

THE COWARD'S PATH

SEPTEMBER REQUEST STORY

BY CHALDEACHANGE



"You know, Dorothea, it was nice to study with you for a change."

"I agree Edie, we should do it again sometime!" Two young woman exited the library at Garreg Mach's academy and wandered down the attached hallway towards the stairs, books in hand as the scene behind them faded. The first was Edelgard von Hresvelg, the princess of the Adrestian Empire that was set to soon take the throne after her time at the academy was complete. The other was a commoner from the empire by the name of Dorothea Arnault. Despite their difference in status, the two had become quite close at the academy and had been spending time studying and practicing together as of late.

At least as often as Edelgard wasn't spending time with her professor or stuck with Hubert looming over her shoulder. The princess had a path she had decided to pursue no matter the costs, but at the same time she at least wanted to spend some quality time with her peers without interruption as well.

When the two got to the top of the stone steps heading down, Dorothea indicated that she was late for a date and had to go ahead, to which Edelgard allowed. As the brunette skipped down the steps, the princess couldn't help but admire her beauty. A tall, gorgeous brunette? Sure she had no shortage of dates. Not that it really mattered to Edelgard, whom had her eyes on one person in particular.

And that *should* have been the end of that. Edelgard *should* have merely reported to Byleth about her progress with Dorothea and been on her way. But a loud scream that echoed up from the bottom of the stairs derailed all that. It was Dorothea's scream!? **"Dorothea!?"**

The princess hurried down the spiral staircase without pause, not even as she noticed something peculiar on the walls. Vines sprinkled with a peculiar purple flower. They hadn't been there when they'd gone up to the library only hours before, and as far as Edelgard knew there was no plant that could grow that fast naturally. Could it have been the result of magic? If so, for what purpose?

But when she got to the bottom of the stairs she didn't find Dorothea at all. She found Bernadetta, the anxious mouse-like girl of the Black Eagles house, buried in Dorothea's oversized clothes. Bernadetta was a very small girl, at least when compared to the brunette but... Was this really Bernadetta? She looked like her certainly, except for one feature. Instead of having a head of purple hair, her hair was brown.

...Like Dorothea.

"Wh-Wh-What am I doing out here!? And wh-whose clothes are these!?" The girl squeaked skittishly and despite being confused by the oversized outfit she still hugged it to her body out of fear of being seen naked. Edelgard was about to question the girl when she became aware of those damned plants again. It wasn't just the walls of the stairs that had been plagued by them, but the walls and flooring of the entire monastery seemed to be afflicted. The flowers themselves giving off a strange, violet pollen. **"E-Edelgard!? N-No, you couldn't be, right? You don't look as s-scary...?"**

"What? What do you mean?" The emperor-to-be's usual confidence was conveyed through her words, but unfortunately the brown-haired Bernadetta wasn't able to provide an answer to her question. In fact she'd ultimately passed out in a heap. **"Could it be the effect of these spores?"** If that were the case then it was already too late for her, she'd inhaled them before even noticing they were present.

Not to mention one of her classmates was collapsed in front of her. She had doubts that this was really Bernadetta, and yet the only other possibility as hard as it was to believe didn't change the fact that this was a member of her house. El knelt before the unconscious girl and reached out to pick her up. It was at this moment that she noticed just how fragile Bernadetta was when compared to herself even though they were of the same age.

The princess had endured plenty and was by no means particularly tall, but despite it all she'd worked tirelessly to hone her body. She had to, it was the only way to earn respect in her position. But Bernie? Even as El considered herself to be short, she was significantly shorter. There was very little muscle upon her bones short of around her arms and core so that she could properly fire a bow, but even that was subtle thanks to her hidden away lifestyle.

Even so, the girl's comment before she'd lost consciousness concerned her. *'You don't look as scary?'* She wasn't as bothered by the implication that she was usually scary as one might think, but what could cause her to have a different opinion?

It was because the woman's expression wasn't as stern. Furrowed brow was usually worn to help push away unnecessary conversation, a subconscious product of her experiences and goals. Yet the muscles upon El's face had relaxed without her knowing, but it was a little *more* than that as well. A tingle upon the tip of her nose rounded out its point and lips begun to quiver as they, too, shrunk into a more girlish design. Cheeks, which seldom ever harbored any color of their own (*short of the time she spent with her professor*) almost seemed healthier as a subtle pink shone in the dim light of the hall.

She stopped just short of actually touching Bernadetta to pick her up. Not because her intent had changed just yet, but because she noticed her hands shaking uncontrollably. "**What?**" Like a truck she was struck by a sudden, overwhelming anxiety. She'd been fine only moments before, but now more and more fears began to worm their way into the back of her mind.

Outside? Why was she outside? There would be people nearby, right? Had she come out in search of something? Someone? Her mouth almost watered as the thought '*maybe there's cake*' popped up, but El shook her head to dismiss it. These thoughts were not only invasive but out of character, lending credence to her initial theory about this situation. Surely this brown-haired Bernadetta wasn't actually Bernadetta. *She had been Dorothea.*

Now, whatever had afflicted Dorothea had afflicted herself. The spores? Those had to be the cause. Bernadetta had an interest in rare flowers after all -- had she gotten her hands on something dangerous? It was becoming difficult to process theories as more of her confidence slipped away.

Gaze drawn back from the flowers on the wall to her hands, she could see that they had diminished. Gloves no longer fit properly, and removing one revealed a hand that she did not recognize. Instead, it was a perfect match for the bare hand of the girl in front of her. Gone from its surface were the countless scars that she hid, smooth skin without blemish left in its place as the nails of her fingers appeared rough -- chewed? Edelgard could understand why considering she was not fighting an urge to anxiously bite them herself.

What was she to do? Resistance to the spores' effects seemed to be a futile endeavor without an antidote, but the princess was too prideful to merely accept her fate. ...Or that should have been the case, but what was pride to these knew insecurities? She had to double take at a silhouette in the corner of her eye, for a brief moment fearing it to be her own father.

Not her father the Adrestian Empire, but the Count of Varley!? Rather why was she considering the emperor to be her father? Surely the emperor didn't treat Edelgard like...

A shaking hand gently slapped herself across the face to snap her out of it. She was falling too far into the trappings of these spores! But how long could she maintain her awareness with self-inflicted violence!? A single glance at her shoulders following the shock was enough to know that her hair had been regressing in length and had already risen to her neckline, texture rougher and styling messier.

Likewise the sudden motion that had been born of thinking she saw 'her' father had made her hyperaware of her clothing -- more specifically that it did not fit properly. **"Wh-Why is this happening to me!?"** The calm was very clearly lost from Edelgard's voice, which trembled like Bernadetta's did. Her pitch had become squeakier as well, to the point some might possibly find it grating.

She ran hands down the front of her garb, which was the typical Garreg Mach uniform decorated with emblems and accessories signifying her status. Dimitri bore similar accessories to indicate his background as the Kingdom's heir as well, but not El was confused by why she was adorning them.

It was a high crime to pose as a member of royalty, wasn't it? No! She'd been wearing them all along! She was supposed to wear them!

Said thoughts weren't enough to prevent her fingers, terrified of the repercussions, from peeling off the mantle and crimson cape that hung from her left shoulder. **"B-Before anyone sees, I need to..."** The princess was only eight centimeters taller than the noble regularly, but losing that much had clearly left the uniform sitting incorrectly. The crimson leggings she wore slid down thighs that were waifish in comparison to their usual forms, no longer supported by the tissue of either thigh nor the rounding butt she'd had before; that too had come to pass. They were merely prevented from falling farther because the girl had moved to her knees earlier to help Bernadetta up.

Fingers barely poked out of her sleeves as she reached from the brown haired Bernadetta again, clothes feeling heavy without her usual muscles to properly support them. It was no use... she couldn't muster the energy... she just wanted to go back to her room...

Hiding away sounded good. Great, actually. In her room no one could hurt her. She didn't have to worry about the empire's problems nor her father coming to harm her. She could just surround herself with plants and cake and embroidery and live happily ever after! But... who was this girl in front of her? It was like she was looking in the mirror, but this one had brown hair. Then again Edelgard had white hair, so she couldn't really judge.

"O-Oh right, the flowers..." Fatigue settling in, she too was about to pass out; but not before remembering something important. The purple flowers, the spores. They were a rare breed of flower that could redistribute the form of a person if it ingested their blood. It was dangerous and she'd received one.

From her father? As the last spark of Edelgard's personality dwindled away and her consciousness collapsed, she realized. This had been a calculated attack by the Count of Varley on her, the princess! But that realization was lost as darkness claimed her.

"H-H-Hey, are you awake!?" Edeldetta was eventually stirred by the sound of a familiar voice. Her own voice. Bernadetta's voice. They were one and the same now. Lashes batted open to find herself looking at the spitting image of herself, but with blue hair.

Blue like their professor. But the emotion conveyed in Byledetta's eyes did not match their professor's usual complacency. It made sense, they were all victims of the flower. Neither of them could prevent themselves from considering them to be 'Bernadetta', but at the same time there was still a flicker of realization that the other Bernadettas weren't Bernadetta at all. Based on the range of the flowers it must have afflicted the entire academy. **"I-I-I'm sorry I wasn't there to protect you..."**

"N-No! I-I'm sorry!" There was no blame to be placed here, at least not on any Bernadetta; not even the original. They'd just have to find a way to turn everyone back before those tiny sparks of identity were lost forever.

...Hopefully the academy had a decent stockpiling of bows.