

Chapter I

The morning star shined down on the small fishing village of Pufi. The rhythmic sound of the tide creeping up onto the sandy beach was quite the calming melody to wake up to. For Philippis, it was the only proper way to start one's day.

Early to bed, early to rise was her motto, and she made sure her daughter followed it. She awoke filled with a sense of pride, seeing that her twelve-year-old girl had risen before her. The young girl's disheveled, auburn hair and contagious yawns told her that sleep had yet to fully break its hold on her.

"Morning... mama." the girl rubbed her eyes as she greeted her parent.

Philippis smiled. "Good morning to you as well, Filomene. I trust you slept well?"

Filomene nodded, still rubbing her eyes. She was too tired to say another word.

Philippis knelt down and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Why don't you go sit down for a bit. I'll have breakfast ready shortly."

Filomene didn't have to be told twice, though she did need some help getting into her seat. By the time Philippis had made it over to the oven, she heard her daughter snoring.

"Baby steps."

Philippis got to work preparing a meal for the two of them: just a few flatbreads with some wild berries she'd picked yesterday. As she warmed the flatbread in the clay oven, her gaze drifted down the hall towards shelves lined with fine pelts, linen, and silk. She took a deep breath in, catching a whiff of such aromas as roots like madder and flowers such as saffron, along with the more pungent smells of crushed snails and iron salts.

"We've got a busy season coming up," she said, flipping one of the flatbreads. "People always want to look their best in the spring."

As she went to set the table, she eyed Filomene, bent over with her head resting against the mango wood table, her hair draped across as though it were a spilled drink. Philippis set her plate down with just a tad more force than usual, and her daughter shot up like a sunflower.

"I wasn't sleeping," she said, clutching her chest. "I swear it."

Philippis chuckled. "So long as you keep one eye open. You never know when..."

"Danger may strike," Filomene finished.

"I have taught you well."

Phillips pat her daughter's head and served her food. Filomene licked her lips as she eyed the hot berries red and black drizzling atop her stack of warm flatbreads. Ever since her growth spurt a year back, her appetite had grown all the greater. Before Philippis had even taken her seat, the girl had already plopped one of the hot berries in her mouth, staining her lips and her fingertips.

"You always did love raspberries," Philippis said. "I can only hope you remember the best spots to pick them on your hunt."

Filomene nodded. "East of the sunlit grove, but it will be a fool's errand, as they won't be in season until the summer."

Philippis gave a slight smile. "A test. One that you easily passed."

Filomene took a big bite out of her bread. "Too eazee." she swallowed, patting her chest as the food traveled down. "I know every bush and tree from here till the river. I even know where to dig for roots. But none of the animals I want to hunt eat those."

Philippis sighed. "Don't expect to hunt such a large beast on your first hunt. You'll have many more hunts in the future."

Filomene sighed, shoving some berries into her mouth. Her daughter always tried to fill her cheeks as much as possible before swallowing.

"I know," Filomene said. "But you'd be really proud if I bagged a chimera?"

"Whatever beast Iagannathos delivers to you will be cause for celebration," Philippis said. "But we've still got a week before that day. Until then, I'll be needing you to help me around the shop. I trust your fingers have healed since last year?"

Filomene swallowed, a tingle creeping up her back and shoulders. "Needles hurt."

Philippis chuckled. "You fear homely duties more than the wild beasts?"

Filomene didn't respond. She continued shoving food in her mouth until her plate was nearly cleared. "We've still got time before we have to open up shop though. Could we practice outside?"

Philippis eyed the window. The sun's light was still dim, and many in the village had yet to rise.

"I don't see why not," she said.

Filomene grinned, her teeth stained red and black. She ate the last of her food as fast as she could, kicking her legs in excitement. Philippis didn't even try to keep up with her daughter. She'd simply eat later.

Filomene ran out the back door, while Philippis set the dishes aside. By the time she'd caught up with her daughter, Filomene had already grabbed a dull sword still a bit too big for her, even when held in both hands. Philippis grabbed a practice blade of her own, a tad worn, with a few chips scattered here and there.

"Suppose the shop has kept me busier than usual." regardless, she held her blade out, the dulled steel failing to even reflect the morning sun.

Filomene tried her best to imitate the stance her mother had shown her many times before. She was a completely different person than the child who could barely hold her eyelids open before breakfast, but Philippis was already noting all the openings in her stance.

Without warning, Philippis swiftly jabbed her sword forward, poking the young girl in the stomach with just enough force to be annoying.

"No fair!" Filomene said. "You didn't say start."

"A beast in the woods won't give you warning," Philippis said, resting her sword on her shoulder.

"Beasts also don't use swords," Filomene replied.

Philippis tapped her chin and nodded. "You have a point."

She gently jabbed again. This time, Filomene barely blocked it, taking a few steps back. But Philippis didn't let up. She kept poking at her daughter, just fast enough to keep her on her toes without overwhelming the poor girl.

"But what a beast of the wilderness does have," Philippis said, continuing her faux assault, "are teeth and claws that can pierce the finest armor."

She danced swiftly around her daughter, bonking her on the head with her sword.

"Ow!" Filomene said, nearly dropping her own blade to rub her head.

"A drop tiger will come at you from above," Philippis said. "Its eyes can spot you from atop the akrodrýon. Before you can even blink," she swung her sword at Filomene's neck, who just barely tripped out of the way, "it will sever your jugular."

Filomene scrambled back to her feet as she tried to catch her breath. But Philippis wasn't going to give her such a chance. She swung her sword right at her feet, and Filomene leaped in the air to avoid the blade.

“The makrioi will come at you from deep within the bowels of the earth,” Philippis said. “They will latch onto your leg with teeth unnumbered and suck it dry.”

Filomene, tired of being on the defensive side, stabbed at her mother, who proceeded to block her with ease.

“There are beasts who could shrug off your blade as though it were a prick from a needle,” Philippis said. “Serpents that could swallow you whole.”

“Like the queen’s pelt?” Filomene asked.

Philippis nodded, continuing her assault. “Indeed. Not even I could stand up to one of the yuga pythons.”

“I don’t... believe that.” Filomene huffed and puffed, struggling to keep her sword up. “Snakes... can’t stand up to you. They... don’t have legs.”

Philippis couldn’t help but laugh at her daughter’s observation. It was the kind of point she’d have made as a child.

Filomene, seeing a chance to strike, ran up and swung her sword right at her mother’s stomach. Philippis coughed as the blunt sword hit right between her abdominal muscles. However, she remained on her feet, grinning down at her daughter.

“A good plan,” she said, raising her own sword. “Should have planned a little further ahead though.”

She brought down her sword, bumping Filomene on the head with more force than before. The young girl fell to her knees, her sword tumbling a ways way from her.

Philippis knelt down, patting her daughter’s head with one hand and soothing her own stomach with her other; she really had hit harder than she’d thought she would.

“I think that’s enough for now,” she said, casting a warm smile on her daughter.

Filomene nodded, trying unsuccessfully to hide her embarrassment. “I’ll beat you one day.”

Philippis ran her hand up and down her daughter’s head. She gently lifted her daughter’s face so they could look each other in the eyes. “And that day will be my proudest moment.”

Philippis reached around Filomene with her other arm and pulled her in for a hug. Filomene returned the gesture, resting her cheek against her mother’s arm.

“I’m gonna do well on my hunt,” Filomene said. “I promise, mamma.”

Philippis tightened her grip. “I know.”

Suddenly, the loud cry of a horn echoed across the village. Birds took flight from the nearby forest as the horn blared ever louder a second time.

“The watchtower?” Philippis said.

“What is it?” Filomene asked.”

Philippis put a hand on her daughter’s shoulder, gesturing her to stay put. She made her way through the store, grabbing her real sword quickly, and headed out her front door. Many more women emerged from their homes alongside her, though many among them quickly retreated indoors upon getting a quick glance of the approaching force that emerged from the forest. Women on horseback, bearing a flag that struck fear into even the most hardened of warriors. A flaming ring of many colors, the symbol of the most feared outlaws in all of Califa.

The cry of the lookout confirmed their worries. “The Ring of Fire! They’re here.”

Philippis felt a rock form in her chest. The wild cries of these vagabonds nearly drowned out even the lookout. Those who had remained, many a part of the village watch, outside bore arms, and Philippis rushed to join them.

“What are they doing here?” one of the women asked.

“You mean what are we still doing here?” another asked. “We can’t fight them.”

Philippis glared back at the women. “Hold your ground, but keep your weapons sheathed. We don’t yet know the reason for their visit.”

But Philippis found herself struggling to heed her own advice. As the horses stopped just a few meters away from them, she found her hand resting on the pommel of her blade. All eyes were on the towering young woman riding at the vanguard, and the flaming feathers of many colors that burned bright like the sun on her back. Flames flew out all around her, sparks and embers just barely missing any of the shops in the small town, all the while the swirling shades of orange, red, green, and deep lavender took the shapes of dizzying eyes that etched themselves into the mind’s eyes of those who gazed upon this woman.

The woman disembarked from her steed, standing just a bit taller than the massive horse. Despite her imposing stature, she was among the youngest in her group of brigands, though she carried herself with the manner of a general. She brushed her fiery blonde locks from her eyes, burning intense like the flames behind her, and eyed the welcoming party from atop the vantage point her height granted.

A sly grin crept across her face. “What do we have here?” she patted her bottom. “I’ve been riding bareback for days now, and the first stop I make I’m greeted by swords and shields? Have we just decided to scatter the laws of hospitality to the wind?” she wiggled her fingers as she said this. “Wouldn’t be the first time I suppose.”

None in the watch responded. They just stood their ground, though it was shaky ground at best. Philippis could sense that some wished to turn tail and run.

The towering woman chuckled. "So, is it gonna be swords?" she snapped her fingers, a bright spark igniting and then vanishing as her women drew their arms. "Because we can do swords."

Many in the watch drew their weapons in turn, but Philippis held back. Before she could speak up, however, a booming voice beat her to it.

"Stand down!" a boisterous woman in the back called.

The crowd parted as a heavy-set woman pushed her way to the front of the crowd. Dressed in a vibrant red tunic and an intricate pelt of a chimera, she bore no weapon, but carried herself like a true warrior.

The woman bowed her head, folding her tattooed hands in front of her. "Greetings. I am Myrina, chief of the village Pufi."

Iris rubbed her chin and nodded. "Finally, some respect." she gestured to her girls, without even looking back at them, and they put away their weapons.

Philippis breathed a sigh of relief.

"Might I ask what brings you here, traveler?" Myrina asked.

Iris rolled her eyes. "So, what, are we not on a first name basis then?"

Myrina cleared her throat. "My apologies?"

"Come on," Iris replied, pointing to the crowd. "I know that you all know who I am. I mean, I wouldn't be getting this kind of welcome if you didn't."

The gang member who had rode up at Iris' right dismounted from her horse. She barely came up to Iris' shoulder, not counting her magenta hair, spiked like a thistle, but she bared her fangs so to speak, as though she were the girl's attack dog. Even her pelt, that of a rouge tree kangaroo, had the hair on its neck raised.

"Such disrespect," the woman said, spitting slightly as she spoke. "You all are in the presence of royalty. You should be on your hands and knees, lapping up dirt."

Iris' girls raised their hands high and cheered. Iris, meanwhile, basked in the glory afforded to her.

Myrina bowed her head. "We meant no disrespect. You must understand, 'tis not every day our quaint village receives so many travelers, much less led by one of your status."

Iris scanned the village. "No kidding. This place is pretty far off the map, wouldn't you say?"

“This village has stood since before the time of the first queens,” Myrina said. “’Twas one of the first lands dedicated to Iagannathos.”

Iris nodded, rubbing her chin. “Yes, and our father on high clearly has other priorities than checking up on it every other generation. Still, you’ve got a nice clearing out back. No shortage of land to set up our tents.”

Philippis nearly did a double take, and a quick glance around confirmed that many of her sisters were in the same boat as her.

“I... I’m sorry?” Myrina asked.

“We’re tired,” Iris replied. “We need a place to set up camp for a few days.”

The villagers murmured amongst themselves.

Myrina cleared her throat. “You’re passing through?”

“Pretty much,” Iris said.

Philippis clutched the pommel of her sword tightly. She felt an intense heat on the back of her neck and creeping down her chest. Iris’ flaming pelt glared her way, her eyes growing sore the longer she gazed into them. Even her nostrils felt as though they were on fire.

Before Myrina could respond, Philippis took a step forward, sword still in its scabbard. “Is that truly the nature of your business?”

Iris was taken aback. She glanced at the one who had spoken up to her, her eyes going wide as her gaze fell on Philippis. She brushed Myrina aside and walked right up to her.

“Well, well,” Iris said, looking down on Philippis, hands on her hips. “There’s a face I never thought I’d see again.” she cocked her head to the right. “You are who I think you are, right?”

Philippis cleared her throat as she gazed up at the woman standing head and shoulders above her. Iris’ flaming blonde hair nearly touched the top of her head, acting like a curtain that shielded her face from all but her view. Philippis was left staring into the latter’s deep violet eyes, resembling a cloud at sunset, yet burning with the same intensity as the flaming cloak on her back.

“What’s wrong?” Iris asked, raising her brow. “Not even a simple greeting, Phili?”

Philippis stood as tall and straight as she could. “I was never one to beat around the bush. Your actions are hardly a secret to anyone. ‘Tis only fair to question your words.”

Iris smirked. “Cute.”

She reached down and pinched Philippis' cheek, like a mother would do to their child. Philippis was none too pleased with the gesture, especially when she could see Filomene watching the whole matter from behind their door. She'd told her daughter to stay put, but she couldn't exactly blame her for being curious about the crowd of unfamiliar people making a scene.

Iris gave Philippis a pat on the cheek. "Real strange I even have to justify myself here. I mean, this land is my birthright after all."

Philippis grabbed Iris' wrist before she could pat her cheek again. Iris chortled, frowning her brow.

"You still haven't answered my question," Philippis said.

Iris gently pulled free of Philippis' light grip, massaging her wrist. "It's as I already said. We're just here to recoup after our travels. Do you really want to make this a problem?"

Philippis grit her teeth, her lips sealed so as to mask her anger.

Myrina took the reins. "Of course not. We are always willing to offer hospitality. We merely ask that certain... guidelines be adhered to."

Iris glanced over at the chieftain, though Philippis couldn't help but feel that she was still the one on her mind.

"We're not looking for any trouble," Iris said. "We'll even hand over our weapons if it'll make you feel all warm and cozy."

Philippis wanted to scoff. Unlike many in her gang, Iris didn't carry a weapon, or even much in the way of clothing besides her flaming cape. Two pieces of snow-white cloth covered her privates, and her hands were bound tight with leather. That fact didn't put her any more at ease in her presence, especially as the air around her grew hotter by the second.

"If you are true in your words," Myrina said, "then we welcome you. Do be warned, many in the village are fishers. It can get quite noisy even before sunrise."

"I'll keep that in mind," Iris replied. "For now, we'll just get settled in." she gestured to her girls. "Set up the tents. I'll be with you all shortly."

With that, Iris' girls rode off towards the outskirts of the village, leaving Iris alone. Alas, even outnumbered, her presence was overwhelming.

Philippis couldn't help but shiver. She glanced over at Filomene, who still looked confused on the whole matter.

Iris' gaze followed Philippis', falling onto Filomene. She glanced back and forth between the two, before she put two and two together. "And what have we here?"

Filomene cowered behind the wall of their house. Without a second thought, Philippis put herself between Iris and her daughter. Iris looked down at her, eyebrow raised and hands on her hips.

“You really think that’s gonna work?” Iris asked.

“You don’t have permission to enter my home,” Philippis said.

Iris shook her head and patted Philippis on the shoulder. “Relax. Just a little surprised is all.” after one last pat, she turned on a dime, nearly bumping into Philippis with her bottom. “I’m parched. We can catch up later, Phili.”

She waved back at Philippis, wiggling her fingers as she made her way across the street towards the local tavern.

Philippis’ only concern was Filomene. She ran over to their lodging, where Filomene stood waiting for her.

“What is it, mama?” her daughter asked.

Philippis crouched down, looking at the daughter directly in the eye.

“Everyone looked scared,” Filomene said. “They were scared of that girl. I heard them say the Ring of Fire. Aren’t they bandits?”

Philippis shook her head. “Listen to me. There’s no danger. You don’t need to worry yourself. Can I trust you’ll be on your best behavior?”

Filomene glanced over at the tavern before looking back at her mother and nodding. “Yes, mama.”

Philippis pat her girl on the cheek. “Good girl.” she pressed her thumb to her forehead. “Daughter of Iagannathos. Now, go get the shop set up. I’ll be back shortly.”

Filomene was clearly still on edge, but she didn’t question her mother further. Taking a deep breath, Philippis approached Myrina.

“Are you okay?” the chieftain asked.

“That’s a stupid question,” Philippis said.

Myrina sighed. “Surely you know I couldn’t tell the watch to drive them off? I’d be sending them to their deaths.”

Philippis sighed. “You’re right. You made the right choice. They agreed to your terms. That’s all there is to it.”

But Philippis knew it wasn't that simple. All around her were sisters wanting to raise their voices in objection to this recent development. Truthfully, she counted herself among them.

Myrina nodded. "We have the boon of Iagannathos. Besides, I've seen worse than her out at sea."

Philippis bit her lip, Iris' laugh echoing from inside the local pub. "I would have to disagree."

The village was rife with murmurs and curses under one's breath all throughout the day, but the Ring of Fire's camp was set up unimpeded. Many had gone to Myrina, but she'd shut it down. The message was clear: none were to harass the "weary travelers."

Throughout all the kerfuffle, Iris had spent most of her day at Evandre's tavern, with many of her girls having joined her after their camp was set up. Even as the crescent moon shined down from on high, a candle still sat lit in the pub's window, and drunken chants echoed into the night like the roar of a chimera.

From her second story window, seated by her daughter's bed, Philippis eyed the scene, before turning her gaze to the many tents set up outside of town. She ran her fingers through Filomene's auburn locks, as her daughter lay deep in sleep.

"Iris." she clutched her daughter's hair. "A name I could have gone the rest of my life without hearing again."

She gazed down at her side, where a long sword leaned against the bed. She moved her hand down to the golden pelt that covered her daughter. Though worn, it made for a fine blanket.

Suddenly, there was a knock at her door. She tensed up and looked down at her daughter, not the least bit disturbed by the sound.

Another knock. This time louder. She peered out her window. Down at her front door was Iris, glancing up at her and holding a large wine jug. The fiery woman glanced up at her, sticking her tongue out playfully.

"Gonna leave me hanging?" she asked.

Philippis wanted nothing more than to ignore her, but she knew that wasn't an option. Glancing back at her daughter, just now rustling a bit in her sleep, she pat her head and planted a kiss on her cheek. She grabbed her sword, and headed downstairs. She opened the door, where Iris stood waiting, gazing down at her with a dazed look and rosy cheeks.

"Took you long enough," Iris said.

"Tis a late hour for visitors," Philippis said, squinting. The flames on Iris' back shone all the brighter in the dark of night.

Iris shook her head. "You're still awake, are you not?" she presented a large jug. "I bought a drink."

"Did you not drink your fill at the pub?" Philippis asked.

Iris scoffed, her breath tainted with the smell of red wine. "I could drag you over there if you'd like?"

Philippis knew she wasn't kidding with that statement. She stood aside, allowing Iris entry. Iris glanced around the shop as Philippis lead her to the backroom, where a table and several chairs awaited her. She plopped down on the chair, setting the jug down beside her, and propped her bare feet onto the table. With just a wiggle of her toes, she conjured up a few sparks around her soles, leaning back and sighing.

"That feels the best after being on your feet all night," she said. "You should really let me treat you."

Philippis didn't reply as she grabbed two cups and set them on the table. Iris shrugged and dipped hers into the jug, filling hers to the brim. She waited for Philippis to do the same.

"Not thirsty?" Iris asked.

Philippis relented and filled her cup. The wine smelled strong; she couldn't help but wonder if it was foreign.

Iris dipped her finger into her glass, setting the drink ablaze. As quickly as she'd done that, she downed the entire cup, flames and all, before blowing out puffs of smoke.

"Still showing off with that trick?" Philippis asked.

Iris chuckled. "What can I say? I have an acquired taste. Not like I'm the only one. The stories I could tell about the supreme general." she eyed Philippis' sword, still at her side. "How long has it been since you used that thing?"

Philippis took a sip of her drink. "Not long enough."

"Such a shame," Iris said. "You were a great soldier. Could have gone places if you wanted."

"But I didn't want to."

Iris nodded, glancing around the backroom. "Hence... all this. When did it all start? After you had that little brat up there?"

Something triggered in Philippis. She stood up and slammed her fist on the table. Even Iris was taken aback.

“You don’t speak of her that way,” she said. “You don’t even think of her that way.”

Iris nodded. “Okay. Sorry.”

The two sat in silence for a while. Iris filled her cup once more, not even bothering to light it up. Philippis still hadn’t finished her first. As she’d guessed from the smell, it was a strong drink; not diluted in the slightest.

Not that she’d expected anything less from this vagabond.

It was Iris who finally broke the silence. “Could I ask about him?”

Philippis sighed. “Her father? Nothing to tell. We met at the hunt. We did the deed.”

Iris winced. “You make sex sound like a tally on a checklist. I think this store owner’s life has gone to your brain, Phili.”

Philippis rolled her eyes. “Do you truly just wish to sit here and talk about the good old days?”

Iris scoffed, waving her cup around. “Nothing good about them. Each and every second tainted by those bitches.” she waved her cup at Philippis. “You included.”

Iris’ burning, violet eyes shot daggers right at her, but Philippis refused to break eye contact.. The temperature of the room grew hotter, and each flaming eye on Iris’ pelt swayed in a hypnotic pattern. Philippis felt the scar on her chest twinge and burn.

Iris continued. “But you’d do it all again, wouldn’t you?”

Philippis cleared her throat. Her thoughts were on her daughter, sleeping soundly upstairs.

“Wouldn’t you?” Iris asked.

“Without a second thought,” Philippis said.

Iris nodded. Her gaze grew a tad softer. She lowered her feet off the table, the tops of her knees nearly hitting the bottom of it, and folded her hands together.

“Smart,” Iris said, still nodding. “If you’d lied, I think I might have killed you.”

Philippis clutched her sword’s pommel. The room had grown cooler once more, yet her palm was still covered in sweat.

Iris stood up, downing the rest of her drink. Philippis didn’t rise.

“It’s getting late,” Iris said. “Keep the wine.”

And with that, Iris took her leave. As soon as she heard the door shut behind her “guest”, Philippis clutched her aching chest, gasping for air as she collapsed to the floor. Her sweat ran cold, her mouth left dry as stale bread.

Her whole body trembled, but she managed to pick herself up. She grabbed her cup of wine and drank, only to spit it out and throw the clay cup aside. It shattered as it hit the floor.

Philippis feared she would get no sleep tonight.

Chapter II

Philippis drifted in and out of sleep through the night, staying by Filomene’s side the whole time. The scar on her chest had ached all throughout, more than it had in years. Each heart beat served a reminder of that lingering pain.

As the last stars extinguished in the morning sky, she sat on Filomene’s bed, brushing away some strands of hair from her daughter’s face. She had slept through it all, unaware of all that had transpired in their house.

“She has always been a deep sleeper. It will not serve her well on her hunt.”

Philippis buried her head in her hands. The arrival of Iris had nearly made her forget about the upcoming ceremony. She breathed deep before letting out a sigh, feeling her hot, wet breath on her palms.

“Yesterday was a lot. She’s performed exceptionally in her training. Must I be so hard on her?”

She probed her mind for an answer, and it showed her no mercy. The six upcoming days weighed down on her like a milestone hanging around her neck, dragging her further and further along the passage of time.

“When did the days grow so short?”

“Mama?” a drowsy voice asked.

Philippis glanced over at Filomene, now sitting up in bed, a concerned look on her face.

“Are you okay?” Filomene asked.

Philippis nodded, placing her hands in her lap. "Yes. I just... came to get you for breakfast."

Filomene's gaze drifted towards her mother's hand, laid flat on her lap. "Were you crying?"

Philippis shook her head. "No. No, don't worry yourself. My eyes are just tired is all." she pat her daughter's knee. "Now, come along. We need to set up shop soon."

Filomene got up and followed her mother, all the while keeping her eyes down at her feet. Philippis knew her daughter too well. She didn't believe her mother as she once did without question. These thoughts lingered with her all through breakfast, though she put on a brave face for whatever it was worth.

Iris' girls were quite the rowdy bunch, with many of them still hungover from last night. At the very least, they hadn't caused any property damage yet – I suppose even they respected the law of hospitality to some degree – but Philippis could tell from the window of her shop that the whole atmosphere of the town had changed overnight. Many stayed indoors, save for those of the village watch on duty and the few brave enough to open up shop for the vagabonds roaming the streets.

Philippis counted herself among the latter. She had a business to run, and orders to fulfill.

Of course, most of her potential customers today were from among the Ring of Fire. Most of them were young women just going around the village, seeing what it had to offer after a long night at Evandre's pub. It was clear some of them had never entered a tailor's shop, as she'd been given several comments throughout the day pertaining to how much her establishment smelled, the result of days of dying fabrics. She was used to hearing these comments from Filomene's friends rather than those decked in their pelts.

As for Filomene, she was helping around the shop as usual: fetching tools, moving inventory, and such. She had largely kept her distance from many of the customers, only speaking when she was spoken to.

"Be on your best behavior," Philippis had told her before they opened. "Iagannathos smiles on his daughters who care for travelers."

Philippis almost wished she could believe her own words, but, regardless of the character of this new clientele, more and more visited throughout the day, many even making purchases. Just a few weeks back, she'd made a trip to a port town a few days away to buy silk from the east.

One of Iris' girls had been browsing around her establishment for some time now. Unlike the others, she hadn't even mentioned the stench. Her eyes were focused on a sky blue silk hanging on the rack.

"So this is silk then?" she said. "I heard the dame say it was nice stuff, but I still can't believe it comes from worms. It doesn't look anything like a worm."

Before Philippis could correct her, Filomene stepped forward.

“It... it isn’t their pelt,” she said. “It’s their cocoons. They m- make them out of one single thread.”

“Really?” the girl asked. “So you’re saying it’s like some sort of butterfly then?”

“A moth,” Filomene corrected, beating her mother once again.

The girl shook her head, still trying to wrap her head around it all.

“Would you be interested in making a purchase?” Philippis asked.

The girl felt the silk, deep in thought.

Filomene raised her hand. “We, we can offer you a deal. How about ten percent...”

Philippis placed a hand on her daughter’s shoulder. This was far from the first time she’d had to reign her in; no sooner had she learned the ways of business, she started driving bargains that were a tad too generous for their coffer’s liking. Her daughter had heard her haggle many a times with buyers, so she had only herself to blame for this.

Iris’ girl reached into her satchel and pulled out a few gold coins. “What kind of tunic could this get me?”

Filomene’s eyes went wide. She’d never seen so much money come from one person. Even Philippis was a tad surprised, but she kept it to herself.

“I think we could work something out,” Philippis said. “I’ll need to take some measurements though.”

That purchase was just the first of many that day. Philippis figured that girl must have told the others because by afternoon, even the pungent smell that filled her establishment – the result of days of dying fabrics – couldn’t keep these new customers away.

“That pink would look dashing on me,” one said.

“How much for the jade silk?” another asked.

“Is this really from the east?”

These women paid good as well, often paying more than Philippis’ asking price. She couldn’t help but feel a bit dirty accepting money that, for all she knew, was stolen, but she didn’t ask questions at the harbor, and she wasn’t about to start here. That was one of the first rules you learn as a business woman.

Of course, among these customers were some drunkards and hungover ruffians. Philippis had managed to deal with them well enough with a quick glimpse at her sword; she wasn't about to let Filomene dirty her hands with them.

Late in the afternoon, they'd had many orders placed by these new customers. Philippis had already gotten a head start on them; it was going to be a late night for certain, and she'd had a rough sleep last night on top of it all.

Filomene, meanwhile, could hardly believe her eyes as she glanced at all the money they'd made.

"They paid us so much," she said. "They didn't even rob us. Oh, mama. Can we get a special dinner tonight?"

Philippis shook her head. "Not tonight, I'm afraid. We've got many orders to finish. Tomorrow perhaps."

Filomene sighed. "Right. Of course."

"No need to be so down, small child," a voice chimed in

Looking up from her work, Philippis spied an all too familiar face standing in their doorway. Decked in the pelt of a large, flat frog that dwarfed her rather petite stature, the lavender-haired woman strode into their establishment. Her get up almost overshadowed the large stick she was nibbling on.

"Iaso," Filomene said, running up to greet her.

"Philippis' child," the woman replied, removing the gnawed stick from her mouth. "You remember what we said about personal space. If I'm not examining you, stay outside of arm's reach."

Filomene stopped in her tracks and bowed her head. "S-sorry."

Iaso adjusted her thick glasses and put her stick back in her mouth. "Not an issue."

"Greetings, Iaso," Philippis said. "Surprised to see you out and about."

"I need to move my legs," Iaso replied. "Get the blood flowing to the brain and all that. Not gonna change that up because of these ruffians. Speaking of which, I saw a lot of them leaving here just now. Wanted to make sure you weren't gonna get robbed."

Filomene waved to her. "Here to buy a tunic?"

Iaso chuckled, taking the stick out of her mouth for a second. "Maybe. Just maybe. You know me, hardly one for flashy fashion."

Philippis could no longer ignore the stick in her mouth. "New treatment?"

Iaso raised the stick up. "A twig from the black wood tree. I'm thinking that its bark may serve to enhance one's psyche." she held the stick up to Philippis. "Care to try?"

Philippis shook her head, and stopped Filomene from raising her hand. "I'll be fine."

Iaso shrugged. "Suit yourself. Just glad to see you two are keeping your heads above water."

Just then, two more girls entered the establishment. Philippis had seen them before; they were the two who had rode in right behind Iris just yesterday, and they both seemed to be of similar age to her. The one decked in the kangaroo pelt waved their way, while her companion, decked in the pelt of a fungal sloth, stood behind her, hunched over in a way that diminished her already short stature.

Filomene backed away a bit, while Iaso just stood off the side, her mind seemingly wandering off to something else.

"Good day," the first girl said, bowing her head. "For it is a fine day indeed."

Philippis nodded. "May we be of service to you?"

The woman eyed Philippis' sword while trying to rest her hand on her own, only to realize that she'd left it at the camp per the terms of their agreement with Myrina. Her companion covered behind her, the former nudging her aside when she grabbed onto her arm.

"Just observing," the first said. "Names Alcippe." she gestured to her companion. "This clingy thing right here is Laurissa. We saw a few of the girls dropping by and figured we'd see what all the fuss was about." she eyed a golden cloth hanging up, shining like it was actually crafted with the incorruptible metal. "A beautiful piece." she scratched the fur of her pelt. "Kind of lacks the prestige of one's own hunt though."

Philippis nodded, feeling her own chimera pelt at her side. "A symbol of one's covenant with Iagannathos. His bounty is great to those who claim it."

Alcippe eyed Philippis' pelt, a chimera with fur golden like the silk. "A very fine bounty in your case. How old were you when you bagged it?"

"It was about ten years ago," Philippis said. "Just north of here actually. Haven't seen a chimera this close to the village before or since."

Filomene smiled, prideful of her mother's accomplishment.

Alcippe nodded to herself. "Impressive." she tugged on her pelt. "From last year." she eyed Filomene. "Seems like this one still has yet to earn her own."

Filomene shook her head. "I'll be going on my first hunt soon. I'm going to hunt a giant beast."

Alcippe chuckled. "Certainly a less barbaric tradition than the old days. Surely you've heard the stories? Chieftains would parade amongst their people, decked in the skin of their slain rivals."

Philippis cleared her throat. She looked over at Filomene, the poor girl shivering ever so slightly. Every child in Califfia grew up hearing those stories.

"My family has passed down stories from that time," Philippis said. "It was a time in which everyone did what was right in their own eyes."

"Right," Alcippe said. "I guess we're not as far removed from such dark times as we would like. A blessing to us all, the rise of Queen Hippolyta."

Philippis remained silent, and, to her surprise, it was Filomene who spoke up.

"I heard about her," the young girl said, still keeping a good distance from Alcippe. "She brought all the amazons together."

Alcippe nodded. "She did a lot of things. Took the fight to the sirenians, instituted the full expulsion of the Gargareans. The first royal line that could unite all the amazons." she balled up her fist. "A shame what ended up happening to them. No one could have seen that plague coming."

Philippis found herself resting her hand on the pommel on her hand.

Alcippe glanced over at Filomene. "You know, your mother, she was in the capital when the plague hit?"

Filomene nodded. "Mama was a soldier."

Philippis sighed. "I was barely a new recruit."

"It was a blow to everyone," Alcippe said. "Lost a lot of good women from what I heard. Even the mightiest of Califfia's warriors could do nothing as the queen and her daughters fell to that plague. My mother always told me we would have fallen back into those old ways had the new queen not stepped up."

Philippis stepped forward. "I hate to interrupt, but you've been eyeing that fabric for some time. Are you interested in buying?"

Alcippe eyed the robe once more. She reached out, feeling the silk between her fingertips. "Yes. Yes, I think I will. Think you can make a tunic that's not too baggy? Don't need it dragging too low."

Before Filomene could offer another bargain, Philippis took the lead. "I can have it made to your liking. With that color, it will cost more. I'd say around ten drachmae."

Alcippe's eyes widened. "Fairly pricey, I must say."

Philippis crossed her arms. "It's my final offer."

Alcippe reached into a sack at her side, pulling out a few shiny coins, and handed them to Philippis. "I can assure you, it's all there." she drew her finger against her throat. "May Iagannathos sever my throat if not."

Philippis nodded. "I'll have it made for you in good time."

Alcippe just shrugged. However, Laurissa stepped forward and bowed. "Thank you."

Philippis was surprised to see such etiquette from one of Iris' girls. She rode in the front, so she surely must have been special to Iris, and yet she didn't look all that proficient. Granted, she had hunted one of the fungal sloths, a beast from the highest point of the akrodrýon, so perhaps looks were deceiving in her case.

Alcippe gave her a soft slap over the head. "Let's go."

Larissa didn't put up much of a fight. However, as the two turned to leave, Iaso muttered something to herself. Philippis could pick up a bit of what she said.

"The queen should have dealt with that lot years ago," she said.

Alcippe stopped in her tracks, right before she could leave the store. Her whole body was shaking, and she shot a glare at Iaso.

"What did you say?" she asked.

Philippis rested her hand on her sword. She feared she may have to use it.

Iaso glanced over at her.. "Just thinking aloud. Helps me collect my thoughts."

Alcippe scoffed. "You think I'm stupid, huh? You got something you want to say, why don't you say it?"

Philippis nearly stepped forward, but Iaso glanced her way with a look telling her to stay put. She then looked back at Alcippe.

"If you must know," Iaso said, "I said the queen would have done as all a favor by killing your 'dame' as you call her. Just a statement of fact. Meant no ill will."

Alcippe grit her teeth, her right eye twitching. Philippis clutched the pommel of her sword, ready to curse Iaso. However Iaso meant those words, her further clarification might as well have been twisting the dagger twice.

"No ill will?" Alcippe asked. "Not sure how else one is supposed to take those words."

Iaso didn't back down, but she didn't raise her fists either. Laurissa backed away, nearly tripping over some crates. Even Filomene cowered behind the counter, peaking out just enough to sneak a glimpse.

Philippis drew her sword. "Enough! Or will you violate the terms of your agreement?"

Alcippe smirked. "You think we're bound to such a formality? You won't touch me so long as we got the dame here."

Philippis felt a bead of sweat run down her temple. Her hand shook momentarily, but she steadied it.

"Is that a bet you're truly confident in?" she asked.

Alcippe glared at Philippis, sweating and gritting her teeth harder. She turned her attention back to Iaso. She took another step towards the young woman, only for the door to swing open, nearly knocking Alcippe over. Standing in the doorway, flames burning bright on her back, was Iris.

Everyone froze in her presence, though her gaze fell on Philippis, peering out through her disheveled bangs, like a tiger watching its prey from the underbrush. She didn't even seem to register that anyone else was there.

"What's all this noise I'm hearing, Phili?" she asked, clutching her forehead. "Someone... causing trouble? And what's with that sword? Why dontcha... put that thing away."

Iris stumbled into the establishment, just barely keeping her footing. Philippis didn't heed her warning though. She could only imagine that if the other smells in her store weren't so strong, she'd be smelling some strong wine at the moment.

"Suppose she didn't stop at just three cups last night."

Alcippe approached Iris. "Dame. Are you okay?"

Iris looked over her shoulder at her follower. "Oh, you're here? What trouble are you causing?" she glanced over at Laurissa, who was still cowering behind some crates. "And you're dragging little Lari in on top of it all?" she scoffed. "You really are despicable."

Alcippe held her hands out in front of her. "It-it's not like that, dame." she pointed at the young girl and her grandmother. "That froggy girl over there was badmouthing you."

Iris turned her gaze to them. All courage the young woman had before had vanished like a vapor, save for the instinct to protect her elder.

"That so?" Iris asked.

Iaso didn't respond, but she did finally take a step back, gnawing some more on her stick. Before Philippis could intervene – her own legs shaking – Iris turned her attention back to her.

“So, yeah,” Iris said. “It's real noisy here. Everywhere I'm walking, everyone is saying your name. Well, my name too, but it's not a competition.” she wagged her finger. “Though if it was, I'd win. Whatever. I'm just sick of hearing about you. Tell those... people out there to keep it down.”

Philippis wasn't even sure how to respond to that. It was clear as day that Iris was suffering from quite the hangover. She didn't even want to imagine how much she'd drunk after she left last night, nor what might happen if she set her off with the wrong response.

Alcippe stepped forward again. “You need to rest, dame. Why don't we...?”

Iris slapped Alcippe's hand aside. “You two are still here? Get lost.”

Alcippe didn't argue back. She gave one last look to Philippis. “Just get my tunic done.” she gestured to Laurissa. “Pick yourself up, you dolt.”

The two finally left, with Laurissa scrambling to keep up with her companion. Iaso just shrugged and went back to browsing the shop.

Iris scoffed. “Tunic? Right, I guess that's why they're all talking about you. Making them all pretty dresses, are ya? Doing your part to make the world a better place?”

Filomene finally popped her head out from behind the counter. “Mama makes the best tunics.”

Iris turned her gaze to Filomene, who immediately went stiff. Iris cocked her head to the side.

“So you're Phili's daughter then?” she asked. “You look a little like her.”

Iris took a tumble after saying these words, falling to her knees. Iaso approached her, and Filomene ran to join her, but Philippis held her back. Iris, however, shoved Iaso aside.

“I'm fine,” she said. “Just tired.”

“I'm a doctor,” Iaso replied, patting her stomach. “I think I'm a better judge of that than you.”

Philippis held her sword ready in case Iris tried anything. However, Iris didn't resist any further.

“Eyes twitching,” Iaso said. “Looks like it's hurting you just to think.” she glanced over at Philippis. “You've got a seat she can borrow?”

Philippis bit her lip. She was tempted to just send Iris on her way. However, she knew Iaso well enough to know that she couldn't very well argue with her when it came to her practice.

“Why don't you come to the back room?” she asked Iris. “I'm sure you'll find it quiet.”

A part of Philippis was hoping she'd turn down her offer, but Iris just looked at her as though she was struggling to make out who was even talking to her. She clutched her forehead, grunting and groaning as she tried to pick herself up. Iaso helped in this endeavor, but the little physician didn't even come up to Iris' shoulders, so this wasn't exactly an easy feat.

"Could use some help here," she said.

Philippis headed over to help Iaso. The two of them helped Iris over to the table in the back, while Filomene followed close behind. Iris leaned against the cushioned chair, rubbing her forehead.

Iaso handed her a black stick from her tunic. "Chew on this. It'll soothe the pain."

Iris eyed the stick in her hand, twiddling it in her fingers for a little sticking it in her mouth. Iaso looked her over a bit, nodding and muttering to herself.

"How much did you drink last night?" Iaso asked.

Iris stuck her tongue out. "No need to get all judgmental."

"I'll take that as a lot," Iaso replied. "You have all the symptoms of a bad hang over. Just drink some water and keep chewing."

Iaso walked over to Philippis, who had been waiting just outside the back room. She leaned close to her, standing on her tip toes. "Don't worry. She'll be fine. Just needs to give her head, legs, arms... basically her whole body a quick break."

Philippis scoffed. "It wasn't a concern of mine. And weren't you the one who said she should have been killed?"

"Well, a hangover sure won't do her in," Iaso replied. "Besides, I'm a doctor, not a soldier. Can't really get caught going back on my oath. Bad for business." she put her stick back in her mouth. "The queen made her choice, and we all gotta live with it."

Philippis nodded. "It does feel that way sometimes."

Iris allowed her head to flop against her shoulder. "What... are you two talking about?"

Iaso raised her hand. "Grown up stuff." she leaned in towards Philippis again. "Well, I've given my diagnosis, so I'd best be off."

Philippis sputtered. "You can't just saddle me with her. I want her out of here."

Iaso shrugged. "Then send her packing."

"What?" Philippis asked. "But didn't you just...?"

“You’re a soldier, not a doctor,” Iaso said.

Iaso gave what Philippis thought was a wink, but looked more like an involuntary twitch. Philippis, crossed her arms, looking at Iris who was practically falling off the chair, legs sprawled out. She then looked at Filomene, who was still standing a distance away. She wasn’t sure how much of their conversation she’d heard.

“I’ll manage,” Philippis said. “Thank you for your... help.”

Iaso pat her shoulder. “Any time.” she turned and walked past Filomene. “Be good to your mother.”

Filomene nodded as Iaso strut out the front door.

Philippis sighed. “Put the sign up, Filomene. We’ll be closing early tonight.”

Filomene did as she was told, while Philippis eyed the sprawling mess sitting beside her. It was hard to believe that this same woman had all but threatened her at this very table just last night.

Iris, who had been looking all around the room, finally looked back at Philippis. “Do I have something on my face?”

Philippis scoffed. “I’ll get you a drink. Then I want you out.”

Iris looked at her for a bit before nodding. “Sure. Not like I want to be here.”

As Philippis headed to the jugs of drinking water, she saw that Filomene had entered the room. Though she kept her distance, her eyes remained on the flaming pelt on Iris’ back.

Iris, despite her current ailment, seemed to take note of this. “You like what you see?”

Filomene cleared her throat. “You... know fire magic? I saw you do it yesterday.”

Iris smirked and propped herself up best she could in her seat, holding her hand out flat. She gestured for Filomene to come closer, but the girl stayed put.

“I won’t bite,” Iris said.

Philippis placed a cup next to Iris. “Drink. My daughter doesn’t have time for...”

Before Philippis could finish her sentence, Filomene approached the two of them. “N- no. I want to see.”

“Filomene?” Philippis asked.

“Please, mama?” she asked.

Iris chuckled. “Just a little trick.”

She took a deep breath, exhaling a faint cloud of smoke as a little spark grew into a small flame like at the end of a candle. Filomene's pupils shrank as she focused on the small flame, which went from orange to red, and then flickered with violet and gold. The colors separated, forming a hypnotic eye that darted around Iris' hand, giving the illusion of multiple eyes.

Philippis herself couldn't take her eyes off the flame of many colors. She could feel its heat, yet it wasn't an uncomfortable heat, but rather a gentle warmth. Filomene held her hand just above it and yet she wasn't burned.

Iris just sat back and basked in the glory she was receiving from this simple act. Her head bobbed back and forth and side to side, as though she herself was getting hypnotized by her flame. "This ain't just fire magic, kid. These are the flames of the immortal bi-- almost immortal bird."

Filomene pried her eyes away from the flame to look up at Iris. Even seated, Iris towered over her.

"You mean a phoenix?" Filomene asked.

Iris nodded. "My best hunt." she gestured behind her. "Took its feathers to make my pelt. Got used to its flames and made them my own. Bet you've never seen anything like that?"

Filomene shook her head. "I'm going on my first hunt next week. I'm gonna get my pelt."

"Are you now? Bet you'll pick off a cute little fowl or one of those lemurs with the red asses."

"I hope I'll hunt something bigger than that," Filomene said.

Iris chuckled. "Will you now? I bet you've got a beast you've dreamed of hunting someday. A special pelt you could show off wherever you go."

"I want to kill a big snake like the queen," Filomene said.

Iris was taken aback, clutching her open palm into a fist, extinguishing her flame. Philippis felt the warmth leave the room. Filomene took a step back, while Iris just sat there, a stern look plastered against her face.

"A Yuga Python?" Iris asked. "That's quite a challenge. It's said that even other beasts won't go near their shed skin." a bit of tension faded from her gaze. "You got some gusto, but you'd probably do best to lower your expectations, especially while you're still under mamma's roof."

Filomene bit her lip. "N- not this time, but... maybe I could someday?"

Iris couldn't help but chuckle, though even she looked a tad guilty for letting it slip out. Before she could reply, a twinge of pain shot through her forehead.

"Damn," she said, clutching her forehead. "Head's hurting. You got any good drink here?"

Philippis sighed. "Iaso told you to drink water."

Iris shook her head. "Don't need that little thistle telling me what to do. Just need a bit for the pain."

Philippis rolled her eyes. "Always looking for quick relief. Only you would think it wise to drink in the midst of your kraipalē?"

Iris muttered something under her breath. Philippis was certain she was just repeating her own words.

"Just a little," she said. "Just enough to tide me over til tomorrow."

Philippis rolled her eyes. "There should be some in the back." she'd been keeping an eye up front, and another customer had just walked in. "I'm sure you can find the amphorae."

Iris saluted and stood up, legs still a bit shaky. Philippis dragged Filomene up with her; she wasn't about to leave her daughter alone with Iris.

"Did I say something wrong?" Filomene asked. "She looked... sad when I said I wanted to hunt a snake."

Philippis shook her head. "No. No, you didn't."

Filomene shivered, rubbing her hands together. She was still nervous, but she also seemed a tad excited. "That flame. It was beautiful. It was like watching a little sun, but with all the colors of the sunset. Have you ever seen a phoenix?"

Philippis shook her head. "N-no. Not many have. They're quite rare."

Filomene nodded. "I wish I could see one."

Just then, Iris returned, carrying a cup in her right hand.

"Damn, Phili," she said. "I had no idea you were stockpiling so much of the stuff." she took a drink. "Smells rancid, and I don't think it's easing my head any."

Philippis plugged her nose, wincing as a yellow liquid spilled out of the cup and onto the floor. Filomene's eyes went wide, seemingly realizing the same as her mother.

"Iris... where did you find this wine?" Philippis asked.

Iris gestured behind her. "Out back behind your house, like you said. Whole lot of them."

Before Philippis could find a way to break the news to her, Filomene raised her voice.

"That's urine!" she said.

No one said anything for a while after that point. Iris eyed the cup in her now trembling hand.

“Blegh!”

That sound echoed across the village.

The rest of the day was quite busy. Even after closing, there were still many orders to complete. Long after sunset, Philippis and Filomene were hard at work sewing, with only the sounds of crickets and night birds, along with repeated yelps from Filomene, ringing in their ears.

“Ouch,” Filomene cried, accidentally poking her thumb again.

Philippis chuckled. “You need to watch where you put your thumb.”

Filomene nodded, sucking on her thumb.

“It’s not bleeding, is it?” Philippis asked.

Filomene shook her head.

Philippis patted her daughter on the head. “Good. We don’t need you staining the silk. Especially after that mess we had with Iris.”

Filomene giggled. “Doesn’t she know you use urine to clean clothes?”

“Clueless to that fact, I suppose,” Philippis said. “And I wasn’t about to have her strip down in front of us.”

Filomene laughed at the suggestion. A big, unrestrained laugh, the same way she would laugh when she was younger. For a brief moment, Philippis could picture the little girl who used to sit on her lap, laughing at the funny antics of flying squirrels.

Her laughter was halted by a loud yawn. Philippis had noticed the dark circles around her eyes for a while now; she’d been sporting them herself all day.

“Why don’t you take a break?” she asked.

Filomene shook her head, removing her thumb from her mouth. “N-no. I want to help.”

Philippis chuckled. “You already have. A great deal. Fifty less pin pricks than last time.”

Filomene blushed, her eyes starting to twitch. “But I’m not tired.”

Philippis pat her back. "At least lay down for a little. There will still be plenty of work when you get back."

Filomene eyed the cushioned seat at the end of the room. She bit her lip and twiddled her thumbs.

"I'll be back to help you soon," she said. "I promise."

Philippis wrapped her finger around Filomene's sore thumb. "I'll hold you to that."

She placed her thumb on Filomene's forehead and sent her off to rest. She hadn't even finished sewing the first sleeve before she heard her daughter snoring to a chorus of crickets.

She held back several yawns as she pressed on. She'd been doing this job for so long that she'd forgotten the last time she'd pricked her thumb, the last time she'd seen a little drop of blood ooze out.

"When was the last time such a sight scared me? When did it become only an annoyance? Definitely before I came of age. Mother always said her own fear more than made up for my lack of it. The look on her face when I told her I'd signed up for the army." her hands trembled. "If I'd known... I'd have treasured her disappointment for just a moment longer."

She glanced over at Filomene. The poor girl was deep asleep, drooling like a dog. Setting her tools of the trade aside, she picked up her daughter, who wasn't the least bit stirred from her slumber, and carried her up the stairs.

"Heavier than the last time I did this," Philippis said to herself. "You've grown like a weed this last year. Those growing pains were a trial for the both of us."

Filomene responded with a snore.

Philippis smiled. "Still my little girl at heart."

After some tricky maneuvering at the top of the staircase, Philippis got the door open and lay the girl down in her bed. She didn't bother putting the blanket over her with how much it had been warming up with the coming of spring.

"When you leave for your hunt, will that be the last time I see you?" Philippis cursed herself for entertaining such a thought. "But there will come a day when you leave this house for the last time. What will the both of us look like on that day? What will we both say on that day?"

She grabbed hold of Filomene's hand. Her hand was so small and soft when she'd first born; she was barely able to even wrap it around her finger. Now, her hands had grown rough from the trade, as her own had. She gave her hand one last squeeze, before pressing her thumb against her forehead.

Philippis shut the door softly behind her and made her way downstairs. Her arms fell limp at her sides as she sat down to resume her work.

"We hold moments most fleeting the tightest," she said. "You told me that once, Penthesilea. Memory is a mercy that never stops hurting."

The darkness of night had already begun giving way to the dawn by the time Philippis had finished her work. The exhaustion of the last two days weighed heavy on her, and, before she could even think of getting up from her seat, she'd convinced herself to let her eyes close for just a second, and they remained sealed like a tomb.

When she finally awoke, she was greeted to the sound of footsteps in the store. She shot up, realizing that her finished tunics had vanished. She scrambled up front, only to find Filomene handing out the tunics to the customers. Each one was given the tunic they'd commissioned, and Filomene kept up the pace, albeit with some difficulty. She didn't even notice that her mother had woken up.

"How late did I sleep?"

Eventually, Filomene saw her mother standing in the back. She smiled, her forehead coated with sweat and her eyes a tint of red. "I told you I'd help you out later."

Philippis couldn't help but smile back as she brushed her disheveled hair out of her face. "You did. You certainly did."

After the majority of the customers had left, Philippis went over their remaining wares. They'd already gone through a good deal of the materials she'd purchased and made quite a hefty profit.

"You handled yourself well, Filomene," Philippis said, wrapping her arm around her daughter.

Filomene sighed, scratching her head. "I thought I did poorly. There were so many at once, and they all spoke so loud. I had to pull out your records and ask each one their name. So many new names."

"You should have woken me up," Philippis said.

Filomene shook her head. "I didn't want to wake you up. You looked so tired. I... you needed to sleep."

Philippis couldn't exactly argue with her daughter, but she still wished it could have been different. "All's well that ends well." she planted a kiss on her daughter's cheek. "What do you say we get something special to eat."

Filomene's eyes lit up. "Can we, mama?"

Philippis nodded. "Come on. I didn't get to make you breakfast after all."

Filomene was quick out the door. Philippis, still a bit drowsy, could hardly keep up with her. Filomene led her by hand to Evandre's pub.

The hot spot for many a tired fisher, it was rare to find a time of day when none were present, and this morn was no exception. Many were, of course, members of the Ring of Fire, alongside a few members of the village watch. Many were seated around a large tree that grew out of the center of the establishment, trunk reaching past the ceiling and up to the second floor of the establishment, where the owner of the pub slept.

Evandre herself was busy preparing food for her rowdy guests. The rather heavysset woman panted as she attended to fish and shrimp on the grill. Even from the entrance, one could smell the copious amounts of red wine that had been used to marinate every menu item.

"Busy day, I take it?" Philippis asked.

Evandre look up from her cooking, wiping her sweaty brow. "Good day to ya. And more like a busy night if ya catch my drift?"

Filomene licked her lips, all the while her stomach growled. "That fish smells so good."

Evandre gave a hearty laugh that reverberated like the purr of a lion. "Then you'd best have some." she handed a fish on a stick to Filomene. "Just don't eat the bones as you're wolfing it down."

Filomene didn't hesitate to snatch the fish. She bowed her head before running to her seat and munching down. Philippis massaged her brow.

"Just one drink," Philippis said.

"Busy day?" Evandre asked as she poured her a drink.

Philippis nodded. "I was up most of the night sewing. I trust the 'new arrivals' have been keeping you on your toes?"

Evandre chuckled. "They haven't drunk me dry just yet, despite their best efforts." she flexed her arm. "Besides, if they try anything, I won't hesitate."

Philippis smiled. She gazed at her reflection in the wine, her eyes stained dark just like it. Some of Iris' girls were present, but their leader was nowhere to be found.

“Has she been in today?” Philippis asked.

“Iris?” Evandre asked. “Haven’t seen her since yesterday. She practically broke down my door begging for a drink. She was all unkempt; kept muttering something about urine. I was worried she was gonna piss on my floor.”

Philippis chose to keep the true story to herself. She had a feeling Iris wouldn’t be too fond of her mouthing off about it. Instead, she just downed her drink.

“Another,” she said.

Evandre smirked. “Must have truly been a rough night. Haven’t seen you drink so fast since you first came to our little village.”

“Is that so?” Philippis asked.

“You were the talk of the town for a while there. It’s not so often we get a visit from a member of the queen’s army invoking the law of hospitality.”

Philippis could just barely recall the first day she came here, and those brief moments were only because of the tales of others. She didn’t even remember whose house she’d stayed in. She’d ridden for several days and stopped at several towns already. It was all like a distant dream.

Evandre could tell Philippis was lost in thought. “You knew her back then?”

Philippis nodded. “I wish I hadn’t.”

“Bad blood then?” Evandre asked.

Philippis scoffed. “Who doesn’t she have bad blood with?”

“You know what I mean.”

Philippis sighed. “She thinks I betrayed her. Even worse, she’s right.”

“You were stuck between a rock and a hard place.”

Philippis downed her second drink, coughing as it went down wrong. “That hard place...” the scar on her chest twinged and ached.

Evandre held up the wineskin. “Another?”

Philippis shook her head. “My day isn’t over yet. Can’t be making a fool of myself in front of my customers.” she eyed Filomene, still munching away at her fish. “How do you think your daughter is doing in the army?”

“Last I heard,” Evandre replied, “she was serving under the Supreme General in the north. Haven’t gotten a letter from her in months though.”

“Months,” Philippis said. “I remember when one month felt as an eternity.”

“Sometimes,” Evandre replied, “they still do.”

Philippis shook her head. “My apologies. I wasn’t trying to…”

Evandre held her hand up. “Nothing to worry about. I know she’s doing well for herself. What I wouldn’t give to have her here right now though. She was always fond of Filomene. Would have loved to see her get her pelt.”

Evandre poured herself a drink. Philippis could see a few tears welling up in the corners of her eyes.

“They may meet each other again sooner rather than later,” Philippis said.

“Oh?” Evandre asked. “Has Filomene said anything about joining the army?”

Philippis shook her head. “She wants to be just like me. And now I know what I put my mother through.”

Evandre sighed. “She’s got a lot of spirit, that girl. My girl will visit before then though. I have no doubt about that. And when that day comes, I’m gonna be right here waiting for her. Comes with the job.”

Philippis bit her lip. “Well, I’d better get back to the shop.”

“Fair enough,” Evandre said, handing her a fish. “A little something before you go. You don’t look like you’ve eaten yet today.”

Philippis wasn’t about to refuse the hot, battered fish on a stick. She said her goodbyes, only to find that Filomene had finished her meal.

“Ready to head out?” Philippis asked her.

Filomene nodded. “Got another busy day ahead of us.”

Philippis couldn’t help but smile. Her manner of speak had certainly rubbed off on the girl over the years. She remembered when she used to imitate her mother, receiving a smile from her.

“Do I still talk like my mother? I suppose I haven’t given it much thought?”