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At that sight, Max felt the inside of her stomach twist. Riftan always appeared terrifyingly calm when his anger reached the tip of his head. While Max felt anxious on whether Riftan would lose his temper and attack the Duke of Croix, Princess Agnes, who had been silent, opened her mouth as if she could not bear it.

“What you’re demanding is excessive! Sir Calypse is undeniably an honorable knight. He is the warrior who risked his life by participating in the subjugation of the dragon on behalf of the duke! If you put him on trial, all the people in Whedon would place the blame on the duke.”

The duke’s face flushed red from the princess’s cold, indifferent cry. He looked at her with b****y eyes and refuted.

“The perpetrator infiltrated my castle and attacked me, who was unarmed. When that fact is made known to all, I doubt that it will be a subject of one-sided criticism...” The duke’s fierce gaze flew back to Riftan and he threw out his words with much indignation. “It does not matter if I become criticized. Through the trial, I am sure the perpetrator will pay for his sins committed. My decision won’t change no matter what happens.”

“It’s pointless listening to these endless words.”

Riftan, watching the duke’s pathetic face, unfolded his arms and slowly leaned to the table. He appeared exactly like a wild beast on the prowl just before rushing to attack its prey. Feeling threatened, Duke Croix visibly flinched and backed away. Riftan, who glared at him scornfully, muttered in a low, sinister voice.

“I have always thought that it’s excellent to have talent for coming up with a plausible cause. How about you just tell the truth? You’re scared of me to death.”

“The au-audacity of yours... what nonsense are you spouting!”

“You were terrified by my declaration of war.” He twisted the corner of his mouth and stated coldly. “It seems as if you think that you’ll be safe once my title of being a lord is stripped away from me... I want to tell you that you couldn’t be more wrong. When I am no longer bound by any vow or oath, only then you will come to know for yourself what kind of insane I am.”

A chilling silence instantly fell in the hall. Riftan spoke slowly, like a tiger pushing its prey into a corner, ignoring the alarmed reactions around him.

“I have the talent for being stealth, to hide anywhere without making a single noise. When I was a mercenary, I did all sorts of unimaginably dirty work without even blinking

an eye. Do you know what that means? It means that every night before going to sleep, you will think of whether you will be able to open your eyes the next day. When you wake up in the morning, the first thing you will do is check that your head is still attached to your neck. Whenever you leave the castle, you will be rolling your eyes from right to left, front and back, looking whether I am hiding somewhere around. Go ahead and strip me of that title, that is, if you are willing to live your whole life in such tension and fear, Duke...” As if checking the effect of his words, he looked across the table, towards the duke’s face, and slowly finished his speech. “If you can live through that, then by all means, try and see.”

“H-how... how dare you...! To make such a despicable threat to me...!”

The duke jumped from his seat, his face pale and frightened. His long, lean body trembled as if he was struck by lightning. He pointed to Riftan and addressed the king aloud.

“His Majesty, did you hear him too? The vulgar things this ignorant scoundrel is babbling about! How can it be said that such a shameless, groundless, boy like him is an honorable knight and a hero at that?! He is a dangerously insane person, that’s what he is! There is no need to even go to trial to prove it. He must be deprived of his title immediately and humble himself for blaspheming the great nobility!”

“Be quiet!” King Ruben’s deep voice echoed through the hall, which was nothing short of chaos. He massaged his temple like his head ached and drew in a deep breath. “Are you telling me that I went on a long journey just to see this mess?”

“Your Majesty, will you really defend what he is saying right now? If you don’t punish him soon...!”

“Enough! If you interrupt my words again, I will punish you for offending the great Royal family.”

The Duke of Croix reluctantly sat back down after looking at Riftan with a helpless dismay.

””” ”

Only then did King Ruben look at the knight sternly. “Calypse, those words you just said cannot be justified, even by me. No matter how angry you are, making such disturbing threats should not be done by a knight. Such excessive remarks do not favor your situation.”

“Didn’t he just declare that he has no intentions of dropping the charges under any circumstance? In that case, there is no reason for me to mince my words.” Riftan leaned back in the chair and said sarcastically. “Once I am deprived of my title, I will no longer

be a knight. That would mean I no longer have to uphold chivalry. Mercenaries have mercenary rules: to return as soon as you receive*.”

T/N: *In mercenary terms, as soon as you get paid, you do the job. But it applies in all situations, if someone hits you, you hit them back right away.

The atmosphere that King Ruben had barely calmed down quickly turned into chaos again. The duke asked how dare Riftan intimidate him, and Uslin confronted him and raised his voice to claim that he was the one who insulted him first. Even the modest Elliot flared at the duke. Including the duke's knights, the situation turned into a complete disaster, just like King Ruben said. Such a violent and fierce discussion was not expected to be intermittent, so Max felt herself shrink in an instant. Irritated, King Ruben jumped from his seat.

“These insolent people! Should I pour cold water on your heads to make you all come to your senses! Don't you see that the king is sitting between you! “ He hit the table roughly to make a loud bang.

Max looked at him in alarm, worried that the king, tired of the rudeness of his subjects, would renounce the mediation for the reconciliation of the parties. However, the king showed a surprising degree of patience. He walked to the window, looked up at the pale winter sky; then turned around and looked at them with a mollified expression.

“It will be impossible to speak when all of you are in the same place. I will talk to each of you separately. Calypse first, I'll start with you.” The king declared in a dignified voice and looked at the Duke of Croix with piercing eyes. “The duke will be waiting in the next room. I would appreciate it if you could calm your feelings that have intensified in the meantime.”

By order of the king, they all stood up, leaving only Riftan. First, the duke led four knights and a priest outside the door, followed by Max and Uslin walking towards the entrance. She couldn't tear her gaze from behind Riftan, until just before the door closed. The situation was much worse than expected. Her father's determination to put Riftan on trial was tougher than she'd imagined, and her husband didn't seem willing to give in at all either. Moreover, the king seemed to have no intention of actively defending him.

Max bit her lip anxiously. If King Ruben did not intervene, a trial would be held at Drakium Castle in a few months. Max anxiously thought whether Riftan would have the chance to win the trial. She wandered in anguish down the corridor, then impulsively pursued the duke. The bewildered knights hastily stopped her.

“M'lady, please stop. It is better not to talk to such a person.”

“J-just for a moment. Just a while... I ha-have something to discuss with him.”

They blocked her way, but she slipped past the knights and ran towards her father. Her strides stopped in front of the duke, who was surrounded by knights. His icy gaze penetrated her: it seemed that even a fluff crawling on the ground would receive a look warmer than her.

Her father roared violently at her, indifferent and stern. "Insolent... with what audacity do you have to stand in front of me?"

Max took a deep breath to shake off her fear. Her father could no longer hurt her now, she was a Calypse, not Croix. She repeated that in her mind and opened her mouth calmly. "Please... drop the charges."

He was so amused that he laughed like he didn't have the energy to get angry. Max spoke quickly. "Persistently trying to incite such charges... will not bring my fa-father any substantial benefit. On the contrary... he has a lot to lose. The friendly relationship with the royal family, being the mockery of the nobles... and it is not only that. If my father succeeds in bringing my husband to court... I-I'll defend him. E-everything you did to me... I'll expose all the atrocious treatments... I'll accuse my f-father!"

She clearly saw her father's eyes burning with anger beyond limits. Max held firm her shaking legs. She couldn't believe she was standing against her father face to face. A cold sweat ran down her back for fear that his cane would fly towards her any moment, but she steeled herself and she looked at him straight into his b****y eyes. Later, as a suffocating silence followed, her father opened his mouth.

"Try and see for yourself."

Max's shoulders shrunk at his unexpectedly calm response. As if the duke was mocking her, his mouth twisted.

"No matter what you say, who will listen to you? Atrocious treatments? Ha! With what evidence are you going to prove that with? You will only end up being treated like a filthy who framed her own father to conspire with her husband."

Max looked at the knights surrounding her father with trembling eyes. As she watched their ruthless faces, a feeling of despair seeped into her bones. After all, it was difficult for people who work for her father to side with her. She even wondered if her own nanny would stand witness. Her father clicked his tongue cynically.

"For the sake of argument, let's say that people will believe you. Do you really think it will affect the results of the trial? All I did was do my best to raise my daughter properly. Only God knows how hard it has been for me to correct her terrible flaws."

Max was stunned by his cheeky words. She couldn't believe what she had heard. "What you're saying is you did all that... for my own good?"

The duke raised his head confidently, as if he did not have a single shame. "If I really did intend to abuse you, then why would I subject you to healing magic every time? I was careful not to leave a single scratch on your body. There is only one reason to do that: it is because the purpose of me turning to corporal punishment was to rectify you."

She opened her mouth to refute, but she was so shocked that she couldn't think of anything to say, she could only push out a grievous laugh. How could he argue that it was all for her own well-being, after distorting her life with so much suffering? The duke, who watched her with contempt while pressing his lips together, spoke as if driving a wedge.

"I struggled to make you normal. It will never be a crime for parents to whip their children to correct them."

"And you intend to do that even when I'm already married to Ri-Riftan? Even fa-father has no right... to lay a hand on me unless my husband allows it!"

As she screamed like she couldn't bear the rising rage, a deep wrinkle appeared on the duke's forehead. He shook his head like it was absurd.

"What the are you talking about? Whatever the result of it, I will only have to pay a few pennies as compensation, but your husband won't be able to get that far."

Unable to take it anymore, Elliot stepped forward, placing his hand on the handle of his sword. Despite her anger, Max managed to hastily stop him. If any sword was drawn out in violence that day, it would lead to an irreversible situation. She glared at her father, gathering what composure remains in herself.

"E-even if my father does not get the punishment he deserves... it won't matter. I will confess all the outrageous things you have done to me. Many people will blame you for your hypocrisy. A-all the honor of the family that you consider as your life... will fall to the ground. Can-can you bear such a scandal? Will taking revenge... be worth it?"

Suddenly, a grinding sound was heard. As if the duke wanted to hit her at that precise moment, he took his cane firmly between both hands. Immediately, the knights slipped between them as if to protect Max. Her father, gazing at her as if she were abominable, screamed as if to devour her.

"Go on then! Try and see how far you can go! Expose your father like that and become the laughingstock yourself! It will be something to see!" He turned and walked into the waiting room.

Max closed her aching eyes. She couldn't look directly at the faces of the knights. She was ashamed to show her helpless side and her disgusting father. It was very dishonorable to drag Riftan into such a situation. She bowed her head and walked down the hall as if fleeing.

The discussions continued late into the night. After the conversation with Riftan ended, there was one between the Duke of Croix and King Ruben, and after that, the dialogue between the three began again.

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Max walked around the room, praying fervently, hoping that her narration of what really happened would miraculously settle the mediation. However, it seems unlikely that her hopes will be fulfilled as she heard the occasional shouts of angry voices from the meeting room.

She bit her lip anxiously. Just imagining her father telling conspiratorial lies against Riftan to frame him made her nerves boil.

She opened the door of the room where she is at to look down the dark hallway—towards the door that leads to the meeting room. The second meeting was tripartite, so there was no way of knowing what was happening since everyone else was barred from entering the meeting room. Max restlessly paced back and forth. Uslin, who was leaning silently against the wall, suddenly opened his mouth.

“I don’t think they’re going to ask the lady to testify anymore. Why don’t you head back to your room first and rest?”

Ruth, who was nodding off as he sat in front of the fireplace, raised his head in alert.

“I agree. The lady should head back to her room first. Even if we all stay here, it wouldn’t make a difference on the outcome.”

“I wish you would care about the situation for even a bit, but...” Uslin frowned displeasingly at Ruth and sighed deeply.

“The wizard’s words have a point. I’m afraid they won’t finish talking until dawn, so you may go back to your room and rest. They might take all night discussing.”

“They’re going to stay up a-all night?”

When her eyes widened in surprise, the knight smiled bitterly.

“This is the method His Majesty often uses to defeat his disobedient subjects. He is as vigorous as most knights, he can hold out until his opponent is exhausted, and when that moment comes, he takes advantage of that. “

“Don’t worry too much. His Majesty can argue for two nights in that state! The same goes for the commander. The Duke of Croix will soon raise a white flag of defeat.”

Even Elliot chimed in and expressed optimism. Max sighed at their naivety. They knew nothing of the Duke of Croix.

As long as he’s persistent, her father won’t lose to anyone. Two nights would be an easy endurance. He could continue to endure, even if he vomited blood. What’s more, it could even get frantic. He would be very riled up by now, spitting out all kinds of slander and insults.

Max rubbed her forehead. Seeing this, Uslin took the cloak hanging from the wall and walked over to her.

“I’ll escort you to your room.”

Then, he opened the door with a determined expression, as if to make her take a break no matter how much she protested.

Although it seemed that she would not be able to sleep after returning to her room, the truth is that she was also feeling very tired from being on her toes all day. She thought it would be better to lie on the bed and get some rest, so she reluctantly agreed.

””” ”

As she was leaving the waiting room, she saw a dim light from the end of the dark hallway. Max stopped in front of the door. Princess Agnes walked silently with Simon, the royal wizard.

After seeing their faces, Ruth crept into a corner of the room as if he was avoiding a plague. Uslin looked at him like he was a pitiful man and then walked over to the princess.

“What brings you here at this late hour?”

“I came here because I have something to say. Can you give us a moment?”

The deep eyes of the princess flew over Max. Max hesitated and stepped aside the door's entrance, gesturing a welcome. At the silent invitation, the princess breathed a sigh of relief and led Simon to the room.

Max took a step back and looked at her rigid face with a tensed eye. The fireplace was burning in the waiting room, and on one side of the room were Ruth, Elliott, Uslin, and two other members of the Remdragon Knights.

The princess looked around, seeing their faces one by one and finally fixed her gaze on Max. The princess looked more exhausted than ever, and there was a hint of concern in her blue eyes. Max asked impatiently as Princess Agnes gave no signs of opening her mouth, even after a long time.

“Wa-was there any...problem that came up?”

“I think this conversation will be very long. May we take a seat?”

Hearing that made her hair stand on its ends, but Max managed to control herself and guided her to the table. Then, the knights who were waiting, quickly brought her a chair.

“Thank you.” The princess smiled stiffly and sat down.

Max sat across from her and tightened her grip to the hem of her dress. ‘But why did she bring Simon with her?’, she was staring doubtfully at the wizard who was silent behind her, when the princess began to speak.

“I’m sorry that I could not be of any help in this situation. After the duke filed the charges, I did my best to avoid it, but the influence of the Croix family is truly terrifying. All the nobles who occupy at least one position in the Drachium Palace are on his side.”

She sighed, as she brushed her tousled hair from her forehead to the back of her ear.

“I think most of the nobles have already been bribed by the duke. If a formal trial will really be held, I won’t be able to influence them.”

“I-if the duke puts pressure on Anatol ... y-you promised to look out for and protect Riftan.”

Max could hear her desperate heartbeat. The Princess had a perplexed look on her face then she continued to speak.

“It may seem insufficient in Maximilian’s eyes, but me and my father are doing our best to protect Riftan. However, the royal family must be fair in its judgement no matter what. Without sufficient justification, we cannot eradicate pressure from the nobles and actively side with Riftan. That is why we have intervened urgently before a formal trial takes place.”

“The commander has enough justification,” Uslin broke into the conversation impatiently.

“The Duke of Croix inflicted harm upon Lady Calypse. On the contrary, we came here not to make the problem bigger. Shouldn’t they be grateful?”

“That is the principle of the Knights. Nobles won’t think that way.”

The princess put her hands on the table and squeezed them tightly. Then, she slowly parted her lips, as if she were choosing the right words.

“As everyone knows, the legal status of women is not that high. No, to tell the truth, it’s miserable. A daughter is the property of her father and a wife is the property of her husband. Even if the Duke of Croix did inflict harm on Maximilian... if we can’t prove that the harm he did was life threatening, the Duke would have to pay a few pennies at most in compensation. On the other hand... it is a much more serious crime for a knight to infiltrate a castle and attempt to kill the lord.”

“That doesn’t make sense! It was the duke who provided the cause in the first place! So, do you mean that he had to stand still and do nothing even after witnessing that?”

Elliott raised his voice with an unusually exasperated expression. The princess shook her head as if she completely understood Elliot’s stance.

“I also believe that Riftan did nothing wrong. But the trial is a fight of justifications. Whedon’s law, as well as the law of the Roem era, is disadvantageous for Riftan. In that sense, the duke has more witnesses and countless nobles behind him. If the trial is conducted in this way, the deprivation of Riftan’s knighthood cannot be avoided.”

Max’s vision began to blur and her ears began ringing. Max shook her head in despair. Somewhere in her confused mind, she heard Elliot’s desperate voice.

“In that case, why did you help in preventing a war? Wouldn’t it have been better to have solved this with warfare? How could the royal family treat the commander like this...!”

“Elliot! Enough. The royal family is doing their best!” Uslin looked at Elliot with a stern expression to stop him. But Elliott looked at him defiantly, as if he couldn’t bear his anger.

“Which side is Sir Rikaido on? I really can’t make sense of it. The commander will lose his title because of such a despicable man! Is Sir Rikaido unaware of how dedicated the commander is to Anatol? We cannot let the blood and sweat that the commander shed for 10 years go to waste. I would rather go to war as planned in the first place!”

Elliott's face was burning in fury. Before Uslin could retort, the princess intervened in an earnest voice.

"It's not unreasonable for you to be this riled up. But please calm down a bit and listen to what I have to say until the end."

Max gazed at her with hope.

"Is there so-some way... to fix it?"

"We have to get the duke to drop the charges in some way. There is no other solution."

The princess's eyes shone with determination. Suddenly, she felt a chill down her spine accordingly. The princess stared at her for a long time, as if she was looking deep inside her, and then slowly opened her mouth.

"The cause raised by the Duke of Croix must be turned from the roots for you to win. In order for that to happen, your determination, Maximillian, will be of utmost key."

Max was confused. Was she saying that she should go back and testify at the trial to defend Riftan? Hadn't the princess said that the justification for the abuse wasn't a sufficient reason to attack the duke? Max asked in a hurry.

"If there's anything I can do... I'll do it, whatever it may be. Please tell me in de-detail what I should do."

The princess hesitated for a moment before opening her mouth.

"I'm thinking of involving the World Tower in this issue."

The unexpected words made Max's eyes widen. Ruth gave a sarcastic laugh.

"What the will you do to attract the World Tower's attention? The World Tower is a completely neutral force. The World Tower's law prohibits it from interfering with any internal affairs whatever the circumstance may be."

The princess sighed and looked at Ruth with a shocked expression, as if he had no right to say that.

"There is only one case where the World Tower interferes with internal affairs to the point that they will go out of their way to bring justice."

"What could that be...?"

Ruth, who was smirking at the princess' suggestion, suddenly realized it and opened his mouth.

“Don’t tell me... are you thinking of registering the lady as a World Tower wizard?”

Not only Max, but even the knights widened their eyes at his words. She wanted to reprimand him, ask what kind of nonsense he was saying, but unexpectedly, the princess nodded.

“Nornui will only intervene in a conflict if it involves the protection of a wizard belonging to the World Tower. If Maximillian becomes a wizard in the World Tower, the duke of Croix wouldn’t only be interrogated for inflicting corporal punishment on his daughter but also for the persecution of Maximillian as a wizard. When that happens, the World Tower will immediately dispatch wizards to investigate the matter. And as soon as it is revealed that he has been inflicting harm on Maximillian, all wizards will turn their backs on the duke.”

“B-but... but...”

Unable to keep up with the sudden twist of the story, Max stuttered heavily.

“I do not understand. Even if I-I...put my name on the World Tower right now... all of this... happened before I became a wizard. C-can the duke be held accountable...even if it all happened in the past?”

The princess shook her head.

“Of course, they cannot question what happened in the past. I’m going to manipulate the time when Maximillian registered as a wizard in the World Tower and list it as last spring. I’ll make it so that when I visited Anatol, I invited you to register at the World Tower and you agreed.”

“B-but...”

Max couldn’t speak easily and looked at Ruth with a downcast look. She remembered perfectly what he had said to her.

“T-to become a World Tower wizard...I was told that I had to t-train in Nornui...for four years. But my father knows that I have never been to Nornui. It’s only been a year since I’ve been in Anatol... before that, I was never anywhere but Castle Croix.”

“There are many people who register their name on the World Tower first and then go to Nornui to study.”

Simon, who was silent, opened his mouth. Without asking permission to take a seat, he pulled a chair next to the princess and calmly continued speaking.

“The situation may be plausible. The lady listed her name to the World Tower last spring on Agnes’s recommendation, and she was soon going to Nornui. However, to help the

precarious situation in which the war against the monsters broke out, the time when she was to enter the World Tower was delayed for a while.”

“Is it possible for someone to be under the protection of the World Tower despite not undergoing their formal training?” Uslin asked him.

The princess nodded.

“Since the moment anyone’s name was registered, they are already protected by the World Tower. And to add to that story, I will argue that Maximillian was sent to Livadon through formal procedures. The knights and the wizards who witnessed your contributions will be held witness. There are more than enough grounds that will help claim that Maximillian is a wizard of the World Tower. Nornui also promised to close their eyes to the point of letting the manipulation of time when the registration was made.”

The story was unfolding so fast until she’s about to feel dizzy. Confused, Max looked in confusion at the resolute face of the princess, the calm face of Simon, and Ruth’s stiff face.

“T-then... I...”

Her throat went dry as if she’d swallowed sand. She squirmed and began to speak as if it hurt.

“I...must go to No-nornui?”

The princess’s face darkened. As she touched her mouth with her fingertips, she nodded strongly.

“At least, for three to four years... once your name is written, you must enter the World Tower as quickly as possible and train to become a wizard.”

Max stiffened. She couldn’t speak, instead, Elliott was quick to reply.

“Is it not possible to just register your name? If she will be away from Anatol for such a long time... there is no way that the commander will allow it.”

“The World Tower has its own rules. Once the registration is made, everyone must obey its rules. There are no exceptions.”

Ruth backed away, his expression grim. Agnes, who was glaring at him with narrowed eyes, rubbed her forehead and said weakly.

“Besides, there is no other way to battle the Duke of Croix. If he discovers that he has been deceived, he will immediately refile his charges. When that happens, he can even accuse us of making false testimonies against the nobility.”

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Max licked her parched lips, it felt like she was pushed to a corner. The thought of leaving Riftan's side made her stomach twist. As she hesitated and couldn't give an answer easily, Ruth, who was deep in thought, began to speak.

“I understand the intention of the princess. But it is a very sudden suggestion. If the lady becomes a World Tower wizard, the lady will have to live in Nornui for the next three or four years. Now is not the time to make such a decision. Give her time to think about it, please.”

“If it were possible, I also would like to have time. However, we do not know when the Duke of Croix will return to the duchy. The man was forced to come to this place because he could not overcome my father's coercion. He must be thinking of leaving at the very least, after the negotiation is over.”

The princess tried to persuade her with an impatient attitude. Max didn't know what to do and lowered her eyes. She said she would do anything for Riftan, and yet she couldn't give an answer as to what she was willing to do. While she continued to hesitate, Ruth glared furiously at the princess.

“Can't it wait for at least three or four days?! The answer shouldn't be forced to be made now. Not only Sir Calypse's future is at stake, but also of his wife's.”

The princess whose eyebrows were furrowed in displeasure, nodded in disgust with a long sigh. “I understand. Think about this solution while the talks are going on.”

The princess rose from her seat along with Simon. Max couldn't say a word until the princess left the room. She felt like she was balancing on one wooden leg. Uslin, looking at her pale face in fear, suddenly opened his mouth.

"You may refuse that option." Max was surprised and her eyes widened, but he continued seriously. "The commander will probably protest against it. To tell you the truth... he's already preparing to leave Whedon."

"You mean he's thinking of...going into e-exile?" She asked in perplexion.

Uslin nodded slowly. "From the beginning, the commander had no intention of going into trial. If these mediation talks fail, he plans to take the lady and go to Livadon immediately."

"But t-then... Anatol, and the Re-Remdragon Knights..."

"Many of the members plan on following the commander. In fact, everyone wants to follow him in exile, but there are those who have to remain in Whedon due to some circumstances. Perhaps the Knights may be divided."

Max sighed and looked anxiously at the faces of Ruth, Elliott, and the knights who were silently guarding the door. They had a calm face, as if it was a fact that everyone already knew: it was clear that Riftan had spoken to them beforehand. She could not bear the shock of it and sank into the chair.

Uslin added hastily. "I'm not trying to put a burden on the lady. It is not yet known how the mediation talks will conclude. We just assumed the worst that could happen and discussed it just in case."

"If this mediation fails... Riftan... Anatol and the Remdragon Knights... he will lose everything."

When she murmured vaguely, the man closed his mouth as if he didn't know what to say. A heavy atmosphere surrounded them. At that moment, Ruth spoke seriously, grasping her shoulders with both hands.

"M'lady, it would be useless to think about this right now... better go and get some rest first. It is not something to decide just on impulse. Entering the World Tower means living as a wizard all your life. Whether or not you are prepared to do so, you should think carefully and with a clear mind before making any decisions."

Max looked at him in the face with hazy vision, then nodded. Uslin quickly supported her and led her out of the waiting room. She followed him and walked down the dark corridor, struggling to clear her complex mind. The stories she had heard from the bard lingered in her head. Ancient wizards who built an island in the middle of the sea to escape the heretic hunters, in the center of which stood a huge tower... When the story

of the legend came to her head, an unfamiliar fear flooded her. When she got back to her room, she couldn't sleep a second and tossed and turned all night.

””” ”

Riftan didn't return to the room until the sun had risen from the horizon. Max turned her back, pretending to be asleep and squeezed her eyes shut. She heard sounds like he was taking off his clothes, then his heavy body slumped into the spot next to her. She let out a shaky breath. Riftan's thick forearms embraced her waist tightly. The warmth of his body she felt radiating against her back made her eyes water. She blinked in the dark. Just because he married her, he was dragged into a situation where he could lose everything. Wasn't he resentful of her, even though it was her father who was making him go through such torment? If he had divorced and married the princess when he returned from the expedition... he would never have ended up in this situation.

'I'm such a fool. What even am I worth...?' Her heart felt like it was rupturing and she closed her eyes tightly. 'If I go to the World Tower, I will not be able to sleep in his arms for the following years. It has been so difficult being away from him for just a few months, will I be able to bear it for four years?'

"Don't you worry about anything. Everything will be fine."

Suddenly, Riftan's deep voice echoed in her ear. As if realizing she hadn't fallen asleep, he turned her body around, hugged her tightly to his chest, and pressed his cheeks against the top of her head. Max sank deeper into his arms, she wanted to run away with him and stay in his arms like that.

'Can't I just do as he planned? Leave his title, Anatol, the Knights, and everything else. Just the two of us far away from all this.'

She swallowed a desperate cry that was painfully scratching her throat. She wouldn't forgive herself if she gave in to such temptation. She couldn't always cling to him like a child who was afraid of being separated from her parents, it was her own fault and weakness that brought them to that situation. This was the result of her not placing his trust in him, constantly being suspicious and insecure, to the point that they got that deep in the problem. If she did nothing now and closed her eyes pretending not to know anything, she would end up forever despising and blaming herself.

The next morning, Max went to the annex where the princess was staying, escorted by knights, just before Riftan would go to the meeting room. Ruth insisted that she should think about it a bit more, but she was afraid that if she didn't act at that moment, her resolve would crumble. Max closed her eyes tightly and knocked on the princess's door. Agnes looked a bit surprised when she saw her standing in the doorway.

"Have you already made up your mind?"

The princess led her into the room and asked carefully. Max nodded as she sat down in a velvet-covered chair.

“The princess’s suggestion... I will accept it. I will become a wizard of the Wo-World Tower.”

Contrary to what she expected, Agnes’s pale face had a slightly complicated expression. “I know it’s ridiculous to say this after pushing you so hard yesterday, but... are you really sure? Once you enter the World Tower, you will not be able to leave the island until you have finished your training. Communication with the outside world is also subject to significant restrictions.”

Max nodded slowly. The princess narrowed her eyes, as if trying to assess her determination and looked at her with a helpless smile.

“I know Maximilian has no choice. It may sound hypocritical, but I made this suggestion because I thought it would also be beneficial to you.”

“You suggested it... because it is be-beneficial to me?”

She looked at her with a puzzled face. She would have to be separated from her husband for four years. How was that going to be beneficial to her?

The princess smiled bitterly when Max glared at her with angry eyes. “Maximillian is talented. The good judgment and quick decision-making you demonstrated during a crisis... that quality is rare even among well-trained wizards. If you study properly, you will surely become a great wizard in just a few years. I thought it was a waste to pass up that opportunity just because you were married.”

“You don’t have to say th-that. I... have already decided to leave.”

“I’m not flattering you, I’m serious.” The princess frowned as if she was annoyed. “Entering the World Tower is a most honorable event for a wizard. I wouldn’t have made an offer like this if I hadn’t thought Maximillian deserved it.”

As she raised her chin arrogantly, she looked into Max’s shocked eyes and added softly. “I know how deeply passionate the relationship between the two of you is. It will be heartbreaking that you will be separate from your husband, but doing this is your chance to stand on your own two feet. I don’t want you to go there for Riftan’s sake alone.”

Max’s eyes stiffened at the impetuous words. The princess sighed in response to her awkward reaction. “You must be realizing it now too... how women are treated. I would not have been an exception. If I hadn’t become a wizard, by now I would have married a prince in order to strengthen Whedon’s unity.”

Cynical energy rose above Agnes's jewel blue eyes. "However, if you become a world tower wizard, you won't have to do anything against your will. No one will be able to force you, not even the Duke of Croix or Riftan. You will have the power to protect yourself."

Her powerful voice resounded loudly in her heart. If she didn't feel such heartbreaking pain for what was going to happen, she would have been excited. How many times had she longed to be such a talented and confident wizard such as the princess? However, she felt so miserable to rejoice about it. Her head was blank, as if she had been hit with a mace. It felt like something was splitting her in half.

Max shook her head weakly. "Right now... my head is too o-occupied with the thoughts of stopping the trial. I can't afford to think of anything else..."

"Of course it is in that state." The princess nodded meekly. "For now, we should focus on defeating the Duke of Croix. And then, you will have time to think about the next steps."

They specified some more details and got up from their seats. As she walked out of the door to head to the meeting room, Uslyn and Elliot were waiting by the door, looking at her with worry. Max flashed them a determined smile and headed to the main building along with the princess. The third meeting of mediation would be held in the same place as yesterday. They all stood in front of the large arched door to gauge the situation inside for a moment. The Duke's sharp, loud voice could be heard through the door.

"If Your Majesty just lets an act as terrible as this pass, the nobles will all pretest against it at once! Does His Majesty intend to turn his back on the vassals who swore allegiance to him for the sake of a mere knight of some humble town?"

It was a despicable threat. Max's face was seething with anger at the insulting words towards her husband. The princess looked at the ceiling as if to gather all her patience, then she announced herself with dignity and approached the attendant who was on duty at the door.

"I have an urgent report for His Majesty. Ask permission for us to enter the conference room."

"Wait a moment please."

The young attendant carefully opened the door and stepped inside. After a while, he came back to open it wide and stepped aside to invite them inside. Max carefully entered the conference room with the princess and Simon. Riftan, who was sitting in the front of the table looking annoyed, looked at her, and his eyes widened. She was close to the princess, avoiding his questioning gaze. Princess Agnes walked slowly in front of the king and bowed politely in accordance with palace etiquette.

“I apologize for interrupting the meeting, Your Majesty.”

“No matter. I was bored of hearing the same words over and over again anyway.” King Ruben’s sullen words distorted the Duke of Croix’s face. The king yawned naturally and spoke slowly. “What is there to report? Don’t beat around the bush and let me hear it.”

“There is something His Majesty has yet to know about this matter. I was hesitant to make a decision on my own, Lady Calypse decided that we shall not stand still so we came in a rush like this to explain to His Majesty.”

She paused for a moment and looked alternately at the rigid faces of Riftan and the Duke of Croix. King Ruben raised a thick eyebrow and touched his chin with his hand.

“I said to stop beating around the bush and tell me the whole story. I don’t like long talks.”

The princess straightened her posture and shot an icy look at the Duke of Croix. “Then I’ll get straight to the point, Your Majesty. The Duke of Croix claimed that his actions were a light corporal punishment, but for Lady Calypse, it was different. If the Duke decides to take this matter to trial, Lady Calypse will charge him with ill-treatment before the wizards of the World Tower.”

The princess’s voice echoed loudly throughout the room. The Duke’s expression was livid with anger and he rose from his seat and screamed. “Nonsense! What does the World Tower have to do with all this!”

“It has a lot to do with it! Protecting the World Tower wizards is Nornui’s greatest concern. The main purpose of The World Tower is to protect wizards from hunters and pursuers of heretics.”

Simon spoke on behalf of the princess. Then, both the Duke of Croix and Riftan made a confused expression, as if they were listening to a calf speaking. Regardless of their reaction, the wizard continued to speak calmly to the king.

“Maximillian Calypse was named a member of Nornui last spring. She is a wizard of the World Tower and given that, any cruelty inflicted on her constitutes a persecution of a wizard. As soon as she asks for protection, the World Tower will launch an investigation, and as soon as the facts are confirmed, the duke will be held accountable for it.”

“I can’t bear to listen to any of this nonsense!” The duke slammed his fists on the table with full anger and looked at Max and the princess as if he wanted to murder them.

“Wizard you say? Ha! To cover up this, they are telling such an absurd lie! Her majesty’s intentions are suspicious!”

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Even for King Ruben, who always had an impeccably calm expression, it was difficult to keep his face from hardening at the blatant criticism that the Duke threw. He looked at the Duke of Croix with his golden-brown eyes shining fiercely.

“Croix, it seems that you see the king as a jester.” The king, who had been seated in the chair, straightened his posture and looked at him with a menacing smile. “Have you forgotten that the one you are insulting now is the king’s daughter? I have decided to listen to all possible complaints in consideration of your resentful heart... I am about to run out of patience.”

“...I was vexed, and I crossed the line by making an inappropriate comment.” The duke immediately softened his attitude but his eyes still burned with hostility. “However, I can’t believe the princess’s words. Isn’t it a fact that everyone knows that the two of them have a close friendship? Right now, I can’t help but doubt that the princess is lying to help cover up for this man.”

The Duke of Croix spoke mockingly and looked at Max with contempt. “I don’t want to say this about my daughter, but this girl’s intelligence is terrible. Only six seasons have passed since she left Croix Castle, it is impossible that she is already a World Tower wizard, it would be more credible to say that a donkey has turned into a stallion!”

Before finishing his words, Riftan jumped from his seat fiercely showing an angrily distorted face. As if he would be hit at that moment, the duke stepped back out of inertia. Two royal knights stopped him quickly, but Riftan kept casting a murderous glance at the Duke of Croix. As if trying to break the tension, the princess spoke aloud.

“If you cannot believe my words, I will call on the knights who participated in the expedition to Livadon as witnesses. Maximilian not only played a role as a healer in the Allied rear, but also played a decisive role in the final battle. This is a truth known to the soldiers of Livadon, Osyria, and Balto. There are countless people who are willing to testify that she is an outstanding wizard.”

Her father looked at her incredulously, as if he couldn't believe those words. Max hunched her shoulders, a habit she developed out of fear, but quickly straightened her back. There was no reason for her to be afraid. Secretly, she wiped her cold, sweaty palms on the hem of her skirt and looked directly at her father. He was a skilled man at crushing others with just the look in his eyes and he looked at her with contempt, belittling her with his eyes, and his face immediately grew red with his temper. She had difficulty overcoming his frosty glare, but suddenly Max realized that her father's height was shorter than she remembered. At the sudden realization, she blinked blankly. She had thought that the Duke of Croix was much, much bigger than her.

'Whenever I was standing in front of those eyes full of scorn, I felt as small as an ant.'

However, her father's height was at best a little taller than Princess Agnes, his firm and tall body seemed slimmer than she remembered. Compared to a troll or a werewolf, he looked like a scarecrow. Suddenly, the fear she felt inside her crumbled like sand and she felt a feeling of bewilderment and despondency wash over her. Why was she so afraid of that man? At least after their recent meaning, there was no reason to tremble so much in front of this person. She had the means to defend herself.

'Didn't I block an attack by a Remdragon Knight? That was much more threatening than his cane.'

In the midst of her state of liberation, she looked at her father. The horrible monster inside her mind that instilled fear in her shrunk insignificantly.

Max slowly opened her mouth to speak. "It doesn't matter whether my father believes it or not. I... am a wizard. If my father puts my husband to trial... I will use all possible means to retaliate against it."

She felt Riftan's intense gaze p***k her cheeks. His eyes were shining dangerously, but he did not say a single word to question what she was on about: although he looked quite annoyed, he seemed to be determined to keep quiet for that moment. While secretly sighing in relief, she heard the shrill voice of the Duke of Croix.

"This ungrateful thing...! Go ahead, let's see how far you can go! You are spouting all these to cover up for the incident!"

"Are you serious with what you have said?" King Ruben, who was watching the situation with an interested face, sighed deeply. "Duke of Croix, if the World Tower intervenes, it usually won't end with only you or me being burdened greatly. Are you aware that you are about to be accused of persecuting a wizard?"

"I didn't even know that this child was a World Tower wizard! And so how could they say that I persecuted her?"

“It does not matter if you knew that fact or not. What is important is that you inflicted damage on her.”

Princess Agnes coldly refuted. Simon, standing silently next to her, nodded and agreed. “That’s how it is. The sequence of the situation is not so important. The World Tower will only investigate whether there has been abusive behavior or not.”

””” ”

The Duke of Croix’s face was now red and almost purple. Seeing their situation, King Ruben’s face filled with triumph. “What he said is true, Duke. You know how troublesome the World Tower can be, right? If they turn their backs on you, most wizards will leave the duchy. In the future, the World Tower will no longer want to dispatch wizards for the Duke. Are you saying that you are going to push through with the trial even if you will face all those penalties?”

The duke opened his mouth wide, as if he were about to refute, then closed it again. Even if he was filled with anger from head to toe, it seemed that his judgment as a lord who had jurisdiction over a huge territory for many years made him hesitate to answer. He rolled his eyes in disgust, as if calculating the losses that would result from an unexpected variable.

King Ruben, who was watching him silently, as if driving a wedge into his enemy, spoke again. “If you continue to insist on a trial, you will lose not only the prestige of your family, but also a significant number of high-ranking wizards. It would be a heavy burden to contain Dristan’s men. And that’s not all, if the World Tower exerts pressure on you, even I won’t be able to ignore those charges.”

The complexion of the Duke of Croix was severely hardened. “That means...”

“What it means is that it will be more difficult for you to have the upper hand in a trial.”

“His Majesty has the duty to preserve the prestige of the nobles. Do you mean that it doesn’t matter if his subjects harbor animosity against the royal family?”

“I’m starting to get tired of your threats...” King Ruben’s eyes narrowed chillingly. “My simple wish is to maintain Whedon’s unity and protect the order of the Seven Kingdoms. You shouldn’t try to fulfill your ambitions by using such weaknesses... you make me doubt your loyalty to me.”

“I was threatened with death by a knight who was knighted by His Majesty himself. If the king is not deemed responsible for this, then who am I supposed to complain to?”

“Isn’t that why I’ve been putting up with your whining until now?” King Ruben’s annoyed reply made the Duke of Croix’s mouth turn pale with contempt. When the king saw this, he spoke in a low voice as if to reassure him. “What happened to you, Duke, is

unfortunate. Calypse was clearly out of control. But upon hearing the full story of the incident, wasn't it you who provided the cause in the first place? If the trial continues, many of the nobles will criticize Calypse, but you too will face heavy criticism. And if the World Tower intervenes, it will be a more burdensome issue. What's so great about making this bigger? If you don't get the verdict that you want, you will be severely ridiculed."

The duke's shoulders shook with fury as if he didn't know what to do, he was unable to accept that his will was about to be thwarted. His bloodshot eyes fluttered eerily, alternating between Riftan and Max. She was nervous that he would react by yelling insults at her. However, it seemed that the aristocratic coldness etched into his bones barely controlled his explosive anger. The Duke of Croix gritted his teeth and shook his anger in despair.

Then, King Ruben presented them a compromise. "However, since Calypse also did something serious, it would be unfair to just let it slide. Now, how about we do this? If you let this issue pass in silence, I will reduce in half the dowry you had promised to marry Rosetta into the royal family."

The Duke of Croix was so overwhelmed with containing his anger that even the unconventional proposal seemed not to be heard. The king added threateningly while the duke kept his mouth shut and continued to say nothing.

"But if you're going to go against my will, there's nothing I can do. I have no choice but to invalidate the engagement. It is impossible for me to have a disloyal subject as a relative."

Coming this far, even as the Duke of Croix, he couldn't back down. The duke gripped his cane so tightly with both hands that it was strange that it did not break. He spoke as if he was vomiting blood. "Alright. To bed to His Majesty's will... I will withdraw the charges."

Max released the breath she was holding. She couldn't believe her father had resigned himself, even though she had heard it with her own ears. The duke looked at her as if he was chewing on something stale, then asked the king's permission and led his vassals out of the room. Only then did it feel that everything had finished. She dropped her shoulders with a sense of relief, but it was too early for her to relax.

As if watching the ridiculous work of a harlequin, Riftan, who was observing the situation in silence, slowly approached her. Max's body stiffened as he took her arm with one hand and turned his head toward King Ruben.

"This seems to be the end of the meeting, so we shall also take our leave."

“Do what you please.” The king responded sarcastically, leaning deeply over the chair as if he was exhausted. “I’m not so happy because you tried to kill Croix. This has reduced my lifespan by five years. I don’t want to see your face for a while.”

“In favor of the benevolence of the king, I will not do anything near the capital in the next few years.”

“You’re just like an arrogant brat.” The king shook his head with a crooked smile. “I’m glad this ended without me losing you. This dramatic turn was absolutely thanks to Maximilian.”

Max didn’t know what to do, but quickly bowed to the king. King Ruben shook a hand dryly, as if the gesture was already a norm. Riftan immediately left the meeting room with her, without wasting any more time. Agnes, sensing an unusual atmosphere, followed him cautiously. For a long time they walked in deep silence, then Riftan entered an empty room and finally opened his mouth.

“... Who put that idea in your head?”

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Max and the Princess grew incredibly nervous at his chilling tone. Riftan leaned over the table and shot them a menacing look.

“You spouted a lot of words in there, and yet now it seems like your lips are sealed together? I want to know who was the one who came up with that idea.”

Max’s shoulders hunched at his daunting voice, if she was a turtle, she would have already been hiding in her shell. Finally, Princess Agnes confessed with a sigh.

“It was my idea. I thought that the only way to get the duke to abandon a trial was to make him suffer a great loss that he could not bear.”

“So... are you saying you used my wife to achieve that?”

When it was made clear who the target of his attack was, he straightened his posture and approached the princess with nimble speed.

“Who asked you to do that? Did I ask for your help!?”

“If the trial had been held, you would have lost your title and assets. There was no other way.”

“And what does that have to do with you? With what right did you dare to offer that solution to my wife!”

“Ri... Riftan...!”

Max was startled at his blatant rudeness and tugged at the hem of Riftan’s robe. He turned his head towards her and looked at her with exasperated eyes, his thick neck visibly convulsed as if he was shedding a thousand curses. Then, as if he had regained that self-control, he took a step back, rubbing his face roughly. After a moment, Riftan asked in a calmer tone.

“What do you plan to do now?”

“... the duke also has contact with several high-ranking wizards who can investigate it in the World Tower. The Duke of Croix will probably try to verify the facts through them. I have spoken to some of the high command mages in the tower, but if they dig a little deeper into the matter, they will quickly discover that Maximilian has not yet been officially appointed. Before that happens...”

The princess hesitated for a moment before continuing, then in a serious tone she began to speak. “Maximilian must go to Nornui. If she becomes a member of the World Tower, the duke will not delve further into the matter. And even if he does discover the truth, Nornui will keep her protected. The tower administrators also promised to alter the day of her registration.”

As soon as the princess finished speaking, Max closed her eyes tightly, but contrary to the expectation that Riftan would impulsively flame in anger, he kept quiet. It was eerily silent.

She felt her heart clench and she squeezed the hem of her dress even tighter, she did not have the courage to look directly into his eyes. As she lowered her head with a troubled heart, a cold voice rang out like a blow of frost.

“If you were a man, right now, I would have challenged you to a duel.”

“I must be thankful for being a woman then.” Princess Agnes murmured sarcastically, letting out a long sigh. She continued, carefully speaking to convince him. “Don’t lash out at me like that, for once, think carefully about it. When she becomes a Nornui wizard, she will be able to defend your title and territory. Also, being a high-ranking wizard would not bring harm to Maximilian. With her skills, she will be able to graduate from Nornui in three years. If you just hold out for those three years, everything will be resolved.”

””” ”

He seemed to be able to kill the princess with just his gaze. Riftan, watching Agnes dangerously with his dark eyes, slowly turned his head towards Max.

“... You also agreed to this plan?”

Max swallowed dry saliva and nodded slowly. She pulled away from him, she had no idea what to say. It seemed like a hot lump had caught in her throat. Riftan, who was looking at her silently, not knowing what to do, let out a dispirited laugh.

“Without knowing it, I thought it was a good plan, that’s why I kept quiet like an idiot.”

“S-sorry for not having told you beforehand. However... I-I couldn’t let you lose everything just like that...”

Max’s words became vague at the sound of his harsh breath. Riftan grabbed his forehead and began to speak as if he was chewing every word.

“That’s why... you decided to leave me?”

“J-just for three or four years . I-I... I will work hard! Every day, I won’t even sleep... nor rest... I will really try h-hard... I’ll be back as soon as...”

“Enough of this bullsh*t!”

Max trembled with fear and took a step back at the sudden rise of his tone. Riftan’s shoulders trembled, and he gritted his teeth, as if trying to ease his fervent anger. His face heated up, turning red with his temper, then in an instant he stiffened like a stone statue and she could see that his determination got harder than walls. Riftan turned his gaze towards the princess and with a low voice, spat out his words.

“Wake up from those dreams. There is no way I will allow this.”

The princess opened her mouth wide as if trying to persuade him, then took a step back, realizing that it was useless to say anything at that moment. “I will visit Anatol again sooner or later. Until then, think carefully. You will come to realize that there is no other way right now.”

“Don’t come.” Riftan said ruthlessly as he grabbed Max and walked towards the door. “As long as I am the Lord of Anatol, I will not allow any visit from you. Don’t ever show your face in front of me.”

“Ri-Riftan... those words...!”

He walked out the door pretending he didn’t hear Max’s embarrassed plea. She looked back as she was dragged away and saw Agnes shake her head, the princess also seemed to have a more perplexed reaction than expected. Max tried to blame him for being so mean, but when she saw his hardened face, she closed her mouth firmly. Riftan gave orders to the knights waiting outside.

“Prepare to leave. We are leaving this castle right now.”

“You mean, right now?” Elliott took turns looking at Max’s and Riftan’s faces and nodded without raising objections. “Understood. I will prepare the carriage immediately.”

As Elliot ran down the hall, Riftan led Max again with longer strides. Uslin, Ruth, and the other knights followed silently, they all adopted a very cautious attitude as if sensing the harsh atmosphere of Riftan. About an hour later, the carriage that she had taken to come here was waiting for them at the castle gate. Max climbed on it and looked across the knights in the ranks. She wondered if it would be alright to leave without even saying goodbye to King Ruben for a moment, but she didn’t dare to get any words out of her mouth. She knew well that Riftan was too angry to maintain proper etiquette.

Max sat silently in the carriage seat and looked at him. Riftan, who was watching her with a pointed gaze, slammed the door shut. When the castle disappeared from view, the cold tension that had filled her lungs escaped. She let out a tired sigh as she rubbed her temple in pain. His eyes were darker than ever, she was worried that an intense fight would break out at any moment. They set out in a dangerous atmosphere, as if walking on a thin layer of ice. The knights watched their words and Riftan looked like he had chosen to ignore her.

Max, who tried to speak a couple of times, soon gave up and looked at the passing scenery. She even thought that she would rather live in the carriage just like this. Wouldn’t it be nice if Anatol were at a distance of more than a month of travel? She needed time to calm down and, above all, to delay the moment she had to face Riftan. Whenever they stopped the carriage for a short rest, Max would gaze intently at her husband’s blank face. Even from a distance, she clearly felt that he was furious. She had seen him get angry many times, but it was the first time that he seemed so dangerously furious. Max was overwhelmed in her miserable heart. She hadn’t wanted to leave his side. Tears of sadness welled up in her eyes, she sat wrapping herself with a blanket around the corner of the carriage and sighed.

Relief over her father abandoning the trial, anxiety about the future, fear of Riftan’s reaction... complex emotions were tangled in her mind. Even in a very exhausted state,

Max couldn't release the tension for even a moment. She sat in the rocking carriage, stiffening her body like a stone. As a result of traveling for a day and a half like this, she was completely bruised when she reached Anatol.

"Are you alright?"

Uslin helped her out of the carriage as he asked worriedly. Max unconsciously nodded. Riftan, who was handing over Talon's reins to the stable keeper, walked over and took her arm from Uslin's hand.

"You go unload the luggage then rest."

"The knights who stayed in the castle will ask about the outcome of the meeting. What shall we tell them...?"

"Tell them nothing has changed."

Riftan spoke in a sharp tone, then headed towards the great hall. The servants flocked at the entrance to greet the Lord, but Riftan didn't even pay attention to them. Max took a deep breath, barely keeping up with his rapid pace. Finally, upon entering the warm and cozy bedroom, Riftan released her hand, walked in front of the bed, and began to remove his robe and heavy armor one by one. She felt throughout her body that she was being silently tortured. The sound of firewood burning, the wind shaking the windows, and the sound of armor rustling were short-lived. In the end, Max, who couldn't overcome her impatience, opened her mouth first.

"I know you're a-an-angry. However... to make my father step back... there was no o-other way. I couldn't let you be placed on trial."

Riftan's hands, which were removing his scabbard-sheathed sword by his waist and placing it on its holder, stiffened. His intense gaze went to her.

"There was no other way?"

When Riftan approached, Max nervously took a step back. He caught up with her quickly and leaned menacingly toward her.

"Don't be ridiculous. It was something you had to let me handle. You just had to let me take care of this!"

"L-leaving Whedon... was that your solution?" Max bit her lip and looked at him.

"Leaving Anatol, the Remdragon Knights... everything—did you really think that was a solution?"

Riftan's cheek muscles tensed and stiffened. He let out a low curse and grabbed her by the shoulder. "It was already decided. I had already told the knights. I would have left all

the assets I acquired while I was a lord here to serve as an operating fund, but I could keep the personal property that I acquired while working as a mercenary. There would have been nothing for you to worry about. Livadon, Osyria, Balto, Drystan... There are many royalties who want to hire me. I just had to accept their offer of a land and start over."

Max looked at him in utter disbelief. "H-how... Can you say such irresponsible words? Y-you are the lord of this place... and the commander of the Remdragon Knights. The people of Ca-Calypse Castle... as well as the citizens here, they all revere you. Even the knights are r-risking their lives following you! Are you saying... that you'll throw them all aside?"

Riftan's eyes trembled slightly, then clenched his fists tightly and quickly rebutted. "Hebaron or Uslin would rule Anatol without me. There are many excellent Knights, so the Knights of Remdragon will continue as is without any problem."

"They... don't want you to leave, Riftan. And we a-all know you also don't want to. Don't even try to d-deny that!" Max turned and stepped back as if to shake his hands off her. Seeing his cornered expression, it felt like her heart was breaking. "I-I...know how much Ri-Riftan cherishes this land. For so long... you've been working to rebuild Anatol! Now that you are finally seeing the fruit of your work... you're going to leave everything behind? A-are you saying... just because of me... you're going to give up everything you've achieved in the last ten years?"

She spread her arms in exasperation. Calypse Castle, which she carefully renovated, and the solid walls that surround it, a city that is about to achieve a dazzling revival... how could he decide to turn his back on all of it? Max let out a desperate cry.

"Have y-you lost your mind? It's like you've gone i-insane!"

"Yes!" He took a step forward and grabbed her in a fit, forcing her to see him. "As long as you're by my side, anything else will be fine. Over and over again, I will build walls and collect riches. If you tell me to do that a thousand times, I would!"

She clenched her teeth to resist the cry that was about to break out from her throat. She could not understand his blind obsession. Why the was this man so tightly tied to her? Max watched his desperate face with trembling eyes. She didn't want to be separated from him either, she really didn't want to leave even for a while, but in a corner of her heart she knew it was wrong. It was impossible to ignore everything and turn away from the world. He had many more things to cherish aside from her.

Max spoke with difficulty, as if she was trying to get a bone out that was stuck in her throat. "I.. I.. I want to go to Nornui"

He looked at her with a confused gaze, as if he couldn't believe what she just said. In one last desperate effort, Max gathered her remaining strength and continued speaking.

“If I become a wizard... everything will be solved. You will not have to lose Anatol... t- there will be no need for you to leave the Remdragon Knights. Please... w-wait three years. Whatever it takes, I will definitely return...”

“Ha...”

Max stopped speaking at the empty laugh that came out of his lips. Riftan muttered bluntly, looking down at the ground in despair.

“Are you telling me to wait all over again?”

It could be clearly seen that his fingers covering his face were trembling slightly. Max looked at him with a broken heart. However, when he looked up again, his wounded face easily disappeared. He opened his mouth with an expressionless face, as if he were wearing a mask.

“Three years may not mean so much to you, but I have already endured three years so I could be with you. Only God knows how miserable and lonely those days were.” An incomprehensible smile lingered around Riftan’s lips. “You don’t know how it feels. One day feels like a year and a year feels like an eternity. You have no idea what it’s like to count every minute when you long for someone... you don’t know, and so you can dare tell me to wait three years for you.”

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“I-it’s not like that. It was a difficult decision for m-me too. It’s not... it’s not like I don’t care.”

“Then...” As if suppressing something, he stopped speaking for a moment. “Then you should leave with me.”

Max couldn’t stop the tears from flowing and covered her face with her hands. Riftan hugged her around the waist, he spoke desperately, trying to persuade her.

“If you really don’t want to leave my side, then come with me. Don’t worry about anything else! I will give you a castle and loyal servants again. Now that we can finally be together... we can’t be apart again. I don’t have the confidence to endure those years again!”

‘Receiving a stab in my heart would be less painful than hearing those words.’ She stared at him in pain as his dark eyes shook painfully in distress.

The desire to do what he asked made her feel like she was being ripped into two parts. Her heart said yes fiercely, and her sense of reason firmly denied his offer in her head. It was so clear which option was the right thing to do. Max’s face crumpled as she wept and struggled to open her trembling lips.

“I.. I can’t do that.” Her mouth tasted bitter and her throat felt cracking as she swallowed the s**s that broke out. She exhaled breathlessly. “I took everything from you... I.. I.. How am I supposed to live with my head held high? Since you married me... there has been nothing good that happened to you... not a single thing... you were forced to an expedition that wasn’t your responsibility to bear... you suffered to the point of dying... and n-now you would be left without title, without territory, without property, without your companions... just-just the fact of thinking that you will lose everything... How can I feign ignorance about that!”

“I’m telling you that I don’t care. It doesn’t matter to me! I’m saying that as long as I have you, everything else will be fine.”

“It matters to m-me!” Hot tears fell on her cheeks. Max grabbed her face and cried out sobbing. “Throughout my life... I-i have thought of myself as a useless human being. I couldn’t take it, I was so ashamed of myself. That’s why... I couldn’t show myself openly to anyone... I couldn’t even tell the truth about me... I built my pride on the motto of... lying... and pretending to be fine...”

Max closed her eyes tightly. She could not control the torrent of tears that flowed constantly. “I-I don’t want to do that anymore. Not anymore... I don’t want to hate myself anymore.”

Max’s blurry vision caught Riftan’s flustered face, she gripped his arm tightly and screamed at him in supplication. “I’m not just... going for you.. I want to change. I want... to be proud of myself. So please... let me go...”

“...I don’t want to. I cannot let you go.”

When she reached for his hand, Riftan rejected her as if he touched fire and backed away from her.

“L-let me go, please. You have to... let me go.”

“I said I don’t want to!”

Riftan screamed like a child. His broad shoulders that seemed solid as rocks trembled violently, staring at her with torn eyes, he left the room as if fleeing. Max couldn’t follow him, staggered, and sat right where she was. Her body shook violently as if she were in the middle of a storm. She hugged herself and cried sadly. The hot tears continued to stream down her face, she felt as if a part of her body had been cut out.

‘Do I really have to do this? Should I go, even if it hurts and causes us pain?’

Overwhelmed by doubt and pain, she wrapped her hands around her feverish face. She hated everything that led to this situation. And among those things, was herself. Max closed her eyes tightly.

””” . ”

When the tears stopped, the tension and fatigue accumulated from the past few days overwhelmed her body. With the help of Rudis, she bathed and put on new clothes. Was it because of her heightened emotions that she felt so weak? She had no more energy left to stand. Once she laid back on the bed, she fell fast asleep.

When she woke up, the morning light was shining through the window. She sat up and stared at the glimmering glass window. The spot on the bed next to her was empty. Caressing the cool sheet with her fingertips, she got off the bed and draped a shawl around her shoulders. She tried to go find him, but changed her mind and sat on the bed. He needed time to think, and she also needed time to clear her emotions and her mind.

She walked in front of the fireplace, washed her face with the water that was already at her disposal and combed her hair. After a while, Rudis opened the door and entered.

“You’re awake.” She smiled kindly and put the wood she was carrying in her arms by the fireplace. “Would you like to have your breakfast ready right away? Last night you stayed asleep and did not even have a proper dinner.”

Seeing the maid’s kind face seemed to calm her heart. Like the croaking of a frog, Max muttered in an inaudible voice.

“Yes p-please.”

“Please wait for a moment. I’ll prepare a delicious meal in an instant.”

Rudis put firewood on the fire that was already burning low, fanned it with bellows, and headed towards the door. Max hesitated and asked.

“By the way... the Lord...”

Rudis stopped short and replied in a cautious tone. "It seems that he is in his office. Do you want me to call for him if you need anything?"

Max shook her head with an awkward smile. She was grateful to Rudis for pretending she knew nothing, when she must have heard of their fight. When Rudis left, she sat in front of the fireplace, lost in thought.

The cats huddled on her lap, meowing and purring. Outside the castle, the sound of the servants busily chopping wood was heard. While paying attention to the usual noises, the feeling of being adrift like a wrecked ship gradually subsided. She watched the burning flames and remembered the past days before they were turbulent.

She thought about the day she was brought there by Riftan without knowing anything about the territory, being the lady of Calypse Castle, and redecorating it, having dealt with incidents and accidents. Having met Ruth, Yulysion, Garrow and the Remdragon Knights. Little by little, getting closer to them and even fighting while learning magic... a slight smile appeared on her mouth.

Then, she also recalled the days when she experienced a horrible war, when she felt resentful of her recklessness and even caused the loss of their child. Sadness and regret filled her heart. She had a hundred or so things to regret, and when she remembered that she had followed her father on her own will, she was filled with shame and negative thoughts.

Thus, all the memories of those days piled up desperately. She closed her eyes slightly: now she had to give up all the things she was used to and walk towards an unknown world. Fear gripped her to the marrow of her bones, yet somehow the decision to leave was firmly established.

Suddenly, she realized that the words she yelled at Riftan weren't just to persuade him. She wanted to stay with him forever, but in the corner of her heart she felt the desire to get out of his shadow. They were trapped in their own world that was decaying progressively, he didn't even hesitate to ruin himself when it came to her. She wanted to hide from the world and cling onto him forever, that temptation constantly afflicted her, but if they continued like that, she would end up drowning his future in mud and he would suffocate her in his arms. They would ruin each other in the name of "love".

She walked to the window and looked up at the pale winter sky. She could see the migratory birds flying in a row towards the distant sky. She felt something inside her rise from the excruciating pain. It was terribly painful to be called hope and too weak to be called determination. Max opened the window, the chilly air filling her lungs and the cold breeze cooling her face. As if announcing the end of winter, the sunlight that had penetrated through the clouds had a faint golden hue. The world was waking up so beautifully that it was cruel.

The next day, she still didn't hear from Riftan. Max didn't look for him, she wanted to give him time to calm his thoughts. However, when she couldn't find a single trace of him on the fourth day of their return to the castle, she plucked up her courage and headed to his office, but when she was finally standing in front of the door, she couldn't bring herself to pull the k**b.

'How many more times am I going to break his heart?'

She was horrified at the fact that she had begged him to let her go. She anxiously toyed with the hem of her skirt, then she turned away from the door and looked into the dark corridor where the sunset's glow was visible. At that moment, she felt a strong temptation to return to her room that way. However, she soon made up her mind and approached the door again.

After hesitating one more time, she carefully opened the door and saw him sleeping on a couch. Max entered silently, then saw a glass of wine on the floor and stopped walking. There was a dark red stain on the carpet as if he had spilled alcohol on the carpet. She raised the glass carefully, the smell of liquor piercing her nostrils. Max wrinkled her nose and looked at the empty bottle of wine next to him.

Apparently, he appeared in no condition to speak with. With a sigh, she took off her cloak and placed it over his body that was lying on a velvet couch. While turning to leave the room, just in time, she heard Riftan's husky voice.

"... that woman... she always went to the hill and looked towards the horizon." Max hesitated and turned. Riftan slowly opened his eyes and looked at her. His eyes were sunk, darker than ever. "The woman who gave birth to me, she would comb her hair and go up the hill when dawn came. I knew that she was waiting for the man who abandoned her."

Max tensed as she realized he was talking about his past he was always so reluctant to talk about. A voice mixed with mockery and disinterest echoed through the room.

"Can you believe it? She waited devotedly for over a decade for a man who just used her and abandoned her. He must have completely forgotten about the innocent woman he once had fun with."

Cynical laughter spread coldly through the air. Max hunched her shoulders and calmly approached him. Riftan continued to speak in an indifferent demeanor, as if he didn't care if she was listening to him or not.

"My stepfather was a slow-witted person. He married a woman who never looked at him for twelve years. Meanwhile, that woman continued to wait for the man she only spent a few months with, as if he were important. She waited and waited... and when she heard that the man had perished in battle, she hanged herself."

Max tried to take his hand, but he withdrew his arm in midair. She felt as cold as if her lungs were filled with ice water. Riftan showed a cold smile.

“One day when I entered the cabin, she was hanging from the ceiling. She was a very beautiful woman... It was a miserable scene.” Riftan lifted his torso and lowered his legs to the floor. Then, looking at her face that paled in surprise with her tear-filled eyes, he spoke again. “I swore to myself that I wouldn’t be like that, even if I die. It wouldn’t make myself so miserable...”

Max knelt down and hurriedly squeezed his hands. When she realized the thoughts he was obsessing over, her heart sank in fear.

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She shook her head desperately and opened her lips to speak.

“Riftan is... d-different from that person. You won’t ever be miserable. I... I’ll be back right away. When I return... I won’t ever... leave again. Never... Never...”

“I’m already at the limit.” Max stiffened, staring at his numb face. His black eyes, like coals, swayed in pain. “Since I started wanting you... I always felt like I was standing over burning charcoal. Do you know what that is? Not being able to stop my feet from moving even for a moment. I can’t sit or stand. Keep running... I have to keep running. I can’t stop over a never-ending fire... I can’t rest even for a moment and I have to keep running.”

His voice had a faint whisper, as if it revealed the weariness on his back. Only then did Max notice that his face had become haggard in a few days. He ran his rough cheeks down with one hand.

“I... want to be free from that .”

“Riftan... I...”

Her lips were twitching, not knowing what to say. A reddish light filtering through the window cast a gloomy shadow on his face. And he opened his mouth again.

“If you go, I won’t wait for you anymore.”

“ ... ”

“I’ll stop thinking about you. This time... I’ll stop. I’m going to quit making myself miserable.” Max’s mouth hung open in shock. He squeezed her forearm and uttered each word heavily. “Do you still want to go?”

It felt as if all the air had disappeared from her lungs. His dark eyes warned her that this would be the last time he would hold her. She hesitated and tried to back away, but he didn’t let go of her arm. Max’s lips twitched like a fish rising above water. Her heart was pounding loudly, and her throat tingled as if she had swallowed a shard of glass. Max grinded her teeth and repeated the same words like a parrot.

“I-I’ll come back. Whatever it takes... I’ll come back to you. S-so...”

All light disappeared from Riftan’s eyes. When she saw those bleak eyes, she couldn’t bring herself to speak anymore. He slowly released her arm.

“Right.”

Even though she tried to escape before, Max felt alone in cold snow when his hand was gone. His voice sounded empty like an echo.

“Then...go. To that place where you want to go...”

As if that was the end of the conversation, he stood up. She couldn’t move, it felt like she was paralyzed. Riftan walked over to the table and took a new glass. Max, who looked at him in frustration, got up quickly and reached for him in a hurry. Then Riftan stepped back and exclaimed fiercely.

“Don’t touch me!”

””” ”

Max took a breath and stepped back. Shock blinded her. Riftan glared fiercely and roared like a wounded beast.

“If you touch me now, I will never let you go. Even if I have to lock you up, I will keep you by my side. You won’t like that...” Max instinctively backed away as he approached. Riftan whispered under his breath. “Get out of here this instance.”

“ ”

“Don’t even think that you’re leaving for my sake. I never wanted this. You’re... You’re leaving me for your own satisfaction.”

Max, who was standing as if she was nailed to the door, flinched, and turned around. Her legs were shaking. Each step she took was as difficult as if her flesh were being torn apart. She looked down at the elongated shadow under her feet, she wanted to look back, but couldn’t because she was scared. Max, who hesitated as she stood rigid in front of the door, quickly made her way to the dark corridor.

After going down a distance in the hallway, she suddenly heard a shattering sound behind her back. The loud noise that hit her eardrums made her shudder. Suddenly, her head went cold and she wondered what the he had done.

‘Have I gone crazy? How can I even think of leaving him? Even if I lose the whole world, I can’t lose him.’

Max turned around urgently. However, she didn’t even move as if her feet were fastened to the ground. The gut seemed to melt with the desire to return to him immediately and beg him to do what he wanted, but she could not take a step. She knew what she had to do. Not knowing what was holding her, she froze and trembled violently. Tears ran down her cheeks. Although it was so painful, she really had to go.

‘What in the world is holding my two feet back? I wanted to give up everything.’

But as her shoulders shook and she swallowed her tears, she turned around again. Every time she walked away from him, she felt as if something around her crumbled. She felt like a young bird breaking out of its egg. It was cold, she was desperate, scared, and sad. She bit her lips. A ray of sunlight from the setting sun painfully pierced her hazy vision blurred by tears. When she turned her head and looked at the glass window where the light was streaming in, Max took a step again.

Through the pain that seemed to split her body in half, she had to move forward... and forward again...

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As Riftan Calypse entered the banquet hall, all the parrot-like chattering of the people died down. Anatol's lord exuded an overwhelmingly eerie aura of intimidation as he strode across the hall full of tension.

A mix of intense curiosity, fear, and admiration reflected on the faces of the ladies gazing discreetly at his face filled with indifference. The ladies covered their blushing faces with their fans, whispering things in each other's ears while the men silently held their breaths in a mix of fear and astonishment.

The first time he set his foot in Drakium Castle, not one noble had the intention to accept a beast who dared to enter their territory. However, now is a different story. Those who have rejected him and even openly insulted him are placed in a situation where they must fend for themselves.

Riftan Calypse rose into one of the most powerful lords of Whedon in just a few years. He forged strong allegiances with the lords of the Southern continent and is currently expanding his influence spherically to the northern and western regions. The momentum of rise was so parabolic that even the eastern nobles who tried to interfere with it had long since surrendered.

The younger nobles were scrambling to strike a conversation with the legendary knight while the more conservative ones silently retreated to the hall's corners.

Despite that, Riftan did not bat an eyelid to the people's reactions. He strode straight to the end of the hall—towards the arched door without sparing a glance at the people who were looking curiously at him or eager to get a chance to talk to him. When he reached the door, he spoke in a dry tone to the servant who was guarding it.

"I have come here to see His Majesty. Announce my arrival."

The servant immediately ran into the room to relay the announcement. After a moment, the permission to enter was granted and Riftan strode into the room, his reddish-brown cloak gracefully swaying behind him. Ruben the third, who was sitting leisurely on a velvet-lined chair greeted him with a crooked smile.

"You're late. Is it because there's no need for you to gain my favor anymore?"

Riftan's lips cynically twisted as he glanced at the congratulatory gifts piled beside the king's seat.

"I think the other vassals have established enough prestige for the royal family even if you exclude me..."

“That does not mean you have the right to slack off on your obligations.”

The king grumbled with a frown and motioned for Riftan to sit on the chair opposite his. As he sat down, a servant immediately came to give him a glass of wine. Ruben was first to take a sip from his cup then continued to speak like a troubled child.

“Today is the last day of celebration. I was half-resigned into thinking that you might not be attending.”

“I thought that it would be better for me not to attend.”

King Ruben raised an eyebrow at his cold reply. Riftan’s eyes were looking down at the glass of wine and continued his words in a calm manner.

“I wanted to avoid running into that man as much as possible. Since we are celebrating the Crown Prince’s birth, shouldn’t we avoid having any bloodshed?”

The king shook his head at Riftan’s violent words.

””” ”

“Oh heavens. Isn’t knocking out all the Duke of Croix’s teeth enough?”

The king leaned deeper in his chair and sighed deeply.

“Haven’t you already intimidated him enough? Your influence now is more than enough to threaten the Duke of Croix. Looking on the other side, the duke’s momentum could not be compared to what it was before. He’s now older, more nervous, and paranoid. His health had declined by much as well to the extent that he appears miserable. Although the Duke won’t admit it even with a knife against his neck, he is terribly afraid of you. It’s not unreasonable for him to feel as such after all the threat you’ve said to him. Didn’t you recently send a box with human necks inside to the Duke of Croix?”

“Those were the necks of all the assassins he sent.”

Riftan responded indifferently.

“I just gave him back what I received.”

“You’re slowly killing the man by drying up his blood in fear.”

The king filled his cup again as a smirk crept on his lips.

“I think it would have been more merciful for the Duke if you had killed him two years ago.”

At the king's sarcastic remark, a cold flame flashed over Riftan's distant eyes. The incident was not something to joke about for Riftan, he is remorseful towards the royal family for intervening with Anatol's declaration of war against the duke. Riftan held his glass of wine tightly as if to suppress his boiling temper and harshly delivered his words.

"I didn't know that His Majesty cared so much for the man. In the past ten years, didn't His Majesty use all sorts of tactics to bring down the Duke's influence? Even my wife, who just returned from suffering on a battlefield, was used by His Majesty as a weapon to hurt that man's reputation. Your Majesty, are you now having sympathy for that man?"

"Are you going to subject me again to a long torture over that matter?"

The smile had disappeared from King Ruben's lips, his face hardened, and he set his glass down roughly, making a banging sound.

"Will you finally let the matter go if I kneel in front of you?"

"There is only one thing that I ask of you, Your Majesty."

Riftan spat out his words.

"Please do not ever intervene between me and the Duke of Croix. There is no tolerating it again if His Majesty steps forward and mediates between that man and me."

"Are you threatening me right now?"

"I'm asking you for a favor."

Ruben, who was glaring bewilderingly at him, suddenly let out a long breath.

"Even if you don't growl at me like that, I will never get between the two of you again. I myself don't want to go through such trouble again. I have no intentions of meddling in whatever the two of you are doing behind my back as long as you don't delve into things like war or trial."

Then, the king drank his wine in one breath and looked at Riftan's marble-like face as if to read his mood.

"However, if you neglect your duty as a vassal citing your hostility against the duke, it will be a different story. You are now a reputable lord who represents the southern region. If you neglect your obligations to the royal family, the loyalty of the other nobles towards the royal family will be shaken—not to mention the knights who are worshipping the incarnation of Uigru."

"....."

“From now on, a lot of people will make a great deal of whatever you do and the words that come out of your mouth. I am very concerned about what your reluctant attendance to the Crown Prince’s birth celebration will look like to the nobles.”

“...Am I not being severely criticized for being late this once.”

Riftan’s lips twisted cynically.

“I have no intentions of having an ill-relationship with the royal family. If that is what His Majesty is worried about, then let me take this opportunity to make it clear. No matter how great my influence and reputation grow, I am a vassal and a knight ordained by His Majesty. That fact will never change.”

The king’s golden eyes lingered on Riftan’s face as if trying to detect a lie in his words. After a moment of silence full of tension, the king’s posture relaxed and he let out a dry laugh.

“If that is so, you should let the people know. Show them that you truly are one with celebrating the birth of the Crown Prince.”

“...I’ll do my best.”

The king raised an eyebrow as if his answer did not please him at all then clicked his tongue and waved his hand at him.

“Alright. You may leave now.”

Riftan bowed his head at the king then went out to the banquet hall once again. Then, everyone in the room who was chattering loudly all grew silent. Riftan ignored their glances and entered the arched door situated at the left side of the hall.

In the dome-shaped hall filled with colorful patterned rugs, nobles dressed in silk and fur were gathered and conversing with each other. Princess Agnes, who was the lead of the conversations, was in the center and smiled brightly upon seeing him.

“Calypse, you came.”

“It’s been a while, Her Majesty the Princess.”

After excusing herself from her relatives who she was chatting with, she approached him elegantly. Riftan found it strange to see the princess in a loose-fitting dress then turned to the person who was standing next to her. A young man with bright golden eyes and a face similar to Agnes was looking at him with curiosity. Just by looking at the young man, he knew his identity without even bothering to hear his name. Riftan bowed lightly.

“It’s been a while, His Majesty the Prince.”

“It’s been a while, Lord Calypse.”

The young prince held out a hand to gesture a welcome.

“Isn’t this our first time seeing each other again since I was little? Thank you for coming all the way here.”

“Forgive me for not coming here sooner. As a gift of congratulations, I have brought you horses from Rakasim. I hope His Majesty will like my gift.”

“From Rakasim?”

A bright smile spread on the prince’s lips. Riftan looked at his young boyish face curiously. Elias Ruben appeared so youthful with his marble-white skin and slender build that it was hard to believe that he had just become the father of a child. The prince then exclaimed excitedly.

“What’s their breed? And the color of their mane? Since Lord Calypse has chosen them, they must be of great lineage, yes?”

Agnes, who was standing next to him, shook her head as if her brother was absurd.

“You appear more joyful to receive those horses than when Abel was born.”

“Of course Abel is adorable. He resembles his mother so of course he’s bound to be endearing.”

The prince spoke in a tone that seemed to resemble a child boasting about a puppy he received as a gift then smiled.

“However, he’s too small for me to ride and get around.”

The prince joked.

“You’re killing me.”

The princess glared at her brother then turned her gaze back to Riftan.

“Thank you for coming all the way here. The baby’s room is that room over there. Would you like to see him?”

Riftan then nodded slowly. The prince appeared like he was dying to see the horses but could not turn down his sister’s urge and started to take the lead.

He went into the room situated at the end of the hall and pushed the thick veil that hung over the entrance. Then, they saw Rosetta Ruben sitting on a couch lined with thick cushions, being attended to by the maids.

She raised her head and gave them an indifferent look. She was elegantly dressed in a rose-colored dress with her hair that was gleaming with a silver glint groomed neatly. She looked supremely noble and dignified. The Prince then approached her and exclaimed cheerfully.

“Rosetta, Lord Calypse has come to celebrate the birth of Abel.’

The princess’ stern turquoise eyes turned towards Riftan. His face then hardened when he observed that her eyes looked around as if she was searching for someone. Rosetta licked her lips as if to ask about his wife but appears to have changed her mind and turned to her husband.

“The child just fell asleep. Please lower your voices.”

Rosetta, who spoke in a cold tone, took the newborn child from the maid and cradled him in her arms. The Prince who seemed used to his wife’s cold attitude merely shrugged his shoulders and smiled at Riftan.

“Abel is no different from a little devil when he’s awake. He has such a loud voice; he may be a tremendous tyrant when he grows up.”

Then, he leaned down to look into the face of his son who was sleeping soundly. Contrary to his light words and actions, there was a deep affection seen in his eyes as he looked at his newborn child. The Prince tickled the baby’s chubby chin and smiled joyfully.

A sigh of relief escaped from Agnes’ lips as they watched the scene. Her younger brother, whom she had reunited with after years, grew up to be a rightful person compared to his serpent-like father. Seeing how the prince hid his true self behind a humorous façade, she felt a little relieved as she was worried about Abel’s wellness if he behaved differently. It also seems that the Prince and Rosetta share a good relationship.

Contrary to the rumors spreading that the Prince and Rosetta don’t get along well, the two appeared to be affectionate with each other. Agnes had a happy smile on her lips as she watched the picture perfect scene.

At that moment, Riftan’s shadowed face by the entrance caught her eyes. As Agnes was about to approach him to invite him to see his nephew up close, he stiffened. A clear look of pain flashed in Riftan’s eyes as he watched the Crown Prince, Rosetta, and their newborn son from a distance. It was as if they had all turned into daggers and

had cut him into pieces. Agnes was startled by the wretched expression etched on his face and reached out her hand to touch his arm.

“Riftan, are you alright?”

Riftan flinched and harshly shook off her hand. Everyone’s eyes then flew towards them at his violent reaction. Agnes smiled as if there was nothing that happened and spoke softly.

“You look exhausted, Lord. You must be tired from travelling all the way here, please proceed to your room and rest.”

Riftan lowered his eyes as if to hide his feelings and nodded slowly.

“It’s late, please excuse me.”

As if sensing the tense atmosphere, the Prince nodded without a word. Riftan bowed lightly, turned around, and left the room. Agnes then immediately followed after him.

“Are you really alright?”

“What do you mean?”

Riftan spoke in a dry tone, keeping his gaze straight ahead. Agnes bit her lips at his cold attitude. They walked silently for a long time and when they reached a deserted hallway, the princess opened her mouth to speak again.

“There seems to be an exchange between the World Tower and the Church recently. I am not exactly sure what the exchange is about but I’m thinking that they’re probably communicating information about the monsters that began to rise in numbers again.”

Riftan stopped in his tracks. Agnes, who was reading his hardened face, chose her words carefully.

“Once the World Tower and the Church begin to actively exchange with each other, the tower’s regulations will relax. If that is so, you will be able to communicate freely with their wizards in training. If you want to, I can soon relay to Maximillian...”

“Please stop it with the useless meddling.”

Riftan turned towards her and spat out his words harshly. Agnes reflexively took a step back. Riftan, who was glaring at her with such cold eyes, spoke his words in between his gritted teeth.

“I don’t need any of your intervention. If you dare to step between me and my wife again, I won’t let it slide.”

At the end of his threatening, muffled, sentence, she could not utter any word and could only keep her mouth shut. Riftan turned away from her with a swish and walked out of the hallway. Agnes let out a deep sigh at his stubborn attitude.

After Maximillian Calypse had left for the World Tower, Riftan drew all his focus on gaining power. The means he used to earn the allegiance of the southern lords were astonishing.

Riftan was more than willing to engage in subtle political maneuvers, threats, and economic pressures. As a result, he was able to seize not only the loyalty of the southern nobles but also of the western nobles with one hand. His terrifying parabolic momentum is stirring up concerns in the Drachium Palace.

Her closed lips quivered. She braced herself for the certainty that he would resent her for sending Maximillian to the World Tower to prevent a trial. However, she may have miscalculated that he would eventually forgive her overtime.

Agnes cast one last look at Riftan's back then turned around helplessly.

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Max turned her head to the sound of loud knocking against the door. She was exhausted from last night, reviewing magic formulas until her eyes were bloodshot. She was all bundled up in a duvet like a cocooned caterpillar and was dazed for a moment. Then, she weakly rolled up the thick curtains. The bright sunlight struck her eyes. The sun is already up in the sky. She rubbed her sleepy eyes and groaned. As if the guest who was knocking on her door could not be more impatient, the knocks grew louder. She stood up wobbly and stuttered.

“W-wait a minute!”

However, the ratty knocking did not cease for a moment. Max quickly pulled her slippers from under the bed, wore them, and ran to open the door. Miriam's aggravated face came to sight.

"Didn't I warn you already that if this frigging beast crawls into my lab again, I'll skin it alive?"

She growled and waved the black cat to Max's face. Max exclaimed as she felt all the drowsiness slip away. "Roy!"

Miriam was holding the cat by its neck, away from her to avoid its paws. Roy let out a pitiful cry but the evil witch did not even blink an eye.

"D-don't hold him like that!" Max jumped to retrieve her own pitiful cat. "Give it... to me! S-stop being so mean to it!"

"And what about the meanness of this brat? Have you seen what he has done to my lab?"

Miriam stood on her toes to place her hand on top of Max's head to push her down and she grew red at the blatant insult on her height. Miriam, who was much taller and had long limbs, always used that method on her. Max shook Miriam's hand away and stared defiantly at her.

"It's because Mi-Miriam's pet, Peori, keeps teasing Roy! That little fly-like creature was the one to taunt Roy first..."

"And so? Are you saying that it was deserving for this ball of hair to run wild in my lab?"

Max's tail immediately went between her legs at Miriam's venomous glare. She spoke sarcastically while maintaining a contemptuous look at her.

"Shouldn't apologizing be the first thing to do? Doesn't the noble lady know how to apologize? Or is it because my lab is worthless compared to a pet of a noble lady?"

At Miriam's fierce, endless retort, Max colored red in embarrassment. "I apologize that my... cat caused you trouble. I will never let it sneak out of the room again n-next time. Please... let it slide this once."

Miriam's plump lips quivered like she was about to say more, but she soon clicked her tongue and threw the cat into Max's arms.

"This is the last time. If that wretched little monster wanders around my room again, I will really skin it alive and turn it into slippers." Miriam fiercely retorted, swept her bangs, and turned away with a swish. "Clean up my lab this instance!"

Then, she strode away. Max could only gaze distantly at Miriam's back, sigh deeply, and look down at Roy. Roy buried his head deeply into Max's side and purred. She then sank into her bed and stroked his soft fur as if to soothe him. The day she left Anatol, unbeknownst to her, Roy slipped into her suitcase and went with her to the World Tower in the blink of an eye. She was incredibly bewildered when she first found her cat on the ship. However, the thought of having a friend on her side in an unfamiliar place made her secretly joyful, but she didn't expect it would be this troublesome.

She caressed Roy's back and heaved a sigh. "I... told you not to enter that woman's room. That evil witch might really punish you, and do bad things to you."

"" "

The cat's ears drooped, and he purred sadly. Max, who was endlessly scolding the cat, suddenly noticed that Roy's fur on his tail was slightly bent and her eyes widened. She let go of Roy to pull her curtains wider and then saw the window's half-bent latch rolling on the windowsill. Max gritted her teeth. As she has suspected, Miriam's pet Peori must have hid and lured Roy out. She wanted to come after Miriam right away and tell her to keep her own pet in sight, but she would only be ridiculed and scolded without clear evidence.

Eventually, she sighed in resignation, closed the window using a fork as a latch, then started to get herself ready to go out of her room. She had to hurry and clean up Miriam's lab before her classes started. After washing up with the water from a basin, she changed her clothes and braided her tangled hair into one piece like a vine. Then, she grabbed a mop and a broom when she suddenly saw herself in the mirror placed next to her desk. She saw a pale, exhausted face, dull eyes, and shabby clothing... She looked exactly like a young servant. If Riftan saw her like that, what would he say? Max's hand unconsciously flew to her neck as she saw her own dark eyes glaring at her face.

When she left Anatol, she made the small shekel that Riftan gave her into a necklace. As she fiddled with it, a small corner in her chest tightened. Whenever she thought of Riftan, she felt a sharp pain. As she touched the shekel's charred surface, she bit her lips to erase him from her mind. She couldn't bear being apart from him. Max gathered her emotions and hurriedly walked out of the door: she had gone there even at the cost of hurting him, there was no time for her to feel depressed. She had to do her best everyday, so she could return to Anatol as soon as possible.

The World Tower consisted of a total of five towers: a giant conical tower called Urd was the center of the island; on its west is Kabbalah, which was the fire tower; Undaim, the water tower is located on its south; Sigur, the wind tower is located on its east, and the earth tower called Gnome Hall was located on its north. In principle, wizards who had no attributes yet could freely take the classes they want to attend in any tower but that's really just nominal. Most wizards had implicitly set their minds on which tower they wanted to take classes from while they were trainees, so the atmosphere in the World

Tower was not really an environment where they could freely learn various attributes as she thought it would be. Max took a deep breath as she recalled the time she attended a class at Kabbalah. The wizards of each tower had a strong sense of competition against each other, but the wizards of Kabbalah and Gnome Hall were particularly pitted against each other, and that made Max feel like she was sitting on a cushion made of thorns the whole time she was in class.

‘But I haven’t made up my mind to become a Gnome Hall wizard just yet...’

For some reason, Max was already being treated as an Earth attributed wizard. She looked up melancholically at the towers rising above the dense grove of olive trees. Gnome Hall was shaped more like a giant’s body than a tower. The dark tower was wide as if it was pressed down from above and next to its arched, wide open gates, was a pulley that had a huge cage around 6 kvettes tall (180 cm) to help wizards go to the upper floors.

T/N: (basically like an elevator)

Countless iron chimneys protruded from the tower walls like lint, emitting puffs of smoke. There were many other strange devices in the dark vivid castle tower. An intricate mesh of cast iron pipes-like and squeaking gears like a clockwork were all over, there were also big and small pulleys used to transport objects, and a huge windmill spinning around on top of the tower. Roy began to squirm uncomfortably as they stood in front of the large, crude, cluttered exterior of the tower.

“N-no. You have to stick to me today.”

Max quickened her steps as she held the cat close to her chest. A loud sound of banging hammers pierced her ears as she crossed the forest road lined with overgrown pine trees and entered the tower gates. Perhaps frightened by the loud noises that came from everywhere, Roy squirmed harder and cried sharply. Max moved quickly to appease his discomfort. She wanted to leave the cat in her room if it were possible, but if he somehow escaped again and made trouble, Miriam would not let it slide.

Max muttered to Roy almost pleadingly. “There’s no other choice until I am able to place a repellent against Peori on the window. I promise to give you something delicious later so hang in there, alright?”

“What are you muttering all to yourself?”

As she was about to enter the communal laboratory, a cheerful voice came from behind her. Two boys with short stature less than 5 kvettes (150 cm) and round reddish faces with large sacks slung over their shoulders, were looking curiously at her. Max quickly hid her cat under her cloak and gave them an awkward smile.

“H-hi, Alec...Dean...”

“Are you practicing for the competition in Urd?” The twin brothers from the Umli tribe tilted their heads at the same time as they asked.

Max stepped back and smiled blankly. “That’s...”

As she searched for the right words, Roy popped out of her cloak and sprinted towards the door and Max hurriedly screamed his name. The cat ran across the hall and went out the door as if he didn’t hear her. At that moment, Annette Godrick, who was walking into the tower just a few steps away from her twin brothers, snatched the cat by its back.

“Roy!”

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She shook her head desperately and opened her lips to speak.

“Riftan is... d-different from that person. You won’t ever be miserable. I... I’ll be back right away. When I return... I won’t ever... leave again. Never... Never...”

“I’m already at the limit.” Max stiffened, staring at his numb face. His black eyes, like coals, swayed in pain. “Since I started wanting you... I always felt like I was standing over burning charcoal. Do you know what that is? Not being able to stop my feet from moving even for a moment. I can’t sit or stand. Keep running... I have to keep running. I can’t stop over a never-ending fire... I can’t rest even for a moment and I have to keep running.”

His voice had a faint whisper, as if it revealed the weariness on his back. Only then did Max notice that his face had become haggard in a few days. He ran his rough cheeks down with one hand.

“I... want to be free from that .”

“Riftan... I...”

Her lips were twitching, not knowing what to say. A reddish light filtering through the window cast a gloomy shadow on his face. And he opened his mouth again.

“If you go, I won’t wait for you anymore.”

“...”

“I’ll stop thinking about you. This time... I’ll stop. I’m going to quit making myself miserable.” Max’s mouth hung open in shock. He squeezed her forearm and uttered each word heavily. “Do you still want to go?”

It felt as if all the air had disappeared from her lungs. His dark eyes warned her that this would be the last time he would hold her. She hesitated and tried to back away, but he didn't let go of her arm. Max's lips twitched like a fish rising above water. Her heart was pounding loudly, and her throat tingled as if she had swallowed a shard of glass. Max ground her teeth and repeated the same words like a parrot.

"I-I'll come back. Whatever it takes... I'll come back to you. S-so..."

All light disappeared from Riftan's eyes. When she saw those bleak eyes, she couldn't bring herself to speak anymore. He slowly released her arm.

"Right."

Even though she tried to escape before, Max felt alone in cold snow when his hand was gone. His voice sounded empty like an echo.

"Then...go. To that place where you want to go..."

As if that was the end of the conversation, he stood up. She couldn't move, it felt like she was paralyzed. Riftan walked over to the table and took a new glass. Max, who looked at him in frustration, got up quickly and reached for him in a hurry. Then Riftan stepped back and exclaimed fiercely.

"Don't touch me!"

"" "

Max took a breath and stepped back. Shock blinded her. Riftan glared fiercely and roared like a wounded beast.

"If you touch me now, I will never let you go. Even if I have to lock you up, I will keep you by my side. You won't like that..." Max instinctively backed away as he approached. Riftan whispered under his breath. "Get out of here this instance."

"....."

"Don't even think that you're leaving for my sake. I never wanted this. You're... You're leaving me for your own satisfaction."

Max, who was standing as if she was nailed to the door, flinched, and turned around. Her legs were shaking. Each step she took was as difficult as if her flesh were being torn apart. She looked down at the elongated shadow under her feet, she wanted to look back, but couldn't because she was scared. Max, who hesitated as she stood rigid in front of the door, quickly made her way to the dark corridor.

After going down a distance in the hallway, she suddenly heard a shattering sound behind her back. The loud noise that hit her eardrums made her shudder. Suddenly, her head went cold and she wondered what the he had done.

‘Have I gone crazy? How can I even think of leaving him? Even if I lose the whole world, I can’t lose him.’

Max turned around urgently. However, she didn’t even move as if her feet were fastened to the ground. The gut seemed to melt with the desire to return to him immediately and beg him to do what he wanted, but she could not take a step. She knew what she had to do. Not knowing what was holding her, she froze and trembled violently. Tears ran down her cheeks. Although it was so painful, she really had to go.

‘What in the world is holding my two feet back? I wanted to give up everything.’

But as her shoulders shook and she swallowed her tears, she turned around again. Every time she walked away from him, she felt as if something around her crumbled. She felt like a young bird breaking out of its egg. It was cold, she was desperate, scared, and sad. She bit her lips. A ray of sunlight from the setting sun painfully pierced her hazy vision blurred by tears. When she turned her head and looked at the glass window where the light was streaming in, Max took a step again.

Through the pain that seemed to split her body in half, she had to move forward... and forward again...

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