



## 'BLESSED' EQUIPMENT

'Dazzling' was the only word a wide eyed squire could think of as he stood to attention amongst his peers serving in the chivalric *Order of The Blade* as they awaited the conclusion of the usual morning assembly. Standing in neatly arranged rows so raised swords held in firm hands and heavy plate armor formed jagged waves of unwavering steel representative of their standing at the first and last line of defense for the Kingdom and its people. An organization for the best of the best to further themselves, composed of men and women whose skills in swordsmanship could not be bested by any other besides their sworn brethren, honorable souls whose gallant deeds and honest hearts could not be swayed by the temptations of monetary greed or sinful vices.



Unlike the rest of the Blades however, that particular squire was only present as far as his physical self was concerned. Numbed to the assembly while hidden eyes wide in wonder and obvious attraction glanced sideways with fevered longing at the silver haired knightess standing to attention with a headstrong look in radiant eyes unabated by the awe inspiring glow of the sun's emerging glow cresting over the distant horizon beyond the ramparts they would always use for such ceremonial practices as the tradition of waking up before dawn's first light to recite their vows in a reverberant chorus. A gesture of welcome to usher in a new day for the Kingdom and its continued prosperity. A message lost entirely to the distracted youth busying his eyes with the stalwart maiden just a few paces away, a focus that breaks upon a sharp nudge delivered straight to the shoulder through a gap where pauldron and breastplate met. Barely able to keep his head from spinning on a swivel when such movement would be made immediately noticeable amongst such a stiff crowd.

And so there he would remain, wondering who had figured him out while enduring the shame and embarrassment of being found out like a child whose shoddy attempts at hiding spilt milk from mommy and daddy had failed. For even if their eyes showed no signs of notice, the squire could feel their attention zeroing in on him for a split second after the mild disturbance he had caused. No doubt wondering how such an oaf had ever managed to become a squire and who amongst them had been foolish enough to take on such a disciple who would one day see battle just like the rest of them, and in the heat of battle,

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veterans like themselves were more than aware of the dangers posed by an unreliable comrade. The likes of which had far-reaching effects that would prove far more deadly than a physical opponent.

For a weak link meant the degradation of the overall structure, and for the Blades. Their renowned ability to respond to any situation at a hundred percent efficiency was something they could not allow to be compromised in any way, shape or form. And they would be damned if the one to deal such a devastating blow was an inept squire who wasn't cut out for their ilk. A fact the shivering man was well aware of as he resumed his solemn stance once more, simmering in his fellows well placed doubts and reservations up until the end of the assembly. Where he would turn on a heel, only to be met with an unexpected yet familiar face as the other armored Blades went about their business, dismissing the crude glares cast toward the taller man's direction as he pulled the heavy helmet off his head. Exposing frazzled, wiry locks of graying hair set atop the lackadaisical mug of an aloof soul sporting an unshaved beard running the length of his chin. A far cry from the prim and proper appearance expected of a chivalrous Blade such as himself.

And from the sight of the standard slung around the shoulder of a notably more decorated suit of armor adorned in custom alterations, this was not just any other Blade...

*"S-Sir Rhopis?! Shouldn't you be a part of the Officer's Banner? W-What're you doing out of formation? I-If they find out-"*

*"Hey now, I told you to drop the honorifics back when I got the Grand Commander's approval didn't I? And for someone whose eyes have been looking the wrong way this entire time, you sure are slow to catch on. Or were you really just *that* focused?"*

Understandably surprised by the nonchalant greeting and appearance of one of the Blade's most legendary figures who had fought in many notable engagements in the Kingdom's recent history, the squire's eyes remain bulging despite the half-hearted jab at his mistake from earlier. A mistake he was surprised to not have been punished for already. Because despite the lackadaisical air about him, Sir Rhopis was anything but, for a man of his caliber hadn't earned many a title just by goofing around, let alone attain the high and lofty position as one of the two Grand Officers in charge of ensuring all the other lesser commanders and the rank and file beneath them were in tip top shape. "I-I'm sorry Sir...it's just that I...well..."

*"Mmm...Sir will do just fine I guess but still, you've got some balls hm? Too 'busy' lookin' up Ruthensia as if she were a smokin' hot tavern wench? Hah! I can get behind that boyo! Don't tell me you've got a crush on her though, a man's gotta know when a woman's out of his league..."*

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While his superior continues to laugh his boisterous laugh however, the mention of Grand Officer Rhutensia brings to mind a question he had been meaning to ask Rhopis for quite awhile now ever since the hero had come to his rescue all those years ago when he had still been a scruffy farmhand whose only noteworthy experience had been charging a group of ruthless bandits with nothing more than the pitchfork he had in hand at the very moment his home had come under attack. Saved from an early trip to the afterlife when the Blades had arrived to put a stop to the bandit's murderous rampage across the countryside, lead by one of the Grand Officers he had heard so much about from his grandfather before he had passed. Filling young *Rufus*' innocent head with the dream of one day becoming one of the Blades, and what better way was there than a first-hand encounter with one of it's greatest figureheads after a swift intercept had deflected the rusty ax head swinging down at him after a feint had sent Rufus tumbling to the grassy floor. An act that only served to turn a childish dream into a fervent desire within Rufus to gain strength of his own, enough so that he would be the one doing the rescuing in the future. No longer a helpless whelp after a process that would take years of hardwork and perseverance to get where he was today; as a potential addition to be inducted into the Blades proper after a swift rise through the basic rank and file that composed the Kingdom's main military arm. A swift career progression that had caught Rhopis' eye from the very moment he had heard tale of a talented whelp making waves among the grunts with ludicrous hopes most others either considered well out of reach or simply not worth it. For being a Blade meant to forfeit one's life of normalcy for a strict path of knighthood with no deviation besides the one offered by Death's cold embrace, a fear of which Rhopis had not seen in Rufus' adamant gaze when he had come to size up the runt he had saved long ago. Evidently satisfied with what he had seen and heard for Rufus to become his squire.

And now that he had, there were a great many curiosities about the Blades Rufus desired to know about besides the many styles of complex fighting styles he had seen in the few weeks since his formal induction as new blood to be tested before he could truly become a part of the group proper. A treatment that saw all his previous accomplishments in the army being null and void, for only the here and now mattered. They wanted to see what he could do, not what he had done.

Despite that, the only one with a modicum of 'normality' about him had been his mentor figure; Rhopis. And that easy going nature of his would be the driving force behind Rufus' decision to begin a conversation that would enlighten him to a great many things he might not have wanted to know about before... "N-No...it's not got anything to do with that! It's just that I've been thinking to ask...do you...*know* Grand Officer Rhutensia well?"

"Hmm...getting a little too big for your pants now are we? Very well, I suppose we've got time for a little story. Gives me time to think about your punishment for that little slip up of yours."

"And I'll be sure to live up to whatever you throw my way Sir! You're the best!"

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Making their leave from the mostly emptied out ramparts to have their little chat over a tankard full of gruel-like nutrient paste churned forth from the Blade's 'knowledgeable' chefs in charge of their own canteen, Rufus and his master would come to rest in an isolated corner of the barracks where none would be able to hear of the tale Rhopis was about to tell to his curious squire. Opening with a question of his own; "Say...how much do you know about our gallant heroine? Anything...*specific* you might've heard going on around the crowd, that sort of thing? Don't worry about crossing someone alright? Just speak your mind, lay it all out there. I wanna hear what you"

"Hmm...well, word around the street is...people seem to think Rhutensia's pampered nobility, that she hasn't done a thing to earn her place as one of the Grand Officers. And even worse, they think she's no better than a common wench who'd lift her dress to get what she wants...that can't be true, right?

Lady Rhutensia's been around for as long as you have, right Sir?"

Taking a long, thoughtful chug of the runny slop with a distant look in narrowed eyes, Rhopis sighs before turning back to Rufus, a strange air of uncertainty hanging heavy that made Rufus dread whatever it was his superior was about to say next. That just couldn't be right? Surely it was all just simple rumor spewed by envious tongues who couldn't stand the thought of a mere woman playing such a pivotal role in the Kingdom's finest? "Well...some of what they say's got a teensy lil bit of truth in it...but it's not what you think it is. Got another question before we get to the juicy bits since you seem pretty well informed; when's the *first* time you ever laid eyes on the fine lady?" Well that was easy, the first time Rufus had ever laid eyes on Rhutensia had been back during the induction ceremony that saw him being laden with the responsibilities expected of a Blade despite his lowly status as a squire under one of their best. For the sight of the ashen haired sword mistress could not be ignored, standing alongside Rhopis and the Grand Commander as he recited the creed.

"That was...back when you brought me to the Bleeding Hall for my induction. But before that, I already heard plenty when I-"

"When you arrived at the capital right? Not before I assume? Hahah...well, that 's the kicker; cuz Rhutensia...well, not as she is today, hadn't even *existed* before then..."

"Hadn't even...wait, what do you even mean by that Sir?" Holding up a hand in signal to wait before downing the rest of his soupy breakfast, Rhopis comes to rest against the oak wood table. Pressing into it with his full weight while glancing skywards at the glare of a dangling lantern, evidently thinking back on a fond memory if the wry grin on his face was enough to go by. "Might've been too hasty with my choice of words there but let's just say my partner hasn't always been herself...actually, now that I think of it, maybe me telling you this is all just one big twist of fate...cuz this all started not too long before you and I first met back when those suckers were attacking your village."

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**"You mean you weren't there on orders? Or running patrols around the border?"**

**"Nope! Sad as it is to say it, we Blades can't be everywhere all at once. And besides, the regulars can't always depend on us to do their job for em. Nah, we were there on other matters. The attack just so happened to take place right when we were passing by on the way back to the capital...you familiar with magic? Rare commodity to come by, but our mission there was to recover a bunch of odds and ends tucked away inside some ruins...kinda like a dungeon of sorts."**

**"But...those places are real dangerous though aren't they? Guarded by creatures of legend, defending whatever it was their long faded masters had left behind down there...oh...is that when Lady Rhutensia...*came to be*?"**

A firm nod accompanied by the faint clanking of chainmail shifting around beneath the heavy plate leaves Rufus to sip at his half filled tankard, contemplating this new information with intrigue and wonder to be seen in shimmering irises. Pondering the reason behind the Blades presence so far out in the countryside despite knowing his mentor would soon avail him to that information himself. A habit he just couldn't let go of since young; an inquisitive spirit Rophis himself had encouraged his apprentice to nurture. "Our mission there had been to recover anything of value that could be considered useful; tomes and scrolls that weren't half rotted...oddities that were more than just dusty old scraps...and equipment...the old badgers up top were looking for ways to improve our current armaments, itself already derived from old findings in another dungeon said to have been situated where the Kingdom's royal castle stands today. You realize how important that is right?"

**"Y-Yeah...the old legends tell of the ancient rulers unearthing secrets of the ancients said to have been pivotal in the Kingdom's rise to dominion over the land...if that's true...then another discovery like that would be enough to give us a superior edge over our enemies!"**

**"Hit it right on the nose...except Rhutensia had other plans in mind; like absconding with anything that might be considered an artifact of power in there...except what she didn't know; was that almost every single thing of note to be found in that place had some sort of spell woven over it. Like a safeguard or something..."**

"But couldn't you have done something to stop her?" The mere suggestion of such a thing makes the somewhat serious man break out into an uncontrollable fit of laughter, guffawing so hard to a point where the gaunt edges of his cheeks were beginning to turn red with a heated flush from laughing so much without catching a breath. Drawing attention to their little gathering that had gone unnoticed till now as the other Blades murmuring silently at their own tables send unpleasant gazes and disgusted scowls their way. "Bahah...phew...you've got a funny mind about you Rufus...sure, Rhutensia might be my partner, but she's on a whole different level than I am. Even back when she was a man, he'd beat me

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a dozen times over without batting a-" *SPRT!* "Whoa there, careful with the way you swallow eh? Don't go choking yourself out on me alright? Breathe...that's it..."

Not wasting a second after a hasty recovery from nearly choking on a clumped up ball of gruel that had gotten stuck in his throat, a bewildered Rufus throws out a flabbergasted response. "Hack! D-Did I hear that right? R-Rhutensia's a man?!"

"*Was...*keyword there...Rhutensia *was* a man. Only a select few in the Blades know of it but yeah...you could call it karmic justice in a way. *Nichols* wasn't the brightest among us, but his skill with any weapon and the tactical genius to make a small army perform better than a large, uncoordinated mass was enough to make up for his shortcomings...pity the Grand Commander wasn't chummy enough to notice his utter lack of moral decorum when out in the field. If I wasn't there, he'd have lost his position a long time ago."

"So...the armor...whatever it was you found in that dungeon. That's why Nichols doesn't dress in accordance with the Blades' standards...and why he's...a she..." Trailing off into silence, Rufus' shoulders slump in visible disappointment and mild self-deprecation, thinking himself an idiot for trusting in outward appearances so easily like his father had warned him about before setting off from home. And to think that such a beautiful maiden had been nothing more than a deceptive trap at the end of the day...that just couldn't be the end of things, and from the snide grin on Rhopis' face, it seemed the mentor was well aware of the train of thought running through his squire's mind. "C'mon, don't look so disappointed there. Nichols might have been a person of poor character back then, but she's honestly made a pretty good effort in turning that bad image around. I've seen to that myself after all, so you can trust me when I say that Rhutensia...well, she's pretty much the woman you might've thought her to be when you were ogling her back at the assembly~" Mouthing off like that had earned him a light bump to his forearm from Rufus, who still seemed conflicted as to whether or not he could trust in his superior's word. Ultimately holding off on that as his damaged mind decided to press forward with learning yet more about these sudden turn of events if they really were true and Rhopis wasn't simply pulling his legs with a bad tale.

"So...this armor. How did Rhutensia even come across it anyway? And if it was cursed, couldn't you have stopped her from putting it on?"

"Hah...like I said, Nichols wanted his run of things while we explored the dungeon. So he got everyone besides me to wait outside, greedy git wanted everything for himself. Particularly the gear, anything that might prove useful, he took. And who was I to say anything? I was just the best friend he always ignored...so when the two of us started trawling through those dusty corridors and breaking down mold eaten doors, I said nothing cuz I had nothing to say. If he was going to be *that* stubborn, I thought; why not just sit back and let fate do its thing?"

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The energy in which he spoke had enthralled Rufus into complete silence, still skeptical but adept enough in social skills to read the room. Letting Rhopis take his own unfinished tankard to down what little slop remained within in an effort to rejuvenate his throat before resuming a lengthy recount telling of Nichols' presumed fall...and the beginnings of Grand Officer Rhutensia...

*It started with a tiny little headpiece, some flimsy little band that looked like the front of a visor snapped off. But Nichols thought otherwise, assuming it to be some powerful crown or something along those lines when he put it on with a smile on his face. A smile I bet he wouldn't be wearing if he could see things from my point of view. Watching with bated breath while his hair drained of color straight down to the roots until all he had was a silver mop lying over his head, I thought it was some sort of trick but it didn't stop there. With each passing second, it all just kept growing until Nichols looked like he was long overdue for a trim. It looked funny back then; seeing a Blade with such a ridiculous haircut...a cut fit for a girl almost...*

*What came next however, made the pieces fit when Nichols found a matching set of bracers to go along with the headpiece's style; black and jagged with gold trim with no sign of there being any rust or battle wear, it was nothing like the standard issue smooth ivory silver mail we were supposed to bear and maintain at all times. A tradition Nichols was willing to break his vows on upholding if it meant gaining strength in return, dropping the armor personally bestowed to him by the Princess herself like it meant nothing to him. And once the straps of his brand new gear were fitted nice and tight, I thought he'd notice when those arms he put so much time into bulking up were stripped away in a matter of seconds, as if the armor were trying to force the wearer to fit it instead of the other way around. It's why I personally never trust in what those scholars like to say about magic, damn thing should stay forgotten....stripping an enemy of their power like that? Just no honor in it.*

*Of course, I'd find out later those fine arms of his could still pack a good punch despite how much they'd thinned out with a lot more pudge, but at that time I just thought it was some weakening curse I didn't mind Nichols falling prey to if it would teach him a lesson. Not a purpose built spell that would turn the wearer into the image of a battle maiden...or whatever it was the scribes said about the dungeon maker's culture. Anyway, we were still about halfway into the expedition with no noticeable findings besides the equipment racks Nichols kept picking apart whenever we stumbled into one. Made the place seem like a real big stockpile of armaments that got ransacked a long time ago save for the bits and pieces left behind for people like us...correction...people like Nichols to find.*

*The next piece he'd lay his grubby hands on looked like one half of a pauldron set and I had to admit then, even without the enhancing properties of the armor, the craftsmanship was superb. You've seen it for yourself haven't you? Sweeping lines of brazen gold interwoven into the steel as if the thing had been put together through the hands of an artisan who plied their trade in metal instead of fabric.*



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*And the spikes? It lacks the Blades' focus on grace and fluidity but if it were all put together, it'd certainly make for a fearsome look...ah, I'm getting ahead of myself again...but a man's got to have an appreciation for the finer things in life y'know? That's something else for you to take down notes about Rufus!*

*Since Nichols' dominant arm was his right, he'd seen fit to slot the pauldron over his left. I guess the idea was that he'd use the fully armored limb like a makeshift shield. You don't need me to tell you how much of a bad idea that is in the thick of combat right? Unless you've got a shield over your precious hand, thinking to use it like one is just insane...but like with Rhutensia's physical strength, I'd underestimated that armor of her's too. You've seen her with a sword most of the time? That's nothing when she's got her mace out. Coupled with the armor's durability, and she becomes a ram to split the enemy lines. Guess you've caught on at this point?*

*Yeah, when Nichols' put that piece on, it became real obvious what the armor's enchantment was doing when it started affecting what remained of his original gear. It just...burned it all away, leaving just the underwear behind and a whole lot of skin for me to confirm it really was turning the brave Grand Officer into a slightly chubby but fair woman a little younger than he originally was...what? Don't give me that look...it's not like she was naked or anything...back on topic however, it really was 'eye-catching' to see the process up close; just flesh moving into new, reduced positions under skin that ripples like water, healed of countless scars and calluses while curly hair just drops and vanishes into the dark. It just catches your eye so hard and you just watch, never noticing the transition at all once it's over and you're just staring at a perfectly fine neckline branching down to a nice set of shoulders...*

*\*Ahem\* But...yeah, with each piece Nichols put on, the transformation just seemed to speed up to a point where he didn't need to put another on just for the enchantment's effects to resume. It became a slow, steady process that continued to eat away at who Nichols used to be...or maybe it could even be the fact that Rhutensia was a woman...I'm not all that versed in matters of the mind, but don't you think even an asshole of a man could change for the better if he'd been forced to live out the rest of his days as a fair lady?*

*By the time we reached what looked to be the heart of the dungeon, Nichols' had all but vanished when he...or I think it was she, stood a full head shorter than I was as we checked out what was left in that dusty old chamber. Only managing to pick out a pair of boots that seemed to fit the bracer's design alongside a warped sheet of metal with a huge chunk of it sheared clean off unlike all the other pristine stuff Nichols had picked out for herself. We initially had no idea what it was meant for...until her grandiose assets began to grow in.*

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*It was really hard to focus on what she was saying then, not when my eyes were glued to my colleagues chest kicking like a small kid trapped in a sack before it just...bloomed. Like, in one fell swoop. Just bwomp, and there laid an amazing pair of breasts that had torn right through her tunic, hanging off a tight, curvy torso that'd get any man raring for a touch...could've sworn something about it was pleasurable cuz there were tents poking up behind the-ow! Yeah, yeah I'll get back on track...at this rate, you won't find yourself a woman Rufus!*

*It was only when I looked again did I realize what the plate was meant for...and after a little bit of persuading. I managed to get her to allow me the honor of putting it on for her...*

*Now I don't know if the magic was clouding her senses, because there was just no denying the sounds she made while I pulled the leather around her chest, pardon the wording. After all, anyone would've said something if they knew they were turning into women but Nichols' hadn't. And from what I could tell, her new body seemed to be really sensitive, so the slightest touch would've caught the attention of someone as attentive as her. So I could only assume the magic was doing its job...and well, I wasn't always the 'best' person ever back then.*

*I was at the breaking point when it came to Nichols' boorish behavior, so much so that I couldn't help what came next when the time came to secure the straps around her back.*



*It was just supposed to be a tease, nothing more. But when she made that adorable noise after my gauntlet ran down the nape of her neck, things just...went downhill from there. I'll spare you the details since you don't seem to be the type for that sort of talk, but that's how I found out she's still got all herself in there even if she might not look or sound like it.*

*I was captivated, it didn't feel like I was getting intimate with Nichols. Not when the cocky bastard had been replaced with a woman whose clothes and armor withheld a body that could hardly be considered that of a knight's. She had lost it all, including the voice with which she used to stir troops into battle fury before a major engagement. I hadn't even noticed it considering how little the*

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*bastard spoke when alone, much less around me, but her little song had been enough of an indicator that everything...well, mostly everything, about the haughty Officer had been claimed by the magic.*

*Because the moment I tried to get even more touchy with her, it's like whatever was keeping her dulled and restrained had faded away. And when she caught sight of herself and where my arms were going...well, you can guess what happened next...*

**"S-So...that time in the village when you rescued me...was *that* the real reason why you had a bruise on your face? Nichols beat you in for attempting to grope her?"**

Sighing with a little apologetic shake of the head for no doubt ruining the squire's boyhood image of his idol with this incriminating story, Rhopis slumps back into his seat with a thump. Gazing up at the ceiling once more to give his apprentice some time to recover before a throaty cough clears the air. "And then? What happened after that? Surely there must've been an uproar about the whole thing? A Blade caught breaking the vow, much less disobeying orders...the penalty is--"

**"*Death*, I know...but the Commander was willing to overlook Nichols' mistake just this once. Because in some way, he saw what it had done to her as a just form of punishment enough; for never would he be able to pass on his genes to another ever again. Just think; a man? Removed of the ability to continue the family line? It was a major blow, especially to one of noble birth like Nichols was. And even though many other families out there were fine with having either a son or daughter, Nichols' kin weren't the nice, understanding sort...now it's your turn to do a lil of the answering; what do you think happened now that their precious son had become a 'pathetic' waif?"**

Furrowing his brow before it eases into a worried look, Rufus turns his downward facing gaze to look his mentor in the eye, realizing not one bit of the story was embellished whatsoever from the serious fire burning behind ebony irises, as if the mere reminder of the past had been enough to incite his rage...  
**"*Exile*...they exiled Nichols? Just because he became a she?"**

**"The sole heir to a family known for their ruthless cunning in trade with a colorful history of it's men serving within high ranking spots in the military...and with their son expected to continue that cherished lineage far decades into the future, they saw *her* misdeed for what it was; a mistake...but what they did in response to it, no one in their right mind could defend such a thing...and as much as they like to tell you about how we Blades embody dignity and respect, well? We're all only human at the end of the day...and the hearts of man are all too capable of dismissing mistreatment and negligence just because of what the established rules tell us..."**

Leaving Rufus to ponder his words, Rhopis rises up from his seat without a word. Startling the squire who would follow after his mentor with the air of a hurried rookie about him as he rushes to deposit the

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used tankards in the wash before sprinting out of the canteen after the Grand Officer, taking his place by the man's side as they stroll through the corridors that spanned the length of the castle walls at a lax pace. Chuckling at the sight of Rufus' flustered expression.

"This story's got a happy ending Rufus...so cheer up would ya? You were looking like I just dropped a heap of bad news on your head!"

"B-But how can it? From what you said, Nichols seemed really down in the dumps though, I mean...it's sort of deserved but...being isolated from everyone's just too much isn't it?"

"That's where you're wrong kiddo...and I haven't gotten to the part where Rhutensia got her name now haven't I?" Ruffling around in the gap of his breastplate to produce a neatly rolled scroll tied with a fine rope of velvet, Rhopis' walk slows to a crawl. As if a man of his caliber was too afraid to damage the flimsy paper with the slightest misstep as he unfurls it with a tender grip, beckoning Rufus to join him in the isolated corner they had found themselves in. And the moment his eyes landed on the contents within, only then would he understand why the Grand Officer was treating said scroll like a fragile treasure to be guarded as if it were a divine gift with an equivalent level of respect that must be paid to its handling. "Is that...who I think it is?"



"Yeah...it's exactly who you think it is...she's expecting you know? The doctors tested her for a positive just last week!"

"R-Rhutensia...so when you said she got a new name...a *good ending*...that was because you *wedded* her?!"

A swift thwack over the head would be delivered with a gauntleted chop, stifling the tail end of Rufus' shocked delivery as the squire bangs into the wall, disoriented by his superior's aggressive response to his hastily spoken words. "Not so loud dammit....but yeah...we got together not too long ago actually, around the time I noticed a certain scruffy little farm hand had actually become a Knight...it took us years to get to this point. But after all she'd been through and my own reflection on the matter, I figured Rhutensia of all people would deserve a

second chance at things...and for the record? She...my wife had been the one to come forward with the

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proposal alright? I hadn't coerced her if that's what you're thinking. I might know my women, but I'm no lech who'd lay his hands on a maiden willy-nilly!"

"Heh...then what about that time back in the dungeon? You almost had your way with your colleague!"

"Like I said Rufus; we were all fools at some point or another in our lives. It's gonna happen to you too so take this as a chance to learn eh? And who knows? Make the right choice? Do what's expected of you? And someday, you might even chance upon the love of your life in the most unlikely of places...now, about that punishment of yours~"

"I know I said I'd be up for anything but...my head isn't feeling it right now Sir..."

"That's no excuse, if anything, that should be a motivator! Attune yourself to pain now when you're in a safe environment? And you're likely to shrug it off the next time it happens in an actual combat scenario...and speaking of, now's the time for me to go. I want fifty laps around the walls by the time I get back, you hear me?"

"Ahah...whatever you say...but...all this you just told me. Are you really not pulling my leg? Nichols...I mean Rhutensia...is she really your lover now?"

Wearing a whimsical expression on his face before spinning around on his heel, Rhopis comes to rest against a pillar. Brushing against his beard with a thoughtful finger before shrugging his shoulders.

"Well...like I said, I'm not an expert on the mind. But my Ma used to say something; that if you wear something long enough, it'll rub off on you in many ways, subtle or otherwise...in Rhutensia's case...maybe it's just acceptance? I've seen her struggle with being a woman, she hated it at first when she snapped out of the magic's influence. For how could she not? It took everything from her and left her with a 'weak' appearance despite all the armor had given her. And no matter what she did, the gear seemed bonded with her forever. Toss it aside? And it would reappear in her quarters in a flash. Attempt to disenchant? And its blowback would be enough to shatter someone's back against the wall...hell, even the broken breastplate had itself repaired by the time we got back to the castle from that assignment..."

"So...you're saying she's accepted things the way they are?"

"I haven't asked her personally but...I think it's safe to say she has. After all, she was the one who came forward out of her saddened husk when I became the only one she could rely on. And even though I didn't feel like laying a finger on her after what I tried to pull back in the dungeon. Not even a sworn Blade like myself could say no when she had asked to do it, and at that point. She was already back in the limelight...Grand Officer Rhutensia, stepping up to take Nichols' spot due to an unfortunate

## **'BLESSED' EQUIPMENT**

accident while out on duty. So says the public in regards to my colleagues 'untimely demise'...truth is, the Grand Commander allowed her back into active duty under the conditions that she was no longer the one in charge of our lance...although the old man might bust a vein when he finds out what she's gotten into with me but...that's another bridge we'll cross when we get to it."

"Huh...and she really didn't...y'know? *Mind* when you had to..."

"My, my, getting adventurous now are we? That whack on the head certainly helped! Yeah...she was...*cute*...about it. Wasn't really sure how to start, got really hesitant when we were both cozied up in bed...but when she got the ropes...Rufus my boy, if you ever do get a girl of your own, pray she's as good as Rhutensia is when it comes rocking the bed...poor thing had to get it's legs swapped out every week, cuz in or out of that armor, she's a real fighter!"

"I guess in this case, you could call it a blessing in disguise huh? Not so much a curse at the end of the day? Heh...thanks for the story Sir, it got a little weird but it's definitely opened my eyes about a thing or two." "Hmm...I guess it is when you put it like that...and if you do well enough in the coming days Rufus? Consider more precious bits of wisdom from your best man!" Sharing another laugh before the blaring of distant horns catches Rhopis' attention, master and student share a look of understanding before having to part ways for the day. With the Grand Officer steeled and ready for deployment while his squire prepared himself for a long, long day running laps across the length of the castle's perimeter. Wondering what other incredulous occurrences like the truth behind Rhutensia might be waiting for him in the future with an organization he had now come to appreciate just a slight smidge better thanks to his mentor's enlightening story...

**THE END**

## SOURCE GLOSSARY

Image 1 by Yuuzuki : <https://www.pixiv.net/en/users/4681467>

Image 2 by Helu2 : <https://www.pixiv.net/en/users/50575239>

Image 3 by Momiage : <https://www.pixiv.net/en/users/85139915>