

## Under The Oak Tree

### Chapter 221

Max felt her skin run shivers, seeing Riftan's eyes filled with rage and fury. He didn't seem to give a about the insults thrown at him. He was furious only at the humiliation that Max had suffered from and that made her at loss. Seeing him angry to the top of his head because of what happened to her, she felt a strange mix of sorrow and joy. If only he had divorced her and married Princess Agnes as everyone expected him to do, then he would not have to suffer the public ridicule he went through today. Princess Agnes would have been like a sparkling jewel, someone whom he would be proud of to call his wife. That cynical thought grew in her mind like poisonous mushrooms, sprouting rapidly and fatally, impossible to pull out of her mind.

Max squeezed her eyes shut, suffering from her painful thoughts. If someone were to ever mock Riftan again for having a stuttering wife, she would rather choose to die.

"You should be treated right away. I'll go summon Ruth."

Mistaking the expression on Max's face as pain from physical suffering, he immediately stood up from his seat. Just as he was about to exit the tent, she hurried to prevent him from leaving.

"The... There's no need. This much... would only need some ointment and it would go away quickly."

"You came all the way here, taking care of all those who are wounded. The least you should do is get treated for your injuries too!"

"I re-really am fine. I'll make sure to get myself treated later. For no... now, please just stay by my side."

Riftan met her desperate, pleading eyes and reluctantly sat in front of her again. He appeared so much like a piqued beast who was trapped in a cage that Max couldn't help her head and eyes to drop in sadness.

"Do you... hate being with me? I did the opposite of what Riftan asked me to do and came here... do you hate me n-now?"

"Do not be ridiculous!" He screamed, his face filled with anguish, unable to believe what he was hearing. "Do you really think that I could hate you? The only thing I hate is that you are here in this place! Whenever I see you struggling because of this sh\*tty place...!"

Riftan, who was shouting in anger, suddenly clenched his jaw and gazed at her. His eyes trailed her messy hair, her woolly, borrowed dress, her sunburnt face, and now calloused palms. It was as if looking at her state caused him a great amount of pain.

“I wanted to wrap you in silk.” He spoke in a voice as if there was a thorn stuck in his throat. “I wanted you to wear clothes made only with the best, most expensive silk and furs. I wanted to put a ring of various gems on each of your ten fingers, put a gold crown on your head and a necklace of the most precious pearls to adorn your neck. Live in a beautiful castle, with servants attending to your every need, have the most comfortable life... I wanted only those for you, and yet now...”

His quiet voice that sounded rough as sand suddenly came to a dwindling stop. Max was at loss of what to do, she reached out and held his hands in hers.

“You don’t have to do t-that. Really... it’s alright even if you don’t do that for me. Just being together with you like this... is more than e-enough.”

Riftan, who had been staring at her with trembling eyes, embraced her suddenly and tightly, as if she would be pried away. Then, as if to take her breath away, he kissed her intensely. She was stunned for a moment at the sudden action, but she responded to him, flinging her arms around his neck. The sadness and anxiety that welled up in her heart melted like snow in the summer sun. She couldn’t count how long it has been since she felt this ecstatic feeling of being pressed against his wide chest.

She gazed up at him with her watery eyes and ran her fingers across his firm, sharp-lined jaw. His deep black hair glistened like satin from the faint glow emitted by the lamp, and the shadows that outlined his chiseled, masculine face made him look terribly seductive. Not wanting Riftan to pull away for even a moment, she clutched his robe so tightly as if she was at the edge of tearing it. She hated that he would always pull back in restraint. She wanted him to shake all of his restraints to the ground, so she initiated the kiss this time. And then, Riftan responded passionately, embracing her in his arms and gently laying her down on the bed.

His hot tongue entered her lips, exploring every sensitive part of her mouth. Then, large palms wrapped around her b\*\*\*\*s, eliciting a moan from Max, who wrapped her arms around his thick neck when his thumb brushed against her stiff peaks. His moist lips were like a summer rain shower that poured on her eyelids, cheeks, temple, and neck. His large palms caressed her incessantly, massaging from her breast, running over her waist, and stroking her inner thighs.

””” ”

“Your arm...”

Riftan, who had been completely absorbed with her, suddenly lifted his head. Just as he was about to pull away, Max quickly grabbed him closer to her.

“It’s a-alright. It doesn’t... hurt.”

Riftan’s eyes were filled with burning passionate l\*\*t as he swiftly pulled her skirt up. As his fingers stroked and dug in her sensitive parts, Max’s body twitched as if she was drowning. His every stroke made her insides flutter and her body burn hot as if she was on fire.

“Lift your hips up a bit.” Riftan muttered, his voice hoarse. Max obeyed and lifted her hips. The cumbersome skirt that crumpled around her waist was hastily pulled over her head. Riftan also did quick work on his own, tossing his clothes aside. Nothing came between them as their hot skins brushed and smoldered one another. His body was hard and smooth, like iron.

Max squirmed under his weight with excitement when she felt his stiff, angry member pressed against her stomach. He wrapped his fingers around her peaks, gently massaging them as his hot, iron body grinded above her in an eccentric way. Sweat formed on the skin of her entire body from the e\*\*\*\*c act. His manhood was so e\*\*\*\*t, standing tall and hard. His long, sturdy legs were tight like a stallion and his marble-like shoulders were so wide and thick that her arms couldn’t wrap his whole frame. It was astonishing, he was so elegant and graceful despite his big, ripped stature. She clutched his tight waist lined with ab muscles and pulled him eagerly.

“Ri-Riftan... faster.”

Fire flared in Riftan’s eyes. He bent down to give her a hot, passionate kiss and sheathed his manhood inside her. Max felt her sensitive part stretching to its limit and took a sharp breath in. Her entrance was fully prepared and yet she felt a strange pain.

“W-Wait... something... is strange. It feels different from before...”

“...it’s been a while since the last time so it’s tighter. Relax it a bit.” Riftan explained through his teeth, a bead of sweat forming on his forehead. “Take a deep breath. Yes... like that... I’ll go inside slowly...”

Max’s eyes widened. She couldn’t believe that he wasn’t fully inside her just yet. He pushed himself in a little more and the overwhelming, heavy pressure she felt between her legs made her a bit anxious. Then, as if to appease her, Riftan stroked the sides of her body and massaged her b\*\*\*\*s with his mouth incessantly. She slowly relaxed, giving in to his desperate, passionate caress and wrapped her legs around his waist.

He pulled out all of his manhood very slowly and went back in again, repeating the same process over and over. Eventually, the pain subsided at the familiar rhythm, replaced by sweet pleasure that began to boil up inside her like a hot bubbling water. Max bit down her lips in an effort to contain the moans that would escape her mouth. But then, Riftan inserted his fingers into her lips.

“...don't bite your lips.”

She tried to shake his fingers off her lips but when he inserted himself inside her again, she lost control of her thoughts. Max gasped for breath, and bit tightly on his fingers. She couldn't help herself: he was too big and she was too tight; he was hard, and she was soft. And oddly enough, the contrast in their sizes incredibly inflated the pleasurable and sensual feeling of their intercourse. He restrained himself, moving in and out until she reached full o\*\*\*\*m. Finally, when her body stiffened and paralyzed from reaching climax, he suddenly pulled his manhood out.

Max gazed up at him, dismayed. Still in shock and her body in a daze from the climax, she collapsed on the bed, but he flipped her over and pushed himself in again from behind. She buried her face against the pillow and held onto the seams of the tapestry. He was not satisfied from the heights they had reached and pushed her further, bringing her to a higher level of pleasure. Max stared into the dark corner of the tent with hazy eyes. With every breath she took, the scent of earth, faint musk, and burning wood that characterized the tent filled her lungs. And every time her body moved back and forth her stiff, sensitive nipples grinded over the rough tapestry.

Riftan placed a hand beneath her stomach and lifted her hips. Then, he sheathed himself even deeper, pumping in and out, fully inserting his manhood to the hilt. Max, who was already drowning in pleasure and with her whole body still sensitive from her first climax, reached another climax. She sobbed and moaned as her whole body shook uncontrollably. Her waist bent like a taut bow and her toes curled up from sweet pleasure. Riftan marked her arched back with his mouth, trailing kisses as she shuddered.

Then, he continued to move, moving at his own unbridled pace. It was only on her third climax that Riftan's seeds exploded inside of her. Hot liquid gushed into her sensitive part and his body stretched gracefully, like a predator lion. Max melted in pure ecstasy with his whole body pressed against hers.

“F\*ck... I kept avoiding you 'cause I was afraid this would happen...”

After their intense climax that elicited hoarse moans and soft mewls that sounded too e\*\*\*\*c for anyone to hear, Riftan slowly pulled himself out. Max breathed laboriously and turned her head to look at him. He returned her gaze, seeing her exhausted and weak, his eyes became filled with regret. Then, he got up from the bed and returned with a towel and basin. Max wanted to stand up but her legs were sore and her limbs were so heavy that she couldn't bring herself to move.

“Did I hurt you?”

“N-No... Just a little... sore.”

He muttered curses under his breath and proceeded to wipe the sweat and fluids from between her legs with a cold towel. She felt a little embarrassed being cared for like this, but she didn't have the strength to lift a finger, so she quietly accepted his gesture. After tending to her, Riftan concentrated on cleaning himself before laying down on her side again. A quiet moment of silence surrounded them before Riftan spoke again, staring up at the ceiling filled with faint light and shadows.

"Starting tomorrow, Garrow will protect you as well aside from Yulysion. Those two are as skilled as regular knights. If those two are around you, an incident such as today won't happen."

"Y-you don't have to do that..."

Max started, but quickly shut her mouth when she felt him squeeze her hand in warning. Even in the dark, she could feel his stare grow fiercer.

"Honestly, I want to send you back to Anatol right now. However, that will be more dangerous, so I have no choice."

Sensing the burden she was placing, Max spoke, her voice trailing off.

"But... because of me... they will be b-burdened..."

"I brought Yulysion and Garrow to give them a chance to gain practical experience before they are formally knighted. Since they will not be placed in the front lines, this is perfect for them, so don't worry."

Hearing his firm tone, Max could no longer oppose him. Riftan looked like he wanted to say more, but seeing as she was quiet, he didn't want to risk starting another argument. She buried her face against his shoulder. As she laid down beside him, their naked bodies entwined with each other under the thin blanket, she felt her body and his get aroused again. However, Riftan lay motionless except for his hand that caressed her back to bring her to sleep. Beneath his caress, Max couldn't fight the impending dream looming over her.

All the tensions, anxieties, and fears that she had on her journey going here dissolved away simply by being by his side. Embraced in his arms, she could forget all the troubles in the world.

Max woke up with a horrendous roar, similar to that of a monster growling. Darkness surrounded the barracks, without a single flame to illuminate the space. Suddenly, a flash of bright lightning shone, casting shadows everywhere. Scared, Max screamed and buried herself in Riftan's side. Loud thunder echoed in the distance and soon, the heavy hit of the rain started to pour. Her husband sighed and stood up from the bed when the sound of rain hitting the tent grew heavier.

“It looks like a thunderstorm.”

Max followed him and got up from the bed, quickly putting on clothes. As soon as she walked to the tent’s entrance and pulled up the curtain, rainwater poured heavily, the drops looked like long arrows and were accompanied by a strong wind. She looked up at the sky and thunderbolts flashed. She wiped the rain drops that fell on her face while the heavy rain poured mercilessly from the sky that was covered in thick black clouds.

Note – LF: I am pretty sure by now that Riftan has a fetish for Max biting him lol. Anyway, thank you author for the good snu details. She even thought of Max being tight since it has been a long time ?

Nymeria: We already know that Riftan’s love language is not sweet words, but when he said “I wanted to wrap you in silk” I MELTED, it really gives the idea how much he loves and cares for her <3

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“Come in here. You’ll get rained on.”

Standing behind her, Riftan wrapped his arms around her waist and Max leaned back on his solid torso. His jaw felt rough as it brushed against her cheek, making her neck shiver. His lips brushed against her temple and with his free hand, cupped her still tingling chest. As the air grew heavier and more humid, another flash of lightning filled the sky once more followed by a deafening thunder. The sound was so loud that it felt like the sky would fall right above their heads. Riftan sighed lightly and gently pulled her shivering body back to bed.

“I have to patrol. You must stay here until the storm passes.”

Max’s eyes widened at his statement. “Are you going out... in a storm like this?”

“The horses will be restless. I need to inspect the stables and make sure our defenses are intact.”

Riftan took out a new candle and lit it, creating a faint glow in the dark. He did a quick job putting on his armor while Max sat on the bed, listening to the heavy raindrops similar to that of thundering horse hooves. She could hear the winds roaring, swaying the tents, and the rumbling sound of thunder and lightning. From time to time, she would hear the urgent yells of the soldiers in the distance. Her heart pounded at the ferocious noise brought by nature that would seem to crack heaven and earth open. Max's expression was plastered with worry as she asked Riftan.

"Because of what happened y-yesterday... won't there be any problems?" Riftan, who was putting on a robe, paused and turned his head. Max lowered her eyes and continued to speak. "Because of me... there are disputes between the allied forces..."

"How is that your fault? Licht Breston was the initiator. That has been causing trouble long before you showed up." Riftan casually refuted. "As you have seen for yourself, the Commander of Balto's forces have been hostile towards me for a long time. Even if you weren't involved, he would have found other ways to provoke a fight."

Max's face hardened and soon, indescribable anger surged as she remembered the vulgar words that barbarian had hurled at Riftan. "Riftan didn't do anything w-wrong...for insulting you like t-that... he is a really terrible person."

Riftan looked at her with a strange look for a moment then shrugged as if he is used to such a lifestyle of hatred and hostility.

"Licht Breston comes from a prestigious family that has existed since the Roem era. His father is a knight branded as the reincarnation of Uigru in Balto. In that sense, he despises the idea of a humble man like me, on equal grounds with his father." He explained with a hateful smile. "I have ignored his annoying antics until now, but this time I can't just let it slide. I'll make sure he'll never be able to approach you ever again."

"But... we are at war. If there are i-internal conflicts..."

"I have no intention of slashing a blade through that right now. Merely a warning for him not to be able to cause any trouble."

Hearing the cold tone in his voice, Max's concerns only intensified. She didn't know what he was planning, but it was obvious even to a three-year-old that he wouldn't take a very peaceful approach with his warning. With pale lightning flashing through the skies and striking his face, his already sharp features looked even more grim and ruthless than usual. As if sensing Max's fear, Riftan knelt in front of her and softened his expressions

"How is your body? Does it hurt?"

He drew gentle circles on her knees with his leather-gloved hand and Max shook her head with a blush.

“I’m f...fine.”

“What about your injury?”

””” ”

“My wrist is n-not... hurt to the point of injury.”

Riftan took her wrist gently and carefully examined it. When he noticed that the swelling had faded a bit, he released her. “I’ll summon Garrow and Yulysion so stay inside until the storm passes.”

Max nodded and Riftan kissed her softly on the lips before leaving. Max watched sadly as he walked into the harsh storm. It broke her heart thinking that he will spend the day under the raging weather. Moreover, she felt guilt biting her because she was inside the cozy tent all by herself, wandering around it idly.

After some time, Yulysion and Garrow, soaked to the bone, entered the tent. Max immediately ran towards them with a handful of dry towels.

“Thank you, m’lady.”

The boys gratefully accepted the towel and wiped the rain off their heads. They then took off their soaked robes, hung them by the entrance, and walked toward the only light that illuminates the space. Only when they got closer did Max see Yulysion’s disheartened face. His eyes dropped and his shoulders sagged as he looked at her.

“The lady must be very rattled because of what happened yesterday. I am deeply sorry. It was my fault, I should have stopped those beasts from harassing the lady...”

“N-No! As I said yesterday... It’s not Yulysion’s fault. You fought them off bravely for me. Rather... I should be thankful.”

“M’lady...” Yulysion was practically crying, and his face lit up to his usual bright face.

Max gave an awkward laugh as she recalled how he yelled at the men who were a head taller than him like an angry hound. The way he was looking at her now with gentle round eyes was comparable to a pitiful puppy, to the point that it made her wonder where was the dignified knight who protected her without showing any signs of distress despite the turn of events that happened.

“Are you hurt somewhere?”

Garrow hung his wet towel on the back of a chair and looked at her worriedly, and Max quickly shook her head.



"I'm f-fine. Just... a little rattled."

"From now on, we'll make sure nothing like that happens again and protect you with utmost diligence."

Max smiled with great gratitude and led the two boys to the table. They lit another candle and ate together while listening to the sound of the roaring rain. After filling their stomachs with wine and bread, the two boys got up and began stuffing pieces of cloth between the gaps in the tents to prevent rainwater from leaking in. Yulysion and Garrow were adamant not to let Max work but she couldn't sit idly while they worked in the tent so she insisted on helping them. Time passed by rapidly as the three of them tucked bitumen-lined cloths between anything that could let the rainwater seep inside the tent.

The storm continued for about half a day before the loud drumming of the water subsided and the roar of thunder gradually faded. Max rolled up the flap at the entrance and looked out. The dark storm clouds slowly receded, revealing the pale gray sky and allowing the faint rays of sunlight to peek through. The rain was still quite heavy as it formed large puddles everywhere, hitting branches and tents, but it has dwindled due to the calming wind. Max grabbed her robe and pulled the hood over her head. Seeing her about to leave, Yulysion, who was polishing Riftan's armor, got up from his seat and ran towards her.

"Are you going to the infirmary?"

"I want to... check if the wounded are doing alright. May I go and see them?"

"Security has been tightened due to yesterday's incident, so it should be fine." He looked around outside, trying to find someone suspicious at will before nodding. "There is an emergency meeting at the headquarters. The Northerners are also there, so yesterday's incident will not happen again."

"An e-emergency meeting...?"

"There have been some strange behaviors on the part of the monsters." Garrow explained, answering before her question was finished. "According to the scouts who came in during dawn, some of the trolls have started moving west. They are trying to find out what the monsters are up to."

"Will it be a-alright being gathered in the same place? The knights of Balto... I think they're ve-very angry..."

"The Remdragon Knights are several times more furious than they are." Yulysion's icy purple gaze hardened. "But they won't do anything stupid like start an argument when our enemies are up to something. Breston has at least that much sense."

Max frowned, she seriously doubted it. The Commander of the Knights of the Balto Forces publicly insulted and acted with violence towards a woman. And if that wasn't enough, that beast of a man publicly ridiculed Riftan and called for a retaliatory duel.

"He's a horrible person... Will it really be a peaceful gathering?"

Max's face clouded with endless worries. Fortunately, their worries were misplaced. Hours passed, and she had not heard any outbursts or news of a duel between Riftan and Licht Breston even when the sun began to set. That was because a more pressing thing occurred, an issue that eased any form of hostility between the two men.

As the night fell, Riftan returned to his room to quickly change his clothes.

"There is a battle at the frontlines. I must leave for battle right away."

Max was sitting at the table, cutting herbs, when her eyes widened at the unexpected news. It was only a couple hours away before midnight, because of the thick rain clouds, everything outside was pitch black. She felt shivers run hearing that Riftan will be going into battle under the rain, in complete darkness.

"I-is it an all-out war?"

"Not yet. However, I'll make it happen." Riftan replied dryly as he removed his wet boots and put on a new pair.

"Make it happen... w-what do you mean by that?"

"This battle seems to be only a light provocation, but I'm planning to take this opportunity to bring about an all-out war. I will put an end to this war."

Max couldn't help but squirm in anxiety and fear at the fierceness and determination in his tone. "Please... don't do anything r-reckless."

In the middle of changing his clothes and putting on his armor, Riftan paused, and his head flew towards hers with a frown on his lips. Then he choked out a laugh as if he hadn't heard anything more ridiculous.

"Now, look who's telling who not to do anything reckless."

Max stiffened at the mockery in his tone. Realizing that he may still be mad at her sneaking into this war, Max prodded him carefully.

"Are you still...mad?"

"Do you think I could let this go so easily?" He snorted as he replied vaguely. "I still can't forgive you for coming all the way here and I'm doing everything I can to control my

anger. Until I can get you back to Anatol without a single scratch, don't expect me to ease my mood."

"B-But last night..." started Max but she quickly closed her mouth.

Her cheeks flushed red with embarrassment at what she was about to say, and she shyly twisted the hem of her dress in her hands. She lifted her head in the strange silence that suddenly fell. It was hard to believe but there was a slight red tint that also formed around Riftan's cheekbones. He awkwardly swept back his hair that was damp with the rain and looked at her.

"Do you have no idea of what I feel when you're in front of me? I have been celibate for months in this barren place! How am I supposed to react when you're lying next to me?!" He took big steps toward her, placing a small distance between their noses and groaned. "It's like shaking a bone in front of a starved dog. However, I had no intentions of doing it with you in a place like this! I didn't want to hold you in such a way that would make you feel like a mere satisfaction to my carnal desires. But even just looking at you, I couldn't hold myself back..."

Riftan growled fiercely but closed his mouth when he saw the surprise on her features. He rubbed his face roughly and muttered as if he was completely drained of life. "I'm going to end this war within a month. Until then, please... take care of yourself."

Max was completely speechless at his outburst, and only nodded in response. Riftan headed towards the exit of the tent holding the hilt of his sword. Seeing his back recede, Max snapped out of her stupor and chased after him in a hurry. Riftan's body stiffened when he felt her slim arms wrapped around his waist. She clung onto his side and looked up at him anxiously.

"You shouldn't... leave angry like this. We don't know when this b-battle will end... I don't know when I'll see you again..." Riftan looked at her helplessly and Max pleaded with him. She raised her hand to rest on his cheek. "Promise me that... you'll return safely, unscathed. I will... be careful too. Pro-promise. So..."

Max's voice dropped to a choke as tears began to flow. She quickly buried her face in his back when she could no longer speak. Riftan turned and took her in his arms. The hand clad in cold gauntlet swept through her hair, falling over her ears and neck.

He murmured with a trembling voice against her neck. "When an all-out battle begins, all allied forces will be concentrated on the front. There won't be many troops left in Ethylene. Anything can happen, so make sure you always have Garrow and Yulysion wherever you go. Ruth will also be left behind. If anything happens, go to him."

Max nodded, her face buried in his chest.

"...I'll come back safe."

Riftan kissed her on her earlobes and struggled to release Max out of their hug, like a child that clung to her mother. Max grabbed her cloak, wanting to see him off but Riftan stopped her by the entrance.

“Phil Aaron will be going into battle with us. Don’t come out.”

“B-But I want to see you off...”

“Stay inside.”

He ordered firmly and commanded Yulysion and Garrow, who were on standby. Max watched by the entrance as he disappeared into the pitch-dark curtain of rain.

Torches were lit along the castle walls, shedding light to the dark road and horses in their own armor were led to the gates. Finally, the knights mounted their horses, formed their lines, and began marching out of the castle fortress. The moment the troops left, everyone in Ethylene became very vigilant. The knights who remained to guard the premises were standing by the wall; their bodies tense and alert. The wizards also began to come out one by one to install their magic tools along the wall.

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The rain that had dwindled only got heavier and poured all night long. Max was worn out, yet she remained wide awake throughout the night. She wanted to close her eyes even for a little while to be able to do her duties the next day, but her heart was so erratic that it didn’t allow her to sleep a wink. During what felt like the longest time of forcing her eyes shut amidst the insufferable tension, Max jumped to her feet when she heard the sound of s\*\*s coming from somewhere. At first she thought that her nerves had finally gotten the best of her and she was hallucinating. However, the soft cries continued to echo amidst the sound of the rain and grew clearer. She slipped into her robes and ran out of the tent.

“W-what’s going on?”

Yulysion, who had spread a double awning over the entrance to prevent the rain from seeping in, was sitting beside a small brazier, his figure illuminated by the light it provided. He lifted his head at Max's question.

"That sound must have woken up the lady."

He glanced at the land surrounded by the rain mist with a tense expression. The thick rain had slowly thinned and was now scattered like dew in the early morning air, and the darkened skies gradually parted to reveal the bluish glow of dawn. Out on the ghostly horizons, Max could hear the wretched wailing of miserable, grieving women that sent chills to run down her spine. She looked around, trying to figure out where the crying was coming from.

"Who are those that are crying? Did s-something happen... to the priestesses?"

"Those cries are not coming from the priestess. Banshees have appeared in the mountains."

"Banshees...?"

Yulysion got to his feet and went to the edge of where the tarp dripping with rainwater extended and pointed toward the black wall of rocks in the distance that surrounded the castle's fortress like breakwater. Max lifted her head following the direction of his fingertip, squinting to get a better look. A huge dark rock protruded from the mountain like a snake's head and on top of those were barely visible figures of people wearing dark robes. Her heart sank to her feet at the ominous sight.

"You're saying... that those are monsters?"

"To be precise, they are spirits. They don't cause any direct harm so please don't worry. They just..." Yulysion trailed off as he chose his next words carefully. "...wail. They will disappear once they've wailed loud enough for the sound to fill the whole castle."

Max could barely understand it, since his voice was buried under the hysterical wails of the spirits. Max's shoulders hunched over, crept out as she looked at the black figures standing in the midst of the misty background that the rain brought. They were too far for her to see what they appeared like in detail, but she could count that at least six of them were gathered there. They were clutching their robes dearly as they loudly howled their cries.

"B-But the Banshees..."

Max bit her lip, not knowing what to say. From what she remembered, banshees were spirits that herald death. It is known amongst the folk people that when these creatures suddenly appear and shriek their cries, a massive number of deaths would occur.

“Please bear with it although they are disturbing. The priests are preparing a ritual to expel those Banshees.”

Her fear must have been very evident, because Yulysion tried to reassure her in such an exaggerated way. Max tried to smile, but the screaming of the banshees didn't stop. It went on for hours. To prevent the morale of the troops from plummeting, the priests used diving magic to cast them away but it was only a temporary solution. The Banshees, who had disappeared for a couple of hours, began to reappear and wail so miserably.

Max, who was already engulfed in anxieties, felt like she was being driven to the point of insanity. After half a day of checking on the patients in the infirmary trying to ignore the very audible cries, she lost her patience and sought Ruth.

“Ruth... can't we use magic to cast out those spirits?”

””” ”

In a small tent next to the knights' barracks, Ruth, who was scribbling something when she interrupted him, raised his head. He was perhaps still figuring out the magic spell to counter the curse casted on Hebaron. There was a pile of papers filled with complex magic formulas written on them. Ruth placed aside his work and rubbed the corner of his eyes with an exhausted face.

“Are you talking about those Banshees? We can drive them out but it will only make them more eager. Angering those spirits will only make it worse, they will never cease those annoying wails. If they cannot be driven out with divine magic, then it is for the best that we just leave them be.”

“B-But... It makes everyone anxious. T-the patients are also getting nervous and nobody knows what to do.”

“It will only last a day at most. Once they've wailed enough, they will eventually leave. Since you're here, just please help me with this instead.”

Ruth replied in his rude, dismissive tone and handed her something similar to that of a flat tray. Max took the item on a whim.

“W-what... is this?”

“It's a magic tool that will be installed on the castle gates. It's a similar tool that the lady made back in Anatol. It won't be difficult.” He turned the finely processed monster bone in his hand and pointed to the part where complex writings were engraved. “All you have to do is engrave this magic formula around here, and that's it.”

“I-I only copied the formulas on parchments back then... I haven't done this before.”

"It's not that different from writing it on a parchment. You may use this tool and ink here to engrave the magic formula on it. I wish I could do it but just looking for a way to break Sir Nirta's curse has already drained me."

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Max shook her thoughts away and picked up the pen again. If everything played out just like how Riftan had planned, they would be able to return to Anatol at the end of that war. For once, Max hoped that Ruth's prediction was wrong, wanting that insufferable time to end as soon as possible. She then bit her lip, turning her concentration on drawing the magic formulas again.

With the rain clouds finally receding and the sun shining, the Banshees dispersed with the rain's mist. However, the anxieties and uneasiness they brought upon the people in Ethylene castle was deeply ingrained and never left. The faces of the soldiers and knights were hardened like never before, and none of the priestesses said a word. Max just tried to keep herself busy, trying not to let the heavy atmosphere weigh her down. To drown the useless thoughts in her head, she focused her attention on treating at least twenty or more wounded patients during the day and when evening came, she visited Ruth to make protective magic tools that would be installed on the castle gates or to help him with his research on breaking Sir Nirta's curse.

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Max nervously wiped her pale face. Maybe it was because she hadn't been getting some sleep these past few days, but her head was dizzy and her imagination was out of control. She stirred the pot in front of her, trying to shake off any ominous thoughts, when suddenly Idcilla leapt into the tent, her face eager and wet with tears.



“M'lady! I saw Elba just now!”

Surprised, Max looked at her and the girl sobbed as she reached out to grasp her hand.

“The Royal Knights of Livadon have just returned to reorganize their forces. My older brother is among them! He had a scar on his face I have never seen before...” Idcilla pursed her lips and wiped her tears roughly with her sleeves. “But other than that, he didn't seem to have any serious injuries.”

“That's such... a re-relief.”

Max knew how worried the young woman was for her brother, and she was genuinely relieved and happy for her. Idcilla nodded with a bright smile on her face.

“I also overheard the soldiers speaking. The allied forces are reorganizing all the remaining troops to lead all of them to battle. I think the outcome of this war will be determined very soon.”

Max's vision blurred. It seemed that they were finally taking the unavoidable risk to come into conclusion. There was no other choice. Even she was aware of the fact that the longer the battles dragged on, the more they would be put into disadvantage. Swallowing dryly, Max asked.

“Before the all-out ba-battle begins... are you sure you don't want to see your older brother?”

Idcilla shook her head, firm in her earlier decision. “When this war is over, I'll go see him. I'm sure my brother will come back alive. I believe he will.”

Her determination even helped calm Max's racing heart, and she felt something strange bubbling inside her. She held Idcilla's hand in hers tightly, praying earnestly that the allied forces would achieve victory.

The Royal Knights of Livadon spent a night in Ethylene and immediately began preparing for departure the next day. Soldiers packed wagons filled with food and weapons, and priestesses helped prepare bags full of first aid and medicines. The troop was huge. The mercenaries who were left behind, the Holy Knights, and the Royal Knights of Livadon all set out to head to the battlefield together. All that was left in Ethylene to hold the fort was five wizards, including Ruth, three priests, thirty-five knights, four hundred soldiers and those who remained to guard the gates day and night, sending reports to the front every two days and opening the doors only to receive the wounded who returned in carts.

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monsters. They didn't skimp on magic or supplies when it came to healing them. Thanks to this, the soldiers who were brought back in blood-covered wagons were up and ready for the battle again in three or four days. However, Max clearly saw that neither of them were happy to recover so soon. Understandably, it was very painful for them. They, who managed to escape death and come back alive shattered and broken, had to throw their lives away again. It was comparable to having stones in their stomachs.

It was incredibly difficult to bury the young people who sacrificed their lives as well. The only consolation at those moments was hearing the news that the allied force with relentless pursuits had gradually but successfully pushed the monster army back.

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## Under The Oak Tree· 223

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The rain that had dwindled only got heavier and poured all night long. Max was worn out, yet she remained wide awake throughout the night. She wanted to close her eyes even for a little while to be able to do her duties the next day, but her heart was so erratic that it didn't allow her to sleep a wink. During what felt like the longest time of forcing her eyes shut amidst the insufferable tension, Max jumped to her feet when she heard the sound of s\*\*s coming from somewhere. At first she thought that her nerves had finally gotten the best of her and she was hallucinating. However, the soft cries continued to echo amidst the sound of the rain and grew clearer. She slipped into her robes and ran out of the tent.

"W-what's going on?"

Yulysion, who had spread a double awning over the entrance to prevent the rain from seeping in, was sitting beside a small brazier, his figure illuminated by the light it provided. He lifted his head at Max's question.

"That sound must have woken up the lady."

He glanced at the land surrounded by the rain mist with a tense expression. The thick rain had slowly thinned and was now scattered like dew in the early morning air, and the darkened skies gradually parted to reveal the bluish glow of dawn. Out on the ghostly horizons, Max could hear the wretched wailing of miserable, grieving women that sent chills to run down her spine. She looked around, trying to figure out where the crying was coming from.

“Who are those that are crying? Did s-something happen... to the priestesses?”

“Those cries are not coming from the priestess. Banshees have appeared in the mountains.”

“Banshees...?”

Yulysion got to his feet and went to the edge of where the tarp dripping with rainwater extended and pointed toward the black wall of rocks in the distance that surrounded the castle’s fortress like breakwater. Max lifted her head following the direction of his fingertip, squinting to get a better look. A huge dark rock protruded from the mountain like a snake’s head and on top of those were barely visible figures of people wearing dark robes. Her heart sank to her feet at the ominous sight.

“You’re saying... that those are monsters?”

“To be precise, they are spirits. They don’t cause any direct harm so please don’t worry. They just...” Yulysion trailed off as he chose his next words carefully. “...wail. They will disappear once they’ve wailed loud enough for the sound to fill the whole castle.”

Max could barely understand it, since his voice was buried under the hysterical wails of the spirits. Max’s shoulders hunched over, crept out as she looked at the black figures standing in the midst of the misty background that the rain brought. They were too far for her to see what they appeared like in detail, but she could count that at least six of them were gathered there. They were clutching their robes dearly as they loudly howled their cries.

“B-But the Banshees...”

Max bit her lip, not knowing what to say. From what she remembered, banshees were spirits that herald death. It is known amongst the folk people that when these creatures suddenly appear and shriek their cries, a massive number of deaths would occur.

“Please bear with it although they are disturbing. The priests are preparing a ritual to expel those Banshees.”

Her fear must have been very evident, because Yulysion tried to reassure her in such an exaggerated way. Max tried to smile, but the screaming of the banshees didn’t stop. It went on for hours. To prevent the morale of the troops from plummeting, the priests

used diving magic to cast them away but it was only a temporary solution. The Banshees, who had disappeared for a couple of hours, began to reappear and wail so miserably.

Max, who was already engulfed in anxieties, felt like she was being driven to the point of insanity. After half a day of checking on the patients in the infirmary trying to ignore the very audible cries, she lost her patience and sought Ruth.

“Ruth... can't we use magic to cast out those spirits?”

””” ”

In a small tent next to the knights' barracks, Ruth, who was scribbling something when she interrupted him, raised his head. He was perhaps still figuring out the magic spell to counter the curse casted on Hebaron. There was a pile of papers filled with complex magic formulas written on them. Ruth placed aside his work and rubbed the corner of his eyes with an exhausted face.

“Are you talking about those Banshees? We can drive them out but it will only make them more eager. Angering those spirits will only make it worse, they will never cease those annoying wails. If they cannot be driven out with divine magic, then it is for the best that we just leave them be.”

“B-But... It makes everyone anxious. T-the patients are also getting nervous and nobody knows what to do.”

“It will only last a day at most. Once they've wailed enough, they will eventually leave. Since you're here, just please help me with this instead.”

Ruth replied in his rude, dismissive tone and handed her something similar to that of a flat tray. Max took the item on a whim.

“W-what... is this?”

“It's a magic tool that will be installed on the castle gates. It's a similar tool that the lady made back in Anatol. It won't be difficult.” He turned the finely processed monster bone in his hand and pointed to the part where complex writings were engraved. “All you have to do is engrave this magic formula around here, and that's it.”

“I-I only copied the formulas on parchments back then... I haven't done this before.”

“It's not that different from writing it on a parchment. You may use this tool and ink here to engrave the magic formula on it. I wish I could do it but just looking for a way to break Sir Nirta's curse has already drained me.”

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## Under The Oak Tree· 224

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“If the allied forces continue their advance north, they will be able to unite with Balto’s Royal Forces on Pamela Plateau who have been driving the monsters out from the east. If all goes according to plan, then they will be able to corner all of the monsters in one place and kill them right there. “

With her exhaustion completely forgotten, Max couldn’t help but burst into a smile at the good news Ruth brought. Whenever the wizard came back from a meeting led by Grand Duke Aren, he would always provide the details afterwards.

“We will probably send over supplies and food two or three more times, after which the war will finally come to an end.”

Max’s heart felt lighter at the prospect of victory. Ruth has always been cynical, but if even he was being this optimistic, then things must finally be looking favorably.

Turning the gears in her head in thought, Max returned to tend to the boiling medicine. It took about a day and a half on horseback riding from Ethylene to Pamela Plateau. Considering the knights’ mobility and stamina, it wouldn’t take them more than three- or four-days roundtrip. They only needed to send supplies a few more times, within a month or a month and a half...

“The medicine is overflowing.”



At Ruth's voice, Max quickly came to her senses and removed the pot from the heat, setting it aside. A new car full of wounded arrived last night, filling the infirmary. The wizards who stayed behind did their best to heal them with magic, but it was impossible to heal all of them in a day or two.

Because of that, they had to categorize the men based on the severity of their injury and heal them in that order. And it was Max's job, along with the priestesses, to make sure these thirty men didn't die.

Max transferred the detox medicine she made into a small bottle and rubbed her tired eyes. Seeing her so exhausted, Ruth asked with his eyebrows furrowed.

"Are you getting enough rest?"

His gaze on her grew more and more stern.

"You don't look well. Have you been eating all your meals?"

"I-I eat... whenever I can..."

Max muttered as she avoided his gaze. The truth was, since Riftan left, she hadn't had a proper meal. Perhaps because she was too nervous. Whenever she forced bread into her mouth, she would feel her stomach churn so it was only more difficult.

Sighing, Ruth looked at her tired face.

"You seem more agitated than usual lately. If it continues like this, you will eventually collapse. You need to take care of yourself if you want to last until the end of this war."

"I kno-know..."

"I don't think you're taking this seriously."

"" "

He glared at her and grabbed the ladle and bottle out of her hands, then came out and called Garrow and Yulysion, who were standing guard outside.

"Go and get some sleep. Sir Lovar, Sir. Rivakion, please escort the Lady back to her place."

"I'm fi-fine! Everyone else is still working... I shouldn't be the only one sitting around..."

"Haven't you already cured three people today with magic?"

In fact, she healed five wounded people. When Ruth went to speak with the Grand Duke, she healed two more. But staring into Ruth's narrowed eyes, Max kept her mouth shut. Ruth pointed firmly to the exit.

"It's common to rest after casting magic. Take the rest of the day off."

"But... Ruth, you're also caring for the wounded... and researching how to b-break Sir Nirta's curse. More than me, Ruth should rest..."

"I treasure my body more than gold."

He responded annoyed when her stubbornness began to get on his nerves.

"The lady, on the other hand, doesn't seem to treasure herself at all. Did you forget that you are a noble lady born and raised in a castle surrounded by servants? This kind of work is tough even for servants who are used to forced labor, and much more for you. But here you are, breaking your back working as a maid. Sometimes, I can't believe you are the beloved daughter of Duke Croix.

Max awkwardly turned her body around at Ruth's pointed words.

"I g-got it. I'll go rest."

"Please don't let her leave the barracks for the rest of the day."

Ruth instructed Yulysion. Max gave him one last look and headed back to Riftan's tent. She doubted she would be able to fall asleep as she lay down on the pillow and closed her eyes.

Rubbing her throbbing head, Max pulled the blanket up to her head and somehow, miraculously, fell into a deep sleep.

In her vague awareness, Max felt someone shake her shoulder. She groggily opened her eyes, but found herself still half asleep. 'How long did I sleep?' She wondered as she rubbed her dazed eyes and suddenly heard Yulysion's urgent voice burst into her unconsciousness.

"M' lady! Please wake up! We need to evacuate, now."

"E-Evacuate...?"

Startled, Max looked up at him as Yulysion, He hastily helped her up without waiting for permission.

"There is no time to explain. Hurry!"

Max quickly got out of bed and followed him. Then a loud, deafening noise drummed against her ears.

Max looked around, wondering what all the fuss was about. When she focused towards the southern gates, her eyes widened. The armed knights were engaged in battle with black, clay-like beings with weapons.

Then, she heard cries and screams from all corners of the fortress. Everyone was in a panic as they screamed and ran frantically. Max unconsciously took a step back. She only closed her eyes for a moment... did she fall into another dimension?

"T-This... What in the wo-world is going on? How did the monsters get inside the castle...?"

"Ghouls suddenly emerged from the grounds. it! It seems like the monsters that were here before buried dead bodies inside the castle's fortress."

Yulysion grabbed her by the arm as he screamed in anger. Max's eyes widened in shock.

"The monsters did...wh-what?"

"I'll explain later. First, we have to get to safety."

The young man wove through the barracks, and Max gasped as she desperately tried to keep up with his pace when suddenly something emerged from the ground and grabbed her ankle.

Max shrieked in a shrill voice, her throat almost tearing a part. A cold, decaying hand with rotted black bones wrapped around her skin and wretchedly pulled her.

In a panic, Max screamed and kicked, trying to push the hideous thing away. Yulysion immediately drew his sword and slashed the ghoul's arm emerging from the ground with a single swing. But the undead hand that gripped her ankle still remained.

Max quickly tore it off with trembling hands and threw it away. The feeling of those bony fingers touching her lingered, and it was a feeling that would never go away for the rest of her life.

"Stay behind me!"

In the midst of her anguish, and rubbing the skin the ghoul had touched, Yulysion screamed and placed her behind him, using his body as a shield.

It was then that she realized that it wasn't just one ghoul crawling out of the ground. Surrounding them were half-rotting corpses crawling towards them from all directions.

Yulysion relentlessly swung his sword at the creatures. The speed of his swing was almost invisible to the naked eye if not for its blue glint. With a single hit, the heads of three ghouls were sent rolling on the ground.

Max watched, surprised by the decapitated monster searching desperately for her head, as Yulysion hastily grabbed her and dragged her away.

“This way! We must climb up the wall to safety.”

There was nothing Max could do but sprint after him. Yulysion cut through the overwhelming number of ghouls on their way without a second of hesitation and led her to the castle walls.

“The undead are coming from the ground. As long as you’re up there, you’ll be safe. If any of them start climbing, I’ll cut them down immediately.”

As soon as she managed to do what she was told, Max climbed the watchtower. Once she was on top, she turned and her breathing stopped. At the top, a full view of Ethylene’s chaotic situation unfolded before her.

Half of the barracks had been brought down. The horses were running around frantically, and the armed knights screamed and fought the emerging ghouls with long spears. It was on earth.

“W-what about everyone else... how...?”

“The wizard is there, so don’t worry. Ghouls are not strong monsters and we have many high-ranking knights and high priests, so they will be able to defeat them soon.”

Yulysion’s words entered one ear and out the other. Her eyes became unfocused at the sheer chaos before her. What about Garrow and Hebaron? Idcilla and the other priestesses? Will everyone come out safe from this chaos?

Max looked around everywhere, trying to see if she could find a familiar face in the midst of the loud commotion, when a loud roar came from behind her.

She turned her head. The installed defensive magic devices had been activated, and huge barriers began to form on the walls. Beyond the barriers, hundreds of trolls in black armor were marching towards them.

“How the...” Yulysion muttered in disbelief.

The young man clasped his face in shock but immediately came into senses. He picked up the big horn by the watchtower and blew into it with all his might. The thunderous sound echoed throughout the fort and in the distance. It was an invasion.

“Don’t worry. I’ll protect the lady even if it costs me my life.”

The boy’s normally confident tone was now cloudy like smoke. This was beyond anything anyone could have imagined, and they both knew it.

Max grabbed and held her forehead as she was barely able to process this reality. There were hundreds of ghouls attacking within the walls, and now, an army of trolls had gathered outside the walls. It was a living nightmare.

‘Didn’t the Allied forces push the trolls to the north? And since when have these ghouls been buried in the ground?’

Suddenly, realization hit Max, and a petrifying fear shook her to the bone. Yulysion said that a large number of corpses were probably buried in the castle prior to their arrival. It could only mean that when Ethylene first fell, it was the monsters who buried the dead beneath the ground.

Was the monster’s defeat in Ethylene merely a trap to gather all the allied forces in here? Then why did the monsters wait for a moment to attack when the allied forces are not here?

Perhaps the monsters are aiming for the chance of ransacking the supply of food. There was enough food left to feed 15,000 soldiers for a month and a week. If that supply is taken away, no matter how much power and upper hand the allied forces have, they will not be able to hold out.

Max wrapped her arms around her shoulders, there was a foreboding chill that ran through her body. At that moment, she heard Garrow’s voice screaming from below the wall.

“Yuri! I’ve lured all the ghouls to one place! You can go down with the lady now!”

Max looked down and saw five to six soldiers standing at the base of the stairs. Yulysion led her down and immediately, Garrow and the soldiers surrounded her in protection.

“All the priestesses and the wounded have been evacuated to the northern sector of the base. Until the situation clears up, we have to evacuate the lady to a safe place.”

Garrow supported Max with one arm and strode forward. Max quickly took his help and followed along. As they approached the battle scene, Max saw knights and soldiers stabbing ghouls with spears measuring 10 kvet (3 m) long.

They were able to quickly reorganize and drive the ghouls into a corner. Even in the face of an unexpected attack, the soldiers remained calm and engaged in a strategic battle. Seeing this has brought a sense of relief to her.

If they are able to defeat the ghouls and defend the walls until the Allied Forces have returned, they will be able to protect the supplies and the lives of those in the castle.

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“This way, please hurry!”

Max was distracted from the ongoing battle, when Garrow’s urgent voice pulled her out of it. She was shaken from her distraction and quickly fled across the uneven dirt terrain. Right now, their priority was to escape to a safe place and get out of the battle’s harm. She gathered the hem of her dress in one hand and ran across the chaotic plaza at once. They headed north and soon she saw a large barrack where all of the food supply was being protected by several soldiers.

Garrow ushered Max into the makeshift storage house. “The priests have casted a shield around this place so that no ghouls can enter.”

Max looked around the warehouse, sacks of grains were piled on top of one another like mountains, she then found the priestesses at the heart of the place, sitting close to each other. Max ran to them at once and Idcilla jumped from her seat upon seeing her.

“Madam! You’ve made it safe!”

“I-Idcilla... were you hurt?”

“I’m fine. But... Se-Selena... I can’t find her anywhere.”

Idcilla chewed on her lip, tears started welling up in her eyes like she was about to cry. Max tried to comfort her as she looked at the fear-filled priestesses’ faces. Looking through them, there were quite a few missing from the group. Idcilla sobbed softly as Max held her.

“The wounded who were in the infirmary... Only half of them were evacuated... only those who could move...”

Max felt her head begin to ache dreadfully as counted the number of wounded lying on the ground like corpses and held her forehead. Yulysion was quick to help her regain her balance.

“Don’t worry m’lady. Those who couldn’t get to safety would have found some place to hide. We will search for them as soon as the chaos subsides.”

“Why did such a thing happen? I heard the alarm signaling that there’s an invasion. Haven’t the trolls been driven towards the north? Perhaps, have the allied forces been defeated?”

Idcilla, who has lost half of her right mind, rushed to interrogate Yulysion. Yulysion quickly waved his hand to try to calm the hysterical girl.

“I doubt it! If that’s indeed the case, then they don’t have any reason to go back around and invade us through the south gate. It must have been an ambush, a plan to attack when the knights are not here.”

“Then what will happen to us now? Will the remaining troops in the castle be able to stop the monsters invading us outside the walls?”

Idcilla’s frantic screams echoed throughout the warehouse. Some priestesses began to sob, unable to overcome their fear. When the situation inside began to spiral out of control, the knight leading the soldiers outside yelled loudly.

“Stop making a fuss! We’re doing our best to drive these monsters out immediately. Once we have defeated all the ghouls, we’ll immediately reinforce our defenses. So don’t lose your mind, keep calm and follow our instructions!”

The loud crying gradually subsided at his commanding voice. Idcilla, barely managing to regain her control, muttered an apology under her breath, then sat back down with the other priestesses. Time passed agonizingly slowly. A minute felt like an hour; an hour felt like a day. The howl of the ghouls and the screams of the soldiers continued endlessly. Only when they thought that this nightmare had no end, two soldiers jumped into the barracks.

””” ”

“We have been successful in cornering the ghouls in one place.” Just when they were able to sigh in relief, the soldier continued to speak urgently. “However, there are a lot of injuries. We need to have them treated right away.”

The knight ordered the priestesses to immediately heal those who were injured and they headed out with wary but determined expressions. Max refused Yulysion’s dissuasions and followed the priestesses. The aftermath unfolded before her eyes: the barracks were in ruins and the soldiers busily weaved through them.

The soldiers were pushing piles of wreckage to one side, making space to build makeshift beds and carrying the injured to lie on them. Along with the other priestesses, Max went straight to aid the injured soldiers. There were a total of 32 patients: it was a high number, considering that there were only about three hundred of the troops left in Ethylene Castle.

After examining the patients' conditions, she prioritized casting healing magic to those who had minor injuries. Right now, having even one of them up to their feet and capable of helping defend the castle was most important.

"I will not be left behind in disgrace!"

As Max was in the midst of healing the wounded, she heard a loud and familiar voice scream. She immediately raised her head to see. Just a short distance away, Hebaron was holding his claymore in his hand, exclaiming loudly.

"Stop your nagging! You're not my wife to nag me, wizard!"

"Sir, stop acting like a stubborn brat! How in the world are you going to fight with that kind of injury?" Ruth was standing in front of him, yelling back at him with an equally angry face. "You must have gone crazy, seeing how you're practically jumping to your own death!"

"B\*\*\*\*y! This injury is nothing! I've been resting in bed long enough!"

Seeing their fight, Max hurriedly ran towards them. The two growling men immediately stopped their fights when they saw her approaching. She looked at Hebaron, unable to believe that he was wearing his armor and all on. Before either man could say anything, Max scolded the great knight.

"W-what in the world do you think you're doing? Your injury hasn't healed yet."

", the lady too?" Hebaron made an annoyed gesture and sheathed his sword, which was longer than Max's height, on his back. "I'm completely fine. I have the medicine that the lady gave me so it's alright."

"T-The medicine I gave you... is just soothing the pain! If you keep moving recklessly... your wound...!"

"Right now, we are in a state of emergency. When the battle is over, I will rest and get treatment."

Hebaron interrupted in a sour tone and turned to head toward where the fighting was taking place. Seeing this, Ruth cursed out loud.



"The question is, will you still have the chance to get treated? If you go ahead and fight in that condition, you'll be the first one to die, Sir Nirta!"

"Then you better pray fervently." Hebaron glared back at him, his teeth gritted tightly. "You said so yourself! There is a high possibility that the monster that cursed me is outside the castle walls. It will be faster for me to get rid of this curse by cutting off its head instead of waiting for you to break my curse."

"... fine! Sir Nirta, do whatever you want then!"

Hebaron shrugged his shoulders and strode towards the castle gates. Max hurriedly went to chase after him and try to stop him, but Ruth grabbed her arm.

"He won't listen to anyone. Let him be."

"B-But... he won't be able to fight with that kind of injury. Ruth, you know it as well. If he wields a sword in that condition..."

"That man will wield that thing without blinking an eye even if his wound rips open." Ruth spat out as he took in a deep breath. "Best pray that the defensive magic tools withstand for a long time."

Hearing the bitter tone to Ruth's voice, Max looked anxiously at Hebaron. The knight mounted his horse so effortlessly that it was hard to believe that he was suffering from a bad injury. Then, he went to approach the Grand Duke Aren, who was forming the battle lines. Their conversation grew more grim as they saw them prepare for battle.

"The monster that cursed Sir Ni-Nirta... that it's out there, what do you mean?"

"...it means that it's out there."

Ruth rubbed his face roughly and pointed at an area inside the castle. Max turned her head following his hand and held her breath. The ghouls' corpses that were in a pile wriggled and twitched slowly. Ruth spoke in a calm manner as he gazed at the creatures still moving despite the long spears impaled through them.

"The high priests have casted a purification spell on them and yet, they keep resurrecting. The most reasonable explanation is that a necromancer is controlling them outside the castle gates."

"A necromancer..."

"A necromancer. There are certain monsters that are capable of high-level black magic. There is a high probability that it is the black lizardman who cursed Sir Nirta." Suddenly, Ruth had a grim expression on his face. "The monster we are dealing with is far from

the norm: a monster lurking outside the walls that contains tremendous magical power, capable of commanding thousands of monsters.”

Max shuddered. For one of the best wizards in the world to say such a thing, they had to be in a very eminent, dangerous situation.

“The a-allied forces... h-how long until they come back...”

“I have already sent a messenger pigeon, but for them to arrive in time...”

Before Ruth could finish, a thunderous roar shot through the skies that seemed to break their eardrums. Max covered her ears and a flash of fire blazed from outside the walls accompanied by a blast of wind from the pressure. Ruth spat out curses.

“We need to strengthen our defenses, now!”

He screamed fiercely, and all the wizards who were tending to the wounded rushed to climb the castle walls. Max followed them, thinking that she might be of help even with her weak mana, but she barely took two steps before Ruth resolutely stopped her.

“Please remain here, m'lady. It's dangerous.”

“N-Now... is not the time to say that. If the barrier is breached... then it will be more dangerous! If I could help... even a little...”

Ruth didn't bother to hear a single word of what she said. He called over his shoulder for Yulysion and Garrow.

“What are you two doing not bringing Lady Calypse to safety right now?”

Yulysion immediately ran over and grabbed her arm. Max looked at Ruth, but the wizard turned and joined the other wizards up the wall. As she stared in a stupor at him, Yulysion began to lead her away in the opposite direction. Max's eyes widened as her consciousness returned and she realized that the boy was rudely dragging her away.

“N-now where are you taking me? Let me go!”

Despite her protest, the young man silently led her to an empty place. Max struggled and pulled with all her might, while glaring at him.

“Ca-can't you hear me... Let go!”

“Please forgive my insolence, but we must leave Ethylene now.”

Max looked at him with eyes full of disbelief and horror. The two young men quickly navigated through the remote forest and towards the wall. And in front of them, the soldiers were standing with three horses and Yulysion quickly took the reins from them.

“Please hurry and get on.”

“Wha-what in the world are you talking about? Are you planning... to run away by ourselves?”

Yulysion’s face darkened at Max’s shocked voice. He avoided her eyes and spoke in a firm tone.

“We are not running away. There is a possibility that reinforcements will not arrive in time. We are going to find the Remdragon Knights and inform them of this invasion.”

Max, unconvinced by his explanation, frowned. “B-But why am I...”

“Please excuse me for this moment, m’lady.”

Garrow held her waist and swiftly mounted her on the horse’s saddle. “This is an emergency situation. Right now, please, you must do as we say.”

Max couldn’t ask any more questions seeing their sheer stubbornness and determination. She took the reins and looked at the soldiers as Garrow and Yulysion mounted their respective horses. Once they were ready, the soldiers pushed a part of the bricks on the wall, the bricks were then pushed back, and a small hidden doorway was revealed. Yulysion took the initiative and first moved forward, then ordered the soldiers.

“After all of us have gone in, seal the passage completely.”

“Yes, sir.”

As Max reluctantly followed the two through the dark path, she looked behind and saw the light gradually disappear as the soldiers on the other side resealed the entrance. They were trapped in complete darkness. Garrow sensed her anxiety and tried to comfort her with a calm voice.

“This secret path leads to a hidden exit. The monsters are probably unaware of this passage. Please, follow us without worrying.”

“I-it’s too dark.”

“Please give me your reins, I will guide you. Hold onto the saddle for support.”

Max handed over the leather reins and allowed him to guide her. They traveled through the dark tunnel in silence, hearing only the sound of clopping horseshoes for around 10 minutes. Yulysion, who was leading them, stopped and pounded on the wall when they reached the end of the passage. Then, Max finally saw a speck of light and soon, a narrow opening emerged through the brick walls.

“When we first arrived in Ethylene, Lord Calypse ordered us to conduct a thorough investigation of the fortress, and we were able to find this secret passage.”

The sudden glow of sunlight on the other side made Max narrow her eyes. In front of them, a bumpy road full of dense trees greeted them. Yulysion went out of the passage and urged her.

“We have to get out of here before the sun goes down. We’ll be riding in speed so please follow carefully.”

“The a-allied forces... how long will it take to get to them?”

“...If we hurry, we can get to them tomorrow.”

“U-until then, will Ethylene be able to hold?”

“Since there are wizards defending the castle, it won’t fall so easily.”

There was something unusual about Yulysion’s tone, but Max didn’t probe further. The three of them traveled in silence, but it was all too strange. When Max could no longer suppress her nagging suspicions, she finally spoke.

“D-did you get me out of there... because there is a high probability that Ethylene will fall?”

The young man’s shoulders visibly shook, and he looked at her with a pale face. Max bit her lip. She knew something was going on when they rushed to take her away from the castle, and when she saw the truth for herself on Yulysion’s face, her heart dropped to the ground. Max was quick to protest.

“I-if the situation is really that dire I... th-then shouldn’t we all evacuate everyone through the secret passage?”

“The monsters will quickly discover us if hundreds of people escape at once, and we cannot bring the wounded with us.” Garrow chimed in, his tone firm. “For now, the best course of action is to inform the allied forces of the monster invasion as soon as possible.”

Unable to counter his strong words, Max had no choice but to spur her horse and follow them. They rode through the winding forest road in great hurry. After a while, a steep

rock wall emerged through the dense trees. Yulysion, who was in the front, turned to its direction and Max, riding her horse after them, stopped at once. Garow, who was protecting her from behind, brought his horse to a stop and gave her a confused expression. She looked at the sun's direction through the trees, and when she realized it, her face hardened.

"This is not the direction to the n-north. Right now... where are we really going?"

"M'lady..."

"Please tell me the truth. We are not going to the allied forces, a-are we?"

Yulysion's face paled at her question. He kept his mouth shut and lowered his head down, but that was the sufficient answer. Max spurred her horse to turn around, but was immediately intercepted by Garrow.

"We're heading southeast of this rock wall, towards Baron Gideon's territory. The territory is yet to be invaded by monsters. It is a bit of a distance from here but for now, it's the safest place. Lord Calypse has directly ordered that if anything happens, the lady should be immediately brought there."

"T-Then... who will notify the allied forces of the invasion?"

"A messenger has already been sent." Garrow replied calmly, but blood rushed to Max's face.

"I-if there's no reason to go to the allied forces... th-then I'm going back to Ethylene. I can't ru-run away by myself! Ruth, Sir Nirta... and the priestesses are still in there..."

"Lady Calypse."

Yulysion quickly led his horse to block their path and spoke in a low, heavy tone.

"Do you know who were those ghouls buried inside the castle?" Before Max could say anything, Yulysion continued to speak. "When the corpse of a human is contaminated with black magic, it becomes an undead. Those ghouls that attacked us are humans who used to live in Ethylene Castle before it fell. The monsters have turned human corpses into ghouls and buried them beneath the ground. If we go back to the castle now... we will meet the same fate."

Max covered her mouth in disbelief with a trembling hand. As she began to understand his words and realized the situation, she felt a bile coming up her throat.

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Max's face was losing color rapidly and seeing this, Yulysion kept his words firm and true.

"If anything happens to the Lady, imagine how heartbroken Lord Calypse would be. Please, be understanding."

"But... But..."

Max's face twisted in pain and conflict. She clutched the shekel in her pocket. The image of ghouls and their rotten black flesh flashed before her eyes. She didn't want to end up like that. Max was completely devastated at the idea of never seeing Riftan again, however, she wasn't the only one feeling that. Idcilla had an older brother who cherished her, and the priestesses too. They all had family and friends waiting for them. Even the soldiers, she didn't want them to die. She looked at Yulysion with pleading eyes.

"Then at least so-some of them...we must take with us. Even just some..."

"We can't go back. It will only add to the chaos."

Garrow shook his head firmly. Their faces were as conflicted and distorted as hers. "We do not wish to leave like this either, but please understand our decision. For us, Lord Calypse's orders are above all else."

"Inside the ca-castle, there's a noble lady from Livadon who came with me. She's only eighteen... she was worried about her brother, so she followed him here. When this war is over, she is going to meet him..."

Yulysion's expression seemed to break for a moment but he shook his head firmly. "It's too risky to go back now. Please forgive us. However, your safety is most important to us."

"I-I'm not that important of a person! I'm not as no-noble as you all think...!"

At her sudden burst, Max sobbed and she couldn't utter a word properly. Garrow was confused by her outburst, but sighed and pulled on the reins.

"We don't have time to argue like this. There may be monsters roaming nearby. We need to get out of the canyon before they discover us."

As he led her horse forward by the reins, the horse followed obediently. She forced herself to swallow the grief and her worries as they dragged her with them. Ruth, who always complained about her but still cared about her regardless. Idcilla, who always pretended to be strong, but actually had a soft heart. And Hebaron and the other priestesses, who were all unconsciously affectionate towards her... all their faces flashed through her mind.

Even if I return and stay in the castle, nothing will change. I will just become another ghoul whom the allied forces have to defeat later on.

Max made up excuses after excuses, but nothing buried the guilt of running away alone. She closed her eyes tightly and silent tears ran down her face. She felt helpless and heavy guilt weighed her heart down.

Think about Riftan. You promised him. That you will be safe. You said to him you won't do anything reckless...

However, the tears would not stop spilling as they fled the dark forest in silence. She kept looking back. She thought she could hear the sounds of screaming in the distance, or maybe it was all a hallucination created by her own guilty conscience.

"... I think we have to change our route." Yulysion, who was leading them silently, suddenly spoke. He looked at Max's tear-stained face and his expression grew grim, but he quickly straightened his face then resumed in his stern tone. "I can send a large group of monsters moving nearby. We need to find another route."

"" "

"How many?" Asked Garrow in a serious tone.

"Thirty... No, about forty."

"Trolls?"

Yulysion shook his head and looked out clairvoyantly into the forest covered in darkness. "They are likely to be kobolds or romgoblins, but nothing good comes from running into them."

Garrow spurred his horse then handed the reins back to Max and spoke to her sternly. "There's really no going back now. Please, calm your feelings and kindly follow us."

Max could barely contain her tears and nodded. Yulysion took the initiative again and led his horse at a gallop. As they ran down the road, she struggled to regain her composure. That was not the time to cry like a little child, she couldn't risk the lives of Yulysion and Garrow.

"This way. We're going to cross the gorge on this trail here."

Yulysion pointed up the steep mountain path. The so-called trail was narrow and bumpy, it was too rough to be even called a path and Max estimated that it would take about twenty minutes for them to escape the woods and onto the main road.

"Must we... climb up this slope?"

"It seems there are monsters lurking north of here in case the people inside abandon the castle and escape. I think it will be difficult to turn around. We must climb up this path and head straight east."

"B-But... if there are monsters beyond the gorge... then maybe..."

Yulysion shook his head. "There's no reason for monsters to scatter their troops. Even if there are monsters up ahead, they would probably be just scouts. Garrow and I can both handle that easily."

"I will lead from now on. I have more experience with mountainous terrain."

Garrow came up the trail first on horseback, and Max followed him up the dizzying steep incline. Her entire body was strained and she sweated profusely, her breathing was heavily labored. The walk up the trail seemed endless, but they finally made it to the top and she saw the whole view of Ethylene from above. Her back stiffened, a faint roar echoed in the air.

"....."

Garrow cursed under his breath and Max immediately understood the reason: one of the two walls defending the castle gates was already collapsing. The monster army that had gathered in front of the castle roared and ran towards the now fragile wall like a herd of angry buffaloes in an attempt to bring it down completely. Max groaned in despair. The monster army was far greater in number than what she saw when she looked out on top of the wall. There were thousands, not hundreds, of trolls, romgoblins, and ogres.

"Where in the world did that army of that many monsters come from?"

"Now is not the time to think about that. The monsters have likely sent a search unit in this area. We have to get out of here before they catch our scent."



Garrow, who was the first to come to his senses, quickly scanned the trail, but Max couldn't take her eyes off Ethylene Castle that was currently being invaded. Seeing her like this, Yulysion, who was as shocked as she was, tried to comfort her.

"Even if the castle falls, the people in there may be able to avoid death. The allied forces will return before that happens and reclaim the castle"

Even though Max was completely ignorant in military warfare, she knew it was a blatant lie. How could a few hundred men hope to stop a horde of a thousand monsters? The monsters would destroy Ethylene Castle in an instant. She looked at the endless number of monsters marching through the gorge when suddenly something caught her eye.

"T-that... if we break that... will that do mu-much damage to the monsters?"

She pointed to the towering rock formation, built on the left and right sides of the road leading to the castle's southern gate. The two boys blinked, confused, then when they realized what she meant, their eyes widened. Turning to look at the huge rock boulder hanging from the edge of the wall, Garrow spoke in a shaky voice.

"Can we... break that?"

"If we use magic... it might be po-possible."

Max wanted to sound as confident as possible, but couldn't help it, her voice cracked, and the faces of the two boys reflected uncertainty.

"But the lady won't have enough mana..."

"I have a plan. Although it's only a slight chance it might wo-work... it is worth a try."

The boys looked at each other, in conflict. Realizing they were in the horns of a dilemma, Max continued to plead desperately.

"P-Please, please. Give me twenty minutes... No, at le-least fifteen minutes. If I fail, I will follow you two without any objection."

Yulysion, who was looking at her, looked back and forth between Max and the rock hanging on the edge of the wall while biting his lips. He talked with Garrow about it and then eventually nodded weakly.

"Alright, let's give it a try. But if we fail, the lady must follow us and flee from here immediately."

Max nodded with a grim expression. The two boys seemed sorry for their decision, but all three began to climb the steep mountain again. As they drove their horses towards

the cliff, the cries from the battlefield grew louder as the sun began to set and cast a purple hue across the skies. Running at such high speed, Max felt the cold afternoon air rush into her lungs.

Her thighs throbbed like they had been stabbed with a knife and her arms trembled, but they couldn't afford to take a break. She endured with all her might. After a long time, something suddenly emerged from the trees. Yulysion quickly drew his sword and yelled.

"Turn back!"

Max yanked on her horse's reins and hurriedly turned, but there were also monsters surrounding them from behind. Yulysion shouted fiercely as he pulled her behind him to protect her and screamed.

"We are surrounded, Garrow! Secure a path now!"

The monsters charged at them all at once, as if they had coordinated their plan of attack, and Max clung to her horse's neck for her life. She wanted to throw a shield, but she couldn't draw the magic formula, steer her horse, and run away all at the same time.

"M'lady, we will act as bait, you should escape! We'll be right behind you!"

Garrow's screams echoed in her ears and Max looked around in pure horror.. She had no idea what direction she's supposed to escape to. While she was overwhelmed, Yulysion and Garrow slashed goblins after goblins and secured a path for her.

"Hurry, run!"

Max spurred her horse and it shot forward like an arrow. A buzzing sound rang in her ears as thick tree trunks passed her left and right. She couldn't even look around to see if she was heading in the right direction. If she slowed down even a little, it would spell her end, so Max swung her reins like a whip, forcing the horse to run in speed. But then, something suddenly flew towards her out of nowhere and Max was knocked off her horse. She landed on her back with a heavy thump against the ground and her breath hitched.

As she gasped for air, she looked up with terror. There was a goblin sitting on her stomach and it was holding something like a h\*\*k in its hands. Max screamed so loud her throat hurt as she grabbed whatever was around her and threw it frantically at the monster. Fortunately, in her hysterical moment she managed to stab the monster in the eye with a branch and the goblin screeched in pain and grabbed its face. She quickly pushed the goblin away and tried crawling off the ground, but before she could get up, the goblin was able to grab her back.

Max smashed and kicked blindly like she was drowning, but it was all to no avail. The goblin grabbed her by the head and kicked her violently in the stomach. Max's vision darkened in an instant and she barely managed to hold onto her fading consciousness. But she couldn't close her eyes, not now. If she passed out here, it would be her end. Unconsciously, Max reached for the dagger tied at the waist while she was being dragged by her hair. She raised the weapon and stabbed it, she had no idea where it was aimed, but she could feel the sensation of the deadly blade ripping through flesh.

The goblin's eyes widened in bewilderment and looked at her in disbelief, looking down at his stomach and screamed, shaking, and tugging wildly at her hair. Max reluctantly raised the dagger once more and plunged the blade deep into its flesh again. Blood gushed out like a fountain, painting her face and arms red but she didn't dare stop. In a state of panic, she stabbed with the weapon over and over again, piercing the blade into the monster's shaggy stomach mercilessly until finally, the grip on her hair was released and the monster fell lifelessly to the ground.

She was breathing erratically and her body shook uncontrollably as she struggled to get back up. The monster's torso was like minced meat when she looked at it. Unable to contain herself any longer, Max quickly looked away. She collapsed at the base of a tree and emptied all the contents of her stomach. Her throat burned from the acidity of her vomit, and every bone in her body felt like it had been crushed to pieces. Every breath she took was excruciatingly painful, as if she had broken her ribs. She wrapped her hands around her sides and looked back at the path she came, she was devastated.

Where am I?

The horse she was riding had disappeared without a trace. Max stood up on shaky legs, leaning against the tree trunk for support. Could the situation even get worse? She couldn't even feel fear anymore as she stood there covered in blood in the deep, dark forest. Max walked absentmindedly, trying to understand where she was, when she suddenly heard screams in the distance. She staggered towards the sound as she passed through the trees. Then, a large, steep cliff with a huge rock boulder on the edge stretched out in front of her.

She approached the ledge and looked down from the dizzying height. There were thousands of monsters lurking outside the defensive wall that protected Ethylene's gates.

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The horrific scene that was revealed below her made her skin shudder instantly. She wrapped her arms around herself, staggering back. There were six gray giants in the front lines, their legs were as thick as tree logs. They charged towards the walls of Ethylene and pounded their iron clubs heavily against it. Suddenly, she heard a loud, monstrous roar, followed by a spewing of a huge fountain of fire.

Max turned towards the source of the flames. Among the crowd of the trolls, was a monster clad in pitch-black robe, perched atop of a half-dragon's back. She then came to a realization: that creature must be the necromancer who had cursed Hebaron and controls the army of ghouls. The monster tugged at the half-dragon's reins that were made of chain, urging the half-dragon to move closer to Ethylene's defensive wall. The necromancer then raised his black, scale-covered hand high; the half-dragon then spewed another ball of fire in the air.

Max covered her face, even from a distance, she could feel the heat from the scorching flames. The dark red flames flew like a cannon ball towards the Ethylene's defensive wall and she felt a strong gust of wind blow. She ducked against the ground, flattening her body to avoid being carried away by the wind. She waited for the gust to stop blowing and as the black smoke began to dissipate, she saw the wall appear half-scorched. Then, the ogres rushed forward like a herd of buffalos and pounded their clubs against the wall.

The deafening sound of their weapons hitting against the wall pulled her out of her stupor. She then hurriedly examined the structure of the ground she was on. It wasn't the time to gape at the scene like an idiot. Max knelt on the ground and searched the margins of the land where dirt and rock parted. The rock was firmly embedded in the earthen ground more than she thought. She, who was testing the ground with the soles of her feet, bit her lips in conflict. The cliff was more solid than when she saw it from below. She didn't know if she would be able to break the rock away from the cliff's earthen ground with her magic alone. Her eyes narrowed as she stared eagerly at the narrowly slanted rock.

'...there's no other choice but to try.'

If she could create even a tiny crack between the rock and the earthen ground holding it stable, the huge rock will collapse by itself with gravity acting upon its heavy weight. She walked a few steps back and placed her palms against the ground. Then, she drew her mana, casting magic to pull up a barrier from the ground, between the rock and the earth to create the fissure. The mana that was drawn out of her stretched to her left and

right, creating a complex pattern. After a while, the ground beneath her began to slightly shake, the ground then rose up, creating an earthen barrier.

She took a step back, avoiding the thick dust that formed. However, the rock remained unbudging. She bit her lip in frustration and swept away the hair that fell on her forehead. Magic barriers were created out of what's around her, making a tangible wall from whatever is in the environment. As this barrier was made from pulling soil from the ground, the structure beneath was meant to become disrupted. However, the structure seemed to be unaffected with only that amount of scale.

She then gathered the remaining mana inside her body once again. She created another barrier, just for it to crumble down again like a sandcastle, creating another thick layer of dust. She did not wait for the dust to settle and pulled up another barrier from the ground. It would have been more effective to create something that would directly rupture the ground's structure instead of pulling up a barrier from earth, but she wasn't skilled enough to create a magic spell for that. Her method was foolish, but she had no other choice but to disrupt the ground structure this way.

She pulled the barrier again and again, drawing mana from her body constantly. Every time the barrier would emerge from the ground, the earth would shake slightly but never did the rock show any signs of budging. She gradually felt her mana being drained and Max bit her lips nervously. It was possible that the rock was embedded infinitely deep and if that was the case, she would have to repeat this method countless times just to create a rift that would break the rock away from the cliff. She clenched her fists in frustration.

Max began to think of herself as too arrogant, thinking that she would be able to tip the cliff off this rock wall, the guardian of Ethylene, that has withstood thousands of years.

'...But there is no other way.'

She only had a limited knowledge of magic: draw out defensive barriers from the earth, heal, recover, and small flames. There was no other choice but to try to her best extent. Creating this barrier to create a rift on the ground was like trying to break a rock using an egg. She repeated creating a barrier for about nine times, then that was when she felt her eyes growing heavy and her body feeling like it was bleeding out heavily.

Max pulled away quickly, gathering her mana back from the ground. If she applied more of her mana, she would risk causing her mana to be depleted. She took a deep breath and looked up at the sky with unfocused vision. The sky's hue was so contrastingly beautiful against her situation that she resented the golden sunset it displayed. She blinked emptily, a cool breeze brushed against her wet cheeks. Her entire body throbbed with pain and her head was numb. Her body was trembling uncontrollably.

She was completely useless. If Princess Agnes or Ruth were here, they would have made it by now. If only Ruth had escaped instead of her, he would have destroyed this

cliff in a matter of seconds and brought devastating damage to the monsters. Her father's voice calling her "useless", echoed inside her head. And he was right, despite trying best and hard as she could, in the end, she was still a helplessly useless person. She thought of herself as absurd for trying to fix such a formidable situation on her own.

Max's face twisted in despair and her throat burned with shame. She tried to swallow the hot, seething misery that threatens to control her, when suddenly, a tremendous boom engulfed her surroundings. She got up quickly and ran to the ledge. The last of Ethylene's defensive walls is crumbling. The trolls all roared at once and began marching towards the fortress.

The soldiers who were on the fortress fired burning arrows at once and the wizards casted blazing fires towards them as an attack but nothing could stop these monsters whose regenerative powers were close to immortality. The monsters rushed, crashing against the castle gates without a single hesitation. Max watched the scene in horror, she gritted her teeth and placed her palms against the ground once more.

'This is the last. This chance is the last one you have.'

She drew out all her mana and applied it to the ground, casting a magic spell accordingly. It felt just like bleeding out as her mana drained out of her body. Before long, the ground trembled and an earthen barrier as high as 15 kvets (about 4.5 meters) high emerged from the ground but she did not stop, she continued to draw out her mana at an accelerated speed: to create a rift deep enough, she needed to pull up more earth. Max made her barrier rise higher and higher yet the rock was still unbudging. She clenched her teeth and spoke to the ground as if to threaten it.

"" "

"Collapse...!"

Her last sliver of mana had been drawn but nothing happened. She pounded on the ground and screamed in exasperation.

"I said co-collapse!"

Hot tears began to form in her eyes. Now, she had no mana left. The barrier fell in vain as the mana ran out, creating heavy dust. As she watched bitterly at the scene unfolding below her, she suddenly heard a thump. Her eyes widened. Then the ground beneath her suddenly began to slide to one side, unable to bear the weight of the collapsing earth.

Max looked at the pile of dust with resentment and bitterness when suddenly, she heard and felt it tremble. Her eyes widened as the ground below her began to pound. With the foundations weakened, the cliff could no longer carry the weight of Ethylene's guardian and slowly began to fall. She staggered backwards and hurriedly tried to turn around

and get to safety as the soil and dust began to collapse beneath her. However, the strength in her legs were lost and she could not run away fast.

She stumbled desperately to get to the other side of the cliff. And then, the ground beneath her began to slant her position and fall towards the cliff at an exponential rate. She was dragged helplessly by the falling silt, making her lose her balance and roll on the ground. And just as she was about to tumble down the cliff with the rock, someone grabbed her arm.

Max screamed as she felt the strong pressure on her shoulder. She lifted her head up and saw Yulysion's ashen face. He pulled her toward him in a flash and leapt up to the slanting ground like a natural instinctive animal. Forgetting the pain of her shoulder, Max allowed herself to be dragged to safety as the ground continued to collapse behind them.

She heard Yulysion curse before the boy wrapped an arm around her waist and leapt onto stable ground. Max held her breath at the pain she felt in her side. He landed near a tree as nimble as a cat and firmly gripped one of the tree's thick branches, then leaned them against the trunk, avoiding the soil that rushed with the landfall. Max clung to him tightly for her life. The ground shook violently as if heaven and earth were cracking open and fierce roars and screaming resounded for a long time. She had no idea how much time had passed when her surroundings finally came to a quiet and she was barely able to open her eyes.

It took her a while to realize what had just happened. Her vision was blurry as if her eyes were covered in frost as she saw the huge rock that had fallen beneath the cliff and the monsters that were crushed and buried under. Her eyes blinked in disbelief. When the rock on top of the cliff fell, the steep rock wall collapsed along with it.

"Oh my God..." Above her, Max heard Yulysion's bewildered voice.

Fearing he might drop her, the boy's arm around her waist wrapped so tightly that it magnified the pain she felt in her side.

"Half of the monster army was crushed by the rock. Do you see it? The entrance has been completely blocked. They will be able to hold out until the reinforcements arrive."

He spoke in a shaky voice as he led her away from the ledge and came back to his senses. Max clung to Yulysion for support and barely managed to step onto soft wobbly ground with loose dirt as the boy continued to ramble with excitement.

"That was amazing! Absolutely amazing! But we have to get out of here immediately. The monsters would discover we're up here. We need to quickly find a place to hide..."

Suddenly, Yulysion trailed off. Max stared at him with unfocused eyes and he let out a low gasp and quickly went to remove her hood to reveal her face.

“Oh my god, blood, blood is...”

At the mention of blood, Max belatedly remembered how she stabbed that goblin to death. Its blood was probably still splattered all over her. She reached up and touched her face.

“T-This is a goblin’s blood. It s-splattered on my fa-face...”

“N-No, your nose...”

Before Yulysion even finished speaking, he grabbed his cloak and pressed the fabric to her nose to stop the bleeding. Only then did Max realize that something warm was trickling down her nose. It appeared that her nose had been bleeding a lot as she came to her senses and felt the metallic taste of blood on her lips. She must have looked terrible, but her unsightly appearance was not even on her mind. Her entire body was cold and she was shaking violently. Her head was dizzy, and she felt sick to the core. Even her arms and legs were trembling worse than her last mana depletion. Realizing her disastrous condition, Yulysion turned as white as flour.

“You are losing too much blood. Please hold this and apply pressure to stop the bleeding.”

Max stretched weakly and raised the cloak to her face with trembling hands while Yulysion turned his back to her and knelt.

“Climb up on my back, I’ll carry you.”

It was difficult for her to stand up, much more to walk, so Max had no choice but to climb up his back obediently. Yulysion gently stood up once she was secured on his back and ran through the forest at lightning speed.

“Please hold for a little more. We must get to safety first.”

The boy’s urgent voice felt so far away. Max groaned in pain as she fought desperately against her fading consciousness. If she fainted there, she would just be a hindrance. As she struggled to keep her conscience at bay, Garrow’s voice suddenly emerged.

“Yuly! What happened?”

“The Lady managed to break through the cliff, but I think it depleted her mana.”

Garrow ran quickly towards them and his mouth fell open.

“A-are you alright m’lady?”



Max looked up at him with hazy eyes and caught sight of the boy's paling face. She wondered what she must have looked like for him to look that alarmed.

"We need to find a safe place to hide right now. The monsters know that we're up here. Those who survived the landslide will come for us."

"Will we continue heading east as planned?"

Yulysion shook his head.

"We cannot travel with the Lady in this state. We need to return to Ethylene."

"But the battle..."

"The landslide has completely blocked the south gates of the castle. At most, there are a hundred monsters trapped between the castle gates and the pile of rocks. The remaining troops in Ethylene will be able to take them down. The problem is the monsters that survived. There's no telling what they will do."

"How many of the monster army were able to survive?"

"Six to seven hundred... No, I can't be sure. I saw more than half of them get buried in the landslide, but the trolls are incredibly tough. If they didn't die from the impact, they would have already regenerated."

Yulysion approached his horse and set Max on her feet. She moaned in pain with every movement, her ribs and shoulders practically screamed. Yulysion, anxious and scared at not knowing what to do, asked.

"Can the lady ride a horse?"

Max weakly shook her head. "My le-left a-arm..."

Only then did Yurixion belatedly realize that one of her shoulders was horribly dislocated and bit his lip. Carefully, he lifted her on his back.

"Let's get rid of the horses and travel on foot. Take only the bare minimum with us."

"Will that be alright?"

"If we can't ride and travel on the horses, it will be better to leave them. That was Sir Calypse' orders. It will be difficult to cover the tracks of the horses, we will only be caught sooner."

Garrow quickly removed the bags and saddle from the horses and set them free. The three of them immediately descended down the mountain, and Max was like a rag doll

on the boy's back. Her shoulder ached as if it had been stabbed with a knife right in the joint and her ribs throbbed excruciatingly. Even when her father beat her to the bone, it didn't hurt as much as it did now. Her shoulder was dislocated, her joints throbbed agonizingly, and her ribs felt as if they had been completely broken.

Her knees were significantly wounded from being dragged away by the falling landslide, and her hip was probably bruised too since she fell off the horse. Her arms and legs felt limp, not a single place in her body did not feel pain and her whole body trembled as she felt chills like icy water was running in her veins. She groaned in pain as she trembled helplessly.

"it, we need to find some place to hide and rest for a while..."

Yulysion muttered urgently as he looked from left to right.

"The lady may only end up worse if we waste our time in a hiding place. It would be better to take the lady immediately to a healer."

"But she's in so much pain..."

Max tried to open her lips. She wanted to say that she was fine, but only a strange sound came out of her mouth. The symptoms of her mana depletion began to grow exponentially worse and the chill punctured her bones. Yulysion began to hurry, sensing her suffering.

"This won't do. We must put a splint on her shoulder to reduce the pain. Let's find a cave."

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Yulysion ducked as low as possible to reduce the impact of his steps on Max's body as he ran swiftly through the forest. She clenched her jaw, suppressing her teeth to chatter from the chill she was feeling and the agonizing pain she felt on her limp shoulder. It

crossed her mind that it would be better if she lost her consciousness. However, she couldn't let herself succumb into it, there is the possibility that she might never wake up again.

"Here!"

Garrow, who was running ahead of them to scan the surroundings, waved at them and yelled. As they approached him, Max could make out with her cloudy eyes that he was pointing towards a small cave hidden among several large, misshapen trees.

Garrow spread his cloak on the ground for Max and Yulysion gently placed her on it as if he were handling precious, fragile glass. However, no matter how careful he was, her entire body was still screaming in pain. It felt like she was being lowered into fire.

Max bit into the fabric she was pressing on her nose to stop the bleeding and sweated profusely. Seeing her in excruciating pain with even the slightest movement, Yulysion grew more and more distraught.

"Garrow, w-what should we do? I think we need to realign her shoulder..."

"Neither of us knows how to do that. If we don't do it right, we could break her bones or make the pain worse. Let's just put a splinter on her shoulder so it stays in place."

Garrow knelt beside her and tore his cloak lengthwise. "Please bare it for a moment. This might hurt a lot."

Max looked at the boy in terror as he reached for her arm. Leaving her shoulder hanging as it is was already more than painful, what more if someone touched it? Max was terrified but there was no other way.

Garrow carefully lifted her arm, folding it in front of her body and securing it with the cloth, tying it in place to keep it from swaying. Max bit her lip so tight that it bled. The pain was so immense that she couldn't even breathe. Seeing her wither in agony, Yuysion hurriedly pulled the bags they brought with them off his back.

"Please hang in there, there must be some recovery herbs in here."

He searched frantically through the bags and pulled out a packet of medicinal herbs. Looking at the handful of herbs, Max's eyes softened and she removed the wrinkled clothing she was pressing against her nose to stop the bleeding.

After roughly wiping the blood from her face, Max opened her mouth and Yurixion crumbled the dried plants into her mouth. Max chewed the bitter herbs and forced herself to swallow them, yet the action caused an inexplicable stinging sensation in her chest.

Unable to suppress the nausea caused by the pain, Max hunched over and vomited the nasty herbs next to her.

“M’lady!”

The pain in her ribs, which was already painful, throbbed even more excruciatingly when she threw up and engulfed her. Yulysion wept helplessly seeing her in such a disastrous state.

“I’m s-sorry m’lady, I was useless...”

“This won’t do. We’ll risk being found by the monsters, but we must make a fire. Her body is dropping temperature. I think her mana depletion is causing her to get worse.”

””” .”

“I-I’ll make the fire!”

“No, you must keep watch. You are more perceptive than I am.”

Max wiped the vomit from her mouth as she dazedly listened to the boys’ conversation. Garrow wrapped her body with the cloak that he had placed on the floor to keep her warm and went to collect firewood.

Yulysion also quickly removed his own cloak and leaned down to wrap it around her. Then, his body suddenly stiffened. Garrow stared, frozen in fear at the possibility that something else had gone wrong.

“What is it?”

“Blood...”

Max wondered if her nose was bleeding again and struggled to open her eyes. The bluish forest which darkness is slowly descending upon were dizzyingly out of focus in her eyes. It was just like being submerged in dark waters.

“Please excuse my actions for a moment.”

Garrow walked over to her side and knelt. Yulysion was still frozen in shock as he unwrapped the cloak around her body. Max twitched weakly, only her eyelids moving.

When the young man unwrapped her robe, he gasped and quickly wrapped her up again. Then, he mounted her on his back and exclaimed.

“We must take her to a healer right now. She’s bleeding out too much!”

"I'll take her!"

"I'm faster on mountain roads. Draw your sword and watch my back!"

Garrow began running down the uneven slope at terrifying speed. Every time his foot crushed the ground and they jerked, Max's chest throbbed painfully as if she had just been kicked by a horse, but she no longer had the strength to even express her pain.

Max drooped against the young man's back like a rag doll, concentrating all her attention on her heavy breathing. Everything around her felt as if it was going further and further away from her; she could no longer tell if her eyes were open or closed.

"! A troll has seen us!"

Max heard Yulysion's urgent screams in the blurred background, and her eyelids trembled. Then, the sound of a terrifying growl resounded in the dark, chasing after them fiercely. Soon, it was followed by the heavy sound of steel weapons clanging.

"Keep running!"

Yulysion yelled fiercely. His screams and the roaring of the monster continued as well as the sound of steel clanging. She broke in cold sweats as she felt the pounding of heavy steps on the ground. Garrow jumped down the steep incline like he was plummeting to dodge the monster who was chasing them. At the pressure of their situation, Max lost her consciousness momentarily.

She was almost completely engulfed in her unconsciousness that she barely managed to open her eyes when she felt someone touch her face. Their surroundings are now completely veiled in darkness that there was no seeing even an inch ahead. She then heard Yulysion's breathless voice.

"Please hold on to your senses. If you lose your consciousness, your body's temperature will drop even more."

He said in an urgent voice as he wrapped a cloak around her body. His arm that was wrapped tightly around her side hurt like she was about to die but she didn't utter a complain and merely nodded her head.

The boy was taking refuge behind a rock to catch his breath, holding her in his arms and trying everything to warm her with the heat of his body. When he realized that her consciousness had somewhat returned, they began to flee down the mountain again.

Max was in and out of consciousness the entire way. It felt like an eternity had passed by her as the boys continued weaving through the pitch-black forest. The rhythm of their footsteps, panting breaths, and the chill in her bones was all that she could sense.

They didn't go far away from Ethylene but the journey back felt endless. As she pondered on that thought, she sensed a light coming from a distance. She felt Yulysion let out a deep sigh of relief from his chest.

"The cavalry has returned! They must have gotten the message and came back in a hurry!"

Yulysion leaped out of the trees and yelled to the top of his lungs.

"A troll is chasing us! Please protect us."

"Are you deserters?"

The voice that questioned them was so calm and composed that it did not suit their dire situation. Max thought it sounded familiar, but she couldn't recall whose it was. With Max still on his back, Yulysion ran in front of the troops and knelt on one knee.

"We are the apprentices of the Remdragon Knights. Lady Calypse sustained serious injuries while traversing the mountains. Please, help us!"

Max heard Garrow's desperate pleas and forced herself to open her eyes, just barely. The blurred image of knights on their horses holding torches on one hand came into view. The leading knight descended from his steed and approached them, his armor rattling with each step.

"We are about to head to battle. I can only cast a mere first aid healing."

"Please, cast it on her! The lady has lost so much blood."

"... Fine. I'll cast my divine healing."

The man knelt in front of her and soon, Max felt that familiar healing energy coursing through her body, returning some of her lost strength.

Her eyes finally managed to focus slightly, and she saw a cold face, with its icy intensity and a silvery light surrounding him. Max caught a glimpse of the knight's green eyes and tan hair, and realized it was the Commander of the Holy Knights. She slowly closed her eyes as a sense of relief ran through her entire body.

If this man is here, that meant that the allied forces had returned sooner than anticipated.

They will live. Unable to fight the intense fatigue caused by her pain, Max released the last chain of consciousness she had been holding and allowed herself to be swallowed into the abyss of sleep.

She heard a mournful weeping echoing in her ears. Max slowly lifted her heavy eyelids open. She was met with confusion as the sand-colored ceiling of the barracks came hazily into view. Perhaps, everything that had occurred was a nightmare. She couldn't come to her senses and blinked her stiff eyes, then the sound of crying grew even louder.

Max let out a sigh and turned her head. At the foot of the bed was a woman clad in black, weeping grievously on her knees as she clutched her loose hair. Max immediately burst into a scream at the frightening sight in front of her. Then, the woman's figure crumbled into black ashes.

"What happened?!"

Max's eyes turned to the man who had just burst into the barracks in surprise. It was Elliot Caron who went to the battle front with Riftan. The knight stood tall in his knight's uniform as he looked at her in utter shock, then ran out of the barracks as fast as he entered.

"Wizard! Lady Calypse is awake!"

Max sighed and her shoulders shrugged along with her breath. Realizing that she did not feel any pain, she turned to look at her shoulder. Her arm, which was hideously displaced earlier, appeared completely fine.

She touched her shoulder carefully. It was like it had been a lie that it was dislocated. Did someone fix it? Just when she was pondering, Ruth came rushing into the barrack.

"You're finally awake. How are you feeling?"

When she saw his face, the tension on her shoulders completely went away. From the looks of things, she was sure she was back to Ethylene. A sigh escaped her mouth, but her throat was so dry that no sound came out when she tried to speak.

Realizing this, Ruth walked over to the bed and brought a glass of water to her lips.

Max sat up a bit and took a sip of water. The cool liquid slid down her throat and into her empty stomach, gradually clearing her consciousness coming back little by little.

She turned and looked at Ruth and Elliot with shaky eyes and opened her mouth. Her voice was thin and weak.

"The mo-monsters... what..."

"Thanks to the lady who brought down the rock from the cliff, it sealed the entrance and everyone survived safely. The monsters trapped between the rock and the castle fates were subdued by the Ethylene's forces. The remaining monsters that survived the

landslide were repelled by the Allied Forces that arrived. All the other monsters are being fiercely hunted down by the Allied Forces as well.”

Ruth put the water down next to the table and pulled up a chair to sit next to her. For some reason, despite the castle being safely defended, Ruth’s complexion paled and this made Max get anxious. Max belatedly recalled the banshee crying at the foot of her bed a while ago and her spine chilled.

“Wa-was someone...hurt? Yulysion...and Ga-Garrow...where...”

“They are both safe. They got hurt fighting monsters but have since recovered.” Ruth replied in a calm tone.

“We were lucky. The Holy Knights were the first to receive the message and their cavalry sped back in a hurry.”

“Ri-Riftan...”

Ruth’s face instantly hardened at the mention of that name. He covered and rubbed his mouth and spoke like he was hesitant and troubled.

“The Remdragon Knights who were out at the front also returned immediately. The moment Lord Calypse arrived, he ran straight to you. Don’t you remember?”

Max searched through her darkened memories but as if clouded by mist, her head throbbed but nothing came to mind. She shook her head slowly and Ruth sighed.

“Just as I expected. The lady was unconscious for a whole week. When you arrived, you had one foot in the grave. You suffered from two broken ribs, your whole body was covered in bruises and your left shoulder was completely dislocated, and your mana was completely depleted...”

As he spoke, Max noticed that Ruth grew more and more gloomy, and suddenly he stopped speaking. He rubbed his forehead roughly and spoke in a low voice.

“If it had been even a moment late, it would have been a huge disaster. Lord Calypse had completely gone half-insane.”

“I’m so-sorry....I just...”

Max turned blue and weak at the thought. Just imagining Riftan’s reaction to her maimed state made her heart clench painfully. Seeing her ashen face, Ruth shook his head weakly.



“I am not blaming you. If the lady did not break the rock from the cliff, the remaining people in Ethylene Castle would have been completely slaughtered by now. Rather, I should be extending my thanks.”

But contrary to his words, his expression was distorted by anguish. Ruth seemed like he had more to say as he looked at her, but he just sighed and shook his head.

“I think that’s more than enough conversation for someone who has just gained consciousness. I will go and prepare some porridge for you, don’t think about anything and get more rest. I’ve been casting healing and recovery magic on you endlessly but since you haven’t been able to eat anything in a week, you won’t have much strength.”

“Where... is Ri-Riftan now...”

Ruth’s shoulders tensed at her question. He turned and looked at her with a dark, sunken gaze and answered her dryly.

“He went to attend a meeting for a while. He’ll be back soon.”

Max swallowed dryly. She was afraid of how he would react.

Out of habit, she rummaged in her pocket for the coin Riftan had left her, but soon realized that someone had changed her into new clothes. Her fingers fiddled anxiously.

Ruth looked at her worried expression and muttered under his breath.

“I’ve known Lord Calypse for a long time, all those years, I have never seen him lose himself like this. He was completely out of his mind.”

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She wondered just how in the world did Riftan react that the blunt wizard with nerves of steel had behaved in such fear. Max clenched the sheets, her expression evidently anxious. Seeing her face, Ruth was quick to add to his words to

“Don’t worry about it. The lady contributed enormously to this war. If Lord Calypse loses his temper, all the people in Ethylene will run to stop him. Whatever happens, I’ll take your side. We’ve had our share of history, so the lord probably won’t kill me.” Max’s eyes widened and Ruth scratched the back of his head and spoke awkwardly. “Come to think of it, I haven’t been able to properly express my gratitude yet. I survived and I am alive right now because of the lady. Thank you.”

Surprised by the sincerity, Max hurriedly waved her hand. “N-not at all. I’m glad... that e-everyone’s is safe. “

Suddenly, a sad smile appeared on Ruth’s lips, but before she could ask anything further, the wizard went out of the tent. Although the conversation was brief, Max felt exhausted. It had to be true that she was unconscious for a whole week: all of her wounds seem to have healed, but her limbs felt tired, and her head felt heavy. She stared up at the ceiling with sunken eyes, then tried to sit up when suddenly, she heard more footsteps rushing towards the tent and two priestesses came rushing into the tent.

“M’lady!”

Max smiled heartily as she saw the faces of Idcilla and Selena. Seeing that they were both alive and well, Max let out a sigh of relief. Idcilla immediately ran over to her and tucked a thick pillow behind her to ease the pressure on her back.

“You shouldn’t be getting up all by yourself just yet. What are you going to do if you fall?”

“I was ju-just... trying to sit up.”

“If you need anything, call someone for help. You just woke up, so you shouldn’t be moving on your own for a while.”

The girl scolded her incessantly and pulled the blanket up to her chin. Selena walked over to her and set a tray by the head of the bed. “I made some light porridge with some herbs to help you regain some of your strength.”

“Th-thank you.”

Max took the spoon and looked at the two girls. Max was concerned that something bad had happened to them while she escaped in the middle of the chaos, but fortunately they seemed to have survived and hidden well from the monster army. Her expression was bright, thinking that everything was well, but suddenly a thought crossed her mind and her face hardened as she recalled the battle. She began to wonder what had

happened to everyone else. Although Ruth informed her, she did not hear of any details. No matter what the result was, a full-scale invasion still took place. There must have been a massive number of casualties.

“What’s the situation... in the i-infirmary?”

“The number of wounded has increased by a lot, but the wizard who came to the frontlines with the Allied Forces has returned to help us and now the situation has gone stable.”

Idcilla poured porridge into the bowl and gave her a stern look. “The lady must focus on taking care of her health. We will take care of the work in the infirmary, so don’t worry about anything.”

Max took the steaming bowl and looked around. She wanted to probe for more details, if everyone was really fine, or if any of the Remdragon Knights were injured, but seeing how busy everything was, she didn’t want to snoop and be a nuisance. She blew on her porridge and slowly took a sip. She ate her food little by little and when she finished, Idcilla placed a partition to surround her bed.

She then carefully helped her clean, wiping her face, hand, feet, and back with a wet towel. Max was a little embarrassed but didn’t refuse. She had done this hundreds of times for her patients, but it felt a little strange to be on the other end of care.

“C-come to think of it... who changed my clothes...”

””” ”

“I was the one who changed your clothes. The priestesses also took turns looking after you.” Selena replied as she pulled out a new change of clothes and dressed her.

Even the minute movements required to dress drained her stamina. Once they finished, Max collapsed back onto the pillows. She nervously opened her mouth to ask.

“Perhaps... d-did you see a small shekel in my clothes? It’s made of copper...there’s a shekel in my robes...”

“A shekel?”

Selena’s head tilted to one side and Max felt a dark heavy cloud form in her chest. She must have dropped it somewhere while she was frantically running away. She fell and rolled on the ground countless times. It was a cherished memory that Riftan had kept since he was a child, and her mouth went dry at the thought of losing something so precious to her husband.

“Can you check my c-clothes? My hu-husband gave it to me. It’s an item he gave to me... for good fo-fortune...”

At her request, Selena’s face grew visibly muddled. “The clothes were probably already burned in the incinerator. They were so soiled...”

Selena’s words grew quieter, but seeing the expression on Max’s face, Idcilla tried to turn the conversation around.

“Ahh, I’ve been so distracted lately. I think I placed it somewhere and completely forgot about it. I’ll go get it now.”

“I-I didn’t mean to bu-burden...”

“Of course not! No problem at all...”

The girl’s voice slightly cracked, and she coughed quickly to cover up her lies, then rushed to get Selena out of the shed with the wet towels, the basin, and the empty tray in hand. Max took a few more sips of the porridge and went back to sleep. After a while, Idcilla returned, and Max awoke to the sound of her approaching footsteps. She looked at the girl with concern and anticipation, and Idcilla smiled widely as she held up the ashen copper shekel with its edges burnt.

“The soldiers found it in the ashes of the incinerator. I washed it thoroughly with water to clean it off but the soot just won’t come off.”

Max quickly accepted the coin gratefully. She felt both relief and regret to have it back. “I didn’t know... it would be that much of a t-trouble to find this. You must be occupied, busy taking care of the pa-patients... I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize! It was no problem at all. When everyone heard that Lady Calypse lost something precious, everyone fought in front of the incinerator to find it.” The girl shrugged like the task was no big deal. “Everyone is very grateful to the lady. If you had asked them to rake across the mountains to search for something, they would have done that without hesitation.”

Max ran her fingers over the rough surface of the coin with a darkened face as she heard everyone’s devotion to her. She felt a complex mix of feelings: after all she had still escaped, leaving everyone else behind, to save her own life. Max couldn’t meet Idcilla’s admiring eyes and she didn’t dare to tell the truth either. She was afraid that if she confessed what really happened, they would turn cold on her.

“C-Could you pass my thanks... to those who helped find it...?”

“I’ll make sure to pass it to them. Now lie down and rest. I’ll bring more porridge later. If you need anything else, ring this bell here.”

Idcilla explained enthusiastically, as if happy to be used as a servant, then slipped out of the tent again. Max leaned back on her bed and fiddled with the coin in her hand. The small piece of copper was very distorted now compared to when Riftan first handed it over to her. One side of the coin was completely burnt black. She tried to scrape off some of the ashes with her nails, but eventually, she succumbed to fatigue and fell back to sleep again.

As Max wandered through her hazy consciousness, she felt something touch her cheek and her eyes flew open. Riftan was at her side. His face, indecipherable, as if he were wearing a mask. Instantly, the groggy remnants of sleep fled from Max, and she tried to get up as she gazed into his eyes anxiously. Riftan's expression was identical to that of when they met at Croix Castle. The Remdragon Knight insignia embroidered on his deep blue cloak and dark gray armor evoked a terrifyingly gloomy atmosphere. His rigid eyes, his tense face, and his cold gaze... a ruthless, cold gentleman that made her fearful was gazing down at her. The stillness around her felt chilling.

Without saying a word, and without a hint of anger or concern, he gazed at her as she pushed the tangled hair away from her forehead. Then, he looked down at her hand and Max blushed when she realized he was looking at the coin he had given her.

"I'm so-sorry. It was something precious to you... and I ru-ruined it.."

A spark of anger ignited in Riftan's black orbs. Max withdrew when she felt his pent-up emotions on the brink of implosion, but instead of yelling with anger, he simply snatched the coin out of her hand with a ghastly blank expression, then casually tossed it to the ground. The coin rattled and rolled into a corner of the barrack with a rattle. Riftan stared at it, then muttered in a hoarse voice.

"There's no use to that..." Max paled as she looked at him. Riftan continued to look at the ground with an eerily calm face. "In two days, Princess Agnes will lead the Royal Knights back to Drakium. You will return with them and go to the royal castle."

"B-But... the war is still going on..."

"The tide has turned. The commander of the monster army was hit by a rock from the landslide and died." One corner of his mouth lifted slightly into a scornful look. "A pathetic, futile death for a monster that led an invasion of this magnitude."

Riftan seemed unable to accept that the monster had met its death so easily, but he continued to speak in a blunt tone as if he was suppressing his seething emotions. "The Royal Knights of Livadon, Holy Knights of Osyria and some reinforcements from Whedon and Balto will stay and that's more than enough to subdue the remaining monsters. We will manage to monitor the situation for the next two days, and Princess Agnes will return with the Royal Knights of Whedon to Drakium. You will return with them. The princess promised to give you the utmost protection."

“Th-then... What about you, Riftan? The Remdragon Knight..”

“Some of the Remdragon Knights will go. Uslin and Elliot have volunteered to accompany you.”

Riftan rubbed his mouth slightly, barely turned to look at her. His eyes were emotionless as if they were covered with a black veil. “Grand Duke Aren said will grant a carriage. Therefore, the journey back will not be too difficult for you.”

“Ri-Riftan... are you staying here?”

He didn't answer, but his silence was more than enough to be an answer. Max bit her lip anxiously then gathered all her courage and opened her mouth to speak again.

“T-Then I'll stay too...”

“Leave!”

At his sudden fierce shout, Max winced, and her shoulders hunched. Riftan's large body trembled, as if he could no longer control himself. His body shook violently, and he covered his face with his hand.

“Please, go... leave this place, please...”

He spoke in a choked voice and staggered just like a strong wall on the brink of collapse. Seeing him like this, Max reached out to him and opened her mouth vaguely, but Riftan stepped back as if she had aimed a dagger at him. She looked up at his contorted face.

“No more... I can't bear to have you here anymore. I'm begging you. Leave, please.”

It would have been a hundred times better for him to be furious and unleash his anger at her than this. Max felt her heart break into pieces, and the eyes looking at her were so shattered and beaten as it closed slowly. Seeing his head fall so downcast and helpless, Max was left speechless.

Two days passed and reports came in about all the monsters being driven north. Immediately, the troops, including Whedon's Royal Knights, prepared to return home. Some of the Holy Knights of Osyria and Royal Knights of Livadon were called to accompany the journey of those permanently disabled due to the extent of their injuries who were to be transported back to the capital. Furthermore, two high priests and several priestesses were to accompany them. The war was not over yet, and Max had to wonder if it would be okay for so many people to return home.

“The elite knights who shall remain are more than enough to defeat the remaining monsters. While Maximillian was unconscious, the Remdragon Knight relentlessly

pursued the retreating army of trolls and destroyed them. Seeing that, Balto's army felt a burning competition and went after the trolls as well. Almost half of the troll army was annihilated just within a week."

Princess Agnes explained as she laid her down on the prepared sheets in the large, luxurious carriage. Max looked into her azure-colored eyes with a worried expression. What was in her thoughts was that before the invasion happened, all of them believed that all of the monsters were being driven to the north and yet, suddenly, a huge army of monsters emerged out of nowhere and attacked Ethylene. Agnes cast a bitter laugh as if he read Max's thoughts.

"The wizards did a search around the landslide. Shockingly, they discovered a secret labyrinth hidden under the walls. It seems that the monsters were hiding in there the entire time."

"Under the rock walls?" Max asked in a stunned voice and Agnes nodded.

"The ones who were living in Ethylene seemed unaware of its existence, so the labyrinth must have been made back in the ancient times. The monsters used it as a secret base and hid in there."

An eerie chill broke out throughout her body. That only meant that all this time, thousands of monsters were right under their noses. They were blind, their situation could not be worse than being under a lamp where it was dark. Seeing Max in rumination, Princess Agnes also frowned and spoke sternly.

"When the allied forces recaptured Ethylene, a total of 2000 monsters hid into the labyrinth, bidding for the right moment to attack." Her mouth twisted into a disdainful smile. "The Allied Forces have completely fallen into the monsters' trap. We have underestimated the monsters' intelligence too much."

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## Under The Oak Tree· 230

"Will everything... be okay no-now?"

“The commander of the monster army who leads devices and their tactics is gone. The coalition of the monster army has fallen to the ground. Although there is still a considerable number of trolls encamped in the north, sooner or later, they too will meet their end.”

Despite the promising sound of the princess' words, the concern and apprehension did not disappear from Max's face.

“It seems as if you have lost confidence in the allied forces.”

“It's not that I have lost co-confidence in them...”

Max muttered but hearing the hesitation in her tone, the princess couldn't help but give her a bitter smile.

“Don't worry. The honor and pride of the allied forces have taken a devastating blow because the monsters have outwitted them that they are now more vigilant than ever. And seeing the Remdragon knights in their fury, Balto's forces have stayed out of trouble as well.” The princess then wrinkled her nose. “Well, it figures, you'd have to be a lunatic to dare get on Riftan's nerves right now. Even during the dragon subjugation, he wasn't as riled as he is now...”

Max clamped her mouth shut, reached into her pocket, and touched the shekel anxiously with her fingers. As soon as Riftan left, Max went and picked it up from the corner where he threw it. As she recalled Riftan disposing of something he had kept for more than a decade with an undecipherable expression on his face, the corner of her heart tightened. Agnes, seeing Max sink into depression, quickly lit up the atmosphere with a joyous beam.

“Let's stop talking about wars now. Just focus on recovering your health. Maximillian pushed her body to the limit, you should rest now.”

“Thank you... for taking care of me to this extent.”

“Don't mention it.”

The princess gave her a warm smile and tucked her in. Max blushed, embarrassed for being treated like a terminally ill patient. There were men there who had suffered much more serious injuries. Compared to those who lost their limbs and are now disabled for life, suffering a shoulder dislocation and some broken ribs paled in comparison. However, her strength was returning at a snail's pace. All of her wounds had gone thanks to healing magic, although she received recovery magic, she was still tired and lacking in energy as a result of completely depleting her mana.

Feeling like a dry well, Max rubbed her sore, dizzy head.



“We are ready to depart!”

A loud voice called out from outside the carriage after a moment. Princess Agnes left the carriage and went out for one last inspection before returning. Soon, the trumpets sounded to signal their departure. With the princess' help, Max sat up and looked out the window, hoping to see Riftan, but he was not in sight. She bit her lip anxiously and wondered if he wouldn't even bid her goodbye. Her heart filled with anxiety and disappointment.

It was not unreasonable for him to be so outraged after she broke her promise not to be reckless and got seriously injured. However, if she hadn't done what she did, Ethylene would have been invaded by the monsters. And in the end, didn't she come out generally fine as well?

She thought to herself, 'wounds can be solved with healing magic... so isn't it alright for me to get a little hurt?'

Max's face suddenly clouded as she remembered the pain that flashed in Riftan's eyes that she felt guilty of her thoughts. She was then overwhelmed in a mixed feeling of confusion and discouragement and her shoulders dropped. At that moment, Max saw someone running to the edge of the carriage. Looking out, her eyes widened. Yulysion exclaimed his words as he followed closely beside the slow-moving carriage.

””” ”

“M'lady, I wanted to sincerely apologize before you left. I really am deeply sorry that I wasn't able to protect you properly.”

Surprised by the unexpected apology, Max quickly waved her hands towards the boy. “T-That's not true. If it weren't for the protection of Yulysion and Garrow...I wouldn't be here right now. If it weren't for the two of you, there would have been a bigger problem.”

“M'lady...”

The boy bit his trembling lips and his eyes wrinkled as if he was holding back tears. His purple eyes appeared slightly moist. Max looked at him with concern and tried to encourage him with a bright smile.

“Don't make that face. Soon... I will re-recover. So... you should take care and return safely.”

Yulysion seemed to have more to say, but kept his mouth shut and bowed his head. Max couldn't help but feel guilty seeing the boy like this. He was only seventeen years old. Although he was already a genius swordsman with great potential, he was still a young boy and one who protected her with bravery befitting a true knight. Max wanted to tell him that, to tell him of his incredible bravery and courage, but the carriage sped

up and Max staggered slightly. Yulysion hurriedly chased after the wagon but soon, he also came to a stop and only watched as the carriage moved away.

Max looked out the window and saw his dejected expression slowly turn farther and farther. Soon, the boy's figure got obscured by the crowds. Princess Agnes went over to her and pointed to the window.

"Over there. They have come to see you off."

Max followed the princess' fingertip and saw several priestesses gathered on top of a hill. Idcilla stood in front and waved her handkerchief high in the air. Max gave them a small smile. When she asked Idcilla to return home together, Idcilla rejected her offer and decided to stay and go home with her brother instead. Feeling solemn that this could be their last meeting together, Max waved her hands until the girl was out of sight. Finally, the carriage passed through the gates and Princess Agnes helped her lay back down.

"The southern road is completely blocked, so we will pass through a valley in the north and travel around the wall. The Remdragon Knights will escort us until then. There will be no monsters throughout that journey so you can relax and sleep without worry."

Max closed her eyes, feeling relieved that Riftan would be with her. The next time she opened her eyes in the rattling carriage, Princess Agnes shook her shoulder gently to wake her up. She then helped her sit and pointed outside the window.

"The Remdragon Knights will no longer be escorting us from hereon. Should I call for Riftan to come say goodbye?"

Max looked out the carriage window with sunken eyes and saw the knights in an organized formation on the tawny-colored field. Riftan, who led the ranks, took off his helmet and held it by his side. She could see his hair swaying against the blowing wind. Max waited for him to steer his horse toward her, but Riftan did not move as he sat still atop his black stallion with an undecipherable gaze. She didn't want to call him when she remembered how he was shaking so painfully in front of her.

She shook her head slowly. "It's a-alright. We've already said our... goodbyes."

The princess looked at her warily, then lowered the curtains and ordered their procession to depart. The carriage shook again, and Max stared silently at his disappearing figure. As they moved away, it felt as if a dark shadow was dimming her heart.

'...will you come soon to take me?'

She looked at him with pleading eyes, but his face remained passive, and Max couldn't read it at all. She clasped the shekel in her hand tightly, wishing that Riftan would

suddenly steer his horse to follow her. For a moment, that expectation swelled but was soon deflated as Riftan stayed still on the field like a stone statue. Max blinked, backed her tears and swallowed the pain that crept up her throat. A gust of cold wind flapped the capes of the Remdragon Knights. She breathed in the wind and realized that autumn had arrived and her most intense, painful summer had come to an end.

The princess' words that all the monsters had been driven north were upheld without exaggeration. Throughout their entire journey to Levan, they did not encounter a single monster. No... perhaps, there was a raid here or there, but Max was completely knocked out the entire trip and didn't notice anything. She slept like a dead man in the carriage the whole trip. She closed her eyes and when she opened them, a day had passed. This routine was repeated every day, but no matter how much she slept, the fatigue did not go away, and she felt as helpless as a newborn infant. Since mana depletion couldn't be cured with magic, she had no choice but to wait for her strength to recover naturally.

For more than ten days of the journey, all she did was eat and sleep. When they reached Levan, she was finally well enough to walk on her own. As soon as she got out of the carriage, she went to see Rem, whom she left in the Great Temple. Having been neglected for nearly two months, Rem raised her hooves in joy at her return. Seeing the horse's overly excited demeanor, Uslin stepped forward and took the reins from her hands.

"She hasn't been out for a run in a while, so she's more agitated. Please don't go near her until she's calmed down a bit."

Max nodded awkwardly and stepped back. Although Uslin no longer looked at her with hostility, she still felt uncomfortable with this cold, stiff Knight. Uslin expertly calmed Rem, who was stomping excitedly, then turned to study her complexion.

"The weather is good today, so we can set sail immediately. Do you have anything you need to pack at the temple?"

"N-Nothing in particular..."

Max wanted to say goodbye to the other Livadon women she befriended during her stay, but she didn't know how to explain that she and Idcilla lied to sneak into the war. Worried about the possible backlash, Max decided to leave without saying a word. They climbed into the carriage again and rode to the harbor, where huge sails embroidered with Whedon's royal insignia awaited. With Elliot's support, she climbed aboard the ship. Princess Agnes stood in the middle of the deck to supervise the soldiers transporting their cargo and ran at once when she saw Max.

"Maximilian! Your face is pale. You could have left your horse to the care of the soldiers. They would have brought it..."

“It’s f-fine. After all, I left her alone for so long... I should at least do this.”

Max lovingly stroked Rem’s mane and the horse whinnied with happiness. She smiled at the affectionate animal before Agnes led her to the stairs located at the center of the ship’s deck.

“Now, come over here. The soldiers and servants will take care of the horses. For now, Maximillian should take her medicines and have a good rest.”

“...I’ve been sleeping all this time.”

Max pouted at being treated like a child and the princess smiled to appease her, speaking in a reassuring tone.

“Maximillian, your mana depletion is not to be taken easily. The mana you depleted is the mana you were born with, in simpler words, you drew mana from your life force and used it. It will take a lot of time for you to fully recover. Right now, you shouldn’t overexert yourself and get a good rest.”

“Please do as the princess suggests. Your complexion doesn’t look good.”

Even Elliot, who was standing silently beside her, chimed in. Max sighed and descended into the cabins with heavy steps. The princess led her to a luxurious cabin fit for a king. Once seated, she drank some porridge and tea made with herbal roots and went to lay down on the bed. Soon, the sound of trumpets signaling their departure echoed throughout the ship. As Max was lying down, she recalled her experiences for the past seasons. Everything felt like a long dream; from her life in Croix Castle, to living in Anatol, and experiencing expeditions...

Since she met Riftan, her life had taken a complete turn. It was full of passion and adventure every day.

‘Ever since I met him, I have never felt more alive...’ she mused, but belatedly remembered the pain in his eyes that flashed in her mind. She quickly pushed the image away, not wanting to think about it. She was exhausted. These past few days, she felt as if she had aged by decades. While listening to the gentle, calm waves, Max slowly fell asleep again.

Drakium, the capital of Whedon, was located in the extreme north of the continent. Compared to Anatol, which was situated at the southern tip of Whedon, the capital was much closer to the port, and they were able to reach the gates of the capital within five days after the ship sailed. Max looked out of the window and gazed at the colors around the autumn leaf strewn city. Indeed, it was a city that Rosetta would adore as she was fond of colorful scenery.

After passing through the magnificent gates, wide roads, large enough to accommodate eight carriages side by side, elaborate, evenly built stone buildings, Princess Agnes pointed out the window.

“That is the theater, and there is the weapons shop. That arena is for hosting jousts...”, she explained the attractions in Drachium one by one.

Max nodded absently. The capital was splendid and magnificent, but strangely, she did not feel interested at all.

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