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“It could be given a t-try. My fa...father must also know that fighting...against the Remdragon Knights would cause a lot of da-damage. If our side takes a s-step back...and n-negotiate conditions...”

“The chance to negotiate has already gone. Even the lady knows that.”

Ruth muttered with a grim face. Max couldn't find any more words to refute and could only clasp her skirt. The Duke of Croix was a person who, above all, valued his dignity as a nobleman, his pride, and the honor of his family. For the first time in the Duke's dignified life, he was reduced to a crawling, blood-covered mess. Her father will not grow lenient no matter what condition will be offered.

She knew well that there was nothing she could do. Max wrapped herself around her cold forearm and trembled at her helpless situation. Ruth, looking at her in that state, then said.

“Doesn't the lady seek to get revenge on the duke? Despite him being your father... he had put you through such a situation.”

Max was caught off guard with Ruth's unprecedented question. After a moment of looking at Ruth with a startled expression, she lowered her eyes and muttered coldly.

“I,I... it doesn't matter to me whatever happens to him. It's just...having Riftan or the others... be subjected again to the battlefield... I don't want that.”

“They have lived on the battlefield their entire lives. And in the future, they will continue to live on the battlefield. It's inevitable, fearing for them every time they go out to the battlefield would be of no worth.”

Max closed her mouth tightly. Ruth looked at her and sighed.

“I understand your sentiments. However, please side with Sir Calypse' decision for this matter.”

She nodded reluctantly. No matter how much she has been reeling in her head, she couldn't think of a way to change her father's decision, and she couldn't find any words that would dissuade Riftan either. While biting her lips with a sunken heart, Rudis entered the room with a steaming herbal tea. However, neither of them was in the mood to leisurely drink tea.

Max excused herself from Ruth and returned to her room. As soon as she sat on the bed, she felt her energy drain, perhaps from all the tension she felt from the

conversation. She collapsed in bed, recalling the faces of the Duke's vassal knights. None of them could match Riftan. Although she said to herself to appease her troubled mind, her anxious heart hardly recovered. She then massaged her throbbing temple and shut her eyes.

Preparations for war continued steadily. It was often noticed that the mercenaries and the knights often interacted with each other in the training grounds, and wagons full of ammunition and weapons entered the castle frequently. Max had to keep silent and pretend not to know what was going on. Every time she looked at Riftan's face, countless words would climb up her throat, but she didn't know what to say. She didn't know if she had to apologize for being subjected to this kind of situation all because of her or beg not to take revenge for her because she didn't want that. She couldn't help but pull away from him several times, and he must have felt the tension surrounding her but Riftan didn't say anything either. And his attitude also played a big role in driving her to a deeper depression.

He was always more polite and cautious than necessary, and Max feared he had lost his enthusiasm for her. He cared for her more carefully than ever, but his treatment for her was closer to that of caring for a newborn baby than a wife. He hadn't even told her that he would be pursuing a war.

'Is he so concerned that if he communicated that fact, I could go into shock?'

Max thought as she looked out the window. The garden was full of workers busily preparing for the winter season. Among them were guards carrying in military supplies. She asked Rudis to fetch details about it and found out that in the next three days, the preparations for the war would be ready. Riftan will lead an army of over four hundred on horseback and march towards Croix. She turned away from the window, consciously trying to put the horrors of war out of her head. Rudis, who was sewing by the fire, looked at her grim face and shot her a worried look.

"Madam, would you like me to get you some snacks?"

"I ate too much for lu-lunch so I don't feel like eating."

"" "

"Then, how about a cup of hot tea..."

"I said it's f-fine."

Rudis closed her mouth somewhat nervously at her rejection. Max felt embarrassed and sorry for the annoyed attitude she displayed.

"I'll tell you...if I n-need anything. Right now, I re-really... don't want to eat anything."

Rudis showed a slight smile, showing that she didn't mind Max's attitude, then plunged back into her sewing. Max wandered around the room, feeling like a resentful child. As she idled around, she suddenly heard a long blast of trumpets from outside. Max turned her head towards it. She heard two long blows from the trumpet. It was a signal that a noble visitor had arrived. As she ran in front of the window and looked out, she saw a delegation of about 40 men carrying the royal flag pass through the gates. A cold sweat flowed down her back.

'Will the Royal family intervene with the matter as expected?'

"Ru-Rudis... help me dress and groom. G-guests have arrived."

In the rush, Max almost tripped over the protruding folds of the carpet. Rudis quickly held her up and sat her in front of the mirror. Then, in the blink of an eye, with wonderful skill, she carefully curled her hair, covered it with a mesh, and heated a flat iron with a stick over the fire to smooth out the wrinkles in Max's skirt. After looking at herself through the mirror, she threw a velvet cloak around her shoulders and hurried out of the room.

As she descended the stairs, she saw Riftan and the Remdragon knights welcoming the guests under the railing. Max felt the air tense and paused. Princess Agnes emerged from the crowd lined up in the hallway. For a moment, she was relieved that a person who was a friend of Riftan came as the representative of the delegation, and then Agnes' dignified voice resounded solemnly.

"I came a long way to deliver His Majesty the King's message. Please forgive me for not informing you of our arrival in advance."

Riftan looked at the princess with a cold gaze and then slowly turned around.

"If it's urgent, we can't afford to wait for you to rest first from the journey. the royal delegation to get ready. I'll arrange a seat. Rodrigo, assist the remaining guards outside and let them have a rest."

As he climbed the stairs, the princess, two knights on her left and right, and four splendidly dressed attendants followed him. Max hid behind a pillar, hesitating on what to do. The sharp air around them made her shudder. How could she intervene in such a tense atmosphere? After moments of hesitation, Max, who was still unable to settle her thoughts, followed them to the drawing room. She didn't want to go back to the room and be anxious about the situation by herself. And in plain sight, she's part and involved in this matter. As she bravely approached the mahogany arched door, the two knights and a veiled attendant turned to look at her. Max froze and stopped on her tracks. Just as she was about to give them her greetings, the princess' cold voice came from the other side of the door.

"His Majesty has made it clear that war is unacceptable."

Hearing these statements made Max flinch and turned her body stiff. Riftan's enraged voice was heard after that.

"The royal family has no right to interfere in this matter. You failed to keep your promise to protect my wife. And yet, with what grounds is it that you ask me to stop!"

"Please refrain from speaking and behaving in a rude manner!"

There seemed to be an uproar about it for a while, then it became quiet. After that, the princess's voice, which had subdued a lot, continued.

"I admit my lack and I have no face to present to you in that matter. However, that is a debt that I must personally pay. Right now, I have come to Anatol not as Agnes Reuben but as His Majesty's messenger. Given that, I ask you to treat me appropriately."

Riftan muttered something in a low, daunting voice but it was so low that Max could not understand what he said given the distance. The tense atmosphere made her feel like her liver had shrunk to the size of a bean. Max gathered all her courage to open the door, but she sweated profusely and was stuck standing by it. The princess's harsh voice came out again.

"His Majesty does not want Whedon's stability to be disturbed. As you know, the Croix family has had a long territorial dispute with Dristan. If the war with Anatol takes a toll on the duke's troops, Dristan will not let that opportunity go unnoticed. It is certain that they will try to reconquer the eastern part of the Croix territory which would then result in staggering damage to Whedon."

"Stop exaggerating the matter! Territorial pillaging is a direct violation against the Treaty of the Seven Kingdoms. Dristan would never be that blatant."

"Dristan also has a justification to execute that. The eastern part of Whedon was originally ruled by them. This is the territory that should have been originally returned to them according to the Seven Countries Agreement. Wasn't the duke's union with the Roem family a scheme to force that territory to be under his ruling? If it is pointed out as such, Osyria will not be able to arbitrate hastily."

Max's face froze at the serious tone of the princess. Agnes's voice deepened even more.

"The peace agreement only exists because of the delicate balance of power in the Seven Kingdoms. If that collapses, the power of the agreement will be useless. In that case, the order of the Seven Kingdoms will crumble with it."

"Even now, disputes continue to exist in every country for all sorts of reasons. A system that would collapse because of one war should have collapsed a long time ago!"

“You are demonstrating that the war between Anatol and the Duchy will not end in a mild conflict! We cannot tolerate a war that could weaken Whedon’s power and furthermore give Dristan an opportunity to invade. If the Lord still will go against the king’s command, His Majesty is planning to call Osyria for reinforcements to stop Anatol.”

Max gasped. It was a harsher response than expected and a chill ran deep in her bones. The tension could be felt even from beyond the door. After moments of silence have passed, Princess Agnes continued to speak in a slightly softer tone.

“The royal family is taking this issue very seriously. Please do not take such extreme measures.”

“Are you now... threatening me?”

“I’m asking you for a favor. The Reincarnation of Wigrew is a title that can only be obtained when you have contributed greatly to the peace of the western continent. Even so as not to spoil the name, please withdraw the declaration of war.”

A loud bang was heard, a sound of fists heavily hitting the table. Riftan’s roaring voice echoed.

“It’s a title I never wanted in the first place, anyway, it’s fine. If Dristan invades, I’ll take responsibility and stop them. No matter what His Majesty says, this time I can’t obey him.”

Max could not stand idle any longer. She reached out to grab the doorknob but before she opened the door, a thin hand like white jade appeared to overlap hers. She turned her head in surprise. The princess’s attendant approached her side. She looked at Max through the veil then tugged on the doorknob and stepped into the room. Riftan’s fierce gaze flew straight towards the person who just entered. However, the attendant walked in front of Riftan confidently and removed her veil. Then, his eyes widened.

“Why are you here...”

“I asked Her Majesty to let me come as her attendant. I thought that if His Majesty couldn’t persuade you, I would have no choice but to ask you myself.”

Max questioned her ears. The soft and fine voice that she had been listening to for decades resounded calmly.

“Coming here was also a risk for me. I came here in the belief of the Lord’s honor, trusting that he will bear me no harm.”

“I could just let those words be ignored.”

Hebaron, who was standing silently next to Riftan, raised an eyebrow. "We are not cowards to take an innocent girl as a hostage."

She ignored him and looked at Riftan with an arrogant look. "The lord is in debt to me. Is he not?"

"Do you want me to pay off that debt by withdrawing the declaration of war?"

Riftan's voice lowered dangerously. The girl did not back down at all despite the pressure emanating from his entire body.

"What else would I ask of you?" She sneered and turned her head towards Max.

Max met Rosetta's turquoise gaze and her eyes widened. She had no idea what was going on as her sister spoke with a sarcastic smile on her lips.

"Of course, if you don't think you owe me anything, you can ignore it. If you think my help was trivial and worthless, ignore my request and invade the land where I live. If you think it is more important to fulfill your own will, I have no reason to protest".

After moving his gaze along her eyes, Riftan's face met Max's and hardened. Max took a step back before the suffocating silence fell upon them. Rosetta looked at Riftan with a testing expression, and Princess Agnes pressed him silently. Riftan, who had clenched his teeth, soon muttered in a grudging voice.

"... I owe you an irreparable debt." He looked at Rosetta and spoke through gritted teeth. "Fine. The declaration of war is withdrawn."

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Sighs of relief erupted from all sides for a while, but Riftan quickly added to his words.

“However, if the duke takes this matter to worse, it will be a different story. This is the only time that I will back down. If any advance comes from the duke’s side, I will not let it pass silently.”

“My father does not want his subjects to cause more discord. I made that clear even to the Duke of Croix.”

The princess intervened between them. “Don’t worry about that. The royal family will not tolerate disturbing the current order. The same is true for the Duke of Croix.”

The corner of Riftan’s lips rose to a grim smirk. “He agreed?”

Princess Agnes nodded firmly. “The Duke of Croix does not want to disrupt his relationship with the royal family. If Anatol takes a step back, even if a dispute arises with the duke later, the royal family will actively intervene.”

Riftan was not at all reassured. Rather, he twisted his mouth and rose from his seat as if in distress. Then, overwhelmed by the back-and-forth conversation, he stepped forward in front of the immobile Max and grabbed her arm.

“You have achieved what you wanted, so now there is nothing more to do. Please leave.”

“Ri-Riftan...”

Max looked at him with a bewildered expression, Riftan’s words were too rude for the king’s envoys.

Then, the bitter voice of the princess was heard. “I will leave as soon as the horses regain their stamina. Will you not allow us to stay until then?”

He looked at the princess for a moment, then turned and walked out into the hall. Max couldn’t say a proper goodbye as Riftan led her up the stairs. Then, she heard Rosetta’s voice from behind them.

“Wait.”

Riftan stopped in front of the stairs. Rosetta spoke as she walked slowly in front of him.

“Before I leave, I want to talk to my sister for a while.”

Max’s face hardened. She wondered what it was that she had to say. The presence of her younger sister approaching felt threatening like she was going to be crushed. As if feeling the tension flowing through her body, Riftan immediately blocked Max from Rosetta.

“What the do you want to talk about?”

“I just want to settle some things between us sisters.” Rosetta lifted her chin defiantly. “Are you worried that I might hurt her? Don’t worry. I want to get out of this castle unhurt.”

””” ”

Her face burned at the sound of Rosetta’s sneer. She feared her little sister, so she couldn’t feel more pathetic seeing herself hiding behind Riftan. Max tugged at his robe as if to pull him back and stepped forward.

“Me, me too... I want to talk to her.” At her words, Riftan’s lips stiffened in repulse. Max added hastily. “Don’t wo-worry. Rosetta is...”

She tried to say something about her, but nothing occurred to her. Max looked at her younger sister’s face. Besides the fact of Rosetta’s beauty, there was not much she knew about her.

Seeing as Max couldn’t speak, Rosetta opened her mouth instead. “Will you walk me around the garden for a moment, sister? It’s too suffocating in here.”

She was displeased by how Rosetta looked around Calypse Castle with an uncomfortable expression, but she forced a smile and nodded. Riftan opened his lips as if to say something and reluctantly released her hand.

“... Don’t stay out too long. The wind is cold.”

He murmured in a low tone and looked at Rosetta with his cold eyes. She didn’t blink even upon his fierce gaze, which seemed to be fixed in not wanting to let go of her. Max smiled at him, meaning she was fine, and went downstairs with Rosetta. As they stepped outside, the intense autumn sunlight pierced her eyes like a needle. She looked at Rosetta’s pale hair shimmering in a muted silver color with a blurry gaze. Even in modest clothing, she was as beautiful as an angel, she was stunned without knowing it.

Her sister glanced at the knights who were following them and muttered. “I want to speak quietly between the two of us.”

Max felt a watchful gaze and turned her head to sir Karon. “Please leave us... for a moment.”

He looked at Rosetta with a cautious look, then nodded silently. “We’ll be waiting here. Please call us if any problem arises.”

When the knights retreated, they descended the stairs and crossed the golden garden. Despite the distance from the knights widening, Rosetta remained silent for a time.

'What in the world does she want to talk about?' Max was very nervous.

Rosetta barely opened her mouth when they reached the corner of the garden.

"Shortly after my sister left, the knights found father. It seems that he received healing magic just in time for him to survive."

Max stiffened her entire body. Rosetta had a mean smile on her lips. "But his speaking became a little slurred, there must be some misalignment caused in his crushed jaw. It may be permanent damage."

Confusion invaded her mind as Rosetta looked pleased with it. Max took a step back and looked at her like she was seeing a stranger.

"I, I... what are you thinking... I can't understand you at all"

"Of course. You never tried to know anything about me."

At her gruff tone, Max's shoulders stiffened. Rosetta wiped the smile from her mouth and spoke bluntly.

"Don't get me wrong, I don't blame my sister for not paying attention to me. I didn't ask to talk to you to merely get rid of those childish grievances."

"T- then why..."

She paused for a moment, then continued calmly. "I think father is in close contact with the nobles. He probably doesn't intend to pass this through quietly."

Max felt the blood drain from her face. A dry breeze blew through their bodies. She hugged her cold forearms and let out a shaky voice.

"What in the w-world... is he going to do..."

"I do not know the details. Perhaps he was greatly shocked by what your husband did. For a time he even confined himself to his room, then he summoned his vassals and sent telegrams to various places. He is pretending to accept the royal warning, but I believe he's planning something. Probably, as soon as my marriage commences, he will execute his plan." Her lips twisted nervously but soon came back to a nonchalant expression as if she had nothing to do with it. "I'm just warning you. Father might see an opportunity, tell your husband to be prepared."

"Ho-how come... why didn't you sa-say this earlier? If so..."

"If so, the declaration of war would not have been withdrawn. It would be more advantageous for your husband if he oppresses father by force." Rosetta spoke coldly.

“But I don’t want the war to ruin this country. There are at least one or two people that I don’t want to get hurt either.”

“I, I don’t want war either... but...” Max swallowed dry saliva. She didn’t want Riftan to get in trouble too.

Rosetta asked suddenly, looking at her face, which was tired of her anxiety. “Are you in love with that man?”

The strange words that came out of her sister’s mouth caught her attention immediately. She did not know what the intention of that question was. When she didn’t say anything, there was a rather sharp smile on Rosetta’s mouth.

“It won’t work. It’s impossible for my sister.”

Something soared from within her from the assertive tone. She knew Rosetta was putting her down, but she was angry for telling her face to face that no one would love her. Max’s face became brilliantly red and she raised her voice.

“Ri-Riftan... saved m-me. Ever since, he has been...”

“It’s not that man that is the problem. The problem is my sister. I mean, it would be impossible for you to love other people.” Rosetta responded calmly and cruelly.

Max’s hands twitched like she was stabbed by a thorn, and then she shook her head like it was absurd. “What do you think you know... a-about me? You... don’t know anything about me. You’re saying I don’t know you? The s-same goes for you too...”

“I know you.”

At the assertive words, Max momentarily lost her voice. She couldn’t even guess how Rosetta had this conviction. They were never close for a moment. However, Rosetta spoke monotonously, as if she was seeing through every detail of her.

“I am probably the only one in the world who can understand my sister even at the slightest bit.”

“Do-don’t say nonsense.” Her absurd arrogance made her nervous. Max distorted her face and fiercely retorted. “How can y-you... understand m-me? You received all the support... you are loved... how can you say that you understand me? You don’t know, you don’t know anything...!”

“Loved?” Rosetta’s face was also coldly twisted. “Seriously, do you think it is possible for that man to love someone else?”

“Fa-father is p-proud of you...”

“Father considers me useful, he doesn’t love me.”

“Well at le-least you...!” Max, who was riled and raised her voice, could not answer and closed her mouth firmly.

Rosetta said a few words with ridiculous coldness. “Yes, I wasn’t beaten like my sister.”

Her face burned with contempt, but Rosetta wasn’t sneering at her. Her sister, who was looking at the flowerbed where the grass had died with a gloomy look, spat in a dry voice.

“The year I turned ten years old, father made me watch while he beat my sister.”

Max’s eyes widened in shock and embarrassment. “Th... that can’t be. W-where were you... that never happened.”

“In that room with a mirror... There was a small partition on one of the walls. Father opened it and... he made me watch while my sister was being beaten.”

She gasped as if all the air had escaped her lungs. Max covered her mouth with shaking hands. The feeling of contempt was triggered by the fact that he showed his little sister how he beat her like an animal. She thought that Rosetta would also know what kind of treatment she was receiving, but she didn’t think that she had seen everything, like how she was crawling across the floor in such a horrible way. Rosetta stared at her as she staggered in shock, her eyes dry.

“Father was trying to show me how he treated people who were not worth using. Whenever my sister was beaten, I was also called to be in the next room. And, as father had intended, I was terrified to see my sister being whipped like an animal. I suffered from nightmares every night. If I wasn’t perfect, I would be treated like you. The next time, I might be the one called to the mirrored room. A useless human being is worthless to father. I... I worked hard to meet father’s expectations. Since then, I haven’t dared to be lax even for a moment.” There was a suspicious smile on her lips. “When I think about it now, I wonder if he punished you even more severely to set an example for me to see. So that I can’t even dream of disobeying or rebelling...”

Max struggled to picture her ten-year-old sister in her head. Everything was hazy as if there was fog in her thoughts. Rosetta always had a beautiful, perfect, and arrogant appearance that was firmly engraved on her mind. However, it turned out that she was also just a helpless little girl who was desperate to protect herself. When she realized that, she saw her little sister clearly as if something had suddenly peeled off from her eyes. A slender body and devastated eyes... a delicate girl, who would turn 19 years old in three months, stood in front of her.

“I have observed all the sufferings of my sister. How the soul of my sister was crushed...how fragile a woman can be, and to what extent a man can become ruthless

and cruel..." Her sister's voice sounded like an echo. Rosetta looked up at the blue sky for a while and lowered her gaze again. "I will never truly love anyone in my life. It would be impossible for me to trust. I want to, but I can't. There are brakes on the corner of my heart like it was broken. Every person who approaches is constantly suspected, tested, and eventually expelled. I'm like that... how about you sister?"

"I, I..."

Max staggered and her face twisted in confusion. At the end of her bewildered gaze, she could see their shadows hanging long and thin at her feet like bare, dead trees. Her spine felt numb. Then, Rosetta spoke her words again like a prophecy.

"It won't work. Eventually, it will crumble."

"I-It won't. I... I'm different from you." The words she barely spoke sounded too uncertain and precarious to her ears.

Rosetta refuted dryly. "My sister did not trust that man at a crucial moment, so it will be the same in the future. When the moment comes when your heart is tested, you will suspect him again. We have been twisted like that."

"I, I..."

Her throat ached as if she had swallowed a needle. She tightened her hold on the hem of her dress. From the depths of her heart, a feeling of resentment against the future asserted by her younger sister arose. And then, she spoke as if forcing the words out.

"I... I will ch-change that."

Rosetta wordlessly told her that it was impossible with her deeply sunken eyes. Max closed her eyes and screamed the same words.

"I will change that."

Just then, a fierce wind struck and swept through their bodies. The dry leaves that hung from the branches rustled loudly. Rosetta, who silently looked towards the clamoring branches, murmured in a skeptical voice.

"... I wish you luck on that."

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After the bitter conversation they shared, they then returned to the great hall. At the time they were back, the delegation was already preparing to leave. It felt suffocating for Max to send their visitors off without taking a proper rest when they had come from a long journey. She ignored Riftan's words not to say goodbye and led her servants to the front of the door to say farewell to the delegation. The princess who threatened Riftan did not appear pleased, but she was still a royal and she shouldn't be sent off so coldly like this.

"Don't make that face, I was thinking of leaving today anyway. I will stay with Count Robern for a day and then head straight to Castle Croix. We must announce the withdrawal of the war declaration as soon as possible." The princess looked at Max who was standing uncomfortably and flashed a hazy smile on her mouth. "Although I do not know what happened, based on Riftan's behavior, the Duke of Croix must have done something very out of place. I apologize that I could not take the side of Anatol."

"D-don't be sorry. I understand... that your royal position forbids you."

Max muttered stiffly, lowering her eyes. The clerical attitude of the princess towards the matter was disappointing, but it was her own fault that things got to that point. If she had not followed the Duke of Croix that day, the princess would not have had to intervene in this way, running around Weddon.

Max couldn't raise her head due to the guilt that's eating her. "Please... be ca-cautious as you depart. I wish you a... safe journey."

"Thank you for seeing us off. Today..." The princess suddenly blurred the end of her words. She spoke in an awkward way, not very likely of her, who was always imposing. "I was relieved to see that you are in good health. I am deeply sorry for many things towards you Maximillian."

"D-don't say that."

While waving her hand with a bewildered face, she shook her head firmly. "In many ways, my thinking fell too short. I'm sorry that you discovered it in the worst way possible. However, the rumors did not spread throughout the palace like what the Duke of Croix said. That man exaggerated."

Max's face hardened when she realized that the princess was talking about the rumors on her fertility. Agnes then added hastily.

"Of course, I am not trying to defend the king's mockery towards the duke. It was wrong of His majesty. I apologize on behalf of my father. If by chance, you have anything you need help with, please don't hesitate to tell me."

Max looked at the serious face of the princess then glanced behind her and looked at Rosetta, who was turning her back on them as if she wasn't interested in the conversation. She wondered if she could tell Agnes what her sister told her on the duke's advances. Max, who was worried for a moment, opened her mouth.

"Later... If the Duke of Croix... exerts pressure on Anatol... please intervene and mediate as aggressively as you did today. That alone... is more than enough."

As if thinking that she would not openly side with Riftan, the princess, who seemed a bit surprised, soon nodded firmly.

"Don't worry about it. If your father does anything wrong, I'll step forward and stop him."

At the princess's words, Max's face became clouded. "I-indeed... His majesty values the Duke of Croix... more than Riftan."

Princess Agnes, who had hesitated, soon admitted. "To be honest, yes. King Ruben wants to keep Riftan close, but that's only because he wants to show off the knight called The Incarnation of Uigru to other nations. At the present time, when war is forbidden by the Treaty of the Seven Kingdoms, Remdragon's armed forces are not of great value to use, except on subduing monsters and mediating disputes."

Max hardened her face at the excessively cold words. But before she could retort, Princess Agnes quickly continued.

"But that will change the game in a few years. Anatol has developed further compared to last spring. If it continues that path, it will become the largest trading city connected to the Southern Continent. If so... the Duke of Croix, as well as the royal family, will not be able to do anything with Anatol at will."

"" "

"But s-still...that's not happening yet."

The princess smiled bitterly at Max's thorny reply. "His Majesty will soon see him differently. I will tell him about Anatol's worth as soon as I return to the palace."

Max sighed. It was useless to expect more from Princess Agnes. The princess will always be a member of the royal family. If Riftan tried to harm royal interests, she could

turn to an enemy any time. She felt overwhelmed by a strange disappointment as she watched the delegation leave. She was relieved to say they weren't going to war, but she couldn't be happy when she thought about the future.

She trudged back to the Great Hall. Rodrigo came down the stairs with a coat in both hands, and approached as soon as he saw her.

"You shouldn't be walking too long, madam. Didn't you just regain your health? The master asked me to take his wife back to the room as soon as she returns."

Max couldn't beat the butler's guidance, so she walked towards the stairs and looked around.

"Ri-Riftan... is he in the room?"

"The lord went to the training grounds with the knights."

She looked out the window with an anxious gaze. Even if the declaration of war was withdrawn, there will be one or two things to resolve in the future. Max returned to the room and anxiously awaited his return. She thought about the words Rosetta had said as she wandered around the room. Perhaps what her sister said was what she was saying to herself. Did she fail and get frustrated even though she wanted to trust someone? Thinking about that made her anxious. Even her beautiful and bright younger sister has failed.

'Can I really change?'

Max walked over to the mirror and looked into her eyes like a skeptical cat. Standing before her was an anxious woman, who did not appear to be sure in her eyes. She lightly squeezed her cheeks, then lost energy and laid down on the bed. Time had passed so much that she seemed to have fallen into a nap. When she woke up, the surroundings were already dark.

Max rubbed her eyes and looked to the side of the bed. She couldn't find any trace of Riftan visiting. She frowned. Since returning to Calypse Castle, has he ever left her alone for so long? Max bit her lip anxiously, then got out of bed and draped a shawl over her shoulder. When she opened the door and stepped out, she saw the servants lighting up the lamps on the walls. She advanced towards them and asked at once.

"The l-lord hasn't returned yet. Is he still... in the training grounds?"

The servants bowed their heads politely and responded. "The Lord is in the office. He said he was going to sleep in the bedroom next to it because he had a lot of work to do tonight. I just saw him after laying the firewood a little while ago."

Max looked from side to side. Even in the midst of being busy preparing for war, he returned straight to his room at night. Was it so difficult to withdraw the declaration of war? She smiled at the servants who were looking at her and turned around, but she didn't want to go back to the room and spend the night alone. She hesitated, but eventually went up the dark stairs. As she climbed the two flights of stairs, she saw light coming from the end of the hall. After a moment of hovering in front of the door, Max carefully opened it, entered, and saw Riftan sitting on the bed while sipping his drink and then spoke, looking at her with penetrating eyes.

"What are you doing not sleeping yet?"

"Because y-you haven't returned to the room yet..."

Max felt slightly uncomfortable upon his sharp gaze and whispered her reply. Riftan sipped his wine, not saying a word. She closed the door quietly behind her and stood in front of him.

"Are you v-very... busy?"

"I had to send messengers to various places and explain the situation to the mercenaries I hired." He answered bluntly as he refilled his glass. "For the time being, we cannot be lenient, so I decided to keep the military system as it is. Mercenaries will also be coming in and out of the castle for a while. They have rough speech, so you must avoid going to the great hall as much as possible although you might run into them once in a while. It's not that good for you to exchange any words with them so as much as possible, don't talk with them. Make sure you're not walking around alone like now."

"I'll-I'll be careful." Max responded obediently and approached the spot close to his knees. Then there was a noticeable tension in Riftan's body. He held his glass so tight that Max was afraid it would break as he spoke to her.

"Sleep by yourself today. I have work left to do."

Max looked around the bed. She couldn't find a piece of parchment. She clumsily touched the hem of her dress and then asked lightly, as if making a joke.

"Isn't drinking a-alone... all that's left for you to do?"

"I want to be alone".

He put the glass on the table with a loud bang. Max flinched and was taken aback. Wine spilled over, creating an unsightly stain on the carpet. Riftan looked at her, rubbed his forehead, and regretted his harsh words.

"I don't want you to see me angry. Let me be alone for today".

Max stiffened and then slowly leaned in front of him. Riftan opened his mouth as if he was going to scream at her, then fell silent again. Max asked carefully as she looked at his cold, hard face.

“Wh-what’s wrong? I... I don’t know why. Why Riftan is so angry...”

“I...!”

Riftan’s shoulders shook and he gritted his teeth. His eyes went black. Max froze at his fierce expression. Riftan, who was panting sharply as if something had caught in his throat, spat out breathlessly.

“I want to make him suffer as much as he hurt you, no, a hundred times more painful than that. I can’t forget the sight of him beating you up. That room... your crying in that wretched room...”

When Max saw blood seep from his tightly clenched fist, she wrapped her hands around his hand in fear. Riftan sharpened his teeth quickly and screamed fiercely.

“I won’t be satisfied until I rip that trash into pieces. However, I cannot do anything because of the circumstances around me. Hard as I try to climb, I am still powerless. I cannot protect you properly and I cannot even fight for you.”

“R-Riftan... d-don’t do this.”

She shook her head, struggling to open his fist. Riftan screamed wildly, as if scratching his vocal cords with sandpaper.

“What use is the title of being a Reincarnation of Uigru! If I really am compared to a legendary hero, then why am I so pathetic and helpless.”

“Y-you’re not.” Max wrapped both hands around his face and managed to make eye contact with him. “Riftan... you saved m-me.”

“I arrived too late...! It was too late! I...”

Riftan, roaring like a trapped beast, suddenly stopped breathing. She lowered her head and placed her lips lightly on his. The hot breath tickled her lips gently. Max touched his cheek and whispered in a trembling voice.

“When I was y-younger... I used to pray every day... that the g-greatest knight in the whole world would appear... and save me from that castle... I hoped every day for someone to show up... w-wishing that person would take me away where my father couldn’t beat me up...”

As she tried to smile, a clear pain emerged above Riftan's eyes. She stroked his messy hair and pressed her lips to his forehead as well.

"R-Riftan... you saved me, you fulfilled that. You... are my hero."

He distorted his face as if he was being tortured. Max hugged his rigid body like a tight rope about to break, reassuring him. His big, hard body leaned over her like a helpless child. Her heart ached. If she had been a little stronger, he would not have suffered so much. She wanted to change for this man. She really wanted to change. She wanted to be tougher and stronger than anyone else.

She bent her head and kissed his warm neck. As their chests pressed together, she felt his heart beating as if it was about to explode.

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Riftan muttered roughly, like a drowned person. "I'm far from being a hero. I'm not like that..."

His voice stopped when she touched his chest under the fabric of his clothes. Riftan looked at her with heavy, confused eyes. Max kissed his cheek and dug her fingers into his black hair, which glowed with a dark blue light. As she pulled on the hair near the back of his neck with her fingers, a slight shudder ran through his iron body.

"Maxi... stop..."

She pretended not to hear, while kissing under the lobe of his ear. A groan emanated from Riftan's throat. He grabbed her shoulder with trembling hands and pulled her away.

"This is enough."

She flushed with fear and looked at him anxiously. "Do you not... want me a-anymore?"

There was something like frustration that flashed on Riftan's face. He muttered some swear words, roughly sweeping his face with one hand.

"Do you think... that is possible? I wanted you even when you were so thin and fragile."

"Then..."

With a sigh of relief, she ran her hand over his forearm. At that moment, Riftan grabbed her arm as if he had touched a hot iron. Pain flashed in his eyes.

"But I don't want to do that. Don't you know? Even when I see you so hurt, I'm horrible as an animal in heat!" He rubbed his forehead against her hand, breathing shakily. "I don't want to bother you anymore. I want to protect you. I want to treat you properly even once."

"I-it doesn't bother me." When she got between his knees, he groaned and brought her over to the bed. "You... the things you do to me when we do that doesn't bother me. Riftan... I like everything you do to me. I want to reciprocate that... to you."

His neck trembled greatly. Riftan reached out and tried to embrace her, but he shook and clenched his fist again. Surprisingly, it was fear that floated across his face. A man who didn't blink even with fearsome monsters in front of his nose was afraid of a woman who couldn't even cut him in half. He turned his head and backed away from her, clenching his teeth until his mouth turned white.

"No. I can't. I don't have the confidence to be gentle. I'm sure I might do it like a person who has lost his sense..."

Riftan's words broke when she unbuckled his belt and thrust her hand into the fabric. He inhaled wildly, grasping the blanket as if to gather self-control. While hesitating, she pressed her lips to his slightly parted lips gently and pushed her tongue in. The taste of sweet wine was felt on the tip of her tongue. As if testing it directly, she licked his lips gently and Riftan rushed to kiss her greedily.

He grabbed the back of her head and entangled her tongue with her aggressively. Then, she wrapped her arms around his thick, throbbing neck. Riftan tilted his head for better access, thrusting his tongue deeper into her mouth and wrapped his hand on Max's breast over the bodice. That only seemed to boil the blood inside her body. She moaned, mimicking him, touching him the same way. Then Riftan's face turned red enough to be clearly recognizable in the dark. As if ripping it off, he removed her bodice and placed his lips in front of the tip of her breast.

She shuddered and hugged his head. She felt the inside of her body melt down like a candle. He pulled the crumpled dress around her waist to the tip of her leg, rubbed her sweat-dampened back with the rough palms of his hands covered in calluses. Then, placed wet kisses on her white belly. Suddenly she was lying on the bed with her whole

body glowing pink. The swaying shadows from the fire ran through their bodies. Max tugged on Riftan's robe and pulled it over his head. He hugged her sternly.

His member, swollen with arousal, squeezed in between her legs. Riftan slowly grinded his body over hers, pouring kisses across her chest and neck. Excited by the heat, Max pressed her nails against his shoulders. At that moment, Riftan raised his body suddenly and pulled out like he snapped back to his consciousness. She looked at him puzzled. His face was fiercely stiff with discontent, and his entire body trembled slightly. However, Riftan took his self-control, held back, and pulled the blanket up to her neck. A stiff smile appeared on his mouth.

””” .

“Today... let's just leave it this way. It hasn't been long since your body recovered.”

Max stared at him blankly as he sat and lifted his pants. She felt ashamed and humiliated. Then she started to get confused and angry. She was fed up with being treated like a sick person. She caught him grabbing the robe he had picked up from the ground. She tried to pull him back on the bed, but he didn't even budge as he was twice heavier than her. She climbed onto the man's knees whose face was blank and pushed her swollen lips over his moist, juicy lips. Then Riftan groaned, took a deep breath, and collapsed in a ridiculously simple manner. Max looked at him with a strange sense of victory.

“I, I... I am not a child that you must protect and care for. I... I am your wife.”

He gave her a bewildered expression, then gradually narrowed his eyes on her. Her heart, which had been so elated, shrank in an instant. Riftan muttered in a low voice, dangerously wrinkling his sharp, masculine face.

“Then... what are you going to do now?”

“About w-what...?”

Max, who thought he would take over, looked around uncomfortably. Riftan gazed at her face, moved down to her bare b****s and abdomen, then squeezed his eyes shut, and his brow furrowed. A little confidence returned after his reaction, so she ran her hand over his chest, which was throbbing so violently she feared it would explode, and said in a low voice.

“You said th-this is natural... to do b-between husband and wife.”

Then she kissed the tip of his chin and ran her hands over his collar bones then down to his muscled abdomen. A sound of pain flowed out from his mouth.

“... you're killing me.”

Since his voice seemed to be genuinely sore, Max withdrew her hand and he held his fist against his eyebrows. Although he said he worried about her body, he may have actually not wanted her. Max gently pulled her hands away from him.

“If it doesn’t... feel good... I’ll stop now.”

He opened his eyes and looked at her with resentment, as if he had been misled. Max hesitated, not knowing what to do. After a long struggle, Riftan, who had been in conflict for a long time, spoke helplessly like a loser.

“I don’t have the confidence to do it and not strain your body. You have to do it yourself.”

As she rolled her eyes in shame, she stammered. “H-how can I... p-please explain to me how I should do it...”

He pulled down his pants with shaking hands. Then he lifted her body over his and gave instructions. “Spread your legs. Good... put that... Under...”

She sat on top of him and slowly took his member inside her. It was a bit overwhelming to feel him being so tense and tight. Riftan’s lips twitched as she stopped moving her hands over his abs. As Riftan held himself back, his body burned like hot copper. He groaned, making a harsh sound, and asked.

“... Doesn’t it hurt?”

For a moment it was a bit painful, but she shook her head. She touched him and he clenched his fist so hard that his hand turned white, and laid her back on bed again.

“Try moving a little. Move in a way that won’t strain you... uh....”

She slowly moved up and down according to his instructions and Riftan tilted his head and he buried his head back on the pillow, gripping the duvet so tight. He was like a lion tied to a chain and unable to do anything. Max looked at him with blurry eyes, wrapping him from above and then slowly climbed up. As she repeated moving up and down, the pain disappeared, and a strange pleasurable sensation arose.

She took him in again and again. Riftan moaned as if she was killing him, his entire body slick and wet with sweat and a harsh breath came out of his mouth. She couldn’t believe that the strongest man in the world stood so powerless under her. The more she moved, the more anxious and painful it seemed to him, but he held himself back in silence. She wanted to move faster and stronger to satisfy him, but it wasn’t easy. Quickly, those movements led her to the limit. The part of her body that touched him was throbbing and convulsions were taking place inside her. Still unsatisfied, she grinded over him anxiously and slumped over him.

“Ri-Riftan... Help me.”

He swallowed dryly, wrapped both arms around her tightly, and began to move deeply and rapidly. Max’s eyes rolled back in pleasure as she clung on to his body. Whenever he pushed in, sharp pleasure ran down her back. She sobbed wildly, crushing her forehead against his shoulder. Riftan constantly stroked her shoulders, back, and neck with passionate strokes. It seemed to her that he was struggling to control himself, but it felt like he couldn’t help it anymore.

Riftan quickly muttered words she couldn’t understand and moved faster and faster like a stallion released from its reins. Max struggled with her limbs, then her toes curled. In no time, an intense climax ran over her body like it was going to cut through her. He hugged her trembling and convulsing body tighter. It would be so good if they could stick together like that and become one, Max thought as she closed her misty eyes.

It had been a long time when the sound of falling rain awoke her and she opened her eyes. The scene of an unfamiliar room with shadows of the fire from the furnace came into view. After a moment of confusion, blinking her eyes in bewilderment, Max felt a hand stroking her head and looked up. Then, she saw Riftan sitting against the wall and looking out the window. Max looked at him blankly, and soon realized that she was lying on his lap and sat up. Riftan pressed her head back to his thigh.

“Stay like this and lie down.”

Then, he touched her earlobes and combed her tangled hair with his fingers. Max’s shoulders flinched at the ticklish feeling. He lifted the spilled sheet over her shoulders and asked with an anxious face.

“How are you feeling?”

“I feel f-fine.”

“I tried to hold back at the end, but you pushed me too hard.”

Only then did she wonder if she was too daring. She tried to turn around, hiding her flushed, embarrassed face in her messy hair. “L-looks like it’s raining outside.”

“It’s the autumn rain. After this, the temperature will drop.” He replied, looking at the raindrops on the window.

Max glanced at his dark face, then carefully wrapped her hands around the hand that was resting on his knee. She felt him slightly tense as she fiddled with his long, strong, calloused fingers. Max took his hand firmly and murmured under her breath.

“You can be relieved n-now. To be honest... I am pleased that I don’t have to see Riftan going to war.”

“Don’t you hate that man?”

Her face grew dark. When she thought of her father, the first thing that came to mind was fear. After being engulfed by deep-seated fear, a feeling of helplessness and shame followed. Perhaps, beneath those emotions there was hatred and resentment. However, the fear was so intense that the hatred did not have time to surface. Max replied in an empty voice, fiddling with his fingers.

“I don’t want to think about anything... regarding t-that person.”

There was a moment of silence. For a long time, only the sound of firewood burning, and the sound of raindrops echoed silently, and Riftan suddenly spoke.

“I knew you didn’t look very happy.” His sunken eyes fell on her face. “I even thought of sneaking into the castle and kidnapping you.”

His lips twisted in vain. “After that thought, the dazzling environment around you came to my eyes. If you were unhappy even in such a beautiful castle, I wondered how I could possibly make you happy.”

She looked up at him with trembling eyes. A distorted smile settled on Riftan’s lips. “I should have got rid of those useless thoughts, abducted you, and ran away.”

“I really think... th-that would have been nice.”

When she gently agreed, his smile faded. Riftan looked at her with a vague look, then looked out the window again.

“If I had, you would have been sad. Back then, you hated the sight of me.”

“I didn’t h-hate you. I was just... scared. I told you that b-before.”

“In my eyes, it seemed like you hated me.”

“In m-my eyes too...”

Max glared at him and closed her mouth firmly. As he waited for her to continue her words, he wrapped her hair around his fingers. She hesitated and sighed.

“In m-my eyes... Riftan seemed to hate me.”

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Riftan's fingers turned stiff. Max, who was laying on his lap, turned her head to look intently at his face. He then bluntly spoke as he stared at the raindrops that hammered heavily against the window.

"It's only because I felt nervous. Croix Castle is a place where I don't really feel at ease."

Max blinked in puzzlement. Even back when he was newly knighted, his actions were more dignified and intimidating compared to any nobleman. Although his speech and behavior were not very sophisticated, the arrogance in his attitude was present in the way he interacted, like he did not care about what other people would perceive him as. Max's bottom lip protruded.

"You're l-lying. Someone that nervous... wouldn't act that arrogant."

"Did I appear arrogant?" He asked, his eyebrows pulling together.

"Every time someone talks to you... You look down at them with this expression." Max lifted her chin up and imitated how Riftan looked at people, trying her best to look as conceited as she could manage. "Whenever someone spoke to you... you looked down at them with th-this kind of expression on your face."

"You mean, I made such a cute face?"

He laughed at Max's ridiculous effort to imitate him, then lowered his head and placed his lips on top of her protruding bottom lip. Max grimaced as Riftan's bangs poked her eyes when he pecked her lips.

"And whenever our eyes met... you used to stare at me with a fierce expression. It scared me..."

"You must have interpreted it that way because of my rugged impression. I was merely looking at you."

He responded gravely and squeezed her face between his hands, making Max's cheeks bulge frontwards like a squashed puffer fish. Her face flushed red and because of her

protests he eventually removed his hands away from her face. It felt like a thorn pricked her heart at the ignorance and nonchalance he gave towards his treatment towards her back then. She looked at him with disbelief in her eyes.

“I d-don’t think so. You looked as if you were angry about something. Sometimes... I... felt like it was because you despised me.”

Suddenly, the smile on Riftan’s face was wiped off. Max anxiously looked up, searching for an answer in his black eyes that seemed to have clouded to conceal his emotions. Riftan then muttered his words with a bitter smile on his lips.

“I thought you hated me. Whenever I got close to you, you were visibly nervous. And whenever I tried to speak with you, you would run away with a frightened look on your face. I felt like a horrendous monster every time you did that.” He lifted a handful of her hair that fell on her shoulders and brought it to his lips. “Later on, it aggravated me. And so, I decided that I would hate you too. I wanted to get you out of my head and stop, I wanted to make myself feel at ease.”

For a moment, Max was speechless. She wondered when she started to mean something to him. She recalled the first time she saw him. She clearly remembered the image of him entering the castle together with the knights sent to settle the dispute with Dristan. Among those hundreds of knights, it was him that stood out most and appeared most prominent. The maids used to argue over who would attend to him while he was at the castle, and even the ladies who were invited to the dinner banquets couldn’t take their eyes off him.

But Max couldn’t understand why women would fuss over someone who appeared so cold-hearted that they couldn’t even approach him. As he said, she did appear stiff and frightened around him, but never in her imagination did it cross that she would catch someone’s attention. Riftan was terribly good at hiding his feelings.

Max hesitated for a moment then reached out to place her palm against his copper-colored cheek. “And so... did you h-hate me?”

“I did.”

””” ”

Max withdrew her hand at his blunt response, but Riftan grabbed it as she was about to move it away then pressed it firmly against his face.

“I really hated you for capturing me and never letting me go.”

Then Riftan’s dark eyes sank and Max sat up and climbed to his lap.

"I r-really... never hated you. You were scary, but... in my head, I a-always thought you were dashing. That's why whenever y-you're in front of me, I get nervous and turn stiff."

Riftan looked down at her intently, as if to test whether her words were true, then placed a blanket around her exposed white back and embraced her tightly against him. Max felt beyond ecstatic as she basked in his warm, thick arms, letting out a sigh and placing her head against his shoulder. She wondered if that was how it felt to be a bird lounging in the comfortable, cozy nest. Even the heartbreaks and sadness, all her worries and pain seemed to melt in that calm atmosphere. Max watched the flickering shadows of the fire from the furnace and asked.

"Aren't you... disappointed with m-me?" She felt his arm that wrapped around her back stiffen. Max then hurriedly stuttered to add justice to her question. "I... stutter... I miscarried the ch-child... I'm not like that lady y-you... thought that I was."

"You are exactly what I dreamed of."

He abruptly intercepted her words. "No, you're beyond comparison from what I imagined you would be. You are impossibly brave, you are lovely to the point of taking my breath away. And the child..."

Riftan swallowed as if there was something stuck in his throat. "To tell you honestly, I don't think I want one anymore. I don't even know how much blood you lost back then. I don't ever want you to go through such a risk again."

She felt him trembling faintly and Max blinked hazily. She hated herself for being relieved by his words. Of course, he needed a successor. That was the most dutiful role of a wife to her husband, even her mother lost her life after several attempts that led to countless miscarriages just to fulfill that duty. Riftan's words felt unfamiliar, she was used to her father's obsessive attitude of having an heir.

Max stared intently at him as if trying to figure out if he really just said those words. And then, Riftan lowered his face to kiss Max's damp eyelids.

"Having you is enough for me."

Those words echoed in her heart. She buried herself deeper into his wide chest and their shadows casted by the light appeared like a strange shape of an animal. She thought to herself that it would feel so great to be just stuck to each other like this and never be able to part. It would have been nice if it was only the two of them in the world. Max then closed her eyes, growing drowsy from Riftan's hands that caressed her hair. The sound of the rain then gradually subsided, a soft silence enveloping them.

The tension that surrounded Calypse Castle immediately dissipated after the announcement of the withdrawal of the war declaration. Although the security in the fortress seemed to strengthen, the visits from the mercenaries and the wagons loaded

with weapons visibly reduced. Max saw this as an opportunity and told Riftan that the Duke of Croix was summoning his vassals and seemed to be plotting something. Surprisingly, Riftan was blunt about this.

“It’s just as I expected. It seems like they are putting pressure on the merchants that are coming to Anatol.”

Max’s face hardened. Anatol was a small land surrounded by mountains, most of its food supply was coming from trade as it was not a land suitable for farming. If the merchants were prohibited to pass through the trading routes that lead to Anatol, it would be difficult for them to come in.

She then asked anxiously. “Will that be... a-alright? If the merchants are cut off... Surviving the winter will be harder...”

“It wouldn’t be a big problem since a lot of the merchants that arrive from the southern continent come through the port.” Riftan replied while polishing his sword. “Lots of spices and silks will be brought into Anatol every year from now on. If they cut off the trading path from the north, it will be their loss.”

His calm explanation made her feel a little relieved, but she knew how stubborn her father was, so the anxiety didn’t go away.

“He might s-still... be plotting something else. My father wouldn’t stop at just th-that...”

Riftan sighed, then lowered his sword and went to embrace her. He sat on the bed and spoke as if to calm a child.

“There are still merchants who want to continue trading with Anatol. I commissioned them to follow the Duke of Croix’s movements, so you don’t have to worry.”

Max lowered her head weakly. “I’m s-sorry. Because of me...”

“Don’t be silly. It’s not your fault.”

He spoke bluntly, patted her head and then ran his hand through her hair. Max looked at his hardened face and sighed. Riftan seemed to want the Duke of Croix to intentionally cause some trouble and if the duke gave him the excuse, he would always try to fight.

She felt like she was set in front of a dam that she would never know when it would collapse. However, regardless of her anxieties, the times passed by peacefully. Castle Calypse was hectic in their preparations for winter and the temperature dropped day by day as the season of rest approached. The restlessness gradually subsided after a week or two: when the weather turned cold, there was almost no travels in between territories. Even if the Duke of Croix was plotting something, it would probably be

executed after the winter season had passed. Worrying about it constantly would only affect her and so Max consciously forced herself to stow her anxieties away.

In fact, since the declaration of war was withdrawn, there was no time for her to be buried alone in her anxieties as Riftan was constantly with her. While Max was brushing Rem's mane, she stole a glance at her husband: he was dressed in casual clothes as he leisurely fed Talon an apple, so it didn't appear like he would head towards the training grounds or patrol the walls after that. Max frowned a bit. Although being together like that was the most enjoyable and blissful moment for her, she worried that he might be dedicating too much of his time to her. Since she had been carefully observing the amount of work he had to do, after having quietly groomed Rem's mane for a while, she carefully opened her mouth.

"Aren't you b-busy? There's no need to accompany me all the time when you have much to do, you might overwork yourself. Your body and health..."

"The road widening construction has been completed and the preparations for winter are all done as well. Right now all I need to monitor is Anatol's border securities."

"Well, it's not that. Just last year... You've been so busy. I was wondering if it's okay to be like this..."

Riftan's expression appeared a little downcast. "Is it annoying for you that I'm around you?"

"Th-that's not the case at all. It's just that last year... you were so busy at this time. I was just wondering if it's okay to be like th-this..."

"Last year, it hadn't been long since I came home from the dragon expedition. I was busy sorting out all the accumulated work. From now on, I have no intention of working myself to death for the rest of my life."

"I would like to object to that."

Max turned her head to the voice that suddenly spoke. Hebaron was standing at the entrance of the stables with a displeased expression on his face.

"You are not going to put the responsibility of being the training director on me in the future, are you? I am overwhelmed with managing the guards alone."

"Don't talk as if you're handling it all by yourself. I am aware of the fact that you've handed the management of the guards to Elliot." Riftan answered bluntly, took an apple from the basket and fed it to Talon. "All this time you were slacking off so don't talk much bullsh*t."

Hebaron pursed his lips as if he was about to retaliate harshly, then looked at Max and let out a deep sigh.

“Let’s discuss that matter later... for now, you must come to the knight’s quarters at once. The spies who were sent to the duchy have returned.”

Max’s shoulders stiffened and Riftan shot a cold glare at Hebaron.

“I’ll be there soon, so wait there.”

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“Don’t take too long.” Hebaron shrugged his bulky shoulders, turned around and went back.

After finishing feeding Talon an apple, Riftan went to the front of the water trough and brusquely washed his hands.

“You should return to the room first.”

He wiped the water from his hands and picked up the robe that he had casually hung on the fence of the stables. Max stroked Rem’s neck and shot Riftan an anxious look.

“Is there... some problem that came up?”

“The informant who was sent to verify the duke’s movements has just returned.” Riftan looked at her darkened face, sighed a little, and draped a cloak over her shoulder. “It’s not a big deal, so don’t worry, just rest in the room. Don’t wander off anywhere else.”

Then, he ruffled Max’s bangs and kissed her forehead. She tried to smile for him. After confirming that she had entered the castle, Riftan headed straight for the training grounds. Max returned to the room and looked out the window incessantly.

Under the gray hazy sky, the bare trees shook their bare branches like blackened bones. The silver sun occasionally cast pale rays of light behind the hazy clouds, but it

wasn't enough to bring life to the desolate garden where the chilly breeze blew. She wondered if her overt anxiety made her feel like the cold landscape was hinting at future ordeals. Max sighed, dragged a chair in front of the fireplace, and sat down. Roy, who was following her, climbed nimbly over her knees and purred alluringly. She was slightly relieved by his relaxed and calm appearance, stroking his soft back to ease her nervousness.

Riftan returned to the room when the night had fallen. Max took his cape and looked at him, waiting for him to tell her what went on in the conference room. However, Riftan walked in front of the fire without saying anything, took off his boots, and washed his hands with lukewarm water. When she grabbed a towel and handed it to him, he barely turned his head towards her.

"Did you have dinner?"

"A l-little while ago. How about you, Riftan...? Do you want me to tell them to prepare something to eat?"

"No, I also had dinner in the conference room."

He washed his face and rubbed his face with a towel. Max looked him in the eye and asked, unable to overcome her impatience.

"A-about my father... have you discovered what he is scheming?"

Riftan's eyebrows slightly pulled together. Then, he shook his head after a bit of pause.

"The only thing I have discovered is that your father is in frequent contact with his vassals."

Max narrowed her eyes. They couldn't have discussed this for so long with so little information. If Hebaron had searched for him in a hurry, they must have found something important. She put on a disappointed expression, but kept her mouth shut tight. Riftan sighed as if he had noticed that she was suspicious.

"Whatever Duke Croix does, it's my job to handle it. You don't have to worry about him anymore."

"" " "

"Ho-how could I do that? That person... is my father. What happened is because of me..."

"He is a son of a b*tch who whips his own daughter, what kind of father he is."

He threw the towel on the shelf and spat his words out roughly. Max's shoulders flinched at his sudden outrage.

"What I'm saying is... This problem concerns me too... I meant I have a responsibility over it. I also have the right to know... what is going on."

"I told you over and over again, you are not responsible for this." Riftan abruptly intercepted her words. "I am the one who beat him up, that's the reason why he's scheming in retaliation. That's all. This is a problem between me and that man."

"But it's because of m-me... that you beat him up!" Max's voice also increased due to his stubborn attitude. "How... could I-I have... n-nothing to do with this matter? I'm the one who was there! If it wasn't for me, Riftan wouldn't have done that... And the pressure that fa-father's putting on Anatol..."

"Fine. Let's say it's your fault. What the are you going to do?" Riftan went ahead of her and asked her furiously.

Max's face turned red. Like he said, there was nothing she could do, but she didn't want to admit it, so she responded with a grunt.

"We don't know for ce-certain. Maybe there's something I c-can do..."

"There is nothing you can do. Even if there is, I will never seek your help."

The cold words drew the blood from her face. Max looked at him with shocked eyes and then took a step back. She turned around and tried to run out of the room, but Riftan quickly grabbed her arm and embraced her. Max struggled and hit his shoulders with her fists. Without blinking, Riftan wrapped one hand around her back and gave her a fierce kiss. Max clenched her jaws tight and tried to pull away from him, but he clutched her hair and pulled her back to him. Riftan frowned and slightly bit her lips. Might reflexively opened her mouth from the stinging pain of his bite and his hot, pulsating tongue entered her mouth.

Max hated herself for melting to him in an instant. He rolled his tongue against her unmoving tongue and sucked on it, swept through the roof of her mouth then to the insides of her cheeks. A strange shiver ran down the back of her ears and her limbs went limp. Max looked at him breathlessly.

"Th-this time... I hate you s-so much... Riftan."

"Don't say it that way." He murmured wildly and kissed her cheeks and wet eyes. "I never depend on anyone else to solve problems for me, especially not you."

His words dug into her chest like a dagger. Max looked at him with a hurt look. "Then... I'm-I'm not going to depend on Riftan either. In the future, I won't let you take care of anything that has to do with me."

At the end of the threatening words, Riftan's face abruptly hardened. "Don't be silly. You are my wife, it is my duty to take care of you and protect you!"

"Riftan... can freely go about my problems... but I-I can't do that for you?"

"Yes."

At his response that didn't even buckle, Max quickly lost her words. He looked at her straight in the eyes and muttered in a low voice.

"I will solve all your problems and mine. I cannot tolerate you trying to solve it again."

"Such thing..."

Before she could even argue he pressed his lips against hers again. Max raised her hand over his shoulders to push him away, but even when she tried, he was pulling her madly against his chest. Whenever his soft tongue pushed into her mouth and then out, her head turned hazy, and when his hand swept across her body, dizzying heat rose from inside her stomach. She took a deep breath and dug her nails on his shoulders.

When Riftan lowered her dress, he lightly caressed her exposed shoulders, making a pleasurable sensation spread down from the nape of her neck to her spine. Max trembled with excitement, his palms gently wrapped around her hardened nubs, lightly flicking and arousing her sensitive areas with his gentle caresses. In an instance, all her rebellion melted like butter under the midsummer heat. She was even a little afraid about how he could handle her so easily.

Max turned to release herself from his arms. However, he simply suppressed her movements, pulling her dress down to her waist and gently sucked the tip of her breast into his mouth. She could not bear it, wrapped her arms around his head and threw back her head. She couldn't believe that she could feel this deep pleasure despite being angry to the tip of her head.

Aggravating the situation, she pushed her hands into his clothes as well and instantly something flared in Riftan's eyes. As if to encourage him, she thrust her tongue into his mouth and he let out a soft moan as he laid her down on bed. In the blink of an eye, Max was lying naked and Riftan was pouring kisses all over her body. His hair that was black as a crow's feathers sent a sweet ticklish feeling against her bright red skin. She breathed laboriously and wrapped her legs around his waist. Riftan muttered out profanity and pulled his pants down in an instance, sheathing his whole manhood into her.

Max writhed like a snake. In the warm air, the scent of their body fluids and the smell of sweat mingled. He went inside her deeper and did not cease kissing her. She drank every breath he breathed, and he sucked in every breath she exhaled. Max could even feel their lips tremble as they moaned in pleasure. She could vividly feel even the slightest tremble from his body as if it was hers, but it felt like his true feelings were something she couldn't reach, like they were hidden somewhere.

Max moaned wildly and scratched his forearm. Riftan's black eyes flared like a forest fire. He pushed her to the limit, but was not satisfied and moved with more vigor. Max jerked up and down, her entire body tensing like a bowstring that seemed to be released at any moment. Soon, she felt him release inside of her. When the storm-like heat escaped from their endearing bodies, a strange sense of emptiness entered her heart.

Max was cold and laid weakly on the sheets. He hugged her tightly as if he couldn't bear the cold silence that surrounded them.

"Don't even think that this is any of your fault. That man is the evil one who hurt you, you are just a victim. I do not regret having crushed that man, if I had known from the beginning what was going on, I would have done it sooner. If I had been lucky, I could have killed him." He caressed her damp body vigorously and trailed his nose against her nape. "That's why there's nothing you're responsible for."

Max turned her head and looked at him with dull eyes. She felt sad to see a man who stubbornly said that she was not responsible for anything and did not have to do anything. Whenever there was a problem, he just tried to keep her away from it. This person doesn't even want to share the slightest burden with her. No, rather, she may be the one who was putting heavy loads on his shoulders.

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Seeing her eyes clouding with sadness, Riftan's eyebrows furrowed deeply. He cupped her cheek in his palm and gently swept her puffy eyes with his thumb. Max then took his hand and placed it against her lips.

"Th-then... what can I do for you?"

Riftan's face, half buried in the pillow, suddenly hardened with longing. His eyes were appealing for something, and Max couldn't figure out what it was. A distant voice tickled her ears.

"Nothing... you just have to stay by my side."

The corner of Max's eyes drooped down as her heart broke: it was the first time she realized that having someone who doesn't want anything from you can be painful. Perhaps displeased with her sorrowful expression, Riftan frowned and pulled her towards his body. The second time they made love started slow and soft, enough to melt all her anxieties in her heart. His mouth caressed her rosy b****s for a long time, he moved inside her vigorously until her eyes became hazy from her petals opening once again and she melted into pleasure. Finally, Max fell asleep, laying over Riftan's tight waist.

She slept for so long that at a certain point she felt a suffocating heat and opened her eyes slowly. The furnace had so much firewood that it kept the flame alight until the dawn set, making her body sweat from the warmth emanated by it as well as the temperature that radiated from Riftan's body. Max got out of bed, draped a robe over her shoulders, and walked to the front of the window. She opened the window a little to let in the cool breeze. Suddenly, she saw something glowing in the dark. Max then lifted her head and noticed little white snowflakes falling down from the dark sky, that was the color of gray and indigo.

Max poked her head out the window, letting the small, soft, icy snowflake fall on her face. Her sweaty body quickly cooled down in the night breeze. However, she didn't feel like going back to bed. As she watched the snow flutter in the wind amusingly, she felt a blanket being wrapped around her back. She turned around and Riftan embraced her from behind, kissing the back of her head.

"You might catch a cold."

"... I was feeling t-too warm."

His hair was decadently disheveled, and his eyes were unusually languorous. Seeing him this relaxed and laid back, her displeased emotions melted away like snow. Max stared at him half-stunned and couldn't prevent a smile from forming on her lips.

"Look at... th-this. The first snow of the year is falling."

Riftan breathed a little sigh of relief and rubbed his hot, moist lips against her nape. “We watched the first snowfall together last year. Should we visit the lake again when the sun comes up?”

“R-really? I can go out of the castle?”

“It doesn’t matter if you go out when you’re with me. If you want, I’ll even take you to town.”

The fact that he made such a proposal in a simple way successfully cut her attention from the plan that the Duke Croix was hatching and Max turned around and embraced him tightly. The first snow fell for a while and soon stopped. The day was bright, but the temperature dropped in such a way that white frost settled all over the land. She was very happy that winter came a little early since now her father’s plan had to wait for the time being. Max stopped interrogating Riftan about it. His words made sense too, just because she knew what her father was doing didn’t mean she could do something: it was obvious that it would only cause restlessness to her heart. She consciously eliminated her worries and decided to fully enjoy the moment when Riftan clung most to her.

He took her to the winter lake as he had promised. On days when it was not too cold, they would leave the castle to see the town. Max toured the new four-story upper building and wandered through the marketplace filled with stone buildings. In the square, merchants from the south sold all kinds of rare items, and despite the cold, the streets were swarming with people. She looked at all kinds of things to her heart’s content. Belts of southern silk and snakeskin, pieces of carved ivory in the form of animals, colorful patterned furs, all kinds of spices and rare herbs... He bought her everything that interested her and promised to take her to the port soon. Max drew in her mind the scene of walking along the shore with him in the spring breeze. The imagination was so sweet that she really wanted to believe Riftan’s words that nothing grave would happen.

‘Right, what can my father do now?’

He would only hurt the family’s prestige and embarrass himself if he openly revealed that he was attacked by Riftan at Croix Castle. Her proud father was unlikely to try to retaliate when it could involve taking even the slightest disgrace on him. If the attempt to isolate Anatol failed, he would soon surrender, so Max decided to be optimistic and, as expected, a time of peace passed. Thanks to the Knights who roamed the Anatol mountain range and subdued the monsters, there was not a single minor accident within the territory, and the day when the Duke of Croix brought armies to charge against them didn’t come.

””” ”

Max began living with Riftan like a bear trapped in a burrow. They lingered in their room all day, eating, sleeping, and making love day and night. During such peaceful days, she let all her worries go. However, their quiet living did not last for long. One morning, a messenger arrived at Calypse Castle and Riftan took the visitors directly to his office, but Max immediately recognized the messenger's face. It was a knight of Count Robern, who visited Calypse Castle last spring.

'His name is... something like Aaron Levier.'

The light in Max's face darkened as she recalled the alliance with Count Robern last year. For him to send someone to the castle at a time like that... she wondered if monsters were going on a rampage again. That must be the reason why he might be trying to request support from the Remdragon Knights.

Max wandered around the room, biting her nails, thinking of the possibility that Riftan could go out on a mission to lead the Knights on an expedition that winter: it felt like her heart was shrinking and her chronic anxiety began again. She wanted to be tough and face anything with a strong heart, but she didn't know how. Max sighed, fiddling with her long, braided hair with her anxious hands. Perhaps being the wife of a knight meant having to spend a lifetime with a heart constantly burning with anxieties. If she had known earlier, she would have tried very hard not to like him too much, but now, she couldn't even imagine being indifferent to him.

Max sat up on the bed and wrapped herself around her knees. Why wasn't life iridescent? Why wasn't the world a paradise covered in soft green grass? It was disgusting to see the endless suffering above their heads. While she was drowning in such useless thoughts, she heard a knock. Max got off the bed like a shot put and thinking that perhaps Riftan sent someone to call for her, she opened the door without even asking who it was. Then, a chest wide and bulky enough to cover the entire entrance filled her field of vision. Max was startled and took a step back. When she raised her head high, Hebaron's seriously hardened face barely caught her eyes.

"With what pu-purpose do you come..."

"I have something I'd like to discuss. Can you spare me a moment?"

He scratched the back of his ear and muttered shyly. Without hesitation, Max wore her robe and left the room. Hebaron took the lead and started walking. She didn't think that he would lead her to Riftan, making her curious about the matter he'd like to discuss. Max looked anxiously at his stiff back. Hebaron looked over his shoulder and gave her a reassuring smile as if he felt her gaze.

"I'm sorry if I came so suddenly and startled you. I have an urgent matter to discuss with the lady... I was planning to talk with you in the infirmary but the lady doesn't seem to visit it these days."

Max blushed and muttered her excuse. "It's because Ru-ruth and... Medrick... are there that I thought I wou-wouldn't be needed there..."

"Oh, I'm not blaming the lady. We are all well-aware that the commander's disease has gotten worse these days."

Max gasped in shock. "D-disease?" She was shocked and saddened.

"I'm talking about his obsession with the lady." Hebaron chuckled, making a joke. "Nowadays, he seems more obsessive. We're becoming worried whether the commander is holding his wife like a prisoner."

"Please don't e-exaggerate it. Riftan is just... worried about m-me."

"I don't think so. I think your words are too light to describe what he does... I'm not sure whether it's alright to tell you this, but the commander has been acting unusually recently. Whenever he is away from the lady for hours, he is visibly tense and can't relax even for a moment. It's been a while as well since I saw his face around the training grounds."

Max's face turned rigid at the worry that leaked out of Hebaron's eyes. She was aware that Riftan was spending a lot of time with her since they returned to Calypse Castle, but she didn't think that it would cause a serious problem.

Hebaron added, frowning. "If he finds out that I have approached the lady like this, the Lord will most likely try to kill me. But it can't stay this way..."

"May I know just what in the world is going on... please exp-plain to me in detail."

"First, we must head outside. We must find a quiet place to discuss."

Hebaron stopped talking and went down the castle stairs in a hurry. Max followed him silently. Hebaron made his way to the patio through the door in the back of the kitchen. When they finally reached a secluded place, he opened his mouth that had been tightly closed.

"Did you hear about the news that the informant delivered the other day?"

Max's eyes narrowed and she shook her head while wearing a bitter expression. "Ri-Riftan... he doesn't explain anything to me."

"I expected that he wouldn't."

He sighed deeply, kicking his shoes at the stone peak that jutted out of the winding dirt road. Silence surrounded them again. For some reason, Hebaron, who was such a frivolous knight, had an unusual anxious expression on his face as he spoke.

“The Duke of Croix is preparing for a trial. It seemed like he bribed the eastern nobles and the royal servants in the palace to side with him. We are retaliating right away but if it continues like this, a formal trial will be held in the palace.”

She felt as if ice water was poured over her head. Max looked at him with a desperate expression. It wasn't until the aristocracy was in ruins that he would be called to the palace court. From the beginning of their reign, the laws enacted by the royal family were practically ineffective. In the current situation, where the authority of the king and the authority of the lord were in subtle conflict, the lord's request for a trial of the royal family was virtually degrading his authority. Max couldn't believe it, so she asked again.

“You're saying that my fa-father... filed a complaint against Riftan?”

“That's right. Now it seems like he has no intention of hiding any disgrace.” Hebaron clicked his tongue and sighed. “Hopefully, it will end with just compensation, but it is not likely to be resolved so easily because it seems like he made up his mind. The duke will demand for the commander to be stripped of his title. If all the nobles put pressure on the situation, even King Reuben will have no choice, he won't be able to ignore the issue.”

“T-then, what can I do...?”

Max's mind was lost for a moment as she desperately clung onto Hebaron's robe. He looked down at her with grim eyes and carefully spoke.

“You have to justify the commander's actions. M'lady... can you testify to what happened to the duke?”

Max's face turned red. Just thinking about standing amidst a room where the king and nobles were gathered to confess every wretched detail of how the duke treated her made cold sweats to form on her back. However, to save Riftan from trouble, even if they told her to strip naked in the middle of the square, she would.

Max bit her lip and nodded. “Of c-course. Of course... I will.”

Relief passed over Hebaron's face. “I know that it must be extremely difficult for the lady. The commander said that the day this reached his wife's ears, he would threaten the life of the person who talked about it.”

He swept his face roughly and let out a long breath. “However, no matter how hard I tried to persuade him, he didn't listen, so I've been looking for an opportunity, but it seemed like he had stayed with you all day and was monitoring you.”

Max frowned as if it were absurd. “Without making me aware of this situation... w-what in the world is he planning to do to solve this?”

“Even the lord does not intend to be stubborn without countermeasures. As soon as he got that information, he started conniving with the southern nobles, but aren't the results seemingly obvious?”

He scratched his head in disgust and Max bit her lip. As he said, the influence of the Duke of Croix was strong. It was impossible for Riftan to defeat her father's political power.

“That is why a messenger from the count has come today. The royal family is trying to somehow resolve this issue before a formal trial takes place. To make it more advantageous for the commander, they said they plan to hold talks to resolve disputes in the territory of Count Robern who is allied with Anatol.”

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“Does th-that mean... that a formal trial may not be held?”

“If the talks successfully conclude, then that can happen.”

Hebaron looked into the air and stroked his chin as if weighing the possibility of this and that.

“It is said that King Reuben himself will come down to this southern region to intervene, so the Duke of Croix will also feel the pressure. However, given that the arrogant duke has come to this point, he must now be firmly decided. It is best not to expect too much.”

“My fa-father... wants to marry my younger sister into the royal family. If His Majesty actively supports Riftan... my father won't have the upper hand either.” Max spoke earnestly like she was hoping to believe as such.

Hebaron sighed and scratched the back of his head. “To be honest, I don't know how far King Reuben will side with us. He will try to avoid stripping the commander off his title, but I don't think he will cover the issue up so openly to the point of going against the nobles. As you know, King Reuben values Wheddon's unity above everything.”

Hearing his words, Max was terrified. "If-if I testify... we can stand a chance, right?"

She expected him to smile and tell her not to worry, but Hebaron hesitated and responded with a grim look.

"The results cannot be guaranteed. After all, a trial without clear evidence is a fight between justifications. It will depend on which argument is more powerful."

Max gripped the hem of her dress tightly, then bit her dry lips. "The talks... w-when will it be held?"

"In principle, it is said that palace trials do not take place during the winter season. It is also said that a trial should only be held when the majority of all the nobles who occupy various positions are present in Drakium Castle. King Reuben will try to put an end to this problem before that happens."

He looked up at the sky as if trying to count the days for when the talks would happen and spoke slowly. "I think the date for the talks will be set within the next few weeks. The commander will also be leading some of the knights to count Robern's territory before the Duke Croix and King Reuben reaches it."

"Can I come... when th-that happens?"

When he paused, he let out a long, deep breath. "If you could convince the commander."

Max touched her temple. Even though this was happening, he was stubborn enough of a person to keep his mouth shut about it: she was better off talking to a wall. The thought of arguing with him already made her feel depressed and exhausted. Max hugged her cold forearm and spoke in a deeply sunken tone.

"I u-understand. I... I'll talk to him about it."

"I apologize for burdening the lady."

Hebaron had a guilty look on his face and Max shook her head.

"" " "

"Not at a-all. Thank you for letting me know. It's better than not being aware... It would have been more painful for me not to know anything."

Max ended her conversation with Hebaron and immediately returned straight to the room to wait for Riftan. Her head felt like it was going to explode as she thought of how she would start their conversation. She contemplated on whether she should approach him and be angry that he didn't tell her a word about what was happening or beg for him

to let her intervene. As she wandered in front of the fireplace, she felt a terrible headache and flopped down on the bed. She was staring at the canopy blankly, but her eyes suddenly turned hot. She couldn't even understand why she was crying.

From the beginning she knew that her father did not even have very little affection for her, she was not disappointed by that matter. However, it was heartbreaking that Riftan had to pay that price as well. Max closed her eyes tightly. It was unacceptable that he would be reprimanded in front of arrogant nobles and forced to defend himself. She couldn't bear to see Riftan put himself in a disgraceful position because of her. When the tears ceased, her determination became firm. The insults and embarrassment she would receive would all be fine to her. If necessary, she would even disclose all the mistreatments her father had done to her in all the years. It didn't matter to her whether she became the topic of gossip or not. However, it was heartbreaking to think that even Riftan would be dragged and become the target of ridicule and pity by the nobles.

'Would he be ridiculed for marrying a woman like me?' Max held her face at the possibility and was overwhelmed with guilt and worry.

If possible, the Duke of Croix should cancel the indictment before a formal trial took place. If he found out that she was going to testify, her father, who valued his image so much, could change his mind. While she was in the middle of that thought, there was a rattle of the door opening. Max jumped to her feet and stood. When Riftan saw her uneasy appearance, she widened her eyes and put a smile around her mouth.

"Were you taking a nap?" He closed the door and walked towards the bed, combing her messy hair with his hands. "Did I do you too hard last night?"

Max stared at him, smiling pretentiously with blurry eyes as if there were no problems. She wondered if he could explain to her about what brought the messenger today, and her expectations fell. He would not say anything to her.

Max bit her lip and struggled to open her mouth to speak. "Earlier... I saw guests arrive... and a messenger from Count Robern..."

His smile faded slightly. "The guests will stay for a few days and then they will leave. I ordered the servants to attend to them, so don't worry about it."

"What purpose did he come for... won't you t-tell me?" Max looked at him hopefully.

Riftan spoke in a sullen tone and avoided her gaze. "They are planning to promote various projects with Anatol as a base. Count Robern also sent someone because he wanted to take a step here."

Max's face hardened. "The story I heard is... It's a little different."

A deep tension appeared in Riftan's eyes and he jumped up from the bed. "From whom did you hear that useless story?"

"It w-was not a useless story. You... You should have told me about the truth sooner."

Riftan's eyes narrowed. He shook his head and smiled coldly as if rejecting her words. "I don't know what you've heard, but you should erase it from your head."

Max got out of bed and stood in front of him. She wanted to appear confident, but the difference in their physique was so noticeable that she felt smaller and weaker. She glared at him and gathered all the courage she had in her weak heart.

"You can't take me out... from a-all the problems in that way, Riftan. Max took a deep breath, trying to speak as calmly as possible. "Even more... when it was my father who got you in trouble."

"Who told you that?" He growled fiercely. "Was it Ruth? Or Hebaron? If there is anyone who would dare ignore my orders, it is one of them."

"Th-that doesn't matter. What's important now is what we should do in the futu-..."

"I'll resolve it myself!" Riftan yelled like he was fed up with it. "Please let me resolve it on my own!"

"H-how can I do that!" Max's shoulders shook in frustration. "How can I-I... pretend not to know! You stubbornly say it's not because of me, but... it is all because of me! If you are stripped of your title... that's my, my responsibility! Are you going to... make me suffer from that guilt all m-my life? Are you?"

Riftan grabbed her by the wrist as she pounded his chest with her fists in resentment. "Whatever you say won't matter. If you thought I would put you to stand in that trial, then you don't even know me the slightest bit. I can resolve this even if you don't come!"

Her dried tears began welling up again. Max glared fiercely at him with her reddened eyes. "Stop being so s-stubborn! My father will also present witnesses. You need someone to d-defend you too."

"That will never be you." He said harshly through his teeth. "If things get to the worst, I'll stick with Uslin or Elliot. You don't have to be involved this."

"Their statements won't hold as much ground as m-mine! I am the Duke's daughter... and the cause of this situation. My testimony... w-will be more credible!"

"How many times do I have to tell you no!" His face twisted fiercely like a cornered man. "In order to protect me, you want to do... something like that? Stand in front of those

people and force you to confess the things you desperately wanted to hide? I'd rather be stripped off my title!"

Max thought that it would be great if she was strong enough to grab him and shake him until he was brought back to his senses. Her prestige could not be more valuable than his honor. Compared to his title, heritage, and fame, her pride was nothing.

Max spoke fervently as if to plead. "I, I... I don't mind testifying. I'm just... I'm just going to talk about what happened that day. Nothing more than t-that."

"Enough. I don't want to talk about it anymore."

He removed her hands from him and turned to leave the room. A fire burned inside of her. Max went straight after him and tugged at his clothes violently. She then yelled angrily at Riftan, who was looking down at her with astonished eyes.

"Don't even think about le-leaving here like this! Whatever Riftan says... I'll be a witness! If Riftan says he won't take me with him... Then I-I'll go there by myself!"

His eyes then turned cold. Riftan growled back, just as angry as she was. "Do you want me to lock you up?"

Max looked at him with shocked eyes and her face hardened. "Are you saying you're going to do the same as my f-father did to me?"

At the end of that sentence, the blood on Riftan's face drained. Even if he had a knife to his chest, it was unlikely that he would have such an expression. His horrible gaze instantly broke Max. She groaned, hurried to him, and embraced his stiff body tightly.

"I'm-I'm sorry. I di-didn't mean to say that! My father and Riftan are different. I know you're doing this to protect m-me."

He took a deep breath and looked at her with a helpless expression. Max cupped his stricken face with one hand, kissed the tip of his chin, and pleaded out breathlessly.

"P-please, I'm begging you. Please understand. As much as you want to protect me, look after me... I want to do anything for you too. When you are in t-trouble... and I can't do anything even with my two hands... it's the most p-painful thing for me. Please... don't force me to feel that way."

"I..." He murmured through a tight throat, took her hand, and pushed her away from him. "I have to think about it."

"Ri-riftan..."

Max tried to reach out to him, but her hand lowered weakly. She didn't want to push him anymore, there was still time until the meeting, so she could take the time to persuade him. She stared with grim eyes at his back as he walked out the door like he was fleeing.

It seemed like her comparison of Riftan to the Duke of Croix had changed his demeanor, he no longer raised his voice at her or acted overbearing around her. And Max used that weakness to persuade him relentlessly. When the day to finally leave for Count Robern's territory came, Riftan relented and succumbed to her threats that if he did not take her with him, she would secretly ride on horseback and follow him. It also helped that the talks would be held in a small conference room where only the Duke of Croix, King Reuben, and a few witnesses were present, rather than the court in Drachium Palace.

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"I have realized now that it's better for me to be beside you and watch over you so that you won't be able to do anything reckless."

On the day of departure, Riftan murmured darkly as he watched her climb into the carriage and Max flushed at the statement. He appeared half-terrified at the thought of what she would do if he left her behind. His eyes were boiling with frustration and his face was cold, like an iron mask. Having spent a few days without a good night's sleep worrying about the thought, he seemed to be more nervous than ever.

"I've never seen anything good from leaving you behind. It would be beneficial to my sanity if I put you where my eyes can reach you."

Instead of retorting, Max sat silently in her seat and nodded obediently. He narrowed her eyes at her as if she was scornful, then bent over to cover her body with a coat made of fur. Despite being furious to the tip of his head, he carefully tended to her comfort by placing the charcoal cast iron heater on the floor of the carriage and made sure the windows did not leak.

“It will take a day and a half to get to Robern Castle. We will be moving non-stop until we cross the Anatolium territories, so tell me if you’re uncomfortable.”

“A-Alright.”

Riftan hesitated as if he could not shake his doubts away, but eventually sighed and closed the carriage’s door. Max pulled up the carriage curtains and looked out the window. About twenty knights were sitting on top of their horses, standing in a row on the left and right sides of the carriage. Hebaron could not figure out why he had been chosen to remain in the castle to maintain Anatol’s defense and, instead, Uslin and Elliot were made to lead the journey. Riftan gave them instructions and sat on top of his horse and before long, the carriage began to roll slowly.

Max huddled as much as she could so as not to freeze in the cold air, and silently gazed at the scenery passing through the window. The coldest period had passed, but the season was still winter. The ground was icy and slippery, and on the left and right sides of the road, the sleet that fell last night sparkled like diamonds. She looked worriedly at the knights driving horses in the cold east wind, lowered the curtains, and leaned her back against the seat.

In two days, a battle more intense than fighting a group of monsters would commence, she had to stock up on her physical strength as much as possible. She gently closed her eyes and recalled the indifferent faces of King Ruben and the cruel and stubborn face of her father. Dealing with them would be ten times more difficult than dealing with an army of trolls. In a gloomy but humble atmosphere, the Knights left Anatol in the blink of an eye and ran to the northeast. The entire world was silent, like it had fallen into a deep sleep, so she had no worry about encountering goblins or werewolves even once in their journey. As soon as they left the Anatolium, Max gave Elliot a skeptical look.

“Du-during the winter season... it seems that the monsters’ activities are also decreasing.”

The knights were gathered in the middle of a field to prepare lunch in a full swing. Elliot, who was building a bonfire, looked at her with a slight smile.

“That’s because we have scoured the whole Anatolium over the past season, sweeping out all the monster habitats in the area.”

Ruth, who was tearing up jerky into a large pot, added an explanation. “In the first place, the movement of the monsters was caused by the excessive increase in the number of trolls. The ecosystem of the monsters is closely connected, so when one of them expands their territory, the other monsters seem to move in search of a new habitat. Since the Allied forces nearly wiped out the trolls that were spreading at a terrifying rate in the north, the monsters that have gone south must have returned to their original habitat.”

“We-well then now... the concern for monsters... will diminish.”

“It will diminish way more than before.”

After lunch, they were on their way again without delay. As Ruth said, they didn't encounter even a single goblin their whole trip to the Count's castle, it was perhaps the most peaceful ride she has ever experienced. At dusk, they reached a small town and there they rented two huts, spent the night, and left as soon as dawn came. Thanks to their speed on the road, they were able to reach Castle Robern before noon the next day.

Max got out of the carriage and looked around the fortress with a gloomy atmosphere. A blue-gray wall surrounded it and an iron-shaped tower rose from the left and right of the gate like a sentinel. Exhausted from the strange pressure she felt, Max walked over to Riftan's side and he pulled her close with one arm as if protecting her, walking silently. When the guard led them through a gate located inside the castle grounds, they came out into a garden with beautiful cypress trees and a long staircase that led to the castle. The servants rushed as they descended the stairs.

“Welcome. The Count is anticipating your arrival.”

””” ”

“And the others...?”

“The lord is the first to arrive. The others are likely to arrive tomorrow.”

At the words of the man who appears to be the butler, Max relaxed her shoulders. She was relieved that she didn't have to confront her father right away. One of the knights who were following behind them muttered in a low voice.

“We'll have a chance to catch our breaths for at least a day...”

Max totally agreed with that. They followed the servants into a spacious hall covered with smooth marble. There, a man with a profound impression, along with dozens of servants, greeted them. Max noticed immediately that he was Count Robern just by seeing his luxurious clothes, the commonly peculiar pale face of the nobles, and the bored look in his eyes: those things were enough for her to quickly recognize the owner of the castle.

He took a deep sigh, skipping the welcome greeting. “You did something annoying, Calypse.”

Max frowned. No matter how high his position was, Riftan was also a lord who ruled a territory. Wasn't it too rude not to have basic courtesy? However, Riftan responded bitterly, as if the man's attitude was familiar to him.

“I will make sure the Count does not suffer any harm.”

“The fact that I am in league with you has already left me in the eyes of the Duke of Croix. The top merchants unilaterally ended deals with me, making unreasonable excuses. It is already obvious why.” The count complained. “Why did you do something like prodding a beehive, you already knew how stubborn he is.”

“He deserved what happened.”

“What I meant was, what was the point of doing such a thing? You have been patient and held back, and now you did something like that... I can't understand you.” The man stepped back and questioned him overwhelmingly. “I also made a significant investment in the business that Anatol was promoting. Now, if the day comes that you are exiled, wouldn't the roads that you have completed be completely useless? I don't want you to lose the land you've spent 10 years of your life developing. If you do not get the Duke's favor in this meeting, we will suffer tremendous losses.”

Max's face darkened at the increasingly serious conversation. Sensing her mood, Riftan squeezed her shoulder tightly and glared at the Count.

“We have traveled through the cold weather. How long do we have to stand like this?”

The Count frowned slightly and then shook his head with a sigh. “I was too hasty to question. I have the rooms ready. Go and take a rest.”

As he waved a hand, the waiting servants behind him stepped forward. “Starting tomorrow, a difficult war of attrition will begin. It would be better to have a firmly open mind. I am already on the same boat as you, so I am thinking of helping you as much as possible, but there is not much I can do. I hope to see what trick you have up your sleeve to overcome this crisis.”

After his gloomy warning, the Count climbed the stairs. Max gazed at his back and made a complex and subtle expression. The Count's words were disconcerting, but at least it was good to know that he was going to side with Riftan. Count Robern was one of the most influential nobles in southern Whedon: although he was not comparable to the Duke of Croix, his support was of considerable force. Following the guidance of the servants, Max entered the luxurious guest room and smiled at Riftan.

“He... He appears eccentric, but he seemed to be worried about Riftan.”

“It's his own self-interest that he is concerned with, not me.” Riftan took off his armor and hung it on the trunk and snorted at the end of his sentence. “The Count made a significant investment in the road constructions. He is anxious that his planned trading business will be ruined. Despite the notoriety of the Anatolium, it is simply due to the reputation of the Remdragon Knights that countless traders have decided to enter the port of Namhae.”

That meant there would be nobles from the south who would soon side with Riftan. Even if the arbitration failed and it reached the court of the palace, it couldn't be pushed unilaterally by the Duke of Croix. Max had some hope. Riftan soon changed his clothes and headed to Count Robern's office to discuss tomorrow's meetings. After bathing in the hot water brought by the maids, she unwrapped her bag of clothes and wondered what kind of clothes she would wear tomorrow. She may have the opportunity to speak to the king, so she couldn't appear shabby, but it shouldn't be too flashy either. She wanted to look as elegant, genuine, and appealing as possible.

'That's the least I can do for Riftan...'

After deliberating about it a lot, Max decided to wear a dark blue dress. Wearing those clothes and standing in front of the mirror, her face looked even more pale and depressed. She stood in front of the mirror and looked closely at herself and practiced defending Riftan. Her voice was not heard more than usual because she was so nervous, but her pronunciation seemed to improve a bit as she spoke persistently and repeatedly. As much as she was doing that, she was able to awkwardly present her own arguments, gaining a bit of confidence, but the next morning, when she saw the Duke of Croix's carriage enter the castle, in no time she felt as if she were a helpless child.

Max stood in front of the window and watched her father come up the stairs. The Duke seemed to have led a hundred knights. Knights in shining armor entered endlessly, and high-ranking priests and wizards trailed after him. It was as if he was not coming to a meeting but to war.

'Surely... he's not going to attack Riftan while pretending to comply with the king's command, is he?'

Her eyes widened suspiciously. However, when she saw her father constantly rolling his eyes with an alert expression, those doubts quickly disappeared. The duke brought his own troops simply for his own safety. He may have been traumatized by Riftan's ruthless attack. Max, who looked closely at him, who was walking as if someone was chasing him, picked up her robe and left the room. Then Elliot, who was guarding the door, immediately blocked her path.

"What seems to be the problem, m'lady?"

"I think my fa-father has arrived. Be-before the talks start... It's better to have a conversation with him at least once..."

"Any contact with the duke is prohibited until His Majesty arrives." Elliot shook his head firmly.

"If you face each other before the talks begin, your emotions will escalate, and things will only get worse. We have to wait for the king to arrive."

It made sense. In the presence of King Ruben, not even the Duke of Croix would be able to speak excessively. Riftan would also put aside the kind attitude. In fact, it was the part that she was worried about the most. Wouldn't Riftan, who might be driven mad by the Duke Croix's biting and cruel taunts, hasten, determined to make a deadly decision? Even in her imagination, it made her shudder.

Max wandered impatiently around the room, staring out the window constantly. At noon, the knights with royal flags and three carriages finally entered Roborn Castle. She went down to the Great Hall to meet the king and hundreds of people were already in the great hall. Elliott guided her courteously, as she wandered around, not knowing where to go.

"Please do not leave my side. During the meeting, I will be the escort of the lady."

Max followed him and stood behind where the Knights of the Remdragon were. Just in time, King Reuben led Princess Agnes, and a group of castle attendants. Riftan, the Duke of Croix, and Count Roborn, the lord of the castle, approached and knelt in front of the monarch.

"It must have been difficult coming a long way, Your Majesty."

As the count bowed his head politely, King Ruben waved a hand with a grim face.

"It was really difficult. It is the middle of winter, and you've caused me such a hassle." The king's golden eyes gazed at his subjects arrogantly. "I came all the way here with a heavy burden. I'd like to state first that I will be gravely offended if my travel to here will be in vain, Duke Croix."

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Despite the distance, Max could clearly see her father's jaw stubbornly stiffening, it was an expression he used to make to suppress his temper when his anger peaked. The Duke of Croix glared at Riftan with hostility, directing his eyes towards him as if he

wanted to kill him. He was holding the cane in his hand so tightly that it seemed as if his veins would burst.

“His Majesty does not have to make this matter problematic... I have said that many times. I did make that clear, to remind you. “

Max noticed her father’s speech indeed became slightly slurred, but not enough to sound ridiculous. His sense of authority, arrogance, and pride were etched deep in his bones to the point that he appeared overbearing even in front of the king. However, the Duke of Croix himself appeared aware and humiliated of the slurred speech that was the aftermath of the incident. Every time he spoke a word, anger flared in his eyes, he glared at Riftan with such hatred that it made everyone in the hall discreetly nervous, but Riftan’s anger and hostility were no less than the duke’s. The king swept an annoyed look at the two people who were at the verge of attacking each other right then and there, he then clicked his tongue and turned to Count Robern.

“After we rest for a couple of hours, we should start these talks immediately. Before my beloved subjects stick knives into each other’s chests, I must take the necessary measures.”

“I will accompany you, Your Majesty.”

“No, I want the count to watch over them in my place so they don’t end up tearing each other apart.”

Count Robern smiled bitterly and instructed the nearby butler to take the distinguished guests to their rooms. When the king led the princess and the attendants like a sole general, climbing the stairs covered in the shadow of gloomy gray, the people who were kneeling in respect all stood up at once. Max watched in confusion as the Duke of Croix hurried to retreat behind the knights. When she saw her father’s malevolent expression, an abominable premonition came over her that nothing would change her father’s mind.

Riftan looked at the duke with deep contempt, then turned his head as if he couldn’t stand the sight of him. “Maxi, come this way.”

Together they walked towards the annex. When her husband’s large, trustworthy body completely blocked her father’s hateful gaze, Max managed to release the breath she had been holding. Riftan led her to an empty room and began to convince her again.

“As I already told you several times, you don’t have to enter the conference room. This is not a formal trial. It is just a meeting that King Ruben made to mediate between the Duke of Croix and myself.”

Max shook her head firmly. “No matter what you say... this time I will not step a-side. My father will sue Riftan for invading Croix Castle... and attacking him. When the fact is that Riftan... all he did was to save me.”

"I always wanted to beat him to death!" Riftan snapped harshly and Max released a weary sigh.

"Riftan... t-thinks that attacking my father is a reasonable retaliation. If-if you exclude me from the story, could you continue to claim that your actions were fair?"

Riftan gave her an expression like he was cornered. Max took his stiff hands and gave him a sincere smile.

"I... I'm not the kind of l-lady you thought I am. Now Riftan knows it too. That I had a difficult childhood... I also survived a j-journey through the middle of the continent. I have been through... a horrible w-war. Testifying to this point wouldn't hurt me."

Perhaps those were words that were preferable not to say because Riftan's face turned grim and a sharp pain could be seen in his eyes. He seemed determined to speak until they heard a firm knock on the door.

"Commander, His Majesty would like to speak with you for a moment before starting the meeting."

It was Uslin Rikaido's voice. Riftan looked at Max in anguish and reluctantly left.

"" "

"Don't let anyone get close."

Riftan, standing in front of the door, gave this stern order to the knights who were there and crossed the hall quickly. Max sat in front of the fireplace and waited impatiently for the meeting to begin. A second felt like a minute and a minute like an hour. A long time passed, she began to bite her nails and her mouth felt dry until she heard a knock on the door again.

"M'lady, the meeting has begun."

"W-wait a moment."

Max stood in front of the mirror and looked at herself. There were several fine hairs sticking out of her carefully braided hair, but she managed to look elegant. She carefully put her cloak over her shoulder and left the room.

"How about Riftan?"

"He went to the conference room first with His Majesty".

Uslin answered as he led through the hall and then to the stairs situated in the middle.

“Don’t worry, Caron and I will be in the meeting room as well.”

“Besides you... who else will be there?”

“About ten people, including His Majesty’s attendants and escort knights... the duke will also bring about five or six people.”

Max was relieved that there would be fewer people than she had expected, but when she saw the huge number of people following the duke, she felt a bit daunted. The knights led her to the conference room located on the second floor and she looked around with a tensed gaze. At the farthest side of the spacious conference room, King Ruben took a seat with dignity as if he were a judge, on the right was Princess Agnes and on the left was Count Robern, both of them had solemn expressions.

Riftan and the Duke of Croix were sitting on either ends of a long table in the middle of the room, both turning their heads the opposite direction as if they despised seeing a glimpse of each other. Max was stiff and frozen as Elliott led her to the end of the room, to the side where Riftan was sitting.

“Please come this way.”

Max sat in one of the long rows of chairs that were propped along the walls. Elliott and Uslin sat on either side of her. The king, who was looking at a long scroll of parchment, raised his head and asked.

“Did all the people involved in this matter attend?” The king leaned an elbow on the armrest of his chair and tilted his chin, waving the parchment.

“Before starting this meeting, I was reading once again the cryptic demand that the Duke of Croix has sent me. In it, he states that last fall, my most esteemed knight caused a very unpleasant incident.” He glanced mockingly at the parchment and smirked as if the whole thing was amusing. “In conclusion, it says that Whedon’s number one knight infiltrated Croix Castle and tried to kill the duke.”

Uslin rose from his seat furiously as if to protest, but before he could say anything, King Ruben calmly continued.

“In the same period, Calypse declared war on the duke with the intention of exercising ‘his just right to retaliation.’ I don’t know what the happened, but one decided on war and the other on trial.”

“Your Majesty! This is not the place to talk about his illegal declaration of war, is it not?!” The duke banged on the table and quivered as he retorted, his face turning a reddish color. “That beastly man... he dared to infiltrate the Castle of Croix and try to harm me, the duke! Despite the high priest treating me urgently, I barely awoke and suffered in unconsciousness for four days. Anyone who dares harm a nobleman must pay the price

accordingly! Isn't that the right thing to do for a subject who is utmost loyal to His Majesty?"

"Your majesty! The Duke of Croix is giving one-sided, biased claims!" Uslin, who had lost patience, raised his voice.

One of the attendants tried to warn him about his rude action, but King Ruben raised a hand and clenched his chin as if to speak. After ignoring Riftan's warning look, Uslin knelt on one knee before the king and began to speak rapidly.

"That day, we went to Croix Castle to meet with Lady Calypse. However, although the duke had no right, he locked the lady in his quarters and treated Lord Calypse with contempt. No man in this world would remain silent if anyone had taken his wife away! The commander had no choice but to break into the castle to claim his wife. Technically speaking, the one who has committed offense is the Duke of Croix. "

"H-how dare you... where did you fetch such lies to speak?!" The duke screamed as he slammed the table. "It was mere probation! My own daughter staying in my castle is not locking her up, it is not an illegal act! Don't you know that well, Your Majesty and the Princess? My daughter returned to Castle Croix out of her own free will!"

"My ears hurt." King Ruben frowned and he muttered. "I did not come here to discern what is right or wrong. What my ears want to hear is what in the world had occurred between the two of you and try working out a mutual compromise. So, considering my extensive efforts, please refrain from yelling at each other."

At the king's cold warning, the duke closed his mouth with an expression of dissatisfaction. King Ruben paused for a moment with a thoughtful expression and opened his mouth again.

"Unfortunately for the Duke, Sir Rikaido's arguments, to my deduction, make complete sense. The wife belongs to her husband. If Calypse wishes to see his wife, you have no right to stop him."

"But Your Majesty, I just wanted to protect my first-born daughter", he said naturally without blinking.

Riftan, who was sitting quietly and had maintained a calm temper, suddenly froze. As if he couldn't believe what he had heard, he looked at the duke with stern eyes.

"Did you just say... protect?"

His gaze was so fierce that the duke's body stiffened and his face paled. He stirred like he was seeing his worst nightmare, turned his head, and appealed to the king.

“My daughter had lost a child and was left completely alone in Drakium Castle. What do you think I thought when I saw her like that?! I was just trying to protect my daughter from the palace rumors and her husband’s cold treatment.”

“How dare you tell such a blatant lie!” Elliott screamed as he stood up and glared at him.

Uslin and Elliot stood from their seats and glared at the duke with such hostility in their eyes that the knights by the king’s side felt the fierce momentum from the two and they quickly drew out their swords.

“For the safety of His Majesty, moderate your attitude!”

As they reluctantly sat back down, the king shifted his position and heaved a long sigh. His indifferent eyes then turned to Max who had stiffened.

“It seems to be that you are at the center of this conflict. What do you think of the arguments of both parties?”

“Your Majesty, my wife...!”

“I wasn’t asking you anything at the moment, I was asking your wife.” The king sternly stopped Riftan’s intervention.

Max tried to smile at Riftan to comfort him when she saw him so stiff and began to stand up slowly. She felt her fingers tremble slightly at her father’s intense gaze. She grabbed the hem of her skirt to grasp out her nervousness and straightened her posture.

“My-my father...” She swallowed dry saliva and tried as hard as she could to refine her trembling voice. “He did not stop me from meeting my husband to protect me. My father... was just worried about whether I would be subject to a divorce and become an embarrassment to the family. And to tell you the truth, Your Majesty, I too believed for a while that a divorce was imminent. I had no confidence to see my husband... I feared that I would be c-criticized, and I foolishly followed my father. But upon reaching the duchy...”

Her voice cracked slightly. She took a little pause and looked at Riftan’s face. When she saw his pale, weary face, her chest ached. She just wanted to get him out of this place and embrace him tightly against her chest. Max licked her dry lips and desperately spoke the words out of her lips.

“I.. I... wanted to meet my husband to talk to him. But my father wouldn’t let me, so I tried to go against his will...” She hesitated for a moment, then exhaled laboriously. “My father locked me up and inflicted severe co-corporal punishment upon me. My husband... witnessing me being punished, was furious to see it.”

“How dare you...”

The duke was so tense that a vein protruded from rage. He opened his mouth wide, as if he were about to vomit profanity, then clenched his teeth as if swallowing a ball of fire. He had an expression of disbelief, he looked as if his slave rebelled against him, the master.

Max lowered her eyes to avoid that look full of anger. After a moment of silence, the king opened his mouth to speak again.

“I think I understand now how things happened.” The king sighed and burrowed his back into the leather-covered chair. “Duke, if what they just said is true, you too cannot escape responsibility. Maximilian Calypse belongs to Riftan Calypse. From the moment their marriage started, you lost all your rights over your daughter. Naturally, you have no right to confine or inflict any corporal punishment on her.”

“That girl, unfortunately, now takes the side of her husband and exaggerates banal things! Preventing her from seeing Calypse or the little corporal punishment was an act for the future of my daughter and the honor of my family!” The duke rebutted desperately. “When I saw my daughter alone in the palace, I really thought that Calypse would abandon her. Is it such a big mistake trying to do my best to prevent my daughter from being insulted like that and suffer?”

Max was completely overwhelmed by her father’s impudence. He had such a calm, insolent expression and it manipulated even her to believe his words. The duke lifted his chin proudly.

“In the process... I will not deny that my behavior was excessive. If I have to take responsibility, I am willing to give compensation. But I don’t care what His Majesty says, I have no intention of forgiving that person’s actions.”

He turned and looked directly into Riftan’s fiery eyes. Apparently, the hatred that welled up in his gut gave him the courage to look at Riftan and he continued.

“No matter where you see it, Riftan Calypse’s behavior was exaggerated. If it offended him that I didn’t let him see my daughter and that I placed her on probation to correct her vulgar habits... then he should have protested on the spot. But what did he do? He tried to kill me right there and there! And as if that has not been enough, he even threatened my land with a war. He could hardly be defined as a sane human being. His majesty must immediately withdraw his title of being the commander of the Remdragon Knights, revoke the Knighthood, and take control of his territory!”

Hearing the duke’s roar, Max held her forehead with her hand and staggered, Elliott quickly held her up, but his face was just as pale as hers. As if already prepared for this outcome, Riftan sat silently with an expressionless face.

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