of a lioness deciding whether to pounce or pace.

"Ah, she will kill him later," Romao said under his breath. "Or kiss him. Or both."

He turned his eyes back to Willow. Her scar caught the firelight—briefly—then softened as she tilted her face to her dance partner.

“Good,” he said softly. “About time someone saw her.”

He raised his goblet again.

“To misfits,” he whispered with a grin. “And to the fire we set just by showing up.”

And then he laughed, quiet and smooth, as only Romao could.

The Balcony

A Night to Remember

The celebration had slowly begun to fade—like the last notes of a dance drifting into memory.

Laughter still echoed inside the King’s Hall. Light from the lanterns flickered across stained glass and polished banners. But outside, beyond the music and the nobility, beyond the whispers and scandal, stood two figures alone beneath the stars.

Sir Los leaned against the balcony rail, hands resting loosely, his face tilted upward as he exhaled a long breath into the cool night. His crimson cloak swayed softly in the breeze, and a faint smile played on his lips—not for anything in particular, just the stillness of it all.

He needed this. After all the tension. After nearly causing a revolt. After dancing in defiance of every unspoken rule of Camelot. He needed air.

And so did she.

Willow stood beside him, small and quiet in the moonlight, her faded dress fluttering at the hem. She hadn’t spoken at all. She hadn’t needed to. Her presence alone had said everything: disbelief, wonder, confusion... and something else. Something delicate. Something new.

She didn’t know what to do.

She didn’t *feel* like herself, not here, not tonight. Not in this dress. Not beside *him*.

He had treated her with care no man ever had. Kindness, she hadn't expected. Respect she'd never been given.

Only Chloe had ever come close.

Willow's fingers twitched, hesitant. And then, slowly—almost imperceptibly—she reached out and took his hand.

Her tiny hand slipped into his.

Los glanced down, surprised. But he didn't pull away. Instead, his smile deepened just a little, quiet and warm.

He looked at her.

She didn't look back. So, he looked up at the stars once more.

But then—soft as a breath, barely more than the wind—she spoke.

Just one word.

"...Los."

His heart caught for a moment. It wasn't what she said. It was *that* she said it.

His name.

He looked down again. She pretended not to notice—staring upward at the night sky, lips pressed into a thin line as if it hadn't happened at all.

"Jes, Willow?" he said gently, his voice low, honoring the moment.

She still didn't look at him. She simply lifted her other hand and pointed to the brightest star above the rooftops of Camelot.

They stood like that, bathed in silver starlight.

"Beautiful," Los said softly, looking where she pointed... then glancing back at her.

"Simply beautiful."

Willow blushed. A light dusting of pink crossed her cheeks. And then—for the first time in what felt like years—she smiled.

It was small. Shy. But real.

Los stared at her for a second longer, as if truly *seeing* her. Not as the silent scout. Not as the girl with the scar. But as *Willow*.

He turned his gaze back to the stars and exhaled again, this time with something like peace in his voice.

"This is a night to remember, eh, Willow?"

She didn't answer with words. Instead, she hugged his arm and gently leaned her head against him.

He didn't flinch. He didn't speak.

He just smiled.

For her, this night had to be a dream. A knight—a *real knight*—had danced with her. Defended her. Escorted her through grand halls like she was someone who mattered.

It couldn't be real.

But maybe... just for this one night...

She would allow herself to dream.

As for Los, his heart remained true. He had no deeper intent. No romance to kindle. Only affection and admiration for a friend who had endured more than most and spoken less than all.

But he had wanted her to feel special. To be seen.

And tonight—tonight she was.

"Let this night be a memory," he whispered, barely audible.

A promise to the stars.

A promise to her.

A night neither would forget.

After the Fire

The lanterns had dimmed. The music had faded. Servants swept petals from the floor while noble guests departed in clusters of laughter and lingering wine. The King had retired hours ago.

Only a few remained behind the thick stone walls of the King's Hall—those who always stayed late. And those who had more to say.

Los Ortiz stepped into the quiet courtyard garden, finally free from stares and expectations. He ran a hand through his dark hair and let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

That's when he heard her.

"You're lucky the King didn't throw you in the dungeon."

He turned. Angela Burns stood in the archway, her arms crossed, the crimson of her cloak dark against the moonlight. Her hair was loosed slightly, her shoes scuffed from dancing, but her eyes—those beautiful blue eyes—were sharp and steady.

"Ah," Los said, lifting his hands in surrender, "I wondered how long until you found me."

Angela stepped forward, her shoes crunching the gravel softly. "I told you to behave."

"I *did* behave," he said, flashing a grin. "I danced. I was polite. I stopped a revolution."

She glared. "You nearly started one."

Los chuckled.

But Angela wasn't laughing.

"You embarrassed the King. You made half the court gasp. You called a scout your *mentor*. In front of nobility."

"She is my mentor," Los said quietly. "She taught me things none of them ever could."

Angela stared at him. "She's a peasant."

Los stopped and stared at her. "That doesn't make her worthless." His tone had lost its humor.

That stopped her.

For a moment, silence stretched between them—long and quiet and raw.

Then Angela spoke again, softer this time. “You should have told me.”

“I did not plan it,” he replied. “It just... became what it became. She looked so scared. So alone. I remembered what it felt like, arriving in Albion with no one. With nothing.”

Angela turned her head slightly, avoiding his gaze.

“You made her smile,” she said after a pause.

Los blinked. “Jou... noticed?”

“You have a way of making people...”

She cut herself off.

Los stepped closer. “Angela—”

“No,” she said sharply, holding up a hand. “Don’t. You don’t get to be noble and reckless at the same time. It doesn’t work like that.”

He tilted his head. “So... jou’re angry with me for being kind?”

She hesitated.

“No,” she admitted. “I’m angry because you’re *you*. Because you break every rule and they love you for it. And I... I *follow* the rules, and I still have to prove myself every single day.”

Los softened. “Angela...”

She turned to go. “I’m going to bed.”

But just before she vanished into the shadows, she paused and looked over her shoulder.

“You were right, though,” she said. “It *was* a night to remember.”

Then she disappeared into the castle.

Los stood alone under the stars.

He smiled.

And whispered to the empty air, “Jes. It was.”

Willow – In the Rafters

The barracks were quiet by the time Willow returned. The stars still burned outside, but the fire in her chest had dimmed into a soft, glowing ember.

She said nothing as she slipped inside—boots padding softly across worn floorboards. The sounds of snoring, shuffling, and murmured dreams filled the lower bunks. No one noticed her. That was fine. She preferred it that way.

In silence, she climbed up the support beams, past the low rafters where only birds and shadows should sleep. Her corner—tucked into the top of the structure where the roof angled sharply—was still there. Her bedroll, her little blanket, the small, chipped wooden box that held her most precious things: a comb, a piece of ribbon, a dried flower, and now... something new.

A half-loaf of bread was still wrapped neatly, saved from earlier.

But beside it, she now set something else: the cloth napkin that had wrapped her silverware at the royal table. She hadn't used it. Hadn't dared. But she had held onto it.

Willow sat down cross-legged on the wood. Her fingers hovered over the napkin for a long time before she let them settle into her lap.

She touched her cheek. The scar. Still there.

She smiled, just a little.

Tonight, she had danced.

Tonight, she had spoken.

Tonight... she had been *seen*.

And she had not vanished.

She lay back on her bedroll, eyes open, watching the rafters above her like constellations.

And for the first time in a long time...

She let herself believe she might not be invisible forever.

Chapter XLIV — The Boil Beneath the Crown

Baldrics Study

Lord Baldric's office was cold. Austere. Built for political warriors and their dark thoughts.

He had not changed from the evening's finery. The black-and-gold crest of his house still rested at his breast, immaculate and unmoved, as though the night had failed to touch him.

He stared out the window at the moonlit gardens below, wine untouched in the goblet by his desk.

He had watched the entire scene unfold.

The girl in the dress.

The scandal at the gates.

The King's quiet nod.

The dance.

The applause.

The nerve.

"A scout," he muttered aloud. "He danced with a mute, scarred scout—in the King's hall, and made it look like poetry."

Baldric's lip curled.

He had spent decades cultivating favor, honoring protocol, maneuvering in the dark.

And this *boy*—this half-blood *Spanish Bastard*—came waltzing through his careful plans with gallantry, smiles, and a street urchin in tow.

And the crowd clapped.

He gripped the edge of the windowsill until his knuckles whitened.

He was supposed to sponsor the next rising knight. He was supposed to shape the court.

And yet Los Ortiz, with his ragtag guild and his foreign accent, had captured the imagination of Camelot.

It couldn't stand.

It *wouldn't* stand.

From behind him, the shadows whispered. A figure waited—one of his informants.

"Send word to the scribes," Baldric said at last, his voice like a blade sliding from its sheath. "I want every noble in Albion to know what happened tonight."

The figure nodded and vanished.

Baldric finally raised his wine.

"To fools," he said bitterly, then drank deep.

The Morning After – The King's Displeasure

The King of Albion sat at the long table of his private solar, a half-eaten plate of roasted pheasant before him and a stack of reports already weighing down the day. Outside, the bells of Camelot tolled morning prayers.

He did not smile.

Chancellor Wacian stood beside him, tapping one finger against a scroll that had arrived only minutes earlier.

"Lord Baldric wasted no time," the King muttered, pushing aside his goblet. "He's already sent accounts of last night's... disruption to half the court."

"Calling it a 'peasant-led breach of decorum,' Your Majesty," Wacian confirmed. "And questioning the judgment of the Castilian Ambassador."

The King grunted. "I *saw* the breach. And the judgment."

He folded his hands beneath his chin.

"Sir Los Ortiz," the King murmured slowly. "Beloved by commoners. Hated by firebrands. Beloved by fools. And now dancing with shadows."

Wacian shifted awkwardly. "The girl did no harm, Sire."

"She embarrassed my court."

"She was invited."

The King's jaw clenched. He stared out the stained-glass window at the golden morning rising over Camelot.

"Keep an eye on him," the King said at last. Then after a pause, "And send Sir Amren to teach him a lesson in protocol."

"And the Guild of Orchid Fair?" Wacian asked.

The King's expression darkened.

"Remind them of their place—*quietly*."

Willow – Dawn in the Trees

Dawn had just begun to break when Willow stepped from the barracks.

The chill of early morning kissed her skin, and the hem of her dress, still folded under her cloak, peeked out over her scout boots. She hadn't changed yet. She hadn't wanted to.

With her pack slung over one shoulder and the last half of her bread tucked safely into it, she walked past the quiet courtyard toward the outer gate.

Her destination: the Surbrooke coast. She would change into her scouting clothes once she arrived at Caer Sursbrooke.

She had a job to do. A scouting report due in a few days. That much hadn't changed.

But *she* had.

Her heart felt... different. Not soft, but warm. Like embers still alive beneath ashes.

A boy selling fruit called out to her as she passed.

She didn't reply—but she nodded.

And just before disappearing down the winding trail that led to the forested path east, she looked back toward Camelot.

Her hand brushed the side of her dress beneath the cloak.

And she smiled.

Lord Baldric – A Letter with No Seal

Later that same morning, a young courier arrived at the Orchid Fair guildhall—one of the many messenger boys with a letter tied with common string. No seal. No signature.

Just a name scrawled across the front: *Angela Burns*.

Angela read the contents in silence.

It was short. Terse. Meant to wound without drawing blood.

The company you keep reflects the honor you possess. Some stains do not wash out, no matter how polished the armor.

Choose wisely who stands beside you, Lady Burns.

— A Friend of the Realm

Angela crumpled the letter in her hand.

She knew that handwriting.

She'd seen it on reports from Swanton Keep.

She turned, handing the page to Romao without a word.

His smirk faded. "So... it begins."

Angela looked toward the castle, the spires of Camelot glinting beneath the morning sun.

"If he wants a war," she said softly, "he'll have one."

The Merchant Quarter — A Keepsake

Morning

The streets of Camelot were just waking when Los stepped into the merchant quarter, his boots clicking on cobblestones still wet with morning dew. Stall keepers shouted to one another as awnings were drawn up and crates cracked open. The smell of fresh bread mingled with that of molten metal and dyed leather.

But Los wasn't looking for steel. Not today.

He passed the armorers, ignored the bladesmiths, and made his way toward the quieter corners where jewelers and woodcrafters plied their trade.

He had something in mind. Something delicate. Personal.

A bracelet, he thought. A keepsake... something Willow could hold onto.

Last night had been something beautiful—fragile and rare. He didn't want it to vanish like mist in the sun. And she had smiled. Truly smiled.

He reached for his coin purse—and stopped.

"...Drat."

It wasn't there. He had handed it off to Cadens last night outside the King's Hall, in the heat of the moment.

Los sighed and turned, fully prepared to head to the vault—

"Looking for this?"

A familiar voice called behind him.

Los turned to see Cadens approaching, flanked by Endrond and Chloe. The rogue tossed him the heavy leather pouch, still jostling with silver and gold.

"We couldn't bring ourselves to spend it all," Cadens said. "Not after what you did for Willow."

"Speak for yourself," Endrond muttered.

A sharp elbow from Chloe cut him off.

"Gracias," Los said with a half-smile, catching the purse mid-air. "Jou are just in time, my friends. I was about to buy something special."

Chloe raised a brow. "For Willow?"

Los grinned, perhaps a little too earnestly.

Cadens's voice cut in, tone neutral—but sharp at the edges. "What are your intentions with Willow?"

Los blinked. "My what?"

"Your intentions," Chloe echoed, folding her arms. "She's not just another girl to flatter and forget, Los."

"I—no. No! I jus want to give her a memento," he said, taken aback. "A keepsake of last night. That's all. I have no... intentions."

He looked between them, bewildered.

Chloe stepped a little closer. "Willow is special."

"And if you hurt her," Cadens said evenly, "we'll kill you."

Los froze.

"Jou... would *kill* me?" he said, raising a brow in disbelief.

"If she cries because of you," Cadens said, "we'll know. And *yes*."

"I haven't done anything wrong," Los insisted. "I gave her a good night. I wanted her to feel special."

"You did," Chloe said, her voice softened. "And that's the problem Los."

Los looked down, genuinely troubled now. "I didn't mean to give her a false impression."

"But you did," Endrond said quietly. "She was shining last night. Like a lantern. And it was because of you."

"What would you have had me do?" Los asked. "Leave her outside looking like a fool?"

They were silent.

Los took a heavy slow breath.

"I would never hurt her," he added softly. "You must know that."

Endrond stepped forward, placing a hand gently on Los's shoulder.

Los flinched, but didn't pull away. Not this time.

"We *do* know," Endrond said. "That's why we're saying this. Just... give her space. Let her come back down to earth before you do anything else."

Los nodded slowly, his gaze downcast.

"Jes," he said at last. "I understand."

They stood in silence for a moment, the early sun rising above the stone rooftops of Camelot.

Then Los turned, slipping the purse back into his belt, and quietly walked away—past the crafters, past the bracelets.

For the first time that morning... he wasn't sure what to do.

Steel and Honor – Sir Amren Confronts Los

The training yard behind the King's Hall was quiet in the midmorning light. The scent of wet straw and steel filled the air, and rows of wooden dummies stood in stoic formation under a silver sky.

Los was there, sleeves rolled, striking the dummy with controlled swings of a weighted practice sword. His motions were fluid, efficient—refined from long hours of repetition. Sweat beaded on his brow.

He didn't hear the approach of armored boots.

But he felt the presence. Heavy. Cold.

"Sir Ortiz."

Los turned, chest rising with each breath.

Standing at the edge of the yard was Sir Amren, the King's Champion. Towering, iron-faced, with eyes like storm clouds and a jaw that looked like it could cut granite. He wore no ceremonial cloak today—just his training armor, a dull grey, marked by countless dents and earned honors.

Los bowed slightly, instinctively.

"Sir Amren."

Amren did not return the gesture.

He took two steps forward and stopped, arms behind his back.

"The King has instructed me to remind you of protocol at court," Amren said. "*Do I need to?*"

Los straightened. "I meant no disrespect, Sir."

"No?" Amren asked. "Because you violated every custom of court presentation. You bypassed the Herald. You presented a guest to the King without clearance. You crossed class lines during a royal celebration. And you instigated a brawl at the gate."

"That was not my—"

"I am not finished."

Amren's voice was calm. But there was a gravity behind it, like stone pressing against steel.

"You are your King's Ambassador to Albion. Your actions reflect not only on yourself, and the Kingdom of Castile, but on His Majesty as well. *And you used that station to parade a commoner into his presence as an equal.*"

"She is not just some commoner," Los replied, keeping his tone even. "Her name is Willow. A scout. A loyal servant of Albion. And my friend."

Amren's eyes narrowed. "You think that word shields you? *Friend*? There are boundaries, Ortiz. And you've grown far too comfortable blurring them."

Los stepped forward slightly.

"With all due respect," he said, "if you are here to remind me of my place, consider it done. But I do not regret last night. Not for a moment."

The wind stirred.

"You are brave," Amren said, finally stepping fully into the yard. "But bravery is not license. You walk a blade's edge, boy. And it will cut you sooner or later."

Los held his gaze.

"Better to be cut than to never take a step."

The two men stared at one another—warrior to warrior, knight to knight, neither backing down.

Then Amren gave a faint nod.

"You will spar with me. At dawn. One week from today."

"A duel?" Los asked.

"A lesson," Amren corrected. "The King's court is not a battlefield. But you treat it like one. Perhaps it's time you learned how to fight like a Champion."

Without another word, Amren turned and walked away, the sound of his boots fading like distant thunder.

Los stood alone in the yard, breath steady, fingers tight around the sword hilt.

"One week," he whispered.

Then he returned to his drills—stronger, sharper, and suddenly... less certain.

Chapter XLV — Words Like Blades

Scene: The Embassy

The embassy of Castile sat just outside the Citadel—sun-drenched, quiet, and unassuming. Inside, its halls were dim and clean, lit by narrow windows and a single lantern in each room. Most in Camelot never remembered it was here. Only two men worked within its walls.

One of them was pacing.

Ramón de Vivar stood beside his desk, hands clasped behind him, head bowed slightly in thought. The moment he heard footsteps in the hall—Los’s uneven rhythm, always too fast, always too heavy—he exhaled as if bracing for impact.

The door opened.

Los slipped inside, shoulders tight, tunic damp with sweat, jaw clenched.

Ramón waited for Los to speak.

He closed the door behind him and leaned against it. “They sent Amren find me.”

Ramón’s head snapped up.

“Dios mío,” he muttered. “What did he say?”

“That I violated protocol and the King had sent him to remind me of my place. I may have refused to apologize for Willow, or for escorting her past the herald, or for presenting her to the King myself. So now we spar in a week.” Los’s shoulder hung limp, head bowed in resignation. “At dawn.”

Ramón stared at him—long, unblinking. “A ‘spar.’ Of course. They can’t challenge an Ambassador to a duel, no. But a sparring match? Perfect way around custom. You realize what this is?”

“Jes. A fight.”

“No,” Ramón snapped. “It is a *message*. Wrapped in courtesy.”

He circled Los like a tailor measuring a man for a coffin.

“Sit.”

Los didn't move.

"Sit, Don Lorenzo," Ramón repeated, voice low. A reminder that he knew who Los really was.

Los sank into the chair.

Ramón dropped into his own seat opposite him and folded his hands.

"Now tell me," Ramón said quietly, "why the King's Champion hunted you down in the training yard."

Los hesitated.

Ramón sighed. "Start with Willow."

Los grimaced. "I was in a hurry, I saw her in the market, I told her I would see her tonight."

"In what tone?"

"The usual tone."

Ramón's eyes closed briefly. "Ah. So she thought you invited her."

"I didn't mean—"

"I see," Ramón said. "But intentions do not matter, actions do."

He leaned forward.

"You walked a peasant girl into the King's Hall. You bypassed the Herald. You presented her to the King as—what, exactly?"

"My friend," Los said simply.

"Yes," Ramón murmured. "And that was perhaps the most dangerous word you could have chosen."

Los frowned. "Jou sound like Angela."

"I sound like a diplomat trying to keep you from being executed for politeness."

Los looked at the ground before responding. "I will not apologize for her Ramón."

Ramón's gaze softened—not in indulgence, but in something deeper.

"I understand," he said. "It is the one thing you cannot do. But would you would rather be hanged?"

Los looked away. "She is my friend. I will not dishonor her."

Ramón nodded once. "I know. But you represent more than yourself. Doubly so last night."

He stood again, pacing the length of the room before stopping abruptly and turning back.

"Don Los," he said, "the first matter you must address is not Amren."

Los stiffened.

"You humiliated House Burns."

The words landed heavy.

"You did not intend to," Ramón continued. "But you did. You abandoned Angela at the King's table while wearing her father's colors. You made her appear neglected. Rejected. Favoring another—before all of Camelot."

Los's jaw tightened. "I had no choice."

"You had choices," Ramón corrected. "You chose kindness. Which is why I serve you. But choices have consequences."

He tapped the table between them.

"You must go to Lord Burns. Today."

Los swallowed.

"You must return his colors," Ramón confirmed. "And to apologize. Not for Willow— but for shaming his daughter, and dishonoring the court while wearing his colors."

Los's hand moved to his shirt, gripping over the ring.

"Ramón..." he said quietly. "I did not mean to embarrass her."

"I know," Ramón replied. "But she was embarrassed. And her father will not care why."

Los shut his eyes. "He will be furious."

Ramón sat again, his voice lowering.

"Don Los... Lord Burns is a good man. A hard man, but good. He will not forgive easily, but he respects courage. Go to him with honesty. Tell him what happened. Tell him why."

Los exhaled shakily.

"And then what?" he asked.

Ramón offered a grim, sober smile.

"Then he will either give you an out," he said, "or throw you out, so choose your words carefully."

Despite everything, Los snorted.

Ramón's tone shifted—softening, but only to a knife's edge.

"And Don Los?" he said.

"Jes?"

"Whatever you do... when you mention Willow. Do not defend her. Do not explain her. Lord Burns is Angela's father. He only sees how things affected his daughter."

Los nodded slowly.

"And when you leave," Ramón added, "come straight back here."

"Why?"

Ramón gave a thin smile.

"Because after Burns is done shouting at you, I will have wine ready."

Los stood, gathering his cloak.

"Thank jou, Ramón."

"For what?" Ramón asked.

"For understanding."

Ramón's face softened—just enough for truth to show through.

"Always," he said. "Now go. Before anything more can come of this."

Ramón waited until the door had closed behind Los before he moved.

He stood there a moment longer, listening to the echo of footsteps fade down the hall. Then he crossed to the desk, drew out parchment, and sat.

He did not rush.

The pen hovered once. Then ink touched page.

Don Flavio,

Orchid Fair — The War Room

Angela slammed the door to the Orchid Fair war room harder than she intended.

The heavy wood echoed through the stone hallway, scattering a group of younger guildmates lingering just outside. She didn't notice. Or care.

Romao glanced up from the map he was studying, brow arched. "So... you've heard?"

Angela didn't answer. She paced instead—back and forth, arms folded tight across her crimson and gold tunic, boots striking the floor like hammers.

"Amren?" she snapped at last. "*Amren?*"

Romao nodded, still calm. "Dawn. One week. Not a duel—technically. A lesson."

"Lesson?" she hissed. "Is that what we're calling it now when the King's Champion wants to flatten someone?"

Romao leaned against the edge of the table. "You *did* say you wanted Los to learn court protocol. Be careful what you wish for."

She shot him a withering glare.

"This isn't about court etiquette. Amren doesn't waste his time unless he means to make a point. And Los—" she threw her hands up, "Los just walks into it like it's another tavern brawl!"

"He didn't start this."

"He *never* starts it," she muttered. "That's the problem."

Romao said nothing for a moment. Then, softly, "You're scared for him."

Angela stopped.

She turned away. "I'm angry."

"You're both."

"I'm angry *because* he's a fool," she said through her teeth. "Because he thinks his smile and his charm and his good heart will protect him from the consequences of every reckless thing he does."

She sat heavily on the bench beside the table, running a hand through her golden-blond hair.

"I told him not to make a scene. I told him to follow the rules. And what does he do? He dances with a peasant in front of the entire royal court, defies a sergeant at the gate, and now—*now*—he's facing Amren."

Romao gave her a sympathetic look.

"He did it for her," he said simply.

"I *know*," she replied, her voice quiet now. "And that's what infuriates me the most."

She stared down at her hands, fingers curled tight into her palms.

"Because it was the right thing to do."

Chapter XLVI — The Lion's Den

The Burns Estate — The Apology

The Burns Estate sat quiet under the evening sky, its lanterns casting soft gold across trimmed hedges and the stone path leading to the front steps. The manor was dignified, restrained—like the man who ruled it.

Los approached alone.

His cloak—House Burns crimson with the golden lion—was folded carefully over his arm. He held it the way a soldier holds a fallen comrade's banner: with respect, and with weight.

He paused at the door, exhaled once, and knocked.

A butler opened with stiff composure, recognized the Spaniard, and stepped aside without a word. He led him down a hall lined with portraits—Burns lineage, stern faces, measured pride—until they reached the study.

The butler opened the door.

"Sir Los Ortiz de Seville," he announced.

Lord Burns stood near the hearth, hands clasped behind him, silhouette long against the light streaming through the window. He did not turn.

"Leave us," Burns said.

The door closed. Silence swallowed the room.

Los stepped forward. He bowed his head, then laid the folded cloak and tabard across the polished desk.

"My lord," he began quietly, "I have come to return your colors... and to apologize."

Lord Burns still did not turn.

"You wore my house sigil last night," he said at last, voice low and controlled. "You stood in my family's livery. And you disgraced it."

Los swallowed. "Jes."

"You abandoned my daughter at the King's own table." Burns's tone sharpened, every word a cut. "Before all of Camelot."

"I did not intend—"

"Intent!" Burns snapped, "Is irrelevant."

Los lowered his eyes.

Burns circled slowly, finally facing him—expression carved from stone.

"I stayed home last night," he said. "So that *she* could walk in the King's hall as her own woman. So that nothing—nothing—would overshadow her moment."

His eyes burned now.

"And you overshadowed her anyway. You disgraced her!"

Los felt the words strike deeper than any blade.

"My lord... I meant no insult to Angela. I went to Beltane to honor her, not to shame her."

Burns stared hard.

"You danced with a peasant girl while wearing my colors," he said. "You used *my house* as the backdrop for your... performance. And every noble in that hall saw my daughter standing alone, abandoned by her escort, while you paraded another girl before the King."

"Willow was humiliated at the gate," Los said softly. "I could not leave her there."

Burns stepped closer, eyes narrowing.

"You will notice, Sir Ortiz, that I did not ask about the *scout*. Nor do I care."

Los flinched.

Noble. Brutal. True.

"I warned my daughter," Burns continued, "that your charm would land her—and her guild—into trouble. And last night, you confirmed it."

Los bowed his head deeper. "I apologize, my lord. Truly. I meant only to protect a friend."

Burns's jaw tightened. "And in doing so, you humiliated my daughter. And now you are to face Sir Amren, I understand."

He stepped behind the desk and stared down at the folded cloak.

"There are only two outcomes now," he said coldly. "Amren beats you into the ground, shaming you—and by extension, my House."

He paused.

"Or—much more unlikely—you defeat the King's Champion. In which case you shame the Crown... and by extension, my House."

The words fell like iron.

Los's voice was quiet.

"I will make this right, Lord Burns. Somehow. If it takes my life to do so."

Burns's glare hardened—then shifted. Just slightly.

"You will stay away from my daughter," he said. "Stay away from her guild. From her name. From her future."

Los lifted his eyes.

"When she asks me to leave," he said, "I will leave. Until then... I will honor her. And I will repair what I have damaged."

Burns's nostrils flared.

"You believe you can mend this?"

"I must," Los said simply. "For her."

A long silence stretched.

Then Burns pointed toward the door.

"Get out of my house," he said, voice low, shaking with restrained fury. "Before you bring further shame upon it."

Los bowed—once, deeply—and left the cloak where it rested.

He turned.

Reached the door—
and then stopped.

He rested one hand briefly against the wood, as if steadying himself.

He did not look back.

"Would you bet on me winning?"

"What?" Lord Burns was taken aback by the audacity.

"Would you bet on me winning?"

Los paused for only a moment.

"Everyone out there, the peasants, the common folk, the guild, are counting on me winning."

It was Lord Burns who hesitated now. He heard it in his voice, the sound of a man who knew he would let everyone down. A man who knew he was walking into a fight he could not win.

"Then they are fools."

Los nodded solemnly, then left.

The steward shut the door behind him — hard.

And for the first time since he'd come to Albion, Los Ortiz felt truly alone.

Lord Burns sat in his study. The boy understands, he thought. If he were not such a fool, he would have made a fine match for my daughter.

A Boar at the Lion's Gate

The Burns Estate — The Study, Evening

Lord Burns did not sit.

He stood where Los had stood—near the desk, near the hearth, near the folded cloak left behind like a blade laid down. The house was quiet again. The servants had learned to move as if sound itself could offend him.

His jaw still ached from clenching it.

A knock came.

Not at the front doors.

At the study.

Measured. Formal. The knock of someone who expected to be let in.

Burns did not answer.

The knock came again.

The butler appeared at the threshold, face carefully neutral. "My lord... Lord Baldric requests a word."

Burns' eyes narrowed a fraction.

"Requests," he repeated, flatly.

"Yes, my lord."

Burns held the silence long enough that the butler's posture tightened under it.

Then, at last, "Send him in."

The butler withdrew.

A moment later, Lord Edward Baldric entered as if the house belonged to him—or as if the world did.

He wore black and gold, the boar upon his breast. He removed no glove. He offered no bow beyond the smallest incline of his head, the kind that satisfied manners without yielding ground.

"Lord Burns."

"Lord Baldric."

Baldric's gaze drifted to the folded cloak on the desk. He did not touch it. He did not need to. The room itself smelled of insult.

"I heard," Baldric said softly, "that our—friend from Castile paid you a visit."

Burns' expression did not change. "If you are here to gossip, you've mistaken my study for a tavern."

Baldric smiled—thin, amused, controlled.

"Not gossip. Concern."

Burns gave a low, humorless exhale. "Go on."

Baldric's eyes flicked to him, then away, as if admiring the hearthstone. "I've been speaking with lords. Quietly. Assessing... the temperature of Camelot."

Burns' voice stayed even. "And you decided my house was a good place to warm yourself?"

Baldric didn't flinch. "Your house is one of the pillars of Albion. Your voice carries. And your daughter honor is... a concern."

The word *daughter* landed like a deliberate thumb pressed into a bruise.

Burns' stare hardened. "Mind your tongue."

"That is precisely why I came," Baldric said smoothly. "To offer you a remedy."

Burns' lip curled. "A remedy."

"To your Los problem," Baldric continued. "He is charming. Dangerously so. The sort of man who makes a crowd forget their station. The sort of man who makes young women forget—"

His gaze held Burns,

“—their fathers.”

Burns took one slow step forward, not threatening. A warning. “Finish that thought carefully.”

Baldric obliged, adjusting course without losing momentum. “Lady Angela has a future. A name. A guild now, yes... but guilds rise and fall. The court remembers blood. The court remembers scandal. And Ortiz invites scandal when he violates protocol, when he violates... tradition.”

Burns’ hands remained behind his back, but his shoulders tightened. “You speak the word scandal and my daughter’s name in the same breath Baldric.”

“What Ortiz did,” Baldric replied quickly to make his point. “Was more than improper, it reflected on her. And on you.”

Burns’ eyes narrowed to slits. “And what, precisely, do you propose?”

Baldric’s smile deepened by a hair. “Help. Quiet help. A push in the right direction. A containment of the problem before it becomes—”

He did not get to finish.

Burns stepped closer, close enough that the firelight caught in the older lord’s eyes—steel, not flame.

“You imply that I cannot handle the boy on my own,” Burns said.

Baldric held his composure. “That is not what I—”

“That is exactly what you implied.” Burns’ voice sharpened. “You didn’t come here to help me. You came here to recruit me. To add my name to your little cause.”

Baldric’s stare cooled. “Cause.”

Burns’ mouth twisted. “You thought you could come into my home, and bring me over to your side by offering to ‘deal with’ the Castilian.”

Baldric’s lips pressed together, briefly. The smile returned, but it was colder now.

"You misunderstand me."

Burns gestured toward the door with the faintest motion of his chin. "No. I understand you perfectly."

Baldric did not move.

Burns' voice dropped. "Angela is my daughter. If anyone 'takes care' of her problems, it will be me. Not you. Not the court. Not the crown's whisperers."

Baldric studied him for a long moment, as if deciding whether pride was worth a fight here.

Then he nodded once. A concession so small it was almost insulting.

"Very well," Baldric said. "He is your problem to handle."

Burns didn't blink.

Baldric turned to leave, then paused at the doorway.

"One more thing," he said lightly, almost conversational. "If Ortiz ruins her—if he brings scandal to your door—remember who offered you a quiet solution before the noise began."

Burns' reply was immediate.

"I appreciate your concern," Burns said with a nod, his tone softened only slightly.

Baldric's eyes flickered.

Then the boar smiled again.

And Baldric left.

Burns stood in the silence that followed, jaw tight.

He did not like Los.

He liked Baldric even less.

But Baldric was not wrong about one thing.

He had a problem.

And he would find a way to solve it.

A Missed Dance – Julia and Prox Arrive

The war room door creaked open again, softer this time.

Prox stepped through first, followed by Julia, still dressed in a dark riding coat, her long honey-blond hair pinned neatly, a faint trace of wind-burned color on her cheeks.

Romao looked up. "Well, look who decided to join us."

Angela's glare turned to Julia. "Where were you?"

Julia blinked at the tone. "We..."

"You missed everything that happened last night." Angela shot to her feet.

"We had plans," Prox offered, rubbing the back of his neck.

Romao smirked. "Plans?"

"We took a ride around the city," Julia said, trying to sound neutral but failing to suppress a small smile.

Angela's expression flickered—surprise, confusion, then exasperation. "While the rest of us were dancing around court politics and social ruin, you two were out *gallivanting*."

Julia raised a brow. "Since when do you care what I do with my time?"

"Since our guild got thrown into the court's spotlight!" Angela snapped. "Since Los danced with Willow before the entire nobility and now has to spar with *Amren* in six days!"

The room went quiet.

Prox took a step forward, brow furrowed. "What?"

Angela sat back down, rubbing her temples. "It was a disaster. A beautiful disaster. Willow showed up in a dress. Sergeant Bradford tried to humiliate her. Los stepped in. Claimed her. Danced with her in front of the King."

Julia's lips parted slightly. "He danced with her?"

"And now he's going to be flattened by the King's Executioner," Romao added. "At dawn. In six days."

Prox's face darkened with concern. "He what?"

Angela nodded. "He said it was worth it. That he'd do it again."

Julia sank into a chair, stunned. "God help us... how did this all happen?"

"He didn't mean to invite her," Angela said. "But he didn't stop it, either."

Prox remained standing, eyes narrowing. "And now Amren wants to teach him a lesson."

Romao crossed his arms. "And we're going to make sure he survives it."

The weight of it hung in the room. Julia looked to Prox, her earlier ease vanished like mist. Their date, the laughter, the awkward smiles—frozen in hindsight. This was the cost of missing a night.

"I should've been there," Prox said quietly.

"No," Romao said. "You'll be there now. When it counts."

Angela stood again, more measured this time. "If you care about him, you train with him. You make sure he walks away from this."

Prox nodded, jaw set. "Then let's get started."

Sharpen the Flame – Romao and Prox

The sun had just crested the rooftops of Camelot, casting pale gold over the training yard behind Orchid Fair's guildhall. The ring was quiet, save for the steady rhythm of steel on wood.

CLANG—CLANG—CLANG

Los Ortiz's breath came hard, muscles burning as he brought his greatsword down in another punishing arc against the sparring post. Sweat clung to his brow and soaked into the collar of his shirt.

"Again," Romao's voice cut in—stern, unrelenting. "I promised Fihri you'd be ready."

Without a word, Los reset his stance and struck again.

Beside Romao stood Prox, leaning casually on the haft of his own greatsword, twirling a length of flax rope between his fingers. Where Romao watched with precision, Prox watched with concern hidden behind a wry grin.

"Careful," Prox said. "You keep hitting that post like that and it might file a complaint."

Los grunted. "I'd rather face a post than Sir Amren."

Romao folded his arms. "Then we had better make sure you're ready. Again."

Los stepped back, raised his blade, and struck.

CLANG!

The post shook, but didn't splinter.

Romao gave a faint nod. "Still too much shoulder. You swing like a brawler."

"I *am* a brawler," Los snapped.

"And Amren is a fortress," Prox added. "You can't knock one down just by throwing yourself at it. Trust us—we've tried."

Romao stepped forward, drawing his sword. "Enough talking. We spar. You against us both."

Los blinked. "Both?"

"You want to face the King's Champion," Prox said, already loosening his shoulders. "You better get used to pressure."

Los hesitated.

Romao's smile didn't reach his eyes. "If you're not dead after this, maybe you've got a chance."

The three men circled, the early sun glinting off dulled steel. Prox was the first to move—fast for his size, bringing his greatsword down in a sweeping arc. Los blocked high, but stumbled back as Romao came low from the other side.

"You're exposed," Romao said, tapping Los's thigh lightly with the flat of his blade.

"Dead."

Prox chuckled. "That was fast."

Los growled and surged forward, swinging a heavy two-handed strike that forced Prox to backpedal.

"That's more like it," Prox said, grinning.

Los pivoted, parried Romao's thrust, and turned the momentum into a shoulder-check that sent Romao staggering.

But Prox caught him mid-spin and locked blades.

Los strained, teeth gritted.

"Good pressure," Prox said, testing him. "But you still hold too much in the arms. Shift through the hips—like I showed you before."

"Yes, yes—like this," Romao added, stepping in and driving a soft jab to Los's exposed side.

"Oof," Los muttered. "Jes jes!"

They broke apart.

All three stood panting, sweat dripping, eyes steady.

Romao wiped his brow. "You're stronger than you were."

"And faster," Prox added, tapping Los's blade with his own. "Still dumb as a rock, but we're working on it."

Los chuckled. "Jou both trying to kill me or teach me?"

"Why not both?" Romao said with a smirk. "You've gotten this far on charisma and stubbornness. But Amren is different. This time, you need *discipline*."

Prox clapped a heavy hand on Los's shoulder. "You're family. You fall, we carry you back. But we'd rather not."

Los exhaled deeply.

He looked between them—Romao, tactical and passionate; Prox, strong and loyal. His brothers.

"I'm going to win," Los said quietly.

Romao smiled. "Then stop talking."

"Back to it," Prox agreed. "This time, we hit harder."

Chapter XLVII — The Steel Accord

The Weight We Carry – Prox Alone

The sun had long dipped below the city walls of Camelot, and the torches outside the Orchid Fair guildhall flickered in the cool twilight breeze. Most of the guild had turned in for the night. Laughter echoed faintly from the main hall, where Romao was still talking with the recruits over bread and ale.

But Prox sat alone in the training yard.

He'd stayed behind to clean the blades—his own, Romao's, and Los's. It was something he always did, without being asked. Not out of duty.

Out of ritual.

The grindstone turned slowly in his hands, its hum the only sound.

Schhhhhh... scrape...

He watched the sparks dance off the blade as he honed the edge. Not to perfection—never to perfection. But enough.

He looked down at the greatsword in his lap, worn smooth in the grip where his hands had held it through many battles. It was a heavy blade. Good steel. Reliable.

He didn't always feel the same about himself.

Los is going to fight Amren, he thought, staring into the coals of the brazier nearby. The King's Champion. The man who trains nobles in the art of killing. And we're just... us.

Prox set the sword aside with care, wiping it clean.

He remembered Los's eyes during the fight—focused, defiant, that strange mix of humor and fire he always carried like armor. The way Romao had danced around him with flawless grace. The way *he* had lumbered in, swinging heavy and wide, like a warhammer among rapiers.

"I'm just the blunt end of the stick," he muttered.

He had never said it aloud before.

Romao was the heart. Los was the soul.

And him?

He was the shield. The hammer. The body they leaned on when things got hard. But not the leader. Not the face of a guild. Not the hero in the spotlight. Not the one girls whispered about at court.

Not the one who would ever stand before the King.

He exhaled and leaned back on the bench, staring up at the stars.

"I don't want to lose him," he whispered to the sky.

He didn't mean to Amren.

He meant *the dream*.

This guild. These friends. The laughter. The weight they carried together.

He remembered when it was just the three of them, covered in dirt and bruises from sparring at Prydwen Keep. When Romao taught them how to hold their stance properly and Los fell down four times in a row trying to pivot. When they ate burnt stew and slept in hay and dreamed about glory.

Now Los was a court figure. An ambassador. A champion of the people.

And still, Prox thought, he comes back to us.

That meant something.

"I'll stand with you, my brother," Prox said aloud. "Even if you fall."

He didn't care if Amren bested him. He didn't care if the nobles laughed. All that mattered was that Los got back up again—and remembered who stood behind him when the court tried to push him down.

He stood up, stretched his sore shoulders, and looked out at the silent training ring.

Then he smiled.

And with that, he slung all three blades over his shoulder and carried them inside—quietly, faithfully, as he always had.

A Quiet Witness – Julia Watches

Julia didn't enter the yard.

She stayed just inside the archway, half-shadowed, her back pressed to the cool stone as she watched him—Proximo—seated on the bench beside the sparring ring, sharpening blades in silence.

The rasp of the grindstone echoed through the dark like breath. Methodical. Measured. Almost reverent.

She had always known him to be solid. A wall others leaned against. But tonight, something in his stillness looked fragile. Brittle beneath the weight.

It's Los who's facing Amren, she thought. It's Los who defied the King, who danced with a silent girl before all of Camelot.

And yet... it was Proximo who looked as though he were walking into fire.

He tended the three blades like sacred relics. No titles marked his shoulders, no crest adorned his chest—but there was devotion in every pass of the cloth. Slow. Honest. Weighty.

Not for himself.

For them.

For Los. For Romao.

For me, Julia realized, breath catching.

He didn't know she was there. He wouldn't have wanted her to see him like this. But she stayed. Just long enough to hear his low whisper carried on the night breeze:
"I don't want to lose him."

And in that moment, Julia understood.

Proximo wasn't afraid of the duel. He was afraid of losing what they had built—this strange, fragile thing called Orchid Fair. A brotherhood forged from scars and borrowed hope.

It was Los who got him and Romao their Paladin recommendations.
Los who stepped in to help Angela and made the guild a reality.
Los who—indirectly—led her to speak with Proximo in the first place.

He was the thread woven through them all.

If that thread snapped... what then?

She almost stepped forward. Almost said something.
A joke. A tease. Something light to lift the weight.

But she didn't.

Instead, she stepped back into the shadows and let him keep his silence.

Some truths weren't meant to be answered.
Only witnessed.

Before the Sun

The stars were still out when Los slipped quietly into the training yard.

The morning air was cool on his skin, and the silence of the hour pressed gently on the stones beneath his feet. He didn't expect to find anyone else awake.

But Prox was there.

Seated on the edge of the sparring ring, arms resting on his knees, he was already dressed for the day—though he'd left his sword leaning against the bench.

He wasn't training.

Just thinking.

Los paused a moment before walking over, the gravel crunching beneath his boots.
"Couldn't sleep?"

Prox didn't look up. "Didn't try."

Los sat beside him, leaving just enough space that neither felt the need to speak right away.

They watched the horizon together as it began to turn gray with the promise of dawn.

"Jou think I'm ready?" Los asked after a long silence.

Prox exhaled through his nose. "No."

Los chuckled. "At least jou're honest."

"I *think* you'll survive," Prox added, glancing at him now. "But that's not the same thing."

Los looked down at his hands—rough, callused, shaking slightly. He wasn't sure if it was nerves or the cold.

"Everyone's worried," he said. "Romao. Lady Triss. Even Fihri, though she'd rather kill me than admit it."

Prox nodded. "She's scared you'll embarrass yourself."

"And jou?"

Prox didn't answer right away. His eyes stayed fixed on the horizon.

"I'm scared you'll get hurt. And I won't be able to stop it."

Los turned toward him. "Jou always protect me, hermano. On the field, in battle. But this... this isn't a battlefield."

Prox's jaw tightened. "That's the problem. If it *was*, I'd know how to fight beside you."

Los was quiet for a moment. Then softly:

"Do jou ever feel like jou're not enough?"

He was thinking about himself as he said it.

Prox blinked, surprised.

"Every damn day," he admitted. "I'm not fast like Romao. Not clever like you. Not royal-blooded like Angela. I'm the help. People only notice me when they need something."

Los smiled. "That's not true."

"You've never needed me to be more than that," Prox said.

Los looked at him—really looked at him.

"I *need* you because you never break," he said. "When everything else is chaos... you're still standing."

Prox gave a quiet grunt, then finally smiled. "That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

Los elbowed him gently. "It's true."

They sat in silence again, watching as the first golden light crept over the edge of the city.

"I'm proud of you, you know," Prox said.

Los blinked. "What?"

"I'm proud of you," he repeated. "For what you did for Willow. For how far you've come. For not letting them shape you into something you're not."

Los swallowed the sudden lump in his throat.

"Gracias."

Prox stood and stretched, towering in the soft dawn light.

"Come on. Let's get breakfast before Romao wakes up and insists on poetic metaphors with his eggs."

Los laughed, standing too.

And as they walked back toward the guildhall—no swords, no titles, no expectations—Los felt stronger than he had in days.

Because win or lose, he knew this:

He wasn't facing Amren alone.

Breakfast — A Bad Idea, Properly Served

The guildhall was quiet.
Too quiet.

Bread, eggs, and a pot of strong barley brew steamed on the long table. Los and Prox ate slowly, the fatigue of early hours still heavy in their shoulders. Prox chewed in silence, eyes distant. Los looked better than he had in days—but only just.

Romao, by contrast, looked delighted.

He dropped onto the bench beside them and tore into his breakfast like a man celebrating a victory no one else could see, humming softly as he poured himself a drink.

“You look overly happy this morning,” Prox said at last.

Romao smiled. “Do you remember Mathias?”

Prox froze.
His fork paused halfway to his mouth.

“The mercenary?” he asked quietly. “The one who took you to the illegal duels in the Frontier?”

Romao’s grin widened. “That’s the one.”

Los looked up. “Illegal duels?”

Romao waved a hand. “Semantics.”

“I spoke to him the moment we heard about you and Amren’s little ‘sparring match.’”

Prox’s eyes narrowed. “Romao... you’re not thinking about—”

“Thinking about what?” Los asked, looking between them.

Romao leaned back. "Mathias got word out. To the Hibs. To the Mids." He met Los's eyes. "Some of their best are already on the way."

Prox stared at him. "We can't. If Angela finds out—"

Los leaned in, voice low. "On the way to do what?"

Romao didn't smile now. "To train you."

Silence settled over the table.

Los blinked once. "Train me?"

"Real fights," Romao said. "Real champions. The kind who won't coddle you."

He paused.

"That's how you learn to face Sir Amren."

Los felt something tighten in his chest.

Not fear.

Interest.

"When?" he asked.

"We leave after breakfast," Romao said easily. "We tell Angela we're taking you into the Frontier. Fresh air. Fewer eyes."

"No," Prox said flatly. "It's illegal."

Romao turned to him. "It's the only way."

Prox pushed his plate away. "If we get caught—"

"We won't."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one that matters."

Los glanced between them. "Where?"

"The old villa southwest of Caer Sursbrooke," Romao said without hesitation. "Forgotten. Quiet."

"And when Los gets hurt?" Prox asked.

Romao's smile thinned. "Then we'll need a reliable cleric."

Los nodded once. "We bring Bunk."

Prox looked up sharply. "He will never agree."

"He'll have to," Romao said. "If this works, Los will need healing fast. Again and again."

Prox rubbed a hand over his face. "This is a terrible idea."

Romao stood and clapped a hand on his shoulder, firm and familiar. "You always say that right before you help."

Prox took a long breath.

"...If I can't stop it," Prox muttered.

Los straightened. "Then let's do it."

Romao's grin returned. "That's the spirit."

And just like that, the choice was made.

A bad idea, but one that brought hope.

And somewhere far beyond Camelot, champions were already gathering.

Before the Line Is Crossed

The Frontier Road – Late Morning

Bunk did not like surprises.

He liked schedules. He liked clear orders. He liked knowing exactly who was bleeding and why.

Which was why the three Paladins surrounding him and asking him to come along “just in case” had already put him in a bad mood.

“You said we were taking Los to do some training,” Bunk said at last, reins tight in his hands, his tone tense. “You didn’t say where.”

Romao grinned as he looked at Prox, who was more on Bunk’s side than he was with this venture. “A little way ahead, a secluded little spot.”

Ahead of them, Los rode quietly, his cloak loose about his shoulders. Prox flanked him, broad and silent, scanning the fog-laden tree line like a man expecting trouble — or already resigned to it.

Bunk frowned.

“You also didn’t say why you needed a cleric,” he added. “Los doesn’t usually break bones while training.”

Romao leaned forward a bit in the saddle as if the question made him uncomfortable. “Just trying to be safe.”

That was when Bunk saw the figures coming out of the fog.

They were waiting near the old villa ruins — half-collapsed stone walls swallowed by ivy, the ground trampled flat by long use. A dozen silhouettes stood scattered loosely about, weapons still sheathed, armored but helmets set aside like they were waiting for something, or someone.

Bunk reined in hard.

Hibernian leathers. Midgard steel.

“Stop,” he said sharply.

Los did.

Prox’s hand dropped instinctively to his sword.

Bunk stared at Romao. “Explain. Now.”

Romao dismounted calmly. “This is who’s going to train him.”

Bunk's refusal was short—incensed. "No."

Romao's smile faded. "Yes."

"This is illegal," Bunk snapped. "Cross-realm combat training?" He gestured sharply. "If the Crown catches wind of this—"

"They won't," Romao said evenly. "They haven't before."

Mathias came sauntering up to Romao.

"They all came once they heard who Los was going against."

"This is why you needed me?" Bunk said with disdain.

Romao looked at Mathias, then the gathered Mids and Hibs, "Look Bunk, they're not here to hurt him, just to train him. You're here just in case."

One of the Midgard warriors stepped forward then — a thick-necked man with arms like iron-bound pillars. He looked Los up and down with open assessment.

"We are going to hurt him," the Midgard said plainly.

No threat. No drama. Just fact.

"Over and over again," he continued. "Badly."

Bunk's hand went to his mace. "Absolutely not."

"It is the only way," the man finished. "Amren will not pull his blows."

Prox turned on Romao. "You can—"

Los reached out and placed a hand on Prox's arm.

Firm. Steady.

"It's all right," Los said.

Prox froze, then slowly looked at him. "Los..."

Los met his eyes. No bravado. No grin.

Just resolve.

Bunk exhaled sharply through his nose as he stared at Los. "Los. No."

Los pulled him off to the side. A few paces away, out of earshot. Bunk turned on him, voice low and fierce.

"Tell me the truth," he said. "Right now."

Los didn't flinch.

"You are still trying to die, aren't you?"

The question hung between them — naked, dangerous.

Los swallowed once.

"No," he said quietly.

Bunk searched his face, hard. "You swear it?"

"I swear it," Los said. Then, softer: "I have something to live for now."

It caught Bunk off guard.

"Angela," Los added. "And... others. I will not let her down."

There was no poetry in it. No flourish.

Just sincerity.

Bunk held his gaze for a long moment—then nodded once.

"All right," he said. "I'll keep you alive. But if the Crown hears about this, I was never here."

Los gave a faint, grateful smile.

Behind them, Romao watched the exchange, unreadable. Prox released a breath he'd been holding since they'd arrived.

Bunk turned back toward the waiting warriors, staff settling into his grip.

"But hear me," he called out. "If any of you cross the line from training into cruelty—"

One of the Hibernians smiled thinly. "Now you've taken all the fun out of this."

Another slapped his comrade on the chest. "We understand, Cleric. We are here to help."

Bunk nodded. "Good. We understand each other."

Los nodded to Bunk, then stepped forward — into the midst of them, into the fog-shrouded ruins, into the first place he would truly bleed for someone else, and not himself.

Romao clapped his hands once.

"Then let's begin."

The Watcher in the Woods

Willow sat high in the branches, still as the tree itself.

The wind passed through the leaves around her, carrying the smell of salt and wet stone. Below, the coastal road lay quiet. Beyond it, the water curved away into haze.

She had been watching since first light.

The boat appeared without warning — a dark shape sliding through the gray, low in the water, sails trimmed tight. Hibernian lines. She recognized it at once. The way the hull rode. The way it kept distance from shore.

She counted them.

Not enough to take an outpost if warned. Enough to raid.

Willow did not wait to see more.

She was out of the tree in moments, moving fast and low through brush and rock, feet finding paths she had worn thin through repetition. By the time the outpost came into view, her breath was already steady again.

The guards reacted at once when she appeared, pointing out to the water, then to a tree.

"Hibernian vessel?" one of them said, already turning. "How many?"

She held up three fingers. Then three with her other hand. Then flattened her hand and moved it south.

The officer nodded sharply. "They're probing."

Horn calls echoed faintly as men moved to stations. Another guard shaded his eyes toward the water.

The boat never came closer.

It passed wide of the rocks and continued south along the coast, just as Willow had indicated.

"Good work," the officer said after a moment. "Likely raiders heading toward Caer Hurbury. Not enough men for a direct strike."

Willow nodded once.

"You can return to your post," he added. "We'll handle it from here."

She turned without a word and headed back the way she had come.

By the time the horns quieted and the men relaxed, she was already climbing again, settling into her branch, bow across her knees, eyes back on the road and the sea.

Somewhere to the south, Los was riding to meet the Hibernians.

To the north, more champions were coming.

Gathering in the fog around a forgotten villa.

All she knew was that the frontier was restless.

And she would be watching.

Nightfall – The Gathering of Blades

The Old Villa – The Dueling Ring

Mist blanketed the old villa like a shroud, and the trees stood sentinel in the fog. Between ancient stone pillars, nestled in a forgotten corner of the frontier, a ring had been carved long ago into the dusty ground. It bore no sigils. No banners. Just trampled earth.

Tonight, this was the neutral ground.
No magic. No politics.
Just training with one purpose.

Los stood at the edge, his cloak removed, sword strapped across his back. Prox stood beside him, wary but calm. And Romao, in full guild colors, stepped forward.

"First," Romao said, voice carrying, "I would like to thank all of you for coming to help us."

A dozen figures formed a large circle. A Warrior, Champion, Blademaster Berzerker, Druid, Healer, and more. Some bore clan tattoos. Others wore only worn leathers or clan-stamped gear.

All had come because *one name* had reached their ears.

Sir Amren.
A man worth crossing borders to sharpen steel against.

Mathias—scarred, smiling—met them in the center.

"Everyone is here," he said to Romao. "Even the Blademaster."

Romao gave a nod. "Naalio, good to see you again."

Naalio stretched out his hand and greeted Los first. "I am Naalio, this is Istra, we heard you are going to be facing Amren."

Los took his hand "I intend to do more than face him."

Naalio nodded, then glanced over at Istra. "We eh... thought from all the stories, that you'd be taller."

Los took a deep breath, "Right now I wish I was."

Naalio stepped back.

The fog thickened.

Steel shifted.

"So," Naalio said quietly, eyes never leaving Los.

"Who's first?"

Lesson I: Naalio the Blademaster – The Dance of Steel

The circle was cleared, blades drawn, as Naalio claimed the first round with Sir Los. Naalio moved like flowing wind—graceful, effortless, lethal. The Celtic Blademaster circled Los in silence, twin swords glinting under moonlight. No taunts. No pleasantries.

Just motion.

And the sound of Los's chants:

Aura Salutis, da mihi, Domine, praesidium contra vulnera corporis. (Aura of Health, grant me, O Lord, protection against wounds of the body.)

Refocillatio Archangelorum, concede mihi, Domine, sanationem divinam et restaurationem virium. (Restoration of the Archangels, grant me, O Lord, divine healing and renewal of strength.)

Carmen Perseverantiae, infunde mihi, Domine, fortitudinem indomitam in adversis. (Song of Perseverance, pour into me, O Lord, unbreakable strength in adversity.)

And so on.

Then Los struck first. A standard overhead arc.

Naalio disappeared under it.

"Too slow," he said, spinning behind Los and tapping his back with a flat blade.

Again.

And again.

Over and over, Los attacked—and Naalio ghosted through every swing.

“Amren will not trade blows,” Naalio finally spoke. “He will *control* them.”

Los growled. “Then how do I land one?”

Naalio smiled.

“You do not land a blow. You feel the rhythm. One breath. One slip. Then you move.”

He lunged forward, feinted high, and then—faster than thought—swept Los’s leg and brought a blade to his neck.

“That is your lesson. Rhythm. Learn it, or you die trying to keep up.”

Lesson II: Justin the Hero – The Weight of Steel

“Justin” the Firbog introduced himself. “And you’re the one who slayed the Dragon. The one they call the Epic Paladin.”

“So they tell me” Los said clasping the Firbog’s hand.

Justin was a Firbolg the size of a cart horse. His movements were slow—but every swing of his great sword was a mountain crashing down.

Los braced his great sword. *Thud. Crash.* Los was already stumbling.

“You rely too much on footwork,” Justin said, voice deep as old earth. “Amren has none. He *roots.*”

Los tried to dodge.

Justin stepped in and *planted*—one step, body low, strike overwhelming.

"You want to dance. He wants to crush. You must learn *to anchor*."

Los lowered his blade, breath ragged.

"No," Justin barked. "*Lift it again*. Hold."

Blow after blow rained down. His knees buckled. His muscles screamed.

"Hold!"

Finally, Los met the swing—and *held*. Not perfectly. But it was enough.

Justin grunted approval.

"You endure. That's the beginning of strength."

Lesson III: Ingemur the Berserker – The Fire Within

Ingemur was madness made flesh. The stout Norseman didn't spar—he *assaulted*. No structure. No telegraphing. Just violence.

Los was pummeled—struck from angles that made no sense. Struck. Slammed. Tossed.

"Fight back!" Ingemur roared. "You think Amren vill duel you like a storybook?"

Los screamed back, lunging wildly. Ingemur *laughed*, and caught him across the chest.

"Now you learn," he growled into his ear, "pain reveals instinct."

Los twisted, bled from a cheek wound, and punched with the pommel of his sword—not slashed—Ingemur in the ribs.

"Good," the Norseman wheezed, stepping back. "Now you fight vith fire."

Lesson IV: Tofinn the Warrior – The Patience of Stone

Tofinn was the opposite. Tall, grim, perfectly still. He held his axe like a sculptor's chisel, and never struck first.

Los circled him.

Nothing.

Attacked.

Parried. Countered. Bruised.

"You rush," Tofinn said. "Amren does not rush. He *waits*. Until *you* lose patience."

"In a fight I don't have time for patience," Los snapped.

"Then you will die."

They reset.

This time, Los stood still. Waited.

Tofinn moved—a flicker of opening.

Los *struck*—fast and hard.

Clash. Grind. Pause.

Then Tofinn *nodded*.

"You are not yet disciplined. But you begin to understand *timing*."

Lesson V: Istra the Nightshade – The Kill from the Shadows

Los heard her before he saw her—soft boots and movements that avoided even disturbing a leaf. He had agreed to this fight even though Istra said she just wanted to see what it was like to fight the Paladin everyone was talking about.

He spun.

Steel kissed his throat.

"Too loud," Istra whispered. "Too proud."

She danced away. No armor. No shield. Just silence and daggers.

Los attacked. She vanished.

"You fight like a knight."

"Jes," he snapped.

"Then you die like one."

She slashed at his calves from behind. His ribs. His fingers. Never fatal. Enough to hurt.

"So the legend does bleed," Istra murmured. "Interesting."

Her voice came again from nowhere.

"You want to beat Amren?"

"Then stop thinking like a soldier."

She paused.

"Be the blade."

He closed his eyes.

Breathed.

Listened.

Then caught her wrist as she struck—and threw her.

For a moment, they stared at one another.

She smiled.

"You might live after all."

Trial VI: Sean the Champion – The Question

Sean was the last.

No warm-up. No theatrics.

He stepped forward alone, sword already leveled, posture calm and balanced as if the fight had begun the moment he entered the ring.

"You stand before the King's Champion in a few days," he said. "With the court watching."

Los inclined his head. "Not my King," he replied quietly. "But jes."

Sean studied him for a moment longer than necessary.

"Over a girl."

Los stiffened. "A friend."

Sean did not smile. "You insulted their order. The court. The lines they drew. You *danced* on them. So now you have to fight."

They circled, slow. Closing the distance.

"Amren does not want to defeat you," Sean said. "He wants to *define* you."

They clashed—once.

The first clash was light — almost polite — steel touching steel and parting again. But the moment Sean's blade slid along Los's guard, something *shifted*.

Easláinte Mhór (Greater Infirmity)

When Los struck again.

His sword felt heavier.

Not slower — heavier. As though the weight had doubled in his hands.

Sean stepped aside easily, turned his wrist, and tapped Los's shoulder with the flat of his blade.

Los recoiled, surprised more than hurt.

Sean nodded. "Then define yourself first. Who are you."

"Sir Los Ortiz." Los answered without thinking, trying to avoid being struck.

"Is that who you are? A name?"

Géilleadh Mhór (Greater Resignation)

Los lunged.

He should have reached him.

He didn't.

His strike arrived a heartbeat late — just enough for Sean to turn it aside and step inside his guard. The Champion's sword pressed briefly to Los's chest before withdrawing.

Dí-mhíniú Deiridh (Ultimate Demoralization)

Los's breath came sharper now.

"You feel it," Sean said quietly.

They clashed again.

Los blocked — barely — and tried to counter.

His arms trembled.

His legs felt thick. Unresponsive. Like wading through deep water.

"I am a Knight." Los answered quickly as another blow knocked him back.

"That is a title. Who are you?"

Los gritted his teeth and surged forward again, frustration bleeding into effort. "I am the Epic Paladin!"

Sean drove him to the ground with a devastating blow. Bunk moved forward, but Sean raised his hand, warning him to stay back.

"Who are you!" Sean asked again.

Los groped at the ground trying to get to his feet. To find his sword.

"If you're going to hide behind titles, monikers, what other people define you as. You will never survive a fight against a man who knows who he is and what he is there for."

Los struggled to his feet.

Then lifted his head.

"I am just a man," he said, voice steady despite the weight pressing on him.
"Fighting for his friends."

Silence fell.

Sean stepped back.

Then—slowly—he lowered his blade.

Dawn – The Accord Complete

Los knelt in the center of the ring, sweat steaming in the cold air, blood dried along his temple. For two days they had battered him, beaten him, and made him bleed for every lesson. But they could see it: they had not broken him.

One by one, they approached:

Naalio handed him a linen cloth.

"Don't forget to breathe."

Justin rested a hand on his shoulder.

"Plant your feet, root your will."

Ingemur grinned, showing a chipped tooth.

"Never stop hitting."

Tofinn nodded silently.

Istra gave a mock curtsy.

"Be the blade."

Sean offered only:

"Walk tall Los."

Los rose slowly. "Thank you all. Sincerely."

Romao stepped forward and placed a new training blade in his hands—longer than his own, lighter, its steel marked with sigils from all three realms

"What is this?" Los asked.

Romao smiled.

"A gift from those who believe you can stand against a legend."

Los looked down at the weapon.

Then up at the horizon, where Camelot waited.

He let out a deep breath.

"I think I'm ready."

Chapter XLVIII — Steel and Silence

The Champion's Chamber— Amren Before the Duel

The Champion's chamber in Camelot's barracks was bare.

No banners. No indulgences.

Just stone, steel, and silence.

Sir Amren stood before the simple iron rack that held his weapons. He was already half-armored, the buckles of his cuirass cinched with practiced hands. His gauntlets lay nearby, polished but not ornate. His blade—bastard length, worn smooth at the grip—rested across a folded white cloth.

He did not polish it today.

He did not pray.

He simply looked at the sword for a long time.

There was no malice in Amren. No hunger for blood. He was not a bully like Bradford, nor a political viper like Baldric. He was something simpler.

A sword with a mind.

And today, the King had pointed him at a boy who had not yet learned when to sheath his charm.

Amren exhaled.

Ortiz.

He'd watched him closely since the Beltane incident. The dance. The declaration. The defiance.

Los reminded him of another—someone long dead. Another foreigner once welcomed at court, who had won the crowd and lost everything when it mattered.

The court could love you one day and cast you out the next. It was a tide.

Amren had no intention of letting Los drown because no one had taught him to swim.

But he would teach him *today*.

Not with cruelty.

With *clarity*.

He fastened the last strap on his vambrace and sat, slowly, on the edge of his bed. He reached for a worn strip of parchment. A letter. Faded from time and sweat.

"To my son: fight without hate, and you will never lose."

He folded the parchment again and slid it into the hidden pocket beneath his chestplate.

Then he stood.

The sword came easily into his hand—an extension of him. Like breath. Like balance.

He looked in the mirror just once.

Not to check his armor.

But to see if the fire in his eyes was still there.

It was.

"I do not fight to punish," he murmured to himself, "but to remind him that even noble causes have consequences."

Willow's Perspective - Camelot Barracks

The sun had only just risen when Willow returned to Camelot, dust and pine needles still clinging to her cloak from the long patrol through Sursbrooke. Her limbs ached, her stomach was hollow, and her mind already longed for the quiet of the barracks loft where she kept her things hidden among the rafters.

But Sergeant Bradford was waiting.

He leaned against the wall just inside the barracks gate, arms crossed, his smirk too wide for the hour.

"Well well," he said, too loud, as if he'd been practicing the line for hours. "The little mute returns just in time."

Willow paused, her eyes narrowing slightly, instincts prickling. She said nothing.

"Oh, haven't you heard?" Bradford drawled. "Your fancy Spanish friend picked a fight with the King's Executioner. That's right. Sir Amren. It's happening today."

He leaned closer, sneering.

"They're call it a *sparring match*, but we all know what it is. He's going to bleed for you; you little gutter snipe. He's going to *die* because of you. Because of that dress. That night. You made him forget he's just a dirt-born stray. Just like you."

Willow's breath caught.

She didn't blink. Didn't flinch. But her heart twisted violently in her chest. Her face betrayed nothing, but her soul screamed.

"You should be proud," Bradford chuckled. "Two knights fighting over the likes of you. I almost want to watch."

Willow fled.

Through the outer gates, across the courtyard, and into the rising hum of a city already buzzing with rumor. She didn't stop. Didn't speak. Her boots hit the cobblestone like thunderclaps only she could hear.

She needed to find him.

Los.

He would explain. He always did. He would laugh and reassure her.

But she didn't find Los.

She found Angela.

The Paladin stood in full armor, crimson and white catching the morning light as she adjusted her gauntlets inside the Orchid Fair Guildhall. Nearby, the red and white banners of the guild fluttered like silent warnings.

Willow skidded to a stop, her breath ragged, and clutched at Angela's sleeve.

Angela turned with a knowing expression, calm despite the storm Willow brought crashing through the door.

"So, you've heard," she said simply.

Willow nodded, frantic.

"Then you know," came Romao's voice, stepping out from behind Angela. The Italian's usual cheer was subdued, but not absent. "It is all right, little one. He will be fine. He *will* be fine."

Willow shook her head. No. No, he wouldn't.

She reached for Romao, begging silently with her eyes, gripping at his arm as if dragging him might change fate.

But he recoiled gently, placing a firm hand on her shoulder.

"Do not paw at me, little one," he said, his voice not unkind but distant. "What is it you think I can do for him now?"

She looked to Angela again.

To someone. Anyone.

Julia and Bunk met them at the door.

"It is all right, Willow; we are not going to let anything happen to him." Julia assured her. "Bunk and I will be right there to take care of him."

Willow stared at her, her lips moved but no sound came out. Her fingers trembled. Her heart was in her throat.

Angela took her by the hand, "Come with us. We've arranged good seats. Prox is already there, saving them."

Good seats.

As if this were a feast.

As if she were to be *honored*, not *shamed*.

Willow stood paralyzed as they guided her toward the door. Her body moved, but her mind screamed to run, to vanish, to undo it all.

She had never wanted anyone to fight for her.

And now—

They would.

And it might kill him.

She clutched the collar of her studded armor with white knuckles as the city stirred around them. The bell of the training yard tolled faintly in the distance, like the call to a funeral.

Her name had never been spoken in the high courts.

But now it was whispered by all.

And she hated it.

But most of all—

She feared what came next.

The Arena – Willow's Arrival

The roar of the crowd struck her like wind through a broken door—loud, unrelenting, and far too real.

Willow walked with the others, though she felt like a ghost among giants.

The seats were set up in the upper court of Camelot's training grounds, just beneath the shadow of the King's Tower. Nobles, knights, and officers lined the benches with their

colorful livery and polished armor, a display of pageantry for what the court insisted was "just a sparring match."

But the weight in the air said otherwise.

Every whispered breath carried the same name:

Los Ortiz.

Willow kept her hood up, her cloak clutched tightly around her. Beside her, Angela moved with perfect poise, her crimson and white armor shining like the banners that fluttered above. Romao walked on the other side, arms crossed, eyes narrowed, scanning the field like a hawk, Julia and Bunk bringing up the rear.

At the main gate, Proximo stood waiting, already in place, armor buckled, cloak waving behind him. When he saw Julia approach, his face softened—just for a moment. He stepped forward, quietly reaching for her hand.

"You made it," he said, voice low.

"I couldn't stay away," she whispered, squeezing his fingers. "He needs us."

"You will stay away." came a new voice, Sergeant Bradford stepped into their path, flanked by two others. "No clerics beyond this point. Orders from the Crown."

Angela stepped forward. "What? Why?"

"No magical interference," he replied. "Even in a sparring match, the court wants a clean fight. Steel and strength only. No blessings. No heals. And no Chants."

Romao scowled. "That's fine, Los knows his chants by heart."

Bradford didn't answer. He simply gestured. "Paladins may enter. Scouts too. Clerics must remain outside." He stared down at Willow a cruel grin on his face.

But something in the way he looked at them told Romao something was wrong.

Julia's breath caught. She turned to Angela, who gave her a look of pure apology—but nodded.

"I'll speak for you both afterward," Angela said. "He'll know you were here."

Julia gave a tight nod, then turned to Proximo. For a beat, she just looked at him—the steadiness in his eyes, the storm beneath his calm.

“Bring him back,” she said quietly. “Please.”

Prox reached out, gently brushing her cheek with the back of his fingers. “I’ll walk beside him,” he promised. “Or I’ll carry him home myself.”

She looked into Proximo’s eyes, staring for but a moment. They said nothing more. There was nothing more to say.

“We will meet you all at the Abbey.” Bunk said then he tossed an angry stare at Bradford.

Julia stepped back with Bunk. Together, they turned away from the gates and began the walk to the Abbey.

As the crowd's roar grew behind them, Julia whispered a prayer under her breath—no longer just a cleric’s duty, but a woman’s plea:

“Let him stand. Let him rise. And if he falls—let him rise again.”

Prox guided the rest of them to their seats up front, by the gate that led into the training circle.

His smile faltered when he looked down at Willow and took in her trembling posture.

“Hey, little one,” he said softly, opening a space so Willow could sit next to Angela. “Here, I saved this spot for you.”

Willow nodded, swallowing hard. Her eyes darted across the arena. Soldiers stood in neat rows at attention. Nobles in silk and gold whispered behind fans and goblets. Even the King’s Chancellor Wacian had taken his place in the King’s tower, his cold gaze fixed on the empty dueling circle.

But Willow saw only one man.

Los.

He stood at the far side of the dueling circle, already dressed in his training armor, nothing fancy, plain, functional, no surcoat, nothing upon it but the black cross of Orchid fair.

He looked calm. Focused. Almost too still.

Until—

He turned his head.

Their eyes met.

And for a heartbeat, the world stopped.

Willow's breath caught in her chest. She didn't smile. Didn't cry. She just stared.

And Los—

Los smiled.

He gave her a soft, short nod.

As if to say, I see you, Willow. I'm glad you're here.

Her fingers tightened in her cloak. She wanted to scream, to run to him, to pull him away from the ring and make him promise not to do this. Not for her. Not ever.

But she couldn't move.

Instead, she stood beside Prox, who placed a strong hand gently on her shoulder as the herald stepped into the circle with a scroll and a booming voice.

Willow heard none of it.

All she could do was watch as the second figure stepped into the ring—tall, broad, and armored in blue, red, and gold.

Sir Amren.

The King's Champion.

Los's executioner.

He moved like a mountain shifting, armor catching the sun in sharp angles, and though he did not look up at the crowd, Willow felt the chill of his presence in her bones.

The match was beginning.

And though no one would call it a duel, everyone *knew* what this was.

A fight for pride.

A fight for honor.

Willow had never asked for this—

and still, Los would pay the price.

The Duel Begins – Los’s Perspective

The stone beneath his boots was cool with morning dew, worn smooth by years of drills and discipline. The arena of Camelot’s training yard had never looked grander—and never felt more like a cage.

Los took one step forward, then another. His training armor shifted with each movement. He was not armored for war, but neither was he unarmed. The weight of his greatsword across his shoulder gave him strength.

A “sparring match,” they called it.

But everyone knew the truth.

This is a warning. A lesson. A punishment. And worse: the herald had just informed him he was not allowed to chant.

He had broken protocol—parading a mute peasant girl before the king, crossing social boundaries the court pretended didn’t matter until someone like him actually stepped over them. A foreign-born Knight.

They had tolerated his victories. Admired his battlefield honors.

But he had embarrassed them in their own hall. Not by being rude—no, he had been nothing but courteous.

His mistake had been kindness.

He reached the chalk line at the ring's edge and bowed his head for a breath. Just one breath.

He felt the world watching. The eyes of nobles. The sneers of old knights. The curious murmurs of commoners gathered just beyond the walls.

And above it all—
His friends.

He dared not look. Not yet.

Not at Angela or Romao or Prox.

He would not see them until this was over.

Until he had proven—

Not that he was right.

But that he would *not be ashamed*.

That no matter how many titles he lacked, or customs he offended, he would always fight for his friends, for his guild.

For those who were overlooked.

For those like Willow.

He held his sword reverently.

The training blade gleamed—steel kissed by gold at the hilt, it had been a gift and it bore the symbols of Albion, Midgard, and Hibernia etched deep in the fuller. He took his stance. Relaxed knees. Strong grip. Romao taught him to hold a sword like he held his faith—with strength, but never with pride.

Across the ring, Sir Amren stepped forward.

The King's Champion looked like he had been carved from iron itself. Steel armor, blue, red, and gold trim. Eyes like a hawk that had not forgotten what it meant to kill.

He did not speak. He didn't need to.

The weight of court and crown stood behind him.

Los inhaled through his nose, slowly. Then exhaled.

I am Los Ortiz de Seville, he thought.

I am a Paladin. I have fought for this realm, bled for its soil. I owe no apology for the way I honor those I care for. Nor for how I live my life.

He finally lifted his gaze.

He found Willow in the crowd—hood down, green eyes wide, face pale.

She was scared.

So he smiled, just for her.

Not a grin. Not a boast.

Just a soft smile, as if to say: *I'm not afraid. Don't be either.*

Then he turned to face Amren.

He would not run.

He would not kneel.

He would not beg forgiveness for showing honor to a girl the court thought beneath them.

Let them see.

Let them all see.

The Duel Begins – Angela's Perspective

Angela stood still, arms folded tightly across her crimson and white breastplate, her expression a mask of grim restraint. Her sword was belted at her side—not because she

intended to draw it, but because she felt naked without it. The shield of her station as a Paladin weighed little compared to the burden in her chest.

This is madness.

The crowd roared softly as Sir Amren stepped into the ring. Like a knight from legend, the King's Champion exuded flawless form—polished steel armor, blue, red, and gold colored, postured like a lion ready to strike. He had been trained by the best. He had never lost.

And yet...
Angela's eyes were not on him.

Her gaze locked on the man standing at the opposite edge of the ring.

Los.

Stubborn fool, she thought.

She wanted to scream. To march down into the arena and pull him out by his ear. But she couldn't. She wouldn't. Not in front of the court. Not when the honor of their guild was at stake.

"Angela," Romao whispered beside her. He was unusually quiet, and for once not smiling. "He knows what he's doing."

"No," she replied curtly. "He knows what he's *trying* to do."

Her jaw tightened.

Los wasn't here to win.

He was here to prove something. To them. To Amren. To the King. To himself.

She remembered Willow's pale face that morning, her frantic tug at her sleeve, her silent desperation. Angela hadn't had the heart to tell her the truth—that this duel was a punishment, a theater of humiliation dressed in courtly ritual.

And yet...

There he stood, calm as ever. Just a sword, a prayer, and that maddening, quiet smile.

He's not afraid.

Idiot.

And God help her, she was proud of him.

Too proud.

"Come on, Ortiz," she whispered under her breath, gripping the hilt of her sword. "Make them remember why even Dragons fear you."

The crowd fell silent as the signal was given.

Steel rang out.

The duel began.

And Angela's heart, battle-tested and iron-willed, slammed against her ribs with every step Los took.

She did not cheer.

She did not flinch.

But she prayed.

She prayed in the silent, desperate way only someone who *cared too much* could pray.

Not for victory.

Just for him to rise when it was over.

The Abbey – Waiting for the Roar

The Abbey of Saint Alban stood at the eastern edge of Camelot, its simple spire rising above the morning mist like a silent sentinel of an older time. Within its stone walls, candles flickered in narrow alcoves, casting golden halos on saints carved in marble and iron.

Julia knelt before the altar, hands clasped tightly, lips moving in silent prayer.

She was not alone.

Bunk sat at the edge of a pew behind her, arms resting on his knees, fidgeting with the leather strap of his bracer. His normally loud voice was hushed.

From beyond the abbey walls—distant but unmistakable—came the low thunder of the crowd.

In the distance, a horn blew.

Bunk glanced toward the arched window. "That's them, isn't it? It's started."

Julia didn't turn. "Yes."

"Sounds like a tournament," he muttered, shaking his head. "All this for a 'sparring match'... I'd laugh if I weren't so sick about it."

Julia finally rose from her knees. She turned and sat beside him, folding her hands neatly in her lap. "It isn't a tournament. It's a warning. A performance."

"Yeah," Bunk said, his voice suddenly quiet. "And he's the one tied to the post."

A long silence passed between them.

The abbey air was still—too still. Outside, the world roared with tension. Inside, only the faint rustle of robes and the echo of their breath filled the space.

"Why him?" Bunk asked suddenly. "Why's it always him in the fire?"

Julia looked at the flickering candles, each one lit for a name or a hope or a soul not yet at rest. "Because he doesn't know how not to step into it."

"I know that," Bunk said. "But..." He took a breath. "Julia... just once, I don't want him to be the one, for mercy's sake—let it be someone else. Just once."

Julia turned to him, eyes clear despite the weight they carried. "He's not in there alone."

Bunk looked at her sidelong.

"He's carrying all of us in there," she continued. "Angela's pride. Romao's spirit. Proximo's loyalty. Even your stubbornness. He fights for all of us."

Bunk exhaled sharply, blinking fast.

"And you?" he asked. "What part of you does he carry?"

Julia hesitated.

"The part that believes in miracles."

Another roar reached them—this one louder. Sharper. Followed by a rolling thunder of chants from far across the city. Even here, in the holy hush of the abbey, it reached them like a wave.

Bunk stood abruptly. "That... that was something. Either he landed a hit... or got hit so hard the crowd felt it."

Julia stood beside him. "It doesn't matter."

"Doesn't matter?" Bunk turned, incredulous.

She looked at him—softly, but firmly. "He stood. That's all that ever matters."

They stepped to the chapel door, instinct drawing them toward the sound, toward the pain and glory echoing from the arena.

Julia placed her hand on the wooden frame, steadying herself. Her voice was just above a whisper. "If he falls... Proximo will carry him."

Bunk nodded, jaw tight.

And in the stillness that followed, the abbey bells began to toll.

Then a horn blew.

It was over.

Steel and Silence – The Duel of Los Ortiz and Sir Amren

The courtyard of the King's Hall had never been so quiet.

The flags above barely moved in the breeze, and even the nobles lining the raised gallery whispered in subdued tones. The peasants were barred from the arena, but a growing throng had gathered beyond the outer wall, pressing their ears to the stone, trying to listen.

Sir Amren drew his sword with an unhurried grace, silver plate armor gleaming like polished judgment, the King's colors upon his breastplate. He didn't even glance at his opponent.

Sir Los Ortiz stood opposite him, the black cross upon his breast stark and defiant. He held his greatsword not with ceremony, but with purpose.

The horn sounded.

They moved.

CLANG.

The first blow came from Amren. Quick. Precise. The kind of strike that shattered ribs. Los blocked it barely in time, staggered a half-step, and twisted to counter.

His own blade arced high and met Amren's shoulder—sparking, glancing. No damage.

From the sidelines, Angela flinched. "He's too slow," she muttered.

"He's fighting uphill," Romao growled, arms crossed. "And Amren knows this ground. And why isn't he chanting?"

Suddenly Angela realized it too, that was why he was so slow. Why his strikes seemed ineffective.

"Because they forbid chants," Prox said, his temper rising. "Not just ours—his."

"They can't do that!" Angela cried out.

Angela gripped her sword hilt tighter. They weren't just testing his courage. They were trying to break his spirit.

They have made him as mute as...

The cruelty of what they had done struck her.

Willow stood next to them, small and stone-still. Her emerald eyes were wide. Her breath shallow. She watched as Los moved—elegantly, but without his chant of endurance he was worn already.

He'd been training. Preparing for this.

And they had sent him in alone—with silence for armor.

CLANG. CRACK.

Amren stepped into a strike, landing a brutal pommel to Los's jaw.

The Spaniard stumbled back, blood at the corner of his mouth. His knees dipped.

From the rooftops overlooking the court, Chloe, Cadens, and Endrond leaned in.

"Come on, Los..." Chloe whispered.

"He's being toyed with," Cadens hissed. "Amren is bleeding him slow."

"Should've brought a bow," Endrond muttered. "I could put a shaft right through that smug tin can—"

"Endrond," Chloe snapped, but her own fists were clenched.

Another strike. Another fall.

Los hit the stone beneath him hard.

Willow's hand flew to her mouth.

Amren didn't gloat. He merely raised his sword again. "Stay down boy."

Los groaned. His fingers clawed at the stone. He pushed himself up.

"He doesn't know how," Prox whispered aloud, standing beside Angela now, arms tense. "He's never known how."

Angela's eyes narrowed. "That's going to get him killed."

But Prox's hands were trembling now. Not from fear—rage.

They'd taken away Los's chants. His strength. His edge. He had trained to fight beside the light—now they'd made him bleed in silence.

This wasn't a duel.

This was an execution.

CRASH.

Amren drove Los back against the back wall of the ring. Another blow to the chest. A knee to the gut.

Los collapsed.

"You've made your point. Now stay down, boy. Surrender. There is no shame in it," Amren told him.

Los spat blood.

He lay on the stone, one eye barely open.

Then he smiled.

"*So jou surrender, then? Good,*" he rasped. "*I did not know how much more of this jou could take.*"

Amren blinked. Just for a moment. Then his expression hardened.

Willow moved forward instinctively. Angela grabbed her shoulder and stopped her. "No. Not yet."

A ring marshal in the King's livery strode in at once—no flourish, no sympathy. He lifted one hand, palm out, signaling the ring was *held*, then dropped to a knee a pace from Los.

"Down," the marshal called.

Then began to count.

"One."

Los rolled to his side. He tried to rise—and fell again.

His vision blurred.

For a long breath, he didn't move.

"Two."

If I just stay down, it's over. I'm badly outmatched.

"Three."

*I gave it everything. But I failed.
If I lie still... I'll survive.*

"Four."

*But then what?
Is surviving a beating enough?
Or does it matter—if I don't even have the strength to stand anyway?*

"Five."

Then a voice thundered from the stands:

"GET UP!"

Everyone turned. Even the Marshal paused a beat.

Prox, fists clenched, tears in his eyes.

“GET UP, DAMN YOU, LOS! GET UP!”

Romao stepped beside him, raising a fist high. “Stand, fratello!”

The nobles gasped, a few held their breath. Several guards stepped forward, unsure if they should intervene.

Angela glared at them.

“Six!”

She stepped forward too, her voice ringing clear:

“Get Up Los! Remind them why dragons fear you!”

Los closed his eyes.

And whispered to himself, half-curse, half-prayer—

“...oh hell.”

Because he knew what he had to do, and for whom—and worse, what came next.

Willow stood there, lips trembling. She didn’t speak. She couldn’t. She took a step forward and clutched the edge of the arena gate, her knuckles white. Her wide green eyes brimmed with tears. Her lips parted—
...no sound came.

Romao stopped her from opening the gate.

But Los saw her.

“Seven!”

From behind the wall, the peasants, armsmen, and scouts could hear nothing but muffled clangs—until Prox’s roar echoed beyond the stone.

“GET UP!”

And then more voices rose.

“Come on, Los!”

“GET UP, SPANIARD!”

And from the members of Orchid Fair outside the gate.

“The Guild is with you!”

Los, gasping, face against the stone, eyes barely open, heard them. All of them.

He saw Prox. Romao.

He saw Willow.

But most of all he saw *Angela*.

Slowly... breath by breath... he *moved*.

He placed his palms on the bloodied stone.

One knee.

Then the other.

The sword found his hand like a memory.

He stood.

The Red Baron’s Eyes

The King’s Viewing Gallery, Mid-Match

The King's gallery was a slice of height and privilege—stone railing, velvet seats, hushed voices.

Baron Philip Eddington sat two places back from the Chancellor, far enough not to be seen as pressing, close enough to be included. He wore his court colors with immaculate restraint, a man of mild expression and careful posture.

A man who listened more than he spoke.

Below, steel rang out. Los hit the stone again.

The nobles murmured with practiced disdain.

But Eddington was not watching Los.

He watched Lord Baldric.

Lord Baldric stood near the outer edge of the gallery, arms folded, posture rigid. A half-step behind him stood his son—dark-haired, half-Avalonian, newly knighted: Sir Baldric. He did not clap. He did not flinch. He did not laugh with the others. His father did not notice, Lord Baldric watched as if the duel were not entertainment, but arithmetic.

How much pain will make the boy smaller?

Then the crowd shifted.

The nobles—the air itself.

Los rose again, and somewhere beyond the walls the common voices surged, thick and hungry.

Eddington felt it in his bones like a distant drum.

Baldric's jaw tightened.

Just slightly.

A tell.

Eddington's mouth did not change, but something behind his eyes warmed.

Good.

Baldric wanted the boy humbled.

The people wanted the boy crowned with honor.

Either way, Albion split a little wider.

Eddington stood back, hands folded neatly behind his back, and kept watching Baldric—
watching the moment satisfaction was lost.

And he thought, without any change in expression at all:

We will speak, old boar. About tradition. About "order." About the future of the kingdom.

And about the boy.

Willow's Heart and the Duel's End

The arena exploded with noise.

Even Amren paused.

Los raised his sword.

Eyes blazing.

A storm behind sapphire eyes.

Willow's breath caught in her throat.

He was moving.

Against stone slick with blood, beneath the weight of failure, bruises, exhaustion—Sir
Los Ortiz, the one they called the Epic Paladin, *her* Los was rising again.

The moment slowed.

To her, it felt like a dream. No, something deeper—a memory carved into the soul.

His hand planted on the ground.

One foot forward.

The sword trembling in his grip as he pulled it to him, not as a weapon, but as a reason.

Her lips parted.

She wanted to speak.

Say something. *Say his name.*

But no sound came. Not yet.

Her whole body trembled. The sound of Angela's voice, of Prox's rallying cry, of Romao's fury—it all became distant. Muffled.

She pressed against the gate.

Her hands shook against the wood, desperate to get through.

Tears traced clean lines down her dirt-smudged cheeks.

And then, softly, her lips shaped the word again.

"Los..."

In the arena, Amren's grip tightened.

He was no fool.

This boy—this Paladin draped in a noble's bearing—should have stayed down. He had every reason to. But he had risen again, sword in hand, surrounded by a world that had not yet broken him.

Amren stepped forward.

"This ends now," he said coldly.

Los didn't answer. He nodded just once—an unspoken *Jes*.

They clashed again.

Amren pressed forward like a tide—hammering, grinding, driving Los toward the edge of the ring. Blow after blow. No taunts. No mercy.

Los fought with instinct, heart, and grit. He blocked one strike. Evaded the next. Took the third clean across the ribs—armor splitting with a metallic groan.

He grunted.

But did not fall.

Up on the rooftop, Chloe gripped the edge.

“He’s still standing,” she whispered, stunned.

“Barely,” muttered Endrond, eyes locked on the ring. “But damn if he isn’t a sight to behold right now.”

Down below, Angela stood rigid, barely breathing. She had seen her share of duels—seen men cut down for pride, for politics, for coin.

But this—

This was something else.

A boy making a stand against the shape of the world.

Prox bellowed again.

“Come on, Los!”

And then—

CRACK.

Amren struck.

The blow hit Los so hard he bounced off the stone wall behind him with a thunderous report, like a tree splitting under an axe. The sound echoed through the yard.

Los was flung forward.

A second strike followed—across the back, precise and devastating. A finishing blow.

Los hit the ground hard, landing on hands and knees.

Before he could rise, Amren stepped in and drove the pommel down into his back.

Los collapsed fully, sprawled against the stone. His sword skittered from his fingers.

The King's Champion—his Executioner—straightened and gave a single nod to the herald.

There was no count.

It was done.

The horn blew.

They would take no chances he might rise again.

Stunned silence fell across the arena.

Amren stepped back, face unreadable. He saluted once—an unspoken gesture of respect.

Then turned and walked away.

Los lay there.

Eyes barely open. Chest heaving.

He did not move. He did not even try.

But he smiled.

It was over.

And he was still breathing.

The nobles began to murmur. Some in disapproval of the display. But others—

Others began to clap.

A single hand began it. Then another. Then louder.

From the outer walls came a *roar*—the peasants cheering, shouting, chanting his name.

“LOS!”

“LOS!”

“LOS!”

Willow climbed between the rails of the arena and broke into a run.

Across the arena steps, past stunned nobles, past Romao who reached out as if to stop her—then let her go.

She dropped to her knees beside her champion.

He looked up at her, sweat mingled with blood on his brow.

“Jes, Willow,” he whispered, grinning weakly. “Jou see that?”

She nodded, tears falling.

He had lost the match.

But not her.

Not himself.

Lady Triss's Reaction to the Duel

She hadn't watched from the royal box. She couldn't. Too many eyes, too much ceremony. The pomp of nobility clashed cruelly with the rawness in her chest.

Instead, Lady Triss stood behind one of the palace's narrow stone lattice windows, high above the arena floor. A place for quiet surveillance. It was where she had stood years ago, watching her soldiers prepare for war. It was where she stood now, helpless watching her son.

She gripped the edge of the window's frame with a gauntleted hand, her golden armor dim in the light that streamed through the lattice. Below, the duel raged. Amren—measured and vicious. Los—battered but unyielding. Again and again, her son rose—shoulder cut, lip split, the black cross on his armor scuffed and stained.

Her chest ached.

"He's going to die for them," she whispered aloud.

"He's going to die for her. For that mute little scout."

A step behind her. The soft click of heeled boots on stone.

She didn't need to turn. She knew that presence. Always had.

Lady Winchell, her oldest friend, her confidante—and the only one other than Master Greant who knew the truth of Los's birth.

Winchell's voice was gentle, but firm. "He's not going to die, Rebecca."

"You don't know that."

"I know you." Winchell placed a hand on her shoulder. "He gets that fire from you."

Lady Triss shook her head, the silver strands of her hair trembling with the movement.

"No. Not this fire. This... this is his father. Reckless. Passionate. Foolish." Her throat tightened.

Down below, Amren landed a punishing strike. Los crumpled—and the crowd gasped.

Triss's breath caught. Her hand shot out and gripped the windowsill tighter. If she let go, her legs might give.

Why isn't he chanting? her mind screamed. Where is the Echo? Where is the steel-laced hymn of war that rises when a Paladin takes his stand?

She had trained him better than this.

No—he would never forget.

"Why isn't he chanting?" she whispered aloud, unable to keep the tremor from her voice.

Winchell stepped closer, voice low and grim. "They forbade it. By order of the Court."

Triss turned, eyes wide. "What?"

"No divine aid. No chants." Winchell's jaw tightened as she watched the ring. "They want him silent. Bleeding. Contained."

The window seemed to tilt. For the first time since her knighting, Lady Triss felt her knees weaken.

"He's still my boy," she said, the words escaping like breath. "I remember holding him. The weight in my arms. The way he smiled—before..."

Her voice failed for a heartbeat, then came back harder.

"They are going to kill him."

Winchell didn't look away from the duel. Her hand stayed on Triss's shoulder—steadying, anchoring.

"They won't," she said. Then, quieter: "Not today."

Triss swallowed, eyes fixed on Los as he dragged himself upright again—shaking, blood on his mouth, refusing the ground like it was an insult.

Winchell's voice dropped to something sharper than comfort.

"Listen to me," she murmured. "Baldric will not forgive your son for this. For continuing to get up."

Triss's gaze flicked, involuntary, toward the edge of the royal enclosure—toward that familiar silhouette watching like a judge.

"He knows," Triss whispered. "Doesn't he."

Winchell's mouth tightened. "All I know is he's hated you since the day you chose Diego over him."

Triss went still.

Winchell didn't soften it. She never had, not when it mattered.

"He calls himself a *traditionalist* so he can pretend he's righteous," Winchell went on, eyes still on the ring. "And your son is living proof that you rejected him."

Below, Amren drove Los down again. The crowd surged—hissing, gasping, hungry.

Triss's gauntleted fingers trembled against the stone.

Then—movement.

Los rose.

Bruised. Shaking.

But standing.

The roar hit the city like thunder.

Triss's breath hitched. Her hand rose to her mouth, fingers trembling against her lips. For one terrible, glorious moment, her heart swelled with something unbearable.

"You idiot," she breathed. "You brilliant, stupid, glorious idiot."

She should have been furious. He had defied royal protocol. He had made a spectacle of himself, and brought attention down upon their entire Order. There would be consequences.

But all she could think was:

He stood.

He stood again and again.

Her son had made the entire court remember what courage looked like.

And yet... Triss's gaze darkened as she spotted Baldric—still watching, still smiling, as if he'd already decided how this story would end.

Winchell's hand tightened, just slightly.

"Just be ready," she whispered.

Triss didn't respond.

She only watched as the duel ended. Amren declared victor. Los lay crumpled, barely conscious—but alive.

The nobles murmured. The city roared beyond the walls. And far above it all, in the lattice-shadow, a mother's face hardened into something carved of stone.

"Get word to the Abbey," Triss said, voice controlled now. "He will need time to heal."

"I'll take care of it, Rebecca."

"And if Baldric makes a move..." She paused.

Then, for the first time in her life, she spoke not as Commander of the Paladins.

But as a mother.

"I will not lose my son again."

Chapter XLIX — The Narrative Turns

After the Duel: Willow & Los

Willow tried to help Los sit upright on the cold stone, her small frame trembling beside him. She wasn't strong enough to lift him—but she held his arm like it mattered. Like her touch could mend bruised bone and burned breath.

Romao and Prox got to him next, lifting him up. "We have you Los."

Los winced as he chuckled. "Oof... remind me not to do that again."

Willow glared at him through wet lashes. He smiled. She pouted. Then, surprising even herself, she struck him lightly in the chest—not hard, not cruel, just... *hurt*.

"Okay, okay," he breathed. "Jes, I deserve that."

She opened the pouch on her belt and retrieved a clean cloth, trembling as she dabbed at the corner of his lip. Her hands were unsteady, her eyes focused. It was all she could do. She still couldn't speak—not yet—but her presence screamed what words never could.

He leaned his head against hers, just for a moment, closing his eyes.

"I did not win," he murmured softly. "But I did not lose either... Jou heard them, Willow. Jou heard the people..."

She nodded. And then smiled.

It was small. But real.

Angela's Reaction – After the Duel

The crowd thundered. Not with applause—but with breath. With heartbeat. With awe.

Sir Amren stood tall, victorious in form, but even he seemed hesitant to raise his blade in triumph. Los lay in the dust, bleeding, wheezing... but breathing.

Breathing.

Angela couldn't move.

She had seen a dozen duels in her life, more sparring matches than she could count—but nothing like this. Nothing so... *personal*.

And when Willow bolted across the arena and dropped to her knees beside him, Angela felt something twist in her gut. Not jealousy—no, that wasn't it. Something older. Something deeper.

Guilt.

She *could* have stopped this. She *should* have stopped this.

She turned sharply and marched towards him, armor clinking in protest. Her red and white cape flowed behind her, her boots pounding across the dueling floor.

Prox and Romao were already on their way.

Willow was trying to help Los sit up when Romao reached him, gripping his shoulder. Prox knelt beside them, and together they lifted him. "We have you Los."

And Angela, she didn't speak right away.

She simply *looked* at him.

He smiled.

Even now, blood on his lips, bruises along his jaw, he smiled.

"Jes, Jes, go ahead," he rasped. "Tell me I am a fool."

"You *are* a fool," she said, biting back the tremor in her throat.

Los chuckled, coughed. "But did you see, Angela? I made them *cheer*. Even the nobles."

Angela stood there, finally letting her voice soften. "I saw Los."

He looked up into her eyes—and saw something she hadn't yet admitted. And maybe she didn't know it herself.

She wiped at a streak of blood on his face with her gauntlet, then pressed her palm gently to his shoulder. "Let's get you out of here, Los. You've earned your rest."

And for once, Los didn't argue.

Within the Royal Balcony: King's Court Reactions

The King had said nothing. Not yet.

The nobles murmured among themselves—some scandalized, others intrigued. Sir Amren had won. *Formally*. But the hearts of the court—especially the younger knights and ladies—had clearly turned elsewhere.

Chancellor Wacian stood beside the King, arms folded, lips tight.

"Well," he said coolly, "That was certainly... dramatic."

The King remained silent.

Wacian pressed on, tone clipped. "He defied your order, brought a common scout into your presence without sanction, disgraced the dignity of court ritual, and yet—he stood there as if this were all a song, and he had merely sung a bitter note."

Still, the King said nothing.

Wacian's voice lowered. "Shall I prepare the writ of censure? Public correction? Disband the guild—?"

The King raised a hand.

"No."

Wacian blinked. "Your Majesty?"

"No writ. No punishment. He has paid his debt in pain... and earned the peoples loyalty by enduring it."

"But sire—!"

"Wacian," the King said, turning just slightly, "if we are to survive these times, I will need hearts, not just titles."

The Chancellor held his tongue.

"And that boy," the King added, nodding toward Los as he was carried from the field by Prox and Romao, Willow beside him, "has the hearts of the people—for now."

Lord Baldric's Reaction

Atop the northern wall of Camelot's great hall, Lord Edward Baldric stood in silence, flanked by two of his personal guards. He had watched every moment of the duel through narrowed eyes, arms folded across black-and-gold armor.

"Well," he said at last, "the boy has spirit."

One of his men shifted. "Shall we prepare a message for the court?"

Baldric didn't answer immediately. He was calculating.

"Sir Amren remains Champion, and the foreigner is battered... but they cheered *him*. Not Amren." His lip pressed tight. "He won nothing. And yet everything."

He turned sharply, cloak swirling.

"Begin spreading the tale among the nobility: Ortiz insulted the King and Amren showed mercy. That the people misunderstand honor."

A half-step behind him, his son stood—uneasy with his father's actions.

"My lord," said the second guard, "what if they don't believe it?"

Baldric's smile was cold. "Then we remind them who commands the narrative in Albion."

He turned and walked away, the weight of old hatred in every step. The duel had not gone as he'd hoped.

But this was not over.

Not by far.

Los and Angela Alone – After the Duel

The infirmary was quiet. Bunk and Julia had tended his wounds, calling on blessings to mend bone and muscle. Now Los needed rest.

The crowd's cheers had long since faded into memory, replaced by the faint crackle of torches and the gentle clatter of a healer grinding herbs in the next room. Shadows danced across the stone walls, but the stillness felt sacred—heavy, like the hush after a storm.

Angela stood near the foot of the cot; her hands tucked beneath her arms. Still clad in her armor, she had not taken the time or pause to take it off.

Los lay motionless.

His chest rose and fell steadily, but every breath seemed hard-earned. Bandages were wrapped around his side, his brow—bruises bloomed like ink beneath his ribs. His lips were dry. His eyes closed.

Angela stared at him.

"You idiot," she whispered.

She didn't say it aloud to be cruel. She said it because the weight of what he'd done was just now settling into her bones. Because she had never been more furious—or more afraid.

"You shouldn't have fought him. Not like that. Not for the crowd. Not for her... Not for anyone."

Her voice was tight, barely audible.

"And now look at you. Broken for your pride."

But it wasn't just pride, was it?

She stepped closer, her fingers gently brushing his hair. She looked at the chair by his bed but did not sit. She didn't trust herself to. If she sat, she might not be able to stand again. Not without saying too much.

"You're not even from here," she murmured. "You don't owe this realm a thing, and still you bleed for it like you were born beneath these towers."

Her gaze dropped to his hand, bruised and scraped from the duel. It had clutched the hilt of his greatsword until the final blow. She took his hand in hers for a moment.

She remembered the way he staggered, how he rose again when Amren said stay down.

Again.

And again.

And again.

"Why do you keep getting up?" she asked the quiet.

Los didn't answer.

She blinked hard and looked away, jaw tightening.

"I hated you when we first met," she said after a long moment. "You were arrogant. Smiling when you shouldn't have. Bowing like a fool to every lady you saw."

She almost smiled.

"But you also... you saved me."

Her voice faltered.

"You made me look weak. I hated that more than anything. And now I don't know what I'd do if you didn't get back up."

She sat finally, slowly, her hands resting in her lap. For a long while, she just watched him breathe.

"You fought for your place," she said softly, "but you've always had one."

Her voice trembled now, and she leaned in just slightly, as if the truth were a secret she could only trust the unconscious.

"I need you, Los."

She stood quickly then, brushing the emotion away with the practiced poise of a noble. She glanced once more at the cot.

"I'll send Willow," she said aloud, but more to herself than anyone else. "She deserves to see you."

Angela paused at the door.

"You deserved better than this fight," she said, her voice nearly lost in the firelight. "But you... you managed to win by losing."

Then she left.

And the room was quiet once more.

Angela and Willow – Quiet Reflections

They met outside the infirmary. Willow sat in the shadow of the archway, small and pale, her hands clasped in front of her tunic. She had not spoken a word.

Angela walked over and knelt so they were eye level.

"He's resting," she said gently. "No broken bones. But plenty of bruises."

Willow nodded slowly, her lips trembling.

"You think this was your fault," Angela said quietly.

Willow's head lowered.

"It wasn't."

Willow's eyes flicked up—uncertain, searching.

Angela exhaled. "Los is reckless. Noble. Kind. A bit infuriating. But he chooses his battles, and he chose this one."

She took Willow's hand.

"I know he's kind to you," Angela said softly. "He sees you. Really sees you. And that's rare."

Willow nodded.

Angela stood, leading her by the hand.

"Come. Let's make sure he wakes up to see familiar faces."

Red Sashes and Cheap Ale

Ye Mug Tavern — Camelot, evening

Ye Mug was the kind of tavern that wanted—desperately—to be respectable.

The floor was swept twice a day. The tables were clean. The ale was passable. A small shrine to Saint George sat in the corner with a stub of candle and a chipped icon, as if holiness could intimidate a brawl.

It couldn't.

Romao and Prox had claimed a back table where the torchlight didn't reach cleanly and the crowd's noise arrived softened—like waves breaking against stone. The air smelled of damp wool, onions, smoke that had lived in the rafters for years... and stew that honestly wasn't bad.

Prox rolled his bruised shoulder once—subtle, practiced—and pretended it didn't hurt.

Romao watched the room the way a fencer watched a wrist.

For a while, neither of them spoke. Camelot had been loud all day—too loud. Even the laughter tonight sounded like it was trying to drown something out.

Prox stared into his mug like it was a pool waiting to reveal its secrets.

"He's going to get himself killed one day."

Romao didn't look at him. His eyes stayed on the room. "Perhaps. But not today. Bunk and Julia will have him healed up in no time."

Prox's shook his head. "You saw, how they were cheering like he'd won."

Romao's mouth twitched, not quite a smile. "In a way, he did."

Prox blew out a breath—more bitter than amused. "He got beat into the stone and when we carried him out, people stood like he'd just slain another dragon, but this time for them."

Romao's voice dropped, softer now. "That is what frightens the court."

Prox finally looked up. His eyes were flat and tired. "That's what frightens me."

A burst of laughter rose near the bar. Dice clattered. Someone started singing a half-drunk song about the dragon—off key, loud enough to be brave.

The tavern door opened.

Cold air slid in first, then three men came with it, shoulders hunched against the evening, boots too clean for dockhands and too cheap for nobles.

Prox barely glanced up.

Romao's gaze sharpened.

A strip of cloth hung from each man's belt—dull red, cheap dye. Not noble crimson. Not royal red. This was rougher. Meaner. A color that was meant to be seen.

They didn't swagger. They didn't hide either. They moved like men who expected to be tolerated.

When the barkeeper passed with a tray of mugs, Romao lifted his own cup with lazy curiosity, like he was making conversation about weather.

"What's with the red sashes?" he asked. "New fashion?"

The barkeeper didn't even slow. His eyes flicked once—sharp, nervous—then away again as if looking too long might invite trouble.

"It's nothing," he said quickly. "Troublemakers is all. Best ye don't mind them."

That answer didn't soothe Romao.

It only made him watch harder.

The three men drifted apart—never fully separating. Close enough to move together. Far enough to look accidental. A pattern you learned to recognize in border taverns and dock alleys. The kind that ended with someone bleeding and everyone swearing they hadn't seen a thing.

One stopped at the bar and spoke with the barkeeper. Friendly. Easy. The barkeeper's face stayed wooden, but his hands moved faster, like he wanted the exchange over.

Another slid onto a bench near two armsmen who were mid-argument, voices already warmed by ale and pride.

"Amren showed mercy," one insisted, sloshing his drink. "Could've ended him whenever he liked."

"MERCY?" the other barked. "That was a message. A public beating!"

The red-sashed man didn't jump in loud.

He leaned in and spoke low—soft as a friend, shaped like agreement.

The second armsman's anger shifted. Focused. Redirected—like a blade turned with a fingertip.

Prox's hand stilled around his mug.

Romao murmured, barely moving his lips. "There."

Prox glanced sideways. "What?"

"They are not here for ale," Romao said. His eyes tracked the red sash without blinking. "They are here to recruit."

Prox watched as the armsman's expression changed again—less outrage, more certainty. Like a man deciding who to blame. Or a man accepting a story because it felt good in his gut.

Then Prox exhaled slowly through his nose.

"And like the barkeep said," he murmured, "we ignore them."

Romao didn't answer right away. He kept watching the way the red-sashed men listened—how they collected names and moods like coin.

Prox leaned back and, deliberately, pulled the conversation somewhere safer—somewhere normal.

"Shinano stopped by earlier," Prox said, as if it were nothing. "Checked on Los. Said if he's going to be laid up, Ceilahieden wants to know if one of us can fill in on a patrol or two."

That got Romao's attention back to the table. Not fully—but enough.

"She runs a tight crew," Romao said. "Efficient. No nonsense."

Prox nodded. "I told him I'd pass it along in case you wanted in."

"You don't?" Romao asked.

Prox shook his head, eyes dropping back to his ale. "I think I'll stay near Camelot for a while. Keep an eye on Los."

His gaze flicked once toward the red sashes, then away.

Romao grinned. "Los? Or Julia?"

Prox exhaled through his nose again—caught, then resigned. "A little of both." He looked down at the table, then back up at Romao.

Romao gave a small, thoughtful hum. "All right. I will tell Ceilahieden I can ride if she needs."

He shook his head once, like he was clearing a thought, then raised two fingers toward the barkeeper. "Two bowls."

Prox blinked. "I thought you didn't like the stew here."

Romao's grin finally surfaced—quick and wicked. He reached into his pocket and produced a small pouch: tight-wrapped cloth tied with string, the faint scent of something sharp and warm leaking through it.

"I don't."

Prox squinted. "What do you have there?"

Romao loosened the knot and angled it just enough for Prox to catch the smell.

Spice.

Real spice.

Not onion. Not salt or pepper.

Spice.

"I could not take it anymore," Romao said, utterly pleased with himself. "I traded with Darkhawk for proper seasonings."

Prox stared at him like he was mad. Then he huffed a laugh. "What did you trade for the spices?"

Romao's eyes danced. "A little coin. A little information." He shrugged, casual as sin. "He wanted to know how Los was doing... and about our little frontier training sessions."

Prox's expression tightened. "One of these days those little sessions are going to get you into trouble."

Romao leaned in, conspiratorial, lowering his voice like he was telling a secret worth stealing. "One day. But today, my friend, you will learn what food can taste like with a little flavor."

Prox laughed—genuine, rough, needed.

Romao chuckled along with him as the tavern noise pressed in again, as if the world could be normal for the length of a bowl.

But even as Romao sprinkled spice into the stew like he was blessing it, his eyes never fully stopped watching the room.

And the red sashes kept moving.

Quiet.

Patient.

Los Wakes and Talks with Willow

The first thing he felt was the ache in his ribs.

Not the pain of the blow—that had passed—but the deep, swollen soreness left behind. A punishment well-earned. His eyes fluttered open to soft light. Morning had come, pale and golden, seeping through the lattice window of the infirmary. The scent of lavender and pine oil clung faintly to the air, mingled with the sharper tang of healing salves.

He turned his head slightly.

Willow sat beside his cot, curled in a small wooden chair, her orange hair tousled from sleep. She hadn't meant to drift off, he guessed—her posture was too tense, her fingers still clenched around the handle of a water jug half-full in her lap. One hand rested on the edge of the bed, barely brushing the blanket, as if anchoring herself to his side.

She looked so small.

And yet... it had been her he thought of when Amren struck him down.

"Willow..." he said softly.

The sound of her name stirred her. She blinked, startled, and quickly straightened in her seat. Her eyes locked with his—wide, green, flooded with emotion. Then her hand moved in a flurry, setting the jug aside and reaching for a cloth made damp with cool water. Gently, tenderly, she pressed it to his brow.

Los smiled, or tried to. His lip stung where it had split.

"Jes... still alive," he muttered. "Though... jou look like jou saw a ghost."

Willow shook her head, lips trembling. She pressed the cloth to his cheek, then adjusted the blanket near his shoulder. She hadn't said a word, but her actions spoke with reverence. Like he was something fragile. Something precious.

Los watched her for a moment. Then he whispered:

"Thank jou for watching over me."

Willow's hand paused. Her eyes shifted slightly, then she gave a little smile.

Los sighed.

"It wasn't only for jou I fought..." he said. "I fought so no one could tell me who my friends are. Or how I should live my life," his voice soft but honest.

He looked at her again—really looked. At the way she bit her lip, the faint pink blush in her cheeks. She hadn't run from the blood. She hadn't looked away. She had been there—*had stayed by his side*.

Her fingers trembled as she reached for his hand.

Small. Calloused. Steady.

He held it in his, like he had that night, on the balcony.

She leaned forward and gently pressed her forehead against his shoulder. He closed his eyes, listening to the hush of her breath, steady and warm.

And for just a moment, Sir Los Ortiz the Epic Paladin, did not feel like a knight, or a symbol. He was just... Los. And for once, that was enough.

The Quiet Bargain

Throne Room — Eddington's Keep, Albion Foothills, Dusk

The chamber was warm, but not welcoming.

Rich mahogany lined the walls, polished to a dull gleam. Heavy curtains sealed out the evening, turning dusk into something that had to be invited in. The fire crackled in a

hearth carved with the sigils of House Eddington—a stag in crimson, flanked by thorns—and the scent of incense and aged leather hung over the long table like a second layer of smoke.

Two guards stood at the doors.

Not for protection.

For punctuation.

Lord Edward Baldric did not sit. He preferred to loom.

“Baron.”

The nod he gave was correct. Minimal. Respectful in the way a blade could be respectful right before it cut.

Baron Philip Eddington stood near the hearth with a goblet of red in hand, posture easy, expression mild—like a man greeting a guest rather than one who had received a summons. His smile held just enough warmth to be called courtesy by anyone who wanted to believe it.

“Come now, my lord,” Eddington said. “Have we grown so formal?”

“I assume you did not summon me to discuss the finer points of etiquette,” Baldric replied, arms clasped behind his back.

Eddington’s smile widened by a fraction. Pleased rather than offended.

“Very well,” he said, and turned slightly as if speaking about weather. “You’ve been visiting lords.”

Baldric’s eyes narrowed. “Have I.”

“You have.” Eddington lifted one finger, as if counting coin. “Lord Ulwyc, two nights ago.” A second. “Lord Renaris, last week.” A third—held a moment longer. “Lord Burns.”

He let the names settle into the room.

“I mention it only,” Eddington added gently, “because some men would call it plotting.”

Baldric’s mouth twitched, not quite a smile. “And what do you call it?”

"I call it concern," Eddington said. "For the kingdom. For the old vows. For Albion as it was meant to be—before foreign charm and court indulgence began to rot it from within."

Baldric's gaze sharpened at *foreign*.

"Ah," Baldric said slowly. "So this is about Ortiz."

Eddington gave the smallest shrug, as if forced to admit what everyone already knew.

"The Beltane spectacle was... illuminating," he said. "It told us what the court will tolerate, and what the people will worship." His eyes drifted, briefly, toward the hearth-carving—the stag and thorns—then back. "But he has done something worse than give them a hero."

Baldric remained still.

Eddington's voice softened, almost conversational.

"He has given them hope."

And hope, Baldric understood, was a kind of weapon peasants did not know how to hold safely.

Baldric stepped closer to the fire, the golden boar on his tunic catching the light in harsh gold. "I am also aware of your little... movement, Baron."

"Movement," Eddington repeated, tasting the word as if amused by it.

"The peasants," Baldric said, voice like a blade. "Red sashes. Red complaints. Red mouths." His eyes flicked—briefly—to the guards beyond the door in red robes. "They're few. Undisciplined. Loud."

Eddington did not blink. If anything, his calm deepened.

"Peasants are rarely disciplined," he said. "But they are many. And when guided, they become... useful."

Baldric's jaw tightened. "Useful to whom?"

Eddington turned at that—slow, practiced, almost reverent.

"Useful to Albion," he said smoothly. "To order. To tradition. To restoring the proper lines between crown and commoner... between noble and stray."

Baldric stared at him, long and cold, weighing the words the way he weighed steel.

"You speak like a man who wants the world as it was," Baldric said at last.

"I do," Eddington replied. "And I believe you do as well."

He stepped closer—not too close. Careful to keep it *courtly*. Careful to keep it deniable.

"I won't insult you with lies," Eddington continued. "You're gathering support. You're preparing for what comes next." A small pause. A deliberate one. "So am I."

Baldric's voice dropped. "Your 'order' is rebellion."

Eddington spread his hands. "My order is correction."

"And the King?" Baldric asked.

Eddington hesitated—not long enough to be caught by anyone who wasn't hunting for it. Only a heartbeat.

"The King is... surrounded by men who confuse popularity with stability," he said. "Men who would rather be loved than obeyed."

Baldric's eyes hardened. He recognized the thought because it was his own.

Eddington took the opening like a man slipping a knife into a seam.

"Work with me," he said quietly. "Not publicly. Not yet. Simply... an understanding." He gestured with his goblet toward the table, toward the other waiting cup. "A quiet accord. We can secure the future of this kingdom before it drifts too far from itself."

Baldric did not touch the wine.

He studied Eddington as if assessing a horse for purchase—and finding something off in the teeth.

"You speak well," Baldric said. "Too well."

Eddington's smile did not change. "I take that as praise."

Baldric stepped back, firelight carving his face into sharp planes.

"I will not pledge to you," he said. "Not tonight."

"Of course." Eddington inclined his head, unbothered. "I wouldn't trust a lord who pledged too easily."

Baldric turned toward the door.

"And Baron?" he said without looking back.

"Yes, Lord Baldric?"

Baldric's voice was calm—almost polite.

"If your peasants reach for my gates... I'll hang them from the walls to teach the rest what order looks like."

Eddington's smile never wavered.

"I would expect nothing less," he said softly. "That is why I sent for you."

Baldric left.

And behind him—alone with the fire and the carved stag watching from stone—Baron Eddington lifted his goblet. Not to drink.

Just to admire how cleanly the first stone had slid into place.

Reflections — Baldric's Mind

Swanton Keep — Late Night

That night, in the privacy of his study, Baldric sat alone.

The fire had burned down to coals. The room smelled of iron, ink, and old leather. Outside, the keep settled into winter silence—guards changing watch, wind pressing against stone, the world behaving the way it should.

He did not fear Eddington.

The Baron's ambition burned bright, yes, but bright flames were easy to smother if you knew where to choke the air. A peasant revolt was the same as any other tool: crude, loud, useful... and disposable.

Let the red sashes gather.

Let them hiss in taverns and whisper at street corners. Let them tear at the weak seams of Camelot's frame and make the King look soft. When the chaos grew loud enough—when the people began begging for someone to stop it—*then* Baldric would step forward with order in his hands.

His order.

Not the priesthood with their mercy. Not the council with their hand-wringing. Not a crown that mistook applause for loyalty.

Tradition must return.

By his hand.

Baldric stared into the coals until they glowed like watchful eyes.

And in the dark, he did not see the only truth that mattered:

A fire once fed does not ask who lit it.

It burns what it touches.

Chapter L — Exile

The Council of Ashes – Orchid Fair Guild Hall, That Night

The torches hissed as the doors of the Orchid Fair Guild Hall closed behind them. The hum of celebration that had echoed through Camelot earlier had long faded. In its place came unease.

Angela stood at the head of the war table, still clad in her red and white armor, the black cross upon her chest. Her hair was damp from the cold air outside. Her gauntlets rested atop a map of Albion's southern holdings, but her gaze was distant—fixed not on terrain or tactics, but consequence.

Prox leaned against the table's edge, arms crossed, still nursing a bruised shoulder from a morning drill. His brow was furrowed—not in pain, but in thought. Romao, ever composed, stood near the fireplace, arms behind his back like a statesman, cloak draped over one shoulder in perfect, deliberate elegance.

No one spoke for a long moment. Only the fire crackled, and outside, wind whispered against the stained glass.

Then Angela broke the silence.

"The crowd may have cheered for Los ... but the Court did not."

Romao nodded, slowly. "True. And the King did not smile. Amren was meant to *scare* him, to teach him a lesson."

"He did both," Prox muttered. "But still lost."

Angela tapped a finger to the map. "And now Baldric smells blood. This—this duel—it was never just about protocol. It was about containment."

Romao stepped forward. "It was about sending a message. Baldric saw Los's rise—his charm, his heroics, the *legend* building around him. So he whispered in the right ear, and what better way to humble a hero than to let the King's Champion do the work?"

Prox's jaw clenched. "Except Los didn't break. He got up. Again. And again. And again."

"And now?" Angela asked, meeting Prox's eyes.

"Now they'll see *us—all of us*—as a threat."

The table fell quiet again.

Then Romao added softly, "He made us visible. Romantic. Noble. Dangerous."

Angela's hands tightened on the map's edge.

"Then we must move carefully," she said. "We can't afford to provoke Baldric further—*yet*. Not until we know what his next move will be."

Prox exhaled slowly and finally said aloud what had clearly been weighing on him.

"Maybe Los should leave Camelot. Just for a while."

Romao blinked. "You mean exile?"

"No," Prox said quickly. "Nothing like that. Just... away from the eyes of the court. From the whispers. Somewhere *safe*."

Angela nodded slowly, the seed already growing in her thoughts. "Caer Benowyc, it is the furthest keep. And they have been asking for support, for a Paladin."

Romao tilted his head. "I agree."

Then Angela added. "But he can't go as Ambassador or be seen as serving Albion."

Prox looked up. "Then how do we get him out there?"

"I will talk to Lady Triss," Angela said quietly. "If she sends him as a Knight of the Church, then there should not be any... diplomatic issues."

Romao nodded in agreement. "Then have her ask him. Before Baldric does."

A gust of wind rattled the windows.

The council of Orchid Fair stood silent once more, the weight of decisions settling over them like dust over a battlefield. But now they had a plan. A pause in the storm. And in the distance—beyond the shadows of pride and power —*hope*.

Outside the Gate of House Burns

Los did not knock.

He did not cross the threshold.

He sat.

The stone bench beside the Burns estate gate was cold beneath him, rough with age and weather. It was meant for guards, for messengers who waited to be summoned—or dismissed. Los rested his hands on his knees and let the ache in his ribs settle where it would. Every breath still hurt. He welcomed it. Pain kept him honest.

He wore no armor.

No surcoat.

No tabard.

No colors.

Just a simple wool tunic, undyed, belted at the waist. Breeches. Boots scuffed from use, not polished. His sword was not with him. He had left it behind on purpose.

A knight, dressed as a man.

The gate stood open, iron bars framing the quiet path beyond. Servants passed within the grounds, glancing once, then looking away.

Someone would have noticed him. Someone always did.

So he waited.

Minutes stretched. Then longer. He did not shift. Did not lean. Did not rise when a guard finally approached, uncertainty written plain on the man's face.

"Sir," the guard said carefully, "Lord Burns is preparing to leave."

Los inclined his head. "I know."

The guard hesitated. "He told you to leave his house."

"I did," Los said calmly. "I am not in it."

That seemed to satisfy the letter of the thing, if not the spirit. The guard nodded once and withdrew.

Los watched the light move across the stone at his feet. Thought of the duel—of the moment his body had screamed *enough* and the voice that had answered it anyway.

Bootsteps approached.

Measured. Heavy.

Lord Burns emerged through the gate, cloak clasped at his shoulders, expression already carved from granite. He stopped when he saw Los seated there.

For a long moment, neither man spoke.

Burns' gaze dropped—not to the bench, but to Los's hands. Empty. Then to his chest. No colors. No cross. No claim.

"What are you doing here," Burns asked flatly.

Los stood.

Slowly. Carefully. He did not bow nor did he square himself like a challenger.

"I wanted to tell you something," he said.

Burns folded his arms. "There is nothing I want to hear from you."

Los drew a breath. It caught, just a little. Then he continued anyway.

"I stood," he said, "because your daughter called out to me to get up."

Burns did not move.

"I was done," Los went on. "I knew I would not win. I knew it would hurt more if I rose. I wanted it to be over."

His voice roughened, just slightly—not with self-pity, but memory.

"But Angela called out. She told me to get up."

He paused.

"She told me to remind them why Dragons fear me."

The words hung there, unadorned. Not a boast. Not a plea.

A breath passed.

"I did not stand to impress the court," Los said. "Or to be seen as brave. I rose because she mattered more to me than the pain I knew was coming. I stood because she believes in me."

He looked Burns in the eye then. Steady. Unflinching.

"I don't care what they think of me," he said. "But I do care what you think of me. And how you believe I treat your daughter."

Silence stretched between them.

Burns' jaw tightened. Not in anger—something else. Something held in check. He looked past Los for a moment, toward the street, the city, the echo of rumor still clinging to the air.

Then back.

"You lost," Burns said.

"Jes," Los replied. "I did."

"You shamed yourself."

"I bled," Los corrected quietly. "There is a difference."

Burns studied him again—really studied him now. The bruising at his throat. The stiffness in his stance. The absence of armor, of entitlement, of defiance.

"You should have stayed down," Burns said gruffly.

Los nodded once. "Jes."

Another silence. Heavier this time.

Burns turned away first.

"You should go," he said.

Los inclined his head. "I will."

He did not wait for dismissal beyond that. He did not ask forgiveness. He did not ask permission.

He turned and walked away from the gate, each step measured, deliberate.

Behind him, Lord Burns remained standing in the open archway long after Los had gone—watching the space where the man had been, jaw tight, thoughts unreadable.

For the first time since Beltane, the anger did not come.

Only questions.

And that, Los knew, was enough—for now.

Angela and Lady Triss — The Ask

The Church of St. George lay in its evening quiet, the kind that came only after the last supplicant had gone and the doors had been barred. Candles burned low along the altar rail, their flames steady, patient. The stone still held the day's warmth.

Lady Triss stood before the altar, hands folded, head bowed.

Angela waited.

She did not interrupt prayer.

Only when Triss straightened and turned—movements measured, reverent—did Angela speak.

"My lady."

Triss inclined her head slightly. "Lady Angela."

Angela drew a breath. She did not rush it.

"Los cannot remain in Camelot."

That earned her Triss's full attention.

Not anger.

Not surprise.

Assessment.

"Go on," Triss said evenly.

"The court is watching him now," Angela continued. "More closely than before. Baldric most of all." She hesitated only a fraction of a heartbeat. "And the King will not forgive him for *how* he survived the duel."

Triss studied her in silence.

Long enough that Angela felt the weight of every word she had chosen—and every one she had not.

Finally, Triss spoke.

"You are asking me to send him away."

"Yes, my lady." Angela did not flinch from it. "I'm asking if you can find cause to send him north. To the frontier. Caer Benowyc, if possible."

Triss turned slightly, gaze drifting toward the nave as she considered it.

Angela pressed on, careful now—precise.

"If Los leaves as an ambassador, it will be read as retreat. And if he goes in the service of Albion, it drags Castile into war." She met Triss's eyes. "But if he goes as a Knight of the Church... that is neither."

"Caer Benowyc," Triss murmured. "They are always short of clerical support."

She began to pace, slow and thoughtful.

The frontier always was.

"If I were to assign him as an escort," Triss said at last, "to a cleric traveling north... then his presence would not be questioned. He could leave quietly."

Angela inclined her head. "That is all I ask."

Triss stopped pacing and turned to face her fully.

"Do you understand what you are asking of me?"

"Yes."

"You are asking me to place him under the Church's protection."

Angela did not soften her answer. "I am."

Triss regarded her for a long moment, then spoke more quietly.

"You care for him."

Angela did not deny it.

"I trust him."

That answer mattered.

Triss exhaled—slow, controlled. The kind of breath taken by someone making a decision that had already been reached.

"If I do this," she said, "it will not be framed as protecting him."

"I would not expect it to be."

"He will go as an escort," Triss continued. "Without fanfare. Without explanation."

Angela's shoulders eased—only slightly.

Triss turned back toward the altar.

"There is a cleric being reassigned north. Alfred. Capable. A bit rough." A pause. "He will require an escort."

Angela said nothing.

"Sir Los will be assigned to accompany him," Triss finished. "As a Knight of the Church."

She glanced back once.

"And Angela?"

"Yes, my lady."

"This buys him time. Not safety."

Angela inclined her head and gave a little smile. "Time is enough."

Triss nodded, once.

"Then see that he is ready to ride."

Angela's Perspective: The Quiet Strategy

Angela waited three full days.

Los had healed well—physically, at least. The bruises had faded into sallow gold and gray across his ribs and cheek, and the bandages on his knuckles were off. But something else lingered in his eyes when he spoke. Quiet. A little unsure.

It was the perfect time.

She found him in the Guild Hall courtyard, tossing dried bread to the birds. The same courtyard he once cleaned without being asked. The same one where Prox sparred in the mornings and Romao bragged about his sword oil.

Angela crossed her arms over her chest, posture firm, tone light.

"Los, Lady Triss has a task for you."

He looked up, blinking against the sunlight. "Jes, Commander?" he said with that infuriating crooked grin.

That word still made her stiffen, even when said playfully. She took a breath.

"The Church is sending a cleric to Caer Benowyc. You are being asked to escort him."

He nodded slowly, curiously. "Why me?"

She stepped closer.

"Because I need you to be away from Camelot for a while."

Los tilted his head. "Exile?"

Angela gave him a small smile, one with more fondness than she usually allowed.

"It's not exile if the King hasn't noticed you're gone."

That earned a quiet chuckle.

"Just for a little while, Los."

Los bowed his head. "Jes, I understand."

Angela didn't say *thank you*. She just nodded, turned and left, leaving the conversation closed.

But as she walked away, her thoughts stayed behind:

Let him rest, let him reflect. Let the world forget him for a little while.

She couldn't protect him from everything. But she could buy time.

Time to figure out what to do next.

Lady Triss — The Only Move Left

Lady Triss had given Angela the sealed letter with Los's instructions. Now she could only pray it kept him out of the reach of those who would do him further harm.

Sunlight filtered through the window, reflecting golden light off her ceremonial armor. Outside, the church bell tolled midday. But her thoughts lingered on the boy—her boy—being quietly moved out of Camelot before the court could decide what to do with him.

Angela's proposal had been intelligent—measured, carefully phrased.

Send Los to Benowyc. Make it look like the Church's request.

Lady Triss had given her approval.

It was not exile.

It was not punishment.

It was preservation.

"Time," she murmured to herself. "Time to heal. Time for the snakes to forget his name."

She rose and crossed to the window, looking north toward the distant frontier, where stone and silence still mattered more than whispers.

She had lost him once.

She would not lose him again.

"Stay safe, my son," she whispered. "And return to me."

The Boar's Smile

Swanton Keep, Late Evening

The fire crackled in its stone cage, but it did little to warm the vast and bitter chamber that was Lord Edward Baldric's study. The heavy doors of Swanton Keep were shut for the night, the guards dismissed with harsh words and flicks of the hand. The only companions now were shadows—long, twitching, ever-watching cast by the dancing torchlight upon dark, ancient walls.

Baldric sat behind his desk, still armored, as if the duel had not ended. His black gauntlets rested on the boar-crested desk, fingers drumming in slow, rhythmic taps upon a map of Albion. His brow was furrowed deep, jaw locked, lips set in a hard line. He had been silent for hours, replaying the moment again and again.

The duel.

The cheers.

The chants.

Not for Sir Amren.

Not for the King.

Not even for him—the protector of Albion's old ways.

They had cheered for Los Ortiz.

The foreigner.

The upstart.

The bastard.

Worse—the hero. Again.

First the dragon. Now the duel. What next? A crown?

Baldric leaned back slowly, the leather of his chair groaning under his weight. He stared upward toward the stone arch above, where the banner of the black boar hung unmoved by breeze or breath. His hands clenched.

“He should have died in that duel,” Baldric muttered. “He should have fallen like every other fool who thought he could challenge the order of things.”

He stood abruptly, pacing. His boots struck hard on the stone floor with every step.

“I gave Amren every advantage. Timing, witnesses, a crowd of nobles ready to whisper. And still—*still*—the people cheered the boy. He bleeds, and they cheer louder.”

He spat into the corner.

“And Rebecca...” he growled. “Still protecting him. Still raising him up. She protects her son like—”

He paused, mid-stride.

Something cold slithered through his thoughts.

He had kept this secret to himself since the boy arrived in Albion—a final card to play.

Now was the time.

He laughed—low and cruel—the sound like steel scraping on stone.

“She kept him hidden... to protect herself. To keep her command. To keep her name. And now—now, he will be the instrument of her destruction. Beloved by the people, and unaware he is the very blade that can sever her reputation.”

He turned back toward the hearth, hands behind his back, and smiled.

“It’s perfect.”

If the truth were revealed now—at the right moment, in the right place—it would ruin them both.

Lady Triss would be disgraced. A mother who lied. Who broke her oaths. Who deceived the entire Paladin Order. She would be removed. Cast out.

And Los?

The noble champion would become the heart of a scandal. The bastard son of a disgraced house. The result of lust and treason, not of divine right or destiny. The nobles would turn. His knighthood questioned. His honor mocked.

All he needed was the stage.

“A council meeting,” Baldric whispered. “Where nobles gather. Where lords listen. Where power shifts like a tide.”

Behind him, the boar on his banner seemed to grin.

Baldric’s grin matched it.

“All too easy,” he said aloud. “This time, neither the crowd... nor his mother... will save him.”

And for the first time in days, Lord Edward Baldric slept soundly.

Not from peace—

But from certainty.

A Simple Honor

Los smiled to himself as he packed.

It felt good to be moving again, to have a purpose beyond bleeding in front of nobles or hearing whispers in the marketplace. Escorting a cleric to Caer Benowyc was just what he needed, time away—fresh air.

To be away from Camelot—even for a little while—protecting one of their own, meant the Order still trusted him, that Lady Triss still trusted him.

Angela had said it plainly, like any other assignment. She hadn't hugged him. Hadn't offered some long-winded speech about his need to heal or about duty.

She'd just *trusted* him to understand.

He looked at his armor, now polished and repaired. His black cross restored. His name now whispered with admiration by commoners, and with caution by nobles.

"I fought Amren," he muttered, fastening his cloak. "And I am still standing."

It felt like a step forward.

He thought of Willow. Of her eyes full of worry that day. Of her wordless presence in the infirmary. Of Angela, too—how her voice had cracked once, just once, when she told him to *ask for help if he needed it*.

He carried too much—but maybe the road would be quieter.

No girls to impress. No nobles to enrage.

Just some old stone walls at the edge of the frontier.

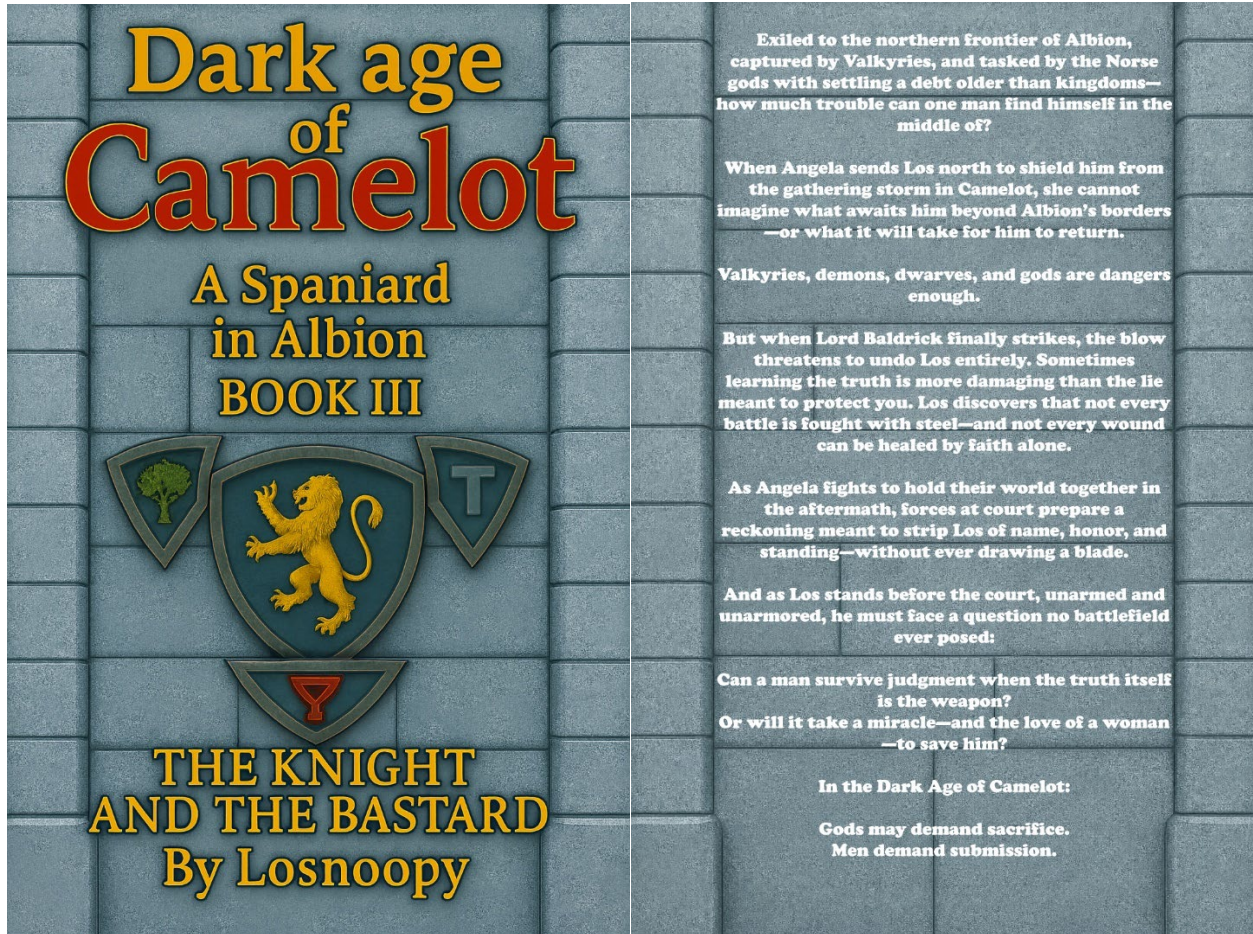
And a cleric to protect.

"What could possibly go wrong?"

He smiled at the thought, and finished packing.

To be Continued...

Dark Age of Camelot: Spaniard in Albion. Book III – The Knight and the Bastard.



Exiled to the northern frontier of Albion, captured by Valkyries, and tasked by the Norse gods with settling a debt older than kingdoms—how much trouble can one man find himself in the middle of?

When Angela sends Los north to shield him from the gathering storm in Camelot, she cannot imagine what awaits him beyond Albion's borders—or what it will take for him to return.

Valkyries, demons, dwarves, and gods are dangers enough.

But when Lord Baldrick finally strikes, the blow threatens to undo Los entirely. Sometimes learning the truth is more damaging than the lie meant to protect you. Los discovers that not every battle is fought with steel—and not every wound can be healed by faith alone.

As Angela fights to hold their world together in the aftermath, forces at court prepare a reckoning meant to strip Los of name, honor, and standing—without ever drawing a blade.

And as Los stands before the court, unarmed and unarmored, he must face a question no battlefield ever posed:

Can a man survive judgment when the truth itself is the weapon?
Or will it take a miracle—and the love of a woman—to save him?

In the Dark Age of Camelot:

Gods may demand sacrifice.
Men demand submission.