

상수리  
나무  
아래  
Under the  
oak tree

김수지 저음



1987

# Under The Oak Tree

## *Under The Oak Tree* *Side Story* **Sooji Kim**



**Riftan's POV : Chapter 1 - 44**  
**Gabel POV**

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# Chapters

[Riftan's Pov](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)  
[Chapter 33](#)  
[Chapter 34](#)  
[Chapter 35](#)  
[Chapter 36](#)  
[Chapter 37](#)  
[Chapter 38](#)  
[Chapter 39](#)  
[Chapter 40](#)  
[Chapter 41](#)  
[Chapter 42](#)  
[Chapter 43](#)  
[Chapter 44](#)  
[Gabel POV](#)

## **Riftan's POV**

### **Chapter 1**

The heavy rain that raged all night ceased at dawn. Riftan washed his face with the rainwater from the trough and blinked his stiff eyes. Last night was a nightmare as the hut creaked and groaned all-night-long against the violent wind that blew like a flying blade.

He looked up at the bright sky that had no trace of last night's savage storm and wiped the water dripping from his face with his ragged sleeves.

Even though his stepfather has been repairing their house since spring, the hut is ramshackle; when the rainy season comes, turbulence is inevitable. They may need to repair it with their hands again before the rest of the season comes.

Riftan's eyebrows furrowed as he thought of how much money he must earn to buy as much wood needed to fix it. At that moment, a disconcerting voice screamed from behind him.

“There’s tons of work to do, what are you standing around there for?!”

He gazed at the forge as the sound of hammers against steel rang loudly. Through the wide-open door, he saw a swarthy red face. If the man was only a short distance away, he would’ve run to punch Riftan in the head. He hurriedly lifted the sack lying next to him.

“...I was just about to go.”

Riftan carried the sack on his shoulders that weigh about as heavy as him and strode forward. The blacksmith shot him a hateful glance and went into the forge ahead of him. He followed him quietly, gazing at the huge fortress that towered over the lush forest.

It has been several months since he started as an apprentice in Croiso Castle’s smithy, but his mind was never where he wanted it to be. Rather than being in the smithy, he was better off removing dung from the horse stables like he used to. Although he was constantly busy working in the stables, the amount of work he had to do in the smithy was beyond imaginable.

Every dawn, he had to dig for piles of firewood, burn charcoal in a kiln, and hammer iron ore red until his shoulders feel like splitting. After that, he must tend constantly to the fire in the furnace, so that the flames would soar.

During the first few weeks, he suffered from blisters that grew on his palms and burns in several parts of his body that sometimes he had thought of beating his stepfather who forced him to be in such awful place. However, after seeing the man’s blunt face, the resentment that swelled up to his neck disappeared like his feelings were all a lie.

As Riftan recalled the image of his stepfather who filled his stomach with nothing but thin, cold stew, he slammed the sack roughly. The words of his stepfather the day he dragged him to this place rang in his ears.

“A peasant farmer like me lives in destitute all his life until the day he dies. At least a blacksmith lives a better life.”

His stepfather who uttered those words dug up a dirt in their hut’s backyard and pulled out a black, rotten leather pouch. Inside it was the dowry he received when he married Riftan’s biological mother.

Fourteen Dirhams. His stepfather offered six of them to the swine-like blacksmith and pleaded with a bow to mentor Riftan. Remembering how ridiculous it was, Riftan spat out profanity from his mouth.

If I had that amount of money, I would have used it to build a new house... Why would he care for a stranger’s bastard who didn’t share a single drop of blood with him.

“Hey! Greenhorn! Bring more charcoal!”

Riftan woke up from his thoughts at the sound of the loud shout. He ran with a barrow filled with crushed charcoal and poured it to the furnace, then pushed the bellows as hard as he could, making a golden flame soar to the ceiling. From then on, he didn’t have time to be lost in thought.

He must obey the instructions of over thirty men yelling, “Do this, do that,” and ran never-ending errands around the large forge, carrying all sorts of load.

Only six of the blacksmiths were veterans, the rest were junior apprentices who came to learn like him yet all of them treated him like a servant.

Riftan noticed how he was the one pushed to do all sorts of chores, yet he couldn’t protest. The blacksmith who took him in neglected him while the others were displeased at the fact that he is a biracial boy. Thus, he couldn’t learn how to properly make a horseshoe.

Riftan clenched his teeth. He couldn’t quit despite being heartbroken that his father paid silver coins to let him learn, yet he is being treated like a slave. He swallowed his grievous resentment down his stomach and hammered until his shoulders were sore.

When it was time for him to go home, he didn't have an ounce of energy left to vomit any swear word. In the stream, he rubbed his face and hands that had become charcoal black and washed his mottled clothes. Then, he roughly wore his dripping clothes again and turned towards the direction of his house. Suddenly, he found something sparkling in the rippling water.

He bent over and picked it up. A white pebble the size of his thumb shone against the light. Riftan, who was fiddling with the peculiar, white, smooth stone, placed it inside his clothes and strode forward. Regardless of exhaustion, his vitality instantly sprung from somewhere.

He walked through the dense forest and headed towards the castle's courtyard. It was long until a magnificent structure emerged against the trees.

His eyes searched whilst picking up firewood from the storage next to him. After a while, he was able to spot a little girl squatting and picking up something in the corner of the outbuilding's garden. Seeing her made the building lump in his heart melt.

Riftan walked slowly, pretending to pick up another piece of firewood. Aside from him, there were several other servants who came to get firewood and he blended in, so she didn't seem to think anything strange about him approaching.

However, the black hound that followed the little girl around, showed vigilance and its ears immediately perked up. Riftan, who was careful not to approach closer than necessary, carefully laid down the pebble he had found in front of the girl.

He then moved away quickly as if he had another business to do. A moment later, he looked over his shoulder, seeing her pick up the pebble he laid and tuck it inside her colorful pouch.

Riftan stepped towards the city's gates, swallowing a laughter that seemed to erupt from his chest. He couldn't shake the thoughts of how he acted like

an idiot. Why in the world did that felt good? Riftan, fleeing away from the castle in a lighter pace laughed bitterly instead.

He couldn't understand himself. Every day I go around the castle just to see that girl before I go home...Am I crazy?

She wasn't even a child he could play with. She is the daughter of the duke, and a peasant like him was not allowed to speak to her unless he is spoken to.

If someone notices what he's doing, he will surely be ridiculed as impudent. Suddenly, begrudging feelings steamed out and he kicked the ground with force.

Anyway, she must have not even noticed his existence. She must not know that he's occasionally throwing strange colored feathers or pebbles in the garden. While she's in bed, does she wonder how unusual it is to find such things in a garden? ...You wouldn't even know what sort of crown she made with those, or if she even made use of what you gave, what gives you the audacity to be curious about it?

Seeing the dilapidated hut at the bottom of the hill, Riftan snapped back to reality. She wasn't a girl who lived in a neighbor's house. She is the daughter of the duke who ruled this huge manor, and he is the lowest of his subjects.

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It wasn't long after he worked in the castle's stables that he took notice of her. As he carried a loaded barrow towards the barn, he saw her sitting in the backyard of the outbuilding.

He immediately noticed the oldest little girl of Duke Croix and briskly tried to shrug it off, but his legs didn't move for some reason.

The doll-like little girl hugged the black hound tightly with her stubby arms and buried her face against its velvety fur. Seeing how she clings to a dog



bigger than him, his body stiffened, and his heart felt sore for unknown reasons.

He noticed that she wanted to be embraced by someone and her loneliness felt as vivid as his. He used to seek aid for his solitude that way too, burying his face against the nape of a foal.

Why does a girl with hundreds of servants seek comfort from a hound? Is she as lonely as I am? Having such thoughts run in his mind, he felt an urge to comfort her presumptuously.

It was thoughts that a passing dog would laugh at. Who will comfort who? He is a servant who removed horse dirt from stables, and she is the daughter of a duke.

Perhaps, she lived a life so luxurious that is beyond what he could imagine. A banquet hall decorated with marbles, golden chandeliers, soft fabrics, and sumptuous food that he will never be able to touch in his lifetime...

She sleeps in a soft, cloud-like bed made of feathers and she can eat and drink as much as she wants. She will never experience the pain of working until the skin of her palms peel till the day she dies.

He shook off the strange feelings he had towards her and congratulated himself for successfully convincing himself to walk away. However, after that day, he couldn't help but chase her with his eyes every time he passed by the outbuilding.

Seeing her shoulders drooping or the back of her shaggy head made him feel sick, her smile made him feel better. He also became worried if she was sick somewhere whenever she's not around. Unexpectedly, she has become someone who provided him healing at the end of the day.

Last night, as Riftan bagged charcoal from the kiln into a sack, he mocked himself. Although he knew that on one hand, he was just creating a comfort zone to escape from the harsh reality.

He's just protecting himself at will, and the girl might not even be lonely at all. Her sad figure must be all but a delusion he's having, and she will have nothing but fun and joyful days ahead of her. Thinking that bringing her shabby gifts daily brings her joy is all but for vain.

She can get as many jewels as she wants if she wished for it. In just a few years, when she grows up a little more, she will forget the fact that she used to collect pebbles and all these kinds of nonsense.

## Chapter 2

He tightly tied the sack filled with black charcoal and tried erasing the red-haired girl who kept flickering in his head. Thinking of her is only an illusion that's made for him to feel like he wasn't alone.

Riftan pulled out firewood from the storage and stacked his sack in a barrow. He then grabbed the handles and pushed his load forward. He did the same routine over and over without stopping that he was able to transport all the charcoal before the sun reached the middle of the sky. With his raggedy sleeves, he wiped his sweat and pumped water from the well to quench his thirst.

The only fortunate thing about his damned life was that he was stronger than his peers. He couldn't get the nutrition his body needed so his limbs and legs were thin, but he was tall and big enough to meet the height of boys two or three years older than him.

From eight years of age, he never suffered from any major illness despite being subjected to rigorous labor. There were times he would hope he's sick when faced with a mountain of work but seeing people dying from unknown causes made that thought disappear.

If he gets sick, it's all over. He couldn't afford to go to a healer, let alone a priest, nor couldn't expect someone to nurse him back to health because taking a day off work also means starving on that day.

Most poverty-stricken people just leave the sick unattended until they die, even their family. There's no other way or choice for them anyway.

Merchants, craftsmen, and architects were better off, but tenant farmers such as they are, had to pay enormous amounts of rent every season.

It was common for peasants to renounce their freedom and become enslaved serfs because they couldn't afford to pay taxes. Despite being able to pay taxes, putting food in the stomach is another difficult burden.

The taxes and rent implemented by the Duke of Croiso was particularly expensive. It wasn't only once or twice did he see his stepfather haggling with the tax collector.

Whenever his father opened his mouth, it would be complaining about the expensive rent and moving to a land with lower taxes and rent. However, Riftan was well aware that there was no way that they'll be able to leave the Croiso Manor.

Outside the walls were forests and lands infested by horrible monsters and it would require at least thirty silver coins to hire escort mercenaries to bring them to safety.

Even if he worked and farmed his whole life, he would never be able to save that amount of money. The only way to escape was to risk his own life, but Riftan knew that his stepfather doesn't have the guts to do so.

Riftan stretched his waist and massaged his throbbing shoulders. Despite all the profanity that his stepfather spat out complaining about the hefty rents and taxes, he went out at dawn everyday carrying a plow to the fields. There was no other choice for him. He'll wake up and do the same work over and over until he's old and ill, until his body can no longer work.

It was not difficult to picture his stepfather lying on the bed, waiting helplessly for the day that he dies. And soon, it will be him. Like most peasants, his life will end that way too.

Riftan's mouth twisted bitterly as he washed his soiled hands with the water from his canteen. But he was born strong, he will be able to withstand the hardships for at least thirty more years.

If he's fortunate, he might even be a blacksmith like his stepfather intends for him to be. However, at this rate, it was a shot to the moon for him to become a master at the craft.

There was a distinct hierarchy in the smithy. The blacksmiths of highest rank are the ones who make armors and weapons, the ones in the middle rank make the cauldrons, pots, doorknobs, and candlesticks; the rest had to hammer horseshoes all day long.

He was very aware that his best chance is only up to becoming a middleranked blacksmith. Despite being skillful with handling tools, he could never even have the chance to hammer a metal of high-quality.

The tension and competition between the apprentices are very fierce and the senior blacksmiths have already handpicked their successors, and so far, he has failed. Perhaps, he will be working errands in the smithy for the rest of his life.

“Still, it's better than being a peasant farmer...”

Riftan washed his face with cold water to reinvigorate his mind, rocking his head back and forth, thinking of ways to escape his damned povertystricken life. However, there simply is no good future that can be drawn for him.

To add to his list of misfortunes, he's an illegitimate mixed-race child, born out of the blood of strangers. Even if his family were able to gather capital and start a business, it would easily be eradicated, having a Catholic-dominant manor that controls the trade. Besides, who would want to buy from him.

He rubbed his neck, which had become sticky from sweat, and went into the smithy. The blacksmiths were already gathered, ready to start the day

and setting fire to the furnaces. One of them looked at him with billowing eyes.

“What in the world are you standing around for?!”

The man pointed to the huge bellows made of dragon’s wings and ordered him to operate it. Riftan sighed and began to pull the thing up and push it down repeatedly. Soon, the spacious, cluttered smithy was steaming with muggy heat.

Riftan thought that it was a wonder how his lungs didn’t give up yet. The reverberating sound of the hammers hitting iron here and there could make him deaf. He smiled bitterly.

What do you need to worry for?

It would have been better if that happened, then he wouldn’t have to hear his neighbors gossiping about his illegitimacy and race when he passes by.

Riftan’s jaw was rigid, and his teeth were tightly clenched as he moved his arms up and down with all his strength. After fanning the furnace for a long period of time, a glowing red-hot stream of iron flowed out, it was then placed in a mold to harden and then on top of an anvil, to be pounded with a hammer to flatten its shape.

When the wrought iron has been made, the blacksmith takes it to be polished further and made into things such as horseshoes, spurs, and axes. This process was repeated throughout the day.

“Hey! We’re out of lime! Didn’t I tell you to get enough?!”

Riftan was in the middle of working on the bellows when someone pulled his ear from behind. Riftan lifted his head, swallowing back a groan. The bearded man squeezed his face hard with one hand and turned his head to one side of the forge.

“We only have half a bag left! Bring more, and hurry!”

Riftan shook off the man's hand and looked at him fiercely. The blacksmith's face immediately turned red from anger.

“What's with those eyes? Are you trying to rebel now?”

As if the man was showing off his solid biceps, the product of hammering all day, he shook his clunky fist and flapped his arm. Riftan had been hit the other day, beaten to the temple which caused him to vomit all day long. He took a step back.

“Are you not going to bring it?”

Riftan strode outside before the man could hit him on the back of his head. However, while dragging the barrow to the warehouse, Riftan's boiling anger didn't subside. There are twenty-four apprentices, why is it that when something runs out, he's always the one at fault?

“Fuck\*ng jerks...”

He groaned and spat on the ground, then dragged the rattling barrow to a shorter path. Walking through the thick forest, he heard a dog barking from somewhere. He paused on his tracks and looked around but could not see a dog in sight. He frowned, left the barrow, and headed to the direction of the sound.

As he jumped over the lush bushes and passed three or four beautiful trees, he saw a black hound barking aggressively at something, its posture in full guard.

If his eyes weren't fooling him, that hound is the loyal watchdog of the Duke's eldest daughter.

What the hell are you doing in this place? Where's your master?

Riftan's eyebrows were creased, then suddenly his eyes widened at what he saw.

The dog was barking at a massive lizard-like creature that was about 1 kvet long, its tongue was slithering.

Riftan instinctively lowered his body against the ground and observed the creature's appearance. It was the first time that he saw such a thing in his life. Its whole body was wrapped in thorny scales and its large, menacing mouth had two long, needle-like protruding fangs.

Are there other monsters hiding?

As Riftan's thoughts were running, the dog ran towards the lizard. Then, the lizard struck the hound with its long tail and bit the hound's neck.

As he was staring stiff and blankly at the scene, something popped out of the bushes. Riftan's breath hitched. The young girl of the Croiso family grabbed a long branch and began to smash the lizard's body.

Riftan, who has never seen such a baffling scene, swears to the heavens that it didn't sink in him. He was so perplexed that his body didn't move and stiffened further.

The lizard swung its head, threw the hound, and ran straight to the girl. Upon seeing what's about to come, Riftan picked up a stone under him and ran like lightning to her side.

As he struck the pointed stone to the neck of the monster, its body, thicker than Riftan's forearm, convulsed violently. It spewed out an ear-splitting scream, threatening with its venom.

He escaped behind the creature and threw stones as hard as he could. A big stone then struck the creature's throat, making the monster struggle and wriggle vigorously with its long tail.

Riftan hurriedly picked up fallen branches and stabbed them into the creature's stomach. After a while, the monster's body turned limp. He kicked it and took a ragged breath.

His heart drummed loudly against his chest, like a horseshoe being hammered, and cold sweat ran down his back like a waterfall. If he could, he wanted to lay the girl face down against his lap and hit her buttocks as punishment.

Riftan glared at the girl ferociously. But, as she saw her sitting down weakly on the ground, all his anger washed away and was replaced by fear.

He hurriedly sat down in front of her, inspecting her whole body. Blood was oozing out of her forearm. She was bitten by that godless creature. Without sparing a thought, Riftan loosened his belt and tied it tightly around the upper part of the wound.

Then, the little girl leaned her head back as if to sleep and burst into tears. He squeezed her arm from top to bottom, her arm was less than a handful against his palms. The girl cried and pounded on his limbs.

“A...ow!”

“I have to get the venom out. Stay still!”

After all this is done, his throat might be cut for contempt, but for now, there’s no one to witness. He screamed at her to be quiet, placed his mouth on the wound, sucked out the venom-infected blood and spat it on the ground.

After doing the process several times, he embraced her little doll-like body and carried her eagerly towards the castle. She burst into tears as her eyes drooped.

“My...Puppy...”

He looked over his shoulder, freaking out. The dog was lifeless and wasn’t moving. Riftan bit his lips and moved again, but the stubborn girl pulled on his hair.

“My...Puppy too...You have t-to take my puppy too.”



“I’ll bring him to you later.”

He urged his legs to move faster as he made a promise he couldn’t keep. The girl wrapped her small, slender arms around his neck and snorted.

“You m-must.”

His heart felt like tumbling down. He hugged her small back tightly and ran out of the woods without any hesitation. He couldn’t keep count of how many times he almost tripped over tree roots in his hurry. He anxiously rubbed his palms against her body that turned colder and harder in each passing moment. After running for a long time, the estate finally came into sight and he shouted so loud he felt like his throat would rip. “H-Help! The young lady was bitten by a monster!”

A passing maid, who was carrying a basket of laundry, turned her head and screamed. She tossed the basket and ran to her quickly.

“Miss!”

The servants who heard the commotion ran, asking what’s going on. He screamed over and over again, until he ran out of breath.

“It was a monster that looked like a lizard! The creature bit her forearm. She needs to be treated quickly!”

“Take her right now!”

A plump maid snatched the little girl from his hold and ran towards the castle. He hesitated, looking at her with hazy eyes. The girl, limp in the hands of the maid, soon disappeared into the grandeur building. Unconsciously trying to chase after them, a soldier stopped Riftan by his shoulders.

“Where do you think you’re going?!”

“Please, if it’s okay, let me see even for a moment.”

## Chapter 3

Riftan shook the hand off his shoulder and tried to escape but the guard snatched his back.

“Didn’t you hear me, I said you can’t go in!”

He looked resentfully at the shoulders. Who is this person to say that when he’s clearly not qualified enough, letting a child wander around the woods alone with her dog, and have the audacity to stop him?

It was Riftan who saved her. Certainly, he must have the right to see her heal. He was about to argue his thoughts but noticed that the man had a strange glint to his eyes.

And he wasn’t the only one giving him that look. Hearing the commotion, another knight rushed to hear what exactly happened and started interrogating.

“You’re saying a monster showed up? Where the hell is it?”

Only then that Riftan realized they were wary of him, and his face hardened. Just because he was a brown-skinned peasant that was seen to be carrying a dying noble-lady from a monster attack, he’s suddenly become a person of suspicion. He lifted his head rebelliously and pointed towards the forest where he ran from.

“That way. I saw it on my way to get lime for the smithy.”

“Fine. Then lead me there. “

“I’m not lying! A venomous black lizard suddenly appeared and attack the young lady! If I didn’t happen to see, the young lady...!”

“That’s why I’m asking you to lead me to the place where the monster is.” The knight responded with annoyance. His careless face that seems to be around the age of thirty-five became stern for a couple of moments.

“If what you say is true, that a monster appeared in the castle grounds, then we need to exterminate it right away. Don’t make me tell you twice and show us where it is!”

Riftan quit trying to avoid the situation and clear his name as it would seem to only make him more suspicious. Riftan glanced at the castle’s entrance where he saw the girl disappear into and reluctantly turned his body around.

However, while retaking the path he went, the stiff body of the girl in his arms lingered in his thoughts. He forced his feet to move and rubbed his chest, pounding it anxiously.

Will she really be okay?... She’ll get healing from a priest, so you have nothing to worry about.

As Riftan ran his thoughts to clear his anxiety, the knight who was quietly following him suddenly grabbed his shoulder.

Riftan turned his head. The knight was staring through the bushes with a vigilant expression. He followed his gaze and saw that the knight was looking at the monstrous lizard and the black dog’s corpse, then removed the man’s grip from him.

“There’s no need to be cautious. It’s already dead.”

The knight’s eyes narrowed as he approached the lizard’s body, pulling out the branches impaled through its stomach.

“You’re the one who killed this?”

Riftan nodded his head. The knight smirked and drew the sword from his waist, cutting off the lizard’s head with one short blow. He then grabbed the creature by its long, thick, and muscular tail with his gloved hand and lifted it up.

Riftan took a step back, avoiding the blood dripping from the monster’s throat. The knight trailed his eyes up and down the monster’s body and shouted at the soldiers waiting behind him.

“This is a young Hume Lizard! Search around the wall. It must have dug a tunnel and hid inside the castle grounds; it’s nest is probably around somewhere nearby.”

“Yes, sir!”

The soldiers who trailed them as he led the direction hurriedly ran towards the walls’ direction. After draining the lizard of its blood, the man threw the lizard at his feet.

“It’s yours since you’re the one who caught it. Dragon subspecies will give you quite a bit of money. Even this low-level monster can earn you two dirhams if you take it apart and sell its leather and gemstones.”

Riftan stared distantly at the lizard’s fluid. The knight lifted the black hound a few steps away, paying him no more attention. He heard his tongue click.

“This guy needs to be buried.”

At the knight’s words, Riftan returned to his right mind. Riftan opened his lips to urgently ask the knight.

“You said this monster is still young and low-level, does that mean it’s not dangerous? Will the young lady be alright?”

The knight slightly frowned. Riftan became nervous, noticing that he might have offended the knight with his intrusive questions. Fortunately, the knight seemed to be a relatively patient person, and responded indifferently, although his expression was unpleasant.

“If it’s only an injury from this lizard’s venom, then it can be resolved quickly with purification magic. It won’t be much of a problem for the young lady.”

It was only then that Riftan’s shoulders relaxed. He lowered his head and rubbed his throbbing back. He felt like he aged three or four years when he

saw the girl being attacked by a monster when it happened only thirty minutes ago.

“Do you work in the smithy?”

The knight who was observing him closely suddenly asked. Riftan nodded his head with an alert expression.

“I’ve been an apprentice for a couple of months. I used to work at the stables.”

The knight stroked his chin thoughtfully and reached at something on his waist.

“I have to go back to work, so I don’t have the time to deal with this matter. I’ll leave it to you.”

Riftan looked down at the four sparkling silver coins that the man is handing him. The knight then bluntly added, “Two coins for the price of quelling the monster and the other two is for saving the young lady. If the lady was in big trouble, the guards would not have been spared from punishment. Take it, as a reward.”

Riftan’s face hardened instantly, realizing that he was being bribed to keep his mouth shut. If it wasn’t for fate that he happened to be passing by, it would be a displeasing news that the duke’s eldest daughter has almost lost her life.

Riftan, who has been plagued and surrounded by hostility since childhood, was able to easily read the knight’s warning gaze. He’s telling him to take the money and never talk about what transpired today in the forest. He had no choice but to accept the silver coins and clench his teeth.

He had no power to oppose him in the first place. The knight might think that he is acting generously towards him, handing a large amount of money to a peasant, yet in turn preventing him from escalating the situation by keeping Riftan’s mouth sealed. Riftan tucked the silver coins into his pocket and walked away towards the dog.

“I will bury this guy as thanks for your tremendous generosity.”

The knife smirked and nodded, not bothering to reprimand a peasant boy's boldness for speaking in a sarcastic tone. Riftan hid the dead dog beneath his barrow, loading it with lime and ran through the woods. When he reached a quiet place where people don't pass by, he began digging using sturdy tree branches.

He longed to get tools from the smithy but if he goes back now, he wouldn't be able to escape chores until the day ends. When the branches broke, he dug deep in the soil with his bare hands. When it was deep enough, he carried the cold dog and laid it on the ground. Its fur was surprisingly stiff and cold as his palm gently swept across its neck.

The girl's image fluttered before his eyes. To her, this dog may be the only friend that soothes her loneliness. He swallowed heavily and watched bitterly as he covered its body with dirt.

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Upon returning to the smithy, he received a blow to his cheek and was asked where he dared to play around. His head was squeezed several times, but he made no excuses. He's not sure what type of anger he would receive shall he go around telling the truth.

The knight who was in charge of the castle's security didn't seem like a violent person but there's nothing wrong with being too careful. Riftan stealthily swore at the blacksmith and went back to shoveling charcoal and grinding bellows.

However, despite the smoldering heat in the smithy, his body grew increasingly cold by each passing moment. He stretched his fingers and clasped his hand, closing and opening it repeatedly, trying to focus his blurry vision. Beads of cold sweat formed on his forehead and his breath started getting shorter.

He suddenly recalled that he had sucked the venom out of the girl's forearm. Although he spat it right away, he seemed to have swallowed the ones that remained inside his mouth. He sat on a rock and thumped on his chest as his lungs felt stuffy and his breathing got thinner.

A loud scream rang in his ears.

“This damn child! If you don't want to work, then f\*ck off!”

He looked up wearily, seeing the blacksmith's reddish face then began to move his arms mechanically. He doesn't know where he got the strength from to continue, by the time he managed to finish cleaning up, the sun was setting.

Riftan barely managed to return to their dilapidated hut whilst staggering, not bothering to wash his face or hands that were stained with black charcoal. As he opened the door, the cold silence greeted him.

Weakly leaning against the door frame, he looked at the bed made of wood plank, the fireless furnace, the slightly inclined dining table, and the bucket for drinking water. There was no sign of life in their house. As soon as his stepfather finished his work in the fields, he goes straight to get a drink while his mother watches the sunset on the hill as she did every day.

Riftan fell on the straw bed. He thought of going to a healer and pay with the silver coins in his pocket, but he could not move his limbs. He didn't even have the strength to light a fire in the furnace, what more to visit a healer.

His teeth rattled as he covered his pulled the blanket over his head. Loneliness sunk to his bones, thinking that he might actually die like this.

What the hell am I doing stupid things for? The girl will receive the best treatments and will be meticulously taken care of by dozens of her maids. On the other hand, he's someone who would never receive care from his family, let alone treatment for his illness. I don't know who should be worried for who.

He swore at himself for doing something useless. However, the twisted judgement against himself disappeared upon remembering the girl's little limbs hanging around his neck and her round face drenched in tears.

What if you die like this?...I was going to die doing rigorous labor all my life anyway.

To die because of saving the precious girl is a heroic act. Although nobody will know.

Riftan rubbed his sore eyes and closed them tightly.

At one point, he seems to have lost his mind as he woke up to a cool touch against his face. At first sight, a woman's face, filled with worry, came to his hazy vision. He thought he was dreaming.

His mother, who constantly avoided looking into his eyes, gazed at him with eyes full of anxiety, muttering as she wiped his dark face with a damp towel. He didn't understand what she was saying as his ears ringed, and the words sounded like a buzz.

He blinked his eyes that felt hot like fireballs. His body felt like a block of ice, but his head felt like it was burning. F\*cking monster got me good. Damn it...

"This is medicinal herbs. Try and eat even a little."

He could barely understand what his mother was saying. He weakly lifted his head and swallowed a few gulps of the lukewarm liquid. However, he couldn't push the substance down his system and puked all of it back up. His mother was taken aback and wiped his mouth with a cloth. Her gentle touched felt as if he was half in fantasy.

He couldn't remember the last time she touched him. He hated how she looked at him like she has been painfully stoked with an iron skewer whenever they made an eye contact, so he constantly tried to avoid it.

"Hang in there. I'm boiling another one."



She laid him back down on the bed and quickly walked to the fireplace. Seeing her care for him made him feel a little better as it always seemed like he didn't have an ounce of affection for him. Riftan held that thought in his head and closed his eyes.

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After suffering two full days, his body felt lighter, and the chill went away like a lie. Seeing him getting up from the bed and washing his face, his stepfather bluntly spoke.

“We have nothing to pay the rent and tax.”

He then opened a flask of cheap ale that he carries around and took a swig. Riftan pretended to be deaf to his words and after wiping the water off his face, ate a bowl of porridge.

He seemed to have gained his appetite back, so he probably won't die like his stepfather said. As he scoffed at his miserable life, he heard his stepfather speak again in an indifferent tone.

“If you're feeling better, go back to working in the smithy. I talked to them, telling them you were ill. Although, they complained on how they're going to make use of a sick boy.”

He looked helplessly at the man, who was staring at the floor.

“It will be difficult to go back to work since you rested only for a while after your illness. I know everyone will be hard on you. Still, you must endure it and learn. If you do not want to live this way your whole life, then you better do it.”

Riftan avoided the man's eyes. His stepfather struggled all his life with heavy burdens on his shoulders, Riftan didn't drink poison but his chest felt stuffy as if he had. He jumped from his seat and wore a shabby robe over his back, covering his naked torso.

“I was planning to go anyway.”

He then strode towards the door, his mother silently poking the firewood in the furnace until he was out of the hut. Riftan glanced over his shoulder and began to hike up the hill.

He was amazed at how his body had the strength to move despite being bedridden for two full days as he crossed two hills at once and passed through the castle gates.

## Chapter 4

As he ran straight to the smithy, the sight of laborers working and running all over the place since morning unfolded before his eyes. Riftan was puzzled at the sight. Perhaps it's because of his mood that the smithy seemed busier than usual.

“Finally, you’re showing up!”

As he entered the smithy, a blacksmith hammering loudly commented with a booming voice. He scrutinized him from head to toe, making Riftan feel uncomfortable.

“You’re not ill, you look fine.”

“...It was just this morning that I finally woke up.”

The blacksmith laughed out loud.

“Are you saying I should get another fool to use and discard you instead?”

Riftan swallowed the urge to retaliate which is building up in his throat. He did recover from his illness, but it was just this morning that he was able to move his body out of bed. Despite that, he didn't want to get on the blacksmith's bad side and get hit on the head with the man's greasy hands. The blacksmith dreadfully stared at him and then pointed to the sacks piled up in the corner.

“Just last night, the royal knights came in, making work pile up to a mountain. I want to finish it right away, but my hands are full, so I have no choice but to accept you again this time!”

You’re making a big fuss out of everything. Riftan began to work silently, sarcasm boiling inside him. As the blacksmith had said, there is indeed a lot of work to do; from repairing armors, swords, maces, battle axes, spearheads, shields, and making hundreds of arrowheads.

I wonder where’s all of this going to. They were ordered to make hundreds of horseshoes for the royal knights’ battalion of horses, the hammering sound never ceased for a moment. All the blacksmiths were preoccupied with all the work that even he was called to do a job.

“It’s been a few months since you came in so you must know how to make horseshoes, right? I’ll give you a sample, so make use of that.”

He was never taught anything properly and was stunned that a job was suddenly thrown at him but Riftan tapped the iron without saying a word. All this time, while he worked errands in the smithy, he looked over the blacksmith’s shoulders to see how the work was done and tried to imitate based on how he remembers it.

He placed the iron against the blazing charcoal and pounded it with a hammer, forming the shape of a horseshoe. There was a huge difference with just seeing how it’s made and actually making it himself. But he was skillful, and the iron seldom bent against his will that he was able to make four pairs with the time he had.

The blacksmith inspected his work, checking the size, thickness, and its durability. Satisfied with the output, he then threw it to the basket with the other finished products; Riftan’s work passed. He then moved on to continuing other tasks.

He was barely able to get out of bed yet here he is, sweating profusely, hammering until his shoulders ached terribly, he felt like he was on the edge of death; but he did not dare say a word about it nor show that he was

having a hard time. If he took a single break, the blacksmiths would give him hell for it.

He hammered for a long time, and when his basket was filled to the brim with horseshoes, he lifted it up on his shoulders and headed for the stables. As he swiftly moved through the forest, the outbuilding appeared before his eyes, making him feel nostalgic. He couldn't control his impulse and his feet went to that direction instead.

He felt like an idiot carrying a heavy basket of irons, but he couldn't shake off the desire to see the girl is well with his own eyes.

As he approached, his pace slowed down and his eyes carefully scanned the garden. The little girl was sitting in front of the flowerbeds, scratching the ground with a stick of branch.

He felt relief wash over him for a moment as he saw that she's okay, but his heart immediately felt heavy as he noticed her pale gray eyes, downcast as she stared at the ground absently.

Maybe she's still waiting for me to bring her dog...

Riftan, secretly watched as the girl lifted her round eyes, glancing around repeatedly just for her gaze to return to the ground. He quickly passed her figure, as if running away.

Now, stop caring. You're just going to get yourself in rough trouble again.

He ran towards the stables, erasing the lonely figure out of his head. However, even after seeing the foals who have been kept tidy all this time, his wretched feelings did not appease.

Riftan mechanically assisted in replacing the horseshoes then immediately went back to the smithy and hammered iron repeatedly. It wasn't until sunset that the blacksmiths, who were busy all-day long, started packing up the tools.

"Go home after you clean up," said one of the blacksmiths bluntly.

Riftan swept away all the dust and ash then put out the fire smoldering in the furnaces.

After cleaning up, he was about to go home when something caught his feet. He looked down; a squashed horseshoe was scattered on the floor. It seemed that the defective iron was not polished properly and did not pass the inspection.

Riftan bent down, picking up the bent iron. He was about to throw it away when his feet led him to the anvil instead. A thought entered his mind, he hesitated as he fiddled with the horseshoe.

He had just finished cleaning; his body was on collapsing, and he felt like dying from tiredness as he was forced to do rigid labor when he just barely got out of bed. It would be a hundred times better for him to go back home and get the sleep that he needed.

Yet, he walked to the furnace and lit the charcoals. He operated the bellows with his remaining strength to escalate the heat. After raising it to the right temperature, he casted the iron against the fire and tapped it with a hammer. His shoulders and forearms felt incredibly sore.

Riftan's was displeased, nonetheless, he flattened the bent iron and used a tool to shape it into a crown. It looked shabby despite his efforts and was bare.

Riftan glared at the iron crown that has wrinkled rings in several places. He sighed, shoving it down his clothes. What kind of crown is this? I did something useless. He laughed bitterly at himself and went straight out of the castle grounds.

Because he took off later than usual, the night's darkness surrounded his path. As he went down the hill, careful not to trip over a rock, his nose tickled at the scent of food coming from their hut.

Riftan rubbed his grumbling stomach, opened the door, and entered. His mother's eyes flashed with anger as she sat on the lit side of the house.

Startled by her overreaction, he remained at the door. His mother looked at him begrudgingly and rapidly stood up.

“You’re...late today. I’ll heat up your meal, so rest first.”

She tucked her messy hair behind her ear and walked in front of the fireplace. He looked at her with confusion. His mother trembled strangely.

Was she worried that I came home late? Riftan sat in front of the table with a dark expression.

“...Where’s father?”

“He...hasn’t come home yet.”

She stirred the pot and muttered in a quiet voice. Riftan frowned at her. His stepfather is most probably drinking his life away at a bar somewhere in the village. That’s the only pleasure that this life could offer that man. Riftan, who couldn’t help but have a disappointed face, sighed.

He didn’t understand his stepfather’s intentions. He has lived with them for ten years; he would be better off without a wife that acts like someone else’s and a dark-skinned boy who he didn’t share a single drop of blood with.

He ate a full bowl of porridge and roughly wiped his face with a wet towel and lied down on a bed made of straw. His mother looked at him and quietly asked, “...How are you feeling?”

“I feel better now.”

The sudden interest his mother gave him felt unfamiliar, so he bluntly replied and turned his body to lay down facing the wall instead.

The woman hesitated as she pulled the blanket over Riftan’s shoulder. Her cautious hands made his nose wrinkle. Riftan closed his eyes, thinking that from time to time, to be in pain doesn’t seem so bad.

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The next day was busy without fail. He was occupied running around the forge since dawn. The blacksmiths were anxious to finish all the repairs before the royal knights prepare to leave the castle.

Trying not to get on their nerves, Riftan strived to do his tasks when he saw a glimpse of a red, curly hair.

Riftan, who was carrying a load of firewood at that time, blinked stupidly. The eldest daughter of the duke was hiding behind the door, only her head was poking out as she peeked inside the smithy.

What on earth are you doing here?

He squinted his eyes as he looked outside. There wasn't anyone accompanying her. Riftan's face stiffened. The smithy is quite a long way from the outbuilding.

Did she come this far by herself? He threw the firewood next to the furnace and then made his way to the door. She was in danger just a few days ago and yet here she is again, unguarded.

Why did they allow you to wonder alone? Are the guards even in their right mind, why didn't they watch over you?

He strode with firm will and attention when a blacksmith brutally snatched him by the arm.

"Pretend you didn't see anything. Don't you know that servants are not allowed to initiate talk with a noble?"

"But it's dangerous for a child to be around this place!"

"That's not our problem, that's the problem of the maids who attend to her."

The blacksmith bluntly replied and pushed him back aggressively.

“We should stick to doing our job and avoid creating annoying problems.”

Riftan glared at him resentfully but all the other blacksmiths seem to agree with what the man said and sent the boy irritated glances. Everyone knew of her presence but chose to ignore it. As Riftan stood still, the blacksmith threatened him with his fists.

“Didn’t you hear me?! Do your job and pretend she’s not here!”

Riftan turned around reluctantly. But while he hammered, he couldn’t prevent himself from stealing looks at the door. The girl was glancing around the inside of the smithy with big, curious eyes.

What are you looking for?

There were too many dangerous objects in the smithy for a child. Weapons were piled up all over the place, hot sparks flew from everywhere, and the air was murky from all the smoke. He watched anxiously, worried that she would enter the place, when he met her eyes by coincidence.

She appeared to be startled and hid behind the door. Riftan laughed in vain as he noticed the twisted fringes and wavy scarlet hair that protruded from the doorstep.

Do you think I don’t know that you’re hiding there? As Riftan shook his head, the little girl poked her head out again and looked at him. When their eyes met for the second time, she hid behind the door again, then lifts her head to glance at him for the third time...

Riftan’s eyebrows creased. Did you perhaps come to find me? She must have come to ask why he didn’t bring her dog. At that thought, Riftan felt like he was stabbed and turned his head away.

He didn’t have the guts to tell her that he had buried her dog. Riftan began hammering again, pretending to be busy.

It went on for so long that when he turned his head to look at the door, the girl was nowhere to be seen. She probably got bored and went back to the



outbuilding. Riftan bit his lips. There's no way that he could let her go around alone.

Riftan pretended to gather scarce materials from the warehouse and went out the smithy with empty sacks. He then grabbed the barrow next to the smithy when something unfamiliar caught his eyes.

His eyes blinked blankly. By the window seal was a crown made from colorful summer flowers woven together. He picked it up, stared at it, and then lifted his head and searched around with his eyes. The girl was hiding behind a tree, watching him

Did you put it here on purpose?

He hesitated and placed it back by the window then lifted the cart by the handles. The red-haired girl jumped up and stomped her feet around, looking restless. Riftan swallowed a laugh and picked up the flower crown again.

## Chapter 5

Riftan looked back at the girl, her eyes twinkled with anticipation.

... Did you come here only to find me and give this?

He cautiously touched the flowers on the crown. At that moment, a loud shout came from the smithy's doorsteps.

"It's deadly hectic, yet what the f\*ck are you doing there!"

Frightened by the angry voice, the girl, who had hesitated for a while, turned around and ran into the forest. Riftan glared unpleasantly at the forge.

"... I'm just trying to bring more charcoal since we've ran out."

"Then hurry up and stop daydreaming!"

Riftan sighed and pushed the cart into the woods, following the direction where the girl ran to.

He had to see with his own eyes that the girl safely returned to the outbuilding, otherwise he would feel uneasy. He gazed anxiously at her who was running through the lush forest trees. Then, he looked down again at the flower crown which was hanging on the handle.

Did you make this for me?

He couldn't help but laugh at the thought of her weaving a flower crown with her small hands. His fatigue was forgotten as he pushed the cart vigorously with light steps.

After confirming that the girl had safely returned to the outbuilding, he went back to the smithy where he saw blacksmiths busily hammering. One of them looked at him furiously, like telling him to hurry up and do his chores, and Riftan swallowed a sigh.

He yearned to go home and put the flower crown in a safe place, but there was still a lot of time left before the work in the smithy would end. Riftan hid the gift in the warehouse instead, then walked back to the furnaces and began fanning them with the bellows. Finally, when it was time to go back home after finishing the day's work, his whole body was drenched in sweat.

He washed his face roughly with the water from the trough and went to the warehouse to retrieve the flower crown. After half a day, the flowers had withered a little. Looking at it with regret, he escaped the smithy and carefully held it with one hand to avoid damaging the petals.

Passing through the sunset-colored forest, he went to the back of the outbuilding where a garden full of summer flower unfolded before his eyes. However, the little girl was nowhere to be seen. She may have been scolded for secretly wandering alone.

Riftan looked at the spot where she often sat alone and reached into his clothes, pulling out the horseshoe crown he made. He thought of leaving it

there for her to find, but it was still too shabby. Riftan, who touched the dull iron ring with his fingertips, took it back in his hands.

If I buy a few small beads from the village and decorate the crown with it, it will be more worthy to look at.

He quickly walked past the outbuilding and out of the castle gates. Even though he had a busier day than usual, he felt like he was flying. He went down the hill carefully, to prevent even a single petal from falling because of the breeze.

Their hut was quiet as a dead mouse, his mother was probably waiting on the hill again today. His mother, who always climbed up the hill, either stared at a distance or pretended not to know him. Riftan swallowed a bitter sigh as he looked at their chimney, where not a single puff of smoke rose. Thinking about the cold, uncomfortable stillness in the house made his chest feel tight.

He looked down at the flower as if to seek comfort, and then opened the door and entered the hut. A strange stench stabbed his nose, he thought that wild animals must have gotten in and left their filth behind. Riftan frowned as he opened a window to let in some light, then turned to lit the fire in the furnace, when he noticed a dark figure hanging in the air.

He stepped back and stumbled upon a chair that had fallen on the floor. The flower crown he carried so precious was crushed under his hand, but he could not grasp the situation. He didn't understand what he was seeing as he blinked his eyes in bewilderment. The dark hair that had always glistened as if doused with expensive oil, despite not having a single trim or care, now stuck out like a spider web against a face that was white as flour. It took some time for him to realize that the face he was looking at was his mother's face. Riftan crawled back. A tight rope that seemed like it would break at any moment was strangling her neck, and two pale legs, white as a plaster, dangled underneath his mother's skirt.

His head was spinning, barely functioning. He ran out of the cabin, vomiting a harsh sob. His heart pounded crazily against his chest with

horror. As he ran for a long time toward the hills dyed with the red sunset, he saw the figure of his stepfather pulling a cow out from the fields.

Riftan couldn't find the right words to explain what he saw and could do nothing but pull his stepfather's arm. Taken aback by his strange behavior, his stepfather swore foul words at him but followed after seeing his pale face, sensing something unusual. Riftan gasped wildly as he ran back to the hut. However, upon reaching the door, he couldn't bring himself to take a step closer. His whole body shook with his grieving face. His stepfather glanced at him with a frown and walked past him, asking what was going on.

Riftan stood three or four steps away, staring into nothingness, eagerly praying that what he saw wasn't real. He wished that his stepfather would condemn him because it was all not real, but just a bad dream. However, his hopes were brutally trampled on as his stepfather ran outside with a sour face, only to drag him into the house. The man then locked the door tightly, lit a lamp, and shouted harshly.

"Close the window right now!"

Riftan mechanically complied to the instruction of his stepfather. The man then made him hold a lamp in his hand and fetched a ladder.

"Hold the light properly."

Riftan looked up at the man's face in horror and turned the lamp to his mother, who was hanging from the ceiling. He didn't know if there was a nightmare worse than that. He held and shone the lamp while his stepfather brought down his mother's body.

Her hands rattled and her legs shook. The sound of his mother's body thumping and falling against the floor sent shivers down his spine. He unconsciously stepped back but his stepfather approached him and held him firmly by his shoulders.

“Get a hold of yourself and listen carefully. Do you remember what happened to the girl across the street?”

He looked up at his stepfather blankly with a bewildered face. He couldn't think of anything, like his head was empty. The man shook him back and forth, waking his senses.

“The youngest daughter of the miller who was raped by miners in the woods! She took her own life, and they couldn't give her a proper funeral. The old priests do not forgive those who commit suicide.”

Suicide. Killed herself. Funeral...

The words his father said barely made sense to him. Riftan looked at the dark body stretched out on the floor and turned around to throw up. A sour smell and terrible stench stung his nose. His stepfather brought him back to his feet as he gasped for clean air.

“If the priests don't bless her body in a funeral ritual, your mother will wander this world for the rest of her life and become a ghoul. You don't want your mother to become a monster, do you? Then, you should never speak of what happened here. Do you understand?”

Riftan bit his lips and nodded. The man released his shoulders and walked to the bed, fetching a blanket to wrap his mother's body with. He then took out a sack, stuffing it with a candle and sickle, and wrapped it around his waist.

Riftan still couldn't come to his senses, he couldn't even believe it when he saw his mother with his own eyes, yet his stepfather was so calm. He sat crouched on the corner while watching the man suspiciously, figuring out what he was planning to do. The man wiped his forehead that was dripping in cold sweat and opened his flask with trembling hands to take a sip.

“When it gets dark, I'll take her body to the woods and disguise her death as if she was killed by animals, like bears or wolves. We have to move quietly so that no one else will see.”

The man failed to cap the flask and dropped it on the floor. Even though he usually treated the drink as something as precious as his blood, he stood there in a trance, not bothering to pick it up.

They waited in hellish silence for the sun to completely set and for the surroundings to sink in darkness. At last, the night grew deep. They each wore their own coats.

His stepfather carried the mother's body against his back. But after a few steps, he slumped down like his legs were exhausted. It seemed that the only thing calm about him was his expression.

The stepfather tried to get back on his feet several times, but when he couldn't, he held his head silently for a moment. Eventually, he looked at Riftan with a helpless expression.

"You have to carry it to the forest. Can you do it?"

Riftan swallowed dryly, took his mother's body wrapped in the blanket and carried her against his back. As he struggled to stand up, his stepfather lit a candle and started to lead the walk.

The strands of hair that fell out of the flowing blanket stuck eerily to the back of his neck and the texture of the soft body against his back felt vivid. He couldn't figure out whether to feel grief or fear.

Just why on earth... what made you do this?

He coughed up a repressed sob between his unevenly rough breathing. After walking for so long in the dark, his stepfather looked around and pointed beneath a gigantic tree.

"This spot will do. Put it down here."

Riftan crept past the man and unloaded the body off of his back. His stepfather lifted the blanket and turned to him.

"You should go over there."

Then, he took the scythe out of his sack with trembling hands. Riftan hurriedly hid behind a far tree. He heard the sound of a mountain bird chirping from somewhere and the rustling of the winds felt like someone was weeping. Riftan wrapped his hands around his head and sobbed.

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The next morning, his mother's body was found by a forest keeper. After retrieving the body, his stepfather went straight to the priest and requested for a funeral ceremony. The Catholic priests, who were exclusive to the Gentiles, reluctantly allowed for Riftan's mother to be buried in the cemetery. It was all thanks to his stepfather who offered to give all the remaining silver coins he had.

The funeral was held right that afternoon. Dead bodies decayed rapidly during summer so they couldn't put it off for another day. Riftan looked down with an indifferent face as a pile of dirt sprinkled on top of the coffin he obtained with the money he worked so hard to earn. The priest then recited a long prayer that would have saved his mother's soul. Riftan wondered if she really would be saved by something like that. He glanced at the figure of his stepfather whose shoulders dropped.

Did you really want to save her by doing this?

Riftan clenched his fists so hard that his nails dug his palms. His stepfather was probably going to have nightmares for the rest of his life. And Riftan too.

Strangely, no tears trickled from his eyes. He stood paralyzed and placed a flower in front of the shabby tombstone erected haphazardly at the urge of his stepfather. Finally, when the funeral ceremony was over, the mourners offered their condolences one by one. There were only four people who attended: two were maids from Croix Castle who had been close to her, an old lady from a neighboring house and a strange man in his mid-thirties.

Riftan was puzzled as he gazed at the mysterious man of profound appearance, who was dressed in fine-looking clothes. The man had a dark brown beard and a burly build. At first glance, he seemed to be a nobleman.

“... You’re more alike than I thought.”

Riftan’s face hardened at the man’s strange tone. The man rummaged in his arms and held something out to him.

“Here, it’s your biological father’s memento. It’s supposed to be handed over to his relatives... but I’m giving it to you as he doesn’t have anyone else that bears his blood. Keep it well.”

The man took out a dagger, which was long a little more than a kvet. Riftan didn’t think of accepting and did nothing but look down at it, so the man hastily pulled his hand and forced him to hold the dagger. Then, as if he had already done his duty and had no other business with him, he turned away without any hesitation. Riftan hurriedly pursued him.

“The memento of my biological father, what do you mean by that?”

“Didn’t you hear about him from your mother?” The man frowned at him and sighed. “Your biological father was killed in action. That dagger was what he treasured the most.”

Riftan’s face twisted fiercely.

“Why are you giving this to me? What does that man have to do with me...!”

“That’s what I thought”, the man muttered in a dry tone. “He hadn’t even started a family yet, and he didn’t have a fiancé. You are the only person who I could give the memento to. So, I looked for you as soon as I came here... I didn’t expect for this to happen.” The man shook his head in disbelief and added in a dull tone. “I’m sorry.”

After expressing his formal consolation, he walked away, leaving Riftan in stupor.



He shed a despondent laugh. When he realized why his mother had done such a thing, a feeling of betrayal and anger seethed in his stomach.

## Chapter 6

Riftan stared fiercely at the tombstone erected on top of his mother's grave. A calloused, rough hand crept on his trembling shoulders.

"... Let's go back."

Riftan, looking up at his stepfather with melancholic eyes, lowered his gaze helplessly.

As soon as the funeral came to an end, he had to work at the smithy and push his feelings aside, not having the privilege of being granted a break. Just because a woman died, no one would care to look with sympathy or give an ounce of compassion to him.

When the plague broke out, it was the lower class that was affected the most. Their dead bodies piled on top of each other, the death of strangers' bodies being mixed up in the pile was not really a concerning matter to the parishioners. That fact was rather fortunate: he did not need pretentious words of consolation. He never wanted to recall the nightmare from last night.

Riftan worked without a break, trying to erase all the thoughts running in his head. He wanted his thoughts to be clouded. He hammered furiously until his shoulders complained with a sharp pain. When he had no strength left to lift a finger, he finally trudged back home. However, upon reaching the hut, his legs didn't move, like they were rooted on the ground. He hesitated for a long time before grabbing the doorknob with trembling hands and the humid midsummer air filled his lungs uncomfortably.

He closed his eyes tightly as he opened the door, a stale smell pricking his nose. With desolate eyes, he scanned the dark hut that was filtered with the setting sun's color. Despite wiping the floors clean last night, the strange stench lingered. Riftan touched his mouth with his trembling hands and

picked up a bucket by the door to fill it with water from the stream. Then, he poured the water on the floor, sitting on his knees, not minding whether his pants got soaked, and scrubbed the black stains again and again.

He scrubbed for so long until drooping petals touched his red and swelling fingertips, then he slowly looked down and turned his gaze. The crushed flower crown was drying up by the corner. Riftan picked it up and the petals hanging from it fluttered and fell to the floor, he bent his back lower to pick them up one by one when suddenly, a drop of water fell on the back of his hand.

He blinked blindly before realizing that it was his own tears, so he wiped his cheeks roughly with his fists. He didn't even know what he was crying for, he felt nothing but ashamed that he shed tears. Riftan placed the flower crown in a small basket and collapsed on his bed, not even bothering to change from his dingy clothes.

The face of the woman hanging from the ceiling flashed before his eyes like a ghost, it felt like the black figure was still hung over his head, but he had nowhere to run away to. Riftan pulled the blanket up to cover his head and huddled like a little ball.

That night, his stepfather returned home reeking of alcohol. When he opened his eyes to the rattling sounds the man made, he saw a dark figure stumbling around, walking to the opposite bed. His stepfather flopped down on the straw bed and gazed at the floor for the longest time. After a long heavy silence, he finally spoke in a resounding voice.

“Don't make yourself so miserable.”

Riftan blinked slowly in the dark, the man's voice rang in between sobs.

“If you are born like waste for the ground, you have to live your life looking only at the ground. Looking up will make you nothing but wretched.”

“...”

“Who the hell would know? If there were a dead waste on the ground... and someone spared a look... But they just trample all over it and leave. You see, no one cares. I’m saying no one will care. But it shouldn’t be like that. Life shouldn’t be lived that mindlessly and then leave just like that.”

Riftan watched as the man’s shoulders quavered, then turned to the dark ceiling. His mother’s despairing face flashed before his eyes.

She was an imprudent woman who did nothing but wistfully comb her long hair neatly from dawn and then go up the hill, waiting for someone who would never return. A woman who brutally left after a man who never came to find her. And his stepfather couldn’t even resent such a woman...

He would not cry anymore. He had no more tears to shed for that person.

I will not forgive you until the day I die. He murmured inwardly and closed his eyes slowly.

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After that day, Riftan mechanically went to the smithy every day and returned home. He was so worn out that he didn’t know when he would collapse from not sleeping nor eating properly, but he was better off like that. He couldn’t close his eyes unless his body was drained to the point where he couldn’t even think. As if noticing how Riftan exhausted himself physically like a mad man, one day the blacksmith bluntly spoke.

“Don’t come here tomorrow. It’s deadly hectic, I don’t want the burden you will cause if you collapse. Take a rest tomorrow then come back looking like a normal human being. “

Riftan thought the man was ridiculously sarcastic for saying that when he had been pushing him to death with work. The boy laughed bitterly and laid down his tools. However, he didn’t think of going home.

He wandered aimlessly through the forest, washed his charcoal black hands and feet in the stream, and sat on a tree stump for a while. The sound of

birds singing resounded peacefully. He looked up through the thick leaves with distant eyes, then suddenly rose from his seat and began to trudge. He didn't know where he was going. He reached the outbuilding after walking silently for a long time and stopped like he was drawn by something.

The girl was sitting in the corner of a beautiful garden filled with blooming flowers. Riftan quietly held his breath. Despite the midsummer heat, the girl's shoulders hunched as if she was feeling a chill. Her figure reminded her of himself when he lied down, curled up under a blanket. She looked so cold and lonely that he wanted to sit down next to her and warm her up with his body temperature.

Riftan suddenly felt a strange sense of fear and stepped back, despite being under the scorching sun, cold sweat trickled down his back. He ran away as fast as he can. Even when he was out of the castle gates, the strange feeling fear did not go away.

He descended the green hill in a single sprint and stopped in front of a rushing stream. The vigorous flowing water gleamed silver in the intense sunlight. In that clear water, white and blue pebbles that he used to look for, shone against his eyes. Riftan gazed at them as he rummaged with his arms and pulled out a shabby crown from his clothes. A crown made by hammering horseshoes.

You really tried to give this thing to the duke's daughter?

Riftan threw it away. The iron crown flew like a boomerang and submerged into the water. He left as soon as he felt the regret creep up, but he couldn't figure out where to go. He could no longer find rest in the hut. Every time he entered the house, an illusion of his mother hanging from the beam haunted him, nightmares pestered him every day, the helpless face of his stepfather, endless rigorous labor, an inescapable poverty, and loneliness that could never be soothed...

He rubbed his face with his rough palms. He could not bare to live in that emptiness his whole life. He didn't want to make himself hope for the impossible. He didn't even want to comfort someone whom he could never

get close to. He wanted to run away. He wanted to run somewhere so far away.

Somewhere very far...

He lifted his head. Beyond the hill, there was a gray castle surrounded by a vast manor. The commoners living there were like a herd of cattle trapped in a fence, born inside the fence and died inside the fence. Riftan clenched his fist. The moment he made up his mind, he ran to the hut without delay. When he stepped into the dark house, the urge to run away felt stronger.

He gathered all his belongings in a ragged sack, packed some food and slung it over his shoulders. However, when he was about to leave, his stepfather's face flashed before his eyes. He leaned against the door, groaning like a stuck animal. He felt like a helpless calf who had been dragged for slaughter but could not bring himself to resist.

I can't just wait for the day that I die. Isn't stepfather the one who told me not to make myself miserable?

Riftan quickly moved, clenching his teeth. He turned around and placed four silver coins on top of the table but knew that wouldn't suffice. He hesitated but scraped jewels off the dagger and laid them next to the silver coins. Then, he hurried out of the hut before his determination could fade away. Guilt and liberation washed over him at the same time. He ran vigorously like a beast out of trap.

As he passed through the wide fields and reached a small market, his whole body was drenched in sweat. He bought a bunch of herbs there. His journey was going to be long, so he wanted to get a horse, but he needed at least six silver coins to buy one. The thought of stealing passed through his head, but he worried that if he was caught, the punishment would be not end with just his wrists being cut off.

If a boy dressed like him attempted to escape the castle with a horse, the guards would catch him right away. Even if he successfully steals one and

escaped from the castle, someone might recognize him and burden his stepfather with a compensation for the stolen horse.

Riftan contemplated and headed to the largest inn in town. He wandered around for a moment and saw three wagons and six horses lined up in front of the building. A man, who appears to be a merchant, came out of the inn and gave instructions to the mercenaries. They followed him and loaded their luggage on the wagon. Riftan hid in an alley and watched the scene.

Finally, the mercenaries sat on the horses in unison, ready to start their journey. As one of them raised his hand, the wagons slowly began to move. Riftan easily climbed onto the wagon, which was built behind the horses' backs, aiming for the chance when everyone was facing front.

Inside the wagon there were buckets of water and feeds for horses. He squeezed between the pile of raw hay and curled up. Soon, the pace of the wagon sped up. Riftan covered his head deep with his hood and looked carefully through the wagon's leather shrouds. They quickly passed through the fortress' gates and traversed the vast plains.

An eerie shudder shook him. I really did it. He couldn't believe it, even seeing it with his own eyes that he was really leaving. He was so firmly convinced that he would never be able to escape the territory until the day of his death, that he could not believe how he simply left.

He buried his face on his lap. How would his stepfather react once he finds out that he was gone? Would he feel relieved, like he got rid of a decaying tooth? Or would he be devastated that he was betrayed even by his own stepson? Riftan bit his lips.

Does she know that I'm gone? The girl's figure sitting alone in a blooming garden faded in front of him. Now what will soothe her loneliness? ... Stop thinking about it.

Riftan reached inside his sack and felt the dry flower crown. He scattered the dry petals outside the wagon. The voice of his stepfather rang in his ears.

“If you are born like waste for the ground, you have to live your life looking only at the ground.”

I will never look up. Never.

## Chapter 7

Even in the middle of winter, his whole body was drenched in sweat after walking for half a day. He was no better than a tramp, covered with dust from the dry wind. Riftan brushed off his loose robe before entering the inn. The sand dust was one problem, but the smell of the blood of monsters sticking to his whole body was another. There was only one inn in the Golden Sand Village and the owner of the inn was particularly nagging.

Riftan eyebrows pulled together. He wanted to avoid taking a bath in the back of the inn not to make himself a feast for the eyes of the maids.

“What are you doing there not going in, Calypse?” Riftan’s head turned to the sudden sound of a voice that spoke with a twisted tongue. A grinning bald man was poking his head out of the inn’s open window. “They said something great about you in Devon. I’m not talking about your handsome face.”

The man swirled his glass of alcohol and whistled frivolously. Riftan’s eyebrows gathered once again, but he ignored the man and walked into the inn. As expected, it was crowded with preoccupied mercenaries. It seemed like those who had been hired for expeditions had already returned.

Looks like I won’t be able to get a quiet rest.

He sighed and walked to the counter. The hostess, who was folding laundry, scrutinized him with her eyes. “You never come back in good shape.”

“Stop the useless talk, instead give me a room.”

The woman grunted and pulled out a rested key from a chest drawer. Riftan picked it up and went straight up the stairs. The hostess shouted after him.

“I’ll ask the bath water to be brought immediately so don’t even think of lying down on the bed without washing up first! If you make a mess of the sheets again, you know the price you have to pay!”



He didn't even look back and waved his hand dismissively. He wasn't injured much in this expedition, but as he fell hard from a rock, he got a bad-looking bruise near his ribs and his shoulder almost popped out while chaining a half-dragon's leg. Riftan wanted nothing else in the world right now but to lie down and rest. He massaged his throbbing shoulder as he tumbled towards the room assigned to him.

As he pushed the door with his good shoulder, a room with nothing but a single bed and a shelf unfolded before his eyes. He dropped his luggage on the floor and the sword he carried on his back by the bed. He then took off his ragged robes that resembled a rag.

Hunting monsters required him to be as light as possible, so he only wore a breastplate, vambraces made of wyvern leather, greaves, and wrist guards as armor. He loosened the leather seam from his armor and threw them on the floor one by one, then he pulled a blood-stained black tunic over his head.

I'll never be able wear this again.

Riftan looked down at the cloth, remembering it was grey when he first bought it. He sighed and flopped down on the bed. After a while, the son of the inn's owner came into the room with a wooden bathtub.

"I heard you came back today looking like a mess? Where have you been this time? Is it true that you caught and killed six half-dragons all by yourself?"

The boy bombarded him with questions as he laid down rough brushed and towels that were used for washing the horses. Riftan held the brush and frowned, his eyebrows creasing together. He was being treated like an animal. As he felt increasingly ill-tempered, the boy continued to ask multiple question with his dark brown eyes shining like a calf's.

"What did you eat to be that tall? Is it true that you are the third strongest among the Black Horn Mercenaries? What should I do to be that strong?"

Riftan looked down at the boy with bored eyes. As far as he knew, the boy and him were the same age. Sometimes, it was annoying to be treated like some thirty-year old soldier. He sighed and threw a coin at him. He meant for the boy to just receive the payment and leave and the boy quickly caught up with his mood and left the room coldly. Riftan threw off his boot and pants, then soaked in lukewarm water. The bathtub was too cramped for a person to bathe in and the water in it was cold for the weather. But he felt satisfied being able to bathe in clean water.

He trembled as he recalled hunting half-dragons for two weeks straight. He had already been in the mercenary corps for four years, he thought he had seen all awful things, but this expedition proved him wrong, being the worst of them all.

He cupped his hands and scooped water to rub his face with, then submerged his whole body, all the way to his head.

In his mind there was nothing but exhaustion, the events quickly passed by when he left the Croix territory. From being caught hiding in the wagon by escort mercenaries, to being allowed to accompany them throughout the journey, to moving west and encountering all kinds of monsters...

As a result of participating in the expedition, he became a member of the Black Horn Mercenary Corps. Since then, he had been working as a mercenary and had done whatever it took to make money, from minor disputes to killing monsters.

He felt like he aged 40 years, and not 4. Besides, no one around him actually saw him as a 16-year-old boy. Riftan let out a sigh, stroking his stubbled chin. His height was already over 6 kvettes (about 180 cm). Even though he was still growing, his bones felt sore every night, his shoulders wide and stretched to the point of breaking, and the muscles in his whole body swelled up tightly. Sometimes, it felt like seeing a different person when he happened to see his own reflection in the water.

However, for him, growth was nothing but a cumbersome and uncomfortable process. Apart from having to buy shoes and clothes often, the biggest problem was acquiring equipment that fit his physique. He had

to replace his armor six times in a span of 4 years, and he was always hard pressed with money to buy a sword that had the right length. The most annoying part of growing up was the fact that the attitude of the people towards him subtly changed.

Riftan rubbed the back of his head, washing it clean and stood up in the water. He roughly wiped himself dry with a towel, then rummaged through his luggage bag and changed into clean clothes, making him feel a little better.

He strapped the sword around his waist again and headed outside. After filling his stomach in the restaurant, he was thinking of going to sleep. Please, he pleaded in his head as he descended the stairs, hoping not to get involved in any troublesome business when he heard an unwelcomed voice.

“Hey, Calypse. I heard you did well in the last expedition. The leader was smiling ear to ear.”

Riftan turned his head and clicked his tongue. A man with eyes slender like a cat and a slim body approached him with a friendly smile. Among the mercenaries, it was Samon who was particularly persistent. Riftan, annoyed, tried shaking him off by quietly sitting at a table on the corner. As if taking his action for granted, he took a chair and sat down next to him.

“Do you know how much the other guys in the expedition cursed you? They said you’re a complete lunatic, like a ravage beast throughout the journey.”

“... any food will do, give me anything I can eat right away.”

He pretended not to listen to Samon and threw a coin to one of the passing servers. The waitress, who was carrying a tray full of liquor bottles, gave him an appealing look and ran straight to the kitchen. Riftan leaned against the wall and gently closed his eyes. Undeterred of his unspoken dismissive attitude, the man continued to babble.

“Who knew a kid who didn’t even know how to properly grip a sword would become this amazing in a few years? Wow, the things I see with my discerning eye in people is... insane!”

As soon as the waitress placed a large glass of liquor down, the man quickly snatched it and gulped all of it down unnervingly. It seemed like the guy wasn’t going to stop pestering him until he dealt with him, so Riftan eventually quit ignoring him and opened his mouth.

“What in the hell is the matter with you?”

“What a hot-tempered fellow.”

Samon grinned and placed a heavy pouch in front of him. Riftan narrowed his eyes at the man. The man untied the strap with his large calloused hands and showed what was inside and Riftan raised an eyebrow. The leather pouch was stuffed with gold coins embedded with Rakashim’s emblem.

“Do you see? It’s not just silver, it’s gold. That’s twenty-three Denars. And this was only the deposit.”

“... just what kind of quests are you accepting?”

Riftan switched from his languid attitude, giving him a wary look. There was no doubt that for someone to pay such a large amount in advance, the task had to be clearly dangerous. What kind of ridiculous quest was it that he agreed to this time? Samon giggled and burst in laughter as Riftan grimaced.

“You are the only guy in the world who reacts like that in front of gold coins.”

“...”

“There’s nothing to be suspicious about it. You would understand more if you knew what the quest was about. A wyvern nest was found in the Soron Valley. The lord of this town and of course the lord of Nebron Castle are

said to be recruiting for an expedition team. If you join, you'll earn one Denar."

"Count me out. One gold coin for an expedition involving wyverns? They must be joking..."

Just then, the waitress placed a bowl of lamb stew in front of him and smiled seductively. Ignoring her subtle flirting, Riftan immediately picked up his spoon and sipped the hot soup. However, Samon wasn't going to leave him alone and let him enjoy his meal peacefully. The man spoke again, his voice rising.

"I told you. This was just the deposit. If you get to kill a wyvern, each one will earn you twelve derhams."

"I'm losing my appetite."

Wyverns were one of the trickiest dragon subspecies. It was one thing to earn a lot of money as every part of a dead wyvern, from its leather to mana stones, was valuable, but a living wyvern was like a demonic monster's incarnation. Twelve silver coins for catching such a high-level monster was a joke. Riftan tore off a piece of bread and dipped it the stew, then he kicked the man's shin.

"Get lost, I'm not interested."

"This f\*cking son of a...!" Samon's temperament was reaching its limit as he hurriedly rearranged his facial expression. "At least listen to what people are saying! There's a reason for that price!"

Riftan silently stuffed food into his mouth. He was planning to finish it as fast as he could and get up. Samon hurried to speak too, seeing how Riftan's planned to shake him off.

"There are two wizards joining the expedition. And that's not all. There will be catapults and magic tools. The lord of Nebron is determined. There's not much work for us but to stand around and watch, and then we'll just take the beast apart when it's all over."

“You mean he’s paying that much just for us to take apart dead beasts?”

“It’s not much. This amount of money was like nothing to a lord.” He threw his pouch in the air and caught it, snorting. “There are still a lot of old religious people living north-west of Libadon. Doing something perceived as fraudulent like hunting and selling monsters will damage a person’s reputation to the parishioners. They will leave it to the mercenaries for job as such, and then make it appear that they defeated evil creatures in the name of God.”

Riftan chewed the lamb and expressed cynicism. He had a rough understanding of why the noble lords wanted to hire mercenaries. The corpses of dragon subspecies like wyverns and half-dragons were like gold mines, some mercenaries earned money solely from hunting monsters. However, nobles were keen to maintaining their dignity. Openly hunting monsters would make them appear vulgar. Riftan laughed through his nose.

“Let the lowly do the dirty works, was it?”

“You don’t have to think of it that way. It’s a win-win situation.” Samon smiled and placed an arm on Riftan’s back. “Think about it. This is a rare opportunity. It may seem like a cheap price for an expedition involving wyverns, but you must consider the fact that there are wizards and soldiers involved. Weighing the risk, the pay is actually pretty generous.”

Riftan stroked his chin with a pondering expression. Taking apart a wyvern’s body parts was a tricky task that would require four skilled men to do it for five hours straight. Still, if it will only take three to four days of suffering, it might be worthy joining for a price of a gold coin. Riftan, who was thinking carefully, eventually nodded his head in agreement.

“Fine, I’ll join.”

“You made the right choice.” Samon took a gold coin out of his pocket and gave it to him. “Here’s the deposit. Once you accept it, you’re not allowed to change your mind.”

Riftan snorted in reply and turned around. He climbed the stairs again to get some rest when someone unnaturally fell towards him. It was the waitress who kept flirting with him. He hurriedly dodged her and lightly pushed her body away from him, like a plague. She dropped to the floor neatly. The woman who was deliberately rejected looked at him with a puzzled face.

Riftan, who was taken aback, also looked at her with a perplexed expression. He ran up the stairs as if to escape. Then, he heard a loud cry behind him saying how rude of a person he is.

Why am I the bad guy? Isn't the one who purposely bumped into me who's in the wrong?

Riftan trudged back to his room with a frown.

## Chapter 8

The next day, Riftan took a relaxing rest until noon and only went outside when he couldn't beat Samon's pestering anymore.

"All spots for mercenaries are filled in for the expedition. We're leaving for Soron Valley in three days. There's no time to spare."

Riftan disheveled the hair behind his head and cursed.

Three days. That's not much time to prepare and buy equipment, let alone rest.

He just swallowed what he wanted to say and went out of his room right away to prepare. To mercenaries, the down payment equated to living. To turn around from an expedition that had already been initially accepted would require a penalty of a hundred and thirty percent of the down payment. Riftan rubbed his neck and let out a long sigh.

"Who else decided to participate aside from me?"

"Zachary, Beger, Gault, Gerris..."

Samon's list of names were of useless men. Riftan gritted his teeth. That must be the reason why Samon was so persistent in recruiting him. No matter how deemed as low risk the expedition was, it involved wyverns. The chance of unexpected problems arising was not so low.

You must have felt anxious to bring only those unskilled men, so you recruited me as your insurance. Riftan thought and smiled sarcastically.

"Great, what a team of skilled men you built."

"The worthy men I tried to recruit cannot make it because of the tight schedule. Lucky for me, you came back just in time."

The man grinned and made a fawning remark. Riftan felt very annoyed, clicked his tongue and shoved Samon's shoulder aside with his, then headed downstairs.

It was him who joined the expedition without properly discerning it, there was no time for him to blame others. He simply filled his stomach in the restaurant and went straight to the village smithy after. There, he polished his scratched weapons and had his armor repaired. Then, he proceeded to buy new clothes and boots.

He lived a rough life, so his clothes and shoes quickly worn out and he had to buy new ones every time he stopped by a village. Recently, he had to discard them in less than two months from growing out of them.

Riftan grunted and bought a sturdy leather boots and clothes a size larger. Although he wanted to buy the shoes in a larger size, it might compromise his agility.

...Irritating.

Riftan looked sulkily at the new pair of shoes that fit his feet rightly. The pair would surely not last for a month. With a sigh, he returned to the inn to inspect each of his weapons.



The sun was setting as he greased and wiped the blood-stained chains and hooks that he used to hunt half-dragons. The next day was spent similarly. He unpacked his bag, mended his torn blanket, and washed the clothes that still fit him.

He wanted to pay the inn maid to do his laundry but every time he went down, she glared at him, the less evil thing she would probably do was burn his clothes to ashes. Riftan sighed, hanging the wet clothes in his room. He stopped by the herbal shop to purchase various emergency medicines and antidotes.

Like this, after a series of hectic days, the day of departure came around the corner. Riftan immediately began last-minute preparations for the expedition. He strapped on a breastplate made of wyvern leather and scales of a half-dragon. He wore protective gear around his arms and legs, wore a leather belt with two daggers and hung a bastard sword around his waist. Then, he wound his chains and placed the anchor hook in a leather pouch. Finally, he wore a robe over his back.

When he had finished arming himself, he heard a knock on the door, so Riftan picked up his bag and went out. Samon, who was dressed similarly, stood leaning against the wall.

“Everyone shall meet in front of the city gates. Are you ready?”

“I’m ready.”

Riftan walked down the stairs as he wore leather gloves on both of his hands. The horses and wagons were waiting in front of the inn. He disregarded the mercenary men who hurriedly threw greetings and rode inside the wagon.

Various equipment used to take apart large monsters were loaded haphazardly inside. Careful not to injure himself with them, Riftan passed through them and went to crash in the corner. After a while, the wagon began to move. When they arrived at the city gates, Samon poked his head inside the wagon.

“Calypse, the client’s here. Why don’t you come out and meet him?”

Riftan, who was sleeping soundly in a blanket, frowned. Working as a mercenary, he had no choice but to encounter a lot of aristocratic people, however, he didn’t exactly get along with the nobles. He pulled the blanket over his face again.

“I won’t bother. Just wake me up when we get to Soron Valley.”

“Hey man, this was a big-shot client. There’s no harm in showing your face to him.”

“My face doesn’t make a good impression anyway so stop nagging me and go away.”

Samon grunted and stepped back, turning around like he annoyed him. The wagon began to move again after the headcount was done. After a long time of being in the wobbly wagon, Riftan’s eyes fluttered open at a sudden blunt shock.

The wagon’s movement became extremely turbulent to the point that he could not bring himself to sleep. They must have entered the valley’s territory. Riftan sat down with his back against the wagon’s wooden wall and looked out.

The pale winter sunlight glinted against the snow that crusted the barely dried tree branches. He glanced at the ground covered in silver frost and the soldiers marching over it. In front was a luxurious carriage which apparently cradled their clients. Surrounding the carriage there were knights in shining armor who sat on military horses.

Riftan, who looked at the scene with a cynical expression, jumped out of the wagon. Territories which had wyvern settlers wouldn’t likely host other large beasts, but there was nothing wrong with checking.

“Finally, you’re showing your head. Did you sleep well?”

A mercenary who rode a horse next to him was trying to start a quarrel. Riftan ignored all questions that had underlying meanings and hung on the wagon to inspect the terrain. The road was starting to incline and eventually became noticeably steep and soon a huge wall of rock came into the view. It was the perfect nest for the wyverns.

“We have arrived. That’s Soron Valley.”

The expedition team stopped a little far away from the valley. Only then was Riftan able to see the scale of the team. It was a considerable number of people. Nearly 50 soldiers, 20 knights, and around 40 mercenaries...

“Are there other mercenaries?”

“I think there are other stray ones there. Oh, the wizards are over there. Keep an eye on them. We can’t let even one of them get injured, we desperately need their help.”

He turned his head to where Samon was pointing. A middle-aged man wearing a grand-looking outfit that was definitely inappropriate for the trip was arguing with a young sane-looking man who wore several layers of thick robes. Riftan’s eyes squinted as he carefully scrutinized them. The older one seemed to wear such outfit to look dapper, but the younger one looked simply sensitive to the cold.

Riftan frowned as he observed the younger wizard. He thought that the expedition involved two arch mages, he was not sure about the middleaged man, but the young one whom he scolded didn’t seem to look like a capable wizard.

He looked like he was in his late teens or early twenties at best, he doubted he had any experience with expeditions as he looked exhausted just by riding a horse for a few hours. Riftan glared at Samon with threatening eyes.

“That wizard looks like he could use some recovery magic himself.”

“Don’t judge a book by its cover. Rumor has it that even though he looks simple, he can wield great magic.”

Is there anything else more unreliable in the world than rumors?

Riftan felt a bad omen. Somehow, it seemed like the expedition wasn’t about to go smoothly and his hunch was always right.

After getting off the carriage, the noble lord, who was dressed finely, discussed with the knights for a long time and ordered the mercenaries to climb up the cliff.

“Eight men have to climb up the wall of rock and install each of these magic tools on a certain location. The wyverns are resting deep in the valley. I’m looking for capable, lightweight, nimble men to volunteer.” The knight next to the noble lord announced with a dignified voice. A mercenary standing by pushed Riftan against the shoulder like he waited for that chance.

“This guy’s the nimblest among the mercenaries.”

Everyone’s eyes flew towards him. Riftan gave him a daunting glare, shooting daggers with his eyes at the mercenary who pushed him. He reluctantly came forward as the knight gestured for him.

“Good, another volunteer.”

“I didn’t agree to volunteer yet.”

The knight, who was looking through the mercenaries, turned his head stiffly at his rigid words. Riftan ignored his aggrieved look and spoke to the nobleman dressed in luxurious fur.

“The price was not right. One Denar for subjugating a wyvern’s nest was not fair. I didn’t know the Lord of Nebron was so cheap.”

Perhaps offended by his insolent attitude, the noble man’s eyes widened.

“The wizards put a sleeping magic. The wyverns won’t wake up unless you fire a canon.”

“Even so, it’s dangerous to climb a rock wall that high. Isn’t the pay ridiculously low for such a life-threatening task?”

“One gold coin was enough for a commoner to fool around and eat for half a year.” The man’s voice irritated the hell out of him. “You’re the one who wants to be paid for doing nothing. Once the magic tools are installed, everything else will be executed easily. My knights and soldiers will launch the catapults to finish them off while the magic tools trap them. What will you mercenaries do, stick around to watch and suck your fingers? I guess it’s true that mercenaries have become nothing but money-hoarding pigs.” Riftan’s lips twisted.

Just who really was the money-hoarding pig? Wyverns will earn a whopping amount of gold coins, all this was just ridiculous...

As Riftan grumble inwardly, the nobleman raised his head and arrogantly spoke.

“If you came here shamefully thinking that you will earn money without breaking a single sweat, then turn around now. Of course, you’ll have to return the down payment first.”

In the end, Riftan clenched his teeth and accepts the magic tool. When the other seven volunteers were appointed, they headed straight for the Soron Valley, while the wizard who had to guide them with the installation of the magic tools followed closely behind them.

Riftan glanced grimly at the young man with rustling gray hair and walk swiftly through the lush trees. As he got a closer look, the rock wall was taller and steeper than what he had expected.

“You have to install this on the tip of the rock wall in 50 kvet (18 meters) intervals.” The wizard, who was catching his breath, pulled out a magic tool as he explained. “Do you see the sharp hook behind this round plate? If you

place this against the rock, it will dig deeply into the rock, sturdy enough to withstand the strength of half-dragons. Installing these magic tools on the left and right sides of the valley at even intervals will create a huge magic net.”

“Wyverns don’t just suddenly creep up on you, right?”

One of the mercenaries murmured in question, looking at the dark valley. The wizard shook his head.

“Unless you intentionally try, they won’t wake up from sleep magic. But please, move as quietly as possible. If anyone falls, I’ll be below supporting you and will make you magically float.” “How many Rants (1 Rant = 35 kg) can you lift?”

Riftan looked at him suspiciously from head to toe. Perhaps feeling the doubt coming from him, the wizard looked indignantly.

“I can lift more than a thousand Rants so feel free to fall if you wish!”

His disbelief only intensified at the wizard’s confident declaration. The young man was too proud for a normal person. Riftan took off his robe and breastplate, putting it on the ground to make him as light as possible. Although, he didn’t put his weapons down since he was still dubious of the fact that the wyverns had been magically put to sleep. After wearing only the minimum amount of armor, Riftan began to climb the rock wall with chains and hook. The other mercenaries carefully followed him.

The hook firmly pushed into the cracks of the rock and the chains supported his weight as he reached half the point of installation in about three minutes. He looked down at the distance and squinted his eyes. The other guys were far from reaching and were cowardly climbing. Riftan sighed and continued to climb to the top. Finally, when he reached the top, he began installing the magic tool to the wall, supporting his weight with the chains. As the wizard said, he placed the hook that looked like a bee sting against a crack between the rock wall and it stuck sturdily.

After confirming that it had been firmly installed, he went up to the edge of the rock wall. Despite the chilly weather, his whole body was soaked in sweat. He lay on the cold stone floor and wiped the sweat away from his forehead.

I'll kill half of the wyverns as soon as I get back down.

As expected, none of the other mercenaries that Samon recruited were skilled. He grinded his teeth inwardly, then all of a sudden he heard a clatter coming from a narrow crevice in the valley.

Riftan frowned, the valley was wide in the middle and narrowed at the top while the bottom was surrounded in deep darkness. Could it just be gravel that fell in the blowing wind? As he looked into the dark valley with narrowed eyes, he saw something like a massive rock moving.

Riftan groaned and stepped back. He looked down in a hurry and found that three more tools were yet to be installed. Riftan shouted, going down with the help of his chains.

“Hurry! The wyverns are awake!”

At his voice, a mercenary who was climbing halfway, screamed and fell. Fortunately, it seemed like the wizard caught him well, but the magic tool the man was carrying fell with him. Riftan swore at how stupid the man was, releasing his chain to its full length.

“Wizard! Send the tools up here using magic! I will install them!”

Riftan shouted as he fell smoothly and steadily with the help of his chain, and the wind blew from underneath. He snatched a flying magic tool, but he was a step late.

A gust of strong wind raged between the rock walls and the head of a huge wyvern protruded. There was no time to install the magic tools. A silver net stretched out of the five installed magic tools and wrapped around the

monster's 40 kvet (about 12 meters) large body. In the aftermath of the force, the rock wall shook as if it was going to collapse.

Riftan hurriedly hung onto the rock. His eardrums almost shattered from the grotesque screaming sound that thundered loud like a volcano erupted.

## Chapter 9

The wild flapping of the wyvern's wings generated such a strong gust of winds that the men hanging on the cliffs were blown away like fallen leaves. Riftan pressed himself against a protruding rock, hanging tightly and swallowing words of profanity. With the men falling, two magic tools have also been blasted away by the wind.

He clasped the remaining one in one hand and assessed the situation. Whenever the wyvern writhed, the net stretched tightly like it was about to break, and the rock wall shook as if it could collapse any moment.

Riftan waited for the tremors to subside, and then he went a little further down, and stuck the magic tool into the rock. The installed magical tools sensed the monster's mana, stretching out to dozens of white chains in response.

Riftan swore and drew out a dagger just in case he got caught by the monster. As the wyvern was about to break away from the restraints, a shell flew in from a catapult with a loud noise. The heavy ironclad rock hit the monster, causing it to collapse and thump against the rock wall.

"F\*ck...!"

He rushed to avoid the falling rocks but it wasn't easy to act quickly with the strong tremors, so he thought of jumping off the cliff and rely on the wizard to catch him with magic, but he doubted the foolish man's sanity.

By now, they must be running away for their lives, screaming to be spared.

He had already realized long ago that the only thing he could trust in the world was his own two hands, so Riftan started climbing the rock wall



while the wyvern was unconscious. When he finally reached the top, he jumped over the rocks and looked down.

The momentum of the soldiers was looking plausible as they relentlessly fired 7 catapults and log-sized spears with giant crossbows. The wyvern was helpless against their constant attacks and went to hide himself in the valley, but that wasn't a good sign.

Riftan peeked inside the dark valley through the cracks. The wyvern crouched, waiting for the attacks to subside then shot out of the valley like an arrow. The remaining chains made by the magic tools broke as it flew high and spread its wings. It would have been fortunate for them if the monster flew away and escaped, but as the wyvern soared through the clouds, he glided down at a terrifying pace towards the soldiers.

In an instant, everything went into chaos. The soldiers poured arrows towards the monster, but the wyvern's thick skin deflected them. Two of their catapults were smashed with the blow of the wyvern's wings and the soldiers scattered as the monster moved unpredictably.

Riftan laughed out loud. What in the hell am I supposed to do with those shambles?

The wizards were a complete sham and the army was pathetically useless. On top of that, he already did more than what he was paid for.

... The pay just doesn't match the job, it doesn't pay fair at all.

Riftan stroked his chin with his gloved hand. Another wyvern loitered out of the valley as he was thinking of his next actions.

As if to make it even worse... he sighed.

Suddenly, a huge fire rose from below. Riftan squinted his eyes.

"That wizard is still down there?" He looked carefully below. The wizard was out of sight, perhaps discreetly hiding himself while using magic.

It looks like I thought too narrow of him... Riftan looked down at the huge golden flame, gauging his skill.

A fierce flame burned with such a force to turn the wyvern's body into ashes and a hazy whirlwind vigorously surrounded the monster. However, the wyvern's skin had great counter-magic capabilities and the flames simply scattered as the monster cried loudly and widely spread its wings.

Riftan made up his mind in that instant. Although the young wizard seemed inexperienced, he had a few tricks up his sleeve, so it could be worth trying. He looked around him and lifted a large rock, sending it to spiral downward. The wyvern looked up, searching for the wizard who poured fire at him and at that time, Riftan threw another rock. The heavy stone hit the monster's yellow eye with accuracy, it flew towards him as it screamed angrily.

Riftan waited for the monster to get in a close enough distance and threw his heavy hook made of steel, which pierced one of the monster's eyes. The monster vomited a high-pitched cry as it thumped and hit against the rock wall. At that moment, Riftan jumped over the monster's body with great aim and landed on it. The wyvern struggled, flapping his wings to shake him off as he moved swiftly with his hooks and chains. When he settled between the wyvern's wings and pulled a dagger up, the monster's movement became intense like it sensed it was in danger. Like that, Riftan rammed the dagger through the thick wyvern's skin, which felt like stabbing a knife with a tight log, despite the creature being made of blood and flesh.

He relentlessly stomped on the handle with his leather boot clad feet for the dagger to sink deeper, until the wyvern screamed and soared high into the sky: the blade must have dug into a painful area. Riftan clung tightly to the wyvern's body and pulled out another dagger. The wyvern's thick skin was helplessly penetrated as he rammed the dagger with a tremendous force. He pushed the blade all the way and tore the wyvern's muscle used to flap its wings, so the wyvern lost its balance, flailing with one wing as it tilted diagonally.

Riftan then stabbed the blade on the other side of the monster's wings: there was no need to cut its bones, breaking off its vital muscles would cause the wyvern to fall since it couldn't bear its immense weight. He prepared for the impact by firmly digging a hook into its body, falling at a terrifying speed. The pace of the fall was faster than he expected.

Isn't this falling too fast?

To reduce the impact of the fall as much as possible, he leaned flat against the wyvern's thickest part of the body, but just before reaching the ground, the wyvern's body floated in the air. Riftan raised his head and looked down. In a not so far away distance, the wizard muttered something with a half-spirited face.

I guess he really can lift a thousand rants after all.

Riftan immediately stood up, not wasting a moment of time. He was planning to break the legs of the wyvern with the fall's impact but that was eliminated when the wizard lifted them. If he didn't take the opportunity to kill the monster while it couldn't control its body, he would soon have a hard time. Riftan agilely jumped over the bumpy black body of the monster and pulled his sword.

The blade gleamed against the sun's light. He immediately rammed the sword deeply into the wyvern's thick skull, which writhed and raised his head in protest. He slid the sword with his arm and tore the flesh down to the monster's spine. The wyvern opened its mouth, vomiting guts and blood, then fell weakly against the ground. Riftan retrieved his sword only after confirming that the monster was completely immobilized. The blood spurted out like a fountain, soiling all his new clothes.

...I'll have to pay the price of this too.

He retrieved all of his remaining weapons and jumped off the wyvern. The wizard shuddered and shrugged. Riftan shook his head over his shoulder, ignoring the wizard who looked at him as if he were looking at a monster.

“Get your head together. There are still plenty of these monsters left in the valley.”

Only then that the wizard turned his head toward the valley like he was snapped back to reality. Wyverns woke up and wandered out of the valley, but that wasn't the only problem. The wyvern which was causing a riot in the sky had not been dealt with yet.

Riftan grabbed the chains firmly in both hands and racked his head for ideas. The entrance to the valley was narrow, its structure provided no choice for the wyverns but to come out one at a time. Given this, the best option for them was to guard the entrance and get rid of the wyvern while they attempted to come out. If all the wyverns escaped the valley and spread out in the sky, there would be no chance of victory for the expedition team. Riftan looked at the soldiers of Lord Nebron who were still scrambling and the mercenaries who were relatively skillful, then turned to the wizard.

“I'll act by myself and you should provide cover for me. I will get rid of the wyverns one by one. If it seems like I will crash on the ground, use your magic to float me like you did just now.”

The wizard's jaw dropped open.

“Get rid of them...How many wyverns are you planning to catch on your own? Don't be ridiculous, you have to take refuge at once...!”

“Shut your mouth and follow what I say. Once these monsters get angry, they become incredibly tenacious. If we run away, they'll soar in the sky and vent their anger.”

Riftan stopped the wizard before he could argue more, dragging him along his plan. He left the wizard on one side of the rock wall, climbed straight up and swung his sword at the wyvern who had just stuck his head out of the valley.

It wasn't a fight nor a war. It was a hunt. Riftan rapidly severed the wyvern's spine, then screamed at the wizard whose head protruded behind a rock where he hid.

"What are you doing, not removing the monster's body out of the way?!" The wizard who was trembling with a blue face, moved the wyvern's body. Riftan immediately jumped into the valley and rammed a hook against another monster's leg. The wyvern struggled and pounded its leg. Riftan jumped up the wall agilely like a goat and settled on top of the monster's body. Then, while the monster was trapped in the narrow valley, and could not spread its wings wide, he amputated its artery.

He repeated similar operations over and over again. After killing a wyvern, the wizard would lift the body aside, and Riftan immediately faced the next one. There was one who flew up and tried to escape from the valley, but he did not miss a single one. In an instant, Riftan jumped up the wall and wrapped chains around the monster's body, cutting off its wings.

Finally, a total of eight wyverns bled and dropped on the ground. He glanced down the darkness, checking if there were any wyverns left hiding. He didn't see anything unusual.

The fates sided with me today.

He had braced himself in case the worst-case scenario happened and twenty monsters of the same kind gathered, in fact nine wyverns were considered only a few. Somehow, these wyverns seem to have been separated from their original nest.

Riftan looked up at the rock wall, thinking that maybe there were wyvern eggs. Although, he didn't have the will to find it and deal with it. He roughly wiped the sticky blood of the monsters off his sword against his soiled clothes and sheathed it into the scabbard. As he trudged out of the valley, the wizard who peeked with his head, moved his eyes anxiously and quickly moved away with a strange sound.

Riftan ignored him and assessed the situation. Fortunately, all the wyverns seem to have been dealt with but the damage they inflicted was great. Nearly half of the expedition force was sprawled on the floor, many of whom seem to have lost their lives. Riftan turned his head towards the wizard.

“What are you doing not applying healing magic?”

The wizard crouched and ran to the place where the swarming squad gathered. Riftan sat down on a rock and sighed wearily.

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Unfortunately, their client was alive. The pig-like man initially promised that he would pay twelve dirhams for each wyvern and insisted on the same price, but Riftan wanted to get paid properly. He expected the client to try avoiding paying fairly in such a stingy way, so he fiddled with his sword's handle with a grunt and growled furiously.

“Then I will terminate the contract. I will return one denar and seven dirhams. I caught those eight wyverns by myself, so I will make my own conditions. Your catapults and magic tools were useless.”

At his threat, the nobleman's grim face turned purple in anger. “Who are you to dare terminate the contract!”

“Don't be mistaken. I do not serve you; I am not your servant. You are just someone I accomplished a specific task for. If I find your contract unfairly judged, then I can cancel it as much as I can.”

The knights who could not stand his insolent attitude, drew out their sword at once. Riftan shot them a chilling glance. The middle-aged sorcerer leaned against the carriage with a tired blue face from mana exhaustion, there were only twenty surviving Nebron soldiers and eleven knights left.

Riftan glanced at the mercenaries who were weighing the situation. There was no way they were going to join the argument, nor will they be paid more. The only chance for them to take his side is if he offers them money.

Riftan's lips pulled at the side. There was no need for that. Only about thirty-five men have managed to save themselves somehow. As he scanned the terrain and the ranks with keen eyes, thinking of the most efficient ways to defeat them, the noble man raised his hand.

"Alright, I am accepting your terms. I've already lost a lot of men. If you were able to deal with eight wyverns by yourself, then it's not impossible for you to defeat the remaining of my forces." The nobleman said, as if to be patronizing. "I'll give you five denars per head, a total of forty denars."

"Eight denars per head."

"Don't be greedy. In any case, you can't take all of these monsters apart and move them by yourself."

Riftan shed a loud laugh. Who is telling who not to be greedy?

"I don't even have to take all of them. Just selling their mana stones can earn me more than 60 denars. Tearing their skin and selling them as leather will earn further money. I want you to know that I'm being very generous right now. It will be more beneficial for me to just terminate the contract. I'm just negotiating because it will be annoying for me to fight with your men."

The nobleman turned red and came up with a final deal. "Fine, I'll give you 60 denars. I can't give you any more than that."

Riftan glared at him coldly and sighed, realizing that there was no point in negotiating further.

"Fine, I'll take it, 60 denars. But you must give the payment to me right here, right now."

The nobleman, who looked displeased with his frank mistrusting attitude, glanced at the knight standing behind him. The knight immediately brought a heavy leather bag filled with gold coins. Riftan inspected it and quickly counted the gold coins. It was exactly 60 coins.

He pulled out a coin, checked its authenticity, and threw it at the soldiers. “Good, that’s yours now.”

Riftan turned his back like he was done with his business and saw the wizard who helped him sat a little far away with a miserable expression. It seemed like he did not receive any pay for failing with the sleeping enchantment and the failure of installing magic tools. Riftan lightly clicked his tongue and pulled out fifteen gold coins from the pouch in his pocket.

“Here, that’s your share.”

The man gazed down at the gold coins, then slowly raised his head with an ecstatic expression. Riftan added in a subtle tone.

“As a rule, wizards usually receive a quarter of the expedition’s pay. Take it.”

The wizard opened his mouth blankly.

This guy probably has something lacking in his head.

Riftan looked at his stupid face that didn’t look an ounce threatening, then he forced the gold coins into the young wizard’s robe and turned away.

## Chapter 10

The wizard quickly grabbed the gold coins and put them in his robe like he had been doused with cold water over his head and chased after Riftan.

“W-wait!”

Riftan looked at him dryly, as if to question with his eyes what the matter was. The wizard looked side to side, and hurriedly spoke.



“Y-you haven’t received treatment yet. Sit for a moment. I will heal you with my magic.”

Riftan didn’t have a single thought about trusting his body to the unreliable fellow. He was about to decline his offer, but then he looked at the people around him. Mercenaries swarmed the area and he had just received a handsome amount of gold coins, those who were eyeing his earnings might plan to execute an ambush.

He shifted his eyes to the other side. Although the Lord of Nebron seemed to be distracted with the wyvern’s corpses, there was a possibility that he would change his mind and try to steal back the money he paid. Riftan was suffering only from light bruises but still, it would be better if his body would be in perfect condition, so he nodded lightly in agreement.

“Fine. Please do.”

“Sit here please.”

The wizard sighed in relief and pointed at a large rock. Riftan shoved the pouch of gold coins in his bag and slumped over it. The wizard immediately healed him with magic for his body to recover. Riftan scratched his neck as he felt a lukewarm heat flowing into his body. He had been treated with healing magic before, but the sensation of a foreign energy penetrating in his bones always felt unpleasant to him. He moved around with his body that felt noticeably lighter and slowly stood from his seat.

“Thank you.”

He muttered an obligated word of appreciation and was about to turn to leave, but a hand too thin for a man, gripped the hem of his trousers. Riftan raised an eyebrow irritably.

“What now?”

“W-where are you going?”

“And why would I tell you that...” Riftan tried to shake him off coldly as he was annoyed by his pestering and sighed. “Where else? I must go and take the monsters apart. I have to help dismantle them and finish the rest of the work.”

He pointed his chin at the mercenaries assembling equipment to dismantle the monsters, and the wizard released his hold, his eyes blinking as he realized that the expedition had not been completed yet. Indeed, the wizard appeared to be lacking to Riftan’s eyes.

He clicked his tongue lightly and went to assist in dismantling the wyverns, but then noticed that the foolish wizard was trailing his footsteps. His patience was reaching its bottom. Riftan gave him a threatening look.

“Why are you following me?”

“W-well t-that’s....” The fidgeting man raised his head and shamelessly spoke. “It’s because I am an assistant wizard! I received my share of payment, so I shall help you ‘til the end.”

“I don’t need you anymore, you can go back to your group.”

Riftan spoke without hesitation and stepped towards the wagon, but the wizard held onto him urgently.

“If I go back now, they will try and take the gold coins from me!”

Riftan had a grim expression on his face. He thought the man was clueless, surprisingly, he seemed to have a good inkling of the situation. Like a chick following its mother hen, the wizard clung to his side, casting a dubious look to anyone.

He looked just like Riftan when he first joined the mercenary corps, the wizard appeared to have a hard life too. However, that didn’t mean that Riftan was obligated to protect this raw human being. He coldly snorted.

“What does that have to do with me? You can deal with it using your magic.”

“I can’t use magic to attack humans! In the first place, its your fault for throwing the gold coins at me in front of everyone! Isn’t it technically your responsibility if I get targeted by these greed-blinded humans and then have my dead body found in the woods?”

Even Riftan, who didn’t bat his eyes at anything, was momentarily speechless at the man’s impudent attitude. After doing as much as I could for this guy, I’m hearing these words come out of his mouth.

Riftan frowned and spoke harshly.

“If you don’t appreciate it, then give it back!”

As soon as his temper escalated, the wizard, who had been clinging so closely to him, created a significant distance from him. Riftan glared at the man who was stunned as he wrapped his hands tightly around the pocket that contained his share of coins, then sighed and resolutely turned away from him. However, the wizard was not intimidated by him, in fact he continued to follow him and whispered discreetly.

“I mean, at least I know I’ll be safe if I stick around you. Other people won’t dare harm me then.”

“ ... ”

“You have nothing to lose. Wizards come in handy in many ways. As you’ve seen before, I can lift heavy objects. If you’re tired, I can restore your strength through magic. If you get wounded, I can give you a quick fix with healing magic. You see, it will be a give and take affair.”

Riftan pretended not to listen as he bent into the wagon and rummaged through the various equipment. Despite the chaos that the wyvern has caused, nothing in that wagon was damaged. He picked iron pliers for skinning the monster and a saw made of special material to cut its joints.

Other mercenaries had already finished assembling the retractor and were draining the blood from the wyvern’s body. Among them, Riftan found

Samon and glared at him fiercely. Sensing his anger, he turned around in a hurry, pretending to be busy and went away.

Riftan looked at his retreating figure and clenched his teeth, dragging a saw as tall as him and walked in front of the wyvern's corpse. He was contemplating on how to deal with Samon later, but the wizard followed him everywhere he went and chattered endlessly.

"I realized I haven't introduced myself yet. My name is Ruth Serbel, please feel free to call me Ruth. I heard the other mercenaries call you Calypse... is it alright if I also comfortably call you Calypse?"

Riftan grinded his teeth. The wizard groaned and shed an awkward laughter.

"Of course, I won't! I was being presumptuous. I will be polite and call you Sir Calypse."

Riftan thought that the man's nerves were probably so thick that he was not a normal human being who shivers at hostility. Riftan shuddered at the thought of having such an irritating person stuck to him like a bothersome bump on his skin.

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Due to the decrease in number of the mercenaries, dismantling the wyvern took longer than expected. It took half a day to drain blood from the monsters' bodies and remove their skin for leather, and another full day to separate the flesh from their bones.

All that time, the wizard literally never left his side. Whenever he tried to go someplace, he would follow. It made the air feel dense, he was following him like male sirens follow females during mating season—making him completely sick of his presence.

The wizard was always on edge, nervous that someone would steal his gold coins shall he let his guard down even for a moment. As time passed, the bags underneath his eyes became darker and his pale face became

noticeably exhausted. Riftan thought it would have been much better if he didn't give him any money.

Although, he wondered why a wizard would be so protective and thrilled about the number of coins he received when wizards earn considerably larger amounts of money, depending on the type of expedition. It seemed to him that this wizard had been exploited by atrocious men and, for some reason, the wizard firmly believed that Riftan would protect him at all costs.

Although the wizard's brazen act struck him, Riftan decided that he would leave him when the expedition was over. Besides, the wizard's anxieties were not exaggerated. He himself felt several times the plotting and unusual gazes of the other mercenaries.

... Although he has a thick face, it's better than having no one siding with me.

For several days it was unavoidable to sacrifice sleep and deal with the anxieties of being robbed if they had lessened their vigilance. However, if they even attempted to be complacent, it could have led to a disaster. Riftan, who was on his way back from the expedition, gritted his teeth as he saw the wizard still following him like it was the natural thing to do. "Hey, cut me some slack. Just how long are you planning to follow me around?"

"The journey going back was the most dangerous! There might be people lurking in the woods waiting to attack!"

Riftan swallowed the foul words that rose to his throat, seeing the wizard tremble like an old man having a nervous breakdown. The man's fear wasn't baseless, it was true that executing an ambush in the woods was much more advantageous than their campsite.

"Fine. Instead, get off as soon as we're out of the woods."

"I don't have much to say on that. I have already received permission to join the journey until we reach the Golden Sand Village."

Riftan, who reluctantly stepped aside to give up a seat, stiffened. He slowly turned his head and stared at him. The wizard puffed his chest out and triumphantly declared.

“I am now also a member of the Black Horn Mercenary Corps. I asked just a while ago and he told me that a wizard was more than welcome.”

Riftan shifted his gaze at the direction where the wizard was pointing. He was pointing at Samon who was saddling his horse.

That f\*cking son of a b\*tch...

As he was going in the wagon, the wizard suddenly climbed up and sat on the wooden island across from him. Riftan fought the urge to kick the guy's ass out at that moment. He didn't have the right to prevent the guy from joining the mercenary. Objectively, the wizard might have a valuable contribution during the expeditions and Samon's decision to accept him wasn't completely unreasonable.

However, he had no intention of allowing the guy to stick around him. Riftan growled furiously and placed his arms across his chest.

“I won't stop you if you really want to join, but you're mistaken if you're expecting me to have your back. You'll be rid off once it gets difficult.”

The man's shoulders shook like Riftan frightened him but soon bluffed him off.

“Wow, really! When have I ever asked you to watch my back? Don't you worry! I will do my part. Even if you try and search every corner of the Western Continent, you will not find a wizard who's better than me.” Riftan laughed in vain.

“It's ridiculous for you to say such a thing when you just failed in this expedition. If your sleeping enchantment had worked properly, we wouldn't have taken a great deal of damage.”

“W-well... it turns out that my theory and the execution itself was a bit different...” The wizard’s face darkened and he confessed with a sigh. “I have been stuck studying in a tower for decades. It hasn’t even been half a year since I had actual hands-on experience. Before that, I did nothing but healing and restoring magic. The first time that I’ve casted a sleep enchantment on a monster was when I joined an expedition for halfdragons...I didn’t know that compared to them, wyverns have far more resistance to magic spells. I will never make the same mistake again.”

Riftan shed out a laugh. For decades, he says. At best, this guy looks like he’s around 20 years old. Everything that comes out from his mouth is nothing but exaggeration and fiction.

“Prove your skills in action. It’s useless to brag about it in words.”

The wizard shut his mouth like he had nothing to refute. Riftan leaned against the wagon’s wooden wall and closed his eyes. Although he told the wizard to prove himself, he wasn’t planning to get entangled with him in any given situation.

Obviously, magic was convenient. However, it was better to get rid of anything that was bound to fail from the beginning. Nothing was more burdensome than a plan going wrong, so he couldn’t bring himself to trust this braggart for one bit.

However, regardless of his determination to shake him off, the man named Ruth persistently followed him around. He was commissioned to follow after his foot, and when staying in the inn, he insisted to death on lodging in the room beside Riftan’s. Riftan immediately took notice that the son of a b\*tch was using him like his personal escort at every chance he had.

The most annoying part was that rumors spread within the mercenary corps that he was protecting the wizard. Thanks to that, the wizard was able to melt smoothly into their mercenary group.

# Chapter 11

On the contrary, Riftan was put in a place where he had to look after the newly recruited wizard. It was hard to swallow the fact that he told him he had no intention of cleaning up after him as they often received expeditions that required their alliance, forced to be the one teaching him the ropes.

Riftan glared disapprovingly at the wizard who was rummaging through his luggage bag. This time, he tried to accept a mission behind the wizard's back in hopes of avoiding him, but he followed him like a ghost smelling money. The wizard was figuratively holding his ankle and Riftan couldn't shake him off. He shouted annoyingly at the wizard who was already chewing recovery herbs with an exhausted face when there was still a long way to go before they reached their destination.

"We are only halfway to our destination, yet you look like someone who's been on a journey for a month. What use are you when you already look half-dead from a mere mountain hike?"

"Do you really think everyone in the world is like you, Sir Calypse? It's not normal for a person to march for a week and be in good shape!"

Ruth, who was quite brazen, shouted in retort. Then, he laid down on a flat rock. Riftan frowned in angry astonishment.

"The harpies live just around the corner. Can't you get up right now?!"

"I have Sir Calypse by my side, what should I worry about? Wouldn't it be more convenient for Sir Calypse if I rest for a moment whenever I get the chance? If I collapse in the middle of the journey, you will have to carry me."

"Carry you? Don't say b\*llshit. I'll throw you down a cliff right when that happens and walk away leisurely. I would have abandoned..."

"Then, that means I need to rest more. Since Sir Calypse will not take care of me if I collapse."



The wizard waved his hand dismissively and lied down with his back facing Riftan, who seriously contemplated on kicking the wizard and letting him roll down the mountain. However, even if he did that, the tenacious guy would still chase after him his whole life.

Eventually, Riftan began to grind his teeth and collect firewood by himself. The wizard slept while snoring loudly and it was only after dinner was already prepared that he woke up from his slumber.

Riftan, who was wary of the smell of food attracting wild animals or monsters, saw the wizard take out his bowl, making his cheeks twitch in annoyance. He was like a buzzing bug flying around his nose and he was infuriated with his every action.

“How many more days ‘til we reach our destination?”

“... If a guy like you wasn’t around, I would have reached it in the next ten days.”

“Then it will take us fifteen more days.”

The wizard replied nonchalantly and chewed on the bird’s meat that Riftan hunted on their way up the mountain, who couldn’t find or sense a bit of guilt or apology from the wizard. Resigned, he took another drink, sighed heavily, and lamented in his thoughts.

“Indeed, I shouldn’t be following you around... following Sir Calypse will put one in serious danger.”

Riftan stared at him with a befuddled expression. “Then don’t follow me!”

“You don’t know how many times I’ve gritted my teeth contemplating thinking, ‘should I follow this guy again?’ But whenever I tag along with Sir Calypse, it’s never a joke...”

The wizard made a coin shape with his index finger and thumb, hinting at the good pay. At this point, Riftan didn’t even bother to get angry. He silently ate his food and leaned against a rock, closing his eyes. The wizard,

who had been shoving food into his mouth with his cheeks bulging from being so full, squinted at Riftan.

“Are you planning to sleep like that again today?”

“...”

“Sir Calypse... are you even human?”

Riftan opened his closed eyes. What kind of other brash criticism is this? The sorcerer rubbed his chin thoughtfully with his fingers, he was serious.

“You can tell me the truth. There really aren’t secrets between us, right? Do you happen to be a descendant of Chimeras or an ancient heterogenous race?”

“Stop the bullsh\*t and go to sleep!”

“If not, then what the hell are you? Ever since we left town, I’ve never seen you lie down!” The sorcerer shuddered like creeped out by Riftan. “Your stamina and physical abilities are certainly beyond what a normal human can do. Sometimes it really frightens me! Please tell me honestly. Some breeds were mixed, right? Was it sub-racial monsters, perhaps werewolves or trolls?”

Riftan, whose patience has boiled empty, placed his hand on the hilt of his sword. As he drew half of his sword, the wizard shook his hands like it was a misunderstanding and shouted.

“I-I’m a little mixed up myself!” At the unexpected declaration, Riftan paused and stiffened. The wizard uttered it in a rush and sneezed like he was surprised by his own words, then he laughed and acted like he hadn’t said anything strange. “For real, it’s just a little bit. There’s an ancient elf among my clan’s ancestors. Thanks to that, my mana affinity was much more advanced than that of ordinary wizard’s and my lifespan was 20 or 30 years longer than an ordinary human. That’s all, I have no other special characteristics.”

He combed his brittle gray hair to show his rounded ears, that would have been pointed if he were a pure-blooded elf. “Through generations, the blood of the elves has almost been diluted to the point that now we’re just like humans with longer lives.”

Riftan squinted and scrutinized each one of the wizard’s facial features. The features appeared neat, except for the bluish-gray eyes that were a little peculiar, but they weren’t particularly remarkable.

Is this stupid guy really saying he’s a descendant of elves who have gone extinct back in the ancient times? His gaze swept up and down in disbelief at the disheveled, insignificant appearance of the wizard.

This wizard is more like a Seiren. Pale, limp, and noisy just like those monsters.

Whether or not the man was just pouring acrimonious criticisms, he had been convinced and had secretly ignited Riftan’s curiosity on his own race.

“Please tell me the truth, Sir Calypse. Even if there happens to be a monster in your ancestors, I will not judge you and tell the church. There’s some secret in your family, right?”

“... There’s no such thing.”

Riftan muttered in an ambiguous tone. How could he, an illegitimate child, know the history of his family’s bloodline? The wizard persisted, as if sensing his hesitation.

“Please don’t lie to me! How can a pure human-being be so powerful?”

Riftan clenched his jaw. “Don’t test my limits and just go to sleep! If you ever mention the same sh\*t tomorrow, I’ll really leave your ass behind.”

“Stop beating around the bush and please answer me! It’s unfair and cowardly of you to keep your mouth sealed when someone just told you their deepest secret!”

“What the hell are you talking about?!”

Regardless of Riftan growling harshly, the wizard crawled to him like a mud man emerging out of a swamp with a strange glint in his eyes.

“I’m desperate to know! It bothers me and it drives me crazy! What’s the secret that lies behind your phenomenal abilities? How and why in the hell are you built like this? Just let me accomplish some research!”

Riftan got up from his seat, filling a cold chill in his spine that he had never felt before, not even when he ran into a pack of monsters. This time, he picked up a heavy rock with the intention of squashing the man who was like a pesky flying bug. The wizard sensed a crisis when he saw what Riftan was about to do and quickly tamed a notch down and stepped back, offering a quite compelling compromise.

“It will only take around 10 minutes! If you will allow me to determine if you are using magic, I promise not to follow you for three expeditions.”

Riftan pondered for a moment, clutching a stone the size of his fist. Although he didn’t really know the exact reason why he had to know why he was this way, the wizard’s suggestion appealed to him. He was even willing to pay if only he could get away from that chatterbox of a wizard. Riftan sighed and sank on top of a flat rock.

“... Fine. But if you dare try doing something weird, I will rip your hair right out the roots of your head.”

“I will just make mana flow into your body. Rest assured that will be all that I will do to you!”

The wizard ran to him with a big smile. Riftan massaged his stiff neck. How did I end up in this situation?

Whether he irked him or not, the wizard didn’t care and held his arm with an excited smile dancing on his lips, making him wonder if he was that

elated because he was about to unravel the mystery of the identity that Riftan had long abandoned.

Riftan frowned as he felt the lukewarm energy flowing into his body. The mana that flowed through his forearms soaked every inch of his body. He shuddered slightly at the unpleasant feeling, but the wizard spoke as he blinked his eyes blankly in disbelief.

“... You really are an ordinary human.”

“That’s what I keep telling you.”

Riftan felt a little relieved and pulled his arm back. The wizard appeared disappointed, like he couldn’t believe he had no secrets in his birth. He walked across him and sat down, speaking dejectedly.

“I thought I was going to discover a great secret. I can’t believe that your physical abilities are just naturally extraordinary. In a sense, that’s more appalling than being mixed with a breed of monster.”

Riftan made a fierce frown at the wizard, who was looking at him with fascinated eyes, and soon closed his eyes.

I’m tired of dealing with this bloke. Exchanging words with him was more consuming than hiking a mountain all day.

“Now shut your mouth and go to sleep. If you talk one more time, I will cut your tongue off.”

“Yes, yes, as you wish.”

He replied passively and laid on the ground, wrapping a blanket around his body. Riftan threw a few dry branches into the weak flames, then quietly closed his eyes. Although he couldn’t let himself fall into a deep slumber, since he had to be wary of his surroundings, closing his eyes gave him relief to some extent.

After a while, the darkness enveloped their surroundings. He felt a faint scent of beasts in the cool breeze, so immediately placed his hand on the hilt of his sword. On the contrary of what he expected, the night was still and deeply silent.

He slept only for a short amount of time and woke up before the sun rose. The sky was cloudy, indicating that it was going to rain, and the air that swept by felt damp.

It will be difficult to climb over the mountain today.

The winter season was almost over, yet the day was still chilly. Walking in rain-soaked clothes for a long time could cause one's body temperature to drop and could put one who dared in trouble. He turned his head and gazed down at the wizard's gray head. Riftan might be able to withstand the rain somehow, but it would be a different case for the wizard.

We'll have to move as far as we can before it rains and find a cave for shelter.

Riftan picked up a long branch, wrapped a piece of cloth around it, and lit it with fire. Then, he relentlessly kicked Ruth's back, who jumped up to his feet, horrified.

"Wh-what's going on?"

"It's time to leave. Now take this and follow me."

The wizard, who blinked blankly, took the torch with a displeased expression. Riftan ignored the murmuring behind him and began to hike up a rocky mountain path.

The wizard gasped and grudgingly followed. Riftan peeked at him several times and noticed he was keeping up with him better than he had expected, so decided to increase his speed. The sky was slightly getting brighter as he looked through the thin tree branches, but as he has predicted, a thin sheet of rain poured from the hazy clouds.

## Chapter 12

“The weather won’t get worse in the next two or three hours.”

Riftan, who was measuring the direction of the wind and the thickness of the clouds, leapt on to a rock. Ruth, who was panting laboriously as he followed him, sighed heavily and crawled up the rocky path. They hiked for another 40 minutes, then took a rest when they found a small pool of water.

“Let’s take a short break here.”

The wizard only nodded his head, having no energy left to respond in words. Riftan opened his canteen of water and drank the remaining content. He then scooped up some water from the pool and handed it to the wizard. Ruth plopped down on the ground, drank a bit of water and asked Riftan breathlessly.

“Will it rain?”

“... Soon.”

Riftan replied in a blunt manner, took a jerky from his bag and chewed on it. After five minutes, they continued their journey again. Dark clouds began to gather above them beyond the bare, gray mountain peaks.

Feeling the wind pick up the brooding weather, Riftan hurriedly searched around the area for a place where they could shelter from the rain. As he urged the wizard to climb up the steep slope, Riftan discovered a small cave between the humongous rocks.

“At this rate, we will run out of necessities before we get to our destination.”

“If so... we’re not far from finding ourselves empty-handed then.” Ruth responded curtly, picking up his ragged breath.

“How many people do you think are climbing Ramek Mountains at such a tremendous pace? We left right away when we received the quest, even the

other mercenaries who accepted this quest and left as soon as possible, would already be behind us by now. So please stop eyeing me pathetically. No other wizard in the world can stand this as long as I do!”

“If you used your energy to walk instead of talk, we would have reached our destination by now.”

Ruth opened his mouth to retaliate and disprove his statement, when a roaring sound resonated from the sky. Riftan turned his head to watch the pouring rain. It didn’t take long for the black peaks of the mountains to be filtered with white mist. Ruth sat leaning against the cave’s wall, mumbling grimly, perhaps to alleviate his nerves.

“If only I knew this would happen, I would have just followed other mercenaries and joined another quest. The hardships become sufferings and the criticisms are getting harsher...”

“I really hope you do, it’s better if you do that next time.”

Riftan muttered dryly, sitting with one leg stretched out. The rainwater quickly soaked the scrawny branches black. Ruth, who was sitting with a blanket wrapped around his body like a cocoon, suddenly opened his mouth to speak.

“Sir Calypse, why do you choose only difficult quests? Although exploring ruins and finding relics or artifacts make good money, there’s a lot of danger involved. There’s a high chance that you will encounter monsters or vexing traps. Wouldn’t it be better to participate in war battlefields like everyone does? With your skills, Sir Calypse, you will be able to make legendary contributions...”

Riftan replied, cutting off Ruth in mid-sentence. “There’s no money in wars. Catching a half-dragon will pay a lot better.”

“But people who participate in wars are more likely to get ahead. If you perform well, you might catch the eyes of nobles and become a knight...”

“I’m not interested.”



“... If you continue to live like this, you might die even before you reach forty years old.”

Ruth's lower lip protruded whilst grunting. Riftan snorted as he watched the hazy sheet of rainfall.

“Then, I'll have to eat more from now on while I still can if that's just how long I will live.”

The droplets of rain grew thicker and thicker by the moment. Since most monsters despised the rain, it was fine to let their guard down for a little bit. Riftan loosened his belt and closed his eyes, intending to take the opportunity to regain energy and stamina. However, the wizard seemed unwilling to let him rest and asked in a suspicious tone.

“How old are you now?”

“Weren't you just whining from suffering? As soon as this rain stops, we will set off right away and continue our journey. Take this opportunity to sleep.”

Ruth shut his mouth again at Riftan's sharp voice. But as if he could not control his sudden curiosity, he continued to poke with questions.

“Are you perhaps in your mid-twenties?”

Riftan sighed. Once the guy starts asking questions, he would never leave him alone until he answered them. Better to quickly satisfy his curiosity instead.

“I'm sixteen.”

“...”

Riftan pressed the hood deeper over his head, hoping the wizard would quiet down a little bit and adjusted his position to help him rest better. At that moment, a shriek rang out.

“Sixteeeeeeen?!”

The wizard jumped to his feet in surprise, bumping his head hard against the roof of the narrow cave. Ruth eyed Riftan from head to toe like he couldn't believe what he just heard, holding his head and rubbing the aching part, tears of pain brimming around his eyes.

Riftan glowered at him. He was aware that there wasn't much of a boyish side to him, but Ruth's reaction was too much, it offended him.

Riftan growled fiercely. “What's your problem with my age?”

“Stop fooling around! Where in the world is the sixteen-year-old in that?!” The wizard squealed, eyeing Riftan's body. “It doesn't make sense for a sixteen-year-old to have that physique and that face. You jump on top of wyverns without blinking an eye, dive into the face of half dragons and stab them in the neck! You do all sorts of outrageous things and it has only been sixteen years since you were born?! What kind of hellish life did you live to become like this?”

“... What do you mean by that?”

The wizard trembled feeling the slight hostility in his voice, smiled awkwardly and the corner of his mouth lifted unnaturally. However, he had to say what he wanted to say, because he was a man who couldn't ignore his curiosity. He looked into Riftan's eyes firmly, opening his mouth to speak.

“You look like someone who has been through everything, something like a veteran of war. How can a sixteen-year-old know so much of the world's cruelty? It just doesn't make sense for someone so young to have that sheer power!”

“What the hell is wrong with being sixteen and looking like this!”

The wizard was silenced by his obvious irritancy and temperament. A subtle but complex expression was etched on Riftan's face.

“Then, how old were you when you joined the mercenary corps? Since what age did you start wielding a sword? You’re already so ad...”

At that moment, without warning, a blinding flash of lightning appeared in the sky followed by a resonating thunder. Riftan immediately noticed a strange scent in the air and pushed the wizard against the ground. A huge shadow outlined against the pouring rain.

“Hey, hey... let’s talk about this! There’s no need to go this far and push me on the ground!”

“Shut up!”

An enormous monster was wandering around and began to approach them. It was so huge that it appeared like a whole hill was moving towards their direction. Seeing its bright yellow eyes gleaming and glowing in the hazy rain, Riftan realized that they had been spotted and immediately drew his sword. Only then the wizard came to know what was happening and took a defensive stance.

“I-is there any half dragon that big?”

Riftan couldn’t bring himself to answer Ruth’s evidently nervous question. Even he himself hadn’t encountered a monster that humongous in his whole life. Although it appeared similar to a half-dragon, its size was four times bigger, with black pointed scales covering its whole body and four limbs.

Could it have been mutated, or a rare, unknown species? Riftan was on the edge of his nerves. In order to defeat monsters several times stronger and larger than him, he had to have enough knowledge about it. Not only did he have to understand their strengths and weaknesses, but their tendencies and habits as well to have the upper hand.

However, he had never seen any monster like that before. He had no clue whether they were venomous or not, and where the vital or weak points were. It was difficult for him to determine as its body structure was far from that of the general dragon subspecies.

Goddamnit, I have no choice but to fight this blindly.

“Defend me from behind!”

Riftan shouted and immediately threw his hook, winding a chain around its hind leg. The monster’s nose wrinkled, and his eyes drifted to Riftan with a faint curiosity, then he lifted his leg. Riftan rolled through the mud, avoiding the monster’s long clawed paws, and released his chain to its full length. Then, he tied it with the monster’s other leg to restrain its movements and the creature staggered heavily.

However, the chains were too thin to bear the strength of the monster who was far from a wyvern’s physique. As Riftan saw the rings of the chain stretching like they would break, he did not spare a single second and unraveled his chains, leaping over the monster’s body.

He hung tightly on the back of the swaying giant creature and drove a dagger against its back, however it made nothing but a small groove against its thick skin. Riftan’s face distorted in dismay and frustration. Given the gigantic size of the monster, its skin and muscles would be much thicker in layer and sturdier than normal half-dragons.

Damn it, I can’t even have a moment to breathe and think.

Riftan climbed up the back of the raging monster like was hiking a running hill. As he skillfully moved to its head with his hook, he spotted two horns.

He grabbed one of them for balance and raised his sword. At that moment, an intense flash of electric current struck his whole body. His senses were blinded, and he felt like his body torn apart as he fell to the ground, screaming in pain.

“Sir Calypse!”

If the wizard hadn’t immediately conjured a shield, he would have been crushed under the heavy legs of the monster. Riftan barely got up from the ground, straining his twitching limbs.

He quickly searched for the monster's weakness, gripping his sword with trembling hands. There were no scales on its belly. As soon as Riftan took notice of this, he ran towards the creature like wind. He was like a madman as he jumped under the creature and hung on one of its legs. He observed that there was a spark of electricity everywhere.

Is it controlling the lightning? Damn it, such bad luck. It's something to run into a monster this rare.

Riftan cursed endlessly in his thoughts as he climbed its leg with a hook and swung his sword. He poked its belly and as expected, it was much more vulnerable than the other parts of its body. Riftan rammed his sword deep into the corner where its legs and stomach meet, then swung his sword to create a cut. Fortunately, it seems like he was able to cut through an artery and black blood gushed out like a waterfall.

Regardless, Riftan rammed his sword again. Then, the monster leapt, coughing up a screech that seemed to tear through the sky. The heavy impact from its movement caused Riftan to slip off its leg.

He instinctively crawled in the mud to escape the ensuing attack of the monster. However his body, which was weakened by the electric shock, did not move as quickly as he wanted it to.

Soon, the dull pain in his mind suddenly surged. Riftan screamed, suffering greatly: his knee was crushed under the monster's heavy feet. Had he been a little late, his whole body would have been trampled on. It didn't really occur to him to be concerned whether he would live or not and dragged his completely crushed leg to find means of escaping. But there was nowhere to hide.

This is the end, it's over.

At that moment of crisis, a spire-shaped sharp rock soared from the ground and pierced the monster's body. The creature opened its mouth, vomiting a high-pitched cry like it will spew out fire.

“Sir C-Calypse! Are you alright? I will heal you with magic right now...!”  
Ruth, who was stunned from the shock, ran quickly to help him. Riftan shook off the man’s hand and shouted fiercely.

“What the f\*ck are you still doing here?! Go and save yourself!”

The wizard was perplexed, he thought that he had completely finished the monster, but it was still growling as it breathed darkly. The creature narrowly avoided being stoked to the spine.

Riftan clasped his sword tightly with one hand. The monster rushed to them with its mouth wide open, crushing the rocks in its way, intending to swallow the men all at once. Riftan pushed Ruth enough to get him out of the way and run to escape the impact. However, with only one functioning leg, he couldn’t avoid the attack.

The monster’s sharp teeth crushed his forearm unfailingly. His bones and muscles were pulverized in a second, inciting a terrible pain to Riftan. He gritted his teeth, as blood spurted out.

If you lose control of your mind, you’re done for.

With his remaining strength, Riftan swung his sword and thrust it deep into the monster’s eye. The creature unlocked its tight jaw and raised his head, shrieking loudly.

Riftan held out with his remaining legs and arms, and climbed up the monster’s face, thrusting his sword deeply into the monster’s head with all his might. After a while, the creature stopped flailing violently and became stiff as a stone, collapsing with a loud thump.

Riftan rolled down, drained of strength. He no longer had the energy to lift even a single finger. He lay on the ground as rain poured over his mangled body. His brain was hazy, and all his senses felt paralyzed, his vision was blurred, like his pupils were submerged under water.

“Sir C-calypse...”

He heard the wizard's urgent voice faintly, but he had nothing left in his body to create a response. He was tired and cold.

Come to think of it, I have always been. Always tired and cold...

## Chapter 13

Riftan opened his eyes to an agonizing pain. He had no inkling of what was going for a good amount of time. It was as if he was a fish pulled forcibly from the deep parts of the sea. He struggled roughly to breathe, it felt like his body forgot how to, and screamed when a burning heat struck his limbs.

“Hang in there! I’m in the middle of healing you.”

He heard a familiar voice against his confused thoughts. Riftan turned his eyes and witnessed the magician mending his half-torn arm.

Blinking at the strange sight, Riftan scratched the ground with his other hand as his bones and flesh felt like melting at the simmering burn. Trying to escape the pain, his whole body innately flailed in protest, but something was holding him back, preventing his movements.

He glanced over his body with dilated pupils. Blue flames swayed all over the dark, cramped cave. Intricate writings were etched on the ground. Soon, he realized that something like tree roots were magically grown from the ground were tightly wound around his body.

He felt a cold sweat drip down his back. Isn’t this ritual for summoning demons? Riftan thrashed around harder.

“F\*cking hell! What... are you planning to do with my body?”

“I’m just trying to heal it!”

As the black roots holding him still started to break, the wizard panicked and pressed Riftan’s shoulders down firmly.

“Please stay still! Your body has been too damaged that I can’t possibly heal it with ordinary magic!” The wizard’s face contorted as he shouted ferociously. “Do you know how much blood you’ve lost? Not only were your limbs crushed but your internal organs were damaged by the electric shock! I can’t believe you were able to wield a sword in that condition... you must be insane.”

As soon as Riftan tried to refute the wizard’s words, a terrible anguish washed over him, like a knife scraping his bones. Riftan raised his head. The crushed bones of his damaged arm were vividly growing.

The torn muscles swelled and twisted together like mud, his body felt like it would explode at any moment. The pain was so excruciating that dying seemed like a better choice. He gasped wildly and howled.

“Stop... stop it!”

“Damn it, you woke up so soon. I need more time to help you fully recover...”

Curses formed in Riftan’s mouth. He wanted to threaten the wizard, tell him that he would kill him if he didn’t stop at that moment, but he only managed to let out a groan of pain.

Riftan gritted his teeth, he had been through all sorts of hardships since he left his home, but he had never experienced such terrible pain until then. When he couldn’t bear it any longer, he tried to bite his tongue but Ruth screamed, holding Riftan’s head tightly.

“No! You have to endure it!”

Riftan glared at him like he could kill him with his bloodshot eyes. The wizard, who was biting his lips anxiously, spoke soon like he had come to a decision.

“I’ll cast a hallucination spell for you to forget the pain. Think about something... something fun, or something that makes you happy.”



Riftan bewilderedly looked at him and all sorts of curses ran out of his mouth. For him to think about happy memories in this situation, he must be completely out of his mind. However, the wizard gleamed with determination.

“For hallucinations to be induced effectively, you have to think of positive memories. If I cast it like this, you will have mind-crippling nightmares.”

“It doesn’t matter, just do it!”

“No! If that happens, your brain will go into shock and you might never wake up again! Hallucination magic is purposely designed to confuse enemies...”

“F...f\*ck it! I’m telling you, just let me die!”

Riftan shook his head frantically and somehow managed to flail again, his body innately looking for an outlet caused by the pain. The wizard urgently shouted, trying to get him to calm down.

“Anything will do. Any memory or moment that made you feel happy... anything is fine so think about it now! It will make the pain go right away!”

Riftan scratched the floor and groaned like a beast. You can escape from the pain. I can get out of this pain. He desperately racked his panicstricken brain as he repeated the words in his mind.

A happy memory. A moment when I felt happy. F\*ck my head is empty.

He ridiculously couldn’t think of anything. All he could remember was the lifeless body of his mother hanging from a beam, the image of his stepfather weeping in the dark, the stench of hunger and filth, the uncomfortable feeling of stabbing a person for the first time, the several moments he almost died... he had nothing but miserable memories. Suddenly, a strange laugh came out of his lips.

It’s amazing how I never had a single happiness in all my life.

Riftan, who shed a desolate laughter like a madman, suddenly blurted out a word as a memory came to his mind. “T-the girl...”

“A girl?”

Not missing his soft murmur, the wizard asked urgently. Riftan barely managed to say more of the story.

“There was a girl. I-I saved her...”

Suddenly, the agonizing pain intensified. He pounded the back of his head against the ground and Ruth grabbed him who was about to lose his selfcontrol.

“Keep talking! Was saving her a good memory of yours?”

“She gave me... a f-flower crown... for saving her.”

“Imagine her vividly in your head.”

Riftan scoured his memory as he could barely hang on.

Hair that was fluffy like clouds, eyes that shined silver in the sunlight, narrow shoulders that always hunched...

In time, a blurry light covered his vision and the excruciating pain that seemed to tear his body apart, faded like it was a lie. He staggered, unable to keep up with the sudden change in his senses. His body felt like it floated into the air, settling gently in a place where a hazy mist outlined his body. Riftan unconsciously plowed through the fog.

After a while, a field came to view, as he came closer, the familiar landscape grew clearer and he blinked blindly. Amidst the beautiful garden filled with colorful blooming flowers, a girl was weaving a flower crown. A gentle breeze blew her hair gently, and a black hound sat with its paws next to her, yawning and lying his head down.

He couldn't take his eyes off the peaceful sight even for a second. The girl placed the flower crown over the dog's head and it licked her cheek, wagging its furry tail. A giggle echoed softly in his ears.

"This is just..."

The spring breeze blew some petals off the flowers, tickling his cheek. Strange and various emotions that could never be explained with words rose in his heart. It was him watching her.

Was this the only comfort I had in my life? This humble memory was the only light in my whole life?

He shuddered and held his face. It was a fantasy, but it revealed how desolate his life had been. A girl who looked as lonely as him: her presence was the sole warmth that eased his hardships at that time.

He slowly closed his eyes just to open them again. Petals stuck to his wet cheeks. His humble paradise smiled brightly, surrounded by a faint gleam of golden colors. He stood there like he could be there forever. Until... \*\*\*

He felt drowsy and his whole body felt heavy like it was a soaked cotton. Riftan, whose eyes flickered in his weakened state, slowly regained consciousness and turned his head. The wizard sat at the cave's mouth with a cramped bonfire. He turned his head as if he felt Riftan's gaze and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Oh, you've barely come to your senses."

Riftan gazed at the wizard's bloodstained face and slowly got up. The cold night air was probably biting the skin of his naked torso, but he couldn't feel a chill. He moved his limbs that were attached to his body like nothing happened, then moved his eyes around the cave, looking side to side. In the narrow cave they used for shelter against the rain, there were several intricate patterns that he assumed were used to perform magic.

Riftan inspected his body, looking down at his chest. All the large cuts, and even the small wounds that were scattered in his whole body, were all gone, but it wasn't just that. He felt something dissonant inside him that he couldn't put his finger on.

The moment he realized that, he thoughtlessly grabbed the wizard's leg and pushed him against the cave's walls. Caught off guard, Ruth squealed and coughed. Riftan growled furiously, pushing him harder.

"What have you done to my body?"

"Hey, what the hell are you doing? I just... those injuries...!"

"Do you think I'm a fool? That wasn't just healing magic. You... are you a dark wizard?" A clear sign of agitation appeared on the wizard's face and Riftan ground his teeth. "Even if the church's influence isn't as strong as it used to be, anyone who's discovered to have used black magic will be condemned and can't live anywhere in this world. Not only that, if I die, my soul won't be blessed nor will I be buried!"

"I didn't use black magic!" Ruth cried out like he was wrongfully accused. "Yes, it is a dangerous magic, but... it's not defying any doctrine!"

Riftan stared at him with disbelief. Ruth tried to pry off from his hold, flailing his arms and legs to escape Riftan's grip and hurling abusive words.

"Damn it! I saved your life and used up my remaining mana yet you're treating me like this? Even in repaying kindness, you're a hostile being! If it weren't for my magic, you'd be dead!"

"I'd rather die than turn into a ghoul, an undead wandering the world for the rest of my life!"

"I told you it wasn't black magic!"

The wizard's face grew redder as he screamed. Riftan looked at him like he could kill with his eyes and tossed his grip from him.

“Fine, if it’s not black magic, I’ll go to the church myself to verify.”

Ruth, rubbing his neck, cried out with a blue face.

“Are you really making your life-saver serve a sentence now?” “Life-saver? You’re turning people into monsters and you have the audacity to talk b\*llsh\*t...!”

“I did not heal with you the monster’s body parts! I didn’t have enough mana to heal you, I only used the monster’s mana stone but I didn’t use any part of that monster or black magic!”

Ruth pointed out of the cave with his finger. At first look, he could see the monster’s body drooping in the middle of the mountain where the darkness surrounded it.

“Theoretically, it’s not against the doctrine to draw mana out of mana stones. Magic tools are also made of mana stones!”

“But your magic... is definitely far from the doctrines. I’ve never heard of that kind of magic, mending mangled human bodies on the brink of death! Healing magic can only treat wounds up to a certain point. However, you regenerated damaged parts beyond repair of healing magic. Am I wrong?”

Dismay and frustration painted the wizard’s face as Riftan bombarded him with interrogation. Ruth, who was sweating profusely like he was cornered, finally sighed and confessed.

“Fine, I’ll be honest with you. The magic I used for Sir Calypse is a taboo magic, unknown by the Wizard Tower of the Western Continent. When the day comes this magic is exposed to the world, it is not only me who will get in trouble but Sir Calypse as well. Because this magic...” As if Ruth wasn’t sure how to explain, he paused for a while before spitting the words out. “It’s a magic designed from studying the regenerative power of trolls.”

## Chapter 14

A chilling silence fell. Riftan glared threateningly with his eyes then picked up his sword which was lying on the ground. Ruth, who is observing what's happening, cried out in plea.

“I-it’s just a magic designed from the principle of trolls’ regenerating abilities! It doesn’t have any side effects on the human body! Except for the excruciating pain during the healing process, there’s no other side effect.”

Regardless of Ruth’s excuse and his desperate words, Riftan thrust his sword, which was stained with monster’s blood, near the edge of the wizard’s neck.

“You m\*thrf\*cker, who the f\*ck are you?”

“I-I am just an ordinary wizard...”

“How in the hell does an ordinary wizard know about this taboo magic?”

The wizard sweated profusely, like a lit candle. Riftan relentlessly pushed him against the cave’s walls, continuing his interrogation.

“What the hell are you doing in the World Tower? Experimenting with monsters and creating magic...If the church discovered such atrocity, they wouldn’t sit still. Do you people intend to be banished?”

“...it won’t end with us being banished. Once the church discovers the existence of this taboo magic, the worst case that could happen is for them to begin persecuting wizards again.”

The wizard groaned, admitting reluctantly.

“That’s the reason why we strictly keep it a secret. Only a few wizards know of its existence. The selected few, filtered through a meticulous process, are learning taboo magic for the sole purpose of research.”

“...Are you saying that you’re one of those few wizards?”

Riftan eyed him suspiciously, raising his eyebrow. The wizard frowned at him angrily, speaking curtly.

“Yes, and you’re very fortunate. If it wasn’t for me, Sir Calypse would be a dead man. You sustained such fatal injuries that ordinary healing magic wouldn’t be enough to heal you. To save you, I broke the rules of the World Tower and used taboo magic!”

Riftan snorted at him.

“So, what, are you expecting me to be grateful and say thank you?”

“Yeah, you should be grateful! A simple thank you is a hundred times better than being threatened with a blade against my throat!”

The wizard felt so exasperated that he spoke like he was at loss for words.

“What was I supposed to do? Look the other way even though I have the power to save your life? When people discover that I used taboo magic, the World Tower will cut my head off before the heretics can hunt and interrogate. And yet, you’re threatening me like this!”

Riftan shot him a piercing glare, wary of the wizard’s intentions, but slowly lowered his sword. Although he yearned to take the suspicious man to the church’s jury, it’s inevitable that he would also be a subject of investigation. Being a person of mixed race, the blood of southern pagans evident on his skin, the church would surely not treat him well, especially if he came to them saying his body was regenerated by magic unknown to them. Riftan clenched his teeth and let out a resigned sigh.

“I’ll let this go just this time. If you dare use that taboo magic on me one more time, I won’t even bring you to be judged by the church. I will finish you with my own hands.”

“Even if you beg for me to do it, I won’t! Next time, I won’t even hesitate and let you die!”

“I hope you do.”

Riftan murmured in a dull tone and rummaged through his bag.

“When it’s time for a person to die, then he should die. There’s no need to do such useless things to keep anyone alive.”

The wizard was speechless, he couldn’t open his mouth to retaliate. Riftan pulled out a tunic. The clothes he wore were destroyed amidst fighting the monster and it was too ruined for him to wear them. He slipped onto the only pair of clothes he had left and went to wear the armor piled in the cave’s corner one by one.

His body felt so light that it was uncomfortable. He questioned inwardly if there really were no side effects from the magic. Riftan’s eyes suspiciously trailed his body that appeared good as new, and picked up his weapons without a word, not wanting another second of argument. The wizard who was watching him, suddenly opened his mouth to speak.

“Don’t you have any desire to live?”

Riftan shot him a glare over his shoulder. The wizard’s face was still and dead serious.

“If any other person does what you do, he would have died countless times already. Are you doing such reckless things because you want to die?”

“If that’s the case, then I wouldn’t have fought so desperately. Rather, I just ...”

Riftan couldn’t find the words to complete his sentence and found himself speechless. He didn’t want to die. However, he did not have a reason to live. He didn’t experience any joy in his life. Even if he dies, he wouldn’t have a regret.

Then what are you fighting so miserably for? Why are you so desperate to earn money and struggle to survive such a lonesome life?



Riftan hurriedly erased the dubious questions that rang in his heart.

“I don’t have time for useless talks. Prepare to leave.”

“We’re leaving right now?”

The wizard asked, startled. He hurriedly picked up his bag. Riftan’s head emerged from the cave, looking at the monster’s dead body. Crimson red intestines drooped on the ground, he assumed that the wizard must have cut through its stomach to retrieve its mana stone. Riftan heaved a heavy sigh.

“Other monsters are attracted to the smell of blood. We must leave before they flock here.”

“But...it’s a waste to leave it like this. I suspect this monster is a Drake. If we sell its scales, hide, and bones, we’re going to make a ton of money!”

Riftan’s eyebrows gathered at the unfamiliar word.

“Drake?”

“It is a Black Dragon’s subspecies. I’m not entirely sure since I’ve only seen them in drawings, but it says that they are about a quarter of a full dragon’s size, have no wings, and can control lighting. The mana I drew from its mana stone was powerful! It must be a Drake.”

The arguments exchanged just a few moments ago seemed to have dissipated, the wizard was grinning ear to ear at the thought of money.

“Dragon subspecies make more money than ancient relics! Now that we have caught this rare monster, we will be rich!” “That’s if we can take it apart and bring it to the city.”

Riftan muttered cynically.

“We have no means to do that with no equipment nor wagons to carry.”

“First we should go back to the city...”

“The harpies will devour it to the bones in the meantime.”

“S-still there will be bones left for us to sell!”

“For a monster this size, you will be surprised that only a few parts of it can be used for magic tools. Its bones are too dense and big, wizards will be reluctant to buy it because it won’t be easy to process. Moreover, have you thought about how much it would cost us to bring equipment up to this rugged mountain, take it apart, and bring it to the city? After sharing the earnings with the people who will help take this apart, there won’t be much left in our hands.”

“B-but when we caught wyverns the other time...”

“Most of the money we received is for the price of mana stones. The most valuable item found in dragon subspecies is their mana stone.”

The wizard’s face, which had been brimming with expectations, suddenly turned blue.

“The power from the mana stone has already been depleted from healing Sir Calypse!”

“Then there’s the answer.”

Riftan swung his bag on his back without a single hesitation. He didn’t think it would be a waste as he is accustomed to throwing away anything that would only burden him. However, the wizard constantly looked back at the monster, like his feet did not want him to leave.

“Can’t we take a few of its scales?”

“You’re going to add more weight to your load when you’re already struggling to keep up and take care of yourself?”

Riftan climbed the dark mountain silently, leading the way for the wizard who shed regrets. In a way, killing the monster was not in vain. It seemed like all the hungry monsters hiding in the mountain had rushed to the smell

of the Drake's blood, allowing them to safely traverse through Mount Ramek.

After that incident, everything went smoothly. They arrived safely at the ruins, Riftan was able to find valuable relics which were sold at a good price in a nearby town. However, the wizard didn't appear to be very satisfied with his usual hefty pay.

Riftan noticed that the wizard worries that he might snitch on his practice of taboo magic. However, he had no intention to ease his anxieties. Riftan hung his purse on his waist and spoke coldly, not shedding a single emotion.

"You promised not to follow me on my missions for the time being, you should keep it."

The wizard stared at him with eyes full of things to say. Riftan immediately strode up the stairs, pretending not to notice.

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As he had hoped, he was able to get away from the wizard for a few months, but it wasn't as pleasant as he thought it would be. Riftan stepped into the noisy tavern, ruffling his hair angrily. He had become entangled with a man several times more annoying than the wizard. He spotted Samon waving his hand cheerfully towards his direction, making his mood go awry.

"Hey, you're already back? I have been busy trying to please my clients."

Samon was flirting with two women whose breasts were only halfcovered, they were sitting on his sides. Riftan, who shot him with a contemptuous glare, sat as far away from him as possible. Ignoring Riftan's blatant disregard, Samon staggered over to him, putting an arm over his shoulder.

"Hey, Calypse. Are you always going to be that cold?"

"Get lost."

“You’re boring.”

Samon grunted in annoyance, placing a glass of ale in front of him.

“Don’t be like that, try becoming more open. I have a client, and he’s interested in recruiting you for an army. Why don’t you settle down and grab this opportunity? From what I heard; he is an ambitious nobleman in the northeastern region of Livadon.”

“If you want to settle down, then do it yourself.”

Samon sighed and clicked his tongue.

“Who doesn’t want to? But you see, they’re not going to accept anything unless you will join.”

“...that’s no longer my business.”

Riftan inexorably brushed Samon’s hand off his shoulder and ordered an employee to serve him a meal. At that moment, one of the women flirting with Samon snaked her hand on his forearm.

“Hmm, are you really that great of a man? Your face is perfect for a play actor...”

“Don’t be fooled. He’s a monster who can kill eight wyverns by himself.”

“Nonsense. You must be lying.”

The woman chuckled, bursting into a fit of laughter with the others. Her plump breasts jiggled and swayed over his forearms. Riftan felt his appetite go away and leaned far from the woman. However, the woman didn’t seem to have any shame and stared up at him seductively, covertly sliding her hand on his thigh. Riftan jumped to his feet.

“Bring the meal to my room when it’s ready.”

He tossed the cashier a coin and turned to leave but the woman pulled the hem of his robe.

“Why? Stay a little more. I will feed you myself.” She fluttered her thick lashes.

“...Or should I go up with you? I can pleasure you.”

“...I don’t need it.”

He relentlessly shook off the woman’s hand and walked towards the stairs. Samon boisterously laughed from behind him.

“He’s not a real man, he’s an innocent kid. Don’t mind him and come to me. I will please both of you.”

Riftan looked over his shoulder, Samon was rubbing his face against the women’s voluptuous breasts. The sound of giggles and frivolous laughter echoed around the bar. He had an indifferent emotion in his eyes as he staggered up the stairs. He felt a lingering pair of eyes follow him and the sensation didn’t wear off.

He’s sick of it. Since he turned fourteen, he has been chased and surrounded by women trying to crawl onto his bed, and he gets anxious whenever someone touches him.

Riftan closed the door behind him, rubbing his forearm with his hand, trying to erase the feeling of the woman’s touch. The tavern’s roaring noise penetrated the thin wooden floors.

## Chapter 15

In the room next to his, a resounding loud moan was heard, an intercourse was transpiring and the scent of it exuded through the open window. Riftan lit a candle and closed the window. The voice of the woman seducing him lingered in his ears, as if sneering at him.

“I can pleasure you.”

Riftan frowned as he felt a strange disgust crawling like a slug in his stomach. As he grew up and went through puberty, he occasionally felt his body heating up, like it longed for something. His lower abdomen itched for no apparent reason when he laid alone in his bed and he suffered the discomfort of having a swollen groin in the mornings. However, when women gazed at him seductively or even subtly touched him, his blood ran cold.

Riftan sat on the bed and massaged his forehead. He grew tired of being constantly chased by women and had lost interest for the opposite sex, but the main cause of his indifference were the memories of him carrying the corpse of his mother on his back. The feeling was carved deep into his bones, something that he couldn't erase.

The limp forearms and cold chest of his mother pressed against his back, and her sparse black hair sticking on his nape has etched an eerie, strange feeling... He muttered curses and lay flat on his back. Perhaps, he would never be able to lie down next to a woman in his lifetime. Ever since that day, never did he pleasantly accept any contact with another person.

He had never been interested in women, and as he spent his childhood living in a world where people casually betrayed him for a few pieces of coins, he put up a front that would make him difficult to be approached at all.

Riftan watched the burning candle with somber eyes. The vision he had seen when he was in the cave suddenly flashed in his mind. Now that he realized it would be impossible for him to cherish someone like that, a sudden cold feeling crept in his chest.

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The expeditions took longer than expected. In the recent years, goblins, who had been growing in numbers, crawled endlessly out of their dens, and to make matters worse, ogres awoke from their hibernation to ransack

villages, ensuing large-scale battles one after another. As the Lords of the northern area of Livadon were forced to recruit more mercenaries, eventually Riftan had an unwelcoming reunion with Ruth.

“... I had no choice either. Every member of the Black Horn Mercenaries was forced to participate in this expedition!”

The wizard, who noticed the piercing glare Riftan was giving him, screamed as he deemed the situation unfair. Riftan clicked his tongue and turned his back on him.

“Don’t hang around near me.”

“Aren’t you being too much? If it weren’t for me, Sir Calypse would have been...!”

Ruth, who was screaming as he got carried away, bit his tongue, startled by his own words, and looked around him.

The Wizard Tower must be completely insane for teaching this idiot a magic that should be hidden from the outside world. Riftan shot him daggers with his eyes.

“You better watch your words or else I will sew your mouth shut.”

“Unless you want to be dragged to the Church’s jury”, Riftan added, mouthing the words. The wizard nervously licked his lips, understanding what he said. He left the wizard and went to the frontlines.

That day, they were ordered to search through dark caves, wedging between rocks as they found their way. The cave was a goblin’s den that reeked with the smell of feces and the stench of decaying animal carcasses. After rummaging through the filthy cave for half a day, Riftan suffered from forcing his nausea down. Confirming that there wasn’t any woman caught hostage in there, he lit it on fire. The den had to be destroyed to eliminate any goblin hatchlings that may be hiding in its nook and crannies.

“F\*ck this, I’d rather fight an ogre. Searching in such a disgusting cave...”

Samon grunted, he sniffed his clothes and wrinkled his nose like the stench offended him. Riftan threw dry branches at the cave's mouth to keep the flames burning and spoke in a sour tone.

“Didn’t you say you don’t like fighting such ignorant monsters because they aren’t worth the money?”

“It’s better than searching through goblin sh\*t. Fighting giants is a more dignified work.”

“But when ogres appear, the person who blabbers the most, falls farthest from the fight.”

Riftan humbled Samon with his straightforward words, then focused on gathering and chopping firewood. Before they took notice, the sky had turned dark as they near finished incinerating the goblins’ remains. The mercenaries simply finished their meals despite the burning corpse of monsters next to them, ignoring the disgust lingering in their stomachs and packed their belongings.

The prevalence of goblin appearances significantly decreased after nearly two months of extinguishing their dens, finally their efforts were bearing fruit. If they continued at that pace, they would be done with the subjugation within the following week.

Riftan heaved a long sigh, massaging his stiff back. Fatigue has dawned on him as it accumulated from the days and nights he spent outdoors. He was sick and tired of sleeping on a mere blanket cushioning him from the ground. Most of all, he longed desperately for a bath. He heaved another sigh as he looked down at his dark tunic, stained black with monsters’ blood and filth. He didn’t even have the luxury to wash his face for fifteen days as he had to conserve water for drinking, let alone wash his dingy clothes. He suffered enough that he even missed the promiscuous, shabby rooms of inns.

“Hey! Wait a minute!”

As Riftan rubbed his rigid shoulders while hiking down from the mountain, he heard a loud voice behind him. He turned his head and saw two other



mercenaries who had left to search the northeastern area, running towards them.

“What’s going on?”

Samon asked with a puzzled expression. The mercenaries explained breathlessly.

“We found another goblin den! We need help right now.”

Curses flew from the mouths of everyone. The news was clearly unsolicited for as it came just as they thought they were finally going to be able to rest. The group grumbled as they climbed the mountain again. After around twenty minutes of hike, a steep rock wall with a huge fissure as an entrance came to view. The two mercenaries pointed to it, explaining what happened.

“Everyone else is stuck in there. We suspect that they are trapped in there by the goblins and have no means of getting out. We were the only ones who were able to escape.”

“How many monsters are there?”

“We’re not sure exactly how many but we’d estimate there are at least fifty of them.”

Riftan made a torch and lit it to investigate the cave. It was quite wide and deep. He inspected in the darkness for a moment and then left six men to guard the entrance, leading the rest into the cave. The path was long, steep and complicated like a labyrinth. Him and four other mercenaries casually explored the cave when they suddenly heard the angry cries of goblins.

Riftan rushed to the sound without any hesitation and saw the wizard with eight other mercenaries, surrounded by dozens of goblins. Riftan immediately drew his sword.

“Sir Calypse!”

Ruth spotted him and exclaimed with a mix of alarm and relief. A wave of goblins suddenly moved to attack like his call was a signal. The clash was more of chaos than a battle. The goblin attacks came from everywhere, hurling themselves and bouncing around like small balls, pulling the men's hair, scratching their faces, and unskillfully swinging their toothed axes and rusty scythes in random directions. Riftan snarled and unsparingly cut off the goblin who was clinging to his leg.

Goblins were used to the dark, so they could clearly see movements and avoid them. Their small physique posed a great advantage in the narrow space. Riftan wielded his sword incessantly and shouted instructions to the mercenaries.

“I'll clear a path so hurry and get out of the cave first!”

The mercenaries quickly secured an escape under his directions. The Goblins surrounded Riftan and the mercenaries didn't miss the chance to flee to the cave's entrance.

Riftan swung his sword at the goblins, cutting his blade through the monsters that tried to chase after the others. Goblins appeared endlessly from every direction. Riftan muttered profanities.

What, fifty? There are at least well over a hundred.

“This is the reason why the number of prey has dwindled in this area.” Riftan stood a distance from the narrow entrance, brandishing his blade to buy time for those who had gone ahead of him. All of a sudden, the cave's ceiling began to collapse.

“Sir Calypse!”

The wizard ran to him, wanting to rescue him. Riftan snatched the foolish man and pushed him into the hollow space of the cave's wall and squeezed himself in. A pile of dirt poured down right next to him, while the ceiling shook endlessly. He covered his face with the hem of the cloth in his arms, preventing the dirt from getting into his eyes.

After a long moment, the rumbling died down. Riftan groped at the wall. He narrowly avoided being buried under a pile of dirt, but he was stuck in a cramped space.

“Damn it... the path has been blocked.”

“A-are you saying we’re stuck here?” The wizard stiffened and swallowed dryly.

Great, that means I’m stuck with this guy. Riftan grunted and punched the cave’s wall. Dirt and stones fell on his head.

“I think the ceiling will collapse if we force to remove the rocks.”

“T-then what should we do?”

“Don’t ask me, make use of your brain too.” Riftan exclaimed angrily. Then, the wizard pursed his lips tightly.

Just as I thought, it’s better not to expect anything helpful to come out of this guy. He sighed and clicked his tongue, searching for a way to clear out the rocks. At that moment, Ruth, who was in deep thought, called out in a bright tone.

“If I put a shield against the ceiling to keep it from collapsing while removing the rocks, we can get out of here.”

Riftan eyed him with doubt. “Are you sure you can do that?”

“Of course! I’m a top-tier wizard. This is going to be a piece of cake!”

Riftan’s doubts only grew bigger at the wizard’s confident statement. However, since there was no other way left, Riftan meekly stepped aside.

“Fine. Give it a try.”

“Keep close to me. I need to conserve mana and make the shields as small as possible.”

Riftan stayed close behind him. Soon, a bluish light surrounded them, gradually, the cave's walls that trapped them began to crumble. Ruth gave him a triumphant look and made the way, so Riftan cautiously followed him. Their progress was slower than what he expected, perhaps the entire cave had collapsed on the paths.

"I have no idea if those who went ahead of us made it out safely."

Out of nowhere, Ruth muttered in a somber tone. Riftan did not answer at all. They made their way out of the cave little by little in deafening silence. However, as soon as Ruth became exhausted, he flopped down on the ground.

"This won't do. I can't do it further because it's tiring. I will need a little rest."

Riftan merely nodded. He noticed that the sun had to be set by now. He searched the mountains all day long and the fact that they were in distress did not help at all, it was reasonable for him to be tired. He unpacked the bag he was carrying over his shoulder and took out some pieces of jerky, handing it to Ruth.

"Here, eat and restore your strength."

"Thank you. My food supply was stolen by the goblins earlier."

The wizard stuttered as he reached out to take the jerky. They sat facing each other in the narrow cave, sharing jerky and a few sips of water, and Riftan felt like they were ground moles. He leaned against the wall, positioning himself to get comfortable. Ruth, who had been silent, opened his mouth to speak.

"Close your eyes for a moment. You haven't had a good rest during the past days. I heard from Samon, have you been on guard duty for more than 10 days?"

"I closed my eyes from time to time."

“Were you sleeping for only three hours a day?”

Riftan didn't give him an answer. A sigh was audibly heard from Ruth.

“The enemies won't be able to attack us from here. So, sleep, even for a while. I'll wake you up if anything happens.”

“Don't worry about me, you go to sleep.”

“Sir Calypse, you're only sixteen. You can try relying on adults too at times.”

Riftan blinked blankly, he couldn't believe what he just heard from Ruth. Did this dimwit just treat me like I'm a child?

“Who's the adult you're talking about?”

“I told you, I came from a clan with an elven ancestor. I may look like a weak, innocent, little boy but I am a bit older than you think.”

Riftan raised an eyebrow. “Are you around eighty years old?”

“How could you say something so rude!”

The wizard leapt to his feet, hitting his head against the cramped cave's ceiling. Riftan clicked his tongue and Ruth spoke vehemently while groaning and pain.

“I'm a little older than Sir Calypse but I'm not that old! I'm still young and fresh!”

It only made Riftan more suspicious when he overreacted so heatedly. However, he didn't question further as he didn't really care how old the wizard was.

“Stop being noisy and go to sleep. You will have to dig the rocks again after resting.”

“Can’t you just rest when I tell you to?” Ruth took a deep breath, frustrated at his unbudging attitude. “Really, your body is not made of steel. Sometimes, you also have to listen to what other people say.”

Riftan frowned. He was about to argue and yell about how it was not Ruth’s business, but he felt the fatigue weighing his whole body down heavily. He gazed up at the cave’s dark walls and muttered almost vaguely.

“How much mana do you have left?”

“I still have plenty. I’m just tired physically. If anything happens, I can still take care of it with magic so don’t worry and go to sleep.”

A fading breath came out of his mouth. This wasn’t the first time he told him such unreliable words, but it wasn’t like the guy didn’t save his life anyway. It would be a pity to think it could already end there. Riftan, whose shoulders finally drooped from exhaustion, opened his mouth and spoke quietly.

“...the magic you casted on me before.”

The wizard flinched visibly. “The taboo magic?”

“No, not that... the magic that gave me illusions back then.” Riftan took off his gloves and stroked the corner of his lips before speaking hesitantly.

“Can you cast it again?”

## Chapter 16

An awkward silence filled the cramped space. Riftan’s ears burned red like he had just stripped himself off in front of the wizard. He kicked the ground and spat his words out bluntly.

“Never mind. Forget it.”

“N-no, I mean, sure! I’ll cast it for you for as long as you want. It’s not even a complicated magic.” The wizard hurriedly exclaimed. There was a sudden hint of brightness in his voice. “Certainly, it is difficult to relax

comfortably inside a cramped cave like this. Please lie down here. I will cast for you a wonderful illusion.”

It annoyed him how Ruth switched to a tone used for soothing children, but he was too tired and longed to rest so much that he quickly overcame his irritation. Riftan meekly lied down on the ground, small rocks and pebbles pestered the flesh on his back while he tasted the peculiar musty smell of the cave in his throat with every breath he took. Despite the unpleasant environment, he was so exhausted that he couldn’t afford to even mind it.

He propped his head against his bag and covered his body with his robe. Ruth bent over to his side and placed his palm on top of the corner of his eyes.

“Paint in your head the happiest scene from your memories.”

After a while, a white light flashed from the wizard’s pale fingertips, and Riftan’s surroundings gradually faded.

A gentle breeze coated with the scent of flowers made his hair flutter. Soon, a scenery of a sunny summer day unfolded before his eyes. The green leaves of the trees gleamed like emeralds as rays of sunlight escaped between them. As he walked through the scenery, a garden with full bloomed flowers emerged.

Riftan felt a strange feeling of relief but an aching emotion of longing crawled inside every inch of his bones as his eyes fell to the girl sitting under the tree’s shade. She was embracing her black hound tightly, burying her arms and face against his luscious fur. A corner in his heart tightened painfully as he watched the tender sight. He also once longed to be held just like her. He yearned to be embraced safely in warm, soft arms.

‘...this is just an illusion.’ Riftan murmured to himself. It was just an illusion created by magic, but the enchanting sigh captured his heart and refused to let it go.

When he gazed at her back then, he forgot all his sufferings. He still felt the same now. However, as the peaceful scene faded away like mist, he returned to a harsh reality. Riftan sighed as he realized he was back to the cold, dark cave that didn't let a single ray of light in.

“Are you already awake?”

The wizard, who was crouching next to him, appeared drowsy as he yawned widely while asking him. Riftan silently sat up.

In the end, everything he saw was just an illusion. Nothing but a mere moment of temporary comfort. He brushed off the empty feelings in his heart and urged the wizard to continue working on getting them out of the cave. When they finally reached the cave mouth, the light of dawn pierced his eyes. Riftan supported the exhausted wizard as they climbed down the mountain. They reunited with the expedition team and reported the accident that occurred last night, prompting a search party to immediately rescue those who were still trapped in the cave.

They spent half a day digging through piles of dirt. There were eight people who miraculously survived. The rest of them unfortunately did not live to see the day. No one made a ruckus about it as it was common to have such accidents in their line of work. Riftan helped carry the wounded to the barracks and retrieve corpses for the priests to bless. Only after all that he was finally able to have a proper rest.

Proceeding that event, their expedition continued for around two more weeks. When their contract ended, the Black Horn Mercenaries traveled straight to the north. Their work required them to constantly wander around countries, pursuing conflicts and monsters. When they ran out of quests in Livadon, they did not hesitate to move on to Balto where they began earnestly doing their work.

Moving to Balto frustrated Riftan. The country's society was greatly influenced by the church and were more devoted compared to Whedon or Livadon. Discriminating people of mixed races or foreign origins was



ingrained among the northerners, leaving him nothing but harsh tasks that everyone else avoided.

There were times when he escorted nobles and aristocrats alike, but he later purposely dodged such tasks as he got tired of their immaturity, they eyed him with contempt and regarded him as a barbarian just because of his skin's color. However, thanks to his reputation of hunting dragon subspecies, similar quests continually came to him. Each of them made him gamble his life but he didn't hesitate to accept them if the compensation was fair. Because of this, he was able to build an overflowing amount of gold, wealth, and fame. However, as he spent his days as such, it did not guarantee that he wouldn't die the next day and it made him wonder what the point of his life was. Most of the mercenaries were secretly hoping that he wouldn't come back alive, even Samon who acted like they were comrades, blatantly probed him about where he hid the gold he had so far earned.

Riftan went on with his life, ignoring them and not batting an eye in their direction, but all of it gradually added on his exhaustion. He was mentally pushed to the limit in an environment where he had to be wary and alert of people eyeing him with contempt. Dead tired, Riftan occasionally sought Ruth and asked to cast an illusion magic for him. Although he always woke up to a feeling of emptiness afterwards, he was at least able to relax during his illusions. The girl in his mind only became more glorious as she grew increasingly lovable and affectionate.

Her hair that gently flowed and plumped like clouds, her small ivory face, and her crystalline eyes that sparkled like a lake on a winter's day... whenever he thought of her, his heart melted as if he was looking at a young meek creature, and he was able to forget about his hellish life even for a moment.

There were times when he would endlessly wonder how she was doing now. He would think of how tall she had grown or worry that she would get herself hurt again walking alone in the forests, or if she still strolled along the garden with a sulking expression.

Whenever thoughts like that filled his mind, he couldn't bear but laugh at himself. Who was he to worry about her? If anyone else heard what he was thinking, that person would probably clutch his stomach from laughing so hard. However, he couldn't bring himself to stop thinking about her even though he thought of it as stupid.

"It's not good to rely too much on illusions." Ruth, who was at first willing to cast illusion spells, eventually warned Riftan who frequently asked him to cast it. "This spell was originally designed to confuse enemies. Nothing good will come out of casting this on you too often."

"...I'll pay whatever amount if you want to, name your price." Riftan snorted bluntly and the wizard frowned like he was offended.

"I'm not even pertaining to money. I am truly concerned about you right now, Sir Calypse."

"Stop worrying about useless things! What could go wrong with having illusions for an hour or two?"

"Beautiful illusions only make you hate reality more."

Riftan clenched his teeth. As a matter of fact, he despised reality more and more as that went on and felt the urge not to wake up and stay in his fantasies forever. Ruth sighed lightly, like he was able to decipher his truth.

"I think I have been too rash in agreeing to cast spells on you. I thought that someone who has such willpower as Sir Calypse would have the strength not to dwell on such fantasies."

"Damn it, what the hell is wrong with hating reality even more? I can't be worse off in this world anyway!"

"You feel that way because you're comparing it to your illusions." The wizard raised his chin and spoke firmly. "Anyway, from now on I won't cast an illusion spell on you. Stop clinging to fantasies, find comfort in reality. Sir Calypse needs to develop his social skills."

The wizard closed the door to Riftan's face. He kicked the door with force, inflicting a crack and denting the wood, but he only heard a mere snort from Ruth. Eventually, Riftan trudged back into his room and laid down against the cold bed.

However, all that came to his mind was the scene he saw in his illusions. He harshly rubbed his palms against his face. He might have become overly reliant on it just like the wizard said. He felt delusional for dwelling on such childhood memories, but he didn't know what else he could do to soothe his weary heart. Riftan gazed at the crescent moon glowing with a faint light through the window and helplessly shut his eyes.

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"Are you sure you want to leave?"

Riftan, who was packing his belongings, looked over his shoulder. The leader of the Black Horn Mercenaries, Gail, was leaning against the doorframe, glaring at him annoyingly.

"Can't you at least pay back the kindness I bestowed so far by taking care of you?"

"I don't remember a time you took care of me."

Riftan replied sarcastically and slung his bag over his shoulder. Gail exhaled so heavily that his shaggy beard fluttered.

"I've given you food to eat and a place to sleep when I took you in, and yet you're being ungrateful."

Riftan laughed scornfully. Gail used him as a bait for monsters when he just joined the mercenaries. Never once did he remember receiving anything without a price.

"I don't owe you anything. I earned every sip of water that went into my mouth. Are you denying that?"

“Insolent bastard.” Unable to counter Riftan’s claim, he wheezed and slammed his fist against the wall. “There’s a brewing civil war in the east. You are the strongest force we have!”

“That’s none of my business.”

Unbothered by Riftan’s blunt reply, Gail prodded continuously. “Think about it again. If you happen to make a legendary contribution to the war, you have a chance of getting a piece of land in Balto. If you just do what you do well, I’ll make sure you’ll get paid handsomely for it. When you turn over twenty years old, I will even make you a vice captain. And if we become Balto’s uniform army, you will be the unit commander.”

Riftan’s lips twisted cynically. “Do you think I’m stupid? As long as I’m on this land, I will be nothing but a mongrel who carries the blood of pagans. I’m sorry, but I don’t want to suffer from being perceived like that anymore.”

Gail’s shaggy cheeks twitched like he was about to spit out a retort, and then swiftly turned around. “Fine. I won’t hold you back any longer. Go wherever you want to go. Based on what you’re doing, you’ll die soon anyway, but I’ll at least pray for your neck to cross Balto’s borders. You won’t be much of a nuisance when you turn into a ghoul.”

The man then stomped his feet while walking away. Riftan grabbed all his remaining equipment with a grim face and left the room. As he went outside the inn’s backdoor, the silvery terrain frozen in ice unfolded before him.

Balto’s northwestern region was covered in snow and ice all throughout the four seasons. It was unimaginable that humans lived in such a desolate place. Due east, a wide field of grassland spread out, but even that often died in vain when the rest of the season came and the people who raised cattle like sheep and horses had to travel to the south as the land turned into a wasteland infested by monsters.

Riftan looked around the disgusting frozen land before getting into a wagon. There wasn't a single person who turned up to bid him goodbye. He plopped down against a pile of straw, feeling at ease.

Let's go south. Anywhere would be better compared to here.

Riftan waved a signal for the coach to depart. At that moment, someone jumped onto the wagon. Riftan frowned angrily. Ruth sat across him like it was a natural thing for him to do.

## Chapter 17

"Apologies for being late. There were a lot more things to pack than I thought."

The wizard smiled brazenly like he had made prior arrangements with him to join his departure, and then tapped his hand against the bag he carried, which was too heavy and big for his own physique.

"I wanted to buy a horse, but livestock are ridiculously expensive here. If we're crossing the border, then we have to secure a horse first when we arrive at the southern region." And, with a long yawn, he leaned against a pile of straw. "Well then, I'll go to sleep. Please wake me up when we arrive at the destination. "

Riftan glared coldly at Ruth and jumped up to grab him by the collar. The wizard screamed loudly. "Aaaack!"

He didn't care for a bit and attempted to throw him out. The wizard then clung desperately to the wagon's railing and cried out in an urgent voice.

"W-wait, wait a second! Let's talk about this! I also have my reasons for leaving."

Riftan continued to stare at him coldly and released his grip carelessly. The wizard then crawled back into the wagon and grabbed his luggage tightly.

“Aren’t you being too much? I can’t believe you just tried to throw me out without a single hesitation! How can you be so ruthless when we’ve had our fair share of experiences together!”

Riftan growled furiously, ignoring Ruth’s protests. “Find another wagon or get a horse in the next town. I don’t care where you go, but don’t even think about following me.”

The wizard flinched at his words. “Are you going to keep that cold attitude?”

Riftan didn’t feel like it was worth answering, so he sat down and turned his back to him. The sound of the wagon’s wheels rolling against the snowfields continued for a long time. Ruth, who stared at Riftan in the uncomfortable silence, soon began to speak.

“It’s more beneficial for Sir Calypse to be accompanied by me. Having a wizard will get you more commission fees, and it’s a lot safer than wandering around alone.”

“Which one is safer?”

Riftan’s eyes flew open, giving the wizard a chilling look. Ruth just shrugged his shoulders and frankly admitted.

“I don’t want to be left alone in a place like this! I don’t like the way they treat wizards here. To be honest, I’m terrified that they’ll drag me to the church’s jury anytime and I don’t think anyone else will protect me.”

Riftan clenched his teeth. Just how many times do I have to let this guy know that I have no intentions of protecting him?

“What does that have to do with me?”

Ruth’s face turned red at his brutal reply.

“If I attempt to cross the border by myself, I wouldn’t end up alive. I will be robbed by thieves, kidnapped by a trafficker to be molested by pervert

nobles, or devoured by a monster! Are you sure you'll be fine with me ending up like that? I've saved Sir Calypse's life a couple of times yet how can you act like that towards your life-savior?!"

Riftan covered his ears with a disgusted face. The wizard, who had been chirping with a high-pitched voice, now began to whine, clinging to the hem of his trousers.

"I'm a top-tier wizard. A genius wizard acclaimed by the Wizard Tower! I'm going to have your back, so what in the world is your issue with that? What's so bad about that for you to reject it so cruelly?!"

"Are... Are you not going to let go of this?!"

"I can't let you go even if I die here! To be honest, I can't trust the other mercenaries! If I hadn't bragged about you looking out for me, they would have taken all my shares. I do crazy and unimaginable things for people to earn money when I have the time, but no one pays me as much as you do!"

Riftan pressed the back of his neck with his palm and cursed under his breath. Truly, the guy's tricks and talent were useful in many ways, he showed commendable reflexes in times of crisis especially in healing and defensive magic, thanks to his experience. However, the irritation that the noisy guy provoked out of him was unbearable. Riftan relentlessly pried the wizard off.

"Look here, I've told you many times that I'm comfortable with being alone. If you need someone to protect you, find someone else. With your skill, not only one or two people will be more than willing to hire you, so why are you so attached to me? Any lord who hears that you're a top-tier wizard will welcome you with open arms!"

"You're saying that, but it's not true!" The wizard exclaimed bitterly, pulling his bushy hair in frustration. "I'm wandering around because I'm hiding from the Wizard Tower. No lord will dare keep me by his side when he finds out that I rebelled and other wizards despise me."

It was the first time he heard about that. He had already sensed that Ruth was entangled in a vague, complicated situation, but to think he turned his back against the Wizard Tower... he couldn't even imagine what he could have done.

Riftan pressed his thumbs against his throbbing temples. The wizard appeared extremely pitiful and he was persistent too, surely he would crawl after him no matter what, so it would be difficult to pry him off unless he knocked him down unconscious, but he didn't want to go that far. Eventually, Riftan uttered his reply in resignation.

"Fine. I'll let you join me. However, there will be a couple of conditions."

"Conditions?"

He nodded. "Don't talk to me unless it is absolutely necessary."

Ruth's lower lip protruded. Riftan narrowed his eyes at him and spoke firmly, emphasizing his speech word by word.

"Don't ask useless questions. Don't be annoying, don't annoy me, and if you just quietly follow me like you don't exist..."

The wizard snorted. "Why don't you just glue my mouth shut?"

Riftan spoke harshly through his teeth. "If you can't do it, then get off the f\*cking wagon now!"

"...who said I can't do it?" Ruth immediately lowered his tail. "Fine. I'll be so quiet that you won't even notice I'm right next to you."

Riftan eyed him suspiciously and let out a small sigh. When the atmosphere completely changed, Ruth hummed softly and wrapped a blanket around his body to avoid the bite of the cold wind. It was obvious that the trip was going to maddeningly annoying. Riftan gritted his teeth and closed his eyes shut.

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Contrary to his expectations, the wizard was not the worst companion he could have had. Most of the time, he was lying down cocooned in a blanket, taking a carefree nap. And when he was awake, he did his part diligently as well, such as setting up and lighting a bonfire or preparing a meal.

Occasionally, he would be annoying when he grumbled to himself or bothered Riftan, but when he shot the wizard a serious glare, he would immediately shut his mouth. After all, it was something that he could tolerate.

They traveled riding the horse-drawn wagon for a full day and rested in a small village. Fortunately, they were able to join merchants heading for the southern region. At first the merchants were reluctant to hire them, but most of the mercenaries had already journeyed north in preparation for the civil war, so they had no choice.

Riftan was paid six silver coins for escorting merchants to Osyria. It was a ridiculously low sum, but he didn't bother to negotiate since his purpose wasn't really the money but a way to travel. Moreover, looking for a merchant who would hire a mixed-blooded man like him in the northern region was comparable to searching for a needle buried in a haystack.

"Here, that's the pay." Riftan said, handing Ruth three silver coins.

The wizard took it coldly and gave him a disappointed expression. "Is this the only way that we could travel for a thousand miles?"

"If you have any complaints, go back to the Black Horn Mercenaries now. Getting jobs that pay like these is common if you don't have a middleman." (Note – Middlemen are people who finds the mercenaries clients to work for, e.g. Samon)

Riftan answered bluntly and loaded his luggage on the saddle. He had no choice but to purchase two horses so that they could escort the wagons properly. Riftan looked at the horse that seemed too weak for him to ride on, then looked at the group of merchants preparing for the trip.

Their group consisted of twelve mercenaries and fourteen merchants. Although the merchants appeared to have good physiques, like most northerners, he couldn't be sure whether they would be helpful in case they encountered a horde of monsters or thieves.

Riftan gauged the mercenaries' skills with his scrutinizing eyes and went to the middle of the procession. When all preparations were completed for the journey, they departed the village and began to move south.

Their journey went smoother than he expected. Although a blizzard struck them in the middle of their journey, there was a positive note in it, since there were lower chances of encountering thieves or monsters on a bad day. They were able to reach a small town in the south through the frozen land without any mishaps. There, they took a rest and left straight for the borders.

After about two weeks of travel, Riftan was finally able to see some grassland. Osyria's plains, which marked the season of rain, were covered with a fresh green color, and a group of deer leisurely drank clear water from a brisk flowing stream. They settled their wagons near the stream and let the horses graze in the grass.

"I think we will reach the capital in a week or so."

A merchant, who was sitting on the coach's seat, looked at the map and then turned to Riftan to ask. "What do you plan on doing when we reach our destination?"

Riftan looked at him with a confused face. He was wary whenever people talked to him as he always wore an unapproachable aura. He chewed on a jerky and replied in a sour tone.

"I'll rest for a few days and then look for a new quest."

The merchant's face suddenly became noticeably brighter. "We'll be staying for around 10 days, purchasing some goods, and then we'll go back

to Balto. Will you still be my escort? I'll pay you double the price on our way back."

Riftan's lips lifted at the corner. They encountered a pack of werewolf cubs twice while crossing the border. He guessed the merchant took a liking to him after seeing his skills that he exhibited during the attack. Riftan stuffed the rest of the jerky into his mouth and dusted his hands.

"I appreciate the offer, but I have to decline. I'm planning to stay in Osyria for the time being."

A faint expression of disappointment clouded the merchant's face.

"Perhaps, are you planning to participate in the sword competition held by the church?"

Riftan frowned at the question which was out of the blue. "Sword Competition?"

"Didn't you hear about it? It's a huge competition where swordsmen exhibit their skills and compete, while the nobles and royalty from all countries spectate. It's the perfect place for a wandering swordsman like you to make himself known."

"Aren't those competitions usually limited for knights to participate?"

"That's not the case, even in jousting matches, anyone can freely participate. The sword competition is hosted by the high church and the fee to join the competition is only two denars."

Rifan sneered. Two denars was an amount that commoners could hardly touch in their entire lives. There was nothing in the high church but a bunch of inflated idiots doing business to climb a fake hierarchical ladder for status. Riftan pulled out his canteen, drank to quench his dry throat, and responded coldly.

"I'm not interested."

“With skills like that, don’t you think you’ll surely catch the eyes of nobles?”

## Chapter 18

“My temper isn’t in control and when it comes to nobles, they wouldn’t find it to their taste.”

“...That figures.”

The merchant agreed meekly. Ruth, who was silently shoveling bread into his mouth from a hearing distance, giggled outright and burst into laughter. Riftan glared sharply at him and then stood up from his seat.

“Let’s get going now. We have to get to town before the night falls.”

They gathered their grazing horses and set out on the road to the south. After riding through the wide fields for half a day, a small village appeared before their eyes. There, they took a day to rest and then traveled again for two more days, arriving at the capital of Osyria, Balbon.

Rfitan’s jaw involuntarily dropped as he witnessed the towering walls of the huge city that was once the capital of the Roem Empire. As they passed through gates so majestic that even a dragon would be able to enter, a wide and clean boulevard that could fit at least six side by side wagons was revealed before them.

His eyes wandered incessantly whilst gripping the horse reins. He had explored the countries of Whedon, Livadon, and Balto, but he had never seen a city as glorious, majestic, and beautiful as Balbon.

The buildings that stood left and right of the road were all made of stone, the structures were so tidy and built beautifully that it was hard for him to believe that those were inhabited by commoners. Well-groomed shrubs and flower beds lined the boulevard, the clothing of the people was neat, and there was no trace or smell of animal manure in the gutters.

Riftan looked skeptically at the clean, immaculate road and the wagons that passed by in orderly traffic. Based on his experiences, bigger cities tended to have the worst stench. He wondered how they maintained the environment clean despite the higher number of livestock and people living in the area. He was immersed in his useless thoughts when the head of their group, who was driving the wagon up ahead, pointed to the end of the road and exclaimed.

“That’s the great temple of the high church. We’ll stop by before we proceed to the inn.”

Riftan felt uncomfortable and adjusted himself on the saddle. Their wagons filled with trading goods passed through the huge square and stopped in front of a gothic architectural structure. The merchants of Balto climbed up its stairs and filed into a line at the arched entrance.

While everyone gave their offerings and uttered their prayers in the temple, Riftan stood beside the wagons and gazed intently at the fountain gushing with clear water. He had always felt uneasy whenever he stood in front of temples, he felt as if he was not welcome.

“Sir Calypse, are you sure you’re not going in?”

Ruth, who had been dozing off on the wagon’s seat, suddenly turned to look at him from over his shoulder and asked. Riftan only shrugged.

“I would’ve ended up being a beggar if I gave offerings at every destination’s temple.”

“I see, in situations like this, Sir Calypse is a normal mercenary.”

Ruth shook his head.

“You always persecuted me, so it gave me the impression that you’re a devout Catholic.”

“I act harsh towards you because you’re annoying, not because you’re a wizard.”

Ruth grumbled at his blunt reply while Riftan let his words come out of his other ear and approached the fountain. Above the crystal-like flowing water stood a statue of Uigru with twelve knights, Emperor Darian wearing a crown, and angels that surrounded them like they were bestowing blessings.

Riftan pulled his hood deep into his head, shading his eyes. He wondered if he was so accustomed to the rough and dirty environment or if he had a deep-rooted sense of inferiority that the sculpture of the knights in the legend looked unnecessarily dazzling.

“Come on, let’s go and take a rest.”

After a while, the merchants who had completed their worshipping rituals walked out of the temple. Riftan mounted himself again on the saddle. As he escorted the wagons toward the inn, his eyes caught six luxurious fourwheeled carriages and dozens of knights heading towards the temple. Riftan narrowed his eyes as the flag that the party was bearing appeared familiar to him. The merchants made a fuss as they parked their wagons near the side of the road.

“Hey you! What are you doing, why aren’t you coming down from your horse?”

A mercenary slammed his leg with a thick palm as he gazed at the goldadorned carriages and the shimmering armors. Riftan frowned in displeasure and hesitantly dismounted from his saddle. A merchant then pulled the hem of his clothes to pull him down to bow down to the height of his waist, rebuking him in a whisper.

“That coat of arms belongs to the Duke of Croix. Half of the land in the eastern parts of Whedon is property of their family. He belongs to the top ten noble families of the seven countries, so you better bow your head instantly when you see that flag.”

Riftan stiffened like he had been struck by lightning. Indeed. It was the same flag he grew sick and tired of in his childhood. Looking at the

complex pattern branded with a silver fish, maroon deer, and golden intertwining wreath, he asked the merchant.

“Why did the nobles of Whedon come to Osyria?”

“I told you, there is a sword competition coming up. They’re here to spectate and socialize with other influential nobles.”

Riftan listened attentively to the merchant’s explanation without taking his eyes off the carriage. For incomprehensible reasons, his throat felt dry and his heart pounded aggressively against his chest. He wondered if the girl had come too. He stared earnestly at the curtained windows with intolerable curiosity.

However, the thick curtains only gave him glimpses of people’s shadows. Riftan was washed with nervousness as he stretched his neck to see. How old would she be by now? Thirteen? Fourteen?

He was dying to see how the girl in his memories had grown up. Most of all, he wanted to know whether she was healthy and well. Eventually, he couldn’t resist his eagerness and tried to follow the party, but the merchant suddenly held him back, startling him.

“Why? Do you know anyone there?”

Riftan’s shoulders stiffened, and then shook his head. He looked at him nonchalantly and pointed towards the inn.

“Then, come on. We’re taking the main road so keep your head low and bow when the nobles and royalties pass by us.”

Riftan glanced at the duke’s flag as it drifted farther and farther away, following it with his eyes. But even after settling down in the inn, he was anxious, and his mind bugged him of the possibility that she was in the city as well.

He just wanted to see her at least once, even from afar. He wanted to witness her with his own eyes, his fantasy that comforted him whenever he

was weary. Riftan, who was lying down at the bed staring mindlessly at the ceiling, leapt to the window when he heard a loud sound of trumpets. In the boulevard were Royal Guards bearing flags of Whedon, marching with a carriage led by four horses.

He gazed at the dignified knights marching majestically towards the temple, then his eyes turned to the amphitheater located east of the city. A cool breeze swept his hair. Riftan ran his hand through his hair, removing the bangs that pricked his eyes and closed the windows.

Stop thinking so irrationally. There's no reason for you to be this obsessed.

Riftan repeated the words in his mind to convince himself, but the possibility of her being in the same city as him wouldn't get out of his head. Riftan harshly rubbed his face against his palms. It was obvious that she wouldn't remember a lowly peasant whose blood was mixed with southern pagans. But what did it matter? He remembered her, and memories of her were the only comfort he had ever had in his entire insufferable life.

Seeing her in real life rather than his fantasies would probably add another comfort to his desolate life. Creating another memory that would give him comfort when he had to spend a night in a cave or suffered from injuries inflicted by monsters wouldn't be so useless. Eventually, Riftan was tempted enough to go see her and went straight to the merchant.

“What is it?”

The merchant, who was resting alone in his room, asked him in a wary manner. His sudden visit was strange and posed suspicions. Riftan took a step back to indicate he didn't mean any harm as he sensed the merchant's vigilance and opened his mouth to ask bluntly.

“I came here to ask you regarding the sword competition. You said that commoners can freely participate, right? What should I do to join and compete?”



The merchant's eyes widened in surprise and then burst into laughter. "Did you change your mind after seeing the Royal Knights march?"

Riftan didn't bother to answer. The merchant, whose expression turned to displeasure because of his unfriendly attitude, responded coarsely.

"You must head to the great temple and pay the participation fee to join the competition. It's getting late so do it tomorrow."

"I see. I apologize for interrupting your rest."

The merchant shrugged and closed the door again. The next morning, Riftan went to the great temple as soon as dawn broke. The great temple was built in the heart of Balbon in the golden age of the Roem Empire, boasting a size grander than any royal castle. However big it was, it wasn't difficult to find where he had to apply to join the competition.

At the left side front of the temple, men who appeared to look like wandering swordsmen stood in a long line. He shuffled at the end of the line and waited impatiently for his turn. The process to register was unexpectedly simple. All that he had to do was pay the fee and write down his name. However, he had to exhibit his skills first through the preliminary rounds in order to qualify for the finals. Of the hundreds of swordsmen who paid two gold coins, only less than thirty men would be able to brandish their swords in front of the nobles.

What a convenient way to make money. Riftan thought bitterly and frowned as he held out two gold coins. When his name was placed in a roster, a priest led him somewhere that appeared like a training ground.

He competed in there against five men and then qualified for the finals. He was stunned for a moment at how there was no sincerity of holding a separate round for qualification, but it was also convenient as the competition did not drag for long. He took the ticket that branded his entry from the priest and left the great temple.

The sun was setting as he headed back to the inn and Riftan went to its tavern to have dinner. Ruth, who was eating in a corner, leapt to his feet.

“Sir Calypse! I heard that you’ll be competing in the sword competition.” The wizard ran in front of him while holding a bowl of soup in his hands. “I thought you didn’t give a damn about it. What made you change your mind?”

Riftan avoided Ruth’s eyes. Somehow, it felt embarrassing for him to take part in such a raucous event just to see a girl. He slowly turned to him and talked.

“The money for winning the competition is better than I have expected.”

“How much is it?” The wizard’s eyes glistened, asking and Riftan gave him a sharp look like he was irritated.

“Did you forget that you agreed not to ask useless questions?”

“It’s not a useless question! That’s a serious question. There’s a bet going on in the taverns on who will win the sword competition!” Ruth wore a serious expression. “As soon as I heard that Sir Calypse was competing, I placed a huge sum of money to bet on you. You’ll certainly play seriously right?”

Riftan stared at him with a startled expression, then shook his head and sat at the tavern’s corner. Ruth sat next to him and continued to pester him. “If Sir Calypse puts his mind to it, the championship will be ours. The winnings will be over twenty times the bet!”

“What’s it with you!”

“What’s it with me? It won’t be fine if I ended up losing the bet and ending up empty-handed, right? I trusted Sir Calypse and poured all my money in. If we win, I’ll give you a share. So, you must do your best, alright? You have to win! Win for sure!”

Ruth's voice rattled his eardrums like a woodpecker throughout the dinner. Riftan had to be patient and prevent himself from throwing the bowl of soup in his face.

The sword competition began a week after. Meanwhile, several nobles from Livadon, Dristan, and Arech came to spectate in Balbon. The streets were crowded with people who watched the knights march and drums together with trumpets rang everyday in the square.

As the boisterous atmosphere continued, the commoners' interest grew focused on the sword competition. When the day of the competition came, a crowd so thick gathered that it was impossible to pass through, unless people were pushed around

## Chapter 19

"This crowd is huge." Ruth grumbled as he scrambled through the dense swarm of people.

Riftan strutted towards the amphitheater, weaving his way like Ruth. In front of the magnificent building, shining against the shimmering sand, there were lines of stalls and vendors, gamblers placing bets, and thousands of people who came to watch the competition.

As they somehow made their way through, he saw soldiers standing guard at the arch's entrance. Riftan presented his ticket and easily entered the building. Ruth, who was about to follow suit, was held back on the shoulder by the guards.

"Hey, are you also a contestant? Show me your ticket."

"I-I'm with that person..."

Ruth called Riftan anxiously from behind, but he continued to stride, pretending not to hear him. Guided by the soldier, he passed through a long, dark-shaded hall. At the end of it there was a large waiting room where men of burly physique gathered. As he entered, everyone's eyes flew to his

direction. Riftan could feel their gazes scrutinizing him and gauging his skills.

He looked carefully at his competitors as well under his hood. About 30 mercenaries gathered at the left side of the room, while the knights resided on the right side, sharpening their blades and polishing their armors. After glancing at everyone in the room, he walked into a corner and plumped down to sit and the men's attention quickly departed from him.

“It seems that a lot of talented knights and swordsmen from all over the world came to compete.”

“The prize is way too valuable, so it will be more competitive than last year.”

“Tch, did you see the matches? We were treated like a side-show. It's a spectacle made specifically for the knights to shine.”

Riftan looked out the window, listening to the mercenaries grumbling. Thousands of people were packed tightly in the stadium, the benches surrounding the arena were all occupied. His eyes traveled around the stadium, looking for a trace of the girl. Then, a man who appeared to be a priest came inside the room with an escort guard.

“The competition is about to begin. Before we start, let me give you a few reminders. This competition is an event involving royals, nobles, and high-ranking officials from all over the world, as well as the Pope. Thus, it must be fair and square. Shall the opponent announce his surrender, the attacks must stop immediately. Using magical blades or weapons is not allowed. It is also prohibited to attack someone who is unconscious, injured serious enough that he can't defend himself, or kill anyone. Assaulting your opponent while he is unarmed is not permitted and excessive atrocities will not be tolerated. This competition was organized in commemoration of the spirit of Sir Uigru and the twelve knights. I hope that all who participate in this competition will show reverence.”

After the priest pronounced the rules of the competition in a solemn tone, he placed the schedule of matches against the wall and exited the room. Riftan checked his turn and then sat by the window.

He would be competing in the fifth match. The knights would be competing only after the battle of the mercenaries, inducing a gossip that the nobles would only start spectating at noon. Riftan frowned despondently and ruffled his hair in frustration. He couldn't stop thinking about why he was doing something so stupid.

“The first match begins! Kyle Sevon, Dermed Eden! Enter the arena!”

Two mercenaries wearing a helmet over their heads walked over to the soldier who called their names and proceeded to the door that led to the arena. After a moment, ear-shattering cheers began filling the air.

Riftan sat with his head leaning against the wall, waiting dazedly for his turn. Those who glanced at him, curious of his appearance, soon stopped paying attention to him.

...What the hell am I doing in a place like this?

Most of his skills were honed from fighting and hunting monsters, not sword-fighting. Although he did exchange swords with knights whom they have had conflict a couple of times, he fought them using the advantage of the terrain and did not hesitate to attempt a surprise attack nor slash his opponent from behind.

He used all kinds of weapons too, from chains, to daggers, to hooks, and rope to damage his enemies. It would be far different from competing only with swords. The uneasy feeling of being out of place never left his worries.

“Riftan Calypse! Cedric Geiron! Enter the arena!”

After about an hour and a half it was finally his turn. Riftan stood up and wore a steel helmet. His opponent was a giant with formidable build and appeared heavily armed with dark steel armor. Riftan glanced at the huge

sword that was strapped to his back. As they walked side by side towards the arena, he flashed his yellow teeth threateningly towards Riftan.

“Well, lookie here. You’re a handsome guy.”

Riftan lowered his helmet’s faceplate and his opponent chuckled resonantly.

“You’re so unfortunate that it is me, Geiron, your first opponent. But don’t fret too much, I’ll be merciful and leave your limbs intact.”

Riftan stared indifferently at the stadium appearing at the end of the tunnel. Flags symbolizing family coats of arms fluttered vigorously in the stands, trumpets and drums rang loudly around the stadium. A vast crowd, consisting of around ten thousand people, cried out for blood in unison. Riftan shed a sarcastic laugh.

Wasn’t this competition made to honor the spirit of Uigru and the twelve knights? It doesn’t seem like noble purposes are running in the crowd’s thoughts.

The reason why people came here despite the expensive admission was simple: to find amusing violent entertainment. Riftan slightly relaxed his stance in reverence.

“Ready in your respective positions!”

The soldier in charge of the tournament shouted and pointed to the middle of the arena. Riftan slowly walked to the indicated area and stood facing his opponent. Amid the tense atmosphere, the soldiers raised their flags high, signaling the beginning of their match.

At the signal, Riftan drew his sword from his waist. His opponent scoffed audibly, mocking his bastard sword and then pulled out the sword from his back. Geiron’s one was wide and its length reached around 6 kvets (180 cm). He had to be a well-known man in Osyria as Riftan could hear the crowd chanting his name.

“Gei-ron! Gei-ron! Gei-ron!”

He pumped his chest and took a deep breath like he was sucking energy from the crowd’s cheers.

“You hear that? I will be the winner of this competition. I’m a real scoundrel who has experienced all kinds of battlefields. Even the knights who are busy kissing the nobles’ asses are no match for me.”

“...”

“I would have let you off the hook if you were smart and announced your surrender, but you didn’t. So, I’ll have to live up to people’s expectations and show them a good match. Well, then. Come on, kid. I’ll give you a special chance to go at me.”

“...If you insist.”

Riftan ran without hesitation. His opponent’s expression changed in an instant feeling the threat of Riftan’s sword flying at a blinding speed towards his head. Geiron immediately swung his claymore in defense but his heavy weapon that weighed much more than Riftan’s bastard sword, bounced off like a twig at contact.

A young look of astonishment was painted clearly on the man’s face. He quickly collected his sword and tried to gather his stance, but it was already too late for him to react to the next attack. Not missing the opening under the man’s arm, Riftan relentlessly thrust his sword into Geiron’s side. His blade pierced through the armor’s gap, penetrating the flesh and muscles as it protruded sharply on his back

“Uck....!”

The opponent gasped violently and opened his eyes widely. Riftan immediately pulled out the sword, dark red blood gushing down the armor. Geiron tried to step back and secure a safe distance between them but Riftan didn’t give him that moment. As he swung his sword near the

opponent's neck, Geiron, who was stumbling while clutching his bleeding side, finally knelt down and exclaimed.

“I, I sur... surrender!”

Their match expired in less than three minutes after the flag signals were raised. The soldiers, who had been standing idly in awe, scurried to blow the trumpets to announce the end of the match. Tremendous roar of cheers erupted from everywhere.

Riftan watched dryly as the priests cast healing spells over the loser and then turned his eyes to look around the stands. The Duke of Croix's coat of arms stood at the top of the stands, next to the seat where the Royal Flag was erected. However, it was difficult to verify the faces there as the distance was quite far and so many people were gathered.

Also, the women wore veils and crowns over their heads which made it more difficult to recognize them. Riftan squinted, then looked down in resignation. As the other mercenaries had said, the high nobles could not be spectating yet. He then trudged out of the arena.

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On that day alone, Riftan competed in four matches. And because all his matches never went over five minutes, he gained the odd title of “One Strike Killer Calypse.” The next day, Riftan scrunched his face as he heard sleazy titles being shouted at him by the crowd of people gathered at the amphitheaters' entrance. From hybrid to dragon hunter, all sorts of nicknames were thrown at him, but the odd title that seemed to glorify him so coolly was the worst and most embarrassing of them all.

“Hey, is it true that you were a famous dragon hunter in Livadon?”

As soon as he entered the waiting room, he received more severe looks than the previous day. While sitting on a bench, ignoring everyone's hostile gazes, a middle-aged man with a tanned face suddenly approached to talk to



him. Riftan frowned as a man, dressed neatly but carrying an air not refined enough to be a knight, sat next to him and gave him a friendly smile.

“I went to the bar yesterday, everyone’s buzzing about you. Rumors have already spread that you were a ruthless monster hunter who caught ten half-dragons by himself.”

“... what about it?”

The man, who blinked as if he were taken aback by his blunt tone, continued to speak calmly.

“I was curious about you and your character, so I came here to find you. From a distance, you appear to look like you’re in your mid-twenties but seeing your face up close, you are younger than I thought. How old could you be?”

Riftan looked at him like it was none of his business. The man smiled, stroking his neatly trimmed beard like he found him interesting.

“You must be terrible at socializing. I’m guessing it will cause a lot of problems when you join a group.”

“...”

“How about your horse-riding skills? It seems that you have been living as a mercenary for so long, but have you ever been to battlefields? Can you ride a horse?”

“... If you don’t have any business with me, please don’t talk to me. I don’t really fancy people who act like they have a close friendship with me.”

Riftan did not hide his displeasure and responded coldly. The man smiled faintly, shrugged, and stood up.

“Excuse me, as I have bothered a person who was just about to compete. Please take my gesture as a sign of support, I’m looking forward to your future performance.”

“ ...”

“Well then, see you next time.”

The man then strode to the area where the knights had gathered. Riftan raised an eyebrow when he saw the man striking a conversation with the knights who were in the competition. He didn't appear to look like a contestant. He wondered if he only poked around him to cheer his colleagues up.

...I see, you're checking out opponents.

A light snort came out of his nose and Riftan turned his attention away from the man. Just then, a soldier called out his name loudly. He grabbed his helmet and stood up. His first match was with the Royal Knight of Arech.

As he took the steps toward the arena, the eyes of his opponent appeared full of disgust. It was like it insulted him that he had a pagan-blooded mongrel as an opponent. Riftan wore his helmet, as he passed through the knight who was giving an icy glare through the gaps. Riftan squinted at the arena surrounded by bright light. Standing in the middle of it, he looked for the Duke of Croix's flag. Then, he turned his head as he heard a belligerent voice speak.

“Hey, you! You're not sincerely after the Knight's Sword, are you?”

Riftan lowered his gaze and the knight wrinkled his eyes with contempt.

“That sword belongs to knights. It's not something that mercenaries like you should covet.”

Riftan, who frowned at his nonsensical words, turned his eyes to the seat where the Pope was. A sword was erected in front of the altar and was surrounded by Holy Knights. Come to think of it, because of that sword, knights from all over the world came to compete. Riftan drew his sword and smirked.

“Are you worried about losing the prize to a mercenary?”

“How dare you...!”

“You talk too much. If you have anything to say, speak with your skills.”

The knight coldly hardened his face and pulled out his sword. “Fine! I’ll explain it to you with a sword!”

Riftan lifted his bastard sword to block his incoming attacks. Their swords clashed and sparks flew out in the air. The man’s face slightly contorted in discomposure. The knight took a step back, thinking that it would be disadvantageous to attack forcibly head on, but Riftan didn’t give him any chance of striking again.

Stupid idiot, how many chances do you think I would give you to wield your sword against me? Once you step back, you’ll die in that moment.

Riftan mercilessly pushed the man’s sword aside, not missing the chance when the knight shifted his weight slightly back. A look of embarrassment passed over the knight’s face.

Riftan swiftly gained his speed and slammed the man’s face with his sword’s handle. The faceplate of the knight’s helmet was crumpled, blood gushing out of the man’s nose like a fountain, but he didn’t stop there. He flipped his knife and swung it towards the knight’s forearm, his blade gleaming blue as he penetrated the armor and embedded it halfway the knight’s thick arm. A shrill groan escaped from the man’s mouth.

“...If you don’t want to lose an arm, declare your defeat.”

The knight’s face was distorted in pain as he glared at him fiercely. Riftan pushed the blade deeper into the man’s arm. Then, the knight who bit his lips like he was swallowing a scream, spoke inaudibly through his gritted teeth.

“I su... surrender.”

Riftan pulled out his sword and fixed his posture, taking a straight stance. Shortly thereafter, the crowd shouted in loud voices, “One Shot Killer

Calypse” echoing from all directions. His face wrinkled in displeasure. When he found out whoever gave him that title, he was going to slap that person across the face.

Even though his opponents were knights, his winning streak continued without fail. Even he himself was surprised, he had always thought it took a big deal to be a knight and he didn’t expect his skills to be this overwhelming.

“The results are certain! How can Sir Calypse, who vanquished a drake, be defeated by a mere human being?”

Ruth gulped down and exclaimed triumphantly. Riftan had only two matches left to win, then he would be the champion of the competition. The wizard, who won handsomely from betting a lot of money on him, was smiling from ear to ear.

“Sir Calypse is invincible! From now on, I will suuuurely follow him around!”

## Chapter 20

At the boisterous declaration of the wizard, Riftan slammed his glass roughly against the table. However, Ruth was so unfazed and delighted that he was even carelessly handing out glasses of ales to the people around the bar.

Riftan stared with narrowed eyes at him, then sighed standing up. As he tried to go up to his room, a drunken man placed a hand on his shoulder out of nowhere and burst into laughter.

“You duel so skillfully! Right now, Balbon is going crazy. The whole city is buzzing over the possibility that a commoner will be the winner after several decades. How does it feel like to be so famous?”

Riftan just frowned at the man and tried to coldly pry his arm away. At that moment, an aggressive voice resounded from the tavern’s corner.

“What a bunch of idiots! A mongrel with a pagan blood will be taking our treasure from us, what’s so good about that?!”

Suddenly, the room became still and quiet, like someone had poured iced water all over everyone’s heads. Riftan’s head turned to the voice’s direction. Three men dressed like guards sat around a small table, drinking. One of them was red-drunken and pointed at him.

“The prize for the competition is the sword of one of the twelve knights of Darian! How can I stay still when a heroic treasure of the western continent falls into the hands of someone who worships some kind of a desert god or a pagan?”

“What did you just say?!” Ruth leapt to his feet, huffing in anger.

“Sir Calypse is not a pagan! I’ve been following him around for over a year and I have never seen him do anything against the doctrine! What are your reasons for saying that?”

“Why would I need proof? It’s already written all over that guy’s face!” The man gestured a hand towards Riftan and snorted loudly. “How does someone who did something evil, such as hunting and selling monster parts, dare stand in front of the Pope?”

“Hey, do you have a problem with people who do that for a living?”

The mercenaries, who had been drinking on one side of the tavern, roared and revealed their gritted teeth. The guard, who was trying to make a point with his arguments, shrugged his shoulders and raised his head again to speak.

“Did I say anything wrong?”

“What a fucking lowlife bastard, are you trying to piss us off?”

A ragged groggy mercenary slammed down his glass of ale and wheezed. As the atmosphere grew more aggressive, the other guards sitting by elbowed their comrade as if to discourage him.

Only then did the man who caused the commotion look around like he had suddenly come to his senses. Riftan, who was silently watching the scene unravel, opened his lips to speak.

“You seem uncomfortable with me winning the competition, so I’ll give you a chance to keep me from winning. If you are able to inflict even a small wound on my body, I will withdraw from tomorrow’s matches. Are you up for the challenge?”

The man shrugged his shoulders visibly and glanced at the sword strapped to his waist. But he kept his mouth shut. Riftan observed him as he wondered if he had the courage to confront him head-on after the publicly announced insults.

Riftan scoffed at the coward man, then turned to climb up the stairs. Ruth hesitated and tried to chase after him, but he shook him off with a bitter gaze: he would only feel more insulted if the wizard tried to comfort him.

It was embarrassing enough for him that he had reacted angrily because of the bullshit that spilled out of the guard’s mouth.

He slammed the door behind him and took off his armor, throwing it to the corner. The blue rays of the moonlight poured into his room through the open window. Riftan gazed at the full moon and then collapsed on the bed.

Suddenly, he felt an uncomfortable tightening and unease in his chest: maybe that was what the girl thought of him too. He had more than enough experience of insults and mockery, but he couldn’t stand it just at the thought of her thinking the same. Riftan rubbed his aching chest and closed his eyes to escape from the unpleasant mood.

The next day, the stadium was filled with more people than the day before. In the waiting room there were only four men left to compete, including him and six other men who attended to the competing knights.

Riftan ignored their scrutinizing glances and sat alone in the corner of the waiting room, sharpening his sword. After a while, a soldier came to call

his name. He wore his helmet over his head and strutted to the aisle leading to the arena. His opponent was a man with a great physique, like that of the mercenary named Geiron. Riftan inspected him with narrowed eyes.

The man was a young knight with curly orange hair, a reddish skin that came from people of the southern region, a thick frame like northern men descendants, and a pair of calm looking eyes that did not much to his vicious physique. The knight gazed down at Riftan and smiled brightly.

“Brother, you’re very skilled, aren’t you? I was itching to meet you since the first day.”

Riftan arched an eyebrow at the frivolous tone that did not fit the image of a knight. The man tapped his sword against his own back and continued to speak.

“I’m telling you, I’m just as aggressive as you are. It’s been a long time since I’ve met a suitable match and I want to enjoy it, so stay alert. Don’t let your guard down, I don’t want this to end so lamely.”

“... For someone who talks a lot about my skills, you don’t seem such a decent opponent.”

“I dislike people who unnecessarily weigh people down as you do.”

The man responded, not willing to lose the argument. As they exchanged taunting words, a loud trumpet suddenly sounded to announce their entrance. Riftan strode into the middle of the arena and stood a good distance away from the knight. His opponent’s spirits quickly changed, like he wasn’t a chatterbox as he showed just a moment before. Riftan was on his toes and kept his stance focused.

Soon, the flag that signified the start of their duel rose high, thunderous cheering echoed from the crowd. The knight certainly did not make a fool out of himself as he swung his long sword at a tremendous speed. Riftan blocked his blow with his sword, a heavy impact resonating in his bones

and he felt a pressure against his shoulder. It was as if he had been hit spot on by a flying bullet.

“Amazing. You were able to block my front attack...”

The man said between gritted teeth as he pushed his sword further and he sounded genuine with his words of admiration. Riftan was equally surprised as he attempted to push the knight back, but the man wouldn't budge. It was the first time since he turned fifteen that he met someone who was nearly as strong as him. He clenched his teeth and forcefully grounded his feet, strengthening his stance.

The knight also gritted his teeth in retaliation. They each knew well that even a tiny mistake or letting their guard down for a moment would mean the end of the match. Moments had passed as they pushed each other with their swords in different angles. Suddenly, the man tensed like a taut bow and changed his stance. He moved at a speed that Riftan would have never predicted coming from a man of his physique.

He narrowly blocked the sword that swung below out of nowhere. However, the man immediately swung his sword again, not leaving a second pass in between. His stance changed so quickly that it was difficult to gain the chance to properly place an attack. Their blades banged against each other, producing sparks and thundering sounds of iron hitting against one another rang in their eardrums.

It's dangerous for this to keep on going.

The sound that came off his blade was alarming. If his opponent's head-on attacks continued, his sword would not be able to bear it any longer. Riftan blocked the intimidating sword that flew towards him with a raging force and looked around sharply for any gaps. The knight's sword was longer and thicker than his. There was no other way to defeat him but to take pertinent risks.

Riftan adjusted his stance, letting his attacks fly at a frightening speed to his opponent's side. The knight also changed his posture, shifting the weight of



his body and swung his sword over his head. Riftan drew his sword from the bottom to block the incoming attack. His blade that gleamed blue narrowly bounced off his opponent's sword that was twice as thick.

He didn't miss the moment when the knight's arm slightly flew up, revealing a gap. He pushed through and went for his head, his opponent hurriedly retrieving the grip of his tremendous sword. However, he was a second too late to defend Riftan's blow.

His bastard sword flanked the opponent's helmet. The man barely managed to block his attack. Although he failed to fatally injure the burly man, he succeeded in disrupting his stance. Riftan didn't hesitate and struck his hands with the hilt of his sword to disarm him and thrust his blade under the gap of his helmet.

A heavy silence fell in the stadium. The man stared at the blade pointing at his throat and declared with a sigh.

"...I'm defeated."

A roaring cheer erupted from the audience. Riftan slowly took steps back and pulled his sword away. The man grumbled while taking off his crushed helmet.

"Damn it, my head is pounding more than when I drank four bottles of ale. Hey, if I was a second late from blocking your attack, my skull would've been shattered. Were you planning to kill me?"

Riftan scoffed and sheathed his sword. "Weren't you planning the same? If I had been hit by one of your attacks, I would've lost a limb."

He responded bitterly, pointing his chin towards his opponent's tremendous claymore. The man only shrugged his shoulders.

"It would be a shame if I let you finish the match in less than five minutes. I have to at least properly scratch your reputation of being a one-strike killer."

Although the knight was defeated by a mere mercenary, it didn't appear like he was deeply humiliated. He did show signs of regret, but he didn't express any anger. His opponent turned towards the direction of the waiting room and spoke coolly.

“Don't you dare lose just because you already beat me.”

Riftan gazed at the knight's inscriptions on his armor, intrigued by his eccentric attitude. There was a symbol of a dragon wrapped with wings engraved on it. He didn't recognize which knighthood he belonged to. For a moment, his eyes squinted and stepped into the waiting room, wondering why that man was so unusual.

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Compared to his first match, the final one ended more easily. Riftan was the grand champion of the competition and climbed onto the podium where the Pope was seated. An elegant old man with a long beard seated at the top center, on his left and right were royals and high nobles of the seven kingdoms.

Riftan immediately found the Duke of Croix among them. He only saw him once from afar, but he clearly remembered the unique dreary atmosphere that he emitted. The man wasn't of great physique. Rather, he was slim but elegant and dressed in incredibly luxurious clothing. His dark reddish-brown hair had faded to a gray color from when he once saw him years back, but his grim, solemn face that gave a ruthless aura didn't change one bit.

Riftan carefully looked at him, then moved his eyes to look to his left and right. There was no sign of the young girl anywhere. There were a few women dressed in fancy dresses sitting near him, but they were all too old to be the girl he knew.

...She probably didn't come.

The girl could still have been too young to attend such an event. Riftan drew his head away, trying to hide his disappointment.

“Get on your knees and show your respects!”

As he stood six steps away from the nobles, a paladin commanded him in an exclaiming voice. Riftan slowly knelt on one knee and lowered his head.

## Chapter 21

After a moment of reverent silence from the crowd, a profound voice spoke.

“You may raise your head.”

Riftan slowly lifted his head at the command. Standing in front of him there was the Pope, unexpectedly tall and imposing. It was hard to guess his age with his white face, pale golden hair, and intimidating dark green eyes under thick eyebrows. He beckoned for the knights standing next to him and then two young holy knights approached, carrying a long sword.

“To you, who now stand here for astonishingly defeating your opponents. As promised, I will reward you with the Knight’s Sword.” The Pope solemnly declared, with a voice reflecting nothing but indifference. “It is said that this sword was in the possession of one of the first knights, Sir Miguel. The hilt of the sword is made with wyvern leather and the blade was crafted by a blacksmith from the Umli tribe, casting steel and adamant.”

Riftan slowly reached out and took the sword. When the unadorned leather scabbard slightly slipped off, a sharp, shimmering blade appeared before his eyes. It was almost unbelievable that a sword in such good condition was made in the ancient times. He looked down at it with awe and admiration, then a stern warning suddenly erupted from one of the knights.

“Sheath the sword right now!”

The paladin pointed the tip of a sword at him and gave him a cold look. Riftan meekly sheathed the sword back in the scabbard. Only then did the pope's monotonous voice continue.

"This competition is a significant event that serves as a way to decide who shall be the owner of the Knight's Sword. Your victory in this composition was accomplished through the will and guidance of God... Please do not tarnish it. Rather, respect the Knight's sword, use it only for honorable causes."

Riftan looked up at him, suspecting that the man was saying those words in a rather sarcastic manner. However, there was nothing in the Pope's eyes but infinite stillness and composure. It was like facing an ancient tree in the shape of a human. Then, he clasped his jewel-studded staff with both hands and rose from his seat, exclaiming reverently.

"May God be with you."

Thunderous cheers erupted from the audience. Riftan gazed down at the sword again, the Pope's words echoing strangely in his head. He now understood the people who begrudgingly opposed, spitting through their gritted teeth that it was not a thing that should be coveted by just anyone. It was too precious and significant just to fall in the hands of a lowly mercenary peasant.

Riftan rose from his position uncomfortably, while the nobles spectating were looking at him with great curiosity, like they were witnessing a rare animal. Then, he climbed down the stairs, following the instructions of the paladin as he ignored curious glances from everyone. People gathered from his left and right, throwing petals as he passed by. Finally, he went through the dark aisle, drawing away from the loud cheers of the stadium.

That day, the competition's winner was given an honorable invitation to the banquet of the nobles, but Riftan ignored it and didn't bother to go. He had no intention of being turned into a spectacle, not to mention he didn't have any clothes to match the occasion. It did cross his mind that the girl might

come to the banquet, but he didn't want to make a fool of himself any longer.

He returned to the inn and rested for a night, then left his room carrying his belongings the next day. Ruth, who was crouching at the top of the stairs, waiting, jumped up and ran to him.

“Heeey! Good Morning, Sir Calypse. Today's weather is perfect for a journey!”

Riftan looked out the hallway's window. The sky was cloudy and gray, and the roads were foggy. He snorted lightly and walked past Ruth as he went down the stairs. The wizard followed naturally after him, cheerfully chattering.

“Did you know that I almost swept all board bets yesterday? Ah! Don't worry. As promised, I will give Sir Calypse a fair share. I'm not going to be shameful and turn back on my words.”

It seemed like nothing would spoil the wizard's good mood that day and Riftan sighed as he left the inn. The chilly morning fog enveloped his body. He swept the bangs piercing his eyes and gazed through the hazy road, wondering where he should go. As he looked around with vague and clueless eyes, he suddenly felt a presence dashing fiercely towards him. Riftan quickly drew his sword, blocking a heavy blow just in time.

“As expected, you have great senses.”

Riftan's eyes narrowed as he stood face to face with the knight he battled before his final match. Although the man seemed to appear genuinely accepting of his defeat before, the next day he came rushing out of nowhere. Riftan sneered and waved his sword at the knight suspiciously.

“Isn't attacking your enemy from behind against a knight's chivalry?”

“Is that so?” The knight blocked his attack, a smirk forming on his lips. “I'm just a newbie who has recently sworn the knight's oath, so I keep forgetting.”

Riftan slightly backed away from him and gripped his sword tightly in his hands.

“You’re the only opponent that I favored during the tournament.”

As soon as the knight finished speaking his words, Riftan flew off the ground to attack. The knight barely blocked his sword that swished like the wind. The ground was carved, and his heavy body was forcibly pushed back a couple of steps. At once, the man’s free-spirited face contorted. “How dare you... were you taking it easy on me?”

“...I just didn’t have intentions of killing you.”

He heard a crackling sound and Riftan immediately adjusted his stance. The style of swordsmanship that he learned from both studying and experience was based on piercing his opponents at their vital points, making them drop dead on the spot, so it was irritating for him to face situations where he had to brandish his sword against a person while consciously restraining himself from cutting his enemy breath.

Riftan deflected the large sword that flew at him at a terrifying speed and swung his sword towards the knight’s neck without any hesitation. At that moment, a chain flew in and wounded around his arm. The knight, who barely avoided having his head roll off his body, quickly backed away from him. Riftan quickly switched his sword to the other hand and looked at the direction where the chains came from. Against the mist stood a slender young man and the middle-aged man who talked to him back in the waiting room.

“What you’re doing is too much, I said we were going to have a talk with him. Why are you wielding your blade against him?”

“I just wanted to have a little fun. I wasn’t satisfied with yesterday’s match.”

The knight who suddenly attacked him groaned as he touched his neck that was nearly cut off. He seemed to be part of the company approaching.

Riftan weighed the situation with his keen eyes, violently pulling the chain that restrained his arm.

The man with the slender physique lost his balance, stumbling at the sudden force. Riftan didn't miss the moment and rushed in to swing his sword at the opportunity. However, the middle-aged man stepped in to block his attack and he gritted his teeth. The man was also skillful and strong.

This is starting to annoy me. He clicked his tongue, looking for the chance to strike again but the man hurriedly spoke.

“Hey! We're not here to look for a fight. Stop it and calm down.”

“That's funny. Does a person who doesn't want a fight, suddenly attack me?”

A deeply embarrassed expression washed over the man's face. He took a step behind and spoke in a more respectful tone.

“I apologize for the rudeness of my subordinate. He's a crazy maniac for fights, and he can't help it when he encounters someone stronger than him.”

Riftan glanced at his gentle face and squinted, turning to the one standing next to him. The young man who threw the chain at him and the knight who attacked him appeared to have no intentions of striking again. Still, there was no way he was going to let his guard down. Riftan kept a distance from them and spoke in a cold, chilling manner.

“What do you want from me?”

“I want you to join our knighthood. I'm here to invite you.”

Riftan smirked, scoffing in disbelief. “That's the worst manner of invitation I've ever received.”

“Well, I guess this guy already had a bad nerve before we even started talking to him.”

The middle-aged man gave a stern warning look at the knight behind him and continued to speak with a sigh. “First, let me introduce myself. My name is Evan Triden, a knight sworn to the allegiance of Whedon’s royal family, a member of the Remdragon Knights. That fight-hungry guy over there is Hebaron Nirta, and the one next to me is Gabel Laxion. Both are members of the Remdragon Knights.”

“...Remdragon?” It was the first time that he heard the name. When Riftan arched an eyebrow, the man smiled softly, confessing meekly. “The Remdragon Knights are not that famous. Mainly, we are active in our duties in the southern region of Whedon. Although our allegiance is sworn to the family, we are more of a knighthood with broader freedom. We were doing a lot of independent activities, so we never really had the opportunity to make a name for ourselves.”

“Or because you guys aren’t really a big deal.”

Riftan muttered cynically. The knight named Gabel raised his head angrily, but Sir Triden kept his composure, grinning without signs of any displeasure.

“I feel sorry that you think of us like that. It looks like you don’t have a very keen eye for people.”

Riftan bit his lips shut. Certainly, Hebaron and the knight in command, who blocked his attack, were very skillful and powerful, they were incomparable to the knights he encountered while he wandered around as a mercenary. He kept his vigilance and spat out his words hard.

“I’m sorry, but I’m not interested in kissing the nobles’ asses. Go find someone else.”

“We do not serve noblemen. Rather we only serve one person, and that’s His Majesty, the King.”

“I don’t think that’s any different.”



“The difference is like heaven and earth. The Remdragon Knights only obey commands from King Ruben the Third. He’s the only one in Whedon who has the authority to give us orders. No other noble will order us.”

Riftan snorted. “Even if what you’re saying is true, will the king of Whedon favor a lowly mercenary who carries the blood of pagans?”

“You don’t have to worry about that. The Majesty seems to fancy you. He’s the one who ordered for us to recruit you into the knighthood.”

Riftan’s eyes widened at the unexpected words. He had been invited by several other lords to join their armies, but it was the first time that he had caught the eyes of a royal. When he started to show a hint of suspicion that they might have an ulterior motive, Sir Triden continued to speak in a calm tone.

“Also, about thirty percent of the Remdragon Knights used to be mercenaries. Hebaron Nirta was also a mercenary in the past. Of course, there are knights who are from noble families, including me, but this doesn’t imply any privilege or status within the knighthood. The ranks are based solely on skills. That’s the Remdragon Knight’s absolute rule.”

“That sounds nice.” Riftan commented frigidly. “You’re saying that it’s possible for nobles to favor commoners and all they have to do is prove their skills? If you thought I would be smitten by that sort of bullsh\*t, you’re talking to the wrong person.”

“What reason is there for me to lie to you?”

The man tilted his head, genuinely puzzled and Riftan’s smirk faded away from his face. As the man said, it was true that he was a nobleman who had no reason to deceive commoners. Living in a world where even liars were ruled by lies, it might have become an impossible thing for him to accept anyone’s word as it is.

Riftan’s face slightly reddened, embarrassed that he acted as if he was someone proud and important. The man came up to him, picking up the

discussion he had stained with profane words and filling it instead with friendly tone and gestures.

“I heard that you have quit from being a mercenary, do you plan on going somewhere?”

“Not really...”

Perhaps the knight had noticed that Riftan’s rough attitude had dwindled and grinned pointing to his armor’s inscription.

“Isn’t it better to entrust yourself somewhere new rather than wander around by yourself? Basically, joining a knighthood is not very different from joining a mercenary corps.”

“The earnings are different.”

Despite his cheeky reply, the man maintained his smile.

“A top-notch monster hunter like you might receive a better pay as a mercenary. But being a knight ensues honor, it gives you the opportunity to build your land and castle when you make a name for yourself.”

## Chapter 22

Riftan paused, glaring fiercely at the man. Evan Triden had a despicably serious expression written on his face. Does he think I am an idiot?

Only a sparse number of knights could own castles and lands. Even nobles were often pushed out of their own estates because of inheritance conflicts, there was no chance for a pagan-blooded immigrant like him to become a lord. Riftan snorted sarcastically and slung his bag over his shoulders.

“You people go and freeze to death trying to build honor yourselves. In any matter regarding that, I’m not interested.”

“Then what exactly made you join the sword competition?”

The man frowned at him like he didn't comprehend Riftan's contradicting words and actions and he felt his cheeks burn. He couldn't admit blatantly that he went through all that trouble just to see the girl of his childhood memories. He stared at the man meaningfully, stating with his eyes that it was none of his business and turned to leave. Then, the scarlet-haired knight, who was quietly listening to their conversation, blocked his way.

"If you let your pride hinder you from the chance of rising in status, you're a complete imbecile."

"...If you don't move, I'll slit you."

"I have no idea why in the world you are so firmly stubborn. Aren't you aware that there aren't many knighthoods who treat mercenaries like us without demeaning them? And even if those knighthoods take you in, they will only make you do the dirty work and throw you away like trash after they've used you."

"Aren't you guys exactly those kinds?"

As he commented with cynical sarcasm, the knight opened his mouth as if to yell something in frustration, but instead he clicked his tongue.

"There's no point in convincing you with words. Come join and see for yourself. You don't have any place to go anyway, right? Brother, you screamed saying being a mercenary makes a better living, but that was back when you were in a mercenary group. There's no idiot who would entrust a wandering swordsman like you with a big sum of money." The knight spat out only the facts and the truth. "Unless you join another mercenary group, you won't be able to make proper money. Given that, it would be better for you to join a knighthood. I guarantee you, once you join us, you'll grow to like it."

"Why should I listen to a man who attacked me out of nowhere?"

Riftan retaliated coldly. The knight laughed, not even showing a sign of shame.

“Let’s put that in the past. I just wanted to see your true skills. The way the duels were conducted back in the competition don’t seem to be of your taste, brother.”

“I don’t have a taste for ambush attacks either.”

“I’ll watch my actions next time.”

There’s no next time. Riftan felt his nerves pounding on the sides of his head and turned away from them. However, as the foggy gray streets came to his view, he began to wonder to himself what in the world he was trying to avoid. The leader of the knights opened his mouth, casting him a contemplative and calm gaze, as if he could read Riftan’s hesitation.

“Probably our approach is too sudden.” He took a step back. “How about we go about this with another option? Try spending three months first as part of the Remdragon Knights. If it isn’t to your liking, you can leave anytime you wish. In any case, if you join the knighthood, you need to undergo an apprenticeship, we’ll take you in as a temporary member.”  
“...what kind of orders will you give me in those three months?”

“Oh, heavens. He’s the world’s most stubborn and cynical man!”

The slender knight lost his patience and exclaimed in frustration. The commander raised his hand as if to restrain him and continued to speak.

“You will not be receiving any orders until you become a pledged knight. Instead, if you accept this offer, I will take you under my wings to learn basic tactics and master horsemanship. Most apprentice knights go through the same process to be pledged as knights.”

“.....”

“Of course, it will be up to you if you’d wish to complete the three months. If you happen not to like the knighthood, you can quit anytime and leave, or stay if you want to become a full-pledged knight. You have nothing to lose.”

“...what makes you want me to join so badly?”

“Let’s just say that your extraordinary skills are extremely coveted.” The man stroked his well-groomed dark beard, a carefree smile displayed on his lips. “Another reason perhaps is that our king is very fond of you. You are a rare jewel. With proper training, there’s no doubt that you can become a great knight. It also seems that the king has decided that it’s best to take you in before another country can snatch you from him.”

Riftan stared intently into the man’s hazel eyes, trying to search for ulterior motives. However, the man did not display anything, rather, it was vague like fog and unreadable.

Riftan tightened his lips. He couldn’t figure out what was making him so cowardly and nervous. As the man said, the offer would benefit him. He was intending to leave Balbon anyway and if he happened not to like the Remdragon knights, he had the choice to leave right away.

“...Fine. I’ll accept your offer.”

A satisfied smile spread across the man’s face. “You thought well.”

Just then the fog and mist gradually faded, the rays of the sun peeking through the clouds. The man turned towards the direction of the great temple and talked.

“Then, I will introduce you to the other members of the knighthood. Let’s head to the inn where we are residing.”

Riftan watched the man’s back and followed him solely. Then, the wizard, who was watching from a distance, followed him. Only then did the knights turn to question Ruth.

”Do you guys know each other?”

“Yes, I am Sir Calypse’s wizard.”

Ruth raised his head and answered stiffly. Riftan glared at Ruth like he had said something that made no sense. Since when did this leech become my wizard?

Uneasiness washed the wizard's young face as he relentlessly tried to shake the men off. Riftan clenched his teeth. He detested how he made him feel uncomfortable.

Damn it... Riftan ruffled his hair back roughly. Sure. At least this guy is reliable, despite bothering me spreading rumors and irritating chatters, he thought to himself as he hesitated, and then finally spat out his words bluntly.

“Yeah, he's my wizard.”

“Delightful. I was looking for a wizard anyway. I'll be considerate and take him in too.”

After the man announced with a joyful voice, the wizard began to speak vainly about his skills. Riftan stomped forward, annoyed at Ruth's voice tattling about how excellent of a wizard he was. Riftan prayed fervently for a good omen as the clouds cleared and the golden sun faintly shone light to every direction.

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Time passed like a raging stream. Riftan was leading his cavalry through the canyons when he heard a sharp howl of a falcon, making him halt. The bird was Agalde, the royal messenger who favored him politely. It flew down the valley gracefully, looking for a support to land on.

Riftan raised his armor-cladded arm. Agalde landed on his arm and clawed at his gauntlet. He calmed the creature down with his deft touch and loosened the pouch tied to its ankles. He took out a small piece of parchment and his eyes read the written lines. Uslin Rikaido approached him, asking him impatiently.

“How's the situation?”

Riftan crumpled the parchment with one hand and replied casually. “All the remnants of the northeastern front were wiped out. We are now ordered to return to Whedon.”

“That means...”

“We succeeded.”

As soon as he finished speaking, around a hundred and forty knights cried loud cheers. Riftan had a faint smile playing around his mouth. It had been half a year since they patrolled the borders eliminating Dristan’s raiders, everyone was eager for the order to finally return to their homeland. Riftan exclaimed in a loud voice.

“Head east! Hurry, join the commander.” Agalde soared vigorously back into the sky, as if it understood his words.

He steered his horse into the biting wind, following suit. As they finally departed from the long canyon, two hundred men of cavalry welcomed their sights, riding over the vast wilderness. Riftan sighed in relief as he spotted the blue flag fluttering in the wind.

“Fortunately, it looks like there weren’t many casualties.”

“If you can be defeated by a bunch of mere bandits, you don’t deserve to be part of the Remdragon Knights.”

Uslin, who stirred his horse next to him, uttered in a proud voice. Riftan had a distant look on his face. It had been four years since he joined the order of the Remdragon Knights and since then the order grew at a frightening pace, reaching a count of more than 400 men. They gained fame being the guardians of the eastern front, drawing the attention of nobles. The second son of Count Rikaido, one of the most prestigious families in Whedon, even volunteered to enlist to the order.

“When we return, we’ll get a few months of rest. Are you planning on staying in Anatol again?”

Uslin Rikaido eyed him sideways and asked. Riftan replied vaguely in a mutter.

“Not sure...”

“How about staying in the capital this time? His Majesty intends to give Sir Calypse the title of a Baron. In order for him to grant that, the backlash of the central jury must be reduced...”

“Are you telling me to tremble before the nobles and obey like a lamb?” Riftan released a scornful laugh. “I apologize, but I have no intentions of doing things out of my taste just to get a title. To me, it’s enough to be ordained as a knight and own a piece of land.”

“Your land is nothing more than a formal grant to Sir Calypse so he could take the post of vice commander. A proper title and a better territory...”

“You’re a bother.”

Uslin pressed his mouth shut with a disappointed expression on his face. Riftan pretended not to notice and steered his horse towards the commander.

“Were you hurt anywhere?”

“How dare you ask me such an insulting question?”

Evan Triden, who commanded the knights, grunted and took the helmet off his head. The falcon who was flying aimlessly in the sky, landed gracefully on his shoulder. The commander threw a piece of meat at Agalde and smiled in a relaxed manner.

“I’m not at that age to be treated like this by you.”

“The symptoms from your last injury still haven’t completely gone away.”

“Well, this much is nothing to me. Sooner or later, I’ll show you that I’m strong and I still have power in me.”



The commander replied firmly, like he was sure of that, and Riftan's tense shoulders relaxed.

"Are we now heading to Drchium?"

"No, we're heading to Croix Castle. The duke has invited us to a monthlong victory banquet."

Riftan stiffened. He often stepped into the Duke's territory as he was involved frequently in its dispute with Dristan, but he always desperately avoided going to the castle. He spoke with a blatant unease in his expression.

"I've left my fief empty for a long time. If the dispute is over, I'd like to be given permission to return to my land."

"Who said the dispute is over? There are still compensations to be settled for damages inflicted and negotiations to be made between Dristan and the Duke. His Majesty's orders are to return only after we've supervised over the negotiations. In any case, we need to stay for a month or so." Triden smiled bitterly as he saw Riftan's unease. "I am well aware that you are not comfortable with the Duke. But you are a knight pledged to His Majesty, the King. If the Duke acts in an insulting manner, I swear to make a formal complaint, so join me just this once."

Riftan didn't avoid Croix Castle because of the Duke's abhorrence. It was a rather different reason that flamed his avoidance, but he couldn't bring himself to explain, so just sighed.

"As you wish, commander."

Triden smiled and patted him on the shoulders. They rode their horses straight to the wilderness, towards the Duke's territory. While they rode endlessly, Riftan felt a lump form in his chest. The strange feeling grew more pronounced as the gates of the territory grew closer.

He gazed up its grayish white walls, clutching the reins of his horse tightly. Not long after becoming a knight, he visited the place by himself, but as soon as the castle gates loomed over him, a strange feeling of foreboding fear rose to his chest. He turned around in vain and ran away.

He still wasn't aware why and what exactly it was that frightened him. Could it be the chance of seeing his stepfather living a miserable life? Or was he afraid that the only memory that made him carry on living would shatter before his eyes like a mirage? He didn't know.

Riftan sneered at himself. He was no longer an innocent, immature boy who clinged onto his memories. It had been so long since he stopped consoling his loneliness by having thoughts of her, and he no longer had the desire to see her. Sometimes, he did feel a strange longing when he saw a field of flowers, but that was all. He was now well aware that his cherished memories were nothing but a mere illusion of his.

It's for the best...

Memories tend to be glorified. Maybe that was the time to wake up from his illusions. Riftan's eyes wandered around the castle manor, steering his horse adeptly through the wide brick road. The farmers who were plowing the fields immediately bowed their heads. He watched them carefully, when the commander turned to speak to him.

"I know that you have an aversion towards nobles, but please be as careful as possible with your manners. As you know, the Duke of Croix is the leader of the eastern nobles. Nothing good will come out of him becoming your enemy."

"There's no use in worrying. That man treats me lower than a human being." Riftan replied in a dry tone. "I can't be his enemy when he doesn't even consider me an equal human as him."

The leader turned his head forward, a bitter expression written on his face.

They crossed the gentle hills at once and arrived at the front of the Crox Castle's gates. The guards opened the gates immediately, as if they were expecting their visit.

## Chapter 23

"Finally! I can eat and drink as much as I want for the coming months."

Hebaron steered his horse behind Riftan's and muttered in anticipation, while he took a deep breath as they entered the castle. It was his first time returning to the castle grounds after nearly 10 years. Every time he passed by a familiar scene, old memories sprang up in his head. He gazed at the neatly lined shrubs and bright blooming flowers along the castle's orderly pathway. As they passed through its beautiful and vast garden, the Duke of Croix's castle emerged.

"I've only heard famous stories about the Duke's castle. Truly, it's incredible."

Even Uslin, who came from one of the most prestigious noble families in Whedon, exclaimed in admiration as he trailed his eyes over the splendid fortress. They climbed down from their horses and handed the reins to the servants and orderly went up the marble stairs leading to the entrance. As they entered through the arched doors that were at least 20 kvets (about 6 meters) high, a golden hall alit with thousands of candles appeared before their eyes.

Riftan lifted his head, his eyes wandering the surroundings. Everything in that hall seemed to be the epitome of all the luxury people could imagine. A gigantic chandelier bejeweled with white crystals sparkled and hung from the arched ceiling, hundreds of glass windows surrounded the hall, and golden armors lined the plaster white walls. He was skimming them through with a half-exhausted expression when a haughty voice echoed.

"I heard the news of your victory. You have been through a lot of hardships." The Duke of Croix slowly sashayed down the stairs, accompanied by his guards. "The Royal Knights arrived early last night and

are currently resting. I shall grant all of you a room too so you can rest comfortably.”

“Thank you for your hospitality.”

Triden marched forward and greeted politely. The Duke of Croix looked at him as if to acknowledge the man’s sincerities and nodded at his servants.

“Bring the guests to their rooms.”

As soon as the man released his orders, dozens of servants rushed down the stairs and the knights followed them. As they crossed the great hall, a group of ladies were glancing at them from the second-floor balcony, giggling among themselves.

Are they the wives of the knights who came to attend the banquet? Riftan questioned inwardly and frowned at the way they were looking at them like a spectacle. At that moment, a woman standing at the end of the hallway caught his attention.

Riftan stopped in his tracks. He couldn’t see her face clearly as she hid in the dark shadows, but he was able to recognize her hair that was the color of a deep red wine. He swallowed dryly, his throat suddenly tightening. As he unconsciously moved towards her, the woman’s expression turned into bewilderment and hid behind a pillar.

“Sir Calypse? What’s the matter?”

Gabel Laxion looked at him curiously as he stiffly stood with a puzzled expression on his face. Riftan barely came to his senses and turned around.

“...It’s nothing.”

It could or could not be her, either way it shouldn’t matter to him. Riftan took a step forward, groaning at himself, who still clung to memories of 10 years before. However, as he went to the room to rest, he couldn’t keep his agitation and his nerves down.

He ruffled his hair angrily and pushed the windows wide open. The sun was setting in the dusk, the landscape that panned out in front of him was the vast backyard where he used to pull carts full of horse dung or firewood. At that moment, it occurred to him how his life had changed so dramatically. Back when he ran away from that place, it never passed his mind that he would someday be returning there as a knight.

“May I come in for a while?”

As he was immersed in his thoughts, the voice of the commander sounded from outside the door. Riftan slowly opened the door for him. Triden, who was now dressed for an occasion, looked at him from head to toe and sighed.

“I knew this was going to happen. What in the world are you wearing?”

Riftan looked down at his outfit and squinted. His dark blue tunic, black pants, and high boots made of cow leather were his cleanest and most proper outfit. He arched an eyebrow at the commander, wondering what seemed to be the problem.

“Were you planning to attend the banquet dressed like that?”

Riftan leaned against the doorpost and sighed.

“I’m not planning to go. Don’t you already know that I feel uncomfortable in such situations?”

“Calypse, it’s a victory banquet. Ultimately, you are the hero of this victory. You beheaded Rudgal, who is the leader of the bandits.” “I don’t think the one hosting this banquet has the same thoughts.”

The commander had a firm expression at his cynical reply.

“I’ve told you several times that I will be handing over the command of the knighthood to you. This decision is in line with the will of the members. In

order for you to succeed to my position without any propositions, we have to please the eyes of the nobles. I can't yield for you today."

"I am not suited to be the commander. There are others who have better status than me..."

"Now, are you trying to break the ultimate rule of the knighthood?"

Triden retaliated with a harsh tone. Riftan bit his lips shut. It is the unwritten rule of the Remdragon Knights to base their ranks thoroughly on skills alone. Even if he himself refused to take the position of the commander, the other members wouldn't easily agree. Riftan sighed and eventually let Triden enter his room. "What do you want me to do?"

"First of all, we need to get you dressed."

He grinned and beckoned to the servant who was waiting in the hallway. Riftan let out a groan as he gazed at the pile of clothes in the boy's arms. Triden patted his shoulder with a sturdy palm and laughed slyly.

"Although you are hopelessly unsociable, you have a handsome face that catches people's eyes. You're going to have to learn to use your cards to your advantage."

"Are you saying you want me to be your face-man?" Riftan frowned fiercely.

The commander snorted and pushed colorful clothes to his face. "You have a bad habit of twisting words negatively. It's not humiliating for one to dress up nicely and show off his charm to the ladies."

"Just leave that job to Nirta instead! His eyes would light up gladly and act the part right away."

Triden let out a sigh. "I can't handle him. The other day, he proudly flirted with a lady in front of my eyes. Then, the young lady's fiancée charged at us, going berserk. It could have been a troubling affair. If only I could, I would not let him step into the banquet hall today."

“Then Rikaido...”

“Calypse.” The commander said his name in a low, authoritative voice. “Don’t make me repeat it: I can’t yield for you today. You are the top contributor to guarding the eastern front, the eastern nobles are bound to pay tribute to you. I will be using this opportunity to make your name known and engraved to the minds of the conservative nobles.” The man handed him silk socks with a firm expression. “So, stop talking and just wear it.”

In the end, Riftan was unable to overcome the commander’s persistence and wore the shiny socks that pulled up to his calves and wore a robe that was decorated with colorful embroidery. As if that wasn’t enough, the commander held out a hat that had colorful feathers. Riftan frowned with a disgusted expression.

“I’d rather hang myself than wear that on my head!”

The leader placed the hat on the bed, defeated. Riftan breathed out nervously and glanced disapprovingly at his reflection on the mirror. He felt like a clown dressed up like that, but Triden nodded joyfully, satisfied with how he was dressed.

“You don’t look less than any other nobleman when you’re dressed like that. Now, all that’s left to do is to trim your rude speaking off your tongue.”

“...I’ll try to keep my mouth sealed as much as possible.”

Riftan nodded bluntly and took the cloak that the servant was holding out and draped it over his shoulders. The night had fallen from outside his windows. He then followed the commander to the banquet hall and turned his eyes away. Every corner of the castle shone brightly, he wondered how many candles were burning for that feast alone. As he thought of nonsensical things, the commander tapped him on the shoulder and issued another stern warning.

“Now, I will be introducing you to the eastern nobles one by one. I’m telling you again and again, please watch your manners and be polite.” “I’ll do my best.”

Riftan sighed and stepped into the banquet hall. At that moment, everyone’s eyes flew to him. He barely managed to keep his face straight at how people looked at him like he was a rare spectacle. Hundreds of nobles were gathered in the hall and the commander started to introduce them one by one. He wondered if he really had to grace every eye of all those nobles.

As he desperately searched for a way to escape the exhausting introductions, the Duke of Croix who was standing in the middle of the banquet hall caught his eyes. To be precise, it was not exactly him that caught his eyes, but the woman donning a dark green dress standing next to the duke.

Riftan felt like someone hit him in the head out of nowhere. He had thought of the possibility of meeting her, but he was determined not to attach any deep meaning into it. Nevertheless, the moment his eyes laid on the red-haired girl, his head instantly went blank.

He stared and skimmed his eyes through her figure. Her height would reach around his chest, so she was still tiny, but considering how she used to reach only up to his waist, she had grown quite a bit. Riftan’s throat felt dry and he pulled the robes that felt like it was tightening against his neck.

“It would be good to formally say your greetings to the Duke Croix.” Perhaps feeling his sudden agitation, Triden warned lightly.

Riftan was barely able to nod his head. The commander proudly walked across the banquet hall, approaching the duke.

“My deepest gratitude for hosting such a sumptuous banquet, Duke Croix.”

“I was only doing what is proper to honor the heroes who defended this land, viscount.”

The duke gracefully turned towards them and raised his chin audaciously.



Riftan, who forgot how to breathe, watched intently as the girl slowly turned towards their direction.

## Chapter 24

The sound of him swallowing his saliva resonated loudly in his ears as he was overwhelmed with agitation. He rubbed his damp palms against his trousers and struggled desperately to not stare at the girl too hard, but no matter how hard he tried, his eyes were glued to her like a magnet naturally attracted to steel.

His eyes skimmed through her meticulously braided hair rolled up to a bun, her long slender neck, her narrow shoulders and slim waist, accentuated by her flowing silk dress.

The little girl in his memories always had disheveled hair. Often, her hair was braided only into one or two parts and would often swell up like a cloud, as it got tangled with branches and bushes. He wondered if this regal-looking woman and the girl who dragged a rugged pouch collecting pebbles were the same person. Triden gently spoke as Riftan stared blankly with an awe-struck expression.

“The lady standing behind you is?”

“Excuse me for the late introduction. She’s my daughter, Maximillian.”

The Duke of Croix urged her to step forward. Only then the girl who was constantly looking at the floor, raised her head. Riftan felt a strange quiver run down his spine. Although she had a face similar to the girl in his illusions, she had grown differently. Traces of childhood were evident on her round forehead, cheeks, and narrow chin but brown freckles that he had never seen before sprinkled the lower-half region of her nose bridge and cheekbones, just like golden dust. Her eyes were still big and gray like a winter’s lake but now it had an unfamiliar sadness in them.

He frowned, curious to why she was wearing such a dark expression. And then, the moment she laid her eyes on him, a clear look of fear tinted her eyes, together with a half-lost expression on her face. Riftan’s whole body stiffened in shock.

He never anticipated that she would be afraid of him. After all, she was a girl who fearlessly charged towards a monster her size. However, she was eyeing him with terror, her shoulders visibly shaking, like she was looking at a hideous monster. The look in her eyes struck his heart like a dagger.

“It’s an honor to meet you, miss. My name is Evan Triden.”

The commander held out one hand and gave her a soft, reassuring smile. The girl hesitantly reached out and placed her hand against his. The man then politely bowed and kissed the back of her hand.

“This young man standing beside me is my subordinate, Riftan Calypse.”

He introduced her to Riftan, who was standing so stiffly.

“...It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“P...p-pleasure to meet you.” Her gaze turned downwards, and she murmured in a trembling voice. Her voice was so soft that it would have been difficult to understand her words without paying it full attention.

Riftan was drowning in an unimaginable despondency: the fantasies he dearly cherished for nearly a decade crumbled like a sandcastle before his eyes. He had depended on those memories of her, using it as a will to live, yet she couldn’t even look him in the eyes. He felt like the world’s biggest idiot.

Indeed... it would have been better if we didn’t meet again.

Illusions should have been left as illusion and memories should be nothing more than just memories. The Duke Croix’s voice suddenly resounded as he was being devoured by the emptiness he felt.

“Child, you look pale. Are you still not feeling well?”

The girl’s back hunched and then she slowly nodded her head. A soft sigh escaped from the duke’s lips.

“Now that you have finished greeting the guests, you may go back to your room so you can rest.”

The girl glanced once at Riftan and Triden, then bowed, turning slowly to leave. The duke, who was staring at her with an anxious look, casted a dry smile towards the commander.

“I apologize for the rudeness. She’s a reserved child, so she doesn’t feel comfortable in noisy places like gatherings.”

“Isn’t she at the right age to go to the royal palace?”

“I’m the one who refuses to send her.” The Duke shook his head and leaned back like he was a generous father. “Although she greets the nobles at certain occasions, it worries me how she is reluctant to appear in front of people. I have unknowingly spoiled her out of habit because I felt sorry for her since she lost her mother at a very young age.”

The man stroked his beard and lightly clicked his tongue. “I am aware that I should be strict with them as they grow older, but I keep pampering them without realizing it.”

“You have a great affection for your daughter.”

“As you know, I only have two daughters. I’m determined to do everything in my power to make them live as they please.”

Riftan followed her distant figure with his eyes as the conversation transpired. Although he repeatedly told himself that he was holding on to a mere illusion, his eyes trailed her, and he felt like he just lost a life-long cherished treasure. He shook his head, struggling to get rid of his bitter feelings.

Soon, the Duke of Croix chatted with other people while Riftan mechanically greeted more eastern nobles. Afterwards, he sat alone in a corner and gulped glasses of wine one after another. However, instead of getting drunk, his thoughts only got clearer.

He despised the fact that he felt utterly disappointed. Feeling disappointment only meant that he expected something else. What did you expect? Did you expect her to smile and recognize you? Or were you expecting her to blush and be mesmerized with your appearance? He smirked at himself. It was time to break free from his immature fantasies. Even though he held a title, he was still a lowly, half-blooded pagan and illegitimate child, while she was the daughter of a venerable duke.

Riftan drank endless glasses of wine and returned to his room, falling to sleep in an instant. The next morning, a throbbing headache stung him the moment he opened his eyes. He muttered nasty profanities and clutched his head. Usually, he avoided drinking alcoholic drinks, so he had never experienced having a hangover. He groaned at the unfamiliar pain and drank a full glass of cold water. However, the pain wasn't chased away. A dull ache pestered his eyelids, running all the way to his temples.

“F\*ck...”

What the hell is this feeling? Riftan violently clicked his tongue and washed his face with cold water, then changed his clothes in an attempt to lift his spirits. The weather was sunny, opposite to his disgruntled mood. He trudged out to the garden maze and looked up at the cloudless sky with displeasure.

As he left the castle and crossed the wide hills, a rundown hut caught his eyes. He was stopped in his steps and his throat felt like there was a thorn stuck in it. The hut was relatively clean and maintained, proving wrong his expectations that it would have been long abandoned. Riftan searched its surroundings and peeked into the dark hut through the open window. There was a small vegetable garden in the backyard and around three or four chickens roamed inside the small fence.

He wondered if his stepfather still lived there. No, maybe someone else started living here after my stepfather left.

Either way, he couldn't verify for himself right away. He looked around again at the empty cabin and hesitantly turned around. At that moment,

something suddenly flew towards his face. Riftan blocked and grabbed it. A skinny boy holding a plow used for the fields stared at him with a fierce look.

“What are you snooping around for, trying to steal?!”

Riftan looked down at the boy who came out of nowhere. The boy’s face was red as he huffed, not appearing to be afraid of him.

“You were planning to steal all of my father’s chickens, aren’t you? I knew it!”

“...do you live here?”

The boy tried to pull the plow back from Riftan’s grip and whined, raising his little chin.

“Yes, this is our house! So, you can’t take anything from here without my permission!”

“I didn’t come here to steal.” Riftan replied in a low, calm voice and bent his knees to observe the child’s scruffy face. His beaked brown eyes looked familiar. “What is your father’s name?”

“Why should you have to know that?”

The boy exclaimed vigorously and arched an eyebrow. The child suddenly felt threatened by his close proximity and stepped back, whimpering. Riftan spoke in the most subdued voice he had.

“I owe the man who lived here. I came here today to settle that debt.”

“This is our house. It is ours even before I was born.”

“What’s your father’s name?”

The boy hesitated for a while but soon replied. “Novan...”

That was his stepfather's name. Riftan asked again with a calm tone. "How old are you?"

"...Eight years old."

The boy replied in a less vigilant tone, feeling the atmosphere change. Riftan slowly stood up and glanced at the hut he ran away from.

That house was filled with such bitter and terrible memories that it made him wonder how his stepfather was able to start a new family. It was hard for him to imagine he did that, as he himself could not stand to spend a night there and ran away.

"...How's your father's health?"

"He grumbles everyday about how his back aches but he's healthy. It is my mother who is sick."

The boy had quickly recovered from being suspicious of him and started to reveal more information. Riftan frowned at the news. "...Your mother is sick?"

"She has been sick since the day she gave birth to my younger sister. And yet, she goes out to work in the fields everyday while carrying my sister on her back." The little boy dropped his plow and looked at him with curiosity. "Are you my father's friend?"

Riftan didn't know what to respond so he bit his lips. He felt relieved knowing that his stepfather wasn't living a miserable life, but he oddly felt bitter inside and it disgusted him. The man who was stuck with his mother and him for twelve years finally got a real family of his own: it was something he should be pleased with.

Riftan pulled the pouch hanging from his waist and held it out to the boy. Inside the pouch was at least forty gold coins.

"As I said before, I owe your father a great deal. Give this to him."

“Just how much did my father lend you? Without having much money... “  
The boy took the pouch and looked inside it curiously. He stopped the boy from taking the gold coins out and warned him carefully.

“There is enough money that even your mother and younger sibling can live comfortably for the rest of their lives. If you show others that money, they might take it away.” The little boy protected the heavy leather pouch and hugged it to his chest, looking genuinely frightened. “You have to hide it carefully inside your house and give it to your father once he returns. Can you do that?”

“Y-yes...”

The boy nodded understandably and immediately ran into the hut. Riftan looked at the boy’s figure, then slowly turned around. As he was about to leave, the boy poked his head out of the hut’s door.

“Mister, what’s your name? Can I tell my father who came here to visit?”

“...he’ll know if you tell him it was Riftan.”

“Are you not going to meet my father?”

Riftan shook his head and strode away. He tried to go back to the castle, but he was anxious as he entrusted an excessively large amount of money to a child, so he just hid in the woods and watched the hut in secret.

He waited for quite a long time. Finally, a man with a hunched back walked up the hill with farm tools strapped to his back. Riftan silently gazed at the man whose face was burned by the sun and whose hair was thinning. As if the boy had been waiting all this time by the window, he immediately went out of the house and ran to his father like an arrow.

Riftan turned around and swiftly walked towards the castle. Strangely, his chest felt empty. Wasn’t it him who left so heartlessly? And yet, why was it that in the corner of his heart he expected for it to be a place he could someday return to? Now that there was nothing left for him there, why did he feel so reluctant to visit? A sarcastic laugh came out of his mouth.



## Chapter 25

Were you expecting that everything would stand still and wait for you? If you had slightly thought as such, then you are nothing more but an arrogant imbecile.

Riftan rubbed his throbbing forehead and walked a little faster. All he yearned for right now was to return to his room and rest. He wanted to sleep and not open his eyes for at least two days.

However, upon arriving at Croix Castle, the urge to rest suddenly disappeared. He also felt that it would only trouble him more if he ran into his colleagues and the commander. Although he trusted them, he had no intentions of showing them his weak side.

He circled the garden and started walking along the deserted forest path. The throbbing pain in his head gradually subsided as he passed along the shortcuts he used to take when he carried charcoal or firewood on his back when he was a child.

He rested against a tree, leaning his back against its marvelous trunk, taking a moment to catch his breath. Suddenly, he realized where he actually was, his face hardening. Riftan sighed in despondency, gazing at the grayish-white outbuilding that peeped through the dense forest. He couldn't believe he wandered all the way to that place. He trudged out of the forest, his shoulders drooping like a man weary from a long journey. The garden that he had seen countless of times in his illusions drew closer and closer.

However, it appeared completely different from how he remembered it. He frowned seeing the lonesome scenery: the flower bed that was lush with various kinds of flowers was now nothing but barren ground with growing weeds, surrounded by a strange silence.

...you don't visit here anymore?

He bent down to pick up a dead flower, crumbling its dry petals with his fingertips. Perhaps she eventually came to neglect this place ever since she

stopped staying in the outbuilding. Riftan laughed at the fact that even the place where his illusions took place was all bare. He stood blankly for a moment, rubbing the back of his head, then slowly turned away.

At that moment, he heard a shrill laughter coming from somewhere. Riftan turned his head, but he didn't see anyone else in the garden. He stood blankly amidst the bleak wind, sensing a presence from a distance, and quickly moved to its direction.

As he circled the annex, his eyes found Maximillian Croix, crouching on the ground and playing with a big cat. He stood hidden, watching her. The girl was wearing a modest reddish-brown dress that was far from the dress she donned at the banquet. Her hair, which had been tightly braided and rolled up to secure every strand, was now naturally disheveled and flowed gently over her shoulder. Her ivory pale face had a young reddish blush.

A sharp pang made its way on his chest. The scene before his eyes was similar to his illusions, but he didn't want to fall for her again like a complete fool. Riftan hurriedly turned around, anxious to be caught. Suddenly, an almost incomprehensible voice stopped him from his tracks.

“Y-you... Do you like me...?”

As if he was held back by a powerful force, Riftan couldn't refrain from looking back again. She was speaking to the cat, which was lying by her feet, and she wore a solemn face. It was a funny sight, but strangely, he didn't feel like laughing.

A smile crept to Maximillian's lips as the cat stretched and rubbed its face against the hem of her skirt, like he understood her question. She carefully cradled the cat carefully in her arms and whispered to it like a playful child with a doll.

“T-then... a-always... will you stay by my side?”

She asked, with a startlingly unstable and pitiful voice. Riftan held his chest, feeling a numbness in the corner of his heart. The loneliness that she

emitted was so clear that it felt like he could touch it with his hands. At that moment, he felt like she was someone closer than anyone else. He looked helplessly at her vulnerable face, then fled.

Looking up will only make you miserable. His stepfather's voice echoed in his ears like he was having an auditory hallucination. Why did I forget? I shouldn't have come here. I shouldn't have come to see her. I shouldn't have known that she's still lonely.

Riftan grazed the edge of his lips with his trembling hands. The girl had the softest part of his heart. He shouldn't have gone there and made himself aware of how easily she could capture his feelings with a single glance. The girl was rooted deep within his core before he had the chance to fall in love with anyone else, before he was able to defend his feelings with a hard shell. And yet, he feared that his only comfort and paradise would shatter.

Riftan violently kicked the ground, raging out of unfamiliar reasons.

What is it to me whether she's lonely or not? He couldn't understand why he felt that way to a woman who lived in a luxurious castle under the protection of a wealthy father.

Did you forget the frightened eyes she looked at you with? Stop, now. Until when will you dwell on such fallacious memories?

He fled from the scene, shaking the turmoil of confusion that battled in his heart.

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Since then, he did not dare step near the outbuilding of the castle grounds and avoided attending the banquets as much as he could. However, her presence continued to spring his nerves like he had a thorn under his fingernails. It was unbelievable how he was able to encounter her so easily in such a vast castle.

He could effortlessly distinguish the sound of her footsteps no matter how far away she was, and he could understand all of her words, not missing a single one of them even if it was uttered in a whisper: all his senses seemed to be geared towards her existence. Merely looking at her from a distance made his whole being anxious.

Riftan was aware of how conscious he was towards her, but he had no way of controlling his own reactions. He was at his wits' ends, dealing with the unfamiliar sensations he was feeling.

Back when he was young, he never thought of her as someone he would desperately covet. When he had thoughts of her, he felt a gentle affection. Whenever he saw her smile, his heart would feel warm. But what he felt now was incomparable to then, his feelings were intense and passionate to the point of being painful. When he thought of her, he didn't feel comfort like he did before. Instead, his heart felt half-crippled and a strange yearning rose within him. Once, he dressed up as dashing as he could with the intention of talking to her, but it ended up being in vain when she stayed for only a few moments to show her face and immediately left the banquet.

He felt like an idiot, fixing himself in front of a mirror for an hour just to end up that way. Riftan asked Hebaron in a nonchalant tone, trying his best to hide his disappointment.

“Hey, do I look that terrifying?”

Hebaron, who was chugging a finest glass of wine like water, looked at him with widened eyes. Shortly, there was a hint of teasing on his face.

“I wonder which pitiful lady had goosebumps when she saw the vicecommander?”

Riftan managed to keep a composed expression. Even if he had to die, he didn't want to admit that he almost caused that. As soon as Hebaron approached him, Riftan tried to erase the memories of how Maximillian had looked at him. Then, he spoke in a sarcastic manner, his voice quiet. “The commander's pestering me to be sociable.”

“So that’s why you’re dressing up so prettily these days?” Hebaron grinned, eyeing his outfit from head to toe. Riftan gripped the sword tied to his waist.

“Do you want to die?”

Hebaron hunched his burly shoulders ridiculously, exaggerating his fright and wearing a false terror on his face. “The problem is not the vicecommander’s appearance. The problem is your impassiveness! All you have to do is joke around, be talkative, and smile! Basically, people won’t get scared of us when men with physiques like us smile as much as we can. I’m wearing an arrogant face, yet people don’t shy away from me, right?”

Riftan kept his mouth shut as Hebaron’s words made sense. What he said would have been enough but he didn’t stop there. He continued to speak, criticizing Riftan. “Also, you have a grim aura surrounding you. When you stare at me, even if you don’t say a word, I get shivers. Who would dare approach someone who stands in the middle of a ballroom with sharp blade-like eyes like he’s in the middle of a battlefield? Even well-trained knights fear that, no wonder the ladies shrink away from you.”

His words only meant that it would be impossible for her to look at him without being frightened unless someone else’s souls possessed his body. For the first time, Riftan felt envious of the bear-like fellow. Hebaron was about half a head taller than him and weighed more than him but he could naturally converse with anyone as he pleased. Riftan took a sip of wine, drowning his bitterness.

“Come to think of it, you’re deep in your thoughts, vice-commander.” Hebaron said out of nowhere, a satisfied expression painted on his face.

“Are you finally to take over the position of being our commander?”

“...don’t jump to conclusions.” Riftan spat bluntly and stood up. Hebaron’s thick eyebrows furrowed as he appeared so determined to blatantly refuse the position.

“Most of the men who joined the Remdragon Knights enlisted because they admired the vice-commander. Even Uslin Rikaido, who had on offer to be a Royal Knight, chose to join us instead. Everyone thinks Riftan Calypse will be the commander! Until when will you dwell on your past origins?”

“...Don’t make it sound so easy.”

Riftan gave him a fierce glare. Hebaron Nirta was born from a fallen aristocratic family and had distinct features of a Whedon. Even though they both used to be mercenaries, he had a better background than him, who had the lowest of the lowest status. It annoyed him how the guy talked about their origins so casually.

“There are a lot of conservative nobles in Whedon. There’s no point in deliberately degrading yourself.”

Hebaron snorted. “We are heretics anyway so no matter what the nobles say about us, we just need to follow our own set of rules.”

Riftan felt riled up with Hebaron’s ignorantly simple logic and left the crowded banquet hall feeling disgusted. It wasn’t the time to be pathetic and desire a woman, it was ridiculous of him to act as such when there were other important things to think about. He removed the ornaments hanging from his neck and violently ruffled his well-groomed hair.

The tedious victory banquet was supposed to be over within the week. Once they left Croix Castle, he had to forever bid farewell to the idiot who dressed up like a clown just to get a girl’s attention. Riftan gazed at the dark sky and turned to the direction of his room.

## Chapter 26

From the following day, Riftan didn’t even dare to go near the banquet hall. Seeing him wield his sword in the training grounds from dawn to sundown, the commander sighed in resignation.

“Yeah, I’ve been thinking that you’re strangely well-behaved these past few weeks. Are you feeling a bit bored already?”

“We’re leaving for Drakium any time soon. I have to repolish my arm movements.”

Ritan muttered bluntly and swished his sword down from the air. Triden, who was watching him with his arms folded, came down from the stairs and drew the sword out from the scabbard tied to his waist.

“Good. I’m also itching to duel. It has been a long time, shall we?”

Riftan glanced at him, sighing as he set his bastard sword down. He had been practicing non-stop for five hours now and was drenched in sweat. He wiped the sweat away from his forehead and picked up the cloak he had taken off earlier.

“Please don’t. I have no intention of spraining your arm further.”

“Aigoo, I guess the vice-commander is afraid to be humiliated.”

The vice commander looked at the balcony overlooking the training grounds and shook his head. Riftan followed his gaze, frowning as he saw noble women sitting near the windows. During the day when there were no banquets, it seemed like their routine was to watch the knights duel, take leisurely strolls, or enjoy tea parties. It was unusual for Riftan though, who had never been idle his entire life.

“Serving the ladies is the true duty of the knights. I’ll grant these beautiful ladies an entertaining duel.”

“...you’re speaking silly again.”

Riftan, who was shaking his head at the man’s absurdity, suddenly stiffened. Maximillian Croix, who was sitting by the fifth-floor window, caught his eyes. Even though she was a distance away, he could certainly sense her curious gaze. Suddenly, his throat felt dry.

“... Fine. Let’s pass time and hang for a while.”

“I really fancy your arrogance.” Triden took off his coat and wore a light armor, adjusting his stance and giving him a calm smile. “It’s worth taking a shot.”

Riftan scoffed and raised his sword again. Triden whirled his sword on one hand and ran towards him at a blinding speed. Soon, the sound of their blades clashing reverberated the air.

Ting! Ting!

Riftan blocked his ferocious attacks in the air, suppressing the urge to see and make sure that Maximillian was still watching him. He could duel all day long if it would engrave a strong impression in her petite head.

It was becoming gradually annoying for Triden to fret on his own when his opponent wasn’t really putting a single care.

“Where’s your focus?”

Sensing that Riftan’s attention was somewhere else, Triden delivered a heavy blow. Riftan’s body was on edge as it picked up the incoming menacing attack. He narrowly blocked his attack and swung his sword rather forcefully to counterattack. Suddenly, Triden’s lips hardened to a thin line, and his reflexes became noticeably dull. Riftan came to realization and quickly stepped back.

“Damn it, I didn’t mean to strain your arm.”

Triden looked at him with displeasure as Riftan hurried to place his sword down and gazed worriedly at his forearm.

“Who said it’s over? I can still go on with the duel.”

“Will you let this stupid duel keep your arm from recovering?”



Riftan retaliated angrily, annoyed at himself. He would not be able to forgive himself if the commander ended up being injured because he was trying to show his strength and skills in front of a woman. The commander's arm grew weaker than before due to being subjected to months-long expeditions. Riftan looked seriously at the commander's wrist and lowered his stance.

"It would be better if you go to the wizard and have it cast with a recovery spell."

"Hey, you're becoming more and more tedious by the day." Triden grumbled and sheathed his sword back into the scabbard by his waist. "I am a knight so stop treating me like a weak old man."

"It's my duty as the vice commander to look out for my superior. If you're not satisfied with my standpoint, then you should recover from your injury as soon as possible."

Riftan dragged his stubborn commander to visit a wizard and receive healing magic. However, despite seeing Triden's swollen wrist go back to its normal state, it still didn't make him feel better. He was fed up with himself for making mistakes whenever he lost his self-control.

"Stop frowning like that." Triden tapped him on the shoulder and sighed. "I'm the one who asked you to duel, right? I would be offended if you had gone easy on me."

"...duels are supposed to be light and relaxed." Riftan retorted and swept his hand from his shoulder. Triden shrugged and picked up his cape.

"You were always on the battlefield since you became a knight and you've never had a rest this long. It's no wonder for you to be uptight."

Riftan felt his cheeks growing hot. The leader seemed to have noticed how restless he was acting those days. Triden stared at him with keen eyes and spoke.

“But at least show up to the banquet tonight. Tonight is the last banquet. We have been so far granted hospitality; it would only be proper to express our gratitude.”

“...are the negotiations for the war damage compensation over?”

Triden nodded. “Now it is time to head for the royal palace and submit a report. You’ll be free for the time being.”

It was only right to feel relief after hearing those words, but Riftan instead only felt loneliness and emptiness flood inside him. He uttered his words indifferently, trying to shake off his feelings.

“It’s good to hear that.”

The commander instructed him to attend the banquet repeatedly and then left the infirmary. That evening, Riftan stepped helplessly into the banquet hall, wearing a stoic expression. Even if the commander didn’t urge him to attend, it would have been hard for him to resist the temptation of catching at least a glimpse of the girl that day. That day would be the last, last night he could put an end to this confusion.

His eyes wandered around the magnificent hall, determination burning in his heart. As that evening was the last day of the banquet, the hall was decorated more lavishly than ever. A lute melody echoed in the vast golden hall, on its side there were long tables lined with bountiful fragrant wines, greasy food, and fresh fruits.

The nobles sitting by were all dressed in luxurious clothes made of expensive fabrics. At the head of the long tables sat Duke Croix who donned a silk and fur outfit. Sitting beside him there was Maximillian Croix, dressed in a stylish velvet dress. Riftan struggled desperately to avoid gawking at her for too long, asking one of the servants for a drink. The commander, who sat opposite him, gave him a smile

“You’re obedient despite your grumblings.”

“Don’t get used to it. Didn’t I shame the commander earlier today? I only came for the time being to build back my prestige.”

“...I have to do something about this useless arm soon.” Triden said with a grunt and frowned. “Just wait, I’ll polish your rough manners soon enough.”

Riftan hid his smile against the glass of wine. Triden’s easygoing attitude seemed to make him feel a little better. He relaxed, ate food, and drank. He even talked to his fellow knights from time to time. But not even half an hour later, his attention flew back to the girl sitting beside the duke.

It was her first time staying at the banquet for that long, but she didn’t talk to anyone. She sat calmly with an indifferent expression that looked so cold that he wasn’t sure she was the same gentle girl who tenderly played with the cat.

Riftan sipped from his glass of wine and watched her carefully. Where are you hurting? He wondered as he gazed at her face that was white as a parchment and her eyes that sank dark like they were forced to hide all emotions.

That could be the last time he could see her, he yearned to see her smile at least once to last him a lifetime, but he was so disappointed and worried that he couldn’t help but shift restlessly in his seat, hesitating whether to approach her or not.

“You must be bored with the banquet, Sir Calypse.”

Riftan’s head turned to the unexpected voice. An attractive beautiful woman in a rosy dress was smiling at him. Riftan only arched an eyebrow but the woman fearlessly flashed him a smile and boldly extended a hand towards him.

“I’m also getting bored with all the conversation. I want to lighten my mood, but I don’t have the right partner. Will you care for my dancing partner?”

It was customarily unusual for a woman to ask a man to dance first. Riftan was taken aback by the woman's boldness, but the commander kicked his shin under the table. He stood up reluctantly, as the commander warned with his eyes that he would humiliate the lady if he didn't accept the offer. A satisfied smile flashed on the woman's lips.

"I've heard that you actively took part in the conflict and played a huge role. His majesty must be very proud of you."

As they awkwardly walked to the middle of the ball, the woman whispered to him softly. Riftan frowned as he tried to recall her name. Despite being introduced to him the other day, he couldn't remember anything else about her but that she was the younger sister of a knight. Riftan nodded bluntly as a response.

"It's a relief it is over but it's a pity that it went on longer than expected."

"Is His Majesty a strict man?"

"He expects highly from his subjects."

"I heard rumors that His Majesty especially favors you."

Riftan sneered cynically, the king was only interested in his skills. However, since he found no reason to divulge that information, he remained silent. Despite his poor manners, the woman constantly chattered and engaged during the dance. Riftan glanced at Maximilian Croix as he twirled the woman. Unexpectedly, he met her eyes as he turned his head. Could it be that she was looking at me? Riftan was sick of himself for thinking such expectant thoughts.

As soon as the music switched, he drew away from the woman like an animal escaping from a trap, but the woman was faster. The noble woman whom he didn't remember the name suddenly stumbled over his arms and leaned against him.

“I’m feeling a little dizzy. I must have drunk too much. I wish to return to my room and rest... will you help me?”

He let out a sigh at her blatant invitation. Noble women treated him in exactly two different ways. First was avoiding him like he was carrying a plague, and the second was treating him like a pet dog to play with in bed. The woman now seemed to be the latter type.

“Today is the last night of the banquet. I want to have a special time.”

She gave him a seductive gaze, squeezing her supple body against him. Riftan tried to shake her off coldly but he didn’t want to cause a scene, so he escorted her out of the banquet hall.

As soon as they entered a dark, deserted corridor, the woman charged at him. Riftan felt like a corpse being preyed upon by a harpy. The woman wrapped her slender arms around his neck like vines and greedily licked her lips. Riftan pried her off with a frown.

“You seem to be fully in your senses. You can return to your room by yourself.”

“Why are you being a bore?” She pouted and looked at him provocatively. He looked at her fiercely, as if to question her audacity to touch that subject. The woman continued to speak as if to admonish him. “Don’t be that difficult and stiff. What I’m saying is let’s play around for a little while.”

“I apologize but I’m not interested in this kind of playing around. Find some else.”

“I’m not interested in other people.” The woman smiled languidly, pressing herself against him provocatively and cupped his cheek. “It’s the first time I’ve seen someone as beautiful as you. You’re exactly like those gods worshipped by evil pagans. Is it true that your kind knows 180 ways of pleasure?”

Riftan had goosebumps running all over him from the looks she was giving him. He shuddered at the woman's ridiculous thought and roughly took her hands off of him.

“My kind? Are you accusing me of apostasy?”

“I was just...”

“I was knighted in front of the holy church. Did you know that I can demand punishment for those insulting words of yours?”

The cold retaliation of Riftan distorted the woman's face. “You're noisy and what you're saying doesn't make sense.” She glared at him haughtily and turned around.

“Good. Go find someone else.”

The woman walked away conceitedly. Riftan wiped his damp lips and smoothed down his top that was disheveled when the woman pulled him down with her arms. He was in a terrible mood.

He didn't feel like going back into the banquet hall, but he was wary that the people who saw him leave would think he was secretly having fun with the woman if he didn't go back. Also, Maximillian would probably think the same way if he didn't return.

## Chapter 27

What does it matter? She doesn't care anyway if I disappear and wallow or not with another woman. I'm just overthinking things.

Despite saying those words to himself, he was striding towards the banquet hall. Riftan smoothed his hair nervously. He didn't like how he felt restless as if he was caught doing something wrong in the dark corridor.

“Do you think it's true that the Duke's daughter is searching for candidates among the knights to be her husband?”

Just as he was about to leave the dark hallway and step into the banquet hall, he heard men whispering amongst each other. Riftan casted a sharp gaze towards the chattering noble men.

Inside the banquet hall, the people were dancing under the shimmering candles to a bard singing a heroic epic to a lute melody. The men whispering seem to be taking advantage of the current bustling and enjoyed a secret conversation. Riftan continued to listen. A slow, drunken voice spoke.

“Isn’t she still too young?”

“She’s sixteen years old and will be turning seventeen in a few months. That’s the perfect age for marrying.”

A slickly dressed man replied as he grinned and placed his lips against the wine glass. “She’s old enough, there are rumors that she’s showing her face more often to find a suitor.”

“Often showing her face?! She has been sitting a little longer than usual at the banquet today, but she always literally just shows up and disappears in a flash, huh?”

“That proves it a lot then. Do you know how much the Duke of Croix pampers his eldest daughter? Among the vassal knights, only a few of them have seen her face before. Even her servants don’t speak of her. Everything about that lady is veiled.”

Another man joined the conversation. “I’ve heard rumors that her health isn’t very good. The Duke of Croix cherishes her daughter so much that he built a huge chapel inside the castle and stationed four high-ranking priests to stay there.”

“It seems that she has been sickly since she was a child, so she’s being overprotected as such.”

A relatively old-looking man said as if he pitied her. Riftan stiffened as he observed Maximillian Croix more closely. She sat next to her father, her eyes watching the ball with a tired and anxious expression.

Is that why her face is so gloomy, because she's sick?

The mere thought of her being seriously ill drilled a hole into his heart. The discreet voices of the men continued, Riftan hearing them through his dazed ears.

"The Duke of Croix has no intention of sending her daughter to the royal palace. That's why some people are saying that she's looking for a husband among the knights. I wonder if it has something to do with the frequent conflicts with Dristan that the duke is looking for a top-notch knight as a son-in-law."

"You are underestimating the Duke's ambitions." A knight who was quietly listening, drinking wine, suddenly sneered and joined the conversation. "No matter how much the Duke of Croix cares for his daughter, she will amount to nothing compared to the honor and power of the family. Everyone knows the duke's intention is to form a deep blood relation with the royal family, right?"

"Maybe he intends to entrust that task to his second daughter instead. Although she's still young, there are rumors already spreading around that she possesses outstanding beauty and skills."

"That figures, if his eldest daughter has concerns regarding her health, she can't marry into the royal family. It will be difficult for her to produce healthy boys to be future heirs."

Riftan clenched his fist as he watched the men scouring Maximillian with their eyes like a mare for breeding.

"It's concerning and might take a lot of work... but the eldest daughter of the duke is still an attractive bride. As the duke's beloved daughter, she will surely come with a huge dowry."



A decrepit man who looked well over thirty groaned and spoke. “What good will a huge dowry be if she can’t bear an heir? If there will be no children to pass your wealth on, all the property and land will only end up in the hands of the royal family.”

“Hey, you must be losing your head. An unhealthy woman won’t live long anyway. You can just go and get a new wife.”

Riftan glared at them intensely. He wanted to murder them, to drag them into a corner and slit off their throats so they could never speak such preposterous words again. It was difficult for him to just stand while they said such disgusting things about her. The mere thought of her being an object of a man’s desire aroused anger within him and engaged strong protective instincts.

He despised that feeling. She didn’t belong to him. Therefore, he had no reason to be angry or desire to protect her. Also, even if he went out of his way, the Duke of Croix was the supreme ruler of the eastern region of Whedon and he would never amount to the protection he gave his daughter.

Riftan turned his eyes to the duke who sat next to her like a watchman. The duke was an arrogant man but he was at least a strong protector for her. It was wise of him to keep his daughter hidden in the castle, away from the reach of those sons of b\*tches.

Riftan took a long, deep breath and turned slowly. If he went into the banquet hall, he would probably cause a huge commotion. He clenched his trembling fists to control his anger. He swore to remember their faces clearly and pull one or two teeth from their mouths before he left the castle so he could relieve the fury boiling in his stomach.

However, he wondered whether there would only be those people with such disgusting intentions. Once the rumors spread that the Duke of Croix’s plan was to choose her daughter’s husband among the knights, all knights of Whedon would have the same vain thoughts of coveting her. What disgusted him though is the fact that he was also tempted to covet her.

Riftan stood on the steps leading to the garden and clasped his face in shame. Where the hell did I end up? The confusion and longing he felt were truly strangers and were unwelcome. But the thought that she might find a suitor in the banquet kept him stuck.

Just because I have a position among the knights doesn't mean that I'm one of the candidates.

It was the predictable outcome considering the fearful gaze that the girl gave him and the contemptuous demeanor of the Duke of Croix towards him. But then, he turned to go to the banquet hall once again. Obviously, If he returned to his room having those thoughts battling in his head, he would toss and turn in his bed worrying that she might have picked a husband amongst those men who had been talking dirty about her. It would ease him to see what was going to happen with his own two eyes.

Riftan turned back, hoping that the m\*therf\*ckers had already finished chattering and would keep their foul mouths shut. But a few steps away, Riftan's body stiffened like a stone. In front of his eyes was Maximillian, walking out of the banquet hall surrounded by maids.

Perhaps, his heightened senses that recognized every fibrous of her being failed to detect her because of his raging anger. Riftan gazed at the woman standing in front of him and blinked like the world's biggest idiot. However, she appeared a hundred times more perplexed than him. The girl, who always avoided his gaze, looked up at him with a blank, mesmerized expression.

Because of that, Riftan was able to take a closer look at her thick maroon eyelashes and her breathtaking silver-gray eyes. The chandelier's light rippled a golden spark in her winter-lake colored pupils, and her ivory face slowly turned the color of a beet. It was a thrillingly fascinating sight. The girl turned almost as red as the color of her hair. Riftan's whole body felt tightly motionless and he barely managed to open his lips.

“...is there a problem?”

His words sounded blunt even in his ears and Riftan cursed himself inwardly. For the past few weeks, he had been trying so hard to talk to her, yet out of all words that was all he was able to say.

Maximillian noticeably flinched. She hastily bowed her head and before he could speak any more, she scurried like she was running away. The maid at her heels giggled as they followed. Riftan gawked at her from behind, feeling utterly despondent. He couldn't figure out why she reacted like that. So, he went to the banquet hall, wondering if something happened during the banquet and went straight to sit with his fellow men.

“Did something happen while I was away?”

The knights turned their heads, while exchanging glasses of wine. Sensing the strange silence, Riftan's eyebrows furrowed. Hebaron, who looked at him with wide eyes, smirked.

“I think if there was something that happened, it's with the vicecommander?”

“What do you mean?”

“There's a mirror in every room, did you come back here without looking at yourself?”

Riftan ran his hand across his hair, wondering if his hair was disheveled. Hebaron, who looked up at him, whistled.

“Very tempting, I see. You seem determined to take all the eastern ladies as prisoners.”

Riftan frowned at his weirdly vague words. “What bullshit are you talking about...”

“You have a stain of lip dye on your mouth.”

Uslin Rikaido, who was quietly drinking wine, suddenly spat out. Riftan wiped his lips and saw something red and sticky at the back of his hand. Uslin sighed as he saw his puzzled expression.

“It’s a dye that noble women apply on their lips to make it look more red.”

Riftan blinked his eyes for a moment and strode out, entering the nearest empty room. Once he saw himself in the mirror, a sound of pain came out of his mouth. Unbeknownst to him, when the woman provoked him, two buttons fell out of his top and his hair was like a magpie’s nest. Red lip marks smeared against his lips, chin, and cheek. He looked like a prodigal playboy who chased after women from every angle.

“F\*ck...”

This completely obliterated his chance of giving Maximillian Croix a better impression of him. Riftan’s shoulders sank in discouragement.

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They headed straight to Drakium place the next day. Riftan gazed with relief at the Croix Castle as it grew smaller in his vision. Leaving would allow him to turn things back to the way they were before.

He was determined to shake all of his past’s shadows. He would erase all fond memories of his childhood days, the faint sense of guilt, and the horrendous image of his mother which sometimes woke him up in a cold sweat. He would live as the knight named Riftan Calypse.

However, his determination was shaken like a reed against the wind when the girl’s image sprung in his mind from time to time. Maximillian Croix had grown up to be such a damn lovely girl that he dreamed of her almost every night. And those dreams drove him to the edge of madness.

He had never looked at any other woman before and he had no one to compare her with. He had known no other standard of beauty but her slim and small body, her eyes that seemed to hide thousands of emotions

beneath them, her small nose and lips, and her rich, luscious hair that shone exquisitely like fireworks. And that perception of him towards her constantly pierced his nerves like a needle.

## Chapter 28

Riftan continued to feel as such even after visiting Drakium to meet the king and returning to Anatol. He gazed out of the window towards the desolate garden, as he frowned with serious thought wavering in his mind. Ruth, who was reporting on the construction progress while Riftan was away for the expedition, noticed his absent-mindedness and carefully asked.

“Did something unpleasant happen at Drakium?” Riftan, whose thoughts were drifting away, raised his head. The wizard sighed, placing a pile of parchment on the table. “The conservative nobles must have started an argument again.”

Riftan didn't affirm or deny Ruth's assertive remark and picked up a piece of parchment. However, the words he read didn't seem to sink into his consciousness, bouncing off his thoughts. He massaged his heated temples and sprang out of his seat to walk out of the office.

His hazy thoughts and burning head gradually cooled down as he strolled down the cold hallways. He took a good look at the old castle that he was granted within the first year of his knighting. The castle was left unattended for nearly a hundred years. Despite pouring tons of funds over the past few years, extreme ruins were difficult to get rid of. Riftan subconsciously compared its state to the Croix Castle and smiled bitterly. It felt like having a foolish dream and being immediately snapped back to reality.

He went out of the castle and rode on horseback around the estate and gazed at the neglected state of Anatol. The farmers suffered from poverty caused by goblins who frequently stole their crops. Despite generously paying for the wall construction, their crop yield decreased by the year and their current state did not improve.

How much blood and sweat should be shed to make this land a habitable place?

His rational thoughts were screaming at him that Anatol was nothing more than a money-devouring monster land. In the first place, it was only granted to him by King Ruben so he could be given the title of a vassal knight. He had no single reason to let this land suck his fortune and rescue it.

However, Riftan felt extremely bothered by a strange sense of duty ever since he was granted this land.

Seeing the faces of the citizens of Anatol look up at him stung his conscience and weighed heavily in his heart as he thought of how their lives were dependent on his hands. He couldn't leave them to fend for themselves, so he began to pour his life savings for the construction of walls but even that was far from sufficing.

He returned to the castle with a troubled expression upon seeing the dilapidated huts, old carts dragged over the muddy dirt roads, and ill-dressed citizens. His mood sank further as the half-ruined castle came to sight. He suddenly wondered how Maximillian Croix would react if she saw Calypse Castle. She would probably be surprised that there existed such a squalid place in this world.

A defeated laughter came out of his mouth: she was still someone he couldn't approach. It was only wise to get rid of thoughts about her as soon as possible. However, he couldn't escape the dreams that seemed to find him every night. He couldn't domain himself, who acted like a daydreaming teenage boy.

“Did you go out to patrol the construction site?”

Ruth, who was writing something down on a piece of parchment in Riftan's office, asked without raising his head and he simply did not reply. The wizard rubbed his forehead; he had an exhausted expression as he spoke with a sigh.

“As you may have already noticed, the construction has made little progress. Several sub-racial monster attacks happened while Sir Calypse

was away on an expedition. Several workers died and supplies of timber for building were lost due to fires. At this rate, we won't be able to complete the wall's construction even after a decade."

"So, in conclusion...?"

Riftan took off his cloak and exhaled greatly. "We lack manpower and the materials to build."

"The funds are already running low as well."

Ruth shook his head weakly. "Sir Calypse, it's like pouring water into a bottomless pit. Even King Ruben doesn't expect you to take care of this land! Stop wasting your fortune on meaningless things and give up on Anatol."

Riftan approached the desk without speaking and read through the accounts. It was clear that the meager taxes coming from the citizens of Anatol could not cover the expenses of the construction. He stroked his chin with his rough hands and turned around again.

"I'll raise the funds. You continue to supervise the construction."

"It will be in vain. It's all a waste of fortune!"

Riftan shot him a cold glare. "I decide how to spend my fortune. Don't overstep your boundaries!"

"But Sir Calypse is my source of income, so how can I not interfere? We're about to become beggars!"

The wizard raised his hands towards the sky and wailed bitterly. Riftan was about to smack him, but somehow held it in. It was not unreasonable for Ruth to run wild as such, actually it was very difficult to rebuild that land without swiping all the gold Whedon has.

Fuck this, what else can't you do?

He read the maps laid on one side of the room for a long time and then spat his words out bluntly.

“I’ll go earn the money and bring it. Continue the construction.”

“But...”

“This is my land and my castle. I won’t throw it away.” Riftan sighed coldly and picked up the cloak he had taken off. “Just wait and see. This place will appear a dozen times worth of the funds I will pour into it.”

“That will take you at least a hundred years.”

The wizard snorted pessimistically. Riftan glared at him once and returned to his room. He was not certain when a royal decree would be issued again. He had to finance the construction as much as he could until then.

As soon as dawn broke the next day, Riftan left Anatol with twelve faithful men. The means of earning wealth for warriors were not many. Some of the ways to gather wealth was to pillage from private residences or wage war to steal the property of other lords. However, if they committed such atrocities, they would be branded as enemies to the Peace Agreement of the Seven Kingdoms.

The other option, that was more viable, was to subjugate dragon subspecies. Selling mana stones, scales, and bones of half-dragons, wyverns, and basilisks would help them survive for at least a year.

Riftan immediately embarked on the second approach. That option was also an excellent opportunity for his subordinates to gain practical experience. They roamed the western region of Whedon for several months, subduing half-dragons and even sub-racial monsters for a price paid by other lords. At one point in time, he competed in another swordsmanship competition near the western borders with an aim of winning the prize money.

There were a lot of people who criticized him for demeaning his knightly title, but he didn’t give a single damn. In any case, he was nothing but a



pretentious knight to the eyes of the nobles. Given that, what was the use of restricting his actions just so he wouldn't offend them?

Riftan swept all gold from the southwest, performing all sorts of dirty work that nobles couldn't do to save their faces and prestige. Ruth was elated with Riftan's activities.

"At this rate, you will be the richest man in the south!"

Riftan gazed down at him with astonishment. The wizard sat at his desk and opened a chest filled with gold coins, drenching in pure ecstasy.

"Did you discover a tomb of a hundred basilisks? How did you manage to find such a trove of treasures?" The wizard asked with twinkling eyes and Riftan merely shrugged.

"I found those in an ancient ruin. I was fortunate."

"Anyway, the smell of gold is amazing!"

Ruth giggled, weighing the gold coins one by one on a scale. After he finished recording them in the accounts, the servants placed the gold back into the chest and carried it into a vault. As Riftan watched keenly, Ruth suddenly murmured in wonder.

"Was it an ancient queen's tomb that Lord Calypse had discovered? Aside from the gold coins, the rest were women's jewelry."

Riftan flinched slightly. Ruth narrowed his eyes as he inspected the extravagant crown bejeweled with emeralds, rubies, topaz, and diamonds. Next to him was a pile of bracelets, diamond necklaces, rings, silver headdresses, and golden jewelry boxes. All of them were women's jewelry. Ruth inspected them for a long time, weighing their worth in his mind and grumbled.

"It's possible to sell these jewels in exchange for gold. It's rare for someone regal to visit Anatol..."

“I have no intention of selling it. Place it in the vault along with the gold.”

Riftan picked a plum from the tray lying on the table and declared idly. Ruth retorted and arched an eyebrow.

“They will be of better use if we exchange them into coins. Aside from the enormous amount it costs to build the walls, do you have any idea how much it takes just to feed the guards and the servants? It’s better to swap these for currencies, just in case.”

“We have enough currency to cover the cost of operating in the estate. Precious stone and metals are said to grow more valuable over time. If you’re in that much of a hurry, then go ahead and sell it yourself.”

The wizard looked at him with an unconvinced expression, but ignored him and lowered his head again, concentrating on counting the gold coins, presumably thinking that it was too cumbersome to persuade him.

Riftan sighed discreetly in relief and gently picked up the crown. He did find some of them from the ancient ruins, but if the wizard found out that most of the jewelry were new purchases of his, he would get a series of nagging until his eardrums were pierced.

It shouldn’t matter how I spend my own wealth.

He muttered inwardly, making excuses to invisible criticisms. He couldn’t figure out what had gotten into him that made him buy such useless things. Riftan stared down at the crown and placed it back in the box.

A few weeks later, a message arrived from the royal household. As the drought in Dristan intensified, hordes of bandits began to pillage again in the eastern border. Riftan was ordered to participate again in a war, less than half a year after he left Croix.

## Chapter 29

“Shouldn’t I tag along with you this time?”

Ruth asked after reading the telegram for a long time and scratched his disheveled hair. Riftan firmly shook his head and threw a piece of meat to Agalde who was sitting on the perch.

“You will stay in Anatol to supervise the construction.”

“I’m a wizard, not a Lord’s representative.” Ruth grumbled, throwing the telegram into the brazier. “How about getting married instead? You can have a decent marriage with someone from the less prominent nobles. You’ll have a noble lady managing your estate when you’re away and you’ll even get the bonus of a little dowry.”

Riftan threw him a sharp gaze. “That’s a very aristocratic idea.”

Ruth merely shrugged. “You’re now a nobleman. The king himself gave you the title of a vassal knight, the Lord of Anatol. It’s not out of the ordinary for nobles to marry for convenience.”

Riftan’s throat felt choked, like he had whole chestnuts stuck in it upon hearing such nonchalant words. It made him wonder if Maximillian Croisso would also get married sooner or later for the sake of convenience. A sharp pang of pain rose in his chest as he pictured a gleaming whiteskinned nobleman standing next to her. Riftan hurriedly drove those thoughts out of his head and turned to stand in front of his desk.

“Stop wasting your time on such b\*llsh\*t and prepare for my departure! I won’t be able to return to Anatol for months. In the meantime, the necessary funds shall be allocated.”

“I’m telling you I’m not a lord’s representative, I’m a wizard...!”

“I’m aware you’re a wizard. I pay a huge sum for your researches every year.”

At his growling remarks, Ruth immediately took on a timid and polite attitude and sat quietly by the desk. Riftan swallowed a sigh and pulled out piles of parchment. He had overwhelming responsibilities; he had to obey

the king's command to participate in wars and expeditions while overseeing Anatol. It was incomparably more burdensome than when he worked as a mercenary.

However, it wasn't the time to be lost in a reverie. He picked up a quill and scribbled his reply to the king's orders on a parchment, stating that he would rejoin the knights within a week and tied it to Agalde's ankle.

A few days later, Riftan led his men back to the eastern border of Whedon. The Remdragon Knights pursued a horde of bandits along with the knights of the Duke of Croix, then he immediately began the pursuit and chased after their trail. Proceeding the long and tedious chase, he was finally able to track them and wipe out the bandits who fled with supplies of stolen food. However, the pillaging still continued after that incident and the Remdragon Knights had to camp near the border. The knights, who spent months camping, had begun complaining.

"If only the Duke of Croix had been a little wise and merciful, we wouldn't have to suffer like this." Hebaron spat violently as he sat in front of the campfire to warm himself. "It's natural for the people of Dristan to go on a rampage when the trade route has been unilaterally blocked, as if extorting a large amount of damage compensations from them wasn't already enough. These people are already suffering from the famine..."

Riftan silently agreed as he chewed some jerky. Without enough food and water to survive the upcoming winter, the farmers of Dristan were left with no choice and rapidly turned into bandits. Their mission was to keep the borders safe until those bandits either froze or starved to death so they could no longer invade the Duke's territory. Hebaron constantly grumbled as he fueled the campfire with long dry branches.

"If only the Duke of Croisso trades food with the merchants of Dristan, all problems will be solved! We don't have to spend winter in these outskirts and that man wouldn't be bothered by the bandits, it will all be solved. But because of his foolish pride..."

“Enough complaints. We’re here to aid the Duke of Croix, not criticize him.”

Riftan bluntly spoke and rose from his seat. He himself had a list of complaints about the Duke but if he openly expressed them where several of Croix knights and soldiers were around, it would easily cause a strife among them. Riftan picked up his helmet and carried it against his side, approaching the barrier’s front. Soldiers stood guard with long spears along the high barrier made of stacked logs while the knights sat in front of the pitched tents, grooming their weapons.

He went to climb up the ladder leading to the watchtower and inspected the surrounding area. At one look, he could see ruined villages, farmland burned by the bandits, and priests preparing lifeless bodies for funerals. Among those piles of dead bodies were the bandits that they had slaughtered. Those corpses of criminals were to be cremated after a simple blessing ceremony to prevent them from becoming monsters such as lich or ghouls.

He took the canteen hanging from his waist and moistened his lips, then smirked. Aside from monsters, knights had to mercilessly kill humans as well at the monarch’s commands. Since he became a knight, he was numbed enough to eat calmly next to a pile of corpses but despite that, he couldn’t help but feel a faint burning when he saw the devastating remnants of war.

He drank the rest of the water from his canteen and threw it down the railing. The winter season, a season of rest, loomed over the blackened earth. It seemed like he wouldn’t be able to spend winter in the Calypse Castle again. He sighed in resignation and inhaled the dry wind that smelled of burning.

After the corpses were all disposed of, they immediately embarked on preparing for winter. The soldiers diligently stocked up on food, firewood, and drinking water for the use of their troops while the knights patrolled the borders in preparation for attacks, wiping out bandits and monsters from time to time.

A few weeks later, an unexpected news flew in from across the border. The royals of Dristan, who sat ignorantly despite the rampant raids, began to mediate. Riftan frowned at the flag of Dristan that fluttered against the wind. Nearly 800 soldiers camped on the other side of the barrier. They were informed that they had been dispatched for arbitration but in truth, it was practically a threat. Riftan eyed the soldiers narrowly from the watchtower and hurriedly climbed down when he saw Triden coming out of the barracks.

“What was Dristan’s proposal?”

One of the Duke’s knights and a messenger from Dristan also walked out from the barracks. Riftan glanced at their grim faces and turned to Triden again.

“Will they declare war at once if the food supply does not open?”

“What a radical mindset you have” Triden shuddered as he turned towards the camp of Remdragon Knights. “The Dristan royals want to settle the dispute as peacefully as possible. The Duke of Croix will have an army of royal knights control the bandits when the trade resumes.”

Riftan’s lips twisted cynically. ‘As peacefully as possible’ also meant that they were willing to use non-peaceful methods in case the situation called for it.

“Do you think the Duke of Croix will agree to their proposal?”

“We’ll have to find out.”

Triden strode into his tent and urged for Riftan to follow him. Riftan followed his footsteps, going into the tent that was already warm due to the brazier that had been let alight. The commander then dragged a chair next to the fire and spoke calmly.

“As soon as the dawn breaks tomorrow, escort the messengers of Dristan and head to Croix Castle.” “Are you appointing me?”

“You won’t be alone. Four men from the Royal Knights and three from the Remdragon Knights shall join the escort. Together with those men, guide the messengers of Dristan to Croix Castle.”

After almost half a year has passed, he would return again to the Croix duchy. He couldn’t help the frown that formed on his face as anticipation and dissent battled within him. Triden raised an eyebrow.

“What’s wrong? Are you disapproving of my orders?”

Riftan slowly shook his head. “No. Do you have any other orders?” “None.

You can pick the other Remdragon Knights who will join you.” Riftan

nodded once and walked out of the tent.

The next day, Riftan prepared to leave for Croix with Uslin Rikaido and Gabel Laxion. When the sound of the trumpets announced their departure, they finally crossed the barriers with the Royal Knights. Then, three knights of Dristan wearing red cloaks drove their horses to approach the front of the barrier.

Riftan made a brief statement, and headed for the Crox Castle, avoiding any delay. The estate could be reached after two days, however, due to the shortened days of winter, they were not able to reach the gates until dawn of the third day.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve had a hot bath and slept in a bed.”

Gabel muttered with a delighted look on his face as his identity was verified at the front gates. Uslin shot him a glare.

“We didn’t come here to rest. Don’t relax.”

“Don’t be too rigid. It’s best to enjoy the good things when it’s there.”

Gabel glanced at him with a discontented look in his eyes.

“I don’t have the talent to keep myself always looking neat like Sir Rikaido, so I have to freshen myself up whenever I get the chance.”

At Gabel’s words, Riftan scanned Uslin with his eyes. He was certain that he had never seen that guy looking disheveled. Uslin Rikaido had an extraordinary talent for maintaining a neat appearance despite being in the middle of a battlefield. He wondered if dirt also repelled from a man who was born into a prestigious noble family. While he was thinking such ridiculous thoughts, they were given the permission to go beyond the gates.

Riftan drove his horse to enter and wiped his rough, stained face. It had been a while since he last washed his face, so he had to look terrible. Suddenly, his messy robe and disheveled hair immensely bothered him. He sneered at his vanity as he nervously swept the hair sticking to his forehead. Who cares how I look? Even when he dressed and presented himself neatly, she still looked at him horribly.

She might faint on the spot when she sees me looking like this.

Riftan smiled wryly at his inner thoughts. As they reached the gates to the Duke’s castle, the guards rushed out to greet them. After handing their horses to them, he led the messengers of Dristan and strode to the great hall. As they entered, a middle-aged man who appeared to be a butler, stepped forward and bowed his head politely.

“I heard that you Sirs have arrived from the borders. Is there an urgent matter?”

“I have come with the messengers of Dristan. I want to meet with the Duke at once.”

The butler looked taken aback for a moment but nodded calmly. “Kindly follow me. I’ll lead you right away to the reception.”

Riftan trailed after him, unconsciously roaming his eyes around, looking for Maximillian. The servant maids who gathered at the top of the stairs caught his eyes, but she was nowhere to be seen. The day was still early so he



assumed that she was still in bed. As he climbed the velvet covered marble stairs, he felt a strange feeling of relief and disappointment. The butler led them to a luxurious room donned with a red carpet and left after leaving them a notice.

“Please wait here for a moment, I will bring the Duke.”

They each sat on the chairs and held their breath, waiting for the Duke to arrive. After about 20 minutes, the Duke of Croix entered wearing luxurious clothes accompanied by his guards and servants.

“I heard that messengers came from Dristan. What brings them all the way here?”

He sat on a chair set in the middle of the room and arrogantly raised his chin. The faces of the messengers slightly hardened at his rude attitude. The oldest of them opened his mouth and spoke as coldly as the duke did.

“We have come bearing the orders of His Majesty to settle the disputes on the border.”

The knight pulled out a parchment letter branded with the seal of the Dristan Royal Family from his robes and held it out. A young servant who was waiting hurriedly took it and handed it to the Duke, who unfolded the letter and swept his eyes over it. A deep crease appeared on his forehead, as if displeased with what was written on the parchment.

After a long moment of uncomfortable silence, the Duke of Croix finally spoke. “... before we discuss the details, I think you should rest first.” He eyed the filthy appearance of the knights and stood up while gesturing to the butler. “Guide the guests to their rooms.”

The knights left the reception without any protest as they were exhausted. Riftan was assigned the same room he used before. There, he took a hot bath for the first time in about a month and changed into clean new clothes, then left the room again. He walked around, seeing guards and soldiers starting their training for the morning and women who strolled in the

gardens. As he was leisurely watching this scenery, he suddenly uttered profanity.

‘F\*ck, I did not come here to play around.’

## Chapter 30

Riftan cursed at himself and turned around. He intended to tell the Duke of Croix the cost of prolonging the conflict with Dristan’s troops camping on the border, before the Duke earnestly discussed matters with the messengers. However, the Duke flatly rejected his request for an audience, saying he was too busy to make time for him.

Riftan’s face hardened at the insulting treatment. Even the Duke had no right to disrespect the king’s vassals that way. Riftan silently turned around despite the humiliation he had just received, not wanting to create a scene expressing his displeasure.

The Duke of Croix continued to reject his requests and delayed meeting the messengers, reasoning that he was too busy overseeing the estate. It was only after the third day after arriving at the castle that they were able to properly discuss with him face-to-face.

The messengers naturally took on an overbearing attitude and expressed their displeasure. Their anger only aroused further as the Duke also claimed that Dristan’s demands violated his authority as a Lord. He provoked them more when he announced that he intended to collect compensations for the damages of the conflict. As a result, the Driftan’s messengers felt outraged and the negotiations got on the verge of a downward spiral towards catastrophe.

Riftan recorded all the happenings and sent a telegram to their commander. Contrary to their expectations that the negotiations would conclude within three or four days, it dragged on for longer than a week. He was sick and tired of waking up to the bluish dawn of the west, yet the Duke Croix appeared to be unwilling to yield to Dristan’s demands. In the worst-case scenario, things could blow up to an all-out-war.

Riftan pictured in his mind the fierce battle ahead. If the Royal Army of Dristan intervened, Whedon would surely retaliate and send additional reinforcements. At that point, he wouldn't be able to return to Anatol for at least a year's time.

No, maybe I will never be able to return again...

Riftan's lips twisted cynically as he approached the castle walls. The war ahead could decapitate anyone's head at one mistake: he had witnessed countless men die insignificantly and he was not conceited enough to think that no one else in the world was stronger than him. Having taken countless lives himself, he was clearly aware of the fact that his life could end just as such.

Just in case, Riftan decided to send a telegram to Anatol and quickly crossed the forests where the light of dawn was still dim. Suddenly, he saw someone running from a distance and stopped on his tracks. The person didn't appear to be a maid, she was wearing a dress so long that it dragged against the ground.

What the hell is a noble woman doing this early in the day?

Riftan narrowed his eyes as he thought suspiciously, watching the woman. Then, his whole body hardened. He caught a clear glimpse of red hair flowing through her black robes as the girl turned around. He was convinced that there was only one person in the world who had that kind of hair, and it was Maximillian Croix. The girl's hair was different from other red hairs. Her voluminous, wavy hair had a reddish-brown color, had an almost purple tint to it in the dark, and a few strands glimmered gold under the bright sun.

All of a sudden, his heart pounded fast and strong against his ribs. It was his first time seeing her since he returned to the Croix Castle. Riftan was torn between yearning to meet her and the urge to ignore her, but his conflict didn't last long. Standing stiffly on the spot, Riftan let out a low moan and chased after her trail. Even if it was only around the castle grounds, he couldn't let her wander alone through the dark forest, not when she had

already been seriously injured before. A slight anger arose within him as he recalled her cold body that was bitten with a venomous monster's fangs.

Did she not learn her lesson even after that happened?

He quickened his strides, his jaw tight as he planned to give her a firm warning. The girl suddenly stopped and looked around and Riftan narrowed his eyes. It didn't seem like Maximillian saw him standing under a tree's shade. Then, she began to fumble, pulling out a piece of parchment out of her arms and started to utter something in a small voice.

What the hell are you doing?

Riftan frowned as he listened to her wistful, trembling voice. Her voice intermittently blended into the chirping of the birds, and the rustling of the branches and leaves against the dry blowing wind. The girl's voice was so quiet that he could barely understand her words, but it seemed like she was reciting poetry. Riftan, who was able to comprehend the situation in a daze, wore a curious expression. Maximillian was reading the same phrase over and over again with a quivering voice.

He felt the frustration that started to build up in her tone and suddenly realized that he was witnessing a very private moment: she had difficulties speaking. His trembling hand grazed his lips. He had heard her stutter several times before, but he thought that it was just because she felt tense, nervous, or disconsolate.

He paced on his feet anxiously, like a stranded beast. He was thinking that it was best for him to leave quietly, but at the same time he couldn't leave her alone in a place like that. Not knowing what to do, Riftan's body froze as he stepped on a branch that had fallen on the ground. Maximillian, who was repeating the same word as if her tongue was paralyzed, turned to his direction and her eyes widened in surprise upon seeing him.

Riftan's face was clouded with embarrassment. Although she was a distance away from him, he could clearly distinguish her face turning pale then switching to a deep red from shame. Her narrow shoulders stiffened in

humiliation and her eyes shook insecurely as if her pride had been shattered. He urgently opened his lips but he had no idea what to say, so Riftan just took a step back as his lips closed and opened.

“I... I’m...”

Maximillian, who was at her wits end after revealing her secret weakness, quickly turned around and ran towards the castle. Riftan unconsciously tried to chase after her, but stopped on his tracks. He wanted to grab her by the arm that instant and impart his excuses that he was only there by accident, but he thought that it would only make her feel more embarrassed. He fully grasped how shameful it felt to have one’s weakness revealed to others.

Riftan stared idly at the forest path she had fled from and turned around, muttering harsh curses at himself. The opportunity to formally apologize for his actions would come sooner or later. For now, it was best to let her pull her thoughts together first. He trudged helplessly back to his room.

However, as the end of the negotiations reached, he couldn’t even see her shadows. He wandered around the annex whenever he had time, hoping to meet her by chance, but eventually he had to go back to the borders, not being able to apologize for what happened that day. He felt utterly miserable. The negotiations did not yield any significant outcomes and he even left the worst impressions of him to Maximillian Croix. Riftan greeted winter with the most terrible feeling of misery.

Despite the tensions heightening from the ensuing war, the girl’s eyes that reflected hurting did not leave his mind. He wondered why her pain vividly touched him when there were more miseries and painful things that existed in the world. Nevertheless, he felt a strong will to comfort her. He wanted to approach her and comfort her as he caressed her narrow back. He wanted to tell her that her stutter was nothing but an insignificant flaw. He would pay amounts of gold just to hear her speak.

Riftan smirked at his foolish thoughts. Behind her delicate appearance, she had a strong sense of pride, he was able to recognize that just by seeing her

face being distorted with shame. She may even feel insulted by the fact that he dared to comfort a noble lady. Riftan desperately tried to pry the girl out of his head by ridiculing himself as such. Whether those kinds of thoughts paid off, his teenage boy fantasies gradually faded away as the cold winter hit and large battles began with huge troops of armed bandits crossing the borders. Such meaningless thoughts automatically disappeared as the fierce battles continued.

He focused on leading the knights and subjugating the bandits, however the enemy cleverly continued to attack despite losing, dwindling their resources and manpower from the continued surprise attacks. Despite wanting to hunt down the enemies to end and wipe them down, he couldn't cross the borders as that would provoke Dristan's royal family.

Sensing a crisis, the Royal Knights of Whedon eventually sent another message to persuade the Duke of Croix. Riftan returned to Croix after two and a half months. This time, he wasn't there only to escort the messengers, but to convey King Ruben's will as well. His eyebrows furrowed as he recalled being burdened with the royal command stating to persuade the Duke of Croix to end the dispute as soon as possible. His Majesty had an extraordinary knack for putting such tedious tasks on his shoulders.

This would end way faster if His Majesty did it himself.

Riftan breathed out a dissatisfied sigh as he passed through the gates. The Croix Castle had a much different impression during the winter. The large estate, where gardens usually bloomed, was now barren and dry winds blew, making it looking somewhat gloomy. The dense fir forest surrounding the castle also emitted a damp chill. He looked around observing as he crossed what used to be the garden and reached the front of the great hall. His face was grim and stiff as he strode into the castle, leaving the horses to the servants.

He was also fed up with the dispute. This time, he was determined to reach a sound negotiation with the Duke of Croix. Dozens of his men's lives were lost because of the man's insufferable pride, he wanted to put a stop to any meaningless battles in the future.

“I came bearing the king’s message to the Duke.”

He declared chillingly to the butler who had rushed out to welcome them. The butler, who flinched from his overbearing attitude, bowed politely,

and led them to the reception. Riftan strode up the stairs, leading his knights. There, standing with the maids at one side of the hallway, was Maximillian and his eyes widened. Meeting her unexpectedly in his shambled state made him feel dizzy, like he had been attacked out of nowhere.

“What a great beauty you are.”

His head immediately turned to the sound that came from beside him. It was Gabel Laxion’s voice, who was looking at her with pure admiration. Riftan looked at him with a sharp glare, feeling all the nerves in his body on edge, but he continued to speak in a daze as if he did not feel Riftan’s displeasure.

“I have only heard stories about how outstandingly beautiful the Duke’s second-born daughter is... I was taken by surprise. In just a few years, won’t she grow into the most beautiful woman on the western continent?”

Riftan blinked his eyes and looked at the direction where Gabel was looking again. It was only then that he realized that it was not Maximillian Croix who captured his admiration, but the girl with flaxen hair standing by her side. He frowned at the girl with a cold atmosphere that seemed to be carved out of ice. He could not bring himself to comprehend how someone could look at another woman when Maximillian Croix was around.

Note – LF: I could not express how \*kilig\* I felt when Riftan could not find another woman more attractive than Maxi T^T I would sell my soul to have a Riftan who loves me like he loves Maxi

## Chapter 31

Gabel wasn't the only one looking at her with admiration, the other knights were also awe-struck at Maximillian's younger sister. Uslin Rikaido shot them a displeased look, seeing how they were gawking.

"We are here to settle the matters regarding the dispute. It's pathetic to be gawking at women in the middle of a war."

"Who's gawking?"

Gabel grumbled with an embarrassed expression and fixed his posture and at the mention of "war" his face instantly darkened. Just before coming to Croix, they had to fight a fierce battle against nearly thrice the usual number of bandits and Gabel lost one of his cherished apprentices in the midst of it. Although he sarcastically declared that the fallen apprentice was not worthy of bearing the Remdragon Knight's armor for losing his life to a bunch of bandits, he paid for an expensive funeral for him. Gabel wasn't even the only one who had lost a cherished apprentice.

The bandits of Dristan, who were nothing more than a disorganized armed bunch, were rapidly turning into a systematic army. And like a group of rats in a food warehouse, they kept coming in flocks from somewhere, no matter how many of them they slaughtered and drove them away. It was pretty obvious that they had the Royal Household of Dristan backing them. Where else could peasants, who were starving to death, obtain powerful war horses and get their hands on steel weapons? The fact that twenty thousand men single-handedly became soldiers and were controlled by a certain commanding system was threatening.

"This way."

The butler who was guiding them led them up to the third floor instead of the reception. Riftan followed him and took one last glance at Maximillian Croix. Her face suddenly had an anxious expression and she hid in the shadows. Riftan could clearly see her eyes clouding like a mist, her round face was ghostly pale, and her tiny body donned with a simple



reddishbrown dress stiffened in nervousness. He looked away from her again. He wanted to believe that the reason why she looked at him so warily was because she was worried about the news that the knights would bring.

“Kindly wait for a moment. I will seek permission from the Duke and return.”

The butler asked them to wait at the end of a marble-tiled hallway and went inside a humongous mahogany door that stood at least 10 kvets (around 3 meters). Riftan stood calmly in front of the door of the office which was closed humiliatingly on his face last time, waiting for his request for an audience to be granted.

The Duke of Croix permitted them to enter after a long time, letting the steam cool off enough from his head, and Riftan strode through the red door with his knights. The Duke sat in an exquisite chair adorned with a lion’s fur and shot him a cold glare with his green eyes.

“I heard that you’ve come bearing a message from His Majesty.” He crossed his arms above the desk and had a displeased look on his face. “How come he didn’t just send a messenger straight to my castle?”

“His Majesty wanted to impart a clear awareness of what’s happening in the eastern borders. This is also the reason why we regularly report the situation.”

Riftan approached the Duke’s desk and spoke in a monotonous tone, but he replied sarcastically, his neatly groomed mustache twitching.

“Well, what orders did His Majesty give you?”

“His Majesty is concerned about the possible prolonging of the current dispute. Dristan’s Royal Army is intervening and there is a high chance that this conflict will escalate to an all-out-war. His Majesty does not desire for the situation to get any worse.”

“If it is proven that the Royalties of Dristan are backing the bandits, then they are punishable according to the Peace Treaty.” The Duke leaned back on his chair and retorted bluntly. “I cannot come to terms with people who invaded my territory. Even the king should not impose such humiliation to fall upon me.”

“Then how on earth will you punish those rulers of Dristan?” Riftan countered him vehemently. “Will you be the one leading an army to the eastern borders and put King Turben on the seat of trial in Osyria?”

The Duke’s face flushed red. “The other monarchs of the six kingdoms will aid me!”

“The Peace Treaty is enforced by the monarchs of the seven kingdoms. Do you really believe that those monarchs will bring the ruler of Dristan to justice?” Riftan continued to speak in a calm manner, turning his hostility down as much as possible. “Dristan will destroy the Peace Treaty of the Seven Kingdoms and it will be used as a means to spark war. The kings do not think that the Holy Pope has the right to judge them.”

“How dare you... are you trying to lecture me right now?”

“I am merely conveying the will of the monarchs.” Despite the Duke’s enraged expression, Riftan remained composed. “His Majesty said that threatening to disrupt the peace is absolutely unacceptable. Thus, I encourage you to immediately terminate this conflict and put an end to the feud with Dristan.”

He took out a letter bearing the royal seal from his robes and placed it on the desk. Instead of picking it up, the Duke stared at it with chilling anger in his pale green eyes. Then, he exclaimed in a sharp tone.

“If you are done delivering your message, leave!”

Riftan went out of the room together with his knights, not delaying. Gabel let out a long sigh as they walked the hallway.

“Is it alright that you gave him that firm of an attitude? It’s best to keep out of that person’s line of sight, otherwise it will be troublesome...”

“I have shown him a decent amount of respect.”

Riftan replied bluntly and strode down the stairs. The women who had gathered before by the second floor’s stair rails were nowhere to be seen. He momentarily glanced at where Maximillian hid and quietly descended the remaining flight of stairs. As they reached the ground floor, servants approached them and led them to the guest rooms.

“We’ll prepare a meal and bring water for a bath at once.”

As the servants left, Riftan took off his armor and went to the window to gaze at the gardens. The pale winter sun shone a faint light over the dark green conifer trees, and birds were harvesting seeds from the flower beds where the grass were dead and yellow. He opened the windows and scoured the garden where Maximillian often took strolls and sighed while leaning against the wall. He felt like he had aged three or four years in the past few months. Riftan plopped down on the bed and let out another weary sigh.

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The Duke eventually decided to accede negotiations with Dristan, there was no other option anyway. Riftan escorted the Duke’s messengers to the borders where they negotiated with Dristan’s Royal Army. As they traveled back and forth between Croix Castle and the borders, the rainy season arrived.

When the negotiations to stop the conflict ended smoothly, the Duke invited the eastern nobles and the messengers of Dristan to a grand banquet. This was held with the intention of pacifying the grievances of the vassals who had been affected by months of raging conflict. The banquet hall was decorated more luxurious than ever, the food was seasoned with rare spices and all kinds of fruits infinitely filled the tables.

Riftan's lips cynically pulled to the side as he watched the Duke of Croix on the podium. The man who had been overbearing throughout the entire negotiation process sat next to Dristan's messengers, acting naturally friendly and even sharing laughter. However, Riftan's unpleasant mood faded at once when he laid his eyes upon Maximillian who sat modestly next to her father.

He watched intently as she ate grapes piece by piece, then he took a long swig of wine, feeling his throat burning at the sight. Somehow, she was getting way prettier in his eyes every time he looked at her. Recently, just looking at her made him feel pain inside. He let out a troubled sigh and called for a servant to fill his empty glass. Hebaron clicked his tongue, looking at Riftan's sight.

"Whoever sees you looking like that might think that we have lost. Why do you look like you're dying?"

"...we didn't exactly win."

"It's an achievement to have stopped 20,000 bandits with merely 4,000 troops and held out for half a year. The negotiations went more smoothly than expected and His Majesty is pleased with the outcomes."

Hebaron mumbled while sucking his fingers dripping with juices from the greasy food. "No one can deny the vice-commander's commendable efforts. There will be a ceremony held announcing the new commander of the knights when we return, so be prepared."

Riftan did not respond and Hebaron looked at him with suspicion in his eyes. "You're not thinking of breaking your loyalty, are you?"

"Once I become the commander of the Remdragon Knights, you will then become of service to Anatol. Would you be content on serving a lord of a mere territory in the outskirts?"

"What are you babbling on about now? In any case, most of the knights are in no position to acquire a fief, being bastards, commoners, fallen nobles, or second-born sons of less prominent noble families." Hebaron snorted

loudly. “If I really gave a damn about that, the vice-commander would have long been ousted.”

Riftan wanted to sarcastically question Hebaron’s capability to do that, but held it in. Hebaron sipped his ale and continued to talk in a calm manner.

“Also, everyone’s aware that the vice-commander is putting efforts to rebuild that little piece of land. We are all looking forward to staying there.”

Then, Hebaron’s lips pulled to the sides as he stared at the seat where Uslin Rikaido was, the man was looking at him with disapproving eyes.

“Of course, there are some who seem to expect the vice-commander to establish a position in the Drakium Palace.”

“...”

“However, it’s the vice-commander who makes the decision. As for us, we have already made the decision to follow the will of Rifan Calypse.”

The man silently demanded an answer from him with his eyes and Riftan gazed down at his glass of wine with an unreadable expression, then sighed heavily.

“I have no intentions of avoiding it this time. When King Ruben will lower his sword on me<sup>1</sup>, I will accept it.”

Hebaron gave him a satisfied smile and placed a full glass of ale in front of him with a thud. “When the vice-commander takes on the position of our commander, I’ll treat him very graciously.”

“... I’m looking forward to that.”

Riftan sighed and took the glass that Hebaron held out to him. Drinking with him usually lasted until the end of the banquet, sometimes even until the break of dawn. Normally, he would have been disgusted and rejected his offer, but that day Riftan was also willing to challenge him with alcohol.

As they turned rowdier by time, some nobles shot them scornful looks. However, he was desperate enough to do anything foolish if he could hold Maximillian's gaze at him for a minute. Riftan gulped down the drinks that Hebaron kept handing as he felt her curious gaze reach him.

## Chapter 32

However, as if to ridicule such pathetic behavior, she quietly left the banquet hall with her maids. Feeling like his enthusiasm had been spoiled, Riftan placed down his half-empty glass. The thought of going after her crossed his mind for a moment, but it would have been too obvious, as he would have lost the challenge that he was involved in. He had tried to apologize several times for what happened but each time, he repeatedly failed at it.

Riftan's lips twisted at the side as he recalled Maximillian who was always busy running away from him the moment he tried to approach her. Now the girl would probably think of him not only as a nosy man, but also a drunkard and a reveler.

Great. Riftan muttered sarcastically and chugged down the rest of his drink. Who knows, maybe it's for the better.

There was no chance that he would get to stand by her side anyway, and even if that could be the case, Maximillian would probably terribly despise him. At that point, he would be able to get rid of his foolish feelings as well. He filled his glass again. The finest wines seemed to taste disgustingly bitter.

At the next day's break of dawn, Riftan and the other knights left for Drakium Palace. The Duke's vassals were staying at the Croix Castle for several weeks while the Royal Knights needed to stand guard until Dristan's delegates leave. The Remdragon Knight's mission was only to provide military support and they had fulfilled that, so there was no reason to stay in Croix any longer.

They travelled endlessly across vast plains, occasionally passing through well-stocked markets and villages in between the sprouting light green paddy fields. Moving a little north, they encountered a huge ranch where thousands of cattle and sheep grazed. Riftan clicked his tongue upon realizing how wealthy the Duke was. The rumors spreading that the eastern Lord may be wealthier than the King was no exaggeration.

After riding their horses across the lands for four full days, they finally reached the northern wall that bordered the Duke's territory. Beyond the magnificent walls that stood nearly a hundred kvet (30 meters), was the rugged Callic Mountains, marking the end of the gentle plains. The royal capital appeared before their eyes after crossing around three or four hills.

“How long are you planning to stay in the capital?”

Uslin Rikaido drove his horse near and asked as they marched through the castle gates and saw the streets full of spectating people. Riftan glanced at him and replied bluntly.

“I’ll rest for a few days here and leave at once. Anatol has been left empty for too long.”

A hint of dissatisfaction clouded Uslin’s face. “How about staying at the palace for a month instead? A number of nobles will be visiting the capital for the coming spring. I will introduce them to you so that...”

“There’s no need for that. I have no intention of wasting my time on meaningless matters.”

Riftan cut him off, retorting coldly. Hebaron chuckled, watching the scene unfold between the two.

“It seems like the young master of the Rikaido household has been rejected again.”

Uslin glared at him ferociously and swung the reins like a whip, driving his horse at a nervous speed. The servants rushed to assist them as they arrived at the Drakium Palace. After Riftan asked the stable keepers to take good care of their horses that had suffered from the long journey, he headed straight to the throne room.

After a few moments, they kneeled down on one knee, facing the King in a magnificent room donned with a red carpet. Sitting on the throne was King Ruben III, who read through the reports written by Triden with a bored glint in his eyes and then handed it to the servant waiting next to him.

For some reason, the King’s appearance looked younger than the last time he saw him. His scruffy beard had been cleanly shaved off, and his rounded cheeks had thinned out, making his features more distinct and revealing a face that looked like that of someone in their mid-thirties.

Riftan had never met someone so erratic and unpredictable of a figure as Ruben III in his whole life. The man displayed the vigilance of a ninety-year-old man while being fickle as a child, yet the next moment he could show remarkable patience



and generosity whilst acting like a cruel and dull man. Even the older nobles of the palace, aged fifty or sixty, couldn't breathe comfortably in his presence.

Riftan looked up to meet his golden brown eyes, swallowing a sigh that blocked his throat and measuring the atmosphere. King Ruben finally opened his mouth after holding their breaths for a long period of time.

"It took longer than I thought."

"It is as I have reported Your Majesty, the negotiations took a difficult turn as both parties involved their prides."

Triden reasoned in a polite manner. Ruben III stared at him intently, then smiled, agreeing with his statement.

"The stubbornness of Duke Croix is remarkable indeed. Well, what's the situation, the damages?"

"Some areas have been ransacked by the bandits, but they are now almost completely restored. The number of casualties remains the same as the number written on the report."

The king stroked his chin with a thoughtful expression and slowly nodded.

"I am not completely satisfied with the outcome. However, considering that the dispute could have resulted in an all-out war, I would say that you did a great effort." The king mumbled vaguely, his words neither praising nor condemning, then smiled generously. "You've suffered a lot of hard work. You must be tired, rise to your feet. As soon as the Royal Knights arrive, I shall reward everyone. Also, Riftan Calypse, as for you..."

Riftan paused from rising, looking up at the King with a hesitant expression. The king leaned his cheek against his fist and slowly declared.

"There will be an appointment ceremony within the knighthood in a week's time, so don't even dream of leaving immediately."

Riftan's face hardened. He had anticipated this coming his way, but he didn't expect it to be declared so soon. Moreover, not directly in front of the current commander. He looked at Triden, but the leader just tapped his shoulder firmly in

support without saying anything. King Ruben, who gazed down at the scene, further added formally.

“I am aware of the internal rules and traditions of the Remdragon Knights. Do any of you have any objections to my decision?” All of the knights were silent and he waved a hand with a satisfied expression. “I don’t think there is any. If that’s the case, prepare for the ceremony of appointing the position. Now, go forth. You all stink of horses.”

Riftan came out of the throne room and asked his colleagues once again about their opinion. All of them conveyed their answers by nodding their heads silently. A rather cynical thought crossed his mind that even if someone did not agree with his appointment, they wouldn’t dare voice it out in the midst of the grim atmosphere, but Riftan refrained from asking twice. He currently topped the ranks among the Remdragon Knights and the knighthood’s absolute unwritten rule was to be led by the strongest member.

A few days passed and the ceremony of his appointment was held in the presence of the nobled. King Ruben personally headed the ceremony and appointed him. After the trudging appointment, it was then immediately followed by Triden’s retirement ceremony. Rather than feeling a sense of accomplishment, Riftan felt empty and lonely. He never wanted to display those feelings but he felt like he had been pushed out of a sturdy fence upon Triden’s departure, his loneliness becoming nothing but more vivid.

“At last, I’m glad I can finally go home.”

Triden declared, looking at Riftan from over his shoulders as he prepared to head for his estate. The man looked genuinely lighthearted. Riftan replied to him bluntly, desperately suppressing his true feelings.

“I’m relieved that I’m being freed from your nagging.”

“Hmp, do you know that I know you don’t mean that? I can already see your pillowcases drenched from tears when I’m gone.”

Triden teased him. Riftan shot him an irritated look, then reluctantly gave him a small grin.

“Take care of your health.”

“You too.” Viscount Triden mounted his horse and stared at him intently. “You have the potential of being a legendary knight that will go down in history shall you live up to the age of thirty. Please, refrain from being so reckless.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Triden headed to his estate, bringing ten men with him. Riftan stood on the hill with the knights and saw him off. The man who had changed his life went away without looking back, like a passing wind.

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The Remdragon Knights had adapted suitably to their new home. While they took the role of patrolling the areas near the construction sites to defeat monsters, Riftan had to manage the estate funds, figuring out a way to compensate the knights, composed of around three hundred members.

When the conclusion came that the tax collected from the estate could hardly make up for their operating expenses, he embarked on commissioned expeditions to subdue monsters by the lords from the southern areas to earn money. It was practically mercenary activities, but the knights did not give a damn. However, he should not keep operating the territory that way and subject his knights to such activities.

Riftan was sitting at his desk, figuring out ways to expand Anatol’s tax revenues and fulfilling his duties as a Lord, when he received a telegram bearing the royal crest.

“What does it say that you look overbearing? Is it another order for you to be dispatched?”

Ruth asked curiously as he looked at him, who silently sat and eyed the king’s letter for a long time. Riftan sighed and held out the letter to him. The wizard read it with a serious expression, his eyebrows furrowing.

“A matter that should be discussed... what will it be this time?”

Riftan massaged his forehead and shook his head slightly. “I have no idea.”

He stood up and walked to the cage, picking up a pigeon that knew the way to the royal capital and placed it on a perch. Ruth frowned at the sight.

“You’re not thinking of going, are you?”

“I am the King’s vassal. I cannot disobey his orders unless I have an acceptable reason to do so.”

Ruth pulled his hair as Riftan’s point made sense. “Isn’t King Ruben being too much? He has hundreds of vassal knights at hand, why does he always call for Lord Calypse?!”

“I’ll make sure to ask him this time when I go to Drakium Palace.”

Riftan responded insincerely and took out a palm-sized parchment, writing down the date of his departure and the expected day of his arrival and rolled it, placing it in a letter pouch.

Unbeknownst to Ruth, the king’s letter had several hidden codes that indicated the urgency of the matter. There must have been a serious matter that should not be known to the world.

“How about supervising the construction? Are you going to leave that to me again?”

Riftan did not answer and walked to the window, tying the pouch tightly to the pigeon’s leg. Ruth then ran to stand in his way.

“No! You can’t go!”

Ruth shouted firmly; his eyes spread wide open to block him. Riftan looked down at Ruth’s determined face, evident that he would not back down and walked to the other window and sent the pigeon off. Ruth squeaked in agony. Riftan grinned, feeling oddly exhilarated with his reaction and muttered.

“You can’t live off drinking only sweetwater. Right?”

## Chapter 33

Ruth’s shoulders sank as he gazed at the white pigeon flying vigorously to the north. Although Riftan felt a little sorry at the sight, he quickly brushed it off. Perhaps because he did not want to empty the castle either.

He immediately called for the butler to prepare his things and informed the knights of the king's orders to summon him. After the discussions, he decided to leave Anatol as discreetly as possible with Sir Lombardo and Sir Elliot Caron. He had no idea why he was being summoned, but rumors spreading in Whedon that he had been summoned by the king in a rush would not bear any good.

"Please send a messenger as soon as you encounter any grave matter."

Uslin Rikaido said as he wore a firm expression, seeing them off the next morning. Not only him but all the other knights also wore a wary face.

"Something grave must have occurred for him to summon the commander so hurriedly at a time like this. Perhaps, His Majesty is in need of a knight who can naturally patrol outside the royal capital." Uslin added in a serious manner. "That would also require a really skilled knight."

Riftan mounted on his horse, his mind running through the possible matters that would have the king summoning him so urgently. He thought of defamatory tasks that ordinary knights couldn't usually perform... Nothing came to his mind but such things as digging into the filthiness or assassination of prominent aristocrats. He swallowed the cynical thoughts and turned towards the gate's direction.

"I'll look first into the situation and then contact you. In the meantime, take good care of Anatol."

"Leave that to us, there will be nothing to worry about."

He then departed the castle with Caron and Lombardo trailing after him, leaving the other knights behind. As they passed through the villages across golden fields, a red mountain valley filled with fallen leaves stretched in front of them. Riftan traversed the mountains in great speed, wary of monsters attacking them. Leaving the territory of Anatol took him two days despite being in a hurry, as they were attacked by werewolves five times.

After crossing the plains, they stopped by to rest at Count Robern's territory for one night and then rode north for ten full days. Upon arriving at the capital, he appeared almost like a vagrant from the several monster attacks he had to fight through. He was in no way looking decent enough to enter the Palace, but went straight to Drakium still, not causing any delay. Upon showing his identification at the gates, a servant ran out through the gardens to assist them.

"You arrived earlier than we expected."

Riftan jumped off his horse and looked down at him under his hood that was soaked in rain. The heavy rain started pouring at dawn, it fell heavily on the servants' narrow shoulders. The man, who appeared to be quite old-looking, gave the stable keeper a stern look, as if questioning why he still didn't take the reins then turned around.

"Kindly follow me. His Majesty is waiting."

The servant led them to a separate castle fortress located near the eastern hunting ground and not to the main castle and Riftan frowned as they followed after him. Usually, he would be required to take time to dress and appear decently before meeting the king. It made him wonder why the hell the king was acting in such a hurry, making his worries gradually expand.

“Only Sir Calypse can enter the room. We will guide the other two guests to another place so they can rest.”

The man, who had been silently climbing the stairs for a long time, announced as they stopped in front of a room’s door at the end of the third floor’s hallway. Riftan looked at the knights lightly and proceeded to enter the room. The room’s warm heat gently touched his face which was cold due to the rain.

He stood by the doorway, scanning the room slowly. King Ruben was sitting in front of the fireplace, reading a book. Riftan narrowed his eyes at the scene, as the man looked more comfortable than ever. It was too leisurely of a sight for a person who rushed him for an urgent matter. The monarch was dressed in a dark maroon tunic and wide satin pants, his golden hair flowed pleasantly like a lion’s mane.

“You look like a feral hound in the rain, Calypse.”

He slowly lifted his head after turning two pages of the book. Riftan boldly stepped forward, dripping with rainwater in front of him.

“His Majesty asked me to come as soon as possible upon receiving the message. I ran through the rain and fast as the wind as you have ordered.”

“I appreciate your display of loyalty.” The king spat out sarcastically and gestured with a nod to the chair across from him. “First, take off your cloak and have a seat. Better warm yourself by the fire.”

Riftan took off his water-soaked cloak and hung it against the wall, then sat down in the chair. A servant, who was leaning against the wall in the shadows, brought them a bottle of wine and poured it into a glass. Riftan merely glanced at it but didn’t touch the drink. There was an ironic rule not to drink anything in the palace, since it was difficult to distinguish the smell when mixed with drugs.

“Please don’t refrain from telling me what the matter is. What is the reason for summoning me?”

“You still have the same short temper.”

King Reuben leaned back on his chair, the corner of his eyes wrinkling. The look on his face could not be distinguished, it was something between being on the verge of laughter and being offended. Then, as if he decided for the earlier option, the corner of his lips went up and he gestured for the servant to step away.

“Fine. I also do not fancy long pretentions, so I will get straight to the point.” When the servant left after placing bottles of liquors and fruit on the table, the king opened his lips again to speak. “There was a meeting held in Osyria regarding the Peace Treaty among the Seven Kingdoms a few months ago. It is usually a ceremonial gathering, but this time, there was a serious matter at hand that was discussed.”

Riftan waited for him to continue, wearing a serious expression. Ruben, who took a sip from his glass of wine to moisten his lips, resumed with a calm voice. “According to the high priests’ reports, there is a high chance of the evil king of monsters awakening in the Lexos Mountains.”

Riftan did not immediately grasp his words and arched an eyebrow. After a moment of reasoning, a freezing chill ran down his spine as he understood. “Are you saying that the Red Dragon will wake up?”

“To be precise, it is currently waking up.” The king corrected himself in a calm tone and picked up a wine bottle, filling his glass. “As you are aware, the Lexos Mountains have been the dragon’s domain for a long time. No one has been able to set foot on the mountain of fire and break through the barriers placed by that monster for over two hundred years. But a few months ago, strange happenings began to take place near the Lexos Mountains.”

“By strange happenings, you mean...”

“Monsters started coming down from the mountains and attacked humans. This could only mean that there’s something brewing within the barriers. And that’s not all of it, there were fissures forming all over the mountain ranges. The priests claimed that these are all signs leading to the dragon’s awakening.”

The king’s voice took a lower and gloomier tone. “Secto will rise and sow evil in the coming years. We need to come up with a counteract before that happens.”

Riftan’s face darkened. He had never seen a dragon in person, but just reading records about it gave him a clear picture of how terrifying of a monster it was. Merely imagining it before his eyes, the immense monster with near-infinite life, magical powers, and spewing breaths of fire over the world, made him shiver.

“...is that the reason why you have summoned me?”

The king lightly waved his hand upon reading the tension written on Riftan’s face.

“Relax, I’m not asking you to defeat the Red Dragon at once. I summoned you as I needed someone who can traverse the south east’s geography, has most knowledge about monsters, and can keep his lips sealed. I need someone to gather information about the Lexos Mountains before forming an expedition team. It’s difficult to find a knight in Whedon who has much experience as you have. Aside from that, having the Royal Knights do this task has a high probability of attracting the public’s attention.”

The king rubbed his bushy beard with a serious expression. “There will be a huge clamor if news about the dragon awakening spreads. As much as possible, I want to keep this a secret until the expedition team has been formed. Can you be the one who will secretly gather that information?”

Riftan gazed thoughtfully down at the carpet that was stained with rain drops and nodded slowly. “When do you plan to start the expedition?”

“The expedition shall embark less than half a year from now. Secto’s magical power will fully recover in about two or three years. We need to find and destroy the dragon before that happens.”

The Lexos Mountains was a place unknown and untouched by humans for nearly two hundred years. Layers of barriers were built by the dragon and all kinds of ferocious monsters inhabited the area. Breaking through those barriers and beating the monsters would be out of the ordinary.

“How many are you expecting to gather for the expedition?”

“Around 40,000 people. It will probably be the largest punitive force in Whedon and Dristan.”

King Ruben slowly rose from his seat and walked towards the window. He stared quietly at the glass window dripping from the pouring rain and gazed at the gray surroundings for a long time. Then, he turned around and declared.

“I’m intending to entrust this expedition to the Duke’s hands.”

Riftan’s eyes widened at the king’s absurd declaration. He bursts into laughter, picturing the noble man carrying a narrow, bejeweled sword around his waist.

“It’s not going to be easy.”

“I am not disregarding his influence; he is still my vassal. He will need a reasonable excuse to openly disobey my commands.” The king smiled viciously, swirling the glass of wine in his hand.

“However, he won’t be able to find any excuse this time. The Lexos Mountains sit right next to the Duke’s territories. No one can neglect the duty of protecting his land while claiming ownership over it. If the Duke of Croix rejects my command to lead the expedition, a lot of nobles will ridicule him. His current dispute with Dristan will also bring him at a disadvantage.”

“...Will it be his honor, or his life. Which option will it be?”

“He will choose his life.” Ruben stated, certain of his words. “I know him well. He puts his honor first and foremost, but he will never put his life at risk. It won’t be easy sending troops given his current circumstance with Dristan.”



# Chapter 34

A wicked smile spread across the king's lips.

"In the end, the Duke will have no choice but to turn to my mercy. Even if he manages to find a way out of it, it will inflict me no harm. Wouldn't it be delightful to watch the man struggle to escape this predicament?"

"...I didn't know you were deeply displeased with the Duke."

"I have no regard for the gold that the Duke of Croix generates. However, I am profoundly vexed with the tedious conflicts he causes." The king flopped back on his chair and breathed out a long sigh. "It is the third time this year that the Duke's hostile attitude almost erupted into an all-out war. The duke's power needs to dwindle down a bit. I'll make the most out of the opportunity to rein him in."

Riftan swallowed the cynical thoughts that ran through his mind. A monster capable of terrorizing the whole world is currently waking, yet the king is devising an absurd political ploy...

Does everything that goes inside powerful people's minds always involve struggling for ulterior interests? Riftan asked inwardly in disgust.

"May I know the reason why you're revealing this to me?"

"If you will be the one to investigate into the Lexos Mountains, you will have to step into the Duke's territory often. I don't want the Duke to have the time to scheme things when his back is turned. As much as possible, I want you to be careful not to let this information reach his ears."

Even if he made an effort to do as such, it was only a matter of time before that information reached the Duke's ears, given that it had been discussed during the meeting of the Seven Kingdoms for the Peace Treaty. However, instead of pointing that out, Riftan nodded and stood up from his seat.

"I'll make sure to keep that in mind."

"I haven't said that you could rise just yet."

King Reuben grunted while wearing a sullen expression. Riftan bent over and bowed respectfully.

"I wish to change from my rain-soaked clothing and cut our conversation here. Will His Majesty give his humble subject the permission to repose?"

The king's chin began to twitch as if he was about to take offense, but soon waved his hand in resolution. "Fine. I have divulged everything I intend to say, you are dismissed."

Riftan nodded once and gathered his coat that was hanging on the wall and left the room. The sound of the rain grew louder by the moment.

I'll use the rain as an excuse to steer clear for a day or two.

He gazed up at the hazy sky through the hallway windows and quickened his strides. It seemed like winter was going to be rough again that year.

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Dark, jagged mountains peeked through the heavily foggy dense forests like castle towers. Riftan surveyed his surroundings as he patted Talon, who was anxiously stomping. A cold, fierce wind was blowing from all directions and crows seeking prey were perched on the bare tree branches. He looked up at the birds circling above them with displeasure, it looked like they were spying on intruders. The priest accompanying them, who kept looking around the whole time, declared with a sullen expression.

"I think we should head back. The barriers are too strong, this is the farthest we can go."

"We can't go back when we've come this far. If there's no passing through this path, we should find another way."

"It's no use. We have wandered in the same area for four days. A powerful magic is intervening, I cannot find the way into the mountains with my sole ability."

Although he was dismayed, the priest was right. They hovered around the same place over and over again. Despite carefully navigating using the sun for direction, they will eventually come to sense and find themselves moving in the opposite direction.

Riftan turned his head to look at the faces of Elliot Caron and Lombardo. Neither of them seemed to show any signs of exhaustion, but they had to be tired from camping and fighting frequently with monsters for over fifteen days. He eventually sighed in resignation and turned his horse around.

"Fine. Let's head back to town for now."

When the priest heard that they were getting out of there, he extended his arms toward the skies and murmured a prayer of gratitude. Riftan turned a blind eye to the scene and spurred his horse. Fortunately, they were able to escape from the forests swiftly, as if the magical forces lurking did not intervene as they headed back.

"What do we do now?"

Elliot, who was tightly keeping his lips shut, asked as a small town surrounded by walls appeared at the foot of the hills. Riftan answered bluntly, steering his horse towards the gates.

“First, we shall wait for the other surveyors to arrive. They may be bearing new information.”

It had been three weeks since he was sent to the southeast, but all that he had discovered was the strong magic interlaced in the foggy forests surrounding the Lexos Mountains. He wasn't even able to find a way to get through the woods.

After verifying his identity with the gatekeeper, Riftan entered the village and settled in an inn called “The Wayfarer's House.” It was a dingy and noisy place, but much information could be gathered from the 30 mercenaries staying there. They sat in the corner of the tavern, filling their stomach with food so awful it was suitable for being fed to the pigs. Most conversations were composed of profanities, jeers, and obscenities. But occasionally, he was able to overhear useful information that revealed the kinds of monsters appearing in certain areas.

In the midst of observing the mercenaries, quenching his thirst with a bland beer, four men with burly physiques entering the inn caught his eye. Riftan's eyes narrowed. The men, who seemed to be looking for someone, walked towards the table where he was sitting.

“Are you Sir Riftan Calypse of the Remdragon Knights?”

The oldest of the men asked. Riftan eyed him warily from head to toe. The man was dressed in clean clothes and fine armor. “What purpose do you have with me?”

“I heard rumors about people who look like knights roaming around the southeastern borders, so I came here to find you. I didn't know that you are actually the commander of the Remdragon Knights...” The man dragged a chair next to their table without seeking permission. “What is the king's vassal doing in a place like this? This is the Duke's territory. It isn't a good place to wander about without any permission.”

“You still haven't introduced yourself yet.” Lombardo, who had been quietly drinking, proclaimed his displeasure.

The man shrugged and revealed his identity with an annoyed expression on his face. “I am the Duke of Croix's vassal; my name is Jared Bayern. This estate is under my jurisdiction.”

“I apologize for not asking for your understanding prior to coming here. However, we did not come here to cause trouble.”

Riftan replied bluntly and placed a glass down in front of him as a gesture of goodwill. The man glanced down at the murky ale, then shot Riftan a wary look.

“I heard that you have been wandering around the misty forests the past few weeks. What the hell are you up to?”

“You’re overthinking this. I’m only here to earn money from commissions.”

Riftan snorted lightly and ordered more food from the passing waiter. Jared Bayern asked him back with a puzzled expression.

“Commissions...?”

“From hunting monsters. I heard rumors that monsters appearing in this area are worth a valuable amount of money, so I immediately led my men here. But it was all just bullshit. Over the past few weeks, I’ve encountered nothing but goblins and undead creatures. It brought me nothing but great damage.”

A glint of content clouded the man’s face. “I’ve heard rumors about you hunting monsters in the western regions... but I didn’t expect that you would come all the way to the east.”

“I’m not going to cover it up, I’m in a tough financial situation.”

Riftan spat out, not showing any sign of shame and poured the rest of the ale into his mouth. Bayern looked at him blankly and then shook his head.

“Please be more careful with your words. Sir Calypse is the king’s vassal. Until when do you intend to act like a mercenary and continue tarnishing the king’s name?”

Elliot grabbed the hilt of his sword in a fit of rage at the man’s presumptuous admonitions. Riftan lightly kicked his boots as warning and replied in a sullen tone.

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear you.”

The knight coughed lightly, sensing the tense atmosphere. “Anyway, get up from your seats. I shall take you to my castle.”

“I appreciate the favor, but I’ll have to decline. I still have men who have not yet returned.”

“I will tell the rest of the party to come to my castle when they return. So, please get up now. The king’s favored knight shouldn’t be left staying in such a shabby place.”

Riftan spoke word for word, expressing his annoyance. “Once again, I’ll have to decline. I came here on a personal matter. I have no intention of being in debt to the Duke.”

A look of embarrassment passed over the man’s face at his stubborn refusal. Riftan sighed lightly, guessing that there was an ulterior motive to his invite.

“If there is any favor that you want to ask of me, please tell me now. I’ll gladly accept it if it’s not too difficult, let it serve as my apology for wandering around your territory.”

“...it’s not that difficult of a favor.”

Bayern picked up a glass of ale with a grim expression and took a sip to moisten his lips, then grimaced as if he had never had such a terrible drink. He quickly took out his handkerchief and wiped the corner of his lips and mumbled.

“If it’s not too burdensome, I would like to ask for you to stop by the Croix Castle on your way back and deliver my present for the engagement.”

Riftan’s body turned stiff as a stone, holding a cup in his hand. His heart felt like it had fallen to his feet for a moment. He gazed down at the empty cup with a distant look and slowly asked him back.

“...engagement present?”

“Rumors are flying around about a marriage involving the Duke’s household and the Royal Family. I wish to extend a small present to serve as my congratulations to the Lord.”

“Which one is it?”

“Huh?”

Riftan slowly breathed out. “I meant which one got engaged.”

Perhaps thinking that he asked out of mere curiosity, Bayern shrugged lightly and responded to his question indifferently. “It doesn’t matter which one got engaged. What’s important is that there will be a union between those households, right?”

Riftan suppressed the urge to grab him by the collar and make him remember clearly who got engaged with force. He remembered that Maximillian Croix would have a hard time marrying into the royal family because she had a weak health, so maybe it was the younger sibling. However, if it happened to be her...

“Will you accept the favor I ask of you?”

Riftan swallowed the profanities rising in his throat. Even though he felt like he was falling into a fire pit, a surprisingly composed voice came out of his lips.

“Fine. I’ll stop by the castle on my way back.”

## Chapter 35

“Thank you. I wish to visit and send my present in person if I can, but I can’t leave the territory unprotected given the sudden increase of monsters attacking.” The knight stood up from his seat

with an eased smile, as if satisfied with achieving a favor. “Well then, please visit my castle before you leave.”

As Bayern went outside with his men, Riftan climbed up the second floor to avoid the curious gazes of the mercenaries. Elliot Caron quickly chased and questioned after him.

“Why did you accept to do a favor for such a rude knight?”

“It just happened to turn out like that. It’s a great opportunity to investigate whether the Duke has noticed something.”

“But... you might get subjected to unnecessary interrogations.”

“I can afford to handle that.”

Riftan responded curtly at his subordinate, whose eyes were filled with anxiety, and entered his room.

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When the rest of the party arrived, Riftan stopped by the Bayern Castle as he promised and took with him twenty-one fox furs and seven rolls of silk, then headed to Croix Castle. Pulling the wagon took two more days than usual, but it enabled him to enter the Duke’s manor without much suspicion. Riftan merely pointed to the wagon branded with the Bayern crest whenever the guards expressed doubts about his sudden visit.

“I was visiting the southeastern region and happened to accept a favor of delivering the engagement presents for the Duke’s daughter.”

After the guards checked the wagon, the gates were opened at once. Riftan led his knights into the magnificent gates, resolutely entering the Croix Castle. The pale winter sunlight shone brightly against the white castle with a silver light.

“Please come this way.”

Soldiers carrying long spears escorted them from both sides as they were led to the castle. After a while, the butler came out of the castle and checked the presents they brought in the wagon.

“These are all valuable items. The Duke will be delighted.”

“These presents were from his vassal knight. I was merely asked to deliver them.” Riftan bluntly declared with a nod and mounted off his horse.

The butler pretended not to hear his words and continued calmly. “The long journey must have been tiring, I shall guide you to your rooms so you could rest.”

The servants came rushing after the butler's orders. Riftan unconsciously shifted his eyes around as he followed the servants. Then, he realized who he was trying to find and smiled bitterly to himself.

Where the hell is your mind wandering to in this kind of situation? Despite ridiculing himself as such, he couldn't stop searching for her.

"Please let me know if you need anything."

As soon as Riftan entered the spacious room with its fireplace already lit, he removed his armor piece by piece. Soon, the servants brought him a tub filled with hot water for a bath. After he drove all the servants out, who were reluctant to leave their duty of taking care of his bath, he washed his hair and body with soap, cleaning off all the sweat and dust off his body. Then, he took out the cleanest tunic he packed and wore it. Just then, a knock resounded on the door.

"Excuse me, Sir Calypse. The duke of Croix summons you. Will you spare a moment of your time?"

"I am in the midst of changing my clothing. Hold on for a while."

Riftan put on his trousers and hung his sword around his waist, then pulled the door open. The butler gave him a stern look, as if scrutinizing whether his appearance was decent enough to appear before the Duke, then began to lead the way.

"Come on in."

Riftan then followed him into the reception. Croix was standing tall in front of the tapestry embroidered with the figure of Isaac and colorful fishes. As the butler quietly closed the doors and left them, the Duke, who was staring out the window, slowly turned around to face him.

"It has been a while, Calypse. I heard you delivered the presents from my vassal." Contrary to his soft manner of speaking, his eyes were chillingly cold. "You went through a lot of trouble."

"I heard that there is a celebration within the household. Jared Bayern regrets not being able to meet you personally and give his regards." Riftan pretended not to notice his inquisitive gaze and responded in a dry tone. "I happened to be passing by the south eastern region and he asked me to grant this favor to him."

"You happened to be passing by the southeast, huh..." The Duke repeated his words sarcastically, his thin lips pulling up to a smirk. "It makes me deeply curious as to why you happened to pass by that area. From what I know, your estate is located in the far corner of the south west."

“I am a knight, as you are aware of. It’s not my nature to stay still in one place.” Riftan spat out his excuse that he had prepared in advance. “I was hunting monsters and ended up going all the way to the east.”

The Duke’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. Riftan read his expression, noticing that the he had yet to notice what was going on in the Lexos Mountains. If he knew that the dragon was waking up from his slumber, he would have no reason to summon him and have this conversation.

Riftan turned the topic around, avoiding fueling his suspicions. “I would have prepared a congratulatory present for the engagement had I not been wandering around hunting monsters. Please, forgive me for coming empty-handed.”

“The engagement is yet to be official.” The Duke declared, stroking his beard. “Although it is true that the Royal Household has come to arrange a marriage, as you know, His Majesty the Prince is merely ten years old. It seems that the rumors spread about holding a matrimonial ceremony after the prince has finished his studies abroad, engagement presents came pouring from all over the place. It has placed me in a tough spot as well.”

Riftan would have bet his entire fortune that the Duke had deliberately spread those rumors; there would have been no way for the stories to spread beyond the Royal Palace borders otherwise, but he swallowed the cynical thoughts and continued to speak as respectfully as he could manage.

“In any case, it is true that there is something to celebrate. Since a good marriage is bound for your eldest daughter...”

“Second daughter.” The Duke immediately corrected him. “It is my second daughter who will be married into the Royal household, Rosetta Croix.”

Riftan was unaware of how tense he was until he heard the Duke’s reply. He tried to appear calm. “Either way, being married into a good household is something worth celebrating.”

“I appreciate your kind words.”

The Duke let out a restrained sigh and sat gracefully on a satin chair. His suspicions about Riftan wandering in the southeast seem to have dissipated as the doubtful expression disappeared from his face.

“You may go ahead and take your leave. I just wanted to know the reason why you were wandering around my territory.”

Riftan silently turned around, but as soon he reached the door, his feet felt as if they were stuck to the floor and he couldn’t move. He held the doorknob and swallowed dryly. It may be the younger sibling betrothed this time, but it may be a different story in the future. She was a noble woman of a prestigious family, people desiring to have her as his bride overflows in this land.



One day, she would also marry the eldest son of a prestigious noble family. He wanted to be able to reach her at least once before that happens. Riftan couldn't resist the intense urge and turned to face the Duke again, who stared at him threateningly, his eyes foreboding.

"What is it?"

"...I have a personal request to ask of you, your grace." The Duke's forehead wrinkled, and his eyebrows gathered like earthworms. He stared at Riftan for a long time with sharp eyes, trying to dig into his intentions, then smirked. "Tell me about it."

Despite being granted permission, he couldn't find the right words easily. He had never felt so daunted even before the King. He licked his parched lips, barely opening his mouth.

"I would like to dedicate my geth... to your eldest daughter."

The Duke's eyes opened wide with unexpected shock. Riftan held his breath as he waited for his answer. Those words were always running through his head, but he never had the intention of it escaping from his lips. Traditionally, geth's were oaths dedicated to a lord's wife or children.

Croix was in the midst of a battle of nerves with the Royal Household given the engagement, offering his geth to the Duke's eldest daughter could be interpreted as an act of disloyalty to the Royal family. However, he wanted to reach her despite that risk. Even if it was just once, he wanted to kiss the hem of her dress and be able to call her name.

Riftan could no longer bear the long and heavy silence and repeated his question. "Will you allow me to dedicate my knight's oath to your eldest daughter?"

"...for what intention are you making this request?" The duke questioned, his eyes narrowing in suspicion.

Riftan's face hardened. "A geth can only be given once in a knight's lifetime. No knight shall use his geth to accomplish other intentions."

"Are you saying that you merely intend to display your pure honorable respect to my daughter?"

The Duke of Croix smiled as if he were dumbfounded. "I can't believe it."

"I'm just..."

"First of all, I don't believe that you have the honors of a knight."

Riftan's whole body stiffened at the sudden humiliation. The Duke picked up his glass of wine, moistened his lips, and continued in an annoyed voice.

“Honor can only be passed down generations. Just because you are a little capable of wielding a sword doesn’t mean you have it, it is not something you can earn overnight.”

“I am... a knight who received his title from Whedon’s ruler in front of the church. There is no reason for me to hear such insults.”

“I am not trying to insult you. I’m merely stating the truth. It’s not fair for you to assume that you have earned the same honor as a real noble just because you were given His Majesty’s favor and blessing.” The duke clicked his tongue at him as if he was genuinely pitiful. “You must be trying to use me to build your position, but you better put aside those hopeless expectations. I have no intention of having you near me nor my daughter.”

Riftan flushed at his savage insults. He knew ever since that the Duke despised him, but he never expected to be ridiculed so openly. Croix ushered his head to him arrogantly while he was still standing at loss for words.

“If that’s all you have to say, get out and leave. I am tired.”

Riftan clenched his fists so tightly that his nails dug into his skin, then he turned around and left the reception. His whole body trembled with anger from the humiliation.

He strode down the stairs, his jaw clenched tightly. At that moment, his eyes caught Maximillian Croix climbing up from the bottom of the stairs. Riftan stopped in his tracks and stood tall. She also paused from her movement as if she also saw him and hunched her shoulders.

The look of fear in her eyes clawed his heart more fiercely than ever before. Riftan felt the anger scorching inside his chest turn into frustration. She stood closely to the wall with a terrified expression. Riftan, who was staring at her, descended down the stairs.

He felt like a miserable beggar who was thrown out while he was begging.

## Chapter 36

The harshest winter ever had arrived as Riftan persisted in rebuilding Anatol like a man possessed by an evil demon. However, no matter how much the castle was repaired and how many walls he erected, he couldn’t build his crumbled self-esteem back.

Riftan stood at the top of the frontal castle walls, his jaw clenched as he gazed over the frozen earth. Whenever he closes his eyes, Duke Croix’s scornful eyes flashed in his memories and whenever his head touched the pillow, the girl’s frightened face appeared before him. He rubbed his face roughly, feeling terribly regretful for tolerating such insults thrown at him.

Now he really had to escape from his fleeting fantasies. He wasn’t even allowed to kneel before her. His useless thoughts had to be put to an end now. Riftan repeated that to himself over and

over again. Maximillian Croix was no longer a comfort to his loneliness, whenever he thought of her now, he felt a bitter pain.

If you were born like a waste for the ground, you have to live your life looking only at the ground. Looking up will make you nothing but wretched.

His stepfather's words sank deep into his bones. Her presence made him nothing but more miserable. He would live the rest of his life in a painful void as long as he couldn't elude his longing for her. Solely because of a woman he couldn't have by his side, he had to suffer from excruciating loneliness until the day he died.

Really, it must stop now.

He didn't want to make a fool out of himself any longer, vowing never to set a foot in Croix ever again. He would cease going in and out of the Duke's estate just to chase her with his eyes and catch a glimpse of the woman who looked at him like he was some insect.

Riftan descended from the castle walls and stepped towards his desolate castle, praying that bearing the humiliation he received from the Duke could etch an anger deep enough in his heart to erase her presence from his mind....

Several months passed and as the peak temperatures of winter subsided and rumors began spreading that the dragon in the Lexos Mountains was waking up. As expedition teams were slaughtered in the foggy forests, each kingdom started earnestly establishing troops for the dragon subjugation.

As thousands of soldiers camped near the Lexos Mountain, King Ruben's predictions came to be and a great commotion ensued. The people became terrified, packing up their belongings and migrating north. An endless procession of commoners marched over the frozen grounds, making landlords face a struggle on cracking down serfs who fled.

Out of everyone, it was the Duke of Croix who caught the sniff of the fire most. Riftan's forehead creased as he read the reports brought by informants. When the dispatch order was issued to the Duke of Croix, he gathered his vassals, convening for countermeasures. He wondered how the cunning man would wriggle his way out of this predicament.

Riftan's lips lifted cynically as he threw the parchment into the furnace. The flames in it soared, lighting up the barracks in an instant. He shredded some firewood and piled it on the fire, making sure that the parchment would burn to ashes, and walked out of the tent to gaze at the sky where the breaking dawn had begun to light up. A bluish shadow hovered over the foggy forests.

The lords of the western lands of Whedon were not exempted from the dispatch order. Rather, they were tasked to guard the monsters from crossing the borders. Hundreds of thousands of monsters lurked in the Lexos Mountains and soon, they would attempt to migrate to avoid the most powerful monster. It became the lords' duty to prevent them from invading the lands of Whedon.

“Sir Calypse, a messenger has arrived from Croix Castle.”

As he was inspecting the temporarily built barriers, a soldier rushed up to him, shouting. Riftan arched an eyebrow.

“For what reason does a messenger from Croix Castle look for me?”

“I haven’t heard the details. The messenger insists on delivering his message directly to you…”

Riftan’s eyes narrowed and he spoke in a cold voice. “Tell him to wait. I have yet to finish patrolling.”

The soldier appeared perplexed at his response, but Riftan merely ignored him and went towards the watchtower. The sun was rising slowly over the dark mountain peaks.

Not far from now, tens of thousands of soldiers would begin marching in there, putting all their lives on the line. There was no telling how many would be able to come back alive. He gazed at the twelve mountain peaks that towered on the skies, taking a sip from his flask to moisten his lips. Hundreds of soldiers had already lost their lives trying to enter through the dragon’s barriers. He couldn’t imagine how much more dead bodies would pile on top of that in the future.

“Sir Calypse, the messenger is repeatedly demanding to see you immediately.”

When the sun reached the middle of the sky, the soldier went up to him again, urging, and Riftan frowned. He was actually considering ignoring it, but he wanted to avoid causing any unnecessary issue in the midst of that kind of situation, so he just let out a sigh.

“I’m going now.”

The soldier led him straight to the messenger who was in the barracks. The messenger of the Duke Croix, greeted him with a furious expression, having waited for nearly half of the day.

“I have been traveling endlessly for three nights and three days to meet you.” He listened as the man stroked his bushy beard, not even giving him a proper greeting. “The Duke wouldn’t be pleased if he knew that I was kept waiting like this.”

Riftan glared at him frighteningly. “I was commanded by the King to defend the borders, keeping evil creatures from invading this land. Are you saying that the Duke’s message is more important than the King’s command?”

The man’s mouth parted as if he was going to try and refute his words, but soon closed it again. After a moment of silence, he spoke in a softer tone.

“There are thousands of soldiers camping here. Even with the Lord’s short absence, the defenses will not immediately be broken down.”

“I have only prioritized the task I had to do.” Riftan’s face expressed annoyance. “Instead of wasting time on complaining, tell me what it is you need. What brings you here?”

“...you must have heard that His Majesty has entrusted the command of the dragon subjugation to the Duke.” The messenger said in a subdued tone, as if suppressing his displeasure. “For that reason, I was sent to deliver a proposal to Sir Calypse.”

“...a proposal?”

Riftan asked in a growling tone, deciding to refuse anything he had to propose at once. He narrowed his eyes, it was truly dumbfounding. After spewing such insults to his face, he never thought that he would hear a proposal from him.

“What in the world is he proposing?”

The messenger, who held his tongue for a long moment, opened his mouth barely, seemingly fed up with Riftan’s hostile attitude.

“His excellency... is proposing to give you his eldest daughter, Maximillian Croix, as a bride if your lordship will take over the command of the dragon subjugation.”

“...what?”

Riftan’s mouth opened blankly. He didn’t fully comprehend what the messenger was saying. The messenger continued to speak calmly before him, half pent up.

“This is a vital mission that will determine the fate of the western region. He intends to assign this task to the most experienced and capable warrior among others.”

“...are you talking about me?”

“His excellency has high regards for your abilities.”

Riftan’s lips lifted to a smirk. It made him wonder how thick of a face the Duke had that he was offering him such a discrete proposal to him, it felt more like an insult. The right thing to do was leave the barracks right that instant.

However, as if his legs were trapped, he remained motionless. Riftan rubbed his hand over his forehead roughly. The arrogant voice of the messenger pierced through his head that had hardened like cement.

“Isn’t it a great honor to have the Duke’s eldest daughter as your bride? It’s a proposal that has never been offered before.”

“Then... should I be grateful and say thank you?”

Riftan retorted between his gritted teeth. His anger only grew at the Duke’s arrogance, who tried to take advantage of him and tried to appear generous. How ridiculous did the Duke see him that he had the guts to offer that to him? His eyes felt like they would turn red in shame. What shamed him the most was that his feelings wavered like it was out of his control.

He clenched his fists tightly. He would never be able to forgive himself for the dilemma that he was having. The proposal was not even worth considering. It wasn’t only about risking his life alone, the fate of the Remdragon Knights and Anatol would also hang by a thread. Would he force the knights to follow his command just to satisfy his greed? Riftan clenched his teeth so hard that it felt like his jaw was going to break any moment.

Moreover, Maximillian Croix despised him. She would desire a better groom, a better man who wasn’t an illegitimate, half-blood child from a peasant background. Riftan spat out his words, it was as if blood would also come out with it.

“I refuse.”

Spitting those words out felt harder than anything he had gone through in his whole life. Riftan’s eyes were stuck to the ground silently, it was as if a huge hole was punched through his chest. As he lifted his gaze slowly, he saw the messenger’s face harden in anger. The man spoke threateningly.

“Are you refusing the opportunity to build a deep connection with the Duke’s household?”

“I have a land and people whom I hold the responsibility for.” Riftan spat out callously. “Tell this to the Duke. ‘Keep your honor to yourself’.”

The man stared at him coldly then slowly got up from his seat. “I shall deliver your message to him. However, you will regret the words you said today.” The messenger started to move towards the exit and clicked his tongue like he pitied him. “The Duke achieves anything he puts his mind on. It would have been better for you to have accepted his offer obediently.”

Riftan opened the exit to let him step out of the barracks. The man ducked his head and walked out. As the sound of the messenger’s footsteps grew farther away, he felt like he was falling into a distant place.

Riftan bit his lips ’till it bled, suppressing the urge to go after him immediately.

That went well. Really, well done. Riftan thought to himself.

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“I have always known that he’s a shameless human being, but this is beyond my imagination.”

Hebaron, who heard of what had happened during the day, shook his head like what happened was so absurd. The Duke’s proposal quickly spread amongst the knights through the mouths of the soldiers who guarded the barracks. All the knights spat out words about the duke’s arrogance.

“Even King Ruben would have not expected that man to be that cunning.”

## Chapter 37

“Trying to pass his duties onto others... it seems he doesn’t have any shame!” Uslin, who was basking in the warmth of the bonfire, exclaimed in contempt. “Making a big deal out of the honor of marrying his daughter and offering such an arrogant proposal. Arrogant son of a...”

“The Duke is old, so he must have been intending to have a son-in-law take over his duties.” Gabel Laxion, who was sitting next to him while sipping wine, let out a sigh. “But why would he not have his vassals be his option and make such a proposal to Sir Calypse?”

“He wanted to avoid being despised by his vassals.” Ruth, who was gazing at the bonfire silently with a thoughtful face, spoke. “The absolute loyalty of vassal knights is vital to protect the vast territories of the east. There will be no good in drawing out their backlash. Moreover, there are still several lords in western Dristan who are eyeing the territory of the Duke. It would bring a disadvantage for the Duke’s military forces to weaken.”

“So... he’ll make the Remdragon Knights solve it for him?” Hebaron growled like an angry bear. “There’s a limit to making fun of people.”

“What do you think he will do now?” Elliot asked, looking at Riftan who sat frighteningly quiet. “Now that the commander has rejected the offer, do you think he’ll try and offer the proposal to another lord?”

“Tell him to scour all the lands in Whedon and see! What kind of fool would gladly go and lose a limb for him?” Hebaron snorted audibly.

Riftan’s lips hardened. That fool will be Maximillian Croix’s husband. The mere thought of having another man stand beside her made his heart ache like it had been stabbed with a knife. Riftan muttered out his words coldly.

“He has no other option so he will probably pass his duties onto one of his vassal knights.” No one thought that any man would embark himself in fighting the dragon and Riftan thought the same. He continued to speak as he poked the bonfire with a long branch. “Then, the Duke of Croix will have no other choice but to depend on the royal military more than ever, this will cause the Duke’s power in the east to weaken just as the king wishes to happen.”

King Ruben had already been pressuring the nobles of the west and north. No lord would desire to go on an expedition on behalf of Duke Croix, even if they did not favor the king. Riftan smiled wryly. The Duke of Croix was clearly aware of that fact, that was the reason why he opted to make such an offer to Riftan, but he flat out rejected it. The man must have thought that a knight from a humble background would have been enticed by his generous offer and risked his life.

I almost took his offer... Riftan scoffed at himself and stood from his seat.

“Enough of this talk. Whatever the Duke is planning for, we must just continue to do what we were tasked to do.”

“You want us to shut our mouths after all that humiliation?” Hebaron asked in a burst of rage. “He made such a ridiculous proposal and threatened you as if he was the one insulted! You want us to just put up with it?”

“So, what if I just put up with it?” Riftan glared fiercely at him. “What am I to do, gather an army and launch an attack against the Duke?”

Everyone became silent at his reaction. Only then that he realized that it was him who held the most anger out of them. Riftan got up and went away before any of them spoke further. The dark night sky scattered a faint light from the stars over him.

Looking up at the pale full moon, Riftan trudged towards the barracks. An ominous premonition ran through his thoughts, thinking that he would not be able to sleep soundly for a while. However, one day, the feelings he was currently feeling would probably fade away. Anyway, he had no other choice but to believe that they would.

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The visit of the Duke’s messenger soon disappeared from the knights’ minds, they were faced with a bigger problem than that. The magic of the dragon became more powerful as days passed by and the number of monsters descending from the mountain increased daily.

It was difficult to dwell on the Duke’s brazenness in a situation where they had to camp in front of the misty forest day through night and battle against monsters. On top of that, they also had to solve the shortage of supplies and manpower, while gathering information from the Lexos Mountains.

Riftan massaged his throbbing temples as he wrote reports to send to the king. If an expedition wasn’t sent as soon as possible, defeating the dragon would only become increasingly difficult. The priests who were dispatched to investigate the barriers surrounding the Lexos Mountains all confirmed that the dragon’s magical powers were recovering at a much faster rate than expected. If they didn’t act immediately, a great disaster would surely fall upon them. Riftan wrote as such in the report and asked for additional reinforcements and supplies, before marking it with the stamp of the knights.



Truthfully, he wanted to convince him that it was not the time to engage in a frivolous war of wits with the Duke Croix, but he was putting up in fear of causing an uproar within the king's aides. Riftan sighed heavily and rolled up the report, tying it securely with a string. As he stood from his seat to give his report to the messenger, he heard Elliot Caron's voice suddenly call out from outside the barracks.

"Sir Calypse, we found a tramp hiding in the barracks... what should we do with him?"

Riftan arched an eyebrow. It wasn't unusual for tramps to hide in the barracks in hopes of stealing food, he should be able to deal with the person according to military instructions without needing to inform him.

Riftan exclaimed annoyingly. "Are you now asking me for a decision because you can't handle a thief yourself?"

"But...the little guy is causing a ruckus about meeting Sir Calypse..."

Riftan's eyes narrowed. "He's looking for me?"

"He said to tell Sir Calypse that he is Novan's son and you would know."

Riftan strode out of the barracks, his spine immediately turning cold. "Where is this boy?"

"...he's over that way."

Caron immediately took the lead and started walking. Riftan frowned when he found the boy kneeling near a wall made of logs. Even though he only had seen the boy once a few years ago, he immediately recognized that he was the son of his stepfather. The boy glared rebelliously at the soldiers with defiance, as if trying to hide his fear. Then, when he saw him coming, he jumped up from the ground.

"That's him! I came here to find him!"

"How dare you point a finger!"

The soldier shouted and pressed him against the ground with one hand. Riftan immediately restrained the soldier.

"I know this boy. Let go of him."

As the soldier took a step back, the boy dusted off his clothes and stood up, raising his chin to look at him. Riftan gazed at his pale, bruised face bitterly.

"What the hell are you doing in a place like this? Did you come here knowing you would end up this way if you were caught hiding in the barracks?"

“I, I was just trying to meet you...” The boy immediately hunched his shoulders as if he was intimidated by his menacing attitude and then soon shouted in defiance. “I couldn’t help it! Y-You are the reason why my father was put in jail!”

“This brat, how dare you raise your voice!”

The soldier hit the boy’s head mercilessly and pushed him to kneel against the ground. Riftan glared at the soldier angrily. The soldier flinched and hurriedly stepped back. Riftan helped the boy stand and urged him with questions.

“What do you mean? Explain it in detail.”

“Because of the gold coins y-you gave me... my father was falsely accused of stealing...”

The boy couldn’t speak clearly as he was overwhelmed with sorrow and burst into tears. Riftan uttered curses inwardly. Even if he didn’t hear the whole story, he already had an idea of what had happened.

“Who was the one who accused your father?”

“I d-don’t know. All of a sudden, men dressed in armor came into our house and dragged my father to Croix Castle. He will be hanged within a month.” The boy continued to speak desperately, swallowing down his tears. “If you don’t testify, my father is going to die.”

Riftan’s back stiffened at the foreboding terror that instantly dawned on him.

“...how were you able to get here?”

“What does that matter! My father...” The boy, who was weeping loudly, flinched at his harsh gaze. “A man in an a-armor brought me here.”

Riftan turned to look at the soldiers, but they all shook their heads. “We didn’t see anyone else aside from this boy.”

“I’m telling the t-truth! He told me that I’ll find you if I come here... he took me to the forest and then left.” The boy gazed up at him pleadingly. “You’re going to save my father, right? My father didn’t steal anything, you know that too.”

Riftan’s hands tightened into a fist, it felt like his stomach was turning upside down in anger. The warning that the Duke’s messenger left him echoed in his head. Riftan stood him upright and nodded to the soldier that was standing behind him.

“Take this child right away and heal his wounds.”

“I’m fine! First, my father...!”

“Nothing will happen to your father. I’ll act on it immediately so you should go and get treatment.”

“R-really? Can I really trust you?”

The boy wiped his bloodshot eyes with his fists, asking again and again. Riftan couldn’t bring himself to look directly into his eyes and nodded bluntly, then strode towards where he had tied his horse. Elliot Caron quickly trailed after him.

“Who is that child? What the hell is going on?”

Riftan glanced back at him and mounted himself on the saddle placed on the back of his horse. He could not leave the camp without giving any explanation. He confessed in a heavy voice.

“That boy is the son of my stepfather.”

“Stepfather?” Elliot asked in a trance.

Riftan nodded his head bluntly. “Yes, I think my stepfather was framed and then put to jail. I will be heading to Croix Castle for the meantime, so please explain the situation to the others.”

It was then that Caron’s face hardened to a serious expression as if he had just understood the situation. “Was it the duke’s scheme?”

“...perhaps.” Riftan clenched his teeth and sat upright on the saddle.

Caron stood in his way. “You should not go alone. We shall accompany you.”

“...this is a personal matter.”

“Sir Calypse is the commander of the Remdragon Knights. Your problem is also our problem.” Elliot refuted with an unusual angry expression.

Riftan grabbed the reins and glared at him fiercely. “Move out of the way, now.”

Elliot folded his arms in front of his chest, determined not to step away. “If other members of the knighthood face a problem, will Sir Calypse also sit still?”

Riftan gripped the reins tightly and grinded his teeth. He didn’t like the idea of it, but it would be better to take his men in order to protect his stepfather and his family. Eventually, he placed his stubbornness aside.

“Fine. Come.”

Caron breathed a sigh of relief. “I’ll go inform the others.”

# Chapter 38

Upon hearing about the situation, all the knights were eager to come and accompany him. After firmly restraining the knights who were all furiously riled up, he left for Croix with Uslin, Elliot, Ruth, and three other squires.

Anger and anxiety raged within him as he rode fast on his horse over the frozen lands. Riftan spurred and rode relentlessly until all the horses were exhausted and reached a creek for them to take a rest.

“Speaking of which... How did the Duke of Croix find the stepfather of Sir Calypse?”

Elliot asked in a careful tone as he lowered the saddle from the back of his horse. Riftan took out his flask of water and moistened his lips, then answered in a heavily somber tone.

“He must have investigated my past.”

The Duke of Croix had a wide source of informants, that stretched not only in the eastern regions but also in the west. If he dug up information from people who dealt with peasant families, he would find out about his past without any difficulty. Moreover, it was widely known that he was once a member of the Black Horn Mercenaries and there was a good chance that he started his probing from them.

It's not challenging to find the family of a mixed-raced child who had once ran away from the Duke's territory. Riftan gritted his teeth at the Duke's vicious schemes and regretted his complacency.

“Don't you think someone who was simply after the gold coins framed him?”

“If that's the case, there should be no reason for him to bring that noisy little boy into our barracks and leave him there.”

Uslin rebutted bluntly as he sat on one side and filled his stomach with jerky. Elliot quietly bit his mouth shut. They filled their stomachs in heavy silence and then began to travel again on horseback. They went on for five days until they reached the Duke's estate, barely having enough rest for their horses.

Riftan went over to his stepfather's house first. As he entered the dilapidated door, broken pieces of claypots, housewares, an overturned brazier, and a black blanket tangled on the floor in a corner caught his eyes one after the other. Riftan looked around the cold shack and gave orders to the knights accompanying him.

“Go down the village and find out where the other people who lived here went. My stepfather's wife must be carrying a little girl with her.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Riftan watched as the squires ran towards the village and then led the rest of his men up the hill. The gatekeepers of Croix Castle opened the gates as if they were expecting his arrival. He walked through the gates and looked around sharply. There were knights donned in metal armor guarding the walls, and even more guards were standing on the sides of the wide road leading towards the great hall. It was clearly meant to be a threat.

“What matter brings the lord here?”

The butler came forward to greet them when they reached the front of the main castle. Riftan dismounted from his horse and spat out his words coldly.

“I want to meet with the Duke.”

“It will be difficult to do that if you come here without informing us beforehand.”

At the butler’s blunt reply, Uslin became furious and strode forward. Riftan held out his arm to restrain him and repeated his request.

“Tell the Duke that I’m requesting his audience.”

The butler straightened his posture and looked at them arrogantly then slowly turned away. “Wait here for a moment.”

Then, he slipped into the hall, leaving them to stand idly at the entrance. Uslin’s face became violently distorted by the blatant disrespect displayed towards them.

“This is not the way to treat the King’s vassals!”

The knight who was standing guard by the entrance, snorted in response to his protest. “You came here without advice, what kind of hospitality are you expecting to receive? Is Croix Castle some inn where you can just come and go as you please?”

“We are the King’s...!”

“Enough, Uslin.”

Uslin clenched his jaw at Riftan’s cold order. He was also furious beyond imagination, but there would be nothing good coming out of being aggressive when he was in a situation where he might have to negotiate with the Duke for the life of his stepfather. Riftan waited patiently for the butler to come back.

Croix allowed an audience only after he left them waiting by the entrance for half of the day.

“Come this way please.” The butler led them to the reception room without even giving a formal apology for having kept them waiting. Riftan tried his best not to let his impatience show on the surface.

“The rest must wait here.”

The butler stood in front of the room and ushered Riftan towards the reception. He gave the knights a light glance and then followed the butler into the room. The Duke wore elegant silk and sat in the middle of the luxurious room that was lit brightly with candles. Armed knights stood straight like statues on both sides of the room and three servants holding a wine and tray of food waited by one side of the walls.

Riftan walked past them and stepped towards the front of the waxed mahogany table. At that moment, the Duke of Croix slowly raised his head from the parchment he was reading.

“Right...” The Duke trailed his pale blue eyes scornfully at his dust and sweat-stained face then continued to speak. “For what reason does the commander of the Remdragon Knights come to my castle?”

Riftan clenched his teeth at the man’s pretentious innocence. “The reason I’m here for, does the Duke really have no good idea of it?”

“I’m not an oracle. How will I know the reason why you came to my castle?”

The Duke replied bitterly and held out his empty glass to the servants. A young servant immediately ran to pour wine into his glass. Riftan glared at him and spat his words out harshly through gritted teeth.

“I heard that the Duke has mistaken a peasant farmer for a thief and imprisoned him.”

The Duke moistened his lips with wine and raised one of his thick eyebrows. Riftan continued to speak in the calmest manner he could manage.

“I was the one who gave the gold coins found in his house. Please release him immediately.”

The Duke continued to feign his innocence. “More than a hundred people are held in my prison. I have no idea which one it is that you are pertaining to, but they were all trialed justly before they were held. I don’t know which prisoner it is that you’re telling me to release.”

“He is a peasant farmer named Novan.” Riftan took a moment to draw in a short breath, gathering his self-control. “Please hold another trial. I will testify for that person. Serving a verdict of hanging without sufficient evidence nor testimony...”

“The commander of Remdragon Knights truly has lots of time in his hands.” The Duke cut his words and lifted his thin lips sarcastically. “I mean, all that effort for a mere peasant farmer.”

Riftan swallowed the profanities reaching his throat. The duke continued to speak as he twirled his wine leisurely like a cat playing with a cornered mouse.

“I apologize, but I have no intentions of doing that. I’m not a person who spends his time dilly dallying like you do. Once a verdict is served, I don’t entertain thoughts of overturning it. If I were to do that, I would do nothing but sit in front of the jury all day. No one will respect my judgement then. Why should I bear such a risk?”

“Then his excellency intends to sacrifice the life of an innocent person for his own convenience?”

“It is me who decides who’s innocent and who’s not! My subjects must abide with my judgement as their lord. His Majesty cannot even interfere with that exclusive power I have as the lord of this territory! What right do you have to interfere?”

“That person...!” Riftan raised his voice but suddenly paused on his words. Words that he has never uttered before flowed out of his mouth awkwardly. “That person... is my father. If there will be no intentions on holding another trial, then I will pay for that person’s bail. If it will be deemed necessary, I will also pay for the compensation. Please release my father.”

“Oh my, that’s unfortunate.” The duke replied casually, not showing a hint of shock. “That’s really unfortunate. However, every prisoner must have a fair treatment. Your so-called father shouldn’t have any exceptions. Anyone who steals must be hanged.”

Riftan could no longer contain his rage and slammed his fist on the table, leaving a dent on the waxed mahogany wood. The guards drew their swords out at his threatening act, but Riftan snarled violently at the Duke, not even sparing them a glance.

“What do you want from me?”

The smile on the duke’s face disappeared. He leaned his shoulders back against the velvet-lined chair and asked in a cold manner.

“Do you really have no idea?”

“So... if I don’t go to the dragon subjugation in your place, you will kill my stepfather?”

“That doesn’t sound right.” The duke glared at him furiously. “You have rejected my generous proposal, insulting me and my family. And now, you barge into my castle and arrogantly demand for me to free my prisoner! To what extent do I have to put up with your audacity?”

“Stop spewing b\*llsh\*t! You imprisoned my innocent stepfather to threaten me!”

“Insolence!”

The knights pointed their blades to his throat as if they were no longer able to tolerate the situation. Riftan glared at the Duke as his eyes burned with rage, ignoring the harsh blade pointing directly at his artery. The duke of Croix's face also contorted in anger. However, his expression soon returned to being sour, thinking that it was useless to pour his wrath over a rat who was already trapped in a jar.

"Whatever you say won't matter. Your peasant father will be hanged tomorrow."

Riftan slammed his fist against the table again. Despite his brutal manner, the Duke of Croix did not bat a single eyelid. He didn't seem to think that there's a possibility for someone to dare harm him, and spoke in a languid manner.

"If you don't want that to happen, give me an offer that could change my mind."

"If I... go to the expedition in your place, will you release my stepfather?"

"If you do that..." Croix took a moment to take a sip of wine before continuing his words. "There's nothing that I can't do to pardon a prisoner. For a son-in-law, that can at least be done, right?"

Riftan shut his eyes tightly. In the corner of his heart, the small voice of the devil whispered and urged him to accept it, 'there's no other way out'. Riftan felt disgusted with himself and clenched his fists so tight that blood flowed out of his palms. First, he thought that it would be wise to buy some time.

"I can't declare any decision in this instance. I have already been ordered by His Majesty to camp by the borders. I must at least consult with His Majesty before..."

"Do what you please." The Duke replied in a stern voice. "However, the execution will proceed as scheduled. I have no reason to wait for you."

Riftan glared at him murderously but he received that indifferently.

"Make your decision right here and right now. There won't be another chance. Tomorrow, your peasant father will be hanged in the gallows, then I will offer the honor of marrying my daughter to another lord. It doesn't have to be you who does it."

Riftan's shoulders trembled. Anger, humiliation, and all sorts of complicated emotions that couldn't be put into words raged inside him. The figure of his stepfather sobbing in the dark and the terrified face of Maximillian Croix flashed in his mind one after the other. He continued to tremble like a beast that was caught in a trap.

"Fine."

The Duke narrowed his eyes at him skeptically. "You mean, you're accepting my proposal?"



Riftan felt like brutally mutilating someone for the first time in his life.

“That’s right.” He gazed down scornfully at the Duke as he uttered every syllable with strained strength. “I will take the risk and leave in your place. Are you satisfied now?”

“You have thought well. We will soon become in-laws, so I will particularly ignore your insolent attitude.”

Then, the Duke gave orders to the butler who was standing by the door. “Take the guest to his room. He must be tired, that’s all for today, get some rest.”

“Please release the person from prison first.”

“I will pardon him after the wedding ceremony. There will be no other compromise to that.” The duke declared firmly.

Riftan glared at him and turned around, muttering profanities under his breath.

## Chapter 39

The next day, the Duke of Croix unnervingly prepared for the wedding ceremony before the dawn even broke. He seemed to be eagerly determined to execute the ceremony straight away, not giving him a chance to change his mind.

Riftan anxiously paced the room like a trapped beast. He felt guilt eating him for putting a heavy burden on his subordinates in order to save his stepfather. He would have felt better if the knights had criticized him instead for his selfish choices. However, although the knights were extremely furious at the Duke of Croix, they did not have a single complaint about Riftan’s decision.

He plopped down against a chair and clasped his throbbing head between his hands. If he would be following his duty as the commander of the Knights, it would only be right for him to turn a blind eye towards his stepfather. However, he just couldn’t bear to do that. He couldn’t bring himself to abandon him once again.

He shut his eyes tightly. On the day of his mother’s funeral, the figure of his stepfather weeping in the dark played in his memory. The man wasted twelve years sheltering them. It would be devastating for his illegitimate son to get him killed when he has barely gotten himself a real family now.

“The wedding ceremony will be held in the afternoon.”

The butler appeared at noon, accompanied with servants who brought robes to dress in and accessories to put on. Riftan gazed down with a contorted expression at the silk and velvet clothing, making the servants flinch and step back at his harsh demeanor. However, the butler endured and did not even budge.

“The High Priest will preside over the ceremony, the easter nobles will serve as witnesses. We should hurry with the preparations to meet the schedule.”

He eyed him arrogantly, as if pertaining that he shouldn't dare make the nobles and the high priest wait. Riftan took the clothes in an angry snatch, he wanted to tear someone into pieces, but not this old man. He replied in a cold manner, gnashing his teeth.

“I can do it on my own, so get lost.”

The butler looked at him skeptically and meekly took the servants outside with him. Riftan took off his clothes and dressed up with the sickening clothing handed to him. He felt rage burn inside him as he saw himself donned unsuitably like a pretentious nobleman. He turned away from the mirror, suppressing the urge he felt to rip off the hem of the clothing.

A moment later came another knock on the door. He strapped his sword to his waist and went outside. The knights of Croix Castle lined the hallways, donned in full steel armor.

“We have come to escort you to the altar.”

Riftan clenched his jaw, it was as if they were taking a prisoner. Regardless, the Duke's knights escorted him to the temple located in the castle. He followed them whilst hurling all sorts of curses inside his mind.

May the Duke of Croix and everyone associated with him be cursed; his vassals, his servants, all of them.

However, the moment his eyes caught the figure of Maximillian Croix standing in front of the altar, all of his thoughts melted away. He stood stiffly at the temple's entrance, gazing distantly at her back.

She was donned in a white dress that was as pale as her complexion. His eyes trailed along her ivory neck, her narrow back, and her slender waist that seemed to fit in one grasp. Her skirt, that glistened silver flowed like a cloud over the marble floors and ornament pearls, shone in her elegantly twirled up rose-colored hair. His heart squeezed at her breathtakingly lovely appearance.

Riftan breathed out deeply. His mind was in a mixed state of confusion, longing, and guilt. He couldn't comprehend how he could feel this way when he was in such a humiliating situation.

“Please enter.”

When he did not move from the entrance, the knights urged him from behind to step forward. Riftan walked slowly towards the altar. The nobles who were on the sides of the aisle line with red carpet, sent him scornful and sympathetic glances. Riftan ignored them and went to stand by her side. Maximillian carefully looked up at him with her cloudy gray eyes.

Riftan felt like he was falling in an endless pit upon seeing her soft gaze that seemed like it would break in an instance. She appeared unhappy and miserable. The offerings sacrificed before the vilest of evil demons couldn't appear more pitiful than her. Anger and sadness welled up inside him, raging with intensity. If someone other than him were in his position, she wouldn't have such a terrified look on her face. Thinking of it that way, he has brought himself to even resent her.

I didn't want to be in this position either. He wanted so badly to reason with her as such. I also didn't want this to happen. However, he knew very well that it would be a lie.

"The ceremony will now begin."

The high priest, who was standing on the podium, declared in a solemn voice. Riftan turned away from her and walked towards the front of the altar. Then, the high priest began to read the scriptures in a low voice. Riftan's eyes fixated at the carved angel on the bottom of the altar throughout the ceremony, but all of his five senses were heightened at her presence, he felt like he was on the verge of being burned down.

Every time he breathed in, the sweet scent coming from her body filled his lungs and her loose sleeve that grazed the back of his hand almost drove him crazy.

"Riftan Calypse, do you swear before God that you will take Maximillian Croix as your wife, cherish her, and care for her as long as you both shall live?"

Riftan lifted his head as the high priest questioned with a dignified voice. Everyone held their breaths as they waited for his response. He replied in a gruff voice.

"I swear."

"Maximillian Croix, do you swear before God that you will take Riftan Calypse as your husband, and obey him as long as you both shall live?"

Riftan could feel her body tense up as if she were about to break. Maximillian replied in a quiet trembling voice.

"I swe-swear..."

He desperately tried not to turn his head to look at her. Finally, the priest declared the union between the two of them and the witnesses stood up, clapping their hands. Everything seemed so unreal. Riftan wiped his palms that were wet with cold sweat against his trousers and watched as the people headed for the banquet hall. He didn't know what he should say to her.

"What are you doing there standing around? There is a wedding reception waiting."

The Duke of Croix said as he approached him with a cruel smile. Riftan glared at him with intense hostility but the Duke only calmly took his stare.

“The wedding is yet from being complete. I trust that you will fulfill your promise to the end.”

Riftan’s jaw clenched, and he gnashed his teeth. However, he knew as well that the wedding wouldn’t be complete until after the reception and after they entered their marital room, so he just reluctantly followed the duke into the banquet hall. He could feel Maximillian quietly following him, but he didn’t dare look back and see her. He didn’t want to see the grief plastered on her face.

Riftan was dragged into the lavish banquet hall that was filled with a crowd and he mechanically drank the wine poured for him by the duke. The happenings went on so fleetingly that it got dark, and his subordinates entered the hall. When Riftan saw Uslin signal at him with a nod, he asked to be excused from the presence of the nobles and moved towards where he stood. Uslin led him to a corner of the banquet hall, looking for a quiet place to talk. When they reached a place quiet enough, the knight opened his mouth to speak cautiously.

“The squires have found your stepfather’s wife.”

Riftan’s face hardened. “How are they?”

“They were extremely terrified, but I don’t think that they were gravely injured. The little girl is also alright.”

Riftan breathed a sigh of relief. If anything had happened to them, he would have never been able to forgive himself.

“Where are they now?”

“The squires are watching over them.”

Uslin paused for a moment then asked him. “Are you really sure of having it settled this way?”

Riftan’s shoulders stiffened at the probing of the torturous issue. Uslin nervously continued to probe when Riftan didn’t reply.

“There must be another way. If we ask for His Majesty’s help...”

“My stepfather will be executed before the message even reaches Drakium.” Riftan looked at him under heavy-lidded eyes. “Don’t worry. I have no intentions of dragging you guys into this. Once the wedding is done, I will resign from my position as the commander.”

Uslin’s face became angrily distorted. “Don’t be ridiculous! Are you planning to go to the Lexos Mountains all by yourself?”

“I could just ask the duke to provide me with an army.”

“Even so, he will only give you hundreds of useless idiots!” Uslin retorted sternly in a growl. “Even if he does give you a proper army, the duke’s knights will not obey the commander’s orders. The commander will be all by himself in the Lexos Mountains.”

“That’s my problem to deal with!”

“The commander’s problem is our problem too!” Uslin replied sharply. “If the commander leaves the knighthood, the knights will either return to being mercenaries or be incorporated into the Royal Knights. Either way, the Remdragon Knights will end up being destroyed. Are you intending to put us through that?”

Riftan tightened his grip around the wine glass so much that it almost broke. He also knew well what would happen to the Remdragon Knights, but he thought that it would be better than being dragged to having them risk their lives. Uslin continued to speak like he was able to hear his thoughts.

“We are knights. I gave up dying peacefully on my bed the moment I was knighted. If the commander says that he will embark on subjugating the dragon, then we will follow.”

“But those are your thoughts, the thoughts of others may be different.” Riftan threw down his wine glass. “If it will become difficult once I resign as the commander, I shall send a message to Viscount Triden. I plan to ask everyone what their thoughts are, and if anyone desires to, I’ll take the measures to help them be incorporated into the Royal Knights. Subjugating the Dragon is a dangerous journey. I can’t have you risk your lives for my sake.”

Uslin opened his mouth as if he was about to attempt refuting, but at that moment the Duke’s voice sounded from behind them.

“Why are your voices raised so high on a good day like this?”

Uslin’s face turned red in anger at the man’s brazen remark. Riftan spoke before his subordinate bursted from containing his blazing temper and began lashing out.

“It’s a problem within the knighthood.”

A crooked smile spread on the duke’s lips as he sat his words out coldly, indicating that whatever it is, he couldn’t care less about it.

“You’re telling me such a dreary story when you’re not my son-in-law just yet.”

Riftan answered his words with a scornful glare. The duke frowned as if he was upset by it, but soon shrugged his shoulders and spoke.

“Well, it’s fine. It’s now time to enter the marital room. Until when will you make the bride wait?”

Then, he stretched out his arm, ushering him towards the stairs lined with candles. Riftan swallowed dryly. His back sweated from the strange tension he felt.

## Chapter 40

The nobles who were sipping their wines were discreetly peeking with interested expressions on their faces from behind the duke. Riftan clenched his jaw tightly and moved away, taking his steps slowly. He heard Uslin urgently calling his name from behind him, but he didn’t look back.

His heart began to pound violently and uncontrollably against his chest as he climbed up the stairs. Riftan repeatedly thought to himself that he was trembling due to the humiliation he was in. However, he couldn’t deny the urge he felt to run away like a coward. He took a deep breath as he reached the room and stood in front of it.

“Go in.”

The soldier who stood guarding by the door urged him to hurry. Riftan glared at him fiercely then pulled the doorknob. The light from the fireplace flared through the small opening of the door. Riftan swallowed dryly once more and finally opened the door wide enough to enter the room. Then, he saw Maximillian sitting on the bed covered in a golden veil.

Riftan hurriedly closed the door behind him. She was wearing a dress so thin that it embarrassed him. As he ran his gaze through her slim figure outlined by the candlelight, the heat that arose in his body almost forced Riftan to take a step back.

Shamefully, his groin instantly became hard as a stone. His face contorted as he drowned himself in self-loathing, but he couldn’t bring himself to take his eyes off her. Her loose hair that fell to her waist glistened colorfully under the light and her pale skin blushed pink in a coveting manner.

He looked at her full lips and then dropped his gaze down to her deep-cut neckline. Her cream-colored breasts were half-showing over the slightly see-through thin linen dress she wore. His face burned up and his throat was scorched. He was speechless as he waited for her to open her mouth and say something. Unable to overcome his patience, he nervously walked towards the table where a glass of wine sat.

Then, Maximillian, who had not moved an inch, began to tremble like a bird. Riftan felt like someone had placed a block of ice on top of his head as he gazed down at her. Her gray eyes were begging, she didn’t want him to be here. Having his heart stabbed would probably hurt less than what he felt right now.

He turned away to hide his wounded expression and picked up the glass of wine. Then, he sipped the wine, buying time to calm down his nerves. It would do both of them better to accomplish the deed sooner than later. Riftan turned again to face her and spoke in a composed manner, suppressing the emotions from showing on his face.

“Take off your clothes.”

Then, he pulled his own clothes over his head and glanced at her. Maximillian blinked blankly like she didn’t understand what she had just heard. Riftan’s eyes frowned at the sight.

Back when he was a mercenary, most of the prostitutes who would secretly hide in the rooms of the inns where he stayed would take their own clothes off. It was all that he had experienced with women, they would crawl naked into his bed and he would struggle to prevent them from taking off his clothes.

Riftan turned his body towards her and nervously asked. “Should I be the one to take it off?”

She took in a sharp breath, shocked. Her eyes were filled with fear as she looked blankly at his exposed body in the light. It was very obvious that she didn’t have a good impression of his appearance. He felt like an ogre, seeing the expression on her face like she was about to faint.

“You’re looking at me terribly. My appearance doesn’t really suit your liking, does it?”

He asked in a sarcastic way but secretly hoped that even if it would only be a white lie, she would deny it. Instead, she only stammered impassively.

“I, I’m...”

However, no words followed her explanation. His lips twisted as he felt bitter and miserable. He asked himself why he felt so disappointed when he had been fully aware of her opinion of him, ever since she pulled away from seeing him. She would never have been in this situation if it weren’t for the Duke of Croix. He muttered words to himself.

“Of course, there’s no chance that a lowly knight would suit the duke’s revered eldest daughter.” After he spat those words out, he flinched. Didn’t that only mean that he wanted her to like him? Riftan then added hastily. “Take it off. We have to accomplish our duty.”

Her eyes were fixated on the floor as she sat still. Riftan stepped towards Maximillian and carefully lifted her face by holding her chin. It was his first time touching her ever since that incident in their childhood. His fingertips tingled at the contact with her soft, petal-like skin. Riftan exhaled hard to hide his feelings as he spoke.

“The marriage will become invalid if we don’t fulfill our first night. Are you refusing to do it?”

A clear look of pain surfaced on her pure, silver-like pupils. He yearned to embrace and comfort her as she was trembling pitifully, but he coldly spat out his words as if those feelings weighed them down.

“Tell me if you want me to put my clothes on again. Once we begin, we can’t stop in the middle of it.”

At his purposeful remark, she bit her lips and loosened her belt with trembling hands. Riftan held his breath as she took off everything one by one and placed them by the bedside. She took a long time fiddling with the straps of her dress before she finally loosened them, just before he collapsed from strained breathing. Her ivory-colored back and round shoulders became exposed under the light. However, as if she didn’t have the courage to reveal more of her skin, she clutched the hem of her dress tightly against her chest.

Riftan could no longer bear the tension that was about to burst inside of him and hastily tried to tug the dress away from her. He didn’t want to endure this difficult situation just as much as she did. He didn’t want to see her trembling like someone who had been sentenced to face her death. He was so horrified of himself because even in a moment like that, his body felt so aroused that he couldn’t control it. He just wanted to hurry and put an end to all of that.

“W-wait...” As the dress slid down to her waist, she covered her chest with her hands. Riftan bored his eyes on her.

“Put your hands away.”

“Wh-why, the clo-clothes...”

Her confused appearance made Riftan’s fingers pull away. He wondered if nobles did it with their clothes on. He had seen mercenaries push women against the wall and do it with their skirts rolled up, but he heard and was well aware that women in fact didn’t like that.

Riftan felt impatient as she constantly tried to buy time and then asked her sternly. “You want me to head out, or you don’t want me to. Make up your mind clearly.”

She lowered her arms in resignation. Riftan froze and felt his head drain of blood. She was so beautiful that it made his heart stop beating. He had suffered from aggressive seductions ever since his teen years, to the point that he grew sick of seeing women’s naked bodies, but his mind was befuddled right now. He swallowed loudly.

His body felt hotter than it would have been if it were on fire. His gaze trailed down her round breasts, flat stomach, and slender calves. A suppressed moan erupted from his throat. There was really no turning back now. He didn’t even know if there was any desire to turn back in him.

He murmured like a lost man and caressed her with his trembling hands. The bones in his body felt like melting butter on a summer day. His stepfather was in prison because of him, and his



subordinates were in a circumstance of being dragged into risking their own lives, yet he was the only one right now who was experiencing heaven.

Riftan lowered his head and poured passionate kisses all over her body. The woman she had dreamt of all his years was finally in his own arms. He couldn't control himself. He may never be able to touch her again after today, he may never be able to see her again.

He could no longer keep in his desperate desire and dug into her. That place was like a heaven made out of fire. He felt ecstatic at the painful, enchanted paradise he was in. His whole body shivered. He tried his best to restrain his movements and let her adjust to him, but he couldn't manage to control himself, tasting pleasure for the first time in his life. Eventually, he began to move like an unbridled beast. His long-buried passion engulfed him like a tsunami and his willpower collapsed like a sand castle. He felt like he was suffering from a terrible thirst and slid his tongue into her mouth.

Her moans tickled his throat and all his guts felt like they were about to melt away. Her thin, soft limbs, moist and mellow skin, and her sweet scent, all took his soul away. It felt like he could swallow all of her, not even leaving a strand of hair. Riftan groaned violently and poured all his desires inside of her.

“Ugh...”

He must have been so out of his mind that his brain was at a staggering state, when he suddenly heard a sniffing sound. He lifted his head and saw tears faintly glistening her feverish face. He looked down at her with frozen eyes.

“Why are you... crying?” She turned her head away to hide her tears. He clasped her face and then turned her by her cheek to look at him. “Don't avoid me.”

Then, she stared at him with hazy eyes filled with shame, confusion, and loss. Riftan swiveled her face and wiped the tears away from her cheeks. Shame and self-loathing also rose within him like wildfire. He embraced her tightly, feeling a mixture of frustration, sadness, and hostility.

Memories from his childhood came over him. He wanted to embrace in his arms the girl who looked terribly lonely. He wanted to protect her from anyone who would harm her. The fact that he had made a mess of something that he had cherished for so long with his own hands was inconceivable.

Riftan supported her, clinging to her with his arms as she hung weakly. Then, he muttered emptily as he kissed her tears and sweat away from her temples.

“You are my wife now. Whether you like it or not, there's no turning back.”

Everything was a mess, but still, being in this situation brought them together. He kissed her on the lips. All was well now. Although this would never make her want him for the rest of her life, if luck would be on his side, he would at least die as her husband.

He felt guilty from burying into her and turned to look away. That night would be such a terrible memory for her. He shuddered forebodingly, thinking that she would have to bear with this forever, that thought repeating in his mind over and over again.

## Chapter 41

Riftan woke up to the sound of rain echoing in his ears. It took a while for him to come back to his senses. It was his first time feeling so distant and languid. He gazed at the dimly lit ceiling for a moment, then, he heard soft sounds of breathing and turned his head startledly to its direction. Tousled red hair spread wide like a cloud against the pillow.

He took a deep breath upon seeing the woman who had fallen asleep in his arms. Her moist, slightly sweaty skin clung to him and the scent of her body intertwined with the smell of intercourse made his mind swirl. Riftan blinked his eyes in a daze like a drunken man, then soon realized that he was embracing her too tight to let her properly breathe and hurriedly pulled his arms. However, as he felt the cold chill creeping, he captured her back into his arms. He could feel every inch of her narrow bones beyond her smooth and mellow skin.

He cautiously swiped the hair away from her face and clasped her cheeks with trembling hands. Her reddish-brown eyelashes, which were slightly darker than the color of her hair, dropped like rain-soaked feathers and the pinkish corners of her eyes slightly wrinkled. His heart ached as if it was squeezed.

Riftan traced his fingertips on her round forehead down to the bridge of her tiny nose and swiped his thumb over her plump lips. Her sweet breath tickled his fingertips and her presence pierced through his bones.

Even if he just gazed at her from afar, she had been the woman who held him captive, never being able to escape from her hold. Now, she had become someone he could never get out of his mind until the day he died. His face contorted as he slowly pulled his body away from her. It felt more painful than having his own flesh torn.

Riftan brought the blanket up to her neck and sat idly on the bed, staring at the dimming fire in the furnace for a long time. He knew it was time to leave, but his body that felt heavy like a soaked cotton refused to move. He rubbed his face harshly and then struggled to stand up. He wanted to see her eyes which looked like a winter lake one more time, but he thought that she wouldn't like to see him. It would be better if she woke up without him by her side.

He wiped his body roughly with a wet towel and picked up his clothing then put it on. He was afraid that if he took even a moment of delay, he would never be able to leave. As Riftan picked up his sword, he forced himself to fight the urge of staying by her side. Then, before he walked out of the door, he took one last look at the woman who came to be his wife.

A bitter sadness surged within him. Riftan shut his eyes, opened the door, and headed outside. Then, the maid and the priest who stood guard in front of the room, entered the chambers, and confirmed that the marriage was successfully fulfilled.

“With this, the deal is sealed.” The butler held out a scroll of parchment to him. “This is a letter the duke has written which states the appointment of duty for the dragon campaign.”

Riftan looked down and snatched it. The butler then nodded to the soldiers waiting by the hallway.

“Guide Sir Calypse towards the dungeons.”

He was about to tell them to take good care of his wife, but he bit his lip. Did he really deserve to persistently say those words for her?

Riftan swallowed his self-scorning thoughts and followed the men with heavy steps. As he descended from the stairs, he saw the faces of his subordinates as they stood guard by the empty venue. They appeared as if they were about to say something, but kept their mouths shut. He passed by his men and hurriedly crossed the garden that was lit dimly by the bluish dawn. The sky was hazy as if it was filled with clouds that showered icy winter rain over their heads and shoulders.

“This is the place.”

The soldier walked briskly through the rain bearing a lighted torch and pushed open a door on one side of a thick wall, revealing a set of stairs leading to a dark underground. After ordering Uslin and Ruth to wait on the ground, Riftan descended the stairs with Elliot. When the soldier who guided them reached the end of the stairs, he unlocked the double iron gates and hung the torch by the wall. Then, a terrible scene unfolded in front of his eyes. He clenched his fists tightly.

Carcasses of dead rats piled on the damp floor like a black sludge, the stench of feces filled the entire area, there was no knowing whether the prisoners were dead or alive as they all lay motionless. Riftan fetched a torch and looked around the prison, grinding his teeth at the mushy sound that his feet made against the ground. It filled him with anger, discovering that his stepfather was locked in a place like this for several days.

“The person you’re looking for is in the farthest cell.”

Riftan glared murderously at the soldier. “Then what are you doing not leading us there immediately.”

The soldier, who was startled by his ruthless tone, hurriedly rushed towards the location. Riftan collected his self-restraint and followed his steps. He would never forgive the duke no matter how awry things get.

“H-he is here.”

The soldier who led them towards the end of the hall, shone his torch through the iron bars. The prisoner inside sobbed and hid towards the corner. Riftan’s eyes froze as he looked down at the man’s figure. The soldier then opened the cell and hoisted him up. Through his disheveled, balding hair, revealed a face swollen as a pumpkin.

Riftan swallowed a grunt. His stepfather’s eyes widened through his dark, bruised eyelids. A terrified whimper-like sound erupted from his chapped lips. Riftan’s face contorted as he realized that he was trying to beg for mercy.

“...hurry, take him out of here.”

Elliot entered the cell without any hesitation and supported his stepfather out on his behalf, as Riftan stood still in shock. He turned away, not daring to touch his stepfather. As they got out of that terrible place, Ruth, who was waiting atop the stairs, immediately rushed straight to his stepfather to check his condition.

“It’s a relief that nothing seems to be missing.”

He mumbled and let out a small sigh of relief. However, Riftan couldn’t feel the slightest of relief. Ruth immediately cast healing magic over him, but the stepfather didn’t seem to even realize that the pain had gone away. Riftan gazed down at the figure of his stepfather and shouted at the soldiers.

“What are you doing not bringing the carriage right this instance!”

After a while, a carriage halted in front of them. Riftan sat atop his horse and watched as his stepfather entered the carriage. The pouring rain covered the world in a white shroud. He stared at Croix Castle as he took icy-cold breaths. The enormous castle that he once envied now peered down as if it was mocking him. Riftan soon spurred his horse, looking at the gray structure that seemed to glow against the mist.

As soon as they saw the stepfather, the wife and little daughter wept. Riftan watched them silently from behind and handed the innkeeper a pouch of money and asked him to bring bath water and a hearty meal, then headed out. The rain was pouring stronger.

“It’s not Sir’s fault.” Ruth quietly approached and said those words as Riftan looked dazedly at the dark sky. “Even if Sir Calypse did not give those gold coins, the Duke of Croix would have still taken your stepfather as hostage.”

Riftan did not reply. Ruth sighed and turned the topic after reading his rejection from the silence. “What are you going to do now? Are you going to move your family to Anatol?”

“No.” Riftan spat dryly, his eyes fixed on the cement walls built upon the hills. “Anatol is too dangerous. I intend on sending them to Triden’s estate.”

In the first place, they were not a family he could call his own. Riftan turned his head to see the stepfather and his wife who were still hugging each other, then spoke in a low voice.

“First, we have to join the Knights when we’re ready. Prepare to leave as soon as the rain stops pouring.”

“...As you wish. Then, I’ll put the carriage on standby.”

Ruth then gently left him alone. After watching the rain for a moment longer, Riftan went to his room and began writing a telegram addressed to the king. King Reuben will certainly be furious, he had just ruined his ambitious plan to tame the Duke of Croix. He will be outraged, it was like having his most trusted blade cut his own foot off.

Riftan frowned as he imagined the monarch’s furious face, but suddenly realized that the words he had written were so swaying that he couldn’t recognize them himself and stopped writing. He arched his eyebrow and took out a new sheet of parchment and dipped his quill in ink. However, the letters only kept getting messed up. It was then that he realized he was awfully trembling.

Was it due to the sense of loss he felt, or because of anger? He felt a chill run through his bones. Then, Riftan hunched as he shivered and threw the inkwell against the wall as a violent impulse surged within him. Black liquid splattered in all directions. Riftan stared vacantly at the black stains, then soon sat down, wrapping his hands around his head, and growling like a wounded beast.

All of the comfort he had cherished in his heart was lost within one day. Riftan clutched his head tightly and groaned woefully as he couldn’t even cry. He was merely trying to relieve his loneliness and find comfort for a few moments, yet even that wasn’t allowed. He clasped his chest that was brindled with dirt as he struggled to keep himself together.

You can’t fall just yet. You must keep your mind straight. He still had responsibilities left to be accountable for. Riftan desperately repeated that to himself. As his trembling barely subsided, the sound of rain pitter pattering against the window came to a stop. Riftan smoothed his expression again and opened the window to gaze at the gray, desolate landscapes.

It’s time to leave.

He picked up his sword.

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His stepfather didn't say a word as he climbed onto the carriage. Riftan didn't even attempt to talk to him. The old man, who had been exhausted for several days, sat unbudging next to his wife until he saw his son running towards him from afar and got up from his seat.

Riftan watched as he embraced his little son tightly in his narrow, skinny arms then asked Gabel to stay by their side.

"Take them safely to the viscount."

## Chapter 42

"...will it be alright if the commander will not go there himself?"

Riftan clutched his horse's reins, looking back at him with a dim light in his eyes. "I have a duty I need to accomplish from now on."

A serious expression took over Gabel's features. He parted his lips as if he was about to ask something, but instead it turned into an awkward grin, conscious of the stepfather's eyes who was looking their way.

"You have nothing to worry about. I'll explain to them clearly what the situation is and take them safely to the Viscount's estate. Sir Triden will take good care of them."

"...please do so in my favor."

Gabel bowed his head once and strode towards the direction of the stepfather and his family. Riftan glanced at his stepfather's raddled face and turned to head over to the camp. After hearing the reports of what had transpired during his absence, he wrote a letter addressed to Viscount Triden, then gathered the knights to brief them of what happened in Croix. Their reactions were restrained, as if they had predicted what happened after hearing that Riftan's stepfather had been locked away in the Croix Dungeons.

"Then, what are you planning to do now?"

"Although it would be most appropriate for me to resign from being the commander of the Knights, given the present circumstances, there is almost no chance that King Ruben will give any one of you a title or a fief."

Riftan gazed at the faces of around thirty knights gathered as he spoke in a heavy voice. The knights were ranked according to skills and those that had now gathered all had the right to voice out their opinions. After giving them a generous moment of contemplation, Riftan continued to speak in a subdued tone.

"I will use whatever power it is that I still have to help you be part of a knighthood. That would pan out better than becoming wandering knights."

“Do you think those who will leave this knighthood in fear of facing the dragon will be welcomed?” Hebaron, who stood leaning against one of the posts, muttered cynically as he straightened his posture. “Those who join the Royal Knights will be branded as cowards and ridiculed for the rest of their lives.”

“...stop exaggerating.” Riftan’s lips grew stiff. “Even if that does happen, deal with it by keeping your mouth shut and letting your skills speak on your behalf. There is no reason for this fight to the extent of involving all of you.”

“If King Ruben had not put this subjugation on the western territories to bridle the Duke of Croix, the Remdragon Knights would have been ordered to be deployed for that mission.” Lombardo, who had been silent the whole time, spoke. “A knight is someone who shall risk his life to fulfill his duties to the monarch. If we feared death, we wouldn’t have become knights in the first place.”

“Risking your lives in a fight to fulfill the orders of the King and fighting in place of the Duke’s safety are two different matters.”

“We are not fighting for the Duke of Croix. We are fighting for the honor of the Remdragon Knights!” Uslin refuted in a harsh tone as he sat with his arms folded in front of his chest. “There’s no difference between leaving for an expedition under the command of His Majesty and following the commander.”

Riftan was a little taken aback since Uslin was the one who had utmost respect and loyalty towards the Royal Family. After saying those words, the weight in the room had significantly changed. After a moment of strange silence, Hebaron cleared his throat and tapped Uslin on the shoulders whilst quivering.

“It’s been a while since the young master had said something I agree with. I detest having to go on an expedition on behalf of a cunning man, but after all, it’s not a bad idea to go slay a dragon and make a name for ourselves across the continent.”

“...People like you are usually the first ones to die.”

“What?”

Riftan raised his hand to stop them from quarreling. “Enough. This is not a matter of taking your dignities into account.”

“What the hell do you see us as...!”

“I’ll give you time to think.” Riftan cut off Hebaron’s words and looked at them sternly.

“Everyone must have heard about what happened to the Holy Knights of Osyria, some of them have perished. There’s no knowing how things will unfold. That means we would be entering an

unpredictable realm infested with monsters, which terrorize the whole continent, and then we will confront them. Contemplate carefully on whether you're really prepared to risk your lives."

The knights' faces flushed as if they were displeased to have their courage questioned. However, Riftan shot out of his seat without giving them any chance to protest further.

"I'll hear your answers in three days." Then, he went straight out of the barracks.

The next day, Gabel, along with his companions, came to Riftan's barracks, ready to leave for the Viscount's estate. Riftan handed him a letter he wrote addressed to Triden and a pouch filled with gold coins.

"Give this to the Viscount."

"As you wish." Gabel took them and secured it within his armor.

Riftan went back to the seat behind his desk to write reports addressed to the King. Gabel watched him and carefully asked.

"How about the Duke's daughter?"

Riftan's whole body stiffened. Gabel spoke carefully as Riftan glared at him as if to ask what he was talking about.

"That person is now... isn't she Sir Calypse's wife now? When the lord is away, she must be the one overseeing Anatol."

"I'm intending to leave Anatol's management to the wizard."

"But the wizard is planning to join the expedition."

Said Ruth, who was sitting quietly in a corner reading a book about magic, and snorted audibly. Riftan shot him a fierce glare but Ruth continued to speak not blinking an eye.

"It's ridiculous that you're intending to leave me out. You have Lady Calypse now, so why in the world do I have to act as the Lord's representative?"

Lady Calypse. Riftan felt a faint shudder as the words echoed strangely. His earlobes tingled, remembering her naked figure lying down on the bed. He licked his lips and pretended to busy himself with a parchment to hide his agitation.

When he did not come up with a decision, Gabel spoke stiffly. "I understand that she can't be trusted because she's the Duke's daughter. However, if she remains in Croix Castle, Sir Calypse's dignity will be tarnished. On my way back, I will take her to Calypse Castle."



Riftan frowned at the knight's stubborn demeanor. The castle repairs and the wall constructions had to be all been completed by now. However, it was nothing compared to Croix. He bit his lips, unconsciously concerned about her well-being.

He wondered if he was the only one who didn't have the guts. It may have been a fleeting marriage ceremony, but she was his wife as declared by the church. Shall he not be able to make it back alive, she would inherit all his property, his castle and territory will be hers.

If only I had a child...

Riftan rubbed the corner of his eyes with his palms at the sudden flash of random thought. A mix of thrill and fear rushed through his veins. If she gave birth to a son, that child would become Anatol's future lord. Also, he would grow up not knowing his father's face. Riftan swallowed a groan that crept up his throat.

I don't want to leave. I really don't want to leave like this.

He waited for the brewing emotions to settle, then slowly parted his lips. "Fine. Take her to Calypse Castle."

Then, he immediately took out a new piece of parchment, writing instructions for Rodrigo to do everything he could to make sure that she would live comfortably, and handed it to Gabel. The knight secured the letter into his armor and headed out.

Riftan gazed down again at the reports piled up on the desk. Once he left for the expedition, one of the royal knighthoods or the duke's vassals would be guarding the borders. He had to document the current situation in detail, but his anxious mind was hardly ever clear.

"Why don't you at least say your farewells?" Ruth chirped, noticing that his quill was not even moving. "This might be the last chance you have. Don't regret it later and see them off."

He tried to dismiss it but hearing the word "last chance" got stuck in his mind. Riftan eventually rose from his seat, muttering foul language. As he stepped out of the barracks, he saw Gabel sitting atop his horse and giving instructions to his companions. The stepfather's family sat side by side on the next idle carriage.

Riftan watch as his stepfather carried up his daughter, who barely reached his knees, up to the carriage and then approached him. The stepfather then hunched his shoulder and looked up at him with clouded vision. Although his wounds were completely healed, the traces of suffering were still intact on his face.

"I apologize for causing you trouble."

A rough voice slurred with a dialect rang awkwardly in his eardrums. The stepfather, who was looking at him with a vague expression as if he was talking to a stranger, bowed his head again and loaded a package, not enough to even be called a proper luggage, onto the carriage.

“However, don’t worry about any matters that involve me. Someone who is the commander of knights must have a thousand other things to do.”

Riftan silently gazed down at his stiff, boney back and thinning white hair, then nodded slowly. However, the stepfather missed his answer as he stared at nothing but the ground. His stepfather’s words saying he had to live by looking only at the crumbling ground echoed in his head. Riftan stared blankly at the curved back of the man who had stared only at the ground all his life, then spoke in an emotionless voice.

“This will be the last time. There shall be no matters in the future that will require you to face me.”

A look of relief passed over his stepfather’s wrinkled face. The old man nodded his head once, then boarded the carriage and sat down.

Riftan closed the door of the carriage himself and gave a signal to Gabel. The wheels of the carriage then began to roll slowly forward at the knight’s signal.

Riftan stood motionless while watching the carriage move further away with a trail of dust. A cold wind blew past his neck. Riftan’s eyes frowned as he felt the shivers run under the pale sunlight.

I’m really alone now.

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The knights moved in an organized manner as they immediately slashed down the giants who were climbing down the rock wall. The fierce roars of the ogres echoed one after another on the ridge. Riftan wielded his sword and swiftly counted the number of the creatures: they were around thirty. It was extremely rare for ogres to gather in a group such as that. He wondered for a moment if they were being controlled by the dragon, then stopped thinking about it and shouted at the troops in the rear.

“Ready the crossbows!”

While the knights obstructed the monsters, well-trained soldiers took the weapons out of the wagons and swiftly positioned them. As soon as the large crossbows were ready, Riftan signaled for the knights to go back. When the knights retreated all at once, gigantic javelins the length of over 10 kvets (around 3 meters) flew towards the monsters at a frightening speed. The long iron rods skewered the monsters’ heads and chest instantly.

Note – LF: Uslin and Hebaron always quarrel xD And Ruth always knows best

## Chapter 43

Riftan didn't miss the opportunity and drove his horse to a fast speed, cutting off the massive leg of a giant. As the giant, who was at least 15 kvet high, staggered and collapsed on the ground, the other knights fiercely followed after him and drove spears through the giants' chests.

He stood behind the defenses and instructed the waiting soldiers to retrieve the javelins, then rushed straight towards the other ogre. The giant, more than twice his size, flew to him at a terrifying speed. Riftan narrowly missed the mace that grazed over his head and thrust his sword through the ogre's ribs. The giant growled loudly and raised his steel-like arms towards the sky, but before the attack had reached him, the giant's enormous head flew in the air.

"The commander must not have all the fun!" Hebaron swung a sword as tall as him and exclaimed.

Riftan swiftly moved aside, avoiding the ogre's collapsing body. As the giant fell against the ground, the earth shook, and piles of stone rolled down the rock walls. He steered Talon to retreat and quickly scanned his surroundings. The soldiers had already recovered all the javelins from the ogre's corpses and had installed them back to the crossbows. After ordering the knights to disperse once again, Riftan signalled to his soldiers.

"Fire!"

Dozens of javelins flew through the air and lodged into the massive bodies of the monsters. As the giants ran down the slope of the ridge, staggering and rolling down, the knights rode their horses like the wind, decapitating the monsters in one strike. At last, thirty-four enormous ogres laid spread out against piles of rocks and their heavy footsteps and loud roars, which shook the mountains like earthquakes, had ceased.

Riftan took off his helmet that was stained with the monsters' blood and skimmed sharply through the valley, now engulfed in silence. Although he didn't sense any other danger right away, there was no knowing when other monsters would swarm to prey on the bodies of those monsters upon smelling blood. He exclaimed to the soldiers.

"Hurry and retrieve the weapons! We'll leave here right this instance!"

The knights stood vigilant while the soldiers loaded the crossbows into the wagons and retrieved weapons such as javelins, maces, and chain bola.

Riftan's brows frowned as he gazed up at the misty, cloudy skies. The weather in the mountains was fickle and unpredictable, it would have been better if it rained heavily, allowing them to rest

for a while free of worries about monsters. But only a damp, cloudy weather hovered over them continuously for several days.

Riftan inhaled heavily, filling his lungs with icy, damp air, and shoved his sword back into its sheath. Talon seemed to appear tired as well from the never-ending march. He patted the horse's nape as it nervously stomped its feet, then began to move with the army again. The soldiers followed him without a word.

A heavy atmosphere loomed over them. It had already been several months since the search for the dragon's lair had begun full-scale, but there were no significant results, instead it only led to the dwindling of their army.

Riftan hid his agitation as he counted the number of wagons left. The expedition was in grave trouble: some of their food supplies had been destroyed from the continuous monster attacks and there was no knowing when their supplies would get replenished by the support troops, whom they had left marks for in order to be located by them.

He had to do something so he decided to motivate his soldiers, shouting in a powerful voice and picking up his speed. "We can rest once we get out of this valley! Keep your spirits up for a little longer!"

Riftan frowned, feeling the morale of the expedition going down. The soldiers were holding out well, but hunger and fatigue was dawning over them. Hunt was scarce in the alpine regions of the Lexos mountains, and they had fought fifteen battles over the weeks, surviving over stale bread, dried meat, and cheese to appease their hunger.

Only a handful of men were able to sleep for more than five hours a day in a row. Even he could barely close his eyes as he laid down on the stone-cold ground and the cold winds blew fiercely. The soldiers who would collect the bodies of those men who had perished in the monster attacks often murmured in voices filled with envy and sorrow.

"May you rest in peace..."

Riftan gazed up at the sky grimly. It would have been better for rain to pour hard all at once. The rain brought a different kind of suffering, but they could at least rest without worries of monsters attacking. However, as if the skies were ridiculing his hopes, the clouds gradually cleared, allowing a hazy sunlight to shine above them. Riftan spat out profanities and picked up his speed.

Then Caron, who was glancing at the rear ranks, ran to the front and shouted. "Chief Commander! The rear ranks are starting to lag behind."

"They must hold out until we at least get out of this valley." Riftan exhaled decisively and sped through the rocks.

After a couple hours of traveling, the shaded view of the Lexos Mountains finally opened, allowing them to see the landscape clearly. Riftan climbed over a rock and looked over the steep mountain ranges, lined with gray rocks and dark green conifer trees. They had climbed so high up the mountains that a cloud of mist spread beneath their feet like a wool carpet and the chiseled peaks of the mountains were just above them. How much blood had been shed just to pass through those dozen peaks?

“Chief Commander, how much farther do we have to go?”

“Encourage the soldiers. We shall take a rest over there.”

Riftan pointed towards the forest on the other side of the wide road. Gabel squinted his eyes as if to measure the distance, then drove his horse back towards the ranks. When they finally reached a secured place, Riftan ordered his men to rest and the knights to scan the area.

“There are no signs of monsters.”

“Set up the tents and make a fire, put guards on post. We shall rest here for today.”

“Will that be alright?”

“It will be unreasonable to continue the search beyond here anyway. Our priority for now is to survive until the support troop arrives.”

While the knights hung ropes with bells attached to them throughout the surroundings to sense any attack, the soldiers took out poles and cloths lined with bitumen from the wagons to build a temporary camp. Riftan dismounted from his horse and removed the saddle and his luggage after inspecting the surroundings thoroughly enough. Talon whinnied and shook his neck.

“You’re holding up well.” Riftan gently caressed the magnificent nape of his steed and led him to the bushes, so that his strong ally could graze upon fresh grass.

After a few weeks, the soldiers finally got a rest, so they all took off their heavy armors and helmets, then sat around the bonfire while chattering. Over the fires, they made stew out of herbs, jerky, dried potatoes, and stone-stale bread in large pots, then sat down on their blankets, that had turned black with dust, and began to dig in.

“Commander, take a break and come over here, sit. You haven’t been able to rest properly all this time.” Hebaron, who was sitting by the fire eating soup, exclaimed in a hoarse voice.

Uslin, who was sitting quietly next to him, muttered angrily. “It’s chief commander. Until when will you quit calling him commander?”

“Commander, chief commander, whatever, it’s all the same.” Hebaron grunted and dug his head into his bowl.

Riftan sat in between them and took his share of food without any hesitation. As the hot soup entered his throat, it felt like his body melted despite the cold wind. They devoured the soup like a feast even though it was bland and improperly seasoned.

As he satiated his hunger, his sensitive ears caught the faint ringing of a bell. Riftan shot up from his seat and grabbed the hilt of his sword and the other knights also rose from their seats.

“Damn it, we can’t even rest for a second. This f\*ck\*ng stone mountain!” Hebaron wore his helmet and spat out all kinds of profanities.

Riftan ordered the men to prepare for battle and climbed onto Talon’s back without even mounting a saddle on, then ran towards the bell’s sound. However, it wasn’t monsters that emerged from the trees, it was soldiers dressed in clothes bearing the Royal Whedon emblem. Relief ran down his spine and the soldiers who saw him shouted.

“We have found the search expedition troops!”

Riftan passed through the trees and gazed down the slopes. Along the mountain paths there were soldiers in a row, carrying the Whedon flag. The supply troops had arrived.

“With their arrival, we can take a breather.” Eliot, who trailed after him, exhaled a long sigh.

Riftan nodded and thrust his bastard sword back into its sheath. “Go and get the supplies.”

The soldiers willingly stood from their rests and went to help carry the loads brought by the supply troops. Princess Agnes, who was accompanied by the royal army, rode her horse towards them, her dark green cloak waving in the wind.

“It’s been a long time.” She looked at the knights’ faces and smiled with relief. “Everyone seems well, looks like we didn’t arrive late.”

“It was later than expected.” Riftan bluntly retorted as he dismounted from his horse. “Did the marks we left to lead you to us get erased while you were locating us?”

“We were contacted by the eastern exploration troops while we were on the way, which made us late, we had to investigate on a few matters.”

“Did they discover something?”

The princess nodded her head in response to Gabel’s question. “I think we found the place where the magic formula that creates the barriers surrounding the Lexos Mountains is installed.”

Riftan narrowed his eyes at the vague explanation. “What do you mean “you think” you found it?”

“The Holy Knights of Osyria had found a magic formula that seems to form half of the barriers set in the east. After Alex’s wizards inspected the magic, they theorized that the other half of the magic formula is most likely installed in an exact symmetrical area. It took longer than I had expected to figure out their location and meet the Knights of Osyria.”

The princess dismounted from her reddish-brown horse as she quickly explained, but Riftan had a careful glint in his eyes. Two years had passed since he began wandering around the Lexos Mountains. After hearing that they finally may have a chance at locating the Dragon Lair, Riftan felt his whole body grow tense. Once the barriers would be removed, they would be able to find the Dragon Lair more easily with the help of the wizards’ tracking magic. As if reading the grim expression on Riftan’s face, she smiled lightly and spoke.

“Let us rest and share the details later. We are all exhausted from traveling all this way.”

Riftan gazed down at her flushed, sweat-soaked face and turned away without a word. The sky had suddenly grown into a purple shade. Agnes and the wizards installed shields to prevent monsters from approaching their camp, then instructed the soldiers to set up their tents. The soldiers also constantly carried kegs, dried fruits, large chunks of meat, flour, and butter from the supplies. The corners of the knights’ lips were lifted: it had been a while since they had seen such abundance on the supply of food.

“It has been so long since I’ve had a drink!” Hebaron’s hoarse voice resounded loudly.

Riftan tried to tell him not to even dream of drinking alcohol, but bit his lips shut. The morale of the troops had taken a dunk on the ground from their endless and relentless wandering, not knowing when they would lose their lives from a sudden monster attack, so a small reward should somehow boost the expedition’s spirits. Riftan permitted them to feast on greasy food and drink alcohol, but the guards on duty had to not be intoxicated.

“Refrain from drinking until you lose your wits. I hope that no one will foolishly lose their lives because they are too out of their senses in case of a sudden attack.”

Despite his stern warning, the smiles on the knights’ faces did not disappear. They deserved the reward, since for the past two years the expedition made them lead a life more restrained than those of the monks. The mere sip of a tangy ale, buttered bread, and greasy meat made them feel like they had reached heaven.

Riftan bitterly sat down by the fire. Naturally, Princess Agnes sat across from him and asked about the progress of the search expedition. He drenched his lips with wine and gave her a simple reply.

“We haven’t found any other special clue aside from the labyrinth located in the center. According to our wizard’s observance, it seems like the dragon is using magic to control sub-racial monsters. The area was infested with ogres, golems, and is dense with the undead.”

Princess Agnes glanced at Ruth, who was poking the bonfire at a corner, and said a sarcastic remark. “Perhaps the lord’s wizard missed something? He could have found out something more if he had investigated further on that labyrinth.”

“You’re being too harsh.” Hebaron came with a huge keg placed on his shoulders and flopped down to sit in front of the bonfire. “What would be left if you didn’t have your wizard’s magic skills?”

“At least I would have a slim figure, splendid beauty and sharp wits left!”

The wizard let out an audible groan. Princess Agnes glanced with cold eyes of contempt at Ruth and sat with her back facing him, pretending that he did not exist. Riftan posed a question as he took the cup that Hebaron offered him.

“Where is the location of the magic formula forming the barriers?”

Princess Agnes pulled out a map and spread it against the ground. “Here. It’s most likely to be located halfway up the western-most mountain.”

“We’ll have to go back a bit from the path we traveled.”

Riftan peered through the map, drawing a route in his head to approximate the time of travel. It was going to take them around two weeks to reach that point.

“As soon as the barriers are completely taken down, reinforcements from all over the continent shall be dispatched. The Wizard Tower also pledged to send a generous number of archmagis. They will be setting magic barriers around the mountain ranges to prevent the dragon from escaping.” The princess pointed at various parts of the map with a tree branch.

“As we speak now, the wizards of the Wizard Tower are installing magic formulas in various parts of the mountain ranges to disrupt the flow of mana, intending to weaken Secto’s magical powers. The Seven Kingdoms are laying out a united front to attempt defeating the dragon by taking advantage of its weakened powers. As you know, the dragon subspecies have strong magical immunity, making them resilient to any magical attack. A dragon would probably be a hundred times more resilient to magic. When a full-scale battle begins to subjugate the dragon, the wizards shall fall to the rear ranks while the sword masters and high priests who can cast divine magic will be the main forces. The Remdragon Knights shall also be at the forefront.”

“I have been preparing for that situation.” Riftan responded with composure and drank the ale in one breath. “How many more reinforcements are bound to arrive?”

“About one-thousand and two hundred people...”

“Only about half of those will remain once we reach Dragon Lair.”



The princess' face clouded at his cynical remark. It took enormous funds and manpower to support their long-term expedition, the monarchs of each kingdom also limited sending elite forces and made up for it by sending mercenaries and criminals. Most of those were unable to endure the extremity of the expedition and deserted or died in battle as they lacked skills. Fewer than half of the expedition had polished abilities.

Although Agnes knew it well, she muttered her words as if to make an excuse. "The lords are also having a hard time preventing the monsters from descending the Lexos Mountains. The unity of Whedon will be shaken if we issue a draft order or collect more taxes."

"The entire western continent will be damned if we don't defeat the dragon."

The princess did not raise any more objections and shut her mouth. Riftan relaxed his harsh expression. The fact that the princess, who was a member of the Royal Family, went to lead an army by herself on an expedition, meant that the Whedon royals were exerting their best efforts. The problem was that the lords were busy passing on the burden to one another.

Riftan gritted his teeth, recalling the cunning face of the Duke of Croix. However, his anger would quickly disperse whenever he thought of him, as he remembered the woman who would inevitably appear in his mind along with him. A strange feeling of emptiness would then take his anger's place. Riftan suppressed the itch to ask if she was doing well: all that he heard of her after he had left was that she did not bear any children.

## Chapter 44

If he were to perish in battle, the thin string connecting him to her would be broken overnight. Then, she would forget his face completely in just a few years: he would be vaguely remembered by her as a monstrous man who had brought her unpleasant and painful experiences.

Riftan hid his bitter expression, wiping the ale from his lips with the back of his hand. He could tell just by her refusal to go to Calypse Castle how lowly she saw him. Perhaps, she even hoped for him to never come back. A sharp pain came over him, a pain he had gotten used to feeling now.

"Enough of the dreary talk." Hebaron suddenly interrupted the conversation, sitting with his long muscular legs stretched out in front of him. "Let us rest for a day or so. Discuss the reinforcements or the dragon subjugation while on the road, can you not? We still have time."

"Are you talking about just having a drink or getting wasted?"

Hebaron laughed at the sarcastic remark thrown at him.

"It's the first time we're tasting ale in 9 months. I don't want to hear any more stories deviating from the taste of alcohol." He shuddered and yelled over his shoulder. "Hey, does no one here know how to tell merry stories? There should be some enjoyment at a drinking party."

“This is a vital expedition that will determine the Western Continent’s fate! An enjoyment...!”

Hebaron disregarded Uslin, who was vehemently shouting, and pointed to one of the apprentice knights sitting around the bonfire. “Harman, tell them a bit about that time you travelled to the South, when you were tricked by three harlots, robbed of all the money you had, then thrown out on the streets stark naked.”

“Sir, you have just told the whole story.” The concerned knight murmured, as if Hebaron’s suggestion was absurd.

“It’s a whole lot funnier when you tell it. Stop hesitating, you’ll never know when you’ll get another chance to brag about your experiences.”

Harman hesitated at Hebaron’s urgings, but eventually stood up. Riftan nodded at him with a sigh after the young man looked at him as if asking for permission. Then, the 20-year-old lad, who was a son of a merchant, began telling exaggerated stories and experiences he had while travelling around the world.

Riftan quietly watched as the soldiers got immersed in his stories, as if they were trying to forget the fears from their minds and the exhaustion of their bodies. Just as Hebaron said, Harman was good at telling stories. Laughter, jeering, and booing erupted from everywhere as he told the story of how he fought off a hundred thieves.

“Who are you fooling? You couldn’t have even fought two of them!”

“Just see and listen ‘til the end of the story. I’m telling you, hundreds of Southern Pagans cried out the name of God while running away from me because I outwitted them with my superior brain.”

Riftan’s lips pulled at one corner: a hundred became hundreds. One of the knights scoffed at Harman. “People from the South don’t believe in God, instead they believe that whenever people die, they become gods.”

“They believe that virtuous people get reincarnated as gods.” Harman corrected. “People from the South believe that humans are reincarnated every time they die. You may be born as a king or a beggar, depending on how you have lived your prior lifetime. They also believe that those people who committed terrible sins are reborn to suffer terribly as livestock.”

Another round of jeers erupted around them. However, some of the men seemed to be interested in his statements.

“Well, if I had to base it on their beliefs, I would be born as a king in my next life.” One of the knights spoke sarcastically and profanities broke out from everywhere.

“You lots would be reincarnated as donkeys!”

“No, you would be reborn as swine because you all devour food like pigs.”

Princess Agnes had an uncomfortable expression on her face as she listened silently to their exchanges. “I think the topic is getting a little out of hand.”

“It’s just a random conversation at a drinking spree, what’s wrong with that?” Hebaron retorted sternly.

The princess’ lips parted as if she was about to warn them, but sighed deeply and muttered instead. “Please be more cautious later when you join the Holy Knights. Mere stories like this could lead to interrogations.”

Hebaron snorted audibly. “If you place your soldiers in front of the jury for some joke such as this, the Holy Knights will be ridiculed.”

“But still...”

“You don’t have to take everything so seriously. Everyone is merely saying such things to get rid of their fears of facing death.” Ruth, who was quietly taking bread apart, spoke.

The princess shot him a glare then sipped her wine, replying with a coy expression. “Fine, then. Do whatever pleases you.”

The princess acquiesced and gently turned her head away. The soldiers began to talk enthusiastically about what they would be born as in their next life. Riftan watched them laugh and chatter for the first time in months and thought that, perhaps, moments like those would never come again.

“How about you commander, what do you want to be in your next life?”

Hebaron, who seemed to have had a good amount of alcohol in his system, dropped the honorifics and asked him just like how he talked to him back in the past. Riftan’s eyebrows gathered. He didn’t want to pour cold water over the heated conversation, but he couldn’t think of anything that he wanted to be.

Despite feeling inferior for being born as a mixed-raced, illegitimate child, that didn’t mean that he wanted to become a pure noble since he had a deep-rooted contempt for the nobles. He didn’t think he wanted to be anyone else other than who he was right now. Perhaps, he was tired of being alive. Riftan stared at the flames of the bonfire with distant eyes. At that moment, absurd words escaped from his mouth.

“...hair.”

“What?” Hebaron burst out laughing like what he said was completely ridiculous. “Commander, are you drunk?”

Riftan brought the cup near his lips and laughed bitterly. “Probably...”

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A vague trail of thoughts ran through his paralyzed mind. He swiped his face with trembling hands, struggling to regain his composure.

Everything here is just an illusion. All of these are merely designed to distract our minds.

He walked through the field of snow again, desperately repeating those words in his head. However, he no longer knew which direction he was going. The wind blew stronger, enveloping the surroundings in a hazy fog. Riftan gazed blankly through the pale world, completely disoriented. He couldn't even think of what else to do so he could move forward.

Haven't I done everything I could? Haven't I fought hard enough?

He slumped down, unable to overcome the exhaustion weighing heavily on his shoulders like a boulder of metal. The fluttering snowflakes clung to his face icily and the cold seeped through his skin to his marrow bone freezingly.

Is this how I die in vain? He thought dazedly, then he saw a red glow that fluttered through the heavy falling snow and he blinked slowly. The fog then lifted; a woman stood on the snow field. Her hair swayed like flame against the wind and her white face glowed from the light coming from behind her. Riftan felt something thumping come up from his chest, drawing out a groan from his lips. His whole body trembled in frustration, sorrow and resignation.

It has always been her, all this time. If you searched deeply in the corners of his heart, it was her who had been there all along. He wondered why it was only her who could make his heart feel such pain. Why was that pain like a stuck thorn that wouldn't go away? It felt like his heart was crumbling.

She approached him slowly then reached out her white, soft palm to touch his icy cheek. He stared sorrowfully at the smile on her lips. Her hair that fluttered against the wind tickled his face like a fantasy and he licked his chapped lips.

If I were to be reincarnated, I want to become your hair. If only I could sway against your back, touch your cheeks from time to time when the wind blows, perhaps even your lips, then I would be...

Looking up at her gentle smile, Riftan closed his eyes.

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“Have you regained consciousness?”

Riftan massaged his throbbing forehead and squinted his eyes open. As his vision gradually became clearer, Ruth's pale, exhausted face met his eyes. He turned his head and saw a warm bonfire burning, then asked Ruth.

"...Have you destroyed the barrier?" Ruth nodded slowly. "There was a magic formula hidden within the torso of the golem. It isn't usually that difficult to dismantle."

Riftan sat up and checked each and every knight with his eyes. Fortunately, everyone appeared to be scatheless. Ruth offered him a warm wine and continued to speak boastfully.

"It could have been a disaster. It seemed like the magical hallucination was bound to work once the golem's body was destroyed. If it weren't for me, everyone would have frozen to death due to the hallucinations."

Riftan picked up his sword and swept the hair that had been caught in his eyes. Ruth, who had placed a thick cloak over his shoulders, brought down the earthen wall he made as a shield against the wind and climbed over the snow-covered field. The light from the rising dawn pierced his eyes.

His eyebrows furrowed at the pale, cold light. On the side of the white hill there were fragments of ice scattered like sparkling diamonds: the remnants of the golem's body.

"... Now, the final battle is not far."

Hebaron muttered to himself as he quietly approached his side. Riftan scanned the silvery snowfield with his eyes, like he was looking for something. Hebaron placed a thick palm on his shoulder and smiled.

"Let's go back to where the expedition is gathered, commander. We must hurry to defeat the dragon and go back home."

"...home." Riftan quietly muttered, echoing the word.

Hebaron approached the knights and instructed them to prepare for descending from the mountain and Riftan gazed at the snow-covered field again. As he stepped over it, the shape of his footprints was clearly captured. Then, while looking down on those footprints, he suddenly realized that he was clutching something tightly in his left hand and stretched his fingers out to see what it was.

At first, he couldn't discern what it was. Only later did he realize that it was the shabby iron-crown that he had never been able to give to her when they were children. Then, the crown crumbled to a white dust. Riftan looked down at it blurrily, then scattered the remains of that hallucination over the snowfield, bidding farewell to the fantasies he had cherished for a long time in his heart.

I shall no longer wander in my fantasies. That woman doesn't exist in fantasies, she only exists in real life.

Something felt like burning up in his chest. He licked his cold lips and touched it. The frosty kiss that they had shared in the hallucinations seemed to remain. Now it was time to stop using fake fantasies as comfort. He recalled the actual kiss he shared with her, stained with tears and sweat. In reality, she was so unbelievably sweet and warm that it pathetically pierced his tongue.

There's no need for fantasies anymore. If I do live through this battle, I will get to know you for real this time. Even if it takes for my heart to get shattered...

The snowflakes scattered in the sudden gust of wind. Then, Riftan, who gazed at the lonely landscape, stepped towards the knights who were waiting for him.

## Gabel POV

\*This story depicts the happenings in Calypse Castle before leaving for the expedition to Livadon.\*

One spring day at the Calypse Castle.

Gabel ruffled his hair roughly with one hand as he sat in the conference room of the knights' quarters, sorting letters from the informants. When Uslin Rikaido left for Livadon with some members of the knights, the work was naturally divided among the knights who were left behind.

He took on Elliot Caron's work without putting much thought to it, then realized after that he was in big trouble. It surprised him how Elliot managed such an overwhelming workload and had not heard a single complaint from him.

Elliot was in charge of overseeing the weapons stored in the warehouses, while organizing and decoding cryptographic documents that came from all parts of the kingdom. He also kept track of the knights' skill progress from time to time. Gabel groaned a sound of pain as he gazed down at the codes scribbled so roughly that they were unrecognizable. Back when he was the second-best knight under Lord Triden, he did learn military codes and mathematics, but he wasn't a very diligent student.

As he was trying to decipher a letter coming from the north, Gabel eventually muttered profanity and threw his quill in frustration. He has been reading parchments all day long and his head was already aching. If only he had known that this would happen, he would've joined the expedition by all means.

I am a knight, not a scholar. He grumbled as he got out of his seat and opened the window. Without realizing it, the weather had gotten noticeably warmer. Perhaps, Livadon's weather would be much warmer than Anatol. As the faces of his fellow knights marching under the scorching heat in heavy armor flashed in his mind, his inflated discontent subsided, anxiety taking over.

It's not that he didn't trust the skills of his fellow knights, but there was no telling in a war, one mistake could blow someone's head off. He had witnessed countless situations with his fellow senior knights, sharing murky life-and-death situations. What's more, based on the report letters coming in from the informants, the war didn't seem likely to end in the near future. There was a possibility that Whedon would order for additional reinforcements.

He shifted his gaze towards the far north, his expression turning serious. At that moment, he heard a knock on the door. Gabel exclaimed over his shoulder.

"Come in."

"Pardon me for the intrusion."

As the door opened, it revealed Kyle Hager, one of Hebaron Nirta's apprentice knights. Gabel let out a sigh as he saw his morose expression, catching a gist of what had happened.

"Has Lord Nirta disappeared again?"

"I haven't seen him since the training this morning." Kyle shrugged and sighed in lamentation. "A training for the general guards is scheduled today. There are 300 guards waiting in the training field, but we couldn't find anyone who would be conducting the training..."

"Isn't there anyone else who could take over aside from me?"

"Sir Calypse has gone out of the castle to do work on the construction site, the rest of the senior knights also went out to patrol along the walls. Can't Sir Laxion take over it?"

Gabel looked down at the pile of parchment on his desk. He was a little exhausted, but he couldn't neglect his duties. He shook his head.

"I have an important report I have to deliver to the commander by this evening. Just ask Brimann to take over for now. He will most likely be at the watchtower."

"Sir Jacque Brimann?" Kyle questioned, his tone a little confused, doubting if it was alright to hand a strategic training to a knight who had just been recently appointed. "Sir Brimann has no experience in conducting any training yet. Will that be alright?"

"This will serve as a good experience. Just tell Brimann that I ordered him to do it."

"...As you wish." Kyle nodded reluctantly and turned around.

Gabel felt sorry seeing his drooping shoulders and called after him. "I'll be going to the Great Hall in a while. If I find Hebaron by chance in the great hall, I'll tell him to go to the training grounds right away."

“Please do so, it will do me a huge favor.” Kyle said in a pleading manner, grabbed the doorknob and turned around. “It’s going to be difficult if he keeps doing this while Sir Rikaido isn’t around.”

As the apprentice left, Gabel sat back in front of his desk and started organizing the parchments. All of them contained nothing but bad news. He clicked his tongue, pulled out a new roll of parchment to write a report, and stood up. Trudging out of the conference room, he saw Jacque standing on the podium, blurting out gibberish words and instructions that were difficult to understand.

He clicked his tongue again and headed straight towards the Great Hall. As he walked up the stairs after crossing the spacious gardens, he saw servants busily carrying loads into the hall. Gabel was about to pass by them without a thought when he suddenly found Maximillian standing at the entrance of the kitchen recording something down, and stopped on his tracks.

Before he was aware of it, a smile spread on his lips. She was counting the barrels piled up on the side with focused eyes. Seeing that she was unconsciously pulling out and fiddling with her hair, he noticed that something wasn’t adding up correctly.

Gabel swallowed a chuckle coming up his throat. She often did that to her own hair, yet she didn’t know the reason why her hair was always tangled whenever she looked in the mirror. He cleared his throat softly then greeted her cheerfully.

“Greetings, m’lady. Today’s weather is quite nice, isn’t it?”

“G-greetings, Sir Laxion...”

Her shoulders flinched in surprise, but soon she gave him a shy smile. Gabel conversed with her in a friendly manner and glanced carefully at her blue silk dress.

“Your dress suits you very finely. Will you be going to the infirmary today?”

“Today’s the day that the... f-food supplies come in. I have to make sure that the goods are delivered accordingly...”

She showed him the account book she was holding in one hand when a sudden look of worry dimmed her face.

“Did anyone... get h-hurt or injured? Who needs to receive treatment...?”

“No m ’lady, I was just asking out of curiosity as you’ve been going to the infirmary for the past few days.”



A faint smile danced on her lips. “I have a lot of work to d-do in the infirmary. I have no idea how Ruth managed to do all the work by h-himself before. One day just passes by... when you’re making herbal m-medicines.”

Gabel smiled as he saw the glint of pride that was on her face. It reminded him of the time she fought head on against the commander to claim her place as the castle’s healer. The sight of the strongest man in the world, Riftan Calypse, losing to a frail-looking noble lady, was truly unforgettable.

He swallowed the smirk that started to creep to his lips and tried to maintain a gentle expression. “We may be putting a lot of pressure on the lady.”

“I...I’m glad to be of help.” She replied awkwardly, her cheeks tinting red.

He admired her and felt proud of her that he almost patted her on the head. Gabel folded his arms to hide his flinching fingers. It felt strange, he never thought he would feel that comfortable with the Duke of Croix’s daughter. He took a step back, feeling a bit conflicted.

“Thank you for your words. Well then, I must take my lea...”

“M’lady, I have even checked the warehouse, but the kegs are still not enough to add up to the correct amount.”

Just as he was about to take his leave, a servant rushed out to her and exclaimed. Her attention was quickly drawn to the servant. After asking the servant a few questions, she gave a stern look at the man who appeared to be a merchant.”

“I’m quite c-certain... the goods must have been delivered mistakenly. There are four barrels missing.”

“T-that can’t be. We counted it several times as we loaded the goods. Someone must have stolen something while...”

The merchant rebutted with a furious expression, but he saw the eyes of the servants looking at him and quickly shut his mouth. Then, he spoke again in a slightly more respectful tone.

“The butler has checked the numbers before, and they were matched. It must be somewhere in the castle.”

“The numbers must have been wrong the... f-first time they were counted. We’ve had the warehouse checked f-five times already. The kegs couldn’t have suddenly... e-evaporated o-out of thin air.”

She sounded quite ferocious in her reply. A distinct look of disappointment was plastered over the merchant’s face. Gabel was standing idly and was watching them quarrel, then decided that it

was not his place to intervene, so he turned around. A sudden thought crossed his mind and his back stiffened. He glanced through the barrels with a suspicious look.

Can a sparrow just leave and pass by a mill? (T/N: It is a Korean idiom that basically says that in a mill, there's a lot of food and a sparrow can't just pass by it without getting food for his own interest.)

He looked up distantly at the ceiling and then, with a painful groan, cut in between the merchant and Lady Calypse.

“Did Sir Nirta happen to pass by the Great Hall this afternoon?”

Max's eyes turned to look at him with a new light, then turned her gaze to the servants. As they exchanged glances, one of the servants opened his mouth cautiously.

“He stopped by the hall at around lunch time. After having a light meal in the kitchen, he headed up to the second floor...”

“What time did the food supplies arrive in the hall?”

The servant realized the intent of his suspicions and answered hesitatingly. “Around lunch time...”

Gabel sighed and asked the maids. “Where did that guy go?”

“He entered the largest guest room on the second floor.”

Gabel headed straight up the stairs, Maximillian Calypse trailed behind him as well as the merchant and a few servants who helped carry the goods.

He thought of saving the dignity of the knights and driving them away, but seeing the merchant's determination to know the whole story, he gave up on it. He cursed inwardly about that guy who acted like he was their enemy as he climbed up the stairs and swung the door open at once.

As he assumed, Hebaron was having a grand drinking spree. Gabel gnashed his teeth together when he saw a barrel rolling around against the floor. Hebaron was sitting casually in front of a table and was drinking, then waved one hand at them, not showing any sign of shame or shock.

“Heya, you came like a ghost.”

Gabel raised his voice at him in astonishment. “What have you been doing in the middle of broad daylight at that? Have you forgotten about today's training for the guards?”

“Ah, right.”

Gabel's teeth clenched harder at his casual reply. "What do you mean, 'Ah right!?' There is a lot of work to be done but a certain guy called vice-commander..."

"Gosh, are you now playing the role of being a pushover when Rikaido's not around?" Hebaron snorted audibly. "Stop being so loud and senseless, it doesn't suit you. Come here, sit down. The taste of this drink is just..."

"What careless words to say in a situation like this...!"

"Ehem."

Gabel shut his mouth at the sound of the intruding cough. Standing by the door was the merchant, gazing down at the four barrels of liquor on the floor. He gave a dull look at Maximillian Calypse.

"I think this would put an end to checking the number of the goods."

"Ah...y-yes. Everything I o-ordered...seems to be in the r-right place."

Lady Calypse, who had been out of her mind, scribbled down her signature on the parchment that contained the list of her orders as if she had been brought back to reality. Her cheeks were flushed red in embarrassment at the stern questioning.

"I apologize for the m-misunderstanding. Rodrigo... please pay a good a-amount of compensation... to those who brought the goods."

"As you wish, m'lady."

The merchant accepted the signed parchment and secured it in his arms, his expression looking like he was trying to hold down his displeasure. "No harm done. I look forward to our next transaction."

"O-of course. I hope the next transaction... will go more s-smoothly."

When the merchant took the pouch containing the compensation and left, Lady Calypse quickly dismissed the servants and closed the door behind her as if to hide her shame. She shot Hebaron with a resentful gaze. He was leisurely sipping wine, regardless of the commotion he had caused. Lady Calypse, who had been gazing at him with a questioning expression, immediately raised her voice.

"H-how can you take something so willfully... when the number of the ordered goods have not been verified yet! I ordered those wine... in case important guests arrive... drinking it all by yourself just like this...!"

“I didn’t know m’lady could say something so disappointing.” Hebaron set down his glass of wine and made a sad expression. “What you’re saying is that I’m not a precious enough person to deserve such a good wine.”

“I d-don’t mean it like that... this wine... I was saving it to s-serve for when guests a-arrive from distant places... I s-sincerely o-ordered this fine wine for those kinds of occasion. I paid 6 denars p-per barrel.”

Hebaron opened his eyes wide like he was shocked by the price, then put on a grim expression again. “Indeed, it’s a waste for this liquor to only go in my mouth. How dare I drink wine that costs six denars a barrel!”

“T-that’s why... w-what I’m saying is...”

“Aaaah! It’s my fault to think that m’lady will be delighted to treat me well! What a presumptuous thing for me to think! A guy like me only deserves cheap ale!”

Hebaron cried bitterly. Gabel was dumbfounded at the clear trick he was trying to play. However, Maximillian was at loss for the hilariously ridiculous trick.

“That’s r-really not what I m-meant. Last time... the guests we hosted were from the r-royal household... I happened to h-hear that the w-wine wasn’t to their taste... so I ordered...”

“I-I get it!” Hebaron chirped.

She urgently interrupted him. “Since you understand now... please... d-don’t be like that. If Sir Nirta enjoys it... then it brings me joy too. P-please... don’t hesitate... to have a-as much as you want.”

“You are saying such generous words... Indeed, Lady Calypse is such a kind person.” Hebaron looked at her with a slightly touched expression and then naturally poured himself another glass of wine. “Please, the lady must take a seat too. I was getting lonely since I was drinking all by myself. Gabel, don’t just stand there and sit here.”

“Jacque Brimann is currently taking over your job and heading the training. Have you no plans of going to the training grounds and oversee it?”

“The time has come for him to start building his experience in conducting trainings. He’ll be fine.”

He opened a new keg, not exhibiting a bit of guilt. Maximillian’s eyes grew gloomier as he watched him. Hebaron merely pretended not to notice it and urged them casually.

“Now, come and take a seat. I have never had such fine wine in my entire life. M’lady must have a taste too.”

“I-I’m... alright. I have work to d-do...”

“The lady works too much. You have to relax at times too.”

He pulled out a chair and placed it next to him, winking as if to urge her to come take a seat. She looked back and forth at the glass and the door with a bashful expression and then at him. Seeing her anxious expression, she seemed to recall the incident when she got drunk at the dinner feast last fall, upsetting the commander.

Gabel shuddered as he remembered that day. Hebaron Nirta had to be insane to even think of giving the lady a drink even after being treated so harshly by the commander. He sat down at the table swiftly and prevented his intentions.

“Stop bothering the lady, I’ll drink with you.”

“You’re annoying me! I just wanted the lady to have a taste of this fine wine!”

Gabel’s eyes widened, wondering if the man was already drunk. It was not unreasonable for him to reach that state as he had already emptied a whole keg by himself. He shook his head weakly.

“Don’t drink too much. If the commander finds out about this, you won’t even be able to lift your own bones!”

“The commander is too harsh. It’s not like it’s a big deal to get drunk, yet he makes a fuss out of it. If I were you, I would have already suffocated from his restrictions.”

He grumbled as he poured wine into a glass. Gabel felt his mouth watering at the wine’s gentle fragrant scent. It did seem like a really fine drink. He scrunched his nose as he pretended to be reluctant when Hebaron offered him a glass. At that moment, he heard a surprisingly cold voice.

“Ri-Riftan just... has a strong s-sense of responsibility.” Gabel was taken aback at how she could speak in such a cold tone. Then, she spoke again in a sterner tone, as if to defend her husband. “It’s just that he doesn’t e-enjoy... getting drunk like everyone else.”

Hebaron snorted. “It’s not that the commander doesn’t enjoy being drunk, it’s because he can’t. He can drink all night long but not get drunk. There was this one time we had a drinking party with Princess Agnes and made him drink five kegs of ale to get him drunk, but his complexion did not change even a bit. He’s no different from a monster.”

Gabel looked at her while holding the glass close to his lips. Maximillian Calypse’s face grew visibly stiff. She asked in a voice that pretended to be nonchalant.

“Did you drink often... with Princes A-Agnes?”

“Of course. That’s natural for people who have endured long expeditions together with us. The princess likes to hang out all the time, never missing drinking parties. It’s amazing to witness how much liquor can go into that petite body of hers. Her Royal Highness and the commander always last the longest.”

Hebaron told the story cheerfully. Gabel noticed that he was doing it to push Maximillian Calypse and kicked his leg under the table. The lady didn’t say a word, then glanced at the liquor keg and soon strode towards the table. She sat on the chair and raised her chin stubbornly.

“I-I can a-also drink that much.”

“Oh, really?”

Hebaron asked her provokingly. Gabel kicked him on the shin once again, but Hebaron did not even bat an eyelid. It was as if he was so drunk that he was as dull as a rock to even feel the pain. He chuckled and handed her a full glass of wine.

“Shall we test it out?”

“Sir Nirta, fear the consequences...”

“Now, now, stop nagging and have a little taste. It’s a killer.”

Then, he burst into laughter at nothing and filled his glass again with wine. Only then did he realize that Nirta was more drunk than he had initially thought. Gabel jumped out of his seat and coughed out a groan, planning to grab him by the collar and drag him out at once, but before he could carry out his plan, the lady gulped down the wine without taking a second to breathe. Gabel watched the sight dumbfoundedly.

Lady Calypse, who had emptied her large wine glass in one breath, vigorously held out the empty glass to Hebaron. “O-one more glass please.”

“As much as the lady wishes.”

Hebaron burst into laughter and scooped wine out of the barrel. She drank the second glass, not leaving a single drip of liquid. The situation was now progressing to something he could not solve. Gabel watched anxiously as Hebaron gave her wine repeatedly and she drank it all in exchange. The furious face of the commander flashed before his eyes.

It crossed his mind that it would be better to leave that place in an instant and save himself from the horror that awaited, but he thought it would not be wise to leave those two alone. Gabel dissuaded her with a nervous tone.

“M‘lady, you’ve had too much. Don’t overdo it and quit now...”

She glared at him angrily. "I'm not overdoing it! I-I'm still fine. T-this much is n-nothing."

Gabel twitched and leaned back. Contrary to what one could think looking at her, she was very stubborn. She brought the glass close to her lips again and drank it in one down.

"Hey, you're taking it down so well. I'm impressed."

Hebaron's compliments made her have a satisfied look. It seemed that she was so drunk that she didn't even mind how strange it was to be happy to be praised with those kinds of words. Her face was as red as the color of her hair. If the commander witnessed this, it would not only be Hebaron who would end up being a dead meat, but he too.

Gabel moistened his dry lips, remembering the leader's blind protective instincts for this little woman. Unaware of his words, Hebaron uttered nonsensical chatter from time to time.

"I didn't know the lady was such a bold person. When I first saw her, I thought she was just a quiet, boring woman."

Lady Calypse's face clouded as if she was offended by his sensitive remarks and soon retorted bitterly. "My first impression of S-sir... was not g-good either. You are incredibly huge... you've g-got a rough face and your v-voice is so loud..."

Hebaron grunted loudly and clutched his chest like she inflicted him a fatal wound. She smiled broadly, as if satisfied with her great rebuttal. Hebaron giggled at the sight and asked her casually.

"What was your first impression of the commander?"

The lady tilted her head to the side as if she didn't know who he was talking about. Then, Hebaron added quickly to his words.

"I mean Sir Calypse. The commander is almost as big as me and he has a frightening impression."

Lady Calypse's forehead wrinkled and gathered her eyebrows as if she was in deep thought, then soon answered gently.

"Ri-Riftan was also...scary."

"The commander is more handsome than Sir Nirta. It wouldn't have been as bad as the first impression m'lady had for Sir Nirta."

Gabel rushed to intervene. He wanted to prevent the ridiculous situation from leading to a marital discord. However, the lady shook her head, clasping the glass with both of her hands.

“The truth is... more than Sir N-Nirta... Ri-Riftan was s-so m-much more s-scarier. He had no e-expression... His eyes were t-too sharp... the way he t-talks... is rough...”

“The commander is pretty overbearing.” Hebaron agreed and struck back. “In fact, someone like Uslin Rikaido, who was slender and sleek-looking, was more popular with the ladies than the commander.”

“T-that’s not true.” She stared at him like she wasn’t pleased with Hebaron daring to compare Ritan to another man. “R-riftan is...tons of t-times more dashing!”

“But the lady didn’t seem to like the commander at first either, right?”

“T-that’s... because Riftan seemed to hate m-me...”

She mumbled as if she grew speechless and drank the rest of her wine. Then, she wiped her mouth and stuttered so badly that he could not understand clearly what she was saying.

“I-it’s b-because i-it’s i-intimidating... t-the f-first t-time I-I s-saw h-him... I t-thought t-that h-he was h-handsome. T-the s-servants i-in C-croix C-castle... t-talked a-about R-Riftan a-all day. I-I a-also p-peeked t-to l-look at h-him f-from f-far a-away a-at t-times.”

She confessed abruptly, her neck turning red all the way. It embarrassed him to watch her. Lady Calypse brought the glass near her lips as if to hide her shame and realized that the glass was empty and lowered her arm again. Hebaron got her glass and filled it again.

“Ah...T-thank you.”

She drank the wine down to the last drip again. Hebaron, who was watching her, asked in a thoughtful tone.

“Did the commander suit the lady’s liking?”

Maximillian Calypse blinked blankly like she was drunk and slowly shook her head. “I’m not s-sure. I thought that he was d-dashing... but he looked s-scary i-indeed up close... it made me n-nervous... when I h-heard that I was going to... m-marry him... I wanted to r-run away. B-because he l-looked like a v-violent person...”

“That’s right, the commander is ruthless when it comes to his enemies but he was never cruel to the weak.”

Gabel quickly refuted. She nodded her head eagerly and grabbed her glass. The wine spilled over, staining her silk garments red but she didn’t seem conscious of it anymore.

“I k-know that t-too. N-now.. I r-realized... t-that I-I m-misunderstood back t-then. Ri-Riftan is... n-nice... k-kind... o-of course... w-whenever he gets a-angry it’s s-scary... b-but h-he o-



only g-gets a-angry b-because h-he w-worries a-about me. S-sometimes... i-it feels g-good to f-feel t-that..."

Then, she sighed nervously and took another sip of her wine. Her lips softened as if all the tension she had been holding were released. "N-now...I don't think he's as s-scary as I thought before. S-surprisingly... he h-has a lot of l-lovely sides to him..."

Gabel spewed out the wine that he was drinking. Hebaron, who had been baptized by his wine, spat out profanity but it didn't seem to reach his ears. He asked back, doubting what he just heard.

"The commander is... lovely?"

He couldn't believe how that kind of description was used for a man over 6 kvets (180 cm) and 1 henge (12 cm) tall, his mouth hanging open blankly.

The lady groaned and exclaimed. "W-when h-he sleeps, h-he's v-very l-lovely. I-it's cute w-when the b-back of h-his hair s-sticks out... H-he's eyelids a-are s-smooth and r-relaxed w-when h-he's sleeping-h-he doesn't l-look t-that s-scary... h-he looks y-younger t-than u-usual..."

Lady Calypse bashfully fiddled and twisted her hair as she expressed her words. "A-and... r-recently, I n-noticed... t-that his h-hair is s-slightly p-parted to t-the r-right... I t-think it l-looks l-lovely."

Gabel's mouth continued to hang open blankly. He was genuinely worried that she might have gone insane from drinking too much. Hebaron and him shared the same bewildered face.

"It's lovely that his hair is parted to the right?"

"Parting it to the l-left side w-won't do!" She exclaimed enthusiastically. "L-left s-side or m-middle p-part... it should be s-slightly parted to the right!"

He was so speechless that his lips only twitched. He wondered why he was suddenly listening to the story of how his commander's hair was parted, but Maximillian Calypse did not stop there.

"A-and... when he's n-nervous... he s-swipes his h-hair up l-like this... it's l-lovely... h-his hands are so big and w-warm. W-when I h-hold it, it f-feels cozy... and h-his voice is so low... that it's nice to l-listen to..."

Gabel's ears turned red as he glanced at the door with troubled eyes. Why am I listening to such an embarrassing confession? He shifted on his seat, but she didn't seem to want to quit the torture she was giving them.

“A-and the f-face he makes when he s-smiles... it’s so d-dashing. Actually... although he makes a c-cool impression... and he i-indeed appears scary... Ri-Riftan looks m-most dashing when he s-smiles like that.”

“.....”

“And... his chest... is so w-wide... w-when he h-hugs me... it feels s-so goo-good...”

Suddenly, Maximillian Calypse, who was talking up to that point, suddenly fell silent. Gabel, who was lost in embarrassment, suddenly jumped from his seat, startled when he saw her face becoming pale. As she staggered dizzily, she abruptly curled up onto the table.

“M-m‘lady!”

He gripped her shoulders hesitantly. His heart fluttered so hard, worried that there was something wrong that happened to her for drinking excessively.

Seriously, I’m f\*cking sick of this damned person. Gabel glared at Hebaron, who had become as dumbfounded as he was, and hastily hugged the lady to support her figure. Then, he suddenly heard a small snoring sound and lowered his gaze to her. Although she appeared pale, she had a steady breath and a normal pulse.

“...it looks like she fell asleep from drinking too much.”

Gabel steadied her figure, embracing her in support and let out a breathless sigh.

“If the commander witnesses this now, he will not grant a peaceful death.”

Even at his threat, Hebaron giggled, not discouraged at all. “Then we should destroy the evidence before he gets back. Hurry, the lady...”

“Hurry... what were you planning to do with my wife?”

The temperature in the room seemed to have dropped below zero in an instant. They became stiff and were barely able to turn their heads to look. Riftan Calypse was standing with an expression looking like a lion who came straight from the pits of hell.

Gabel swallowed dryly. His black eyes glared at the kegs rolling on the floor and the messy table, before his gaze shifted and fixated onto his unconscious wife that was cradled in Gabel’s arms. He heard a gruesome, hair-raising grinding of teeth.

“Do you care to explain what happened?”

“A fine drink arrived, and we shared it together... hahaha.”

Hebaron chuckled loudly as if he was trying to somehow cover up the situation. The commander's eyes only darkened further. He walked eerily in a slow manner and snatched Maximillian Calypse from Gabel's arms. He became conflicted at his hostile attitude and began to make excuses.

"I-I was just trying to bring the lady to her room because she fell asleep!"

"In the first place, why did you guys end up drinking with my wife until she passed out?"

Gabel had no intention of defending Hebaron one bit, so he did not hesitate even for a moment and pointed at him with his fingertip. Riftan wrapped his arms tightly around the woman and glared at Hebaron as if he was about to kill him.

"Are you tired of living, Nirta?"

"We were just building our friendship over a couple of drinks, you are overreacting..."

Hebaron, who was lightly booing, immediately shut his mouth upon seeing Riftan's face, which grew more violently distorted in anger by the second.

At least you know when to shut up. Gabel quipped inwardly. Riftan stared at them in fierce silence and clenched his teeth.

"Both of you, stand by in the training grounds. Let's test until where this building friendship b\*llsh\*t goes."

"C-commander I'm..."

Gabel tried to plead, but he turned around without even listening. Despite being angry to the tip of his head, he moved carefully like a flowing water, afraid that his sleeping wife would feel uncomfortable.

We're dead meat for sure.

Gabel stared blankly at the back of their commander distantly, then immediately sent a resentful gaze towards Hebaron. It seemed like he wasn't fully awake yet, in fact Hebaron smirked, not fully comprehending the situation.

"It has been a while since I've had a proper sword fight with the commander. That's unexpected."

He stared at Hebaron as he grabbed the sword that he had previously taken off. Gabel vowed to himself that he would never be involved in anything again with this bastard and Nirta exclaimed as if he was intentionally upsetting him.

“Now, let’s go fight a little match with the lovely Sir Calypse whose hair is slightly parted to the right!”

Note – LF: Aww Gabel’s perception of Maxi is so cute, he wanted to pet her <3 Hebaron knew which buttons to press, and Maxi... girl, I’m getting second-hand embarrassment xD Nymeria: GUYS I just can’t, this chapter was so hilarious omg lmaoooo Gabel being a cutiepie with Maxi, then Sir Hebaron (best character) Nirta being a real troublemaker and finally Maxi talking about Riftan with his knights!! I’m dead lol