# Like wind on a dry branch

*In a land of magical spirits and northern lights, two wounded souls find rest and healing in each other.*

Dalsaeowl

1

# THE MERCILESS SEASON (1)

Count Casarius unexpectedly died of the plague.

His dying wish was to have the beautiful young widow Rieta, whom he had planned on taking as a mistress, be buried alive with him.

Just as she was about to be buried alive, the infamously violent Archduke of Axias appears at Cevitas Manor.

His purpose? To collect an enormous debt Count Casarius had delayed all the way to his death.

Rieta Tristi was a beautiful woman. Her blonde hair, tied back or left loose, shone brightly. The feminine and delicate lines of her nose and lips and her elegantly deep eyes drew everyone's gaze. Her pale complexion that didn't even darken under the sun was rare among the commoners.

But the most special of all were her eyes. In the light, they were sometimes brilliant light blue and at other times they shone like blue crystals. They only made her pure beauty more mysterious.

When she smiled gaily with those beautiful eyes, even the flowers and stars faded in comparison to her beauty.

When people learned she was already married and had a three-year-old daughter, they all sighed with regret and envied her husband, saying he must have been a hero in his past life. Her family was a happy one.

Until her husband died four months ago.

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Rieta lost her laughter after her husband suddenly died from an unknown illness.

Beauty for a powerless commoner woman was not a blessing, but a curse.

Casarius, the lord of the land Rieta's family lived on, started to force her into becoming his mistress, even before the flowers laid at her husband's grave had wilted.

Rieta refused at first. The fact that Casarius was old enough to be her father was secondary to the fact that her husband had passed away not longer than a month ago.

﻿Casarius grew impatient with Rieta, who continued to ignore his demands, so he kidnapped her daughter. She was only three years old. She was so young and didn't know what death was, so she constantly asked Rieta where her father went.

Rumors started to spread about how Casarius sold off Rieta's daughter to a slave trader.

Poor Rieta was pushed to the brink of insanity and told Casarius she would become his mistress if he brought back her daughter safely.

But whether by blessing or misfortune, Casarius was struck by the plague sweeping the empire and died without attaining Rieta or returning her daughter.

However, he did leave behind his dying wish: to bury Rieta alive with him.

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It was a merciless season.

Only cries of sorrow and anguish were left in the empire tormented by plague and devil. Screams of pain and flames of burning corpses were never-ending and everywhere. The land withered, and the people fought among themselves for food. In some regions, people started to offer human sacrifices to appease the demon of the plague.

So, sacrificing the life of a lowly peasant woman was rather...acceptable.

The day of her death was set. She would die on the day of Casarius Cevitas's funeral.

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That day, the Archduke of Axias appeared at Cevitas Manor to collect the enormous debt Casarius Cevitas owed him.

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“So young... That poor thing."

“Tsk, tsk... Beauty is only a curse for peasants.”

﻿"That's true. How unfortunate. The heavens must not care."

Rieta was dressed in the finest clothes she'd ever worn, but there wasn't even a touch of joy on her face.

The soft black silk of the ceremonial dress and the black veil, hiding her sky-colored eyes from view, adorned her beautifully. And Rieta, with her braided hair done up with white flowers, was stunning enough to make people sigh.

She was soon moved to the funeral procession in front of Count Casarius's manor. On the makeshift altar, she was kneeling on a carpet more expensive than her own body's worth, waiting for her turn.

She drank a sedative made of alucino berries, which had analgesic effects, to feel no pain at the point of burial. It was hard for her to even control her own body, but to each side of her were servants, and surrounding them were guard soldiers to make sure she didn't escape.

Everyone gathered there pitied the beautiful woman with the unfortunate fate. Of those, one middle-aged matron started to mutter.

"The heavens do care after all. Casarius plastered his body with blessings. But look! Even he was struck down by the plague. It was divine retribution!"

A man nearby snickered as he replied. “Rather, the demon took care of him, not the heavens, no?"

Everyone was unanimously cursing Casarius while pitying Rieta. But there was no one to stand up for her.

She was an orphan, and her husband, the only person who could protect her, was already dead.

“To lust after a woman younger than his own children... Dragging Rieta with him even in death... He is truly an evil man."

“Shh. Lower your voice. People will hear.”

The cleric finished his memorial address and the Count's servant women pulled up Rieta at each elbow. Faint and hazy from the alucino, Rieta was﻿ forced by the servants to stumble to her feet.

To the far side of the world. It was time to join her family.

Frigid snow started to flutter down from the gray sky. It was late snow in April.

As she was watching the flurries fall, she thought about her young daughter's last tantrum. Her daughter had waited endlessly for her father, who had passed as soon as winter started. She begged for a snowman all season.

*Adele.* She called out her child's name in her mind one last time as a teardrop fell, tracing her cheek. If this snow piled up... Making a snowman together would be possible.

*Soon... The three of us...*

The dead were silent, as were the soon-to-die. The people to be left behind also fell silent, tucking away their opinions. The hushed funeral procession staggered into motion.

The Casarius family also followed the beautiful sacrifice who was being made to follow the coffin by the maids holding her up.

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Just as they were about to arrive at the grave, a small disturbance

burrowed through the slow march. A servant was rushing, running toward their procession.

Frederik, Casarius's eldest, wanted to deal with this affair quietly. His face was calm, masking the spike of irritation beneath.

He hoped the harebrained fool wouldn't come up to him, but the servant plowed through the crowd and ended up in front of Frederik, panting and lowly bowing his head.

"My lord...! An urgent visitor, my lord!"

Frederik frowned and snapped, “This is a funeral. It's not a time for levity. Are you not even aware of how to receive mourners?" ﻿

The flustered servant stammered, "Th-this guest is not a mourner. The Archduke of Axias has arrived!"

At the news of his arrival, the family's faces turned pale. A quiet, uneasy shiver spread among the procession.

Frederik, momentarily stunned into silence, bit his lip. “Are you saying Killian Axias is here?"

The dead Casarius owed the archduke a great amount of debt. It was, in fact, overdue to be paid, as the period promised upon had long passed.

The Cevitas family spent an immense amount of money on the temple in order to invite the clerics to deal with the plague, and with Casarius's unexpected death and funeral, the family's financial situation was near bankruptcy. There was no way for them to settle the debt with the Archduke of Axias. The reason why even Casarius's death was dealt with quietly was so they wouldn't give him a reason to visit.

Frederik gnawed on his lip. “How did he find out Father passed away?"

The servant did not have a chance to answer. as a cold voice pierced through the crowd, accompanied by heavy hooves. "I was passing through. I thought I might press an old friend to settle an old debt."

All eyes turned toward the speaker.

A man with an intimidating aura and shining red eyes sat astride on a great black horse, slowly moving toward them. Every time he moved, his pitch-black hair swayed with the horse's mane.

Killian Axias tilted his head to one side and smirked. The people who had been watching all gasped. It was such a beautiful and vicious smile that it made their skin crawl.

"But I find myself facing his coffin," he sneered coldly.

No one could blame Killian Axias for rudely intruding into the funeral procession on horseback.

The guards instinctively swallowed and tensed at the sight of him. In comparison, he appeared quite relaxed, almost lazily so, but was perfectly﻿ alert. They could feel he wouldn't even blink if a swordfight broke out. Killian Axias.

He was a brutal man, yet the most influential man in the empire. He was born as the crown prince, but around ten years ago, he severed his brothers' heads and threw them at the feet of the emperor and empress. He was stripped of his title.

According to imperial law, the assassination of the imperial family and treason were crimes punishable by death, and this was to be his eventual fate, but the emperor, who valued his skills, couldn't bear to kill him. He banished his son to the bloody, far wastelands in the north. All Killian had was his body, without authority or the title of prince.

However, the young former crown prince, who seemed to have lost everything, reclaimed the ancient Axias Castle from the demons who had infested it for hundreds of years. He started making the wastelands habitable for humans. And within a few years, Killian gained full control over the vast territory and reigned as the ruler of the north.

Another fortune fell upon him when the most valuable metal in the empire, adamantite, was found in a great, snowy mountain in his territory. Axias started to amass enormous wealth, with a great influx of workers and soldiers, artists and craftsmen, all with their eyes on the spoils of war from the demons and the adamantite.

Axias grew at an explosive speed. The territory that was once a wasteland became a great city at an astounding rate. The nobles changed their tune and vehemently claimed that he should be given an official title and duty to pay taxes.

In the end, the imperial family officially bestowed upon him the title of archduke and acknowledged his right to rule over his territory. He may not be an imperial prince, but the imperial family was acknowledging his title and power as an archduke, a noble. Killian accepted this indifferently.

That was as much as any citizen of Liefheim Dimfell knew. Thirteen years had passed since he lost his title and was banished to the far north. ﻿

Killian Axias had never appeared in society, but his name was on every noble's lips. But among the commoners, more and more exaggerated rumors of his cruelty and tyranny came to be, to the point where he was considered a monster rather than a human. Everyone whispered about his insanity, how he was possessed by a devil, or how they heard he had been cursed.

He'll kill you if you look at him. He'll kill you if you touch him. He'll kill you if he's unhappy. He'll kill you if he's happy. He'll kill you if he disapproves of you. He'll kill you if he approves of you. He'll kill a woman if he isn't satisfied. He'll kill you if he likes a certain part of your body, to own it by carving it out. All of these rumors flew around.

People even whispered about how he was a cannibal, drank human blood, or collected people's ears, eyes, or fingers. There was no way to know which were true and which were not, but everyone was aware of all these horrific, bloody rumors trailing him.

The crowd in front of him parted unconsciously, their faces stark white. They bowed their heads in fear of meeting his eyes.

By the time the Archduke of Axias stopped in front of Frederik, the funeral procession had naturally come to a stop.

"It has been too long, Your Highness."

“Indeed, Frederik. Or should I call you Count of Cevitas now? You should've sent word of your father's passing. You could have spared me from the discourtesy of collecting debt at a funeral." Killian coldly smiled. He had yet to dismount his horse.

Frederik returned the smile.

"Not at all, Your Highness. His sudden passing gave us little time to prepare for a proper funeral. The fault is entirely my own." ﻿

"Is that so?" Killian smirked. “And here I was, wondering if you had deliberately kept it from me."

The blunt words, from a man who had no connection or whatsoever to high society and had never concerned himself about others, made the family freeze.

Even Frederik, born and bred in society, had a hard time replying to these words that hit so close to home. He considered denying it, but he decided to concede was more appropriate and bowed his head.

"I apologize."

It turned out his choice was not incorrect. Killian chuckled and casually turned his head to Lord Casarius's coffin.

"They say it is nearly impossible to collect a debt. They must have been talking about you, no? You gave only excuses, all different every time. And now, there is no use in dragging you out of the coffin,” Killian muttered bitingly. He jumped down from his horse. "But I suppose one must pay respects at a funeral. My condolences on your father's passing."

The archduke removed and placed his hat on his horse's head, then handed the reins over to the knight who had followed him. He joined the funeral procession naturally.

Contrary to the rumors of his insanity, his lucid speech surprised the people, whose eyes widened at his remarks. A few of them exchanged looks and whispers.

"Is it him? Is he really the Archduke of Axias?"

"He doesn't seem like a cannibal."

If not in shock at his lucidity, they were mindlessly staring at his terrifying beauty, speechless. ﻿

The Archduke of Axias, whom Casarius Cevitas called a friend, was closer in age to his son Frederik. Killian Axias was a chillingly handsome man, glacial and relaxed. An icy gaze from his crimson eyes created a cutting atmosphere, but it didn't seem as though there was any lunacy in those eyes. At the very least, he didn't seem to be murder-crazed, let alone insane.

Even the nobles, who knew enough truth to ignore the ridiculous rumors floating among the commoners, were surprised by their first glimpse of the Archduke of Axias. The gray robes he wore, dusty as if he had been on horseback for a long journey, stood out among the mourners who wore black, but no one thought he was being discourteous thanks to his handsome appearance.

The talk of how he severed his brothers' heads, the idea that he tamed the wastelands by ruthlessly slaughtering the predators and the demons of the north, were all hard to grasp as truth because his elegant and refined face and wild locks of black hair were much more aloof and colder than any ceremonial dress. Pitch-black hair and a black horse suited him more than any other man.

He blended into the ranks of mourners, as if he had walked with them from the beginning with the purpose of mourning the dead man, and bowed toward Frederik's wife and brothers. The Cevitas family tentatively and silently responded in kind and resumed the funeral.

Rieta stumbled and collapsed, due to the long, unforeseen delay in the procession. The servant woman, dressed in black, became flustered and helped her struggle to her feet.

The smallest furrow formed in Killian's brow as he watched the dazed woman following right behind the coffin, ahead of everyone, including the family.

"Who is that woman?"

2

# THE MERCILESS SEASON (2)

﻿"Who is that woman?"

"Ah..."

Frederik couldn't bear to even bring his father's disgrace to his lips and hesitated to speak. But he eventually cleared his throat awkwardly and said, “Ah... Sh-she is... She is a living offering for his corpse, as per his dying wishes."

A short silence passed. Killian gazed at them, and a chilling smirk appeared on his face.

Frederik's wife Segnithia saw her husband's pride crumbling and swiftly cut in. “Now that I think about it, Ferdian knows this woman personally. This must be unsettling for him."

Casarius's second son bit his tongue and turned away, stony-faced.

Segnithia continued as if she pitied the poor woman. "He wasn't the kind of man to insist on such deplorable acts... She must be quite the temptress, as they say."

She spoke as if their hand was being forced, simply because it was Casarius's will, insinuating they were not approving of this activity themselves.

“Segnithia." Frederik stopped his wife. “This is Father's funeral. Let us watch our speech."

"Of course." Segnithia bowed her head respectfully and stepped back. Frederik sighed in relief and silently praised his wife's wisdom.

This was enough. It was disgraceful to have one's flaws revealed, but at least it was an effective recovery. Frederik could feel his pride being pieced back together a little and looked at the archduke to scan his expression.

And he was surprised by what he saw. ﻿

“A temptress, you say...” He was smiling. “I must say I find myself intrigued."

Those close to him fidgeted and were unsure of what to do.

It dawned on Frederik how Killian was rumored to enjoy women in his "East Annex."

A banished prince, stripped of his title, daring to maintain a harem only an emperor had the right to obtain, was a primary reason for contempt among many people, but it would surely be interesting to see how many of those in actuality were simply envious. It was said he was accompanied by ladies of his annex wherever he went, but today there was no one by his side.

The archduke cocked his head to the side and smiled. “All of you express great pity for the woman, and Casarius still owes me a great debt. If I take this woman as his payment, all will be settled nicely for the living parties."

The Cevitas family stared at him, eyes wide in surprise at his completely unexpected suggestion.

Killian grinned widely. "What say you? Will you accept my offer?"

He didn't realize it, but Frederik's jaw had dropped.

Was he serious? That debt was immense!

“Are you saying... You'll forgive the entire debt?" Frederik barely got out the words without stammering.

Killian didn't even blink as he nodded.

“I'm saying I'll steal the dead soul's final companion. Isn't that the least I can do? If there is an excess, we'll call it a contribution for funeral expenses."

Frederik gulped and glanced at Rieta.

There was no need to consider further; it was a profit, through and through. Giving away someone that was set to become a corpse anyway, ﻿and at the same time having that enormous debt forgiven, was killing two birds with one stone.

But there was always his pride to think about, so he couldn't simply jump at the chance. He pretended to hesitate.

Killian smirked knowingly, seeing through Frederik's intentions. “Alas, I shouldn't force you to act against your father's dying wishes. You may dismiss my offer."

Everyone's expressions suddenly changed again. Segnithia whipped her head around to look at Frederik.

You never knew when the Archduke of Axias's mind will change. This was not a time to hesitate because of pride. Frederik anxiously wrung his hands. The decision was made quickly.

"Fetch the woman!"

This time, another person quickly turned their head to look at him.

"No, you mustn't, my lord!"

Everyone looked at Cedric Caballam, the late Casarius's faithful servant. He quickly ducked his head, flustered by all the cold, noble eyes upon him.

"It... It was your father's dying wish, my lord!"

Frederik shot his witless servant an icy gaze. “Then I suppose you have a plan to repay his debt of over twenty million in gold?"

You couldn't fool the archduke with petty tricks. Frederik was aware that being straightforward was less likely to rub him the wrong way and spoke bluntly. Caballam faltered at this sudden rebuke and recoiled.

"B-but, sir... Their souls have been married through the memorial ceremony..."

"Such sincerity and compassion." The moment Killian cut him off with a mirthful voice as if he were impressed, he suddenly drew his sword. ﻿

The mourners' faces turned pale in an instant. For a moment, even the guards near the lord could not respond. The archduke fingered the flat of his blade, eyeing Caballam with a cold stare.

Killian threw back his head and laughed sweetly.

"Very well. I wasn't able to prepare my own parting gift for Casarius. How would you like to accompany your master to the afterlife? A loyal servant to serve him for all eternity... I can think of no greater gift.” He turned his gaze to the edge of his sword, slowly examining it with his red, heavy- lidded eyes. "Wouldn't it be the most touching story?"

Cedrivc Caballam's face was stark white, trembling as he looked up at those red eyes full of lazy mirth.

"Casarius will be thrilled,” Killian said, amused.

Cedric, nearly frozen from fear, backed away. The monocle that had been perched on his nose slipped off from the rain of cold sweat.

A melodic voice fell upon Cedric's head like a death sentence. "I insist," Killian said with a grin and tilted his head.

The instant he let the tip of his sword fall and took a step forward, Cedric Caballam fell to his knees with a thud.

"I-I-I overstepped my place! P-p-please, forgive me!"

The procession stopped soon after the Cevitas family and the Archduke of Axias seemed to have discussed something.

The guard soldier stationed next to the new lord of the manor, Frederik, gave a message to the servant women. The women exchanged a few incoherent words and then helped turn Rieta around.

The rest of the mourners, who hadn't heard of the new arrangement, were bewildered and started to murmur among themselves. The procession was suddenly stopped and Rieta was turned around and pushed toward the Cevitas family. ﻿

"Huh? What's going on?”

"I don't know..."

Rieta again did not understand what was being said and stared blankly as she followed where the servant women led her.

The beautiful widow, pulled away from death's door, was led to the Archduke of Axias.

The servant women struggled to make her greet the archduke respectfully. Rieta clumsily bowed and greeted him with her eyes out of focus, not even knowing what she was doing.

His knights, and even Frederik, couldn't ask him to sheath his sword, so it was still left drawn.

Killian calmly reached his sword toward Rieta to lift the black veil over her face with the tip.

The woman's pale, beautiful face was revealed. The blue eyes, still trembling, slowly blinked, unable to come to their senses.

The cold, red eyes gazed down as they took in the woman. A chilling smirk spread on the man's face.

“Tempting, indeed.” Killian Axias chuckled and tilted his head. Then he extended a greeting, like a great beast lazing under the spring sun.

"Good day, temptress."

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That night, when Killian entered his room in the guests' chamber, he found someone unexpectedly sitting on his bed.

Rieta was sitting on the bed with a blank expression on her face, her blonde tresses undone and flowing, wearing only a translucent, white slip. When she realized he had walked in, she got to her feet unsteadily and bowed her head. ﻿

"Your Highness." A thin, weak voice trickled out of the woman. “I thank you for saving my life. I will devote myself to your service."

She had a completely unfitting expression on her face for someone saying she would provide a delightful night.

Did she even know what she was saying? It seemed like she was mumbling outlines from memory, in a weak, empty voice. He wondered if someone had sloppily brainwashed her.

"Have I truly saved your life?"

The woman didn't even know to smile at a joke criticizing her attitude and stood there, staring blankly at the floor.

He knew her behavior was due to the alucino she was forced to take earlier, but it seemed like she still hadn't returned fully to her senses. Killian strode over to the woman and lifted her chin up. Her blank, blue eyes were out of focus and empty.

"I strain to see much life in this face."

"Forgive me," she replied after a long while, with a blank face.

Killian clicked his tongue mentally. *Temptress, my ass.* He let go of the woman and turned away. "I have no need of you tonight."

The woman didn't even refuse. She just stood there blankly, replied, and started to walk away. “Yes, Your Highness..."

He approved of how she didn't try to talk to him further. But he was also slightly miffed about how she turned away so neatly as if she was waiting for him to say that.

Killian glanced at her and asked, "Now... What is your name?"

A slow, dull answer returned from a blank face. "Rieta Tristi, Your Highness."

Killian looked her up and down. She was truly a rare beauty in this godforsaken place. But where was the fun in taking a woman to his bed﻿ when she looked so miserable?

Such bad taste of a senile man.

“Very well, Rieta. Leave me and send in Leonard.”

"Yes, Your Highness."

He took his eyes off her leaving the room and removed his cloak.

Such kindness from Frederik to send in the woman he asked for just that

day during the funeral. And this was the woman who was meant to accompany his father on his final journey at that.

Killian snorted dryly.

What a fine job Casarius did raising such a despicable son.

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“You summoned me, my lord?” Killian's knight, Leonard, saluted his liege.

Killian jerked his head casually and started to remove his clothing. “Find out what happened to that woman."

Leonard smoothly started to report. “She is a common widow, said to have lost a good husband."

"You beat me to it."

Leonard nodded sharply. "But of course. I wouldn't let some unknown woman into your chambers."

"Continue."

"Her husband took ill and passed four months prior, after which Count Casarius made numerous attempts to claim her as his mistress. They say he was unrelenting. But when she declined, the count sold her young daughter to a traveling slave trader in a fit of rage." ﻿

Killian stared at the corner of the chamber and put on his bedclothes.

The emotionless voice continued calmly. “The lady soon conceded to his demands and agreed to become his mistress if he retrieved her daughter. The plague took Casarius before he could find the child, but not before he requested the madam be buried in the grave with him in his dying wishes."

Killian, who was listening silently, sat down on the sofa and spat, “A despicable account. Good riddance he's dead."

"Furthermore..."

"There's more?"

"It's not entirely certain, but there may have been some suspicious activity regarding the husband's death. They say he died of the plague..."

Killian glanced at Leonard. “Didn't you say her husband passed away four months ago?"

"But the plague had yet to spread to Cevitas at the time of his passing. There are rumors through the manor, that Count Casarius may have murdered the husband and fabricated the story of his death as a result of the plague, and that this was what led to Casarius catching the plague."

Killian sneered*. A curse, huh?* People certainly did enjoy those kinds of stories.

Leonard continued. “The building Casarius lived in is a common manor, thus it cannot benefit from the blessings of a mage. It does seem particularly unlucky that he caught the plague since a count would've immediately received the protection of the clergy."

Leonard offered a slip of paper with a simple summary of his report. Important dates, such as when Casarius's symptoms arose from the plague and the date he died, were written on it neatly.

"But the count was one of the first in Cevitas to fall sick, and apparently, the illness took his health at an unprecedented speed. Shall I dig some﻿ more, my lord?"

This was more than enough.

"No need. You've done well. Let's move on.”

He had no more interest in the matter.

Leonard bowed and left the room.

*So a widow...* Killian took the report without much interest and lay down on the sofa.

He had simply dropped in at Cevitas Manor as he was passing by. He was irritated at Casarius for avoiding him without even informing him—only to find out he was dead.

It was not in his interest to hound the deceased's children for a debt. It wasn't that much money to him anyway. And the honest and respectful way Frederik acted wasn't so bad either. He didn't even expect the woman to be a great temptress.

It was ridiculous to see the antics and airs they put on, all in the name of being nobles, and it was just a way to pass the time.

Killian crossed his legs indifferently and tossed the slip of paper Leonard gave him onto the table, then opened his book.

He soon forgot about her and climbed into bed to sleep.

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"Will you not grace us with your company longer, Your Highness?” Segnithia put on a disappointed face to say goodbye.

"Some other time," Killian replied with an unaffected face.

His casual demeanor was as if he didn't care for empty words, but that was enough from a man who was so cold-hearted. ﻿

Just seeing Killian Axias act gentlemanly toward them was encouraging. Even so, Frederik and Segnithia were silently quite disappointed at the sight of him leaving.

It was a rare opportunity to have someone with such unique influence, whether financial or military, stay at their home. It'd be very beneficial for them in the long term to make a man of his stature an ally.

They were caught red-handed doing something that could have ruined their reputation, but everything worked out nicely in the end, and he was not as picky as they had feared. Besides, the Archduke of Axias's demeanor as he lightly forgave their considerable debt was something that was etched into their memories as a remarkable quality.

But he was not someone who could be persuaded to stay.

Cevitas was multiple rungs lower on the ladder than Axias, thus they weren't in a place to desire a deeper relationship. Frederik had to just be satisfied with providing the archduke and his knights lavish hospitality, dressing and primping the woman to be offered to him, and gifting the finest carriage for her to ride in.

When Rieta, dressed in a simple and graceful black and purple dress made of the finest fabrics, climbed into the carriage with a dead, blank face, the Archduke of Axias's party was ready to depart.

"Well then." Killian passed his eye over the woman dressed in expensive fabrics uninterestedly and turned away.

Frederik was slightly thrown off guard at the lack of a formal farewell but offered a final parting bow to his back.

"May the heavens grant you a safe journey, Your Highness."

The Archduke of Axias lifted a hand in reply to his farewell, still facing ahead, and spurred on his horse.

3

# THE MAGE OF AXIAS (1)

The archduke's entourage arrived at Axias Manor late at night after about ten days of travel.

Killian took a hot bath to wash away the fatigue from the journey. As he was walking into his bedroom, he paused.

The beautiful blonde woman with blue eyes was sitting on his bed with only a filmy white slip. She rose and bowed her head.

It wasn't even déjà vu; it was the exact same scene from a few nights ago. The only difference was that they were now in his bedroom, and her expression was a little more composed. But the woman's face still showed no expression. Her deep and limpid eyes were courteously cast down.

For the past few days, it was as if she didn't exist. He only remembered an unfamiliar woman was traveling with them when he saw the carriage during the times they stopped to rest. And she didn't complain even though it must have been her first time on such a long journey, which made things simple for him. He wasn't even aware if she had gotten nauseous at all during the journey.

The woman was silent.

"I can see you have nothing to say today.”

She did not answer.

Killian walked past the table and asked, “Do you remember what you said that night in Cevitas?"

After a moment, she replied, “Yes, I remember."

It was what the head maid at the Cevitas House had brainwashed her about, repeating it over and over. She wasn't fully awake because of the strong sedative, but she still remembered flashes of what happened.

“His Royal Highness the Archduke of Axias saved your life. Do not forget you must serve him well, your savior. Whether you live or die will be decided by how you behave. Do not dirty the honor of Cevitas. If you fail to act properly, you will surely be dragged out of there and be killed!"

Honor...

She thought she had giggled at that even in the haze of the sedation.

The head maid raised her hand in anger at her, but she couldn't leave a grotesque mark on the body of a woman who was soon to be handed over to a powerful noble, so she made a fist and struck her own chest instead in frustration.

Other than her burst of quiet laughter, Rieta just sat there blinking vacantly.

The maid sighed. Why does she look like she still hasn't woken up yet? How much alucino did those idiotic soldiers feed her?

"Repeat after me. 'Your Royal Highness.' Say it!"

“Your Royal Highness. Thank you for saving my life. I will serve you faithfully.""

A forceful hand grabbed Rieta and shook her. “Say it, now!”

Rieta absentmindedly drew up the memories from that night. The archduke had rebuffed her, since she was out of her mind, drunk on alucino.

The fact that he rebuffed her had no effect on her at all. She was going to be dragged away to die anyway. It didn't matter. Living or dying, it was all the same to her.

But what the head maid said must have been falsehood, because what awaited Rieta was not death.

Rieta was extensively groomed, primped, and handed off to the Archduke of Axias like precious cargo.

Had they stopped by her home and told her to gather her things? It seemed like she had collected a few things in a daze, but she didn't remember doing so.

And the long journey that followed. It was the first time she had gone on a carriage journey for so long, but she had no interest in where they were going or what was going to become of her.

It didn't matter whose property she'd become, and it didn't matter when she'd die. Nothing mattered...

That was how Rieta's mind wandered all along.

"What, you aren't going to beg me to just kill you?” The archduke's drawling tone pulled Rieta back to reality.

She didn't respond immediately, as if she didn't understand what he meant.

Killian poured a glass of wine from the prepared tray cart and continued. "If you intend to sit there sulking, at least say something to keep us entertained."

Entertainment... The meaning that her body and life gave them. She laughed weakly, the smile barely grazed her face.

"Your will is all, Your Highness. What words could a simple country woman offer? Do as you please."

Killian looked at her bemusedly. He walked toward her, wine glass in hand.

It didn't matter anymore. Rieta closed her eyes, so as to not flinch or evade his touch, so as to not feel unavoidably miserable.

Killian brushed past her.

Rieta, blinking vacantly, heard an emotionless voice from behind her.

"Have you ever heard rumors about me?”

What did this question mean?

There were so many rumors surrounding him that she was not sure which one he was referring to. Was he talking about the rumor of how he killed the women who couldn't satisfy him in bed?

It didn't matter to her. Did he want her to tremble in fear? It could make sense for a nobleman to have such lordly tastes, and enjoy watching her in that state and playing with her like a toy.

"Do as you wish. Kill me or keep me alive, take me then kill me, or kill me without..." Rieta mumbled in reply.

A drawl came back in response. "Very well."

Killian placed the glass on the bedside table and took off his robe. "Put that on. I will call for the steward."

Rieta stood there blankly and asked, "Pardon?”

He didn't even look at her and spoke. “The steward will show you to your room for the night. You need not wait on me in my quarters."

Rieta was bewildered and couldn't understand what he said. After a moment's pause, she asked, "Why?"

It was good she was back to her senses, but she was making him explain. Was her name Rieta? Killian undid his sword and glanced at her face.

"If it was your wish to be held by me, I'm sorry for letting you down. But that expression isn't that seductive. If you were to confess your love to someone with that face on, it wouldn't sound like a confession of love, it would sound like you were telling them a loved one died."

Killian, now dressed a little more comfortably, picked up the glass he had put down.

Rieta dropped her head after hearing the same remarks of criticism from last time. It took some time again for her to reply.

"I apologize."

It was the same as last time, nothing new. Killian lost interest.

"Cover yourself. Do not cause me to repeat my words a third time."

No matter how beautiful she was, he had no intention of taking a woman with that kind of expression on her face. Rieta fumbled with her dressing gown and pulled it on.

A moment later, Killian put down his glass and pulled the bell cord. Soon, they heard a knock and a man's voice rang out.

"You summoned, my lord."

"Come in."

An elderly steward with neatly combed silver hair walked in and bowed.

Killian jerked his chin toward Rieta. “Show the lady to her room for the night. Make sure she has everything to make her stay comfortable and find her a dwelling for her to reside in."

Rieta looked at him, puzzled.

The steward bowed his head. “As you wish, my lord.”

Killian looked at Rieta with indifference. "Sleep in that room for tonight. I'll find a house for you to live in, and you can live there starting tomorrow."

Rieta was silent and couldn't respond.

Killian had already turned his gaze elsewhere.

The aged steward escorted her out of the room as if he didn't care whether or not she had replied.

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The next day, Rieta followed the steward, Eron, out of the castle.

Axias was still peaceful and lively. The evil influence of the plague hadn't reached this place yet. She stared out the window of the carriage because it had been a long time since she saw bustling streets. The skies were clear and the people's faces were bright and happy. Everyone was busy moving about and energy was overflowing everywhere.

There was a time when Cevitas was like this. When her husband and child were by her side...

"We've arrived."

Eron's voice jerked her abruptly from her thoughts. The carriage had stopped in front of a neat, two-story house with a yard and a garden.

Rieta stared up at the house in shock. None of her neighbors in Cevitas lived in a house as grand as this.

"What do you think?"

Rieta couldn't respond and stared at him. She replied, "It's lovely... It looks like a wonderful house."

"I see."

Eron grinned and opened the carriage door to get out of the carriage first. He then extended his arm to help her down. This sort of kindness was something she had never experienced before, except for when her husband had joked around with her. She declined hesitantly and grasped the handle to get off by herself.

Now that the house was actually in front of her, she started to feel the reality of things.

So it was. The archduke had found her a place to live and work. Thankfully.

Was this the house she'd work in as a live-in maid? It looked a little small

for a noble family to have maids, so she grew worried. Would there be separate maids' quarters? It was a little small but the house looked pretty and neat, and she couldn't find fault anywhere. Well, a neat residence was easy to work in. For something like this, she would be happy even if she had to stay in a shed.

"This house was built less than half a year ago. A modest dwelling, but it is within the walls, and will serve your convenience.”

"I see..."

Eron led Rieta toward the house and started to explain things like the location and the natural light in the dwelling.

"It's dry here in Axias but in the summer, we get a lot of rain. It'll be good for you to ventilate the house often during the season. Other than being careful the rain doesn't ruin the wood in the window frames, there won't be much for you to worry about."

Rieta listened attentively. However, the most important information, which was about the lord of this house, had not been mentioned yet. Eron continued to explain where she could go to buy the things she would need. Then, he stood, two hands clasped as if to signal he was finished and said, "The house has been outfitted with necessary furniture and other items. So, do you approve of this house? Would you like to see inside?"

Something was strange. He was asking if she would like to see inside? He said the things she needed were already prepared?

Rieta was denying this reality and she asked back, after a long while, "What sort of man do you take its master to be?"

Eron nodded his head slightly toward her and replied to her question. “Are you asking who lived in this house previously? This house has yet to have any inhabitants. If you choose to do so, Madam Rieta, you will be the first to live in this house."

Rieta thought that was utterly impossible. She made a strange face. "By any chance... I'm sure it's impossible, but are you telling me I'll be...living here on my own?"

Eron tilted his head and smiled. “Do you have someone to live with? Perhaps an acquaintance in Axias...?"

"Oh, no. This house, do you mean you're giving it to me... Were you asking me whether or not I approve of this house because you're giving me this house? Were you asking how it would be for me to live here?" Rieta waved her hands hastily and replied.

The steward Eron saw Rieta becoming flustered and stayed silent as if to examine what she had said. He then answered carefully. "Of course."

Rieta covered her mouth in shock. Was this what he meant when the archduke had said he would find a house for her to live in? Not as a live-in maid, but as the owner?

"It's too big... It's too much," Rieta said, shaking her head with a confused look on her face.

"This is a house from His Royal Highness. It cannot be humbler than this," replied Eron, smiling warmly.

Humble?

Eron pulled out a key to open the door and gestured for Rieta to enter. "Would you care to take a look inside?"

She couldn't remain still and leave him standing there holding the door for her, so she followed him, flustered.

As she stepped inside, it became even more certain this house was too grand for her to live in alone. All the furniture was perfectly prepared.

There was a table, a sofa, and even wardrobes. They were all brand new. It was odd that no one had lived here, even though it was fully furnished.

Rieta awkwardly stood there, frozen, then her mouth barely opened.

"By any chance, do events like this happen often?"

She had thought she would be working there as a maid. But actually, it was a home for her to live in.

It wasn't as if she had gone around with the steward to look at properties. They simply took a carriage ride to this place and he opened the door with the key. As if he had always been prepared for things like this to happen, and had the house ready for whenever it would be needed.

The answer that came back with a smile only confirmed her suspicions.

"If you are inquiring as to whether or not the master gives houses to those he invites to Axias, then the answer is yes. It does happen from time to time. Please do not be burdened by it. Would you like to go see other houses?"

Rieta shook her head in disbelief.

"No... No."

Was the steward testing how shameless she was?

"I'm not at all trying to say I think the house isn't wonderful but is there a house that is a bit smaller?" Rieta asked carefully.

Eron replied, "Most of the houses are similar in size to this one, but if you would like, there are a few larger ones. Would you like to go take a look?"

Rieta let go of her complicated thoughts at the steward's answer. It was much too shameless to keep making things harder for him. She bowed her head hastily and gave up.

"Then, I'm sorry, but I'll take this house..."

"Will you? Very good. Then I will order the maids to bring along your things tonight," Eron said and asked for her hand.

Rieta held out her hand in confusion and Eron pulled out a pouch of gold. He placed it into her hand. The sound of gold clinking together resounded as the heavy weight fell into her hand.

The pouch opened slightly and the gold peeked out. Rieta's eyes grew to the size of saucers.

"This is a portion of your support fund to aid in your first month of settling in Axias,” Eron continued.

She stared at Eron dazedly because he just told her to use the money for a month's expenses. It was an amount she had never even held in her hand before in her entire life.

Before she could say it was too much, the elderly steward spoke calmly, as if he was expecting that. "This is a new beginning, so there will be many expenses. Prices in Axias are higher than in Cevitas. I will be visiting with a monthly allowance of half this amount for your first year.”

Rieta, with a dumbfounded expression on her face, asked, “A monthly allowance?"

"Yes. The reason why it's not a lump sum is that there is cause for worry about theft or simply just losing it. Once you've given some thought as to your future means of living, please do not hesitate to contact me for assistance."

She was struck silent by the situation. But Eron wasn't finished.

"If you wish to establish a storefront or to purchase land, please ask for me at the castle. A large venture will require approval through a proper business proposal, but I'm sure His Highness will grant you his approval on most occasions."

Allowing her to open a business? Giving her land?

She clamped her mouth shut when she realized why he was being so generous. It was like a bucket of cold water on her frozen face.

He was buying her.

She was in such a shameless position that it was mortifying.

Rieta bit her lip and wavered timidly so as not to look rude just standing there. She held out the pouch back to Eron. “I have money I brought from Cevitas. It will be more than enough."

The steward replied immediately, "Please do not decline. It is my duty to assist those consorts to His Highness to the utmost of my ability.”

Rieta thought he was elegantly avoiding being blunt.

She bowed her head, keeping her hand aloft, and bit her lip harder, then she lifted the pouch a bit higher and said, "All the more why I cannot receive this money, for His Highness did not have me."

"I know," Eron replied serenely.

"Pardon?"

Killian had never made a woman he had slept with leave in the middle of the night like that. But the shocked Rieta could have never known that, and Eron simply bowed his head instead of explaining all of that.

"I apologize for misleading you with careless words, madam. I only meant that as long as you have been brought to this land by His Highness, you

are one of his people."

Rieta looked at Eron with a confused look on her face. She was silent for a

long time, but the words that fell out of her mouth were foolish.

“Then was I mistaken in taking your kindness as such under the assumption that I had spent the night with His Highness?"

The old steward smiled.

"I am merely showing due courtesy to one whom His Highness wishes to support."

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After Eron returned to the manor, Rieta sat on the bed alone, in a daze.

What did she just discuss with the steward? Everything was unreal.

Even before she could be shocked by the sudden, overwhelming generosity in the house and the large sum of money, the fact that she was just left alone was unreal.

She still could not believe she was let go. Surely, a little while ago, she had been locked up and waiting for the day she would be buried in Casarius's grave. It still seemed like there would be guard soldiers making sure she didn't run.

The sounds of birds twittering outside were ever so peaceful, and Rieta's shoulders shuddered—as if she was just now waking from the alucino she had drunk a couple of weeks ago.

4

# THE MAGE OF AXIAS (2)

After the maids from the castle had come by, on the second floor of the white house where the widow brought from Cevitas was living, thin candlelight glowed in front of a wooden mortuary plate with a child's name written in small letters.

Rieta sat there and stared.

And she prayed for a long time.

\*\*\*

The night, where nothing beyond the dim candlelight was visible, passed. Rieta lay down in her bed just as the moon that was once high in the sky started to set to the west.

The cool but cozy bedding cocooned her body. It was her bed. It was a bed not intended for being taken by someone, but rather a bed for her to sleep and rest. It was a bed just for her.

The man who had scooped her up indifferently and placed her into his domain, the man who was the most brutal in the land, drifted up in her mind.

Killian Axias.

So cold-blooded it was believed he cut his brothers' throats... Or that he killed the women he slept with if they didn't satisfy him. This insane brute was at the center of all these atrocious rumors.

*Did the rumors really describe the man?*

As the cool bedding slowly started to warm up, Rieta thought back to what the steward Eron had said.

"You may not know much about the master, Miss Tristi, but he does not take women who do not desire to be taken.” ﻿

He acted as if it was natural for her to be misunderstanding Killian. Respect and affection toward his master were reflected on his grinning face.

"Why would he take me in if not to lay with me?"

The steward smiled kindly at her foolish question. "I suspect His Highness felt compassion for you and your circumstance, Madam Tristi."

Rieta sighed and covered her eyes with the back of her hand.

On the one hand, she felt deep loneliness as the only survivor with her husband and her child having both departed from this world. On the other hand, guilt weighed on her heart because of the relief she felt from being alive.

Tears flowed from her eyes, covered beneath her shaking palms. She thought she had let go of all her desire to live. Countless people had said they felt pity for her.

However, the only one to extend a hand was the most infamously cold- blooded man in the entire empire.

\*\*\*

After one full day and night of tossing and turning, Rieta groggily rose from her bed as the eastern sky was just starting to turn light.

The thin rays of dawn streaming in through the windows were always pretty dim, but she also hadn't eaten anything and just sat there for a very long time, so black spots dotted her vision. Rieta steadied herself on the wall and waited for the dizziness to pass. Her body was acting up, thanks to how comfortable she had become.

Because she had sat there in front of the plate memorializing her daughter day and night, lighting candle after candle, her stock of candles and tinder didn't last the day. That was when she was reminded to get up. ﻿

Rieta scolded herself for lazing around for so long and started to move around instinctively. Sitting in one place and not doing anything was a luxury when she was waiting to be buried alongside the count. But sitting here in the house doing nothing when she wasn't even waiting to die went against all the habits she had taken on over the years. Rieta shuffled around almost unconsciously.

Too much time had passed for her to use the excuse of not being able to accept reality and sit around lifeless. Since she was alive, she had to get ahold of herself quickly. Even if it was to just light a candle and pray for her daughter to be able to find her husband safely...

A commoner must work to survive. No matter what they did, they had to move as much as they could without resting because they didn't know when a spring famine could pop up, or when they could fall upon hard times and have to pull through. Even a long mourning period was a luxury.

She was offered a living allowance, but she couldn't just accept them and do nothing. It was spring, a time when food costs went up. This may not have applied to the Archduke of Axias, but to a common woman like Rieta, the financial help she was being given felt even more significant during this period. Just the fact that she was in his debt for saving her life was an unbearable weight for her. Thinking of that made her uneasy.

She assumed the day would soon break as she dragged her sluggish body through the actions of organizing her things. But she hadn't collected her things with the thought of settling down somewhere, so there wasn't much to organize. She was done before she knew it. It was still dark outside.

She realized she really hadn't brought many belongings. It was fortunate she remembered to collect her daughter's memorial plate and tinder.

She had only moved slightly and became tired quickly. She stared at the burnt-out candle, then looked out the window again. It was still too early and dangerous to go out and buy the things she needed. ﻿

She stood up weakly and again started to drift around the house like a ghost. She wondered if there was anything in the house to use as kindling.

It was believed a candle must be lit by the deceased's loved ones, so they may cross the River of Laudamus and meet with those who had been escorted first to the afterlife. Even after witnessing how this belief was used over and over again to earn money for ten years during her time at the convent, she still clung to it when it became relevant to her.

The convent at Cevitas where Rieta grew up made money off the people's faith by telling them they had to light candles and perform memorial ceremonies on the last day of each month when the devil rages. They had to buy certain amulets, they had to invite the priests to offer up prayers and so on, in order to add to their faith.

Rieta knew how to offer up prayers and memorial ceremonies on her own thanks to her long residency at the convent. But lighting candles was something she couldn't let go of, even just for the symbolism of the ritual.

Rieta gathered her body, trembling from weakness, and moved around. She was a little surprised at how well-supplied the house was as she opened the cabinets, cupboards, and closets. It was much better outfitted than her previous home, and it looked like she had everything.

She even found simple, dried food stocked in the cupboard. There were dried biscuits that would stay fresh for a long time. That's when she realized she was hungry. Rieta hugged the tin with one arm, nibbling on them as she kept looking through the drawers and the cupboards. The hard tack made her gag a few times. Maybe it was because she hadn't eaten in so long, but she still continued to eat.

Rieta found the matches in a drawer moments later. Eyes widening in surprise, she gripped them tightly. They were expensive matches that were only used for important events at the convent. She found a lamp full of oil right next to them. She didn't have to worry about her candle going out every so often because the wick was of poor quality, now that she could light the lamp. ﻿

No, actually, shouldn't there be candles as well? It would be stranger if there was a lamp and matches but no candles.

As she expected, she found candles in a nearby drawer and she was delighted as she picked them up. They were of high-quality beeswax.

She hurriedly went back to her altar-more accurately, the small set of drawers where she placed the memorial plate and the incense-and hunkered down in front of the memorial plate again. She watched the flame after she had lit a good candle with the expensive matches. She just stared, forgetting to even pray, as she remembered after a while to chew and swallow the biscuits remaining in her mouth.

At some point, the tin was half empty. It was funny how she could be hungry in this situation, and as she mocked herself for being able to eat, she giggled. As the self-deprecating smirk faded away, her head fell.

She had nothing to laugh about but this...

Rieta wasn't laughing because she was happy to see her daughter enjoy the food she had made, smearing it all over her face. It wasn't because she found her daughter cute for making a mess of herself within an instant, wearing the dress she had dressed her in. It also wasn't because she found her daughter so lovable for mumbling silently in her sleep.

She was happy because she liked the candle in front of the memorial plate. And because she thought she would die but she lived. And because she thought she would become a noble's plaything but she was freed.

But, sadness was sadness.

She swallowed the biscuits down with her tears, and thought about her husband's grave, so far away, and her daughter, whom she wasn't able to make a grave for.

It hadn't even been two months since that happened to her child. But here she was, a mother who had lost her child, eating in relief that she was alive. ﻿

She had absolutely nothing to be happy about, so she was sitting here, happy about how she was able to put an expensive candle in front of her daughter's memorial plate.

Having hardtack without water was not the only thing making her throat choke.

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She woke at the sound of someone knocking on the door. She didn't realize she'd fallen asleep. The bright sunshine and breeze were streaming in peacefully through the open window.

Again, a dull knock sounded on the door. Fear first thudded in her chest.

The knights of Cevitas? The guard soldiers? No. It couldn't be. This was Axias.

Did the Archduke of Axias change his mind?

Rieta nervously opened the door and saw a middle-aged woman with a warm face and a slightly younger couple, still seeming to be about ten years older than Rieta. Rieta's face turned blank.

"Hello.” The woman greeted her first.

The man spoke immediately after, almost continuing her greeting. "Hey! So, it's true. You're the new owner of the house. Wow, you're gorgeous! I'm Martin. You can call me Uncle Martin. Or darling Martin is fine as well."

Before she could allow that energetic greeting to sink in, the woman standing next to him smacked him on the back and scolded him.

"You're making a fool of yourself! I'm Nella. No need to pay any heed to this man's babbling." ﻿

The middle-aged woman giggled at them and extended the dish in her hands with a smile. A sweet and savory smell wafted up.

"Welcome to Axias. I hope you like apple pie.”

Rieta realized at that moment they were there to simply extend a welcome.

"Ah, th-thank you..."

Rieta accepted the plate blankly and quietly mumbled a word of thanks. They smiled and waited for her to welcome them inside. She finally gathered her wits and realized she was the owner of the house. She faltered in front of the house, not knowing what to do.

Even though she had freely wandered around the house when she was alone, now that there were other people standing in front of her, she felt it very strange to have to invite them in as the homeowner.

Oh, right. This was a situation where she had to invite them in. “Ah, um... Would you like to come in? Just one moment. The house...isn't organized yet."

Rieta stumbled backward and awkwardly welcomed them in. She hastily looked behind her. It was so perfectly neat that she felt embarrassed she had said it was not organized yet. Of course. It was a new house, and Rieta had barely any luggage.

She saw a table in the living room, surrounded by four chairs, in front of the kitchen.

"Th-this way..." Rieta spoke, meekly leading them in and setting the dish down on the table.

The middle-aged woman who gave her the pie smiled and introduced herself. "I live just next door. They call me Mrs. Fenyll."

The couple who had already introduced themselves joined the conversation. "We run the M&N General Shop at the intersection just up﻿ the road. It's Martin's and Nella's General Shop, of course."

"Nice to meet you, Miss New Neighbor!"

"Ah..."

Her brain told her it was time to introduce herself, but it was a beat too

late. Rieta barely got herself together and bowed her head in greeting. “H- hello, I'm...R-Rieta...!"

"Ririeta? Your name is beautiful too!"

“N-no, it's Rieta. Rieta Tristi."

"Rieta! That name is pretty too!"

Martin had a booming voice that seemed to be powerful no matter what he said and was full of energy. Rieta wasn't the one who had spoken, but it felt like she was also out of breath, and she floundered without exhaling. She then became flustered, again a beat too late, when she saw her guests just standing there, and offered them to sit. Her guests, smiling, each took a seat around the table.

After she had set out the plates and cutlery to eat the pie she realized something: there was nothing suitable for them to drink. Rieta turned toward her guests in a panic.

“Oh, oh, I'm so sorry. You've come by and...I have nothing to drink in the house. C-could you wait just a moment? I will quickly run out and buy something."

The money. Where did she leave the money? She was racking her brain and Nella waved her hand, laughing.

"Don't worry. We're happy with just water!"

Rieta became flustered again. "Th-the thing is. I have no water. Oh, could you tell me if there is a well or a spring nearby?" ﻿

The trio's eyes grew wide.

"Oh my, hasn't it been two days since you moved here? What will you do if you still don't have water? And food? Have you eaten anything?"

Nella whipped her head toward Martin and pushed his back with a smack. "Martin, go and buy some milk."

"Ouch! Come on!" Martin responded sharply because she struck him in the same place she had hit him before.

Mrs. Fenyll examined Rieta's complexion and looked concerned. “My goodness. Look at how sunken your face is. You must have been so out of sorts with the move and cleaning! Still, we must eat to stay alive, so you should be eating while you're working!"

Nella's eyes grew round. “Were you very busy? Were you unable to do anything else?"

Martin then detected Rieta's poor complexion and frowned. “Huh. We waited to come and visit, thinking we might get in the way when you're busy... Maybe it would have been better if we came a bit earlier and helped. You must have had a hard time."

Mrs. Fenyll motioned toward Rieta and stood up. “Come with us. We'll show you where the well is."

Nella clapped, jumping from her seat and following suit. “Oh, that's much better. Have you never gone outside? Then you must not know where the market is either?"

Martin had already gotten up. The conversation flew by so fast, that she couldn't get a word in. Rieta instinctively flapped her hands in the air, up and down, to follow along with their pace.

“Oh, th-thank you. Just one moment. The key... Where did I leave the key?" ﻿

Just as she was about to run up the stairs in search of the key, Nella grabbed hold of her hand and told her it was all right to just leave. She blinked dumbfoundedly at Nella who had her almost arm in arm.

Nella grinned a friendly smile. “It's all right. You don't have to lock up. It's your first time in Axias, yes? Axias has almost no thieves."

Mrs. Fenyll, who had walked halfway to the door, said, “Well, you'll still have to lock up when you go about at night. But when it's bright like this, it's fine to leave it unlocked. Ha, but more than common thieves, you'll have to be careful of other thieves. My goodness, Rieta, you're stunning.”

"I-I'm sorry?"

Nella reached out a hand toward the pitiful face and caressed her thin cheek. “But your coloring is not very good. Did you sleep? You have to eat well and sleep well. You're still so young.”

Rieta blinked vacantly at the sudden warmth.

"It's rough. Your lovely skin will be ruined."

"You're still beautiful. We have a wonderful cream in our shop, would you like a jar of it as a gift?"

"Nella, I told you to not thrust yourself upon someone at first sight and touch them like that."

“Oh, excuse me. I didn't even realize."

Rieta was pulled by the hand as if she was being swept away into the rapids. She had no room to even think about how she may be following kidnappers who were spinning a ruse to let down her guard. Rieta was whirled away by the energetic group without being able to refuse. ﻿

5

# THE MAGE OF AXIAS (3)

The boisterous welcome was over as quick as it had started.

There was food, the bottle of milk Martin had bought, and jars of water in the kitchen thanks to Mrs. Fenyll's and Nella's help. While Rieta was whisked about, her kitchen became so full that she could spend at least a week without worrying about food.

It was like a storm had blown through—a strange storm that specialized in supplying rather than destroying.

Rieta was exhausted after their whirlwind and flopped down into a chair in front of the table. Her head was spinning. It wasn't because she was hungry. Rather, it was because she was full.

On the table, there were two slices of the pie they had enjoyed together and left because they were all full. Next to it was a doorplate, a gift from Nella.

Martin and Nella quickly left, saying they had left the shop unattended for too long, and Mrs. Fenyll said it was time for her to take over for her son.

Rieta stared blankly at the newly stocked kitchen and decided to cook something for her neighbors as well before the mountain of food went bad.

Their visit had completely exhausted Rieta, but the overflowing kitchen and the kindness of strangers filled her heart with warmth. It wasn't only her new neighbors who were kind, but also all the people she met on the street.

Everyone welcomed Rieta, commenting on how she was a new face, and she left with more things pressed upon her than things she had paid for. She had heard people living within the castle walls were unfriendly and harsh...

The general shop, the bakery, the forge, the dry goods shop, greengrocers, the butcher, the well, the market... She thought of all the places she was escorted to and stared at the blank doorplate.

Mrs. Fenyll told her she herself was working at a bakery in the middle of the main street within the walls. Nella and Martin were on and off﻿ romantically all the time, but were currently off, so they were just partners in the general shop...

*“Oh my, Rieta. So, you have the power of blessing?"*

*"Oh my goodness, how wonderful! Actually, there hasn't been anyone who knows how to cast blessings within the walls! We had to go far out to find a mage. And it's been especially hard because there haven't been any clerics on pilgrimages these days."*

*"We'll spread the word. Ah, be sure to put up the sign on your door stating that you're a mage!"*

Quietly drumming her fingertips on the table, Rieta sat pensively for a while, and then rose to her feet. She went upstairs and brought down the thick chalk she had noticed earlier.

She looked at the doorplate, and feeling a little awkward, tentatively wrote "Mage" on the sign. It looked a little small, so she rubbed it out and wrote it again. She lifted it up and looked at it from various angles, and stood up.

Rieta opened the door to her house and went outside. She looked at the fence next to the gate and looked for a place where she could hang it. She hung the sign nicely.

Then she glanced around to see if anyone was watching, and looked at the sign again from multiple sides, adjusting the angle.

What made her feel so strange? She soon realized Axias's gates and fences were much lower than those in Cevitas, and realized the houses were lower as well.

Here... there are no thieves? Is it safer here because we are within the castle walls?

As Rieta was walking back in, a small sign next to the door to her home caught her eye and she stopped. It was much smaller than the doorplate Nella had gifted her so she couldn't use it as a signboard, but it was perfect for writing the homeowner's name so the messengers could know who lived there. ﻿

Rieta hesitated for a moment and brought out the chalk. And she stood there for a long while again, and then...

She lifted the chalk and wrote her name.

*"Rieta Tristi"*

\*\*\*

After a week, Rieta Tristi came to see Killian.

"My lord, Madam Tristi has requested your audience. Shall I bring her in?"

Killian was busy looking over the papers that had piled up in his long absence, so he silently looked up at Eron without lifting his head. He then asked, "Who?"

"Rieta Tristi, Sire."

"Right." He remembered the woman he had sent away with a house and lifted his head to look at Eron. “Is it a matter beyond your capabilities?" Killian asked because Eron only came to him if he had a problem only Killian could solve.

Eron simply said, "She wishes to have an audience with you, Sire."

Normally, he wasn't a person anyone could see just because they asked. But seeing as Eron had gone so far as to ask him, Killian nodded without much thought.

Eron left and moments later, he escorted a woman to Killian's study. Although he didn't look up when she entered, he could sense her greeting with a bow, maintaining respectful distance. Eron withdrew and returned with a cart carrying tea.

Killian remained at his desk and continued to peruse the document in his hand. As the tea table was being set, he finally glanced up and stood from his seat.

He loped over and flopped down into a chair in front of the tea table. He looked toward Rieta only after he had taken the teacup Eron was serving him. ﻿

The moment he laid eyes on Rieta, the first thing that caught his eye was her blonde tresses, pulled up and away from her face, and a petty thought brushed by.

It didn't happen that much these days, but for a while, Eron had taken great lengths to keep himself from doing a double take when a young, blonde woman appeared. Just because a few of the women he had taken just happened to be blonde...

Eron should be aware of the fact he just sent her away that night. He knew Killian was staring at him openly, but he kept a blank face, finished preparing the tea, and excused himself.

Killian laughed bitterly without even realizing it. Removing his eyes from Eron, who was quietly leaving the room, Killian spoke to the woman with the intention of being brief yet polite, and then sending her on her way.

"Is the dwellings to your liking?"

Rieta remained standing with her head bowed, and replied, “Yes, I could not ask for better. Your generosity and the aid of my neighbors have been a great blessing."

Killian stared at the crown of her head and said, "I see no meaning in granting you an audience when you look to the ground for my face."

"Your Highness?" Rieta barely lifted her head and looked at him.

Killian jerked his chin toward the chair. “Be seated.”

Rieta hesitated for a moment and approached the table quietly. Before she took a seat, she pressed her hand to her bosom and curtsied again, then perched carefully on the edge of the chair. She was the pinnacle of modesty and good manners. Killian could clearly see her breathing deeply to calm her nerves. Her face was frozen as if she were quite nervous.

He had basically seen her naked body, but she was keeping her distance.

Killian gazed at the woman, who was acting differently from before. He felt a little strange. When there was something to be nervous about, she made no indication of it. But now, what was there to be nervous about? ﻿

Now that he thought about it, he had only seen her in a mourning dress, in a slip, and in an ornate dress. It was the first time he had seen her in common, everyday clothing. There weren't many instances for Killian Axias to speak to a woman in common clothing, and in such close quarters. She had come to see him in clothing that was extremely plain.

*Ah. Was she implying she didn't have enough money?*

"I gather you've come to a decision on what your profession will be. You must need my permission for something since you've come to me instead of having Eron attend to the matter,” Killian said bluntly.

Rieta hesitatingly lowered her gaze. She fidgeted, her slim fingers trembling.

*Why was she taking so much time to speak? Was it that grand of a request?*

Just as Killian was about to feel irritated, Rieta moved, just barely.

"This..." Rieta pulled out a small box from her sleeve and placed it on the table. She pushed it forward. She opened the box with trembling hands and turned it toward him.

There was a necklace in the box.

*No, was it a ring?*

It was a simple necklace of a small ring attached to a strip of leather.

"What is it?"

Rieta bowed her head at Killian's question and murmured quietly, “It is but a humble ability, but I've cast it with a blessing. It isn't much, but this is the most valuable thing I can offer."

Killian was lost for words. He didn't expect this. A silence passed, as neither of them spoke.

He broke the silence. “You're a mage?”

Rieta nodded slightly and replied, "Yes, I have limited ability to cast blessings and purify. Thus I do not require any funding or land to carry out this work. And as for the generous dwelling and allowance you've

granted... I will work diligently to repay your kindness one day.” Her voice﻿ gradually became softer, and her head fell. "You needn't bestow a monthly allowance..."

Killian stared at the bowed woman. She looked stubborn and pitiful, with her fingers gripping her skirt, as if she were extremely nervous.

"I don't need your money." That was what she came here to say. Was she an earnest type of person? One who couldn't bear to lean on others? Of course, some people tried to use that earnestness to their advantage and get more out of him.

"As you say, it seems you have no need for any funding.” Killian didn't mind her saying no, but he drew the line. "I have no need for repayment and will inform Eron as such."

Rieta whipped her head up. “No. I couldn't...!"

Killian cut her off. “Excessive courtesy turns manners to vice. Do not refuse me again, for your words suggest that I am in need of your money."

Rieta's face flushed. "For...forgive me."

"As for this trinket." Killian looked down at the table.

*You don't need to bring me things like this. I can get things with blessings cast upon them anytime at the temple...*

That was what he was going to say, but he swallowed his words as he saw Rieta's stark white hands, wringing her skirt and trembling. Seeing people being terrified of him wasn't new to Killian, but she had been the recipient of quite a bit of benevolence. He was a little miffed.

Killian leaned back on the sofa and sat askew. He stared at Rieta.

*What did I do?*

It was ridiculous how he was being treated this way even after he had been so generous. *Well, fine.* It wasn't like him to go back and forth, pretending to be kind and refusing the gift. ﻿

"I will accept with thanks."

As soon as he said those words, the woman let out a breath quietly, as if she was finally reassured. Then she looked up at him with dewy eyes.

"I thank you, Your Highness."

Killian looked at the woman without a word and looked down at the necklace the woman had held out.

Well. There was nothing bad about having one more thing with a blessing. Because it was a merciless season when the plague was sweeping over the world.

\*\*\*

After Rieta had respectfully said her goodbyes, Killian picked up the shabby ring and examined it.

It looked like it was quite old. It had a lot of nicks. It was rough but was most definitely made of a precious metal. It was most likely the finest thing a common woman who was that poor could own.

It was dangling off a new leather strap, so he could wear it around his neck. The leather looked to be of high quality and definitely had to be expensive. It seemed like she had purchased it for the purpose of gifting it to him.

She must have bought the gift with the money he gave her. Killian chuckled. ﻿

She was a mage. She said she could also purify. It was an expensive skill, especially in times like now. Being able to cast blessings meant she had the power to bless people or items with holy strength, making it so the plague or devils could not attack, and wishing good fortune upon them. It was the most basic skill of divine magic, but mages themselves were rare to begin with. So this skill was welcomed everywhere.

It was mostly performed by clerics, who had the ability to use divine magic. But there were also a few people who had those powers but were unable to become clerics. Generally, they were people who had grown up being educated in the abbeys but failed to become a cleric in the end. The most common reasons for their failure were either that their powers manifested too late, or even if they did manifest in time, there were other factors barring them from becoming a part of the clergy. Oftentimes, their powers were weaker than those of the clerics.

These people were called ones with the power of blessing or just simply mages. But unlike the clergy, their identities were not certain, and their powers were not uniformly guaranteed, so they were treated as being on a level lower than the officially recognized clergy. Their main clients were people who could not afford to travel to the temples or invite a cleric.

But on the other hand, mages who had deep roots in a certain community and had been there for a long time--and were thus recognized to be skillful -were treated very well and beloved by the people. If that mage was especially talented, they would rank as a powerful figure in the community, and sometimes, they would be treated even better than the clergy. ﻿

In times like these, when the plague was sweeping across every corner of the continent, and the clergy were requiring very high fees to protect themselves from the danger, the mages were raking in the money. They could price their services at whatever price they wanted, and it was a blessed job. Purifications, healings, and purges of evil, which were lauded even more than blessings, were no exception.

She might not be very skilled, but she had great timing. The fact that he brought her here himself and placed her within the castle walls would only help her gain the trust of the people. He thought she would do well here and adjust to these lands without much difficulty.

But what about the fact that they tried to bury her alive, a woman with the power of blessing? It would have been such a wasteful move on their part, especially in a place where the plague was raging.

And he brought that sort of person to his own lands, right at that opportune moment. Wasn't he one outstanding lord?

"Your Highness. Would you care for a friendly duel?” asked Leonard, his prized knight and loyal right-hand man.

"Hmm... Perhaps."

Killian burrowed his body into the sofa and grinned at him.

"But it's not as fun when I'm so good at everything..." ﻿

6

# THE MAGE OF AXIAS (4)

"You appear to be of good cheer, Your Highness."

Leonard, collapsed on the ground and panting heavily, was shedding his armor and tossing its pieces everywhere.

More than ten knights were in a similar position, having gotten the same loving treatment from their lord, whose high spirits they hadn't seen in a long time.

"Not particularly.”

A leonine grin spread on Killian's face and his red eyes swept across them. "Not when my beloved knights have apparently degenerated in skill."

The knights, who were all collapsed in exhaustion, started to groan at the foreboding comment. A sad premonition never failed to pass. The archduke's voice rang out. “Twenty laps for all but Leonard, who managed to hit me once with a blow. And ten more for the last man."

"I adore you, my liege, Archduke of Axias!" Loyal Leonard quickly professed his love in a loud shout. He was completely sprawled out in front of his leader but his voice was still at attention.

The knights grumbled, devoid of energy, and got up with the pace of drying concrete. Killian's lip twitched in one corner, watching his men drag their feet.

"Since only Leonard adores me so, everyone else shall do thirty laps, and the slower half shall do ten more."

"We love you, Archduke of Axias!"

They chorused and leaped to their feet, ripping off their armor. The noble knights, all dressed in the bare minimum, ran with all their might to somehow escape the extra ten laps. ﻿

Killian grinned playfully and watched his knights who adored him. “Every man fears finishing in the slower half of the lot, but none seem to entertain the notion of being last.”

Leonard snickered. "The markings of true comradery, my lord. I may not be the best of us, but I'm surely not the worst."

Killian looked over at him calmly and began, “Leonard. Were you aware Rieta is a mage?"

Leonard had told him that she was an ordinary widow. He didn't say she was a mage. Did he leave it out because that was out of the scope of what had happened to her? But it was a skill that demanded attention, especially since Leonard said that her husband died of an illness.

"The madam from Cevitas?" Leonard blinked, bewildered.

"So, you didn't know." It was as he had expected. There was no way this capable man could have missed this kind of information.

Leonard sat up. "I will look into it."

"No need," Killian replied, looking away.

He was not a superior who harassed his subordinates for no reason. There was a stark difference in difficulty gathering information about this when they were in Cevitas and when they were not. And it wasn't especially suspicious nor related to something meaningful.

It was already confirmed she wasn't a woman with a suspicious past, so it wasn't something that needed to be researched. In any case, it wasn't like she was directly connected to him like Casarius, with money or interests.

"I apologize, Sire."

Leonard understood what Killian meant, but he apologized for the insufficiency in his research. Quite the earnest fellow.

Killian waved his hands dismissively. Killian wasn't one to concern himself with a sad story. And Leonard was used to who Killian was, so he must﻿ have stopped his research after discovering there was nothing suspicious about Rieta's background.

Being assured of the fact she hadn't been publicly known as a mage was enough. Killian thought asking her the next time he saw her would suffice.

Just as he was about to forget about it, Killian met Rieta again.

\*\*\*

"Rieta?"

Killian was on his way back to the main building where he lived after warming up with his knights on the training grounds when he noticed Rieta and called out her name.

Rieta pressed her hand to her chest and curtsied with respect as if she had noticed him a long time ago and was preparing her greeting. Again, she was dressed plainly. Maybe it was because of the warmer weather, but her clothes were lighter than before.

"I hail His Highness, the archduke."

"My lord' will suffice."

"O-of course, my lord."

As Killian corrected her casually, Rieta's face flushed, and she ducked her head. It had already been more than a month since she started living here. Calling him Your Royal Highness... She addressed him as if she wasn't his subject.

She wasn't dressed up at all, but the lighter clothing she had on made her look even more beautiful. A simple linen dress with her golden hair pulled up neatly, and her sky-blue eyes looked perfect with spring.

*She is undoubtedly a beauty,* Killian thought.

"What brings you here?"

"I am headed to the East Annex, on a request for a blessing." ﻿

Killian remembered Eron mentioning in passing that she was adjusting well as a mage and nodded slightly in acknowledgement.

"I see that you've settled well here."

"By your gracious generosity."

Right, he had something to ask her. He considered asking her casually, but it was something that could take some time. He also decided it was not the time to pull aside a person who was on her way to work.

"If you have time to spare, come visit me after your work is done."

"As you wish... my lord." Rieta bowed respectfully and replied.

Rieta stayed bowed until Killian's form disappeared into the main building. When he was gone, she stood upright, let out a short breath, and continued on her way to the East Annex.

She hoped he didn't take her for being aloof when she was so greatly indebted to his kindness. She had only one lord her entire life, Casarius. Inevitably, she needed time to adjust to her new lord.

She felt it was strange to call one that almost ended her life and another that saved her from that end by the same designation.

\*\*\*

"Oh, oh! Ahh!"

Suddenly a scream sounded from above, and Rieta looked up in shock. A blonde girl had climbed up a tree and was clutching the branches. She, and the tree, were falling toward Rieta.

She was so shocked she couldn't move and stood frozen, staring up at the tree. With a loud thunk, the falling tree halted and stood still.

"I can't believe you! Anna!"

A woman had popped up out of nowhere and grabbed the roots, pushing the tree back into place. The woman saw the girl, who had almost fallen﻿ headfirst, trembling in fear and unable to come down. She held the tree up with one hand and reached out to her.

"Come here!"

She had astoundingly superhuman strength but trying to hold up the tree with one hand was hard, and the tree wobbled.

"I'm scared! I'm scared! I'm scared!"

The girl kept shrieking, on the verge of tears, and that broke Rieta from her stupor. Rieta ran to the girl. She briefly hesitated between running to the tree and the girl, but she decided rather than approaching as a total stranger and scaring the girl, it would be better to help hold up the tree. She ran to the unstable tree and pushed to help keep it up.

"Thank you!"

As Rieta helped push the tree, the woman uttered a brief word of thanks and swiftly regained her balance. The woman leaned toward the girl and reached her arm a little higher, in a more stable position.

The girl, seeing the hand come close enough to reach, stretched out her hand. As soon as they grasped each other's hand, the woman quickly shouted, "Let go!"

The girl could have been terrified in such a precarious position, but she let go of the branch. The girl called Anna threw herself into the woman's arms as if she trusted her wholly.

The woman flung an arm around the girl's body, twisted to regain her balance, and shoved the tree away. The weight of the tree Rieta was holding up with her hands disappeared in an instant.

The pretty huge tree was now tossed away and its roots were totally upended. It looked like the soil around the tree base had washed away from the rain and weakened the roots.

The girl was crying from behind. ﻿

"Wahh! Seira!"

The woman with superhuman strength, Seira, picked Anna up and dusted her off.

"I've told you time and time again you're too old to climb trees! Do you still think you're a child? Even after you fell last time because the branch broke?"

"That's why I went up to a thick and strong branch this time!" The girl cried.

"Why did you climb the tree in the first place?"

"His Lordship, to see His Lordship! Ow!"

Seira rapped the top of the girl's head and looked at Rieta, whose eyes were wide, smiling apologetically, and addressed Rieta.

"My goodness. You must have been frightened because of Anna. I'm sorry. Did you get hurt anywhere?"

"No, no, I'm fine."

"Can I see your hands?"

Rieta waved both her hands in the air to show her she was okay. She was truly fine.

"That's good."

Seira lightly smacked Anna on the back, still carrying her in her arms.

"This lady almost got hurt because of you!”

"I'm sorry!"

Just then, Rieta discovered a long scratch on the girl's calf and suggested that they hurry and treat the wound before it became infected or scarred later. ﻿

Seira quickly scanned the scratch on Anna's leg. The girl stretched out her neck to look down as Seira did, and her eyes grew wide. It seemed that in her shock, she did not realize she had been hurt.

In a hurry, Seira thanked Rieta again and asked for her name. Rieta told her there was no need to thank her and urged her to take care of Anna. Seira didn't press the question. With a smile at Rieta, she walked away with Anna in her arms.

As they moved further away, she could overhear them talking.

"I'm going to tell Helen!"

“You can't! You can tell anyone but Helen! I'll do the cleaning three times!"

"Just three?"

"No, no! Five times!"

Rieta stared at them walking away from behind. She then looked over at the tree, uprooted and on its side.

*Is this okay?*

She wandered around the tree, not knowing what to do for a while. She realized the time and quickly turned toward the direction she had been walking. It was the direction of the East Annex.

\*\*\*

Past the main building of Axias Manor, where His Lordship resided, past two buildings she didn't know the names of, and past the corner of another unknown building, the East Annex appeared.

Where the Archduke of Axias's women lived.

Killian's women lived in the East Annex. Such a thing was possible because he used to be an imperial prince and was unmarried. And also because no one could question his personal life. ﻿

Most of the women associated with Killian were compensated generously, and they went back home to their respective lands. But if anyone wished to stay at the castle, he allowed them to stay for as long as they wanted.

And so, over time, the number of women who lived in the castle grew to more than ten. It was a much smaller number than the rumored hundred- something women in his harem, but...

Rieta thought he wouldn't need someone like her.

Killian was now over thirty years old and still unmarried. Rumors ran amok about how that was because he had such evil propensities with women. Disturbing stories like how Killian wouldn't see the same woman twice, how he would kill a woman if she didn't satisfy him, how he would kill a woman to stuff her if he favored her... it was widely known even when she was in Cevitas.

Rieta had been extremely lucky to be saved by the archduke's grace... But the women in this place were most likely all here for different reasons and different purposes.

Before she turned the last corner of the building, she took a deep breath in anticipation. She took a step inside, quite nervous. An unexpected atmosphere greeted Rieta.

The East Annex was filled with sunlight and felt cleaner than the other buildings. The cozy building was surrounded by women who seemed to be close to one another.

There was a woman rolling around on a blanket under a tree, another sitting by the window, yawning and eating fruits, and some tossing bread﻿ for the fishes or skipping rocks. There were also women playing in the middle of hanging laundry on a clothesline.

Rieta's eyes didn't know where to rest, with no way to tell who was a “Lady of the East Annex" or a maid.

Some women were dressed in slightly fancier dresses, but most wore comfortable dresses without corsets or frippery. None of them were scared or gloomy, and none of them looked disagreeable or in a bad mood.

Rieta stood there, staring, then quickly dropped her gaze. She wasn't there to observe. Shouldn't she be able to go up to anyone and ask the name of the lady who asked for her? Since it looked much safer than what she had thought...

Rieta pushed her feet to walk faster and headed toward the East Annex. As the women started to notice her one by one, their eyes gathered on her.

Right then, a woman who had silently walked up behind her spoke.

"You must be the mage, Madam Tristi!"

Rieta turned around quickly and greeted the woman. "Oh, how do you do? Did you request..."

"Yes, I'm Rachel. Pleased to meet you." A pretty woman with short black hair and purple eyes grinned.

Rieta was slightly shocked at the woman's short hair. It was a hairstyle rarely seen among noblewomen. Although short, it was beautiful. She was a beautiful woman. She had more of a neat, intelligent beauty, rather than a glittering beauty. ﻿

The women who were staring at Rieta all started to come closer, curiosity filling their eyes.

How their expressions didn't even change when one of them rested their chin on another's shoulder, made them look even more like they were all very comfortable with each other.

"Rachel, who is she?" A tall, blonde woman smiling with her arms on two other women's shoulders asked.

Rachel turned toward her and introduced Rieta. "The Mage's House within the castle walls."

Just saying the name of her establishment was enough. The women oohed and ahhed with their eyes wide and stared at Rieta.

Rieta quickly bowed her head. "Good day. I hail the ladies of the East Annex. I am the mage, Rieta Tristi."

One of the women, joking and jostling the others, giggled as if what Rieta said was funny.

"Strange way to say hello."

Then she lifted her skirts and curtsied, mimicking an elegant figure, greeting her mischievously.

"Welcome, Mage."

Another woman tilted her head slightly and laughed.

"Welcome to the East Annex." ﻿

7

# THE MAGE OF AXIAS (5)

“Mage Tristi, could I ask you to bless my room as well?"

“Yes. Before that, I must visit Miss Elise's and Miss Giselle's rooms, so could you wait a moment?"

"Of course!"

"I'd like it if we went to Helen's room first. It's closer to her room from here. Since Giselle's room and my room are the farthest, let's go to ours last." Elise budged in.

"Oh... Would that be all right?"

"Yes, let's do that." Giselle agreed brightly.

The women were all kind and good-natured.

But the problem was it seemed there would be more work than she had predicted. The women who were lounging outside had slowly started to swarm, and as Rieta entered the East Annex, the women who were resting in their rooms began to pop out one by one and join the group.

Even the women who had already been blessed followed Rieta around, adding to the bright hubbub, making things slightly more hectic. Had all the women of the East Annex come out to see her? Now a sizeable group followed, each woman popping up and asking her to bless their rooms.

Having all these women following her around as they chattered behind her, watching her work was creating a bit of pressure, but she was grateful that the East Annex wasn't the dark, gloomy place she had imagined.

“Mage Tristi, I heard you can bless things to carry around too, not just rooms.” One of the chattering women asked Rieta.

“Yes. But it's more difficult than blessing a fixed location, and it takes more time. Blessings cast on humans or objects don't last long," Rieta replied. ﻿﻿

"Regardless, I want blessings for my belongings... And it's hard to meet a mage you can trust."

"If you're going to get one, I want one too."

"Me too."

The women started to chime in. It seemed like her workload was about to get bigger.

His Lordship had told her to come and see him...

"Th-then could you gather the objects you would like to have blessed? If you give me some time, I can bless them and send them back to you.”

All the women agreed to leave their items with her. It was a big enough number of requests she probably didn't have to worry about money for the next few months, but all she could think about was whether or not His Lordship was waiting for her.

She had just barely gotten through blessing all the ladies' rooms, and as the end was in sight, one woman asked, “Oh! Won't you join us for tea in the garden afterward? Our flowers have bloomed quite marvelously."

With a flustered look, Rieta shook her head slightly. “I'm afraid... I must decline your generous offer, for I am expected elsewhere.”

"Ah, more commissions to attend to?"

She was here in the castle on their invitation, so it didn't seem polite to say she had made another appointment so close to this one. So, she considered evading the question, but Rieta decided it would be better for her to be honest. After all, there were many eyes and ears in the castle.

“No. I encountered His Highness on my way here, and he has requested that I pay him a call afterward.”

Giselle's eyes became round like saucers, and she covered her mouth. "Oh! Then you should hurry. We've taken too much of your time already."

"You should hurry and go."

The women pushed her to the door unreservedly. Rieta was slightly embarrassed, but thankful for the friendly women, even though she was not quite at home with them yet. She bade them goodbye and stepped outside. Rieta tried very hard to hide her hurried footsteps as she left the East Annex.

\*\*\*

"You're truly cold-hearted, Sire...”

Rieta was hurrying toward the main building where Killian resided, but she stopped at the sound of a woman's plea.

"My orders were to stay put until I came to you,” a cold voice rang out.

Rieta's eyes moved toward the source of the voices.

"But... How can you not even come to see me once? I came here with my eyes only on you."

“Then wouldn't going back right now fix that for you?"

"I didn't mean it that way."

Killian's face darkened. "I did not allow you to stay here so you could bother me."

"Your Royal Highness..."

Killian noticed Rieta and stopped abruptly. A stunning redheaded woman in a pink dress was chasing Killian and followed his gaze to turn around and face Rieta. Her wistful green eyes were brimming with tears.

Rieta stopped in her tracks, embarrassed, and bowed toward Killian. Killian didn't take his eyes off Rieta and spoke.

"Axias is not the place for you. Gather your belongings and return to your homeland, for nothing you desire can be had here.” ﻿

Killian didn't even glance at the miserable woman beside him and threw down an icy order to leave. Rieta thought he meant for her to leave because he continued to stare at her when he said that.

The moment she realized he didn't mean her, Killian called for her. "Rieta."

She quickly gathered her wits and tensed her shoulders.

"Follow me."

Without waiting for her reply, the Archduke of Axias disappeared into the main building of the castle.

The beautiful woman's tear-ridden eyes hastily turned to Rieta... But all Rieta could do was bow her head, ashamed, and follow Killian in.

\*\*\*

As Rieta walked in, Eron stepped toward her as he took Killian's cloak. Killian looked back at her with a quick turn of the head as he kept walking ahead of her.

He spoke to her roughly. “Dine before you go."

Rieta jumped, startled. “Pardon? No, I... I couldn't.”

"I must, as it's suppertime for me."

She panicked for a moment, fumbling for something to say. It was because she was too late. "For... Forgive me for the delay.”

"Shall I have the kitchen prepare a dinner, Sire?" the steward asked Killian.

Killian did not take his eyes off Rieta. "Only if Rieta responds."

Rieta's heart thudded in her chest. "I-I would gladly dine with you, Your Highness. It would be an honor." ﻿

"Very well, though I strain to find much honor in a simple meal,” Killian snorted.

It was a harmless offhanded comment from Killian, but to Rieta it sounded like a cold sneer. It was made only worse by what she had just witnessed before entering the room. Her heart felt like it was shriveling up in fear.

"I'm not pulling you from a prior engagement?" Killian asked nonchalantly.

Even if she did, it felt like she most definitely had to dine with him. The archduke said he hadn't eaten.

"No, Your Highness." Rieta spoke without lifting her head.

Killian spoke pointedly at her head. “Is it customary in Cevitas to speak to one's feet?"

"Pardon?"

"You've made your good manners well-known. Now do me the courtesy of raising your head when speaking, so I may recognize you by your face rather than your head. Here in Axias, it is proper decorum to speak to one's face, not to the shadows clinging to their feet.”

Rieta quickly lifted her head and raised her eyes toward him. “I shall, Your Highness."

Killian glanced at those azure eyes and turned toward Eron. "To the great hall then. I shall join you once I've changed.”

The steward bowed his head with respect. "Yes, my lord."

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Supper with the Archduke of Axias. She had no clue of the proprieties of dining with nobles.

*Where did I go wrong? ﻿*

If she were only able to come a little faster, this would never have happened. But there was no use crying over spilled milk.

Rieta hadn't eaten, waiting for Killian, but she could already feel her stomach churn.

It was apparent she would be the most ignorant tablemate. It would have been better if she were sitting far away from him, but of all seats at the vast table, the steward had pulled out the one right next to the head of the table.

Rieta wondered, *What do I do?*

There were many seats at the table, so Rieta wanted to ask if she could sit anywhere else. But in a situation where she didn't even know if they were going to converse, she couldn't say a word. She couldn't run away.

Moreover, she was more concerned that her actions of respect and restraint might have irritated the archduke. She had been told she was rude last time too...

Should she have just replied with a blanket statement of deference and agreement to everything? How could she even think to refuse and decline as a lowly commoner? And it didn't seem he was the type to speak idly.

Rieta's survival instincts as a commoner told her to watch out for little triggers in nobles and they paid off. They brought her close to the answer.

The Archduke of Axias didn't like effusive people.

Rieta vowed to answer with the clear-cut answers he wanted, rather than refusing on account of respect or politeness. She fidgeted with the tips of her fingers.

And looking at his face when speaking... No matter how high-ranking they were, she wouldn't face the floor.

Rieta thought it would take quite a bit of time to get used to his ways. And she thought it would be better not ever to have the same thing happen﻿ again.

It seemed supper tonight would take a while.

She still hadn't heard why he wanted to speak to her. She'd have to stay on her toes if he wanted to talk to her during the meal. If he didn't bring it up, she didn't know when she could broach the reason why and what that reason could be, so she'll have to be doubly tense.

Rieta was certain her stomach would become upset.

Soon after she sat down to wait, a wonderful smell wafted in, and the food started to be carried in. She had never experienced such delicious smells, not even at the yearly harvest feasts... What did such things even matter? She was so nervous all the food would taste like sand anyway.

Delicacies the likes of which she had never seen before started to be set on the table.

A salad with sliced tomatoes and cheese, with an amber dressing, garnished with kale, a salad made of lettuce, rose, and tender oak leaves, with peppered tenderloin and orange supremes, a tangy-smelling soup with shrimp and vegetables, and a stew with meat, mushrooms, onions, potatoes, romaine, and cabbage.

A dish of strange vegetables fried with red and white sausages, sprinkled with almond slices, an unfamiliar dish with mashed pumpkin, with cream and a rose-colored sauce poured on top with seeds sprinkled all over, a steamed dish of chicken stuffed with yellow grains and olives, a huge fish, completely new to her, roasted and wafting a savory smell...

It was endless.

At first, she foolishly thought he was just a big eater but soon started to panic. How could just the two of them eat all this food? Most of it was probably going to be thrown away. Did he always dine like this? ﻿

More and more dishes came in. A gigantic, steaming roasted fowl, maybe a chicken, perhaps a turkey, and a silver platter full of ribs smothered in sweet-smelling cheese were being walked in.

Right then, she heard a commotion. A group of men dressed in armor crashed in. It was the knights. Rieta jumped with alarm. The knights noticed Rieta sitting there at the table full of fancy food.

"Huh? It's a woman."

"What?"

"Who is she?"

"Oh, that woman. You know, the one that His Highness brought back from Cevitas."

"Ah, the woman who almost got buried alive?"

Rieta stood up, bewildered. Something seemed strange.

The steward saw her stand up and walked up to her. "Is there something you require?"

Before she could open her mouth, the door opposite the one the knights walked in opened, and the Archduke of Axias walked in. He had changed into lighter clothing and swung into the chair at the head of the table, not glancing at a single one of them.

"Be seated."

The knights sat immediately as if they had never even paused. Rieta, spurred on by this trend, also sat down, dazed.

"Let us dine."

Killian started to eat as if nothing was any different. The knights also picked up their forks and knives. Rieta stared dumbfoundedly at the knights and Killian. ﻿

"Your Royal Highness,” a handsome knight sitting across Rieta, his face familiar, addressed Killian. “The lady's unease gives me a reason to suspect you failed to advise her, again."

"Oh."

Finally, Killian flicked his eyes toward Rieta as if he had just realized she was there. "We will dine with my knights and speak thereafter.”

"I see."

Rieta ducked her head, bewildered.

Leonard buried his face in his hand at this tragic situation. He shrewdly gave up on his liege and decided to address the situation on his own.

"I'm sure it must be rather uncomfortable, but please pay no mind to us and enjoy your meal,” Leonard gestured in Killian's direction with his chin. “I'm afraid His Highness is as far from romance as one can be.”

The flustered Rieta quickly took in Killian's reaction. *What was he doing, acting this way? How was he going to deal with the consequences?*

Killian was silently cutting into his food. All he did was raise an eyebrow, glance at Leonard, and lift his fork to his mouth.

Leonard looked at Killian with a pitying expression, just accepting the look Killian gave him and kept going. “Nonetheless, very charming indeed. Master of all trades, except for matters of the heart."

"Keep those concerns for your own matters." Killian swallowed and reached for his wineglass.

"I have absolutely no concern for myself because I know quantity outweighs quality in love and romance. But I couldn't say the same for you, Your Highness." Leonard responded cheekily.

She watched Killian like a hawk, feeling like she was navigating over fragile ice, as she saw him place his cutlery on his plate. Would he stab his knight right then and there with the knife? Would he smash the plate? Would he overturn the table? Her head was spinning. ﻿

Killian turned his red eyes to Leonard, a faint smile on his face, and tilted his head. “It pains me to hear such harsh words from my beloved knight.”

"And you are my beloved master, my liege,” Leonard responded to Killian with a straight face. Raising his hand to cover his mouth from Killian, he whispered to Rieta in a loud stage whisper. “But he only knows the love between a master and his knights."

"I spurn that notion."

"I've yet to feel this love you speak of!"

"He only cares for Leonard!"

The other knights chimed in, in response to Leonard's observation. Within moments, the table was in an uproar.

Suddenly, Killian started to laugh silently. He was smiling faintly before. But there was a different look on his face of delight.

It was a fleeting expression, but under Rieta's nervous and careful watch, she caught that slight difference.

She felt mixed emotions as she sat watching Killian, who looked like a different person. His face smoothed back into an expression of indifference within moments, and a chilling voice flowed out from between his lips.

"I fear I have failed to aptly express my emotions."

Killian lazily rested his chin in his hands and smirked. Then he swept his laid-back but also dangerous-looking red eyes across the knights sitting around the table.

“I shall not rest until each of you feels the full extent of my affections to your very marrow."

The knights immediately fell silent, knowing deeply what that meant. Leonard took advantage of the sudden silence to clink his fork against his wineglass and shouted. ﻿

"I adore you, my liege, Archduke of Axias!"

The brief toast sparked a monstrous shout.

"We adore you, my liege, Archduke of Axias!"

It was a frightening roar. The knights started to dig in, talking and laughing. There was no elegance of nobles, but no one could say this was coarse or crude.

"Meow-"

She heard an unexpected sound. A white and brown striped cat with charming pumpkin-colored eyes had walked over to Killian's side. It stretched up and placed its fluffy front paws on Killian's chair, tail swishing, and licked its nose. The cat meowed again, and the tiny thing tilted its head.

Killian only glanced at the adorable creature and didn't pet it even once. He simply picked up a piece of roasted fish from the side of his plate with a blank expression on his face and gave it to the cat. The cat had its eyes glued to his hand, and as soon as the fish came close enough to capture, it snatched the fish away and hopped down with the fish in its mouth.

It had taken a sizeable piece of fish underneath Killian's chair and settled in the shadows, with its tail wrapped around its body. And then it started to happily nibble and tear at the fish, meowing contentedly occasionally.

The knights were still in the middle of their meal. Killian, who had finished his meal before the others, was drinking a cup of tea. He casually took his cup off the saucer and poured milk into it. And then he placed it on the floor.

The cat was licking its paws after polishing off the fish in seconds and brushed toward the saucer of milk.

When she came to her senses after seeing this, she had already finished her meal, now feeling full and comfortable, without even realizing it. ﻿

8

# THE MAGE OF AXIAS (6)

After supper, the knights rubbed their full bellies as they sang boisterously and retreated after an odd greeting of, “I adore you, Your Royal Highness!"

Killian and Rieta stayed in the quiet dining hall with a cup of tea. They didn't move to the sitting room.

Now that she thought about it, she didn't meet him in the sitting room last time either. She met with him in the study. She took comfort in this because she was only a commoner who didn't merit the stiff sitting room.

"It seems the meal was to your liking."

Rieta's face flushed at Killian's statement. Was he watching how much she was eating?

“Yes, it was delicious. Thank you."

Rieta couldn't dare to look him in the eye, but he had ordered her to look him in the face, so she replied while looking somewhere around his neck.

She knew that she had indulged at dinner tonight. Her face grew hot, thinking she ate at such a good pace because such a man invited her to dine. She hadn't ever eaten this much recently. She couldn't believe how she was able to eat so comfortably.

“Good," Killian chuckled briefly and shifted in his seat. "I called you to hear of your settling. Is life in Axias treating you well?"

“Yes, by your kindness, my lord," Rieta replied concisely, without any mannerisms or frills.

Killian glanced at Rieta and leaned back in his chair.

He wondered why she was staring at his chin so hard, but he thought it was a big step to speak to her while looking at her face, so he decided to let that go. He also knew that there were quite a few places that didn't allow commoners to look at nobles straight on. It seemed Cevitas was one of those places. ﻿

The chef walked in with a newly made dessert to go with their tea. It was beautiful and smelled wonderful, but because Killian didn't touch it, Rieta couldn't either.

Blind to this detail, Killian continued. "They say you are a proficient and hardworking mage. I gather you hadn't worked as a mage back in Cevitas?"

Confusion about how he knew briefly whizzed by in her head, but she thought it was only natural he could have known. It wasn't exactly a secret, so Rieta replied right away. “No, my lord. I did not."

"Why so?"

"There lived an elderly, retired cleric nearby, and in comparison, my modest ability had little to offer in service."

“Even during the plague?" Killian's eyes slightly narrowed as he asked.

As the plague was ravaging the empire, the clerics' pilgrimages were put on hold, and those with the powers of blessing only became more expensive. And Cevitas even more so, because the plague had recently spread through there as well, making these powers even more in demand. It was strange that a commoner struggling to live did not use her skills to make money.

Rieta bowed her head calmly and replied. "The spread of the plague was recent in Cevitas, and my humble abilities had little time for use."

*Ah.* Killian remembered what had happened to her during that time, but only after the fact.

When cases of the plague started to crop up, with Casarius being the first to fall victim to it, spring had barely begun. It had only been three months since her husband passed. By then, she was being watched and guarded by guard soldiers, confined in her home and waiting for the day she was arranged to die.

Regardless of her class they would not have treated her in that manner if her husband were alive. ﻿

Killian was rubbing his chin silently and suddenly asked, "And your husband? Lost to the plague?"

"Yes... I did not witness the demon of the plague myself, but the elder who verified his corpse informed me that the plague had taken him."

Although she responded calmly, Killian saw a shadow cast over her face. Instead of trying to console her hastily, he focused on what he could discuss further. "You are able to see evil?"

Rieta nodded. “Yes, but it is a weak ability and therefore of little use." "I see."

He might be in the dark about the power of blessing, but even he was aware of the rarity of clairvoyance, the ability to see demons.

The powers of blessing, purifying, purging, and healing were all powers that could improve through training and effort. But the ability to see demons was something one had to be born with.

If she could see demons, she could have become a cleric. Purges were something she could have trained in to see powers that would manifest later.

There was a great synergy when the innate ability to see demons and the skills to wield divine magic strong enough to perform purges came together.

Among the strongest types of divine magic, there was magic that allowed one to see demons momentarily, but it wasn't that beneficial. He remembered the emperor's clerics saying how people who could see demons with barely any effort had the upper hand.

Those with the clairvoyance could make it up the ladder as a high cleric or high priest of a temple, or if they were lucky, the emperor's cleric. It was highly probable that these kinds of people could reach a very high rank.

Killian was intrigued in her abilities. “Did your powers manifest after you became an adult?

"No, Sire, before I became an adult." ﻿

"In the convent?"

"Yes, Sire."

Killian just barely tilted his head to the side. He was confused. Why didn't she become a cleric? If her powers manifested before she became an adult, then couldn't she have become one?

If she was from the convent, that meant she was an orphan. Becoming a cleric was the most excellent occupation a commoner orphan could choose. Clerics were people to whom even nobles had to show respect. All commoner orphans from convents and abbeys wanted to become clerics if they could. If her powers and clairvoyance had manifested early, she could have already risen to a high rank through consistent training.

Then she would never have been dragged to the grave by Casarius.

"How old were you?”

"I could see them from when I was fifteen, Sire."

"You said you could purge as well? And that?”

"I could purge when I became seventeen...”

*Hm... Is this the norm?*

Even though they say the skills to use divine magic blossom through training, the potential was bigger the younger they were when their powers manifested.

He did ask about how old she was when it all happened, but because he didn't know about clerics or the skills for divine magic, he had no idea if fifteen was young or old to rate her potential.

When he was young, numerous geniuses within the elite clerics of the emperor were commonly spoken of, with their powers having manifested before they were even ten. The only clerics he had conversed with were only the emperor's clerics when he was young and the abbot of Axias.

Either way, hadn't she been young enough to decide to become a cleric? It didn't seem she could heal or purge, but if she could purify as well, then her prospects were good for not just a mage but even a cleric. ﻿

*Why did she not become one?* He was going to ask the question lightly, but something held him back, and he couldn't bring it to his lips.

Most people with powers who became mages had to because their powers manifested after they graduated from the abbey or became adults. Even if their powers manifested early, they had a significant reason that went against the doctrines barring them from becoming a cleric. But it didn't seem like Rieta had anything blocking her from becoming one.

Though, she could have had a situation before she got married...

*Did she get pregnant? Or did something terrible happen to her?*

The fact that it was possible made him hold his tongue. It was credible. Looking at Rieta's face convinced him even more.

Marriage and pregnancy were not problems for noble clerics, but it could result in ex-communication for a commoner cleric. Because divine magic was passed down, the nobles reserved the privilege for themselves.

As he thought to that point, he realized she was incredibly beautiful for a commoner, and he felt that possibility was quite convincing. *Did she get pregnant? Did something happen to her?*

But even if he were who he was, Killian couldn't bring himself to ask those questions of a woman. But he wasn't so benevolent and considerate as to sweep it under the carpet and move on.

He stirred the cold tea and asked, "You don't have a mark on you to show you were excommunicated, and it looks like you married early on, so you probably were never a cleric before getting excommunicated."

He avoided asking the question directly, but he was asking why she didn't become a cleric.

Rieta answered impassively. “You're correct, Sire. I failed the exam to become a cleric and gave up."

Strangely, Killian felt relieved. He faintly remembered hearing about it. The convent at Cevitas had started to carry out a graduation exam some while ago, and it was only in their convent. It was a replacement for the exam to become a cleric. ﻿

*It must've been a written exam... Was it difficult for her?*

All children at the abbeys and convents learned theory on blessing, purification, purging, and healing, but it was extremely rare to find a child with even a kernel of the power to bless within them. Furthermore, the number of people who could purify, purge, and heal, decreased dramatically even within that number.

It was unfortunate for the temple that lost a precious candidate, especially when the powers of blessing were so coveted with this plague ravaging on such a large scale.

*So then why did they even make a meaningless exam?* “To fail a mage capable of even purification... A stringent convent it seems,” Killian remarked.

"I was lacking, Sire,” Rieta replied calmly.

He saw her face was impassive, smooth. So, it wasn't a matter of her virginity.

There was a possibility of her lying, but he could imagine Rieta lying with such a serene face, so he just accepted it. Even if she was lying, there was no reason for him not to believe her. It wasn't a big deal.

Rieta wasn't a daughter of a noble family where things like that were critical, so what did it matter if she did run around a little in her youth? But if she had been robbed of the opportunity because she was just a commoner, and if that were a part of some ambiguous doctrine, he thought he would feel uncomfortable.

If this had come to be because she suffered some terrible happening, he would have gotten angry. Life was tough on her even on its own, and he hoped there weren't any more reasons to feel sorry for her.

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The two of them spoke for quite some time. Rieta continued to reply to Killian's questions concisely and quickly, as she had promised herself earlier. ﻿

He felt more comfortable with her, now that she spoke to him without any fluff. It felt like she was someone he was familiar with for a long time, like Eron or Leonard.

It was a moment where the instincts of a commoner to survive among nobles paid off.

Killian had no way of knowing Rieta had made a new rule for herself to respond quickly and concisely with just the core of her answer, completely focused and ready.

He felt his belief that people had to be fed before any talk progressed was reaffirmed, just because she had stopped beating around the bush and faltering before she spoke.

Rieta was reassured in her new method because His Lordship no longer looked displeased and had slightly shifted in his attitude. It seemed he would no longer get her in the neck. Rieta didn't realize this herself, but she had set down her fears about Killian during the meal as well. She was even comfortable enough to let her mind wander a little.

Rieta thought about how she was a little disappointed he was not using the necklace she gave him as she answered his questions. Her heart felt a little empty.

It was a keepsake from her daughter. It was the thing she had poured her everything into a blessing when she was emotionally pushed to the cliffs. No, she didn't even intend to bless it in the first place.

The necklace had become semi permanently blessed even before she realized, with hopes and prayers gushing out while in her trance. Even﻿ objectively, it was rare. It could be said she would never make another item like this for the rest of her life.

It was the only thing she could give to repay her savior... He probably needed it more than her because she had a slight resistance to the demons of the plague...

Deciding to give the necklace to him was an ordeal. Rieta asked if it was the right decision, asked for permission, prayed while tears streamed down her face, and felt the heart-wrenching ache within her chest, all in front of her daughter's memorial plate.

But she knew it was a trifle in the Archduke of Axias's hands, so she swallowed her emptiness. It was already out of her hands.

Killian continued to press in with questions. "So, what business summoned you to the East Annex?"

"The ladies requested that I bless their living quarters and chambers, as well as some of their personal belongings."

She gauged his reaction, but it didn't seem like His Lordship had been spurred to think about the necklace she gave him.

She couldn't approach the subject of paying him back because he had said she was rude the last time she did. And he wasn't wearing the necklace she gave him. Rieta thought she had to try her hardest to pay him back in some way. She had only received from him and never repaid him.

Then, an idea popped up in her head, a way for her to be of use to him, at least a little. *Why didn't I think of this before?* Rieta, with a brighter face, quickly spoke when the conversation paused for a moment. ﻿

"Shall I cast a blessing on your bedchamber, Your Highness?"

Killian's eyebrows shot up.

“Oh, my lord!" Rieta bit her tongue at what she had implied and quickly corrected herself.

But Killian reacted that way just because of that. He didn't even think about correcting her. He thought she was being quite daring, to seduce him so boldly.

Unconsciously biting the tip of her pink tongue and even blushing at that was no ordinary seduction. Immediately, he felt something within. He hadn't ever seen her smile. She still wasn't smiling, but her expression was bright.

He was only going to ask about her powers of blessing. Killian had assumed the reason why he was uncharacteristically extending his conversation with her was that he felt a kinship he had only known with those who had served him for a long time but...

Blonde tresses that were reminiscent of the moon on a clear night. Pale, azure eyes. A beautiful face with exquisite features and a serene voice that calmed the listener.

Rieta was indeed a beautiful woman of his taste.

"If you wish."

He couldn't help but raise a hand to his lips. No wonder Rieta kept looking at his lips. He felt uncharacteristically awkward and somewhat strange.

He chalked it up to what Leonard had babbled on about earlier. ﻿

9

# THE MAGE OF AXIAS (7)

They went up together to Killian's bedchamber, which was prepared for them to rest. Rieta kept answering Killian's questions freely, unaware of what was going on in his head, and entered his bedchamber without an ounce of embarrassment.

Starting with the door connected to the hallway, Rieta carefully traveled the edge of the room, praying with all her might to cast a blessing. A faint white light emanated from her hand as she brushed past the windows and doorways connecting to the bathing chamber and the study, and even on top of the bed, to protect from plague and demons. It was an action with no frills.

Killian crossed his arms and leaned against the wall as he watched the small, beautiful woman busily flit around his bedchamber, a lovely scent wafting from her.

Last month, when she was sitting in the middle of his bed wearing nothing but a gossamer slip, his heart had not responded this way. The same person was now dressed so plainly in neat, commoner clothing and bustling around his room. His heart couldn't flutter more oddly. Just looking at her hardworking face delighted him.

With her eyes closed in prayer, the pale white light from her hands started permeating the walls, the windows, the bed, and her whole body.

Strangely, her plain clothing made the atmosphere that much more mysterious.

She was busily moving around one moment, and calm and quiet the next. It was extraordinary how she didn't even glance at him once, not even subtly, let alone seductively.

Rieta's mind was blank. He was staring at her, but she brushed it off. Just a few hours ago, she had to work surrounded by numerous women while they watched her. She realized it could be an interesting thing to watch for ordinary people.

Rieta did her best to cast Killian's gaze out of her mind and continued meticulously. She worked so intensely no one could have done a better job, ﻿not even a highly skilled cleric. Her blessing was so substantial that his bedchamber was surrounded by something close to a barrier. Even a layman like Killian could tell the pure, white light that emanated from her hands was evidence of a pretty strong blessing.

Rieta turned to him. "It is done. The effect of the blessing will begin to weaken after a month, but I will return to replenish it with your permission.

Was she trying to see him regularly?

"Very well.” He nodded and acknowledged her labor. "Good work."

Rieta smiled faintly and bowed her head. She was standing next to the head of the bed.

The bed.

Killian was conflicted. He was going to ask her to have a glass of wine first.

*Surely, not immediately?*

Rieta was simply standing there watching him.

She was enticing him without moving herself but making him come toward her. It was the first time seduction had struck so deep into his heart without the woman even lifting a finger.

She had been so focused on the blessing she didn't even look at him once, and this? The almost austere figure quietly standing there, looking at him was... Curiously enough, quite the attractive temptation.

It wasn't a temptation that appealed to how much she wanted him, how much she needed him, but rather how much he needed her... Killian faltered at the feeling of immorality as if he were harboring impure thoughts about a chaste cleric, but he took a step toward her.

With each step, Rieta slowly looked up at Killian and blinked. As Killian looked down upon her, he was about to lift a hand to caress Rieta's pale neck when...

"Ah," Rieta slipped to the side when she noticed his hand. ﻿

Killian's hand paused in midair. The bell cord hung where she had been standing.

"Well then, good night." Rieta politely bowed, leaving him frozen.

"What?" Killian was momentarily confused.

Rieta was thinking how they were a bit close, and that she had been standing in his way. His Lordship was indeed about to pull the cord and call for Eron. She knew he was going to send her into Eron's care and rest for the night. So, Rieta stepped back from the bed and bowed toward him without a hint of suspicion.

"I shall take my leave, my lord."

He couldn't think how his gesture could have been misread and blurted out, "You may spend the night, for it is late.” He only realized this after his outburst.

Rieta smiled, as if she knew, "Oh. Then I shall. Thank you."

Killian was regretting his outburst when she replied so easily and serenely that he became even more flustered. Rieta didn't think he meant it in that way, not at all.

Unfortunately, Rieta was now fully assimilated to how to respond to him and she took what Killian said similarly to when he told her to stay for supper. Forget about the polite refusals and follow his orders promptly. Rieta only replied in the manner he had approved of throughout that evening.

Thinking he wouldn't need a woman like Rieta was a given. Her experience a month ago where he had her escorted to a different room when she sat in this bedchamber with nothing but a slip on solidified her belief.

Rieta missed Killian's flustered face with her head bowed in modesty, but she serenely looked up at him because she expected him to pull the bell cord and call for the steward.

But he was frozen and didn't look like he would be pulling the bell cord anytime soon. And he didn't immediately call for the steward either. ﻿

An odd silence filled the room.

She decided to act on her own will as an astute, subordinate person should. It wasn't as if she didn't know where she had to go or who she had to look for. Eron was probably waiting not far from the bedchamber.

Rieta smiled slightly and bowed again. “Thank you for your care today, in more ways than one. Good night, Sire."

Thankfully, Killian didn't fall deeper into his shock. He brought his awkwardly extended hand to his forehead. He pressed his eyes firmly.

"Sure. You as well." He was nearly unable to answer naturally.

Eron was sitting far away on a chair at the end of the hall, reading a book. He jumped a little as Rieta silently opened the door and exited the room. The steward, who had recognized Killian's strange look instantly back when he was removing her from his bedchamber, was confused as he saw her walk out as if nothing had happened but smoothly hid his confusion.

Rieta bowed toward Eron. As she looked back up at him, she said in a voice that was calm behind measure, "His Highness has instructed me to spend the night.” ﻿

She was exhausted from the mental exertion of casting her blessings meticulously and being on her feet all day, walking from within the East Annex to Killian's bedchamber. It was two, three times more challenging than the work she usually did, so exhaustion crashed over her like a wave as the tension left her body.

But she was able to let go of her burden a little bit. And she had eaten delicious food to her heart's content.

Rieta was about to sleep in a place that was different from the house she had gotten used to in the span of a month, but she couldn't feel any more relaxed than she did even if she tried.

She couldn't sleep a wink before when she stayed here overnight.

"Is life in Axias treating you well?”

Of course. So well.

Rieta silently repeated her one true answer, the one she couldn't express to him fully.

A place where she had a house to place her daughter's mourning plate and light a candle.

She was at least able to have a funeral for her husband when he died last year, so Benjamin, the caretaker at the cemetery, would most likely take care of his grave, remembering her husband in death, as he knew him in life.

But her daughter, she buried her in her heart, which was far from a proper farewell. Every night as she lit a candle in front of the mourning plate. Rieta was slowly putting down roots in this land, in the house that had her name on it.

A wonderful place where no thieves would try to enter even if you didn't lock the door. Where neighbors knocked on the door to greet the new neighbor and take care of them.

Rieta thought about the door on her house back in Cevitas, the one where no one visited and was closed off for a long time.

Eron's eyes widened. He instantly understood the underlying meaning Rieta had missed. How did she understand that? She wasn't a child of six. She was a woman of twenty-six! How could an adult woman be so blind?

The stunning woman who must have made his master's heart pound was just standing there serenely, blinking those blue eyes, her face innocent and naïve. It was obvious what was entangled.

*Ah... But Rieta was a woman he had an interest in for the first time in a long time...*

Eron silently agreed with Leonard as he thought wistfully of His Lordship.

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Rieta followed Eron and was escorted into the same guest chamber as last time. He was oddly melancholic, but she didn't recognize it. She laid down on the cozy bed, proud of herself. ﻿﻿

She was exhausted from the mental exertion of casting her blessings meticulously and being on her feet all day, walking from within the East Annex to Killian's bedchamber. It was two, three times more challenging than the work she usually did, so exhaustion crashed over her like a wave as the tension left her body.

But she was able to let go of her burden a little bit. And she had eaten delicious food to her heart's content.

Rieta was about to sleep in a place that was different from the house she had gotten used to in the span of a month, but she couldn't feel any more relaxed than she did even if she tried.

She couldn't sleep a wink before when she stayed here overnight.

*"Is life in Axias treating you well?”*

*Of course. So well.*

Rieta silently repeated her one true answer, the one she couldn't express to him fully.

A place where she had a house to place her daughter's mourning plate and light a candle.

She was at least able to have a funeral for her husband when he died last year, so Benjamin, the caretaker at the cemetery, would most likely take care of his grave, remembering her husband in death, as he knew him in life.

But her daughter, she buried her in her heart, which was far from a proper farewell. Every night as she lit a candle in front of the mourning plate. Rieta was slowly putting down roots in this land, in the house that had her name on it.

A wonderful place where no thieves would try to enter even if you didn't lock the door. Where neighbors knocked on the door to greet the new neighbor and take care of them.

Rieta thought about the door on her house back in Cevitas, the one where no one visited and was closed off for a long time.

For a long time after her husband died, and for a long time again after Casarius had started to coerce her, no one, not even her once-kind neighbors, had visited her house.

Rieta placed a hand on her chest, still in bed. It was where her daughter's final keepsake had rested before she had gifted it to Killian.

Rieta closed her eyes and prayed a brief but heartful prayer because she couldn't light the candle in front of the memorial plate.

\*\*\*

The month she had spent in Axias was lovely.

It was more expensive than Cevitas but not beyond what she had expected. Because of that, it was a place where she was compensated that much more for her work. There were no beggars on the streets, and the people were cheerful and kind.

Axias Manor was the same. The warm and bustling East Annex and the lively supper with the knights. And the smile that momentarily flashed on his face. The smile that didn't even seem to have happened.

*"I love you, Your Royal Highness!"*

*That was truly funny.*

And... The hand that absentmindedly poured out milk to the cat who comfortably padded over to him without any hesitation...

He was a good person. He was less scary than she had thought.

It was a good place. It was a place where he had probably made it so.

Lying still, Rieta blinked.

*"You may spend the night, for it is late.”*

She belatedly realized Killian's final statement could be misconstrued, but she soon laughed at herself for thinking the impossible. No matter if they were both lords, it was a terrible mistake to compare the archduke to that lord. ﻿

The bed was becoming warmer. She soon fell into sweet slumber.

\*\*\*

Killian tossed and turned in bed. He couldn't fall asleep even a long while after Rieta had.

He eventually gave up on sleep and got up, picked up a book, and opened it. It was *the Imperial History of War*, a book he had read so many times he nearly had it memorized, but the text just looked like unfamiliar scribbles. Soon, he shut the book and tossed it onto the nightstand.

The image of Rieta flitting around his room in her simple, neat dress kept replaying in his mind. But, funnily enough, he couldn't remember what Rieta looked like when she was dressed in just her slip.

She pressed the top of her bosom every time she greeted him. With such an innocent face, even though she had been married once before.

Killian glanced at the headboard where her hand had brushed over.

*Her face, with her eyes peacefully closed and her hand resting here, was beautiful.*

The face she made as she spoke of her deceased husband, hiding her sorrow, was miserable.

*“Shall I cast a blessing on your bedchamber, Your Highness?”*

*Was she not a sly woman? It wasn't his fault he had fallen for it.*

*"Oh, my lord!"*

Remembering her red face with the tip of her tongue between her teeth made him chuckle.

*It was funny.*

He wasn't that much of an idiot to not know what powerful love felt like, even if he had no experience in it. He knew it was something that would make things difficult if it progressed. He didn't want the emotions to gnaw away at his logic and take over his mind. ﻿

Killian got up. There was a tried-and-true method for dealing with those kinds of emotions. It wasn't long before he was sitting at the desk in his study. He picked up a quill and started to deal with the pile of papers on his desk, one by one.

It wasn't difficult. Killian skillfully started to dry out the sprouts of emotion in his heart.

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Killian worked all night. Rieta entrusted her goodbyes to Eron and went home as Killian took a nap on the sofa in his study. Killian didn't even look at Eron and curtly said, “All right,” when he was informed of this fact at his desk.

He picked up the bundle of papers he had made a checklist of, his face impassive, seemingly having forgotten all about Rieta.

He asked Eron, "When did we receive this report?”

"Which report, Sire?"

"This supplication from Havitus Temple imploring to cast blessings upon my land."

The report also informed how Castinor Manor, not far from Axias, had been ravaged by the plague and devastated within two months. So the report recommended blessing Axias Manor to strengthen the defenses against the demons and devils of the plague.

"Not yet a month."

"Was it early May?"

"Late April, my lord."

Killian had stopped at Castinor Manor while he was traveling with his knights. It was a large city in proximity to a temple and not far from Axias.

He had intended to stop by Castinor Manor again as he returned to Axias with Rieta in tow. But he decided against it after hearing from a local peddler how the plague had started to rage, and its infection was widespread. ﻿

A report that landed on his desk at the end of April. That meant it was completed and sent on its way in the middle of the month. They made quick work of it.

Killian ordered, "Bring me Leonard."

"You called for me, Sir?"

"Leonard," Killian said as he put down the report he was reading on the sofa where he was leaning back on, and looked up at him. “Before the plague, when had we visited Castinor Manor?"

"Early March, my liege."

"And when did the plague begin to spread in Castinor?"

"Early April."

Killian fell silent. He suddenly barked out a laugh and held out the report he had been reading to Leonard. “This report says it began in early March."

Leonard took the report. The report was full of information about the situation with the demonic plague, the casualties, how it was spread, and

so on.

Leonard examined the report, flipping through a few pages, and replied, "I'm not sure, Sir. My recollection of our party stopping by the Count of Castinor's estate around the beginning of March is correct. There was no talk of the plague then."

"I remember it that way as well."

At least, there was no plague in Castinor then. This was a fact, for they had been staying there at that time themselves.

But the report explained how the plague appeared, started to devastate Castinor at the beginning of March, and took its course throughout April. This horrific situation was in progress right now. It seemed the spread was creeping toward the north of Axias. ﻿

The sound information they had was in stark contrast to the information from the report.

It wasn't just Castinor that was questionable.

The plague in Cevitas was also briefly mentioned in the report. The time line matched what they knew to be accurate, but its spread was exaggerated. It hadn't been as devastating to the degree that was described even if the plague had struck Cevitas. They would never have stopped in Cevitas if it were that terrible.

The information wasn't entirely twisted but was manipulated to rationalize the conclusion.

"Being that such numbers can be precarious, some error on dates or the degree of the spread is expected."

Killian smiled coldly and looked at the report in Leonard's hand. “But it's almost as if they predicted it."

Serious concerns about the fast spread of the plague were well documented in this report from Havitus Temple.

The report also stated it would be best to receive blessings from a reputable organization because it was also concerned about how Axias Manor, a major city, could also be invaded by demons of the plague. The temple would happily work to make it so if Axias agreed.

Killian laid down an order. "Put one of our own in Havitus Temple."

He was suspicious of the temple. Leonard was a man who was so fully trusting of his liege but he hesitated in front of the order.

“But, Sire... They're just clerics..." He had a brother who was a cleric.

"Leonard." Killian's ruby eyes narrowed and brought his reclined body to its feet like a beast waking from slumber. A cold smile appeared on his sharp face. “I always say this to you. To make the right decision, think about who is primed for the greatest profit. Who reaps the greatest profit from the spread of a plague?"

In thought for a moment, Leonard's expression hardened. ﻿

10

# THE MAGE OF AXIAS (8)

A week later, Rieta went back to the East Annex with her arms full of the trinkets the ladies had requested be blessed. Eron mentioned this to Killian in passing, but he merely acknowledged it.

Killian headed toward his private training grounds to stretch his body not long after Eron excused himself.

Leonard stepped back from the ricochet of striking back at Killian's sword, gritting his teeth, and panted, “I have one of our own in Havitus Temple. I will report any suspicious activity."

"I see."

Killian slashed up at Leonard's sword that plunged at him and clanged it away, whipping his body, and kicked Leonard when he showed his back. Leonard swiftly regained his balance and snapped back into a defensive position, panting. And he then continued his report.

"The spread of the plague truly did start at the beginning of April. But it doesn't seem like that is enough evidence to hold the temple in suspicion as the cause of the plague."

Killian smirked and laughed coldly.

"I'm aware. Just the fact that they moved a little too quickly to keep one of the temple's biggest clients..." Killian jabbed his sword in the small crack he saw in Leonard's stance and sent Leonard's sword flying. Clang! His sword stabbed the ground far away in the corner of the training grounds. "...is highly possible."

Leonard grabbed his wrist as he tried to quell the aftershock traveling all the way up to his elbow and shoulder, sighed, and paid his respects as the loser.

“Thank you, Sire."

Killian commented by pointing out the blind spot with his sword to Leonard's stance in his right thigh. “It seems your habit of leaving yourself open when you get distracted is unchanged." ﻿

Leonard grunted and scratched his head. "Yes, Sire... I know it in my head, but it's not easy to fix."

Leonard picked up his sword from the corner of the training grounds.

Killian gazed at the ankh dangling from the grip of Leonard's sword. It was a blessed item the temple often sent them.

The Temple of Havitus.

Clerics were human too. The temple itself was most likely reluctant to step into where the demons and the plague were cavorting about. Blessings were not a perfect defense, and just because they were clerics didn't mean that they had some innate immunity to the demons or the plague. The fact that many clerics had already died from the plague disproved that possibility.

The fees for their services were skyrocketing, and the most enticing jobs comprised of placing extensive blessings on locations like Axias, where the plague was yet to rage but had a huge city. Jobs like these paid exceptionally well, with the danger level not too high.

Axias was a prosperous city. It was indeed a customer they had to keep.

He thought about the report from Havitus Temple. Because it was determined the information in the report was less than trustworthy, its results were even more unsatisfactory than not having researched at all. Could it be a simple error or possibly a product of greed?

He was the type of person who never refused the annoyance and difficulty of reading all the reports and taking care of those himself. He hated to look at false reports because they wasted his time. He wasn't so free that he could waste time by focusing on even those kinds of trivial issues.

His mind could have been disturbed by the fact that he had found the false information, but could it have really?

Killian left open the possibility that the plague was not of natural causes.

Even if he decided blessings were necessary, the Temple of Havitus already had a big black mark against its name in Killian's book, so there would not even be crumbs for them in the future. ﻿

But there definitely was reason to take care against the plague. Killian remembered Eron telling him about how Rieta was at the East Annex. A person with the power of blessing. Could he use her?

It would not be easy to get any aid from her if she had no experience against demons, but... He still focused on the fact that Rieta could see demons and was in no way connected with the temple nor had suspicious aspects in her background, making her a trustworthy mage.

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"My goodness. Getting blessings without me. You should have told me!"

“You weren't here then. You can ask her today!”

"Mage Tristi, I'd appreciate it if you started with my room!"

Her second time at the East Annex. There were four more women who couldn't get blessings last time because they were occupied elsewhere or just out at that moment. Seira, the woman with supernatural strength, and Anna, the girl who had climbed the tree, were also among them. The group of women buzzed around Rieta again after putting on their blessed charms and trinkets and started to chatter. Some women brought out new things for her to bless.

But it went a little more smoothly because they were fewer than last time.

Rieta completed her tasks and softly addressed the women. "By any chance, would you have any inclination toward calling for my services again when the blessings' powers run out?”

One woman replied immediately. "Yes. I would like to ask for you again."

"Me too. I prefer you, Mage Tristi, to the clerics from the temple.”

"And you can come quickly because you live close by."

"And you take much more time for your blessings. And you're nice."

"And cheaper than the temple."

"And most importantly, you're not full of yourself!"

All of the women giggled and nodded together as if they were of one mind. ﻿

Rieta let out a quiet breath of relief and bowed her head respectfully as a gesture of gratitude. “Thank you. I wish to come here weekly and replenish the blessings, but five places every visit if you allow me to. Would that be all right?"

Of course, blessing more than ten rooms, large ones at that, was quite the overwhelming task as meticulously as she preferred to work. She could work much more comfortably if she divided it up into five per week.

The ladies all easily agreed with Rieta's offer and told her to do so.

"Then it'll take three weeks to do fifteen places."

"Yes. And you all happen to be fifteen ladies."

"We're fifteen? One of us is missing. Who is it?" "Irene."

"Ah." A look of recognition swept past the ladies' faces.

Rieta asked, slightly curious, “Is there another lady?"

"Yes. There are sixteen of us living here, but... Don't worry about Irene."

*What was going on? Who was Irene?*

Rachel spoke up as if she had caught how it was weighing on Rieta's mind. "She'll most likely say she's not interested. Do not worry. It seems her

family sends her things with blessings or holy water because she's a noblewoman."

Still, wearing blessed things and receiving blessings in the actual residence were incomparable to each other. It was as big a difference as using an umbrella or wearing a hat to avoid the rain.

But Celine interjected with something so out of sight that all thoughts about Irene dashed away. "Why do you not reside within the castle? His Highness would allow it if you wish."

The other ladies clapped with delight.

"Oh, my goodness, yes! Please move in. It's wonderful here. And you can see His Lordship too, even if it is rare." ﻿

The ladies' eyes shined as they gazed at her.

Rieta became flustered. She had thought last time they all looked close, but...

*Wasn't this crossing that line? How could this atmosphere exist? Wouldn't I be an added rival among them?*

She could firmly believe the ladies didn't fear the Archduke of Axias, that was for sure. But wasn't this a bit too far from the image she had of the harem, of women jealous of each other and clawing for the singular man's attention?

Rieta couldn't tell them the truth and faltered.

Eron told Rieta about how there were all these past issues, about people trying to take advantage of the archduke's goodwill and being paid back viciously with rage, and had asked her not to talk about the generosity His Lordship had shown her.

Rieta remained silent about the matter. She believed the "archduke's goodwill" wasn't just the financial help he had given her but also included his refusal to take her and send her on her way.

She wasn't some young lady with an immaculate reputation to protect. So it wasn't something to worry about, even if it became the talk. It wouldn't be an issue because she wasn't in a position to worry about her not having a chance of getting married, and she wasn't interested in getting remarried. Living in Axias was so safe and peaceful she didn't feel the need for a husband.

Although Rieta didn't recognize it, the fact that the archduke was interested in her was what protected her, so her life was comfortable without a single ogling glance at her.

She didn't go around explaining there was nothing between herself and the Archduke of Axias. The ladies wouldn't have been acting like this if they knew he had no interest in her whatsoever as a woman. She couldn't understand why they would be so unguarded, inviting in another competitor like this. ﻿

The women paid no heed to whether Rieta was confused or not and started to huddle closer to her, stroking and complimenting her hair, all while advertising the East Annex.

"You can always make yourself pretty if you stay here. And the work isn't so much if we all divide it among ourselves."

"The living allowance is generous too!"

"Your hair would be so much prettier if you braided it and added some accessories. I'll do your hair every day if you come here."

"We don't bully. We'll be nice!"

“And we can get blessings for free!"

It was Anna, the young blonde, who carefreely blurted out. “You have no shame! We still have to pay her what she deserves!"

"What, really?"

Anna quickly clapped a hand to her mouth.

“I'm sorry. This child is still immature.” Giselle, who had an attractive mole just under her eye, put her hands on Anna's shoulders from behind her and smiled. Her charming tawny hair was tied up to one side, making her look vivacious and lovely.

"Has His Lordship called for you today as well?"

"Oh, no," Rieta answered.

Anna smiled sweetly. "You'll join us for tea?"

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They laid out blankets on the ground in the blooming garden and started to drink their tea. There was fragrant tea and sweet cookies. Rachel, an intelligent-looking, petite woman with raven hair and violet eyes, carried out the tray of tea and cookies herself. She was the one who had invited Rieta to the East Annex for the first time. ﻿

"I made this myself. Do you like it?" "Really? It's delicious."

"I helped too," Anna interrupted.

Rachel laughed as she looked at Anna.

"Anna, you didn't help; you made it harder," Helen sighed.

Anna looked shocked as a cookie fell from her mouth. Rachel calmly brushed off the cookie from her dress. "It's all right, Anna. You're getting better."

"Even though it took an hour for a thirty-minute job," Helen noted.

"Still, we ended up with edible results. Isn't that better than nothing?" Rachel smiled.

There were no maids at the East Annex. The "ladies of the East Annex" lived on the archduke's generosity, but they helped out around the castle when more people were needed and took care of themselves in the annex in return.

They each cleaned their own rooms and public spaces such as hallways and lawns together and personally took care of laundry, cooking, and all other things that came up. They even chopped wood themselves in the winter, although they did go out to purchase some when the conditions weren't suitable.

Even the women who weren't particularly talented in one thing or another took on the tasks of setting the table or cleaning up afterward or

organizing the garden. Their days sounded happy and joyful, but it definitely was not the life of a noble lady. ﻿

"Irene is the only one who doesn't do anything. She even gets out of cleaning the lawns by herself."

The other women replied in an offhand manner. “Because she's the darling daughter of a count, and at least she doesn't receive an allowance from His Highness."

"But everyone else helps to do their fair share,” Anna said with a pout. Her complaints flowed. "Irene doesn't eat with us and never comes out for our tea parties. She doesn't say hello and shoots icicles at me with her eyes every time I look at her. And she doesn't even get to see His Lordship, but she acts as if she's the only one who can have him. I don't like Irene."

You could argue her reaction was the most sensible...

Rieta felt a little odd as she sipped at her tea, cupping the simple teacup in her hands, and watched the friendly women and pouting Anna. Something felt strange. Anna looked to be just barely twelve. The archduke's concubine... Even a girl so young as this.

She looked as if she hadn't even started puberty yet, so how could she be so bright after enduring those kinds of things? The twenty-six-year-old widow Rieta had felt an immense amount of pain from receiving an offer like that from Casarius.

No matter how the Archduke of Axias was much younger and much more handsome than him.

How old was she? How much better would it be if she were mature but simply looked young? But Anna looked too young for her to hold onto that hope. Maybe fifteen at a stretch?

"No? Anna's twelve." ﻿

"Ah..." Rieta's face darkened unknowingly.

Anna was busily pouring milk from the pitcher into her glass with her cheeks stuffed full like a chipmunk's, crumbs at both corners of her mouth, keeping an eye on the others to see if they were watching her.

Rieta was in no position to criticize the Archduke of Axias since he kept his hands off her and even saved her life. No one could dare point a finger or interfere with his private life including her. Even if they understood in their heads that it was possible because he was a nobleman, it was something just to let go...

Elize followed Rieta's wistful gaze and laughed as she tucked a hand under her cheek. "Ah. Mage Tristi, I know what you're thinking. But it's not like that, not Anna. She's just a child His Lordship picked up off the roads."

Rieta's eyes became as big as the saucers that held their cups.

Anna, who was munching on the cookies and gulping down her milk, howled, "What do you mean, picked up! I said he brought me here to take me as his wife someday!”

"What am I to do with you..." The women ruffled Anna's hair, showing how cute they thought she was.

Rieta watched them with a confused look on her face. *A child he picked up? Weren't the only inhabitants of the East Annex the Archduke of Axias's women?*

The women explained how Anna was rescued by Killian and brought here because she was being abused at the convent where she was staying after losing her parents. ﻿

Anna had nowhere to go. She would have been given a house to live in Axias like Rieta if she were an adult, but she was barely five and too young to live independently. They wouldn't send her to another convent when she had been abused at the first one.

At the time, the women in the East Annex volunteered to take Anna in.

"Still, I've been here the longest!" said Anna, as she felt pride in the fact that only a few women had been at the East Annex longer than her.

"Being here the longest, my foot. Anna, when you were in diapers, I...” Helen chortled at Anna.

“Argh! Helen!" Anna ran helter-skelter toward Helen, fists balled up, swinging in the air.

“Oh, oh, the cookies. The cookies!" Seira was bursting with laughter as she kept hold of the tray.

Rieta looked wide-eyed at the girl's face. They said she had been abused, but her face was bright with no lasting shadow. Anna was a strong and lovely child. Anna brushed at her messy hair with hands covered in crumbs, and those crumbs stuck to her head.

“You're going to attract ants, Anna!"

Helen scolded her with a smile and brushed off the crumbs from her hair.

Rieta sat there for a long time with a shocked look on her face, but her heart started to feel warmer at some point, and she smiled.

Killian then visited the East Annex for the first time in a long time. ﻿

11

# THE MAGE OF AXIAS (9)

Rachel sensed the arrival of someone new and unconsciously looked toward the garden between the main building and the East Annex.

"How strange. His Highness is here,” she said, pursing her lips.

"What?"

All of the women's eyes turned toward the entrance of the East Annex's garden. Killian and Leonard were walking into the East Annex through the garden.

Helen sighed and looked at Anna. "It must be your lucky day, Anna. His Lordship is here."

"Helen! Do I look appropriate?” Anna, who was already brushing off her skirts and trying to fix her hair, looked up at Helen.

Helen rubbed off her milk mustache and replied, "Yes, you're lovely. Go on, before the vixen beats you to it."

"Oh, no! It's Irene!” Anna jumped up and shouted.

A red-haired beauty had appeared and was walking toward Killian. Anna trotted over to Killian with her skirts in hand.

That woman was Irene?

She was a woman Rieta had seen before. She was the red-haired and green-eyed woman whom Killian had told to pack up and leave this place last week.

Killian noticed Irene walking toward him, and his brow furrowed ever so slightly.

"Still here, I see."

Irene beamed. "I could never ponder leaving your side, Your Highness." ﻿

Her beauty was great enough it would make anyone do a double take, but Killian's face was announcing to the world how bored he was. Irene ignored Killian's expression as if she were used to it and laughed.

"I made you uncomfortable that day, Your Royal Highness... Please take pity on this poor woman who could not control her overflowing emotions. I would like to gift you something to apologize. Would you by chance have anything you require?"

Killian ignored Irene and looked toward the group of women. There were a lot of women gathered, perhaps for tea? And Rieta was there too, in the middle.

It felt very awkward to be accosted by Irene as soon as he walked in. He thought it was rash of him to come here, even though he didn't really have an immediate reason for seeking out Rieta. He thought it was a bit irritating.

Irene was not an Axian citizen but rather a daughter of the family overseeing the county between the imperial city Rodmigneau and Axias, called Spielmann. She had wriggled into the East Annex, claiming she was being chased after her father had kicked her out for some reason and required refuge. It was all a lie to get into Killian's line of sight.

It was quickly revealed it was all a lie because she didn't exactly try to hide it.

But she hadn't committed any sins and was regularly paying like she was paying for a usage fee, so it was hard to yank a noble lady out of there. He never thought this would happen, but she had been bothering him for the past two years.

"Irene is besotted with His Highness. She arrived some two years past, under the delusion that he dotes on us women of the East Annex."

“Does he not?” Rieta asked, puzzled. The women looked at Rieta and burst into laughter. ﻿

"Everyone outside thinks the East Annex is the Archduke of Axias's harem,' right? I mean, really.”

"There are women who came because of that, but the number of women with other reasons is the majority."

"When His Lordship visited the East Annex before, he would call for one of the women who appealed to him and called them to join him in his chambers, but that was a while ago. Already several years ago, I think?”

"I'm scared he's going to grow old and die alone.” Giselle shook her head and agreed with a pretty worried look on her face.

Helen tilted her head to the side and laughed impishly. “Still, His Lordship seeks you out quite a bit, Giselle."

"Don't be silly. I can't even go near his bed. I told you, it was always for something else," Giselle said.

Beth leaned back on her hand and rolled her eyes. "We don't know that. You might just be saying that," she said with a laugh. It was more of a teasing tone rather than a serious one.

"Ah. Is that the level of trust we hold between us? I must be lacking something. Think whatever way you want." Giselle pouted with a hint of a smile and lifted her cup to her lips.

Rachel dropped her voice and playfully whispered, "Helen, that's not it. Giselle isn't interested in His Lordship. She's interested in someone else."

"What?" Giselle spat out her tea in shock and mopped up her mouth as she glared at Rachel. "Rachel, please."

Rachel reached for her tea, but her glance lingered at Leonard.

"I told you you're wrong!" Giselle shrieked.

"We'll see if I'm really wrong," Rachel said as she sipped her tea, smiling primly. ﻿

Rieta was listening attentively to their conversation. The women here... It was most interesting how they were so jolly and maintaining such a free environment, one where they could bring up their interest in men other than the archduke.

"Anyway," Giselle cleared her throat as if she was going to change the subject and looked at Rieta. "Most of the besotted women grew weary and retreated, leaving only Irene and Anna to pine for him..."

Celine rubbed her forehead with a look of contemplation on her face. “Is it even fair to include Anna in that tally?"

“I'd say I have a fairer stake at the challenge," Caren bluntly put her name forward even though she hadn't even looked at His Lordship since he arrived.

"I wouldn't include you in that tally either," Celine said.

"I'm ready to be reeled in if some bait will come my way. He has yet to toss some bait, which is why I'm here like this." Caren laughed.

The other woman chuckled and shrugged.

"Sure. Then you'll end up like me. There wasn't even a burning passion, but boredom popped up.” Giselle grinned mischievously.

Caren shivered as if a chill had run down her spine. “Ugh, that seems too real, Giselle. Stop it."

Giselle smiled in Rieta's direction. "Now, we just seem like family.”

"Exactly. You don't do that to family," Seira remarked and laughed.

The other woman leaned her chin on her drawn-up knees and fiddled with her skirt. "Ah. I'm grateful he's not giving false hope, but.....”

"Grateful, my foot... He's not kind; he's doing that because he's really not interested." Elise reached through the ensuing sighs and picked up the last cookie, tossing it in her mouth. "It's not going to happen for us, but it's not﻿ like we're hoping that someone who is like family will die alone. So don't mind us and try your best."

Elise's last comment was aimed at Rieta. Rieta looked at her in confusion.

Giselle lowered her voice and whispered, "I hear you spent the night last week."

Rieta realized what the women were misunderstanding and looked toward Giselle, shocked.

She really just slept that night. In a different room.

Giselle winked at Rieta. “Just make safe that Irene doesn't come upon that information."

Rieta realized it wouldn't be an issue if she told the truth to these women, but she had been asked not to tell anyone else about what happened, so she just smiled awkwardly.

"Giselle."

The Archduke of Axias approached them at some point, and the women on the blankets whipped their heads toward him in surprise.

"Hang this somewhere.” He frowned and pointed at Anna, who was hanging on to his leg.

Giselle looked shocked. “Sire?"

Killian looked down at Anna and coldly spat out, “The fringe tree on the path toward the East Annex... Was it not you who planted it?"

Anna paled and scrambled off of the archduke's leg.

Rieta's face also paled, scared by the sudden chill. Could he be talking about the incident that time?

"I saw you practically uprooted the tree. I recall warning you I'd not let it go if you climbed up another tree and caused trouble again." ﻿

Anna fidgeted and trembled, backing away. "I-I'm sorry! I won't ever again!"

Rieta jumped up without even realizing it. *Hanging?* There was no way, a child that young?

Anna turned and bolted.

And the Archduke of Axias caught her in two bounds.

"Ahh!"

The archduke furrowed his brow and lifted Anna's wrist. He scowled. "There's nothing more to be done with you."

She was like a rabbit with its ears in a vise.

The archduke coldly said, "I sentence you to capital punishment."

Blood drained from Rieta's face.

"Wait, wait a moment!" All eyes were on Rieta now. Rieta's mind went blank and she sputtered, "I saw the tree too! The tree didn't fall because someone had climbed it but because the rains washed away the soil around the roots...! I mean, there's no way, no way Anna's actions merit capital punishment!"

A strange silence settled.

Killian stared at Rieta and barked out an order after a while. “Prepare for capital punishment."

"Yes, Sire."

They all rose from their seats, clawed their hands, and surrounded Anna with all the seriousness in the world. Anna screamed and started to thrash.

Rieta stood there struck dumb, and Killian's order rang out.

"Execute."

"Ahh!" ﻿

The women pounced and started to tickle Anna, who was thrashing.

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"Boo... His Lordship is mean. He doesn't even play with me and leaves after punishing me..."

An exhausted Anna was lying down with her head in Helen's lap and whining. Seira ruffled Anna's hair into a mess and chuckled.

Rieta had calmed herself down and was smiling when Giselle nudged her thigh and started to tease her.

"I mean, Rieta. Did you really think he would execute her? How are you going to survive in this cruel world if you're so naive!"

Rieta flushed and looked down, fidgeting with the tips of her fingers. Celine laughed and leaned into Rieta with a hand on her shoulder.

"Still, I was somewhat touched. She was trembling like a leaf, with her face all white and still talking to His Lordship. Just think, what if it were a real execution and someone was speaking up for you like that?"

Seira tossed her head back and burst out in laughter.

Rieta's face turned redder. “Please don't tease..."

A little later, a tall blonde woman opened the side door to the East Annex and walked out. Elise had a tray in her hands.

"Ta-da! I brought fruit salad!

"Ooh!" Seira moaned in delight and jumped up to help carry the heavy tray. "Elise, I love you... Will you marry me?"

Elise drew the tray up out of Seira's reach without a single crack in her elegant, smiling face. "No. Your love is too cheap."

"Wow. She said no. And with an incredibly cruel comment at that.” Elise feigned a tearful expression. ﻿

The ladies bubbled with laughter.

"Here, spoons!"

They all reached out and grabbed a spoon, gathered together around the bowl of fruit salad Elise had made and started eating, giggling, and chatting all the while.

Rieta also was offered a spoon. Suddenly, as Rieta accepted the spoon, she noticed Irene standing there as if she were chasing after Killian even after he vanished from sight.

That lonely-looking figure soon disappeared into the East Annex.

"What? How are there grapes already?"

"They're from the greenhouses at Havitus Temple! They were an expensive bunch because they were grown with divine energy!"

"Wow. The goddess's grace tastes ever so sweet. Even though they must be ever so expensive...”

As tea was about to end, Rieta carefully spoke up after hesitating all through the afternoon. "Um... By any chance..."

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The ladies permitted Rieta to enter the East Annex one last time before she left for home.

And she stopped in front of Irene's room, which was far away from the other ladies' rooms, all alone on the fourth floor. They all received blessings. Rieta was concerned about how she was the only one who didn't.

Unlike the second and third floors, where potted plants and small knick knacks decorated the windowsills, the fourth floor was bare.

Rieta had decided to bless the entranceway to the room since she was doing this only because she wanted to, so she lifted a hand and placed it﻿ gently on the side of the door.

Right then, the door swung open.

Rieta was surprised. She took her hand off and stepped back.

"Who are you?"

An icy tone. Irene glared at Rieta, but she couldn't hide her reddened, emerald eyes.

"I-I'm a mage, and I've come by request from—”

Rieta was flustered and almost bowed her head like she used to in front of nobles but remembered what she had been told about Axian manners and lifted her head back up.

Irene squinted her eyes in irritation and scanned her clothes up and down. And she coldly shot out, "I don't need you. Get out."

Telling her to get out... Rieta hadn't even stepped into her room, not even one foot. Irene spoke as if even the hallway was a part of her property.

*Well, Irene was the only one living on the fourth floor.*

There was no time for her to excuse herself by telling her she wasn't looking for work nor asking to be invited in.

Irene's face no longer looked miserable but instead seemed irritated and annoyed. She sneered condescendingly. "Do mages solicit their services nowadays? Why don't you find some other place where there are a lot of men if you can't sell your services here?"

Rieta simply bowed her head. She thought there was nothing she could do about this noble lady who must have gotten angry because a stranger loitered around her door without permission.

"Please, allow me to cast a blessing... Just a small blessing and I'll leave you. That is my only purpose here." ﻿

Irene was glaring at Rieta icily but suddenly strode into her room and picked up a gold piece. She threw it out the door, where it rolled out and hit Rieta's foot and clinked to a stop.

"Take that and get out of my sight."

Rieta's face flushed red. "I-I have no need for the payment..."

*Slam!* The door shut.

Rieta silently stood there for a moment. She did feel insulted, even if Irene was a noblewoman. But she felt pity at the same time. Irene's room was dark and in a mess from what she could see through the doorway.

There were no maids in the East Annex, so they had to fend for themselves here. It was a place that was unfitting for a daughter of a noble family, who must have ordered around servants ever since she could speak. She threw all that away to live here, and yet the person she was so desperately clinging to paid her no attention no matter how beautifully she adorned herself.

And there was no one to care for her. She forced her way to stay here, but time was just passing by with no hint of an opening in the wall to his heart.

Even Rieta couldn't understand why a daughter of a noble family was doing nothing but simply growing older here without a fiancé. It was certain she must have burned up inside, waiting alone, absolutely anxious.

Her pride must have been hurt as well. She probably didn't have the luxury of bantering with the archduke's women, who thought of him as family. There was no other way she could protect her pride other than throwing nasty barbs and terrible remarks.

Rieta slowly brushed her hand against the door as it emanated a faint light. She poured her prayers of sympathy into it, praying she stayed healthy-as she had for the other ladies.

After Rieta walked out, the gold piece shining all by itself was all that remained on the fourth floor of the East Annex. ﻿

12

# THE TEMPLE OF HAVITUS (1)

Rieta visited the East Annex every week after that, working and having tea with the ladies. They became close naturally.

Killian hadn't appeared at the East Annex since then, but he was always one of the topics of conversation among the women. They clucked about him like he was their older brother, still unmarried and the focus of their worries, instead of the most infamously ice-cold terror in the empire.

"They say another rumor of His Lordship killing a woman has come up in the city," one of the ladies said, reading a letter she had received.

Elise grinned at her and asked, "Did your aunt send you another letter because she's worried about you?"

She sighed. "Yeah. No matter how much I tell her there is nothing like that here, she won't believe me," she grumbled.

Seira leaned back, wrinkling her nose, and wiggled her toes. "How is it rumors of him killing a woman spread when he saved one instead? As expected of His Lordship."

Rachel adjusted her straw hat, which had gotten knocked off from a falling fruit, and calmly evaluated the situation. "Wouldn't it be possible bad rumors were spread to stop any possibility of a rumor of his kindness with Rieta's situation?"

"Who knows?" Giselle shrugged.

The lady who received the letter sighed and complained. “Ahh. I'm getting fed up with how everyone misunderstands His Lordship and how everyone takes pity on me. I hope he finds someone, just anyone nice, and settles down soon.

An excited Anna squeezed in. "Yeah! With me! Everyone, help me! So I can grow bigger faster!" ﻿

A few of the ladies burst into laughter.

"There she goes again.”

\*\*\*

Rieta went back to Killian's bedchambers to replenish the blessing after a month. A meticulously placed blessing's effect lasted for at least three months, but the effects did weaken as every month passed, so it was standard to top it up once a month. This time, she got permission to bless his study as well.

While she was replenishing the blessing, Killian was nonchalantly sitting at his desk and reviewing papers. A random thought popped out of his mouth.

"You didn't take the money last time."

He was talking about when she placed the blessing in his bedchambers last month. Eron knew what she had done and tried to compensate for her work, but Rieta had refused it profusely.

"Yes, Sire."

"Take it."

Don't comment, and don't refuse. Always respond with, “Yes, Sire.” Rieta had established these rules about following his orders, but this was the one thing she couldn't budge on.

Rieta stopped blessing the window in the study and turned toward Killian. She buried her hands in her skirts and carefully spoke.

"I'm truly grateful, Sire."

Killian glanced up from the papers he was reviewing and looked at her.

"For saving my life. And for bringing me here to live in such a wonderful place... Every time I laugh here, every time I realize again how I'm﻿ breathing..." *And every time I light a candle in front of my daughter's memorial plate.* “I feel a grace I will never be able to repay, not even in my whole lifetime."

Rieta chose her words carefully before she continued to speak because she knew saying, "You don't need to pay me. Just allow me to do this," would only cause a blunt refusal from Killian.

Killian was silently listening even though he didn't like long-winded explanations.

Rieta took a quick breath, fidgeting with the tips of her fingers, and bowed her head. "I'm sure it's only for my satisfaction... But I'd like to repay your kindness at least a little in any way I can."

Thankfully, Killian didn't call her impudent.

It was hard to withstand the awkward silence, so she bit the inside of her lip hard. Rieta's eyes had drifted down and in a slightly quieter voice, she said, “Please don't take away this small happiness of mine."

Killian stared at Rieta indifferently. He didn't feel an ulterior motive from the woman standing there modestly.

*She spoke quite adroitly.*

Even for him, who didn't trust people easily. He briefly thought it was a skill to speak as if she were incorruptible and pure. He silently looked back down at his papers, not having said a word in reply.

Rieta realized a little later his silence signified his approval, and she felt reassured. She then quietly turned back toward the window.

"You'll have more chances to repay that kindness with your powers."

Rieta turned her head back to him when she heard that low voice. Killian had spoken with his eyes still scanning his papers.

"I shall call for you when it's needed." ﻿

Rieta replied happily. "Yes, Sire!"

She could use her small ability to repay his kindness, at least a little. It was delightful and fortunate news.

Summer had approached quite a bit. The birds were chattering.

The days had become completely sweltering in no time. It was a blazing

summer.

Anna was watching Rieta wipe the sweat off her brow with her sleeve. She told Rieta she had a request for her and dragged Rieta to her room, tugging her wrist. Anna was hesitant for a while, and then she asked if there was a blessing to make her prettier or older.

Laughter bubbled up out of Rieta. “There is no such blessing, Anna. You're so pretty already."

"But everyone keeps telling me I'm too young. And His Lordship only sees me as a child. He doesn't look at me with passion at all either."

*Look... with passion...* Rieta almost imagined the Archduke of Axias looking at Anna with passion for a moment, and she quickly shook her head. *Such a dangerous little lady...*

Rieta smiled gently, as if she could do nothing about it, and knelt lower to Anna's eye level. "That applies to all women, so it's not something you need to be heartbroken about."

Anna looked miserable. "Still..."

Rieta laughed warmly and tucked Anna's hair behind her ear. Then, she took the girl's hand. “Anna. The future will be here even if you don't hurry it. Rather, I'm worried you'll not be able to fully enjoy the beautiful present because you're so focused on the future." ﻿

Anna stared at the beautiful mage, mesmerized. Rieta serenely looked Anna in the eye and continued. “You are so pretty and adorable right now that frankly, all of us wish time would stop... But we all know little Miss Anna won't stay with us forever. You'll become more mature and more beautiful next year, and more the year after that. You'll be a lovely lady in no time. I'm looking forward to that day as well."

Anna blushed and looked down at her toes shyly. "You're just telling me that. No matter how much prettier I become, I'll never be as pretty as you, Mage Tristi."

Rieta shook her head, laughing. “You're already prettier than I am. And please, call me Rieta."

All the ladies in the East Annex were calling her Rieta at some point because they had become close, but Anna still called her Mage Tristi.

Anna hesitated and looked at her. She let go of Rieta's hand and ran to the corner of her bed. She opened the sewing basket kept under her bed and took out a white handkerchief. Anna carried it back to Rieta.

And she faltered again for a moment and thrust it toward Rieta. “Here.”

It was a handkerchief with *"Mage"* embroidered on it, in crooked lettering. Not even her name, but mage.

*What was this?* Rieta thought this was quite an adorable facet of the girl and chuckled at her. "For me?"

Anna nodded her head with her cheeks flushed.

A warm smile bloomed on Rieta's face. Rieta was very expressionless at first, but as she spent time with the people in the East Annex, she started to laugh and became prettier by the day. Anna felt her heart pound as she saw the woman she admired so much smile at her.

"I think being a mage is an incredible job," Anna said with her body squirming out of bashfulness. “If I don't become His Lordship's wife... I'd﻿ like it if I could become a mage like you.”

Rieta looked a little shocked and blinked rapidly as she stared at Anna. When Rieta stayed silent, Anna, whose face turned red, quickly grabbed a white pillow off the bed and shoved it toward her to mask her embarrassment.

"Bless this please."

Rieta took the pillow falteringly and looked at the girl who was staring at her with adoration.

"Bless this, this, and this too please!"

Anna, still blushing, grabbed everything from inside her room and pushed it to Rieta. Rieta blessed all the things Anna gave her.

"Um... How much is it?"

She had requested blessings on more than ten items. She had requested blessings on things left and right, but she knew blessings were labor she had to pay for.

Rieta smiled and shook her head. “It's fine. You already gave me a gift. The work today is a gift from me."

"Really?" Anna's eyes widened.

Rieta lifted a finger to her lips. "It's a secret from the others."

“Rieta... I...” Anna hesitated for another long while. And she spoke as if she had made a big decision after a long time. “If it's you, Rieta... I'm okay with giving up His Lordship."

Rieta stared at Anna's determined face and burst out in laughter. She laughed right out loud for the first time in a very long time.

Anna grabbed her one more time before Rieta left. “You're going to stop by the fourth floor before you leave today too?" ﻿

The fourth floor. It was where Irene was.

"Oh, yes."

Even though Rieta never said it outright, everyone knew Rieta was secretly blessing the hallway where Irene lived. No one really spoke of it, but Rieta always stopped by the fourth floor after she was done before she left.

Anna slowly pulled something out of a drawer. “Could you... put this in front of Irene's door?"

It was a packet of white silk ribbon for tying hair back. The green embroidery at the ends looked like it would go well with Irene's red hair and green eyes.

Rieta looked at it questioningly and asked, "For Irene?"

"It's her birthday tomorrow, so..." Rieta was staring at her, so she quickly added, "Of course, I like you much better than her, so I'll give you something much better than this on your birthday!"

Rieta stared blankly at her and took the packet Anna had pushed onto her, flapping this way and that. “It's not difficult passing it on to her... but why not give it to her yourself?"

Anna fiddled with her ear, an awkward look on her face.

"I mean, I'm not on good terms with Irene generally... And His Lordship probably doesn't know it's her birthday, so she's probably depressed," Anna said sheepishly. “Because we're rivals in love. So, I thought it would be better if it were a present from you rather than any of the rest of us."

She couldn't tell her Irene hadn't accepted Rieta, not even a little, and she looked down at the little gift in her hands. The reason she was speechless wasn't because of the phrase “rivals in love.” ﻿

She felt a quiet warmth from somewhere within the small, rustling package.

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Rieta left Anna's room and gathered her courage to head up to the fourth floor where Irene lived. She hadn't seen Irene after that last time she was shouted at with the door slammed in her face. But she always knew Irene was there in the room just past the thin wooden door every time she came up.

*Should I knock on the door today?*

If Irene did open up for her, she wanted to tell her that the ribbon was a gift from Anna, wish her a happy birthday, and that she'd like it if Irene could join them at the next tea time. With as much kindness and courage as the girl had shown...

But Irene wasn't in her room. There was no light from under the door and no muffled presence from the room.

Rieta waited for a long time, but there was no sign of her coming back, so she hung the package on the door handle and walked away. And she gifted a warm, silvery blessing on the tightly shut door.

"I have a growing suspicion about Havitus Temple.” ﻿

With his silence, Leonard agreed with Killian's statement.

The cleverly strange flow of money, several of the clerics being sent away or transferred for no reason and nowhere to be seen for a long time, the difference in people officially listed as being there and people actually there, and even the secretive guests at times.

Their plant in the temple had been seeing strange movements.

Their informant reported back on the identities of several of the secretive visitors. There were excommunicated clerics who had their hands in black magic and scholars highly versed in demonology and medicine. There was a plague going around, so demonologists visiting the temple was a valid possibility, but going so far as to hide their meetings was suspicious.

All were proof of the hypothesis of how the temple interfered in steering the plague in a bad direction. Killian had only thought of this investigation as insurance, but the results were surprisingly unsettling even for him.

Moreover, the Archbishop of the Temple maintained he had not sent such a report to Axias.

"My lord," Eron called out for Killian from outside the door. "Enter."

Eron walked in and bowed his head. "Her Majesty the Empress's delegation and the clerics of Havitus Temple have arrived. They are requesting an urgent audience with you, my lord." ﻿

"Their purpose?" Killian frowned.

"They say they will tell you in person, Sire."

Leonard laughed bitterly and muttered, “The combination between the empress and the most dangerous, most suspicious Havitus Temple, huh?”

The empress. She was not his mother, but she was the mother of his two brothers whom he had killed.

And soon, one corner of Killian's lip spread up like always, and he smiled a chilling smile and said, “Eron, is Rieta expected to visit today?"

"Yes, she is currently at the East Annex."

"Send these words to the delegation: They shall wait until I have finished dawdling in bed with my mistress."

"Yes, Sire."

And he turned to Leonard, who was standing there, and laid down an order that was expected.

"Quietly bring Rieta to me."

Leonard bowed his head in acceptance.

"Yes, Sire." ﻿

13

# THE TEMPLE OF HAVITUS (2)

"Mage Tristi."

Rieta had just left the East Annex, heading to the castle gate, when she turned toward someone calling her name. Leonard was jogging over to her with his hand aloft.

"Oh." Rieta realized who he was and bowed her head in greeting. Leonard bounded over a pretty long distance in a very short time. “Hello, Sir Leonard."

Leonard stopped in front of her and grinned broadly. “You can just call me Leonard. Are you heading back?"

"Yes."

"Thankfully, I'm not late."

"Excuse me?" Rieta cocked her head.

"His Royal Highness wishes to speak with you."

"Oh, of course." Rieta nodded and answered readily. *It hadn't been that long since I replenished the blessing... Why was His Highness looking for me?*

Rieta thought she might hint at Irene's birthday tomorrow if she was given the chance, but she jolted at the thought. She was in disbelief at how she could be thinking such impertinent thoughts. Even if His Highness would never give Irene a gift, he might just accept a gift from her. Even if he would never offer words of congratulations for her birthday, he might just listen to Irene's conversation with a slightly warmer face than usual. Even if, normally, he might shake her off coldly, he might just shake her off a little gently.

Because it was her birthday. ﻿

Rieta wished he would be a little less cold, at least on that day. Even if he was brusque, he was kinder than he appeared.

Rieta gave her head a thump to reprimand herself. He wasn't an older brother who was an old bachelor. He was the Archduke of Axias. *Have I picked up the behavior of the East Annex ladies?*

"Mage Tristi?" Leonard called Rieta strangely as he watched her thump her own head.

Rieta flushed with embarrassment and pulled herself together. She then realized she had just followed a man who was pretty much a stranger toward a far-off building and into a dark tunnel. "Yes...?" They had already walked a long while.

"We're here." Leonard was climbing up the ladder at the end of the tunnel. Rieta was staring at Leonard blankly as he manipulated several knobs or devices, out of her line of sight, and opened a door attached like a lid on the top of the tunnel.

Light was streaming in through the door. It was a pretty familiar place.

"Rieta." Killian greeted her with a slightly more disheveled appearance than usual. "Lift your head." He smirked at Rieta, who was bowing politely. She was dumbfounded. “It seems the chance for you to repay my kindness has risen."

He was bright and beautiful, but Rieta thought his face was somehow colder than usual.

Killian snapped his fingers, and two maids walked in through the door. "First, you may change your garments." The two maids were carrying an expensive-looking, emerald-colored sleeveless dress made of gossamer. "Afterward, I shall speak my request."

\*\*\*﻿

When she came back in the new dress, an exotic-looking woman with long dark hair in a similarly racy, sky-blue dress was receiving orders from him. She nodded and placed her hand on Killian's chest, and a shield-shaped blue light flashed in front of his body and disappeared.

Killian looked at Rieta as she walked in. His crimson eyes scanned over Rieta's attire. "It suits you."

*Why did I dress in this?*

She was a little bothered by the draping, revealing dress, a kind of attire she'd never worn before, and by his gaze, but that disappeared immediately as soon as Killian started laying down orders. “We will soon be met by a delegate of the empress and some clerics. Lana, you'll stay by my side. Rieta shall stand behind me."

Rieta's eyes widened. *The empress's delegate?*

“Rest your hand on my shoulder if you suspect any among them to be other than a cleric, and grip my neck if you detect a demon or anything as alarming."

She was shocked. It wasn't a task difficult to understand. But Rieta instinctively felt it was a dangerous and important task, so she quickly nodded and clenched her fists to mentally brace herself. “Yes, Sire. I cannot be certain if one is truly a cleric, my lord.”

"I understand, and I do not expect an exact assessment from this ordeal." Killian approached her. "No inkling of suspicion is too insignificant. It's all right if you make a mistake. If you so much as feel something peculiar, tap me like so..."

The tips of Killian's fingers touched the top of Rieta's shoulder. Rieta stared at where his fingertips were touching her shoulder.

"And like so, if there are many whom you suspect." ﻿

The two fingertips on her shoulder became three.

"And like so if you sense a threat, or something as disquieting that you should feel the urgent need to escape."

Killian grasped Rieta's shoulder and brushed it.

Rieta bit the inside of her lip and nodded nervously. "I understand, Sire."

The empress was a political enemy of his, and they would fight to the death. Of course, there were events that had occurred in the past, so it was plausible to assume she was not on good terms with the Archduke of Axias. But never in the ten or so odd years was there any news of either of their deaths, so it could be inferred that was only a figure of speech.

However-Killian's attitude was casual, but even a passerby could understand that his orders were grave and not to be taken lightly.

"Would you require a blessing, Your Highness?"

Killian shook his head briefly. “No, Lana's protection spell will serve me well enough."

As the lady named Lana quietly finished preparing to cast her protection magic on Rieta as well, a laugh lifted the corners of Killian's mouth. "Smile, lest they detect your uneasy nerves. Mind yourselves, that you have both just risen from my bed.”

“I hail the Archduke of Axias. I am Vincent Riberhouke, royal delegate to Her Majesty, Empress Aversati."

“I see.” Killian reached out and grabbed Lana's waist, tugging her toward him lounging back in the seat of honor. "What brings you to this distant land?" ﻿

Empress Aversati, the mother of the imperial prince. She was the most powerful woman in the empire and someone who had lost both of her sons at the hand of Killian, the son of the deceased empress. After the late empress died, the emperor married Aversati, and only her, so she was the lone companion of His Majesty.

Aversati lost popularity due to several events stemming from the hostility between her and Killian. Still, there was no other woman besides her, and her own son was the crown prince, so she naturally grew to wield sizable power, second only to that of the emperor.

Understandably, they were long enemies.

Rieta took comfort in the fact that she was not the one in Killian's arms and faked a peaceful smile, watching Killian's profile.

Killian was so indifferent and even looked languid at times. And he looked that way right now. But Rieta had witnessed how he prepared to look that way before he stepped in front of the delegation.

It was hard to understand. *No matter how much of a hostile relationship he had with the empress, would she have openly hidden an assassin or a spy as a delegate?* Rieta considered that as she looked toward the delegation, and she felt a creeping chill run up the back of her neck.

One of the people in the cleric's robes was staring at Rieta. Rieta knew he was feeling her out the moment their eyes met. It wasn't divine energy. It was unfamiliar energy scanning her that made her shiver.

He wasn't a cleric.

“Empress Aversati is concerned about the plague spreading around the empire and has taken it upon herself to spend her days in prayer at the Grand Temple of Havitus, for peace in the empire and the good health of His Majesty, the emperor." Vincent spoke politely, ignoring Killian's﻿ contempt, as he yawned widely with a woman in his arms right before the empress's delegate.

Rieta tried hard to smile lovingly toward Killian and lifted a shaking hand. Rieta placed a single finger onto Killian's bare shoulder, revealed through his disheveled clothes. And she brushed it off straight away.

Killian let go of Lana, grabbed hold of Rieta's hand that had flitted by, and brought it to his lips as if he thought her tease for attention was delightful. Rieta's hand was soaked with a cold sweat. Killian replied flatly, keeping Rieta's hand against his lips as if to calm her. “So?"

"You haven't been able to see Her Majesty for a long time. You've seen His Majesty from time to time, but Her Majesty the Empress—”

Killian smirked at how he was trying to deceive with transparent guile and laughed, cutting him off. "So, Her Majesty wants to see me?"

There was no way the empress would want to see him. Maybe kill him, but not see him.

"Yes, Sire. Her Majesty hasn't been able to see Your Highness, who has come of age. Her Majesty considers this to be regrettable-"

"Vilhelm."

"Vincent, if it pleases His Royal Highness.”

"I don't know if what Her Majesty wants to see me or my corpse, but..." "How could you say that?"

"I dislike when people drag on and on. So, what does Her Majesty want from me?"

A white-faced Vincent bowed his head. "Her Majesty, with her hopes the Archduke of Axias is in good health, offers the blessings of the Havitus Temple-"﻿

"Just state your business.” Killian cut Vincent off again.

Vincent gritted his teeth and bowed his head again. "Your Royal Highness, Her Majesty invites you to join her at Havitus Temple."

Killian snorted, a blasé expression on his face. “I shall consider myself blessed and thank her greatly for her regard.”

"You must go, Sire. Before the new moon ascends."

Killian cocked an eyebrow and stared at Vincent.

Vincent continued. "Her Majesty has discussed this deeply with the Archbishop of Havitus and wishes to discard the bitter sentiments of yesteryear, by reinstating your standing as a member of the imperial household, Your Highness."

Killian's face froze. Everyone, including Rieta, looked at him in shock.

"So, Her Majesty the Empress Aversati has received an auspicious date from the high chaplain. That day is when the brightest full moon in twelve years will ascend, and this moon is the most auspicious, so she has sent clerics who will assist you on your journey. You will then receive a grand blessing from the Archbishop of Havitus himself, before the statue of the goddess in the temple, thus receiving the acknowledgment of the temple, and restoring your prestige as a member of the imperial family-”

"When is the full moon?"

Vincent bowed even deeper out of panic under the stark glare. He wasn't asking because he didn't know. “Five days from now, Sire."

"Five days," Killian repeated what he had said in a stage whisper. He raised both eyebrows and laughed as if it was absurd. Whether or not the empress's offer was genuine, it was too small a time frame to lead a large party there in time. ﻿

*Bam!*

Rieta and the delegation jolted. Killian kicked over the table in front of him and pinned Vincent down with an icy stare. “You dare to taunt me?”

It was disrespectful behavior no one could imagine doing to the empress's delegate, but it was their fault for making the deadline so tight.

"Forgive me, Your Royal Highness. We planned our arrival in Axias for four days prior, but were met with a band of thieves in our passage and thus greatly delayed. But if you hasten your leave, I am certain—"

"And what of His Majesty the emperor?"

"His Majesty the emperor has continued to suggest this. Her Majesty the empress is such a warm person, so she was concerned and was missing Your Royal Highness. Because she is of such strong faith, when His Majesty the emperor, the Archbishop of Havitus, and the high chaplain spoke of this, Her Majesty the empress immediately made the final decision-"

"Vilhelm." Killian cut Vincent off again and stared coldly at him with his crimson eyes. "I am asking if His Majesty the emperor is aware of this doing."

"Yes, Your Highness. Her Majesty sent word to the emperor. A delegation will be attending the grand blessing ceremony on his behalf," Vincent replied, trembling like a leaf.

Killian closed his eyes slowly and gritted his teeth.

*Killian... Must I take your life? ﻿*

*I am aware of the abysmal hatred between you two. I do not expect you to change the emotions you harbor within, for it matters to me not. But you must display your deference, and it shall be so.*

*This is the limit of my mercy.*

Much time had passed, but the dry voice, still clearly etched into his head, whispered.

When Killian opened his eyes, his crimson eyes had drifted coldly down. The news had already been delivered to the emperor, and a delegation was to stand in for him at the grand blessing ceremony, so there was no room to refuse. Even if he refused to be reinstated, he couldn't refuse without seeing the empress who had extended the offer.

He had to go.

"Vilhelm."

"Yes, Sire." He couldn't bring "Vincent, Your Highness" to his lips and just bowed his head.

"Await outside the castle, for I will ready my departure."

"Oh, yes, Your Highness!"

The delegation left the audience chamber, terrified.

Immediately, Leonard approached him and spoke. “It cannot be an honest affair. They are hiding an evil design."

"I know," replied Killian, brusquely. He then turned to Rieta. "Which of them was suspect?"

"The far-left side, second row, the third cleric in from the left, Sire.” ﻿

Killian rubbed his jaw with his fingers and asked, "What made you suspect this?"

"Our eyes met but for a moment, and he scanned me with an aura that was not divine."

Killian's eyes flashed brilliantly. *Did Rieta mean she could feel the type of energy as well?* “Leonard.”

"My lord."

"Do you remember this man?"

"I do, My lord."

"Kill him."

Leonard instantly acquiesced to Killian's order with a “Yes, Sire."

Rieta's eyes widened. “Sire?” The same word burst from Rieta's mouth in a different tone.

Killian's eyes swept over to Rieta. His gaze was bone-chilling. “I was not speaking this order to you."

Rieta looked at Killian, incredulous. “But... Did you order Sir Leonard to kill that man?"

*With just one word from me?* *No, that couldn't be. Absolutely not.* She must have misheard. She just said that person didn't seem to be a cleric.

Killian's cold eyes reflected blood. "I have.” ﻿

14

# THE TEMPLE OF HAVITUS (3)

"Wait!" Rieta shouted frantically and ran out in front of Killian.

Her hands were trembling. She had forgotten because she had gotten so used to this place and to this person. The man standing in front of her was Killian Axias, the most infamously cold man in the empire.

"That, it's too..." Rieta's words were jumbled and choppy as she struggled to gather her senses. But her intent was sufficiently delivered.

An odd, cold reply came back from him. “Why?”

What did he mean why? If he were going to kill someone so easily, she wouldn't have been so forthcoming about her suspicions.

Rieta hastily looked up at Killian. A warm but skin-prickling voice came from the beautifully smiling man."I didn't say to kill you.”

That emotionless, cold smile sent a chill down her spine. Lana and Leonard were also straight-faced and didn't look too perplexed.

*Am I the strange one?* “I... I could have been mistaken,” Rieta choked out. “I... How could you just believe me and... that person..."

Killian smirked. "You're more trustworthy than the empress's delegate. You're indebted to me, no?"

Rieta froze at the unexpected answer. But Rieta spoke urgently to save the man whose life was hanging by a thread because of her. “He simply had the energy of something other than a cleric."

"Didn't you say he searched you with that energy?

"He just brushed that energy over me!"

"That's the same thing, no?”

Rieta clutched her chest, feeling like she couldn't breathe. "Killing someone so easily..."

"If I don't, we might die.” Killian dismissed her flatly. “It is out of concern for your safety, more than my own.” His crimson eyes looked at Rieta's﻿ innocent blue eyes head-on. "Can you defend yourself against the enemy as well as me, Leonard, or even Lana?"

The delegation had been sent by someone hostile against him. The person who had sniffed out the woman standing next to him to see if she was just an ordinary plaything or if she was a mage or a cleric.

*He wasn't a cleric, so why was he in clerics' robes?*

"We must submit to their supposed guard and protection for five days of travel. I see no reason to spare the life of an obvious threat."

And Killian was thinking of another possibility.

They said they had run into thieves. It was a plausible story. There were in fact recent reports of thieves raiding travelers. There weren't many cities that accepted nomads who originated from towns reduced to nothing by the plague.

But was the fact that they arrived late to force his hand in swiftly preparing to leave really a mistake?

Rieta slowly replied, a blank look on her face. "We... My lord?"

"We, as in you are to accompany me on this passage,” Killian said swiftly. "Eron."

"Yes, Sire."

"Prepare for my passage to Havitus Temple. We will need a tribute for the temple and a gift for the empress."

"As you wish, my lord."

"Leonard, gather eleven more men to accompany us."

"Yes, Sire."

Rieta, terrified and in a daze, hurriedly grabbed Killian's attention again. "He is a cleric sent by the empress herself! How will you kill him without so much as a pretext?”

"That is no matter of your concern." His reply was cold. He shrugged her off, and Killian's back disappeared out the door. ﻿

\*\*\*

Not even two hours later, a large group of travelers gathered to depart for Havitus Temple. The empress's delegates, the clerics she had sent, and the twelve knights to accompany Killian lined up in front of Axias Manor, on horses and in carriages.

There was a limit to the number of armed men he could take. And if the emperor was watching, there was especially no way he could bring more men than the number the empress had sent. It could be interpreted as rude and distrustful.

He was the Archduke of Axias, so he wouldn't have thought twice about it if it were an ordinary journey, but this was the way it was. So only twelve knights accompanied him, as was the common practice. This was half the number of guard knights the empress had sent.

Six women, including Rieta and Lana, were riding in a carriage pulled by six horses, and six other carriages carrying an enormous amount of luggage followed them. The clerics frowned at how he was bringing along a whole group of his prized mistresses when the highest woman in the land, his stepmother, was calling for him, but no one was brave enough to protest. He did all he was supposed to do by limiting the number of people to protect him.

Giselle, Rachel, Elise, and Seira all had no idea why they were being brought along but got into the carriage. They noticed Rieta and greeted her warmly.

"Oh, my! Rieta?"

Rieta couldn't even think to greet them and just stared at them vacantly. The four women saw her ashen face and blinked at each other in bewilderment. Rieta thought it wasn't something she should talk about recklessly, so she kept her mouth shut tight.

Just then, Lana raised her hand and put up a blue barrier inside the carriage. And with a rough accent, she started to explain in the imperial language where the carriage was headed and what had happened. Lana seemed to already be acquainted with the women of the East Annex. Rieta figured it was all right, seeing this woman talk, who appeared to be more﻿ familiar with situations like these, so she distractedly picked at her fingernails.

The women, who had now learned what had happened, looked at Rieta with pity in their eyes.

"Rieta... You must have been so shaken." Giselle tried to comfort her. But what they thought was not that his order to dispose of that man was unreasonable, but something else. They didn't think he had laid down an unreasonable order, but rather it was almost like they were rueful about the fact that he wasn't considerate of Rieta and said it within earshot of her.

*But...*

Rachel looked at Rieta's pale face calmly. On the one hand, he had burdened Rieta with this aggressive stress, but Rachel thought she might know why Killian included her on this journey all of a sudden. *He trusted her. As a person who wouldn't betray him.*

And now, it looked like he was testing her capabilities.

"But Rieta, I don't think His Lordship's orders were wrong," Rachel spoke up carefully. "It's true that man acted in a threatening manner. Why else would a common man have disguised himself as a cleric? Even I wouldn't care to spend several nights in a passage with such a man, especially when he has been sent by one who had relentlessly threatened my life.”

"Still... Killing him is a bit too much. It's not like he's done something yet,” Rieta said with an expression riddled with distress.

"You can't wait until he does do something. The fact that he searched for you was a sign he was planning on doing something. Getting found out was probably something he had prepared for when he chose to do it," Seira said.

"Can't he just be locked up somewhere or be told we'll go with him left behind?" Rieta offered.

Elise leaned her head against the carriage wall and sighed. “There's no justification. Do you think there's a way to leave him behind without arousing suspicion? To secretly get rid of him is the most comfortable way. ﻿

There's nothing we can do. It could have been different if he didn't find out, but now that he did..."

Giselle noticed Rieta sitting there in a daze, her face growing grayer and grayer. "Rieta? Are you feeling well? Rieta."

"Wake up!" Seira clapped her hands in front of Rieta's face.

"Ah." Rieta's mind had gone as blank as a sheet. She looked up at the woman with her eyes blinking. She was grimacing and clutching her collar without realizing it. Rieta forced an expression of ease and brought down her hands. "I'm fine."

Seeing Rieta try to act calm with that dazed look still on her face made them sympathetic. “It'll be hard, but try to forget. That oddity would be found out sometime even if you hadn't pointed it out, and it probably wouldn't have been something we could ignore. I'm sure the empress herself isn't expecting all of her people to come back alive.”

Elise spoke up when she saw Rieta was just nodding, still looking like she didn't understand. "It may be unfathomable for you, but we have seen many a threat. The empress has her blade aimed at His Highness at all times. And though His Highness seems cruel in his ways, his resolve is wholly for the safety of the countless who serve him."

Another one of the ladies added, "Didn't the empress feign innocence when they asked her if she sent those delegates? His Lordship just moved on, saying he knew she would come out like this."

Rieta's face turned into a face of shock. This was the first she'd heard of it*.*

*For such a thing to have happened between the Archduke of Axias and the empress... If that were true, wouldn't it be something that would create an uproar in the empire?*

*The empress's delegate openly tried to assassinate the emperor's son, and the emperor's son killed the assassin without batting an eyelash... Then he just moves on, accepting the fact the empress was feigning innocence?*

"To be honest, the reason why His Lordship doesn't refute those heinous rumors about him, and why he acts like he's a lazy, womanizing playboy is probably because he doesn't want to become a threat to the current crown﻿ prince. He's appealing to the fact that he's not someone the emperor has to focus on."

Rieta repeated blankly, “A...threat?”

"The people are speculating the emperor still has hopes for His Lordship, and the empress, who is the mother of the current crown prince, must address this as a threat.”

"His Lordship has no intention of that. It would be better if he gave up."

"I don't know. Even if he isn't a threat to the crown prince, the empress probably hates His Lordship... enough to want to kill him."

"Still, she'd probably not pull something like this every time.”

The women started to murmur anxiously.

"What will it be this time? I'm really nervous. And with the reinstatement into the imperial family on the line. What if something really big happens?"

Rieta felt an anxious chill and wrapped her arms around her body.

Giselle gazed at her. "Rieta. What is that inside your sleeve? It's about to fall out."

Rieta thanked her and put away the dagger that had slipped out.

Giselle cocked her head, watching her, and asked, “A dagger? Why do you have something like that?”

"I wondered if His Lordship would let the man live if I could protect myself," Rieta answered awkwardly.

Elise covered her mouth in surprise and shook her head. "My goodness. Rieta... Have you not given up on that yet?"

"It's no use. His Lordship is not that flexible." Seira laughed bitterly. “You can't even keep a dagger in your sleeve. Will you be able to use it, let alone protect yourself?" ﻿

She was right. Rieta smiled weakly as if that had convinced her. "You're right. It was foolish of me."

Rieta couldn't gloss over why she had the weapon, so she spoke truthfully, but what she said sounded idiotic. Rieta wasn't the only woman who couldn't protect herself. Five other women were exactly like her. Even if they didn't count Lana, there were four. If he really were a dangerous man, and if a situation did arise, many people, not only Rieta, would be in danger.

Rieta blinked her sky-blue eyes vacantly. *Safety. Danger.* These were words that didn't connect well with the Archduke of Axias.

Fights between commoners were subject to the law. But nobles could do whatever they wanted to commoners and could come away unscathed most of the time. Of course, fights between nobles were also subject to the law. But the imperial family could do whatever they wanted to nobles and could come away unscathed most of the time.

Rank was above the law.

The Archduke of Axias was a quasi-member of the imperial family. He had been ousted from the imperial family and lost his position, but he was the emperor's eldest son, and that made him unique. Along with his title of Archduke, he was being treated as a member of the imperial family. Nobles, and obviously commoners, couldn't dare harm him. So the only people who could commit a crime against him and be given the room to distinguish right or wrong were other members of the imperial family.

She considered him to be someone whose life would never be in danger. He had to have been comfortable... She thought he had to have grown up safely.

"Rieta. Try to forget, though it will not be easy. Even if you had not suspected him, the man would surely have caused his own demise." Someone comforted Rieta consolingly.

Rieta stared out the window and looked around at the people. Of all the places Rieta's eye could rest, it just so happened she could see the man﻿ she'd pointed out. The person who was going to die today—he was still alive.

She couldn't believe it. He was riding his horse without realizing what was about to befall him.

Her hands shook weakly. He was someone who endangered the Archduke of Axias. No matter how much she tried to understand, her hands trembled as she thought that man would die because of a single comment she had made.

The women may have been used to it because they had lived in the manor for a long time, but Rieta was a simple countrywoman. She was scared. She couldn't believe the weight of her words. She couldn't bear to look at the man right now. He was still alive. She didn't want to see, but she couldn't tear her eyes away.

"Leonard was the one who received the order, correct?"

Giselle sighed softly. "We'll try it... maybe there's no other way. It could be useless, but..."

Rachel whistled. "Ooh. Going for it as his girlfriend?"

"It's not like that." Rieta's eyes widened.

Elise asked dubiously. "What are you going to do?"

"There's no way we can leave a possibility of danger on His Lordship's life. And we can't carelessly improvise a reason to leave him behind. Since Leonard can't just ignore an order from His Royal Highness."

Giselle seemed to move her sleeve, but she pulled out a small brown bottle from her hand. The bottle, which had been completely hidden, far beyond Rieta's clumsy effort to conceal the knife, popped up out of nowhere and dangled between Giselle's fingers.

"I'll make it so that he suffers from awful diarrhea for a few days. He'll give up continuing on the journey before his head gets chopped off." Giselle winked. "I've not yet disclosed this to you, but I know my way around potions.

15

# THE TEMPLE OF HAVITUS (4)

The dawdling procession stopped even before sunset. One of the clerics, looking haggard, staggered over to Killian and bowed his head.

“Forgive me, Your Highness... I fear my health has deteriorated with great urgency. I beg pardon for causing a delay in this pressing passage."

Killian replied dryly, with no expression on his face. "I see.”

The women squeezed to watch through the open window of the carriage with bated breath.

"Seems to be unfolding according to plan."

"Shush!"

It seemed everything was going as they had surmised.

Killian's voice rang out. "Come closer.” The man, slightly confused, stepped up to Killian. Killian looked him up and down indifferently. And he smiled faintly. “So that I may better espy your scheme."

"Pardon?"

"No need.” Killian's red eyes shifted coolly. “I care not about your true intentions."

The next moment, the man let out a strange cry, and his shoulder shook. An unfamiliar and desperate groan followed. From below the man's bloodshot eyes, he hacked up blood.

Several of the people around him screamed.

“Good heavens! Brother!"

His trembling hand desperately scrabbled for the blade protruding from his chest. Blood spread on his back, soaking his clerics' robes, and his head fell. The man's body collapsed. ﻿

Killian shoved his heel against the cleric's shoulder and withdrew his sword. A few drops of blood splattered onto his emotionless face.

Vincent shrieked. "What have you done? You cannot slay a cleric! How will you absolve yourself of this sin?"

"Cleric?" Killian smirked with his handsome face and laughed. "You are better aware than I, that this fiend is no cleric."

Vincent flinched and stumbled back a few steps.

Killian's eyes were glowing red, his back to the setting sun.

"But I do wonder what the empress will say of it... I imagine she will deny even the mere existence of such a man in the midst of her delegation." Killian wiped away the drop of blood falling from his face with the back of his hand. His blasé voice rang out. "No character to whom I would pledge my loyalty. I would advise you to hold those tongues if you value your lives. After all, you would not wish to cross Her Majesty, would you?”

\*\*\*

"Rieta, I'm sorry. For how it ended." Giselle apologized, crestfallen. Rieta shook her head, and all the blood drained from her face.

"No, no. Giselle... What is there for you to be sorry for? You worried for me. Rather, I'm sorry. You all worried about this because of me... And I made you watch such a terrifying scene as well."

The kind women shook their heads and silently smiled at Rieta. Rieta tried to make herself smile, but she knew it would look strange on her face. She bowed her head instead and tried to forget.

They had seen the same thing she had, but they were keeping a stiff upper lip.

*I'm the only one who's becoming a burden. ﻿*

She should have stopped Giselle in the first place. But when she had offered that suggestion, Rieta couldn't speak up to stop her. If they let him live and there was a problem in the future, how would she have dealt with that?

*This was good. It's good. He got rid of any future troubles.*

She tried to clench her fists but they shook. The image of blood spreading on the back of the man she had pointed out hovered before her eyes. The scream she never heard in her life before, the scream of a man facing death, echoed in her ears.

Soon, Rieta started to run a fever and became sick. The women

surrounded her and worried about her. Lana, who guarded her words for when they were truly necessary, placed a cool hand, glowing blue, onto her forehead.

Rieta thanked her with her eyes.

\*\*\*

Killian announced he couldn't travel with the clerics because they were so slow and traveled ahead with only his knights. Vincent claimed he had to accompany him. "But... We are here to guard Your Highness to safe passage!"

“You presume to guard me?” Killian's mouth turned up to one side, and he laughed derisively. “Give the so-called cleric a proper burial and follow at your leisure. I entrust you with the rest of the carriages."

No one could go against Killian's cold dismissal. So, leaving the baggage and clerics behind, Killian's party left. To their surprise, the women's carriage picked up at an extraordinary speed and followed Killian. The delegation had thought the women would travel with them.

Killian's knights helped the carriage keep pace at a speed slow enough that they could keep in step, but it was still a carriage. How it followed right behind the knights astride their horses was surprising. ﻿

The women's carriage had wheels and axles reinforced with adamantium, and Lana's magic was cast on it. It was able to withstand power and speed because it was much stronger than an average carriage. It was lighter than the carriage that carried their baggage, and six powerful horses were placed in the care of a skillful coachman.

Killian was of a mind to leave the clerics behind in the first place, but how he left the baggage in their hands and prepared the carriage beforehand to not leave the women behind with them were matters most people had no way of knowing.

Lana had cast magic to stabilize the carriage, but the carriage shook quite a bit. The women silently stayed strong through the difficult journey.

\*\*\*

Rieta's condition only got worse from her psychological burden, adding to the difficult journey that continued for three days.

It was the third night. The party had just a day's worth of travel left before they arrived at Havitus Temple, and when they stopped at the last village, Killian heard of Rieta being ill. This was after Rieta had lost consciousness. It was because Rieta had begged the women not to tell him, saying she was fine before passing out.

Thankfully, they were on schedule to arrive at Havitus Temple tomorrow night with time to spare, so he was already of a mind to rest for the night. Killian's knights brought a trustworthy doctor on his orders.

\*\*\*

"A fever caused by distress." The doctor, who examined Rieta, announced. "It has taken a toll on vitality. She may appear well on the outside, but her organs are in ruins. Has she been eating well?"

Killian clicked his tongue. She didn't seem to require this much care before. He had thought her skills were practical, so he had decided to have her accompany him. *Was she too weak? From such a trivial thing as that. ﻿*

He looked over the fact that she argued and spoke up against him because he valued her skills. She was a trustworthy mage, able to see demons and feel the energy. It was better than what Killian had hoped.

The rumor of how Killian accepted "the Widow of Cevitas" as payment instead of the large sum owed to him was pretty believable, so it was easy for him to bring her along, disguised as a prized mistress. And she was beautiful enough to be quite convincing.

*But to be like this?* He'd have to look for someone else.

"Try to calm her once she wakes. Tell her not to mind my actions from two days ago, for they were mere effects of my fickle temper."

The doctor, his head cocked in confusion, replied to Killian's order, which had been made when he thought Rieta was in distress from what happened two days ago. "The ailments wrecking the madam's body have not been caused so soon. Only the fever can be accounted for by what may be a bout of severe fatigue."

Killian shut his mouth.

"I fear her distress has been great and long. What great calamity has the madam endured? She has all but withered to ashes within."

The doctor, thinking Rieta was simply one of Killian's prized mistresses, advised it would be best if he didn't touch her for a while and left after giving her some medicine.

The people walked the doctor out. Killian, left alone in the patient's room, gazed down at Rieta's pale face. "She told me she was doing well." The slim face was gaunter than he had remembered.

\*\*\*

*“Killian, Killian! Stay back, Killian!"*

*Mother. ﻿*

*"I have never seen an undead creature still left sentient. A true marvel, is it not?"*

*His beautiful mother was tied up in chains. She screamed terribly.*

*"Killian!"*

*His stepbrother looked at Killian's mother, her body rotting away, and snickered.*

*"But alas, it is nonetheless an undead thing.”*

*A sword was pulled from his hip. A blue light reflected off the blade.*

*“Fear not, for we shall keep you from harm, lest its persistence breaches your judgment."*

*His dead mother was ripped away in front of his eyes. The coppery smell of blood.*

*"Father."*

*Prince Killian, covered in blood from head to toe, stepped up to the throne and addressed the emperor with a name he'd never called him before.*

*"I...come bearing news of my late mother's vengeance.”*

*Killian, eighteen years old, smiled lazily.*

*"I have brought the head of her slayer with me... Will you accept this humble offering?"*

*Killian tossed his brother's head at the feet of the emperor and empress. The emperor's eyes blasted open. The empress flew out of her seat, a hair- raising scream wailing out of her.*

*"William!"*

*This was the start of a long, ill-fated relationship. ﻿*

\*\*\*

"Your Highness."

Killian replied slower than usual, lying on the sofa in his room and walking the line between dreams and thoughts. “Leonard.”

“Madam Tristi has just awoken. Will you see her, my lord?"

"No need, if she will be able to bear the morning's departure." Killian paused for a moment. He thought it wasn't like him to send a message without seeing her himself. “No. I will go see her."

\*\*\*

"Leave us to speak in private."

Killian dismissed everyone and once they were alone, walked toward Rieta who was sitting on the bed. As Rieta tried to get up, Killian shook his head to stop her and commented indifferently, “You are feeble.”

Rieta didn't know what to do and just bowed her head. "Forgive me. Have I caused a great delay in the passage?"

"No. We were in need of rest. It could not have been an easy journey, and you endured quite well.” Rieta barely felt relief as Killian continued. “But we must make haste tomorrow, and cannot await your recovery. You may return to Axias if you wish. I shall appoint a knight to escort you."

Rieta lifted her head in shock. "Not at all! I am well able to make the journey if you will allow."

Killian tilted his head. "To Axias?"

"No, my lord! To the temple! I am of sound health, truly." She had come along to repay him and to help him. She couldn't go back, especially taking one of the knights who were supposed to protect him. ﻿

Killian crossed his arms. "Do you realize what you must do at the grand temple?"

"Yes, in part,” Rieta recalled what she had heard from the women. *“Surrounding oneself with women proves to be a very effective measure. It serves the perfect excuse to relieve oneself of unsought company."*

Killian traveled with his women quite often when he had to attend events outside of Axias. First, it was to look as if he was a horrible bastard who didn't deserve attention from the emperor, and second, it was to avoid surveillance and irritating attention from others. This was why he was labeled as a scoundrel who ignored what happened around him, why he was thought to be a playboy with bad habits with women, and why the East Annex was famous for housing his prized mistresses.

"Once we arrive at the Grand Temple of Havitus, the clerics will cling to my side with the pretense of blessings and service. And if so, I plan to wield you as my shield."

Rieta nodded determinedly. "Yes, Sire. I can serve as your shield."

"Good." Killian nodded. “Can you depart with us tomorrow?"

"Undoubtedly so. Forgive me for causing such concern."

"You have no cause for apology." Killian paused, then continued. “I brought you because I saw the need for you... And I did so without ado for your volition. As such, you may request something you desire in return."

Rieta shook her head. "I am content with this opportunity to repay your kindness."

It was the answer he expected. Killian tossed out what he had been thinking. "Shall I search for your daughter?”

Rieta's eyes wavered at the sudden proposition.

Killian went on. "I heard Casarius sold her to a roving band of slave traders... And also that he parted this life before retrieving her. If the search has proven difficult by your means, I shall find her for you." ﻿

A strange light flashed past Rieta's face. A reply came back not too long after. “My daughter... She is dead, my lord.”

A silence flowed between them.

"Is that so?"

Silence, again.

"Then I have spoken in idle error.”

"No, Sire," Rieta replied serenely and smiled. “I thank you for your kind words."

Killian looked at her face bemusedly. A smile blooming upon a slightly gaunt, pale face.

He learned for the first time, how such a beautiful face could look so sad.

\*\*\*

The next morning, as they were eating breakfast before they departed, Killian glanced at Rieta and made sure she was eating. The doctor's medicine and Lana's nursing must have helped because her complexion was undoubtedly better than it had been the day before.

Killian casually spoke to them all. "We shall reach the grand temple by nightfall. It will be a long journey, so fill yourselves well.”

"Yes, Sire," the knights sitting at his table replied mindlessly to Killian's sudden announcement.

"What say you, women?"

The women sitting at another table answered, slightly puzzled.

"Yes, Your Highness."

With his prized mistresses, Killian Axias and his knights were to arrive at the Temple of Havitus that night.

It was a day before the full moon. ﻿

16

# THE TEMPLE OF HAVITUS (5)

When Killian's party arrived at the entrance to the temple, they were in the middle of service for the eve of the full moon. The archbishop was leading the service. The empress was also present.

Most of the high-ranking clerics were present at the service, so the bewildered cleric who ran out to greet them was a young cleric of middling rank. “Your Royal Highness! Just a moment... I will escort the archbishop here to greet you."

"No need. I am in need of rest, so show me to my chambers."

"B-but I couldn't—”

Killian frowned coldly. "I require a chamber to rest, not the company of the archbishop. Is no other man capable of locating my chambers in these walls, that an archbishop need be pulled from officiating a mass?"

The poor cleric's eyes darted nervously. Thankfully, while he squirmed and was on the brink of tears, a cleric of a higher rank, calmer in comparison, came to them and started leading them to their quarters.

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The high-ranking cleric respectfully and carefully led them to the guest quarters. One of the three major temples in the empire, Havitus Temple was located on top of a mountain and wasn't very flashy. Not many people visited the temple and the guest quarters were a small, three-story building that stood by itself in a quiet, secluded area.

A roomy lobby, dining room, prayer room, and other amenities made up the first floor, and the second floor was made up of many big and small rooms meant for the guest's knights, companions, or servants. The third floor consisted of a large room for the guest of honor.

Killian's party was only over twenty people because he didn't bring anyone else other than his knights and ladies. Their small numbers made the isolated guest quarters feel excessive. ﻿

After the cleric showed them through the amenities on the first floor and the rooms on the second floor for the knights and the ladies, he led them to the third floor, where Killian would be staying. Ten or so monks dressed in monk's blue habits were standing before the door to the guest chamber.

Killian glanced at the cleric, and he started to explain, "These monks of Havitus Temple will be serving you during your stay. Consider them as your attendants and ask whatever you need."

Perhaps because of the Archduke of Axias's reputation, there were no women. But maybe they wanted to look as non-threatening as possible because most were young men, almost so young they could be mistaken as being too young.

Of course, Killian had no intention of keeping anyone from the temple near him, no matter how young they looked. He walked past them into the room, completely ignoring them. “Leave us. I have no need."

The cleric bowed his head from behind him. “Please do not decline.”

Killian turned his head back halfway and smirked. “My women shall attend to all of my needs. My quarters are no place for young monks to be."

The cleric shut his mouth. They showed their disapproval with looks of embarrassment and confusion on their faces. There were even some who couldn't hide their offended reactions, as if they were insulted.

Not caring about them, Killian tossed his cloak aside, striding in as if it were his chambers back home. The women trailing him followed and picked up the cloak to place it neatly. Killian sat on the sofa in front of the table and bit into a cigar. Leonard jumped forward and quickly lit it.

The cleric gathered himself and spoke again. “But even our grand temple cannot be completely safe from the evils of illness... And you've turned away the escort of one of our clerics during your passage."

Killian blew out a long stream of smoke and looked at the cleric. The cleric turned his body toward the young men and continued. “They are yet to be﻿ ordained, but only because they are still young. They are all excellent users of divine magic. If anything were to happen here..."

Killian ignored him and reached his hand out toward the group of women. "Rieta."

The exceptionally beautiful blonde woman stepped forward through the throng of lovely women, gathering her skirts. The young men stopped breathing, their jaws dropping open at the rare sight of a young woman, and a gorgeous one at that.

The dreamy, elegant, mysterious woman quietly stepped toward Killian and placed her hand lightly on top of his. Killian, sans cigar, seized her hand and drew her over. He trapped her in his arms within moments and gazed up at her sensually.

The red eyes, peering through the raven black hair, met with the sky-blue eyes below the stunning blonde hair. Killian smirked and laughed, bemused. "Bless me."

The woman smiled.

Soon, a transparent and white light emanated from Rieta's body. She placed her hands on both of Killian's shoulders and bent down to place a kiss on his forehead. The scene, which resembled a goddess blessing a devil, made people stare and forget to breathe.

Killian could see it in the back of his mind. Pleased, he smiled and wrapped an arm around Rieta's waist. He yanked her on top of his knee.

"Ah!"

Rieta flung her arms around Killian's neck in surprise. A chilly voice whispered in her ear, “As it is clearly evident..." The lazy, beast-like crimson eyes slowly, blood-chillingly swept over the clerics. "I have no need for your monks, as my prized mistress herself is a mage.”

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After the temple people all left, the women spread out in Killian's room, checking the bed and any other strange-looking items in the room for danger and casting blessings and protection magic.

Killian leaned back into the sofa with his eyes following Rieta as she meticulously blessed the room. Rieta was more useful than Killian anticipated and was fulfilling her role well. And she wasn't ignorant of the acting Killian wanted.

Rieta instinctively thought back to the blessings from her youth she had seen the abbess place on nobles. Killian had been testing this feeble woman's resourcefulness, but Rieta had performed better than he had hoped. Killian gave her high marks for her natural and plausible moves from someone he had thought of as timid.

*It wasn't bad.*

She could become quite a fine pawn.

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Killian, who had driven out the clerics, stayed in his chamber with the East Annex's ladies and did not step even a foot outside until the evening service was over. The people muttered how it was exactly something he would do.

Rumors about his prized mistress spread throughout the temple within a few hours. Clerics were fundamentally very curious about mages who could use the same power as them but were not caught up in the regulations of their religion. Moreover, the temple was stirred as they added more and more flourish to the scene of her remarkable blessing. Speculations connecting the puzzle of a mistress and the widow from the rumors also circulated secretly.

When the long evening service was finally over and night fell, everyone knew the Archduke of Axias had arrived. The majority predicted that he would offer his greetings to the empress after the service was over. ﻿

No one was surprised that the Archduke of Axias came to greet the empress and escort her. But most people watched, with held breaths, the empress's reaction to his carefree attire and the prized mistresses on his arm in a gesture of flamboyance.

Aversati discovered Killian and stopped at the top of the stairs, smiling. "So you've come, Archduke of Axias."

"Your Majesty, it has been too long. I am quite tardy."

With a snow-white veil on her head, the empress floated down the steps and stopped in front of Killian. Her ladies-in-waiting arranged her train and stood in a row behind her. The foreign-born empress's gray eyes looked up at Killian.

She was so beautiful, it was unbelievable she was over fifty years old. The most powerful woman in the empire.

Empress Aversati.

Long, wine-red curls fell over her pale, mild face. The empress folded the fan in her hand and spoke, handing over the fan to a lady-in-waiting. “I began to worry when I received no word of your coming.”

Killian chuckled and replied. “I would not dare to disappoint."

The mother and son, only in name, stood face-to-face. Above their mistrusting embrace, their masklike faces wore cold smiles. The empress murmured into Killian's ear without even lowering her voice. “A pity to be alive."

"Indeed."

"I meant, pity for you to have to see me still alive."

Killian grinned. “As did I."

The archbishop was taking care of his busy schedule, which he wasn't able to put off. Even the high-ranking clerics who claimed to be something couldn't interrupt this bloody conversation between the noble imperial family members. ﻿

It was a rare sight. The imperial family members of high degrees meet each other outside of the imperial palace. In front of the empress and her six ladies-in-waiting wearing white veils, were the Archduke of Axias and six of his prized mistresses. He was very casually dressed for someone seeing his stepmother for the first time in several years.

The empress spoke calmly, not exactly flashing condemnation on her face. "You've surely outdone the emperor in his pursuits."

It seemed like a very pointed remark about how even the emperor did not blatantly walk around with this many women.

Killian replied brazenly. "It is one's filial duty to strive for greatness, after all."

The empress laughed dryly.

Killian calmly smiled and extended his hand to the empress. The empress, of course, placed her hand on top of his without the slightest compunction. “It is quite obliging of you to escort me. Might I ask, how many women have you had by your side today?"

"You would be the eighth woman of the day. I took care to cleanse myself with the fragrance of the womanly body, for fear of disgracing Your Majesty with the putrid scent of an old bachelor. Is it not to your liking?"

The empress glanced back at the women following him. "But I spy only six mistresses in your convoy. Pray, did you stop by a brothel on your passage here?"

"The seventh was none other than a horse. My prized black mare."

The clerics, who turned pale by the insult thrown at the empress, gasped.

"Such a thoughtful gesture." The empress laughed softly without as much as a blink. "I only hope my own gestures were enough for you. Pray tell, what might you have done with my gifts? Have you sent them to cross the river of Laudamus?" ﻿

Killian laughed naturally and retorted. “Forgive me, for I was only able to send off but one man across that river."

The empress took it in stride. "It is a surprise to hear you haven't been as proficient as you once were. And the rest?"

"We should expect them soon, though their slowness did concern me. They bear my gifts for Your Majesty."

The empress smiled. “I wonder what delightful gift I should expect to receive. Someone's head, perhaps?"

Killian shrugged. “Perhaps, but I'm afraid it will not be the head you most wish to have."

The faces of those who were listening turned blue. Only the empress and the archduke's faces were still like masks. They went toe-to-toe until they almost reached the guest quarters where the empress was staying.

"Our banter can continue later. Go and rest to relieve your fatigue from travel. Perhaps a good cleansing of your hands to rid yourself of this old woman's foul touch." The empress graciously spoke as she wiped the hand that had touched Killian's with a white handkerchief.

"I thank you for your thoughtful generosity." Smiling sensually, Killian wrapped an arm around one of the mistresses standing next to him.

The empress continued calmly, having dropped the handkerchief she was wiping her hands with to the floor. "They tell me you must observe a fast during the day until the blessing ceremony. Since you've had your supper already, we shall hold a small banquet tonight to celebrate your arrival."

"Then it shall be a long night." Killian pressed his lips into the hair of the woman who barely grazed the bottom of his chin and chuckled lightly. “I look forward to Your Majesty's welcome." ﻿

The empress replied with a smile on her face, "I hope it will be an enjoyable one as well."

They were gathered here for the important matter of his reinstatement into the imperial family, but neither the empress nor Killian brought it up at all. They both knew it was only to lure Killian onto the stage.

The past thirteen years for the empress and Killian were no different from a gamble with their lives on the line. They pretended to be unaware and played hide-and-seek under the watchful eye of the emperor.

Their war, which the empress did not react to, even if Killian was the winner of every battle, had gone on for so long, repeating itself over and over again. It was now falling into becoming one of the empress's

pastimes.

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A message was delivered, saying the emperor's delegation had arrived to participate in the grand blessing ceremony. It was time for the banquet. This would be the stage.

Empress Aversati, now dressed in a purplish evening gown, was gazing into her mirror, smiling slightly, as her ladies-in-waiting adorned her.

*The Archduke of Axias. I've prepared many gifts for him this year as well.*

The lengthy game had started, between an opponent not easily toppled and a retaliator who did not tire. ﻿

17

# THE TEMPLE OF HAVITUS (6)

Emperor Aestenfelt the First's delegation entered the banquet hall. The head delegate lifted his hand to his chest and kneeled before the empress and Killian to show their respect.

"Lectus Eustio, His Majesty's loyal servant, offers his greetings to Her Majesty Empress Aversati and His Royal Highness, the Archduke of Axias." The empress greeted them with a smile, while Killian nodded, bored.

A long series of greetings volleyed back and forth. One of the attendants stepped forward at Lectus Eustio's order, carrying a red cushion with a black coffret. “A gift from His Majesty." The attendant opened the box to reveal a beautifully crafted necklace and a pair of earrings garnished with red stones. As the people in the hall started to murmur their exclamations, the empress smiled faintly. “The emperor further bestows upon Your Majesty the following register of gifts. Mining concessions to the adamantite ore of the Sea of Oran. And as for the rights to trade and tariff the oak wood of Lenaha, he wishes to discuss the matter with Your Majesty upon your return to the palace."

Killian snickered. “How grand.”

*Was he promising to do whatever it took for her to come back without devising some plot?*

"It appears His Majesty's affections are as unconditional as ever."

The empress's eyes crinkled beautifully as she said, "Largely in thanks to you, Archduke."

From the looks of how they were hastily making offers that seemed exceptionally big, they weren't a delegation here to attend the grand ceremony, but rather a team for negotiation with the empress to stop her.

*Well. The empress wouldn't blink at even the grandest of presents. The greatest gift the empress could receive above all that would be me falling into hell.*

Killian looked at Lectus Eustio and laughed lazily. “I am rather envious of the adamantite mining concessions. Is there no gift for me? What if I were﻿ to decline my reinstatement to the imperial family as a gesture of my consideration of the crown prince?"

All the people in the banquet hall turned their shocked stares toward Killian as he said that. Killian lifted his glass indifferently and swirled it. "Surely, this could not come as such a shock. It is common knowledge that I am quite suited to my current way of life. I can only view it as a rite with more cumbersome obligations than I care for, and frankly, I prefer not to concern Halstead after all these years."

Halstead was the empress's youngest son, the seventeen-year-old crown prince. His half-brother, who was four when Killian was exiled from the imperial family's castle Lillefeiam, was declared the heir to the throne.

The emperor's Kingdom of Rhodmignue, the father of the Lillefeiam Dimfell empire, had a unique way of passing on the crown. It wasn't an absolute rule to pass it down to the eldest son. But instead, they would wait until all the princes turned eighteen, then the crown would be handed to the prince with the most outstanding qualities. The King would take many wives to increase the number of sons he could attain, and before at least two sons turned eighteen, they didn't decide who the heir was.

It was quite reasonable, but it was a custom that caused many intense fights between the princes over the throne. But the king of Lillefeiam's morals forbidding rifts between members of the royal family and the murders of family members had a hand in continuing this custom. As the kingdom became an empire and the king became an emperor, the empire, now a united group of many lands, followed many characteristics of the Rhodmignuean culture.

When Imperial Prince Killian murdered his half-brother, and the empress, enraged by this fact, pointed a sword at him in the emperor's presence, many changes started to take place in that tradition.

Empress Aversati and Lectus Eustio silently looked at Killian. He calmly met their gazes and continued speaking. “It's not as if I have to be reinstated in the line of succession to be acknowledged as His Majesty's son. I do not wish to join the fight for the throne, and I disapprove of the fact busybodies will be discussing me." Killian gazed down at the wineglass in his hand. “For me, I'm satisfied with Her Majesty arranging a meeting for us as a symbol of her forgiveness for my previous transgressions." ﻿

He lifted his glass, as if in salute, and brought it to his lips.

His comment about how the power was only accompanied by an increase in irritating tasks was the only truth he spoke. Killian had no mind to accept the reinstatement into the imperial family, or the line of succession. He didn't want to make any more points of contact with anyone from the imperial family. The empress probably had no intention of quietly giving up the right to succession anyway, so it was self-evident actual threats to his life would occur if he accepted it without any hesitation.

But there was no need for him to say that in front of the emperor's eyes and ears. They had promised the emperor they'd "get along.”

"Such earnest consideration for the crown prince..." The empress smiled pleasantly and spoke. "It fills a mother's heart with great happiness."

Killian laughed brightly at the empress.

The empress raised her glass slightly in reply to Killian's salute and continued, “There's no need for you to refuse. I am aware of your sincerity, and the emperor is surely aware of it, so what would be the problem? Since you will surely need a bride upon your reinstatement into the household, I've selected a few suitable ladies to consider for marriage. Mistresses and steeds are to be treasured, but you must eventually settle down and nurture a family of your own."

*Ha. So I'd be unaware of when the knife would be thrust into my back?*

Killian smirked at the empress, who was kindly making a hole for him to escape through. "All the more reason to decline your generous offer, Your Majesty. I will gratefully accept Your Majesty's intent for forgiveness. I am quite content with my current life. No matter the greatness or beauty of the lady in question, I cannot expect to settle with one woman."

Killian tucked both Rieta and Lana, who were serving him, into either side of him and smiled brazenly. “After all, how would I dare inspire tears in the eyes of these beauties?"

Their conversation would be delivered directly to the emperor, through the messenger, the fair and inflexible Lectus Eustio. ﻿

Killian was Killian, but in the fight between the emperor and the empress, she had won. Mining rights and trade monopoly. It was quite a gift. Rather, it would be better if she was simply aiming to get what she wanted.

But she had dangled the big bait that was reinstatement into the imperial family...

*Was that truly all it was?*

Words of offering and refusing volleyed back and forth, and finally, the empress pretended to put a stop to it.

"If that is truly how you feel, I will discuss the matter with the emperor on your behalf. Since you are so insistent on rejecting my good intentions, I will ask Ostia to take extra care in tomorrow's grand blessing ceremony, for it appears to be all I can offer in your aid."

Killian frowned slightly at the unfamiliar name. “Ostia?”

The empress smiled. "The high chaplain who will officiate tomorrow's grand blessing ceremony with the archbishop. She is my cousin."

"I see."

There was a smile on his face, but Killian's eyes sank coldly.

The empress saying she would ask for special care sounded suspicious. The grand blessing ceremony he had to accept in a completely vulnerable state. If the empress was plotting to do something to him during the ceremony, the woman who would be close to him for the longest, the high chaplain, had the highest likelihood to be the one to do it. With the emperor's delegate watching, would they dare to attack so directly?

From his thirteen years of experience, the empress used all sorts of attacks, simple and complex, indiscriminately. He couldn't let down his guard just because the emperor's delegate was participating. The empress was someone who could do something cruel and unexpected at any time.

She was masquerading as a sane person, but she had lost her mind that day thirteen years ago.

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As the banquet came to a close, the archbishop, apologizing for his tardiness, approached the guests of honor and warmly welcomed them. But perhaps he was unable to untangle himself from the pile of tasks waiting for him because not long after, a cleric ran over, panting, and pulled him away. From the looks of it, it seemed like something to do with the ceremony tomorrow.

"Excuse me for a moment.” The archbishop apologized and moved off to the side a little to speak with the cleric.

At that moment, a high-ranking cleric approached Killian to explain the grand blessing ceremony. "We'll tell you tomorrow as well, but please observe a fast from this night until the beginning of the ceremony."

"Must I fast my appetite for flesh as well?"

"Excuse me?" The cleric stuttered at Killian's flustering question. “Pardon? But of course... Your body and spirit must be clean to seek the blessing of the holy heavens."

“But Rieta is a divine mage. Would I not become cleansed in body and soul the more I keep her close?" With his shameless reply, Killian's seductive gaze swept toward Rieta. Killian brushed Rieta's hair back and muttered in a gentle voice. "I would have liked to receive blessings from you instead."

Rieta knew it was only words, but her face flushed. However, it was a natural setup as it was.

Rieta was performing her role better than he had expected. It couldn't be easy to trust her body to an unaccustomed touch and act naturally. She didn't fidget awkwardly or pull away from him, and her acting wasn't awkward, nor too much. The way her face sometimes flushed or her body froze, but her meekly obeying the way he led her after a moment's hesitation fitted for a commoner mage who was also a widow. It was perfect for making people think she was his shy, prized mistress.

The archbishop, who finished his conversation, came back and smiled as if he had heard what Killian had said. “Your affection for the madam is inspiring. I've been told that your mistress is able to wield the powers of divine magic." ﻿

Killian looked at Rieta sweetly and wrapped an arm around her waist. "I will admit that she is all the lovelier for it. She will be a breathtaking sight in the ceremonial robes of the grand temple."

The archbishop agreed, smiling pleasantly. "A beauty worthy of your eye. But, as you well know, no one other than a cleric can preside over the temple's grand blessing ceremony. Also, wouldn't it be a bit much to ask of

her?"

Killian snorted in frustration. “How boring."

As Killian lifted his empty glass, Rieta poured wine into it as if she had been anticipating the gesture. He quietly observed Rieta's profile.

He would have put some distance between them if she had behaved awkwardly or too obviously. She acted much more naturally than when she first stood in front of the empress's delegation or blessed him in front of the clerics at their quarters. There was so much more he could do with a responsive partner. Killian was currently widening his area of action more than he had planned.

"I would think it's much more divine for me to receive a blessing from a divine woman I had embraced before the ceremony. No?"

The archbishop beamed. “That's reasonable, but Your Highness has the high chaplain Her Majesty personally invited for you."

Killian retreated mildly. “That's true.”

He was of the mind to insist on receiving the blessing from Rieta for that very reason. But if nothing happened, then there was no way his request would be agreed to. Killian asked about the high chaplain, who the empress said was her cousin.

"How long has she been here?"

"High Chaplain Ostia? She has been with us for an incredibly long time. More than twenty years. Through Havitus Abbey..." ﻿

He thought she might be someone the Empress planted when she started plotting, but he learned the high chaplain was an inhabitant of Havitus Temple through and through. She was the empress's cousin, but rather than that benefiting her, it hurt her. After losing her parents in a witch hunt that accused her parents of corruption, she became an orphan and lived a life of deep sorrow.

Since it wasn't a name Killian recognized, she couldn't be someone close to the queen, and more accurately, she was a cousin twice removed. She was a person who lived her life in Havitus Temple and grew up to be a cleric.

Well, even if that's what he'd heard, he couldn't just trust it all. And the archbishop's words couldn't be trusted to be entirely truthful either.

"Has she not joined us for this banquet? I should like to introduce myself before the ceremony.”

“The high chaplain has been fasting in prayer for the past three days, in preparation for the ceremony.

"How dutiful," Killian replied indifferently and tilted his wineglass.

As the empress returned from a moment away, she spoke as if she had overheard him. "I will tell her to greet you separately before the ceremony."

"That won't be necessary."

The empress's smile gleamed. "Please, do not decline."

After the banquet ended, they all went back to their respective quarters.

The high-ranking clerics stuck to him closely, endlessly telling him the dos and don'ts of the ceremony. Killian didn't hide his irritation and looked down on them with chilling eyes. It was right before they were about to walk up to the third floor, where his chamber was located. ﻿

"Take your orders with moderation and leave, for I will not allow your presence within my chambers."

"B-but Your Highness, will the lady retire with you? You must...be abstinent until the ceremony."

"The archbishop chose not to interfere, and I'd advise you to do the same. The ceremony is precisely why I plan to spend the night with this holy woman."

"But Your Highness..."

"Ha..." A corner of Killian's mouth jerked up, and he sighed frostily, twisting his head. His hand, perhaps unconsciously, was placed on the sword at his hip. "It is tiresome to explain myself to these unknowing characters... They've not been warned of my propensity for blood, even if it be from the head of a holy man.”

The clerics' faces turned white as they met Killian's icy stare. “Forgive us, Your Highness. We shall bid you good night."

The clerics exited the quarters hastily. Rieta whispered carefully to Killian as they watched them get farther and farther away, "My lord. Are you really intending for me to preside over the grand blessing ceremony?"

Killian turned his body casually. "Do not worry yourself with matters beyond your means. Take rest, for you have served me well." Killian placed a hand on Rieta's shoulder and walked up to the third floor.

When they were away from prying eyes, Rieta's expression turned serious. Killian chuckled. "My saying I will clean my body and soul with you is also a jest, so don't worry about that either."

"Sire?" Rieta shook her head in bewilderment."No, I'm not worried about that, Sire. If this chaplain has been planted by the empress, is it not perilous to partake in the ceremony?"

Killian stared at Rieta. ﻿

Rieta was dressed in a way befitting a prized mistress. Now she had to spend the night in a bed chamber with a healthy male who just had drunk wine. It was funny how she was worried about what Killian should be concerned about when she should rather worry about herself.

"I'm a little hurt that you're not worried at all.”

"Sire?"

Killian blankly removed his hand from Rieta's shoulder and looked ahead. "Your role is completed. You did well, so go and rest.”

And the moment Killian opened the door, the two of them froze like ice. A familiar smell. But one that shouldn't emanate from here right now.

The iron smell of blood stung the nose.

"My lord!" Rieta called for him in a trembling voice. Killian pushed her into the room quickly, following her soon after, and locked the door. He then looked around the room coldly. Nothing looked out of place.

He drew the sword from his hip and strode over to the wardrobe. He then pointed the sword out and yanked open the wardrobe door.

Ominous shouts rang out outside the building.

"Has anyone seen High Chaplain Ostia?"

Then Killian discovered High Chaplain Ostia waiting in his room. Inside the wardrobe in his bed chamber. The dead body of a middle-aged woman in bloody cleric's robes was crumpled in the corner with her eyes open.

Rieta clapped a hand over her mouth to stop a scream threatening to pierce through. ﻿

18

# THE TEMPLE OF HAVITUS (7)

The sounds of a search for the missing Ostia rang out outside. Killian realized in an instant what was going on, and his inner thoughts slipped out.

"Damn it."

Rieta ran to the wardrobe and collapsed to her knees with her face as white as a sheet. She felt like she would faint, but the thought of how she needed to help him kept her body moving. She instinctively felt fear and reached out a hand, trembling like a leaf, to touch the hand of the bloody corpse. Rieta shivered at the chill of the corpse.

"Oh no! Oh no! She's dead!"

Killian spat out, "I'm sure she is. It must be High Chaplain Ostia, cousin to the empress. It is a ploy to charge me with the murder of a high chaplain."

In front of the emperor's delegate. The high chaplain of the temple. A blood-related woman of the empress at that.

*Shit.*

He thought wrong. There was no plan to hurt him with the high chaplain in the first place.

Rieta had a bewildered expression on her face as she lowered her voice in desperation. "But this was not our doing!"

"Yes, it is a trap."

Because he had insisted on being left alone by the temple's monks, they had lost their alibi. How hilarious must it have been for the empress while he was waxing on and on about placing Rieta to replace the high chaplain?

The imperial family forbade murder within the family. The justification was on that side. Just the fact the emperor had spared Killian's life after he killed his half-brothers, which was already thirteen years ago, was still a vise on the emperor's feet, with the chain in the hands of the empress and the nobles. The imperial family threatened the Archduke of Axias, who﻿ was not on friendly terms with anyone, rather than the empress, who was singularly focusing on Killian.

If the nobles and the empress let slip the fact that he had killed another member of her family, the idea that he was a threat to her one remaining child would only grow stronger. If that happened, even if the emperor felt the empress might draw up a plot, he wouldn't be able to protect Killian. And if the emperor made a move, even if he was the Archduke of Axias...

Rieta hurriedly pushed her shaking body up. "Quickly, we must gather witnesses to investigate before they jump to suspicion...!"

Killian grabbed Rieta's wrist as she was getting up and stopped her.

“You truly think claiming our innocence will free us from blame?"

*It was planned from the start. All the necessary evidence will already have been prepared. It isn't going to be easy to get out of this.*

Killian moved quickly. He wrapped the body in the wardrobe with a sheet from the bed and carefully pulled out the body, so no blood dripped down. But there was nowhere to hide it.

"But... What will you do?"

"Fetch a towel and wipe the blood off the wardrobe. Open the window and douse the room with perfume to mask the stench of blood."

It was hard enough to keep her head on, but her body moved swiftly.

Rieta opened all the windows with trembling hands to air out the room and ran to the bathroom to open the jar that contained perfumed oil. When she came out after pouring some out into an empty bottle and a washcloth tucked under her arm, the corpse that was in Killian's arms had disappeared somewhere. She sprinkled the oil all around the room and wiped down the wardrobe where the corpse was with a dry washcloth first, and then a wet one. After that, she practically poured the perfumed oil into the wardrobe and wiped it again.

Killian lit the entirety of a cigar on fire and placed it into the ashtray. The room was full of the smell of oil and cigars, but the iron stench of the blood﻿ left in the room still remained.

Soon, a chaotic mood was starting to spread inside the guest quarters they were staying in.

"What is this stir?” They heard a flustered Giselle speak from a floor below them through an open window.

"High Chaplain Ostia is due to officiate tomorrow's ceremony and is

nowhere to be found. We ask that His Highness's company cooperate with our search effort."

"But you don't even know where she could be! How dare you storm our rooms? Paladins in the women's chambers!"

The voices of the bewildered women rang up from the floor below and informed them of the situation.

"We will only be discourteous enough to investigate the room and no more. We ask you to cooperate."

"Wait, couldn't she just be somewhere else for a moment? How rude!"

A cold, gravelly voice replied to Elise's protests. "There was an oracle who told the clerics who were praying in the prayer room that the high chaplain was in danger. We must find her right at this moment. We ask for your understanding."

The heavy clunking of the paladins' armor was getting closer to their room. Rieta snapped back instantly and whipped her head toward Killian. "Where is the body?"

"I've disposed of it so that they will never discover it."

Rieta trusted his words in a heartbeat and didn't ask further. The remaining problem. The iron stench of blood that not even perfumed oil, not even cigars could cover up.

Killian grit his teeth with a fierce look in his eye and spat out, “It's fine. They won't be able to find the body." ﻿

The footsteps, already so close, stopped in front of the door.

"The scent of blood alone cannot be proof of murder. We will maintain our stance and deny it all."

A series of bangs sounded on the door. And a voice calling out from outside. "Your Royal Highness!"

Right then, Rieta moved. Rieta ran to the little room where she had placed the clothes she'd changed out of and pulled out the dagger.

Killian sharply lifted his eyes at her unsheathing out the dagger.

"What are you..."

Suddenly, she pulled up her skirts, kneeled, and placed the blade on her thigh. There was no time to stop her. In seconds, blood seeped down inside her thighs and ran down her legs. The snow-white skirt she was kneeling on was dyed red.

Rieta used the dagger and ripped a sleeve off the dress she had taken off. With trembling hands, she wrapped it around her leg and pulled it tight. Her hands were trembling so badly she couldn't use her strength.

Killian strode over to her with a steeled face and lashed out in a low voice, yanking the bandage into a knot over her leg. “What have you done?”

They heard the pounding on the door to their room again. “Archduke! Are you inside, Your Highness? Please open the door!"

Their eyes met. Killian realized what Rieta had done.

She shoved the dagger back into its sheath, tossed it into the pile of clothes, and quickly limped off to the washroom while gathering her skirts with her hands. Blood stained the back of her white dress. Rieta hurriedly washed the blood off her hands, dried them off on her skirts, and turned to him with a calm face.

“I am fine, my lord. Please let them inside.” She spoke loud enough it could be heard outside the door. ﻿

"Your Royal Highness!" The voice from outside demanded him again. Killian stood there frozen stared at Rieta wordlessly. The pounding on the door pushed at them again. "Your Royal Highness! We do not wish to force our entry! Please open the door!"

Killian was unmoving, his face frozen and his eyes stuck on Rieta.

Rieta went toward the door herself when there was no indication he would move. Just as she was going to grasp the door handle, her determined, calm eyes rested on Killian. With her eyes keeping a hold of his, she unlocked the door.

*Clunk.*

The door swung open with a clunk. A significant number of clerics and paladins dressed in armor hovered in front of the door with an air of austerity. The paladin at the very front looked down at Rieta, then discovered the Archduke of Axias behind her, and spoke.

"Your Royal Highness."

Killian turned his head slowly toward the man who called for him and bore a hole through the man with terrifying eyes.

The paladin flinched and shivered when he met Killian's murderous gaze. "Forgive us for an intrusion of this late hour. I am Niesten, a high paladin of Temple Havitus. We request your cooperation in our search, for the High Chaplain has gone missing." His expression darkened as if he realized something. “These chambers had been immaculately prepared for your stay...but they oddly smell of blood, Your Highness."

Killian's cold, crimson eyes drilled into him. “And?"

"What do you mean, Sire? How is it that your room smells of blood? We shall be searching your room. I bid you grant us entry!"

Killian laughed chillingly and placed a hand on the handle of his sword. "The dim wits of holy men continue to test my patience.” Killian cocked his head and drew his sword. "Heed my words for my tolerance is limited."

"My lord!" Rieta threw her body toward him and clutched the hand grasping his sword, and shook her head firmly. “My lord! Pay no mind to﻿ me! Do not give them the reason for misapprehension and let them search the chamber!"

Blood had seeped into the back of Rieta's dress. The paladins understood what that meant, and they froze. The knights who were jolted in shock in the back lowered their voices and started to murmur among themselves.

*Boom!*

Killian kicked the door open. The paladin flinched at his attitude and retreated a few steps.

Killian growled. "Whispering before my very own eyes..."

“I can bear it, my lord!"

"But I cannot."

Killian pulled Rieta up gently from her position, hanging from his hand, and brought her to stand behind him. Killian kept a hand on Rieta, and as she hid behind him, she looked outside the door piteously. Her face was flushed.

“But even these paladins must surely understand...that the body of every woman grows feverish every month.” Rieta stammered falteringly.

“Normally, it's very regular, so there is time to prepare, but it came all of a sudden because of the unexpected difficult journey...I should have liked to make myself presentable, but it seemed an urgent matter."

“Rieta.” Killian cut Rieta off. "You need not explain yourself." "But, Sire..."

Her voice was shaking. She couldn't finish her sentence, and her distressed, sky-blue eyes became wet. The woman's flushed face dropped. Right then, a drop of blood rolled down Rieta's thigh from the still-open cut to her feet. The paladins took it as a different type of accident, and their faces reflected their embarrassment. Several paladins even turned their heads away. ﻿

One of the clerics, next to the paladin, gritted his teeth. “Sir Niesten! We still must search this room. We cannot just ignore a room where the stench of blood is permeating the air!"

Killian removed himself from Rieta's grip and walked toward the door to block it. He simply placed a hand on the door, but the knights' shoulders tensed up from the threatening aura like a wild beast was guarding the door.

The cleric, who took a few steps back, didn't give up and stared Killian in the eye and continued. “It is unnatural that a woman's monthly fever could fill such a chamber with this stench of blood... We must search the chamber."

At that moment Killian snorted out of absurdity. The people gasped. No one saw the moment when the sword moved. At some point, the tip of the sword was touching the cleric's throat. "Would you have the lady lift up her skirt for your conscience as well?"

“No, I...only the chamber...”

Killian pushed the sword on him as if he were going to thrust it into him at any moment and walked him outside the room. The cleric coughed with the sword pressing into his throat and retreated so he wouldn't get pricked by the blade.

Killian cocked his head and spoke with a blank face. "Were my mistress not so faint of heart to witness, I would have slashed every last one of your﻿ throats already."

The blue-faced cleric protested, stammering. "You would assault holy men, clerics, and paladins of the divine temple?”

Killian smiled a twisted grin. “A cleric.” As if he were chewing on it, a strange tone. “And your name?"

The cleric faltered. He disintegrated in a moment and became unaware of what to do next.

Killian lowered his voice into a silky, caressing tone and scraped the air. "Name."

When his answer was not becoming apparent, and the cleric stayed silent, several of the paladins felt a strange air and looked at him. Then, the cleric couldn't stall any longer and answered, “C-Cerus, Sire."

Killian swung the sword toward him. The paladins failed to react in time and clenched the grips of their swords tighter in shock.

*Clang!*

Instead of blood spurting out through cut flesh, the sound of metal hitting metal rang out. The sharp tip of the blade cut through the cleric's cape at an angle and slipped off his shoulders. The chainmail hidden under the cape was revealed. The paladins' eyes widened.

"Wake up, Cerus." Killian laughed sweetly. "Are you this cleric you speak of?" ﻿

The blood drained from Cerus's face. His hand drifted to his hip in reaction to the threat, with his face pale as a sheet. But where a sword should be was bare because of his disguise.

The cloth was hiding the sounds of the chainmail, but Killian had realized Cerus was wearing it from the strange way he was moving. And he was standing in that distinctive stance of a swordsman.

Then, Cerus, who was fumbling for his sword, nudged something. It rolled... A gold identification medal on a purple loop had dropped to the floor.

As Cerus stood there, frozen, Killian threaded his blade through the loop and lifted it. And he read it.

"Cerus Biechen. A knight of the Order of the Gripps, of the empress's palace."

He smirked in disbelief at the kindness of the gesture to provide an identification medal. He looked up at Cerus's face and what he saw... It was an expression so pathetic, his suspicions of this being a plot disappeared instantly.

Killian muttered chillingly. "Her Majesty must have cultivated a fetish of dressing non-clerics in cleric's robes." He snorted with his eyes drawn toward the paladins. "By the way... When have the paladins of the Temple become Her Majesty's dogs?" ﻿

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# THE TEMPLE OF HAVITUS (8)

“You misunderstand! What do you mean, Her Majesty's dogs?” A red- haired paladin shouted at the insult, with his face as red as his hair.

Before Killian could speak, Niesten drew an arm up and stopped the redheaded paladin. “Shut up, Riedlers. It's our fault."

Riedlers flinched and closed his mouth, retreating with his head bowed in apology. It did seem they were insulted at the comment calling them the empress's dogs, but they followed suit and bowed their heads like Niesten in respect as if they were all accepting their role in this.

“My apologies, Your Royal Highness... There is nothing to excuse this." The paladin Niesten bent at the waist in true apology and admitted their mistake in bringing along one of the empress's men without knowing who he was. He was acknowledging the Archduke of Axias's anger was warranted.

The temple's paladins were extremely rude when they invaded his chambers in the middle of the night with one of the empress's men in their midst, and they humiliated his prized mistress in a way that should never have happened.

"This is solely from our inadequacy. Please do not consider this mistake as carelessness on the part of Havitus Temple... We are deeply indebted,” said the man who disguised himself to infiltrate the search for the High Chaplain Ostia. The Archduke of Axias had a temperament that did not forgive those who angered him, and he knew this well, so he'd told the clerics how he hoped it would help. It was for this reason that the paladins believed he was a cleric of their temple and brought him along.

There weren't that many people who were at the banquet where the emperor's delegate was also in attendance, but everyone had heard what happened between the empress and Killian. No one believed Killian and Empress Aversati to be on good terms. People were more interested in﻿ secret disputes or dark stories and trusted those more than the guise of friendliness.

The fact that the paladins blindly accepted the suspicious man's words without doubting his identity, and that they pushed forth the empress's man to the archduke... It was an obvious mistake by the paladins, and it was absolutely a reason for the archduke to be angry.

The Archduke of Axias was not a man to pass over with that sort of apology, but Killian ignored the paladins completely and turned his head. Rieta stood there behind him, blood still dripping from between her legs. The naive cleric and paladins couldn't lift their eyes without knowing what to do. It was blood from the cut hastily bandaged up inside her skirts, but no one could realize that was the case.

Killian undid his cape and turned around. He walked into the room and carefully wrapped it around her as if to cover her up. The cape that had barely reached underneath his knees fell to Rieta's feet and dragged along the floor. Rieta glanced up at him in bewilderment but then grasped the edges of the cape he had wrapped around her and closed it.

That action was entirely different from the rumors of his cold- bloodedness, and several of the paladins stared at them with strange looks on their faces. Some of them even looked quite shocked. As he stared at them, Niesten's eyes were round as saucers.

When Killian shut the door to leave her inside and came out to stand before the paladins, the situation had oddly changed. Cerus was cowering in the middle of the paladins. He was saying that he did know the Archduke well. He was taking the brunt of the paladins' anger as he was telling the ridiculous excuse of how he borrowed a cleric's cape for a moment to minimize unnecessary explanation.

"Who lent you the cleric's robes?” ﻿

Cerus's mouth shut, and he couldn't answer the redheaded paladin

Riedler's irate question. The cleric's robes were an identifying symbol of a cleric. It was enough to suspect his motives if he had prepared the temple's robes beforehand or taken them from somewhere.

Niesten informed him bluntly, "I will be reporting this incident to the archbishop and His Majesty's delegate."

He looked like he was trying to reinstate himself in light of the "empress's dogs" comment, but Killian's expression never thawed. "Fine. How does that man claim to know me?” Killian questioned coldly with his head at an angle. “Did he warn you of my tyrannical temper and suggest that I had harmed the high chaplain?"

It might not have been those exact words, but he probably planned to do him over with something that could be taken in that way. The paladins were unable to lift their heads with faces red in embarrassment, having burst in with those suspicions.

Plus, with no resistance against women, these paladins felt they had become scoundrels while watching the angry Killian try and cover up the poor beauty, and they didn't know what to do about that. The scene where the woman must have been extremely humiliated but trying to dispel the misunderstandings about the Archduke, and Killian protecting that woman attentively, left quite an impression on the paladins who had a prejudice against him.

They had lost any sense of trust in Cerus after it was revealed he dared to impersonate a cleric and lie.

"Your Royal Highness!" Leonard and the knights ran up belatedly and stood in between Killian and the paladins. They were disheveled, perhaps from fighting the clerics or paladins without swords but just their fists, and panting. ﻿

Killian couldn't help but laugh. “What a group of speedsters.” His brow furrowed, and he addressed the paladins. "If you must search my quarters, bring one of your own women."

Leonard gritted his teeth at his statement with his eyes blazing at the paladins. "Search? You dare...?"

"Enough." Killian looked at Leonard dryly and gave him orders. "Leonard. Have the Annex ladies bring over fresh garments for Rieta to wear." His gaze turned toward Niesten next. "I'd like to give Rieta some time to prepare. That should be all right, yes?"

Niesten lit up at Killian's unexpected kindness because he had half given up on his search and bowed his head respectfully in thanks. “Of course, Sire. I am but thankful for Your Highness's thoughtful consideration.”

Leonard and the knights looked upset instead. Another knight spoke up sullenly with a face full of disapproval. “But Your Highness...surely there is no need for you to humor their insolence any further!"

"It matters to Rieta,” replied Killian indifferently and he jerked his chin toward Leonard.

Leonard was frowning, but he bowed his head and turned to walk away, following his orders. And one of the paladins left to escort a woman cleric according to Niesten's orders.

The women of the East Annex arrived from the floor below. It was Giselle, Elise, and Lana. Cerus, who was huddled in the corner, started to butt in before they knew it. "Halt! She must not enter without the company of the female cleric!"

Before Killian had to make a move, the paladins shot furious looks at

Cerus with their eyes ablaze. Killian started to speak while staring at him blankly. "Even if High Chaplain Ostia or something of the sort is in my room, having a few women enter my room wouldn't change that fact. Why are you so anxious?” ﻿

Niesten stepped in to mediate just in case Killian would change his mind if his mood soured. "The lady may enter."

Cerus clamped his mouth shut in frustration, his ally stolen from him.

"Well. If there's a possibility of a misunderstanding, I'll send only one in. Lana."

The raven-haired woman answered and stepped forward. “Yes, Sire."

"Assist Rieta."

"Yes, Sire,” Lana answered and took the clothes from Giselle. The door closed again after Lana walked in.

An awkward silence flowed between the paladins and Killian as they waited for the woman clerics. Killian was staring at Cerus, expressionless, and spoke. “It's strange.”

Everyone's eyes focused on Killian.

“It's like I'm looking at a person who is certain there is going to be something suspicious found when there's nothing in my room." Killian threw back his head in laughter. “Pray tell, will you be able to absolve yourself of these transgressions once the chamber has been searched to no avail?"

Cerus's face went white. An actual threat crashed over Cerus, beyond a simple warning to be prepared for the consequences, in each of Killian's paced words.

The paladins exchanged looks of doubt and started to watch Cerus.

"Doesn't he seem like a man who could make issues out of anything if he can simply look into my room?" Killian smirked coldly at him and informed the paladins, “We will choose the cleric to enter the room. I do believe you would understand my perspective. I can't trust that one over there, and honestly, I can't trust you all either.” ﻿

It was like he was looking down on them as a group, but none of them could protest. The paladins, who couldn't even recognize a single fake cleric who was ridiculously suspicious, couldn't reply and bowed their heads in shame.

Killian barked out brusquely, “A single woman cleric will be the only one to enter my room. I've sent in only one of my women, so a single cleric is only fair."

At some point, Killian was controlling the situation however he wanted, but no one realized that it was strange. Everything was going the way Killian wanted.

And one of the four clerics the paladins had hurried off to find was the cleric Leonard had planted in the temple a long time ago. She wasn't just a fake who just threw the clothes on but a real cleric. No one suspected her. Niesten checked the identities and affiliations of the four clerics and confirmed they were free of suspicion. And Leonard chose that particular woman to enter the room.

A while later, it was determined Killian's chamber was free of anything suspicious.

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A three-way meeting commenced between the emperor's delegate, the empress, and the Archduke of Axias. The archduke had generously cooperated with the investigation even with the paladins' mistake. Rather, the fact that the empress's man had infiltrated and acted suspiciously was delivered directly to the emperor's delegate.

The paladins confessed of their own volition and proved Killian's

innocence. Niesten, a high-ranking paladin, sat the empress's guard knight Cerus in front of them and attested to his acts. ﻿

The empress frowned. "Cerus. Why commit such an offense? Where did you get the cleric's robes? You must know how grave a crime it is to impersonate a member of the clergy.”

The empress expressed her regrets and cast Cerus out of the room. “After all my efforts to forgive the archduke and accept him into the family, your insolence could have undermined the sincerity of my good intentions. How will you ever absolve yourself of this offense against us?"

Cerus was dragged out with his head hanging, but without saying a single word of opposition.

"I am in great lament, Archduke. I have slighted you in failing to regulate my subordinates." The empress made a regretful expression and laughed as if it was nothing. "Please give my condolences to your prized mistress as well."

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A small, black shadow looked around and jumped off the roof without a sound. The figure gathered the dark lump slung on its shoulder as if it were heavy and caught its breath. Then they dropped the body they were carrying in a remote, wooded area. ﻿

The figure slumped to the ground, caught its breath silently for a moment, and cast down its amethyst eyes to stare at the corpse. The dark figure looking down at the body carefully arranged the bloody, blue robes around the mess and adjusted the body to lie down properly. The figure placed a hand on the face of the resentful cleric who was still wide-eyed, having not been able to close her eyes, and shut them for her.

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The body of the empress's cousin, Ostia, was found in a far-off corner of the temple, long after the night passed but not long before the sun came up. The location was a place quite a way away from where Killian and his people were staying. It was a location far away enough that it was hard to suspect Killian, who had attended the banquet to the end and arrived at his quarters right on schedule.

The empress, who heard her cousin died an unexpected death, after a tragic life without a semblance of fame, expressed her sorrow with dry eyes. ﻿

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# THE TEMPLE OF HAVITUS (9)

Killian returned to his room. Rieta jumped up from the sofa where she was waiting the moment the door opened. And as soon as it closed, she ran over and asked, “Has it been resolved?"

Killian narrowed his eyes coldly at Rieta. It was too easy to see she was limping while trying to hide her wound. He wasn't grateful. He was boiling inside. "Your actions were out of turn and uncalled for."

Rieta's face, already devoid of blood, grew so pale it couldn't get any whiter even if she tried. “Did I cause a complication?"

Killian's eyes shot down to Rieta's legs. The cut was covered by the skirts of a navy-colored dress and remained hidden. Killian gritted his teeth and looked away. “No,” Killian coldly replied as he took off his cloak and placed it on a chair beside him. “It has resolved quite nicely."

Rieta's face relaxed a little with that, and she pushed her chest down to slow its pounding. She barely let out a sigh of relief and reached out her hand toward the cloak he had tossed onto the chair.

Killian grabbed her wrist as it was crossing in front of him. "What do you think you're doing?"

Rieta looked at him with slightly widened eyes. "Attending to your garment... I am the only one here to do it."

The only person of lower status who could attend to him was Rieta. Moving was, in fact, Rieta's job.

"Ha." *Was she trying to make me into someone who would force a person to serve me while injured?*

Killian sighed at the absurdity of it and retorted, "When have I ever asked this of you?"

Rieta's eyes darted back and forth. She was unsure of what to do. "Forgive me, I was only..." ﻿

“The situation was not so lost that you needed to take such measures,” Killian ground out icily. “You dare, do something I didn't even..."

It stopped being about the cloak at some point. Rieta, flustered, bowed her head in front of Killian as he expressed his fury. "Please forgive me for my imprudent ways."

A sudden wave of anger rose up. His grip on Rieta's wrist tightened before he even knew it. “What were you thinking? Reckless...!"

Rieta's eyes jerked back and forth. Eventually, Rieta sank to her knees with her wrist still in his grip. “I'm sorry. Please, punish me. I will accept any punishment you deem fit."

“Punishment?” Killian couldn't control his anger and yanked her arm to bring Rieta to her feet. “Are you kidding me?"

Rieta stumbled to her feet helplessly. He saw the weak woman being jerked around by him and let go of her that instant. An angry red mark signaling the start of a bruise was left on the wrist he had yanked.

He shivered as if a bucket of cold water had been thrown over him. He hadn't even used that much strength and her wrist had bruised. A woman so weak she wobbled with just a slight pull. She had cut her own flesh, her own body...to help him.

Her apologetic pleading to punish her when he got angry for her unapproved actions was so upsetting to the point of humiliation. He shook from a new kind of embarrassment. He'd never felt this kind of humiliation.

"Rieta," Killian growled in a low voice, "This is not the loyalty I want from the people who serve me."

Killian could protect himself. And there were people who protected him and did only that. Not a frail, weak slip of a woman. His beloved people were all strong, loyal, and ready to throw themselves into danger. And still, Killian protected them always. Because he was someone with the ease and ability to allow him to do so. He had never even thought he would get help from such a frail woman's sacrifice. ﻿

Killian rubbed his fists in his eyes, feeling pathetic. He didn't know why he was this angry. There was someone who was humiliated but no one who humiliated him. It was anger with no place to go.

He couldn't accept the sacrifice and how she had taken on the social scandal. It would be unimaginable if she were a normal noblewoman or a lady, but she simply accepted the physical pain. Additionally, he couldn't resist his narrow-mindedness, raging against the person who had helped him, saying he didn't need that help.

Killian bit down on the anger that was bubbling up and muttered darkly, "Don't make me into a shameless person who orders you around.” His lips were in a thin line as he opened his eyes, and they met the sky-blue eyes that were filled with panic. "There is no need for you to take on sacrifices I didn't even ask for."

Rieta's face became bewildered. It took a moment for her to vaguely realize he might have been getting angry at her because he felt pity for her wound. "Respond."

Rieta quickly nodded and said, “I understand, Sire."

Killian's expression was still displeased, but a bit smoother. His crimson eyes were on her reddened wrist and lifted to meet her sky-blue ones again. "What of your wound?"

"I am well, my lord."

Her answer, precisely as he had anticipated, sparked a flash of irritation. But to not repeat his mistake, he barely held it down and ground it out, "I will send for a physician or a cleric as soon as we are free of this place tomorrow."

"Thank you, Sire."

The irritation he had tried so hard to hold back blew out of Killian. "What would you thank me for? I am the very cause of your wounds!"

Rieta floundered for an answer but couldn't find one, and closed her mouth. Killian swore under his breath and sighed because even if she opened her mouth again, he knew he would only get angry again. ﻿

He spoke only after he calmed himself down. "You understand that I cannot call for a physician now."

"Of course, Sire. I understand."

Killian couldn't hide his stewing anger and glared at her. After a long while, he finally sat on the edge of the sofa where Rieta sat, with a hostile expression on his face.

Rieta had taken off the bloodstained white dress and put on a deep navy dress that hid the wound and any blood. Nightclothes were arranged for Killian on the bed, so he could change whenever he decided to. There was a towel placed on the sofa where she hadn't even laid down but just sat. Killian soon realized the towel was there to prevent any blood from staining the sofa.

Killian clenched his jaw and called for Rieta. “Come here.”

"Sire?"

"I need to see the wound for myself. You barely managed to stop the bleeding. I'd bet you didn't even let Lana inspect the wound?"

Rieta's eyes widened. “Oh, no, Sire. You tied it securely enough, my lord."

Killian beckoned with his hand. “I did not, but come over here so that I may do so now."

Rieta waved her hands in reluctance. “There is no need, for it is tied well."

"But there was blood trickling from the wound.”

"It's fine now, Sire."

Killian's brow furrowed. "Making me repeat myself more than three times

Rieta immediately let down her obstinance and stepped toward him. Kilian was struck dumb for a moment at the quick change in her attitude and barely strung words together. “I'm pardoning this only once."

He didn't bring up that statement about how no one survived after making him repeat himself more than three times just for nothing. For Rieta, it﻿ was a way for her to catch herself and recall how she followed his orders instantly and without refusing.

Killian reached out his arm, pulled the little stool accompanying the sofa, and thumped it with his hand. He meant for her to place her foot there.

Rieta carefully lifted her left leg, her eyelashes fluttering as if she were in pain lifting her leg. She hesitated for a moment, but she lifted her skirts and showed him the wound on her thigh, tied off haphazardly with a ripped piece of cloth.

Killian observed the knot and drew the sword from his waist. He carefully cut away the bloody cloth. It was an extremely uncomfortable tool to use, but the sharp blade easily snapped off the tightly wound cloth.

As the cloth fell away, it revealed a fairly deep cut. The cut itself was not so clean, more shredded than cut, thanks to the fact she forced a duller blade into her skin. It was because she hurried through without even knowing how to use a knife. The bleeding had stopped a bit, but blood was still seeping from inside the deep wound. It looked excruciating, the skin surrounding the injury an angry red.

Killian frowned bitterly. “There was no need for you to cut this deep.” "My apologies, Sire."

*Those damn 'My apologies, Sire,' 'I'm fine, Sire.* 'He should remove them from the dictionary. He narrowed his eyes at Rieta for a moment then sighed, "You should wash."

Killian carried Rieta into the bathroom, taking care not to open the cut. Rieta was quiet but couldn't even bring herself to look at him.

"I-I will..."

"No."

Killian personally washed out her cut with clean water, something someone as obedient as Rieta couldn't imagine happening. As she flinched from the pain of the water coming into contact with the wound, he growled, "Tell me if it is too painful to bear." In contrast to his voice, his touch was delicate. ﻿

Killian muttered between the splashes of water. "What would you have done if those imbeciles dared to search your person?"

It was a strategy that could only work because the group that appeared at their door were all men of the cloth. They, as paladins or clerics, would not have been able to dare say they would look up a woman's skirts. But they might have found there was something off if they pushed in a female cleric.

And in reality, they were able to tamp down the possible danger from that knight Cerus with his position and the justification she created. They were able to get over it smoothly thanks to the fact they had a female cleric planted here, but...

However, Rieta's reply cut his thoughts off entirely. "I trusted you to stop them in the end."

Killian's hand stopped.

"Since I am Your Highness's prized mistress."

Killian stared at Rieta's face.

"Your Lordship's." Rieta slipped in a revision, thinking he was staring because she had addressed him incorrectly.

Killian turned his eyes back down to Rieta's wound. He had expected something along the lines of 'I apologize, Sire." "Of course, I wouldn't have let them dare search you."

*What the hell was she thinking with this leg? She could have cut a little less.* He stood to bring over a towel for the wound.

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After washing out the wound with cold water, he used a clean cloth to wrap the wound tightly. Rieta didn't know what to do at first, but she started to feel comfortable and entrusted her wound to Killian's capable hands as she would do with a doctor. ﻿

Although the pressure to repay the kindness persisted, she remained still because she thought he also might be more comfortable with that too.

"Good job," he said as he finished.

“Thank you, Sire.”

Killian had cleaned things up and let Rieta remain seated, and jerked his chin toward his bed. "You should sleep."

It was clear what he meant. Rieta's eyes widened. The Archduke of Axias was heading to a high-backed chair rather than the bed. No matter how obedient she was, this wasn't right. There was only one bed in the room.

"I-if anything, you should be the one to sleep in the bed, my lord. The ceremony of the grand blessing is later tonight."

Killian pulled the chair to face the bed and flopped into it. "It is no matter, and my mind will find greater peace in watching you get some rest.” He glanced at Rieta, who was still sitting, unsure of what to do. "Must I lay you on the bed myself?"

Rieta jumped to her feet. Killian pointed at the bed with his eyes. "Into the bed. That is my order.”

Rieta, slightly crestfallen, crawled into the bed.

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The curtains were closed, but they by no means blocked out all light, so the room was bright with the morning sunshine. Even though she had stayed up throughout the entire eventful night, she couldn't fall asleep easily because of the bright sun and the tension in the room.

How was she supposed to sleep with him staring at her like that? Killian was watching her like a hawk, leaning back into the chair with his chin in his hand as if he was watching to see when she would fall asleep.

Rieta finally spoke to Killian with difficulty, "I say this with simple intent," he probably wouldn't misunderstand anyway, "but the bed is wide and with ample space for Your Highness to rest as well." ﻿

A smile snuck out on Killian's face as he saw her mumbling in a tiny voice, her eyes wandering without a destination. Even though he knew she wasn't trying to seduce him this time, feeling this way had to be because of that blank face.

A red-faced Rieta mustered up a little more courage and spoke a little more bluntly, "I fear that I will not be able to sleep with you sitting by the bedside."

The brave gamble Rieta chose in her clear words paid off. Killian laughed. "Is that so?"

He liked when people spoke honestly and bluntly, and more generous to those sorts of suggestions. Now dressed in his sleepwear, Killian looped over to the opposite side of the bed and lay down with his back toward Rieta. The bed was very wide, so wide he could roll over twice and not even touch Rieta. Rieta thought not seeing his face was a relief and sighed with ease.

*There were many memories with His Lordship about a bed.* When actually, there wasn't anything of the sort. Strangely, that was funny to her, and Rieta smiled faintly without a sound.

The shadow made by a tall, broad-shouldered man didn't even touch her, but as if comfortable darkness was cast, Rieta soon fell into slumber.

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As soon as he heard her breathing even out in sleep, Killian turned toward Rieta and looked at her. She moaned a little in her sleep as if her wound were hurting her. With drops of sweat beading down, the beautiful face had turned red.

Killian watched her sleeping face in discomfort for a long while. How dare she leave this feeling of indebtedness in him? He felt outraged and miserable.

He placed the back of his hand to cool her feverish, reddened cheek. His heart was pounding quietly. ﻿

21

# THE TEMPLE OF HAVITUS (10)

In the end, the High Chaplain Ostia's murderer was not found. Separate from that investigation, this case was kept confidential because something so ominous occurred in such a holy place as the temple.

The grand blessing ceremony was an event widely advertised among the residents. There was no way they could cancel it on the day of. After an emergency meeting, the decision was made to continue with the ceremony, but the question of who would stand in for the high chaplain was still being discussed.

Surprisingly enough, the person who was suggested by the emperor's delegate, Lectus Eustio, was none other than Rieta.

“There are no fundamental differences between the magical abilities of a cleric and a mage.” He calmly spoke the truth the clerics didn't want to acknowledge. “There will be no issue in the process. And the Archduke of Axias, who is to receive the blessing, expressed his desire to do so early on."

Many people looked like they wanted to use the temple's image and the power of the grand ceremony to refute his claim, but...

"As long as we are faced with the possibility that High Chaplain Ostia's murderer is still loose in the temple, I can think of no better fitting individual to attend to the archduke during the ceremony. This individual has no affiliation to the temple or the clergy, and therefore proves to be the most suitable choice." As he spoke those words, they couldn't protest.

Rieta, a mage and the prized mistress only whispered about covertly, now drew focus at the forefront of a formal discussion.

The rumors started to pour out and snowballed into stories blown out of proportion. That she was the beauty of this century, or she was an incredible mage who put even high-ranking clerics to shame, or the Archduke of Axias fell so deep into her he didn't have any interest in any﻿ other women, or he had become someone who looked at her so lovingly, or how he became feral if someone else even glances at her as if he would kill them with his eyes, or he stole her by crushing Cevitas with his knights...

While these groundless rumors spread, Rieta was sleeping soundly. She slept after whimpering a bit and finally opened her eyes in the late afternoon.

Killian walked over to her, extending a glass of water expressionlessly. Rieta stared up at him.

"Do not let my presence alarm you, and do not rise too quickly. Be mindful of your injured state."

Thankfully, Rieta didn't jump to her feet in surprise. She quickly blinked several times and carefully brought herself to a sitting position. Killian slipped a pillow behind her back to support her. She gratefully accepted the glass with two hands, and she could feel the cold in her hands.

She managed a froggy, "I thank you, my lord." She was thirsty and finished the glass of water in moments. Killian silently refilled the glass and gave it back to her. Another “Thank you, Sire,” but it sounded a little better this time.

Then Killian told her about what had happened at the temple's emergency meeting with Lectus Eustio's suggestion.

"You may refuse if you feel it is too great a challenge,” Killian added calmly, but even she could see it would be safest and most reasonable for Killian if she took on the task herself, rather than leaving it in the hands of someone they didn't know. Moreover, it was already too late for her to refuse, with the ceremony only several hours away. This was not a time for her to wonder if she was stepping out of bounds or not.

She spoke serenely, much more so than even she thought was possible. "I am able, Sire. I learned the process of grand blessing ceremonies during my time in the convent. It won't be perfect, but I remember the steps in﻿ the ceremony and the high chaplain's role. I can become familiar with it quickly." Even though when she learned it as a novice, she didn't think in her wildest dreams she would ever take on the role of the high chaplain.

Killian gazed at Rieta for a moment and asked, “Can you walk?”

"Undoubtedly, Sire."

Killian cocked his head to the side. Rieta climbed out of bed and walked naturally without limping. It didn't look like her gait had any problems, but her face was obviously tense. “But it is not without pain,” Killian cut in before Rieta could open her mouth and get ready to reply. “Give me the truth, for 'I am well' is not what I wish to hear."

Rieta closed her mouth, her line stolen. Killian looked directly into her eyes. “This matter cannot be overcome with one's volition alone. You will have to sit and stand repeatedly for over an hour's time, and I do not want others to suspect that you are not of sound health.”

Rieta stayed silent for a moment to take account of her body and replied after careful consideration. “The pain is not too great, and I expect no difficulty in such small movements. But if I were to kneel or perform great movements for a prolonged time, I fear it will not appear quite natural.”

Killian nodded at her detailed response. He pushed the door open and walked out. She could hear him calling for someone on the stairs. "Send for Giselle."

Moments later, Giselle appeared on the third floor, where their room was. "You sent for me, my lord?"

Killian asked straightforwardly. “Do you have an elixir to lessen the pain? If not, perhaps you can concoct one."

Giselle stared with round eyes, and asked, "Are you ill?"

Killian told her about the wound Rieta had to hide. Giselle cringed at the sight of Rieta's bandaged leg and her slightly feverish face. She whipped﻿ around and ran down the stairs. Giselle came back and gave Rieta medicine and painkillers to lower her fever. “Why did you not call for me sooner?"

"It escaped my mind."

"That's no excuse!" Giselle started to scold him with a frightening spirit.

Killian apologized blankly. "I apologize."

Rieta watched their conversation, feeling very strange. Giselle was scolding Killian like she wasn't even scared of him. Killian was apologizing to Giselle, not even looking up at her, like he wasn't even listening.

She couldn't lie back and watch when the arrow came flying toward her instead. "And Rieta, you could've told me yourself!"

Rieta flinched, then froze. "Forgive me."

"You both knew well enough that I could treat this easily, but you both failed to alert me! When were you injured?”

Rieta mumbled in a tiny voice, which was getting tinier, “Not long ago. It was last night."

Giselle lifted her eyes. A moment of silence passed. “By any chance..." Giselle clamped her mouth shut. She couldn't come into the room, but of course, Giselle remembered the commotion last night. She had heard a bit of it as well-that there was something that shouldn't be in Killian's room, but it seemed like it had been taken care of. Then the mysterious order to bring along a change of clothes for Rieta...

Giselle spoke up a little while after, "I should like to see the wound. It would be better if we sterilize it."

Rieta glanced over at Killian's reaction and replied carefully. "Of course..."

Giselle sat Rieta down on a chair near the bed and unwrapped the bandage to inspect the wound. Thankfully, the bleeding stopped, and it looked like﻿ there was no sign of infection.

Giselle became stony-faced and took out an antiseptic. It wasn't a shallow cut, and even though it must have hurt quite a bit when she was pouring and wiping away the antiseptic, Rieta didn't seem like she was in too much pain and was watching Giselle take care of her wound.

Killian was sitting quietly on the sofa away from them.

"It would be wrong to apply a medicinal poultice at this point, for it may cause an infection. I will treat it once the wound has dried some more, and give you something to ingest for the pain."

"Thank you, Giselle.”

After the antiseptic dried a little, Giselle silently rewrapped the bandage around Rieta's thigh carefully. Maybe because she concocted elixirs, her hands were quick and skilled. Rieta felt more at ease with this woman's delicate touch rather than when Killian did it for her.

But Giselle's pretty face looked a little cold, slightly stony, unlike her usual expression. Rieta couldn't speak in this oddly heavy atmosphere.

When Giselle was done, she stood up with her face still stony, turned toward Killian, and barked, “The wound will leave a lasting scar on Rieta's leg. You will assume her care as your duty, will you not?"

Killian flicked his eyes up at the women and simply stared. Rieta realized Giselle had misunderstood and grabbed her hand in a panic.

"No, Giselle. This was not His Highness's doing..."

Giselle looked at Rieta with suspicious eyes.

"I did this myself...” Rieta's voice crept back inside.

Killian interrupted in a low voice. "But I may as well have commanded her to do so." The crimson eyes looked down calmly. A cool voice muttered﻿ indifferently. "At least if I had done it myself, such a lasting wound could have been prevented."

Rieta bit her lip and bowed her head in slight embarrassment. Giselle stared at Rieta in surprise.

Killian's eyes turned toward the windows without a word and ignored the women. "Never again, Rieta.”

Giselle was still staring at Rieta in disbelief. It took a while for her to sigh, "Rieta..."

It's hard for someone to inflict a deep wound on themselves because they instinctively try to protect themselves. Giselle couldn't imagine Rieta would have done that to herself after seeing the wound. Giselle reached out a hand to Rieta's feverish cheek. “You're incorrigible!" Giselle pinched Rieta's cheek hard.

"Ah! It aches!"

"This aches, does it? Do you feel pain from this mere pinch? Then what of your leg? What will we do with the open gash on your leg?” Giselle scolded.

Rieta shriveled in on herself, flustered.

Killian sat there like a statue, absently accepting that all scolding was directed at him as well.

Clerics came by and informed Killian that the archbishop was asking for him. As Killian left the room, he left Rieta in Giselle's care. As soon as the door shut after Killian, Giselle realized Rieta was staring at her.

Giselle winked at her. The wink and the beauty mark below her eye were charming. "Why are you looking at me so passionately, Rieta?" ﻿

"Giselle."

"Yes?"

“Are you actually fond of Sir Leonard?"

"Even you? Why do you ask? I've told you I am not."

Rieta was serious as she asked, “Do you not care for His Lordship?”

"What?"

Rieta had thought of the way Killian was very different from how he spoke with Giselle, and she thought it looked special. "Isn't it possible His Lordship is fond of you?" From her perspective, the two of them clearly looked good together. Rieta looked solemn as she spoke. "He even apologized earlier."

Giselle was stunned for a moment and soon laughed in disbelief and looked at Rieta. “Oh, Rieta... What exactly do you think of His Lordship? He's fond of me because he said he's sorry?”

"Still. That terrifying person..." Rieta had never seen Killian apologize before. She didn't even think that was possible. "He didn't even seem displeased when you nagged him."

Giselle placed a hand on her waist and leaned into Rieta's face. “Oh, my. What do you mean by nagging? I simply spoke the truth. So, you're saying it sounded like that to you, Rieta? It was absolutely useless then. You didn't listen to anything I said, did you?" ﻿

"Oh, no. I listened."

"No!" The heartfelt speech went on again. Rieta was flustered, but this situation felt nostalgic and warm, so she smiled. Pressing on her temples as if she'd given up, Giselle sighed. "His Lordship is not the type of person to grumble at correct statements. He knows how to apologize too. He's a little brusque and stern, but he's a normal person who understands common sense.

Rieta tilted her head to the side with a confused look on her face. "But I've never seen His Lordship converse so smoothly without reserve. You two really do look very close. And look very good together."

"Enough. Rieta. I told you, we're family. It's gross.” Giselle wrinkled her nose in disgust. But Leonard, his knight, was the same too. Rieta thought the people of Axias Manor spoke to the archduke in ways outsiders couldn't even begin to imagine.

"But most nobles can't even move a muscle in front of him. He's that terrifying. And he even kills people. You don't think he's scary, Giselle?"

Giselle answered nonchalantly. “His Lordship is not someone who's terrifying to everyone. Normally to women or children... He is kind to the people he takes care of. And his knights too."

*It's just that he's merciless toward the people who are hostile or who attack him...but that's the same for anyone, to dislike those kinds of people.* Giselle swallowed the rest of her reply. Because Rieta seemed to be scared of Killian, even if she didn't say that. ﻿

Giselle hesitated for a moment and continued with her honest opinion. “Rather than that, I think His Lordship treats you in a more particular way."

Rieta shook her head with her eyes wide. "No. I'm... He's simply entrusted me with the role of being by his side because I'm a mage, and this is a temple."

From what Rieta thought, Killian clearly had no interest in her. He could have already had her if he wanted her, but he was always uninterested. It made sense; she was a boring widow who couldn't even be pleasant.

Their conversations were always clearly those of a master-servant relationship. Orders were given and followed. Asked and answered. She couldn't imagine an atmosphere like that that existed between Giselle and the archduke. Rieta thought Giselle was thinking that way only because Killian had kept her close to him as they went from place to place and kept only Rieta in his bedchambers since they arrived at the temple.

But Giselle was feeling that Killian's gaze toward Rieta had strangely been chasing Rieta little by little. Subtly. That feeling was becoming surer after this journey had started.

What she said earlier was the same. The way he spoke and what he spoke about. His replies were unlike him, who was usually obtuse to everything and indifferent. Killian was definitely aware of Rieta's presence.

*Even though the two involved were completely blind to it.*

Giselle simply rolled her eyes and shrugged. ﻿

22

# THE TEMPLE OF HAVITUS (11)

The Archduke of Axias's approval for leaving the high chaplain's role to Rieta was announced. As soon as the archbishop and the high-ranking clerics heard the awaited news, they called for Rieta to inform her of the ceremony's procedure. Killian had them come to the guest quarters rather than bringing Rieta to them.

A simple array of refreshments was arranged on a table in the drawing room. Killian walked up to the room himself to escort Rieta down. Killian kept his eyes on her and walked at her pace so Rieta wouldn't strain her injured leg. The clerics whispered among themselves as they saw his careful escort, muttering how everyone said he treasured her dearly and that he must really have become a different man.

They all sat down and exchanged greetings. The archbishop quickly excused himself to prepare for that night's grand blessing ceremony after asking Rieta to take good care of the ceremony. They told him to hurry and take his leave, feeling like he had taken too much time in coming to greet Rieta.

After the archbishop left, the high-ranking cleric who was left in charge started explaining the steps to the grand blessing ceremony. There were parts tailored to Havitus Temple, but the grand blessing ceremony was mostly similar without any complications. Rieta listened carefully to their explanation and nodded intermittently, noting the steps and her tasks.

In the middle of their explanation, one of the clerics asked, "I wondered if we could inquire about the capacity of your magical gifts?”

Rieta answered respectfully. “I am able to cast blessings and purifications, but my powers of purification are limited."

“Then, you are unable to wield the powers of purging or healing?”

"Yes."

The cleric replied, “Ah, I see...” and drifted off. He then asked, “Have you ever faced an aggressive demon?"

Rieta shook her head again. “No. I've never faced a middle-grade demon. I've seen slower, nonaggressive low-grade demons or evil spirits at times."

The cleric nodded and said, "Ah, I see."

It seemed she was born with clairvoyance, able to see the demons, but her ability wasn't as great as the rumors floating around about her. This cleric couldn't heal but could purge, so he had experience against demons.

Rieta wasn't unaware of his strange, implied meaning. "I only fear that I will do a disservice to the sacred ceremony," Rieta added carefully.

There was no reason a demon would pop up in the middle of the temple where the ceremony was held. Still, the younger clerics, seeing the older, competitive cleric ask if she could heal or purge or if she had any experience fighting demons, laughed bitterly on the inside. The cleric felt quite superior to this young mage who was stepping into the role of the high chaplain and explained patronizingly,

"That will be enough. Once the moon rises, the clerics will surround the statue of the goddess, and every cleric will start to pray. Then your divine power will increase severalfold for a few moments from the divine energy brimming over the altar."

Rieta knew of the theory, but because the cleric couldn't know about Rieta's skills, he explained it in an elementary manner. Intended for someone who finished learning at an abbey, his explanation was somewhat arrogant in the manner he explained it, but Rieta still listened closely just in case she had missed something, nodding.

"Then, your senses will be heightened greatly by the divine energy. You will be sensitive to everything around you, but there is no need to be alarmed. If it's severe, your senses will be slightly distorted, but...there will most likely be no need to worry about that. I'm only informing you so you are aware of how that may happen, so you won't be too alarmed."

His attitude was kind.

"If you've fasted and abstained properly, you may be able to start feeling it in the early evening. You may not be able to feel it that well because you're currently in your monthly fever, so..."

Killian glanced at the cleric.

*Did the paladins discuss Rieta's condition? Or the clerics? ﻿*

Rieta meekly asked, "Does that matter?"

"Of course. Did you not know? During monthly fevers, divine power and sensitivity to the divine decrease." The cleric was speaking as if it were common knowledge, but it was just an old wives' tale. In reality, the only difference was whether they were a little more tired or not.

Rieta didn't have her monthly fever in the first place, so she tried to move past that concern, but the cleric added a hefty comment. “Of course, that is not something you can control...but for us, it's an event we've prepared in- depth for, and especially right now, many things do not pass muster.

You're a mage who can even purify, and the fact is that you won't be able to perform as well as you can normally."

The grand blessing ceremony was a ceremony that was held maybe once every several years. It was a great honor and an incredible experience for a cleric to be standing as the high chaplain, and it was a fantastic opportunity for a divine experience. This cleric was one of the people who could preside over the ceremony if High Chaplain Ostia were to not.

It was disappointing that he would miss this good opportunity, but he wasn't going to feel envy toward the likes of a mage and continued his kind lecture.

"Still, don't worry. The clerics will be pouring even more strength into their prayers to ensure the ceremony at the Temple of Havitus will not be lacking. His Royal Highness the Archduke loves and treasures you, so he will understand."

Rieta answered carefully, "I have not seen changes in my ability during the monthly fevers. I understand there is such an old wives' tale, but the timing of the monthly fevers does not influence everyone's skills."

He laughed and shook his head a little and leaned back. “Our female clerics normally do not take part in ceremonies during their monthly fever, but it was already an irregularity from the moment it was decided a mage, not a cleric, would be taking the high chaplain's place, so something like that wouldn't matter. Even His Majesty's delegate has said so, and since Your Royal Highness is so-"

"A cleric speaking so much about a woman's body," Killian, who was just listening up to that point, cut him off. ﻿

The cleric flinched and sat straight. “Ah. That wasn't my intention. Just from a theoretical point of view-"

"No matter your intentions, it's a discourtesy if it's uncomfortable for the subject to hear. Ask for her forgiveness."

Rieta spoke up calmly. “I do not mind, Your Highness."

He leaned back into his chair, head cocked at an angle, and his crimson eyes shone with a threatening gaze as they looked down on the clerics. “I mind this vulgar treatment of my woman.” His voice was nonchalant, but an icy chill swirled from his eyes. The cleric couldn't open his mouth, suffocating under the dominating air with his face white as a sheet. "Well?"

Killian kicked the cleric's leg under the table. The cleric couldn't squeal and jolted in his chair. “Now, sir?" The cleric bowed his head toward Killian and Rieta and stammered out an apology. “F-forgive me, madam."

Rieta became abashed and accepted the apology, saying she was fine.

Killian smirked and, feigning generosity, tossed out, "Now, carry on. Any man who cannot uphold my decree may leave at once."

The cleric became even paler. Was he supposed to say he wanted to escape, or was he supposed to shamelessly sit here and beg for forgiveness again? It really seems like Killian was telling him to leave because he didn't want to look at his face anymore. It was meant to embarrass him blatantly. A high-ranking cleric was kicked out while hosting a quasi- member of the imperial family. It would cause a big black mark on his cleric evaluation.

He couldn't stand nor stay seated. His face just changed colors. Rieta squirmed inwardly and changed the subject to calm down the atmosphere. "Um, will the prayers begin in the early evening? There are only a few hours left."

The cleric, who caught on to Rieta's intent to move on, replied carefully, "Yes. Soon, a hundred twenty faithful clerics will gather in the square.”

Rieta smiled at him. “I've heard of the spirituality of the temple. The statue of the goddess of Havitus and a hundred twenty clerics shall be an incredible ceremony." ﻿

A younger cleric spoke instead of the dumbstruck cleric. "Yes. An incredible amount of divine energy will be concentrated in one place. Laypeople won't feel it, but clerics and those with divine power will feel heavy, spiritual pressure. It's a special experience. At the climax of the ceremony, the dense divine energy will be so overwhelming that it will be hard even to speak."

Rieta responded with deliberate nods in response. This cleric continued to explain the things to be careful of with the ceremony and its process. "Those who possess an acute sense of spiritual sensitivity will experience a spiritual awakening. It can be rather physically straining. You will instinctively feel the desire to relieve the pressure cast upon you by the gathered energy, but you mustn't attempt to suddenly stir the divine energy during the ceremony The amplified divine energies are meant to be used for the ceremony."

The other younger clerics started to add their suggestions. "It's only a short moment when the power is at its highest. The pressure will be relieved quickly as soon as the grand blessing is laid down, and the side effects from the concentrated divine energy will slowly be eased, so don't fret."

“And their fickle nature can cause great distress to those surrounding.”

Rieta nodded and replied. "Thank you for your concern. I will keep it in mind."

Killian stayed silent and let Rieta do as she pleased, without interrupting anymore.

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The clerics walked in and gave them the ceremonial robes soon after they returned to Killian's chambers to wait and told them the clerics were soon starting to pray for the grand blessing ceremony. Killian nodded indifferently and took the robes.

Soon, they realized they had taken the grand blessing ceremony lightly. "Rieta." ﻿

As Rieta reached out for the robes Killian offered her, he whipped over to her and grabbed her nose. Rieta nearly dropped the clothes in shock.

She was bleeding from her nose. Rieta quickly placed the robes on the sofa and brought a hand up to her nose herself, and firmly pressed it as she started to tilt her head back.

Killian put a hand on the back of her neck and pushed. "Bow your head." Killian led her into the bathroom. Rieta washed her forehead and nose with cold water. Killian stood behind her, frowning. “Are you all right?”

"Yes, the clerics must have begun their prayers. It will subside soon."

"Is it because of the prayers?”

"Yes, I believe so, Sire."

Even though the square where the prayers were taking place and the guest quarters were quite far away from one another, the divine energy that spread powerfully started to affect Rieta's body as well. Rieta's insides started pounding with every heartbeat as if the divine energy flowing through her blood was about to burst out of her body.

Rieta was able to change into the ceremonial robes once she'd barely stanched her nosebleed after a long while. Rieta, now dressed in the robes, came back to Killian with a flustered look on her face. “My...my lord, if I may..."

Killian caught onto her issue immediately. The cut on her leg had opened up again and started bleeding. Killian walked forward, eyes narrowed.

"The bandage..." Killian cut her off. “No. I will send for Giselle."

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Giselle dashed up from the floor below. She dealt with the wound however she could, using a hemostatic agent and bandages, but Rieta's face became﻿ flushed again and her forehead glistened with sweat. "Are you in pain, Rieta?"

"Yes..."

"When did you last take something for the pain?"

"I took another capsule roughly an hour ago."

Giselle bit her lip. "This will not do. The only stronger remedy for the pain would be alucino. I will prepare a batch of that for now."

Killian's brow twitched when he heard that. He remembered the first day he met Rieta. He didn't realize because these were sky-blue, but the ceremonial robes she was wearing right now were quite similar to the black funerary robes she was wearing that day-the clothes she was wearing while she was being dragged to Casarius's grave.

Right as Rieta was about to speak, Killian spoke. “Don't."

As Rieta saw Killian refuse immediately, she mumbled to Giselle. “Yes, I fear that alucino may be too potent. I will not be able to complete the ceremony with a clear mind."

Killian stared at Rieta with a terrible expression on his face. An unexpected comment popped out of his mouth. “I shall cancel the ceremony."

Rieta grabbed him in shock. "You mustn't! It has already begun. The temple simply would not allow it."

Killian looked down at Rieta and in a low voice, he bit out, “Then they will have to appoint another to officiate as high chaplain. The temple is brimming with clerics. Any one of them can perform the deed."

Rieta shook her head and looked up to counter him. "But could we trust them? Is there one whom we can trust, whom the temple will accept? ﻿

Of course, there was no such person. A mage in the high chaplain's place, something that wouldn't have been accepted if it were under normal circumstances, was only accepted quietly because of the emperor's delegate Lectus Eustio's recommendation. Rieta and Killian were both aware of this fact.

"I am the only one suited for the task, and we cannot let them know that I am injured. Above all else, the empress may have another person in mind for the role."

She was right, annoyingly so. Killian couldn't control his anger and kicked away the table before whipping his body around. Rieta flinched and bowed her head in apology. She'd seen this happen several times already, but she jolted this time too.

"Forgive me. I-I will surely grow accustomed to the energy... My body needs a moment to adjust."

“Must you always ask for forgiveness?” bellowed Killian.

Giselle couldn't understand why he was angry and just stood there, eyes flitting back and forth between Killian and Rieta, but Rieta also looked like she also didn't know why.

Giselle spoke up carefully. "I do not intend to use just alucino alone. I will infuse it with other medicines to maintain the remedy and minimize any side effects. As long as the current elixir fails to provide relief, this is our only option."

Killian glared at Rieta, his brows casting a dark shadow over his eyes. He whooshed out of the room.

Giselle sighed a sigh of relief. “That would be his permission...but why is he so vexed?"

Rieta had no idea either. ﻿

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# THE TEMPLE OF HAVITUS (12)

Thankfully, Giselle's potion kicked in, and Rieta was able to move more comfortably. The full moon peeked out from the clouds, hanging on the tips of the outstretched fingers of the statue of the goddess. Killian came back when it was time for them to go to the square. Killian stood there, still looking displeased, but he silently reached out a hand to her upon seeing Rieta in a better state.

Rieta, dressed in the sky-blue ceremonial robes, placed her hand on top of Killian's.

“Tell me if you are tired.”

"Yes, Sire."

It was time for the grand blessing ceremony to start.

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The great square, at the highest point of the Temple of Havitus.

Before the tall bell tower, visible from anywhere in the temple, was an altar in the shape of the letter T, coming up to a person's waist, and an empty dais. In the middle of the altar was the goddess's statue with her right hand reaching for the heavens and her left hand with a water jug, acting as a great fountain for pouring out holy water.

In front of the statue, a red carpet embroidered with gold thread was laid out, and two groups of sixty clerics were in prayer on either side, lined up in rows of two with candles in their hands. They wore their robes and kept their hoods up. When the weighty horn sounded, the clerics and the people who lit the candles and lined up became quiet.

A hooded Rieta walked before Killian to the altar with a large ringed moon, the symbol of the goddess, in her arms. Killian followed her, also dressed in ceremonial robes, unarmed.

The archbishop walked to the dais in front of the bell tower. Applause greeted him in welcome from the crowd. The archbishop's greetings started. "We give thanks to our goddess and Her Majesty for taking on this great endeavor and to all the faithful believers gathered here for this﻿ auspicious occasion. I hope this night will be as blessed as the moon is full." The archbishop chuckled as he looked at a mother soothing her whining child. "You've journeyed from far and wide to this square, at the highest peak of this high mountain. I only hope the arduous climb up will have been worth the effort and pain."

His eyes drifted up toward the skies, and he looked grave. "What was expected to be the brightest moon in years has now decided to hide away, and it seems the heavens will bestow upon us an untimely bout of rain, even. I intend to have a long conversation with the fool who selected such a night." The crowd laughed at his self-deprecating joke. "Nevertheless, we must all learn to forgive. We must forgive this foolish archbishop for picking a rainy day. We must forgive our ancestors for building this temple on such a high mountain."

The archbishop raised both hands and started to recite the holy book. "From the moment you entered this world, every small action you have taken to survive was taken by the blood or sweat of another living form of creation. Before you choose to discriminate, hate, and resent others, consider the weight of your own sins."

The crowd and the clerics joined him for the following recitation, “We enter this world in sin, through the great suffering of our own mothers, and only in love and compassion for others can we be redeemed This path alone will absolve you of sustaining this life at the cost of others. You shall not give an offering to me at the cost of another's blood."

Next, the archbishop and the people continued, "Forgiveness is the most precious offering, outweighing the greatest of sacrifices. Forgiveness is all that I shall accept on my altar in happiness."

The archbishop crossed himself and opened his eyes. Small raindrops started to fall, one by one. The people reached up and covered themselves from the rain. The clerics placed a hand over the flames of the candles to stop them from going out. The archbishop began to speak while observing them quietly. “Here, today, the grand blessing ceremony has started with a mother's intent to forgive the one who stole away the lives of her precious sons." ﻿

The crowd started to murmur when they heard the statement, so blunt it could offend Killian and the empress.

The archbishop looked around the people kindly and stressed, “It's a noble forgiveness."

The rain began to fall.

The people stared at Empress Aversati, who was calmly seated slightly away from the archbishop. Many people started to whisper as they wondered whether the empress was to truly forgive Killian.

"All of you here will remember the prince of the ancient kingdom of Cassus, the one who confirmed the existence of the Goddess of Havitus for the first time."

Silence captured the people.

The archbishop continued. “After surviving thirty-eight years of thirty- eight different adversities with the singular purpose of seeking revenge for the destruction of his kingdom, the murder of his family, and the ruining of his life at the hands of a single woman, the prince was finally able to face her."

"But after realizing this woman was also someone's loving mother, even with his enemy right in front of his eyes, he wept tears of blood and gave up his quest for revenge, forgiving her. Right at that moment, he met the hierophantic Goddess of Havitus in that woman's body."

The people listened to the archbishop telling the myth of the Goddess of Havitus with bated breath. They looked past the archbishop and watched the empress and Archduke of Axias, who was kneeling on the altar.

"And this bell tower erupted." The archbishop started to raise his voice. "This land that the goddess of love, sacrifice, and forgiveness has testified. I think Her Majesty the Empress Aversati and His Royal Highness the Archduke of Axias are truly the most fitting pair to be standing here."

A composed, but holy reverberation-energy full of great divinity started to reverberate and ring out from the archbishop. “I ask you all to pray for Her Majesty the Empress Aversati, who has chosen to embrace the most painful hate born from familial love, the most difficult forgiveness." ﻿

Surprisingly, as she was sitting there expressionless, tears fell from Empress Aversati's eyes. People all took on looks of shock when they realized this. Some people followed suit and began to cry.

The archbishop raised his hands and let them become wet from the rain. "We pray with holy power that the tears of bloodshed from over more than a decade will be washed away today by the goddess's tears. May the blessing of the goddess always be with us on this land. Lucieli.”

The people clapped their hands together at the archbishop's prayer. "Leciel."

The ceremony started with everyone's eyes staring. The clerics bowed their heads and started to pray.

Killian, who was staring silently at the empress, walked up to the statue and went down on one knee, lowering his body. Rieta, standing to the side, took the silvery staff in her hands and pointed it to each of his shoulders, then the top of his head.

Rieta walked in front of the fountain, relinquished the staff to the awaiting cleric, and lifted a small glass, placing it under the streaming holy water from the statue. A clear, bright light wrapped itself around Rieta's body and reflected off the water in the glass. Rieta turned and wet a finger in the glass of holy water to place it on Killian's forehead. A brilliant light shone from between the two of them as soon as she touched his skin.

Killian placed a hand on his chest in respect, reached up for her hand, and placed a kiss on the back of it. Rieta placed the same hand on his shoulder and kissed Killian's forehead to bless him.

It was the first time this ritual was offered at Havitus. The people held their breath at the beautiful high chaplain's blessing. This ritual was not a ritual from Havitus as Rieta had thought, but rather a ritual modified by the clerics who were moved by Rieta's actions. The blessing from a young female high chaplain, a rare sight at a grand blessing ceremony, felt holy for all the people and the clerics, and it was memorable.

Rieta took the staff from the cleric again and glided over to the archbishop standing in front of the altar. She walked each step up to the altar and﻿ knelt in front of the archbishop. She then offered the staff to him with both hands.

With the staff in hand, the archbishop pointed it at the empress's shoulders and head, and as Rieta did, he blessed her with the holy water. A powerful light swirled around the archbishop and the empress.

The empress's white-gloved, frail hand was placed on the archbishop's outstretched hand. Now it was time for the archbishop and the empress to climb the bell tower. The people prepared their prayers and waited for them to enter the bell tower. But the archbishop kneeled, bowed, and placed a kiss on the empress's hand. Then, he stepped up to the dais once again.

The archbishop closed his eyes and reached out his hand. Divine energy washed over them. The rain became a brilliant silver. The people turned their faces up in shock, holy water being showered onto them. Some people spread their arms out and soaked themselves in the holy water while the mothers lifted their children and made them get wet with the holy water.

The archbishop retracted his hand and crossed himself in respect. "We praise once again this glory that will fill the goddess's altar. May the goddess's blessing be always with the imperial family Liefheim and the Dimfell empire. Lucieli.”

“Leciel!” The people shouted. Thunderous applause broke out.

After the applause died out, the empress took a lamp and accepted the archbishop's escort to disappear into the bell tower.

Rieta came back to her position behind Killian and stayed there.

While the pair climbed thirty-eight floors to the top of the bell tower, people walked around the statue of the goddess or knelt for their prayers. The ceremony was gaining traction to the climax. As the powerful divine energy from the people's prayers concentrated in the square, Rieta felt a spiritual fullness she had never felt before. Great power was collecting and pushing Rieta down, but at the same time, her energy was brimming up, feeling endless. ﻿

The prayers lasted for a long time. Then, the bell rang.

*Clang...*

*Clang...*

*Clang...*

*Clang...*

The concentrated divine energy became a powerful blessing and spread out into the air. The goddess's great blessing fell onto the people's heads with the imposing sound. With the rain...

Rieta lifted the staff. The powerful strength filling the air started to focus on the staff and her body. A round, divine pattern started to shine blindingly underneath Killian's body. Rieta closed her eyes and began to pray for Killian. A glaring light broke through the rain from the heavens and shone upon them.

In the square with the statue of the goddess at the center, a magic circle appeared on the ground and turned slowly. Rieta's body pounded as if the concentrated divine energy was going to burst from it. It was difficult to breathe as time dragged on endlessly. She looked out on the clerics and the people, feeling like she had fallen from a different dimension.

She could feel each one of the faithful clerics' prayers. Her sharpened senses informed her of everything. She instantly caught onto several strange truths. A few of the clerics were not in prayer. One who was not of solid faith. One who carried a dangerous intent in their heart.

There were imposters among them.

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"Thank you, Your Majesty. You must be weary from the long climb. Shall we rest for a moment before we return?"

The empress was drenched in sweat from climbing thirty-eight floors, and she collapsed onto the top step. She replied after a long while. “A memorable sermon, Archbishop."

The archbishop chuckled. "Words are merely words. You have touched the hearts of all who've gathered here today through your commendable actions."

"Forgiveness..." The empress laughed weakly. “The dead family of that prince... Would they have forgiven he who had chosen to forgive?"

"They wouldn't have wanted the prince to step onto the path of painful revenge if they loved him."

"Your Excellency." The empress lifted her head. Her gray eyes turned toward the archbishop. "You didn't drink the tea I served you. Do you not trust me?"

A sudden question. The lamp went out.

"Your Majesty? Please restore the light. I cannot see you, Your Majesty.” The archbishop's panicked voice rang out in the darkness.

"Archbishop...is this too dark for you?" The empress's voice slithered out. "I do not share that sentiment, for I have been in darkness for so long... since the day I was forced to part with William and Salerion thirteen years ago, I have been dwelling in this darkness alone."

The rain grew heavier and slapped against the windows of the bell tower as the wind blew. ﻿

"The only light over the years came from their faces in my dreams... they still call out to me with longing."

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Rieta turned her head slowly. Killian was kneeling with his head bowed, on the steps of the altar. Her voice calling out to him didn't come out. It was hard to move her body as well.

Rieta slowly took a step as if she were forcing her almost frozen body to move in a dream.

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The empress struck flint against some tinder to light the lamp.

"When William calls for me... Fantastic thoughts rush up... Like a revelation..."

The empress stared at the burning tinder with foggy eyes.

"Even then, the last image I see is their faces covered in blood... They say, 'Mother. Have you forgotten us? Have you forsaken us?""

The empress huffed a laugh and lit the lamp.

"All I could do was to reply... How could I possibly forget you?"

The empress let her head fall, and her body shook as if she were crying.

"I am alone in a dark and long tunnel, Archbishop. My heart has long since stopped beating. It only beats when I am chasing after my revenge. It is only then that I can once again see the light."

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Killian had his head bowed, unaware of Rieta coming closer to him.

Rieta's body was heavy like it wasn't her own, and she barely made it behind him. It seemed like the hand she reached out to him wasn't hers. She barely brushed Killian's shoulder.

One, two, three, four-her fingers touched him in order. As her palm also touched Killian's shoulder, she slowly brushed it down.

Perhaps he couldn't understand what she was trying to say, or he couldn't feel her hand on his shoulder at all because Killian didn't look back at her.

*There is someone here who is not a cleric.*

Her voice remained silent. It seemed like her words weren't getting through to him. Rieta began to panic.

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"Furnish me with your light." The empress lifted her head and giggled. “I shall only need it for a moment."

Blood was dripping down the steps. The cold, twisted corpse of the archbishop twitched behind her.

"They say the stronger the divine being that falls, the stronger the darkness they leave behind.”

The archbishop's body twisted bizarrely and stopped moving. The empress looked at him in amusement and laughed sweetly.

"I look forward to your shining darkness that will become my light. Whether or not you'll lead me out of the tunnel we will see..." ﻿

24

# THE TEMPLE OF HAVITUS (13)

The large magical pattern on the square and the magical pattern under Killian's feet blazed blindingly and were absorbed into his body. His body then glowed with a silver afterimage, and his clothes whooshed out as if a wind had picked up. The blessing was given.

Her head spun as she felt the divine power drain from her body. Her heightened nerves relaxed at once, and the pressure she felt on her body lessened. Rieta tried to open her mouth again, but her voice didn't come out at all.

*My lord... My lord!*

*"If you think the people accompanying them are not clerics, place your hand on my shoulder. Grip my neck if you detect a demon or anything as alarming."*

Time passed so slowly as if it had stopped altogether and Rieta fell, almost collapsing behind Killian's back, her arms wrapping around his neck.

*I see a demon.*

Time passed by too slowly. Killian turned his head bit by bit and grasped her arm.

*Creak...*

The door to the bell tower opened, and the archbishop appeared with the staff in his hand. The same archbishop that climbed the bell tower, was no longer the archbishop he used to be. Soaked in blood, the archbishop lifted the staff high with only the whites of his eyes visible.

That moment felt like a thousand years.

Then time snapped back. Killian yanked Rieta from where she was hanging onto his body and pulled her down.

*Boom! ﻿*

All of a sudden, something black swept past their heads and exploded above them.

"Oh no! The archbishop!" Hair-raising shrieks resounded from everywhere.

"Get down!" The cleric who screamed out had been decapitated.

A dozen clerics who were praying suddenly pulled swords out from inside their robes and began slaying down the clerics around them. The archbishop's eyes spun in different directions, and he cackled gruesomely while swinging the staff. Darkness shot out from the staff and pierced the people's bodies.

The crowd piled on top of each other as they ran for their lives. Chaos ravaged.

Just then, the archbishop turned his head unnaturally and rushed toward Killian with a gaping grin on his face. Killian realized he was the target, pushed Rieta to the side, and barely avoided the attack by splaying down to the ground. The place where Killian had been only moments ago caved in and crumbled.

Killian reached out his hand in midair and shouted. "My sword!”

Someone threw a sword toward him from the chaos. Killian snatched the sword in midair and ran.

The archbishop's staff swung again and smashed the stones where Killian had been. The archbishop growled with glowing eyes, having missed Killian again. The devil possessing the archbishop's body lifted the staff into the air. Yellowish energy spread around them like a sandstorm. The mutilated bodies of the clerics glowed black, and the undead groaned to life on their feet.

One undead flung itself toward Rieta, who collapsed on the altar. The moment Killian cursed under his breath and ran, the archbishop rushed toward him. ﻿

*Clang!* The staff and the sword collided.

"Giselle!" Killian gritted his teeth and roared. “Protect Rieta!”

One of the armed clerics jumped like lightning and blocked Rieta.

*Crack!*

A white sword wavered and sliced through the undead that was about to attack Rieta. It must have been a blade plated with silver because the undead's body where the blade sliced through burned and crumbled black.

Rieta's hand clamped onto her mouth in horror, and she stared at the cleric who had tried to block her. A woman dressed in a cleric's robes threw back her hood and shouted.

"Lana!" A charming beauty spot and tied-up brown hair were revealed under the moonlight. "Guard His Royal Highness!"

The undead swarmed in from all sides. Giselle whipped her body around, scooped Rieta up, and jumped. The ground fell away in a second.

Rieta dumbfoundedly stared down and watched the ground get farther away. Several men dressed in clerics' robes drew swords and fought the fake clerics who'd massacred their peers. Rieta realized a majority of the people fighting who were dressed in clerics' robes were Killian's knights. The knights who were mixed in the crowd and the stunned paladins jumped into the fray.

"Seira! Save the emperor's delegate!”

Seira, who had been mixed in the group of clerics, was already running, having already tossed her robes aside. Seira flung a poleax and drove it into the ground to somersault and fly onto the altar. Lectus Eustio and his guard soldiers were armed and fighting the undead, but they barely defended themselves, unable to fight properly. The moment her feet touched the ground, Seira spun like she was dancing and whirled the poleax around her body. ﻿﻿

*Crack!*

Three undead were instantly tossed aside as their spines cracked. Seira drove the poleax into the ground again and somersaulted over. It spun from a terrifying height and struck straight down, splitting the undead attacking Lectus Eustio from behind in half completely. Seira used the recoil from the attack to land lightly on her feet and swung the poleax just above the ground. The ax lopped off the undead's ankles.

There was no time to admire the dance. Many of the undead in robes were swarming toward where Giselle and Rieta had landed. Giselle pushed Rieta's shoulder down, flung her sword above her to cut down the undead, and jumped again. The undead swarming in on their flanks slammed into each other and ravaged each other.

The shards of darkness from the staff the archbishop swung were attacking the people who were trying to escape. The victims' corpses jerked up and grabbed at the ankles of the people, who they were running away with just moments ago, tripping them to attack them blindly.

The corpses of the dead clerics who had answered the call from the devil possessing the archbishop's body were rising as bigger, stronger undead. The undead high-ranking clerics carried corrupted divine energy, and their bodies were swelling into hulking monsters, losing the shape of human bodies. They were stronger than the average undead and moved with more finesse. They pushed toward the other clerics and Rieta, who were emitting powerful divine energy, to make themselves even stronger allies.

Killian wasn't completely free either; he was the archbishop's target.

After carving an escape route out for the people, Killian's knights and the paladins ran back up through them and joined the fight, swinging their swords.

Lana snapped her fingers in the air. It was hard to identify friend from foe in the rainy darkness, but a strange pattern burned a blue flame on those devil-possessed humans. The undead gripped the pattern and writhed in pain, with their movements slowing down. Killian's knights slashed through the undead Lana had lit on fire and started to protect and evacuate the remaining people. The paladins, who ran about in a panic, followed suit and started cutting down the enemies burning with a blue flame to help carve out escape routes for people.

The devil possessing the archbishop's body swung his staff endlessly to make more undead. Some of those ran toward Killian, and some ran toward the knights protecting the remaining clerics.

Giselle placed Rieta down and quickly scanned their surroundings. The undead nearest them recognized that Rieta was a human with enticing divine energy and charged toward them. Giselle drew another sword instantly and started to slaughter the undead that charged at them, with a sword in each hand.

Rieta stared unbelievingly at her friend, the woman who was calmly slashing the throats of the undead to destroy them.

"Elise!" Giselle cried out again. “Destroy them!"

The response rang out from the midst of the clerics on the left. “Your command is late!" A tall woman, dressed in robes, was already dancing in the middle of the fight. She was whirling a massive two-handed sword, almost as tall as she was, and her hood flipped back to reveal an elegant, blonde-bobbed face drenched with rain.

Giselle was wielding the two swords effortlessly and massacring multiple enemies at a time. She was moving so fast, it was hard even to follow her movements. She drove a sword into the back of one undead to use it as a shield and cut down with the other sword, carving diagonally across another undead. She ducked down from another's nails aiming for her head, and placed her blade on the swiping arm, slicing straight into its ribs.

This all happened while Rieta took a single breath.

"Take shelter over here!” the paladin Niesten bellowed.

The paladins lined up and raised their shields to make a barrier, creating a path for the people﻿ to escape and take shelter.

Giselle kicked off the undead that was skewered on her sword and jumped again, spinning in midair to sever the legs from the torso of the undead chasing her, crushing them underfoot. In the next instant, Giselle's speed slowed as if she suddenly stopped. She slowly stood from where she had one knee on the body of the undead. A blue light was emanating from her body. Her eyes which were coldly drawn down moments ago suddenly burst open and blue flames flared out from her blades. She disappeared in a flash.

A sharp whoosh of wind sounded from between the undead standing there, frozen like time had stopped, and suddenly their bodies were eviscerated and fell into pieces. Even though the number of undead surrounding Rieta was not small, when Giselle saturated her swords with energy to disappear for a moment, there was no undead around her that could move when she reappeared. Giselle crossed the swords in her hands, scraped the blades against each other, and a mist of blood from the blades dispersed into the rain.

When the undead surrounding Rieta were taken care of, Giselle ripped away from the cumbersome robes. Giselle and Rieta's eyes met. Giselle grinned and lifted a finger to her lips.

*Shh.*

She jumped into the air again in the middle of the fight to protect the remaining clerics. Giselle, freer now, practically flew through the air. She somersaulted over and snicked her two blades like a pair of scissors, beheading an undead. She then struck out to either side instantly, stabbing the clerics on either side of the knights who were fighting them. Next, she slipped out between the legs of the cleric who hadn't fallen entirely just yet and carved up the undead behind them who hadn't realized she was there. As if she were laughing at the fake cleric who swung his sword at her, Giselle vaulted lightly onto his shoulder and sliced his throat open, then jumped again. ﻿

Every time Giselle jumped into the rain, no one could see where she had gone. It seemed too much like a lie that there was no time to consider the cruelty of it. Rieta stared blankly and followed her with her eyes.

“That way! Run behind the wall!" The paladins helped the survivors and the real clerics, and they escaped behind the shields.

On the other side, Elise was wielding a broadsword as big as her with both hands. When the huge blade cut through the air, it whooshed, and the fake cleric she was facing off with lost hold of his sword and fell backward. Elise pulled the blade close, now behind her due to inertia, placed her hand against its body, as if she were pushing it to the other side, but suddenly twisted her torso and stabbed it below her waist. The undead that jerked toward Elise broke its arm against the broadsword, coming out of nowhere from an unexpected angle. She immediately crouched, swung a leg out to trip the undead, stepped lightly on its back, and drove the sword in front of her feet as an axis to spin.

With a graceful motion, as if the broadsword was her dance partner, the undead's neck crunched open. She lifted it at an angle using that inertia, extended it out in front of her nose, and spun one more time. The menacing blade drew a great circle. The fake cleric who approached with a sword in hand ran away in fear at the powerful wind from the broadsword. The undead who were not aware enough to read the situation kept coming hopelessly, and their skulls were cracked off and thrown into the rain.

Elise closed her eyes and took a breath in a moment of respite, and pulled up a blue aura from her body. Elise tilted the broadsword back and lifted a knee elegantly, then swung her sword with two hands and brought it﻿ down. Immense blue energy crushed the ground and flew out, undeviating, blowing through the faltering fake clerics.

She spun again with her sword at her chest and looked for her next target through narrowed eyes. Even the unaware undead kept their distance at the threat of the broadsword's huge attack radius and its terrifying presence.

"Don't come close!” The paladins who were about to jump into the fight stopped at the indomitable voice.

Elise had purposely moved to an area where her comrades couldn't get hurt in the scope of the attack and demolished the fake clerics and the undead with graceful, dance-like movements. Her movements in whirling the heavy sword around were not as fast or agile as Giselle with the two swords, but the long broadsword's incredible scope of attack neutralized its limits in speed.

At the sight of the women's completely unexpected, furious sword dances, the remaining fake clerics on either side of the altar faltered and started to run away.

Giselle's voice rang out angrily from midair, “Rachel! Not a single one can be spared!"

Rachel was nowhere to be seen, and there was not even a response. But the sharp sound cutting through the air sounded, and the escaping fake clerics' heads or throats gushed blood as they collapsed. ﻿

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# THE TEMPLE OF HAVITUS (14)

The archbishop took a step back and retreated from his fight with Killian, and the undead swarming around them rushed toward Killian as if they were protecting the archbishop. He sidestepped the first who got to him, stabbed his sword in its neck, and ran past. He ran through the next with his sword against a pillar on the altar. He swung out to hit one coming in from the side, with the undead still thrashing on his sword and kicked the undead scrabbling for his ankles.

The undead was running in at an incredible speed, but Killian massacred the undead calculatingly, without even batting an eyelid. When the undead proved to be no match for Killian, the archbishop lunged at Killian in anger, but Killian took him on like it was nothing, and sliced into the archbishop's side. The inside of the wound was red, like lava. It was the body of a devil.

Blue energy pierced toward the archbishop, who retreated and hoisted his staff. The archbishop roared in fury, swung his staff, and counteracted the energy. The energy he couldn't counteract hit the altar, smashing the marble. The archbishop swung the staff and attacked him with evil energy, but Lana's blue shield diffused in the air and blocked the devil's attack.

The furious archbishop lifted his staff. Killian's empty left hand, with his sword still stuck deep in the undead, reached out toward him. A blue light shot out from his unarmed, left hand. The archbishop, who was about to raise up more undead, seethed with fury and blocked its path with his staff. The enraged archbishop continuously stopped from blindly massacring to stare back with glaring eyes.

Killian kicked away the undead's corpse casually and regripped his sword lightly, calmly crushing the corpse underfoot. The amount of trained energy he displayed from his chiseled body, so fast it barely registered in the human eye, was unbelievable. It was his first time facing off with a﻿﻿ devil, but the evil spirits of Axias that he had trained with were no less powerful.

The traditional swordsmanship he was trained in by the imperial sword master, as was his right as the eldest son of the emperor, and through his years adjusting to Axias, he attained a finely honed mercilessness. Killian's swordsmanship had been praised as being complete before he was even eighteen. He had forced the evil spirits and barbarians to their knees, honing his skills to be more exquisitely brutal.

Delicately sharp, aggressive, elegant, and ferocious. It didn't matter if his opponent was a human or an evil spirit, there was no mercy in the hand that went for the vital points. Already, his swordsmanship had surpassed the point where he had to be careful of his opponent or their weapon.

The victory was growing closer to him. There were no new undead, and the number of monsters was decreasing thanks to the knights all over the square. Killian smashed through the demons and the undead coming for him with devastating power and even bound the archbishop's movements from a distance.

The red-eyed archbishop was spewing black smoke and roared toward the sky. The archbishop's body started to shred. The devil inside the archbishop was now powerful enough that even people without divine powers could see it clearly. The archbishop's body no longer resembled a human's. A pair of horns and a large tail erupted from his body.

The devil's tail slammed on the ground twice, and it shrieked horrifically. The black smoke spread rapidly and caused the nearby undead to contort writhingly. The hulking undead, so large now they ripped through their robes, emitted black energy from their bodies, and echoed the archbishop's shriek toward the sky.

The smashed remains of the undead, unable to fight anymore, began to twitch and tangle together, burning red. Great claws burst through the hands of the undead, and their teeth elongated into fangs. They already no longer looked like the undead. Several undead swelled and fused together, and rose as a chimera.

"Oh my god..." Someone's terrified outburst slipped out like a sigh.

The monsters turned their heads and shrieked in unison. They were to attack Killian. The huge monsters sprung at Killian, red light emanating from both their hands.

Giselle screamed. "Your Highness!"

At the same moment, Giselle's sword flew. The sword lodged into the shoulder of the chimera lunging at Killian, and it went flying.

Giselle shouted urgently. “Leonard! Sword!"

"Damn it, then what about me!"

A sword shot over from between the knights fighting among the undead, accompanied by colorful language. Giselle snatched the sword out of midair like Killian did and leaped off from the ground. She mowed down the crowd of undead swarming toward Killian.

The undead were so much faster and more powerful than they had been just moments before.

Leonard narrowly ripped a sword from a fallen cleric's hand and rejoined the fight.

The divine energy stoppering her throat released and Rieta gasped for air like a person dragged up to the surface. Rieta's voice barely opened up but she screamed desperately, “The right eye is their weakness!"

The archbishop swung his tail and knocked down a pillar, turning toward Rieta, eyes rolling. In the next breath, a silver dagger flew in out of nowhere and sunk into the archbishop's eye. ﻿

The archbishop gave a hair-raising howl and dropped the staff. The archbishop clutched his eye and thrashed around in pain, and he kicked the staff and it rolled. The archbishop's body was exuding black smoke.

Killian ran and swung his sword for the archbishop's throat. The devil whipped his head around, yanked out the dagger from its eye, and stared.

*Clang!*

Metal against metal rang out and sparks flew. Killian's sword bounced off the archbishop's body. The devil's body through the shredded archbishop's body was a blazing red. With a gruesome sound, the devil's body swelled to the size of a house.

The holy water flowing from the statue of the goddess was now flowing red.

The devil surrounded by black smoke smelled of vile sulfur and raised both its hands. The undead and the chimeras started to riot in unison.

The chimera drooling blood from Giselle's sword in its chest jerked the sword in its body along with Giselle's hand. The moment Giselle struck with the sword in her other hand, the eye on the chimera's forehead glowed red and blocked the blade coming down with its bare hand. The clang reverberated. It felt like hitting steel.

A severed hand crawled to Giselle as if it had a mind of its own, grabbed Giselle's ankle, and squeezed. Giselle's eyes widened.

"Giselle!"

The red-eyed chimera bared its claws and lunged for Giselle, stuck with her ankle and her hand in the grip of the monsters. Killian heaved his sword toward the head of the attacking chimera but another chimera whipped its tail in an instant and knocked it aside. People stared in horror and screamed.

*Crack. ﻿*

It was the sound of bones breaking. Right before the claws were about to dig into Giselle's neck, a man dove in between and grabbed Giselle, tumbling to the ground.

"Kweeeeehk!" The chimera embedded its claws into Leonard's right shoulder and back. The chimera screeched. The chimera wasn't satisfied with missing Giselle's neck and just swiping Leonard, and it dug in deeper. Blood exploded everywhere as his flesh and bones tore apart helplessly.

Leonard gritted his teeth and lifted his sword, not making a single sound. But his trembling hand couldn't go above his elbow. Giselle stared, her face drained of blood. The chimera bared its fangs to sink into Leonard's throat.

*Thunk!*

They heard a heavy sound and the chimera's head caved in. The chimera's whole upper body turned to dust. Rieta was looking down at them with a face as white as a sheet, having swung the staff at the chimera. Giselle and Leonard faced Rieta in shock.

Rieta stared down at the staff in her hands, stunned at the incredible power she had wielded. It was the power of purging, the power she couldn't attain before, and at an incredible scale at that. As the high chaplain of the grand blessing ceremony, Rieta's body was still extremely powerful, thanks to the concentrated divine energy that flowed through her moments ago.

The moment she grasped the staff, a relic of the temple that increased evil energy, the power within her hands started to pound, having found a place to express itself. She had never faced a demon that was aggressive, but Rieta realized she had to use this power in any way she could and sprung to her feet.

She looked at Killian instinctively. The sword Killian threw to save Giselle happened to be at the feet of the archbishop. The devil stomped on it and﻿ crushed it to pieces. The towering devil, its body as hard as steel, was already beyond the average devil. There were only people who barely made it out alive against the evil monsters in the square made into pandemonium by the powerful chimeras and the undead. There was no one who could help Killian.

Rieta started to run blindly toward him, staff in hand.

"Rieta! Behind you!"

At Giselle's warning, Rieta squeezed her eyes shut as if she couldn't bear to look at the undead loping toward her and swung the staff full of divine energy. The undead immediately turned to dust, not even coming into contact with the staff. The staff that compounded evil energy reacted to the huge amount of divine energy, flush with purifying power, and was glowing blindingly.

"Don't go any closer!" Giselle shouted while frantically stanching Leonard's wounds. “The chimeras are unlike the other undead beings! They will not be defeated easily! You have to make contact! You can't do it alone!"

*I can't get any closer?*

Rieta came to her senses and looked over the chaos in front of her. A fight so savage she couldn't recognize it with her eyes was unfolding before her. There was no average undead charging at Killian. They were mostly chimeras. The undead near him were mostly all warped undead, grotesque and hulking.

*Can I get close into the fray?*

Giselle was right. No matter how much power she had, it was no use. There was no way she could survive in that frenzy, let alone attempt an attack. Rieta faltered, not knowing what to do. She lifted the staff. The white energy pounded in her hands. ﻿

*Something will happen...something!*

"Please...someone must help Rieta!" Giselle shrieked.

There was no one to help Killian, so there was no way anyone could protect Rieta. Rieta lifted the staff in the direction of the devil that possessed the archbishop. A silvery whirlwind whooshed around her body.

"Gracious heavens..." Rieta looked tremblingly at the enemy and whispered. “Punish these demons.”

The glaring light that blasted out of the staff in her two hands shot upwards and became a terrifying lightning bolt, striking the devil's body.

"Kiaaaaah!"

With cracking thunder, the holy lightning penetrated the devil's body. The devil howled and thrashed its tail every which way. Seira used her poleax as a vaulting pole to avoid the unpredictable writhing, flew up into the air, and barely escaped the humongous tail. But because its tail was so long, Seira's poleax caught the writhing mass and was ripped out of her hands.

Seira narrowly regained her balance and slipped to a landing. When Seira looked up to retrieve her weapon, Killian leaped up and snagged Seira's poleax from midair at that exact moment. Almost immediately the blade of Seira's poleax burned blue. He used the inertia of the poleax, flying through the air, drawing a huge crescent, and drove it straight into the devil's empty eye socket.

The devil screamed metallically, and black blood spurted out. ﻿

"Kieeeeeeehk!"

The devil sprayed blackened blood everywhere and started to writhe in agony. Killian left the poleax in the eye socket and twisted his body, avoiding the devil's thrashing by a hair. The chimera and the undead all jolted at the hit their source of power took and started to get restless.

The giant, red devil writhed in agony on the ground, scrabbling at its eye. Every time the red tail and its limbs thrashed on the ground, it shattered the slabs of stone on the ground, sending shards flying. The undead and the chimeras were being caught up in the devil's thrashing.

Rieta's eyes flew open and she saw the devil holding out.

*It wasn't enough!*

Rieta instinctively ran to the statue of the goddess. Leonard pushed Giselle forcefully with his left hand and shouted. “Go!”

Giselle's gaze wavered when he pushed her. But even that was just a moment. Giselle gripped her sword and jumped up.

Giselle's sword and Lana's magic swiftly followed Rieta to create a cover. As she focused the divine energy on the staff in her hand, the tip of the staff glowed silver as if a full moon had risen on it. “Oh, goddess, protect us. Help this demon-taken land."

Divine energy stormed around her at her prayer. Rieta swiped away the pouring rain in her eyes and splashed into the bloody fountain. Taking a﻿ deep breath, she looked up. Blood-red holy water was crashing down like a waterfall from the goddess's water jar.

"Heavenly goddess, protect us... I surrender this great power as an offering to your sacred altar.” Rieta chanted her prayer, clenched her eyes shut, and drove down the staff full of divine energy into the bloody holy water.

*Crack!*

The water in the fountain rocked with an earsplitting clap and returned to its clear, pure translucency. At the same time, a blinding light exploded.

“Protect your hallowed ground!"

The light suffused the entire square.

"Kiaaaaah!"

"Kieeeeeh!"

Suddenly, the devils started to weaken, as if the dawn had come. The undead who took the holy light in full started screaming and burned into cinders. The chimeras grew weaker at the holy light flooding the space and their bodies started to fall apart. Their squirming bodies crumbled at the knights' blades.

The white light struck the devil head-on, as it yanked the poleax out of its eye socket and flung it aside. ﻿

26

# THE TEMPLE OF HAVITUS (15)

As the huge crowd of undead disappeared from in front of her, Elise whipped her body around and swung her sword at the devil, the archbishop.

Bang!

"Kiaah! Kiaaah! Kiaaaahk!"

The wounded devil writhed and screamed. The ironlike skin was fading in.

It was working!

The moment she pulled back to swing out again, Killian shouted, his hand outstretched. "Throw it to me!"

Elise kept her arm cocked back and changed direction, throwing it toward Killian with a full swing. Killian snatched the sword, hurtling through the air like a huge, deranged barb as if he were catching an arrow in the air, and infused overwhelming energy into the flying sword.

*Good riddance, I should have Eron find one of these for my own*, Killian mused leisurely as he leaped up and drew the sword down in another crescent moon swing, striking downwards. The devil's head split surreally into two.

Hellish wails shook the earth. The single, devilish eye the monster had left, rolling in its socket, dimmed, and the black smoke from its body started to die down. The devil's black skin started to crack and crumble and became dust for the rain to wash away.

When the archbishop's body collapsed to the ground, the devil having dissipated from it, everyone's fights were over.

At some point, the rain became a light mist, and the eastern sky was becoming brighter. The survivors' eyes all turned to Rieta, who was﻿ standing under the holy water in the fountain, praying. The people then let out a breath. There were people who smiled with relief.

For a moment, Killian's expression shifted, he ran to the fountain and grabbed Rieta's hand. Rieta was lost in prayer, and her glazed-over eyes looked up at Killian. Her irises were changing to a strange color.

Killian brought his hand up to Rieta's face in disbelief. Killian's fingertips brushed Rieta's ear. His fingers picked up sticky blood that even the rain couldn't wash away.

Rieta vacantly raised a hand to her ear after seeing the blood on his hand and touched her ear herself. The blood seeping out of her ears was dripping down past her chin. Her vision blurred, and her head spun. "Rieta!"

She could hear someone calling for her from far away. A familiar, yet strange feeling pulled her heavy body down.

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The empress muttered with a wearisome face. "If only the goddess of clemency had shown herself to Killian... Could she have stopped him from slaying William and Salerion?" The empress looked around in realization. "Ah. The archbishop cannot answer this, for he is dead."

The empress looked at the evil blade in her hand, the one that had the devil sealed inside it. It was now just a normal dagger with no power. The empress stared at the blade covered in the archbishop's blood and threw it out the window of the bell tower with a bored look on her face.

The goddess hadn't descended in front of Killian. And the goddess hasn't appeared in front of me. If the goddess was of any mind to offer forgiveness to someone, then she would have been here already. ﻿

"It can only mean the gods do not yet wish for me to forgive him. It surely means I must continue to seek my vengeance."

That was a message from on high, to not forgive yet. To not stop seeking revenge yet.

"So...give me strength, Goddess of revenge."

She could still keep going on this boring journey. Somehow, Killian and she may be people whose fates have been erased, to have them in enmity for eternity.

The empress stood up and took a step on the blood-flooded stairs, but stopped. She crouched down on the step again and took off her shoes, carrying them in one hand. She started back down the steps barefoot, humming a lilting tune childishly.

"Ah... Archbishop." Empress Aversati burst out in a childish giggle. “If you could have stopped your sermon there, we wouldn't have come this far."

The last remnants of an elegant woman's giggle disappeared. Only the bloody footsteps on the winding stairs of the bell tower remained.

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The first-ever massacre to arise at the Temple of Havitus led people to fall into a state of shock. The temple was in a state of such disarray that it lost its function as a sacred site. They tried to package it into a nice story of how the Archduke of Axias's party and his knights saved the people and evacuated them, and the beautiful mage, who was the high chaplain of the grand blessing ceremony, purified the temple and pushed out the devil, but...

The archbishop died during the grand blessing ceremony. The temple's clerics ran amok as undead. The archbishop's body was taken over by the devil which led many people to their deaths. This was something that couldn't happen. ﻿

The people who went through hell to escape had witnessed the archbishop's disastrous form. The only people who saw Rieta purifying the temple and expelling the devil and the actions of Killian's companions were the few clerics who survived to the end and Lectus Eustio's delegation. The terror of a massacre, which would last forever in people's minds as an unforgettable nightmare, will replace the Temple of Havitus's renown.

"Havitus Temple is over as a temple."

"I know. Why did the empress have to get involved?"

"What says the empress?"

Leonard replied to Killian's question with a dissatisfied look on his face. "Her Majesty appears to have lost consciousness after the ringing of the bell when the archbishop allegedly attacked her."

"That is preposterous!"

"Blasphemy!"

The knights became enraged and started to clamor.

"Has she even been injured by this dubious attack?"

"What does it matter when countless lives have been lost?"

"This is no matter to be overlooked, Your Royal Highness. You must have an audience with the emperor!"

"We should just take her life ourselves! She's not the only one who can feign innocence!"

Chaos exploded in front of Killian as his knights fearlessly exchanged harsh words about the imperial family. ﻿

Killian frowned and waved his hand, signaling them to stop. “Where is the empress now?"

Leonard spoke up but looked like he didn't want to. “Due to the immense suffering to her psyche, her carriage set off early this morning to the imperial palace for convalescence."

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"I didn't expect much this time either." The empress stretched out her stiff legs. "Whenever William reveals his impressive schemes to me, I am ever more convinced that they will not fail, but I cannot bear such antics for much longer."

The shoes she placed in the corner got knocked over by her toes. The empress muttered as she stared at the bloody shoes. “These were dearly cherished shoes... It's such a shame to waste them after a single use." It was a waste to throw them away after wearing them only once.

The empress nudged them upright with her feet, but rather than standing back up, they tumbled farther apart.

She couldn't recall the name of that pretty young thing... the widow from Cevitas. A great mage?

"He always had good fortune with his alliances," the empress mused.

The empress turned toward the window, placed her elbow on the windowsill, and rested her chin on her hand.

"Alas... How trite it is... This ordeal we call life."

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Killian's people heard that Lectus Eustio and the rest of the emperor's delegation were leaving. Lectus Eustio, having finished preparing for﻿ departure, had come to their quarters to bid them farewell. Killian and several of his knights escorted them to the gates of the deserted temple.

"I am greatly indebted for your aid, Archduke."

"An early departure."

"Yes, Your Highness. I have a great deal to report to His Majesty and I must do so in person. Havitus Temple may not find its place as a temple again, but I'm considering asking him for his assistance in taking care of the aftermath of this incident."

"Very well."

Lectus Eustio was going to the imperial palace. The empress will probably have arrived first. Killing the archbishop, and destroying this temple, one of the only three great temples in the empire, to this degree... This time, the empress had gone too far.

Even so, there was no evidence the person behind it all was the empress. If they had been unable to protect Lectus Eustio and the remaining clerics, they might have been blamed for this entire incident. Clear evidence was needed to bring down the most powerful woman in the empire.

Lectus Eustio was a fair judge. Killian remembered him even though he feigned ignorance. When the emperor was looking for people who could stand in for him when he practically became unable to walk outside of the palace, he was the judge the emperor thought of very highly. He was someone who was fair and uncompromising toward all evidence that was submitted, but he should have his own judgment.

Killian spoke briefly, "Convey my greetings to the emperor. And to the empress."

"I shall, Sire, and lest I forget..." Lectus Eustio held out a letter stamped with the empress's seal. "Her Majesty did leave a missive for Your Highness." ﻿

Giselle, who was standing behind Killian, stepped forward and accepted it.

Lectus spoke unflinchingly. "It's free of poison."

Giselle grinned. "My duty is to uphold our own protocols, sir."

Lectus Eustio stared at her and said, "And protocol decrees that His Highness may only be accompanied by no more than twelve armed knights."

Giselle clamped her mouth shut at Lectus's fair criticism. Killian cocked his head to the side airily and laughed. “Will you report this as well to His Majesty?"

Lectus bowed his head at his question and replied. “That would be my duty."

A flustered Leonard carefully interrupted, "But the ladies of the East Annex are Axias Manor's most well-kept secret."

Giselle shoved her elbow into Leonard's side. Leonard yelped and grabbed his ribs.

Giselle lowered her voice, maintaining her smile, and spoked through gritted teeth, "Not anymore, with that indulgent tongue of yours."

Lectus Eustio replied without any change to his expression. “But I have only been witness to three knightmaidens, and I express my deep gratitude for Dame Seira in her opportune aid.”

Seira smiled flushing and shrugged. “Then might I suggest that you forgo the address as a gesture of your gratitude?"

"As you wish, Miss Seira. Thank the other ladies as well for their remarkable skills at arms. I've witnessed the most unexpected thing and find myself filled with great admiration.” A faint smile appeared on Lectus Eustio's face for a moment and disappeared. ﻿﻿

Giselle narrowed her eyes at the strange comment.

"Now I must embark on my passage. I bid you a safe journey for the remainder of your travels."

Killian replied calmly. “Farewell.”

Lectus Eustio and his guard knights left. Giselle and Leonard, watching them leave, turned to each other simultaneously, and he asked, “Did he know?"

The reply didn't come from Giselle but from Killian. “So he knew."

Killian looked at Giselle casually. "What of her missive?"

Giselle quickly looked over the letter and opened the seal. She read, "Archduke, I am most grieved by the incidents of Havitus Temple. Knowing you are unharmed gives me much comfort. I regret being unable to bid you farewell before my departure, but I shall impart your regards to His Majesty. I pray for your safe return to Axias. May your lands be filled with peace. Empress Aversati."

Giselle handed over the letter when Killian reached out his hand. Killian swept his gaze over the letter again. It was a normal letter but something felt out of place to him. "And Rieta?"

"She is still in deep slumber. Rachel is attending to her, but shall I go and see how she is faring?"

Right then, they saw a familiar train of carriages climb up the mountain path and toward the gate. It was the empress's delegation and clerics, all looking much worse for wear, and the gifts for the empress from Axias.

The delegation recognized the Archduke of Axias's people and stopped in front of them. A gaunt Vincent stepped out of the carriage and bowed in respect.

"My gosh, they must be cheetahs or something."

Killian chuckled at what one of his knights muttered under his breath. "Well, that was fast."

"I-I apologize, Sire. Did the ceremony go well?"

Killian put a hand on his waist and turned his head. “Her Majesty has left already. You must want to rest, but Vilhelm, it seems you'll have to leave for the imperial palace right away."

"Sire?” Vincent asked again with a dumbfounded look.

Killian ignored him and added, “The clerics should steel themselves. Something happened at the temple."

"Sire?"

This time, the clerics looked dumbfounded. Killian turned away, not adding anything else.

How long will it take for Rieta to heal? Her body was damaged quite a bit here and there. If it was possible, he wanted to take her after she was all better.

Right then, Leonard's voice stopped his thoughts. "Pray... I believe I see a knight of Axias headed this way!"

They all looked up at the flag bearer on the single horse coming down the mountain path. The black and red fabrics on the saddle, and the gold border were surely proving it was one of the knights of Axias. The flag bearer was galloping up the mountain path, pushing the horse on. As the knight got closer, the flag bearer's identity became clearer.

"It seems like it's Vector?"

"You're right. That gray horse. It's Falcon."

Killian's group stood there and waited. The fastest knight of Axias, and the one who happened to be the messenger, was getting closer quickly. The flag bearer flew through the gate, jumped off his horse as if he was falling off, and fell prostrate at Killian's feet. Falcon, sides foaming with sweat, nickered excitedly, and Leonard grabbed his reins to calm him.

"M-my...lord Archduke, Y-your Highness... Knight Vector..." ﻿

"No need for formalities, just state your business." Killian instinctively felt this wasn't a small item of news and asked for it immediately.

Vector wailed as if he was spitting blood. "Plague is upon Axias!"

A bolt from of the blue. The people's shocked faces turned white in an instant.

Killian crumpled the letter in his hand.

"May your lands be filled with peace."

It felt like his blood was curdling.

"Where, precisely? And how great?" pressed Giselle quickly.

"Over eighty villagers have fallen sick in the west of the manor...and three ladies of the East Annex of Axias Castle!"

"The East Annex?"

Their faces turned from white to blue in shock.

"W-Who...?" A voice crept out from somewhere not there. The people turned around.

A ghost-pale Rieta was standing there, supported by Rachel. Rieta was the person who was in charge of blessing the East Annex.

"Whom of the East Annex has caught the plague?” Rieta pushed for an answer in a trembling voice.

Did they get infected from the place there wasn't enough of a blessing? If I had blessed Irene fully too, then couldn't this have passed by? Because my heart had disliked her for what that Irene had said. Because my sincerity in the blessing wasn't enough. Couldn't it be possible that's why I wasn't able to stop this?

It felt like hours before Vector spoke.

"Miss Charlotte, Miss Deborah, and the young Miss Anna." ﻿

27

# THE PLAGUE OF AXIAS (1)

"Are you sure it's a plague?"

"A doctor and mage have confirmed this as such, my lord.”

Killian gritted his teeth. "When did they learn of the outbreak, and how long was your journey here?"

"I departed as soon as we learned of the outbreak in the East Annex, and I have ridden for two days."

"Report on everything, including the western territories."

"Before the plague was found among the East Annex's ladies, there was a report on a fever that was suspected to be the plague, spreading through the western territories. At the time of the report, the estimated number of victims was about eighty or so." Vector ignored his cracking voice and continued his report. He didn't even think to wipe away the sweat beading down his jaw. "A group of knights, doctors, and mages journeyed out to verify the veracity of the report. I left as soon as three ladies of the East Annex became sick because I decided there was no time to delay.”

Vector continued his report, panting. The type of plague, the area it broke out, and the current estimation of its progress according to the reported information.

People's faces changed with every word that came out of Vector's mouth. Even if the plague hadn't attacked Axias thus far, everyone could still remember the epidemic disaster ten or so years ago, killing off a third of the empire's population in five years. The plague broke out nineteen years ago right at the cusp of the union of the empire, and it was barely contained fourteen years ago, but it was common to hear of entire villages being ravaged.

The Diritas Plague Outbreak. The outbreak of a plague nearly decimated the newly united empire of the first emperor. No one could forget the disaster that saw the loss of a third of the population in just five years. ﻿

Many cities were destroyed through it, and many people lost their parents, friends, and close neighbors.

Even Killian, a member of the imperial family, was no exception. His half- sister, a young imperial princess, had lost her life to the plague at the time.

People of similar age to Killian and his knights had all been in their teens and remembered what happened. The majority of the people in Axias were refugees from places devastated by the plague and settled in the faraway land of Axias, just establishing itself then. The sense of danger they felt was even more so for those who retained the memory.

"Did you isolate the area of the outbreak?”

"The East Annex was immediately isolated. The outbreak in the western territories is not yet confirmed, but it has been cordoned off for now, and knights set out for them. I came here without verifying it with my own eyes, but the knights will have arrived and placed restrictions on travel. Leonidis has taken charge there. If it's not the plague, they will lift the travel ban, and after that..." Vector's report continued.

Hopefully, it was wrong, but it'll have to be seen as right. Vector didn't say it, but it was highly likely the plague was in the western territories, even without considering the worst possible situation.

Eighty people. Normally, when there were more than ten plague cases in a territory, the number doubled within one or two days. By now...and by the time they arrived in Axias...

Killian wrung his fist.

*If they were isolated in time, then it'll be all right. It can still be resolved.*

"So we won't be able to know the number of additional cases in the western territories. Is the East Annex the only place the outbreak is confirmed? And the status of the patients?"

"Two days before I left, Miss Charlotte and Miss Deborah were showing symptoms of high fever and general debility, but they were able to move﻿ and were still of able body. But..." Vector's face darkened. "Miss Anna was in an especially poor state. Her condition declined after she went through a night of high fevers and vomiting, so they called for a doctor to find out those were symptoms of the plague."

The East Annex women's faces became stiff at the bad news they intuitively knew was coming.

"The disease had progressed far more greatly than what is expected within a mere day."

Rieta stood there, her eyes seeing nothing. The conversation going back and forth right next to her echoed faintly like a conversation in another world.

"Why is the progression so fast? Is there a demon of the plague?"

"None were able to determine the cause. The retired cleric who was with them didn't have enough divine power to confirm."

Rieta had lost her senses like she was stuck in a nightmare, but she spoke up as if she were breaking down the screen that clouded her mind. “Plague is swift through the body of a young child."

With the interruption from an unexpected source, the people's gazes all focused on Rieta.

Killian asked quickly. “A young child? Can Anna be seen as such a young child?"

"Yes. She's twelve, so it will progress at double the rate for her. It can soon become fatal." Rieta was woodenly speaking like she was someone who couldn't feel emotions. “In most cases, if a plague demon attaches itself to an adult, the plague progresses into a coma in two weeks at the fastest. It's a matter of time until death from then on, and it varies, but most can't last a month. There are a lot of cases where they can't last at all.”

Her heart dropped. The people remembered Rieta was a mage and that she came from a place where the plague spread far wider. ﻿

A calm voice flowed out of her mouth like it was someone else's voice. “The soul of a child is too pure for demons to easily target, but it is also weaker than a soul of age and quickly becomes consumed should a demon seize it.

"If it is a case of the Diritas Plague, she will fall into a trance in two weeks' time. But if the demon of plague dwells in her, it will barely take a week. Removing the demon, and even trying to cure her..."

The people's faces grew even paler as they listened closely to Rieta.

"If the demon eats the death caused by the plague, it starts to multiply very fast after that. That is why we burn patients who are in a trance. It's the only way for laypeople to stop the spread of the plague without a cleric.”

Even the knights who used to be mercenaries grew serious and exchanged glances as they listened to the testimony of a person who had come from a plague-ridden village, a gruesome truth they had never experienced. What she just said was shocking as well, but the knightmaidens who knew her well were staring at her in shock at how she was talking about even death as if she were a stranger.

“When did the symptoms appear in Anna?” Killian's voice shot through like ice water.

A bleak answer came back. "The nightfall of the fourteenth, my lord."

It was the morning of the eighteenth. It had already been four days. If it took them four days to leave the empress's delegation behind and push forward relentlessly to Havitus Temple. It would have been at least week by the time they returned.

"Prepare the horses. All will return to Axias,” Killian declared. The air around him had changed.

"Yes, Sire!"

He turned to Vector. “How did you manage the journey in just two days?”

“I didn't sleep, my lord. I carried no load and endured on a single meal.” ﻿

The knights' faces grew gaunt at the ridiculously simple answer. Instead of looking in awe at his subordinate's dedication, he asked again with no change to his expression. "Is there a quicker route?"

"I came by way of Nauhanas and Ottnang, Sire"

“I know it to be a difficult passage. Is there a route for horseback?”

Vector informed him of a shortcut that was quite difficult. It was a rough path that the carriages couldn't go on.

"Make ready and assemble here in twenty minutes for departure. We will leave the carriages, and the women shall ride on horseback."

Looking at Rieta as soon as he was done, Killian realized there was a problem. What she whispered to Giselle in a low voice struck into his ears like needles.

"Giselle, could you quickly explain to me how to ride a horse?"

Even the oh-so-great Killian choked at the nonsensical question. *There's no way anyone can ride after only an explanation!* But that was besides the point. *How would she'd be able to ride through the rough paths of the mountains alongside his knights?*

Giselle replied in disbelief. “But Rieta, your leg is injured. You cannot be riding horseback!"

*Right, she is injured.* Killian spoke immediately and corrected himself. "The women will stay here. Bide your time until Rieta recovers and return to the carriages."

Rieta shook her head promptly. “No, my lord." She dared to talk back to him while her pure blue eyes looked straight into Killian's crimson ones, without any fear in them. “Anna is family to all the ladies of the East Annex."

Killian was so dumbfounded that he didn't even feel he should get angry. It was such a direct statement it was hard to believe Rieta said it. She doesn't﻿ even know how to ride a horse, but glancing at the women's faces, they all looked like they were desperate to go. They all looked at him with looks saying they wanted to be the first ones to run over.

Killian clenched his eyes shut and opened them. “Leonard, Allen, Marcus, you three will remain with Rieta. Return together when you all, including Rieta, are completely recovered. The rest of you, make haste."

The three who got called out were the ones who had gotten wounded in the fight the day before. They couldn't ride immediately anyway. Killian knew he was laying down orders as they came to him, in his blurred judgment from being in a state of restlessness.

*Still, it was better than the woman babbling and asking how to ride a horse.*

Before Killian turned to walk away, he thumped Vector on his shoulder. "Good work. Get some sleep. You will come with the second party."

"I will go with you, Sire.”

Killian refused Vector right away. "No. Don't be a deadweight. Just draw a map in twenty minutes and give it to me so we can use it to get back."

Vector faltered for a moment but made a fist across his chest in respect and bowed his head. "Yes, Sire."

He was about to brush past Vector when Rieta stepped in front of him. Killian's eyebrow cocked up. "What now?"

Rieta bent down without any hesitation and lifted her skirts just up to her undergarments. The people's eyes went wide. Rachel whipped her skirts up and hid her from the view of the male knights.

Rieta's wound on her upper left thigh was just a thin red line from the cut and nearly healed. It was from the divine power she immersed her body in last night, healing her without her even realizing it. ﻿

"My wound is fully healed. I am well able to travel."

*But the fact she couldn't ride a horse still stood, no?* Killian burst out in laughter at her quite confident behavior. The knights stared at Killian as i they were looking at something peculiar. Killian looked her up and down with his crimson eyes, a hand on his hip.

"Very well. Then you shall ride with me."

"Thank you, my lord."

Rieta calmly thanked him and let down her skirt. Killian nodded twice, facing Rieta, and turned around. "Twenty minutes. Make ready and assemble here."

"Yes, Sire!"

The mercenaries-turned-knights fell into step and whispered with unbelieving eyes. "Wow. I honestly didn't believe it. It's even more than what I've heard?"

"Yeah. Don't the two of them give off a good feeling?"

A cold voice pierced through. "What leisure is this, gentlemen? You must not be so worried because you don't have any lovers you left behind in Axias, hm?" The two knights clamped their mouths shut and ran off at Rachel's cold assumption.

Giselle, who heard them, tilted her head to the side with a dubious look.

*It was surely not a bad feeling, but... It wasn't this kind of feeling. Rieta, she... ﻿*

Giselle snapped to reality and shook her head, quickening her step. Right now, there was a bigger problem at hand than that.

*"If the demon eats the death, it starts to multiply very fast after that. That is why we burn patients who are in a coma."*

A chill passed in her head. The plague, and...death. In the people of the East Annex. There was no way they could let something like that happen to Anna. Giselle hurried her steps and moved toward getting her things together.

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The six horses drawing the carriage were unhitched and found their way to their riders. Giselle, Elise, Seira, Rachel, Lana, and the groom pulled each of their horses along. The groom changed into a knight's uniform and mixed in naturally among them.

Excluding Leonard, Allen, and Marcus, but adding knight Hasler, who had disguised himself as a groom, the number of knights came out to ten. And the five women each mounted their horses. They all had fought in a relentless battle during the night and had not been able to rest properly, but there was not even a single person whose movements were sluggish.

Killian grabbed Rieta by the waist and hoisted her up onto the horse. He got on the horse behind her and took hold of the reins. Without any sign of their departure, without leaving word of a farewell to the temple, all the riders started to gallop as Killian spurred on his horse. Leaving behind the temple soaked with the blood of the biggest massacre in the holy land. Past the historical temple's dreary scenery, dew glistened on green leaves, and the sun rose adamantly. ﻿

28

# THE PLAGUE OF AXIAS (2)

"Must we stop at a village for the night?" Rieta asked again with a shadow on her face. Killian looked bitterly at her as he lifted her off the horse, her face blue from the pain.

"I am no more for delay than you are,” Killian replied. “But there's no way to cross that distance in two days anyway. Vector and Falcon are the fastest knight and horse pair in my knights, so no one can follow them. We are seventeen people, and we only have sixteen horses. This large convoy cannot ride through the night without rest and sustenance."

If they did that, there would definitely be a person or a horse that would become ill. Killian thought the chances of Rieta being that person were high, but he didn't want to poke the stubborn mule that she was and claim she was fine, telling them to go. Killian's black mare Rhea was particularly working hard, carrying two riders on her back.

"Steady yourself, for even this four-day journey will not be agreeable."

Rieta forced herself to nod. "But we will depart by the fifth hour of dawn?"

If they were to leave at five, they'd have to wake up at four-thirty, at least. The knights looked at her, irked. Someone muttered, "What a trouper." Giselle shot a look at them.

A slightly more assertive knight raised his hand bravely. “I call for the sixth hour."

The women retorted simultaneously. “Five.”

Killian settled it. "Five and a half."

The women looked dour, dissatisfied, but the men clenched their fists in joy and cheered inwardly. The women didn't feel tired from their impatience caused by the report of the plague. Giselle was worried first﻿ and foremost about Anna, but she had no choice but to agree with Killian's decision.

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They ended up resting for four hours, from one to five in the morning. The inn had plenty of rooms open because travelers were scarce in the village due to the plague. They paid the innkeeper handsomely as if they had rented out the whole place, and the innkeeper accommodated them generously. He looked a little surprised but agreed to even prepare them breakfast at five in the morning.

Only Killian used one double bedroom by himself, and the rest were allotted two each a room. Giselle and Rachel, Elise and Seira, and Lana and Rieta roomed together. It was so Lana could help Rieta with a bit of magic to make her feel a little more comfortable because Rieta was the only one among them not used to this kind of journey.

But Giselle felt Rieta was not having a problem with her body, but something else, looking at her blank, thin face as Rieta walked into her room. Lana would make her body feel more comfortable, but Giselle waved at Lana to switch rooms with her because she thought she was more needed.

But there was no chance for Giselle to speak to Rieta. A knock sounded on the door as soon as they quickly bathed and changed their clothes. It was Killian.

"A word with Rieta."

Rieta rustled to her feet, still expressionless. Giselle waited for Rieta to come back, leaning against the bed frame, but she couldn't fight off the weariness settling on her body after her bath for long and ended up falling asleep.

\*\*\*﻿

Rieta followed Killian into his room and stopped. It was because she saw the small, low-level demon hanging in the window.

"One moment, Sire."

Rieta quietly walked toward the window, not even looking back at Killian. As Rieta approached, the demon, wriggling like a lump of mud, stuck out an eye like a snail's antenna and stared at her. Demons, invisible to most, were beings like ghosts. They started to be visible to even ordinary people when they became faster and able to attack directly.

It was rare, but these kinds of demons could be found anywhere. Low-level demons that weren't visible to ordinary people and didn't attack. They could be left alone, the insignificant creatures that only had the instinct to gobble up people's negative emotions. They couldn't directly give a negative influence on people. Even if they didn't attack, some dangerous ones like plague demons or fire demons endangered humans with just their presence, but this one was just a dream demon. The kind that ate the fear and despair from nightmares they caused.

But Rieta decided to chase it out because it could attach itself to His Lordship if she left it alone. Even Rieta, who had no powers of purging to obliterate the demon directly, could purify or bless to get rid of a weak demon like this. They were small enough to try to escape even the weakest amount of divine energy. The demon struggled to keep hold of the window as Rieta started to pray and purify but soon slipped off and fell outside.

Killian was watching Rieta from behind, watching her bless the windowsill with her glowing hands. Soon, Rieta stepped back from the window and turned to him. "It's done, Sire."

Rieta sat at the little table upon Killian's urging and looked at him blankly. It didn't look like rude behavior to Killian much, but... Her careful behavior, so careful it made him wonder if she was scared, was so ingrained into her that this Rieta seemed too bold and somehow seemed like perhaps there was a loose screw. ﻿

"What did you wish to speak about?"

*Look at that. It's strange.*

Killian stared at Rieta. “Something is different in your manner today."

"Different?"

"This is nothing like you.” Killian smiled an odd smile. “Bold may suffice as my impression."

"The matter at hand is urgent."

"But the usual response from you would be..." Killian looked into Rieta's eyes and cocked his head to the side. "Forgive me for my offense, my lord. Or some other equally submissive remark.”

Rieta paused and replied. "Forgive me, my lord."

Killian smirked. "No matter, for I have heard more apologies from you than I can bear in one lifetime already. In fact, I prefer this new, refreshing demeanor, but this is not why I brought you here tonight." Killian laced his fingers together and placed his hands on his knee. "Will you not come and reside in the East Annex?"

Rieta pursed her lips into a thin line at the unexpected offer and met his eyes. She had heard something similar some time ago, but she didn't think it was something he would say.

"I must first explain, you must be aware of It by now, but the East Annex is no harem. It is a place of dwelling for my knightmaidens. All who dwell there are doing so in service of me."

Rieta nodded slightly. “Yes... I was advised by Rachel to hold this knowledge to secrecy."

"Good. Then this shall not keep us long." Killian picked up the teapot from the table and poured Rieta a cup of tea. “Would you care to stay beside me﻿﻿ as the mage of the manor? I have yet to have a mage in my order."

Rieta silently gazed at the tea filling up the cup. She looked up from the cup and spoke. "I would not be able to learn how to combat on horseback at this age... I fear I am rather too old."

Killian chuckled. "Is that what you think I would require of you?”

He pushed the teacup full of tea in front of Rieta. The crimson eyes looking down at the teacup through slightly wet, black hair, swinging just a little, looked up at Rieta. "There's no need for you to learn how to fight. You'll have to learn how to ride. But even Lana doesn't know how to fight on a horse. The ability to ride a horse alone would prove useful."

Killian crossed his arms and rested his chin on his hand as if he were going to guess what she was going to say. "The Axias knights are not made up of people who went through formal knight training. The East Annex is the same. They are called knights, but the general meaning of knight applies to about half. It's different from other orders because it's somewhere sorcerers, mercenaries, and even assassins are called knights."

He looked down again and poured his tea, continuing, “The East Annex is publicly known as a place for my prized mistresses, so it'll most likely be difficult to get married. I'm compensating them at the very least.

Everyone's values are different, but from what I've heard from the women in the East Annex, it's enough even to give up having a romantic relationship for a while."

Killian paused momentarily and looked at her. "But perhaps you have a lover?"

"I do not."

"Very well." Killian lifted his cup to his lips and added. "I do not forbid romance, and a private marriage is allowed if you were to choose from one of my knights."

*They were people who knew the situation as well.*

"If you have someone you'd like to have a relationship with from the territory, then do so as you wish, but you have to keep this a secret. You should be able to determine if someone willing to understand the fact that you're the prized mistress of a tyrant. If you're able to keep this a secret, then you're free to meet whoever you'd like.”

Killian sipped his tea and continued. "People outside the territory are difficult. If you must choose someone like that, then I'll be confirming myself over a long period of time if that person is trustworthy.”

Rieta looked calm. Killian thought there was a good chance she would accept his offer, so he explained in that much more detail. “Your duties would not vary greatly from these recent days. In fact, I would prefer it if you didn't labor as much as you have on this journey. And if you choose to join the East Annex, it'll be fine to continue accepting jobs in the manor to bless as you have been doing."

Rieta looked a little hesitant and spoke. “My abilities last night were unusual and only possible as a result of the great surge of divine energy from the ceremony. None of that divine energy is left now that the ceremony has long since ended. I am merely a middling mage, no better than any able cleric. It would be my honor to aid you in any capacity, but I fear my humble abilities will fail to please you."

Killian grinned and replied. “I was already much satisfied with your talent before last night."

She gave one last rally, but Killian had already set his mind on it. A hardworking and loyal mage who could see demons. She was quite weak, but he approved of her flexible ability to handle situations. Her skills were needed now more than ever with the situation in the territory, and she already knew the secret to the East Annex, so there was no other danger in bringing her in. ﻿

"What matters more is the heart that lies behind the talent. It is a rare thing to come across a truly trustworthy individual with no risk of betrayal. Such a thing is vital for a man of my standing."

The answer came back promptly. "I shall.”

Killian chuckled and murmured, “Such a quick response?" He had expected it. Killian brought the teacup to his lips again and spoke. “I know it to be difficult to decline an offer made by one in a higher power. Take a month's time to deliberate it with due care. Should you still feel the same afterward, come to the castle and ask for me."

"I have given it ample thought."

“I do not allow exceptions. Every one of the East Annex ladies had a month to consider the matter," said Killian bluntly. “Then you have until the eve of the fall. Should enough time pass without a word from you, I shall take the silence as your refusal."

"Yes, my lord." She wasn't going to refuse anyway, but Rieta didn't make a fuss about it when she learned the others also got a grace period.

Killian continued. "Do not take this matter lightly, for it can become a marker of change in your life. Should you have any inkling of doubt, you may refuse. There are many ways in which to borrow your gifts, even if you do not choose to live as a knightmaiden of the East Annex."

Rieta nodded. “Yes, my lord. And I offer my services without regard to this decision."

"It seems I shall be forced to take that offer soon, by the looks of our current ordeal.” Killian expressionlessly added as he looked at Rieta, who hadn't touched her teacup. "Which is why you'd best take heed of your health. Keep yourself well, and do not miss your meals."

"Yes, my lord." ﻿﻿

A calm reply. It was the kind of sure and concise reply Killian preferred, but he was slightly put off by the immediate and reckless answer this time. It was his first time seeing someone more expressionless than he was

when they were talking with him.

Killian frowned and tossed out a spontaneous question. "Rieta... Are you quite well right now?"

A seemingly obvious reply came back. “Certainly, my lord."

"I am aware of your words of habit but are you truly feeling well?" Killian stared at Rieta's face. "I do not want you to be in pain. I've caused you much distress during this journey."

Rieta was silent. He continued. "And it is my duty to care for you. I brought you to Axias Manor, and thus I am responsible for your care as your lord. You devoted yourself in too great a service to me at Havitus, and even this rushed passage home is for the good of my manor. Regardless of whether or not you choose to join the East Annex, you are already one of my own."

The strange emotions he felt from her on their way to the temple overlapped on the woman's expressionless face. Killian ended up asking the question he wasn't going to ask. “The plagued child you spoke of earlier... Was that your daughter?"

Rieta's face froze. She looked like she was shocked. Then, after a long while, she broke the silence with her mouth opening and closing as if she were going to speak but then not.

"If I may..." Rieta spoke, her face pale. “May I discuss it at another time?"

Killian already thought there was no need to listen to her response. Rieta spoke as if she couldn't breathe, stammering. “We must hurry back to Axias. And you bid me take rest.”

*As expected, this wasn't the normal Rieta.*

"Very well," Killian replied, wry on the inside. “Go and take a rest. Your troubles will not go unrewarded when we return to Axias."

A moment passed, and an answer he'd expected from her normal self came back. "The opportunity to repay your kindness is reward enough for me."

*So this was also Rieta.*

She was impertinent, but rather than hearing the excruciatingly tiresome submissiveness, he preferred her present demeanor. Killian was about to wave her off, but Rieta's voice rang out, “Shall I take you to your chambers then?"

Killian's face froze. "What?"

Rieta's hand was grabbing her body unconsciously. "This flesh is what you..." The empty blue eyes floating in the pale face were wavering strangely.

"Rieta...?"

Killian stood up and shook Rieta by the shoulder. Rieta flinched as if she had come to her senses and looked up at Killian. The refocused blue eyes met his and blinked.

"What did I just say...?" Rieta's already pale complexion became even whiter. Rieta jumped to her feet. "I've spoken amiss. I bid you good night, my lord."

Rieta ran out of the room as if she were escaping. She looked so desperate that Killian couldn't even dare to grab hold of her. He stood there for a while, flustered. ﻿

29

# THE PLAGUE OF AXIAS (3)

It was a murderous march they took on right after the terrible battle against the demons that stomped all over Havitus Temple. No one in their entire group slept properly for two days.

But the nightmare of the plague was becoming a reality in their Axias, so they couldn't just flounder around like in a dream. Even the knights used to harsh conditions crawled out of bed groaning of muscle pains and exhaustion, but the dizzying race back was to continue and they blindly shoved breakfast into their mouths at the crack of dawn.

Rieta stood in front of Killian, her face impassive as if nothing had happened the night before. He didn't ask or talk about the night before and simply lifted Rieta atop the horse.

Sixteen horses and seventeen people started to race toward Axias again. The horses' hooves pounded against the dry land, and a yellow cloud of dust followed them.

The small blonde-haired woman, barely coming up to Killian's chin, was at the head of the pack, enduring the intense journey in his arms.

Her hair was tied up firmly when they started the new leg of their journey, but it came loose quickly on the horse. Rieta had her hood on in this heat to make sure her flying hair didn't bother Killian. The breeze blew through the white-gold strands under the hood.

*Every little thing you do, from eating, breathing, and putting on clothes, will be done with your feet on the sweat, blood, and life of other creatures.*

Killian wasn't a devout believer, but his mother had placed him on her lap from time to time and read him verses from the holy book. He loved the golden rays of sunlight streaming through the leaves, shining on his mother's hair and eyelashes. ﻿

*We enter this world in sin, through the great suffering of our own mothers, and only in love and compassion for others can we be redeemed. This path alone will absolve you from sustaining this life at the cost of others.*

*The life that sustained him was surely won at the cost of William and Salerion's blood*, Killian thought. He had perhaps killed them to survive- to save his soul from the self-destructing rage and thirst for revenge burning him up.

He saw himself in the empress. She was surely doing these things to him to live herself.

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*"Mother. Were you in pain when I was born?”*

In his memory, his mother smiled beautifully, brushing away blinding strands of blonde hair.

*"No."*

\*\*\*

*"Killian."*

*"You must forgive Aversati.”*

A parched voice intersected his beautiful memory.

*"The sin is with William and Salerion, not their mother."*

*"She has done no wrong worthy of the great price she is forced to pay."*

*"You must bear her wrath as your burden."*

\*\*\*

*"You're lying..."*

A lovely laugh trilled across the leaves. ﻿

*Beautiful. Beautiful. My beautiful mother.*

She smiled lovingly and pulled Killian close.

*"Truly."*

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The journey continued breathlessly.

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*"Killian."*

*"You must find a true purpose for your existence."*

*"For your mother gave her life so that you may keep your own."*

\*\*\*

Whenever his territory's issues filled his head, that bother of a woman disappeared from his mind shortly. Even if he couldn't love and empathize and bless others, helping those on his territory live their lives was the least he could do.

*“Plague is upon Axias!"*

Killian welcomed her wrath upon him. The people in his territory had nothing to do with it.

Even in such nerve-racking and angering moments like these, the fact he cared so much about the woman in his arms, looking straight ahead, was because she was so frail but so unnecessarily devoted.

Perhaps it was because of her white-gold hair, which reminded him of someone.

Perhaps it was because it was tough to bear the empress's wrath this time around. ﻿﻿

Perhaps.

Around sunset two days later, They returned to Axias. It was the seventh day since the plague developed in Anna.

\*\*\*

The plague and demons were a matched pair that could never be separated.

The fear, disgust, and grief brought on by the deaths from the plague were the best sources of energy for the demons. So the demons flourished in any place the plague struck. Plague demons were more so. Demons of the plague were always in the cities where the plague was thriving. The plague and the plague demons were in a symbiotic relationship, one strengthening the other. Moreover, the deaths from the plague strengthened the demons of the plague and caused them to multiply.

Was the plague first, or the plague demons? There were two cases of such an unpleasant alliance between the two. The first is where the plague demons are drawn close after sensing the naturally occurring plague. The second is where the plague demon attaches itself to a person and leads to the occurrence of the plague.

Most plague demons went around looking for people with the plague to make them their hosts, make their conditions worse, and help spread the plague to more and more people. This is a case where the plague was first.

There were also cases where the demons were first. Sometimes plague demons would attach to healthy people and work their way in gradually, causing the plague themselves. The demons are very weak before ingesting death, so they cannot cause illness in people immediately, and it takes a long time for them to succeed. These demons can be warded off relatively easily if someone is blessed, but it was not a perfect out because there were always exceptions. Like with Casarius.

Killian asked Rieta. "Could it be the work of a demon?"

Rieta replied. "It is likely. The plague has penetrated the barrier of blessings I had cast on the manor. This can only indicate the presence of a highly powerful demon or a curse cast upon the land."

Demons cannot infiltrate a place or a person with a blessing easily, but there were exceptions. If a curse or a fraud offset a blessing, or if it's a demon that's become stronger from eating tens or hundreds of deaths, or if it's a demon so powerful its name was remembered throughout history, then it was impossible to stop it with a blessing or purification.

In times like these, purging was necessary, and with these kinds of demons, they were visible enough to be seen by ordinary people as well. The demon that raged over the night of the grand blessing ceremony was also of this kind. The ones who became visible enough to look like plague demons were able to hide themselves to a point, but it was hard to put down roots into a human's body and stay there without being found out until even the power of purging couldn't take care of them.

If Rieta were there, she would have known as soon as she laid eyes on the demon had it infiltrated. She was thinking back to when she had last visited the East Annex. There wasn't even the slightest sign of a demon.

It was barely a few days since they had left Axias. It was something that occurred as if it was lying in wait.

As soon as they arrived in Axias, they were informed that Anna's condition was even worse. Spots had appeared on her body, and she had started to babble nonsense. She was already in the third week of a plague of the same kind, the last straits of the sickness.

They quickly exchanged necessary words as they headed to the East Annex to check on Anna themselves.

"What is the difference between a plague with a demon and one without?" ﻿

"The plague progresses faster and it's harder to get better if a demon attaches itself. So the sickness cannot be treated properly if the demon is not first removed, Sire."

"And infection?"

"If the patient dies with a demon present, the plague spreads faster, Sire."

Killian recalled the report he had read from Havitus Temple. He had ignored most parts, thinking it wasn't credible. But there was something written in there about this too.

"Is there another reason why the sickness spreads differently if a demon is present?"

"It is because the proliferation of the sickness and the demons are different, Sire. There are cases where death brought on by a demon can cause the spawning of another demon, and plague demons are such cases. So the plague instantly spreads to those who are in their immediate vicinity if someone dies."

*If Anna died, then the East Annex would be ruined. Axias Manor itself could fall into danger.*

Killian was running through all the horrible calculations while listening to Rieta's explanation when Anna's childish face popped up in his head.

*Anna. Twelve years old. Too young to die. Damn it.*

Seven years ago, he had rescued the five-year-old little tyke from the grip of an abusive abbot in the western countryside. The little one who trailed behind him would trot out and beam at him every time he visited the East Annex, and she had grown up to be a little lady and a fixture of the East Annex in no time.

*How could it be the plague? ﻿*

"The plague itself can spread at any time, but it can be avoided if careful. Healthy people do not catch the plague that easily, and having a blessing can prevent it to a point.” Rieta continued as Killian was listening. “But newborn demons can cause the plague in their first host, so even healthy, blessed people cannot escape infection."

"Can't escape it? Even if the newly born demons are killed quickly?”

“Yes, Sire. The illness will remain in the body even if the demon disappears."

Killian immediately asked, "They can be treated, right?”

"Yes, Sire. The treatment is possible once the demon is removed."

"Then we're fine."

Killian stood in front of the door of the East Annex, cordoned off by the knights. Killian ordered Rieta. "I require a blessing."

A white light glowed around Rieta's body. She spoke simultaneously. "I will bless you, but I will go in alone, Sire."

Rieta pulled Killian's shoulder to bring his upper body down and quickly pressed her lips to his forehead before he could react. It was not the first time she had done this, but Killian froze at her unexpected words and actions. Rieta's lips went away as quickly as they had reached his forehead. Her body was away from Killian at some point, and she was heading toward the East Annex.

“As I've just told you, you will not be able to avoid the plague if that one- in-a-thousand situation were to arise."

That one-in-a-thousand situation. Someone's death. The women of the East Annex's faces grew stony at Rieta's statement. Rieta didn't wait for their reply and walked into the East Annex like Killian usually did. ﻿

Killian's face twisted all of a sudden, and he started after her. "Wait! Rieta!"

Giselle frantically grabbed at his arm. "My lord! You mustn't!"

Killian turned to her angrily. The four women, who wanted to be there more than anyone else, were looking up at him desperately.

"You know this, Sire."

He was the one who had to take responsibility for Axias. He was the final bastion that had to protect and guide the territory where the plague had started to spread. He understood in his head that Rieta's actions were rational.

*But how dare she?*

Before he was angry at her for rudely leaving before listening to his response, which occurred after she only said what she needed to say, she took on the danger, which was a responsibility that he was supposed to take on, without permission. He was furious at Rieta, who had acted beyond her position.

\*\*\*

"Rieta!"

The woman behind the door to the East Annex that was sealed off ran out crying to greet the person opening the door for the first time in a while.

"Helen. Where is Anna?"

"Anna is in her chamber. I haven't seen her in a week. She's being kept in isolation from us all. Celine does not allow us to enter her chamber.”

It was the obvious thing to do, but Helen pushed down her tears in resentment toward Celine. Thankfully, there was no demon on Helen's﻿ body. Rieta pulled Helen close by the shoulders and silently blessed her body.

Celine came downstairs to greet her, looking haggard. Her beautiful face and her once-shining, pumpkin-colored hair were dull.

"Rieta. I thank you for coming."

Celine had a white cloth wrapped around her neck like a scarf. It was to cover her nose and mouth. And there was no demon. Celine put up a hand and stopped Rieta from starting toward her.

"Please, do not come closer. The plague is contagious."

Rieta's eyes widened. "Celine. Have you...”

"No. As far as I am aware, I have yet to catch the plague.” Celine replied calmly. "But there is no way of being certain because I enter Anna's chamber frequently."

Celine's late father was a doctor. She didn't study medicine professionally, but she was knowledgeable in pathology and nursing the sick, so she stepped up out of the women to take care of the three patients alone. Celine offered a cloth to Rieta for her to cover her nose and mouth, but Rieta refused.

"You needn't worry, for my divine energy will shield me. Do come closer."

Rieta stepped closer to bless Celine's body. Celine hesitated for a moment, but she trusted her and nodded. Rieta was a mage who came from a place that had experienced the plague.

Charlotte and Deborah were confined to their rooms, but they weren't in a worse state than before because Celine's nursing was effective. They were conscious and able to walk. ﻿

But Anna. No manner of treatment was effective. Anna's condition was worsening by the moment. Celine briefly said, “Anna is not faring well. She rouses every so often, but I do not know if she will be awake now," and said no more.

The three women quickly walked down the deserted hallway and headed toward the rooms where the patients were located.

They went into Charlotte and Deborah's rooms first. Thankfully, there were no demons on them, but the blessings Rieta had cast previously were contaminated with dark energy. Rieta placed blessings on their bodies and their rooms again.

As soon as Rieta stepped out to the hallway, the women gathered around Anna's room after hearing Rieta was here as if they weren't afraid of the plague. Rieta placed blessings on everyone's bodies.

"Rieta... May we keep the door open? The ladies are all very concerned for Anna." Celine asked.

Rieta thought about it for a moment and asked, “Celine, what do you think? I might know about demons, but I don't know as much about pathology as you."

"If we look at how I'm still all right, I think it will be fine."

Rieta nodded. She could see the demons if it was dangerous because of them.

"You may keep it open, but do not come too near."

The door opened, and Rieta went into Anna's room. ﻿

30

# THE PLAGUE OF AXIAS (4)

The pillow, doll, frame, diary, and dried bouquet Anna had held up at Rieta the last time she was in Anna's room... The blessing Rieta had placed was contaminated with a demon's energy. Rieta had been calm, but she froze in place when she discovered Anna in her bed.

The black energy that was undulating on her body...

She had braced herself somewhat for this, but a demon of the plague had encroached on the girl's body. The demon had already put roots deep into the body and was now past the stage where purification or purging would be effective.

"Anna..." Rieta croaked out her name. There was no response. “Anna.”

Rieta snapped back to her senses and ran to the bedside. She leaned over. The pretty face was ridden with blisters. Black spots dotted her entire body. The white nightgown she surely couldn't change out of was damp from the blood and pus from the blisters.

Rieta knew it was fruitless, but she pulled up her divine energy frantically and started to purify Anna's body and her bed. Her anxious desire became a pure light shining out of her and it wrapped around Anna. The demon that had infiltrated Anna's body shuddered in frustration and hid deeper into the girl's body.

A tentacle crept out from around Anna's neck and wriggled as if it was observing. It was a lowly plague demon that hadn't been able to gain enough strength. *How did such a low-level demon get through the blessing?*

The demon's feelers, like a snake's head looking this way and that, soon discovered Rieta and the eye at the end of the tentacle glared at her. It was a disgusting sight, but no one other than Rieta could see it. Rieta stared steadily at the demon's eye, at the demon she couldn't do anything about. ﻿

"Madam Tristi...?

A hoarse voice. Rieta jolted and looked down. The girl's hand was grasping at air.

"Anna!" Rieta called out her name in a flurry and grabbed hold of her hand. There were blood and bits of skin on her fingernails as if she scratched her blisters until she saw blood.

She blinked a few times, and her fever-dry lips trembled weakly. “Is that you, Madam Tristi?"

Rieta looked down at her tremblingly and nodded profusely. “Yes, it's Rieta. Can you hear me?"

She looked around for a glass of water, but the pitcher was empty. Rieta turned back and shouted. “Fetch her some water!"

She could hear the feet of the women clamoring to get water.

"Madam Tristi..." Rieta quickly brought her eyes back to Anna at the thin, brittle sound calling for her and looked over her. She couldn't make eye contact. The girl wasn't able to see Rieta.

"I heard you went to the grand temple...” Anna mumbled, her eyes dim, her mind confused. “How are you back so soon...?"

Rieta shook her head, listening to the heartrending voice that sounded as if it would disappear any moment, and swallowed her tears.

"I should have come sooner... I apologize."

The scarred, thin face smiled as if she were comforting her instead. Rieta's heart plummeted at what the girl said calmly, “Will I be able to live?"

The demon's tentacle twisted up and looked down at its host, grinning. Rieta interlaced her fingers with Anna's and squeezed as hard as she could. "Of course. I'm here now. You'll get better." ﻿

Anna's state was hopeless. But Rieta hoped her words would calm Anna. The innocent skull of a face smiled brightly.

"You're right." Anna tossed and turned a little, her face comfortable, and burrowed into her pillow. “Just seeing you... I feel well already... Truly...”

Anna's eyelashes closed like a pair of butterfly wings. The whistling gasps turned into a deep sigh.

Rieta's expression froze.

"Anna."

The strength left in her body was released with a chill in the air. Rieta took hold of the girl's shoulder with a trembling hand and shook it.

"Anna?"

She couldn't hear her breathing. Celine dashed to the bed, her face ashen, and placed an ear to Anna's nose. She placed a hand below her neck. They heard the clatter of a tray being dropped to the floor.

"Anna!" Helen pushed the other women aside and ran in. "Anna! Anna!” Helen flew past Celine, sobbing, and collapsed on top of Anna to shake her. "Anna!"

Someone whispered Anna's name, through the cries of disbelief, as if they couldn't believe it. Someone started to cry from behind them. Rieta stared at Anna and Helen in shock. *There was no way... Not yet. She was still in a coma. Don't do that.*

*"I know little Miss Anna won't be with us forever."*

*Anna. She was supposed to grow into a fine young woman!*

Black smoke rose from Anna's body. In moments, it formed a grotesque lizard-like shape with two heads and eight legs. The eye at the end of its tail whipped around and blinked at the woman. A red light flashed out. ﻿

Rieta's eyes widened. “Everyone, get back!"

Rieta leaped up like lightning and pushed Helen and Celine behind her. "Heavens, protect us! Deliver her from evil's hold!"

A blinding light shone from Rieta's body, blocking Helen and Celine.

"Shield this poor child! Shield her from the reaches of this wretched demon!"

A crack resounded, and the East Annex shook.

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Rieta dashed through the corridor, swallowing the noises her choking throat was making. Her vision was dark. Rieta tumbled to the ground, tripping on her own feet.

*"I'll call for a healing cleric. It hasn't been long, so if you receive the healing of a cleric, there's a good chance you'll get better completely. You can recover with the help of a healing cleric!"*

*Celine, in a trembling voice, asked, “A demon... Is there a demon in this dwelling?"*

*"No, it has fled!" Rieta babbled and got to her feet.*

*Celine looked at her in bewilderment. “It fled?”*

*"Celine. Helen. Chloe. Cheryl. Caren." Rieta's face twisted in pain as she called out their names one by one. “Flee to your rooms and stay inside. A cleric will surely heal you since it has not been long!"*

*"But what of you, Rieta?”*

*Rieta was already running out of the room. Celine shouted frantically from behind her. "The demon's force surely touched you as well! You must﻿﻿ receive treatment, Rieta!"*

*She had immunity against it. She was not susceptible to the plague.*

She was sorry, so sorry, to everyone. She took the demon's power too lightly. She should have been aware that Anna might die.

*Anna. Anna.*

She was sorry. She was so sorry. If only she had the ability to heal.

Rieta tried to get to her feet, but she stepped on the hem of her skirt and fell again. She fell several more times to get to the door, her legs giving out beneath her trembling body. The closed door at the end of the hallway felt so far away. She had to ask for help.

Rieta's knees were a bruised mess by the time she got to the door. Her trembling hand kept slipping off the handle of the heavy door, and she couldn't open it.

*Please. Please. This useless hand!*

She desperately hung onto the handle after slipping off numerous times, and she pushed with her body and barely opened the door enough to squeeze her body out. Rieta's body collapsed through the gap. Someone ran over and helped her stiff body to her feet after Rieta had crawled out from the doorway, unable to stand properly.

*Ah. His Lordship.*

Rieta hurriedly gasped a whisper in his ear, clinging to him.

"Please fetch a healing cleric. I was able to chase away the demon. A healer will be able to save them. Please! You must fetch a healing cleric with haste!"

Killian saw that she was half out of her mind and pressed her for an answer. "What of Anna? Was she able to fend off the demon?”

Rieta mumbled the girl's name, her face as white as a sheet. "Anna...” *It was too late for Anna. I'm sorry. I couldn't save her. She was alive... She called my name.* Rieta's body began trembling like a leaf.

"Rieta."

She pushed his hand away and collapsed to the ground.

"This time... This time, I could have stopped it." This time it was in a place she could reach. "I have failed her. I had cast a blessing upon her, but... Anna...Anna.... I could not stop it."

Her eyes lost focus and rolled back in their sockets, not knowing where to rest.

"Rieta!" Killian took hold of Rieta, who was still muttering unintelligbly, and shook her by the shoulders.

"You are not to blame. A blessing cannot protect from all demons! Even Casarius was blessed, and yet he succumbed to the plague!"

At the name that evoked hell, she stopped breathing. Something snapped in Rieta's head.

Killian stood and called for his knights. "Make haste to Alpheter Temple and fetch the healing clerics! Fetch them, no matter the cost. No less than ten healers. Make haste!"

Giselle ran to the slumped Rieta.

"Ugh...ugh." Rieta was hunched over to the ground, and choking sobs were escaping. “Just... Take me...!" It seemed like Rieta's eyes were not seeing this place as she babbled nonsense.

“Rieta?" As soon as Giselle was about to place a hand on her body, Rieta started to wail horribly.

"Take me! Take what you desire! Take this wretched flesh! Take it all!" ﻿

The startled people all turned to her.

"What value does this flesh hold? Why do you covet it so? Take me! Have you as you will! I submit my flesh and soul to you... Just return my Adele to me! Give Adele back to me!" Rieta started screaming and ripping at her clothes.

Giselle retreated from the sight she'd never even imagined.

“Adele! Come back, Adele!” The pain and anger ripping through her heart echoed in the name she called out. Rieta's eyes were empty, and the blue irises had no focus as she screamed out her daughter's name. Bloody tears were running down her face.

The heart-shredding angry voice turned into an awful sob in an instant. "The fault is my own! I am to blame! Please, return Adele to me! Please. I beg you!" Only the wretched pleading ripped through the air full of silence. “I will be your mistress. I will do all that you ask of me. I can do it well. I can..."

No one could speak up.

Her voice became more and more frantic. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'll give it to you. I'll give you my body! It's not precious at all. I can give it whenever you want. Just Adele. Spare me this grief of oblivion and tell me if she lives!"

Giselle broke out into tears at the rawness of motherly love oozing from Rieta and reached for her. But she must have gotten a burst of energy because she couldn't keep a hold of Rieta, who pushed her aside with monstrous strength.

"It's a lie! You're lying. There's no way. Do not jest! Please, please! There's no way she's dead! Please!" Rieta started to clutch at her chest, her dress already shredded and in ribbons. ﻿

*Was this what a person writhing in hell looked like?* Everyone lost the ability to speak and was dumbstruck at the heartbreaking cries. It seemed like this awful pleading toward her enemy, who had already departed this world, would go on forever.

Killian stepped forward when Giselle couldn't withstand it. “Rieta. Calm yourself, Rieta!"

"Please! She cannot be dead!" Rieta's hands were clawing the earth. Her fingernails broke off and blood was dripping, but she didn't realize it and writhed in pain.

Killian couldn't watch anymore and slapped Rieta's cheek. “Wake up!"

Rieta immediately clung to Killian, unaffected by the slap. "She cannot be dead. You must return her to me! I will do anything you ask!”

Killian wrestled Rieta's wrists away from her writhing body. Her throbbing cheek was becoming a mess from the reddening mark and her tears.

Killian's face contorted as if he who hit her felt more pain. Killian gritted his teeth and pulled Rieta into his arms. Rieta started to struggle mindlessly in his arms with unbelievable strength.

From her cries of wicked resentment, Rieta pled in rapid-fire speech, then cursed with so much malice and begged, sobbing, and repeated it all over. She scratched Killian, pounded her fists on him, and wailed, unable to get out. She started to breathe heavily, and her body slowly grew weaker. Rieta's body seemed like it would thrash forever, but she quieted at some point and drooped helplessly in Killian's arms. It was more comfortable to see Rieta unconscious rather than the alternative.

The people all stared at Rieta dumbly. A terrifying silence descended. Killian got to his feet, stony-faced, with the unconscious Rieta in his arms. ﻿

"I will allow no witnesses to what transpired here tonight,” Killian spoke after a long while. “And Giselle."

Giselle replied immediately, albeit in a slightly broken voice, “Yes, Sire."

"Fetch a trustworthy physician and send him to my chambers. One with a watchful tongue."

"Yes, my lord."

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Killian laid the unconscious Rieta on his bed and stood before her with his eyes shut and a hand pressing his forehead.

What did Leonard say? That she had allowed it because she couldn't stand the pressure?

He couldn't remember exactly. It didn't seem like an incorrect summary. But being this different was too much. Killian clenched his fist.

"Casarius..."

*What a piece of work. Croaking after he did that kind of thing and asking to have Rieta buried with him? And still, he would be called a noble, and he would have been buried in the most sunlit place in the manor.*

Killian regretted how he had taken off his hat and shown his respect at the funeral. He was furious at the fact that he couldn't twist that man's neck himself because he was already dead.

This poor woman, who was alive, but her insides all rotten like this... She had hidden her tears of blood and wounded heart with a peaceful, serene face, lying in his bed, and was barely surviving her harsh existence. ﻿

31

# THE PLAGUE OF AXIAS (5)

The empire was polytheistic, worshipping the great god Siel as their core god, but Killian didn't worship any god. He wasn't a devout man, and there wasn't anyone among his people fearless enough to suggest building a temple, so the metropolis that had been built in this wasteland for the past thirteen years did not have a temple.

It wasn't a significant discomfort to be without a temple in Axias. Axias was a major city where mercenaries hunted for spoils of evil occurrences. Groups of clerics on pilgrimage traveled through regularly, volunteering their skills and receiving donations or offerings as a service charge, and the Temple of Havitus was located five days of one-way travel away, close enough to go and get blessings or holy water periodically. A large abbey behind Axias Castle took in orphans and people who hoped to become clerics, taking on some of the roles a temple carried out.

So, there weren't that many clerics or divine mages that were any good who settled in Axias. There were a few mages like Rieta, but they were at the level of divine mages, not clerics, so it was apparent they weren't up to par.

Killian was feeling a desperate regret for that fact for the first time.

The novitiates raised at the abbey were transferred to cities with temples as soon as they graduated and became clerics. It was a good way for more skilled clerics to go to bigger temples and learn more to achieve their dreams. Just as he was thinking of building a temple, although he didn't feel a great necessity, the plague started growing throughout the empire, and the clerics on pilgrimages all stopped.

It became hard even to find people who had divine energy. The clerics started to protect their own interests and only visited wealthy people or nobles from some point on. They only went to places that were still safe, only to bless, and there weren't that many clerics who went to plague- ridden areas to heal or purge. This was after the devoted clerics already sacrificed themselves to the plague. ﻿

He had just started asking for advice, but the plans for the temple in Axias had to be put on hold indefinitely.

Alpheter Temple was where Leonard's brothers were, so it was somewhere Killian could find trustworthy people, although it wasn't that big. Many clerics graduated from Axias Abbey and went to Alpheter Temple. It wasn't that far, but the mountain that needed to be climbed to get there made it a hard journey. No matter how fast one went, it would take a day longer than it takes to get to and from Havitus Temple. But they had no other choice because Havitus Temple, the closest temple to Axias, could not fulfill requests as of now-or possibly forever.

And the message. *Hoping your lands are full of peace.*

They couldn't use just any untrustworthy cleric because there was no way to know how far Empress Aversati's sabotage reached.

The only cleric at the abbey who could heal was the abbot, an eighty-year- old man. He was always incredibly busy with the abbey's work, and he could not walk well because he was old. Killian didn't want to pressure the abbot, but this was not a situation where he could worry about that.

"Eron."

"Yes, my lord."

"We must seek the abbot. Could you escort him with haste?" "Yes, Sire."

"Then I'll ask you to do so." Eron bowed his head and left his study.

Even though Eron was healthy and full of vigor, he was also over sixty. Killian knew the ages of all the people who worked for him and the people he took care of. He'd suggested retirement ever since Eron had turned sixty. Still, he insisted he was healthy and requested to continue working because he wanted to work for his lord a bit longer, only if His Lordship allowed it, and had continued to do so until now. ﻿

*Anna... She is dead.*

Feeling miserable, Killian closed his eyes and mourned the twelve-year-old girl of the East Annex who followed him like a puppy.

*There has to be a funeral. How were funerals done for those who died of the plague? Would it be a cremation because there was no cleric?*

How would they prepare and dress a corpse due to plague in a commoner's house? Different funerary methods were available if there was a purifying cleric to stop the spread of the plague from the corpse, but it cost a pretty penny. So, a cremation was normal for a plague victim.

People who remembered the tragedy of the plague ten-odd years ago thought of cremation as the most pathetic form of a funeral because it didn't even leave a grave. Even if it wasn't because of the plague, cremation wasn't an enjoyable type of funeral for the people of the empire that were less educated and easily swayed by superstition, and the smell of the corpses burning in the nightmare of a plague pushed the entire empire into terror and anguish rooted deep into the people's hearts and gave a very negative perspective to cremation.

Cremation became the method used only by the poor who couldn't afford a coffin and a grave as the plague quieted down. Even commoners avoided cremation, the most pathetic form of funeral, so nobles didn't even consider it, thinking it was bad taste. Crematoria were scarce, and there were no high-heat facilities or technicians because people's view of it was like that, so it was just burning the corpse not leaving it to rot.

Still, there were a few crematoria approved of and maintained by the manor.

Killian pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. His mouth tasted bitter. Killian had never sent someone he knew to a crematorium before. His half-sister, Princess Hilsrain, who died at six from the plague, was buried at her funeral as a cleric hosted purification. ﻿

Now, even if there was a cleric, it was a problem for the living rather than the dead. Since people with divine power were rare in Axias... It was a journey of four to five days even if the clerics of Alpheter were to come. No matter how much we hurried, they wouldn't be able to come within a week.

Either way, there was no way a corpse could be left among the women in the middle of this summer. And a corpse dead from the plague at that. They needed to bring the body out of the annex.

*Were they to ask the eighty-year-old man to do it when he couldn't even walk properly?* Just thinking of that made his stomach turn sour.

Not everything said in her fit of confusion could be believed, but Rieta said she had expelled the devil and said it would be enough to call for a healing cleric and treat the patients.

*How were the patients doing?*

Someone else would have to venture into the East Annex again to check on their statuses while Rieta was in that sort of a state. Someone who could handle the plague readily in the East Annex. *Giselle worked with medicines. And Celine... Was that all? Giselle was outside, so probably Celine alone...*

Seven people. The number of people who caught the plague in the East Annex. *Who would it be this time? Charlotte, Deborah. Dammit.* There were sixteen women living in the East Annex. With Anna dead, now fifteen. Four knightmaidens went with him from there to Havitus Temple.

*So, seven were already infected from the eleven that were left? Only four were safe,* and that was a number he couldn't be sure of. How much longer could they last like this?

And there still was the problem of the western territory. While they were waiting for Rieta to come out of the East Annex, the knights who returned from the western territory informed them that one hundred eighty or so people were confirmed to have the plague and that affected areas were﻿ appropriately isolated. They also reported the plague still hadn't spread outside of the western territory.

Thankfully, it wasn't a hub of commerce where many people came and went. It was a remote area where farmers lived, and it looked like the spread wasn't as bad. The number of infected people was higher because they couldn't quarantine as quickly as the East Annex did, and it was discovered after many people infected others.

But it was found out quite quickly, considering how it started among commoners who weren't well-off enough to call for a doctor or a cleric. The number Vector reported three days ago was eighty or so infected. It took Vector two days to get to Havitus Temple, and it took three more days for Killian to get back. He had steeled himself for the possibility the number could have grown to over five hundred people. The fact that it hadn't gone over two hundred yet was a small blessing.

But it would take at least eight days until the clerics of Alpheter arrived. Deaths would start to occur in earnest two weeks after the start of the plague. And the spread of the disease would be significantly accelerated if there were a devil then.

*It still was a mystery whether or not devils were present, but they would be there too, right?*

Maybe it was because there were no plague demons that the scale of infection was so small. Most even those with divine power, who had more than just the power of purification, needed to get close and touch with their hands to feel the devil. And where the plague had spread was not an excellent location to investigate that.

Rieta's innate skill in seeing devils was uncommon.

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Eron returned to the study not long after. "My lord. The abbot has arrived." ﻿

Killian flicked his eyes up. “Already?”

"I ran into him on my way there. Thankfully, he already seemed to be coming this way."

"I see."

The abbot, leaning on his cane behind Eron, was standing there, beaming. Killian stood and welcomed the elderly abbot.

"The cleric Vetere greets His Lordship of Axias."

“I'm sorry. I've called for such a busy person for such a difficult thing. So, you were coming here?"

The abbot smiled and grasped Killian's hands. "What are you saying? I had already set off on the path, for I sensed some use for my meager talents. But, pray... Where might your cleric be?"

"I do not know this cleric you speak of. I've called for the clerics in Alpheter, but it'll take at least a week for them to arrive."

"I felt a great surge of divine energy on my passage here, the strength of a purging cleric."

Killian thought back to the divine energy that shook the East Annex and cocked his head in confusion.

"Purging? No. That was purification."

Rieta wasn't able to purge. What she did at Havitus Temple was because of the power of the grand blessing ceremony and the holy staff from the temple. And Killian remembered the powerful purification Rieta performed when she stepped into the statue of the goddess in Havitus Temple. It was nearly similar to the color and sound of the energy that exploded out of the East Annex earlier. ﻿

"Purification? Ho-ho. Then that seems to be the most powerful purification energy I've ever felt in my entire life. It was so much that I believe if they trained just a little, they would immediately be recognized as a purging cleric."

Killian looked into the abbot's face calmly. He had seen the same person cast an even more powerful purification just a few days ago. Instead of bragging about his experience before the old man, Killian simply told the truth.

"Rieta isn't a cleric. She's a mage."

The abbot's eyes widened. *That back then was the power of just a mage?* Those non-clerics with divine power could only "bless," so they were called blessing mages or mages for short. Cumbersome titles like purifying mages, purging mages, and healing mages were not used.

Distinct titles, such as purging clerics or blessing clerics, were only used to differentiate clerics. But on rare occasions, there were people with exceptional divine powers who were not clerics. The abbot thought she was the rare mage who could purge and heal as well, a non-cleric who had divine magic.

Killian took a beat and continued. "She's slightly ill right now, and she's collapsed... I'm not sure about what happened, but she said a healing cleric was needed at the East Annex. The devil was driven out, but the patients are still there."

*If the devil was driven out, that was a purge. Even though purifying and purging were skills performed in different ways technically. If driving out a﻿ devil with just purification was possible, wouldn't that mean it was practically proclaiming holy ground?* The abbot stared at Killian blankly.

A tired, low voice continued. "There's a person who died from the plague at the East Annex. I think I'm going to have to ask a difficult request of you."

The abbot was slightly baffled while listening to him, but he flinched with the whites of his eyes showing when he heard someone died from the plague.

"They died from the plague? And there was a devil? By chance, are you saying that person drove out the demon that ate that person's death with purification?"

It was natural for the abbot to be surprised, but there was no way for Killian to know since he was unaware of demonology and theology. Killian just frowned a little and shook his head.

"That I don't know either. The person who went in and out just said that and lost consciousness. More than that, I wanted to ask about the funeral process for a person killed by the plague. The corpse is also still in the annex..."

The abbot realized what request Killian was about to make as soon as he heard the corpse was in the annex, even before Killian said anything else.

"I see. It's customary for victims of the plague to be cremated...”

“One moment.” Suddenly a young woman's voice interrupted. ﻿

The abbot and Killian turned toward the direction of the voice, the door connecting the chamber to the study. A beautiful woman with a stark white face stood there, holding onto the doorframe.

"I apologize for the intrusion, but... I wish to say a word on the matter."

Killian jumped to his feet. He immediately headed toward Rieta, loping over. The abbot jolted to his feet.

*Who was this? His Lordship was probably already on edge from the plague, and to act so rashly?* No way he would hit her, but no matter if it was a woman, he wasn't the type to just gloss over this kind of behavior.

The woman who walked out of Killian's chambers and jumped into the conversation looked a little flustered as Killian walked toward her. Killian walked to Rieta in moments and looked her up and down carefully. Rieta looked up at Killian, who was just a breath away from her. The clear sky- blue eyes looked a little tired but were looking back at Killian steadily.

His hand unconsciously drifted up to the slight red mark on her cheek. But just as his fingertips were about to touch Rieta's face, Killian ground his thumb into his forefinger and clenched his hand into a fist, bringing it to rest on the doorframe. It was just above where Rieta was gripping.

"Rieta," Killian spoke again a moment later. "Are you well?"

The lunatic tyrant. The fearless hellion. The playboy with bad habits with women who'd cultivated a bad name for himself as a pastime. The abbot couldn't believe his ears, hearing such a careful voice from the most infamously cold man in the empire. ﻿

32

# THE PLAGUE OF AXIAS (6)

Rieta had no idea why she was in Killian's chambers. She thought she had lost consciousness after letting go of her anxiety upon relaying the East Annex's request to call for a cleric.

Rieta answered awkwardly. “I'm all right, Sire."

The piercing crimson eyes inspecting Rieta frowned in dissatisfaction. He asked while looking her over with a displeased air. “And your hands?"

Rieta looked up at Killian's face questioningly, wondering what he meant, and realized then her fingertips were throbbing. “Oh." Rieta discovered her fingertips bleeding with her nails broken off, and she let go of the doorframe to hide her hands behind her like she was embarrassed. Her fingertips brushed against each other.

"It looks like I hurt myself when I fell."

Rieta was about to say she was fine again, but she took a breath. It was a reply His Lordship disliked. He said he was sick of it. And looking at him now, he looked displeased. Rieta barely caught herself and squeezed out a reply that wasn't much different. “It doesn't hurt much, Sire."

Killian realized Rieta couldn't remember losing her mind. *Was this better?* Killian sighed and asked her about what she had blurted out. "And what is it that you wish to say?"

Her gaze moved past his shoulder. Rieta first bowed her head as if she were asking for understanding, testing the waters with the elderly cleric sitting in the study. Then Killian remembered the abbot was there behind him, swiped at his forehead, and took a few steps back.

He gestured to the seat across from the abbot. "Sit."

Either way, it was good she came back to her senses. There was much to listen to. It would be better to discuss it together, especially with the situation in the East Annex. ﻿

Killian followed her and silently stared at her from behind. So, it looked like she didn't remember. And she looked like she was calm again.

The abbot surreptitiously raised his white eyebrows to look up at Killian. Killian's eyes seemed to rest on Rieta for a moment too long. Of course, the woman didn't have eyes on the back of her head, so she didn't realize and just quietly walked to the spot he told her to go to and stood there. And she bowed her head again, apologizing to the abbot for interrupting their conversation. The blonde beauty looked quite elegant and doleful, perfectly fitting the Archduke of Axias's tastes.

*Still, he was much more generous than he normally was. Was she someone he treasured so much that he made her an exception?*

Killian wasn't someone to allow rudeness just because he approved of a woman's looks, so the abbot easily guessed that she was the mage who'd collapsed. There would be no other reason for Killian to seat a woman he didn't know right in front of him right now.

*Although it was concerning that she came out of his chambers.*

Only after Killian sat did she sit down. Rieta waited because she didn't dare speak before the archduke spoke. Abbot Vetere smiled benevolently and introduced himself while she was waiting.

"Vetere the Cleric greets you, Madam. I serve as the abbot of Axias Manor."

Rieta jolted visibly at his statement. "And I greet you, Abbot Vetere. I am Rieta Tristi. I am but a mage of meager talents."

The abbot nodded and smiled. “Hello, sister."

Rieta waved her hands humbly at the title clerics used for each other. “I'm not a cleric. Please just call me by my name."

Even titles were unsuitable for Rieta. Calling a woman famous for being a young widow "madam" seemed too tragic and calling her “miss" would seem like teasing. She couldn't be called Madam Widow either. For﻿ someone who couldn't be defined as ladyship, or madam, or miss. Madam was the safest choice of those, but she looked too young to be called that, and he was careful about calling a woman whose relationship with the Archduke of Axias was unclear.

Calling her "Mage Tristi" felt like he was setting a line between himself and the non-cleric with divine power as a cleric. There was nothing to do but do as she wished since she jumped at his calling her sister, the title he thought would be the safest while still expressing his respect.

Still, he had enough experience through his years to skate by in most situations. The abbot smiled warmly, looking kind. “Then may I call you Miss Tristi?"

"Rieta is fine."

Vetere grinned. "Very well. Miss Rieta. Were you the one who used divine energy in the East Annex, by chance?"

“Oh, yes. There was a devil. I purified it.”

*Was that really a purification? That?* The abbot was deeply impressed.

*"I am but a mage of meager talents.”*

She was so humble it almost felt like a rude joke. He was sure if she was that strong, she would be able to heal and purge.

Killian spoke. "Can we hear about the situation in the East Annex first? The abbot is a cleric who can heal, so he's come to help.”

Hearing he was a healing cleric, Rieta jolted for a different reason from before and hurriedly leaned forward. "Thank you, Abbot Vetere. The East Annex is in dire need of healing at this time. There are seven patients. Two have been sick for five days, and the five were clouted with the demon's first strike from eating its first death. Those five will start to show symptoms within the day." Rieta quickly continued. “I will go in with you and tell you which five need treatment, but their names are Celine, Helen, ﻿Chloe, Cheryl, and Caren. I told them before I left, so they will know as well."

The abbot raised his eyebrows and asked. "The first power? How are you sure of that? Were you there when the demon was born?"

Rieta's face contorted slightly as if she recalled a painful memory. The moment the plague demon was born. Without going through a comatose state. Anna dying before they could prepare to let her go... “Yes... I was there."

The abbot looked at her, slightly tense. “Are you all right, Miss Rieta? May I palpate you to see if a demon has stuck itself to you?"

It was common for those nearby a demon's first strike to be harmed. There was no assurance she was safe from the plague.

Rieta shook her head. “I'm all right. I can see demons.” She added after a brief pause, “The demon didn't attack me, and I went in after blessing myself, so I wouldn't have caught the plague."

The abbot was a bit shocked when he heard she could see demons and nodded as if he understood. *So that's how she was able to know so distinctly who was attacked by the demon.* It was an excellent result to have only five people hit by the first strike the newly born demon displayed after a person died. It looked like the purification was done well.

That she could see demons... It was truly a rare skill. Most people with divine energy beyond purification could feel the demon's energy from touching a person's skin. But having the clairvoyance to see it with bare eyes was an innate talent. It was obvious that someone like this would become a high-ranking cleric at any temple, with a high chance of becoming the emperor's cleric. *How was this kind of person just a mage?* She could have become a very famous cleric.

"What happened to the demon? Did you by any chance expel the newborn demon with the purification you cast at that time?” The abbot clarified what Killian had said he wasn't sure about. ﻿

"Yes. The demons were forced back to hell. The only thing remaining is simply the plague. There were no demons rooted in other people's bodies except for the first victim. But plague demons are drawn to the plague as you know, so if we delay..."

"You're saying other demons can come and attach themselves.” The abbot nodded and smiled to soothe the anxious woman. "I see. But looking at the purification you cast, I feel there won't be any demons who will be able to approach for some time. So don't be too worried. I will go in and take care of those you mentioned."

Rieta's face relaxed, and she bowed her head, pressing a hand down her chest. "Thank you... Truly, thank you."

The abbot thought the way Rieta was speaking was somehow odd. “But, Miss Rieta, you don't heal or purge?"

"Oh, I only know how to purify. I can't heal or purge."

The abbot was shocked. This was the strangeness he felt from their conversation. Rieta couldn't heal or purge, hence her desperation in asking for help. The abbot quickly composed himself. “Oh my! I thought you would know how to heal. I'll look at your hands for you."

The abbot reached out to Rieta. At that moment, Rieta leaped back in shock. "Ah." It was such a jump that the abbot felt humiliated.

Rieta's eyes shook from embarrassment and fear of what might happen. Before the abbot could hurry and apologize for reaching out, Rieta spoke quickly, “I-I'm fine. My fingernails are ruined, so if I receive healing magic now, my nails won't be able to attach again. I'll wrap them tightly and receive healing later."

Vetere took back his hand and smiled. “Ah, I see. I understand. Please ask whenever you need it."

Rieta nodded as well and smiled back. Rieta quickly found peace again, but Killian felt that something was strange. He was looking up and down﻿ at her hands and her pale face.

What they had discussed was urgent. Killian tucked away that bit of suspicion and asked about what Rieta had said. “And what you said about Anna's funeral?"

Rieta hesitated while Killian and the abbot looked on.

“I know cremating a person who's died from the plague is the best way. But if we continuously purify, then an ordinary funeral can be possible without any danger." Rieta bit her lip and twisted her fingers in her skirts. “I will stay by Anna's side if you allow it. So..." Rieta bowed her head deeply. "Is there no way we can bury her instead of cremating her?"

Killian looked at Rieta calmly. He then nodded curtly. “We'll do that.”

The abbot stared strangely at the Archduke of Axias, the man who surprised him so many times today.

"Is there a reason?" If it were the normal Killian, he would have asked why first. But he gave his permission first.

There was a limit to how far she could help as a person with divine powers if she couldn't heal and purge, but her purification powers were outstanding. It was inefficient to allow the rare mage to stay with a dead person in this state of emergency for days on end. He wasn't the type of person to allow it first without hearing the reason, even if he had decided on it in his head. This archduke who conquered this great, harsh land under his feet was someone who acted in a way that wouldn't make him seem soft.

Rieta couldn't answer Killian readily, and her mouth clamped shut. She hadn't prepared a rational reason to persuade His Lordship. She just jumped out of bed and ran when she woke and heard the words she instinctively rejected. ﻿

It felt like if they went ahead with cremation, it would feel like the plague was here in this land. Like Cevitas. Axias too. The cheerful, friendly people, the streets full of life, the refreshing air. This wonderful land... It felt like it would quickly become barren like Cevitas. Cevitas was all right to live in before the plague rampaged. But everything changed after the plague. The people lost their ease of mind and locked their doors, and the kind neighbors and friends stopped coming to her house one by one after her husband died of the plague. And in the state of isolation where no one reached out a hand... All her nightmares started.

But that couldn't become a reason. Rieta vacantly moved her lips a bit.

"If Anna had a family..." Rieta couldn't continue, and she fell silent at the emotion she felt within herself. *If Anna had a family... They wouldn't have wanted a cremation, right?* It was crossing the line. It was an excuse. How could Rieta say that for certain?

Rieta knew as well. It wasn't because of that that she didn't want a cremation.

The blood drained from Rieta's face as she recalled the horrific memory. Her hands grew clammy.

Killian recognized the minute changes to Rieta's expression as she couldn't bear to speak, and he broke the silence. "Well. It would be good to have a grave for the women in the East Annex to go to."

Rieta's head popped up.

Killian was looking the other way as he continued. “The doctor's here. Rieta. Return to your chambers, and have the physician examine you. I'll wrap things up here with the abbot." ﻿

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# THE PLAGUE OF AXIAS (7)

"Is she the rumored Widow of Cevitas?"

"Yes," Killian replied calmly.

"She's as beautiful as they say.”

Killian didn't even acknowledge the obvious impression everyone shared and threw himself into the sofa.

The abbot added, “A pity.”

Killian looked up at him. "Why do you say that?”

“Her talents are greater than most clerics, not to mention her powerful divine capabilities. And to be clairvoyant, above all... With some careful training and effort, I believe she will be able to heal and purge in due time." The abbot fell into thought, looking pensive. “She would surely have excelled at the convent. Why has she not become a cleric...?"

Killian replied coolly. “The convent of Cevitas requires a test of skills at graduation."

*“I was lacking.*”Rieta's calm reply rang in his head.

“She professed failure of this exam caused her to stop her efforts.”

He had been assuming she just had no head for books, but... Over the last few days with Rieta, Killian also thought she seemed educated, unlike ordinary commoners.

Even if they said divine powers could be developed through training, many clerics could only bless throughout their entire lives. *If someone with that much divine power failed, who could become a cleric in Cevitas?* The abbot seemed to be talking about that.

"I bid you have her dwell in the East Annex." The abbot suggested in a low voice.

Killian chuckled. "I was going to." ﻿

The abbot was one of the few people who knew the secret about the East Annex. Killian supported the talented children at the abbey in their various studies, and the girls who showed promise in martial arts were brought to the East Annex and trained to become a part of the special force pretending to be his prized mistresses. Many of the East Annex's knightmaidens were from Axias Abbey. Born and raised in Axias, the abbot was Killian's partner during the thirteen years he cultivated this land a while being his adviser and aide who shared his intimate secrets.

Killian told him what had happened at Havitus Temple. The circumstances related to the plague. The empress's delegation. The discovery of the high chaplain's body in his room. The death of the archbishop. The blood- soaked night of the grand blessing ceremony. And the end of the religious life in Havitus Temple.

The abbot closed his eyes in pain as he heard the wretched story. He prayed for his brethren clerics for a moment, as a cleric himself, and mourned the lost people.

"It is most auspicious that she has acted as a high chaplain over the grand blessing ceremony.”

Killian frowned irritably. No matter what they discussed, the topic seemed to go back to Rieta.

The abbot stroked his white beard thoughtfully and continued. "The surge of divine energy from the ceremony is gone by now, but the body retains its memory of such compelling swells of energy. With enough care and training, her gifts will bloom to unimaginable extents. Whether it be healing or purging, she will be of great use to you, my lord. It shall behoove you to keep her by your side."

"I shall take heed of your words. Now on to urgent matters."

The abbot lowered his voice, smiling furtively. "May I ask just one more thing?" ﻿

Killian disapproved of the abbot's oddly calm demeanor, but he nodded begrudgingly because he was just about to ask him many difficult favors.

"Is she a true mistress of yours?"

“Only as an artifice for affairs of governance.”

The old man looked disappointed at Killian's flat dismissal. “Aren't they all. It seems you have none in truth as of late."

Killian frowned. The abbot was so laid back, almost as though unaware of how urgent their situation was. Killian could feel his frustration about to bubble over. “I did not expect such great disappointment from a cleric regarding my private life."

"I am only concerned that you have yet to wed, as are all your loyal subjects."

“As am I, to hear talk over such trifling matters when the manor is faced with such suffering,” Killian curtly fired back.

The abbot grinned unexpectedly. "You need not worry for the western lands." Killian cocked an eyebrow. The abbot continued. “Our novice clerics awaiting graduation this year are quite gifted. I anticipate the additions of one healing and one purging cleric."

Killian's eyes widened. *The novitiates from the abbey?*

"They have stolen into the isolated sectors to serve the patients of the western lands. We shall hear from them soon enough if they manage to escape undetected as they have."

Killian looked at him in disbelief. "They stole themselves into the isolated sector?"

He and the people who had the authority to give orders in his place, like Giselle and Leonard, were unavailable, so the remaining people couldn't call for outside clerics or do anything. Of course, the knights guarding the isolated area couldn't allow underage novice clerics to enter a plagued area until he ordered it. ﻿

"The vigor of determined youth always finds a way." The abbot looked embarrassed, but his face revealed the affection he couldn't keep hidden. "And with my aging abilities, I should like to put them to use upon their return. Although, I do worry for such young men entering the likes of the East Annex. I am well aware of your fondness for the Annex ladies, but would you allow for these naive boys to enter their dwelling?"

Killian let out his breath in a whoosh. He had thought they were going to have to wait for the Alpheter Temple clerics while doing nothing for over a week, just wringing their hands. It was an unexpected ray of help.

"My god." Killian sighed in disbelief. “I profess that I have yet to take faith in any god." He couldn't help but let an unfamiliar smile appear on his face. "But I do believe that you may be the image of one among us men."

Usually, when ten or more people infected by the plague were discovered, the number of patients doubled within two days. There had to be at least five hundred by now, but it stopped at only a hundred and eighty. It wasn't luck. They'd snuck in and were helping the western territory.

The abbot grinned. "The child who can heal was saved by your hands from a battlefield eight years ago. The child who purges was rescued by your hands from a band of thieves five years ago."

Killian's face froze upon hearing the unexpected anecdotes.

The abbot's face shone with admiration. "My lord, it is I who beholds the very image of a god among men."

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Giselle and the doctor had sat Rieta down and were lecturing her when he returned to his chambers. Her hurt fingers were each wrapped neatly in white bandages. Rieta was half-forced to lie down on Killian's bed, but she flushed and hurriedly rose when he came in. She was stopped by a glaring Giselle.

"Do not arise." Killian tossed bluntly and turned toward the doctor. "How does she fare?" ﻿

The doctor replied she was dehydrated, but there weren't any significant issues with her body other than her hands and the scrapes on her knees. However, he emphasized the need for proper nutrition and plenty of rest because she was fatigued and her strength had grown faint.

Rieta, who had no recollection of what happened before, looked flustered at the overwhelming interest in her minor injuries. She had no idea why they were so overprotective.

After the doctor left, Giselle continued to harangue her about staying calm and not doing anything to stress herself out and to rest her body properly.

"Enough. You do not fare much better, Giselle." Killian stopped her quietly. “The others have retired for the night and you should do the same. You have nary gotten a night's sleep these days."

A gaunt-faced Giselle got up silently.

Even if he said that no one probably was of a mind to sleep. Everyone probably knew of Anna's death by now. Giselle looked terrible from the physical and emotional exhaustion.

Killian spoke. “I called for the abbot. It seems the abbot and the novice clerics will be able to help us tonight."

Giselle and Rieta both looked at Killian.

"When they arrive, I'm going to ask them to bring Anna out of the East Annex. Since we can't just leave her there."

*It wasn't going to be a big comfort seeing a dead person's corpse, but...*

Killian continued. "You won't be able to go into the East Annex. But would you wait with us in front?"

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They were told the novitiates and knights-in-training who snuck into the quarantined area got caught by the patrolling knights and dragged back to the manor. The abbot smiled helplessly and shrugged. Killian sighed briefly and ordered them to bring the group to him. ﻿

Five monks, two novice clerics, and three knights-in-training, all between the ages of fifteen and seventeen, were brought in.

Killian stared at them from all angles. The knights who brought them in informed him briefly about the charges against them, the route they took, and their methods. They had finally been caught because they didn't fully cover their tracks from their previous usage of the foxhole.

"A foxhole," Killian repeated it incredulously.

The knight nudged the youthful men's sides when silence ensued. The young, not youthful, boys started to squirm. “We apologize, Sire.”

Killian chuckled and rubbed his chin. "Who taught you that?"

The knight who brought them in spoke up reluctantly. "We do not teach them how to find foxholes, Sire."

The youngest-looking knight-in-training muttered stupidly. "If it wasn't for Dyana, we would have gotten out of there without being found out."

The knight that brought in the sullen knight-in-training cuffed him on the back of his head. The knights of Axias took turns training and educating the abbey's knights-in-training, so they all knew one another well. That was also why they could get into the quarantined area because they knew of their patrolling strategies.

Killian tilted his head and smirked. “Quite a feat for knights-in-training. And it looks like I'll have to pay more love and attention to my knights who allowed their infiltration."

The knights' faces turned gray at the sound of Killian's words, feeling wronged. "My lord, who could have anticipated an intruder in a sector filled with plague victims?"

"Please take into consideration how we caught them getting out!"

"We are making do with what few we have!"

Killian chuckled. "You have much to say for trained men infiltrated by a few young novices." ﻿

The knights clamped their pouting mouths shut. Watching these rascals made him feel a little bit lighter.

"Vetere."

Killian called for the abbot sitting behind him, who stood, lifting his cane and grinning in response.

"The novice clerics may go see the abbot first.”

The two novice clerics bowed their heads in confusion and walked toward the abbot.

While the abbot informed them of the task ahead of them and the information surrounding it, the knights-in-training who helped them infiltrate the quarantined area stood before the Archduke of Axias, stiff and nervous. It was evident from just their posture. They were young, but their foundations were solid. The quick, young faces were focused.

"State your names."

"Claudio, Your Royal Highness!"

“Dyana, Your Royal Highness!"

"Lucian, Your Royal Highness!"

The three youths shouted their names simultaneously. They then frowned and glared at each other. The knights rubbed their own foreheads as if they were in pain.

"I see.” Killian laughed, one corner of his mouth pricking up. “I shall remember those names."

"We are honored, Your Royal Highness!"

Their voices were in sync this time. The two boys and the one girl's faces were shining with pride. *If things went well, this 'we are honored' would soon become 'we love you.*' Having reserved their confessions of love for later, Killian lifted his eyes to the knights and grinned. "Now, set them straight." ﻿

The three knights smiled widely. "Leave it to us, Sire."

The future of Axias was bright.

The glum knights-in-training were dragged out, and soon the two seventeen-year-old novice clerics were left standing in front of Killian. Killian looked at them.

"Your names."

The novitiates were only a few years older than the knights-in-training, but they calmly answered the question in turn.

"Damien, my lord."

"Colbryn, my lord."

Killian nodded. “Very well, Damien and Colbryn. The abbot has spoken of you two. He tells me that you possess great divine abilities."

The young novitiates bowed their heads to express their humility.

The mood cooled in an instant when Killian spoke. “Have you ever witnessed a corpse?"

The two youths nodded, slightly nervous. "We have."

Killian crossed his arms. “I see. You both bravely went in and came out of an area quarantined from the plague."

The novice clerics looked up at him quietly, their faces respectful but firm.

Killian continued calmly. "The threat of plague within a closed building is more serious, far more than the open land of the isolated sectors. And we have already lost one of our own to the plague. Are you prepared to face such dangers?"

The novitiates answered resolutely. “Yes, Sire. We have been ready for a long time."

"Very well." A moment passed, and Killian spoke. “Then I shall take you to Anna."

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# THE PLAGUE OF AXIAS (8)

"I shall go as well," Rieta whispered as she watched the two novitiates and the abbot prepare to go into the East Annex. Killian flatly ignored her.

"My skills are poor in comparison to three distinguished divine clerics, but I can be of assistance if something were to happen because I can see demons. A devil may have gone in as well." She had a sense of shame. Her diminishing voice mumbled.

Killian thought it wouldn't be a good idea to have her go in again and face Anna's corpse. At least he, who was the only one who could handle her, had to be next to her if something were to happen. If he couldn't go in, then Rieta couldn't either.

Rieta kept talking, hesitant but continuing.

Utter indifference. Killian completely ignored Rieta's requests to join the three clerics going into the East Annex.

Rieta was anxious and keeping an eye on Killian's reactions, or lack thereof, and cunningly enough, slid over to behind the novitiates. Killian wasn't even looking at her, but he grabbed Rieta's wrist as she tried to walk over. Rieta flinched and looked up at him.

"Leave this to their hands.” Killian spat out coldly and pulled her wrist. Rieta staggered and was pulled to his side.

"I won't find forgiveness if you defy my wishes again as you have."

Rieta stared at her wrist caught in his hand and looked back up at Killian. Rieta stammered, "I have an odd constitution, so I cannot catch the plague easily. So, me going in is..."

"You said there were no demons."

"Yes, Sire, but..."

"Isn't it enough to just cast a blessing if it's the plague without demons, especially since you can wield divine energy?" ﻿

The two youths replied as they cast blessings on each other's bodies. "Absolutely, Sire."

Killian looked down at Rieta and coolly said, "They are all more capable than you. And they're all men, so they're strong enough to bring out a single person."

The youths finished blessing each other and hoisted the stretcher on their shoulders.

"And the abbot said your purification was so strong that demons wouldn't be able to come in for a while."

Truly, the air wasn't just pure, but it was full of divine energy. Laypeople could also feel the oddly clean and refreshing air.

Rieta stammered her piece. “At, at least, let me go in for the abbot, Sire. He has difficulty walking, but I'm young, Sire.”

Killian stared at Rieta and hammered it into her. "Your place is here.” He looked directly into her blue eyes and firmly held her by the wrist. "Do not cause me to repeat my words thrice."

The abbot, leaning on his cane, looked at their hands. He pretended to not have seen anything and smiled brightly at Rieta. "Don't worry, Miss Rieta. I'm not that useless just yet."

Flustered, Rieta apologized, saying it wasn't what she meant, not knowing what to do. She was still awkwardly in Killian's grasp while she bobbed her head. He was holding her by the wrist and the back of her hand to make sure he didn't touch her bandaged fingertips, but he could always make sure she couldn't move with just a finger.

Rieta looked back and forth from her wrist in his grasp and his face didn't turn to her and fidgeted. The hand touching her was awkward and strange. He wasn't just imposingly tall with large hands, but he was someone who used swords. Rieta's hand in his grasp was no different from a child's tiny hand. The fact he was holding her hand made her feel uncomfortable in many ways, so she tried to get out, but she couldn't budge. ﻿

In the end, the three clerics went into the East Annex alone without Rieta.

Killian, Rieta, and the women who couldn't go into the East Annex were all standing in front with their faces dark, preparing themselves for Anna's arrival. But the clerics came back out empty-handed after a long while.

The women of the East Annex had refused to allow them to take Anna's body. They requested a day. The clerics relayed a message from the ladies of the East Annex. They were wondering whether they'd be able to see Anna again if they allowed Anna's body to be carried out. The people in the quarantined East Annex wouldn't be able to come out until after Anna's funeral, and they would be unable to attend it. The ladies were right, but the people outside didn't see this coming.

The women of the East Annex asked for a day. Time to have a funeral of their own, time to send Anna off, just a day.

Seira started to cry as their message made her finally feel Anna's death was real. Elise placed a hand on her shoulder and wiped away her tears with her sleeve. Rachel's head dropped in sadness before she quietly left. Giselle stared at the East Annex in silence. She looked at it with empty eyes.

Rieta stared blankly at the sky. A cloudy night sky had settled above their heads.

In the end, they decided to come back the next day at the same time, and they all dispersed. The exhausted people all spread out into a separate guesthouse.

Rieta followed Killian blindly as she had done back at Havitus Temple. Killian walked into his chambers with Rieta trailing behind him. Rieta followed him blankly into his chambers, and only when she saw Killian start to strip and change clothes did she snap back to her senses.

*Why did I follow him here when this is Axias Manor?*

Rieta quickly turned her head away in confusion and said, "I-I shall retire to my chambers." It was like déjà vu. She remembered the room she ﻿always slept in when she came here. She blurted out something, under pressure to say anything. "Oh, or shall I spend the night?"

She meant, "Shall I spend the night in the room I always sleep in?" A wave of déjà vu washed over Rieta as she blurted out something much bigger than what she had in mind.

*Goodness!* She recalled the horrifying mistake she had made just a few moments ago.

Flushed, Rieta sprinted to cover her mistake. "What I mean is, since I am a mage and we are short of hands and I will be needed here tomorrow, perhaps I could spend the night in the chamber I used."

Rieta started to ramble in her panic. “But of course, my dwelling is not far off, so I shall return home and change my garments, that is what I shall do."

"Spend the night here," Killian said.

Rieta blinked and stared at him. Killian had somehow changed into his nightclothes. "I will do so. I thank you, my—”

"In this chamber." Killian jerked his chin toward his bed.

"Pardon?"

Killian ignored Rieta, whether she squawked or not, and laid down on his bed. Rieta could see his neck and collarbone shadowed in the loose nightclothes. She didn't know where to look.

*I heard wrong, right?*

His voice, which was lower than usual, perhaps from exhaustion, rumbled, "Lie here."

Rieta couldn't believe her ears and stared at the man lying down on the bed. Killian had burrowed down into the sheets, and the one visible

crimson eye blinked slowly and looked at her.

"My bed is spacious enough to accommodate both of us,” Killian mumbled nonchalantly. It was what Rieta had said back at Havitus Temple. ﻿

"The abbot tells me I must keep such a gifted mage as yourself by my side." Killian turned to his side, still lying down, and reached out an arm to her. "So, come here."

As he was telling her to come into his arms, it was like he was speaking to a child. The savage body, visible through his clothes, and the terrifyingly handsome face, seductive even when doing nothing, made her breathless. He had his arm outstretched, and his hand was beckoning.

Rieta became flustered. She couldn't hide it.

Killian let his arm drop and chuckled when she fidgeted, frozen where she stood. “I bear no hidden agenda, other than to mildly punish you,” Killian murmured without even a bit of change in expression. "I warned you never to put yourself in such danger again without consent, but you spared not even a second's thought."

Killian stretched his body out and grabbed Rieta's wrist. It wasn't that fast, but Rieta was so out of sorts she couldn't dodge it. He pulled Rieta's body to the bed.

"Therefore, this shall be your punishment. You will rest by my side tonight."

Killian let go of Rieta's wrist and picked up the edge of the light blanket as if he were opening the door to hell. Rieta's mouth gaped open, and she stared at his raised arm with her face stark white.

“Well?" Killian nodded his head, his arm still aloft, and hurried her as she stood at the side of the bed. "Hurry."

Her blue eyes shook, unable to look at His Lordship. The unwavering crimson eye kept her trapped without any room to escape.

Killian hurried her again, expressionless. "I repeat, come here."

Rieta realized that was indeed a terrifying punishment. How could she dare refuse the order of a noble-that of the archduke who saved her, at that? She hadn't ever thought of refusing, even back when she thought she was here to attend to him in the bedroom. ﻿

But Rieta choked out a reply after a long while, and that reply was one of refusal.

"I-I shall never put myself in harm's way again, my lord."

*Please let this go once.*

But Killian was merciless. "You may keep your garments on to sleep. Or discard them, if you wish, but I would expect otherwise."

She desperately hoped he was joking, but there was no flexibility to his words. Rieta's mouth dropped open.

"M-my lord."

"It would behoove you to come here before I require more of you tonight."

Rieta looked close to fainting, but she climbed onto the bed and knelt.

As soon as she climbed onto the bed, Killian dropped the blanket onto her knees and turned away mildly. He even crossed his arms to show her that he had made up his mind not to touch her.

Objectively, they were far enough apart from each other, as far apart as they were in Havitus Temple. Rieta knelt like she was being punished, frozen with her head bowed.

Killian stared at her silently with his head deep into his pillow, and he suddenly chuckled. "Shall I lay you myself?"

Agonized, Rieta wriggled into the covers reluctantly. Unlike last time, he didn't turn his back on her. He pulled his arm under his head with his body facing her and silently gazed at her. His eyes, unmoving from exhaustion, exuded a dark and deviant mood. This bed was more spacious than the one in the temple, but his gaze filled that space to no end, and it made the bed feel narrow. ﻿

Rieta nearly bored a hole in the ceiling with her eyes, so embarrassed she wanted to die, lying there by his side. Time didn't flow by this slowly, even during the grand blessing ceremony. Time flowed so slowly that she thought she'd rather faint.

How much time had passed?

"What became of Anna...” The fragile, icy silence shattered as a deliberately cool voice murmured. "It was not by your wrongdoing."

Rieta's breath caught at his statement out of nowhere, and she blinked.

His voice was dry and cracking from exhaustion. Killian muttered like he was talking to himself. "You did well."

It wasn't like a person's voice but more like a whisper of wind. It drove deep into her chest. It wasn't some great statement. But her heart plummeted. Her throat grew thick suddenly and she had trouble swallowing. She glared at the ceiling stubbornly and forced back her tears, but she couldn't force them back anymore, and she started to sob with her fists digging into her eyes. She thought she would look hideous like that, so she turned away from him. An invisible hand quietly touched her shoulder and slowly, very slowly, rubbed her back.

Whether they try not to cry or whether they do cry. Whether they lie there or sit there. Whether they comfort or whether they are comforted. On the bed. On the rocking chair. Under the moonlight. The people, exhausted from their long journey, fell asleep for the first time in several days. Even if not everyone said everything on their mind, just silently being with each other was comforting.

The first full moon in twelve years. The heartless moon, wasted away within only a few days, was setting toward the west. ﻿﻿

35

# THE PLAGUE OF AXIAS (9)

The next evening, the novice clerics returned to the East Annex after a day of racing around, following Killian, who was working on solving the issue of the western lands. Killian wasn't with them because he was busy dealing with the plague and all the work that came with it, but he told Giselle to ensure Rieta didn't enter the East Annex.

Thankfully, Rieta didn't protest.

The women of the East Annex, Anna's family, were watching. The girl's corpse, dressed in clean clothes, was carried out on the stretcher. She was wrapped in a white cloth. It wasn't a shroud, but the women of the East Annex had decided to bury her in a bright yellow dress that they had chosen and dressed her in.

Blisters and spots pocked her face, but she looked so much like herself, making it almost unbelievable she had died two days ago. She looked like she could jump up at any moment. Her face was so calm that they felt thankful amid the sorrow.

After setting up protections against the plague with purification and blessing, all the East Annex women stepped up to Anna one by one, bent down, and whispered their goodbyes in her ear. Then, they all kissed her on the cheek. They were brave knightmaidens who had prepared themselves within the day they were given, but most of them were crying as they said goodbye to Anna.

After her loved ones said goodbye, during the previous twenty-four hours, while the undertaker was preparing Anna's corpse and the funeral rites, Rieta stayed by the twelve-year-old girl's side. At times, a white light emanated from her hand that purified her.

When Rieta was left alone in the room with Anna after even the undertaker left, she sat there while staring at Anna, trying to keep every bit of her memories. Anna's face was ever so peaceful.

*"Mage Tristi."*

She liked calling Rieta by that title rather than her name. She looked like she would open her eyes at any moment and call for her again.

*"If I don't become His Lordship's wife, I'd like it if I could become a mage like you."*

*Silly Anna. As if being a mage was anything to be proud about. Just blessing and purification. My skills were trivial when I couldn't even heal or purge.*

*"The future will be here even if you don't hurry it. Rather, I'm worried you'll not be able to fully enjoy the beautiful present because you're so focused on the future"*

*The future...*

*"You'll become more mature and more beautiful next year, and more the year after that. You'll be a lovely lady in no time. I'm looking forward to that day as well."*

*That future won't come. Anna will stay twelve forever. How could I have said such things so rashly?*

*"Will I be able to live?"*

She couldn't get rid of her memory of the youthful smile on Anna's, the one that had comforted Rieta instead. It was as if she had already foreseen her future. *I am sorry I lied. There was nothing I could do. I am useless. Someone who can't save anyone.*

Rieta sorrowfully reached out a hand. The bandaged fingers brushed Anna's alabaster cheek. A rush of hot tears welled up at the feeling of Anna's cold skin, the warmth having long seeped out.

*"Since Rieta's here, it's fine now."*

*I was sorry. I couldn't protect you.*

The only woman who hadn't said her final goodbyes struggled to speak. "Rest in peace, somewhere with no demons, nor pain.” Rieta pressed her﻿ lips to Anna's forehead. "Goodbye, Anna.”

The handkerchief in her left hand with the crooked "Mage Tristi” embroidered on it... Not even able to wipe away her tears with the handkerchief, Rieta cried into Anna's cold wrist.

The young girl, who had fallen into eternal slumber with a peaceful face that would last forever, sunk serenely into the darkness.

Three-day funerals were customary in the summer. During the day after placing the body into the coffin, Killian and three clerics treated the patients in the East Annex and decided to go to the western lands.

Rieta bowed her head to the clerics in apology for not joining them on their inspection of the lands. She had to stay by Anna's corpse to purify it. The clerics assured her it was all right; she didn't need to worry.

Casting blessings and purifications were things they were fully capable of doing on their own in the first place. No one would complain about her attending the funeral, and there was no need for Rieta to come along on the inspection when she couldn't purge or heal. Even though they said it was more than enough for her to bless and purify the East Annex and Axias Manor, she said she would be sure to join them on their inspections starting tomorrow, after Anna's funeral. She apologized repeatedly.

The novice clerics admired the beautiful, powerful mage.

Damien, the purging cleric-to-be, asked Rieta, “Newly born demons of the plague are strong and complex. How were you able to purge it?"

Rieta couldn't say anything other than how she had only purified because that was the truth.

Colbryn, the healing cleric-to-be, was also interested in the pure and powerful energy of her purification that spread throughout the East Annex and asked her, "Miss Rieta, your purification is truly amazing. I thought it was traces of a purge. Were you claiming holy ground?" ﻿

"No, it was just a purification. God answered in my desperation. I think I was fortunate."

The two youths thought she was humble.

Abbot Vetere looked at Rieta differently. He knew how Killian was gentle toward the weak, and he knew well how he especially cared for his people.

Vetere lowered his voice and whispered to Killian after Rieta left. “You must have her reside in the East Annex."

"I shall."

"She is truly a rare talent."

"Noted, I say."

Killian, the three clerics, and the medical teams got onto horses and into carriages, all blessed for protection, and departed for the isolated area with their arms full of supplies.

The two novice clerics, who didn't have to sneak around anymore, skillfully rode their horses toward the western lands and showed the group to the first isolation quarters, where they gathered the sick from the western territory. The people approached with smiles, having recognized the two young novice clerics riding astride their horses, leading the carriage with the medical personnel and workers.

"Brothers, you've returned!"

"Oh, please just call us by our names."

Damien dismounted his horse as soon as they arrived and started placing blessings on the people who came out to greet them. He put a hand on their shoulders, heads, and necks one by one, feeling out for pulsing plague demon energies and releasing divine power on the attack when he felt them. He didn't have a divine eye like Rieta, but Damien was sensitive﻿ to spiritual energy. He was exceptionally gifted in recognizing demons' energy and was thought of highly for that fact.

Low-level demons couldn't hurt people directly, but middle-level demons and greater, those that attacked and were dangerous, could be seen without a divine eye. Demons cultivated the power to hide because physically materializing hurt their powers in the first place. Still, they had to attach themselves to their hosts to harm humans, and those kinds of demons' energy were so chaotic that it was easily recognizable. It wasn't a problem not to have a divine eye.

"How is your wife faring?”

"She's better, yes, yes. Now she can stand up by herself! Your care has done her much good."

"That's wonderful! Now there's a team here to care for everyone, so you'll be able to breathe a little better."

"Thank you. Truly, thank you."

The moment Colbryn got off his horse, he walked over to the area where the patients were staying and started to treat those who had high fevers or severe symptoms. Killian helped Abbot Vetere out of the carriage and he joined Colbryn in healing patients. Vetere had difficulty walking, so more mobile patients went over to him to be treated, and Colbryn went around treating the patients rendered immobile by their severe symptoms.

The medical teams that the clerics blessed early on climbed out of the carriages and quickly spread out at the clerics' suggestion to examine the patients. The workers and the attendants started to hand out the supplies and began to carry them over to where they were needed.

Killian noted what supplies were insufficient, where more people were needed, and the damage of the situation while they were all treating patients and working. He hid his identity from the people to not fluster any of those in the quarters and pretended to be a somewhat high-ranking official. He was a quiet lord who didn't even hold triumphal celebrations, ﻿so people outside of the manor couldn't recognize him. Several people looked at him strangely, cocking their heads in recognition, but no one asked about it because they thought it was impossible for him to be there.

Killian made it so he could speak to the people running the sick quarters, and he surveyed the quarters with a stony face. There were about forty patients who had the plague. It came out to about sixty if they included those who were suspected of having the plague. And another fifty or so family members nursed them, took care of the supplies, and cooked meals. It was taking a while for them to all be healed, purified, and blessed.

There were eight temporary clinics like this one. This was a large clinic compared to the others.

"We must hasten if we are to inspect every relief camp within this day. We shall barely see half at this rate."

Damien looked up at him in surprise. “You intend to visit all the camps today, my lord?"

Killian cocked an eyebrow. "Why would I not?"

Damien and Colbryn faltered at his obvious reply.

"B-but this may prove to be an impossible task. Some are quite far off. It would require two or three days, at best."

Killian turned away from them as the person in charge of the clinic brought him an unidentifiable document. He replied as he scanned the document with his eyes. "The earliest we can expect the temple clerics are in a week, whence the plague will begin to take numerous lives and thus attract a frenzy of demons. Whether or not this plague can be dealt with will be decided by the number of cases we have at that point."

The two novice clerics both had a shadow of shock pass by their faces. In seven days, they'd start to see deaths. It was a future right ahead of them, but it didn't seem real. ﻿

Killian quickly skimmed through the papers and looked up at them. "As of now, your valiant efforts have cast us on a hopeful course. I recognize this is a toilsome feat, but one last week of your efforts will be crucial in saving my people."

Close to two hundred patients. Eight clinics. Excluding the medical personnel, the only clerics were these three. They were undoubtedly a good defense, but this was the reality.

The young clerics' chivalry organized the chaos of the terrified people, and just being able to see and treat the patients right in front of them made them feel proud. A new expression of determination appeared on the youths' faces.

"Yes, Your Highness!"

The aid team was also working hard, thanks to the hazard pay they had received in advance. Plus, His Lordship, who happened to be their benefactor, was standing there watching their every move.

All the territory's people were friendly toward the young clerics who had sneaked in for them and worked with such dedication. The townspeople, who followed their orders and gathered the patients to nurse them, naturally started to help the aid team. They weren't enough, but everyone was cooperative. The clerics were also doing their best, and things were getting done rapidly.

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But no matter how passionate and chivalrous they were, the three of them were just regular clerics. There was no way they could match Killian's monstrous stamina, which made even fully trained knights collapse.

Killian's blind desire to travel the whole western territory made for a brutal schedule and it was in the middle of summer. Among them, the young and healthy novice clerics and the attendants, who were doing their everyday jobs, were gritting their teeth to keep going. But Vetere ignored what people would think of him and who he was supposed to portray as an esteemed abbot and threw himself to the ground. They were in the middle of a narrow path the carriage couldn't get through on their way to the fifth clinic. The sun was shining hot above them. ﻿

"Take this withering life instead, my lord.”

"Speak some sense."

“There is no sense in such a futile attempt to visit all the camps in one day! We are only three men! I shan't! Not in a million regimes!"

Killian silently watched the eighty-year-old man, his whiskers white with age, lie there on the ground and throw a tantrum. At one point, he looked like a god. But now, he was a whining little kid.

*It would be good if someone could carry him on their back.*

Everyone else was carrying the supplies, so they had no room to help him. Vetere didn't have to carry anything, but leaning his body on his single cane was difficult for him with his uncomfortable leg.

"If this is your agenda for us, I shall request Madam Tristi's assistance." "I see now that you've passed your prime, making much ado over trifles."

Vetere retorted back to the cynical lashing. “A cleric past his prime is no matter, compared to your own detriment."

"What of mine?"

"Why have you yet to marry, Sire? Already dwindling in stamina, Sire?”

The novice clerics' faces paled at the swaggering abbot's brash remarks. But Vetere pressed on. “All the more why Madam Tristi must be moved to the East Annex."

"Enough. She has been granted a grace period, and you know this. Should she wish to come after this month, I shall receive her then."

"But why is such long preparation needed in the mere act of receiving a mistress? I fear your manly vigors have shriveled-"

Killian ended up exploding. “That is quite enough!"

The inspection of the territory and the relief camps started at dawn and ended at dawn. ﻿

Vetere didn't have the strength to step into the carriage, let alone return home, so he passed out in the middle of the final relief camp. The two youths said they'd rest there since they had to come back the next day anyway and fell fast asleep like they were sick themselves. They didn't even see Killian off.

In the end, Killian rode his horse alone in the direction of Axias Manor. He needed to return to the manor to figure out the supplies and workforce required in the western territory and deal with the rest of the issues. He was also going to attend Anna's funeral in the morning.

He clicked his tongue at the clerics while riding alone back to Axias Manor, thinking they were definitely much too weak. Sadly for the clerics, he decided he wouldn't bring Rieta along at all after exploding with frustration at Vetere's insistence that he bring her along.

He figured out how to get everywhere after a day of travel. They were going to hire the mages in the territory, so there was no reason why the three clerics couldn't do the job. Now that he had found the rightful places for the medical teams and the supplies, he should be able to go around all eight clinics within the day, caring for everything perfectly.

If Vetere knew, he would have stomped his foot and demanded Killian kill him instead. Vetere pushed to the brink of his ability and asked for Rieta over and over again, but it had backfired and made Killian hostile. A tough journey, overwork, frustration, and bad tempers went around and around in a loop and influenced even Killian just a bit.

He also somewhat wanted Rieta to rest. She continued to act recklessly, so keeping her beside him was making him worry about her more. There were three fully capable clerics with plentiful divine power. Damien's skills in purging and his talent for discovering demons were quite excellent, so Rieta's talent in seeing demons was not strictly necessary.

The blessings needed for the people who would be newly posted in the western territory could be done by other mages, not just Rieta. The loyal Vetere, who was so worried about His Lordship's love life, would be disappointed, but that wasn't something Killian had to concern himself with.

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# THE PLAGUE OF AXIAS (10)

The following day, the girl's coffin was laid in Axias Manor's cemetery after being taken for a loop around the East Annex after His Lordship, who she liked so very much, kissed it.

"Goodbye, Anna." A cool, dry voice offered a calm farewell.

Anna.

Angel of the East Annex.

Rests here in eternal peace.

White blossoms were placed in front of the gravestone. The funeral was over.

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After Anna's funeral, Killian told Rieta outright to take a break and take some days off. She was getting ready to follow Killian to the western territory.

"Pardon?"

“Return to your home and take a week of rest. Giselle and the physician both agreed that you are in dire need of rest.”

Rieta's eyes widened in shock at Killian's words. “Although my talents are meager, I could offer aid in blessing and purifying-"

Killian waved his hand dismissively. “I have no need of you. The clerics' efforts will suffice. If you join the team now, the abbot will..."

*The old man must be senile. Who cares if I get married or not?* Killian shuddered when he recalled the nagging he had heard from the abbot.

“There is no need for you to strain yourself in your condition, and aid from Alpheter Temple will soon arrive. That is all. Go and rest.”

*It is a lie.* Rieta couldn't understand how Killian wouldn't use her when they were so short of people who could use divine energy, even if they included her. He must be tired. He must be needing people to work. *I told the three clerics I'd join them after the funeral!*

Rieta hurriedly said, “But you agreed to allow me the chance to repay your kindness."

"And you have, more than was expected of you."

"I have not! I've yet to return any portion of your payment!"

Killian barked out a laugh and dropped his head. He then looked up at Rieta roguishly. "Still dwelling on that ambition, are you? I suggest halting such efforts, for it is no sum which you can repay in your lifetime.”

Rieta replied boldly, her face set and brave. "I can procure good sums of money. I can repay you, my lord."

Killian rolled his eyes and smirked. "Rieta. Surely you do not believe the meager allowance and cost of dwelling to be all of my kindness." Killian crossed his arms, leaning on one leg languidly like he was having fun. "I fear you have no knowledge of the debt I forgave in exchange for your life when I brought you out of Cevitas."

*Debt?* Rieta blinked twice. Rieta only knew Killian bought her from Frederik. She had overheard he forgave Casarius's debt for it, but this was a financial matter between lords, so commoners had no way of knowing how much it was. She simply thought the cost of the house probably wasn't more than the cost of her body.

Someday, she would get a chance to repay him for the house and the money to settle in, and she was thinking she would be able to pay back his kindness for saving her life by doing her best to help him.

From what Killian was saying, it looked like her house cost less than what she cost. *Why couldn't I have thought of that?* It was only obvious that debts between the nobles would be greater than what commoners could imagine. Now, that was how much she cost.

Rieta asked falteringly. "Well... How much was it?"

Killian replied without hesitation. “Twenty million gold.”

Rieta couldn't believe her ears. She asked, “Two thousand...gold?

It had been the annual cost of living for her family of three.

"Twenty million," Killian stated matter-of-factly.

Rieta's face drained at the unbelievable number. *Not two thousand, not twenty thousand, but twenty million?* No matter how well paid a mage was, it was impossible to earn ten thousand gold a year.

She couldn't breathe. It was so big a number, way past what she had considered an amount of money. The biggest amount of money she saw was the yearly budget the convent had when she helped organize the ledgers. There was no reason for her to consider anything bigger. Twenty million? It was enough to run the convent for several hundreds of years and still have some left over. It was unbelievable, but he wasn't someone who would lie to make fun of her.

*I wasn't anything, really, but that kind of money? And not even to bring me in as a mistress, but because I was pitiful?*

She had no idea what to say. Rieta had unknowingly clenched a fist in front of her chest and barely squeezed out a response, looking like she was going to pass out.

"I-I shall be diligent."

"No need." Killian shook his head indifferently. "I have long since considered the debt paid when you offered me a gift procured with the allowance I had bestowed.

*Even if I said this, she probably was going to come back with a “but."* But what did come back was a slightly belated, unexpected response.

"But you do not even use the gift."

Killian looked at Rieta suddenly. A brief look of disappointment flashed across her face and the hand she had clenched at her chest lowered a little, and Rieta was smiling abashedly. “This was expected as such since it is a trinket too paltry for the likes of a lord." Rieta blushed and smiled as if what she said was making her even more embarrassed.

Killian closed his mouth and observed her face. Killian had gotten better at reading Rieta's expressions, so he knew her face was telling him that she was somewhat hurt.

"No, I do use it." He lied before even realizing it.

"I have yet to see it on you." Rieta tilted her head to the side slightly and smiled.

"No, I make good use of it.” Killian frowned.

*Huh? That face. She doesn't even smile much, and she is smiling now. Why is her face looking so tired?*

"Despite your lack of recognition, I have used it often. It is now in my chambers, having left it out after my bath last night.” The excuses kept pouring out to support his lie. He had never lied before in his life, so he felt strange and guilty.

"Then it must be so." Rieta laughed as if she didn't believe him.

Killian was watching her, and suddenly he reached out, quick as lightning, and pulled down the brim of Rieta's mourning hat. The black hat pulled down on her head and covered her eyes.

"Rid yourself of useless thoughts and focus on tending to your meals and getting plenty of rest. You are in true need of replenishment.”

Rieta fumbled with the hat, but she just bowed her head instead of fixing it. Somehow her obstinacy was broken, and she said from her slightly parted lips, "Yes, my lord."

Killian frowned, looking irritated. “Even your response lacks any hint of vitality." He was irritated because she just calmly accepted her fate to rest after struggling so hard to go with him. "Be diligent in relieving yourself of your fatigue." He ordered intimidatingly. "Eat, sleep, and rest with the utmost devotion, for I command you to do so."

He turned on his heel to head to the main house without even waiting for a reply to his blunt order, like always.

He felt strange. It felt like someone was making fun of him. Rieta wouldn't dare, but it was a strange occurrence.

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When Killian returned to his room, Eron asked, surprised, “Didn't you say you would be leaving right after the funeral, Sire? Did you forget something?"

Killian didn't reply and rummaged around his drawers in the study to find the box she gave him. When he opened the box, the necklace was as it was when she gave it to him. The scratched-up, crude ring shone at the end of the leather strip.

Killian put it on his neck and justified it to his lying self. Simple blessings on people or things didn't last very long, so this would probably be a normal necklace, but he could always have Rieta bless it for him again while showing her that he was actually wearing it.

Killian clenched his eyes shut. “She's a peculiar woman for sure."

Making a nobleman like him give it sitting and take it standing. But the commoner woman, who was almost buried alive in that nobleman's territory, struggled so hard to follow him around stubbornly, asking him to take her repayment, telling him she was going to pay him back. It was a funny thing.

Killian and the clerics moved back and forth from the western territory and Axias Manor constantly. It was a murderous journey, but both the western territory where the plague had spread quite a bit and the East Annex where the women were infected by the demon's power needed consistent healing and maintenance of the swarming demons.

Killian combined the eight camps into six and charted a course for quick rounds. Physicians were assigned to patients who had severe cases and couldn't move, and their family members were trained to look after them if there weren't enough. Mages scouted from within the territory were assigned to each clinic. They took on the task of blessing the medical staff and the families, lifting some of the burdens from the clerics.

Plague demons swarmed after feeling the energy of the plague, but they couldn't avoid Damien's purging, because he was inspecting the clinics and their surroundings every day.

Demons that did attach themselves to people were eliminated before they put down proper roots. Colbryn and Vetere's constant purifications and blessings made it hard for demons to get around.

"How is it in the East Annex?"

"Thankfully, none of the ladies are any worse, so they're getting through well. There are no additional cases. It looks to be good, thanks to the quick response."

"And the suspected cases that came in recently to the fourth camp?"

"It's been thought to be something other than the plague, so they've been quarantined separately. We'll observe them until tomorrow, and we'll release them from quarantine and have them go home when it's confirmed there aren't any problems."

There ended up being several confirmed cases of those suspected cases, so the numbers went up to 250 people or so, but it didn't go up past that. The plague was cut off completely with no signs of leaks, thanks to the clerics, healing and purging every day, and the powerful aid from doctors and mages who were scraped up from every corner of Axias and put to work.

By the fifth day, like a miracle, not a single new case occurred. After a week, patients who were looking at full recoveries started to appear. And on the ninth day, news of the healing clerics from Alpheter arriving at the large camp in the western territory came by. They were twelve healing clerics and four purging clerics. The three gaunt, exhausted clerics brightened, claiming they were finally saved.

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Killian and the three clerics came out to greet the sixteen clerics. A thin female cleric, around forty or so and looking to be the group leader, discovered Killian and bowed her head.

“I greet you, Archduke of Axias. I am Tania the Pilgrim, humble servant of the great god Siel."

The three clerics, who were beaming, jolted at her name. “Saintess Tania?”

She wasn't a cleric from Alpheter. Saintess Tania was one of the greatest, most influential healing clerics of the empire. She wasn't a part of any temple, but instead, she was a mighty person of divine power who traveled the empire to heal and purge.

She nodded calmly. "Yes. I am also known as such."

Normally, divine powers of the highest order became specialized in either healing or purging, but this didn't apply to Saintess Tania. She was one of the greatest clerics in healing and purging and was an influential divine cleric, one of the only fighting clerics who could face high-level devils even with her small stature. She was clairvoyant like Rieta, but not only that; she was at the astounding level of being able to see even divine energy.

She traveled the empire with undying zeal and energy, eliminating devils and helping those in pain, a heroine with the power to choose the pope. She was thought of as a money-grubber by the nobles. She was called Saintess Tania by most people, and all clerics and commoners respected her.

Vetere and the two novitiates bowed their heads.

"Vetere the Cleric greets the Saintess Tania.”

"It is a great honor to greet you, Saintess. Damien, at your service.”

"We have always admired your work. Colbryn, at your service."

Tania silently walked up to Damien and waved her hand over his shoulder. The divine energy, like a soft wind, shot through the air above Damien's shoulder.

"Alas, I spy a brazen little demon."

Damien went pale.

"We must not forget that plague demons are highly skilled in concealing themselves. Take heed that even a blessed body is never secure from the grasp of a vile demon."

"Was it its last power?"

"It seemed so," Tania replied calmly. “Your powers are great, but you're not an adult just yet, so do not forget you are working here in a plagued area, and you must be careful of the demon's powers. Be especially careful of demons that have been eliminated. The final power they leave for revenge is not easy to recognize by yourself."

A devil's final power. Leaving behind a little demon in malice, one a human cannot recognize nor remove on their own, as they disappear. This little demon left behind from the final power was able to ignore purifications or blessings.

The person who had one couldn't get rid of it by themselves. If someone else discovers it quickly, then it could be purged. Still, it was hard to recognize the energy of a little demon on a body with mighty divine power, so it often was recognized too late. If it lays down roots within that time, then it was hard even to get rid of the rascal.

The three clerics' senses for the divine were blunted by their exhaustion, and they didn't recognize it. Colbryn looked shocked at how he couldn't figure out the danger Damien was in and looked at him vacantly.

Damien laughed it off and bowed his head in thanks to Tania. "I thank you, Saintess."

Tania nodded and looked at Killian.

"Long has passed since our last encounter, Your Highness."

Killian cocked his eyebrow. “Have we met prior to this occasion?"

"You may not recall very well, since I had not been of as notable repute then as I am now. I had spent a short while here before you recovered the castle of Axias."

It made sense. She was a woman who had traveled the empire for the past twenty years, so he thought she could have come to Axias as well. And if it were when Axias wasn't even a city, then it would have probably been a wasteland where she was even more needed.

"How did you know to come here? You are not associated with Alpheter Temple."

"I had been resting at Alpheter but briefly. When I heard of the great need for a healer in Axias, as well as your eagerness to recompense. Could I have come mistakenly?"

So the rumor Saint Tania was a money-grubber wasn't wrong. Helping those in pain wasn't something that could be helped with just divine power. Tania was someone who knew well how important money was and how necessary it was.

"It is no mistake."

And thankfully, she was someone so great that the empress's scheme couldn't involve her. She was someone Axias was happy to see. It could be called excellent luck.

Killian smirked and chuckled.

"I welcome you to Axias."

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# THE PLAGUE OF AXIAS (11)

The demon's power. The power of the demon materialized while ignoring blessings or purifications.

According to the type of demon, they each had different powers. But the one thing in common was the wicked power they had which materialized from the anger they felt from being destroyed or sent back to hell. The more vulnerable the person, the more easily they became the target of the final power. Still, there were instances when this power targeted powerful clerics, ignoring that they carried divine power.

People's perception of the plague demons' first power and how this power absolutely causes the plague the moment they were born after consuming death was so strong that people tended not to be careful of their final power. But it wasn't something to be ignored.

As a purging cleric, Damien was exposed to greater danger than Colbryn, who was a healing cleric. Colbryn's face grew dark. He thought not being able to recognize the demon attached to Damien was his fault.

Damien just whispered excitedly. "Did you see? Saintess Tania's purging, Wow."

Colbryn looked at him and sighed. He scowled and muttered, "Sorry.” "For what?"

"Something horrible could have happened."

Damien looked at him confusedly and shrugged. “That's unlike you. Don't worry about it, bastard."

*Thwack!*

"Ow!"

Vetere smacked the head of the foulmouthed young cleric from behind with his cane. Damien rubbed his throbbing head with tears in his eyes and corrected himself. "Don't fret, Brother Colbryn. I'm all right, aren't I?"

Colbryn's worried face didn't clear. When Damien saw Colbryn's unchanged face, he slung an arm around his shoulders and whispered happily, "Thanks to you, I got purged by Saintess Tania herself. Hey, be honest. You're jealous, right?"

"You're a punk who'll come back to brag about how you crossed Laudamus first." Colbryn did mutter it quietly, but he suspected it wasn't silent enough for Vetere not to hear. However, the cane of justice didn't come flying.

Damien looked chagrined for a moment, but soon he became serious and looked benevolent as he lifted his hand. “That's a leap, Brother Colbryn." Vetere didn't lift his cane but offered warm words instead. "It's difficult to recognize newly born demons that have attached themselves with their final power. Thankfully, nothing really happened, so consider it a good experience."

Colbryn eventually nodded and relaxed. For once, he didn't shrug Damien's arm off his shoulder. It looked like he was pretty concerned about this.

Damien thumped his shoulder and laughed. "Don't act so squeamish. I know your senses are dull from squeezing yourself dry. Nothing happened in the end. Anyway, are we able to take a breath now?"

Vetere whispered loudly as if he wanted someone to hear. "If Miss Rieta had been here, she would have realized quickly..."

Damien frantically lowered his voice. "Don't, Father Abbot. His Lordship has a bit of a demonish streak in him."

They looked up at Saintess Tania and Killian walking up ahead of them, talking.

"I was concerned because I'd heard it's been two weeks since the plague spread. But it's better than I thought. The plague hasn't spread but rather is on its way to dying down, and quite a few purifications were cast. I can barely believe this was all done by only three people." Saintess Tania skimmed her eye over the energy spread throughout the large camp and looked back at Killian and the three clerics. "It looks like you've worked the clerics to the bone."

The three clerics turned dismal at Saintess Tania's words.

"His Lordship isn't even a human."

Killian chuckled at Vetere's complaint. "I don't have anything other than money, so I'm going to compensate them generously with at least that."

Tania's thin face instantly turned bright, and she smiled brilliantly. “Then that's fine. Shall we go then, as well?"

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Killian went with them to the temporary conference room behind the clinic. The clerics from Alpheter looked around the camp full of pure, divine energy and marveled.

"Neither plague demons nor the plague would be able to be active in an environment like this one. It's truly amazing."

Colbryn and Damien stared dumbly around them, hoping to feel something like that as well, but they soon gave up, with their faces turning blank. The three clerics' senses had become dull from exhaustion, and they had no idea how amazing it was because they had just worked mechanically. Vetere shuddered at the thought of what had happened rather than feeling proud.

Killian spread out a map of the western territory and started explaining the situations of the six relief camps and what they had to do to help. Tania and Killian discussed their ideas briefly, sent two healing clerics to each of the camps to be under their purview, and ordered the purging clerics to pair up and round through three camps a day. Finally, Vetere, Damien, and Colbryn took a breath of relief. They only had to power through today, ushering the new camps to each clinic.

But the three of them grew pale when Killian ordered them to visit all six camps every day since they knew the situations and the patients in each.

Killian cocked his head in genuine confusion at the three clerics, whose mouths dropped wide open.

"I do not understand the alarm when you're only asked to travel while the others attend to the camps."

In the end, Vetere put his foot down, and they came to a compromise. They would visit all six today, but they would take two days, going to three a day starting tomorrow.

"This is the only place we've seen, but the plague has been taken care of quite well. We should be able to take care of the plague without much difficulty. But the waves of plague demons rushing in will be great if the plague has spread this broadly, so we must not be off our guards just because the plague seems to be diminishing.”

Saintess Tania turned to the clerics. “The plague demons will not relent, but we can purge if they are discovered before they take root within the host. You must diligently replenish your own blessings to thwart the disease, for your own blessings will gradually as you continue to dwell here."

The clerics nodded gravely.

"Even if it's said to be a plague without demons, if the patients have underlying conditions or if they're young, they won't be able to overcome it easily, so healing clerics in each clinic must focus on those patients. Be careful of the demons' power when purging or when with terminally ill patients."

The clerics nodded and started to bless each other. Tania waved her hand lightly in the air, and pure energy spread out. The clerics looked up at the divine energy with awe.

She had one last piece of advice. "This next month in which the plague begins to dwindle will be crucial. This is when we must extinguish the plague at its very core."

Killian thought she had gone the long way around to tell them to do well in their blessing, purification, purging, and healing.

He calmly skimmed the documents in his hands. The documents were lists of supplies needed from each camp, itemized documents about how they each used the support money, written opinions from doctors reporting about patients' statuses, and a sheet of paper with the travel allowance the clerics from Alpheter were asking for, along with the contract outlining Saintess Tania's service charges.

Indeed, Tania's service charge was so daunting that even nobles would be shocked. Saintess Tania's service fee was twenty times more than what the fifteen clerics asked for together, just for one person.

*But the scale of a cleric's pay is unsurprising.*

Killian, who had nothing other than money, signed the papers without so much as a twitch in his expression.

The clerics spread out throughout the camp. It was the largest camp, but things were taken care of in moments because they now had many clerics. The three clerics from Axias looked close to tears.

Tania was quietly looking at the superhumanly strong man, so strong his sharp face didn't even show how tired he was. Surely, he had gotten through an even more grueling schedule than the clerics who were half- dead.

She had traveled the continent for two decades but never had she encountered a lord so intense, nor a territory that had stoppered the plague this perfectly.

The silent crimson eyes below raven hair. Tania was thinking back to how she saw Killian a decade ago before the infamous former imperial prince became the Archduke of Axias. Just as Pilgrim Tania was starting to be called Saintess Tania, she visited Axias.

The young, former imperial prince expelled from the imperial family was standing on the corpse of a foe, covered in the blood of looters. The cold, cruel madman who'd cut through his own brothers. His ruthless, tyrannical name was unchanged, and he had the same dry eyes as before, but they were now a decade deeper.

Saintess Tania knew several secrets about the imperial Lillefeiam family, ones the commoners didn't know, including why the emperor hadn't been able to leave the imperial palace for quite a long time.

She knew the truth about how Queen Ariadne had become undead when "that incident" occurred thirteen years ago. That was a top secret topic, only known by a few clerics who had overseen the search of the castle and a few nobles who were related to the imperial family.

But like the others, she couldn't know what exactly had happened that day, nor why Killian kept his mouth shut to the end. The reason why he killed his brothers thirteen years ago. And why he didn't open his mouth to speak up for himself, not even a single word.

*"Your Royal Highness. We wish to help you. Please say something to explain this."*

*"If you act this uncooperatively, we cannot do anything ourselves to help you."*

*"Are you really deserting His Majesty like this?"*

There indeed was room for pity if he had tried to speak up for himself. It was undead, but "that thing” was his mother. It had the appearance of Queen Ariadne, the woman that the emperor loved.

No matter if the imperial family didn't tolerate murdering the family, the emperor was of a mind to protect him. Many things had happened to shatter that tradition. Imperial Prince Killian could have kept his right to ascension. He could have kept his position, his power, and his imperial family's name, Lillefeiam.

But even when the emperor swallowed his grief and struggled to protect him, Killian didn't say a single word before the House of Lords about why he slaughtered his brothers and their knights. The only hint they had was what he said when he tossed William's head at the feet of the emperor. How his brothers were "his mother's enemy."

*“As you know, she's an undead, a thing of evil! She is no longer Your Highness's mother!"*

*"Why are you doing this, Your Highness? Why did you do it? Your Highness, you're not one to do something like this.”*

*"Your Highness, please. We are not acting this way because we aren't sorrowful for what happened to Her Majesty."*

*"Are you truly deserting us like this?"*

The queen had passed away long ago from an illness. There was no one who wasn't aware of this, for she had been ill for a long time.

The conclusion that could be guessed from this situation was obvious. Even the ever-so-wise prince couldn't resist the temptation from the thing of evil wearing his beloved mother's body. She was no longer his mother but an undead.

The actions William and Salerion took against the evil that took the queen's body as a host could only be seen as self-defense against a monster, no matter what they did.

Killian's response surely was excessive. The two brothers along with their knights totaled twenty-seven dead bodies. There weren't any wounded left to act as witnesses. Of those who had been there, all but Killian were dead.

The two brothers' bodies were so shredded it could be called a desecration of their corpses, and William's head was tossed at the feet of the emperor and empress. A candidate for the crown prince, who had taken on everyone's hopes to become a sage leader, had become a lunatic murderer after one morning.

He kept his mouth clamped shut, not answering a single question or interrogation. There was no way to protect someone who refused to speak up for himself, even for the emperor. Still, the emperor arbitrarily decided Killian would lose the Lillefeiam name, not his life, and it would be done there.

Saintess Tania looked upon Killian Axias, who had taken on a new name, starting thirteen years ago. Like back then, when he was protecting this barren territory with a single sword aloft, this territory that had become a gigantic city, not a barren wasteland any longer, the now thirty-year-old man of an archduke was protecting it.

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After they finished their work, they gathered their horses in front of the camp to depart for the others. Now they would go through the other five camps, assign a pair of healing clerics to each one, introduce the doctors, mages, and patients in each and explain each situation, and have the purging clerics become familiar with the camps they'd each have to take care of.

Before they got on their horses, all the clerics blessed each other's bodies and blessed the horses they were going to ride. Killian's horse Rhea was also blessed by the clerics.

But strangely, no one approached Killian. He stared at the clerics moving around busily, blessing each other, but no one blessed him. They started to mount their horses, saying they were done blessing themselves. Did they not know no one blessed him?

"You, there." He felt somewhat left out. "Why has any cleric yet cast a blessing upon me? Even a coldhearted man is still just a man before the plague."

"Pardon?" The clerics stared at him blankly, as if they had absolutely no idea what he was talking about. “H-had you not received your blessing already?"

Killian gave them a disgruntled look. "I have not, while even my mare has been blessed."

Even the cleric who blessed Rhea had looked at Killian and just brushed past him. He had waited, thinking someone else would do it, but no one did.

The clerics started to babble their excuses, flustered.

"W-We assumed you were blessed by the saintess."

"You already bear a strong blessing, greater than what we can hope to cast."

Killian frowned. “How am I blessed, when none have even approached me this day?" The disapproving crimson eyes fell upon Saintess Tania, who was standing a ways away. “Saintess Tania. Had you cast a blessing upon me without my knowledge?"

Her horse must have gotten hurt because she was crouched next to its leg, performing healing magic on it. She looked up at him when she heard him address her. She tilted her head to the side after looking him up and down.

"No, but it does appear that you have been blessed. Do you have a blessed object in your possession?"

*A blessed object?*

"No, I do not." He belatedly thought about the necklace Rieta gave him. But that was already several months ago. Didn't blessings on objects usually not last that long? Killian looked skeptical as he took out the necklace from inside his clothes.

"Could this be the object?"

Saintess Tania's eyes widened. Several clerics who were sensitive to divine energy also flinched.

"So it is. Why would you think otherwise?"

38

# THE PLAGUE OF AXIAS (12)

"But this object has not been blessed for three months now."

Saintess Tania got up at Killian's words and walked over to him. “What importance is a few months? It seems it'll last several hundreds of years."

Saintess Tania immediately recognized that thing was no ordinary object. Tania reached up an open hand to Killian, who was astride his horse. "May I inspect it for a moment?"

Killian didn't look too happy about that, but he took off the necklace and showed it to her. He did lower it to her, but he didn't let go of the leather strap.

Saintess Tania reached up and touched the necklace while examining it. She said, "This is a blessed sacer. The blessing that has been cast upon it will never fade away. It is a semipermanent blessing."

"A sacer?" Killian asked again as his eyes narrowed in thought.

Saintess Tania thought it was strange that he was reacting like he didn't know the necklace's value and asked him. “Where did you get it?"

*"It is but a humble ability, but I've cast it with a blessing."*

He thought back to Rieta's voice as she offered it to him with shaking hands. "It was a gift received in exchange for a good deed, but the giver personally blessed the object."

Saintess Tania's eyebrow twitched conspicuously. "Perhaps you saved their life or something?"

Killian clamped his mouth shut. Saintess Tania continued to judge the value of the necklace, as she would, without even realizing her words had struck his core. "It looks like it'd be expensive. It's something you won't be able to buy even with a significant amount of money."

Killian still looked disbelieving. “An ordinary mage made it. Does a few days worth of blessings turn such a paltry thing into a sacer?"

"No, sacers are rare and sacred for good reason."

Saintess Tania expanded her divine power to examine it. As if the leather strap was resonating with the silvery energy from her body, it pulsed and gave off a pure light. The clerics gasped in their amazement quietly. The saintess' eyes also widened.

"If the staff of Havitus Temple has the attacking characteristic of intensifying evil or divine energy, then this looks to be a sacer that has the defensive characteristic of repelling. I'd have to research further to know the details, but it looks like it'll be effective against curses or even illnesses.

"It's a noteworthy object, loyal to the true intent of blessing. There's nothing like this even registered in the Book of Sacers." The saintess fingered the necklace as if she desired it but let it go and stepped back. "Has the owner of this object died?"

Killian frowned. "What?"

Saintess Tania shrugged nonchalantly. “From what you've said, I was wondering if the person was alive."

"Why?"

"Surely, you must know the tale. Sacers are the vestiges of the deceased. All have died or taken their own lives, leaving only these holy objects. Only the most desperate of blessings can achieve this but at the price of one's own life force."

Killian's expression froze.

"To be honest, there aren't that many who are left alive after making a sacer. The Staff of Havitus, the Crown of Lamenta, all the famous blessed sacers made by those with divine power... Their creators generally all committed suicide or were burned at the stake. It's wretched." Saintess Tania continued to speak mercilessly. "Well, it could be they lied about blessing it themselves. You didn't see the process of it being made, yes? And they're alive?"

Killian stared at the ring in his hand with a strange expression on his face. He brought the other hand to his forehead.

Saintess Tania took the half-nod of his head as a sign of affirmation and continued. "If you're all right with it, you should register it in the Book of Sacers."

Saintess Tania thought he didn't know much about sacers and kindly added an explanation.

"Since the mechanism through which an ordinary object becomes a sacer is unclear, there are many scholars who want to research it. Many will wish to know how it was made. A sacer of this quality, and one with its creator still alive, the academic world will be in an uproar because of this.

"It's an honor, and it'll bring in quite a bit of money, so it'll be a good chance for whoever made it. But did you pay them properly for it?" Since he seemed like he didn't know it was a sacer, there was no way he would have paid it properly. Saintess Tania believed one had to pay appropriately for an item of value, so she couldn't help herself.

"It'll be helpful if you use it, but it'll be good to sell it now with the plague if you have any thoughts of selling it. In times like these, the people who will pay astronomically for a sacer with this kind of characteristic will line up, so if you send it to auction-"

Killian growled and cut her off icily. "Silence." The air grew cold.

Unsure of what brought up his wrath, the clerics all grew pale at the sudden verbal lashing directed at the saintess. There were quite a few clerics who were wary of going to work for the Archduke of Axias, who always had bloody rumors following him around even though the clerics from Axias Abbey convinced them it'd be fine, and Saintess Tania had assertively pushed them after catching the scent of money.

They had forgotten momentarily, with his image of being a clever, intelligent, handsome man and the proof of that in how perfectly managed the clinic was. Still, he was the one people called a lunatic murderer, and a ruthless, cold-blooded man.

A spine-tingling chill emitted from Killian's body.

Tania just shrugged at the threatening man's verbal lashing. “As such, Your Highness is in no need of more blessings. With that sacer on your body, no demon could dare approach you. I believe you are the safest of all in your presence here today.”

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Thankfully, nothing significant happened. The archduke did not murder, nor did he assault the saintess. The clerics were wary as they rode in a chilled atmosphere between Killian and an unconcerned Saintess Tania.

When they stopped, it was when the sky was dark, and stars appeared. They were murmuring among themselves as they were distracted by something else, looking down on the last camp at the top of the final hill.

"What unfolds here?"

A cleric answered Killian's question with his eyes fixed down at the last clinic. "It seems someone else has surpassed us, for I spy a figure casting an areal purification up ahead."

"Alone? How? A purification of that scale would be quite dangerous. Is that all right?"

Areal purifications were a powerful divine magic called the pinnacle of purification magic, but it was flawed magic because the person casting it was exposed without any protection. The caster would be unprotected if they cast it alone, like the eye of a storm, so of course, the devils around them attach unconditionally, and it was easy to become the target of the devils' final power.

Another clairvoyant cleric looked down and muttered, "There's no way it's all right. It looks like the plague demons took over?"

“You're right. Four on the back already... No, there are five.”

“Oh, lord. Even if it hasn't been that long since the devils attached themselves, the symptoms must be showing."

Killian looked toward the form, praying in the middle of the clinic. Of course, he couldn't see the demons with his eyes, but he recognized the small woman with blonde tresses dressed in a familiar, simple linen dress.

"Rieta?"

Tania, who had stepped toward him, asked. “Do you know who it could be?"

Killian spurred his horse on without replying.

The people in the clinic discovered the group of clerics who were coming down the path and started to gather toward them. The woman opened her eyes and turned her head, realizing the commotion that was going on.

"Oh, the clerics have arrived!" Rieta wobbled a bit, but got up and quickly walked over to them with a relieved look on her face.

Horrifying demons latched onto her body and were dangling off it. The clerics saw and flinched, stepping back instinctively. Only Saintess Tania and Killian didn't step back.

Rieta had seen the group of people in clerics' robes but faltered at the sight of the archduke in the darkness, dressed in plain clothes with a hat deep on his head.

"Rieta." Slowly, Killian spoke. “How is it that you are here?"

Rieta looked nervous at his voice. He sounded angry.

"My vacation is over, sire. Your knights saw me and sent me in."

*A vacation. Right.* He had told her to rest for about a week. *But that didn't mean I was giving her permission to enter the isolated area on the eighth day, did it?*

*Really? This woman?*

The knights had dined with her once. There was no way they didn't know about the famous mage from Cevitas. There would be at least one knight who recognized her. *So. The knights who recognized her sent her in without any suspicion because she said she was here to work after a week's break? Without even checking to see if I had allowed it first?*

Doctors and mages from other clinics had to carry authorization documents to move around. The only ones who were the exception were

the clerics from Alpheter, who had identification documents issued by the temple.

Killian stared at her icily. “Entry to this area is restricted without my assent."

"Pardon?" Rieta's eyes grew big. "B-but... Is this not your written assent?"

Rieta panicked at his attitude, which looked truly angered, and took out a slip of paper from her bosom. The document authorizing her entrance into the quarantined area was stamped with the Archduke of Axias' stamp.

Killian saw through the situation in a flash. *Vetere. That deceitful old scoundrel.*

Killian had spared no expense in cutting off the plague. Most of the money and workforce going into running the territory went through him, but there was a limit to how many of the little things he could handle on his own. So, Killian had appropriated a significant budget for each of the clinics' managers to use as they wished upon giving them a set of guidelines for using those funds. They would report to him afterward on how they used it.

They scouted trustworthy people from within the territory on their own, adding them to the roster of doctors and mages Killian personally sent in. It was efficient to trust the actual residents who knew what was going on, so Killian allowed it. Still, they needed Killian's final stamp of approval to enter the isolated area, so he told Vetere yesterday to just let them all in if there weren't any reasons to reject them, and that's when Vetere approved Rieta's document as well.

He whipped his head around to Vetere, but Vetere avoided his stare and fidgeted. Rieta stammered by explaining how she saw the notice for people needed in the clinics and how she had applied as a mage. He was not interested in it.

Killian spat out chillingly, “Are you in great need of money?"

"My lord?"

"If not, why do you persist in straining yourself? No matter how much you are being paid, don't you know this is dangerous for your body?"

Working in the quarantined area was a well-paying job. The angry voice continued. "Had I not assured you that you needn't repay such a meager sum?"

Rieta bit her lip nervously.

Then, some irritated-looking man grabbed Killian's reins from his hands. "Who is this insolent fool? Step down from your horse this second! Do you owe this fool money? If so, I shall repay him myself!"

The blood drained from Rieta's face. "He is the archduke!"

"What?"

Rhea, Killian's horse, whinnied skittishly and shook the reins out of the strange man's hands. The man belatedly recognized the towering black horse and Killian in the darkness and grew white as well.

"My-my lord!" The man flattened himself on the ground with his knees slamming down.

Killian fixed his frown on Rieta, ignoring the man lying prostrate on the ground. "You're not being paid?"

He stared at Rieta. “Saintess Tania." Killian continued, still fixed on Rieta. "First, attend to the treatment of this woman."

Then, Killian threw a hand out from his chest. The dagger whizzed past, sticking itself into the cliff.

"Eek!"

A gasp for air. A man hiding behind the cliff in the darkness fell to his knees in shock at the dagger that suddenly appeared.

"Colbryn, Damien. Lead the clerics from Alpheter in." The Archduke of Axias smirked spine-chillingly with murderous intent emanating from his crimson eyes. "I seem to have a guest to entertain, for I spy a familiar face in the shadows."

Cedric Caballam, the dead Casarius's faithful servant, backed away with nowhere to go with his heels scraping the cliff.

39

# THE SPECTER OF CEVITAS (1)

In the town hall near the temporary relief camp, unusually loud sounds rang out in the meeting room that had been prepared for visits by the lord or nobility.

*Crash!*

Killian dragged Cedric Caballam by the nape of his neck and tossed him into the room. The person in charge of the camp followed them in, placed the things Killian ordered him to bring in on the marble table, and saluted. He then left the room. He had brought in a bottle of liquor, said to brace the drinker against the desert winds, and two glasses on a tray to place on the table.

Cedric Caballam gasped for air as he gathered himself and prostrated himself on the floor, trembling. Killian glanced at Caballam's trembling body on the floor and barked out a cynical laugh.

"You make me lose my appetite for a drink."

There was a corkscrew, but Killian broke open the bottle with his bare hands. The stinging scent of hard alcohol spread throughout the room.

Killian placed the glass upright and spoke. “What are you doing? Get up and pour me a glass."

Caballam trembled to his feet, unable to look at him in the eye, and picked up the bottle with shaking hands. And he tipped the bottle toward the glass in front of Killian. Killian watched the glass as it filled with liquor, and he brought it to his lips and drained it as soon as the glass was full. And he placed the other glass on the other side of the table, gesturing to that side.

"Pour yourself a glass as well."

Cedric Caballam shook his head, shivering in fear. "I am honored, Your Highness."

Killian laughed icily. "Of course you are."

Killian poured out a glassful for Caballam himself. A shard of glass from the broken bottle fell into the glass with a clink. He crossed his booted feet onto the table casually.

"It'll be hard to face this sober, so I'm showing you this mercy. Go ahead, drink up."

Cedric Caballam tremblingly stared at the glass of liquor on the table. The shard from the bottle swirled in the clear-cut crystal glass.

The chilly voice continued. “Axias has not allowed entry to outsiders since the outbreak."

"Thus, you must not have secured your welcome otherwise." The blood- freezing sound of a sword being pulled out of its sheath accompanied the cold ridicule. "I trust that you value the business that brings you here over your own life."

Cedric Caballam's legs gave way, and he fell to his knees. "Y-Your Highness."

"Goodness, man. Cease this cowering on the floor." He picked up the bottle again. "Your miserable quivering mimics an image of vermin" Killian cocked his head and smiled nicely. “And I fear I might slaughter you in error." Placing his sword-gripping hand on the table, Killian nodded toward the seat across the table. “Try to mimic the mark of a man and take a chair.” Again, the bottle tilted. "Only such is the way for men to commune."

Killian poured himself another glass and gulped it down in an instant. He breathed out lazily through his nose with his eyes closed as if he was savoring the fragrance of the alcohol, and he opened his crimson eyes to look at the pathetic man.

Cedric Caballam crawled over to the chair while trembling like a leaf when the calmly threatening eyes turned upon him. He barely pulled himself up with his shaking hands gripping the chair and sat down. He was soaked with a cold sweat.

Meanwhile, Killian had refilled his glass and was swirling it while staring at the surface of the liquid.

"Your name?"

"Cedric... Caballam, Sire."

“Right. Cedric Caballam.”

The piercing crimson eyes calmly looked at him. Caballam flinched as if that gaze had physically struck him.

"What business brings you to seek Rieta Tristi?"

A drop of sweat rolled off Caballam's chin. “I, I was...simply curious...to see if she was doing well..."

Killian drained his third glassful. Killian snickered, looking down at his empty glass, and placed it down. The eyes brought back up to him indifferently, emanated a murderous rage.

"Is this a jest?"

Caballam, suffocating from the sinister air, fumbled his feet and pushed his body deeper into the chair.

Killian picked up the dagger that had terrified Cedric earlier. While toying with it, Killian smiled faintly. "Has the specter of Casarius asked for Rieta again? Or could it be Frederik?"

"Well..."

Killian's gaze swept over the dagger's blade. “Did they send you to see if the costly temptress still breathes, or to see if more benefit could be reaped from the transaction?"

"Of course not, Your Highness..."

Thwack.

"Kuhk!"

The dagger suddenly appeared right beside Caballam's head. His eyes were bulging. Cold sweat was dripping down his back with the whoosh in his ear.

“I recognize such a question would be disconcerting for the count's loyal servant to ponder."

Killian picked up the bottle again with his empty hand and tipped it. His eyes stayed on Caballam.

“I should be more trusting of your judgment since a shrewd man like you would surely have the wit to alert his master that Rieta Tristi has long since passed the plague." Killian slowly swirled his refilled glass and smiled. "Right?"

Cedric Caballam replied breathlessly. "C-certainly, Your Highness."

Killian emptied his fourth glass. His long sword remained where it was on the table where he had placed it. Killian was acting as if he didn't even know something like that was there, but Caballam couldn't tear his eyes away from it. The liquor that is said to drive the cruel cold of the desert away disappeared like water.

"Ah."

As if it had suddenly occurred to him, Killian took out the necklace around his neck. He lifted it so Caballam could see it. “Pray tell, what do you know of this object?"

Caballam's face froze at the sight of the ring dangling at the end of the necklace. He avoided the archduke's gaze with trembling eyes and replied. "I-it belongs...to the daughter of Rieta—the child named Adele.”

Killian's eyes narrowed. “Then relay to me what you know of it."

Caballam had no idea what to do and bowed his head. "C-Casarius, the former Count of Cevitas, relentlessly courted Rieta following her husband's passing, but when she would not accept—”

“I am aware of him taking her child and selling the girl to slave traders." Killian cut him off. “The knowledge I seek is regarding this ring.”

Caballam became speechless. Killian cocked his eyebrow up lazily. “Must I repeat myself for you?"

Caballam quickly shook his head. "N-no, Your Highness! I-it is only that I do not know much more."

Killian leaned back in his chair as if he were tipsy and threw his head back in a laugh of disbelief.

"Cedric Caballam.”

"Y-yes, Sire?"

"I would like to believe that you have come to cooperate."

"I-I fear that I fail to understand-."

A sharp ruthlessness shot through the air.

"You dare."

It looked like Killian's hand was perhaps sweeping over the sword placed on the table, but the chair Caballam was seated in shook backward with a crack.

"You dare to test me?"

The sword was driven in next to Caballam's neck. A wave of terror. Even without touching it, he could tell his neck was bleeding from the blade that was brushed by it.

"Shall we begin with how you recognized the ring of a commoner child upon a single glance?"

Caballam's temples pounded and his body shook from the presence of the cool blade stuck next to his neck. If the archduke's hand had slipped just a bit, the blade would have run his neck through. The scent of alcohol filling the air made him come to his senses. The sharp scent felt like poison, choking his throat.

The Archduke of Axias slowly got out of his seat and stepped toward him. The archduke leaned to him and whispered, the fragrance of the alcohol getting thicker and thicker. “I told you, tell me what you know."

Killian pulled out the sword in one swift move. Cedric Caballam, frozen in his seat in terror, felt something cool under his chin.

"The only thing you will be able to test is whether you live or die, Cedric Caballam." Killian lifted Cedric's chin with the tip of his sword and smirked. "It'll be wise of you not to test my patience."

Killian's sword flew through Caballam's middle and ring fingers into the marble table. Sparks flew, and a crack appeared on the table.

Caballam's frozen, pale hand spread out wide and trembled. His fingers had nearly been cut off. A shiver ran up his spine and left his hair on end.

Killian's gaze swept down with his head tilting, and he smacked lips together with a calm face. "Shall we see how good your luck is?" Killian tapped Caballam's chin up with the tip of his sword. "I believe a man needs not his fingers to engage in conversation, but you may not share this sentiment."

Caballam shrieked out of fear. "That ring!" The man, who seemed to have aged ten years, stammered out his answer. "It was taken just before Rieta's daughter was sold off to slave traders!"

Finally, a proper answer was making itself known, and Killian smiled a friendly smile and nodded. "So?"

The loving sword caressed Caballam's jaw as he shuddered. His opaque eyes shook as he continued. “Rieta came and asked for her daughter back as promised, in exchange for becoming his mistress!" The sharp tip slowly ran up his cheek. “Master's father was deathly ill, and she continually came by, irritating them, making things difficult. So they told her that her daughter was dead!" The sword was now circling his ear. Caballam gasped for air as his words poured out hurriedly. "But she didn't believe it. She was acting stubbornly, so to make her give up, they sent back that ring to Rieta." Killian's sword, now at his temples, stopped.

Killian's face contorted monstrously and terrifyingly. “But surely a mere ring makes not sufficient proof of a dead child."

"Th-the plague. From the plague!" When the sword was no longer brushing over but had some strength behind it, Caballam scrabbled with his face drained of blood. "The ring was enclosed in a coffin holding a dead child's corpse." Caballam's eyes filled with dread as if he couldn't believe what he was saying. But he didn't stop. "And thus presented to Rieta!"

Killian's face drained of all human decency.

Cedric Caballam's mouth continued to pour out words without end. "The corpse had been disfigured in cremation, and seeing the ring on the child's finger, she believed it was her own daughter."

An unnerving silence fell. Those terrifying crimson eyes were boring holes into his frozen body. The hair-raising silence felt like it went on for a thousand years.

“Ha.” Killian made a noise and slowly pulled back his sword.

Caballam nervously trailed the blade, disappearing into its sheath with quaking eyes. And the next moment, his body was lifted by Killian by the neck. "Ack!"

The bloodcurdling, monstrous voice scraped through the air. “You imbeciles presented the disfigured body of someone else's child with her daughter's ring on her finger, knowingly deceiving a mother to believe that her daughter was dead?"

“Kuhk, kuh, kuhk.” Caballam couldn't reply. His face was completely red.

Killian laughed bitterly. He grabbed Caballam by the back of his head with his other hand and drove it straight into the marble table.

A muffled scream. Blood splattered all over the table. "I have foolishly ordered a beast to mimic a person."

Killian drove his head down three more times. Caballam's scrabbling hands tried to get hold of the table and his head to stop it, but the relentless hand drove his head down and cracked fissures into it while blood splashed everywhere.

The fourth time Caballam's head was shoved into the table, Killian whispered, "Under whose order was this executed?"

Caballam pleaded as blood and tears streamed down his face. “P-please... Have mercy!"

"Was it of your design?"

Again, he was lifted by the nape of his neck. The new height he was brought to made Caballam fear for his life, and he screamed. "Please! Please! It was not by my design! Not at all!"

Killian tossed him to the ground. Before Caballam could take another hurried breath, he was pulled up by his hair and forced to face up.

"Do not dread the risk of a death long to come."

As if the murderous intent until now was just child's play, his eyes now with horrible malice met Caballam's. The spine-tingling malice flushed over Cedric Caballam's face, distorted in terror.

"Cause me to repeat my question once more, and you shall meet your end here and now by my own hand."

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# THE SPECTER OF CEVITAS (2)

Killian grabbed the tablecloth and wiped off his bloodied hands roughly, stalking out of the room. A young volunteer was waiting outside with his face pale from the scary screams and sounds of something being crushed. He ran forward to offer a handkerchief. Killian took it and wiped off the blood splattered on his face.

The barely visible man in the meeting hall looked ragged like a corpse. He had braced himself somewhat for an ugly sight, but even so, his heart dropped. *Is he dead?*

"Sh-shall I call for a cleric or physician?"

"No need. He still has life left in him. You need not bother yourself, for I shall have my knights collect him shortly." Killian dismissed him. “I shall recompense you for the damage done to your meeting hall."

The youth waved his hands in a fluster. "There's no need, Sire."

The boy was the son of the town hall's caretaker. His uncle was the person in charge of this camp as well, so he knew Killian was the Archduke of Axias. Even if it could be said he had observed Killian up close due to this plague and had grown to respect him deeply, he was still scared of him in one deep corner of his heart.

The Archduke of Axias came out with a face that said he had just watched a very dull piece of theater, wiping the blood off his hands, but the hair- raising atmosphere that hadn't been fully tucked away was still emanating from him. Perhaps the image of him in the widespread rumors was his true self...

The boy quietly bowed his head and stayed tense. He was brusque, but how this warm, wise, and even diligent man could be the center of those terrifying rumors was a mystery to the boy.

*"That's simply because you've never seen His Highness angry.”*

*"Be very careful not to irritate him."*

He belatedly understood what the town's elders meant when they warned him.

*"When he's tightening the screws on the enemy, he doesn't look like that.”*

*"How fortunate we're not his enemy."*

*"But, it's not easy finding someone as great as His Lordship.”*

*"As a lord, he has no equal."*

The boy agreed with that in his heart and quietly followed the lord of Axias.

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The people who saw him as he came back to the camp covered in blood were shocked. Colbryn hurried over and asked. “Your Highness, are you injured?"

"The blood is not my own."

"Pardon?"

Killian looked around the clinic, but Rieta was nowhere to be found. "Where is Rieta?" Killian asked Colbryn.

"Madam Tristi is taking rest in the dwellings of the camp overseer."

"The overseer?" Killian frowned.

Saintess Tania's voice rang out from behind. “Thankfully, she didn't catch the plague."

He turned around as she continued calmly. “But keeping her among patients would not bode well and we arranged for her stay with the overseer. I sought a proper place of rest for the madam, and the overseer obliged with his own dwelling."

Killian frowned even deeper. "And how does she fare?"

"There is no great concern as of now. She has lost her senses and is sleeping now, but she will be well once she awakens."

"Wherewith did she lose her senses?"

Vetere was staring at Killian, reacting sharply from a distance.

"While she did evade the demon of plague, it seems an incubus demon has set upon her. She was too overworked and has fallen into a deep slumber, but it is nothing grave."

Killian's expression shifted to one of disbelief at the declaration it was a dream demon. Saintess Tania recognized why his face had changed and added, “A low-class demon with a few mere hours of influence cannot take root within a human body. There is little need for concern."

Killian looked up at Saintess Tania. She had stepped back after only explaining that, but Killian realized what she implied. *She knew.* Of course, a cleric of Saintess Tania's stature knowing of such things wasn't that surprising. It would have been stranger if she didn't know. Killian sighed, having recalled a certain someone ruined by the nightmare a dream demon had planted.

"Overworked?"

Now that he thought about it, she was casting a wide-range purification, forcing it.

"Yes, it is a dangerous feat to perform an areal purification in such a setting all alone." She looked up and glanced at the clean, empty space in the middle of the camp. “But she was without other devices, for there had been a death here just prior to our arrival.”

The space where the young patient had been lying in the intensive care section was still empty and hadn't been filled by a new patient. Clerics and doctors were purifying and sterilizing the spot.

“The demon of plague had little time to spread its reach to the rest of the camp, but the anguish of the people had been attracting more demons to the area."

"Which is why your mage was purifying the area by herself. A reckless attempt indeed, but nonetheless effective in fending off the other demons.” Saint Tania continued. "Thanks to her, the devils were kept at bay. It could have been dangerous if that mage wasn't casting a purification.”

Killian pressed the heels of his hands into his closed eyes. He opened them slowly. "Very well. Did she offer any remark on the matter?"

"Ah, she did." She continued as if she had just remembered something. “Should the bereaved families not wish to cremate the body, then she would offer her aid in the funeral services at no cost."

Killian didn't speak.

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The man in charge escorted Killian and Saint Tania. His home wasn't far from the square where the clinic was set up.

They walked to his home together while he praised Rieta endlessly. "Goodness, I knew I had not heard of such a gifted madam in Axias hitherto. So, she is the famous Lady of Cevitas they all talk of. Rather, she is not a woman of Axias, is she not? The mage of Axias!"

"Although she is new to Axias, the people have grown quite fond of her. Her aid has been of utmost value and relief.”

Perhaps he recognized Killian's anger toward Rieta at the sight of her? He looked like he was trying to defend the poor woman working her fingers to the bone volunteering.

"Forgive me, for I know not how the madam could have aroused your anger, and it is no matter for a man like myself to inquire on. Please do not admonish her too greatly. She acts out of the goodness of her heart, and in truth, she has yet to take any remuneration for her efforts.”

Killian didn't say a word. He ended up falling silent.

He was an untitled, common man, but he was wealthier among the people outside the castle walls, so his home was nothing to scoff at. When they entered his home, his wife jolted from her recognition of the archduke and showed her respect.

"I greet you, my lord. Forgive us for our humble dwellings."

"Where is Rieta?"

“Ah, she is upstairs. This way, Sire."

She had never heard that name, but the quick-witted wife understood he meant the woman who had been carried in a little while ago and swiftly led him to the second floor.

As soon as they went upstairs, the sleeping woman's blonde hair caught their eye. Saintess Tania examined Rieta and cast healing energy into her body. Killian stared at Rieta for a while, scowling, before turning around to speak to the man in charge.

"Dispense the payment for her services." And as soon as he said that, he corrected himself. "Rather, I shall see to it myself. Let it be heeded that Rieta is ascribed to Axias Castle, not this relief camp. Saintess Tania."

She looked at Killian, having finished healing. “Has Rieta received all needed treatment and purgings?"

"She has. Now we shall wait for her body to heal itself."

“Then you can return to camp with the physician. I shall watch her until she awakens, for we have matters to discuss.”

"As you wish."

Either way, Tania and the doctor were labor more needed at the clinic rather than waiting for a patient's natural healing to occur. Tania accepted it without much fuss and relayed several precautions to Killian.

"But do not rouse her before the natural course. One cannot be stirred before the incubic dream has been completed. Stirring her will only cause adverse effects on her dream."

Killian frowned. "An incubus... Will it cause her to dream of such obscenity?"

"If you speak of dreams of an erotic nature, then no. Only a high-class demon of such sorts can do this.” She knew he wasn't talking about that, but she replied casually, "The low-class incubus demon she is riddled with will only inspire some grim memories."

Bad memories. Killian's expression froze.

Thankfully she continued. “Since I chased away the incubus and treated her, she should be left with a few normal dreams of her childhood. It is no cause for great concern."

Killian's stony face softened a little at the sound of that.

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The man who had brought her to Casarius, the day she had been told to become his mistress. The man who had told her that her child was no longer in Cevitas. The man who brought the corpse of that child. The man who had relayed Casarius's dying wish. The man who had assigned people to watch her and make sure she didn't run away even on the very day of the funeral. To Rieta, the man who was her grim reaper, a servant from hell. It was all him.

*"Beautiful."*

His face dripped down like mud and changed into the face of the person she had feared for so long.

*"Beautiful."*

*"Rieta. If you are indebted to someone, you must pay them back. Did I teach you to act this way?”*

I didn't want this. Please help. The abbot. The abbot... Father Abbot. He keeps touching me.

*“Come alone next time."*

Miss, please help. Sister, please help. Sir Ferdyan, please help. The abbot. The abbot. He keeps...

*"Don't ever go alone. I'll stay with you."*

Jade.

*"Jade? I didn't call for you."*

*“Rieta has nothing to confess. The one who needs guidance is me."*

Jade.

*"It's all right. I'll be next to you."*

It's not all right.

*“You wretched girl. I'd treasured you so much.”*

Don't hit him.

*"Your skills? Blessings? Purifications? Being able to see demons with your own eyes? Don't act superior. Those things don't matter."*

*"First in your class? Do you think you're smart because you were first in your class at this tiny hovel of a convent in the middle of nowhere? Clerics like you can be found anywhere!"*

No. I wasn't showing off. I didn't think I was smart. I could just see demons. I was only trying to help.

*"You disrespectful girl! Don't talk back!"*

*"You worthless wench!"*

*"You don't know your place! You'll never be able to carry out the ministry wherever you go!"*

Please don't. Father Abbot. Please don't.

*"You arrogant thing! Absolutely useless!"*

I was sorry. I was sorry. Please, please don't hit Jade. Hit me instead.

*"Absolutely useless!"*

Sir Ferdyan, please help. Jade. Jade...

"Please don't! Please don't!"

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Killian paced the floor, watching Rieta mumble in her sleep and sweat profusely from the effect the incubus demon left on her, and ended up kicking aside a chair in frustration. *Saintess Tania said Rieta wouldn't have a nightmare!* A bad memory. This was difficult. If it were anyone else... But this was Rieta. *Why didn't she just dream an erotic dream that sucked out her spirit instead!*

"No. No! Father Abbot. Father Abbot!"

Killian froze at Rieta's mumblings coming out of her mouth turning into screams. A memory from a little while ago, of Rieta, flinching and avoiding Vetere's hand when he introduced him as the abbot, whooshed by.

"Please help!"

At the desperate cry, Killian forgot Tania's warning not to wake her by force and shook Rieta's shoulder. “Rieta!"

"Please don't! Don't touch me!" Terrified, Rieta thrashed her hands around fitfully. “No! No!"

The blind thrashing swiped Killian's face, but the fingers wrapped in bandages couldn't leave a single mark on him. He remembered a moment too late he shouldn't try to shake her awake. *Dammit! Is there no way to wake her up?* Killian couldn't hold back his anger and brought down a fist onto the bed frame.

Right then, Rieta's eyes opened.

"Huh?"

Rieta, awoken from her sleep, stared blankly up at Killian, who had broken the headboard.

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# THE SPECTER OF CEVITAS (3)

Rieta scrambled out of bed as soon as she saw Killian, who was covered in blood. Rieta looked him over, and her eyes came back into focus as they widened.

"You are bleeding, my lord! Are you injured?" Rieta touched his bloodied body, unsure of what to do.

His shadow loomed over the bed as he stared down at Rieta. His expression was glacial. "No." His breath reeked of alcohol.

Rieta's eyes became like saucers in disbelief. “Are you intoxicated?"

Killian turned away, irritated. "No."

Killian walked away from the bed and flopped onto a half-broken chair before the table with a huff.

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Killian was leaning on the table with his elbow, his face dark, and stayed silent for a long time. Rieta kept track of his mood and looked back and forth between Killian's monstrous expression, his hand, and the broken bed. The bed looked like a bear had clawed through it, but strangely, Killian's hand looked fine.

Killian didn't even look up at Rieta, a hand gripping his forehead, glaring at the corner of the room. The silence broke a long time later.

"What manner of a dream were you having?” Killian asked angrily.

"A dream?" Rieta bit her lip for a moment and carefully asked. "Was I talking in my sleep?"

*Can she not remember, or is she pretending not to remember? Is she acting like she didn't know because she doesn't want me to ask? Do I have to ask? Do I not?*

A long silence followed again. Rieta fidgeted and spoke cautiously. “You are wearing the necklace at last.”

Killian's rage boiled up in an instant, and he looked at Rieta. This was something he had to talk about. "You...!" Killian grabbed the necklace at his throat. "What intention lies behind this? Would you have me give thanks for such a gift?"

Rieta flinched and stepped back.

Killian realized he was shouting at her and gritted his teeth, swallowing his anger. A little while after, Killian calmed himself down with difficulty and spoke again. "How can you offer such a precious thing to a mere stranger?" "But you are no mere stranger. You are my savior and-"

"So you would have me carry a ring left behind by your deceased child?" He couldn't control himself and shouted again.

Rieta clamped her mouth.

Killian clenched his eyes shut not to shout or yell violently.

Rieta realized he knew about the ring. *Did he learn from that man?* She had hoped he would take it as a simple, helpful piece of jewelry, and use it like that.

"Is this object not of great significance to you? Does it recall too painful a past for you to bear? Are you thus repulsed by the sight of this object?"

Rieta's face went white at Killian's furious words. *Repulsed.*

"Absolutely not, Sire."

*It wasn't for me, but... It hurt, and it was heartrending to call it horrific, but... It could be that to others.* The ring was on a burned corpse. Something that made someone feel sick... Something hot shot through her painfully.

Rieta's lips trembled, her head bowed. “If I have given you cause for offense, do forgive me. I had not known it could offend you as such. I merely thought it may serve you well in these unsafe times."

"Serve me?" Killian let out a terse sigh and turned away. He whipped his head around and fixed her with blazing eyes. "I made no demand for an offering of any service. Why are you making me the villain?

"Why did you even give your daughter's keepsake to someone who didn't even ask for it in the first place? You should have fought to keep it from whoever asked for it, no matter what kind of person tried to force you into giving it up. Do you not even have emotions?" He ignored the fact he was known as the most coldhearted man in the empire and shouted in a rage. "Take it now, for I have no intent on keeping such a thing."

"It's all right, Sire." Rieta smiled serenely, tears shining in her eyes. "Wherefore would I cherish a forsaken ring when she is lost?"

He was about to explode in anger again, but tears fell from Rieta's eyes, contrary to her serene smile. Killian was at a loss for words.

Rieta brushed away her tears with the index finger of her left hand, then with her thumb. Then the back of her hand, and then, brought up the right hand to brush them away.

In the end, she couldn't help it and both her hands came up, but she couldn't hide the fact she was putting in great effort to hold her tears back through her trembling fingers. She gave up trying to cover her face and fanned with her hands, fidgeting, putting them on her face, then off...

Her voice was awkwardly calm for her current, pathetic state. “Forgive me. I am fine." Tears kept streaming down from her eyes, no matter how much she wiped them away. Strangely, only her voice was calm. "But I cannot seem to stop myself.”

Killian had been staring at her silently, and he finally turned away. He thought he would never see an image of her more pitiful than when she had been delirious before. How she was standing there, calm after reliving her painful memories, fully conscious, made his heart ache even more. She would have cried like this on the day she had given him the necklace with shaking hands.

That foolishness infuriated Killian.

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She stopped crying a long time after. He pulled up a chair in front of her. Killian quietly held out the necklace. "Take it.”

Rieta's eyes seemed melancholy looking at it. "If this object does not offend you, my lord, please pay no mind to its origin, and keep it as your own."

Giving it back would be simple. But Killian didn't want to do that. He could also say he didn't need it, tell her to do whatever she wanted with it, and leave it where she could see it. But that too, he didn't want to do.

"Perhaps, if it had not been a memento of the deceased."

"But as such, I cannot keep this ring, and you were mistaken for offering it to me at all."

Rieta replied calmly. “It will serve its purpose better in your hands than in my own."

Killian frowned harshly. "This ring isn't the kind of thing to keep to use. It's something precious to you.” His voice was irritated, but behind the cold tone, there was an unmistakable warmth.

Rieta smiled serenely, utterly unafraid of his anger. "And I am sure that it shall please Adele better as well." A short silence. Rieta added, “Oh, Adele is the name of my..."

"I know." Killian cut her off.

Rieta just accepted the fact he knew her dead daughter's name and continued. “I wish for this ring to be of use. I wish for this to not become a needless thing in my hands, with no meaning, just to fulfill my selfishness."

*Selfishness? Was that called selfishness?* No one would say that it is selfish to treasure something precious even more if that was a keepsake. "How..." Killian muttered to himself, dumbfounded.

Rieta added cautiously, "Perhaps this isn't something I can say myself, but it will be useful. Especially when you're traveling these days."

"It will be useful," Killian repeated Rieta's words. “Right. I heard this was a sacer that couldn't even be bought with money. You didn't even tell me that. This, you-"

Killian stopped speaking, gritted his teeth like he had eaten something bitter, and clenched his eyes shut. She should have explained what this was, but she probably couldn't. It was probably because she wouldn't have been able to answer the questions of how she had a blessed sacer, how she made something like this. She probably did that because she thought he wouldn't have taken it if he had known.

What did that matter? She must have known since she saw he wasn't wearing it. He didn't know anything and had even forgotten he had received it.

*"You didn't seem to use it.”*

If Rieta hadn't said something, he didn't know when he'd have used it. If there were no plague outbreak, if Saintess Tania didn't see it, he would have never known all his life it was a blessed sacer.

How was that a worthwhile present in Rieta's eyes? If he hadn't put the screws on that bastard who appeared by chance, he would have stayed in the dark about what meaning it carried for her.

Killian took a moment to calm himself down, letting out a sigh, then spoke again. "Rieta." Killian met eyes with Rieta. “I cannot conceive of you and your ways. What moves you to such rash behavior?"

Rieta simply looked at his crimson eyes with her own clear, sky-blue ones and didn't reply. It really looked like she wasn't going to take it back. Killian repeated it to those eyes, forcefully, to have it sink in. “Take it.”

"I thank you for your regard, and I do understand your intent, but I would like for you to keep it, my lord." Rieta smiled. “My child gave her permission. She'll be disappointed if you return it to me. I beseech you... Put it to use, Sire."

*Gave her permission? How funny. Permission from a dead child?* Killian felt a myriad of emotions at Rieta's serene smile. *Is Rieta's daughter truly dead?*

*"Is her daughter truly dead?"*

*"I, I don't know... I truly don't know, because we didn't look for her."*

"Rieta." Killian blurted out her name. He couldn't say anything and closed his mouth.

The empire was afflicted by the plague. The child was sold off in the slave market at just three years old. The possibility of her being safe was low. The thread of possibility could become a terrifying false hope. The weight of hope and the weight of despair were both incredibly great. The serene smile where there should have been a sad look. If he gave her desperate hope for nothing and ended up pushing her to the brink...

*Damn it. Why didn't I investigate this before?*

Killian swallowed the miserable words swelling up in the back of his throat and shut his eyes. "Damn it,” he cursed. Rieta had a puzzled look on her face. Killian irritably spat out anything he could. “You want me to use this...this ring?"

Rieta nodded, looking slightly brighter, smiling.

*Why is she smiling? For what? Is she joking?* "I don't want to."

Rieta's expression darkened again at his sharp rejection.

"Never mind thankful, I feel like a vile looter. Do not continue your stubborn ways. I shall receive the blessing of any cleric if need be. You can even bless me if you wish to repay me so intently.”

Rieta shook her head. "I will cast as powerful a blessing as I can wherever you stay, my lord. But for blessing a person's body, I cannot perform any greater blessing than what the ring already bears. Neither can any other cleric who may try."

The blessing that had been cast on Adele's ring was one that wouldn't disappear even as time went on and was so powerful it allowed the wearer to move freely in areas ripe with evil energy, no matter how strong, without worrying about demons, curses, or diseases attacking. It was more powerful and more effective than anything a remarkable cleric could create.

A blessed sacer. A magical item that protects the owner from outside harm or curses. What's more, the sacer she made had the specialized power to keep the plague and demons away. The threat of Empress Aversati. And the plague afflicting the empire. It was true this was something of vital importance for him right now.

Rieta convinced him with the facts, on and on. There was nothing wrong with what she was saying. She knew exactly what Killian's situation was. But no matter how much she offered it and tried to tell him how much he needed it, he wasn't going to accept it even a little. It was nothing compared to that feeling.

"No matter, for I shall not have it."

“But my lord..."

"Do not cause me to repeat myself anymore."

"It wouldn't be useful even if I carried it, Sire."

Rieta dared not to back away from Killian, with him right before her she wasn't afraid. Killian put on an angry face, one signaling he was about to explode, but it didn't work. The two mules continued their tug-of-war.

In the end, a long while after, Rieta took a step back and offered a compromise. “Then...what say you accept the ring as a loan from me?”

Killian glowered. "What manner of lending their dead child's belongings to another?"

"I have already given it to you to possess, so wherefore would I not offer it as a simple loan?"

Killian huffed out a laugh of disbelief at her shameless answer. Rieta smiled as if she wasn't even afraid of the angry man in front of her.

"Please let it be of some use to you. And should you wish to return it, I shall gladly take it off your hands afterward."

Rieta didn't seem like she was going to give up any more ground. In the end, Killian scowled. He set the dissatisfying compromise of her taking it back later in stone.

"You said yourself that you'll take it back."

Rieta nodded eagerly. "Of course, Sire."

He turned away and replied. “Very well, then."

Neither of them said when that would be. Rieta thought she would continue lending it to him since he would continue to need it. Killian thought he would never borrow it ever again. The parallel lines that seemed would continue forever finally found a dramatic resolution.

Killian couldn't win by crushing her with his authority, not against Rieta, who was armed with her genuine, innermost feelings. For better or for worse, he was someone who couldn't hurt his people, nor the weak.

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# THE SPECTER OF CEVITAS (4)

Killian stared at Rieta, who was smiling for the first time in a long time. He thought about the things she should have said but didn't.

The fact that it was her daughter's keepsake. The fact that it was a blessed sacer. After she let go of the will to live, once she saw the burned corpse masqueraded as her daughter, waiting to be buried alive with the villain in her life, being kept captive by Casarius's soldiers, the time it must have taken to pray, how painful and wretched it must have been to make this ring into a blessed sacer...

His hand moved without him even realizing it. The tips of his fingers touched her right cheek. Rieta's face adopted a strange, awkward expression at the sudden contact, and she leaned back. *There wasn't even a mark left behind.*

Killian's crimson eyes looked toward Rieta. He balled his hand into a fist and brought it back. “I have heard your request to refrain from cremating the deceased."

"Sire?" Rieta asked. She quickly realized the request she made to the cleric had been passed to him as well. Cremating a victim of the plague was the most economical method. Rieta's face reddened, and she bowed her head because she felt she had exceeded her authority, spurred on by her personal feelings.

"N-No. I just. If the family was hoping for an alternative method, but they have a financial problem... I just meant to relay the message there was someone who could help, Sire." Rieta carefully examined Killian's face. "Only if you should see it fitting, my lord."

He answered quietly. “The victims of the plague will not be cremated.”

Rieta looked at him with a surprised look on her face.

Killian avoided Rieta's gaze and spoke curtly. “There shall be no more cremations in the land of Axias from now on."

Rieta couldn't believe her ears. She looked confused. "My lord?"

Killian continued blankly. “As such, I bid you relieve yourself of concern with this matter."

Rieta's face froze.

"You belong with the halls of Axias Castle, not the tents of this relief camp. My knights will arrive in the morn and you shall return in their escort. There is no need for you here, as the clerics of Alpheter can do my bidding."

*"Surely not, but is the person who made it still alive?”*

Saintess Tania's voice rang in his head.

*"Was there some large event she had gone through? Her insides are all burned up."*

Then the doctor's voice.

*"All the famous blessed sacers made by those with divine power... Their creators generally all committed suicide or were burned at the stake... It's wretched."*

*In this woman's end, she too was almost buried alive. If he hadn't passed by Cevitas then. But she was kept alive. I kept her alive. So.*

*"There aren't that many who are left alive after making a sacer.”*

*"And they're alive?"*

*She's alive, so shut up.*

A hand came down on Rieta's head, and Killian's forehead rested on top of his hand. As his black hair fell on her forehead, a potent stench of alcohol wafted down.

Rieta's body froze. Even her breathing was slightly husky, scratching the lungs. With nowhere to go, Rieta's body was frozen tight. It took a while until she struggled to get words out. "Are you intoxicated, Sire?" She asked him before as well, but she had to ask him again.

There was no answer. *Oh god. No wonder, she thinks I was saying things that didn't even make sense...* As soon as she thought it was something of a drunken tirade, she relaxed, an unsuitable action for this situation. Killian felt unfamiliar, and she was somewhat careful but also felt worn out.

"Why did you take to drink?"

"To inspire fear." A confusing answer came back.

*The stench of alcohol...* Being in a room alone together was nothing new. If she had to choose, the sober Killian was much more frightening. Rieta laughed hollowly. "This was in vain, for you do not strike me as any more frightful than when you are without."

Rieta wasn't the one who he tried to frighten, but Killian didn't deny that.

"Am I frightening?"

Rieta answered calmly, "No, Sire."

Killian muttered, "Why aren't you scared?"

"Must I be scared?"

"Don't you know men are terrifying creatures? And I'm a drunk man at that."

He was saying something she couldn't make heads or tails of, but she wasn't afraid of him in that way. She believed in the fact he didn't touch women.

A laugh bubbled up as if she was suddenly mocking herself while she thought that. *Who was I kidding, protecting my body?* It wasn't appropriate for her to say that, so Rieta just blinked, murmuring to herself to shake that away.

"Those who are good are good even when inebriated. Those who commit heinous acts and blame it on the alcohol were heinous to begin with."

Killian chuckled. *Is it that she thoroughly believes I am a good person? Or is she telling me I won't be able to do anything absurd with alcohol as my excuse?*

"Either way, the situation is quite good." He was going to let that scoundrel go. Because he had to track the puppet master behind him.

He had tortured all the answers out of him, but Killian didn't wholly believe what he blabbered on about. Because the real answers would be based on where that scoundrel went after he was let go.

Finding out how the Archduke's prized mistress, Rieta, was living outside the castle walls, freely going back and forth to the castle, consistently interacting with him, was a simple task requiring only a little bit of asking around.

It was a gamble; it was good if they accepted Rieta was dead and just moved on, but it was something he couldn't help if they didn't. Either way, something like that was so trivial it wouldn't even be a problem if he found out the real mastermind, so it didn't matter in the end.

He was of a mind to crush them so badly they wouldn't dare to even look in this direction again, so whether Cedric Caballam relayed the message as he had ordered or not wasn't an issue.

However, if that scoundrel didn't return whole, they would probably send another man, inferring Rieta's usefulness to be greater. It was better to use Cedric Caballam when he had him because it could be a man not as incompetent next time. So he would assign a tracker to him and let him go alive after reasoning with him, but...

He had almost killed him for real. Had he ever felt such a desire to kill after that time?

Rieta placed a hand on his shoulder and pushed a little. "How much did you drink, Sire? Are you dizzy by chance? Do you feel sick?"

Funnily enough, her voice was worried. *Who is worried for whom, huh?*

*"There's no way she is dead. This can't be. Please. Please! Give her back. Give Adele back! I'll do anything!"*

*"It's a lie! You're lying. There's no way. Don't make jokes! Please, please! There's no way she's dead! Please!”*

He could almost hear the crying voice. Killian clenched his eyes shut.

*"This thing, what is it worth, what's so important! Take it! If you want it, have it! I'll give it all to you. My body, whatever you want, so give Adele back to me! Give her back!”*

No matter how much she pleaded and cried, it reached no one. Casarius was dead. The image of her shredding the earth and her own body was fresh in his mind. The tears of blood he couldn't even wipe away were tragic. The heart-aching anger and sadness. The wailing and pleading were full of pain. The maternal love was violated so horribly. And the serene, doleful smile.

*"I've let my child go. What good does it do to cherish a ring?"*

It felt like she would fly away somewhere. He cursed under his breath, and he grasped her shoulder with his other hand.

She didn't place much meaning in a drunk man's actions, but there was no way she was comfortable. Rieta fidgeted and tried to push him upright to slip away, but...

"Rieta." The sound of him calling her name was so close, that she could almost feel the vibrations. “I trust you are aware of how you have deceived me.” A cold voice, unbefitting a drunk man.

And what he said made Rieta pause, flustered. The crimson eyes met hers. "I charged you to seven days of immediate rest, only to discover you in these isolated lands before a week's time."

She couldn't even make excuses for the chilled inquiry. Rieta had no idea what to do as the sharp voice drilled into her ear.

"Have you misheard of my concern for your condition? Or do you propose to test the limits of my waning tolerance? I am not fond of such foolery."

The perfectly enunciating voice, not slurred at all, disconcerted Rieta. *Is he drunk? Is he sober?* He was using a calm, quiet voice. But he was expressing his anger.

"Your seal of approval was plain to see on my letter." The excuse of her believing he had given her permission crawled out a moment too late.

"And you truly believed it to be of my own assent?"

Rieta was flustered, but her face wore a look of betrayal. It looked like he didn't give his approval from the current atmosphere, but Rieta still felt accused. Then how was she to understand a paper stamped with the Archduke's seal of approval? Her vacation was over, and they needed more workforce, so she took it as his permission.

He wasn't someone to do this. She was sure he wasn't thinking logically because of the alcohol. This kind of action was unlike him. No matter how he didn't see her as a woman, he wasn't someone who would do this to a full-grown woman.

Killian's forehead on Rieta's, only separated by a hand, and the hand on her shoulder, kept her trapped between him and the ruined bedframe.

"You claim to aspire to repay my kindness. And yet, you do not abide by my wishes for you to spare yourself from harm. Few matters infuriate me thus."

She curled up into herself as her hair slipped down.

"Rieta. Do you know you truly anger me?"

In the end, he was drunk. She wasn't afraid of him touching her uncharacteristically if it's just a bit, but this much was unsettling. "My lord." Rieta struggled to get out of his grasp.

*"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'll give it to you. I'll give you my body! It's not precious at all. I can give it whenever you want."*

*When she didn't even know how to cherish her own body.*

*"I'll become a mistress. I'll do whatever you want me to. I'll do well. I can do well."*

*What the hell was that? Like a woman with no emotions...*

"It looks like the punishment you received didn't feel like a punishment.”

"Sire?” Her struggles paused with her bewildered response.

He pulled her body in. "This time, you'll be punished properly."

Killian's arm wrapped around her shoulder. Rieta's body froze in confusion.

"Be grateful and stay still.” His voice muttered, slightly slurred, like someone who was drunk. "Execution."

Rieta was about to push him away in embarrassment, but the short word from his mouth reminded her of that girl they both loved. Anna. Even if he didn't show it, he cherished the girl too. The weight of worry fell in her empty heart.

And Rieta got a belated shock from the touch of another person's embrace, something she hadn't felt in a long time. *How long had it been since someone held her?*

She had resistance against the plague so she had thought there wouldn't be a problem being in a quarantined area, but plague demons weren't the only ones to swarm where there was grief. She was taken by a dream demon, an incubus.

Rieta realized she had made him worry. The rustling smell of alcohol. The hair felt cool at first but was now warm. The hand that was to push him away went limp.

No one in Cevitas came close to worry about her, scared of being infected by the plague or ending up walking away with a plague demon on their body. There was someone who pulled her close, her demon-infested body, saying he was worried.

It was a slightly grumpy action, a punishment that would make her so grateful she could die, and the embarrassment might be a punishment, but the soothing warmth and concern were sinking into her heart so gently that it made her almost feel sad.

Rieta's hand stopped on his arm. She felt his warmth, standing still, and a slightly softer voice murmured a little while after. “Don't do that again.”

Rieta nodded unconsciously. Her hair brushed his lapels. “Yes, my lord."

A light laugh. "Your reply holds little value now, for you will surely do as you please and defy me again."

"Forgive me. I shall not defy you again, in truth."

Killian chuckled as she spoke like she always did. “And you shall abide by my wishes?"

Rieta faltered. "From this moment..."

“From this moment?” Killian urged her on.

Rieta considered her answer. She knew there was no weight to a drunk man's words, but even so, she didn't want to answer without sincerity. “I shall always give care to your concerns for me.” Her careful and deliberate answer continued slowly. "And set my course by the side of your wishes."

It took a moment, but her face reddened after Rieta understood what she said. What nonsense was she babbling? It was as if His Lordship was giving her special treatment. Rieta quickly tried to rescind her words. "By this, I only mean that you hold such concerns as you do for all your subjects, as I am not one in particular among your many peoples-”

Thankfully, he must have approved of her answer, so with a slightly gentler and less angry tone, he echoed her. "You are." He considered the voice coming out of his mouth as if Killian was confirming with himself. "And I worry for you."

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Mothers seemed to be incredibly tenacious. This woman. The empress. "Killian!"

Mother. She shouldn't have risen like that. Even if they're conscious, the undead are just miserable. And this woman just had to be blonde, reminding him of his mother at times. Her determination also was like that of his mother.

Feeling like he was savoring something bittersweet, Killian closed his eyes gently.

43

# MORNING AT THE CLINIC (1)

After being attacked by a dream demon, the feeling of being tired and sleeping was continuous. The dreams also continued. Rieta nodded off, without realizing she had fallen asleep, and slept in later than usual. This was rare for Rieta, who had stopped sleeping deeply, so she always woke up before sunrise at some point.

The warm sunlight was streaming in through the cool morning air. The sunlight highlighted the dust particles in the air.

Rieta blinked, staring dazedly at the particles dancing in front of the window, and looked up at the unfamiliar ceiling. She jumped at the crimson eyes staring at her. “A-Archdu—, my lord!"

Killian sat in a chair before the bed with his legs crossed, ignoring the strange way she addressed him, and tossed out, "Such deep slumber you did sustain."

Rieta quickly gathered herself, brushing back her hair and fixing her clothes. "W-why did you not awaken me sooner?"

*When did I fall asleep? How long has he been sitting there?* There was no way to know if he had woken up early or had never gone to sleep. *There's no way he stayed here the whole time, right?*

Killian quietly watched Rieta and said, “You may rest some more if you wish."

He was being considerate, in his own way. But Rieta shook her head, already awake and alert. “N-No, I am much rested now, my lord."

He jerked his head in a nod, turning away. "Very well."

She was about to ask if he had slept well last night, but Killian suddenly clapped the book shut on his knee and tossed it onto the table. “What were you thinking yesterday?”

Rieta looked at him nervously, unaware of what he was referring to. The lowered crimson eyes shifted to Rieta, glowing in the morning light.

"You must have known a demon was there.”

Rieta closed her mouth. It was a question that didn't require an answer. There was no way she didn't know a devil was stuck on her when she could see them.

"You could have caught the plague as well if we had been late.” A strange expression appeared on his face as he crossed his arms. Maybe he was angry. Maybe he was watching for her reaction. “Why don't you take care of yourself?"

Rieta fidgeted with her fingers, unsure of what to do with the scolding she was getting first thing in the morning. She chewed her lip, and her head dropped. Only in a little while did she open her mouth and whisper, “I apologize, Sire, I wasn't trying to meet you while I was infected. Thankfully, it was not the plague, but just fatigue.”

Killian scowled. “It's not because I think you'll infect me."

Rieta couldn't bear to lift her head. She remembered the cold yet warm words she had heard the night before. Rieta now also knew she had made him worry.

"I would like it if you rested, and I want you to stay out of the current situation. Rieta. Did you not know I meant that? Or do you think of my words as a joke?"

Her excuse of how her signed papers were the reason why she was here didn't stand anymore. Rieta couldn't answer, and a silence ensued.

With a quiet clatter, something was thrust in front of her eyes. It was a cup of water. Rieta flinched and looked up. The man who offered her the water had the same calm face as always, looking down at her. She fumbled and took the glass, and he flicked his eyes up as if signaling her to drink.

In the silence, Rieta awkwardly brought the cup up to her lips. It was faintly bitter and slightly minty. She sipped the warm herbal tea. She was wiping the barely there mark left by her lips when the large hand took away the empty cup.

She was here to help and look at how things were going. Her fingers fidgeted, feeling indebted to him. There was nothing else to say other than her apologies. But since he had said he didn't like those kinds of words, she started to consider all sorts of possible replies, thinking one over, then going on to the next.

“Are you trying to test how far you can go?"

Rieta faltered, struggling and failing to come up with a proper answer. The lengthy interrogation that had embarrassed Rieta the night before reared its head in her memory.

"If you act in that way, you're deceiving me."

Rieta lifted her head without realizing it and looked at him. Strangely, he was repeating what he had said last night. *It couldn't be... Was he unable to remember what happened last night?*

"You said you'd repay your debt to me. So why do you not do as I want?" Killian's voice coldly continued, whether Rieta was flustered. “Rieta, do you know you truly infuriate me?"

Rieta's mouth gaped open like a fish*. Oh god. It is unmistakable. He can't remember.*

Rieta's mouth opened and closed. Killian stared coolly at Rieta's silent, frozen figure.

A knock sounded, saving her. Killian stood up and opened the door. The manager of the clinic's wife had brought a tray for Rieta, and she was shocked at the broken bed and chair she saw through the open doorway.

"Oh my!"

Killian replied shamelessly. "I'll recompense you for the damage.”

Killian walked out with her and exchanged a few words. Then, in a little while, he came back, the tray in hand.

Rieta saw that and quickly tried to get up, but Killian stopped her with a look. Killian returned to the chair next to the bed, expressionless, and placed the tray on the table.

He picked up a bowl and the spoon from the tray. Rieta reached out to take the bowl from his hands. But Killian evaded her hands deftly, and he scooped up a little porridge to bring it up to her lips.

Rieta's eyes widened. She inadvertently grabbed the edges of Killian's sleeves. "I am able to feed myself."

Killian looked up, then down, looking at his sleeves in Rieta's grasp.

Rieta flinched, releasing his wrists, and stammered, “I... I...”

"You have to accept your punishment, correct?"

"Sire?"

The cold voice. “Being indebted to me. That's what you hate the most.” Killian's eyes darted from Rieta's eyes, lips, and the spoon in front of her lips. "It's time to repent."

She couldn't speak in her confusion. Rieta's eyes quaked. *But I have taken my punishment already.*

“Just, just a moment, my lord."

"Be quiet and open your mouth. And reflect on what you did while being truly grateful. That's what you have to do.”

Rieta's face went white. She nearly said, "You punished me last night!" She didn't dare say it aloud. If he came back with "What punishment?" then what was she supposed to say? She just opened and closed her mouth, unable to confess that she was punished last night, unable to defend herself.

The spoon slipped through her unwittingly open mouth. She nearly bit her tongue and barely swallowed when Rieta pushed herself up and reached out a hand toward the bowl.

"P-Please, my lord. Please don't do this. Please."

"Remove your impertinent hand and lie back. It's an order."

"My lord."

"Do I have to call for the mistress of the house and have her force you back? Or would you rather I lay you back myself?"

Rieta had no idea what to do, and she looked as if she was about to cry. She had no choice.

He lifted the spoon toward her again. "Ah.”

The porridge this hellkite was feeding her tasted like sand, but despite how Rieta felt about it, her body accepted the porridge heartily. This man's bedside manner for one of his subordinates, with his authoritative manner not allowing any rebellion, was warm and kind.

The embarrassing and hellish meal was over.

"Don't do that again." As if he was telling her this was an appropriate punishment, Killian drove in his point again.

"Yes, Sire."

"You always say yes. You'll do what you want even if you do, right?”

"I'm sorry, Sire. From now on, truly..."

"From now on?"

Rieta clamped her mouth shut. She felt this was an unfair situation. Now, she was ready just to let the chips fall as they may. Rieta was pouting with a gloomy, red face.

And Killian, seeing her like that, turned away for a moment and broke his cool facade to laugh. Rieta's eyes widened.

He became cool again and tossed out, "Why don't you finish your sentence?" Killian flicked his finger against the dazed Rieta's forehead. "Did you forget already? You have to say, I'll keep in mind how you worry about me in all that I do."

Killian grabbed his forehead and bent over in laughter at the vacant look Rieta had on her face. Her jaw dropped open at the absurd situation. The archduke's eyes, when he focused them on her, were full of mirth. The beautiful face turned beet red at the sense of betrayal she felt. “My lord!” Rieta shrieked. She didn't know she could do that to the Archduke of Axias.

As he was cleaning up the plates on the table, he turned to Rieta, and his face was like that of a handsome trickster.

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"Does your hand still ache? Surely the cleric must have cast a healing spell on your hands."

"Oh." Only at that did Rieta realize the tips of her fingers didn't hurt anymore. Rieta undid the bandages around her fingers. Her nails had cracked and broken significantly, so the traces of her injury were still there, but the wounds were healed enough that she wouldn't have to wrap them in bandages anymore.

Killian grabbed and lifted her hand to inspect it and put it back down. Rieta fidgeted with the tips of her fingers absentmindedly. *They weren't too bad in the first place.* They weren't fully healed, so her fingers still felt ticklish like a butterfly had landed on them.

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Killian dragged Cedric Caballam away. After Rieta was moved to the house of the camp's overseer, a rumor of how Rieta Tristi was the maker of the blessed sacer traveled, and the clerics discussed it in hushed tones.

Killian didn't confirm it, but... *Three months ago. A person with divine magic who the Archduke of Axias showed his mercy.* With these two clues, it wasn't difficult to guess the mage inside the castle walls. Even if they didn't know the specifics, the story of how she came to Axias with an unfortunate tale was quite well-known in the vicinity.

Killian had already reacted quite sharply about the blessed sacer, so there wasn't anyone who would ask him or Rieta directly about it, but he must have guessed the story was being passed among the clerics, because Killian ordered them to pretend not to know about the sacer, even ordering them not to feel curious about it.

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As the morning sun rose and Killian went toward the camp to inspect the necessary clerical work that needed to be done, he discovered Vetere sleeping on a cot in the corner of the camp. The clerics from Alpheter who were in charge of this camp let the exhausted elderly cleric sleep and went about their day.

*The abbot.* He felt irritated for some reason and kicked the innocent man's bed. Vetere jolted awake from his slumber and blearily looked up at the Archduke of Axias.

*He wasn't completely innocent. He approved Rieta's papers on his own and didn't tell me.* Killian stared down at him, expressionless, and just turned to walk away.

Vetere realized he was just cross and scowled, acting irritated. “Aw, what the...?"

"You're far from a has-been. Stop whining."

The reply was completely unexpected, and Vetere's jaw dropped. Of course, his leg was uncomfortable, but he thought of himself as still healthy. But this wasn't something a man who drove them to exhaustion should say.

Vetere, who hurled attacks at the back of the receding tyrant's head that it was just a tantrum from an old bachelor, His Lordship was tormenting a weak, old man, and that he was an eighty-year-old who couldn't even walk properly, fell back onto the cot, falling asleep as if nothing had happened.

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"I am wholly honored to greet you!" Saintess Tania nodded casually and accepted Rieta's greeting.

Rieta was shocked to hear the cleric who had healed her last night was Saintess Tania. She thought she had heard His Lordship call out that name, but because of the dream demon, she was on the brink of falling asleep and thought she had heard it mistakenly. But it truly was Saintess Tania!

“I-I am Rieta Tristi, a humble mage of meager talents."

"I see."

"I truly admire you."

"I see."

"I have always worshipped you."

"Thank you. You know I can't accept those feelings, yes?" The saintess answered the words of adoration, which she must have heard endlessly for the past twenty years, with kindness.

*To think I would meet her here!*

Rieta saw the saintess was trying to pull some supplies off a shelf and quickly went over to help. Rieta looked to be in awe, her face flushed and her eyes bright at the fact that not only had she been healed by Saintess Tania, but she was also going to work with her at the same place.

Rieta trotted behind Saintess Tania, her face looking like she was in love. She diligently did all the jobs that weren't even asked of her, but her body was always half-turned toward Saintess Tania, and her blue eyes stuck to Saintess Tania like magnets whenever she had a chance.

Saintess Tania looked like she didn't care very much, but she was somewhat curious about the woman who made Killian's blessed sacer and allowed her to help bless or purify.

Rieta truly worked hard. The saintess now had a hardworking assistant, and, thanks to Killian's help, the work throughout the large camp was being completed steadily.

Killian glanced up from the papers the manager had given him and followed Rieta with his eyes while she trotted from this place to that. Seeing her flushed face, he remembered a fleeting memory and rubbed his knuckle with his thumb.

On the bed in the temple, where the afternoon light was streaming in. The feeling of her pulse in her reddened cheek. The image of her collapsing into tears, one she had hidden so well. The pale, almost gaunt face and... She smiled as she said, "but you don't use it," and the tears...

They had been through quite a lot, so the faces he could recall were numerous. It was innumerable. As he was watching those memories flying around incoherently, Rieta's eyes suddenly met with his, and she must still have felt difficulty with the events that morning, so she quickly broke eye contact and ran away to Saintess Tania.

Killian smiled faintly and rifled through the papers. *I just teased her a little; what a grudge.*

Saintess Tania saw Rieta and motioned her over just then, and Rieta quickly ran to her side. She clasped her hands respectfully in front of her and nodded as she listened carefully to what the saintess Tania had to say. He could almost see a tail wagging behind her.

The saintess must have sent her on an errand, because Rieta said, "I will return swiftly, saintess," and ran off somewhere.

Killian chuckled and muttered, “As a duckling would shadow its mother."

Saintess Tania chuckled. “I fear I may have stolen the affections of your prized mistress from you."

At that, Killian smirked and casually looked back at the papers. "And I now find myself an envious man."

44

# MORNING AT THE CLINIC (2)

They went around looking after patients since there was time until the workers and supplies that were scheduled to come with the knights today would arrive. Because they only had to go to three camps a day now, Vetere, Damien, and Colbryn had a little breathing room.

The new clerics were assigned to their posts and informed of the respective situations, so it took longer than expected. There weren't any patients in critical condition at the East Annex, and it had rained at night, so Killian and the clerics pushed off their plans to visit and stayed the night at the last camp.

Killian and the eight people of divine magic met in the morning at the last camp. Saintess Tania and the healing cleric would take charge of this camp. And the two purging clerics who would make their rounds through three clinics, including this one. Axias' three clerics: Vetere, Colbryn, and Damien. And Rieta, who had stayed at the overseer's house. All the workers and the medical personnel except for these aforementioned went home.

The clerics from Alpheter would take charge of a camp in pairs, so Saint Tania would have to take charge of this camp. But she suggested switching roles with Vetere who had difficulty walking. Killian thought it was logical, so he accepted it without objection. Vetere thanked the saintess, looking touched.

In the end, Vetere would stay with the healing cleric from Alpheter at this clinic, and Colbryn and Damien would join the pairs of purging clerics, to work in teams of three. And Saintess Tania would move from place to place, helping where she was needed. She proved not just anyone could be called a saintess by volunteering to travel between all the clinics.

Killian shook out the last of the papers and prepared to go back to Axias Manor. Now he could relax a little with the camps and deal with the piled- up papers and documents back in the castle.

The patients in the East Annex were fighting the plague without incident, and there weren't any additional or worsened cases. Still, they had to be vigilant against plague demons, so he planned to have Colbryn and Damien come to the East Annex as well as part of their rounds. The young clerics anticipated this responsibility and were waiting.

But Saintess Tania put her hand up again. "I shall go and survey the East Annex patients myself."

"Yourself?"

"I will not charge you any special fee for this care. I merely offer services that have already been paid, so please do not decline."

Killian chuckled. *There was nothing to refuse.*

"Very well."

Killian told Colbryn and Damien to rest at the camp for a while and go when the purging clerics departed, and this time, Colbryn and Damien looked at the saintess in awe.

Saintess Tania would go with Killian to Axias Manor once the knights and the supplies arrived. Rieta was to go with them, having been ordered to leave the quarantined area upon joining Axias Manor. Rieta looked tired while preparing to leave the quarantined area, but once she heard the saintess would be going with them because the East Annex needed help too, her cheeks and eyes regained a healthy glow.

Killian watched Rieta help with organizing the luggage from a distance. *Should I have her accompany Saintess Tania?* It wasn't so desperate they couldn't function without Rieta, but it seemed like she was helping. The knights would be with them and would ensure the saintess' safety.

Saintess Tania glanced at Killian and said casually. "Your prized mistress seems to be quite clever. It's disappointing that she cannot heal, but her levels of blessing and purifying are significantly good, and she's quick to understand. If you didn't treat her like a porcelain doll, then she would be a fine companion for you on your travels."

Killian cocked an eyebrow and looked away from Rieta. "Not really." He couldn't agree. Quick to understand, his ass.

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They could hear rattling carriage wheels and hooves. *Whoa, whoa.* They could hear the horses neighing as the horses whinnied. The mages, doctors, and workers brought from Axias Manor by the knights started to disembark. Vetere was put in charge of the handover, and Killian called for Saintess Tania to go up to the meeting hall, and they went, including a few knights.

As soon as the door opened to the room, a coppery smell emanated from it. An unconscious man, beaten to a pulp, was tied to a chair, covered in blood. Killian stepped toward him and kicked his shin to wake him up. Cedric Caballam jolted awake. He looked pretty grotesque because his forehead was in ruins, and blood had dripped down and thickened. His face was swollen, and he couldn't open his eyes properly.

Killian spat out, "Treat him no more than as to sustain his life."

Saintess Tania looked at Killian, who had boldly shown her this bloodied thing of a man without so much as an explanation and began healing him without asking any questions. Since it was the man who acted suspiciously, peeping at the archduke's prized mistress, he was dragged away. *Well, there is nothing to say about him being rough with the man.*

Saintess Tania didn't like violence, but she had traveled to the most dangerous places in the empire for the last twenty years. She had encountered all sorts of nobles, thieves, and scoundrels, and she had grown more and more used to their actions, so Killian was practically a gentleman in her eyes.

Looking at the state of this man, it seemed like he had become a mush last night. There had to be a reason for leaving him in this state all night.

Whether it was a matter of passion or whatever. She thought that way, so even when he pulled out his sword and pointed it at the man's eyes, she wasn't shocked.

She just had one thing to say. "I shall not be able to heal the eye if you continue."

Killian tilted his head to the side, maintaining eye contact with the man. "Did you hear that?"

There wasn't even a quiver to the sword, as if she had said it about

someone else. The man tied to the chair couldn't avoid the sword aimed at his eyes and sobbed in terror.

"Cedric Caballam. Surely you remember my words from yesterday, do you not?"

"Yes, yes, Sire. I remember."

Killian whispered sweetly. "Rieta Tristi is dead. Tell him the archduke is quite angry he sold the archduke a sickly woman at a very high price, and that all from Cevitas are forevermore unwelcome in these lands. Mind you, I shall not be so forgiving again."

"Of course, Sire, I'll relay the message. I thank you for your kindness."

Killian smirked. "Of course, you have to be thankful. I saved your life." Killian stuffed a pouch full of gold in Cedric's mouth. "Now take this generous payment to some other land and get yourself treated. Do not forget that we now own your life and tongue."

Killian turned the blade and patted his cheek with the flat of the blade. He grinned. "Be careful on the road."

Killian raised his hand, and Saint Tania stopped her treatment to step back. The knights who were waiting behind them were ordered to get Cedric Caballam out of Axias. The knights moved forward and hoisted him up.

"Let's go." Killian emotionlessly spat out and turned to walk away. Still, there was no explanation, but Saintess Tania figured she knew enough.

She thought she had heard the name before. She also had heard some rumors herself. She had stopped by the plague-ravaged Cevitas not too long ago. How a widow, meant to be buried alive with the previous count, Casarius, was bought and taken away by the Archduke of Axias was a popular story among the people of Cevitas.

*Rieta Tristi. Was she the widow bought from Cevitas?*

She had thought he was much too careful and overprotective with a mage, but this was the backstory? She did think there would be a full story from what she had seen with the blessed sacer. Of course, she wasn't interested in her because of the blessed sacer, but Rieta was someone who kept drawing her eye, a rare occurrence even for Saint Tania. *Was it because of her beauty?* She felt oddly concerned for her. And she felt bad for her.

Of course, when she heard of what happened in Cevitas, she couldn't help but wonder if the fates had abandoned her. Thankfully, the archduke seemed to treasure and protect her somewhat. She contemplated. Saintess Tania remembered the anger in the archduke's eyes when she had asked if she was alive.

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Sometime later, Killian, Saintess Tania, and the knights gathered outside the camp. Rieta was the only one who didn't know how to ride. Killian grasped Rhea's reins in one hand and reached out the other to Rieta. "Come here."

This wasn't the first time this had happened. Rieta felt strange for some reason but hid her emotions and approached him. Killian lifted and seated her on his beloved horse as if it was the most natural thing in the world. He gave her the only saddle and stirrups and swung himself up lightly behind her. He took hold of the horse's reins with Rieta in his arms.

Rieta clenched Rhea's mane, and her shoulders stiffened. The shamelessness from their ride back from Havitus was repeating itself, but this time, she didn't just feel embarrassed but also humiliated. There was nothing she could do at that time. She couldn't even remember how she was able to do it. But unlike before, the reason why she was embarrassed was that the situation where she was the only one who didn't know how to ride continued to repeat itself.

Rieta had no idea about horses, so she had no idea what to do with the saddle and stirrups he gave up for her. She fidgeted, clueless about whether she could do this.

Killian rode his horse unaffected like there was nothing different. Even if Rieta was the one seated in the saddle, his view wasn't at all blocked by Rieta's head. The small lump in the saddle was not a problem for the large horse and the large rider.

Rieta clenched Rhea's mane with both hands and thought she had to learn how to ride as soon as possible. He had said that she would have to learn how to ride a horse if she joined the East Annex.

The clerics who came to see them off blessed Saintess Tania, the knights, and the horses before they departed. People who were able to bless could bless themselves, but there was a matter of heart, and it was customary for someone else to bless as a courtesy. They placed glowing hands on each other's shoulders and heads, crossing themselves and blessing each other.

Rieta realized she had gotten on the horse without being blessed. Killian had the sacer necklace, so he didn't need a blessing, but Rieta did. Her feet in the stirrups rattled as she floundered, unaware of what to do. She looked down at the man's arms around her protecting her and was about to decide to bless herself when Killian's hand moved above her head.

Something dropped. Her heart thudded along with the leather strap now being placed around her neck. What she then saw past her eyes down to her chest...

She turned around in shock, and because she was in the saddle, their faces were closer than ever, and the handsome face was fixed on her, expressionless. His lips moved, and a calm voice sounded. "Bless me."

Rieta's body froze. Killian was indifferently pulling her blonde tresses out of the leather necklace.

"I do not relish this feeling of exclusion,” Killian murmured as if he was talking to himself and bowed his head toward her. Even if he didn't do so, his face was close, but the keen and brusque face got even closer.

Rieta became speechless. The hand she had raised to grab the ring from her chest, couldn't bear to touch her daughter's keepsake at her neck and fell away.

*I can just be blessed by the clerics. I'm a mage, so I can do it myself. Take it back and wear it.*

She had to say that. She should have said that. If this was like usual, she would have been able to. She just barely missed the chance to refuse, and the necklace settled into place under her hair. Because he made it seem so natural.

She didn't refuse. She couldn't refuse. It was all in the timing. Because everyone around them was already on their horses and waiting for just them. Because she felt it would be a nuisance for everyone else if she started arguing with him. Rieta looked at his raven hair brushing against his eyelashes and his eyes waiting for her.

She stayed like that for a moment, brought the hand that was about to tear away the ring onto his shoulder, and leaned in and kissed his forehead, led by some unknown force. A respectful, reverent kiss. This was a blessing a high-ranking cleric would cast for nobility to express their respect, not a customary blessing with a hand on a head or a shoulder.

It was a method for formal public situations. But...the two of them on the horse... The image of the man sitting behind lowered his head, and the woman sitting in front turned to place a hand on his shoulder and placed a kiss on his forehead, which felt quite different from a simple ceremony. The clerics and knights stared, slightly shocked.

Killian knew blessings could be done just with her hands. But maybe because of what happened before, he was used to it. He had bowed his head as if he was accustomed to it and matched her eye level. She blessed him like this several times before, so maybe he felt this way was more authentic than the one cast with hands. But it wasn't just that.

Rieta's hands moved only after she kissed his forehead. Her trembling fingers touched the necklace on her neck, her daughter's ring on her chest like it was a dream. *It is heavy. That is impossible.*

She was going to give it back. As soon as they returned to the castle, she would hang it back on the neck of this invaluable man. Her daughter's ring, which she had assumed would never come back to her, was settled on her chest, which was unreal. Its presence made her choke up, and her heart felt heavy.

There was no way for her to dare express the sadness and thankfulness that was washing over her, so she wanted to bless him in the most respectful way possible. With all her heart.

Killian sat up after being blessed, looking indifferent. “Face forward."

Rieta was staring at Killian, but she quickly turned toward the front. The Archduke of Axias pulled on the reins. The horse corrected its course and started to gallop.

How could she have believed anyone could be without greed? When the weight of greed in her heart was so heavy?

45

# LIKE WIND ON A DRY BRANCH

The earth was damp from the rain that had fallen all night. Every time the horses' hooves thudded against the ground, clumps of mud instead of clouds of yellow dust splattered. The dew from weeds and wildflowers growing alongside the path often sprayed up, creating big and small rainbows. The summer sun was high in the sky, but the breeze was cool because of the previous night's rain.

They chose a quiet path without many people because there were so many horses and carriages. Fields of green wheat, barley, and corn alternated. Thanks to crops such as corn and potatoes that had a tenacious vitality, the farmers could maintain their title on this merciless land that yielded little harvest. With the effort of many people to make the earth fertile, they could slowly start growing wheat and barley.

If the loot, art, and mercenaries were the hands and feet that moved Axias, then the small but persistent crops that grew on the near-barren land were its lifeline. They were consistently receiving the food supplies they lacked through trade, but after the door to trade closed off due to the plague, they could last this long thanks to these farmers' crops. The green crops that breathed life into Axias swayed in the breeze, stretching up to the sun.

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The rain stopped by morning, and white clouds filled the skies. The light breeze felt good, tickling the napes of their necks. To prevent the horses from slipping on the rainy path, they went at an easy pace. Most of the spring flowers were gone, and alongside the path were trees and plants emanating green life.

Cicadas passionately chorused as if they were saying the plague was simply a human matter, and the birds sang their songs as they flitted from tree to tree. The clopping of the horses' hooves against the ground broke through the azure sounds of summer.

The colossal citadel, visible from anywhere in Axias, was getting closer and closer to them. While the horses slowed down to catch their breaths, Saint Tania looked at the castle and shared her brief thought.

"Where does the time go?"

The saintess had an expression on her face as if she were saying it had been a long time.

Killian glanced at her. She had said she had visited about ten years ago, or so. "Is there something that's changed?"

*Was he joking?* Saintess Tania chuckled and replied. "I think that goes without my saying.”

Axias had been completely transformed in a decade. The miracle of the barren wasteland turning into a city.

But the lord of Axias just replied bluntly with a flat look on his face. "I didn't ask simply to hear your flattery.” His plain look revealed no particular emotions, and his crimson eyes shifted toward the citadel he had conquered. "That may be true for the city, but the citadel itself hasn't changed much, no?"

Saintess Tania shrugged at Killian's question and looked up at the castle ahead of them. Axias Manor. The previously bare walls, where not even ivy grew, were now covered in a blanket of morning-glory blooms.

During the hundreds of years under the devils' possession, it was a place where black-thorned brambles ran rampant, and the only change that occurred was the snow that covered them in the winter, making for an achromatic change.

He didn't seem like he asked for an answer. Killian quietly steered his horse away from the party and went ahead. Saintess Tania didn't think she had to unnecessarily bring attention to that fact, so she also spurred her horse on.

Those who saw it every day couldn't feel any difference, but the freshness of summer was spreading on the gray stone wall. The simple summer flowers growing through the cracks dotted the wall with white, celadon green, and purple colors.

The gates to Axias Manor and the drawbridge for crossing over the moat gradually came into view. The ancient grey castle, surrounded by the moat, wasn't delicate or decorative. But it was stoic and had a majestic air.

It wasn't in the elegant and fancy style nobles preferred these days, but the castle had a long history that had lasted through ancient peoples and demons, emanating a solid, old-world atmosphere.

Thick adamantium bars made up the twice-layered gate, and on either side of the gates were faint carvings of dragons that were now extinct like ancient magic. Claw and scale marks from unknown demons were on the dragons' bodies, and other markings accrued over time.

The strength from the blessing held by the citadel itself helped avoid damage to a point, but time ended up making its mark on the artificial architecture over several hundred years.

It was an old citadel that used to be under the rule of demons for a long time, but no one after its architects, not any of their descendants from hundreds of years later, could build a castle of this scale. Did those ancestors foresee this? The soulless ex-imperial prince who recaptured the castle from the evil grip after hundreds of years strangely resembled the castle.

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The guard soldiers must have seen the lord of Axias approaching because the drawbridge was slowly being lowered.

Rhea neighed in pleasure to be home. Killian pulled the reins, and the black mare reared her front legs rhythmically before stopping. Rieta shut her eyes at the terrifying feeling that always followed.

Rhea had maintained her position as the head of the pack, despite being the only one with two riders. Killian patted her mane and swung off. The sturdy gates to Axias Manor slowly started to open to greet their lord. It looked as if it would take a little more time to cross as Killian gauged the drawbridge, so he turned and reached up to Rieta.

Before he could turn all the way, something dropped onto his neck. He knew what it was even before he looked. Killian scowled. *I will have to get a different blessed sacer or something. This is...*

He was looking up at Rieta's face, irritated, when...

*Whoosh.*

"I thank you."

A wind blew, rattling the leaves. When their eyes met, he froze because he had seen something he didn't expect. Rieta was smiling. The late-morning sun was shining on the woman's simple, white-blonde hair and illuminating the side of her face. Truly radiant. Rieta was smiling at Killian like she was truly alive.

"You can return it to me in due time."

Killian stared at her, still frozen.

"And when you do, I vow to receive it gladly." Rieta's sky-blue eyes held him, and she tilted her head to the side as she smiled again. “You'll visit the annex, yes, Sire? Regardless of the necklace, I can cast as many blessings for you as you'd like."

His half-joke about feeling left out, did she take it to heart? She said things that she'll regret later. Rieta reached down and trusted her body to his hands.

*Whoosh...*

Killian lifted her off the horse by her waist as if his body was reacting instinctively. He was so shocked by her unexpected smile that he had no idea what he was doing. She took her hands off his arms as soon as her feet hit the ground, having put them there only for stability. Then she turned and ran as if she was escaping him.

Killian watched her run away with a stiff look. *Was she able to smile so normally like that?* *That woman?* No. It also seemed abnormal. He had never seen that kind of smile ever before. But it seemed like a normal smile that anyone could make.

"Saintess Tania!"

Rieta had run toward where Saintess Tania had arrived, a step behind them, and stopped her horse. Rieta was running to the saint.

Killian doubted his eyes as he lifted a hand to shade them from the blinding sunlight. The woman's form, as she was running away from him, was even clearer. That form, the mussed blonde tresses, the sunlight...

The sunlight.

"Saintess Tania, would you grant me a blessing?"

The saintess nodded like it was nothing, under the blazing sunlight, and got off her horse. He could clearly hear what was being said as if they were right next to him, even though they were far away.

Killian looked down at his hand. He felt strange. The hand that grasped Rieta to bring her down felt strange. He awkwardly felt his forehead with that hand.

Yesterday, he had been just slightly tipsy. It wasn't like he did it because he felt something particularly special or different. He just... It felt like he should hold her. But once morning broke and he became sober, he realized he had made a mistake. He joked around in the morning because he thought she would feel awkward. That was it.

Emotions that would make things difficult if they progressed. Emotions that eat up logic. Before he realized it, that smile had burrowed into his heart, the heart that had become unguarded at some point.

Killian observed Rieta from behind, feeling a slightly unbelievable slew of emotions. He felt, that if he saw her once more, whatever this was would become certain. But, instead, everything fell into chaos again.

The shocking smile seemed like his mother's but also seemed completely unfamiliar. In the barren land where not even a single tuft of grass grew, it fell like wind on a dry branch. Warm with a saddened joy, pure and fresh, the blinding summer sunlight was dizzying.

He realized he missed the chance to let his feelings dry up and disappear.

*Whoosh...*

She turned her head from over there and looked at him. Sunlight shone onto the luxurious greenery.

Killian closed his eyes. *No... Not yet. I was just too immersed in my role. I still had time.*

Killian thought he had been standing there for an unusually long time. He heard the clunk of the pulley opening the castle gates, and only then did he realize it wasn't that long until the gates fully opened up.

He drank yesterday, and it was because he hadn't gotten any proper rest in a while. It was because the sun was burning hot. Killian reminded himself.

Guards and gatekeepers in heavy armor saluted the archduke and stood aside. The tightly closed gate was now wide open. They were waiting by the castle gates to make way for his entrance. Killian stepped onto the drawbridge with a slight frown on his brow, walking like he was a lamb taking its first steps. Because he had to get into the castle however he could right now. He took slow, deliberate steps.

*Whoosh...*

Fringe trees brushed the desolate citadel walls overgrown with ivy and the gates. The summer leaves were so fearlessly green, blissfully unaware of their knocking against the spiked lattice of the gates. Even on the gleaming, sharp points of the lattice, and on the leaves waving with the breeze, sunlight blazed down.

*Whoosh...*

The thick scent of summer was carried by the wind passing through the greenery and pouring down on the wall like seafoam. It has been thirteen years since he had put down roots in this land. Now this landscape was long-familiar. After the strange smile within it, the same world he had seen every day had changed into something new.

A strange feeling told him the landscape he always carried with him had changed entirely. It was distracting. The hot sunlight yearned for the emerald leaves, and the wind weaved through the beams. The cool breeze teased her hair. The passion of the sun-crazed cicadas.

It was summer.

Killian finally arrived in front of Rieta, looked at her for a moment as if he was confirming something, and loped into his castle, expressionless.

46

# EVERYONE HAS SECRETS (1)

People were expecting Killian in front of the East Annex and preparing for his visit.

Killian looked at the white cloth Eron handed him and cocked his eyebrow. "What is it?"

"It's a blessed Lamenta linen, Sire. They say it's effective in warding off the plague if you hold it against your nose and mouth. So please use it, Sire.”

Killian gazed at the white cloth. It was unofficial common knowledge to cover the mouth and nose to avoid catching the plague. Magical protection or blessings could stand in for physical protection, so it was something he didn't necessarily require, being as surrounded by people with divine power as he was.

“I don't recall Rieta, nor the clerics, using something like this.”

Rieta quickly took the cloth offered to her and wrapped it around her neck like a scarf. Saintess Tania glanced at it and accepted it as if it were something familiar to her.

Eron answered. "Better safe than sorry, Sire. Doubling, tripling your protection is always helpful."

Killian didn't look that happy about it. Better safe than sorry. Sure. But if it was a way to lower the risk of infection, the people working in the clinics should have had it from the beginning. "How is it these aren't being supplied to the camps?"

Eron readily answered as if he was prepared for this question. “The demand for Lamentan flax increased exponentially due to work in the clinics, and there has been a slight hiccup in supply.

The East Annex was supplied first because it is a closed-off area, and all camps will be supplied starting today. They are most likely in the boxes of supplies that have already arrived at the camps, Sire."

"They are?"

Eron grinned. "Yes, Sire. Those who cannot wield divine magic will receive them first."

Eron probably said something with Killian in mind, but he was even safer than those with divine power because the blessed sacer protected him. He didn't need it. But Killian didn't say anything about the blessed sacer and quietly accepted the cloth after the two women.

The doors to the East Annex opened.

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"Rieta!"

Two women who were still healthy and uninfected ran out to greet the people coming into the East Annex. They were slightly worn from the pain of losing Anna, but they still smiled warmly. Their faces showed how they were sorry for making her enter such a dangerous place, how they were grateful she was safe, and how they were happy to see their friend again.

"Lotte. Beth." Rieta also walked forward and mirrored their smiles.

But they faltered once they recognized the man walking in behind her with his mouth and nose covered. The women's eyes quaked. It was someone they could recognize from just his shadow.

"My lord?"

The Archduke of Axias was following Rieta and the cleric. Half of his face was covered by the cloth with only his raven hair and crimson eyes visible, but no one could mistake the man. The moment they met his eyes, their suspicions transformed into certainty.

"My goodness, my lord!" The two women retreated in a fluster. “How are you here?"

The two women went white at seeing him come in himself. Although the plague was receding and he was blessed, entering a place closed off to prevent the spread of infection was out of the question. It was a dangerous place where most of the residents were infected with the plague.

Moreover, Killian was neither a doctor nor someone who could wield divine power.

"You mustn't enter! Hurry and get out, Sire! Hurry!"

"What were they thinking, not stopping you? Rieta, hurry and escort His Lordship out!"

Beth and Lotte didn't dare approach him but expressed their insistence on him leaving. He was the man who had to take charge and lead Axias in this dire situation. If the head was in danger, then the body was too.

But Saintess Tania had assured him he wouldn't catch the plague just because he breathed in the air in a closed-off area, because the blessed sacer was protecting him. For Killian, he had entered because he felt a sense of trust. There was no reason to worry, but he didn't explain further and just answered, “It's all right.” He said he would go to see the patients.

He wasn't particularly loquacious, but seeing him not say anything about the blessed sacer reassured Rieta. There wasn't any need to tell people a sad story. The clerics who took Killian's orders all knew about the sacer but were keeping silent, but Rieta was in the dark on the reason why no one asked her about it.

To the uneasy women, "Don't worry. The cleric who is accompanying us is Saintess Tania," Rieta quietly whispered.

The women were shocked and stared at the cleric. Even if they weren't mages or clerics, everyone in the empire knew who Saintess Tania was. She was the most powerful female cleric in the empire. Saintess Tania was such an influential cleric that even just her name was enough to reassure people.

As a result of her twenty years of dedicated service spent traveling the empire and saving people, she was beloved by all who were poor and struggling. She was one of six saints who put an end to the demon war that went on for seven years and had even achieved the unprecedented feat of destroying a junior high-level devil by herself. She was a living legend.

Looking at two pairs of saucer eyes in front of her, Saintess Tania touched the two women's heads with her finger that formed a drop of white divine energy at the end to bless them. The power of the divine energy made the air vibrate the moment it touched their heads. Saintess Tania's face shifted to become somewhat holy and charismatic from looking like she had no idea due to the light her name brought.

Lotte and Beth were sucked in and stepped aside as if in a trance to let them in.

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The three of them decided Beth and Lotte would escort them to the room where the patients were, and they would examine them one by one. It was a type of plague that could damage vital organs, but thankfully, there weren't any people who had fatal cases.

Some patients had fevers occasionally and bouts of vomiting, but most were improving. It was thanks to Vetere and Colbryn desperately casting healing magic from the moment of the outbreak.

But the trio's examinations weren't that easy. When they were stopped at the door by Beth and Lotte, who weren't even infected, they should have expected the sick patients to also go white at the sight of Killian and close the doors against them.

Of course, this did happen. The patients were so obstinate that they couldn't talk about it at all. It was so difficult they had to hide Killian and wrestle the door open.

They all reacted similarly to Lotte and Beth, who tried to discourage them, but it was much worse. They couldn't find the feebleness a patient should have anywhere.

"It seems there is no need for worry." Saintess Tania curtly made a positive comment. It was a nice thought at first, but they started to tire very quickly as they continued to force their way in with the women going berserk and pushing against the door with Amazonian strength.

Saintess Tania revised her comment. “Ladies as sound as they could pommel a wild boar, let alone trounce a plague."

Each and every one of the strong, healthy patients panicked as soon as they saw Killian. He acted as if nothing was going on and quietly continued to confirm each patient's condition with his own eyes. The main instigator for the patients' discomfort couldn't step up and lend a hand in pushing the doors open. It was Rieta and Saint Tania's job to wrestle with the doors.

Saintess Tania decided they needed to remove him. "As you can see, everyone is as healthy as a horse, so you need not worry any longer. Please leave the rest of the patients to Rieta and me."

Killian must not have understood because he shook his head and pointed to the next room. "We'll see the rest first."

Saintess Tania huffed a sigh and repeated herself. "Leave it to Rieta and myself, please."

"Aren't I?"

"If you accompany us, you disturb the patients' rest.”

Killian stood there with his arms crossed, staring at the empty hole where a patient had pulled out the doorknob in her protests. “I think it'll be all right."

Saintess Tania cut him off. "It's much too all right, so we're the ones suffering. It's helpful for us if you aren't trying to see them yourself."

Killian nodded as if he finally understood. "I'll add to your compensation."

The saintess flipped like a sunny-side-up egg. “I'll serve you with the utmost sincerity."

It was an instinctual response, one that questioned where the person who refused to be paid went.

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Killian backed off after confirming seven patients in the end. All the patients were in fair condition, and no matter the process, they felt a sense of safety after His Lordship and the saint visited.

He turned to Saintess Tania in the hallway and asked, "Will we be able to release them from isolation by next week's time?"

Killian was now quite well-versed in information about dealing with the plague, thanks to the documents describing the current situations and the contact tracing the experts and scholars had performed. It had been determined it would be safe to lift quarantines in about a week to ten days after all patients were healthy again if there were no further outbreaks.

But Saintess Tania tilted her head to the side and looked wary. She answered vaguely, "I cannot say."

She also knew that would be the appropriate timing in her head. The patients were indeed all in good condition and close to being fully healthy, but something troubled her mind.

Saintess Tania became contemplative and looked at Rieta. “Rieta. You were the one who cast the blessings upon this place?"

Rieta quickly straightened and replied, “Oh, yes.”

"I have been told of the presence of a plague demon in the early days of this outbreak. Was this demon of a higher class, in the image of a man?"

Rieta shook her head. "No."

"Was it a mid-level demon capable of hiding itself?"

"No. It was of lowly class and had little but a ghostly form. But once it fed on death, the demon advanced to medial stature before my very sight. It took on a beastly form, with a ghastly eye fixed on the end of its tail. The demon scholar Helios calls such a creature Arpeo Tridum."

They started discussing and using technical terms that sounded like foreign tongues. Saintess Tania mostly asked, and Rieta answered, the lingo flowing easily. Killian scowled, looking uncomfortable with the conversation he had no idea about. It was a topic he couldn't ignore, but it didn't feel too good to just stand out of the loop. Was he going to have to start studying demonology now?

There weren't many chances for him to feel this left out of a topic he wanted to discuss. Just as he thought it was time to be the stupid nobleman he was and ask for a dumbed-down explanation, Saintess Tania looked at Rieta strangely and smiled. "I thought you were smart." The saintess' blue eyes shone. "You have studied *Haviston's Review of Demonic Nature*? You know quite a bit, despite the fact you're not even a purging cleric."

Rieta waved her hands profusely, embarrassed by the compliment. “Oh, no, no. You're much too kind."

Killian was leaning on one leg as he stared at them. Saintess Tania caught this and let him into the conversation. "Your prized mistress has studied a very hard-to-find book quite deeply."

"What might this be?"

"It is the singular text of authority on the study of demons. It's quite the abstruse text that eludes many cleric scholars."

*Who cares?* Killian was confident even in his ignorance, the lord of a territory who had no connections to devils and not someone who had divine energy.

Saintess Tania nodded slightly, understanding. "Of course. As the Archduke of Axias, you could be unaware of it. It's a different story if it were about evil, but since Axias is a place with no connections to demons..."

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# EVERYONE HAS SECRETS (2)

"Well. Your Highness may not be aware. They may have one with monsters, but Axias has no history with demons."

*Haviston's Review of Demonic Nature* was a book of the highest class; it minutely categorized every demon with individual histories and the methods of destroying each specifically documented. It contained illustrations of hundreds of demons, from high-level to low-level demons, so it was a book people with divine power and purging clerics needed to read.

Saintess Tania shrugged and continued. "It's expensive, and it's hard to find. For those who must fight against demons with divine energy, it's the book of their dreams. I mean, with money, there's nothing you can't find." Then the saintess asked Rieta. “Do you own the book?"

A temple might, but ordinary abbeys and convents wouldn't be able to own the book. It was so expensive ordinary people wouldn't be able to purchase it. It was a book that only a few abbeys owned for all their residents could use, so being so well-versed in it was difficult.

It was required reading, but it was so rare there weren't many people who even saw an actual copy of *Haviston's Review of Demonic Nature*. Many clerics copied it over onto paper and handed them around.

Given how easily Rieta had answered Saintess Tania's questions, it was apparent she had studied the book closely for a long time. However, Rieta shook her head in reply to the saintess' question about whether she had her own copy. "I do not own it now. When I was at the convent, someone gifted the book to me when they found out I could see demons. I studied it diligently, but I donated it to the convent when I graduated."

Saintess Tania stared at Rieta. She was clairvoyant too, and she donated the Havistan? It's a book people say those with divine power must study for as long as they're alive. Was it because she gave up on becoming a cleric?

Identifying the demon as a Helios type with one glance without even checking the book was extraordinary, even by the incredible purging cleric Saintess Tania's standards. More than the difficulty of finding a copy, the act of studying it was notorious among clerics for being even more challenging.

The next question was only natural. "Why didn't you become a cleric?"

Killian's brow twitched ever so slightly, and he cut in. "Why do you ask?"

"Because her talents are being wasted. I almost want to take her in and train her myself."

Rieta was dumbstruck, her cheeks glowing at what the saintess said, like a child who had heard sweet praise for the first time in her life.

*Why did everyone she met ask why she didn't become a cleric?* Killian completely forgot he had asked the exact question and looked at Rieta somewhat uncomfortably.

Tania saw this and chuckled. “Oh, dear. My mistake. If she had become a cleric, she wouldn't have been able to become Your Highness's prized mistress. I'll extinguish my interest, so please stop looking at me menacingly."

Killian replied coolly. "Just continue what you were saying. Why were you asking about the high-level demon?"

"Hm. Shall we speak outside?"

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"Why? Did something go wrong?" Killian tore the cloth from his mouth as soon as they left the East Annex and asked without hiding his irritation.

"No, the patients are fine, so do not worry."

Killian frowned at Saintess Tania's plain answer. "You're giving me cause for concern."

Saintess Tania's statement felt a little like a cleric's or a doctor's words before a foreboding announcement. He was on edge.

"As you have seen, there are no patients with life-threatening symptoms. Currently, the blessing is being worn down quickly because the plague has spread, but that's a natural reaction and something we cannot do anything about."

The saintess also undid the cloth from her mouth and replied, "It'll be enough to replenish the blessing once every two days like it is being done now. There are no plague demons, and everyone is fighting against this plague nicely."

Saintess Tania turned and looked up at the East Annex. "There isn't anything certain I can say is bad." The saintess squinted. “But I have this feeling..."

*Whoosh.* With the sounds of the wind, the overgrown trees along the walls of the East Annex shook.

"There's something that's bugging me."

Maybe because this place was disinfected intensively due to the plague, the cicadas crying all over the area did not cry here.

Killian frowned at the saintess' vague answer. If someone of her caliber said she was being bugged by something, it was only natural the people around her would be even more anxious. Saintess Tania was known as someone who received divine revelations. It wasn't something to gloss over when someone with such acute senses had a bad feeling.

Saintess Tania kept her eyes on the East Annex as she said, “Rieta.”

She was not talking to the Archduke of Axias.

"Yes?"

"You are aware even though I blessed you, a human blessing isn't perfect, so demons can attach themselves to you?"

Rieta nodded, a little confused. "Yes, of course, Saintess Tania."

The saintess turned toward Rieta. "That reply must apply to you as well. You're aware, I'm sure."

Rieta faltered as she met her eyes.

"I know you are concerned because you were in charge of blessings for the East Annex. It would not be your fault, even if a demon got through that blessing. I think you'll be able to understand since you're smart."

Rieta unconsciously started to fidget with the tips of her fingers and closed her mouth. Saintess Tania continued, expressionless. "I'm not saying this only to comfort you. I have something to ask. If you made a mistake, don't hide it. But if you didn't, don't be virtuous to act humble or be guilty."

Rieta tucked her chin in and nodded. "Yes, Saintess Tania. Please ask."

Saintess Tania continued. "Was your blessing not whole, or not replenished for two months when the demon invaded? Was there a gap in the blessing?"

Rieta paused for a moment but replied firmly. “No. There was no problem with the blessing."

Saintess Tania nodded calmly. That's what she thought. Tania hadn't known Rieta for long, but after working with Rieta for even just a little while, she knew. Rieta was hardworking and meticulous. She wasn't someone who would leave a gap in the blessing.

Saintess Tania continued, explaining for Killian. “Like most castles, Axias Manor was built so the castle itself exudes a great blessing. And if a mage cast a focused blessing on top of that, the strength of it requires no explanation." Saintess Tania looked back at the East Annex. "But how did a low-level demon infiltrate?"

It wasn't a mid-level demon nor a high-level demon that infiltrated the East Annex. Normally, low-level demons couldn't come into an area with layers of blessings on their own.

But things humans couldn't understand often happen in the demons' world. Even if *Haviston's Review of Demonic Nature* was extensive, it was just a single tome and couldn't contain everything about demons. What humans understood was only a tiny fraction of the demons' domain. Demonology was still mostly uncharted terrain.

"Rieta." Saintess Tania looked into Rieta's sky-blue eyes. "Is there a chance a curse could have neutralized it?"

Of course, it was a possibility. Curses were the most common reason blessings became tainted. But Rieta realized why Saintess Tania was asking such an obvious question in that careful manner and stopped breathing before she realized she had stopped, and the tips of her fingers flinched. It was impossible for people inside the castle, being protected by the blessing, to be cursed from the outside.

The saintess said, "You have clairvoyance and were the very first to have seen the situation in this place, which I could not see. So I want to hear your honest judgment."

The demon was expelled, what was tainted was purified, and the blessing was replenished. And there was a fact that was looked over because there were no more new patients. The blessing was tainted.

The saintess' question fell like a guillotine. "Were there traces of an attack from outside?" Saintess Tania was asking the question in reverse. The chances of a curse from the inside.

As the saintess said, this place was inside Axias Manor. And yet, the multiple layers of blessing had been tainted so quickly in less than a month. Axias Manor couldn't have been attacked from the outside because a mage had even blessed it. So, it was highly possible the curse was from the inside.

The state of corruption that Rieta saw was somewhat fitting with that possibility. Rieta momentarily fell into a confused panic and couldn't say a word. She looked at Killian without meaning to. The chilly crimson eyes. And the voice that made her shudder.

*"Kill him."*

She was scared, and yet she trusted him. Her mouth knew what to say.

"No." Rieta felt the weight of her words as she did some time ago. She thought carefully. After cementing her resolve. She spoke honestly, understanding her responsibility, and basing her words on what she saw.

"I cannot overlook the possibility of a curse from the inside."

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Killian turned to her as he listened to her. Rieta also looked at him nearly at the same time. Before he could say anything, Rieta quickly bowed her head with her face drawn to apologize. "I apologize, my lord. I was complacent."

Killian's eyebrow twitched. Rieta closed her eyes tightly.

"I should have sensed it in the first place and informed you, but I couldn't. It was my negligence, Sire."

His Lordship had asked for her to join his order because he needed the strength of one who had divine energy. It was her responsibility not to let anything slip and to do her protection duties perfectly. It was a job only she could do. She had no idea there was any need to be wary of corruption or that it could be an essential issue.

"As I said before, Rieta, it's not your fault." Saintess Tania interrupted Rieta and asked, "From what you saw, the blessing was already tainted, correct?"

"Yes."

“Then it wouldn't have been a state where you could have felt something else."

Rieta bit hard on the inside of her lip and bowed her head. No matter. Even so, she should have felt it. She should have told him. Even if it brought suspicions upon someone inside of the castle. Even agreeing to that felt like she was making an excuse for her incompetence, but Rieta finally nodded and squeaked out, “Yes.”

Saint Tania asked Rieta a few more questions about the state of the corruption and glanced at Killian, who remained silent. Killian continued to stay silent, but Rieta looked deeply guilty.

"If the blessing was corrupted, then thinking of the possibility of a curse is extremely ordinary. Not speaking of what was only natural is not her fault." Saint Tania turned toward the East Annex. "There are numerous reasons why a blessing is tainted in the first place, and normally, the cause of the corruption cannot be found."

Killian was about to say, "I'm not trying to blame you," but paused at Saintess Tania's strange undertone. He heard what Saintess Tania said underneath: *She* could find it. *But how?*

Today, when ancient magic was extinct, there was no way to find the source of corruption with divine methods. Killian also knew how difficult it was for his father, Emperor Aestenfelt the First, to find the origin of a curse, so he had also learned a little about curses. Finding the traces of a curse was part of ancient magic, something that was mostly hidden now. The magic from a faraway land that Lana used was also different.

All curses were smart, smart enough to keep their tail away from divine magic. But Killian saw Saintess Tania's expression and instinctively felt she could find it and that she intended to. However, two weeks ago, when Rieta went into the East Annex, she said she couldn't find the source of the problem. *And now, how would she?* Two weeks had gone by, and the traces of the tainted blessing, the demon, and the people had already disappeared. It was purified, and a new blessing had been cast over it.

*Did Saintess Tania think she could still find it and that she had to find it?*

Killian stared at Saintess Tania from under a furrowed brow. "So, what do you propose?"

Saintess Tania looked like she was estimating something, and she muttered, “Is today the twenty-seventh? So the end of the month isn't far."

“So?"

Saintess Tania looked up at Killian and nodded.

"Let us return in a few days' passing, for the vile energies that rouse demons are strongest at month's end. I should expect our senses may sharpen at such an occasion."

48

# EVERYONE HAS SECRETS (3)

Saintess Tania swung up onto her horse, saying she'd return at night, and she left for the camps in the western territory. It was such an assertive action even Killian, who had paid a generous price to hire her, looked on with approval. She was someone who didn't know how to tire and continued moving.

Killian and Rieta stayed at the castle. Killian had to travel at a rapid clip for a while, but he could finally get to work on his piled-up responsibilities thanks to the arrival of the saintess and the clerics.

Rieta saw Saintess Tania off with a wistful look and quietly fidgeted her fingers with her head bowed. She was finished with her given tasks. Now it was time for her to go home.

"I'll also take my leave now, Sire."

She became a part of Axias Manor. But now, he probably wouldn't give her any responsibilities. Because she had shown him how weak she was. Because she caused him to worry. She couldn't help in what she had barely taken on, and now there were skilled clerics and even Saintess Tania. What did a weak mage who can't even heal or purge matter?

Rieta bowed her head toward Killian. Killian gazed at Rieta and clicked his tongue. “You seem like Saintess Tania's prized mistress, not mine." "My lord?"

"Do you know what your face looks like right now?"

Rieta touched her face awkwardly.

"You look like you're quite disappointed Saintess Tania's gone."

Rieta blankly ran her hands down from her cheek to pull down her chin and her neck. Rieta turned her eyes in the direction of where Saintess Tania had gone. Now Saintess Tania's image was growing smaller and smaller, almost no longer visible. Rieta took a step back, following the trail with her eyes, hooves fearlessly galloping across the wet earth.

"You must like her quite a bit."

Rieta laughed weakly. It didn't seem like a comment that required an answer, but Rieta murmured to herself. “Of course. She was my idol."

She thought she was talking about something absolutely unnecessary, but she had even argued with him with a loud voice, so it seemed like there was nothing she couldn't really say. She had unknowingly become slightly comfortable with him. She quietly gazed after Saintess Tania.

Killian stared at Rieta's profile with a strange look on his face. The question from before on why she didn't become a cleric. He knew her answer, how she “didn't pass the test.” Killian was starting to recognize her expressions. So he asked a slightly different question. “Did you wish to become a cleric?"

Rieta answered. “Yes.” She had a serene smile on her face, looking somehow carefree and somehow dejected. Like she was thinking of the faraway past, she added, “I did.”

*Whoosh...*

The wind blew through the green leaves, and a few small birds flew away. Rieta fingered her hair, embarrassed, and smiled. “As would any child of a convent wish for at one time or another. It is all but the folly of the past."

She was trying to put her dream down as something commonplace, but Killian could recognize it was a dream she had had for a little longer than that. Killian kept looking at her silently before turning away.

"I do not grant you this today.”

Rieta looked up at Killian.

"But in days to come, I shall take you myself to shadow the saintess and offer your aid to your heart's content."

"Sire?"

Killian gestured toward a servant standing far away. "You shall dwell in the castle for the meantime. Will the usual chamber suit you?” Rieta's expression was puzzled. Killian continued. “You must not venture off on your own. Only in my company are you allowed to proceed with this aid. Although I suspect we shall frequent the camps in survey nonetheless."

Her eyes widened. "Y-You needn't take such measures on my behalf, my lord. I do not wish to become a nuisance."

Killian snorted. "Surely you do not take me for such an obliging man.”

Killian ordered the servant who had run over to tell the gardener to trim the overgrown branches from the windows of the East Annex to let in sunlight. And to tell the butler Eron to prepare Rieta's room.

The crimson eyes went back to Rieta. "Cedric Caballam." Rieta's face froze as the name she had forgotten suddenly came up. "You know of this man who visited last night, do you not?"

Last night. The man was found by the Archduke and dragged away. Rieta remembered the desperate eyes and the hand outstretched toward Rieta, begging to be saved while being dragged away by Killian.

"I believe you are acquainted with this character."

*Just acquainted?* *Her daughter's death and Casarius's dying wish all came from his mouth.*

"Yes, Sire. I remember him."

Whether by good luck or bad, there was no chance to think about it, because she had been forced to sleep by the dream demon. She was shocked by Killian appearing, covered in blood, as soon as she woke up, and couldn't take a breath to recall the event.

She fell back asleep after that, and she was caught up in His Lordship's jest. Then she met her lifelong idol, Saint Tania. Because of the cascading events, one after another, there was no chance for Rieta to be shocked or scared of seeing Cedric Caballam.

But at times, she remembered he was close and thought about it enough that she would have to pause. *Why was he in Axias? And why was he there? Was he looking for her?* She couldn't breathe.

A large hand dropped onto her shoulder. Rieta jerked her head up and looked up at the man before her. The blank, indifferent face was looking down at her. He took hold of her calmly with just enough strength to not be painful.

"Have you ever seen him in Axias before I found him?"

Rieta shook her head in a daze. “No, Sire. I saw him for the first time yesterday after I left Cevitas."

Killian narrowed his eyes. Dew had settled on Rieta's tired, frozen face. "And anyone else?"

"No one has ever come to find me."

He wanted to brush away the strands of hair on her forehead, but Killian just patted her shoulder. Rieta let out a breath she didn't realize she was holding.

Killian muttered in a cold voice, “The Cevitas family must be curious to see if you have any more value to them."

Rieta's fingers twitched.

Killian continued. “Therefore you shall dwell in the safety of the castle and refrain from straying alone."

*So I could spot any other sly characters if they approach.*

Rieta had been standing there silent for a while, and only after was she able to open her mouth. “To me...from Cevitas? Why..."

*What did they have to say? To come this far.* She had no idea why, but her heart thudded.

"Who knows? It's not my concern." Killian replied coldly, almost deridingly. "Wouldn't it be something about wanting you back if you were doing well with me?"

Rieta's face went pale. More than feeling sorry for the man in front of her, she first considered whether the people in Cevitas were of their right minds. The price for her was the forgiving of debt for twenty million gold pieces.

Were they so shameless they thought to ask for more even after fleecing him so ridiculously? And from the Archduke of Axias at that? This was beyond being shameless; this was sheer folly.

But Killian wasn't finished. "Well, that's the sanest possibility."

He fingered the grip of his sword absent-mindedly. "They may hire wandering bandits to kidnap you and hold you for ransom. They've confirmed that money is of no concern when it comes to you."

Rieta's face went even paler.

It was a mistake to forgive the debt the son inherited from his father, thinking it wasn't the son's fault. Killian wouldn't have done it that way if it were normal circumstances. His judgment swayed for a moment by the thought of the ridiculousness of burying her alive, and he chose to be kind. Tsk. It always came to bite him when he showed kindness monetarily.

Killian tapped his thumb on the pommel of his long sword and quietly lowered his eyes. Looking at the state of Cevitas, it was apparent they would exploit their citizens. If Cevitas were acting this way, it would be no fun, innocent people or not.

Rieta gasped at Killian's imagination. She wanted to deny it and question whether they would go so far, but the fact that she also thought it could be a possibility was even more serious. Rieta actually went to and from the castle often, and people saw her walking with the archduke many times. Even if that were the truth, if someone tried to look for the Widow of Cevitas, it wouldn't be hard for them to hear she was the apple of the archduke's eye.

Even if Axias was closed off to outsiders, outside the castle walls was too big an area, and it was impossible to refuse access to all outsiders. Rumors could easily be spread outside the castle walls, and her job was what it was, so her home could also easily be famous.

The Mage's House was inside the castle walls. It was extremely easy to meet her by asking where she lived. And if someone decided to use that rumor for a bad end...

"I persuaded Caballam to relay the message you had died of the plague." Killian looked somewhere far off and spoke. “If Cevitas believes that wholly and is done with it, that would be the best conclusion. If they don't believe it and take the initiative to do some more digging..." Killian harshly grinned a sardonic grin. He let his words trail off.

Rieta thought back to the scene she had seen. Caballam, his legs undone and on the floor, was dragged by Killian to somewhere like an animal for the slaughter. *How did he persuade Cedric Caballam? Did he punish him too?* No matter how much she thought about it, his words "I persuaded him" didn't sound like they meant just that. Rieta imagined him persuading him by using all sorts of threats and terror and shook her head quickly.

Killian turned toward Rieta. “So it's not good if you stay where you're easily accessible. You'll be protected from inside the castle for the time being."

The sardonic grin had disappeared at some point, and only a gentlemanly, passive expression was left on his face. Rieta quashed her anxiety, half- nodded, and said, “I shall, Sire. Thank you."

Rieta's house was within the castle walls, but she couldn't just stay inside the walls, and even if she did stay inside, it was always possible someone could make up their mind to hide and then attack. But inside Axias Manor, which was guarded by high walls, a moat, a drawbridge with knights patrolling in shifts, and a double iron gate with guard soldiers, anyone suspicious wanted to approach her with bad intentions wouldn't be able to.

*It was shameless. It would be the path to take for His Lordship to be less concerned.*

"I'd like it if you are within arm's length. You'll be able to help the Saintess Tania you like so much. Since she said that you're useful.”

Rieta's face blossomed at what Killian added as if she had forgotten the serious matter they were just discussing. “I'm...useful?”

*Her face was pale just moments ago, appearing to be on the brink of death. How is it her face could bloom ever so brightly at the sound of the saintess considering her to be a help?*

"You can't." Killian cut in brusquely. "You can only help when I'm on surveys because you're needed at the castle too."

Rieta looked up at him confusedly.

"I'll most likely need you more than the saintess does," tossed out Killian, slightly cross. “Blessings will be required all over the castle with the plague raging, not just in my room and the East Annex. I have much to ask of you, so it'll be good if you take a deep breath and get ready."

The shocked, round, sky-blue eyes looked up at him. "Blessing the castle, Sire?"

It was meant to shock her, but her tone was a little strange. Killian stared at the woman's face. This wasn't the faces of Vetere, Colbryn, or Damien when they reacted to something like this. Why was that her expression?

While he was recently traveling with the clerics dying of overwork, Killian also learned how much hard work it was to bless. Blessing Axias Manor wasn't child's play, so it was obvious his order to take charge of blessing the castle was just him expressing his irritation. Killian clamped his mouth shut after seeing Rieta's eyes.

"Wait."

He raised a hand to stop Rieta and rubbed his forehead. He had forgotten this was Rieta he was talking to. She was someone who could come out and say she would work as hard as she could if only he asked her to and mean it with her whole heart. Didn't he get angry about something like that a little while ago?

He saw Rieta's scared expression as she watched him reconsider his words, worried he would take it back, and Killian was dumbstruck. That desperate expression that she would no doubt go one step further than, "it's enough for me if you allow me to pay you back."

*Was she unsure?*

Killian's mouth moved involuntarily, following his instinctive order. “I'll have a few more mages accompany you."

Her long eyelashes reached higher than ever before. Looking up at him, she blinked twice.

"You'll take charge of them and undertake the task of blessing the castle."

The blue, pure eyes looked up at him and grew even bigger in unbelief.

*This isn't it.* He was going to have her rest. He had to have her rest.

"Am I blessing the castle?"

Killian ended up not being able to take it back. He had to try very hard to open his mouth to continue. “Since your blessing is one even the saintess has acknowledged." Killian lifted the necklace. “And you're someone who made this."

Killian took off the necklace and placed it on Rieta's neck again. Rieta didn't avoid it for once and stared at him with an unidentifiable expression.

"You keep it when we're in the castle. Since it is safe inside the castle." Killian belatedly organized his thoughts while he spoke. *Right. Nothing good would come of letting a mage do nothing.* It would be more rational to leave the blessing of the castle to her rather than let her go around the quarantined area rashly.

His mind had to calm itself, but he was somehow so anxious he wanted to chew his own lip off. He'd keep an eye on her to make sure she didn't work too hard anyway, and she would be within his arm's reach, so it didn't matter if he assigned her work.

After he places the necklace on her neck, perhaps she will smile. *What will happen if she smiles suddenly?* He seemed to be anticipating it but also wanted to avoid it too.

While he grasped for logic and rationality, Rieta continued to gaze up at him with those sky-blue orbs.

"Go rest for now. I'll assign mages to you. You can start working with the main building of Axias Manor and the front gates after they're here."

There was no reply.

"Your body most likely isn't in good shape just yet, so get started after you fully heal. I'll give the necklace back even if you don't bless me, so don't worry about that."

"N-No! I can do it! I can, Sire!"

With her hurried but clear answer, the thing he had feared appeared. A smile bloomed on Rieta's face, like a wildflower in a meadow.

Killian's eyes twitched. He felt a sinking feeling as if knowing she might smile was a shocking revelation. *What was it about that smile that made my heart heavy?* He couldn't tear his eyes away from the ordinary, but not so ordinary, happy face.

"Why are you so happy? I'm making you work."

It wasn't anything hilarious, but she laughed again. “Please give me a lot to do, Sire. I like working.” Her tone was higher than usual. “I want to be of use too, Sire."

The added comment was slightly stupid and unfitting. Killian looked at her. Rieta looked sheepish, slightly red-cheeked as if she knew what she said was somewhat odd.

*Of use. Does she think she isn't of use?*

The smile that brushed her skin brought an instant realization. Killian quickly reviewed what had happened so far without letting on. *It is ridiculous. Is she an idiot?*

"Manners can become impertinence if it goes too far."

Rieta cast her eyes up at him. Killian was glaring at her with his eyes almost aflame.

"You're a great help, more than you can imagine. So much that you make me, someone of absolute use, feel like this is a critical situation."

Rieta laughed like she didn't believe him. He choked up deep inside for a second. His lips moved almost reflexively. "I, the saintess, the clerics, the people of the clinics, all think of you as useful.”

*How did I not know until now?* He furrowed his brow intentionally as he met the blue eyes in the pretty face, feeling his gaze becoming soft.

"So stop."

*Summer is a damaging season.*

"There is also a quota for laziness, so keep that in mind while you work."

Rieta laughed, now knowing when to take his words as a jest.

*Whoosh...*

Several strands of moonlight-like hair danced above her smiling face. With the sound of the sunlit wind blowing through the overgrown green life on the branches, feeling strange, Killian peeked at Rieta, who was now beginning to smile quite often.

49

# EVERYONE HAS SECRETS (4)

"Then, would it be all right for me to go home and pack a few things?" Killian answered as he walked alongside her.

"Fine. We'll stop by my study for a moment and go together."

Rieta was perplexed at his answer and asked, “Together, Sire? I can go by myself, Sire. I can't take up your precious time, my lord-"

"What did I say earlier? Didn't I tell you not to go anywhere unaccompanied?" Killian scowled.

Rieta fell silent and felt incredibly guilty.

Killian continued. "Wait here. No, actually, come with me."

As always, he didn't wait for any sort of an answer from her and walked away. Rieta stood there awkwardly for a few moments and hurried after him.

\*\*\*

His officials were notified of his arrival and were waiting for him in line. Killian turned his head to the side slightly and muttered something.

The officials were lined up from the door of the study, down the stairs, and through the lobby, all the way out the entrance.

Eron, who had seen him, bowed his head. "I'll take care of it, Sire."

Killian sighed. "Good. Bring me only the documents and reports that are absolutely necessary."

"Yes, my lord."

He informed Eron of a few of the tasks he had to do face-to-face, and Killian walked past the lined-up servants into his study.

All the officials stood there, not a single one of them fidgeting to raise their hands about what they needed him for, their heads bowed in respect for the archduke. They were all officials dressed like nobles or scholars.

Rieta was overwhelmed by the formality of it all and froze.

They must've been in quite a hurry because they all lifted their heads at Killian walking away and begged with their eyes.

No one dared to grab hold of him or talk to him. Everyone there had waited for him for a long time.

Several of the eyes fell on Rieta, who had fallen a few steps behind him. Rieta hesitated at the sudden feeling he was someone so distant from her.

The eldest son of the emperor. He had been disowned, but he had gotten back up by himself and had the dignified blood of a quasi-imperial, even higher than any noble.

The master of Axias Manor. The ex-prince of the north. He wasn't someone a common woman like her could talk to easily.

Eron was waiting, keeping the door to the study open, but Rieta didn't move.

Then, Killian turned around to Rieta, who wasn't following him in. “What are you doing?"

He jerked his head inside the room. "Come here."

At his voice, the wall Rieta felt between them crumbled instantly.

An automatic response left her mouth. "Yes, Sire." She finally picked up her feet from the floor and followed him into his study.

\*\*\*

Killian closed the door and sighed. He thought he only had to deal with a few urgent things, but even those were far more numerous than he had anticipated.

He loped over to his desk. He started to quickly rifle through the pile of papers on his desk to find the most urgent ones he had sworn he would finish right now.

Outside, he could hear a low murmur. Eron must have started to usher the officials to the drawing room because the noise was getting farther away.

Killian was the type to go directly to the source rather than going through a mediator. He only made someone wait in the receiving room or the audience chamber when needed as a political gesture, or the person in question wasn't trusted. Having a hands-on approach without mediators wasn't an issue when he could take care of work. It was pretty efficient, and it suited his temperament.

But since the plague outbreak, his workload had exploded. This was an unavoidable problem when he had to be directly engaged in this kind of emergency.

Rieta was replenishing the blessing she placed in the study since she was there anyway when Killian suddenly asked, “Rieta. Would you care to draft a report for me?"

Rieta turned around, puzzled. “A report, my lord?"

"I trust you have no prior experience with this task?”

Rieta nodded hesitatingly. "I do not."

"It is no great feat." Killian pushed a bundle from the pile of papers toward her.

"This is a report on the management of the plague. This is a report on the budget for the emergency camps and the expense report. Something akin to this will suffice so just look and consider it as a template.”

Rieta approached the desk and carefully picked up the bundle. The sky- blue eyes skimmed down the page.

"Draft a report on the funeral costs for commoners. I shall like to know the usual sum they would expend for a burial ceremony. If there are any other types of funerals, it'd be good to research that, but I'm sure burials are the most common. Even just that's fine."

Rieta lifted her head up and looked at him.

He thought she would ask something totally different but oddly, she asked the most important and most basic question.

"When shall you be wanting this report?"

"What say you to two weeks? The quicker would prove better."

Rieta nodded. And she gave a brief but sure answer, the way he liked. “I understand, my lord."

Killian pulled the bell cord.

The elderly butler walked in and bowed. "Shall I bring the officials in, Sire?"

"Not yet. Before that."

"Yes, Sire. Is there something else?"

Killian put down the papers he was holding and picked up another paper.

"Appoint someone qualified to scout out places we can build more public cemeteries and have them report back to me. And find another job the crematorium official might accept."

Rieta was carefully examining the papers in her hands when her head jerked up in surprise. She belatedly realized the meaning of the report she was to write.

Killian continued. "Have them research a plan to give tax cuts for those who choose to bury their dead. Prioritize grave keepers and funeral specialists, and lessen the financial burden on the people to hire them or find a way to provide them directly from the Manor. And find other ways to minimize funeral costs for the people. Do carpenters normally build coffins? Bring the workers to me."

"M-my lord!" Rieta called his name, disbelieving the implication.

Killian turned to her blankly.

*"There will be no more cremations in Axias.”*

The words he said last night. She thought it was just the ramblings of a drunk man. The calm eyes glittered then, just as they did now.

Rieta asked, shocked, “Are you truly getting rid of cremations?"

"Why?"

It was impossible to bury all their dead, even more so in a city as large as this one. *If he got rid of cremations, how would the poor have funerals? And even more, victims of the plague?*

Corpses might be thrown away on the streets. They needed at least a crematory!

"Why, Sire?"

She didn't answer and just tossed it back to him. Instead of criticizing her flustered rudeness, Killian answered concisely. "I want Axias' air to be clear."

Rieta was dumbstruck at the completely unexpected answer.

Killian turned back to his papers and calmly said, "I don't want the people of Axias forced to choose cremation. I want a place anyone can visit the loved ones they've laid to rest if they so wish."

Rieta was an inch away from protesting when he added mildly, “Not just the women of the East Annex," and Rieta was at a loss for words.

Killian didn't even look at her and lightly asked, “Do you have any objections?"

The people of the empire were haunted by the smell of burning corpses from the Diritas plague outbreak ten or so years ago, and cremation was the most miserable, dreaded manner of funeral everyone tried to avoid.

Now that people felt such a strong sense of repulsion at the act of burning corpses itself, there weren't any people who chose to cremate when they were able to bury.

Cremations were the last resort for the wretchedly poor, the incarcerated, the undead, and victims of the plague. It was the miserable outcome none of the dead would even imagine for themselves. The poorest, most tragic, and disastrous end-cremations meant only that. If that were going to be the end, then it would be better to have nothing.

If money was a problem, then it was simple. He could just distribute the money. But it was easy to have problems later if monetary goodwill was spread willy-nilly. Carefully.

Rieta replied, “No, Sire. I do not."

Killian whisked his pen over the paper and signed it. He looked at the clock and frowned slightly. He brought her here thinking he would get her out of there quickly if he just invested twenty to thirty minutes. It looked like it was going to take longer than he thought.

"It seems as if visiting your house will have to wait until after supper. Go to your room for a little while if you're done blessing. I have to take care of a few things here."

Killian looked up toward Eron. "Escort Rieta to her room. She'll be staying for at least a month."

Eron bowed his head respectfully and turned. He opened the door to the study for Rieta and waited.

Outside the door, officials were waiting in line for their turn.

Rieta placed the paper on his desk with both hands and walked away. Killian stayed seated and raised his eyebrows at her.

"Will you not take this with you?"

"Pardon?" Rieta looked at him quizzically.

Killian glanced at the paper pointedly and looked back up at her.

Rieta asked with a look of disbelief on her face, "Is this allowed?" "I do not see how it can be amiss"

"It seemed a report needing your review."

"I have reviewed it many times over."

"I see."

She blinked. She looked at the paper momentarily and looked at Killian again.

"I will be fine without it, so I have reviewed it as well."

There were official documents in there too, so it would be better to leave them here than take them with her and feel burdened.

Killian cocked his head to the side and had a vague look on his face. “Are you certain you can manage?"

"I am lacking in such skills, but I shall give it my best effort."

Killian silently stared at Rieta, then replied. "Very well."

*Was the book called "Havistan Demonology"?* He wasn't sure what it was, but she was said to be someone who studied theology and demonology, one of the most challenging subjects to study.

Who knows? Reading and writing were completely different beasts.

She was a commoner, but she could read, because she grew up in a convent, and she didn't seem like a total idiot, so he had thought it would be all right to see if she could do the work.

Saintess Tania's comment about how she wanted to train her also piqued his interest. He wasn't giving her work just because she had said she wanted to be a useful person. He just wanted to test her and see how much she could do with a task that wasn't that hard.

Killian ordered Eron, "Escort Rieta and come back. Also, send in the officials."

If the report was worth hearing, and if he considered the person to be someone of some merit, Killian preferred meeting them in his study and talking to them one-on-one.

This was because he hoped his intentions would be carried out precisely without any warping or twisting, no matter what it was.

Officials who met with Killian in person and closely listened to what he had to say always came back with results in the way he wanted.

Unless the official was lacking in ability.

Maybe it was because the immigrants who had made up Axias' environment had roots that leaned toward the physical, not the mental, there were no instances when his officials or scholars brought him results that did satisfy him if he was being honest, but there was some significance to how he could listen to the details of the actual scene in detail and how he could control them.

Anyway, they slowly started to align with his working style if he continued to correct them and teach them, so he was satisfied with correcting them somewhat minutely.

At first, he was so hot-tempered he hurled unacceptable reports across the room, but now, he had acknowledged the level of work he was asking for was severely high, so he cultivated his patience quite a bit.

He also felt a little space to breathe now that Axias had settled into place.

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Eron came back alone after escorting Rieta to her room. Killian was speaking to several officials, but he sent them away and called Eron in again.

"We'll be picking up planning for the construction of a temple. Would you find me the papers related to it in the archive near the library?”

"Yes, Sire." Eron retreated.

It had been planned for long ago but was just put on hold because of realistic difficulties.

Not only did they deeply realize the need for it from this current plague situation, but high-ranking clerics from Alpheter were also here, and he had even hired Saintess Tania, so he thought it would be worth it if he asked them a few questions while they were here anyway.

The timing was perfect.

He also liked the clerics-to-be Colbryn and Damien. They were talented men whose skills for healing and purging manifested before they became adults, knew Axias well, and had an untainted sense of chivalry.

They were too good to send off to other territories.

They would need to gather clerics if they did end up building a temple. And it would be better to have them work in Axias immediately, even if it would take a pretty penny rather than having them come back after working elsewhere.

It would be better to have a few native clerics as the temple's core, rather than having only clerics new to Axias.

There would be an advantage to sending them out to other temples to gain experience, but that could be settled by requesting Alpheter clerics to come or buying them.

Killian gazed at the papers Rieta had left behind.

This was also not because Rieta said she had wanted to become a cleric.

She might be useful in the process if what she brings back to him is workable or not.

*What would her work be like? It would be good if it were enough to teach her and use it.*

Looking at the papers snapped him back to his senses. He was satisfied with finding composure again and placed the papers where they needed to be.

There was a justifiable reason for him to become generous toward Rieta in many ways, and he didn't think he would ask too much from a commoner who only knew how to read from the beginning.

Either way, he wouldn't hurl her report at her.

"Next in line, come in."

He turned, and while he was meeting with the next official, the papers fluttered silently down onto a book. It would be a while until he needed to take some time to look for the papers that he had placed on a shelf above where they needed to be.

50

# EVERYONE HAS SECRETS (5)

Two weeks ago

"What's this?"

"A laxative. Put this in his waterskin."

"Giselle." Leonard frowned.

"The order I received was 'assassinate him,' not ‘shake him off."" Giselle replied briskly.

"Did I say anything? I'm just telling you to give this to him. I didn't ask you when you were planning on killing him, nor ask you to wait, nor ask you to hold off on those plans." Leonard, with a horrible frown on his face, pressed hard on the bridge of his nose.

"Look. This is the reason why His Royal Highness trusts me more, even though your skill with a blade is objectively better than mine."

Giselle looked confused and tilted her head to the side.

"An order to a knight means carrying out exactly as his lord wants. Not arbitrarily manipulating the situation and thinking, this will bring a result close enough to what he wants."

Giselle shot back to the serious Leonard, “Did I ask you not to kill him? It's just that you never know how it will turn out. I'm just saying we should try at least one other way that could expand our choices. That's it."

Leonard's face darkened as if he was getting fed up. "I'm saying, trying something like that in itself is overstepping."

"Vice-captain." Giselle lolled her head back as she changed the way she called him. "I think you've forgotten I'm also your superior."

Leonard clamped his mouth shut.

Giselle continued. "This isn't the first time, right? His Lordship absolutely could have foreseen this. Of course, he could have prevented this kind of situation by making you the captain of the knight order and me the vice- captain."

"However, the fact that I'm captain means His Highness considers my judgment to be of higher quality than your absolute obedience. Therefore, you are to follow my orders, based on the authority of His Royal Highness making me your superior."

Giselle patted Leonard on the shoulder and finished. “As long as my orders and His Lordship's don't contradict."

Giselle clapped and grinned. “And as you know, I'm not someone who gives that sort of order."

Leonard's eyes followed her begrudgingly.

"Now. Answer me. Does my order to feed this to that man contradict His Lordship's orders?"

The beauty mark under her eye was annoyingly highlighted on her smiling face. Leonard stared at Giselle and eventually sighed, snatching the bottle from her hand.

He muttered, "Fine,” and the sarcastic Leonard turned.

Leonard drew the line with his last bit of resistance. "This doesn't mean I'm going to put killing him on hold."

"Of course. You follow His Royal Highness's orders.” Giselle smiled brightly and waved at him.

"And it looks like you don't know. His Lordship may trust you more, but the one he likes more is me."

Leonard looked on the brink of tears and turned his head, but that was after Giselle had already left.

\*\*\*

Giselle thought about Leonard, who was acting strangely awkward, and twirled the parasol in her hand. Well, she was a bit much then. When she knew how sensitive Leonard was toward His Lordship's orders and trust...

"Giselle."

She would be good to him when he came back.

How many hits should she allow when they sparred? "Giselle!"

"Huh?" Giselle was lost in her thoughts as she looked up.

Rachel gave her the news, sighing. “Leonard's back."

\*\*\*

The second group, including Leonard, left behind at Havitus Temple, came back to Axias Manor.

"Vice-captain!" Three dirty knights-in-training ran toward Leonard and hugged him, looking like they were about to cry.

"Uwaa. We heard you were injured severely. Are you all right, Sire?"

Leonard looked down in bewilderment at the three young knights-to-be at their unexpected welcome. They were covered in dirt and sweat and scrapes, the poor, tattered baby knights. Leonard looked up at the culprit behind their shocking appearance.

Giselle was standing there quietly next to Hasler with a parasol above her, feigning innocence.

He could see why they missed him.

Leonard chuckled at the knights-in-training, who had been so lovingly tossed around, and ruffled their hair.

It had been quite some time since he was tossed around with her, but terrible memories of that pretty lady's cutthroat hand from just a few days ago were burned into his head.

\*\*\*

"Show me your wound."

A little paler than usual, Leonard looked down at the captain of the order in a dress, bitterly standing at his door. Leonard was half-undressed with a bandage around his right shoulder and had on a black dressing gown.

"It's fine. Hasler dealt with it, so just give me the medicine and leave."

She pushed past him into his room and said, "Take it off and sit."

He had no idea what she thought when she changed her dress, but there was blood on Giselle's hair as she carried in a basket filled with bandages, herbs, holy water, and medicine.

Leonard said again, past her shoulder, “I said it's fine.”

Giselle halted and turned back to him blankly. "What?"

Leonard whipped past and walked to his bed. He adjusted the gown that had fallen from one shoulder with his left hand.

Leonard ignored Giselle, looking tired. “Leave.”

Giselle couldn't believe her ears. "I said that you have to be treated."

"I told you Hasler did it for me. It's a bother to open it again. I'm tired."

Giselle was stunned for a moment but refuted him angrily. “What in the world are you saying, no matter if Hasler worked on it, all he could do is stanch the blood and wrap a bandage, he can't do="

"Can you do something amazing? It's a wound that will heal soon after a healing cleric looks at it," Leonard said, cutting Giselle off.

"It's because I think it's something that won't heal soon! Do you know how many patients are fighting for their lives? Only a few healing clerics were able to survive! If you wait for your turn, you'll die of old age!" Giselle had ended up shouting.

"As you said, it's an injury that isn't threatening my life. So, there's no need to bother with opening it up again.” Leonard scowled and pushed away Giselle's hand. Leonard was stubbornly refusing to show her.

Giselle had no choice but to lay down an order coldly. "Give it here. That's an order."

Leonard replied curtly, “No.”

Giselle looked at the man who might have refused other things but had never refused an order in shock. “Have you taken leave of your senses?"

Leonard turned his head toward Giselle crookedly. "I'm going to try becoming someone His Royal Highness could also like."

"Ha?" Giselle smirked at the absurdity.

"Leonard. You seem to be misunderstanding something.” She dropped the basket on the table and strode over to Leonard.

"I'm acting with flexibility, not rebelling.”

Leonard flicked his eyes up at her.

Giselle was a breath away from him.

"And the reason His Lordship likes me better than you..." Giselle grabbed Leonard's arm in an instant, overpowering him, and mounted his body. "Is because I'm stronger than you."

Leonard gritted his teeth to not let out a single sound from the pain of his arm being kept in a hold and his body under Giselle. She wouldn't be nice just because he was injured.

He tried to fight back, but he was injured, and his opponent was the strongest dual-blade fighter in the knight order of Axias and someone he had never beaten even when he was uninjured. The poorly behaving patient, fighting back with all his might, was eventually worn out and fainted.

When he woke up alone in his bed, groaning from the pain in his shoulder, his wound had been expertly cleaned up with a familiar hand.

He obviously trusted Giselle's skills in neutralizing poisons and handling wounds.

But it hurt like hell.

*I told her not to open it.*

\*\*\*

Hasler slung an arm around the young knight's shoulders. “This is it for today. Let's go and cool off, you little rascals."

The knights disappeared instantly, and only Giselle and Leonard were left in the temple's drill hall and training field.

Leonard sighed.

"How's your wound?”

Leonard shrugged his injured shoulder at Giselle's question.

"It's all better. It was nothing. And it healed quickly because the healing clerics treated it."

Giselle narrowed her eyes suspiciously. Giselle moved the parasol in her hand almost instantly, and it flew toward Leonard's left shoulder.

Leonard grabbed the parasol that swung for him with his right hand and stopped it lightly.

"I hurt my right shoulder, not the left."

She knew.

She wasn't trying to hit where he had been wounded, but rather, she was trying to see if his right shoulder was moving as it should.

Giselle saw he was moving like before, without much difficulty, and she watched him. “But why did it take so long for you to come back?”

Leonard scratched an eyebrow. "I got better quickly, but Aren, who was in the group, was so badly hurt that he was down for a while. And the speed of a group of just knights like you guys is different from the speed of a group of carriages and attendants like us."

He was talking as if it wasn't anything important, but Giselle saw the six marks from the claws of that chimera with her own eyes.

They were going to be in her throat. A wound with black bruises from the poison.

She had no idea what sort of insanity spurred him on to act like that, but if she hadn't looked fast, it was a wound that could have threatened his life.

Even if clerics had treated it, a wound with demonic poison did not easily heal.

Giselle didn't comment and turned her head away.

"And your report of your return to His Lordship?"

"I stopped by, but there were a lot of officials, so I told Eron I would be back. The line was long. I think it was the longest I've ever seen."

Giselle paused before she asked, “There's a scar, right?"

"Not really." A flat answer resembling someone they both loved came back. *Acting tough, are we?*

She was staying silent, but Giselle spat out, "What were you thinking, jumping in to protect me when you're weaker than me?"

Leonard scowled in irritation. “Can't you just say thank you?"

Rachel and a group of spies hid and watched them, under the guise of training how to travel incognito. They twisted the branches in frustration.

"They won't work out. They're impossible. There's a reason why something that hasn't worked for these past ten years hasn't worked out!”

"Give it here. Ten gold pieces each."

Rachel, who was ready to celebrate the birth of a new couple by paying for a meal, muttered under her breath with a chilly look on her face.

The knights who had been robbed by Rachel whined, "This isn't right. Rachel, tell His Royal Highness to order them to stop wasting time and just date!"

*How is it they are still like that?*

Rachel started to contemplate the last spy's suggestion seriously.

\*\*\*

Killian heard Leonard and the second group were back from being treated at Havitus Temple. The first thing he did was look at the clock, and then he looked at the pile of papers on his desk.

"How many more people do I have to meet?"

"Those who have deferred to tomorrow morning have been pushed back, and the people you must see today are about thirty more, Sire.”

Killian listened to Eron's reply as he accepted his reality of having to focus on today's work.

There was no way it was possible today.

Killian lifted his pen directly onto another piece of paper and scribbled down the page in the same manner as writing down his orders on the

document, signed it, and gave it to Eron.

"Give this to Rieta."

\*\*\*

*Eat with my knights. Apologies.*

*If it's all right, I'll go to your house tomorrow since I can't seem to go today.*

She had already read it three times and looked at the back, but that was it.

*What is this scrawl on the bottom line?*

She squinted at it but couldn't decipher it. She couldn't recognize the words in the middle clearly, but she could understand the first and last words.

Killian...Axias?

*Was this his full name? Why did he sign this?*

Of course, it wasn't strange to write your name at the bottom of a letter, but this signature of his full name was in fancy script, which could have been on a contract or something.

Rieta examined the paper, looking for some important information she might have missed, and looked up at the elderly steward who gave it to her.

*If it was a message as short as this, couldn't he have had Eron give it to her verbally?*

But she couldn't question her superior's intentions out loud, forgetting her place.

She couldn't just say, “Tell him I understand," when he handwrote a letter, so Rieta asked Eron to wait a moment and went into her room.

Thankfully, there was paper and a pen in the room.

Rieta sat down in a daze and reread the letter. Then, she started to write a response to the invitation to dine with the man a floor above her.

She considered His Lordship's tastes and the line she mustn't cross as a commoner, not too long, not too short, a brief answer of obeying his order, without protest.

Despite hurrying to keep Eron from waiting for her for too long, Rieta reread His Lordship's letter several times and organized her thoughts before she carefully wrote out her response.

And she thought she might have to do so and copied Killian's letter style, writing in her own name carefully in the corner.

And she quickly fanned her hands to dry the ink, folded it, and gave it to Eron respectfully with two hands.

"This is my response."

\*\*\*

"There are some pushed to tomorrow, but the people you had to see today are all concluded. So, please, have supper, Sire. The feast is almost ready."

Killian looked at the papers and sighed. *Why do humans have to eat?*

Eron added as if he could see what Killian was thinking, "It's a celebratory feast, Sire. If you miss it—”

"I know."

He had told his knights to join him in the banquet hall to celebrate the return of Leonard and the other knights and to reward them. Everyone who had had such a hard time in Havitus was all here, so it was the right time to share a meal.

The elderly steward smiled. “Even if you do not attend the banquet, please do not skip your meals. The cook will be depressed, Sire."

The corners of Killian's mouth twitched up at Eron's nagging. “And this is Miss Tristi's response to your letter, Sire."

Killian signed the paper he was reading and opened Rieta's letter calmly.

Maybe he didn't hear Eron's suggestion to start heading toward the banquet hall, but Killian froze for a moment. He brought a hand up to his mouth, brought it down to his knee, switched the hand holding the letter, rested his elbow on his desk, and cocked his eyebrow up with a serious look on his face.

Eron stared confusedly at his master, who was somewhat agitated.

*Wait. What did I write to her?* No matter how much of a mess he was in, there was no way he would have written something like that. *How was it that a letter like this was here in my hands?*

He surely had no memory of writing something that would merit this kind of response.

Killian smoothed down his face with a dry hand and whipped his head toward Eron. "What did I write to Rieta earlier?"

"Sire?"

"You don't know what I wrote?"

There was no way he could know. Loyal Eron wasn't someone who would open his master's handwritten letters, even by accident.

Eron shrugged and said, "If you allow me to do so, I will start to open it just enough and remember what you write."

Killian answered with a serious look and stared at Rieta's answer. *No. No. There was no way she meant this.*

Making the same mistake wasn't allowed. He was frozen for a while with his eyes on Rieta's note. *Did she not have to go home? What did she mean by saying she would wait?*

“Is there a problem with Miss Tristi's house? Shall I send someone?"

Killian flinched at Eron's question and looked up.

*Oh.* Killian grabbed his forehead, and a sigh slipped from his lips. Then, he burst out into a laugh. Not going to get her things... She didn't mean she wasn't going to go home. Because they couldn't go today...

Killian finally relaxed and chuckled. He rested his chin on his hand and reread her letter. And he shook his head.

Was it something to spend so much time on, figuring out this simple message? *Absolutely not.*

Killian sprung up with a light air about him, looking at the butler watching him strangely like he was observing something odd.

"Let's go."

He had to come back to his senses. No one deceived him, but he was almost deceived.

*Why did I even write a whole letter?*

Writing a reply to match what he did was definitely, absolutely Rieta- esque. He was speechless.

*There is no immediate need for me to go home. I shall wait for you, Sire. — Rieta Tristi*

He looked down again, and annoyingly enough, her script was immaculate.

*How was it that looked like this?*

*There's no need for me to go home. I shall wait for you, Sire. —Rieta Tristi*

*How did I see that?*

He wasn't in his right mind from reading all those documents and papers so laboriously.

He grinned and looked down at her letter one more time, folding it carefully and placing it in his desk drawer before he departed his study.

51

# EVERYONE HAS SECRETS (6)

*Knock, knock.* "Yes, I'm coming!"

Rieta stood to open the door and her eyes jolted up. Rieta hadn't expected Killian to come for her himself but thought it would be Eron or a servant and awkwardly took a few steps back.

"Were you waiting?"

"Sire?"

Killian smirked and cocked his head. “You said you'd wait.”

Rieta sheepishly rubbed her neck. She did write it meaning she'd wait for supper.

But his smile felt like he was saying he hurried over because he thought she would be waiting for dinner like a hungry puppy.

The feast she'd attended last time was extremely delicious, but she wasn't waiting desperately for him in rabid hunger, wondering when he was coming or anything.

Killian gazed down at her and chuckled. "What were you doing?" "Nothing much, Sire."

He stepped back as if he was going to hold the door for her and waited. Rieta stepped out.

"You must have been bored."

Rieta looked up at Killian with his comment and blinked her eyes quickly a few times.

*Oh, dear. His Lordship must have been so busy today. I said something wrong just now. How should I reply? Saying I was doing nothing but that I wasn't bored didn't sound right to say. Or, “Were you very busy, my lord?” No, that was... I wasn't trying to make fun of him. It sounded too rude.*

While Rieta puzzled over her options, Killian said, "Well, I made you come here and made you feel bored."

Rieta paused.

He turned and started walking ahead without waiting for her response. "We'll go tomorrow."

But he couldn't hear footsteps following him. Killian stopped in only a few steps and turned to look at her.

Killian watched Rieta stand in place, and a faint, playful smirk appeared on his face. He held out his hand and asked, “Shall I escort you?"

"N-No, Sire!" Rieta flushed and waved her hands. She quickly followed.

Killian lowered his hand calmly, chuckling at her response and not pushing it further. It was as if he knew she would respond this way. "Let's go." He gestured.

"We'll go to your house after lunch tomorrow."

Rieta nodded and answered, “Yes, Sire."

\*\*\*

Rieta followed Killian to the banquet hall.

The boisterous chatter flowed out to the hallway. The knights who had departed later from Havitus were sitting in the banquet hall. The ladies of the East Annex were with them.

Killian gave Rieta a look telling her to go ahead. Rieta walked into the banquet hall while he stood in the hallway speaking with Eron.

A few knights recognized Rieta and nodded or met her eyes in greeting. Rieta quickly returned their greetings. This was her second feast in this place. They were strangers to her at the previous dinner, but now, she recognized almost everyone in the room.

"Rieta!" The East Annex women made room next to them and waved her over.

Rieta sat in the seat Giselle made for her and greeted the ladies in a friendlier manner.

She realized her seat was somehow next to His Lordship's once she sat down.

It was because that was the only empty seat.

*It was because I was late, right?*

Even though they had spent a very long time with him, it looked like the knights and the East Annex ladies didn't want to sit right next to their boss.

"How have you been, Rieta? They said you've been having a hard time.”

Rachel sounded concerned, and Rieta shook her head. “No, absolutely not. I've been doing well. How have you all been?"

"Fine, fine. Patrolling the quarantined area is the men's work, so we're quite free. Mages like you, Rieta, and His Lordship are the ones doing the hard work."

Seira didn't hold back. They didn't draw attention to it per se, but they no longer hid the fact that they were fighters.

Rieta felt strange like she was somehow in their circle. And she had only been with them for a little bit of time. They had walked through a life-and- death situation together, they had shared sorrow, and now Rieta knew their secret. And they were serving the same lord.

He happened to walk in at that moment and sat at the head of the table. Rieta turned her head slightly and looked at him.

Killian first asked Leonard and the other injured knights how they were healing and was now conversing with them on this and that.

*The people who served the same lord... Rieta ruminated on those words quietly.*

*I was also offered a position in his order as a mage, so I would truly be part of it soon.*

But his order to come into the East Annex, was there another reason other than the fact that would be her ruse, acting as His Lordship's prized mistress?

Rieta fidgeted with her fingers. The house she was living in right now was also given to her by His Lordship...

She wasn't going to make a fuss either way.

She glanced up and Lana caught her eye from across the table. Now that she thought about it, she had never seen Lana in the East Annex before they met during the Havitus Temple situations.

Rieta had continuously visited the East Annex, but Lana was someone she had met for the first time through these affairs. She looked like she was on good terms with all the other ladies, but maybe because she was just quiet in the first place, Rieta felt a bit more distance from her than the other women who lived together.

Lana was a part of the East Annex, but she didn't live there.

*Where does she live?*

Delicious smells accompanied large and small plates full of food. The plates wafted up incredible smells, and the ingredients were fresh and good, but it wasn't an extravagant setting like last time.

The table wasn't loud and greasy like one might expect at a celebratory feast but instead had a calm and serene atmosphere. They had given up variety and extravagance for fresh ingredients and smart presentation of food.

"You've all worked hard."

The knights focused on Killian.

He typically wasn't one for celebratory speeches, but Killian raised his glass for the first time in a while. "It feels a little early to celebrate or grieve for that matter, but you all have worked so hard this time."

His knights understood his message and raised their glasses as well. "I hope this will help you at least relieve the fatigue from your journey."

The knights were all silent, each hiding their emotions and expressions.

Giselle was looking at Leonard but quickly looked away when he met her eyes.

Rieta silently thought of the departed girl and carefully looked down at the glass in her hand.

She belatedly understood why the table was rather extravagant when it was a feast for the knights who returned after a long trek, and there was no way the manor was in financial straits.

No one complained about it. The table was plain but not lacking.

"Good work." Killian raised his glass slightly and finished his speech concisely. "And the bonuses will not be disappointing."

The knights grinned and shouted together at the friendly last words. “We love you, Your Royal Highness!"

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The knights all went off to continue their celebration and relax after dinner, while Killian left Rieta with the knightmaidens to return to his study.

He told Leonard to come upstairs to him once they were done. Leonard followed him up before even half an hour had passed.

Leonard gestured his respect as he always did. “You needed me, Sire?”

Killian didn't speak to him other than asking about his injury and about how he was, so Leonard assumed he would have him report on the journey back and various other things, such as how Havitus Temple ended up, and what he thought would happen now. Leonard had already prepped and organized his thoughts for a neat report.

He also prepared the things he heard and saw at Havitus Temple while they stayed there after Killian had left.

As Killian's most trusted confidant, Leonard worked hard to complete all tasks, even if Killian didn't order him to. Killian nodded briefly at Leonard and lifted a hand. Everyone else left the room at his gesture and Leonard approached Killian.

Killian opened the conversation with a completely unexpected topic after a short pause.

"What did you tell me about Rieta's daughter? I think I heard she was sold off to nomadic slave traders. Did you say she died?"

He told him several months ago already. Leonard slightly hesitated and answered.

"No, Sire. I didn't say that. The slave traders took the girl, and I believe there was no news after that."

Killian crossed his arms and fell into thought. *If you looked at it, that was a logical story. There was no need to doubt it.*

Rather, hearing that she had died was less believable than this story. Sharing news was all money too.

There was no need for wandering slave traders to send that kind of news back to a town they had already left. “And there's no way to know where she went?"

"No, Sire. Cevitas also tried to look for her after the fact, but it seems that they've failed. They say they don't know where she went."

Killian's eyes narrowed. “And your source?"

"The townspeople and the guard soldiers of the Count of Cevitas' home."

*The townspeople, the guard soldiers?* Killian frowned, in doubt of what he heard.

Rieta most likely wouldn't have stayed quiet once she learned her daughter had died. Did that mean the townspeople didn't know Rieta's daughter came back as a corpse?

*No. That was actually more possible.*

If the situation was urgent while Rieta was being confined after they showed her the corpse, it was possible her neighbors didn't know.

*But the guard soldiers?*

They must have stopped Rieta several times when she came to plead for her daughter back.

*Casarius's man gave her the corpse, but the manor's people didn't know her daughter was dead? But even more, they didn't know they were going to consider her dead?*

"Rieta says her daughter is dead."

Leonard trusted what Killian said, and he frowned, looking solemn.

"Is that so, Sire? No wonder she wasn't looking.”

But what Killian said next made his expression change to one of bewilderment.

"Look into it a little in secret. She might be alive."

"Sir?"

"Don't tell anyone. Rieta thinks her daughter is dead. There isn't a big chance she will be alive.” Killian briefly informed Leonard of what had happened while he was away.

Leonard looked shocked and let out a huff, and his expression started to soften. His eyes were full of a complicated regret. Leonard quickly understood why he had to do his work in secret.

"I hope to be able to give you good news."

Killian nodded sharply.

“Very good. Minimize who knows about this. If you find anything, report it to me immediately. It's fine to share this with Giselle."

"Yes, Sire."

"And one more thing. At the abbey in Cevitas..."

Killian drifted off. And he rubbed his face with his hand, leaning back in his chair.

"No. I'll leave that to Giselle."

"Sire?"

Killian glanced at the clock.

"Tell Giselle to stop by my study before she turns in. You may go.”

"Are you thinking to use the knightmaidens of the East Annex?"

Their main job was to stay by Killian's side as harmless "ladies" and make him look like an arrogant playboy.

They had to turn into people who could protect him whenever the need arose, so they didn't have any other work most of the time, and the fact that they trained to be fighters was successfully kept confidential.

Killian replied as if he didn't think much about it. "The plague ran through the Annex, so we'll just say they went somewhere to convalesce."

Leonard said, "Yes, Sire," and nodded. He paused.

"What is the job you'll be leaving to Giselle, Sire?"

"It's fine. It's not something you need to know."

Leonard tightened his lips. And he added a comment a little after, which was very unlike him.

"If it's about my body, then I'm all right, Sire."

Killian didn't look up at him and cut him off. “I do not doubt your health. The task is not suitable for you."

Leonard looked a little shocked. A strange, ugly emotion whizzed through his head for a moment.

"Is it something I cannot have a part in?" He was abnormally fixated on it.

Killian looked up at Leonard. His loyal man was looking confused. "What are you doing?"

Leonard straightened like an arrow.

"It's nothing, Sire. My apologies." Leonard bowed and took his leave.

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"Your Royal Highness. You asked to see me?”

"Yes." Killian put down the sheaf of papers in his hand and looked at Giselle.

"Did Leonard tell you of the task he's been given? What have you heard?"

"Task?" Giselle repeated.

*Has he not reported to her yet?*

Killian didn't take long to tell her about what happened with Cedric Caballam in the quarantined area. He knew she was close to Rieta, and it was a point to consider, but Giselle was someone who could act appropriately.

During the short time that he told her the story, Giselle's expression changed multiple times. There wasn't much need to explain a lot.

Giselle had seen with him what happened to Rieta when she lost her mind.

Giselle's eyes blazed when she learned what they had done, but she quickly doused the anger and nodded. “I understand, Sire. I will keep this from Rieta."

Killian looked away for a moment to look at where Rieta was and nodded.

"Good."

*We have to keep this from her, right?*

Killian stared at the empty corner of his desk and recalled her laugh, her tears, and her empty eyes.

52

# EVERYONE HAS SECRETS (7)

"Did you task Leonard with looking into that happening?"

"That's right."

It wasn't going to be easy. Cevitas wasn't exactly somewhere you could call close to Axias. And tracing wandering slave traders who didn't have a set course...

Leonard was great at delegating work and was quite skilled in gathering information, considering his role as a knight. But he was a close someone who could not leave Killian's side for long. There was a limit to how carefully he could control things and lay down quick decisions from far away.

"Shall I have Rachel help him?"

Killian rested his eyes on Giselle for a moment and thought about it one last time but came to the same conclusion. There was no one else who could help, other than Giselle or Rachel.

"I'm going to be giving you another task to take care of before that. It's up to you to decide which is more urgent."

Giselle replied immediately. “I await your orders, Sire."

Killian paused, and with a low voice, said, “Look into whether there were cases of child abuse in Cevitas Abbey. Including sexual abuse."

Just then, Giselle whirled around at the sound of a familiar rustle.

Killian scowled and let out a sigh. “Leonard. Come out."

Leonard stepped out from behind the door and bowed deeply with his face stony. “I didn't intend to listen in, Sire. I apologize."

Killian stared at Leonard, and one eye crinkled as he chuckled.

"You've become bold after spending time with Giselle. But there seems to be a need for you to spend time with Rachel as well. You're far from being able to hide your traces." Killian didn't blame him.

Leonard didn't say anything for himself and simply bowed his head. “My apologies, Sire."

Killian had already allowed Leonard, Giselle, Rachel, and several other knights he held a little more dearly to be able to come into his space without prior permission. But this was no different from using his liege's trust to exceed his authority, and Leonard felt ashamed.

Truly, he didn't mean to eavesdrop. He realized he missed something in his report about the temple and had come back. But he found out Giselle was receiving her orders and that he had come back too quickly.

He thought it would look like he had followed her on purpose, so he was going to dampen his footsteps and walk away. But he ended up hearing the order before he could. He gave up on hiding his presence and revealed himself as soon as he realized it wasn't something he should hear.

It wasn't a mistake he was found out, but he didn't try to explain himself. He couldn't confidently say he wasn't conscious of Giselle. Whatever type of consciousness that was.

"It's fine, so come here."

With his tail between his legs, Leonard trudged forward and stood next to Giselle. Giselle watched Leonard out of the corner of her eye and looked forward again.

Killian, leaning back in his chair, flicked only his eyes back and forth between the two of them. Was that a strange response from before because of this? It seemed like he was very conscious about what orders he was giving Giselle.

People really wasted their energy in useless places. Killian just finished his orders with both in front of him.

"Giselle, you find out if there have been cases of child abuse in Cevitas

Abbey. Take a close look at the abbot. If you confirm there have been instances of such acts, you're free to do whatever you wish to fix that habit, break something, or cut something, however you see fit."

"Yes, Sire," Giselle answered neatly.

Killian continued.

"But do not kill him or notify the Lord of Cevitas. Whether it be by official or unofficial routes, whether it be by force or not, bring him to me so I can see his face."

It wasn't hard to decipher who he was laying down these orders for.

There was only one woman they knew who had a connection to Cevitas Abbey. The mage who didn't say much about herself.

"If there are children in the abbey, find other places for them. It's a bit far, but it's fine to bring them to Axias if there are no suitable places."

"I shall, Sire."

Killian was done, so he turned to Leonard. “I'm not giving this task to Giselle because I don't trust you."

Leonard bowed his head. “Yes, Sire. I know that."

Killian continued. “It's just a matter of the nature of this issue. You both have different styles. Giselle is flexible, and you're upright. I'm giving you both different tasks because of that."

Killian had people to take care of what he wanted to be taken care of, no matter what way, and he thought he was very blessed for that fact.

A corner of Killian's lip drew up, and he smiled. “My beloved knights. You're loyal. And competent. And I would think you both know that you're the people I cherish the most."

Giselle and Leonard simultaneously lifted their arms and saluted him. Giselle smiled brightly, and Leonard reddened slightly and bowed his head. But their faces turned identically stunned with Killian's following sentence.

"So don't fight over my love, and just date nicely."

Giselle's mouth dropped open, and Leonard looked at his liege in shock. They both looked at each other and immediately blurted out, "No, Sire!" They even made that enjoyable to watch. Weren't his people truly lovely? Killian grinned and waved his hand. “You may go."

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Killian walked downstairs after sending away the two knights. He could hear an unexpected, quiet strain of a song coming from somewhere on some floor. Killian looked around and slowed down.

A familiar woman's voice was singing a beautiful, slow melody that sounded warm. It wasn't a remarkable voice, nor was it very skilled, and it was a hummed line with many pauses in it, but the clear voice felt comfortable, and it wasn't hard to listen to.

Killian had stopped walking without even realizing it.

Faint candlelight was streaming out of the slightly open door, trembling at a small breeze. The small shadow of a person wavered at the window from the breeze.

*Should I tell her the door wasn't fully closed? Would it be better for me not to scare her for nothing?*

The brief melody ended while he considered his options and gazed at the shadow. She was sitting there in front of the candle, doing nothing.

*"I shall wait for you, Sire."*

Killian chuckled and walked away. He did wonder if he had something to say, but it was nighttime. It wasn't an appropriate time for him to visit a widow alone in her room. And it was time for him to stop worrying about her.

What he had Giselle and Leonard do, that was it. Just that.

He silently closed the door for her and left.

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Eron had given her a permission slip to enter the library when Rieta asked him if she could use the library.

She woke up at dawn the following day and went to the library when it opened to borrow books. A page knocked on her door and informed her of Killian's order to have breakfast first when she came back.

Rieta thanked the page and walked down to the breakfast room alone to eat.

A delicious-looking, beautiful breakfast was arranged on the table before Rieta's seat in the breakfast room. It almost looked too much. Unlike the previous two meals, the spread wasn't jaw-dropping, but it was perfect for her to eat alone.

She thought it was a bit of a pity to eat by herself. It was a meal too rich for just one person. A quiet meal by herself felt strangely awkward.

*Perhaps it was because the dinner with the knights last night was so energetic? Was he very busy? His Lordship would probably eat in his study while he was working, right?*

Rieta sat up and picked up her fork with intention. She thought she would also work hard to do what he asked of her.

“Thank you for the meal.”

The cook put down the plates before Rieta, smiled and said, “Thank you,” and returned to the kitchen.

*What did she say thank you for?*

She had taken a big bite from a steaming-hot potato and was chewing, so she couldn't respond to it, but she watched the cook walk away and tilted her head in confusion. Rieta was confused for a moment, but she had to focus on her conversation with the food.

*Goodness. It is quite delicious.*

Rieta was almost done when a cat meowed a familiar meow from behind.

The small cat with beautiful white and brown stripes was sitting in the doorway. It blinked its mysterious pumpkin-colored eyes once and waved its tail through the air.

Rieta hesitated for a second and then copied what Killian had done that night. She placed a piece of roasted fish on a saucer and put it under the chair carefully.

The cat didn't move.

She pushed the saucer closer to the cat with her finger, and the cat jumped back as if it was about to run away.

Rieta awkwardly withdrew her hand.

*It went close to His Lordship without any hesitation...*

When the cook walked out with dessert and saw Rieta look disappointed, the cook laughed. “That rascal Cinna is scared of people."

"The cat's name is Cinna?"

A young cook laughed as he cleared away dishes. "Yes. From cinnamon."

The head cook sucked her teeth with a disappointed look on her face. "The young ones in the kitchen insisted that naming cats with names of ingredients would make them live longer. Naming that cat Cinnamon made it timid and a scaredy-cat, afraid of people."

The undercook, who was clearing away dishes, giggled as he poked fun at the head cook. "I think it's a more fitting name than Desert Tornado Jr. the Third."

The head cook snapped, “If we named it Desert Tornado Jr. the Third, then it would have become quite a brave fellow!"

"Why do cats who live for free at the castle have to be brave? And what's wrong with Cinnamon?”

Rieta laughed.

For a cook, it was enough to have incredible cooking skills, and there was no need to be a genius with names.

The cat, Cinna, disappeared.

Rieta was about to pick up the saucer with the fish on it again, but the head cook assured her it was all right.

"Cinna will come back to eat it if you leave it that way. Don't worry. Was the food to your liking?"

"Yes, it was so delicious. I enjoyed it very much. Thank you.”

The cook smiled widely.

"No, thank you for eating it so deliciously."

Rieta wondered if she should and asked.

"Um, does His Lordship eat in his study?”

The head cook laughed slightly bitterly.

"No, he comes down here to eat when he does eat. It looks like he won't be eating today."

Rieta's eyes widened.

"He skips meals often when he's busy. We're only thankful Mr. Eron pleads with him to eat at least a meal a day, whether that be lunch or dinner."

The head cook excused herself for a moment and went back into the kitchen. She came out with a small arrangement of pastries.

"Would you be so kind as to eat these with His Lordship, miss? No matter what we bring him, he very rarely eats there, but he might eat if you ask, miss. You're the woman who's gotten the closest to him in these past few years."

The young cook prodded the head cook in doubt.

"Ma'am, His Lordship doesn't exactly like these-"The head cook cut him off.

"What, so he likes other things? He doesn't have any likes or dislikes and eats whatever we give him fairly, so it doesn't matter."

A look of realization bloomed on the young cook's face.

Rieta ended up taking the assortment.

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*He skips meals often?* She didn't even imagine it. *I enjoyed the meal so much, and he... It was so shameless of me.*

She sat before the desk in a daze and fidgeted with the bundle of pastries when she came back to her room.

*Telling me to eat with him...*

There was no need to be in doubt of the cook's skills or their taste, but..... If he was so busy that he needed to skip meals, wouldn't she just be a bother? And she wasn't close to him in the way the cook meant she was.

*What should I do? Still, he should eat... If he also skipped today...*

*Knock, knock.* Rieta jolted at the knocking close to her ear and turned.

The door was already open, and Killian was leaning against the doorframe. "What are you thinking about that you can't hear me knock several times?"

Rieta put the pastries behind the books without even realizing she did so and stood.

Killian jerked his chin. "Come. It dawns upon me that I do not know the whereabouts of this dwelling."

*Ah. It would have been better if he assigned a knight to me.*

Rieta couldn't muster up the courage to ask for a different knight to guard her because she felt apologetic to him, and she scolded herself.

*Why did I tell him, a man who was so busy he didn't have time to eat, that I would go and get my things, those things that didn't even matter much, and steal away His Lordship's precious time?*

Rieta's face reddened at her embarrassing and pathetic self, and she bowed her head to hide it. She reluctantly followed him out of the room.

53

# EVERYONE HAS SECRETS (8)

Rieta's house, now known as the Mage's House, was quite famous within the walls of Axias Manor thanks to her unique and prized skill.

But Killian, who had given the house to her, had never actually seen it.

It was famous enough that if you asked around, two out of three people could answer where it was, and it was a quasi-landmark. However, His Lordship only knew it was within the walls and had no idea where to go or where it was. He was going with Rieta anyway, so he could leave the navigation to her.

Killian brought out his horse.

The house Rieta was given wasn't that far from Axias Manor, but they took a horse like usual. Rieta left it up to him like always, thinking this was just more comfortable for His Lordship.

But it was different from traveling outside the castle walls.

"Oh! My lord!"

The streets within the walls were full of people in the middle of the day, and plenty of people recognized them, especially the Archduke of Axias.

That was inevitable because there was no way another black horse as large as Killian's Rhea could be within the castle walls. Killian's looks were also a reason to stare.

"Goodness, look there! It's His Lordship."

"Where, where?"

The people walking past split into either side and gaped at the woman sitting in front of His Lordship. They lowered their voices and whispered, but the words drove into their ears.

"Who's that woman?"

"It's her, from Cevitas."

"Oh! The Mage's House?"

"Oh my. Oh goodness."

Rieta's face was beet red. Rieta couldn't help it anymore, and she had to speak.

"Isn't it a problem for us to go like this? It'll cause more rumors. If someone decides I could be used, I'm worried it could cause more bothersome issues for you, my lord," she murmured, so the people around them couldn't hear her.

Killian muttered, "It's fine. Rumors aren't something that can be retrieved once they're let out. If they started looking for you without believing your death, you'd soon be found. I've let him go along with an appropriate amount of terror, so it's better to send a message you shouldn't be messed with."

Killian glanced down at her and continued. “It's probably more dangerous for a rumor of how my affection for you has withered to spread."

Rieta looked like she couldn't understand what he was saying. "How so, Sire?"

"You're known here as a mage, unlike in Cevitas. You're a useful asset, and there was that incident at Havitus Temple."

He looked at Rieta's blank face and added with a slightly bitter look, "Expensive things just happen to look more attractive."

And that was partly my fault. There were those scoundrels who held a grudge about the things they considered as their possessions once, even after they sold them off for a generous price.

He didn't intend to display Rieta in a place where it looked like she could be snapped like a twig. Killian was looking forward to it.

*Let them dare try to crawl in. I would welcome them with open arms, the right way this time.*

Killian hid his inner thoughts and quietly said, "It would be a relief if they took you nicely. Do you think those bastards who sold you once and had a taste of that money will just let you freely go about in their territory?”

*"They may hire wandering bandits to kidnap you and hold you for ransom. They've confirmed that money is of no concern when it comes to you."*

Rieta closed her mouth gloomily, having remembered what he said.

Killian quietly looked down at the woman in his arms. Killian realized that she was in a more dangerous position than he had thought after discovering Cedric Caballam. There was no reason for Cevitas to use force against Rieta.

*If they tried to lure Rieta away by telling her the corpse she saw was not her daughter's, would she have asked for my help? Who knows?*

If something had happened before he realized it, then there was a bigger chance she would have gone without him even knowing.

Rieta would have vanished from Axias, and what she would have gone through after that... It might have become a mystery forever.

*Damn it. I don't even want to imagine it.*

It was good to see what could have happened before it did, thanks to Rieta flitting around the quarantined area. If he missed Cedric Caballam at that moment, it was something that could have really happened.

If there were letters from outside his borders for Rieta, he would have to vet them first. This was a headache too.

News of what happened at Havitus Temple hadn't spread to here just yet, but it was going to have quite the radius.

There were plenty who could desire Rieta for themselves, even if it wasn't Cevitas. There was no way he could let her be and not protect her properly at this rate.

"Here they come. Go."

A mother, crouching on the other side of the street, pushed the child forward, and the child trotted over to them with a flower crown in hand. The child paused next to their path and offered the flower crown to them.

*Oh... Me?*

Rieta met eyes with the child and gestured to herself, her eyes widening like saucers.

Killian lowered his head and whispered in her ear. “Kindly accept it from the child."

Killian slowed the horse. Rieta clutched the saddle and leaned over to the right. Killian's hand wrapped around her waist. Rieta nearly fainted.

He always helped her up and down the horse, but she was shocked because she didn't expect it just now.

Rieta stopped breathing with her face blazing red and lowered her upper body even more to accept the crown.

The boy who gave her the flower crown grinned. "I thank you,” he said with a bow and ran back.

The mother, who was waiting for her child with open arms, hugged the boy close. "Good job."

*What is he saying thank you for?*

"It is because you are a mage with divine abilities.” Killian gave her an answer as if he knew what she didn't even ask.

"He wears the garb of the desert nomads, who believe those with divine abilities are proxies to the gods. They believe the child will now be blessed for having offered blossoms to a proxy of gods, and he thanks you for accepting his gift and blessing him in return."

Killian took the crown from Rieta's hands and placed it on her head.

"As those with divine abilities are rare in these lands, rarer are they in such barren deserts," he said as he adjusted it so the flowers weren't crumpled and the crown would stay on. “Seldom does one come across such delicate blossoms or individuals with divine gifts."

Rieta awkwardly looked up at him and touched the flowers on her head.

Killian smiled and gestured to those people with his head. “Smile for him."

Rieta did as he said, but she couldn't smile naturally. Killian saw Rieta's face all red, even her ears, and burst out into laughter. Rieta's face got impossibly redder.

Just then, three patrolling knights approached and saluted. “Greetings, Your Royal Highness."

Killian maintained his smile and waved his hand airily.

"Shall we have the people disperse?"

Killian looked down at Rieta and asked the same question. “Shall I have the people go away?"

*Why is he asking me?*

He knew asking her to make these kinds of decisions was a struggle for her, and it seemed like he was making fun of her on purpose.

"Th-that's all right, Sire."

Killian nodded briefly, as if he had expected that answer, and told the knights, "No need of that."

They replied, "Yes, Sire," and stepped back. And smiling, they added, "Have a good time, Sire," and saluted him.

Rieta's face was burning. Now that she thought about it, this was one of her jobs as a part of the East Annex.

“Pretend to be a prized mistress of the Archduke of Axias.”

Everyone watching them must think she was a truly prized mistress to be the recipient of all his affection.

She wasn't going to run away from her duty. She did well at Havitus Temple too.

But compared to before when she thought she was pretending to be a completely different person with a totally different relationship, it was now a part of her everyday life.

She was a widow from Cevitas, a mage, and an ordinary citizen living within the castle walls. And she suddenly felt bewildered when the role of the Archduke of Axias' prized mistress blended into her actual everyday life.

Rieta couldn't act with a straight face when familiar faces passed by, so she ducked her head and avoided their gazes. Everyone in the street was her neighbor within the castle walls that she could run into at any time.

This was why there was a grace period. She didn't think she would change her mind, but she must not be ready yet.

They came to a fork in the road, and Killian asked, "Whereto?"

"Oh, it is to the right, just yonder.”

Joining the East Annex meant that lies would permeate her everyday life, she would have to lie to those around her at every moment, and her life would change. She realized moving into the East Annex might be the more logical option from some points.

Killian urged Rhea onto the path Rieta indicated.

Rieta smelled like green fresh from the flowers in the crown on her head.

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"We're nearly there, Sire."

It was farther than he had thought. Actually, it was a reasonable distance if one kept in mind that no one could live within thirty minutes of walking distance to the castle.

It was a distance that a woman could have quite a bit of difficulty walking alone. He thought Eron should have given her a house closer than this one.

"Is it here?"

"Yes, Sire. That house with the white door...” Rieta let her sentence trail off awkwardly as if she was embarrassed.

The first thing that caught his eye was the sign that read *Mage's House* rather than the white door. A small plate with the name "Rieta Tristi" was hung next to the door.

The same handwriting from the note she wrote for him was familiar. Killian frowned. She was basically advertising where she was, begging them to kidnap her.

Killian got her off the horse and sighed quietly. He waved his hand. "All right. Go and get what you need."

*Is it inevitable because she was a mage?* Since, if he thought about it, her house was her place of business.

Rieta paused in front of her house. Killian had already turned his attention away from Rieta, adjusting his gloves and keeping a grip on Rhea's reins. He was looking around at his surroundings.

"And will you wait here, my lord?"

"Where else shall I go?"

Rieta's eyes darted back and forth between her house and Killian.

*Would it be okay for me to ask him to come in?* This house was given by His Lordship. She hadn't been able to show him any hospitality, let alone show him her gratitude properly. And the day was hot.

Rieta awkwardly gestured toward her house. "Perhaps you would like a drink of water."

Killian's mouth twitched, knowing what she was trying to do. *Was she asking me in?*

"Are you in the habit of inviting any bystander into a home in which you dwell alone?" She definitely was a reckless woman.

"But you have bestowed this very dwelling upon me."

"It is your home." Killian drew the line. And sent Rieta away expressionlessly.

"Go on. Pay me no mind."

\*\*\*

Rieta only packed a few pieces of clothing and the memorial plate.

Rieta flipped the sign marking her house as the mage's house and wrote a note saying she would be resting for a while.

She also wrote a short note for Nella, Martin, and Mrs. Fenyll, who she thought would worry, and placed it where they could find it easily. Killian was going to personally task other mages with taking on the regularly visiting clients who required blessings.

Rieta didn't take long and quickly came back out.

Killian was waiting in front of her house with a blank look on his face and grabbed the linen pouch from Rieta's hand.

"Is this all? I fear I have come to offer my strength to no avail." It was surely something he said for others to hear, but she was incredibly grateful.

"I-I can carry the load, my lord." She tried to scrabble for the bag, rising onto her toes and saying she'd carry it, but it was no use. He was too tall for her hand to even graze her pouch.

He put a hand on Rieta's shoulder to turn her around and placed the other hand on her other shoulder. "Move those impertinent hands and pretend to be friendly with me."

Her hand was now awkwardly on her chest as Rieta mumbled, “Truly, the rare temptress..."

*Using His Lordship as a porter...* Rieta started to deny reality, her voice growing softer and softer.

*Isn't this such a tiny thing to do if my role is the rare temptress? They didn't do anything in the first place, and what did I do other than take that cloth bag, which wasn't even heavy?*

Even if it was summer, the size of the bag wasn't big enough to be able to claim it was her luggage for staying a month, so Killian didn't even listen to her as he opened the pouch.

A small memorial plate. The name Adele was written on it.

*Did she come so she could get this?*

Killian pretended not to have seen it. "What of a nightdress?"

Rieta didn't dare stop Killian from looking into her sorry little bag and was standing there embarrassed.

"I-I have one already in my chamber at the castle."

"Oh?" Killian didn't ask before he rifled through the clothes in the bag as he wished.

Rieta's face turned red. “My lord! It is unseemly to search a woman's belongings."

*Tsk.* Killian clicked his tongue at the sight of the clothes.

"This is hardly fit for a servant."

Killian stared at Rieta as if he was reprimanding her with his eyes. Killian scanned his eyes over her from head to toe like he was examining her clothes for the first time.

"I didn't even realize the clothes were so shabby because the wearer was so fine."

"Sire?"

"I recognize that your beauty does eclipse the trifles of any garment."

Killian tilted his head and frowned.

"But do remember that you are dwelling in the castle as my prized mistress. What shall my people think when they see my mistress in such a frock?"

54

# EVERYONE HAS SECRETS (9)

Killian immediately dragged Rieta to the largest dress shop inside the castle walls, Latria. Latria was the most famous dress shop in Axias, with eight designers in house.

He noticed it as he made his rounds because it was a large shop, and he knew it was the shop where Eron ordered clothes from at times. But it was his first time walking in.

The designers and the shop clerks recognized Killian immediately, dropped what they were doing to stare at him. It was the first time the Lord of Axias had stepped foot into the dress shop in all its history.

Latria was a little offended when nobles from other territories came looking for this shop, but their lord had never even poked his head in. But they had hoped, thinking he might sweep in with a pretty lady in his arm, although no one knew when that might happen! It was all just a delusion until today.

They couldn't believe their eyes when their archduke, who they had considered to be someone they might never see in the shop in their lifetime, was really standing there with a young woman.

"Welcome to Latria, the finest dress shop in Axias Castle." The head designer instinctively felt this would be a whopper and quickly regained her senses to invite them in.

"What sort of dress did you have in mind?"

Killian calmly and boldly said, “Bring us everything you have."

Rieta's face turned a color close to blue. "N-no need! Just a dress that may fit and suit me, madam!"

Killian cocked his head in confusion. "Could there be such a dress that wouldn't suit you? Any dress that fails to flatter you would be a failure in the making."

Rieta's lips made an "o."

For Killian, he was simply stating the facts. He objectively thought she was beautiful even though her clothes looked like they were half-made.

The clerks hid their shock at the words that coldhearted archduke said, gasping silently in disbelief, wondering how His Lordship could be so sweet.

"But quite right, it will need to fit her form."

The designers rushed in and quickly started to gather Rieta's measurements while she was in a daze.

Killian naturally turned to the head designer, who looked like the person in charge, and said, “She shall have one to wear now, and another to spare. And fix as many dresses as you'd like to suit her and deliver them to the castle tomorrow."

The designers and the clerks' jaws dropped. *By tomorrow? What is with this order? Does he have no sense of business ethics?*

It didn't matter that this was Axias, heaven for artisans famous for producing lots of high-quality items and that they were only altering ready-made clothes; it was still impossible for clothes intended for nobles to be made that easily.

Killian had never bought clothes himself. He was one of the richest nobles in the empire, but he lived a humble life far from the extravagance of the nobles for the past thirteen years, and Killian's closets were always full of clothes, appropriate for the season and the situation, even if he didn't pay attention to it. His perpetually full closets, which he took for granted, were maintained by Eron.

But the head designer pretended to stay calm and bowed her head elegantly to acquiesce to his order. "Yes, Sire."

Complaining about an order or request should only be done after observing the customer's mood. His order to send along as much as they wanted to sell meant everyone was to stay up all night, but the head designer's hunch was not wrong.

The quick-witted woman lifted her bowed head and smiled brightly as she carefully offered, "But surely, a mistress of yours deserves a creation made only for her?"

"Ah. Is that the custom of such things?"

"Our shop carries only the finest garments, of course. But for the select few with a certain penchant for class, only an original creation unlike any other will prove satisfactory."

Killian cocked his eyebrow, unaware that was a thing since he had never ventured out into high society and had never gifted a woman a dress. "Remove all designs that have ever been sold."

It was the opposite reaction to the one the designer wanted, but the workers moved quickly, understanding the gravity of the situation.

Rieta was in a daze, but she thought it was a relief that the number of possibilities shrunk a little.

The designer second in command ordered a clerk to flip the sign from "Open" to "Closed."

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The designer and Rieta disappeared behind a changing curtain.

Killian sat on the sofa in front and scanned the dresses the other designers brought him. The designers were tense, feeling as if they were being graded on a test.

Axias was a city called heaven for artisans because all types of

craftsmanship, from metals, leather, stone, and wood, to cloth, were fully developed. An environment with rare mines, where finding the trophy of a magic beast was easy.

In Axias, where people who lost their place gathered, various cultures and essences of craftsmanship converged. And a lord with no interest in exploitation. This was a significant issue.

The strangely mysterious notoriety of the north, the land of the exiled imperial prince, piqued the nobility's interest, and craftwork from Axias was secretly a trend in the upper class at some point.

Goods from Axias, where there were many craftsmen, were generally high- quality. And in Axias, where the technique-rich artisans got even more techniques, their goods were objectively excellent.

They started with weapons or ornamental ware made of metals at first, but now all types of craftsmanship and the quality of goods from Axias became famous and now were a trend.

Thanks to the goods' high quality and incredible durability, which had been thought to be a flash in the pan, Axias was now widely accepted as a purveyor of top-class premium goods.

Nobles thought gifts of Axian goods were the best they could receive. When they started to deal in nobles' dowries and furnishings necessary for marriage, that was the decisive move that began to bring in incredible amounts of money to Axias.

Demand called for more demand. Only the minimal, reasonable taxes were levied, but Axias was sitting on a pile of money.

Imitations sprung up everywhere, but nowhere could they imitate Axian craftsmanship completely. It was impossible to imitate the unique ecosystem of master artisans, apprentices, and even amateurs gathering to lead an independent life.

At some point, artisans in Axias started to take pride in where they were located and made goods of only the highest quality. It was the key to Axias' economic shift into the black.

Everything sellable was sold, so even high-end shops in Axias sold ready- made products. It was a culture that existed only in Axias.

That also influenced this dress shop. Still, of course, the symbol of the highest-class nobles was the custom-made clothes. He was the Archduke of Axias, their lord.

Most craftsmen had affection for their indifferent lord who made this heaven for them, and the designers also carried this love, but the people in a high-end dress shop naturally desired to be approved of by high-ranking nobles. His Lordship had walked into their shop for the first time, so it was like they had stepped up for a test.

Voices could be heard from behind the curtain a little while later, and it was whipped aside.

Rieta hastily reached out a hand to the designer, who was pulling the curtain aside.

“But white cloth is easily sullied!"

What kind of woman could say that kind of thing while trying on dresses at Latria? Killian was speechless as he gazed upon the woman.

The designers' focus was on Killian only because they instantly knew Rieta had no say in the matter.

They were confident about their design. There was no way he would disapprove.

The full skirt blooming from the waist and an off-the-shoulder sleeve revealed her smooth, slim shoulders. The bell-line dress was worn with a white shawl to only add to the seraphic nature.

No matter how much they tried to remember all the beautiful women who visited the shop recently, they couldn't remember anyone who looked so incredible in a dress. She was so beautiful that comparing her to how she looked when just wearing that simple dress was impossible.

Killian stared for a while, silent, and indicated the dress in another designer's arms with his chin, not taking his eyes off her. It was a chiffon dress, the color of the early morning sky getting darker as it went down.

“This one would complement her as well.”

The designer who made that dress beamed and confidently walked toward Rieta. Rieta faltered, stepping back, but was trapped behind the curtain again.

The curtain opened again.

It was a mermaid dress, wrapping around the body elegantly. The silver thread was embroidered on the gradually darkening blue skirt, dotting it like stars, and transparent green chiffon was layered on top, making it look like an aurora in the cold desert sky.

The top portion, reminding the viewer of a dawn breaking, was a pale emerald that looked beautiful with Rieta's sky-blue eyes. The designers and clerks all sighed in awe. "Wow." "Whoa."

“People like this are just slamming.” The head designer didn't even think about curbing the youngest designer's inappropriate word choice and just started to explain in awe.

"What a marvelous eye you have, Your Royal Highness. Truly, she looks like a goddess of the dawn. We normally don't recommend this style for those with smaller builds, but her build can be ignored because her proportions are so great, and she fits in it so perfectly. You look so incredible in it!"

Again, Killian just watched her silently and indicated another dress. "Try that one too."

It was a sleeveless halter neck dress in red that was open-sided, revealing a white petticoat. The designer with that dress in her arms clenched her eyes in delight to silently celebrate and walked toward Rieta. Rieta gaped at the next dress as it got closer.

As soon as the curtain closed, the other designers pushed forward, plying their designs on Killian, passionately speaking for their best works.

The curtain opened.

The moonlight blonde and the blue eyes juxtaposed with the red, provocative dress, and it was amazing. The designers' jaws dropped again as they continued to sigh and shower her with compliments.

There was no way to know if it was the archduke's tastes, if the dress did all the work, or if Rieta's beauty was the key because it was all mixed up.

The designer's eyes had even stronger flames in them as they saw her beauty taking in any dress, no matter the design, and turning it into the most fantastic piece of art. They begged him to choose them with their eyes.

Killian's face was stony as he stared at only Rieta again. He lifted a hand to point to another dress without saying a word. The chosen designer cheered.

He had nothing on his face that indicated his approval, but everyone could see. The designers were sure that even with his intensely serious face, he couldn't take his eyes off of her, and that was a sign of his approval.

Everyone around Killian had eyes like saucers and sighed while watching Rieta when the curtain was pulled aside. They all held up their dresses with passion in their eyes and turned to Killian when she disappeared behind the curtain again.

A designer was enthused about the possibility of making her a custom dress, bringing along a sheaf of paper and a pencil.

Rieta was exhausted, having tried on more than ten dresses. This time, it was a romantic V-necked dress in a flowy, elegant purple silk.

"This dress is far too long and will drag on the ground."

The excited designer forged ahead and didn't hear what she said. "Your waist is so tiny! I knew it would look exquisite on her! Would you imagine that such form can be had without a corset?"

But Killian met Rieta's eyes and said, “I would not.”

The designer thought he had spoken to him, but it was meant for Rieta.

Killian continued. "But perhaps a shorter length would do?"

The designers, who had been hyper-focused on his lips, got flustered at the sudden question. They all ran around senseless and came back with their best minidresses.

\*\*\*

A few hours later, ignoring his initial order of one dress to wear right now and another one to carry home, Killian had bought all sixteen dresses Rieta had tried on. They decided she would wear an everyday dress that fell below the knees right now. It was one that didn't need any alterations because it fit so well. The rest would be altered to fit Rieta perfectly and delivered to the castle as they were finished over a month.

"We will bring this pouch tonight to the castle as well." The kind designer was talking about Rieta's linen pouch. It was something that didn't go with the dress she was wearing right now.

Rieta faltered for a moment, but Killian had replied that it didn't matter because he would be the one to carry it.

A nimble designer quickly whipped off a black silk pouch and placed the entire bag into it.

It was an everyday dress, but it was from the best shop in the city. A plush ribbon was wrapped around the waist for a pop of color against an ivory top, and the dress accentuated Rieta's slim body while emanating elegance and class. On Rieta's arms, the loops of a transparent lace bolero were slipped onto her middle fingers and came up to her shoulders.

Her hair was let down and was braided here and there with beads and pearls, and on her head, the flower crown she wore into the shop was still there, but there was a small bejeweled pin as an adornment. Strangely enough, they went well together.

Once her pale lips were stained with red flower water, her pure face that slightly lacked life turned into a lovely bloom.

Someone muttered she looked like a goddess, and it didn't sound like even a bit of hollow flattery.

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# EVERYONE HAS SECRETS (10)

Greeted by a passionate farewell from the designers, Killian dragged the dazed Rieta out of the shop and began going around other boutiques in the area. Rieta came to her senses just as Killian was about to fasten something around her neck at the jewelry shop. She flinched and whirled around, reminded of their back-and-forth with Adele's necklace. She hadn't realized that she had already placed it on his neck when they left the castle.

To her surprise, the necklace in Killian's hand wasn't the necklace she lent him, but an aquamarine necklace that shone with the same turquoise color of Rieta's eyes.

Killian nodded casually, meeting her gaze. “A prized mistress of mine surely needs a trinket as a token of my affections, don't you think?”

Before she could say anything, Killian already anticipated and answered her question before she could even ask. He was slowly learning how to work around her. Killian lifted the necklace against her to see if it looked good on her neck.

"Turn and let us see," Killian said.

Rieta faltered, looking once again the necklace in his hand and once at him. But her body remained still.

“Are you waiting for me to put it on you...like this?” Killian said as he stepped towards Rieta and cocked his head. “This is difficult, you test me." His hands approached her, lifting the necklace towards her between them.

Rieta realized what he was about to do, and she turned around with a jolt. Rieta's back was now facing Killian and the monocled elderly jewel appraiser's eyes twinkled as he pushed a mirror towards her. She calmed her pounding heart and took a deep breath, thanking the appraiser with a timid smile.

The white-gloved appraiser took off his magnifying monocle, pretending not to notice Reita's awkwardness as he was wiping the glass, but then he met Rieta's eyes. Without a word, he smiled and tapped his shoulder.

*Oh... My hair is in the way...*

Rieta looked into the mirror and gathered her hair to fall over one shoulder. Her hair slipped past her pale neck and cascaded like moonlight down her right shoulder. Killian looked at the necklace on her neck in the mirror over her shoulder.

"How old did you say you were?" Killian asked unexpectedly.

"Twenty-six, sire," Rieta answered.

Only twenty-six, much was too young to be wearing her daughter's keepsake around her neck. Killian felt a strange impulse wash over him when he saw her pale neck and shoulder under her white-blonde hair. But he quickly snapped back to reality. That would be too much. It wasn't rational. He was going to gather the loose strands without thinking, but he gave up on that too.

*Wasn't I a little vulnerable?*

Whether it was her or him, he dismissed the question of who was the one being vulnerable and adjusted the necklace's chain. He stopped thinking and simply focused on putting the necklace on her. The softly glittering white gold chain hung on top of her hair.

*This isn't easy.*

It was a simple clasp, but manipulating a delicate hook wasn't easy for Killian's large hands. The jeweler saw he was having trouble and was about to offer advice when Killian stopped him with a hand gesture. Rieta looked down at her chest in the mirror. A daintily cut turquoise gem glittered blindingly from her neck, which was empty from the top dress and the bolero. The clear, water-like jewel hung from a white-gold chain seemed to be made just for Rieta's white skin and water-like eyes. Killian's taste was impeccable, as the jewel truly suited her striking eyes.

Just as Rieta was about to say the jewel didn't suit her as his hand lingered a tad longer than she expected, Killian finished the clasp successfully. He adjusted the chain on her neck and looked past her at the mirror.

"It's not quite enough to make up for what you've lended me." His voice rumbled from behind her ear. "Let it replace your necklace for now."

Rieta looked flustered, unsure of what to do, and looked down at the necklace again. Her meek eyes looked up at him in the mirror. "It's too much, sire."

"Nonsense." Killian's hand drifted up and dropped lightly on her head for a moment and then left. “Considering the worth of what you have lent me, it is a paltry thing."

She had never revealed the desire that had grown in her heart, but her gaze momentarily deepened before they trembled downward. Rieta was truly a rare beauty. Killian was reminded of her youth again, how she was a young woman who looked better with these things than the crude silver ring on a leather string she wore. He wondered how she had persevered through all the pain at an age when she should only have been happy looking at pretty, sparkling things.

"This will do nicely." He signed the order slip and stood up to leave.

\*\*\*

They left the jewelry shop. Rieta blinked, watching Killian's face as he lifted her onto the horse.

*“Rather, I actually thought His Lordship was special to you."*

Giselle's voice popped up in her head and Rieta grew pale, shaking her head quickly to dismiss the thought. Killian gazed up at Rieta's strange expression as she mounted the horse and smiled.

"They say fine feathers make fine birds. You are magnificent today." Not a single passionate designer in Latria was able to hear his words of satisfaction with their ears, but they would have felt it instinctively. Ironically, the only person who heard could not feel it.

Rieta didn't know whether he was teasing or praising and her face reflected that. Killian chuckled to himself before swiftly mounting his horse behind her.

\*\*\*

Killian rode slightly slower than usual because Rieta was riding sidesaddle. Even though they shopped all day, it wasn't obvious because he had ordered all the big and bulky things they bought to be brought back to the castle separately. With his stamina, he didn't easily feel fatigue from the shopping. He was simply satisfied to have spent the day turning someone pretty even prettier. He had hardly noticed the time passing. The stress from work must have taken a great toll, because he was indulging in doting on her. Rieta tried to stop him several times, but it was like moving a wall, especially now he had learned how to stop her retorts: "Dress appropriately as my prized mistress."

Rieta had several things on her, but he was in the same state as when they left her house with just Rieta's pouch in hand. It was just at the start of twilight when Killian stopped. Through the clopping of the horse's hooves, Rieta spoke up uncharacteristically.

"My lord."

"Hm?"

"Did you... have anything to eat today, sire?"

Killian paused and stopped his horse. “Have you not eaten anything today?"

Rieta shook her head. “I've eaten, sire. I was asking about you, my lord.”

Killian instinctively knew he had just gained another person who would nag him and swallowed. “What did Eron say?"

*He really didn't eat*, Rieta thought, clenching the horn on the saddle. "Oh dear, I've stolen so much of your time..."

Killian looked at Rieta. He could already tell what she was thinking. Even if they would only be stopping by Rieta's house briefly and the rest was time spent as he had wished... He urged the horse on again and answered curtly, "It's fine."

A few moments of silence passed, then Rieta quietly murmured. "Please don't skip your meals. Even if you're busy... My lord.”

Killian stared at her profile. *Where was this coming from? No reason for her to worry like that, I wouldn't starve to death.*

But it was strange. Eron or the cook often nagged at him about his meals, but Rieta had the ability of making the same thing sound different. She spoke in a way that made him want to soothe her.

"I wasn't that busy. It's just that eating becomes a chore when I start to focus," Killian said, adding a few more words to his normally curt answers.

"Aren't you busy?" Rieta asked.

"There's nothing pressing." It would be a lie to say that he wasn't busy, but he took care of urgent matters in the morning. He did spend more time out than expected, but he had enough flexibility to spend a few extra hours in the afternoon. And the field clinics had clerics now, so it was time for him to take his leave.

Sending off supplies was completed yesterday as well and thanks to the clerics the clinics were running smoothly. The clinics would now recognize his lordship over the territory, which would probably make things stressful. He was going to change his schedule of touring the clinics only once every few days to ensure that patients and the workers weren't receiving undue stress. Although he had been at the clinics every day because the situation was terrible before, it would be better for the workers now to not have their boss looming over them all the time.

Saintess Tania was faithfully watching over things in his place. She would return tomorrow and based on her report, he would consider the situation before patrolling the clinics with Rieta.

Rieta had been quiet for a while before she asked, "Is there a particular reason you don't eat?"

"Not really. I just don't have an interest in eating," Killian said.

"Do you like pastries by any chance?"

Killian realized the original person to have asked the previous question and laughed. “So, it was the head cook."

Rieta skirted from answering him and continued. "If I bring them to your study, would it bother you when you're focusing, sire?”

Killian remembered that he had told Eron to stop bringing food into his bedchamber or study.

"Wouldn't you have them with me, sire?"

Killian looked down at Rieta in silence. Rieta, sitting side-saddle, was looking ahead in the same direction as the horse and he couldn't see her eyes. Rieta continued softly when Killian stayed silent. “The head cook is truly skilled..."

He was capable of eating by himself, and he wasn't so hard-pressed that there was no time to eat. If she had only asked about bringing food to Killian so that he would eat, he would have said no. But he could not say no to this timid woman who was asking him if he would eat with her in that meek voice.

"When we arrive it'll be time for dinner," he answered.

"Later, sire," Rieta replied.

Then there wasn't any particular reason to say no. "As you wish,” Killian answered curtly and fidgeted with the reins behind Rieta's back. A fresh floral scent drifted towards him from Rieta, who still had the flower crown on. For the first time in a while, he wanted to eat dinner.

\*\*\*

It was evening when they arrived at the castle. The long summer's sun fell to the west and the sky was painted with the reddish glow of the sunset. The shadows of the castle walls coated the surface of the moat. A group of people unloading a cart full of packages caught their eye. Rieta recognized two people in the crowd, and her eyes widened.

"Nella! Martin!" Several people turned toward them. Rieta reached up and waved her hand. Killian got off the horse first and let her down. Rieta quickly grabbed hold of his arms on her way down and ran to them excitedly, even forgetting to thank him.

"Rieta!" the pair shouted and came to greet her from far away.

*They must be acquaintances of hers*, he thought.

They appeared to be people permitted to supply the castle. There was nothing suspicious about them. Killian watched for a moment. He didn't try to make himself known and turned to head into the castle. Knights stepped forward and took Rhea's reins from him. A white flower on the saddle caught his eye just then. Killian picked up the flower. It was a wildflower, one he didn't know the name of.

*Was it from her flower crown?* he wondered.

The stem was quite long. The flower's petals were starting to droop, having been picked several hours ago. There was nothing he could do, as flowers only stayed fresh for a while. He was about to toss it away, but he brought it up to his study instead. Nonchalantly, he stuck the flower in the first vase he saw. Perhaps it would maintain its blossom, if only for a little while longer. Its life was short anyway. At least it would stay fresh while it bloomed. He was someone who recognized the beauty of a flower, even if its blossoms would perish before long.

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# EVERYONE HAS SECRETS (11)

“No, really. It's not just Lamentan linseed; it's half Renahan. They should have written it in the contract,” Nella said.

Martin frowned. "We don't even call this kind of blend linen in Axias. That's basic stuff! But they claim they still call it Lamentan linen even if only half the linseed is Lamentan. They say it's perfectly fine for the field clinics."

"They were the ones who blew everything out of proportion," Nella muttered. “Like it isn't their fault to begin with."

"No wonder the deal seemed too good to be true." Martin sighed. “What with the shortage of Lamentan linen..."

"It's our fault too." Nella sighed. "We should've researched more thoroughly before we confirmed."

Martin massaged his forehead. "We nearly scammed the castle. What a disaster. Our reputation is our lifeline as merchants."

Nella squared her shoulders. "We reported to the castle as soon as we discovered the problem, and we brought them pure Lamentan linen. Plus we sold it to them at wholesale value. We'll earn no profit, but I'm just grateful they didn't return the whole shipment."

Nella and Martin's bickering slowed as the business partners nodded. For all their disagreements, they trusted and relied on one another.

Rieta just listened and smiled. She was used to them by now.

"Oh. Rieta, take this to eat." Nella passed her some food.

"Thank you, Nella. I am ever in your debt."

"It's nothing. Write to us if you need something. I saw your letter; are you sure you're okay living in the castle? Will you stay here or return to your dwelling soon? Can we come visit?"

"I'd be delighted if you would come to see me. But I do not know where I will be. He hasn't said. Although, His Lordship didn't order me to pack my house..." Rieta paused. Killian's voice echoed in her ear.

*It's your house. Not a house I gave you.*

Nella chuckled. "I would keep you close, if I were the archduke."

Martin snorted and brushed Nella's forehead. “You silly girl.”

*So they're dating again.* Rieta smiled. "I will write if I need anything. Please do the same if I can ever assist you.”

"Goodness. Now we have a friend in the castle!" Nella laughed.

Rieta shook her head, though she knew it was just a joke. "I'm only staying temporarily. But I think—” Rieta caught herself. She almost said *I think he'll let me go back.* "I think I'll go back."

\*\*\*

Killian was working in his study when Eron announced it was time for dinner. He went to Rieta's room, but she wasn't back yet.

The empty room displeased him. He lingered by the door for a moment, then spun on his heel and stormed back to his study. "Eron."

"Yes, my lord."

"I saw merchants bringing in supplies for the castle." Killian asked who they were and what they were delivering at this hour. Normally merchants came in the early morning, but the sun was almost setting.

Eron didn't oversee the merchants, so Killian expected he'd need to go digging. He was surprised when Eron nodded knowingly. "That was about our order of Lamentan linens, sire. The merchants made a mistake, but they corrected it and brought us the correct items."

*Lamentan linens?* The clinics had run out of those. Today was the first shipment they could find. Linen from the stems of linseed plants in Lamenta cost three times more than ordinary linen, even before the plague. Now the price had jumped twenty times as high.

In fact, anything stamped with *Lamenta* had sold like hotcakes since the plague broke out. He'd seen more fake Lamentan candles and glass than he could count. But Lamentan plague had been in wide use since the Diritas Plague, since rumors claimed it prevented the spread.

Superstitions about the divine kingdom of Lamenta augmented those claims, of course. Lamenta was a minor nation along the border that fell twenty years ago. But even as all the empire's wealth flowed toward Lillefeiam, Lamenta still captured people's imaginations.

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"Next time, we'll come by with Mrs. Fenyll,” the merchants called as they left.

By then, the sun had already set. Rieta blessed them and watched them go. As she turned toward the castle, she startled, biting her lip. “Oh my.”

She dashed inside, shocked. “Oh dear, His Lordship."

\*\*\*

"Rachel."

"Yes, sire?" Rachel poked her head through the window at the sound of her name. She was perched on the windowsill, as per usual. She almost never used doors, even when entering Havitus Temple.

Killian beckoned her. Rachel flipped over the window and landed lightly on the carpet. "I have a favor to ask. Do you think you can manage?" He explained in a few quick words.

She nodded. "Yes, sire."

The raven-haired woman, her hair cut short, slipped back out the window. A few minutes later, she poked her head through the window of the guests' quarters.

She waited for Rieta to enter the washroom, oblivious. Then Rachel hopped into the room. She darted past the washroom door, to where the archduke had come to meet her.

Without flinching, Rachel accepted the corpse Killian offered her. Then she carried it to the window, where a shadow of a tree loomed outside. She vanished the same way she'd come.

Killian hadn't given her any more specific orders, but she knew what to do.

The next day, guards found the body a significant distance away. Head Chaplain Ostia lay with her eyes closed, her ankh necklace clasped in her hands, like a soldier killed in war whose comrades had begun praying, but didn't have time to complete the final rites.

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Even though she was no ordinary person, Rachel's task had been very difficult. Not only did she have to climb a tree, but she'd carried a corpse down too. In addition to risking life and limb, she'd risked shame if anyone caught her, too.

Killian considered giving her a token of gratitude. Business first, though. "About Rieta."

"Yes, sire. I've heard,” Rachel said. “Shall I help Giselle or Leonard?"

"No. Surveille those who Rieta feels close to in Axias."

"And the scope of my task, Sire?"

Killian considered the nature of care that Rieta needed. “Find out who her friends are. What they talk about. If they are making anything difficult for Rieta or bothering her. Oh, and if she receives any letters, route them through me first."

Rachel blinked. That sounded awfully close to stalking.

He met her gaze, and must have noted her distaste. “It's not what you're thinking."

A strange smile crossed Rachel's face. "Yes, Your Royal Highness."

"They're necessary precautions."

"Of course, sire."

"The issue with the letters-"

"I understand, sire. There's no need for you to explain."

Killian chuckled and turned away. "My, my."

"No one is courting Rieta at the moment, sire," Rachel said slyly.

"I said it's not like that," he muttered. But no matter how much he insisted, he didn't think Rachel believed him.

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*I must be insane. I didn't even thank His Lordship. I just tossed him aside once I saw people I knew. What was I thinking?* She couldn't go to her room, so she just paced the landing.

*Should I beg for forgiveness? He doesn't seem the type to care. Would interrupting his work over a petty matter like this be even worse?*

Killian would be busy. He always was. *Maybe at dinner?*

Rieta went back and forth, pacing the landing, torn between going to his study or her room. Then she recognized the horse approaching outside the window.

"Saintess Tania?" Rieta immediately looked for the moon. It was already the end of the month. Rieta considered all her options: His Lordship, dinner, Saintess Tania, or the East Annex situation?

She finally decided where to go.

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Saintess Tania had returned earlier than expected. Upon learning this, Killian went straight to Rieta's room. But it remained empty.

"Rieta?"

"Mage Tristi has gone to Saintess Tania's quarters, sire," the page answered.

Killian scoffed. *I was about to get really jealous.* He still didn't know why Rieta had volunteered to be Saintess Tania's messenger.

Any woman who stayed in the main building, close to his quarters, would be considered a woman of his, so Saintess Tania made sure to stay in distant guest quarters. He walked to her usual apartments, where he found Rieta hovering outside the door.

"What are you doing?” he asked.

"Oh, my lord." Rieta startled, then bowed to him. "Your esteemed knights informed me Saintess Tania would see you after her evening prayers. I was waiting for her, sire, but she sent everyone else away."

She'd planned to greet Saintess Tania first, then go to see him before the saintess's visit. But she hadn't expected Saintess Tania to send the knights away.

Killian scowled. "So you're waiting all alone in the dark?"

Rieta smiled faintly. "It's Your Lordship's castle. What could be dangerous here?"

*When the castle is filled with people. She is so stupidly fearless.* Killian stared at her. He always knew she was a beauty, but seeing her in this dress, instead of her usual dingy clothes, it was difficult to tear his gaze away. Anyone who saw her would agree.

"Rieta, you can't walk around in public looking like this," Killian said. She'd find herself kidnapped and tied up by scoundrels.

"Yes, sire. Of course. I would never take the clothes you bought me outside the castle for personal reasons."

He bristled. *Does she think I'm so poor I can't afford to buy her a few clothes?* But he liked her promise to only dress like this inside the castle. It would keep her safe...

The sky darkened. Thunder rumbled. It looked ready to rain again. The sliver of a crescent moon hid behind scuttling clouds, and the sky grew even darker.

Killian looked up at the sky, then back down at Rieta's clothes. Just then, Rieta flinched and spun toward Saintess Tania's quarters. Almost simultaneously, a shiver traveled down Killian's spine. Killian followed Rieta's gaze.

He instinctively knew something was off. Normally, no one reacted faster than he did. Yet Rieta had sensed something before him...

Killian stepped in front of Rieta, drawing his sword. “What is it?"

"I sense demon energy!"

That explained her reaction. Normally, Killian couldn't sense divine or evil energy. But even he felt this. Raising a foot, he kicked down the door, sword held aloft.

As the door splintered inward, Killian dashed inside. Rieta hurried after him.

Just over the threshold, Killian froze. He couldn't believe his eyes.

Saintess Tania wore a shocked expression, her eyes jet black. Dark energy emanated from her body. In front of her, black smoke swirled in a circular pattern.

A faint human shape knelt inside the circle. Faint for Killian, anyway-to Rieta, the demon looked stunningly clear. A high-class demon, goat horns protruding from its forehead.

Rieta clapped a hand over her mouth.

Killian's eyes narrowed. He knew only the most powerful demons appeared in humanoid shape. *And those purple eyes...*

Saintess Tania turned toward the demon, not seeming to notice Killian or Rieta. Her black eyes fluttered shut. “(Mordes the Demon,)" the saintess intoned in demonic tongue. “(Abide by the promise you made to the Pilgrim Tania.)"

The black smoke swirled faster, the human shape within it shining brighter now. "(Gladly.)” The purplish demon, now fully formed, spread his wings wide. Mordes, highest of all the dream demons, looked at all three people in the room. A terrifying grin split his face.

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# EVERYONE HAS SECRETS (12)

Mordes waved and bowed, extending a hand to Saintess Tania.

Saintess Tania slapped his hand away. “Give me your power and be gone."

The demon frowned. "My, how hospitable you are to guests."

"You are no guest. And I have a reputation to uphold."

Mordes grumbled, looking dissatisfied. He rolled his head, cracking his neck, and asked, "Which power?"

"You possess only one fit for use."

“Humans cannot stand to use it for long,” he said.

"One hour will do."

"Half an hour," he replied.

Saintess Tania narrowed her eyes. "Do not bargain with me. I will do as I see fit."

The demon sighed and shrugged. "So be it." With that, he raised a hand over the saintess.

In an instant, Killian pointed his sword at the demon's neck.

Mordes froze, eyeing the blade. “That sacer of yours will hardly scald a high demon like me."

Rieta tried to step between Mordes and Killian, but Killian grabbed her shoulder and pushed her behind him with a look of disbelief.

Mordes tilted his head, amused. The horns on his head glowed. "What do my eyes behold?"

Tania threw out her arms and blocked Mordes's way. Her eyes, still glowing with black light, rested on Killian. “This demon cannot harm me. I thank you for your concern, but you may withdraw your blade.”

Killian's cold, crimson eyes narrowed. "What business has a saintess befriending a demon?"

Killian's icy voice made Rieta go pale. She clutched his arm. "No!" Killian looked at her. "She deals in divine magic, not evil. I beg you, give her a chance to explain." Rieta's hands shook.

The empire's people were merciless against those black magicians who contracted with demons in exchange for evil experimental magic. Many were killed on the spot, without so much as a trial.

"You can subjugate a demon with divine magic once you have trained for long enough," Rieta added. “Please, let her tell us."

Killian's eye twitched. Rieta kept her grip on his arm and turned to the saint. “Am I correct, Saintess?"

Saintess Tania's eyes glittered. She'd known Rieta was smart, but she hadn't expected the woman to know this much.

Killian furrowed his brow. "As far as I am aware, only members of the royal family of Lamenta held such sway over demons."

Mordes sighed and raised both hands over the saint's head. "One hour."

*Poof.* The demon vanished and silence hung in his wake.

Saintess Tania laughed bitterly. “We must hurry now. I shall clarify afterward, if you believe me."

Killian continued to look disapproving, but Rieta clung to his arm, desperate. Reluctantly, he sheathed his sword.

The saintess nodded her thanks and picked up a hat with a black veil. Her eyes, still glowing darkly, were hidden behind the lace. “I gather you have surmised my plan.” Saintess Tania glanced at Rieta. “I cannot wield divine power whilst carrying the demon's power. Therefore, I am in your hands, Rieta."

Rieta beamed. "I'll take care of you."

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No one had been expecting visitors. Lotte and Beth looked a little dazed as they rose to greet the approaching trio.

"You've returned, my lord?" They curtsied respectfully. "Greetings, Saintess Tania, beloved daughter of the highest of high, the great god Siel, and of the salt of the lowest in the Empire Lillefeiam.”

"Greetings, Saintess Tania,” Lotte carried on. "We, the young lambs, cared for by the light of the great god Siel, bow to his beloved." As she spoke, she and Beth both lowered themselves, waiting for a blessing.

Rieta hastily cleared her throat. “Saintess Tania! I should like to bless my friends, if I may."

Saint Tania smiled warmly and lifted a hand.

Rieta quickly hugged them both. "Have you fared well?” She offered Lotte and Beth each a blessing. If they noticed any awkwardness, they didn't let on, smiling and hugging her back.

Brilliant divine power emanated between the three of them.

At the same time, Saintess Tania raised her hands over their heads, offering a prayer rather than a blessing. “Lusieli. The god will save you with light."

"Lesiel!" Lotte and Beth chorused. "As the god is willing."

Killian watched expressionlessly as Saintess Tania kissed her fingertips, her black irises still hidden. Rieta nudged Killian. He flinched and looked at her.

Rieta smiled and nodded at the women. “Lotte. Beth. Did you greet His Lordship yet?"

The women just laughed. But Rieta's hand was trembling.

"Let us review the patients once more. We just need to see their faces for a moment." Saintess Tania led the way. She visited each of the patients she had seen earlier.

Rieta blessed each one, before Saintess Tania even asked. Finally, once they'd completed their route, Saintess Tania turned to the three uninfected women following her. “Have I missed anyone?"

"You have seen us all," Lotte said.

“There's no one healthy I still need to visit?"

"We are the only...oh.” Beth flushed.

Saintess Tania took it from there. “Please, lead the way."

Beth nodded and took the lead, the three other women following. Killian's eyes narrowed. Only he noticed Saintess Tania turning expectantly toward correct the hallway, before Beth even led them to it.

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"She refuses all blessings and purifications," Lotte murmured. "She is free of plague, since she keeps to herself. She seems healthy, thank heavens, but... Irene rejects all blessed objects except those from her family. She doesn't let male clerics near her."

Beth nodded. "It will be good for Irene to meet a woman with divine power. Perhaps she will be more comfortable. Although, you've also come, my lord, so..."

Lotte leaned in and whispered in Rieta's ear. “Irene chewed us out last time His Lordship visited, because we didn't tell her. She'll be quite irritated today, I'm sure."

Beth knocked on the door. The fourth-floor room stood far from the others. "Irene."

No response.

Beth knocked again. "Irene? Will you see us? Someone has come to bless \_\_”

Something crashed against the door. "I have no need for blessings!" The voice sounded irritated and cracked, like someone who'd been crying for a long time.

Beth sighed. "His Highness is here as well.”

Something else crashed inside, followed by pattering footsteps. *Whoosh.* The door opened.

Red-rimmed green eyes went round with shock as they met Killian's. Irene's face contorted into bewilderment. “Your Royal Highness.” All of her love, sadness, hatred, fear and regret were audible. So was her relief.

Saintess Tania stepped forward.

Belatedly, Irene's gaze flicked to the saintess.

Beth hastily cleared her throat. "You are familiar with the Saintess Tania, I'm sure. She has come to see to your care."

Irene grudgingly lowered her eyes. "I must decline, for I am perfectly well." She gripped the doorframe, not moving, utterly unfriendly. Like always.

"I see," said Saintess Tania. With that, she reached around Irene to push the door wider.

Irene slapped the saintess's hand and blocked the entrance like a guard dog. "What are you doing?"

Saintess Tania tilted her head in feigned confusion. "I intend to enter."

Irene looked both nervous and anxious at once. "I thank you for your concern, but I have no need of your blessing. My family sends blessed items for my protection. And I cannot allow a sainted woman into my chambers. They are in disarray. I shall change and come out."

Irene pushed the saint away, about to shut the door, but Saintess Tania grabbed it. Irene looked at the saintess, panicked. Then her gaze flew to Killian, just as Saintess Tania wrenched Irene's hand from the doorknob.

Saintess Tania pushed Irene toward Killian with great force. Then she shoved the door wide.

Even as the man she loved desperately caught her, Irene didn't bat an eyelash, but whipped around and screamed. "No!"

But saintess was already stepping inside. Killian instinctively gripped Irene, who struggled to free herself.

The saintess froze just over the threshold. “A chamber in disarray, indeed.” When she shifted, Rieta glimpsed the room behind her and gasped, clapping her hand to her mouth.

The faint light of a single lamp illuminated magic circles drawn in blue blood around the room. The stench of blood hung in the air-different from the way human or animal blood smelled, but distinct nonetheless.

Rieta turned toward Irene in disbelief. "You could not have..."

"No. No." Irene shook her head, paler than a sheet. Even Beth and Lotte, with no knowledge of divine magic of curses, gaped at the scene.

Everyone knew blue blood was used for curses.

During the collapse of the divine kingdom of Lamenta—the greatest mistake made by Emperor Astenfelt the First-the last queen of Lamenta, Esahilde, drew a magic circle in blue blood, cursing Astenfelt as she died. Everyone in the empire knew the story.

“Irene,” Killian murmured.

Irene trembled as he practically sighed her name.

"Did you cast a curse?" Beth's voice shook, the blood draining from her face. “Anna. You cursed Anna?"

Irene shook her head, staggering. “No. I cast no curse."

Tania's eyes, hidden behind the black veil, drifted to the left of the room. She crossed to the bed and bent, shoving a hand under the snow-white sheets. It emerged gripping a dagger, red as blood.

As if the dagger contained a live heart, veins pulsed along its half- transparent blade, made of a translucent black glass.

A bone-chilling silence fell. No one knew exactly what it was, but they all sensed it was terrible.

"How does a young, noble lady," Saintess Tania whispered, "Come to possess a demon-sealed dagger?"

Irene shook off Killian and ran toward the saintess. "No!" With monstrous strength, she shoved Saintess Tania onto the bed.

They struggled. Irene snatched the dagger away and raised it.

Sudden wind blew. The lights winked out.

"Irene!" Killian drew his sword. "Stop!"

"Saintess Tania!" the women screamed.

Lightning struck outside, just past the balcony. It illuminated Irene's silhouette, the dagger held aloft. In the sudden flare of light, Irene's and Rieta's eyes met.

Killian leapt between Irene and Rieta, his sword leveled at Irene.

But Irene had already moved toward the balcony. She shifted her grip on the dagger, rotating it away from the others. Her desperate, sorrowful eyes made Rieta's body freeze.

All at once, Rieta realized what she was about to do. She ran toward Irene. "No!"

Killian and Saintess Tania both moved too. Rieta grabbed Irene's arm to stop her from stabbing herself in the heart. Killian grabbed Rieta's arm. And Saintess Tania threw off the veiled hat, her skirt swirling.

A veil of darkness covered all four of them, and they vanished from the room.

58

# EVERYONE HAS SECRETS (13)

*Your Royal Highness. Please, look into my eyes. Just once. I'm always looking at you, but you never notice me. Infatuation magic. Could I use it? It would make him notice me...*

*No. Magic should be good. I can't betray him. My heart aches at the thought. Besides, he'd be too strong to fall for it. I won't hurt him. But if I stab myself, he'll have to look at me.*

Time stopped. Rieta found Irene's consciousness via the demon's power Saintess Tania channeled. Demons had the ability to bring hidden things to light. Humans couldn't use demonic powers perfectly, but it worked well enough for Rieta to sense Irene's despair.

*I'm scared, Your Royal Highness. Please, look at me. Just once. Am I crazy? No. I'm only hurting myself.*

*Where is the dagger? Please, don't be sick. Please. Don't die, Anna. If you heal, I'll...*

Tears welled in Rieta's eyes. She felt Irene's despair like her own. She wanted to close her eyes, but Rieta kept watching. After all, she'd experienced her own share of pain.

Irene's consciousness seemed to speak to her directly now. I love him the most. *For him, I gave up my family, friends, freedom, and pride. I gave up everything. What did you sacrifice?*

Rieta met her gaze. *Ah, Irene. There was nothing for me to give up. I didn't have anything.*

At least now she knew: Irene didn't curse Anna. In the pitch-black darkness, Rieta stared at the dagger protruding from Irene's heart. It felt like a dream or a premonition of the future. Not real.

Suddenly, someone snatched Rieta's arm.

Lightning illuminated the space. In a flash, all four people returned to the room they'd vanished from. With a clang, Killian's sword struck the dagger Irene had aimed at her own chest. At the same time, Rieta sprang back into motion, tackling Irene to the ground.

Saintess Tania's pure white, divine energy flowed into her staff, just as the dagger spun through the air toward her. Tania stabbed the dagger with an ear-splitting crack.

With a shriek, a black demon emerged from the dagger, claws extended toward Saintess Tania. Killian moved faster, stabbing the demon. The demon snarled, reaching to wrench the blade from its body.

Blue swaths of energy burst from the sword. Flames enveloped the demon's body. It bared its teeth, whipping around to face the pile of skirts that were Rieta and Irene.

"Who summons me?" the demon spat. "How will I last without an offering or host?" Without warning, it shrieked and fell to its knees, black blood spewing from its mouth.

It looked down at the silvery staff sticking out of its chest. "S...Saintess Tania!"

The saint twisted the staff from the demon's body, her blue eyes were cold. The demon screamed and reached for Irene. Killian raised his sword to chop off the demon's hand, but its arm stretched and disjointed grotesquely, avoiding the blow.

Its arm doubled in length, stretching toward Irene.

Killian whipped around. Rieta covered Irene with her body and shut her eyes. Then she exploded with divine energy.

The demon's hand had just reached their skirts. It flattened to the ground, avoiding the blast, just as the saintess twisted the staff in the demon's body.

The demon screamed again, retracting its arm to grasp the massive hole in its torso.

Flames blazed. "Get the lady out of here,” the saintess called, as a massive chain of divine energy appeared in her free hand.

She flung the chain at the demon. *Crash*. It wrapped around the thing's legs, and a black, killing spirit raged against the divine fire.

Saintess Tania pulled the chain tight and wrenched the staff out of the demon, raising it high. The chain slithered higher, wrapping around the demon's neck now. It collapsed, writhing, and the saintess aimed at its neck.

The demon splayed on the ground as if lying beneath a guillotine of divine energy.

Once Killian saw that the saintess was in control, he grabbed Irene and Rieta, hauling them to their feet. All three hurried from the room.

Outside, serving women hurried up the hallway carrying brooms and drying racks for weapons. "Don't come any closer!" Killian yelled.

Behind them, the demonic and divine energies collided. A wall exploded in a shower of stone and dust. Killian hugged both women to his chest and hunkered over them.

Boom. Blinding light filled the entire space. When it cleared, multiple rings appeared around the demon, binding it layer by layer. The demon fought through one ring, then another, but more appeared, dragging it to the floor again.

The black, killing energy faded. In its place, brightness reigned.

The serving women gaped at the magic circles drawn around the wrecked room in blue blood. Helen rounded on Irene. "What have you done?" she shouted.

Killian straightened, both Irene and Rieta still hunched close to him. Helen ran at Irene, pounding on the other woman's shoulders and chest. "What did Anna ever do to you? That poor child!”

Irene cried silent tears. She did not fight back.

Behind her, the demon began to shrink. “No! Please, let me live. I vow to stay in hell! I'll never return.” It struggled, but the glowing chains did not break. Terrified, it stretched a horrifying arm toward Killian. “Send me back to hell."

"Why are you asking me?" Blue energy whipped from Killian's sword. It struck the demon's arm, deflecting it.

Its arm bent at a strange angle, the demon tilted its head to the saintess instead. "I will submit,” it said. “I am a fire demon. Don't you wish to wield my flame?"

Saintess Tania didn't even pretend to listen. She lifted her staff, light pouring from it. The staff arced into a burning white blade.

"You may command me as you wish. You have the power to do so!"

The saintess snorted. "Commanding one demon caused me enough regret already." With that, she brought the guillotine of light down on the demon's neck.

*Crunch.* The demon started to oxidize as its head rolled across the floor. It screamed, not from the head but from its soul. Once it disintegrated into black dust, an old dagger clattered to the floor.

The glowing blue circles of magic faded, too, and blew away in a gentle breeze.

\*\*\*

"Did you curse Anna?" Killian asked.

Irene sagged to the floor, her head in her hands. She couldn't bring herself to respond.

"I dare say I might understand if you attacked your competition, but...why Anna?"

"It is not a curse." The saintess flicked her staff, shaking off the demon's blood. “If it were, purification would have weakened the spell. This was simple ill-wishing."

Rieta flinched. In that strange darkness, Irene's consciousness told her that she didn't curse Anna. But Rieta didn't know if that was just her imagination. *Did anyone else feel it?*

"This Anna," the saintess said. "Was she lost to the plague?"

Helen nodded, crying.

"And she was a child?”

"Only eight years old," another serving woman answered.

Saintess Tania looked down at Irene. "Those magic circles, drawn in blue basilisk blood, might resemble a curse. But in actuality, they released the creature in this dagger." The saintess picked it up. "Demons feed on malice. You resented the women in this place, so it was able to target any woman it desired."

Killian looked up.

The saintess eyed Irene coldly. “Children make easy targets. If she were an adult, she would have been able to resist the attack. Due to her age, the blessing wasn't strong enough to save her."

Irene didn't move or react. She just sat motionless, her head bowed.

"Human hatred, ill-will, and malice are vessels," the saintess continued.

"These negative emotions create cracks through which demons can wriggle into our world."

Everyone watched Irene, except for Killian. He glared at the dagger. "Why did you have this?"

Irene did not respond.

Saintess Tania glanced at the dagger, then Irene. “The ritual you

attempted was no enchantment. Surely you realize now that you were tricked."

"What enchantment was she doing?” Killian's eyes narrowed. “Infatuation magic?"

Saintess Tania laughed bitterly. “Looks like I'll have to tuck away my joke about men sinning more.” With that, the saintess considered the three of them.

They'd all joined her briefly in the mental space Mordes' power created. Judging by Rieta's pale complexion, she had sensed something. But the Archduke of Axias just frowned at Irene, oblivious. Only he seemed not to have picked up Irene's consciousness in the veil.

Saintess Tania knew why. It meant he'd never experienced the pain of love. She turned to Irene. "You did not intend to cause anyone harm.

Nevertheless, you are responsible for this outcome."

Irene's shoulders finally trembled. Everyone stared at her.

"Your ill will has killed a child," the saintess said. In the veil, she, too, had felt Irene's despair. The piercing longing. Even in the depths of her agony, she couldn't hurt Killian. She'd chosen to stab herself instead.

Neither Saintess Tania nor Rieta could say anything more.

59

# EVERYONE HAS SECRETS (14)

Thanks to the chaos in the East Annex, many knights had gathered outside. Killian sent most of them away, only asking a few knights to remain. He handed Irene over to them.

"Confine her," Killian said curtly. They still needed to find out where she got the dagger and who taught her to draw the magic circles.

Someone had planned this.

The knights seemed at a loss, staring at the noblewoman. "In the solitary cell for nobility, Sire?" one knight finally asked. Usually, nobles would be imprisoned in a tower, rather than the dungeon.

Irene might have been disowned, but she was still the daughter of a count. And the general dungeon was full of common criminals.

But Killian did not bat an eye. “There is dark sorcery involved.”

At once, the knights' expressions changed. All their pity for the young, beautiful woman vanished. “I see, my lord. Then we shall confine her underground and bind her with magic."

Irene followed them obediently, not reacting even when their shoves got rougher.

Killian couldn't deal with her violently, but he also resolved not to protect her. He needed to inform Irene's family. In the meantime, she'd be locked up with all the other ordinary criminals in Axias.

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It started to rain. Rieta wore only a thin summer dress, her body covered in cuts and bruises. Killian removed his cloak and placed it over her shoulders, drawing up the hood.

Rieta flinched, then she met his eyes and nodded in thanks. She hugged the cloak tight around her chest.

Killian frowned at a scratch on her cheek. He reached for it, just as Saintess Tania stepped out of the building.

"Rieta," she called.

Rieta turned toward the saint. Killian's hand hovered in midair, as Saintess Tania waved Rieta over. Gently, Killian laid a hand on Rieta's shoulder to nudge her toward the saint.

Rieta walked toward Saintess Tania. The saint met her halfway, then gripped Rieta's shoulder and cast a healing spell. A silvery breeze picked up, dancing around them. Rieta felt divine power sink into all her cuts and bruises.

"Thank you." Rieta bowed her head.

Killian watched the two from a distance.

Just then, one of the knights who'd escorted Irene to the dungeons returned. "Your Royal Highness?"

Killian turned. He shared a few words with the knight. By the time he glanced back at Rieta, his eyes had met Saintess Tania's instead. “I must purify the place before I depart,” the saintess said. “May I borrow Rieta for a moment?"

Killian was about to refuse, but when he glanced at Rieta, she nodded. So, without another word, he turned and walked away.

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The ladies could no longer quarantine patients in the East Annex. Most of the building had been damaged in the fight against the demon, but even if it was intact, nobody wanted to inhabit a place where a demon had run rampant and evil blood was spilled.

Nightmares would stalk anyone who remained in that building.

Luckily, the sickness had started to die down, but they still needed to stay inside the castle. The women volunteered to either move into the castle walls or venture outside to find another safe place to quarantine.

But Killian ignored them and prepared another space instead. The ladies of the East Annex moved into the mages' building. Those who were still symptomatic lived together, while the healthy shared other rooms. In ten days, doctors said they'd be able to rejoin the world.

Killian made sure none of the women roomed alone tonight. He knew they wouldn't sleep well, after what happened. Helen hadn't stopped crying since Irene was taken away.

Meanwhile, Saintess Tania and Rieta stayed behind to purify Irene's room. They found faint traces of demonic energy and evil blood in the ruins, which they destroyed.

Rieta purified and blessed any places the saintess told her to. Then she watched Saintess Tania cast a widespread purification. The saintess's divine powers had returned the moment she'd returned the demonic power she'd borrowed for this fight.

Compared to Rieta, who could only bless one small area at a time, the saintess's flood of divine purification looked as easy as breathing. No wonder people called her the most potent force in the empire.

Rieta found the black-veiled hat the saintess had tossed aside in the corner of the ruined room. She bent to pick it up, brushing dust from the rim.

The saintess stepped gingerly over to Rieta. She beamed when Rieta held out the hat. "Thank you. You didn't have to do that." Saintess Tania smiled as she accepted it.

Rieta looked bashful and shook her head. "It's nothing."

The rain spilled into the room through enormous cracks in the walls and roof. Gusts of wind ruffled both women's hair. The saintess took a seat on an overturned cabinet and patted the spot beside her. "How do you feel?"

"What do you mean?” Rieta asked.

"The demon's force struck you. That can harm one's mind."

"I believe I am well,” Rieta replied carefully. Then she eyed the saintess. "That power you wielded...was that from the demon?"

Saintess Tania knew at once what Rieta was asking. Rieta had never experienced mental powers before. Feeling Irene's despair within the veil of darkness must have been confusing. “Yes. Mordes's magic allows you to speak with a subject's inner mind, in a secondary space. We call it the Veil of Darkness."

Rieta nodded silently.

Saintess Tania did not add that this power allowed one to learn secrets the subject wanted to hide. Dream demons like Mordes often had powers that were difficult for humans to comprehend. The entry on dream demons in the encyclopedia of demonology, *Haviston's Review of Demonic Nature*, was surprisingly slim.

The saintess studied Rieta's profile. She'd plunged all four of them into the Veil of Darkness to prevent the demon from leaping into a host. But it had been a risk, even for her. She was just relieved none of them lost their minds in the dark.

But it shouldn't have surprised her. Rieta was strong. She'd overcome all sorts of mental struggles already. The Archduke of Axias, conversely, had never suffered at all, so he couldn't even sense Irene's consciousness.

"So that's how you were able to expose the truth," Rieta murmured.

"Precisely. Did you not feel Irene's spell also?"

"I believe so, though I cannot be certain.” Rieta glanced up. “I did not see as clearly as you."

Saintess Tania shrugged. “It is not that I saw more clearly-I was but a proxy for the demon's force. But I recognized the signs I observed."

The saintess wrung out her rain-soaked sleeve. Water gushed onto the floor. “Humans make imperfect vessels for demonic power. And Mordes's ability is particularly bewildering."

One could learn a lot more using Mordes's power. But she'd only used as much dark energy as she dared. It had returned to the demon early, because of how much she drew. Any more would be dangerous, even for her.

"But..." Rieta hesitated. “Do you suppose His Highness felt nothing?"

"Humans can only perceive so much within the Veil of Darkness. What we feel depends on our own experiences. If people share no similar emotions, they wouldn't be able to sense each other."

The saintess turned away from Rieta for a moment. "He has yet to experience love. It's a wonder, how he could have lived thirty-odd years without, but..."

Rieta's eyes widened. “Saintess Tania. Who do you love?” Suddenly, Rieta realized she was prying. She clamped her mouth shut. "Forgive me. Please ignore my rambling."

Saintess Tania smiled. “Why? Do I seem ignorant to matters of the heart?"

Flustered, Rieta cleared her throat. “Mordes is the infamous demon, isn't he? The one you purged from the Land of Scourge ten years ago..."

"Yes. But I did not destroy him. As you saw, I subjugated him, so that I can wield his power anytime it's necessary. It's a useful ability. But I don't use it often." Suddenly, the saintess laughed. “Are you disillusioned yet by the witless Saintess Tania?"

"No, not at all." But Rieta did glance around them as if startled.

Thankfully, no one seemed to have overheard. “But why tell me such a secret?"

"I cannot say," the saintess replied. "Perhaps I sense that you will guard my secret."

Rieta couldn't hide her anxiety. “I shall, of course. But you must take care to keep it from others. It may cause you harm.”

"I know. I do not wish to be burnt alive by the heretic tribunal." The saint grinned. "I was startled when you exposed me. I did ask to be left alone."

"F-forgive me." Rieta flushed.

But the saintess smiled, waving a hand. "No, my carelessness is my fault. I've become lax because I've never been caught before. I thank you for your defense and your concern." Then the saintess frowned. “But how did you learn that divine powers could force a demon into submission? Even *Haviston's Review* does not mention such an ability."

Rieta bowed her head. "I learned it as a child, from the monk who trained me."

Saintess Tania grinned. “Rieta." The saintess grabbed Rieta's wrist. A wave of divine energy washed over Rieta's body. "You deceive me."

Suddenly, the saintess's piercing blue eyes latched onto Rieta's sky-blue ones. She seemed to know everything, all at once.

"Tell me. How is it that you are immune to the plague?"

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# EVERYONE HAS SECRETS (15)

Now that she thought about it, she had suspicions for some time. Five plague demons and one incubus had stuck to her that day. But she'd avoided the plague demons, only succumbing to the dream demon.

*How could I only just now realize this?* Back in her quarters, Saintess Tania frowned at the purplish demon inside the door.

"Now you make no effort to hide yourself? Did you not witness my plight?"

Mordes shrugged. "That's precisely why I confined myself to this room."

"How thoughtful." She glared.

"I aim to please."

Tania gave up on him and went inside.

Mordes stared at her. “I noticed my force returned quite quickly."

Tania leaned her staff against the wall. "Did you take offense?"

"What happened?"

"Plenty, as I'm sure you can surmise."

"Did the humans harass you? Call you a witch for making a contract with a demon?"

Tania glanced at Mordes. The demon was fingering his own horn.

When he noticed her looking, his hand dropped. "Was a tribunal judge there? It felt like something pushed my force back to me."

Tania took off her hat and hung it up. “No. You must have been feeling my own divine energy.”

Mordes narrowed his eyes. "Why? Did you need to use divine magic?"

"Do not ask me. Uncovering secrets is your forte."

Mordes scowled. Not knowing things was a foreign concept to him. He'd always had the power to uncover any secrets he wanted to learn. He could read anyone's thoughts, except the woman who subjugated him. She was taunting him, and she knew it.

Suddenly, Tania looked up. “About that woman from earlier...”

Mordes leaned back, purposefully ignoring her.

Tania's eyes narrowed. "So it's true?"

"I know not what the holy saintess asks. I am but a lonely incubus.”

"I saw her, you know. In the Veil of Darkness,” Tania said.

Mordes wrinkled his nose and rested his elbow on the sofa. "Then what more knowledge do you seek?"

"An explanation. Being human, I cannot discern everything your power reveals."

Mordes sighed, annoyed. "Which is why you mustn't misuse my force. Its power is too great for a human to wield, especially when traveling to the spiritual realm-”

Tania scoffed. "You're being churlish. All I'm asking for is an explanation. Must I take your power again to see for myself?"

Damn the contract. The demon yanked on his own hair. “What do you wish to know? I am not omniscient. I can only reveal that which someone tries to conceal. Secrets. I cannot perceive truths that humans themselves do not understand."

The saintess nodded and asked her question.

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"My lord?"

Killian opened the door of the dungeons to find Rieta waiting for him. He looked her up and down. "Pity to see your new dress ruined."

He flicked a hand at a knight waiting nearby. The knight handed him an umbrella and left.

"Let us go inside," he said. "We'll order you a new dress from the shop. The maids will help you dress from now on."

Rieta peered at him. “You must dine, my lord." Shadows danced over her face as he raised the umbrella over her head.

"Perhaps those pastries you mentioned will serve as a late morsel," Killian said.

Rieta shook her head. “But you abstained from lunch too. And surely you have matters to discuss with the saintess."

*Saintess Tania*. Killian sighed. Neither Rieta nor the saintess would have eaten a proper supper. Eventually, he nodded. “Then the saintess shall join us in the dining hall.”

Rieta bowed and stepped back. But Killian lifted the umbrella over her again and jerked his head. "Come."

Rieta walked to his side. Killian held the umbrella over her head. "Mind your dress."

Rieta grasped her skirts and held them up as she followed him into the dining room. The torches cast shadows across her face, concealing her expression.

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After the three of them finished eating, Rieta bowed farewell and retired to her room.

"The time the demon wakes,” Killian smirked. “I didn't realize what that meant."

Saintess Tania grinned. “Will you have me burnt to death?"

"I have no desire to mimic my father's ways."

The saintess tilted her head and laughed. “Nor do I, for my mother has passed from this life."

"Then why mention the burning? I spoke in jest."

"Humor is not your strong suit."

"Nor is it yours, saintess." To be fair, he should not joke about this topic. Not as the son of Emperor Astenfeld the First.

Once, the divine kingdom of Lamenta was a small, peaceful land, run by shaman queens. But the empire feared Lamenta's power. Twenty years ago, when Killian was only an imperial prince, his father Emperor Astenfeld invaded Lamenta.

By that time, Emperor Astenfeld had subjugated most of the continent. Lamenta had never been a military power, and they were a small nation. Esahilde, the queen at the time, bent her knee quickly to avoid war.

No one expected the horrific tragedy that followed her choice.

"It was a tragic affair," the saintess murmured.

"Unimaginable," Killian agreed. “And a disgrace to His Majesty's previous conquests."

Esahilde sent Princess Beatrice to offer Emperor Astenfeld the crown of Lamenta. It was supposed to be a symbol of their surrender and friendship. Instead, the princess was accused of witchcraft, and arrested for attempted assassination of the emperor.

She was burned alive. All because Rutenfeld, a divine cleric and Killian's uncle, discovered powerful demons traveling with Princess Beatrice. As far as the empire knew at the time, only dark sorcerers could use demons or their magic.

“You acknowledge your father's sins quite readily,” Tania said.

"Who am I to refute something His Majesty himself believed?"

Tania arched a brow. "I heard His Majesty's brother was responsible.”

"The fault lies with my father alone. He trusted his brother's judgment; that was his mistake.”

"Your morals are surprisingly proper."

"Not really." Killian shrugged.

"Then, frankly, your uncle acted rashly.”

Killian smirked. Whether it was rash or not, his father destroyed Lamenta anyway. And ever since, the empire had been paying the price for burning the divine princess. They didn't know Lamentan royalty had the power to make contracts with or subjugate demons.

Even Rutenfeld, a talented cleric, was unaware that Lamenta's princesses possessed powerful divine energy. And although Killian had since heard the stories, he hadn't believed it until he saw the saintess with his own eyes.

Killian carefully watched the beloved saintess, who had devoted herself to healing the empire for twenty years. Even now, he felt uncertain of her ability. "Wasn't the power to subjugate demons unique to the Lamentan royals?" he asked.

"Yes. But I am of Lenahan birth, and I knew my parents before their passing. There are no secrets buried in my lineage.”

Killian nodded.

The last queen of Lamenta had cursed Emperor Astenfeld the First, yet the emperor still honored her as divine. He'd held memorial services for her and Princess Beatrice every year, on a similar scale to the mourning rites for his own beloved daughter.

But Killian didn't believe in gods or fate. He thought of curses as silly nonsense. Magic and disease were the true harms. "Mordes obeys your bidding?" he asked.

"Generally," the saintess replied. “I can influence him, but my control is not absolute."

Killian frowned. "That gives me little confidence."

"I cannot divulge more details without revealing trade secrets." Saintess Tania paused, then added, "Mordes cannot run amok in the human realm without my consent. He must obey my decrees. And anytime the moon grows weak, I can summon him and borrow his power."

Killian tapped the table. “That is different from the royal family of Lamenta's subjugation, then. Were their demons not bound to obey Lamentans at all times?"

"Yes. The royals of Lamenta wielded a number of powerful demons," the saintess replied. "But the royal bloodline was bound to the same demons for generations. I can only assume that their covenant permitted more control because they paid far more than I have so far."

A better contract. A higher price. Killian fixed his gaze on the saintess. "Were you not obliged to pay for your covenant in strife or human lifeforce?"

Saintess Tania fell silent for a moment. “No, Your Highness. I am fortunate, for Mordes is cut from a finer cloth than most demons. I cannot assuage all of your concerns, but I can swear I took no part in dark sorcery."

"Very well."

The saintess tilted her head. “Have you studied dark magic or demonology? You seem well-versed in these matters."

*Surely not.* Killian chuckled. He did know a little about Lamenta, but only because of his father. He was twelve when his father conquered Lamenta. Old enough to overhear the whispers and piece together answers.

The Lamentan royals' secrets had become the Lillefeiam family's secrets too. Nobody explained the situation to Killian in detail, but no one lied to him about it either. After all, his father's life was on the line.

*And Father didn't believe he'd last very long.* Not after Esahilde's curse.

But rather than answering the saintess, he rested his chin on one hand. "What about the story of you extinguishing Mordes?"

"It was a lie," Tania answered.

"How bold you are."

"Far from it, Your Highness. I feel as anxious as when I faced the inquisitor in my youth."

"How did you subjugate him?” Killian asked.

"He swore fealty to me if I stayed my hand," she replied.

"But then, why claim you destroyed him? Why not say you sent it back to hell?"

"I feared that one day, some dark sorcerer might attempt to summon Mordes. He wouldn't be able to respond, of course. It might cast doubts on me if I claimed he was in hell."

"So you were anticipating future trouble,” Killian murmured.

"Well, I am quite fond of living. And it wasn't like I had much of a reputation at the time.” Tania shrugged. “But now, I've long since missed my opportunity to confess. I cannot, without being branded a liar and a dark sorcerer."

Killian couldn't disagree. Everyone thought only dark magic users could control demons. Even Killian, who knew about the Lamentan royals' unique power, had doubted the saintess at first.

It was ironic. The saintess everyone revered, along with the queen and princess of a powerful divine kingdom, all used demon powers.

No one would believe it.

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# EVERYONE HAS SECRETS (16)

"When you pass from this world, will the demon be freed?" Killian asked.

"Yes. Which is why I'm trying to convince him not to wreak havoc after I'm gone. I've been educating him in respect, and gently coercing him. But should I fail, I trust you will see to the matter."

Killian scowled. "You think me very obliging.”

"Our fates are aligned, Your Highness. I ask you to take care of it, that's all."

Killian suddenly burst into laughter. "That explains why you were so eager to explain yourself to me."

"How could I conceal it any longer? I value my life greatly, Your Highness. I dare not lie to you. I chose honesty over excuses because I believed the truth would reach you faster."

Killian leaned back and crossed his arms. “I would not have asked if I knew the answer came with such an obligation attached."

“Surely you would not want a high-class demon roaming free upon my death."

"Is that a threat?" Killian asked. “No one can kill you without paying the price, is that what you're saying?"

“Of course not. I implore you, that's all. I do not wish to leave destruction in my wake."

Killian paused thoughtfully. "So to subjugate a demon, one only needs to promise to let it live? How does that work?"

"Industry secrets again," she replied.

“I thought you said our fates were aligned."

Saintess Tania shrugged. “Well, lower demons are not eligible for subjugation. Demons need to be strong enough to converse with you, in order to withstand the process. And you need enough divine power not to be consumed in the process. It's not easy."

"Could anyone other than you withstand it?"

The saintess hesitated. “As arrogant as it sounds, I am likely the only person capable of subjugating a demon in this kingdom."

"Hmm." Killian rubbed his chin. “And Mordes is your only servant? The royals of Lamenta ruled many demons.”

"Mages without Aeulatian blood can barely manage one."

Killian's eyebrows rose. "Their priestesses were that powerful?"

"Yes, but not only that. The covenant was sealed with their blood. The demons were bound to the entire Aculatian lineage, not each individual. The bond was foundational; they were born with it, so it required very little of their divine energy. That's why they were strong enough to seal all demons from our realm."

Killian huffed and leaned back. “But when their bloodline ended...”

"The high-class demons bound to them were all released.” The saintess nodded.

It was indeed an enormous mistake. After the emperor killed the princess, Esahilde was consumed by rage and sorrow. According to the rumors, she cursed Emperor Astenfeld, using blue blood in a magic circle, and died.

As she died, an enormous blaze devoured the Lamentan palace. Fire demons performed a requiem meant for Aelutia. The flames spread across all of Lamenta. Earth turned to lava, and red columns of light pierced the sky.

Everything within the palace was consumed. People living close to it fled. The flames continued to burn for months on end, though they never escaped the palace walls.

By the time the fire died, everything within the palace walls had been reduced to ashes. All that remained was a column of red light piercing the sky, visible from anywhere on the continent.

The small nation of Lamenta collapsed. As it did, the real catastrophe began.

Many powerful, high-class demons were freed from their shackles in Lamenta. They ventured forth, determined to ruin the human world. They feasted on human anguish, despair, anger, and death. Evil ran rampant across the earth.

Fire demons, water demons, dream demons, and plague demons haunted the continent. Fires and floods erupted, people went mad from nightmares, and the plague consumed entire cities.

The human world descended into chaos.

People blamed Lamenta's fall for the disasters, claiming Queen Esahilde had cursed the emperor and the entire continent as she died. Their suspicions weren't far from the truth.

The empire started to fall into ruin. And there was one more imperial secret that both Killian and Saintess Tania knew.

Emperor Astenfeld's body was invaded by an incubus. The demon used its power before anyone discovered it, and all of the empire's clerics became hysterical.

Once a demon fused with a human's body, it could not be removed without killing the human. The emperor ordered his clerics to keep silent and used every method he could to stop the demon's encroachment.

But he could only slow it down.

The cunning incubus assumed the appearance of the dead empress, eating away at the emperor's life. Nightmares of grief and pain haunted the emperor every evening.

But no one realized a dream demon was devouring the emperor. It was easy to hide, given how many other problems distracted people.

The plague consumed a third of the empire's population within five years. Even Princess Hilsrain caught it. Public sentiment toward the new empire fell into the gutter along with their quality of life.

Terrified people fell back on superstition. They hung Princess Beatrice's portrait on every door, and everyone condemned cruel Emperor Astenfeld. The entire continent grieved Lamenta's destruction. They wrote epics about the lost princess. They prayed for her return.

In their stories, the empire was always the villain.

At first, the emperor's advisors tried to suppress public sentiment. They urged the emperor to blame the fallen kingdom, but he refused to make excuses. He accepted the blame.

Emperor Astenfeld knew his war had caused strife for ordinary people. He was no innocent target, even if the demons were the true cause of the problems.

His people faced a horrible disaster, dying left and right. Nobles might believe his excuses, but ordinary people wouldn't care. Astenfeld refused to dirty the divine princess's name or to accuse her of witchcraft and demon magic.

He accepted his fate. Even after he lost his only daughter, Princess Hilsrain, to the plague, he blamed only himself. After all, there would have been no plague if Lamenta didn't fall.

Astenfeld worked hard to suppress the demons with his clerics, but he also protected Lamenta and Princess Beatrice. He honored them, admitting his fault. He advised people to hang up the princess's portrait, and he held grand public blessing ceremonies every month.

But despite all of his efforts, the disasters continued to pile on.

The emperor called for all scholars, ancient magicians, and even dark sorcerers. He offered rewards to anyone who could find the source of the curse. Finally, his research paid off. He learned the exact wording of the queen's curse.

(Astenfeld's children will force him to cry tears of blood.)

As befitted a queen of her power and knowledge, she was too smart to curse him directly, or even to simply direct a demon to harm him. No. Her curse was far more complex.

Temples everywhere held blessing ceremonies for the Lamentan kingdom, begging for forgiveness. They offered purification ceremonies to the Lamentan gods.

Many new clerics flocked to the fold, like Saintess Tania, who was in her twenties back then. With the help of these new devotees, many demons were destroyed or sent back to hell.

All the while, the emperor hid the fact that he'd been infected by a demon. Only his closest clerics, Killian, a few essential household figures, and Empress Aversati knew.

The emperor fought the incubus every time he slept. Sometimes it took so much effort that in waking hours, he could not leave the palace. He always managed to show his face when necessary, but at night, Killian heard him calling for Empress Ariadne, his mother.

Grief and despair swallowed the emperor. He was slowly dying.

After five years of hard work, the plague finally quieted. Peace returned. Public sentiment began to turn around. Many adapted to the empire, enjoying the fruits of unity. They believed the queen's curse had lifted.

But a year later, the incident that made Killian the worst savage in the empire occurred.

Now, Killian considered the saintess over his wine glass.

"Do you believe Queen Esahilde's curse is gone?” she asked.

He shrugged. "The temples say it is. I'm not an expert, so what do I know? I'd rather ask your opinion." The exiled imperial prince tilted his wine glass toward the saintess, smirking.

One year after the last plague ended, Killian, the oldest imperial prince and heir to the throne, killed his half-brothers William and Salerion, tossing their bodies at the emperor's feet.

Afterward, the three greatest temples in the empire claimed the emperor's curse had run its course. What more terrible fate could await him, beyond losing all his sons: two to death and one to madness?

But rumors continued to circulate. A powerful and divine queen had given her life in exchange for her curse. Could it really be lifted already?

Unbeknownst to the world, the demon continued to encroach on the emperor. After Killian's incident, grief further weakened the emperor, until he could only stay awake for an hour a day.

Even so, surviving twenty years with a demon in his body was an incredible feat. The emperor still hadn't fully lost his mind, despite being haunted by nightmares for two decades.

Whether the curse had run its course by now, however, no one could say.

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# EVERYONE HAS SECRETS (17)

"On that note, Saintess, I seek your advice." Killian looked up. "I believe Axias needs a temple, but I fear the powers that be will not approve."

"I'm not sure," Saintess Tania replied. “Even I don't claim to know the gods' wishes."

“Hmm.” Killian put down his wine glass. “Then would you aid me in establishing a temple in Axias? I will compensate you."

The saintess tilted her head. "While I welcome any lucrative work, I am a wandering soul. I am not familiar with the settled ways of temple life."

"If you could recommend a trustworthy cleric, that would be very helpful. I also wonder how we could entice clergy members to join."

Tania made a circle with her thumb and forefinger to indicate coins. "There's nothing greater than this, as far as I know."

Killian smirked. “An answer fit for your temperament."

"You flatter me.” Saintess Tania maintained a straight face. "Perhaps you could ask those you already employ? Rieta would surely rise to the occasion."

Killian's eyebrows shot up. "I keep my professional and personal lives separate."

In response, Tania just stared at Killian.

The archduke cleared his throat. "If Rieta wants to help, that would be ideal. But I won't force her."

The saintess continued to watch Killian, then nodded. “I do not require compensation, for my services will hardly be of use. But I do have a favor to ask in return." She removed a cracked, worn dagger from her sleeve.

Killian's eyes widened. At first, he thought it might be the dagger from Irene's room until he remembered he kept that one. Still, the saintess's blade looked very similar.

"I need to investigate this object," she said.

Killian picked it up and examined the ruined dagger. *What made it crack like this?* He concealed his emotions, glancing at the saintess. "What do you need to know?"

“I believe it was used in a magic ritual, but even Mordes could not discover its secrets."

Killian frowned and narrowed his eyes. “Perhaps ancient dark sorcery?”

"If only." Saintess Tania studied the dagger. “This is a new and terrible art. Someone summoned a demon and sealed it within this blade. When it was used to stab a human, the demon seized that host. I'd hoped this knife was a one-time accident, but alas, it seems whoever made it has replicated their morbid spell."

The saintess lowered her voice. "I need to know who forged such an evil thing, and why."

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*It must have taken someone a long time—and many horrible practices—to achieve this.* Killian looked at the broken dagger. *Experiments...*

As the plague restricted travel and left many towns decimated, it would have been easy to disguise demonic hosts as plague victims. Killian returned to his room and opened a drawer, retrieving another cracked dagger-the one Rachel found the day after the Havitus incident.

*This was found outside of the bell tower.* He'd thought it strange at the time. It was rusted beyond functionality, yet it had blood on it.

*The bell tower.* Where they held the blessing ceremony, above the crowds. It was also the first place the demon appeared in the archbishop's body.

*How many were there that day?* Killian had long wondered about the weapon: the blood on the cracked blade meant it had been used. But no chimera or undead would have bothered with a weapon-they attacked with claws or teeth. And who would carry a rusty dagger?

He hadn't asked Havitus Temple to investigate. They were a mess already, and the empress's plant might overhear anything they told him. So he'd brought the blade back here instead. He showed Vetere, but the man didn't know anything about it.

Killian had put the blade away until he could find any related clues. Now...

*Experiments. A rite to make something evil.* Killian shut his eyes and gritted his teeth. *The empress. How far is she willing to go?*

He'd have preferred if she just attacked him with a plain blade instead. Killian sank into his chair, scowling. He needed to think rationally. *Could the empress do something like this without the emperor finding out? He was no fool.*

Even if he only managed to wake for an hour a day, he must have known the empress was up to something. In a personal fight between her and Killian, the emperor would stay out of it. But he would never have allowed her to cross this line.

*Something like this couldn't be crafted in a day or two. It must have taken a long time.* And it would've required the sacrifice of many innocent lives. Whoever made this was wealthy and connected.

*Could this be the empress's work alone?* Surely His Majesty hadn't anticipated the disaster at Havitus Temple. *Does the empress have this many people on her side?*

Not that he knew. What kind of lunatic invested vast amounts of time and money into such an evil pursuit? Who would support that woman's crazed thirst for revenge?

Killian didn't often get tired, but tonight he rubbed his face, suddenly exhausted. As one question was answered, a dozen more sprang up. His head hadn't hurt this much even when the imperial family kicked him out thirteen years ago.

But now the Archduke of Axias had a lot to protect. Many lives hung on his shoulders. He'd take the saintess's story into account, but he needed to prioritize his problems first.

Killian dragged a hand down his face, thinking about the work piling up. *The western territory. The plague. The destroyed East Annex. Irene's interrogation. The dagger. The dangerous magical experiments.*

*Havitus Temple. Empress Aversati. And...*

Killian sighed and shoved the dagger back into the drawer. Next to it, a letter caught his eye. Killian slowly picked it up.

*There is no immediate need for me to go home. I shall wait for you, Sire.*

*- Rieta Tristi*

Killian chuckled. This woman had given him more work and headaches than almost any other. But he could not stop rereading her pretty name, in that delicate handwriting. “Rieta Tristi...”

Eron, busy making Killian's bed in the adjoining chamber, must have overheard. He ducked into the study. "Shall I fetch her, Sire?"

Killian barked out a laugh. He was about to say no when he glanced at the clock. She wouldn't be asleep yet. “Have you assigned maids to care for her?"

"Yes, Sire. As you requested.”

He could ask Rieta whether Saintess Tania had warned her to keep the saint's secret. He could also check if her clothes fit properly. That wouldn't be crossing the line. *And I'd get to see her face one more time.*

No one could blame him for wanting an extra glimpse of something so beautiful.

"Very well. Tell her to bring some pastries."

The steward's eyes widened, but he hid his surprise and bowed. Killian opened his mouth, about to add that she should come in one of her new dresses, not a nightgown. But he shut his mouth again a second later. Surely she'd already know to do that.

When Rieta entered, however, Killian shot her a disgruntled look. She wasn't wearing a new dress or her new nightclothes. Instead, she'd put on her old, plain clothing.

"Where is your new dress?" he asked.

"It seemed too formal, so I changed back to this one."

Killian scowled. "If you needed a less formal garment, why not visit me in your nightgown?" He eyed her with concern. *I just wanted to make her pretty again.* Saintess Tania had treated her wounds, but her outfit was a mess.

Rieta stood there in silence, her expression unchanging. She couldn't help not thinking to reach for a dress she'd only owned for a few hours. Besides...

*Anna.* Rieta's eyes welled up again, thinking of the girl she loved. As she had been ever since the night's events. *Is it a sin to hate someone?* She'd never have guessed that ill-wishing could cause someone's death.

Although she knew Irene hadn't done it on purpose, Rieta couldn't help resenting her. She'd treasured Anna.

*Please. Don't die, Anna. If you heal, I'll...*

Rieta's throat tightened. After feeling Irene's emotions like her own, she couldn't hate her. She could still recall Irene's desperation and tears inside the Veil of Darkness.

*Am I crazy? No. I'm only hurting myself.* She'd opted to punish herself, not anyone else—at least, so she thought. She didn't realize she was a pawn. She'd thought she could handle the problem on her own.

She didn't realize she wasn't working infatuation magic, but something much darker. Not until it was too late.

Rieta had felt her panic and despair when Irene finally realized she'd been hoodwinked. It was when she saw Anna on her sickbed. She'd guessed, all at once, that the dagger was something terrible.

*Please. Don't die, Anna.* Irene had given up on her magic that day. But it didn't help. Anna died anyway, and her death shocked Irene into silence.

Consumed by fear and guilt, she'd planned to confess everything to His Royal Highness. But the saintess discovered her dagger before she could confess.

And after that, she couldn't deny the truth any longer: she had killed an innocent girl.

Hysterical, she'd planned to plunge the dagger into her own heart the moment Killian finally looked at her.

Rieta couldn't despise Irene, even though her spite killed a child. Because anyone could hate. Rieta had hated people too. Who would imagine such an emotion could destroy lives?

The saintess had been merciless in front of Irene, condemning her. But when Tania and the archduke were alone, she'd begged for leniency*. Please, go easy on her. She didn't surrender to the darkness in the end. Her crime was being blinded by love and used by a demon.*

Irene could easily have given her own body—or even Rieta's-to the demon. If she had, Saintess Tania would've had to battle a high-level demon inside a host.

If not for the demon, no matter how much Irene hated the ladies in the East Annex, no harm would have come to them beyond poisonous works or evil glares. She might even have befriended Anna in the end. Anna had treated Irene kindly, even though she didn't like her.

Sorrow filled Rieta's heart. Her eyes welled with tears.

Killian noticed and froze, panicked. "Forgive me, I did not intend to insult you." He reached for her, then thought better of it and lowered his hand, gripping his desk instead.

He'd thought she was comfortable enough around him to take his tantrum as a joke. But he'd been insensitive. He'd forgotten how much she'd suffered already.

*Damn that abbot. Damn Casarius.* She probably thought Killian was just as bad. Just another difficult superior she needed to put on a good face to impress.

Rieta bit her lip and turned away, trying to hold back her tears. But she couldn't. Instead, she wiped her cheeks hurriedly. As she did, her bundle of pastries rustled.

His Royal Highness had asked her to bring cookies, then demanded to know why she didn't wear a dress. He seemed to have already forgotten Irene, now locked in the dungeons. *How can he be so unaffected by her plight?*

Just then, Rieta thought of someone she had almost forgotten. Someone with a very different experience than her, yet the person she felt closest to in the world.

63

# EVERYONE HAS SECRETS (18)

Killian hesitated for a moment, then pulled out a chair for Rieta. "Take a seat."

He sat behind the desk as Rieta floated over like a ghost and sank into the chair.

Killian placed his hands on the desk. “I've become a cruel supervisor."

Rieta's teary eyes immediately cleared.

Killian winced. He knew he had a distant way of speaking, but he didn't realize he was this bad.

Then again, Killian had murdered his half-brothers and been thrown into exile just as ladies his age debuted into society. Thirteen years later, he'd finally returned to Axias as a complete outsider. He'd become violent to survive, but when had he gotten callous?

"I'm sorry if I hurt you. I was being insensitive."

Rieta raised her eyes to look at him.

Killian rubbed his forehead. "I misspoke. I just...I'm sorry."

"It's nothing, Sire." Rieta shook her head, but her expression still looked off to Killian.

He studied her closely. *I will never joke so insensitively again.* She should wear whatever clothes she wanted. He'd buy her comfortable outfits for every day of the week if she wanted. He opened his mouth, about to say so, but Rieta's expression clouded further.

Flustered, Killian ran a hand through his hair.

"Master, I've prepared tea," called Eron from the doorway. "Come in."

The elderly steward pushed a cart inside and went about setting up tea on the table. But Killian asked him to bring it to the desk instead. He wanted to maintain more distance between himself and Rieta, for her comfort.

Eron made room on the desk. As he poured, he smiled. "Your Lordship doesn't normally partake in refreshments so late. I trust it is for the lady's sake."

Killian flinched. *Lady?* Did Eron always call Rieta lady?

Once he finished, Eron bowed and took his leave. Rieta placed the pastries she'd brought onto the tray, making it rattle. Then she nudged it toward him.

He hesitated, feeling foolish. But he couldn't say why, exactly. Staring at Rieta, Killian picked up a cookie and bit into it. *Delicious.*

But Rieta didn't touch the pastries. Meanwhile, Killian couldn't help nearly finishing the entire plate. He wasn't sure if it was the flavor or the awkwardness that kept him eating.

Finally, Rieta broke the silence. “The ladies of the East Annex...what do they mean to you, my lord?"

Killian studied the soft-spoken woman before him. "What do you mean?"

Rieta lowered her gaze. "Are they all knightmaidens?"

"I invited you to join the order," Killian said slowly. “But you're still an outsider. This is a confidential matter."

"I see." Rieta paused, then cleared her throat. "Did you have a lover in the East Annex?"

This time Killian fell silent. A lover? Not at present. In the past, yes, but he hadn't summoned anyone to his chambers in years. *Dammit. What is she really asking?*

For some reason, he didn't want to admit that he'd taken lovers in the past. "Why do you ask?" he said.

Rieta hesitated. "Was there any hope...for Irene?"

Killian felt like he'd been struck in the head. He took a moment, lips parted. *What is she implying?*

Rieta's expression darkened even further. She fidgeted in her seat. "If no one in the East Annex was your lover, then...isn't that deceptive? To the ladies who joined in the hopes of winning your heart?"

No one had ever dared to interfere in his private life before. Killian froze, unable to formulate a response.

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"Saintess Tania. About Mordes's power. You said it could be detrimental to a human's mind, yes?" Rieta asked.

"I did." The saintess nodded.

"How detrimental, exactly?"

"In extreme cases, it can make someone go insane. Why do you ask?"

But Rieta did not reply. She simply nodded calmly, finally understanding. She'd fallen victim to Mordes's power.

She had gone insane.

\*\*\*

*Deception?* Killian stared at Rieta. Of course he'd deceived people, he couldn't deny that. He'd gathered ordinary women-women who didn't know how the order worked-so that to the outside world, they'd seem to be his mistresses.

But the relationships were reciprocal. Each side got something. He'd

protected the East Annex ladies from danger. He treated them fairly: they could leave whenever they wanted, or stay as long as they wished. He gave them generous allowances.

*But who really stayed for the money?* They weren't prostitutes. He didn't pay them for services rendered. Why did so many stay? *What did they want? Did I deceive them?*

Killian spent that whole night buried in work, fueled by his agony. He couldn't stop thinking about the women who'd come into and out of his life. All the women he'd watched cry. And of course, the one woman who agonized him the most right now...

\*\*\*

The next day, Saintess Tania left for the western territory to settle some issues after last night. Killian, for his part, prepared to leave on patrol. He was taking Rieta today, so he stopped by to prepare her.

But the moment he saw her, he forgot everything he'd been about to say.

Rieta's blonde tresses were braided like always. She awaited him with her face demurely lowered, dressed in a white shirt and leather trousers. When he approached, she raised her clear blue eyes to his.

He blinked. *Right.* He'd warned her to wear pants since they'd be riding far. Killian rubbed his face, sighing. *I might have made a mistake buying her this outfit.*

"Raise your arms." Killian undid his cloak and wrapped it around Rieta's waist.

Rieta accepted the skirt-like garment without understanding why. Then Killian helped her onto the horse and mounted behind her.

"I have given much thought to what you said last night,” he murmured as they set off.

Rieta's face drained of blood. *My insanity, you mean?*

"You spoke true," he said.

Rieta's soul left her body. She turned to look at him. Killian seemed more tired than usual.

When their eyes met, he shoved a hat on her head. “I shall make amends.”

Rieta blinked. Then understanding flooded her. His Lordship was also exposed to Mordes's power. He must be confused too. Unsure how to respond, Rieta placed the blessed sacer around his neck.

Killian instinctively looked at her neck. It peeked through the snow-white shirt collar, bare. She wasn't wearing the necklace he gave her. His brow lowered sulkily. “Bless me,” he said curtly and bowed.

Rieta kissed his forehead. He must still be under the effect of Mordes's power. How scary. She prayed for him in silence.

"I can't make this decision alone,” Killian said, as they waited for the castle gates to open. "Both you and Saintess Tania make valid points. I'll ask what the family of the deceased wants."

Rieta blinked. *The family of the deceased?* There was no time to ask what he meant.

Killian spurred the horse into a gallop.

\*\*\*

That evening, Killian spoke to each of the ladies of the East Annex, one by one. He asked them how they wanted to see Irene punished. He also asked a few if they still loved him.

They all laughed and replied frankly. He apologized, surprising them. For the first time, Killian held deep conversations with the women who loved him.

Tears welled in some of their eyes as they spoke. Some said they were alright, but offered bittersweet smiles. Realizing all of these women had stayed by his side, even after his affection for them disappeared, Killian apologized again.

Finally, he told them he hoped they would leave. He wanted them to find their own happiness.

None of the women answered right away. He told them they had a month until the East Annex would be cleaned up.

Once he finished speaking to all of the women, Killian met with Rieta again. "What punishment will Irene face?" Rieta asked.

"I'll decide after discussing it with Anna's family," Killian replied.

\*\*\*

In her locked cell, Irene prayed for death.

Outside the cell, Helen lingered, glaring at her. Of all the women in the East Annex, Helen had treasured Anna the most. Her voice sounded emotionless as she addressed Irene. "Death would be the easy escape," she said. “You must live and atone for your sins."

\*\*\*

When Irene's father, Count Schepelmann, learned what his daughter had done, he was infuriated. He'd already disowned her for muddying his reputation—lying and running to Axias, breaking all of her marriage proposals.

Now he raged, claiming he'd never had a daughter at all. He told the archduke to sell the foolish girl to a slave trader.

But Countess Schepelmann, Irene's mother, visited the archduke on her own. She pleaded for mercy, apologizing for the death of young Anna. In tears, she offered to pay a hefty sum in compensation.

But Killian snorted, his expression cold. “Do you think you have more wealth than I do?" With that, he stalked out of the room, leaving the countess alone.

Leonard worried about His Lordship's volatile temper and attempted to handle the matter. "Anna was a prized mistress he treasured..."

But he didn't handle it very well.

Countess Schepelmann ignored Leonard and requested a visit with Irene. Then she spoke to Saintess Tania, offering to establish a foundation for children struck by the plague. She promised both she and Irene would devote themselves to caring for others full-time.

She also offered the loan of her marble quarry and silver mine, free of charge. It would help in building the temple Killian planned in Axias. The countess offered to dedicate it to the girl who had died.

The countess's entourage chittered, shocked at how much she'd offered. Saintess Tania had incredible bargaining skills.

Finally, after he spoke to the ladies of the East Annex again, the Archduke of Axias accepted the countess's offer.

64

# EVERYONE HAS SECRETS (19)

Regrettably, Irene's interrogation yielded no clear results. She described the man who sold her the dagger and the basilisk blood—an old sorcerer- but he wore a black hood, his face concealed. He appeared to her in isolated locations, with no other witnesses.

At first, she'd ignored him. But after he told her Mage Rieta had stolen the archduke's heart with infatuation magic, she'd fallen for his tricks.

Following the sorcerer's instructions, she waited until Killian and Rieta left for Havitus Temple. Then she left money in her pouch. It disappeared overnight, replaced by the dagger and vial of blood. She had no idea when he'd made the switch.

A note accompanied the dagger, warning her to draw the magic circles in her room that night before anyone discovered her secret.

She almost threw the vial and dagger away, scared and shaken. But in the end, she couldn't resist. She did check the library first, but the circles he'd instructed her to draw just looked like simple circles to conceal magic energy.

She told herself it wasn't dangerous. Then she locked her door and drew the circles.

Afterward, she ran outside, hoping to encounter the sorcerer again.

He found her several hours later. She protested, saying she'd changed her mind. But he told her it was too late. She was already his accomplice. Besides, didn't she want to win the archduke's heart? All she needed to do to complete the spell was cut Killian with the dagger.

Terrified, Irene refused. So the sorcerer suggested she cut herself first, so she could understand the effects.

That, Irene accepted.

Saintess Tania and Mordes watched Irene's interrogation, confirming she told no lies. Afterward, Killian ordered Irene to roam the castle grounds alone for a few days, secretly shadowed by a handful of knights.

But the sorcerer must have caught on because he didn't appear.

Her interrogation over, a carriage came to take Irene away. The knights escorted her from the tower in a plain black robe. Her red, curly hair had lost its usual shine, now tied under a gray bonnet.

Rieta alone came to see her off. She watched Irene in silence, bowing at the waist when the other woman looked her way.

Irene put down her luggage and opened her handbag. She removed something and offered it to Rieta: a white silk ribbon, with green embroidery. "I do not wish to reject your gift, but I must leave everything I've acquired here behind. I promised."

Rieta looked at the ribbon. It had been unwrapped, but it was still folded neatly and tied with string. Unused. Rieta let out a weak laugh. Then she took it and gently undid the string. "I only delivered it."

She freed the ribbon from its ties and smoothed its folds. "The gift was not from me, but another." She held the ribbon out to Irene and stepped forward.

Irene flinched away, but Rieta didn't stop. She came right up to Irene and tied to ribbon to her wrist.

"Take it with you, for the one who gave it is not here," Rieta said.

Irene turned, as if ready to sprint away. But then she stilled, as Rieta's hand rested on her wrist. She looked uncertainly from Rieta to the ribbon and back.

"Find happiness," Rieta murmured. “The giver would have wanted you to."

Irene froze.

A little while later, she looked at Axias Manor one last time. She'd spent two short years in this gray castle. It still held the man she loved. Her gaze lingered on the eastern side, wondering if he was watching her departure.

Then she shook her head. "I fear that would be rather shameless." With that, she boarded her carriage with trembling hands.

The beautiful ribbon fluttered on her thin wrist. She climbed the steps. Right as she was about to step inside, she turned back. “Your blessing was appreciated," she murmured, her voice a mere whisper in the wind.

\*\*\*

"Sire, you wish to disband the East Annex ladies?" Leonard asked.

Killian inclined his head. "All but the knightmaidens.”

Leonard looked flabbergasted. "Will that not cause trouble, my lord?" The knight order that resided in the East Annex had been hidden among the women the world believed to be his mistresses.

If his so-called mistresses all left, the remaining knights, soldiers, and mercenaries would be conspicuous. “Without civilian women to confuse enemy spies, it will be difficult to conceal the knightmaidens' identities.”

There were a few women who'd joined the East Annex to escape dangerous pasts, but otherwise, the remainder had all trained in martial arts and thievery. It would be obvious at once who Killian's knightmaidens were.

The people who protected him could become his weakness instead.

But Killian remained calm. “It does not matter. The survivors of Havitus will testify as to what they witnessed. Our secret is already out, or will be soon."

They'd already managed to keep their plans quiet for longer than he'd expected anyway.

Leonard thought of Lectus Eustio's face as Lectus said, *It's my duty.*

Killian smirked. "Of course, we can still use my prized mistresses as an excuse. Who cares if rumors circulate about all my mistresses being talented swordswomen?" It all depended on how he acted from now on.

He sank into his chair and crossed his arms. “Fewer people will awkwardly drool over the mistresses now. In fact, this might not be a bad decision."

Leonard faltered. "But won't this expose the women of the East Annex to more danger than ever?"

Killian laughed and tilted his head. “Who are you worried about?”

Leonard clamped his mouth shut. Honestly, he worried more for their enemies than the women. If anyone attacked, the knightmaidens would be forced to massacre their opponents.

"I never planned for us to hide forever. That's why I'm only keeping those who can protect themselves from danger.” Killian paused. "Well, those are additional considerations, anyway."

He picked up a folio of papers and began to read. “I've concealed these gifted women for far too long. Even the finest sword will rust when it is never used."

Leonard's eyes widened. "Then..."

Killian nodded. “Henceforth, the knightmaidens shall train with your men. But maintain some discretion, for now."

"Yes, my lord."

Suddenly, a black-haired woman poked her head out of a window above his study. Leonard grabbed his sword, alarmed. Until he noticed the woman's violet eyes twinkling playfully.

Killian looked at Leonard with pity. "Rachel. Take care of Leonard from now on. He's in desperate need of someone to teach him."

Rachel grinned. “I'd rather not, Sire. I have no interest in men who are intertwined with my friends.”

Leonard's gaze shot toward Rachel. Rachel stuck out her tongue. And Killian flicked a finger at Rachel.

She flicked her wrist. A dagger whistled past Killian's ear, so fast it was invisible. Yet Killian caught it in midair. Without even adjusting his grip, he flung it at a person-shaped dartboard across the room. It embedded into the wall, right at the top of the figure's head, quivering.

"He's dead. No points," Rachel said.

Killian clicked his tongue. “He probably won't die with immediate medical care. Nine points."

Leonard was shocked. "Don't play such dangerous games! Are you both mad?"

Rachel snickered, grabbed the window frame, and somersaulted into the room. She landed lightly on her feet. "A game? It's training.” She sauntered to the dartboard to retrieve her dagger.

"Rachel." Killian beckoned her.

Rachel stopped halfway across the room and turned. Killian pushed a delicate ebony box across his desk. She took it, confused.

"A gift," he said.

Suddenly, Rachel's eyes twinkled in recognition. “Can I open it, Sire?"

Killian nodded. "As you wish."

Rachel's eyes widened as she opened the box. Inside the expensive purple lining was a series of beautifully crafted silver daggers. The blades glittered in the sunlight.

"Oh, my goodness, the limited edition of Vicet!" Rachel clapped a hand over her mouth, barely containing a delighted laugh. She loved collecting daggers.

As Rachel bounced with excitement, Killian laughed. “Good work on your last rough task."

"Rough task?" Still grinning, Rachel cocked her head in confusion. "I don't remember any particularly rough tasks, but thank you, Sire.”

Killian just shrugged.

She lowered those pretty purple eyes and tucked the box under her arm. Then she grabbed the windowsill and flipped onto the roof.

Killian chuckled. He should have done this from the beginning. Plotting in secret wasn't his style. Thanks to Rieta, he'd finally remembered to take care of his former lovers and his knights.

He felt certain he was the best lord out there now.

Together, Killian and Leonard discussed where and when his men should train with the knightmaidens. By the end of their discussion, he was nodding. “Oh, and Leonard? I heard you were interested in the fourth foal from Athlan. The mare who bore Rhea?"

Leonard flinched and shook his head. “Oh, no, Sire. I only thought she might make a fine warhorse.” Leonard scowled. “Hasler has loose lips."

Killian smirked. “Go to your stables at home.”

"Sire?" Leonard's eyebrows shot up.

Killian yanked out his own dagger to toss at his target. "Give her a good name."

Leonard's face slowly reddened. He cleared his throat once, then again. When he spoke, he sounded gruff. “I have no poker face, Sire."

"I can see that."

"I shall take my leave."

"Do."

"I love you, Your Royal Highness."

Killian smirked. "I know."

Leonard laughed, saluted, and left. Alone again, Killian chuckled. He wished he'd had a lord like him, growing up.

He ought to reward himself too.

\*\*\*

After lunch, Rieta was on her way back from the library when she ran into Killian. He leaned against the wall outside the main building, between the library and the training grounds. Ivy and lavender arched overhead, and the breeze was cool. It was an excellent place to rest.

Rieta bowed respectfully. “Greetings, my lord.”

Killian watched her. A breeze blew past, shaking the branches. Birds overhead twittered and flew away. "Where are you coming from?"

"The library. Oh, thank you for allowing me to enter, Sire. Mr. Eron said you gave your permission.” Rieta dug in her pocket for the permission slip Eron had given her.

Killian chuckled. “No one in Axias Manor will stop you."

Rieta looked slightly dazed. He wondered if she was still concerned about what had happened at the quarantine camp.

"Rieta."

She looked at him from beneath her lashes, blinking.

“You don't need a permission slip. You can go wherever you want to in the castle."

Rieta fingered the piece of paper. “Oh. Um...thank you, Sire." Leaves overhead cast shadows over her pale skin. Her pure face looked as beautiful as ever, dappled in sunlight.

Suddenly, he thought he'd never seen a color as lovely. Her eyes looked closer to sky blue than blue grass. They were almost transparent, clearer than the ocean. Her blonde hair looked as fragile as spun gold on a moonlit night.

And her cheeks reminded him of the moon that rose in the daytime, pale yet still evident, no matter how brightly the sun shone.

Killian walked toward her. Rieta froze at the top of the steps, gazing down at him. He paused two steps below her.

Finally, their eyes met.

He wanted to tell her about the East Annex. He wanted to tell her everything he'd done in the past few days, and all of his thoughts besides. Instead, he murmured, "Bless me."

"Pardon?" Rieta blinked, puzzled. “Are you headed beyond the walls? Shall I also prepare to ride out?"

"No."

Her brow puckered. "Then would you care to take the necklace along?"

Killian smiled and reached for her small, pale hand, which darted to the necklace she wore. “No.”

Rieta blinked, bewildered.

Killian remembered how he'd made her cry. Thankfully, she seemed to have forgotten it now. He placed her hand on his shoulder with a faint smile. “Bless me,” he repeated.

In the distance, birds chirped. A faint breeze tickled their hair. Branches rustled. All the sounds of summer. But all Rieta could heart was her heart, pounding in her eardrums.

She leaned toward Killian, feeling awkward. Then she pressed her lips to his forehead.

65

# EVERYONE HAS SECRETS (20)

The western territory was being taken care of. The plague had finally slowed. The remaining patients were recovering.

Saintess Tania didn't linger at any one camp, but traveled through the territory, treating the worst patients. No one could keep up with her, so she worked alone.

As for Rieta, she followed Killian's path, finding things to do. Occasionally, she located small demons with her divine eye. She also blessed clerics and patients alike, and purified camps for the clerics.

Above all, Rieta blessed Killian. Again and again.

"A blessing." Killian sat with his legs crossed, reading a report on the western territory. With his free hand, he reached for Rieta.

Awkwardly, she approached and kissed his forehead, as she'd done dozens of times since they began their work. At first, this always made the clerics' eyes widen. Now, nobody batted an eyelash.

Rieta felt torn. Killian wore the sacer, so her blessings weren't strictly necessary. But His Highness claimed to need them. She couldn't tell him otherwise. How would it look if she blessed everyone but His Lordship, the man she served?

But with each passing day, she couldn't help but wonder why Killian asked for more and more blessings. She was happy to do her part, but it still seemed strange.

Finally, the end of the plague approached. The inspections, which they'd been carrying out thrice a week, grew less frequent. Killian and Rieta were free to focus on their duties at the castle.

The women of the East Annex were all declared healthy and freed from quarantine. Reconstruction on the East Annex began.

\*\*\*

One day, Rieta ran into Leonard and Hasler near the library, as she carried a pile of books. "Hello, sirs."

"Hello, Madam Tristi. Allow me to assist you." Leonard held out a hand.

"Ah, thank you."

Leonard and Hasler each took half of the books. The stack had come up to her chin, but the knights easily tucked them under their arms. "You're going to the main building, yes?" Hasler asked.

"Yes." Then Rieta reached for a book apologetically. “I-I can still take some."

But Leonard shook his head, grinning. “Please, allow us. We could use the workout."

"Are these heavy enough for a workout?” asked Hasler. He carried the books as lightly as a serving tray.

Rieta knew him from the time he'd accompanied the procession to Havitus Temple, disguised as a coachman. She smiled, unable to refuse their help. But she did thank them again, wiping sweat from her brow.

"I hope I'm not keeping you from anything important," she said as they walked. "I hear the Axias knights' investiture takes place soon?"

Most knight orders inaugurated new members in August. The Axias knights did too. Killian had been infuriatingly busy lately, between the territory patrols and plague treatments, so he'd delegated the new knights' training to Leonard.

The new inductees had already been selected. All that remained to plan was the initiation ceremony.

"We're almost done preparing," Hasler said. "We only have the final rehearsal to go. Vice-captain's almost home free."

Rieta's eyes widened. "Vice-captain?"

Hasler jerked his head at Leonard. Leonard laughed.

Rieta looked flustered. “V-Vice-Captain of the Order. I've been so rude."

"Rude?"

"I-I never used your title..."

Leonard chuckled amiably. “That's alright. You can just call me Leonard. Or Sir Knight, as you have been."

The Order of Axias had only been founded ten years ago. The archduke started it himself, training the knights and soldiers who served him. As Axias grew and the order attracted more followers, Killian finally instituted a formal structure, as per his men's joking moans.

He expressed his trust by knighting new members and promoting existing knights. Some of the members were soldiers. Others were thieves who hadn't known how to use a sword until they joined.

Somehow, his haphazard collection of knights became a real order. But his men saw no need to act lofty. Unlike other orders of knights, comprised mainly of noblemen, Axias knighted orphans, beast hunters, and veterans of the war against the barbarians.

This order acknowledged skill, rather than lineage. They did not put much stock in titles-only in proven ability.

In the end, they all served the same master.

But Rieta wasn't used to their ways. She grew up in Cevitas, a culture so hierarchical she wouldn't even dare to meet the vice-captain of the order's eyes. He'd slapped men for lesser infractions.

Her body shrank in on itself automatically now, remembering. "I will also join the order soon."

Now it was Hasler and Leonard's turn to look surprised. “You're joining the order?"

Rieta clapped a hand over her mouth. *I thought they knew. Did I just blab His Lordship's secrets?* Apparently, Killian hadn't told anyone about his offer to her yet.

But before Rieta's nerves got the better of her, the two knights grinned. "So you're coming to the East Annex. Welcome! You must still be in your grace period, yes? Have you made up your mind?"

Somewhat reassured, Rieta nodded.

Leonard whistled, and Hasler balled a fist, pumping it as he cheered.

Rieta blushed and ducked, grateful for their welcome. She followed them down the slope to the training grounds.

Hasler and Leonard slowed, both looking at the same place. When Rieta followed their gaze, she also stopped walking.

The young knights-in-training had lined up in the training grounds beside their quarters. They saluted the existing knights in formation, rehearsing the investiture ceremony.

They were all dressed casually, but they still looked imposing and disciplined.

Rieta watched the lead knight roar orders. She'd seen him once in the banquet hall, devouring food. Out here on the field, he looked like a completely different person.

With military precision, the young knights finished their salutes and stepped forward, dropping to one knee, their arms crossed over their chests.

It was quite a sight to behold. The whole castle staff had turned out to watch.

Rieta stared in a daze.

"Would you like to watch?" Leonard asked.

"We're free now, and we'd like to watch as well," Hasler added.

Rieta laughed, then nodded.

"Act bravely, honestly, and justly,” the lead knight said. "I dub thee my knight."

"Your justice is my justice," a young trainee recited. "Your honor is my honor. Your life is my life. I am your sword. I pledge my fealty to you."

They watched until the last knight saluted and rose.

*These people are all loyal to the Archduke of Axias. Because he is a good man? Or because they are good followers?* Rieta pondered over the word fealty.

At the same time, she unconsciously fingered her necklace. She pictured the man she was indebted to, as summer sunlight streamed onto the knights' shining swords.

Slowly, she raised her eyes to Axias Manor. The dignified castle had survived much hardship. It was beautiful, sprawling, and resilient. She studied it as the wind mussed her hair. She brushed stray strands from her forehead, watching the gray stone path shine in the sunlight.

\*\*\*

Rieta brought Killian the report he'd asked for. He accepted it, blinking. *That was fast.* It felt as though they'd only just ridden through the western territory together. Not to mention, the report was thicker than he'd expected.

He skimmed it, ready to tell her what she needed to add or fix. He expected a lot of unnecessary rambling.

Rieta folded her hands and waited nervously as Killian flipped silently through the pages.

After a few pages, his brow furrowed. Hmm. *This is...* His hands slowed. Then he froze mid-flip and returned to the table of contents. His expression shifted. He turned back to the page he'd left off at. “I thought you said you've never written a report?"

"Yes, Sire. If you tell me what I'm missing, next time, I will—”

Killian lifted his hand. "This.” He shook the report. "Does not seem like it was written by a first-timer.” Dumbfounded, he opened to a page of charts and formulas, outlining the costs for necessary goods and what they could make at home. “Did you study mathematics?"

She'd estimated any quantities she couldn't verify, such as the costs for funerals depending on the wood they chose for coffins and whether they used carpenters or artisans. But even her estimates were exacting, considering the tiniest expenses.

He'd never thought to calculate that specifically. It felt almost ridiculous. She'd calculated extra costs for those who'd died of the plague, to deal with the contamination, as well as the additional expectations for noble funerals.

Using this chart, one could calculate burial costs by region, familial wealth, and the number of mourners. She'd estimated the population of each district in Axias too, with an asterisk noting the data was two years old, so may vary.

Killian looked from the report to Rieta and back. This would help minimize their costs significantly. *Where did she learn how to do this?*

This report was far better than the reports he'd shown her as examples. She couldn't have produced this out of nowhere. "Have you studied anything other than theology and demonology?"

“I helped with bookkeeping once,” Rieta said. “When I was at the convent." Then she ducked her head. “And I held a funeral myself last year..."

Killian clamped his mouth shut. When he spoke again, it was in a gentler tone. "Did you sleep at all, while you worked on this?"

"Of course, Sire."

Killian examined her suspiciously. Was her face a little red? Maybe not. She didn't usually look energetic, so he couldn't be sure. "Good work,” he said. "But next time, there's no need to go this far."

He picked out a few of the pages. "This much information is fine." He held those sections out. "Please read and summarize these pages. Keep it under five pages."

66

# EVERYONE HAS SECRETS (21)

The knightmaidens' temporary quarters were becoming messier and messier. They could not focus on maintaining their home while training ordinary knights. They had no time to clean, do laundry, or cook like they used to.

Killian assigned managers, servants, and maids to maintain the East Annex women's temporary quarters. Meanwhile, his former mistresses departed one by one.

He did not bid farewell to the women who loved him. Some things didn't need to be said aloud.

Those women had already suspected Killian's East Annex was not quite what it seemed. After all, most of them had never warmed his bed. But after he apologized, dismissed them, and told them to find happiness, most were able to shake off their old feelings.

The final past lover departed that morning, and workers picked up speed on their reconstruction.

"One, two...hoist!" They shouted, hauling columns upright and a new roof into place.

Everything was going smoothly.

\*\*\*

"Rieta, Rieta." Seira flung herself onto Rieta's shoulder, groaning. “Save me..."

Rieta spun around, worried. “My goodness.” She grasped Seira's arm and blessed her at once. “Are you alright?” Scratches marred the other woman's arms.

"No, not at all." Seira moaned.

Elise strode toward them, pulling Seira off Rieta. "Don't indulge her. She's playing on your sympathy."

"But she's all cut up,” Rieta said. “Did she fall?"

Speaking of injuries, Elise didn't look so good herself but she simply grinned. "Don't worry about it. The cleric will look at it tonight.”

"The cleric?"

"Ah. I guess you haven't heard. We've hired Cleric Colbryn and Cleric Damien to join the manor."

Rieta's eyes widened. “Really?” Manor clerics would stay here at the castle, rather than the temple. Not many clerics respected that career path-even though it paid well to work for a noble. At the temple, they had a better chance of getting ordained.

Rieta glanced at Elise, noticing her bruises and scrapes. Without being asked, she blessed Elise too. "Take care of your body."

Before Elise could respond, Rachel leaped down from a nearby tree. "She can't help it. It's been a long time."

"How come you aren't injured, Rachel?” Seira grumbled.

Rachel laughed. "Because I work out every day. You need to exercise more. Get a routine." With that, she uncorked a jar of herb paste to slap over Seira's largest cut.

Seira grunted.

Rachel smirked. "You'll get used to it soon enough." She turned to offer Elise some paste as well.

Elise's elegant brows furrowed. Rieta looked between all three worriedly as she continued to bless them. She didn't want their wounds to get infected. *Good thing the clerics will be looking at them tonight.*

But Rieta's divine energy felt more plentiful than usual lately. She couldn't tell whether it was from the grand blessing ceremony, or because she'd been using her gifts more often, but she felt more comfortable purifying now. Consecutive blessings no longer tired her.

It all felt light and natural.

Rachel glanced at the books Rieta hugged to her chest. "Are you headed to the library again?"

"I am."

"You work so hard"

Rieta shook her head. “No, I just read a lot. It's no feat, compared to what you ladies do."

Elise rolled her eyes at Seira. "We're not that busy. Come visit us when you have a chance! That is, if you want to."

Rieta smiled. "Thank you for the invitation. I'll try not to bother you."

Elise shook her head. "You're no bother. Really. Hanging out with a bunch of swordfighters gets dull. We like having ordinary conversations with ordinary people."

Rieta blinked, confused. "Um..."

Elise hesitated, frowning. "I just mean, we don't want to lose touch with reality. We can get too wrapped up in our own world. Especially now that all the other women have left."

*What other women?* Rieta, who hadn't yet heard about the departures, looked lost.

Elise just laughed.

"Elise is right," Rachel said, smiling at Elise. "We need to talk to people like you. It's a breath of fresh air.”

She and Elise had disagreed recently about Giselle's decision to use a drug to induce an upset stomach. Rachel wanted to kill the cleric instead. She'd do the same if the situation repeated itself. But even so, she understood Elise's point now.

Seira grinned and slung an arm over Elise's shoulder, nodding at Rieta. "It's true. We miss looking at your pretty face."

Rieta touched her cheek, embarrassed. But she knew they didn't mean it as empty praise. With one last smile, she extended her arms for a final blessing.

The knightmaidens were used to keeping the outside world at a distance. They had too many secrets to let anyone close-even the ordinary women who'd lived in the East Annex.

But they had no need to hide things from Rieta. She already knew about their order. She might not agree with everything they did, but she understood their logic, and she didn't judge them for it.

In short, Rieta reminded them what it meant to be human.

As they hugged Rieta, accepting their blessings, her sky-blue eyes shone clear in the sun.

\*\*\*

Killian had stopped by to watch the knights' ceremony preparations when he heard that Rieta went to the library. He changed direction to head there instead. It didn't take him long to find Rieta shuffling through the bookshelves. He peered at her through a crack.

Unaware of his attention, Rieta flipped through one volume. Suddenly, she thrust it back onto the shelf, withdrawing a different book. The transparent hem of her green silk and blue chiffon dress fluttered.

Killian leaned against a shelf and watched Rieta scamper through the library. She looked more beautiful than ever.

Rieta craned her neck, then set her jaw. The book she wanted was at the top of a shelf. She grabbed the stepstool and positioned it, before stepping gingerly onto it. But her fingertips only barely grazed the edge of the book she wanted.

She rose onto tiptoe and reached again, but only succeeded in nudging the book farther back on the shelf. Frustrated, she strained one arm higher, stretching as far as she could.

Suddenly, someone stepped onto the stool behind her, their hand reaching to snatch the book she wanted easily. Rieta jolted in surprise, her feet slipping from the stool.

She didn't even have a chance to scream. Before she fell an inch, a strong arm wrapped around her torso.

Rieta clutched that arm, not even breathing. When she lifted her head, crimson eyes bored into hers.

"Next time, just ask the librarian for help.” Gently, Killian released his grip and set Rieta on the ground.

Still trembling, Rieta pulled her hand from his arm. “Th-thank you, Sire.”

He held out the book, glancing at the title. “This is by Alfredo. Are you reading it because of your next report?"

Rieta clasped the book in both hands and nodded. “Yes, Sire. *The History of the War of the Empire* said Alfredo was the foremost authority on weaponry."

"It's not a bad standard. Have you read Hynel's book?"

“Hynel, Sire?” Rieta racked her memory, but she couldn't recall the name.

"Hmm. Alfredo was a nobleman. His family name guaranteed his place as a scholar. But Hynel was just an ordinary citizen, a soldier who worked his way up the ranks. He created his own system. Traditional scholars often dismiss it, but I find it quite useful."

Killian walked to another bookshelf and pulled out *Hynel's Practical Guide to Weapons.* “He has a very different point of view on weaponry. It will help to read both together."

Rieta tucked Alfredo's book under one arm and accepted Hynel's. As she did, Killian's gaze snagged on a strand of hair stuck to her lip. He brushed it away, almost without thinking, and Rieta froze, glancing from his hand to his eyes and back.

Slowly, she bowed her head. "Thank you.”

Killian crossed his arms and rubbed his chin. "What other history books have you read?"

"I've read Schuwalt's *Introduction to History*, Cherrni's *A Complete History*, Andersen's *One Hundred Years of History on the Continent*, and Bloom's *Dimfelliam Empire's History of Unification*, Sire."

His eyebrows rose. "Mostly traditional scholars. Did the convent recommend those titles? Read George's *History of the People on the Continent*. He's a nobleman, but he criticizes the throne. You need to read opposing viewpoints to gain a balanced understanding."

Rieta nodded.

She was truly intelligent. She understood logic and reason, discerning which sources were trustworthy. Her reports showed her to be a good judge of what was important. She made decisions carefully and had a good sense of balance, never biased.

*Why didn't I put her to work sooner?* he wondered. He should have realized how talented she was when she caught Saintess Tania's eye for her work on demonology-the most complex subject known to man.

Killian found himself earnestly looking forward to Rieta's next report.

\*\*\*

After dark that night, Rieta headed back from the library, a fresh stack of books under one arm, when she ran into Killian outside the training grounds. She bowed respectfully. Killian approached her, his hands deep in his pockets, and bent at the waist.

She knew at once what he wanted.

He requested this often, usually when they bumped into one another at the start of their days. But this was the first time he'd requested a blessing with so many people watching.

All the knights on the training grounds and the maids exiting the castle froze, watching them with round eyes. Rieta darted a hesitant glance around, then quickly brushed her lips against Killian's forehead.

Without a word, Killian straightened, brushed his hand over Rieta's head, and swept past.

Everyone watching them gaped, astonished. His Lordship's devotion to this new mage was amazing. They'd never seen the brusque archduke show affection to anyone like that.

Sensing eyes on her, Rieta quickly hurried away.

Lately, it didn't matter if he was wearing the necklace or not venturing outside the castle. Killian requested a blessing every time they met. Rieta's hand drifted up to her head, where Killian had touched her.

Perhaps he craved extra divine energy because of their recent exposure to demonic energy. That was a known side effect when demons got a toehold in someone's body.

She shivered. He might not feel it, but a remnant of the demon's power could be trapped inside him. Perhaps he asked for these extra blessings because his body instinctively sensed danger.

*Or it could be a side effect of Mordes's power.* Worry swept over Rieta. Alone now, she crossed the fields to the small lake inside the castle grounds. Her reflection wore an unfamiliar expression, rippling in the breeze.

Rieta lifted her book to cover her face.

\*\*\*

Back in the training grounds, Seira sharpened the blade on her polearm. Without thinking, she scratched an itch on the arm Rieta had recently healed. Something tore like a scab pulling off her skin. She glanced down, frowning.

Faint white light glowed from the scratch. Even as she watched, her skin knit itself back together. Her eyes widened. “Huh?”

67

# EVERYONE HAS SECRETS (22)

The saintess nodded at Rieta, who had come hoping to discuss something with her. They both sat while she prepared tea. The saintess was prepared for gravity, but Rieta's worry was not so serious as all that.

After she finished explaining, the saintess nodded. "Do not worry yourself. I have seen little evidence of demonic intrusion in His Highness's mind. And if he did suffer a minor affliction, it would only last a few days."

Rieta seemed reassured. "I see.” She met the saintess's piercing eyes again and smiled.

"Is that all you wish to discuss?" the saintess asked.

Rieta didn't reply.

"Pity," the saintess sighed. “I'd hoped you might confer with me about your own affairs."

"My affairs?" Rieta tilted her head.

\*\*\*

Only three emergency camps remained. The rest had been broken down and packed up. Most patients were healthy enough to go home. Those with underlying conditions were being cared for by clerics, who poured their last bits of strength into treatments.

Saintess Tania rode to the more remote patients on horseback, healing and purging as she went.

Some people debated whether they should close the remaining camps altogether. But the patients they still held might be uncomfortable, and the clerics had things relatively under control. They decided to keep the last three camps until the plague was eradicated.

With fewer camps to visit, they completed their rounds much faster. Killian and Rieta finished before the sun even reached its apex. They rode back at a more leisurely pace than usual. They might even make it back for lunch at this rate.

Rieta leaned forward. "My lord? May I make a brief detour? I'd like to visit the northeast quarter of the inner walls."

*The northeast?* That was quite far from Rieta's house. "We can visit on our way back. What business do you have there?"

"I would like to see the horses..."

"Horses?" Killian blinked.

“Yes, my lord. If I am to join the knightage, I should learn to ride horseback."

Killian nodded. “I see. Then we shall visit, and I will bestow you a steed myself."

"Pardon?" Rieta blinked.

"Do you have something better to do? You haven't visited your home for a while."

Rieta shook her head. "Nothing, Sire. And I don't need to go home." After Rieta moved into the castle, she only left her quarters to perform their rounds. Killian had told her not to leave, after all. She did not doubt that if she went home for a visit, he'd assign knights to join her.

That would be asking too much.

Killian fell silent for a moment, deep in thought. “You don't want to visit your home? Houses shouldn't be left empty for too long, you know...”

Rieta stared at him.

"If you don't want to visit, I'll send some maids to care for your house. If that's alright."

Rieta shook herself. "I-I can purchase the steed. Knights equip themselves, do they not?" Horses were expensive animals.

Killian snorted. "And risk exposing our secret? Why purchase a horse from someone else, when I own hundreds? Let me gift you a steed. It will seem perfectly ordinary to others."

Rieta clamped her mouth shut. She didn't dare risk His Lordship's safety. And he was right—people would find it odd if a prized mistress bought her own horse. All the knightmaidens had acted properly. Even on the trip to Havitus Temple, they rode in a carriage.

Of course, on the way back, they rode horseback, but...

"V-very well," Rieta managed. "Then I ask you to please withhold its cost from my wages."

"I cannot see the logic in making you pay for something I requested. I've given steeds to all of my knights. Leonard included."

Rieta's eyes widened. “Truly, my lord?”

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"Find an amenable one."

"Yes, Sire. One moment.” Several equerries hurried into the stables. After a few moments, one ushered them in as well.

The equerry led Rieta and Killian to a row of stalls, where five horses shook their heads and swished their tails, lips billowing. “Is this your first time riding, Madam Mage?" the equerry asked.

“I have ridden with His Highness, but I've yet to ride alone.” Suddenly, Rieta reddened, realizing how that sounded.

Killian didn't notice. He studied the horses. He frowned at one in particular. "Isn't this Tigris?" The white horse had a beautiful silver mane. "I asked you for an amenable steed. This one is too unruly.”

The horse's huge black eyes blinked. It had long white eyelashes, and looked at Rieta innocently, swishing its tail. Rieta glanced at Killian. The horse looked calm, no?

Yet Killian didn't seem pleased.

"Tigris is only fussy with men, Sire," said the equerry.

"Nonsense." Killian scoffed.

Tigris neighed and stamped the ground, drawing their attention again.

"Here, allow me to verify this." The equerry undid the latch and opened Tigris's stall door.

Killian snorted, watching the equerry lead Tigris out. "A white steed would suit you well. But let's see how obedient he is."

Killian motioned for Rieta to approach.

Rieta took a careful step toward Tigris. The beast snorted, eyes rolling. She realized its eyes didn't face front but to the sides. She sidestepped,

allowing it to see her as she neared. Thankfully, Rieta had gotten used to riding Rhea, so she wasn't scared. Just cautious.

She remembered how Cina ignored her. Thankfully, Tigris remained calm as she approached. Rieta slowly extended a hand and placed it on the horse's nose.

"Whoa." All the equerries watching gasped.

Tigris, usually the fussiest mount they had, allowed this stranger to touch his nose. He even nuzzled Rieta's hand. His mane shone like ivory, his large black eyes were meek and calm.

"But he's my horse," Killian said, sounding both amused and dissatisfied.

The equerries burst into laughter. "The owner and the rider a horse prefers are not always the same, Sire," one said. "We also thought Tigris hated everyone. But he just doesn't like men. He's amenable to women, Sire."

"He seems especially friendly with the madam," another equerry added. "It, too, must recognize her beauty."

Killian usually rode Rhea, but he was friendly with all the horses in his stables. Tigris had such a bad temper that he'd never ridden him without blinders. "Between Rhea and Tigris, I can't believe people think horses are fearful," Killian muttered.

The equerries laughed. “He's probably not even an herbivore. I bet he'd eat meat," one said. Then he looked at Rieta. “Do you like this rascal, miss?"

Tigris's neck was warm and soft beneath her hand. She glanced over, just now noticing the equerries' reactions. Even Rieta, who didn't know much about horses, knew white horses were more expensive.

"He's the only steed we have who's almost as fast as your Rhea," one equerry added.

Rieta flinched and jerked her hand away, stepping back. She couldn't take a horse of Rhea's caliber. She knew how incredible Killian's beloved mount was. "Oh, no. I'd be content with a modest horse. Such a fine steed would be wasted on a novice like myself."

But when Rieta moved back, Tigris tossed his head and blew his lips in annoyance.

Killian chuckled. "An excellent steed, you say?"

The equerries looked distressed. “Yes. Fine, indeed. But...in truth, he has a serious problem."

"A serious problem?" Rieta echoed.

One equerry sighed deeply. "He can run as fast as the best, but left to his own devices, he refuses. He ignores crops and stirrups, and won't run unless he wants to. We're not sure if he's lazy or stubborn or just competitive. Also, he has a horrible temper.”

Another equerry stepped forward. "But he truly does prefer women. He bucks male riders and goes crazy if they use a crop. He at least pretends to listen to women."

Killian laughed unexpectedly. “Then he'll do nicely. Have you taken a liking to Tigris?"

Rieta's eyes widened. “I-I would be much obliged by any steed you

bestow..." Rieta did like the beautiful white horse, and he seemed friendly. But she didn't know much about horses.

In the end, though, what choice did she have?

"Then Tigris it is," Killian said.

The equerries quickly saddled Tigris. He remained calm as if he knew Rieta would ride him.

"Few steeds can keep up with Rhea,” Killian murmured. “And the groomer vouches for his temperament, so..."

Once they finished saddling Tigris, Killian picked Rieta up and placed her on the horse, just like always. Rieta quickly got into position. She reached for the reins but wound up grasping Killian's hand instead.

"Oh, I...forgive me." She jerked back in surprise.

Killian offered her reins again. This time, she took them properly. She felt empty in the saddle, unstable. She was used to having Killian behind her.

But she'd ridden with him long enough to know how to sit straight and tall. *Is this right?*

She glanced at Killian, who was studying Tigris. “He's actually calm," Killian muttered. “He acted so differently with me. I'm hurt."

The equerries led Tigris, with Rieta on his back, into the training grounds. Rieta's posture crumbled, and she struggled to keep straight in the saddle.

"She'll have to learn properly, but it seems they're well-matched,” Killian said.

"It seems so, Sire." The equerries all smiled. Once she learned to ride properly, Rieta and Tigris would suit each other perfectly.

"Do you like him?" Killian asked.

Rieta nodded, anxious from riding alone. Thankfully, Tigris didn't look like he would toss her off.

Killian smiled and reached out to stop the horse. He'd need to teach her how to mount and dismount, as well as better riding posture. But for now, he walked out, arms extended to Rieta. She let him lift her from the saddle, flustered.

*She has a cute side.* Killian placed Rieta on her feet, then removed the blessed sacer from his neck to place on hers.

Rieta snapped to attention. The magical device forced her to.

"Very well. Tigris shall be your steed." Killian's crimson eyes blazed, full of mischief. “I'm happy that your horse can keep up with Rhea. He's perfect. But if your horse ever helps you do things you aren't asked to, I'll be hurt."

Rieta looked at him, panicked.

"Still, the fact that I'm worried-"

Rieta's face burned as she cut him off. "I'll remember how to act, Sire."

Killian stroked Tigris's neck contentedly. "Good. You shouldn't need to ride him alone often anyway."

The equerries cheered, scratching and stroking Tigris's head proudly. Tigris shook them off, irritated. But as soon as he met Rieta's eyes, he calmed, obedient once more.

Killian laughed. "With this gift, I pray you will always ride by my side."

68

# EVERYONE HAS SECRETS (23)

"The Abbot of Cevitas died?" Killian asked.

Giselle nodded. "Yes, Sire. He died in early June from the plague.”

Killian frowned.

"We've been investigating other places, but we couldn't help noting that Cevitas has seen a massive increase in plague cases since last April. Many have died. The survivors started fleeing Cevitas a month ago. It's not looking good."

Killian trilled his fingernails on the tabletop. “They're leaving their homes behind?"

"Yes, Sire. Many families were devastated by the plague, and the convent had many victims as well. They started fleeing in mid-July, and their numbers increase daily. Barely any living people remain in Cevitas."

They fled their home... *Were they fleeing straight to destruction?* Thankfully, Axias had overcome the worst of the plague by now. But Killian had read many reports about it. It usually took six months to a year for the plague to destroy a village.

Cevitas had fallen in six months.

*Where did all the money he'd given them go?* Casarius died of plague in spring. Quite a few died after him, but no one left. They planned to stick it out. People didn't abandon their lives unless they had no other options.

Sometimes families kicked out members who caught the plague, but surely the healthy members would want to remain. Especially the farmers, those who lived off the land. To leave would be to lose their livelihoods...

Giselle cleared her throat. "The empire recently declared Cevitas a high- risk area. All paths in and out have been barred."

Killian sank deeper into his chair. Nothing related to Rieta went the way he wanted. That bastard Casarius was already dead-nothing he could do about that. Now the other bastard abbot...

He hadn't seen proof of the abbot's death, but he trusted Giselle's information. He balled his fists. The man didn't deserve to die in peace.

Giselle went on to explain her plan to hire the thieves' guild through Rachel. Cevitas had been blockaded and their main suspect was dead. It was a setback for their investigation.

He could ask Rieta directly, but... Killian clicked his tongue. “Fine. Keep investigating. And find out who lived with Rieta in the convent."

They should know more about Rieta or the situation. Those with divine power all trained together. Rieta might have given up on becoming a cleric, but her convent produced many clerics. Some may be working at other temples.

If they knew Rieta's archduke was interested in her past, they'd likely be eager to discuss their old friend.

This seemed far easier than asking Rieta to talk.

\*\*\*

The knights at Axias enjoyed good treatment. Children who grew up in the Abbey admired the knights and their undefeated commander, Axias's savior. He supported children with talent generously, personally sparring with them each at least once, smiling all the while.

The youths were honored to train with him and compete to become knights. After training, they could leave the abbey to join any knight order, but most applied to stay in Axias.

Until eight years ago, only men could join Axias as knights. Young women had to apply to other orders that accepted knightmaidens. Giselle was the one who'd first opposed this.

When she'd applied to join Axias, Killian had smirked and said, “My order is too dangerous for women. But if you insist...” He'd tapped three of his existing knights. "Beat all three. Then I'll consider you."

Giselle had accepted, asking only if she could use two swords.

Killian had agreed, then tapped Leonard, Hasler, and Flint to fight her. The knights accepted, eager to prove themselves—and to see someone wield double swords. It was a rare skill.

None of them truly expected to lose to a nineteen-year-old girl. But Giselle dominated the knights.

Using both hands and her quick, flexible body, she overcame any difference in strength. Every time the knights parried one sword, she swept in with her off-hand to catch them off-guard.

Once she disarmed them all, the little miss faced the gaping knights and sighed. “I'm sorry. It's because I have two swords. This seems unfair. Would you like to go again, one-on-one?"

Shocked at her pride, the knights agreed. This time, Leonard relieved Giselle of one sword immediately. Her sword flew from her grip, striking a nearby tree. She shook her now-empty left hand. Before she could recover, Leonard touched the tip of his blade to her neck.

It took her a second to accept her defeat. She balled her trembling hands and slowly bowed over her remaining sword.

But Leonard scowled, displeased, and turned away. He retrieved her sword and offered it to Giselle again.

Giselle raised her eyes to him. "What are you doing?"

Leonard faltered for a moment. “In my attack just now, I used solely physical strength. It was unfair. Let's go again."

Giselle looked surprised for a moment. Then she narrowed her eyes at Leonard. “I didn't know you were so vindictive."

"What?"

"I'll admit I was showing off. But this revenge feels a bit petty." Giselle ignored the sword he offered and bowed again. “I lost. Thank you.” Then she snatched her sword from him.

"Ah." Leonard huffed, watching Giselle storm out of the training grounds. Then he hurried after her. "I wasn't being sarcastic. I just thought the offer sounded cool."

Giselle didn't reply, just continued walking away.

Leonard ran his hands through his hair and chuckled. “My shoulder is fine, by the way. Don't let up on me next time."

Giselle paused and half-turned. “That gap by your right thigh. You've taken care of it." With that, she opened the door and left the training grounds.

\*\*\*

In an empty field in the residential area just south of the castle walls, a group of children kicked a ball around. One child knocked it to the feet of a nobleman.

He stood there in an expensive suit, watching the game. The children all froze as the tall, handsome man bent to pick up their dirty ball with white- gloved hands. He didn't throw it back but crouched and offered it to the nearest boy.

“Thank you, sir.” The boy took it with both hands.

"You're welcome." The gentleman smiled benevolently. His silver hair made all the children stare. “Might I ask you something?” He fingered his cane awkwardly. "I'm not sure if you'd know, but...did His Lordship bring a pretty blonde woman here, a few months ago?"

The children looked at each other.

He frowned. “She's gorgeous. You wouldn't be able to forget if you'd seen her. She has blonde hair, a bit lighter than his, and she's about this tall." He extended a hand.

One boy tilted his head. "Sky-blue eyes?"

The gentleman brightened. “Yes, that's right! Have you seen her?” The boy nodded.

The gentleman crouched, one hand on his knee. “When? Where?"

“A few days ago. Inside the castle walls; she was riding with His Lordship..."

The man's eyes widened. "With His Lordship? Does she live at Axias Manor? Here, take this and buy yourself a treat.” The man held out a silver coin.

The children's eyes went wide as saucers. They'd never seen that much money before. The boy accepted the coin, brightening. "No, she doesn't live with him. But her house is inside the castle walls. Everyone knows the Mage's House!"

"The Mage?" The gentleman frowned, curious. Then he smiled, and the children all grinned back. “Alright. Thank you for telling me.” He gave them another silver coin and stood.

The excited children shouted goodbye and hurried off.

The gentleman turned toward Axias Manor. "So, a mage..." His smile widened. "Not a cleric, but one might say you've gotten a little closer to your dream."

\*\*\*

"Will you leave now?" Rieta asked.

Saintess Tania nodded. “Yes. Many places need my assistance."

Rieta smiled, a little disappointed. "Do visit us again."

"I hope I do not, for I only go wherever great unrest occurs."

"Even so..." Rieta bowed and fidgeted with her fingertips.

Saintess Tania spread her arms wide.

Rieta blushed and hugged her. Saintess Tania hugged Rieta back. “I revere you, Saintess," Rieta said.

"I know."

"And I cherish you dearly."

"As most do." The saintess smiled.

"I will miss you greatly."

Saintess Tania patted Rieta's shoulder and laughed. “We will meet again."

Rieta, who'd taken on too much at a young age, and never before had someone to rely on, smiled. Her sky-blue eyes grew watery. "I thank you, Saintess."

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"It was entertaining," the saintess said.

Killian bowed his head. "Your efforts were appreciated."

"Merely doing my duty. And you paid me for it."

Killian offered his hand, a rare sight, and the saintess grasped it. *“Deus lux mea est. (God is my light.)"*

Normally, Killian rejected this phrase as a nonbeliever. But he respected the saintess too much and answered. *“Deo volente. (God willing.)"*

Tania smiled. "When next we meet, you may address me by my name."

The clerics from Alpheter stared in shock.

"If only I were but ten years younger...” she added.

The clerics' faces drained of blood. One of them coughed.

Killian smirked. "Am I worthy of that distinction? I supposed only a divine heart as good as yours could harbor a wretched soul like mine.”

Saintess Tania grinned. “Well, you are handsome and wealthy. And I approve of your expenditures. But I suspect the East Annex has no room for a woman ten years your elder."

The clerics seriously started to debate which one was the maniac.

Killian lifted the saintess's hand to his lips. “I implore you to remain cherished by all hearts, not one in particular."

The saintess waved her hand. “Ah, it is a duty to be so beloved...” And then the time came. Saintess Tania swung onto her horse.

"Where will you go?" Killian asked.

"To the capital."

Killian nodded. "Deliver my regards to His Majesty."

"Why not deliver them yourself? I trust he awaits your next visit.”

Killian shrugged. "Perhaps I will, if fate allows." He raised a hand to wave.

Saintess Tania tugged the reins and turned her horse. The clerics fell in line behind her, but then she stopped and looked back at Killian.

Killian stared at her. The saintess bent and motioned to him. He approached her, confused. She leaned in.

"You must not keep Rieta Tristi too close," she whispered.

Killian's eyebrows shot up. Then he shook off his surprise, forcing a laugh. "Whatever do you mean? Rieta has long been my prized mistress."

The saintess's calm blue eyes studied his, dead serious. “You needn't lie to me, Your Highness. Do not forget that my secret is already in your hands."

Killian said nothing.

Saintess Tania straightened. "Do not keep Rieta close. She is an ill-fated match for you." With that, Saintess Tania turned and rode off, leaving Killian with a strange expression on his face.

The plague finally vanished from Axias.

It had been a long summer.

69

# SINKING IN (1)

On a chilly morning, autumn rain falling, Rieta closed herself in the library. She sat between the shelves, nodding off as she read.

A tall man entered and quietly closed the open window, through which a light spray of rain misted. The sound of rain grew muted as it shut. He brushed droplets from his cloak, then carefully removed the cloak to drape it over Rieta's shoulders.

She wore a dawn-colored dress, one he had picked out. A beautiful summer dress, but too cold for this weather.

"Looks like I'll have to call the seamstress again,” Killian murmured, his raven hair still damp from his morning walk.

\*\*\*

Due to the plague, the knighting ceremony had been delayed a week. Finally, they initiated the new knights, including one trainee who'd become the youngest knight in the order.

The novitiates also graduated from the abbey, ready to become full-fledged clerics. Damien and Colbryn opted not to leave. Killian hired them as the Axias Manor clerics, at least until his temple was built. They helped Rieta bless, purify and purge all around Axias territory.

After tending to the last remaining camps, they joined Rieta in keeping Axias Manor safe. Thanks to their help, Rieta had more free time—at least until Killian gave her new duties.

Rieta took on many duties, because she was a quick learner and adapted to any task he set. Killian didn't hold back, giving her administration and finance tasks as well as judicial, trade, customs, and military assignments.

Rieta excelled at every job he threw her way. Soon, she became something of a secretary or manager for the manor. Killian consulted her anytime he needed to make decisions.

Rieta started to prepare Killian's meals, too. The elderly butler, Eron, had no choice but to acquiesce. Killian usually ignored his bodily needs, but strangely, he never brushed Rieta off when she fed him. For the first time in his life, Killian began eating regularly.

\*\*\*

Rieta came to Killian's study at lunchtime and returned the cloak, her cheeks pink. “You should have woken me,” she said.

"You can just thank me."

"Thank you, Sire." At some point, she'd begun to enter Killian's study or bedchamber without asking for permission.

"Are you getting proper sleep these days?" he asked.

"Of course, Sire. I was just reading a boring book."

Killian chuckled. "I'll have to make sure you're actually sleeping. Ah..." Killian's expression turned stone. "Not that I'm trying to harass you."

Rieta smiled. "I know, Sire."

He stared at that face, briefly smiled, and picked up a report. “You cited Pedler's Theory in here. I didn't find him all that great, but you think differently. It was very interesting to read your interpretation."

Killian asked her a few more questions about the report. Rieta answered him, as usual, briefly and plainly. Killian listened intently, his eyes never leaving her face. He nodded from time to time.

Axias didn't have many talented academics. Most people didn't meet his exacting standards, so Killian was accustomed to shouldering all the work himself. Better that than risk someone else making mistakes.

But it meant he took on a lot of insignificant tasks that piled up over time. Rieta was the only person he trusted to take those off his plate.

It seemed impossible that he'd once gotten angry and argued about everything she did.

Rieta thought exactly like him. Her reports were succinct and perfect. She usually went above and beyond what he expected. Better yet, she researched everything thoroughly, so when their conclusions aligned, Killian could relax, knowing his intuition was right.

Anytime their conclusions didn't align, that amused him too. Their debates helped him learn. He advised her anytime she needed it, and Rieta fixed any problems that arose.

She was a hard worker. With her help, Killian had more free time than ever.

\*\*\*

"You have no talent for riding."

Rieta trembled like a leaf, hanging onto Tigris's neck for dear life. She might have perfect reports, blessings, and outfits, but she was no horsewoman.

Killian was surprised by how badly she performed. The riding instructors all sweated bullets, trying to correct her form.

She'd had no trouble riding Rhea with him. Then again, Killian had perfect form, and Rhea was an incredible horse.

Every time her horse moved, Rieta froze up. It flabbergasted him. He couldn't imagine upping the speed, even with Tigris acting gentle as a lamb.

Rieta's first experience on a horse had been merciless. She'd given up trying to hold onto the horse, instead just gritting her teeth and leaning against Killian while Rhea galloped.

Now, she couldn't shake the terror of that first ride.

When neither Rieta nor her instructors made any more progress, Killian approached. “Let's stop here for today. Come here.” He reached for Rieta.

Rieta, still quivering with fear, clutched his arm and let him pull her from the saddle.

"Oh dear. You need to mount and dismount by yourself to improve," one instructor said.

Killian chuckled and set Rieta on her feet. "It's fine. There's no need for haste."

The instructor lowered his head in shame. He'd sworn he could get Rieta trotting in a month and cantering in three.

Even Rieta didn't know she would be this bad. Her cheeks flushed.

Killian chuckled and patted her head. “If you don't learn to ride, Rhea can always carry us both. It's alright."

Rieta's face reddened even more, and she bowed her head. "My apologies, Sire. I'll try harder." After he gifted her a horse, how could she not try?

Plus, even though Rhea was an incredible horse, Rieta knew it was more difficult for her to carry two riders. She'd read everything about horses she could get her hands on lately.

"Don't worry." Killian smiled warmly and placed his hands on her shoulders. "You're learning to ride as a hobby, no?"

"Ah..." Rieta nodded awkwardly. In reality, she'd hoped to learn to ride so she wouldn't be a burden to the other East Annex ladies in an emergency. Of course, to anyone outside the East Annex, this needed to seem like a hobby for the Archduke of Axias's prized mistress.

Killian cocked his head. "Your efforts are admirable and adorable.” He spun her to face him. “I did say I wanted to ride alongside you, but I don't mind riding with you in my arms."

Rieta knew he was only keeping up appearances, but heat still flooded her face. She stared at the ground, embarrassed.

Killian laughed. "You're too eager. You pick up everything else so quickly. That's why you're struggling with this. Don't be impatient. Get to know Tigris, give him treats. Ride him once in a while, only when you feel like it." He bent, bringing his forehead level with her mouth.

Rieta hastily pressed her lips to his forehead.

The stable hands, the riding instructor, and everyone else watching felt their faces heat at witnessing this beautiful moment.

\*\*\*

Eron bowed. "I shall speak to Latria."

"Good." Killian undid his cuffs.

"But... will it be alright for Miss Tristi to receive the head seamstress in her current room?"

*Her current room?* Killian fell into thought. Right now, Rieta lived in an empty room in the main building. A temporary guest's chamber, for any old visitor.

Even if Axias Manor was dreary and cold, that room was much too plain for an archduke's mistress. Eron squinted at Killian. “Perhaps she could meet in master's bedchamber?"

"Surely not." Killian scowled. Even if he acted like Rieta was his mistress in public, he wouldn't treat her indecently.

"Perhaps we might move her to another room. Or shall we prepare a dressing room?"

All he'd wanted were some new fall clothes for Rieta. *Is all this necessary?* When he'd first declared her his mistress, he'd only wanted to protect her temporarily. He didn't realize how long she'd be staying here.

"All the nobles will be talking about Latria's visit. We should at least make up a dressing room where Miss Tristi can receive the head seamstress."

*What a pain.* Killian scowled. “Leave it. We'll go in person instead.”

"To the dress shop, Sire?"

Killian stopped undressing and buttoned his shirt again at the sound of a woman's voice. When he looked over, Rachel hung upside-down outside his window.

"Going to the dress shop once is fine, but will Your Highness visit every time Rieta needs something new?"

"Can't I?" he replied.

"It might seem odd," Rachel said. "The exiled prince of the north, Archduke of Axias, escorting his mistress to dress shops whenever she likes."

Killian thought again. But he'd enjoyed going in person. Buying her everything that fit well.

"Everyone thinks she's your most prized mistress,” Rachel said. “She needs custom-tailored clothing."

Killian sighed. “Tell them to bring everything. To the castle. And turn one of the spare rooms into Rieta's dressing room."

"Of course, Sire." Eron beamed and bowed.

Rachel grinned and whirled out of sight again. Only then did Killian take off his clothes.

70

# SINKING IN (2)

Beth ripped open the letter. Her expression crumbled as she read it. Seth noticed and picked up the empty envelope.

"Rodmigneau Chanellope. Your aunt in the city?"

Elise looked at Beth's face, her legs crossed and a teacup in hand. “What's in that letter to make you scowl so much? Did His Lordship kill someone again?"

"Ugh." Beth tugged on her hair in frustration. “I think my aunt has been scammed again. Look at this!" Beth waved a drawing of a blonde woman around. "She says this is a portrait of the divine princess. It prevents the plague. She spent two thousand gold pieces on it!"

Elise took the portrait and scrutinized it.

Seira picked up the letter Beth tossed aside. “That retired cleric told me you were in danger," she read. "I didn't believe him at first, but then I heard about the plague in Axias. Do you know how scared I was about the news of the East Annex infections?"

Beth growled, frustrated. The cleric told her he'd been "drawn to her," because he could sense her worry. "It's insane. Everyone was worried!"

Seira kept reading quietly. *When I told him about you, he said the air around you was full of dark energy, demons, and plague. Even though he was a retired cleric, he was still so knowledgeable.*

"He must have taken one look at my aunt and sensed the perfect prey," Beth muttered.

*He said you'd be safe if I gave you this portrait of the divine princess. Normally it costs four thousand gold, but he gave me a discount, since you're very important.*

Rachel, reading over Seira's shoulder, groaned and massaged her forehead.

*I pray this letter makes it to you in time. I know what you'll say, but don't get angry or say this is a waste of money. Just listen to your aunt this once. And put this on your door before you go to bed.*

The letter had arrived too late. The plague was already gone. The women looked at Beth sympathetically.

*My darling Beth, I worry about you ever so much. I shouldn't have left you in Axias. I pray for news of your safety soon. Please reply.*

Beth turned to Rieta, nearly in tears. “Rieta! Does the portrait of the divine princess truly fend off demons or plague?"

Rieta winced. "Well..."

Lana shook her head. “That cleric is a fraud. This isn't even a portrait of Princess Beatrice."

Every head swiveled her way, then back to the portrait Beth held.

"Truly?" Beth asked.

Lana nodded. “It doesn't look like her at all.”

Seira looked at Lana, confused. “How do you know?"

"Princess Beatrice did not have blonde hair," Lana replied.

Rieta smiled. “Yes. She was a raven-haired woman."

\*\*\*

Rieta hovered in front of a bookshelf when someone plucked the book she'd been reading from her hands.

“A curious read, indeed. Fundamentals of Equestrian Understanding?”

"My lord." Rieta's hands clenched and unclenched. She seemed to be battling with herself over whether or not to snatch the book back. Finally, she bowed her head, cheeks flushed.

Killian flipped through the book and chuckled. “Has this text aided in your riding skills?"

"It offers sage advice. I must loosen my form and move with the horse's motions, like so." Rieta clenched her hands into fists, as if she were holding reins, and squatted, wiggling up and down.

In her beautiful dress, she looked ridiculous.

Killian thought he knew why she couldn't ride. It wasn't just her fear. "Worry about the bouncing after you learn to trot. You need to figure out how to walk first." Killian closed the book and replaced it on the shelf.

Rieta reached for it again. “I-I'll just hold onto this..."

"No book can teach you how to ride. You must ride to learn."

Rieta pouted.

Killian chuckled at the crinkle between her eyebrows. He smoothed it with a fingertip. "Go to the stables rather than the library. Do not torment yourself over posture and form. Your nerves are the problem."

"Yes, my lord." Rieta ducked her head again.

Killian nodded at the door. “Now come, let us dine.”

"Ah, forgive me. I failed to mind the hour." Rieta glanced at a nearby clock. Suppertime already. She replaced the book and followed him out.

They never discussed it, but it had become a daily habit for them to eat together. Rieta made sure Killian was eating, and Killian made sure Rieta ate her fill in turn.

Over dinner, Killian speared a piece of meat and said, “Next time, I'll go riding with you."

Rieta hesitated. "But you are so busy."

Killian shrugged. “As I have said before, your work grants me more leisure time than usual." Before she could protest, he added, “The instructors can't be very hands-on with you, since you're my mistress."

Rachel had hinted at this problem to Killian.

Rieta's eyes widened. She hadn't realized that either. She recalled the way her instructors tried to explain things using their hands and awkward gestures. They never touched her.

*Is that why my riding hasn't improved?* Rieta speared a piece of food and chewed thoughtfully.

She thought about offering to learn from Giselle or Rachel instead, but lately they seemed busier than Killian.

Killian met her gaze and raised his wine glass. “Answer."

Rieta looked down at her plate. “Yes, Sire. Thank you."

\*\*\*

As Rieta took on more of Killian's administrative work, she also learned quite a bit about Axias. Like that evening, as she discussed road-planning with Killian.

"Why do we need to invest so much money on new roads?" she asked. "Even if we improve our roads, merchants will just keep traveling around us to Ottnang."

"The new roads won't be for merchants,” Killian replied. “We're building a temple."

"I see," Rieta said, before she realized what he just said. The implications hit her a second later, and her eyes widened. "Wait. A temple. In Axias?"

Killian nodded. “Yes.”

Rieta covered her mouth. *So that's why the clerics stayed here.* She'd been working with Colbryn and Damien at the manor lately, and she knew some abbey graduates with divine power who'd opted to remain in Axias rather than join a temple.

She'd been wondering why those graduates didn't want to become full clerics. Even if they preferred to serve a noble, better to do what Colbryn and Damien did, earning their cleric titles before transferring from a temple to a secular position.

There weren't many other jobs that benefitted from divine power, either— except for healing, when plagues sprang up. Ministering to fickle-minded nobles was a less-than-glorious position.

Temples, on the other hand, offered stable lives, with the possibility for fame and prestige. Many commoners dreamed of such honorable positions.

But if Axias had a temple...

They needed to attract a lot of people with divine power in order to protect themselves from plagues. They could offer to pay clerics, but even with significant support, not many would find the offer appealing.

Most temples only admitted new students around age eighteen, freshly graduated novitiates. *No wonder so many novitiates stayed in Axias this*

*year.*

Axias was no ordinary city. And with a temple in its walls, they'd attract more and more divinely powered clerics and students every year. This could be the start of something very meaningful.

Rieta's eyes sparkled. "What good news! So many people will be happy if we build a new temple."

Since Rieta had been laicized and even married, the temple couldn't help her become a cleric. But she was grateful others with divine power would be able to participate. “And you'll be able to use the mines Countess Schepelman lent you. What perfect timing."

Rieta babbled about how hard it had been to find clerics since the incident at Havitus Temple, and how this would help develop Axias's commercial districts too. She spoke in a high-pitched, fast tone, her face flushed.

"Where will you build it? How large will it be? It might be good to build it outside the city walls. Unless it will be small, then perhaps in the southeast area... Oh, shall I invite some architects to draw up a plan?"

Belatedly, Rieta realized Killian was laughing. She snapped back to reality, blushing.

"Oh, I apologize. You surely must have all of this under control already..."

"No." Killian straightened in his chair, still smiling. "I'm grateful for your enthusiasm. You'll have a lot to do." With that, he nudged a fresh stack of papers toward Rieta.

All the plans regarding the construction of the temple. It was a towering stack, but Rieta wasn't daunted at all. She grabbed the topmost file and began reading at once.

As she flipped through more sheaves of paper, she fired questions at Killian. He looked amused, answering as best he could. They wound up conversing deep into the night.

Normally, Rieta would have retired already, but she didn't notice the time. Not until she glanced at the window and realized it was dark outside.

Killian eyed the clock and rose. “We'll finish talking while we walk."

"Yes, Sire.” Rieta leapt to her feet. They continued discussing, but Rieta's room was only one floor below Killian's. The walk was a short one, and she still had plenty to say once they reached her door.

They lingered there, Rieta leaning on the frame and Killian talking more. Rieta wrapped her arms around herself as she listened, guarding against the slight autumn chill.

Killian noticed, his brows furrowing. "You look cold.”

Rieta straightened and dropped her arms at once. She shook her head. “No, Sire. I'm alright.”

"Go to bed. I'll call for someone from Latria soon." With that, he bowed his head.

Rieta placed her hands on his shoulders and kissed his forehead. She didn't know when, but somewhere along the way, she'd gotten used to this greeting. "Have a good night, Sire."

Killian brushed a hand over Rieta's hair, smiling. "You too."

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# SINKING IN (3)

"Rieta. You didn't sleep well last night, did you?" Killian asked.

Rieta blinked. “No, I slept."

Killian frowned at the shadows under her eyes. "It doesn't look like it to me."

"I'm alright, Sire. Really."

Killian sighed. "I shouldn't have given you those papers. You stayed up reading them, didn't you?"

Rieta squirmed guiltily. "No, Sire, they helped quite a bit. Besides, I'll sleep again tonight."

"You'll eat supper, so why bother with breakfast and lunch?” He smirked.

Rieta laughed. "Please, don't skip meals. Even if you're busy."

"Why? I won't starve to death."

"If you're this harsh on yourself, as a lord, how can your lowly servants eat or sleep comfortably?"

Killian chuckled. “So it's my fault?”

Rieta flushed. "Not exactly, Sire..."

"At least I sleep."

Rieta laughed. "I'll go to bed early tonight, Sire. As long as you keep eating well, I will follow your lead, my lord."

Killian smiled. That much, he could promise.

\*\*\*

The time came for Rieta's riding lessons. Killian accompanied her to the stables. By the time they arrived, she was already freezing up with fear and anxiety. He chuckled, tapping her shoulder.

Rieta flinched.

"Oh boy." He watched Rieta ball her fists and take deep breaths. She was already wearing the necklace, so magic tools wouldn't help. “You weren't like this with Rhea. What's wrong? Are you afraid of Tigris?”

Rieta jerked upright and shook her head. “No, Sire. Tigris is friendly. It's just that I..."

Just then, the stable hand led Tigris into the ring. He recognized Rieta at once, his ears twitching. Rieta stared at him, whispering, “Isn't it hard to hold your reins all alone?"

Killian burst into laughter. "Reins are usually handled alone."

Rieta took another deep breath and approached Tigris. When she touched his nose, he nuzzled into her hand. She kissed him softly.

Killian watched her, smiling. “I'll leave her to you today, Tigris."

It soon became apparently that Rieta's riding skills had not improved at all. Her attempts were pitiful.

"Forward!" the stable hand called. “You must look forward, madam."

Rieta hunched over Tigris's mane, hugging his neck for dear life.

Unable to watch any longer, Killian approached, clicking his tongue. He swung onto Tigris behind Rieta.

Tigris stomped in surprise, blowing his lips. But he didn't buck, as Killian squeezed his thighs tight. Killian placed his hands over Rieta's on the reins. "Sit up straight.”

Rieta lifted her head at the suddenly familiar position.

"Get a good hold." Killian adjusted her grip on the reins. The riding instructor and the stable hands stared in amazement as Rieta straightened into a near-perfect posture.

Killian looked down at Rieta, cradled between his arms. “Now look forward. Hook your feet deeper in the stirrups. Why in the world can't you do this?" He maneuvered her hands to steer them around the ring.

Within moments, they'd passed from a trot to a canter.

The instructor gaped, as if Killian had performed a miracle. But of course, Rieta was accustomed to this. She'd ridden at a full gallop with Killian before.

Clearly the problem wasn't Tigris.

"How does this feel?" Killian asked.

Rieta exhaled. "Fine."

Killian chuckled. “Apparently you'll have to keep riding with me and Rhea."

Rieta focused on her posture quietly.

Killian slowed them down. "The problem isn't your speed. Trouble comes if you fall off. You can injure yourself, or even die if you hit something on the way down. Better to relax and take your time than risk a fall.”

Rieta nodded.

"Tigris won't trust you if you keep acting so unnerved," he added. “He'll follow his own lead in an emergency, rather than yours. You need to take charge, or you'll increase your risk of falling."

They rode once around the ring. Then Killian asked the stable hand to open the doors.

After a slight pause, the instructors and stable hands opened the doors to the riding grounds.

"Don't try to force yourself,” Killian said. “Just focus on letting go.”

Rieta sighed. "Yes, Sire..."

Killian grinned. “I've said this before, but you don't need to learn this, you know. Rhea can carry both of us." He twitched the reins, guiding them out onto the riding grounds. “Besides.” He dug his heels into Tigris. “I like riding with you in my arms.”

\*\*\*

Killian offered children who'd experienced tragedy a home in the abbey. He educated them all, no matter their gender or age, and took particular interest in those who showed a talent for fighting. He allowed them to train as knights in the Axias order.

The highest-performing girls from the abbey became knights and secret agents. Of course, outsiders assumed they were mistresses. But Killian never laid a finger on the women in his order.

"Giselle is doing well these days," Seira murmured.

"Not right now,” Rachel pointed out, as Giselle yelled "Next!” Below them, the training grounds turned to chaos.

"Who's chasing her?" Seira asked.

“Leonard. Giselle has never lost to anyone but His Royal Highness before."

Leute's eyes widened like a bunny's. “I thought she let that go?"

"Apparently not." Rachel smirked. “We must have rested for too long. We've gotten lax. Now someone is able to conquer the knightmaiden with two swords."

Beth leapt to her feet. "Let it go! Our captain couldn't have lost," she shouted.

Nearby, Rieta startled, dropping the apple she'd been holding. "What?"

Meanwhile, Killian watched his knights clash with amusement. He recalled the last time he'd fought Giselle himself—the year she turned thirteen.

As a young, exiled imperial prince, he'd come to this land a near-stranger. People assumed he was just a pampered young noble, running away from home over some argument.

Everyone thought he'd leave soon enough. That, or get himself killed in battle, leaping in too recklessly. But every time he left on a mission, he returned victorious.

Before long, people began to follow him. His followers grew over time. Everyone came to recognize that the safest place to be was at his back, because he always stood on the front lines in a fight.

The eighteen-year-old prince fiercely protected his adopted land. He even renovated the ancient Axias Manor for the first time in a hundred years.

Giselle saw this with her own eyes. Her baron homeland, so often filled with the stench of blood, changed after his arrival. He made a city out of an empty field.

Like everyone else, she followed him, feeling as if reality had become a fairy tale. Eventually, people began to call him the Archduke of Axias.

But as his trainee, Giselle knew his character better than most. Back then, his order didn't accept knightmaidens, but she knew if she could prove her worth, he'd understand.

She trained to use two swords, confident this would make her undefeatable. And she very nearly was...

Until she fought Killian Axias.

"Why are you crying?” Killian had asked her. "It's impossible to defeat me."

"Now I can't join your order," Giselle had murmured.

But Killian shook his head. "I said I would think about it if you defeated my knights. You have. Just not me.”

A while later, Killian summoned Giselle to his bedchamber. There, she received the greatest gift she could have hoped for. He tapped both of her shoulders and her head with the flat of his blade.

"Act courageously, honestly, and justly," he'd said. “I hereby dub you my knight.” Then he gave her the sword. “I didn't expect to take on any knightmaidens. Consider this an honor."

That day, he became her lord.

Giselle gritted her teeth. "Next!"

Another challenger raced toward her.

The swordsmanship of the Axian order had improved exponentially since Giselle joined. All those mercenaries and hunters couldn't stand being shown up by a young woman. They fought all the harder, especially once she began to help train the knights.

Giselle made the Axian order what it was today. Killian had been marked as unique from birth, but not Giselle. Her swordsmanship was a result of her talent and her effort.

Even though she didn't look like a knight, nobody protested when she was named captain. Everyone had seen her fight. No one could defeat her except Killian. The only real problem had been her promotion while she was still a secret agent of the East Annex.

Now, Giselle tilted her head at Leonard, taking a pause between bouts. "Rieta is joining the East Annex as a knight?”

"Yes. You didn't know?" Leonard shrugged. "I hear Killian even gave her a horse." He was about to say she'd been given Tigris, but Giselle cut him off. "No."

Leonard blinked, puzzled. “Why not? The knight order could use a knight with divine abilities. Surely everyone will welcome Madam Tristi.”

"I welcome her as a friend, of course. But she must not become a knight!" Leonard looked confused. "Because she cannot wield a sword? She wouldn't be the first knight without such skills. Even Lana isn't very good with weaponry."

"Because Rieta's a woman," Giselle said.

Leonard's face contorted. "Thanks for letting me know." He smirked. "And you are not?"

Giselle huffed. ""For His Highness, I mean. His Highness never courts any woman who has taken vows."

Leonard hesitated. "I have sensed sparks between them lately...but what does that matter?"

Giselle looked flabbergasted. “His Royal Highness swore a vow not to touch any of his knights. How can you not know this? You claim to be his right hand!"

Leonard's eyebrows rose. He gaped at Giselle. “He doesn't court them? But he spends so many nights with you, and Lana, and everyone..."

Giselle shot him a disdainful look.

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# SINKING IN (4)

Rieta's expression darkened as they talked about the dubbing ceremony. Killian noticed. “What's wrong?"

Rieta faltered. "Will the East Annex partake in this investiture?"

"No. The East Annex keeps its own schedule."

Rieta relaxed a little.

Killian glanced at the papers he was holding. "Your grace period is one month. You have until then to reconsider your position. Take your time. The East Annex is still under reconstruction."

"Yes, Sire."

Killian finished skimming her report. Satisfied, he grinned and looked at her again. “You know, Rieta, it is not vital for you to join the knightage.”

"Pardon?" Rieta tilted her head.

"I offered you the position because all women in my service have been assigned to the East Annex. But now that I've seen your other gifts, I do not believe you are suited to be a knight.” Killian gestured to the report. "You would make a wonderful administrator."

Rieta's gaze shifted to the report.

"The East Annex isn't the only way you can work for me. What you're doing right now is truly remarkable.” Killian tapped the papers against his forehead. "Your mind is your biggest talent..." He smirked. “And you do lack some, ah, physical agility."

Rieta became flustered and lowered her face. "The horseback riding... I am making effort, my lord." After the incident at Havitus Temple, she knew better than anyone how much he needed someone with the divine ability to see demons.

Killian probably did as well. He must not want her to become a knight, due to her deficits.

Killian set the report aside and folded his hands together. “But riding strains you."

"I shall manage."

"Do you not want to take on a supervising role?"

"I strive to aid you with both mind and body, my lord.”

Killian barked out a laugh. Truly, she knew how to make him worry more than anyone else. "I fear I must decline that offer."

She didn't understand and flushed. "I will not cause you any concern." Joining the order was dangerous, but she was determined to see it through.

He sighed. He would let Rieta do whatever she wanted to. If that meant becoming a knight, well...at least he could still keep her by his side.

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The leaves turned red and orange as autumn deepened. Inside the castle walls, fall flowers bloomed as the dubbing ceremony began. The knightmaidens of the East Annex watched the new knights from a distance —somewhere out of the spotlight, but with a good view.

From the fourth-floor of a nearby building, they could see the entire ceremony. Rieta blended in with the other women, all dressed the part of prized mistresses.

Down below, the knights saluted, holding a fist to their chests as they knelt.

The Archduke of Axias stood before them in full dress uniform. He accepted a sword from a servant and raised it high. He tapped the flat on the first young knight's shoulders and head.

"Be brave. Be true. Be just. I dub thee my knight."

Rieta watched him from a distance, feeling strange. Right now, Killian reminded her of a cleric blessing a believer.

The young knight took the sword with both hands and cradled it to his chest. "Your truth is my truth. Your honor is my honor. Your life is my life. I am a sword for your will alone."

The newly-dubbed knight drove the sword into the ground. "By these words do I pledge my fealty to His Royal Highness, Archduke of Axias."

Even from a distance, Rieta felt it when those cold crimson eyes lifted to hers for a second. She looked away, focusing on Giselle and the other knightmaidens. "Did you have a dubbing ceremony too?"

Elise nodded. “Not a formal one like this, but yes. A dubbing ceremony is necessary to become a knight."

Seira extended her thumb and forefinger. "Have you found our pledge markings yet?"

Rieta shook her head, her eyes wide.

"In Killian's rooms. We give them to him after our ceremony. Mine is the widest, Elise's is the longest, and Rachel's the thinnest."

Rieta covered her mouth. It sounded like a scene from a romance novel— the knightmaidens swearing fealty to their emperor.

Elise laughed. “They're by his bed. Look for them next time."

"After Giselle swore her loyalty there, it became tradition for the East Annex knights to swear allegiance in his bedchambers,” Seira said. “Fitting, for an order of mistresses."

Rieta nodded enthusiastically. "I'll be sure to look for them."

Seira smiled and drew out a curved blade. "Mine looks like this."

Giselle and Rachel exchanged glances. "You know nobody else can see them," Rachel said. “No other woman has entered His Lordship's bedchamber in years. Except you, Rieta."

Giselle nodded. "Ever since your arrival, the mood in the castle feels quite optimistic. His Highness has grown almost temperate."

Rieta laughed. "He's been eating regularly, at least."

That was interesting. *Why, all of a sudden?*

"Everyone is shocked,” Giselle said. Was the food the problem? He's acting like a completely different person."

"Usually, he's frigid and cross this time of year,” Rachel added. “But I've yet to notice that."

"It must be thanks to Saintess Tania's visit,” Rieta said.

Rachel practically gritted her teeth. "No. Surely, he has been faring better since your arrival, Rieta.”

Elise's lips twitched. Even she'd realized what they were implying. Only Seira and Rieta remained oblivious, Seira excitedly talking about the knightmaidens' heroic escapades.

Finally, Giselle sighed. “Rieta, you are still in the grace period, are you not?"

"Yes, I am!" Rieta gathered her hands deferentially, feeling slightly awkward before her future captain.

"How much time remains?"

Rieta thought for a moment. "Until the end of fall, when the East Annex reconstruction is finished-"

"Do not accept."

Rieta blinked, taken aback.

"You cannot serve as a knight if you cannot ride a horse on your own," Giselle said.

Rieta's face turned white. She thought of what Killian said recently. How he didn't think she had what it took to become a knight. Her heart sank. He'd offered her a different position, if she didn't want to join the order.

*Was he trying to imply I won't pass muster?* Maybe he was just trying to be nice about rejecting her. *And I didn't realize...*

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"Sire. Wouldn't Miss Tristi be more suited as an aide or advisor?"

Killian looked at Leonard. *Miss Tristi?* More and more people had begun calling Rieta that. Before now, Leonard had always called her Mage Tristi. "Why do you say that?" he asked.

"She is not very agile..."

Killian frowned. "I've said as much myself, but it was in jest." He knew Rachel would be listening to them from the window just now.

Leonard clamped his mouth shut.

"I'm not going to make her wield a sword from horseback. As long as she can ride as much as Lana, she'll be fine.” It was called a knight order, but many types of people served in the Order of the East Annex. "She promised to work on it. And she can ride with me in a pinch.”

Leonard fumbled. "But why not employ her without making her join the order?"

"As a knight, she'll receive compensation. She won't accept money otherwise."

Leonard looked bewildered. “That's it?"

Killian narrowed his eyes. "What's the trouble?" Normally his people didn't oppose him directly.

He didn't even get this much opposition when Giselle joined the all-male knight order. Or when he appointed her captain, even though she was still undercover.

Then again, at the time, everyone had acknowledged Giselle's unrivaled swordsmanship.

"You all told me we need someone with divine abilities in the knightage. After Lana joined, our efficiency increased. Someone with divine powers will have the same effect. It will be helpful to learn each other's skills."

"Then surely a purger or healer would be a better choice? Damien or Colbryn, who are able riders already.”

"They are clerics. They swear loyalty to the gods first and foremost. Nor can they slay or lie if necessary. They certainly cannot pose as a mistress. Rieta can detect demons by sight alone. She need not follow the clergy's rules. Certain matters can only be addressed by "

Killian paused and leaned back in his chair. "Why must I explain this decision? I want her to join. Whether she does it not is up to Rieta." He recalled Saintess Tania's warning to keep his distance from Rieta, and grew more irritable.

What did women of the cloth know about the relationship between a man and a woman?

He hadn't taken the saintess's warning to heart, but now that his captain and vice-captain were protesting too, and it felt like everyone was siding against Rieta. Didn't they care that he approved of her? "If you want to speak an objection, do it plainly," Killian said.

When Leonard didn't reply, his eyes narrowed. "What is it? Speak, I order you."

The loyal knight sighed. “You have stated...that you will not engage in affection with anyone who pledges themselves to you..."

“Affection...with Rieta?” Killian laughed hollowly. “You worry in vain. Target that zeal on your duties instead.”

Leonard clenched his fists. "Your Highness, I confess I am but a straitlaced servant, but I wish for you to be happy."

Killian fixed Leonard with a sour look. "While I value your care for my happiness, Rieta keeps by my side because she has taken on many tasks for me. That is all."

“And you protect her, my lord.”

"Indeed. But she is one of countless souls under my care.”

"Yes, Sire. But you dote upon her!"

Killian's brow furrowed. "I dote on all my knights. Rieta just requires more care right now. She does her duties well, but she has much to learn. Plenty about her displeases me."

Leonard looked at him doubtfully. “Like what?"

Killian crossed his arms and fell silent for a moment. "Her incessant apologies, constant gratitude, and the way she always claims she's fine when she is clearly not. Anytime she says such things, my stomach turns."

Leonard's expression turned strange. "Perhaps because you wish to become better acquainted with her?"

Killian stared at Leonard, nonplussed. "I do not wish to become better acquainted with Rieta. I just want to protect her. She makes me feel like a poor superior. And I detest her proclivity for dangerous duties."

Leonard gaped.

Killian's forehead knit. "Why must she do such things? I wish she valued herself more. Instead, I must constantly watch over her. She has such a frail composition-why must she throw herself into danger?"

Killian paused. He realized he may have complained too much.

"Nonetheless, she has many gifts and aids me greatly." Was that enough? "And she is beautiful."

Now he felt guilty. He hadn't said anything wrong. But he talked so much about her bad qualities, when in fact, she had far more strengths. “She can be unruly at times, but she has a loyal, earnest nature."

Leonard simply stared at his lord.

Killian paced. “Anything I ask her to do, she learns quickly. She can grasp the whole book from a single page. Horseback riding is her only failed endeavor. She possesses many talents that cannot be taught, like her divine abilities, her skillful execution of tasks..."

Leonard blinked.

“Everyone adores her. Even her horse likes her better than me. She's adaptable, intelligent..." The more Killian spoke, the more talents he thought of.

Leonard nodded. "She is tremendous. I shall make a greater effort, my lord."

"In what?" Killian asked.

He had a long way to go toward understanding.

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# SINKING IN (5)

Rieta threw herself into temple work with even more enthusiasm than usual. Unlike her riding lessons, this work came to her easily. She buried herself in the library and reemerged with helpful information.

"We may refer to West Lenathus as a precedent," she told Killian.

The name didn't ring a bell. He didn't believe on gods, but as an imperial prince, he thought he knew all the temples. “Lenathus...the temple near Caligo?"

"Yes, Sire. It was also called the Caligo Temple, before Caligo County fell into ruin." Rieta offered her report. “The temple was built near an abbey, in an existing but derelict old building. Many people offered their aid once news of its construction spread."

*They used an existing building as a temple? What a novel idea.* *But...* "Caligo was already famous. Surely that's why the temple was so successful."

Rieta nodded. "Yes. Nearby Caligo was a major transportation hub, and many people needed divine assistance. Some even began using the temple before construction finished."

Caligo had been destroyed a little over a decade ago, when the plague hit.

It was located on good, fertile land. But a single high-grade demon had wiped out the entire village, including its lord's family, during the Diritas Plague nineteen years ago. No single demon in history had done more damage.

After its destruction, the territory reverted to imperial ownership. The regency ruled Caligo now. Members of West Lenathus Temple spread out and joined other temples, leaving the old temple site empty.

He was impressed. He had no idea how she'd dug up this information.

"Axias is not as central, travel-wise,” Rieta continued. “But many soldiers gather here to hunt magical spirits in the fall. Thus, I believe we may be able to follow Caligo's example."

Killian skimmed the report and smiled. He couldn't believe Rieta knew the hunting seasons already, when she hadn't even lived here a full year.

"One way we might differ is that the abbey West Lenathus was attached to wasn't an ordinary abbey."

"That's true," Killian says. "It used to act as an academy and a barracks."

"Yes, Sire. So, it was quite different from ordinary abbeys. Even after construction finished on the temple, they continued to use the abbey often. But it was damaged significantly during the war with the demon. If we were to use it, we might have to investigate more. I'm in the process of doing so..." Rieta trailed off. “But I couldn't find any structural records."

That made sense. If it were a barracks, they wouldn't have wanted anyone knowing the layout. When Killian explained this, Rieta nodded.

"I see. Shall I ask some scholars of architecture?"

Not a bad idea. But he could think of one book, at least, which might have answers. “That would be logical, but first check *Cartesius's Pictorial Guide to Structure*."

Rieta's eyes widened. “I've seen that text in the library! I shall retrieve it right away." Rieta made to stand, but Killian stopped her.

"Not at this hour." He waved her back to his seat and approached his bookshelves. "I'm sure I have a copy in my archive."

"Archive?"

Killian opened a drawer and rummaged through it. “Yes. The archive in the main building.”

Rieta blinked. Killian's study was so large it doubled as a library. She hadn't imagined he had another whole library as well. "There is an archive in the keep?"

"Yes. You haven't seen it because it's my personal archive." With that, Killian produced a key. He chuckled at Rieta's wide, sparkling eyes.

*His Lordship's personal archive?*

"It is not as big as the library," he warned. "It's merely where I stored my own texts before the library was built. A humble room, likely in disarray.”

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Killian undid the door at the end of a long, dark hallway, lit only by flickering candles. Shadows danced around him. He pushed the door inward with a creak.

Rieta followed him into the dark room.

With a hiss, he struck a match and touched it to a candle. He lit more candles, one by one. The scent of burnt matches and candles spread, mingling with a dry, papery smell as yellow light illuminated the room.

Killian handed Rieta a candlestick. She took it, and Killian moved toward the wall, lighting more wicks as he went.

Rieta gazed around her. Even at night, she could tell the window faced another wall, so no direct sunlight entered. It smelled a little musty, and it was dark, but not too bad. The servants must have taken care of the room. She didn't see any mold or any spiderwebs.

As promised, the room was small, with bookshelves and tables strewn about in no real order. Books piled on end tables and chairs. Someone had laid a thin cloth over some, to prevent dust settling.

The room looked like it had been used a long time ago. The furniture didn't have the usual sophisticated Axian touch—it was all old and mismatched.

“I told them not to tamper with it.” Killian finished lighting the candles and hurried back to Rieta. “A state of disarray indeed."

Books lay on some shelves, unsupported. In other places, they'd been tossed onto floors or tables, or balanced in towering stacks. It was the complete opposite of his organized study.

Killian glanced around. “I would have packed these up, if I'd known I'd desert the room for so long." He began to rummage through the bookshelves. “I don't remember where, but I'm sure it's here..."

Rieta went to the nearest bookshelf, squinting at the spines. "Shall I help you organize these?"

"No, it would take too long. Just look for the guide. I'll have someone else organize this."

"Yes, my lord." Rieta carefully scanned the bookcases. They didn't seem to be arranged by any theme, so she read titles one by one.

Rieta found earlier editions of books in the library, as well as books she'd read in the convent when she was young.

She found herself smiling. The library was open for anyone to visit, but this was a private archive. It reflected Killian's personal taste. Rieta almost felt like she was here with the Killian of the past, not the present archduke. As if she were walking through his past.

*He liked literature.* The books in his study were mainly about war, weapons, history, or work matters. But here, she found a lot of literature.

Rieta knelt to check the books on the floor, tables, and chairs. Then she noticed a stack covered by cloth on the round table. She carefully lifted the cloth and brought the candle closer.

Her eyebrows rose. *This...* A book on the top of the pile drew her eye. *What Remains in the Body After Death.*

*Theology?* She thought His Lordship had no interest in gods or religion. *Then again, he is building a temple.* Maybe he wasn't as staunch a nonbeliever as he claimed.

The book excited her. She hadn't seen anything about her speciality in a while. Rieta lowered the candle to read the other titles in the stack.

*Correlations of Flesh and Soul. What Remains in the Body After Death. Rebirth and Consciousness.*

She tilted her head. Perhaps this wasn't theology, then. Either way, the architecture book wasn't here. She straightened and dropped the cloth again.

Then her gaze snagged on another stack underneath the table.

*Undead: Defilers of Life and Death. Undead, Causes and Solutions. The Undead Tragedy: Souls Lost. Collected Illustrations of Undead Rarities.*

Rieta tilted her head. Undead meant the study of evil-or rather, demonology. Purging clerics dealt with demons too, so the topic was related to theology, but...

Rieta crouched to scan more titles. *The Verity of an Undead Soul. The Ceremony of Death.*

*The ceremony of death? Dark magic?* Rieta flinched. No. Surely His Lordship wouldn't be interested in that. She continued to scan more titles, all with the words evil, souls, and undead, over and over. *Did the dead ever rise in Axias?*

She'd heard of problems with undead souls before, but only in relation to demons or dark magic. Axias, a land of evil beasts, had nearly no problems with demons, since the two did not mesh well.

Axias might have suffered from the evil beasts, but at least it freed them from the demons' influence somewhat.

Rieta would have heard if dark magic had been a problem here, surely. *I'll have to look into it later.* She was about to stand, when a hand suddenly appeared, clapping over the title of the nearest book.

Rieta froze.

“Architecture texts are not in this area,” Killian said, his voice low and calm. He kept one hand over the books, blocking the titles from view.

In this position, he'd pinned her between his arm and body. She didn't know what to do, so she just swallowed hard, trembling. “F-forgive me, my lord."

He didn't move. Just whispered, "What do I need to forgive?” His voice was soft, quiet, and yet somehow sharp.

“I-I didn't get your permission to look..."

Killian sighed and removed his hand, letting her go.

Her heart beat so hard she could hear it in her ears. *Boom, boom...* Rieta stepped away from the books, pulse trilling as she brushed against Killian's body.

He smiled bitterly, studying her pale face. "You were simply doing what I told you to."

Rieta remained silent, trembling like a little bird. Being quick-witted and sensitive wasn't always a benefit.

With effort, Killian suppressed his defensive hostility. "I fear it is I who must ask forgiveness. Forgive me for startling you." Belatedly, he'd remembered why he told the servants not to touch these books.

The second anniversary of his mother's death was fast approaching. He nudged Rieta toward another bookshelf, gently enough that it didn't feel brusque. "I shall examine this selection myself. Please look at these bookcases."

Rieta raised her gaze to his. Their eyes met. Killian was smiling, but only his mouth. His eyes remained cold.

He looked away first. His gaze drifted to the pile he'd pulled her from. *Are humans who fall to evil still beings with souls?* asked one of the papers there. The title sounded respectable, but it had been absolute trash. So bad he wondered why the author wasted the ink.

Even so, he couldn't throw it away. Because of that title.

Meanwhile, Rieta drifted to an old frame on the corner of the shelf he asked her to check. It was the size of her palm, stuck between two books. She worked it free and found a portrait of a beautiful blonde woman wearing a ruby tiara.

She had never seen the woman before, but she knew at once who it was.

*Empress Ariadne.* Prince Killian's deceased mother.

Now, his eyes followed Rieta's to the frame. He sighed and reached for it, his eyes dry. “I had forgotten this was here." He studied her image. “A beauty, was she not?"

Maintaining a calm smile, he returned the frame to Rieta. “My queen mother."

Rieta couldn't speak. She didn't move to accept the frame, either.

He fingered it for a moment, then set it back on the shelf. Their eyes met again. Slowly, he reached out to brush his fingertips across the ends of her hair. The fragile white-blonde strands looked like moonbeams trying to escape his grasp.

He let go.

Azure eyes locked with crimson ones in the flickering candlelight. Killian took a half-step towards Rieta. He put his hands on the bookcase behind her, leaning over her.

She looked up at him, trembling again, for an entirely different reason this time. Her back bumped against the bookshelf.

He bent toward her.

Her pulse picked up again. *Thump, thump...*

Then Killian pulled something from the bookcase. A volume labeled *Cartesius's Pictorial Guide to Structure.* "Here it is." Grinning, he left Rieta frozen and pinned to the bookcase as he strolled away.

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# SINKING IN (6)

Killian fell silent as he walked Rieta to her room. He didn't look back at her once, even though she was only walking a few steps behind him.

He only turned when they reached her room. He wore the same smile as always. “About this book.” He held up *Cartesius's Pictorial Guide to Structure.* "I'll give it to you tomorrow, so you don't stay up all night reading.” He smiled mischievously. “Good night."

As he turned away, Rieta caught his sleeve automatically. "Ah." She froze, just as Killian looked back. Her eyes went wide, unsure why she'd grabbed him. But she didn't let go. "If you need anything from me..."

Killian studied her expression in silence. Then he smiled. “I'm fine.” Gently, he brushed a hand over Rieta's forehead. “Go and rest. I'll call if I need you."

For a moment, his usual cynical smirk looked sad. Before she could say anything else, he turned and left.

\*\*\*

Rieta tossed and turned in bed. *The undead...*

At first, she thought he was angry that she'd touched those books. But she quickly realized that wasn't it. He acted defensive, not angry.

She understood, even though she'd never seen that side of His Lordship before. She realized, too, that she wasn't scared of him anymore. But no matter how much she tried to forget those books, her mind crawled back to the stack.

*The undead. An evil thing that mocked life. The terrible in-between state: not alive, but not resting either.*

The undead weren't common, but bodies did rise on occasion. They were difficult to kill. Even beheaded, the undead could continue to move for a while. You had to burn their cores-body and head-or fry them with divine power.

Nobody wanted to remember their loved ones this way. As monsters feeding on the living. But the destruction required to put an undead down again was even worse. It haunted the survivors.

There were even rumors that anyone undead would never enter the gods' embrace. She'd read plenty of horror fiction where entire families turned- first the father, crawling from his grave on a rainy night. Then his wife and beloved children, who he murders in a blind rage.

She'd heard other stories about wives falling victim to dark magicians, or tragedies where fathers sacrifice themselves to save their children after their dead wives rise. At abbeys, novitiates whispered these tales over fires at night.

Rieta tossed and turned some more. The undead did not recognize anyone from their lives. They had no sense of self or consciousness. They attacked at random.

Even purging clerics struggled with the undead, because although they could channel divine energy at will, the undead had both evil energy and a physical body. At Havitus Temple, some clerics researched the undead.

Did they think about how each undead used to be a person? How they'd been loved? How must it feel to battle such entities?

One would need both physical and divine power to face the undead. Rieta shivered.

Of course, the Archduke of Axias's people could face the undead and demons alike. All their weapons were blessed and coated in silver-divine and physical power. But nothing was certain when it came to demons...

Demons, whose power could raise undead in places where a lot of death had occurred...

In other words, the undead could rise anywhere. Rieta's mind drifted to Empress Ariadne. It was over twenty years since Empress Ariadne died. Killian's birth weakened her body. She battled illness for seven years before she passed on.

The emperor tried everything to restore her, but in the end, all he could do was build her a magnificent tomb. He even cast a powerful blessing circle around it, so her body would never break down.

Rieta blinked. Rotting corpses didn't become undead. But a preserved body...

She pictured his mother's portrait. A fleeting idea latched onto her mind. She tried to force it away, but couldn't. *Could Empress Ariadne be undead...?*

Rieta rolled over again, groaning. His Lordship would be horrified if he knew what she was thinking. It was mockery of the imperial family, a slight on his mother. But the more she tried to forget the idea, the deeper it sank.

He'd read so many books about the undead. He'd kept Empress Ariadne's portrait. And his reaction when she found it...

Rieta bolted upright. He hadn't asked for his blessing tonight, when they parted. She looked at her hands, fisted in the sheets. *A blessing...*

His bedchambers were already blessed from top to bottom. Yet Rieta rose anyway, worried. She dug through her closet of La Tria dresses. All she wore now was a thin slip.

But then she paused. It was late. She couldn't summon a maid to help her dress. And His Lordship didn't like her ordinary clothes.

Rieta wrapped herself in a large shawl and tiptoed from her room.

\*\*\*

*If you need anything from me...*

Did she know? Killian leaned against the window, resting his forehead on the glass. She was a smart woman. A woman with a background in demonology and theology.

The glass chilled his forehead. He chuckled. *It's done now.* He'd never discussed it with scholars or clerics, because he knew more about the undead than any demonologist, any cleric.

There had never been a case where a person regained consciousness as an undead. Only of evil beings possessing the undead body to lure unsuspecting humans in.

*Don't come any closer, Killian!*

"Evil beings," he murmured, gazing out the window. The moon was out, but world outside looked quiet and dark.

After so long, what did it matter if his mother was undead or not? It could be his own delusion. But he hadn't entered his old study in five years for a reason...

Whatever his mother's fate, it didn't matter now. Her soul was gone. If an evil being possessed her, then he couldn't reveal it. What would others think?

Killian studied the quiet night outside. Not a single candle was lit in his bedroom. The book lay where he tossed it on the bed. He closed his eyes.

His heart sank at the idea of anyone else finding out. Once, he'd struck down anyone who dared mock his mother with his own hand. Grief had shortened the emperor's life too.

He wanted to protect his mother's remaining memory. But he had no interest in honor anymore. He'd already taken his revenge. He didn't care who believed he was justified.

He pictured her whispering his name. The things she said as he carried her to the slab. His mother, who died twice, once as a human and once as an undead. He couldn't stand the idea of people whispering about it. Debating what happened, or whether Killian was insane.

*They're all useless.* He opened the window and let the wind caress his skin. The anniversary of his mother's second death was fast approaching.

*Two deaths were too many.* One loss was devastating enough...

Just then, he heard quiet footsteps, and cloth rustling outside his door. He turned from the window to open the door. “I thought I made myself clear. You can't have the book tonight."

Rieta hovered in his doorway, dressed only in a nightgown and some thick shawls. "I did not cast your blessing tonight,” she said.

Killian leaned back against the window and smiled. Maybe it was just the moonlight streaming in, but Rieta's body seemed to glow.

Killian chuckled. "Is that so?" She could have just blessed him tomorrow morning instead. Obviously, she thought he needed consolation. *Or...* "You're a bad liar," he said.

Rieta bit her lip and lowered her head. She hadn't come here for confirmation, but...it was hard not to think about the conclusion she'd drawn.

*Empress Ariadne.* No wonder it was a closely-guarded secret. The imperial family already had a terrible enough time, with all the rumors about a curse. *It must have been so difficult for him.*

Not just Killian, but everyone in the imperial court. His father, anyone who helped conceal the empress's state. *How did something like this even happen?*

It must have been before His Lordship left the imperial palace. Dimly, she recalled people talking about how the archduke didn't believe in gods.

"You were going to bless me.” Killian beckoned Rieta to the window. "Come here."

Rieta faltered a little, then approached.

When she neared, Killian smirked, grabbing her wrist to pull her closer. He caught her waist, then lifted her onto the windowsill. Trapping Rieta between his arms, he gazed at her. “I accept your consolation gladly. Any man would welcome pity from such a beauty.”

Rieta blinked, surprised. But not as much as he'd expected.

*This woman needs to be warier.* She'd come here alone, at night, wearing this. He felt a rush of irritation. Why wasn't she more flustered?

*Perhaps I really should kiss her.*

But then Rieta reached up and touched his right eyebrow. "When you say words you do truly not believe, this eyebrow rises higher than the other." Killian clamped his mouth shut. They stared at one another.

Her fingertip traced his eyebrow again. Smiling, she lowered her hand.

With her back to the moonlight, Rieta's white-blonde hair was dazzling. Her sky-blue eyes seemed to pierce right through him. One of her maids said she looked like a goddess.

*Perhaps she is*. She reminded him of one now. *Well.* *She isn't just any beauty.*

In comparison to her, he probably looked pitch black. Or blazing red.

She offered no words of comfort. He realized it would be fine if he didn't want to talk. She would stay silent, pretending she hadn't guessed. She'd come to let him know she understood him, that was all.

Rieta glanced down at herself, then. "Forgive my impertinence. I shall retire, if you want me to go."

Killian went still for a moment. Slowly, he lowered one arm, and lowered his head.

She wondered if he was avoiding her gaze, or nodding. Either way, she slipped off the window ledge and stepped back. Rieta hesitated a moment, then gripped his shoulders, raising her silvery divine energy.

Killian didn't bow for her like usual, so instead, she placed a hand on his forehead. The same way he always brushed her hair.

He went still as she touched him. His eyes closed, almost without him realizing.

"Sleep well, my lord."

Killian did not respond. In the dark, the breeze made his curtains dance, throwing moonlight around the room. The autumn night cooled further, and he thought of his beloved mother.

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# THE WOUNDED BEAST (1)

"Oh!" Rieta woke with a jolt, gasping. Her entire body was drenched in sweat. She looked up at the familiar ceiling, then faced the slowly brightening window. The sun hadn't risen yet.

"Ha." She pressed the back of her hand to her forehead, catching her breath. Her stomach throbbed. *Is it time for my period?* That would be terrible timing.

She wrapped her arms around her torso, shivering, and pulled the sheets back up. Her eyes drooped. *Just a little longer, then I'll get up...*

A faint light emanated from her body, but Rieta had already closed her eyes, so she didn't notice.

\*\*\*

Later, Eron came to tell her Killian overslept, and she should eat breakfast by herself. Rieta was disappointed, but she figured they couldn't always eat together. Sometimes things came up.

After breakfast, she visited Killian in his study. He held out *Cartesius's Pictorial Guide to Structure* as soon as she entered.

"Thank you, Sire." Rieta took the book with both hands.

Killian looked away and nodded, acting somewhat distant. “I went through and marked some sections for you to review."

“Thank you, my lord.” Neither of them mentioned what happened last night.

Rieta held out a ledger. "Here's a list of the hunters taking part in the magical spirit hunt. More mercenaries applied to the guild than in previous years. I've included the hunting fees and guild payments as well. The mercenaries we polled seem satisfied with the guides, supplies and rescue system from last year. But they're considering increasing the fees."

Then she held out a second report, one he hadn't requested. "These are the names of those banned for violating the hunting laws. I've processed their penalties, but I'd appreciate if you could review them."

She then offered a third report. "The second hunting team returns soon. They sent word about a few injuries, which need to be treated at the abbey. While they get treatment, we'll need to store the mid-sized evil beasts they captured alive."

*She works so fast*, Killian thought, as she passed him two more ledgers. He found he didn't have much to add to their conversation.

Once she finished her report, Rieta took a step back. “If we're finished, I shall take my leave, Sire." The only thing left in her arms was *Cartesius's Pictorial Guide to Structure*.

As she turned to go, he said, "I apologize for last night."

Rieta looked back.

Killian sat at an angle in his chair, his chin resting on one fist as he studied his desk. Slowly, he lifted his gaze to meet hers.

Rieta smiled. "As do I." She hugged the book and bowed at the waist, turning to leave again.

"Let us eat lunch together later," Killian blurted. He sounded almost anxious. But they always dined together.

Rieta wondered if he'd avoided breakfast today on purpose. But she smiled anyway. "Of course, my lord." She stepped out, closing the door behind her.

Outside, she leaned against the door, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. *Phew.* Then, cradling the book, she walked away.

\*\*\*

Killian sat at his desk, not moving. Suddenly, he frowned. He pressed his interlocking fingers to his forehead. *Dammit.*

He couldn't ask her to bless him. It felt too awkward. He'd acted deliberately distant, but now he wondered if he'd scared her.

But he apologized. And Rieta was treating him the same way she always did. *Maybe it's fine.*

He lifted his head and stared at the mirror. His face looked handsome, as usual. But he couldn't tell if his expression was normal or idiotic. Killian furrowed his brow and pushed the mirror away.

\*\*\*

"You look pale, Rieta. Do you have bad cramps this month?” Giselle gave her a painkiller.

“Just average, I think, but...they're more painful when they come late."

"I'm like that too." Giselle winced in sympathy, then smiled. “Exercising lightly helps. Just don't stay sitting in one spot. And keep your belly warm."

Of course, Giselle's idea of light exercise was very different from Rieta's. But she nodded and smiled, accepting the medicine. “Thank you.”

Giselle grinned and leaned forward. “If you're grateful, bless me before you go."

Rieta laughed and put a hand on Giselle's shoulder, near her bruise. “Don't get hurt."

"Thanks." Giselle felt alive with electricity. She hugged Rieta and hurried off.

Rieta stared at the palm of her hand, seeming confused.

Seira watched Rieta. She felt like she had something to tell Rieta, but she'd forgotten it. Seira scratched an old injury, words hovering on the tip of her tongue. *What was it?*

Rieta walked away from the grounds. Seira approached Giselle, still deep in thought. Giselle lined up across from her, ready to spar.

Just as Giselle swung both swords at Seira, Seira's eyes went round as saucers. "Ah! Wait. I have to tell Rieta something!"

\*\*\*

"Rieta."

Rieta's head whipped up at the sound of her name. "My lord." She glanced at the nearest clock. Lunchtime already. And she was late. “Oh. I'm sorry, my lord."

Killian approached her, moving more sluggishly than usual. He frowned. "Why do you look unwell?” He reached for Rieta's forehead.

"I-I'm fine, Sire." Rieta shook her head and backed up to the desk. She was about to return a book to the shelf when pain shot through her forehead. She winced and dropped the book.

Killian's expression shifted. "What's wrong?"

"N-nothing, Sire. Merely..."

"Why are you here if you're sick? You should be lying down."

“I'm alright, Sire.” Rieta bent to pick up the fallen book. As she did, her knees buckled. She fell, but Killian grabbed her just in time.

Her whole body was burning up. Killian's eyes widened.

Rieta trembled and moaned. Killian scooped Rieta into his arms.

She batted at his chest feebly. "I-I'm fine, Sire."

"What do you mean, you're fine? What's wrong?"

"It's just...just a cold, Sire. Please, let me down!"

"Absolutely not."

Rieta covered her face with her hands and wailed, "It's my period!"

"Oh." Killian froze.

“Please let me down! It's uncomfortable."

Slowly, he lowered her to the ground. Rieta wobbled and grabbed the desk.

Killian scowled. "Are you sure you don't need help?"

"No, I'm more comfortable walking.” The cramps were worse this month because she'd skipped her period last month. She must have been working too hard.

Her whole body ached. Even the painkillers didn't help. But, conscious of how Killian already thought her riding skills were weak, Rieta forced herself to stand straight and act normal.

Alas, she only managed a few steps before she grabbed the desk and collapsed again.

This time, Killian insisted on carrying her to the main building on his back. They walked past shocked butlers and servants, until he laid Rieta in her own bed.

"I'm sorry, Sire," she murmured.

"Do you want me to call a doctor or a cleric?"

Rieta clutched the sheets with trembling hands and shook her head. "No, Sire. No one can do anything for me anyway."

Killian gnawed on his lip. He knew healing clerics couldn't help illnesses unrelated to demons. But she was in so much pain. "What about Giselle?

I'm sure she could make a painkiller for you."

"I've already taken one, Sire. Please don't worry."

Killian grimaced. *She's in this much pain after a painkiller?* “Is it normally this bad?"

"No. It's not always like this."

"What's different today?” he asked.

"It gets worse like this when my periods become irregular."

He frowned. "Why has it become irregular?”

Rieta winced and shut her eyes. "It...it just happens sometimes. There's no reason."

Killian looked like he didn't understand. He glanced at the open window. "Rachel. Are you like that as well?"

Outside, Rachel blinked, startled to be addressed directly. She wondered if she misheard. But when Killian fell silent, waiting, she finally cleared her throat. "Normally you're not this nosy about women's matters. Heat helps. Place a hand on her belly."

Rieta's eyes went wide. "Rachel!"

The voice outside fell silent.

Rieta turned white. Thankfully, Killian took the hint. He called for a servant, and ordered them to bring hot water in a leather pouch.

Rieta's eyes filled with relief. Killian noticed this bitterly. *What kind of man does she take me for, a common criminal?*

But he couldn't plead complete innocence. Not after last night. So he just stoked the fireplace in silence.

\*\*\*

Rieta hugged the warm leather pouch. “My lord. You must eat.”

"Just worry about yourself."

"You have a meeting this afternoon," she said.

He shrugged. “They can hold it without me."

"But experts will be testifying. Don't you need to hear what they say?"

“A single word from your mouth is more helpful than a hundred meetings like that."

A faint smile appeared on Rieta's pale face. “You should go.”

"I'll go when you fall asleep." Killian poured water into her teacup. “I told you. You spend so much time on me. It's only fair for me to care for you in return."

Rieta watched the glass teacup fill with the medicinal tea. He was acting so warm, as if she'd imagined his earlier aloofness. He didn't summon servants, but rather personally stoked her fire, made her tea, and gave her medicine.

She smiled, drifting off to sleep shortly after drinking the tea.

\*\*\*

Rieta clutched her body and moaned in her sleep. She began shivering, cold sweat breaking out on her forehead as her cheeks turned red with fever.

Killian pushed his chair back, bolting to his feet. “Eron!” he shouted. Something was very wrong.

This couldn't be a cold. Or period pain. He'd never seen her like this.

He shouted again, until all of Axias Manor was in an uproar. Soon, Giselle, Celine, and Colbryn came running.

"What causes this wretched state?" Killian asked.

Giselle blanched. "I-I cannot fathom, my lord. It does not seem a simple fever."

"Do something. Anything. Painkillers, alucino, whatever she needs!"

Giselle bent over Rieta, tapping her cheek. “Rieta?”

Rieta didn't seem to hear her. She just quivered and gasped for air. “Ugh... hng”

Killian's chest felt hollow as he watched Rieta writhe. She looked completely senseless, on the brink of death. He felt like he stood at the edge of a cliff. "What do we do?"

Celine stepped forward. "We have to lower the fever. Get a wet washcloth. And...we'll have to take her clothes off." Celine glanced at Killian and Colbryn, no doubt wanting the men to leave.

But Colbryn's expression turned wary. "Wait." The young cleric took a step forward. "I...I believe I recognize this."

Everyone froze, staring at him.

Colbryn, on the other hand, studied Rieta. He frowned deeply. Then he gestured to Giselle, who'd been about to give Rieta another dose of medicine. "Wait. Do not give her medicine."

"Pardon?" Giselle looked bewildered.

"Call for Abbot Vetere," Colbryn said.

Killian looked ready to knock an explanation out of the cleric. “Explain."

Colbryn snapped back to attention. "I believe it is a divine fever."

Everyone's jaws dropped.

Colbryn kept his eyes on Rieta, his brows knit. "Caused by her burgeoning healing powers."

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# THE WOUNDED BEAST (2)

"I believe it to be divine fever." Colbryn kept his eyes on Rieta, his eyebrows knit. "Caused by her burgeoning healing powers."

“Divine fever?” asked Celine. “I've never heard of it making someone this ill."

"Nor have I, which is why I cannot be certain.” Colbryn took a step closer to Rieta. “The abbot will know. He's witnessed many such fevers.” Colbryn summoned his divine energy to inspect Rieta.

She writhed in pain, crying out.

Colbryn flinched and let the energy subside. "I don't have enough experience. I'm sorry. Please send for Abbot Vetere."

"Eron!" Killian shouted. "Send a carriage to the abbey." Then he caught himself. "No. Rachel, you go. Take Falcon and bring Vetere here."

No one replied, but they all heard a whooshing sound out the window, followed by the thump of feet on the ground, and hurried footsteps. Killian joined Colbryn by Rieta's bed. "What is divine fever?"

"It occurs when someone with divine abilities acquires new healing or purging powers. I've heard of rare cases where it causes intense pain." "Is she in danger?"

"I-I'm not sure, Sire. I've never heard of anything dying from the fever, but I don't have much experience... I had a fairly severe case myself, though not this bad. Perhaps because she stood in for the high chaplain at Havitus Temple? Mage Tristi might—"

"You went through this?” Killian interrupted.

"Yes, Sire. Last year, when my healing ability manifested."

Killian relaxed slightly. At least now he knew what was happening. Colbryn survived it. *Rieta will be fine.* His expression still looked a little terrifying as he growled, "Can't you help her?”

Colbryn clenched his fist. "I don't think it will help. This isn't an illness, really. More divine energy might make things worse.” Suddenly, Colbryn's head shot up. "Did the madam utilize any healing or purging powers lately?"

"Not since Havitus Temple,” Killian said.

Colbryn shook his head. "You're certain?"

“Actually, I-I believe...she has,” Giselle murmured. Everyone looked at her. "Seira said Rieta blessed her wound. She healed shortly thereafter!"

"Good." Relief flooded Colbryn's worried eyes. “Then it must be divine fever."

Rieta gave another pained twist, her eyes still shut. She didn't seem to be conscious again yet.

Killian stared down at her sheet-white face. "Her healing powers are coming in?"

Colbryn nodded. "Apparently, Sire. Damien also suffered growing pains with his purging ability." Colbryn noticed everyone's nerves and forced a smile. "Don't worry. The abbot will know what to do. In the meantime, we should celebrate! Her divine energy has bloomed."

Killian's eyebrow twitched. “Celebrate?” His expression darkened.

Colbryn clamped his mouth shut, flushed.

Killian turned back to Rieta. *Celebrate, when she's in pain?* But the word *bloomed* struck a chord with him. Where had he heard that before?

*The divine energy of the grand blessing ceremony may have gone, but her body will remember that power. If she keeps training, she'll bloom into a terrifying talent. Whether she becomes a healer or a purger, either way, she'll be a big help. Keep her close...*

Killian pressed a palm to his face to hide his expression. *She'll be the perfect pawn.*

Rieta gasped, tears running down her face.

He flinched. *Is she supposed to suffer this much?* Killian clenched his fists. If it caused her this much pain, he didn't want her to gain healing powers. It wasn't worth it.

*Rieta. Come back to me.*

\*\*\*

Vector practically carried the grizzled, elderly abbot inside. The moment Vetere saw Rieta, he nodded. “It's divine fever. Caused by new healing energy." He looked at Killian. "Felicitations are in order."

Fury exploded in Killian's chest. *Why is he congratulating me and not Rieta?* He ignored that. “What do we do? Is it life-threatening?"

"Do not worry. She's in no danger." The abbot smiled. “You must have been so shocked."

At that, Killian finally let go of the breath he'd been holding. He brushed a hand over his pale face.

Vetere watched Rieta. "This fever is more severe than I've seen in quite some time. She'll possess mighty skills."

*So?* Killian growled. “Just make her better."

But Vetere shook his head. "There's nothing we can do but wait."

Killian glared at the abbot. “Can't you at least do something for the pain?”

"She must endure it. This is God's test. To use the highest form of power, you must acquaint yourself with suffering."

Killian gritted his teeth. "I don't care if god himself forbids it. Fix her. Now."

Vetere sighed. "We cannot use divine energy. It would backfire. Like when Colbryn tried to heal her, it will only cause worse pain. Medicine, too, would just stoke the flames."

"Oh." Killian shut his mouth.

Giselle turned pale and covered her mouth. She just remembered the painkiller she'd given Rieta before she went to the library.

Killian, too, was remembering Rieta saying she took medicine. Thank goodness Colbryn had warned them not to try the alucino.

"Colbryn said you did something for him," Killian said.

“I explained the situation and sat with him. I offered mental support,” said the abbot. “That's all we can do in a case like this. Be here with her until she regains consciousness."

Killian fixed him with an icy gaze. “So many people, yet none of you are any use."

“I understand your concern, truly,” said Vetere. “But do not worry. God gifted her this pain. With his blessing, soon she will be restored to good health again."

Killian kicked a table. The leg snapped off and spun across the floor. "A gift? You call this a gift?” *Absolute crap. Pain was just pain.*

Colbryn startled and backed away.

On the bed, Rieta had stopped moaning. She took short, gasping breaths, her cheeks coated with tears.

Killian felt like he might explode. He covered his eyes and clenched his teeth. Knowing her life wasn't in danger didn't calm him any. His insides writhed with guilt.

That poor woman... *How much more pain will she need to carry?*

Killian perched on the end of Rieta's bed. “Leave me. All of you."

\*\*\*

Most people filed calmly from the room. But Colbryn was nervous. He'd never seen Killian so hysterical. He was acting like the Archduke of Axias people spread rumors about. Colbryn had never believed the rumors before, but today he understood how they'd arisen.

The man Colbryn had worked alongside for the past eight years—the man who'd saved him from that war-torn hellscape-was blunt and sharp- spoken, but always logical. Seeing his side of Killian shocked him.

This was the violent swordsman who'd stormed the battlefield in Axias.

Every healer and purger went through these growing pains. But His Highness seemed shocked by Mage Tristi's state. He clearly cared for her very much...

*Is the abbot alright?* Colbryn glanced at the rest of the group, all relaxing now that they'd been kicked out of the chambers.

"I thought it surprising how calm he was, this time of year," someone muttered.

The abbot chuckled. "This is reserved for him," Vetere said. “He's gotten much better." Thirteen years of friendship had taught him the archduke's cycles.

Every year around this time, Killian grew violent and irrational. He'd either lock himself in a room or disappear. If he couldn't, he'd exercise like a madman, starting fights with random nobles and hunting evil beasts alone.

Vetere had seen Killian at his worst. The man who'd just kicked him out of Rieta's sickroom was downright adorable.

"Better?" Colbryn asked in bewilderment.

Vetere smiled and thumped Colbryn's back. “Oh dear. I see he shocked you. Don't worry. His Lordship is just pining."

Colbryn looked even more bewildered than before.

Vetere didn't explain, he just turned back to the closed door. This was the calmest he'd ever seen Killian at this time of year. He'd joked about His Lordship one day needing this beautiful woman with divine energy. But perhaps that had happened already.

\*\*\*

*It hurts. Jade...* Shivering, she longed for warmth. Every part of her felt cold, frozen solid. Her hands pawed at empty air, grasping for something.

"Rest," someone murmured. “It's alright. It'll be alright."

*It hurts...*

A dry hand palmed her forehead. It felt cool to the touch. Tears fell through the cracks of her hazy consciousness.

"Why is the room so cold?” Killian hissed to the servant who opened the door.

"Shall I stoke the fire?” he asked, pausing in the doorway with a bucket of water.

But Killian was already wrapping Rieta up in a blanket. He lifted her easily, carrying her toward the door. “I'm taking her to my room.”

The servant looked bewildered. “But, Sire, your chamber will be colder right now."

Killian scowled. "Then where is warm?"

“Please wait. I'll light a fire in Miss Tristi's dressing room. Once it warms up, we'll bring her there. It has two fireplaces, and we can bring more heating braziers too."

*The dressing room?* He looked skeptical, but he trusted his servants. Finally, Killian retreated back into the room, Rieta cradled in his arms.

The maids came to change the sheets in an hour, then again half an hour later. Rieta shook like a rain-soaked bird, sweating even as she shivered. He cradled her, and she burrowed into his chest instinctively.

Her hot forehead blazed against his cool neck.

"Jade," Rieta whispered. And then, a moment later. "It hurts..."

Only Killian heard her moans. He hesitated, then hugged her awkwardly, patting her shoulder. “Shh. It's alright. It'll be alright...”

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# THE WOUNDED BEAST (3)

Inside the blanket, on which Jade had drawn an angel, the loveliest child in the world whimpered in her sleep. Her nose flushed red as she whispered, “A snowman...”

What did she do?

"Mama. I want to make a snowman!"

"Hmm? A snowman?” It wasn't very much to ask. But she couldn't even manage that. She was still too wrapped up in his death...

"An angel snowman! For when Papa comes."

Adele. Her angel-child. Did she leave to join Papa because Mama wasn't there for her? She should've been there for her...

"Mama. When is Papa coming home? Will he be here when the snow melts?"

Her heart was broken. But she should've stayed strong for Adele.

“After the snow melts, the flowers will bloom. Will Papa come home when the flowers bloom? Mama!"

*Don't leave Mama, Adele. Mama is sorry.*

"Let's make a snow-mama, a snow-papa, and a snow-baby!"

*Mama's so sorry, Adele. I never made a snowman with you.*

\*\*\*

Rieta was sick for an entire week. Killian moved her twice more. On the fourth day, when she still showed no signs of waking, they brought her to Axias Abbey, worried that the castle's magic blessings might be having a detrimental effect on her recovery.

As they were settling her in the abbey, Colbryn approached Killian carefully. “P-Pardon me, Your Highness. That necklace...is it not a blessed sacer?"

Killian's gaze drifted to Rieta. To the chain around her neck. "I shall tend to it." Gently, he slid a hand between her head and the pillow. He raised her head, which felt light as a feather.

Her tiny breaths sounded so fragile they might shatter.

Propping her head up, he touched the necklace chain. But he couldn't bring himself to remove it. He'd thought it would be easy, but...

He stared at her for a long moment, bringing a hand to her neck. His finger slip under the leather strap, just as her weak body began to tremble like a leaf.

Fresh tears spilled from her eyes. "Don't go," she breathed.

He froze.

"It was Mama's fault,” Rieta whispered. "Mama's sorry.”

He held his breath, listening to hers. Those whispers had become familiar. Sometimes they sounded hurried or sad, other times desperate. Every time, she cried out for her child.

He wondered if she always talked in her sleep, or if it only happened now because she was weak with fever. Either way, he'd learned more about her from these small outbursts than the thousands of words they'd exchanged while she was conscious.

No dream demon haunted her sleep, but Rieta had nightmares enough of her own.

Rieta reminded him of his father, in a way. Cursed to cry tears of blood because of his child. He studied her bloodless cheeks, the damp hair stuck to her forehead. He touched her face, brushing a few strands away.

A pained breath rattled against his palm.

He hoped her daughter was alive. He hoped he could find the girl. He'd do anything to stop these tears from falling. He yearned to protect her from all future pain.

She probably didn't know what he was doing, but the way she moaned made him feel like she didn't want the necklace taken. "Rieta," he murmured. "Please, let me relieve you of this burden for now."

He waited until her breathing calmed. Only when her face relaxed and her breaths deepened did he slip the necklace off.

\*\*\*

Killian sat at an uncomfortable table in Rieta's room, working on the files he'd had delivered to the abbey. In autumn, landlords like him had many tasks to accomplish.

“My, my," murmured the cleric, Majis, who'd been assigned to clean Rieta's room. “Another day, and still His Royal Highness refuses to leave his prized mistress's side. Did you sleep, Your Highness? You could use some rest. They say Mage Tristi will wake soon anyway."

Killian looked up, scowling. “You charlatans claimed she'd wake up five days ago, too. Why should I believe you this time?”

Majis sighed. "She is stable. Surely she will awaken soon. Divine fever never lasts this long."

Three days ago, she'd improved somewhat. She wasn't feverish anymore, nor writhing in pain. She still moaned, tossing and turning while she emitted light. But she didn't scare anyone as much as she had in the beginning.

Now, Rieta looked as peaceful as someone who'd just taken a nap.

"Father Abbot already told you, patients with divine fever wake up three to four days after stabilizing." Majis placed a basket of bread on Killian's table. "She does not require sustenance right now, but you do. What good will come of starving yourself?"

Killian didn't even respond. He just looked at the bed again. It had been so long since he'd heard her voice.

Majis sighed again. "Rest. For the sake of the poor madam, who will wake to find you in this state."

"I have rested," Killian replied.

"If hunching over the table is your notion of rest."

"I do not hunch. I sleep while seated."

Majis snorted. "How admirable, Your Highness."

The clerics had arranged the room next door as a bedroom for Killian, but this picky nurse wouldn't even go to his own bed. He stuck by Rieta's side day and night.

Finally, they brought a cot into Rieta's room. But Killian just used it like a larger chair. He never laid down or slept. He perched upright, so he could keep his eye on Rieta at all times. He'd been surviving off a few minutes of snatched sleep anytime he nodded off.

"You'll ruin your face," Majis added.

Killian ignored this. He'd still be handsome, so what did it matter? Living like this for one week hardly bothered him. He'd already done it for months, ten years ago.

He was used to it. At least this time, he wasn't being rained on. And he could light a fire, change chairs, and eat when he remembered to.

The only thing worse this time was all these inexperienced people flapping around worrying.

Majis exchanged his stub of a candle for a fresh one. “Once the growing pains pass, this will be but a memory."

"They haven't passed yet. It's not a memory," Killian snapped.

"I just mean there is no need to nurse her without eating or drinking.” Majis's eyebrows lowered. Then he smiled. “You know, I'm sure many women dream of this happening to them. If you keep acting like this, you'll make her the envy of Axias.”

"How shallow clerics are." Killian snorted.

*How cynical you are*, Majis thought. He dusted the room. "Do you truly think Mage Tristi will regret this pain? Perhaps I am more conscious of her inner thoughts than you, Sire."

*Do I know Rieta?* Now that Killian thought about it, she'd also volunteered to join him in plague territory.

"She'll be happy about her new strength,” Majis said. "Please congratulate her when she wakes. I'll be sure to tell her you worried about her very much."

*Congratulate her on one, being more useful?* Killian ignored this without even a twitch.

"Mage Tristi wouldn't like it if she knew you were acting like this. And you, my lord, aren't getting any younger.” Majis kept nagging as he folded rags. Killian remained silent, just watching Rieta.

Finally, Majis gave up. He opened the windows to let in the fresh autumn air. The fire would be lit all night, so they needed some fresh air while it was still light out.

Killian glanced at the window. A red sunset glowed outside, lighting Axias Manor's roof.

"Do you think the madam will enjoy waking to see your foul state?” Majis asked.

Killian frowned. "What is so foul about me?”

"Your eyes are red."

"As they always are."

"No, Sire. The whites are red too now."

Killian begrudgingly looked at the mirror. His eyes were a little bloodshot. So what? It wasn't so much lack of sleep as the dusty, dry air in the abbey.

But with one last glance at Rieta, Killian got up.

Majis grinned. "Whoa. Do you need help finding your room, my lord?"

Killian waved him off. "I shall bathe and return shortly."

"Yes, Sire."

Killian walked to the door. Majis chuckled, watching him go. Killian was halfway out when he turned, frowning. “Do not dally. I should not leave you in here."

"Of course not, Sire."

\*\*\*

He refused the clerics' offers to heat the water as he entered the bathroom. Leonard followed him in. "If you keep thinking and worrying about her, wanting to be with and help her...that's love."

Killian stared at Leonard. "Are you joking?"

"I swear on my sword, my life, and my loyalty to you, Sire. I am serious."

Killian laughed. "Putting your life on the line just to call me an idiot..."

"Do you believe only idiots know what love is?"

Killian scowled, annoyed. “I know what love is too."

"You only know the dictionary definition. You haven't experienced it before. You don't even realize you're in love right now."

Killian snorted. "Is part of falling in love having everyone tell you over and over that you're in love? Is that how it becomes love, through group hypnosis?"

"I'm telling you, it's love," Leonard said. “You hurt when they hurt. You want to protect them. You want to get revenge on any bastard who mistreats your woman!"

"I told you, it's not."

"Think again. Are you sure? Why did you give me and Giselle those orders? You could have just asked her yourself.”

Killian waved his hand irritably. "I'm busy. Leave."

Leonard snorted. "I thought you have more time lately, thanks to Madam Rieta?"

Killian barked out a laugh. “I have no secrets anymore."

"Your Royal Highness." Leonard's eyes blazed. “Were you not startled when she fainted? Were you not concerned?"

"Of course I was concerned," he said.

"I've yet to see you so stricken with worry over your knights."

Killian fell silent for a moment. When he spoke again, he sounded cool and detached. "Her health warrants my concern. Besides, Giselle was shocked as well."

“Has her beauty never blinded you or stirred your heart?” Leonard pressed.

"Anyone can see she's beautiful. That is no evidence of my affection."

"Thoughts of her do not distract you from governance?”

"Quite the contrary. Governance has never been so effortless,” he replied.

Leonard thumped his chest. "Why do you deny it? Are you ashamed of love?"

"There is no shame in love. I merely deny what is untrue."

"If this isn't love, what could love me?" Leonard asked.

"Stop wasting my time," Killian muttered. "Leave."

"I'll leave once you answer, Sire. What is love?" Leonard gestured at the piles of books strewn around the bathroom. “You read so much, you must have come across a definition."

Killian shut his eyes. Then he grabbed the nearest book and tossed it at Leonard. *Rose and Count Hamel*, read the title.

Leonard grimaced.

It was a classic, tragic romance about a love that pushed everyone to catastrophe. The queen sold her soul to a demon and the count killed himself for losing her. Many people had written about the psychological problems with their passionate, forbidden love.

"Your example is too extreme,” Leonard finally said.

"Fine. What about *The Vampire Ereloa*?” Killian replied. A story about a king who ruined his country by falling in love with a beautiful vampire.

"That is even more extreme! Why are all of your examples tragedies?" Leonard demanded.

Killian laughed dryly. “Fine. *The Pheretra Troupe*.”

"Ah. That's a little more normal. The love story between Gustav and Lena-" Leonard stopped himself, probably just remembering that Gustav was the emperor.

Killian crossed his arms and frowned. "Not Gustav and Lena. Esras and Madame Celcy."

Leonard's expression tightened. "The...what?" Leonard was still busy changing track. "Your Royal Highness, there is such a thing as normal love. Most love is normal, in fact. It can change you, and make you act irrationally. But it's not always a passionate, crazy affair.”

Killian uncrossed his arms. “Rieta is beautiful. I appreciate her. I pity her, too. From a humanitarian stand, I worry about her. I want to help her, and I hope she will be happy. But that's all. She has not driven me insane. I have no desire to throw myself upon her.”

Leonard breathed in. His eyebrows turned down. “Your Highness. Love has many different stages."

"Perhaps. But what I feel for her is far from some deep yearning to claim her." Killian stopped Leonard with a gesture. "You are aware of her past. Consider her view on the matter. Would such affection be welcomed?"

Leonard shut his mouth.

Killian turned to the tub. "I trust I have given you ample explanation. Now, leave me." With that, Killian dumped cold water over his head and straightened.

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# THE WOUNDED BEAST (4)

Killian left the bathroom, rubbing a towel through his hair. A noise from outside made him glance out the window. The hunters from the mercenary guild were returning, hauling magical spirits in cages across the abbey's front lawn.

The beasts carried magical power. They lived among ordinary beasts in the valleys, forests, and lakes, far from people and demons alike.

Between the humans pushing demons out of their cities and the increased numbers of demons, beasts' habitats were almost gone. The last remaining one was Dragon Valley.

For some time now, Axias Abbey had allied with the beast hunters. Every autumn, when spirits flooded Dragon Valley just north of Axias, the mercenary guild sent hunters.

In exchange for the mercenaries controlling the beasts' population, they abbey provided them with food and lodgings.

As Killian watched, one of the hunters argued with Juan, a monk who cared for the caged beasts. "Brother, please show mercy. These beasts are worth a lot of money, and this is the only place we can store them."

"My hunter brother, you've brought many more creatures than you were permitted. This is no miscalculation; all the extra beasts are the most valuable ones!"

The hunter lowered his voice and took out a small pouch. "Please, if you will overlook it just this once..."

But Juan flicked his wrist. “I cannot overlook so many creatures. We can only store medium sized beasts." Juan pointed at a white beast squeezed into a cage. “That is an argen lupus, is it not? They are classified as large magical spirits."

The hunter flinched. “Your knowledge of magical spirits is most impressive, brother. But if you look closely, you'll see this creature has but one meager tail. It is a wee suckling, unable to wield magic. It poses no threat. Not like a grown lupus!"

Killian glanced at the caged white beast, about the size of a dog. *An argen lupus*. Quite the rare beast. They banned large magical spirits for safety reasons, but a young argen lupus couldn't wield magic yet.

But why wouldn't the hunter want the argen lupus on record? Tax evasion perhaps? Humans paid hefty prices for magical spirits, even though they didn't like them. Magical spirits were smarter and stronger than ordinary beasts, and their magic was useful.

With Axias Manor being rebuilt, more and more voluntary beast hunters flocked here. But with the increase in hunters, the hunts themselves grew more ruthless. As the beasts' population dwindled, more humans lost their lives at the hands of the remaining beasts.

Axias had laid ground rules to protect both sides. They called it the law of beast hunting.

Now, Killian watched hunters lift the white-furred beast, bound in barbed chains, into its cage. A shackle connected its leg to the cage, to prevent theft.

"Nobles pay great sums for young lupus," the hunter was saying. “The sucklings pose no danger, I assure you! If it dies, their furs make for magnificent decoration."

The sun had already set, and the sky was darkening, but the argen lupus' silver fur shone like silver.

Juan checked his ledger. "I do not care. Did you take more than two from a single den?"

"Of course not! I can recite the hunting laws by memory if you'd like." The hunter cleared his throat. "One must never massacre or kill. One must not capture any creature too young to be separated from its mother. No more than one youngling from each den. Should an elder spirit offer its life in exchange, any others must be freed..."

The rules protected humans, but also stopped excessive hunting. Cruel handling could lead to the beasts' ruin. Axias preferred to coexist, rather than raze the beasts entirely.

Killian himself had convinced the mercenary guild to write these new rules. For a while, he'd commanded the beast hunts himself, to ensure they were followed. If the *Archduke of Axias* obeyed the law, then so would these rough-and-tumble mercenaries.

At first, there were complaints. But the law kept the price of beasts high, so the guild saw the advantage in the end.

Juan finished comparing the other cages to his list. When he finished, the hunter clapped his hands and grinned. “I trust we are settled then?"

But Juan just raised an eyebrow. "Yes, we have settled that two rules were broken. You captured an argen lupus, and you exceeded the number of beasts you were permitted.”

"Brother, please!"

"This magical creature is too risky for the abbey to manage. You must transport the creature beyond the outer walls in the next day."

The hunter scowled. "Why? There is no risk here! The pup is too young to wield magic."

Juan ignored him, wrote something down, and turned to the other hunters. "If you truly believe it to be harmless, then bring me proof of sanction from the castle. Ask for approval of the six unreported creatures as well."

The hunter stomped his feet. “Come, now! You know I was banished for violations last year. If I receive any more penalties, this will be the last hunt I'll ever go on."

So he was a habitual offender. Killian sniffed at the sight below, just as Rachel touched down lightly on the windowsill.

“Shall I arrange an incursion?” she asked. “It would fix his nature for good."

"Is he a great nuisance?" Killian asked.

"He is nothing but an obsolete hunter, stuck in his old mindset."

"Then leave him be. The overseer will manage it."

It wasn't that big of an issue. Killian had no desire to intervene and cause a scene. The mercenaries and hunters didn't even know he was at the abbey. He didn't want anyone giving the clerics a worse time because of him.

Disinterested now, Killian stepped back to look at Rachel. "Watch over Rieta when I'm absent."

Rachel nodded. "I will, Sire. But I have not shadowed her closely in recent days."

Killian frowned. "And why have you not done so?"

"I have no wish to meddle in your private affairs, my lord."

Killian stared at Rachel.

This woman looked back innocently.

After a pause, Killian said, “A thoughtful gesture... But there is no need for such precaution over Rieta and myself."

"Yes, Sire."

He rubbed his damp head one more time with the towel.

Rachel pulled a letter from her cuff and held it out. "I came to give you this."

Killian took it. It was addressed to Rieta, from someone called Anais.

"She was with Rieta at the convent," Rachel added.

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The closed eyelids fluttered. Light emanated from Rieta's body. The child at the window stopped drawing pictures in her steamy breath. She looked over.

"Mama, the flower bloomed..."

She couldn't remember Adele's face. The girl's face looked burned and indistinct. Not the face of any child.

“Mama, what about our snowman? What about Papa?"

What did she look like when she used to ask such things? She couldn't remember the loveliest face in the world.

Slowly, the child's face burned black.

She couldn't remember her own daughter. Still. She was still alive then...

"Mama. Why are you crying?"

*Dear lord.* Adele. Her child. Her baby. *Oh god.* If only one of them survived, it should've been Adele. She should've died in her place.

If only one of them had to die...

*Jade.* He should've lived. He would have done much, much better than she did. He would have protected Adele.

He would have...

"Mama. I'm alright.”

She lost her child by protecting herself instead. *Jade.* How could she ever face him?

"We can make a snowman next winter... Don't cry. If you cry, the plague demons will take you away..."

*Adele, Adele.* Mama's sorry she couldn't come to her senses. Mama's sorry she couldn't protect you.

"Rieta. Get a grip. You have to live, for your child!”

Why didn't he save her child? *You promised Jade that you'd raise your child well*. He said she and Jade were his friends.

It didn't matter what happened to her, but she needed to save her daughter. She begged them to find Adele. He was the only one who could help.

*Why.*

"Mama."

It wasn't true what she said at the funeral. She couldn't do it on her own.

"Rieta."

*Jade. You can't go. Don't leave.* Without him, she couldn't protect Adele. *Mama's sorry. Mama's sorry she's alive.*

"Mama..."

*A snowman. Make a snowman with Mama. Please. Just once...*

"Awooo!"

Rieta startled awake at the unfamiliar cry of a beast. Her eyes were open, but she still felt hazy. She didn't recognize the room where she lay. She didn't even realize she was still glowing.

Again, she heard a howl in the distance.

Rieta pushed herself up as if in a trance and padded to the window. With a clunk and a *whoosh*, she forced it open.

Night air blew through it, mussing Rieta's hair. She didn't notice the cold, even though all she wore was a thin nightslip. She stretched a hand out the window, her expression blank.

In the distance, a beast let out another low cry. It mingled with the wind in her mind, the magical spirit expanding.

*Argen lupus.* The magic beast, called a silver wolf in Axias.

Without blinking, Rieta stepped out the window.

A massive silver wolf was clawing at the cage containing its pup. Blue flames blazed from its mane and teeth. It howled, bleeding from its paws. The cage's serrated metal had torn its mouth to shreds. It was bleeding, but the enchanted bars held.

It was so engrossed in its attempt to free its young that it didn't even notice the intruder at first. Suddenly, it growled and hunched defensively.

The mother wolf guarded the cage containing her pup, and raised her bloody head high. All four of her tails spun aggressively.

Inside the cage, the pup had been tied in a magical bind, its silvery fur stained with blood.

Rieta stared at the mother beast in a daze. The beast watched Rieta back, motionless. After a moment, it spun back to the cage, white electricity crackling. It bit into the metal again.

It ignored its own blood, biting again and again. But neither tooth nor claw could penetrate this cage.

Rieta walked toward the cage, her eyes open but unseeing.

The beast's eyes blazed blue. It whipped toward her, baring its teeth. "Grr..."

Rieta ignored it, reaching for the cold iron cage door. Her hand glowed white, almost as bright as the wolf's blue flames. At her divine touch, the cage's spell broke with a shriek.

*Clank.* The magic gone, the physical lock rattled apart. The mother wolf glared at Rieta, then panted, looking at her pup.

Rieta opened the lock. Then the cage door swung out.

The mother lupus quickly pushed past Rieta, as if she didn't even exist. Frantically, she licked her pup clean. Then she picked it up by the scruff.

But just as the mother lupus was backing out of the cage, the pup in her mouth, a loud crunch pierced the air.

An arrow seemed to sprout from the mother beast's side. “Kaa!"

Rieta watched the beautiful silver wolf fall in slow-motion. The mother dropped her pup as she fell.

But one arrow couldn't fell an argen lupus. It snarled and yanked the arrow out with its teeth. Red blood blossomed on its white fur.

The beast stood, barely able to raise its head, and drew the pup beneath its body. Blue magic blazed everywhere.

The ground began to tremble. Then came a clanking sound, and a solid *thunk*. Another projectile tore through the air with a *whoosh.*

Rieta just stared at the huge arrowhead, glinting in the moonlight, as it flew toward her.

Suddenly, a black figure appeared out of nowhere and snatched the ballista arrow from midair. He threw the huge iron arrow to the ground.

"Who is the imbecile..." Flames leapt in the man's eyes. "Who dared cast a spear at my woman?"

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# THE WOUNDED BEAST (5)

The hunter watched in shock as a man snatched the ballista arrow from midair with his bare hands. He lowered his telescope in disbelief.

The raven-haired man visibly seethed as he walked toward the bare-footed blonde woman, dressed only in nightclothes. He scooped her into his arms.

Rieta, meanwhile, stared vacantly at the argen lupus. She didn't recognize her surroundings, or even Killian.

Killian took one look at Rieta's vacant expression, then followed her gaze to the beast. The wounded beast growled.

"Rieta," he murmured.

No answer.

With a rushing noise, Lana's magic bound the beast. Hunters followed suit, tossing a net over its head and circling it. The huge silvery beast tore at the net, fighting desperately. Dirt and rocks flew everywhere.

The hunter jumped to his feet. "Wait! The silver wolf is mine."

The argen lupus breathed blue flames as it fought, but it was already fatally wounded. Its attacks grew dull and slow. The flames sputtered and began to fade.

At last, the beast collapsed, surrounded by hunters and layers of nets. It panted, bleeding.

"The creature is mine! I discovered it first. I shot it myself!" The hunter ran over.

Fury seeped from Killian's eyes. He shifted Rieta into his left arm and drew his blade with his right. All the hunters stopped moving at once, one holding a gag around the silver wolf's mouth.

Killian's crimson eyes were icy calm.

"Hey... Hey." Several mercenaries recognized him and gestured to the others to back away.

The Archduke of Axias. The exiled prince of the north. Frost bloomed along his blade, shimmering in the night air. He suppressed his fury with a terrifying amount of control.

One of the older mercenaries recognized the look and ran, his face drained of blood. He ran straight into the hunter's path and grabbed his collar. "You impudent fool! How dare you throw a ballista with a person so close by?"

"Huh?" the hunter sputtered.

The mercenary's spine tingled. *Dammit!* The archduke was coming. Without even turning, the mercenary could feel the chill.

Killian walked toward them, emanating fury. He still carried the woman in one arm, his sword at his side. "Beg forgiveness,” he snarled. “At once."

The hunter scoffed. "I am the one deserving of apology! That woman opened the fence and tried to steal my quarry.”

*Crazy bastard!* Did he have a death wish? The shocked mercenary slapped the hunter silent.

The hunter groaned.

The mercenary glared. “Ha! You jest, friend. We know you shot that ballista to stop the lupus from hurting her." The mercenary grabbed the hunter's collar, forcing him upright, then faced Killian. “Please forgive him, Your Royal Highness. He intended no offense."

The hunter looked ready to protest until he heard that title. At once, his face slackened with fear. He looked at the blue sword, the man's clothes, then his cold crimson eyes.

Finally, he looked at the woman in his arms.

The hunter's face drained of blood.

Killian straightened, ready to tear this man to shreds. Suddenly, the ghostly woman in his arms gripped his collar. She tugged weakly, her lips moving.

For a second, the killing aura vanished. The archduke bent to listen. None of the mercenaries could hear what she was saying, but the archduke nodded and turned away, as if he'd already forgotten the hunter existed.

He walked toward the trapped argen lupus, carrying Rieta. He set Rieta down in front of the beast, then drew the cloth off nearby cage to drape over her shoulders.

Rieta knelt before the argen lupus. She reached toward its chest.

The mother lupus panted, unable to move. It stared at its pup.

White light glowed from Rieta's hand. It grew so bright that all those watching turned to shield their eyes.

Quiet exclamations and murmurs bubbled up. "That woman, isn't she the Widow of Cevitas?"

"The archduke's prized mistress is a healer as well?”

She treated the pup with healing magic, as if she did this sort of thing every day. Killian watched her, his eyes filled with strange light.

The mercenaries muttered to each other. "Do healing spells work on magical spirits?"

"I don't know..."

The mother watched, its chest heaving. The pup whimpered as white light encircled its wounds. Nobody could tell if the pup's wounds were improving or not.

Killian watched her. Suddenly, he spoke. “You claim the youngling as yours?"

The hunter realized he was talking to him. He stepped forward. "Sire? Yes, Sire!"

Killian jerked his chin at the pup. "Release the shackle.”

"Ah...as you wish, Sire!" *Why release a beast?* But the hunter didn't dare protest. He fumbled with the keyring at his hip, then approached the pup. With a few clinks, the horrible iron chains fell away.

The only sounds were the divine energy resonating, and the mother wolf's labored pants.

The hunter glanced at Rieta, barefoot and in her nightclothes. The makeshift cloak the archduke had given her was the only thing protecting her from both cold and stares.

She ignored everyone around her, casting her healing magic. Even not in her right mind and half a mess, she was an incredible beauty.

"Her face, really...she's lovely," people murmured.

Perhaps she'd gone crazy with fear after the ballista attack. Or did she feel sympathy for the pup? The hunter couldn't understand why she'd let a beast go. Or use healing magic at that.

*Unless they want to steal my beast?* The guys in the guild had warned him that the Archduke of Axias was strict about his laws. The hunter gritted his teeth. He wouldn't let anyone take away his beast without paying.

Then again, he did almost hurt the archduke's mistress. He'd have to apologize properly. When should he?

The sound of someone pulling a chain caught his attention. The mercenaries grunted, tightening their grip on the mother lupus's chains.

Her fur shone bright silver in the moonlight.

The hunter's jaw dropped at the beast's dignity, even while bleeding out. *How much is she worth?* he wondered. Even his fear disappeared for a second. *She must be ten times more expensive than the pup...*

The hunter took half a step forward. “My lord, I gravely apologize for startling the esteemed lady..."

Heavy crimson eyes shifted toward him. The hunter began to shiver, curling in on himself. Then he slowly pointed at the ballista. “B-but the lady would have been in danger, had I not shot the beast."

*And if the archduke hadn't interrupted, I might have been able to finish the beast.* But he'd fatally wounded it. Surely he deserved some compensation?

Everyone around him just stared at him flatly.

The hunter's gaze darted around the crowd. *Why was everyone looking at him so strangely?* No one even congratulated him for defeating such an incredible beast.

Finally, a mercenary spoke up. “Catching a mother and suckling together is forbidden by law."

The hunter's eyes nearly popped out of his skull. "What?"

"Did you forget the hunting laws?" that mercenary asked. “You cannot use a youngling to lure a mother into a trap.”

The hunter gaped at the mercenary, then the Archduke of Axias, dismayed. He finally understood why no one else claimed the expensive beast. He realized they hadn't been hunting it, only containing it, so it didn't hurt anyone.

But both the pup and mother were worth their weight in gold for magic ingredients and fur.

The hunter's eyes swiveled to the pup. *This is the most expensive beast I caught. I have to let go of a gold mine all because of its horrid mother?* Argen lupuses were incredibly rare.

Bitterness suffused the hunter's body. *What can I do?* If it were just him and the other hunters, he would've sucked it up and offered to split the profits. But he couldn't do that with the archduke standing here.

He forgot his fear and teared up. *Why is that even a law?* The archduke just invented laws whenever they suited him...

A few mercenaries exchanged looks, then glanced at the two argen lupus. "Will the archduke really order him to let one go?"

"Ugh. Which one?"

"Probably the mother, right? The pup was caught first," a mercenary murmured.

Another mercenary shook his head. "There's room for interpretation in the law."

"Really?" another hunter hissed. Letting that massive beast go would be a challenge. They weren't in Dragon Valley. This was the middle of Axias. To release it, they'd have to cage it and haul it all the way back to Dragon Valley.

And even then, they weren't confident the argen lupus would retreat. Not if the humans kept its pup.

"Besides," another mercenary said, “He caught the pup without permission. That's a serious crime. It warrants confiscation.” Everyone glanced at the archduke again.

The archduke turned his head, expressionless. “Release the mother.”

The hunters all deflated a little. *Well. That was that...*

"Please release the youngling," said a woman's voice.

Killian froze. Everyone followed his gaze to the healer kneeling beside the pup. Everyone blinked, wondering if she'd really spoken.

For a moment, silence fell. All they could hear was the mother's panting, the pup's whimpering, and the divine energy radiating from the woman.

Then Killian said, “Release the mother."

Rieta shook her head. "Please release the youngling."

The air grew cold as a bucket of ice water. Nobody could believe she'd just contradicted the Archduke of Axias. And so impertinently too.

The beautiful mage, rumored to be the archduke's prized mistress, just sat there, as if she hadn't said a word. The only proof she was awake, in fact, was the silvery healing glow of her hand.

What was going on? People's eyes darted back and forth between the archduke and his mistress.

Killian looked at Rieta quietly. With a clunk, he sheathed his sword. "Release them both."

The mercenaries all gaped.

The Archduke of Axias said, “I will purchase any creatures that are left."

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# THE WOUNDED BEAST (6)

"Release them both,” the Archduke of Axias said. “I will purchase any creatures that are left." With that, he gestured at the monks, who had run out at the sound of the commotion.

Juan, the caretaker, had been staring at the magical beast in shock. He shook himself and trotted over. “Will you release them, Sire?"

"Yes. We'll take them both to the castle first."

"I shall call for a cart, Sire."

Killian nodded. Even before Juan gave the order, the monks leapt into action.

The hunter stared at them, then the archduke. "F-forgive me, but...by purchase, you mean..."

Killian didn't even look at him, just Juan. “Bring me the contract for transfer of ownership."

"Yes, Your Highness.” Juan ran off. Soon, he returned with the ledger of beasts and a pile of papers.

Still not giving the hunter a second glance, Killian said, “There will be precedent for an argen lupus of this size. I shall pay you twice the highest bid for such a creature."

"Pardon?" The hunter and even the mercenaries looked shocked.

Juan was a little flustered too, but he quickly opened the ledger and began drafting a contract. "Goodness...the value of silver wolves has risen greatly of late. Twofold? I-I cannot quite recall the price of the highest bid..."

Another monk held a torch up to illuminate the ledger. Juan paused on a page, then held out the quill to Killian.

He took it. Without waiting for the hunter to answer, Killian signed.

Juan offered it to the hunter, along with another quill. The hunter signed, stunned by the sudden windfall.

Killian faced the hunter.

The hunter finally came to his senses and bowed, holding out a hand excitedly. "Goodness, Your Royal Highness. I've heard much of your fair and just nature, but I nev-"

Killian slapped the hunter across the face. The crack sounded solid, more like a fist than an open palm.

The hunter staggered back. Killian followed and slapped him again. And again. The loud cracks echoed across the lawns.

Unable to withstand anymore, the hunter sagged to the ground, bleeding. A tooth spilled from his mouth. He scrabbled backward on hands and knees.

The mercenaries near him all stepped back to avoid him.

An elderly cleric stepped forward. Vetere, leaning on a cane, put himself between the fallen hunter and Killian. “This is abbey property, Your Highness. We do not permit murder."

"I am well aware," Killian answered. With that, he turned away, as if he'd never planned to kill the man.

Lana approached Killian and held out a handkerchief while the onlookers stared, dumbstruck.

Killian took it. He wiped his hands clean. Emotionlessly, he told Juan, "Let the law handle him. And reward the mercenaries generously for their efforts."

"Yes, Sire."

He turned and walked to the argen lupus and his mistress, while everyone else stared in shock.

The mistress was still healing the lupus pup. *Did healing magic even work on magical spirits?* It looked like she was shoveling sand against a tide.

Killian stopped in front of her. He held out something that glinted in the light, and draped it around the mage's neck.

The mage blinked. Then she looked up at the Archduke of Axias. Their eyes met in silence.

As the mercenaries watched quizzically, Killian knelt on one knee before the mage. He looked calm now, after that burst of fury. A strange light filled his eyes.

He opened his mouth, about to call her name, when—

*Rattle, rattle.* The new cart arrived.

"Now, now. Let us all retire." Majis dispersed the crowd of mercenaries. They all leapt to the side, welcoming the cart that would diffuse this warlike atmosphere.

Several mercenaries helped lift the beast onto the cart.

"Rieta." Killian sat Rieta on a burlap sack someone brought. He watched her for a while, then sighed. "You told me you would consider my worries before taking drastic actions."

Rieta just stared at him.

Killian chuckled and placed his hands on Rieta's cheeks. Those pale eyes looked into his. Rieta's cheeks were cold, but so were Killian's hands. He let his hands drop to the cloth on her shoulders. He pulled it tighter.

"The mother is dangerously ill," he murmured. "The youngling will heal. Please heal the mother instead."

Rieta gazed at him quietly.

Killian smiled.

Rieta turned toward the argen lupus pup and the mother. Her wound needed to be staunched. But it didn't look like Rieta understood him.

Finally, she looked at her own hand, still hovering over the pup. “Ah.” As if she'd only just now realized what she was doing.

Killian frowned at her. *I waited so long for her to wake. Why is she here, doing this?* People told him to congratulate her. Her fever was so dangerous. He was worried. He nearly lost his temper.

So many questions crumbled in Killian's throat. He caught her eye again. "Please heal the mother."

But she couldn't seem to move her hand from the pup's side. Her lips parted. "The youngling...but a moment more..."

Behind them, Vetere walked forward. He raised his cane and cast healing magic on the mother. Rieta watched, but continued to pour divine power into the pup.

It didn't seem to make much difference. The monks bandaged the mother lupus, who could no longer lift her head. They lifted her onto the huge cart, and prepared to carry both beasts to the castle.

Still, Rieta couldn't take her hand from the pup. And Killian couldn't drag himself away from Rieta.

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First light broke. Killian set a pair of shoes before Rieta. "Let us retire."

Rieta did not respond. She did not reach for her shoes, either.

Killian gazed at her, then touched her cold, dirt-encrusted foot. "Rieta." He brushed the dirt off and put on her shoe himself.

Rieta let him.

Killian met her eyes and smiled once more. “I wish...” He paused, then looked down at her other foot. He dusted it off and added her second shoe. "I wish you would heal the mother."

Rieta blinked. Her lips fluttered. Finally, she said, "But the mother...she wished for me to save her youngling."

Killian brushed strands of hair from her forehead and laughed. "How do you know this?"

Rieta's eyelids fluttered. Her lips curved in a smile. She was beautiful, but still so sad. "It is her nature."

"But surely the youngling would wish for you to save its sickly mother." Gently, Killian wiped a tear from her cheek. “This, too, is in its nature. No?"

Rieta looked bewildered. She lifted a hand to touch her cheek. Only when she felt the cold did she realize she was crying.

Killian watched her with a strange expression, then dropped his head. "Rieta." He put both hands on her shoulders. "Do not weep" His hand slid to her neck and shoulders. He rubbed her cold arms, then touched her shoulders again. "Please."

He pulled her toward him slowly.

They stood close enough to feel each other's breath on their cheeks. But he wasn't hugging her. And she didn't lean into him. He just gripped her shoulders tightly.

"Do not dwell on this. You saved them both."

Rieta stared at his chest.

His voice grew smaller, as if it were crawling back into his throat. "You need not strain yourself to save them." His hands traced down her arms again, then crept back to her shoulders. He wanted to warm her, but his hands were just as cold as she felt.

"The youngling will survive. It's healthy,” he said. It sounded like his voice was trembling. His hands, too. As if he'd sustained a wound he didn't notice.

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Inside the rattling carriage, Rieta and Killian sat across from one another. Rieta was wrapped in several layers of blankets and outerwear, but she was still cold.

"How do you feel?" Killian asked.

"I'm fine, Sire."

Killian smiled. “Are you not going to ask me if I'm alright?"

Rieta frowned. "Are you...not well, Sire?"

*That's a little better.* Killian chuckled.

Rieta staggered to her feet. "If you're hurt, I can..."

Killian waved her away. "No, no. Just heal the mother when we get to the castle. I'll leave the pup to Colbryn."

Rieta mumbled, "Why..." Then her eyes glazed over.

Killian maintained his smile. “Just because. I want you to heal the mother."

Rieta's expression turned odd. She blinked. Her lips fluttered. "Why did you demand the mother's release?"

Killian leaned against the window. "That is the law. And it was the appropriate choice."

Rieta's pale, moonlight-colored hair looked beautiful against the dark blanket she wore. The carriage rattled beneath them.

Rieta mumbled, "You should have asked them to spare the youngling.”

Killian turned away. "Well. I think it was an ambiguous situation.”

The carriage must have hit a rock, because it shook a little. Rieta's mouth opened and closed. Finally, she frowned. “Is it not better to free the youngling, if the law aims to preserve magical spirits?”

Killian paused. "It was an ambiguous situation.” He looked down at his hand, slung over the carriage windowsill. A hangnail had broken off. He wanted to rip it off, but it might make him bleed. He didn't want Rieta to use her healing magic on him.

"The pup...to protect the species," Rieta muttered.

Killian narrowed his eyes. “Enough. That's not important right now." Killian pulled off his cloak somewhat aggressively and tossed it onto her lap. "Warm yourself and rest. I shall wake you upon arrival.”

"The argen lupus species cares strongly for its kin,” Rieta said. “She cannot survive without her youngling anyway."

Something welled up inside of him. "I do not believe she cannot survive,” he spat. "If all mothers deprived of their young died, the argen lupus would have gone extinct long ago. Much like the former dragons of Dragon Valley."

Rieta looked at him, her eyes glazed over. She didn't seem shocked, though.

Killian shut his mouth again. After a long moment, he said, “You have done well. I am told I must congratulate you on acquiring the ability to heal. Personally, I do not understand why we should congratulate you on one more ability that will only benefit others. Nevertheless, I congratulate you."

"Thank you, my lord."

"You may request a reward of your choosing."

Rieta's mouth gaped. But after a moment, she nodded. “Should a mother and her youngling be captured together again, I wish for you to save the youngling instead."

Killian grinned with one corner of his mouth. "Alas, I do not feel thus inclined."

"Better to save a pup than a mother who has lost her young."

"I disagree,” Killian said.

Rieta's lip trembled. Melancholy shone in her eyes-the first emotion she'd displayed since waking. “A report,” she replied. “I will present you a report for review."

"You shall not," he snapped.

"If you would but review it."

“I shall do no such thing.” He glared.

"My lord."

He winced. “I know you're right. But I..." He grimaced and turned to the window. "I wanted to spare the mother."

The carriage rattled.

Killian fidgeted with the hangnail. Finally, he whispered, "My mother died protecting me, too." He blinked, shocked he'd said that aloud. He'd never even thought about it that way. He forced a laugh. "And as the tyrant that I am, I shall do as I please."

He didn't care if that sounded shallow. He would never be a proper person anyway.

His chest felt heavy. He grabbed his shirt in his fist, then let it go, leaning back. Something seemed caught in his throat. He cracked one eye to look at Rieta.

Her sky-blue eyes gazed right back.

He hated seeing his own red and black reflection in them. To be honest, he thought she would have been hurt by what she'd seen earlier. He'd thought he'd need to console her. But she seemed calm as a placid lake.

He was the one burning with unspent emotion.

Killian cleared his throat. "I cannot fathom the heart of a mother. But you do not know the heart of a child as well as I do. I remember...” He showed her a tiny corner of his old, red scar. "The child, too, has a feeling heart."

Rieta looked at him carefully.

He stared back in silence. Then he forced a laugh, fidgeting and turning back to the window. “In the end, a parent cannot reason over their child.”

The air between them was so dry it crackled. Rocks caught in the carriage wheels, kicking up dust. Was it because he'd released something so heavy? His heart felt empty, rattling and bouncing like the carriage.

But Rieta spoke in a low voice, as if she knew how important this was. "Perhaps you would like to hear." She gave him the same strange smile he wore. "My own tale. Shall I recount it, my lord?"

Rieta guessed her expression must look similar to Killian's right now.

But he shook his head. "No." He put his chin in his hand, smiling. “You need not recount it for me. I am aware of it."

Their eyes met.

Killian's brushed down for a second. Then he looked out the window to the cool dawn light. He knew she carried a painful wound. And yet, her daughter lived. He knew that. He couldn't listen to her story and then lie to her face.

Anything she told him would just pour salt on the wound. He knew things even she didn't know.

The corpse she had seen was not her daughter's.

He knew all of her stories. Or so he thought...

She probably just assumed he'd guessed it. Or at least, some of it. Rieta laughed, a weak sound that came out more like a sigh. For a moment, she thought about forcing him to hear the story. *Does he really know?*

But in the end, she just laughed again. This time, it sounded more like a sob.

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When Rieta came to her senses, she lay on a bed in an unfamiliar room. She couldn't remember anything after that moment in the carriage.

She didn't know if she'd asked that question aloud or not.

81

# IT’S ALRIGHT, IT’S LOVE (1)

Rieta stared at the gray ceiling, buried in the blankets. She recognized those gray stones... She was in Axias Manor. But she didn't know this room. It wasn't hers, nor was it Killian's bedchamber.

She pushed herself upright. The cloth covering her slipped to her waist. She grabbed it instinctively. It was the dusky purple cloak Killian had given her in the carriage.

Rieta fidgeted with it, then laughed weakly. She carefully folded it on her lap, looking around again. Suddenly, she flinched.

Not far from the bed sat a man. He nearly blended into the background, he sat so still, a book on his lap. But he was watching her.

"My lord." Rieta smiled awkwardly and rubbed the back of her neck. "I didn't realize you were here."

Killian shut the book and rose. “I've been keeping watch as you heal. Forgive me if I've intruded." He poured water into a teacup on a table at the foot of the bed. Then he offered it to her.

"You have not...thank you.” She took the cup.

"Rieta."

Rieta paused mid-sip to look at him.

"If ever..." He bit his lip. “If ever I...” He stopped, looking down. Slowly, he raised his eyes to hers once more. After a long, tense moment, he turned away curtly. "If I can console you in any way, please let me know how."

Rieta blinked, confused. Before she could respond, someone knocked at the door.

"The physician has arrived."

Behind the doctor stood Celine. She smiled brightly at Rieta the moment their eyes met.

"Celine has decided to study medicine properly,” Killian said. “She'll look after you once she completes her probationary period."

Celine lifted her skirts and curtsied, beaming.

Rieta giggled.

Together, the doctor and Celine examined Rieta. “How are you feeling?"

Killian interjected. “She suffered divine fever for two weeks, then spent all last night in the cold."

The doctor took her pulse. “I'm not concerned about the divine fever. But what about now. Do you feel any discomfort?"

Killian's eyes shifted to Rieta.

She opened her mouth to say *I'm alright*, then caught herself. He wouldn't believe her if she said so. And she was hurting. But she didn't want to exaggerate the pain or worry him...

While Rieta searched for the right response, Killian asked, “Where were you injured, your foot?"

"No, Sire. It feels fine."

"Your stomach?"

"It does not hurt."

"Are you still sweating? Or cold? Or do you feel feverish, perhaps?"

Rieta swallowed hard. “I feel just right. Neither cold nor hot."

The doctor finished taking her pulse and nodded. “Wonderful. You're in the best health I've seen yet." Apparently god really had watched over her during those godforsaken pains. “But,” the doctor added, “You might not notice anything amiss after the past two weeks."

He eyed Killian, then Rieta. Finally, the doctor lowered his voice. "How does your heart feel?"

"Excuse me?" Rieta blinked.

"Your remaining ailment springs from heartsickness," the doctor said gently. "You must not tax yourself. If you cannot release this emotional pain, it will surface in your physical body."

Rieta winced, flustered. “I-I'm fine. I assure you."

Killian and Celine both watched her.

"This is exactly what I mean,” the doctor said. “Forgive me if I speak out of turn, but you seem one to swallow your own burdens for others' sake. Do not, or they will rot inside you. You must shine light on your troubles. Give them air. And let others help you."

Killian listened expressionlessly.

The doctor picked up his medical bag. “This will be my last visit. Celine will care for you from now on.” He paused. “Also, I heard some of what happened last night. I was worried, but it seems the lady's body is unharmed. Now she must only calm her mind."

With that, the doctor bowed, heading toward the door. "Rest. Grow healthy again. Miss Celine will care for you admirably, but please call anytime you need me. Goodbye."

On his way out, he exchanged a few words with Killian in lowered voices. Killian nodded, arms folded, though it was impossible to guess what they were saying.

Once the doctor departed, Rieta rubbed the back of her neck, looking around. "What chamber is this?"

Killian glanced over. "It is your dressing room."

Rieta blinked. "Sire?"

Killian looked away. “I've allocated this dressing room to you. Didn't Eron inform you?"

Rieta nodded jerkily. "Y-yes. Someone mentioned they were preparing a dressing room, since I'll need to dress as Your Highness's prized mistress, but..."

She swallowed the rest. After all, she'd agreed to adhere to his wishes. *A lady of the East Annex* needed a dressing room. She just hadn't expected it to be so large.

Silver candlesticks brightened the wallpaper and the paintings hanging around it. A large window overlooked the lawns, and two fireplaces graced either end of the room. Several elegant sofas filled it, and one open door led out to the hallway.

Screens blocked the bed where she'd awoken. An enormous canopy hung over the bed, all elegant lacy tulle. Nearby, she saw a wardrobe for her dresses, a simple yet sophisticated vanity, a closet, many mirrors, and a safe for her accessories.

An archway led from here into a washroom. There was also a rocking chair, a tea table, an armoire for refreshments, and an enormous desk. It looked like a bedroom, study, parlor and dressing room all rolled into one.

*Is this how all nobles' dressing rooms look?* Rieta gazed around in awe. Besides Killian's study, she had never seen a room this large. Generally, Axias Manor felt dreary, but here seemed bright and elegant-even with the gray stone walls.

Surely this couldn't truly be *hers*. It must just be a temporary placement, while they finished redoing the manor and gave her a proper room, as befitted her station.

"As for the argen lupus,” Killian was saying, "They're being isolated in the northeastern sector. Both the pup and the mother."

Rieta blinked.

Killian approached the bed and sat in a chair nearby. "Do you still wish to heal the creature?"

Rieta nodded vigorously. “Yes, my lord."

He laced his fingers together. “I am told healing magic seldom works on magical spirits."

Rieta hesitated before nodding. This was true. Magic energy and divine energy didn't mix well. They resisted each other, like oil and water. But sometimes, if magic beasts chose to accept divine energy, it could be effective.

Divine energy was uncomfortable for demons, and welcomed by humans. For magic beasts, it was ambiguous. The beasts were strange creatures, with their own rules and laws. Every case differed.

She'd never heard of healing magic working on an argen lupus. It certainly hadn't seemed effective last night. But still...

"The youngling is doing well,” Killian said. "But the mother is agitated. She rejects all our attempts to treat her.” He frowned. "Healing magic will strain you, and may provoke her further. We might want to wait for the full moon instead."

Rieta frowned. Argen lupus, a wolf species, took strength from the full moon. The mother might be able to heal herself once the moon ripened.

But could she wait that long? Rieta bit her tongue. She didn't know what to do. And she couldn't get the doctor's words out of her head, either. How could he tell, just by looking at her, that she was heartsick?

Rieta lowered her head, shame coursing through her. "Yes, my lord."

Killian gazed down at her. "Will you come with me to see the creatures?"

Rieta nodded. "Yes, my lord."

*Is that all she can say?* Killian wondered. “Will you eat?”

“No, Sire...” Suddenly, Rieta straightened. “Have *you* eaten, Sire?”

Killian chuckled. "We'll dine together later." He glanced at the door, then back at Rieta. "The East Annex ladies have come to visit you. Can you manage that?"

Rieta's eyes widened. "Certainly.” Now that she paid attention, she could hear the soft shuffling and murmurs just outside.

Killian nodded and called out, “Enter."

"Rieta," called a familiar voice. Not from the doorway, though.

Rieta turned to see a woman somersaulting through the window. "Rachel." Just then, several people burst through the door. Hands pressed Rieta's forehead, worried faces popping into her peripheral view. "Giselle. Seira. Elise..."

"Are you well?"

Rieta smiled. “Yes, I have recovered."

Seira pulled Rieta into a hug. “Forgive me. It's my fault."

Rieta frowned. "What do you mean?"

Seira let her go, looking frustrated. “You blessed my cut. It accelerated your growing pains, as the healing powers came on." Seira looked halfway to tears.

Rieta laughed, embarrassed. "It's alright. It would've happened eventually no matter what." She looked around at the many kind, familiar faces. Her heart warmed slowly. "Were you all very worried about me?"

They all looked so morose now. Not one smile showed among them.

Rieta forced herself to smile for them. “I'm really alright. My body feels lighter now. I feel good. But I'm sorry I worried you..."

Still, everyone else continued to frown. "Of course we were worried," Giselle burst out. Then she pushed a small silver tray toward Rieta. On it were a bottle of champagne and a box the size of her palm.

Rieta took the tray, confused.

"Felicitations, Rieta.” Giselle grinned. “The clerics told us this is a cause for celebration. When someone pushes through the divine fever, they must be congratulated first and foremost."

Rieta fell silent, struck speechless.

When she didn't touch it, Rachel opened the box for her. Inside was a divine bracelet made of silver beads, as well as an ankh cross. A symbolic item gifted to clerics or monks by their family after they finished their divine growing pains.

It was customary to drink water or alcohol with whoever received this blessing.

"You went through a lot.” Giselle laughed. "Now you deserve to celebrate."

Rieta couldn't bring herself even to touch the jewelry. She looked bewildered. Gently, Giselle took her hand and slid the bracelet onto her wrist.

Rieta bowed her head, gazing at it.

All the women laughed and hugged her.

Rieta blushed fiercely. As her friends watched, she raised a silver slice of divine energy and brushed a finger against the champagne bottle. The moment she touched it, the whole bottle shone bright gold, and a clear note sounded from it.

The women clapped and whistled.

"P-please don't,” Rieta mumbled, her face turning even redder. She touched the bracelet again. Unable to speak any louder, she drew Giselle close and whispered, “Thank you.”

Rachel snagged the bottle from the tray. She tossed it over her shoulder and caught it backhanded. Bubbles fizzed inside the bottle like upside- down stars.

Rachel's violet eyes glinted mischievously. Without warning, the champagne bottle popped open. The women all screamed in delight as the blessed champagne burst, sprinkling over their heads.

Rieta jolted upright and grabbed the sheets, covering Killian's cloak as quickly as she could. Champagne soaked their heads in an instant, and a sweet smell wafted throughout the dressing room.

82

# IT’S ALRIGHT, IT’S LOVE (2)

The archduke bought the argen lupus pup. As for the adult argen lupus, he decided to let it go. He paid ten times the going market rate to the people who'd cared for it, in exchange for all their hard work controlling such a powerful live beast.

Rumors of this expenditure spread like wildfire. Mercenaries and adventurers alike speculated that the archduke-normally very frugal— only spent so much to appease his prized mistress.

People talked about the beautiful mage and the archduke who spared no expense for her.

Was Rieta in danger? No. Some people mentioned how ruthlessly the archduke dealt with the hunter who'd endangered her, but it only improved most people's opinions of her.

As for Killian, he helped the rumors along.

"I'll let that slip through the Latria Dress Shop with the nobles," his employee said.

"Good." Killian had already planted rumors with the mercenary and thief guilds, the temple, and the abbey. He waved his employee away, waiting until he was alone again. Then he frowned at the latest report.

Whatever it took, he would ensure Rieta's reputation rose until she became untouchable. He didn't want anyone daring to threaten her again.

A book on the shelf caught his eye. *Rose and Count Hamel.* He chewed his lip, raising his head.

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After the knightmaidens left, Rieta sat alone in her room. She touched the ankh, then the silver bracelet on her wrist.

Killian had disappeared while the women showered her in champagne. Rieta toweled champagne out of her hair before standing to examine her room.

It had been assigned to her in order to keep up appearances. She'd have to act naturally here. She should at least know where everything was, but...

*It's so big.* It felt like they'd put several rooms together into a maze. Her old bedroom wasn't tiny, but this was several times larger.

*They call this a dressing room?* Why was it bigger than her actual former room?

Gazing around it, all she felt was pure wonder. But when she approached the desk, envy flashed across her eyes. *Wow.* She touched the dark wood, fascinated. It was fantastic, nearly as fine as the desk in His Lordship's study. She'd never seen anything so fine.

She could already tell it would increase her productivity. The label marked it as a product of the artistan street in Axias, the highest-quality producer on the continent.

*It would be wonderful to work here...* Afraid she'd become greedy, Rieta turned away. This was called a dressing room, so she ought to focus on that.

She walked to the vanity to examine the clothes. She recognized a few of her ordinary clothes and dresses from her old bedroom.

Suddenly, she heard a knock.

"It's Eron, miss," a voice called.

"Come in," she replied.

Eron entered, bowing as he pushed a tea trolley inside. He started to clean up the remaining refreshments from her visitors.

She felt strange. Eron was always kind, but he'd never waited on her like this. Rieta hurried to try and help him, but Eron put out an arm to stop her.

He smiled. "I'll do it, miss."

"We'll do it together."

"That would make me uncomfortable. It's an easy task, and you've been lying in bed for the past two weeks," he replied.

She couldn't argue with that. Rubbing her neck, Rieta stepped back.

Eron cleaned up the cups, plates, and trays with a practiced hand. Before long, he was done. Just as he was about to leave, Rieta cleared her throat.

"Um, will I be staying in this room for a while?"

Eron grinned. "I guess this is the first time you've seen it, but you've been in this room for a while already. You were here while you recovered, miss. The room is warmer and larger than your old bedroom below us, so master told us to bring you here."

Surprised, Rieta bit her lip.

"This room will be better for you,” Eron added. “Seamstresses from Latria Dress Shop will be coming by soon to fit your autumn dresses."

*So that's why they moved me here.* The seamstresses would need to see the archduke's prized mistress in a luxurious room.

"But please, miss, treat this room as your own," Eron said. "The bedroom and dressing room are yours. Everything inside it belongs to you."

Rieta smiled awkwardly.

Eron adjusted his white gloves and bowed again. “I apologize if the change feels sudden."

"Oh, no..." It didn't matter where she lived. But the level of deference Eron showed her made Rieta uncomfortable. He'd worked at Axias Manor for a long time. Aside from Killian, he was the most senior member of staff. He'd never addressed her like this before.

Eron smiled, hoping it would make Rieta more comfortable. “Nobody was using these rooms, miss. Don't worry. Please, make yourself at home."

She couldn't refuse that. Rieta smiled and nodded. “I shall. Thank you."

The butler beamed and left.

\*\*\*

Someone knocked, but it didn't come from the main door. Rieta turned toward the sound, confused. "Yes?"

Killian entered from a door in the wall opposite the hallway, close to the bed.

Rieta stared at him in bewilderment. Belatedly, she bowed in greeting. "Hello, Sire."

Killian beckoned. "Come here for a moment."

Rieta got up and walked over. Before she reached him, she noticed Killian's cloak. She'd folded it at the foot of the bed. She picked it up to take to him, but Killian turned back the way he'd come.

Then he paused and faced the room again, frowning. “No. Let's go that way."

Rieta followed him into the hallway instead. She recognized this passage once she saw it. Eron's words came back to her then. *The room is warmer and larger than your old bedroom below us.*

*Oh.* She was now living on the same floor as His Lordship.

Killian opened another door, and Rieta stared at it. The room two doors down from hers was very familiar. Killian's study.

He'd placed her in a dressing room two doors from his study. Which meant...she was living next to his bedchamber.

*Goodness.*

But as soon as she saw his study, all those thoughts flew out the window. Killian's study was stuffed to the gills with papers.

*What day is it?* Rieta suddenly recalled that she'd been lying in bed for two weeks. She had so much catching up to do.

How could she have taken so long? Most people woke from divine fever in two or three days. It felt like such a waste. *Oh dear.* How did all the reports she'd worked on go for the past two weeks.

Anxiety and guilt crept over her. "Thank you for lending me your garment, my lord." Rieta held out the cloak.

Killian grabbed it. Rieta tensed, waiting for him to speak. What would he want to address first? Taxes? The guild fees? Road maintenance, or plans for the temple, or...what about the third beast hunt?

She'd fallen ill at the most inopportune time. Talks for the fourth beast hunt should be well underway by now...

Killian dropped the cloak on his desk, opened a drawer, and pulled out a bundle of keys. He held them out to Rieta.

She watched, puzzled.

Killian picked up one key. "This is for your room on the floor below." Then he held up another. "This is from the hallway to your dressing room.” Another. "This is for the door between my bedchamber and yours. And this key is for the second-floor storage room.”

Rieta focused hard, though she didn't know why he was telling her this.

"And this is for the archive in the main building." He held up a final key. Rieta startled.

He ignored that. "I've had the servants clean it up. It won't be a mess this time. Any books you need that you can't find in the library, you should be able to find there. Use it anytime." Then he jingled the keys at her.

Rieta accepted it with both hands. The silvery keys looked brand new. "It's alright for me to use the archive?" she asked.

Killian laughed. "You can go anywhere in Axias Manor.” Then he took a step closer. "I require a blessing."

Rieta lifted onto her toes. Killian bent down, and she kissed his forehead.

Killian straightened and touched his forehead. "I meant the archive."

"Oh." Rieta's face turned bright red. "Yes, of course, Sire."

Killian laughed again. “Keep any books you use often in your room. I've left word with the librarian, so they know to expect this. Go to the library during the day, and don't walk around late at night, even though the library is within the castle walls."

"Yes, Sire."

He frowned. "Call for Eron or me after sunset. If you have a lot of books to carry back, ask the servants to do it. Don't carry them yourself."

"I shall, Sire." Rieta stared at her hands. "What do I need to handle first work-wise?"

Killian shook his head. “Take your time. I don't need your help immediately."

Rieta looked at the papers stacked around the room. “I apologize for leaving you to fulfill all these tasks alone. You trusted me to carry them out, and..."

Killian waved her off. “It might look like a lot, but it's not. Everything here is almost done."

She frowned. "I've troubled you."

"Never. You organized everything so well, it was easy to continue working." Killian picked up the nearest stack of papers. "If it will put you at ease, I'll explain how everything you were working on is going now. I know how anxious you'll be otherwise."

\*\*\*

Before long, Rieta's thirst for work overtook her. But Killian caught her sneaking a stack of papers back to her room. “You're a workaholic.”

Rieta covered her face with the files she'd pilfered. "Not compared to you, Sire..."

Killian chuckled.

Feeling bashful, Rieta shifted the papers in her arms. “Um...while I'm staying in the dressing room, may I use the desk there?"

Killian stared at her. She probably thought she'd disguised it, but the anticipatory longing on her face was obvious. He sighed. “You should have told me your old desk was uncomfortable. I would have gotten a different one."

"Oh, no, Sire! My old desk was fine.” Rieta smiled quickly.

Killian chuckled and shook his head. He hadn't seen her this excited about jewels or dresses. He was tempted to buy her three more desks. A sweet scent caught his attention, and without realizing, he reached for Rieta's hair, bending to sniff it.

Rieta tensed.

Killian smiled. "What is that sweet scent?"

"Oh, th-that." Rieta leaned back. “A shower of, um...champagne.”

Killian laughed at Rieta's eyes, wide as saucers. “You bathed in champagne?"

"Well, it, it..."

Killian let Rieta go and picked up the cloak she'd returned, burying his nose in it. "Even this garment smells sweet."

Rieta's eyes widened even more. “Truly? But I tried to keep it dry.”

Killian lifted the cloak. “Did you use it to dry yourself?"

Rieta gasped. "I would never!"

Killian snickered. “I would not take issue with you using it thusly."

"But I didn't! Truly!"

"Then why does it smell of liquor?" he asked.

"I-it cannot. Allow me, my lord. I shall wash it." Rieta tried to grab it, but Killian whipped it out of her reach. Rieta reached up again, bumping into him.

Killian smirked at her. "Your sweet scent has stimulated my appetite." He nodded at the door. "Let us dine." Gently, he nudged her toward it.

Rieta's cheeks flushed as he turned her around. Her sky-blue eyes darted around the room, her beautiful face full of life.

Killian hadn't joined in the knightmaidens' congratulations, but he recognized the scent of the champagne he'd selected. His favorite. He didn't mind Rieta smelling like his favorite indulgence.

83

# IT’S ALRIGHT, IT’S LOVE (3)

While Rieta was gone, Colbryn and Damien blessed Axias Manor. The two of them had to work twice as hard just to keep up with the work Rieta had been doing alone.

Of course, after their murderous schedule in the field hospital, they were used to hard work. But the moment Rieta was able, she asked Killian for permission to return to work.

He refused to grant it, ordering her to rest for another week. Rieta protested, but Killian stood firm. “One week," he said, patting her head as he rose to leave her dressing room.

Shocked, Rieta followed him out. "My lord.”

"No."

Rieta hurried in front of him, blocking his path. "I've rested plenty. I feel fine, and the clerics are struggling to keep up."

Killian stopped mid-stride. “Rieta.” He waited until she met his gaze. "You promised not to cause me worry."

Rieta fidgeted. "Truly, I'm alright...” Her spirits sank. She knew how much worry she'd caused him already.

Killian gazed down at Rieta. His face softened, before he turned away. "Then you'll enjoy your rest even more."

Rieta's head drooped, her expression glum. Passing servants stared at the two of them, wide-eyed.

Killian scowled. In the short time he'd left her side, Rieta had awoken and gone toe-to-toe with an argen lupus. Now, he worried what would happen if he left her alone again. If it were up to him, she'd never leave his side.

But he couldn't keep her with him, either, because she'd want to throw herself headlong into his work too. He didn't want to tax her yet. "Once I'm no longer worried about you, we'll talk about your work," he said. "Rest for four days first. Until the dressmakers return."

Rieta's head whipped up. *Four days.* That was quite a large concession coming from Killian. "Yes, Sire!" Her eyes twinkled as she nodded.

The watching servants all eyed one another, surprised. *What's going on? His Lordship is acting strange.*

The oldest servants, who had been there the longest, seemed the most shocked. After all, it was autumn, and though Killian spoke sharply, he wasn't being violent or cynical.

Any other year, he would be disappearing somewhere to act crazy, or pushing and shoving everyone in his path. But he didn't do any of that this year. The day Rieta collapsed, everyone had braced themselves for his hysterics.

Instead, he acted calm and composed. He watched over and cared for her as she tossed and turned. *How strange.*

The servants all traded glances now, until the butler raised a finger to his lips.

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Killian agreed to let Rieta only rest for four more days, but in the meantime, he assigned maids to her dressing room. Supposedly they attended her, but in reality, they guarded the door, following her around like ducklings and reporting to Killian anytime she left her room.

But all she did was make her usual rounds of the castle, visit Killian in his study, eat with Killian, or go to sleep. Since she couldn't leave the main building, Rieta took to blessing the castle instead. At night, she slept in her old bedroom a floor below.

Eron couldn't help but wonder about this. Why did Rieta work alone in her dressing room, or never visit Killian via the door that connected his bedchamber to hers?

*Is she still taxed from her ordeal?* Or perhaps the bed downstairs was more comfortable?

Killian must have shared his concerns, because he summoned Eron one evening. “Eron. Was it too much?" Killian jerked his chin toward the side door that led to Rieta's room. "Offering her a room connected directly to mine?"

Eron frowned. “It was the only chamber suitable for a lady of her stature,” he said. "All other chambers were occupied, too far away, or lacking in heat."

"I know you set this chamber aside for my future bride,” Killian said.

Eron laughed dryly. “Ah. You remember, Sire.”

"Ah...so you remember, Sire.”

Killian smirked. “If you think my memory is that poor, no wonder you were eager to fill that chamber." To prevent any accidental mishaps, he'd given Rieta the key to their adjoining door. He couldn't enter her rooms from his end.

He didn't want to give her the wrong impression. No matter what Eron's plan was.

Still, Rieta insisted on sleeping downstairs, which made him feel guilty. They hadn't discussed it, but both of them were reacting to Eron's housing decisions in their own way.

Killian sighed. "I know you only did this out of loyalty to me. But I won't condone such a move again."

He needed to make Rieta seem like a prized mistress to the outside world. But there was no need to maintain the impression within the castle.

While Killian wasn't looking, her false mistress position seemed to have become more real in everyone else's eyes. But he didn't want the ruse to become something base. He didn't want to give in to indecent desires.

Thankfully, he'd bought himself some time-ordering her to rest, and to wait for the dressmakers to come from Latria. He'd promised to protect her. He wanted to treat her well.

He couldn't let Eron or anyone else interfere again. Rieta believed he'd saved her; he wanted to maintain her respect and gratitude for as long as he could.

Rieta carried many scars. One of the biggest was what Casarius did to her. Eron's decision might have brought up old nightmares, or frightened her.

But Killian wanted to make her feel safe. Relaxed. He wanted to treasure her smile, her little laughs at his jokes. Already she acted less afraid of him. She was even willing to raise her voice and banter a little.

Slowly, the devastated, terrified woman he'd first met was beginning to melt. And that, in turn, felt like it healed his heart too.

Killian turned away from her bedroom door. She didn't need the chambers of a prized mistress, or even the lady of the castle. She needed time alone to heal her wounds. She needed reliable people by her side, rest and room to breathe.

That would get harder if more people in the castle thought they were actually together. He intended to keep Rieta by his side, but not in a way that impeded her healing.

"If you do anything to make Rieta feel awkward again,” Killian said, "I will take it as a personal deception. Understand?”

Eron bowed. "I shall practice due caution, my liege."

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Rieta walked around the castle, casting blessings. At night, before she went to sleep, she spent her time in the dressing room. The knightmaidens came to visit her every day, asking her to heal scratches from training.

They cuddled up to her, admiring her new chambers. Rieta's dressing room started to feel more like the East Annex than the actual East Annex, which was still under reconstruction.

The women quickly adjusted to the luxurious space. Rieta smiled, watching them sprawl out everywhere. Their presence made the rooms feel more lived-in.

"Rieta!" Seira called. She grinned, resting her chin against Giselle's shoulder. "Can we sleep over here tonight?”

Rieta looked confused. "Um...here?"

Seira nodded and beamed. "We don't have morning training tomorrow! We can stay up all night talking, braiding our hair..."

Before Rieta could respond, the other women piped up. "Yes! Let's all sleep here tonight. We can call the kitchens to make us a roast."

"Mushrooms, too!"

"And cookies!"

All the women raised their hands. They had sprawled around the room, playing games and drinking tea. A couple read in the corner, and Rachel even practiced sword dancing-albeit without a blade. Now, they all stood frozen, waiting on Rieta's response.

Flustered, Rieta stared back. Although the room was hers for the moment, and plenty large enough for the women, it belonged to His Lordship.

Someday, this room would house the lady of the castle. It was difficult to think of it as hers.

Plus, His Lordship lived right next door. Rieta knew he was a light sleeper. What if the girls talked too loudly?

“Oh, um, this room..."

Suddenly, a familiar male voice interrupted. “Let them stay.” A large hand came down to rest on Rieta's head. “If you want.” Killian smiled, having just entered from the hallway. Eron followed him inside, then quickly darted out again at a sign from Killian.

Rieta flinched. “Th-thank you, Sire.” The idea still worried her, but if His Lordship allowed it...

She looked up, thinking the women would be happy. They all gazed at Rieta, eyes filled with anticipation. Rieta stared back, uncertain.

Then Eron returned from the hallway with a tea cart full of refreshments. "Shall I have a few more beds brought in?” he asked. “So you can sleep comfortably tonight?"

Rieta looked at Killian. She expected His Lordship to respond, but he just watched her silently. After a moment, he gestured to the butler.

Rieta followed his gaze to Eron. The elderly butler looked at her expectantly. “Shall...shall we do that?” she replied, and the women cheered.

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# IT’S ALRIGHT, IT’S LOVE (4)

The ladies of the East Annex gathered in Rieta's dressing room, buzzing around as more beds were brought in. It shocked Rieta how many beds fit in the room, in fact.

But despite her worry, Rieta felt unexpected excitement. Her heart fluttered, and she pressed her hands to her cheeks. She remembered when she and her friends stayed up for prayer circles at the convent.

"Do you have to go back, Lana?” Elise asked.

Lana smiled, rising from her seat. “Yes. I don't sleep in the castle."

Elise pouted. "Lana, just say, *have a good time*, or, *I'm sorry I can't stay*.” Lana ducked her head. "Have a good time. I'm sorry I can't stay."

Seira huffed, mock offended. “Sure, she *has* to sleep at home.” But Seira smiled, too. "Don't worry about us. Get home safe."

Lana nodded. Suddenly, Rieta noticed her bandage.

"Your hands...what happened? Are you hurt?” Rieta reached for Lana's hand. Reddish pus seeped around the bandage.

Lana looked down. “I touched something hot.” Rieta was about to heal her, but Lana shook her head. "As a sorceress, I can only tolerate divine magic sparingly. Divine and mystical magic counteract one another."

"Ah, I understand..." Rieta frowned.

Elise said, "Lana, just say *thank you for worrying, but divine magic cannot heal me.*"

Rieta made a fist and stepped back. Just because she could heal now, didn't mean she could fix every problem. But she was concerned about Lana leaving alone in this state. "Where is your house?"

Lana pointed out the window. Beth followed her gaze and murmured, "Lana lives in the abbey."

Lana nodded. “This place isn't good for my body."

Elise corrected her. "Lana, you say, *the blessing circle feels uncomfortable for me*."

"Don't be offended, Rieta,” Beth added. “It's just that she gets uncomfortable being inside the circle for too long."

Rieta nodded. It made sense, given that Lana was a magician. Not many sorcerers remained in the world, after the dragons destroyed ancient magic. Aside from the dark sorcerers, who were evil to the core, only those who'd inherited magic retained it.

For a long time, only tiny schools of sorcery remained, isolated deep in valleys or forests. Sorcerers were a closed-off people, who only taught magic to their own. Outside scholars didn't know much about their world.

Lana must belong to one such group. *No wonder she didn't live at the East Annex*, Rieta thought. She recalled how quickly Lana had appeared at the abbey. It reminded Rieta of her own childhood in the convent.

She smiled at Lana, who smiled back. “Aren't you more comfortable in the abbey than the castle too?" Lana asked.

"Yes," Rieta admitted. “Since I lived in a convent for a long time."

Lana's smile widened. “Come visit me after you've finished resting.”

Elise praised Lana for her manners. Seira settled in, happily chatting about how much more talkative Lana was getting.

Rieta laughed and nodded. “I shall visit you."

\*\*\*

"Since Cevitas lacks a temple, graduates of the abbey dispersed to temples nearby. Of all those graduates, only one kept in touch with Rieta, a female cleric named Anais," Rachel said.

She held out a report, which Killian accepted. He frowned at the paper as she spoke.

"Anais became a blessing cleric and traveled south to Hermeden Temple. But they exchanged letters for more than ten years.”

Killian crossed his arms. Hermeden was quite far away. He thought hard. Rieta could purify, but she could never become a cleric. Even if she passed the clerical exam, she wouldn't be able to pass the theoretical one. It was no horseback riding test.

*And the exam might have changed in two years*. "If I wish to speak to her?" Killian asked.

"It would require her temple's consent,” Rachel replied. "Since she is a cleric. I can enquire with Hermeden Temple about a visit to Axias."

Killian nodded and put down the papers. Then he picked up Anais's letter. Beside it sat a new, forged envelope and a broken wax seal. He used beeswax to recreate the temple seal.

"I can fix that, Sire,” Rachel said. “Just seal it for now."

Rachel was a competent subordinate. He pressed the envelope shut, and allowed Rachel to pluck it from his fingers.

"Rachel," he said.

"Yes, Sire."

"Have you read the letter?"

"No, Sire. Only the name on the envelope."

Killian heaved a sigh.

Rachel frowned. "Why? Don't you believe she wrote it? I could call for a handwriting analyst."

"No. It's fine." His expression looked strange, even for Killian.

Rachel leaned forward. "If you feel it's strange, I can take a look.”

Killian was silent for a moment, then said, “It's fine. Leave it here. I'll seal it again." Better for him to commit this wrong, than her. Once he finished, Killian leaned back in his chair heavily. “And the child?"

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Rieta came back to her room after blessing the main building and saw a pile of letters on her desk.

*Rieta Tristi.* Noticing her name on one envelope, she picked it up, puzzled. The handwriting looked familiar...

She flipped the envelope over. As soon as she saw the seal, her eyes widened. *Anais!* Rieta tore open the envelope.

*My dear unresponsive Rieta,*

*Are you alive? It feels like it's been a hundred years since I last got a reply from you.*

*Please reply. I beg you. I'm lonely. Did you receive my New Year's letter. Then again, most of my letters get lost in the mail. Next time, I recommend sending the letter via courier. Tell them a cleric at Hermeden will give them extra for the delivery.*

*Ah... My tears are blinding me. I apologize if I sound too cling. But you're the only person I have to write to. I've become an object of ridicule! My sisters tease me, asking why none of my friends write anymore.*

*Now that you've stopped too, I feel like I have nobody left to hold onto. Were we just a fling?*

Rieta giggled at this part, then shook herself and kept reading.

*I'm glad you're married now, and that you say your husband is good to you. If he isn't, hurry up and write back! Tell him it's only Anais for you.*

*Just this one line will be enough. If you divorce, I'll take you in. Your daughter, too! I'm not heartless. If she takes after you, I'm certain she's beautiful. I'll raise her as the darling of the temple.*

*I'm sorry for babbling. I know you must be ever so happy. Hopefully, your response is flying toward me even as I write this. But try to understand how much I miss you. Before long, I'll be writing another crazy missive.*

*Write me often. Don't you pity me, begging like this? Glen and Peterson both acted like they couldn't bear to be parted from me, but neither of them writes me either. Liars.*

*That's how boys are, I suppose. You're the only one for me, Rieta.*

A cheeky lip print was stamped on the side.

She looked at the envelope again. It wasn't addressed to Axias, to the palatine of Cevitas. It was dated last winter. Had someone discovered letters piling up at the house in Cevitas and forwarded them to Axias?

Rieta turned the letter over and found a post-script*. I do understand the slow replies these days. What with the plague, it's difficult to find travelers to carry messages. I hope it dies down soon so I can go on pilgrimage again.*

*I miss you, Rieta. I hope to hug you, and Jade, and your child soon. If you see Glen and Peterson, tell our friends I miss them too. And tell them I'll forgive them as long as they write to me soon.*

*If you still speak to them. I don't know. I await your reply.*

*With all my yearning,*

*Poo, ostracized Anais*

The word *yearning* glistened. Rieta was already twenty-six, and Anais would soon be twenty-nine. It had been ten years since they'd graduated from the covenant and separated. But her letter sounded as clear as if Rieta could hear her speaking now.

Her heart sank. Delight warred with pain in her chest. How could she convey all the terrible things that had happened?

But a tiny smile ghosted across Rieta's face. Anais was so vivid, even her handwriting sounded jolly.

Digging through the letter, Rieta found two more letters from Anais, both sent to the Cevitas address. She checked the dates, opening the next one.

*To my nostalgic friend Rieta,*

*Are you well? Clerics are being drafted to help relieve the plague in Rosanches (a large city near Cevitas). I volunteered, but they turned me away. They will only dispatch clerics who can purify.*

*I fear I will never become more than a blessing cleric. Can you purify? I've been trying to learn, but even blessings are hard, if I'm not in prime condition.*

*I trust that you and Jade are both doing well! I am so curious about your daughter, who you described so vividly in your letters.*

*I hoped to meet her before she grew older. I cannot believe she is already old enough to speak! I thought surely I'd be able to visit sooner than this.*

*When will I be able to leave this place? I should have gone to a closer temple. It's so isolated here. I'd foolishly imagined my life as a cleric on pilgrimage, like Saintes Tania. But clerics are expected to provide their own horses for travel, so it's hard.*

*Especially for one like myself, with mediocre abilities at best. I truly never imagined that we would be apart for so long. I cried when I missed your wedding.*

*Someday, I will meet your daughter, and visit you. I comfort myself with that thought.*

*But sometimes I get anxious. I hope I'll see you again before I die.*

*Enclosed is a pair of slippers for the child. I am guessing she is about three now? I knitted them with room to spare, since I know children grow quickly.*

*Please tell her about her Auntie Anais and do send Jade my best wishes.*

*I long to see you dearly. Awaiting your letter,*

*Adele's auntie, Anais.*

Rieta stood there, unable to let go of the letter. She stared at it, pressing a hand to her cheek. Finally, she felt in the envelope and withdrew a lemon-yellow ball of yarn. She smoothed out the wrinkled letter, and set it down.

She stood there for a long moment, slippers in hand, before she reached for the last letter. Her hand shook.

The final letter was short.

*Dearest Rieta,*

*Does this letter find you well? So much time has passed without a reply. It worries me. I've received word of plague in Cevitas. I fear for you, my dear.*

*I have heard other, stranger news as well... The last messenger I spoke to claimed you are no longer in Cevitas. But fear not. I did not believe him. There must be some misunderstanding.*

*If you get this letter, then I am sure it was all a mistake. I eagerly await your reply. Though we are far apart, my heart is always beside you.*

*From your dear friend, Anais.*

*P.S. Please alert me should you ever face trouble. I shall be there, whatever the cost.*

Rieta stood very still. A drop of water fell onto Anais's name, blurring the ink. Rieta quickly raised a hand. The hot tears changed course, falling from her other eye instead.

She stared at the ceiling, blinking hard. She swallowed around a huge lump in her throat and gritted her teeth. After inhaling a few short, wet breaths, she finally wiped her eyes again.

Then she crumpled to the floor and began to sob.

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Listening to the muffled cries next door, Killian's head drooped. *The child.* He needed to find the child. She must be alive.

"Adele," he whispered. Desperately calling the name of a child he'd never even met.