

## Chapter LXXVII: Resolution of the Final Regret II

I barely had time to realize what was happening, and by then, Aífe had already slapped her own hand to the floor, twisting her wrist as her own set of runes blazed into existence — just in time to blunt the explosion of light and force that seemed to shake the entire building.

“You’ve gotten faster!” Aífe praised. “I haven’t seen anyone that quick with runes since my sister!”

Gáe Bolg let out a resonant *bong* as it collided with Aífe’s spear, and they were moving so fast I hadn’t even seen them move their weapons into position. They had just suddenly gone from one pose to another without any in-between, because unlike those three from before, this new guy was able to keep up with her speed.

“High praise indeed, coming from you,” the stranger said. “To be compared to the Witch of Dún Scáith — that’s an honor I never expected to receive when I first started training with you.”

They separated briefly, each retreating about half a dozen feet, but in an instant, they were at each other’s throats again, exchanging blow after blow at speeds I’d come to expect of Servants, not ordinary people. Aífe was still holding back, I could tell, because this still wasn’t as hard or as fast as she had gone up against Tiberius and Altera, but it was closer than I would have expected.

*BONG* was the sound of a particularly powerful strike, and the two of them held there, the shafts of their spears pressed so hard against each other that I thought Aífe’s might snap in two.

“Even if you aren’t the man whose face you wear, you should already know,” said Aífe. “I don’t offer praise lightly. If I compliment someone, I mean it. If I praise a student, it’s because they really have achieved something of which to be proud.”

“I only made it this far because I had an excellent teacher,” the man said. “Even if I was the Master and you the Servant, everything I accomplished was because you were there to bring out the potential that slept inside of me. That’s why...”

He twisted his heel, and another series of runes lit up under the path his toes had taken.

“I don’t intend to hold back against you!”

“Shit!”

It was Aífe who said it, but it was me who grabbed the twins and pulled them back through the front door, just in time for another explosion to rip through the house. The glass of two of the front windows shattered and went flying out onto the grass as Rika, Ritsuka, and I all tumbled onto the front lawn. Smoke chased us out of the doorway, thick and oily.

“Holy shit!” Rika swore. “They’re really going at it, aren’t they?”

“Yeah,” her brother agreed.

Two shapes soared out of one of the broken windows and landed twenty feet away from us, kicking up dirt on impact, and they resolved into Aífe and the mysterious man, deadlocked again.

“Who is this guy?” Rika asked incredulously.

“I don’t know,” I said, keeping my eyes trained on the action.

“Hero of the Winter Crisis,” Aífe had called him. Except he was apparently a modern enough human who had also been her Master at some point — in another timeline? Probably in a Grail War, like the one from the Fuyuki Singularity. Maybe El-Melloi II would recognize him if we brought the name up. Or Emiya, for that matter.

Either way, if *this* was the sort of thing that became possible when Aífe had her tutelary aspects to make use of, I was sorely missing the fact that she didn’t have them. Being able to fight at *this* level would have been incredible.

The stalemate broke, and the two of them engaged in another flurry of blows, faster this time, and their arms and weapons swung about as blurs. The ringing *bong* of Gáe Bolg echoed the wooden *crack* of Aífe’s ordinary spear, a discordant chorus of collisions that rang out in such quick succession that it was impossible to count by sound alone. My ears ached just hearing it.

Was there even anything we could do in this fight? My power wasn’t here with me — or at least, if it was, there weren’t any bugs around to control — nor my ravens, and I wasn’t even sure we could cast magic in a dream. Command Spells? Somehow, I doubted they would actually accomplish anything, because here, there were no Command Spells, not really, just our brains changing the pigment on our hands because we’d grown used to them being there.

Instead, I could only watch with the twins as those two went back and forth, flitting to and fro at speeds that my eyes simply couldn’t follow. They’d left us behind, so focused on each other that they seemed to have forgotten that we were even here, or even that this wasn’t anything more than a dream.

Maybe it was *because* it was a dream that Aífe was taking it so seriously. This was a moment that couldn’t exist in the real world, something that she could never experience again, so she was doing whatever she could to make the most of it.

I wasn’t sure I could blame her for that. If it had been *my* dream we were stuck in and all of the people I’d loved and lost were there, I wasn’t at all sure I’d be in any hurry to leave it, even if it meant the twins got to see *everything*.

Aífe suddenly broke off and made distance. So quickly I struggled to keep up, she swept her foot across the ground and drug her fingers through the dirt, leaving burning runes in her wake. The stranger mirrored her exactly, and even though he was behind her by a few fractions of a second, somehow, he was still fast enough to finish almost simultaneously.

The realization of what they were about to do only hit me as they were doing it.

“Ochd,” Aífe snarled.

“Deug Odin!” her opponent finished.

“DOWN!” I yelled at the twins, and I grabbed their arms as I dropped straight to the ground as quickly as I could. I squeezed my eyes shut, bracing for what was about to hit.

Twin flashes of light detonated through my eyelids, and a pair of thunderous booms so deep and so powerful that my bones ached from the force behind them exploded from the direction of the two combatants. A hot, searing wind whipped past me, gathering up my hair and throwing it all over the place.

The heat disappeared almost as quickly as it came, replaced by a familiar chill that reached down to my marrow. My eyes snapped back open in time to watch the stranger take a familiar throwing stance, one arm held out for balance and a red spear clasped tightly in the other. Across from him, singed but mostly unharmed, Aífe’s eyes went wide, because she was far too close to avoid that, no matter how quickly she backpedaled.

The snapping of a spider’s thread resounded inside of me.

“Gáe Bolg —”

I did the only thing I could, under the circumstances.

“Prototype!”

*Emergency Evasion!*

Aífe’s body moved faster than fast as the streak of red light took aim at her heart, and she leaned out of the way at an impossible angle, letting it pass through the place where her chest had just been. One of her hands snaked out, viper quick, and snatched the deadly spear out of the air. Much like how Caligula and Romulus had done in Septem.

The ordinary wooden spear was dropped unceremoniously, and Aífe bent and twisted back into that same pose the stranger had just used. A fell chill descended upon the entire valley again, and now it was the stranger’s turn to backpedal as he hastily drew another set of runes.

“Gáe Bolg —”

The deadly red spear flew again, headed the opposite direction from before.

“Prototype!”

Glass shattered as the stranger’s barrier spell broke before the strength of Aífe’s throw, and he couldn’t avoid the point of the blade as it pierced through his vest, his shirt, and then his heart in one go, so deep that it jutted out of his back. Like Caesar had before him, he stumbled back, hunching over the wound and clutching at the spear lodged in his body.

The tension wound in my gut loosened. It was over.

Strangely enough, though, there wasn't any blood. The stranger remained standing, but didn't move, not even to pull the spear from his chest.

"I never taught you that," Aífe said into the sudden silence. "Even if I wanted to, that technique can't be passed down by me."

"Not in the form you use," the stranger agreed, strained. "After all, the bones of that sea monster are far out of your reach now, aren't they? The only thing you can make...is a cheap replica."

Aífe looked down at the spear she had discarded. With the toe of one boot, she kicked it up, and it had become an identical red spear, except whatever it was made from was duller, less vibrant, like it had been made from a weaker, lower quality material. Her face twisted into a snarl.

"Is that what I'm supposed to come to terms with here?" she spat. "That no matter what I do, she'll always come out ahead of me? I'm always going to be second best? A pale imitation standing in her shadow? Are you trying to say I should just accept that and move on?"

"Heh." The stranger chuckled weakly. "Don't spare my feelings, now. I thought I did pretty good."

"You matched the Hound as he was when he left my sister's tutelage," Aífe said, but it was bitter and disappointed, not a compliment.

The stranger sighed, shoulders sagging. "Ah. And...naturally, that means..."

"Yes." Aífe tossed the replica aside like it was cheap trash. "The Hound grew and grew and kept growing. His strength and skill only increased over the course of his adventures. That you matched him at all is praiseworthy, but you only matched him —"

"— at the beginning of his journey," the stranger finished. "Geez. I guess...I still have a ways to go, don't I? I really am the *Hero of the Winter Crisis*."

And then, just like the three young men from before, he was gone. Rika squeaked as the mansion — along with the front step the three of us had wound up sort of sprawled out over — disappeared, too, leaving us to drop to the ground.

"Failure after failure after failure," Aífe said lowly. Her glove creaked as her fist tightened around her spear. "Three warriors of great potential, snuffed out because I hadn't prepared them to face a genuine prodigy. A warrior of the modern era whose training I never completed, left to plateau without my guidance. A failure as a queen, a failure as a teacher — is my last obstacle to be my failure as a mother?"

"H-heh, you're not a failure!" Rika insisted as she scrambled to her feet. "You killed that magical tentacle monster! And that super scary Altera lady! And that Tiberius guy and that Caesar guy!"

Aífe didn't say anything in response to that as Ritsuka and I climbed to our feet, too. If Rika's words reached her at all, she didn't give any sign. Not even a twitch of her lips for the smile she might have been trying to smother.

Instead, she just reached out with one hand, and Gáe Bolg flew back to her palm, like she'd been carrying it the whole time. She turned towards the treacherous path that led towards the castle, away from us.

"Come, Master," she said evenly. "There should only be one more trial for us to vanquish, and then you can all wake up."

"Aífe," I tried, and she glanced over at me, her expression saying what her mouth didn't. Whatever I'd been about to say died in my throat.

She started forward without us, and we fell into step behind her. I wasn't the only one who had to be concerned about the thunderous disposition she had right then.

"What's going on?" Rika whispered my way. "I've never seen Super Action Mom like this before!"

"I'm not sure," I admitted, because we really hadn't. She was normally too composed, too in control of herself. I'd had the thought before that she was actually a really private person, and it was proving even more true than I'd originally thought, because I had no idea how long she must have been stewing on this for it to spill over the way it was right now.

This was different from that book I'd caught her reading. Deeper, more meaningful to her. On some level, I'd known that she wasn't entirely satisfied with how her life had gone from that day onwards, but she'd never let on that it bothered her *this* much.

"If we're here because there's something she needs to resolve," Ritsuka began quietly.

That much seemed obvious enough. Dreaming of your Servant's past was an established enough thing, but getting dragged into their dream was unprecedented and unusual enough that something important was definitely going on.

I just wasn't sure how we were supposed to help her.

"We might need to intervene," I told them. "If the first two got her this worked up, then the third is going to be a doozy."

"How?" Rika asked incredulously. "That Winter Hero guy was fighting on *her* level. We'd be crushed!"

My lips pursed. "I'm working on that. For now... It might not work, but if you see a moment where you think she needs help, don't be afraid to try using a Command Spell."

The twins looked down at the backs of their hands, where the three strokes of their Command Spells lay. We'd been back from Septem more than long enough to restore the ones we'd used at the end, and no matter what I'd thought a minute ago, we wouldn't be leaving again soon enough that we'd have to worry about being down one or two, so it was worth a try if it came down to it.

"Will they really work in a dream?" Ritsuka asked, unknowingly echoing my own doubts.

"Don't be afraid to find out."

“This is gonna be a helluva thing to explain to Da Vinci-chan,” Rika said.

It would be a hell of a thing to explain to Marie, too, and of the two, she was probably going to be less understanding.

We stayed mostly single file down the treacherous path, because the steep cliff and jagged rocks that lay over its edge weren't something any of us was looking forward to testing. Thankfully, nothing else sprung out of the air to attack us, so we made it to the other side unaccosted and none the worse for wear to stand before the gates of the massive curtain wall that leered down at us at the end.

The huge double doors swung open with an ominous creak as we approached as though to welcome us inside. Aífe paused for a moment, then let out a long, low breath through her nose.

“Of course,” she mumbled bitterly, but didn't elaborate.

The doors led to another path, wider and less treacherous than before, but the drop was still steep and ominous, so we took it carefully, sticking as close to Aífe as we could without crowding her. The path itself sloped upwards and wound around to another gate and another wall, and these too opened before us without our group needing to do anything aside from get close.

Past the second gate was a courtyard, a wide, open expanse, easily big enough that I could see an army hundreds strong packed inside it comfortably, and on the opposite side of it was the giant tower I'd seen from afar, jutting up towards the heavens. It was tall enough that Emiya could have seen for miles comfortably, and Arash would probably have called it an ideal sniping spot.

And there, standing at the foot of that tower, familiar red spear in hand...

“Hello, Sister,” Aífe greeted her.

...was a woman. She dressed in dark, skintight clothing, and her long hair fanned out behind her like a cape. An aura of cold calm radiated off of her, like she could kill you in an instant without so much as a twitch of her brow and feel nothing about it. It matched the expressionless look on her face.

“Hello, Aífe,” said the woman who could only be Scáthach.

“Holy cow,” Rika murmured. “There's *two* Super Action Moms! And they're both super hot!”

“If that's Aífe's sister,” Ritsuka began, whispering, “then does that mean... That's the woman who trained Cúchulainn?”

“Yes,” I answered him. “Yes, it is.”

“I thought it would be you,” Aífe said, stepping forward. Scáthach observed her placidly. “Perhaps Connla, maybe the Hound, those were also possibilities I considered, but when I thought about my greatest regrets... They're all tied to you.”

“And mine you,” said Scáthach, still eerily calm. She might as well have been discussing the weather. “There were many things I wished to have done differently. That day, too, is one of them.”

Aífe stopped. “Is it? Have you no pride in your student, who managed to defeat me?”

“I already knew beforehand, he wasn’t ready to face you in honest combat,” said Scáthach. “That was why I tried to keep him from that battle. I knew it could only end in tragedy.”

Aífe chuckled lowly, bitterly.

“Whose? Mine, or his?”

Scáthach closed her eyes briefly. Like she regretted what she was about to say.

“Setanta had the weight of destiny on his side. There was only one outcome to that battle.”

My lips pulled tight. Only one outcome, she said. It was destined. Predetermined. Already decided long in advance. Except I’d faced that sort of thing before, too. Had the odds stacked against me, been told there was no way out — and then I’d *made* one.

Destiny was just an excuse people used to justify their bad decisions.

“Destiny?” Aífe echoed, something dangerous and sharp in her tone. “If something as trite as destiny was enough to defeat me, then I would never have picked up a sword at all. I would have become some king’s broodmare and popped out heirs to great kingdoms, instead of fighting them to test my mettle. It wasn’t *destiny* that guided him that day. It was the one woman in the whole world who knew what I cherished most and told it to him.”

She snarled, “It wasn’t *destiny* that let him win! It was his teacher telling him exactly which button would guarantee his victory!”

My eyes bounced back and forth between them while I watched and listened. Even if the pattern hadn’t already been established, I could tell that this was going to come to blows, it was just a matter of time, and I had to be ready for it when it did.

“I know,” Scáthach agreed, “but you must have seen his talent just as well as I. It was too soon for his life to be cut short.”

“But it was acceptable for mine?” Aífe demanded furiously. “Your precious Hound still had too much life left to live, but mine had gone on long enough that it didn’t matter if he ended it, whatever form that would have taken?” She sneered. “Would you have let him put that sword through my throat?”

“Would you?” Scáthach countered. “I know you too well. Setanta was talented, but you were the greatest woman warrior in the world. Even at his mercy with his sword pressed against your throat, couldn’t you have turned the tables on him, if you truly wanted to?”

This time, Aífe didn’t answer right away.

“Maybe I could have,” she said eventually, some of the fire gone. “Maybe I wasn’t thinking clearly, because he surprised me the way he did. Maybe, in that moment, some part of me admired him.” Her hands trembled. “And maybe it was the look on your face. Like everything had gone exactly as

you had known it would, and for just that moment, I felt as a child again, beaten and defeated by my brilliant sister.”

For a moment, Scáthach bowed her head and closed her eyes, pained. “That was not my intention.”

“No,” Aífe allowed. “You were simply selfish. So selfish and so greedy to keep your pet project alive that whatever he did to me was an ‘acceptable outcome.’ As long as he lived long enough to kill you, right?”

Scáthach didn’t deny it, which, well, that said a lot of things about both her and the sisters’ relationship.

“That’s fucked up,” Rika whispered, summarizing my own thoughts.

“You don’t have to worry about that anymore, Scáthach,” said Aífe. She swept her spear out, holding the red shaft tightly. “Because I’m going to kill you right here and now.”

“It has been a long time since last we fought one another seriously,” Scáthach said. Her eyes widened and her brow furrowed, and a burst of *something* swept out from her, a focused chill that reminded me of the spear they both wielded. “Very well. Let us dance along the path of feats one more time.”

The ground shattered and Rika let out a startled yelp as both sisters disappeared. Suddenly, they were in the middle of the courtyard, a loud *BONG* echoing out from the shafts of their crossed weapons as they collided with the intensity of a detonating bomb. For a tense second, they hung there, staring into each other’s eyes, red against amethyst.

And then, they *moved*, flickering out of sight as they danced back and forth across the courtyard. They reappeared only in the moments when they collided, the brief fractions of a second where they came to a stop, but they were gone again by the time I turned my head to follow. The staccato of their impacts and the trading of their blows seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, and it was impossible to tell which was the original sound and which was just an echo bouncing off of the castle’s stone walls.

It was on a different level than what I’d seen before, in no small part because I *couldn’t* see it. I thought Aífe had already shown us her best, that we’d already had a chance to see what she looked like when she was going all out and holding nothing back, and maybe that was true, but here, she was unbound. Caesar, Tiberius, Caligula, Romulus, Altera — none of them could compare to the sheer power, the unbelievable speed, the raw *physicality* that Scáthach brought out in her.

The same seemed to be true of Scáthach. They were moving too fast for me to get clear looks, but blood was flying in every direction, splashing across the ground, and the brief glimpses showed me the wounds that they came from: they were both giving as good as they got. And even though they were both wounding each other, they were both also healing themselves up almost as soon as the wounds were made.

“Holy cow, look at them go,” Ritsuka whispered.



“I would if I could even *see* them!” said Rika. “Damn! Even that Winter Hero guy didn’t make Super Action Mom go *this* hard!”

A final *BONG* rang out, and the sisters separated, skidding backwards from each other to bleed off momentum. Both of them were panting for breath, their clothing ripped and rent from where their spears had cut into the fabric.

Aífe reached up with one hand, wiping blood away from her cheek with one thumb. The wound had already sealed over seamlessly, leaving a faint smear over undamaged flesh.

“Two thousand years,” she said, “and this is all the further you’ve come?”

“My training has never stopped,” Scáthach replied evenly, “but there is only so much farther one might go without worthy challenges to surmount and worthy enemies to fight.”

Aífe’s lips pulled away from her teeth. “You could have had *me*!”

She kicked off the ground again, racing towards her sister, and the two of them met in the middle once more, exchanging another flurry of blows too fast for me to see.

“An eternity together!” Aífe spat as they fought. “Day after day, challenging our limits, pushing each other even further beyond what should have been possible! Always advancing, never stopping, until even the gods themselves looked upon us with awe!”

“Do you think that would have made you happy?” Scáthach asked placidly.

“Of course it would!” Aífe answered. “Fighting strong enemies, overcoming great challenges, pushing past my limitations — those were the things I *lived* for!”

“Even if it would have meant Connla never existed?”

Aífe...stumbled, for lack of a better word, and this time, I saw it as Scáthach’s red spear — so similar to Aífe’s, and yet also so different — take aim at her throat. But if I could see it, there was no way Aífe couldn’t, and she proved it by dodging out of the way and throwing herself back, creating enough distance to recover. I lifted my arm and prepared to toss another Emergency Evasion or a Momentary Reinforcement her way, in case she needed it.

She didn’t. Scáthach didn’t follow up. I let some of the tension ease out of me.

“If you had never been defeated by Setanta, you would never have taken him to your bed,” said Scáthach. “Our rivalry would have continued unabated, our skirmishes would have escalated. He would have completed his training under me and left, and your paths would never have crossed.”

“Are you saying,” Aífe said lowly, her voice tremulous, “that you did me a kindness?”

“You would never have known the joy of motherhood,” Scáthach continued to explain. “You would never have had the experience of raising a son and watching him grow, as I did. Your own excellence would have been your undoing.”

“THEN WHY DID YOU LET HIM DIE?” Aífe roared, more furious than I had ever seen her.

She took off like a jet, and she attacked Scáthach with a thunderous blow that seemed to shake the whole castle. Scáthach blocked it and held it off, but only just, because I could see her arms tremble under Aífe’s strength.

“I taught him everything I could!”

She threw Scáthach back, and then took up the javelin throwing pose. This time, she didn’t spend the time or energy to incant her Noble Phantasm, she just threw the spear with all of her strength, aiming to take her sister’s heart out with nothing more than raw speed and power.

Scáthach deflected it with another *BONG*.

“I pushed him as far as he could go, and I never let him slow down!”

Aífe seemed to teleport across the distance, her fist drawn back, and Scáthach leapt out of the way as the punch passed through the space her head had just occupied. The wall behind her exploded, tossing chunks of gray stone all about.

“I taught him side by side with *you*, and I watched him soak up our knowledge like a sponge! He learned everything we had by the time he was only *seven*!”

She chased Scáthach, throwing punches and kicks with such speed that I couldn’t follow them anymore, and the only thing more incredible than how fast she was laying into Scáthach was the fact that Scáthach was *still* managing to dodge it all.

“There was only one thing he never learned —”

Another *Thunder Feat* whooped out of Aífe’s knuckles, soaring past Scáthach’s shoulder, and in the distance, the far wall cratered.

“— and you *refused* to teach it to him!”

Scáthach backpedaled, and Aífe held out her hand instead of following. *Gáe Bolg*, *her* *Gáe Bolg*, leapt back into her hand.

“You even refused to let *me* teach it to him!”

Bloodlust chilled the air as Aífe’s *Gáe Bolg* ignited with cold power, sucking in all the warmth from the courtyard. Aífe spread her legs, thrust out one arm, and cocked the other back until the spear ran parallel with her body.

“If you covet this technique so dearly,” Aífe said with deadly venom, “then you can go ahead and die to it!”

Scáthach spread her own legs, mirroring Aífe’s stance, and cocked her arm back.

“*Gáe Bolg* —”

And then, at the last second, she hesitated. I realized what was about to happen a fraction of a second too late to do anything about it.

“Prototype!”

Like it had so many times before, Gáe Bolg flew like a missile across the distance, too fast for me to see as anything more than a streak of light. Scáthach didn’t try to dodge or to block or even parry. She just stood there and let it hit her, folding over the spear as it pierced through her heart and stumbling backwards.

The twins gasped from next to me, but no one seemed more shocked by what had happened than Aífe herself.

“You...”

Scáthach gulped down a ragged breath, her hands clutching the spear as red blood poured from the wound and ran down the blade and the shaft. The front of her skintight bodysuit darkened.

“You invented that technique,” Aífe said. “There’s no way...!”

“You were right,” Scáthach rasped. “I was selfish. I was too selfish. I wanted my star pupil to survive. I wanted him to overcome all challengers, to remain my undefeated student, even if it cost my nephew his life. I wanted him to one day return and take my life, so that I could finally die like a human being.”

She reached out with one bloodied hand as though to cup Aífe’s face, but Aífe was too far away. Scáthach smiled a small smile as a trickle of red dribbled down from the side of her mouth.

“I wanted my sister to live the life I couldn’t have,” she went on. “I wanted her to live and die as a human being. I wanted her to know the simple, ordinary joys that I had to leave behind. Most of all...I wanted her to be free of the burden that would come with taking my life. I wanted her hands to never be soaked in my blood.”

“That’s it?” Aífe asked, voice trembling. “You came all this way, you invaded my dream, you set up these obstacles for me to face...all so that you could tell me that you loved me too much to let me suffer like you have?”

Scáthach’s smile grew brighter and broader until it crinkled her eyes, and she tilted her head a little, the way a mother might when leaning down to praise her daughter.

“I also...selfishly wanted to see my sister’s face again.”

Slowly, Aífe walked towards her sister, and Rika moved to follow her, but I threw out my arm to keep her back with us. She looked at me, a question on her face, but I ignored it in favor of watching Aífe.

She came to a stop within arm’s reach of Scáthach.

“As children, I idolized you,” she confessed. “I saw your brilliance and selfishly wanted it for my own. And so I took up a sword —”

“And challenged me to a duel.” Scáthach chuckled weakly, flecks of blood flying from her lips. “You had courage and drive —”

“But no skill,” Aífe finished. She reached out and cupped her sister’s cheek tenderly. “I lived in your shadow for so long, and when it finally seemed that I’d grown out of it, you shoved me back in, using your prodigy as the tool.”

Scáthach sighed. “I’m sorry.”

“As am I,” said Aífe. “For not realizing when you were looking out for me, even if it wasn’t in a way I could appreciate. You’re right. If not for that day, Connla would never have existed, and I would not have known the joy of having him, raising him, nor the pride of seeing him grow.” She paused. “But you’re also wrong. I would gladly have spent eternity fighting with you, beside, and against you, and even knowing what it would cost, I would not have regretted it.”

“That is my greatest regret,” Scáthach admitted. “That I was always underestimating you, even when I should have known better.”

And then she vanished, bursting apart into golden dust. It glittered and disappeared in a nonexistent wind.

“And mine,” said Aífe, addressing the empty space, “is that I left you alone in that hellscape, doomed to an eternity of solitude amongst its ghosts.”

Her hand fell back down to her side, and she let out a heavy sigh. “But that is how regrets work. You can never regret something that you can change.”

“Super Action Mom,” said Rika.

“I’m sorry to have dragged the three of you into my mess, Ritsuka, Rika, Taylor,” said Aífe, finally addressing us. “No doubt, it was also Scáthach’s intent that you might see me in this moment of vulnerability — more of her meddling.”

“It’s okay,” said Ritsuka. “I know we didn’t do much except stand here and watch, but...”

“I think you’re even cooler now, Super Action Mom!” Rika blurted out.

Aífe ducked her head. I could make out the traces of a smile on her lips.

“Don’t think for an instant this will mean I’m going to take it easy on you in training,” she warned. “But...for tomorrow, I think I can give you the day off.”

“Oh my god!” Rika gasped. “Onii-chan, now I *know* this is a dream!”

“Now if only we could figure out how to make it last another week,” Ritsuka agreed.

“Right?”

Aífe chuckled and shook her head, staring off into the distance. What she was seeing, what she was thinking about... Maybe she was just wistfully reminiscing about the sister who had just disappeared.

“I hope the rest of your dreams tonight are a little less eventful.”