A World of Little Dreams

by DrHu

Summary

Byleth has one wish: to remove the Crest Stone from within her heart and continue her life as a mortal.

So when her search points her to the legends of a powerful warlock, she chases after his legacy to a remote Almyran village. There, she discovers the last treasure he left behind for the world, a set of cards supposedly able to grant almost any wish. But when she accidentally releases the cards out into the world at large, she is set upon a hunt that will bring her across the globe as she hears the dreams of the people, all the while learning to grow in her roles as a queen, as a partner, and as a person.

Notes

This fic has a small prequel titled Reunion at Dusk that can be found in the series (only the first chapter of it is relevant). While not absolutely necessary, this fic will sometimes reference events.

Next, some dedications:
For Lizzie, for being the one who somehow knows all my interests and understands
For Noodles, whose enthusiasm for my works has kept me smiling and helping me through many a rough day

And last but certainly not least, for yarra, for helping me through my creative processes, for being the best enabler, and for without them this fic would not exist at all
A Wish

Byleth leans forward, staring intently into the mirror. Her reflection looks back at her with equal intensity: her brow is furrowed, lips are pursed, and her seaglass gaze only reveals discontent.

She runs her fingers through her mint-colored hair and rubs her cheeks. Her skin is as smooth and youthful as ever; looking at her, one may never guess that she is only a few years shy of thirty.

And therein lies the issue.

Over six years ago, Byleth emerged from the endless abyss of Zahras, cutting through time and space itself with the power Sothis passed on to her. And shortly later she would fall into a deep sleep that she would not wake from for another five years.

The world she awoke to was a different place: a war ravaged the continent, and her former students evolved with it. Seeing how they’d grown after all that time had been a great source of joy for her.

And, while she hadn’t admitted it then, it also made her uneasy.

She breathed not a word of it to anyone through the entire conflict, not until Shambhala fell, and Rhea lay in bed awaiting her end. Claude had left the room by then, urgently beginning to prepare for the assault by Nemesis’s army. But Byleth had remained just a little longer, just a few more minutes to have some lingering questions answered.

She had asked, then. About whether Rhea knew about any other potential side effects of the merge. The former archbishop had lived for well over a thousand years, and if the stories were true, she looked the same as she did when she was under the guise of Seiros. Byleth thought of Flayn who, despite her youthful appearance, had also not changed in the slightest after five years.

Rhea had given her a sad look then.

“You are the first success,” she said. “One that still defied my expectations. I do not know the full extent of the effects of inheriting my mother’s power. But if I could conjecture… The first generation of humans who imbibed our blood lived far longer than a normal human lifespan. You have already undergone physical changes; I can only imagine that merging your soul with one such as Sothis will only exacerbate those effects.”

“So… I could live as long as you?”

Rhea slowly bowed her head in affirmation. “Perhaps even longer.”

Those words settled in her stomach like a rock, a weight she could ignore only a little while before the burden became uncomfortable.

The three months that have passed since Claude's return to Fodlan felt like a dream. He’s wise and innovative, filling in the gaps where she’s lacking, guiding her where she needs to be while never losing his patience. And each day he never fails to make her laugh.

The one in the mirror continues to stare back. She wants to preserve the dream for as long as she can, as naturally as she can. Unable to look at her reflection any longer, Byleth turns away with a frown. She examines her hands, flexing her fingers. What might they look like, wrinkled and withered with age?
Would she ever find out?

The door to the bedroom creaks open, and Claude’s head peeks around it. He catches sight of his queen letting out a sigh before crossing her arms and glaring at nothing in particular. He recognizes that little furrow between her eyebrows, that focused far off look that alerts him to something serious.

Claude approaches her and tenderly lifts her chin. He gives her a soft smile as he jokes, “Was Viscount Kleiman that unpleasant? I can always scheme up a way to deal with him. What'll it be, my dear? Your pick. Unending bowel movements? Unstoppable flatulence? A swift kick to the stomach by a horse?”

Despite herself, Byleth can't help but crack a small smile. "Please. As if someone as stuffy as that could really bother me."

He still smiles, but it's a bit somberer now as he takes her face into his hands. "Then what is really bothering you?"

Byleth purses her lips, mulling over her words carefully. "Do you remember when you told me that if I helped you achieve your dream, you would help me achieve mine?"

"Of course. I still stand by that promise."

"Claude, I…. Before Garreg Mach, before we met for the first time in Remire, I wasn't—I wasn't really one to have dreams. No lofty goals for the future beyond surviving to see the next day. And I suppose I still don't. But when I'm with you, I…"

"Claude, if I asked you to help me remove the Crest Stone that Rhea put into me, would you do it?"

He blinks, taken off guard. "The goddess—Sothis's Crest Stone? Why?"

"I mean, look at me." She steps back and gestures up and down her person. "I pretty much look the same as I did after I came out of that trap Solon put me in. I fell asleep for five years and nothing about me changed, even though everyone else did."

Byleth sighs, running a hand over her face. Claude wonders just how long this has been on her mind. Ever since her return to the war? Has she been thinking about this the whole time?

"I think about Rhea, and how long she lived. I think about the Ten Elites and Nemesis, about my father… Just taking Nabatean blood gave them all those extra years. What did it do to me, merging together with Sothis like that?"

"Claude, when I'm with you… I said before I didn't have any dreams, at least not big ones like you do. But when you're with me… I start wanting all kinds of things. I want to have children and watch them grow up. I want to retire to some nice, tropical island and just watch the stars together with you. I want to grow old with you, Claude. Grow old and when the time comes, be buried right next to you."

She sighs again and takes a hold of her lover's hand, the one bearing the ring she gave him before his initial return to Almyra. It glimmers, matching the green piece on her own finger. Bright, crystal green eyes meet his own. They’re earnest, almost unbearably so, and they look as though they hold the whole world for him. Claude feels a deep ache settle within his chest.

"I just don’t want to live very long in a world without you in it,” she admits. “Without any of our friends. And if I have to rip this stone out of me to do that then—“
She cuts herself off the moment she sees Claude’s face. For some reason, it looks like he’s about to cry.

“Claude?”

Byleth takes hold of his face, and he’s immediately aware of the wetness creeping into his eyes. Claude blinks away any impending tears, instead pulling his partner into a tight embrace.

“I’m fine,” he murmurs. “I’m fine. I just…”

“I’m sorry if I said something out of line. Did I hurt you?”

“What? Oh no, my love, you could never. Quite the opposite, actually.” He plants a kiss on her forehead. Claude’s eyes are impossibly tender when they pull apart and he tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. “Why didn’t you say anything before?”

“It didn’t seem appropriate. And I… Well, I was afraid you would have disagreed.”

“Disagreed?”

“Maybe you’d think Sothis’s power was too useful to give up. Maybe you’d think it was foolish to throw something so powerful away.” She pauses, giving a shy glance. “Do you think it’s foolish?”

Claude snorts. “At the end of the day, whatever she left you is just a tool. One that you might not need at this point. And besides, it’s yours to do with what you please. My opinion doesn’t matter; I made you a promise, and I’m here to keep it.”

It’s a huge relief, hearing him say those words. Byleth feels a weight fall from her shoulders. Just having his support alone is enough to almost make her shed tears; all she can do is hold a hand over her chest and breathe out the twisted knot of tension that’s been tightening within her ever since the end of the war. There are logistics to figure out, risks that he needs to know, but for now she wants to enjoy this.

Claude lets her have this brief moment, even feeling a tiny bit guilty that she would ever have the impression that he would denounce her choice to begin with. Eventually his own smile fades, replaced by a more serious demeanor. Byleth, sensing the change in mood, focuses back onto him.

“I know this might be an urgent issue for you, but there’s something you need to know.”

“What is it?”

He heaves a heavy sigh. “It’s my parents. They’re asking me to go back.” Claude hesitates before continuing, “And they want me to bring you back with me.”

The air catches in Byleth’s throat, and her whole body freezes. Slow, muted alarm seeps into her, steadily chilling her from the core. Were he a crueler man, Claude may have laughed. Fodlan’s most esteemed war hero, its grand unifier, Rhea’s chosen, nervous over meeting some parents?

He doesn’t laugh, of course. The king does his best to soothe his beloved as he mutters soft encouragement.

“If it makes you feel better, you can just think of it as work,” he suggests. “Consider it a matter of…diplomacy.”

Even if there aren’t practical reasons for traveling to Almyra, Byleth could never bring herself to
refuse. Though he’s rarely brought it up since his return, she knows Claude has always wanted her to see his homeland. And what kind of trip would that be if she doesn’t meet his family along the way?

The famed Ashen Demon steels herself and gathers her courage. She thinks of all the foes she’s faced: she’s escaped the rabid maw of eldritch monsters and charged down hordes of enemy battalions. But now she wonders if this is a challenge that could surpass anything else she’s encountered.

Byleth recalls something Claude told her some time ago: that no matter what happened, life always kept turning. And it seems life is insisting on putting her on a new journey.

“Byleth?”

“Hmm?”

“It won’t be so bad. Almyra has plenty of magic and techniques that don’t exist in Fodlan. You might find something that can make your wish come true.”

That makes her laugh, and a little sad at the same time. Byleth gently pats his cheek with a smile in spite of herself. Perhaps one day she’ll be able to break him away from the give-and-take lens he viewed the world through for so long. For now, her goal of separating herself from Sothis will have to wait.

“I’m going for you,” she tells him. “So let’s get started, before I get cold feet.”
The journey east across Fodlan’s Throat isn’t as long as Byleth anticipates. It’s a flurry of activity, getting everything sorted out before their departure. Lines of communication are established, administrative duties are meted out, and all of it makes Byleth almost reluctant to travel. She can’t help but feel a little jealous of Claude, who has the right royal ties to ensure someone he trusts can handle a country in the case of his absence.

He laughs when she brings it up, and the sound is almost downright scornful. “I think you overestimate how much I can really rely on anyone over there for long periods of time.” He smiles, but it’s empty, just a reflex. “My dad keeps it all from falling apart, and that’s all I wanted for the time being.”

*His dad…*

Byleth thinks a lot about Claude’s parents in those days preceding their departure. She wonders what they could be like; their marriage by itself is a sign of how unconventional they can be.

She thinks about his father, the former Shah Abbas, a man so determinedly dismissive of public opinion that he took a Fodlaner as his wife.

She thinks of Tiana von Riegan, a woman so driven she was willing to cross leagues, mountains, and borders to be with the man she loved living in a hostile foreign nation.

And she thinks of Claude, the child they bore fated to grow up alone and alienated.

What kind of relationship does he have with his parents? In the midst of her preparations, the question scratches at the back of her skull over and over. And as open as she is with Claude, for some reason she can’t bring herself to broach the topic with him.

It’s not that she’s afraid of his parents. It’s not that she’s afraid of their opinion of her.

> *My parents always told me that I wouldn’t grow stronger if I didn’t learn to fight my own battles. And so, in the end, I did. And I grew up to be as independent and self-reliant as my parents always wished for me to be. Lucky me, right?*

Every now and again, she thinks of those words. She remembers the loss of the twinkle in his eye, the almost imperceptible quiver at the edge of his lips. Looking back, she realizes it’s one of the very few times she’s ever seen Claude look small, and it fills her with a hot, molten sensation that threatens to sear a hole right through her.

Byleth isn’t scared of his parents. She’s more afraid of what she’ll do when she meets them.

The days leading up to their departure are filled with rigorous lessons in diplomacy, crash courses in anything anyone knows about Almyran culture and politics. Claude is strangely casual about the whole affair, even though he’s taken on the bulk of the work, not least of all the painstaking job of teaching her the main Almyran language. If there is anything she throws herself into, it is this. Byleth stumbles, she stutters, and she swallows all her pride as she struggles to rise to the challenge.

"As much I love seeing how cute you look when you're concentrating, you don't have to try this hard right now," Claude notes, amused. "You'll pick up a lot more of it when we enter the
country."

“I do have to try hard,” she mumbles in response, gaze focused on her parchment. “It’s important to you. So I have to.”

Had her attention been more divided, perhaps she would have seen the softening in his eyes, the subtle ease in his shoulders. He wonders if he’s losing his touch, finding his guard being dropped again and again over the past few months. Or maybe this is what’s supposed to be normal?

Their departure from Derdriu is filled with the expected fanfare. Byleth is bombarded with last minute pieces of advice, to the point where she’s almost grateful for the trip if only to get away. They’re accompanied by a small entourage, a mixed group of horseback riders and fliers acting as a small guard during their travels as well as a “cross-exchange team,” as Claude put it.

It’s been a while since she traveled for the sake of anything besides war, and the queen is reminded of her time as a mercenary. It’s a bittersweet thing, thinking about her father and their travels. She looks towards the horizon, toward the peaks of Fodlan’s Throat, and in spite of herself she smiles a little.

“Well, what are you grinning about?” Claude asks.

“My dad.”

“Jeralt? Anything about him in particular?”

Byleth pauses to think for a little. “He never said as much, but if there was one part of mercenary life he liked, it was the travel. I think once he mentioned hoping to go beyond Fodlan’s borders some day.”

“What do you think he’d say if he was still around to see this?”

“He’d be happy, I think. Knowing him, he’d probably go off on some grand journey around the world. Maybe even take me with him. You know, I’ve said I didn’t have much in the way of dreams but… I guess besides the Crest Stone, I always thought it’d be nice to see more of the world. I think that was my favorite part about being a mercenary too.”

Claude’s green eyes sparkle under the sun. “Then I think you’ll like these next couple of weeks.”

They follow a route east at Claude’s behest. It carries them away from the lush river-fed lands of the Riegan dukedom to the mountainous territories of House Goneril. They have a brief yet harrowing respite with the Goneril siblings that involves Holst trying to educate Byleth on the two different types of wyverns Almyrans raise, and Hilda raiding her baggage in an attempt to evaluate her fashion choices. Claude only chuckles, and when no one else is around, kindly informs Byleth that Almyrans in fact raise four different kinds of wyvern.

They depart from the Goneril residence with an abundance of supplies to last the rest of their journey. Continuing east, it doesn’t take them long before they’re at the doorstep to the peaks of Fodlan’s Throat.

As the entourage steadfastly march on, Byleth feels the trepidation within her heart grow. It’s a small but heavy thing, like an itch she can’t reach that steadily worsens with each day. She hasn’t felt this since the negotiation talks with the Alliance leaders during the war.

So she throws herself into her language studies, hoping to distract herself. She can string together rudimentary sentences now, something that makes Claude practically giddy with glee. If he speaks
slowly enough, she can catch at least a good portion of what he’s saying. Seeing his smile calms her nerves to the point of tolerance. She prays it will be enough to last.

Guided every so often by Holst’s troops scattered across the Throat, they slowly make their way through the mountains. With days still left till their arrival, Byleth finally gathers enough courage to ask Claude more detailed questions about his homeland.

He tells her in his own way, through anecdotes. He tells her of the times he snuck out of the palace at night, secretly frequenting the city bazaar and stuffing his face full of snacks and candies. He boasts of Almyra’s cookies, of toffees masterfully seasoned with nuts and saffron, of fried balls of dough dripping with syrupy sugar. (She has to physically remind him to get back on track, since it eventually devolves into long tirades on Almyran cuisine alone.)

Claude recounts hunting parties he was brought on, of a particular time he was separated from the group in a locale rife with wyverns. He speaks of laying low to the ground hidden among shrubbery as he waits for help, eyes wide as he watches the scaly creatures pass him by. He exalts on the many different kinds, far more diverse than the breeds found in Fodlan. Wyverns with longer necks, wyverns with forearms, feathery wyverns of all sorts of colors. Learning to ride one and use one effectively in combat is a rite of passage, he tells her. But they’ve always been far more than that; just as dogs, cats, sheep, and chickens are common staples in daily life for Fodlaners and Almyrans alike, so too are wyverns.

The young king regales his queen with all kinds of stories, from ridiculously opulent festivals he’s attended—“Fodlan parties can’t even compare!” he brags—to old, mysterious ruins on the outskirts of abandoned villages he’s visited. She listens, cobbled together as best an image of Almyra as she can. His tales become akin to bedtime stories; perhaps a tad exaggerated, yet they soothe and enchant her all the same. What’s more, they’re snapshots into Claude’s life before he came to Fodlan, puzzle pieces to who he was before he became a duke, before he lived and survived a continental war.

He doesn’t speak of his family much during his tales, and Byleth doesn’t ask. It saddens her when she notices how he never mentions having any companions during his childhood adventures. She sidles just a little bit closer to him during the journey when she remembers this, caressing his hand with her thumb in a silent show of comfort.

Snowy peaks grow thinner, and Byleth notices sharper declines as they march. The air grows warmer, and at last they emerge onto the other side of the Throat. As they make their way completely out of the mountains, she surveys the distant landscape. From what she can see, the ground is flat, flatter than anything she’s seen in Fodlan. Almyra holds plateaus as far as her human eye can see, and after being surrounded so long by tall peaks, it rattles her a bit.

It’s at this point Claude takes out a different map. He runs a finger down the southwestern coast of Almyra.

“Here, see? We’ll take this route down here and head to this city. I’ve already sent word ahead; there should be people waiting for us.”

Tension coils again within Byleth’s belly. At this point, Claude takes the lead, seemingly unperturbed despite setting foot once more in his homeland. As they venture deeper into Almyran lands, Byleth focuses on her surroundings, trying to absorb as much as she can. They’ve only just arrived, and it already feels so different from home. She looks about, taking in the air, the shape of the roads, the surrounding flora. Despite the nerves, excitement thrums through her, and a feeling of wanderlust she hasn’t experienced in ages wells up from within.
Dad, are you seeing this?

It doesn’t take too long before their destination comes into view. Claude orders them to hold, and they pull onto the side of the road, as far out of sight as they can manage.

“I’ll go in with someone to a rendezvous I’ve set up,” he tells Byleth. “I need you to stay here with the rest for now, but I won’t be long.” For the first time since they arrived, he looks unsettled.

“Are you sure? Is everything okay?” she asks.

He presses his lips together and nods. Pulling her aside, he says, “Now that we’re here… There are some things I need to tell you.”

“Huh?”

Claude fidgets. He looks like a child who knows he’s about to be scolded. “This has been on my mind for awhile… Ever since I came back, three months ago. Now that we’re finally here, I figure… It’s better for you to hear it from me.”

“Hear what?”

“My name. It—it’s not actually Claude.”

Byleth waits for him to continue. He steels himself with bated breath, only to release it when she doesn’t give him the reaction he’s expecting.

“Really? Nothing? No indignant huffing? No cuffing my ear?”

“Indignant? Why would I be—oh. Over your name?”

“Well, I assume so, I just told you my whole identity this whole time was a cover!”

She keeps staring, and then it clicks. “Oh. Oh, Claude, erm—I’ve known that wasn’t your real name for years now.”

“What?”

Rolling her eyes, she explains, “Yes, Duke ‘Claude is a popular choice for fake names’ von Riegan. I seem to recall you saying that it’s a ‘solid, good, all-purpose moniker’. Add on the fact that I knew you didn’t grow up in Fodlan, and it ends up being a pretty reasonable hunch.”

He’s thunderstruck. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Not everyone is so eager to dig up secrets like you, you know. I figured you would tell me sooner or later when you felt more comfortable.”

Claude takes a few moments to gather his wits. Just when he thinks he’s got Byleth figured out, she always manages to throw him a curveball. He can only chuckle in the end at his poor assumptions; she keeps him on his toes, and he likes it that way.

“If you don’t mind me asking, what is your real name?”

He smiles faintly, holding her right in front of him so he can look her in the eyes. “It’s Khalid,” he answers quietly. “Mirza Khalid Zaufishan bin Abbas.”

“Mirza—Khalid—Zaufishan—bin Abbas,” Byleth slowly repeats back to him.
A thrill runs up and down his body as he hears the words. Her lips curl around the sounds like a caress, warm and gentle, like they’re safe inside her mouth. Claude feels a small weight disappear within him as she speaks; it’s like a cover that’s been ripped away, leaving him open and vulnerable yet freer than before. The king of Almyra is loathe to part with his secrets, but with this small confession, it feels like it’s the first time in a long while that anyone has seen him for who he is.

That being said, it still sounds weird as hell.

“Kha-lid. Khalid. Am I saying it right?”

He kisses her forehead. “You’re perfect. But honestly you can keep calling me Claude.”

“But it’s your name…?”

“It’s true that Claude was just a cover I chose, but… I’ve spent the last several years hearing you say that name and a guy gets used to some things, you know? It’s not really that bad a name… If it’s you, I won’t mind.”

“I don’t know how other people here would feel if they heard me call you that though…”

“Well, if we’re in court, I suppose it would be proper….” Claude shrugs dismissively. They both know his opinions on such things. Yet Byleth hardly wants to lose face in front of high ranking Almyrans; she continues to roll his name around her tongue, whispering it over and over until she can get it as close to how he says it as she can.

He gives her another quick kiss before he pulls away. “I’ll be back with some extra people in a little bit. Sit tight for me until then, alright?”

He sets out into the city with an attendant in tow. Byleth returns to the rest of the guard, keeping watch and listening to their chatter. She’s surprised to hear that all of them are curious about this new land they find themselves in: while some are more cautious, they all express some desire to see more. Byleth wonders if this was intentional on Claude’s part.

A few hours pass before someone alerts her to Claude exiting the city gates. The scout reports that he brings with him someone new.

"What do they look like?" she asks.

"I think it's Nader, ma'am."

She smiles and shakes her head at the familiar name. She would never admit it out loud, but she rather missed the boisterous, bearded general since his departure from Derdriu a few months back.

Byleth rushes out to meet them. Nader grins wide when he sees her, clapping a big, friendly hand on her shoulder.

“Well there, good to see you again, Professor! Oh, wait, I suppose I shouldn’t be calling you that anymore, should I? It’s Your Majesty now, isn’t it?”

She smirks. “It’s good to see you healthy and whole, Nader. Almyra hasn’t killed you yet, I see.”

“Ha! As if anything here could bring me down. That being said, with all the work the kiddo’s been giving me, I might be speaking too soon!”
Claude rolls his eyes. “Oh, what have I done…? Come on, let’s not waste anymore daylight.”

A small entourage of his own has followed Nader to the town: he goes to mobilize them, sending a messenger ahead to their final destination, the royal capital of Ulubey. Byleth and Claude gather their own guard, and he briefs them as they await the arrival of the other troop. She feels the smallest knot of worry in her stomach as they wait for Nader to return. The army Claude brought upon his return to Fodlan to repel the insurgents hadn’t remained long; even for the short time before he sent them back, they mostly kept to themselves, interacting with the Fodlaners only on occasion. She was in their territory now, and she had no idea what to expect.

They lead their troop back onto the road, just in time for them to see a group of riders approaching. Some of the guards stiffen, others peer at them curiously. Claude is unfazed, his shoulders relaxed as he steps out to meet them.

Nader whistles as he pulls his steed to a stop, the others behind him following suit. Byleth’s eyes immediately widen at the sight of the small Almyran brigade before her. Clad in the most beautiful, patterned silks, the Almyrans sit atop their steeds with poise and elegant control. Even the horses are adorned with elaborately decorated saddles and bridles. The entire company practically sparkles under the sun, and she can’t help but feel woefully underdressed.

Even though Claude is further ahead, she can feel the weight of numerous eyes on her as he greets them. Byleth watches as the soldiers collectively slide off their saddles and kneel before their king. Claude speaks a few words, some that she can catch, others that she can’t. She’s surprised when he gestures to her, beckoning her to stand next to him. The Almyran troop rises, and this time all eyes are on her. She stares back, trying to gauge their reactions. Some of them appear curious. Most betray little on their faces at all.

With his hand on her back, Claude introduces her with a smile. The Almyrans bow their heads respectfully, speaking a greeting in unison.

Mustered her courage, Byleth dips her head in response. “Thank you for your hospitality. My name is Byleth Eisner; it’s nice to meet you.”

At the sound of their language leaving her lips, a murmur of surprise ripples through the crowd. Many of them nod in approval, looking at Byleth with newfound respect. Next to her, Claude smirks, feeling prouder than ever.

Nader winks at her before calling out another order. His soldiers climb back onto their steeds, ready to go at a moment’s notice. Byleth gestures at the Fodlan troop to do the same, and they set out as one large group across the flat Almyran lands.

Initial contact with Nader’s brigade is at first slow and awkward. Few among the guards brought from Fodlan can speak any usable degree of the Almyran language; the two brigades stay within their circles for a while, and Byleth worries.

But before long she realizes she has little to be concerned about. She had almost forgotten how Almyran culture valued combat prowess; all it took was a sparring session and some curious Almyrans to break the ice. After a few scrapes and tussles, the two groups were laughing and drinking together soon after. It was also then that it was revealed the Almyran guard understood more of the Fodlan language than they let on.

The Fodlaners howled, chagrined. “So you heard all those things I said about your horses?!”

One of the soldiers grinned. “We did. We thought it would be funnier to not say anything then.”
The barriers between the two slowly crumbled, and it warmed Byleth’s heart to see. Unfortunately, the same could not be said for her.

She’s been a ruler of a sovereign nation for several months now, but she’s still not quite used to the formality of it all. Byleth knows the Almyran soldiers’ reticence towards her is most likely due to her position and closeness to Claude, but it still feels odd to be among a large company and not be part of the main body. She remembers the time spent in her father’s mercenary company; neither she nor Jeralt were ever separate from the other mercenaries’ romping and merriment. Back then, she thought that would be her whole life. Who could have known she’d be in such an extraordinary position years later?

She resigns herself to the situation, turning to Claude and Nader for company. If she thought the general was boisterous before, he’s practically bursting at the seams with energy now that they’re in his home territory. Byleth’s head spins at the number of recommendations he throws at her; if it doesn’t burst now, she’ll surely be in trouble if she follows through and goes with him to every brewery he’s suggested.

In between keeping track of every famous tavern and food market in the country, Claude makes sure to set time aside for proper enrichment. Byleth loves the quiet moments between them at night, well away from the main body of their guard. There is no rhyme or reason to what he decides to teach her day to day beyond their usual language lessons. If it’s a starry night, he’ll tell her Almyran folktales behind the constellations. If she spotted an animal earlier that she’s never seen before, he’ll recount all he knows about it. If they pass by a town he’s familiar with, he’ll describe to her all the attractions it holds.

Almyra grows warm this time of year, but the nights are still reasonably chilly. On one particular evening, only a few days away from their arrival in the royal capital, Byleth finds herself snuggling close to Claude as they sit together near the fire. He wraps his coverlet around her, pulling her close.

“Won’t be long now,” he says out loud, pensive. He’s been increasingly more solemn as the days pass, a far cry from his more optimistic persona. Though he’s as conniving and calculating as ever, Claude is sterner and more reserved toward the collective group. He’s shifted his general demeanor from a charming upstart to one more suited for a sovereign leader: Claude more directly commands the room wherever he goes, and he will allow no one to overlook him.

“Mm.”

“Are you nervous?”

Byleth turns her head to look up at him. “Are you?”

Grinning, he replies, “After everything we’ve been through? Hardly. If I could, I’d be parading you through every street and corner of the country right now.”

“Um… Please don’t.”

He winks. “Sorry, love, you can’t get out of that one. It’ll happen eventually. Almyran tradition, you see.” Claude nods at the Almyran branch of their troop “You probably figured out we’re a grandiose bunch.”

“...Great.”

Claude can’t help but chuckle at her expression, kissing the top of her head. “We’ll give it some
time for you to get used to everything else first, I promise.”

They fall silent for a little bit, though Byleth can tell he’s got something on his mind.

“What are you thinking right now, Claude?”

He takes a minute to mull it over. “I’m thinking about my family.”

She perks up at the topic, and he notices. “Ha! I knew you were interested. Stars, Byleth, your self control is astounding. If I were you I’d have pestered myself to death already.”

“Hmph. It’s how I keep myself sane. So, what do you have to say about them? Your family.”

Claude takes a deep breath. Where to even begin? He has an ocean’s worth of things to say, but the last thing he wants is to drown her in royal family drama, not when she’s about to live it herself.

“Well, my father… Us royals can be a fancy bunch, and I can’t think of anyone else who embodies that better than my old man. Sometimes the things he wears are worth more than what an entire village can muster together.”

“But he was still king.”

“Oh yes. He can blind you from all the jewelry he’s got on, but if you’re smart you should never look away from him. My aunts and uncles can be some of the most cutthroat people you’ll ever meet; for my old man to still come out on top says a lot.”

“Your mother must deal with a lot then.”

“Ha! If there’s anyone in the world who can reign that man in, it’s her. The toughest woman I know, well, aside from you, of course. Don’t ever think about crossing her; she’ll chew you up and spit you out like you’re nothing more than a bowl of soggy oatmeal.”

“...When she first came to Almyra, was it easy for her to adjust?”

Claude knows what she’s asking. How did Tiana von Riegan, the first Fodlaner to hold a position of power in Almyra, navigate the treacherous waters of Almyran politics? He doesn’t know how to tell Byleth that a very long time ago, she was probably softer than how he describes. He’s not sure how to admit that he has faint memories of a gentler Tiana, before he watched as court life sharpened her edges, before it hardened her skin to steel.

Fewer things scare him more than watching the same fate befall his beloved.

“She’s tough as nails, but… I won’t lie to you. I can’t imagine it having been easy for her.” He squeezes her arm, emphasizing his words. “Before you meet everyone, I should tell you about.. my siblings.”

“You have siblings?”

“Well, half-siblings, more accurately. My old man was busy before he married my mother.”

“So does he have more than one wife?”

“No, only one legal wife. One queen. He had concubines, just didn’t apparently like any of them enough to marry. He still had a few children before my mother came along; I’m his youngest child.”
Something clicks. “So, before, when you mentioned attempts on your life…”

Claude takes a deep breath. “They weren’t the only ones but… They certainly weren’t the best role models, I’ll say that much. Out of them all, I doubt you’ll expect much trouble from my parents. But the rest… You keep your guard up, alright? Don’t give them an inch.”

There’s an acerbic edge to his voice, and Byleth purses her lips. She wants to soothe his worries, to tell him that she can handle any attempts at physical harm, but she knows better than to underestimate a foe she has no experience with. She nestles her head into the crook of his shoulder, staring into the fire.

“I’ll be careful. I promise.”

“Good. Because you’re about to have a lot thrown at you in the next couple of weeks.”

“I have you. I’ll manage.”

He smiles, the softest he’s looked the entire night. “You and me, old friend. We’ll get through this like we always have, together.”

Claude wasn’t joking when he said she would have a lot thrown at her.

Their arrival at the gates of the royal capital is heralded with more fanfare than even her own coronation. First a messenger is sent ahead to alert the guards, and then they’re fetched by yet another troop. They join the brigade that initially met them when they first entered the country, and the soldiers fan out around them in formation. Claude addresses the Fodlan troops, ordering them to fall in line behind him and Byleth. Hesitant, she pulls her steed astride his, looking to him for guidance. He smiles encouragingly, reaching over to squeeze her hand.

“You don’t have to do anything for now. It’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Well, I guess you can try looking a little scarier. Believe it or not, that actually works here.”

So she sits a little straighter atop her saddle, reverting just a little into her Ashen Demon persona. Claude nods in approval.

“They’re going to be a lot more scared of you than you are of them soon enough, I promise you that.”

“Hm.”

Once they’re ready, Nader barks out an order, and they begin their march. The roads leading to the city are significantly more developed than those they’d previously traveled on; Byleth notices the way they grow steadily whiter and more opulent as they go. Her awe only grows once they arrive at the city perimeter. Their path into the city proper is overseen by a beautifully constructed wall, adorned with various mosaics and reliefs, and she can see several soldiers peering over the edge. On the ground two guards flank the split in the wall leading into the capital. As they approach, they stand up a little straighter, bowing as they open the way.

Byleth is not at all prepared for what lies within the city walls.

It’s the noise that shocks her. Only a few paces in, and a raucous, roaring clamor nearly deafens
her. All around her, the streets of Ulubey are adorned in bright and gaudy colors as far as the eye can see. Guards in silken garb line the sides of the streets while citizens in festive clothing throw out variegated debris by the bucketful. Spectators surround them, crowded next to the guards and peering out from their windows in their homes above, crying out cheers for their king as he returns to them once more. Byleth is thunderstruck, but she retains enough of her wits to keep a straight face as she slowly urges her falicorn forward. Claude plasters on a smile, waving to the masses as he leads them through the city.

There’s music playing somewhere, children can be heard faintly shrieking through the general din, and there is so much activity that she has a hard time keeping track of it all. She doesn’t dare let her eyes stray far from in front of her lest she lose herself in the crowd. Byleth can do nothing but follow Claude’s lead, her head spinning from all the noise.

She has no idea how long it is until they pull into a quieter road, a smaller one that looks more private. The general commotion of the public falls away as she realizes they’re entering special property. Nader has them quicken their pace, and Byleth beholds a giant garden sprawled before her, with a large palace set on the opposite end. The road leading up to it is split into two by a narrow waterway that crosses into a central fountain. She’s surrounded by lush greens on all sides; the trees and shrubbery are neatly arranged along the pathways, giving her some reprieve from the warm spring air. Combined with the flowing water and the lack of crowds, the garden possesses an air of calm, and Byleth feels she has some space to breathe.

About three-fourths of the way in, they’re asked to dismount. The Almyran contingent of the guard breaks away as several stablehands appear to take the company’s steeds. Amid the commotion, Claude offers Byleth his arm.

“We’ll need to walk the rest of the way. No room for horses up ahead.”

She swallows and nods as she loops her arm through his. Trailing behind Nader, Claude leads her around more waterways and the other elaborate decorations littered across the front of the property. Though she’s been able to keep her poker face, Byleth’s heart pounds as they approach the palace. She’s led up a set of stairs before coming into an ornate entry hall, supported by towering columns. She cranes her neck peering at the surrounding architecture, taking in the multitude of colors and intricate shapes and details that mark the ceilings and along the lengths of the tall columns around her.

They’re greeted by even more staff in crisp, bright uniforms. As Claude approaches the large doors that lead further into the palace, they bow and move in perfect synchronicity as they lead their returning king home.

Though they left the bustling crowds of the public behind, the palace interior is far from quiet. The moment the couple enters the royal residence proper, they’re immediately swarmed by countless servants. Without missing a beat, Claude greets them with a smile.

“Your Majesty! You’ve returned safe and sound!” a rather official looking fellow calls out.

“I have. It’s good to see everyone again. Before we get the rest of the castle affairs in order, I’d like to introduce someone. Everyone, this is Byleth Eisner, the reigning queen of the United Kingdom of Fodlan.”

He actually steps away, gesturing at her with a flourish as if to show her off. She nearly glares at him for his theatrics, but Byleth is able to catch enough to understand an introduction; she inclines her head in acknowledgment.
“Thank you for your hospitality. Your country is beautiful; I look forward to getting acquainted with you all,” she greets in Almyran, rather stiffly.

Despite her awkwardness, they react much the same as when she first met Nader’s guard: a murmur of pleased approval runs through them. They’re less stoic than the soldiers: many of the servants scrutinize her with clear curiosity, probably having never seen another Fodlaner since the previous queen. The man who initially greeted Claude steps forward and gives her a friendly smile. He’s fairly young, somewhere around her own age, sporting a pair of spectacles that give him a bookish appearance.

In perfect, only slightly accented Fodlanese, he says, “Welcome to Almyra, Your Excellency! We’re so happy to have you here in the capital! My name is Yessa; I am the steward here at the royal palace. Please do not hesitate to call on me should you have any matters within the castle you’d like to take care of.”

She wonders if Claude had a hand in choosing the palace staff as well after his ascension. Yessa speaks to her with not a hint of hostility; Byleth only detects earnestness. She returns his smile with one of her own.

“I’ll keep that in mind. Thank you, Yessa.”

His eyes twinkle. “Would Your Excellency like to take a moment to rest? Your journey must have been quite long.”

The thought of sleeping in a soft bed for the first time in weeks is too tempting to ignore. “I’d like that, yes.”

She looks to Claude, who shakes his head. “I’m fine. You go on ahead, I have some things to take care of first.”

Yessa assigns her two servants, two energetic women named Afsoun and Kazeewah who waste no time in spiriting her away. Afsoun is a young maiden, probably only in her late teens. But she’s spry and quick, and out of the two she is the one who knows just enough Fodlanese to scrape by. Kazeewah is a matronly, older woman. She moves slowly and unhurried, often softly chastising her younger companion when she gets too far ahead of herself. Byleth finds them charming; between her and Afsoun, it’s enough for her to get her needs across. The two spoil her; it takes Byleth quite a lot of convincing to tell them she doesn’t need them to wash her in the baths, and even then they still insist on at least washing her hair. Byleth wonders if it’s simply a ploy when she notices the two of them cooing over her mint-colored tresses.

“Your hair color… Common, in Fodlan?” Afsoun asks.

“Ah, not really. I’ve known maybe three or four people with hair like mine.”

She mulls this over as she lathers through Byleth’s hair, chattering away to Kazeewah. The queen hopes it’s a good sign.

Once she’s cleaned up, they clothe her in some of the softest linens she’s ever touched. They lead her to her bedroom, a massive, luxurious space that puts the Derdriu estate to shame. Her travel bags are already there; Byleth doesn’t have the energy to stop the two from pawing through them, organizing and searching for anything they need to take care of.

She doesn’t wait for them to leave before she slumps into the large bed situated at one end of the room. The exhaustion from weeks of travel finally settles in, and she lets herself be swathed by the
fluffy, silky covers. Byleth’s eyes are already halfway shut when she feels someone properly tuck her in, and by the time they leave, she’s already fast asleep.

When she awakens, the room is dark.

Byleth rubs her eyes, shaking off the last clinging vestiges of sleep. Her weariness is gone, and while she knows she should rise, the downy bed makes it difficult.

She rises slowly from under her covers, only to notice a large bulging shape next to her in bed. The queen almost chuckles at the sight of Claude’s messy head half-swallowed by the surrounding linens. Her movements are enough to make him stir, and a set of bleary green eyes blinks up at her.

“Oh, good morning, sunshine. Err, actually I guess it’s nighttime? Good evening?”

Outside, only the last bit of orange is left dusted across the sky. Dusk has only just fallen on Ulubey, but Byleth can still hear some kind of low ruckus.

“What’s that noise?”

“Probably the townspeople having their fun.” Claude sits up, his hair flopping over his face, devastatingly handsome. “They’ll be like that for at least the rest of the week.”

“A week? This is your second time returning after only a few months. Do they always do this when you leave?”

He scratches his head. “No, last time it was for my coronation, not exactly to celebrate my return. This is a bit more special.” Claude gives Byleth an affectionate side-eye. “Not every day I bring home a foreign head of state. Especially one whom everyone knows has a good chance at becoming queen consort.”

“Oh gods.”

Claude can’t help but laugh, leaning over to give her a kiss. “Forgive me. I may have...been a little excited when I brought you up with my parents. Word can travel fast.”

Byleth sighs, pretending to pout. She smoothes back the loose strands of his hair. “Well, it’s nice to know I’m not a terrible shame you aim to hide.”

“I’m a little tired of hiding at this point, my love. Especially when it comes to you.”

He kisses her again, and she’s very tempted to take full advantage of the lovely bed provided for them. He must have sensed her thoughts through the urgency in her touch; Claude pulls away with a breathless laugh, shaking his head.

“We can have as much fun as you want later, just the two of us,” he promises. “Unfortunately if I don’t bring you out for everyone to see the palace doors might get stampeded.”

The inevitable prospect of meeting his parents hangs over her head again. Byleth sighs again, forcing herself out from between the plush sheets before she can fix herself there permanently.

“Alright. Let’s get this over with.”

There’s another rush of activity as they prepare for the evening’s festivities. Byleth and Claude are separated into different rooms as the servants help them get dressed. Once more she’s swarmed on all sides as the staff assist her in putting on Almyran garb for the first time.
“Do you know what you’d like to wear, my lady?” Afsoun probes.

“Uh, um… No, I have no idea. I’ve never worn these kinds of clothes before.”

“Do you have a color in mind? A kind of… A certain kind of look you’d like?”

Byleth thinks hard. “I don’t mind the color but do you have something that… I don’t know, something that would be a good first impression? Something like that?”

Afsoun mulls it over, and Byleth turns to directness. “I might be meeting his mother and father tonight. I’d like to look… suitable, if you know what I mean.”

The girl’s mouth forms into the shape of an “o” as comprehension washes over her. She nods, looking determined.

“Yes, we can help with that!”

They get to work. She’s fitted into a resplendent, turquoise garb that glides over her skin like water. The gown is hemmed with trimmings of gold, and they complement it with simplistic, yet elegant pieces of jewelry. It had been acquired months ago by the king, the servants tell her when she asks where it came from.

Her hair is carefully pinned up before they drape a head scarf that matches her gown over her. They finish with some makeup, allowing her a final look in the mirror. What a discerning eye Claude has, she thinks to herself. The jewels both match to Byleth’s tastes and make her stand out. In front of the mirror, she feels as though she sparkles enough to rival the night sky. She sashays back and forth, giving little spins as she marvels at how high-quality the material is, how easy it is to move in. Byleth practices moving about, making sure she gets used to the numerous trails of fabric hanging off of her.

She smiles at her team, telling them she likes it. They grin and titter in response; it soothes her heart somewhat, seeing how welcoming the staff has been so far. She’ll need all the support she can get.

Byleth is led back out, where Claude is waiting. When their eyes meet, they grin at each other. Claude looks oddly comfortable sporting a long, Almyran style cloak, embroidered as splendidly as her own clothes. It reaches his ankles, with large, loose-fitting sleeves, giving him an overall larger-than-life aura. He wears the same kind of loose trousers she has, and instead of leaving his hair loose his head is wrapped in a patterned cloth. It looks right, she thinks.

Under her scrutinizing eye, the king makes a grand sweep of his arm and bows. “Well now, my dear, how do I look? Could my humble fashion choices here possibly match the splendor that Fodlaners wear?”

She snorts, tugging at his coat. “Nothing you do could ever be called humble.”

He gives her his arm again, his eyes twinkling as he takes her in. “That’s only because I have you to keep up with.” Claude leans in, his breath tickling her ear. “You look absolutely breathtaking.”

She flushes. “Only because you have such a good eye for jewelry. Thank you for these, by the way. You could have just gotten me some, I don’t know, some hand-me-downs.”

“What do you take me for? You think I’d let my queen wear things that belonged to someone else? Please, Byleth, you should know that you deserve far better.”
Let’s hope so, she thinks. Byleth straightens her back as she steels herself.

“Alright. I’m ready. Let’s go, uh, mingle, I suppose.”

Their foray into the night begins with a ride. The two of them travel a short distance through a small, private road that leads to the back of another building. Claude tells her that it’s a government building; the palace is used more for residential purposes than anything official.

Even against the dark skies, Byleth can tell it’s just as magnificent as the royal residence. It’s topped with beautifully constructed overlayed domes, its outdoor corridors marked with repeating arches. They quietly enter through the back, and he leads her through a spacious, marbled interior. They climb, and as they rise higher she can hear a low, aggregated murmur, the same she heard before when she awoke from her nap.

At the top of the stairs, they meet with some kind of official, who greets them with a stiff nod. There’s an open door nearby, and even from inside Byleth can see that the building overlooks a giant square, and in that square is one of the biggest crowds she’s ever laid eyes on. Claude squeezes her hand.

“Don’t worry too much about appearances right now. Just have some fun tonight, alright?”

If only it could be that easy. She shuffles closer to his side, putting on the same face she had during her coronation. It would be much of the same thing, she tries to convince herself. Look regal, and if not regal, then respectable. It is only her first day; she’ll give them a proper taste of her in due time.

The official adjusts his clothing before slowly marching out the doorway onto the balcony. A hush falls over the crowd as he approaches the rails at the edge. He makes himself look as grand as possible before speaking.

Byleth cannot understand everything he says. She catches mention of Claude, and of Fodlan, but otherwise the language is too formal for her to fully grasp.

“He’s introducing us. In, you know, the most pompous way possible,” Claude snorts.

When the announcer finishes, a cheer runs through the crowd below. Though she’s within the safety of the building, the sound still astonishes her. And she thought the initial ride through the city had been intense!

The official retreats back inside, giving his king another nod. Claude looks at his partner.

“Ready?”

Byleth gives her assent. They step out onto the balcony, and they’re immediately greeted by a raucous round of shouts and applause. It continues for some time, until Claude has to hold a hand up. The Almyran people steadily fall to a low hush, awaiting their king’s words.

He speaks in Almyran, loud and clear, with language thrown in every now and then that she can understand. Claude starts by greeting his people, thanking them for the warm welcome to his return. He speaks about his activities across the border, about the importance of establishing better foreign relations. With that, he looks to Byleth, who almost jumps. She takes his outstretched hand, swallowing as she steps up to him.

“To help me on this path of unity, I would like to introduce you, for the first time in our history, the one who leads our neighbors to the west. Byleth Eisner is a warrior of no equal, a mentor of peerless wisdom, and a very dear friend of mine. Please, I hope you welcome her with open arms.
and show her the best Almyra has to offer!”

A cheer runs through the crowd, and Byleth holds up a hand and smiles, doing her best to put on a show. Fortunately for her, Claude has no intention of putting her in the spotlight for long; he only keeps her up there for a minute before he lets her step back down. Byleth backs away, relieved, but she still scans the audience below, watching for any other reactions. From so high up, and with so many people, it’s difficult to discern any faces. If there’s any displeasure at her presence, she won’t know until later.

Claude concludes his grand speech and the crowd roars. With a final wave he retreats from the balcony and pulls Byleth with him, grinning.

“Now, the real fun begins.”

The events of the rest of the night are both unforgettable and incredibly difficult for Byleth to chronicle. Once they leave the building, they join the festivities proper. Though they’re still under the watchful eyes of assigned guards, the two are more or less free to partake in whatever activity they please. At one point Nader even joins them, throwing more goblets of alcohol at Byleth than she’d ever experienced. Almyran spirits come in all kinds; some are smooth and pleasant to swallow, others burn to the point where she feels she may be breathing fire. Thank Sothis for her enhanced constitution, or else she’d be passed out drunk in the streets in less than an hour.

The entire city is alight, from both the numerous bonfires and the multicolored lanterns accenting the streets. Byleth is swept along from place to place; one moment she’s having treats stuffed in her from all directions, the next she’s twirling in step with Claude next to a fire. She doesn’t know the moves, but her partner hardly pays any mind. Byleth is reminded of the annual ball all those years ago in Garreg Mach and the dance they shared then, but it’s a stark contrast to what it is now. Claude moves more fluidly, less reserved, and there’s a real, uninhibited grin on his face as he carries her across the paved stone. She can’t help it; she laughs when the world spins around her, when she nearly trips over a misstep. He keeps her secure in his hands the whole way through, laughing with her. Just for a little while, they can forget that they are sovereigns of two nations—it’s just them, just Claude and Byleth, carelessly dancing the night away.

She doesn’t know how long they’re like that, only that he lets her stop once she’s truly breathless and her feet feel like they’re about to fall off. He takes her on another short tour around the city, spoiling her with more delicious food to help her regain her energy. Byleth samples delectable skewered meats that melt on her tongue, rich stews that trail fire through her whole body, pastries filled with mixtures of ingredients she could never dream of. She feels as though she’s eaten enough to burst, but the night’s activities force her to burn through so much of it that she often finds herself coming back for more. There are other kinds of vendors scattered among the streets as well, ones selling little trinkets and knickknacks for those who want to enhance the festivities. She peruses through them intently, feeling like a small child who wants nothing more than to line her pockets for things to show off to her friends later. (Claude has to hold her back, reminding her that she has no pockets to line and promises to bring her to places that have much better wares to sell.)

Dance, eat, frolic, drink. This is the cycle the night runs through. Byleth rarely leaves Claude’s side, and a part of her is surprised that she has yet to meet any other important figures during the celebrations. She wonders how much of it is intentional on his part, and how much of it is due to the festivities. She’s grateful for it; she doubts she could enjoy herself as much as she has with the responsibility of diplomacy hanging over her head. If his goal was to give her a good first impression, he has succeeded.

Maybe, she thinks, she might not have to see his parents after all.
She doesn’t know how long they’ve been out before Claude finally pulls her away from the main crowds. They meet with a nearby guard, who leads them to a more secluded area of the city to rendezvous with the rest of the small palace guard. Together they return to the palace, sweaty and a little tipsy. As they march through the front doors, Byleth is more than ready to collapse face first into the amazingly soft bed she knows is waiting for her. But before they can disperse, Yessa approaches with a serious expression on his face.

“I’m terribly sorry I can’t let you turn in quite yet, but I must notify you of something. Your mother and father are here,” he says, looking pointedly at Claude.

Those last words are enough to chase the buzz away, and Byleth crashes back into sobriety. She straightens her back as she forces herself back to alertness, lamenting her tousled state. Claude too looks rather annoyed, his tone taking on a cooler quality.

“This really couldn’t wait?”

Yessa shakes his head. “I tried my best to head them off but you know they can be a little…”

Claude clasps the steward’s shoulder, sympathetic. “I’m not blaming you, Yessa. I know exactly how they can be. Byleth?”

“Hm?”

“You can go on ahead and rest, if you’d like. I won’t be long.”

She purses her lips at his suggestion. It’s not like she hasn’t been wound up for weeks for this exact moment. “I’m no coward. I’ll go with you.”

Claude smiles, and Yessa nods approvingly. “Every day I love you just a little more. Alright, bring us to them, Yessa. They’ll just have to put up with how we look at the moment. I’ll be sure to keep it brief.”

He takes them down a few halls to a small foyer. Byleth notices a small change in Claude before they enter. He’s stiffer than he’s been the entire night, and she recognizes the mask he slides into. It’s one very much like the persona he put on during their days at the Officers’ Academy: a smile that seems a bit too forced, a little colder, though far more self-assured. For the first time this whole journey, she becomes less worried about how she’ll fare and more about how he’ll feel. She pats his arm, squeezing his hand in an effort to comfort him. He notices, giving her a small, resigned smile.

“I’ll be fine. Don’t worry too much about me, I know how to deal with them.”

He speaks as if they’re diplomats to be negotiated with, as opposed to family. Byleth feels that familiar fire in her begin to emerge once more. She’s glad she doesn’t have a weapon on her.

Steady, now...

Claude doesn’t even wait for Yessa’s go before he pushes the door open himself. Two people are waiting for them inside; they rise from their seats in unison at their entry.

“Khalid! At last! Look at you, had quite a night already, I see!” the man calls out, spreading his arms wide.

Claude wasn’t joking when he said his father was extravagant. Though he has stepped down from his throne, the former shah is dressed in a way that screams of a lavish lifestyle. He wears more
gold than Byleth is, wrapped in a fancy plum-colored outer robe that outdoes even Claude’s. He’s about the same height as his son, grey streaks beginning to surface in his beard and his long dark hair, pulled back in a loose ponytail. Though his face shows the clear signs of age, his eyes and attitude exude nothing but regal, larger-than-life energy. Byleth can immediately tell where the newly appointed king got his good looks from.

While Abbas warmly greets his son, his wife stands poised just a little farther away. Tiana von Riegan is a statuesque swan of a woman, exuding elegant confidence with the hardness to match. While her fashion sense isn’t as showy as her husband’s, her attire serves to accentuate her commanding presence—Tiana has nothing to prove to anyone. Her pale hair, tied back in an elaborately bejeweled bun, also grows grey, but age has done nothing but sharpened her. Claude’s verdant eyes are a mirror of her own; while Byleth has learned to recognize warmth in his, his mother’s gaze feels unfathomable.

“Hey Ma, hey Pops,” the king greets. “Didn’t have a chance to join the festivities yet?”

“Oh, we were out for a bit, but your mother and I are getting on in our years… We can’t frolic about like we used to.”

Abbas turns his attention to Byleth, a wide grin stretching across his face as he switches to the Fodlan language. “And here we have the guest of honor! Hello there, Miss Eisner, it’s so good to meet you. Our clothes suit you quite well, it seems!”

She puts on a smile and bows. “It’s nice to meet you. You can just call me Byleth. May I call you…?”

“Oh, you can just use my name, we are practically family. Come, come, Tiana has been itching to meet you as well—”

His wife is already next to him, and Byleth feels the weight behind her scrutinizing gaze. Yet she detects no hostility when Tiana places a fist over her heart and bows in the traditional Fodlan manner.

“Byleth Eisner… Well met. It’s good to see someone from my homeland after so long,” she greets with a faint smile. “You just arrived in Ulubey today, did you not? It’s quite a long journey from Fodlan. You must be exhausted.”

She feels as though she’s being tested. Gathering her wits, she replies, “The journey was certainly long, but it was worth it to see all the sights. You need not worry, I’m quite used to travel. I can endure plenty.”

“You certainly can, seeing as how you’ve spent the night!” Abbas laughs. “It’s a good thing you’ve got stamina; we’re an energetic bunch, if you haven’t noticed already! Did you enjoy the festivities, Byleth? I hope we put on a good show for you!”

“It was wonderful! I haven’t had that much fun in quite some time.”

“Oh, we can do better, I’m sure. Khalid! Next time make sure to put a bit more *oomph* into it. You couldn’t muster up some fire flowers for your lovely queen? And your speech could have used a bit more work as well—”

He lightheartedly cuffs Claude’s ear, who rolls his eyes. Tiana lightly coughs.

“Byleth, may I call you that? Thank you for taking care of Khalid during his… *escapade* into Fodlan. I hope he wasn’t too much of a burden on you.”
Escapade. As if it was some silly adventure he set out on a whim. Byleth feels that molten feeling creep within her chest again, threatening to choke her. She pushes it down and dowses it, leaving an ugly lump behind.

“Claude—Khalid’s efforts and unique perspectives were invaluable, to me as well as Fodlan at large. Journeying with him has been both an honor and a pleasure.”

“You used to teach at the Officers’ Academy, did you not? It’s good to see you giving him the proper tools to succeed.”

Byleth imperceptibly sticks out her chin, her tone just barely tainted with an edge. “Of course, but it is also my duty as a former mentor and a friend to support him and lend a hand when he needs me, not just to preach at him.”

Claude’s hand instantly snakes around her wrist, but her gaze holds steady against his mother’s. After so many years at court, Tiana is impossible to read. Her eyes probe into Byleth, something unknowable swimming around in their depths.

It could have only been a millisecond, but it’s long enough for something to have passed between them. Tiana relents, if ever so slightly.

“Of course. You have our utmost thanks for guiding him along the right path.”

Abbas places a hand on her shoulder, a perpetual smile gracing his lips. “We appreciate you bringing him back to us in one piece, Byleth! To say nothing of the rest of his achievements… Truly, your support of our son means the world to us. And I hope you continue to support him through this new phase of his life. We will obviously be here as well, in case any more guidance is needed.”

He’s definitely more perceptive than what that smile might let on, Byleth thinks. On top of his looks, it’s easy to see where Claude also gets his cunning from.

“Of course. I’ll always be here for him.”

She feels pressure around her wrist, and Claude interjects. “Mom, Dad, while it’d be nice to catch up some more, it’s late. We came by to make sure to say hello, but Byleth and I did just spend a long time on the road. Let’s have some more family time another day, alright?”

The tension deflates, and Abbas nods in agreement.

“Sounds like a plan, Khalid. Let’s try and get a whole day in together sometime, hm? What do you say, my dear?”

Tiana silently affirms, her eyes glancing back towards Byleth. With that, the two bid their farewells as Yessa leads them out of the palace.

Claude’s shoulders sag, the events of the day catching up to him. “Okay, now we can get ready for bed.”

They bathe and change, and at last Byleth finds herself enfolded within her heavenly covers once more. Claude puts out the remaining lights before climbing in with her, letting his body sink with a satisfied sigh.

“I said we could have some fun for ourselves later, but I hope you can forgive me for pushing off our plans for another time.”
“Out of stamina so soon?” she teases.

“Ooh, ouch, that one stings, right in my manly pride. Alright, alright, Byleth, Have your way with me, if you must.”

She snorts out a laugh, pushing herself deeper into her blankets. “And ruin this lovely bed? I think not. No, you’re off the hook for now, but I expect great returns, Khalid.”

“If you’re afraid of ruining the bed then we’ll never get very far,” he mutters. Out loud, he says, “Well when you put it like that, how can I refuse?”

Byleth hums, satisfied. They lay in silence for a while, hearing muffled shouts coming from outside every now and then. Almyra sure knew how to keep a party going, she couldn’t help but think.

“Claude?”

“Yeah?”

“About your parents, I’m sorry that I—”

“No, don’t. You don’t need to apologize for anything when it comes to them.”

“I don’t know, I don’t want to be disrespectful.”

“You weren’t. If anything, I’ve never seen my mother look so sheepish.”

“That’s sheepish for her?”

He chuckles. “You’ll figure her out eventually. No, it’s good. Not letting yourself be cowed by them is the best thing you could have done.”

“If you say so…”

When she looks over at him, he’s still smiling, softly and with gratitude.

“What? Thinking about the next time I make an ass of myself and mouth off your folks again?”

“Hm, as delightful as that might be, that’s not it. I’m just happy, I guess.”

“Over anything in particular?”

“Hmm…” He yawns, very close to sleep. “You know those dances and games we played down there?”

“Yes.”

“They’re all meant for at least two people. I could never do any of them before because I never had anyone with me. But now…” Claude’s eyes slowly shut. “Now, I’ve finally got someone…”

Even after he slips into slumber, sleep eludes Byleth for some time. She spends most of it staring at Claude, thinking about the day’s events. Eventually she succumbs, her dreams chased by the flutter of a gown against the backdrop of a roaring fire.
Home of the Warlock

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Byleth begins her toils as she tries to find a routine living in a new country. For the first few weeks, she rarely leaves the palace proper, spending her time familiarizing herself with the staff and her current residence. With everyone’s help, her Almyran improves steadily with each day, and she graduates into more and more difficult reading material. It was a rare moment in the palace for anyone to stumble across the Fodlan queen without her nose in both a dictionary and some new book she’s found.

By the third week, she feels brave enough to begin meeting others. Claude’s work began from the moment he entered the city; she starts attending a few of his smaller assemblies, determined to make herself known among the Almyran court. Most of them simply smile politely and then turn to the king, paying little attention to her for the rest of their talks. Byleth reminds herself to be patient. They’ll see soon enough.

And there is the occasional naysayer, the ones who aren’t adept enough—or perhaps can’t be bothered—to hide their disdain. Somehow, Byleth finds these types easier to deal with, if only out of spite. She speaks out more often in their presence, offering them biting smiles and a pristinely chilly demeanor that she picked up from other lords in Fodlan. She makes sure to commit to memory every look of shock that arises when she makes a suggestion or statement that easily addresses whatever petty issue they bring to the table.

If their chagrined silence isn’t enough on its own, Claude’s smug satisfaction surely makes it all worth it.

She feels more useful when diplomacy isn’t involved, huddled with Claude in his luxurious workspace well into the late hours of the night. It feels no different than when they were in Fodlan just a short while ago; they banter back and forth, throwing ideas at one another and hashing out future plans. Claude continues to be astoundingly patient, carefully explaining foreign concepts to her and coaxing her into speaking even when she’s less confident.

His parents haven’t made an appearance since their initial meeting. It’s a small relief, otherwise she’s not sure whether she can work under their eyes.

She’s happy like this. It can be a busy, hectic life, and she knows it won’t always be this peaceful, but for now, she’s happy.

So when hints of anxiety come gently knocking once more, Byleth tries to smother it. Old fears linger in the shadows of her mind, and she almost feels that physical weight in her chest again, as if the Crest Stone is screaming at her to make itself known. It’s as though she can hear the ticking of a clock no matter where she is, a reminder of what’s at stake. She has time! She wants to shout back. But her denials always end up lost against the daunting tides of her wish.

Even though she’s already gained Claude’s blessing, it feels impossible for her to bring it up again. How could she tear his attention away from governing a nation for this? Tear her own attention away when there is so much she still needs to do? It’s selfish, she tells herself. Better to stow everything away in a little box for later, even if it suffocates her.

One day, during one of her more sullen moments, Claude beckons her into his study. He’s more
careful than usual as he closes the door, double-checking the hallway before locking it shut. He raises an eyebrow and grins at Byleth’s inquisitive expression.

“The walls always have ears, my queen. Can’t ever be too careful!”

Walking over to his desk, Claude motions to her. He casually slides into his chair, pouring out two goblets of wine. Byleth notices a multitude of books scattered about—his habits really haven’t improved much since his academy days, have they?—dusty, old volumes with odd titles that don’t seem to have much relevance to their tasks. They’re mostly books on local legends, fairy tales, and some covers that are so old the cover text have well worn away.

Something clicks in her head. The last time she knew of when he was so voracious over texts like these, he was researching Fodlan’s mythos. It made sense then, but why the sudden interest in tall tales that come from his homeland?

Byleth picks one up and flips open the cover. The words are unintelligible to her of course, the pages a little sooty from age. Pictures accompany the text, depicting strange creatures of all sorts that she’s never seen before.

“The last time you went digging through things like these, you ended up discovering a cover-up as old as Fodlan itself,” she notes with a raised eyebrow. “I know you wanted to implement changes in Almyra, Claude, but are you really planning on repeating that? Once wasn’t enough?”

He laughs. “Please, as if there’s anything that big about this place that I wouldn’t have already sniffed out. No, no, unfortunately I won’t be completely upending an entire country’s history this time around. This time it’s something...smaller.”

Claude fishes out a particular book, thumbing through its contents until he finds what he wants. “I haven’t forgotten my promise, you know.”

The reminder comes to Byleth as a bit of a surprise. He pretends to look offended.

“You didn’t really think I’d completely dropped it, did you?”

“I—No, I’m sorry, It’s just that the timing of it all… I wasn’t sure whether to bring it up.”

His eyes soften. “It’s important to you, isn’t it? That makes it important to me too.”

The words are a familiar echo, and Byleth feels something warm flutter in her chest.

“Thank you,” is all she can say.

Claude smiles, reaching out and tenderly touching her cheek before he sets his book in front of her. Like the rest, she doesn’t recognize the text. All she has to look at is the complementing illustration, an inked sketch of a cloaked figure.

“What am I looking at here?”

“When I started thinking about the problem at first, there were a couple of possibilities that came to mind. We could go a more physically practical route and find a surgeon, but given what I know, I’m not sure even Almyran medicine is capable of something this dangerous without a lot of risks involved…”

At the mention of danger, Byleth’s mouth runs dry. Memories of Rhea’s words return to her.
“The child she bore was not breathing… And so, I granted her final wish. As she had hoped, the baby started breathing again....”

Ever since she’d learned of this, Byleth couldn’t shake her feelings of unease. Sothis’s core was what brought her back from the brink, but was that all it did? What if it had been the only thing keeping her body alive all these years?

And if that was the case, what would happen to her after they remove it?

Claude continues on, not noticing anything amiss in her silence. “There are quite a few Almyran legends that talk about spellcasters, but none of the major ones really led anywhere, not that I was expecting them to. But when I went digging a little deeper, I found this guy.” Claude taps the illustration. "Minor Almyran legend has stories about this guy. He’s a warlock of unparalleled ability, said to have some of the most unusual magic because of his journeys around the world."

She has her doubts, but there’s a determined spark in his eye that keeps her from telling him what’s on her mind. Byleth grasps at that spark, that glimmer of hope that soothes the fears in her heart. Perhaps she’ll see where all this might lead first, she thinks. No need to worry him when this might not go anywhere.

“It doesn’t sound like a lot to go on.”

"Not like this, no. But the difference is that I have more than just stories."

Pushing aside the book, he spreads out a map before her. It’s been marked only once, near the empty space within Almyra’s borders that marks the expanse of the country’s desertland.

“I have the possible location of his old home. It’s said that he left behind some kind of—hey, don’t give me that look, stay with me here—stories mention that despite all he was capable of, he didn’t leave any of his knowledge behind save for some kind of magical treasure.”

Byleth crosses her arms and gives Claude a skeptical look. “You want us to go to the middle of the desert for some mysterious treasure based on that?”

He shrugs. “I mean, this wouldn’t be the first time you followed me to a desert based on legends. For something significantly more dangerous, I might add.”

Damn, he isn’t wrong there. Her shoulders slump in resigned acceptance.

“Alright, I’ll bite. But if it turns out there’s nothing out there, it’s going to look very odd to people as to why we’re out there.”

Claude gives her a devilish wink, something that immediately fills Byleth with dread. “Oh, don’t worry. I’ve got a good excuse.”

No matter what part of the world Byleth finds herself in, desert air doesn’t seem to change much. Though only on the outskirts of the sandy expanse, she can already feel the moisture being sapped from her skin, the grainy air coating the surface of her tongue.

The village is small, a cluster of unremarkable stone and clay houses several hours away from the nearest city. It’s barely a blip on most maps, completely absent on some. An ideal location for anyone who wanted some level of obscurity.

And obscurity is something Byleth wishes she has. Her time had come: Claude’s “excuse” was
nothing more than the dreaded homecoming parade across the country. In her heart she knew it was coming, but even after everything she’d seen she’d underestimated the sheer lengths Almyrans will go in the name of extravagance. Camels, elephants, and what felt like an entire army at their backs had accompanied them on this journey. They were only in the beginning legs of the tour, yet she already felt she’d seen a lifetime’s worth of faces in those couple of days alone. The queen thought that Fodlan’s continental war would have equipped her to face any obstacle with relative ease. Oh, how wrong she was.

She stands off to the side, hiding in the shade in an attempt to keep herself from being too noticeable. Though she’s wearing light, flowy clothing, the morning heat is still oppressive. She’s grateful for the thin headscarf her attendants insisted on her wearing; otherwise she fears she might be blinded by the aggressive sunshine. The nondescript outfit is a welcome change from her normal attire since the start of the tour. Byleth is accustomed to the weight of wearing armor, but the constant cycle of rich silks and luxurious jewelry is enough to throw her off center. As uncomfortable the heat is, it’s nice to move about and feel like she’s in her own skin again.

The soft crunch of footsteps alerts her to Claude’s presence. Like her, he’s got his head wrapped in a cowl, both to protect himself from the harsh light and to hide his face. Tearing themselves away from their journey for their little “detour” without drawing too much attention had taken some effort; even at this distance, she can still see the specks of their guard meandering about at the far edges of the village, no doubt agitated by the current situation.

Of course she feels little need to fret herself. Slung across her back is a long bundle wrapped in cloth. In the best case scenario, Byleth would have no need for the Sword of the Creator, but old habits die hard, and neither she nor Claude are foolish enough to leave themselves completely unprotected.

“All right, I convinced them,” he recounts to her as they reunite. “Think I’m starting to lose my touch… I used to be able to shake off guards no problem.”

“Sounds like you’re getting old,” Byleth teases. He groans in response.

“Aagh, why’d you have to bring that up? Come on, let’s get going before I start thinking too deeply about my own mortality.”

She nods, nervously pulling the headscarf tighter around her face. As much as she knows how necessary keeping a low profile is, Byleth can’t help but wonder how useful it’ll prove to be. Claude knows how to move through crowds with ease, but next to him, with her pale complexion, the bright seafoam green eyes, she has doubts. She can’t imagine an obscure village such as this being a common locale for foreigners, and given how unique she looks even by Fodlan standards, she’s not exactly confident in her ability to lay low. How fast and how far can word travel in Almyra, out here to this tiny settlement? Byleth wonders how many might be able to recognize her by appearances alone.

For now, she stays close to Claude as they head into the heart of the village. Within its borders, it looks more inhabited and organized than its outer walls might suggest, though obviously not as opulent as Ulubey can be. They head towards the center of town to the bazaar, hoping to find someone who might know of their query.

Despite its size and location, the village still enjoys a healthy dose of activity. The proximity to the desert doesn’t seem to deter anyone at all; people pass and go, conducting their business as if the heat is only an afterthought. Byleth spots strange, unfamiliar produce being peddled from stands, figures covered head to toe ferrying in odd parcels with their horses.
“I think they’re treasure hunters,” Claude explains.

“Treasure hunters? Out here?”

“The desert wasn’t always the way it was. There are plenty of tales of ancient kingdoms that were centered in the heart of the sands. For various reasons they fell and rose, and now we’re here. Some are brave enough to venture in and comb over what’s left.”

“You’re not worried about… I don’t know, tomb robbers?”

“They’re a concern, but it’s not practical to send out too many patrols into the middle of the desert. For the most part we leave most of the treasure hunters alone. A majority of them bring back valuables like gold and silver out from the middle of nowhere anyway, so they have their uses. What, did you want to try it?” He raises an eyebrow at her, teasing.

Byleth thinks back to their encounter with the Wind Caller and sniffs dismissively. She hopes the Almyran desert doesn’t hold similar horrors, or else she couldn’t imagine the payoff being worth it.

“After all the giant crawler innards I’ve had to wade through, I can safely say that the desert is not for me.”

Claude laughs. “No throwing in the towel yet. We have our own hunt to see through.”

They pick their way through the sparse crowd. Byleth leaves the talking to Claude as she stays close, keeping watch of their surroundings. So far, it doesn’t look like they’ve attracted any kind of special attention. Despite the remoteness of the village, they don’t seem to pay outsiders much mind.

And yet, she can’t quite shake the feeling that she’s being watched.

They spend about an hour meticulously making their way through. Though it’s difficult for her to understand the dialect used in this region of the country, it’s not hard for Byleth to see that it isn’t easy to make much headway. Most of the residents they speak to have never heard of the warlock in question, and even the ones who have have little information to offer. And with their need to stay inconspicuous, it limits their options.

But Byleth knows better than to underestimate the Almyran king. Having borne the brunt of his curiosity several years prior, she can’t help but admire his persistence. Claude never falters, subtly pushing and prodding, all while masterfully wearing the mask of the harmless, sightseeing tourist.

Eventually, they have a small breakthrough. An elder resident tilts his head in interest when Claude mentions the warlock, caught off guard by his questions.

“Not a lot of people these days know of those stories,” he notes, squinting at the younger man. “You must be quite the studious type to have come across it.”

“Oh yes, I’m quite an avid reader when it comes to legends like those. It’s been a little personal project of mine, digging up lesser known histories. Tell me, you wouldn’t happen to know anything, would you? I’m doing some research, and my search led me here.”

“What exactly do you know already?”

“The stories say he was extraordinarily skilled, that he left to travel the world to learn even more. That by the end of his life, he’d supposedly created new branches of magic by combining all the different disciplines he’d come across. That this village was allegedly where he spent his twilight
years."

The old man strokes his face and nods slowly, pensive. “Yes, I imagine that’s as much that would have made it into most books today. Tell me, are you aware of how long ago he walked this earth?”

“Not exactly, but details in his tales date him back at least a thousand years.”

“Yes… I grew up in this village, lived here for a majority of my life, and even then people my age only know bits and scraps of what really happened with him.”

“...Are you sure he actually existed then? Even his name seems to have been lost to time.”

He chuckles. “Oh, he absolutely lived, of that I can assure you. To answer your query, boy, I cannot give you precise accounts of what the warlock was like, nothing that you might not already know, but I know somewhere where you might find something to help. There is an old house, long abandoned by the time I was born, yet it has somehow withstood the test of time. It is said that was where the warlock spent the last years of his life. Perhaps you might find something of interest there.”

“Has no one ever looked inside it before?”

“Oh, I’m sure many have tried! But even my grandparents have told me that it’s been in the village since their youth, looking much the same as it does now. But I imagine it takes a special kind of will to march into a powerful mage’s final resting place, and even if they do… Would you be willing to stay for long in a structure as old as that?”

“...Noted. So where is this old house?”

The elderly man looks amused even as he gives Claude directions. His eyes look over at Byleth, and for a moment she swears he’s looking behind her at something. Paranoid, she dares a glance behind her. She sees no one suspicious; the only thing that remotely catches her eye is some kind of large brown bird perched on a building across the street. When she looks back at him, the elder’s eyes twinkle. With what, she couldn’t say.

Claude thanks him, and they’re on their way again. All the while, the sensation of being watched clings to her. Even though she can’t pick out anything amiss, she knows better than to ignore her instincts.

“Claude? Do you get the feeling that someone’s watching us?”

“Hm… I’ve been keeping a look out this whole time, and I haven’t noticed any sign of anyone following us.”

“I haven’t either, but I still can’t shake it…”

He purses his lips. “Hold on to that feeling. Let’s follow this lead first and see what happens.”

The old man’s instructions lead them into an even less populated area of the village. The buildings here are markedly older than where they were before; it’s clear that few actually inhabit this part of town.

*Ideal for an ambush,* Byleth thinks. Her fingers itch, and she resists the urge to reveal her weapon.

By the time they arrive at their destination, the streets are well abandoned, the layers of dust and
sand thick on the dilapidated walls of teetering houses. Their target does little to differentiate itself from its neighbors; peering inside through empty window panes reveals only a messy, sooty interior.

Byleth crosses her arms, unimpressed by what she sees. Even though it’s been a millenium, she imagined a powerful warlock would have been a bit more decorative.

“We’re...at the right place, right?”

Claude, deep in thought, nods. “If we’re at the place the old man pointed us toward, then yes.”

“I don’t feel anything odd…”

“Well, we’ll just have to see what we can find, huh? I’ll go in and take a look; you alright with staying out here to keep a look out?”

“Sure. Be careful in there.”

She watches as he carefully steps into the old house before turning her attention back to the empty streets. Her senses are on edge, hoping to detect anything amiss. Other than the occasional bird flying overhead or small creature skittering across the ground, it’s quiet and uneventful. Over the years she’s learned to trust her instincts, yet no matter how hard she tries Byleth can’t pick out any suspicious signs of human life.

Claude emerges from the house a short time later, looking puzzled as he shakes his head.

“Nothing?” Byleth asks.

“Nothing that seemed relevant at least. Strange... The old man didn’t seem disingenuous. Definitely not senile either. You didn’t see anything suspicious while you were waiting, did you?”

She shakes her head. “I still feel like something’s watching us but... Nothing out of the ordinary.”

“We’re back to square one, huh...? I wonder if the building is just too old for anything to have been left behind.”

As they make their way back to the main town square, she feels ready to give up on the whole endeavor, already deeming the tiny village a lost cause. It’s disappointing, but not entirely surprising—after laying in the dust for so long, surely the passage of time would have eroded away anything useful that might have been left.

As they round the corner, the final leg of the small road that would lead back into a more populated part of town, Byleth spots a figure lounging against the wall. They’re clad in an array of the most beautiful shades of copper, so brilliant she can barely look away. Something about them seems familiar, but she can’t quite place why.

When they pass by, the figure looks up. “You two look like you’re lost. Are you looking for anything in particular?”

Under the hijab, Byleth can make out the feminine features of a typical Almyran. Yet something about the stranger’s eyes puts her off; she can barely see the whites of them, colored almost entirely by a dark brown centered with a beady, black pupil. She can’t shake the feeling that they aren’t entirely human.

If Claude noticed any of these things, he doesn’t let it show as he addresses the stranger. “Thank
you for your concern, but we were just on our way out, actually.”

“Really? So soon? Even when you haven’t found what you’ve been seeking?”

Her words make Byleth wonder if she’s been the one who’s been watching them this whole time. Yet she knows she hasn’t seen anyone like the stranger before since entering the village, despite what the odd sense of familiarity might imply. Claude continues to be unflappable, answering her with a smile.

“And how would you know that we’re looking for anything? We could be sightseeing for all you know.”

She shrugs. “People don’t come here to sightsee. They’re usually looking for something. You want to find the old warlock’s last legacy, don’t you?”

“Well, when you put it out there like that… Yes, we are. You know something?”

“I can guide you to where his last home was.”

Claude raises his eyebrows at her, and Byleth makes a small face. “If you mean that dusty old house, I hate to tell you that we were just there. It had nothing worthwhile.”

“Oh, not that place. That’s just a red herring. I can take you to the real thing.”

The bullshit alarms are sounding off in full force. Byleth crosses her arms, regarding the stranger with suspicion. While it’s true that there’s something off about her, neither of them are foolish enough to give their trust so easily.

“You don’t…expect us to just go with you based off just that, do you?” she asks.

“Hm? Oh, right. I suppose you need some kind of proof I’m not some sort of shill, don’t you?” The stranger regards Byleth with particular interest. “I find it a bit strange that you can’t immediately tell though, what with that thing you’ve got lodged in your chest.”

Byleth’s blood runs cold, and Claude stiffens next to her. It would have been one thing if she’d deduced their identities as king and queen, but the number of people in the world who knew of Sothis’s Crest Stone could be counted on one hand.

“What are you talking about?” Byleth replies, hoping to sound nonchalant.

“I’m talking about that…thing you’ve got inside your body. It radiates so much power that I became aware of your presence the moment you stepped within the village. And it’s not just you.” She tips her head toward Claude. “This one’s blood sings of power too. Not as intensely as yours, but when I stand close I can pick out something quite distinct.”

With that, she’s confirmed to Byleth that she is far from a normal person looking to bamboozle a few travelers. Byleth and Claude look at each other, a silent exchange flowing between them. She nods, a show of affirmation.

“Allright, you’ve proven your point. Take us to where you claim you can, but know that we don’t take any threats to our safety lightly. And… Please tell us who you are.”

The stranger grins. She beckons to them as she sets off in another direction. “My name is Mifta. And I’ve been waiting for you for a very long time now.”
Mifta guides them through a small path that winds and weaves through the village, eventually taking them to what they realize is the outside of its immediate borders. All the while, Byleth is tense, ready to unravel her blade at a moment’s notice. Claude does his best to continue looking for any more hidden onlookers, but the feeling of being watched has long passed. It seems Mifta really was the one watching them the whole time; Byleth is curious as to how she could do it and remain beneath detection, but it’s already clear something beyond normal methods is at work here. All the while, they pelt her with questions.

“How exactly do you even know where the warlock supposedly stayed? What was that other building that old man pointed us to?” Claude probes.

“I’m the guardian of his house! Of course I’d know where it is. As for that other place, it’s just something I asked some of the villagers to point travelers like you to. There’s nothing special about it; it just gives me some time and a place to get a read on the people who come looking, so I can make sure they’re the right ones. Obviously, no one had the right qualifications until now… But to be honest, now that you’re here, I realize I didn’t need to bother with the usual tests. There’s no doubt you’re something special, from the moment you got within a certain distance of this place.”

“Qualifications? Who gave you qualifications to look for?”

“My master. You know, the warlock whose house you’re looking for.”

Once more, Byleth and Claude throw a glance at each other. They were swept along so suddenly that barely anything about Mifta is registering. What Byleth had thought was a failed endeavor to chase old legends has turned into something she could have never expected.

“Does that mean you… You knew him personally? All those years ago?”

“Hmm… It’s hard for me to keep track of the years since I usually just sleep to pass the time. But yes, he created me! Gave me the task of watching over the last of his belongings after he passed away, at least until the right person came along.”

“And somehow he knew we were the right ones?”

“Master predicted your arrival a little bit before his death. He couldn’t tell me when exactly you’d show up, but he told me to specifically watch for a ‘woman with eyes as fresh as spring, with a soul that shines as brightly as a star.’ He knew you would come looking for something of his and asked me to wait so I could give it to you when he wasn’t around anymore.”

“How powerful could this guy have been, for him to be able to predict the future?” Claude mutters. Byleth can only imagine, but she can already feel the trepidation rising with her at the implications. If the warlock really could see into the future, if he really had the ability to apparently create an entity like Mifta, perhaps he really could have left behind some means that could grant her wish. She wondered how much the warlock knew then, whether he could have even foretold her reasons for needing his help.

They travel a little ways out from the walls of town before their guide brings them to a stop. The village isn’t completely bordered by empty, sandy space: it sits next to the edges of a small valley basin, though much of it is inaccessible by the way it cuts into the desert’s sandy dunes. Mifta leads them to an area dangerously close to the desert’s edge. Already the oppressive dry heat weighs down on Byleth more than ever, the wind kicking up buffets of sand that half-blind her. She can’t believe how sudden the change is—even Claude is covering his mouth, fighting the urge to cough as the dust swirls around them.
Mifta remains unperturbed by the stormy sands, pacing along an invisible line, searching. She stops at some indeterminable spot and waves a hand. Just like that, something in the air shifts. The winds around them calm, and the light shimmers before them, revealing the silhouette of a building resting underneath the shadow of the low, neighboring cliffs. No longer under the threat of wild sands, Byleth and Claude venture forth once more.

The house is startling pristine for what can be assumed of its age, looking practically untouched by the passage of time. Its design is something more akin to what Byleth has seen in the city compared to the simpler structures found in the village: the front is built with simple arches and pillars as well as a porch leading up to the front door. Mifta prances up, pushing the door open with a flourish as she gestures the two inside.

“Welcome! Let’s get out of this heat. Once we’re inside, I’ll have more to tell you.”

They approach slowly, both wondering if they’ve stumbled into some kind of trap. Claude scratches his neck, reluctant to cross the threshold.

“Should have brought my bow with me,” he says in a low tone.

“I told you before that I’m just here to help!” Mifta protests. “And even then, that sword she’s carrying on her back should be more than enough.”

So even Byleth’s Hero Relic wasn’t beneath her detection. She shakes her head at him, taking his hand as she steps through the door.

“We’ve come this far. Might as well see what she has for us.”

He continues to grumble, eyes alert as is his habit. But otherwise Claude gives in, carefully stepping in after her. Mifta follows suit once they’re both inside, shutting the door and bathing them in darkness.

Their guide gingerly scoots past them, staying close enough so that Byleth can still make out the outline of her figure. They march forward carefully, but the darkness is banished soon enough, as nearby candles and lamps spontaneously light up as Mifta passes. Aside from the curtained windows, the interior of the house looks fairly normal from where they are; there’s a lounging area, a kitchen not too far away. No odd magical paraphernalia, no obvious signs that someone of great magical capability once inhabited the place. The only hint is the lack of dust and age matching the house’s exterior. But Byleth, all too familiar with objects that can stand the test of time, understands the implications.

But now isn’t the time for a house tour. They once again follow Mifta’s lead as she weaves through the small corridors of the house.

“Mifta, was it? What else can you tell us about this thing your master left behind?” Claude inquires. “Are you sure there’s something there that can help us?”

“Well, I suppose that depends on what it is you want. But even so, if you get creative enough with it, I’m sure you can find a way.”


“You were close with the first one! It’s a book of cards.”

“...Cards?”
“Yup. A set of cards, each with a different spell or function on it. So whatever your wish is, there’s a good chance that there’s a card in it that can help.”

Before he can ask more questions, Mifta opens another door, one that leads downwards into even deeper darkness. They give her a suspicious look, only for her to shrug, stepping inwards. Byleth waits atop the stairs, watching her until she reaches the bottom. Only when Mifta arrives at the end does Byleth cautiously follow suit. She unwraps her blade, grasping it firmly in one hand while casting a small flame in the other as she descends, guiding Claude as he trails behind.

The room the stairs lead into is dimly lit compared to the rest of the house. Byleth tosses her flame into the center of the room, letting it float and illuminate the small space.

The embers’ glow reveals to them a study, surrounded on all sides by bookshelves. The collection is truly a sight to behold, books stacked upon books stacked upon books, and she is reminded of Garreg Mach’s library. Immediately she senses that the room is different, feeling an almost undetectable buzz ripple through the air. Still on high alert, she scans the room for any threats, but she is only greeted by more books. On another side of the room, Mifta paws through the shelves, brow furrowed in concentration.

“Hmm… Now where did I last see it? It’s been so long since I last came down here, ugh… You two! The book you want is somewhere in here, so you’ll have to look for it! It’s been a while so I can’t remember exactly where—why in the world did he keep so many of these down here?—so it looks like you’ll have to get your hands dirty a bit. Look for a red cover with a golden spine, secured by a lock.”

“Wonderful. I feel like I’m back in my school days,” Claude chuckles.

Byleth snorts before picking a side of the room and getting to work. The next few minutes pass in silence as the three scour the huge trove of texts. Byleth wonders how Claude has the patience for this, endlessly sifting through what seems to be multiple lifetimes’ worth of tomes. There are times when she feels like she’s about to go cross-eyed, having been staring so long at an endless stream of book spines.

Deeper and deeper into the warlock’s collection they went, pulling book after book out from the others. She wonders whether, after all this work, they would simply be defeated by an old mage’s voracious reading habits. A book secured with a lock is unusual by any standard, yet in this hoard such a distinction would not easily be found.

She reaches a certain point, fingers still hungrily brushing the shelves, before Byleth feels a strange sensation. As if being gently pulled by a mysterious force, her pace slows, her hand hovering over the books as she tries to follow the feeling. She passes by several that might have fit Mifta’s description, sparing them not even a glance as she wanders deeper into the study, heeding what feels like a silent call to her very soul.

At last, the sensation stops. Under her hand, she discovers what appears to be a gold spine. Carefully Byleth tugs it out from between its neighbors, peering at the cover. The chosen volume is immaculate, its front decorated by a design of the sun, the moon, and the stars. Sure enough, a small lock keeps the tome fastened shut.

“Mifta? Is this it?”

She holds out the book for Claude and their guide to see. The former squints at it, deciphering the ancient writing embossed across its cover.
“The Book of Chesed,” he recites. “Was that the name of your master?”

Mifta looks like she’s barely listening, eyes twinkling with excitement as she lays eyes on the book. “Yes, finally! And here I thought I’d tossed it into some dark corner at some point… Here, here, take this key.”

From her pockets she pulls out a thin chain. The key in question dangles from it, looking more like a stylized pendant. Byleth hands her sword to Claude before taking it, gingerly fitting it into its rightful slot in the book. Both she and her partner wait with bated breath as she slowly twists open the lock. Nothing happens.

She takes out the key, letting the strap keeping the pages shut fall off to the side.

What ensued could only be described as an explosion.

The cover is blasted open, unleashing a hurricane of power that knocks Claude and Mifta back into the shelves. Byleth feels as though she’s had the wind thoroughly knocked out of her, yet she remains standing and holds fast to the rogue book. Through the gusts of energy pouring out, she sees multiple objects fly from the open pages, fleeing too quickly for her to catch.

The whirlwind of energy lasts for several seconds before it abates, and Byleth can only collapse onto her knees in shock when it’s over. Around them, the room is in complete disarray from the book’s outburst, matching the state of the living entities sprawled across its floor.

When she finally comes to her senses, Byleth stares down into the book that she somehow still has a grip on. There are no pages, only a rectangular slot where it looks like something should fit inside. It’s completely empty.

Nearby, Mifta groans as she sets herself right. Looking towards Byleth, she notices the open volume across her lap, and the lack of contents within. It takes her several seconds before she can speak.

“Well… That’s definitely not good.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading this first chunk of uploads! Comments and kudos are always appreciated, and I hope I gave you guys enough of a taste to be curious as to what comes next!

Things to note going forward:

Because of the fic's Monster of the Week format (and my own preference, really), there will be chapters in the future where I will be jumping around in terms of locale without a lot of explanation of when and how the main characters get there. I'll do my best to make transitions as smooth as I can; nothing will happen completely out of the blue or be completely unreasonable, but I do apologize if chapters are a bit bumpy between one another.

Otherwise, thank you for joining me on this little pet project of mine! I haven't written a longer fic in a very long time so I'm both nervous and excited. Hope to see you in
future updates!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!