

Draconic love

The sun sat red. Its dimming light painted the twilight sky in a palette of red and oranges, the silhouettes of the mountains and even the clouds growing ever darker. It provided all a sense of comforting uniformity, one last display of its fiery might before the dark coated it all for the night. It also allowed to conceal the result of the battle that had engulfed the surroundings hours ago, as the glow of the flames bled into that of the dusk. The columns of smoke, the result of fires and siege engines, merged with the darkening clouds above, and the monastery slowly became but a silhouette, an oddly shaped mountain peak in the dark.

Both were formidable, be it as individuals or as fighters. Byleth, the Ashen Demon, led the way, looking over her shoulder every few moments to make sure the enemy had not spotted them. And Rhea, archbishop of the Church of Seiros, leader of the Knights of Seiros, followed in tow. They made their way in complete silence, taking the chances the dusk offered, allowing them to somewhat conceal their flight, but in their minds grappled with a hundred and one different thoughts at once.

Edelgard's betrayal had been... not that surprising. Ever since Byleth had known her, she had seen a fire within her. And the same applied to Rhea. The archbishop wasn't prone to public displays, but few things went unnoticed at the monastery. The idea -now fact- of one of their brightest pupils doing something like this... Her proclamation, her march to her former study centre, the ensuing battle... All of it was too recent, but something seemed off with the whole affair.

Why had been she playing the flame emperor persona? What was the root of her convictions? Where had those monsters that had overpowered Rhea come from? Questions that would remain unanswered for now. Both women limped along a small stream, their clothes torn and armour shattered. Rhea grunted in pain, earning Byleth's attention as she clutched her chest. *"I hope no bones were broken..."*

- Lady Rhea, if you need, we can stop for a moment.

- That's sweet of you, but I'm far more durable than what I seem. - She smiled, trying to chuckle and reassure her. The moment she tried a sharp pain shook her yet again, blurring her vision, but she managed to stand up. - What about you? That mark under the eye...

- The work of one of those mysterious attackers. - She shrugged, otherwise stalwart as always. - I cut him down too late.

- I- I see... - She looked at the mark from the corner of her eye. An ominous symbol that glowed in red, but the pain got a hold of her yet again. - Maybe I do need a bit of rest...

- The fall has taken us far from the monastery. We should be safe for now.

- If memory serves right, there should be a place near...

Their roles reversed, much to Byleth's chagrin, as the archbishop took the lead. She followed closely, lending a helping hand or a shoulder to lean on whenever it was needed. Be it with boulders they were unable to walk around or moments where they had to cross the stream, and Rhea always gave her a warm smile in return. It was a miserable march, but one they did not dare stop. The new empress was, among other things, thorough after all, and would not stop until she found them.

Following the stream, they made their way down, slowly, but the glistening water eased their pains somewhat. Be it with the freshness that coated their bodies, or the lulling sounds it surrounded them with. The water, the breeze, and the faint sounds of forest critters. And not far away, they saw it. A simple building, circular in shape and several columns holding the roof up. It stood in the middle of a pond, with a small stone shack nearby. There were even some bottles scattered here and there.

"It will do. A place to hunker down and rest." Byleth looked at Rhea. The woman had a bittersweet smile on her face, sight fixed in the scenery and apparently lost in thought. She was never good with expressing her feelings, but it was endearing to see the high and mighty head of the church display something else but aloofness and the otherworldly aura that followed her.

- We are here. -She gave her a small and pained grin.- There should be supplies in the shack.

- I'll go get them.

Rhea nodded, making her way into the platform as Byleth limped towards the shack. She heard her open it and rummage around the supplies, followed by a door closing and hurrying footsteps. It took her some effort, but she was infatuated with her sight, as the professor rolled out a mat and set some elixirs and water down. Even when wounded herself, she was always on the lookout for any who needed assistance.

The archbishop sat down with a grunt, her ribs and chest still aching, and she immediately took the medicine that was offered. She did not recall when or where it had come from, but quite the handy item it had become. The aromas of several plants mixed and merged, the liquid leaving a refreshing aftertaste as it slid down her throat. And the effects were immediate, if a little off-putting. The pain immediately started to heal, but she could feel some of her bones going back to how they should be.

She shook off those thoughts, enduring the healing. The sensation did not last long, but it was something she would rather not repeat any time soon. Breathing a sigh of relief, instead she beamed to the woman crouching next to her, trying to reassure her.

- Thank you, dear, the pain won't be long now.

She was adorable, sighing in relief herself and slumping her shoulders as she relaxed. However, Rhea's smile didn't last, instead turning to worry as she focused on Byleth's own problems. Neither had made it unscathed, and the red mark under her companion's right eye -a series of straight lines in sharp angles- glowed maliciously.

- I will see to that the moment I get my strength back. - The archbishop murmured. - How are you feeling? Ill? Wrong? Anything that might help us?

- I feel fine... - Answered Byleth, standing up - A bit sore and stiff, but that's probably the exhaustion finally catching up.

- I see...

- Something wrong, Lady Rhea?

- You seem to have something in your hair. Some dirt or dust must have mixed with sweat during our... predicament.

"Flight" she had thought, but she bit her tongue. She gritted her teeth. That brat would not let up, being as stubborn and iron-willed as Edelgard was. They were isolated and probably being hunted down, but for now they were somewhat safe. But Byleth needed to rest, no matter how expressionless she could be. She needed to rest too. A moment of respite, to recover, and to plan their next move.

Byleth touched her hair, quickly finding what Rhea meant. A lock of hair felt rough and coarse, like a dark streak in her vision. It probably had been mixed with a bit too much dirt and dust. She rubbed it, but no matter how much her fingertips and nails scratched the surface, it would not fall off. Moreso, she felt her own fingers with much, much more detail than what she should. And her cheek felt warm. Too warm.

Mercenary life had taught her to be disciplined, to think quickly and to remain calm, leading the troops by example. Teaching had given that another application, a more calm one, but just as demanding. All in all, her mind raced around potential outcomes, connecting the dots. The assault at Garreg Mach. The rather... different nature and look of some of the Adrestian forces. The brute that had surprised her, branding her with the mark on her cheek. The texture and the colour.

For as long as she had known her, Byleth had been a delight to witness. Her growth around the students, her development as a tutor, and her prowess at the battlefield. She certainly had earned her nickname, the respect of her peers, and admiration of her pupils. Stalwart and silent, but always on the lookout and ready to assist. A bit too much at times. And they had grown close, very close, during the time they had spent together. One of the few that saw not the head of a religion, but a lonely woman on a pedestal.

So seeing the usually stoic woman's face turn into a grimace of realisation, horror and worry shattered her heart in a thousand pieces. Her green eyes widening at the moment of understanding. The slightly trembling lips morph into a silent shout. Her usually firm pulse, growing shaky and unsteady. She knew Jeralt had not told her anything, but the woman before her, gripped in horror, made her distraught in ways no one else could.

"Mother, please, help her. Allow her to curse. To scream. To wail." She pleaded in her mind, witnessing Byleth's silent pain. *"Anything but the silence."*

There was no answer. Never was. Instead, there was a cracking noise. A monotone that came from Byleth, specifically, her left hand. Devouring her from the inside out, her fair skin darkened and stiffened. The stone rendered it eternal, rough and coarse as her lock of hair, sharing the exact same hue of dark grey. It crawled under her bracer, moving up her arm, and leaving behind nothing but cold grey stone.

Much to their horror, rather than spreading from a single point, the curse seemingly generated new hot spots, from which it spread. The light green hair, so similar to Rhea's, stiffened and lost its lustre. The same stony grey appeared around the woman's face, framing it as more of her locks hardened.

For the first time in a very long while Rhea did not have a plan to follow. As archbishop, she had always played puppetmaster, devising plans and when to execute them, but remaining otherwise uninvolved. But now, she had nothing, only herself and a distressed companion. So when Byleth clung to her, with eyes pleading for help, she gave her the most heartfelt hug she could. The mercenary might not have been able to express herself, be it rage or anguish, but she would offer comfort the best she could.

Silence hug heavy over their hideout. The dusk light grew dimmer, purples and indigos becoming the prevalent palette across the night sky, with some stars twinkling shyly here and there as the night gradually took over.

Rhea sat on the knee-high wall, eyes closed and lost in thought, while Byleth stood next to her in complete silence. Had it not been for the stone texture and the dark colour the transformation left behind, some could have thought rightfully the woman had already changed fully into a doll. The gears in the archbishop's mind turned, going over every possible avenue and option at her disposal.

But the more she explored the different choices, the fewer remained. One that was too complex. Another for which they lacked the necessary materials. Yet another one which was doomed to failure... She opened her eyes, looking to the side and avoiding eye-contact. There was one thing they could do. A drastic measure like none other, but the situation required it. She closed her eyes again, tempering her nerves and steeling her resolve.

"I have done plenty of heinous acts before. If with this I can atone but one of them, so be it." She thought. "I owe her that much."

- Lady Rhea? Something I can help you with?

Looking up, Byleth's eyes had transformed too. Two blank orbs that, regardless of that, looked at her the same way as before. "*Her glare was already... lifeless.*" A disturbing thought, and one that made her grateful her father had never been told the truth. But it mattered little now. She stood up, gently caressing her non-marked cheek.

- You have done plenty. Now it is my time to help you. -She spoke.- Tell me, Byleth, do you trust me?

- Completely.

The answer melted her heart. "*Oh, sweetie, if you only knew what I have done...*" But there was no time to lose. The transformation kept claiming more of the woman, having started to crawl up her other arm and legs. Her fair skin darkened and dulled, leaving behind the softness and smoothness to become rough and unpolished. A mockery of the woman, "*and something to be displayed*". She would not let them. Maybe it was greedy of her, maybe it was altruism, but she would help her.

- Then do not be afraid.

She stepped away, turning her back to her and clasping her hands before her. Closing her eyes, she murmured something only she could hear. An ancient spell, one that she had long stopped using and tried to scrub all records of it existing. The results it had produced in the past, though gruesome and horrible, would be vindicated this one time.

A light breeze surrounded the woman. It rose from the pond and ran along the trees. It slipped past the pillars that surrounded them and playfully twirled around Byleth, finally converging on her. The breeze danced and spun around the archbishop, becoming a whirlwind. And as it did, it took a darker shade, a grey that the mercenary found horridly familiar.

It did not look like dust and dirt carried by the wind anymore, but a block of solid stone. The cracking that emanated from it was a monotonous cacophony, a noise that sent chills down her spine. A single hand stretched towards the spellcaster, but she stood put. She would have to trust her. *"Do not be afraid"*. Rhea's words echoed in her mind briefly as the spell's intensity went up.

For a single moment, the block of stone seemed unbreakable, trapping the woman inside forever and indistinguishable from any other natural boulder. A crack appeared here, followed by another one there. And another. And another. They lengthened and widened, tiny flakes of stone breaking off and falling to the floor. It wasn't long until the stone shell, brittle and fragile, collapsed entirely into a myriad of tiny flakes that fluttered downwards.

Rhea stood with her back to her, but the results were hard to miss. Her fair skin and her green hair now shared Byleth's grey colour. The stone, rough and coarse, had left nothing untouched. Not her golden crown, not the flower in her hair, nor the clothes that had survived thus far. And as the woman turned around, the mercenary pulled back her hand. Her eyes, blank spheres of stone, held that warmth and care that she had shown previously.

The tatters of her outfit cracked and fell, joining the rest below. She unclasped her hands, planting them firmly on her hips.

- Do not be afraid.

- ...Lady Rhea?

- Yes. - She smiled, shyly touching one of her long locks as she was left nude. - I might look different, but it is still me.

As she spoke, the flakes of stone joined her form, reshaping and transforming the woman. She clasped her hands again, her fingers lengthening and sharpening into claws, but always maintaining a serene appearance as Byleth watched intently. Her face pushed forth, taking a draconic shape, her upper canines turning into sharp fangs. And through her hair four curved horns emerged, like they had always been there like a natural crown.

Against all logic, the woman did not seem bothered by it. Instead, she took it in stride, calmly letting the changes happen. She even seemed to be enjoying her stone body becoming a smooth and carefully sculpted piece of stonework.

- Lady Rhea? What...

- It's very old magic, my child. Something that can be used for good or ill. - Rhea explained - It combines the curse and my nature, allowing you to carry on as a hybrid of both, and me to shoulder the burden alongside you.

The curse spread across Byleth, rendering more and more of her body into a stone. Rough and coarse, a rather crude stonework, more akin to turning someone into a trophy and a mockery. A joke to her former self. She put her arms behind her back, her movements stiff and janky, the magic making her body sluggish. With her mind soon to follow, until she was left a lifeless rock.

- Why?

Stone flakes crowded round the archbishop's back, merging and joining one another into a great form. With a solid base on her shoulderplates, they spread backwards, casting a great shadow as they did so. She was not sure whether she would be flight capable or not anymore, but her new draconic set of wings would find a use eventually. She felt the flakes replicate the

process at the end of her back, near her shapely butt. A familiar feeling, since it was a reptile tail, like the one she possessed in another form. But smaller.

However, her attention was focused on Byleth's question. It left her mouth dry, unsure of the answer. Many choices of words came and went, but none felt adequate. Some were more truthful, others flat out white lies. She had vested interest in her, even more so when she had reacted to the Sword of the Creator. Finally, after so long, her hard work bore fruit. That had been at the beginning.

Byleth had been... surprisingly cordial. Even if she had kept up appearances, she had been surprised when they first shared tea together. It had been lovely, to finally break her façade a tiny bit, even if conversation had been awkward and stiff. She found herself looking forward to more of these meetings, somewhere where she could be herself, chit chat and gossip, and enjoy her company.

She couldn't single out the moment she had fallen for her, but she had. It was kept secret, of course, but time flew by when they were together. The occasional gift she received made her heart flutter, and receiving flowers for her birthday had made her squeal like a little girl.

- Because you are important to me. - She finally spoke, twirling her locks like a young girl at first love. - And I won't allow anything ill to come to you.

- ...

Byleth remained silent, the cracking stone having almost consumed her whole. She barely moved at all, her face was as blank as the first time they had met. It was the truth, even if it had a very long history that she had conveniently omitted. But the idea of losing her, to spend eternity alone, was far more terrifying. She would gladly become a monster, if it meant saving her and remaining by her side.

- ... - She opened her mouth to say something, an answer Rhea dreaded and lusted for, to finally clear any and all fears and doubts.

The spell kicked in, as the breeze returned and ran by the archbishop. It quickly engulfed the other woman, swirling around her before engulfing her in a block of grey stone. The cracking intensified, concealing the petrification with both the slab of stone and the monotone noise. Rhea could only wait and hope for the best, praying that the magic would work as it had done with her, overpowering the curse and letting Byleth free.

Cracks appeared on the stone shell, lengthening and widening as they covered more and more of it. And just like before, it crumbled into a flurry of stone flakes, which fluttered to the ground around the newly revealed stone woman. Dazed and confused, the Ashen demon stumbled in place. She was still mobile and far more lucid than before. Rhea, before her, clasped her claws before her snout, and despite her blank eyes she could feel her relief and glee.

She raised her left hand, and her gaze was met with a stone arm, smooth and flawlessly sculpted. Her hand was now longer and claw-like, her right one immediately reaching for her face. She hit herself, her fingers now longer, but she barely registered it. The hand on her cheek moved forth, coming into sight and finally seeing the draconic snout her sight ignored.

The cracking continued, filling her body with a ticklish feeling. She felt her own quartet of horns grow, long and curved, and the weight of something else on her back. Both on her shoulders and her rear. Steadily, the stone flakes solidified into two massive dragon wings, while on top of her butt now hung a reptilian tail, solid and thick. Looking down, she also noticed her feet had grown longer, more beast-like. *"Fitting, I suppose."*

It was then when she also noticed she was completely nude. She had never given much thought to her own physique, other than keeping her shape, easy with her line of work. But now, as her stone breasts obscured partially the sight below, she covered both bust and crotch. Her blush could probably be seen miles away, even as a stone creature.

- Do not worry - giggled Rhea, her hands behind her back - you look wonderful.

- The spell did work... - Said Byleth.

- Before the spell took hold... you wanted to say something?

Byleth blinked, remembering. With steady footing, she closed the distance and put both hands on Rhea's shoulders. It was a bit hard reading her blank expression, even more so now, but the former mercenary simply leaned forward and kissed her. Her mind was left blank, not knowing how to react, enough for her lover to work things with her snout and finally lock lips.

Rhea melted in the embrace, their long and serpentine tongues pushing back and forth for a moment that went on and on. Without need to breathe, they could keep going, and they were very content to do so, even as Byleth had to stand on her toes to match her lover's height. It was as if time itself had stopped, and they wished they could remain like that. But they did not, and when they finally broke the kiss, Rhea pouted in protest.

- Thank you. That was what I wanted to say.

Had she been younger, the archbishop would have fainted on the spot, heart fluttering and giggling like a giddy young maiden. But she maintained her composure.

- Anything for you, my love.

Holding hands, blank gazes met, channelling their love for the other as well as they could. None knew what awaited them the day of tomorrow, but as the dark of the night finally took over, they didn't care. Tonight it was for them, and the moon had brought out her best tapestry of stars. Like diamonds in the sky, all dancing around their silvery queen.

For the first time they cared for nothing but each other. They explored their forms, lovingly getting to know every inch and detail. Their wingspans and the curves of their tails; the graceful elegance of their horns; the beauty of their new statuesque selves. How alike they looked, had it not been for their now permanent hairdos and their height difference...

They giggled and laughed, striking all sorts of poses both on their own and together. A range that went from the devout and classical to the more daring and brazen, both showing a life that had long been absent previously. They were delighted to know they were capable of

flight, even if the attempts ended with the two of them in the pond, drenched and splashing, chasing one another like kids.

Both talked and discussed. About their future. The first ray of sunlight would turn them into immobile statues until the night arrived. About their next step. Needing. to find shelter for the length of the day. About themselves. Their future was uncertain, but whatever it was to come, they would face it together.

No record can tell exactly what became of Byleth Eisner and Rhea. Some say they were eventually found by the Empress during the war, smashed to gravel under her boots. Others, that when the coalition between Kingdom, Alliance and Church forces triumphed, the new archbishop, Seteth, found them and secured them. Very few dare suggest the couple no longer reside on Fodlan, instead finding sanctuary elsewhere.

Regardless, the fact remains that they were last seen together, and each was fond of the other. Wherever they might have gone, it is likely the two did so together, standing side by side for as long as they lived.

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