

Ties That Bind

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Ties That Bind

by [Saringold](#)

Summary

Tying the knot has always had many meanings to Linhardt. This is a story about Linhardt's hair band and what it means to him, his best friend, and perhaps their very bond.

(Written for the Casphardt Mini Bang 2020!)

Update: Now with ADDITIONAL art from [DrawingDDoom!!](#)

Updated 6/28/2022 to add info from Fire Emblem Warriors: Three Hopes

Notes

This fic was such a joy to write!! My partner artists for this were [Dannie](#) and [MariettaRC!](#) Thank you both so much for your incredible artwork. Please enjoy everyone, and don't forget to check out the other works being posted for the Casphardt Mini Bang!

Update: My lovely partner [MariettaRC](#) commissioned another piece to accompany this work from the amazingly talented [DrawingDDoom!!](#) AHFFF it turned out so well; thank you so much! :3

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

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

The chilling cold and lasting winds of winter had finally come to the Adrestian Empire, and House Bergliez's territory was no exception. The Guardian Moon of 1173, heralded by a bright full moon that orbited watchfully in the heavens overhead, had brought with it a cascade of cold wind and low temperatures that, while seasonable for this time of year, were an expected and yet undesired discomfort to all who manned Fort Merceus. Seasoned soldiers shivered in subzero suits of chainmail as they patrolled the outer perimeter, and tall stone towers, one in each corner of the fort, seemed tall enough to pierce the darkling skies above as another afternoon gave way to the encroaching evening. The sturdy stone walls of the Fort, the entirety of which was hewn from materials mined from the Oghma Mountains, rose up like towering shields around the inner compound of the Fort, stubborn and determined to use both its own defenses and the natural landscape to repel all invaders as it had done for countless years.

It was well within these safe, stalwart walls that young Caspar von Bergliez gave a wild grin, surveying the imaginary battlefield all around him with sharp, evaluating eyes. He was dressed in a patched, stained, perhaps-at-one-point-white puffy wool coat with a slightly frayed knit hat and gloves, all of which were hand-me-downs from his brother, and sturdy boots covered his feet as he stomped around the gray fort's frosted yard. His surroundings were bathed in white, snowflakes falling down from the skies in fat, freezing drops, and he stuck his tongue out excitedly, hoping to catch one in his mouth and savor the cool, clean taste that came from fresh falling snow. He tried for about a minute, flailing about wildly and running all around the yard for a better chance, until finally, a delicious snowflake landed with a gentle splash on his tongue, the slight burst of cold invigorating him as he shouted with glee and pumped a fist in the air. "WHOO! That's good!" He turned around, and hurriedly dashed back to the vaguely fort-shaped mound of snow that stood a short distance away. "Linhardt!" he called urgently, hoping that his best friend might've finally finished the snow saint he had been working on for what felt like forever. "Are you done yet? Wanna play soldiers now?"

A sleepy groan from behind the fort was the only response, and after a moment, Linhardt von Hevring sat up, brushing some snow off of his pale face and out of his evergreen hair. He was also wearing a wool coat, although his was newer and of finer quality, with matching mittens and earmuffs as well as his own pair of sturdy snow boots. "Urgh. Caspar, please don't be so loud," Linhardt reprimanded. Giving a yawn, the young Hevring turned at the waist to peer at the snow saint behind him, which looked more like a deformed blob than anything else, and shrugged. "I suppose we could play more, although I would much prefer to go inside. My hair's all wet and I'm cold."

Caspar sighed, bending down to take a look at Linhardt's condition. "Well, that's 'cause you didn't wear a hat! C'mon, let's go in and ask Tabitha for cocoa."

Linhardt's eyes brightened at the prospect of the head maid's delicious cocoa recipe (and of no longer being exposed to the elements), and when Caspar extended a hand, Linhardt took it, grasping firmly as his best friend pulled him up. Carefully, Linhardt reached up and wrung out his hair, wincing at the unpleasant tug. "Urgh," he grimaced, wiping his hands on his coat. "I really should ask Father if I can cut my hair short and leave it that way. I know that my parents both want me to have long hair, but..." Linhardt trailed off, gesturing at his head with a firm point of his index finger.

Caspar shook his head, grinning widely in response to Linhardt's annoyance. "Nah, I like your hair long."

Linhardt cracked a smile, the tiny upturn of his mouth as expressive as Caspar's widest grin. "Oh really? That's not what you said when we first met."

Caspar felt his face flush with embarrassment, and he could tell that the bridge of his nose was already colored crimson from the memory. "Look--"

"Oh, excuse me miss," Linhardt imitated exaggeratedly, putting on a falsetto and clutching his hands to his chest, "but where's uh... what's his name... Linhardt? My father said I'm supposed to meet him here."

Caspar sighed, the blush having spread completely across his face by this point. "Ok, so *maybe* I was kinda clueless."

"And *then*," Linhardt continued, ignoring Caspar completely, "once I introduced myself, you asked why I had long hair, and when I told you that it's because it was traditional and that my family liked the style, you laughed and said that it was *weird* and demanded that I play with you."

"Ok, but," Caspar shouted, attempting to defend himself before Linhardt could speak further, "I also meant that it was weird *in the good way*."

Linhardt shook his head in amusement, still smiling. "Well, I got that part, especially since I said I didn't want to do any running, so you said we would play 'Knight and Princess' because my hair was long and pretty and I could sit and be the princess so that you would come rescue me."

"And I meant it! Your hair is long and pretty, and it's fun to play with, see?" So saying, Caspar slipped his right hand out of his glove and ran it through Linhardt's hair, his questing fingers almost immediately snagging in the sodden locks and causing the slim noble to hiss in pain.

"Ouch! Caspar, get your hand out of my hair at once!"

"Urgh! Uh... one sec! My fingers are tangled!"

"I can't believe this--OW!"

"Hold on, hold on, almost got it..."

After a few more seconds of struggle, with Caspar adding his other hand to the mix and Linhardt attempting to help himself, they managed to wrest Caspar's hand from Linhardt's hair, freeing a few green strands along with it. Linhardt shook his head, the corners of his mouth turned down in displeasure as he gave Caspar as weary a stare as a 9 year old could give. "Right, then. Let's go inside now."

Caspar gulped, and nodded eagerly. "Yeah! I'm in!" The two bounded toward the large doorway leading to the inside of the fort, eager for warmth and that sweet, sweet treat.

A short time later, they were escorted to one of the empty bedrooms and promptly bundled up in two thick blankets, left to happily sip their cocoa and watch the snowfall through the room's sole window. Wooden floorboards stretched from one wall to the other, plush rugs spread over the planks, and a neatly made twin bed with a faded red bedspread was pushed back in one corner, making it perfect for the two children to rest against. Between that and the comfortable heat emanating from the crackling fire roaring in the stone fireplace near the bed, the entire room felt warm and welcoming in contrast to the snowy scene outside. Linhardt was leaning against Caspar's shoulder, the young Hevring trying to decide if it was worth sneaking a nap in before Tabitha came to collect them, before Caspar broke the silence. "Hey, Linhardt?" Caspar asked, placing his now-empty mug on the floor.

"Mhm?" Linhardt replied, not moving in the slightest except to set down his own wooden mug.

"I'm sorry for getting my fingers all tangled in your hair. And I'm *really* sorry for calling your hair weird when we first met. I didn't mean it."

Linhardt sighed and snuggled closer to his best friend, the Bergliez's natural warmth seeping even through the blankets and making Linhardt feel lethargic and snuggly. It was a nice complement to the warmth in his chest. "It's alright, Caspar. I don't hold it against you; plenty of people think that I'm weird, so--"

The air wooshed out of Linhardt's lungs as Caspar turned and wrapped him up in a tight hug, the comfortable blanket falling from the bluenette's shoulders onto the ground as his arms encircled Linhardt. "You're not! You're not weird! You're my best friend with really nice hair, and..."

He trailed off as Linhardt started chuckling, genuine happiness in his tone. "...Thank you, Caspar. You're my best friend too." They continued to sit in an emotional silence until Linhardt's eyes grew heavy, and the young noble fell asleep on Caspar's shoulder, dead to the world. Caspar had become used to his best friend's sleeping habits by this point, and, not bothering to let go of Linhardt just to retrieve his own blanket, simply readjusted himself to be more comfortable and continued watching the snow, lost in thought. The two children didn't move an inch until a short time later when Tabitha knocked loudly on the door, summoning them both for dinner.

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The harsh, metallic clang of steel against shield rang out across the training grounds of House Bergliez's Enbarr estate, the elite troops serving the Minister of Military Affairs refusing to let even the oppressive heat of the scorching summer sun detract from their training. Shouts of "Hiyah!" and "Hoowah!" could be heard as seasoned soldiers instructed novice knights-to-be in the use of the training dummies, and elsewhere, sharp-eyed swordmasters squared off against formidable fortress knights in exercises to learn strategy and cultivate instinct for facing foes with such varied fighting styles from their own.

On a rolling hill a short distance away from the expansive training grounds, the great number of barracks, and bustling workshops for engineering and experimenting with weapons of war, the Bergliez manor towered above the various facilities, surprisingly small for a minister's home but placed such that it was easily defensible and only accessible via a single main road that was closely guarded. The house itself was made of brick, the sturdy structure lending itself well to fending off enemy attacks, and rather than gardens or the like, the terrain around the home was flat, allowing the occupants to spot any approaching enemies from miles around. Around the rest of the perimeter was a tall wrought-iron fence that firmly deterred any would be burglars, although the Count's reputation for being a less than merciful man tended to do most of that work for him.

The large estate was near the outskirts of Enbarr, the distance affording the minister and his men the space to train and test themselves and their weapons without bothering the other titled families, as well as the freedom to shout battle cries as loudly as one wanted to. Caspar often reveled in this fact, as he was too often hushed or ordered to be silent everywhere else and this was one of the few places where he could be as loud as he naturally was without being judged. Today was no exception, with the 12-year-old's voice ringing loud and proud throughout the estate, although this time, his best friend was here, which naturally made everything all the better.

Despite Caspar's volume and undue excitement about... well, most things, Linhardt allowed himself to smile at the prospect of spending some quality time with his best friend. It had taken much convincing on his part to persuade his parents that Caspar was not only a suitable friend for him, but one that he should be allowed to personally visit, and after much hemming and hawing and letter writing and stomping and snarling and smirking on his father's part, he had finally been given dispensation to visit Caspar's home for the weekend. In Linhardt's mind, it would be a time of relaxation, away from nagging parents and eagle-eyed governesses and maids who always knew when he was more interested in leisure than lessons. It would be sleeping in during the mornings, and quiet afternoons that could be spent with a good book and good company as Caspar inevitably ran around and played knights or some such game while Linhardt got acquainted with a scintillating story and an even better napping spot. Ah, what could be better than submerging oneself into a sweeping tale of the Saints on a sunny day?

These expectations were dashed almost five minutes after he had left his family's carriage, however, as Caspar promptly ran over to greet him, seeming like he had been prepared to tackle Linhardt to the ground were it not for Count Bergliez's steady gaze, reminding him to show some decorum in front of their guest. "Linhardt von Hevring," the Count rumbled. "It is good to see you well! Come in, come in. You will be bunked in the room across from Caspar's. Dinner is at sundown; you won't want to be late!" With the greetings out of the

way, the Count turned on his heel and walked toward the training grounds, leaving the two children to their own devices.

“...Well!” Caspar exclaimed, clearly not wanting to waste any more time. “C’mon, Lin! I’ll show you where you’ll be sleeping.” He grabbed Linhardt’s suitcase for him and excitedly dashed off toward the manor, leaving Linhardt himself feeling breathless just from watching him. If this was a sign of things to come, Linhardt thought, then this much-wished for weekend away would be nowhere near as relaxing as he had hoped.

Linhardt’s prediction had unfortunately been proven true the very next morning; he and Caspar had stayed up late chatting and talking about all manner of topics, most of which he could barely remember now, as they simply spoke about whatever happened to leap from mind to mouth first. The downside of this, however, was that they hadn’t gone to sleep until late in the evening, and were woken up at the first break of dawn by several insistent roosters and the uproarious sound of soldiers gearing up for morning drills and patrols. Caspar, the lucky little lad he was, slept through it all but Linhardt, unfortunately, couldn’t get another wink of sleep and almost took a dive right into his maple sugar oatmeal during breakfast. Caspar had managed to persuade his parents to let the two have some leisure time until the early afternoon, which Linhardt had spent napping in order to recover his strength, but as soon as he had awoken, Caspar had dragged him outside (albeit with much protest on Linhardt’s part) for a “Super Awesome Tour of Everywhere Cool.”

At the moment, Caspar was certainly doing his best to be a Super Awesome tour guide, pointing out each and every landmark that the estate had to offer as the two of them roamed the grounds. “...Aaaaaand over there are the horses, Lin! They’re all big and strong and they can be big ol’ meanies sometimes but they’re also pretty nice if you give ‘em apples! And that’s the chapel of Seiros and the Saints, where the big bell that rings out the time is...” Linhardt let his best friend ramble, covering a yawn with his free hand. His other one was currently being occupied by Caspar’s own hand, which had gravitated to his in an effort to pull him along so that they could see each and every corner of the estate just a little bit faster than Linhardt’s default speed of “sedate walking.” Every so often, he would summon a small breeze to help cool himself off, all of the exercise making him feel hot and sweaty, especially with his long hair partially covering his neck. He would then blow it at Caspar, the other letting out a little yelp as the unexpected burst of cool wind caused him to flinch, before grinning and dragging Linhardt along to the next “exciting” sight.

“This is the weapons workshop! Here’s where--”

“Caspar, I hate to interrupt, but it must be getting close to when we have to meet your father.”

At this, Caspar stiffened slightly, looking somewhat nervous, and he squeezed Linhardt’s hand, Linhardt returning the gesture almost unconsciously as a means of comfort. Linhardt couldn’t blame him for being worried; over breakfast, Caspar’s father had announced that he had wanted to see them both near the training grounds when the bells struck two. The very prospect of having to spend time with the Minister of Military Affairs made Linhardt grimace; he had come here to relax and enjoy being in Caspar’s company, not get roped into some no-doubt arduous task that the minister had refused to elaborate on. Still, it wasn’t as if

he or Caspar had a choice in the matter; in this case, it was best to just get it over with and complain endlessly about it later. Caspar's father was as stubborn as the fort he commanded, and no amount of begging, threatening, or entreating would get him to change course from anything he had deemed worth doing.

Caspar gulped, nodding his head and fixing Linhardt with a serious but resolved gaze. He removed his hand from Linhardt's own, and fleetingly, the young noble thought of how he missed the contact before Caspar's next words recaptured his attention. "Yeah, I think so. Let's head over there, and we should be on time."

The two best friends wound their way to the main area of the training grounds, trying to ease their nerves with some small talk, but the tension only increased as they got closer, heartbeats drumming in their ears. Moments after they stepped foot into the training grounds, ringing bells sang out that it was two hours past noon, and right on time, Caspar's father, Count Bergliez, stepped forward into the sun-drenched yard.

Count Bergliez, also dubbed "The Man of Countless Conquests," was an imposing man by any standard, tall and broad and wearing a frankly intimidating set of armor that featured *a bear head* as one of the pauldrons. According to Caspar, he would only be seen without his armor while he slept, and before his personal servants had confirmed the rumor, the rest of the servant body had been starkly divided as to whether it was true and he only took his armor off for bed, or whether he just slept in a few pieces of his armor, ever-prepared since he could be called upon to serve the Empire at any moment. In the afternoon sun, it was easy to see his shoulder-length locks; his sky blue beard, which resembled a mountain range jutting up from his chin; features were as craggy as the cliffs of the Oghma Mountains; and steely blue-gray eyes that were a frankly astounding match to the polished metal of the giant axe strapped to his back.

Turning his head toward the entrance, the Count motioned Caspar and Linhardt over, his hand curled into a "come here" motion as the two hurried to obey. Once they had reached him, the Count began to speak. "Ah, there you are! Now then, young Linhardt, I thought it wise to help toughen you up somewhat with some martial training. It may not be your specialty, but even mages ought to know how to defend themselves with weapons. You both will start with some stretches, followed by simple swordplay drills against one another. I will supervise."

The Count narrowed his eyes, scowling with displeasure at Linhardt's soft, shiny hair. "I have had many a conversation with Count Hevring about the folly of wasting time and money on maintaining one's hair to such a frivolous extent. At the end of the day, it will be filled with sweat and blood, and any extra time that one spends on hair care could instead be spent training. That said, out of respect for your father, I will refrain from commenting on it further. Just be aware that such delicate locks are *ill-advised* on the battlefield."

Linhardt, with a great show of politeness and restraint, did not utter the scathing words that he had conjured on the tip of his tongue, burning in response to both the Count's utterly unasked-for training regime or his stupidly spartan idea of what hair care entailed. Instead, he swallowed them down to be angrily scribbled into his private journal later that evening and gave a curt nod in response. With a final appraising stare, the Count walked off, gesturing to

a nearby weapon rack. “Both of you, choose your blades. We will begin weapon practice after a sufficient warm up.”

The next several minutes were spent selecting swords and stretching muscles Linhardt hadn’t even been aware of, leaving him even more sweaty and tired than before. Beside him, Caspar appeared to be as fresh as a daisy, a wide grin on his face, and Linhardt only felt envy--envy and a pervasive feeling of soreness. Caspar must have sensed his plight, because he shoved a full waterskin into Linhardt’s hands, and the young Hevring drank from it greedily, the cool water tasting far more delicious than it had any right to be. He handed it back to Caspar, who drank the rest of it, and he gave a loud whoop as he tossed the now empty waterskin aside. “Alright! I’m feelin’ good! You ready for this, Lin?”

Linhardt sighed, shaking his head and wearing a rather resigned expression. “Honestly, no. But if there’s one thing I’ve learned from dealing with your father, it’s that it’s best to just get this over with since the only available option is ‘his way.’”

Caspar gave a sheepish laugh, bringing his arms up in a shrug. “Yeah, well... I know this isn’t necessarily your idea of fun, but he means well! And don’t worry, I promise I won’t go too hard on you!”

Linhardt gave Caspar a rather unimpressed look this time. “You say that, but... we’ll see.”

Caspar grinned, pumping his fist in the air. “Hey, don’t doubt me! I’ve got this!”

At that moment, Count Bergliez strode over to them, locking his arms behind his back and flicking his head in the direction of the weapons rack, looking at them both expectantly. Caspar’s jovial smile quickly morphed into a more focused expression, and meeting his father’s gaze, he nodded and sprinted over to the rack to grab the two training swords they had chosen earlier. Returning with the blades, he handed one to Linhardt, keeping the other one for himself. The Count then walked over to the edge of one of the training areas, and beckoned for them to join him. The two nobles headed over, Caspar with notably more enthusiasm, and they each took their spots on either side of the field. “Ok, Lin! I’m ready when you are!” Caspar called. Linhardt sighed again, but tried to rally himself as much as he could despite his still-sore muscles and genuine disinterest in the entire affair. With any luck, this complete and utter torment would be over soon.

Once again, Linhardt’s wish was in vain; half an hour later, Caspar and the Count showed no signs of stopping or slowing down, and Linhardt felt as though all of the hydration and moisture that had once been in his body had been converted to sweat and was leaving him at an alarming rate. The afternoon sun continued to beat down on both him and the Bergliezes, and yet only he seemed to be having any sort of problem. He’d had to messily swipe at his sweat-soaked hair slapping unhelpfully at his face and neck, seeing as he’d already lost several times to Caspar because of it, and overall, he was just feeling too hot, too tired, and too miserable to go on. “STAND!” bellowed the Count, and Linhardt had to drag himself up off the dirt, tired eyes meeting Caspar’s worried gaze. “Caspar...” Linhardt panted, wincing at how out of breath he sounded and how even that one word made his chest hurt. “Could we perhaps... take a break?”

Caspar huffed, and looked toward the Count. He had tried to take it easy at first, but his father had yelled at him to stop holding back, and as such, he'd started landing heavier blows against Linhardt, his eager smile having slipped away into an obvious expression of worry at least seven rounds ago. They were now gearing up for Round 10, and it was clear to both of them that Linhardt was not doing well. "...You know what, let me ask him something. I'll be back in a bit; just take some deep breaths, ok?" he asked, turning back toward his best friend. Linhardt didn't speak, instead giving a single nod before taking a deep breath in and letting it out.

Caspar nodded in reply and ran up to his father, the Count giving him an analytical stare. "What is it?" he intoned, even his regular volume carrying all the way over to where Linhardt stood. Caspar gestured for him to bend down, whispering something in his father's ear. After a moment, the Count flicked his head back toward the manor, and with a last lingering glance toward Linhardt, Caspar ran off, quickly leaving Linhardt's line of sight. Well. It seemed like he would get his requested break after all.

With his son gone for the time being, the Count had called over some of his men and began consulting with them on some matter or another. Linhardt brought a hand up to his forehead, wiping away the sweat. Judging by the distance from here to the manor, he had time for a short nap; after all of the exercise he had been through and how hot and tired he was, he deserved it. He--

He was unconscious even before the sword fell from his hand, both body and blade landing with loud thumps on the ground.

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As soon as he had collapsed, Linhardt had been rushed immediately to the infirmary. The infirmary was located a short distance away from the training grounds, the stout, two-story brick building placed in yet another easily defendable and strategic location, and Linhardt had been taken to the top floor, which held suites reserved for nobles and other important personages. By the time Caspar arrived, all red-faced and out of breath, clutching something tightly in his grasp, House Bergliez's personal doctor had just finished her examination of the young noble and was in the middle of informing Caspar's father of Linhardt's condition. "My lord. Master Hevring has come down with a combined case of heatstroke and exhaustion due to his below-average stamina. A day of rest and frequent fluid intake will be the best remedy that we can offer at this time," she explained, adjusting her glasses in a neat, practiced manner. Caspar could see that a bandage had been applied to his face, and he was laying on his back against two plush pillows, practically sinking into them.

The Minister sighed heavily, bringing his arms up and clasping his hands behind his back. "I understand. Thank you, Dr. Colette." The petite, dark-haired healer gave a short bow at the waist and left the room, presumably to attend to other patients, and gave Caspar a deferential nod of her head as she passed. Caspar's father turned to face him, a pensive expression on his face. "Caspar, come with me. I must write a letter of apology to Count Hevring for allowing his child to come to harm under my watch."

"But Father! What of Linhardt? Who will be here with him?"

“One of the nurses, of course. They will ensure that his condition does not worsen.”

Caspar’s hands clenched into fists. “Father... please... Please let me watch over him!”

Count Bergliez raised an eyebrow. “You?”

Caspar nodded in response. “Yes! Linhardt’s my best friend, and it’s partly my fault that he’s here. Please, Father... I should be by his side.”

After a moment of silence, Caspar’s father sighed and began to walk toward the door. “Alright, do as you like. I will inform the nurses.” With that, the Count strode out of the room, closing the sturdy wooden door behind him with a resounding thud.

Now that he had a moment to breathe, Caspar looked around, examining the room. It had one larger window reinforced with steel bars, and a few smaller windows as well. From the door, there was an unlit fireplace against the right-hand wall, as well as a writing desk replete with various pens and inks. Against the left wall was the room’s only bed, and Linhardt was resting on the side closest to the door. The bed was easily big enough for three grown adults, covered with fine blankets and a number of comfortable pillows, and to each side of it were matching nightstands. Two large rugs covered the floors, and tapestries hung from the walls. Overall, Caspar was impressed by just how comfortable the room was in comparison to the rest of the infirmary.

The chair at the writing desk was far too bulky to move very far, but Caspar managed to find a squat wooden stool in the corner of the room, and pulled it up to Linhardt’s bedside, his back facing the door. Taking a seat and drumming his fingers against his knees (it was the best way to avoid playing with the newly-applied bandage on his face that one of the nurses had insisted upon giving him as he’d run in), Caspar stared worriedly at his best friend. Even though the emerald-haired healer-in-training was noticeably taller than Caspar, in here, Linhardt looked so small and frail in the massive bed. Caspar idly adjusted the pillows behind Linhardt’s head and smoothed out the sheets, doing whatever he could think of to make his friend even the slightest bit more comfortable. Linhardt was wearing a long cloth hospital gown, his clothes having been removed and brought to the maids to launder and mend, and Caspar hoped he was comfortable, trapped in dreamland as he was. At least he had finally gotten that break he had been begging for.

Caspar’s gaze drifted down to Linhardt’s hand, which was laying serenely at his side. Part of him longed to take his friend’s hand in his own, to offer him that small measure of comfort, and without a second thought, he reached out--

“Oy! Is the br-- erm, *guest* up yet!?” boomed a loud voice as the door swung open, and Caspar sighed, his hand dropping to the bed as his older brother Walter marched into the room. Walter was tall and broad, much like their father, and had inherited the Bergliez family’s signature sky-blue eyes, but his hair was jet black like their mother’s, and his features were more severe than Caspar’s, who had far more of a baby face. He usually donned an impressive set of armor, but unlike the Count’s, his was optimized for his class, Hero, and his axe lived on his hip rather than his back. Today, however, he just wore a cotton tunic and breeches, and Caspar didn’t even have to guess why he was here; he had likely made the excuse of checking up on Linhardt to avoid training and was now just here to

heckle them. Besides, ever since Linhardt had come to visit, Walter had been the picture of a humble and dutiful host, but as soon as Linhardt's back was turned or he was out of earshot, Walter would unleash a barrage of insults and rude gestures at the sea-eyed noble. He knew he could not do anything to Linhardt's face, lest the heir of Hevring complain to the Count about it and action would then have to be taken, but he could, and did, get away with harassing his younger brother and insulting their guest at every available opportunity.

"What do you want, Walter?" Caspar groaned, hoping his brother would hurry up and leave so that Linhardt could rest. Just because Caspar himself couldn't do much to stop him didn't mean he would get a free pass to cause a ruckus inside the infirmary, and if he made too much noise, there was a bell by Linhardt's bedside that Caspar could ring to call for a nurse. His brother would almost certainly beat the stuffing out of him later if Caspar got Walter in any sort of real trouble, but if it meant that Linhardt would get the rest he so clearly needed, then Caspar was willing to take the risk.

Walter gave his brother a cruel smirk. "I just wanted to see how our guest was doing, of course. But oh, what a shame to see how sad and weak someone of our status can be. Why in the world would you pick someone as pathetic as *this* to be your closest friend, Caspar?"

Caspar's hands balled into fists. He knew Walter was trying to bait him into starting a fight and have the nurses storm in, evicting him from Linhardt's room. Well, when he was younger, he probably would have risen to the bait, but not now, not here. He had a duty to protect Linhardt from whatever his brother wanted to do, and that required keeping his temper in check. "Just because he can't fight doesn't mean he's pathetic! He's smart and kind and he's working really hard on his Faith magic! He's--"

Caspar was cut off by Walter's raucous laughter, loudly echoing down the hall. "Awwww, does widdle Cassie have a crush on the baby over there? That's so cuuuuute," Walter taunted, grinning all the while, and Caspar could feel his face flush crimson in both embarrassment and anger.

"SHUT UP!" he yelled, standing up from the stool. "Linhardt is--"

"What is the meaning of this noise!?" a nurse interjected, annoyance written all over her face and in her tone. "Masters Walter and Caspar, I must insist that you settle down at once! If our guest is bothered, I will have to lodge a formal complaint with the Count."

Walter gave an annoyed "tch!" at the interruption, seeing that he wasn't going to be able to pin the blame on Caspar this time. "Fine. I was just about to leave, anyway." He headed for the door, passing the nurse without another word and tromping out of the infirmary. The nurse sighed, bringing a hand up to cup her cheek.

"Please keep it down, Master Caspar. I will be back later to check on Master Linhardt." So saying, she pulled the door closed, and once again, Caspar was left alone with Linhardt in the silence of the infirmary room. Caspar sighed, relieved. "You're safe now, Lin," he murmured fondly, unclenching his fists and letting his hands fall to his sides. Suddenly, he felt something slip from his palm, and he bent down, rescuing a slightly crumpled white ribbon from the floor. Right! He hadn't left the training grounds just to give Linhardt a break; he'd gone to get this.

He had gotten the ribbon during a summery Market Day a few weeks ago, a monthly event where every merchant in or near Enbarr set out all of their wares at once to entice commoners and nobles of all backgrounds and businesses to come and buy their stock, or even better, create contracts with them. That day, the chamberlain of House Bergliez, Neilos, had taken Caspar and Walter out to explore the market, and their father had given them each a small allowance to buy what they liked. For Walter, he spent his money on food and some overly-jeweled sword that cost way more than it was worth and was made to be more ornamental than anything else. From then on, he grumbled and complained at each and every booth and stall they passed, demanding that since he was done, they ought to leave already.

For Caspar, however, he hadn't seen much worth buying, at least until he had set eyes on that beautiful white ribbon. He couldn't place exactly why he wanted it; considering that he kept his hair at a short and manageable length befitting a warrior, he certainly didn't need it for himself. This time though, his instinct said that it would be worth it, and even at this age, he had learned to trust his gut completely. He had practically dragged Neilos, and by extension, Walter, over to the stall, where the merchant, a purveyor of accessories, looked at the blue-eyed boys with an intrigued expression. "Well, hello!" she greeted them, enthused. "Can I interest you fine young men in some cufflinks, or in a pin perhaps?" She gestured to some of the accessories on display, which had little placards placed nearby to indicate the prices.

"Um, no!" Caspar replied. "I want this hair ribbon! Um. Please."

The woman looked nonplussed. "A hair ribbon? Well, don't you have a good eye! It's made of pure silk, and woven to be elegant, durable, and beautiful. Anyone you fancy would adore such a piece!" Before she had even finished, Caspar was fishing the money out of his purse, handing her the amount listed on the placard for the ribbon. The woman blinked, clearly having expected their chaperone to haggle for it, but decided not to question it and pocketed the gold, handing him the ribbon. "Thank you very much!"

As Caspar, Walter, and Neilos walked away from the stall, Walter scoffed at Caspar's purchase. "What's the point of buying something like that? Who's it even for? It's not like you have any marriage candidates, and even if you did, that's too nice for some peasant and too plain for any noblewoman, you dunce!"

Caspar stuck his tongue out at Walter, blowing a raspberry. "Gimme a break! I just wanted it, ok? It's nice!"

Walter rolled his eyes in disdain. "Whatever," he sneered, bringing a hand around to deliver a hard smack to the back of Caspar's head and hurried along to where their coach would be meeting them. Caspar winced at the pain, rubbing at the sore spot, but he gripped his treasure tightly. Who cared what Walter thought, anyway; his gut said this was worthwhile to have, and that was all the reason he needed.

A firm hand landed on his shoulder, and Caspar looked up, surprised, at the smiling face of Neilos. "Do not worry, my boy," the wizened chamberlain reassured him. "I think that you have found something precious, and even if its time has not yet come, when it does, you will know it."

As the memory faded and Caspar once again found himself in the infirmary, sitting on the stool with the ribbon in his grasp, he could feel in his gut that this was the time. Slowly, he stood up, and gave a hum of thought. He carefully picked up Linhardt's arm and arranged it so that it laid over his chest, but groaned as he saw that he still didn't have the space to kneel on this side of the bed. Well, that was fine; he would just approach this from another angle! Caspar ran over to the other side of the bed, got on his hands and knees, and crawled over to Linhardt. He lifted Linhardt's other arm so that it crossed with the other one, and gently lifted the other noble's torso, his gorgeous green hair cascading to the side. Caspar took a deep breath; this was his chance. Carefully, he gathered as much of Linhardt's hair as he could in his hands, and tied the ribbon around the long locks in what he hoped would be a sturdy hold. There; now it was out of his face, and next time they sparred (if there was a next time), Linhardt would be safe from the dangers of his own hair and, hopefully, heatstroke.



Satisfied, Caspar laid Lin back down and backed up, slipping off of the bed, and took back his spot on the stool, his expression softening as he stared at his best friend. Before he could stop himself, he began to speak, the words coming straight from his heart and bypassing his brain altogether. "Hey, Lin... I'm sorry this happened to you. I never meant to hurt you. But now, I..." He sighed, and swallowed. "I hope you and your dad won't be too mad. I hope we can still be friends after this. I hope... that you can forgive me."

Caspar closed his eyes, hands gripping at his breeches as he tried his best to keep tears at bay. "But more than anything else, I just really want you to be ok, ok? That's all... Please get better..."

Suddenly, Caspar heard the rustling of sheets, and his eyes flew open just in time for him to see Linhardt sitting up slowly, rubbing at his eyes. “Mmm, don’t worry, Caspar,” Linhardt drawled. “I’m alright--”

He could barely get the words out before Caspar was hugging him, the shorter noble wrapping his arms around Linhardt and pulling him close, tears rolling down his cheeks as he rested his head on Linhardt’s shoulder. “You’re ok! You’re really ok,” Caspar blubbered, sniffing as an overwhelming wave of relief washed through him. Linhardt shifted out of Caspar’s grasp, the awkward angle making him uncomfortable, but took Caspar’s hands in his own.

“Yes, Caspar. I’m ok.” There was a beat of silence between them as Linhardt looked around, taking in everything. “Were you here the whole time?” he asked, a note of surprise in his voice as his gaze drifted over to the stool, and Caspar nodded energetically, wiping his tears away on his sleeve.

“Uh huh! I was waiting for you to get better!”

Linhardt’s expression turned to one of worry. “But... don’t you have better things to do than--”

“No way!” Caspar exclaimed, cutting him off. “You’re my best friend, Linhardt! I wouldn’t wanna be anywhere else!”

Linhardt went quiet for a moment, and Caspar could practically hear him thinking until his face finally broke into a small smile. “Well, that is rather kind of you. Thank you, Caspar. And for what it’s worth, you’re my best friend too.”

“Of course!” Caspar grinned, a warm feeling suddenly spreading all throughout his body. Hearing that Linhardt still thought of him as his best friend really was the best feeling in the world; with any luck, they’d be able to stay that way. Suddenly, a look of surprise crossed his face, and the bluenette brought a hand up to the side of his head in a grabbing motion, as if clutching at something that wasn’t there. “Oh! Linhardt, I--”

Linhardt never learned what it was that Caspar was going to say as the wooden door opened once again, with Dr. Colette walking into the room. She gave a crisp bow to the two young nobles as she approached, and looked toward Linhardt. “Master Hevring,” Dr. Colette greeted, “it is good to see that you are conscious. Your father has arranged to retrieve you early tomorrow morning, so we shall keep you here overnight for further observation and to ensure that you have sufficient bedrest.” Linhardt nodded, honestly quite happy to not have to leave the bed. The doctor then turned to Caspar. “Master Caspar. Your father has requested that you prepare for dinner. Please return to the manor at once.”

Caspar hurriedly stood up, knocking over the stool in the process. “Ah!” He righted it, then gave Linhardt a sheepish look. “Um, bye, Linhardt! See you around! Feel better!” With that, he dashed out of the room, running toward home.

Linhardt shook his head as he watched Caspar leave, a small smile on his face. Dr. Colette looked over his vitals, did some tests, and seemed pleased at the results. “Excellent. You

seem to be doing much better.” She blinked suddenly as her eyes honed in on something near his shoulder. “And, may I say, that is a most lovely hair band.”

“Hair band...?” Linhardt echoed, confused, blinking in surprise as he reached for his hair and found that it had been tied into a loose, low ponytail, secured with a fine, albeit slightly crumpled, white silk ribbon. “Huh. Now where did this come from?” Linhardt’s gaze moved up toward the door Caspar had gone through as he considered the mystery. “Well, it is a kind gift, and one that I will not turn down. As for where or who it came from... perhaps I might have some idea.”

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Linhardt gave a loud yawn as he awoke from his afternoon nap, languidly blinking back into awareness as he flinched away from a bright beam of sunlight shining directly onto his face. The soon-to-be-17-year-old stretched his arms up, appreciating the shade this particular tree had given him as he’d slept, and stood up slowly, brushing dirt off of his uniform. There were a number of people (most notably, the two who bore Crests of Saint Cichol) who would give him grief for “neglecting to properly care for his uniform and display his pride as a member of the Garreg Mach Officers’ Academy,” but as he’d readily admitted to Dorothea, pride was hardly his concern. However... he reached up to twirl his ponytail around his thin fingers, examining his long-held hair band. It looked to be clean enough despite brushing against the bark, and Linhardt sighed in satisfaction before picking up his backpack and setting off for wherever his feet desired. Despite the fact that he’d been almost utterly consumed with worry over whether the saints’ coffins had been damaged at all during the battle that had transpired in the Holy Mausoleum, he had made good use of his time today by starting his studies into what he had been able to see before a bout of sleepiness had struck him, and he’d gone about finding a perfectly sturdy oak tree to rest against. Now that he was more awake, he was fairly sure that he didn’t have any other pressing commitments, so the rest of the afternoon was his to waste as he pleased. Perfect.

His feeling of satisfaction changed to one of discomfort, however, once he noticed just how nice it was today. The Verdant Rain Moon, despite being known for its sudden summer squalls, once in a while yielded a day of shining sun and puffy white clouds, and unfortunately, Linhardt knew full well just how distracting it would be to attempt any sort of research or study in this weather. He would inevitably be lulled into another nap, completely unable to finish any of the books he’d wanted to read today, and curse himself for it before doing it all again tomorrow. No, best to immerse himself in his research now before the demon of drowsiness insisted on afflicting him with its loathsome magics. Looking around for a quiet place to read, he headed to the Black Eagles classroom, smiling happily as he registered that there was nobody else in the vicinity important enough (or impertinent enough) to bother him, and was about to find a seat and resume his research when familiar footsteps came running into the room. “Linhardt!” Caspar exclaimed, panting slightly as he blew in like a storm, scattering Linhardt’s thoughts to the wind.

Linhardt sighed in defeat and turned to face the bluenette; now that his concentration was irrevocably shattered, he might as well see what his best friend needed. “What is it, Caspar?”

“I need to talk to you. About stuff.”

“Stuff,” Linhardt repeated as he stared down at Caspar, hoping that this would prompt the brawler to elaborate.

It did not. “Yeah, stuff!” Caspar parroted back, practically craning his neck back to meet Linhardt’s gaze, and Linhardt sighed once more, slightly exasperated.

“Alright, Caspar. What kind of ‘stuff’?”

At this, Caspar looked around at the other students before grabbing Linhardt’s sleeve and pulling him over to an empty corner of the room. “Ok, here’s the thing,” Caspar began, lowering his voice to what most people would consider normal volume. “The Professor came and talked to me earlier, and it got me thinking. This whole thing about House Gautier’s Lance of Ruin being stolen... do you think *I* could wield a Hero’s Relic someday? I’d love to try it! I mean, my dad has a crest, so he could probably do it. If I could do it, I’d be just like Catherine and Thunderbrand, going around Fódlan as a hero and beating up bad guys, making a name for myself! It would be awesome!”

Linhardt hummed and brought a hand up to his chin, considering the idea. “To be honest, I’m not sure. But should I get the chance to study a relic up close, I could possibly figure out the requirements for wielding it, and let you know if it’s possible. Obviously there’s very little chance of you ever obtaining one, but if you did, it would be quite a fascinating topic of research indeed.”

Caspar groaned, bringing his arms up in a shrug. “Awww, is that all I am to you, Lin? A research experiment?”

Linhardt tilted his head at the question, confused. “Of course not, Caspar. You are my close and irreplaceable friend. You also, however, have a penchant for stirring up trouble, and depending on what kind of trouble it is, it could lead to many more fascinating opportunities for study.”

Caspar broke into a grin, his worries seemingly disappearing. “So I’m your close, irreplaceable, and fascinating friend, huh?” he asked boisterously, evidently deciding that his quiet time was over.

Linhardt huffed affectionately and shook his head, unable to prevent his lips from curling into a fond smile. “You would be correct.” His ponytail shook with the motion, catching Caspar’s eye. The brawler blinked, then gave a satisfied smile, resting his hands on his hips as he regarded the ribbon resting just above Linhardt’s shoulder.

“You really do love that hair band, huh?”

Linhardt’s smile morphed into a smirk. “Of course I do, considering it’s one of the few vanities I actually bother with. Not that I know who gave it to me, mind you. Whoever my mysterious benefactor was, I was asleep in the Bergliez infirmary at the time, so I must have forgotten their identity.”

Caspar rolled his eyes, but couldn't hold back a bark of laughter. "At least you keep it cleaner than your uniform. You're covered in dirt."

Linhardt pretended to give an imperious sniff. "Says the one who forever smells of sweat."

"Well, you got me there!" Caspar replied jovially. "Speaking of, I gotta go! See ya!" With a whoop, Caspar tore out of the room, stopping just shy of the doorframe to yell "Let me know what you find out!" before tearing across the courtyard to... wherever he was going.

Linhardt took a deep breath and let it out, sighing in relief. As much as he enjoyed Caspar's company (most of the time), his best friend could be quite distracting when he wanted to be. Still, this particular research project was an interesting one, and Linhardt vowed that once the opportunity arose, he would talk to Catherine about studying Thunderbrand, as much as for Caspar as for himself. He walked back to where he'd placed his things, ignoring the curious glances of the other students. For now, he had research to do.

Mentally mulling over his memory of the notes he had managed to take regarding the Holy Mausoleum, the Faith user paused to ponder what the focus of his research was to be. It still rankled him that he had gotten to spend so little time actually studying the coffins and artifacts, but alas, there was nothing he could do now but to make do with what he had. Then again, his frustrations with the situation really weren't conducive to maintaining his focus, as the missed opportunity would be all he could think about to the exclusion of all else. Perhaps it would be best to take another nap in the interest of sleeping off his feelings.

He was weighing the merits of each option when the Professor walked in. Now *there* was an enigma enshrouded in mystery. If not for the fact that Linhardt had so many other intriguing subjects to research (and the fact that Professor Hanneman had his own eyes on them and thus a well-timed trip to his empty office would yield much of what Linhardt wanted to know), he certainly would have desired to study the Professor and their relic more closely. As it was, though, he was quite satisfied with simply observing such a talented individual, reasonably sure that answers, and perhaps even more mysteries, would crop up as time went on.

He wasn't terribly surprised when the Professor walked up to him; they tended to enjoy making small talk with the students on their free days, and they were surprisingly easy to talk to about problems and the like. If he had to guess, it was because of their excellent listening skills, vacant yet non-judgmental stare, and almost distressingly thoughtful gift giving. Returning their nod of greeting (the Professor had also never been the most talkative of people in the few months that Linhardt had known them), Linhardt took the opportunity to discuss his less than stellar experience in the Holy Mausoleum with them. They nodded along, listening closely, and he had to admit that venting his annoyance did put him in a better mood; he didn't even think twice about abandoning his carefully considered question of study or sleep to pick up his pack and indulge in a cup of tea with the Professor. It would be a shame to miss a wonderfully brewed cup of tea and delectable sweets on such a lovely day as this, after all.

Within moments, they arrived at the outdoor gardens, and the Professor headed into the dining hall to prepare the tea and collect the sweets. Linhardt took a seat at an open table, and in what felt like no time at all, the Professor returned with a tray laden with a freshly made

pot of tea, twin teacups and saucers with little silver spoons, matching containers of cream and sugar, and a wooden basket brimming with sweets. The Professor set the items out on the table, putting the tray aside and pouring tea for them both as Linhardt stirred his desired amount of cream and sugar into his cup, letting the tea sit and cool for the moment. "I am happy that you invited me, even though it interferes with my nap time..." he started, and although he meant to say more, the captivating scent of Almyran Pine Needle caused him to look down in delight at his teacup. "Mmm, this tea is my favorite scent. So relaxing as to be downright sleep-inducing..." Well, that decided that; this was certainly a sign that after this, he should sleep and conserve his enthusiasm for a better day. Linhardt lifted the teacup to his lips, sighing in appreciation as the refreshing taste of pine needle hit his tongue. He almost wanted to ask how the Professor knew that this was his favorite, but thought better of it; given the Professor's eccentric personality, the answer could range from "I've been observing your movements for an entire week and noticed you reacted favorably to pine trees" to "the leaves are the same color as your hair."

Fortunately, the Professor broke the silence with some idle conversation about this and that, and Linhardt found himself being drawn in, enjoying the chance to relax and talk about some of his favorite topics with someone who truly bothered to listen. What a difference it made when someone was genuinely interested in what he had to say; it made his appreciation for both the Professor (and Caspar, for that matter) grow all the more.

Once conversation had dwindled, the two sat in silence for a moment, simply enjoying the calm atmosphere, when the Professor's eyes drifted to Linhardt's hair tie, and they stared at it in interest. Linhardt chuckled. "This hair band? Someone gave it to me, I think. Yet if that's the case, I've forgotten who." The Professor gave him a ghost of a smile and a knowing look, as if they could tell that wasn't the whole story, and Linhardt huffed good-naturedly before beginning to elaborate. "You see, Professor, Caspar and I are childhood friends. When we were young, I was invited to his father's residence in Enbarr, and Count Bergliez took the opportunity to try to... eugh... *train* me. I fell unconscious from heatstroke, and when I awoke, Caspar was at my bedside, watching over me. However, between the time that I fainted under the sun's cruel rays and the time I returned to consciousness, *someone* had tied a hair band around my hair, and although it is abundantly clear who would have bothered to do so, he has refused to own up to his chivalrous act. Thus, I am forced to wear this ribbon daily, in the hopes that my kind and ever so mysterious benefactor will one day confess and I can express my appreciation properly."

The Professor stared at him, wide-eyed for several moments before a rather undignified snort escaped them and they shook their head, taking another sip of tea. "What?" Linhardt questioned, unable to hold back his own quiet grin. "It's just one of the many things that we tease each other about. Another one is that despite the fact that Caspar is four months older than I am, I'm still about a head taller. It's just been the way of things ever since we were small, and quite frankly, as much as I want him to confess to giving me this ribbon, it is so very fun to tease him about it." The Professor gave him a warm smile at that, and he answered their amused expression with a light-hearted chuckle of his own; everything he'd said was true, and while much of it was more personal than what he normally preferred to share, he had a feeling that all of his secrets were safe with the tight-lipped Professor.

The conversation then turned to other topics, and the two chatted about various subjects as they indulged in some of the sweet treats that the Professor had brought over before the conversation inevitably slowed, indicating that it was almost time to leave. The Professor handed Linhardt a fishing float, which he accepted gratefully, before they put their napkin on the table and pushed back their chair, a sure sign that tea time was over. Taking the cue, Linhardt followed suit. “That was delicious. It feels good to relax. Well, I’m off to catch a nap...” he sighed, quite satisfied with how he’d spent the afternoon. The Professor waved him off, and Linhardt turned and made a beeline for the dorms, fully intent on succumbing to sleep.

He was just crossing the courtyard when his eyes drifted toward the direction of the training grounds, and he slowed to a halt. Was Caspar there now, working his muscles as well as he could, striving toward his goal of becoming a great warrior of justice? Or was he perhaps in the dining hall, stuffing his face and almost choking on his food again? Linhardt rarely made a habit of wondering about such things, but with how much Caspar’s name had come up in conversation today, he supposed it was inevitable that thoughts of the blue-haired brawler would cross his mind. Perhaps most perplexing was why he cared so much. Certainly, Caspar was important, even precious to him, but for his best friend to occupy his mind like this was still somewhat unusual, and more unusual still was the warm feeling bubbling up in his stomach at the very thought of Caspar’s signature grin, rivaling even the sun; his unbridled energy and zest for whatever the world threw at him that Linhardt could only envy; and perhaps most telling, the way he always made time for Linhardt, always listened to his problems and offered a shoulder or a listening ear, and always cared about whatever Linhardt cared about.

His hand came up to play with his hair band, twirling the ribbon between his fingers as he hummed in consideration. Perhaps these feelings were best left unexamined until later. Overthinking the matter would only prove to be irksome, as it would distract from his studies, and even if these emotions were something he desired to follow up on, his fate would be decided for him the moment his days at the Officers’ Academy ended. Besides, who even knew how Caspar felt? Did he feel the same sparks of warmth in his chest when... *if*... he thought of Linhardt? Then again, even if he did, there was practically no chance at all of anything coming of it. Suddenly, Linhardt felt unusually restless, the very thought becoming rather distressing. Sleeping no longer sounded quite so appealing, so he meandered back to the Black Eagles classroom, finding that the seat he’d spotted earlier was still empty. With renewed vigor, Linhardt fished out his notes and began to study in earnest, losing himself in the world of words. He didn’t need to worry about his future right this minute; he was fortunate enough to have a wonderfully irreplaceable friendship with Caspar, and he would be grateful for the time they could spend together before they went their separate ways. That’s right. He still had time.

Chapter End Notes

Take a look at the original piece at Dannie's twitter [here!](#)
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Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

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

It would seem that time was almost up, Linhardt mused, pulling his thick fleece traveling cloak tighter around himself in an attempt to keep his teeth from chattering. With his hands still exposed, he summoned a small flame to dance in his palm, effectively warming his frigid fingers; marching on foot in the cold was hardly his idea of fun in the first place, but doing so during the tail end of the Ethereal Moon was truly the height of foolishness, their only saving grace being that there was no snow or ice to speak of around here. The light of the waning moon shone weakly upon the path before him, its light barely enough to see by but his tiny flame was enough to pick up the slack. Fortunately, this road had been well-travelled enough that it hadn't become overgrown just yet, although weeds had started to take root in a number of niches along the road, and the moss covering several sturdy rocks meant that they had to watch their steps as they went. It was a shame that the road wasn't more travelled *now*, but that was to be expected; nobody in their right mind would be heading to the ruins of Garreg Mach Monastery. Linhardt huffed, shaking his head; by that criterion, he wasn't in his right mind after all, if he ever was, although he took some comfort in the fact that if he was indeed crazy, he was at least traveling with two companions who by definition were equally so.

Ahead of him, there was a cry of "Whoa!" and an answering whinny, and as if Linhardt's very thought had summoned him, Ferdinand von Aegir, the sunshine cavalier himself, brought his horse alongside the woebegone healer. "Are you cold, Linhardt? You are free to ride Sundance if you so wish!" Linhardt stared at the packed bedrolls, tents, and supplies strapped to the back of the poor black-maned beast and tried his best not to grimace. Ferdinand, out of the kindness of his heart, would likely propose that Linhardt could ride and he would take the reins to walk alongside them, but horseback riding tended to make Linhardt's stomach sway, and if a battle *did* crop up, he would be far happier feeling the ground beneath him than the skittish swaying of some scared animal.

"No thank you, Ferdinand. I would rather keep my dinner where it is. Bernadetta, would you care to ride?"

From Ferdinand's other side came a sudden shriek as the purple-haired plant lover practically leapt at being addressed so suddenly. "AH! N-no thank you! Horses are nice and all, but... I think I'd rather walk. Th-thank you though!"

"Very well!" Ferdinand exclaimed brightly, and urged Sundance forward, taking point once again as Bernadetta fell silent, absorbed in her own little world. She had been like this for most of the trip; Ferdinand and Linhardt had met up as the knight-to-be had rescued Linhardt from a particularly perilous swamp (the loss of all of his reading material for such a long and arduous journey was painful indeed, and the emotional wounds his soul had suffered had taken a good week of complaining to heal), and then they had eventually met with Bernadetta as she was making her escape from Varley territory. It had been a long and sometimes highly annoying few weeks, but their goal was in sight--even in the darkness, Linhardt's sea-blue

stare could make out the towers of the monastery, still standing majestically despite the fact that so much of it had fallen to ruin.

Linhardt sighed; now that they were almost at their destination, or at least what was left of it, several questions swarmed his mind, each one seemingly more pressing than the last. How much of the monastery was intact? Would his other classmates, especially the other former Black Eagles, be there as well, compelled to reunite thanks to a promise made five years previously, years that felt more like a lifetime now? Would the Professor be able to keep their promise somehow, given their sudden disappearance from the battlefield? Yet perhaps what was both most and least surprising was the fact that there was no doubt in Linhardt's mind that Caspar would be there. If he was alive--which he surely was, given that this was *Caspar* they were talking about, the fighter with the biggest heart and the craziest luck that Linhardt had ever seen--then he would be at the monastery, right on time. Caspar never went back on his word.

He took a breath, the towers seeming to loom ever taller with each step he took. Unconsciously, his hand moved to fiddle with his ribbon, now somewhat frayed from years of service but not quite willing to give up the ghost just yet. "Caspar," Linhardt whispered into the night. "Hold on. I'm almost there."

A handful of miles away, on another road once-well-traveled, Caspar, along with Dorothea and Petra, slowly approached the remains of the monastery. Dorothea and Petra had apparently been traveling together for a while, Dorothea trying her best to help as many people as she could on her travels and Petra fighting back against the Empire whenever possible, and the two of them had run into Caspar as he was stocking up to cross the mountains back into what had once been Garreg Mach territory. Naturally, they had all been overjoyed at the reunion, and together, they had vowed to make it back to the monastery and see if anyone else had been willing (or able) to keep the promise of reuniting after such a long, and at times lonely, five years.

Caspar stared up at the sky, clear except for the weak light of the waning moon. It made it fairly easy to see the twinkling stars in the heavens overhead, and in the back of his mind, he could almost hear Linhardt telling him stories about the various constellations and what they all meant. The one that sorta looked like a pot was meant to be something related to--

"Caspar!" Dorothea exclaimed, and he flinched, his concentration shattered as he turned back to face her.

"What? Are we under attack?" Caspar asked, hands already balling into fists.

"No, you goof. You just looked like you were staring off into space," Dorothea replied with a smile, shaking her head fondly.

"Oh! Well, I kinda was," Caspar laughed sheepishly, interlocking his fingers behind his head as they continued their trek.

"Really now?" Dorothea asked, a glimmer of interest in her tone.

“Yeah!” Caspar grinned. “When we were kids, Linhardt would tell me all about the stars and constellations and stuff. He was super into studying it for a while, and some of it stuck with me. Now, whenever I look up at the stars, I can’t help but think of him.”

Dorothea brought a hand to her chin, unable to stifle a laugh. “Aww, that’s adorable. You two really are bound by the red string of fate, then.”

Caspar dropped his arms, looking at her with a questioning, wide-eyed expression. “The what now?”

This time, it was Petra who answered him, an easy smile on her face. “In my homeland, we have many stories of the spirits and how they are enriching our lives. One such story is that if you are loving someone very much, and that someone is returning your love, then the spirits will tie an unseeable red string around both of your tiny fingers so that although you may be separated, you will forever find your way to each other again.”

“Huh!” Caspar smiled, propping a hand on his hip. “That sounds kinda nice, actually!”

“I think it’s rather romantic,” Dorothea chimed in, her piercing emerald eyes practically staring through Caspar. “You and Lin always sort of gravitated around each other, and it *was* you who gave him that hair band he always wore, right?”

“What?” Caspar exclaimed in surprise. “How did you know?”

Dorothea smiled at him indulgently. “It really wasn’t too difficult to figure out. Lin’s not the type to be too careful with anything he doesn’t deem important, and he was always careful with that ribbon. Not to mention that I overheard him teasing you about it one day.”

Caspar held his arms out in a shrug, shaking his head. “Fine, fine. Yeah, I gave it to him. Honestly, I’m just glad he kept it all this time. Besides, he gave me my grounding charm, so whether there really is a red string of fate, whether we see each other again... we carry a piece of each other wherever we go, and that’s enough for me.”

Petra and Dorothea shared a glance before they looked back at Caspar, and Petra walked forward, clapping him on the shoulder. “That is a wonderful thought, Caspar. I am wishing you and Linhardt all of the best.”

Caspar cocked his head to the side, confusion evident in his tone. “Uh, thanks?”

Instead of replying, however, Dorothea and Petra shared a smile, like they knew something he didn’t, before passing him and continuing on their way. “Hey, wait!” Caspar called. “C’mon, just tell meeeeeee!”

“Nope!” Dorothea laughed, her breath misting in the frosty night. “You’ll have to figure it out for yourself!”

Caspar sighed, readjusting his backpack full of gear. When Dorothea got like this, no amount of begging would get her to talk; he would just have to be patient. His gaze drifted up to the stars once more, hand patting the secret pocket where he stored his grounding charm. Maybe

it really was the red string of fate at work, but somewhere deep inside, he knew with utmost certainty that he'd surely see Linhardt again.

Suddenly, Dorothea and Petra stopped in their tracks, and Caspar managed to stop himself just shy of ramming into the songstress. He took a breath, about to say something, when suddenly, he heard it. The ringing of steel and the shouting of orders weren't far off, and from his position, he could see the smoke of lights and torches. There were people nearby, and from all of the shouting he could hear even from here, it was easy to gather that the castle town was now a battleground. Caspar couldn't hold back his grin; his blood was rushing in his ears, his heart pounding with adrenaline. Someone in there needed his help, and he was gonna give it!

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Thank goodness, Linhardt thought to himself, that they had arrived when they did. The battle was over, various familiar faces cleaning up here and there, and Linhardt grimaced as he splashed through a distressingly large puddle of blood left behind by the slain bandits. He had retrieved his belongings from Ferdinand (relieving poor Sundance of at least some of her burden), made some excuse to leave, and was now on his way up to the monastery proper. From all of the rumors buzzing around, as well as the briefest sight of that Goddess-blessed green hair, it seemed that the Professor really had returned, but to his own surprise, he found that he really couldn't be bothered with that right now; the fatigue of the journey coupled with the stress of battle and the early morning hour was enough to override any other feeling beyond the need to lay his head upon his pillow and not wake up for a week.

Much to the magic-user's misfortune, however, this goal also required remembering where exactly everything was, and given the current state of the monastery and the unreliability of his memory, Linhardt eventually found himself at the crossroads of the entrance hall, the bridge to the cathedral, the Officers' Academy, and the graveyard. The sea-eyed scholar huffed in exhaustion, noticing with some apprehension that the sky was already lightening. At this rate, morning would come, which would mean that someone would likely try to come and find him so that they could all catch up on everyone's personal adventures and give their greetings to the unearthed Professor.

With a sigh, Linhardt rubbed at his neck and turned his gaze just slightly, looking in the direction of the bridge spanning the chasm between the cathedral and the common areas. In that moment, all other thoughts flew away like birds on the wing, leaving him to stare wide-eyed and open mouthed at the only other person on the bridge, a blue-haired boy--well, no longer a boy, but a man now--who Linhardt would recognize even if he'd been blinded. He dropped his pack, and with soft, hesitant steps, approached Caspar, whose knicked, grimy, obviously-secondhand armor seemed to shine in the rays of the rising sun. He was holding one hand on his hip and his other hand to his forehead to shield his eyes just enough that he could look out at the horizon, and on his face was an unusually thoughtful expression, one that Linhardt could never have envisioned crossing Caspar's countenance. They had both changed quite a bit, that was for certain, and yet, as he got closer, closing the gap between them, Caspar turned and saw him, those sky-blue eyes going wide, that gleaming smile even wider, and before he knew it, he was in Caspar's arms, being held close and tight. Linhardt returned Caspar's embrace, laying his head on (well, near) Caspar's shoulder, and *oh*, he

hadn't noticed at first but Caspar was about his height now, and he would wrap his mind around that world-altering fact later but in the moment he would simply be grateful for the wonderfully convenient, if rather uncomfortable, pillow. Yes, they had changed in many ways, but their bond, thankfully, time had spared. With Caspar alive and his own resolve reaffirmed, for the first time in 5 years, Linhardt allowed himself to think that everything might indeed be alright.

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Once pleasantries had been given and naps had been taken, Caspar and Linhardt found themselves sitting across from one another in the dining hall with a steaming plate of sweet buns to share and fresh cups of ginger and Angelica tea beside them both. After meeting with the Professor and monastery staff and moving back in, they had both been so exhausted that they had slept until that evening. Now that the sun had gone down and the dinner/dessert rush had passed, they had the pleasure of privacy given that the dining hall was totally empty except for the staff. Caspar was digging into a Noa fruit-filled bun with gusto, wolfing it down with glee, while Linhardt had taken a cream-filled one and was slowly savoring it as he contemplated his eating companion. On the one hand, he wanted to ask about all that Caspar had experienced over the past 5 years, but on the other, he was almost afraid to bring up the subject, considering that Caspar had to have experienced so much more *hardship* than he. The air of experience and eyes that held lifetimes of stories told him that much.

Linhardt swallowed the lump in his throat and finished his pastry, wiping his hands on a napkin before he brought them below the tabletop to tap patterns on his knees. His gaze began to trace the grains of the table as his thoughts began to race; they had hugged when they'd first seen each other, but now that rational thought was now back in control, he had to wonder if--"Linhardt, are you ok? You have that look on your face like you're thinking too hard about something," Caspar interrupted, swallowing the last of his sweet bun, and Linhardt's stare snapped up to meet his. Caspar's own eyes fixed him with an appraising expression, as though he was looking *through* him, and the young runaway was reminded in that moment just how emotionally intelligent and insightful Caspar was, matters of the heart aside (not that Linhardt himself could claim to be much better).

He sighed, trying to find the words. Caspar had always been unusually easy to talk to, but this time, his lips and tongue felt leaden as he struggled to piece together his thoughts without making his worries too obvious. "It's... well, it's simply surreal being able to see you again, especially after how we parted. And I am so, so very glad that you're alive and well, but... I..."

He trailed off, words failing him, and Caspar gave a little huff, not looking away from Linhardt. "If you're worried about whether I'm mad at you for what you did back then, I'm not. If anything, I'm grateful." That was not entirely the response that Linhardt had expected, and his confusion must have shown because Caspar gave a wry grin and brought a hand up to scratch at the back of his head. "Look, I was impulsive back then. I mean, I still am! But... well, if you hadn't saved my life when this place fell, I wouldn't have known how much I didn't know, I guess."

He took a sip of tea, slurping it a little bit. “After we defended Garreg Mach from Edelgard’s first attack, I thought we’d won. And when the rest of her troops moved in, Lady Rhea turned into a dragon, and the Professor went missing, I thought I needed to stay back and fight. I had to lay down my life for this place because that’s what it meant to fight for what I believed in. But the next thing I knew, you were holding a cloth to my nose and I fell asleep. After that, I woke up in some merchant’s cart heading to the Alliance!”

Linhardt’s fingers stopped their tapping to ball into fists, resting atop his knees. Here it was. He had expected at least some condemnation, because even if he had saved Caspar’s life, the warrior put much more stock in pride than he did and would no doubt be displeased that anyone, especially his best friend, had deprived him of such “glory.” His muscles tensed and he could feel himself withdrawing, waiting for the reprimands--

“Hey.” Caspar’s metal glove tapped the table in front of him, and he opened his eyes (when had he closed them?), raising his gaze to meet Caspar’s once more. There wasn’t a hint of anger in Caspar’s face, nor disappointment or disgrace. There was only acceptance, and the knowledge that he *wasn’t* about to lose his best friend all over again filled Linhardt with such a profound sense of relief that were he not already sitting, he might have fallen over. “I’m not mad, Lin,” Caspar continued, a small yet genuine smile on his face. “Really. Like I said, I’m grateful. Thanks to you, I lived. And yeah, I was angry for a while, but as I went around and met people and learned things, I kinda realized that if you hadn’t saved me then, I probably would have been executed for treason or something. I mean, I’m a crestless second son, and my father would care more about saving face than leaving me alive, so... it’s thanks to you that I’m here now. Thanks for saving my life!” he grinned, bringing his hands up to clasp them behind his head, and Linhardt couldn’t help but smile back as his eyes began to fill with tears, a wave of emotions coursing through him, and he brought up his napkin to dab at his cheeks, unspeakably happy that Caspar had understood after all. The brawler reached out and Linhardt took the offered hand, grasping it tightly, before letting go and putting the napkin aside.

“I’m glad, Caspar. Truly, I am.”

“Heh, me too! But what about you, Lin? What happened to you?”

Linhardt sighed, his smile slipping from his face. Turnabout *was* fair play, and Linhardt had expected the question after Seteth had insisted on updating everyone’s records with their most recent information, but that didn’t make it an easy story to tell. After taking a few sips of tea and a moment of contemplation, he began to explain.

“After you were... ah... taken off the battlefield, I was found by some Imperial soldiers. They took me to Ladislava, one of Edelgard’s generals for this campaign, and after I had explained that I was the only heir of Hevring, I was immediately sent back to Enbarr. Fortunately, my father was able to receive word of my arrival before it was made public, and through some well-placed propaganda, it was quickly spread that I and the other noble children who had been ‘rescued from the cruel clutches of the church’ had been brainwashed into helping the Church of Seiros, and now that we were safe, we had been sent to our own territories to rest and recover. It was a rather bold move on my father’s part, especially because your father realized the ploy for what it was. If not for Edelgard neither confirming

nor denying the rumors, he might have managed to sway public opinion. I consider it highly lucky for us all that he did not.”

Linhardt took another sip of his tea before placing the teacup carefully on the saucer. “From there, I continued my research at the family manor in Hevring, and was kept up to date on the various affairs of the house. However...” Linhardt lightly tapped his index finger against the tabletop, staring at Caspar with a slightly devious smirk. “Father has been devoted to his work and thus has remained in Enbarr these past five years, only returning for the occasional vacation, and Mother has stayed close to his side, as ever. The point of interest here is that all records regarding finances for the Empire are kept in three places: the Imperial Palace, the Enbarr estate of the Minister of Domestic Affairs, and, for archival purposes, the Minister of Domestic Affairs’ estate in their home territory. What is important to note is that in the right hands, this data can be rather illuminating regarding troop movements, supply chains, and what the army needs that is not weapons and ammunition, as well as the prominent families backing them. Hence, if someone needed such information for reasons including, but not limited to, espionage, predicting routes that the army would take, and the like, then perhaps if they were to bring one such as myself a delicious baked good, I could drop a piece of paper on the floor in my excitement and that would be that.”

As Linhardt concluded his explanation, Caspar blinked once, then twice, as he parsed this information. “So wait, Lin... do you mean... you were a *spy*!?” he exclaimed, slamming his hands down hard on the table and causing the plates and teacups to rattle ominously.

Linhardt thanked the Goddess that the kitchen staff were paid to be hard of hearing. “It would be dangerous for me to confirm such a thing one way or another, but let us phrase it as our mutual friends being very grateful for my five-year-long convalescence.”

Caspar chuckled and shook his head. “Man, Lin. That sounds like a lot more work than I’d expect from you.”

The corner of the green-haired healer’s lip curled up in response as he took another long sip of tea and placed a strawberry jam sweet bun on his plate. “You’d be surprised; it was so easy that I got away with indulging in laziness much of the time.”

Caspar laughed, then, the sound bursting up from his belly and spilling out into the air, with a wide grin on his face to match. “HA! Now that sounds more like the Linhardt I know. Speaking of...” His eyes darted toward Linhardt’s hair. “I noticed you don’t have the...” His hands mimicked the small ponytail that Linhardt had sported for the past 10 years, and seemed almost baffled at Linhardt’s chuckling. The lithe magic-user turned around in his seat, and Caspar’s eyes widened at the sight of a familiar white silk ribbon, securing long, forest-green locks in an elegant bun. His heart began to beat a little faster in his chest, and he swallowed, resolving to think about *that* later. “So you wear it in a bun now, huh? It’s, uh, a good look for you.”

“Thank you,” Linhardt replied evenly, turning back to face Caspar and taking another sip of his tea. He tried not to make a face at the fact that it was cold. “I’m glad that you don’t mind my hair being this long either; during our years apart, I simply let it grow, and truthfully, I think long hair looks nicer on me.” He gave a somewhat shy glance at Caspar. “Don’t you think?”

Caspar was nodding his head even before Linhardt could finish the sentence. “Yeah, it does! It really, really does. I mean, I’m pretty sure I’ve said it before, but I like your hair long. I’m just glad you still have a use for...” he trailed off, making a “you know what I mean” motion with his hands, and Linhardt’s shoulders shook in a quiet giggle.

“Oh, this hair band? I could never part with it. It’s far too precious and dear to me, a sign of a bond that is as tightly woven as this tie, and I can be surprisingly sentimental about some things. This is one of them.”

“GOOD!” Caspar almost yelled, his face now crimson. “I mean, good. That’s good. Everyone should have something like that.”

“While we’re on the subject though, perhaps you’d like to tell me what you’ve done with your own hair?” Linhardt prompted, having taken note of Caspar’s slicked back and rather interesting style choice, and noted with some amusement that Caspar’s blush only seemed to intensify at the question.

“Yeah, about that. I, uh, tried cutting my own hair first, and that just didn’t go well, so...” Caspar continued to spin the story of his new ‘do, and Linhardt listened, enthralled, as the talk turned to Caspar’s tales of travels and trials as he roamed the countryside, with Linhardt contributing some of his own anecdotes here and there. Before they knew it, the moon was almost fully overhead, and the dining staff were ushering them out with no small measure of forced patience. The two meandered back to their rooms, in no particular hurry, and once they stood in front of Linhardt’s door, the green-haired healer opening it but not yet walking inside, he turned to face Caspar with a warm, fond gaze. “I suppose this is good night, but... it’s good to see you, Caspar. And... I’ll see you tomorrow.”

The truth in Linhardt’s words, the simple joy of the fact that they could indeed see each other tomorrow, brought twin smiles to their faces. “Yeah,” Caspar replied, giving a little wave as he turned to walk up the stairs to his own room. “See you tomorrow.”

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Caspar grinned as his punch pierced a bandit’s chest, killing his foe in two short strikes as the brigand’s body slumped against the base of a tree trunk. A spurt of blood splashed against Caspar’s cheek, staining his skin with crimson streaks, and as another nameless foe came his way, the brawler again brought his might to bear, beheading his opponent in the blink of an eye. The afternoon sun beat down overhead, and Caspar was grateful for it as he dodged a sniper’s shot, the glint of sunlight reflecting off of the metal arrowhead the only warning he’d gotten. Adrenaline surged through him, and he could feel the tension, the pressure, of knowing that keeping his life hinged on his ability and skill to survive. While some found battle intimidating, and others saw it merely as an unfortunate means to an end, Caspar revelled in the *challenge*. He didn’t enjoy taking a life, nor did he fight simply because he wanted to; battle was one tried-and-true method of making himself stronger, and the feeling of confronting and surpassing his own limitations, of stacking his strength against strong opponents and challenges and seeing where he measured, made him feel alive.

His gauntlets crashed through the spine and sternum of another enemy, his forearm bathed in a spray of blood, and before he could make his next move, a wind spell came wooshing at him from behind. Caspar could feel the magical chill run through him and he winced, goosebumps springing up all across his skin. Moments later, however, the uncomfortable sensation gave way to a familiar feeling of warmth, and the familiar scent of pine needles and old books hit his nose as healing magic flowed through his body, returning it to its proper temperature and state. He cast a glance over his right shoulder, giving a grin when he locked eyes with Linhardt, whose magic circle was just starting to disappear. "Thanks, Lin!" he yelled with a wave, and ran off to go hand to hand with another attacker as the rest of his troops engaged other enemies.

The battle raged on, and Caspar wiped his face on his sleeve, leaving dim red splotches all over his cheeks; his tunic was soaked with sweat and his armor was covered in the blood of his enemies, and unfortunately for all of them, this battle was far from over. The bandits were strong, and they were just starting their final push against the bandits' leader, which would be no easy feat in these dense woods. The crunch of leaves behind him drew his attention and he turned back momentarily to see Linhardt coming over to stand next to him, giving him a once-over before they pressed on. "Caspar, are you feeling well? You're not wounded anywhere?" The grappler gave a little laugh, flexing an arm.

"Nah, I'm fine, but I should be asking about you, though! Are *you* alright, Lin?"

The healer ran a hand through his sweaty locks, pushing a few stray strands out of his fair face. "I will be fine, Caspar. It is somewhat of a struggle to keep my stomach from turning, but better that I be here at your back than wringing my hands in the infirmary, worrying about what state you'd be in the next time I saw you." Caspar could feel his expression shift into something more sullen, and he was about to open his mouth to say something when Linhardt's gaze suddenly slid to stare at something behind him. "Move!" Linhardt cried as an arrow cut cleanly against the side of his scalp, and with a cry, he winced in pain before bringing his hands up in retaliation to cast two quick blasts of wind into a nearby bush. The enemy archer staggered back with a final cry before falling lifeless to the ground, and Linhardt grimaced in pain before searching through his pants pocket and grabbing a vulnerary, downing about one-third of it in a single hearty chug. Caspar put an arm around Linhardt's shoulders to steady him, eyes darting around to try to perceive further danger.

This had been another unexpected change; up until they had reunited all again, Linhardt would never have offered to step onto a battlefield, mainly doing so only because none of the other healers were available or because he had been convinced to come along. In fact, for the first several weeks after their collective reunion, Linhardt had secluded himself in the infirmary alongside Manuela, Mercedes, and Marianne, tending to the various patients and treating their wounds, but now, Linhardt was bound and determined to tag along whenever Caspar was deployed, and the Professor seemed to be on board. At first, Caspar had assumed Linhardt would be taking an adjutant role, but the Professor had deemed his Physic and Warp spells to be too useful to squander, hence why he'd been given his own battalion and told to stick close to Caspar. At least that made it easier to protect him... for the most part. "I know I can't convince you to go back now," Caspar sighed, as though he were talking to himself as much as Linhardt, "so hang in there. I'll get you through this, Lin. Don't you worry."

A faint chuckle came in response. "I trust you, Caspar," Linhardt replied, steadfastly not looking at Caspar's gore-spattered skin, and with a deep breath, the Faith-user gathered his courage and pulled away. "Let's go. The sooner we get this over with, the better."

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Under the Professor's guidance, they soon managed to mop up the last of the bandits, the sun already starting to set as they began to sluggishly wind their way back to Garreg Mach. As if to make up for the day's heat, however, the evening brought with it a cool and refreshing breeze, and Caspar stretched his hands up gratefully, relishing in the relieving feeling. "Ahhh, that feels nice."

"I'm sure it does," drawled a familiar voice, and Caspar looked up just in time for a wet towel to connect with his face, Linhardt's amused chuckles filling his ears and making his heart race.

"Geez, Lin," Caspar pouted, blushing in what could only be embarrassment as he took the towel in hand and thoroughly wiped his face and neck. "You didn't have to *ambush* me, you know. You could have handed it to me like a normal person."

"And risk getting some unknown brigand's blood all over my hands after I spent so much effort cleaning up after tending to our own men? No, thank you."

Caspar was about to retort, but despite the sarcastic monotone of Linhardt's voice, he could see the healer's hands trembling, and it wasn't just from washing them. A familiar pain pricked at his heart at the sight, but all that came out was "Yeah, that's fair. C'mon and walk with me."

Linhardt accepted the invitation without complaint, falling into step beside him and walking as closely as he dared without being overwhelmed by the stench of battle still hanging around Caspar. They walked in silence, each immersed in their own thoughts, and Caspar's gaze slowly roved over to Linhardt. They may have been here together in body, but from the look in Linhardt's eyes, his mind was miles away, mulling something over. The more Caspar stared, the more he wanted to know just what the other was thinking about. Was it the war? Home? Him? Probably not that last one, but... He had just opened his mouth to ask when he blinked in confusion, leaning back to get a closer look at Linhardt's hair. "Oh. You... took your hair band out."

Linhardt suddenly shook his head, blinking rapidly as his mind pulled itself back to the present moment, and turned to face Caspar, bewildered. "What was that?"

"You're not wearing your hair band. That's all."

Furrowing his brow, Linhardt brought a hand up to the back of his head. "What do you--" Suddenly, the confusion on the Faith-wielder's face was replaced with fear, and he stopped in his tracks, Caspar having to pull him to the side so that they didn't impede traffic. Linhardt brought up his other hand as well, patting at where his bun normally sat only to find that his hair was down and the hair band was conspicuously absent. "No. No no no no no. Where? Where would it be?"

He sounded so lost and confused that Caspar placed a hand on Linhardt's shoulder in an attempt to calm him, hoping to keep his best friend focused enough that they could figure this out. "Lin. Did you have it with you when we finished the battle?"

"I... I'm not sure. I wasn't thinking about it," Linhardt answered in a weak voice. "I must find it. I don't feel right without it."

With a sigh, Caspar looked toward the setting sun. It was more than halfway down by now, and the light would fade fast. They really needed a plan.

"What's going on?" interjected a smooth voice, and as if summoned, the Professor came trotting over on horseback, glancing rapidly between the two of them.

"Linhardt lost his hair band and I need to find it," Caspar blurted out before Linhardt could speak, and the Professor's eyes honed in on the healer, noting his paler-than-usual complexion, unfocused eyes, and worried expression.

"...Alright. Caspar, take this horse; I know you know how to ride at least a little bit. Find the hair band and catch up with us; we will make camp further up the road. Hurry back." Without fanfare, they dismounted the horse like a professional and handed the reins to Caspar, who accepted them gratefully. The Professor placed an arm around Linhardt's shoulders as Caspar mounted the horse and gave a loud "Hyahh!" as he rode off back in the direction of the forest.

Linhardt turned back to watch him go, anxiousness buzzing throughout his body as Caspar rode away. "Come back soon," he murmured, his unbound hair blowing freely in the breeze as the Professor urged him along.

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Caspar rode for about 30 minutes before he found the battlefield. He dismounted the horse and tied its reins to a nearby branch, then began his search by looking carefully at his surroundings as he tried to deduce where he and Linhardt had been fighting. There--the body of a bandit he'd defeated earlier was still sitting against the base of a tree. Now he was getting somewhere! He continued his search, trying to stick close to that general area, and just as the first stars of the evening were beginning to twinkle in the heavens overhead, Caspar spotted a flash of white among the corpses. Speared on the end of a bloodied arrow was a familiar white ribbon, one he'd recognize anywhere. With a wide grin, he picked it up and examined it. Luckily, it was still in one piece, meaning that Linhardt could still wear it, and while it had gotten a little blood on it, likely from when that arrow had nicked Lin's temple, it wouldn't be too hard to wash out. Clutching it tightly in his left hand, Caspar started to meander past the corpses back to his horse, and had just set eyes on the shaggy mare when his instinct demanded that he *move*. He jumped backwards with not a moment to spare as an arrow buried itself right where he'd been standing, and his eyes darted among the trees, trying to locate his attacker. "Get out here!" he called, his voice echoing throughout the area, but predictably, there was no response.

Unfortunately, Caspar knew full well that he had a clear disadvantage in this position; from where he was on the ground, his assailant was hiding in the treetop, and he couldn't see nearly as well as a keen-eyed archer at night. Just as he was considering what to do, ominous



laughter echoed from the brush nearby as two burly brutes with axes on their backs walked out, their garb indicating that they were from the same bandit gang as the ones Caspar had fought earlier today. “Well, well!” one of them chortled, sizing Caspar up. “Looks like we got a straggler here, and he’s all by himself. I think it’s time to get revenge for all our dead boys!”

“You said it!” the other one chimed in, taking his axe in hand. “Let’s get ‘im!” With a roar, they charged at Caspar, who dodged out of the way of the first attack but got clipped with an axe on the second. He grunted in pain, but forced his muscles to move, badly injuring one of the broad bandits with twin gauntlet strikes. He barely dodged another arrow that came flying his way, but received a gash across his arm for his effort as the brutes continued their attack. The less injured one came barreling toward him, but Caspar saw in that moment his weak point, a sliver of exposed flesh under his ribs. With a shout of “I’ll have your head!”, he aimed his Whirlwind Blade attack carefully, his claws piercing the man’s heart as the bandit slumped to the ground, dead.

“YOU BASTARD!” screamed the other, and he charged in, dealing Caspar a heavy blow to the chest.

“GAH!” Caspar cried out, spitting blood, and after setting his jaw, he reared back and delivered a decisive strike through the man’s throat, a final cry serving as his last utterance. Caspar pulled his gauntlet back, grabbing a hand axe from one of the bandit’s belts with his free hand. However, just as he turned away, another arrow flew, landing true and piercing his shoulder. Caspar bellowed in pain, throwing the axe on reflex, and perhaps he still had some luck left because there was an answering “ARGH!” and the sound of a body hitting the ground.

Caspar brought a hand up, clutching his head. His vision was swimming, and his head felt like it would split apart. Oh no. He had almost certainly been poisoned, and between that, his injured arm, and his fatigue, he really needed to find the camp *fast*. He stumbled over to the horse, unfastening its reins from the tree, and hopped on, trying to direct it back to the campsite. With every ounce of resolve that remained in his body, he forced himself to stay awake, stay alert, stay focused, even though his body felt like it was burning, his muscles aching and breaking from the strain. Each time he felt like he was about to lose consciousness, his eyes slipped to the ribbon resting in his hand, and he would take a deep breath and close his eyes, willing his body to resist the poison and his mind to stay awake for just a bit longer.

Finally, as his eyes drank in the welcoming glow of the camp’s torches, his vision became blurry and he could make out shouting as hands grabbed at him and the horse. Looking around, his eyes locked onto a familiar mass of green, and he reached out for it with a shaking hand, still clutching the ribbon tight. A pale, familiar hand reached out to him in return, and with the last of his willpower, he urgently pressed the hair tie into Linhardt’s palm. “Lin...hardt...” he managed to murmur, only vaguely registering the panicked shouts of his name and the feeling of cold fingers grasping at his cheeks, and then his world went black and he knew no more.

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The Garreg Mach infirmary had, thankfully, not changed much in the years that everyone had been away. Some of the supplies had been switched (or snitched) over time, but thanks to the influx of merchants who had managed to return to Garreg Mach, as well as a steady stream of uncommon components supplied by Anna and her associates, the infirmary was fairly well-stocked with all of the herbs and medicines one would need to treat just about any injury. Linhardt was more than grateful for that fact, as the combination of wounds, poison, and exhaustion that Caspar was suffering from made his healing process rather difficult. The antitoxin had purged the poison from his body and would stave off any lingering infection, but he still needed regular application of healing spells in order to boost his body's vitality and return him to a healthy state more quickly.

Linhardt closed his eyes and lifted his hands up, palms facing Caspar, and in his mind's eye, envisioned Caspar exactly as he remembered: healthy, whole, with a great big smile on his face that could lift the heart and bolster the spirit. He could feel the warmth of his magic as it coalesced at his fingertips, the smell of fish oil and forget-me-nots hitting his nose for merely a moment as the Crest of Cethleann activated, and a wave of healing magic flooded Caspar's form before the luminescent sparks of magic faded and the magic circle that surrounded his hands disappeared as well. Linhardt let his palms fall to his knees and took a deep breath. Caspar's complexion, which had been worryingly pale, was returning to its normal color, and although he was still asleep, it was likely that he would come around sooner rather than later. The healer's gaze slid to the bandaged laceration on Caspar's arm, and, taking another deep breath, Linhardt slowly undid the wrapping. Fortunately, the wound had stopped bleeding by this point, so he simply applied a poultice and redressed the injury. Caspar had already been unconscious for a day and a half, and Linhardt had felt like his body was moving itself, an automaton of a nurse, performing his tasks with unthinking precision as he cared for Caspar's wounds. Once he had finished, Linhardt seated himself on the mattress, facing the door, waiting.

Ever since Caspar had been admitted to the infirmary, Linhardt had refused to leave his best friend's bedside for any meaningful length of time other than for the Professor to insist that he at least take a shower. They didn't bother asking him to try to sleep, and Linhardt was grateful for it; Manuela, Marianne, and Mercedes had only come by to bring him food and give him some small gestures of comfort before they left to tend to patients in other rooms.

Almost hesitantly, Linhardt placed his right palm over Caspar's right hand as he slipped his left into his pocket, taking out his own manhandled hair band and clutching it tightly. As he stared at it, a fresh feeling of guilt washed over him. If only he had been more attentive, more careful! If only he had noticed that it was missing sooner! If only... Linhardt swallowed the lump in his throat. What's done was done, and thinking about it any more would serve no helpful purpose. Still, for Caspar to do such a thing was so reckless and yet so very true to his character that Linhardt couldn't help but feel an odd warmth in his chest that contrasted the chills that ran down his spine at the thought of Caspar's many wounds. "Oh, Caspar..." he murmured, giving Caspar's limp hand a slight squeeze. It hurt his heart to see the usually boisterous brawler so unnaturally still. "Don't you know how much you mean to me?"

Tears started to drip onto the bedsheets, and Linhardt ignored them, unable to contain the flood of words that threatened to burst forth. "We have an unbreakable bond, remember? You promised that we would survive together, and you never go back on your promises. You can't

even lie all that well. So please, come back...please forgive me..." He trailed off, syllables devolving into sobs as his hand moved from resting atop Caspar's own to holding it properly, giving it another, tighter squeeze as tears continued to fall.

Suddenly, he felt Caspar's fingers flutter in his palm and heard groans leaving Caspar's lips, and as Linhardt lifted his head to see what was wrong, Caspar's eyes slowly cracked open, blearily surveying his surroundings. He blinked several times, gradually coming back into consciousness, and as his eyes locked on to Linhardt, his lips curled up into a wide smile. "Heya, Linny," he rasped, and Linhardt's eyes immediately darted to the glass of water sitting by his bedside. The healer let go of Caspar's hand and surged forward, picking up the glass and holding it firmly to Caspar's lips.

"Drink," he commanded, and Caspar obeyed, practically gulping the water down until the glass was empty. Linhardt placed it back on the bedside table, staring at Caspar with a worried expression. "Caspar. How do you feel?"

The fighter moved like he was about to sit up, then winced and laid back down against the pillows. "Ow ow ow! Still pretty achey, I guess," he replied with a laugh, and despite his words, a weight in Linhardt's stomach lightened at the sound. "But Lin, what about you? Were you... crying for me?"

Linhardt huffed, a small smile appearing on his face as his tears began to dry. "Of course I was. You're my most important person, Caspar; I don't know what I would do if I lost you."

Caspar was silent for a moment, Linhardt's sincerity obviously having struck a chord with him, and as sky-blue eyes met his sea-blue gaze, Linhardt could see the gears turning in Caspar's head as he took a long, deep breath, looking like he suddenly, desperately wanted to say something, if only he had the words. "Lin, I..." It was at that moment that his gaze slid to Linhardt's left fist, still holding the hair band, and his expression turned to one of surprise, and then of glee, looking back up at Linhardt and fixing his nurse with a gleaming grin. "Hey, there it is! I found it, just like I said I would!"

Linhardt took a deep breath as he quickly glanced at the hair band, trying his very best not to fixate too much on the blood spatter as another wave of emotion welled up within his heart. As he looked back over at his... well, his everything, his free hand moved to gently cover Caspar's once more, and he began to speak, voice quivering. "Thank you, Caspar. I'm sorry... I'm so sorry that I didn't notice sooner. If it weren't for my negligence, then--"

"Linhardt. It's ok," Caspar interrupted, his expression weary but still so full of spirit. "I don't blame you. These things happen, and I know how much that ribbon means to you considering you've worn it every day ever since I gave it to you." He let out a laugh, trailing off as the motion agitated his injuries. "Ow."



Linhardt went silent, eyes widening and his lips parting as Caspar's words resounded in his ears. Before he could stop himself, slight snickers started to escape him before they escalated into full-blown laughter, and Caspar could only stare at him as if he'd grown a second head. "Uh, Linhardt? Hey! What's so funny!?"

"Oh... I'm sorry..." Linhardt wheezed, giving a little cough as he got his giggles under control. "It's not you. It's just that all this time, I've been waiting for you to confess that you were the one to give me this hair band, and now of all times, it had to be when our positions were reversed and *you're* the one resting in the infirmary while I watch over you."

"Wait, WHAT!?" Caspar groaned, bringing a hand up to his forehead in disbelief. "Man, if I had known *that's* what you wanted, I would have said so ages ago! Geez. Well, even if you *have* been teasing me about that since forever, I'm glad I'm still the one who got to give it to you!"

Linhardt shook his head and looked straight ahead as he pulled his hand away from Caspar and began to tie his hair back, binding it into his usual bun. "It just wouldn't be the same coming from anyone else."

"...Yeah," Caspar replied quietly, and as Linhardt looked back down at him again, he was struck by the sheer amount of emotion in Caspar's eyes. The brawler reached for the healer's hand once again, as if unwilling to let go, and truly, Linhardt was less than inclined to pull away. "Lin, I... I have something to say."

Linhardt blinked. This was new; usually, Caspar was the type to blurt out his thoughts rather than wait for acknowledgment of his turn to speak. "Yes, Caspar?"

The bluenette swallowed and took a breath, not once breaking eye contact with Linhardt, and the Faith-user couldn't help but give Caspar his full and complete attention, sensing the seriousness of what he wanted to say. "I don't know much about love and stuff like that. I'm

not that kind of guy. But what I do know is that I would do anything you asked. And when I saw how well you treated that ribbon I gave you all those years ago, it made me so *happy* knowing that even though we hadn't seen each other for so long, you still cared about it. About me."

Caspar took another deep breath and tried once again to sit up. Linhardt leaned forward as if to stop him, but Caspar set his jaw and didn't make even a peep of pain as his gaze seemed to pierce through Linhardt's eyes, down into his very soul. "Lin, I... once this war is over, would you like to leave our noble names behind and travel the world with me?"

Linhardt could only blink slowly, processing Caspar's proposal, for there was no doubt in his mind that that's what it was, an invitation to spend the rest of their days together, journeying across the continent and beyond, to see all that they could see. It was a tempting offer, and though it did sound like it would take no small amount of effort to pull off, if it was with Caspar, then it was well worth it. But first...

"While that offer does sound delightful, you'll have to ask me again when we're closer to our goal. That said... Caspar, are you asking me to be yours? Not just as best friends as we have been, although we can be that too, but rather, do you wish to make me your partner in love?"

A crimson blush suddenly exploded across Caspar's face, quickly spreading from the bridge of his nose all the way across his cheeks, and he stared at Linhardt bashfully, yet earnestly. "...Yeah, I guess I am. Like I said, I don't know a lot about all this love stuff, but you make me happy, Lin; you're willing to listen to me no matter what, and you always give the best advice to help me grow even stronger. Whenever I'm by the library or the docks, all I can think of is you, studying stuff like 'degrees' and 'curves' of crests, or trying to catch fish to feed to the cats. Linny, all my life I've just wanted to do what was right, and you've always helped me up when I was down. I want to make you happy too, now and for the rest of our lives."

Linhardt could feel his heart melt at the confession, a deep and fulfilling warmth blazing through him, and as carefully as he could manage, he enveloped Caspar in a tight hug, holding him close. "Caspar, you *do* make me happy. More than anybody else. You listen to my rambling without a word of complaint, you try to make sure that I eat properly, and you come collect me from the infirmary when everything simply becomes too much. You are my rock, the person who makes me feel *safe* no matter what the world throws at us. When I saw you for the first time after all these years, all I could think of was how *handsome* you were, and my heart felt like it was about to beat out of my chest. Nobody else makes me feel the way you do."

Caspar pulled his head away to meet Linhardt's eyes once more. "Linhardt... I love you."

"I'm quite certain that I love you too, Caspar."

"Can I... kiss you?"

"Of course."

Slowly, their lips met in a gentle kiss, and the two parted for only a moment before they dove right back in, as if trying to express all of their appreciation and devotion through this simple yet so very sacred act of love. After a while, they pulled apart, and Linhardt could see in Caspar's face how only his sheer stubbornness was keeping the exhaustion at bay. He pushed against Caspar's chest as gently as possible, laying him back down on the pillows, and Caspar gave him his best pout, which was quickly softened with another peck.

"Sleep well, Caspar. I too need to catch up on my rest, considering how many naps I've missed," Linhardt smiled, and before he could turn away, Caspar grabbed his sleeve.

"Wait."

"Hm?"

"Could you... maybe sleep here? Next to me?"

"...Well, I've never said no to a convenient sleeping spot." Caspar scooted over as much as he could, and Linhardt set about making himself comfortable as he shucked off his shoes and unfastened his overcoat, draping it over the back of a nearby chair. He then crawled under the covers, rolling over onto his side so that he could face Caspar.

"You comfy?" the bluenette asked, and Linhardt gave a noncommittal grunt.

"It's not the worst bed I've slept on."

"Heh, fair enough." Linhardt's arm encircled Caspar's waist as Caspar's own arm draped over Linhardt's shoulder, their eyelids fluttering as they succumbed to sleep. "Mmmm... night night, Linny. I love you."

He received a squeeze and Linhardt's quiet reply of "I love you too" in response, and the two of them drifted off into dreamland, enjoying the first truly peaceful sleep they'd had in some time.

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Caspar breathed a sigh of relief as the hill he was looking for came into view, a satisfied smile stretching over his face as he recognized this particular landmark. "C'mon, Lin! We're almost there!" he called, throwing a glance over his shoulder at Linhardt, his official best friend and the love of his life, who was lagging slightly as he tried his best to keep up with Caspar's punishing pace.

"Haaaah... that's easy for you to say, Caspar," the green-haired healer panted, holding the straps of his pack with one hand as he used the sleeve of his other one to wipe the sweat from his brow. "You've always had the stamina for 'adventures' like this."

"Look, I'll carry your stuff when we go back, but this is important!"

"So I've heard. Give me... just a moment--ah!"

Linhardt yelled as he was suddenly picked up in a bridal carry, Caspar sweeping up both him and his burden in those strong arms as if he were weightless. The gesture was rather sweet, and the now ex-noble found himself blushing as Caspar bounded his way up to the top of the hill, closing the distance in what felt like mere moments. He set Linhardt down gingerly, then removed his own pack and placed it by a tree as Linhardt followed suit. Caspar had apparently passed this place when returning to Garreg Mach, and he had desperately wanted to show Linhardt ever since. He'd even marked it down on a map so that he'd remember, and the effort was well worth it.

"I can see why you wanted to come here, Caspar," Linhardt murmured breathlessly; now that he could take the time to look around, the scenery was simply stunning. The early morning sky, slightly lightened by the rays of the not-yet-risen sun, seemed to stretch indefinitely across the mountaintops stretching out before them. High above, too many stars to count twinkled with unearthly light, the sight almost ethereal as a gentle breeze blew through their hair. At the bottom of the hill was a cliff that dropped off into a valley below, and in the far, far distance, a thin column of smoke snaked into the sky, indicating that somewhere beyond the mountains, a town was just waking from its slumber, beginning the bustle and business of the day. The entire tableau was so vibrant and beautiful that Linhardt could have believed it to be a startlingly realistic rendition of one of Ignatz's paintings.

"Isn't it great?" Caspar answered appreciatively, eyes wide as he stared out at the horizon. Suddenly, he gave a gasp of excitement, and quickly tapped Linhardt's shoulder, pointing straight out in front of them. "Quick, Lin! Look!"

Linhardt turned his gaze toward the horizon line, and his eyes widened as the sun slowly began to rise, bathing the mountains in a glorious golden light. The deep blacks and blues of the night sky gave way to a tone more akin to Caspar's, and the stars flickered once more in farewell as they took their leave for the time being. Linhardt was struck speechless at the sight; now that the sun had risen on the first day of their journey, the first day of the rest of their lives, he found that he had not the words to express the emotions in his heart. A gloved hand slipped into his own, and Linhardt gave Caspar's hand a gentle squeeze, knowing that he would carve this moment into his memory forever.

After a few moments, Caspar turned to Linhardt and took his other hand, pulling him slightly so that they now faced each other, and Caspar beamed, giving a wide, bright smile reminiscent of the same sun they'd just been watching. "This is it, Linny. You and me, traveling the world."

"Hm. Seems almost like a dream, doesn't it? And yet, here we are. The war has been won, you and I are no longer bound by the shackles and chains of titles and propriety, and we've both upheld our ends of the promise. Wherever you go, Caspar, I will too, and that includes the very ends of the Earth you seem to be set on seeing."

"Well, I dunno about 'the ends of the Earth,' but I wanna see Almyra, for sure!"

"Almyra, hmmm? That sounds like as good a place as any to start."

They fell silent once more, lost in their own thoughts, before an idea suddenly dawned on Linhardt and he reached for his bun, undoing it and pulling out the ribbon.

“Uh, Linny?” Caspar asked, staring at his partner with visible confusion. “What are you doing?”

“I just had an idea,” Linhardt replied, holding his ribbon between them “Have you heard of the traditional ceremony of handfasting?”

“Nope! What’s that?”

“Well, according to Flayn, it’s an old ritual that essentially indicated a betrothal or an unofficial wedding. It’s a way of binding two people together, such that they would never part. Now that we’re about to embark on this journey together, and hopefully stay by each other’s side for the rest of our lives, I felt that it might be appropriate to perform such a rite, both to commemorate our new beginning and because, well, our fates seem to have been tied together long before this.”

Caspar had been listening attentively throughout the entire explanation, and once Linhardt had finished, enthusiastically nodded his agreement. “Yeah! That sounds great, Lin! I already knew I loved you more than anyone else and never wanted to leave you, so something like this is perfect.”

Linhardt could feel his cheeks redden at Caspar’s genuine yet so very carefree declaration of love, and the small flicker of nervousness he’d felt snuffed itself out, leaving him with only a warm feeling of satisfaction and adoration for the man before him. “Very well. Take off your glove then,” he murmured, lightly tapping Caspar’s right forearm, and the warrior did so, setting the armor aside to reveal his bare hand. Giving a little cough to clear his throat, Linhardt took Caspar’s right hand in his left and began to recite the words to the rite, lightly winding his ribbon around their joined hands.

“Oh, Goddess who dwells on high, before your gaze this day, I, Linhardt, hereby bind myself to this man, Caspar, that we may be acknowledged by all as partners and equals on the road of life, and... oh, this is all so stuffy.” With a huff, Linhardt locked eyes with Caspar, neither looking away as Linhardt started to speak once again. “Caspar, I wish to remain by your side for the rest of our days, seeing the world with you, finding a home with you, sharing my dreams with you, and growing old with you. I want you to be mine, and I want to be yours. It will take some time, but once we are ready to settle down, we can retire to the countryside. A place where the air is fresh, the lakes are full of fish, the sun is warm, and where we may nap deeply. When that day comes, to have you there lying by my side... Paradise. And we will have made it so.”

Caspar’s eyes were wide and his lips quivered like he could barely hold himself back, but with a herculean display of restraint, he took a deep breath and began to speak. “I don’t... I don’t really know what to say. I guess I never thought about stuff like this during the war. I mean, I never really had a reason to. Ugh, now I’m babbling. I just... I always secretly hoped I could spend my life with you, and now... I’m just...so happy. And I can’t stop grinning. I bet I look like a real fool right now!” Linhardt was about to say something reassuring but Caspar pressed on, giving Linhardt the biggest grin he’d ever seen. “I love you, Linhardt! And listen, I know I can be reckless, stubborn, and generally difficult to be around at times... But you’ve always accepted me, even with all of my flaws. Knowing that, I made a promise to myself. I



promised that I'd always protect you. And, well, sometimes you might have to protect me from myself, but I intend to keep my promise.”

Linhardt could see the moisture beginning to gather in Caspar’s eyes, and knew that he himself was a compliment away from crying as well, the love and joy in each and every word they exchanged making this moment even more important to them both. “Very well. Just use your free hand to help me tie this knot--there you go--and... done.”

Caspar stared wide-eyed at their bound hands, and then up at Linhardt, like he couldn’t quite believe this was real. However, the blush blooming across his face certainly was, and he gave a nervous chuckle. “So uh... now that we’ve done all this, Lin... can I kiss you?”

Linhardt laughed, endeared. “Oh, Caspar, you don’t even need to ask,” he answered, and pressed his lips to his fiancé’s in a sweet kiss. They lingered for a heartbeat, then two, before pulling away, wide smiles on their faces and warmth in their gazes.

“Phew! OK! I gotta let all these emotions out...” Caspar grinned, and Linhardt chuckled once more as his beloved looked out once again over the landscape before them. “One, two, and...three! I LOVE YOU FOREVER!” he shouted, and the mountains echoed his pledge, such that Linhardt was sure people could hear it from as far away as the Leicester Alliance.


“That’s that, then,” Linhardt smiled, undoing the knot and freeing their hands so that he could tie his hair back up as Caspar once again equipped his armored glove. “You and I may have had an inescapable, unbreakable bond before, but now, it’s officially unofficial. Delightful, isn’t it?”

Caspar simply laughed in response, positively beaming. “If anything, that’s what really makes it sink in that we’re setting off together!”

“Indeed it does,” Linhardt smiled, and he walked over to their packs, slinging his up on his back. “Now that we’ve undergone a sacred pledge of unity, I’m ready to set off. How about you?”

Caspar couldn’t hold back a loud whoop of excitement, grabbing his own pack and hefting it onto his back. “I thought you’d never ask!”

Hand in hand, they descended the hillside, and as they began to walk away from Garreg Mach, smiling brightly and chattering excitedly about all that they planned to see and do, Linhardt’s ribbon blew gently in the breeze, proof of a love that would last a lifetime.

 Caspar and Linhardt are smiling at each other as their hands are bound with Linhardt's ribbon

~~~~~The  
End~~~~~

Chapter End Notes

And that's the end! A big thank you to the mods and participants; this minibang was a ton of fun. And of course, another big thank you to my artists; you guys are amazing! However, the biggest thanks goes to my partner (who also happened to be my artist), MariettaRC <3 Couldn't have done it without you, babe! Be sure to take a look at the other great pieces being made for the minibang, and enjoy what all of the other talented artists and writers have to offer~

Take a look at the original piece at MariettaRC's twitter [here!](#)

Update: The final piece was commissioned from [DrawingDDoom!!](#) Their casphardt art is amazing; please check them out!

You can also check out my writing twitter [here!](#)

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