

Great Mage 481

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Dragonmen on Combat Island didn't carry around anything like an identification card.

This didn't mean that the concept of identification cards didn't exist. However, since the process of obtaining one was tedious and required money, most people chose to live without it. For most, it was not something they needed to have.

Of course, there were still cases when it was necessary.

The most typical case was when traveling between islands. At that time, strict screening was carried out on both sides, so those who didn't have any form of identification were not allowed to cross over to another island.

In addition, identification cards were required for self-employed people, signing important contracts with each other, or having special jobs. Of course, these people were the minority, and most Dragonmen went their entire lives without getting one.

Perhaps the characteristics of the people living on Combat Island were part of the reason.

The Dragonmen living here were very against the act of lying, and they would never think about using someone else's name to impersonate them.

Because of this, when Lukas revealed his name, no one doubted him.

Instead, the Fighters beside him all shot sideways glances at him and whispered to each other.

Even without listening carefully, it was easy to get a rough idea of what they were saying.

'The Dragon Hunter? That man?'

He certainly didn't look like a Dragonman.

'He looks weaker than I expected.'

Lukas spoke to the receptionist without paying any attention to their whispers.

"Is that enough for me to register as a Fighter?"

"Ah! Yes. Of course!"

The receptionist quickly erased her shocked expression and responded with a professional smile.

"This is the contract. Please read it carefully and write your name in the blank space at the end."

Lukas collected the document and read it through.

Deciding to only focus on the important things, he directly ignored the small clauses.

The minimum contractual period for a Fighter was three months.

They had to fight at least five times a month no matter what.

And they had to accept the fact that they could die in a match without complaint.

After reading it, Lukas wrote his name in the space provided before handing it back to the receptionist.

She received the document and coughed slightly before speaking in a serious voice.

“Mr. Lukas, you said that you don’t belong to any arena, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Then how about signing an official contract with the Lirua arena?”

“Are there any disadvantages for not signing the contract?”

The receptionist shook her head.

“There aren’t. However, if you do sign the contract, there would be many advantages.”

“Like?”

“For one, you would be able to rent equipment exclusive to our arena at half the price. As your value as a Fighter increases, the price will become cheaper and cheaper, and later, you may even be able to borrow the items for free.”

Naturally, since it was a major city, the weapons, and equipment in the Lirua arena were all high-quality items. In fact, many Fighters came to the Lirua arena specifically for the weapons here.

Nevertheless, Lukas, who had no interest in the Fighters’ weapons or equipment wasn’t the least bit interested.

Realising this, the receptionist dropped for a moment before she began speaking in a slightly more frantic manner.

“A-, and you would have access to the various amenities of the Lirua arena at half price! Not just meals, but also blacksmiths, clothing stores, accommodations...”

“ ... ”

“You will also receive three times your salary as a down payment! O-, of course, your salary will also increase based on your number of wins!”

Money.

He had already received more than 100 million erus, so that offer was not appealing either.

Lukas decided to voice his thoughts.

“I will remain independent.”

“...yes.”

The receptionist’s face became a bit pale, but she did not pursue the issue any further.

“How do I register for a match?”

“You just have to tell me.”

“Then I would like to apply for one immediately.”

“Yes. Do you have any specific date in mind?”

Lukas thought back to the match schedule that he’d seen before coming.

“The earliest date possible.”

* * *

Lukas’ first match was scheduled two days later.

The receptionist didn’t really want to do that, but it was what Lukas wanted.

“If you postpone a match because of personal reasons, you will receive a fine. Please note that if you accumulate a certain number of absences in a short time then you will no longer be allowed to fight in the Lirua arena.”

Lukas nodded at the receptionist’s reminder.

Afterward, he didn’t leave the arena right away. Instead, he headed inside.

According to the newspaper, there was a big match scheduled for around that time. But Lukas’ goal wasn’t to appreciate the match.

‘Of course, it is worth it to see the level of my competition in the Lirua arena.’

But what he truly wanted to see was something else.

Lukas found his seat and sat down.

Naturally, the prices varied greatly depending on the location of the seats.

The price of one on the 'Sky Stand' that Bargan had mentioned was 3,000 erus, while the 'A Stand' that Lukas was currently sitting in only cost 30 erus. The prices were one hundred times apart.

Nevertheless, this didn't mean that the A Stand wasn't good. The seats in this stand were clean, and there was little trash strewn about. The only downside was that there wasn't a very clear view of the arena below.

This didn't really matter for him since he would be able to see everything perfectly just by focusing slightly.

Murmur-

Maybe it was because the seats in this stand were the cheapest, but his surroundings were filled.

The spectators were all looking at the arena with eyes filled with anticipation. The Fighters hadn't even appeared yet, but the heat in the arena was already beginning to rise.

They didn't know.

That the match they were so enthusiastic about was being thoroughly manipulated.

Thinking about it, Bargan's anger was understandable.

Suddenly.

"Big Match!"

A loud voice erupted, spreading across the entire arena.

It came from the sky. The eyes of everyone in the crowd turned to look in that direction, and some of them had even begun to cheer.

There, they saw someone standing on a platform floating above the arena. But before anyone could get a better glance at him, he did something completely unexpected.

He leapt from the floating platform.

Bang!

And when he landed, the ground caved and cracked. The dust cloud that rose up was much thicker than Lukas expected.

“Are you guys ready for the fight?”

The voice was heard again.

It was a simple murmur, but it strangely sounded like it was coming from right beside their ears.

“Woooooaaah!”

“Kang! Ki! Kang! Ki!”

At the same time, the crowd began to go crazy. It felt like the temperature in the arena rose by a few degrees in an instant.

As the crowd chanted his name like fanatics, Lukas found out who the owner of the voice was.

Whoosh!

A huge burst of air erupted, clearing away the dust cloud.

And a huge Dragonman could be seen in the center of the arena.

He was really huge.

This wasn't just a simple difference in appearance. For a moment, Lukas wondered if he was a different race. At first glance, he appeared more like a Dragonling than a Dragonman.

Generally, male Dragonmen tended to be about two meters tall, but this man appeared to be at least five meters tall.

He was sitting cross-legged on a stone throne, which wasn't there when he jumped.

'The Major City Lord of Lirua, Kangki.'

Lukas' eyes narrowed slightly.

"Ah! You guys are really hot today!"

Kangki smiled before taking a large wine bottle from his pocket.

Then, without even bothering to open it properly, he tore the bottleneck off with his hand and poured the wine into his mouth.

Gulp... gulp...

Because of his large size, the bottle he took out was as tall as most adult men. Drinking this bottle was no different from a man drinking an entire barrel of wine.

Crack!

After he was done, Kangki threw the bottle on the ground before shattering it beneath his foot.

Then he got up from his throne and roared.

“Maintain his undefeated streak without any signs of stopping!”

Clank!

An iron gate to the left of the arena slowly rose up. Then, a Dragonman walked out from it.

“The current fourth place ranker in the Lirua arena! In order to compete in the ‘Championship’, he cannot afford a single loss!”

Papapang!

Fireworks shot into the sky. At the same time, the crowd’s voices became so loud it even shook the ground.

Kangki also exclaimed in excitement.

“Kaytai!”

“Waaah!”

“Kaytai! Kaytai! Kaytai!”

The crowd screamed his name.

The Dragonman called Kaytai swung his large axe a few times before releasing a savage roar. The audience became even more excited by this unrestrained display.

“The emergence of a super rookie! Who said that green skins only have peaceful personalities? In the 15 matches he has fought so far, this Fighter has never spared a single opponent! The one with the overwhelming performance, Toirask!”

On the right side, a green-skinned Dragonman walked out from behind the gate. He looked a bit nervous, but he was certainly a formidable Fighter.

Lukas turned away from the Fighters and looked at Kangki, who was looking appreciatively at the two contestants, once again.

‘...indeed.’

Lukas admitted honestly.

At his current level, he wasn't Kangki's match.

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Lukas left the arena without bothering to watch the match.

That match would probably be won by the man named Kaytai. Although the Dragonman called Toirask was relatively strong, he hadn't fully matured yet.

The place he headed to next was a blacksmith. Of course, there were dozens of blacksmiths in Lirua, but the one he went to was the place that Ashstar had left the Ancient Dragon's skull earlier that day.

Clang! Clang!

The clanging sound unique to smithies resonated through the entire area. The blacksmiths were all busy with their work.

These blacksmiths had appearances closer to humans than to Dragonmen, and many of them were old.

Lukas approached one of them. This blacksmith was sitting on a chair and wiping sweat from his forehead as though he'd just finished his work.

"Customer?"

He asked in a blunt tone.

Lukas nodded and said.

“Yeah. I would like to commission an item.”

“Hmm. Wait a minute...”

The Dragonman looked at Lukas with slightly hazy eyes for a moment.

“...aren't you the Dragon Hunter who left the Ancient Dragon's skull here earlier today?”

“That's right.”

The blacksmith's face immediately brightened.

“Hoho. I see. Are you thinking of entrusting us with the skull now?”

His voice was even more excited than his expression.

Now that he thought about it, Lukas realised that these blacksmiths had probably been eager to process the skull from the moment he asked them to store it for him.

Of course, since he hadn't decided on what he would do with the Ancient Dragon's skull yet, he refused.

"No."

The scene was a replay of what happened earlier.

The Dragonman's excited expression rapidly devolved to one of disappointment.

"Then what kind of commission would you like to order? We have most of the materials that you might need here in our forge, but the quality isn't very good compared to that. And on that subject, the cost would be a bit high too."

"Didn't I entrust another set of materials with you as well?"

The Dragonman tilted his head in confusion for a while before nodding with an 'ah'. The impact of the Ancient Dragon's skull had been so big that he had completely forgotten it.

"You mean the corpse of the Ancient Dragon's offspring."

"Yes."

“Well, it is a mutant, and the strength of its bones and scales are pretty good, so it wouldn’t be a problem to use it as materials.”

The blacksmith nodded.

In particular, the long, flexible tail could be used to make a unique piece of equipment, whether it was a weapon or armor.

“Fine. I’ll get started on it right away.”

“Please do. How much will it cost?”

“It’ll probably cost around 3,000 erus. You can pay when I’m done.”

“Understood. How long will it take?”

“Hmm. Well. I’ll have to figure out where to start, but I think it’ll take at least a week...”

“...”

At least a week.

Lukas rolled this thought around in his head for a while before nodding. It was a bit longer than he would have hoped, but it couldn't be helped.

"All right."

"Then you can come back to me in a week."

After saying that, the Blacksmith turned around without hesitation. It seemed that he was preparing to work again, so Lukas decided to leave the smithy.

Clang!

That was until a clear sound rang out.

It was definitely the sound of metal striking against metal.

But in this environment where the sounds of hammers striking metal came from every direction, it was only this sound that caught Lukas' attention.

He turned towards the direction the sound was coming from.

Clang!

The person behind this sound was so eye-catching that Lukas couldn't help but wonder how he hadn't noticed them before. But after thinking about it for a moment, he realised the reason.

It was because compared to the large Dragonmen, her physique was rather small. Right, it was a female Dragonman.

Even though she wore baggy clothes, was covered in soot, and her face was scrunched in concentration, she could still be considered beautiful.

Clang!

The sound of the hammering was extremely clear.

Lukas grabbed the blacksmith who had turned his back to him and pointed to her.

"Who is that woman? Is she also a blacksmith?"

"Her... don't mind her."

The blacksmith replied with a strange expression on his face. Lukas had a feeling that he shouldn't ask any more questions.

He turned to look at the woman again.

By then, the blue-haired woman had put down her hammer with a slight frown on her face. Was she done with her work?

That was probably the case. Her gaze turned to the table beside the anvil she had been working with.

“...”

Then, her eyebrows twitched slightly and her lips parted.

“Ryto! You son of a bitch!”

Although it wasn't very loud, her voice strangely resonated through the entire smithy. It reminded Lukas of Kangki's voice back in the arena.

The blacksmith in front of Lukas flinched when he heard her shout.

It seemed that he was the very same 'Ryto!'. With his back hunched, he carefully approached the woman.

“...what do you need?”

Why was he being so polite?

Contrary to Lukas' curiosity, Nekdu frowned with an unforgiving expression.

"What do I need? You little pig-nosed bastard, what did I tell you yesterday?"

"...If it's the hirometal that you mentioned, I put 10kg below your anvil."

"Besides that! The towels and water in case I get thirsty while working! I told you to leave them beside me, didn't I?!"

"Ah."

"Ah? You little bastard."

The woman seemed to be less than half Rytol's size.

In truth, it wasn't that bad, but when compared to the Dragonmen who were usually 2m tall and extremely muscular, she appeared thin and fragile.

Nevertheless, Rytol simply lowered his head, seemingly unable to respond to the woman's cursing.

Lukas continued looking at the woman.

Maybe.

She was a really good blacksmith. He didn't know much about blacksmithing, but he did know a lot about 'sound'.

And the sounds she made with her hammer were not normal.

But that wasn't the only thing that caught Lukas' attention.

[Blacksmith of Lava Nekdu]

“...”

Unlike Bargan and Ashstar, she didn't have any 'loyalty' stat.

Perhaps it was because she and Lukas were complete strangers. Nevertheless, besides a name and a title, there was one other thing that Lukas could see.

[Difficulty: B]

It was the B difficulty that he was seeing for the first time.

At that moment, their eyes met. Nekdu opened her mouth.

“What’s with this wimp?”

It seemed that this was the impression that all Dragonmen had upon seeing Lukas for the first time.

Rytol hurriedly whispered.

“That’s *him*.”

“Am I supposed to know this person? I hope he’s not some trash sent by Kangki aga-”

“He’s the one who entrusted us with the Ancient Dragon’s skull.”

“...”

Nekdu’s expression dropped immediately, then she hurriedly changed her words.

“N-, now that I take a closer look...”

She looked at Lukas with an expression that seemed to say she was doing her very best to think of something nice to say.

“He is a really muscular and handsome guy. Ha, haha. I must be tired from working all night, which is why I couldn’t recognise such a handsome man.”

“...”

Lukas was at a loss for words

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Lukas pondered for a moment.

Originally, he had just wanted the blacksmiths here to make some equipment for him. That’s why he’d said it so bluntly without adding any specifics to his order.

He didn’t think the blacksmiths here would be able to create the weapons he wanted even if he wanted them to.

This wasn’t because he was looking down on their skills.

Instead, it was because the things he wanted were concepts that the blacksmiths would be unfamiliar with. Even if they had exceptional skills, it would be incredibly difficult for them to make custom equipment that they had never encountered before. In addition, the more skilled a blacksmith was, the more proud, and the more likely that they wouldn’t have any curiosity towards new concepts.

But Nekdu gave him a different feeling compared to the other blacksmiths.

He didn't just mean her skills.

If it was her, then maybe...

With this thought, Lukas opened his mouth.

"Are you the best blacksmith in this smithy?"

"That's right."

Nekdu responded casually with a nod.

Rytol, who was still beside her, didn't refute it. In fact, his expression didn't even change.

This meant that at the very least, the best blacksmiths in the smithy recognised her as their better. Rytol's reaction, or lack thereof, was the best proof of this.

"There is equipment that I would like to have made."

"With the Ancient Dragon's skull?"

“It’s not that, but...”

“Ah. Then that’s fine.”

Nekdu had a hopeful expression at first but waved her hand carelessly before Lukas could even finish speaking. Nevertheless, Lukas calmly finished what he had to say.

“It’s a weapon that no other blacksmith can make.”

“Ah. Really? What is it?”

Her expression became one of curiosity and anticipation.

“A staff.”

“...a staff?”

A suspicious yet disappointed glint appeared in Nekdu’s eyes.

“You don’t seem to have any problems with your legs, or are you talking about something like a wooden club that you can use as a weapon?”

“...it’s a similar concept.”

After saying that, Lukas pointed to a piece of paper on the table.

“May I use that?”

“Sure. Go ahead.”

Then, he picked up the pen beside it and started sketching.

“...”

At first, Nekdu was only watching on indifferently, but the more the image gradually took shape, the more the look in her eyes changed.

After seeing the finished product, she couldn't help but ask.

“...this is...?”

“A quarterstaff. It's the weapon I would like you to make.”

“Hmm...”

She tilted her head to the side for a moment before finally opening her mouth.

“By any chance, have you ever worked in a smithy before?”

“No.”

“Ah. Right.”

“...by the way, why do you always speak informally?”

Lukas asked.

Not because he was offended by the way she spoke, but because he was genuinely curious about the answer. Even Rytol, who seemed to be extremely proud, was still polite to customers, but Nekdu didn't seem to care at all.

“It's because I'm old enough to.”

“...how old are you?”

“I stopped counting after reaching 500.”

“...”

While Lukas became speechless for a while, Rytol, who had been standing quietly at the side, opened his mouth.

“You’re an outsider, so I guess it isn’t that surprising that you don’t know. Blue skins are renowned among Dragonmen for their longevity. Well, her case is a bit unique even for them, but...”

Of course, that wasn’t the reason why Lukas was speechless.

Nekdu hadn’t raised her head to look at him at all, instead, her eyes remained glued to the sketch Lukas had drawn.

Then, she pointed towards the top of the staff.

“There is a groove here. Do you intend to put something in it?”

“Yes.”

Lukas nodded before taking the heart of the young Dragonling from his pocket. Of course, it didn’t actually have the shape of a heart. To put it into other terms, it was like a jewel that didn’t shine. This was because most of its vitality had been exhausted.

In all honesty, in its current state, it was already impossible to use it to make some kind of elixir. Or at least, that was the judgement Lukas reached.

Nevertheless, this heart was once a storage box that contained an enormous amount of energy. It could still play a similar role.

In other words, it was the perfect mana storage device.

“What main material do you think the body should be made of?”

“I think it would be best to use the tail of the Ancient Dragon’s young as the main material.”

“It would be very difficult.”

It was Rytol who said this.

He was also looking at the sketch with a baffled expression.

Naturally, Lukas was aware of this as well. It was common for staves to be made of wood. Metal could also be used at times. However, it was extremely unconventional for the tail of a living organism to be used as the main ingredient.

As Rytol had said, it would be an incredibly difficult task. That was why he hadn’t intended to mention it at first.

If he hadn’t met Nekdu, Lukas would not have brought it up at all.

His eyes remained on the blue-haired woman. Her forehead was wrinkled and it seemed that she was deeply contemplating something.

“Give me that.”

She took the pen out of Lukas’ hand as if she was stealing it.

Then she began to draw over his sketch.

“The tail would be too weak to support it on its own... It would need metal to hold it firmly, and I’m sure you’d prefer a softer material for the grip. Something like rubber maybe. And with this overall shape and appearance, the audience probably wouldn’t look at it even if you were standing in the center of the arena.”

Rytol turned to Lukas with a sigh.

“You can go now.”

“...”

“It seems that she has already started working on it.”

“How long do you think it’ll take?”

“If it’s short, then within the week. If it’s long... it could be two or even three months.”

“Huh?”

Rytol couldn’t help but shake his head when he saw Lukas’ expression.

“It’s your fault for getting her so interested. Whether that was a mistake or a good deed will only be known once the finished product makes its appearance.”

“...”

“Now is your last chance to stop it. It seems that she hasn’t become completely immersed in her own world yet, so you might be able to bring her back to her senses.”

Lukas turned to look at Nekdu for a moment.

Unlike her low mutterings, her eyes were shining brightly as though they were filled with starlight.

He knew people like this.

People who were deeply immersed in their own worlds, and who didn’t really care about anything unless it was something that interested them, like Nekdu, were usually those who became extremely successful in their chosen fields and were often called geniuses.

“It’s fine. I’ll be waiting for the results.”

This time, Rytol was the one to look surprised.

Nekdu’s skills could only be described as amazing, but even among the blacksmiths who were known for their quirks, she was fickle and had a bad temper, so she rarely had customers.

She was a woman who had kicked away a customer after a month of hard work and acquiring materials while saying that she’d lost interest. No matter how amazing her skills were, it wasn’t very surprising that she wasn’t very popular.

Nevertheless, it was clear that Lukas had become interested in Nekdu.

“It seems that you’re a weirdo too.”

“...”

“I will find out how long it’ll take. Come back in a week.”

“Thank you... Is it fine if I ask one more question?”

“What is it?”

“Where can I find a refiner with excellent skills?”

“...a refiner?”

Rytol tilted his head to the side.

“You’re looking for a strange person. Why do you want to find a refiner?”

“I was wondering how to make use of the Ancient Dragon’s heart.”

“Aha.”

Rytol chuckled.

“I knew you brought that frozen heart to be stored for a reason. So it’s because you believe those bullshit rumors too.”

“...bullshit rumors?”

“The rumors that say that highly skilled refiners can transform the hearts of Ancient Dragons into elixirs...”

“Is that not true? It’s something I read about in a book.”

“If everything in books were true, wouldn’t this world be a fairy tale?”

This caused Lukas to fall silent for a while. Rytol continued.

“Those rumors are just myths. The Ancient Dragon’s heart is useless.”

“It’s not a myth.”

The one who spoke was Nekdu, who seemed to have temporarily awoken from her concentrated state. Her eyes were still locked onto the sketch, but she had an annoyed expression on her face.

“It’s not bullshit. There are refiners who can do that.”

“Do you know any refiners?”

“Yes. But I don’t know where they are now.”

Then, before Lukas could ask any more questions, she continued.

“That’s all I know. I’m only telling you that because you showed me something interesting, so I decided to tell you something interesting.”

Lukas wanted to get more clues, but it seemed that Nekdu wouldn’t answer any more of his questions. This time, her attention was completely focused on the sketch to the point that she had even begun to lean over the table.

From her back, he could see her clear desire to not continue the conversation.

Therefore, Lukas had no choice but to leave the smithy.

‘At least I can obtain a weapon.’

The staff which didn’t exist in the Heavenly Realm, would be a valuable tool that would drastically improve his fighting strength.

So for now, he should be satisfied with this result.

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Shortly after returning to the inn, Lukas called Bargan to his room.

Their rooms were right beside each other.

In fact, considering the size of the rooms, it wasn't necessary for them to get two, but the stubborn wandering Fighter didn't dare to sleep in the same room as his Lord.

He even forced Lukas to let him pay for his own stay.

"You called for me?"

"Right. Have a seat."

"Yes."

Lukas had an unusually serious expression at that moment.

It wasn't just that, it seemed that he was unconsciously releasing his aura. Bargan had encountered many strong people in his life, but whenever he faced Lukas, he couldn't help but feel that his strength was fundamentally different from theirs.

With a slightly nervous expression, he went down to one knee and lowered his head.

"Bargan."

"Yes."

“I do not gather people casually.”

“...”

Bargan’s expression darkened. He hesitated for a while before lowering his head even further, unwilling to open his mouth.

“If there is anything I lack, I will do my best to fix it.”

“That’s not it.”

“...I’m sorry. My knowledge is limited, so I don’t dare to assume my Lord’s intentions.”

“I accepted your allegiance because I needed your knowledge. As you know, I am an outsider who knew nothing about the Heavenly Realm or its culture.”

Although it might not have seemed that way, Lukas had asked Bargan many questions during their time together.

“And now, I have enough of an understanding about the culture of the Heavenly Realm. Even if I have more questions in the future, I have at least adapted enough to be able to find the answers on my own.”

“...are you saying you don’t need me anymore?”

“Right.”

“...”

Bargan’s heart grew heavy in his chest, but he couldn’t refute it. As far as he knew, there were only two people that Lukas was really close to.

Rin Summers, the Champion of the Herui Arena, and Li Hao, the Whirlwind of the Babylon Arena.

Compared to Bargan, there was a large gap between them both in terms of strength and standing.

It was only natural for Lukas to find him useless.

“I will become the Champion of Lirua.”

“...yes.”

Although he nodded, Bargan was still skeptical about that remark. If Lukas had aimed to become the Champion in any other major city, his attitude would certainly have been different.

However, this was Lirua.

In this city, there were limits to how far one could reach just by fighting.

“However, that alone isn’t enough.”

“...what do you mean by ‘not enough’?”

“The match-fixing.”

Bargan’s body shook.

“I went around the entire city today. And I could tell with a single glance. Everyone in this city loves fights and loves the arena.”

“...”

“You must have too, Bargan. That’s why, when you found out about the darkness in Lirua, you were unable to accept it and ran away.”

When he heard those words, Bargan almost burst into tears.

Ran away?

He did.

That's what he'd done when he found out about Lirua.

"...!"

Belatedly, he lowered his head again in order to hide his surging emotions. Under his bowed head, his eyes, which were always steady, rolled around excitedly.

"You have to do what you should do."

"What should I do...?"

"You once ran away from Lirua. You refused to accept your responsibility and threw it away instead. No matter how much time passes, that fact will never disappear. Therefore, you must find that which you once threw away, and pick it up again. In some form or other."

"...that."

Was he telling him to face the darkness in Lirua head-on? If so then that was no different from telling Bargan to rush to his death.

Bargan looked at Lukas with a stiff expression on his face.

But Lukas looked back at him with a freezing cold gaze.

“Then what do you intend to do, my Lord?”

“I will also do what I should do, Bargan.”

Lukas spoke in a calm voice.

“Don’t look for me any longer.”

“ ... ”

“Forget about me, and think only about what you have to do.”

* * *

There was a lot to think about, and a lot to do.

Therefore, two days flew by in a flash.

And now,

Lukas was standing at one end of the Lirua arena.

“Wooaaahh!”

“Dragon Hunter! Dragon Hunter!”

The crowd roared Lukas’ title with overwhelming enthusiasm.

It was inevitable.

For the two days after his match was decided, numerous newspapers and articles talked about the upcoming match. This fuss naturally became a form of , and before long, there were few Dragonmen in Lirua who didn’t know about Lukas.

As a result, today’s match became so big that it could no longer be seen as the debut of a new Fighter.

The opponent was also formidable.

Lukas looked at the Dragonman standing in front of him.

‘Jaihum.’

From what he heard, it was quite unusual for a rookie Fighter to compete with a veteran Fighter as well known as him in his first appearance.

Jaihum was a Fighter ranked 78th in the Lirua Arena, and his recent record was 8 wins and 2 losses. He was someone who was considered to be rising to the top with unstoppable momentum.

‘Good enough.’

His goal wasn’t just to take part in the Championship, but also to deal with the match-fixing in Lirua.

And this opponent was a suitable first step to allow him to break into the darkness of the arena.

Crunch.

He could feel the roughness of the sand beneath his feet. A hot wind suddenly blew over.

Lukas looked at Jaihum with a solemn gaze.

“Begin!”

The match began following the referee’s cry.

—And so, Dragon Hunter Lukas, the huge rookie Fighter that many people had great expectations for, stepped into the Lirua Arena for his first match...

And suffered a devastating defeat.

Season 2 Chapter 185

[The Dragon Hunter's shocking record, 12 consecutive losses!]

[Is his hunt of the Ancient Dragon nothing more than an exaggerated rumor?]

[Hirup Subjugation Squad Leader, 'Butcher' Ashstar, says the hunt of the Ancient Dragon is not a lie and that Lukas is the strongest Sorcerer she has ever seen...]

“...”

Bargan read the article again with a strange expression on his face.

He'd already read it five times before, and the words in the article hadn't changed, but he still couldn't believe it. Eventually, he put down the newspaper with a sigh.

“Ah. *He* has a match today.”

“He?”

“I’m talking about Lukas.”

“Ah, the Dragon Hunter?”

The square was the center of the city and it was also the place where one could easily hear discussions about the hottest news in the city.

And at that moment, the topic the people were talking about was none other than Dragon Hunter Lukas.

“The Dragon Hunter is a fraud. You’ve never seen one of his matches have you?”

“Mhm. That’s why I intended to take a look today.”

“Don’t bother. I’ve seen three of his fights and I don’t want to see him fight ever again.”

When the man said those words through gritted teeth, the woman in front of him tilted her head to the side.

“Is it that bad?”

“That guy lost 12 matches straight in only two weeks! Usually, if a Fighter loses 5 times in a row, they would begin to consider retirement, but that bastard continues to fight as though he has no shame.”

“Losing 12 times in a row... Wow. That must be a record.”

“That’s right. Shit. I’m an idiot for going to watch him three times.”

The Dragonman crushed the newspaper in his hand as he clicked his tongue. From start to finish, he had continued grinding his teeth so much that it wouldn’t be surprising if powder came out of his mouth.

Pretending not to see that, Bargan let out a soft sigh.

This Dragonman wasn’t the only one who had such thoughts.

Combat Island.

True to its name, the biggest entertainment for those living here was to watch fights in the arena.

No, for them, the fights in the arena were more than just simple entertainment. Instead, it was an inseparable part of their culture and life.

And Lirua was a city that had one of the largest arenas on Combat Island.

The citizens of this city always eagerly anticipated the appearance of new Fighters, dark horses, and underdogs. Naturally, because of Lukas’ unique identity as a Dragon Hunter, the interest in him was unprecedented.

In fact, on the day of his first match, all the tickets in the arena had been sold out.

...If Lukas had won that fight.

No, if he had even been able to display a performance equal to his opponent, they would have only let out shouts of disappointment at most.

“Kuk.”

Bargan clenched his fists.

He knew.

He’s seen it with his own eyes and felt it with his own body.

Just how strong Lukas actually was.

...Of course, he understood that fighting against an Ancient Dragon in the wild and a Fighter in the arena was different. It was also common for Sorcerers to be at a disadvantage in head on combat.

‘Nevertheless.’

The strength of Lukas, who had been able to deal with an Ancient Dragon single-handedly, was not that simple.

Right.

If Lukas had lost to the Champion of Lirua or even one of the top five Fighters in the rankings, he wouldn't find it too strange.

In the end, Bargan only had one question.

'Why is he losing on purpose?'

He wanted to ask him directly. But at that moment, he couldn't.

'You have to do what you should do.'

'Don't look for me any longer.'

The words Lukas had left behind had become shackles that wrapped around his chest.

'...do what I should do.'

What the hell did that mean?

Did that mean that he had to pick up and face the responsibilities that had been given to him? The ones that he'd thrown away when he ran.

He didn't know, and it was giving him a headache.

He was a Fighter.

Rolling around questions in his head until he found the answer had never been a trait he possessed.

So instead, he decided to make internal guesses about what Lukas was planning.

'Does he intend to continue losing for a while before turning it around and getting a winning streak in order to turn the crowd's curses and criticism into cheers and admiration?'

It was something that would surely make him into a star.

However... that couldn't be it.

If Lukas planned to do something like that, then he would never succeed.

The audience wasn't made up of fools. Many of them were people who had fought in or watched countless arena battles during their lives. Their eyesight was so developed that they could almost be compared to experts.

He didn't think that a childish plan like hiding his power before suddenly revealing it would be able to fool them. Instead, it would probably spark outrage because he would be insulting the spectators and Fighters.

'It can't be that.'

Bargan clenched his fist.

Whatever it was that Lukas was planning, he couldn't just stand around and do nothing.

So what should he do?

"..."

His shaky gaze slowly turned to the arena.

...In the end, he was a Fighter.

And from the past to now.

There was only one way for Fighters to prove themselves.

* * *

“Twelve straight losses, huh?”

“Yes.”

“...”

Kangki remained silent, his chin resting against his knuckles.

The person who was currently bowing in front of Kangki waiting for him to speak was someone that anyone in Lirua would be able to recognise with a single glance.

It was the 3rd place Fighter in the arena rankings, ‘Padudu’.

Of course, it wasn’t strange for Fighters from the arena to be polite to the City Lords. The problem was that Padudu’s current posture was something that went far past simple courtesy.

He was currently on his hands and knees on the floor with his head almost touching the ground. This type of posture was something that not even slave Fighters would take when expressing their complete surrender.

Just because they were called slave Fighters didn't mean they were actually slaves. At the very least, in Dragonman society, you still had to at least show a certain level of respect to the slaves that followed you.

Their pride was the bottom line for all Dragonmen, and their loyalty stemmed from this pride. Therefore, regardless of how the slave owner might feel, they would never touch the pride of their slave.

Otherwise, if they were to provoke them carelessly, the slave might stop caring about their own life and death or even kill themselves directly.

—In other words, one thing was clear.

The fact that Padudu was able to take such a position in front of Kangki meant that he didn't have the slightest shred of pride.

“Hunting the Ancient Dragon... didn't he do that on his own?”

Kangki frowned.

It was said that the Ancient Dragon had been as large as a small mountain.

For such a large Ancient Dragon, he didn't even dare to guess how valuable its corpse would be.

Kangki had received the news too late, so he hadn't been able to take part in the race for body parts with the other Major City Lords.

But he became even more upset when he learned that the Ancient Dragon's corpse had been shared among the Major City Lords for free.

The fact that he couldn't take part in such an opportunity was more painful than anything he'd encountered for a long time.

However, the Dragon Hunter, the main character in the subjugation of the Ancient Dragon, had actually come to Lirua. Since he'd received this news, Kangki had been paying close attention to Lukas.

Lukas had entered the arena.

This was something he expected. After all, there were only so many reasons why such a talented person would come to a major city like Lirua.

Because of this, he had some expectations.

Of course, he didn't have any expectations of Lukas' strength.

Instead, what he focused on was how much the title of 'Dragon Hunter' would increase the profits from the arena.

With that in mind, he decided to choose a fairly good fighter as his opponent.

To put it simply, he was laying the groundwork.

If Lukas won, the attention he gained would multiply in an instant.

Nevertheless,

‘Complete defeat.’

He never would have expected it.

The man who had defeated an Ancient Dragon was suppressed by a Fighter on the level of Jaihum?

Was he hiding his power?

Kangki thought that was likely to be the case.

Although he had lost, Lukas hadn’t received a single injury. Anyone with eyes could see that he hadn’t been trying at all.

Similarly, he wasn’t hurt in the next battle either. If he had been hurt in the first place, then there was no way he could do something crazy like fighting 14 matches in two weeks.

'Disgusting tricks.'

Kangki's lips twisted into a cold expression.

He felt dirty.

Like his authority was being violated.

He was the only one who could decide who won or lost in the arena. This was something that only he, Kangki, Major City Lord of Lirua, could do.

And now, an outsider who he didn't know had come to trample all over him with his dirty feet.

It would be strange if he wasn't upset.

"He is Bargan's master?"

"Yes."

Bargan.

He remembered him.

Season 2 Chapter 186

Bargan appeared in Kangki's thoughts.

He was one of the Fighters who had persistently stood in his way when he was trying to expand his business. That had been decades ago, but there was a reason why he could still remember him even now.

This was because he felt that Bargan's skill and talent would be fairly eye-catching. Therefore, he'd tried to win him over.

But in the end, he failed.

Bargan was unable to look at the bigger picture. It was said that Fighters were usually ignorant, but Bargan was an extreme case.

If he had continued to grow steadily, with proper support, it wouldn't have been hard for him to have a win rate ranking among the top 10 in the Lirua arena.

"Tch."

In any case.

The fact that Lukas was Bargan's master meant that there was a very high chance that he knew about the match-fixing in the Lirua arena.

Even though he came to this realisation, Kangki's expression didn't change in the slightest.

'This is pretty interesting.

Even if Lukas had made a great contribution during the subjugation of the Ancient Dragon, he was just a Sorcerer anyway.

In front of Fighters who could be said to be experts at fighting other people, Sorcerers were at a major disadvantage.

In addition, this was Lirua.

This was the territory that he'd shed blood and sweat for decades in order to develop to its current state.

Even if the opponent was another Major City Lord, they would not act carelessly in his territory.

'It's said that he left the skull of the Ancient Dragon at a smithy.'

He wondered if he should continue to spend money to advertise him, or if he should do something else instead.

After thinking for a while, Kangki looked at Padudu.

“Call ‘Hubi’.”

* * *

‘The target is hiding his real strength, so be careful.’

The assassin, ‘Hubi’, thought about the advice Kangki had given him before he left, but he didn’t really take it to heart.

It wasn’t that Kangki’s advice had entered one ear and left through the other. It was just that he felt that even if his enemy was strong, it would not impact the completion of his mission.

Sss.

The window opened with a soft sound. Nevertheless, Hubi didn’t immediately enter the room. Instead, he remained in his position and waited for a while.

...No movements could be felt from the room. This proved that the inhabitant hadn’t noticed his intrusion. Even after coming to this conclusion, he still waited a while longer before finally entering the room.

His movements were as silent as a shadow.

“ ... ”

The target, Lukas, was laying on the bed, sound asleep.

The dim moonlight from the window dimly revealed an outline of his face.

Indeed, this wasn't the face of a Dragonman, but an outsider from some distant place.

Shing.

Hubi slowly drew his dagger. The dagger seemed to gleam slightly in anticipation of what was to come.

Quietly, he took slow, measured steps until he reached Lukas side. Then, he covered his mouth with his left hand.

It was only at that moment that Lukas opened his eyes.

“ ...! ”

Confusion, urgency, and fear were easily discernible in the man's wide eyes.

But Hubi didn't pay any attention to it as he carried out an action that he'd done many times before.

Without the slightest hesitation, his dagger skillfully slid between the ribs and penetrated his target's heart in one clean motion.

Groan.

The convulsions of the man beneath him were enough to cause the bed to creak slightly. This was the final struggle that could only have been seen at the moment before death.

It was a bit noisy, but this was an inn that also took the role of a bar. Even now, the shouts of Dragonmen could be heard from the floor beneath them as well as the clinking of their glasses being hit against each other.

No one would be able to realise what this creaking was.

Pushing his dagger deeper, Hubi counted in his head.

One, two, three.

"..."

It was over.

After confirming that Lukas' eyes had rolled back, he finally took his hand away from his mouth.

Thick saliva coated his hand, but he roughly wiped it away on his clothes as he looked down at Lukas' body.

If he were to leave like this, it would certainly cause a commotion when the body was found. This was something his master didn't want.

Fortunately, he knew of a few ways to quietly dispose of a body.

Of course, the sudden disappearance of a person would surely attract some attention. But Lukas was an outsider who currently had the lowest reputation in the entirety of Lirua. It was safe to say that there wasn't a single Dragonman who looked at him favorably after his streak of consecutive losses.

Even if someone were to notice and point out his disappearance, others would simply curse at him. They wouldn't try to look for him. They would loudly declare that he had quietly run away at night out of shame.

With that thought, Hubi wrapped Lukas' body in his blanket before sliding out of the room again with his cargo in tow.

Creak-

Unlike when he entered, there was a subtle noise from the window as he left.

But that was all.

After his figure completely disappeared into the dark night, silence fell in the room once again.

* * *

“You already completed your mission?”

“Yes.”

“...”

Kangki looked down at Hubi.

The assassin in front of him was the sharpest and truest of all the daggers he had created.

Up to that point, the number of people that Hubi had killed for him probably exceeded 20,000. And despite the number being so large, this man had always completed his missions with perfection.

Naturally, several of the missions he had been tasked with could be considered difficult.

And in Kangki's opinion, this mission should have been similar.

He looked at Hubi again.

There wasn't a single wound on his body. Except for the fact that his clothes were a bit wrinkled, there was basically no difference from when he'd left.

"Were there any problems?"

"No."

He answered shortly, then, thinking that an explanation might be necessary, he continued.

"The target only became aware of my existence after it was too late. He might be a powerful Sorcerer, but he is ignorant of the silent dangers of the night."

This meant that Lukas had died without even realising that Hubi had broken into his room.

If that was the case, then it could even be said that Lukas was the easiest task Hubi had ever had to complete.

"The corpse?"

“It has been dealt with.”

“Where is your proof?”

“Yes.”

Hubi stepped forward and took something from his bag. It was a severed finger. Perhaps an index finger.

Kangki glanced down at the finger. It was definitely not a Dragonman’s finger. It also matched the skin color of the target. He touched it, he smelled it, then at the end, he put it in his mouth and chewed it.

This was the surest way. The tongue was the most sensitive part of the body. With it, one could easily find a single grain of sand on a piece of meat.

‘The strange thing is...’

There wasn’t anything strange.

Frowning, Kangki spat the finger onto his palm. It looked like a chicken bone that had its flesh removed.

Seeing this series of actions, Hubi couldn’t help but ask in a cautious tone.

“Is something wrong?”

“It ended too easily.”

Even if it might just be a small doubt, Kangki wouldn't let it go. Even if it was only a feeling that stemmed from his instinct without the slightest bit of proof.

No.

He believed it even more because it came from his instincts.

This kind of warning had saved him many times when he faced dangerous situations.

‘It shouldn't have been completed so easily.’

After having this thought, Kangki gave Hubi new orders.

“Think that the thing you killed was just a doppelganger and search the entire inn. Investigate every trace of the Dragon Hunter. And if you find something strange, no matter how trivial it might seem, make sure to report it right away.”

“As you command.”

Hubi bowed his head without any complaints. Even if he had absolute confidence in himself and his skills, orders were orders.

After taking a step back, he bowed politely once again before his body gradually merged with the darkness of the room and he disappeared completely.

“...”

Alone now, Kangki slowly lowered his head.

He was looking at the bottle of wine he had been drinking just before.

“I hope it’s just a delusion.”

He muttered those words with sincerity.

Kangki was never the type to leave a bottle of wine unfinished but he was no longer in the mood to drink.

After thinking for a while, he decided to call someone.

Season 2 Chapter 187

Bargan sat in the stands of the arena and looked down at the field.

It was really large.

It hadn't been this big when he left. By the looks of it, the arena was at least 10 times larger than when he last saw it. It had probably taken hundreds of architects from Peace Island to build it.

Now, the arena had become a symbol that represented Lirua and had become its pride at the same time.

“...”

30 years.

Bargan suddenly realised that it had been 30 years since he'd left the city.

It had clearly been a long time, but even when he thought back to that time, no memory really stood out. All he had were desolate feelings and a body that was steadily growing older.

Such was the life of a wanderer.

That's why the week or so that he'd spent with Lukas had become a powerful memory for him.

“Dammit. He still hasn't shown up yet?”

“He really just does whatever he wants.”

“Can we get ticket refunds?”

There were spectators sitting here and there in the mostly empty stands. And the ones sitting behind Bargan constantly muttered in a dissatisfied tone.

He understood them.

It was already past the time for the fight to start, but only one Fighter stood in the arena.

Even the Fighter’s expression showed displeasure and irritation. Anyone in his position would probably have had the same expression if their opponent still hadn’t appeared ten minutes after their fight was supposed to start.

Bargan’s expression was also not good, but for a different reason. His face didn’t show any irritation or impatience with the current time-wasting situation.

To put it simply, he didn’t look upset, he looked extremely serious.

“Dammit. If it wasn’t for the fact that Padudu is fighting in the next match, I wouldn’t have come to see this one.”

“What are you talking about? Kingtan’s matches are all worth watching.”

“That’s only when the opponent is also competent! If the opponent is a loser who lost 12 consecutive matches then he won’t even break a sweat!”

Most of the spectators usually didn’t care which side won as long as they could watch them fight. Unless they were a big fan of that Fighter.

What the spectators were enthusiastic about was a thrilling battle that made their hands sweat.

A battle where, after hundreds of clashes, the winner was decided by a paper-thin advantage.

Those were the famous matches.

And Dragon Hunter Lukas, who was currently the most criticised Fighter in the entirety of Lirua, had never shown such a match.

“ ... ”

Bargan bit his lip as a feeling of anxiety welled up within him.

The reason he was sitting in the stands was, of course, to watch Lukas’ match. He’d told him to not come to him, but he hadn’t said he couldn’t watch him fight.

But even though he'd used such a cowardly excuse to buy a ticket, Lukas hadn't appeared even after 10 minutes had passed.

This had never happened in any of his 12 fights.

'Did something happen?'

Just as he had this thought...

One of the officials entered the arena and walked to the referee before whispering something in his ears. The referee's expression hardened, and he let out a soft sigh, though he tried his best to hide his reaction.

Then, he raised his hand and shouted.

"Kingtan wins by default due to the absence of Dragon Hunter Lukas!"

Winning by default was one of the most humiliating ways for a Fighter to win a match.

In a way, it was much worse than directly losing. Because of this, Kingtan's expression twisted fiercely and he simply turned around and left the arena without saying a word.

Booo!

The crowd booed, but they weren't booing Kingtan.

Instead, they were booing Lukas, who had failed to appear.

"Is it because he didn't want to take part and directly lose in 13 consecutive matches?"

"He really is creating history in the arena in a different way."

"Mm. Maybe something happened?"

"Ha! If something did happen, it was probably that he couldn't walk to the arena because his legs were shaking too much! He's just a disgusting, cowardly bastard!"

Tweh.

One of the audience members spat on the ground.

That remark caused Bargan to turn around. When his eyes met with that audience member, they flinched back. This was because the fierce look in his eyes was truly frightening.

"D-, do you have something to say?"

"...no."

Bargan realised that he was just childishly venting his anger, so he turned away and got to his feet.

“What the hell was that...?”

“Is he crazy?”

Bargan heard the voices coming from behind him, but he just ignored them and continued walking to the lobby.

Then, he headed towards a free receptionist.

Looking at her, Bargan spoke in a blunt tone.

“Please set the match as soon as possible.”

“Huh?”

The receptionist blinked.

“Yesterday, I registered as a Fighter for this arena. I didn’t pick a time for a match then, but I’ve changed my mind.”

“...ah, I see.”

It was only then that the receptionist smiled and nodded.

Then, after Bargan told her his personal information, she checked the schedule and nodded after a while.

“A match can be scheduled for tomorrow morning. Would you like to do it then?”

“Can’t it be sooner?”

“It’s not possible to reserve a match for the same day.”

The receptionist spoke in an embarrassed tone, but Bargan continued without hesitation.

“Didn’t Kingtan’s match end up as invalid? Looking at the schedule, it doesn’t seem like he has another match for a while.”

“If it’s Sir Kingtan... Yes. He doesn’t have any matches scheduled for next week.”

“He’s probably pretty heated right now. There is still a while till the next match. What do you think?”

Bargan pointed to himself.

“I’ll fight him on behalf of the Dragon Hunter.”

* * *

In the end, Bargan’s coercion worked.

A middle manager who seemed to have some authority had taken the place of the disgruntled receptionist.

His attitude was pretty lukewarm at first, but it quickly changed after he learned of Bargan’s identity.

“Headsmasher Bargan. You were originally from Lirua.”

“...that’s right.”

This was why Dragonmen risked their lives for fame.

Even if it was in a major city like Lirua, one was still able to receive a certain degree of recognition with a reputation like Bargan’s. If one managed to become the Champion of a city, they would be well received no matter what city they went to.

Of course, Fighters who didn't fight didn't receive the same treatment.

Most Dragonmen didn't have identification cards. This didn't just apply to wanderers like Bargan.

So if people were killed or eaten by Dragonlings while traveling between cities, no one would remember them.

And that was something that the Dragonmen living on Combat Island feared the most. To be completely forgotten after their death.

For no one to remember they'd existed in the first place.

Because they didn't want that, the Fighters fought.

They all wanted to become legends that would be remembered for decades and centuries, not forgotten after a year or two.

In other words, even after death, they wanted to be talked about by many Dragonmen.

That was the ultimate goal of the Fighters who risked their lives in every battle.

"This is interesting. The return of Bargan, a former Lirua Fighter."

The manager said this with a bright smile.

“I’ll give you 30 minutes to prepare.”

“No need. If he’s ready to fight, we can start immediately.”

“Huhu, you really are a role model for other Fighters.”

He smiled in satisfaction and beckoned to his subordinate.

* * *

Bargan stood in the arena for the first time in decades.

There weren’t many spectators in the arena. Since the match had just ended anticlimactically, most of them had left or gone to watch another match.

“I think you’ve long passed the age to be running around in the arena.”

There was a sneer on Kingtan’s lips as he said this. He looked like he was in a much better mood. Perhaps he was happy that he now had someone to vent his anger on.

“I’ve heard the rumors about you. 30 years ago, you were pretty famous in the arena.”

“...”

“But this place is completely different from back then, so you better be careful. Well, you don’t have to worry too much. Since you’re my senior, I won’t-”

“You talk a lot. Is that tongue of yours your weapon?”

Kingtan’s expression immediately became hard.

“...of course not.”

Creak.

He squeezed the handle of his mace. His mace, which was covered in ferocious spines, seemed like it would shred Bargan’s skinny body to bits in an instant.

He spun his mace in his hand.

Bargan looked at him for a moment before he slowly raised his club.

Season 2 Chapter 188

“Huu.”

Nekdu put down her hammer as she wiped sweat from her forehead.

After finally finishing her work for the day, she looked around for a while. There were no signs of activity in the smithy.

This was natural since everyone had already gone home.

“Mmm.”

With a loud yawn, she got up from her seat. She grabbed her coat in preparation to head home before something in the corner caught her eye.

“...”

It was a cane.

No, did he call it a staff?

It had been four days since she completed it, but the person who had requested its production hadn't shown his face. She didn't mind that though. In fact, she actually hoped that he wouldn't turn up.

That way, she could take the skull of the Ancient Dragon for herself.

That thought caused a laugh to burst from her mouth.

"Thank you."

Suddenly, she heard a voice from behind her.

"...what the hell?"

Nekdu turned around.

There, a man whose entire body was covered by a black robe stood. His body was so covered that she couldn't see anything but his eyes.

She was shocked for a while but it didn't take her very long to recognise the voice and scratch her head.

"Look who it is. I've heard a lot of rumors about you. Worst Fighter in Lirua's arena, coward, fraud, embarrassment... What was the other one?"

“Runaway.”

“Right, that.”

Nekdu snapped her fingers with a nod.

Contrary to her exaggerated actions, her voice remained indifferent.

“I don’t care about my public reputation. I’m just dressed like this because this isn’t the time for me to make an appearance.”

“Really?”

Even though she asked this, Nekdu’s voice remained flat as if she wasn’t the least bit interested. Then, as if she had just remembered something, she asked.

“But what are you thankful for?”

The staff Nekdu had made was already in his hands.

Was it for making that?

It couldn't be. She hadn't done him a favor.

He paid, and Nekdu had done the required job. There was nothing for him to be thankful for.

"You told me that you knew refiners capable of dealing with an Ancient Dragon's heart."

"Ah, that's right."

Nekdu nodded carelessly for a while before suddenly narrowing her eyes as she thought of something.

"You don't mean..."

"Yes. I listened to your words and decided to search for them. And not so long ago..."

Nekdu realised that the eyes beneath the hood of the robe were shining.

"I found them. The refiner."

* * *

His head was hot and his heart was pounding.

The blood in his veins was so hot that it felt like it was boiling. No. It felt as though molten iron was flowing through his body....

Crunch.

Bargan clenched the handle of his club tightly.

The loud pulses that seemed to resonate from his heart seemed to flow down to the club in his hand.

That was exactly how he felt at that moment.

It was probably because of the intense excitement filling him at that moment.

Surprisingly, a certain amount of excitement was actually beneficial during fights.

This was because it not only enhanced one's instantaneous judgement, but it also pushed one's physical ability to a higher level.

That was exactly what was happening at that moment.

On the other hand, the expression of the Fighter in front of Bargan was extremely sour.

“Tweh!”

Himba spat on the ground.

He was forcibly suppressing his anger as he stared at Bargan.

‘This fucker...’

When did he become so strong?

Maybe it was because he was nervous, but sweat was starting to build upon his palms. Without letting his guard down, he roughly wiped his hands on his leather coat.

Just like in an encounter with a Dragonling, even a moment’s carelessness was not acceptable.

He didn’t know even when he ran into him at the inn. He didn’t know that there would be a time when he was put in such an embarrassing situation by this son of a bitch.

In the center of the arena before a full audience of spectators no less.

“Do you think that I’m strong?”

Bargan suddenly spoke.

Himba felt as if he had been caught, but instead of showing it, he suppressed his emotions and sharpened his gaze.

“It’s a really pathetic thought. Himba, why don’t you put down your flimsy denial and accept the reality?”

“...what are you talking about?”

Bargan sneered coldly.

“It’s not that I’ve become stronger, it’s that you’ve gotten weaker.”

“What did you just say?”

“You... haven’t grown at all in these years.”

“...you bastard!”

His pride had been thoroughly bruised this time.

Spitting a curse, Himba swung his fist.

He was a man who could be called a giant among Dragonmen. His fists were so large and powerful that he could easily crush boulders with a single punch.

However, that was it.

Himba's attacks lacked finesse and skill.

It was a simple punch that was filled with emotion.

Excitement and anger were similar emotions, but they were fundamentally different.

Fwoosh.

Bargan easily avoided the clumsy attack that seemed like it wouldn't hit him even if he stood still, and raised his club.

A look of shock appeared on Himba's face, but it was already too late.

Himba was extremely tall and had long arms.

In other words, it would take longer for him to pull his fist back after he had outstretched it.

Paak!

Bargan's club hit the back of Himba's head.

“...”

Himba's eyes instantly rolled back into his head. He staggered a few times like a drunk man before finally collapsing to the ground.

He had a hard skull so he probably wouldn't die, but he would probably be confined to a bed for a few months.

“Ba-, Bargan wins!”

The referee who was overseeing the match declared the outcome.

At the same time, cheers erupted from the stands.

“Wooooaahh!”

“Bargan! Bargan! Bargan!”

Compared to the lukewarm reaction when he defeated Kingtan, the crowd was so hot that it didn't seem like he was a returning warrior.

“I love you! Wanderer-!!”

“Ohhh! I trusted you. Shit!”

The audience members who bet on Bargan were particularly pleased. So in the stands, some were dancing while others were in tears.

“...”

This was all familiar and unfamiliar at the same time.

Bargan stood quietly in the middle of the arena for a while.

—The moment when they won and received the crowd's cheers of enthusiasm.

Pleasure that was more addictive than any drug rolled down his spine.

Unable to suppress it anymore, Bargan began to tremble.

Most Fighters could never forget this scene and feeling, so they continued to run to the arena until they died.

'...I thought that I would never feel this again.'

30 years after leaving Lirua.

Bargan, who thought he would reach the end of his life as a wanderer, was once again receiving the enthusiastic cheers of the crowd in his hometown arena.

In all honesty, he hadn't expected the crowd to show such a reaction.

This was because Bargan thought he wouldn't receive any recognition in this city.

But that wasn't the case.

At least on this island, there was nothing that couldn't be solved by fighting. As long as one was capable enough, they could even erase their past mistakes.

'I might be able to make a change.'

His heart raced.

This feeling was different from the excitement of fighting.

A faint glimmer of hope began to rise in his heart.

On Combat Island, honor was the factor that had the most influence. For example, though it might be limited to Combat Island, former Grand Champions had greater influence than even Major City Lords. And naturally, the ripple effect that could come from a single statement of a Grand Champion was beyond imagination.

As a wandering Fighter, no one would care about what Bargan said even if he talked about the match-fixing till he vomited blood.

But what if Bargan became the Champion of Lirua?

Were 'Champion Bargan' and 'Wanderer Bargan' the same?

'No.'

Not in the slightest.

It had taken him this long to realise something so simple. On Combat Island, one could achieve anything they wanted simply through fighting.

It was at that moment that Bargan came to a decision.

To climb up from the bottom and deal with the darkness in Lirua with his own hands.

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Bargan headed back to the lobby to receive his match earnings from the receptionist.

“Great job, Sir Bargan, that was an amazing match,”

With a big smile on her face, the receptionist’s attitude was completely different from before.

On the other hand, Bargan’s blunt attitude hadn’t changed at all since the beginning.

“I’m here to collect my earnings.”

“Yes! Here it is.”

Clink.

She took out a bag that seemed pretty heavy.

“It’s 1,500 erus. Also, congratulations, Sir Bargan, for winning four consecutive matches.”

Clap clap.

She even gave him a soft clap afterward.

Bargan ignored her and looked at the bag.

1,500 erus was by no means a small amount. To be specific, it was twice as much as he’d earned in his previous match.

This was natural since the higher the value of the Fighter, the higher their earnings. Bargan was gradually increasing his value day by day.

If he were to win his next match, his earnings would probably be doubled again.

‘Of course, the higher the ranking, the harder it is to get a match.’

At least, he wouldn’t be able to fight multiple times in a few days like he was doing now.

Nevertheless, it was fine for now.

In all honesty, his four consecutive victories were a surprise to him as well.

Bargan was well aware of his skill level. He could only be considered among the best of the lower-ranked Fighters in the Lirua Arena.

And yet, he had won four times in a row.

In all honesty, there wasn't that big of a difference between Bargan and Himba, who he'd fought today.

Nevertheless, the battle had been one-sided. At first glance, it might have seemed like a rather fierce battle, but Himba's attacks hadn't even caused him any trouble.

Of course, it could be said that the result had been influenced by luck and other complex factors that were difficult to calculate, but the most decisive factor was Bargan's momentum.

'As long as I maintain this form, it would be worth trying even if I meet someone stronger than I am.'

More importantly, Bargan felt that he was getting stronger the more he fought.

Leaving the arena, Bargan began to head to the inn, but he stopped not long after he started.

It was just starting to get dark.

“...”

And a man was standing in front of him.

A Dragonman with blue scales.

“You’ve got a lot of skill, senior.”

Senior.

It was an awkward title and not something he expected to hear from someone he’d met for the first time.

Bargan shot back in a cold voice.

“I don’t remember having a junior like you.”

“That’s natural. This is our first meeting.”

Bargan narrowed his eyes slightly at the sly answer. Just as he started to reach for his club, the man changed his attitude and hurriedly waved his hands.

“Ah. Relax, relax. I didn’t come here to fight.”

“Do you expect me to believe that?”

“Really. I have something to tell you.”

“Say it then. I’m listening.”

“I can’t say it here.”

“...”

Was he messing with him?

Just as Bargan’s irritation was about to reach another level, the man spoke urgently.

“I swear. I have no hostile intentions towards senior. Rather, it could be said that we are on the same side.”

“On the same side? Are you saying that you know what I want?”

Bargan had a cold sneer on his lips but the man in front of him just nodded calmly as if he had been waiting for such a question.

“Of course I do. Aren’t you dissatisfied with the darkness in this city?”

“What?”

“The match-fixing.”

“...!”

Bargan’s expression changed slightly at those words.

When he saw that, the man let out a soft sigh of relief.

“Are you interested now?”

“...who are you?”

“You can call me Aram. A Fighter who is dissatisfied with the darkness in Lirua just like senior.”

Aram looked around for a moment before continuing.

“We should change locations first. There are too many eyes and ears around here.”

* * *

In the end, Bargan decided to take Aram to the inn where he was staying. Aram followed him with great caution. Sometimes it seemed like he was checking to see if anyone was tailing them.

Click.

Even after they entered the room and closed the door, he didn't let his guard down. Instead, he thoroughly checked the room for a few minutes and even opened the window to look around outside.

It was only after this that he finally opened his mouth.

“...hmmm. Fortunately, it doesn't seem like we picked up a tail.”

Aram wiped some cold sweat from his forehead before casually sitting on the bed.

“First off... should I say that it's nice to meet another comrade?”

“Forget about the greeting and get to the point.”

Aram let out a bitter laugh.

But it seemed like he'd gotten used to Bargan's cold tone to an extent.

"Fine then. I'll just say it outright, senior. Please join us."

"...us?"

Aram nodded.

"That's right. Like senior, I'm one of the Fighters who are dissatisfied with Lirua's current state. I think that Kangki and the other leaders in the city are all crazy."

"..."

"However, I only ever had vague thoughts about it. After all, I didn't have the courage to do anything about it. The opponent is a super-strong man who managed to make it to the semi-finals of the Championship, and the forces supporting him are unfathomable."

Those words were things that Bargan could relate to.

He had also struggled against the darkness in Lirua and had felt despair when he realised its depth.

“...but then I met him.”

“Him?”

“Ountar.”

This was his first time hearing the name.

“Under his leadership, comrades who all had the same thought were able to come together. I cannot tell you the exact number, but I can at least say that we have grown enough to be considered an organisation.”

Aram’s expression became a bit sad.

“It took a very long time and a lot of patience.”

“...”

Bargan was speechless for a moment.

He never would have expected something like this.

He couldn't believe that a man like Kangki didn't know about the existence of an opposing organisation in the city he controlled.

'I didn't know either.'

Even after leaving Lirua, Bargan had never even heard rumors about them. This was his first time hearing about Ountar and the organisation Aram was a part of.

"There's a reason why I came to you, senior."

"Isn't it because you want me to join your 'organisation'?"

"That too, but it's mostly because we would like to borrow senior's strength for an operation."

"Operation?"

Aram lowered his voice.

"This might be our best chance to kill Kangki."

"What? How...?"

“Once a month, the Lirua Arena will be closed for a day. The excuse is that it’s for cleaning, but that’s not the truth. That’s the day that Kangki uses the arena for himself.”

“Using the arena for himself?”

“That’s right. Even now, he never neglects his training. On the day that the arena is closed, he calls some Fighters there and makes them his fighting partners. The Fighter usually depends on Kangki’s mood, but this time, we can confirm that the Fighter will be ‘Kaytai’, who is ranked 4th in the arena.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because Kaytai is one of our comrades.”

This meant that the 4th ranked Fighter was a part of their organisation.

Bargan couldn’t hide his surprise.

It seemed that this organisation led by this man named Ountal was larger than he initially thought.

Aram continued to speak in a solemn tone.

“So we came up with a plan. It’s not too complicated. We will all attack Kangki, who will go to the arena with minimal security that day. This month is our best chance. If we miss this opportunity, we might not get another like it for several years.”

“Why do you say that? Doesn’t he use the arena once a month?”

“Because this time, two of his three henchmen have gone missing.”

“Three henchmen...?”

“They are the most dangerous and terrifying beings that support Kangki.”

Even as he said this, Aram trembled slightly. This showed just how terrifying these ‘henchmen’ were.

“They are ‘Samash’, the current Champion of the Lirua Arena, and ‘Hubi’, also known as the Midnight Reaper. According to Kaytai, they are both currently carrying out special missions for Kangki.”

“Special missions?”

“That’s right.”

After closing his mouth for a while, Aram spoke in a serious voice.

“I’m not too sure about the details, but it seems that they are looking for someone.”

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* * *

Time flew by in the blink of an eye. Perhaps it was because he couldn’t afford to waste even a single second.

After all, at the moment, he was shackled by his body which could only move properly after it had received a certain amount of rest and nutrition.

“...”

Lukas shook his head for a moment, denying this thought.

Even the other Absolutes wouldn’t consider this body of flesh and blood their bodies.

Then, he raised his head.

In front of him was a huge castle that reached up to the sky.

Most of the preparation had been completed, and it was time for the endgame.

Of course, if anyone were to see him now, they would see his actions as a way to commit suicide. But his plans were by no means hopeless.

“You there, halt!”

It was at that moment that a guard in front of the castle called out to Lukas in a cautious voice.

He was dressed in a robe to the extent that not even his hair was visible. So it was natural for them to feel suspicious.

“Who are you? And why have you come to the city lord’s castle?”

“Take off your hood so we can see your face.”

“...my name is Lukas.”

Lukas lowered his hood, revealing his face.

“And I’m here to see the Major City Lord.”

(TL: It was such a good cliffhanger too... *sigh*)

* * *

“Who is the last henchman?”

“No one knows.”

Bargan narrowed his eyes slightly as Aram shook his head with a confused expression on his face.

His attitude seemed to say that he didn't know anything.

“It's the truth. But I heard that they're even more secretive than Hubi, who lives in the shadows. No one has ever seen them.”

“Your words don't make sense. If that is true then you would call them the two henchmen, not three.”

It could certainly be called caution to sometimes add enemies whose existences you weren't fully certain of, but in this case, it seemed more appropriate to call it a delusion.

Nevertheless, Aram didn't back down, and instead spoke in a confident voice.

“No. There are several circumstances that prove that they do, indeed, exist. You don't have to believe me, but at the very least, our organisation believes they exist.”

“...”

“The fact that they have never been exposed means a few things. One is that they might not be very good at direct battles.”

Otherwise, there would be no better time to reveal their existence than when two of the three henchmen were not around.

As Aram said, this was an opportunity that might not come again for several years, if not several decades.

He continued in a serious voice.

“Senior, we are staking our lives on the success of this plan. We will do our best to kill Kangki by any means necessary.”

“...will killing him make the darkness in Lirua disappear?”

“It won’t happen immediately. However, wouldn’t it be easier for us to declare war?”

His words were true.

It couldn't be said that Kangki himself was the darkness in Lirua, but he was the leader who held absolute control. Killing him was enough to be considered half of a victory.

Aram then spoke in a cautious tone.

"By chance, are there any Fighters in Lirua that you are acquainted with?"

"No Fighters. Just ordinary citizens."

Of course, there were some whose strength they could make use of, but Bargan shook his head decisively.

He didn't intend to ask them for help.

Unlike him, who could easily give up his life if the plan failed, they were all people with families.

Aram scratched his cheek for a moment.

"Well is there anyone that you can ask to assist us? It doesn't necessarily have to be a Fighter. Anyone with the capacity to help would be most welcome."

"...there is."

Lukas.

Bargan said this while thinking about his lord.

“Are they strong?”

“Yeah. Very.”

He didn't say who it was.

He knew the kind of evaluation Dragon Hunter Lukas had in the city. He was certain that Aram had at least heard the negative rumors about him.

Fortunately, Aram didn't ask him any more questions about his helper's identity.

“If it's someone that senior suggested then I'm sure they can be trusted. Where are they now?”

“I lost contact with him for a while. But I believe that we will meet again very soon.”

Lukas had told him that he would become the Champion of Lirua and that he would clear up the darkness in the city.

Bargan had firm belief in Lukas.

“I’ll look for him when I have time. When is the operation scheduled for?”

“Two weeks from now.”

“...”

There was plenty of time.

He was sure that Lukas would show up before then.

“In any case... Thank you so much for your help.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“Huhu, you don’t know how nice it is to have someone as strong as senior join us at such an important time.”

Aram smiled before rising to his feet.

“I will take my leave now. I will contact you again when it’s time.”

“Understood.”

After saying those words, Aram left the room.

Bargan didn't see him off and instead fell into deep thought as the door of the room closed.

He couldn't trust Aram's words right away.

If his story was true, then it certainly would be one of the best chances to kill Kangki, but the question was whether they would even be able to kill Kangki or not.

More importantly, Bargan didn't actually know how strong the organisation behind Aram or this 'Ountal' was.

That's why he needed Lukas' help.

Of course, he wouldn't just sit still and ask for help.

'I will also do everything I can.'

Even if it meant risking his life.

* * *

It was about four days after investigating in earnest that Hubi, who was thoroughly searching the surroundings, finally felt that something was strange.

The scope of his investigation, which stemmed from the inn Lukas stayed at, continued to expand day by day until it had reached tens of blocks away.

Nevertheless, Hubi's attitude towards the investigation had remained unchanged since the beginning.

He was calm, cautious, and above all, he maintained his focus.

In a way, he was the perfect example of a good assassin.

“...”

It was about time for the sun to start peaking from below the horizon. Although he was underground, Hubi instantly realised this fact.

This was because this was usually around the time when he would be preparing to go to work, but he couldn't do that today.

Hubi was currently looking around a general store.

He'd heard that Lukas had been poking around this place a few weeks ago.

However, this general store was currently not in operation. And Hubi even knew where the owner of the general store was at that very moment.

That was the reason why Hubi felt strange.

This store had not received any customers for a long time. But now, someone had been seen coming and going even when the owner wasn't around. That was more than enough to make him suspicious.

Because of that, Hubi had come to carry out a thorough search of this general store.

After searching almost every corner of the three-story building, the only place left was the underground warehouse. In fact, he had chosen this place for last on purpose.

In this dark, dank space filled with cobwebs, there were countless piles of dust-covered junk strewn everywhere.

Searching a place like this would require fairly high levels of concentration and patience. If he were to relax his focus even a little bit, it was possible for him to miss something without realising it.

It was thanks to this work ethic that Hubi was able to discover something.

“ ... ”

It was a place where several boxes had been piled to form large towers.

But on the floor, there were traces of someone moving those box towers. There was a thinner layer of dust in the path of the box which allowed Hubi to notice it.

Creak creak—

Hubi carefully moved the box tower aside.

What was revealed was the same floor that looked no different from the rest. If ten people were to look at it, at least 9 would have this thought.

Hubi's gaze turned.

'It's said that he is a Sorcerer.'

This meant that it was possible for him to use strange or incomprehensible methods.

His dagger struck the ground like lightning.

Puk!

It didn't feel like stabbing the ground. Instead, it felt softer, like piercing flesh.

At the same time, the 'soft thing that was disguised as the ground', collapsed. In other words, the hidden space beneath it was revealed.

Thud...

It took a while for the sound of it landing to reach his ears, followed by what sounded like flowing water.

This gave him an idea of the depth of the hidden passage.

Even so, Hubi wasn't scared.

Instead, feeling joyful that he'd finally found some clues about Lukas, he threw himself into the hole without hesitation.

His body was quickly swallowed by the darkness.

Splash.

A perfect landing. He immediately raised his five senses and scanned his surroundings. He was ankle-deep in what should be water.

It was a culvert. The secret passage below the general store led to a culvert.

The air in the tunnel was stale and humid, sticking to his skin in an uncomfortable way.

Nevertheless, Hubi didn't pay any attention to the discomfort.

Shuk.

His pupils dilated and he was able to clearly see despite his dark surroundings. There were no signs of people nearby. It wasn't until he was certain of this that Hubi began to slowly move forward.

For a while, only the sound of the flowing water could be heard.

But soon after, Hubi stopped walking.

This was because he found something piled in front of him.

It was a pile of corpses.

“ ... ”

Finding a pile of corpses in a gloomy underground waterway was bizarre enough to shake even someone with nerves of steel, but Hubi only looked at it with curiosity and a bit of confusion.

Were these really corpses?

'It doesn't smell.'

He knew how horrible the stench of rotting corpses could be. And in such a warm and wet environment, it would be strange if they didn't rot.

Nevertheless, the pile of corpses in front of him didn't stink at all.

That wasn't the only strange thing. Noticing that something wasn't right, Hubi slowly approached in order to identify the corpses, but his face gradually grew pale.

"Th-, this."

There was a hint of fear in his stuttering voice.

This was because all of the corpses piled there had the same face.

More importantly, it was the face of the person Hubi had been looking for so intently.

"..."

In front of him were more than ten corpses with Lukas' face.

'Did I also kill a corpse like this?'

However, it... had really struggled like someone who was alive.

With a gulp, Hubi took a step backward.

—But he suddenly stopped moving.

His pupils shook violently. He felt as though his entire body had frozen into a block of ice.

It was an underground tunnel, so he was able to feel it immediately.

A moment ago, the airflow had suddenly changed.

Cold sweat slowly rolled down his cheek.

Someone was standing behind him.

Without moving the rest of his body, Hubi slowly turned his neck and looked behind him.

“...”

A man was standing there.

A man with the same face as the corpses in front of him.