

Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 12 – The Duke of Croix (2)

From some point on, he came to regard the existence of his first daughter, Maximilian, as an eyesore.

In the aristocratic society, many families were reluctant to associate with cursed people. There were even some people who refused to get close to any member of the Croix family, fearing that they too would be cursed just by being within a close proximity. In fact, eligible men refused to marry Rosetta, thinking they may be born with a defective child.

This issue drove the duke to anger—and incorrigible resentment.

He even thought that he would die out of frustration! For the first time in his life, he suffered this massive setback. For the first time in his life, he had a useless daughter who always succeeded in bringing shame and frustration to the family.

Alongside the child's growth into womanhood, his anger also grew paramount. And he projected his frustrations on her without mercy.

Hitting her flesh until it swells to teach her manners, shaming her in front of others for spilling her porridge clumsily, the Duke never forgave even the slightest fault.

Her imperfection was the imperfection of the family. They had to be extra cautious with their actions and do all means to uplift their reputation. All of these became the fault of the immature Maximilian. And through this belief, his father's actions were justified.

She's a flaw that couldn't be fixed. Her existence, nothing but a mistake. Everyone believed that the family was better off without her—that she should have not been born in the first place.

Maximilian grew up hearing all of these in her entire life.

A stuttering block of the family.

A disgrace.

A foolish and shabby girl.

A timid mouse.

Her father never called her by her name. With her father's beating, underneath his disdainful gaze, her character crumpled to pieces. Resigned to her heart, she

succumbed to the judgments hurled at her, and slowly embodied the Maximilian that no one wanted.

“Max! Wake up!”

She opened her eyes to quite a stirring—a strong hand shaking her shoulders. From under his nose, Riftan’s dark eyes stared down at her. She glanced back blankly, unable to grasp the situation quickly. But by the moment he swept the hair on her forehead behind her ears, Max immediately came to her senses. The intimate action pulling her from her stupor.

She hurried to her feet and looked around.

””” ”

“Is this...?”

“This is an inn. Remember when we were in a carriage and attacked by Ogres? You fainted. While you were unconscious, we slipped through the forest and stumbled on this village nearby the roads.” He answered with a big pillow in his hand, which he stuffed behind Max so she could sit upright comfortably.

She buried herself in the cushion and looked up at him with a puzzled look. He poured water into the bowl on the table.

“Drink. You kept sweating. You have to replenish the water in your body.”

When Max only stared dumbfoundedly at the water, he frowned and hurried.

“Do you think that I put poison in this? Don’t be ridiculous. Drink quickly.”

She took the bowl right away and drank its contents. Her stomach felt a little nauseous when the lukewarm water got into her insides. The man raised one eyebrow when he put the bowl down with a frown.

“Are you uncomfortable with anything?”

“Oh, no...”

“Let me know if you feel any pain. I’ll call in a physician.”

“No. I feel fine.”

The man soon walked toward the table with a bowl of water. When he stepped back away from her sight, she was able to see the whole view of the room; the place no longer obscured by his body.

It was a shabby room. The walls and floor were all made of wood, and the only thing in the fairly spacious chamber was a bed, a table, and a couple of rickety chairs. Above her, she studied the ceiling carefully, in case there was a spider. Surely, a spider's web glistened faintly within the reach of light.

Fortunately, the bed was clean. Max tentatively sniffed the soft blankets which smelled like mildew, and suddenly frowned. Something feels strange. She slipped her hand inside the thick blankets which covered her legs.

Reaching beneath, she felt her smooth bare legs. Only then did she realize that she was wearing a man's tunic. She was not even wearing any underwear.

"This is, oh my... my clothes...."

Riftan, who was immersed in arranging the towels, picked the bowl of water from the table, glanced at her once and replied nonchalantly. He found the matter insignificant.

"I took it off. You threw up and got dirtied. What you are wearing is my tunic. In haste, we failed to bring with us your suit of clothes, so I had to dress you with my spare."

She pouted like a carp; unable to figure out whether she should be dumbfounded or shocked at the fact that he undressed her while she was unconscious.

"You've been unconscious all day and haven't eaten. I should go out and fetch you some food."

As soon as the man went out the door with a grave look on his face, Max quickly rummaged for something to wear underneath. Nothing in the room that could be presumed as a suitcase was found. Instead, there was only the armor he had taken off casually piled by the bed.

While she determinedly searched for something she could use, the blanket was peeled off from her body, therefore exposing some of her skin. In cue, the door rattled and Riftan's head bobbed in as he returned to the room to check on her. Like a deer caught in the headlights, she looked at him with stunned, round eyes and hurriedly grabbed the blanket tightly, wrapping it around her body once more.

"It's no use trying to hide it now. I saw it all while wiping your body."

"You... cleaned me up yourself?!"

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