

## Interlude Co: Mother's Lessons

In the end, it was only natural that Connla was the one to notice something amiss first.

After all, he wasn't the type to sit still. He may not have understood words like "rambunctious" or "incorrigible," and words like "recalcitrant" and "intractable" went straight over his head, but if someone bothered to explain their meanings to him, he would have grinned, nodded, and laughed, saying, "Yeah, that sounds just like me!"

Not only because his legend and life had ended at a mere seven years old, before he had the chance to mature, but also because he was the child of both Ireland's most free-spirited and uncontrollable hero and the woman who had defied the destiny of her birth through sheer force of will. Neither of his parents understood the concept of restraint, so it was strange to ever believe that he would either.

Therefore, it was only natural that Connla would hardly wait until his mother was out of earshot before disobeying her.

Of course, even so, he didn't do something as rebellious as actually follow her and those Chaldeans to Rome. There were a lot of things Connla was willing to risk to stave off boredom — up to and including his own life — but well and truly arousing his mother's ire was not one of them.

Not that it wasn't tempting. During the week and a half that passed after she left, nothing much of note happened around the castle, let alone inside of it, and there were only so many times he could venture out just a little bit farther than he really should to spook some of those United Empire idiots before even that got dull and repetitive, no matter how much he handicapped himself to make things more interesting.

It was nearing two weeks since he'd been left to defend the castle with Uncle Lance when he finally noticed something strange on one of his "walks."

"You're certain it came from this direction?" Uncle Lance asked as they raced through the forest.

"Yeah, yeah!" Connla called back. He hopped about from tree trunk to tree trunk, or even branch to branch, instead of Uncle Lance's boring, ordinary run. "Hey, just because I'm seven doesn't mean I didn't finish my training, you know! Pops was over twice my age when he got with Ma, and I fought him to a draw that day!"

"I don't mean to doubt your competence," Uncle Lance said apologetically. "It's only that... Well, this direction is..."

Connla laughed. "That's what makes it interesting, isn't it? Not only is it the first time we've seen some major magical beasts since we were summoned, but they also came from where that wall we heard about is supposed to be! Why, it's almost like this might be the enemy testing the waters for a full scale attack, isn't it?"

Uncle Lance glanced at him briefly, face as solemn and serious as ever. Connla found that kind of boring, too. What was the point in being so sad all the time? Where did it get you to carry all that weight around everywhere? Connla's own father killed him when he was just seven, for doing what

he'd been told he had to do, for that matter, and you didn't see him moping around day in and day out.

Well, it wasn't like Connla really got all of that guy's legend, either. In a distant sort of way, he understood the idea of being in love and how that led to kids and marriage and stuff, but it just seemed kind of silly to go through that much effort for a *girl*.

Connla also knew, in that distant sort of intellectual way, that his opinion would very much have changed as he got older, but he never got the chance to experience that, so it was all the same to him.

"Even if I have my doubts, the possibility itself is enough to warrant investigation," Uncle Lance said. "I might question your motives, but you're right that we can't afford to let it go unanswered, not when considering who our enemy happens to be."

Uncle Lance was on his side, this time. Heh. Now if only Mom was that easy to convince. She would've seen right through him.

"At least it's more interesting than sitting in that castle all day!" Connla grinned. "You can only count the number of bricks in the wall so many times before you start thinking about throwing yourself off the top of the tower!"

Even if Connla couldn't actually remember a time when that would have killed him. It was the principle of the thing, you know?

"Of course, if this turns out to be a false alarm and nothing comes of it," said Uncle Lance, "then I will be telling your mother about this."

Connla faltered for a moment and nearly tripped and fell on his face. "Uncle Lance, you're so uncool."

"You're in my care," was the unflinching reply. "I'm responsible for your well-being and your discipline."

Ugh. Uncle Lance really was a stick in the mud, wasn't he? How could a guy that was supposed to be so cool be so boring at the same time?

Well, whatever. It wasn't like Connla wasn't already hoping to run into something — or *someone* — on this little outing. The fact that he had another reason why he wanted it to happen didn't really change anything.

They kept going for a while, and several hours passed as they ran. They had to take stops here and there, of course, because without Masters, their supplies of energy were a bit more limited, so they couldn't go nonstop, but for the most part, they kept going without interruption.

And then they ran into a hulking chimera, a huge beast that mages might call a "centennial monster." Connla just knew that it had to be pretty old to be that big, so big that it looked like it could swallow him whole if it put its mind to it, which meant that it had to be pretty powerful, too.

It roared a challenge from the mouth of its lion head, and the goat's head and the snake that made up its tail fixed beady red eyes on the both of them with hunger.

"Another one," Uncle Lance mumbled.

An instant later, he had crossed the distance, and red blood splattered over the grass. The chimera, however, was no fool, and although the long, scaly serpent that made up one third of the thing flopped to the ground, writhing in its death throes, the larger creature had avoided death with a nimbleness and a cunning that belied uncommon intelligence.

Like it was trained or something. Fancy that. Those United Empire guys had a monster tamer on their side. Who would've thought?

The chimera charged in for a counterattack, but Uncle Lance dodged out of the way and drew a thin line across its flank for its trouble. Again, however, it managed to avoid getting killed in a single blow, and the injury on its side that bled freely seemed only to make it angrier — and worse, more cautious.

"I hate that kind of thing," Connla mumbled to no one.

Uncle Lance dove in again, and the chimera dodged again, snarling a furious growl. It swiped at Uncle Lance as he passed, but he threw himself into a roll to avoid the worst of it and probably only wound up with a few scratches on his backplate. The chimera landed lightly on its feet in spite of its size and bent those huge legs it had as it prepared to go on the offense.

It was taken by surprise by the wooden spear that neatly pierced the vulnerable flesh just beneath its jawbone and stabbed straight up into the lion's brain.

"Smart monsters are just a pain."

The ground shook as the great beast fell and collapsed onto its side. The goat's head bleated impotently, thrashing back and forth, until Uncle Lance walked over and slit its throat to put it out of its misery. Connla joined him so that he could retrieve his spear, yanking it free in a spurt of blood and then cleaning it off in the thing's thick mane, because Mom really would tan his hide if he lost another one that easily.

There was nothing to be done about the splash of red that coated the tip, though. It would dry and turn a rusty maroon, no matter what, because after all, this spear was just a piece of ordinary wood that had been hastily carved into a weapon.

"There may have been something to your suspicions after all," Uncle Lance admitted. "I'm sure you noticed — that chimera might not have been a match for you or me, but against a normal human soldier, it would surely have been an almost insurmountable foe."

"Maybe if they were blind, deaf, and dumb," Connla replied flippantly.

The furrowing of Uncle Lance's brow said that he wanted to respond to that, but he decided not to, and that was fine by Connla, too. Fighting of the more verbal kind was only fun in the ways that it could lead to fighting of the more physical kind.

“In either case, I can’t imagine that was the only one,” said Uncle Lance. “We should continue. The wall shouldn’t be too far away, and we’re likely to encounter more of this kind of magical beast as we approach it.”

“Fine by me.”

They took off again, leaving the corpse of the chimera behind. Something that was a mere one-hundred years old didn’t have anywhere near enough weight behind it to make it worth harvesting any of its parts, and there wasn’t time to waste on something like that right then anyway.

True enough, the chimera may have been the first, but it wasn’t the last. They must have run for another hour, the monotony broken only by encounters with more magical beasts. Bicornes and chimeras, monster crabs and demon boars, ghosts and restless skeletons, the things that they wound up fighting were as varied and different as it was possible for magical beasts to be, almost as though someone had gathered them all up from all across the continent and bundled them together in one place before letting them loose.

None of them were much more than annoyances, although they seemed to be getting progressively sturdier and cleverer the further along Uncle Lance and Connla went. That first chimera was already an outlier, more cunning than it had any right to be, but as lone monsters became rarer and groups of them became the norm, their crude tactical ability became more refined and more sophisticated.

It would actually have been kind of incredible if it also wasn’t so annoying.

At last, however, their group of two came to their goal, the great, towering wall that was supposed to stretch from one end of the continent to the other, barring their way forward. Only...

“Huh? Where did it go?”

There was no such wall there anymore.

“It’s vanished,” Uncle Lance said unnecessarily.

Connla huffed. “I can see that, Uncle Lance. I’m not blind.”

“It *was* here,” Uncle Lance went on. He gestured to the strip of bare earth, flattened and starved beneath the heavy stones that had sat upon it for who knew how many weeks. “Look. A long stretch of barren land, wide enough for a full complement of mounted cavalry to march. The forest hasn’t had time to even begin reclaiming it — this only happened recently. Days, at best.”

*Duh.* Connla rolled his eyes. Talk about saying the obvious stuff. Any idiot with half a brain could have realized all of that.

“So where did it go, then?”

“Something which can appear and disappear so quickly must be a Noble Phantasm,” Uncle Lance concluded. “To bar our way into the United Empire, it must also have belonged to one of the Servants under its banner. That it’s disappeared now would only mean that the Servant to whom it belonged was vanquished.”

He straightened, his eyes growing almost imperceptibly wider. “And that must mean...the warriors of Chaldea have made their way into the heart of the United Empire itself.”

And that could only mean that Mom was having a blast. Man, she got to do all of the fun stuff, didn't she?

“Your decision to come out here was the correct one,” said Uncle Lance. “We should go. The final battle of this era's correction is no doubt being fought, and we may be of some assistance to those who came to preserve the future.”

“Go and kick some butt down there against all those pretenders? Sounds like loads of fun,” Connla said wistfully. “There's just one thing we gotta take care of, first.”

Uncle Lance's brow drew down, and he eyed the trees scornfully. “Yes, I suppose there is.”

Connla smirked.

“Hey!” he called out into the forest. “You hear that, you big loser? Why don't you stop hiding and come out and face us like a real warrior, yeah? Stop skulking about like a coward!”

A moment of silence answered him, and then the trees rustled and the ground shook as laughter echoed out across the clearing. Branches cracked and snapped, and from further on ahead, slightly off the path they would have taken towards the capital city, a massive, hulking form stepped out, smushing everything underfoot as he walked.

“I should have known I wouldn't be able to keep myself hidden from other Servants,” the figure said. “Even in this sorry state, you upstarts should at least be able to feel my presence.”

Connla whistled, eyebrows rising as he looked up and up and *up* at the humanoid thing. Had to be something like six meters tall, an enormous creature with pale, naked skin, covered only by a crude loincloth and a few pieces of basic leather armor. The right arm was noticeably bigger than the left, bulging with muscle, and atop the comparatively tiny head was a mop of blood red hair.

“Big fella, aren't you?”

“Not by choice,” the giant snarled suddenly. “That stench clinging to you... That means it was your whore of a mother who put me in the position of having to squeeze my fractured Spirit Origin into this body, wasn't it?”

Connla grinned, a thing of teeth and danger. “Hey, hey! No need to be a sore loser just because Mom kicked your ass so hard you got even uglier! I bet this was an improvement!”

The giant took one earth-shaking step forward. “You brat! Just for that, I'm going to rip your head from your body so I can show it to your mom!”

“Idiot,” Connla laughed. “We're Servants! If you rip my head from my body, I'll just disappear entirely!”

Really, you'd think this guy was smart enough to make threats he could actually carry out, but apparently, switching into a giant's body also made him stupider as well as uglier.

The giant growled, glaring down at him from far above, and the rumble of it seemed to shake even the trees.

"Tiberius," Uncle Lance said solemnly.

The giant's tiny head swiveled to look at Uncle Lance, and the beady eyes narrowed as they inspected him, glancing up and down his body at the armor, the hair, the face, even the sword, and then they narrowed even more.

"You. I remember you now. You're one of that Arthur brat's Circlejerk Squad, or whatever ridiculous name you were calling yourselves." The giant sneered, lip curling. "Funny. I don't remember seeing you later on, so maybe you died earlier. Or ran away like a coward."

"Indeed, I am a Knight of the Round Table," said Uncle Lance, ignoring the jab without the slightest sign of anger. Uncle Lance really was a boring guy to try and pick a fight with. "My name is Lancelot. To my shame, I was not present for my king's final campaign against you, Tiberius, and so I could not aid my comrades in striking you down."

He hefted his sword, the blade gleaming in the sunlight. "It is a mistake I intend to rectify right here and now."

The giant, Tiberius — know what? That was too much of a mouthful. Connla decided he was just gonna call the guy Tibby from now on, since he was literally half the man he was when he fought Connla's mom.

Tibby laughed, a deep, booming laugh that shook the trees and seemed to fill the entire clearing.

"You? Strike *me* down?" Tibby asked. "You're not a knight, you're a comedian. Even in this twisted mockery of my usual self, there's no way I'd lose to another snot-nosed brat like you!"

"Shall we test that?" Uncle Lance asked, serious as the grave.

"Why not?" Tibby leered, and his oversized fingers tightened on the comically undersized sword in his right hand. It looked more like he was holding a toothpick than a sword. "I could use a warmup to let out some of my pent up aggression before I hunt down the bitch that did this to me."

"You guys forget about me?" Connla asked them both. "Maybe you want to get a room? Work this out the old-fashioned way? I can stick my fingers in my ears and pretend I'm not listening."

"Get out of here, brat," Tibby said dismissively. "Count yourself lucky that you're not interesting enough to go through the effort of killing."

"Go and assist your mother and the Chaldeans," Uncle Lance ordered. "I will stay here and dispatch this menace at once, then join you."

"You're gonna try," said Tibby. "And fail. Miserably."

Geez, they were even going through the pre-fight banter. It was almost embarrassing to watch.

“Heh.” Connla grinned. “See, there’s three things I’m not allowed to do, no matter what. First, I’m not allowed to give my name. Second, I’m not allowed to turn back once I start something. Third...”

He kicked off the ground, flying through the air like a diving falcon, and Tibby was so surprised that he didn’t react in time to avoid the right cross Connla landed on his cheek. Connla landed nimbly on his feet with a little bounce, but the ground shook as Tibby stumbled backwards, reeling.

“I’m not allowed,” said Connla, “to back down from a challenge. And you already challenged me, didn’t you?”

“You son of a bitch,” Tibby growled. He wiped away a trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth. “Just for that, I’m going to kill you first.”

Connla’s grin showed his teeth. “That sounds like another challenge.”

“Connla...” Uncle Lance murmured.

“Hey, hey, don’t get even moodier on me, okay?” Connla waved him off. “You go and help Mom and those Chaldea people, yeah? This guy is pretty pathetic. I’ll catch up after I’ve finished what Mom started.”

Uncle Lance considered that for a moment, then turned to leave.

“Running away?” Tibby jeered. “Again? Are you that frightened of me that you won’t stand your ground and *fight*?”

“Hey, that’s rude, you know!” said Connla. “Are you deaf up there with that tiny head of yours, Tibby? *I’m* the one who’s gonna fight you!”

“You’re going to let a *child* fight your battles?” Tibby asked, ignoring Connla entirely. “Huh, *Sir Lancelot*?”

“Do not mistake me,” said Uncle Lance. “It is prudence, not cowardice, that bids me to take leave of your odious presence. Were it only you and I and nothing else on the line, I would gladly stay and cut you down. However... There is far more at stake than my pride or my king’s honor, and so I shall leave the task of dispatching you to one who is more than qualified so that I might go where my own power is more necessary.”

“Oooh,” said Connla, grinning. “That has to sting! He just said you weren’t even worth his time! Hey, Tibby, do you need something to soothe that one? Mom taught me some stuff about herbs for pain relief!”

“Brat!”

Tibby lashed out, but it was so haphazard, so poorly executed, and so blatantly telegraphed that Connla would frankly have let himself be killed if he actually got hit by it. He landed on the balls of

his feet, bouncing from the anticipation, his mouth stretched wide and showing every one of his teeth.

“Go on, get going, Uncle Lance!” Connla called. “This won’t take all that long, so I’ll catch up in a few minutes.”

Uncle Lance inclined his head, and before he left, he said, “Your mother will kill me if you die here, Connla.”

And then he was gone, racing off through the foliage and in the direction of what should be the United Empire’s capital. It was still going to take him a while to make it all the way there, and he would probably get caught up at least a few times fighting some of the magical beasts that were undoubtedly waiting on the way, but it was still loads better than both of them wasting time to take out the big guy who just didn’t know when to let himself get killed by a better warrior.

“Heh.” Connla twirled his spear and settled into a ready stance. “Not as bad as she’ll kill *me* if I lose to a chump like this!”

“Tch.” Tibby sneered. “Guess I’ll just have to put you down before I go and slaughter that weakling, you brat. Any last words?”

“Just two,” said Connla. He channeled magical energy into the fragile spear, just enough to give it the air of something that it wasn’t, and hefted it into a pose he’d seen his mother use before. “Gae Bolg.”

“Shit!”

The spear flew, aimed straight for Tibby’s tiny head, and Tibby reached out to grab it out of the air. With his free hand, he wrapped his smaller fist around the shaft, leaving the point to jut out past his fingers and towards his face. And then nothing else happened at all.

Tibby’s brow furrowed. “The hell?”

Connla put on a *baibrasse* *spurt of speed* and landed an instant later on the back of Tibby’s hand, crouched.

“Don’t you know? I never learned that one.”

His fist lashed out, lightning fast, but Tibby reacted just fast enough to avoid the worst of it, and the punch that was meant to burst one of Tibby’s eyes landed instead on the tip of his nose. The echoing *crunch* of it breaking was like the snap of a wooden branch breaking, and Tibby reeled back with a shout, dropping Connla’s spear in his pain.

Connla sprang off of one of Tibby’s massive pectorals, flipped midair, and retrieved his spear, then landed on the ground in the sort of perfect landing he’d always seen his mom pull off. One leg thrown out, one knee bent to his chest, and one hand pressed flat against the forest floor, with his spear held out behind him.

Probably looked so cool. Too bad no one was around to see it.



“You brat!”

Blood streamed down Tibby’s face from his shattered, crooked nose, but the pain only seemed to make him angrier, and he lashed out with his toothpick sword — that was actually a perfectly ordinary-sized longsword that only looked small because of who was holding it — in that massively oversized hand.

Connla <sup>leim dar néib í ch n - erred</sup> *leapt over the blow* into a *hero’s salmon leap* that carried him into the branches of a tree on the edge of the clearing. He felt the wind whipped about by Tibby’s swing as it passed him, and for once, he was frowning a little as he landed in a crouch on the bark.

Whatever Tibby had lost when he was forced to squeeze whatever was left of his Spirit Origin into that giant’s body, his raw strength obviously wasn’t part of it. Maybe he’d lost some of his Magic Resistance? That was how a number of great heroes had been brought down in the Celtic legends. When they broke a geis, their power was cut down by the curse, and some of them even lost the super incredible abilities that made them so special in the first place.

Made sense. He was just going to have to be careful not to get hit by that huge fist or anything swung by it, because it would really hurt.

Connla hefted his spear again, and once more, he threw it with all of his might. Tibby snarled and swatted it aside with his toothpick, and Connla flung himself into the air with another <sup>b a i brasse</sup> *spurt of speed*, grabbed his tumbling spear, and hurled it back towards Tibby again. Tibby leaned out of the way, dodging with a kind of grace that was frankly ridiculous for how huge and lopsided he was, and the spear sank tip-first into the ground.

And then Tibby, going with the flow of his momentum, slammed his other fist straight into Connla’s gut with the force of a runaway train, although with how much bigger Tibby was, it was more like he just hit Connla’s whole torso.

Connla rocketed through the air, and tree branches whacked him over and over, snapping against his back one after the other after the other as he went flying through the forest, until at last he landed on a trunk that was sturdy enough not to break immediately. Stars bloomed in his head as his skull bounced off of it, and he drew in an involuntary gasp as his body tumbled to the hard ground.

Ow, ow, *ow*. That guy really did hit pretty hard, didn’t he? Tibby might be the ugliest thing this side of Hell, but at least he was actually strong.

Slowly, Connla pulled himself to his feet. His back felt like one, gigantic bruise. His whole front ached and throbbed. Hot blood trickled down one corner of his mouth, and its coppery flavor sloshed over his tongue. He spat it out on the ground, wiped it off of his chin, and grinned. So maybe taking extra damage actually was a bad thing, even when you were fighting a misshapen giant who only had half a Spirit Origin. Who knew?

“But that’s what makes it fun, isn’t it?”

A regular human would have been paste on the ground or a smear on Tibby's knuckles. A weaker Heroic Spirit would probably have taken critical damage to his spirit core — would be struggling to hold his Saint Graph together.

Connla wasn't either of those, because his mom raised a tougher kid than that. Not many toddlers could say they fought Ireland's greatest hero to a draw, after all.

"Alright. Ready for round two, Tibby?"

Connla put on another <sup>b a i    brasse</sup> *spurt of speed*, and the ground blurred beneath him as his feet stretched across the distance and he stepped back into the clearing. Another <sup>bai brasse</sup> *spurt* carried him over to his spear, miraculously still intact, and he yanked it free in a spray of dirt and grass just in time for Tibby to realize that he wasn't dead yet.

"Tch." Tibby sneered. "You're just like your bitch of a mom, aren't you, brat? You just don't know when to lay down and die!"

Connla grinned mockingly. "Where do you think I learned it from?"

Tibby swung, and Connla <sup>leim dar néib</sup> *leapt* over it again, and then again as Tibby swung back around, lumbering about with his enormous body. That looked like it was something else Tibby must have lost when he took that giant's body, because he was definitely fast enough to catch a regular human easily enough, but as long as a Servant didn't let himself be cornered, Tibby was almost too slow to hit anything.

"Stay still!" Tibby growled.

Connla laughed, and this time, he timed his jump so that he landed, crouched, on the back of Tibby's massive fist. "Why would I do that?"

"So I can kill you!"

Tibby's other hand came around to smash him as though he was squashing a bug, but with another <sup>bai brasse</sup> *spurt*, Connla landed on the opposite shoulder, grinning, and hefted back his spear. This close, there was no way he could miss.

"See ya later, Tibby."

"Disrespectful brat."

They stabbed at the same time, except apparently Tibby had been holding back, because that toothpick sword of his was lightning quick as it aimed for Connla's stomach, and Connla, already mid-thrust, almost didn't react fast enough to avoid being gutted.

Blood spurted and flew. Tibby's sword glanced across Connla's side as Connla twisted and bent awkwardly to avoid the worst of it, narrowly avoiding a fatal wound, and then, just as he thought it

was over and he could get away, Tibby swept his sword down in a cut that absolutely would finish the job.

*Damn, thought Connla. I screwed up.*

Blood spurted and flew again, and Connla crashed into the ground with a thud, thrown by the slash. He rolled to a stop, red splashing across the grass in his wake, and laid there.

*Sorry, Mom. I know you taught me better than that.*

“Guess it doesn’t matter who your mother was,” said Tibby disdainfully. “You were still just a brat, weren’t you?”

He turned to leave and took one lumbering, thunderous step in the direction Uncle Lance had left.

“Hey, Tibby.”

Tibby stopped and turned back around. He scoffed. “You’re like a cockroach, kid.”

Slowly, Connla pushed himself off of the ground. “Say my name.”

Tibby snorted. “You want me to give you that respect, you brat? I’ll acknowledge your mom as a real warrior, even if she’s a woman, but you’re just a bug I needed to squash.”

“Can’t even give me a last request?” Connla asked. He blinked down at the spear, the last defense he had only barely managed to put up between himself and Tibby’s sword. Just like the last one, the shaft had been sliced in half. Mom was going to be pissed. “Come on. I just wanna know you know it, you know?”

He could practically hear the nasty grin in Tibby’s voice. “Fine.”

The giant lumbered closer until Tibby’s massive shadow fell over Connla. On the ground, Connla watched the shadow’s arm twist and distort as Tibby lifted his sword up to deliver the final blow.

“I’ll be sure to send your mom to see you real soon, *Connla*.”

Unseen, Connla’s lips stretched into a smile. *Thanks, Tibby. That’s the last one I needed to get rid of.*

Tibby’s sword came down to take Connla’s head — but Connla put on a *spurt of speed* and was already gone, sliding to a stop halfway across the clearing in the divot left behind by Hardian’s Wall. Tibby’s head swung around.

“What?”

“Hey, Tibby, you know, Mom has a rule,” said Connla. “She says, telling your enemy all about your trump cards is a stupid idea! The only time you explain what’s happening is after you’ve already dealt the final blow!”

Connla tossed aside the two halves of the spear his mother had carved for him, and as he reached back to the small of his back, a sheath appeared with a handle jutting out of it. He took hold of the handle, and with the ring of singing steel, he pulled free his sword and flipped it around in his grip.

“But I think it’s funnier when you tell the other guy just how badly he screwed up,” Connla said gleefully. It was way more fun to watch the way their faces twisted up when they realized it was all their own fault. “See, my legend means I have three things I can’t do, remember? But that means that as long as I’m bound by those three things, I can’t fight all out! <sup>Bond of the Golden Thumb Ring</sup> G e a s a T r í a n a c h might hide me, but there’s a price I gotta pay to make it work.”

His grin gained teeth. “But when I can’t hide anymore, that means I don’t have to play by those rules anymore, either.”

Tibby’s eyes went wide with fury, and his lips curled in a snarl.

“You’re saying I just made you stronger?!”

“Can’t you tell?” Connla mocked. “I was a Saber pretending to be an Assassin this entire time!”

“You...!” Tibby growled. “I’m done playing games!”

Magical energy swelled, and Tibby thrust his toothpick into the dirt. The blade filled with blood red light that traveled down the center and into the earth. Glowing lines of power radiated out from it and formed into concentric magic circles, like ripples in a pond.

<sup>Blossoms of the Bloody Flower</sup>  
“F l o r e n t S a n g l a n t !”

The Earth trembled, and the whole clearing shook and rumbled, and from beneath the soil, bodies sprouted like flowers, pushing up through the grass and the dirt. They clawed their way to the surface like newborn chicks breaking out of their shells, and one after another, magical beasts rose up from the ground, fully formed and grown.

One after the other they came, one, two, three, five, ten, until a full two dozen creatures of various kinds stood around Tibby like an honor guard. A chimera, another giant — this one proportioned like an actual human instead of Tibby’s misshapen, malformed body — a bicorn, a manticores, a couple of monster crabs, a demon boar, and several others that Connla couldn’t name or just didn’t care to.

“It’s not up to my usual standards,” Tibby said with a sneer. “You can thank your whore mother for that. But these children of mine should be more than enough for a snot-nosed brat like you.”

Connla grinned. “Heh.”

*Sorry, Mom, it looks like it’s gonna take me a little bit longer to catch up with you. You and those Chaldea people will just have to get by with Uncle Lance for now.*

Magical energy surged into the sword in his hand, and the blade lit up with a bright glow, as though the whole thing was filled with light.

<sup>bai brasse</sup>  
A *s p u r t* carried him into the midst of the hoard, and before any of them knew what was happening, Athdénta Soluis ripped through the mantichore's throat in a spray of blood and gore. The hoard reeled and turned to rip him apart, two dozen different beasts roaring and clacking and growling, but he was already gone again with another <sup>bai brasse</sup> *s p u r t* that brought him behind their ranks.

“More than enough?” Connla laughed as his blood sang, because this was the most fun he'd had since he was summoned. “This is barely a warmup, Tibby!”

The blood on his blade sizzled as the light inside burned it away. Connla leveled it at the whole group in challenge.

“Try not to die too fast!”