

## Under The Oak Tree·231

“Are you exhausted?”

Noticing her passive expression, the princess asked with a smile, but Max blushed in embarrassment.

“N-No. I just feel sorry for the others who are travelling with us...that I am traveling so comfortably...”

“Not at all! You are a patient, Maximillian. Besides, traveling by carriage all day puts a lot of stress on the body.”

The princess leaned her elbow on the windowsill and sighed. “I thought about stopping at the port to let you recover fully there, but it would be better to get you to the royal healer as soon as possible...”

Princess Agnes tapped the mantle with her long fingers thoughtfully, her words trailing off. Max glanced at the princess' face that was suddenly clouded and her eyebrows furrowed. Throughout the entire journey from Ethylene to Drakium, she received the utmost care. Even on board the ship, two servants were constantly by her side with a healer. When they docked, they travelled to Drakium in a carriage furnished with a large, luxurious cushion. In Max's eyes, it was undeserving for her to receive such royal treatments, and she felt uncomfortable being treated like a patient on her deathbed.

“It's just a little... lack of s-stamina. I rested and took a lot of medications... for weeks without end. I'm really fine no-now.”

“But it still wouldn't hurt to see a proper-qualified healer. In the royal palace, we have an archmage from the wizard tower, he is well-versed with medicines from the southern continent. He'll surely be able to help recover your health.”

Max wanted to tell her again that she is fine, but seeing how stubborn the Princess was, she kept her mouth shut. She had no good reason to refuse treatment from a good healer. Although the princess's attitude was a bit excessive, Max did not want to argue with her and simply accepted her demands silently.

“Ah, that's Drakium Palace over there.”

Max looked to where Agnes was pointing and soon saw a magnificent grayish white castle inspired by the Roem Architecture. The sprawling palace was like a magnificent spear, towering over the other brick red buildings with its spires. The royal palace did not appear as glamorous as her father's castle, however it seemed larger. The carriage cut through the crowds and entered the huge circular town plaza. Max could see the great bell tower of the temple and the arched entrance leading to the regal palace.

The knights leading the procession approached first and soldiers guarding the castle walls pulled the crank to lift the iron gates. Max looked out the window and saw the knights on their warhorses marching in single file toward the palace grounds. Their carriage followed right behind them and soon, a vast garden lined with bushes came into view. Her eyes widened. Despite living 2 decades of her life in Croix Castle which was considered one of the grandest castles on the western continent, she couldn't help but be amazed by the magnificence of Drakium Castle.

"We have to go first to the central palace to announce our arrival to my father. Then, we will go to my palace."

The princess got out of the carriage before a servant could even open the door. The princess then held out her hand to Max to help her descend.

"Y-your palace?"

Max asked, a little confused that the princess was taking on the role of a knight in escorting her out of the carriage.

"My palace is in a more secluded place, closer to nature than the capital as the use of magic is very restrictive here. My father built the palace for me as a gift when I was thirteen. Now hurry and come on down."

At the insistence of the princess, Max reluctantly placed her hand on hers and stepped out of the carriage. Uslin and Elliot came over to tend to her heaved a sigh when they saw Agnes snatching their jobs.

"" "

"Your Highness, we can attend to our Lady."

"Maximillian is my guest, so it is natural for me to take care of her in all aspects."

The princess dismissed the knights and led Max up the stairs. She followed Agnes to the entrance of the main palace adorned with hundreds of glass windows. Beyond the stately oval doorway stood steel-armored guards in endless lines of silk-clad attendants. As the princess walked inside, the knights and wizards involved in the war followed closely behind. Max looked around curiously into the strangely silent hallway. Beautiful statues were placed between stone pillars and dazzling golden chandeliers hung from the high vaulted ceiling. Once they reached the end, Max saw the entrance to the throne room.

"Her Royal Highness, Princess Agnes Reuben has returned with the Royal Knights!"

The attendant standing by the door announced loudly, and the double arched mahogany doors swung open to reveal the Whedon monarch on his throne. Max

stepped onto the red carpet that lined the great room and looked up at the king curiously. King Ruben III sat perched on his throne, in a luxurious cloak of leopard skin and silk robes with intricate embroideries. The monarch wore a face of indifference and cynicism, not at all what she imagined a benevolent ruler of a kingdom would look like.

She felt nervous in the presence of his unexpected appearance. The King of Whedon was a handsome man, with an air of mystery. His golden tan hair was like the mane of a lion under his crown. His taut, wrinkled face which is far from his true age was covered in an untidy golden beard. His appearance reminded her of a listless cat.

The king then handed the scroll he was reading to the scribe standing beside him and extended his ring-covered clunky hand to Agnes.

“My treasure. I am happy to see you return safely. Welcome home, my pride and joy, serving to elevate the glory of our nation.”

“We have returned from the expedition, Your Majesty.”

Agnes walked over and kissed the King on his long cloak that adorned the carpeted floor. The knights and wizards bowed their heads and knelt on one knee in front of their King. Max quickly imitated them, getting to her knees and bowing her head. Then she heard a strong and authoritative voice that sounded a bit annoyed.

“Raise your heads. This King does not wish to speak while looking at the crown of your heads.”

Max looked around, and after seeing Uslin and Elliot on either side of her slowly raised their heads, she too looked up. Ruben III had an elbow on the armrest as he looked down casually at his subjects kneeling before him. He spoke again, in that low, powerful tone.

“Many did not return.”

“The war is not yet over, so I have ordered that a third party remains in Livadon.”

“... Who is left?”

“A lot from the Remdragon Knights, West, and Northern territories remain. All will return in a month at the latest.”

The King’s golden eyes studied the faces of his subjects closely, then suddenly, his gaze stopped when he met Max’s. She felt her throat constrict and gulped at the intense pressure strong enough to stop her heart from beating. The King, although he seemed detached and distant, gave off an intimidating aura.

“If my eyes are not lying to me, aren’t those men from the Remdragon Knights?”

At the call of their presence, Uslin and Elliot bowed their heads. "I am Elliot Caron of the Remdragon Knights."

"I am Uslin Rikaido of the Remdragon Knights. We are here to accompany our Lady by the order of Lord Calypse."

"Lady...?"

The King's sharp eyes immediately locked onto her and Max froze on the spot. Then she quickly opened her mouth, trying to be as calm as possible.

"It is an honor to mee-meet you...Your Majesty. I am Maximillian Calypse."

"Hmm."

The King's golden eyes coldly stared at Max, and at that moment, she felt like she was standing in front of a lion disguised in human skin. He stroked his thick, curly beard and his mouth twisted crookedly.

"Ah yes. Now I do remember being repeatedly rejected by that stubborn knight because of you."

The temperature in the hall immediately plummeted, enough to freeze her bones. Max hurriedly bowed her head, her face pale and exhausted but Agnes was quick to redeem her.

"Royal Father, Lady Calypse is a wizard and one of the greatest contributors to the Battle of Ethylene. She was seriously injured during the war, so I have brought her here in a hurry to help her recover."

"That is a very interesting story."

Contrary to his words, Ruben III had a blatant disinterested expression plastered on his face. "Riftan Calypse is the pride of Whedon and this king's most-favored knight. We cannot afford to neglect the care of his wife. She must receive utmost care and special treatment during her stay."

"I am g-grateful... for His Majesty's generosity."

Max barely managed to mutter with a shaky voice. The monarch then looked away, like a cat tired of playing with its toys, then gestured with his hand towards the subjects who were still kneeling before him.

"I would be delighted to hear the details of your expedition, but I cannot keep you all here, who had just returned from an arduous journey and battle. I shall hear about the

expedition at a separate time. Now rise from your knees. Tonight, a banquet shall be held in your honor.”

The scribe quickly wrote down the King’s order and handed it to a servant, who then rushed to carry out the order. They all bowed their heads in respects and rose to their feet then quietly walked out of the hall. Only when the doors closed behind her did Max let out the breath she was holding.

Seeing her with a pale, tired face, Agnes gave her a pained smile. “My father has a bad habit of making people feel uncomfortable. He was just trying to antagonize you, don’t think about it too much.”

Even with the princess’s words, Max didn’t feel comforted. King Ruben was the one who wanted Riftan to divorce Max and have him marry Princess Agnes. In the King’s eyes, her existence would be like a thorn stuck in his eyes. She bit her lip anxiously and, realizing her distress, Uslyn, who was watching her silently, opened his mouth to speak.

“Don’t worry, the King is merciful and just. No harm will come to the Lady.”

Max gave him a vague smile. King Ruben didn’t seem to have any compassion. And as if she knew exactly what she was thinking, Agnes laughed.

“I know he’s grumpy and can be a bit mean, but he’s just in his own way. Once he learns of your contributions, he will offer you nothing but praise. I’ll be sure to tell him in detail.”

They left the central palace and got into the carriage once more. Drakium palace was the size of a small village. They passed the great chapel, a huge training ground that could easily accommodate ten thousand men, and a lush forest of elms. Only then did the princess’ residence come into view. Max was completely drained of strength when she was ushered into a spacious and cozy guest bedroom overlooking the orchard and the reservoir.

“I’ll call the healer. Lie down in bed and rest for now.”

“You don’t have to do that ri-right away. Her highness Agnes must be really ti-tired too...”

“I promised Riftan that I would take care of you. For my pride and honor, I will, so don’t worry about anything.”

Agnes immediately summoned two female healers and they examined her as she lay rigid on the bed. They studied her complexion and poked her around her stomach. They asked her several questions, then threw more than a dozen different types of herbs into a porcelain teapot and prepared the medicine. Max eyed the dark, foul-smelling black liquid warily and turned to speak to the healer.

“W-What is this medicine? I’ve ne-never seen some of these herbs before...”

“It is a medicine that helps your body recover much faster.”

The princess quickly interrupted and answered vaguely on behalf of the healers.

“These medicines are good for your health so don’t worry about it and take it.”

Max sniffed the bitter herbal tea, thinking of the Princess who still took care of her despite also being exhausted from the journey, she squeezed her eyes shut and swallowed it down. When she emptied the cup, the healers continued their mysterious treatments and placed a pack of hot stones on her blankets to warm her, then applied a strange-smelling oil to her hands and feet.

“Excuse my intrusion, but the princess has summoned me...”

Just when Max thought the treatments would be over, another voice came from outside the door. Agnes turned and quickly yelled for the person to come inside. He was a slim man in his mid-forties wearing a dark gray robe. He stroked his messy beard as he approached her.

“Which idiot would draw their mana to the extent of draining it? Who is this fool? What an ignorant person. That person must be prepared to hear my sermon.”

“Simon, I will not tolerate such rudeness.”

The princess gave the man a stern look, but the man named Simon didn’t flinch. He snorted derisively, then turned to look sternly at Max.

“You don’t look like a wizard from the Wizard Tower. May I ask from which idiot did you learn your magic from to do such a reckless thing?”

“I-I...”

“Simon.” The princess warned again and the wizard pouted.

Then, he dragged a chair and sat by the bed. “Yes, yes. Alright. I will stop nagging and examine her. Now, please give me your hand.”

Hesitantly, Max reached out her hand and the man took it between his dry, slim, brittle-feeling fingers and injected some of his magical energy into hers. She shuddered as she felt cold magic seep into her body. The wizard did this for about ten minutes and released her hand with a sigh.

“Her mana exhaustion is not as severe as I had expected. But still, you must please rest well for another month or so.”

“So, will she recover fully?”

At the princess’s anxious question, the wizard blinked his big, owl-like eyes and sighed again. “Her body will recover in time. However, you shouldn’t use magic again in the meantime. Not until your magic energy is fully replenished naturally, or else it could lead to permanent damage.”

“W-what kind of... permanent damage...?”

“One that could shorten your lifespan.”

Max’s body shuddered at his ominously low voice. To show that he was not exaggerating, the wizard had a serious expression and crossed his arms across his chest.

“Mana is the energy we are all born with. Wizards take mana by force from the natural world into their bodies and use it to cast magic. The mana inherent in the body is like the magnet that holds your magical energy. The lady not only exhausted her magical energy, but also the mana that powers and gives strength to our bodies enough to live. What you did is like to purposely shorten your life.”

“T-that was not my intention. It’s just at that time... there was no other choice...”

The wizard sighed deeply at her excuse. “There are some wizards who act rashly as the Lady on the battlefield.”

He muttered bitterly and got up from his seat. “Right now, the Lady’s body is as weak and fragile as a newborn. That is why you are constantly seeking sleep. Get as much sleep and rest as possible to help your body replenish what it has lost. And don’t even think about doing anything strenuous until you are back to normal.”

Max nodded. The wizard gave her a few more warnings and precautions before his departure. The princess and the two healers also left, but she could barely rest peacefully. Ever since arriving at Drakium Palace, all Max did was eat and sleep like a newborn infant. In between, she would take the medicine that the healers prepared and occasionally receive healing magic from the priests. A banquet was held every night, but Max did not take a single step outside the princess’s palace. She was too tired and in no mood to socialize in such noisy surroundings.

Even though she had left the battlefield, and everything was fine, she couldn’t shake off her anxiety and depression. Riftan kept flashing in her mind, and it pained her, worrying that she might have completely turned indifferent towards her. Overwhelmed with so many negative thoughts, Max closed her eyes and went to sleep. She was helpless against herself, torturing her own mind with her s\*\*\*\*t thoughts. She spent her time idly, like a goldfish swimming around inside a fishbowl.



News of the victory came from Livadon after a fortnight. The messenger announced that the allied forces scaled the Pamela plateau and completely destroyed the main base of the monsters. At the arrival of such great news, cheers erupted not only from the Drakium palace but echoed throughout the whole capital.

◀ Previous Chapter  
Next Chapter ▶  
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## Under The Oak Tree 232

◀ Previous Chapter  
Next Chapter ▶

So loud was the sound that even Max, who was helpless and couldn't do anything but slumber on her bed, opened her eyes to the noise. She felt like an earth nymph who had awakened from a deep sleep when the cheers and victorious tunes erupted from afar. The domineering evil forces that had caused her the greatest pains and trials throughout spring, summer and the beginning of autumn, had finally raised a white flag, signaling their surrender.

Max opened the window next to the bed and looked out at the elm forest that was transforming to the rich yellowish-brown color of autumn. She then slipped her feet into a pair of comfortable moccasins and wrapped a shawl around her shoulders. One of the healers walked into the room with a tray and her eyes widened upon seeing her up on her two feet.

"M'lady, is there anything you need? Tell me what it is and I'll do it right away."

"I want to go...o-out. I would like to hear the details of the war's conclusion..."

"I'll ask one of the servants to gather the details and report to you. You shouldn't leave your bedroom just yet."

"I'm not feeling sleepy, and my body has recovered now. Let me meet the knights for a while... I'd like to hear from them. Those from Livadon must have heard of the details."

"But I have prepared your food and medicine..."



The healer looked embarrassed and put the tray she had brought down on the table. Upon the tray was the bitter medicinal herbs she was made to drink every morning and evening. Max wrinkled her nose.

“That medicine... makes me really drowsy, it’s harder for me when I feel sleepy. I’ll drink the medicine when I come back instead.”

The healer had an anxious and resolute expression on her face, but called for a servant to accompany Max as she knew that she would not back down. Max walked through the quiet hall with two servants accompanying her. The princess’ palace was situated in the most remote place of the Drakium Palace, so it was calm and quiet during the day. She slowly descended the marble staircase that led to a long, sun-lit corridor. One of the servants who was accompanying her followed closely and held onto her elbow, as if afraid she might collapse and fall over. Max felt like she was being treated just like she aged to 90-years-old, but she accepted the support without protest. In truth, her legs felt weak for being in bed for too long and any movement she made caused her a slight dizziness. This is why she didn’t complain, even though Simon scolded her rudely.

She sighed as she took the last steps of the staircase. At that moment, she heard Princess Agnes’ voice from somewhere, causing Max to turn her head. Usually, the princess was not around her palace until dusk, she would be in the main castle or training grounds all day, so it was a rare occasion that she was in her castle at this time. Her curiosity ate her, wondering if something concerning must have happened as she walked towards the hallway where she heard the Princess’ voices. Her feet led her to a huge door that was ajar. The room inside was large and filled with bookshelves. Princess Agnes and Simon were sitting opposite each other in the middle of the room.

The princess, who was scribbling something down on a piece of parchment, saw Maximillian standing by the door and immediately jumped out of her seat.

“Maximillian, is it alright for you to be already out of bed?”

“It’s just for a whi-while... it’s alright.”

The wizard did not even glance at Max, he then nagged the princess. “Ms. Agnes, your hands are not writing.”

“Ugh, it’s sickening. Are wind wizards ever taught how to keep from nagging during their training?” Agnes complained irritably as she dipped her quill roughly into the inkwell. “I have to request that they only send me water wizards next time!”

“If you cannot adequately explain the situation to the inspectors who are coming this time, you will have to wait at least 10 years for a new wizard to be assigned to you.” Simon snorted back at Agnes and then he gestured to Max.

“Don’t just stand there, why don’t you come in and sit down?”

“You seem to be bu-busy... I don’t want to disturb you. I shall leave you...”

“Where are you going?” Agnes asked anxiously. Max replied with a bitter smile.

“Just for a whi-while... I’m going to meet Sir Caron to hear the news from the Remdragon Knights.”

“You can ask me instead. You don’t need to go to him.” Agnes smiled as she fiddled with her pen. “Everyone is safe. Estimating from the time it took for the messenger pigeon to reach Drakium, they must have reached Levan by now and have boarded a ship.”

At the good news, Max ran in front of the desk where the princess was sitting. “Was the messenger Pigeon... from Ri-riftan?”

“It came this morning. Would you like to read it? I think they will arrive in two or three weeks at the latest.”

The princess then rummaged through the pile of parchment and scrolls on the desk, then pulled out a letter the size of her palm and held it out to her. Max’s eyes widened as she read it. There were no casualties among the Remdragon Knights and they would return once the injured had been treated in Levan. The note that announced their arrival was written in just two sentences.

Max was distraught. ‘Has anyone been injured so badly that they needed to receive treatment for an injury?’

While she was biting her lip anxiously, Princess Agnes said in a bright voice. “Don’t worry. If someone had been seriously injured, they wouldn’t even have thought of sending a messenger pigeon. The telegrams sent by the other lords of the Allied Forces that remained are more sincere than this letter. They said that they will be immediately boarding the ships after resting in Levan’s Great Temple for 3 to 4 days to allow those who have mild to serious injuries be treated. There’s already an uproar for the preparation of a great banquet.”

The princess shrugged nonchalantly. “I’ve been writing hundreds of invitations since the news of the victory came. I think the king is going to summon all the nobles of Whedon this time.”

“You must be very bu-busy... pre-preparing for the banquet.”

“Right now, what’s more urgent than a frivolous banquet is to write a report to the inspection team of the Wizard Tower.”

Simon abruptly interrupted the conversation and tapped with his fingertip a parchment paper with ancient script, as if to urge the Princess the message. The princess started to write something again, grunting in annoyance. Simon, who gazed at Agnes like a supervisor, turned his head to Max and explained.

“Three wizards from the Wizard Tower died in this expedition. Nornui will be investigating whether there were any unwarrantable commands involved. The cause of their death must be told and explained in detail. Otherwise, it would be difficult in the future to hire wizards who were trained in the Wizard Tower.”

“The wi-wizard tower... goes to that extent of interference?”

“Isn’t that the purpose of the creation of the World Tower, to prevent the persecution of wizards? All wizards registered in the tower are protected by Nornui. Although the treatment towards wizards has since improved, there remains those who see the use of magic negatively. Because of this, Nornui is vigilant about seeing whether there was any maltreatment whenever a wizard dies.”

“That is why every time huge battles take place, army commanders like me have a lot to suffer. I must explain the whole situation to closed-minded people who have never been on a battlefield all their life and then beg for new wizards to fill the positions of those who have perished.”

The princess explained sternly. Max trailed her eyes curiously at the ancient writing made with the princess’ skilfully fine handwriting then asked cautiously.

“Do the wizards in the Wi-Wizard Tower... get di-dispatched to any place that they were requested from?”

“Usually, when the requests for wizards come from Drakium, the Wizard Tower will review the request and send over the wizards who volunteer. These days every lord in the continent are eager to have at least one high-ranking wizard, some would request for more archmages, but it would take a long time for this to be fulfilled... The Wizard Tower tries as much as possible to balance and evenly distribute wizards in all parts of the world.”

“Will it be possible... to send another wizard to A-anatol? We don’t have enough wi-wizards in our territory.”

Simon and Princess Agnes paused at her words. After a strange silence, Simon opened his mouth with a complicated expression on his face.

“I doubt it... as long as ‘that person’ is there, it would be difficult to acquire a new wizard.”

“What do you mean ‘tha-that person’?”

“Who do you think! He’s referring to that shameless runaway scamp!” The princess suddenly raised her voice. “Ruth Serbel, who ignored all the rules of the World Tower and left the tower without permission! As long as that traitor is in Anatol, there will be no dispatch of wizards from them.”

Max’s eyebrows furrowed and she looked around in confusion. She always wondered why there was only one high-ranking wizard among world-renowned knights, but she didn’t even know it was because of Ruth. The more that the topic relented, the princess became more and more critical about her friend.

“If it hadn’t been for that pesky lump, there would be one or two more high-ranking wizards who would volunteer to serve Riftan Calypse. I advised Riftan several times to kick him out, but he wouldn’t listen. He seems to be keeping his loyalty to a scamp who doesn’t deserve it and suffers a tremendous loss.”

Max’s face clouded. She may not have seen it in that regard, but a corner of her heart grew cold when she remembered that Riftan refused to marry the princess, as if he had kept his marriage vows by force. The princess then spoke in a calming voice, misunderstanding her expression.

“Still... There are a lot of talented free-roaming wizards so don’t worry about it too much. This time, when the Remdragon Knights return, I will request for high-ranking and wizards and make a petition for the king’s benevolence to sent them to Anatol.”

“Th-thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now, let’s get you back to your room. You shouldn’t be straining yourself yet.”

Unable to overcome the princess’s persuasion, Max had to quietly return to the room, take her medicine, and reluctantly lie in bed to sleep. A few more senseless days passed. There was an endless procession of nobles who visited the capital to attend the grand banquet at the Drakium Palace. In the morning, the whole manor would be filled with servants who would greet them, and in the evening, a welcome dinner was held. Max sat up in bed craning her neck, staring at the castle gates day and night, wondering if Riftan would miraculously arrive a little earlier. Princess Agnes felt sorry for her and suggested that she attend the banquet, to which Max appeared surprised. Meanwhile, Princess Agnes knew that she was anxious because she could not wait for Riftan’s arrival. As if aware of her unusual attitude, the princess said with a consoling expression.

“I heard from the healer today that your health has improved a lot now. If it’s not difficult for you, why don’t you attend the banquet and lighten your mood for a little? You have never attended any event at the palace since you arrived at Drakium castle.”

“B-but...”

Max tried to protest, she was embarrassed. There were several occasions that she attended for some reason at events at the Croix Castle, but she was always under her father's supervision and quietly returned to her room after a while of showing up. Because association with nobles was forbidden, court etiquette was learned at a desk and she had no ability to speak or socialize. As she imagined stuttering like an idiot among the nobles, a cold sweat ran down her back.

"I am not... very fond of no-noisy environments..."

Finally, when she gave that excuse, the princess laughed as if she was hiding something. "I had planned to surprise you, but I better tell you instead. The truth is, this afternoon the Duke of Croix entered the palace with the Eastern nobles. If you go to the dinner banquet, you will be able to see him."

Max felt cold air rush down her spine. She quickly hid her grim expression. Her heart pounded with old fear and her palms began to sweat.

"My fa-father came? Does he kno-know... that I'm also here?"

"The king must have informed him. The duke has been in discussion with the king since the moment he arrived, that's why he hasn't come to visit Maximillian just yet." The princess added, mistaking her upset expression, thinking that Max was upset because the Duke had not come to visit his daughter yet.

Max swallowed her cynicism. Her father didn't care whether she was there or not. No, he probably had no interest in whatever happens to her. Her shoulders hunched, remembering that he wouldn't forgive her if she did anything that would taint the family name. The Duke of Croix hated that she appeared before the nobles. She was instructed to keep a low profile, to appear almost invisible as she is inferior, it was etched in her blood for being a stutterer.

Max didn't want to imagine the punishment she would one day receive if she attended the dinner banquet and somehow embarrass herself in front of the nobles. She then hurriedly made up an excuse to refuse.

"I-I also wish to attend... but I feel really e-exhausted today... It would probably be better... to quietly meet him to-tomorrow."

"Are you still feeling weak?"

"Although it's not that se-serious... if I appear too pale and f-frail to him...he might wo-worry..."

The princess nodded when she saw how convincing she had spoken. "I understand. You should rest then. I'll tell the healer to bring your medicine."

When the princess left the room, Max wrapped her cold body with her blankets and curled up, bringing her chest to her knees. She scanned her mind for excuses to avoid meeting him when tomorrow comes. No. Maybe her own father will make excuses. In the capital, there were countless nobles whom he had to acquaint with. He would probably have no time to come see her. Max held dearly to the thought that he wouldn't meet her. She really didn't want to see him ever again. The last memory of her father flashed in her mind, he threatened her that the worst would come for her if she became a divorced woman and threatened the name of the family.

She didn't end up being divorced as her father had threatened. The Duke must be content that she was able to keep her marriage and would not come for her. Max tortured herself with those thoughts, she tried to erase her father's existence from her head. However, her expectations were brutally betrayed. The next morning, just before the break of dawn, the Duke of Croix went to the separate palace to meet her. When she found out that her father was waiting for her downstairs, she stiffened. Before approaching her, Princess Agnes told her with unprecedented embarrassment the kind of conversation she had with her father.

"When he heard that Maximillian's health... is not doing good, he became overly anxious. He immediately rushed and went to see his daughter."

[◀ Previous Chapter](#)

[Next Chapter ▶](#)

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## Under The Oak Tree 233

"My fa-father did...?" Max blinked rapidly, the Princess' words were hard to believe.

Princess Agnes was as restless as her and nervously ran her hand through the golden hair that fell across her forehead, looking anxiously at Max's face. It was a strange look that resembled that of knights when checking the strength of their weapon. As if checking Max's stability, the princess took her hands and said in a very cautious voice.

"The knights calmed the Duke, but now... he doesn't appear to be in a stable mood. Will you be alright?"

Max was in shock; she couldn't put her head around how her father acted to create this situation. He never lost his composure in front of other nobles. Whenever he interacted

with her in front of them, he would act like a genuinely generous and merciful father. She would be casually beaten by him in front of the servants, but in face of the nobility, he would place his cold lips to her cheeks dearly as if he truly adored her. Max cleared her throat, she was afraid that her anxiety would surface.

“Wha-what caused him... to flare up?”

“Well, it’s because of that— Maximillan had gone through a difficult, rough situation...”

Agnes swallowed dry saliva and lowered her eyes as if she couldn’t find the right words to speak. It was so ridiculous that Max almost burst out into a fit of laughter. Her father would not blink an eye even if he hears that she died. Perhaps, he was only acting the role of a caring father and he was not genuinely furious. That should be it. He was probably so conscious of the nobles in the palace that he felt it obligatory to visit her. Max slipped out of her bed, some tension she felt going away from the thought that ran in her mind. There was no reason why she couldn’t face her father for at least 10 minutes. Had she not withstood him for 22 years?

Max held her emotions in place. It would be unlikely for her father to beat her up when she was under the protection of the princess, he valued his image too much to do that. Max used that thought to reassure herself. She was a Calypse now, not a Croix. Even if he was her father, he had no right to treat her rudely.

“I’ll just change my clothes... and then I’ll head down soon.”

The princess hesitated for a while, as if she wanted to say something else, then closed her mouth and left the room. Her demeanor was a bit puzzled, but impatient knowing that Duke Croix was waiting downstairs. Although the princess acted a little strange, Max was overwhelmed with the fact that her father was waiting downstairs, so she hurriedly washed her face and changed into a modest dress with the help of a servant. Then, after roughly combing her hair, she immediately went out of her bedroom. As she approached the entrance to the lit drawing room, the tension twisted her stomach. Max hesitated a few steps ahead and then walked in with her eyes tightly closed.

“You’re here.”

Elliot, standing by the door, politely extended a hand. Max grabbed his arm awkwardly and walked into the room. Then she saw Uslin Rikaido, whose gaze was hostile towards the Duke. Finally, she saw the duke standing right behind Uslin. Max felt her heart freeze. Just by looking into his father’s icy eyes, she could tell how angry he was. The Duke then spoke in an ominously low voice.

“It’s been a while, my daughter.” When she stiffened and said nothing, the corner of his mouth pulled up into a warning smile. “Aren’t you going to greet your father?”



Reading the threat in his lines, Max quickly opened her lips to speak. "It's been a while... since the last time we met. I'm glad you appear to be he-healthy..."

"I heard what happened. It seems that you have gone through a lot of hardships."

The duke interrupted her in the middle of her greeting and sat down gracefully on a luxurious chair lined with thick silk. Then, he straightened the buttons on his clothes nonchalantly while speaking words that didn't make sense to her.

"Your story is spreading through the royal castle. When I heard about what happened to the little child, I was devastated."

"Your grace!"

"" "

Elliott, who was standing silently behind her, suddenly raised his voice. The rude behavior immediately coaxed anger to plaster on the duke's face.

"Can't you see that this is a conversation between father and daughter? No one has the right to interfere with this conversation between family members."

"Lord Calypse has ordered us to protect the lady."

"Are you saying that I'm threatening my daughter right now?"

"But the lady still...!"

Elliot suddenly stopped talking and glanced at Max. She looked around, confused as she couldn't understand what they meant with their exchange of words. The Duke of Croix sighed as he looked at her.

"Have I not made myself clear? This matter is something that my daughter should be aware of as well. Do you think that you know what's better for her sake more than I do?"

Max turned pale as a parchment at the Duke's brazen words. How could he say such things without even blinking an eye! The duke arrogantly raised his chin, he didn't even flinch at the piercing glare that she was giving him.

"Now then, give us some space. I want to have a quiet conversation alone with my daughter."

The knights exchanged glances and they turned their gaze towards Max. She nodded reluctantly.

"Please leave us for a mo-moment. I'm... a-alright."

“... We'll be in the adjacent room. Please call out in case you need us.”

The knights then turned and left the room. When the sound of the door closing echoed behind her, Max grabbed the hem of her dress anxiously. Her father was staring at her as if he would cut her to pieces. Her nerves were so tense from the hostility he's emanating. However, contrary to what she expected, that she would be bombarded with threats, the Duke of Croix remained silent. He was ominously silent. Unable to bear the stifling silence, Max eventually opened her lips and was the first to speak.

“For what re-reason... I...”

“Prepare to leave for Croix Castle right away.”

Max froze at his unexpected words. As if he couldn't bear to even look at her, the Duke kept his gaze on the window and continued speaking in the same low foreboding voice.

“Rosetta's union to the royal family is in the works. I can't have you staying here in the palace. Prepare to leave today.”

“B-b-but...”

She was so flustered that she couldn't find the right words to say. Suddenly, an expression of disgust clearly emerged on her father's face.

“In the first place, what on earth were you thinking, coming to the royal castle? You should be locked up in the countryside, keeping quiet... yet how dare you come here and embarrass me.”

Max trembled at his increasingly hostile tone, but she quickly clasped her hands tightly. Her father had no right to order her to go wherever he pleased her to. The only person who had the right to do so would be her husband, Riftan, and so she shouldn't have been trembling as she was now. She repeated those thoughts to herself and spoke as calmly as she could.

“I have no intention of interfering with... Rosetta's be-betrothal. Just a few more days... My husband is coming here to take me-me. Until he does... I'll lay low and stay in the princess' palace.”

“Now... are you going against my order?”

The Duke's voice lowered a notch. Max tried to hold herself back, but her pleading voice came out without her accord.

“Ri-riftan will soon come to Drakium... so I can't leave the palace. Father also... didn't want me to... get di-divorced.”

“I am telling you to leave now so you won’t end up like that!”

The Duke jumped out of his seat and strode towards her. Max rushed to grab the doorknob. However, her father’s actions were much faster. He pulled her harshly and spat his words into her ear.

“Which man would live with a woman who has no hopes of bearing a successor! Do you really think he will take you with him when he comes to the capital? You’re a hopeless idiot! You really had to dishonor the family name! That was disastrous for all the nobles to see.”

“What-what do you...”

“Right now, are you even aware that not one or two people in the Drakium Royal Place are whispering about your miscarriage? How far have you lost your mind that you don’t even know that you’ve had a miscarriage!”

Max could not comprehend what her father had just said and could only stare blankly at her father’s face. ‘A miscarriage? What is he talking about?’ Her ears pounded as her mind clouds in confusion.

He shook her violently by her shoulders, half-alarmed as he got more and more angry, and shouted at her fiercely. “King Ruben has even questioned Rosetta’s fertility all because of you. He mocked me right in my face, questioning what if Rosetta will have difficulties bearing children just like her older sister! Now, how does it feel to pull your younger sister down too? If this betrothal fails, how the are you going to take responsibility for it?”

“I, I...I... did not lo-lose... a child! There must be... a mis-misunderstanding...”

The Duke of Croix distorted his face and raised a hand high, aiming to strike her. Max closed her eyes tightly. However, no matter how long she waited, the severe pain did not come. When she slowly opened her eyes again, she saw her patting his own chest as an attempt to calm his anger. He turned and picked up his ivory cane, which he had placed next to the chair, then, as if he didn’t want to argue further, he straightened his posture and spoke in a firm tone.

“There is nothing to say. Prepare to leave immediately before he returns. The divorce must be postponed, at least until Rosetta’s marriage is over. The divorce and separation... it is absolutely unacceptable that because of you, the family name will be tarnished and my name will be mocked among the nobility!”

“I’m... I-I can’t go. When Ri-Riftan arrives... he-he will tell you! Ri-Riftan said he has no intentions of di-divorcing m-me. I’m telling the t-truth!”

Max grabbed her father's hem urgently. She could see the Duke's face fiercely distorted but she couldn't stop herself. As if her feet were shaking with anxiety, she couldn't control her body and her mind felt like it was being swept by a whirlwind.

"The mi-miscarriage... must be a mis-misunderstanding. I've never... h-heard of such a thing. It was because of magic... that my body is this weak..."

"You must really want to be dragged away from here."

The Duke swatted her hands away furiously. Max looked at him with dismay. Her eyes welled up to hot tears and a loud sob broke out. She turned around, opened the door with shaking hands, and ran out. Perhaps hearing their argument, she saw Uslin, Elliot, and Princess Agnes running out of the opposite room. Max ran to them at once and asked as if pleading.

"Did I-I lose my child? No, right? My fa-father has misunderstood, right?"

"Maximilian..."

The Princess's face turned painfully distorted. When Max read the answer on her face, her legs went weak, and she staggered enormously. If Elliott hadn't caught her fast, she would have collapsed. She stared at the ground blankly, sweeping her face roughly. One by one, memories came flashing in her chaotic head. A week of unconsciousness, people looking at her with sadness, their careful demeanor around her, and the painful look in Riftan's eyes. Max cupped her mouth with trembling hands. It felt hard to breathe, like someone was choking her.

"Ho-how come... you didn't tell me earlier? Ho-how come..."

"The commander has ordered us to keep silent about what happened." Uslin responded with a stiff face. "The lady almost died. It was a really serious situation, with your mana depletion and excessive bleeding. If the lady was also made aware that she had a miscarriage, you might not also be able to handle the shock..."

"Shock from... the child... child, I lost..."

Max muttered with a lost expression as she placed a hand on her belly. She was bearing Riftan's child in there, and now that child is gone. She didn't know how to digest that fact, so she was in utter confusion. Losing a child that she didn't even know existed, she couldn't feel the sudden crash of despair and mourning. Instead, she felt numb, paralyzed, and a faint, strange sense of loss. Finding out about this so suddenly, it was as if she was pulled out of her mind. The princess approached her and patted her on the shoulder.

"Maximilian, I know it hurts... but you will be able to bear another child in the future. What's most important now is that you are safe and recovering."

Max looked at the princess's face with blurry eyes. Above those beautiful blue eyes, a sign of sympathy was clearly visible. Suddenly, her heart raced violently. She knew how difficult it had been for her biological mother to have children and how many miscarriages she went through before giving birth to her. The Duke of Croix always recounted how incompetent his first wife was. She knew well what kind of treatment a wife who could not produce a successor would receive. She also watched Rosetta's mother grow weak by the day and eventually die in a hospital bed. Her heart sank in fear. No. Riftan was different from her father. He wouldn't treat her so harshly.

'He wouldn't be so cruel, but...'

She bit her lips. Remembering his dark, sunken eyes, her heart shuddered with anxiety. There was no one to blame but herself if Riftan ended up resenting her. He begged for her to stay put in a safe place and yet she selfishly and stubbornly broke her promise and followed him. She had no excuse if he blamed her for killing their child because of her recklessness. Max held her face in agony. When she thought that Riftan might not want her anymore, her entire body trembled so violently that she couldn't control it. Elliott urgently went to comfort her.

"M'lady, please calm down. It's all in the past. You have to make peace with your feelings..."

"It's... not all in the past for m-m-me!"

Max pushed his hand away and screamed between her cries. Uslin looked at her with utter sadness in his eyes. She suddenly felt nauseous. She took a step back and abruptly turned around. Unbeknownst to her, the Duke of Croix was approaching her from behind. At the moment she turned around, the Duke grabbed her arm tightly. She swallowed the groan of pain that crept up her throat as she felt his fingers adorned with golden rings dig deep into her flesh. Croix placed an arm on her shoulder and spoke bluntly to the knights.

"I will bring my daughter back to my castle. It would be better and more comfortable for her to stay in her home."

The knights then strongly objected to the Duke's statement. "Lord Calypse will be arriving soon! Without his permission, going anywhere..."

"I can't stand having my daughter in a place where frivolous people whisper around over her. Everyone here is insensitive and indifferent to her situation." Duke Croix sighed and then turned to Agnes. "No one in Whedon has not heard about the talks of marriage between the Princess and my son-in-law. Has her majesty ever wondered how in the world her loyal servants would view my daughter as?"

The princess' face grew bright red at the duke's words. "I don't think my relationship with Riftan is like that at all!"

“Does her highness’ loyal servants think the same as her highness does?”

The Princess could only stare at the Duke with a pale weary face and turned her head away. The servants who were standing on one side of the hallway bowed their heads in unison. Upon seeing this, the Duke of Croix clicked his tongue.

“No wonder, malicious rumors are spreading within the palace. I can’t let my daughter stay here any longer. I will take her to my castle, so tell Calypse to come to my castle if he has the will to take her.”

Agnes kept her mouth shut, not being able to find any more words to dissuade him. Uslin, who had been glaring fiercely at the duke, turned his head towards Max.

“M’lady...do you want to return to Croix Castle?”

“I, I’m...”

Max, who could only listen to the conversation as if it wasn’t her own business, shuddered and was startled when she was spoken to. She raised her head, and she felt the hand of the Duke on her shoulder tighten, as if threatening her if she didn’t obey his orders. The cold, violent touch made her heart tight with fear. However, she was more afraid of seeing Riftan now. She then muttered her words in an empty voice.

“...Yes.”

She felt the tears in her eyes heat up and bit her trembling lips to swallow her cries which were about to burst out.

“I want to g-go back... to Croix Castle.”

Every time the wind blew, dead leaves would flutter in the air like moths. True to its name, autumn, the season of wind, would have the cold northeastern winds blowing endlessly over the hills. Amidst the deep, blue sky, migratory birds would fly over the dark river, and the ripe, golden-colored rice paddy would sway like a golden sea. She sat on the wagon, looking out at the land of Croix that grew closer and closer. At the end of this vast, endless land of granary, there was a prison where she was held for countless years.

[◀Previous Chapter](#)

[Next Chapter▶](#)

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## Under The Oak Tree 234

◀ Previous Chapter

Next Chapter ▶

Memories of the day that she left that place resurfaced in her mind. The day when Riftan led her by hand and brought her into a carriage felt like a distant past, she left on a whim, without knowing the world, innocent. Even in her dreams, she would have thought that she would have returned there of her own free will. She leaned her head against the wall of the carriage, drenched in a strange sense of despondency. Her father, who was sitting quietly across from her, looked at her and made an unpleasant expression, then struck the floor with a cane. Max shuddered and sat upright.

Riding in a carriage with her father was like torture, she couldn't relax for a moment. She closed her mouth tightly like a clam, trying as much as she could to not get on his nerves. Fortunately, Elliot was with them. The knights argued that they could not disobey Riftan's orders, so they insisted that at least one of them had to accompany her. It was then concluded that Elliot was going to be the one to escort her to Croix Castle.

The duke couldn't unleash his wrath upon her because he followed them closely on horseback, right next to the carriage. The duke could do nothing but ferociously glare at her with his eyes and clutch his cane tightly.

"When you get to the castle, live as if you were a dead mouse." He would say repeatedly, nailing it to her ears the whole journey. "Rosetta will be married as spring comes next year. You should hide quietly in the castle until then. I intend to reject all the visitors who will come, making your recovery an excuse. Although I told them to tell Calypse to come if he wishes to take you, I have no plans of letting him meet you. When he comes, he will formally demand for a divorce. That will have to be delayed until next spring."

The Duke of Croix looked at her with faded gray eyes. "Even the church sees it justifiable to divorce a woman who miscarried a child. Needless to say, King Ruben will grant that divorce with open arms. You shouldn't be the cause of ruining what I have planned for decades."

Max was overwhelmed with shame and lowered her head. It was his father's ambition ever since to obtain an outstanding successor through Rosetta, he planned it to the point of obsession: it was so embedded in him, comparable to a stew left to boil for a long time that it had stuck to the bottom of the pot. He continued to speak of his plans, anxious to manifest it.



“Rosetta needs to have at least two children. A healthy child, a boy, who will inherit the royal lineage and another boy, a perfect child to be the successor of Croix. I will surely convince them that Rosetta is the healthiest and most perfect woman, better than anyone else, unlike you.”

Knowing that he wasn't expecting a reply from her, Max simply held her hands tightly and earnestly prayed that an Ogre would come out of nowhere and overturn the carriage right away. But, as always, her expectations were shattered. The carriage entered the luxurious and magnificent gardens of Castle Croix without any trouble. Hundreds of servants descended the stairs to greet the Duke, who returned earlier than expected, as she stood in front of the carriage and anxiously clutched the skirt of her dress.

Elliott jumped off his horse and approached her. “Are you alright? Your complexion does not look good.”

“She must be tired from the long journey.” Before she could reply, the Duke of Croix quickly intervened. “Now that she is home, she will recover soon.”

He wrapped her around his shoulders and turned around. Then, he looked at Elliot over his shoulder and talked.

“Are you satisfied now that you have seen with your own two eyes that she has arrived here safely? You have fulfilled your duty. I will allow you to stay in my castle tonight, but you must leave at once tomorrow.”

Elliot's face hardened at the duke's rude words. Max didn't know what to do, she looked at him and went up the stairs because she couldn't overcome the duke's pulling force. As soon as the duke entered the Great Hall, he pushed her away as if she were something despicable. Then he walked proudly into the magnificent hall, it was so big, and its ceiling was so high that even ogres would be able to fit inside and hold a banquet. Then, he yelled for the butler to take her to the room immediately.

Max lowered her head to avoid the gaze of the servants who looked at her with surprise. The butler, who had served the Duke of Croix all his life, obeyed his orders without asking what was going on.

“...please follow me, miss.”

As he bowed his head, Max followed him like a ghost. Suddenly, she stopped when she noticed something silvery shining above her head. Rosetta was standing in front of the second floor, looking down at her from the railings. Max took a deep breath. How could it be? In just over a year, Rosetta had become so much more beautiful. Her luscious, flax-colored hair shone like silver against the sunlight, and her slender, perfectly shaped body boasted her alluring charm. Max bit her lip. The perfect figure of her younger sister shattered her chest more cruelly than ever. She was engulfed in misery as she

hastened to follow the butler. He immediately led her to a quiet room at the end of the annex.

“Well then, please rest well. I’ll summon Joanna.”

When the butler did his duty and left, she stood still in the middle of the room and looked around the space that she once lived in. It was a dark room, where the shadow of nature was cast even during the day and dust sat everywhere. As she walked to the window and looked out the scenery, she felt weak and helplessly slumped on her bed. Moments later, a heavyset woman about fifty years of age opened the door and entered.

””” ”

“Miss...”

Max looked strangely at her nanny whose gray hair had grown considerably compared to the last time she had seen her. The nanny, unable to continue her words for a long time, slowly approached her and took her hand in her wrinkly palms.

“How did this come to be, my poor miss? Madam Arian\* also suffered the same misfortune and died...and now, how could it happen to the miss as well...how could God have no mercy?” //TN: Arian is the name of Maxi’s mother

The woman’s laments pulled on her nerves that were already tight to the point of numbness. Max’s face contorted as she pushed the woman’s hands away. For some reason, seeing her eyes full of pity felt more unbearable than the indifferent faces of the other servants.

“I, I ...” Max turned her back towards her and tightly shut her eyes that were sore from crying. “I... I feel tired. I want to rest.”

“Alright. Please wait for a while, I’ll bring bath water and a meal at once.”

Joanna wiped her wet eyelids with her handkerchief and headed out. Max took the flagon sitting on the bedside table and vomited up the bowl of porridge she forcibly downed that morning. As she threw up the sour liquid, the emotions she was suppressing broke like a dam. Remorse and shame boiled in her stomach and the sense of loss weighed heavily on her chest. Every time she was reminded of how reckless she had acted and strained her body, guilt pounded on her head like an axe.

Max trembled as she put the flagon down on the floor. Like other lords, Riftan would want to have a successor to pass on his castle, lands, and riches. But would she be able to have another child in the future? Her miscarriage could not have been the result of overworking her body, it was probably inherent in her blood. Reminiscent of the

women who have died in the Croix family, she hugged her cold shoulders. Would she be able to bear it when the cruelty grew?

Max touched her burning throat with shaking hands. She had no face to see Riftan, and she was scared and frustrated when she imagined how he would treat her. She looked up and saw the mirror leaning against the wall. When her pale, clear face caught her eyes, her spine seemed to freeze. Her mother's face, which she vaguely remembered, was clearly revived in the mirror. She was looking at her daughter, who would face the same fate as her. Max squeezed her eyes shut and laid her dizzy head on the pillow.

She didn't want to think about anything anymore. It would be better to live trapped in that small world, pretending to be as insensitive as possible to pain and sadness as always. If so, she wouldn't have to worry about losing someone's affection and she wouldn't have to try so hard to be someone other than herself. Max buried her face in the pillow. It would be easier to pretend something like happiness did not exist in the first place than to have it ruined, even when her hands were barely holding it. If she had nothing at all, then there was nothing for her to painfully lose.

Max quickly adapted back to the life she had before she met Riftan. The helplessness that was buried deep in her bones swallowed her up as if it had been there all along, just waiting for her. While staying in her dark room, her confidence dropped as much as how it used to be, and her voice became a bit slurred because the only person she could talk to was the nanny. Little by little, she felt the things that she had built in herself over the past year fall apart, and she didn't have the strength to hold herself back. Fear, frustration, and resignation ate her all up.

Max sat by the window and looked at the bare branches swaying in the wind. It felt like she had gone back to that day when she was shaking with fear of being divorced. No, the pain she felt now made her suffer more than before. Before she left for Drakium, he didn't even embrace her or make eye contact to comfort her. He didn't even give her a chance to explain why she did it. 'Please, leave.' was what he said. Maybe he wanted her to disappear before his eyes.

Max looked up at the cold sky and then turned back to the bedroom. She looked at the bed where her mother once laid and where her stepmother was, and then curled up on top of it. In the corner of her heart, she kind of knew that this moment would come for her someday. She fought so hard not to be separated from him. Every time she was away from him, she struggled from the terrifying thought that her happiness, that came like a miracle, would disappear like a mirage. However, her own actions backfired at her like a boomerang, stabbing her, disappointing Riftan, and even causing her to lose their child. And now, it brought her back to this place.

Max stared blankly at the ceiling, then slowly closed her eyes. At lunchtime, Joanna usually came into the room without fail, carrying a tray of bowls filled with porridge. No matter how much she threw up, the nanny always tried to still feed her. Considering the

nanny's sincerity, she forced the spoon into her mouth. She hadn't even consumed half of it when her face turned yellow, and she vomited it all out.

Joanna's eyes, looking at her, sank into melancholy.

"Madam Arian was also too delicate and sensitive, it must be a disease." She shook her head softly. "At the worst, even a sip of water was too hard to swallow down. How could you be so similar to your mother..."

"I-I'm sorry... I'll eat it later..."

Joanna sighed deeply as she gently cleaned the bowl of porridge. "I'll get a new blanket. Please lie down."

When Joanna left the room with the soiled blanket, Max got up, washed her face in a basin, and changed into clean clothes. And as she was lying weakly on the bed again, she heard knocking on the door. She wondered if that was already Joanna. However, when she raised her head, she saw Rosetta in a purple dress gracefully entering the room. Max looked at her blankly. Rosetta skipped the formal greetings and dragged a chair to the side of the bed and sat down.

"You don't look well."

Max sat up and looked at her anxiously. "Wh-why did you come here..."

"I came here because that fickle woman is talking about how my sister is dying." Rosetta's hazel eyes, a mix of emerald and sapphire color, swept her figure coldly. "I see her words aren't mere exaggerations."

"If you have no-nothing else to say...just leave."

"Do you intend to die?"

Rosetta spat out her words frankly, not even paying attention to what Max said. She looked at her with apprehension and her half-sister looked back at her, Rosetta's eyes were clouded with gloom, a true contrast from her vivacious beauty as she spoke to Max.

"You won't be able to last a year in this castle with your body in that condition. Father wouldn't even blink an eye if you die."

"Whatever happens to m-me... is none of your business."

Rosetta's face hardened with coldness at Max's rough answer. "You are so pathetic that I can't stand it. You're drowning in self-pity and ruining your own body. I'm tired of seeing my sister's foolishness."

“There’s no reason for me to hear those words... from y-you.”

“Then you shouldn’t have returned here in that condition!” Rosetta retaliated in a fierce manner. “Whenever I look at you, anger boils within me. Like a complete idiot, you went to the middle of the battlefield and miscarried your child, came back in a vegetative state, and now you’re killing yourself by refusing meals? Do you think your husband will care if you do that? Ha! He might even rejoice at the fact that he wouldn’t have to go through the cumbersome process of divorcing you when you die. And then, when the last shovel of dirt is laid upon your grave, he will probably marry Princess Agnes, because men are cruel like that!”

Max flinched as if she had been stabbed by Rosetta’s sharp, knife-like words. She glared at her brutal sister, holding back the tears building up in her eyes.

“Don’t talk bad about... hi-him like that. He was... g-good to me. He truly ca-cared for me. That’s why I...”

“And you fell for him just because he spared you some affection.”

Rosetta was cynical and sarcastic. She hastily tried to refute her, but when she saw the bitter smile floating on her lips, she suddenly became speechless. Rosetta then continued to speak in a dry manner.

“Come to your senses. You only fell for him because he was nice to you, but that’s not true affection. Men’s feelings are as changing as the two sides of a coin, when the odds are not in their favor, it flips over in an instant. Haven’t you already realized that from our father? Men will be generous and give whatever you ask for as long as you fulfill their expectations, just like how father treats me. And when a man could no longer get whatever he wishes from you... you are well-aware of how cruel they can be.”

“Ri-riftan... is not like fa-father. He is...”

“If that man is not like father, then why are you here?”

Max’s lips twitched; she couldn’t find the words to argue. Rosetta blatantly mocked her.

“Don’t tell me words that even you yourself have no faith in. That man is not different from our father, you know that. That’s the reason why you came back here. Although you don’t see it, you are just as cynical as me, no, you are more cynical than me, sister.”

“S-stop it... leave. I don’t want to... spe-speak with you again.”

Max covered her burning tears with her palms and spoke in a muffled voice. Rosetta sat still and quiet for a long time then slowly stood from her seat.

“When you left, I wished that you would never come back to this castle again.”

Max looked at her, pain was evident in her eyes. Rosetta turned around and as she went towards the door, she muttered.

“You disappoint me sister. You always do...”

[◀Previous Chapter](#)

[Next Chapter▶](#)

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## Under The Oak Tree•235

[◀Previous Chapter](#)

[Next Chapter▶](#)

The conversation she had with her half-sister messed up her already chaotic mind. Max began questioning her thoughts. Looking back, everything felt uncertain. She questioned why she was so engrossed with Riftan, what was that made her this blinded. In a span of just over a year, Riftan turned her life around, making her have the will to live her life vigorously. In an instance, he became the reason for her to live. However, she wondered if that was normal. She thought maybe she blindly pursued him, like a newborn duckling closely chasing after its mother.

The moment those doubts entered her mind, the things that Max thought were clear to her, became a blur. She was no longer able to figure out the truth out of her chaotic mind. Now that she was back in this castle, looking back at everything felt doubtful: her life in Anatol, following along the expedition and even suffering in the middle of the battlefield all seemed like distorted memories. The cynicism that was etched deep in her stomach grew bigger and bigger as the days passed, it was as if it would come up to her throat.

“Miss, how about taking a short walk outside? The winds are not blowing harshly today, and the sun is warm in the garden.”

Max, who was deep in thought, lifted her head up at Joanna’s suggestion and the nanny then pulled the thick curtains, letting the silvery sunlight stream through the windows. It was that time in the morning, the only time of the day when the sun would seep into her room. She stared at the cold autumn sunlight for a moment then turned her head away weakly.

“I don’t really...want to go o-out.”

“Miss, have you seen how pale your face is? If you wouldn’t get any sunlight, your complexion would look just like a corpse. Please, breathe in fresh air to your heart’s content on a sunny day like today. If your health continues to deteriorate here, even if the miss’s husband does come, when he sees the lady looking like this, he might just turn his eyes away, shake his head, and leave.”

Her nanny’s last sentence barely made her get out of bed. Even though she was doubting everything, it was still him who gave her a sliver of will to live. Max wore a robe over the loose dress that had grown too big for her because of the enormous weight she lost during a short course of weeks. Joanna then accompanied her as she left her room. The annex was as quiet as a dead mouse. There were no traces of anyone else living in the huge, majestic annex, except for the five to six maids and a few guards assigned by the Duke of Croix to supervise the place: Max was aware of how the servants secretly referred to it as a place of exile. For generations, the Duke of Croix banished the meek women in the Croix family there, hiding them from the eyes of everyone else.

They descended the cold staircase and entered a courtyard full of fallen leaves. The red ivy that had grown on the wall gleamed white in the light, and the bushes that had not yet lost their green color fluttered against the gentle breeze. Max walked along the flowerbed and looked at the dried flowers. A few birds were hovering around, diving for a while on the ground, picking up flower seeds and pecking them. As she mindlessly watched the scene, her eyes caught the guards who were busily going to and from the road that led to the main castle.

Max became curious. On usual days, no one at this time would be approaching the annex. As she watched and wondered what might be going on, one of the guards spotted her in the garden and rushed over.

“The miss is not allowed to be outside. The duke ordered that the miss must not come out of the annex.”

Max’s face reddened at the guard, who treated her like a prisoner who went out of her cell. She knew that she was forbidden from going to the main castle without permission, but back when she lived here, she could at least take a walk around the garden outside the annex or even visit the library. As she stood still with a bewildered expression on her face, the guard spoke with a daunting voice.

“Please return to your room immediately.”

And then Joanna, who was fidgeting behind her, hurriedly grasped her by the elbow. “I will see to it that she gets back.”

Max felt helpless as she was forced to go back to her room, supported in her nanny’s arms like a young chick. Joanna claimed that she was the one who suggested for her to take a walk and didn’t know of the duke’s orders.



"That's strange. I didn't hear any orders about the miss being forbidden from even taking a walk in the gardens..." The nanny closed the door of her room and looked into her eyes. "Even though, his grace still sends out healers to the miss from time to time. It's not that his grace does not cherish the miss. Please don't get too upset."

Max couldn't even smile bitterly at the babysitter's ridiculous words of comfort. The only reason why her father sent healers regularly was that if she died before Rosetta's marriage, his plans would be ruined. Rosetta's mother also died in the hospital, unable to bear a son. If Max died from her deteriorating health, the cause of it would be pointed out to her miscarriage and would conclude that Rosetta might suffer the same fate. No matter how much her sister's dowry would be, her betrothal to the royal family would cease in an instant.

Max didn't say her thoughts out loud and merely nodded to acknowledge the nanny's words. She then took off her robe and handed it to the nanny, who folded it and placed it over her forearm. At that moment, something fell on the floor and made a rattling sound.

"Goodness me, that scared me. What is this...?"

"" "

Joanna bent down and picked it up. Max, who inadvertently turned her head, widened her eyes when she saw the blackened, dented shekel. She had placed it in a pocket inside her robe so as not to lose it again. Max quickly reached out her hand.

"Give i-it to me."

The nanny blinked in surprise, looking back and forth between the coin the size of a fingernail and Max's face. Then, she eventually handed it to her with a click of her tongue as if she found it strange.

"When the miss was a young child, she used to pick up pebbles and such to make flower crowns. However, the miss is now a grown woman. It's not proper for a woman your age to still pick up such a piece of junk."

"This is n-not...a p-piece of junk."

"I see, if you say so."

Joanna just lightly shook her head as went out of the room. Max looked down at the shekel in her hand. It was as if it was telling her that meeting Riftan and everything that happened after was all an undeniable reality. She stroked its rough surface and bit her lips silently. Her heart raced as she recalled what he said when he handed her the shekel.

'I hope that nothing bad happens to you, may everything that falls upon you be all good.'

Max placed the shekel against her lips and her face twisted as she teared up. Her shoulders trembled uncontrollably. She realized how warped her feelings were, how hopelessly weak her consciousness was, all her new awareness came flooding in. Rosetta's words were right. She didn't believe anyone. She didn't even believe in herself. All that she believed in was a hopeless future.

"Mi-miss!"

Hearing Joanna's urgent voice, Max rushed to wipe the tears from her eyes. The nanny came rushing into her room exclaiming in such urgency as she pointed her finger towards the window.

"Something happened! I went and found out why the guards were acting as such a while ago. The Remdragon Knights have come to the castle!"

Max was not immediately able to comprehend the nanny's words and blinked blankly. Joanna hurriedly drew the curtain windows and brought her to sit down on her bed.

"The miss's husband asked his grace if he could see the miss. Usually, it isn't that difficult for the guards to drive knights out of the castle."

"Di-difficulty driving them out ...?" Max repeated Joanna's words questioningly. "You mean to say... Ri-Riftan is here right now to se-see me...but fa-father d-drove him out?"

"There's no other choice. If he sees the miss now, he might demand a divorce this instance..." Joanna heaved a deep sigh as she looked with concern at Max's ill-stricken face. "No man would like a woman when she appears in this condition. His grace has no other choice but to drive them out."

Max's eyes darted anxiously, wondering if Riftan really came there to demand a divorce. At least the nanny seemed to believe that. No. Everyone in the castle thought the same. The nanny glanced at the door as if she was afraid that Riftan would come barging in at any moment and then clasped Max's hands.

"Fortunately, the season of rest is coming. As the days get colder, the miss's husband will have no choice but to return to his estate. And then, he will not be able to return until the season changes. If we will be able to delay it until then, the second miss shall be able to marry, and his grace will probably be less adamant."

The nanny softly patted Max's arm as if to soothe a child and headed out of the room again. She opened her fist and looked down at the shekel drenched in cold sweat. Her heart trembled at the thought that Riftan was there. She bit her lip anxiously. She did not have the courage to face him, that was why she ran away and returned to the castle just as her father ordered her to do. But still, she couldn't help her desire to see him.

She shoved the coin into her clothes and looked through the curtains. She couldn't see him from there. Perhaps, if she climbs somewhere high, she might be able to see him from a distance.

She hesitated for a moment, then pressed her mouth firmly together and put on a robe again. She really wanted to see with her own eyes that Riftan actually returned safely and uninjured. She looked around for a while through the small opening of the door and after making sure that no one was around, she carefully went out of her room. She was sure that no one would think that she would dare sneak out. And fortunately for her, the backdoor of the annex was left unguarded. She then hastened her steps.

The annex had a small backdoor that the servants used which led to a forest that was now dyed reddish brown in the autumn season. She hid among the trees as she went around the annex and headed for the main castle. Having been confined to her bed all this time, she felt dizzy just running through the woods for a little while, and her legs were shaking. Max took a breath behind the bush and slipped into the castle. Fortunately, she had gone unnoticed. Her eyes darted anxiously from side to side as she ran up the narrow stairs two steps at a time.

When she finally reached the fifth floor of the castle, she felt dizzy to the point of fainting. She gasped like an overworked mule and forced herself to climb up one more floor. And then, a wide arched terrace was unveiled before her eyes, with the full view of the duchy for her to see. Max staggered as she walked forward to the terrace. A flag embedded with the Croix insignia fluttered fiercely as it sat atop the castle tower. Beyond the castle's thick walls that surrounded the entire manor, she saw the Remdragon Knights encamped in front of the gates.

Although he was so far away that it was difficult to recognize, Max found Riftan immediately. He was sitting on top of Talon as the dry wind blew fiercely. Her heart pounded as she watched his dark hair sway against the wind and the chaotic emotions that swirled inside her became clear. All Max wanted at this moment was to see him up close. Even if he didn't want her anymore, if she could only be in his arms just one more time, she might be able to withstand everything.

Max was swept away by a pounding impulse and turned around. Just as she was about to run down the stairs, someone grabbed her by the arm and she let out a scream: it was one of the knights who served her father, he was glaring at her with a stern expression.

"Didn't the duke say that the miss is not allowed to leave her room?"

"L-let me go."

He ignored her request and took her down the stairs. "The duke was angry to the tip of his head when he found out that the young miss had disappeared from her room."

He said in an annoyed tone as he dragged her. When the knight turned to a hall located on the 4th floor, he sighed. Max began to tremble in fear.

“I was j-just... trying to see my husband’s f-face from a distance! I-I will go ba-back to my room! Please... let this slide for o-once.”

“His grace ordered for the miss to be taken straight to him once she is found. I must obey his orders.”

The knight replied bluntly and continued to stride forward. Max struggled to get out of his grip. However, as she was weaker, there was no way she could break the firmness of a trained knight’s arm. Immediately, he dragged her into the corner room at the end of the hall. Max looked around with a terrified expression on her face. Mirrors and chairs lined one side of the wall as well as various types of horse whips that hung from the display stand caught her eyes. It felt like her stomach was twisting into knots. She desperately grabbed the arm of the knight who was just about to leave the room.

“I really won’t... go out from now on! I s-swear! Please let me g-go.”

The knight sighed and gently removed her hand. “The miss should have then obeyed her father’s orders earlier. The miss is well-aware of how strict the duke is, why on earth did the miss act like this?”

The knight then turned around and went out of the room. Max groaned as she heard the sound of the door’s lock turning and hurriedly pulled and twisted on the doorknob. However, no matter how much she twisted and pulled, the door was firmly closed to no avail. Her legs then began to tremble. She collapsed helpless on the floor, looking between the mirrors and the whip with a terrified expression. Her reflection on the mirror seemed to sneer at her, telling her that she knew what kind of punishment she would meet.

What in the was she so afraid of that she came here to this with her own two feet? Was she really so afraid that she would be abandoned by him? Did she really believe that Riftan would treat her worse than her own father? Max hugged her knees. Even if that was the case, it would have been better for her to run somewhere far away rather than come back to this place. She was no different from a lamb being pulled by a leash to a slaughterhouse. She sobbed uncontrollably, overwhelmed by shame.

Time went by and the sky began to darken to a lavender color when the duke finally opened the door and entered. Max was startled and stood up from the floor. Her father walked across the room and arrogantly raised his chin.

“I’ve been patient with you for a long time.” It was a voice so cold that her spine shivered. “There was only one thing that I’ve asked of you. To behave just like a dead mouse. Is that so hard of a request to fulfill?”

“I j-just... wanted to see his face fr-from afar. I wasn't disobeying father's orders...”

“Did I permit you to open your mouth?”

The Duke struck the floor violently with his cane. Max immediately clamped her mouth closed as he glared at her with enraged eyes and spoke sarcastically.

“That has completely ruined 20 years of my upbringing of you.” The duke grunted as he clenched his cane with both of his hands. “Well, no wonder. You've been living with an uncultured idiot who has no regard for social class, it's only natural that some boorish manners would rub onto you.”

Max, who had her eyes glued on the floor, couldn't help but lift her pale face. How could her father say such mockery against Riftan?

“Riftan... went to wa-war on behalf of fa-father and suffered all kinds of hardships. The least father could do... is not to speak of him tha-that way...”

Before Max could even finish her words, his cane came crashing towards her with a violent strike. She collapsed on the floor, light flashing in her eyes as it hit her. No scream could come out from the imminent pain that seemed to cut through her bones. Her vision blurred and her temples felt hot like it was on fire. She wrapped her head in fear and looked at the Duke of Croix with eyes of horror. The Duke breathed wildly in anger and spat out his sentence word per word.

“How dare you, who are you mocking with that mouth?”

As if his anger was still not released, he raised his cane once more and stuck her on her shoulder. Max's whole body twisted as the pain reached her bones. With only two strikes, the Duke of Croix trampled all over her entire rebellion. Max's cold, shaking hands flew down to touch the floor as her whole body collapsed and trembled. The duke then grabbed her by the hair and pulled it tightly.

“If you wish to say anything, talk properly. Don't stammer like a f\*cking freak so I can understand what you say!” Max's lips trembled. The duke grabbed her by the chin as he swore harshly at her face. “Now, this time you may open your mouth. If you have anything else you want to say, say it. And my goodness, speak at least one word out clearly!”

“I'm so-so-sorr...”

Max's teeth rattled uncontrollably as she desperately tried to move her stiff tongue. In her effort to speak, she bit her tongue and blood came gushing out of her lips. A clear look of contempt flashed in his father's eyes as he looked down at her. He then harshly pushed her away and walked forebodingly towards where the whips were and picked up one of them. Max could only look at him helplessly. Although she wasn't tied up, she

couldn't seem to take a single step to escape. And then, his father ordered her in a cold voice.

"Turn around and remove your clothes."

"..."

"If you don't obey me right at this moment and cause any delay, your punishment will increase by the second."

Max turned around. With her stiff, trembling hands, she took off her robe and pulled her dress down. As her bare skin was revealed, the duke approached from behind her. She could clearly see him raising his arm that was holding the whip. Max tightly bit the hem of the dress that she was gripping against her chest. Soon after, the violent beatings began. It felt as if her skin was being chopped finely by a sharp knife. Every time the strike hit her back a shocking pain seemed to split her body, she felt like the most insignificant living thing in the whole world. With every beating that landed on her, she was on the edge of throwing what's left of her pride and begging for forgiveness.

Max knelt, her body crouched, curled against the cold stone floor, barely enduring the pain. And when she instinctively crawled on the floor to avoid the beatings, the sound of his father's furious curses echoed loudly in the room. However, not one word that entered her ears was comprehended. She wrapped her head and cried. At that moment, the whipping suddenly stopped. Max couldn't even think to raise her head as she groaned in pain and gasped like a labored animal. At that moment, a chilling voice resounded in her ears.

"Now... what are you doing?"

Max felt her throat tighten; she slowly lifted her head. Riftan grabbed the hand of the duke and looked down at her as if he could not comprehend what he was seeing unfold before him.

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[Next Chapter ▶](#)

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## Under The Oak Tree·236

[◀ Previous Chapter](#)

## Next Chapter ►

It was hard to guess who was most surprised by all this; him, her, or the Duke of Croix. Max froze like a stone statue and waited for him to disappear like a mirage. It felt like it would be better for her to crumble into dust than have Riftan see her look so miserable. However, as always, fate turned her back cruelly against her and mercilessly betrayed her expectations. He still stood where he was, wearing an expression so empty that she had never seen before.

The first to speak was the Duke of Croix. The duke shakes off Riftan's hand that held his arm and alternates looking between the wide-open door and the intruder's face. His face gradually became more distorted with anger.

"How the did you get in here? How dare you trespass into my castle?! I can't just let this go! If you don't get out of here right this instant..."

"Now..."

Riftan's voice was extremely low and flat. However, there was something so dreadful in his voice that even the heedless Duke of Croix froze. Riftan lifted his gaze which had been fixed on her and continued to speak.

"Didn't I ask what you are doing?"

This was the first time in Max's life that she saw her father so perplexed. There was something in Riftan's eyes that made him flinch and take a step back, he then turned red as if he had been embarrassingly insulted by his own reflexes.

"Don't make a fuss about whatever you've just witnessed! As a father, it is only right to fix my daughter's rebellious mind. It is a parent's duty to discipline their child."

"Discipline...?" Riftan tilted his head to the side as if he couldn't understand what he had just heard. His voice was extremely low and dry. "What you're doing now is... discipline?"

As his gaze flew back to her, Max hunched her shoulders and clasped the hem of her dress to her chest with trembling fingers. His eyes landed on her disheveled hair, her bruising face that was hit by her father's cane, and then on her swelling back: she felt like an earthworm, she had never felt so miserable and lowly in all her life. Max couldn't look him directly in the eye and lowered her head, then she heard her father's annoyed voice.

"A high-ranking priest is on stand-by downstairs. Wounds such as this won't leave a trace once she is healed with magic! My daughter must be taught this difficult way to make her learn how to properly obey orders." As the duke spat out his words, he lifted his pointed chin arrogantly, as if he wasn't happy with the fact that he had to excuse his



actions. “Now, it’s your turn to explain. How the did you get in here? Didn’t I clearly tell you not to return? It’s impossible for you to be unaware that trespassing into someone else’s castle is a crime... will you be able to pay the price of your actions?”

Riftan merely stared at him without a word. At the stillness of Riftan’s eyes, the duke clicked his tongue nervously and arrogantly waved his free hand that didn’t hold the whip.

“First, get out of here. Let’s discuss in the drawing room. You better have a valid excuse for your actions.”

“... Right.”

Rifan barely opened his mouth to mutter the words. He stood still with a firm, stone-like expressionless the whole time, then slowly turned around and walked towards the door. Max stared in disbelief as she watched his back grow more distant. She felt her body turn cold as if all the blood in her veins were drained. Her lips could only tremble, her mind was in complete daze and the thought of calling his name didn’t even cross her mind. Riftan paused right in front of the door. And then, he picked up a chair that was leaning against the wall that was next to him, turned around, and walked back towards them.

His face was so calm and restrained that neither she nor the Duke of Croix could understand what was happening until he lifted his arm that held the chair by one of its legs and the chair was ruthlessly slammed against the duke’s slender build. Max’s eyes widened. Suddenly, time seemed to move twice as slow. The chair shattered on impact, pieces of wood flew in all directions and the duke’s body soared in the air like he was a mere scarecrow and landed rolling on the floor. Screams, groaning, and strange sounds of pure bewilderment erupted out of her father’s mouth.

“You, you... wha-what do you think you’re doing...!”

The duke, who had crashed against the floor, lifted his torso, and looked up at Riftan with wide eyes as if he couldn’t believe what had just happened to him. His gray hair, which had been combed back without a single strand out of place, was strewn across his forehead and blood was dripping from his mouth. His face was horribly distorted like an evil creature by the blow, and he pointed a finger at Riftan.

””” ”

“You d-dare...! You dare...! You dare do this to me...!”

The harsh hissing sound that came out of his mouth was comparable to the creak of an iron door. The duke staggered to his feet and screamed to the top of his lungs, so loud that his throat would seem to rip open.

“Guards...! Guards...! Seize this right awa- UCK!”

Riftan approached him and kicked him forcefully in the stomach. The Duke of Croix collapsed pathetically and rolled against the floor. Blood and vomit came out of his mouth as he struggled to breathe as if he was choking. Max was totally shocked that the tyrant who had ruled her life could be so weak and defenseless. Riftan grasped the neck of the writhing Duke of Croix. He lifted him by his throat and ruthlessly slammed him against the wall. The duke's body swayed like a broken doll at the impact. He held his head against the wall and murmured in a low, foreboding voice.

“Why are you making such a fuss? Won't it be simply solved when you receive healing magic from a priest?”

“Heuuuk, heuuuu...”

The duke choked as his long slender legs that floated in the air floundered. His face that was filled with shock and horror was turning blue. For the first time in his whole life, the duke sobbed and struggled, kicking, grasping, and scraping his nails at his thick forearm that was covered in armor. He writhed with all his might but Riftan didn't even flinch. He looked down at the duke as if he was some pesky, fluttering bug and began to raise his fist. At that moment, someone barged into the room and urgently restrained him.

“Commander!”

Elliot and Uslin, who were wearing deep black robes, held Riftan back from both his sides. Riftan's face, which has been frighteningly expressionless all this time, twisted in fury as they forcefully attempted to loosen his grip.

“Let go!”

“What the are you doing! Even with the commander's position, if you do something like this...!”

Riftan shook them away at once. And then, he lifted the duke who was crawling on the floor to escape and slammed his fist on his face. The duke's jaw was crushed like mere clay and his eyes clouded and rolled back to his head. Riftan raised his fist once more towards the duke's lifeless, distorted, drooping face. Elliot was barely able to throw himself in between and grabbed his arm.

“Commander! He'll really die at this rate! Any ordinary person will instantly die if the commander properly lands a blow!”

Riftan writhed and roared like a chained beast. Max could only watch the scene transpire with a bewildered look on her face. Her father's face was covered in blood. He wasn't even moving; his eyes were rolled back and his body drooped lifelessly on the floor. As she dazedly stared at his mangled, broken body, someone else barged into the

room. Max flinched as she saw the person's face. Ruth gasped as he looked around the room in disbelief, and when he saw her, his eyes widened in shock. His face turned whiter than the color of flour.

"Oh my god... m'lady... how the did this..."

Just as Ruth's hand was about to reach her, Riftan screamed out loud.

"Keep your hands away from her!"

Riftan broke away from the other knights' hold, shoved them, and ran to her at once, harshly pushing away Ruth's arm. Max shuddered and hunched at the sight of him completely losing his reason and engulfed in anger. Ruth also flinched for his life at his vicious demeanor and then spoke cautiously as if he was appeasing an enraged beast.

"Please calm down. Shouldn't I cast healing magic upon the lady?"

Riftan didn't even seem to understand Ruth's words. His pupils were dark, dilated, and clouded as if he was possessed by a ghost. His ashen face was strangely distorted. Ruth approached her cautiously, as if trying not to aggravate him as much as possible.

"I won't touch her. I'm just trying to cast a healing spell."

Riftan's whole body tensed as Ruth reached out again towards her. This time, he didn't push her away. Max let out the breath she had been holding as she felt all the pain slowly subside. As the physical pain went away, her crushed pride now took over. She pulled her robe to the tip of her chin and glanced between the faces of Ruth, Riftan, and the faces of Elliot and Uslin that were frozen in shock. And then, she lowered her head and hid her face with her disheveled hair. She felt humiliation and shame pierce her spine like a sharp awl. She wanted to crumble like dust and just disappear from their sight.

"Alright now, it's all done."

When Ruth withdrew his hand, Riftan quickly removed his robe and wrapped it tightly around her body. And then, he lifted her securely in his arms and strode towards the door. Max felt as if she was floating in a cold cloud of insecurity and averted her eyes.

Standing on one dark side of the cold hallway was Rosetta. She slowly came to the door and looked frigidly at her father's drooping corpse-like state and asked in a sullen tone.

"... Is he dead?"

"He's still alive. But if you don't hurry and call the priest, he might stop breathing any moment."

Elliot had bent over to check the duke's condition and responded calmly. Rosetta merely nodded but did not call the priest. Max looked at her sister with dazed eyes. She wondered what on earth was going on. She must have fainted while being beaten by her father and was now having a strange dream. Her beautiful younger sister, whom her father was so proud of, turned her head away from the mangled body of the duke and pointed to a dark hallway.

"I ordered a maid to induce sleeping pills in the guards' meals. However, there are guards who remain awake in the eastern annex. They must have heard the commotion and are probably already running on their way here. You must hurry and escape out of the castle." Then she turned quickly to the other side. Her cold eyes swept over Max and Riftan's faces and then moved away. "Please don't forget that this has nothing to do with me."

"There will be no harm to the young miss."

When Uslin answered bluntly, she walked down the hall calmly and gracefully. As Max stared dazedly at her back that slowly retreated, Riftan turned and quickly strode to the direction that Rosetta had pointed. No one spoke as they descended the stairs of the long hall. Riftan went down four flights of stairs at once like a silent swish of a sharp blade and immediately headed for the castle grounds. Just as they were about to escape through the backdoor, the Duke's guards appeared and drew their swords to block their way. The guards gasped in surprise as if they had immediately recognized Riftan.

"This blatant behavior is absolutely atrocious! How dare you sneak around the castle! Are you aware that this could warrant the Croix family to declare a war against Anato?"

One of his father's loyal knights came forward from among the guards and screamed in defiance. However, his firm attitude was immediately trampled on by Riftan's piercing gaze. He then spoke in an eerily low voice.

"You'll get what you wish for. All of you, your families, this piece of land, I will burn everything down without a spare."

The guards who were around 12 or so in number, backed down and slightly moved away. The guards' faces grew pale, they knew well what fate awaited them if they went against Whedon's best knights. Elliot stepped forward as if to mediate when the tension was rising between them.

"You must be well-aware that the lady belongs to Lord Calypse. In the first place, the line has been crossed the moment that his wife was imprisoned in Croix Castle! Looking at it logically, it is clear that the duke is the one at fault."

"The miss is the duke's daughter! He has the right to keep her here...!"

“Caron, what’s the point of trying to settle this with words? As of today, Anatol and the Duchy are in conflict. Since that’s the case, then it wouldn’t be a problem if we cut anyone who stands in our way and get this over with.”

As if his patience had reached its limit, Uslin drew his sword and stepped forward. The knight that led the guards and stepped forward hesitated for a long time, it seemed that he had decided that they would not be able to stop them on their own and nodded at the other guards as if signaling for them to make way.

Riftan strode through them while Elliot and Uslin vigilantly held their swords, watching any attack that may come from whatever direction and quickly escaped from the castle. The cold evening air gently brushed her cold cheeks filled with dried stains of tears. Max buried her face against Riftan’s cold chest that was covered in armor and huddled her body close.

Riftan pulled his horse, which was tied by a tree, and mounted her on the saddle, then climbed behind her. It was only when she heard the echoes of horseshoes galloping against the ground that Max choked out the sob that she was holding back. She didn’t know whether it was from relief or from hopelessness. Max burst into a breathless cry.

No one questioned what had happened at Croix Castle. The Knights who were waiting outside the castle walls felt the tense aura that surrounded them, so they quietly drove their horses, not opening their mouths to ask about what had transpired. They rode non-stop across the hills as darkness began to dim the skies until they saw a town that was nestled at the bottom of the hills. Max blinked her puffy eyes in the darkness, squinting at the dim light. As she raised her gaze, she saw Riftan’s sharp-angled jaw glimmer. He spurred his horse and descended the hill at once without sparing her a look. They boarded an entire large inn at the southernmost part of the town. The knights got off their horses and moved them to the stables then took their loads.

Meanwhile, he lifted her in his arms, strode up the inn’s stairs, and brought her into an empty room. He carefully laid her down on bed and walked towards the lamp sitting near the window and lit it. Max sat curled up tight, hugging her body. The expression on Riftan’s face, which had been shrouded in the dark, was clearly revealed in the flickering light.

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## Under The Oak Tree 237

◀ Previous Chapter

Next Chapter ▶

She sobbed and took a deep breath. The smell of horses and the steely scent of his iron armor entered her lungs. Riftan placed both his hands on the windowsill and stared at the crescent moon floating on the sky. A tense flowing aura that could cut emitted from his back; he was still clad in armor. Max had no idea what to say. She stared at his tense back with a hazy vision and as she lowered her gaze down to her knees, she heard a light knock on the door.

“Sir Calypse, the hot water is ready.”

Ruth announced from the other side of the door. Riftan slowly turned and opened the door. Max scooted to the edge of the bed to avoid the light that creeped in from the hallway. Ruth was shooting a worried glance over Riftan’s shoulder.

“Here, I brought some clean towels and a set of clothes to change into. As for the food...”

“Bring the food up an hour from now.”

Riftan blocked the door with his broad shoulders as if preventing Ruth from entering. He then grabbed the basin, towel, and clothes from him, shutting the door before the wizard could say anything more. Max gazed nervously at Riftan as he approached the bed with the basin in his hands. He placed the basin filled with steaming hot water by the bedside table and dipped a towel into it, then wringed the towel and brought it close to her face. Max reflexively flinched, her throat tightening at his move. Riftan’s lips hardened and he spoke in a strangely tight voice.

“I’ll wipe off the blood.”

“Ah...”

After Riftan had wiped her face clean, he then carefully removed her robe, wiping off the bloodstains from her bare shoulders and back. Max felt miserable and helpless as she wordlessly accepted his care. Every time the warm towel would glide down her back, she felt shameful, she felt an overwhelming urge to run and hide away somewhere, but Riftan diligently wiped away the dried blood and scabs off her bare back, not paying attention to her uneasy expression. Max bit her lips anxiously as she felt his trembling fingertips graze her skin. After a while of wiping down her back, and rinsing the towel several times, he spoke with his mouth barely opening.

“... How often did this happen?”

Max's shoulders tensed; she avoided his gaze and averted her eyes from side to side, like a trapped animal looking for an escape. She forced a stiff smile.

"Wh-what... Do you mean?"

She heard his breathing grow heavier. Max looked away, fiddling with her tangled, messy hair with trembling hands. Despite being silent, Riftan's aura probed for an answer. She tried to ignore it but being unable to withstand the heavy tension, she eventually murmured in an awkward tone.

"It di-didn't happen... that o-often. It's ju-just... that he was extremely f-furious at me... today. U-usually, it's not this... bad..."

He stared at her with an undecipherable expression as she struggled to protect the last ounces of her remaining pride. His gaze felt like he was looking through her, and Max's face turned red in embarrassment.

"Fa-father is... e-exceptionally s-strict... at times, when he gets f-furious..."

"Since when was he doing this to you?"

Riftan brushed off her pathetic effort of trying to cover up the incident like it was no big deal and probed her relentlessly. Max held her breath like she was a cornered person, back pressed helplessly against a wall. She needed a shield, something to wrap her protectively and somehow save her remaining pride. She felt so insecure, like a weak, defenseless, bare infant defending herself from a man clad in armor. Max pulled the blanket nearer to her like it was a shield and looked at him fiercely. That hostility was triggered by the cruelty of being prodded to reveal everything.

"" "

"W-what do you want to know? How often I-I... get hit... since wh-when did he start hitting me... d-do you really want to know that?"

The knuckles that were holding the towel turned white as her grip tightened. Her heart trembled: it was laughable that even up to that point, she was still trying to save her pride.

"If you're th-that curious... then I'll give you an a-answer. It began when I was e-eight years old. Wh-when it became clear... that I was a s-stutterer. My fa-father would make me... recite a po-poem in front of him t-twice a week. If I-I... st-stuttered... he will punish me... in that room."

Hearing her words that were spoken so helplessly, Riftan lowered his head with a bewildered look on his face. It was the first time that she saw him that disappointed. He muttered in a rugged voice, holding his forehead.



“Today... I wasn’t thinking of taking you back to Anatol.”

At that moment, Max instantly lost all of her will. Whether or not Riftan knew that she was looking at him with a face so pale as if all the blood was drained from her body, he continued to speak like a puppet, his eyes stuck on the hardwood floor on the fluttering shadow of the fire in the furnace.

“I thought that it could have been better for you to stay in your father’s estate. If you had said that was what you wanted, I would’ve let you... the whole time I was there, I kept telling myself that over and over again. I’d leave once I saw that your health was recovering, I just wanted to see your face and then I’d leave. This time, I wouldn’t force you and drag you with me like I did before...” Riftan’s voice cracked as his voice grew lower and softer. He breathed heavily as he swept the hair away from his forehead. “I begged for the duke to see your face even just once. That man told me you didn’t want to see my face. It felt like the ground under me crumbled apart.”

“I-I d-didn’t...!”

Max’s voice suddenly surged reflexively, but her lips were immediately brought to close. Riftan’s piercing gaze flew towards her again. She fiddled anxiously with the sheets, her eyes averting from side to side.

“I-I never said that. I never said I didn’t want to s-see...”

“Then why did you go back to that place with him? Why?”

He abruptly rose to his feet and Max curled up even more, her back pressed against the cold wall as a cornered mouse. Riftan placed one hand against the wall, next to her face, as if blocking her escape.

“Was it better for you to suffer like that than to wait for me? Rather than being with me, was... was it better to be with that kind of person?!”

“I, I...” Max’s mouth trembled as she attempted to speak. “I thought Ri-Riftan... would never want to s-see me again...”

As Max barely blurted those words out, Riftan’s tanned face grew unnaturally pale. Max was hardly able to continue her words as her voice trembled.

“I-I lost... the ch-child...”

“And so... you thought I no longer wanted to see you?”

Riftan murmured in disbelief. Max clamped her lips, her eyes brimming with tears as she glared at him.

“What e-else could I... think? Y-you told me to l-leave. You didn't tell me a-anything...but to leave...”

“I didn't want to see you get hurt anymore!” Riftan exclaimed furiously as if he was blurting out blood with his words. “Ever since I brought you to Anatol with me, you've been subjected to danger for so many times. When I saw you covered in blood, all I could think of was that it was all my fault. Why did you have to suffer through that? Why you got pregnant, why you went and followed all the way to that place! It was all because of me!”

Max became speechless, her jaw dropping at his desperate shouts. Riftan continued to bitterly speak out the anguish that had accumulated in his chest.

“I should have left you alone. I shouldn't have even taken you to Anatol! I knew from the start that you didn't want to marry me! If it was really for your sake, I should have let you go when I came back. I even thought it might have been better if I didn't come back alive! While you were unconscious, that was all I could think of...” His voice cracked at the end. Riftan trembled violently as if he was suppressing something, then grabbed her shoulders. “If it wasn't for your sister, I would have left you there! Why didn't you tell me? What he has done to you... Why didn't you tell me? If you had only spoken to me, I would not have allowed him to come anywhere near you. I would have protected you, no matter what! Why didn't you tell me before? Why!”

“I, I, I...”

Max turned away from him, but Riftan did not allow her to escape. He held her by the face and made her turn towards him. She felt the last remaining shield collapse before his fiery gaze. There was no more pride or energy left to cover her.

“You...You like to t-think of m-me as someone special...” The tears that were brimming around her eyes ran down her cheeks. Without even thinking about wiping her tears away, she licked her dry lips and spoke again. “However... I'm-I'm merely nothing... I really a-am nothing...I was a-afraid...that y-you would discover that...”

Riftan's expression looked as if he had been hit hard on the head. Max closed her eyes tight, and tears came streaming endlessly down her face.

“Even if I died... I didn't want to tell y-you the truth. I, I... I-I didn't want you to know. That I-I'm... I-like this... s-someone so pathetic...” She tried to put a smile on her trembling lips, but she failed, and her face crumpled miserably. An unshakeable sob broke out. “I... I... I am so embarrassed...”

Riftan's hands that were holding her shoulders slid and dropped. Max huddled her body closer and covered her tear-stained face with her fists. Another suppressed sob escaped her lips. She felt more embarrassed than being subjected naked in the middle of a town square. In front of his eyes, she wanted to see herself as the noblest lady in

the world. It was better for him to see her as if she were dazzling. She didn't want to look so miserable, wretched, and pathetic.

She cried uncontrollably, trembling, and gasping as if something hot was lodged in her throat. Her crumpled face was soaked in hot tears, she couldn't get a hold of herself at all. As she gripped the sheets tightly and clamped her lips shut, she heard an empty voice above her head.

"You... you've been in my mind ever since." Max paused and raised her head. Riftan had a bewildered look on his face and his arms were drooping helplessly. He muttered his words as if he were confessing to her. "There wasn't a single moment that I didn't think of you. Even back when you didn't know that I existed in this world, you were the only one I had."

"Ah..."

She couldn't understand what he was saying, and her lips shook. Bitter, salty tears seeped into her mouth. Her wretched appearance reflected in his desolate eyes.

"The more that I yearned for you, the more pointless it became, even though I became miserable... I couldn't stop." Riftan's lips twitched slightly. "Many times, many times I thought about giving up. I thought to myself, I should stop now. The more that I thought about you, the lonelier I felt. I was alone, no matter who I was with. Many days, I tried to get rid of my thoughts of you. I told myself to stop wishing for someone I couldn't reach. Over and over again, I decided to stop... but every time I came back to my senses, I would always be chasing after you."

He pressed his fist to his forehead and closed his eyes tightly. "I don't think my heart is mine. From the moment I first saw you, it was no longer mine. And yet... how could you be nothing. How could you be nothing..."

Max stared blankly at his shoulders, thick as iron walls, trembling slightly. Riftan's head hung so weakly, like a man who had given up the thing he had been protecting all the while to the enemy. She, looking at the precarious figure from a distance, reached out slowly and hugged his head to her chest. She did not know what to say. Max just called his name again and again. How can he be so fragile, so heartbroken, so sorrowful? As she shattered in front of him, Riftan also broke into pieces in front of her. His body leaned helplessly against her. Their shadows against the light couldn't seem more pitiful.

Their bodies fell onto the bed like rubble from a crumbling wall. Max buried her face against his cold shoulder. Now she didn't even know why she was crying, she simply rubbed her damp cheek against his dark hair, spilling out the old anguish piled in her chest. In the dark, they lay and embraced each other motionless.

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## Under The Oak Tree:238

◀ [Previous Chapter](#)  
[Next Chapter](#) ►

Maxi had to ride a horse with Riftan as they couldn't find a carriage in the town of Genoa. She leaned against his chest and gazed out at the flowing landscape. The rice paddies swayed leisurely against the breeze and a few clouds floated on the dark blue sky, making her eyes shiver. Max leaned deeper into Riftan's arms and watched from a distance how everything got closer and closer as they moved. After the sun set and then rose again a couple of times, the Knights passed through the vast fields of granary and into the Yudical forest in one day.

As they did not have a carriage, they were able to reach the Anatolian plains twice the speed of when they first did last year.

"I was worried that the duke might send someone to chase after us... our journey has been more peaceful than I thought it would be."

Gabel murmured as he turned while preparing to make camp in the middle of an open field. Max stiffened at his words as she climbed down the horse with Riftan's help.

Riftan gave him a cold glance. "Are you perhaps afraid of the duke's knights?"

Gabel's face grew red as if his pride had been trampled over, he glanced at Max and shrugged. "It is better to avoid useless battles whenever possible. The lady can get hurt again..."

"If you have time to talk nonsense, build a fire, Laxion."

Uslin, who was pulling down the loads on the saddles, exclaimed annoyingly. Gabel grunted and went to gather dry branches in the area. Max merely watched with Riftan's arms around her as the knights released their horses to graze and pitch tents. As the campfire began to burn, Riftan placed a sleeping bag next to it for her to sit on. Throughout their journey, Riftan always held her, not leaving her even for a second. He did not even let Ruth nor the other knights approach her. Perhaps tired of his oversensitivity, the knights minded their own businesses.

Max wondered if they had learned all about her miserable plight. Did Ruth, Uslin, or Elliot let others know what they had seen at the castle? She was so flustered and embarrassed that she couldn't ask, but she couldn't bear it either because she was worried that the knights might take pity on her.

"Come here."

Riftan pulled the disconcerted Max to his side. She sat close to his chest and hugged her knees, like a chick hiding beneath its mother hen's bosom. When everything was finally set up in the camp, he took her into a tent, then laid her on a blanket, massaged her stiff back and waist, then fed her by hand. Max ate the bread and stew he gave her and crawled into a sleeping bag. In the darkness, the sound of rumbling horses, the echo of the wind, and the snapping of the bonfire sounded faintly. After a long quiet moment, Riftan's voice broke the silence.

"Don't worry about anything. I'll protect you."

Max realized he was talking about the Duke of Croix. Thousands of questions remained on her tongue. What will happen in the future? Will he really be able to stand against the duke? No matter how accomplished a knight was, if he attacked a duke, they couldn't let him go unpunished. She held her breath, remembering her father's horribly crushed figure. If the knights hadn't stopped him, Riftan would have actually killed him, and as she remembered the sight of his half-dead body, her consciousness flew directly to the words Riftan had said that night.

'Did he really mean those words? Did he say those words only because he felt pity for me?'

Given the cold demeanor from the first time they met, it was difficult to believe that she had been on his mind for a long time. However, Max couldn't dare to utter those questions despite them almost escaping out of her lips. She was worried that this glass-like peace that surrounds them now would be shattered. She stirred, closing her eyes tightly to shake the thoughts out of her head. Then, Riftan wrapped his arm around her back and embraced her tightly.

"Sleep well and tight. From now on, I will never let anyone hurt you ever again."

The tension from her stiff shoulders went away like a lie at his words that he uttered as an oath. She then wrapped her arms around his sturdy waist. When she was this close to him, all her worries went away as if she was enclosed in a huge, comfortable fortress. Max breathed in his scent and slowly drifted to sleep. The next day, they crossed the mountain in half a day and reached Anatol. The horses raced down the hill like the wind, making it to the front of the gates at once. After a while, the gates were pulled by its lever and became wide open.

They entered the lively city packed with buildings, completely exhausted after days of journey. Anatol was thriving as if some kind of magic was unfolding while they were away. Huge buildings that were not built before they left were now towering. The road expansion has since been completed and stalls selling rare items from the south were on both sides of the way. Those who were looking at the items with their backs turned and bent, noticed the knights' arrival and all cheered at once. People flocked and flooded the streets.

””” ”

Max was blown away by their enthusiastic cheers for the lord of the land. The citizens waved branches of Linden tree rich with red berries as the knights passed by. Riftan took the lead and led his horse through the crowds. Just when they had entered the square, a knight ran to the forefront of their procession.

“Commander, I have ordered the gatekeepers to increase the security.”

Max watched Riftan's face with an anxious look. He nodded to the knight and spurred his horse. They passed through the welcoming crowds in an instance. As they climbed the steep hill past the birch grove, the knights who stood guard on the castle walls immediately lowered the bridge of the moat. When they crossed the bridge, she breathed a sigh of relief. Finally, they were home.

“Leader!”

As they passed through the gates, the knights who were on the training grounds rushed to meet them. All the knights who went to Livadon for the war have returned to Anatol, except Riftan and around thirty knights as they have gone to the duke's territory to fetch her. Hebaron, who led them and returned to Anatol first, patted the knights on the shoulders one by one. Max sighed in relief as she looked at him, who had regained his health to its perfect condition.

When he found her glued to Riftan's side, he flashed her a soft, sad smile. “You have come back safely. Was the journey back difficult?”

When Hebaron approached her, Riftan's face hardened. He pulled her closer to him and gave him orders.

“...tighten the security right this instance.” Hebaron was visibly flustered. However, Riftan turned around as if it was too much to explain further. “Double the troops posted on the walls and restrict the access to the gates until further notice.”

Then, as if to leave the rest of the instructions to be detailed by the other knights, he led her and strode towards the great hall. Max glanced at the knights' faces as they hardened into serious expressions. She had been trying to pretend to be ignorant, but this time she couldn't help but ask.

“Wh-what will... happen now? Will a wa-war really...”

“It’s just preparation for precaution. That man would have no ounce of guts to lead an army and invade Anatol.”

Riftan cut her off and quickened his footsteps. As Max stumbled, unable to keep up with his speed, he lifted her in his arms.

“You don’t have to worry about anything, all you need to do is focus on recovering your health. I’ll deal with that man.”

“D-deal with him...”

Max wondered if he really would declare war. Riftan ignored her anxious gaze as he crossed the garden and strode up the stairs at once. As they entered the great hall, Rodrigo and the servants rushed out to meet their lord.

“Welcome home, m’lord, m’lady. It’s a relief that both of you have come back safe-”

“Please bring hot water and food. And clean clothes.”

Riftan ordered, cutting short their welcome, and went straight up the carpeted stairs. He climbed the stairs two steps at a time, not even taking a moment to catch his breath nor did he need it. In the blink of an eye, Max entered the room and she looked around. The tension she felt melted away as she looked at the room that looked no different from the last time she saw it. Riftan strode over the cats that swarmed and rubbed their bodies against his legs then lowered her down on the bed.

“Wait a bit. I’ll get some fire going.”

Then, without even taking off his armor, he walked in front of the fireplace and started lighting a fire. He struck the flint only a few times and a fire sparked in an instant. Riftan used the bellows to fan the fire then walked back to the bed and took Max’s shoes off. She looked at him with a peculiar tension. She could see his deep black eyes trembling through his dark hair that had been ruffled by the wind. The moment he tried to mutter something to say to her, they heard a knock on the door.

“M’lord, the water for the bath is here.”

It was Rudis’ voice. When Riftan told her to come in, the maids entered the room with a large steaming tub. Max looked at their familiar faces and tried putting a smile on her lips. Rudis smiled back but when she saw her pale complexion, her face hardened.

“M’lady, are you perhaps injured somewhere...”

“Leave the bathtub by the fire and get out.”



Before she could even finish speaking, Riftan exclaimed sternly. The maids were startled and flinched, then hastily moved the tub.

“T-then... I’ll leave the towels and change of clothes here. If there’s anything you need, please call for us.”

As Rudis led the maids out, Riftan removed his armor, hung it in front of the stand, and carefully helped her up.

“Come here, I’ll wash you.”

“I’m f-fine...”

“I’m not going to do anything. I just want to take care of you.”

Max nodded reluctantly. After Riftan took off her robe, she was left with a loose tunic that he had bought in the village and it was also pulled over her head. She raised her arms over her chest, wearing only a thin camisole, socks, and underwear. It was an act of shame rather than shyness. She had lost weight within a few weeks and her stomach was not flat, but she was skinny. He may have already seen it all, but since everything was revealed in such a bright light, she was concerned of what he thought of her. He muttered in a choked voice, rubbing the goose bumps on her waist.

“Are you cold?”

“N-no...”

Then, he knelt down, took off her socks one by one, tossing them away, and pulled down even her thin chemise. The light from the fireplace gently warmed her bare body. Max looked down anxiously as his eyes swept over her protruding ribs. As he stroked her bony back, Riftan’s face suddenly became distorted as if he was in great pain.

“I should have ripped that man to pieces.”

He muttered in a suppressed voice and buried his face in her stomach. Max hesitantly touched his hair. Riftan’s hand ran down her back, as if looking for a wound that had already vanished. She could feel his breathing grow heavy. Max felt a mysterious feeling envelop her. How did she come to mean so much to him? Although she wanted to delve into his mind, she was afraid of knowing the truth.

On one hand, she wanted to believe everything about him, and on the other hand, she had doubts as to whether there was any misunderstanding, or he just felt pity for her. Was it possible to receive unconditional love from others even if you haven’t really done anything for them? Even the denigrated didn’t do that, and yet, how could someone so perfect give it to her? Perhaps, someday, that passion could also fade away.

When such suspicions arose, she became overwhelmed with her own disillusionment. Perhaps, she had finally lost the ability to trust anyone. It could be forever impossible for her to completely trust Riftan. Engulfed in her own guilt, she leaned down and embraced his head.

“We’re home n-now, so... everything will be fine.”

His large body was trembling pathetically. After being held by Max for a while, Riftan removed the last of her undergarments and lowered her into the bathtub. And then, he washed her with utmost care, like a servant caring for a royal princess.

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Max thought that Riftan had to be exhausted as well, but she couldn’t refuse his meticulous care. In truth, his touch, which was soft as if he was handling fragile glass, felt like a great comfort to her worn-out mind and body. Max leaned her head back in the tub, looking at his strong, copper-colored hands gently caressing her. She could feel the blood in her body warm up and her stiff muscles release the tension.

“You can sleep if you’re feeling tired. I’ll dress you up and bring you to bed.”

Not minding if the sleeves he rolled up to his elbows got wet, Riftan embraced her from behind and kissed her on the temples. Max looked up at his hair that was damp from the tub’s vapor and his tinted cheekbones. Unable to resist the heavy weight of her wet eyelashes, she let her eyes slowly shut. The sound of the wind blowing against the windows and the water sloshing around created a strange rhythm—lingering in her ears. Surrounded by the peaceful, languish atmosphere, Max slowly fell asleep.

Max quickly regained her health upon returning to Calypse Castle. Riftan started behaving like a person who dedicated his life to fatten her up, and everyone in the castle seemed to be doing the same. Every morning, she would be served with grilled chicken, soup, and a variety of vegetables, and when her appetite returned, they served plump pheasants, ducks, lambs, and calf. For dessert, cakes filled with sugar, honey, cinnamon, and all kinds of strange fruits from the south were brought to her.

While they were away, the construction to widen the road had been completed and Anatol's market now overflowed with all kinds of rare goods, so Riftan seemed to have made his mission to bring her every food that exists in the world. Max sighed as she watched him enter the room with enough food for two men to eat.

"If I keep being fed like this... uh, I'll become a fat lady."

"Please be one." He set the tray next to the bed and looked over her skinny frame. "You need to gain some weight. Come on, eat some."

As if feeding a picky child, Riftan held the spoon and tried to feed her. He watched as Max ate little by little, large pieces of filled pie and steamed sea bass topped with cameline sauce and chopped geese. While she ate, Riftan cut off large pieces of wine-stewed meat next to her and Max also took those with enthusiasm. She liked the relief on his face every time she finished most of her food, but even though she ate a large portion of it each time, Riftan was never satisfied. When she barely emptied a third of the tray and set the plates aside, he offered her a piece of meat.

"Eat a little more."

"I really... am full."

"Just one more bite."

Max reluctantly opened her mouth. After eating so much, she felt like she was a sack for storing food, but if it would mean reassuring Riftan, she could endure the feeling of being bloated for hours. She eagerly chewed the meat and watched as he called for the maid to pick up the tray.

Riftan's overprotection had become several times worse after he witnessed her miserable plight. At times, he had to leave their room to fulfill his duties as the Lord of the estate, but he would come back every few hours to check her condition and bring her meals. Although she had already regained a lot of energy, she felt so restless because she had to stay in the bedroom. However, she couldn't complain because she knew she was the one who made him so anxious.

Max hid her sigh. "There are p-preparations to be made for winter... is it really okay if I do nothing..."

"Everything has been taken care of last year. This year, it's only food that we need to stock up on." Riftan frowned and looked back at her as he washed his hands clean in a basin. "The preparations are almost done. Rodrigo is referring to last year's ledger and is completing the preparations for this year step by step."

"Well, how about the infirmary..."

“Ruth and Medrick are overseeing the infirmary. The monsters have declined in numbers, so the patrol guards are not getting injured as often as they used to get.”

He answered her without any hesitation as if he had known she would say that. Upon hearing that everything was running smoothly even without her, Max’s face became slightly gloomy. Riftan, who saw her expression, frowned.

””” ”

“You almost died, and you were very ill. You even suffered through an extremely terrible situation. Don’t worry about anything else, just focus on getting better.”

In his eyes, it seemed that he could still see her bleeding. As she saw a faint hint of pain spreading through his ebony eyes, Max hurriedly spoke.

“It’s a very he-ctic time. You don’t have to spend too much of your time... on me. Nowadays, I’m feeling much b-better... Ri-Riftan has much m-more important things to do...”

“You are the most important thing to me”. Suddenly, his voice became rough.

Max’s shoulders shuddered from the abrupt shift. Riftan’s lips pressed into a line and slowly lowered his gaze. A very cautious silence fell upon them. Perhaps she was startled as he had only been showing her his soft side for some time now. From time to time, they both broke down for fear of hurting each other’s sensitivity. Riftan nervously rubbed his forehead as if the strange tension severely bothered him and exhaled as he spoke in a more subdued tone.

“I... like watching you eat. A long time ago, I once imagined serving you all kinds of sumptuous feasts.”

Max was puzzled and her eyes blinked rapidly. ” Since wh-when...”

“... Since the first time I attended the dinner banquet at Croix Castle.”

Riftan shifted his position and answered bluntly as he sat down. Her eyes shifted from side to side as she tried to recall how many years had passed, then Riftan continued to speak in a cautious tone.

“The banquet table was filled with all kinds of food I hadn’t heard of, and once the plates had gone even a little empty, the attendants would bring out new dishes. You sat quietly next to the Duke of Croix, merely staring down at your plate. I... I used to carefully watch which food you liked and ate.”

Max suddenly felt her face turn red. While looking at him with trembling eyes, Riftan slightly avoided his gaze.

“When I was alone, I imagined sitting with only you at the table. I wanted to throw you a dinner banquet as great as the ones your father threw, or even better than that, so that you could eat to your heart’s content every day. I don’t know how many times I have pictured your eyes in my mind, shining brightly amidst the candlelight with a satisfied smile on your lips. I wished that you would lift your head and look at me even just once...”

Perhaps thinking he had talked too much, Riftan suddenly stopped talking. His face turned reddish. As if trying to hide it, he scratched his head nervously and muttered to himself.

“They were childish delusions.”

“Even if my fa-father threw such banquets... we didn’t have such en-enjoyable dinners together every day. It was merely a way... to show off his wealth... to the g-guests.”

Max couldn’t bear the pounding of her heart and lowered her eyes. Even her fingers were pink in embarrassment. She wiggled her toes beneath the blanket and spoke her next words in a gibberish manner.

“I-in Anatol... the food is much more delicious. There are a variety of foods such as this... It is the first time that I eat like this every day.”

Suddenly, a chill passed through Riftan’s eyes. “Has that man ever starved you?”

“Oh, he’s never done th-that! To tell you the truth... whether I-I eat or not... my father didn’t care.”

Riftan looked into her eyes for a while, as if trying to figure out whether it was true or not and spoke slowly.

“I care for everything about you. Whether you are eating well, healthy, and happy, all of those are the most important things to me. So, don’t flinch away from me. Every time you do that, it makes me want to kill that man.”

“I, I...” Max stuttered as she swallowed dryly. “I really don’t... know why... I’m, I’m like this...”

Suddenly, a faint tension rose in Riftan’s face. “...I can’t explain why.”

He looked at her clenched fists and suddenly pulled her close by her shoulders. Max’s throat clenched when she felt his warm lips settle on her neck’s pulse. Riftan pressed his cheeks against her hair, then stood up with a sigh.

“I’ll be back in the evening. Take a nap.”

Max watched him from a distance as he turned and left the room. She thought that no one would care for her, and now that someone actually had her in his mind, her heart fluttered. She felt thrilled as if she was floating on a cloud and at the same time, she felt anxious as if she were floating in the vast open sea. Max held her shaking hands firmly. Riftan wanted her even without knowing the truth about her. Perhaps, he was merely pouring his affections because of the fantasies he had created. Perhaps, he is just stubbornly denying the truth...

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## Under The Oak Tree·239

[◀ Previous Chapter](#)

[Next Chapter ▶](#)



Max thought that Riftan had to be exhausted as well, but she couldn't refuse his meticulous care. In truth, his touch, which was soft as if he was handling fragile glass, felt like a great comfort to her worn-out mind and body. Max leaned her head back in the tub, looking at his strong, copper-colored hands gently caressing her. She could feel the blood in her body warm up and her stiff muscles release the tension.

"You can sleep if you're feeling tired. I'll dress you up and bring you to bed."

Not minding if the sleeves he rolled up to his elbows got wet, Riftan embraced her from behind and kissed her on the temples. Max looked up at his hair that was damp from the tub's vapor and his tinted cheekbones. Unable to resist the heavy weight of her wet eyelashes, she let her eyes slowly shut. The sound of the wind blowing against the windows and the water sloshing around created a strange rhythm—lingering in her ears. Surrounded by the peaceful, languish atmosphere, Max slowly fell asleep.

Max quickly regained her health upon returning to Calypse Castle. Riftan started behaving like a person who dedicated his life to fatten her up, and everyone in the castle seemed to be doing the same. Every morning, she would be served with grilled chicken, soup, and a variety of vegetables, and when her appetite returned, they served plump pheasants, ducks, lambs, and calf. For dessert, cakes filled with sugar, honey, cinnamon, and all kinds of strange fruits from the south were brought to her.

While they were away, the construction to widen the road had been completed and Anatol's market now overflowed with all kinds of rare goods, so Riftan seemed to have made his mission to bring her every food that exists in the world. Max sighed as she watched him enter the room with enough food for two men to eat.

"If I keep being fed like this... uh, I'll become a fat lady."

"Please be one." He set the tray next to the bed and looked over her skinny frame. "You need to gain some weight. Come on, eat some."

As if feeding a picky child, Riftan held the spoon and tried to feed her. He watched as Max ate little by little, large pieces of filled pie and steamed sea bass topped with cameline sauce and chopped geese. While she ate, Riftan cut off large pieces of wine-stewed meat next to her and Max also took those with enthusiasm. She liked the relief on his face every time she finished most of her food, but even though she ate a large portion of it each time, Riftan was never satisfied. When she barely emptied a third of the tray and set the plates aside, he offered her a piece of meat.

"Eat a little more."

"I really... am full."

"Just one more bite."

Max reluctantly opened her mouth. After eating so much, she felt like she was a sack for storing food, but if it would mean reassuring Riftan, she could endure the feeling of being bloated for hours. She eagerly chewed the meat and watched as he called for the maid to pick up the tray.

Riftan's overprotection had become several times worse after he witnessed her miserable plight. At times, he had to leave their room to fulfill his duties as the Lord of the estate, but he would come back every few hours to check her condition and bring her meals. Although she had already regained a lot of energy, she felt so restless because she had to stay in the bedroom. However, she couldn't complain because she knew she was the one who made him so anxious.

Max hid her sigh. "There are p-preparations to be made for winter... is it really okay if I do nothing..."

"Everything has been taken care of last year. This year, it's only food that we need to stock up on." Riftan frowned and looked back at her as he washed his hands clean in a basin. "The preparations are almost done. Rodrigo is referring to last year's ledger and is completing the preparations for this year step by step."

"Well, how about the infirmary..."

"Ruth and Medrick are overseeing the infirmary. The monsters have declined in numbers, so the patrol guards are not getting injured as often as they used to get."

He answered her without any hesitation as if he had known she would say that. Upon hearing that everything was running smoothly even without her, Max's face became slightly gloomy. Riftan, who saw her expression, frowned.

"" "

"You almost died, and you were very ill. You even suffered through an extremely terrible situation. Don't worry about anything else, just focus on getting better."

In his eyes, it seemed that he could still see her bleeding. As she saw a faint hint of pain spreading through his ebony eyes, Max hurriedly spoke.

"It's a very he-hectic time. You don't have to spend too much of your time... on me. Nowadays, I'm feeling much b-better... Ri-Riftan has much m-more important things to do..."

"You are the most important thing to me". Suddenly, his voice became rough.

Max's shoulders shuddered from the abrupt shift. Riftan's lips pressed into a line and slowly lowered his gaze. A very cautious silence fell upon them. Perhaps she was startled as he had only been showing her his soft side for some time now. From time to

time, they both broke down for fear of hurting each other's sensitivity. Riftan nervously rubbed his forehead as if the strange tension severely bothered him and exhaled as he spoke in a more subdued tone.

"I... like watching you eat. A long time ago, I once imagined serving you all kinds of sumptuous feasts."

Max was puzzled and her eyes blinked rapidly. "Since wh-when..."

"... Since the first time I attended the dinner banquet at Croix Castle."

Riftan shifted his position and answered bluntly as he sat down. Her eyes shifted from side to side as she tried to recall how many years had passed, then Riftan continued to speak in a cautious tone.

"The banquet table was filled with all kinds of food I hadn't heard of, and once the plates had gone even a little empty, the attendants would bring out new dishes. You sat quietly next to the Duke of Croix, merely staring down at your plate. I... I used to carefully watch which food you liked and ate."

Max suddenly felt her face turn red. While looking at him with trembling eyes, Riftan slightly avoided his gaze.

"When I was alone, I imagined sitting with only you at the table. I wanted to throw you a dinner banquet as great as the ones your father threw, or even better than that, so that you could eat to your heart's content every day. I don't know how many times I have pictured your eyes in my mind, shining brightly amidst the candlelight with a satisfied smile on your lips. I wished that you would lift your head and look at me even just once..."

Perhaps thinking he had talked too much, Riftan suddenly stopped talking. His face turned reddish. As if trying to hide it, he scratched his head nervously and muttered to himself.

"They were childish delusions."

"Even if my fa-father threw such banquets... we didn't have such en-enjoyable dinners together every day. It was merely a way... to show off his wealth... to the g-guests."

Max couldn't bear the pounding of her heart and lowered her eyes. Even her fingers were pink in embarrassment. She wiggled her toes beneath the blanket and spoke her next words in a gibberish manner.

"I-in Anatol... the food is much more delicious. There are a variety of foods such as this... It is the first time that I eat like this every day."

Suddenly, a chill passed through Riftan's eyes. "Has that man ever starved you?"

"Oh, he's never done th-that! To tell you the truth... whether I-I eat or not... my father didn't care."

Riftan looked into her eyes for a while, as if trying to figure out whether it was true or not and spoke slowly.

"I care for everything about you. Whether you are eating well, healthy, and happy, all of those are the most important things to me. So, don't flinch away from me. Every time you do that, it makes me want to kill that man."

"I, I..." Max stuttered as she swallowed dryly. "I really don't... know why... I'm, I'm like this..."

Suddenly, a faint tension rose in Riftan's face. "...I can't explain why."

He looked at her clenched fists and suddenly pulled her close by her shoulders. Max's throat clenched when she felt his warm lips settle on her neck's pulse. Riftan pressed his cheeks against her hair, then stood up with a sigh.

"I'll be back in the evening. Take a nap."

Max watched him from a distance as he turned and left the room. She thought that no one would care for her, and now that someone actually had her in his mind, her heart fluttered. She felt thrilled as if she was floating on a cloud and at the same time, she felt anxious as if she were floating in the vast open sea. Max held her shaking hands firmly. Riftan wanted her even without knowing the truth about her. Perhaps, he was merely pouring his affections because of the fantasies he had created. Perhaps, he is just stubbornly denying the truth...

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## Under The Oak Tree•240

[◀Previous Chapter](#)

[Next Chapter▶](#)

Max held the doorknob as she waited for Rudis' response. Rudis was evidently hesitant, her face uneasy as she opened her mouth with a reluctant tone.

“The Lord has asked for food to be prepared and served to the guests. They are probably at the dining hall.”

As soon as Max heard her response, she immediately opened the door without any hesitation and left the room. She could feel Rudis rush to follow her, but she pretended to be ignorant of it and quickly ran down the stairs, seeing servants busily carrying kegs of beverage and trays of food. Max brushed off their startled glances and headed straight for the dining hall. She hid along the hallway that led to the dining hall and secretly listened to the loud voices of the knights. It was difficult to understand every detail of the conversation as it was a mix of Whedon and Southern languages, but it seemed like they were talking about war horses and weapons.

Max frowned at the tepid conversation. The atmosphere was so casual that it didn't seem like a place to discuss important issues.

‘Were they... really just hired to keep Anatol safe?’

She wanted to try peeking through the cracks of the dining halls' doors, but she didn't want to be caught by any of the knights who always had keen senses, so she settled for

listening to the intermittent voices that resounded from a distance. Then suddenly, someone tapped her shoulder. Max let out a little startled cry and looked to see who it was. Ruth was glaring down at her with creased eyebrows.

“What are you doing in a place like this?”

Max was embarrassed to be found spying, so her face turned red, and she quickly straightened up her posture.

“T-that’s...”

Ruth’s eyes narrowed as she fiddled with the hair that fell forward her face and searched for an excuse. Max awkwardly lowered her gaze. Since seeing him again back in Croix Castle, they never had a proper conversation yet, so she had no idea how to approach him. Max stuttered as she struggled to make up her excuse.

“There were guests... who arrived...”

“I see, you’ve seen the Rakasim mercenaries.” Ruth looked into the dining room and clicked his tongue like it wasn’t worth knowing. “So, you came down here to eavesdrop?”

“Ea-eavesdrop... I can’t even ma-make out what they’re saying.”

Max forgot her embarrassment at Ruth’s accusing tone and glared at him. As he witnessed her attitude take a turn, he turned his back at her to hide his laugh.

“If you linger around here any longer and Sir Calypse sees you, you’ll get a lot of scolding. Please, come this way.”

Before Max could retort, Ruth went up the narrow stairs which were used by the servants. Rudis, who followed Max like a shadow, hesitantly followed, looking anxiously towards the dining hall that was noisy from the knights’ voices. Ruth proceeded to the drawing room situated on the second floor, then pulled the window curtains open and lit the fire with magic.

“Are you feeling better now?”

He asked as he dragged a chair next to the fire and sat down. Max, who was standing by the doorway, nodded.

”””” ”

“I’m mu... much better.”



“If it’s possible, I want to personally check your condition, but I will need permission from the Lord to do that.”

Ruth muttered bitterly and gestured his head to urge her to sit down. Max asked Rudis to bring him a cup of hot drink and then carefully sat down across from him. After a moment of silence, Ruth spoke first.

“I was relieved that your complexion looks good. Are you taking your medication well?”

“I’m taking them w-well. Thank you... for your concern.”

She fiddled with her skirt and plucked up her courage to raise her head and look at him. There was no sign of pity or awkwardness in the wizard’s eyes. Max’s shoulders relaxed as she watched him poke at the fireplace with the usual slightly gloomy and indifferent expression Ruth wore. Max sighed in relief at his normal attitude and raised her question comfortably.

“Why are... those pe-people here? It was so sudden... why are those mercenaries from the southern continent being hired?”

“Lord Calypse didn’t tell you anything?”

Ruth asked back, his forehead wrinkling. Max thought for a moment then shook her head. The wizard took some time to hesitate then eventually confessed a sigh.

“Sir Calypse has officially declared war against the Duke of Croix.”

Max’s whole body froze. Although she half expected that it would happen, her heart still sank upon confirming it from someone else’s words. Seeing her complexion turn pale, Ruth hastened to speak.

“It was decided after several internal meetings. The Remdragon Knights have long been hostile against the Duke of Croix. This was bound to happen sooner or later.”

“But... u-until now, they had no intention of going to war. The reason that this is happening now... is all be-because of me...”

Ruth opened his mouth and closed it again as if he couldn’t find the right words to say. Max lowered her head with a desperate expression. Her clasped hands visibly trembled. As she bit her lips, she felt the guilt and shame weighing heavily on her chest, then Ruth spoke in a cold voice.

“What happened is already done. Lord Calypse sneaked into Croix Castle and attacked the Duke. Although it has been quiet since, the Duke won’t let this matter be settled peacefully. It’s better to strike first than have them attacking Anatol.”

“B-but... according to the peace agreement between the seven kingdoms, war between territories is prohibited. King Ruben...won't stand s-still.”

As if that thought didn't cross his mind, Ruth shrugged and replied. “As you said, it is very likely that the royal family will impose sanctions. But there is enough justification from our side to proceed with it. The Duke of Croix has no authority over where the Lady should be held as she clearly belongs to Anatol. Moreover, harming the lady is more than enough of a reason to declare a war. Even if the royal family does interfere, when the cause is clear and just, it can be inevitable.”

Max's shoulders tensed and she couldn't help asking. “The other knights... do they know e-everything?”

Despite being vague about what she was pertaining to, Ruth seemed to have known what she meant. He paused for a moment and rubbed his nape, then eventually nodded his head.

“...It isn't because I, Sir Caron, or Sir Rikaido talked about what happened. However, everyone would have caught on that the Duke of Croix had done something unacceptable against the Lady. It is more than evident from the demeanor of Sir Calypse and the other knights who accompanied him that day.”

Ruth added hesitantly. “To tell you honestly, there were quite a few men who opposed going to war because of various practical reasons. However, those who agreed to declare a war were very adamant. It wasn't only Sir Calypse who was furious... but the other knights as well. There's no persuading them out of it.”

Max lowered her eyes in shame, not knowing what kind of reaction she should have. Ruth spoke with an exaggerated sigh, as if trying to clear the deeply sunken atmosphere.

“Besides, aren't knights known for wielding their swords in the name of honor and chivalry? Don't worry about it too deeply. Everyone will eventually calm the ruckus.”

“I-I... can't take wa-war that lightly! For m-my sake... th-there's no need to go through such...”

“M'lady.” Ruth's voice suddenly dropped low. Max flinched and raised her head. The wizard looked at her with a serious gaze. “The lady is the mistress of Anatol and a wizard of the Remdragon Knights. The Remdragon Knights never forgive anyone who does harm to their members. Majority of the knights voted in favor of the war. Even those who opposed it because of practical reasons also had the same sentiments against the Duke.”

“B-but...”

Max's lips quivered, she was at loss for words. She was reminded of that time when she envied the bond that glued Riftan, Ruth, and the Knights. Her heart raced. She wondered if she was really considered as part of that bond now. Seeing her face that was deep in thought, Ruth gave her a bitter smile.

"The Lady spared none for herself to fight for the remaining people in Ethylene Castle. And so are we. The Remdragon Knights have the right to resent and spare nothing to retaliate against anyone who harms the Lady."

"I, I..."

Max bit her trembling lips lightly and her eyes went watery. At the same time, her throat felt blocked as if she had swallowed a piece of lead. If she hadn't followed her father in the first place, it wouldn't have been necessary for Riftan nor the Knights to go to war. If she had not been so weak, if she only had a little courage and had believed in Riftan, if she only had believed in others, she would not have thrown herself out in that situation if she didn't abandon her own self...

She closed her eyes tightly and spoke roughly. "Although my heart appreciates it... I... surely don't want any wa-war to happen. I don't want to witness... such a tragedy a-again."

"It won't escalate to an all-out war." Ruth said firmly. "Although Sir Calypse seems to intend on ruining the Duke's territory to rumbles, if he does such an act, he will not be able to escape the sanctions from the Seven Kingdom's Peace Agreement. That's why territorial wars only commence after its formal declaration is fought through jousting. The opposing sides would summon their best knights upfront and after several clashes and combats, if anyone succeeds in striking down the commander of the opposing side, the war then usually comes to a conclusion. Wars between territories are completely different from wars against monsters."

"Yes, although... there must be some degree of damage... you cannot avoid the bloodshed. We have barely returned from a long expedition... yet now... there's another war..."

A perplexed expression floated across Ruth's face as if he thought she might burst into tears with her weak, trembling voice. Then, he spoke to her in a soothing manner.

"Lord Calypse will be leading it so it will last at most for a month... no, the war will conclude within a fortnight. Although the number of the Duke's troops are thrice of Anatol's, the power of the Remdragon Knights is far more superior compared to the combined strength of all the Duke's Knights. The reason why they haven't declared a war against us yet is because they have no chances of winning."

Ruth shrugged his shoulders as if what he was saying was a matter of fact and murmured. "Actually, it's better for us to declare war and bring it to them."

Then Max asserted urgently. “T-then, if there’s little chance of retaliation coming from the Duke... there’s n-no need to go to war anymore. I-I’ll try... to persuade Riftan out of it. Ruth... please convince the k-knights as well. If Anatol withdraws its de-declaration of war, my fa-father will also...”

“Doesn’t the Lady know better what kind of person the Duke of Croix is? Yes, he will try to avoid an armed confrontation, but he won’t sit quietly and let the incident go. For sure, he will find some other way to retaliate. Given that, it is better for us to conclude a war wherein we have an advantage. We cannot defeat him when he decides to use his power in politics.”

Max’s shoulders grew more tense. A cold sweat formed on her back when she remembered her father’s figure, laying on the floor, covered in blood. He is certainly not the type of person who would sit still after going through such a thing.

She bit her lip gently and then nodded with a stiff face. “I u-understand what you mean. Thank you... for explaining.”

Max ended the conversation and rose from her seat, Ruth followed her and stood up as well while giving her a stern look.

“M’lady, there is nothing you can do regarding this matter. Please, don’t even think about doing something reckless.”

“I won’t do anything re-reckless...”

Ruth narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms in front of his chest as he gave her a relenting serious look.

“I’m talking about you trying to contact the Duke of Croix and persuade him. There is no way that man will listen to the Lady, and that would not change Lord Calypse’s decision either. The two Lords will not be able to release their hostility between each other just because the Lady stepped in the middle of their fistfight. Some conflicts are just inevitable.”

Max’s face turned red at his words that seemed to see through her.

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