**Chapter 9: Exchange in dusk**

*[Darwen’s POV]*

It's rather amusing to find myself stuck here with Marvos, our unconventional archangel always up to something, irrespective of how it deviates from the norm of common folks like us. I must admit, looking back, I can't quite recall why our kingdom was chosen to host the third archangel as our protector.

Perhaps it had something to do with the influence of the Thirteen here. Not that I'm one to speak of faith or judgment; I'm just a sword, after all. My duty is clear, but that doesn't mean I have to dislike it wholely.

"How long do you plan to keep hiding under that blanket, Marvos?" I ask, peeking under the covers. The rejuvenated king emerges, clutching a few books and a quill, looking to document these unfamiliar sensations.

"As long as possible, even with clothing, I don't think I can face anyone right now. You know how it feels, Darwen, with these rejuvenated limbs," Marvos whines, sounding every bit like the young prince I once knew.

Thinking back to those days, how easily we slipped in and out of the castle walls. I envy that freedom of our past. It's how we first met, not as the shining figures we are today, but as two ordinary boys on the streets. And to think of the absurd offer he made back then still makes me chuckle.

*["If you don't intend to become a knight or adventurer, how about becoming my sword?"]*

"You're like a boy in the throes of puberty, Your Highness. I believe you left that stage behind long ago," I jest, playfully ruffling the blanket.

A way to escape this bashful situation, perhaps? Honestly, I can't see anything beyond being assigned to the castle and tirelessly training those self-proclaimed "knights." A bunch of dreamers clinging to notions of prestige and honor.

But on the battlefield, swords and lances don't discriminate. They don't care if your armor gleams or your blade is dull. Survival is the name of the game, and tactical prowess is what keeps heads on shoulders, not flowery chivalry.

"Sir Gaucher, the tailor has arrived," a voice from outside announces. Ah, the formidable woman herself. I instruct them to let her in, and with a grandiose entrance, she appears—Mariqueses Violetta Gaucher. She bows, her lavish green dress exuding an air of arrogance.

"Violetta Gaucher, a pleasure to serve the king," she acknowledges Marvos with a bow, but then, addressing me, she adds, "And greetings to you, my dear husband, who never graces us with his presence."

"And to you, my dear wife, with whom I can never get too close without sparking an argument," I retort with a bow that carries a hint of cheekiness.

"Violetta, did you bring what I requested?" Marvos emerges from the blanket, eagerly anticipating her response. Must he look so pitiful when he's meeting the savior of his wardrobe?

"Of course, my king. I never stray far from your splendid collection of clothing. These are your most modest garments, as per your request during your absence," she replies, producing the attire—a set of two tunics and pants, all in a subdued shade of green.

It's the most unassuming clothing this flamboyant woman has ever crafted, designed to blend in and thwart dragon rampages from our glory days. She dresses Marvos, and as he stands, there's a newfound confidence in his stance.

Violetta, the Marqueses, presents the monarch with a rather smug expression, her nose subtly upturned as if expecting praise for her noble endeavors. Ever since she ascended to the lofty position of a marquess, she's grown increasingly intolerable, akin to those highborn ladies who frequent insipid tea parties. I find myself seeking solace in solitude or wandering away to evade those gatherings where every serving is drenched in an unbearable excess of sugar.

"Does it meet your expectations, Your Majesty? Is it as modest as you wished?" she inquires, her tone tinged with the air of nobility that thrives on admiration.

Since her elevation, Violetta has taken on all the airs and graces of high society, transforming into a rather unpleasant counterpart to those "dignified" ladies at the aforementioned gatherings. I make a habit of steering clear of such events, preferring the company of silence.

"I believe this attire shall suffice for today, but do you accept my proposal to fashion the entire wardrobe as I've requested?" Marvos inquires, returning to his usual manner, reaffirming his request. He appears eager, as though we're back to being the close friends we once were in days gone by, while it seems I'm the only one who has truly changed since our royal masquerade began.

"I'm afraid I must delay your Royal Highness's request due to a shortage of the necessary materials. It may take up to two weeks...unless..." She continues to push for concessions, her demands taking precedence over earnest exchanges. How does she manage to manipulate the king so skillfully?

"Very well, I shall provide additional gold coins. Just create a few pieces for me to wear in the meantime," Marvos concedes, handing her several coins. Seven of them, no less! That's the equivalent of three years' worth of a foot soldier's salary. Does he truly require the garments so urgently?

"Thank you, Your Majesty, for your generous patronage," she responds, accepting the coins with a sly grin. I have no interest in being part of this financial transaction, so I decided to step away and leave them to their dealings.

Then, Violetta's tone grows harsher as she turns her attention to me, the atmosphere mirroring the complexities of our strained companionship.

"My dearest husband, there's something I'd like to discuss with you, should you find the time for my query..." Her words are laden with saccharine insincerity, a transparent attempt to salvage her dignity in the presence of Marvos. I have no patience for such pretense.

"Please, cease this, woman. Just ask your question without the sugary coating. I have no interest in his holiness's thoughts on your dress. It seems he wasn't overly impressed if his pained expression is any indication," I interject, my voice laced with a bittersweet edge, like aged honey.

"He composed entire paragraphs of praise for it, much to my chagrin, so I had to cut him short," I add, bending the truth just enough to align with the archangel's opinion. A little white lie never hurt anyone, except perhaps myself.

"What!?" Violetta exclaims, her disapproval apparent. It's as if the sewing witch from Umbridge herself has returned.

"It was necessary to expedite things before the ceremony, my lady," I retort, reverting to our usual banter from simpler days. I relish the rawness of our exchanges more than the artifice of aristocratic decorum.

"Unnecessary!? Let me make one thing clear, my dear husband. Those words are a treasure to me, and you callously severed my connection to them. Do you liken yourself to those devils?" She accuses, her tone unyielding. I prefer this unfiltered version of her to the stifled "dignity" of aristocratic society.

"I'll have you know, my troublesome and exasperating wife, that we were already running late. If you had the audacity to dress his holiness like a doll, you should have done so earlier," I assert, pouring my emotions into my words. It's been a long time since I've felt this alive.

"Ahem!" Marvos interrupts, his abrupt grumble breaking the tension. Why is he always so anticlimactic in these moments? I nearly succeeded in riling her up, but a king's command takes precedence. The room falls silent, awaiting his next instructions.

"Violetta, I shall request his holiness to provide you with his thoughts on the attire at a later time. Darwen, please accompany me for a walk," Marvos signals, and Violetta bows before him. Finally, some action after our prolonged standstill. Perhaps the king will challenge me to a sparring match afterward.

We traverse the bright hallways, where sunlight streams through ornate glass art. Has it always been this pristine? I recall seeing people lounging about during breaks, but today, not a soul rests on the carpets. Perhaps they've discovered more suitable places to rest, far from these pristine halls.

"Why did you engage in such a confrontation? You don't strike me as one who initiates pointless quarrels, Darwen. Is your relationship with her truly that contentious now?" Marvos stops to ask, his gaze fixed on me as if I were a sinner.

"You wouldn't understand, Marvos. I still hold affection for Violetta, and to this day, I continue to shower her with banquets and letters every week. But..." Explaining myself, I stumble over my words. I can't reveal my disdain for the nobility without substantial proof. I must resort to falsehoods once more.

"The new life you granted us has changed her. She's become increasingly consumed by vanity, and her work has lost its vibrancy," I offer, presenting a simplified version of my truth, an easier pill to swallow. Nevertheless, it evokes a displeased expression from the king.

"Do you find this troubling? To the extent that you regret accepting my offer?" Marvos sighs, as though harboring regrets for the past. While I did yearn for a life of adventure and freedom, I knew they'd never accept someone from a background of servitude.

"Not to that extent, Marvos. You're overthinking it; save your judgment for another time," I respond, just as the chancellor whisks Marvos away to a mountain of completed paperwork. Lord Mikhail appears to be a man of his word.

In the afternoon, I found myself facing Lord Mikhail's final task of the day. Rather than summoning guards to fetch me or relying on a messenger steward, the archangel himself arrived at my quarters to escort me. I couldn't help but wonder how he had located my room so swiftly.

My afternoon duties were relatively straightforward, a welcome break for the knights who could now focus on their responsibilities without added tension. Lord Mikhail's adeptness with weaponry was truly remarkable. With precise cuts and strikes, he demonstrated a mastery that made magic seem unnecessary. Among all the weapons he wielded, the polearm appeared to be his favored choice.

As I worked, I allowed my thoughts to wander momentarily. Perhaps I could afford a bit of relaxation. But then, out of nowhere, Lord Mikhail made an unexpected proposition.

"I request a spar with you, my aide. Will you accept?" His offer caught me off guard. Did he truly mean to challenge me?

"Wait a minute, you're not planning to best me for slacking off with Marvos earlier, are you?" I asked, somewhat frantically. Several young knights burst into laughter at my expense. After this, I resolved to assign them to more rigorous tasks.

"That was indeed my initial intent. However, I now ask to test your strength. Is that unreasonable?" Lord Mikhail's expression remained unchanged, his seriousness palpable. It seemed I was in for quite the challenge, and I knew I had to give it my all.

"No, it's not unreasonable, Lord Mikhail. Please prepare your weapon," I replied, reaching for my trusty tomahawk, forged from the kingdom's toughest steel. It might seem like a twig in his hands, but I was determined to make a valiant effort before conceding.

I raised my axe high, and the battle commenced with a flurry of clashes and parries between my steel weapon and his lance. Even with my lightning-fast strikes, I soon found myself at a disadvantage against the scorching flames emitted by his burning lance.

My axe rent the earth asunder, but Lord Mikhail's lance clashed against it with even greater force, causing me to stumble and nearly lose my footing. The desperate struggle for survival pushed me to strike back, managing to inflict a small flesh wound before succumbing to his lance's relentless assault.

I couldn't accept defeat so easily; it would be a humiliation. As I looked into his piercing golden eyes, I realized we shared the same determination. However, that was the last coherent thought I had before losing consciousness.

**The end**

**In humble adoration, his plea subsided,**

**His eyes met the heavens, fervently abided.**

**For he knew, in his heart, the trials ahead,**

**Would test his resolve, his spirit, his stead.**