Those Who Soar into Dawn

by inexacterminology

Summary

The young mercenary Byleth Eisner has fought to survive since he was sixteen, traveling from conflict to conflict across Fódlan to aid his father in skirmishes, bounty hunts, and displays of force. Byleth finds himself lifted out of this violent life and into the elegant world of aristocratic politics after he is scouted to teach Military Strategy at the Officer's Academy at Garreg Mach Monastery. Byleth's teaching career begins just as the future leaders of Fódlan's three major powers arrive at Garreg Mach, each of them bringing secrets and schemes to the Class of 1181. Barely an adult himself, Byleth must strive to nurture the minds and hearts of his students even while investigating the hidden ends of some of Fódlan's most cunning individuals.

This work aims to rewrite the story of FE16 so that:
- The world building is more consistent and feels more real
- Conflict is driven by ideological differences between the main characters, not misunderstandings or miscommunications
- No concessions to gameplay or development resources need be made due to the differing medium
Notes

Spoiler Warning: Some information that is buried at the end of the Silver Snow route in the game is revealed pretty early on.

UPDATE: 2020.06.07 for personal reasons this fic is now dead
The continent of Fódlan is a land home to fair-skinned folk who revere a creator goddess said to have fallen from the stars. Its lands are divided between three feudal aristocratic states. In the south lies a region held for over a millennium by a single dynasty—the Adrestian Empire. Beyond its borders, to the frigid north, is the home of the Holy Kingdom of Faerghus. To the east, a league of nobles that heeds no king or emperor rules what is called the Leicester Alliance. In the center of the continent, atop the Oghma Mountains, lies the headquarters of the Church of Seiros, a powerful organization dedicated to the goddess and her saintly prophet.

Relations between the three states, all once part of the Empire, have never been better. Heathen enemies to the north and east and west have prompted the leaders of each state to work with the Church in creating a shared cultural identity for the people of Fódlan, with the elites going so far as to school their children together, so that bonds may be forged across borders. The Officers’ Academy at Garreg Mach Monastery attracts scions and heirs from across Fódlan for two years of learning in the Central Church of Seiros’s own seat of power.

Within each country, however, struggles for power and dark tragedies plague the lives of nobles and commoners alike. In Adrestia, it has become common knowledge that a power struggle between the Imperial household and the other nobility has left the sitting Emperor Ionius IX a mere figurehead, while disease has cost him ten of his eleven children. In Faerghus, an assassination of the king by religious extremists from a minority group has led to cruel pogroms against the people of the Duscur ethnicity. When nobles within the Kingdom were found to be complicit in aiding the assassins, a peasant revolt followed, led by a heretical prophet who challenged the divine right to rule granted to the nobility via Crests—hereditary blessings that grant those born with them supernatural abilities. In Leicester, attacks by wandering monsters have devastated trade routes and claimed the life of Godfrey von Riegan, heir to one of the Alliance’s most important families.

Still, those who lead the present prepare their successors for a future without them. In Imperial Year 1180, the ones who will shape Fódlan’s future will meet at Garreg Mach.

Wyvern Moon, 1179IY

Crown Prince Dimitri Alexandre Blaiddyd waited in the king’s study, a guest in his own palace. Despite his uncle’s promise to meet him here three hours ago, Dimitri had needed to barge into his uncle’s room and rouse the Grand Duke from his hungover, whore-covered stupor. Still now, Dimitri waited for his uncle to finish making himself decent enough to conduct the day’s business. As he waited, Dimitri meditated like he would before fighting—the only way to keep himself from flying into a rage and breaking everything in the room.

At last, Rufus, Grand Duke of Iltha and ruling regent of the Holy Kingdom of Faerghus, joined his nephew in the study. The indulgences of palace life had eroded the great, blonde-haired and blue-eyed man’s once powerful figure, and he moved clumsily with the weight he’d gained over the last four years.
“I’m terribly sorry, Dimitri,” he said, blushing with shame. “I’m afraid I had a little too much fun last night, and well… I should have held back a bit more. I don’t want you to think you’re not important to me.”

“I understand,” Dimitri replied, his face like slate. “A man doing a king’s work is entitled to at least some of a king’s privileges.”

“Right you are—but! Family needs to come first,” Rufus replied, now grinning with pride at his own apparent virtue in admitting this. “What is it that you want to discuss with your uncle?”

Dimitri stood from his seat. “Uncle, I am nearing seventeen years of age. While you have done your best to maintain the peace and prosperity of Faerghus during your regency, many are dissatisfied with the problems that have arisen during your rule. While you can hardly be blamed for last year’s rebellion, you must be aware that many lords of Faerghus do just that, if only for your own convenience. Because of this, they hamper your ability to do what is needed to recover at every turn. It is time for me to take the throne, as is my birthright. On my seventeenth birthday, I will be old enough to be crowned. Unlike you, I am popular with the lords, and my deeds during the rebellion are smiled upon. I will still need to rely upon you as my advisor, but I believe we can make real progress if I am the one pushing for your ideas. What reason is there to put off my coronation any longer?”

“Dimitri, my boy…” Rufus began, “you really have grown up, haven’t you? As great as it would be for you to be the one sitting in that chair, making all the dukes and marquises and margraves pissed at you, I don’t think it’s such a great idea. We both know that Gaspard boy that got the axe couldn’t have been the only one involved in Lam’s death… I’m terrified the same could happen to you. If an old, weak fool like me is sitting there, there’s no way our enemies would think it worth the risk, but you… you’re strong, Dimitri, and you’ve got this fire in you that could melt a Fhirdiad winter. Lambert was the same. They’re afraid of that…”

Dimitri stomped the floor in frustration, cracking the stone under his boot with the supernatural strength of his Crest. “I can’t just spend my whole life hiding from knives in the dark! I have to take the throne eventually, whether I’m surrounded by traitors or not. There’s no sense in waiting out of fear!”

“Alright, I hear you,” Rufus replied, hands raised in front of him, “but there’s another important factor to consider. Things have been pretty bad since Lam died, but they would have been much worse without the Central Church’s help… and it would be a terrible snub to them if we crowned you without sending you to the Officers’ Academy at Garreg Mach Monastery first. Every king has attended since its founding, and I’d hate for you to miss out on that. Not only would it be a great experience, and make you a better king to have that schooling, but it would be two years where you could get to enjoy life again before wading back into the mess of politics. You’ve hardly seen your friends since the Tragedy, don’t you think—”

Dimitri kicked the chair he’d been sitting in, breaking off one of its legs as he shouted his disagreements. “I don’t care about ‘enjoying life!’ How could I possibly be worried about that when the West is in ruins, stricken by famine and war, the East is overcome with refugees and bandits, and the North struggles to maintain order as people riot and protest! What gives me the right to take it easy when my countrymen are dying? I should be helping them, not playing at being a schoolchild!”

Rufus said nothing for a moment, waiting to hear any other complaints Dimitri might have, but he only stood there, catching his breath and staring at the chair he’d ruined. “Dimitri, if you wait until everything is alright to start living, you’re never going to have a life. Lam was working ‘til the day
of the Tragedy, and he still made time for fun, and for family. It’s not like you won’t be working while you’re there, either. It’s important for the Holy Kingdom to be close with the Church, and they teach you cutting-edge military strategy there—something that will be vital if you ever need to go to war. All of the most important people across Fódlan will be sending their heirs there—any one of them could become your valuable ally if you befriend them!

"Look, here," Rufus said as he fumbled to withdraw a scroll from his robe. “The Adrestian Empire sent us a scroll announcing that they’ve got some pretty important kids going there next year. Lots of house heirs! Hresvelg, Vestra, Aegir, Hevring. Wouldn’t it be great to be able to borrow the help of someone like that?"

Dimitri’s eyes widened at the name Hresvelg, but he soon closed them and took a deep breath, steadying himself. “The Hresvelg heir will be there?”

“They sure will! It says, 'The Great and Holy Adrestian Empire, Land of... yadda yadda... is pleased to announce the following students to attend the Class of 1181 of the Officers’ Academy at Garreg Mach: Imperial Princess Edelgard von Hresvelg, heiress to our most great and righteous...’” he stopped reading, fascinated by how Dimitri was now pacing back and forth across the study, his previous anger vanished and replaced by a look of serious contemplation.

Dimitri stopped and stuck his arm out to his uncle, hand open. Rufus handed him the message. The Duke waited quietly for Dimitri to read the thing several times over, as though he needed to be absolutely sure of its verity.

“I’m going,” Dimitri finally said. “Have an application prepared for me, and one for my retainer Dedue.”

“Sure, sure,” answered Rufus, amazed by Dimitri’s sudden change of heart. “I’ll make sure Fraldarius, Gautier, and Galatea know you’re going this year. I’m sure your childhood friends will want to join you if they get the chance.”

Dimitri eyed his uncle for a moment, then shrugged. “If you insist.”

Thup!

Claude smiled as he looked at the target he’d been shooting at, particularly at the neat cluster of shots gathered around its bullseye.

“Excellent shooting, Claude. You continue to impress,” a voice called, drawing Claude’s attention off of his sport. It belonged to Claude’s grandfather Duke Oswald von Riegan, an aging man whose small stature contrasted with his regal bearing. “I admit, I was skeptical of your ability to succeed as a noble of the Alliance, but you’ve done nothing but prove me wrong since you arrived in Derdriu two years ago. There is nothing left for me to teach you: it is time to announce you as my heir to all of Fódlan.”

Claude chuckled, “Heh, I knew you’d come around, gramps. So, how do we do this here in Fódlan? Is there some huge meeting of all the biggest and baddest nobles where I need to get on stage and dance, or am I supposed to wander all over the place knocking on people’s doors and spreading the good news?”

Oswald folded his arms and snorted. “Nothing like that, you idiot pup. I will announce you to the other lords of the Alliance at the next meeting of the Leicester Alliance Roundtable. As for the
other nations, they will come to know of your existence when we send them messages saying you will be attending the Officers' Academy at Garreg Mach starting next year.”

“What, more schooling? I thought you said we were done with that!” cried Claude, his face wrought with exaggerated plight.

“Just because I’ve nothing left to teach you doesn’t mean you’ve nothing left to learn,” Oswald replied, snarling at his grandson’s antics. “As a leader, the moment you stop learning, stop adapting, you might as well be dead! Besides, the point of the Officers’ Academy isn’t just the education. It’s an important opportunity to take stock of your peers. I’ve just received a message from the Adrestian Empire announcing the attendance of not just their Imperial Princess, but also the heir of the Prime Minister, the heir of the Minister of the Interior, and the heir of the Minister of the Imperial Household. This opportunity is too good to pass up!”

“Well, when you put it that way, of course I’ve got to go! No way I could pass up a chance to rub elbows with all of those snooty and spoiled brats! Now if you’ll excuse me, I think I need to go throw up—in preparation,” Claude joked.

For once, Oswald laughed at Claude’s humor. “Ha ha ha! Just keep that up, boy. No one’s going to take you seriously at this rate. They won’t know what hit them…”

Drinking was Jeralt Eisner’s favorite pastime. A long life of violence could only fill a man with regrets, and nothing made those fade from the mind quite like a frothing mug of ale or three. The mercenary commander sat at the bar and quaffed deeply, looking forward to a night of peace and haze.

Unfortunately for the commander, the sort of patron who sat next to him seemed ready to spoil that fun. Though the man looked like any dockworker, his movements were far too careful, and his gaze was far too sharp as he checked his surroundings before sitting down. Jeralt had been recognized—this was a client.

Not wanting to drag business out any longer than necessary, Jeralt greeted the man. “I’m pleased to meet you,” he said, offering a handshake. “You know who I am, you’ve got something that needs doing—what’s the job, and what are you paying?”

The man took the handshake and smiled. “I can only hope the tales of your skill in battle are as accurate as the descriptions of your bluntness, Jeralt Blade-Breaker. That said, I’m not looking to pay you to kill anyone or fight anything. I just need you and your men to visit a specific town at a specific time, and not ask who wants them to do this or why.”

Jeralt groaned. He’d never been good with these clandestine sort of operators. He’d made his reputation through guts, bravery, and keeping a straight head, not cunning or viciousness. “Where do you want us to go?” he asked. “I need travel expenses covered, and then some. Plus hush money, and blood money in case things go south for one of my troops.”

“There’s a town in the Western Empire called Remire. You just need to visit it by the seventh of Lone Moon and stay until the fourteenth. While you’re there, just do whatever feels right to you, no need to worry about what my employer wants. I’ve got your ‘expenses covered and then some’ here; someone will meet you at the destination to deliver the rest of the payment when the job’s done,” the envoy said as he passed Jeralt a bag of coins.
Jeralt pretended to count as he considered the odds of this being some horrible trap against what he stood to gain by going through with it. His instincts told him he wasn’t being led on about being paid later, if this wasn’t entirely a scheme to capture him. It was not as though Jeralt was without enemies. “Nothing else about the job you can give me?” asked Jeralt.

The envoy thought for a moment before answering, “My employer did not select your company himself, rather, I was given discretion as to whom I should hire for this job. I came to you for a few reasons: your reputation as an honorable, but powerful warrior; your proximity to where I was already operating; and your complete and utter lack of connections to the Adrestian Empire’s current rulers.”

Jeralt could see the truth of it, now. He was being employed as a deniable asset by someone important in the Empire’s court, someone who was trying to pull one over a competitor inside the Empire. Maybe Jeralt had finally adapted to these scoundrels after all. “I’ll take the job,” he said. “Tell your employer it’s a deal.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to @alchworks for beta reading.
As we marched down the rocky path, the evening sun cast wide shadows over the forested hollow. Smoke billowed from a place across the trees, a sure sign of our destination. Unfortunately, a more worrying sign awaited on the near side of the wood. What had once been a watchtower now lay in ruins, the whole thing toppled over due to one of its great wooden legs breaking eight feet up.

“A northern watchtower,” I said to Father. “Can’t be more than a couple of years old, likely to warn of bandits coming over the northern border.”

“Show me the bandit that can do that,” he replied.

We approached quietly, many of our company with swords drawn, as we went to examine the wreck. Soon, the cause became obvious.

“A demonic beast,” I muttered, examining the huge depressions scattered about the scene that marked the monster’s footfalls.

Father continued to stare intently at the tracks. I waited patiently for his judgement; the former knight was sure to know more. “Strange,” he finally said. “These look like death wyrm tracks in shape, but… there’s an extra toe.”

He paused to think for a moment. “Well, we’d better get to the town quickly any which way. We don’t want to fight a demonic beast of any kind out here in the woods, with the gear we’ve got.”

He turned to the rest of the company. “Everybody hustle... quietly.”

We jogged across the woods wordlessly, eyes darting around the dark in fear of ambush. As we reached the town’s gatehouse, we were relieved to be clear of the trees, but devastated to find this town’s northern side was protected by a natural moat, across which the drawbridge had been destroyed—likely by the same perpetrator as the watchtower.

Luckily, we weren’t forced to call attention to ourselves, as a man in chain with a nervous expression had been watching our arrival from the other side. He shouted to us from across the moat, “Who goes there?”

“I am Commander Jeralt, and this is my mercenary company,” Father answered, his deep and rough voice proclaiming confidence, but not hostility.

Father was a tall, burly man who wore an old suit of plate. For weapons, he carried an arming sword and a heater shield, as well as a crossbow. Though the lines of age had begun to show on his face, he still had all of his hair and in full color—except for the sideburns, which he’d shaved off when they’d started greying last year. Though the helmet he’d donned when danger became apparent hid his hair, his sandy brown beard did show. His brown eyes were only a shade darker.

“We’d like to get across this moat, unless the thing that knocked your bridge down is on your side and not ours.”
The chain-wearing man responded, “Mercenaries? Oh, thank the Goddess! I’ll get the ladder. You’ll have to climb across.”

Sure enough, the long ladder the man brought out held our weights as each one of us individually crossed the moat—a nerve-wracking experience for everyone involved.

Inside the town, it quickly became apparent that we were not any safer than out in the forest, as it was possible to see the ruins of someone’s home, clear evidence that the beast both could and had jumped the moat. The entire town sloped upward from its northern entrance, its buildings placed well apart according to the natural rise of the land. The road through the town was paved, but weeds aplenty sprouted between its stones. Remire stretched the width of the hollow and was bracketed by cliffsides.

“As you can see,” our nervous greeter began, “we’ve been attacked by a demonic beast. Our brave sheriff perished in his attempts to stave it off. We held an emergency council, and I’ve been appointed the law until that thing is dead or driven off. I need to ride west to Castle Arundel and call upon the protection of our Lord, or our village is doomed. As acting sheriff, I have the authority to hire mercenaries in times of extreme danger—such as right now! Someone has got to watch the town while I’m away.”

While Father negotiated pricing, I decided to check on the state of my comrades. Jeralt’s Mercenaries numbered ten including Father and I, the other members being various toughs and lads we’d picked up wandering across Leicester. Though they were generally a brave sort, their expressions at the moment betrayed their beast-inspired fright. Mulder, the youngest of the lot at seventeen, was shaking in his boots, which was only putting the rest of them on edge. I put my hand on his shoulder, hoping to steady him.

“Goddess, Byleth,” said Colm, a nineteen year-old rogue with black hair we’d picked up in Derdriu. “How can you stay calm after seeing that mess?”

My face has always been naturally inexpressive, sort of like a resting poker face. People are often put off by my lack of natural displays of emotion, but the feature was useful in situations like this one, where I could remain stoic despite my every instinct screaming in fear at the giant monster that might well show up and kill me at any time.

“The Commander has plenty of experience fighting demonic beasts,” I calmly replied. “If he’s accepting the job, it means he believes we can defeat it, even with these numbers. What reason have I to doubt the Commander’s judgement? Is he not Jeralt Blade-Breaker, a legendary warrior?”

“I suppose you’re right,” replied Anthony a twenty-eight-year-old merc with red hair.

“Argh, that kind of thinking is so stupid!” countered Arthur, Anthony’s younger brother.

“If we just blindly trust the Commander to do everything right, we’re going to get fucked the first time he makes a mistake! Not that we’ve any better options at the moment. I don’t know where the fuck around here I could go that would be safe with that monster on the loose,” he pouted.

“I didn’t mean to imply that we should assume the Commander’s decisions are perfect,” I corrected, “but it’s worth trusting in his expertise if we can’t see an obviously better course ourselves.”

“Yeah, yeah, have faith in Daddy,” Arthur muttered.
“Art, Byleth’s point is sound,” scolded Anthony. “None of us would be here in this company if we hadn’t seen for ourselves how great the Commander is. You’ve seen on our jobs he’s the real deal.”

From that point, the conversation ceased being about how fucked we were in the moment and started being sibling bickering, so I considered my attempt at raising morale a success.

Father finished with his negotiations and came to speak with the company. “Alright, we’ve no time to waste. Here’s what we’ll need to do to get ready to fight the demonic beast…”

There are five ways to gain an advantage over a demonic beast: numbers, relics, spells, artillery, and explosives. We did what we could to expand our numbers, pressuring two local hunters into lending their bows to the fight. Our spellpower was too low to make a difference: we had only a local priest who could heal minor injuries and my own self-taught black magic, which was good for lighting fires and not much else. Relics were out of the question, and the town had nothing in the way of cannons or ballistas.

That left explosives.

Remire was a mining town, located near copper deposits that were reached by blasting down large sections of stone using gunpowder charges. It might put a hurting on local industry for a bit, but we were commandeering the gunpowder supply for the time being. We loaded up as much powder as we could gather onto a cart, which would be pulled by a horse while I stayed nearby ready to light its fuse via magic at the appropriate moment. Once we’d finished, we gathered around Father to discuss our strategy.

“Here’s the most important thing to remember when fighting a demonic beast,” Father began, “don’t be a hero. They’re stronger than you; they can run faster than you. What they aren’t is smarter than you. Careful teamwork will let us beat this beast. I’m going to operate under the assumption that this is a death wyrm, or something like it, based on its prints. These are vicious, hungry predators that are a bit too fond of the taste of human flesh, but they’ll go after larger prey if they can. We’ve got a horse pulling the powder, a target I think it’ll go for. We haven’t got enough powder to put a death wyrm down, only stun it, so as soon as Byleth blows the cart, we’ll need to be on the beast making sure it doesn’t get up. Taking off the head will be our goal, as it’s one of the surest ways to keep a beast down.”

“Question,” asked one of the hunters, “If you lot are just going to hack at it with swords, what are we supposed to do?”

“Things might not go as planned,” Father replied. “If it’s not going for the horse, we’ll have to just shoot it ‘til it goes down or fucks off. For that purpose, here’s how we’ll be positioned tonight. The explosives team will be Byleth and Mulder, positioned by the gatehouse. Anthony, Arthur, and I will be the ground team, positioned a hundred yards back. Our job will be to get in there and start working on the head as soon as the cart blows. The rest of you will be perched on the ledges in sight of the gatehouse and serve as the volley team. Wait for my signal, then don’t stop shooting.”

“You got it, boss,” the hunter replied.

“We’ll have to be in place every night until the thing dies or Arundel’s soldiers get here. Shame, I was hoping to sleep on a bed. Byleth, I’ll leave the watch schedule to you. Let’s get to it.”
The beast did not return on the first night, which I was not grateful for. My watch schedule proved futile, as we were all too nervous to sleep that night, and slept through the day instead. We woke early evening, ready to while another night of waiting.

After exercising, then eating, I decided I’d spend my time rereading the sole book I possessed on the study of magic.

Titled Karlman’s Basic Guide to Magecraft, the text contained relatively little information on how to actually cast spells. Instead, most of the tome was spent explaining the nature of magic—or rather, summarizing the ongoing academic debate as to the nature of magic. Karlman examined everything from the writings of pre-Imperial scholars to the treatises written by professors at Fódlan’s greatest schools of magic in the last century. Only once Karlman had made it clear that there was insufficient evidence for anyone to be sure of what magic was and how it worked did Karlman start talking about practice, beginning with instructions on exercises for developing a “mage’s mind.” These exercises consisted of puzzles and riddles that tested deductive reasoning and mathematical proficiency, and were followed by meditative practices for clearing the mind of distractions that might interfere with the shaping of arcane energy.

Finally, the last section of the book covered how to summon and shape arcane energy, a task I had dedicated myself to over the last three months. Though I had only gotten comfortable creating small flames, I had succeeded in maintaining the fire for long periods of time. This, I read, was essential for developing a “mana base,” which would be useful for casting more powerful and sophisticated spells.

The light was running out well before I finished my reading, so I lit a spark and maintained it while I read. Maintaining the flame while also paying attention to something else was far more challenging, but I found it quite rewarding to save the money on candles.

I was most of the way through the book before my reading was interrupted. A baying sound unlike that of any hound I’d ever heard called through the night, and we knew the beast was near. The horse snorted in alarm. Mulder and I hid behind the cart, peeking out past the gatehouse as we saw the beast step into the light of the torches ensconced nearby.

The demonic beast was like a giant, black lizard, at least fifteen yards long. A single glowing red eye shone atop its snout, the mouth below agape and lined with jagged teeth. It leapt over the moat before letting out another bay, now close enough that it hurt my ears. The horse attempted to run away, but it was slowed by the cart it dragged behind it. Mulder and I ran ahead of it, hoping the beast would follow, but its loud footfalls went in a different direction.

The beast had spotted the men on the ledges and gone after them instead. It perched back on its hind legs to raise its mouth up to their level, a good twenty feet above, and issued its bay once more. The man nearest it was one of the hunters, and the fool decided to shoot it in the face. The man was skilled, true—his arrow flew right into the beast’s mouth and stuck in its throat, but this only caused the monster to strike the man with one of its clawed forearms, definitely a lethal amount of force. Father’s horn blew, the signal to start firing.

“The horse is useless! Let’s detach the cart,” I shouted to Mulder. We stopped the horse and started unhooking the cart from the horse’s yoke.

“Shit,” Father muttered, catching up to me. “The plan’s a bust. That’s not a death wyrm.” He
handed me a crossbow. “Let’s get firing.”

The five of us on the ground joined in with the volley team, firing bolt after bolt into the thing’s hide. We spread ourselves out in a half-circle around it, so that the projectiles came at it from all sides save back whence it came. The beast appeared aggressive, but seemed to be having trouble deciding which of its assailants to attack as its hide became littered with bolts. It turned this way and that, baying at each one of us while the others continued to fire at it. Finally, the thing turned its snout to the sky and bayed once again before jumping back over the moat and fleeing into the forest. My ears still rang from its cries.

“Holy fucking shit,” said Arthur.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to @alchworks for beta reading.
“What the fuck was that!? That monster didn’t go for the fucking horse at all! Now Cord is dead!” the Remirian hunter shouted at us, spit flying as he screamed his grief and fury.

“He knew what he was getting into,” Anthony replied with a frown. “There was never a guarantee the plan was gonna work; we all knew that. It’s a right shame, though, he seemed like a fine chap.”

“Pah!” decried Arthur. “Funny how the one guy who decided to shoot the beast while it was right up in his face is the only one who got offed. I guess he wasn’t listening when the Commander said not to be a hero, eh?”

“Why, you!” the hunter snarled before attempting to charge at Arthur.

Anthony began scolding his younger brother while Mulder and I attempted to hold the hunter back. “Goddess’ sake, Art! The man just lost a good friend; can’t you show some sensitivity?”

“Unhand me you sellswords! That punk needs a lesson!” the struggling hunter hissed.

“Enough!” Father shouted. “Since Cord died helping us defend the town, I’ll make sure his family receives some money from our pay. As for Arthur, he’ll be taking a pay cut for his rudeness, to help cover the expense.”

Arthur opened his mouth to protest, but Anthony quickly covered it with a hand.

Father turned to me. “I need to go offer my condolences to Cord’s family. Keep an eye on the crew until I get back.” He followed the still-cursing hunter deeper into town.

Barst—one of the mercs on our volley team—noted, “If that thing comes back again, I’m going to run out of crossbow bolts.”

I checked the quivers of our troops. It was about a week’s ride to Castle Arundel, so if it took two weeks for aid to arrive, we were in deep trouble. Assuming the beast decided to return every other night, we would need to drive it off five or six more times. I wasn’t sure how large the population of Remire was, but the town wasn’t big enough to provide enough bolts and arrows for each of us to fire as often as we had tonight.

I took a look around. Though the town sloped toward the northern entrance, its road was too winding for us to push the powder cart downhill with enough momentum to reach the gatehouse. If we positioned ourselves deeper inside the town, we risked the beast taking cover behind the buildings. We would also make the town suffer more, giving the beast opportunity to smash more homes.

I considered Father’s original plan for dealing with a death wyrm. His plan had revolved around predicting the enemy’s behavior and punishing it. While our foe was not a well-characterized type of demonic beast, we did have some information to work with: we had just observed the beast’s behavior.
Father said a death wyrm was driven by hunger, and would prioritize large prey, but our enemy hadn’t seemed interested in eating at all. It had killed Colm with a claw, not a bite, and it hadn’t paid attention to his corpse. Moreover, it had announced its presence, as though its roars were challenges—wouldn’t a predator have instead sought to obtain its meal with the least amount of struggle? It had only killed Colm after he’d responded to the challenge by shooting it. Though the rest of us had shot it afterwards, it had never been shot by someone it was looking at, for the beast would turn towards whomever had just shot it, and that person would then be reloading their crossbow while the beast bayed at them. The next shot would come from someone else, and so the cycle repeated had until the beast had fled.

What would have happened if no one had shot the beast? Would it even have attacked us? I wasn’t about to bank on the giant monster being friendly, especially now that we’d shot it. But if it was willing to stand in front of someone just to scream at them? That was a behavior that could be punished.

“We need to succeed in blowing it up next time it comes, then,” I said. “I think I might have an idea of how to do so…”

8th of Lone Moon, 1179IY

My new plan was simple: I would serve as the bait so I could draw the beast in and light up the cart. However, I would need a way to survive the explosion.

*Karlman’s Guide,* unfortunately, held no solutions for me: destroying things with magic was significantly easier than preventing them from being destroyed. I wasn’t about to wear myself out trying to practice a magical shield hours before I’d be relying on it to live, so instead, I’d had a local craftsman attach a grip to the door of the demolished house. The oversized shield was far too heavy to fight with, but that was fine—it only needed to put a barrier between me and the shrapnel.

I waited by the gatehouse, sitting in front of the powder cart alone. The others were positioned similarly to how we’d been arranged the night before. I practiced one of Karlman’s meditations, emptying my mind while I awaited the beast. I was no longer concerned about looking out for it, as I was confident it would announce its presence when it arrived.

Sure enough, I was roused from my zen by a distant bay. I opened my eyes and stood. The unearthly sound had awakened something in my mind that screamed I was making a mistake, that I needed to run and hide, yet I never felt my heart beat, my pulse quicken, or my skin break out in sweat. I noticed that my hand had ended up on my sword hilt, so I removed it.

The beast leapt over the moat once again, and it was too late to back out. The sound of its landing was no less intimidating than the nearness of its maw. In this proximity, I could see that the glowing red object on its snout wasn’t an eye, but rather a stone—one small enough to fit in my hand—embedded in the beast’s flesh. The monster bayed in my face, loud enough that I could feel my ribcage shake.

I didn’t wait for it to finish before I lit the fuse and started running, grabbing the door as I passed the cart. The beast noticed my flight but began its pursuit too late. We’d packed the barrel of powder’s remaining space tightly with rocks that don’t spark to maximize the amount of shrapnel. The shockwave rattled me as the barrel burst, though the door spared me from the worst even as I was knocked over. I heard father shout something, but the combination of the pressurized powder going off and the baying I’d endured had robbed me of some hearing.
I threw the door aside and saw our company descend upon the beast’s limp body with axes and swords. They hacked and chopped at its tree trunk-sized neck until it severed off. Once the head had detached, the dark mass of the beast began to break apart and drift away as though it were ash in the wind. When it cleared, there was only the rock, no longer glowing, and a human with long, white hair.

I pulled myself to my feet and made my way to join them. Arthur reached for the stone, but Father snatched his arm and shouted at him. Father took a cloth from his pocket and gingerly wrapped the stone before picking it up.

I reached the human. I looked to Father for approval before attempting to touch them. Father nodded. The pulse was faint. Looking at them up close, I could see they looked to be a young teen, male. He was completely naked.

My hearing suddenly returned, rattling me as muddy sounds leapt back into clarity.

“What in the world?” I asked.

“This is what demonic beasts are,” Father explained. “They’re just people or animals that touch these rocks—Crest stones. No one without a Crest can handle them safely.”

Our conversation was interrupted by the sound of a signal horn. Whose signal was that? It was far too early for the troops from Castle Arundel to be arriving.

“That tune… it can’t be…” Father said.

Twelve riders came trotting up to the moat, one of them carrying the banner of the Church of Seiros. The leading rider dismounted and walked up to the moat’s edge, getting a closer look at us. This broad-shouldered knight was wearing high-quality plate armor, as functional as that worn by Adrestian heavies yet modestly ornate.

“I can’t believe it!” he shouted at us. He removed his helmet to reveal the face of a middle-aged man with brown hair, green eyes, and a horseshoe mustache.

“Sir Jeralt?”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to @alchworks for beta reading
8th of Lone Moon, 1179IY

We turned to look at Father. “Sir?” Arthur asked.

“Nevermind that,” I interjected, “get the priest! The kid’s barely hanging on by a thread!”

“I’ll go!” Mulder shouted, running off towards the town church.

Father and I met eyes, and I could tell he was torn about something. He looked back to the knight, then shook its head. “Long time no see, Alois. Let me get the ladder so your men can cross the moat. And it’s ‘Commander’ now; I’m a mercenary these days, not a knight.”

Once the knights had crossed, their medic immediately got to work on the boy while Father and Alois conversed. I stood by Father’s side, interested.

“This place is a wreck! You must’ve been dealing with the demonic beast we were tracking! Sorry we didn’t get here sooner. Hey, you really beat it with just this many men? Incredible!” Alois shouted at roughly the same volume he’d been using when we were across the moat from one another, though he was barely five feet away.

“Tch… you’ve gotten a lot older since I last saw you, but you still act like an annoying kid. And the credit for taking this beast down has to go to my son, Byleth. He’s the one who used himself as living bait to pop the town’s black powder supply in its face,” Jeralt replied.

“Ha! You don’t look like you’ve aged a day since we last met! Except… don’t tell me… you shaved your sideburns! I thought there was something goofy about your look!”

Alois turned to me as Father face-palmed. “So you’re the captain’s kid, huh? Nice to meet you. The name’s Rangeld—Sir Alois Rangeld. I’m a Marshal in the Knights of Seiros, and a professor at the Officers’ Academy.” He held out his hand, and I shook it.

“Byleth Eisner, at your service,” I said.

“When your father was in the Knights of Seiros, I was like his right-hand man! I owe him a lot,” Alois said. “So, what are your plans now that you’ve blasted the beast?”

“We’re supposed to stay here until relief comes from Castle Arundel,” Jeralt explained. “Our rider only left on the sixth, so we’ll be here a while yet. I don’t want these louts getting lazy, so I’ll probably put them to work helping rebuild. We need the goodwill since we put the town’s mining to a stop and a local got killed on our watch. Also, it’s damn annoying having to cross the moat with a ladder.”

“Ha! You’re telling me! I had to leave Sir Gilbert on the other side with the horses!” Alois exclaimed.

“What about you, Alois?” Jeralt asked.

“Hm… I really need to get back to Garreg Mach. It’s a three-week journey from here, and I need to
be back by Founding Day, so we depart on the tenth. Rhea sure will be relieved to hear you’re safe; she was in a real state after you vanished twenty years ago.” He opened his mouth to say something more, then seemed to decide against it.

“Spit it out, Alois,” Father commanded.

“It’s just,” Alois began, “I know you wouldn’t have left if you didn’t want to… but… it would be a shame if Rhea didn’t get to meet your son. Also, it feels wrong for us to part so soon, after meeting again after all these years. If I’m being honest, I want you to come back, Jeralt. Rhea’s not the only one who’s missed you.”

Father closed his eyes and thought for a moment before answering. “I’ll need to discuss it with Byleth. In the meantime, get your men settled.”

I followed Father some ways out from Remire, through a trail that led to the copper mines. No one else was around.

“You knew we’d be found eventually,” I said.

“Yeah,” Father said, looking out at the night. “It was only a matter of time before the Church started investigating rumors of the Blade-Breaker’s return. That Alois recognized my face only sped things along.” He spat. “Damn the Dagdans and their stupid invasion. If not for them, we might’ve been able to stay in Brigid forever.”

I thought back to my childhood on the sunlit coast, to the day I enlisted in the Army of Brigid, to my first kill: a hapless Ochsport guard. I reached my hand to the left side of my stomach. I thought I remembered being impaled there, but without a scar, I couldn’t be sure.

“After Herstal,” I said, “you told me the Church couldn’t be trusted. That they would try to control me, because of my Crest. That they did something to me, when I was a child. There’s a reason why my face doesn’t emote properly, why my blood flows even though my heart doesn’t beat, why I don’t sweat or shiver in any temperature.”

“That’s right,” he answered. “I was out on a mission when your mother gave birth to you two months early. They said she’d passed away, but they’d managed to save you. You looked just like her—you still do. But you had no heartbeat, and you didn’t cry at all.”

He looked at the ground. “I was a coward. I took you and ran, rather than confront the Archbishop. She was your grandmother; she might have told me what she’d done, explained it to me if I was willing to listen.”

“So now you want to go back?” I asked. “Beg forgiveness for twenty years of hiding and demand answers?”

He thought about this for a minute or so. “Yeah, I think it’s for the best. It’ll be a lot harder to hide once Rhea finds out I’m in Fódlan. Alois can’t keep a secret to save his life, and we can’t count on any of the knights with him to keep quiet. Unfamiliar faces, the lot of them; too young to have served under me.”

I thought we had a good shot at killing the knights, but the consequences of success would be ugly, so I didn’t raise the notion.
“The question is, should you come with me? It would be easy to claim you’re the child of another woman, as long as Rhea doesn’t lay eyes on you herself. She might try to track you down, anyway, but—”

“No,” I interrupted. “You want to come clean, right? It’ll be hard to do that if you’re still hiding who I am.”

“Right, but… if I’m wrong about Rhea, it could be the end of you. She’ll want to finish whatever it is she started,” he said.

“What’s Archbishop Rhea like?” I asked. “Don’t you trust your judgement of her character?”

“Rhea… she’s been leading the Central Church for a long time,” Father answered. “Like me, she possesses a Major Crest of Seiros, which extends its bearer’s lifespan. I’m feeling like I’m only middle-aged, and I was born towards the end of the tenth century—she’s older, but you’d never guess it. The Church of Seiros is both the most charitable organization in Fódlan and brutal in executing heretics and criminals, and I don’t think it’s wrong to say she’s the reason why. She’ll fight for what she believes in harder and more viciously than anyone. She’s also incredibly hard to read; almost nothing slips out of her that she doesn’t intend to let on.”

I put my hand over where my heart should be and felt nothing. My Crest alone couldn’t explain why I was this way. If I avoided the Church, maybe fled to Sreng or Brigid or Dagda or Almyra, I might be safe from any harm Rhea intended for me. However, the sword was the only trade I’d ever known. It would be all too easy for me to find myself embroiled in another war, and I might not survive the next. I’d probably never learn the truth about myself, either.

“I’ll go with you,” I said. “I too, want to know what I am.”

9th of Lone Moon, 1179IY

Jeralt’s Mercenaries gathered in the tavern for our final meeting.

“Barst,” Father began, “Castor. Darros. Julian. Anthony. Arthur. Navarre. Mulder. I want to thank you all for your service; it’s been a pleasure to fight alongside you. Some of you were criminals, before joining; others were peasants. Regardless of where you came from, I’m proud of how you’ve grown—as fighters and as people—in the time I’ve known you. Drinks are on me tonight.” Darros and Castor high-fived.

“However, this isn’t just a celebration of how far we’ve come, or of saving Remire from a demonic beast. It’s a farewell; Byleth and I are leaving the company.”

“What!” Arthur exclaimed. “How can Jeralt leave Jeralt’s Mercenaries? This is hardly a company without you at the lead!”

“Did the Knights of Seiros ask you to join them or something?” Mulder asked.

“We are going with the Knights back to the headquarters of the Central Church tomorrow… as for joining the Knights, I’m not sure if that’ll happen, yet. Whatever happens to me, I won’t be a mercenary after today. As for what you want to call yourselves without me, it’s up to the new leader to decide that. Unless there are any objections, I’d like for Barst to succeed me, since he’s spent the longest in the company. Are you up for it, Barst?”
“No problem, Commander,” Barst answered.

“I’m not your commander anymore. How do the rest of you feel about this?” Father asked.

"I suppose I can learn to live with it, as long as it’s not Anthony taking over,” remarked Arthur, earning him a punch in the shoulder from his brother. Most of the other mercenaries agreed that Barst was the best choice.

“Well, you’ll want to take this, then,” Father said as he passed Barst a small sack of coin. “These are company funds; use them responsibly. Take Byleth and mine’s share of the payment from this job and give it to Cord’s family. Remember to always collect what you’re due and pay what you owe. Your soldiers are your family, treat them as such. Never take a job that goes against your conscience. Keep your weapons sharp, and your mind sharper.”

Barst laughed. “I’ve got it, Jeralt. You’ve been saying this stuff since day one. I’ll miss you.” He gave Jeralt a hug. Soon, the rest of the mercs were gathering around to hug Father. I received no such attention, but a few of them did shake my hand and thank me for various things I’d helped them with.

Once the drinks were out, everyone unanimously and wordlessly decided it was time to tell stories. I stayed for the first few—all recollections of occasions on which Father had done or said something incredible and life-changing for one of the mercs—before finishing my drink and quietly excusing myself. Alcohol had no effect on me—another dubious benefit of my unnatural physiology—and I found the stories much less interesting than the idea of learning about the white-haired child who’d been the beast we’d defeated.

I headed towards the town church, where most of the Knights were staying. Father had told me that all churches were obligated to provide food and sleeping quarters to any visiting Knights of Seiros. It didn’t appear the standard for these services was very high, however, as I arrived to find bedrolls lying between the pews.

I greeted the local priest and explained to her my interest in the well-being of the beast-turned boy. To my surprise, the child was already awake. He was sitting up in bed and turned to look at me when I entered the room. His eyes were yellow with huge irises, constricted such that his pupils were tiny.

“Hello,” I greeted him. “I don’t suppose you remember me?”

He cocked his head to the side, as though he didn’t understand my question.

“He can’t speak,” said the knight who had been assigned to watch over him. She wasn’t wearing her armor, just a simple black outfit with an emerald cloak. The knight had short, black hair and piercing, violet eyes. I recognized the choker around her neck as a Dagdan widow band. I was surprised to find a Dagdan among the Knights of Seiros, since the Dagdans were historic enemies to the faith. “Doesn’t understand much Fódlanian, either.”

“Have you tried Dagdan?” I asked.

“I have.” I could feel her gaze dissect me. “Fódlanians who can recognize Dagdans are rare. Where are you from?” Truthfully, I wouldn’t have been able to place her if not for the band. Her accent was similar to Alois’s: unplaceably cosmopolitan.

“I was raised in Brigid,” I answered. I repeated my greeting to the child in Brigidese, but he didn’t respond any differently.
“Were you at First Herstal?” she asked.

“That’s right,” I responded. “Were you at the Second?”

“Yep.” We shared a moment of silent understanding. She didn’t look much older than me; her face still held the smooth attractiveness of youth.

Finally, I broke the silence by asking, “What’s going to happen to the kid?”

“Our healer wants to bring him back to Garreg Mach,” she explained. “Says he’s ‘medically interesting.’ You Fódlanians can have some crazy hair colors, but white’s out of the ordinary except for in the elderly; the eyes are strange, too. He thinks the kid’s been altered, magically. The Church has some of the best White mages in the world, so if anyone can fix him, it’s them. There’s an orphanage in the town by the monastery that’s funded by the Church, so he’ll be well-taken care of.”

“He’s good to travel?” I asked. “I checked his pulse after the battle, and it was very faint.”

“Yeah, he recovered really quickly, with our healer’s help,” she said. “He should be ready to ride tomorrow.”

“I see.” The child was fidgeting in the bed, looking bored, as though the knight and I had already stopped being interesting.

“I guess I’ll see you tomorrow, then. I don’t know what Alois has told you, but Father and I will be riding to Garreg Mach with your group.”

“I’m aware,” she answered. “In fact, I’ve been ‘volunteered’ to share a mount with you, since I’m a bit lighter than most of the knights, so it’s best if we get familiar.”

She stood up and offered a handshake.

“I’m Shamir Nevrand. I used to be a merc like you, but I’ve found the Knights of Seiros to be a more stable line of work for someone with a similar skillset.”

“I’m Byleth Eisner,” I said as I accepted the handshake. “I think we’ll get along pretty well.”

When I turned in for the night, I found Father passed out on our bed in the inn, drunk and snoring loudly. It was a horrible habit of his. On the dresser, I noticed a sizable sack of coin that hadn’t been there before. I’d have to ask Father about it in the morning.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to @alchworks for beta reading
I was the last to be ready for departure, my morning a scramble. As much as I prided myself on my professionalism, timely awakenings continued to elude me. Though my Crest allowed me to recover from injuries and exertions much faster than should be possible, it did not reduce my sleep time. In fact, I slept more each night than anyone else I knew. Father sometimes commented that he was afraid I would sleep endlessly if someone didn’t make a sustained effort to wake me. He himself would often let me oversleep for hours if he got bored of trying to get me up. Thus, he put off waking me on the day of our departure until immediately before we were supposed to be leaving.

Each Crest could come in either a Minor or Major variant, with the Minor variant of a Crest granting a single supernatural power to its bearer: for example, the Minor Crest of Seiros granted superhuman strength—it allowed its bearer to exert far greater force than should be possible for the size of their body. The Major variant of a Crest granted the power of its Minor variant in addition to a power exclusive to the Major form: for example, Father’s Major Crest of Seiros granted him both superhuman strength and extended longevity.

The Crest I bore was no Crest of Seiros, but rather one inherited from my mother. Father had said she was never allowed to leave Garreg Mach because of how rare and valuable her Crest was. However, I suspected I had only inherited the Minor version of her Crest, for I possessed only one ability that was a known Crest ability: superhuman regeneration. Three known extant Crests—Lamine, Riegan, and Chevalier—granted similar boons, in addition to their other power. While this ability had saved my life, and it allowed me to apply myself when others might tire, it was not so special that it needed to be a guarded secret. Thus, I suspected the Major ability of my crest to be the true source of its value. While there were a variety of other unusual things about me, I found it more likely that these were the result of whatever had happened to me as an infant, since my mother never displayed any of them, according to Father.

Running late as I was, I hadn’t bothered donning my armor—traveling with this heavily-armed group, I’d pity any highwayman to cross our path—so it went with the rest of my things on the Knights’ pack horse, ridden by a boy so young he must be a squire. My scruffy black hair, normally hidden by my helmet, was in an embarrassing state of bedhead beyond even its typical unkemptness. I did not take particular care of my hair, only occasionally cutting it with my dagger, so it didn’t obscure my vision or make my helmet uncomfortable. I caught Shamir smirking at my expense before I mounted behind her so we could depart.

We rode north out of the town, back up the rocky path our groups had approached Remire from. The Knights rode in a two-wide column: Father rode with a female knight at the front of the column next to Alois, Shamir and I rode in the fourth row alongside Sir Gilbert—the old knight who’d watched the horses outside the town on the night of Knights’ arrival—and the white-haired child rode behind us, sharing a horse with the Knights’ healer. The trail through the portion of the Oghmas that were in the eastern Empire was slow and treacherous, so we’d charted a route around them, going north through the Kingdom and approaching Garreg Mach from the road in Charon territory.

We rode twice each day for three hours before taking a half-hour break, then again for two before
stopping to rest for the night. Though winter was ending, we still lost a day to a snowstorm traveling through the Kingdom.

Shamir and I were both silent riders, and only occasionally talked on breaks. I was annoyed that the cold caused us to spend almost the entire trip with cloaks up. Though the scenery was undeserving of complaints, it would have been nice to have the option to admire Shamir’s hair on occasion. I’d thought Shamir was pretty when I’d first met her sitting in the church, but that thought hadn’t become a crush until I’d seen her move around, graceful and poised. Sparring with her was fun, both because of the challenge and because I got to watch her in motion.

Father’s partner in the saddle was not at all fun to spar with. Dame Catherine, the highest-ranking knight under Alois, was so absurdly fast it was impossible to keep up with. She trounced me five times in a row before admitting that she bore a Major Crest of Charon, which she could use to accelerate her movements. Until that moment, the blonde and blue-eyed woman had mocked me mercilessly, which hadn’t hurt as much as Shamir laughing at me throughout the process. She also carried a Hero’s Relic, so I felt foolish for ever entertaining the possibility that Father and mine’s Crests might be enough for the two of us to overpower the knights in combat—Catherine alone might be more than a match for the two of us.

Shamir and Catherine seemed to be close friends; they would spend most of our downtime together. Catherine’s skin was a bit tanner than what one normally saw in Fódlan, but with her hair color and eastern Kingdom accent, I couldn’t place her as any other nationality. Unlike Shamir, she would chatter and ramble about nearly any topic, though at least she didn’t shout or make abortive attempts at puns like Alois did.

Alois could be heard shouting about one thing or another to Father for much of the trip, audible even over the clapping of horse hooves. By this method, I was forced to learn that Alois was forty-four years old, that he had a thirty-five-year-old wife named Minerva and a twelve-year-old daughter named Maria, that he had an extensive collection of currency from around the world, that he considered puns to be the highest form of art, that he was embarrassed by his inability to handle spicy foods (also embarrassing, at his age), and that he’d racked up quite a kill count in recent years. The banditry problem in the Kingdom had created a lot of work for mercenaries and knights alike.

To my surprise, my fastest friend in the Knights was Gilbert, who noticed me practicing magic one evening and decided to ask me about it. He was no mage himself, but he seemed highly entertained whenever I explained to him a principle of magic I’d read about in *Karlman’s Guide*. I told him that the wizard among the Knights would be more knowledgeable about the subject, but Gilbert insisted I made it easier to understand the topic. We would occasionally spar, and I was impressed with his skill, as he was able to keep up with me even though his hair was nearly as white as the snow. He made me a wooden carving of a flame during the trip, a token I was glad to accept.

I barely talked with Father throughout the entire journey, since he spent most of it catching up with Alois. When I did get a chance to ask him about the money he’d obtained the night before we departed, he told me collecting it had been the reason we’d gone to Remire in the first place, and of his meeting with the client’s intermediary. The innkeeper had turned out to be the contact in Remire, and he’d decided to pass Father the payment early because we took out the demonic beast. Assuming his reasoning that we’d gone to interfere with an Imperial noble’s affairs was correct, it meant someone in the Imperial government was probably responsible for the state of the white-haired child. I was already inclined to distrust the Empire, so I wasn’t surprised. We agreed to reveal this information to Rhea when we met her, but Father insisted explaining the situation to Alois would be more trouble than it was worth.
As for the child, we’d taken to calling him “Kid,” a name he’d learned to respond to. Kid was incredibly well-behaved for the trip, and would go along with just about any command he could be made to understand. Communicating with him was still difficult, but he’d started to be able to understand a bit of Fódlanian by the end of our journey.

We passed by little in the way of civilization during our journey. The Kingdom’s roads were cold, foggy, and quiet this time of year. These weeks of nothing but trail rations made me long for the days of my youth when I would indulge in Brigidese street food on the regular. Our only enjoyments were each others’ company and portable hobbies such as magecraft and woodworking.

As the year came to a close, my nervousness towards meeting the Archbishop heightened. I spent many of our hours riding wondering whether she was friend or foe, and what either outcome would mean for me.

1st of Great Tree Moon, 1180 IY

Finally, on Founding Day, we came in sight of Garreg Mach. It was a grand view: the mountaintop monastery was easily as big as the largest castle I’d seen, and equally as fortified. Its statuesque spires and whitewashed walls made it seem like something out of a Brigidese epic, many of which told of great beasts in distant lands ruling from fantastic lairs.

“ Incredible,” I noted aloud.

“Sights like these remind me that the Goddess still loves us, despite all the ill we do,” Gilbert replied. “She makes for a fine home, Garreg Mach. I’d be happy to show you around.”

“I like her well enough,” Shamir added. “There’s hardly a place more ‘Fódlan’ on the whole continent, for better or worse.”

We made our way up the road, through the town that existed to support the monastery and its activities. Garreg Mach Town was on land wholly under the jurisdiction of the Church, but its citizens were still out in the streets celebrating the Adrestian Empire’s founding. I hadn’t seen many people celebrate the holiday in Leicester or Faerghus, but I supposed the Central Church still saw the founding of its secular sister a holy occasion, even after sanctioning divisions from it.

Once we were closer, one of the knights blew his horn to signal our return, and we rode inside the monastery’s bailey, where we dismounted. Squires and stablehands quickly took the horses from us, and the knights began to disperse to their dwellings, eager to rest after the long trip. As the leader of the expedition, Alois was required to report, so he told Father and I to follow him.

We followed him first through the entrance hall, a building whose purpose was pure ostentation, near as I could tell. The doors were carved with ornamental designs and wide enough to fit ten men walking shoulder-to-shoulder through them. The spacious passage had tile flooring and was lit by candles every dozen paces. A staircase went up its center, flanked on each side by water-fall like fountains, while banners bearing the Church’s insignia (a shield bearing the Crest of Seiros in front of a white dragon) hung from the ceiling overhead.

We exited this building to find ourselves in a paved stretch of bailey leading to the monastery’s central building, which was no smaller, but bore far more ordinary doors. From its top floor, there lay a balcony from which a woman looked down at us.

“Rhea…” Father murmured.
“Oh, she’s seen us! Let’s not keep her waiting!” Alois shouted cheerfully.

The ground floor of the building was a chandelier-lit open space with tables set along its sides. People sat at them and chatted, wearing the attire of both servants and Church officials, though in separate groups. We moved past this room to a stairwell up to the second floor, where we entered an audience chamber guarded by knights. The interior of the audience chamber was no less fancy than the entrance hall, boasting two identical statues of Saint Seiros that faced one another across its width.

“Just wait here for a moment while I report!” Alois said. “Rhea will want to join you shortly, I’m sure of it!”

I examined the statues of Saint Seiros while we waited. The Church’s founding prophet was a warrior who wore mail and wielded a shield and sword. She raised her blade to the heavens in a triumphant pose. I was impressed by the detailed craftsmanship that went into these statues, for the individual rings of riveted mail were visible, and Seiros’s long hair flowed down her shoulders like it was truly soft.

Father and I didn’t talk to each other at all while we waited, since we felt we’d already said anything we might need to. The Church hadn’t disarmed us, which I found comforting. Either we were being extended a huge amount of trust, or the Archbishop’s bodyguards would be numerous enough to obliterate us regardless. I couldn’t help but compare everything here to the next-richest abode we’d visited—Castle Gloucester, home of the most prominent noble family in the Alliance. Father had been made to leave his weapons with me when he went to meet the Duke, and nothing I’d seen from the castle exterior had been half as spectacular as the sights around Garreg Mach. The Church was on another level, raised up above the rest of Fódlan on its mountain perch.

When the doors finally opened, there were only two people who came in to join us. Both looked young and hale, but mature, and had the same green hair and eyes. I recognized the woman as Archbishop Rhea; she wore distinctive bejeweled regalia. The other was a man whose clothing, while still of fine material and well-tailored, was less obviously ceremonial.

“It’s true,” the Archbishop said, smiling and with tears in her eyes. “You’ve returned to me!”

She ran up to me and hugged me tightly, pressing the side of her face up against mine. I just stood there, unsure of how to react. “All these years, I thought I had lost you, but you’re back, here in my arms, safe and sound…”

“Rhea…” Father began, “…It seems I’ve made a mistake. When you gave me Byleth, I could tell there wasn’t something right with him, so, I panicked. I thought you’d done something wicked to him, but…”

“Enough, Jeralt. You’ve brought my grandson back to me, healthy and strong. Any evil you might have done is forgiven,” Rhea said.

“Still… I have to know… why doesn’t Byleth have a heartbeat?” Father asked.

Rhea pulled back from the hug and lifted a hand to my hairless face, stroking it. She was still crying. “The goddess has given me many blessings, but motherhood was never one of them. I sought the help of sorcery to help me bear a child, and I succeeded with Sitri. However, the sorcery was not perfect, and though Sitri lived a blessed life, she was unable to survive childbirth, and her baby was very premature. I turned to sorcery again, for the gift of magic is among the greatest of the Goddess’s gifts to us. Using Sitri’s blood, which flowed with the power of her Crest, I was able to keep Byleth alive beyond the failure of his heart. Tell me child, does your blood also
flow with her Crest?”

She made herself fertile with sorcery? Then revived me from death with it?! Was that possible? How skilled a White mage does one have to be to cast such a spell? I didn’t know the extent of what was possible with magic. Was she truly capable of such things, or was her story a lie? If I was alive enough to benefit from my Crest, how come my heart never started back up thanks to my regeneration? I wanted to ask her to address these questions, but she might be the single most powerful person in Fódlan, family or not. I would feel more confident calling her story into question if I knew more about magic.

I managed to answer, “It does. I believe it is a Minor Crest, for I possess only one power: regeneration. I have been stabbed through the gut by a spear and recovered without a scar.”

Father chuckled nervously. “Heh, here I thought you were trying to turn him into some sort of super-Crest-bearer or something, when you were really just saving his life. I really messed up, and I’m sorry I didn’t trust you.”

Rhea turned to face Jeralt for the first time since she’d entered the room. “If you truly feel you need to repent for your foolishness, you can spare me the apologies and make it up in service. For twenty years, poor Sir Arran has been working to fill your shoes as the Grand Master… he’s pushing eighty, now. I think he’s earned a retirement, don’t you?”

“Right back into the Grand Master’s chair, eh?” Father remarked. “Sure. I’ve got another fifty years or so before I’ll need to retire myself, I expect.”

“Do you know which Crest I bear?” I asked.

Rhea looked behind her at where the green-haired man was standing. He had an eyebrow raised in inquiry at Rhea.

“Your Crest… it is the Crest of Flames, long believed to be lost,” Rhea answered, turning back to me.

The green-haired man stepped back in surprise at this revelation, and opened his mouth to say something before thinking better of it.

“The Crest of Flames? That’s the one the King of Betrayal, Nemesis, received from the Goddess, according to the Book of Seiros, right?” I asked. Though I’d never attended a church, I’d read from the Book of Seiros before.

“The very one. None in my line nor Jeralt’s had ever borne this Crest before your mother. I consider it proof that the Goddess approved of her existence and had answered my prayers that she was granted the most sacred of Crests, one that the Goddess had only granted to her greatest of chosen champions, before he turned against her,” Rhea explained. “I kept Sitri’s bearing of the Crest a secret, to prevent her from becoming a target for the Church’s enemies. I suggest you do the same.”

“Rhea, do you mind introducing your friend, here? He looks like he could be related to you,” Father interjected.

“This is Seteth, my aide and the Headmaster of the Officers’ Academy. He is as much my family as you are, so I have chosen to include him in these discussions,” she explained.

“You must forgive my intrusion, Grand Master Jeralt,” Seteth said.
Whereas Rhea’s voice was gentle and sweet, Seteth projected authority and power. Rhea’s accent matched Alois’s, but Seteth pronounced a few words archaically, as though he were a character in a historical play. “Though Rhea and I are close, she never revealed to me before today that she ever had a daughter. I was eager to meet her family.”

“Good to meet you, Headmaster,” Father said.

“Likewise,” I added.

“Now, Byleth, I know not where you’ve been or what sort of life you’ve led… I would love it if you’d join me in my room for some tea. The Grand Master and Headmaster have work to do,” she said.

Rhea and I moved up to the third floor of the building, to her private chamber. Unlike the grandiose rooms I’d seen before, it was warm and inviting, despite its size and the fine make of everything in it. Her furniture included a large and full bookshelf, a four-poster bed, a writing desk, and another desk covered in instruments whose purpose was unknown to me. We sat at a small table, where we received hot tea and freshly baked sweets delivered by a servant.

There, I told her of my life, starting from what I remembered growing up in Brigid’s capital, the port city of Bearigon. I told her how I’d planned to follow Father in the military trade, and how unfortunate timing had me fighting in the Brigid and Dagda War at the age of sixteen. I brushed over what the wartime experience was like, only noting where the Army of Brigid had gone, and where it had won and lost. I told her Father and I had escaped imprisonment by the Imperial Army and made it to the Alliance, where we started a mercenary company. I described how we’d followed a succession of jobs that led us to Remire, where we ran into Alois, including the bit about us being employed as deniable assets.

“Hm… it bodes ill that someone in the Empire is up to such things,” Rhea remarked. “I will have to have Jeralt look into it, once he has settled back into his role as the Grand Master. Meanwhile, let’s discuss your plans. You’ve always been a soldier, but you needn’t pursue such a career anymore. You can join the Knights, if you wish, but I would prefer to have you doing something safer. I’m willing to help you pursue whatever goals you might have, even if you just wanted to go back to being a wandering mercenary.”

“Hmm…” I’d followed Father into the military because it was the only trade he could teach me himself, and he hadn’t the money to school me in anything else. I’d become a mercenary afterward, again for the sake of survival. Magic was a fascinating subject, but I had mainly been interested in learning it for the military applications, after seeing the Imperial Army apply sorcery to devastating effect at First Herstal.

“I don’t have any goals or dreams, really. Everything I’ve ever worked towards has been to secure safety and survival for Father and me. Now that you’re taking care of both of those things, I’m not sure what to do.”

Rhea smiled. “Well, if I may make a suggestion, then—in his report, Alois told me of how you’d been teaching one of the Knights the basics of sorcery. How would you like being a teacher?”

The thought had never crossed my mind. “I’d sooner go to a school to learn magic than be able to teach it… everything I know comes from Karlman’s Guide.”

“Ah, but you’ve been training to be a warrior since a young age. Jeralt is a fine commander, surely he’s schooled you in military strategy and tactics better than most could? You’ve got practical experience leading, too, I’m sure. Alois remarked that Jeralt credited you with the plan that let your
under-equipped company defeat a demonic beast,” Rhea said.

It clicked. “The Officers’ Academy? I’m not sure I’m qualified...”

“I’m confident my grandson can live up to the challenge,” Rhea said. “Seteth will be quite grateful to have another hand—he’s been run ragged, serving as my aide, and the Headmaster, and the Flight instructor. He was not looking forward to adding Military Strategy instructor to his list of duties when our previous professor retired last year. I already have enough of my best knights tied up as professors already; Sir Arran says we can’t spare any more with all of the support we’re providing to the Kingdom. What do you think?”

Looking back, the two most enjoyable aspects of my journey to Garreg Mach had been the opportunity to spar with Shamir and my conversations with Gilbert, most of which had involved me explaining something to him. If that was what teaching was like, perhaps I could find it an enjoyable profession.

I still wanted to learn a bit more about sorcery, especially White magic, so I could become able to investigate Rhea’s claims about my origins. This would have to be a long-term goal, as most mages I’d spoken to had shared that it took several years of study to reach the pinnacle of modern magecraft.

As I considered, I grabbed another confection and took a bite. It was delicious. Most of the time, I had gotten by on trail rations, gruel, and vegetable stew. I didn’t expect to have a servant delivering cakes to me all the time, but it was clear that living in Garreg Mach, I’d be able to afford to eat a lot better than I had before.

What was the worst that could happen, if teaching turned out to be a poor fit? Rhea would probably be disappointed, but she’d already committed to helping me do whatever I wanted, even if I ended up quitting my teaching position after a single year. I wouldn’t need to worry about making a fool out of myself to anyone, since it wasn’t as though I’d need to be dependent on them for future jobs. Why not give it a shot?

“All right,” I said, “I’ll see if teaching is a good fit for me. I can’t guarantee I’ll stick with it, but I think it will be worth trying to teach Military Strategy for a year.”

“Excellent!” Rhea said, beaming with happiness. “Let me take you to Seteth’s office right away. You’ll need to put together a curriculum quickly—lessons begin in two weeks!”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to @alchworks for beta reading
Reunion, Referral III

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

1st of Great Tree Moon, 1180 IY

“Enter,” Seteth boomed from within his office.

Rhea opened the door and led me inside. The headmaster’s office held bookshelves in every corner, and on the wall left from the entrance hung a huge board of cork upon which a blizzard of documents and diagrams had been pinned using metal tacks. A couple of chairs for the use of visitors were set to the opposite side. Seteth’s desk was a monster among furniture, and its girth was laden with piles of scrolls, books, and loose sheets of paper and parchment. He sat at it, quill in hand, his expression conveying some frustration.

Seteth grunted. “I know he’s your grandson, Rhea, but it would be awfully late to add another student to the roster this year. Twenty-five is quite enough, and—”

“You misunderstand,” Rhea interrupted. “Byleth isn’t going to be a student—he’s the Military Strategy instructor we’ve been looking for!”

“I look forward to working with you, Headmaster,” I said.

Seteth opened his mouth to complain, but then covered it and made a ponderous expression. He stared intensely at the document he’d been writing for a moment. He moved his hand up to his temple, giving it a rub before saying, “…Fine. I will accept this last-minute addition to my staff, and train him, if only because it might save me a great deal of time later on.”

He looked me directly in the eyes. “I must warn you, boy—the Officers’ Academy is the most prestigious school in all of Fódlan. The incoming class of students this year includes the heirs to a majority of the most powerful Houses on our continent. If your performance or your conduct brings shame upon the Officers’ Academy, I will personally ensure you never find employment with or aid from the Central Church again, regardless of the Archbishop’s wishes.”

So much for this job being risk-free. I looked back at Rhea, curious to see her reaction to Seteth’s defiance.

“Don’t worry, Byleth. I have faith you won’t disappoint me,” Rhea said, smiling confidently. She left the room and closed the door behind her.

I looked back to Seteth. Perhaps it was prideful, but I wasn’t about to run back to Rhea saying I changed my mind about teaching because of Seteth’s threats. “So, job training. I already know the subject pretty well; what do I need to know to be a teacher?”

“ I will be the judge of how well you know the subject,” Seteth said. “Let us start with a quiz.”

Seteth assailed me with a variety of questions about various famous battles from the War of Heroes. I couldn’t answer any of them.

“What kind of strategic training do you have if you cannot even answer these questions?” Seteth asked.
Luckily, I was prepared to defend my ignorance. “When Father taught me military strategy, he said it was a bad idea to get caught up in the strategy and tactics of long ago. Modern technology has changed the way we fight considerably. Even as recently as the Leicester Rebellion, crossbows were not commonplace in Fódlan. Now, they’ve far eclipsed bows in usage.

”Advances in military sorcery have also completely changed the way armies can fight. Records of the Almyran War show that mages were dispersed throughout the ranks of normal soldiers to increase the firepower of individual military units, but I believe that standard is changing. The Imperial Army fielded dedicated mage units in the Brigid and Dagda War to devastating effect, thanks to the overwhelming force that mass sorceries can apply at key points in a battle.

“Going back to the War of Heroes, the differences are even greater. Armor was much worse, flechettes weren’t used from pegasusback, mages were much less common, Almyra hadn’t introduced gunpowder yet… I’d pity the commander who attempted to map that era’s tactics onto modern tools. That said, I acknowledge it is a hole in my current knowledge, and, should the library suffice, I will attempt to incorporate the wars of long ago into my curriculum. I am confident I can distinguish the ways old strategies would no longer work.”

Seteth stroked his lightly bearded chin. “So, you are not without teeth. Your first instinct was to seek Rhea’s protection, so I worried you might be spineless.”

He went over to one of his bookshelves and retrieved a stack of papers tied up in a ribbon. “Truthfully, our last professor left extensive notes on her curriculum. You may have them, since you are taking the position. That said, I trust you will not merely regurgitate the information contained herein, but add to it with your own insights and experiences. The Officers’ Academy expects nothing less than the best from its professors.”

I accepted the stack from Seteth and felt its weight in my hands. Judging by the size, it might take me an entire day to go through these. “So, about that training…” There was a lot to go over, so I pulled a chair across from Seteth’s seat at his desk while he explained the structure of the Officers’ Academy.

Classes would begin on the fifteenth of Great Tree Moon and end on the twentieth of Pegasus Moon—a span of ten months. Classes would be canceled on holidays, in addition to an entire week off starting the twenty-second of Ethereal Moon, during which a ball would be held on the day of the monastery’s founding. Since the gap between school years was during winter, it was common for students to spend the break at the monastery or in town.

Students would attend two three-hour classes each day except for on weekends. My own Military Strategy classes would be taught Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, giving me Tuesdays, Thursdays, and weekends off. I would be teaching second year students in the morning, then first year students in the afternoon. I would also need to hold office hours at least six hours a week, so that students would be able to bring me questions about the material they were studying. It would also be ideal to involve myself with an extra-curricular activity in my spare time, but this was not a requirement.

Seteth covered the rules for addressing students of noble birth, the dress code I would need to enforce, the kind of behavior I should and should not tolerate in lectures, and an assortment of failures to perform my duties or violations of professionalism that might see me immediately terminated.

Afterwards, it was getting on in the afternoon, so he brought me to the dining hall to get lunch before they stopped serving it. When we entered, I saw that some of the knights I’d traveled with were eating together, along with various other servants and staff. The dining hall was large enough
“Many who would be eating here are out on the town for Founding Day, so we will enjoy some peace,” Seteth noted. We were served a soup of white trout and chickpeas, a savory and acidic dish with herbal seasonings. It was so much better than what I normally ate that I was tempted to shovel it into my mouth, but I was aware of Seteth’s judgment and so practiced the proper methods of eating Father had taught me for meals with clients.

Over the wonderful food, Seteth explained me to the facilities I would be able to make use of as a professor. The dining hall made three meals a day in large batches. Anyone employed or enrolled at Garreg Mach was entitled to partake in these meals. Additionally, one could short order a selection of other dishes if willing to pay for them. The monastery had a sauna, which I could use once a week. The training grounds were open when not in use by a scheduled class. Attending services at the cathedral was encouraged, but not required. For a small fee, I could reserve a plot in the greenhouse. I was free to check out any book from the library, but the penalties for lost or destroyed books were steep. Housing in the barracks would be provided, with housekeeping once a week.

“I think that is enough for one day,” Seteth said, a good while after we’d both finished our food. “Tomorrow, there will be a faculty meeting at nine o’clock in the morning, where I will introduce you to your colleagues.” Counting time was easy in Garreg Mach, thanks to the cathedral clocktower’s bells. “Do not be late, and do something about that hair beforehand. As for now, you’d best check in with Rhea—she will likely have already arranged your quarters.”

We turned in our dishes and parted ways, for Seteth had business elsewhere. I returned to the central building’s second floor, where I found a teenage Almyran boy in servant’s clothing waiting outside Seteth’s office. He was tapping his foot, looking bored, until he noticed me.

“I haven’t seen you here before.” His accent was only slightly better than some of the Almyran traders I’d met in Derdriu. “Are you the new professor?”

“Yes,” I answered.

“Lady Rhea told me to bring you to your room. Follow me,” he said.

The barracks where the monastery employees stayed was five stories tall in order to house all of the knights, servants, priests, professors, and other personnel. I would be sleeping alone for the first time, as professors were granted private rooms. The space was small, but I was more worried about being able to wake punctually. The servant boy informed me that the bells began marking the hours at six in the morning, but I wasn’t about to stake my career on their ability to rouse me. Instead, I marched back to Rhea’s quarters, hoping to ask her to give me a shared room with Father, so he could (hopefully) wake me on time for work.

“Ah, so you’re a deep sleeper,” Rhea responded to my request, seeming all too pleased about the fact. “As a matter of fact, I am as well. I’ve long come to rely upon magic for waking me. I can cast a similar spell on you, but be warned, it will wake you at the designated time each day without fail for the next thirty days, after which I will need to renew it. When do you want to wake?”

“You can do that with magic? Maybe I should have asked you to send me to the Royal School of Sorcery instead of signing up for this job,” I commented.

“Now, now, there’s no need to go all the way to Fhirdiad to learn magic,” she answered. “You’ve had a good deal of success with Karlman’s Guide, yes? Our own library contains much more advanced books on spellcasting. If you want to learn the basics of magic from a teacher, you could
even sit in on one of the first-year sorcery courses taught here, as they don’t overlap with your own classes. I would be willing to teach you some myself, but I can’t spare more than say, a half-hour each week for your instruction. My duties keep my preoccupied much of the time.”

Her willingness to help teach me could mean that her story about my origins was truthful, or she simply might be leaning on the illusion that she had nothing to hide. If my estimation about how much understanding of White magic I’d need to comprehend her claims was accurate, it might be years before I could scrutinize her story, even with her assistance.

“I’ll gratefully accept your offer,” I said. “I’d like to focus on White magic, since it seems like the more useful school off the battlefield. As for the waking spell, six in the morning would be nice, since that will coincide with the first bell.”

Rhea pressed a finger to my forehead. I kept my eyes open and pointed up, but I could only see her fist. Blue light shone on it for a moment, and then she lowered her hand, the spell complete.

I returned to my room and unpacked my things. I still had some time left before dinner, and I was tempted to rush off to the library to start looking at spellbooks, but I had a job to do. I started going through Professor Chalphy’s notes, trying to get a feel for what her classes were like. Skimming through them, I found a great number of diagrams detailing hypothetical battle scenarios distributed throughout. It seemed that Professor Chalphy’s lessons focused primarily on examining these scenarios as a vehicle for teaching the students how to handle a variety of tactical situations. I only finished reading through a few of them before deciding I wanted to establish my curriculum in a manner contrary to hers, but that could wait until I was fed.

Gilbert was taking his dinner at the same time I was, and so we sat together and enjoyed a cold pasta dish with vegetables, sausage, and cheese.

“How are you liking the monastery?” Gilbert asked.

“It’s a nice place. The food’s pretty good,” I answered, before putting a dressing-covered bite into my mouth. Ugh, why was there raw onion in this? “What is this dish called? I’ve never had anything like it.”

“It’s called pasta salad. I’m not sure where it’s from, or how it qualifies as a salad,” Gilbert answered. Most of the components tasted rather nice together, but I wasn’t about to put another piece of raw onion in my mouth if I could help it. “So, how did your meeting with the Archbishop go?”

“Pretty well, all things considered,” I said. Though Rhea had asked me to keep my Crest a secret, she hadn’t said the same about my relation to her. Still, I hadn’t outed myself as her relative during the journey, and I wasn’t about to start bringing it up.

“She gave me a new job, which is good, since being a mercenary isn’t exactly safe or comfortable. I’m teaching at the Officers’ Academy.”

“Oh? Impressive, for one so young. Congratulations, and good luck,” he encouraged me.

We finished our plates and began a tour of the areas of the monastery I hadn’t seen yet. We exited south from the dining hall and saw the greenhouse, then walked north past the student housing to reach the classrooms where I would be teaching. Past the classrooms were the sauna and the training grounds. By the training grounds, we could see the cathedral across a bridge to the north extending from the central building. We instead walked east across the building to find a cemetery, and south of that the armory for the Knights by our barracks. We walked further south and down
some steps to reach the stables, which were adjacent to the entrance hall.

Our tour complete, we sat on the steps to the entrance hall and watched the fireworks display from the town take light upon the night sky.

“Did you ever think you might become good enough at magic to become a fireworker instead of a mercenary?” Gilbert asked as we gazed at the motes of different-colored magic dance across the sky.

“The thought hadn’t occurred to me,” I answered. “To be frank, I only looked at magic as a way to kill enemies, until recently. What brought this on? Wish you were a fireworker yourself?”

“No, nothing like that,” Gilbert said, his voice sorrowful. “I was a father once. My daughter loved fireworks, and told me she wanted to be a fireworker when she grew up. I no longer deserve to call myself her father, but I’m still reminded of those good times each holiday I spend at the monastery, Goddess forgive me. I pray every day that she gets to realize that dream, even in my absence.”

We didn’t say any more after that, our eyes and ears focused on appreciating the flares and explosions. The greatest fireworks performance I’d ever seen had been when I was in Derdriu for Leicester Founding Day, but this smaller performance was impressive in its own right. After the grand finale, I looked to find Gilbert praying.

I had never prayed to the Goddess before. In Brigid, I had prayed to the spirits, as was custom, though Father ensured I knew better than to believe in them. I was not yet a believer in the Goddess either, but my compassion still moved me to join Gilbert in asking her to grant his daughter a successful career and a happy life as a fireworker.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to @alchworks for beta reading
“So, we’ve got quite a bit of time to kill. Want to play some board games?” Sylvain asked.

“I can’t believe you still waste your time with that crap. How do you ever get people to agree?” Felix retorted.

“Well, there are a few fellow connoisseurs in the Gautier Knights,” Sylvain answered. “I mean, what else are you going to do for this whole trip? Sit there and pout?”

“Won’t the motion of the carriage disturb the pieces?” asked Ingrid.

“Nah, a few games in my collection have pieces that stick in the boards—they’re built for long trips like this! Here, this one’s good for playing with two or three people,” Sylvain said, opening up a hinged block of wood to reveal a six-pointed star playing board. “This game is pretty rare here in Fódlan. My knight says it supposedly comes from a land east of Almyra.”

“I’m not interested. Fuck off with your stupid toys,” replied Felix.

“What, are you afraid I’m going to beat you?” teased Sylvain.

“I’m not afraid you’ll beat me, I know you will, and then you’ll be a sore winner about it for this entire fucking trip, and it’ll push me to the brink of my patience not to stab you. So fuck your board games, I’m not playing,” declared Felix.

Ingrid giggled. “Speaking from experience?”

“Obviously,” Felix huffed.

“Now, now, I was like that when we were young, sure, but I’m much more mature now! I know I have an unfair advantage since I’ve played this game a lot more than you guys, so it’s natural that I’ll win. I’m not going to act like I’m better than you, I just want to show you guys what makes this game so interesting!” Sylvain pleaded.

Felix just glared at Sylvain.

“Fine, I’ll play,” Ingrid resolved.

Sylvain taught Ingrid the rules, and Felix, having nothing better to do, learned along with her. Sylvain played his first game against Ingrid with a handicap, starting with fewer pieces on the board, but he still won.

“That was pretty good for your first time! A few more games, and I’ll have to play without a handicap to win,” Sylvain said, beaming.

“Insufferable,” Felix sighed.

“Hey,” Ingrid said, “I’ll play again, but first… can we talk about Dimitri?”
Felix’s scowl intensified.

“What about Dimitri?” Sylvain asked.

“I wonder if he’s recovered any since the Tragedy. Losing Glenn hit me hard, and I know you’ve been suffering, too, Felix, but… when I saw him three years ago, he was like an empty shell. He almost didn’t acknowledge my existence... you’ve seen him since then, haven’t you, Felix? Has he healed any?” Ingrid asked.

Felix looked away from them, glaring at the carriage doors. “Stop worrying about that boar. Any feelings spared for him are wasted. The friend you knew is dead, and an animal wears his skin.”

Sylvain frowned.


“You’d agree if you’d seen him. An earnest smile one minute, and then the next…” Felix swallowed. “We had to kill them, the peasants. They were breaking things, and killing, too, but… no one should die like that. No one should kill like that. And he laughed. He was enjoying it.” Felix’s hands were shaking.

“Oh, Felix… that’s horrible… but that just means he needs our help even more than I thought! We can’t abandon him, or he’ll stay like that forever!” Ingrid protested.

Felix chuckled. “What a fucking waste. The boar prince doesn’t deserve you.”

“If you’ve really given up on him, why come to the Academy?” Ingrid asked.

“Because I’ll kill him myself before I let him lay a hand on either of you,” Felix snarled, slamming his fist down on the board, startling Ingrid.

Sylvain grabbed Felix’s hand, speaking to him gently, “Thank you, Felix. It was brave of you to come. I’m glad I have a friend like you.”

Tears started to well in Felix’s eyes, and soon, he was sobbing. The three childhood friends hugged each other tightly until Felix’s whimpers started to subside.

“So,” Sylvain said. “Let’s not go into this without a plan. I agree with Ingrid that we can’t just leave our future king to be a bloodthirsty madman who hates the world. We’ve got to get him to open up to us. Ingrid, I think you should show romantic interest in him.”

“What?” Ingrid exclaimed, blushing, while Felix glared.

“If he reciprocates, you should be able to curb his violence, since you’ll have a direct road to his heart. If he brushes you off, you can demand an explanation from him, and maybe that will go somewhere,” Sylvain explained.

“That’s not a very concrete strategy,” Ingrid complained.

“It can’t be helped,” Sylvain said with a shrug. “People aren’t board games; they don’t operate on simple logic, so flexible plans are better than concrete ones. While you go after him from a romantic angle, I’ll approach him from a friendly one. The sacred power of the brotherly bond of friendship is a powerful tool—one of us is bound to succeed!”

Ingrid let her gaze wander. “I don’t know… if it works, I might end up marrying Dimitri—then
I’ll never be a knight… but if I can save the king, it will be worth the sacrifice. There’s nothing more knightly than that, is there?"

Felix snorted in disdain.

Sylvain turned to Felix. “Felix, I know you’re not good with people, but you are pretty good with swords. If it turns out His Highness is a danger to us, then…”

Felix nodded. “I’ve got you.”

“Don’t get too hasty, though—give us some time to work with him, please,” Sylvain implored.

“Sure,” Felix agreed. “Don’t get me wrong, I still think this is a waste of time, but… I want it to work. I want my friend back.”

---

Pegasus Moon, 1179 IY

“It was very kind of Your Highness to allow us on his carriage, Prince Dimitri,” Mercedes said with a smile.

“Think nothing of it, Mercedes. We’re all headed to the same place, so you’d might as well take advantage of the protection of the royal knights. It would be dishonorable to leave you ladies to fend for yourselves in times like these,” Dimitri declared, looking pleased to be of service.

“Besides, the carriage is built for four. Dedue and I will appreciate the company, won’t we?”

“It is as Your Highness says,” the tall Duscan man replied, his speech slow and deep.

Annette fidgeted in her seat. “Bored already, Anne?” Mercedes asked.

“Sorry Mercie, I’m just getting a little anxious thinking about how many days it will take to ride all the way to Garreg Mach—oh, I want to be there already! There’s nothing to do in this tiny car—it’s gonna drive me crazy!” Annette whined.

“True, I think it’s unfortunate our education will have to be bookended by these long journeys,” Dimitri commented.

“Your Highness should have ridden ahead, as the ride would have been more enjoyable,” Dedue said.

“And leave you to suffer here by yourself? Nonsense, Dedue! It’s better that we endure the monotony together!” Dimitri proclaimed.

“Your Highness, I would have been fine by myself. I take great enjoyment in sewing; it is Your Highness that does not enjoy sitting still,” Dedue disagreed.

“Oh, you sew, Dedue? I would have never guessed! I’m a bit of a seamstress myself,” Mercedes said. From a bag at her feet, she procured a huge sewing kit. “Why don’t we all sew during the trip? I can teach those who don’t know how.”

“As much as I’d love to join in the fun, it would only end in disaster,” Dimitri disagreed. “My Crest of Blaiddyd grants me a strength I cannot fully control. I break anything that needs to be treated gingerly.”
“Oh, so Your Highness has tried sewing before? That’s unusual for a prince,” Mercedes noted.

“No, I just… alright, I’ll try it out, if you insist,” Dimitri conceded. “But be warned, your needle may end up bent or broken.”

“That’s fine, I have plenty. Perhaps Your Highness simply needs a method to practice his control?” she suggested. “Let’s get started…”

Lone Moon, 1179 IY

“Father,” Lorenz Hellman Gloucester said with a bow. “I am ready to depart for Garreg Mach. While attending the Officers’ Academy, I promise to bring excellence to the Gloucester name through both words and deeds, to find a wife whose marriage will nurture House Gloucester’s prestige, and to discover the measure of our rival house’s heir. May the Goddess bless me on this journey.”

“Excellent, Lorenz,” replied the duke. “Though, I should hope the Riegan heir succeeds in reaching Garreg Mach alive—it would be the worst sort of tragedy if, like the previous Riegan heir, this ‘Claude’ character met his end at the jaws of some beast. The carriage is ready and waiting. Oh, I should mention, there is a common student accompanying you on the journey. I have graciously allowed her a seat on our carriage, as the cost of transportation would surely prove quite ruinous to her.”

“How very noble a deed, Father! Your generosity is the light that inspires my life and purpose!” Lorenz exclaimed.

“I must remind you, however, that generosity has its proper limits. You must be a perfect gentleman with her and no closer—such a lass is unsuitable to be your wife,” the duke warned.

“Of course, Father. Even should she be an unmatched beauty, I shall not accept any of her advances—it would be cruel to her, to provide through act a promise I would be unable to keep,” Lorenz stated proudly.

“Magnificent, my son! Go forth with glory!” the duke cheered.

Outside Castle Gloucester, the finest keep in all of Leicester, Lorenz Hellman Gloucester’s carriage waited, accompanied by a detachment of the legendary Gloucester knights. Leaning against the carriage was a girl about Lorenz’s age with short, red hair, dressed in hide garb with a long dagger at her belt. Lorenz was relieved to find that she was only an average beauty at best, and scowling at him like a piece of burnt steak for good measure.

The young lord gave only a slight bow, as was proper for introducing oneself to a person of lower standing, and announced, “Greetings, fellow student of the Officers’ Academy. I am Lord Lorenz Hellman Gloucester, Heir to House Gloucester, and I shall be your companion for this journey.”

“Howdy, Your Lordship. The name’s Leonie Pinelli. Why don’t we get going?” she asked.

Once they had gotten moving, Lorenz asked, “Miss Pinelli, what brings you to the Officers’ Academy? Most of the students are the children of nobles or merchants, and, forgive me, but you do not appear to be of particular wealth.”

“I’m aiming to become an elite mercenary, like the famous Jeralt Blade-Breaker. He and his crew
visited my village a few years back, but I was too young to join. I did get Commander Jeralt to teach me a few things, though,” Leonie answered. “With a Garreg Mach education, I can become a Knight of Seiros even as a commoner with no combat experience. Once I’m free of my student loans, I can quit the Knights and take those skills anywhere—maybe someday, I might even work for Your Lordship.”

“Ah, I remember meeting Jeralt. My father allowed me to sit in on his meeting with the commander,” noted Lorenz. “He struck me as the chivalrous sort, being a former Knight of Seiros himself. Is he how you were able to afford the academy?”

“Hah! Like Commander Jeralt could’ve afforded that when he was busy building a mercenary company from scratch! I took out loans—lots of loans. The people in my village helped, so now I’m obligated to succeed and pay them all back!” Leonie declared.

“Well,” Lorenz said, “I’m sure that will happen. The cost of tuition at Garreg Mach is only five-hundred antlers, so if the wage for a Knight of Seiros is a little lower than the wage of a Gloucester knight, then… you should only need three or so years of service to pay it off!” Lorenz calculated.

“Hah! Your Lordship sure knows how to tell a joke! Try seven,” Leonie replied.

“Seven years?” Lorenz stammered. “Am I wrong about the figures?”

“Yup. The tuition is only five hundred antlers, sure, but in order to get my application through, I had to bribe the mayor, bribe the sheriff, bribe the province bishop, bribe a member of your staff… I’m sure the process was nice and smooth for Your Lordship, but for a Crestless commoner, a lot more signatures are needed for an application to get approved. Then there’s the interest rates. Your Lordship probably used the kind of rates only a noble can get—for us commoners, the rates are a lot higher. So yeah, seven years. Impressive I managed to get this far at all, though, right?” Leonie bragged.

“I must agree,” Lorenz admitted. “Thank you for enlightening me, Miss Pinelli. I look forward to studying alongside you this school year.”

Pegasus Moon, 1179 IY

“Your parents sure are nice people, Ignatz. They paid for all these guards, and they even let me come along for free! Not to mention this Almyran pilgrim,” Raphael praised.

“Yes,” the thickly accented stranger said, “they are truly blessed and generous. It will be big ease for me to not must walk and beg as I go on holy mission. I add them to list of people I pray for every day.”

“It’s no big deal,” Ignatz protested. “There’s no way we’d leave a family friend hanging like that. I’ll admit I was surprised they let Nagir here come—it’s not like we normally give discounts or free services to the Church or unaffiliated pilgrims.”

“Yeah, it is pretty suspicious, huh?” Nagir said, this time with a much weaker accent. “I suppose I can drop the act now that we’re far enough away from Derdriu, though.”

“Huh?” asked Raphael.

“Sorry for the earlier deception. My name’s not Nagir, and I’m not a holy man. I’m Lord Claude
von Riegan, the duke’s grandson. Grandfather secretly paid the Victors to let me come along.” Claude leaned back in a relaxed pose, an easy smile laid across his face. “I’m afraid Grandfather has found this kind of subterfuge a necessity ever since my uncle died.”

“So, the carriage guarded by Riegan knights that left the other day was a decoy?” asked Ignatz.

“Yup—anyone after my hide will find themselves attacking a carriage full of gunpowder instead of a lordling. But now that the facade has dropped, I hope we can cultivate a friendship in earnest,” Claude said.

“Is Your Lordship truly the Riegan heir? I’d read that the duke’s daughter had eloped, but I had no idea she’d married an Almyran,” Ignatz said.

Claude held his hand out, and above it, a glowing crescent moon rune the size of a plate appeared. “See?”

“That symbol is on the Riegan flag, but I don’t understand how you being able to make it appear is proof of anything,” Ignatz admitted. Raphael just shrugged his ignorance.

“It’s a Crest manifestation. Someone who bears a Crest can cause it to manifest with a basic sorcery—it’s an easy way to prove someone’s a Crest-bearer. The crescent moon Crest you just saw is the Crest of Riegan, the proof that I’m of the Riegan line,” Claude explained. “And drop that ‘Your Lordship’ nonsense, okay? We’re classmates—let’s save the formalities for after we graduate. Just call me Claude.”

——

Pegasus Moon, 1179 IY

“Excited to head to school, Hilda?” Holst asked.

“Yup! No big brothers to always pester me with questions like ‘how are your studies’ or ‘what did you learn today’ or ‘did you finish your application yet’? Classes are only five days a week, so that leaves two entire days to do nothing but laze around!” Hilda cheered.

“You know your teachers will bother you if you don’t keep up with your studies, right?” her brother asked.

“Yeah, but I’m sure they can’t be half as annoying about it,” she teased. “I’ll be travelling with that Edmund girl, right? What’s she like?”

“Marianne’s a quiet one. She was adopted by the margrave after her parents died in a beast attack. She doesn’t seem like she has many friends, so… be nice to her, alright?” he implored.

“Sure thing. It will be good to already have a friend before the school year—I’d hate to be approached by that Gloucester weirdo and not have an out,” she fretted.

“I know I’m supposed to chastise you for talking about our allies like that, but... I’ve gotta be honest—the Gloucesters weird me out, too. Humans just shouldn’t look like that,” he admitted.

Holst helped Hilda carry her things to the carriage, where the Edmund girl was already waiting. After several tearful hugs, he finally let Hilda join Marianne inside the carriage.

True to his description, Marianne only acknowledged Hilda’s entry with a glance, before lowering
her eyes and looking away. Hilda could see dark circles under the blue-haired girl’s eyes, like she’d been crying.

“Hello Marianne, my name is Hilda. It’s a pleasure to meet you,” she greeted the girl.

Marianne adjusted her hands before responding, “You as well...” softly.

The carriage began moving. Hilda listened to the clopping of the horse’s hooves for a bit as she considered the girl before her.

“So... do you want to be friends?” Hilda asked.

Marianne’s fingers twitched slightly during the long pause before her response. “Um... I’m sorry, I don’t think I would make a very good friend,” she answered.

“Compared to whom?” Hilda asked.

Marianne looked at Hilda, startled. “I’m sorry?”

“Who would you be a worse friend than?” Hilda asked again.

“Oh, um... I don’t know... anybody else, really,” Marianne considered.

“Okay... but I don’t see anybody else in here, do you?” Hilda asked, gesturing around the compartment.

“...No...” Marianne answered with a worried look.

“Well, I guess that makes you better than everyone else, doesn’t it?” Hilda declared.

“...Okay, I guess,” Marianne said, looking defeated.

Pegasus Moon, 1179 IY

“Well, time for a nap,” Linhardt said with a yawn. He left the others in the carriage’s seating area, retreating to the floor above with the bunk beds. The Imperial Carriage was more of a giant wagon, a two-story home on wheels for up to twelve lordlings pulled by a team of draft horses.

Petra looked at the others who’d elected to remain awake and recalled their names from the send-off ceremony they’d just partaken in. Edelgard, the princess; Hubert, the tall one; Ferdinand, the handsome one; Dorothea, the pretty one. Edelgard and Ferdinand looked embarrassed, possibly by Linhardt, the sleepy one? Hubert and Dorothea, meanwhile, were eyeing Ferdinand in contempt. The Adrestians did not seem to all be friendly with each other.

“Is this a rudeness that Linhardt has committed?” Petra asked.

“Yes,” Ferdinand answered. “It is the onset of our journey! There is no better time for us to become acquainted with one another and forge the first link of the bonds of friendship!”

“How unfortunate that you’ve already forged a link, then,” Hubert answered, “and with shoddy iron, Lord Aegir.” Ferdinand glared at him.

“Play nice, Hubert,” Edelgard reprimanded him. “Like it or not, we’ll be spending quite some time
in Ferdinand’s company over the next couple of years.”

“Forgive me, Lady Edelgard,” Hubert apologized. “But it was far too embarrassing for me to allow the Lord to remain ignorant of his own nuisance.”

“Hmph. Envy suits you, Lord Vestra. I have not behaved in any but the most gentlemanly of manners,” Ferdinand retorted.

“Be that as it may, Ferdinand, you have left negative impressions on almost everyone in this wagon,” Edelgard explained. “Humility rather than pride would win one in your position more goodwill.”

Ferdinand turned to Petra, looking frustrated. “Is this true, Lady Petra?”

“Sorry, I am not understanding all of this talk. You are talking not of this meeting but of past meetings, yes?” Petra asked.

“No,” Ferdinand denied.

“Yes,” Hubert confirmed. Ferdinand looked confused.

Dorothea giggled. “Why don’t you let a simple commoner like me put this simply for you, Ferdie? You’re an arrogant prick and you piss everyone off.”

“What?” Ferdinand looked hurt. “I don’t understand where this accusation comes from. What aspect of my behavior is unsatisfactory?”

“Listen, Ferdie, I’ve met a lot of people who were far too proud of themselves because of whom their parents were, and you’re chief among them! The only people who appreciate that kind of attitude are other spoiled nobles,” Dorothea explained.

“Oh? Why then, do the princess and her lackey not give the same impression?” Ferdinand asked.

“Neither Hugh nor Edel have boasted once since I’ve met them! In fact, they seem as put off by your pride as I do,” Dorothea said.

“I have studied and trained relentlessly to become the perfect noble since a very young age! If others take issue with my pride, it can only be because they are envious of the many gifts the Goddess has blessed me with, and of the accomplished being I have used them to become!” Ferdinand proclaimed. “Or, is simply that I have yet to demonstrate that I have indeed used my blessings well, and so they believe my pride is misplaced?”

Edelgard looked worried. “No, I think you’re missing the point, Ferdinand…”

“Excuse me,” Petra interrupted. “Ferdinand, I am not finding you rude, but others are. Maybe it is better to pretend you are not proud, so they do not think you are rude?”

Ferdinand shook his head. “I cannot allow myself to do something so duplicitous!”

Edelgard sighed. “This is going to be a long two years, and a long trip. I wish we could’ve taken wyverns, instead of this clunky thing.”

“Impossible! The use of the Imperial Carriage to transport students from Enbarr to Garreg Mach is an essential part of Imperial tradition!” Ferdinand disagreed. “It is bad enough that we must make the journey without the two students who could not make it to Enbarr before the school year.”
“Perhaps envy does suit me,” quipped Hubert, “for part of me wishes I could trade places with them.” Dorothea laughed.

“Please don’t encourage him,” Edelgard pleaded to her.

“Oh! That was a mean joke!” Petra noticed.

Edelgard smirked at Hubert. “Indeed. What do you have to say for yourself, Hubert?”

“My apologies, Lady Edelgard. I will try to limit my sarcasm to thrice daily, for the health of our journey’s morale,” Hubert pledged. Dorothea giggled some more.

“This… was also a joke?” Petra asked.

“Yes,” Dorothea answered.

“No,” Hubert lied, exaggerating a look of betrayal.

“Ah! You say words differently when they are funny lies instead of serious truths! That is an interesting way to joke,” Petra deduced.

“Anyway,” Edelgard changed the subject. “I think it’s hardly appropriate to consider this carriage ride an important tradition. The Officers’ Academy hasn’t even been around for a hundred years yet. If anything, we ought to change how we do things before the centennial, so as to avoid such a scenario.”

“I think it is interesting to be able to spend time with all of you,” Petra said, “but I am also interested to ride a wyvern. We do not have wyverns or pegasi in Brigid.”

“We’ll have plenty enough time together once we’re at the monastery,” Edelgard countered.

“We will also have sufficient opportunity to ride wyverns at the monastery,” Ferdinand countered back. “Are you taking Flight as well, Petra?”

“Yes, it is a great interest to me,” Petra said.

“Forgive my correction, Petra, but the correct grammar is ‘it is of great interest to me,’” Hubert noted.

“Oh, you are right. Thank you, Hubert. I have tried hard, but Fódlanian is very difficult, and I am still learning,” Petra explained.

“Your speech has progressed greatly since we last met,” Hubert complemented her.

“Thank you,” Petra accepted the compliment.

“What is Brigid like, Petra?” Dorothea asked.

Petra looked disappointed. “I do not get a nickname?”

“Petra is short enough, don’t you think?” Dorothea proposed.

“It is not longer sounding than Hubert, but you gave him a nickname,” Petra pointed out.

“Oh, but Hugh just suits him so much better. Plus, it would be weird if I went around calling you ‘Pet’—we don’t have that kind of relationship, yet,” Dorothea explained with a wink. Edelgard
raised an eyebrow at her.

“Ah, it would be strange to refer to a human as a pet, like so,” Petra mused. “To answer your earlier question, Brigid is warm, sunny, and humid all year. There are many beautiful places in Bearigon, the capital where I was raised.”

“Oh, that sounds lovely! Won’t you take me there on wyvernback once we graduate?” Dorothea asked.

“If I am able, gladly… but I do not know what the future will be,” Petra shared. “Sometimes I get afraid I will never see Brigid again…”

1st of Great Tree Moon, 1180IY

Bernadetta peaked out her door. Sure enough, a servant had left her a bowl of soup. She picked it up and brought it inside her room, shutting the door and eating a spoonful. It was already cold. She managed to get herself to swallow three more spoonfuls of cold soup before opening her door again and putting it back where she’d found it.

Bernadetta looked out her window. Although she’d barely woken up, it was already afternoon. Damn, she’d missed the good painting light again.

With a shrug, she walked over to her writing desk, where she went over the manuscript she’d been working on the night before. It was awful—really, well and truly sinful. She marked the revisions she wanted to make, then went about rewriting it with the changes. She added about five hundred words of new material to it, too, before running into a stumbling block in her flow. She put the manuscript down and walked around her room for a few laps, stepping over various items she’d left on the floor, before picking up an unfinished sewing project.

She hummed a tune as she worked on a plush spider. She didn’t know very many songs, though, so she got bored of humming quickly, and her mind wandered to the story she’d been writing. What had started out as an innocent romance had become a horribly naughty story by this point, so Bernadetta had given up on ever being able to show anyone her work. As her imagination flitted about the possible ways she could portray the next scene, she found her stitch-work getting increasingly sloppy. She put it down and went to lie on her bed, letting some of her frustration out on her body. From there, it was back to writing. She lit a candle to keep scribbling on into the night.

By the time she got stuck again, it was already past when most of the household would be in bed. She snuck out to the pantry, where she grabbed a jar of Noa fruit preserves and a mug of water, but soon darted back to her room when she thought she heard someone approaching, using her Crest ability to speed up her movements.

She opened the jar of preserves and started eating them, washing the sugary fruits down with the water. Her meal was interrupted by a knocking outside her window. She turned around and saw a human face pressed against the glass, peering in at her. She gave a short shriek, surprised and embarrassed to be spied upon while in pajamas.

Who was this? What were they doing here? The person waved at her and beckoned for her to open the window, but Bernadetta was paralyzed with fear. The person turned to talk to someone behind them, after watching Bernadetta do nothing for about a minute. What should she do?
Should she tell a servant? No, they would tell Father, and then Father would kill the people outside, and also hurt her. Should she open the window? No, the people out there were strangers, and she couldn’t trust them. She grabbed her stuffed bear for comfort, and huddled behind her bed, hoping the strangers would just go away.

She heard her window shatter as one of the strangers created an entrance. “Bernadetta?” She heard a man’s voice call. “Your mother sent us; we’re here to take you away from your father.”

Bernadetta peeked around the corner of her bed, and gazed upon the would-be kidnapper reaching through and fumbling with the latch. He was a handsome young man in armor, with sandy blonde hair and brown eyes. Was Bernadetta’s life turning into a romance novel? Was this her shining prince, come to rescue her from the warlock’s tower?

She stood up, shakily. She opened her mouth to say something, but it’d been over a week since she last spoke to someone, so the most she could manage was a clumsy, “Who you?”

“We can’t waste any time,” the man said, opening the window and stepping inside. Bernadetta babbled useless non-words as he approached her and picked her up with one arm around the waist. Wow, he was really strong! Then again, Bernadetta hadn’t been eating well for years and was also really light. He passed her out the window to his companion, a shorter blue-haired teen, then followed. The boy carried her on his shoulders away from the manor.

“Wait! My book!” Bernadetta wailed. “Oh Goddess, I’ll die if anyone reads that! Don’t leave it!”

“Sorry,” the man said, “no time! We’ve gotta fly before the count finds out about us!”

Bernadetta cried in futility as they brought her to a wyvern that was resting a short run’s length away from the manor. The man climbed up, then accepted Bernadetta from the boy and placed her behind himself as the boy mounted behind her. Before she knew it, Bernadetta was flying off somewhere far away from home, unconscious from the shock.

28th of Pegasus Moon, 1179 IY

“I’m ready to try again,” Lysithea said to her tutor. The old woman placed a gourd on the table.

Lysithea focused on the gourd, letting her mana flow out of her to concentrate in a point in space inside the fruit. Instead of letting the mana expand out from that point to create a flame, she used it to pull inward, causing no discernible change. “It’s done,” she said. Her tutor cut the gourd open with a knife, revealing that the flesh, guts, and seeds of the gourd had been compressed into a ball.

This method of magical violence was more difficult than creating flames, but it had the advantage of being much sneakier. With this spell, one could kill without touching a target or sending an identifying projectile their way. If done precisely, the attack’s effects were identical to a natural tragedy—at least until the victim was autopsied. An experienced mage’s greater mana base would protect them from the attacker’s mana intrusion, but anyone else would be defenseless against this spell.

“You continue to impress, My Lady—at this rate, I will soon run out of things to teach you,” her tutor praised.

“Is ‘soon’ before the twentieth?” Lysithea asked.
Her tutor laughed. “My Lady, you mustn’t let that you are the most singularly talented student I’ve ever had go to your head.”

Lysithea frowned. “I thought not.” Though the old woman had declined to share any details of her past, it was difficult for Lysithea to think she’d been trained as anything other than an assassin. Though she moved carefully, it was the unconscious caution of an experienced sneak, not the struggle of a fragile woman fighting her age.

“My Lady, would you like to proceed to the next spell? I know you’ve yet to empty your mana base,” her tutor prompted.

“Not today, Master. It is my fifteenth birthday, so I must attend a banquet celebrating the occasion,” Lysithea answered. “If you would like, I would be happy to have you join us.”

A flash of sorrow washed over the tutor’s face, but it soon vanished, replaced by a veneer of serenity. “I’m honored, My Lady, but I’m afraid I no longer have the stomach for such things—you must understand?” It was a question.

“Of course,” Lysithea replied. “I apologize if I have brought forth unpleasant memories. I merely wished to share this milestone on my journey to adulthood with my Master, as her tutelage has had great impact upon it.”

“My Lady is a genius at flattery as well as spellwork—‘tis a horrid exaggeration that I have had any effect at all upon My Lady’s character! No, My Lady—you were already an adult when I met you last year,” her tutor responded. “If My Lady merely wished to share a moment of joy, worry not—the face My Lady makes upon success is among the most adorable sights in the world!”

Lysithea blushed. “Ah—well, I apologize regardless. I will be off now; it would not do to delay the event with my absence—getting permission to come at all today was very nearly a fight.”

They said their farewells, and soon Lysithea was on her way back to Castle Cordelia for the banquet. No longer whitewashed, one could look upon the castle and see the varying shades of stone indicating the repairs that had been made after the wall’s partial collapse over a decade past. Seeing the castle’s exterior never failed to enrage her. As soon as she arrived, a servant dragged her out of her carriage and off to change into something proper for the event.

Lysithea’s birthday party was boring. As it began, Countess Cordelia said words of praise for her daughter’s talent, but she could hardly have been heard over the sound of Lysithea’s infant half-sister crying. A priest they’d invited said a blessing, and then the party was underway. Several young gentlemen asked Lysithea for a chance to dance, but she refused them all, citing her poor health. Instead, she sat and ate a meal of almost exclusively cake as she watched the others chat and dance to the movements of the fiddler who’d been hired for the event. Lord Merric pestered her a few times to at least attempt some socialization, but she repeatedly ignored him. At least her mother knew better than to bother her with such nonsense.

After her step-father’s fifth such nuisance, she announced to the hall that she was feeling overwhelmed from all the festivities and would be retiring to her room. She conscripted a servant into helping her out of her dress, then made her way to the library.

Lysithea finally felt relaxed as she lounged in a chair and read through a history book. She’d exaggerated her illness to get out of dancing, but she truly did find crowds taxing. She’d already had quite some time to unwind by the time her mother approached, finally freed from the countess’s duties as the host.
“Are you feeling okay?” her mother asked.

“Yeah, I just don’t like crowds. I’d rather be reading; this stuff on the Crescent Moon War is pretty interesting,” Lysithea answered, continuing to look at the book.

“Please stop that,” her mother pleaded. “You know it worries me whenever you act even the least bit ill.”

“Well, it’s better that I don’t exert myself unnecessarily, so I can prevent myself from actually suffering later. I have a busy schedule planned out, and I don’t want to become bedridden because I partied too hard,” Lysithea argued. “I’m not accepting anything less than the highest possible chance of accomplishing my goals. To do that, I need to make myself as skilled as possible in the shortest amount of time. That’s why I pushed for a wyvern straight to the monastery instead of taking a carriage to Derdriu. I need every travel day I can save.”

“It hurts me to see you go so soon… it feels like I just got you back, and now you’re going off to school for two years, and then who knows what… it’s… it’s…” Lysithea looked up from her book to find her mother starting to cry. She put the book down and beckoned for her mother to sit beside her, where they clutched one another tightly.

“Hey, I’ll be around longer because we got the wyvern… why don’t we spend one day before I go together, just the family? I can make time for that… for you,” Lysithea promised her sobbing mother. She was glad to be loved, as she comforted the crying countess, who let Lysithea snuggle against her as she mourned lives lost and losing.

3rd of Great Tree Moon, 1180IY

“Thank you for everything, Sir Matthis,” Ashe said, standing in the roost below Garreg Mach.

“It’s only duty, Lord Ashe,” the knight answered. “You’d best start heading to your room. I’ll be in town until tomorrow, if you need anything, but I’m going to have to head back to Castle Gaspard once I get some proper bed rest.”

Just as Ashe was turning away, the knight added, “One more thing, Lord Ashe. Whatever happens in the Kingdom while you’re gone, you’ve got to stay here and finish your education. Don’t do anything rash. You’re the Baron’s greatest hope!”

Ashe nodded his agreement before carrying on.

Ashe was winded by the time he’d finished carrying his luggage up the long staircase to the walkways around Garreg Mach’s cathedral. He sat down for a moment to catch his breath before moving on across the bridge to the rest of the monastery.

“Hey kid, I haven’t seen you around before. You one of the new students?” a guard asked.

“That’s right. Name’s Ashe von Gaspard,” he answered.

“You’ll want to go straight through this building into the next and down the stairs, where there should be a professor waiting to confirm your identity and take you to your room,” the guard explained. “Most of the students come by land, so they set up closer to the front entrance.”

Ashe thanked the guard and followed his directions, admiring the scenery along the way. At his
destination, he found a woman leaning back in a chair, her feet up next to stacks of documents on a table.

“Hey kid, I’m Professor Catherine. Welcome to Garreg Mach. Your name?” she asked.

“Lord Ashe von Gaspard,” he said, offering her a letter waxed with the Gaspard seal. At the mention of his name, her easygoing demeanor transitioned to a haunted stare. She didn’t take her eyes off of him until she’d opened the envelope, skimming its contents.

“Nice to meet you, Lord Ashe.” She flipped through some documents. “Alright, I’ve got your room assignment. Follow me.”

They made their way to the Blue Lions dormitory. “You’re the first of the Blue Lions to arrive, so try not to make a mess of the place. Here’s your room. If you need help with anything, there should be some second-year students lazing around on the floor above, so just bug them about it. Oh, and here’s a copy of the student manual. Make sure to read the whole thing before Monday, or you’ll regret it. There’s directions to the shop where you can pick up your uniform in there. Later!”

Ashe could barely contain his excitement as he unpacked. Here he was, in the halls where the greatest champions of the era trained. He stopped to pray to the Goddess and thank her for his amazing fortune, and for the Baron’s continued health. To think that an orphan commoner like him would be schooled at Garreg Mach!

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to @alchworks for beta reading
Rhea’s spell worked as she described, and I found myself awakened just as the morning bells began to ring. I marveled at how convenient this magic was—no longer would I suffer embarrassments like on the morning of my departure from Remire.

With the faculty meeting in mind, I went about my routine of exercise and food, then made an effort toward making myself presentable. There was a communal bath in the barracks that I made use of, but I hadn’t had time to prepare a particularly fresh change of clothes, so I settled for my nicest black trousers, a nigh-unused undershirt, and a black gambeson. I attempted to neatly trim my hair, but I made so many mistakes cutting it in the mirror that it ended up much shorter than I’d planned. Still, it was an improvement over the shaggy mess I’d had before.

Safety didn’t seem to be much of a concern in the monastery, but I still decided to wear a dagger—I had one with a blue sheath that matched my eyes. It would be nice to be able to go out without a sword, for once, but my warrior’s fashion would be incomplete without some sort of weapon.

After introductions were made at the faculty meeting, Seteth passed out the student rosters and gave a presentation on information we’d need to know going into the school year. I suspected I was the primary beneficiary, being the only professor who’d spent less than two years at the monastery. Seteth began by reminding us that the main purpose of the Officers’ Academy, from the Church’s perspective, was to reduce armed conflicts between the noble houses by giving Fódlan’s elites the opportunity to bond during their schooling. The Church convinced the elites to attend by offering high-quality education and giving students the opportunity to build alliances.

He then proceeded to the next topic of discussion: a report on the political environment our students would be coming from. I’d known Faerghus was in rough shape, but Church intelligence suspected that it might be on the brink of civil war thanks to a divide between the regions of the country on how to best recover from the chaos. Adrestia was a bit more stable, but its ruling alliance of ministers was showing early signs of future rivalry. Leicester, at least, didn’t have much of interest going on.

The next topic of discussion was assigning faculty advisors for the three dormitories that the incoming students would be sorted into based on their sending region. Students sent from Adrestia were sorted into the Black Eagle house, but we also had a student from Brigid, now a vassal state of the Empire, sorted into that dorm. Students sent from Faerghus were sorted into the Blue Lion house, while students sent from Leicester were sorted into the Golden Deer house. Three of the knights I’d traveled with—Shamir, Catherine, and Alois—were also professors at the academy for a majority of the year; they currently served as the faculty advisors for the second-year students.

“As Professor Chalphy has retired, we still require one more faculty advisor,” Seteth said. “Professor Tomas, as our only remaining experienced professor not already serving as an advisor, may I ask you to accept that role?”

“Oh, no, I’m far too busy with the library,” protested our History teacher and librarian. He was an aging man of brown hair and eyes. “Not to mention, it’s a bit out of my area of expertise. I may be a priest, but I served purely as an archivist in the Western Church—never once have I provided
spiritual counsel!"

Seteth looked openly exasperated. “Surely, you are not asking one of our first-year professors to accept this additional responsibility? Why, Professor Eisner has not even finished preparing his initial curriculum!”

“Do you want a precisely sorted library with a well-curated stock of the most relevant tomes, or not? Let Professor von Bartels do it; he just teaches Riding,” Tomas responded.

“No,” refused our Riding professor, who had folded his arms and shut his eyes, as though he didn’t care to acknowledge his seniors’ plight. Lord Emile von Bartels was a blonde, handsome young man with long hair, blue eyes, and an East Empire accent. Although he’d graduated from the Officers’ Academy just months ago, he’d immediately taken a position teaching.

“How much additional work would be involved with the role?” I asked. I didn’t want to sign away too much of my free time, but the look on Seteth’s face as Tomas hurled a bickering retort to Emile’s standoffishness was too pitiful to bear.

“Primarily, you should simply expect your office hours to be more active, since you will be your house’s primary counselor for any topics not related to a specific course. There is also a chance you may find yourself interrupted on your off hours by a student experiencing a crisis. Additionally, there will be a few more meetings you will need to to take part in, and you will be required to attend all inter-house competitions to support your assigned house,” Seteth explained. “However, in your case, I would be more concerned with whether you are prepared to provide emotional counsel to eight or nine youths, many of them nobles.”

“It doesn’t seem like Emile or Tomas think they’re a better fit for the job, so we can’t worry too much about that,” I said. “Since the workload isn’t too bad, I’ll do it. Just go easy on me when rating my performance, alright?”

Seteth sighed. “I suppose I have no better option,” he replied, stroking his chin. “Very well; your first duty as a faculty advisor will be to join me in interviewing the incoming students on the seventh at 9am. Once the interviews are completed, I will determine your house assignments. And thank you, Professor Eisner, for putting this extra effort in. I appreciate it.”

After the meeting, we all ate together in the dining hall and got to know each other a bit more. While some of the professors remained aloof, I found my fellow faculty advisors easy enough to get along with, and Seteth turned out to be more amicable than the image of the stern headmaster he’d projected before.

After the meal, I focused on developing the structure of my curriculum. I settled on a bottom-up approach, beginning with an examination of the tools available to belligerents working up to the various strategies and tactics these tools could be applied towards. Because of the structure of Professor Chalphy’s class, I decided that I would teach the second-years the same material as the first-years, just to make sure they’d covered the sort of fundamentals I deemed essential. It wasn’t ideal, but it was the best I felt I could do with an inherited class.

I attempted to spend my evening poring through reference works in the library, but Tomas, kicked me out after he noticed me using magical flame to light my reading. While I had grown accustomed to reading by my own flame, Tomas declared it an unsafe practice because of the disaster that could befall his books if I were insufficiently careful in handling it. Instead, he demanded that I purchase and use only candles held with a specific type of candlestick that he believed minimized the risk of flame-related accidents. He even gave directions to the shop that sold them.
I brought a book back to my room and continued working there until I ran out of paper on which to take notes. My supply of ink was not faring much better, so I resolved to procrastinate until the stores in town reopened in the morning. I kept using magic flame to light my work since I was confident in my control despite Tomas’s warning.

At dinner, I met Seteth’s younger sister, Flayn, who would be joining this year’s Black Eagle house. The girl had green hair and green eyes just like Seteth and Rhea. Her face was also similarly shaped as the archbishop’s, cementing the likelihood that Rhea—and by extension, I—held a blood relation to the siblings. A cheerful and outgoing girl of age eighteen (according to the roster), she badgered Father and I with questions about living in Brigid while we ate, but the duo deflected most questions about their own pasts. Seteth’s story was that they were Rhea’s cousins a few times removed, but they looked more closely related to her than that. They claimed to have lived in Enbarr “some years ago,” but I couldn’t get them to commit to a number.

I went over my roster a bit to let my meal digest, then headed to the training yard and sparred with Emile for a bit. The other new professor trained shirtless despite the cold mountain air, showing off an impressive physique. I found him to be my superior in swordplay, and not just because of his half-foot height advantage. He seemed pleased by my performance, however, and asked me to spar with him again another day.

3rd of Great Tree Moon, 1180 IY

While obtaining the all-important candlestick, paper, and ink, I also decided it would be a good idea to spend some of the money we’d gotten in Remire on new clothes, for I’d been the worst-dressed by far at the faculty meeting. The outfit of gambeson, trousers, and boots I purchased was nearly identical to the one I’d already been wearing, but a great deal more unused. I made sure to wash it and everything I wasn’t currently wearing once I returned.

After lunch, I put my new purchases to good use, setting up in the library to work on my curriculum. I got a good amount of work done before I was interrupted by Gilbert approaching me.

“I understand you’re busy, Byleth, but would you honor me with a spar?” Gilbert asked.

I didn’t particularly want to take a break from working on my curriculum. I had ideas floating around in my head that would be better anchored in ink than left to drift until I could return. “Can we reschedule? I need to get a lot of work done before my classes start.”

“I apologize, but I’ve received a new mission and will be leaving tomorrow. If possible, I’d like for us to cross swords once more before I depart,” Gilbert requested.


The old knight was my closest friend, and I didn’t want to deny his request, much as I loathed to be pulled away from my books. “Just give me a moment to clean up. I’ll meet you at the training grounds in fifteen.” I was tempted to add just a bit more to my notes, but I knew that if I started again I’d keep going until I was late.

Once I arrived, we did some warm-ups and began sparring. Since I’d been dragged away from my curriculum, I wanted to get a substantial workout out of this interruption, and so I pressed him to fight several rounds with me. Gilbert was a more experienced swordsman than I, but the gap between our skills had been closing since the first time we’d sparred on the road. After about half
an hour of closely-matched battles, I noticed his movements slow, and I began defeating him easily. I suspected he was running out of stamina, so I ended the session.

“How was that?” I asked Gilbert as he sat at the edge of the grounds, recovering.

He wiped some sweat from his brow. “It’s impressive how quickly you’ve adapted to my techniques.”

“I had fun as well. I’ll see you at dinner, if that’s all,” I said.

“Wait, Byleth, I wouldn’t have pulled you away from your work just to train. I’d also like you to listen to me for a bit,” he protested.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“My true name is not Gilbert, as I’m sure you’ve guessed. Those of us who carry no surname took new names when we joined the service of the Church. Before joining the Knights of Seiros, I was a knight of Faerghus.” Gilbert’s face was downcast. “I was there when everything went wrong… I was guarding the royal family during the Tragedy of Duscur. It is because of my failure to protect my liege, Goddess forgive me, that Faerghus has fallen to its current state. I should have died in King Lambert’s place. I do not deserve to live, and yet it was the Goddess’s will that I survived. For that reason, I resigned as the captain of the royal guard, abdicated my nobility, and entered into a life of service to the Goddess.”

“And your daughter?” I asked.

He shook his head. “One who has failed as I have deserves not the comfort of a wife’s embrace or a child’s love; I left them in my baron nephew’s care.”

“It seems unfair to your family that you did not bring them along in your exile. I’d guess you were an excellent father, based on how you behave here,” I contested.

“Alas, I had to leave them. In Faerghus, it is expected for a knight to commit suicide if he fails to protect his liege. It is an old tradition from before the War of Heroes, one not practiced in other regions of Fódlan. My failure negates my right to life; the only reason I’ve not already killed myself is that I believe such would be a waste of my death. It is better that I give my remaining years to the Goddess and the Church of Seiros, that I may die for their benefit,” Gilbert explained. “I donate most of my earnings back to the Church, so that it does not waste expenditures on me.”

It was difficult for me to sympathize with Gilbert’s perspective. If someone demanded I kill myself, I’d kill them or run away; if someone tried to take Father from me, I’d kill them or take Father somewhere we couldn’t be reached. I didn’t like it when other people got hurt or had to die, but caring about something more than Father’s safety or my own seemed impossible. In Gilbert’s situation—living in a society that expected me to die just to satisfy tradition—I’d have taken my family and fled.

“Well, I’ll have to thank the Goddess then,” I said. “If she’d not spared you for her own use, I’d have been a bit lonelier these past few weeks.”

“You are too kind. If you might indulge me once more—you’ve read your roster, yes?” Gilbert asked.

“I have,” I confirmed.

“The girl named Annette Fantine Dominic is my daughter; I believe she has enrolled in the
Officers’ Academy merely to meet me. One of the graduated Blue Lions must have deduced my identity and informed her. You probably think it is cowardly that I am leaving for a long mission just before she arrives, and I do not think you are wholly incorrect, but a reunion would only disappoint her. I have no intention of reclaiming the life I have pledged to the Goddess,” Gilbert said.

“And yet…” I prodded, expecting more.

He nodded. “And yet, my paternal instincts demand I assist her in some way. It is unfair that I should pass my burdens to you merely because I am unworthy of their honor, but Byleth… no, Professor Eisner: please provide her with what guidance you can. If you became the faculty advisor for this year’s Blue Lions, I would be grateful beyond measure.”

“I don’t believe I get a say in whether I’ll be the Blue Lions’ advisor,” I replied. “The headmaster has the authority to determine which professor advises which house.”

“The greatest influence on his decision is the preference of his available professors. Shamir has informed me she refuses to lead the Black Eagles, and Catherine the same for the Blue Lions. If you make your preference clear, I believe he will respect it, as he has two seasoned and flexible professors available for the remaining houses,” Gilbert explained.

“What’s got you convinced I’d be better for her than the other advisors?” I asked.

“It is not a matter of experience, but a matter of perspective. As one who is himself young and missing a parent, I believe you will be able to understand her better. You are also the only one outside of the clergy and the headmaster I’ve informed of these circumstances,” he shared.

“How much of what you’ve said should I pass on to her?” I questioned.

“I will trust your judgement on that matter. Although you are a reserved person, you are also patient and kind,” Gilbert said. “Well, I have surely wasted enough of your time already today. Thank you for hearing my request; if you should fulfill it, I will be eternally grateful, but I understand if you decide not to. You have no obligation to comply, but I felt I needed to make my desires heard. You might catch me tomorrow morning, but I will give my farewell here, should it be the case that we do not again see one another for a long time, or ever.”

4th of Great Tree Moon, 1180 IY

I spent the fourth working furiously, attempting to make up for Gilbert’s distraction the day before. The lost time and break in my flow were bothersome enough, but I also hadn’t been able to avoid thinking about his situation and request for the rest of that day. I wanted to be able to spend all of my focus on making the best possible curriculum, but I kept considering when and how I should let Annette know the things her father had shared with me.

I spent as much time in the library as I could manage, but eventually I reached a point where I couldn’t sit still any longer. I headed to the training grounds in the afternoon, hoping to run into Emile again, but I only found a black-haired teenage boy staring nervously at the weapon racks.

“Need help?” I asked.

“Oh, um, yeah. It’s my first time here, and I didn’t expect it to be so empty,” he said. The boy was about four inches shorter than me, with only the slightest stubble. As his green eyes appraised me,
I wondered if he might suspect I was a second-year student; enough of the ones I’d seen around the monastery were about my age. I might even appear younger than my twenty years thanks to my hairless face.

I had been hoping for a spar, but I could tell from the green-eyed boy’s physique he’d be unable to make me work for a win. His arms were too thin to be those of a decent sword-fighter. “What weapon were you hoping to practice with?” I asked.

“The sword,” he said.

“Alright. I came out here to get some exercise, so why don’t you join me for my workout routine? You’ll want some more upper-body strength if you’re going to get serious about swordplay,” I said, leading him away from the weapons.

The boy struggled to keep up with my exercises; he was breathing heavily, and before long he dropped to the floor in a sitting position. “I don’t think I can get up,” he said between breaths. “I’m feeling kinda dizzy.”

I picked him up and carried him to the infirmary. What fool’s idea was it to put the infirmary on the central building’s second floor? Anyone who couldn’t walk would have to be carried up the stairs. Luckily, I had the endurance for the task. The infirmary door was open, and inside, the White Magic professor was conversing with a girl of unusual appearance who lay on one of the beds. I explained the boy’s symptoms to the professor after laying him down in a bed of his own so she could examine him.

“You’ll be fine, dear,” she said to the boy. “You’re the new student who arrived yesterday, right?”

“Yeah, that’s me. I’m Lord Ashe von Gaspard, in the Blue Lions,” he said.

“The air is thinner up here in Garreg Mach. Most people have to spend a few days in the mountains before they can do strenuous exercise; it’s why we have a whole week between when students arrive and when classes begin. If you came via wyvern, you wouldn’t have spent enough time at high enough altitude to adapt. Just rest here for a bit, and avoid strenuous exercise for the next three days,” she prescribed.

“Apologies, Manuela. I wasn’t aware that such a phenomenon existed,” I explained. “On the land approach from the Kingdom, we didn’t suffer such an effect. I guess we climbed gradually enough that it wasn’t a concern for us or our horses.”

“No, it should be the duty of the professors doing room assignment to ensure the students who arrive by air are informed,” she replied. “I’ll have to speak with the headmaster about it.”

Professor Manuela Casagranda had brown hair that was pulled up and puffed out such that it curled back from the sides towards her mouth. She wore noticeable makeup and low-cut dresses every day, even though it was still cold during the early spring due to our altitude. She’d flirted with me at the faculty meeting, but I didn’t think she was seriously interested, since I’d seen her flirting with other men in the dining hall twice since then.

Instead of considering Manuela’s interest, I was more concerned with the infirmary’s other patient, whose conversation with Manuela I’d interrupted. Like Kid, her youthful appearance contrasted with her white hair, and her red eyes had similarly constricted irises.

“Excuse me, Manuela, but who might that be? Is she ill?” I asked quietly, gesturing to the girl.

“A new student. She’s just tired from a long wyvern ride—she has a poor constitution, she’s said.
Come, I’ll introduce you.”

We approached her bedside. “Lysithea, this is your Military Strategy instructor, Professor Byleth Eisner.”

“A pleasure, Professor. I am Lady Lysithea von Cordelia. I look forward to your instruction,” she greeted me.

“Your hair and eyes are unusual,” I noted. “Have they been this way since birth?”

She looked caught off-guard. “Uh, no. I was exposed to some dangerous magic as a child, but I managed to survive,” she said, quickly regaining her composure and giving me a more tired expression. “My health has suffered since then, though. Two weeks of wyvern riding was a bit more than I could take, so my driver had to carry me here as soon as we arrived.”

“Interesting,” I said. “There’s another in town with a similar appearance at the orphanage. We brought him in from the Western Empire, where we found him alone. He doesn’t talk, but you might be interested to meet him.” As I spoke, the weariness fled from her face until I was looking at a visage mirroring my own: cold, blank, analytical. ‘Dangerous magic’ was blatantly non-specific—she was hiding something.

“Thank you for your concern, Professor. I’ve yet to meet another in my condition, so I will perhaps visit him when I am in town,” she said.

I excused myself and went to find Father’s office, where I was admitted after a knock. “Have you learned anything from the Church physicians about Kid?” I asked him.

“Rhea told me she had a look at him. She confirmed that he’s been sorcerously altered, and the effects are pretty nasty: total infertility and damage to several major organs, including his brain. Even with Church healers on his case, Kid’ll be lucky to live another twenty years. She wasn’t able to figure out what the purpose of the alterations might be,” Father reported. “What’s got you so curious?” he asked.

“A new student just arrived that looks a lot like him, and a Cordelia at that. Her mind seems intact, but she went straight to the infirmary when she got here—think it could be connected?” I asked.

“Hm… it might be,” Father said. “According to the intelligence I’ve been reading, House Cordelia hasn’t been doing so great since ‘67, when the Empire invaded its territory in retaliation for assisting House Hrym’s attempted defection to the Alliance. In that invasion, the Empire seized the keep, killed the countess’s lord husband, and took their kids hostage.”

“If she’s the countess’s daughter, then it’s likely she was in the Empire when she was afflicted,” I reasoned.

“Yup,” Father agreed. “In ‘74, House Cordelia sent troops into the Empire for reasons we’re not sure of; somehow, that must have led to the young lady’s return. Regardless, Countess Cordelia had already remarried by then, and she named a Crest-less son from her second marriage the heir in ‘77.”

“That seems like evidence in favor of the possibility that any children who survived their time as hostages have become infertile, or worse,” I deduced.

“Well, that’s a bit of a reach. Her first husband was a noble from a minor branch of House Charon, but her second husband was a commoner prior to their marriage. It’s possible she simply wanted to affirm the place of the husband she was living with. If the return of any of the hostages was
unexpected, she might have needed to disinherit them to protect them from schemes to make his own child the heir,” Father explained.

He stroked his beard as he considered the situation, then sighed. “I hate to ask you this, but maybe you could ask Seteth to make you the advisor for the Black Eagles this year? I don’t know how much the students Adrestia is sending have been kept in the loop about what their parents are doing, but I’d appreciate any info I could get on the Empire. Whatever they’re up to down there can’t be good.”

Gilbert had already asked me to advise the Blue Lions, but I felt that Father’s request had to take priority over his. Besides, I’d surely have opportunity to tell Annette about him even if I wasn’t her faculty advisor.

“Unless I happen upon a more compelling reason to request another house, I’ll ask for the Black Eagles, then,” I decided. “I’d also like to ask about the Crest stone we found with Kid. You gave it to Rhea, right?”

“Yeah, she was really unhappy with that thing. She said it’d been messed with as well—apparently that’s blasphemous,” Father reported. “Let’s assume the Empire is trying to make weapons. Crest stones can make demonic beasts or be used with Hero’s Relics, right? Maybe the Empire is trying to make their own Relics. It could be that the stone’s changes are why the beast we fought was so different from the ones I’ve seen before.”

“What if the beast was actually the end goal?” I asked. “I don’t know how that’s related to Kid’s condition, though. Do different people turn into different beasts when exposed to the same Crest stone?”

“Not to my knowledge,” Father said. “Rhea might know otherwise. I’m not gonna tell her about this operation we’re conducting with the Black Eagles, though. Getting kids to spill on their parents’ crimes isn’t supposed to be a goal of the Officers’ Academy, so we can’t have the headmaster or the archbishop involved in case it comes to light—it’d harm their reputations too much. Anyway, if the changes to Kid have something to do with turning him into a beast, why would they have done the same with the Cordelia girl? It doesn’t sound like something you’d want to do to a valuable hostage.”

“Good point. I don’t think we’re going to figure this out, yet. I’ll let you know if I find out anything interesting,” I said. I went back to work for the rest of the day, having gotten well enough exercise carrying Ashe all the way to the infirmary.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to @alchworks for beta reading.
5th of Great Tree Moon, 1180IY

As I continued my work on the curriculum, I began to notice first-year students checking out the library. First, I saw Lysithea, who merely eyed me with suspicion before turning her attention entirely to the books. Second, I met Ashe, who thanked me for bringing him to the infirmary the day before. Then, a group of three students visited, bantering as they browsed the shelves and making it difficult for me to focus. My attention drifted away from my work entirely when I noticed the student at the lead was yet another white-haired girl with constricted irises.

The trio were all dressed in fine clothing. The white-haired girl wore a bright red outfit with golden trim and was more than half a foot shorter than me with lilac eyes, while the other girl in the group was slightly taller and definitely Brigidese, with brown eyes and dark burgundy hair. I’d have been able to tell she was Brigidese from her skin tone and facial shape alone, but the purple prayer marks around her eyes left no dispute about her ethnicity. Following behind them was a tall young man with black hair, green eyes, and a monochrome outfit.

There was only one Brigidese student on the roster: Petra Macneary, the granddaughter of Brigid’s king; a girl who had been taken as a hostage by the Empire after the Brigid and Dagda War. Her presence meant the others were likely fellow Black Eagles—students from Adrestia, likely nobles. The other white-haired children I’d met had been people in adverse circumstances—one turned into an unusual demonic beast, the other a political hostage. If anything, I’d have expected Petra to be the Black Eagles student with white hair. Curious, I listened in on their conversation while pretending to work.

“...but most of these volumes could probably be obtained in Enbarr,” the white-haired girl finished her sentence.

“I see. Many of these look to be on subjects not taught in the academy… I wonder if I will have time to read those. That man over there looks about Hubert’s age, so I think he is a student, but it seems like he is already very busy even before school has begun,” Petra said.

“Why don’t we find out?” the white-haired girl asked, and the group approached me.

“Greetings, I am Princess Edelgard von Hresvelg. These are my friends Princess Petra Macneary of Brigid and Lord Hubert von Vestra.” They each gave short bows as they were introduced.

“May I ask your name, good sir?”

The Imperial Princess? Why might one of the most important people in the Empire have been subject to this sorcerous treatment? I knew from Seteth’s briefing at the faculty meeting that the noble families who ran the various ministries of the Imperial government held the true power in the Adrestian Empire, and that the sitting Emperor was a mere figurehead. So was this a punishment to the Emperor that his daughter would be altered? Or are there benefits to the process? Kid was brain-damaged, but Lysithea seemed to have her mind intact despite her poor health. What if we had cause and effect backwards, and the treatment was an attempt to undo the children’s poor health? I couldn’t know that without consulting Rhea about the matter, and—
shock. Let’s give the poor man a moment to collect himself, shall we?” Hubert said, snapping me out of my thoughts.

I remembered him from the roster—the heir to House Vestra, which controls the Ministry of the Imperial Household. I imagined she was being monitored by the ministers, so he seemed a natural choice as her handler. His gaunt face and narrow eyes gave him a bearing that seemed naturally shady and smug.

“Apologies, Princess Edelgard. I’m Professor Byleth Eisner, and I’ll be teaching Military Strategy this year. I’m something of a last-minute hire, so you’ve caught me in the middle of working on my curriculum. I’ve never been a teacher before, but I’m working my hardest to ensure I can perform at a level worthy of your patronage.”

Hubert raised an eyebrow at me, but said nothing, letting Edelgard continue to lead the conversation.

“I apologize if I have shocked you. Since you are my professor, I would prefer if you would dispense with my title when addressing me—simply ‘Edelgard’ is fine,” she said.

Though I’d only gotten lost in thought, I did find her appearance rather striking. While the white hair looked somewhat sickly on Kid and Lysithea, Edelgard’s hair seemed to gleam in the candlelight. When combined with her poise, it lent her presence a nobility I hadn’t seen in any other highborn.

I nodded my agreement, and she continued, “Since this is your first year teaching, may I ask what occupation you held before?”

“I’ve been a mercenary since age sixteen,” I answered. “I know that doesn’t sound very impressive, but I’ve studied the arts of war under the current Grand Master of the Knights of Seiros.”

“Oh? And yet you weren’t a knight yourself?” she asked.

“Now that I think of it, you probably haven’t been informed of a recent change to that post. Sir Arran has retired; now Jeralt Eisner commands the Knights. He’s my father, as you might guess,” I informed her.

“Ah, I thought the name ‘Eisner’ sounded familiar,” Hubert said. “Quite unusual for a Grand Master to retire, then replace his replacement two decades later, but I suppose such is the power of the Major Crest of Seiros.”

His eyes narrowed further as he ventured a suspicion. “It is also quite unusual for a commoner to bear such a Crest. Might you have inherited it, or its Minor version?”

“I have not, Lord Hubert,” I responded. I recalled from the roster that Edelgard did bear a Minor Crest of Seiros, however. The Crest was typical for the Hresvelg line, who were said to have received it by the blessing of the saint herself.

“You may extend Lady Edelgard’s request to myself. It would not do for me to be entitled in your speech when she is not, for I am but her humble servant,” he said.

Yeah, right—Marquis Vestra was known to be a core member of the faction that opposed the Emperor.

“I as well,” Petra added. I wondered if all of the Black Eagles would be joining in with this
“I served under your father in the invasion of the Empire,” I told her in Brigidese. “He was a valiant warrior. The world is darker without his light.”

“You speak Brigidese? Now that’s interesting,” Edelgard mused.

“I believe we have deduced the location of Grand Master Eisner’s twenty-year leave of absence,” Hubert noted.

“Thank you for the condolences, Professor,” she answered. “I have often been homesick since coming here… it’s nice to hear one who speaks my tongue, for once.”

“I too, miss the warmth of Bearigon. Garreg Mach is beautiful in its own way, but it’s rather cold,” I shared.

“Yes… I cannot believe how chilly it is even during the day in spring, here,” she agreed. “It will get warmer soon, though, yes?” she switched back to Fódlanian.

“Hm?” Edelgard asked.

“We were just complaining about how cold it is here compared to Brigid,” I shared with the others. “Early spring in these mountains still feels like it might as well be considered winter.”

“I spent much of my youth in the Kingdom, so I’m used to these sorts of temperatures,” Edelgard remarked. “Anyway, I believe we’ve distracted the Professor long enough. Come, Hubert, Petra, let’s leave him to work in peace, for the sake of our education.” She led them over to Tomas’s desk, where they began speaking with the librarian in whispers.

Try as I might, I could no longer concentrate on my work. The revelation of Edelgard’s appearance was something I needed to talk to Father about, but it would be suspicious if I packed up my stuff and left while they were still in the library. I pretended to read while I organized my thoughts on the matter, instead.

Alright, what if the white-haired children had been altered as a punishment? Lysithea and Edelgard would both have been under the power of the ministers. If the countess or the Emperor had acted against the ministers’ wishes, the kids might have been messed with as a way of retaliating against their parents. Kid might have also been a hostage, even if we didn’t know the parent, but then how did he get his hands on that Crest Stone and end up a demonic beast?

Well, what if the sorcerous alteration provided some benefit to the recipient, even if it came with complications? Then it might have been something the ministers had offered to the subjects’ parents… of course, I couldn’t tell what that benefit was. Lysithea and Edelgard were both Crest-bearers, so they couldn’t become demonic beasts like Kid did… unless what the treatment did was let Crest-bearers become demonic beasts? I didn’t know if Kid had been tested for a Crest. Of course, even if he did have one, I wasn’t sure how it benefited the nobles to have kids who could become demonic beasts.

The way Father worded Rhea’s diagnosis made it sound like the treatment caused Kid’s health problems, but did she actually know that, or was it just conjecture? What if the children had preexisting health problems the treatment was attempting to remedy? If so, there was no indication it was a success. What if the treatment was experimental, but towards some other benefit? In that case, Kid may have been a test subject and received a less-practiced version of the process the nobles had undergone. That would explain why they didn’t appear brain-damaged even though
Kid clearly was. What could be something nobles wanted to give their children so much that they’d risk dangerous magic?

I realized it—Crests! If the treatment was intended to give a Crest, nobles might find it worthwhile, especially if they fixed the process such that it no longer caused infertility. Wait, did I know that Kid’s infertility was caused by the sorcery? Again, I didn’t know how well Rhea’s pathology worked—she could be certain the sorcery caused the infertility, or it could be a possibility he was already infertile before being altered.

Unfamiliar as I was with nobles’ customs, I wasn’t sure at how young an age they received Crest testing. Father had known I had a Crest from a pretty young age, he’d told me—I’d scraped my arms playing on a paved street, and the injury had been gone within minutes. I’m sure some other Crest abilities were pretty obvious—I imagined a toddler with strength proportional to Father’s—but I knew that sorceries existed to confirm the identity of a Crest, which was needed since many Crests had some overlap in the powers they granted, and there were Crest powers which were purely mental. I could easily disprove this theory if records existed that showed either was born with their Crest—it was impossible for a single person to bear two Crests, after all.

Having processed all of my conjecture, I decided to put away my things from the library and go see Father. The Black Eagle trio had already departed with some books they’d checked out.

“Back again already?” he greeted me.

“So, I just met the Imperial Princess…” I began.

“You’re kidding—her too?” he asked.

I told him about my interactions with her group and explained the reasoning I had done regarding the case of the white-haired children.

“Hm… I trust Rhea on this. She said she thought Kid’s condition was caused by the sorcery he’d been affected with, so I believe her. Edelgard was also born with her Crest, near as I can tell. Church intelligence says she was sold to House Blaiddyd as a Crest-bearing bride for their prince when she was young, but they bought her back when her siblings started dying off to congenital disease. At least, that’s the official reason for their deaths—for all we know, every one of Edelgard’s siblings died from having this done to them. Maybe you can get her to open up to you? I doubt she has many friends in the Empire since most other noble families are in conflict with hers,” Father expounded.

“I’m not sure. She appeared to be the leader of the trio, but that could just be because Vestra is playing at being her friend to spy on her. The Brigidese princess seemed taken with her as well,” I reported.

“The Brigidese princess probably just thinks becoming the closest ally of the future Emperor is the best chance she has of making it home,” he pointed out.

“Either way, if Edelgard believes she already has allies, she won’t be as desperate for my support,” I said. “She seemed like a genuinely nice person… I hate that I’m going to be manipulating her for info, but if she’s really under the thumb of the imperial ministers, the Church finding out what’s going on could be the best thing for her.”

“Right,” Father agreed.
“By the way… do you believe Rhea’s story about my birth?” I asked.

Father sighed. “It seems far-fetched, I know, but sometimes, miracles genuinely happen around that woman,” he said. “If you don’t believe her, maybe you can try checking with another magic expert?”

“What do you mean by miracles?” I asked. “I’ve never been sure how religious you are, since I never catch you praying, and you never raised me to believe.”

Father explained, “The Book of Seiros might be all horseshit, but Rhea herself is definitely tapping into something divine. Everyone who has Crests is supposed to be born with one, right? But according to the Book of Seiros, all those Crest lineages started somewhere, usually a blessing by the Goddess or one of her saints. Rhea might very well be a modern-day saint.

“Back in… what, 1019? 1020? I was a young merc, being paid to escort this noble who was meeting with the Archbishop. If I’m remembering it right, Rhea had been Archbishop for less than a decade at that point. Someone who didn’t like the changes to the Church she’d been making tried to have her assassinated during the meeting. True believer that I was, back in those days, I took an arrow for her even though I was working for someone else, and passed out from the bleeding. When I came to, she said the Goddess had healed me without her intervening, and she offered me a place in the Knights of Seiros for my bravery. It was only later that I figured out I’d gained the Major Crest of Seiros when I’d been Crest-less before.”

“That just makes it sound like Rhea knows how to grant Crests, but keeps the method a secret,” I argued. “And if that story’s true, why isn’t it more wide-spread like the rest of your reputation as a knight?”

“Well, even though Rhea likes people who’ll take arrows for her, I don’t think she wants anyone to die for her. A big part of Church operations is trying to keep Fódlan peaceful. If everyone thought fighting for the faith could lead to this kind of reward, I think it’d only make them more eager to kill. We’ve got enough fights as it is,” he reasoned.

“I think I will consult an expert about this… our Black Magic instructor knows a lot about Crests and sorcery. Maybe I can get him to fill in the holes in my knowledge so I can better piece these mysteries together,” I mused. “I’ll go stop by his laboratory and see if he’s available.”

Professor Hanneman von Essar had introduced himself at the faculty meeting as a former professor of Crestology at the Imperial Wizard’s College in Enbarr. Von Essar was a noble name, but Hanneman hadn’t provided a noble title, unlike Lord Emile.

His laboratory was on the same floor as Father’s office, so it wasn’t long before I found it and went right through the open door. There, Hanneman and a second-year student were staring intensely at a large panel of slate which had been mounted on one of the laboratory’s walls. There were a variety of runes I couldn’t comprehend mixed in with numbers and marked on the panel in chalk.

Hanneman was an older gentleman wearing a brown longcoat over a brown shirt with a green tie. The graying hairs across his head were neatly combed and well-trimmed, from scalp to sideburns to mustache to goatee. He was wearing his monocle to better see the runes.

“Excuse me,” I interrupted their rumination. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything too important, but I’d like a private discussion with Professor von Essar.”
Hanneman turned to face his student. “I think we’ll need to sleep on this one, my boy. Why don’t we meet again tomorrow?”

The student nodded and excused himself. As he left, he closed the door, which I then locked.

“I want to talk to you about my Crest,” I told Hanneman. “How much do you already know?”

“Not much, I’m afraid. Archbishop Rhea informed me that it was a Church secret and that I wasn’t to ask you about it or otherwise attempt to investigate the matter,” Hanneman explained.

“If I offered to let you study it, would you keep that a secret from Rhea?” I asked.

Hanneman took a moment to consider this. “Yes, I would. While I have respected the archbishop’s requests to stop pursuing certain lines of investigation in the past, they were never in contradiction to the wishes of the actual subject. If she wishes to keep you ignorant about your own self and capabilities, however, I believe your own autonomy in the matter should be prioritized. What can you tell me about your Crest?”

“I know only one thing for sure: it grants the power of regeneration.”

I pulled out my knife and made a slice across my fingertip. I stuck it in my mouth to cleanse the blood, and by the time I pulled it out, the cut had healed, which I showed him.

“The rest of my knowledge consists of my own speculation and Rhea’s testimony. According to her, my Crest is the Crest of Flames, inherited from my mother, who received it directly from the Goddess as a result of Rhea’s prayer—I’m Rhea’s grandson, you see. She claims there’s no history of the Crest of Flames appearing in either Father’s line or her own, but she made no mention of who my grandfather might be.”

“Hmm… that is indeed a difficult claim to swallow. At the very least, I can confirm that it’s unlikely you had an ancestor who possessed the Crest of Flames,” Hanneman explained.

“According to the Book of Seiros,” he continued, “Nemesis had twenty wives but never succeeded in fathering a child. None other than him have been known to possess the Crest. The Book of Seiros is one of our best archaeological resources on the first century, because of the diligence with which it has been passed down, but it never states what exact powers the Crest of Flames granted Nemesis, only that he could wield the Sword of the Creator and was a warrior without equal.

“However, we needn’t rely on speculation! I have here an assortment of the finest Crest testing equipment known to Fódlan—much of it my own make. None of them are designed to be able to detect the Crest of Flames, but at the very least, we will be able to eliminate all other possible Crests. If you are willing to put the effort in to learning sorcery, there is a more definitive way of identifying your Crest, however.”

“I’ve already studied a fair bit from Karlman’s Guide,” I said. “I can keep a flame going steady for several hours.”

“Excellent, you already possess the necessary mana base, then,” Hanneman said. “Karlman was a colleague of mine at the College, you know. While I was busy trailblazing the field of Crest research, he focused on the fundamentals of educating new mages. I still remember the day the College got its own printing press… ‘This changes everything!’ he told me.

“But where was I? Ah yes, Crest manifestation. If you’ve only been practicing flames, so far, you’ve focused entirely on emission, that is, creating spell effects from mana that has exited the body of its caster. However, it is also possible to move mana around in the body without creating
spell effects. You will already have learned this by way of directing mana to the hand you use to cast the flame, as a precursor to having been able to create the flame.

“To perform a Crest manifestation, you must learn to direct your mana into your blood and no other type of tissue. This is somewhat difficult, as the blood is not an intuitive direction to move towards from another point in your body the way an extremity is. In order to perform this technique, you will need to learn what is known as White Sight, the technique that guides all of our practice of White magic.

“White Sight is essentially the ability to sense biological material that has been suffused with a caster’s mana. For a beginner, the sight is very rough and can only distinguish the gross structure of an intact organism, but refinements to the technique allow one to detect individual cells, up to a certain minimum size. The beginner’s version will suffice for our purposes, as we merely need to distinguish tissue types.”

“I’m planning to sit in on Manuela’s White magic classes already,” I shared. “Should I come back once I’ve learned White Sight?”

“Yes, I think that will be best. We cannot progress further in this investigation without you possessing it,” Hanneman agreed.

“In the meantime, I’d like to ask you about a few other topics of interest. First, do you know if it is possible to reverse infertility using White magic?” I asked.

“It would depend on the cause of the patient’s infertility,” Hanneman said. “Certain ailments that interfere with fertility have known cures, whereas others do not.”

“What about reviving someone who is recently deceased?” I asked.

“Again, it would depend on the patient. A stopped heart can often be easily made to beat again, which will save the patient if they are treated within minutes of the attack. Brain death, however, is impossible to reverse,” Hanneman said.

So, if my heart could have easily been restarted, why hadn’t it continued beating after Rhea’s spell? “What about pumping the blood directly with sorcery? Could that be done?”

“Theoretically,” Hanneman said. “However, restarting or repairing the heart is easier and more effective. Even a skilled mage wouldn’t be able to supply enough mana to keep such a spell working indefinitely, but if the heart were beyond repair, I could see such a spell being used.”

Then either the spell wasn’t what was pumping my blood, or Rhea had simply built up a mana base so massive that the spell she had cast on me once was still going after two decades.

“What if a Crest-bearer’s blood were used to power such a sorcery?”

“Hmm… I still can’t think of a way to make that feasible,” he answered. “Crest-bearing blood can be used as a mana source, but only by a mage with the same Crest. Moreover, it’s not as though the amount of mana that can be obtained from Crest-bearing blood is particularly great compared to the amount of mana a seasoned wizard will naturally possess. It might take a gallon of a Major Crest-bearer’s blood to equal the mana I can output in an hour without making use of my own, Minor Crest-bearing blood as a power source. A wizard with a more active specialization than I, such as a member of the Imperial Wizard Corps, would have an even larger mana base; they maintain a training regimen deliberately designed to maximize just that.”

So, she had to be lying about using my mother’s blood as a power source. Rhea definitely
possessed the Major Crest of Seiros, since she was still living despite being older than Father—this would mean she couldn’t possess the Crest of Flames needed to make use of my mother’s blood.

“I’m correct in thinking it’s impossible for a person to bear two Crests, right?” I asked.

“The evidence is in agreement with that assumption. There are no recorded cases of such a person existing,” he answered.

It might still be that the Major power of the Crest of Flames was the same extended lifespan granted by the Major Crest of Seiros—in that case, Rhea could be lying about which Crest she possessed. I could disprove this if I witnessed her use her super-strength, but there would still be a definite lie involved.

“Is there any way for someone to acquire a Crest they weren’t born with?” I asked.

“All such known events have been sufficiently mysterious as to be attributed to divine intervention. While divine intervention may indeed be the cause, I have made it my life’s work to attempt to study how that divinity functions. For too long, Crests have been treated with an unwarranted mysticism. Sorcery is also a gift of the Goddess, one available to any person with the intelligence and diligence to study it, so why should Crests be ignored as a subject of research merely because they are not a blessing meted out equally? Demonstrating that such was possible was the foundation of my professorship at the Imperial Wizard’s College. I believe that eventually, a method of bestowing a Crest through sorcery may be discovered, but so far, none is known to exist,” he explained.

I was left with two points of discrepancy in Rhea’s story: it couldn’t explain my lack of a heartbeat, and she shouldn’t be able to use my mother’s blood to power a spell. However, I still had no idea what she could be covering up. I wasn’t sure what to make of the white-haired kids, either. However, I was satisfied to have a lead on the mystery of my self, and I was looking forward even more to learning magic.

“Thanks for all the help. I’ll come by again if I have any more questions,” I said.

“I’m glad to be of service, and I look forward to conducting more detailed studies on your person. If you’d be willing to donate some blood and strands of hair, I might be able to find time to conduct tests on my own,” he suggested.

“I’ll agree to that.” I cut my finger back open and bled some into a vial of glass, which Hanneman marked with a number that was meaningless to me. I allowed him to pluck some hair with a pair of tweezers as well, which went into another container.

As I excused myself from his lab, I tried to shove aside all worries of Crests and re-focus on military strategy—that curriculum wasn’t going to write itself.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to @alchworks for beta readin
Interviews I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

7th of Great Tree Moon, 1180IY

Somehow, I’d managed to avoid any interesting encounters with other people at the monastery on Sunday, and so I’d gotten plenty of work done in time for Monday’s event. As Seteth had promised on Wednesday’s faculty meeting, the headmaster, Hanneman, Manuela, and I would be interviewing the incoming students. The other professors had all of the first-years gather in one of the monastery’s three dedicated classrooms, where they would be called one by one to present themselves in uniform to the headmaster and us faculty advisors in another room.

The first name on our alphabetical list was Aegir, Ferdinand von.

“Greetings, Lord Ferdinand. I am Seteth, the Headmaster and Flight instructor of the Officers’ Academy at Garreg Mach. Joining me here are Professor von Essar, Black Magic instructor and Crest scholar; Professor Casagranda, our White Magic instructor and physician; and Professor Eisner, our Military Strategy instructor. These three professors will be advising the Class of 1181. Tell us about yourself, and your education thus far.”

The seventeen year-old young man who sat before us had short, red hair and wore a sword at his belt that was thin and long with a swept hilt. The pale of his fair skin contrasted with the black and gold threads of the Officers’ Academy uniform, which he wore with a pair of gloves and a neckerchief, both white.

“I am Lord Ferdinand von Aegir, son of the Adrestian Prime Minister and heir to House Aegir,” he boomed. “I of course intend to become the next Prime Minister, and so have come to Garreg Mach to become the best noble I can be. My favorite things are good tea, good horses, and good armor.

“I have received some military instruction from knights in my family’s employ: I am already proficient in horseback riding, equipment upkeep, and swordplay—though one can always stand to improve! My education has mainly focused on matters of state and trade—necessary skills for one who stands to inherit what I do.”

“I believe we can help you achieve that goal, Lord Ferdinand. Though the Officers’ Academy’s curriculum is focused on military education, our primary goal is to develop our students’ potential as future leaders for the benefit of all of Fódlan,” Seteth responded.

He took a moment to look at his notes. “I see you have chosen Flight and History as your electives for this year. Why did you select these?”

“I chose Flight at the suggestion of a knight in my father’s employ. I was told the ability to ride a wyvern would be distinguishing beyond basic magical knowledge or archery. I selected History because I feel that learning from the past is vital for informing the decisions that will shape our future,” Ferdinand answered.

“Very well. Next, your application describes a desire to serve as the House Leader for the Black Eagles. Why should you be selected to lead the Black Eagles?”

“In the modern Adrestian Empire, it is the Prime Minister, not the Emperor, who holds the real political power. House Aegir has manned this post since the ousting of House Slesinger in 321. I
believe it is my duty to seek any leadership experience I can, for the good of my nation. Additionally, I have been raised from birth to handle the responsibilities that come from leadership, making me the most capable candidate,” Ferdinand boasted.

Seteth raised an eyebrow. “Are you not joined by several noble heirs in this year’s Black Eagle class? Surely their own education is not dissimilar to yours.”

Ferdinand smiled. “As it happens, I am already acquainted with the other Black Eagles: the heir to House Hevring is a layabout who would only fulfill such a position if his life depended upon it; the heir to House Varley is a shut-in… I am surprised she even managed to make it to the school; House Vestra’s heir knows only how to follow, not lead; and the princess of Brigid is disadvantaged by her youth in contrast to the rest of us. As for our own Imperial Princess, she was fostered in Faerghus for much of her upbringing—during that time, she could not have received the benefit of a proper Adrestian education.

“I, on the other hand have been tutored by the finest teachers of the most powerful nation in Fódlan since my education began. I have also had a hand in the education of my two younger siblings, while Edelgard has, unfortunately, had no opportunity to practice being a leader in her own family. As opposed to having this leadership experience herself, she will be far better served as Empress having the best version of myself to assist her in leading the nation.”

Seteth adjusted his notes, face betraying nothing. “I see. Do you have any questions for us before we invite the next student in, then?”

“No, sir. I look forward to learning from you, professors.”

Seteth glanced to his right, checking to see if my colleagues and I might have anything we wished to bring up before Ferdinand departed. I saw Manuela and Hanneman make negative motions, and so shook my head slightly myself.

“Thank you, Lord Ferdinand. Please tell Professor Rangeld to send the next student in after five minutes.”

It appeared I’d been fooled by my encounters with the likes of Ashe, Edelgard, and Lysithea into thinking that the noble students would be humble, agreeable, and respectful youths instead of stage caricatures with inflated egos, but I was somewhat grateful for this reveal—I could use it. My roster stated that Edelgard was the Black Eagles’ other candidate for House Leader, so I’d already intended to voice my support for her to take the position as a means of providing more excuses to interact with her. Now that I’d met Ferdinand, there was an obvious case to be made for her to be selected over him.

“I don’t think Lord Ferdinand would be a good choice for the Black Eagles’ House Leader,” I ventured, since it was clear that the time between meeting each student was to allow us to deliberate. “It’s poor form for a leader to be so eager to insult the people he aims to lead.”

“You are correct, Professor Eisner,” Seteth answered. “However, this is a bad habit Lord Ferdinand can be taught to avoid. I believe he will make a fine choice for the role should Princess Edelgard prove unsuitable.”

“True, if she’s a worse candidate, we should go with him, but I worry what lesson we’ll teach if it appears he’s been rewarded for acting like this,” I argued.

“Should Lord Ferdinand be our choice, we can make it clear to him he has been given the position despite how he referred to the other Black Eagles, rather than because of it,” Seteth explained.
“Are there any other concerns regarding Lord Ferdinand?”

“My name is Dorothea Arnault. Until recently, I was a songstress at the Mittelfrank Opera Company in Enbarr. While my career was going pretty well, the stardom of a performer can only last so long before she fades from the limelight. I decided it would be a good idea to get an education while I’m still young—and Garreg Mach offers the best education anywhere. Plus, it helps to know there’s someone I can trust on the staff—Manuela used to work with me. As for my education… I spent some time on the streets, so I haven’t had as much schooling as the nobles, but I’ve been doing my best to catch up, though when it comes to combat, I only know how to use a dagger.”

The eighteen-year-old young woman before us had long, brown hair and large, green eyes. She wore the jacket of her uniform open, with a black top beneath it that showed off her cleavage. She’d accessorized with a black choker, a black peaked cap, several bracelets, and a pair of earrings—pushing the limits of the dress code.

“Miss Arnault, we will try our best to live up to the praise you’ve given us,” replied Seteth. “You’ve selected Black Magic and History as your electives—I am surprised you would not select White Magic, the class taught by Professor Casagranda.”

“I intend to take her White Magic class in my second year, Headmaster, but I thought History would be better for my first year. Two months of travel from Enbarr with the likes of the Hresvelg, Vestra, Aegir, and Hevring heirs have made me feel like I’m lagging behind in that area,” she said with a worried expression.

“Very well. Do you have any questions for us before we invite the next student in, Miss Arnault?”

“No, Headmaster.”

Dorothea left, as we did not have any more questions for her either.

Again, I was the first to speak: “I’m wondering why she’d pursue a military education. If she’s interested in magic, why not attend the Imperial Wizard’s College?”

Manuela replied, “I think she might have wanted to get out of Enbarr, dear. The city can be a rough place, and it’s not easy being a diva.”

Hanneman added, “It’s true that the Imperial Wizard’s College is the finest institution of arcane science in Fódlan; while I consider myself more than a match for any one of the College’s current professors, I cannot compare to their teachings in tandem. However, I too departed from that environment, so I can hardly begrudge whatever additional motive she may have.”

“You seem to already have a close relationship with Miss Arnault, Professor Casagranda. Will you be taking the Black Eagles this year?” asked Seteth.

“It’s too early to tell, Headmaster,” Manuela replied. “I will bid for whichever class I feel needs me most. Dorothea is a strong girl; while it’s nice to be around familiar faces, I’ve already imparted in her the most important lessons I can, and I’m more than comfortable entrusting her care to one of my colleagues.”

With that, it seemed I’d either need to concoct a compelling reason to take the Black Eagles based on what they said here, or I’d need to hope one of the other houses contained a student Manuela
deemed sufficiently needy.

“What about you, Hanneman? How do you determine which house you want to take?” I asked him.

“Well, getting on in the years as I am, I’m hoping to find a student who can become my apprentice after graduation—I’ve already picked out a few potential candidates using the information contained in the roster. I’ll select whichever house contains the student I believe has the best chance of becoming my apprentice. Of course, I would never fight Manuela for a house we both want—the needs of the students come first, and I’ll still have ample opportunity to recruit my target even if they’re in another’s house,” Hanneman explained.

So, I wouldn’t have to fight both of them for the Black Eagles, if they both wanted that house, just Manuela.

“Do you have your eye on a house already?” he asked.

“No, I’m not even sure what my criteria for selecting a house would be,” I lied. Well, that would have been true, in normal circumstances. I might have selected the Black Eagles just to get to talk about Brigid with Petra, but I didn’t think saying as much would help me win the house if Manuela went for it. Unless...

“My name is Lord Caspar von Bergliez! I like fighting, training, and eating! I don’t like bad guys, wasting time, or rain! I’ve been training for the Imperial Army all of my life. I don’t have an inheritance, so I need to excel.”

Caspar was a short sixteen-year-old with short, blue hair and pale blue eyes. Like Ferdinand, he wore a similar sword at his side and a white neckerchief that poked out from his black and gold uniform—no gloves, though. He had an Eastern Empire accent like Emile’s.

“We will be doing our best to help you excel, Lord Caspar,” Seteth replied. “I see you have selected Flight and Unarmed Combat as your electives. Why these?”

“I just thought those would be the best classes for fighting. And, uh, I already know how to shoot a bow, but I’m pretty bad at it, so I wanted to give something else a shot.”

“I look forward to having you in my Flight class, then. Do you have any questions for us before we invite the next student in, Lord Caspar?”

“Nah, I’m good,” he replied.

“Lord Caspar, would you mind if I had a look at your sword?” I asked. “Lord Ferdinand was also wearing one, but I hadn’t seen one like it before.”

“Oh, this?” Caspar asked, drawing his sword. He approached my desk and presented it to me. “This is a rapier—they’re swords made just for dueling and self-defense. They’re long and thin so they can out-range other one-handed swords, because the first blow usually wins. We wouldn’t wear them into battle—a regular longsword is better for knocking an enemy over, and since they’re all thrust and no cut, it’s harder to fight a bunch of guys. They’ve gotten pretty popular among the nobles in my area lately.”

“Interesting,” I replied. “Thanks for showing me, Lord Caspar.”
“No problem, Professor. I guess they haven’t spread out of the Empire, yet, since I didn’t see anyone in another house with one,” Caspar said with a shrug.

“My name is Dimitri Alexandre Blaiddyd, Crown Prince of the Holy Kingdom of Faerghus. My story hasn’t been a very pleasant one, but I’d rather not get any special treatment for it. Describing myself… sorry, I’m not very good at opening up on the spot, like this. As for my studies, I have been taught the arts of war by the finest knights in Faerghus. I also gained some experience in the 1178 rebellion.”

The tall youth before us had short, blonde hair and blue eyes. Unlike the Imperial noblemen, the sword at his belt was a standard longsword. He wore greaves and gauntlets over his uniform, like he expected he might need to fight at any moment and was making his best attempt at compromising with the dress code while remaining protected. He spoke firmly in a harsh Northern Kingdom accent.

“And what is your reason for attending the Officer’s Academy?” asked Seteth.

“My reason…” Dimitri began, taking a moment to look away from us as though he had to search for this answer, “it is tradition for Blaiddyd princes to attend the Officers’ Academy before they ascend the throne. I am already seventeen years of age, and so I must rule soon. I wish to learn all I can before my coronation, so that I might lead my people out of the troubles that now plague us and restore Faerghus to its former glory.

“As for why I did not attend sooner…” he trailed off for a moment, searching again. “To tell the truth, I had planned to skip the Academy and begin my rule this year. However, upon learning that heirs of the other powers would be attending, I thought it would be more appropriate for me to join them.”

“We will certainly aid you all we can in preparing to become a ruler, Prince Dimitri. As for the heirs to Leicester and Adrestia, it is our hope that you can forge strong bonds with each of them, so that this era of peace between Fódlan’s three powers can persist. Towards that end, we are grateful for your decision to attend,” Seteth shared.

Dimitri nodded. “I intend to give maintaining our peace my full effort.”

“As for your electives, you’ve selected Archery and History. Why these?”

“I just picked Archery for my retainer Dedue’s sake—I knew he would pick whatever I did. I’m mainly interested in the Strategy and History courses. I’m already confident in my riding and archery skills, and I’ve no interest in magic or wyverns,” Dimitri said.

“Very well. Next, let’s discuss your application for House Leader of the Blue Lions. Why should you be selected for this role?” Seteth asked

“Despite being old enough to take the throne, I’ve yet to gain any real leadership experience. I hope that to gain that through my service as a House Leader, so that I might become a better ruler before I displace my uncle’s regency,” Dimitri explained.

Seteth looked satisfied with this answer. “I would like to inform you that you have been selected as the House Leader of the Blue Lions, by virtue of being the only student to apply for the position. You may receive your cape from Professor Nevrand once you exit; you are to consider it an essential part of your uniform and wear it at all times you would be required to wear the rest of
“My name is Lady Lysithea von Cordelia. I may be young, but I’m more than capable of keeping up with my peers. My main interests are magic, politics, and medicine. I’ve done my best to study military topics, but my poor constitution has limited me from training my body very hard. Still, I’ve been exercising every day to get better, and I can hold my own in a fight using my Black spells.”

“And what is your reason for attending the Officer’s Academy?” asked Seteth.

“I am here to hone my leadership and magical skills,” Lysithea replied.

She kept stealing glances in my direction, still suspicious of me after our interactions on Friday. Not particularly unwarranted, since I was trying to figure out her secrets.

“I see. Your choice of both White and Black magic as electives seems appropriate, then.”

“My name is Lady Annette Fantine Dominic. I was the valedictorian of the class of 1179 at the Royal School of Sorcery in Fhirdiad. Things I like are cleaning, doing laundry, getting dressed up, dancing, singing, reading stories… ooh, and eating sweets!”

Whereas the students thus far had done their best to present themselves as serious young adults, the short, blue-eyed, sixteen-year-old redhead speaking now was all bubbles and smiles. Instead of a weapon, at her waist was a pochette worn with a strap over the shoulder.

“Things I don’t like… dark places! Or hard-to-reach places that need a good dusting! Oh, and coffee. Bleagh!” she said, sticking her tongue out in disgust.

Somehow, all of us managed not to laugh. I guessed my natural inexpressiveness fit right in with these seasoned professors, who had long since mastered the art of not reacting to children’s antics.

“And what is your reason for attending the Officer’s Academy?” asked Seteth.

She blinked intensely before replying, “I’m here to support my best friend in the whole wide world, Mercedes, whose step-dad is making her come here. Oh, and if I can learn a whole lot too, that would be great.” I took the obvious tell to mean that finding Gilbert had been her true reason for attending.

“I see. It is natural that you would choose both White and Black magic as electives, then,” Seteth noted. “I would expect no different of a Royal School of Sorcery graduate.”

“Uh… uhm…”

The student who sat before us, staring at the ground, clutching her trousers and trying to piece together something that resembled a response was Edmund, Marianne von, age seventeen. Her
blue hair was braided in a style that hugged the scalp, and her brown eyes had dark circles under them.

She had a note in her roster entry saying do not enquire about Crest. I wondered if it was a Church secret I wasn’t privy to or a request from Margrave Edmund. What were the odds she had the Crest of Flames as well? I couldn’t think of any good way to investigate her without getting caught, though.

“I can… I can read! And I can do math… and I can write… and um… I like taking care of horses… and other animals, too. I know a lot about the Goddess and the saints… and um, I started learning to heal, too,” she managed, with great effort.

“There is no need to be nervous, Lady Marianne. We are all here to help you. I only have one more question for you, alright?” Seteth asked in a much gentler tone than normal.

“Okay… go ahead,” Marianne said with resolve, though her knuckles were white.

“Why did you decide to attend the Officers’ Academy?”

“I didn’t ask to come here… Margrave Edmund made me,” she said. “It’s okay, though… I have a friend here, so it’s better already, I guess. The cathedral is really beautiful, too, and it makes me feel close to the Goddess, which I like.” By the end of her response, she started to relax her grip.

“It pleases me to hear you find it comfortable here, and that you have already made a friend. I see you are taking Riding and White Magic as your electives, which makes sense given your interests. If you have nothing you would like to ask us before the school year begins, you can leave—just let Professor Rangeld know to send the next student in after five minutes,” Seteth said.

“Um, okay. Sorry for being scared. I’ll go now,” she replied, leaving in just a slight hurry.

“I might have to take the Golden Deer this year,” Manuela said. “Whatever that girl’s been through, if we let her leave the Academy like this, the world will eat her alive.”

I thought it’d be more likely she wouldn’t want to leave the monastery, since she liked it so much better here, but I was grateful that she was a Golden Deer. I’d already met seven of the nine Black Eagles so far, and all of them had been more emotionally put-together than Marianne, so odds were I wouldn’t be up against Manuela to claim the Black Eagles house.

“I was training to become a knight, before I became the heir,” said Fraldarius, Felix Hugo, a Kingdom lordling.

He was seventeen years old with brown eyes and a permanent scowl. His long, black hair was done up in a bun to keep it out of his face. He’d replaced the standard black boots of his uniform with white winter boots, and he wore a longsword like his prince.

“I can’t say I miss that path, but I still want to perfect my swordplay. I spent most of my time at home training, and I imagine I’ll do the same here.” We waited for him to add more, but he seemed to think that sufficed as a personal description, as he tapped his foot and looked in our general direction, but never directly at us.

Deciding to move on, Seteth asked, “Is that your goal here, Lord Felix?”
Felix shrugged. “More or less.”

“Hmm… And for your electives, you have chosen Archery and Unarmed Combat. Why those?”

“They seemed like good exercise,” Felix said, confident that this was a fine reason.

Seteth frowned and checked his notes again before asking, “Do you have any questions for us before we invite the next student in?”

“Yeah. Who are the best fighters among the professors? I’m looking for a challenge,” Felix said.

“You’ll want to try Professor Catherine,” I answered. “I give most knights a run for their money, but she destroyed me last we sparred.”

“Hm,” Felix grunted, looking directly at me for the first time. “Sounds good.”

Once Felix had left, I commented, “Is it fine for a House heir to be so single-minded? It seemed as though his interests began and ended with fighting.”

“Though we have a great deal of authority over the students, we cannot force them to learn,” replied Seteth. “If a student is so insistent on wasting our time, they can be expelled, even if they are a House heir.”

“My name is Lady Ingrid Brandl Galatea, and I’m the heir to House Galatea. I grew up around knights, and I’ve always wanted to be one, so I’ve gotten a few of them to teach me some things. Can I just say, this place is absolutely magnificent? The library, the training grounds, the dining hall… I truly feel blessed for being able to come here.”

The seventeen-year-old lady before us had striking green eyes and long, braided blonde hair. She was the first female student we’d seen who carried a blade at her side, a longsword like those of the male Kingdom lordlings.

“Thank you for your praise, Lady Ingrid,” replied Seteth. “I am sure the staff responsible for maintaining those facilities will be grateful to hear your praise. Am I correct in thinking your knightly aspirations are what motivated your decision to come here?”

“Partially. Felix, Sylvain, and I… we all decided to come this year to support His Highness. The four of us were friends, growing up,” she replied, traces of woe on her face.

“I see. As for your electives, you have selected Flight and History—why these?”

“Galatean pegasus knights are renowned as the best in Faerghus. It’s important that I maintain my flight skills while I’m away from home, so I’m not an embarrassment when I come back. As for History, it’s just a personal interest of mine.”

“My name is Lord Ashe von Gaspard, and I’m the heir to House Gaspard, even though I was born a commoner. Cooking and reading are my favorite activities. My education is a bit behind the other nobles, but I’ve been working hard to catch up in the five years since the baron adopted my two younger siblings and I.” The sixteen-year-old fidgeted uncomfortably in his seat, unused to
wearing a longsword at his belt.

“And what is your reason for attending the Officer’s Academy?” asked Seteth.

“The baron says it’s the fastest way for me to really learn how to be a noble, which I’ll need to do if I’m to inherit the barony,” Ashe explained.

“I see. As for your electives, you have selected Archery and History—why these?”

“I love reading about history, so it was an obvious choice. As for the other elective, it was hard to decide between Riding, Flight, and Archery. Truth be told, I flipped coins to make my final decision,” Ashe answered.

“The name’s Lord Sylvain Jose Gautier. I like lively places, fine art, and board games. I don’t like dirt, gardening, or jealous women. My education… as the heir to House Gautier, I’ve spent plenty of time with tutors of all kinds. Fighting, negotiating, strategizing… yeah, all that’s been covered.”

Sylvain had short, red hair and orange eyes like Ferdinand, but where Ferdinand had been neat and proper, Sylvain looked much more relaxed and easygoing. The nineteen-year-old wore a longsword like his childhood friends, and the collar of his uniform was popped open. His boots were a matching pair to Felix’s.

“Jealous women?” Manuela asked, eyebrow raised.

Sylvain laughed nervously before replying, “Well, you know, it’s all too common for women to mistake some harmless flirting for serious infidelity. It’s a huge problem for me when there are beautiful women everywhere who deserve to know how gorgeous they are!”

“I hope you did not come to Garreg Mach just to flirt, Lord Sylvain,” warned Seteth.

“Well... I wasn’t originally going to attend the Officers’ Academy—I feel plenty prepared to take over as Margrave for my father if needed. But Felix asked me to come with him, and well... he’s like a brother to me—I couldn’t say no. Oh, and I wanted to get a chance to hang out with His Highness again. I feel like I’ve neglected him as a friend lately. So those two are really my first priority, and having fun comes next. Sorry about that, Professors.”

“While supporting your friends is an admirable aim, it will cause problems for us if you do not at least perform adequately in your classes. Avoid doing anything that might reflect poorly on the Officers’ Academy and the Church, and I believe we will be able to get along,” said Seteth.

“Yes sir!” Sylvain responded with a sloppy salute.

“As for your electives, you’ve selected Riding and History. Why these?”

“They sounded the easiest,” Sylvain admitted with an embarrassed grin.

“I am Lord Lorenz Hellman Gloucester, heir to House Gloucester. As the next Duke Gloucester, it is my duty to hone my abilities to their fullest extent, so that I may help lead the Leicester Alliance into its glorious future. As such, I have come to pursue an education here at the Officers’
Academy. My personal interests are fine tea, fine arts, and equestrianism.”

Oh great, another Ferdinand. “My past education includes some of the finest tutoring available in Leicester. I also attempted to attend the Royal School of Sorcery in Fhirdiad, but I was forced to withdraw because of the 1178 Rebellion.”

Lorenz’s purple hair was rounded on top, like a bowl cut, and matched his eyes. It was uncanny how it tapered perfectly to his jawline, which came to a point at his chin, rendering the tall eighteen-year-old’s head into a flawless almond shape. A saber hung from his belt, and a bright red flower was pinned to the breast of his jacket.

“Lord Lorenz, we will gladly support your journey to better yourself as a leader. Let us start by discussing your choices of electives. Please tell us why you have chosen Black Magic and History.”

“Certainly. With Black Magic, I hope to pick up here where I was forced to leave off in Fhirdiad. As for History, I believe its study is essential for informing any governor—nay, anyone who seeks to lead others.”

“I agree,” replied Seteth. “Speaking of leading, you expressed an interest to serve as House Leader for the Golden Deer in your application. Why should you be selected to lead the Golden Deer?”

“Only my superb breeding, my stellar education, and my familiarity with my peers,” Lorenz boasted. “I have dined with nobles across the Alliance and even some in the Empire, so I have already established relationships in my class within and without the Golden Deer.”

“I see. Do you have any more questions for us, before we invite the next student in?”

“I do have one,” answered Lorenz. “Is it really appropriate for Claude von Riegan to attend the Officers’ Academy? One of the primary reasons for the establishment of the Academy in 980 was to better prepare Fódlan’s readiness to counter Almyran incursions. Now, we Fódlanian students who are faithful to the Goddess must be schooled alongside an Almyran student who believes in heathen gods? I cannot help but feel his attendance is a corruption of the Academy’s purpose.”

Seteth didn’t bat an eye before countering Lorenz’s complaints.

“First of all, Lord Claude von Riegan is as much Fódlanian by blood as he is Almyran. Second, although blaspheming is not permitted, it is not a requirement that a student be of the faith. Third, I cannot help but notice you have not levied such complaints about the Princess of Brigid’s attendance—could it be because her family is not your own’s political rival? Perhaps instead of only thinking of how you might gain an advantage over your peers, you should instead consider what you might have to gain by befriending them and learning from them. Is there anything else?”

Lorenz winced throughout Seteth’s entire admonishment. Still, he managed to maintain his composure as he answered, “No, that will be all.”

Once Lorenz had left the room, Manuela raised the obvious concern. “Hmm… it’ll be hard choosing a House Leader for the Golden Deer. Our only candidates are Lord Lorenz and Lord Claude. Lord Lorenz’s prejudice against Lord Claude will make it unfairly difficult for Lord Claude if Lord Lorenz is selected as the House Leader, but there’s also the possibility that the Fodlanian students would resist having an Almyran leader.”

“No, I feel the character Lord Lorenz has demonstrated makes him unsuited for the position,” Seteth disagreed. “Unless Lord Claude is likewise unsuited for the role, I will assign it to him.
Should both of them prove unsuitable, I will solicit the other Golden Deer.”

“What makes Lord Lorenz so much worse than Lord Ferdinand?” I asked.

“When Lord Ferdinand spoke ill of his peers, it did not appear to be out of malice, but the sort of competitiveness that leads one to compare oneself to others. Lord Lorenz has demonstrated active hostility to Lord Claude, a mentality that would be far worse for his house should he lead it,” Seteth explained.

“My name is Lady Hilda Valentine Goneril. I’m the daughter of Duke Hardin Goneril and the sister of General Holst Goneril. As always, my brother sends his thanks for your work here in helping him protect Fódlan from Almyran invaders.”

Hilda wore her long pink hair in twintails and greeted us with a smile. Amazingly, both her eyes and her lips were the same color as her hair. The eighteen-year-old’s uniform’s only accessory was a white neckerchief.

“He has our thanks as well, for holding the border of this holy land against those heathens,” replied Seteth, apparently finding no contradiction between this sentiment and his defense of Claude’s attendance.

“As for me, my interests are fashion, music, and crafts. I was tutored at the Goneril estate, but I don’t really know much about war or fighting,” Hilda said.

“What is your reason for attending the Officer’s Academy at Garreg Mach?”

“Tradition,” Hilda replied. “Every Goneril has attended the Academy since its founding.”

“So I have read. What about you, personally? Surely you have something you hope to accomplish in your time here?” asked Seteth.

“Um…” Hilda trailed off, suddenly blushing. “Well, you know, I haven’t decided yet.”

“That is fine. We will consider it part of our own jobs to assist in finding an answer to that question. Meanwhile, let us discuss your electives. You have selected Black Magic and History. Why these?”

Hilda’s blush deepened. “Ah, well, they were... less physical than the alternatives.”

I noticed Seteth wince ever so slightly.

*Hevring, Linhardt von* yawned before answering Seteth’s first question.

“I’m a bit of a bookworm. It often keeps me up at night, so I apologize for my…” he paused to yawn again. “Yawning. I’ve been studying whatever catches my fancy, here and there. I’m very impressed with your library, I must say.”

“I will ensure our librarian receives your compliment,” replied Seteth.

“No need…” another yawn. “I’ve already let him know.”
“Is there anything in particular you’re excited to study here at the Officer’s Academy?” Seteth asked.

“Yes, actually,” replied the blue-eyed sixteen-year-old, adjusting the ponytail that bound his medium-length dark green hair. “I’ve always been interested in Crest research, so I’m excited to study under Professor von Essar. His presence here was part of what motivated my decision to study at the Academy instead of at the Imperial Wizard’s College. Though, I will admit, it was also easier to convince my father to pay for the Academy. My friend Caspar is attending this year, as well.”

Hanneman looked ecstatic. “You’re in luck, boy. I’ve been searching for an apprentice who shares my passion for Crest research.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Linhardt apologized with little change in expression. “I don’t really have the option of becoming a Crest scholar myself. I’m going to be inheriting the titles of Duke Hevring and Minister of Finance, unfortunately, so my future is pretty much set in stone already.”

Hanneman sighed his frustration. “Nonetheless, I’ve much to teach an inquiring mind. Feel free to stop by my laboratory anytime.”

Linhardt yawned again. “Thank you.”

“Just to confirm, you have selected both White and Black Magic as your electives, yes?” Seteth asked.

“That’s right. I’ve dabbled in both magics before, but not done any intensive research on them.”

“There is no need for you to refer to me by my title—just ‘Edelgard’ is fine for you, my professors, to use.”

The seventeen-year old princess had tied ribbons into her hair that matched the lilac of her eyes. Somehow, she looked even more dignified in her uniform than she had in the bright red outfit she’d been wearing when I met her in the library, an effect that was heightened by the dagger at her belt.

“I am afraid I cannot do so, Princess Edelgard, unless such pact is also made with Prince Dimitri. It would be improper for the headmaster to show greater deference to a crown prince than an Imperial Princess,” replied Seteth.

“If you wish to address me as Princess by your own volition, I will not stop you, Headmaster, but know that I demand no such thing of you.”

She flicked her hair over her shoulder with one hand, her glove vanishing in the sea of white during the motion.

“Though I was originally tenth in line for the throne, my education has been no lesser than any heir’s would have been. My studies have spanned everything from the essentials of literacy, arithmetic, and politics to the mysteries of Crest science, philosophy, and sorcery. However, I am still in need of a military education, of which no better can be found than at the Officers’ Academy.”

“We will do our best to live up to your esteemed opinion of us, Princess Edelgard. Next, I would
like to discuss the electives you have selected: Black Magic and History. Why choose these?” Seteth asked.

“I have selected Black Magic so that I may continue to hone my sorcery during my time here. As for History, I believe this to be the single most important subject for a ruler to study. History contains the effects of all other subjects, each of them making their mark upon it—else they would not be worth studying.

“We who live today are not so different from those who lived before,” she said, looking Seteth straight in the eyes, “so History is one’s best tool for understanding those around them. There is no more important task for a ruler than to make decisions that make sense in the context of the people surrounding them, be they subjects, allies, or enemies.”

“Well said, Princess Edelgard,” Seteth replied. “Next, let us discuss your desire to serve as House Leader for the Black Eagles. Why should you be selected to lead the Black Eagles?”

Edelgard closed her eyes for a moment before opening them and launching into a speech.

“My father’s reign as Emperor has been characterized by strife—petty struggles for power as each house sought to enhance its own selfish means. House Hresvelg is no exception. I plan to leave that history in the past, and, during my rule, bind together the noble houses of the Adrestian Empire—not as subjects under the imperial throne, but as those who, in harmony, shoulder the burden of advancing the prosperity of our nation.”

She stood up.

“That task begins here, Headmaster, where the scions of each house have gathered to bond in the innocence of youth. My hope is that the bonds we forge over these next two years will persist even as we leave Garreg Mach, such that when we inherit our fathers’ powers, using them to aid one another rather than assail one another comes to us naturally. In pursuit of this dream, my Professors, I ask that you grant me the duty of leading the Black Eagles, so that I may work to establish the norms of our house as ones that foster the sort of bonding that could lead to a future of peace and unity for the Adrestian Empire.”

She sat down.

“You make a very strong argument, Princess Edelgard,” replied Seteth, “but we will need time to deliberate before we can select the House Leader. Do you have any questions for us before we invite in the next student?”

“No, Headmaster.”

I wondered if I should ask her about her appearance now, or wait until later. If Edelgard’s appearance was because she was a victim of abuse, would she accept an offer of aid from the Church? Or would she pretend it wasn’t the case out of fear of further retaliation from the ministers? I wanted to play it safe with her, so I kept my mouth shut on the matter.

Once Edelgard had left the room, we began our deliberation. “Do any of you object to the selection of Princess Edelgard as the House Leader of the Black Eagles?” Seteth asked.

“No,” I answered. “Her speech was incredible—I almost want to become her follower myself, after hearing that.”

Truthfully, I’d have been ready to swear her my undying loyalty, if Kid’s existence didn’t raise so many questions about her appearance. The power of her voice, the eloquence with which she
spoke, the vision of hope her words provided—she was capable of stirring my heart like no other priest, shaman, or commander.

"I think it is worth giving her dream a chance," he replied. “Very well, Princess Edelgard will lead the Black Eagles.”

Chapter End Notes

thanks again to @alchworks for beta reading
Interviews II

Chapter Notes

IMPORTANT

This chapter is written from Lysithea's first-person perspective instead of Byleth's. We'll be seeing more chapters later on from her perspective, and there will likely be more characters who get first-person chapters as well. From this point forward, the notes at the beginning of the chapter will indicate whose perspective the chapter is written from, unless the chapter is an interlude like Travelers (which there will be more of) that will be written from one or more third-person perspectives.

I would also like to note that the names of Byleth's mother and Claude's grandfather have been retconned to match the names revealed in the Cindered Shadows DLC.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

6th of Great Tree Moon

“What,” Lorenz asked, “do you think you’re doing here?”

Lorenz and I had been enjoying some tea in the common room when a young man of unusual complexion entered, trailed by a bespectacled boy and a hulking man. They looked like they’d just gone to get their uniforms, since the large one was carrying a big bundle of black and gold outfits under one enormous arm.

“Oh,” the leading youth apologized, “I’m sorry, I thought this was the Golden Deer dorm. There’s just so much yellow around, and there was the Leicester flag hanging outside, and a professor assigned us rooms here—my mistake! I must have walked into the Blue Lions dorm on accident!”

The young man’s skin was tan, and his dark brown hair began to curl where it was long. His eyebrows were tall, and yet the hairs were sparse enough in parts that skin could be seen between them, even from ten feet away. I’d never seen someone who looked like this, but it matched the descriptions I’d read of Almyran people. His slight accent led me to believe he had spent quite some time in Fódlan, but that Fódlanian wasn’t his first language.

“Don’t get smart with me!” Lorenz snarled. “What’s an Almyran like you doing here? Didn’t we build this school to help keep your kind out of Fódlan?” His shouting attracted the attention of Marianne and Hilda, who peeked their heads out of Hilda’s room to see the commotion.

“Oh, I’m a student here. I know, I know, I’d rather I didn’t have to attend either, but my gramps said so, and here I am!” he replied, looking exasperated. “But where are my manners?” he asked, approaching with a hand extended. “The name’s Claude von Riegan.”

Claude von Riegan? Why did Duke Riegan adopt an Almyran heir? Surely this was a prank—‘Claude’ seemed to be having far too much fun taunting Lorenz.

The Gloucester heir fired a furious scowl at the Almyran. Just as he was opening his mouth to respond, Claude turned his palm upward, manifesting the Crest of Riegan above it in green arcane
light.

It wasn’t a prank—this was a Riegan. But how? Duke Oswald von Riegan had two children—he must be “gramps.” Did his son Godfrey have a dalliance with an Almyran whore before he died, or was Claude the spawn of Godfrey’s elder sister, who’d vanished nearly two decades past?

“I-impossible! How can an Almyran have the Crest of Riegan? Crests are the blessings of the Goddess on her chosen people—we nobles of Fódlan! What sorcerous trickery are you employing?!” Lorenz shouted.

“I’m flattered you think I’m so accomplished a mage I can fake a Crest manifestation, but sadly, I’m just a beginner at magic who happens to have a Minor Crest of Riegan,” Claude replied with a frown. “As for how I got the Crest, well, I assume it was passed down from my mother, since she has it, too. Her name’s Tiana, maybe you’ve heard of her?”

A mysterious disappearance eighteen years ago… an Almyran son of Academy age… Tiana had eloped, hadn’t she? I’d read that she’d been disinherited after her disappearance, but that had been before Godfrey died, childless, in 1177. Her son would be the most legitimate blood successor to House Riegan, even if he did have Almyran blood, as long as he inherited her Crest.

Few things matter to nobles more than maintaining Crest-bearing lineage.

I observed as Lorenz scrunched his brow in thought, his reasoning catching up to mine. I wasn’t about to jump into the conversation: better that I see how the sons of the Alliance’s two most powerful Houses interacted. Riegan and Gloucester had been friendly rivals since before the founding of the Alliance, but at some point, the gentleness faded from that rivalry, and they began to genuinely compete for dominance of the Alliance’s affairs.

“I will accept that you are whom you claim to be. However, my point about the purpose of the Officers’ Academy still stands. I, Lorenz Hellman Gloucester, refuse to accept that you have a place here,” Lorenz proclaimed with a dramatic gesture.

“Aw, that’s too bad, but don’t be ashamed if you have to withdraw because you can’t handle my presence,” Claude said, his face displaying the utmost pity for Lorenz’s dire situation. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, my friends and I have to prepare for tomorrow’s interviews,” he said, switching to a smile in a heartbeat and breaking off the conversation.

Lorenz was furious. “That scum! He thinks he can just waltz right on into our lands like he owns them! Lady Lysithea, I’m sure we can get the headmaster to disallow this if enough of us complain about feeling unsafe living with a heathen! I’ll talk to the others and get them on board, so we can rid our dorm of that Almyran menace!”

I took one more sip of my tea. “No, thank you.”

“What?” he sputtered.

“Apologies, Lord Lorenz, as I have nothing personal against you. I simply believe Lord Claude will prove to be a more valuable ally than yourself,” I answered.

“So, you do not believe my cause is righteous?” he asked.

Righteous? What a joke. I was well aware that House Gloucester had been cozying up to the Empire ever since Lorenz’s father became the duke. For all that the Almyrans were heathens and warmongers, I couldn’t spare an ounce of hatred for one half-Almyran kid, not when the spawn of monsters more dreadful walked the grounds.
“Righteousness has nothing to do with it. Were you ever once in control of that conversation you just had? Mark my words, you may get the others to side with you at first, but Lord Claude will win them over given time,” I explained. “When you both meet the headmaster, I expect the results will be the same.”

Lorenz growled, but said no more to me. He marched away in indignation, leaving me to clean up the tea set.

7th of Great Tree Moon

Classes hadn’t even started yet, and already the Golden Deer were divided into two distinct factions, each with their own leader. One faction consisted of Claude von Riegan and the Derdriu merchants’ sons who had traveled with him. The other faction was led by Lorenz Hellman Gloucester, and its aim was to convince the faculty to oust Claude. Joining Lorenz were Leonie, his own commoner traveling companion; Hilda, whose family’s territory was on the border with Almyra; and Marianne, who did whatever Hilda asked of her.

I was impressed with Claude’s comportment—he’d made Lorenz look like a buffoon in their exchange yesterday. I would need him to stick around to make him my ally, so I needed to whittle down Lorenz’s team before the interviews.

To this end, I got ready as early as possible and waited around the common room. My efforts paid off when I was able to catch Hilda crossing the hall to visit Marianne. She was fully dressed, her hair was done, and her makeup was perfect. She didn’t look any less stunning in the Academy black and gold than she had in the green frock I’d first met her in.

“Hold on a moment,” I called out to her. “I want to talk to you and Lady Marianne about something.”

She looked at me curiously.

“Oh… but let me wake Marianne up, first. She’s a pretty heavy sleeper, so she won’t have gotten up at first bell.”

Soon, I was sitting on the room’s bed while Hilda stood behind Marianne, braiding her hair while she sat quietly in her desk chair. Although Hilda had said Marianne was a heavy sleeper, her eyes were adorned with dark circles, like she hadn’t been getting enough. I watched carefully as Hilda’s dainty, but nimble fingers wove patterns into Marianne’s beautiful blue hair.

“So, what did you want to talk about? Feeling nervous about the interviews?” Hilda asked, reminding me that I hadn’t come here just to admire the two girls’ looks.

“I wanted to talk about Lord Lorenz’s plan to evict Lord Claude. Can I convince you not to go through with it?” I asked.

“Huh, aren’t you afraid of him? Living near the Throat, I’ve seen plenty of knights come back from Fódlan’s Locket with pretty horrible wounds… and then there are the ones who didn’t come back. The Almyrans are pretty bloodthirsty; they start fights all the time even though they never get anything out of it—just dead soldiers,” Hilda explained.

“The Church wouldn’t let him get away with hurting another student. You overheard him talking to Lord Lorenz, correct? He’s obviously too smart to try anything with the Knights of Seiros
around, even if he did want us dead, which is unlikely. I suspect he’s here for the same reasons most other nobles are—he wants to make allies. He’ll probably be trying his hardest to befriend anyone who doesn’t immediately reject him because of his race,” I explained. “I think he would make a much better ally than Lord Lorenz would, at the very least.”

“Huh, I guess you’re right. When I think about it, he doesn’t seem very much like the stories I’ve heard about Almyrans. The way the knights tell it, Almyrans are more like monsters in human skin than jokers like him. What do you think, Marianne?” Hilda asked.

“He’s not,” Marianne answered. Her voice was weak.

“Huh?” Hilda asked again.

“He’s not a monster,” Marianne clarified. “Claude.”

Hilda hesitated for a moment, trying to puzzle Marianne’s reasoning.

“Well, if Marianne says so, who am I to disagree? Fine, I won’t complain to the headmaster about him,” Hilda said. “There you go, Marianne! All done! Want me to do yours, too, Lysithea? I know a style that’ll look so adorable on you!”

“No thank you, Lady Hilda, and I haven’t given you permission to drop my title,” I declined.

“Oh, don’t be so stiff! It’ll be way more fun if we don’t have to say ‘Lord this’ and ‘Lady that’ all the time,” Hilda argued. “What do you think, Marianne?”

“It’s not nice to be rude,” Marianne answered. She abruptly stood up. “I’m hungry, so let’s go.”

Hilda giggled. “Yeah, let’s not be rude. Later, Lady Lys!” she said.

“Actually, I’ve not eaten either, so I will join you. And fine, you can drop the ‘Lady,’ just don’t call me ‘Lys,’” I conceded.

“Do you know who that is?” I asked Hilda, pointing to another girl in the dining hall with my same white hair and constricted irises—another victim of Blood Condensation.

She was eating with her own group of three others. One was a tall man who looked a bit older than the other students thanks to some unfortunate facial features. Another was a pretty young woman who’d gone the extra mile to look sexy in her uniform. Her long, wavy brown hair cascaded beautifully from under her cap, flowing past gorgeous green eyes, tasteful earrings and a choker, and an attractive face before coming to rest by the cleavage revealed by the open collar of her uniform. Lastly, there was a short, purple-haired girl who looked like she was afraid someone was about to steal her food.

“No, but I’ve seen her around the monastery. The tall guy is always with her. Do you? You almost look like you could be related,” Hilda answered.

“I’m afraid not,” I replied. I didn’t think there would be another like me at the monastery—and this one was a student! “Not many people look like this, though. I’m tempted to go talk to her, but I’d hate to interrupt her breakfast conversation. I’m sure I’ll get the opportunity later.”

“Don’t be such a scaredy-cat! Do you need big sister Hilda to go with you?” Hilda asked.
“Please don’t patronize me just because I’m younger than you,” I scolded her. “I was thinking strategically. I want to make the best impression possible.”

“Oh? Do you have a crush on her or something?”

“Wha—No, I was just curious, alright?!” I snapped. The white-haired one was far from the most attractive girl at either of our tables.

“Don’t be mean, Hilda,” Marianne chided.

“Sorry, sorry, I shouldn’t tease. But if you ever do have a crush on someone, come to me right away— I’ll give you a makeover that’ll make you irresistible,” Hilda promised.

“I will try to keep that in mind,” I said, collecting myself. Truthfully, I had more important things to think about than Hilda doing my hair or involving myself in a school-time fling, especially now that I knew Blood Condensation was still being practiced.

It took some convincing, but Hilda was willing to head straight to the classroom where we’d be waiting for our interviews. Since Hilda and Marianne had traveled to the monastery all the way from Goneril territory together, the quiet Marianne seemed to have imprinted on Hilda and would follow her lead on everything, from what I’d seen.

“We’re the first ones here! I guess we can talk in peace for a bit. So, what kind of boys or girls do you like?” Hilda asked, after we’d grabbed some seats in the corner.

She wasn’t going to let me focus on my ambitions, was she? I almost groaned, but I reminded myself that she had to have her own reasons for coming here. She was trying to make allies as well, and girl talk is probably just the method she understands for doing that.

“You first,” I insisted.

“Okay…well, I like boys, and I like them strong, handsome, and willing to do whatever I say! Your turn,” Hilda said.

Surprisingly forthcoming, but I guess she wouldn’t be the sort to ask unless she was willing to share. It was such an uninteresting answer that I realized I needn't hide my own preferences—odds were, she wouldn’t care either… I hoped.

“I’m interested in mature women,” I confessed.

“Oh, so like Professor Nevrand? Combat class will be fun for you, huh?” Hilda inquired with a smug grin.

I could feel my face heating up as I remembered the day I arrived at the monastery. When Professor Nevrand had shown up in the infirmary to give me my room assignment, I’d been so shocked by how beautiful she was that I’d hidden under the covers and pretended to be sicker so I didn’t have to show her my blushing face.

I was overcome by the sinking feeling that I’d made a horrible mistake in opening up to Hilda, and that she’d be teasing me for the rest of the year.

“What about you, Marriane?” I attempted to change the subject before Hilda started asking about
other women I might be attracted to. Better to let her have this victory than deny anything and let her take the conversation to places that could only get more awkward.

“Me? Um... I’d rather not say,” Marianne said, turning away and blushing. Why hadn’t I just done that?!


“I didn’t ask,” Marianne insisted.

“It seems we must accept we’ve simply been outplayed,” I admitted, nodding my respect to Marianne while Hilda giggled at our shared defeat.

I hoped we could move on from this subject, as the next group of students then began to enter: it was the group we’d seen at breakfast. To my surprise, the white-haired girl led her squad straight to where we were sitting.

“Greetings, I am Princess Edelgard von Hresvelg, and with me are Lord Hubert von Vestra,” the tall man, “Lady Bernadetta von Varley,” the timid, purple-haired girl, “and Miss Dorothea Arnault,” the hot one. “Feel free to dispense with titles when you are addressing us, as we’ve all agreed that we’d rather be casual amongst classmates.” Her lilac eyes were piercing in their intensity as she examined me, her face unreadable.

So, this was what I’d been made to suffer for? The product of the Insurrection’s machinations? How much had the Blood Condensation been different for her? Did she lament the deaths of her siblings, did she hate them for burning up her family’s lives? Or was she thankful for the results, and for moving up nine places in succession? I didn’t see a scrap of pity or sorrow in her gaze. Instead, she seemed to be taking my measure, just as I was taking hers, watching my face for any emotions it might betray.

I had my suspicions that she might be more like me, that she too had been a mere test subject as they worked to improve Blood Condensation’s results. I had no doubts that whatever other costs, the Insurrection would turn Blood Condensation upon their own children if they were able to find a way to preserve the subjects’ fertility. Regardless, I knew I couldn’t trust someone with a Vestra at their side. I had to assume she was an enemy.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Lady Lysithea von Cordelia, and with me are Lady Hilda Valentine Goneril and Lady Marianne von Edmund. I believe I speak for all of us when I say that you may address us casually as well, yes?” I asked, looking to my fellow Deer, who nodded their assent. No need to reveal my animosity if I could not act upon it.

“Forgive my frankness, but I know that your family has suffered terrible losses at the hands of the Empire, Lysithea,” Edelgard said. “I know it may seem as though I’m spouting empty words, but it’s my hope that during my reign, Adrestia might become a place where such cruelty is no longer permitted.”

Was this an olive branch?

“House Cordelia infringed upon Adrestian sovereignty; it was natural to expect a military response,” I replied.

“Indeed, but I am referring to the events that followed,” she replied, looking right into my eyes. Now, she was letting me see her sorrow. “While I had no ability to prevent such a tragedy, I still feel at least partially responsible. Should you ever require aid, I am willing to lend you whatever
“And what do Vestra and Varley think of this?” I asked. A promise of aid from House Hresvelg was of no use if the Insurrection’s houses were exempt allies.

“I am but Lady Edelgard’s humble servant,” Hubert responded, bowing. “You need not be concerned about either of your words being passed to that wretch I call a father.”

Was that bloodlust I saw in those narrow eyes? It had been an easy assumption that Edelgard was in Vestra’s pocket, but their behavior suggested the princess had managed to turn the Vestra heir from his own House’s allegiance. If the Imperial Princess and other heirs were opposed to the Insurrection’s practices, that might make my task much easier.

“I’m never speaking to Father ever again, Goddess help me,” pledged Bernadetta with a fist over her heart.

The poor girl tried to look fierce, but she was trembling. Dorothea gave her an encouraging pat on the shoulder—shame I wasn’t pathetic enough for her to comfort me like that. House Varley’s heir hadn’t been among the six students announced by the Empire last year, and neither had the commoner Dorothea.

A couple of more students entered—likely Black Eagles, since they waved to Edlegard’s group. I wondered which of the Insurrection’s houses the two boys belonged to, and if they too held some sort of resentment for their parents? Edelgard’s father had lost control of the Empire when the other Houses betrayed him; perhaps Edelgard meant to take it back by winning the hearts of the next generation.

“It might be presumptuous of me, but I believe we might build a flourishing friendship, should you desire it,” Edelgard said. “For now, though, I will leave you to your house as I attend to mine.” The princess’s group moved to join the other Eagles across the room.

“Whoa, you’re already doing hardcore politicking before classes even start! Sorry I underestimated you, Lysithea!” Hilda exclaimed.

“Why did you think I bothered you so early in the morning?” I asked.

“You mean it wasn’t because I’m so pretty you just had to talk to me?!” Hilda asked, looking shocked.

“No! Just because you’re a little older and you have big boobs doesn’t mean you’re my type! You’re a bratty little sister and you know it!” I scolded her.

“Guilty!” Hilda giggled.

Surprisingly, Marianne joined in on the giggling. My heart skipped a beat as I saw her smile for the first time. True, Hilda’s personality was a bit childish, but she was really pretty—and Marianne might surpass Hilda if she could match Hilda’s skill with makeup. Oh Goddess, I wasn’t sure if I should be dreading the day Hilda decided to doll Marianne up or look forward to it.

“Hey, why are you blushing? You’d better not be having impure thoughts about my Marianne!” Hilda chided.

“Your Marianne?” the girl in question asked, reverting to her typical dreariness. “Do I belong to you now?”
“Yes! We spent forty days and forty nights on the road together! That makes us road sisters!” Hilda declared.

The next group of students soon entered the classroom—they looked to be all eight of the Blue Lions. They claimed a group of seats next to each other, but then one of them—a young man of blonde hair and blue eyes, moved to approach the Black Eagles. He was followed by a tall man with dark skin and silver hair—traits I had read marked ethnic Duscans.

Edelgard and Hubert stood up to meet him. “I have got to hear this,” I whispered to my fellow Deer, moving closer so I could listen to what the Eagles and Lions had to say to one another.

“It’s been years, El,” the blonde Lion said. “I see you’ve kept the dagger.”

“I’d like to say it’s served me well,” Edelgard responded, hand brushing over the pommel, “but, as a dagger, it hasn’t been put to much good use. Still, I’ve valued it as a memento.”

“Your hair, your eyes… what happened?” the Lion asked.

Edelgard explained, “In a better world, I’d have been able to stay in the Kingdom and be your bride. I’m more powerful in this world, but no freer. These changes are the price of that power, or part of it, anyway.

“The inbreeding of the imperial family, which had allowed us to consolidate power for so long, was not without consequence. My siblings and I… our health started deteriorating, suddenly and rapidly. The magic that could treat us was new, and not gentle. I alone survived, and not unscathed.”

So, that was the cover story Edelgard was using; I would have to match mine in order to avoid drawing attention through contradiction. I knew that Edelgard had once been engaged to the crown prince of Faerghus—this must be him, Prince Dimitri.

“That’s terrible,” Dimitri said. “My condolences.”

“I appreciate the sentiments. I’d like to offer mine in kind for your parents,” Edelgard reciprocated.

“Thank you. There are many days when I wish we could return to that time, before we were torn apart and our families shattered. In truth, I already considered you part of mine, by the time you departed. However, as for your feelings on the matter…” Dimitri began.

“No, I was never in love with you. You were a total wimp, and I hated that I was engaged to such a crybaby. Still, you were a friend when I needed one, so thank you,” Edelgard replied.

She turned to look at the Duscan man. “I see you haven’t let hate cloud your heart, after the Tragedy. We might not live in that better world, but we’re trying our hardest to improve this one, aren’t we?”

“I suppose so,” Dimitri said with a chuckle. “This is Dedue, my retainer. I took him into my service after the Tragedy. He’s rather taciturn, but once you get to know him, you’ll see he’s a kind and good-natured young man.”

Dimitri’s Duscan companion was so large and muscular he resembled a bull stuffed into a uniform. The prince’s retainer was currently engaged in a staring match with Hubert.

“And your retainer, he would be…?” Dimitri asked.
“Hubert von Vestra, Your Highness,” Hubert answered, breaking off the staring match to bow to the prince. “I promise you that though my father may have forgotten his oath to the Imperial Throne, my loyalty belongs wholly to Lady Edelgard.”

If Dedue’s sized likened him to a bull, then Hubert’s cold gaze gave him the impression of serpent. Whether he was an enemy or a potential ally, I could tell he was a dangerous man.

“Hubert has a bit of a sarcastic streak, but otherwise, he’s an astute and reasonable person. There’s no one I trust more,” Edelgard praised him.

The conversation was then interrupted by the entrance of Claude and his lackeys. The half-Almyran lordling took one quick look around the room before bursting into a jovial greeting.

“Prince! Princess! What a pleasure it is to meet both of you! I am Lord Claude von Riegan, Almyran expatriate, Riegan heir, master archer, and handsomest man in the Alliance. Feel free to start fighting over my affection,” he said with a sweep of his hand.

Edelgard was the first to reply. “So, you’re the mysterious Lord Claude. I heard you caused quite the commotion when you arrived—what a shame that I missed the confrontation.”

“My reputation precedes me! I hope the dramatic reveal was worth the wait—gramps and I went to great lengths to conceal my heritage. It’s no fun if everyone thinks they know you without having met you, right? But don’t worry, Princess, you’ll have plenty of opportunity to get to know the real me over the next two years,” Claude responded. His smile was difficult to read; I couldn’t tell if it was smug, teasing, friendly, or entirely false.

“I certainly hope so,” Dimitri added. “It’s not often that we in Faerghus have the opportunity to meet an Almyran. If anyone tries to mistreat you because of your heritage, you need only ask, and I will lend my aid.”

“Whoa, a pledge to protect already? You’ll need to up the ante, Princess, or Prince Charming here is going to sweep my heart away with his noble chivalry,” Claude warned.

“Oh? Aren’t you a master archer? Can’t you take care of yourself?” Edelgard asked.

“Yeah, but if I solved everything on my own, I’d be letting my dashing looks go to waste! Come on Princess, there’s no need to hold back,” he enticed her.

“It’s a bold assumption that your affection is worth winning, Lord Claude,” Hubert interjected. “Lady Edelgard could easily steal it should you prove so desirable.”

“You must be the Lord Vestra,” Claude replied. “May I consider you stolen?”

Hubert chuckled. “I suppose so.”

“Well, Lord Vestra, I’ll be sure to keep your words in mind. In the meanwhile, I might need to call on your assistance right away, Dimitri. Being bordered with Almyra as the Alliance is, over half of the Golden Deer house has already turned against me, and—”

“You needn’t worry about that,” I interrupted. “I’ve convinced Lady Hilda and Lady Marianne to rescind their hostility. You’re welcome.”

“I didn’t think you had a sister, Princess. Who’s this?” Claude asked.

“My name is Lady Lysithea von Cordelia, and we’re not related. Rather than trying to butter up
the other nations’ leaders, don’t you think you should be paying more attention to your allies within the Alliance?” I reprimanded him.

“Hey now, I’m supposed to be the one getting buttered up here! But thanks—that just leaves Lorenz and one other who wants me gone,” Claude commented.

“I doubt the headmaster will act based on a minority within the house complaining. Besides, you’re going to win the position of House Leader, aren’t you? Then, they’ll just have to accept that you’re a part of the Golden Deer,” I stated.

“Hey, I never said I was going to be House Leader! What gave you that idea?” Claude complained.

“It’s only logical. Things would become difficult for you if the Gloucester heir, a sure candidate for the position, were awarded the title. Of course, having met you, I’m sure you just applied because you love the attention,” I accused him.

“Damn, you’ve got me pegged. What kind of underground children’s gambling ring were you raised in?” Claude teased.

Could he take anything seriously? While his joking affectation had been effective in deflecting Lorenz’s bigotry, it would get annoying if he tried to make light of everything.

“I’ve also applied for the position of House Leader for the Black Eagles,” Edelgard interrupted. “I trust you’ve done the same for the Blue Lions, Dimitri?”

“That’s correct. I hope it’s the three of us who win the titles—when the inter-house competitions come around, I think you’ll be worthy opponents,” he answered, smiling. I wasn’t into boys, but I found his smile much more endearing than Claude’s.

The last five students entered the room as a group: Lorenz, Leonie, Flayn, and the remaining two Black Eagles, whom I hadn’t yet been introduced to. One was a red-haired young man, the other a girl with tanned skin—process of elimination indicated she was the Princess of Brigid.

“Edelgard! I hope you are prepared to lose the position of House Leader to yours truly!” the male Eagle boasted.

“Take it if you can,” Edelgard dared him, while Hubert merely sneered his way. He and the Eagles who’d entered with him moved to join the sitting members of the house.

Lorenz said nothing, only glaring at Claude. Leonie instead gave Claude a curious glance, but she followed Lorenz over to next to Hilda and Marianne.

“So, Lord Claude, I’ve yet to be properly introduced to the men who traveled with you. Might I have your names, gentlemen?” Lysithea asked.

“I’m Ignatz, and this is Raphael,” the one with glasses said. “We’re going to become knights in House Riegan’s service after graduation.”

“You can count on me for any heavy lifting!” Raphael bragged, flexing.

Then, the professors entered the room, and all chatter ceased. It was time for the interviews to begin.
Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to @alchworks for beta reading
Interviews III

Chapter Notes

Perspective: Byleth

7th of Great Tree Moon, 1180IY

“My name is Raphael Kirsten. I was studying for the Derdriu Academy of Commerce before deciding to come to the Officers’ Academy instead. My parents were merchants, but they passed away three years ago. My goal is to become a knight of House Riegan and provide for my younger sister’s education. I’ve been training nonstop to achieve that goal! Look at this!” he said, grinning and rolling up the sleeve of his shirt to better display the flexing of his sizable bicep.

The blonde seventeen-year-old was among the largest men I’d seen: over six feet tall and at least 250 pounds. He wasn’t wearing the jacket of his uniform, and his shirt was stretched tightly over his broad chest. It looked as though one of his buttons might snap off at any moment. He carried a long knife as a weapon.

“Your physical condition is most excellent, Mr. Kirsten,” complimented Seteth, “but I must ask, whatever happened to the jacket of your uniform?”

“Right, well, either I got the measurements wrong when I sent them with my application, or I got a lot bigger in the last year,” he replied. “I couldn’t even put it on, so I left it at the tailor’s. They should have it fixed by the time classes start, though.”

“That will have to do. Let us discuss the electives you have chosen: why have you selected Flight and Unarmed Combat?” Seteth asked.

“Well, I picked Unarmed Combat because the other subjects would need a lot of reading. I’d rather get out and train than sit in my room reading all day. I picked Flight because… I forgot, actually. But it seemed like a good idea when I discussed it with my sister. She’s much smarter than I am, so she was able to convince me pretty easily!” he answered with a laugh. The things he said seemed to indicate lack of intelligence on his part, rather than any particular gift of his sister’s.

“How old is your sister?” I asked.

“She’s twelve, and a real genius. She has no trouble going through big books like it’s nothing. She’s torn between going to school in the Kingdom or the Empire. Apparently, their capitals have the best magic schools in Fódlan,” he answered, laughing again.

“Greetings, professors. My name is Princess Petra Macneary of Brigid. In my homeland, I was schooled in our traditional ways, whereas most of my time in Fódlan has been spent studying the language—I did not speak it at all three years ago. As for describing myself… forgive me, I don’t think I have the words to do it justice, in this tongue.”
The fifteen-year-old princess had a determined look on her face. She kept one hand on the pommel of her longsword.

“What does the Brigidese way of schooling entail?” Seteth asked.

“Many things. Swordplay, hunting, reading and writing our language, the ways of the spirits, the history of the land, and more,” she answered.

“And what is your purpose for studying at the Officers’ Academy?” Seteth asked.

“My attendance is part of the hospitality I am owed as a ‘guest’ of the Empire. As for what I plan to make of the opportunity: someday I’d like to return to Brigid with what I learn here to improve Brigid’s military. The Brigid and Dagda War was not a conflict Brigid should have participated in, but we were unable to resist Dagda’s influence because of our army’s powerlessness,” she explained.

Seteth frowned. “I do not want to set your expectations too high, Princess Petra. An education at the Officers’ Academy is certain to help you as a leader, but it cannot drastically change the military situation of your country.”

“Regardless, I must make whatever improvements I can,” she replied.

“Indeed. You have chosen Flight and History as your electives. Why these?”

“Fódlan’s countries are strong, compared to Brigid. History will help me understand how they came to be strong, so I can use that knowledge to strengthen Brigid. As for Flight, I hope learning about flying mounts will be the first step towards being able to make a Brigidese air force.”

“Perhaps,” Seteth said. “I look forward to teaching you, then. Do you have any questions for us before we invite the next student in?”

“No, Headmaster Seteth.”

It was time to implement my plan to obtain the Black Eagles house.

“Petra, would you prefer it if you could receive counsel in your native language?” I asked.

She considered this. “On certain matters, I can see it being helpful. I think it is important that my classes on Fódlanian knowledge are taught in Fódlanian, though.”

Not as enthusiastic a response as I’d hoped, but it might be enough to get me the house.

“That’s all I have to ask, thank you,” I said.

Once Petra had left to fetch the next student, I told the other professors, “I was actually raised in Brigid and am fluent in Brigidese. I think I’ll bid for the Black Eagles house so I can counsel Petra in her own tongue. Hostaged to a foreign land at a young age, as she was, I think she’d appreciate the familiarity.”

“You were raised in Brigid? That’s got to be an interesting story,” Manuela commented.

“I’d prefer not to go into detail. Suffice it to say that I’m technically a deserter from the army of Brigid,” I answered. There was also a chance I was still a wanted criminal in the Empire for escaping as a prisoner of war, but it might hurt my case to mention that.

“And yet you would seek to advise their princess?” Seteth asked, somewhat incredulously.
“Sure. It’s not like she can arrest me.”

“I’m a graduate of the Royal School of Sorcery. About myself… well, I find fulfillment in taking care of others.”

*Martritz, Mercedes von*, age twenty-two, was the only first-year student older than me. Her long, blonde hair was tied with a bow that matched her blue eyes. Like a few of the other Blue Lions, she seemed very reserved in talking about herself. Her speech was slow and gentle, with a mellow Southern Kingdom accent similar to Ashe’s.

“Your friend Lady Annette made a comment to the effect that you had been forced to attend by a parent. Is this correct, Miss von Martritz?” Seteth asked.

“Yes,” she admitted. “My step-father wants me to marry into nobility, you see. I’ve refused all his previous arrangements based on the character of the groom, so now he’s decided I need to find a suitable husband on my own terms, before I graduate. After that, he won’t hear any further refusals. It’s a shame to use your school just for matchmaking, so I apologize.”

“There is no need to apologize, Miss von Martritz, but neither can we assist you in such an endeavor. If you can maintain adequate performance in your classes, and you do not act in a way that brings shame to the Church or Academy, we will not have to obstruct your path,” Seteth explained.

“Thank you,” she said with a nod.

“I am Prince Dimitri’s loyal retainer. He insists that I study here with him. Before entering His Highness’s service, I was studying to be a blacksmith, like my father. Since then, I’ve mainly focused on learning to fight.”

*Molinaro, Dedue*, age eighteen, was the last of the Blue Lions. The green-eyed Duscan man had dark skin, neatly trimmed silver hair tied back into a short ponytail, and a longsword at his belt. He was a good four inches taller than Raphael and nearly as broad, but he hadn’t suffered the same struggles with his uniform. A golden ornament dangled from his left ear.

“In that vein of thought, Mr. Molinaro, Prince Dimitri informed us you had merely selected your electives to match his. For your interest in becoming a better fighter, you may find it preferable to pursue Unarmed Combat instead of History,” Seteth suggested.

“Dimitri plans to take Unarmed Combat in his second year. I would prefer to wait until then to take it. Fódlanian History is not a bad thing to learn, either,” Dedue replied.

“Wait, Byleth Eisner? Fancy meeting you here! Well, I suppose I have to call you ‘Professor Eisner’ now, huh? What’s Commander Jeralt doing that’s got you here?”

*Pinelli, Leonie* was a girl I’d met before working as a mercenary in the Alliance two years ago. At the behest of House Gloucester, we’d eliminated some poachers who had been hunting in a forest
without the Duke’s permission. Leonie’s village had been next to the forest, so we’d spent some time there after completing the job. She’d latched onto Father a bit and gotten him to teach her the basics of fighting.

“Father’s returned to his old post in the Knights. I’m surprised to see you as well—isn’t this school rather expensive?” I asked.

“You’d better believe it! I’m gonna be paying it off for years…” Leonie whined.

Seteth cleared his throat.

“Oh, right. Sorry, Headmaster,” she apologized for getting sidetracked with an embarrassed grin.

Leonie was nineteen years old with short, red hair and orange eyes. She wore a long dagger at her belt and an archery glove over her right hand. Though her home wasn’t too far from Lorenz’s, his posh accent more resembled a combination of Derdriu and Eastern Empire accents, whereas Leonie’s speech was infused with more of a country twang.

“My name’s Leonie Pinelli, for the rest of y’all. I was raised to be a hunter back in my home village of Sauin in Gloucester County, but when Jeralt’s Mercenaries came to take care of some poachers that were stealing our game, I got inspired to follow a different path. I’ve figured out joining the Knights of Seiros will be my path to becoming an elite soldier,” she explained.

“While an education at the Officer’s Academy is not required to join the ranks of the Knights of Seiros, I am not aware of any cases where the Knights have declined a graduate from joining their ranks. Should you apply yourself to your studies, I am confident you will be able to succeed in realizing your goal,” Seteth replied.

“Sounds good,” Leonie agreed.

“On that subject, let us discuss the electives you have chosen. Why have you selected Riding and Unarmed Combat?” Seteth asked.

“Horseback riding’s real important for being a knight, innit? Plus, Unarmed Combat seems like a useful skill,” she answered.

“Very well. Do you have any more questions for us before we bring in the next student?”

“Um, yeah. Is it really okay to have that Almyran kid here? Lord Lorenz has been telling me all sorts of stuff about the scary shit they pull out in the East,” Leonie asked.

“You must understand that Lord Claude is a political rival to Lord Lorenz, and so it is in Lord Lorenz’s own interest to show Lord Claude in a negative light. Rest assured that even were Lord Claude a wicked man, he would be unable to harm his fellow students for fear of reprisal from the Knights of Seiros. Additionally, it would be our duty as servants of the Goddess to expel the wickedness from him, not expel him from the premises,” Seteth explained. “As for the question of his character, we have no more reason to believe Lord Claude is wicked than we would any other student. The Almyran on our staff has proven only to be good-hearted and reliable, so we cannot discriminate against a student based on similar heritage.”

“Oh, that makes sense,” Leonie conceded.
“Let’s see... about me? Let’s not hurry to end the mystery—I’d prefer if you get to know me little by little over the next couple of years. As for my education, I think you’ll find it’s as good as any other noble’s.”

*Riegan, Claude von,* was a seventeen-year-old with tan skin befitting his Almyran heritage. His dark hair was short on his left side, revealing a small earring, and lengthened towards the right, where it was bound into a single braid capped with an ornament. The collar of his jacket was worn open with a saber at his belt. He smiled confidently, but the expression didn’t reach his green eyes, which flitted about, scanning us.

“Lord Claude, we are taking valuable time out of days to conduct these interviews. Please do not be cagey about answering our questions,” Seteth reprimanded him.

“Well, since you’re dying to know, I guess I can give you the basics. My favorite things are feasts, long rides, and hitting a bullseye at the archery range. Education-wise, I’m a pretty voracious learner. I couldn’t hold back from buffing up on all sorts of military topics as soon as I learned I’d be attending,” Claude shared. His smile didn’t drop, even during Seteth’s scolding.

“Much better. Next, I would like to ask your reason for attending.”

“Voracious learner, remember? I don’t need a better reason than that, do I?” Claude asked.

“No, that is a satisfactory answer. Next, let us discuss your choice of electives. Why have you selected Riding and History?”

“Learning Fódlanian History wasn’t easy growing up in Almyra—also, I have a feeling that’s what all the cool kids will be taking. As for Riding, well, I couldn’t pass up the chance to indulge in one of my favorite things,” Claude answered.

“Would it not better serve your ‘voracious’ appetite for learning to pursue a subject you are not already familiar with?” Seteth asked.

“Hmm... you’ve got a point there. I guess if I took anything other than Black Magic for my morning elective, I’d just be showing off. I’ll change to that, okay?”

“Certainly. Next, let’s discuss your application for House Leader of the Golden Deer. Why should you be selected for this role?”

“Well, my fellow Golden Deer have only ever known what Fódlan is like, from what I can tell. I think it would be to their advantage to experience an outsider’s perspective on the world. I’ve learned more from spending two years in Fódlan than I would have spending five years in Almyra, and it’s not because Fódlan’s teachers are better, or anything like that—it’s the difference in perspective that makes for an entire body of new understanding. You follow?” Claude asked.

“You make an interesting argument. Still, we will need time to deliberate before we make our final decision,” Seteth said as he had to Edelgard. “Do you have any questions for us before we invite in the next student?”

“A few, but I’d rather savor that curiosity than have them answered immediately,” Claude replied.

Once Claude had left the room, Seteth groaned. “Hmm... I believe he is far more suitable than Lord Lorenz, but his attitude... it is grating. I have met his sort of man before—it is the kind who refuses to follow, and I consider following to be an essential skill for a leader.”

“Essential enough that you’d ask another Deer to lead instead?” Manuela asked.
“No. I believe Claude will be suited well enough for the role, but I have my doubts as to how well the experience will serve him,” Seteth answered. “You may need to take a firm hand with him if you are his advisor, as he will doubtless test the limits of the authority we professors have over him.”

Varley, Bernadetta von, would be what sunk me.

She did not enter the room alone, but was escorted by Caspar, Dorothea, and Alois, the trio gently coaxing her to make her way to the chair where she would be interviewed.

The seventeen-year-old girl was short and slight with messy, purple hair and grey eyes. Once Caspar and Dorothea left the room, Alois remained by her side, giving her one hand to hold onto while her gaze nervously darted about the room.

Seteth opened the interview with his usual round of introductions followed by the instruction, “Tell us about yourself, and your education thus far.” The longer he spoke, the jitterier the girl seemed to get.

She looked around for a good minute trying to figure an answer to this question, before simply replying, “I want to go back to my room.”

Seteth glanced to Manuela, unsure of what to do. Manuela looked like she was about to take over before Bernadetta added, “That’s my about me. My education is that my father used to tie me to a chair and discipline my manners until they were perfect except they were never perfect so we kept going until I refused to ever come out of my room again and then I would stay in there all day writing and sewing and drawing until some strangers came and grabbed me and now I’m here. Next question.”

There was an uncomfortable silence as we all processed what she’d just said. Meanwhile Bernadetta took a deep breath, and started staring at the ground with a blank expression, determined to last until the end of the interview.

Seteth started to clear his throat. “Your father has treated, you horribly, Lady Bernadetta, but—”

“Yes! He has! And I’m never going back! Instead, I’m going to be the best student ever so I’ll never have to see him again! Next question!” she screamed, trembling greatly.

“Actually, I had intended to ask why you are attending school here. I take it that is your answer?” Seteth asked.

“Yes,” Bernadetta confirmed.

“After hearing what your father has done to you, I do not think I could send you back to him even if you were to drop out of the school, Lady Bernadetta. You need not force yourself to become ‘the best student ever,’ or even attend at all if you find it too difficult,” Seteth assured.

She shook her head furiously. “I’m going to do it, for my prosperous future. Don’t try to stop me!” she snapped at the headmaster.

He scratched an itch, seemingly made nervous by way of her mania. “If that is what you desire. However, your application did not include a selection of electives, so you will need to decide them now. For your morning elective, you may select from Black Magic I, Riding, Archery, and Flight.
For your afternoon elective, you may select from White Magic I, Unarmed Combat, and History.”

“Okay. I decided these already. In the morning, I’ll do Archery. In the afternoon, I’ll do History,” she responded.

“Excellent, those were all of the questions I had for you,” Seteth said, deciding it wasn’t worth it to question why she selected those electives. “Please escort her out, Professor Rangeld, and send the next student in after five minutes.”

Bernadetta didn’t seem to calm down even once the interview had ended, still shaking as Alois led her out.

I sighed. I knew what was coming next.

“Between Marianne and Bernadetta, I think it’s clear which one is in greater need of my assistance,” Manuela said.

I wasn’t getting the Black Eagles.

“As a person, I am but Princess Edelgard’s humble servant. That said, I do have a few personal interests: I find a game of wit and words quite entertaining, and the Dagdan drink known as ‘coffee’ pleases me beyond any other beverage. As for my education, I have studied to serve the imperial family since a young age, but please forgive that I must keep the limits of my capabilities a mystery.”

“I take that the purpose of your attendance is to increase your ability to serve her, then?” asked Seteth.

“Of course,” replied Hubert. He wore white gloves and a rapier with his uniform. Turning twenty in less than two weeks, he was the second-oldest of the students.

“I see you’ve selected her same electives, as well.”

“Greetings, my name is Ignatz Victor. As the second son of a merchant family, my parents determined that I am to become a knight. Luckily, Lord Claude von Riegan has offered to take me into the service of House Riegan once I graduate. That said, I don’t have much training in military matters as of now—my personal interest lies wholly with the arts.”

The short sixteen-year-old wore his olive-green hair in a bowl cut that was long in the back. Our final Golden Deer’s brown eyes were covered with a pair of eyeglasses. He’d accessorized with a pochette like Annette’s and a neckerchief like Ferdinand’s—no weapon.

“You have selected Archery and Unarmed Combat as your electives. Why these?”

“Actually, I want to change those. My physique isn’t such that I’ll be able to keep up with those physically intensive courses, I’ve realized. Instead, I’d like to take Black and White Magic both for my first year.”

“Do you have any training as a mage already?” Hanneman asked.
“No, it would be my first time studying magic,” Ignatz answered.

“Then, without a magic-enhancing Crest, you will find your mana base drained too quickly to keep up with both classes. I suggest you change only one of your previous selections to a magical course,” Hanneman offered.

“In that case, I’ll replace just Unarmed Combat for White Magic.”

Finally, we had reached the last student.

“Well, you’re already familiar with your beloved brother and the other professors, so I’ll skip the introductions. Tell us about yourself and your education thus far, for the sake of the other professors.”

Flayn, whose surname was listed simply as X on the roster, looked thrilled to be wearing her uniform. She’d done up her hair in a more elaborate style, with a couple of golden hair clips keeping it in place. Despite her purported age of eighteen, her five feet of height placed her shorter than the fifteen-year-old Petra.

“To describe myself, I would say that I am someone who is very fond of other people. Lively places like the monastery when school is in are my favorites, but I also love the ocean. To describe my education, I would say it has a lot of depth, but not much breadth.”

What kind of description of an education was that? The headmaster ignored how vague her answer was, pushing ahead with the next question.

“And what is your purpose for attending?” asked Seteth.

“Learning is also one of my favorite things,” Flayn replied.

“You have selected Flight and History as your electives. Why these?”

“History is something I know very little about, so I’m interested in gaining an understanding, there. As for Flight, I wish to be able to re-experience the joys of travel in the sky under my own power.”

“Now that the interviews have been concluded, it is time to receive your house assignments as faculty advisors. First, I am assigning the Black Eagle house to Professor Casagranda. Any objections?” Seteth asked.

There was no way I could challenge Seteth or Manuela on this—it simply would not make sense to assign a total novice like me to a student as deeply traumatized as Bernadetta. I wasn’t going to be able to keep my promise to Father. All of three of us shook our heads to concede to the headmaster’s decision.

I was disappointed to have failed Father’s request, but I also had to admit to myself that my own curiosity had driven some of my eagerness towards pursuing the task. It was small comfort knowing I couldn’t have done anything to change the outcome.
“As for the other two houses, I would like to hear your thoughts on the matter, Professors,” Seteth shared.

If I couldn’t investigate the Empire by befriending the Black Eagles students, then maybe my next best use of this opportunity was to try to get Lysithea to open up to me about the mystery of hers, Edelgard’s, and Kid’s conditions. However, that would mean I wasn’t going to take the Blue Lions like Gilbert had asked me to request. Between my own interests and Gilbert’s, I wasn’t sure which to prioritize here.

“I am fine with either of the remaining houses, Headmaster,” Hanneman said. “But I am leaning towards the Blue Lions. In the Golden Deer house, Lady Lysithea strikes me as a potential apprentice. However, we have two Royal School of Sorcery graduates in the Blue Lions, and neither of them House heirs. While Miss von Martritz acts as though she is under her father’s thumb, since she is of a common family, he has no legal control over her at age twenty-two that might prevent her from disentangling from his affairs.”

“Before we met Bernadetta, we were concerned with providing Marianne with high-quality counseling,” I noted. “I’m not saying I would be at a loss trying to help her the way I would for Bernadetta, but as the next-neediest student, should she not receive a more experienced counselor?”

At this point, I wasn’t angling for a particular house, just giving my honest opinion. Whatever the outcome was, I’d make something of it.

Seteth closed his eyes and thought for a moment.

“I have decided. To Professor von Essar I assign the Blue Lions, and to Professor Eisner I assign the Golden Deer.”

Chapter End Notes

thanks as always to @alchworks for beta reading
Perspective: Byleth

Heads up, NEXT WEEK will be the last of my weekly uploads (Chapter 14). Due to lifestyle changes, I'll be moving to updating every 2 weeks, so Chapter 15 will come out three weeks from now. I'll see if I can keep that schedule up, and if not, I'll switch to updating every three or four weeks if needed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

7th of Great Tree Moon, 1180IY

Seteth’s decision surprised me. I didn’t think I’d done anything to merit a switch from underestimation to overestimation.

“While Marianne did show more outward signs of emotional struggle, the attending members of the Blue Lions have personal connections to Faerghus’s national tragedies. For that reason, I would like to have a more experienced counselor serve that house,” Seteth explained. “Professor Eisner, I can only ask that you spare no effort in counseling to the best of your ability.”

“I’ll do my best,” I promised. I tried not to be nervous—I was only going to be talking to people, not fighting for my life on the battlefield.

We headed to the other classroom, where the students were assembled. I noticed that Bernadetta was missing, and that Dimitri was already wearing his blue House Leader cape. Seteth directed the Black Eagles and the Golden Deer to move to the other classrooms, then took the remaining House Leader capes from Professor Nevrand.

“I assume Lady von Varley has returned to her room?” Seteth asked.

“Yeah... she was really pushing herself to make it through the interview. She said she’ll make sure to come to classes, but she wants to stay where she feels safe whenever she can,” Alois explained. Judging by the look on his face, he seemed to feel as though it were his personal failure that Bernadetta felt afraid.

“I’ll have to visit her later,” Manuela said. “I think it will be best if I speak with her where she feels most comfortable.”

“Professor Rangeld, Professor Nevrand, good work today; you are dismissed. Professor von Essar, you may introduce yourself to the Blue Lions. Professor Eisner, Professor Casagranda, follow me,” Seteth directed. “Though I will not be supervising your first meeting with the students as their advisor, I must be the one who assigns the role of House Leader.”

The Black Eagles were in the near classroom, so we stopped there first. They seemed pretty downcast, likely a result of Bernadetta’s inability to stick with them after her interview.

“Greetings, Black Eagles. While Lady von Varley has escaped to her room, I want to let you know that I think no less of her for retreating there. Though she has suffered great abuse and been thrown
into an unfamiliar environment with no choice in the matter, she has shown incredible courage by demanding that she be educated despite how challenging she finds it. I have already witnessed some of you lending her your assistance, and I thank you for that. I must ask for your continued patience and kindness in dealing with her.

“Now, I would like to announce your House Leader. Our candidates were Lord Ferdinand von Aegir and Princess Edelgard von Hresvelg.

“Lord Ferdinand, though the vigor with which you pursue greatness is admirable, the swiftness with which you were willing to speak negatively of your peers is not. I believe you have let your competitive spirit become the better of your kindness. For that reason, I must award the position of House Leader to Princess Edelgard.”

Hubert smiled. Dorothea cheered. Petra and Caspar looked interested, while Linhardt did not. Flayn seemed disappointed, while Ferdinand himself threw his head back in frustration and pressed his hand to his forehead. Edelgard barely reacted, as though her victory were natural, expected, inevitable.

“Lord Ferdinand, you stand to learn much from Princess Edelgard’s example. I believe you to be quite talented, and I am sure you will grow into a fine leader. But first, you must understand how seeking the best in their subordinates is essential to a leader’s success.”

Seteth presented the red cape of the Black Eagles to Edelgard. The Black Eagles were so named for the armor of the Empire’s famed heavy infantry, blackened by linseed oil and paint for easy maintenance and a daunting semblance, but their iconography throughout the monastery tended to use the red of the Adrestian banner. In this case, it made sense to have a red cape to go with the predominantly black Academy uniform.

“Princess Edelgard, this cape is henceforth to be considered an essential part of your uniform. You are to wear it at all times you would be required to wear the rest of your uniform,” Seteth commanded.

Hubert helped her don the cape. Its brilliant color complemented the muted white and lilac of her hair and eyes.

“It suits you, Lady Edelgard,” Hubert complimented.

“Thank you, Hubert. And thank you as well, Headmaster, for providing me this opportunity. I hope to live up to—nay, exceed your standards,” Edelgard proclaimed.

“I look forward to it. Now, I would like to inform you that Professor Casagranda has been assigned as your faculty advisor. Professor Eisner and I will take our leave, so that you may have your first discussion together as a house.”

Seteth and I proceeded back to the classroom where the desks were still arranged in the formation we’d moved them into for the interviews. Here, the Golden Deer awaited. They were chattering when we entered, though Lorenz sat isolated from where the others clustered. It seemed clear that Lorenz had tried to turn the other Deer against Claude, but Claude’s charm had won out over Lorenz’s arguments.

“Greetings, Golden Deer. Seeing how Lord Lorenz sits alone, I will not waste any time in announcing that the position of House Leader will be awarded to Lord Claude von Riegan, despite Lord Lorenz also competing for the title. Listen close as I explain the reason for this decision,” Seteth began.
Unlike with the Black Eagles, there was little reaction to the announcement of the winner—instead, all eight of them focused on the headmaster’s explanation.

“Even should no other idea enter your head, it is of the utmost importance that you leave the monastery knowing of the strength that comes through unity and cooperation. To turn against your peers, to deem them rivals and enemies, destroys a bond that could instead be forged in that place, making both of you stronger.

“It is true that this school aims to prepare Fódlan’s leaders to protect the land and its people from foreign invaders, the Kingdom of Almyra included. However, we should also consider what a boon it would be if the Almyrans could be convinced to be allies instead of enemies. A Leicester Alliance that includes a half-Almyran duke could be the first step towards such a future.

“That, however, is not the reason I have selected Lord Claude to be the House Leader for the Golden Deer. I have selected Lord Claude because I believe he understands this virtue of cooperation, and the ways in which we can grow by befriending those who differ from us. If you have yet to join him in this understanding, I believe he may be capable of providing a path to it.

“Lord Lorenz, I ask that you not feel slighted by my harsh dismissal of your concerns about Lord Claude, and instead, try to learn from him the understanding you yet lack. To the rest of you, I ask that you forgive Lord Lorenz for his mistreatment of Lord Claude thus far. Welcome him back into the fold with open arms, and you may yet find there are things he can teach you, for all that he is ignorant on other matters.”

Seteth presented the yellow cape of the Golden Deer to Claude, reciting again the rules of its wear. I saw Lysithea start rising to help him don it, but Hilda moved more quickly and reached him first. Claude twirled to show off the movement of the cape, and the others clapped for him.

“With that, I will take my leave. Professor Eisner, proceed as you see fit,” Seteth said, then departed, leaving me alone with the Deer.

I looked around at my students. Most of them were still cheerful from Claude’s demonstration, though Lorenz of course looked sullen. Marianne looked weary; I suspected she found these social situations to be stressful.

“Alright, my name’s Professor Byleth Eisner, in case you forgot it, and I’ll be the faculty advisor for the Golden Deer of the Class of 1181. This is my first year teaching, so I’m sorry if my classes are a bit rough to start off. My class is on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday afternoons. Any questions?”

“Leonie says you’re an experienced mercenary, so how come you didn’t join the Knights of Seiros?” Hilda asked.

“A couple of reasons. One, teaching other people how to fight is a lot safer than going out and fighting. Two, my father is the new Grand Master. It’d be embarrassing if he gave me special treatment, and not very fair to the other knights. That kind of stuff was fine when he was leading a small mercenary band, but not when working for the archbishop,” I lied.

Well, the first reason was true. The second reason was that Rhea had pushed me into it so she could keep me close by. I had no doubt that if I’d wanted to join the Knights of Seiros, she and Father would have conspired to keep me on guard duty around the monastery most, if not all, of the time.

“Wait, you were a member of that mercenary band Leonie is always talking about? Jeralt’s
“Mercenaries, right?” Lorenz asked.

“I was a founding member. Father and I founded it in the Alliance after escaping there from an Imperial POW camp during the Brigid and Dagda War,” I answered.

This was also a lie—we’d been VIP prisoners of Count Bergliez and escaped while we were on the road to his territory in the Eastern Empire.

“You fought against Fódlanians?” Lorenz asked, narrowing his eyes in distrust.

“I assume you mean during the war—in which case, yes, I fought for Brigid against the Empire. It’s not as though I stopped fighting against Fódlanians as a mercenary, though. The men I killed when Jeralt’s Mercenaries worked for House Gloucester were also Fódlanians,” I reminded him.

“So, they gave you to us because you already knew Leonie, right?” Claude asked.

“No, faculty advisors were assigned based on need. You guys seemed like the least troublesome house, so you got the least-experienced counselor,” I explained.

“Me? Least troublesome? My mother must be turning in her grave!” Claude exclaimed.

“Your mom’s not dead,” Ignatz pointed out.

“You look pretty young compared to most of the other professors,” Lysithea noted. “How old are you, if you don’t mind answering?”

“I turn twenty-one in Verdant Rain Moon,” I answered. “I know that I’m actually younger than one of the Blue Lions, but I’ve been fighting since I was sixteen, and studying strategy since before then.”

“Only twenty, huh?” Claude asked. “In that case, why don’t we all speak casually with one another? I don’t think stuffy noble titles will contribute to the ‘virtue of cooperation’ I want to cultivate here. What do you say, Teach?”

“Good idea, Claude,” I replied. “If that’s how you want the Golden Deer to be, I’ll support you wholeheartedly.”

“I don’t mind dropping titles, but I refuse to call the professor ‘Teach,’” Lysithea said.

“I will… begrudgingly accept a lack of titles, for the sake of the ‘virtue of cooperation’ I’m supposed to be learning,” Lorenz conceded.

“No complaints here!” Hilda chimed in.

“I’m fine with it,” Marianne added.

“Thank the Goddess! I’ve gotten real tired of saying ‘Lord Lorenz’ all the time,” Leonie shared, earning a dirty look from the aforementioned man.

“I guess this is fine? I don’t have a title, so…” Ignatz trailed off.

“Works for me!” Raphael agreed.

“Looks like it’s unanimous, then,” Claude concluded, causing Lorenz to wince.

There was a moment of silence while I waited for another question to be raised, but it seemed as
though they’d had their fill, for now.

“Since I’m not hearing any more questions, let’s discuss counseling. During the school year, I will be available in this room to help you with anything not related to your courses during specific hours of the week, which I will post on the cork board outside the classroom once I figure them out. You can also come to me with questions about my class during this time. If you’re struggling emotionally, and you need to speak with someone outside your peers right away, you can come to me anytime if you can find me. I’ll show you where I sleep, but do not abuse this privilege. If you can’t find me, your next-best bet is to try speaking to one of the priests at the cathedral.

“For the rest of this week, if you would like to speak to me about something, I can usually be found in the library, since I’m still working on Military Strategy lesson plans. Any questions?”

I showed the Golden Deer which door I slept behind, but there was no need to reveal my room’s spartan interior. Instead, we headed back to the dining hall to eat lunch together.

Our lunch was the chef’s special meat pie: ground beef and pork mixed with cheese and a variety of minced vegetables that somehow all worked together. Claude loudly proclaimed his excitement for the meal as soon as we got close enough to smell what they were cooking.

We got a table just for the nine of us, at which Claude sat in the center, with Ignatz then Raphael to his left and Hilda then Marianne to his right. Lysithea sat across from Claude, with Lorenz then Leonie to her left, so I took the seat across from Ignatz next to Lysithea, a move that seemed to startle her at first, though she didn’t complain about it.

Claude was naturally the center of our table’s attention. Almost every sentence he spoke was a joke of some sort, and though not all of them were particularly funny, he still got the other students to laugh at his failures when his quips fell flat.

Hilda and Lysithea seemed to compete for Claude’s attention the most—Hilda would say whatever was on her mind if it was even slightly related to the conversation, whereas Lysithea was determined to pick apart the logic of what the others said at every opportunity. Neither of them touched their food much, though I wasn’t sure whether they were just that focused on the conversation, or if they weren’t fond of the dish.

Claude, for his part, had no problem both speaking and tearing through his meal without seeming too rude. It helped that Leonie was there for contrast—she ate exclusively with her hands, to Lorenz’s disgust.

Raphael, Lorenz, and Leonie didn’t speak as much as the trio at the table’s center, but they occasionally made comments or asked the others questions. With how jovially Claude included Lorenz in the conversation, it was as though Lorenz hadn’t just tried to get him kicked out of the school.

Marianne, Ignatz, and I were quiet eaters, not speaking unless spoken to. I noticed that Raphael made some effort to include Ignatz, while Hilda did the same for Marianne. Since they were my students, not my peers, I didn’t make an effort to join in the discussion, as I was more interested in observing their dynamics.

We parted ways after the meal, but I was interested in talking to Lysithea privately, so I asked her to walk with me for a spell. I could feel her picking me apart in her head as she considered my
request, but my face never gave any thoughts or emotions away, even when I wanted it to. She obliged, and so we began a circuit around the monastery.

“Did you get a chance to visit the orphanage?” I asked.

“I did,” she answered.

“What did you think?”

“It was horrible,” she answered.

“Why do you say that?” I inquired.

“No one should have to experience what we did… and it looks like he came out much worse for it, as well,” she lamented.

So, their conditions indeed shared a cause.

“May I ask under what circumstances you were… ‘exposed to hazardous magic?’”

She took a deep breath. “When I was living in the Empire as a political hostage, my elder siblings started to succumb to a heritable disease that sometimes pops up in noble families. A treatment exists—that’s the ‘hazardous magic’ I was talking about, but it’s brutal on the body, and the success rate isn’t great. The Empire provided it so we could be sold back to my mother, but my brother and sister didn’t make it. The Prime Minister ended up returning me to House Cordelia as an apology for failing to keep them alive.”

This story couldn’t explain why House Cordelia sent those troops into the Empire in 1174. It was possible that Lysithea was misinformed of the reason for her return, but her previous evasiveness suggested a deeper secret. I was also intrigued by how well she could speak of the matter without showing any emotion.

“My condolences for your loss,” I offered.

“Thank you,” she said, though I could tell she didn’t mean it. “Why are you so curious about this, anyway? Do you have some sort of attachment to the orphan kid? You said before that ‘we found him,’ but you didn’t explain who you were referring to,” she pressed me.

I thought this might be an opportunity to get her to open up, so I was honest with my response. “My last job as a mercenary was protecting this town in the Eastern Empire from a rampaging demonic beast. Once we defeated the beast, we found Kid and a magically modified Crest Stone had been its components. It turned out the Knights of Seiros had been hunting the same monster; they recognized Father and convinced him to rejoin, so I came with him.

“It’s suspicious to find a demonic beast born from a Crest Stone and a human both modified via sorcery in the same country whose governors seem to be the sole source of these changes in people. I’ve been asking you about it because I thought you might be willing to share why you, Edelgard, and Kid had been changed, when the Empire might not be so forthcoming. However, if the white hair and constricted irises only come from a medicinal process, I can tell Father it has nothing to do with the appearance of the demonic beast,” I explained.

“What did you think caused my appearance?” she asked.

“Well, I couldn’t really tell. I thought it might be some sort of punitive measure, since I knew both you and Edelgard were held as hostages by the Imperial ministers,” I explained.
“The Insurrection,” she corrected, a bit of hate bleeding into her voice. “The nobles who opposed Ionius IX’s reforms and usurped his political power call themselves the Insurrection. However, you’re mistaken about the meaning of my appearance; I apologize for not being more forthcoming earlier and saving you the worry. The Insurrection are a rotten bunch, but they’ve no need to resort to torturing children to exert their influence.

“Since I was very young and only a hostage while I was in their care, I can’t really help you with the Church’s investigation into the demonic beast’s appearance. If the Insurrection were behind it, I wouldn’t know.”

My instincts told me she wasn’t being as truthful as she claimed, but her story couldn’t be refuted with the information I had available to me. For a group that had saved her life, she seemed to harbor a strong hatred for the Insurrection, even though they hadn’t yet seized power when her father was killed and she was taken as a hostage.

“Thanks for clearing up my misunderstanding, then. I’ve noticed you behaving suspiciously towards me after our first meeting, so I’m sorry if I startled you by so bluntly asking about your condition,” I apologized.

I stopped walking. Our path had led back to the faculty building, where I’d need to collect my materials.

“If you’ll excuse me, I need to get back to work on my curriculum. I’ll see you next Monday for class, or you can visit me in the library if there’s anything you’d like to talk about,” I said.

Lysithea gave a short bow. “Of course, Professor.”

I couldn’t shake the feeling that she was still acting abnormally wary around me, as though I might learn something incriminating about her. Her red eyes added an intensity to her gaze that was only amplified by her miosis. However, I couldn’t rule out that she only found me suspicious because of how unreadable my own face was.

Before heading to the library, I stopped by Father’s office and reported my house assignment, as well as what Lysithea had told me.

Father shrugged. “It’s too bad that you didn’t get the Black Eagles, but it was an unreasonable request to begin with. Don’t sweat it. As for the Cordelia girl, I think we’ll just have to take her at her word. Leave the rest of the investigation to me, alright? I want you to focus on your career.”

Freed of the obligation, I was able to set aside my curiosity about the Empire’s mysteries and return my attention to growing my pile of lesson plans. The date when I’d need to start using them was rapidly approaching.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to @alchworks for beta reading.
After Professor Eisner released me from his interrogation, I quickly walked to the library. I knew he’d be moving back there before long, so I wanted to get a book or two to read before running into him again.

Professor Eisner unnerved me. His smooth, still face made him seem like he might be a doll, were it not for the articulation of his mouth. He even blinked far less than a normal person—I’d watched his eyes for a minute and counted an average of ten seconds per blink, more than double the normal period. And yet, the way the rest of his body moved was every bit as lifelike as any other person’s.

He was strange enough to raise my suspicions about what might be the cause of that peculiarity—I wondered what he’d experienced while a prisoner of the Empire. If his father really was the famous Jeralt Reus Eisner who’d commanded the Knights of Seiros in the fifty years preceding Arran von Berchtold’s tenure as Grand Master, he might have been treated differently from Brigid’s normal soldiers, for better or for worse. Moreover, the chance that he bore a Crest was high if he was truly of the old knight’s blood. The Dagda and Brigid War took place during the same year I’d been subject to Blood Condensation, and while he didn’t display any symptoms of that process, I had no reason to assume that the Insurrection had only one sinister magical experiment going on.

After all, he’d revealed to me that he’d found a modified Crest Stone in the hands of a Blood Condensation victim. I hadn’t been lying when I told him that I wouldn’t know if the Insurrection were responsible for the demonic beast, but they were obviously the most likely culprits.

I had to hide Blood Condensation’s existence from the Church. If history was anything to go by, I could only expect one of two foreseeable responses from the archbishop. If luck were against me, she would sanction Blood Condensation’s use and hail it as a great development in sorcery, rewarding the Insurrection. If luck were with me, she would declare it blasphemy and press the Kingdom and the Alliance into a crusade upon the Adrestian Empire, leading to the deaths of at least tens of thousands. In the meanwhile, I might still be executed as a product of that blasphemy.

No, it would be better to stick to my original plan of quietly assassinating every leader involved in the project until it became clear that Blood Condensation wasn’t worth pursuing. As a lone operator, I had plenty of advantages, but if it came to open war, the Imperial Army was without peer. With the backing of Houses Hresvelg and Vestra (and Varley, maybe? Probably not; counting on Bernadetta for anything seemed like poor judgement), my odds of success would only improve. I had lots of ideas for how I could assist Edelgard in passing a moratorium on Blood Condensation in the Empire.

Regardless of how I would eventually make my way to Empire and begin my mission, I needed to
give my everything to developing my skills for the next two years. To that end, I was intent on absorbing as much magical knowledge as I could before classes began and I’d be able to start practicing new spells in earnest.

9th of Great Tree Moon, 1180IY

I sighed as I noticed yet another interruption approaching me.

I preferred to spend the majority of my time reading by myself, but I hated staying inside my cramped room, though it was turning out to be the only place I could count on being truly private. Between the monastery’s staff, clergy, and students, it seemed there was always someone in any place I might try to go. I’d been at the monastery for less than a week, and already I was missing the peaceful halls of Castle Gloucester.

The library’s quiet should have made it my preferred location, but Professor Eisner’s near-constant presence there had me avoiding the room. Instead, my regular reading area became the ground floor of the monastery’s central building, which was far from a convenient arrangement. The main hall lacked a fireplace, so it was a bit chillier than would be ideal. Other people regularly came there just to talk with one another, though the room was spacious enough that they usually grabbed a table that wasn’t right next to where I read.

Worse still, its central location meant people who had just been passing by would approach me and interrupt my reading on the regular. Several of the second-year students had introduced themselves to me in this manner, but I expected this phenomenon would come to an end once every second-year had made my acquaintance.

The boy approaching me now, however, was a green-haired Black Eagle, and a first-year student.

“You’re Lady Lysithea von Cordelia, right?” he asked.

I put my bookmark in place and shut the copy of Lightning Magic I’d been reading, annoyed. It wasn’t that I didn’t care to make acquaintances and socialize, merely that I wanted to dedicate certain portions of my day to studying without interruption. I conversed with my classmates throughout my meals, even though I could eat a lot faster and have more time for reading if I didn’t.

“That’s right. If I recall correctly, you’re the Hevring heir,” I noted.

I put my bookmark in place and shut the copy of Lightning Magic I’d been reading, annoyed. It wasn’t that I didn’t care to make acquaintances and socialize, merely that I wanted to dedicate certain portions of my day to studying without interruption. I conversed with my classmates throughout my meals, even though I could eat a lot faster and have more time for reading if I didn’t.

“You can just call me Linhardt, or even ‘Lin’ if you prefer. I’ve got some questions I want to ask you, if you have the time,” he inquired, sitting down across from me. I hadn’t seen much of him before, but when I had, he’d always looked to be on the verge of nodding off. This evening, though, his blue eyes seemed bright and sharp.

“I suppose I can spare a moment. What do you wish to know?” I asked.

Linhardt explained, “Well, Edelgard told me on the road from Enbarr that her appearance was caused by White magic that treats a hereditary disease stemming from inbreeding, but I didn’t think that was very interesting until I saw that you display the same symptoms. We had some horribly deformed Hresvelgs running the country around the time of the Leicester Rebellion, but I hadn’t heard of any other noble families practicing incest to such a great extent. Luckily, the library here has extensive genealogies on every Crest-bearing noble family, so I was able to take a look at your lineage. I was surprised to find that there was actually zero record of any incest, here meaning
‘child-bearing marriages between first cousins or closer,’ in either House Cordelia or House Charon, your blood father’s House. Moreover, I went back over the House Hresvelg’s genealogy and found that there hadn’t been any incestuous marriages since the 830’s, after Emperor Lycoan VI died at age twenty-five. I have to conclude that Edelgard isn’t telling the truth about the cause of her appearance, and since you look similar to her, I thought you might know and be willing to share.”

That damn foolish princess! Her flimsy cover story had been blown in less than a week! Mine was way better, damn it!

Enough raging, I needed to figure out what I would say to get Linhardt to stop investigating this. It was clear that offering up another false explanation wasn’t going to work, since he would just figure out how to prove it false. Moreover, Linhardt’s question meant he didn’t already know about Blood Condensation, even though House Hevring was in the Insurrection.

I took a look around the hall to make sure no one was close enough to eavesdrop before whispering, “Well, good job figuring that out. Why don’t you take the results of your research over to your House Leader, then, and ask her for an explanation?”

“Edelgard is scary, that’s why. I’m not sure why, but I often sense an aura of dread in her presence,” Linhardt whispered back.

“You mean Lord Hubert?” I suggested.

“Yes. That’s probably it,” Linhardt noted with a ponderous expression. “Bringing it up in either’s presence seems like a bad idea, but you’re not scary at all, so I’m asking you.”

That was stupid; Hubert might be scary-looking, but I doubted he could hurt another student and get away with it. Edelgard could easily keep Linhardt from finding out by claiming it was an Imperial secret (which was probably true), and that he should ask his father about it once he got home if he wanted to know so badly. However, since he’d come to me first, I might be able to turn it to my advantage.

“Alright, I’ll tell you, but not for free. A trade of information is in order,” I offered.

“Hmm… what do you want to know?” Linhardt asked.

“I’m interested in finding out how many Black Eagles already know, particularly children of the Insurrection,” I explained.

“The Insurrection…” Linhardt mused. “While its primary leaders are Houses Aegir, Gerth, Hevring, Varley, Bergliez, and Vestra, every other noble House has fallen under their influence, to the point where the Insurrection more or less is the Empire by now. Do you want me to ask all of the Empire nobles, or just the ones from those Houses?”

“Those Houses will suffice. To keep our investigation under wraps, I want you to ask them by bringing up the term ‘Blood Condensation,’ since…” I stopped speaking as Linhardt’s eyes went wide.

“Blood Condensation? The theoretical method of artificial Crest bestowal proposed by Professor Hanneman von Essar in 1162? That’s the cause?” I shushed him as his whispered speech grew louder and louder.

Damn it, so much for my trade of information. We didn’t have any of Professor von Essar’s publications on Crestology in the family library, so I had no idea that Blood Condensation had
been a publicly acknowledged theory before the Empire had begun working on implementing it in secret.

“Well, since you’ve told me the cause, I guess I’m obligated to get the information you want,” Linhardt said, being surprisingly generous. “Plus, when I get back to you, you can tell me if it worked.” Or not.

I sighed. Damn you, Edelgard.

“Don’t bother asking Lord Vestra,” I instructed. “I have a feeling he already knows all there is to know about Princess Edelgard. Stick to asking Aegir, Bergliez, and Varley, I guess.”

“I can rule out two of those right away. Bernadetta has an antagonistic relationship with her father, so I don’t think he’d have shared any important info like that with her. Caspar’s not an heir, and he wouldn’t have kept such juicy info from me if he knew it… not that he’d be able to tell it was important, so I can easily check with him, just in case. Ferdinand has a more positive relationship with his father, better than the one I have with mine, I think, so he might know something,” Linhardt expounded.

“Please find out for me. As the heir of the Prime Minister, it’s the most important to find out what he knows,” I urged.

“I’ll get back to you when I find out. In the meanwhile, I will attempt to contain my excitement at the information you’ve shared with me. See you later,” Linhardt said, finally leaving me.

I pressed my book to my head. I trusted that Edelgard and Hubert would be able to keep the secret, but now that Linhardt knew, I had cause to worry. If Professor Eisner figured out that Linhardt had learned, he might have an easier time getting the curious boy to share.

10th of Great Tree Moon, 1180IY

It hadn’t taken Linhardt long to get back to me.

“Ferdinand doesn’t know anything,” he confirmed, looking far drearier as we hung out in Professor Eisner’s classroom on that Thursday afternoon.

It turned out that the perfect place to hide in seclusion had been right in front of me the whole time! With Professor Eisner occupying the library, the room where he would be teaching was going completely unused in the meanwhile. Linhardt had discovered this and started using it as his own place to be alone since Monday, when he’d seen the professor in the library for the third day in a row and decided to just start using it by himself instead of asking permission.

“Nothing?” I double-checked.

“Nope,” Linhardt repeated. “I checked with Caspar as well. He just said it sounded like ‘nerd stuff’ and had no clue what I was talking about.”

So, the Insurrection knew what they were doing was wrong, so much that they were keeping it a secret from the ones who would be inheriting the results! I tried to calm myself, considering what other reasons they might have for keeping Blood Condensation adult-only knowledge. From an information security standpoint, it made sense that they wouldn’t tell their kids until after they go back from Garreg Mach.
It was Professor von Essar’s own theory that was being enacted… I’d gone to read his treatise proposing the procedure soon after my conversation with Linhardt. In ’62, it had been purely theoretical, and Professor von Essar hadn’t known how it could go wrong. Now that Linhardt knew, would he be able to keep from letting Professor von Essar know about this “incredible” advance in Crestology? For the sake of preventing the Church from finding out, Duke Hevring had chosen correctly by not telling Linhardt. Shame that Linhardt had found out anyway.

“Okay now, I’m dying to know. Are your external changes the only result of the Blood Condensation procedure, or did it succeed in giving you a Crest?” Linhardt asked.

“First,” I demanded. “Promise that you are not to speak of this to anyone other than myself.”

“Sure, I promise,” Linhardt agreed. I couldn’t detect any dishonesty from him.

“It did,” I said.

He kept looking at me, expecting me to elaborate further. “And?”

“That’s all I promised to tell you. The Blood Condensation procedure succeeded. If you want to know more, ask Princess Edelgard. Since she survived, it must have worked for her, too,” I explained. “However, I would advise you wait to do so. I intend to ally myself with her; you may find answers easier to obtain from her once our alliance is established, if you join it.”

“Hmm… I guess I’ll be waiting eagerly until then. Well,” he paused to yawn. “It’s not like there’s a lack of things to study here, but I’m dreading the day I finish off the library. I know that sounds unreasonable, but unless we get a lot of new books in the next two years, I know it’s coming,” he fretted.

“Seriously? We won’t always have this much free time. Wait until classes start before you make that kind of judgement!” I reprimanded him.

“Ugh, don’t remind me. I hate getting up early, and exercising. My only hobby besides reading is fishing, and it’s not like there’s a lake on top of the mountain. Did you know that most of the monastery’s water supply is collected from snowpack on the surrounding mountains? I’m glad I was born a Hevring, so I don’t have to do that job,” Linhardt started taking the conversation on an unexpected tangent.

“I wasn’t aware, thank you for the trivia,” I replied. “Do you mind if I use this room to read? It’s probably the most peaceful place in the whole monastery.”

“It’s not like I own this spot,” Linhardt acknowledged. “But I have to say, the most peaceful place in the monastery is probably one of the many chambers in the extensive catacombs under the cathedral. That’s where the Church claims the remains of Saint Seiros herself lie.”

“You don’t think they’ll let me read there, do you?” I joked.

“No, only certain Church personnel are allowed in,” Linhardt answered, missing the joke entirely.

14th of Great Tree Moon, 1180IY

I sat on a bench, watching some knights get their morning exercise in, as I waited for combat class to begin. Rather than the sharp and warm black-and-gold uniform I’d worn to last week’s
interview, the other students and I had donned the brightly-colored activewear we’d been assigned for the classes and activities that would involve exercise. Our first class, Combat, was one such class.

Our activewear was color-coded to our houses, so mine was the yellow of the Golden Deer. Since I’d yet to begin exercising, the non-existent sleeves and the pant legs that stopped at the thighs left me feeling much colder than I’d have liked.

With fifteen minutes yet before eight o’clock, the professors arrived. Professor Nevrand and Professor Rangeld were wearing the same gambeson and boots they’d worn while supervising the students during the interviews.

“Alright everyone! Clear out of the training area, we’ve got class starting soon!” Professor Rangeld bellowed to the adults in his normal speaking voice. They complied, putting away the equipment they’d been using as more students began to arrive.

Once the ninth bell had rung, Professor Rangeld called everyone to attention. We stood around the professors in a vague half-circle that was somewhat segregated by house. Though I wasn’t excited to start working out, I ended up standing near the front since I was the shortest student.

“Hello, students! You’ll remember Professor Nevrand and I from last week. Who remembers our ranks in the Knights of Seiros?” Professor Rangeld asked. Goddess, he was loud.

Most of the students raised their hands.

“Molinaro,” Professor Nevrand selected as the respondent.

“Professor Nevrand is a knight, the lowest rank. Professor Rangeld is a marshal, the highest rank under Grand Master,” Dedue answered.

“You’re mostly right! Though they aren’t actually knights as of yet, squires are still members of the Knights of Seiros, and so they form the lowest rank,” Professor Rangeld corrected. “The reason I bring up our ranks is because our knights, whatever their backgrounds, are the model to which we hold our combat standards for students of the Officers’ Academy. By the time you finish your first year, you should be able to respond to or initiate armed conflicts with all of the competence and professionalism of a Knight of Seiros. To this end, the Officers’ Academy’s two most vital courses are the Military Strategy course, where you will learn to think like a knight, and the Combat course, where you will learn to fight like a knight.

“Who can tell me what the most vital thing for a fighter to possess is?” Professor Rangeld asked.

“Vestra,” Professor Nevrand selected.

“Killing intent, Professor. Bringing about an opponent’s death is the surest way to victory, and as such, one must be willing to bring this end about, else they hamper their own success,” Hubert answered. He was as morbid as I’d expected, and yet I didn’t disagree.

“Oh? What if a cat were to suddenly develop a killing intent aimed toward me?” Professor Rangeld inquired. “Should I then be afraid of facing it in battle?”

“Significantly more than if the cat were acting under its typical instinct to run from such danger,” Hubert argued. “However, the intellect of a feline is minimal, so I would not rate its chance of success very likely.”

Professor Rangeld considered this. “Any other opinions?”
“Aegir,” Professor Nevrand selected.

“Justice! Violence that is not backed by the will of the Goddess brings only ruin upon those who commit it!” Ferdinand proclaimed.

“I don’t disagree,” Professor Rangeld commented. “However, things only work out that way in the long term: perform wicked acts, and eventually the hammer of justice will fall upon you, but no justice is needed to begin fighting or killing. Anyone else?”

“Varley,” Professor Nevrand called out, causing the girl to squeak in surprise.

“Strength! People are obviously scarier the stronger they are, or the more strong people they can make fight for them!” Bernadetta cried.

“This is the answer I believe fits best!” Professor Rangeld proclaimed. “Someone with great strength but little killing intent can kill or injure on accident. Someone with great strength but no sense of justice can kill or injure until the just rally to oppose them. To become the best possible warrior, you will need to cultivate all three aspects, but this class is about developing pure martial might.

"In Combat class we have three focuses. First: raw physical ability, the basic substance from which a warrior is shaped. Second: skill at arms, the handling of the tools of battle. Third: organization and discipline, the handling of the soldiers who fight under you. Since physical ability takes the longest to develop, let’s not waste any time getting started on it! Time for a physical fitness test!”

I knew that even though my combat potential lay with magic and not with weapons, I couldn’t ignore my body as a tool, so I’d been sticking to an exercise routine since the age of twelve. Unfortunately, the same curse that enhanced my magical power also drained my physical strength. Blood Condensation had left me so weak I’d passed out after the first time I walked around the perimeter of Castle Cordelia. Since then, I’d made a lot of progress on improving my physique. I could run as much as a half-mile without exhausting myself.

However, I worried about the break I’d taken from my routine because of Garreg Mach’s altitude. Professor Casagranda had forbidden me from any serious exercise until today while my blood acclimated to the thin air, so I hadn’t exercised at all since the third of the month—longer than any break I’d ever taken in my routine, the longest being when I’d been bedridden for eight days straight with a fever last summer.

We began our fitness test by doing push-ups, an exercise I knew I’d perform poorly at. My main priority in my training had been improving my cardiovascular endurance, since the medicinal guides I’d read had indicated that this had the greatest impact on general well-being. Moreover, I didn’t think being able to lift heavy things or swing swords around was nearly as important as being able to run from danger, so I hadn’t trained my upper body strength at all, really.

Thus, it was natural that I completed only two push-ups before flopping to the ground, unable to press on. My upper body burned in pain even from lifting my meager body weight.

“Oof. Better than one, I guess,” Leonie, as the partner who was counting my repetitions, remarked.

Once I’d recovered enough to regain an awareness of my surroundings, I noticed that many of the other girls, and even a few of the boys had reached the limits of what they could do. Still, some students were struggling on, while others were pumping out push-ups like it didn’t phase them. I was particularly surprised to find Edelgard among the most athletic students. Either Blood
Condensation hadn’t affected her nearly as badly, or the increased strength provided by her Crest of Seiros more than made up for the damage the procedure had caused.

When Professor Rangeld, who had been watching the spring clock the professors had brought, called the two-minute test to an end, we switched places so that the other twelve could take their turn. Professor Nevrand then collected everyone’s scores and marked them on a notebook she was carrying. Leonie had fared far better than I, completing forty-five push-ups, but even her score was blown away by Edelgard’s one-hundred and twenty push-ups. I was even more surprised to find that Marianne had completed one-hundred push-ups; as she hadn’t struck me as particularly athletic. I reasoned that she, too, must possess a Crest; there were a few that granted increased strength.

The next stage, sit-ups, went similarly. Though my gender wasn’t working against me here, I still had poor core strength. Making full use of the two minutes, I completed only fifteen sit-ups. By the end, I almost felt ready to throw up from the pain in my gut.

Leonie completed eighty repetitions, while Edelgard managed another one-twenty. Edelgard’s numbers were so perfect, she must have been holding back by sticking to one repetition per second.

Finally, we moved on to running. We walked out past the monastery’s gate to a trail leading off the main road with distance markers along it. We lined up at the first marker and were told to touch the one-mile marker and come back, where Professor Nevrand would be waiting with the spring clock to mark our time. Professor Rangeld would run with us to make sure we’d all actually touched the marker before turning back.

Two miles was far more than I could hope to run, so I resolved to merely walk quickly instead of exhausting myself with so much as a jog. This turned out to be a good idea, as the downward incline of the mountain trail made the return trip even more difficult. I have to do this, I told myself as I marched up the slope, ignoring the burning in my lungs and rising complaints of my legs.

As I approached the starting point, I could see that everyone in the class was watching and waiting for my return. Hilda was leading the Golden Deer in cheering for me.

“Ly-si-the-a! Ly-si-the-a!” they shouted.

I wasn’t sure which was worse, the thought that I might not make it, or the looks of pity coming from most of my classmates’ faces.

Knowing I was reaching the limit of my endurance, I sprinted to the goal, ignoring the pain that coursed through my body. When I finally reached my destination, I threw myself to the grass in relief. My head was spinning, and my heart felt ready to burst out of my chest. I kept gasping for air, but it never seemed like enough.

“You really pushed yourself there, huh?” Leonie asked as she carried me back to the monastery.

“Poor health… been exercising… had to stop… because wyvern… never run… more than half-mile…” I panted. “Time?”

Leonie hesitated. “About fifty minutes.”

Once we’d returned to the training grounds, Professor Nevrand pulled me aside while Professor Rangeld addressed the class.

“I think it will be best if you sit out of Combat class. I did see that you were in the infirmary on
your first day here, so don’t try to act like there’s nothing wrong with you, and you’re just out of shape. You look like you might need to head there now,” she said.

I shook my head in disagreement, then stumbled. Somehow that normal gesture had disoriented me.

“I don’t want to miss out… my mother is paying good money for this school, so I can’t just skip out on one of the required courses. I want to get stronger, and to learn how to fight with weapons in case I face an opponent who won’t go down to my magic, or in case I need to fight when my mana runs out,” I argued.

Professor Nevrand shook her head. “I think it’s better that you take the time to yourself. If you want to improve your body, you should do light exercise at your own pace instead of trying to keep up with people who are training to be professional warriors. You have classmates who are already quite skilled fighters, so if you want to learn a weapon or two, you should ask them to help you. Alternatively, ask Professor von Essar if there’s anything you can do to keep your mana from running out, or to find ways to fight magic-resistant foes using spells.

“However, I can’t allow you to participate in my Combat class after seeing that it’s clearly a hazard to your health. If it makes you feel better, I’m saving you from a failing grade. There was no way you’d be able to get a passing score on the physical exam you just took in time to pass this class.”

I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes as my mind screamed its rejections to this cruel reality. “But… but what about the mock battles, and the other competitions?”

“I’ll have to consult with Professor Casagranda and the headmaster to see if there’s a capacity in which you can be allowed to assist your house that doesn’t put your health in jeopardy,” she explained. “Let’s visit the infirmary right now. I want Professor Casagranda to check up on you again before I let you loose, okay? I’d hate for you to miss out on your Strategy class, too.”

I nodded my head and followed her as the tears poured down my cheeks.

Chapter End Notes

thanks to @alchworks for beta reading
I tried to relax as Professor Casagranda put a hand to my bare chest so her mana could flow out through my body. I wasn’t worried about blushing at her touch, since I was certain my face and ears were already quite red from all the walking and crying I’d done. Besides, I needed to get used to receiving these check-ups from the older woman. Frequent visits to her infirmary over the next two years were inevitable.

“I think you’ll be good to go to your next class today,” Professor Casagranda informed me once she’d finished checking me over with her White Sight. “However, I’m worried about how high your pulse is. If you push yourself like that again, I’m afraid your heart might give out.”

“No more Combat class, then?” I asked.

She shook her head. “There’s no point in learning to fight if you’re more likely to hurt yourself than an enemy. Go ahead and put your shirt back on, and rest for a bit. I’m going to arrange for you to get some food and your uniform delivered, so you can rest here until it’s time for your Strategy class.”

I reluctantly donned my bra and activewear shirt, which were still wet and cold from my sweat. The infirmary had a fireplace, so it wasn’t as bad as if I’d had to walk about the grounds in the clothes I’d ran in, but it was still uncomfortable to lie on the infirmary’s bed. I had to lie there and stew in my disappointment for a good fifteen minutes before Professor Casagranda returned, this time with Headmaster Seteth in tow.

“Lady Lysithea,” he greeted me. “It seems your health condition is more serious than we initially thought. It is unfortunate that you will be unable to participate in Combat classes, but we can make an exception to our normal requirements in case of a disability like yours. Professor Nevrand has informed me, however, that you still hope to compete in some of the inter-house competitions, such as the mock battles. I am here to advise you against this desire. Professor Casagranda has informed me that the state of your heart is bad enough that you should avoid any serious athletic activity whatsoever, including combat, real or simulated.”

“Apologies for doubting that assessment, Professor, but the physicians who saw me at Castle Cordelia weren’t quite as grim about my prospects of recovery,” I replied.

“If you would like yet another opinion, I will take a look at your heart myself. I may not meet the standards of a modern physician, but I am a White mage of some skill,” the headmaster offered. “If I disagree with Professor Casagranda’s evaluation, I may restore permission for some activities.”

“Okay,” I agreed, then started moving to remove my shirt again before noticing that the
headmaster had his hand extended. I stopped and took it with my own, and so he closed his eyes in concentration.

A minute later, he spoke. “Apologies, Lady Lysithea, but I am afraid my opinion on your heart matches Professor Casagranda’s. I also noted significant damage in your liver and discovered that you have only one functioning kidney. Tell me, how did you come into this state?”

He got all that just from touching my hand? “A White mage of some skill” was an understatement.

“I was exposed to some dangerous magic as a child, or at least, that’s what the physician told my mother when I was returned to her after spending time as a hostage in the Empire. I was quite young when it happened, so I’m afraid I don’t remember any details,” I lied, easing back on the cover story’s weakness by maximizing my own apparent ignorance.

“Your elder siblings, did they suffer from the same condition?” he asked.

“I’m not sure… I don’t remember them looking like this, but for some reason, I can’t remember anything from around when they died. It’s frustrating,” I continued, showing my anger as best I could to sell the story. In truth, I remembered their agony all too well.

“I find that concerning. Which House in the Empire fostered you?” he asked.

“House Rusalka,” I answered.

“I will have to send Baron Rusalka an inquiry about the details of whatever accident led to your current state, then. If we better understand what might have caused your condition, it may help us understand what treatments will be most effective in prolonging your current level of health, which is, unfortunately, at grave risk of declining,” the headmaster explained.

The headmaster’s statement left me with an uneasy feeling. What would Rusalka reveal, when pressed by the Church? I hadn’t realized how many questions I would raise just by appearing at the monastery. I remembered all of the times mother had sobbed and begged me to choose another path.

“I apologize if bringing up such a topic has caused you unpleasant feelings, but I believe it necessary to address the root of your condition in order to properly fulfill my duty as your headmaster. I will leave you to rest in peace for now; take good care of yourself,” he added, excusing himself.

I sighed in frustration. My heart and stomach now ached from anxiety instead of the pain of exertion. Why did I think I could succeed just because I was smart and because I was determined? No amount of cleverness could hope to make up for my crumbling health. It was as though I were trying to win a game of chess with only my king and a single pawn.

There was a knock on the infirmary door, and Professor Casagranda moved to open it.

“Yo, Lysithea! I brought your uniform and some chow, like the professor asked!” It was Leonie, already wearing her uniform.

“Thank you,” I greeted her. “If you’ll excuse me, I’d like to change first,” I said, rising from bed and taking my uniform from her, then moving behind a curtain in a corner of the room.

Once I’d donned my uniform, I came out to the table to eat with Leonie and Professor Casagranda. Our lunch was a chicken soup with onions and carrots; I appreciated the simple seasoning, and the carrots had been boiled long enough that their bitterness had vanished.
“Anything you wanna talk about, Lysithea?” Leonie asked. She’d started the meal by drinking all of her broth, and was now eating the solid ingredients out of the bowl with her fingers.

“I got kicked out of Combat,” I said after swallowing another spoonful. “Turns out my body’s actually worse than I was originally led to believe. I’m not even sure if exercising at all is a good idea, any more. What was it you said, Professor Casagranda? No ‘serious athletic activity,’ right?”

She shook her head. “Nothing that will get your heart too excited, but that doesn’t mean you should become altogether sedentary. If you put on weight, it will actually make things worse. I recommend thirty minutes of light exercise, such as walking or swimming, every day.”

“But no weapons training?” I asked.

“No, I don’t think you should risk strength training, or anything that resembles it,” Manuela said.

“Aw, that sucks!” Leonie said. “Well, if you ever need anything lifted, don’t be afraid to ask me!”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I noted. “Since you’ve met him before, I’d like to ask what you think of our Strategy professor, Leonie? I don’t mean to make fun of his appearance, but I think it’s strange that he always has the same expression on his face.”

“Yeah, he’s always been like that. He’s a pretty quiet guy, and a bit of a loner. Loves his books though, so you’d probably get along. He’s not very much like Commander Je—I mean, Grand Master Eisner, but I’ll wait ’til I’ve been in one of his classes to judge his skills. I haven’t gotten a chance to spar with him, since he didn’t work out at the same time any day for the past week, according to the people I asked. I’ve been trying to wrangle a chance to fight him, but whenever I approach him at the library, he awlays says he’s too busy! Professor Rangeld said he didn’t show up at the monastery until New Year’s, and he got hired that same day, so he’s been rushing to get our curriculum done.”

“Isn’t that strange?” I asked. “I can’t believe the Church waited that long to fill the position.”

“The headmaster was planning on teaching it himself,” Professor Casagranda added. “I’m very glad he’s not. He can be unbearably strict even when he’s in a good mood… if he were teaching eighteen more hours a week, then…” she trailed off. “Forget I said anything, please.”

“Well, I’m finished with my food,” I said. “I would appreciate it if you would take our dishes back to the dining hall, Leonie. I need to take my dirty activewear back to my room, and I’m going to need my note-taking materials.”

I saw that Leonie didn’t have a bag to carry any of her own. “Did you forget yours in your room as well? I can get them while I’m at our dorm, if you wish.”

Leonie shook her head and grinned. “Nope! I didn’t buy any! I can’t afford to spend money on ink and paper, unless I really need it, so I’ll just have to memorize everything in my head!”

“Are you serious? That’s no way to learn. I’ll gift you some,” I said.

“But—”

“No buts. Consider it payment for helping me lift things, if you have to, but I’m not going to let someone as nice as you fail just because you’re short on cash,” I declared.
Leonie and I met back in Classroom A, just as Military Strategy was about to begin. All of the front-row seats were already taken, unfortunately, so we took third-row seats behind some Blue Lions.

The 1pm bell rang, and the chatter of the students subsided until only Hilda, gossiping to Claude on the other side of the room, could be heard. Professor Eisner cleared his throat, and she stopped.

“Lord Caspar, please wake Lord Linhardt,” the professor commanded. “It’s time to begin.

“First, let’s go about how this course will be structured. The material I will teach you over the next two years is separated into five distinct stages. In the first stage, we will develop an understanding of the material facts of military units, including their armaments. In the second stage, we will study how terrain influences the clashes between those units. In the third stage, we will learn how the material facts of war determine which strategies are preferable. In the fourth stage, we will study what sort of tactics can be employed to take advantage of the material facts and further our strategies. In the fifth and final stage, we will perform historical analysis on past conflicts so we can learn how the strategies and tactics we’ve studied fared when applied in various contexts, and how the modern context might affect using similar strategies and tactics.

“I understand you’re all from various backgrounds and are headed towards careers that involve differing levels of strategizing, so I’ve tried to include information that will be useful to soldiers of any rank. Those of you who intend to become knights or or military officers should rest assured that we will eventually cover the tactics for various group sizes that will be most useful for your jobs, but there are also future rulers and generals attending. It’s essential that those students leave with a strong grasp of warfare on the highest strategic level. Regardless, understanding both tactics and strategy will help you make decisions on one level that are mindful of concerns on the other.

“Yes, Prince Dimitri?”

“Since we will not be learning any strategy or tactics immediately, how are we supposed to apply what we learn in your class to the mock battle in two weeks?” the crown prince asked.

“I did not know about the mock battle when I designed the curriculum, and I have no intention of changing my lesson plans to account for it. Were you to enter a real combat scenario in two weeks, those of you with no previous combat experience might find some information of value in this course by then, but the materials we’ll be studying likely won’t be applicable to the simulated combat on the thirtieth,” the professor answered.

The professor then began to explain the structure of the day’s lesson.

“Our topic of study today will be personal protection; that is, armor and shields. Understanding how armor works is essential for knowing what types of offense are most effective against differently-equipped foes. Additionally, you’ll want to understand what kind of punishment different forms of protection can withstand, both for your own safety, and the safety of any troops under your command.

“Of course, I won’t be merely describing the effectiveness of each kind of armor. We’ll also discuss the expense of supplying soldiers with each type of protection and weapon we examine in the first unit. Knowing the best armaments to outfit your soldiers with is of no use if you can’t afford them.”

The professor had at the front of the classroom a few examples of armor and shields taken from the
monastery’s armory. He described each kind of gear according to his earlier prescription, and in some cases, demonstrated their effectiveness with the dagger at his belt. He also described some gear that wasn’t available in the monastery, giving us only vague visualizations on it, and explaining why it wasn’t kept in stock by the Knights of Seiros.

He gave us a fifteen-minute break at two-thirty, saying that he didn’t think listening to a lecture for too long without any interruption would be good for our retention. Leonie got up to stretch, and I saw that many other students were doing the same.

The social ramifications of being the only student excluded from Combat class were only then coming into view of my mind. I hadn’t even thought about how it might make the class treat me differently. I’d been so focused on trying to succeed, or perhaps my brain had been too addled from my body’s exertion, that I hadn’t bothered to be embarrassed when the Golden Deer had cheered for me at the end of the two-mile run.

And yet, I remembered the looks of pity. I looked around the room and saw a few of the same ones, though they turned away when my gaze wandered towards theirs.

“What do you think so far?” Leonie asked, providing a needed distraction.

“He’s a bit dry and long-winded, but the information seems good,” I noted.

“Yeah, I agree. I hope I don’t ever need to worry about arming thousands of troops, but at least now I have some idea how I’d do that,” she added.

Once our recess had come to an end, Professor Eisner raised his hand and caused a loud snap, a basic bit of magic, to emanate from it, calling us back to our seats. He proceeded with more of what had come before, then finished by soliciting us for questions about what we’d just learned.

The only one with a question was Ferdinand, who got into an intense discussion about the optimal shape for shields that ended with them agreeing to disagree on the matter.

“While I believe Lord Ferdinand’s assertion about the best type of shield is incorrect, I do not ask that you concede entirely to my opinion, as I am only human. What I claim is the best might change were I to go back to the battlefield and observe certain things in action. I have worked my hardest to provide to you the best synthesis of our recorded knowledge possible on the subject of Military Strategy, but I am by no means incapable of being mistaken on this subject,” the professor explained.

“Now, if there are no more questions, I would like to inform you that I will be beginning each of my classes, going forward, with a short quiz on the material covered in previous classes, so that I can be certain you have not forgotten what you were previously taught, as it would be inconvenient for all of us if we reach the parts of this course on managing an army’s finances only to find that you all have forgotten how to project the price of arms,” he announced.

“Study well, and remember: the mind is the ultimate weapon. You are dismissed,” he said, and then the room was alive with the students exiting their seats.

“I’m gonna ask the professor if he needs help putting all that armor back where it belongs. Maybe I can get him to spar, after,” Leonie told me.

“Good luck,” I said.

Throughout his lecture, Professor Eisner had kept that same, steady, neutral expression. He’d spared few glances toward me during the class, focused as he was on explaining his topic. Was he
still curious about me, or had he heard of my trip to the infirmary and been concerned for my health, like the students? I had the feeling that even if Professor Eisner came to pity me, I wouldn’t be able to tell from his face alone.

“You okay, Lysithea?” Linhardt said, approaching me from the back of the class where he and Caspar sat. He looked like he’d been utterly bored by Eisner’s lecture.

“For… reasons,” I said, winking at him, “I won’t be able to come to Combat classes anymore, but I should be fine.” At least for the next ten or so years.

He raised an eyebrow. “Lucky… all that exercise is such a bother,” he said with a yawn.

I remembered my bedridden days, the fevers, the headaches, the vomiting, the pain, the weakness. **Lucky.**

“It’s not lucky, you bastard! I didn’t want to have a heart that might break just because I went for a run!” I snapped, turning some heads.

Linhardt’s eyes went wide open in surprise. In my anger, I was delighted to knock that stupid, bored, sleepy look off his face.

“I’m sorry, I… I just thought—” Linhardt began before Caspar began pulling him away.

“That’s enough, Lin. He’s sorry, okay? We’ll see you later,” Caspar said.

I turned away from the boys, feeling the heat flush my cheeks, and I noticed Edelgard watching us from across the room. There wasn’t a scrap of pity to be found in her piercing, lilac gaze. She merely observed, absorbing my faults and reactions.

“Hey, you okay, Lysithea? Want me to head back to the dorm with you?” Leonie asked, her concern clear.

“No,” I answered a little sharper than I’d intended. “I have some things I need to do by myself. Go help the professor, like you’d planned.”

“Oh, I’ll catch up with you later,” Leonie agreed, reluctant to let me go in this state.

For his part, Professor Eisner appeared to be showing some emotion. His face remained unchanged, but his body was tensed in alarm from my shouting. His posture didn’t relax until Leonie began speaking to him.

I gathered my things and walked outside the classroom, only to find the rest of my house standing by the entrance.

“Heard some shouting in there; you feeling alright?” Claude asked. He was perfectly capable of showing emotions such as pity, sorrow, and the current concern, but it was still difficult to tell if they were genuine.

“Right now, I’m feeling a bit smothered from all of the attention,” I said. “If you’d be so kind, I’d like some time to myself.”

“Alright,” he said, his posture relaxing and his typical smile returning. “I’ll make sure none of these clowns bother you for a bit,” he gestured to the other Deer. “See you at dinner?”

“Certainly,” I said, walking towards the cemetery.
I sat on a nearby bench, looking out at the graves. They reminded me again of what I’d lost, and of the end I was approaching all too quickly, but the graveyard was one of the least-visited locations in the monastery, so I’d headed there put some distance between me and everyone who might fuss over my health and feelings.

I could feel the tears welling up again. I knew Linhardt didn’t know what it was like, didn’t know my Crest had come at the cost of my siblings’ lives, didn’t know that I retreated to books only because of my fragile health. I still hated him, envying his ignorance.

I heard Edelgard’s voice. “I thought I might find you here,” she said.

I wiped my tears and turned to look at her. It was the first time I’d seen her without Hubert trailing behind. I was tempted to look and find him sneaking behind me, but I believed Edelgard wanted to speak to me alone.

“I’ve gotten lucky,” she said, sitting beside me and lowering her voice. “Were it not for the specific Crest I gained, I would be the same as you. It’s not clear what determines which Crest a subject gets.”

For some reason, Edelgard’s typical distance from me meant I didn’t mind her intrusion here. She hadn’t spoken to me at all since the interviews.

I asked, “Why did they do it to you?”

“Because you exist. You were the first, I am told, to survive. Because you lived, and you gained a Crest, they became hopeful. Thus, me.” she said, gesturing to herself.

I began to open my mouth, but she chastised me, “Don’t apologize. My siblings were already dead by the time you were subjected to it. For my siblings’ deaths alone, I would hate the Insurrection and plot their ends. If anything, I am grateful you survived. If you’d perished, I would have been left in the Kingdom to marry Dimitri. It would perhaps have been a gentler fate, but not one that suits me. I’ve never been the sort of person content to bear the shackles of others’ control.

“What about you?” she asked. “Is there something for which you would sacrifice your own autonomy?”

“I would gladly die to revive my dead family members, were such a thing possible. I would also die to kill their killers,” I answered.

She gave me a curious look. “So, you regard your freedom equal to your life?”

“What value is my life, but what it may accomplish?” I asked.

“You do not value comforts such that you would surrender purpose for ease, then?” she prodded.

“If I did, I wouldn’t have come here, not so young,” I explained. “You saw how I pushed myself in Combat, didn’t you? I wouldn’t have done that were I overly concerned with comfort.”

“I saw only that you were either unaware of the severity of your condition, or that you were foolish enough to risk yourself anyway,” she replied. She had returned to her typical expression, a carefully neutral face that now seemed altogether different from the naturally emotionless Eisner exterior.
“The physician at home wasn’t nearly as good as the White mages here.” I’d known I was weak, but not that I had no hope of growing stronger.

She sighed and rose from her seat. “Well, I hope you take good care, for the sake of your ambitions. If I’m correct, I will be seeing you tomorrow in Black Magic.”

She left me there after that brief conversation. It was clear we had a common enemy, and yet Edelgard didn’t appear ready to invite me to join her own campaign against the Insurrection. I wondered what answer she might have been looking for, when she’d questioned my character so.

At dinner, I let my whole house know about my permanent withdrawal from Combat, though I could tell a few of them had already guessed as much. Leonie hadn’t informed the other Deer, since she’d just returned from sparring with Professor Eisner, and seemed thrilled to have lost to him.

“Well, that’s terrible! But you’d better stop complaining about your vegetables, then! They’re really good for you!” Hilda chided me.

I sighed. “Okay, Mom.”

“What? No, you need to eat more meat. That way, you’ll take the animals’ strength into yourself,” Claude argued, eliciting surprised looks from around the table.

“What are you talking about, Claude? That’s not how nutrition works!” Hilda exclaimed.

He displayed genuine surprise. “Huh?”

“The protein in meat only builds up your muscles after you exercise them! Someone like Lysithea who can’t exercise very much shouldn’t eat a lot of meat, because meat also has a lot of fat that could make her, uh, fat!” Raphael explained.

“Sorry, I don’t know what this ‘protein’ thing is,” Claude apologized.

“I’m guessing you’ve never heard of starches, sugars, or vitamins either, then?” I asked.

“Of course I know about sugar! You use it to make things taste sweet. Starch, you use to thicken soups. Never heard of a vitamin, though,” he admitted.

“I recommend you check out a textbook on nutrition, then,” I said. “It sounds like this might be one area in which your education was lacking.”

“Perhaps this is a cultural difference?” Lorenz suggested. “If I recall correctly, the basics of nutrition have been taught by the Church for centuries, as part of their ethos of serving the public’s health. It may be that such knowledge was not exported to Almyra due to being seen as possessing a religious connotation.”

“Hm… it’s true that magic is treated with a lot more superstition in Almyra than over here. In Fódlan, even though almost all priests are trained to heal, there are plenty of other folks who learn to cast. In Almyra, only the holy men are allowed to study and practice magic. You have no idea how strange I find it that you let heathens sign up for Black magic classes, even though you claim that magic is divine in nature,” Claude explained. “I wonder how much other good advice we might have written off because of where it came from.”
Claude put a piece of the night’s meal into his mouth. We had been served a plate of barley, assorted beans, and vegetables with three fried balls of dough.

“Wooh! That’s a unique flavor! Where’s this from?” he exclaimed, still chewing on one of his dough balls.

I put one into my mouth, and—OW, HOT, BURN—I spit the fishy dough back out onto my plate and quickly reached for my drink to put the fire out, almost spilling it in my haste.

“What the hell!?” I shouted as soon as I was able to breath again. “Are they trying to kill us? What kind of food burns you when you eat it?”

“I don’t know, but I love it! I can’t believe rich people get to eat like this all the time!” Leonie exclaimed before biting down on another ball.

“It’s from the West,” Ignatz shared. “There are some places in Derdriu that sell spicy Brigidese and Dagdan food like this, but they’re really expensive. I’ve only had it a couple of times.” He took a bite. “Mmm, delicious.”

“Only three…” Marianne let out with a dejected look on her face. All of her dough balls were already gone.

I gave one of my two remaining spicy fishy dough balls to her and one to Leonie. “Please, by all means, take these away from me,” I begged. “I’ll just focus on forcing down these vegetables.” Why did all healthy food have to taste so bad?

15th of Great Tree Moon, 1180IY

There were eleven students in Professor von Essar’s Black Magic I class, meeting in Classroom B: Myself, Hilda, Lorenz, Claude, Edelgard, Hubert, Dorothea, Linhardt, Annette, Mercedes, and a second-year student, a Blue Lions noble named Gianni. We stood by the room’s entrance per Professor von Essar’s direction until the bell rang. The professor was accompanied by a second-year student from the Golden Deer, a noble named Rosa. She was the daughter of a Gloucester knight and one of the people who’d interrupted my reading in the main hall.

“Welcome to your first Black magic lesson at the Officers’ Academy. Here, we will dedicate time to your personal development as a battle mage,” Professor von Essar began.

“First a bit about myself. I was born in 1129, the third child of the Baron von Essar and bearer of a Minor Crest of Indech. I graduated from the Imperial Wizard’s College in 1152, the valedictorian of my class, and then began a career of research at that institution. My development of several new methods of Crest testing led to my appointment as the head of the department of Crestology in 1159. However, in 1164, I accepted a position teaching White Magic here at the Officers’ Academy. When the previous Black Magic instructor retired in 1174, I switched to teaching Black Magic, as it was found that the White Magic position was easier to fill.

“Now, it is true that as a Crestologist, White magic is indeed my true specialty. That said, you will find my knowledge and experience to be more than adequate when it comes to casting Black spells. However, you’re better off asking another about the tactical and strategic uses of your magic, as I have no combat experience myself.

“Our first matter of business will be to determine what skill you already possess. It is typical that a
single Black Magic I class contains students that range from complete beginners to practiced mages of several years. Please, raise your hands if you are capable of conjuring a flame,” he instructed.

All hands raised save Hilda’s.

“Lady Hilda, please take a seat for now. Everyone else, put your hand down if you can cast a combat-ready fireball.”

I lowered my hand, as did Hubert and the Blue Lion girls.

“I see. The fireball is the iconic spell of a combat mage; you cannot be considered one unless you can cast that most basic of Black spells. As such, I will be enlisting the assistance of those who can already cast the fireball to aid in catching the other students up. Once we are all fireball-ready, we will progress to more interesting methods of offense.

“Lady Rosa, please lead the first-year students in guiding their peers to the complete fireball while I introduce Lady Hilda to the ways of magic,” Professor von Essar directed.

“Greetings, my lords and ladies. I am Lady Rosa Tanja Lacy, and I will be leading you down the path of flame. The first thing to keep in mind is safety. You needn’t hold back as much as normal, as this entire room and everything in it have been warded against most forms of magical damage, including magical flame. The only exception is us. Please keep in mind to stand at least ten feet away from any of your fellow students while manifesting any sort of magical effect, and never to aim your magic at another person. Should you manage to light yourself on fire, please stay calm and drop to the floor, then proceed to put the fire out by rolling over it to deny it air. If ever you injure yourself or another, please alert Professor Hanneman or myself immediately so we may treat the injury as soon as possible,” the second-year said.

“The fireball spell is different from the flames you have been creating so far only in that it is of greater size, so as to have a higher chance of striking your targets, and that it is launched as a projectile. We will focus first on maneuvering the flame before attempting to achieve size.”

Rosa asked us all for our names, and then began pairing us up, so one could watch and give guidance while the other student practiced directing their flame across the other side of the room.

I was a bit annoyed that I’d be spending my first class teaching instead of learning, but I was paired with Edelgard, so I was looking forward to showing her my expertise. She made no attempt to acknowledge the previous day’s events; immediately dedicating her focus to the practice of moving her flame.

When I’d first started learning this spell, I’d had no difficulty directing the flame to and fro. Edelgard’s flame, however, moved erratically. She attempted to pass the flame from one hand to another, a basic exercise, and it moved across the space in front of her body in a zig-zag instead of a straight line.

I gave her some tips on how to conceptualize the actions so that the angle of movement would stabilize. It took her a few more tries, but soon, she was passing the flame from left to right with ease. Then, she practiced projecting the flame further away from her.

Mana was more difficult to control the further it went from one’s own body, so a projectile like the fireball would need to have its movement vector applied while it was still close enough to its caster to be easily controlled, but not close enough to burn the caster. One’s skill with controlling mana at greater distances could be developed with practice, which was essential for assassination spells that created spell effects from raw mana at a distance, like the one I’d learned for silently destroying
hearts. However, controlling the mana at the range of ten feet needed to launch a fireball did not take much skill, so Edelgard was soon able to launch her tiny flame from about that distance.

Making the flame larger was no issue for Edelgard. I watched as the fireball hovering ten feet away from her soon grew to a diameter of five feet, which she then launched at the opposing wall. When the wall was struck, the flaming sphere collapsed as the wards repelled the ignited mana. True to Rosa’s word, there wasn’t so much as a scorch.

“Thank you for your assistance,” Edelgard said after her first successful cast. “I believe I’ve progressed much faster than I would have on my own.”

“Don’t discount your own efforts,” I replied. “You’re able to succeed today because you’ve been working diligently to develop your mana base. That’s the real barrier to entry on a basic spell like this.

Dorothea, Lorenz, and Gianni were still practicing, but Linhardt had already finished casting his fireball. Claude was just sitting and watching, as he’d run out of mana about thirty minutes in.

“You know more advanced spells already, I take it?” she asked.

“A few, mostly dark spells,” I whispered, not wanting to advertise to the class that my spell kit revolved around killing sneakily or quietly.

It wasn’t long before Lorenz and Dorothea mastered directing their flames, but they’d both already expended too much mana to create fireballs of decent size.

Rosa called the class’s attention. “Okay, I think that’s a good place to call it for today. Those of you who ran out of mana, please stay a while I discuss some exercises you should do on your own to increase your mana base. As for the rest of you, you’re dismissed. A big thank you to all of our helpers! And don’t worry, I think we’ll be moving on from the fireball before too long.”

It was a relief to move outside the classroom, for though the flames we’d been using didn’t ignite anything thanks to the wards, they did heat the room up quite a bit.

“Lady Lysithea,” Linhardt called out to me. “I’m sorry about yesterday. I wasn’t thinking about what it must be like to live with a condition like yours. Will you please forgive me?”

“Why should I?” I snarled. “You’ve done nothing but be rude to me since the first day we spoke to one another. You snoop into my business, you spout off the most banal trivia like it’s a service, and you never stop to consider my feelings before opening your mouth!”

Linhardt was stunned by my refusal; he stood frozen in place with his mouth agape as I walked past him. I spared him no more than a glance as I headed back to my room, but I couldn’t help noticing Edelgard and Hubert coldly surveying the interaction.

I had no idea what Edelgard might glean from that interaction. If she knew Linhardt even somewhat well, it seemed all too likely that she would be able to guess that he’d pressed me for information about Blood Condensation, information I’d willingly given up in exchange for Linhardt’s help. Would she have approved of that exchange?

I’d almost made it back to my dorm when I noticed that the other two people present at the scene had decided to follow me. I turned around to see Annette and Mercedes jogging to catch up with my abrupt departure. I waited for the two of them, curious to see what they wanted from me.

“May I help you, ladies?” I asked.
I’d yet to have a substantial conversation with either of them, but I’d seen them around. Annette was only slightly taller than me and very energetic, always chattering animatedly to whomever was present. Mercedes was quiet without being shy, beautiful without being flashy, and possessing of a gentle and cheerful demeanor. They were nearly as inseparable a pair as Edelgard and Hubert or Dimitri and Dedue—I wondered if they had a similar master-servant relationship, or if they were just close friends (or lovers?).

“Why, we wanted to introduce ourselves, of course. We’ve been trying to get to know everyone, but you’re one of the ones we haven’t had a chance to chat with just yet!” Mercedes cheerfully reported.

“We haven’t had a chance yet because you seem to only talk to people in your own house! But, we can’t just leave you alone after seeing you fight with Lord Linhardt like that! All your friends are still in class, right?” Annette asked.

I shook my head. “My feud with Lord Hevring isn’t anything you need concern yourselves with.” The more students found out about Blood Condensation, the higher the risk it would leak to the Church. “However, I would be glad to make your acquaintance. Would I be mistaken in guessing you attended the Royal School of Sorcery in Fhirdiad?”

“Not at all! That’s where Mercie and I met!” Annette exclaimed. “Where did you learn magic?”

“Private tutors,” I replied. “You two are close, I take it?”

“Of course! Mercie’s my best friend in the whole wide world!” Annette proclaimed, beaming. Mercedes smiled her agreement.

“So, what brings you to the Officers’ Academy?” I asked. “In my case, I wanted a better magical education, but my family is on bad terms with the Empire, and Fhirdiad was much farther away. Leicester’s magic schools aren’t nearly so impressive.” I wasn’t lying, since those were among my reasons.

“Well, in my case, I’m supposed to be looking for a husband. It’s a bit of a waste, if you ask me, but I prefer it to letting my stepfather do the match-making,” Mercedes explained.

“I’m here to support Mercie!” Annette declared. “Oh, but, if you see a knight with hair the same color as mine, let me know, okay? One of my relatives wandered off a while back, so I’m out here looking for him. He was a fierce fighter and a devout believer, so I think he might have joined the Knights. Trouble is, half the knights change their names when they join, and more than half of them are out on missions at any given time! For all I know, it might be another year before he comes back to the monastery, even if I turn out to be right!”

“I’ll keep an eye out,” I said. “I’ll be seeing both of you again in White Magic, right?”

“That’s right!” Annette exclaimed. “I’m hoping we’ll learn a lot more than our first day of Black, but I guess it must be rough for the professors to manage teaching students of all different levels. I mean, Edelgard, Dimitri, Dedue, and Felix could probably fight off everyone else in the class working together in a melee, but they have to take Combat at the same pace as the rest of us.” I nodded my agreement.

“Would you like to join us for tea after class?” Mercedes offered. “They let students use the kitchen on Saturdays, so I made a whole lot of scones and biscuits!”

“Ooh, Mercie’s sweets are the best! You’ve got to try them!” Annette urged.
“Well, with an endorsement like that, how can I refuse? I graciously accept your invitation.” I agreed.

I didn’t see a political benefit to befriending these two, but they were nice, and offering me sweets, so I felt I ought to oblige them. Besides, after all I’d dealt with over the past week, I deserved the treat. After all, I was sure that something would happen in White class to make the day even worse.

Chapter End Notes

thanks to @alchworks for beta reading
Chapter Notes

Perspective: Byleth

15th of Great Tree Moon, 1180IY

My work didn’t yet ease on my days off. As I was creating two years’ worth of lesson plans, I still spent some time in the library that Tuesday morning working on the later parts of my curriculum. Now that I was teaching classes, I had much less time to spare for the task, so I suspected I’d be continuing this grind through the end of Great Tree Moon.

Today, I would finally be able to make progress on learning about my Crest and origin as I began to study White Magic in Manuela’s class. My safety, residence, and income came at the grace of a woman whom I was certain had lied to me about the circumstances surrounding my Crest, my birth, and my mother’s death. Though she behaved as though she truly cared for me, I felt uneasy knowing that Rhea was hiding something from Father and I. What about my birth could be so terrible that she felt the need to shield us from its comprehension? Even if my unnatural aspects were a curse Rhea had willfully or accidentally inflicted upon me, I could not forgive her for the deed if I remained ignorant of the specifics.

After a quick lunch, I arrived at Classroom C with time to spare. Atop the large desks now stood cages of rats.

Manuela noticed my arrival. “Byleth dear, it’s good to see you. Seteth informed me you’d be joining in on my Tuesday and Thursday classes! What has you interested in the healer’s arts?”

“I’ve long believed magic to be an incredibly useful skill. I was studying Black magic before, but with my recent career change, I can’t think of many scenarios where launching fireballs would help much. Being able to heal, however, can benefit anyone in an emergency. If a student were injured in a training accident, for example, being able to treat them on the spot might save their life.” This wasn’t my primary motivation, but it was compelling enough reason for anyone to learn.

“It certainly comes in handy,” Manuela agreed. “Back when I was in the opera, I did save a few shows by treating injuries myself instead of fetching or paying for a professional healer.”

“What’s with all the rats?” I asked, looking over the cages.

“I’ll explain once class begins,” she said.

The first students to arrive were Annette and Mercedes. I approached and greeted them, “Lady Annette, Ms. von Martritz, how are classes treating you?”

“Professor Eisner? Are you here to teach White Magic, too?” Mercedes asked.

“The opposite, actually. I’ll be studying alongside you for this year. Professors are allowed to sit in on another’s classes if there are no scheduling conflicts,” I said.
“My, how diligent of you!” Mercedes said. “As far classes go, it’s been rough. When it comes to warfare, I’m afraid I don’t relish the study.”

“Well, I thought your class was great!” Annette disagreed. “Your explanations were very clear, detailed, and paced for good note-taking!”

“Thanks.” Leonie had also complimented me on a class well-taught. I was surprised to be receiving any praise so soon after starting.

“By the way, Lady Annette, are you free after this class? There’s a matter about which I’d like to speak with you in private.” I didn’t see any good reason to put off informing Annette about her father’s delinquency.

Annette was surprised. “Huh? Oh, sorry Professor, but Mercie and I already made plans to have tea with Lady Lysithea. Maybe another time?”

“What about after this class on Thursday? While it isn’t an urgent matter, I believe it’s information you would like to know sooner rather than later,” I said.

“Sure,” she answered, eyeing me curiously.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t like to join us for tea as well, Professor? I’ve never seen you smile, but I bet a taste of the biscuits I made on Saturday could change that!” Mercedes said.

“There’s no need to fuss over my face. I just don’t smile, even when I’m happy,” I explained. “As for the tea, I suppose I can join you, if Lysithea doesn’t object.” It seemed like she was still uncomfortable around me, even though I hadn’t bothered her about anything since last Monday.

“Wonderful! Oh, there she is!” Mercedes exclaimed.

Lysithea entered the room in a group with her fellow Golden Deer Ignatz, Marianne, and the second-year Rosa. Mercedes and Annette excitedly waved and beckoned her over. Her face flashed in surprise upon seeing me, but she soon returned to a neutral expression and came over.

Mercedes asked, “Lady Lysithea, I was wondering if you would object to Professor Eisner joining us for tea? He’s about our age, and he’s studying White magic as well, so I thought we might like to get to know him better.”

Her answer surprised me. “Hmm… well, I was looking forward to it being just us girls, but I won’t object to the Professor’s presence.”

“Don’t feel obligated to allow me to join. I would hate to impose,” I said.

“You’re not just trying to get out of it on another’s behalf, are you?” Lysithea asked, somewhat accusing me.


Annette giggled. “Of course not! No one can resist the temptation of Mercie’s sweets!”

The 1pm bell rang shortly after a trio of second-year Blue Lions arrived, so Manuela called for everyone’s attention.

“Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to White Magic I. This class focuses on using White magic to diagnose and treat wounds and other medical problems afflicting a living being. That is
not all that White magic consists of, however. Should you take White Magic II, you will learn warding and gating, the other applications of magic that are considered White.

“The foundation of the healing arts is a technique known as White Sight. To treat a condition, a mage passes their mana into a patient. This mana is used to sense a patient’s insides on a level too fine to be seen otherwise, even in places that light cannot reach. Only once a mage has an understanding of the structure of a patient can they use their injected mana to treat the patient’s wounds or other ailments.

“The first skill a mage of any kind usually learns is to create a small flame, as it is a very simple task that requires several of the essential skills of magic. Have any among you yet to create your first flame?” Manuela asked.

Ignatz raised his hand. “I’m still learning how to move the mana around my body,” he said.

“Soren dear, please direct Mr. Victor through the essentials,” Manuela commanded the second-year student, a Black Eagle, who was serving as her teaching assistant.

Manuela went on to explain, “The rest of you will be practicing your White Sight on the rats we have here. We will be working with rats throughout the year for a few reasons. First, it is unsafe to attempt any White magic technique on a human if you are not confident in your ability to do it correctly the first time. Living beings are far more fragile internally than you might believe. Second, it is easier to work with small subjects. While we could work with insects even more easily, they have little anatomic similarity to humans, so working with them will not teach you what you need to know for healing people. Third, rats have no mana of their own, so it is easier to move your mana into and about their internals. In order to inject your mana into a space occupied by another being’s mana, you must expend extra effort to displace the mana that is already there.

“The principle behind White Sight is simple. First, you will expel mana through your hand, much as you would for creating a flame. However, instead of expelling that mana into the air, you will expel it through the point of contact with your patient so that it enters their body. Next, you must attempt to move that mana around inside your patient. This will give you sensory feedback on their internals. By paying close attention to that feedback, you can learn what kinds of structures exist at different points in the patient’s inside. As you continue to practice White Sight over the coming months, your ability to interpret the information it gives you will improve until the point where you can sense cells, the basic units of life that all of the Goddess’s creatures are composed of.

“Something else to keep in mind is that you should avoid creating spell effects while using White Sight. Accidentally igniting your mana, for example, will have disastrous effects on your patient.”

After that explanation, Manuela began showing us how to handle the rats, so we could get them to hold still for our examinations. Soon, I was handling my own rat and passing my mana into her.

I hadn’t really thought about the feeling of moving my mana before, even though I had grown accustomed to moving it around my body and through the air. Somehow, my consistent ability to locate the invisible, intangible energy hadn’t managed to force the realization that my mana provided its own sense. Feeling my mana move through the rat was such a distinct sensation, however, that I could no longer stay ignorant of all the sensation my mana had been subconsciously providing me, separate from touch or sight or smell.

I let just a pea-sized ball of mana travel throughout the rat I was caressing in the crook of my arm, letting the sensations wash over me. The sheer amount of unfamiliar feelings froze up my body. The flood of input reminded me of times I’d lost my sight or hearing, then been stunned when my
eyes or eardrums regenerated and restored my senses. Shocked, I withdrew my mana from the rat and returned it to its cage while I stopped to try and process all of that magical noise.

My thoughts were interrupted by a loud popping noise. The second-year Blue Lion Evan had accidentally ignited his mana and exploded his rat. Immediately, the other rats began to squirm and riot in fear. Lysithea cried out in pain as her rat bit her; another second-year Blue Lion Tiphanie dropped hers, and it fell to the floor and began scurrying away. Others hurried to put theirs back into the cages before things got too out of hand.

Manuela urged us not to chase after the dropped rat, instead reaching for a container in which she stored treats to attempt to entice the rat’s return, while the rest of us worked to clean up Evan’s rat shrapnel. However, the dropped rat escaped outside when the classroom door opened from without.

“Sorry I’m late… I took a nap after Black Magic and I overslept,” Linhardt said as Tiphanie’s rat scurried past his boots.

“What a way to start the class off! Didn’t someone do the same thing when we started practicing White Sight at the Royal School?” Annette asked.

“Mhm… those poor rats,” Mercedes confirmed with a frown.

“I wonder if Lord Evan scared them badly enough that we’ll have to use different rats next time,” Lysithea said.

“You were right, Lady Annette. Ms. von Martritz’s biscuits are great,” I added.

My comment earned me a peculiar look from Lysithea. Wait, nobles had special rules for tea time, didn’t they? I had never learned them, so I ignored her and dunked the biscuit I’d bitten from back into my tea, readying for another bite.

“Thank you, Professor! I’m glad you enjoy them,” Mercedes said.

“Professor,” Lysithea interjected, “It has occurred to me that, since you are a commoner, you must be unfamiliar with the proper etiquette for afternoon tea.”

“The thought occurred to me,” I answered, “but since I’m a commoner, I’m sure I’ll be forgiven. This is my first afternoon tea, after all.”

Rhea hadn’t addressed my etiquette at all when we’d had tea the morning I’d arrived at the monastery. She’d also had substantially less food at the table; just a few sweets, no scones or sandwiches.

“So, I’m taking your first time? Oh my…” Mercedes said with a mischievous grin, causing Lysithea to blush for whatever reason.

“Oh, don’t worry about it! Just watch what I do, so you’ll know what to do next time someone invites you!” Annette reassured.

“Got it.”

The other three took sandwiches from the cake stand, so I finished my biscuit and grabbed one
myself. The small sandwich wasn’t even composed of a whole slice of bread, and it contained only vegetables for substance and aioli for flavor.

“So, Professor, you seem quite young compared to your colleagues. How did you happen into this position?” Mercedes asked.

I explained my situation to her as I had to the Golden Deer.

“Oh my! I knew I was older than the other students, but I didn’t think there would be two professors younger than me! If people your age are already becoming professors, I guess I need to hurry up and get married, huh?”

“No rush! You’ve got two whole years!” Annette encouraged her.

“Well, it’s not like I really earned it. I’m sure the Church could have hired a more experienced teacher; in fact, I’m amazed they didn’t,” I said.

There was a pause in the conversation as we each took a bite of our sandwiches.

“Professor, may I ask why you don’t show your emotions very much? You always seem to have a neutral expression,” Lysithea asked.

“I’m not sure. I’ve been this way since the day I was born, I’m told. Of all the people I’ve met, only Father has been able to read my moods,” I said.

“Whoa… mysterious!” Annette exclaimed. “Can you smile on purpose?”

I tried to force the corners of my lips upward.

“...No good,” Annette said. “You’ll just scare people away if you look like that.”

I tried to force a frown, instead.

“That frown somehow makes you look smug instead of sad.”

“I guess I know what to do the next time I’m feeling smug, then,” I joked.

The next item to be eaten was our scones. I copied the others’ movements, breaking the scone in half with my fingers. I watched as they passed dishes of jam and cream around, spreading some of each on their plates. I served myself in turn then copied Annette as she broke off a piece of scone and slathered it with the condiments she’d served herself.

Annette asked, “You’ve traveled a lot, haven’t you, Professor? Where would you say your favorite place was?”

“Bearigon, the capital of Brigid,” I answered without hesitation. “I’m not sure what the future holds, but I’d like to visit my home city again some day. There simply isn’t anywhere like it in Fódlan.”

“Interesting! As for me, I can’t say I’ve been anywhere as impressive as the monastery. It’s just wonderful here,” Mercedes said.

“The monastery’s pretty great, but I’m more fond of Fhirdiad, to be honest. There’s something special about the place you grew up, isn’t there?” Annette asked.

“Hmm… I see what you mean. The church in Eastern Faerghus where I spent my youth certainly
“is special to me,” Mercedes agreed.

“If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather not share my own opinions on the matter,” Lysithea said before taking a sip of tea. Since she’d been a captive in her youth, I doubted she had the same fondness for her early years that the rest of us did.

There was another break in the conversation as we enjoyed the scones.

“Professor Eisner,” Mercedes asked, “What do you think of Professor von Bartels? I know you only recently became colleagues, but I’m curious to know how he’s doing.”

“Lord Emile? He doesn’t like to talk much, but he’s a good sparring partner. Do you know him?”

“Sort of… he’s my younger half-brother, you see. We separated when I was only ten years old. Living in that household as he did, I can’t help but worry about him.”

“Hmm…” My description of Emile was perhaps an understatement. He wasn’t merely quiet; he seemed to actively avoid people most of the time. He smiled when we sparred, but he would only shoot me glares when we encountered one another outside the training grounds.

“Professor,” Lysithea interrupted my thoughts, “grunts are never an appropriate response in a setting that demands any sort of etiquette.”

“Apologies.”

With the scones finished, we were able to move on to the biscuits, finally.

“Incredible…” Lysithea moaned, having devoured her first biscuit with a ferocity that would make you think she hadn’t just eaten the sandwich and scone. I was of the same mind as I moved on to my third biscuit.

“Hold on, you three! You’ll spoil your supper if you gorge yourselves on sweets!” Mercedes cried.

Lysithea ignored her, grabbing another biscuit. “That’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make.”

That evening, I sparred with Emile again. As we took a break between rounds, I decided to strike up a conversation for once.

“Ms. von Martitz tells me the two of you are half-siblings. What’s the story there?” I asked.

Emile shot an annoyed look towards me. “Don’t know. I was eight when they left.”

“Left?” Come on, elaborate.

“Mercedes and my mother. They left. Mercedes says they went to the Kingdom and lived in a church.” Nothing she hadn’t already said. “You always wear that gambeson when you train. Don’t you get hot under all that?”

“Not particularly,” I answered, annoyed that he’d changed the subject. Emile’s toned and shirtless body glistened with sweat, but between my Crest and my general strangeness, I never perspired.

Emile frowned. “You must not be working hard enough, then. Let’s go again until you can’t take


it anymore.”

As we continued to spar, he continued to beat me again and again until he started to tire and I gained the upper hand.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” he accused me. “You should stop holding back. If we were fighting for real, I would have killed you many times over before you got me tired enough to defeat me fighting like this.”

“I’m not holding back, I just have a lot of endurance,” I denied. “You win unless you’re tired because you’re a better swordsman than me, and you’re taller on top of that. Anyway, you’re right that it’s pointless for me to practice against exhausted opponents, so let’s call it a night.”

Emile looked like he wanted to shout some pejorative at me, but he reigned himself in. “You can fight unarmed, right? Let’s do that next time instead of using swords,” he suggested.

“Sure.”

16th of Great Tree Moon, 1180IY

I taught my second day of classes that Wednesday, lecturing on infantry weapons as I had armors and shields previously. I’d drawn polearms, swords, a war bow, and crossbows from the armory to use as examples.

I was starting to get an idea of who in the first-year class cared the most about my subject based on where they sat. On the side of the aisle to my right, a cluster of Black Eagles dominated the front two rows and took attentive notes—as expected from the loftily titled Edelgard, Petra, and Ferdinand. Hubert sat behind Edelgard, jotting down brief notes every so often, while Dorothea and Bernadetta scribbled more intensely. Occasionally, Bernadetta would jolt as if startled, but then shake herself out of it without causing a fuss.

At the back of that side sat Claude, Hilda, Marianne, Raphael, and Ignatz. Of this group, no one seemed to take notes except Ignatz. Sandwiched between the two groups sat Annette and Mercedes, who took turns passing their notes between the two of them every ten minutes or so.

To my left, the remaining Blue Lions sat at the front near the aisle. They each took their own notes, except for Sylvain and Felix, who seemed to space out and look bored most of the time.

Lysithea, Leonie, and Lorenz sat at the front further from the aisle, diligent note-takers, all of them. Flayn sat a mere seat behind the Blue Lions, taking the occasional note. Caspar and Linhardt sat at the very back, with Caspar juggling his own note-taking with the need to shake Linhardt awake whenever the other lordling started to doze off.

As on Monday, Leonie stayed behind to help me return the weapons to the armory, then sparred with me. She had neither the technique, the strength, nor the height to overcome me, but she’d been practicing enough that defeating her was at least decent exercise.

Once we finished sparring and ate, I returned to my classroom to have my first scheduled session of office hours. I’d prepared a book from the library to study from as I waited to see if any students would visit me.

About half an hour in, a singsong “Professor!” rung from the door as a student stepped in.
I shut my book. “How can I help you, Hilda?”

She walked to the front of the room and sat down on one of the desks. “Well, you remember how I signed up for Black Magic at the start of the year, right? It turns out I made a poor decision there, so I’m looking to switch to another elective.”

“What’s the trouble?” I asked.

“Everyone else in the class is just so far ahead of me! I’m the only one there who’s never studied magic before, and it’ll be weeks before I even get to the point where I can do the fireball everyone else is learning right at the start!” she complained.

“So, you’re feeling left out?” I asked. “Alright. If you want to change to another elective, I have no objections, but please don’t decide the same thing about whatever you switch to, or it’ll be a hassle.”

“Okay!” Hilda cheered. “Um… but, I’m not sure what I should switch to. I don’t want to change classes and still be the worst!”

“Hmm…” I pondered the options. Riding would probably be pretty forgiving a subject; after all, there was only so much you needed to know to be able to ride a horse, right? I knew there were a few novice archers taking Archery, so Hilda would merely be one among several newbies. Flight, on the other hand… well, I hardly knew much about the subject myself. It was basically Riding in three dimensions, right?

I tried to imagine how my fellow professors would react to Hilda’s transfer to their class. I picture Emile’s look of utter indifference, Shamir rolling her eyes in annoyance, and Seteth… well, Seteth might either be exasperated to have a student with Hilda’s attitude or be delighted at the opportunity to drill some discipline into her.

“Well, there are others who are just starting out with Archery and Flight as well. Archery’s pretty physically intensive, so you may not want to take that course unless you’re looking forward to serious workouts,” I said.

“Okay, I’ll do Flight, then! I guess since I’m short, I should take advantage of it and learn to ride a pegasus, right?” she asked.

“Sounds good to me. I’ll make sure to let the headmaster know before class tomorrow, so you should be able to head to the rookery instead of Classroom B.”

“Thanks, Professor!” she called out as she left the room.

17th of Great Tree Moon, 1180IY

Thursday’s White Magic class went without explosions of gore as we continued to practice our White Sight on rats. I was still unable to glean any useful information from moving my mana around the rat; the sensations continued to register as indecipherable noise.

After the class, Annette followed me back to my classroom, where the students who had taken History were still making their way out. I approached a group of them when I spotted a certain individual.
“Happy birthday, Lord Hubert.” As of today, we were both twenty.

“Thank you, Professor. I appreciate the sentiment,” he responded with a smile more polite than joyous.

“Will you be having a celebration?” I asked.

“Just a small outing with a few friends. I don’t find that large parties suit me,” he responded.

“Have fun, then.” Tomas and his students had finished clearing out of the classroom by this point, so Annette and I proceeded inside.

I pulled one chair across a desk from another and beckoned Annette to sit.

“Lady Annette… how much of your reason for coming to the Officers’ Academy was to find your father?”

Her whole body jerked in surprise. “Have you seen him?” Her eyes were wide with anticipation.

“I have. We met last month in a mining village in the Western Empire called Remire. He was one of the Knights of Seiros who recruited Father and I to serve the Church. He uses the name ‘Gilbert’ now.”

“I knew he had to be alive! I’ve looked all over the monastery for him, so he must be out on a mission, right?” she asked.

“Yeah, he left shortly before you arrived.”

“When will he be back?” she begged, jittering.

I shook my head. “I’m not sure. His mission is on an indefinite time table; you might well have finished your two years before he returns.”

Annette clenched her fists and bent her head down. “Father… why?” Her voice came out in a pained squeal.

“After the death of King Lambert, Gilbert feels he cannot be responsible for his own life. He told me that in Faerghus, it’s expected that he die for such a failure, so he decided to give his remaining years to the Goddess instead. Though he loves you, he doesn’t consider himself worthy of being your father.”

“His name… is Gustave!” Annette screamed before breaking into sobs.

I sat there awkwardly, letting her cry. I wasn’t sure what I should do in a situation like this. I was tempted to hug her and comfort her in my arms, but I feared that misinterpreted physical affection might bring the wrath of Seteth down upon me. The menace he’d exuded when describing the punishments for acting inappropriately towards students had been perhaps too effective. Maybe I should have brought Mercedes along in case hugs were needed? However, even between the best friends, there had to be some privacy I should be seen as respecting.

I remembered the words of praise Gilbert had given me. Although you are a reserved person, you are also patient and kind. Was it truly a kindness that I had inflicted this state upon Annette? Perhaps she’d have been happier ignorant, able to continue hoping her father Gustave would return to the monastery, overjoyed at their reunion and ready to beg Dimitri for a chance to return to House Blaiddyd’s service.
As I continued to wait, her sobs eventually died down. “I hate him,” she murmured. “I hate him!”

shouting, this time. “That good for nothing—no wonder the king died, if he had such a cowardly knight protecting him! I bet he planned this! He asked to leave right before I got here, didn’t he? He couldn’t face me himself, so he ran away again and left some kid I don’t know to apologize in his place!”

She took a deep, but quivering breath, then wiped her tears away. “I’m sorry, Professor. He hasn’t been fair to you, either, if he’s making you fill in for him when he should be here!”

“Hmm,” I hummed, nodding slightly. I didn’t know what to say, but staying silent felt wrong.

Annette recomposed for a moment, then rose from her seat. “Unless there’s anything else he wanted you to pass on…?”

“No. I’m sorry, but that’s all.”

“I’ll be leaving, then. See you again in class, Professor.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to @alchworks for beta reading

Would you believe I haven’t actually finished a new chapter in 6 weeks? I got back into tabletop, so I just haven’t been spending much time working on this fic. Don’t panic if there’s no update on the 26th, I’ll get it out the week after!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!