
SUJI KIM
Under the Oak Tree
the novel
VOLUME ONE



About the Author



Suji Kim is the author of *Under the Oak Tree*. Her novel won the Romance Webnovel Award from South Korean ebook platform RIDI, and its webtoon adaptation has earned global acclaim. Kim's other published works include *Twilight Poem* and *There Is a Mouse in My House*.

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UNDER THE OAK TREE

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A Note From Suji Kim



To my readers,

This story grapples with many difficult and complex themes. The content includes depictions of physical and mental abuse as well as themes of trauma and emotional distress experienced by the characters. Certain scenes may be disturbing and triggering for some readers; reader discretion is advised. The story also contains explicit sexual content that may not be suitable for all audiences.

Please approach this content with care and seek support if needed. For any readers who see themselves in this tale, my hope is that it provides you with comfort, courage, and the knowledge that you are not alone.

Suji Kim


Rovideu Continent
Pamela Plateau
Erh Lene Castle
Balto
Sykan
Kerbin Castle
Hrex
Livadon
Osiriya
Legan
Chrysanth River
Balbourne
Dristan
Prochium
Wedon
Pachy of Cregan
Pearl
Hermit
Lesyrian Ocean
N
E
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W

CHAPTER 1



MAXIMILIAN CALYPSE PACED AROUND THE drawing room.

She was so nervous that she did not realize she was biting her fingernails—not until the Duke of Croyso entered the room. The clack of his heavy cane shattered the silence, and she rushed to hide her hands behind her back.

"Have I not told you time and again to cease that *revolting* habit of yours?"

The duke's words were like a biting chill, and Maxi fixed her eyes on her feet.

"F-Forgive me, Father …"

The duke clicked his tongue disapprovingly. "You'd best not embarrass me, girl. You have been far more fortunate than you deserve. Should your repulsive behavior besmirch our family name, know that I will not forgive you."

A cold sweat formed on Maxi's back, and an icy bead trickled down her skin. She opened her mouth to try to form a smooth reply, but her spine stiffened with fear, choking her words.

"I-I w-w-w—I shall … I shall d-d-do as you c-command, F-Father. W-When he c-c-c-comes, I w-w-w …"

Maxi did not have to raise her head to know that her father was grimacing at her. Disgust shadowed his face whenever he heard her speak. She tried to remain calm, even as she scrambled for words.

"I-I … I w-will p-persuade him t-t-t … t-to stay i-in this m-m-marriage …"

"Enough!" The duke rapped his cane on the floor. "Is it too much to ask that you speak normally for a day? For even just an hour? Can you think of any man who would want a stuttering wife?!"

"I … I …"

"As you are well aware, Riftan Calypse is no longer just a lowborn knight! He is now revered as one of the best swordmasters on the entire continent, as the hero who defeated the Red Dragon, Sektor! He need only ask, and the church would rush to annul this marriage!"

The duke paused to catch his breath. He pressed a palm to his temple, as if the mere thought of divorce scandalized him.

"I will *not* allow the eldest Croyso daughter to be divorced by a lowborn knight! I will *not* stand idly by while my half-wit daughter ruins the reputation of this house!"

Maxi bit her lip, unspoken words burning her throat like bile. *It's not my fault,* she wanted to say. Neither she nor Riftan had ever expressed a desire to be wed. It was her father and her father alone who had willed the marriage to happen.

The duke continued his tirade, lips snarled in rebuke. "If only you were half as beautiful as Rosetta … No, if only you were *normal*! Then I would not have to grovel at that lowborn's feet, to humor his every whim!"

Maxi's half-sister, Rosetta, was like a rose in full bloom. At the mention of her, what little defiance Maxi had mustered slipped from her grasp like water through her fingers. She had turned deathly pale, but her father was relentless.

"King Reuben may wish to make Riftan Calypse his son-in-law, but there is nothing he can do if Calypse refuses! If only you had managed to win your husband's affection, you would not be facing a divorce! You have no one to blame but yourself!"

"B-But he … he left for the c-campaign the day after … after the w-wedding …."

Maxi had hardly had a chance to talk to Riftan, let alone win his affection! But just as she was about to give voice to that protest, her vision flashed white as her father slammed his cane into her side.

The pain was so severe that she curled over, gasping for breath and unable to scream.

"How dare you talk back to me?!" the duke demanded. "Just thinking about your wretched impediment is enough to infuriate me!"

Maxi nodded in desperate submission, lest he strike her again. The duke's lips twitched, as if he was readying himself to spew forth another stream of vitriol.

A knock at the door saved Maxi. The duke spun to face the sound, and he was addressed by the meek voice of a maidservant.

"Your Grace," she said. "The Remdragon Knights have arrived."

"Show them in!"

Maxi's face flushed with terror, and she finally raised her gaze to meet her father's. The duke hissed through gritted teeth.

"Make it very, very clear to Calypse that the marriage will not be annulled. And a reminder, should you have forgotten—if you bring shame upon our house, you will have a price to pay."

The duke stormed out of the room. When she was sure he was gone, Maxi slumped against a window. She tried to slow her breathing as she waited for the throbbing pain to subside.

The light of the autumn sun streamed in through the window, and Maxi blinked back her tears. Crying would only serve to drag her deeper into the abyss, where her sorrows would consume her.

Maxi clasped her shaking hands together. She had to collect herself. For a noblewoman, divorce was akin to death. Not only would she be ridiculed, but she would also disgrace her entire family. It was an unspeakable dishonor, and a duel was the only path to redemption. But a duel, against Riftan Calypse?

The Duke of Croyso had no sons, and none of his relatives or sworn knights would stand the slightest chance against Riftan. He was a swordmaster who had felled a dragon! Who could possibly match him in combat, let alone best him?

It seemed inevitable that she would tarnish her family name. The duke would never forgive her—it was possible he would even kill her with a timely "accident" before the annulment was complete. Such machinations were not beneath her father.

I must do all I can to prevent something like that ….

But would Riftan Calypse listen to her?

Maxi bit her lip. She was trapped at the edge of a sheer cliff, with no way to safely descend. After all, her marriage had been arranged solely for the convenience of the duke and his knights.

Three years prior, when news spread across the continent that Sektor the Red Dragon had awoken from its slumber, King Elnuima Reuben III called his vassals to arms, to embark on a campaign to subdue the beast. Duke Croyso and his forces were bound by law to participate, but he had found a way to shift his duty to Riftan Calypse by marrying off his daughter.

Maxi shuddered, recalling her wedding day. The air had been thick with thinly veiled insults, whispered among the guests. As a lowborn knight, Riftan had no choice but to obey the duke and appear at the wedding hall. Just how much resentment had he felt? How humiliated must he have been?

That day, Maxi had been terrified of Riftan's expression. He had looked as if he was holding something back.

If I were half as beautiful as Rose, could I have won his heart?

Such thoughts deepened Maxi's torment. Riftan Calypse was a stunning man. Even Rosetta, who often mocked his humble origins, could not help but blush when she saw him dressed in his order's ceremonial attire.

Riftan could have courted any woman he wanted. How could he possibly be attracted to a plain, stuttering woman like her? Especially now that his accomplishments had elevated him from his lowborn status?

Now that he's likely to marry a princess, pleading won't be enough to change his mind.

The night after the wedding was their only night together. Riftan had left for the campaign the following morning, without saying a word, and he never wrote to her once while he was gone. Maxi was not sure if he even saw her as his wife.

She buried her face in her hands, dark thoughts clouding her mind.

"What a sight you are," said a familiar, sullen voice.

Startled, Maxi looked up. A giant of a man glowered at her from the door. She hadn't heard him enter.

"A wife trembling in fear while awaiting her husband's return from mortal peril." Riftan's voice dripped with sarcasm, and he approached her with slow, silent footsteps.

Dressed in silver armor and a navy-blue tunic reminiscent of a monk's robes, Riftan was far more powerfully built—far more intimidating—than Maxi remembered. She held her breath as he drew closer.

"I didn't expect a warm welcome, but do you have to tremble as if I'm carrying the plague?"

His frigid tone snapped Maxi out of her trance. As she realized that she had managed to displease him within mere minutes of their reunion, the blood drained from her face.

"I … I am relieved t-to see you un-unharmed …."

Maxi's voice trailed off. What else could she say? She was not even sure how to address him. Riftan? Too intimate. Sir Riftan? He would surely mock her. Unsettled by his piercing gaze, she took a step back.

Why was he looking at her like that?

Riftan's face hardened further as she retreated from him, until he grabbed her arm and yanked her back. His words came in a threatening whisper. "At least pretend you're happy to see me."

Maxi froze. Their bodies were close. Too close. The potent undertones of leather, horses, and sweat filled her nos trils, and the overwhelming *maleness* of his scent unearthed memories that she had kept buried for the past three years.

A curious heat radiated from his muscular body, and his eyes seemed to pierce straight through to her mind. On *that* day, he had looked at her the same way, like he was a hound ready to gorge on fresh meat.

Maxi ducked her head, ripping her gaze away. Her face was burning. There was no stopping the torrent of memories that now flooded her mind. Memories of that night washed over her, engulfing her, the sensations as vivid as yesterday.

"TAKE OFF YOUR CLOTHES."

Maxi regarded her new husband with apprehension. She was perplexed. When the wedding feast came to its end, her nursemaid had led her by the hand to the bridal chamber. After her maidservants bathed her, they left her alone, and she was sitting on the bed when he entered the room.

Unable to gauge his intentions, Maxi just stared at him, wide-eyed. She could not comprehend why the man who had ignored her during the ceremony would make such a sudden demand. She was vaguely aware that unspoken things happened between wedded couples in the privacy of their bedrooms, but no one had ever told her the details.

Her nursemaid had impressed upon her that she must follow her husband's commands. She was to remain still, no matter what he did. But removing her clothes was *not* one of the commands she'd expected. And she was to obey without question?

Riftan Calypse pulled his tunic over his head, shooting her an impatient look as he stepped closer. "Must I remove them myself?"

Maxi gasped at the sight of him. The muscles in Riftan's body were like cords of steel, and his shoulders were twice as broad as hers. His neck was long and thick, and his chest tapered into a taut, slim waist.

Maxi had heard that Riftan was a giant, even among the knights, but to see him standing before her eyes was overwhelming. Her mouth went dry. A few blows from her father were enough to cause her unbearable pain. Would she survive at all if a man like Riftan decided to strike her?

"You look like you've just seen a monster," said Riftan.

Maxi flinched. His tone was frosty, and he crossed the distance to the bed with a single stride, fixing her with an interrogating stare. Bathed in the warm glow of the fireplace, his body gleamed bronze. It completely filled her vision.

"Do you find me undesirable?"

"I … I, um …"

He leaned over her. Two black eyes, embedded in a nearly flawless face, glinted frighteningly. His mouth, clenched shut, twisted into a

cynical smile. “How could I, a lowly knight, ever please the proud daughter of a duke?”

The contempt in his voice sent a shiver down Maxi’s spine. She was at his mercy. If he wanted to, he had the right to flog her and subject her to the cruelest of punishments. Realizing that she had earned his scorn, she broke into a cold sweat.

“Come. Fulfill your marital duties.”

Maxi wanted to ask what those duties were, but the question never left her lips. She fixed her gaze on his feet as his body cast a dark shadow over her. A long, calloused finger reached down to lift her chin. There was something subtle in Riftan’s gaze, something she could not read.

“A marriage is annulled if it isn’t consummated,” he said. “Do you wish to leave me?”

She trembled uncontrollably. At any moment, she might drown in the dark depths of his eyes, but he only sneered.

“Speak now, if you want me to leave.”

“…”

“I won’t stop once we begin.”

Maxi’s tongue clung to the roof of her mouth. Her father would never forgive her if she let him leave. She had never had any choice in this matter. She squeezed her eyes shut and began to unclasp her belt with shaking fingers.

She feared her father’s retribution far more than what shame she would suffer at the hands of this strange man. Should Maxi fail him here, her father would not stop at a mere beating. He would punish her brutally, and in a matter of days, she would find herself back in this very room, facing a different knight. To her father, she was nothing more than a tool.

Maxi removed her jewelry, piece by piece, and set them next to the bed. A suffocating silence hung between them, punctuated only by the crackle of wood burning in the fireplace. Riftan’s gaze bore into her as she pulled down the straps of her linen dress and removed her arms from the frilly sleeves.

The cold night air lashed at her bare back and shoulders. Not daring to expose herself further, she stopped and clutched the dress

to her bosom. But before she could hesitate further, Riftan knelt on the bed and pulled her dress down.

"W-Wait … Wait!"

The dress slipped off her body before she could stop it. She clutched desperately at her skirt, even as Riftan's impatience grew more palpable.

"Keep your hands away."

"W-Why are you … p-pulling …"

She gazed up at him, her eyes wide with confusion. His face was concealed in shadow, silhouetted against the light, and she couldn't make out his expression. It intensified her fear.

"Do you want me to leave?" Riftan asked. "Make up your mind."

Maxi stifled a sob. She reluctantly lowered her hands and the dress slid to her waist. Riftan pulled it down further and flung it to the floor.

"There's no turning back now." His deep voice chilled Maxi's heart.

As his rough, warm hands caressed her tense body, she pushed him away instinctively—only to end up more firmly in his embrace when he locked his arm around her waist. Skin pressed against skin, and his body exuded an unfamiliar heat. For reasons Maxi could not explain, the heat made her shudder.

"N-Not so c-close …"

He carried on as if he had not heard her stammering plea, and leaned forward to press his lips to her breast. Maxi's eyes widened in shock.

Warm lips, sweeping across soft skin. A shiver coursed through her body at this unfamiliar sensation. As he buried his face in her bosom like a newborn babe, her mind went blank.

"Relax." With his calloused palm, he stroked her back, now paralyzed with fear. His damp breath left goosebumps in its wake.

Rubbing his chin on her soft skin, he slid a hand under the garment that covered her waist. His touch here startled Maxi, and her lips quivered. She had never imagined that a man would one day intrude on *this* region of her body.

"W-What are y-you—"

"Stay still. It will hurt if you don't warm up."

Maxi's legs were caught in a helpless struggle. She had only ever exchanged a few greetings with this man, and now—now, here he was, casually touching her most intimate parts.

"P-P-Please! D-don't …"

She grasped his thick shoulders, pleading with him. It was now his turn to quake and quiver. Her hands burned when she touched his firm, smooth skin, like she had wrapped them around a red-hot iron.

Riftan's lips twitched. But instead of words, Maxi received a rough kiss. He tasted of something savage and untamable. She was still trying to make sense of what was happening when he removed the last piece of clothing from her body. She cried out in protest—but even that was quickly swallowed up in a kiss.

"Damn it …" Riftan let out a series of curses and moans while Maxi gasped for air like a fish out of water. He was encroaching on parts of her that she had never even known she had.

She thrashed her legs, but they were soon weighed down by the bulk of his unyielding body. She was trapped like a helpless animal, caught between the jaws of a wolf.

"Damn it. I can't hold back any longer …" He muttered to himself impatiently, and his fingers entered her deeper and deeper still. Maxi's breath was lodged in her throat. She had long forgotten her maid's instructions about dutifully submitting to her husband's will. Under his touch, her body twitched and jerked, and she gasped helplessly, overcome by unthinkable sensations.

"N-No! D-Don't … *Oh!*" Her struggles and protests were useless. There was no chance of escaping his searing mouth and rough caress. She clutched at the pillow under her head.

She could not believe that something so grotesque was happening to her. Her eyes burned, and her mind twisted and turned, tossed in an impossible storm.

What's happening to me?

After what seemed like a lifetime, Riftan's hand stopped. "This will hurt a little."

Maxi sank into the bed, her limbs hanging limply as she tried to catch her breath. Her body had been so tense that it was now drained of strength. She was no longer capable of struggling.

Riftan undressed completely and wrapped an arm around Maxi's waist, lifting her up. Their warm bodies touched. Only then did Maxi realize that they were both slick with sweat.

His back shone reddish gold in the dim firelight. It reminded her of the time she snuck into a goldsmith's workshop and watched as they cast statues out of molten gold. Was this how it might feel to have bubbling metal poured over her? Her entire body was melting away, as if submerged in a crucible of liquid gold.

"Take a deep breath." Riftan's voice had become so husky that it was hard to decipher his whisper. His lips grazed her earlobe, sending chills down her spine.

Holding on to his sinewy arm, and without thinking, Maxi allowed her legs to open. Riftan promptly paired his hips with hers.

"Ah …!" Maxi cried out, startled.

Before Maxi could grasp what had happened, a dull pain radiated through her lower body. She struggled, terrified of the unfamiliar feeling. Riftan weighed her body down with his own to stop her from breaking free, and he nibbled at her lips. Her breasts pressed flat against his rugged chest as he entered deeper. Close to tears, she scratched at his arms.

"It … It h-hurts …"

"Too tight …"

Droplets of sweat trickled down his neck and dripped onto her face. As she writhed in an attempt to flee, he quivered slightly and secured her waist with both of his hands. A deep line creased his forehead.

"Just … stay still …"

"H-hurts … It hurts …!"

"Don't move, damn it—ugh!"

Riftan's body trembled, and Maxi held her breath as he crushed her in an embrace. As if unable to hold back any longer, he began moving rhythmically. Each thrust produced a sharp pain that drew faint moans from her throat.

Maxi's body rocked like a boat on stormy waters. Her mind sank into miry depths, her knuckles turning white as she gripped the sheets. What was he doing to her?

"Damn …" Riftan released a strangled moan and collapsed over her. His body radiated so much heat that his sweat threatened to turn to steam. Panting, Maxi allowed her gaze to drift to his shoulders. Like hers, they were rising and falling in rapid succession. A strange sense of emptiness enveloped her and, eyelids aflutter, she stared blankly at the ceiling. What had just happened to her?

"Why are you crying?" Riftan asked.

Maxi hadn't realized it, but her cheeks were wet. She tried to cover her face, but a warm tongue slid across her skin, tracing away the tears. He cupped her cheeks so she could not turn away.

"Don't look away from me." Riftan spoke the words through clenched teeth. His dark eyes flickered with intense emotion and the hairs on her nape stood straight. He pelted her tear-streaked face with kiss after kiss.

"You're my wife now," he said between kisses. "There's no turning back, whether you like it or not."

A hand reached into her hair and pulled her lips to his. There was little she could do but allow it to happen. Again, and again …

When Maxi awoke the next day, it was well past noon, and Riftan had already left for the dragon campaign. She learned from her nursemaid that a cleric had come to inspect the blood on the sheets and declare the marriage valid, and that this consummation of marriage was a rite of passage for all newlywed couples.

And that was all that had transpired between her and Riftan back then. Nothing more, nothing less. She had lost her virginity, and he had left for the Lexos Mountains in the duke's stead. It was difficult to believe that they were man and wife—even now, at this moment, as he stood before her returned from war.

Lost for words, Maxi stared silently at Riftan's face, his expression like a storm. Her ears rang with the echoes of her father's voice, threatening her with myriad punishments should Riftan Calypse divorce her. Her lips, however, were sealed shut. What could she possibly say? He was a stranger—her husband in name only.

"For heaven's sake, stop shaking!" Riftan snapped, voice raised.

Maxi flinched and took a step back, but he tightened his grip on her arm and closed the distance between them once again.

"Do you find me that horrendous? Have I come back a monster?"

"I … I …"

He ran a hand through the thick, shaggy hair that covered his eyes and glared at her. Maxi's vision blurred. Far from achieving her goal—to persuade him not to divorce her—she had instead managed to offend him less than five minutes into their reunion. Her lips twitched.

I need to say something. Anything. Please …

"I-I w-was n-n-n-nervous and I-I … I d-d-didn't know w-what t-to say …."

Her cheeks burned red with shame. Tears welled in her eyes, but this wasn't the time to cry. Doing so would only enrage him. She searched desperately for the right words.

"Y-Y … Y-You're n-not a m-m-monster. I-I … I'm just n-n-nervous and w-w-w—can't stop sh-shaking …."

Maxi's tongue was failing her even more than usual, and she could not bring herself to meet Riftan's gaze. It had been hopeless from the start. How could she possibly persuade him when she was hindered by this dreadful impediment?

The burning flush rose from her cheeks to the tips of her ears. She hung her head in shame, overwhelmed by a sense of vulnerability. Perhaps she would be better off keeping her mouth shut. A proper woman would not stutter and shake like a half-wit.

"Damn it all …" Riftan muttered.

She flinched at his quiet cursing. Her father was right. There was not a single man in the world who would desire her as his wife. Asking him to turn down a princess's hand in marriage, in favor of her, would be ludicrous.

Overcome by her helplessness, Maxi's eyes prickled with tears. At that moment, something cold touched her cheek—Riftan had reached out with his gauntleted hand to cup her face.

"Open your mouth."

Unable to grasp his intentions, she gazed numbly into his jet-black eyes, hovering a hairsbreadth from her own. Riftan sighed, as if his patience was being tested yet again. He pushed her chin down and

thrust his soft, wet tongue into her mouth. Shocked, she found herself gripping his arms to steady herself.

Riftan bit his lip and muttered in annoyance. “Should’ve taken off my armor first ….”

It happened so quickly that Maxi had no chance to brace herself. She stood there uneasily, until he pushed her down onto the sofa behind her. With a knee pressed into the side of her thigh, he deftly removed his silver gauntlet.

The long, thick fingers that emerged from the gauntlet tenderly grazed her cheeks. Her hands clutched his tunic, as if they had a mind of their own. Again, Riftan pressed his lips to hers, and he removed the other gauntlet to bury his other hand into her hair and roughly grasp the back of her head.

Riftan’s tongue twisted and tangled with Maxi’s, roving over her teeth. She found it harder and harder to breathe. She shoved at his chest, but he clung more firmly to her.

“Just a little more …”

Her heart skipped a beat at his pleading tone. Warm hands slid over her face and neck, stroking the curve of her back before sliding along her ribs and up to her breasts. When Maxi squirmed in embarrassment, he pulled her in by her waist and laid her down on the sofa. Then, without delay, he pulled up her skirt.

“R-Riftan …!”

This time, she immediately knew what he wanted. Her eyes darted toward the door. How could he do this in the middle of the drawing room? And in broad daylight, no less! Someone could burst in at any moment!

But Riftan didn’t seem to care. He nibbled on the back of her neck, pressing his body insistently against hers. When she felt his hardness between her legs, she cried out in shock. He began to rub against her, slowly, and with each movement, the steel cuisses that covered his powerful thighs brushed up against her, the cold metal raising the hair on her skin.

Unable to bear it any longer, Maxi squeezed her eyes shut, but the intimacy abruptly ended when Riftan sprang up without warning and threw a cloak over her body.

Someone was watching them. A blond man dressed in the same armor as Riftan stood at the door, his eyes wide and mouth agape.

"What are you looking at, you little rat?!" Riftan roared.

Maxi leaped to her feet, startled by Riftan's shout as much as by the man at the door. For a split second, the blond man was taken aback by the intensity of Riftan's ire, but he was soon growling a retort.

"Commander, how could I have known that you'd be *engaged* like this in the drawing room? I assumed you'd hear me approaching right away, as usual. I didn't see the need to knock."

"Get out!"

Riftan's bellow turned Maxi's face white as a sheet. She dreaded what was to come if the blond man left the room, so she sent a pleading look in his direction, but he simply cursed through gritted teeth and turned back toward the door.

"A carriage is waiting for you outside, Commander. You said you didn't want to stay a moment longer than necessary at Croyso Castle."

"Keep it waiting," said Riftan.

The blond man paused, as if struck dumb by Riftan's words. Then, he scowled and let out an exasperated sigh. "Please be quick, Commander."

With that, he shot a displeased look at Maxi before exiting the room, the door slamming shut behind him.

Maxi searched Riftan's face for signs of anger as he scratched the back of his head. When his eyes slid away from the door and back to her, Maxi withered under the intensity of his stare.

Riftan scoffed. "I won't pounce on you again, so there's no need to tremble like that. Hell, I wasn't planning to jump on you here at all."

She dared not raise her head. Instead, she stared at her clasped hands, as if trying to bore a hole through them with her gaze.

Riftan rose from the sofa and straightened out his di sheveled clothes. "You heard him, didn't you? A carriage is waiting. It's leaving soon."

Maxi's blood froze. He had tried to ravish her only moments ago, and now he spoke of leaving? She hadn't managed to convey even a single coherent thought to him, let alone *persuade* him.

"B-But …" In her panic, Maxi clutched at his tunic, oblivious to how rumpled her own clothes had become. "C-Could we t-t-talk for a m-moment …?"

"There's no time to lose," said Riftan. "Have a servant pack your things. We'll talk in the carriage."

Maxi had been shaking with fear, but now she was confused. She hesitantly repeated his words. "My … My th-things?"

"Yes. Your things. Do you not have things to bring with you?"

She blinked, still not understanding. Riftan sighed heavily and deftly adjusted her clothes back into some semblance of propriety before calling to the maidservant waiting just outside to pack Maxi's bags.

Despite all the evidence unfolding before her, Maxi could not believe that Riftan truly intended to take her with him.

"Pack only what you need. We can't dally for too long."

"Th-There's n-not much to t-take. J-Just a few …"

"Good. We'll leave now, then. Anything you might need, you can find at my estate."

Riftan sent the maidservant away and led Maxi out of the drawing room. She almost had to run to keep up with his massive strides. Everything was moving so quickly that her thoughts could not keep up.

"Your … Y-Your estate …?"

"What? Does it amaze you that a lowly knight would have land of his own?" He glowered at her over his shoulder, his voice brimming with scorn. "King Reuben bestowed an estate upon me when I became a knight, along with a castle. A castle that should have become your home after our wedding."

Maxi looked up at him, bewildered. A castle that should have become her home?

Riftan seemed uninterested in explaining further. He was already marching down the staircase and into the expansive courtyard beyond. Next to the colossal fountain stood an extravagant carriage

pulled by four horses. An entourage of fifteen or so knights stood guard around it. Their boisterous voices died down when Riftan and Maxi approached. Some of the men threw furtive glances at Maxi, who followed awkwardly behind Riftan. Her cheeks burned under their curious gazes.

"What are you waiting for?" Riftan asked her. "Get in the carriage."

"B-But … F-F-Father is w-waiting for … for me. I n-need his p-p-permission …."

Riftan's face hardened when she mentioned the duke. Tightening his grip on her arm, he dragged her toward the carriage.

"You are my wife. Why must I seek anyone's permission to take you with me? Your father has no right to interfere."

With that, he lifted her up and placed her in the carriage, where she sat in mute astonishment. "*My wife.*" Jumbled thoughts filled her head over those two words. Could this mean Riftan did not intend to divorce her?

"Go!" Riftan shouted out the carriage window as he sat down across from Maxi.

The carriage rattled to a start, and soon Croyso Castle shrank into the distance. It was unbelievable. Maxi had imagined dozens of different scenarios as she prepared for their reunion. This was not even close to being one of them.

Why is he taking me with him?

She stared, dumbfounded, at her husband. He was calmly taking in the passing scenery with one arm draped over the windowsill. Was this really the same man who had showered her with blistering remarks and kisses before marching out of Croyso Castle, dragging her along with him?

Maxi recalled her father's words: *King Reuben has offered him the princess's hand in marriage. He will not let such an opportunity slip by!*

Duke Croyso was the one who had drilled those words into Maxi's head, but he was not alone in assuming that Riftan would marry Princess Agnes. She was a renowned sorceress who had fought alongside Riftan in the campaign against the Red Dragon. Two warriors falling in love after sharing the thrill of the battlefield was

an irresistible source of inspiration for the bards, and they wasted no time in composing ballads of the romantic tale and performing them throughout the city. Everyone had anticipated a royal wedding after the princess's and the knight's victorious return.

Maxi herself thought a divorce was inevitable. Even the cleric who officiated her marriage to Riftan would have agreed. Everyone knew that Duke Croyso had strong-armed Riftan into marrying her, and Riftan had every right to demand a divorce.

So why …?

Maxi stole a glance at Riftan's finely sculpted features. Tousled hair crowned his chiseled forehead, and it rippled in the gentle breeze that blew in through the window. His lus trous, golden-brown skin lent him an exotic appearance. And though the arduous campaign had etched a forbidding edge into his naturally stony face, his handsomeness hadn't eroded in the slightest.

Maxi had never seen Princess Agnes in person. Rumor had it that the princess was remarkably beautiful, with golden hair and deep blue eyes. If Riftan and the princess stood together, they would probably look like a work of art.

She turned to her reflection in the carriage window. A broad, round forehead. A small, low-bridged nose with a dusting of brown freckles. Large, round eyes that seemed to throw her features off balance. Wavy red hair twisted into a single braid, stray strands sticking out like pieces of straw. Maxi could only think the worst of herself.

It was impossible that Riftan really wanted her as his wife. There had to be a catch. A secret scheme, perhaps. What was he planning to do with her?

As if he sensed her misgivings, Riftan whipped his head around to look at her. Shrinking before his piercing gaze, Maxi averted her eyes. She must have done something to displease him, for he began to curse.

"Am I so unbearably repulsive? At least try to hide your disgust! You're stuck with my company whether you like it or not. I have no intention of leaving this carriage."

"Y-You aren't r-repulsive. I … I n-never s-said …"

"Then do something about that dreadful look."

Maxi's hands flew up to cover her face. It was true that she felt uncomfortable, and it was true that his presence scared her. But she hadn't realized that her expression so openly betrayed her feelings. Knowing that she had angered him, she struggled for the remedy. Just what kind of expression should she wear?

Riftan sighed. "You must realize that we're not like other married couples."

Cold sweat beaded on Maxi's forehead.

"I don't know much about you," he continued. "And you don't know much about me. But you *are* my wife, and I'm to spend the rest of my days with you. How can I treat you as my wife if my mere presence makes you tremble like a leaf in the wind?"

"The … The rest of y-your d-days … w-with m-m-me?"

His features twisted into a frown. "We were married three years ago. We are man and wife. Are couples not supposed to live together for the rest of their lives?"

She looked at him as if he had suddenly grown another head. She could not believe her ears. Did he genuinely want her to be his wife? Or was he lying for the sake of some ulterior motive? Perhaps he was mocking her, thinking that she had yet to learn of his engagement to the princess. Increasingly distressing thoughts tore through her mind.

"I may be a man of low birth, but I hold the vows of marriage sacred," Riftan snapped in frustration. "It astounds me that the daughter of a duke would show such contempt for our vows."

"C-Contempt?"

"If not contempt, then what is it? You married me, yet you've disregarded my existence all this time. Do not expect me to tolerate that any longer."

Dismayed, Maxi stared at him. How could he accuse her of such a thing? He was the one who had left without a word the morning after their wedding!

"I've … I've never disregarded y-you! You're th-the one who … who …"

"Enough! As Lady Calypse, you should have left for my estate immediately after our wedding night. Yet for three years, you chose to remain in your father's opulent castle!" Riftan snorted. "Then again, how can I expect the daughter of a duke to give up her high standing for the life of a near-widow, forced to await the return of either her husband or his corpse?"

Taken aback, Maxi could not think of a retort to his accusations. His words were utterly incomprehensible to her.

"H-How c-could I have left for your estate? I d-didn't know w-where it was. You d-didn't t-tell me a-anything …!"

"Enough with the lies! Before I left for the campaign, I made every preparation I could for you to come and live on my land. In the event of my death, you would have inherited the estate! A duke's daughter may not care for such a paltry piece of land, but it's a place I hold dear. It was your duty to be there, but you neglected it."

His eyes blazed with anger. He did not seem to be lying. There was no reason for him to invent such a tall tale.

Maxi swallowed hard against her nerves. "I-I d-d-didn't know … Y-You d-d-didn't s-say a w-w-w—anything."

"My men told me you refused to leave," he said, his voice bitter. "So spare me the excuses. For three years, I've known precisely what you think of me and—why are you trembling, damn it? Are you afraid I might beat you?"

"I'm … I'm s-sorry. T-Truly, I knew n-nothing of it. I awoke th-that m-morning to find you g-gone …. N-No one ever t-told me."

He narrowed his eyes, as if to assess the veracity of her words. Like a prisoner awaiting judgment, she braced herself for his reply. When he spoke again a few moments later, it was in softer tones.

"Even if that were true, you should have left for my land. A wife's duty is to take care of her husband's house. If that didn't occur to you, I can only assume that this marriage is worthless to you."

Again, she could think of no reply. Their marriage was not as meaningless to her as Riftan imagined. Still, it was true that she had not wholeheartedly accepted the arrangement. She had simply thought of them both as victims of her father, and their marriage an

unavoidable sacrifice. Had Riftan been sincere about their marriage all along?

"What were you going to do if you were pregnant?"

"P-P-Pregnant?" Maxi raised her head, jarred by the unexpected word.

The corners of Riftan's mouth twisted. "It was a possibility. I performed my duties to the fullest that night, didn't I?"

His sardonic tone drained her face of blood. To Maxi, the events of their wedding night remained a harrowing and shameful memory. She was now aware that every marriage required consummation, but that did not change anything for Maxi. She still trembled when she recalled what he had done to her.

Riftan, however, spoke casually of their wedding night as if it had all been a trivial affair. Maxi shuddered with renewed dread.

Riftan's face contorted into a scowl, and he slammed his fist into the wall of the carriage. "Don't make that face! As if the thought of having my child sickens you! I—"

Something cut him short, drew his attention away from her and to the window. With one hand on the hilt of his sword, Riftan leaped out of the carriage, his fierce growls morphing into action. Maxi screamed as a knight in their escort bellowed a warning.

"Commander! Ogres!"

"I know! Cast a shield around the carriage!" After shouting his orders, Riftan turned to Maxi. "Whatever happens, do *not* come out!"

He slammed the carriage door shut without waiting for an answer. A thunderous roar shook the ground and Maxi clapped her hands to her ears.

Thud. Thud.

As the earth shook, so did the carriage.

Maxi curled up into a ball on the floor, averting her eyes from the window. She had heard rumors that monstrous creatures had been spotted near the dukedom, but she hadn't expected to encounter some within an hour of leaving Croyso Castle. She was terrified, stricken by the thought that one might soon attack her.

"Stop that ogre at once!" A voice rang through the chaos outside.

The carriage rattled violently. The knights' cries and urgent shouting mixed with the eerie shrieks of something inhuman, echoing frighteningly through the air. Maxi buried her face in her skirt.

Thump. Thump.

Something struck the carriage and Maxi looked up, fearful that the ceiling would come crashing down on her. Then, she started in shock—an enormous eye, green and bloodshot, stared at her through the window.

Maxi screamed as she stood, pressing herself against the opposite side of the carriage. The world turned upside down, and her body fell backward as the door flung open. She tumbled out of the carriage and crashed to the ground.

Pale with terror, Maxi scrambled to her feet, but her legs were paralyzed with fear. She looked around for help, desperately, but the others were all busy fighting the ash-skinned ogres. She would have to find her own way to safety.

She began crawling toward the carriage, just as an ogre lumbered toward her, pounding the earth with its enormous feet. Maxi shrieked at the top of her lungs. There was a flash of bright light, and the ogre collapsed, falling flat onto its back.

"My lady!" A lean knight tugged at Maxi's shoulder. "You must get inside at once! There's a shield protecting the carriage. It's safer in there!"

Startled from her daze, she whipped around. The knight was staring her down.

"Mountain ogres, my lady. Fortune frowns on us, but we have nothing to worry about with Sir Riftan here. Please get back inside!"

"I d-d-didn't m-mean to c-c-come out. I-I w-w-was th-thrown …" Stammering, Maxi tried to explain. Riftan's stern order for her to stay inside the carriage echoed in her ears. She hadn't intended for this to happen. She hadn't intended to get in the knights' way!

"The c-carriage was sh-shaking, and …!"

"My lady! Get inside!"

The lean knight cut her off impatiently. She stopped trying to speak, silenced by his irritation. He was right. This was no time to be

making excuses. She rushed to collect herself, and she had already begun climbing unsteadily back into the carriage when another thud shook the ground.

Maxi turned around. Behind her, blood spurted like a fountain from an ogre's cloven torso. She clapped a hand over her mouth. Her stomach, already tense with anxiety from the past few days, now twisted painfully. Something sour rose up in her throat. She attempted to push it back down, but to no avail. Watery bile splattered the ground and her throat burned.

"My lady!" Alarmed, the knight wrapped an arm around her heaving shoulders.

Maxi panted and clutched her stomach, hot tears stinging her eyes. Something was twisting her insides.

"Heavens … Are you all right, my lady?"

Maxi gasped for air. The knight patted her back, trying to calm her down. However, her nausea refused to subside.

"What happened?!" Riftan's concerned voice cut through the air.

Maxi managed to raise her head. He was standing in front of the ogre's corpse, its body split cleanly in two.

Without realizing what she was doing, she began backing away from him, even as he stepped toward her. With each stride, he left a dark red footprint on the ground. The long, sharp blade of his sword gleamed blue as fresh blood trickled down its edge. In his silver-white armor, now mottled with crimson, he was nothing short of ghastly.

As she retreated from him, Maxi stumbled and placed a hand on the carriage to steady herself. Riftan's face blurred, warping like a cloud of smoke before her. The world spun. Her vision dimmed, and sounds became indistinct as she sank into the dark depths of unconsciousness.

CHAPTER 2



With the fall of the Roemian Empire—conqueror of the western kingdoms, and whose rule once reached the Southern Continent—came the age of lords.

The empire was split into the Seven Kingdoms: Wedon, Balto, Dristan, Osiriya, Sykan, Arex, and Livadon. Kings sought the loyalty of their vassals so that they could protect their territories, and vassal lords strove to bolster their armies with powerful knights and sorcerers in ever increasing numbers.

Duke Ezion Croyso, Maxi's father, was one such lord. His ancestor, the first Duke of Croyso, had been one of the lords of Wedon who successfully seized the vast eastern territories. Over the generations, the Dukes of Croyso joined dozens of wars to secure fertile lands and tens of thousands of serfs, allowing them to garner immense wealth and power.

But thirty years ago, the Seven Kingdoms signed an armistice, for growing numbers of monsters had started to flood the land. As part of the agreement, Duke Croyso was pressured to return his annexed eastern territories back to Dristan. Unwilling to relinquish half his dukedom, Duke Croyso quickly devised a solution. He would strengthen the legitimacy of his rule by marrying a princess of the old Roemian Empire. In this, he succeeded.

Duke Croyso found and married Arian Roem Girtha, a maiden descended from Roem's fallen royalty—and Maxi's mother. Arian was a beautiful and virtuous woman, dutiful and docile. But above all, she was a scion of the great House of Roem, which had once ruled

all the land under the sun. With Arian as his wife, the duke neatly extricated himself from all territorial disputes, much to his satisfaction.

However, it was not long before he encountered that age-old problem faced by all noblemen—the matter of succession. Like all other lords, Duke Croyso longed for an heir who would inherit his titles, his vast lands, and his castle. Yet even after six years of marriage, Arian had failed to bear him a child. Every pregnancy ended in miscarriage.

The duke devoted all his efforts to securing a healthy heir, and he tried *everything*. From enlisting the help of high-ranking clerics to seeking out sorcerers—he did it all. But his struggle yielded nothing but frustration until a decade later, when God finally answered his prayers and a healthy child was born.

Unfortunately, the child was a girl.

His hopes dashed, Duke Croyso became despondent. And by the time the girl was two or three years old, a violent rage had taken root within him. The girl was not only utterly useless, but she also had a stutter.

He abandoned what little expectations he had had for his daughter. He had hoped to marry her off to a prince of Wedon to secure an heir from their union, but he would never allow a child with an impediment to succeed him. It was his firm belief that only a perfect, healthy, male child could bear the honor of the Croyso name and legacy.

Arian died without giving birth to a male heir. Repeated cycles of pregnancy and miscarriage had drained the life out of her. Needing an heir who carried the royal blood of the Roemian imperial family, Duke Croyso wasted no time in marrying one of Arian's cousins. To his dismay, his second wife soon died of an illness—and she, too, left only a daughter behind.

As rumors spread that House Croyso was cursed, no other members of the Roemian imperial bloodline would agree to marry their daughters to the duke. He had no choice but to pin all his remaining hopes on his second daughter, Rosetta.

Unlike her older sister, Rosetta was beautiful, intelligent, and exceedingly talented. If he could secure an heir by marrying her off to the son of a prestigious family, he would be able to preserve the pedigree of his house and maintain his rule over his vast territory.

To that end, Duke Croyso spared no expense. The most distinguished tutors, hundreds of servants, dazzling clothes, sparkling jewels … Anything Rosetta wished for, he gave her. The duke did everything in his power to make her the most desirable bride in Wedon.

As for his useless daughter, Maximilian, he wasted no time on her. She was the least of his priorities. In fact, Maxi would have been better off if her father had forgotten that she existed at all.

After Rosetta was born, the duke began to see his eldest daughter as a thorn in his side. Most nobles were averse to uniting with a family that had produced flawed offspring. Some went so far as to avoid such families altogether, believing that their blood carried bad luck. If it became widely known that Duke Croyso's eldest daughter had a severe speech impediment, many suitors might shy away from taking Rosetta's hand in marriage, no matter how perfect a bride she was. Without an advantageous marriage for Rosetta, his plans for future political alliances would lie in ruins.

Such thoughts worried the duke to no end, as he did not want his eldest daughter's condition to block his path to power. He wished a plague or illness would claim his firstborn, who had given him his first taste of failure. Not only had she brought shame upon him, but his useless excuse of a daughter could also destroy the family's future.

The taller Maxi grew, the more intense her father's anger became. And she bore the brunt of his unmitigated rage. In the name of teaching her manners, he lashed her day after day, until her flesh was covered in blisters. Whips tore open the skin on her back whenever she made the terrible mistake of being noticed by outsiders.

The duke never forgave even the smallest of errors.

He saw her flaws as a threat to his house. He felt assured that he could beat her imperfections out of her. To him, everything was

Maximilian's fault. It was her fault that she had emerged from her mother's womb as an imbecile, and her fault the Croyso family's reputation was threatened. He merely treated her the way she deserved.

No amount of scolding or lashings could correct her imperfections, and for this, she was blamed. She was a mistake, a good-for-nothing miscreant who should never have been born. Such words were hammered into her ears like crooked nails as she grew.

The Croyso stumbling block!

A disgrace to our house!

Foolish, unsightly girl!

No better than a rodent!

Faced with her father's unforgiving blows, and under his contemptuous gaze, she shriveled like a dried leaf. She resigned herself to living out the rest of her days as the unwanted daughter, the shameful fool, the despicable *Maximilian*.

"MAXI! ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?!"

Firm hands shook her awake. A pair of black eyes gazed intently into hers. Still in a daze, she blinked, not comprehending what had happened. Riftan gently brushed back the strands of hair that were stuck to her forehead, and the quiet intimacy of the gesture brought her back to her senses. She sprang up.

"W-Where am I …?"

"An inn, in a village near Zeno. Do you not remember? An ogre attacked the carriage, and we left the woods while you were still unconscious."

Riftan placed a large pillow behind her back. As she sank into its warm embrace, she looked at him, her mind bursting with questions. He took a bowl from the table, filled it with water, and handed it to her.

"Drink. You've been sweating. You need to rehydrate."

Maxi did not take the bowl, but only stared blankly at the rippling water.

Riftan frowned. "I didn't poison it, if that's what you're thinking. Drink."

Hesitantly, she accepted the bowl and brought it to her lips. As the lukewarm water filled her stomach, her insides churned again. She lowered the bowl with a grimace.

Riftan raised an eyebrow. "Do you still feel unwell?"

"N-No …"

"Tell me if you're still in pain. I'll call for the cleric."

"N-No, I f-feel b-better."

After observing her with narrowed eyes, Riftan took the bowl and walked to the table to set it back down. Only then did Maxi have an opportunity to study the room. It was shabby, its floors and walls made of wood and its only furniture a bed, a table, and a few chairs. When she examined the ceiling for spiders, she noticed a silken web in one corner that glinted in the dim light.

The clean bed was the room's only saving grace. She had just finished sniffing the blanket for mold when she frowned in suspicion. Hoping that she was wrong, she slipped a hand under the blanket.

Bare skin. She was wearing nothing but a man's tunic. Her undergarments were nowhere to be found.

"M-My c-clothes! W-Where …?"

Riftan glanced up from rearranging the towel and water bowl. He answered her matter-of-factly, as if nothing was out of the ordinary. "I undressed you because your clothes were covered with vomit. That's my tunic you're wearing. You didn't bring a single piece of clothing with you, so we had to make do with something of mine."

Maxi opened and closed her mouth like a carp. Should she be astonished that he was blaming her for not bringing spare clothes, after he had given her no time to pack? Or should she be more shocked by the fact that he had undressed her while she was unconscious?

When she did not speak, Riftan did. "You've been unconscious all day. I'll order something for you to eat."

"Oh … W-Wait …"

But Riftan had already turned and left the room without a sign of guilt on his face. Maxi quickly scanned the room for something to wear, but all she could find was Riftan's armor, piled up haphazardly

next to the bed. Nothing in the room resembled a suitcase. She resorted to pulling the blanket up over her nose.

Soon, Riftan returned. When his eyes landed on the top of Maxi's head, peeking out from under the blanket like a turtle's from its shell, he frowned.

"There's no use hiding now. I already saw everything when I was cleaning you up."

"C-C-Cleaning me up?"

Riftan twisted his lips cynically in response to Maxi's question. "As I've told you many times, you are my wife. We've already lain together, albeit three years ago. What's there to be ashamed about?"

An intense flush washed over Maxi's body, turning her beet red from head to toe. Clearly irritated by her distress, Riftan's face darkened.

"All I did was change your clothes, but you're acting as if I violated you! You shouldn't have fainted if you didn't want me to touch you!"

Maxi flinched as he began a tirade about fragile noblewomen who faint at the drop of a hat. Her eyes glistened with tears as she whispered a quiet apology.

"I'm s-sorry."

Riftan clenched his mouth shut and left the room and Maxi lowered her head in shame. It had been less than a day since Riftan's return, yet she had already angered him countless times. Was it really wise for her to follow him to his estate?

She bit her lip, her heart heavy with anxiety. He thought of her as his wife now, but he could change his mind at any moment—it was only a matter of time. Even now, it was clear that he disliked her, and he was bound to treat her with cruelty once he realized how useless she was.

As a distinguished knight whose name was known throughout the continent, Riftan would find himself invited to countless festivities and banquets. Maxi knew better than anyone that she was not a wife he could proudly bring along. She was not worth showing off. And before long, Riftan would realize that, too, and start abusing

her. Would she be better off returning to Croyso Castle sooner rather than later? If she begged, would her father show her mercy?

Maxi pictured Riftan standing with a sword in his hand. It had taken him only a single swing to halve a monster three times his size. A whipping at his hands would cause her unthinkable harm.

But so far, he hasn't struck me even once.

She creased her brows at this sudden realization. He hadn't raised a hand against her, even when he was consumed by anger. Perhaps he was not as vicious as her father. But before this hope could bud and bloom, she crushed and flattened it. They had only just reunited, and there was no telling how their relationship would unfold.

She was still deep in thought when the door rattled open. Riftan walked into the room, a tray of steaming soup and bread in his hands.

"Vegetable soup and barley bread." He set the tray on the bedside shelf. "Eat some before you sleep. We leave at sunrise."

Maxi blinked, confused by what she was seeing. Riftan had stormed out just moments ago, yet here he was, bringing her food as if nothing had happened. He was truly unpredictable.

He placed a wooden spoon and the bowl of soup in her hands. "What are you waiting for? Eat while it's still warm."

"Th-Thank you …"

She stirred the soup and scooped up a spoonful, blowing on it before bringing it to her lips. It was hot, but not hot enough to scald her tongue. And though she had no appetite, a few mouthfuls of the savory soup did help to settle her stomach.

She stole a furtive look at Riftan while she returned to stirring the contents of the bowl. He had dragged a chair next to the bed and was polishing his sword. Without his armor, and with his long legs resting languidly, he looked two or three years younger than he really was.

"Why aren't you eating?"

Did he have eyes in the back of his head?! Maxi blushed, embarrassed that he had caught her staring.

"I just … I just w-wanted to ask …" Her stirring became listless, and he turned to look at her as she continued. "I … I have n-nothing to ch-change into …"

"It's late, so I'll buy you new clothes tomorrow."

"W-What about m-my old c-clothes …"

"I asked the maidservants at this inn to wash them."

Riftan studied his reflection in the blade of his sword. Maxi hesitated for a long time before opening her mouth again.

"M-May I at least h-have my un-undergarments b-back …?"

To Maxi's surprise, a deep blush spread across Riftan's cheeks. He kneaded his face, roughly, before he reassumed his nonchalance.

"They were torn. I had to throw them away."

"P-Pardon …?"

"They ripped when I was taking them off, so I threw them away."

Maxi flinched at his brusque tone, but she continued to press him.

"W-Why would you t-take my un-undergarments off …?"

The question seemed to catch him off guard. He began to mumble a reply, his eyes avoiding hers. Suddenly, he glared at Maxi, and she clutched the blanket like a shield.

"I had no choice! You couldn't breathe, and your face was turning blue. Those dreadful undergarments of yours were just about strangling you, so I tried to loosen the straps! All I did was pull at the … at the knot. How the hell was I supposed to know that the skirt was sewn onto the bodice?!"

Maxi's cheeks burned, and her scalp felt as though it might soon give off steam. Knowing that he had seen her undergarments, she wanted to sink down into the ground. Her nursemaid had forced her into those undergarments, convinced that they would help her win her husband's affection.

She had put on the dreadful things at her nursemaid's stubborn insistence, but she never imagined that Riftan would see them. She buried her face in her hands, resisting the impulse to throw herself out the window.

Riftan sighed. "Don't make that face. I'll get you new undergarments tomorrow. Would you like to borrow mine for now?"

She shook her head. "N-No! Th-There's n-no need …"

Maxi did not have the faintest desire to wear undergarments that belonged to someone else, let alone ones that belonged to him. But at the same time, she felt uneasy wearing nothing but a loose tunic. She returned to fiddling with her spoon, and she tried to read his face. This only made him stare back at her, his brow creased with frustration.

"Are you going to stir your soup all night? Eat up. You haven't even touched the bread."

She shoveled a few spoonfuls of the soup into her mouth. She usually ate like a bird, though, and there was still a mild discomfort in her belly. Unsure that she could stomach the coarse bread, she took only a few more sips of the soup before lowering her bowl.

"You didn't even finish half of it."

"I … I have no a-appetite …"

"Don't be picky. You won't get anything extravagant until we reach my estate. Eat, even if the taste doesn't agree with you. How else will you endure the journey?"

He scolded her as if she were an ill-mannered child, and she blushed.

"Do you plan to trouble us all by starving yourself, and fainting throughout the entire journey?"

"I-I'll eat …" Maxi forced down a few more spoonfuls, but she had to stop when her stomach churned in protest.

Riftan frowned when she set down the spoon, but he did not insist further. He took the tray from her with a sigh. "Satisfying the noble lady's palate … I can already tell it's going to be a pain."

He turned away, clucking his tongue, and Maxi hunched her shoulders in an attempt to make herself smaller. His mood changed like the wind. He had kindly brought her supper, only to burst into sour agitation again. She could not adapt fast enough.

Am I that much of a nuisance to him? He must secretly regret bringing me along. Why did he make me come with him …?

Maxi had been treading cautiously, but she could no longer suppress her curiosity. "W-Why are you t-taking me w-with you?"

"What?" Riftan stopped in his tracks. He had been walking toward the door with the tray in his hands, but he now turned to examine

her. “What do you mean?”

“I kn-know you d-didn’t marry me b-because you wanted t-to … so I d-don’t know why you’re t-taking me w-with you …”

His face hardened. She held her breath, unsure if it had been her stutter or the question that displeased him. She continued, her words stumbling over her trepidation.

“W-We’re … W-What I mean to s-say is … We d-don’t kn-know each other w-well enough to be … to be m-man and w-wife … A m-man like you d-doesn’t have to t-take me … You c-could have any w-woman …”

“Shut your mouth!” Riftan stomped back to her bed and slammed the tray down, his eyes smoldering with anger.

“If you don’t want to come with me, just say so!”

“N-No, th-that’s not w-what I—!”

“Don’t try to fool me! My castle may not be as large as Croyso Castle, but it’s more than enough to house a small woman like you! I have gold if gold is what you want! You’ll continue to live in luxury, damn it, so enough of your nonsense!”

She shrank back like a frightened tortoise. Why did he think luxury was her greatest concern? She tried to rebut him, gesturing frantically with her hands.

“Th-That’s n-not … That’s not what I’m w-worried about! I was j-just w-wondering why you’re t-taking me …”

“You’re my wife! Our marriage is recognized by the church! Do I need any other reason to take you home? *You’re* the one who remained in your father’s castle even after our wedding!”

“If you w-want a d-d-divorce …”

“What?”

He grabbed her shoulders. Maxi’s body went numb, her strength evaporating in the wake of his rage-filled voice. She was like a mouse before a hissing serpent. Perhaps he really would strike her this time. She clenched her eyes shut in terror, bracing herself for a blow that never came.

Maxi cracked her eyes open, and a pair of black eyes stared back, gleaming with cold wrath. The hands on her shoulders trembled, as if they could barely contain their anger.

"Divorce? Are you saying you want a divorce?"

"N-No … Th-That's not what I …"

"What is it, then? Is there another man?"

Unable to make sense of Riftan's words, Maxi could do nothing but bear the blaze in his eyes. He closed in on her, spitting his words through clenched teeth.

"Were you with another man while I was off fighting for my life?"

"N-N … N-No!" Her voice faltered.

His grip loosened, but his face remained contorted with suspicion. "Then why did you mention divorce?"

"E-Everyone s-said that w-w-when you c-came back, you would d-d-divorce me and m-marry the p-p-p … marry the p-princess, s-so …"

"Princess?" he asked sharply, understanding finally dawning on his face.

Maxi nodded, holding back tears.

A stream of curses poured out from Riftan's lips, and he ran a hand through his hair. "Blighted fools, wagging their useless tongues …"

He scooped her into his arms, blanket and all, and sat down on the bed. Ignoring Maxi's flailing legs, he placed her on his knees and cupped her face with his hands. Before she knew it, his tongue was lapping up the tears from the corners of her eyes. His warm breath tickled her cheeks and lips, distracting her enough to stop weeping.

Riftan wrapped an arm around her waist and let out a deep sigh. "I don't know what silly rumors you've heard, but I turned down that proposal a long time ago."

"You t-turned it d-down?" Maxi's eyes widened with disbelief.

"Of course I did! Why would I accept such a deranged offer?"

Deranged? Why did he think it was madness to offer a princess's hand to the hero who had saved the world?

"I thought the king had finally lost his mind! How could he make such an offer to a married man?!"

"B-But …"

"But what? We swore a sacred vow before God. I'll castrate any bastard who dares to break the holy vows of matrimony with my

own two hands. Did you think me a disloyal scoundrel?”

Maxi gave him an incredulous look. Was he being sincere? She was well aware that knights prized honor and loyalty, but Riftan seemed to have an almost religious devotion to his ideals. He was perhaps chivalrous to a fault. But how could he choose a forced marriage over an opportunity to marry into royalty? Glory, titles of nobility, and an unimaginably large dowry could have all been his. Furthermore, his child would have the right to succeed the royal throne.

He had dismissed all of that as madness, for the sake of a wife he had never wanted.

Perhaps he’s the mad one.

But it finally dawned on Maxi that Riftan regarded their marriage with the utmost sincerity. He was taking her with him, not because of some ulterior motive, but simply because she was his wife. It was exactly as he had told her.

She was overcome with surprise. “B-But …”

Did he truly have no regrets? Perhaps he did not comprehend the opportunity he had turned down. Forgetting that her current predicament obliged her to cling to him, she blurted out another question.

“Are you rreally all right with that? P-Princess A-Agnes is very b-beautiful …”

“Have you met Agnes?”

She winced. Riftan claimed he rejected the princess, but they were close enough for him to use her first name.

“N-Not in p-person …”

“Then how do you know she’s beautiful? I can’t stand women who romp about like wild unbridled stallions.”

Taken aback by how candidly he spoke about the royal family, Maxi gaped at him. With a thumb, he wiped off what remained of her earlier tears.

“Forget that ridiculous rumor. Palace life suffocates me, and I don’t intend to live out my days in the shadow of a haughty princess.”

“B-But …”

"Enough with the buts! Did you bring up that rumor as an excuse to escape this marriage you so despise?" A threatening glint flashed across his eyes. He relaxed only after Maxi vigorously shook her head. "Good. Don't you ever mention such nonsense again. I won't be so patient next time."

Maxi nearly rolled her eyes. Patient? He had been shouting all this time! If this was patient, then—

Riftan placed his hands on the small of her back, and her thoughts came to a screeching halt. She froze as his hands inched downward, making their way beneath the blanket that covered her.

"W-Wait …!" Maxi kicked her legs in alarm. She was wearing nothing but a thin tunic.

Unperturbed, Riftan slid a hand under her buttocks and lifted her slightly. He pulled the blanket out from under her and tossed it to the floor.

Maxi frantically pulled the tunic over her legs, but Riftan simply rolled up the tunic's lower half and reached underneath to cup her high-perched breasts. She let out an unceremonious cry as the roughness of his warm hands brushed across her tender skin, sending strange and intense sensations coursing through her body.

"W-W-Wait …"

Riftan, who had been burying his nose in the nape of her neck, raised his head. He wore a disgruntled look. "Is that your favorite word? Or have you forgotten your own husband's name?"

He wore a disgruntled look and Maxi blinked like a confused owl. As if to chastise her, Riftan pressed his mouth roughly against hers. His lips were surprisingly soft and warm, and for a moment, Maxi wondered how they could be the same lips that uttered such cold, harsh words to her before.

"Don't look so startled," Riftan said. "We weren't married under ordinary circumstances, you said so yourself. But there is little we can do. You must learn to accept me."

He combed her hair back with his firm, reassuring fingers, and the tenderness of the gesture surprised her. His lips incessantly explored her cheeks, her temples, her ears, his warm breath tickling her skin. When his muscular thighs twitched beneath her, Maxi instinctively

clutched at Riftan's clothes and clenched her eyes shut. She knew what this overture meant—she had experienced it once before—and she remembered the pain that followed. Her body stiffened, and Riftan sighed.

"Try to relax. It'll hurt if you're so tense."

"B-But …"

"This isn't our first time." Riftan stopped nibbling on the soft flesh of her throat. His voice grew hesitant. "Do you want me to stop?"

She opened her mouth to reply, but the words failed to take form. She did not have the heart to refuse. He turned down the chance to marry Princess Agnes to honor his vows to Maxi. It would not be right to deny him her bed.

After a long pause, she shook her head.

Emboldened once more, Riftan wasted no time in kissing her and pushing his tongue deep into her mouth, eager to taste her. Maxi placed a hand on his chest, only to pull it back, startled by how fast his heart was beating.

Riftan peppered her chin and jaw with kisses, before sliding his lips down her neck to her collarbone. Hot breath, and the wetness of his tongue prickled gooseflesh along her skin.

"Raise your arms."

Maxi rigidly obeyed. His calloused palms stroked her from waist to armpits, pulling the tunic over her head. She hugged herself to hide her breasts as Riftan embraced her from behind and planted a kiss on her shoulder.

"I'll be as gentle as I can."

Maxi's vision blurred. She could feel his eyes greedily devouring the sight of her exposed flesh. Round breasts and a flat midriff. A pale pair of thighs, and that tender region between them. She shut her eyes in shame at the sight of her nakedness.

But closing her eyes only amplified the sensation of his fingers stroking her nipples. When Riftan's mouth left her collarbone and moved down to her breasts with a heated, hungry need, Maxi gasped as he began to suck.

His lips delicately grazed her skin as the tip of his tongue roved around her hardened nipples. Teeth nibbled her flesh, stopping just

short of causing pain but sending a pleasant tingle from her neck to her ears.

"H-Hey … W-Wait …"

"Riftan." He sucked hard, as if to punish her.

Maxi uttered a small, weak cry. Not knowing what to do with her hands, she tore at his clothes. Riftan gently loos ened her hands and draped her arms over his shoulders. Her insides quivered at the touch of his warm skin, at the tickle of his sleek hair brushing against her neck.

"Say my name …"

"U-Um …"

"Say it." His command was firm, but gentle.

"R-R … R-Riftan …" She called his name, her voice shaky.

A shiver passed through his shoulders. He muttered something unintelligible, almost guttural, before overwhelming her with a wild flurry of kisses. His powerful arms tightened around her waist with such strength that Maxi feared she might snap in half. A passion she had never experienced before overcame her and she clung to his neck, panting.

With his lips on hers, Riftan chuckled. "That's it. Hold on to me, as tightly as you need."

For the first time, he smiled at her. He rained kisses on her, one hand on the back of her head while his other hand drew a few slow circles around her navel before sliding down and pushing between her legs. Maxi clamped her thighs together, but it was too late—his hand had already settled into her tender flesh. The slow movement of his fingers bloomed an aching heat deep within her and Maxi jolted, startled by the sensation.

"You're beautiful," Riftan whispered as he admired the flush in her cheeks. His face had changed markedly from before. His piercing eyes had softened, and the hard corners of his lips were curved into a boyish smile.

As his ravenous mouth covered hers, his fingers touched her delicately, like a bard playing a lute. Maxi's ears turned red at the wet sounds emerging from her body. Odd sensations simmered inside her and she quivered uncontrollably, her toes curling. She

instinctively tried to escape Riftan's touch, but he only pursued her more insistently.

"Ah …!" Maxi cried out as a flash of sweet lightning shot from her lower belly to the top of her head. She held on tightly to Riftan's shoulders. His thick chest rumbled with laughter.

"Does this feel good?"

"N-No … It d-doesn't …"

She was suddenly afraid. The flush in her face had spread down to her chest, and she did not recognize the strange sounds coming from her own mouth. Her limbs seemed to melt, and she buried her face in his shoulder to stifle her moans. Riftan's uncompromising attention on that most intimate part created an unbearable heat within her.

"S-Stop … Ah!" Maxi whimpered and panted as her insides threatened to dissolve.

"It's all right. Just let yourself feel." He ignored her pleas and continued with his torturous caress.

What am I supposed to feel?

Maxi's lips quivered as Riftan's hand began to move faster. Something down below bubbled and erupted, sending tremors throughout her body. She moaned, thrashing for release, and he drew her in closer.

Trembling helplessly, Maxi rubbed her forehead against Riftan's neck. Her body writhed, and her legs shook. The drum of his quickened heartbeat pounded against her skin. Like a man dying of thirst, he drank in the air with quick, erratic gulps.

"This was all I could think about while stuck in that living hell. The feel of your body, of you melting in my arms … I've wanted this for so long."

He hungrily sucked on her lips and returned his fingers to the swollen place between her thighs. Maxi whimpered and shook her head, but there was no escaping the flood of overwhelming sensations.

Riftan's tongue traced a damp path around her ear as his wet fingers pushed inside her. He encroached upon her body, and her

most delicate muscles contracted at his touch. Riftan breathed a low growl into her ear.

"Do you know how soft and warm you are down here?"

His fingers inched outward before thrusting deep inside. The friction brought forth a mild discomfort, but it was not as painful as Maxi remembered.

Was her memory of that first night all wrong? She had never felt a sensation so intense, tender, and warm. As Riftan's fingers slid in deeper, his thumb continued apace, rolling over her most sensitive nub of flesh. The back of her neck tingled.

Panting, Maxi tried to get used to this new and consuming sensation. She felt different, as if she were in a completely different world. Just yesterday, she thought Riftan was a frightening man and doubted that she could ever be comfortable with him. Now she was clinging to his neck and allowing him to touch her all over. It was incredibly surreal but not disagreeable.

"Loosen up a little," Riftan murmured.

"It h-hurts …"

"Relax. You must relax so it won't hurt when I enter you."

The shock of his words did not last for long. As his fingers moved slowly inside her, Maxi's mind went blank. Her legs trembled. She panted breathlessly.

Riftan planted kisses on her forehead, temples, and eyelids, and whispered with unrestrained passion. "I'll tell you what to do. Trust me and relax."

Maxi shook her head, her thoughts failing to keep pace. He gently stroked her hair and pushed his fingers in deeper. A quiet moan escaped her lips.

"I c-can't … I d-don't know h-how …"

"Breathe out … Relax your body slowly …"

She exhaled, long and slow, and gradually, her body relaxed. He kissed her cheeks as if to praise her and stroked the length of her back.

"Now try to tighten this part."

Riftan showed her where she should squeeze by pressing and rubbing. Somehow knowing exactly what to do, her body tightened

and closed around his fingers. He laughed again.

"You're driving me mad. No, no. That was a compliment. Relax again … Yes, just like that."

As she loosened her body, his long, deft fingers entered her once more. When he began to slide out, she squeezed again, as if trying to keep him tightly within. How long had Riftan been groaning? He grunted, as though he were in pain, then muttered something inaudible.

Maxi's body began to contract and relax on its own, even as a pulsing heat coursed through her veins. Her legs writhed, her waist tensed, and her thighs began to shake uncontrollably. And then another eruption, deep within her pelvis. She pressed her face into his shoulder, waiting for the overpowering sensation to pass. Something trickled down her legs.

"Shhh. You were so good," Riftan whispered as he laid her flat on the bed. Still riding the high of her climax, Maxi sank limply into the blankets.

Riftan nimbly pulled his clothes over his head and climbed onto the bed. It was not the first time she had seen his naked body. Still, the way he glowed sensually in the darkness caused her heart to flutter, and she realized anew just how beautiful he was.

"Hold on to me," he said as he lay on top of her.

Something hot and hard pushed itself between her thighs. She wrapped her arms around his neck and Riftan's body, radiating heat, weighed down on her in a curiously pleasant way.

Strange. Were they really doing what they had done three years ago? The feeling of him slowly filling her was somewhat uncomfortable, but it was not as painful as she remembered.

"Just a little more," Riftan murmured as he stroked her hair. The flicker of the nearby lamp cast shadows over his face. A droplet of sweat trickled down his forehead and along his cheek before stopping at his chin. Maxi reached her hand to his face and touched his smooth, golden skin, sending tremors through his frame.

"Ah!" Riftan moaned, pleased by her touch.

When he lowered himself, Maxi squirmed against the sudden pressure and locked her legs around his hips. A pained whimper

escaped him.

"Don't squeeze too tight."

"I'm s-sorry …"

She gazed at him with wet eyes. They were pressed together like two lumps of clay, and each rhythmic movement kneaded and remolded her. How was it possible to feel someone so intimately? Ragged breaths, quickened heartbeats, feverish bodies … Shaped into one like this, their bodies were indistinguishable.

"It feels so good …" Riftan moaned and drew her closer into his arms. Sweat dripped from his heated skin and onto her breasts.

Maxi looked up at his hardened face. He was holding back most of his moans, his brow furrowed and his features etched with pain.

"You rreally f-feel g-good …?"

Riftan broke into a smile at her expression of doubt. "Why else would I lie here with a woman who fainted earlier today?"

With that, he tightened his grip on her hips and moved his lower body in urgent *need*. His hot flesh pulsed deep inside her, drawing whimpers from her throat. Each time he exited and pushed slowly back in, Maxi's body responded in rhythm.

Riftan panted, muttering hoarsely between each gasp. "I hadn't planned to take you like this, like an animal … I wanted to let you rest … but that undergarment of yours … Ah!"

His firm abdomen pressed against hers. Maxi's fingers left scratches on his back.

"I … I tried to hold back, but …"

Maxi could no longer hear what he was saying. His movements became so irregular that she completely lost the rhythm. Should she relax now, or tighten? Unable to match his motions, her body spasmed. Just as she thought she could not bear it any longer, Riftan began to gather speed. Maxi's legs shook.

"Maxi …" Riftan's large hands cupped her cheeks. She squinted at him.

Why is he saying my name like that?

The longing on his face confused her. He was close, so very close, and pressed his mouth hungrily to hers. His body, which had been bucking like a stallion, stiffened suddenly. There was nothing left to

take, yet he seemed to thirst for more. The thing that filled her swelled and, with a pulse, it spewed forth something warm and wet.

"Ah …" Maxi gasped a moan.

She wound her arms around his sweat-slicked back as his breath fogged between them. He collapsed on top of her, his heart pounding out of his chest.

"Damn it! I didn't want to be rough this time."

As Riftan caught his breath, Maxi gazed at him through heavy eyelids. His dark eyes, still smoldering, gleamed in the glow of the lamp. Remaining inside her, he brushed feathery kisses across her shoulders and throat.

"Did it hurt?" Riftan asked.

It had burned a little between her legs, but Maxi shook her head. He sighed in relief and kissed her temple. The intimate gesture made her heart swell—she hadn't expected to feel this way. Maxi had anticipated pain and the bitter emptiness and shame—but none of that materialized.

"Am I crushing you? One moment." Riftan lifted himself and slowly withdrew from her. Something viscous trickled out after him, and Maxi reflexively recoiled, drawing her legs together. Riftan firmly stopped her.

"R-Riftan …!"

"Stay still. You must be tired. Let me clean you."

Riftan pulled the washbasin toward him and wrung out a wet towel before bringing it between her legs. With the cold towel, he gently wiped the junction of her thighs.

"Are you sure it doesn't hurt?"

"It d-doesn't." Pain was the least of her problems. She had turned beet red.

Riftan seemed not to notice, and he finished carefully, cleaning her groin before moving on to his own. She avoided his eyes, snatching up the blanket and quickly covering herself.

"You'll get used to it soon enough," Riftan said with an amused snort.

When he finished washing, Riftan threw himself down next to her, and Maxi squeezed her legs together in alarm. Unperturbed, Riftan

moved to the center of the spacious bed and pulled her to his side with surprising grace. Pressed so close to his slick body, she squirmed.

"R-Riftan …"

"If you keep squirming like that, I'll assume you haven't had enough."

It was not an empty threat—she felt him swelling against her lower belly and froze. Riftan nonchalantly slid an arm under her head and drew her closer, pulling the blanket over their bodies as he did. He slid his fingers through her hair and closed his eyes. Did he intend to sleep next to her?

"R-Riftan …"

"What's the matter?" He acted as if sleeping together in the nude was the *natural* thing to do.

Not knowing where to look, Maxi swallowed what she had wanted to say and managed only a hesitant whisper. "G-Good night."

Riftan gave no reply. As she watched the fluttering pulse in his muscular neck, Maxi drifted off to sleep.

MAXI AWOKE TO SOMETHING PRESSING DOWN ON HER chest. Feeling suffocated, she blinked her eyes open, only to find that a tanned, muscular arm completely blocked her vision. She raised her head slightly. Riftan was fast asleep, his head buried in her hair. Memories of the previous night came rushing back and she blushed.

Under the blanket, they were tangled in a naked embrace, his long and sturdy legs intertwined with hers. He hugged her tight, like he might a favorite pillow.

Maxi had never known such an affectionate embrace. Not even her own mother had held her with such warmth. As her eyes roamed uneasily around the room, it occurred to her that she should find something to wear before he woke up. If he found her like this, he might …

Burying her face in her hands, she recalled how she had writhed in his arms. How could she face him again? She would rather throw herself out the window. A proper lady would never have acted the way she had.

Her nursemaid had made things crystal clear: She was to stay as still as a corpse when submitting to her husband's will. That was her duty as a wife.

The heat of shame spread across her cheeks. Far from being corpse-like, Maxi had writhed and moaned. Would he not think her a wanton, unseemly woman?

Anxiety washed over her. She could not let him see her like this. After cautiously freeing herself from his arms, she searched under the bed. Dressing like a proper lady might not be possible, but she could at least cover her nakedness.

She discovered a tangle of clothes piled on the floor in the corner of the room. She desperately grabbed for them, but they were just out of reach. Not daring to wander about the room naked, she leaned over the edge of the bed with her arm outstretched. But instead of inching forward, she was yanked back.

"What are you doing?" Riftan asked, observing her through half-open eyes.

Maxi turned to him, surprised. She had thought he was still asleep. When she tried to break free, his arm wrapped around her waist and nimbly rolled her toward him, pinning her under his body.

"R-Riftan … It's m-m-morning …"

"Yes, it's morning. I was dying, waiting for you to open your eyes."

He pressed his lips to her eyelids as he spoke, and she startled under the ticklish sensation. A mischievous smile spread across his face, and he continued to shower her face and ears with light kisses before proceeding to her neck. His lips were like the tickle of a butterfly's wings. Flustered, Maxi pushed his face away.

"P-Please d-don't … Let me p-put on s-some …"

"Do you know how much I had to restrain myself the entire night?"

He brought her hand to his lips and slipped one of her fingers into his mouth. As his tongue savored her, she blushed to the tips of her ears. Had her hands always been so sensitive?

"If you knew how I felt every time you blush," Riftan muttered as he nibbled on her fingertips, "you would never blush again."

Unable to bear the embarrassment, she hid her hands under the blanket. Riftan's brows twitched, and he snatched the blanket away.

"Why are you trying to hide?"

Maxi curled up to hide her nakedness. "Th-The sun has r-risen! It's so b-bright …"

"All the more reason to let me see. I want to admire you in the light of day."

He pulled at her bent legs. She was embarrassed to the point of tears. It was hard to believe she was in bed with a man in broad daylight, when just the day before, she had been cowering in her father's castle.

Riftan's hand roamed over her shoulders and breasts before gliding down past her waist and settling between her thighs. His fingers slid easily into her, where she was still wet from the night before.

"Maxi … How was last night? It wasn't so bad, was it?"

"R-Riftan …"

"You felt good, didn't you?"

She would die of embarrassment before she answered that question. His fingers began to move dexterously in that most intimate of places.

"For me, it was heaven. Do you know how hard it was for me to leave you three years ago? I wanted to throw the Dragon Campaign to the dogs and stay with you. It was agony for me to rise from your bed, though I knew you must have wanted me gone …."

Maxi's eyes went round with surprise, the shame of her nudity forgotten. A crooked smile appeared on Riftan's lips, and he grazed the tender skin below her collarbone with his teeth.

"I still feel the same way. When I'm with you … I can't hold back."

He nipped the nape of her neck, and his fingers pushed in deeper. Maxi reflexively squeezed his arm with her thighs, drawing out a satisfied moan from him.

"It's your bad luck, being married to a man like me."

Maxi was convinced that *she* was the inadequate half in their marriage. Like her father said, this marriage was a great fortune that she did not deserve. Why, then, did Riftan think she was unlucky?

But the question slipped away as her thoughts grew hazy, eclipsed by the heat kindling within her.

She panted, squeezing the fingers moving vigorously inside her. Riftan's feverish gaze surveyed her body from head to toe and Maxi found herself unable to look away from him. His fingers withdrew and were immediately replaced by the deep thrust of his length.

"Ah …!" He let out a savage growl and bit her earlobe. "You'll be the death of me, damn it."

Maxi clutched tightly on to his iron-hard shoulders, feeling like a prey animal that had been captured by a hound. His grip dug into her thighs, spreading her legs to the very brink of pain, and he started to move steadily.

Maxi tried to stifle her moans as Riftan moved with the smooth, gentle cadence of a slow-flowing stream. But before long, he abandoned his restraint and began to move wildly over her and within her. At length, he climaxed and slumped onto her, his body a sweaty heap. She gasped for air, his hot breath brushing her forehead.

"I could do this for days."

"You're h-heavy …"

If he wanted to, he probably *could* pin her to the bed for days.

Seeing the stricken look on her face, Riftan playfully bit her ears. "You taste so good here too."

After nibbling on her reddened earlobe, he dug his tongue into her ear. She shuddered at its wet touch.

"R-Riftan …!"

"If not for that accursed lizard, I could have bedded you every day and every night. We might have had children of our own by now!"

"N-No more! Stop … Ah!"

Ignoring her protests, Riftan continued to brush his sweat-slicked body against hers while he teased her ear. Drained from the endless marital duties, Maxi was shocked when Riftan shifted himself between her legs again.

She almost burst into tears and was considering trying to faint when someone knocked loudly on the door. Riftan froze.

"Damn you! What do you want?!"

"Time to wake up, Commander!" The loud yell carried through the door. "The sun's high in the sky! How long are you going to lounge about in bed?"

Riftan threw a fierce look toward the door as if he could see through its thick wood. "Didn't I tell you I'd gut you alive if you disturbed me again? Do you have a death wish?"

"Can't you contain yourself until you're back home? We must leave again for the capital as soon as we reach the estate!"

"Delaying things by a day or two won't be the end of the world! Stop whining!"

"Commander!"

"All right! I'm coming, I'm coming! You ruined the mood, you little bastard!"

Riftan ran a hand through his hair, and Maxi stiffened as he spat out a string of creative expletives that she had never heard in her entire life.

He sprang up, his features tense with annoyance. "Get the carriage ready! We'll depart soon."

In response, the man behind the door stomped away to obey the order.

Riftan let out a deep sigh and looked down at the floor. "I shouldn't have brought those bastards with me …."

Maxi watched him silently.

"Wait here," Riftan said. "I'll find something for you to wear."

She nodded, her pale face peeking out from behind the blanket. As Riftan gathered his clothes from the floor, he frowned at her.

"Why the waterworks?"

Maxi did not know how to answer.

"Speak. Perhaps you haven't noticed, but I'm not a patient man."

How could she not have noticed her husband's red-hot temper? But she could not say that, could she?

"Y-Y-Your m-m-men outside kn-knew," she stammered in a timid voice.

"Knew what?"

"W-W-What w-we were d-d-doing in th-this r-room …"

Her cheeks were on fire. Riftan had been staring intently at her, but the corners of his mouth suddenly twitched up ward. Much to her disbelief, he burst into boisterous laughter and clutched his stomach.

"R-Riftan!"

"You really do drive me mad." Almost choking with laughter, he lifted her and the blanket and sat down with her on his lap. For someone with such an intimidating presence, he had an extraordinarily innocent and boyish laugh. His chest still shaking with mirth, he nibbled on her shoulder, which was already dotted with the marks of his passion.

"My sweet, innocent lady. Of course they know what we did. My men are not half-wits. They know what happens in the bedroom when a husband and wife are reunited after three long years."

"B-But …"

"It's nothing to be ashamed of. We are married, and that's what married couples do. It's only natural."

Natural? She knew the duties that were expected of a wife in the bedchamber, but what she had shared with him last night felt anything but natural. And was "shared" even the right word? Had it been an act of giving and taking?

Her thoughts surprised her. Was it not just a rite she had to endure if she was going to bear a child?

"You're blushing again. *Tsk,* I would have taken you again if it weren't for those pests outside …."

Maxi shrank away from him.

"Don't cower like that. They'll smash the door down if they hear us at it again." He gave her a playful peck on the tip of her nose before setting her back down.

Wrapped in the cocoon of her blanket, she rubbed the spot he had kissed and watched as Riftan picked up his clothes and began to dress. She quickly averted her eyes, but he seemed unfazed by his own nakedness.

In no time at all, Riftan was fully clothed, armored, and giving her instructions. "Wait right here," he said as he strapped on his sword.

Maxi nodded. She was in no state to leave the room; her shaking legs would give out if she even tried to stand. When Riftan left the room, she crawled to the headboard to crack open the window.

Beneath the pale blue autumn sky was a cluster of small villages. Some five or six wooden cottages stood against the horizon, and unpaved dirt roads, grooved by carriage wheels, wound through a vast orchard and a sea of scattered meadows. Maxi drank in the pastoral view until she sensed an intense gaze and looked down.

Three knights were gathered by the carriage parked in front of the inn, and they were staring up at her. Startled, she hurriedly slammed the window shut. She had covered herself with a blanket, but she did not want all those strange men to see her disheveled state.

Did I delay their departure?

She bit her lip. Moments later, someone knocked at the door.

"W-Who is it?" Maxi called in answer.

"Water for your morning ablutions, m'lady."

"C-Come in." Still wrapped in her blanket, Maxi sat on the edge of the bed, hugging her knees.

Two maidservants entered with a large washbasin, kettle, and snow-white towel in their hands. They exchanged uneasy looks.

"We're here at your husband's behest, m'lady," one said.

"I c-can do it m-myself."

"He said you would need help."

Maxi's face became hot. "It's rreally all right. I will t-tell my h-husband."

The women didn't insist further. They set the items on the table and quietly exited the room. Maxi waited until their footsteps grew faint before she stood from the bed and locked the door. She then soaked the towel in warm water and began to wash her aching body.

The warm water refreshed her. As she wiped away the sticky layer of sweat and secretions, she noticed the red and purple marks strewn across her shoulders, chest, arms, and legs.

Was this how every woman found herself after performing her marital duties? Recalling the previous night, Maxi blushed again. Though she knew that no amount of scrubbing would make the love marks disappear, she rubbed at them furiously with the wet towel.

Spending the night with Riftan had been as taxing as it was embarrassing. But she had not felt the same terror as she had three years ago. If Maxi was honest with herself, Riftan's embrace—his smile and gentle kisses—had enraptured her in a way that she had never thought possible. Far from finding her inadequate, Riftan truly seemed pleased with her as his wife. He had even said that when he left her on their wedding night, he did so with great reluctance.

It felt like a dream. Afraid of the sparks reigniting inside her, she plunged her head into the washbasin. She washed her tangled hair with soap and dried it with a towel before applying a generous amount of perfumed oil. She had just started combing her hair when there was another knock at the door.

"My lady, your husband has sent you a change of clothes."

Maxi opened the door just enough to receive a dress through the gap. It was rose red and embroidered with gold thread. As she unfolded it, a girdle, a sash, and a thin piece of cloth that resembled an undergarment fluttered to the floor.

The undergarment was not that different from the one her nursemaid had given her. She blushed. How had he managed to find such salacious clothing in this backwater? And surely there was some mistake. He did not think *this* was her taste in clothing, did he?

She covered her face and was whimpering in dismay when another series of knocks interrupted her. This time, it was Riftan.

"Maxi," he called through the door. "Did you get the clothes? Have you changed?"

"N-Not yet …"

"Hurry. We must leave soon."

"One m-moment …"

At his urging, she hastily put on the flimsy undergarment. Feeling no less naked than before, she threw on the white chemise and pulled the extravagant red-and-gold dress over her head, tugging on the flowy skirt until it grazed her ankles. She was not used to getting dressed without servants to assist her, and though she managed to fasten the bodice, the laces on the back were impossible to reach.

She was sighing in frustration, her shoulders cramping from the strain, when Riftan knocked again.

"Are you dressed yet?"

"Uh … Um …"

"What?"

"C-Could you s-send someone t-to help me?"

Riftan made no reply, so Maxi pressed on.

"The s-straps on the b-back …"

"Open the door."

"P-Pardon?"

"Open the door!"

Maxi slowly opened the door, clutching the dress to prevent it from sliding off. Riftan pushed past her and closed the door behind him. As he appraised her from head to toe, she stammered out an apology.

"I-I'm s-s-s—forgive m-me for b-being so s-slow. But the d-d-dress …"

"Don't apologize. I'm not angry," he said, examining her flowing skirt and voluminous sleeves. "I don't know much about women's clothes. It didn't occur to me that getting dressed alone could be difficult."

An awkward silence followed. Maxi clenched her fingers in the fabric of the dress, deep in self-deprecating thought.

Do such lavish clothes suit me? Do I not look ridiculous?

Without warning, Riftan took her shoulders and turned her around. "Let me help you."

"Uh … I …"

As he laced up the bodice, something about the rustle of the dress put Maxi on edge. After much fumbling—Riftan clearly *was* unused to handling women's clothes—he spun her around to face him again.

"All done."

"Th-Thank you …"

"I bought it from a merchant who happened to be staying nearby. It may not be to your liking, but this is the best I could do. I'll find you something nicer once we're home."

Maxi blinked. This dress was more luxurious than anything she had ever worn. Was it not to *his* liking?

Her life hadn't been as extravagant as he imagined. All of Maxi's old dresses had been sewn by the maidservants at Croyso Castle, pieced together from scraps of fabric left over from Rosetta's clothes. Only Rosetta had ever known their father's generosity; Maxi had never worn anything so richly embroidered. That Riftan was concerned she would not find the clothes acceptable disheartened her.

Perhaps he was more used to luxury than she had assumed. And perhaps it was a good thing that she hadn't brought her belongings. What a stroke of luck, to have avoided the humiliation of putting her shabby wardrobe on display.

Pretending to straighten a crease in her skirt, Maxi attempted to speak in a detached manner. "This d-dress isn't so b-bad."

Anxious that she had come across as too haughty, she quickly searched his face. But Riftan displayed no signs of displeasure. As he draped a cloak around her shoulders, she turned her attention to his hands, which carefully fastened the cloak. It was a surreal sight, a knight attending to her most trivial of needs.

Riftan helped her into a pair of ankle-high leather shoes and then spoke. "Come. Let's go."

Maxi blushed and nodded. Hand in hand, they stepped out of the room and walked down a wooden staircase. Downstairs, armored knights were milling about a tavern crammed so full of tables and chairs that they had to carefully plan their paths.

One of the knights crossed his arms when he saw them. "I thought we were going to spend the whole day here, Commander. Are we leaving now?"

Riftan ignored him and ushered Maxi outside.

At the door, another knight approached them and complained loudly. "Come now, Commander. We're not going to gobble the lady up. No need to shield her so."

"Shut your mouth," Riftan said sternly. "Haven't I told you to watch your tongue?"

Maxi looked at the knight with bewilderment. He was a curly-haired young man, tall and well built. His sharp gaze was completely devoid of friendliness. Behind him stood another knight, this one blond and equally disapproving as he assessed Maxi. She hid herself behind Riftan, earning herself a loud snort from the blond man.

"This is ludicrous!" he said. "Going so far, just for the daughter of the Duke of Croyso …"

"I told you to shut up!" Riftan's growl was a clear warning, and the men finally held their tongues. He turned to Maxi and pushed her into the carriage before following her inside.

"Don't mind them," he reassured her, and slammed the carriage door closed. "They have no love for your father, but you are no longer a Croyso. You are now Lady Calypse, my wife. And I'll make sure they never disrespect you again."

The daughter of the Duke of Croyso. It was an unpleasant reminder of how their union had come to be. Unable to think of a suitable reply, Maxi fixed her eyes on her knees.

"Have my men hurt your feelings?" Riftan's voice was tinged with concern.

She looked up in disbelief. No one had ever bothered to ask about her feelings, yet here he was eager to address the smallest slight to her. He spoke like a man walking on eggshells. Maxi smiled in spite of herself.

"You know …" Riftan gazed at her, an inscrutable expression on his face.

"Y-Yes?"

"This is the first time you've smiled at me."

As he reached over to caress her cheek, her breath caught in her throat. His lips quivered as if he had something to say. The moment quickly passed—Riftan withdrew his hand and bellowed through the carriage window, pretending nothing had happened.

"What are you all waiting for? You said we were in a hurry!"

Someone outside grumbled, and the carriage began to move. In the awkward silence, Maxi stole glances at Riftan. He leaned his head against the window and closed his eyes as if he had forgotten

about her presence. The sight calmed her nerves, and she soon found herself following his lead, leaning against the wall.

Weary from days of anxiety, Maxi barely noticed the bumps in the road below. She drifted off to sleep, as if the carriage and its rattling were a gently rocking cradle.

CHAPTER 3



THE CARRIAGE LEFT THE VILLAGE AND PASSED through vast swaths of farmland, moving slowly over the unpaved dirt roads. It was dark when they reached a smaller village near Eudychal Forest and Riftan disembarked to identify himself at the village entrance. Maxi had never traveled so far by carriage, and she was drained.

"We're staying the night here," Riftan said when he returned, retrieving a bedroll and lamp. "It's cold outside, so bundle up."

Maxi fastened her cloak and pulled the hood over her head before stepping out of the carriage. Riftan put an arm around her shoulders and strode toward his men, the dirt crunching beneath his feet. The knight who had been talking with the village guard turned as they approached.

"There aren't any suitable lodgings here, Commander."

Riftan raised the lamp in his hand and quickly scanned the area. Four or five unlit cottages stood clustered at the end of a winding dirt path. Following Riftan's gaze, the knight hastily added an explanation.

"Those five cottages are fully occupied by farmers who were sent here for the harvest. There is an empty barn, however." The knight glanced uncertainly at Maxi. "Perhaps we could stay there for the night …."

Riftan frowned and turned to face the village guard. "Are there no suitable lodgings for the lady?"

"Only cottages, sir, for housing farmers during the harvest season. We could have two of them emptied at your command, but even

then, I'm afraid they're no place for a lady."

"Still, better than a barn," said Riftan. "You'll be rewarded handsomely if you can arrange it."

Surprised, Maxi clung to Riftan's arm. "I'm … I'm al-all right …"

It did not feel right to force serfs out of their cottages. They had been slaving away all day under the hot sun. Furthermore, she did not wish to spend the night alone in a dark, spooky cottage.

Maxi squinted into the darkness and tugged at Riftan's sleeve. "I d-don't want to b-be alone …." In the uncomfortable quiet that followed, Maxi slowly realized the implication of her words. She let go of Riftan's sleeve as if it were on fire, and her blood rushed up her neck.

Riftan gave no reply, perhaps struck speechless by her shamelessness. She clutched at her dress and did not dare to look him in the eye. The knights exchanged awkward glances. Much to her relief, they soon changed the subject.

"Is it decided, then?" said one knight. "I'm starving. Let's get some rest!"

"You there!" Another knight called to the village guard. "Where can we find some water? We must look after the horses first."

"There's a brook by the mill," said the guard. "This way."

After the men dispersed, Riftan took Maxi's hand in his. "We should go as well."

"Y-Yes …"

She almost had to run to keep up with Riftan's strides. Were it not for Riftan's quick reactions, she would have tripped over the bumpy ground countless times. They followed the dirt path and came to a stop before a large wooden structure that emerged out of the darkness.

A few knights entered first and hung up their lamps. Maxi followed Riftan inside and studied her surroundings. Everywhere the light reached, silken cobwebs gleamed like the tangled hair of ghosts. She would not be surprised if the barn *was* haunted. The wooden floorboards creaked unpleasantly beneath their feet and were so caked with dust that footprints appeared where they passed.

Maxi tiptoed across the floor, afraid she might step on a bug or even a rat. The men, however, were completely unfazed. They threw down their bedrolls wherever there was space, and then swiftly shed their unwieldy armor. Riftan, too, was spreading an ample amount of hay in the corner of the room as a cushion for his bedroll.

"Over here," he called to her.

Maxi could not bring herself to lie down. Certain that the makeshift bed was infested with bugs, she managed only to perch at its edge. And though the barn was by no means small, it felt cramped with eighteen people inside.

Riftan took off his breastplate and greaves. After shoving the discarded armor to the side, he stretched and cracked his neck. "It'll be days before we find a comfortable bed. You'll have to bear it until we reach Anatol."

Maxi nodded as she hugged her knees. She had never been in the same room as so many men, and she was nervous. The knights, however, were too busy lighting the brazier and preparing food to pay her any notice.

One of the knights, returning from watering the horses, stuck his head into the barn. "Commander! There isn't enough fodder for the horses!"

"Then ask the guard where we can buy some grain," Riftan replied matter-of-factly while he unclasped his leather belt.

"We tried negotiating already," said the knight. "But he says the grain isn't his to sell. The granaries in this village all belong to Duke Croyso."

Maxi flinched at the unexpected mention of her father's name. Riftan pushed his hair back and clicked his tongue.

"Seems he wants us to pay more."

"Your orders, Commander?"

"Just pay him what he wants."

"Perhaps we can give him a good scare so we won't have to—" The knight's words stopped when his eyes fell on Maxi. "On second thought, we shouldn't give the duke any reason to find fault with us. Very well. Just don't scold me later when you notice how light our purse has gotten."

With that, the knight left. Maxi withered, realizing that the knights were far more hostile to her father than she had imagined. Perhaps that explained their indifference toward her.

If she had been born with Rosetta's charming features, would things have turned out differently? The thought of her half sister, delighting in all the gifts and love letters brought to her by the knights who frequented Croyso Castle, wilted what little confidence Maxi had. She was only pulled out of her self-torment when Riftan left the fireside and approached her. She raised her head to a bowl full of freshly cooked potatoes, burned brown here and there from roasting in the fire.

"Careful. They're still hot."

Riftan ignored his own warning. He grabbed a potato with a large, calloused hand and swiftly took a bite. Maxi followed suit, gingerly wrapping one in her sleeve and peeling off its burnt skin to reveal the soft yellow flesh beneath.

As she took a small bite, she was overcome by a wave of hunger that anxiety had been keeping at bay. The roof of her mouth burned from the heat, but she continued to chew, swallowing bite after bite of the steaming potato. Even the chewy half-cooked sections tasted like the rarest of treats. In no time at all, the entire fist-sized potato was gone.

Riftan had been watching her eat, and a peeled potato was already waiting for her. Maxi frantically waved her hands.

"I've had m-my share. Y-You sh-should have it, R-Riftan …"

"Just take it."

He pressed the potato into her hands and snatched another one from the bowl. Without even peeling it properly, he bit off a large mouthful. She stared at her own potato, which had been peeled perfectly smooth. Then, she brought it to her mouth and ate with gusto, stopping every now and then to blow away the scalding wisps of steam.

When her stomach was full, drowsiness began to take hold. Her fear of bugs already forgotten, Maxi laid her head down on the bedroll. The flame of the brazier in the center of the barn cast a dim

light over the walls and ceiling. One by one, the knights finished eating and retired to their bedding.

Maxi had purposely refused the privacy of a cottage, but she was still embarrassed by the idea of sleeping in the midst of so many men. She pulled her blanket up to her chin. As she stirred, Riftan set aside the sword he was polishing and lay down next to her. He wrapped an arm around her, tightly, but Maxi pushed it away.

"R-Riftan … Th-There are other p-people here …"

"No one gives a damn, so stay still. You're cold, aren't you?" Riftan slid an arm under her neck and rubbed his cheek against her head.

Unsure of what to do, Maxi peeked over his shoulder to see if anyone was watching them. Just as Riftan had predicted, no one so much as glanced their way. Even so, she did not have the nerve to stay pressed against his side.

"I'm al-all right, so c-could you m-move over a little …"

"Can't you see she's embarrassed? You need to be more considerate!"

Maxi's head snapped up. A lean young man in his early to midtwenties stood a few feet away. He held a small lantern in his hand.

"Mind your own business, Ruth," Riftan grumbled. "Go away."

"There's no need to growl at me like a watchdog," Ruth replied, his voice as irritated as Riftan's. "I have no intention of harassing your lady."

Maxi's eyes rounded with surprise. The young man—Ruth—spoke like he was scolding a feral dog, completely unfazed by Riftan's daunting presence. As Ruth's gaze settled on Maxi, she hastily sat up, and Riftan reluctantly followed suit.

"What do you want?" Riftan asked.

"The night air is cold, so I took the liberty of bringing something for the lady." Ruth fished around in the pocket of his robes and pulled out a small stone. It shimmered faintly in the light. "This is a firestone. I cast a spell on it to keep it warm, so hold on to it."

"Is this r-really for m-me?" His unexpected kindness surprised Maxi.

Ruth raised an eyebrow. “Who else? Those men could sleep soundly even if you buried them naked under a pile of snow.” His tone was scathing, and he did not seem to care who heard him. “But you’re different, my lady. By the looks of it, you have a delicate constitution. I’ll be the one to suffer if you catch a cold, so consider this a preventive measure.”

His frankness surprised Maxi, but she understood what he meant. She could not allow herself to become anyone’s burden, and she silently accepted the stone. Just as Ruth had promised, warmth enveloped her. She stared at the stone in awe before she realized she had not expressed her gratitude.

“Th-Thank you, S-Sir R-Ruth.”

A subtle look flashed across his face. “I’m a sorcerer, not a knight. You can just call me Ruth.”

With that, he turned around and walked across the barn to his bed. Maxi was watching him, a blank look on her face, when Riftan plunked himself back down and pulled her toward him. He was clearly annoyed.

“You must be tired. You should sleep now. We leave at sunrise.” Riftan snuffed out the bedside lantern.

As if waiting for his cue, the other knights put out their lanterns one by one. In the growing dark, Maxi squirmed uncomfortably in Riftan’s arms before a wave of intense fatigue overcame her. She closed her eyes, the steady thrum of Riftan’s heartbeat soothing her like a lullaby. Soon, she was deeply asleep, her qualms about lodging in a dirty barn all but forgotten.

WHEN MORNING DAWNED, THE VILLAGE BRIMMED WITH vitality, bearing none of the eerie silence that had plagued the previous night. Before the row of humble cottages was an endless field of rippling golden wheat, and the verdant beauty of Eudychal Forest was visible just beyond.

Maxi stepped out of the barn and washed her face with ice-cold water from the nearby brook. With wet hands, she combed out the vine-like tangles from her long tresses of hair. A cool breeze chilled her damp face, raising a trail of goosebumps down the length of her back. After wiping herself dry with her sleeves, Maxi returned to the

barn. The knights had already finished packing, and they were assembled in front of the carriage.

"Don't wander around alone," Riftan scolded when he noticed her approaching.

"I'm s-sorry." Maxi rushed to his side, apprehensive of the sternness in his voice.

Riftan frowned and lifted her into the carriage. "Monsters are frequently sighted in Eudychal Forest. Never wander alone."

She flinched, reminded of the ogres from the first day of their journey. "I'll be c-careful."

"Good. We have too much luggage loaded on the carriage now, so I'll have to ride horseback from here. Call out if you need me."

Riftan closed the door. Moments later, the carriage began to rattle down the bumpy dirt road. The wheat fields grew ever more distant through the window, and Maxi's vision was soon filled with a dense wall of trees. Rays of sunlight shone through the canopy of leaves, falling over the winding path like a veil of golden thread. The knights maintained a leisurely pace as they rode in formation through the cascading light.

Maxi anxiously scanned the dense forest, searching for any monsters that might jump out and ambush them. Thankfully, her worries were for naught, and the journey progressed in peace. Before long, she slumped down in her seat, exhausted from the strain of her own fears while in the ever-shaking carriage. *Her* vigilance, after all, would do little to protect them.

Eventually, the carriage came to a stop and Riftan opened the door for her.

"We'll rest here," he said.

Relieved, Maxi hopped out of the carriage. Her stiff legs tingled unpleasantly as the flow of blood resumed. Stifling a groan, she bent forward awkwardly to rub them. Before she had managed a single stroke, Riftan spread his cloak over a flat rock, motioned for her to sit, and began to massage the cramps from her legs. She glanced around, flustered. The knights who were watering the horses watched them in disbelief.

Maxi blushed and pushed him away. "R-Riftan, I'm al-all right …"

"Is that a habit of yours?"

"W-What?"

His hands were just above the hem of her skirt, gently massaging her calves. "Every time you open your mouth, you say that you're all right."

Maxi could not think of a suitable reply. Instead, she wanted to ask why he was being so kind to her. The butterflies he unleashed in her stomach were pleasant, but they also gave her the uncomfortable sensation that her clothes were too tight.

"I-I really am all right n-now …." She freed herself from his attentive hands and pretended to smooth the creases in her skirt.

After a moment, Riftan stood as well. "Rest. I'll get you something to eat."

When he returned, he offered her bread and cured meat. The bread was so dry and tough that Maxi had to soak it in water before she could push it down her throat. After she finished her meal, she stepped away from Riftan's side and relieved herself in the thickets.

The dull journey resumed. Inside the unsteady carriage, Maxi whiled away the time by counting the trees that passed by the window. The farther they went, the thicker the forest grew. Eventually, only thin needles of sunlight could pierce the dense canopy of leaves.

When it became so dark that it was impossible to journey farther, the horses came to a halt. Maxi was permitted to disembark only after the knights had patrolled the vicinity to ensure that no monsters or wild animals were lurking nearby. She clutched the handle of her lantern and approached Riftan as he set up a small tent near the carriage. The other knights were placing their tents around a campfire.

Riftan hammered a stake into the ground to secure his tent and turned to face her. "These woods are thick with fog before dawn. We need these tents to protect ourselves from the frost."

Maxi looked down at the small, waist-high tent, and bent down to peer inside. It did not look like it fit a single person.

"Isn't it t-too n-narrow for t-two p-people?"

She tilted her head quizzically, and Riftan stopped hammering. He looked embarrassed.

"I'm sleeping here alone," he said. "You'll sleep in the carriage."

Maxi's face went red. She should not have assumed that they would be sleeping together. Ashamed, she hurriedly searched for an excuse.

"W-W-We've b-been sleeping w-w-w—sleeping t-together, so I th-thought …"

"Spare me. I could barely hold back last night."

Maxi hung her head, and Riftan let out a deep sigh. Muttering a curse, he took her hand and led her away from the camp. She followed him as best she could on her unsteady legs.

They did not go far, but it was already alarmingly dark. The haunting cries of nocturnal birds mingled with the rustle of leaves in the wind. As Maxi squeezed Riftan's hand in fear of the unsettling sounds, he pushed her against the thick trunk of a tree and hungrily kissed her.

Maxi gasped as his soft tongue passionately wrapped itself around her own. She flinched, still embarrassed by the sensations of such intimacy, but her movement only encouraged Riftan. He cupped her face and kissed her more deeply.

His soft hair tickled her forehead as his large hands gently stroked her neck, and a finger traced the line of her jaw. Riftan tilted his head to taste the roof of her mouth and explore the insides of her cheeks. A drop of saliva slipped between their lips and trickled down Maxi's chin.

Following its trail with his tongue, Riftan whispered, "I want to spend the whole night like this."

He guided her hand down his body. When she found his hardness pressed against her palm, her heart pounded loudly in her ears. She tried to yank her hand away, but his grip on her arm was far too firm.

"Do you have any idea how excruciating it is to keep my hands off you when I'm in this state?"

Riftan ravaged her with kisses. Caught between the tree trunk and Riftan's body, Maxi struggled for breath. His hands cupped her

buttocks and pulled her close, the bulge of his arousal grinding over her belly. A hungry fire ignited between their bodies. Afraid of how she might react if this continued, Maxi tried to twist out of his embrace.

"N-No … N-Not here …"

Riftan groaned and knocked his head against the tree. "You'll be the death of me, goddammit."

His shoulders heaved with ragged breaths, and Maxi tensed, worried that her refusal had displeased him, but he slowly backed away from her.

"I can't help myself whenever I'm around you," Riftan said. "So you should sleep alone in the carriage. Do you understand?"

Maxi nodded.

He gently patted her cheek. Once again, he took her hand and led her back to the camp. When they returned, a burly knight sat perched on a rock, warming himself by the fireside. He flashed them a knowing grin.

"Done so soon, Commander? It's been too long since you brandished your sword! Has it gone rusty?"

Riftan stopped in his tracks and threw the man a murderous look. Unfazed, the burly knight simply chuckled.

Nearby, another knight leaned against a tree, polishing his sword. "Vulgar oaf," he muttered.

"And how virtuous is the young scion of the House of Ricaydo?" asked the burly knight.

"More virtuous than you'll ever be."

"Ha! The tongue that praises its own master often spouts lies. When no one's looking, prigs like you are the worst lechers of all—Ow! Ow, you little—!"

The burly knight's taunts were cut off as the blond knight—Ricaydo—kicked him. He sprang up and drew his sword, and Ricaydo raised his own freshly polished one to meet him. Maxi clung tightly to Riftan, shocked by their quick tempers.

Putting an arm around Maxi's shoulders, Riftan glowered at the two men. "Aren't you both sprightly tonight! Guess that means you can take the night watch."

"What?!"

"Commander!"

Ricaydo and the burly knight protested in unison, but Riftan ignored them. Brushing past them, Riftan led Maxi straight to the carriage. She glanced anxiously back at the two men, who continued to glare at each other with murderous intent.

Riftan turned her around to face him. "Don't mind them. They're always at each other's throats."

She nodded blankly. Not all knights got along, it seemed, even if they were in the same order.

Riftan helped her into the carriage before heading back to put the finishing touches on his tent. Maxi sat at the door of the carriage, holding out a lantern for him while he worked. When he was done, he tossed a bedroll into the tent and settled on a bulging tree root to polish his sword.

Soon, two knights returned from patrol with three large black-feathered birds in their hands. Grabbing the birds by the wings, the knights twisted and ripped, tearing the appendages off at the joints before discarding them on the ground. Then, with a swift motion, the birds' skin was pulled clean off. Maxi froze, unsettled by the gory scene. Next, the knights sliced off the legs with their daggers before casually tossing them onto a growing pile of feathers. As her stomach churned, Maxi hastily withdrew to the interior of the carriage.

Riftan soon appeared with roasted golden-brown meat and urged Maxi out of the carriage. Together, they sat near the campfire.

He insisted that Maxi eat, but she flatly refused, unable to bring herself to try a single bite. Instead, she chose to have the stale bread again, which she gulped down with the help of a few morsels of cheese.

Riftan frowned at her dinner choice, as he gnawed on meat that dripped with sizzling fat. "It'll take another day to get out of this place. You should eat more."

"I'm … I'm eating m-my f-fill."

It was true. She was continually cramming food into her mouth whenever it was offered, knowing there would be no end to Riftan's

nagging if she did otherwise.

He raised an eyebrow as if he had something to add, but shrugged instead and directed his attention to the food in his hands. Maxi finished her meal and returned to the carriage, trying her best to ignore the mound of feathers next to the campfire.

The chilly air thickened as the night wore on. One by one, the knights entered their tents. Maxi spread her bedroll on the seat of the carriage and lay down, but the cold seeped through her skin and into her very bones. Out in the night, the occasional howl of wild animals and the rustling of leaves punctuated the quiet.

Unable to sleep, Maxi quietly opened the door and looked down at Riftan's tent. For a reason she could not explain, the sight of his long legs jutting out from the tent put her mind at ease. She closed the door and lay back down, but sleep still would not come. She was haunted by the cries of birds that sounded like mournful calls to their lost brethren. After pulling the blanket over her head, she plugged her fingers into her ears.

MAXI DID NOT MANAGE TO FALL ASLEEP UNTIL JUST BEFORE dawn, and she was soon awoken by a flurry of activity. The knights were redonning their armor in the gray early morning. She hurriedly splashed some water over her face and combed her fingers through her hair. They all ate a rushed breakfast of bread and water before the knights signaled for departure.

Maxi climbed into the carriage, which quickly pulled away from the campsite. Despite the rattling, Maxi dozed off. The journey so far had been smooth and easy. The knights even seemed disappointed by the lack of monsters, grumbling aloud that they hadn't seen so much as a common forest goblin. Maxi, however, would be content to never see another monster.

They rode for half a day without taking a break, and after a short stop for lunch by a small spring, the journey swiftly resumed. Maxi's arms and shoulders began to ache from bracing against the juddering carriage as she bounced around inside.

Yet even when her head began to throb, she could not work up the courage to ask for a moment's rest. She endured until nightfall,

and only then was there respite. She ate the food Riftan handed her, though she had no appetite, and fell asleep the moment she lay down on the blanket inside the carriage.

A good night's sleep made the following day much more tolerable. They departed at dawn, and by midday, Eudychal Forest was behind them. The carriage no longer shook as violently, and Maxi let out a sigh of relief.

Unlike the rugged terrain of the forest, the roads on the plains of Anatolium were even and well paved. She opened the window and took in the lush grassland, a wide expanse of green speckled with the cream white of wildflowers. After days of having her vision obstructed by dense forest, the plains were a refreshing sight.

"Anatol lies just beyond those mountains." Riftan, who had been leading the knights, approached the carriage window on horseback. Maxi stuck her head out of the window and looked up ahead. Snow-white peaks lined the horizon of the open plains.

"Endure just a little longer," Riftan said. "We might be able to reach Anatol as early as tomorrow evening."

Maxi almost cried out in relief at the thought of sleeping in a proper bed. For the rest of the day's journey, she pictured herself soaking in a warm bath and dining on soft, freshly baked bread and thick vegetable stew. For dessert, she would have a pie stuffed with jam and a sweet-smelling fruit wine. To top it all off, she would fall asleep in a soft, clean bed.

The carriage came to a stop just as the sun was starting to sink below the horizon. The knights barely acknowledged her as she stepped out of the carriage. Standing among them, she felt like a lost child. Searching for Riftan, she cautiously passed through the knights as they set up camp. She found Riftan watering the horses by a river and hurried toward him.

He turned to her, his brow lined with concern. "What is it? Is something wrong?"

Maxi could not bring herself to admit that she felt uneasy when he was not in her sight. Instead, she bent over and pretended to wash her hands. Riftan crouched down to join her, splashing water over his hands and sweat-slicked nape. His long, muscular neck glistened

in the sunset like heated copper. She stole a furtive look at him as he ran a hand through his windswept hair. Once again, his handsome features set butterflies churning in her stomach.

Riftan pointed at her feet. "Your skirt is getting wet."

His words snapped her out of her reverie, and Maxi quickly stood. Her skirt, dirt-streaked from days of travel, was now heavy with moisture where the hem had touched the water. She clutched her dress and tried to rub away the mud. For a while, Riftan watched her in silence. Then, he got down on one knee.

"Let me help."

"It's … I-It's all right …!" Maxi was about to take a step back when he gave her a pointed frown. She hesitated, recalling his question from the other night. Was it really a habit of hers to always say she was all right?

While she wavered, Riftan took hold of her skirt and soaked the muddy fabric in the river before wringing the water out. Not knowing what to do, Maxi crouched next to him.

Knights valued honor more than their own lives, and a knight would never bow his head before anyone but his sworn lord. Yet Riftan always stooped before her over the most trivial affairs. Perhaps he considered himself beneath her because he was lowborn. But wouldn't the other knights belittle him for kneeling to a woman like her?

"Your skin is cold," Riftan said as he washed his muddy hands. "Warm yourself by the campfire."

Maxi began making her way up the hill, taking care not to soil the skirt that Riftan had just cleaned. A cold westward wind cut through the field, and she pulled her hood tightly over her head to prevent the wind from tangling her hair. She watched as Riftan finished watering the horses, his pant cuffs dampening in the river. The sun sank behind the mountains, and an indigo darkness descended.

Riftan returned with the horses, and he looked up at the sky. "The rainy season is upon us."

Maxi followed his gaze. Thousands upon thousands of brilliant stars twinkled in the clear night sky. Maxi cocked her head, confused. There was no sign of rain.

One of the knights, busy splitting dry twigs to feed the campfire, quietly agreed with Riftan. “It’s that time of year. We’re well into Etherias.”

Maxi pulled her cloak more tightly around her. Etherias, the season of wind, when the leaves changed colors and bitingly cold days were not far off.

“Just thinking about tramping through the mountains in the rain is depressing,” grumbled another knight as he warmed his hands by the fire. “Your armor gets heavier, your greaves sink into the mud …”

“We’ll arrive in Anatol before that,” said Riftan. “No need to worry.”

“Have you forgotten about the capital?” The grumbling knight furrowed his brow and glanced at Maxi. “We’ll be departing again in just a few days! We already lost time because of our detour. No good will come of keeping King Reuben waiting.”

Maxi stood next to Riftan, huddled against him like a duckling to its mother.

“It can’t be helped once the monsoon starts,” said Riftan as he bound the horses’ reins to a stake and plunked himself down by the fire. Maxi quickly settled in next to him.

Ricaydo, listening silently until now, replied to Riftan’s nonchalance in disbelief. “Will the hero who defeated the great dragon disobey the king’s summons over a rainstorm?”

“Who said anything about disobeying? I’m only suggesting a slight delay.”

“We’ve wasted enough time! If we keep the king waiting any longer—”

Ricaydo’s words stung Maxi like the tail end of a whip. Blood drained from her face, and she bunched her skirt in her fists. Riftan’s face hardened.

“Ursuline Ricaydo. Watch your mouth.”

The knight’s lips twitched, as if he had more to say, but Riftan’s menacing voice forced his mouth shut. A heavy silence shrouded the camp, the crackle of burning firewood the only sound until one of the knights finally spoke. His tone was blithe, almost flippant.

“I agree with the commander,” he said, scratching his head. “I don’t want to enter the capital looking like a rain-drenched mongrel.

Three years we fought in that campaign! At least let us return in shining armor."

"Fool!" Ricaydo scowled. "Are appearances all you care about?"

"Sir Hebaron has a point, Sir Ursuline." Ruth, who had been watching from the shadows, stepped forward to join them. "Why not use this opportunity to show the capital that the Remdragon Knights are not to be trifled with?"

Hebaron Nirtha triumphantly raised his chin. "See? Even our sorcerer says I'm right."

"For now, we shall watch where the wind blows," Ruth said to appease Ricaydo. "There may yet be time before the rains begin."

The mood lightened, and Maxi quietly released her breath. From their conversation, it was clear that their detour to the Duchy of Croyso had significantly delayed their journey to the capital.

Located at the southwestern end of the Roviden Continent, Anatol was on a small peninsula that jutted out into the Issyrian Ocean like a serpent's head. Maxi vaguely remembered hearing that the land was surrounded by rugged mountains and bordered by a vast ocean to the south. Drachium, the royal capital of Wedon, was located in the northwestern corner of the kingdom, far north of Anatol. The fastest way to reach Drachium from Aranthal, where the knights fought in the Dragon Campaign, was to follow the Yserium River upstream. Maxi's knowledge of geography was limited at best, but it was not difficult to see that they were taking a circuitous route because of her. If King Reuben was angry with Riftan and the Remdragon Knights, it would be her fault.

Maxi understood why Sir Ursuline was so anxious to reach the capital. Riftan had turned down King Reuben's offer of the princess's hand in marriage, and now he ignored the king's summons, which was intended to honor his victory in the Dragon Campaign. Her guts twisted.

It can't be because of me. There must be some other reason. What kind of knight would disobey a king's summons just to bring his wife home?

She dismissed her initial worries. It was simply absurd to think that Riftan had gone to such lengths for her.

In this age of lords, the power of kings had declined; the lords owned vast tracts of lands, and the manpower required to maintain those holdings often exerted greater influence than that of kings. But unlike the monarchs of the other six kingdoms, the King of Wedon still held considerable power. King Reuben III had earned the fealty of hundreds of high-ranking knights through displays of sheer might. It was implausible that Riftan would shirk his duties to such a king just for her.

"Come," said a knight who had carved a wheel of cheese while the others argued. "There's no need to tire ourselves with fruitless arguments. Let us eat."

As the knight distributed pieces of cheese, Riftan passed Maxi a cup of wine. She drank it to wash down the dry bread that she had already come to loathe. After a dinner of salted meat, bread, and cheese, she stepped back into the carriage.

Despite her exhaustion, she could not fall asleep. Her thoughts wandered to the following evening, when she would arrive at her new home. What would Anatol be like? Just a few days ago, she had been trembling in fear. Now a sliver of hope flickered in her heart.

Perhaps I'll be able to start a new life.

Fearing disappointment, Maxi suppressed her fragile hope.

My good fortune won't last forever.

Not only had she escaped the threat of divorce, but she had also broken free of her father. And her fearsome husband was not a heartless man at all—on the contrary, he was kind. It was too many good things all at once, and Maxi knew that the goddess of fortune seldom smiled.

Pulling the blanket up to her neck, she resolved to be brave, come what may.

THE SUN WAS AT ITS ZENITH WHEN THEY ARRIVED AT the foot of the mountains the following day. A narrow road led into the valley, where it was guarded by a small watchtower. Four sentries hastily came out to greet the knights before leading them to a small pavilion, where they were able to sit at a table for a proper meal of hot stew and roast potatoes.

After sating their hunger, they rode on again. They decided to take the most direct route to Anatol in hopes of arriving before sundown, which meant that Maxi had to step out of the carriage and ride with Riftan. She had ridden ponies before, but never a warhorse. Perched awkwardly in front of Riftan, she nervously gripped the saddle. Riftan locked an arm around her waist and drew her close against him.

"It's a shortcut, so it'll be a bumpy ride. Lean on me if you want to rest."

Maxi did not want to be a burden, but with her riding skills lacking, it was impossible not to hold on to him as they rode through the mountains. She desperately clung to the arm around her waist, certain that she would fall off the horse at any moment. But at no point did Riftan utter a single unkind word.

After they had been riding awhile, a knight at the lead of their formation shouted down the line.

"Commander! There are five werewolves about two thradions up the road!"

The other knights drew their swords. Paralyzed with fear, Maxi gripped Riftan's arm, her knuckles bone white.

"You'd better not make me take care of it!" Riftan bellowed to the knights.

"Of course not, Commander!" said Hebaron. "I've been itching for some action."

With that, he charged forward, and up ahead the snarls of werewolves could be heard. Maxi trembled in terror, and Riftan pulled her close, allowing her to bury her face in his chest.

"It'll be over soon," Riftan said, his tone firm but soothing. "Keep your eyes closed."

Maxi shut her eyes and pressed her hands to her ears, but she could not block out the sound of clashing swords and the echoing bestial roars.

"Commander! Above you!"

Maxi looked up reflexively and shrieked. Quick as lightning, a dark-furred monster with a humanoid body and the head of a wolf jumped from its branch, pouncing at their horse. But before the

creature could reach them, Riftan sliced it cleanly in half midjump. Maxi found herself looking down at the werewolf's bloody corpse, unable to comprehend what had happened.

Riftan, his cloak splattered with blood, clicked his tongue in annoyance. "Can't you even count, Gabel? There were six, not five."

Gabel, the knight who had scouted ahead, scratched his head in shame. "These are black werewolves …. Some can use concealment spells …."

Riftan snorted and spurred his horse forward. Werewolves lay dead everywhere, their battered and broken corpses sprawled over tree roots that protruded from the ground like coiled snakes. With practiced indifference, the knights wiped their swords clean and remounted their horses.

Their incredible strength shook Maxi to her core. She had read about werewolves many years ago, and she knew that they had bones as hard as cast iron and skin as tough as chain mail. They were difficult to kill, even with swords of steel. Yet Riftan's blade had split one such monster in two.

"We should hurry. There might be more of them around," said Ruth, scanning the area.

The knights nodded and urged their horses into a gallop along the sloping path. Maxi clenched her teeth to stop them from biting her tongue. For countless hours, they rode over rocky, thickly wooded mountain paths. When they finally cleared the peak, Maxi was greeted with a breathtaking view. She was spellbound. Beyond the wide-open plains lay a sizable village, enclosed and protected by gray stone walls.

"That is my land, Anatol," said Riftan, pointing at the village. "Our people are mostly mercenaries or miners. There are serfs, too, but the land is ill suited for cultivation, so they mostly raise sheep, chickens, and goats."

As she listened, Maxi surveyed her new home. Pastures sprawled before a towering gate, and a precipitous mountain overlooked the village. On the mountainside, an enormous, golem-shaped fortress jutted out from the rock. Calypse Castle, solitary and intimidating in its immensity, reminded her of Riftan.

"It may not seem luxurious on the outside, but the castle is quite nice on the inside." Riftan sounded nervous as he spoke of his home. "And compared to most castles, it's of a decent size."

Maxi turned to him with incredulous eyes. The stone fortress covered half the mountain! Was this what he considered a merely "decent size"? Perhaps Riftan was comparing his castle to Croyso Castle, which was twice as large and built in the spectacular architectural style of the fallen Roemian Empire.

"We can renovate the interior if it isn't to your liking," Riftan continued uneasily. "I can order furnishings to make the castle as splendid as your father's, though it won't be easy to change the exterior. The castle may look dreary on the outside, but that can't be helped, damn it! There are a lot of monsters this far south, so …"

"A-Are there many m-monsters?" Maxi asked in alarm.

Riftan groaned and rubbed his face with one hand. "There's nothing for you to worry about! You see how tall those walls are? They were the first thing I built when I was granted this land. Years of construction went into them, all for the sake of protecting the village. No monster can set foot inside."

"I'm n-not w-worried …." Maxi could sense his agitation, but she was not just trying to placate him. The walls really did look formidable and secure.

"Enough talk, Commander!" A knight called from behind them. "We're famished!"

Riftan pulled on his reins, and the warhorse galloped down the hill. Maxi squinted as the wind buffeted her face. Her hood blew back, and her hair unfurled from its knot and lashed about in the wind. Soon, they reached the gates of Anatol.

"The Remdragon Knights have returned!" Several of the knights announced their arrival in unison. "Open the gates!"

When the guards saw the white dragon crest on the knights' armor and robes, they immediately opened the gates. Inside, a crowd gathered to welcome the great lord who had defeated the fearsome dragon. When they saw Riftan, they cheered in unison: "Rosem Wigrew d'Calypse! The incarnation of Wigrew!"

Overwhelmed by the booming shouts, Maxi buried her face against Riftan's chest. To be called the incarnation of Wigrew, the legendary hero, was the greatest honor a knight could hope for. Peasants abandoned their work and rushed to join the chorus, raising their pickaxes high above their heads. Women dressed in their best clothes waved bright handkerchiefs, forming a sea of fluttering colors. Miners stood on their carts to greet them, builders cheered from the roofs, and children, their faces covered with soot, beamed with white toothy smiles.

Maxi had never seen anything like this. A staggering number of people were chanting Riftan's name, all in thronging concert, as if unified by an invisible conductor. This was so unlike the world she had known before. It was the opposite of her father's lavish but frigid castle, where the servants' heads were perpetually bowed in fear. A warm vitality filled the air, and the people's faces lit up with joy and pride.

"Commander!" one of the knights in the retinue called. "The people have arranged a welcome feast for us. They've been preparing since they received news of the victory!"

Riftan waved his hand dismissively. "I must return to the castle without delay. The rest of you can go on and enjoy yourselves."

He spurred his horse forward. It reared and galloped at full speed down the flagstone-paved road, while the people crowding the sides of the road rained flowers upon their returning lord. Maxi watched the flying petals, her eyes damp with emotion. The people were not cheering for her, yet her heart was racing. Riftan, on the other hand, remained utterly composed as they rode on.

He was so emotional sometimes, but at other times, he wore such a cold expression that she could mistake him for a granite statue. The man baffled her.

Anatol was so large and full of such vigor that it was impossible to think of it as just a backwoods village. Its wide roads and village square were densely lined with shops, inns, and cottages that were built three to four stories tall. As the knights made a beeline for the taverns along the brook that flowed through the village, finely dressed prostitutes leaned out of the windows to blow kisses their

way. Some even pulled down their bodices to reveal their breasts. Maxi gaped at the scandalous scene.

"Let's hurry," whispered Riftan as more people flocked to the road.

Maxi nodded, and the horse bounded across the square. Past the brook was a long ride up a gentle slope that was bordered by thick rows of trees. When they finally made it to the end, they were greeted by a moat and stone walls the color of ash.

Clearly expecting their lord's arrival, the guards quickly lowered the drawbridge. As the bridge creaked open and revealed what lay beyond, Maxi's eyes widened with awe. The castle was even more magnificent up close. They crossed the bridge and passed through the gates into an expansive courtyard, flanked by training grounds and what must be the guardhouse. Calypse Castle resembled a fortress more than a residence, but it was impressive nonetheless.

After passing the guards, they entered the castle's inner gate.

"We're here," said Riftan.

They climbed a steep ramp and found themselves just outside the main keep. Maxi took in the structures one by one—bleak gardens, colossal stone buildings, and an imposing tower. In front of the steps leading to the main keep, some four dozen servants stood in neat formation, their heads bowed.

"Welcome back, my lord," said the stocky man standing at the head of the gathered servants. "We are happy to see your safe return."

"Yes, yes," Riftan answered absentmindedly as he hopped off his horse and helped Maxi to the ground. He handed the reins to the man who had greeted them. "Make sure Talon gets his rest. It was a long ride."

"As you command, my lord. And the knights …?"

"There's a celebration in the village. They'll likely be staying in the taverns or inns. If any of those fools manage to return despite drowning themselves in wine, you may give them clean rooms."

"We prepared the training grounds and living quarters as soon as we heard news of your return. But if I may inquire, my lord, this lady here is …?"

The stocky man's gaze shifted toward Maxi, and she involuntarily straightened her shoulders.

"My wife." Riftan's tone was uncompromising. "I went to fetch her as soon as I returned to the kingdom."

The servant bowed to her. "Welcome, my lady. My name is Qenal Osban, and I am the stablemaster of Calypse Castle. I tend to the lord's horses."

"It's … a p-pleasure to m-m … m-meet you. I'm M-Maximilian … C-Calypse." Maxi mumbled her reply, avoiding the gazes of the servants as she spoke.

Before she could examine their reaction to her presence, Riftan took her hand and whisked her up the stairs. Up close, the castle was somehow magnificent *and* bleak. In most castles, the steps leading up to the great hall were decorated with brilliant assortments of flowers, plants, and sculptures. Here, there was only a spacious, but neglected pavilion, and a lone, leafless tree. It seemed no one had attempted to landscape the courtyard.

The castle's interior was no better, and Maxi shivered as she followed Riftan into the drafty, dimly lit hall. The floor was made of clay tiles, not marble, and was illuminated by nothing but an old chandelier, hung precariously from the high ceiling. The main hall was completely bare, and even the grand stairway that connected the entrance to the banquet hall was conspicuously uncarpeted.

Riftan strode to the center of the room and surveyed the hall. He whipped around, his voice brimming with fury. "What is the meaning of this?"

The servants who had accompanied him inside paled at the question, but Riftan was unrelenting.

"Didn't I order the castle to be refurbished before my return?"

"We did as you commanded, my lord," an old servant answered. "A new carpet for the drawing room, new furniture, oil for the lamps, and the large quantity of expensive candles you requested—"

"That's not what I asked for! I wanted you to make the castle look as spectacular as possible!" Riftan's voice intensified. He ran a hand through his hair, his breath quick with frustration. "I sent you more than enough gold!"

"Did you mean for the entire sum to be used for refurbishments, my lord?" The old man spoke uncertainly, struggling to mask his distress. "W-We are not accustomed to spending such large amounts of gold without knowing your express wishes …"

"I said I was leaving everything to the steward's discretion!" Riftan snapped. "Look at this mess! How could you let this happen?!" His eyes prowled over the castle's dark and ghastly interior.

The servants exchanged looks, their faces white with fear. Not even a silver-tongued sycophant could describe Calypse Castle as anything but poorly kept. The staircase was missing balusters here and there. Instead of glass, the windows were covered by a foggy film that had faded yellow with time. And not a single curtain had been hung to insulate the room against the season's chill. It had almost felt warmer outdoors.

"Times were good without your lord here, were they?" Riftan's tirade continued. "You've all grown lax!"

"W-We did our best to redecorate the castle as you commanded," said the old servant. "We even replaced the beds and the old furniture so you could rest comfortably as soon as you returned …"

"How dare you make excuses—"

"R-Riftan!" Maxi tugged at his sleeve, unable to bear his stormy mood. "I … I w-want to r-rest now …."

Riftan flinched and gazed down at her, then lifted her into his arms. Maxi flailed her limbs in surprise.

"R-Riftan …!"

"Stay still. You said you needed rest."

"I can w-walk! P-Put me d-down!"

Ignoring Maxi's protests, Riftan ascended the stairs. At the top was a vast hall with an intricately patterned russet carpet, which ended at a heavy oaken door. Riftan strode down the hall, and when he reached the door, he propped Maxi up with one arm and twisted the doorknob with the other.

"At least the room's in a better state," he said as he stepped over the threshold and set her down on the bed.

Maxi took in the neat and cozy bedchamber, her eyes bright with curiosity. The floor was covered with a patterned carpet, and a

wooden pillar, engraved with elegant patterns, stood in the center of the room. The bed was flanked by a fireplace and a large arched window. The glow of the setting sun filtered in through the glass, illuminating the long divan and shelf set against the wall.

Gauzy curtains hung from the corners of the luxurious cherrywood bed, and Maxi brushed her fingers across the delicate fabric. The bedding, too, was delightfully soft, made of a thick fleece. It seemed the bedroom, at least, had received special attention from the servants.

"Everything here must seem so shabby in your eyes," said Riftan, watching Maxi uneasily.

When she gave him a puzzled look, he dragged a hand over his face and spat out a curse.

"Damned fools. I clearly told them …"

"N-No. Th-This room is lovely. The c-castle too … And the b-bed is w-wonderful."

"Don't bother. I've seen Croyso Castle enough times to know better. Compared to your father's castle, this place is like a barn."

"N-No! Th-That's not t-true."

But Maxi's denial must have rung hollow, for it failed to wipe away his frown. She cast her gaze down, resenting her foolish tongue.

Riftan shot her an irritated look. "It's *your* job to decorate our home. The castle wouldn't have fallen into such disrepair if you'd only come here sooner. In the lord's absence, it is the lady's duty to manage the castle."

"I … I'm s-sorry."

"Don't apologize. What I mean to say is … Why don't you decorate this place as you like? I'll give you as much gold as you need. You can buy whatever you want. Expensive ornaments, new carpets …"

Maxi blinked at the unexpected suggestion.

Riftan continued animatedly. "Women love to decorate and pick out furniture, don't they? I can get you more servants to help."

His face glowed with expectation, but Maxi broke into a cold sweat. She had paid little attention to her nursemaid's lectures about a lady's duties, doubting she would ever have an opportunity to perform them. She had never put those lessons into practice, and

her confidence in her abilities was as miserable as the courtyard below.

"You don't want to?" Riftan asked when she did not answer right away.

Maxi hurriedly shook her head. She would do anything to prevent her husband's generosity from ending.

Days of travel had taught her one thing for certain—Riftan Calypse did not have the slightest clue what kind of treatment she had suffered at Croyso Castle. As far as he knew, Maxi was a refined noblewoman who had grown up in luxury, the beloved daughter of the powerful Duke Croyso. And as unpolished as Riftan was, he was still making every effort to treat her accordingly.

Maxi's mouth went dry, and a faint nausea prickled her throat. Her father was likely at the root of this misunderstanding. Ashamed of his eldest daughter's stutter, Duke Croyso had never presented her to high society. Instead, he confined her to the castle, playing the part of a doting father committed to protecting his sickly daughter. The public knew her as the cherished, but frail daughter of Duke Croyso. Riftan, too, seemed to believe that carefully crafted rumor.

Riftan could see with his own eyes how dull and plain she was. Maxi could not understand how he saw her as someone worth doting on, but she resolved to draw out the misconception for as long as possible. If he discovered that she was no refined noblewoman, but a reviled, unwanted pest of a daughter, he would feel deceived.

Riftan had already endured three years of an exhausting campaign because of their unwanted marriage. How demoralized would he be to then find out that his wife was nothing but a nuisance to her family, and one they were glad to be rid of? He would have more than enough reason to curb his generosity.

Maxi anxiously clutched her skirt, unable to bear the thought of Riftan despising or pitying her. She was not sure which would be worse. She wanted him to think of her as a highborn lady who had wanted for nothing. So, instead of admitting that she had little experience ordering servants around, and knew nothing about

managing a castle, she simply dipped her head in a shallow, uneasy nod.

"If … If th-that is your w-wish …"

Riftan's face lit up. "I'll tell the steward to get the ledgers ready. Don't worry about the money. The castle is yours to decorate." He gently tousled her hair, absently wrapping a few locks around his fingers. "This is your home now."

Home. The word burrowed into her heart, and Maxi held her breath against the flutter in her chest.

He means nothing by it. I shouldn't read too much into it.

"I'll d-do my b-best to m-make this place c-cozy," Maxi said with feigned confidence.

"Good." Riftan smiled, satisfied, and planted a kiss on her cheek.

Maxi shied away, suddenly aware that they were now very much alone. Her body smelled acrid from days of traveling without bathing or changing her clothes. She took a step back.

"I would l-like to take a b-bath …."

"Ah. Of course." Riftan turned to sniff himself. He shot up, a mortified look on his face. "I'll tell the maids to prepare your bathwater."

After he left, Maxi rose from the bed and began to shed her dirty clothes in the corner of the room. Riftan soon returned, four maidservants following close behind, carrying a divider and a wooden bathtub between them. As they poured hot water into the tub, Riftan took off his armor and set it on a nearby table.

"Leave us now," he said to the servants. "I'll summon you if you're needed. In the meantime, prepare something for us to eat."

"Yes, my lord. We will leave your clothes here."

Once the maidservants were gone, Riftan pulled his dirty, sweat-stained tunic over his head and undid the straps of his trousers. Flustered, Maxi turned away from him. Riftan approached her and loosened the laces on the back of her dress.

"R-Riftan …!"

"Let's bathe together."

As his warm hand ran down her bare back, she let out a soft gasp. He combed her tangled hair with his hands, sweeping her tresses

over her shoulder to expose her vulnerable nape. Maxi trembled as his soft lips brushed against her.

"It's salty," he murmured.

"D-Don't … It's d-dirty …"

Riftan turned her to face him and pulled her dress down. She closed her eyes, unable to look squarely at his naked body under the light.

"Would it kill you to stop making that face?" he asked, his voice cold. Grabbing her chin, he tilted her face up to him. "I know I don't have the pretty looks of a nobleman's son, but am I *that* horrid to look at?"

"I never said y-you were h-horrid!" Her eyes fluttered open. Was he oblivious to his own beauty? "I'm just n-not used to th-this. I'm … I'm ashamed …."

Riftan stared at her, his intense gaze dark with displeasure. "It's normal for married couples to bathe together."

"N-Normal …?"

"At every castle I've visited, the lord bathes with his wife," he commented coolly, tugging at her dress once more.

Maxi wanted to ask how he knew, but she closed her mouth when her dress slipped down and pooled at her feet. She focused her attention on the light from the fireplace, its warm glow softly illuminating the room.

"It's not strange at all," Riftan reassured her. "Did you know, in the north, it's customary for the lady of a castle to wait on visiting nobles and knights as they bathe?" He gently massaged her shoulders.

Maxi's eyes went round. "W-Will that be e-expected of me t-too?"

"You jest." A savage grin spread across Riftan's face. "Any fool who dares to make such a request, I'll personally bathe in the Stemnu River. I'm the only one you need to tend to. Come."

As Maxi imagined Riftan tossing another man into the river to the underworld, his brawny arms wrapped around her waist, and they entered the bath. Water spilled over the rim. Maxi sat against the edge of the tub, hugging her knees. Riftan, on the other hand,

shamelessly relaxed his body in the water and leaned his head against the tub.

"Is the water too hot?"

"It's … It's all right."

Chin-deep in the water, Maxi curled into a ball and tried to avoid touching his long legs. After a moment watching her, Riftan pulled her toward him and placed her on his lap.

"R-Riftan …!"

"Let me wash you."

He picked up a bar of soap from a small table set near the tub. She tried to free herself, but his grip around her waist was so tight she could not budge. Riftan began to rub the soap over her shoulders and neck.

"I-I can d-do it m-myself!"

"You can wash me afterward," Riftan said, gently kneading the round swell of her breasts with soap-covered hands.

Maxi hastily lowered her arms to cover herself, but it did nothing to stop him. When something hard pressed between her buttocks, she clenched her eyes shut. Riftan's hands continued to glide through the warm water, exploring her waist and abdomen. Tenderly, he caressed every curve of her body and massaged the knots out of her muscles before washing her tangled hair. As he carefully rinsed her hair clean, Maxi began to relax.

"Now wash my hair," Riftan breathed in her ear when he finished.

Maxi gazed at him blankly, her eyelids heavy. Nevertheless, she soon took the soap in her hands and began to rub it over his scalp. When Riftan lowered his head so she would not strain her arms, his hot breath rolled across her breasts.

Suppressing her embarrassment, Maxi carefully worked her fingers through his soft hair. Riftan gently licked the droplets of water that pooled in the hollow pit of her collarbone. It was not unlike bathing a large dog—he could not stay still, and he was intent on licking everything he could reach. It reminded her of her father's hounds, when she was little and used to sneak out and play with them in the garden. The hounds had splashed water all over, too, just like Riftan.

"The foam's getting into my eyes," Riftan whined, scooping a handful of water to his face.

His pouting nearly made her laugh. She splashed water onto his hair to rinse it clean of foam.

The maidservants had left a kettle near the tub, and Riftan lifted it and added hot water to the tub. The knots in Maxi's muscles softened like jelly. Shoulder-deep in the steaming water, she began to doze off. Tension had held her exhaustion at bay, but her fatigue now became an all-consuming haze. In this state of half-sleep, Riftan's touch was deeply soothing.

"Maxi …" He purred in her ear and pulled her against his chest.

A sweet, tingling sensation coursed through her, and she sank into him, the steady beat of his heart lulling her to sleep. Her eyelids became so heavy they closed without her willing them to.

"Maxi? Are you … asleep?"

She tried to open her eyes, but they were too heavy and she was so tired.

"Are you actually asleep?"

The gentle stroking on her back turned into insistent shaking. She tried to say something, but all she could manage were unintelligible mumbles. Her vision began to fade. Soon, she was snoring lightly, her nose buried in his shoulders.

Riftan looked down at her, completely at a loss. "I don't believe it …."

A BLINDING RAY OF SUNLIGHT PRIED OPEN MAXI'S EYELIDS. Her limbs ached, and her head throbbed. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she sat up in bed, only to be instantly chilled by the morning air. She looked down to find herself completely naked under the blanket, and she hastily covered herself again. Disoriented, Maxi tried to recall what had happened.

Yesterday, she and Riftan had arrived in Anatol with the Remdragon Knights and … she had fallen asleep while bathing with Riftan.

Maxi's head snapped up and she quickly scanned the room, but she was alone. Riftan's robe lay next to the fireplace, where a few

stubborn embers still glowed brightly. Where had he gone?

From the bed, she searched the room for something to wear. A neatly folded chemise lay on the window-side shelf. Wrapping the blanket around herself, she scrambled to her feet. As she reached for the chemise, a knock sounded at the door.

"Y-Yes?" she said, too sharply.

"I beg your pardon for disturbing your sleep, my lady," a gentle voice answered her. "But it's time to rekindle the fireplace."

"I-It's all right. I've h-had enough s-sleep. Y-You may enter."

A tall maidservant entered the room and curtsied. She looked to be about thirty years old. "My name is Ludis Ain," she said. "I will be serving you beginning today."

"I'm M-Maximilian C-Calypse. P-Pleased to meet you."

"You retired to bed without dinner last night," Ludis responded courteously, showing no signs of surprise at Maxi's stutter. "Shall I send for your breakfast now?"

"I-I would like to ch-change first …."

"One moment. I shall help you get dressed after I tend the fire."

Ludis took out a few logs of firewood from her basket and fed the embers, occasionally stirring them with a poker until flames crackled to life again. When she was done, she brought Maxi a stack of folded clothes. Maxi quickly slipped on a linen undergarment and a thin chemise while Ludis filled a small washbasin with warm water and a few drops of scented oil. She soaked a clean towel in the fragrant water and dabbed Maxi's face, neck, and arms before helping her into an elegant, ankle-length golden dress.

Once the dress was on, Maxi gasped at its intricate embroidery. The long hanging sleeves looked like butterfly wings. It was as lovely as anything from Rosetta's wardrobe.

"Please tell me if it's too tight," Ludis said, tying a red ribbon just beneath Maxi's bust.

Maxi shook her head. She hardly recognized the woman in the mirror. Her pale face was radiant, perhaps due to her good mood, and her unruly auburn hair elegantly complemented the gold of her dress.

"Would you like me to braid your hair and put it up, my lady?"

“Y-Yes, please.” Maxi nodded and sat down in a chair by the window.

Ludis adjusted the mirror and began to gently comb. Listening to the ivory comb slide through her hair, Maxi looked outside. Beyond the window, a palisade of gray cliffs dominated the view and towering conifers pointed toward the sky like spears.

“Do you wish to eat in here, my lady?”

Maxi shook her head, hoping to explore the castle some more. Here, there were no scowling half-sisters or fathers who could fly into a violent rage over the mere sight of her. She was free to roam wherever she liked.

“I’ll e-eat in the ddining hall. P-Please help me f-finish getting r-ready.”

“Yes, my lady.”

In the blink of an eye, Ludis braided her hair into a bun, and then fetched a pair of fashionable long-toed shoes. Maxi slid her feet into them and examined her reflection in the mirror. After days of travel, a change of clothes and freshly styled hair had done wonders for her appearance. Her cheeks flushed with excitement. Would Riftan be pleased to see her?

“W-Where’s R-Riftan—I-I mean, Lord C-Calypse?”

“I’m told the lord went to the training hall at dawn,” Ludis answered, looking concerned. “My lady, do you feel unwell?”

“N-No …” Maxi cocked her head, unsure how Ludis had gotten that impression.

Blood rushed to her face in sudden realization. Was it because of her stutter? A torrential wave of shame swept away her excitement.

“I-I … I’m a-all right.” Her shaky voice sounded awful even to her own ears. Unable to bear the embarrassment any longer, Maxi made straight for the door.

“My lady!” Ludis ran after her, her expression troubled. “Please allow me to guide you through the castle.”

Maxi had darted into the hallway with almost no knowledge of the lay of the castle. She slowed and nodded slightly, grateful that Ludis continued to treat her with respect.

“This way,” said Ludis when she reached Maxi’s side.

As Ludis led her toward the stairs, Maxi peered into corners of the castle that she had missed the previous day. The gray stone walls, though coarse, had a natural beauty to them. Sunlight streamed in through the arched windows, casting intricate shadows on the floor. She squinted in the blinding light as she followed Ludis.

Calypse Castle looked different in daylight. It was still just as bleak and as empty, but now it radiated an antique charm.

It's the perfect castle for a knight ….

"Are there any foods you dislike, my lady?" Ludis asked as they walked. "Or any favorites you would like me to request for you?"

"N-Not really …" Maxi trailed off, uncertain how to answer the unfamiliar question.

A long-suffering look flashed across Ludis's face. Perhaps she was lamenting her misfortune to have received a difficult mistress.

Maxi shook her head to clear the self-disparaging thoughts and followed Ludis into the spacious dining hall. A long cherrywood dining table stood in the center of the room, and a row of servants waited by the wall. One of them, the old man who had been on the receiving end of Riftan's ire yesterday, pulled a chair out for her.

"I trust you had a good night's rest, my lady?"

"Y-Yes, I did."

"Forgive me for not introducing myself yesterday. My name is Rodrigo Ceric. I oversee all the servants in this castle."

"P-Pleasure to meet you," Maxi said, trying her best to remain calm.

Rodrigo bowed. "At your service, my lady. Please do not hesitate to let me know if there is anything you need."

"Th-There is s-something," Maxi said hesitantly.

Rodrigo waited politely for her to continue.

"The l-lord told m-me that I c-could decorate the c-castle …"

"Indeed, my lady. The lord made it clear this morning that I am to assist you in any way I can. I was planning to summon the merchants to the castle soon. Would you like to look around before then?"

"Y-Yes, I w-would."

Maxi examined the steward's face, searching for signs that he scorned her stuttering. But Rodrigo betrayed no such emotion as he placed a set of silver cutlery and cup on the table. Relieved, she began eating the food that the attendant served her. She fell asleep without eating dinner the previous night, and partaking in little more than coarse bread during the journey from Croyso Castle had made her ravenous.

She started with a spoonful of rich soup before proceeding to the soft, freshly baked bread, spreading generous dollops of butter and jam over the fluffy surface. Though she usually ate like a bird, the sight of such mouthwatering fare after days without a proper meal had given her a voracious appetite. After she finished the thick soup and a slice of meat pie with relish, she cleansed her palate with sweet apple cider. Even if she had not been so hungry, the food would have tasted exceptional.

"Would you care for some more, my lady?" Rodrigo asked.

"I-I've had plenty, th-thank you."

She dabbed her mouth with a napkin and rose from her seat. When she left the dining hall, Rodrigo guided her through the castle and recounted Anatol's history.

"Calypse Castle was built one hundred fifty years ago by Sir Anatol, a Roemian knight. After the empire fell, monster attacks became more frequent in this area, and the Seven Kingdoms gradually lost control of Anatol. Forty years ago, when the region was incorporated into Wedon, the land was barely populated. It was an untamed place where monsters roamed free.

"But ten years ago, Sir Riftan Calypse, age eighteen and freshly knighted, became the new lord of Anatol. The first thing he did as lord was order a thorough renovation of the castle, and the walls around the village were rebuilt. Because of Lord Calypse, the population in Anatol has since tripled."

Rodrigo's voice swelled with pride and respect as he spoke of Riftan's achievements. It appeared the previous day's scolding hadn't diminished his loyalty at all.

"That being said," he continued, his voice almost apologetic, "the focus of the renovations was on utility more than on architectural

beauty. The castle is quite stark in appearance."

Maxi smiled awkwardly. Her mission was now clear. "H-How many rooms a-are there in t-total?"

"More than one hundred rooms in the main keep alone. The tower and annex hold some forty chambers. When you count the guard barracks and knights' quarters, there are two hundred fifty rooms."

His answer dismayed her. How could she possibly redecorate so many rooms?

But Rodrigo was not finished.

"There are five drawing rooms, two banquet halls, and refreshment rooms on each floor, but none have seen use in decades," he lamented. "The knights do not care for tea. I must confess, it has been far too long since I last brewed a nice pot."

Maxi pictured Riftan holding a dainty teacup. It was a dreadfully unflattering image. She chuckled to herself, and Rodrigo gave a discreet cough.

"Do you enjoy drinking tea, my lady?"

"I … I do."

"Then I'll have the page prepare refreshments. Nothing but the finest tea leaves for you, my lady."

"Th-Thank you."

A soft smile spread across the old man's wrinkled face, and Maxi's anxiety dissipated. The steward seemed to be a gentle soul.

"Shall we move on to the next room?"

Maxi nodded and followed Rodrigo up the stairs.

"You must already be aware, my lady, but the dining hall is on the first floor next to the grand hall, and your ladyship's bedchamber is on the third floor. Lord Calypse's study is located at the northern end of the same floor. The second floor holds the banquet hall and guest quarters, and the library can be found on the fourth floor."

"Th-There's a l-library?"

"Yes. The lord owns a collection of some eight thousand books, though most are from the days of the Roemian Empire. Would you like to see the library?"

She hesitated. Books were costly, and Riftan might not want her rummaging through them. Maxi shook her head.

"N-Next time, p-perhaps …"

"Of course. Then let us proceed to the drawing room and banquet hall."

She nodded. Drawing rooms and banquet halls served the vital function of receiving guests, and it seemed prudent to survey the rooms before planning their decoration.

The banquet hall was completely bare. Not a single chandelier hung from the vaulted ceiling, and a chill rose up from the stone floor. Cracks in the windows allowed a draft to sweep through the barren hall, completing the dreary atmosphere.

"We've never held a banquet here, you see …" Rodrigo trailed off in embarrassment.

"Y-You must have had g-guests visit?"

"The only guests who visit Lord Calypse are knights who do not care for balls or banquets. The lord opens the wine casks for such guests from time to time, but he has never hosted a formal dinner with other lords. The reconstruction of the castle and walls required so much gold that there was none to spare for the entertainment of guests." Rodrigo sighed. "After years of disuse, his lordship seems to have forgotten about the very existence of these halls."

Exasperated, Maxi resisted the urge to clutch at her hair. Riftan may have managed to avoid hosting banquets thus far, but he was now a man of influence. He was lauded as the strongest knight on the continent. Sooner or later, guests would flock to the castle, and she could not leave it in such a sorry state.

"P-Please ask the merchants to c-come as soon as p-possible."

Rodrigo nodded eagerly before leading her to the drawing room and guest quarters. The drawing room was in no better shape—the guest quarters, at least, contained sufficient furnishings. There were sturdy beds and clean sheets in each room, and elegant shelves by the windows. Maxi appraised the rooms before following Rodrigo to the servants' quarters on the first floor.

"The men live in the annex," Rodrigo explained, "and the maidservants sleep on the first floor of the keep so they can answer summons at all times. You need only ring the bell in your room to call for them, even in the small hours of the night."

According to Rodrigo, a total of eighty-seven servants worked in the castle, a number that seemed far from sufficient for maintaining a castle so large. Perhaps there hadn't been a need for more hands, with the master of the castle absent for so long?

After introducing Maxi to the maidservants, Rodrigo led her to the spacious kitchen, the last stop of their tour. There, she encountered a warmth that was absent from the other rooms.

An enormous flame-spitting oven and a row of fireplaces lined the wall. A bathtub-sized pot simmered on red-hot coals, and in an open oven beneath the air vent, a deer roasted on a spit, its flesh dripping and sizzling tantalizingly.

Everywhere Maxi looked, servants were busy kneading dough, peeling potatoes, carving smoked meat, and washing a veritable mountain of dishes at the sink.

"The kitchen is the busiest place in the castle," Rodrigo said, gesturing at the bustling activity. "The servants can barely rest, as they must cook for the knights and soldiers every day. We're short on labor, so every servant in the castle is involved with the preparation of lunch and dinner."

"So th-that's why th-there were n-no servants in the o-other rooms …." Maxi silently resolved to ask Riftan to hire more servants.

"Shall we head to the annex, my lady?"

Under the sun, the gardens looked even more barren than before. The earth was thick with weeds, and the leafless tree next to the pavilion was long overdue to be cut down.

The great hall was the pride of every lord. The gardens leading to the entrance of the main keep were always designed to impress guests, for they were the first thing that visitors would see. Her father had always ensured that the gates of Croyso Castle were decorated with many colorful flowers and a host of well-groomed trees, no matter the season.

The gardens don't need to be extravagant, but I must improve them so that no one can ridicule Calypse Castle or Riftan.

"I-Is there no g-gardener?" Maxi asked with a frown.

"The servants usually take turns cleaning the gardens," answered Rodrigo, wiping the sweat from his forehead. "That is to say we

don’t have any gardeners.”

The servants could not be blamed. It was the responsibility of the lord and lady to keep the castle presentable. When Riftan departed for the long campaign, the task should have fallen to Maxi. She finally understood her husband’s earlier rebuke.

Maxi rubbed her temples, overwhelmed by the amount of work to be done. “I’d l-like to see the a-annex now.”

“Certainly, my lady. This way.”

She followed Rodrigo through the gardens and along a narrow dirt path. A few ancient-looking oak trees cast delicate shadows on the ground.

“In the past,” Rodrigo said, “the annex was the residence of Lord Anatol’s kin, but it has since been renovated and now serves as lodging for the squires.”

“Are there m-many s-squires here?”

“Around thirty, I would say. After Lord Calypse became commander of the Remdragon Knights, many lords sent their sons here. After a period of apprenticeship, they will be knighted and formally inducted into the order.”

Rodrigo came to a halt. “Ah, it’s their training hour.”

Maxi stopped beside him. In a wide clearing at the end of the path, a group of youths who looked no older than fifteen stood in neat rows, wooden swords in their hands.

“Shall I announce your presence, my lady?”

“N-No … I d-don’t wish to d-disturb them. We c-can see the annex l-later.” Maxi waved her hands in agitation as she spoke, but quickly froze—Riftan stood before the youths in the shade of a tree, his figure tall and imposing.

“It seems his lordship is overseeing their training,” the steward said, his voice suddenly nervous. “I think it’s best if we head back, my lady. The lord doesn’t approve of anyone intruding on his training sessions.”

“All right. L-Let us r-return, then,” Maxi said, turning back the way they had come. But before she could take a step, someone grabbed her wrist and she whirled around in surprise.

It was Riftan. Just a moment ago, he was standing over by the tree. How had he approached her so quickly?

"Were you going to leave without saying a word?" he asked, still gripping her wrist.

"I d-didn't want to d-disturb you …"

"You're not disturbing us at all." He took hold of her arm and turned around to face the squires. The young men were drenched in sweat, their faces red with exertion as they watched their lord curiously.

"We're taking a break!" Riftan bellowed. "We'll resume in an hour. Go and rest in the annex."

With his hand over hers, he pulled Maxi away. Flustered, she turned to look at Rodrigo, but the steward stood with his hands politely clasped, making it clear he did not intend to follow.

"Have you eaten?" Riftan asked, his eyes fixed on the path before them.

"I … I-I ate in the d-d-dining hall. The s-steward g-g-g—was g-giving me a t-tour of the c-castle …." she stammered, without once meeting his eyes. Remembering how she had fallen asleep while bathing with him, her cheeks grew hot.

"F-Forgive me … for t-troubling you last n-night."

"Troubling me?" He slowed his pace so he could look at her.

"I f-fell asleep, j-j-just like th-that …."

"It's fine. You're not used to long journeys," he answered brusquely before picking up his pace again.

Maxi studied his expression. Despite his reassuring words, he looked displeased. "S-Still, you must have been t-tired too …. But you had to t-take care of m-me …"

"I wasn't tired," Riftan replied coolly. "Quite the opposite, actually."

"P-Pardon?"

Riftan glanced sharply at her. When she flinched, he let out a sigh. "Never mind. You said you were looking around the castle? I'll guide you."

"Al-All right …" Though Maxi wanted to ask if she had done something wrong, she decided it was best to keep quiet.

CHAPTER 4



TOGETHER, MAXI AND RIFTAN CROSSED THE GARDENS and climbed the stairs to the battlements. In the distance, hills thick with verdant trees sloped into rocky mountains and steep cliffs.

"Thirty to thirty-five sentries patrol the ramparts every day, keeping watch for monsters," explained Riftan. "If they spot any, they sound the kopel horn, which signals our forces to ready themselves for battle."

Maxi looked over the fortress, its simple structure steadfast against the howling winds. It was surrounded by high walls, with the knights' quarters and training grounds in front of the outer gates. Within the inner gate were the main keep and the annex. Altogether, the rustic castle resembled a kneeling giant. Behind the castle was a spacious garden, and in the center of that garden was a tall, slender tower like an iron spike.

Noticing Maxi's inquiring look, Riftan said, "Ruth lives in that tower. It's near the mountains, so it makes it easier for him to use long-distance magic, should the need arise." He furrowed his brows in annoyance. "But don't get too close. He cast strange magic runes all over the tower in the name of *research,* and they can be a real pain to deal with."

"M-Magic runes …?" Maxi glanced up at him, her curiosity piqued.

But Riftan seemed to be uninterested in explaining further, and instead led her along the patrol route toward the castle's rear.

"What you see over there is the stable. That's the barn, and that structure there is the granary. We always keep the granary stocked

in case we come under siege." Riftan's monotonous voice faltered as he considered her expression. "I must be boring you. I'm not much of a storyteller. Especially around women …"

"N-No, I'm not b-bored." She gave him a small, reassuring smile.

It was difficult to picture Riftan bantering or engaging ladies in conversation. It was harder still to believe that he was uninitiated in the art of courtship. Unless he had only recently transformed into a good-looking man, Riftan had lived twenty-eight years with an incredibly handsome face. It was implausible that women left him in peace.

The knights who regularly visited Croyso Castle were masters of courtship. Time and again, Maxi had overheard the maidservants giggling among themselves as they whispered about the knights' seductive charm. Riftan must have bedded a pretty maidservant at some point—or perhaps even a beautiful noblewoman. When Maxi recalled him mentioning the northern custom of the host's wife attending to guests while they bathed, her spirits plummeted. His past deeds were not her business, yet she felt a pang in her heart.

"What's wrong?" Riftan asked. "You're frowning."

Maxi quickly thought of an excuse. "Oh, th-the wind. The wind is j-just a little c-cold."

Riftan wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "I should've told them to prepare warmer clothes."

His closeness enveloped her with an overwhelmingly masculine scent, and Maxi held her breath against it. "It's … It's all right. It's s-sunny. If th-the wind w-weren't blowing, it w-would be w-warm …."

"Do you like the dress?"

She glanced down. He would surely find it strange if she told him that she had never worn anything so beautiful.

"Y-Yes, I do."

"I'll call the dressmaker to the castle so you can order anything you want. You can have dozens of dresses. Hundreds, even."

Riftan raised her chin and his penetrating gaze seemed to strip her bare. Blood rushed to her face. Was this really the act of a man who did not know the first thing about courtship?

Maxi averted her eyes. "Is th-that a h-habit of yours?"

"What do you mean?"

"Always t-telling me you'll g-get me anything I w-want."

He frowned at her candor. "I mean it. I told you I wouldn't give you any less than what you had at Croyso Castle."

Maxi swallowed nervously. She had neither lived in luxury nor received the things she had wanted. Would Riftan still show her such kindness if he discovered she was not the noble lady he imagined? Just how long would she deceive him?

"I'd l-l … l-like to g-go back … inside and r-rest now," she mumbled, trying to avoid his eyes.

"Are you tired?"

When she nodded, Riftan stepped forward, leading the way. A fierce wind whipped through the dense forest on the mountain, and the trees themselves seemed to howl. Maxi stopped in her tracks. The wind brought with it an inexplicable scent of loneliness.

Will I be living with this for all the years to come?

Her eyes briefly rested on the bleak landscape before she turned to follow Riftan.

MAXI RETURNED TO HER ROOM ALONE WHILE RIFTAN resumed his supervision of the squires' training. As she sat beside the fireplace, Ludis brought a tray of honey ginger tea and biscuits flecked with dried fruit.

"Lord Calypse will hold a feast with the knights this evening," said Ludis, pouring her another cup of tea. "Would you like to freshen up for the occasion, my lady?"

Maxi gave her a puzzled look. "F-Freshen up?"

"Yes, my lady. This is your first appearance as Lord Calypse's wife. I thought it might serve you well to have you styled for the occasion …." Ludis trailed off and bowed her head suddenly. "I … I spoke out of turn, my lady. Please forgive me."

"N-No, it's all right."

Maxi glanced toward the mirror that stood against the wall. The elegant bun that Ludis so carefully styled had become disheveled in the wind. She brushed back the loose strands and nodded.

"Then p-please …"

Ludis rose and left the room with the teapot in her hand. She returned with a small box containing a comb, scented water, and jewelry. Maxi sat in front of the mirror as Ludis swiftly undid her hair, combing it until it gleamed under the light. Maxi was accustomed to her nursemaid combing with so much force that it threatened to tear off her scalp. In contrast, Ludis's hands were miraculously gentle and skilled.

"Would you like a hairpin, my lady? Or a circlet, perhaps?"

Ludis opened the box of jewelry. On the red satin lay brooches adorned with precious stones, pearl necklaces, gold rings, and silver hairpins.

Maxi's eyes went wide with wonder. As far as she knew, Riftan had no mother, sisters, or any other family members. Why, then, did he have all this jewelry? It was also strange that such an extravagant dress was prepared within a day of her arrival. Could it all belong to a former lover?

"My lady, are these not to your liking?"

"N-No, they're lovely …" Maxi focused her attention on the ornaments, and tried to ignore the strange, sharp feeling in her heart. She pointed to an exquisite hairpin that sparkled with flower-shaped jewels. "P-Please use th-this one."

"Yes, my lady."

Ludis braided Maxi's hair and rolled it into a thick bun, fixing it with the glittering hairpin. Next, she hung a string of pearls around Maxi's neck and slid a crystal ring on her finger. When Maxi beheld the final results, she saw a richly dressed stranger. Flushed cheeks, wavering eyes, and an uncertain expression—she looked like a clumsy child who had stolen her mother's jewels.

Ludis studied Maxi's expression while she straightened out the creases on her mistress's skirt. "Shall I bring other jewels, if these are not to your liking?" she asked cautiously.

Maxi shook her head. "I-It's all right. Th-These are g-good enough."

Ludis rose from straightening Maxi's dress, visibly relieved. Maxi wrapped a thin shawl around her shoulders and left the room.

Outside, the sun was already setting. As she strolled down the hall, Maxi watched through the windows as it sank toward the horizon.

"It seems you are ready, my lady," a bright voice called from behind her. "I was just on my way to escort you to the dining hall."

She spun around to see Rodrigo, smartly dressed, walking briskly on his spindly legs.

"The knights have arrived," he said when he reached her side. "Let us hurry, my lady. Lord Calypse is waiting."

Maxi nodded and followed him downstairs. When they reached the entrance to the dining hall, boisterous voices clamored from within, and she hovered on the threshold to peer inside. Under the twinkling lights, fifty men sat crammed on either side of a long dining table laden with delectable roasts, loaves of bread, goblets of wine, and ripe fruit. Flames blazed warm and inviting in the fireplace.

Unsure that her presence was appropriate at a knights' banquet, Maxi hesitated.

"Is something wrong, my lady?" Rodrigo asked hesitantly.

Maxi shook her head and mustered up the courage to enter. Silence fell upon the room as all eyes swiveled toward her.

Riftan beckoned. "Come here, Maxi."

Her legs nearly froze in place, but she managed to walk over to the seat next to him. Maidservants promptly placed small portions of food on her plate.

"Some of you haven't been introduced yet," Riftan said as Maxi settled into her seat. "This is my wife, Lady Maximilian Calypse."

Maxi looked up from her plate and anxiously watched the knights' faces. Their expressions were ambiguous, neither friendly nor hostile.

"I trust you'll treat her with the respect she deserves," Riftan continued, a hint of warning in his tone. Only then did the men begin to extend half-hearted greetings.

Maxi mumbled her thanks, and the knights quickly resumed their meal.

"Why aren't you eating?" Riftan asked as he poured her a half-full glass of wine. "Is the food not to your tastes?"

"N-No, it's d-delicious."

"Then eat." Riftan picked up a drumstick with his bare hands and sank his teeth into it, his manner no different than when he had been eating fireside on the journey from Croyso Castle. He devoured the meat from the bone before reaching for another.

Maxi gaped at his insatiable hunger. After gulping down wine like water, he urged her to eat again with a sharp look.

He always pressures me to eat ….

Maxi sliced off a steaming piece of smoked meat and brought it to her mouth. It was fatty and sweet, and paired well with the side of light salad greens. Despite her anxiety, the food tasted delicious. The chef here at Calypse Castle was undeniably more skilled than the one at Croyso Castle.

As Riftan watched her eat, he deposited more food onto her plate. "Try some of this. It's good."

She took a bite. This meat was marinated in a red sauce and tasted gamey, though it was not terrible. While she chewed, Maxi glanced at the platters on the table. Most were piled high with meats, but she could not identify all of it.

As soon as she finished her plate of food, Riftan passed her steamed fowl stuffed with beans and potatoes. "Here, eat this too."

"I c-can't eat all th-that."

"You've barely eaten! Come now, just a bit more."

Maxi scrunched up her nose. She had forced herself to eat everything that Riftan put on her plate, and she now felt nauseous. Unable to endure another bite of the rich feast, she set her fork down.

Riftan frowned. "Even birds eat more than you do."

"Th-That's not t-true. I've had so m-much …."

Riftan snorted. A heap of bones, picked clean, sat on his plate. Even among the knights, he seemed to have an exceptional appetite. Maxi really did eat like a bird in comparison.

She sighed. "H-How much is e-enough?"

Riftan glanced at her, his mouth full. He swallowed the food before answering her nonchalantly. "You should eat a whole chicken, at least."

"I d-don't think m-most women c-can eat that m-much …"

"I know one woman who did."

Maxi winced. Who was he referring to? Was he fond of women with big appetites? Most men wanted healthy wives who could bear them healthy children. She looked down at her own thin body. Squeezing her eyes shut, she pushed more food into her mouth, determined to eat just a little more.

Riftan smiled. "Try eating more and more each day. You're too frail."

She nodded, an entire piece of bread stuffed in her mouth, and Riftan began drinking with the older knight sitting next to him. As Maxi sipped her wine to wash the food down, she studied their faces. Many were ones she did not recognize from the journey to Anatol.

At the center of the table were younger knights drinking and laughing raucously, and at the far end sat youths who had seen no more than sixteen summers. Two middle-aged knights near the head of the table offered Riftan glass after glass of wine.

Maxi continued to sip her own wine, intrigued by their conversation. They spoke of the progress of the squires' training, crop yields and mine outputs, monster sightings, the efficacy of various weapons. She never had the chance to learn about such matters—or even overhear their discussion—at her father's castle. Riftan was still engrossed in the conversation with the senior knights when the youngest of squires, a youth with silver hair, sprang up from his seat.

"Sir Riftan!" he cried. "Is it true that during the final battle in the Lexos Mountains, you cut through Dragon's Breath with your blade aura?"

Everyone stopped talking to stare at the young man. Unruffled by the stares of the senior knights, he continued to chatter away.

"They say the flames of Dragon's Breath can blow off the tops of mountains. It's the most powerful magic in the natural world! How were you able to cut through it with only a sword?"

"My blade aura just so happens to be special," answered Riftan, irritated by the interruption.

"Our captain's sword can absorb any magic that it encounters," interjected a knight as he filled a large tankard with ale. "The stronger the opponent's magic, the stronger his sword becomes."

Maxi recognized Hebaron Nirtha, one of the knights who had traveled with them to Anatol.

"Well, even without such a unique sword, our captain is an excellent swordsman!" said Sir Hebaron. "He bested that pompous commander of the Osiriyan Temple Knights!"

"He's the commander, not captain," said Ursuline Ricaydo, the short-tempered blond knight. "When will you get rid of those mercenary habits of yours?"

Sir Hebaron snorted loudly. "Captain, commander, it's all the same! Don't lecture me on useless distinctions."

The silver-haired youth watched them bicker for a moment, then shouted with renewed excitement. "Is it true, then, that Sir Riftan dueled Sir Kuahel Leon of the Temple Knights? Why doesn't anyone ever speak of it?"

"It wasn't the time to brag," Ricaydo said sharply. "The Dragon Campaign was right before us, and two of the greatest knights dueled each other instead. The campaign's high command feared that Sir Kuahel's defeat would demoralize the Temple Knights and weaken the alliance with them, so they silenced all talk of it. One duel can always lead to another among hot-blooded knights. We were there to hunt a dragon, not fight in a tourney."

"S-Still, it was a duel between the two strongest knights on the continent! It's a pity that no one has heard of it. It must have been spectacular to see."

"Slaying the dragon was more than enough," Riftan said dryly. "I don't need any other exploits to my name. And it wasn't an official duel—we were preparing for the Dragon Campaign, so both of us held back. As for the dragon, my contribution to that victory was greater than Sir Kuahel's solely because of my sword's ability to absorb magic. It had nothing to do with swordsmanship."

"It's not like you to be so modest," quipped a young knight as he munched on an apple. "A victory's a victory. You both agreed to a duel under limited conditions, and you won fair and square."

The silver-haired squire looked eagerly toward the new speaker. "Sir Gabel! Please tell us more about the duel."

Gabel Lachzion raised a brow. "You'd rather hear about that instead of the campaign?"

"No! You must tell us about the dragon too!"

Sir Gabel chuckled at the youth's enthusiasm. Maxi listened intently, hoping he would tell the story. She had heard bards sing at her father's banquets about the heroic deeds of knights, but she had never heard the stories firsthand.

Gabel guzzled a tankard of golden ale before recounting the campaign's early days, beginning with a battle against ogres and trolls. By the time his vivid account reached the struggle against three basilisks in the valley leading into the Lexos Mountains, Maxi was just as enthralled as the bright-eyed squires.

The monsters she had encountered in person had been terrifying, but she was captivated by the creatures in Gabel's eloquent narration. As she silently marveled at his talent for storytelling, Riftan reached out and touched the pearl necklace at her throat. Maxi turned to him in surprise and found him watching her, his head propped up on one hand.

"W-What is it?" Maxi asked, then gasped softly as his hand grazed past her nape to stroke the bare skin above her plunging neckline. Mortified, she looked around the room, but the others were too engrossed in conversation to notice.

She let out a sigh of relief and tried to push Riftan's arm away. He smirked and toyed with the loose strands of hair resting on her shoulder instead, then tapped her collarbone with his fingertips. A pleasant tingle shivered through her body, and she trembled as he traced the length of her spine before grasping her waist. As his hand caressed her belly, she blushed.

"R-Riftan …"

"It seems my wife has had too much wine," Riftan addressed the knights. "We'll take our leave now."

The animated chatter among the knights quieted as the men exchanged knowing looks. Maxi blushed crimson, certain that she would die of embarrassment.

"Let's go," Riftan said, ignoring the knights' suggestive jests.

He helped Maxi to her feet and led her out of the dining hall. She followed him on faltering steps, and her eyes struggled to adjust to the darkness. Not a sliver of moonlight shone through the opaque windows, and the corridors were illuminated by only dim flickering lamps. The walls gave off a deep chill.

"R-Riftan," Maxi pulled at his arm, unable to keep up with his quickening pace. "P-Please slow d-down."

Suddenly, Riftan grabbed her waist and slid his hands down to her thighs, lifting her up so her legs were at his hips. She cried out, but he pushed her against the staircase wall and kissed her passionately, stifling the sound. Though the entanglement of their tongues was overwhelming, Maxi found herself tightening her grip around his shoulders. She had tasted his lips countless times, yet each kiss still felt new and strange.

"I wanted to do this all day." Riftan's growl reverberated through her, and the vibrations tickled her insides. "I was holding back for your sake, but you were watching the other men so intently …."

As his powerful chest pressed against her breasts, Riftan slid a calloused hand into her hair and pulled her closer. He resumed their ascent upstairs and, with each step he climbed, he showered her with kisses. Maxi clung to his neck, afraid of tumbling down the stairs. Once, Riftan had been a source of fear, but now his touch melted her thoughts until they trickled and pooled deep inside her like molten rock.

"Damn these stairs! Why are there so many?" Riftan impatiently slid a hand under her skirt and stroked her thigh.

"N-No!" Maxi shrieked. "N-Not out here—"

Riftan swallowed her words with another kiss. A shiver ran through her, and she dug her fingers into his shoulders. His hand slipped below her undergarment, and his fingers slid easily into the wetness between her thighs, producing a soft, slick sound. Maxi's insides melted, and her heart pounded against her chest.

"I want to enter you right here and now," Riftan said, his breath hot on her neck as he pushed his fingers in deeper.

Maxi could not tell whether the intense sensations sweeping through her body were caused by fear or passion. Shuddering at the thought of someone watching them from the shadows, she clung to Riftan more tightly.

Riftan's lips burned with his need as they brushed across her ears, neck, and collarbone. His thick fingers thrusted gently in her tender flesh, and when Maxi moved her hips the way he had once taught her, Riftan bit her shoulder to the point of pain. He panted heavily, like an eager hunting dog standing before an ensnared bird.

"Not even death could stop me today."

With that, Riftan bounded up the last flight of stairs as Maxi clung to him. He yanked open the door to their room, closed it behind them, and immediately undressed her, pulling her chemise down to her waist. Maxi suppressed a moan as Riftan's mouth enveloped one of her breasts. His tongue teased and circled the sensitive bud of her nipple, and his teeth grazed her skin briefly before he began to suck.

Disoriented by the soaring thrill shooting through her, Maxi writhed. "R-Riftan …"

"Let me have you," he growled, and the command was almost a plea. "Don't say you don't want it."

Maxi's heart pounded dizzyingly under his intense gaze. "I … I …"

"I'll die if I wait any longer," he said, his voice cracking. "Let me fill you. Please."

As his lips devoured hers again, the skin around Maxi's eyes grew hot. Without a word, she wound her arms around his neck. In answer, Riftan embraced her fiercely, and they tumbled onto the bed.

Shame and excitement. Trepidation and anticipation. A tangle of emotions swept through her as she dazedly kissed him, and the sheets bunched together like cotton clouds under them. Riftan pulled out her hairpin, freeing her hair from its elaborate braid before tearing off her chemise. The cool air on her bare skin roused the last bit of modesty left in her.

"W-We should b-bathe first …"

"So you can fall asleep again? Not a chance." Riftan grabbed her breast and murmured against skin that was wet from his attention.

"I'll bathe you later, so …"

The rest of his words were lost to her as she surrendered herself to his touch, like dough in a baker's hands. Each time the tip of his tongue swirled around her nipples, Maxi's blood foamed and she arched into him.

"Th-This feels s-s-strange." Her stutter was more severe than usual, but she was too overcome to feel embarrassed by it.

Riftan stroked her ears soothingly and placed himself between her legs. His hardness rubbed slowly against her, but they were still separated by the thin layer of his clothes. Though their bodies were pressed so close together, Maxi felt an unbearable emptiness.

"My heart might stop, I need you so badly." Riftan's breath tickled her neck. As he pressed his lips to hers again, he unfastened his trousers.

Their tongues intertwined gently, and Maxi clenched her eyes shut when she felt his hot flesh against her wetness. He entered her with a single deep thrust and Maxi squirmed, still unsettled by the sensation.

Every muscle in Riftan's body tensed and he groaned. "Don't tighten so much."

"S-S-Sorry …"

"Breathe out," Riftan coaxed her. "Yes, a little more …" His warm breath moistened her skin and smelled sweet like the wine at dinner. Damp with perspiration, his raven locks tickled her forehead. "Is this how it would feel to soak in hot cream?" Though Riftan's words were pleasing, he looked like a man under torture.

Feeling a pulse where they were connected, Maxi tried to get used to the sensation of him filling her. The friction of his coarse tunic against her bare skin was harsh but pleasant as their bodies rubbed together, tightly entwined like serpents. Unable to bear it any longer, Maxi bucked beneath him, and Riftan began to move. His thick length slowly slid into her before pulling out to the tip, only to thrust in deeper.

"*Ah!*" Maxi let out a loud moan. She became dewy with honey and a shivering pleasure reached the ends of her limbs. Moaning quietly, she arched her back.

Riftan leaned over her and put his mouth over her breasts, one and then the other, each suck rekindling the growing heat inside her. She shook with his movements, and the warmth between her thighs surged and consumed her. Her legs trembled as she reached her climax, and she squeezed. Riftan gasped and swelled inside her.

Losing all control of her actions, Maxi writhed beneath him. Riftan's body burned like red-hot iron, and weighed her down with urgent, fluid motions. His intense gaze startled her, and she could almost see his heartbeat under the skin. The primal movement inside her—a pain so passionate and sweet—overwhelmed Maxi.

As if a bolt of lightning had struck her, Maxi shuddered and arched, her own heart beating uncontrollably. She twisted in his arms to break free of the maddening sensations, but Riftan scooped her up and sat back, placing her on his lap.

"Ah! Ah …" Maxi gasped a moan.

Maxi found herself upright and facing him with her legs wrapped around his hips. She received him even deeper and shuddered again, the stimulation too much to bear.

Riftan held her tightly and whispered, "More … Just a little more, Maxi …"

She clung to him. Once broken open, her gates could not be closed. Each time he sank into her, Maxi's hips thrust to meet him, and her body squeezed around him, seeking more. Just as she thought that she could no longer bear it, Riftan's movements stopped, and something hot burst inside her. She closed her eyes, a drop of sweat trickling down her cheek.

"I thought I was going to die," Riftan whispered, licking the droplet.

Still in a daze, Maxi lifted her heavy eyelids and looked up at his flushed face. Through his disheveled hair, black eyes looked back, unsated.

"Don't fall asleep just yet," Riftan said and pressed his mouth to Maxi's. He slowly rubbed the part where they were joined together, and her eyes snapped open.

Their bodies, still connected, quivered in the afterglow of pleasure. Riftan carefully laid her back on the bed, remaining inside her as he

threw off his tunic. Finally unclothed, he grabbed her ankle and propped her leg on his shoulder, then lifted his hips.

Maxi let out a low moan, despite the obscene vision of their naked, writhing bodies that entered her mind. The clerics preached about the conduct of a virtuous wife, but she forgot their sermons as Riftan began to rock his body again.

"Ah … A-Ah …" Maxi moaned again, all hesitation gone.

"Look at this." Riftan lifted her head so she could see how their bodies were joined.

The sight of him inside her was almost as shocking to her as the sensations he caused, and Maxi stifled her gasp.

Riftan slowly pushed himself deeper, until Maxi took him in to the hilt. He bent over her, his lean torso pressing hard against her, and with every thrust, wave after wave of searing pleasure rippled through her.

"Ah …!" Maxi whimpered and twisted her head away.

"Don't close your eyes. Look. I'm inside you," Riftan moaned and moved urgently inside her, a vein rising to the surface of his neck.

Caught between the impulse to push him away and the desire to embrace him, Maxi could only clench her hands in the blankets. Shuddering, Riftan gritted his teeth and began to rock his hips with unrestrained need. He swelled, his length sliding hard against her insides. With each movement, he broke and remolded her, their lower bodies emitting wet sounds. Maxi covered her face with her hands and moaned.

The agonizing rapture continued all through the night.

MAXI AWOKE TO THE SOUND OF RAINDROPS STRIKING the window. Through her blurred vision, she could make out the droplets as they trickled down the window, and beyond the glass was a stormy sky. The chilly air made her shiver, and as she drew the covers closer, Riftan's arm slipped from her shoulders to pull her close against him.

Maxi blushed as his large hand settled over her breast. His thigh, hard as marble, was pressed between her legs, right where he had entered her countless times during the night. Careful not to wake him, she turned to watch his sleeping form. With his head half-

buried in the pillows and his face so relaxed, Riftan looked almost innocent.

She shook her head. Innocent was the last word she would use to describe this man. Still, she could not take her eyes off his peaceful face. With his frown gone, he looked no older than twenty.

Maxi had a sudden urge to brush back his unkempt hair. At her touch, Riftan shook his head and mumbled sleepily. Her heart tripped in her chest, and she fought the desire to run her hand across his smooth forehead and cheeks.

"R-Riftan," Maxi said softly. "It's t-time to wake up …."

Though it was impossible to tell the time from the cloudy skies, she knew that they had been in bed for a long while. Gingerly, she tried to slide out of his embrace, but Riftan murmured something unintelligible and nestled himself close against her. The faint scent of sweat and musk emanating from him ignited a heat in her lower belly, and she held back a moan.

Maxi lay on her stomach and clenched her thighs together. She ached from the previous night. Any more intimacy would render her immobile—she was sure of it. Biting her bottom lip, she waited for him to fall asleep again. When his arms relaxed, she began to cautiously rise from the bed, but he suddenly pressed her back down with his weight.

"R-Riftan …!" Maxi flailed, startled by his weight.

He placed himself behind her and seized her buttocks, spreading her open before thrusting into her. She gripped the sheets and gasped for air, breathing through the brief, sharp soreness.

"It feels like I'm melting." Riftan's sleep-laden voice tickled the backs of her ears.

Maxi buried her face in her pillow as Riftan cupped her breasts and slid deep inside her.

"Mmm …"

"O-Oh …" Maxi let out a soft moan as she received him, and his hands released her breasts, roving down to tenderly rub between her legs. The quiet warmth inside her grew into a hungry blaze.

Maxi's toes spread out as Riftan pushed deeper into her with each thrust. His broad chest pressed into her back, and she felt a bite of

pleasure on her neck.

Though she had experienced it several times last night, the feeling of him, swollen and moving inside her, still felt strange. Her whole body convulsed as a lightning-like pleasure unraveled within her.

"It's only morning, and you're already making me go crazy," Riftan said, pressing his lips to her quivering back as he pulled out slowly.

Maxi whimpered at the fleetingly sweet sensation.

"Wait here." Riftan ran a hand through his tousled hair and yawned loudly before springing out of bed.

Stark naked, he strolled across the room to retrieve his trousers and pulled them back on. His first act in the morning had been to ravage her, but he looked as languid as a cat basking in the sun as he walked to the door. He opened it and stuck his head out.

"Bring us some bathwater and a change of clothes," he instructed a maidservant waiting outside their door.

With that, he ambled back to the bed, where Maxi still trembled softly in the aftershock of her climax. Gazing down at her with his dark eyes, Riftan perched on the edge of the bed and leaned over to press kisses against her bare shoulders and back. She groaned.

"I-I'm t-tired …" Maxi mumbled, fearing that he might try to enter her again.

Riftan frowned and brushed a hand across her pale buttocks. It came away sticky and wet.

"Are you in pain?" he asked, his voice thick with concern.

"It's a b-bit s-sore," she managed to stammer.

Brows still furrowed, Riftan ran a hand through his hair. "I pushed you too far," he muttered.

Maxi could only blush in response. Moments later, maidservants entered with towels and a bathtub filled with hot water. After sending them away, Riftan scooped Maxi into his arms and carefully lowered her into the tub. She sighed as her aching muscles loosened and watched Riftan shed his trousers. He stepped into the tub, and water spilled over the edges as he sank down behind her.

"You can relax. I won't do anything more today."

Sitting with his long legs stretched on either side of her, Riftan massaged her shoulders, then began to wash his face and hair. Maxi

hugged her knees to her chest and looked over her shoulder, watching as he scrubbed soap into his scalp. After rinsing his hair, Riftan poured fresh water into the tub and proceeded to wash hers. She was embarrassed to be treated like a child, but she was too tired to object.

"Your hair is so fluffy, like a red cloud," Riftan said.

Maxi's eyes went round. She had never imagined that anyone would compare her bright, unruly hair to something as beautiful as clouds in the sky. Her long tresses floated on the surface of the water, looking to her like the tentacles of a jellyfish.

"It's always g-getting t-tangled up. I-It's uncomfortable."

Riftan took a few locks in his hand and twirled them around his fingers. "But your curls are so cute."

Her eyes widened further. The man had peculiar taste.

"Let your hair down when you're with me," Riftan said, still playing with the long tendrils. "I love seeing the way it falls over your shoulders. And I love feeling your curls on my skin." He hugged her waist from behind and nuzzled at her shoulder.

After soaking in the warm water until their fingers and toes pruned, Riftan sat Maxi down in front of the fireplace and dried her hair with a towel. When he finished, she did the same for him in return.

"Just stay in bed and rest today. It's raining, so you won't be able to go out," Riftan said as he pulled on a snow-white tunic. The neckline was embroidered with gold thread, and it made him look absolutely stunning.

Maxi nodded. She was still wrapped in bedsheets, lacking the courage to dress in front of him. Riftan put on a pair of long boots over his starched trousers and fastened the leather straps.

"A-Are you g-going out?"

Maxi watched him, confused, as he donned his armor and gathered his sword and cloak.

Riftan turned and smiled gently at her. "Do you want me to stay?"

Maxi opened and closed her mouth, unsure of how to answer. He fastened his sword to the belt around his waist, then draped his

cloak around his shoulders and continued to speak in a detached tone.

"I've been away for a long time, so there is much that requires my attention. I'll be inspecting the estate all day. Send a guard to me if anything happens."

"B-But it's r-raining so heavily." Maxi looked at the rain pounding against the window.

"I once crossed an entire mountain in a heavy storm," Riftan said with a shrug. "A stroll around my estate in the rain is nothing."

With that, he lowered his hood over his head and strode toward the door.

"I'll be back tonight."

"T-Take care …"

He glanced over his shoulder at her before leaving, but it was impossible to tell what he was thinking.

MAXI CLIMBED DOWN FROM THE BED AND STOOD ON trembling legs. She pulled on the undergarments and chemise prepared by the maidservants, but she could not find a dress. After she rang the small bell next to the head of the bed, Ludis entered the room with fresh clothes.

"Would you like your hair braided and pinned up again, my lady?"

"J-Just b-braid it over my sh-shoulder."

Ludis deftly twisted Maxi's hair into a braid and fastened it with a ribbon, then helped her into a simple but elegant dress. After eating a breakfast of warm chicken soup and cornbread, Maxi sat by the window to watch the rain. In the afternoon, she summoned Rodrigo to continue the tour of the castle. Each step she took flared aching and sore between her thighs, and her nipples chafed against her clothes. Still, she did not want to idle around in bed all day.

I only just got to the castle ….

Maxi did not want the servants to think she was a slothful mistress, so it was not until she finished visiting the drawing room in the annex that she finally returned to her room. Before they parted, Rodrigo gave her a ledger of purchases, but she found it difficult to tell which items listed on the yellowing parchment were essential and which ones were not.

The truth was that Maxi had no experience making any sort of purchases. The extent of her knowledge was that gold coins were called soldem and silver coins were liram. But the ledger listed the names of currencies that she had never heard of.

Denar, derham, dant … Maxi began to sweat as she read them all.

All she knew about these currencies was that they came from the Southern Continent, but she did not have the slightest clue how much they were worth in soldem and liram. As she leafed through the ledger, she noted purchases of weapons, foodstuffs, clothing, oil, candles, and firewood. Numbers in the column next to each item description seemed to indicate the quantities and total cost.

Maxi tried to estimate the value of each currency based on these figures, straining to remember the arithmetic lessons with her governess. After a long struggle, she gave up and closed the ledger. Discouraged, she flung herself onto the bed.

It crossed her mind that it might be best to ask Rodrigo to help her, but the thought was eclipsed by the echo of her father's voice: *A master must always maintain his dignity in front of his servants. Servants will mock and deceive a foolish, incompetent master!*

Maxi winced, recalling the indifferent servants at Croyso Castle. They had never been openly disrespectful, but she had always sensed condescension in the way they spoke to her. She could only assume that the servants at Calypse Castle would treat her with the same disdain if they became aware of her lacking abilities.

Th-There's still time … she thought, attempting to comfort her withering heart.

RIFTAN AND HIS KNIGHTS RETURNED LATE IN THE EVENING, drenched from the rain, and the servants quickly ushered them into the saunas. After warming himself in the steam, Riftan ate a hearty meal with a generous amount of wine before withdrawing to their room to polish his sword and armor. Observing his nimble hands, Maxi asked why the servants were not tasked with the job.

Riftan shrugged. "I've been doing this since I was fourteen, and I don't trust anyone else with the maintenance of my companion here."

He raised the sword to the light. The blade was entirely different from the ornamental sword that Duke Croyso wore at banquets. Broad and long, the tip of Riftan's sword was pointed like a spire, and the handle undecorated. It was simple and unsophisticated, yet seemed far more impressive than her father's jewel-studded golden sword. Maxi studied it with wonder.

"It m-must be a fine b-blade."

"I won this in my first competition," he said with unmis takable pride. "It's one of the finest swords in all the Seven Kingdoms."

Maxi had never seen a sword-fighting competition before, though Rosetta had attended several with their father, beloved as she was by many of the competing knights. But Rosetta had always returned from the events in a sour mood, grumbling about how they were filthy and barbaric.

"D-Did you w-win?"

"Of course."

"Th-They say that the ch-champions receive a k-k-kiss from the h-highest-ranking l-lady in attendance," Maxi blurted as she watched Riftan sheath his sword. Immediately ashamed of her meaningless words, she lowered her eyes.

When she dared to glance back at him, Riftan gave her a puzzled look, and she scrambled to explain herself.

"I once r-read a b-book about a kn-knight and a p-princess. When the kn-knight won a j-joust, the p-princess kissed him on the l-lips. I th-thought it was a r-romantic s-scene …." Maxi trailed off, certain she was making a fool of herself.

You never know when to keep your mouth shut! Her father's favorite rebuke rang in her ears.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you," Riftan said, remaining composed. "But I've never been the romantic hero. I never wanted a kiss from a woman I didn't even know."

"I-I see. I thought a l-lady's k-kiss was the g-greatest h-honor a knight could r-receive."

"I used to be a lowly mercenary, so I did everything possible to be seen as honorable. What honor is there in kissing women who would scowl at my approach?"

His words seemed sincere. Unsure of what to say next, Maxi eyes flitted across the room. Riftan leaned his sword against the wall and lay down on the bed, his limbs splayed wide beside her. When she flinched, he rolled onto his side and smiled bitterly.

"I won't disturb you tonight, so lie down and rest. You said you were sore."

She nodded, a flush creeping down her neck. As she lay down next to him, Riftan extinguished the bedside lamp with the lid. Darkness fell.

Listening to his steady heartbeat, Maxi began to relax. Another day at Calypse Castle had come to an end.

THE RAIN LASTED SEVERAL DAYS. DURING THAT TIME, Riftan inspected the village, the mines, and the farmlands. Meanwhile, Maxi took advantage of her library privileges and spent much of her time there. She was surprised to find that the books were made of paper, and the collections seemed to date back to the days of the Roemian knight who had first ruled Anatol.

Maxi resisted the temptation to delve into Roemian poetry and literature. Instead, she spent her time struggling through inventories and arithmetic books. She did not have grand ambitions—her goal was simply to study the basics. Still, no matter how hard she tried, she made no progress.

"My lady," Rodrigo announced. "The regional head of the merchant guild has arrived."

Maxi closed her books and emerged from the library. She followed Rodrigo into the drawing room, where a clean-cut man in his midthirties awaited her. He stood up when they entered and bowed respectfully.

"An honor to make your acquaintance, Lady Calypse," he said. "I am Aderon Suner, at your service."

Maxi forced a smile. With the rain abating, she had been informed in advance that the merchant was expected today, but seeing him in person petrified her. Her mouth went dry.

"Thank you for c-coming despite this r-rain," she managed to say.

"No, my lady. It is my regret that I could not visit sooner."

Maxi sat at the table, opposite Aderon, and the merchant smiled politely. He appeared to be a good-natured man. Her reunion with Riftan had placed her in many situations in which she was expected to speak. With practice, she had learned to talk without getting nervous to the point of breaking out in a cold sweat, but she was still anxious.

Sensing that Maxi was not going to initiate the discussion, Aderon spoke first. "I was told that you plan to refurbish the castle. May I ask where you wished to start?"

A maidservant arrived and served tea for them. Maxi stared at her cup, considering her answer before speaking.

"F-First, I'd l-like to r-replace the windows," she said. "The c-corridors and h-halls are too d-dark. M-Many of the windows in the r-rooms are b-broken."

"Replacing all of the windows in the castle will be quite costly, my lady. Were you considering balt glass?"

Maxi thought of the gleaming windows at Croyso Castle. Were there different kinds of glass?

"The price varies enormously depending on the transparency of the glass," Aderon continued. "For example, balt glass is rather inexpensive, but the crystal glass of the Southern Continent will part you from quite a bit of gold. I can provide whichever kind you prefer. Would you like me to prepare some samples for my next visit?"

"Y-Yes … I-I'd like that."

"Is there anything else I can offer, my lady?"

"C-Curtains for the w-windows and … a ch-chandelier for the b-banquet hall, as well as c-carpets and t-tapestries for the walls."

The merchant's face lit up at the prospect of such a lucrative transaction, while Maxi felt her throat constrict with worry. Riftan said he would provide her with all the gold she needed, but was there truly no limit? Uncertain if what she requested was too lavish or not, Maxi's hands twisted nervously in her lap as Aderon uttered a torrent of words.

"We'll need some time to procure all the goods, of course. I shall return at the earliest possible day with samples. May I see the rooms you wish to redecorate?"

Maxi glanced at Rodrigo for approval, then nodded. A merchant would know better than she would which items were needed to properly renovate the castle.

As they exited the drawing room and headed to the largest banquet hall, Rodrigo followed them with an old maidservant and two guards. Aderon briskly appraised the empty hall and proceeded to deliver a lengthy speech on his recommended decor. Maxi did her best to memorize his words.

"In my humble opinion," Aderon said, "the stone floor should be replaced with marble. What do you say, my lady?"

"I th-think we should f-focus on w-what we r-really need."

"But imagine how splendid this hall would look with smooth marble floors and murals on whitewashed walls! If you wish, I shall send the best artisans among our guild's ranks."

Maxi smiled awkwardly. "I'll th-think about it."

"Of course, of course. But this is the castle of the greatest knight on the continent! Its grandeur should match the prestige of its owner."

After reassuring Maxi to take her time and mull things over, Aderon left the banquet hall to inspect the bleak corridors and empty rooms. He returned with a list of items he deemed to be essential. Some of his suggestions were extravagant, but Maxi agreed to replacing the damaged stair railings and rattling window frames.

When the merchant left, Maxi returned to her room to examine the ledger. The budget that Riftan had allocated for the castle's refurbishment was recorded in its pages, but she still could not figure out how much the different currencies were worth. Though she had been raised with the care that one might bestow upon vermin, Maxi was still a duke's daughter. As often happened with the daughters of nobility, she had never held an actual coin in her hand.

I should ask for help ….

But whose help could she seek? Riftan's? If he discovered her incompetence, he would surely regret not divorcing her. The servants? They would begin to whisper about their uneducated mistress and mock her stuttering. Paranoia filled her thoughts, so she gravitated toward the most convenient solution.

Perhaps I should go along with Aderon's suggestions.

The merchant had traveled to countless castles to sell his wares, so he must have a discerning eye. Maxi was sure that the castle would undergo a splendid transformation with his help, even if he did overcharge her.

Riftan said that the cost wouldn't be a problem.

Decision made, Maxi's mind calmed. She closed the ledger and walked out of the room on lighter steps. Outside, the heavy rain had slowed to a drizzle, and she longed to breathe fresh air after days spent inside the castle.

Stepping out onto the terrace that led to the garden, Maxi observed gray skies and waterlogged grass. Beside the pavilion, the leafless tree's branches were drenched a ghastly black from the rains. The flower bed, thick with weeds, gave off the pungent stench of wet foliage. Maxi extended a hand past the eaves and a few cold raindrops landed on her arm. Though the rain looked light, her sleeve was soaked within moments.

"Why are you out here?" Riftan appeared in the rain, crossing the damp garden on long strides. When he reached Maxi's side, he touched the fabric of her sleeve. "And wearing such a thin dress too."

"I-I wanted s-some fresh a-air …."

His eyes narrowed under his low-hanging hood. With a chilled hand, he brushed a stray strand of hair out of her eyes, and Maxi wondered if she should comb back his dark fringe in return. Though it seemed natural for him to touch her, something about her touching him seemed improper.

"Put on a cloak if you're going to take a walk. What if you catch a cold?"

"I'm s-sorry …"

He raised an arm to hold her close before realizing that he was soaked. He lowered it again. "We should go back in."

Maxi nodded and followed him into the castle. With each step, Riftan left muddy footprints on the flagstones, and Maxi made a mental note to place rugs at the castle entrances. When she spotted

a bouquet of wildflowers in Riftan's hand, he hurriedly hid it under his cloak.

"It's nothing," he said, looking away.

An awkward silence fell between them, the only audible sound the plodding of their footsteps. Eventually, Riftan muttered a curse and held up the flowers.

"I saw these in the fields and brought some back."

Maxi stared at the flowers, surprised. Blue petals no larger than her pinky nail sat atop thin stalks. Raindrops still clung to the petals, sparkling in the light. Her eyes darted between Riftan and the flowers. He had picked them himself?

Riftan scowled. "They looked so pretty in the fields, but now that I take a closer look, they seem ragged." He hesitated, then thrust the bouquet at her. "Just throw them away if you don't like them."

"I-I'd n-never." She quickly took the flowers from him and touched the wet petals. They gave off a faint scent of rain and grass. "They're s-so p-pretty," she whispered.

Riftan's expression shifted subtly. Perhaps he thought she was only being polite?

Maxi opened her mouth and closed it again, not knowing how to express the emotions welling up inside her. Instead, she buried her face in the wet flowers and inhaled their scent. In that moment, nothing was lovelier to her than the sight of those flowers, drooping from the weight of the rainwater. Knowing that Riftan had braved the heavy rain to pick them for her, a lump formed in her throat.

"Th-Thank you."

A faint blush tinted Riftan's cheeks. He turned away and trudged down the corridor. "Let's go back to our room. I need a bath."

She trailed after him and cradled the flowers lightly, afraid of damaging them.

ADERON RETURNED THE NEXT DAY WITH TWO SERVANTS and several bags of samples in tow. Maxi sat with him in the drawing room and listened to his lengthy explanations of her options for the windows. The emerald-hued glass was affordable but had an irregular surface, while the smooth, transparent glass was more expensive. There was

also a rough glass that glowed a beautiful silver. After describing the pros and cons of each type of glass, Aderon spread out a dozen brilliantly colored fabrics before her.

"Banquet halls require thick curtains, my lady," he said. "What do you think of this mahogany-colored fabric? It would certainly befit a lord's banquet hall. And here is another of our very best—gold silk! Its elegance and splendor could not be outdone by even the most eminent residences of the royal capital."

As Maxi inspected the fabric samples, Ludis set down a cup of tea, then cautiously began to browse with her. After hesitating for a long while, Maxi decided to ask her opinion.

"L-Ludis, what d-do you think?"

"I beg your pardon, my lady, but I lack the eye for such things."

Ludis looked so bewildered by the question that Maxi could not bring herself to inquire further. She returned her gaze to the table, deliberated alone, then eventually settled on a costly rose-colored curtain with gold tassels and elaborate embroidery along the edges.

With the color for the curtains set, the next decisions were easier to make. For the banquet hall, Maxi opted for a red carpet and a tapestry depicting the legendary knight, Wigrew, riding a white dragon.

"And for the floor, my lady?" Aderon asked. "Marble, perhaps?"

"Th-That would involve c-complex construction w-work." Maxi hesitated. "But I'll th-think about it."

"Very well, my lady. In any case, it will take some time to have the materials brought from the capital. Please think it over in the meantime."

Maxi nodded.

Next, Aderon presented her with a silver miniature of a chandelier. As she exclaimed in delight at the palm-sized replica, the merchant quickly brought out more models, this time made of marble. There was a rearing unicorn, a dragon with its wings spread wide, a roaring lion's head, and a fully armored knight. Maxi marveled at the intricate figures until a knock sounded at the door.

"Come in," she said, looking up from the display of miniatures.

Rodrigo entered and spoke from the doorway. “My lady, the tailor is here.”

“The t-tailor …?” She tilted her head, only now remembering that Riftan had promised her new clothes. She turned back to Aderon, who was already tactfully packing up the samples.

“I can come back another day, my lady,” he said. “And I will leave these figurines for you to examine at your leisure. You can decide which one suits your fancy before our next meeting.”

“You c-came all the w-way here …. I’m s-sorry.”

“It’s no trouble at all, my lady. I shall return whenever you need me.”

After Aderon’s departure, Maxi went to the dressing room with the maidservants, where a gaunt, well-dressed man in his forties and a woman in her thirties awaited her arrival. The spacious room was filled with exquisite fabrics, a loom, and colorful skeins.

“Greetings, my lady,” said the man, bowing respectfully. “My name is Roanne Selous, and this is my wife, Linda Selous. It will be an honor to make your gowns for you.”

“A p-pleasure …”

“Lord Calypse instructed us to make you dresses of the finest quality regardless of cost. Is there a style you prefer, my lady?”

“I have n-nothing specific in m-mind.”

“Then allow me to show you what is fashionable right now.”

Roanne pulled out a scroll of yellow parchment and spread it before her. As Maxi studied the sketches, it all began to feel like a dream. Though she was not entirely sure what the pictures represented, she grew excited by the prospect of an elegant wardrobe. Rosetta was often surrounded by tailors, and though Maxi had often looked on, she was never the recipient of such attention.

Maxi’s measurements were taken as she browsed fabrics and listened to the tailor’s explanations. She tried on a headdress, veil, and belt and was surprised by her own reflection. An unfamiliar woman stared back at her, adorned like a peacock. The cone-shaped headdress was tall enough to graze the doorway if she passed through it. That, combined with the mass of jewelry the tailor’s wife piled on her, made her feel absurd.

"I th-think a smaller h-headdress might be b-better …."

Roanne nodded and scribbled a few notes. In the end, Maxi placed orders for three new dresses before thanking and dismissing the tailor.

Outside the window, the sky was already dark. Time had passed without her noticing, and she promptly returned to her room. Maxi was unaccustomed to managing so many tasks in one day, and she was utterly exhausted. She sat on a chair and massaged her aching shoulders, tense from the stress of dealing with the merchant and tailor.

As she stretched her neck left and right, as she had seen Riftan do, the small vase by the window caught her attention. The wildflowers had bloomed overnight, and she was reminded of Riftan's awkward expression when he gave them to her.

What a strange man ….

When they first met, she'd had no idea that a kind soul lay beneath his intimidating exterior. In the great hall at Croyso Castle, he had appeared aloof and disapproving, more like a conqueror preparing to lay siege than a guest. Who could have expected such a man to pick flowers for his wife?

Maxi's face clouded over. Flowers and dresses, people who treated her with respect, a kind husband—her life had changed so quickly that she could not help but doubt its authenticity.

Riftan is too good to me. This must be a dream.

"My lady," Ludis called to her from where she waited by the door. "The lord has returned and plans to dine with the knights in the dining hall. Do you wish to join them?"

After hesitating briefly, Maxi nodded. She was not ex actly comfortable around the knights, but she did not want to forgo dinner with Riftan.

Ludis stepped up to her. "Then allow me to arrange your hair again, my lady."

With a comb and hairpin, the maidservant tamed and twisted Maxi's disheveled hair into a neat bun. Once Ludis finished with her hair, Maxi inspected her appearance in the mirror and then left the room.

In the hallway, servants were busy lighting lamps along the corridor. As she passed them and descended the stairs, she heard angry voices coming from below. She paused, then slowly continued down the stairs and toward the dining hall. Through the half-open door, she glimpsed Riftan engaged in a heated argument with three knights.

"We *must* leave for the royal capital tomorrow!" one of the knights pressed. Maxi recognized Ricaydo's blond hair and arrogant tone.

"I already told you we're leaving in three days," said Riftan, his voice unsettlingly low. "Don't make me repeat myself."

"But you must attend the ceremony," Ricaydo insisted. "How much longer will you test His Majesty's goodwill?"

"For once, I agree with Ricaydo," said the light, familiar voice of Hebaron Nirtha. "With the rain subsiding, we'll have no problem making the journey."

Maxi hovered by the door, unsure if she should enter. The knights' words froze her in place, and she recalled similar remarks being made during the journey from Croyso Castle. As the hero of the Dragon Campaign, Riftan should have returned to the royal capital as soon as Sektor was slain. Given the distance between Anatol and the capital city of Drachium, making the journey to Anatol first meant that Riftan would be late reporting to the king by at least a fortnight—maybe even a month.

"I've sent a carrier pigeon to the capital," Riftan said. "I haven't been home in three years. King Reuben will understand."

"Commander," the third knight chimed in. He stood the farthest away from the door, and Maxi did not recognize him. "I know you're trying to distance yourself from the king, but if you make it too obvious, you could lose his favor."

"Distance himself?" Ricaydo asked sharply, turning toward the unfamiliar knight.

"King Reuben is anxious to have the commander in the capital." The knight ignored Ricaydo and addressed Riftan. "Sir, could it be that you're wary of becoming shackled by the royal family after they rewarded you for your contributions?"

Riftan remained silent.

"And there's still the matter of Princess Agnes," the knight continued. "It's clear that the king desires a marriage between the two of you. I understand why you're hesitant, but you must avoid antagonizing him. He distrusts his vassals as it is."

"Elliot's right," said Hebaron. "If we miss the celebration, the king will feel that you humiliated him in front of the entire court. He tends to hold grudges, so there's no telling what the repercussions could be."

"Hebaron Nirtha!" Ricaydo snapped. "You dare blaspheme the king?"

Hearing the growing agitation between the knights, Maxi turned away from the dining hall.

"P-Please bring my m-meal to m-my room," she instructed Ludis before making her way back up the stairs.

Her mood darkened as she dined alone, wondering how she would fare while Riftan was away. So far, everyone in Calypse Castle had been kind to her, but that might only be because Riftan was with her. The prospect of being alone in Anatol made Maxi uneasy.

"Is the food not to your liking, my lady?" Ludis asked, noticing her glum expression.

Maxi quickly shook her head. "N-No, it's d-delicious. I j-just … I don't h-have an a-appetite."

"Are you feeling unwell?"

"I'm j-just a little t-tired. I'd like to r-rest."

"Should I take away your plate?"

Maxi nodded, and Ludis left with the half-finished food. Still seated at the table, Maxi gazed at the figurines that Aderon had left behind, but the little statuettes had lost their charm.

It should not have bothered her so much to be alone—she had always been alone, after all. For twenty-two long years, she had lived with a cruel father, a callous half-sister, and disrespectful servants. There was no reason for Riftan's monthlong absence to make her feel so forlorn.

An arm suddenly reached over and entered her vision.

"What's that you're looking at?" A hand reached over her shoulder and picked up one of the statuettes.

Maxi whipped her head around in surprise. She hadn't noticed Riftan entering the room, and now watched as he bemusedly examined the marble miniature in his hand.

"They're m-models of the d-decorations for the b-banquet hall."

"The banquet hall?" Riftan frowned.

Maxi's heart sank. "Y-You wanted me to r-redecorate the c-castle …."

"Yes, I just forgot that there was a banquet hall in this castle. I suppose we'll need to hold banquets and balls eventually."

Maxi swallowed against her constricting throat. The thought of hosting a ball or banquet was enough to make her head spin, but Riftan's eyes were bright with anticipation.

"D-D-D-Do you w-want to host a b-ball?"

"I don't dislike the idea, though I can't say I'm accustomed to such noisy affairs."

Riftan bent forward and set the miniature down, then he reached into her hair and pulled out the pin that held it in place. Her thick braid thumped heavily onto her back. He undid the braid, smiling as his fingers slipped through the soft tresses.

"I'd like to see you dressed up and dancing."

Maxi had never thought of herself as beautiful, and she had never danced at a ball. The disparity between Riftan's expectations and her true self unnerved her.

"C-Come to th-think of it, I h-haven't even thanked you p-properly. Th-Thank you for sending the t-tailor."

"You needn't be so formal over something trivial," Riftan answered impassively, withdrawing his hands from her hair. "I know that life here can't compare to your life at Croyso Castle, but bear it for now. With time, I'll give you everything you want."

He wound an arm around her shoulders and kissed her earlobe, but she shrank from his embrace. She wanted to say that she came from nothing, that his kindness was more than she could ever have hoped for, but the words never left her mouth. She was happy that he cherished her, even if what he cherished was an illusion.

"I need to leave for the capital in a few days," Riftan said. "I'll bring back a cartload of gifts for you."

"Al-All right …"

"I'll come home as soon as I can. I only need to attend the ceremony, and then I'll return …." He trailed off as he parted her lips with his tongue.

Maxi's eyelids quivered closed. She tasted traces of wine in his kiss, and his stubbled chin rubbed pleasantly against hers.

There was something alluring about the way he pursued her. Though his persistence and the fierceness of his desire frightened her sometimes, his tenderness was sublime. Under his touch, she felt like a delicate wildflower plucked from the earth and brought home to treasure.

"Damn it," Riftan whispered against her mouth. "I really don't want to go."

When their lips parted, a string of saliva stretched between them. Maxi gazed up at him and he cupped her breast in one hand, pulling her closer with the other.

"I just want to lock myself in this room with you for as long as possible." His voice was thick with passion but heavy with a fatigue built up over three long years.

Guilt and sympathy welled up in Maxi's heart, and she hesitantly reached up to slide her fingers through his hair. Riftan stopped kissing her neck and pulled back in surprise.

"Ch-Cheer up," Maxi said, her voice trembling.

A storm flickered in Riftan's dark eyes, and they filled with turbulent emotion before he captured her mouth with his own. As their breath mingled, goosebumps shivered down the back of Maxi's neck.

"You're the one who started this, so don't blame me later," Riftan growled.

He lifted her into his arms as if she weighed nothing. Maxi was not afraid this time—rather, she felt a sharp thrill. She was beginning to realize the important place he had come to occupy in her life—and, now, that is what frightened her.

THE SKY WAS BRIGHT WHITE THE NEXT MORNING, COVERED by a blanket of misty clouds. Milky sunlight seeped in through the windows. It was

well past dawn.

"E-Enough …" Maxi whimpered hoarsely as she crawled across the blankets to evade Riftan, but her strength had been depleted overnight. She did not have the strength to pick a flower, let alone fend off Riftan.

"R-Riftan, p-please …" She sprawled on her stomach, her hips lifted high into the air.

"Just a little more …" His breath was hot between her legs as she buried her face in the sheets.

The warmth of the flickering fire licked their skin, and their bodies glistened with sweat. Even that faint, dying heat felt like torture.

"It's amazing that you have a part that can receive me," Riftan murmured as he kissed the place between her thighs. "And that I have a part that can connect with you."

Maxi's hips trembled. Her thighs were stiff and cramped, and her wet, swollen flesh throbbed. She whimpered quietly, her heart constricting as she lay defenseless and bare under his scrutinizing gaze.

"Do you know how beautiful you are right now?" Riftan's fingers gently parted and stroked her.

Maxi sank her teeth into a pillow, certain that she would go mad. It felt as if her entire body would melt, leaving noth ing but the place he touched. Overwhelmed by the intensity of her climax, tears streamed down her cheeks.

"You're maddeningly beautiful …." Riftan whispered, his voice deep and husky as he stroked her back to soothe her.

His lips grazed her neck and the back of her ears, and Maxi gripped the blankets against the consuming sensations. His hot breath warmed her delicate skin and gently nibbled back down to press his mouth to her swollen nub. Every nerve in her body seemed to split.

"I c-can't … Ah …!"

Her back arched, rocking her hips into him. Riftan shifted back and clasped his hands tightly around her buttocks before sliding his thickness into her yet again. She lacked the strength to even moan.

Riftan's weight pressed into her, and the bed creaked with the urgency of his thrusts. Swollen to an unbearable degree, he parted her wetness and filled her to her depths. With each thrust, his movements became rougher. Maxi's body, flushed and sensitive, melted into the sheets. Her vision dimmed, and all sound became indistinct.

MOMENTARILY DISORIENTED BY THE SENSATION OF plunging down a cliff, Maxi was brought back to her senses by the sound of raindrops striking the windows. Riftan lay quietly behind her with his arm wrapped around her waist. He was still sheathed inside her, finally sated from continual release. His chest rose and fell gently with each slow breath.

Maxi's eyelids fluttered closed as she lay in his arms. She was unsure of how long they had dozed.

"I want to make love to you until you melt and become one with me," Riftan murmured, reaching for her breasts. They were sore from his unwavering attention, and she moaned as he began to knead them.

He leaned over to gently kiss her lips. His hair looked as if someone had been tearing at it, and his face, usually as cold as a metal blade, was flushed and glistening with sweat. Scratches marred his neck and arms. Realizing that she was the one responsible for them, Maxi cautiously touched the angry welts.

Riftan smiled faintly, his stern eyes clouded with passion. "Not even the basilisk I fought left a scratch on me …."

"I-I'm sorry." Maxi's voice came out as a croak.

He kissed her. "You … are a dangerous creature."

Riftan's dark eyes seemed to stare straight into her mind, and it frightened her. She wanted to ask him what he meant, but her voice would not work. Riftan kissed her once again, their tongues entwining.

"The first moment I saw you, I knew you would ruin me."

He spoke so softly now that Maxi could barely hear him. In the quiet after, she sank into a deep sleep.

As if to make up for the previous day's drizzle, an unrelenting rain poured down outside. It almost seemed as if a hole had opened in the sky, and the knights did not dare resume their arguments for an immediate departure. So, the journey to the capital was delayed once more. Riftan, unable to inspect his land in such a deluge, spent the day idling indoors for the first time since his return.

Maxi listened to the sound of the rain as they lay naked in bed together. When desire struck, they locked themselves in a heated embrace, making love until they could not tell whose body was whose. Later, when they were sated, they bathed together and ate a meal that the maidservants brought to the room for them.

Riftan placed Maxi on his lap and fed her pieces of sweet fruit, cream-topped bread, and delicate pastries while they sat in bed. She worried that such indulgence was improper, but was too exhausted to protest or feel embarrassed. Leaning against his chest, she accepted the food from his fingers.

Riftan looked down and smiled at her. "You're just like a little bird." He pressed a kiss to her cheek, then offered her a sip of wine.

Maxi felt herself go weak. He was protective and possessive at once, unable to let go of her for even a moment. He washed and fed her, kissed every corner of her body, and showered her with gifts. She had never known such devotion.

A thrill surged through her. Not even her own mother had cared for her like this, and Maxi wanted to throw her arms around him and rub her face against his chest, but she was too exhausted to move.

"I never imagined that I'd be jealous of a grape," Riftan muttered as he pushed one into her mouth.

She popped the tart fruit between her teeth and swallowed. He kissed juice from her lips, then cupped her cheek in his hand. His thumb danced across her glistening lips and the sensation intoxicated her, as if she were submerged in a barrel of golden wine. The sensual heat in the room mingled with the damp scent of rain in the air.

"Crush and swallow me like that grape," Riftan said and pressed his mouth to hers.

Their tongues connected, hungry and seeking, more eloquent than any words could be. Maxi's throat tightened and a passionate shudder rippled through her. She wrapped her arms around his neck, and Riftan pushed her onto her back.

Pieces of fruit rolled onto the bed as their bodies knocked over the fruit bowl. Riftan's chest, smooth as marble, pressed down on Maxi's soft breasts as he licked her juice-stained skin. The sheets, sticky with nectar, were cool beneath her.

"Oh …"

"Mmm …"

Joined in a wet kiss that tasted of fruit and desire, they rolled around the bed. Their flushed bodies rubbed longingly together, and they breathed each other's breath like oxygen. Heat simmered in Maxi's heart.

"Say my name," Riftan pleaded, gazing intently into her eyes.

"R-Riftan …"

"Again …"

"R-Riftan—Ohh …!"

"More. Say my name again …"

She called his name again and again, until her voice grew hoarse. At that moment, she existed only to fulfill him. The sermons she had heard about temperance, about the virtues of a modest woman, were all but forgotten. In their place was the joy of knowing, for the first time in her life, that someone needed her. Enraptured, she thought she might lose herself.

It feels so good. He's taken my life and resurrected me.

She looked at Riftan through foggy eyes. In that moment, he was all that existed. His name became the only word she knew.

CHAPTER 5



UNFORTUNATELY, THE RAIN BEGAN TO SUBSIDE IN the evening, and by dawn, it had ceased. Maxi squinted at the bright morning sun and tried to rise, but her limbs gave way as if her bones had evaporated within them. When she groaned quietly at the dull aching, a large hand stroked the length of her back.

"Go back to sleep," Riftan said softly.

The glare of the morning sun cast stark shadows over his sculpted face. He was already dressed and fully armored.

Maxi gazed up at him, transfixed even as her heart sank. "A-Are you leaving al-already?"

Riftan nodded. "We leave at noon, but first we must prepare weapons and rations for the journey."

He lifted her chin and tenderly kissed her swollen lips, then stepped back from the bed and pulled on a pair of silvery-white steel gauntlets and forearm guards before picking up his sword.

"I'll come and see you before I leave, so go back to sleep." He picked up his sword on the way out the door.

Maxi stared as the door closed behind him, a wave of emptiness sweeping through her. She rose from the bed with shaky steps and asked Ludis to draw her a bath.

Sometime later, Ludis and three maidservants entered the room, carrying a bathtub filled with steaming water. It was only with their help that Maxi managed to step in and lower herself into the water. Ludis washed her hair and lathered her body with a soft, soapy

sponge. Though she was mortified, Maxi did not refuse her help, knowing that she lacked the strength to bathe herself.

As one of the other maidservants dried her hair with a towel, she stopped suddenly. “Excuse me for a moment, my lady,” she said. “I will bring you a high-necked dress.”

A deep blush spread across Maxi’s face. Red splotches dotted her body where Riftan’s mouth had been particularly attentive, making her look like she had contracted the pox.

“Th-Thank you.”

When the servants left the room, Maxi stood in front of the mirror and gingerly unwrapped her towel. Her neck was covered in red marks, and her breasts also bore dark rose-colored spots. With trembling hands, she reached for her breasts. They had felt entirely different under Riftan’s touch.

She stared at the bright-eyed, flushed woman in the mirror. Was this truly the same pale, morose girl with slumped shoulders? Her hands traveled down to the curve of her waist and her smooth abdomen before reaching the soft region between her thighs. It was moist and warm there, but she felt as if she were touching a stranger’s body.

“I’ve brought you a dress, my lady.”

Startled by the voice at the door, Maxi hastily withdrew her hands from her body. Her face burned as she stammered a reply.

“C-C-Come in.”

A maidservant entered the room and, with practiced hands, helped Maxi into a beautiful green dress that rippled with gold. A golden belt was fastened around her waist and her damp hair was tied up with a silken green ribbon. Before the servant could adorn her with jewels, Maxi thanked her and hurriedly left the room. Riftan said that he would see her before he left, but she was worried that he might forget his promise.

Sunbeams streamed through the open windows and warmed Maxi’s face as she skipped down the stairs. The air smelled pleasantly of rain.

“Good morning, my lady,” Rodrigo greeted her with a bow when she reached the bottom of the stairs.

Behind him, servants swept the floors and aired out the hall now that the rain had stopped. Rodrigo supervised them with hawk-like eyes while he spoke with Maxi.

"Breakfast is served, my lady," he said. "Would you like to have it in the dining hall?"

"N-No, I can e-eat later. I w-wanted to see R-Riftan—I mean, L-Lord Calypse."

"The lord is at the training grounds with the knights."

Maxi nodded and was about to leave the hall when a worrisome thought occurred to her. What would she do once she found Riftan? She would only get in his way. Rodrigo noticed her hesitating at the door and approached her.

"My lady, if I may …" Rodrigo cleared his throat before continuing. "Could I trouble you to inform the lord that lunch is ready? The kitchen has been busy since dawn, preparing a proper feast for the knights before they embark on their journey."

"C-Certainly!" Maxi exclaimed.

The old steward was visibly relieved that Maxi did not find his request impudent. "Thank you, my lady."

Overjoyed to have an excuse to see Riftan, Maxi rushed out without another word. The gentle autumn breeze was cool against her skin, and she paused to glance up at the pale sun before walking past the pavilion and down the stairs.

She bunched up her skirt to avoid the silvery puddles scattered across the garden, and soon arrived at the inner gates. A sentry hastily raised his hand in salute as Maxi passed by and skipped down another set of stairs. The vast training grounds were surrounded by tall, thick walls, and inside knights clad in shining armor stood in orderly lines before Riftan.

Maxi halted in her tracks. They seemed to be in the middle of a serious discussion. She recognized Gabel, the young knight with a gift for storytelling, as he stepped forward and spoke to Riftan.

"Commander, if it is the safety of Anatol that concerns you, allow me to stay behind. With a Remdragon knight here, you'll have nothing to worry about."

"No," Riftan said. "All knights who participated in the Dragon Campaign must attend the celebration. The honor must be equally shared."

"I have no interest in wealth or titles," Gabel said. "I've already made a name for myself as a knight, and I've received more than enough praise for my achievements. I'd rather remain here, protecting Anatol, than waste my time at tedious festivities."

"Do you really mean that?" Hebaron shook his head in disbelief. "All the ladies of the court will be falling at your feet. With that silver tongue of yours, you could make even the proudest lady swoon! Only an ascetic would throw away such a chance."

"You're a frivolous fool, as always," Ricaydo said, his voice sharp with disapproval. "Is there a brain in that giant head of yours, or is it filled with only vulgar thoughts?"

"What did you say?!"

As Hebaron and Ricaydo glared at each other, Ruth sighed at Riftan's side.

"Are the two of you cursed to die of plague if you go a single day without bickering?" Ruth clicked his tongue in annoyance and continued. "Sir Riftan is right. No knight who fought in the campaign should miss the celebration. Sir Obaron, Sir Sebrique, and the sentries will be here to guard Anatol. And I plan to stay behind as well."

"What are you talking about?" Ricaydo turned from scowling at Hebaron to face Ruth. "As Anatol's sorcerer, you played a crucial role in the battle. You must go with us!"

"Fame and heroism do not become me," Ruth said with a shrug. "Besides, my presence in the capital will cause conflict among the court sorcerers. I'm an outcast among my peers, or have you forgotten that I left the Mage Tower without permission?"

The knights rolled their eyes, as if this was something Ruth brought up frequently—so how could they have forgotten?

After listening to the exchange in silence, Riftan finally spoke. "It would certainly ease my mind if you stayed, Ruth."

"That was always my intention," the sorcerer said with another shrug.

Riftan straightened and turned to address the gathered knights. "It's decided, then. We leave as soon as the preparations are complete. We'll take the route we discussed earlier."

The knights touched their fists to their chests, then lowered them back to their sides. The gesture seemed to be the customary salute of their order. As the conversation came to a close, Maxi quietly approached Riftan, pretending not to notice the knights stealing glances at her as she stepped up to his side.

When Riftan noticed her, his brows came together. "I told you to rest this morning. Is something wrong?"

"N-No, it was t-time for me to r-rise." She felt suddenly shy, her chest constricting as she considered her next words. "R-Rodrigo said that l-lunch is ready, s-so I c-came to t-tell you …."

The worry melted from Riftan's face and he looked toward the sky, gauging the time by the angle of the sun. "We'll eat first," he called to the knights, who quickly dispersed at the mention of food.

Riftan wrapped an arm around Maxi's shoulders, and they began to walk back together. She peeked up at his handsome face. He stood tall under the bright sun, a dashing figure in silver armor and a navy-blue tunic, as if he had strolled out of a temple mural depicting a magnificent hero. It was no wonder that his subjects called him the incarnation of Wigrew, the legendary knight who had ascended to the heavens.

"Are you all right?" Riftan asked.

"I-I'm fine." Maxi hastily fixed her eyes on the ground ahead of them.

"You looked like you were in pain the last time we made love."

Her face burned, as if it had suddenly caught fire. "I-I feel f-fine."

"I wish you would say that in bed as well," he said, frowning. "Tell me it's fine when I ask for more."

"R-Riftan!"

Maxi looked around, afraid that someone might overhear them. The knights, however, were all far ahead of them. With effort, she regained her composure and gave Riftan a stern look.

"Y-You shouldn't say s-such things out here. W-What if someone hears?"

"So what if someone hears?"

She wanted to say that people would think they were shameless and debauched, but her tongue tied itself into a knot. Instead, she teared up in embarrassment. It was undeniable, after all, that they had spent the last few days engaged in endless and indecent lovemaking.

Riftan burst into laughter and drew her in close. "Oh, my sweet, innocent lady," he said, brushing his lips against hers.

The chill in his armor seeped in through Maxi's clothes and she shivered against the cold, even as her pulse quickened.

"Don't make it so hard for me to leave you," Riftan whispered.

Maxi gazed up at him, suppressing the urge to ask if he would truly miss her. If she was not so afraid of irritating him and shattering this sweet moment, she would have asked him to bring her to the capital. Reining in her emotions, Maxi tried to speak with poise.

"We sh-should hurry t-to lunch. You n-need to e-eat."

"Yes, let's go."

Riftan pulled away from her, and Maxi tried her hardest to repress the desire to cling to him as they made their way to the dining hall.

AFTER LUNCH, THE KNIGHTS LEFT THE HALL AND mounted their horses in the courtyard. Maxi followed them out to send Riftan off, and the servants lined up on the stairs. Riftan sat elegantly atop his black stallion and tugged at its reins, slowly turning it around so he could meet Maxi's gaze.

"I'll be back soon."

"P-Please b-be careful."

Her murmur was almost unintelligible, but he smiled and leaned dangerously low in his saddle so that he could stroke her face. Though Maxi could feel the servants' eyes on them, she did not shy away from his touch.

Maxi stood on the tips of her toes and their lips touched lightly before locking together in a deep kiss. Riftan's tongue gently explored her mouth and then, as if nothing had happened, he pulled away and sat up straight, leading his horse away from her and to

the front of the party. The knights, who had been watching their commander in disbelief, turned and followed him wordlessly. Blushing, but unbothered, Maxi watched as they passed through the gates and crossed the moat in single file, then climbed the stairs up to the ramparts to watch until their silhouettes shrank into the distance.

As the long train of men passed below, the sentries on the walls blew their horns. The rich sound of the kopels reverberated through the air, forming a discordant harmony with the clopping of hooves.

Long after the knights and their horses had disappeared over the horizon, Maxi stood unmoving on the walls, gazing at the place where Riftan had passed out of sight.

After Riftan's departure, Maxi fell ill and was confined to her bed for two days. She hadn't rested enough during the previous days, and the recent flurry of activity combined with her accumulated fatigue finally caught up to her. The maidservants attended to her diligently, providing steady doses of herbal soup and damp towels to cool her fever.

When her condition improved three days later, Maxi asked Ludis to draw her a bath, hoping to feel refreshed after washing off the sweat of her illness.

"Shouldn't we call the cleric, my lady?" asked Ludis.

Maxi shook her head as she shed her gown and stepped into the tub. "I f-feel b-better now."

Ludis hovered near the tub, her voice filled with concern. "But I don't know if the herbs the sorcerer gave us are enough. Perhaps we should call a healer instead and—"

"I-I'm really al-all right. It was j-just a f-fever," Maxi said, forcing a smile to reassure Ludis.

In truth, she had not fully recovered yet, but her fever had broken. A day of light exercise and nourishing food would surely restore her strength.

After her bath, she put on her newly tailored dress and draped a warm shawl over her shoulders before heading out to the garden. A sharply chill wind greeted her, and Maxi hugged her shawl more

tightly around her shoulders. The temperature had dropped so quickly in just a few days.

Ludis smiled at her astonishment. "The days turn cold once the autumn rains have passed."

"It f-feels like it's already w-winter," Maxi said, rubbing warmth into her arms.

"Anatol's winters are mild compared to the winters in other regions," Ludis said, still smiling at her. "We're close to the southern sea, so it rarely snows, even in midwinter. When it does, we only get flurries."

Maxi's shoulders slumped in disappointment, despite her efforts to hide it. Her father's lands were in the warm southeastern regions, so she had never seen a proper snowfall. Drachium, the royal capital, was said to regularly see enough snowfall to cover the entire continent, and she wondered if it would be snowing there by the time Riftan arrived.

"You shouldn't linger outside too long, my lady," Ludis said, interrupting Maxi's snowy thoughts. "You've only just recovered."

Maxi smiled and nodded. "I j-just want to walk a l-little."

Ludis seldom spoke unless it was necessary. When she did, it was always out of concern, as if Maxi were her younger sister.

This really is my home now ….

As she walked, Maxi took in Calypse Castle with fresh eyes and recalled her solitary life at Croyso Castle. Imagining the new experiences that awaited her here in Anatol, her heart fluttered with hope so that her chest felt too small to contain it. Could she really pave a new life for herself?

The brief hope sputtered out so that her chest just hurt. Her new surroundings hadn't transformed her into a different person—she still stuttered, still knew nothing about running an estate. Riftan would one day realize that she was foolish and useless. Then, everything would change. He might even come to hate her, just like her father. The thought of losing Riftan's affection froze her blood.

"My lady, are you feeling unwell?"

Ludis had noticed her agitation, and her brow creased with concern again. Maxi tried to shake off her doubts.

"I'm f-fine. I'd like t-to have a w-warm cup of t-tea."

"I'll prepare it at once, my lady."

Maxi turned around to begin the walk back and tried to collect herself.

I'll change. I'll become a proper lady for this castle. I'll become someone Riftan can depend on.

THE NEXT DAY, MAXI RECEIVED A VISIT FROM THE MERCHANT, Aderon. After a long deliberation, she chose white marble with a jade sheen for the banquet hall floor, and masterfully crafted transparent glass for the castle windows. Construction was set to begin the next day, and Aderon assured Maxi that the masons from his guild would arrive on time.

Afterward, Maxi headed straight to the library with the receipt from Aderon in hand. She attempted to record the transaction in her ledger, using Rodrigo's accounting books as a guide, but she was only able to achieve a clumsy imitation of the steward's records. By the time she managed to complete the list of purchased items and their costs, it was dark outside.

The days that followed were hectic as construction began on the castle. Many repairs were needed, and there was no end to the list of required items. Early each morning, Maxi met with Aderon to discuss the refurbishments and approve the purchase of additional tools, as needed. After their meeting, they would supervise the workers, observing the progress of each project.

In the afternoons, Maxi met with the landscaper to review the plans for the gardens. Then, she examined designs for the window frames and railings with the artisans. But her day did not end there. Each day brought a jumble of new receipts for salaries, materials, and tools, and Maxi worked late into the night, recording them in the ledger.

"My lady, you look exhausted," Ludis said to her one morning. "You should rest."

But Maxi shook her head determinedly. "I'm f-fine," she said, and headed down to examine the latest shipment of goods from the merchant guild.

Aderon and his workers arrived at precisely the appointed hour with a large horse-drawn wagon. The merchant flung back the wagon's leather canvas, revealing its contents to Maxi.

"These are the marble slabs for the floor, my lady, and the tools needed to lay them."

"And f-for the w-windows …?"

"The guild branch in Anatol lacks the required quantity of the high-quality glass you've requested," Aderon explained, his face regretful. "It will need to be shipped from the capital or from Livadon. For now, I shall send a message to see if we can purchase the glass in bulk."

He spoke as if he was granting a favor, and Maxi almost thanked him, but she caught herself. Quietly frustrated with her servile attitude, she led Aderon to the drawing room, where the merchant launched into a long-winded explana tion of construction times and costs before the maid could even serve them tea.

Maxi tried to memorize every detail, but when Aderon began to rattle off the names of foreign currencies, her head spun. Struggling to keep up with his calculations, Maxi did her best to keep track of the currency rates. One soldem was worth twenty liram, and twenty liram were equal to two hundred and forty derham, or twelve denar. This meant that thirty denar were worth …

"Oh, dear," Aderon said, just as Maxi thought her head would burst. "It seems I got carried away in my excitement. Please forgive me."

She forced a smile. "I-It's all right."

"My poor nerves just won't calm down. To think that I'm contributing to the refurbishment of the great Lord Calypse's castle!"

"Th-Thank you for y-your hard w-work."

Hearing this dismissal, Aderon awkwardly rose from his seat. As soon as he was gone, Maxi dashed to the library with the parchment listing the latest expenses from the merchant. Just recording the workers' wages took her several hours, and she was still hard at work when a rustle interrupted her exhausted sigh. Maxi whirled toward the sound, and a man emerged from behind a pile of books in the corner.

"R-Ruth?" Maxi stared at him blankly, unsure of what else to say. How long had he been there?

The sorcerer scratched his light gray hair absently and gave her a bleary-eyed look. He appeared to have been napping in the collection of precious books.

"Why has there been so much commotion lately?" Ruth complained, unperturbed by the fact that the lady of the castle had caught him sleeping on the library floor.

"W-We're refurbishing the c-castle …."

"Yes, I know about the castle. But I was asking about *you*, Lady Calypse."

"M-Me?"

"You've been sighing and muttering to yourself in the library for days. Are you aware that you are disrupting my sleep?"

Maxi stared at him, mouth agape. Should she be mortified that someone had watched as she tore at her hair over simple equations? Indignant that Ruth had not made his presence known? Or amazed that he had the audacity to reproach her when he was the one sleeping where he should not be? At a loss for words, Maxi opened her mouth, only to close it soon after.

Ruth stood up and approached her. "Is this a ledger?"

Maxi hastily tried to gather the mess of papers scattered across the table, but she was too slow. Ignoring her attempt to hide the documents, Ruth picked up a few sheets and examined them.

He frowned. "Just how many miscalculations are there?"

"G-Give it back!" She tried to snatch the papers from him, but he simply turned around and raised them above her reach.

"Twelve liram for one marble tile?" He groaned quietly as he examined her work. "Surely that's a mistake. Please tell me you've written the wrong unit here."

"I w-w-w-was j-just about to c-correct it!" Maxi said frantically.

Ruth seemed to be on the verge of a fit. With narrowed eyes, he snatched away the accounting books she had hidden behind her back. Maxi gaped at his insolence. A true gentleman would never touch a lady's belongings without her permission.

"G-Give those b-back!" Maxi demanded, her face flushed with anger as she pulled at his sleeve. "H-How d-dare you!"

"How much gold have you spent in just the last few days?"

Maxi flinched, her heart sinking into the pit of her stomach at Ruth's frightfully harsh tone.

"Just. How. Much?" The sorcerer bit off each word in a short, angry burst.

"W-Well …" Cold sweat trickled down Maxi's back. "R-Riftan said n-n-not to w-w-worry about th-the c-c … cost …"

"But you should still keep track of how much you've spent!"

His sharp tone made her face burn. She avoided his gaze, feeling as humiliated as she had when her tutor scolded her for stuttering.

"I-I d-d-don't know exactly … h-how much."

"Do you have an estimate?"

She slowly shook her head.

Ruth rubbed his temples in obvious annoyance. Maxi briefly wondered if he had the right to admonish her, but the fear that she had made some grave mistake overrode the thought. After a long pause, she decided to confess.

"I'm n-not used t-to handling such m-matters …."

"Then you should have asked for help!"

He was right. Maxi stared at her toes, feeling like an utter fool. "H-How … m-m-much of it is wrong?"

"The ledger is a complete mess. Some items are impossibly cheap, while others are ridiculously overpriced—the calculations are all wrong."

Ruth pointed to a page in the ledger. "And do you see this list of expenses? None of it is essential! You've made too many unnecessary purchases. The Dragon Campaign may have brought Sir Riftan a massive fortune, but gold shouldn't be spent like water!

"We need funds to pay the knights and guards of Anatol," Ruth continued, almost breathless with the flood of his words. "Not to mention next year's construction of the new road connecting the village to the port. Come winter, tax revenues will fall. We must not waste gold!"

Maxi shrank away like a turtle withdrawing into its shell. "I-I didn't kn-know. I w-was n-never … told. R-Riftan j-just told m-m-m—just said to d-do as I w-wished …."

As her stammering trailed off, Ruth's shoulders slumped, and he sighed loudly.

"I'm not saying that the castle shouldn't be refurbished," he said. "Too great a focus was given to the castle's fortification, and its furnishings were neglected. The place looks more like a military base than a lord's residence. But if you continue to spend this lavishly, Sir Riftan will need to battle another dragon to rebuild his wealth."

"Th-That's …" Maxi gripped the back of a chair to steady herself.

She wished to refurbish the castle only so that Riftan might be pleased with her. It was a task he had asked her to do. The thought that her efforts might anger him instead brought her close to tears, and she felt the blood drain from her face.

"Please t-t-tell me what I d-d-did wrong," she pleaded with Ruth. "I'll c-correct my m-mistakes."

Ruth rubbed his temples, but eventually returned his attention to the ledger. As he flipped through it, Maxi hung her head low like a scolded child. When he began to sift through the pile of receipts, Ruth sighed deeply and ran a hand down his face.

"I don't even know where to start, my lady. Are these all the receipts?"

Suppressing her desire to dig a hole in the ground and bury herself, Maxi managed to respond. "Y-Yes, they are!"

He narrowed his eyes at the pile of parchment, then closed the ledger with a thud. "It's late," he said sullenly. "Let's continue tomorrow."

"You c-could show me n-now."

"Look at the state of this ledger. It isn't something we can take care of in a day."

Maxi could hear his teeth grinding. There was nothing more she could say. Crestfallen, she nodded.

THE NEXT MORNING, MAXI RUSHED TO THE LIBRARY AS soon as she awoke, eager to begin work on the ledger.

"You're early," Ruth greeted her with a yawn.

Maxi narrowed her eyes at him. She could tell by his unkempt appearance that he had slept in the corner of the library again. Meanwhile, she had slipped out of her room at sunrise just to avoid being humiliated by Ruth's sharp tongue in front of the servants. She had barely had enough time to wash her face, but here was the sorcerer lounging about without a care in the world.

Ruth rose from his corner and sat down at the desk. "Let's have a look at the list of purchases first. We must cancel unnecessary orders at once."

"Th-The merchant will c-come th-this afternoon. T-Tell me what I sh-should c-cancel, and I'll d-do it." Maxi seated herself across from him, running her fingers through her uncombed hair.

"Very well," he said, organizing the receipts by date.

Maxi clutched her skirt while he inspected them.

"Twelve liram for a slab of marble that is two kevette long and wide," he recited from the ledger. "You've written the wrong currency here. It was twelve derham, not liram. And considering the cost of construction, that's a rather inexpensive price."

She sighed in relief, but Ruth was not finished. Tapping the desk with the tips of his fingers, he continued his review with painstaking detail.

"Is it really necessary to change the flooring of the banquet hall *and* the great hall to marble? The flagstones are only a few years old." He paused, considering. "I suppose there's nothing to be done now since construction has already started. And Lord Calypse does deserve some luxury, so we'll just leave that be."

"B-But c-construction on the g-great hall hasn't b-begun yet. There's still t-time to c-cancel …"

"If you please, my lady," he replied dryly and flipped the page. "Nothing else seems amiss. Banisters, railings for the balcony, window frames, curtains and carpets, tapestries, furniture, chandeliers, sculptures, a fountain—fountain?!"

His flat voice rose sharply, and Maxi flinched as if he had lashed her across the back. Ruth whipped his head up, his eyes demanding

an answer. Maxi looked at the floor, stammering excuses in a barely audible voice.

"Th-The merchant s-said it w-would look s-splendid in the g-garden."

"Do you know how much work it takes to maintain a fountain? The plumbing alone requires large-scale construction! And the fountain is to be made of marble and crystal?! This accursed merchant is trying to swindle the Calypse estate."

Maxi shrank away from his outrage, but the admonishment did not end there.

"Whose idea was it to use high-quality glass panes for all the windows? Only Roemian emperors would pay for such extravagance! Have you any idea how expensive glass is?"

"Th-The w-windows of m-m-m—of C-Croyso Castle were all g-glass."

"Your father is easily one of the wealthiest people in the Seven Kingdoms!" Ruth pinched the bridge of his nose before continuing. "But it's not just a question of affordability. This type of glass window is impractical for Anatol's climate because it can't insulate against the cold. It would be no different from keeping the windows open in the winter.

"And don't forget, my lady, that the knights' training grounds are in the courtyard. The day will come when one of those fools misfires his blade aura and shatters these expensive windows while showing off. Besides, glass scratches easily, and the servants will have to work twice as hard to keep it polished. We're shorthanded as it is."

These points had never crossed Maxi's mind. She remained silent.

Ruth's voice softened only after he finished examining the receipts. "I see that not everything listed here has been ordered yet," he said. "Let's replace the windows in the great hall, banquet hall, and a few of the guest rooms with the high-quality glass."

He pulled out a fresh piece of parchment and drew a blueprint of the castle, indicating the halls and rooms he had mentioned.

"Balt glass or a double covering can be used for the remaining rooms. Adding shutters would be practical as well, so that the windows can occasionally be opened for air flow during the winter.

That should be more than sufficient for convincing visitors of our wealth."

Maxi listened, nodding at each solution he outlined. "I un-understand. I'll t-tell the m-merchant."

"And that crystal fountain isn't even worth discussing," he said, discarding the piece of parchment listing the fountain's costs and materials. He dipped a quill in ink and opened the ledger to a fresh page.

"Now, my lady," Ruth said, handing her the quill. "Let's try recording the purchases again, without the overpriced items this time."

Maxi nervously eyed the quill. She had expected Ruth to take matters into his own hands. "W-What if I m-make more m-mistakes …"

"You'll need to keep accounts in the future. If you make a mistake, I'll help you correct it. But you should have a try first, my lady."

She nodded and took the quill, but her mind went blank as she stared at the ledger. Unable to recall anything she had learned, Maxi sifted through the receipts in panic.

Taking a breath to compose herself, Maxi decided to start with the oldest receipt and began copying the item names and expenditures. This time, her records included the number of workers hired, their wages, and the length of their contracts in addition to the quantity and cost of purchased materials.

As the calculations grew more complex, a cold sweat beaded on Maxi's skin. She added, added, and added again. But how much was each currency worth? The more she thought about it, the more confused she became.

After silently watching her struggle, Ruth intervened, his voice apprehensive. "Forgive me if I'm wrong, but it seems you don't know the currency conversions."

"I d-do!" Maxi insisted, tightening her grip around the quill.

Ruth gave her a dubious look, and Maxi's mouth went dry.

"It's j-just that I've n-never b-bought anything myself, s-so I g-got a little c-confused …"

"How much is sixty liram in soldem?"

Maxi hurriedly counted on her fingers and blurted out the first answer she came to. “F-Four?”

As Ruth’s eyes narrowed, she inhaled sharply and corrected herself.

“Th-Three!”

“How much is twenty-four denar in soldem, then?”

“Um …”

“How many derham coins would you get for ten liram?”

Ruth’s continued scrutiny had Maxi on the verge of tears, and her face burned with shame.

He’s realized that I’m utterly incompetent. He knows that I’m hopeless. What if he tells Riftan that I’m just as I appear—a stupid, stuttering fool?

As she lowered her head in defeat, Ruth clutched his head and groaned.

“Not even Princess Agnes was this ignorant about worldly affairs! Has your life been that sheltered?”

Maxi bit her lip but did not answer. Ruth, too, was silent. Finally, he heaved a sigh and pulled a small pouch from his robe.

“Look closely,” he said as he fished two silver coins from the pouch.

One was large, its diameter as wide as her little finger was long, and it was impressed with the image of a bird spreading its wings. The other coin was small and thin, only as wide as a single joint of her index finger. Ruth tapped the larger coin.

“This is a liram, the currency minted during the Roemian Empire and circulated widely across the continent. The smaller coin is a derham. Twelve derham make one liram.”

He paused, making sure Maxi understood before continuing.

“The derham originated in Lakazim, on the Southern Continent. Trade with the southern realms has increased in recent years, so we’re seeing an influx of these coins. They may be small, but they are stable and carry much value.”

Maxi examined the small coin, placing it in her palm so she could see it up close. She had never held money before and so wanted to memorize its details.

Satisfied that she was following along, Ruth resumed his lesson. "On a scale, it takes exactly twelve derham to balance the weight of one liram, which is why the exchange is twelve derham for a liram."

The next coins that came out of Ruth's pouch were gold. One was the size of a liram, and the other the size of a derham.

"This large coin is a soldem. Like the liram, it's been in circulation since the Roemian era. The smaller gold coin is a denar, and it is from Lakazim, like the smaller silver coin. A soldem weighs as much as twelve denar, so the conversion is the same as from liram to derham: one to twelve."

"W-Why do they p-produce such small c-coins on the S-Southern Continent?"

Ruth scrunched his nose in annoyance. "Because trade there is far more developed than it is here. If the coins carried too much value, trade between individuals wouldn't be possible."

Sensing that the sorcerer was explaining things that should be obvious to her, Maxi chose not to inquire further. She was not sure she understood the nuances of trade and currencies, but waited for Ruth to continue.

"Gold is twenty times more valuable than silver. So, one soldem can be exchanged for twenty liram, and one denar for twenty derham."

Maxi struggled to wrap her head around the conversion rates. "S-So this small gold coin—a d-denar, was it? How m-much is one d-denar in liram?"

"There's no precise conversion. Five liram are worth three denar." Ruth slid a gold denar and a silver liram across the table.

She quickly began scribbling notes on a spare piece of parchment, and Ruth watched her for a few moments before sighing softly.

"You were likely confusing liram and denar in your dealings with the merchant. The soldem is rarely used on account of being too valuable, while the derham is worth too little to be considered practical for large-scale transactions. Trade between noble houses and merchants is usually conducted in liram, the Roemian silver coin, or in denar, the gold coin from Lakazim.

"Like I said, liram and denar do not convert neatly. Since breaking the coins into pieces isn't an option, traders often convert them into derham to simplify things. As long as you keep track of these conversions, your calculations should be accurate."

Maxi nodded, dejected. "I d-didn't know th-there were so m-many kinds of coins …."

"You've only seen a fraction of them, my lady. Balto in the north and Sykan in the east have their own currencies. Their coins' purity and weight are identical to that of soldem and liram, but it's best that you still take note of their appearance." Ruth searched his pockets, then scratched his head. "Unfortunately, I don't have any samples with me. Next time, perhaps."

Maxi stared at him with dread. More currencies only meant more confusion.

"If th-they're worth the s-same as s-soldem and liram, is th-there really a need t-to s-see them?"

Ruth nodded. "More and more lords have been minting their own coins to show off their wealth and power, but most of them are made from impure alloys containing lead or copper. These must be rejected in transactions. Coins from Balto or Sykan, on the other hand, are pure and reliable. Come next spring, merchants from these kingdoms will arrive in Anatol, so you'd do well to familiarize yourself with their currencies beforehand."

"I s-see …"

"The soldem, liram, denar, derham, and copper shekel widely used by commoners are among the most reliable currencies. And then there's the dant, which is used only by the elite. You should remember those at the very least."

Maxi's ears perked up at his mention of the dant. She had heard of it in passing before.

"H-How much is a d-dant w-worth?"

"It's the most valuable currency in the world, issued during the golden age of the Roemian Empire. They're book-sized, resembling metal plates more than coins, and they're made of orichalcum. As such, they're exceedingly rare. Only six hundred exist across the

continent, and one hundred and sixty of them are in Sir Riftan's possession."

Maxi's eyes grew wide as Ruth continued to boast.

"Sir Riftan found them six years ago. During that time, he hunted monsters like a madman and collected all sorts of treasures. It was in a lair in the canyons of Osiriya that he came across two hundred dant coins—the most valuable of his finds. Of the two hundred, he spent forty on building the castle walls, repairing the castle itself, and paving the roads in the village."

"H-He was able t-to do all that w-with just f-forty coins?"

"*Twenty* would have sufficed, but Sir Riftan paid the workers several times the usual wage to expedite construction." Ruth made no attempt to hide his displeasure.

"Y-You've known R-Riftan a long time."

"Since he was nothing but a lowly mercenary. It's been nearly twelve years."

Maxi was intrigued by the revelation. Twelve years ago, Riftan would have been sixteen. Had he really become a mercenary so young? She knew that Riftan had been knighted at the age of eighteen, and doing so typically required at least three years of training and an additional year of dedicated swordsmanship under another knight's guidance ….

"But we've digressed," Ruth said. "Let's return to the task at hand, my lady. We must finish before the merchant arrives."

Swallowing her lingering questions, Maxi nodded and buried her nose in the ledger once again.

ADERON WAS VISIBLY UPSET WHEN MAXI CANCELED some of the orders, and though he made several eloquent attempts to persuade her to reconsider, she stood her ground. Just remembering how Ruth had scowled at her immoderate spending gave her courage. In the end, the merchant heaved a sigh of surrender and drafted a new statement.

While Maxi tried to estimate the total cost, it dawned on her that she would be paying with *piles* of the gleaming coins that Ruth had shown her earlier. It was no small sum. With a renewed sense of

responsibility, she signed the receipt and gathered the rolls of parchment.

Later, in the library, Ruth looked relieved when Maxi told him that everything had gone well.

"May I see the receipt?"

Nodding, she passed him the piece of parchment.

"I see the fellow isn't entirely unprincipled." He idly tapped his lips as he examined the page.

"He's rather p-persistent, b-but he's not a b-bad person …"

"Anyone can pretend to be a paragon of virtue when it comes to lining their pockets."

As he pulled out a chair to sit at the table, Maxi sat down across from him and rolled her eyes at his cynical remark. The sorcerer was far more ill-tempered and sharp-tongued than his soft features suggested. Though Ruth was nosier and more talkative than Riftan, both men had undeniably difficult personalities.

"Please record the transaction in the ledger," Ruth instructed. "I'll help you make any necessary corrections."

"Al-All right." Maxi obeyed without questioning his authority.

"This calculation is wrong," he said, almost immediately.

"Oh, I'm s-sorry …"

Ruth silently observed as she scratched away with the quill. When she made another error, he pressed a hand to his forehead and tapped one corner of the ledger with the other. She hastily corrected the mistake, but he pointed again to the section below it.

"This unit here is wrong."

"I-I'm sorry …"

"Try to keep the accounts as detailed as possible. We want to avoid confusion once they're settled."

"I-I understand."

"Here, your spelling is wrong. And please refrain from scrawling. These are official records that will be passed down for generations."

Maxi withered under his criticism. Not even the tutor that Duke Croyso hired had been so strict with her. When she finished writing, Ruth slid the ledger closer to himself and looked over the numbers as if he were reviewing her homework.

"This is acceptable." He let out an exaggerated exhale as he closed the book. "Now that all of the issues have been addressed, my lady, I'd like to ask that you not disturb my sleep."

Maxi rolled her eyes again. Did the sorcerer always sleep in the library? Hadn't Riftan mentioned that his quarters were in the tower? But it was not her place to interfere, so she did not question him.

She hesitated a long while before speaking again. "We also d-decided to renovate the g-gardens for next spring."

Ruth lifted his eyes to the ceiling in exasperation, but Maxi continued to look at him pleadingly. For days, she had toiled over this endeavor—alone, no less—and she was at her wits' end. Having suffered all manner of humiliation, she had nothing else to lose.

"And r-repair the a-annex," she added meekly.

Ruth clutched his head, regretting that he had ever offered his assistance.

FROM THEN ON, RUTH OVERSAW MAXI'S BOOKKEEPING. Every day, she would enter the library and silently hover over him as he slept in the corner, and every day, he would rise from his pile of books, grumbling that he should never have intervened in the first place. Still, he studied the ledger meticulously and advised her on the purchases. Though his advice bordered on nagging, his assistance proved to be invaluable, and Maxi found herself turning to him for even the most trivial problems.

When Maxi told him of her plans for the garden, however, he looked concerned.

"The servants will be troubled if you order the removal of the tree by the pavilion."

"But it's d-dead," she said, confused. "It d-doesn't even g-grow leaves."

"Anatolians believe that nymphs inhabit trees, so they're wary of uprooting them, even dead ones. Logging is considered sacrilegious. If you were to order that tree's removal for aesthetic reasons, people would be horrified."

"B-But …" Maxi trailed off, perplexed. "W-Wouldn't they understand if w-we told them the t-tree would be used f-for fuel?

Look how h-hideous it is."

"They'd probably accept it." Ruth rubbed his chin, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "If that tree wasn't an oak."

"W-What's s-special about oak trees?"

"Anatolians hold dear the legend of Sir Rosem Wigrew, the first knight to have flown across the sky on a dragon. That hill is, supposedly, where Wigrew mounted his dragon before he set out for the last time."

Ruth gestured to the steep hill outside the window as he spoke, and Maxi's eyes went round. Of course, she was familiar with the legend of Wigrew, the man to whom God had granted the holy sword Ascalon to end the war against darkness—the very hero who had united the western realms under the banner of the Roemian Empire before ascending to the heavens. He was a recurring figure in children's bedtime stories, and the scene of Wigrew flying into the sky on a white dragon had been immortalized in countless ballads and paintings.

Maxi's eyes sparkled with wonder at the knowledge that this place of legend was right outside her door. "Is the l-legend really t-true?"

"The Anatolians believe so, though there's no historical evidence."

"B-But what does th-that have to d-do with oak t-trees?"

"Well, the story goes that Wigrew fell in love with the nymph of that very oak tree, and the Anatolians believe that the nymph is still there, patiently waiting for his return. Every spring festival, all the maidens take to the hills to sing songs of praise for the nymph's love and devotion."

"S-So that's why p-people here d-don't cut down o-oak trees."

Ruth nodded in confirmation. Still, Maxi could not help feeling that the dead tree marred the appearance of the castle's main entrance.

"Would the p-people really be so d-disgruntled if I h-had it r-removed?"

"The people of Anatol revere Wigrew and anything associated with him. Most will likely resent the decision."

Maxi frowned, remembering how they had cheered "Rosem Wigrew" the day of Riftan's return.

Sensing her distress, Ruth sighed. “I’ll see if I can revive it. Once it grows leaves, it won’t look as bad as it does now.”

“You can d-do that?”

“The lives of plants are very different from those of humans. They sometimes appear dead when they’re simply dormant. If we infuse the tree with mana …” He pursed his lips with a dismissive scratch of his head, as if offering her an explanation would be too tedious.

“I can’t make guarantees, but we could at least spread the word that your ladyship has enlisted the help of a sorcerer to revive the sacred oak. Even if the experiment ends in failure, it will be enough to placate the servants.”

His cynical tone made her pause. “A-Are you suggesting I c-care too much about how the s-servants perceive me?”

“That wasn’t my intention. It’s natural for the lady of the castle to try to earn her servants’ respect, especially when she hasn’t been here long.”

Ruth’s answer was uncharacteristically kind, but the reassurance only made Maxi feel more puzzled than relieved. She had grown used to his backhanded remarks.

Her eyes traced nervous lines around the library, not sure where to direct her gaze. “Then … I s-suppose I’ll l-leave it to you.”

Immediately, Ruth looked as if he regretted volunteering for such a bothersome task.

“All I want, my lady, is for this tedious project to end so I can return to my routine in peace.”

CHAPTER 6



The refurbishments proceeded smoothly. In place of crude flagstones, gleaming marble tiles covered the floor of the banquet hall, and each of the old shutters framing the windows—which creaked in the slightest breeze—were replaced with smoothly oiled mahogany.

As Ruth had suggested, panes of the high-quality crystal glass were installed only in the banquet hall, great hall, eight of the largest guest rooms, and Maxi's bedchamber. The windows in the library, barracks, and dining hall were set instead with standard balt glass. The remaining chambers and corridors were fitted with new greased parchment windows, complete with shutters. These small changes were enough to brighten the gloomy castle, and the servants seemed pleased by the transformation. They worked with cheerful faces, though the maids did have to work twice as hard to clean in the wake of the construction.

"Have you seen the new furniture? It's magnificent!"

"And the curtains are beautiful too! I can't wait to see the chandelier. We'll soon have the most splendid banquet hall in all of Wedon."

"The great hall finally lives up to its name. I heard that once the windows are complete, they'll bring in new carpets for the floor!"

Three young maidservants carrying baskets full of laundry chatted animatedly, their cheeks flushed. Recognizing them as the new hires Aderon had recommended, Maxi paused in her hurried strides through the corridor.

"I'm certain the lord will be surprised when he returns," said one of the maids excitedly.

"He most definitely will be! I heard he was furious at the state of the castle when he returned from his last campaign."

The maidservants' words made Maxi's heart flutter in anticipation. Would Riftan really be pleased by the changes? Or would he perhaps think them too extravagant? She quickly cast off her worries before they could consume her. Ruth had assured her that the renovations were acceptable, though he did seem a little bothered by the expense.

Shaking off her anxiety, Maxi continued on her way downstairs to oversee preparations for the winter. In Riftan's absence, it fell to her to ensure that there were sufficient reserves of food and water—for the servants, guards, *and* horses—as well as firewood and warm clothing for the coming months.

"My lady, the new wall lamps and braziers have arrived." Rodrigo bowed his head to her as he and a few other servants carried wooden crates inside. "Would you like to see them?"

Maxi nodded, and Rodrigo set the crates down so he could pry one open with an iron poker. Inside rested nine elegant wall lamps.

"There are fifteen crates in total, my lady."

"P-Please m-make sure the rest of the l-lamps are in g-good condition. I-I want them placed in the great h-hall, the b-banquet hall, and the c-corridors."

"And the braziers?"

"Please put t-two in the k-kitchen. The r-rest can go in the b-barracks and the g-guardhouse."

"As you wish, my lady."

One by one, the servants carried the crates across the great hall, and Maxi turned on her heel to exit. Winter was fast approaching, and the air had turned sharp with cold. Maxi's breath puffed in front of her lips as she made for the stables with quick, light steps. She planned to visit the stable, annex, and forge to decide whether anything else needed to be purchased. While leafing through old ledgers earlier in the day, she had discovered that her predecessors

had made annual inspections of the castle. Her focus on the renovations had caused her to neglect other areas of the estate.

The path led her around the garden to the southern end of the grounds, where the stables were located. Surprised by her presence, the stable hands dropped the fodder they had been transporting and hurriedly took off their hats.

"My lady! What brings you here?" Qenal Osban, the stablemaster, came out to meet her. "Were there no maidservants to accompany you?"

Maxi recognized him from her first day at Calypse Castle, and she took a deep breath, hoping to speak calmly. "They h-had their own duties to attend to. I came to … see if there is anything you … need for the w-winter. Since merchants will be l-less inclined to t-travel when the d-days grow c-colder …"

"Oh, thank you, my lady." Qenal's face brightened. "I was about to go meet with Rodrigo for that very purpose."

He swung open the stable door and held up a lamp for her. The interior looked as though it had just been cleaned. Grimacing slightly at the stench, Maxi leaned forward without stepping inside, her eyes skimming over the twenty warhorses that were snorting and grazing on hay.

Qenal pointed to the end of the room, where one stall appeared to be on the verge of collapsing. "See there, my lady? We'll need new partitions, but our tools are old, and we don't have enough wood since all of the suitable trees have been cleared."

"Is th-there anything else?"

"We'll also need more hay to last us the winter, my lady."

"V-Very well, I'll p-put in an order."

"Bless you, my lady! Thank you kindly." The old man grinned.

Maxi smiled in response, letting out a breath of relief. Not long ago, the mere presence of other people had been enough to make her tremble in fear, but now, she was able to look them in the eyes while keeping her composure.

Though her tongue still refused to move as she willed, her stutter had improved a little, owing to the fact that she had far more opportunities to speak here than at Croyso Castle. Proud of her

progress, Maxi left the stables and stepped back into the spacious garden. The high walls cast frigid shadows over her, and she wrapped her shawl around her shoulders more tightly.

The breeze carried the scent of grass, and loose strands of her hair danced in its wake, tickling her face. She brushed them away absentmindedly, only to stop in her tracks when she suddenly recalled Riftan likening her voluminous hair to cotton clouds.

Looking up, her eyes fell upon the distant mountains that Riftan had traversed to reach the capital. He should have arrived in Drachium by now.

She pictured the royal capital bustling with lively festivities. Riftan, clad in silver armor, would stand tall and gallant before the nobles like a hero out of a legend, and none would dare look down on him for his humble background anymore. Even the noblewomen who had once shunned him would fall for him.

Maxi's heart plummeted at the thought, and her stomach began to turn as she imagined Riftan surrounded by poised and beautiful ladies in the ballroom of the royal palace. Basking in their admiration, Riftan would regret marrying her. He would realize his mistake and finally divorce her.

"What are you doing here all alone, my lady?"

The voice snapped Maxi out of her unpleasant reverie. She whirled around to see two youths in black tunics watching her with puzzled expressions. Recognizing them as two of the squires she had seen at the banquet, she straightened up.

The youths greeted her with their hands on their chests and bowed respectfully.

"No need to be alarmed, my lady," one said. He was the handsome, silver-haired squire who had been eager for stories of Riftan's adventures. "We just wanted to make sure that you were all right."

"I-I am, thank you, um …" Unsure of what to call the squire, Maxi fell silent.

"Please pardon my late introduction, my lady," he said quickly. "I am Ulyseon Rovar. I will be knighted next year."

The taller youth standing awkwardly next to him fol lowed suit. "Garrow Livakion, my lady. I am to be knighted on the same day as my friend here."

"I-I am Maximilian C-Calypse." As soon as she said it, her expression became sheepish, feeling silly at having introduced herself when they clearly already knew her.

Ulyseon, however, flashed her a reassuring smile. "Were you taking a stroll, my lady?"

"N-No. I was j-just inspecting the castle."

Ulyseon's face turned serious. "We may be inside the safety of the castle walls, but you still shouldn't wander on your own for too long, my lady. We've had more visitors lately, and if an accident were to occur …"

"An a-accident?" Her voice wavered, which in turn sent Ulyseon into a fluster.

"Ah, apologies. It was not my intention to scare you. I was just concerned is all …." He trailed off, rubbing the back of his neck uncertainly before brightening again. "Would you, perhaps, allow me to escort you, my lady?"

"I-It's all right. I don't want to w-waste your t-time …."

"It is an honor for a knight to serve a lady, and though I may not be one yet, I'm fully prepared to protect you with my life!"

His fervor took Maxi by surprise, causing her to step back.

Garrow elbowed him in the ribs. "Stop exaggerating, Uly."

"I assure you, I mean every word!" Ulyseon's eyes flashed with a fiery determination, but only for a moment. The sound of his own shout echoing through the courtyard seemed to help him realize he was getting carried away, and he cleared his throat before addressing Maxi in a calmer voice. "In any case, you mustn't walk around by yourself. If you'd like, I can send for some of the guards to escort you."

"I'm just t-taking a walk," Maxi said. "There's n-no need to g-go that far …"

"These walls do not guarantee safety, my lady. If *anything* were to happen to you, I would never be able to face Lord Calypse." Ulyseon blanched at his own words, shaken by the thought alone.

"If this w-worries you so, then I s-suppose I could use an e-escort."

The squire's face lit up at her assent. "Where shall I escort you, my lady?"

"I-I was on my w-way to the forge."

"What a coincidence! That's where we were headed as well. Please, allow me to lead the way." Ulyseon took the lead with a spring in his step, and Garrow shrugged before falling into step beside him. After hesitating for just a moment longer, Maxi followed after them.

Ulyseon's attention had a refreshing warmth to it. Though Riftan was caring, his mannerisms were brusque, to say the least, and Ruth was not one to mince his words either. When it came to the rest of the knights, they simply ignored Maxi's existence entirely.

These squires must be fifteen years old—sixteen at most.

Ulyseon glanced over his shoulder at her curiously. "Do you have some special business in the forge?"

"Nothing in p-particular, b-but I wanted to see i-if they n-needed anything o-ordered before w-winter sets in."

"Ah, I see. Garrow and I were on our way there because my sword broke during training." Ulyseon remained cheerful as he pointed at the sword strapped to his belt. "It's em barrassing to admit, but this is the second time it's happened this month. The blacksmith scolds me whenever he sees me."

He blushed slightly at his own confession, but Maxi smiled at his candor. Though his eagerness to please made her a little uncomfortable, she could see that he was a kind and sincere young man.

"At this rate, I'll never become a tenth of the knight Sir Riftan is—I couldn't even fill the *toes* of his boots!"

"We'll be Remdragon Knights next year, Uly," Garrow said in a mollifying tone. "Comparing yourself to him is a little unproductive, don't you think?"

"You only say that because you don't understand how incredible Sir Riftan is, Garrow. Never mind one-tenth! Becoming even one

one-hundredth of the knight he is would be an achievement all on its own!"

"Is that right?" Garrow's tone was unimpressed. He'd clearly had enough of his companion's hero worship.

Maxi, however, looked pleased. "Is R-Riftan really so a-accomplished a knight?"

"Accomplished doesn't even begin to describe him!" Ulyseon gawked at her, incredulous. "Sir Riftan is the greatest knight of our era—he isn't called Wigrew's reincarnation for nothing! Only *five* knights on the continent have received that honor, and he's defeated *two* of them! First, it was Sir Sejuleu Aren of Livadon during a sword-fighting tourney six years ago, and he just recently bested Sir Kuahel Leon of Osiriya!"

Maxi smiled again, though it carried a hint of uncertainty. She had heard the name of the Temple Knights' commander on several occasions, but she had no sense of his greater renown.

Almost as if he was unsatisfied with her response, Ulyseon continued in a more enthusiastic tone. "I decided to become a knight after seeing Sir Riftan's swordsmanship in a competition. I've admired him ever since!"

"I-I see …" Maxi nodded tentatively, unsure of what kind of response he expected from her.

Ulyseon frowned at her lukewarm reaction. "It seems you're unfamiliar with your husband's eminence, my lady."

"That's n-not true! I kn-know of how he f-felled the d-dragon …"

"He was a remarkable knight well before the Dragon Campaign. Have you ever seen him wield a sword, my lady?"

"O-Of course I have! I've watched him fight off m-monsters in the past." But even as the words left her lips, she was unsure that she could truly claim to have seen anything. The first time, she had fainted, and the second time, the battle was over before she even realized what had transpired. Reluctant to give the impression that she knew next to nothing about her own husband, Maxi filled the gaps in her memory with embellishments.

"In fact, I-I saw Riftan c-cut a full g-grown giant in half! With m-my own eyes! T-Ten of them attacked us, and they were s-slain

before I could b-blink."

In truth, she could not remember how many monsters there had been, but she stubbornly maintained her pretense, certain that there could have been no fewer than ten. Her recounting earned her the awe of both squires, and their eyes sparkled with intrigue.

"*Ten* giants?! Did he really?"

"Incredible! Tell us more!"

Maxi flinched. She could easily tell from the squires' eager faces that they expected an epic tale, but she had already set their expectations too high to admit the truth now. Desperately, she racked her brain for details from heroic ballads she'd heard from bards in the past.

"W-We were in the c-carriage when we h-heard a f-ferocious roar. It was t-terribly loud, loud enough to t-tear the sky a-asunder! I th-thought the very s-sky had c-come crashing down, but while I stood p-paralyzed, R-Riftan leaped off the c-carriage, sword in hand. H-He moved so f-fast that I didn't have a ch-chance to see him d-draw it."

"No one can draw faster than Sir Riftan!" Ulyseon took a step forward, eyes wide. "His enemies bleed from their necks before they've even noticed the glint of his blade."

To be honest, it was a bit unsettling to her that the youths were so delighted by the nightmarish scene, but she carried on.

"Th-There were t-ten giants as tall as the castle walls. All of the kn-knights drew their blades then, and they charged with R-Riftan leading the attack. He s-swung his sword at the b-biggest of the m-monsters, and with a f-flash of light …" She squinted, trying to remember how Ulyseon put it just moments ago. "The b-beast's head rolled onto the ground, b-blood spurting from its n-neck!"

"Of course! Sir Riftan's blade can slice through Dragon's Breath." Ulyseon grinned. "A mere giant is nothing!"

With bated breath, the squires waited for her to continue, showing no sign of frustration with her stuttering. Their zeal fueled her own excitement, and she held her arms out in front of her, swinging an imaginary sword.

"Seeing its k-kin slain, another g-giant let out a deafening roar. It swung its c-club at R-Riftan—it was as th-thick as this tree—but

Riftan dodged it by j-jumping high into the air, like an eagle taking f-flight!" She smiled inwardly, commending her own choice of words. "The giant w-was too s-slow to react, and it struck the ground where Riftan stood j-just a moment before. The very earth sh-shook beneath the b-blow!"

She swung her arms downward, pretending to strike the ground, and the squires tensed their shoulders in suspense. Their anticipation made Maxi grow more and more elated. No one had ever been so engrossed by her words before.

"Riftan's s-sword flashed again, and a split second later, the ogre's arm dropped to the g-ground … sliced clean off! And the b-blood …"

The mere mention of blood made the squires lean in closer with renewed excitement, and so she raised her arms and began to shout dramatically.

"It p-poured down as the giant shook its s-severed stump! A rain of b-black blood!"

"Indeed … and it took us half a day just to wash it all off of us."

Maxi's heart skipped a beat and she froze, arms still held above her head.

Ruth crouched under a tree just ahead of them, scraping moss from between its roots. With a soft grunt, he stood up with a sack in hand and continued.

"Everyone's armor and clothes were stained black that day. I nearly thought we'd have to change the name of our order from the Remdragon Knights to the Black Dragon Knights, because there was nothing white about our clothing that day."

"Mage Ruth!" Ulyseon eagerly hurried toward the sorcerer. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm gathering a reagent for the trees on her ladyship's request." Ruth lifted the sack slightly. "But did I interrupt something? It seems she was in the middle of recounting our fierce battle against the ogres."

Maxi blushed from head to toe, wishing she could crumble into dust and be blown away by the wind. Ruth, who had seen her vomit and faint at the sight of blood, could call her bluff if he so wished.

The squires, however, seemed wholly oblivious to her mortification and continued to chatter away.

"Yes! We were just at the part where Sir Riftan felled ten of those giants in the blink of an eye!"

"Ten, you say?" Ruth spoke in a slow drawl, feigning interest.

Maxi's heart pounded and her eyes darted from side to side as she tried to think of some way to excuse herself before Ruth exposed her lie. But Ruth did not expose her. Instead, he cast her a knowing look before carrying on with a straight face.

"If that's enough to impress you, then I suppose her ladyship hasn't told you about the battle in the mountains."

"Battle in the mountains?"

"Oh, yes. We were crossing Anatolium when a pack of werewolves tried to ambush us, but …" He tapped his lips thoughtfully. "My memory fails me lately. Lady Calypse? How many of those beasts were there?"

"I d-d-don't remember …"

"Mm, well, there were simply too many to count. The horde had enough fur to carpet the whole mountain."

"That many?" Ulyseon gaped. "In Anatolium?"

Maxi stood paralyzed, cold sweat beading on the back of her neck.

Ruth smirked. "I think her ladyship is better equipped to regale you with the finer details."

The two youths looked to her expectantly, but Maxi's face was now flushed crimson. She might have gotten a bit overzealous in her storytelling moments ago, but to concoct such bold-faced lies in front of Ruth? She did not have the nerve.

Thankfully, Ruth seemed to take pity on her, and came to her rescue.

"But I'm sure her ladyship has many other affairs that require her attention. We mustn't take so much of her time."

"Y-Yes, I d-do have some m-m-matters to attend t-to." Maxi hastily went along with his excuse, but as she turned to leave, Ruth stopped her.

"I have a message for you, my lady. Your tale was so enthralling that it almost slipped my mind."

"A m-message?" She narrowed her eyes skeptically, half expecting him to start mocking her. Ruth, however, simply pulled out a small piece of parchment, unfolding it before handing it to her.

"This is a letter from Sir Riftan. He plans to leave the capital as soon as the victory celebration is over. The journey will take a fortnight at most, but at their pace, I expect his arrival in ten days' time."

Maxi's embarrassment melted away at the unexpected news. Beaming, she took the slip of paper from him to read it herself, noting Riftan's date of departure and planned travel route.

Ruth shook his head and sighed. "He really doesn't want to stay a second longer than necessary."

"I-Is that a p-problem?"

"It wouldn't hurt to let King Reuben save face by staying at court a little longer."

Ulyseon quickly came to his idol's defense. "With werewolves roaming the borders of Anatol, I'm sure Sir Riftan is only concerned about our security. I can only imagine how worried he must be."

Wishing to avoid this uncomfortable change in topic, Maxi brought the conversation to an end. "Th-Thank you f-for t-telling me, Ruth. I really m-must be going now."

"Of course, my lady. I am *very* well aware of how busy you are." Ruth's acerbic comment echoed behind her as she scurried off.

The lightness of her feet surprised her. Despite being almost humiliated moments ago, she was in relatively high spirits. She resisted the urge to hum a tune, conscious of the young squires following behind her.

AFTER COMPLETING HER INSPECTION OF THE CASTLE, Maxi returned to her room to organize her list of requisitions. As soon as she awoke the next morning, she rushed to the library to ask Ruth to check her work for errors, only to find the sorcerer fast asleep on the threadbare carpet with books piled atop his body in place of a blanket. He scowled when she woke him but ultimately relented and scanned the list without a word of complaint, using an ink-dipped quill to cross out a few items and adjust certain quantities.

"The steward has more than enough fuel for lanterns stocked, candles as well. We also have plenty of spare tableware in storage. And pray tell, my lady, who will be using all of this soap and scented oil?"

"The kn-knights seemed t-to enjoy baths and s-saunas …"

"Ha! Do you honestly expect those men to use such things? They'll scowl if you so much as hold anything with a vaguely floral scent under their noses. Only order enough for yourself." He promptly crossed out the unnecessary items with a flourish, as if he was doing her a great favor, and continued to scan the list. "The rest seems fine."

"Then sh-should I p-put in the o-order?"

"Let me add a few items first."

Maxi's eyes widened at his request. It was the first time Ruth had suggested spending *more* money. Curious, she peered down at the words he was scratching onto the parchment. It appeared to be a long series of names. Seeing him add *people* to her list of purchases made her assume the worst, and she gaped at him. He was not asking her to buy slaves, was he?

"W-What are those?!"

"Names of scholars. I'd like you to order anything and everything the merchants can find that was written by them."

Maxi stared at him blankly for a few seconds. "Y-You're asking me t-to buy p-personal items using the c-castle treasury? E-Expensive and e-extravagant items at that!"

"My lady, knowledge is valuable beyond all measure." Ruth's demeanor transformed into solemnity. "I assure you, these books are not for my personal benefit. They're for the library. Anyone would be free to come and read them."

Her jaw dropped at his brazenness. Ruth *detested* seeing others in the library. He made no attempt to hide his displeasure when even she, the lady of the castle, entered. In fact, he had practically claimed the library as his territory in addition to his tower.

"I've n-never seen a-anyone but yourself using the l-library."

"I'm sure more people will use it in the future." He gave a pragmatic shrug.

Maxi regarded him doubtfully. The majority of the castle's inhabitants were knights who spent their days training outside, only returning to eat or sleep. For all his uncompromising interference with her purchases, Ruth seemed to have no qualms when it came to buying the things that he wanted. Narrowing her eyes, Maxi snatched the quill from his hand and crossed out his additions.

Startled—and rather indignant—Ruth snatched the parchment back. "I am the resident sorcerer of this castle! Cultivating my talents is for the good of Anatol!"

"I-I knew it! Y-You're ordering these books f-for yourself! A-And … And these books aren't e-even about magic!"

"Oh, really? And how would you know that, my lady?"

"I s-spent twenty-two years in a l-library! E-Even I know th-the names of philosophers l-like Gerald or K-Kazaham!"

The arrogance within his blue-gray eyes wavered, a clear sign that she was right. The books had nothing to do with magic in the slightest.

She smiled triumphantly. "G-Give me that list. Y-You told me yourself th-that we need to fund road c-construction next year! We c-can't afford all these b-books!"

"My lady!" Ruth cried, a hint of desperation seeping into his voice. "Aren't you worried that your future child will grow up to be nothing but a sword-swinging fool?"

It was Maxi's turn to be shaken. Her face burned as though someone had poured scalding water over her. She could almost feel steam rising from her head.

"Ch-Ch-Child? W-What on earth are you t-talking about?"

"Your child? The next natural undertaking between a man and his wife? And unless Sir Riftan leaves for yet another campaign, I suspect it'll be a year or two at most before we hear the first cries of an infant in this castle."

"I-Infant …?" The rising heat was pricking at her eyes now. Bringing her hands up, she tried to cool her burning cheeks with her palms, heart racing at the thought of holding a baby in her arms. As she fidgeted, flustered, Ruth grabbed her hands.

"Surely you want your child to grow to be well learned? Sensible? Clever?"

"B-B-But the ch-child hasn't even been b-born …"

"It'll be too late by then! Children need knowledge to grow! It's your responsibility to prepare a good environment for them in advance!"

It was all too much too soon, and suggested so suddenly. Overwhelmed by the sorcerer's insistence, Maxi could not find it in herself to protest. She had no time to gather herself before Ruth took advantage of her distracted state, swiping the quill from her and penning in his list of authors once again.

"There." He nodded with approval at the names. "All done."

After filling nearly five entire lines with his requests, he returned the parchment to Maxi with a satisfied look, unbothered by her reluctance as she looked it over.

"W-What if Riftan gets m-mad because we b-bought too many b-books?"

"Sir Riftan wouldn't concern himself with such paltry sums as these, truly."

Maxi stared at him, at a loss for words. She did not consider herself a worldly woman by any means, but even she knew that books were extremely costly—more so than glass. Producing a book required tremendous effort and time. Each line was inscribed letter by letter, and meticulous needlework bound the pages to gilded leather covers. Even her father had kept certain books on a display shelf to keep them in pristine condition.

The academic tomes Ruth sought were handwritten by a handful of scholars. As such, they were not nearly as easy to locate as novels of prose or poetry derived from bards' songs and stories. On the rare occasion that the manuscripts *could* be found, they were prohibitively expensive.

"You w-were the one who said w-we must c-cut spending …"

"Knowledge is more precious than gold, my lady."

As Ruth plunked himself down in his usual seat, the impact caused the towers of books around him to collapse. Volumes that purportedly contained invaluable knowledge were scattered across

the floor. Maxi scowled at the sight, wondering whether she should make a caustic remark, but she decided against it with a heavy sigh. All things considered, Ruth had been of great help. After everything he had done for her, she could not afford to antagonize him.

"I'll put in the o-order for the b-books."

"Thank you," Ruth said crisply before returning to his book.

Maxi left the library shaking her head. The hallways beyond were illuminated by the sunlight pouring in through the newly installed windows. She kept her gaze fixed on the cloudless blue sky before descending the stairs with light steps.

Elegantly carved railings lined either side of the stairs, the steps of which were now covered by a soft carpet. Though Maxi had initially panicked when she was tasked with redecorating the castle, her heart swelled with pride now that she saw the small changes her efforts had made.

She smiled broadly as she entered the banquet hall, where Rodrigo was busy supervising the final phase of construction.

"Rodrigo, are y-you busy?"

"My lady." Rodrigo's wrinkled face brightened when he saw her.

Maxi handed him the handwritten requisition list. "I w-went around the c-castle to ch-check if there's anything else we may need. C-Can I trouble you t-to order these items?"

"Of course, my lady."

"And p-please ask the m-merchants to find the books authored by the scholars listed at the b-bottom."

"As you wish." The steward folded the parchment neatly and put it in his inner pocket.

Maxi smiled again, satisfied to have completed one of her tasks, but as she turned around to leave, Rodrigo stopped her.

"The young squires caught four ocrie in the mountain stream at dawn, my lady. They'll soon be ready if you'd like to head down to the kitchen."

"O-Ocrie …?"

"Fish. They live in fresh mountain streams, which gives them their soft, rich texture. There's nothing as delicious as a freshly caught ocrie grilled over charcoal."

His description alone was enough to make her mouth water. Though the meals at Calypse Castle were always deli cious, they were meat heavy. Despite Anatol's vast coastline and its numerous lakes and rivers, Maxi had never seen seafood on the table. Her stomach growled at the prospect of sinking her teeth into freshly grilled fish.

"B-But the squires c-caught those fish. It would be presumptuous of m-me to …"

"They say they caught them for you, my lady. They'll be thrilled if you join them."

Maxi nodded, though not without a slight blush, and rushed out of the banquet hall. Her eagerness to try the delicacy only grew as she made her way to the kitchen. When she poked her head inside, she found Ulyseon and Garrow filleting four fish on skewers above the drain, each ocrie the length of a grown man's arm. Next to the squires, the cook looked on anxiously, sweating profusely.

"Young masters! Please allow me! I insist."

"It's fine, it's fine." Ulyseon waved him off dismissively, his light tone entirely at odds with the carnage in his hands. "We need to learn how to cut into creatures like these, after all. Consider it part of our training!"

Beside him, Garrow collected the blood in a bucket held beneath the fish's severed tail. "Uly, I'm finished bleeding this one out."

"Give it here. I'll carve that one too."

The cook blanched. "P-Please, let me. I can't let you do such lowly work!"

"Oh, hush," said Ulyseon. "As I said, this is part of our training!"

"That's right. And besides, this fish is going on the lady's table. We are determined to prepare them ourselves." Garrow's brow furrowed as he spoke, and he added, "But why did we catch fish, of all things? A fox or a stag would have made a better gift."

"Garrow! How could you even think of hurting such magnificent creatures?" Ulyseon looked horrified at the suggestion.

Garrow gestured to the fish. "Are you saying these fish met untimely deaths simply because they're ugly?"

"They had the misfortune of being ugly on the outside and tasty on the inside."

Maxi hesitated by the kitchen entrance, taken aback by the scene unfolding before her. The sight of the half-butchered fish prompted a wave of nausea to roll through her, and she quietly turned to leave. Unfortunately, Garrow happened to stretch his neck at that very moment, turning left and right until he locked eyes with her. She immediately froze in place, but the squire only grinned brightly and waved, either too ignorant or unperturbed by her visible discomfort.

"Good morning, Lady Calypse!"

"My lady!" Ulyseon glanced up from the fish in his hands and beamed, his head tilting excitedly to one side like a dog's.

Maxi waved back feebly. "G-Good morning."

"You're just in time!" Ulyseon held up a half-butchered fish. "We caught these to thank you for the exciting tale you told us yesterday. They're the tastiest fish in all of Wedon."

"We'll have them on the table in no time." Garrow returned to his task, lopping off another fish's head.

Maxi stared at the severed head as it flopped onto the floor with an unceremonious slap. Its bulging eyes seemed to stare back at her in resentment, and it took all of her willpower to keep from gagging as she nodded. Again, she quickly attempted to make her escape, but Ulyseon addressed her happily.

"My lady, if it isn't too much of a bother, would you tell us more about the skirmish with the werewolves while you wait?"

"Uly, I'm not sure she appreciates the sight of all this blood." Garrow eyed Maxi's queasy expression uncertainly.

"Don't be ridiculous. Her ladyship is brave! She watched a fountain of blood rain down from a giant ogre! The wife of the most valiant knight in the land can't possibly be squeamish!" Ulyseon looked at her expectantly, waiting for her to affirm his claim.

Maxi swallowed against the lump in her throat and forced a smile.

Thunk.

Yet another fish head fell onto the ground, and she tried her best not to look.

"O-Of course. Th-This is n-nothing to me."

"See? Oi! One of you bring a chair for our lady!"

With that, she was trapped, forced to look on with a polite smile as a servant brought in a wooden stool. They set it down in full view of the squires while Maxi stood by, dreading the prospect of spinning a gory tale while the young men disemboweled their catch. Holding back tears, she took a shaky breath and perched herself on the edge of the seat.

Meanwhile, Ulyseon cut and peeled away sections of the ocrie's thick skin, revealing the ivory flesh beneath. After descaling its back and belly, he carved out evenly sliced fillets and arranged them on a plate. Soon, all that remained of the fish was its skeleton.

"I've seen a werewolf before." Ulyseon's eyes flitted from Garrow to Maxi as he reached for another fish. "It had the fearsome head of a wolf, but its body was humanoid, and I watched as it sprang from tree to tree on its hind legs."

Garrow nodded. "And their canines protrude like boar tusks. In Balto, they stuff werewolf heads and display them as trophies."

"What? Why? I'll never understand Northerners and their aesthetics."

"Wolves are a symbol of courage for them."

More ivory fillets were added to the growing pile. As the ocrie began to look less like creatures and more like food, Maxi's nausea abated. She took a deep breath to regain her composure as Ulyseon turned to her, drying his hands on a strip of cloth.

"It's laughable that they mount werewolf heads to show off their bravery. The Remdragon Knights slaughtered dozens of those beasts in mere moments and don't need to boast of it with stuffed heads."

"Please tell us how Sir Riftan fought in that battle, my lady," Garrow requested, his voice milder than his companion's.

Another forced smile, another deep inhale, and Maxi began her story, starting with how effortlessly Riftan had decapitated three of the beasts with a single fatal flash of his sword. From there, the tale only grew taller. As the knights advanced through the woods, dozens of the werewolves' heads fell down, thudding like hail through the forest. Her fabricated story of flesh, blood, and bones seemed to delight her young audience, and their infectious enthusiasm

gradually made her forget her previous discomfort. She had never imagined herself talking so happily in front of others.

Just as the story was nearing its end, the cook interrupted. "The marinade is ready, young master."

"Excellent!" said Ulyseon. "Start grilling. I'm famished."

The cook wasted no time dropping the fillets into a bowl of dark liquid. Next, he heated an oiled pan on the stove while he put together a salad of lettuce, onions, and herbs. Maxi's mouth started to water again, her appetite reinvigorated.

"The ocrie will be ready in just a moment, my lady." The cook bowed his head toward her, placing the marinated fish on the pan. "Each bite will be grilled to golden perfection and served with this salad. It'll be nothing short of divine."

As the fish began to sizzle, a wonderfully savory smell wafted through the air. Garrow, in his impatience, insisted on eating the fish fresh off the stove instead of waiting for it to be served in the dining hall, and so Maxi and the squires found themselves sitting around a small table in the corner of the kitchen.

Soon, the fresh salad and grilled ocrie were set before them. Maxi sliced off a piece of steaming fish and brought it to her lips. The soft flesh, slightly sweet from the marinade, melted in her mouth, and her eyes grew wide.

"It's d-delicious!"

"Of course!" Ulyseon grinned. "Nothing can compare to freshly caught ocrie. It's one of the best things about the fall season."

Though the fish was tender, the cook managed to retain its texture, and it did not have a hint of pungent odor usually associated with a fresh catch. In the blink of an eye, Maxi finished two large fillets. Meanwhile, Ulyseon and Garrow were already polishing off their third serving. After helping herself to more of the crunchy salad, she served herself another slice of fish.

"Th-This is one of the m-most amazing things I've ever t-tasted, truly."

"We're pleased to hear that you like it." Ulyseon clasped his hands above his clean plate, having been the first to devour every bite of his food. "Perhaps we'll catch more for you soon, my lady."

Maxi returned his smile, grateful for his kindness. "I-I look f-forward to it."

THE FLURRY OF ACTIVITY CONTINUED OVER THE NEXT few days until, at last, the renovations were complete. Maxi and the servants gathered in the great hall for a final thorough inspection.

By now, the space had transformed beyond recognition. An enormous golden chandelier illuminated the once gloomy hall. Underneath it, a striking crimson and gold carpet covered the floor. A similarly patterned rug ran up the grand staircase to the second floor, where the now lavishly appointed banquet hall could put even the royal palace's accommodations to shame.

After ascending the stairs, Maxi stood awestruck at the entrance of the spacious banquet hall. Sleek marble tiles gleamed where drab stone once was, and three silver chandeliers shimmered between the arches of the hall's high ceiling.

"Is everything to your liking, my lady?" Aderon asked apprehensively.

Maxi nodded, brushing her fingertips against the crystal windows. Sunlight streamed in through the glass, bathing the entire chamber in a warm glow.

"I-It's splendid."

Seeing Aderon's face break into a satisfied grin, Maxi found herself smiling as well. Although he had been a rather aggressive salesman, he was, at his core, an honest one. He had gone to great lengths to procure high-quality goods for her at reasonable prices, and he helped her hire diligent staff as well.

To express her gratitude, Maxi instructed the servants to prepare a sumptuous feast for the merchant, and after indulging in their wine and the chef's specialty of roasted venison, Aderon left the castle content. Maxi and the servants saw him off, watching from the castle doors as his carriage receded into the distance.

"The castle is practically unrecognizable," Ruth said, descending the stairs while running a hand through his disheveled ashen hair. "Sir Riftan will no doubt be surprised when he returns."

Maxi glanced over her shoulder at him. "D-Do you think R-Riftan will like it?"

"Why wouldn't he? He was the one who asked you to redecorate the place."

Ruth's indifference did little to assuage Maxi's worries. As he gave an undignified yawn, her expression turned resentful. "W-Would it h-hurt you to give a ccompliment?"

"Oh, pardon me, your ladyship. The castle is so dazzling that I can't bear to look at it! The splendor of it all is enough to put me in a trance!"

Maxi glared at him, but he paid her little mind, instead stretching languidly before striding past her. Then, suddenly, he came to a stop as if remembering something. He turned back toward Maxi and the servants.

"This might be the perfect time …" He pulled out a small vial from his pocket. "I've just finished making the elixir for the oak tree. Would you like to test it out?"

"Th-That was q-quick!"

"It certainly didn't feel like it to me. I was so consumed with this that I haven't been able to sleep properly for days." Despite his complaints, his unkempt appearance made it clear he had just rolled out of bed.

Maxi was again stunned by the sorcerer's brazenness, but he *had* lent her immeasurable aid during the renovations, so she simply nodded.

Ruth turned lazily on his heel to venture out into the pavilion. He strode right up to the large, leafless tree, coming to a stop under its gnarled branches. Maxi joined him and watched intently as he uncorked the vial and poured its mysterious contents onto the exposed roots of the ancient oak.

"Oh, great and merciful god of the earth, we beseech you! Extend your healing hands and fill this humble servant once more with your power!"

Maxi rolled her eyes at Ruth's theatrical display. Hierarchs had visited her countless times throughout her childhood to heal her whenever she was left injured by her father's cruel abuse. She had

seen their ministrations enough to know that mages could channel their magic through simple runes or incantations. Such lengthy and grandiose invocations were unnecessary.

But when she noticed the servants looking on in awe, Maxi suddenly understood why Ruth spoke the words. He wanted to prove to them—or at the very least, convince them—that he and Maxi had done their utmost to save the tree.

Ruth dramatically extended his arms toward the heavens as if he were being granted some divine boon, then lowered them again and clasped his hands in prayer. Maxi covered her mouth with one hand to avoid giggling at the spectacle.

Soon, however, she noticed a faint light collecting around Ruth, and she watched with amazement as the light began to coalesce into a small sphere between his hands. With the exception of the hierarchs' visits, Maxi had never witnessed magic from such a close proximity. The delicate energy then flowed from Ruth's hands to the ghastly tree, enveloping it before being absorbed.

Transfixed, Maxi reached out to touch the warm streams of light. The moment she made contact, it changed course and began seeping into the palm of her hand. She pulled away, startled, and Ruth looked at her in surprise.

"That's unexpected," he said, lowering his arms.

Once the tree fully absorbed the remainder of the radiant magic, Ruth touched its trunk as if to confirm something, then turned toward Maxi again.

"It seems you have some mana affinity, my lady."

"M-Mana affinity?"

"The primary requirement for anyone who wants to practice magic."

Maxi's eyes widened in surprise, and she gazed down at her hands. Did that mean she could be a mage like him?

"It's only the most basic prerequisite," Ruth added casually. "The same way agile people are better suited for swordsmanship. That trait alone isn't enough to make someone a sorcerer."

"I-I see." Her shoulders slumped. Of course. How could she think, even for a moment, that she might be capable of such an incredible

ability?

Seeing her disappointment, Ruth smiled faintly. "But it is a rare talent, nonetheless. You're quite full of surprises, my lady."

"W-What do you m-mean?"

"To name a few, you're surprisingly short-tempered, prone to exaggeration, stubbornly competitive, and now, it seems you're magically inclined as well."

Maxi's face was flushed with embarrassment, but Ruth grinned and continued.

"And here I thought you were nothing but a feeble, demure highborn lady. You're proving to be rather interesting."

"Th-That didn't sound l-like a ccompliment."

"It was," Ruth said, his eyes mischievous as he gave her a smug smile.

Still skeptical that any honest compliment could sound so sardonic, Maxi changed the subject, prodding the roots of the tree with the tip of her shoe. "A-Anyway, did we s-succeed in reviving th-the tree?"

"I can't say for sure."

"H-How can you n-not know?"

Ruth shrugged. "All I did was infuse the tree with the earth's mana. We'll have to wait until spring for the results. If it sprouts leaves by then, it means the magic has worked. If not, then it's beyond saving, and you can cut it down with a clear conscience."

Maxi looked up at the oak's dense tangle of brittle branches and nodded. Taking a step back, she surveyed the bleak garden and thought back to the plans she had discussed with the groundskeeper. If the tree was still dead come spring, she intended to replace it with bright flowers and a new sapling, regardless of anyone's objection.

WITH THE RENOVATIONS COMPLETE, WINTER PREPARATIONS began in earnest at Calypse Castle. There was barely a moment for rest for the servants as they worked to cover the well with thick wooden planks, repair the partitions in the stables, and gather enough hay and firewood to last the coming winter.

Inside, the maidservants washed linens until their hands swelled, scrubbed every room in the castle from top to bottom, and wove at the looms. They were tasked with assembling winter apparel for the guards before the weather became unbearably cold.

Seeing the strain on everyone, Ludis approached Maxi with a cautious suggestion. "My lady, I fear that we may not be able to complete the garments on time. Would it be possible to purchase some of the fabric instead of weaving all of it ourselves?"

Maxi readily agreed, aware that everyone was overworked.

"H-How much sh-should I order?"

"About half of what we initially required. We've already prepared the rest."

Maxi eyed the bolts of fabric in the corner. If she failed to calculate the exact amount, she was sure to hear an earful from the meddling sorcerer. Determined to see this done properly, she retrieved a piece of parchment to calculate just how much she would need to purchase, making sure to account for what the maidservants had already made.

"W-Will this suffice?" She turned the page over for Ludis to see.

"Yes, my lady. And if you could also procure more of the leather straps, thread, and needles …"

"My lady! I'm sorry to interrupt, but we have an emergency!"

Maxi was not even finished jotting down Ludis's request when her gaze flicked up to the doorway. There stood Rodrigo, out of breath and clearly distressed.

"W-What is it?"

"A man by the name of Rob Midahas is at our gates with thirty of his knights. He claims to be a Livadonian nobleman, but he has no identification to prove it."

"Rob M-Midahas?" Maxi frowned at the unfamiliar name. Livadon was one of Wedon's allies to the west, and it was the kingdom that Wedon interacted with the most. Despite the alliance, the nobles of Wedon did not necessarily know all the nobles of Livadon. That was doubly true for Maxi, who had lived a cloistered life at Croyso Castle, and so she could hardly be expected to know a single one of them.

She looked at Rodrigo with a sheepish expression. “D-Did he say w-why he was h-here?”

“Apparently, he’s come all this way to meet the Lord of Anatol and extend an offer of friendship.”

“Then c-can’t we just l-let him in?”

“My lady, we cannot let armed men into our land without confirming their identities first.” Rodrigo’s tone was unusually stern. “The area surrounding Anatol is beset with mon sters, so it’s not uncommon for visitors to carry weapons, but they are only allowed entry if they can provide proper identification or show their family crest. It is a precaution against those who might attempt to pillage our lands while the lord is away.”

The color drained from Maxi’s face, and she could hear Ludis inhale sharply in fear. Maxi herself stood frozen, never having faced such a crisis. After a few moments, however, she managed to will herself to be calm.

“I-Is it … necessary to be so p-precautious? Who would d-dare p-pillage the land under the R-Remdragon Knights’ protection?”

“We can never be sure, my lady.” Ruth’s voice cut through the air as he entered the room with a grim countenance, his steps swift. “Everyone on the continent knows that our knights are at the capital attending the victory celebrations. It’s suspicious that this Rob Midahas is visiting us while Lord Calypse is away.”

Maxi felt nauseous. “D-Do you also think th-they’re here to attack us?”

“It’s certainly possible. As the acclaimed hero of the Dragon Campaign, Sir Riftan was allowed to keep a large portion of the treasure found in the dragon’s lair. It’s a tempting prize for those blinded by greed, even at the risk of crossing the Remdragon Knights.”

“W-Will we have to f-fight them, then?”

“If he continues to be unreasonable, we may, yes. But he has thirty knights with him.” Ruth frowned, considering their odds should violence become necessary. “If those men *are* real knights, they’ll be difficult to deal with. Even the lowest-ranking knight is capable of eliminating ten sentries.”

Ruth was clearly anticipating a full-blown confrontation, the mere notion of which made Maxi's throat tighten.

"What would make matters significantly worse," Ruth continued, "would be if this man really is a Livadonian noble. He might take offense at us refusing him entry and use his political standing to retaliate—even going so far as to start an armed conflict. The ceasefire may have stopped the war between the Seven Kingdoms, but clashes among the nobility are still fairly regular."

"Th-Then what sh-should we do?"

"What would *you* like to do, my lady?" Ruth's eyes bored into hers.

Maxi flinched, her shoulders slumping under the sudden pressure. As lady of the castle, it was her duty to keep Anatol safe in Riftan's absence.

"I …" She bit her lip to still her trembling jaw. "I-I will go to the g-gates and try t-talking to him myself. I'll d-decide what to do a-after I've d-determined who th-these people are."

"I think that's a good idea." Ruth nodded in approval. "I'll accompany you. And we should also bring the guards with us in case this escalates. Rodrigo, inform Sir Obaron and Sir Sebrique of the situation at once."

"Yes, sir. Right away!"

"Come with me, my lady."

Without waiting for her, Ruth turned and strode from the room. Quickly, Maxi handed her piece of parchment to Ludis and rushed after him. When she finally reached the garden, she found Ruth taking the reins of two horses from the stablemaster, Qenal.

"Do you know how to ride a horse?" Ruth held one set out to her.

"I-I do." She nodded, even though she had never ridden a horse this large on her own. With the help of a servant, she clambered onto the lean brown mare, gripping the reins and pressing her thighs against the saddle to keep herself from toppling over. Ruth watched for a moment, and when he was satisfied by her ability, he mounted his own horse.

"The guards should be waiting for us at the training grounds. Follow me." He had barely finished speaking when he spurred his horse into a gallop. Maxi followed close behind.

When they passed through the castle gate, they found thirty guards standing in formation and awaiting their arrival. An elderly knight with white hair sat proudly atop his steed at the head. As Ruth approached, the knight turned his horse around.

"I heard some rabid bastard is causing a ruckus at the gates," the white-haired knight growled, tapping the sword fastened to his hip. "This old thing was starting to miss the taste of blood."

"You won't be fighting them, Sir Obaron. Your task is to protect her ladyship."

"What?" The old knight glanced over at Maxi, clearly disappointed.

Maxi suppressed the urge to cower under his gaze and nudged her horse forward. "Th-Thank you, S-Sir Obaron."

The old knight awkwardly scratched his cheek with one finger. "Rest assured, my lady, you'll be safe with me here. Those troublemakers won't be a problem."

With that, Sir Obaron returned to his position at the head of the formation and led the guards out of the castle. Ruth galloped after them, nodding for Maxi to follow. She trailed behind them as they crossed the drawbridge, her heart racing in time with the pounding of hooves, and her anxiety grew only stronger as she rode through the grove. It reached a point where she was trembling so badly that she had to clench her teeth to keep from biting her tongue.

Maxi kept up with the guards' charge down a steep hill and through the bustling town square below, though not very confidently. She was terrified, never having ridden at such speed before. Her hands shook as she gripped the reins tightly. Eventually, after what seemed like eons, the rampart finally came into view, and one of the sentries stationed above the gates rushed out to meet them.

"You're here!"

Ruth and Sir Obaron leaped off their horses, and Maxi dismounted soon after with the help of another guard.

"Where is this man who cclaims to be a L-L-Livadonian noble?"

"He's just outside the gates," said the sentry. "This way."

"This way, my lady," Ruth said, motioning for her to follow first.

Maxi followed the sentry up the rampart on stiff legs. Once she was standing on the battlement, she saw thirty young men on horseback gathered beyond the wall. Their faces were tanned, and they were dressed in heavy robes with a long sword hanging at each of their waists.

Ruth peered over the parapet and addressed them loudly. "Which one of you is the nobleman?"

"It is I, Rob Midahas!" The haughty voice came from a man astride a chestnut horse. He appeared to be in his mid-thirties, with golden-brown hair and a bulky frame. He squinted up at Ruth. "Are you the Lord of Anatol?"

"I am but a mere servant. Our lady is here on the lord's behalf." Ruth calmly gestured to Maxi with one hand.

When the stranger's intense gaze fell on her, she instinctively took a step back.

The corners of his lips rose into a sneer as he addressed her. "It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm sure you've already been informed, but I am Rob Midahas, the Lord of Kaysa, a province in Western Livadon. I come seeking an alliance with the Remdragon Knights after hearing about their victory over the dragon. I hope you'll welcome me in."

Maxi glanced at Ruth, but he remained impassive with his arms crossed. He obviously had no intention of humoring the unwelcome guest, and so it was up to her to sort out the situation. Trying as best as she could to loosen her rigid tongue, Maxi slowly opened her mouth to speak.

"I-I heard … you h-have nothing to p-prove your identity. I c-cannot allow … unidentified individuals t-to enter!"

"We lost them on our journey here, unfortunately, but your cleric can confirm my identity once you let us in."

"Anatol does not welcome unidentified g-guests. Th-This is our lord's command, and his word is l-law within our b-borders. C-Come back when y-you have new i-identification."

Midahas furrowed his brows, and his voice grew irritated. "I can't understand a word you're saying. I demand to speak to someone who can talk properly!"

Maxi blanched at the blatant insult, but Ruth quickly stepped forward in her defense.

"You're speaking to the Lady of Anatol. Mind your manners."

"I only spoke the truth! I can't understand her!"

Maxi clutched at the fabric of her skirt, fighting back the urge to flee, and mustered every ounce of her courage once more. "A-As I've said … C-Come back w-when you have some s-sort of identification w-with you. I w-will not open the g-gates until then."

"We passed through monster lairs to reach Anatol! You would have us weary travelers turn back without rest?" The man's voice took on a menacing edge as his diplomatic façade began to crack.

Maxi took a nervous step back, but her meek reaction only made him more incensed.

Furious, Midahas began to shout even more loudly. "Is the Lady of Anatol so uncharitable?"

"I-I …"

"If you deny me entry, I swear to you I will return with *hundreds* of knights. I won't forget this insult!"

"W-Without identifications, I c-c-c—"

"Your cleric can confirm my identity! I've said that already!"

As Midahas grew increasingly hostile, a familiar sense of dread paralyzed Maxi, and sweat prickled at her back. Maxi began to tremble, so Ruth intervened yet again.

"Stop being so unreasonable! It isn't our fault you're unable to prove you are who you claim to be. How in the blazes do you expect us to simply allow a band of armed men through our gates?!"

"Ha! Is Anatol so weak that you're afraid of letting thirty men enter?" Midahas's mouth twisted into another sneer. "I see now. Without your lord, Anatol is merely a den of cowards."

"How dare you!" Sir Obaron's fury finally burst out of him, and he drew his sword in outrage. "Ruth! Open the gates! I'll cut off that arrogant bastard's head myself!"

"Sir Obaron!" Ruth twisted around and gave the old knight an admonishing glare, then he immediately spun back, his hands outstretched in a warding gesture.

But it was too late.

A massive flame hurtled toward the gate and collided with a force that shook the rampart down to its foundations. Maxi shrieked and gripped the parapet to keep her balance while the guards scrambled in confusion.

Rob Midahas unsheathed his own sword. "You want my head?" he called up to Sir Obaron. "I'd like to see you try!"

Ruth grabbed Maxi by the arm and led her back down the battlement. Frantic and disoriented, Maxi barely stifled an alarmed cry when she saw that the ball of flame had demolished the gate.

"Shield!" Ruth threw one hand out in front of him, conjuring gusts of wind that made a barrier to hold the invaders at bay. But Midahas shattered the barrier with a vicious swing of his sword. "I can't hold him back! Obaron!"

"Leave it to me." Sir Obaron leaped down from the rampart with a roar, swinging his massive sword as he charged the intruders. A cacophony of metallic clangs pierced the air. Maxi tried to run clear of the fighting, but she stumbled and was pushed to the ground by someone from behind.

"My lady!" Ruth looked over his shoulder at her, but he was busy creating another barrier to stem the tide of enemies and could not help her.

Defenseless, Maxi looked around with wide, fearful eyes. Sir Obaron and the guards were locked in fierce combat with Rob Midahas and his knights, while a crowd of Anatolians—people who had come to the gate to see what the commotion was about—fled in terror.

Then, Ruth's voice cut through the chaos again. "My lady! Take shelter!"

"B-But …"

"Please get out of here! There's nothing you can—"

"The Remdragon Knights are here! The lord has returned!" An archer on the ramparts lowered his bow and shouted down to them.

Icy silence swept across the grounds, the intruders all halting in their tracks to look behind them in disbelief. Sure enough, knights clad in silver armor thundered down the hill toward them.

When Maxi saw the man leading the charge, she was overcome with pride. Her gaze fixed, unwavering, on Riftan, who exuded an effortless confidence as he galloped toward the gates of Anatol. Though they had spent only three weeks apart, the separation had felt like months.

Riftan and his men slowed to a stop in front of the gates and appraised the black-robed Livadonian knights. Beneath his dark, wind-tousled hair, Riftan's eyes narrowed menacingly.

"I didn't think I'd have guests while I was away." He raised a hand and gestured for the Remdragon Knights to surround Rob Midahas and his men, swords gleaming brilliantly under the sun. "What do we call uninvited guests?"

"Trespassers, sir."

"Thieves, more like."

His men barked answers as they reined in their excited steeds.

Maxi looked on with bated breath. The Livadonians, who had seemed so self-assured earlier, shifted uneasily.

Riftan spurred his horse closer. "You had the nerve to come to my land and stir up trouble. I know just the thing to have engraved on your tombstone. '*In memory of his boldness, foolishness, and disregard for his own life.*'"

Riftan's voice was chillingly soft. Slowly, almost leisurely, he drew his sword, and the unhurried gesture was enough to make the assailants pale in terror.

Their leader quickly lowered his weapon and addressed Riftan directly. "I-I am Lord Rob Midahas of Kaysa! A nobleman of Livadon!"

"A lord?" Riftan raised an eyebrow.

Encouraged by his patient response, Midahas began to speak with more confidence. "Your people have offended me by questioning my identity and refusing me entry. This little misunderstanding simply got out of hand, that's all!"

"A misunderstanding, you say?" Riftan's words hung ominously in the air as he took in the destroyed gate and injured guards on the ground.

Midahas grimaced. "I-I apologize for letting my anger get the better of me. W-Why don't we end things here? I'm sure you wouldn't want things to get more unruly than they already have."

"This was an act of war." Riftan's calm voice sent shivers through the crowd of onlookers. He slowly approached Midahas, baring his teeth in a wolfish grin, and the Remdragon Knights parted to make way for him. "You came to my gates and attacked my men. What could that mean if not war? I have every right to cut off your head, ride to your homeland, and bring it to ruin."

"D-Do you mean to break the armistice between the Seven Kingdoms? Our king won't stand for such an attack!"

"You lost its protection the moment you broke down my gate."

A chill ran through Maxi's body, and she wrapped her arms around herself, sensing that Riftan's collected manner was only the calm before the storm.

Midahas must have realized the same, because the rest of his color drained from his face. He hastily made to retreat, but before he could move, Sir Obaron blocked his path with his blade. With the panic of a cornered rat, Midahas made another attempt to defuse the situation. "I-I have hundreds of knights in Kaysa who are pledged to my service! If you kill me, you will truly have a war on your hands!"

"I very much look forward to it." Riftan raised his sword.

Ruth dashed toward him. "Sir Riftan! You mustn't kill this man. If he really is a noble, that *will* be trouble. It's best to deal with him after we've confirmed his identity and sent word to Liva—"

"Are you questioning my decision?" Riftan furrowed his brow slightly, unmoved by the sorcerer's words.

"A war will only bring loss. It's best to use diplomacy. We may even receive compensation for—"

"I disagree." Riftan waved off Ruth's advice. "What need is there for diplomacy? Pillaging his land is a far less complicated solution."

He seemed entirely unbothered by the knights here with Midahas, or the hundreds more he would find in Kaysa.

Ruth let out a sigh. "It won't just be Kaysa. An attack of that scale would mean coming into conflict with the whole of Livadon." As he

spoke, he glanced at Maxi, who had been hiding amid the guards. "Think of her ladyship. You should show her the chivalry befitting a knight of your caliber."

Riftan's scowl deepened, and he followed Ruth's gaze. When he saw Maxi still slumped on the ground, his eyes widened in shock, and his impassive face turned hostile. "Why is my wife here?"

"It's only natural that the Lady of Anatol would handle disputes such as these while her husband is absent." Ruth was unfazed by Riftan's quiet wrath.

One moment, Riftan was gritting his teeth. The next, he was holding the tip of his sword to Midahas's neck. "Dismount your horses and surrender your weapons. Comply, and I'll allow you to keep your heads."

"L-Let me go! I'll leave at once! I'll never—"

"You're begging for me to release you after you attacked my people?" Riftan's fury reached its boiling point. "No. Surrender or die where you stand. Choose."

Midahas twisted around, eyes wild as he assessed the situation. His knights were completely surrounded. Realizing they stood little chance of escape—much less victory—he threw his sword to the ground and dismounted. After his men followed suit, Riftan signaled to the guards.

"Bind them and throw them in the dungeons!"

Maxi heaved a sigh of relief, astonished that Riftan's arrival was enough to put an end to the confrontation without any more bloodshed.

A guard helped her to her feet. "Are you all right, my lady? Are you hurt?"

"What were you thinking?!"

Maxi froze, petrified in the shadow of her husband. He towered over her atop his horse, silhouetted by the sun at his back. It was difficult to make out his face like this, but she knew that he was furious.

She shrank back in fear. "I-I heard th-there was a problem …"

"And what the hell did you think you could do about it?"

Maxi's blood ran cold, and she quickly lowered her head to hide her shame. Riftan had treated her with such kindness before he left, but now he spoke to her with such derision that it stole the breath from her lungs.

"I-I …" She bit her lip and desperately tried to come up with an answer, but her mind was blank. He was right. She knew that. There was nothing she could have done to salvage the situation. Why did she even try?

Riftan muttered a stream of curses, then lifted her off the ground by her waist. She yelped in surprise as he placed her in front of him on his saddle.

"I'm returning to the castle first." He turned to address his knights. "Clean up this mess."

And without waiting for a reply, he took off. Villagers who had gathered to watch from afar scrambled to make way, and Maxi clung for purchase on the saddle and squeezed her eyes shut. Riftan's arm around her waist tightened, and the cold edges of his armor dug into her side painfully.

He must be angry because I interfered when it wasn't my place to do so.

Maxi's entire body shook. Angry men frightened her, and the thought of a man as immense as Riftan admonishing her drained the blood from her face.

Violence was not the only thing she feared. The man who was so kind to her had suddenly turned cold, and her heart ached like never before. She had to suppress the urge to beg him not to hate her.

When they reached the castle, Riftan dismounted and helped Maxi down. "Take my hand."

She hesitantly placed her hand in his, and he lifted her off the horse. But instead of setting her down, he kept her in his arms and carried her across the garden. He ignored the servants who had rushed out to greet them, save for uttering a single, icy order.

"Send Talon to the stables."

Riftan strode into the great hall, marching up the stairs without sparing a single glance at the space she had spent weeks renovating. He was livid.

Maxi swallowed hard and hesitantly spoke. “R-Riftan … P-Please put m-me down.”

“Shut your mouth.”

He climbed two steps at a time. Though he had traveled for days in full armor, he showed no sign of fatigue, and set Maxi back on her feet only after they reached the bedroom.

Maxi anxiously looked up at him. Would he berate her? Strike her? She had only tried to settle a conflict as the lady of the castle.

Hands clenched in her skirt, she was just about to speak when Riftan pressed his mouth to hers.

“Mmph!”

Her eyes widened. A cold armored hand slid into her hair and pulled her in. Sweet, chapped lips rubbed against her own, and his wet tongue slid inside the softness of her mouth.

Maxi gripped Riftan’s arms. She pressed tightly against his armor, and the stubble on his chin chafed her skin. When their mouths parted, she gasped for air, looking up at Riftan. He stared at her with a hardened expression as he grabbed her face with both hands.

“What were you going to do if I hadn’t arrived?” he demanded.

Maxi shuddered at the touch of cold steel on her skin. “I d-didn’t think they’d b-break through the gates …”

“You shouldn’t have been there in the first place!” Riftan snapped. “Never, *ever* put yourself in danger again. Do you understand?”

Maxi quickly nodded, which seemed to placate him. His shoulders relaxed and he let out a long sigh. After hesitating for a few moments, Maxi caressed his chin, and Riftan leaned his finely shaped forehead against hers. His hair smelled faintly of grass, and Maxi wondered if he had slept in a meadow the night before.

“My blood ran cold when I saw you out there, on the ground. Damn it! I didn’t ride day and night to find you like that.”

“I-I’m sorry.”

Riftan’s tone remained stern, but the dangerous chill was gone from it. “If I’d arrived just seconds later, things could have been so much worse. Damn it …”

“I-I didn’t m-mean to w-worry you. I’m s-sorry.”

Riftan stared at her for a moment, then began to remove his armor. After shedding his vambraces and gauntlets, he threw them to the floor and cupped Maxi's face in his hands again.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, examining her closely.

"N-No, I'm fine."

"Show me."

Like a moth to a flame, Maxi's gaze was caught in the dark of Riftan's eyes. Warm, calloused hands grazed her cheeks and combed through her hair. Her breath quickened, and her heart began to race. Every night that he had been away, she had curled up alone in their spacious bed, missing him terribly.

"I want to see with my own eyes," Riftan murmured, caressing the soft spot behind her ear.

He pushed off her robe, and Maxi shivered, though she was not cold. Riftan's body radiated heat from beneath his cold armor, and it ignited a spark within her. Sweat prickled at the back of her neck.

Riftan removed Maxi's hairpin, and her hair cascaded down. Tossing the pin onto the floor, he grabbed a handful of her mane and brought it to his face. "A head for every scratch."

"W-What?"

"I'll sever a head for every scratch I find on you."

Such violent words, whispered in gentle tones, made Maxi shiver, but Riftan ignored her reaction and slowly slid her dress off her shoulders. His jet-black eyes roved over her, from her pale collarbone to her breasts, which were still hidden under her thin chemise. Trembling like a dragonfly caught in a spider's web, Maxi was breathless with anticipation.

"That's one head," Riftan murmured, pointing at a small scrape on her forearm.

Maxi tried to cover up the mark. "Th-This is from when I-I bumped into a shelf in the l-library …"

"Don't lie."

"I'm n-not—oh!"

Riftan grazed his mouth over her skin, sending a shiver down her spine. His lips made soft pecking noises as they moved down her arm. When he reached the spot on her wrist where her erratic pulse

quivered through her skin, he gently bit down. Nibbling and sucking her soft flesh, he lifted her off the floor and carried her to the bed.

"Riftan … I-I promise, I'm not hurt."

"I told you, I'll confirm that myself."

He slowly lowered Maxi onto the blankets and grabbed her dress where it was bunched at her waist, pulling it off and throwing it to the floor. Stripped down to her chemise, Maxi watched nervously as Riftan knelt at the foot of the bed and lifted the hem of the chemise. His hand slid up her leg, then stopped when he discovered another scrape on her calf.

"This one has sealed their fate," he said darkly, rubbing his thumb over the cut.

Maxi quickly tugged her chemise back down. "It d-doesn't hurt at all. Please d-don't kill anyone."

"They not only destroyed my gate and attacked my guards, but they harmed my wife. Killing them wouldn't be enough. I'd have to make examples of their families, or this could easily happen again."

"B-But y-you've only just returned …."

She had not meant to whine, but the words escaped her lips before she could stop them. Flustered, she squeezed her eyes shut and blurted out, "Y-You would have to l-leave again if w-w-war broke out. Th-Then I'd be a-all b-b-b—all alone again."

"Damn it," Riftan muttered, pulling her toward him and kissing her with such hunger that she thought he might devour her.

Maxi moaned into his mouth. As he pushed her back down on the bed, her body arched into him. Riftan pulled her chemise up to her waist and stroked her hips. The chill of his armor, and the searing heat of his hands—the opposing sensations flared with an intensity that made her lightheaded. Maxi clung to his shoulders, her body shaking with quick, uneven breaths as Riftan broke their kiss and licked her wet lips.

"The things you do to me," he said, his voice heavy with his desire.

Tasting the saliva on her chin with the tip of his tongue, Riftan pulled the chemise over her head. Before Maxi could cover herself

with her arms, he cupped one of her breasts in his warm, calloused hand and greedily sucked her nipple.

She pulled him closer, brushing her hands over his bronze neck before combing them through his thick black hair. It was a strange feeling. She was naked under a fully armored man, allowing him to do to her as he pleased. She was powerless and powerful, lost to her hedonic desire.

Unable to contain himself any longer, Riftan pulled her into a crushing embrace and kissed her once more. The warmth of his tongue intertwined with hers and their heartbeats raced together. His cold armor pressed against her breasts, sapping the heat from her skin, and tingling sensations raced through her body, blooming heat in her ears.

"These past few weeks have felt like years," Riftan breathed against her mouth as he pushed his hands between her thighs. "You were all I could think about."

A startled cry escaped her throat, and she was torn between a desire to spread her legs open and the instinct to clamp them together. Riftan smiled and spread her legs wide open, lowering his head between them. Embarrassed, Maxi twisted her body away, but Riftan took her in his mouth without a moment of hesitation.

"R-Rift—ah!"

Her thighs squeezed down on Riftan's head. As if annoyed, he seized her knees, holding her legs open as he continued to caress her with his tongue. The obscenity of the act left Maxi gasping for air even as she writhed in pleasure and clenched her fingers in the sheets.

Heat coursed through her, simmering on the edge of release. Unable to clutch at Riftan in this position, Maxi grabbed a pillow and sank her teeth into it. An overwhelming sense of pleasure swelled in her as Riftan's tongue explored deeper, but just as she was about to reach her climax, he stopped. Maxi whimpered and rocked her hips urgently.

"I'll be inside you soon enough." Riftan lightly stroked her thigh, then undid his trousers, freeing his desire.

Unable to contain the heat surging through her body, Maxi forgot her embarrassment and pulled Riftan closer. When he brought his hips to hers, she rubbed herself against his hardness, frantic with her need.

"Damn it!" Riftan groaned and grabbed her hips, pressing himself briefly against her wetness before plunging into her.

Maxi's legs spasmed and jerked as Riftan thrust into the deepest parts of her before swiftly slipping out. She clung to him, breathlessly desperate. Riftan let out a low moan and thrust into her again, harder this time. It was a little painful after so long without him, but Maxi needed more.

A little more. Just a little more …

She urged him on by rocking her hips, faster and faster, and he devoured her flushed body with his dark eyes, his lips parted in pleasure. But Maxi wanted to devour *him.* She wrapped her legs around him and tightened herself, surprised by her own hunger. She wanted more. Every last morsel, every last scrap. As she bucked in desperation, a pained moan escaped her lips.

"You push me to the brink," Riftan breathed, his fingers digging into her hips as he tried his best to restrain himself.

"R-Riftan," Maxi pleaded, exasperated. She wanted him to take her with greater urgency, to embrace her like a man blinded by his desire. Without giving him any warning, she used her legs to pull him in deeper.

Riftan gasped a moan and his restraint snapped. Like a horse galloping through the fields, the silver-plated giant began to thrust wildly into her. Still, Maxi's hunger grew. She wanted to feel him deeper inside her, so she stretched her legs wide and pushed against the bed, arching her back.

Not long ago, Riftan had carried her up the stairs with ease, but now his breath was heavy and labored. Maxi drowned in the sound of their bodies connecting, the creaking of the bed, the rattling of his armor.

"Maxi … Maxi …" Riftan panted, his voice breaking.

He was beautiful in his longing, and Maxi caressed his face. He crushed her lips against his as their bodies came together again, and

again.

"Ahh!" Riftan moaned as he released himself inside her.

Maxi squeezed her eyes shut against the intensity of the climax, but it was not enough. She wanted him deeper still. She wanted him to fill her completely.

"Damn it, I haven't even taken off my armor."

Riftan tried to get up, but Maxi impulsively clung to him when she felt him sliding out of her.

"W-Wait." Her body still throbbed with need.

He gazed down at her, his eyes dazed, and slowly pulled out. Maxi shuddered as something warm trickled between her legs, and Riftan gently rubbed her thigh as if to soothe her.

"Just wait," he said as he loosened his cuff armor with his teeth. "We're not done yet. I'll do it again. As many times as you need."

"N-No … I-I'm …"

Suddenly overcome with embarrassment, Maxi quickly brought her legs together. Riftan threw off his remaining armor and feasted greedily with his eyes. After dropping his breastplate, spaulders, and greaves onto the floor, he pulled his tunic over his head and made his way back toward the bed.

His broad back glimmered with sweat in the light streaming through the windows. Maxi stared, transfixed by the shape of his body and the contour of the muscles that covered him like a second armor.

"Come here." Riftan sat on the bed and reached for her. As Maxi hesitantly approached, he began to stimulate himself with his hand. "Climb on top of me."

"R-Riftan, I …"

"I know you weren't satisfied."

Riftan parted her thighs and helped her straddle his lap. Embarrassed by the position, Maxi tried to get up, but Riftan held firmly to her waist. He took her breast into his mouth, nipping and sucking while grinding himself against her. Maxi clung to his shoulders and rubbed her cheek against the softness of his hair.

Panting again, Riftan plunged into her. Sharp pain and pleasure coursed through Maxi as they merged, their limbs entangling like

snakes.

"Did you miss me terribly?"

She gazed at him, dazed by the sensations flooding her. As their bodies began to rock against each other, faster and faster, Maxi feared that her heart would burst.

"Tell me you did?"

"I m-missed y-you t-t-terribly," Maxi stammered, writhing in anticipation as their bodies melted together.

Riftan clenched his teeth and began to thrust deeper. His hardness ravaged her sensitive flesh, mirroring the friction between their sweat-soaked bodies. They were pressed so close, but Maxi needed him closer still. Whimpering, she slid her arms down his back, clutching him tightly.

More. She needed *more*. The black snake of desire coiled inside her stomach, and she wanted to swallow Riftan whole. She wanted him to possess her, and she wanted to possess him.

"Maxi … Maxi …" Riftan whispered, his voice shaking.

Maxi gazed down at him, hardly able to believe that such a beautiful man was so enraptured by her. Tears welled in her eyes.

CHAPTER 7



THE SOUND OF FIREWOOD TOSSED INTO THE fireplace woke Maxi. It was dark beyond the window, and she blinked sleepily as she looked around the room. Riftan stood in front of the fire, and she quickly untangled herself from the blankets to sit up. He looked as if he had just finished bathing and was dressed in a fresh black tunic. When he heard Maxi stir, his head turned to look at her.

"You're a light sleeper," Riftan said, a faint smile on his lips.

Maxi shook her head. "I d-didn't even n-notice you g-getting up to wash."

"I wanted to wait until you were awake so we could bathe together, but I had to go interrogate those damned Livadonians."

He walked toward the bed and planted a kiss on her bare shoulder. Blushing, Maxi looked up at him, her eyes searching his face with worry.

"Y-You interrogated them?"

"Yes. I even summoned a cleric to confirm their leader's identity."

"A-And? W-Were his claims t-true?" Maxi asked cautiously.

Riftan frowned. "He's a Livadonian noble."

Maxi's heart skipped a painful beat. Had she made a mistake? The situation might not have escalated so dangerously if she had just allowed Rob Midahas entry.

Riftan soothingly brushed her hair back from her face and kissed her cheek. "He *is* a Livadonian noble, but he lied about his claim to Kaysa. He's not the lord, but one of the lord's sons. When his half-brother was chosen as heir, he stole his family heirloom and fled to

Wedon. I assume he was roaming around with his knights when he heard about the vast collection of treasures I'd gathered from the dragon's lair."

"D-Did he c-come here to h-harm you?"

Riftan considered her with a blank expression, then laughed. "He's not that bold. He just never thought I'd make it from Drachium to Anatol in eight days. It was a grave miscalculation."

Maxi remembered Ruth telling her that it would take at least ten days for Riftan to arrive in Anatol. Riftan had beat the sorcerer's prediction by two full days.

"I arrived at just the right moment," Riftan said, still stroking her hair. "If I had come a day or two later, things could have been much worse. Midahas had three high-ranking knights with him, and they brought a magical device. It wouldn't have taken them long to break our defenses."

"M-Magical device?"

"His family heirloom." Riftan's mouth pressed into a grim line. "The device contains powerful fire magic—that's what destroyed the gate. Since the knights were away, Midahas thought he had a chance. If he had managed to succeed and fled back to Livadon, tracking him down would not have been easy."

Maxi put a hand on his arm, trying to calm his growing wrath as he had soothed her worry. Rob Midahas may have been foolish, but harming a nobleman could easily lead to conflict.

Riftan gazed down at her and smiled bitterly. "I should have beheaded him and hung his head outside the castle walls to set an example. But you were right. That would have meant leaving you again for war."

"Th-Then …"

"I shall send a message to his father as soon as the sun rises, demanding compensation. And I'll tell him to rein in his son."

Maxi breathed a relieved sigh, and Riftan smiled. As he kissed her from her shoulder to her cheek, his damp hair emitted a sweet, flowery fragrance. Recalling Ruth's comment about how the knights disliked scented soaps, Maxi stifled a laugh.

"What are you laughing at?" Riftan looked at her questioningly.

"Y-Your hair smells like r-roses."

Riftan blushed, fidgeting with his hair. "I figured you'd like me to smell nice …."

Maxi's chest tightened. In the early days, his crude language and imposing figure had frightened her, made her anxious that he might be as violent as her father. She never expected to one day find him so endearing.

"I suppose it's not becoming of a man." Riftan sniffed himself sheepishly.

Maxi gazed at him silently for a moment, then stood up on her knees and planted a kiss on his cheek. Riftan tensed and, blushing, Maxi placed another kiss on his jaw.

"I-It smells nice. It's n-not unbecoming of a m-man."

"If you like it, then I'll use this soap for the rest of my days."

Riftan slid his hand to her waist and pulled her into a kiss. When he gently squeezed her breast with his other hand, Maxi pushed him away.

"W-We've already …"

"Isn't this what you wanted?"

She had kissed him because she was overwhelmed by a rush of affection for him, not to seduce him. After such an intense round of lovemaking, that was the last thing on her mind.

"I-I wasn't trying to—"

"You fanned the flames yourself, Maxi," Riftan said, ignoring her. He kissed her with swelling passion and began to strip off his clothes.

Riftan climbed back onto the bed and lowered himself onto her, and Maxi's body went limp under the desire in his kiss. He entered her gently, and this time, there was more pleasure than pain. When it was over, she wound her arms around his neck and pulled him closer.

THE FOLLOWING DAY, RIFTAN LEFT AT DAWN TO DEAL with the Livadonian intruders, but it was not until well past noon when Maxi awoke again. With Ludis's assistance, she bathed and dressed, worried that

Riftan was not resting enough. He had only just returned from a long journey, after all.

Ludis stopped brushing her hair. "Is something wrong, my lady?"

Maxi shook her head. "N-No, it's n-nothing."

"The sorcerer says he will tend to your wounds. Should I call for him now?"

"Th-This is hardly a w-wound," Maxi said with quiet exasperation as she traced the scratch along her knee and shin.

She had scraped her leg when she stumbled during the commotion; it was nothing. The guards who clashed with the Livadonians would have suffered far more serious injuries. Some had been crushed by the ruined castle gate, and many others were slashed by enemy swords. It would not do for Maxi to raise a fuss over something so minor.

"I d-don't think th-that will be n-necessary."

"But, my lady, it could leave a scar—" Ludis stopped herself midprotest and pressed her lips together, worried that she had spoken out of turn. "As you wish, my lady," she amended. "I'll ask the sorcerer for some ointment."

"Thank you, L-Ludis," said Maxi.

Later, when Ludis returned with fresh bandages and a vial of ointment, Maxi dutifully applied the ointment and dressed the wound to keep it clean. She did not think her scratch warranted bandages, but it was easier to use them than to refuse under the watchful eyes of the maidservant.

"I'll bring your meal to your room, my lady," said Ludis once Maxi finished tending to her scraped leg.

"Th-That's all right. I'll h-have it in th-the dining hall. I should f-finish my work from y-yesterday."

"The lord instructed that you are to stay in bed today."

Maxi frowned. It was true that their nighttime adventures had worn her out—but not so much that she needed bed rest.

"I'm f-fine," Maxi insisted. "I was j-just a little sh-shaken by yesterday's e-events."

"But the lord …"

"I-I'll talk t-to him." Maxi draped a warm shawl over her shoulders, preparing to leave.

With Maxi stubbornly set against staying in bed, Ludis could only nod silently and follow as she left the room. Crisp air flowed in through the open windows, and Maxi's eyes roved over the clean windowsills and new carpets as she made her way down the corridor.

"D-Did the l-lord say anything about th-the castle?"

Behind her, Ludis shifted in discomfort. "I'm sure he hasn't had the time to give the renovations a proper look, on account of yesterday's commotion."

"I-I see." Maxi's face fell with disappointment.

Ludis flashed one of her rare smiles and quickly added, "But the knights were astonished. When they came into the great hall for dinner last night, they said that the castle had been transformed magnificently."

"R-Really?"

Ludis nodded, and Maxi continued downstairs with a spring in her step. Servants paused in their work polishing the windows to greet her, and Maxi nodded to them all as she headed into the dining hall.

Ruth and three Remdragon Knights looked up from their lunch when she entered. Maxi froze, suddenly uncertain.

Unless it was a special occasion, the knights usually had their breakfast and lunch in their quarters. She had never encountered them here during Riftan's absence, and she found herself standing in place, feeling awkward.

Ruth yawned loudly and leisurely addressed her. "Good day, my lady. How are your injuries?"

"It was j-just a s-scratch."

The sorcerer looked Maxi up and down while he ran his fingers through his perpetually messy hair. "The way Sir Riftan reacted," he said flatly, "I thought you'd broken a bone. But you do seem all right." Ruth pulled out the chair beside him. "Please have a seat, my lady."

Before Maxi could protest, Ruth instructed a servant to bring her food. Having lost her chance to leave, she glanced at the knights'

faces before taking her seat. Silence hung over the hall, and Maxi anxiously waited for her meal to arrive. Unable to bear the awkward quiet, she broke it with a question.

"W-Where is R-Riftan?"

"He's at the gates, checking on the progress of the repairs," Ruth grumbled, tearing off a piece of bread with his teeth. "He summoned blacksmiths and craftsmen to build a steel gate. And that's not all. He also wants a defensive magical device installed. He's always been obsessed with the defense of Calypse Castle, but that dim-witted noble, Midahas, has made it worse."

"Th-The safer the b-better," Maxi said brightly, relieved to have a topic to discuss.

Ruth scowled. "*I* will need to create said device. I'll be worked to death at this rate."

Maxi was spared the impossible task of appeasing Ruth by the servant arriving with her food. A bowl of chicken soup, a salad, and freshly baked bread were placed in front of her, and Maxi put her spoon to her mouth to hide her amusement as Ruth groaned and tore at his hair. Though she knew nothing about the workings of magical devices, she could guess from the sorcerer's gripe that creating one was quite an onerous task.

Suddenly, Ruth raised his head, sitting up a little straighter. "My lady. Can you do basic arithmetic?"

Maxi nearly choked on her soup. Ruth's usually lethargic gray eyes regarded her expectantly, and it unnerved her. She could not say that she was not good at arithmetic. The knights already had little respect for her, and they would think even less of her if she did. But if she said that she *could* perform basic arithmetic, she was sure Ruth would assign her an unpleasant task. To avoid answering, she gulped down her soup.

Ruth leaned forward so that she had no choice but to look at him. "Is this how you repay my kindness, my lady?" he asked, eyes narrowed.

"I'm n-not skilled enough to be of h-help to a s-sorcerer—"

"I know you're no mathematician! But I need all the help I can get."

Any inclination Maxi might have had to help him evaporated into thin air. Noticing the unfavorable change in her expression, Ruth pouted like a hurt child.

"I hope you haven't forgotten the aid I gave you in your hour of need, my lady."

"I-I really d-don't think I'm q-qualified …."

What Maxi dreaded most was the caustic remarks she would be forced to endure if she agreed to help. Ruth was one of the most critical people she had ever met.

"You'll be managing simple records and calculations," Ruth pressed, even though Maxi refused to meet his eyes. "You're more than qualified for that."

"Enough." One of the knights finally intervened. "You're being disrespectful to her ladyship."

Ruth ignored him and continued to look at Maxi imploringly. If she refused, the ill-tempered sorcerer would probably accuse her of being ungrateful at every opportunity, so she eventually gave in and nodded.

Ruth grinned. "You have my eternal gratitude." He passed her a potato from his plate as a token of his thanks.

"I see you two have become quite close," said Sir Hebaron, scratching the back of his head a little awkwardly. The brawny knight had been quietly listening to their conversation.

Maxi hesitated. "R-Ruth … provided v-valuable advice on the castle re-refurbishments."

"I see," said Sir Hebaron as he took a large bite of bread.

Maxi's heart sank at his apparent lack of interest.

"The castle doesn't look half bad," he added after a few thoughtful chews.

"Oh … Th-Thank you."

Hebaron shifted his gaze. It appeared he found the conversation just as uncomfortable as she did. Though some time had passed since their first meeting, they had never really exchanged introductions. Unsure how to proceed, Maxi resorted to stirring her soup. Moments later, all the knights stood, nodded to her

respectfully, and filed out of the dining hall. Maxi watched them leave, her chest hollow.

Ruth sighed. "There isn't much we can do about their attitude," he said. "The Remdragon Knights suffered greatly because of Duke Croyso's actions."

Maxi flinched at the reminder of how Riftan ended up married to her, and turned back to Ruth.

He languidly dipped a piece of bread in his stew and brought it to his mouth before continuing. "The Dragon Campaign brought great fame and honor to the order. But if fortune hadn't been on our side, or if Sir Riftan wasn't as strong as he is, most of us would be dead today. The Red Dragon was a formidable foe, and that any of us survived the assault still seems impossible. Sir Riftan was at the forefront of it all, dancing with death."

Maxi's blood chilled in her veins, but Ruth continued speaking calmly, as if commenting on the weather.

"Serving in the campaign was Duke Croyso's duty, but he pushed it onto Sir Riftan because he knew how dangerous it would be. In exchange, Sir Riftan received a highborn wife, but she failed to leave her father's grand estate, let alone look after Calypse Castle in the lord's absence."

"B-But I—"

"That is how the knights see it." Ruth lowered his spoon, his face impassive.

Maxi's lip quivered and the color drained from her face. She had stayed at Croyso Castle only because she was convinced that Riftan did not want her, that *he* had abandoned *her*. Riftan had been forced to marry her, forced to go to war, so of course he had left her without a word. But Maxi knew this would sound like a pitiful excuse if she tried to explain it to the knights.

"I-I truly d-didn't know th-that Riftan w-wanted me here."

"He sent knights to escort you to Anatol," Ruth said. "They were turned away at the gates."

"I was n-never told a-about that," she whispered, surprised to find out that Riftan *had* tried to bring her home.

"Did it never occur to you to come to Anatol yourself, escorted by your father's knights?"

Maxi was silent. She couldn't bring herself to tell him that her father would not have allowed it, that she was so afraid of Duke Croyso that traveling to her husband's castle was never an option, let alone something she would have dared to suggest. Lost for words and embarrassed by her own weakness, Maxi hung her head.

Ruth let out a small sigh and rose from his chair. "Well, there's no use bemoaning the past. You *are* Sir Riftan's wife, regardless of what the knights think. Pay them no mind unless they insult you."

It was unclear if he meant to console her or simply end the conversation, so Maxi gave him a weak, noncommittal nod.

"Well, my lady," Ruth said lightly, rolling his shoulders. "In the coming days, I shall be eagerly awaiting your help in the library." With that, he left the dining hall.

Alone, Maxi pondered Ruth's words, listlessly stirring her soup and wondering if everyone saw her as a shameless woman—a wife who neglected her duties after her husband left for a deadly campaign. They must resent her for acting like the lady of the castle now, only after Riftan had returned a hero. In their eyes, she must seem so insincere.

She recalled how Rob Midahas had openly mocked her at the gates, and the small confidence she had gained over the past weeks shriveled into familiar uncertainty. How could she expect the Anatolians to respect her after the miserable impression she had made when their lord went to war? Un able to bear her own thoughts, Maxi put down her spoon and left the dining hall.

"My lady!" Rodrigo called to her as she entered the great hall. In his arms, he carried a large wooden chest. "The lord has asked for you."

"I-Isn't he at the n-northern gates?"

"He has just returned. He's in the garden—"

Maxi dashed outside before the steward could finish his sentence. She passed the pavilion and reached the stairs, and there, she paused. The garden was bustling with activity as servants unloaded

chest after chest from an enormous horse-drawn wagon at the entrance.

Cautiously, Maxi made her way down the stairs and passed the servants. Riftan stood at the front of the wagon, speaking with two merchants. By the style of their clothing, Maxi guessed they must be from the Southern Continent.

"Maxi," Riftan said, noticing her and motioning for her to come to his side.

She ran to him like a puppy answering her master's call. Riftan took the reins of a strikingly beautiful white mare from the merchant and tugged lightly. The horse obediently trotted forward.

"Here." Riftan patted the mare's long, graceful neck, then offered Maxi the reins.

Maxi blinked, looked to the horse and then back to Riftan.

"Do you not like her?"

"W-What?"

Riftan pressed the reins into Maxi's hands. "I said I'd bring gifts, didn't I?"

Bewildered, Maxi looked from Riftan's impassive face and back to the mare. Riftan pulled her closer and gently took her hand, placing it on the mare's muzzle. His closeness made her brave, so Maxi reached farther and stroked the horse's golden mane, earning an appreciative nudge from its muzzle.

"My horses are too big and wild for you," Riftan said. "But you should be able to handle this one. She's young, but she's well trained."

"She's l-lovely," Maxi murmured, enthralled.

Riftan's lips curled up into a smile. "She's yours now."

"This is the m-most wonderful g-gift I've ever r-received."

The mare let out a soft, charming snort as she rubbed her muzzle against Maxi's palm. Maxi stroked the horse's thick mane while admiring her brilliant black eyes. She was clearly a fine breed, with balanced proportions, straight and slender legs, and a glossy coat.

"C-Can I really h-have her?"

Riftan frowned. "I told you, she's yours. None of the knights would ride such a dainty horse."

The mare gave a great snort, as if she understood his words, and Maxi laughed.

Riftan tilted his head, watching Maxi closely. "Do you like her?"

"I-I do." Maxi struggled to express just how much she adored the mare. She tried to keep her voice from shaking as she spoke. "I t-truly do. Th-Thank you, Riftan."

Riftan lowered his head and kissed Maxi. When she took a step back in surprise, he smiled and turned to the merchant.

"My wife is pleased, and you arrived two days earlier than expected. For that, I'll pay you fifty percent above the price we agreed on."

"It is my honor, Lord Calypse!" the merchant said, eyes wide with excitement. "We worked day and night to fulfill your lordship's request on schedule."

Maxi buried her face in the mare's mane to hide her flushed cheeks, mortified that Riftan had kissed her in front of strangers.

When he finished talking to the merchant, Riftan put his arm around Maxi's shoulders. "Let's go up to our room. I have more gifts waiting for you."

"Th-There's more?"

Riftan pointed to the chests unloaded from the wagon. "Every one of those is filled with gifts for you."

Maxi's jaw dropped. There were enough chests to fill an entire room.

"I've instructed the servants to bring them up to our room. Come." Riftan handed the mare's reins to a servant and began walking toward the great hall.

Maxi followed at his side, her steps as light as if she were walking on clouds. Her earlier worries had all but disappeared. "I th-thought you were b-busy repairing the g-gates."

"I've given my instructions to the craftsmen, and the knights will take turns standing guard until the new gate is finished. Anatol will be safe from intruders even without me there."

Maxi hadn't asked because she worried about the castle's security. She trusted Riftan and the knights to protect them all, but she did not want to keep Riftan from his duties. Instead of correcting the

small misunderstanding, she quietly followed him up the stairs and into the great hall. Sunlight streamed in through the windows, casting golden rays on the crimson carpet. As he strode across the great hall, Riftan stopped and turned back toward Maxi.

"I haven't told you yet how magnificent the castle looks. Rodrigo tells me you worked tirelessly every day to complete the renovations."

Maxi blushed at the sudden compliment. "D-Do you like it?"

"Of course. I thought I'd woken up in someone else's castle."

Maxi breathed a sigh of relief. "Y-You didn't say a-anything, so I was w-worried."

"I was a little distracted—I'd just seen you in grave danger! I had no attention left for anything else. You could have gilded the walls with pure gold, and I still wouldn't have noticed."

His eyes glinted, angry with the memory, and Maxi stared at her feet. Riftan sighed and stroked her hair to soothe her.

"That's all in the past now," he said. "Let's go see your gifts."

Maxi nodded and followed him up the stairs to their bedchamber, where servants were busy arranging dozens of wooden chests. Ludis, who supervised their work to ensure none of the newer hires were tempted to steal, bowed in greeting when Maxi and Riftan arrived.

"My lord. My lady," she said.

"Is everything here?" Riftan asked, surveying the collection of treasures.

"Yes, my lord. There are thirty-two chests in total. Would you like to check the contents?"

Riftan nodded, and the servants began to open each chest. Maxi gawked at the contents that were revealed. Fine silks and exquisitely patterned fabrics from the Southern Continent, lustrous fox furs, a belt made of snakeskin, a shawl embroidered with gold thread, a silver hand mirror, a set of pearl hairpins. She could not believe her eyes. Though she was used to seeing Rosetta surrounded by gifts, Maxi had never been the recipient of so many treasures.

"I-Is all of this f-for me?"

"Is it not to your liking?"

Maxi quickly shook her head. She was a duke's daughter, and Riftan would find it suspicious if this extravagance overwhelmed her. Rosetta had faced down chests full of priceless jewels without ever batting an eye. Remembering her half-sister's haughty demeanor, Maxi forced herself to remain composed.

"N-No, I l-like them."

Riftan was visibly relieved. He instructed the servants to open the remaining chests, and Maxi tried her best to play the part of a noblewoman. She must appear to be accustomed to such luxuries, but despite her efforts it was impossible to stop her jaw from dropping.

Plucking an emerald hairpin from the glittering pile within one trunk, Riftan carefully slid it into Maxi's hair, just above her ear. Before she could admire the ornament, he clasped a sparkling diamond necklace around her neck. Clearly charmed by Maxi's astonished reaction to the jewels, Riftan softly kissed her cheek.

"I knew they would suit you perfectly," he said with a satisfied grin.

"Th-Thank you." Maxi's cheeks burned.

Eyes bright with pleasure, Riftan brushed a lock of hair behind her ear and urged her to try on the rest of the jewelry.

Maxi was delighted by her reflection in the mirror, but unease gnawed at her gut. Riftan was treating her like a royal princess, yet she felt more like a jester, forced to perform under an ill-fitting mask.

Riftan frowned at her troubled expression. "What's wrong?"

"N-Nothing." Maxi quickly smiled. "These are b-beautiful. Y-You must have been s-so busy in D-Drachium. How d-did you find the t-time to make all th-these purchases?"

"You were forced to leave all your belongings behind at Croyso Castle because of me. It's only right that I make up for it."

"Th-Thank you …" Maxi forced another smile, trying to hide the stinging dismay in her heart.

Riftan seemed to relax, and he began instructing the servants to put away the gifts. Maxi watched him, struggling to shake the strange sense of guilt. She hadn't lied, not exactly. Riftan had simply

assumed she was worthy of this indulgence because she was Duke Croyso's daughter. That was the truth, but why was her mind still so unsettled?

AFTER CONFIRMING THAT ALL THE ITEMS WERE ACCOUNTED for, Riftan left to check on the Livadonian captives. Maxi's preparation of the fabric order had been interrupted by the tumultuous arrival of Rob Midahas, so she decided to finish it now that Riftan was occupied. After discussing the order details with the maidservants, she made a thorough list of the necessary items, then went to the kitchen to oversee the food preservation for the winter.

Late autumn to early winter was the busiest time of year at any castle. As the weather grew colder, fresh vegetables became scarce and the price of meat increased. During this time, the servants at Calypse Castle tirelessly cured meat, pickled fruit, smoked sausages, and carted copious bags of flour from the mill. If they had any time to spare, it was spent preparing winter fodder for the livestock.

Ludis explained all this to Maxi as they observed the bustling activity in the kitchen. The smell of oil permeated the room.

"It's difficult to find enough grass to feed the livestock during winter," Ludis continued. "So we keep only the number of animals that we can keep fed, and the rest are slaughtered. Butchers prepare the meat and entrails, which are then sent to the castle. The meat is smoked, and the entrails are used for sausages."

Maxi nodded as Ludis spoke, watching the cook and servants at work. The kitchen was always busy, but it had become a veritable battlefield over the past few days. On one side of the room, four servants were busy stuffing sausages at a long table, washbasins and plates piled in small mountains beside them. On the opposite end of the room, more servants sawed whole cuts of meat, already drained of blood, into much smaller pieces.

Smoke pricked Maxi's nostrils and she wrinkled her nose, looking over her shoulder. Outside, four makeshift stone ovens were being used to smoke meat. Steel mesh had been placed over the stones, and a half dozen servants were hard at work placing meat on top of the mesh.

"I-I've never s-seen so much m-meat," Maxi said, her eyes wide as she watched.

"We've prepared enough to last the whole winter," Ludis said. "Smoked meat doesn't keep for long, so most of the meat will need to be cured. Jerky will serve the knights well when they go on expeditions or monster raids."

"W-We're ccuring all this?"

Maxi inspected the hunks of meat hanging along the walls. Ludis had supplied her with records of the quantity of food preserved in previous years, along with how much they planned to preserve in the current year, but seeing it all laid out in one room was still surprising.

"With the knights' return, we must prepare twice as much food as last year," Ludis explained. "We should have started the process earlier, while it was still warm …."

"D-Does it take a l-long time?"

"Yes, my lady. The meat is cured with salt, which takes several days. After that, the meat must be cut into thin strips before being dried."

Dismayed, Maxi worried that the refurbishment of the castle had delayed the winter preparations.

When Maxi's face fell, Ludis quickly added, "But with the extra help we have this year, I'm sure everything will be ready before it gets too cold."

"Th-That's a relief …."

Maxi glanced at the servants laboring away in the kitchen. As the lady of the castle, it was her responsibility to manage every item of housekeeping, and it was clear the servants never had a moment's rest. As Ludis explained the different methods of food storage, Maxi tried to gauge the amount of work that remained.

The servants already had a backbreaking list of duties to perform every day, including cooking meals for all who lived in the castle, and cleaning every inch of the grounds. With winter approaching, their workload only grew. Now they must also make warm clothing for the knights, store fodder for livestock, and preserve enough food

to last until spring. They needed to hire more servants. She would have to ask Riftan first, but Maxi was sure he would agree.

"I'll a-ask Aderon if he can f-find us more help f-first thing t-tomorrow—"

"My lady!" A cheerful voice interrupted Maxi.

She turned to see six squires standing near the braziers, sweat glistening on their foreheads. At the head of the group, Ulyseon grinned and quickly bounded toward her.

"I heard what happened, my lady," he said when he reached her side. "Is it all right for you to be walking around? Those damned Livadonian bastards! How dare they—"

"I-I'm fine."

Garrow sighed. "Calm down, Uly. You're making her ladyship uncomfortable."

"I've just never been so frustrated about being a squire before. If I were a knight, I could've …" Ulyseon's crestfallen face reminded Maxi of a dog with its ears tucked back.

"Th-Thank you for your c-concern," she said, stifling a giggle. "But I-I'm fine, really. S-Some of the guards w-were injured, but Sir R-Riftan arrived j-just in time."

"Yes, and I heard those cowards surrendered immedi ately when they saw him. Not that I blame them! The gutless scoundrels didn't stand a chance against Sir Riftan."

Maxi rolled her eyes, and Garrow was already shaking his head. Once Ulyseon began singing Riftan's praises, he wouldn't stop.

Maxi gently cut him off. "W-What brings you to the k-kitchen?"

Ulyseon glanced at the squires standing behind him, as if he had just remembered where he was. "The smell of meat was too tempting, so we snuck out of training."

No wonder they looked so nervous. Maxi smiled to reassure them that their secret was safe. "W-We were j-just cooking up some s-sausages," she said, and turned to the cook. "W-Would you s-serve the squires some?"

The cook looked up from stuffing clean entrails with ground meat and grinned. "I'll have a few ready in a jiffy, my lady. You there!" he shouted to one of the servants. "Bring me a plate of sausages."

The squires eagerly gathered around, and Maxi slipped out of the kitchen to let them enjoy their snack in peace.

As the days shortened, darkness fell abruptly over the castle, and servants were already lighting candles in the corridor. The central hall and stairs in particular needed to be lit in midafternoon to chase out the lengthening shadows. With the new sconces mounted on the walls, the castle was twice as bright as before, though lighting the extra candles required twice the labor.

"I'll hire m-more servants first th-thing tomorrow m-morning," Maxi said to Ludis as they walked past the servants.

"I don't think that's necessary, my lady."

"W-We need at least th-thirty more servants for a c-castle of this s-size. D-Do we have enough room to h-house them?"

"Yes, my lady. There's plenty of spare sleeping quarters on the first floor."

"Th-Then I'll d-discuss the matter with his l-lordship tonight."

After making her rounds at the stables, Maxi returned to her room to record a log of the day's affairs. To manage an estate as large as Calypse Castle, it was essential to keep track of every last detail.

"My lady," Ludis said from the door. "The lord has sent word that he'll be late. He says you should dine without him. Would you like to have your meal in the dining hall?"

Maxi looked up from her writing. She had not noticed Ludis entering the room. How long had she been at her desk? Outside the window, darkness had already fallen, and Maxi couldn't help but worry that Riftan was not getting adequate rest.

"My lady?"

"I'll e-eat in my r-room," Maxi said, rising from her seat.

As Ludis left to fetch her meal, Maxi absentmindedly poked at the logs in the fireplace and stared into the flames. A day in Calypse Castle felt both infinitely long and incredibly short. Managing the place was exhausting, but she was happier and more confident than she had ever been at her father's castle.

Is Riftan happy with me too?

Maxi's face fell as she recalled Ruth's words that morning. The Remdragon Knights believed Riftan had suffered a great injustice at

the hands of her father. That much was clear from the way they treated Maxi. If Riftan resented her, too, she would not have blamed him, but instead he had been unfailingly kind to her.

His kindness confounded Maxi. She did not find herself appealing in the slightest. Striking beauty, exceptional talent, a sharp wit—she possessed none of these things. The one thing she *did* have was her noble lineage. But her ranking as a duke's daughter was nothing compared to Agnes, a royal princess.

What did Riftan see in her? Whatever it was, Maxi's father had been right. She was far more fortunate than she deserved. Duke Croyso's selfish cruelty had unexpectedly turned into a blessing, and Maxi swore to do everything in her power to hold on to her good fortune.

"Mmm …" Maxi groaned softly, awakened by the faint light of dawn filtering in through the windows.

She had fallen asleep reading in bed after supper and was still fully dressed. A firm hand rested lightly over her breast and, as she drew the blankets over her shoulders to ward off the morning chill, the hand slid down and wrapped a powerful arm around her waist. Maxi looked over her shoulder; Riftan was still fast asleep behind her, his bare chest rising and falling gently.

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously. Was he pretending to be asleep again? After watching him closely for several minutes, Maxi decided he was not faking, and nudged his arm away. He released her, which meant he was definitely asleep.

Maxi rolled toward him as quietly as she could. Though Riftan usually woke at the slightest noise, he remained sound asleep and the sight warmed her heart.

He must be exhausted.

Riftan's face was bathed in the bluish glow of dawn, and Maxi gently traced its outline with her hand. His hair had grown longer. It now settled over his fine forehead in a tousled mess, and the ends brushed at his eyelids. The corners of his lips tilted downward, and when Maxi brushed his hair back from his face, the frown disappeared. She smiled at him.

He was at least a kevette taller than she was, imposing at more than twice her size. But when he slept this soundly, Maxi could almost forget how intimidating he could be. Indulging an impulse, she crawled into his arms and rested her head against his chest. When he remained sound asleep, she was overcome with the urge to do something more daring.

Maxi buried her face in his neck and inhaled his warm, masculine scent. He smelled of sunlight and soap, an inexplicably sensual combination. As she breathed him in, a heat bloomed in her belly.

Maxi followed the outline of Riftan's jaw with her finger. He was truly stunning. Even in the half-darkness of daybreak, his smooth skin gleamed like gold, and with his long lashes lowered, he looked as innocent as a lamb.

Something must be wrong with me.

Just a few months ago, she never would have described this rough, prickly knight as innocent. She was overcome by a desire to embrace him tightly and rub her face under his chin, but she suppressed the urge. She did not want to disturb his much-needed rest, and did not dare be so bold in any case.

Maxi slid out of bed, slipped on her robe, and quietly left the room. The crisp morning air chilled the corridor, but the kitchen was pleasantly warm when she arrived.

The cook stopped kneading dough and rushed to greet Maxi. "My lady! What brings you to the kitchen so early in the morning?"

Maxi smiled awkwardly as she stepped over to the fireplace. "I-I woke up early, and d-did not w-want to disturb the l-lord. Is it all right if I s-stay here?"

Her request seemed to fluster him, and he nodded so vigorously that Maxi worried his head might come loose.

"Of course, my lady. As you wish. There's fresh bread and rabbit stew. Would you like to have your breakfast now?"

"Y-Yes, please. I'd also l-like to w-wash my face. C-Could I have a b-basin of water and a t-towel?"

"Right away, my lady."

The cook promptly poured warm water into a basin and brought it to her, along with a clean linen cloth. Sitting next to the fire, Maxi

washed her face. When she finished, she dipped her fingers in the water and ran them through her tangled hair.

A maidservant placed a loaf of freshly baked white bread and a bowl of thick stew in front of Maxi. As she sliced the bread, steam rose from its soft, fluffy center. Maxi buttered a piece, blew on it a few times and took a bite. The sweet bread melted in her mouth, and she soon started on the stew.

When she had finished the delectable meal, Maxi washed everything down with a glass of honeyed goat milk and sat by the fire, her stomach full. Drowsiness began to overtake her, and she considered returning to bed until Ruth shuffled into the kitchen.

"Why, you're up early today, my lady," he said when he saw her.

Dismay chased away Maxi's drowsiness.

"I see you've enjoyed an early breakfast." Ruth joined her by the fire, eyeing the breadcrumbs and the empty bowl. "That must be nice. I, on the other hand, haven't had a single thing to eat since dinner last night, thanks to the special task Sir Riftan assigned me."

Maxi smiled stiffly. "I-I was b-busy yesterday …"

"Yes, yes. I heard about the *mountain* of gifts Sir Riftan brought you. Is that what you were busy with all day, my lady? Opening them?"

"Th-There are m-more matters in the c-castle that require my a-attention than you th-think!"

Maxi had, in fact, spent much of the previous day opening gifts, but she would rather die than admit it. The sorcerer stared down at her with cheerless eyes. His domineering attitude had a way of making her feel like an inept student being scolded by her tutor, but she hoped the servants would not notice.

"I'm sure you have many responsibilities," Ruth continued in a gentler tone. "But strengthening our defenses must be a priority. This magical device will stop further attacks. And you, my lady, are the only person with the arithmetic skills to help me craft it."

Maxi narrowed her eyes. There was no way Ruth actually thought highly of her arithmetic skills. "I-I understand, b-but making winter p-preparations is also im-important. I'll h-help you as s-soon as I'm finished."

"To Sir Riftan, the safety of Anatol takes precedence over all else. If I can complete the device with your help, his worries will be greatly eased."

Maxi perked up, and her eyes brightened. "Would they r-really?"

"Certainly, my lady."

Eager to prove herself to Riftan, Maxi hardly noticed how Ruth had skillfully chosen the exact words that would convince her. She nodded resolutely. "I-If that's the case, I'll h-help you f-first. A-Are you s-satisfied?"

"I'd be happier if you could start right away." Ruth ran a hand over his haggard face. "I have countless equations that need to be sorted before I can properly begin. Mages typically employ two or three assistants to make a magical device …."

"I-I understand. Why d-don't you have s-something to eat f-first?"

"This will do," Ruth said and snatched a loaf of bread, biting into it. On his way out the door, he grabbed an apple and thrust it inside his robe pocket.

As Maxi followed after Ruth, she found Ludis and told the maidservant that, if anything happened, she could find her in the library.

RUTH HAD NOT EXAGGERATED THE VOLUME OF WORK that awaited them. When Maxi saw the mess he had made of the library in just two days, her jaw dropped. Haphazard stacks of books, scattered parchment, and other miscellany cluttered the desk. A piece of cloth the size of a blanket lay spread out on the floor, inscribed with complex, meticulously drawn patterns.

Maxi leaned down to inspect it and sighed over the empty ink bottles on the floor. Ruth appeared to have used five whole bottles to draw the inscriptions.

"Why are y-you working h-here instead of your t-tower?"

"There isn't enough room in the tower," Ruth said with dismissive ease. "And Sir Riftan has made it clear that it will no longer be mine if I don't finish this device within a week."

Maxi frowned as she pictured the lofty tower in the back garden. How could Ruth possibly have run out of space? Is this why he slept

in the library instead of in his tower?

"Your task, my lady, is quite simple," Ruth said as he sat down and placed his half-eaten apple on the edge of the desk. Maxi reluctantly took the seat across from him, but he ignored her disapproving look.

"I'd like you to draw copies of these diagrams using these tools," Ruth continued and handed her six flat wooden tablets cut into varying shapes. "I'll explain how to use them, of course. As long as you know basic arithmetic, it should be simple enough."

Gripping the wooden tablets in her hands, Maxi studied the intricate diagrams sketched on them. Several pieces of parchment with similar sketches littered the desk. "W-What are all these?"

"Designs for the magical device."

"Are m-magical devices b-big?"

"They vary in size, but the one we're making is about the size of a pumpkin. These are blueprints for the magic runes that will be placed inside the device. The runes will be arranged in intricate layers and placed inside an object infused with protective magic."

"M-Magic runes?" Maxi studied the diagrams with re newed interest. Circles, triangles, squares, and spirals were intricately intertwined on the yellow parchment. She had known the magical device would require complex calculations, but the process was far more complicated than she had expected.

"Magic runes are tools that allow us to amplify the mana in our surroundings tenfold, or even a hundredfold," Ruth explained. "That's how all magic is created. A mage's talent is determined by how efficiently they can use runes to achieve a desired effect."

Maxi tilted her head curiously. "B-But I've seen m-mages use magic without r-runes before. Y-You recently cast a s-spell without one t-too."

"That's only possible when a mage has memorized the spell and can draw the required runes in their mind. And only basic spells can be used this way. Advanced spells take a great deal of time and effort to prepare."

"Th-Then what we're m-making must be extremely a-advanced magic," Maxi said, eyeing the heap of parchment.

Ruth grinned. “That’s right. We’re making a Nome shield—a protective rune that uses earth magic. If someone were to attack the gates with magic again, the rune would create a powerful barrier as soon as it detected the attack. Once we place the runes inside the magical device and install it at the main gate, even a rain of fire won’t be able to breach it.”

“Th-That’s reassuring.”

Maxi rarely had the chance to see magic in use and she was excited to learn something of how it worked. With the exception of the hierarchs’ healing magic, Ruth’s work on the oak tree and the defensive magic he employed at the gates were the first time she had witnessed its use. There were plenty of stories about the great mages and their brilliant exploits, but they never detailed how the mages wielded their power.

“D-Does that m-mean anyone can use m-magic if they know how to d-draw the r-runes?”

Ruth shook his head. “The runes won’t work if you can’t harness magic to activate them. To do that, you’d have to know how to control mana. Magic can’t be created from nothing.”

“B-But I’ve seen ordinary p-people use magical d-devices.”

“That’s because they have magic stones.” Ruth rummaged through the cluttered desk and produced a glimmering red stone the size of Maxi’s palm. “This stone contains a fixed amount of magic. It functions as an energy source for magical devices. By placing one inside a device, even ordinary people can use magic.”

Maxi studied the stone when Ruth placed it in her hand. Its surface shimmered mystically, like red light reflected on a surface of rippling water, and it seemed to offer her a glimpse into its depths, into a strange new world. Her heart beat faster.

“Now,” Ruth said, interrupting her reverie. “If that satisfied your curiosity, shall we get started? If we don’t finish this soon, I’ll lose my tower.”

Ruth shoved a pile of books to one side, clearing space on the desk. Maxi set the stone down and listened attentively as he guided her through the steps to make the calculations and draw the complex runes.

With his detailed directions, Maxi quickly understood her task, and began to methodically add and subtract as she redrew the diagrams with a ruler. Though it was a complex process and she did not fully comprehend it, she never grew bored with the work.

They worked in silence and, after a while, Ruth looked up from writing in the ancient language.

"You're better at this than I expected, my lady," he said, his brow raised. "Your work is close to perfect."

Unsure if he was complimenting her, Maxi narrowed her eyes. "E-Even I can do th-this much."

"You've exceeded my expectations. That's all I meant."

Maxi eyed him distrustfully. She knew the sorcerer thought little of her. Still, that was better than his usual backhanded comments and barbed words. "I'm g-glad you f-find me helpful."

Maxi returned to working on the diagrams, a faint smile on her face. Just as her fingers began to ache from gripping the quill, the library door burst open and Riftan stormed in. He wore leather trousers and a black tunic instead of his armor, a sign that he did not intend to leave the castle that day.

Happy to see him, Maxi began to rise from her seat, but his icy tone froze her joyful mood.

"I'm told you've been here since early this morning," he said, scanning the parchment and books on the desk with displeasure. "What do you think you're doing?"

Maxi stared at him, confused. Why was he angry?

"What's all this about?" Riftan demanded.

"Isn't it obvious?" Ruth said, unfazed by Riftan's moods, as always. "Her ladyship and I are making the device you requested."

"I can see that, but what is my wife doing here?"

"I've asked her ladyship for her assistance. If you'll recall, I informed you countless times that it was impossible to finish the device by myself in only a week."

Riftan leaned over the desk, looming over the sorcerer. "You find my request unreasonable, and so you order my wife around?"

"I didn't order her, and I didn't ask for her help just to annoy you. She happens to be the only literate person in this castle who can

also do arithmetic. It's not as if I could ask the knights for help."

"But you think it's acceptable to ask my wife?!"

"R-Riftan, I really d-don't mind," Maxi quickly cut in.

Riftan gave her a sharp look, and her courage wavered. But after all that Ruth had done for her, she could not allow Riftan to berate him like this.

"I-It's not difficult," she said, trying to keep her voice even. "More im-importantly, it's f-for Anatol. I d-don't want something l-like this to h-happen again."

"I'll make sure it never happens again." Riftan's voice was softer now, but he still looked irritated. "There's no need for you to put yourself in danger."

"And what danger could she possibly be in?" Ruth asked. "Are you afraid she'll die from the prick of a quill?"

"You're prone to starting fires with a flick of your hand! And why are you doing this here instead of in your tower? What if you start a fire in the castle?!"

"I'm making a protective device. The chances of an explosion or fire are slim to none! The worst that could happen is the library becomes safer."

Riftan scowled, irked by Ruth's thorough and logical reply. Maxi knew that the best way to stop two hounds from fighting was to separate them, so she gently tugged at Riftan's tunic.

"P-Please don't be a-angry. R-Ruth says i-it's safe."

"I'm not angry, I'm worried." Riftan sighed. "Fine. Help him if you must, but don't overexert yourself. And, Ruth, don't you even think about involving my wife in any of your dangerous experiments."

"What kind of person do you think I am?"

"You're a loose cannon."

With that last quip, Riftan pulled Maxi toward him. In the past, a hint of a frown from him was enough to terrify her. Now even though Riftan's anger was still dissipating, she did not feel an ounce of fear as he pulled at her arm. His displeasure still made her anxious, but she knew he would not hurt her.

"That's enough for today," Riftan said to Ruth as he led Maxi toward the door. "You can continue on your own for the rest of the

day.”

Ruth quickly rose from his seat. “Wait, where are you going?”

“Nowhere. Even I need a day of rest from time to time.”

Maxi looked up to Riftan in surprise. It was already apparent to her that he rarely rested, but Ruth’s own shock confirmed her suspicion.

“But what about the intruders?” the sorcerer asked.

“I’ve sent a messenger to Livadon. Rob Midahas and his knights will be released once I receive compensation. Until then, they stay in the dungeon.”

“What if his father refuses to pay?”

“Then I’ll cut off their—” Riftan stopped himself, seeing the look on Maxi’s face. He waved his hands at Ruth. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Seems fair. Enjoy your day off. It’s well deserved.”

“How gracious of you.”

As they exited the library, Maxi turned and nodded a goodbye to Ruth. In the corridor, bright rays of sunlight flooded in through the windows. Riftan gazed outside for a moment before turning to Maxi, his eyes bright with excitement.

“We’ll need something warmer before we go out,” he said. “It’s a fine day, but the wind’s chilly.”

“W-Where are we going?”

“You have your own horse now, and you should take her out before it gets too cold. I’ll show you a good place to ride.”

Maxi’s lips parted in surprise. He wanted to spend time with her outside the bedchamber, and the realization pleased her.

“B-But you m-must be tired. M-Maybe you should r-rest …”

“I’m not an old man, Maxi. But if you would prefer we return to the bedroom instead …” His dark eyes smoldered with mischief and desire.

Maxi’s breath caught in her throat as her face burned with embarrassment. When she cast her eyes downward, Riftan chuckled and embraced her.

“It’s tempting, but we’re going out today. I want to show you my land.”

AFTER CHANGING INTO A DRESS MORE SUITED FOR RIDING, Maxi followed Riftan to the stables where a stableboy helped her lead her beautiful white mare outside. Moments later, Riftan emerged from the stable with his own mighty warhorse, the same horse he had ridden on their journey to Anatol.

Riftan gently stroked the horse's neck. "You remember Talon, don't you?" he asked Maxi. "He's got a fiery temper, but he's as fine a horse as you could wish for."

Maxi studied Riftan curiously. "D-Do you like h-horses?"

"When I was ten years old, I dreamed of owning one. And Talon here is the best of all the horses I've had."

Riftan rubbed his cheek against Talon's muzzle, and the sight filled Maxi with a strange jealousy. Nothing was more shameful than a woman's jealousy, according to the church, and Maxi was mortified to feel slighted by a horse.

Riftan stepped toward Maxi. "Have you given her a name?"

Maxi shook her head, trying to rein back her emotions. "N-Not yet."

"You should choose one soon. She'll warm up to you faster if you call her by her name."

"W-What should I n-name her?"

"She's your horse. You should be the one to decide."

Maxi mulled it over. "Th-then … I sh-shall call her R-Rem."

Riftan smiled playfully. "Rem because she's white? I see my wife's imagination is wanting."

"I-It has a n-nice ring to it." Maxi did not mention that the order of knights under Riftan's command had inspired the name.

A groom came to saddle the horses, and Riftan helped Maxi mount Rem. Unpracticed in horseback riding, Maxi nervously tensed, clutching the reins. Riftan, on the other hand, looked perfectly at ease on Talon.

Riftan eyed her awkward posture. "You're not used to riding, are you?"

Maxi shook her head, embarrassed. "I never l-left Croyso Castle. Th-There weren't many o-opportunities for me to ride."

"Yes, I heard the rumors. Duke Croyso's eldest daughter avoids the outside world because of her delicate constitution."

Something in his voice made Maxi nervous, and she fidgeted with the reins. "I-I didn't know th-that was how people p-perceived me."

"The Duke of Croyso is one of the most powerful men on the Western Continent, so it's no surprise that people would take an interest in his daughter. Unlike your sister, you never made any public appearances, and that only fanned the flames of their curiosity. I know of a knight who snuck into Croyso Castle just to catch a glimpse of you."

Maxi avoided his gaze. This was news to her, and she wondered what Riftan had thought of her when he first heard those rumors. Had he imagined a frail woman, delicate as a flower? She knew there was nothing delicate or elegant about her short, thin frame. She also knew that her tenderhearted and skittish nature failed to make her endearing.

"H-He m-must have been d-disappointed," Maxi said brightly, trying to mask her self-doubt.

Riftan turned to her, frowning. "How so?"

"He w-went through all that t-trouble just to s-see an ordinary w-woman."

Maxi tightened her grip on the reins and attempted to feign nonchalance. Calling her looks ordinary was generous, but maybe Riftan wouldn't notice. Her ears turned red.

Riftan slowed Talon's pace and came up alongside Rem as they neared the back gate. "You aren't ordinary. In fact, I find you charming."

Maxi smiled awkwardly, certain that he was only being polite. "Th-Thank you."

"It's not my habit to say things I don't mean," Riftan said, sensing her disbelief. "If I didn't find you alluring, you wouldn't drive me into a frenzy when we're alone together. Or have you forgotten about that because of our peaceful evening last night?"

Maxi flushed with embarrassment. She opened and closed her mouth, unable to form a reply.

Riftan leaned in and cupped her chin with his hand, his eyes dark with desire. “Perhaps riding was a foolish suggestion. Shall we turn back?”

Heart pounding, Maxi shook her head, and Riftan pulled away. He straightened in his saddle, his expression inscrutable. Was he disappointed or amused?

“Let’s hurry, then,” Riftan said. “We don’t want the sun to set before we’ve even left the castle.”

Maxi trailed after him, trying to calm her racing heart.

THEY RODE THROUGH THE FOREST, ALONG A NARROW path that led out of the back gate. Leaves crunched under their horses’ hooves, and above them birds chirped, but those were the only sounds. It seemed as if the whole world were still asleep.

Maxi stole glances at Riftan as they rode in peaceful silence. He rode Talon gracefully, while Maxi felt clumsy atop Rem, clutching the reins as she hunched inelegantly forward to keep her balance.

“I didn’t know my wife was such an unpracticed rider,” Riftan said, looking back at her with an amused smile.

“A-As I m-mentioned … I h-had few opportunities t-to ride.”

“Relax your shoulders, and don’t clench your muscles so. Horses get nervous when they sense their riders are tense.”

Blushing, Maxi took deep breaths and tried to do as Riftan instructed, but every time Rem moved, she bounced in the saddle, and her body tensed in panic. After observing her for a few moments, Riftan offered her further guidance.

“Relax your upper body. Squeeze your thighs to balance yourself, following the rhythm of the horse’s movements. It’s just like when you’re on top of—”

“R-Riftan! Y-You mustn’t say such th-things out loud!”

“Why? It’s just us here.”

“S-Still! I-It’s improper!”

Riftan burst into laughter. “You get so upset when I speak of our lovemaking, while in bed, you’re so—”

“R-Riftan!” Maxi attempted to cover his mouth with her hand and lost her balance, but Riftan swiftly steadied her.

"All right, all right," he said. "Calm down."

Maxi glared at him, but he only grinned at her mischievously, then leaned down to kiss her forehead. Maxi lost her balance a second time, prompting Riftan to steady her again.

He laughed. "Looks like I'll have to teach you the foundations, starting with how to sit on a horse."

"I'd b-be able to r-ride better if you'd stop d-distracting me," Maxi muttered.

"Is that so? As you wish, then." Riftan's grin widened.

Maxi tried to maintain her haughty demeanor, but she found it difficult to be indignant when he behaved so mischievously. Whenever he smiled, her cheeks burned and her heart beat distractingly fast.

Without warning, Riftan galloped ahead, steering the powerful stallion with his long, muscular legs. Maxi reluctantly spurred Rem to catch up and, before long, Riftan slowed his pace to make it easier for her. The small gesture sent flutters through her heart. No one had ever cared for her like Riftan seemed to. She could almost believe that he really did see her as a beautiful, ideal wife. But even if he did think that of her, Maxi knew she was undeserving of the affection.

"You're not accustomed to riding, but you like animals, don't you?"

Maxi blinked. "H-How did you kn-know?"

"I saw you, once, in the garden at Croyso Castle. You were petting a cat while it sat happily on your lap."

Maxi stared at him. It had never occurred to her that someone might have been watching her in the garden, and she tried to recall if she had ever seen Riftan there.

"He was purring away blissfully, that cat. I remember it well because everything was so soft and serene around you."

"I-It was p-probably the k-kitchen cat. We k-kept him for catching mice, b-but he wasn't a g-good hunter, s-so he was often h-hungry. I'd feed him in s-secret."

"So that's why he snuggled so contentedly with you." Riftan looked deep in thought, then glanced at her over his shoulder. "What else do you like?"

When Maxi's brows furrowed at the confusing question, Riftan smiled bitterly.

"You're veiled in mystery," he said. "And you rarely reveal anything about yourself. Why are you so reluctant to show me who you are?"

Maxi's heart dropped painfully. How could he not know the answer? He must be truly blind to her impediment. She could not understand why he refused to see it.

"I-I've never been r-reluctant," Maxi said defensively.

"Then tell me about yourself. I want to know what you like and dislike, and what you think about every day."

"Why d-don't you g-go first? Y-You don't t-talk much about y-yourself either."

"I'm certain I've shared more than you have," he said, but then immediately shrugged. "Very well. Allow me to show you some chivalry." He knit his brows, as if combing through his memories. "I like horses, wine, and rich food. Honestly, I like anything that fills the belly and pleases the tongue. I also like gold, jewels, honor, and powerful weapons. Nothing out of the ordinary or particularly interesting."

"W-What do you dislike?"

Riftan snapped off a branch that blocked their path and tossed it to the ground. "Liars and incompetent fools. I've seen enough pompous lords flaunting their unearned power to last a lifetime. They're only outnumbered by the scum who deceive others for profit."

Though she knew his words were not directed at her, Maxi became uneasy.

"Now it's your turn," said Riftan, oblivious to her agitation.

Maxi tried to mask her anxiety. "I-I like what m-most people like."

"That's not a fair answer. Give me a proper one."

Maxi thought for a moment. "A-As I've said before, I like a-animals. Dogs, c-cats, horses … ch-chicks and rabbits too."

"What else?"

"I l-like to read. At C-Croyso Castle, I spent m-most of my time in the l-library."

"Rodrigo did mention that you spend much of your time in the library here."

Maxi nodded. "Th-There are so many r-rare books in your library. Th-Though Ruth tends to use them as b-blankets …"

"Shall I drive that rascal out for you?"

"I would n-never h-hear the end of it if you d-did," Maxi said, horrified by the thought.

Riftan frowned and gave her a cryptic look. "It seems you two have been getting along well."

"H-He helped me g-greatly with the r-refurbishments. H-He's fussy and he nags, b-but he's a g-good person."

Riftan turned away from her, irritated. "You're right. Ruth is fussy and talks too much, but he's an honest man."

For a while, they rode in silence.

"What do you hate, then?" Riftan eventually asked. "It's not a fair exchange if you don't answer the same questions I did."

Maxi hesitated over her answer. Lashings, shouting, and beatings were the first things that came to mind, but she could not reveal that part of her past. Still, she did not want to lie to a man who said he detested liars.

"M-Myself." Maxi blurted the truth softly.

Riftan blinked.

Worried he hadn't understood her, Maxi repeated her answer. "I-I hate myself the m-most."

They reached the end of the path, and a vast golden meadow came into view, illuminated by the winter sun. She spotted a single large tree at the top of a gently sloping hill and spurred her horse into a gallop before Riftan could press her further.

To her surprise, Maxi was enjoying herself. Riding through an open field was far easier than navigating a winding mountain path, and as she rode up the hill, her posture naturally improved. When she reached the top, she stopped to rest and realized she was sitting properly in the saddle at last.

"I brought some wine," Riftan said, dismounting next to the large tree on the hilltop. He grabbed Maxi's waist in both hands and lifted

her off her horse as if she weighed little more than a feather.

"Your body feels hot." He smiled as he set her on her feet. "And your heart is pounding like a drum."

Maxi wiped sweat from her forehead and tried to catch her breath. Just as Riftan had said, her entire body seemed to pulse with her heartbeat.

"It d-does feel like a t-tiny drum is b-beating inside me."

"That's an endearing way to put it." He planted a kiss on her flushed cheek, then spread his cloak under the tree and sat down.

The winter breeze chilled Maxi as she sat down beside Riftan, and she wrapped her arms around herself. A village sat on the other side of the hill, surrounded by golden fields that rippled in the wind.

"Th-This place is b-beautiful."

"It's even more beautiful in the spring, when the wildflowers bloom."

Maxi's heart grew eager, imagining the view in spring. It was such a new feeling; She had never dared to hope for anything before arriving in Anatol.

"Come closer," Riftan said and shifted to lean against the tree trunk. "You're cold."

As she sat on his lap, Riftan wrapped his cloak around her and handed her the small wine flask. She took a drink, completely content.

"Let me have a sip." Riftan locked an arm around her waist and rested his chin on her shoulder.

Maxi brought the flask to his lips and carefully tilted it back. After taking a few swallows, he leaned back again.

"Why don't you like yourself?"

Maxi shifted uneasily and stared out at the village below. It was sweet that he continued to feign ignorance, but the answer was obvious. She could not speak without tripping over her words like an utter fool.

"H-Have you n-never disliked yourself?"

"I have, countless times." He seemed to relax a little. "But I've never disliked myself so much that it would be the first thing I think of when someone asked me what I hate."

"Th-That's because th-there isn't much to d-dislike about you."

Riftan looked amused. "Is that so?"

"I-I'm sure y-you're well aware."

"I can't say that I am. Do enlighten me."

Maxi looked up at him, incredulous. "Y-You're one of the b-best knights in the realm. Y-You're strong and tall and c-clever …"

"No one's ever called me clever before," Riftan said lightly. "Though many have called me a lumbering oaf."

Maxi frowned. It was true that Riftan's manner and way of speaking were unrefined, but he was not an oaf. His eyes were always sharp, and his words, though direct, often revealed a keen insight. Maxi sometimes felt that he could see right through her.

"If you r-really were an o-oaf, you w-wouldn't be s-so well respected."

Riftan's lips twisted into a cynical smile, but he did not argue with her. He leaned his head back against the tree. "What else?" he asked coolly.

"Y-You are honorable, you're a great l-leader, and y-you're … h-handsome."

"You think I'm handsome?"

"Y-You know I d-do."

"How would I know that?"

Maxi blinked in disbelief. "I-I have an eye for b-beauty, just like e-everyone else."

"Every time I visited Croyso Castle, you shuddered at the sight of me, as if I were an ogre. You certainly didn't look at me with admiration. Even the wrinkled face of a goblin wouldn't have elicited such a horrified look."

"I've n-never even seen a g-goblin before."

"You know that's not my point." Riftan tilted her chin up so that she looked at him. "Whenever I came close to you, you looked as if you might flee."

His accusatory tone unnerved her. She had been oblivious to his attempts to approach her before their wedding day. To learn that he had been so intent on her that he no ticed and remembered her unconscious reactions to him was surprising.

"I-I was … a-afraid of you. Y-You were b-big and intimidating, a-and you always wore th-this icy expression. Y-You always s-seemed to be angry."

Riftan remained silent, and Maxi shifted uncomfortably in his arms.

"Do you still find me frightening?" he asked.

Maxi shook her head. Riftan studied her face for a moment, then slowly lowered his lips to hers. A tingle ran down her spine, and her nipples hardened as he cupped her breast with one hand.

Maxi moaned softly. "R-Riftan … W-We're outdoors."

"It's all right," he whispered against her mouth. "It's just you and me here. If anyone approaches, I'll hear them."

He slid one hand under her dress. Warmth emanated from his body, and she shuddered with pleasure. His arousal surprised her and, unsure of what to do, Maxi tried to push him away.

Riftan kissed her forehead. "Don't be afraid. I would never hurt you."

Maxi's breath caught in her throat as she gazed up at him. He kissed her again, sliding his hand up between her thighs and beginning to gently stroke her. Maxi clutched at his soft hair.

He would never hurt me. She repeated those words over and over in her head as she clung to him.

"You smell like winter," he moaned against her neck, burying his face in her scent.

Riftan also smelled like the crisp winter breeze, mingled with the pungent musk of tree bark and the faint scent of horses.

"Damn it. I want to kiss every part of you, but it's too cold to strip you naked out here." Riftan impatiently ran his free hand along her body, his palm whispering over the fabric of her dress.

A fire burned inside Maxi. She was not cold at all, but she did not tell Riftan. She was not bold enough to lie naked in an open field. They were already doing something they should not be doing out here, but she could not bring herself to pull away from him.

Riftan sucked and nibbled on her neck as he swiftly undid the straps of his trousers. Sitting inside his cloak, Maxi pulled her dress

up and shifted to straddle him. He entered her slowly, stretching her to her limit, and she let out a soft cry.

"I'll never hurt you again, Maxi," Riftan soothed, kissing her neck and lightly stroking her hips with his fingertips. "It's all right."

Maxi could not recall him ever hurting her, or the reason why she had been afraid of him in the first place. It felt as if Riftan Calypse had always been a part of her. She clung to his neck like a drowning woman.

Riftan took hold of her hips and pushed himself deeper. As their bodies merged, Maxi's entire being quivered. She began to move atop him, mimicking the motions of riding a horse. She took him to his hilt, tightening around him before reluctantly letting him go, again and again. Her heart hammered ecstatically, and her mind dissolved under his kisses.

CHAPTER 8



RIFTAN PRACTICALLY HAD TO HAUL MAXI BACK to the castle on his horse. Dazed after their lovemaking, she rode with him on Talon while Rem was led by the reins behind them. After carrying Maxi to their bedchamber, Riftan bathed her in warm water, dressed and fed her, and then lay in bed with her to lull her to sleep.

The next day, as Maxi worked with Ruth in the library, her mind wandered to Riftan and his tender care of her. When they were together, he was little different from a nanny, constantly making her eat and rest more. He was particularly adamant that they bathed together and, in the mornings, he would snatch the comb from Ludis so he could brush Maxi's hair himself.

Such constant attention baffled her. All her life, she had been taught that courtesy, polite disinterest, and duty were the only pillars of marriage. She had never once heard of a man treating his wife with affection. It made her wonder if her father was the exception and most husbands were, in fact, just as caring as Riftan.

Maxi had lived a cloistered life at Croyso Castle and had only been allowed to leave its walls to attend church—but even those visits were forbidden after she turned fourteen. So everything she knew about the outside world came from overheard conversations with guests at the castle. The two people who'd had the greatest hand in shaping her worldview were her father and Rosetta, but their cynicism knew no bounds. The longer she lived outside of Croyso Castle, the more Maxi began to suspect that her knowledge of the world was warped.

"You're good with your hands, my lady." Ruth's voice interrupted her thoughts. He inspected her calculations with a satisfied grin. "And a quick learner too. I must say I'm surprised."

Unsure if he was complimenting her, Maxi smiled wryly. "D-Doing the same thing over and over t-tends to make one f-faster."

"We're nearly done. At this rate, we'll be able to finish the device by tomorrow."

Maxi sighed in relief and rubbed her stiff neck, rolling it gently from side to side. Her initial enthusiasm had not lasted long. The endless calculations and diagrams had quickly become tedious, and now the mere sight of a piece of parchment made her feel exhausted.

"I d-didn't know p-performing magic required all these d-documents. I thought it would b-be more s-spectacular …"

"Magic is one of the highest forms of learning, my lady. It requires meticulous calculation and research. Spectacles can only be expected during battle. Even the sorcerers in the Mage Tower never get to experience such excitement. They spend their whole lives making diagrams like these."

Maxi paused her work and gave Ruth a quizzical look. "W-Were you a m-member of the M-Mage Tower?"

"Yes. For a time."

Maxi's eyes widened. The Mage Tower, on Nornui, was the birthplace of mages and the greatest repository of knowledge on all the continents. It had been built by the mages of antiquity, raised up on an artificial island in the Issyrian Ocean. Nornui was a neutral territory, and its mages protected the world order, never intervening in the affairs of other states. Even Maxi, confined to Croyso Castle, had heard of the tower countless times growing up.

Ruth, however, seemed unimpressed. "Sorcerers in the Mage Tower must accept certain restrictions the moment they become a high mage," he said with disdain. "In exchange for learning the dangerous and classified magic of Nornui, they must accept constant surveillance, lest they disturb the world order by using magic for personal gain. That's why I left."

"Is … Is that a-allowed?"

"Certainly not, which is why the mages of Nornui consider me a traitor."

Ruth's tone was indifferent. Were all mages as brazen as he was?

"Th-Then did you meet R-Riftan after you left the t-tower?"

"Indeed. I met him not long after I became a mercenary. By then, he was already somewhat famous."

Maxi perked up, eager to hear about a young Riftan. "W-Why?"

"For obvious reasons." Ruth counted them out with his fingers. "Incredibly good-looking, extraordinarily well built for a sixteen-year-old, nerves of steel. Everyone thought he was a madman back then too."

"A m-madman?" Maxi stumbled over Ruth's choice of words.

"He knew no fear," Ruth said with a helpless shrug. "He would fight ogres with nothing but a dagger, and he'd rush into the mouth of a drake to crack open its skull. He did all sorts of crazy things without batting an eye. I was a nervous wreck any time I had to go on missions with him—he was so unpredictable." Ruth shuddered at the memory.

Maxi listened, horrified. To think that Riftan had been so reckless so young. At sixteen, he would have been younger than Rosetta—younger even than the squire Ulyseon!

"Is he s-still so r-reckless?" Maxi asked, her voice trembling as she licked her dry lips.

"Even now, he charges forward without regard for his physical safety," Ruth said with a heavy sigh. "But he no longer takes the perilous gambles he used to. He's powerful enough now to slay most monsters without endangering himself. The only time I've seen him risk his life recently was during the Dragon Campaign."

"W-What happened?" Maxi blurted the question, unable to stop herself.

Ruth sighed again. "Sir Riftan has the unusual ability to absorb his enemy's magic and transfer it to his sword—temporarily. It's a skill he gained after years of battling monsters. And frequently being covered with monster bile and blood probably had something to do with it too.

"So, to answer your question, *that* ability allowed Sir Riftan to defeat the Red Dragon. With it, he was able to cut through Dragon's Breath—the most powerful magic that exists in the natural world—and infuse the dragon's magic into his sword, which he then used to cut off the creature's head."

Maxi imagined Riftan rushing headlong into the dragon's flames and her heart beat at a panicked rhythm.

Ruth gritted his teeth. "The slightest mistake could have turned Riftan into ash. But that reckless bravery is why he's now regarded as the most valiant knight on the continent."

Maxi had heard Riftan's deeds during the campaign praised before, but she hadn't realized how rash his feats were. If Riftan had died, she would never have gotten to know him. Their wretched first night together would have remained her only memory of him.

"I didn't mean to frighten you, my lady," Ruth mumbled when Maxi did not say anything. "Blast! That wasn't a proper conversation to have with you. My apologies. Extended time with only these rowdy knights as company has made me tactless."

"I-I was the one wh-who asked." Maxi doubted it was the knights' company that made Ruth tactless, but she decided not to voice the thought.

She returned to her work in silence, her mind in turmoil. As a knight, Riftan would have to face more danger in the future. Once winter was over, King Reuben would inevitably call him and the Remdragon Knights on another campaign. How many battles could one man survive? Riftan was powerful, but he wasn't invincible.

The thought was enough to choke the air out of Maxi's lungs. She had not realized how fragile her current happiness was.

"I see you're distracted." Ruth squinted as he scanned the desk to assess their progress. He lowered his quill. "Why don't we stop here for the day?"

Grateful, Maxi nodded and rose from the desk. New servants were scheduled to arrive at the castle today and she wanted to greet them. After discussing the matter with Riftan, she had asked Aderon to hire an additional thirty servants to help ease the workload on the current staff.

In the great hall, Maxi greeted the new hires and assigned veteran servants to train them. Once everyone was settled and introduced, she made her way to the kitchen. The winter preparations were nearly complete, and the place no longer resembled a battlefield, though it was still a flurry of activity. When they finally finished the preparations, time in the castle would slow down again, and Maxi would not need to frantically rush about.

"We'll see the first frost in a few days, my lady," Rodrigo said, shivering as he pulled his coat closer to himself.

Maxi frowned with worry. "W-Will we be able to f-finish all the w-winter garments b-by then?"

"I am told they are almost ready, my lady. With the additional help, they should be finished before the weather turns truly cold."

With the impending drop in temperature on her mind, Maxi inspected the bedrooms in the castle to ensure that they were stocked with plenty of firewood. Then she retired to her room to write her daily log.

WITH THE DAYS GROWING SHORTER, DARKNESS FELL ON the castle long before Maxi finished her work. She lit a can dle and walked to the window, her thoughts turning again to Riftan.

No one in the castle worked harder than he did. Throughout the day, he inspected the land, trained soldiers, and scoured outside the castle's perimeter to stave off monsters or plunderers lying in wait along the roads. Then he would visit the village to oversee construction progress, hold negotiations with tax collectors, and settle disputes. Despite working day and night, he never showed signs of fatigue.

Could it be that Riftan was made of iron instead of flesh and blood? Such an exhaustive list of duties would have drained most, yet he performed them with apparent ease.

Maxi focused her thoughts on Riftan's resilience in an attempt to forget what Ruth had told her that afternoon. Lord Calypse was no ordinary man; he was strong enough to overcome any trial. There was no need for her to fret over things that had yet to happen.

Consoling herself with these thoughts, Maxi finished her supper and relaxed in her room. But when Riftan returned late that evening and told her that he would be leaving in two days for a monster raid, Maxi's anxious thoughts returned.

Oblivious to her distress, Riftan continued speaking. "When the envoy from Livadon arrives tomorrow with our compensation, we'll finally be rid of Rob Midahas and the other prisoners. Ruth tells me the magical devices will be ready by then. With the new gate almost finished everything should be fine, even if I'm away for a short while."

Maxi licked her chapped lips and tried to respond calmly. "W-Where are you g-going?"

"We've received reports that a horde of goblins has settled on that mountain," Riftan said, pointing to one of the mountain peaks beyond the window. "It'll likely take four to five days to deal with them."

"W-Won't it be d-dangerous?" Maxi looked at him anxiously.

"Are you worried a goblin might hurt me?" Riftan snorted incredulously. "Goblins are a nuisance, but they aren't dangerous. A goblin raid is about as dangerous as hunting rabbits, if a tad more bothersome."

"I-If they aren't d-dangerous, can't they j-just be l-left alone?"

Riftan frowned. "It is my duty to protect this land. You're asking if I can simply shirk my responsibilities."

Maxi shrank under his sharp tone.

"Goblins may not be powerful creatures," Riftan said. "But they are prolific breeders. If we don't deal with them now, they will multiply at an alarming rate. Merchants will be attacked on our roads, and our hunting grounds will be destroyed. I must make sure that doesn't happen."

"I-I'm sorry. It w-was presumptuous of m-me."

Riftan studied her pained expression and let out a long sigh. He reached for her, and she fell into his arms. Nuzzling into her shoulder, he played with her braided hair.

"I'm not leaving our bed to sleep on the cold, hard ground because I want to," he said softly. "It's something I must do, as Lord

Calypse."

Maxi remained silent as she ran her fingers through his thick black hair. The thought of him sleeping outside in winter made her heart ache. Was it the fate of a knight's wife to live with these worries, always? She wondered if other noble couples kept each other at arm's length to protect themselves from this anguish, and feared that she had become too attached to Riftan.

THE NEXT DAY, A NEW STEEL GATE WAS INSTALLED, sturdy enough to withstand blows from an ogre's hammer. Ruth's magical devices were mounted on either side of the gate, large ivory disks roughly the size of a pumpkin.

Maxi followed Riftan to the gate to watch as more of the devices were installed on the watchtowers. A red magic stone, like the one Ruth had shown her before, adorned the center of each ivory disk, and ancient inscriptions lined the edges.

"W-What is this m-made of?" Maxi asked as she ran a hand over the smooth surface of one of the devices.

"Basilisk bones," said Ruth.

Maxi drew her hand back in shock. "B-Bones?"

"Creatures of the Ayin Race—basilisks, wyverns, lizards, earth dragons—possess powerful defensive magic. Most protective devices are constructed using their bones."

Maxi studied the pale, polished disk. Knowing what they were made of caused the hairs on her neck to stand on end.

Ruth clicked his tongue. "No need to look so appalled. They're just bones. You eat meat, so this can't be your first time touching bones."

"B-But these are *m-monster* bones!"

Ruth snorted and turned his attention back to the device. He secured it to a stone pillar using clay, then walked through the gates. Maxi moved to follow him, but Riftan stopped her, pausing his orders to the guards.

"It's dangerous out there," he said to Maxi as the gates began to close.

"B-But Ruth …"

"Ruth is a high mage. He can protect himself. Just be patient and wait here."

Maxi nodded, and Riftan ordered a handful of sentries to protect her before proceeding up to the ramparts. When he motioned a signal to Ruth, a massive flame formed outside the walls and hurtled toward the gate with a roar.

The ground shook, and a magical barrier sprang from the earth, blocking the flames before they could connect with the gate. Maxi watched, stunned, and swallowed her startled scream. Villagers had come to watch and were similarly shocked. Many had stumbled backward and slumped on the ground.

One of the sentries guarding Maxi let out a whistle. "He's always loved a good spectacle."

Seeing how calm her escort was, Maxi realized that this sort of display must be completely ordinary to them. They had undoubtedly experienced far more frightening things.

"Excellent!" Riftan bellowed triumphantly. "It's working. Open the gates!"

At his command, the heavy steel gates swung open, and Ruth trudged in, covered in dirt.

"Was that really necessary?" Ruth asked.

"We have to show them that Anatol is impenetrable even when I'm away," Riftan said, slowly descending from the rampart. "This should dissuade anyone from even thinking of invading us."

"Well," Ruth said reluctantly. "If rumor spreads that Ana tol's defenses are impenetrable, merchants may be more inclined to do business here, which isn't a bad thing."

Testing the new magical devices was not the sole purpose of this demonstration. It was also for the people of Anatol. Riftan wanted to assure them that their home was safe. Maxi watched him exchange a few words with the gathered knights before he approached her.

"You should return to the castle."

"W-What about you?"

"I need to supervise the transfer of Rob Midahas and his men to the Livadonian envoy." Riftan turned back to the knights. "Ruth and

Hebaron, I want you to escort my wife back to the castle and begin preparations for the goblin raid."

Before Maxi could say anything else, Riftan departed with the rest of the knights, his cape fluttering behind him. She watched his retreating figure before mounting Rem. Ruth and Hebaron followed suit.

"So, we're off to the mountains again," Hebaron grumbled as he led the way. "And here I thought I could sleep in the comfort of my own bed for a while."

Ruth smirked. "Just a while ago, I heard you say your muscles were aching from inaction."

"Why don't *you* try sleeping out in the snow?"

"I'm afraid I must decline. That's a death sentence for a delicate sorcerer like myself."

Hebaron snorted. "Delicate? I don't know a single Remdragon Knight who has skin as thick as yours."

"That, Sir Hebaron, is only your opinion."

Maxi rolled her eyes, unable to tell if they were bantering or bickering.

When they reached the town square, Ruth suddenly slowed his horse. "Let's stop by the market."

Hebaron turned to him, irritated. "We can't stop just so you can go about your personal business. Come back on your own, when we don't have …" He trailed off, glancing furtively at Maxi.

Ruth sighed. "Must you continue to treat her ladyship as if she were a contagious boil?"

"Now, wait a minute! When did I—"

"You treat her like a persistent pest when you deign to notice her. Give it a rest."

Hebaron looked away, a sheepish twist to his mouth. Before he could retort, Ruth turned his horse to face Maxi.

"I just need to buy a few things before the merchants leave. Once winter arrives, they won't return for some time. And this would be a chance for you to see the market."

Maxi glanced hesitantly at Hebaron. The knight, as disgruntled as he was, eventually relented. Letting out a sigh, he turned his horse

in the direction of the market and Maxi quickly followed after them.

"W-What are you l-looking for?" she asked Ruth.

"Herbs and magic stones. I'm almost out, you see."

Despite the cold weather, the market was bustling. From pitched tents and temporary vending stalls, merchants sold nearly everything under the sun—animal hides and bones, coarse fabric and rustic ornaments, meat, bread, potatoes, and sacks of grain or acorns. The merchants' booming voices clamored in Maxi's ears, and she urged Rem closer to Ruth.

"Sorcerer! Oi!" Hebaron called out to him, but his thunderous voice was drowned by the noise of the market. "Slow down! Escorting someone through a crowd like this isn't easy."

Maxi looked nervously around them as they followed Ruth.

"Worry not, my lady," Hebaron said. "The chances of an attack here are slim."

"Th-That's not very r-reassuring."

"Anatol is quite secure. You'll only attract unwanted attention by behaving so warily."

Maxi tried to look calm but flinched at every unexpected sound from the crowd. Ruth shook his head at her before finally coming to a stop at a stall displaying strange plant roots, mysterious bottled powders, and thin twigs. Jumping off his horse, he began to inspect the items. Maxi and Hebaron dismounted as well.

"Are these all herbs?" Hebaron asked, craning his neck to peer at the items.

Ruth ignored him and beckoned to the youth sorting herbs inside the stall.

"I'll take twenty segal of each of these," he said. "How much will that cost?"

"It's one derham for ten segal," the youth answered. "These are rare herbs of high quality, so for twenty segal of each type, it'll cost forty derham."

"Do you accept payment in liram?"

"Of course. Let me get the scale."

Maxi watched as the youth meticulously weighed the dry herbs on a brass scale. As each was weighed and bundled, Ruth collected

them in a small pouch. He paid with four silver coins, and the young peddler placed these on the scale as well.

"W-Why is he w-weighing them?" Maxi asked in a whisper.

"He's confirming that they're real silver. Counterfeit coins have become common, and some scoundrels have even started shaving coins to make new ones."

"Th-They shave the c-coins?"

"Yes, they gather the dust to create new coins, which leaves the original coins weighing less. But my coins are as good as new, so there's nothing to worry about." Ruth reached into his purse and fished out a few more coins to show Maxi. The edges were crisp and polished.

Once the peddler was satisfied with the payment, he slipped the coins into his pocket and placed eight derham coins on the scale. After checking their weight just like the youth had, Ruth accepted them.

"Tightfisted as always," Hebaron scoffed.

Ruth remained unfazed. "I call it being meticulous."

He proceeded to the stall opposite the herb vendor and immediately began haggling over a large, fist-sized stone. The man selling it appeared to be a mercenary. He claimed to have nearly died trying to acquire the stone and would part with it for no less than fifteen liram. Ruth snorted at the price and insisted it was worth no more than ten. In the end, Ruth left with five magic stones, purchased at the lower price.

While he was busy, Maxi perused the other stalls. Browsing the tables, she saw beaded daggers, wooden animal figurines, embroidered belts, copper brooches, and colorful fabrics that had been braided into tassels.

Maxi pointed at one of the tassels. "W-What is this?"

But Ruth, haggling with another merchant several steps away, did not hear her. Embarrassed, Maxi turned to leave when Hebaron answered.

"They're charms that you can attach to sword belts," he said brusquely.

Maxi looked up in surprise. Hebaron leaned over her shoulder to examine the tassel she had pointed to.

"Many adventurers believe they grant the protection of the nymphs. You tie them here, like this." Hebaron pointed to the colorful braided tassel hanging from his own leather sword belt.

Maxi's eyes shifted uncertainly from the tassel to the knight's face. "I-I've never seen one b-before. R-Riftan doesn't w-wear one."

"He's too proud to place any faith in superstition. It's all hogwash to him." There was a hint of fondness in his blunt voice, and Maxi relaxed.

She gave the knight a small smile. "Th-That sounds like him."

"But who knows? If your ladyship were to give him one, he might wear it." Hebaron scratched the back of his head. "Why don't you pick one out?"

Maxi blinked, baffled and elated by his newly friendly behavior. "Aren't they e-expensive?"

"These little trinkets?"

Maxi blushed, afraid she appeared foolish. When she chose a short tassel woven into a red, green, and orange braid, Hebaron handed the merchant a coin without asking the price.

"Keep the change," he said.

The merchant looked surprised by the knight's generosity. How much had Hebaron overpaid?

"I-I will c-compensate you w-when we r-return to the castle," Maxi said as she carefully tucked the tassel away.

"That won't be necessary. I'm no miser, unlike a certain sorcerer we know." With a shrug, Hebaron began walking toward Ruth.

Maxi wanted to thank him properly for his kind gesture, but when they reached Ruth's side, Hebaron had reverted to ignoring her. He grumbled at Ruth for dawdling, and the sorcerer stuffed his purchases into a sack.

"Yes, yes. We can go," Ruth said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

They led their horses out of the market, where it was less crowded, and mounted them. As they rode back to Calypse Castle,

Maxi was able to gallop through the winding, hilly paths with ease, but they slowed to a canter when they reached the moat.

"Who will be participating in the raid this time?" Ruth asked Hebaron.

The knight stroked his chin, thoughtfully. "Gabel and I, along with some of the squires. It's about time they got some real experience."

"Then we'll finally be able to enjoy some peace and quiet at the castle."

Hebaron laughed. "I'll ask the commander to bring you along."

"I'm sure he would refuse. It's best that I remain here in case of a crisis."

Hebaron let out a long sigh. "Aye, you're right. Enjoy the peace while it lasts, then. Before you know it, we'll be back to liven things up again."

With that, the knight spurred his horse forward and galloped ahead, leaving Maxi and Ruth behind. Ruth simply shrugged and continued at a slower pace alongside Maxi.

She found herself feeling envious of the camaraderie in their banter. Riftan, too, was most at ease when he was in the company of the other knights. Though they quarreled at times, it always seemed to be in good humor. She found their bonds captivating; they were so unlike her relationship with her father and sister.

Ruth turned to her as they entered the castle. "If you'll excuse me, my lady," he said, "I'll be off to get some much-needed rest. I've been living like a cave bat while working to complete those accursed magical devices. Thank you again for your assistance. I wouldn't have been able to finish them so quickly otherwise."

"I-I am happy t-to be of help."

Ruth grinned. "Then I'll be sure to provide you with another opportunity soon."

Maxi tried to frown, but she found herself smiling instead. She longed to be accepted into the company of Ruth and the knights. What would it feel like to truly belong?

THE NEXT DAY, RIFTAN ROSE BEFORE DAWN. THE SHIFTING of the sheets as he got out of bed woke Maxi, and she rubbed her eyes drowsily as she

propped herself up on one arm. Seeing her rise, Riftan chuckled and kissed her cheek.

"Go back to bed," he said. "No need for you to wake up too."

"I-I've s-slept enough."

"I thought I kept you up quite late last night," Riftan teased her, his hand drifting to her exposed breast.

Maxi blushed and quickly pulled the blanket over herself.

Riftan laughed again and stroked her tousled hair. "Don't be stubborn. Go back to sleep."

"I-I want t-to get up." Maxi wriggled free of him and rose with the blanket wrapped around her.

Riftan shrugged and began to dress, preparing for his departure on the goblin raid.

Maxi shuffled to the hearth and fed the fire absentmindedly while, out of the corner of her eye, she watched Riftan shave and wash his face in the basin. Using a pair of bellows, she urged the dwindling flames into a bright roar, lighting the room with an orange glow.

After briefly warming herself, she washed her face and body with a wet towel, then selected undergarments and a chemise from her wardrobe and pulled them on. Riftan did not like having servants around while he dressed, so Maxi had grown accustomed to dressing herself. Over her chemise, she donned a thick woolen dress and then pulled on stockings that reached her thighs. Once dressed, she sat down in front of the mirror to comb her hair.

Riftan walked up behind her, dressed in a navy-blue tunic and thick leather trousers. "Give me the comb."

Maxi shook her head. "I-I can c-comb my own h-hair."

"Just humor me. I won't see you for the next few days."

Maxi acquiesced, though she did not understand his fascination with her unruly hair. The comb looked small in his calloused hand and, despite his size and strength, he took great care not to pull or tug as he brushed. After gently untangling her hair, he deftly braided it into a four-strand plait.

"I'm becoming rather skilled at this, don't you think?" Riftan said, admiring his handiwork.

Maxi turned and impulsively planted a kiss on his chin. Riftan froze, and she wondered why. He had no qualms about showering her with kisses whenever he pleased, but he became so bewildered if she took the initiative.

"Th-That k-kiss was to say th-thank you," she said, trying to hide her blushing.

Riftan sighed bitterly. "I am loath to leave. Don't make it more difficult for me."

"Th-That wasn't m-my intention."

He abruptly pulled her into an embrace, and she wrapped her arms around his waist.

"Stop doing that," Riftan groaned, burying his face into her neck.

"W-What do you m-mean?"

"I won't have time to wash myself if we make love again." Riftan's gaze slid longingly to the bed.

Maxi's cheeks burned and she pushed Riftan away. When he reluctantly released her, she retreated to the other side of the room and wrapped her shawl tightly around herself like a shield.

Riftan sighed and made his way to the armor stand. "We'll pick up where we left off when I return."

Maxi watched from a safe distance as he put on his breastplate, a set of spaulders engraved with dragons, greaves, and cuisses. After securing the fauld and tassets, he encased his gloved hands in silver gauntlets.

He was dashing, and Maxi could not help but admire him. When he strapped on his leather belt, she suddenly remembered the colorful tassel she had bought at the market and quickly rummaged through drawers searching for it.

"R-Riftan …"

He turned to her while fastening his sword to his belt. After a moment of hesitation, Maxi held out the tassel.

"I b-bought this at the m-market yesterday," she said. "On our w-way back to the castle. Sir Hebaron told me that a-attaching this to a sword b-belt protects the w-wearer. A blessing f-from the n-nymphs."

Riftan stared blankly at the tassel in her outstretched hand.

"S-Sir Hebaron w-w-was the one who p-paid for it, b-but I p-picked it out. I-If it's a-all right w-w-with you …" Her voice faltered when he made no move to take the tassel.

Maybe Sir Hebaron was right and Riftan really did consider such trinkets useless. She slowly lowered her hand, hoping to mask her disappointment with words.

"Y-You don't have to take it i-if y-y-y—if it doesn't p-please y-you."

As she turned to put the tassel back in its drawer, Riftan grabbed her arm.

"Give it here," he said, snatching the tassel from her hand and fumbling with the strings as he tied it to his belt. The brightly colored ornament clashed absurdly with the blue of his tunic, and the sight of it made Maxi lament her unrefined taste.

"Thank you." Riftan kissed her forehead. "I will treasure it."

Despite his kind words, he immediately turned away from her again. His aloofness disappointed Maxi until she noticed him smiling to himself.

Riftan draped his cloak over his shoulders and even put a hand to his face, rubbing his chin as if to conceal his smile. But the flush that crept up to the tips of his ears did not escape Maxi's notice. He was genuinely happy, and the realization made her heart swell with pride.

She suddenly felt angry with herself. It was a paltry gift, and one she had only thought to buy because of Sir Hebaron's suggestion. Though she did not have the means to buy Riftan gifts as expensive as the ones he had given her, she still could have bought him more than a cheap trinket. Seeing him delight over a gift she had chosen on a whim—one bought on someone else's coin and suggestion—made it all the more frustrating.

"I'll be back before you know it," Riftan said, pulling Maxi close for a final embrace.

She burrowed her face against his chest and held back tears as she resolved to give him everything she could.

RIFTAN LEFT FOR THE RAID WITH THREE KNIGHTS, SIX soldiers, and three squires in his company. Though Maxi worried they were too few in

number, Ruth assured her that smaller raids like this one typically called for a deployment of eight to fifteen men.

From the ramparts, Maxi watched the men's figures disappear into the distance. When she could no longer see them, she made her way to the weaving room to confirm that her order of fabrics had arrived. Inside the spacious room, maidservants were busy sewing winter garments, and beyond their spinning wheels and looms, Maxi found a tall pile of the high-quality woolen fabric she had ordered.

With her task complete, Maxi watched the maidservants' work with interest. Thick fabric was spread across an expan sive table, where they traced patterns, cut pieces, and stuffed wool between two layers before sewing them closed. They worked by candlelight and the light of the fire, despite the daylight hour. Now that the weather had grown cold, most of the shutters were kept closed for insulation and only small slivers of sunlight seeped into the room. But even in the dim, the maidservants worked nimbly. Maxi could not help but admire their dexterity.

"W-When will e-everything be ready?" Maxi asked.

Ludis knitted her brows as she inspected the newly arrived fabrics. "Everything should be ready in three or four days' time, my lady. The completed garments have already been distributed, and the men have agreed to share them until the rest are finished."

Reassured, Maxi left the weaving room. After dark, there was something sinister about Calypse Castle that Maxi had never noticed before. Since her arrival, it had bustled with activity—first with the renovations, then with the winter preparations. Now that both were nearly completed, she found the stillness unsettling. After inspecting the kitchen, stables, and annex with Ludis, Maxi returned to her room for the evening.

Melancholy crept in as she leafed through a book at her desk. Now that the castle was nearly prepared for winter, there was little left for her to do. She stared out the window, wondering whether the days had always felt so long. Less than a day had passed since Riftan's departure, but she was already lonely. She had always been alone in the past, so the feeling surprised her and made her gloomy mood more painful.

"You look tired, my lady," Ludis said tentatively. "Would you care for some tea?"

Maxi looked up, startled out of her dark reverie. For the lady of the castle to mope in her husband's absence was undignified, so she smiled brightly and nodded.

A strong gust of wind shook the windows and worry gnawed at Maxi again. She watched bare branches shake violently outside the window while the eerie cries of migrating birds echoed in the distance.

Winter had arrived in Anatol.

THE FIRST SNOW CAME TWO DAYS LATER. MAXI PEERED through her window and down into the garden, where a layer of white covered the ground like spilled flour. Her gaze shifted to the distant mountains, her concern for Riftan growing as the temperature dropped.

Ludis sighed from a nearby chair and put down her sewing. "This winter feels harsher than usual, my lady. It's come early and frightfully cold."

"I r-remember you telling me that w-winters here never got t-too cold."

"Yes," Ludis said, looking agitated. "Anatol is located within a basin, so winters here are milder than most other places on the continent. But this winter seems different. A thin layer of ice has already formed on the surface of the well."

"I-Is there enough firewood t-to last us the winter?"

"We've prepared more than usual," Ludis said with a reassuring smile.

Maxi smiled back and sat by the hearth to thaw her icy hands. Since it had become so cold, a stillness had fallen over Calypse Castle, as if all its residents had gone into hibernation.

Servants who ordinarily hurried about now huddled in front of the braziers, and few merchants braved the elements to sell their wares in Anatol. The deathly chill had turned the gardens into a desolate wasteland, and no one went for walks anymore. Maxi usually preferred peace and quiet, but the sudden change was dispiriting even to her.

"Shall I serve lunch, my lady?" Ludis asked brightly, chasing away Maxi's despondent mood.

"W-What's for lunch?"

"The cook has prepared cream stew with peas, smoked sausages, and pumpkin pie with treacle and cinnamon."

Maxi's mouth watered, and her hunger quickly overcame her melancholy. Seeing her perk up at the mention of food, Ludis carefully folded the garment she was mending and left the room.

While she waited, Maxi opened the poetry book she had taken from the library, but she barely read two pages before a loud rapping sounded at the door. Expecting Ludis, Maxi closed the book again and called for the maidservant to enter, but it was Rodrigo and Ruth who stepped into the room.

"My sincerest apologies for interrupting your rest, my lady," Rodrigo said as they entered. "But the sorcerer has an urgent matter to discuss with you."

Maxi rose from her seat. "I-Is something wrong?"

Ruth sighed. "Last night, monsters climbed over the walls. The sentries and knights on duty at the time were able to defeat them, but many were wounded in the process and assistance is needed to tend to them all. Could you spare a few servants to help?"

The blood drained from Maxi's face. Just days after Riftan's departure, and Anatol was already faced with a crisis.

"This is nothing unusual for this time of year," Ruth explained. "With winter comes a scarcity of food, and it's no different for the monsters. But they've never managed to infiltrate our walls before. As you can imagine, the sentries were taken by surprise."

Ruth's calm demeanor helped Maxi regain her composure.

"H-How many servants do they n-need?"

"At least a dozen. And ample supplies of clean cloth, wooden splints, and medicinal herbs, along with a cauldron to brew the herbs in, a pail, brass bowls, needle and thread, and basic provisions. The wounded are situated on the outskirts of the estate, which has made it difficult for them to procure these items from the village."

After listening to Ruth's hurried instructions, Maxi turned to look at Rodrigo.

"I'll have everything prepared at once, my lady," the steward said with a quick nod.

"And s-send word to the ch-church. A-Ask them—"

"There aren't any clerics in Anatol capable of divine magic," Ruth interrupted. "Anatol has been isolated for a long time, and clerics were only sent here after Sir Riftan rose to prominence. The central church would never spare a hierarch for such a rural region."

Maxi grew anxious. If there were no clerics capable of performing divine magic, that left only Ruth to perform healing magic. If something worse happened, and more people were seriously injured, what then?

Ruth gently poked the worried crease between Maxi's brows. "Now is not the time to fret, my lady. You must summon the servants, and I will prepare the herbs."

"I-I understand."

His news delivered, Ruth spun around and left the room. Maxi threw on a thick cloak and set about ringing the bell to summon the servants to the great hall. She could not leave the castle's regular chores neglected, so she chose ten strong young men and five maidservants to accompany her. After giving them their instructions, Maxi rushed to the training grounds, pulling her hood over her head to block the wind.

At the training ground, servants were already loading three wagons with the provisions she had requested. Maxi checked to ensure nothing was missed or forgotten, and soon they all climbed into a carriage headed for the castle outskirts and the injured sentries.

Just as they were about to depart, Ruth appeared with a weighty sack of herbs slung over his shoulder. He placed it on top of the other provisions in one of the wagons and walked toward the carriage. Maxi shifted to make room for him, and Ruth clambered in beside her.

"You're joining us, my lady?" he asked, his brows raised in surprise.

A nervous prickle crept up Maxi's spine. She had assumed that it was her duty to accompany them.

"W-Would I be in the w-way?"

"Not at all. I just didn't expect you to come along. Your assistance would be helpful." Ruth smiled at her and closed the carriage door.

With the passenger carriage leading, the three wagons passed through the castle gates. After crossing the drawbridge, the carriage began to rattle violently when they turned down a steep hill. Maxi gripped her seat, certain they might topple over as the carriage lurched forward.

"No need to worry, my lady," Ruth said, slowly shaking his head. "The wheels are equipped with a device that prevents the carriage from flipping."

Realizing that she had appeared ignorant in front of the servants, Maxi blushed and released her grip.

They rode on, tilting precariously in the carriage until they reached the bottom of the hill and turned eastward. Through the window, naked trees rolled by as they continued along a secluded forest path. The leafless branches traced ghostly shadows like spiderwebs across the frost-covered ground, and Maxi focused on the patterns as she tried to slow her breathing and calm her pounding heart.

Eventually, the carriage came to a stop.

"We've arrived," Ruth said and jumped out of the carriage.

Maxi climbed out after him and froze at the sight awaiting her. In a wide-open clearing, littered among the tree stumps, the enormous carcasses of black-furred werewolves were stacked in piles.

"So they were werewolves," Ruth said, examining one of the dead beasts. "That explains why the sentries were caught unaware. I'll need to devise measures to prevent this from happening again."

Maxi averted her eyes from the carnage and swallowed against the urge to vomit. She did not want to embarrass herself that way for a second time.

"Mage Ruth!"

A knight strode toward them, leaving the group that was setting up camp by a few dilapidated cottages nestled along the edge of the clearing.

"Sir Ursuline injured his shoulder during the skirmish," the young knight said. "Could you tend to him?"

"Sir Ursuline was wounded?" Ruth asked, almost sounding like he did not believe the knight.

The young knight sighed. "There was heavy fog, so we didn't see his distress signal right away. Sir Ursuline had to hold the beasts back on his own for some time before the rest of us arrived."

"Heavens! Where is he now?"

"This way," said the knight as he led Ruth away.

Maxi listened silently, then watched as the two men walked away. She found herself at a loss, unsure of what to do. After instructing the servants to unload the provisions, she hurried after Ruth.

Inside the cottage that Ruth and the young knight had entered, Maxi found rows of injured men lain out on the floor. As she scanned the dingy room, looking for Ruth, her eyes settled on the sentry lying closest to her; his injuries were gruesome.

The man's arm was mangled and twisted at an unnatural angle, and his face was badly burned. He grimaced in pain and his entire body was covered in blood and dirt, emitting a foul smell.

Maxi recoiled from his frightening state and backed away. She had intended to help, but she knew nothing about tending to the wounded. Panicking, she broke into a cold sweat, and stood there uselessly until Ruth called to her.

"My lady! Please tell the servants to start boiling water. We'll need a lot of it!"

With a clear task to do, Maxi was able pull herself together. She hurried back to the wagons to pass on Ruth's instructions to the servants, who hastily lit a fire and collected fresh spring water in a large cauldron. Meanwhile, Ruth had finished treating Sir Ursuline and came outside in search of Maxi.

"Do you have any experience treating injuries?" he asked her as he retrieved the medicinal herbs from one of the wagons.

Maxi shook her head. This was not the time to worry about appearing incompetent.

Ruth nodded as if he had expected her answer. He produced several small pouches from his provision of medicinal herbs.

"These contain coagulating powder," he said as he handed the pouches to her. "It will stop the bleeding. But first, you must carefully cut off any clothing covering the injury and wash the wound with clean water. Then sprinkle this powder onto the wound and compress it with a clean cloth until the bleeding stops."

"W-Wouldn't it be f-faster to use magic?"

"I can't treat all these men alone. I can heal ten of the most critically injured, but the rest will have to be treated without magic."

"I-I understand," Maxi said, hiding her apprehension.

There was no time to hesitate, so she took the pouches from Ruth and opened them with trembling hands to check their contents. As she repeated Ruth's instructions silently to herself, he handed her yet another pouch.

"These dried leaves are detoxicants," he said. "If you notice anyone with a fever or wounds with purple swelling, have them swallow one of these. If the patient is unconscious, please call me over."

"I-I … I-I understand."

"You don't need to be so nervous, my lady. Many of the servants have experience treating injuries, so they'll know what to do once they're given instructions."

Ruth took the remaining herbs and returned to the cottage, leaving Maxi with the servants. After delivering Ruth's instructions with some difficulty, she watched as the servants swiftly divided herbs, linens, and bowls among themselves and went inside.

Maxi followed them, though she lingered by the door, still unsure of herself. As the servants got to work cleaning and bandaging wounds with practiced hands, Maxi surveyed the injured men. Some of them were fortunate to have escaped with only minor injuries, but most were in serious condition.

In this cottage alone, Maxi counted seven sentries among the wounded, as well as a dozen civilian men—loggers by their humble garb. Combined with the men in the other cottages, the casualties must have numbered in the forties. The sheer number filled her with dread.

Repressing the urge to flee, she knelt down to the sentry closest to her. The man was barely conscious and looked to be one of the older ones. After hesitating for a breath, Maxi peeled off the blanket covering his body.

The sentry's right thigh was covered in a thick layer of dark blood, probably torn apart by one of the werewolves lying dead outside. Fighting another wave of nausea, Maxi used a pair of scissors to cut open his tattered trousers. When a faint groan escaped his lips, she froze, afraid that she had caused him greater pain. She quickly withdrew her hands and inhaled a few slow breaths to calm herself. Then she resumed cutting his trousers.

The wound beneath was stomach-churning. Lumps of dark, sticky blood surrounded a gaping wound where his flesh had been shredded and torn. Swallowing against her unsettled insides, Maxi soaked a piece of linen in water and cleaned the area as Ruth had instructed.

Every time the cloth touched his flesh, the sentry writhed in agony, forcing Maxi to work slowly. When she finally finished, she tossed aside the blood-soaked linen and sprinkled Ruth's coagulating powder on the man's wound. Her hands shook clumsily as she wrapped a strip of cloth around his leg to compress the bleeding. With stiff shoulders and sweat beading along her spine, Maxi sat back on her heels and anxiously looked over her work.

Is this enough?

It would have to be. There were still so many more to tend to. As she stood up, Maxi comforted herself with the fact that she had followed all of Ruth's instructions. There was nothing more she could do; the sentry would be all right for now, at least.

With faltering steps, she walked over to the next patient, bracing herself to treat one gruesome injury after another. One man had a bone sticking out of his arm, while another's face was covered in blood that seeped from a head injury. Maxi went to the latter first and gingerly inspected his wound. Her stomach turned as blood coated her hands, slippery and warm, but she willed herself to endure it. She had come to help.

Once again, she cleaned the wound, sprinkled it with the coagulant, and dressed it. Though she was more confident this time, she could not steady her shaking hands no matter how hard she tried. The man's bleeding stopped and, with a sigh of relief, Maxi turned to see how the other servants were faring. The sight of everyone using the same method was reassuring, and it inspired her to continue her work, but as she moved on to another patient, a hand grabbed her shoulder.

"It's best not to touch him, my lady," Ruth said from behind her. "We need to realign his bones first."

Maxi turned and was taken aback by how gaunt Ruth looked. His complexion was noticeably paler, perhaps from the strain of healing so many people. With a sigh, Ruth crouched down next to the sentry and gingerly raised the man's broken arm.

"My lady, would you be so kind as to hold down his shoulder?"

Glancing first at the unconscious man's face, Maxi nodded and pressed down on his shoulder with both hands. Once Maxi was restraining the man, Ruth swiftly pulled on his bent arm to realign the broken bones. The sentry's eyes flew open, and he thrashed with such force that he almost knocked Maxi over.

"My lady!" Ruth said, gritting his teeth as he struggled against the man's flailing. "You must hold him down!"

After regaining her balance, Maxi pushed down on the man's shoulder once more, holding more firmly this time. After the man's bones were set properly, Ruth placed a hand over the bleeding wound and shrouded it in pale light.

As Maxi watched, she recalled the healing magic the clerics performed on her whenever her father's wrath had turned violent. It was cold and bitter, their magic like burning ice against her skin. But the magic Ruth used now seemed gentle and warm, like spring sunlight. With an outstretched hand, Maxi touched the healing aura and, just like when she had touched the barren oak tree by the pavilion, an intoxicating warmth seeped into her being.

Ruth finished examining the sentry's arm and lowered it back to the man's side. "Werewolf claws and teeth contain venom, so administer some detoxicant once he wakes. In his case, it's best if

you boil the medicinal herbs we brought and have him drink the concoction."

Maxi stood up, shaking off the strange sensation left behind by Ruth's healing magic. "I-I'll ask the s-servants to boil some i-immediately."

"Thank you." Ruth lowered himself onto a straw bed to catch his breath. He looked exhausted.

Maxi knew that healing magic consumed a great deal of energy, so she left him to rest and went to tell the servants to begin boiling the detoxicant herbs. When she stepped outside to gather firewood for the brazier, she noticed a group of sentries and knights burning werewolf carcasses in the clearing. It was a horrific sight. The smell of burning flesh and hair invaded Maxi's nose, and bile rose in her throat at the acrid stench.

Dropping the firewood into the snow, she ran into the woods. Her stomach twisted painfully and she crouched against a tree, heaving up watery bile that splattered onto the roots. Tears stung her eyes, and she belittled her own weakness.

As Maxi gulped in chilled air to calm her nausea, a low voice addressed her from behind.

"You there, are you all right?"

Startled, Maxi turned her head. A young sandy-haired knight stood a few steps away, regarding her with concern. The moment he recognized her, his eyes went wide and he rushed to her side.

"What are you doing here, my lady?"

Embarrassed, Maxi quickly wiped her mouth on her sleeve and stood a little straighter. "I-I was g-gathering firewood …" She left the sentence unfinished, refusing to admit that she had been sick.

"This is no place for you to be, my lady. You should return to the castle. I'll have someone escort you." Without waiting for a response, the knight spun around and called for a nearby sentry.

Flustered, Maxi tried to stop him. "Th-That w-w-won't be n-necessary! You d-d-d—you n-need not mind—"

"How can we not worry when you're wandering these treacherous woods alone? There's no need for you to be here." The young knight

turned back to the sentries. “You there! Prepare the carriage. Lady Calypse is returning to the castle.”

Incensed, Maxi strode ahead of the young knight and blocked his path. “As the L-Lady of Anatol,” she said, glaring up at him despite her trembling nerves, “it is my d-d-duty to o-offer assistance to th-those who are injured! I-It is n-n-not your p-p-place to t-tell me t-to leave.”

She had intended to sound dignified, but her voice fal tered, and she stumbled over her words more than usual. Her ears burned with an unbearable but familiar shame. Discouraged, she bit her lip and her gaze flicked nervously to look at the ground before her feet.

“Y-You need not m-mind me,” she added, more meekly. “G-Go back t-to what y-you were doing.”

Before the knight could protest, Maxi picked up her dropped firewood and hurried back to the cottages. Heart racing, she tossed some of the wood into the dying fire and nervously eyed the door, worried the knight would come after her. He must think her an arrogant, stuttering fool.

Eventually, she decided it did not matter what he thought. The knights already despised her, so it would make little difference if their dislike worsened. With slumped shoulders, she placed the remaining firewood next to the brazier before approaching Ruth.

“A-Are you f-feeling better, Ruth?”

He looked up from treating a logger’s broken ankle and sighed. “I’ve nearly exhausted my magic. I won’t be able to use it for at least half a day after this. I’ve tended to those in critical condition, but the rest will have to be treated without magic for now.”

“Sh-Should we call f-for a healer f-from the village?”

“There is only one healer in Anatol who is capable enough, but it wouldn’t be right to ask him to leave his own patients to help us. We can send our injured to him instead.”

Ruth stood up and stroked his chin, trying to determine who among the remaining wounded could travel safely. “The healer can’t take all of these men, so we’ll send those poisoned by werewolf venom and treat the rest ourselves.”

Maxi swallowed hard. “W-What can I d-do?”

"Compress swollen wounds with warm cloths, splinter broken bones, and stitch open wounds."

"S-Stitch …?" Maxi became lightheaded with the thought.

"Don't worry." Ruth sighed. "I will do the sewing. Your ladyship need only assist."

"A-All right."

"But first, we must send those with high fevers to the healer."

With those words, Ruth strode out of the cottage. After taking a moment to settle her nerves, Maxi followed him.

FIFTEEN FEVER-STRICKEN MEN WERE IDENTIFIED AND carried to the wagons for the journey to the village healer. Those who had been treated by Ruth were given porridge and detoxicants, and once they recovered their strength, they set about repairing the drafty cottages.

There were eight cottages, usually used by the loggers, and four of them had damaged walls. With a cold snap expected after sunset, the injured men would freeze if the walls were left unrepaired. As Ruth gave her new instructions, Maxi struggled to hear him over the clamorous noise of men sawing timber and hammering at walls.

"Soak a clean cloth in strong liquor and dab it onto the wounds. This reduces the chance of infection, though how it works is a bit of a mystery."

"I-Is it b-because of something in the l-liquor?"

"It's possible. Liquor never goes bad," Ruth said as he threaded a needle. "It is a method used by the healers in the south. According to them, a wound must be kept clean, and bleeding should be avoided at all costs. A patient's body shouldn't be allowed to become too cold or too hot."

Ruth turned his attention to an injured man with a painful-looking gash across his back and continued to talk as he worked. "I admit that I thought this southern method was gibberish at first, but it has proven more effective than dog urine and leeches, or simply cauterizing the wound. It's still inferior to magic but is incredibly useful in situations like this."

As Ruth began to stitch the open wound closed, Maxi flinched as if it were pricking her own flesh.

"Making a knot after each stitch makes it easier to remove the thread once the wound has healed," Ruth explained. "Would you like to give it a try?"

Maxi shook her head vigorously. She did not want to be seen as weak, but she did not have the stomach to pierce another's skin with a needle and sew him together like cloth.

"It's no different than sewing leather shoes." Ruth made another stitch.

The sentry whimpered, but the sound was muffled in his bed of straw. Paying him no mind, Ruth continued stitching the wound. Whenever blood oozed from the gash, Maxi used a liquor-soaked cloth to wipe it clean, and she used heated scissors to snip the thread after each knot Ruth made.

"The final step is to apply a salve and dress the wound. This helps it heal faster."

Ruth finished the last stitch and trimmed the thread. As he applied a generous smear of sticky salve over the wound, the sentry howled in pain.

"M-Mage Ruth," he cried. "Can't you just heal it with magic? Whatever that is, it burns!"

"I've exhausted my magic, I'm afraid."

The sentry groaned in response.

"Bear it for just a while longer. I'm almost done," Ruth said as he tightly wrapped the wound in cloth. When he finished, he poured a portion of the salve into a small vial and gave it to the sentry. "Apply this salve and redress the wound every two days. It should be healed in ten days' time."

Maxi packed up the tools and followed Ruth to the next patient. While he stitched wounds closed, Maxi gave the injured men sips of detoxicant, cut up strips of cloth, and soaked Ruth's needle and thread in strong liquor. Though it was her first time performing such tasks, Ruth's calm direction helped her remain collected. When he realigned broken bones, Maxi tied the splint; when she saw an ankle swelled like a pig's bladder, she compressed it with a warm cloth.

By the time the last of the patients was treated, night had fallen. Bone-tired, Maxi sank to her knees and warmed her chilled hands by

the brazier.

Wearied by the prospect of spending the night in this bleak place, Maxi wondered if she would be able to return to the castle that night or if she would need to wait until morning. She was still absorbed in thought when a wooden bowl of steaming soup was thrust in front of her.

"Please have some, my lady."

Startled, Maxi looked up. It was the young knight who had tried to send her back to the castle earlier.

"It's rabbit stew," he said and nudged the bowl toward her again. "It doesn't compare to what they cook up in the castle, but it's edible."

Maxi reluctantly accepted the bowl, feeling awkward in front of the knight. But she hadn't eaten since breakfast and was famished, so she eagerly brought a spoonful of the warm stew to her mouth.

"Th-Thank you."

"My pleasure. And about earlier …"

Maxi froze, dreading his next words. But to her surprise, he bowed his head shamefully.

"I beg your forgiveness, my lady," the young knight said. "It was not my place to say such things."

Maxi stared at him, her spoon still in her mouth. She had not expected him to apologize.

"I-It's all right," she said, quickly putting down her bowl. "I sh-shouldn't have b-been so short-tempered. I-I apologize."

"No, my lady. It was I who offended you. There's no need for you to apologize."

"Th-Thank you …" Blushing, Maxi relaxed.

The knight appeared hesitant, unsure of what to say next, and they remained locked in an uncomfortable silence until Ruth returned.

He raised an eyebrow at the knight. "Is something wrong, Sir Elliot?"

"No, I was … apologizing to her ladyship for offending her."

Ruth looked surprised, but he did not press the knight further. Instead, he sighed loudly and sat by the brazier to warm his hands.

"The knights we sent to patrol the walls have returned," Ruth said. "It seems no monsters are lurking nearby. So I think it's time for you to return to the castle, my lady."

"W-What about you, R-Ruth?"

"I'm afraid I must spend the night here. Though we have stabilized their condition, some of the men might develop fevers as the night progresses. And once I've recovered my magic, I'll be able to fully heal a few more people."

Maxi hesitated briefly, conflicted. Though she was thoroughly drained and longed to sleep in her own bed, it did not seem right to return to the comfort of the castle while Ruth and the others remained here.

"P-Perhaps I should s-stay and—"

"You have done enough, I assure you."

Maxi's face hardened, and she wondered if Ruth found her presence a nuisance. As if he sensed her unease, Ruth smiled softly.

"If Sir Riftan finds out that you spent the night in this dilapidated cottage," he said, "there will be hell to pay. I've already asked the knights to escort you back, so please get some rest. You don't need to worry about us. In fact, we'll sleep better knowing you're out of harm's way."

"Allow me to escort you, my lady," said Sir Elliot.

Maxi nodded, unable to protest further. If she was honest, she would be glad not to spend the night in the forest, surrounded by the stench of burning carcasses and the winter's chill.

With half-feigned reluctance, she climbed into the carriage with two servants in tow. When Sir Elliot arrived mounted on his horse, he signaled to the carriage driver, and together they departed. As the carriage rattled along the forest path, Maxi breathed a sigh of relief. Fatigue soon took over and, hugging her knees to her chest, she dozed off like a cat in front of the fireplace. In her twenty-two years of life, this day had been the most exhausting.

ONCE SHE ARRIVED AT THE CASTLE, MAXI THREW OFF her bloodstained clothes, took a bath, and then immediately climbed into bed. When she awoke the next morning, her whole body ached. Groaning, she

rolled from one side to the other in an attempt to get comfortable again.

"Are you all right, my lady?" Ludis asked when she entered the room with some firewood.

Maxi nodded, forcing a smile, and crawled out of bed. Seeing her discomfort, Ludis swiftly summoned the other maidservants to prepare a warm bath. Maxi soaked until her muscles loosened, then dressed in a soft cotton chemise and a thick woolen dress.

"Why don't you rest in your room today, my lady?" Ludis said as she dried Maxi's hair with a towel and began to gently comb it. "It's a cold wintry day outside."

"I-I want t-to spend some t-time in the library. Th-There's a book I'd l-like to read."

"Then I'll see to it that a fire is lit in the library immediately. It hasn't been used since the sorcerer left yesterday morning, so it's quite cold in there."

After finishing with Maxi's hair, Ludis left the room to prepare the library for her. A maidservant brought Maxi breakfast, and she ate her fill of the creamy barley porridge before draping a thick robe around her shoulders and heading to the library. The large room was already warm when she arrived.

Maxi threw the curtains open to let light in, then began browsing the bookshelves. She searched for a particular book, but it proved more difficult to locate than she had an ticipated. Pulling out book after book, she checked their contents only to return them to their place, disappointed.

Should I wait and ask Ruth when he returns?

Maxi sank to the floor, defeated, after hours of combing through the library shelves. Just as she resolved to give up and ask Ruth, she noticed a messy pile of books stacked on the desk, and in that stack she recognized the book she had been looking for.

Smiling, Maxi stood and retrieved the book from the stack. It was an illustrated apothecary's reference of age-old remedies and medicinal herbs. The lands surrounding Anatol were filled with monsters, so it was likely that yesterday's events could occur again.

Maxi was determined to prepare herself by studying the art of healing.

Taking a seat near the window, Maxi began reading by the pale winter sunlight. The book was difficult to understand, its language convoluted and obscure. The illustrations had faded, and some of the remedies seemed dubious at best—sprinkling ash on bruises or soaking hair with raw eggs to cure fevers did not seem like reliable methods. After flipping through the book's contents, Maxi sighed and closed it, discouraged.

I'd feel better if Ruth wasn't the only one capable of healing magic ….

Maybe she could ask Riftan to hire another mage, or they could request the central church to send hierarchs to Anatol. But mages were highly sought after by the nobles, who fiercely wielded their power and money to recruit the best sorcerers into their service. Ruth had already told her that the central church in Osiriya would never waste a hierarch by sending them to a remote place like Anatol.

After a moment of deliberation, Maxi decided to continue her search. But even after scouring the library for an entire afternoon, she was unable to find anything useful. She returned to her room frustrated.

Ludis served her a lunch of crisply grilled goose meat, crepe with caramelized apples, and savory pumpkin soup. Maxi barely touched the food, engrossed in another book she got from the library. She doubted her efforts would bear any fruit, but she could not just do nothing.

Maxi stared into the fire, her mind wandering anxiously. Riftan liked her now, but there was no guarantee his affection would continue forever. The moment he realized she was not the charming duke's daughter he believed her to be, his attachment to her could disappear like a mirage.

Maxi needed to become indispensable, she needed to be valuable for more reasons than just her noble lineage. If she could be useful to Riftan in some way, even if it was small, he might allow her to

remain by his side even after he grew tired of her. Sighing, Maxi stopped frantically leafing through the book.

After staring at the cover for a moment, Maxi curled up in her chair and buried her face in her knees. These moments of self-awareness overwhelmed her. She could see her distorted thoughts as in a mirror, and her mind became a tumultuous storm of desperate contradictions. She wished for Riftan to hold her in his arms, even as she plotted to make herself worth keeping. Maxi had lived a life of loneliness, but in these moments her solitude consumed her.

THE NEXT DAY, MAXI DISCOVERED A BOOK OF ANCIENT remedies tucked away in a corner of the library and spent the day reading the faded pages. It was written in the ancient tongue, but Maxi had no trouble reading it until she began to encounter words she didn't know. Eventually, unfamiliar words were appearing so frequently that it became difficult to understand full passages.

As she read, Maxi carefully wrote a list of the words she did not know on a piece of parchment. Most of them seemed to be antiquated terms for body parts or archaic tools used for treatment. She searched for books on each of these subjects, and before long, gathered an enormous stack on the desk.

Quill in hand, Maxi scrunched her nose as she reviewed her growing list of terms. She frantically read anything that seemed even tangentially related to healing, but after hours of study, she still only understood half of the material. Taking a deep breath, Maxi sighed and ran a hand through her hair, uncertain that she would be able to learn anything substantial this way. When the door to the library swung open, Maxi turned, happy for the interruption.

"R-Ruth!" she said as the sorcerer strode into the room. "W-When did you r-return? Did you m-manage to t-treat everyone?"

"I returned last night," Ruth said flatly. "And yes, everyone has been tended to." He trudged over to his usual chair and was surprised to see the books lying open in front of Maxi. "Are you trying to learn medicine, my lady?" He picked up one of the books and raised an eyebrow.

Unsure of herself, Maxi mumbled her reply. "W-What happened a few days ago could h-happen again, so I th-thought I would p-prepare myself." She watched Ruth anxiously, certain that he would scoff at her. But to her surprise, his face broke into a bright smile.

"A commendable effort." He sounded sincere, if a little condescending, like one complimenting a small child. "Let me take a look. Did you start yesterday?"

He sat down across from Maxi and snatched up her heap of notes before she could protest. Maxi glowered at him as he examined her work. One day, she would chastise him for touching a lady's possessions without her permission.

Ruth lowered the pages and looked at her with surprise. "You're able to read the ancient tongue?"

"I-I learned it w-when I was young."

Before Rosetta grew into a flawless young woman, the Duke of Croyso subjected Maxi to rigorous instruction, desperate to correct her impediment, but Maxi showed little improvement. Eventually, Rosetta's sharp intellect became apparent, and their father gave up on Maxi, freeing her from the ordeal of reciting poetry every month.

Maxi used to stay up all night memorizing those poems, but she had never been allowed to finish reciting any of them. Her stutter had always ignited her father's rage, and he would lash at her with his cane before she finished the first verse. The terrible memory left Maxi feeling sick, and she quickly looked down to hide her face.

"I-I c-c-c—I am n-not f-fluent, though …."

"Well, judging from your writing, I'd say you are quite proficient."

"I've a-always liked to read, s-so I c-can read and write in the ancient tongue, b-but there are m-many w-w-words I c-c-c—I am not f-familiar with."

Ruth remained silent as he continued to read through her notes, and Maxi shifted nervously in her seat.

"Why not learn magic instead?" Ruth asked abruptly, setting down the stack of parchment.

Maxi blinked, unsure that she had heard his words correctly. Ruth rose from his seat, excited by his own suggestion.

"Why spend time learning medicine when you could learn magic instead? If you became capable of healing magic, it would lessen my burden tremendously!"

Maxi furrowed her brows. Did he only make the suggestion because it would benefit him? Or did he truly think she was capable?

"D-Didn't you s-say that magic is the h-highest form of learning? Th-That it requires complex c-calculations? I-I am not suited for that."

"Advanced magic does require years of research and practice, yes. But basic magic is different. As long as one has mana affinity, a few years of study is all it takes to master basic spells."

"W-What is basic magic?"

"All non-elemental magic," Ruth explained casually, as if the topic was no more complex or uncommon than basic mathematics. "Simple healing magic, levitation, and other minor spells."

Maxi smiled timidly. "I-I would l-like to learn, b-but as you m-mentioned, it t-takes years of work. Wouldn't s-studying mundane healing yield f-faster—"

"I meant that it takes several years for a person to cultivate mana affinity, and to learn arithmetic and the ancient tongue. But you already have mana affinity. It isn't strong yet, but with your knowledge of arithmetic and the ancient tongue, you meet the basic conditions for learning magic. With a few months of practice, you should be capable of casting simple spells."

Hope glimmered in Maxi's heart. Could she really learn magic?

"D-Do you think I'll b-be able to d-do it?"

"It's worth a try. You have nothing to lose."

He was right. Maxi clutched her hope and mustered her courage. "I-If you're willing t-to teach me, I will do my b-best."

"I shall make the necessary preparations. We can start tomorrow afternoon, here in the library." Ruth walked over to a bookcase and removed two weighty tomes, then returned to where Maxi sat at the desk. "These will help you understand the foundations of magic. Please read them whenever you get the chance."

Heart racing, Maxi left the library with the books hugged to her chest. For the first time in her life, someone had seen potential in

her.

THAT NIGHT, MAXI WAS TOO EXCITED TO SLEEP. INSTEAD, she lit a candle and read the books Ruth had given her until her eyelids grew heavy. The first tome expounded the concept of magic, while the second explained its working principles. Neither book was as complicated as she had feared, and the idea of becoming a sorceress suddenly seemed possible.

Maxi imagined herself wielding fire from her fingertips to vanquish monsters, and raising storms to sweep away invaders. She pictured Riftan pulling her into a tight embrace, proud of her achievements. The thought was enough to make her grin as she pored over the text.

If she mastered magic, she could join Riftan on his campaigns. Gone was all memory of the fact that she had once fainted at the sight of a monster. Maxi's heart pounded with excitement, and she flopped back in bed, kicking her feet in the air with giddy energy.

The next day, Ruth quickly shattered her fantasy. He walked into the library looking just as eager as Maxi felt, but his lengthy lecture on runes and magical theory left Maxi staring blankly at him and the large slate he had drawn several diagrams on. When he moved on to the governing principles of magic runes, Maxi felt as if he were speaking a different language entirely.

"Do you understand, my lady?" Ruth asked when this lecture finally concluded. When she did not immediately answer, Ruth's brows creased in confusion. "Was there anything you didn't understand?"

"I b-b-barely understood a-any of it," Maxi said, so disheartened that she had to hold back tears. "I-I'm n-not s-suited to th-this after all …."

"It's too soon to give up." Ruth seemed displeased by her wavering resolve. "You must learn to be tenacious, my lady. The less you understand, the more you must persist."

Maxi was so accustomed to resigning herself to disappointment that Ruth's advice bewildered her. She avoided his gaze as she considered his words, then looked up at him and nodded tentatively.

"I-I understand."

Ruth erased the diagrams from the slate and drew a simpler one in their place. "There's an energy that flows through the natural world, invisible to the naked eye. This energy is called mana."

Maxi promptly picked up her quill and took notes. Ruth waited until she finished writing before continuing.

"Through training, mages can draw mana into their bodies and harness its energy. This concentration of mana is what we call magic."

"A-Are they not th-the same thing?"

"The two words are often used interchangeably, but they are different in nature. Think of mana as a stable force that exists in equilibrium in the natural world. Magic, however, is a force of considerable instability that was forcibly accumulated inside the body of a human or monster. While mana adheres to the order of nature, magic defies it."

"I'm n-not sure I u-understand."

"Allow me to demonstrate." Ruth unfurled his fingers to show his palm. "The mana flowing through this room is currently in a state of perfect equilibrium. But if I do this …" He flicked his index finger, and a fist-sized ball of fire burst into being. "I've broken that equilibrium by using the energy I accumulated. That is magic.

"In the natural world, this fire would be considered unnatural. Its light and heat should not be present; it only exists because I called it into being. Nature fights against these anomalies and tries to remove the surplus mana to restore everything to its natural state. Mages call this resistance negation, and it's the reason that magic disappears over time." Ruth lowered his hand and the flame fizzled out.

"B-But d-didn't you say r-runes were required t-to use magic?"

"The flame I conjured *was* created through a rune. If mana is the ingredient, runes are the recipe. Runes contain detailed instructions on how much mana must be transfused and where it should be directed to create, let's say, a flame of a certain size. Mages must maintain a store of mana inside their body at all times and learn to properly manipulate it using runes."

Maxi's hands flew across the page as she took notes.

Ruth narrowed his eyes. "Do you understand everything up to this point?"

"Y-Yes, but …" Maxi glanced at the pile of books he had placed on the desk, feeling frustrated. "I s-still don't understand h-how it happens, o-or the p-principles behind it."

"Let me explain." Ruth scratched his head, thinking. He rolled up the diagrams and gathered up the books, stuffing all of them into his bag and clearing the desk. Then he produced a translucent stone from a small pouch. "Take this, my lady. We'll start by practicing how to accumulate and use mana."

"W-What is this?"

"A stone that assists with growing mana affinity. It absorbs mana from its surroundings and emits heat. Hold it in your hands and try to discern the subtle flow of mana around it. Over time, your mana affinity will grow stronger and you'll be able to perceive its movements. Please practice with the stone and read these books." He handed her three heavy tomes as he spoke. "Comprehending the principles of magic requires geometry and metrology, not just arithmetic."

As Maxi thumbed through one of the books, what little confidence she had deflated. Its pages were dense with cramped text. Remembering Ruth's words about persistence, Maxi recalled her fantasies from the previous night. She imagined Riftan beaming at her as she accompanied him on his adventures, and she pictured herself dressed in the magnificent garb of a mage, traversing mountains and fields. Her courage rekindled, Maxi took the magic stone from Ruth.

CHAPTER 9



In the three days that followed, Maxi pored over the books Ruth had given her, taking only occasional breaks to visit the stables and brush Rem's mane. A week had passed since Riftan's departure for the goblin raid, and she grew anxious for his return.

Winter had descended rapidly on the region, and the temperature dropped with little warning. To collect water from the well, the servants had to routinely break through a layer of ice.

The sudden drop in temperature only intensified Maxi's worry for Riftan. Her heart ached whenever she pictured him sleeping on the ground, surrounded by ice and snow, while she slept in a warm bed each night. Even when she had her nose buried in a book, Maxi would glance out the window hoping to see Riftan returning to the castle. But all she ever saw was the harsh wind blowing through the shivering garden below.

After two more days, the raid party finally returned. It was well past noon, and Maxi was busy practicing with the magic stone when a loud kopel blast sounded outside. With a jolt, she leaped up from her seat.

Maxi rushed to the window and saw the mounted knights making their way into the garden. Riftan looked dashing as he led the knights home, and Maxi ran downstairs, breathless with excitement as she burst out into the garden. When he saw her, Riftan jumped off his warhorse and opened his arms.

Maxi flew to him, crying out his name. Laughing, Riftan wrapped his powerful arms around her shoulders. The steel of his armor,

chilled by the winter air, made her shiver, but Maxi pressed herself against him.

She burrowed her face in the dirty cloak draped over his shoulders before looking up at him with eager eyes. Even disheveled and haggard, Riftan was astonishingly handsome. She gently stroked his cold cheeks.

"I-I'm so g-glad you're home. A-Are you—"

The rest of her words were lost as Riftan pressed his mouth to hers, his hand going to the back of her neck. When his tongue hungrily entered her mouth, she moaned softly and clutched his shoulders. Her body burned with a feverish desire.

As she nestled against him like a cat, she noticed Hebaron, Gabel, Ulyseon, Garrow, and the rest of the knights standing behind Riftan. Mortified, Maxi tried to pull away, but Riftan held her firmly in place and rubbed his stubbled chin against her cheek.

"Had I known such a passionate welcome awaited me," he murmured, "I would have simply burned the forest down and returned sooner."

He kissed her cheek and Maxi blushed, unable to believe that she had just behaved so shamelessly in front of half the castle. Riftan, however, continued kissing her cheek and neck.

"R-Riftan … P-People are s-staring."

"And?"

"R-Riftan …"

With a deep sigh, Riftan scooped Maxi up and looked over his shoulder at the knights. "Those of you who participated in the raid are exempt from your duties for a week. You may return to your quarters. I'll have the servants attend to you."

"How kind of you," said Hebaron, his lips curving into a sly smile. "We can take care of ourselves, Commander, so why don't you go put out that pressing fire first?"

Maxi's face burned so intensely she was certain steam must have escaped her ears. Ignoring Hebaron, Riftan walked into the castle, carrying Maxi. Though she begged him to put her down, he ignored her too. In the great hall, Riftan nodded at Rodrigo and the servants who had gathered to greet him.

"See that my horse is cared for," he said to Rodrigo. "And prepare dinner and bathwater for my men."

"As you wish, my lord. Shall we prepare a bath for you as well?"

Riftan frowned, taking in his filthy state. "Yes, at once."

Rodrigo bowed and took a step back. The servants behind him bowed as well, their faces impassive. Maxi was grateful that they seemed unbothered by the sight of their lord carrying his wife like a child.

"I will have my meal later," Riftan said. "Just bring me a change of clothes."

With that, Riftan climbed up the stairs and carried Maxi to their bedchamber. Once the door was shut behind them, he released her and covered her in more kisses. Maxi clung to him, panting. After tasting her mouth again, Riftan threw off his gauntlets and began stroking the back of her neck.

She pushed her cheek into his hand and let him coil her disheveled hair around his fingers.

Riftan groaned. "You don't know how I longed for this."

His hands slid hungrily under her dress to caress her soft skin. Following his lead, Maxi slid her hands inside under his cloak and explored his armored chest. With ragged breaths, Riftan guided her hands up to his exposed neck.

"Y-Your body feels c-cold."

"That can't be possible," he said hoarsely. "I feel as if I am burning."

"D-Do you feel u-unwell? A-Are you hurt?"

"I'm in excruciating pain, and it's because of you."

Thinking that she aggravated an injury when she had thrown herself at him earlier, Maxi leaned away to examine his body.

Riftan let out a low moan and tore his cloak off. "I've never been this hard." He cast off his breastplate and scooped her up with stiff, frantic movements.

He pushed her up against the wall and Maxi's eyes went round when she felt his arousal pressed against her abdomen. She had assumed that the barrage of kisses earlier had only been a show of affection.

Riftan rubbed his feverish body against hers and thirstily devoured her lips. Clinging to his neck, Maxi moaned and relished the desperate, wild way he moved against her. Riftan pressed her between his body and the wall, allowing her to feel the entire length of him. His body burned.

"I can't hold back any longer," Riftan breathed heavily against her neck.

Dazed, Maxi looked at him; his moist lips glistened from the relentless kisses.

Riftan yanked off the belt at her waist and pulled her dress and chemise up in one swift motion. Grabbing her buttocks, he hoisted her up and Maxi wrapped her legs around his hips. He ripped open his trousers and thrust into her.

Maxi gasped, her legs squeezing around him. "R-Riftan …"

His hands pressed into her thighs and Maxi thrust her hips against him. Riftan flinched as if he had been struck in the gut, then began to move inside her. With each urgent thrust into her deepest parts, Maxi's head rocked against the wall. Every nerve in her body seemed to unravel, and a pressing need grew inside her. She moaned as she clutched at his clothes.

"Just a little more, Maxi." Riftan pressed wet lips to her temple. "Just a little more …"

She gazed at his flushed face, teary with her need. Panting, Riftan grabbed the back of her head and kissed her greedily. He filled her completely, and she cried out as she teetered at the edge of climax. Riftan pumped hard three times and shuddered, his hips rocking erratically against hers.

Pleasure burst through Maxi, curling her toes as she clung to him. Riftan cupped her buttocks, holding her against the wall until his quivering stopped.

"Damn it …" He gently slid his hand between her head and the wall. "Did I hurt you?"

Maxi looked back at him in a daze.

"I didn't mean to be so rough," he said, lowering her gen tly back to her feet. He studied her face with concern as Maxi struggled to maintain her balance.

Though she could barely stand, it was not because he had hurt her, so she shook her head. “I-I’m a-all right.”

“That’s what you always say.”

Seeing her sway, Riftan grabbed her waist to steady her. Still drowsy from her climax, Maxi let him right her dress, watching as he lowered the hem and smoothed the skirt. He was always so gentle with her, and it continued to confound Maxi. His behavior was the opposite of what she had been taught to expect from a husband—as his wife, she was his property, and he was entitled to take her whenever and however he pleased. But Riftan was not like that at all. A lump formed in her throat.

“I-I really am a-all right.”

“All right. Then let’s do it properly—”

A hesitant knock at the door interrupted him.

“W-We’ve brought water for your bath, my lord,” an embarrassed maidservant called from the hall.

Maxi’s ears burned. Had the servant heard everything? Unfazed as always, Riftan tied his trousers closed and walked to the door.

Maxi scrambled onto the bed and slid under the blankets, pulling them over her head to hide her mortification. A moment later, maidservants entered carrying towels, a change of clothes, and hot water for the bath. Maxi listened as they prepared the bath but did not dare peek out from the blankets until she heard them leave. Riftan stood near the fireplace, and she watched as he stripped off his remaining armor and clothes.

“Come, Maxi,” he beckoned her as he settled into the tub.

She stared, captivated by the sight of water dripping from his dark hair, but did not move.

“I’m too tired to lift a finger,” Riftan said, resting an arm on the tub. He smiled at her, as if trying to coax a wary cat. “Come help me wash.”

“Y-You’re lying …”

“I had to sleep out in the snow for ten days. My whole body aches, and I can’t feel my toes. Come help.”

Though he was obviously exaggerating, Maxi could not help but feel concerned. She reluctantly climbed out of bed and approached

him. Once she was within arm's reach, Riftan grabbed her hand and brought it to his lips, kissing her palm and pressing it against his cheek.

"Take off your clothes and join me." When she hesitated, he added impatiently, "I need you. Hurry."

It was difficult to refuse him.

Holding his gaze, Maxi slowly began to undress as Riftan's dark, smoldering eyes bore into her. After slipping out of her dress and chemise, she removed her stockings and draped them over a chair. Once she was fully naked, Maxi stepped into the tub and Riftan pulled her toward him by her waist. He pressed his mouth to her swollen breast, prompting her to clutch at his wet, glistening hair.

The heat of his lips on her skin rekindled her desire and she clung to him with a moan, wanting him to both stop and continue. Riftan shifted her to his lap and began nibbling at her collarbone. A pleasure akin to pain prickled her spine.

Riftan cupped her breast. "You want me, too, don't you?"

Maxi's face went beet-red, but that was sufficient response for Riftan. Intense emotions stirred within his dark eyes—contentment, desire, and something else she could not decipher. Capturing her mouth in a hungry kiss, he opened her legs around his hips and entered her, and Maxi melted into him once more.

MAXI DID NOT HAVE A MOMENT OF RESPITE FROM RIFTAN'S insatiable desire. No part of her could escape his wandering hands; he kissed, nibbled, and stroked until her flesh was tender. After teasing her unbearably, he would push himself inside of her and thrust until she unraveled into an endless series of climaxes.

When Riftan finally slumped onto the bed, content, Maxi was so relieved that she could have thanked the heavens. Exhausted, she rested her head on his shoulder.

"A-Aren't you tired, R-Riftan?"

He sighed, stroking her back with light fingertips. "Imagine that you've prepared a feast for a man who has starved for days. What do you think he would do?"

Maxi blinked at him.

Riftan pressed his lips to her shoulder. "He would devour the food in front of him, even if he was on the verge of losing consciousness."

He nibbled at the flesh between her neck and shoulder, and Maxi squirmed away from his wandering mouth.

"I-I am not your *feast,*" she said, glowering at him.

"But you are so sumptuous."

He trailed his lips along her shoulder, and stroked the sensitive skin at the nape of her neck. It sent a shock of pleasure down her spine, and she dove under the blankets to escape him. Chuckling, Riftan drew her into his arms, blankets and all. A pleasant warmth swelled in her chest at the sound of his laughter.

Content, Maxi buried her face in his chest. To be sharing such an intimate moment with another person felt like a miracle to her.

"The knights and I dealt with all the goblins on the mountain," Riftan said, stroking her hair. "So there shouldn't be any more raids until winter is over. Once it gets warmer, we can go riding again, or maybe visit the lake to the west of here. It's beautiful, even in winter."

"I-I would l-love that."

"Then I'll take you when it gets warmer." His had voice softened under the weight of his fatigue.

Maxi waited for him to fall asleep before gently hugging his waist, and Riftan's own arm wrapped around her in response. She was so hungry for affection, but she had never noticed it until now. When his warmth filled her, she became aware of the vast void inside her.

The realization terrified her. Riftan had come to occupy the deepest recesses of her heart; he had the power to shatter her, to crush her will to live. If his devotion to her withered, Maxi was certain her future would hold nothing but utter desolation. She watched his sleeping face, fearful of that future. This was a different sort of fear than what her father had instilled in her. Somehow, it could hurt her more for the simple fact that Riftan had become so dear.

Despite her exhaustion, sleep did not come easily.

RIFTAN ROSE EARLY THE NEXT MORNING TO MAKE HIS rounds while Maxi stayed in bed until noon. With the distri bution of the winter garments complete, there was little left for her to do in Calypse Castle.

After washing and dressing, Maxi walked over to her desk, deciding to spend the day reading the books that Ruth had given her. Soon, Ludis entered the room with a breakfast tray.

"I prepared food for you, my lady," she said as she placed the tray next to Maxi's stack of books. "You can enjoy it while reading."

On the tray was a delectable meal—crepe with grape jam, walnut oat cake, and warm honeyed milk. Maxi smiled and thanked Ludis before taking a bite of the delicate walnut cake, slowly turning pages while she chewed.

This time, Maxi understood the contents of the book with ease. Perhaps Ruth had taken extra care in choosing texts suited to her level of knowledge. She wrote notes on a piece of parchment, diligently etching the concepts into her mind.

Despite using up several sheaves of parchment in her studies, Maxi felt no closer to becoming a mage than she had before starting. Could poring over these books really teach her magic? As her eyes narrowed on the page before her, there was a knock at the door.

She closed the book and looked up. "Wh-Who is it?"

"It's me. I'm coming in."

Maxi hastily put away her books and rolls of parchments as Riftan strode in, dressed in a knee-length black tunic. It was unusual for her to see him during the day, even when they were both in the castle, so Maxi was pleased to see him.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked, planting a kiss on her forehead.

Maxi nodded shyly. "F-Forgive me for waking up s-so late."

"You should have stayed in bed."

"B-But how could I have s-stayed in bed when y-you had already risen?"

"There's no need for you to follow my schedule."

Riftan seemed to be drawing a line between them with these words, but Maxi shook her head against the gnawing worry, reassuring herself that he was only being considerate. Riftan

wrapped an arm around her shoulders and slid his hand along the fabric of her dress.

"Isn't this dress too thin?"

"I-I'm wearing more l-layers underneath."

"Come here." He pulled her to her feet and led her by the hand to a wooden chest. Taking out a velvet cloak, he draped it around her shoulders.

Maxi looked up at him in surprise. "W-Where are we g-going?"

"There's something I want to show you. We won't be leaving the castle."

With her hand in his, Maxi followed Riftan out of their chambers and down the stairs toward the kitchen. They arrived at a small side door and, seeing Maxi shiver when an icy draft blew inside, Riftan threw an arm around her shoulder and pulled the hood of her cloak over her head.

"I know, it's cold," he said. "This won't take long."

Maxi looked ahead, perplexed. All she could see were bare trees and a frozen untended path. Stifling her curiosity, she continued to follow Riftan.

After a short walk, he turned toward the large stable behind the castle. Warm air greeted her as Riftan led her in side, and Maxi lowered her hood. Though the stench of horses pervaded the air, the stable was clean and protected from the wind. In fact, it was rather cozy.

"A-Are we here t-to see the h-horses?"

"Shh." Riftan put a finger to her lips.

Maxi pressed her lips together and looked around as Riftan gently pulled at her arm to lead her deeper into the stables. Horses pricked up their ears as they passed the stalls. When they reached the innermost stall, Riftan's intimidating stallion, Talon, snorted at them. Maxi shied away from the warhorse, staying close to Riftan. He patted Maxi's back soothingly before stepping into the stall.

Maxi hesitantly moved closer, and her eyes grew wide. In a pile of hay next to Talon, three tiny kittens squirmed and mewed.

"I found them this morning," Riftan whispered.

Maxi stared, transfixed by the kittens curled up in the hay. Riftan crouched down in front of them.

"I noticed Talon was agitated and found them after rummaging through the hay. No signs of the mother, though."

"D-Do you think th-they were a-abandoned?"

"It seems like it. The stableboy hasn't seen any cats around. A stray must have snuck in to give birth. What a shock for Talon to come home and find these trespassers." Riftan gently patted the horse, and the stallion scratched nervously at the ground.

Maxi was amazed that Talon, a proud and ferocious warhorse, had not immediately trampled the kittens. She eyed the horse dubiously, worried that he might change his mind, before crouching down by Riftan and the kittens.

Each one had a different coat—white with gray stripes, ink black, and pure white. Resisting the urge to scoop them all up in her arms, she looked up at Riftan.

"C-Can I t-touch them?"

"Do as you please." Riftan smiled and stood, leaning against the wall dividing the stalls.

Maxi reached out to gently stroke one of the kittens and frowned. Its frame was delicate and thin beneath its downy fur. All three kittens looked malnourished.

"Th-They must have g-gone days without f-food."

"Shall we take them back? Give them some milk?"

"C-Can we?" Maxi looked up at him hopefully.

Riftan grinned and bent down to kiss her cheek. "You're free to do as you wish. You don't need my permission."

"Th-Then I'd like t-to bring them b-back."

Maxi's voice shook as she cautiously picked up a kitten, afraid that the slightest pressure might crush the tiny creature's bones. The kitten wriggled helplessly as Maxi carefully placed it inside her cloak.

"We'll need to find a basket for them to sleep in," Riftan said as he scooped up the last two kittens, depositing them into Maxi's arms.

"L-Ludis will f-find us one i-if we ask."

Maxi clutched the kittens to her chest to shield them from the biting wind as she and Riftan left the stable. Feeling the small

warmth of their tiny bodies in her arms, her heart clenched with pity.

"I-I've n-never had cats b-before."

"Really?"

"M-My father w-wasn't f-fond of animals. E-Even his hunting dogs w-weren't allowed in th-the castle, so I often s-snuck into the b-back garden t-to play with them."

Riftan glanced at her, but she was too exhilarated to notice the subtle look in his eyes.

"Shall I get you a hunting dog as well?"

Maxi's eyes widened, and she quickly shook her head. "Th-These kittens are m-more than enough."

"If there's anything you ever want, you can tell me," Riftan said, a sharp edge in his words.

Maxi studied his face, trying to determine what had displeased him.

Still staring ahead, he grumbled, "I told you that I would give you a life as lavish—no, even more lavish than the life you had at Croyso Castle. Thinking that you lack *anything* here enrages me."

Maxi laughed awkwardly and her throat felt crowded with thorns. It seemed Riftan's animosity toward her father was greater than she had thought.

"I t-truly am c-content," she said. "If I w-want anything, I-I'll be sure to t-tell you."

Riftan eyed her, one eyebrow raised incredulously, then sighed and continued walking down the path. Maxi followed him quietly, gently stroking the kittens, which had begun to knead her with their tiny claws.

When they arrived back in their room, Ludis gasped when she saw the delicate creatures snuggled in Maxi's arms. She set about creating a simple nest for them fashioned out of an old reed basket lined with cloth.

Maxi set the basket by the fire and placed the kittens inside, then watched as Riftan held a spoonful of warm goat milk to their mouths. The kittens frantically lapped up the milk and, once their stomachs were full, they purred and rubbed their heads against

Riftan's hand. He scratched along one of the kittens' soft backs, and Maxi watched with envy as it stretched in contentment.

"Have you thought of names for them?" Riftan asked.

Maxi's eyes left the stretching kitten and looked to Riftan. "Y-You think I sh-should name them?"

"You'll be spending the most time with them, so you should be the one to name them."

Maxi mulled it over, considering each of the kittens carefully before speaking. "I'll call th-the tabby Ron, th-the white one L-Laura, a-and the black one R-Roy."

"Ron, Laura, and Roy?"

"Th-Those are the names of the three fairy siblings f-from a tale I read as a child. I was s-suddenly reminded of th-the story …."

Riftan picked up Roy by the scruff, smiling faintly. "Aren't they too mangy to be named after fairies?"

The kitten exposed his claws and struggled in Riftan's grip, as if in protest.

Riftan laughed. "This one is feisty."

"Y-You shouldn't t-torment such h-helpless creatures."

"You call this torment?" Riftan grumbled, but set Roy back in the basket with his siblings.

Worried that the hearth would be too warm for the kittens, Maxi moved the basket away from its heat and to a more temperate position. Then she gave the kittens a small ball of yarn to play with and they tottered, chewing and batting at it before falling asleep.

Maxi watched their soft bellies as they slept and gingerly stroked one on the chin. The kitten purred and shook its long whiskers. Eventually, Riftan tugged at her arm, and she turned to look at him.

"Come sit," he said, patting his lap as he reclined against a cushion.

Maxi hesitated, blushing. She recognized the low, sultry tone of his voice. Though she enjoyed being intimate with him, she wondered whether they had been too indulgent.

"Don't worry." Riftan smirked. "I just want to hold you."

Still hesitating, Maxi slowly walked over to him, and he pulled her onto his lap. With a gentle hand, he guided her head to rest against

his shoulder. Her toes curled at the pleasant feeling of her body against his.

Riftan wrapped one arm around her knees and stroked her back with the other, fully cradling her. Maxi smiled and breathed a soft laugh against his neck. She felt like a chick nestled under the wings of a hen.

"Your laugh tickles." Riftan sounded content and continued to stroke her back as he had done with the kitten. After a few quiet moments, he brought his hand up and began to rub the back of her neck.

Maxi swallowed a moan as a shiver ran through her body. Riftan caressed her cheek with light fingers, then kissed her forehead. An unusual sense of peace and comfort enveloped her as they sat in the pleasant warmth of the fire, and Maxi relaxed in his arms.

She listened to the steady beating of his heart, the rattling of wind at the windows, and the crackling of the fire.

"Are you happy in Anatol?" Riftan asked suddenly, staring into the fire.

He spoke uneasily, and the question shook Maxi out of her reverie. She looked up at him and, though his expression remained impassive, she could tell that he was anxious.

"Are you really comfortable here? Is there anything else I can—"

Maxi shook her head vigorously. "There's n-nothing. I w-want for nothing, t-truly."

Her life in Anatol was perfect. She had found a place where she could belong, and not only be needed, but also be surrounded by kind people who listened to her with patience and understanding. Above all, she had a husband who treated her with care and affection at every opportunity. There was nothing more she could have wished for.

Maxi curled up in Riftan's arms like the kittens in their basket. "I-I'm h-happy here."

Riftan drew a sharp breath, then wrapped his arms around her and squeezed. Though her ribs were being flattened and she could barely breathe, Maxi did not complain. She would gladly let him crush her in his arms if it comforted him. She adored everything

about him, from the pounding of his racing heart to the masculine scent filling her lungs whenever he was near her.

Maxi timidly wound an arm around Riftan's waist, joy mingling with guilt in her heart. He persistently compared his castle to her father's out of fear that she was unhappy with her changed circumstances. She could have told him the truth about her father and her life at Croyso Castle, but pride kept her lips sealed around the secret. Instead, she burrowed her face in his chest to reassure him.

"C-Calypse Castle is w-wonderful," she said, her voice muffled against him.

Riftan laughed, a short, strained sound. He did not believe her.

"I-It's true. With th-the castle walls looking so g-grand and u-unassailable, I f-feel safe. A-And since the c-castle is on a mountainside, I-I can see the wh-whole of Anatol out th-the window. Th-The landscape is beautiful e-everywhere I l-look. Th-The servants are c-courteous and kind, and—"

Maxi abruptly stopped her rambling, worried that Riftan might think her father's servants had treated her poorly.

"M-More than anything," she said to change the subject, "th-the cook here is f-far better than the one at C-Croyso Castle. E-Everything he makes i-is so d-delicious that—"

That she had gained weight since her arrival in Anatol. Feeling self-conscious, Maxi stopped herself again.

"S-So delicious th-that …" Maxi trailed off, searching for a way to end her half-formed sentence. "Th-That I'm a-always looking forward t-to my next meal! His d-desserts are excellent, and h-he makes delicacies that I've n-never even seen before."

"I'm glad the food is to your liking." Riftan smiled and caressed her neck.

Now that he was at ease, Maxi burrowed her face into his chest once again.

Riftan slid a fingertip along her ear and let out a low groan. The subtle motion sent pleasant shivers down her spine, but a gentle knock at the door dispelled the intimate tension growing between them.

Riftan grumbled to himself before calling out gruffly, “What is it?”

“It’s me, Gabel Lachzion. Everyone is waiting for you in the council room, Commander.”

Riftan sighed loudly. “I’ll be right there.”

“Then I shall go wait with the others,” Gabel said through the door.

Riftan waited until the sound of Gabel’s footsteps grew distant before releasing Maxi from his lap. She sat on a cushion and gazed up at him as he wistfully looked back at her, illuminated red by the glow of the fire. Awakened by sudden activity, the kittens poked their heads out of the basket and mewled in displeasure.

“I’ll see you at supper,” Riftan said, leaning over to kiss her cheek. “I’ll have the cook prepare a feast tonight.” He stood up and threw on a cloak, then left the room.

Maxi lifted the mewling kittens into her lap and fed them more goat milk before tossing them the ball of yarn. When they tired of playing and returned to napping, she sat at her desk and opened the book she had been reading that morning.

Time passed quickly as Maxi became engrossed in her studies, and when she next gazed out the window, darkness had descended. She took out the magic stone from her pocket and clasped it in both hands. Ever since Ruth had told her it would help her cultivate mana affinity, she had begun to carry it with her, taking it out to practice from time to time.

Despite her efforts, she did not feel any discernible change. The stone felt no different from an ordinary gemstone. She closed her eyes and clasped the stone more tightly, wondering if she should try a chant or incantation, when a knock interrupted her focus.

“I’m here to help you get dressed for the dinner banquet, my lady,” Ludis called through the door. “Is now a good time?”

“Y-Yes. C-Come in.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Ludis entered, followed by Linda Selous, the dressmaker’s wife, and two of the recently hired maidservants. They each carried a pile of dresses, and Maxi’s eyes grew wide as she glimpsed the rich fabrics.

Ludis set a small box of jewelry on Maxi's dressing table, then adjusted the angle of the mirror. When she saw the kittens tumbling about on the floor, she scooped them up and placed them in their basket. While Linda and the maidservants laid out the brilliant dresses on the bed, Ludis moved the kittens to the opposite side of the room.

Once all the dresses were displayed on the bed, Maxi gaped, bewildered by the knowledge that they were hers.

"These are the dresses you ordered, my lady," Linda said brightly. "And what better occasion to wear them than a banquet?" She lifted a beautiful navy-blue dress off the bed, and its fabric seemed to glow in the firelight.

Maxi gasped, delighted by its elegance. Linda spread out the lustrous skirt for Maxi to see it better, then lifted a second dress, and a third—one green with gold embroidery and the other a stunning ivory that sparkled as if studded with countless tiny jewels.

"Are they to your liking, my lady?" Linda asked. "My husband and I spared no effort to make them."

"Th-They're lovely," Maxi murmured, unable to tear her eyes away.

"My lady! You should try them on!" Isinda, one of the maidservants, urged her. "Everyone at the banquet will be mesmerized."

"Which would you like to try on first?" Linda asked.

"I think this green one will complement the color of your hair," Isinda said, holding it out to her.

Maxi obligingly put on the green-and-gold dress and, just as the maidservant predicted, it flattered her auburn hair. The long, flowing skirt was graceful, and the gold vine embroidery was breathtakingly beautiful against the green fabric. Maxi twirled in front of the mirror, letting the skirt swish around her.

After examining Maxi carefully, Linda nodded approvingly and passed her the next dress. With the maidservants' assistance, Maxi tried on all of the dresses, sighing happily every time soft fabric grazed her skin. For each new dress, the maidservants eagerly selected jewelry and hennins to match.

Now Maxi wore a white dress and Linda clasped a gold belt around her waist.

"I think this dress suits you best, my lady," she said.

Maxi studied her reflection. A noblewoman stood before her, elegant and modest, dressed in flowing white. A golden chemise peeked out from under her skirt and sleeves, and a web of diamonds adorned her neck. From her finger, a topaz ring glinted in the firelight. Even to her own eyes, she looked as regal as any princess, and the thought made her breathless with excitement.

"I l-like this one t-too."

"Then please allow me to arrange your hair, my lady," said Ludis. "I think braiding your hair back would suit the dress better than a coronet. Perhaps the pearl hairnet?"

"I suggest a small braid on either side, with hair ornaments," Linda offered.

Ludis nodded agreement and began combing Maxi's hair. Starting above her temples, she skillfully wove two braids and pinned them back, leaving the rest of Maxi's voluminous hair to cascade down her back. To finish the style, Ludis slid amber pins, each about the size of a walnut, into Maxi's hair, just above her ears.

Amazed, Maxi stared into the mirror. Ludis had worked magic on her unruly curls, and her red hair looked elegant against the white dress.

Nearly in unison, the maidservants gave her admiring compliments.

"You look marvelous, my lady!"

"You look just like the nymphs of the light! His lordship will be astonished."

"He most certainly will. You look more magnificent than we've ever seen you!"

"Th-Thank you," Maxi said softly.

"Is there anything you'd like adjusted?" Linda asked.

"N-No, this will d-do nicely."

Linda nodded, then draped a wine-colored velvet cloak over Maxi's shoulders. Maxi turned this way and that, inspecting herself. Once

satisfied with her appearance, she entrusted the kittens to the maidservants and left the room.

The night cast long shadows in the corridor. Diligent servants had lit the torches, and Maxi followed their light with Ludis trailing behind her. Since Riftan's return, the castle seemed to have awoken from hibernation. Faint voices echoed through the halls, and the smell of rich food and fragrant wine permeated the cold winter air.

Maxi walked past a handful of servants, who were going about their duties with kerosene lamps in their hands, and headed downstairs. When she arrived at the dining hall, the room was alive with activity. Young attendants and maidservants flitted around the table, serving the knights as they ate, drank, and chattered boisterously.

Hovering in the doorway, Maxi watched them all, their faces lit by the flicker of candlelight. Riftan had promised a feast, and it was nothing short of one. The table legs seemed to buckle under the hearty servings of food.

"My lady!" Ulyseon, clad in a charming white tunic, noticed her by the door and paused in slicing a piece of boar meat to wave his hand in greeting. He set down the knife and rushed toward her, smiling brightly.

Maxi smiled back awkwardly, unable to look him in the eye as she recalled Riftan's brazen display of affection in front of the knights the day before. Ulyseon, on the other hand, seemed to have no memory of the incident and began to babble excitedly at her.

"Have you been well, my lady? You must already know, but I went on my first raid with Sir Riftan! It was the most meaningful ten days of my life!"

Ulyseon spoke as if he had just returned from a pleasant excursion rather than a monster raid. Unsure of how to react, Maxi laughed, the sound as awkward as the smile on her face.

"I-I hope you w-weren't hurt."

"Just a little bruised is all, my lady." Ulyseon smiled bashfully and pointed to his knee. "It's embarrassing to admit, but I tripped over a tree root and took a tumble down a hill. Fortunately, I was able to avoid inconveniencing the party by using an ointment Mage Ruth

provided. But Sir Hebaron mocked my clumsiness for the rest of the raid."

From the table, one of the knights glanced over his shoulder, looking as if the squire's chatter irked him.

"Ulyseon Rovar," he called loudly. "Escort her ladyship to her seat. Plenty of time for your nattering later."

Ulyseon scratched his head sheepishly and offered her his arm. "Pardon my manners, my lady. I was just thrilled to see you again. Please allow me to show you where the best food is."

Maxi placed her hand on Ulyseon's arm, and he led her to a seat at the center of the table. With surprising grace, he pulled out the chair for her.

"Oh! And allow me to take your cloak," he said, holding his hand out.

Maxi gripped the ties of her cloak, hesitating. She felt self-conscious standing in front of so many people.

"My lady?" Ulyseon gave her a quizzical look.

She clenched her eyes shut, removed her cloak, and handed it to the squire before she could hesitate any longer. A disconcerting silence fell inside the dining hall. Maxi drew in her shoulders, shrinking in on herself as the knights stopped drinking and talking all at once to stare at her with wide-eyed surprise.

Maxi's fragile confidence evaporated, and her face burned red. Had it been presumptuous to think that such a splendid dress suited her? Perhaps the knights saw only the pathetic attempts of an ugly woman to appear beautiful.

Then Ulyseon's loud voice cut through the silence. "Heavens, my lady! You look magnificent."

"I d-do?" Maxi looked up at him uncertainly.

Ulyseon nodded vigorously, his large purple eyes sparkling in earnest. "You are the spitting image of the elves of old! White becomes you, my lady. You have always been lovely, but tonight, you are breathtaking!"

His extravagant praise made Maxi's blush deepen. Before she could thank him, he continued with even greater fervor.

"You had me spellbound for a moment there! That's only to be expected from the wife of the greatest knight in the realm. Even the proudest nymph would envy your beauty."

The heat in Maxi's cheeks spread to her neck and ears. Though she looked more elegant than usual, she knew she was no peerless beauty. Suppressing the urge to clap her hand over Ulyseon's mouth, she quickly took her seat. But the squire was oblivious to her discomfort, taking the seat next to her and continuing his grandiose praise.

"It's a shame, my lady," Ulyseon said. "We're the only ones who get to admire your beauty, but if this were a royal ball, the entire court would have been captivated by you! The knights of the royal capital would be fighting over themselves to swear their geas to you!"

"Th-Thank you …"

Maxi stared fixedly at her plate, unable to process such high praise. The idea of knights fighting to swear their oaths to her was absurd. As the silence from the rest of the knights around them became unbearable, Maxi imagined them sneering inwardly at Ulyseon's exaggerated praise and trembled.

"Allow me to serve you," Ulyseon said, heaping food onto her plate as he spoke. "Is there anything you fancy? All of these dishes are delectable, but the smoked duck is exceptionally good today."

"Th-Thank you." Relieved by the change of subject, Maxi took a moment to regain her composure and glanced around the room. "Do you h-happen to know w-where his lordship is?"

"Sir Riftan is still in the council room discussing the recent monster migrations with a few of the knights."

"M-Monster migrations?"

Before Ulyseon could answer, another voice spoke from behind her. "Monsters in the west have suddenly started moving south."

Maxi twisted in her seat to find Sir Hebaron standing there, dressed in casual attire. He looked her over with an odd expression, then sat down next to her.

"There are signs that trolls are migrating into Anatolium," he said. "The commander is discussing countermeasures with the sorcerer. It

wasn't clear when the discussions were going to end, so he told the rest of us to dine first."

Maxi's face fell. Did that mean Riftan wasn't coming?

Hebaron filled his goblet with wine and continued. "That's why the goblin raid lasted longer than expected. We observed changes in the monsters' habitats, so we combed through the northern mountains."

"D-Do you mean t-to say that a p-pack of monsters is m-making their way t-to Anatol?"

"It would be more accurate to say that they are moving south. These are still assumptions, but according to the monster hunters we met in the mountains …" Hebaron trailed off as Maxi's expression darkened with worry. Awkwardly scratching the back of his head, he tried to reassure her. "I've said too much, but you have nothing to fear, my lady. With the Remdragon Knights protecting Anatol, no monsters will be able to invade our land."

Maxi still felt uneasy. She had witnessed herself what havoc monsters could wreak while tending to wounded sentries and loggers in the aftermath of the werewolf attack. If more monsters came to Anatol, it would mean more violence. She slipped a hand inside her pocket and clasped the magic stone. Though she might only ever be capable of small, simple magic, she did not want to be useless.

Starting tomorrow, I'll study even harder.

"Don't look so anxious, my lady," Ulyseon said to lighten the mood. "Have a taste of this roast boar—it's our cook's specialty. The skin is crispy, but the meat inside is tender and juicy! Dip it in cameline sauce and take a big bite. I guarantee you won't regret it."

"I-It does look d-delicious."

"Try the pigeon with nutmeg too. And the fried cinnamon wafers are exceptional." Ulyseon filled her plate as he spoke.

Unable to ignore his urging, Maxi took a few small bites. The food truly was delicious, and for the moment, she managed to forget about her worries. Hebaron observed her as he drank, then leaned forward and filled her goblet with wine.

"You must be thirsty, my lady."

"Th-Thank you." Pleased by the rare show of kindness, Maxi gulped down the wine.

Hebaron raised an eyebrow and refilled her cup, shifting in his seat to face her. "You must like your wine, my lady."

Maxi rarely drank more than a goblet or two of wine with her meals, but Hebaron was looking at her so expectantly that she didn't want to disappoint him. Maxi threw her head back and emptied her goblet once more. The wine tingled warmth through her body, and she relaxed a little. It was not an unpleasant feeling.

Each time she drained her goblet, Hebaron filled it again, and soon her eyes shone with the effects of the wine. Amused, the other knights began to offer her food and drink as well.

It was a little offensive—the knights attempted to feed her as they would some fantastic creature—but she did not refuse them. She soon lost count of how many goblets she had drunk. Her vision blurred, and she felt as if she were floating. Hiccupping, Maxi clutched her goblet in both hands and began to sway in her seat.

Hebaron moved to pour more wine for her, but one of the knights stopped him. "I think her ladyship has had enough, Sir Hebaron."

"I-I'm … a-a-all right."

Maxi's tongue was less cooperative than usual, and her words came out slurred. Normally, she would have clamped her mouth shut in embarrassment, but now she felt no shame. Intoxicated with a rare boldness, she emptied her goblet and held it out to Hebaron.

"I-I would l-like s-s … some m-more."

"Happy to oblige," Hebaron said. "You can certainly hold your alcohol."

Maxi noted with pleasure that Hebaron's tone had grown amicable, much the way he might speak to a fellow knight. She drained another goblet of wine with even greater enthusiasm. Despite spilling wine onto her sleeves, she found herself giggling. One of the knights burst into laughter.

"Who knew her ladyship could be so charming? And here I thought she was a cheerless, self-absorbed noblewoman!"

Maxi spun around to glare at the speaker. "I-I am not s-self-absorbed! Though I c-can't deny th-that I'm ch-cheerless."

Hebaron poured her another goblet of wine and she drank it like water, then sighed deeply. Her euphoria had dissipated, replaced by melancholy.

"B-But th-that's because I-I'm not u-used to i-interacting with s-so many p-people! And I-I'm not w-well-spoken … I d-don't ever know what I sh-should say …. A-And all of you are s-so intimidating, e-especially when you're so t-tall you l-loom over me. Y-You can't b-blame me for sh-shying away. I-In fact, *you're* the r-reason I've been so ch-cheerless! I w-would a-appreciate it i-if you could all sh-shrink a little."

The knights stared at her dumbly. Hebaron broke into uproarious laughter.

"We're not tall for no reason, my lady," Hebaron said, still laughing. "Bulk is an advantage in combat. I'm afraid your ladyship is the one who is too small. What were you doing while everyone else was growing?"

"Are you drunk, Sir Hebaron?" one of the knights asked with some surprise.

Ignoring the question, Hebaron filled Maxi's goblet to the brim. "It's not too late, my lady. If you start drinking and eating as much as I do, you may yet grow as tall as a pine tree."

"You r-really think I-I can still g-grow taller?" Maxi looked up at Hebaron with hopeful eyes. If she was taller, maybe she would have more courage.

Hebaron smiled cheekily. "I've been drinking alcohol since I was a lad of thirteen. That's how I managed to grow this tall."

"So that's your secret, Sir Hebaron!" Ulyseon finished stuffing his mouth with meat and reached for his goblet of ale. He guzzled it down eagerly.

Nearly in unison, the rest of the knights groaned and buried their faces in their hands.

Maxi could not understand why they looked so agitated. Foggy with wine, she tilted her head this way and that, wondering why the atmosphere felt suddenly gloomy. As she raised her goblet for another sip, a large hand shot past her shoulder and snatched it from her.

Startled, she turned around to find Riftan towering over her, his expression grim. He narrowed his eyes, taking in her flushed, stupefied gaze.

"What the devil are you doing?" he asked through gritted teeth.

"I-I was t-trying to grow t-taller …" Maxi hiccupped, and her voice withered.

Riftan ground his teeth and turned to glower at the knights. "Explain to me why you got my wife so drunk."

"She seemed capable of holding her alcohol, so we got a little carried away …." Hebaron answered a little sheepishly, scratching the back of his head.

Riftan's face grew more forbidding. "So, your idea of entertainment is getting my wife drunk?" He slammed Maxi's goblet onto the table, and silence fell over the dining hall. When he opened his mouth to speak again, his voice was menacingly soft. "Eat well and rest up. You'll need the energy for training tomorrow."

The knights groaned, but Riftan ignored them and gathered Maxi up before striding out of the room. Maxi wrapped her arms around his neck, glad to have him carry her. Her eyes had grown unbearably heavy, and she longed to make her way to bed.

Riftan sighed and Maxi burrowed her face in his neck, pretending not to have heard. He flinched and she felt him stiffen, but her blissful inebriated state made her quite indifferent to his reaction. She inhaled the smell of him and im pulsively kissed his neck, pressing her lips right against his pulse.

Riftan stood frozen in the hall. "Maxi …" His voice was like the growl of a beast.

Smiling, Maxi stroked his hair like one pacifying a disgruntled animal. Riftan briskly climbed the stairs, Maxi bouncing lightly in his arms. She felt as if she rocked in a cradle, on the edge of sleep. Placing her hands against his chest, she snuggled into him and closed her eyes. Riftan reached the door to their bedchamber without breaking a sweat.

"Maxi … You're not sleeping, are you?" He shook her gently.

She murmured in sleepy annoyance and nuzzled into his neck.

"Just how much did you drink?" he muttered, gazing down at her fretfully. "And damn it all, why are you dressed so …"

He lowered her onto the bed and pushed up the skirt of her bunched-up gown. Disoriented, Maxi raised herself so he could undress her. As soon as he pulled the dress over her head, she slumped onto the pillow and fell asleep. Riftan ground his teeth again as he loomed over her.

"You'd better be prepared tomorrow as well."

CHAPTER 10



MAXI WOKE FROM A DEEP SLEEP TO THE SOUND of the kittens mewing. Bright light streamed in through the windows, and she squinted against it painfully. Her head felt as though it might split open. Groaning, she closed her eyes against the light and gripped her temples.

Something scraped at the insides of her stomach, and her head throbbed in rhythm with her heartbeat. She had never felt such overwhelming discomfort in her life, and her face crumpled as she groaned again. A cup of water was thrust into her face, and she slowly turned her head to find Riftan brooding at the edge of the bed while the three kittens climbed up his trousers.

"Is my carousing lady finally awake?"

Memories of the night before flooded her mind, hazy through the fog of her headache.

Riftan placed the cup of water in her hand. "You were quite the sight. I didn't know you loved to drink so much."

His soft tone made Maxi uneasy, and she rushed to ex plain herself. "I-I don't! Y-Yesterday was the first time I-I d-drank that much." It was the truth, but her voice faltered.

Eyeing her doubtfully, Riftan sat on the bed and sighed heavily. He seemed to be suppressing his temper.

Maxi hung her head and gripped the cool cup in her hand. The hair that Ludis had arranged so elegantly was a mess of tangled vines around her shoulders, and her beautiful dress was gone.

Wearing only her chemise, and with her hair in such disarray, she must look like a vagrant.

She slowly raised the blanket to hide her face, feeling ashamed and puffy after so much alcohol.

"Let this be my only warning," Riftan said, his soft voice clear as a bellow. "If I ever find you drunk among a group of rowdy men again, I'll make sure you can't leave this bed for a while."

Maxi snapped her head up in surprise. It was not his threat that surprised her, but the fact that she was not afraid of it. She trusted absolutely that Riftan would never hurt her and that his threat held no substance.

"Do you know what I'd do to you?" Riftan growled when his threat failed to scare her.

Realizing that his anger was genuine, Maxi quickly shook her head. "I-It will n-never happen again."

"If I could have my way, I would …" Riftan paused, gazing resentfully at her disheveled appearance, then breathed a sigh of resignation. "I'll have the maidservants bring you herbal tea to help with the hangover, so rest here awhile. We'll speak again this evening."

"W-Where are you g-going?"

"I have business to attend to on the training grounds," Riftan said with unnerving calm as he stood up from the bed. He plucked the kittens free from his legs and set them down on the bed, then strode out of the room.

Maxi gathered the kittens onto her lap. Their indignant mewling aggravated her piercing headache, so she tried to placate them with gentle pats and scratches.

"How are you feeling, my lady?" Ludis asked when she entered with a tray of tea.

Maxi felt terrible, but after the spectacle she had made of herself last night, she did not want to be seen suffering from a hangover. Trying to look as dignified as possible, she sipped the herbal tea to soothe her stomach. Despite her efforts, Ludis was quick to notice Maxi's condition.

"Allow me to prepare a bath for you, my lady. A warm bath and a bowl of the cook's special egg porridge should help you feel better."

Maxi nodded, comforted by the suggestion. "Yes, th-that would be n-nice."

A tub of steaming water was brought to the room, and Maxi quickly undressed and lowered herself in. After washing her thick hair with an herbal tonic, she felt refreshed and soaked peacefully until the water grew lukewarm.

By the time Maxi dried and dressed, Ludis returned with a bowl of porridge mixed with barley, potatoes, onions, and eggs. After eating her fill, she found that her headache had faded and decided to read by the fire.

"Shall I take the kittens away, so they don't disturb you?" Ludis asked as she gathered the breakfast dishes.

Maxi shook her head, reluctant to send the tiny creatures away from the warmth of her room. "Th-That won't be n-necessary. Th-They've been behaving."

Ludis smiled. "The black-haired one is so docile, but the other two are mischievous little things. The moment they recovered some strength, they started running about the room. They'll make fine mouse hunters one day."

Maxi was relieved to hear Ludis speaking of the kittens so fondly. She had worried that Ludis might resent the additional responsibility, but the maidservant seemed as smitten with them as Maxi was.

"I th-thought of names f-for them yesterday. The black one i-is Roy, the white one i-is Laura, a-and the gray t-tabby is R-Ron."

Ludis knitted her brows and mouthed each name, then smiled. "I shall let the servants know. They've all taken a liking to these precious things, and the cook has high hopes for them. He even prepared treats to help them grow faster so that they can start catching mice in the kitchen."

She pointed to a flat wooden bowl on the floor, where the kittens were happily feasting on milk and fish porridge. Maxi smiled at them, then turned her attention back to her book.

Though Maxi had made little progress on cultivating mana affinity, reading had given her a better understanding of the governing

concepts and principles of magic. This was the last of the books that Ruth had assigned her, and she was eager to learn more.

Just as Maxi took out a fresh piece of parchment and turned to the final chapter of the book, Laura scampered over to her and began clawing at the hem of her dress. Maxi leaned down and absently scratched the kitten's back, but Laura soon began to yowl so loudly that Maxi could not focus on her reading. Agitated, she glanced down at the kitten.

Ludis came over and scooped Laura up, dropping her in the basket, but the poor thing continued to mew pathetically.

"Shall I take them outside, my lady?"

"N-No. I was a-about to head to the l-library. C-Could you l-look after them f-for a little while?"

"Of course, my lady. They'll quiet down once they've had a chance to play."

Maxi gathered her book and notes, slipped a robe over her dress, and left the room. After passing quickly through the chilled corridors, she arrived at the library and was greeted by Ruth.

"Did you grow any taller in your sleep?" the mage asked, looking up at her with a smirk.

Maxi stared in confusion, then remembered her drunken behavior and blushed. "Embarrassing a lady b-by bringing up her blunders is a g-great discourtesy."

"I know of no lady capable of drinking half a barrel of wine by herself."

Maxi eyed him distrustfully. "Y-You're lying. I couldn't have had so much."

"And that's only counting the wine. If we were to include the ale …" He trailed off, his smirk turning to a teasing grin. "But seeing as you're perfectly sound this morning, you must be a natural drinker. Sir Hebaron wouldn't stop singing your praises."

"I s-suffered a t-terrible headache when I woke up th-this morning."

"But you seem perfectly fine."

"Because I-I drank h-herbal tea!"

As a noblewoman, Maxi could think of few things more mortifying than being branded a drunkard. To her relief, Ruth seemed to have grown bored with teasing her. He shrugged and sat down at the desk.

"We'll have plenty more opportunities to see just how well you can hold your liquor."

"H-How dare you! I w-won't be drinking l-like that from n-now on."

"If you say so. You're here to study, no?" He waved to the chair across from him. "Please have a seat. How far have you read?"

Maxi shot him a resentful look before sitting down despondently. "I-I only have th-this left, though I can't s-say I've understood e-everything I read …."

"You've made fast progress. I shall try to explain anything you found difficult in as simple terms as possible."

Maxi pulled out rolls of parchment from her leather pouch and handed them to Ruth, who skimmed over the pages and smiled.

"I see that you've been studying hard. I'm glad that you're so determined."

"I wrote down everything I could not u-understand," Maxi mumbled, embarrassed by the rare compliment.

Ruth cleared his throat and adopted a serious look. "Then allow me to explain. Please focus."

Maxi hastily took out a quill, an ink bottle, and a piece of fresh parchment from her pouch. Once she was ready, Ruth launched into his lecture, and Maxi took careful notes on every word. For a few hours, the only sound in the library was Ruth's monotonous voice and the scratching of Maxi's quill.

Well into the afternoon, Maxi requested a light meal from a maidservant, and they moved the desk closer to the brazier before continuing the lesson. When the food arrived, they ate their bread and soup without breaking. While she listened to Ruth, Maxi dipped pieces of bread into her soup with one hand and took notes with the other.

Every so often, Ruth would ramble excitedly about complex concepts, but he always explained them to her in simpler terms if

she asked. He was surprisingly patient—even when she failed to grasp something right away. He never became exasperated with her, and this encouraged Maxi to ask questions freely.

"This reminds me of my time in the Mage Tower," Ruth said suddenly, a nostalgic expression on his face.

Maxi looked up from her notes and gave Ruth a quizzical look. "D-Didn't you l-leave the tower b-because you h-hated it there?"

"What I disliked was the tower's rules, not the tower itself." A faint longing crept into Ruth's voice as he continued. "It is, after all, the only place in the world where hundreds of well-educated mages gather to cultivate their skills."

Maxi could not help but be curious. The Mage Tower was located on Nornui, a sequestered island that outsiders were rarely allowed to visit. Though Nornui's port was frequented by merchants from the Southern and Western Continents, only authorized mages were allowed inside the Tower. For generations, countless bards from all across the continent had sung of the enigmatic island. Maxi had heard a few of them and developed her own fantasies about the place.

"D-Do all m-mages study in the M-Mage Tower?"

Ruth shook his head. "Are you not currently studying magic in Anatol, my lady? Learning elemental magic does require study in the Mage Tower, but basic magic isn't as strict. In fact, most itinerant mages who work with mercenaries are unaffiliated with the Tower."

"E-Elemental magic?" Maxi tilted her head.

Ruth ran his hand through his hair, evidently surprised that he had not explained the concept yet. "As you learned in *Introduction to Magic,* mana is made up of six different elements: wind, water, earth, fire, light, and darkness. Mana is the perfect balance of these elements. While basic magic involves the accumulation of all six elements in equal proportions, elemental magic requires the extraction and accumulation of a *single* element inside the body in order to harness the pure energy of that element."

"I-Isn't it better to u-use all the elements than j-just one?"

"Not always. The more unstable the energy source, the more powerful a spell becomes. Hence, magic concentrated in one

element is ten times more powerful than typical magic. As I mentioned, magic requires us to disrupt nature's balance through meticulous calculation. Let's imagine that we have six bricks. If you placed these bricks in neat rows on the floor, it would be difficult to scatter them because they're in a stable state—but if you placed them in a pile, you could easily topple them over."

Maxi nodded, recalling his explanation of mana and magic; magic went against the rules of nature, while mana adhered to the natural order. She began to understand, if only dimly, how the accumulation of pure elemental mana amplified the power of magic.

Pleased with her progress, Ruth smiled and rolled up his sleeve to expose his wrist. A small magic rune was inked in red on his pale skin.

"To learn elemental magic, a rune like this must be inscribed on your body at the Mage Tower. Through this rune, I can accumulate pure wind mana."

"W-Wouldn't it be e-easier f-for me to learn m-magic if I had something s-similar o-on my body?" Maxi asked with breathless expectation.

"These runes can only be inscribed by the high mages of the Mage Tower," Ruth explained. "To receive one requires four years of training in the Tower. During that time, you're prohibited from leaving Nornui."

Maxi's shoulders slumped in disappointment, and Ruth clicked his tongue.

"You've only just started learning the foundations of magic," he said. "How can you be thinking about elemental magic already? I suggest you focus on learning basic spells first."

"I-I was j-just asking," Maxi muttered sheepishly, hiding her face behind a book.

Grinning, Ruth leafed through his own book, then stood to light some candles. Though the day was still young, thick clouds darkened the sky, casting shadows in the library. Using tongs, Ruth plucked an ember from the brazier and held it to the wicks of the candles and oil lamps. Maxi returned to her reading, rubbing her tired eyes now and then.

When it was time for supper, Maxi gathered up her books and rolls of parchment.

"Will you be eating in the dining hall?" Ruth asked as she stood.

Maxi shook her head. Facing the knights after her drunken spectacle last night was out of the question.

"I-I plan to d-dine in my room so I can c-continue my s-studies."

Ruth saw through her excuse. "Haven't you ever seen a belligerent drunk? Behaving a little foolishly is nothing to be ashamed of. Why don't you use this opportunity to get to know the knights better? I think they found you rather amusing."

"I do not wish t-to be *a-amusing*."

Contrary to her words, Maxi was a little comforted. Did the knights really look on her favorably? As she turned Ruth's words over in her mind, the library door swung open and Riftan, still armed, strode into the library.

"Why are you still here at this hour?" Riftan asked brusquely.

Maxi flinched, wondering whether he was still angry with her, and studied his face.

"I would think what one does in a library is obvious," Ruth answered flatly.

Riftan glowered at him. He scanned the contents of the desk—empty plates and trays from lunch lay next to chaotic piles of books and papers—and a deep crease appeared on his forehead.

"The maidservants told me that you've been here since noon," Riftan said, looking dumbfounded. "Have you been reading all this time?"

"Some people *enjoy* reading, Sir Riftan," Ruth said. "The same way you like to spend your days swinging your sword."

A hint of displeasure flashed across Riftan's face, and Maxi hastily gathered up her belongings.

"I-I was just a-about t-to leave …"

Riftan took the books from her. "Come. I've asked the servants to bring our meal to our bedchamber."

"And not to the dining hall?" Ruth asked.

Riftan glanced over his shoulder at Ruth. "All the knights are lazing about in their quarters. They were grumbling about how exhausted

they were, so I've instructed the servants to bring them their meals there."

Ruth shuddered. "Those men have an endless reserve of stamina. What have you done to them? All they did was offer her ladyship some wine."

Maxi looked up at Riftan in surprise, wondering if he had truly punished the knights for her drunkenness. Suspecting the answer, she hung her head in shame.

Riftan snorted. "I just happened to notice how undisciplined they'd become when I saw them staggering about intoxicated. An intensive training session was in order."

"Of course you did," Ruth said, sighing loudly.

Pretending not to hear, Riftan grabbed Maxi's hand and pulled her toward the door. Maxi quickly said her farewell to Ruth and followed Riftan into the cold corridor, practically running to keep up with him.

"A-Are you …"

Riftan came to an abrupt halt and turned to face her.

"A-Are you still a-angry?" she asked.

He did not answer.

"I-I assure you, I w-w-won't ever drink th-th—s-so much again. I-I didn't know I'd g-get so d-drunk."

"I'm not angry anymore," Riftan said and strode forward again.

Maxi followed in silence, all the while stealing glances at his face. His lips were pressed together firmly, belying his words.

"Is Ruth always there with you in the library?" Riftan asked abruptly when they reached the stairs.

"P-Pardon?" Maxi eyed him, confused, before nodding slowly. "R-Ruth s-seems to spend m-most of his time i-in the library, s-so he's almost always there w-when I am."

Maxi decided to hide the fact that the mage had taken up residence in the library, feeling she owed him at least that much.

Riftan frowned. "Don't you find the man exasperating? He's wily as a fox and always roping people into doing things for him or using them for strange experiments."

"W-Well, yes … But I-I'm the one wh-who's a-always bothering him. H-He has a caustic personality, but he's t-taught me so much.

And h-he helped me w-when I first a-arrived at the c-castle."

Riftan's demeanor shifted, becoming unsettlingly subdued. The strange tension made Maxi anxious, but she was not sure what had upset him. Did Riftan dislike Ruth? She had seen the two of them bicker over the most trivial affairs, but she thought that they shared a sort of bond—that they trusted each other. Not knowing what to do, she shifted her eyes nervously.

"Do you like intelligent men?" Riftan asked as they neared the door to their room.

Maxi blinked, astonished to realize that jealousy was the reason for Riftan's discontent. She had never thought of Ruth in a romantic manner, so it never occurred to her that Riftan might find the arrangement displeasing.

"N-No, I don't!" Maxi said, panicked by the thought that Riftan might doubt her fidelity. "I r-respect Ruth, b-b-but I've n-never thought of him that way. H-He's overly critical and n-nags me every chance he g-g-gets. His e-extensive knowledge has b-b—has pproved useful, a-and I am grateful f-for his help, but … He's a-always got an o-opinion about everything! S-So I w-w—I could n-never … I-It is you I—"

Maxi clamped her mouth shut and swallowed her next words. Riftan stared at her vacantly, and she opened and closed her mouth uselessly before hanging her head. Her ears and face burned red. When the long silence became unbearable, she hesitantly spoke again.

"I-If you're ccurious about the kind of man I l-like … I like m-m-men who are d-dependable, ch-chivalrous, a-and g-g-good with h-horses."

"Are you …"

Riftan's words trailed off into a dull thud, and Maxi looked up in surprise. He had slammed his head against the door and now stood with his forehead pressed against the polished wood.

He sighed. "Haven't you tempted me enough?"

"TTempted you?"

Riftan regarded her with narrowed eyes, then grabbed Maxi's hand and opened the door to their bedchamber, pulling her into the room.

When the door closed behind them, he scooped her up and pressed her against the wall.

Maxi gasped in surprise and Riftan captured her mouth with his, pushing his tongue inside. Maxi gripped his thick arms to steady herself. The sensation of his soft tongue against her own, teasing her, sent pleasant tremors through her. He tasted of something untamed and exhilarating that Maxi could not name. As he thrust his tongue in deeper, searching and hungry, she clung to him and nearly forgot to breathe.

Riftan moaned against her mouth and the feverish sound sent a sharp surge of pleasure to the core of her, igniting a fire in her body. As she wrapped her arms around his neck, she glimpsed through half-lidded eyes a handful of startled maidservants standing in the room behind Riftan. Maxi's heart stopped and she stared dumbly at them.

The maidservants had been in the middle of preparing their meal when Riftan and Maxi burst in, and they now stood frozen, their hands hovering over table settings and unlit candles.

Maxi cried out and tried to push Riftan away. "R-R-Riftan!"

Riftan leaned back and, seeing Maxi's panicked expression, glanced over his shoulder. He calmly stepped away from the door, pulling Maxi along with him.

"If you are done, you may leave," he said to the maidservants.

Their eyes darted between the bright red face of their mistress and the impassive face of their lord. Maxi was certain that she would die of embarrassment. The maidservants seemed to come to a wordless decision together.

"H-Have a pleasant evening, my lord, my lady," one said with a polite bow. The rest followed her lead, and they all scurried out of the door, taking the basket of sleeping kittens with them.

Riftan thanked the maidservants, then shut the door behind them and immediately resumed kissing Maxi. She pushed his face away, her eyes stinging with tears.

"H-How am I to f-face them again?"

"They're only servants. No need to care what they think." Riftan leaned in and peppered her neck with kisses.

Astounded that he would persist when she felt so humiliated, she pushed him back again. "Y-You're hardly a-around so you don't s-see them much, b-but I spend a-all day with them!"

"But you spend most of your time with Ruth," Riftan said, lips curved into a small, unnerving smile.

Maxi stiffened at his accusatory tone. His dark eyes reminded her of a beast, and the glint in them made her shudder.

"Th-That isn't t-true. I-I spend far more t-time with the m-maidservants."

"Is that so?"

"Y-Yes."

"I am your husband. Shouldn't I be the one you spend the most time with?"

"Th-That's h-hardly my fault."

Riftan was always away from the castle and, although Maxi knew that he only tended to his duties as the lord of Anatol, she could not help but take an accusatory tone with him as he had with her. She studied his face for signs of displeasure, but he simply sighed.

"I know," Riftan said, striding to the table and sitting down. "What I mean to say is that since we don't have much time to spend together, I'd like you to focus on me when I'm here."

When Maxi sat down as well, Riftan pulled his seat closer to hers, took her hands in his, and kissed them. She found it difficult to think when he was so intensely affectionate.

With his lips still touching her fingers, Maxi smiled in spite of herself and nodded. She felt she could endure any humiliation if she could see him happy.

AS THE WEATHER GREW COLDER, RIFTAN BEGAN TO spend more time at the castle. Each morning, before dawn, he joined the sentries at the training grounds, and in the afternoon he did reconnaissance outside the castle walls with his knights, vanquishing any monsters they encountered. But he always returned at dusk to join Maxi for supper.

They had far more leisure time together now than they had in the fall. During the day, Maxi read the books that Ruth assigned her or practiced cultivating mana. In the evening, she adorned herself in

finery, with the help of the maidservants, and enjoyed a pleasant meal with Riftan.

As they spent more time together, Maxi began to learn more about Riftan. One of the first things she noticed was that he cared little for luxury or fine things. When he was not clad in armor, he wore plain clothes in dull colors, and he only ever wore unembellished belts.

This aversion to luxury was more than a simple consequence of being unfamiliar with it. He seemed to find the attire commonly worn by noblemen—tight silk trousers, extravagant floor-length tunics, padded shoulders, pointed shoes, feathered hats—absurd. When Maxi had offered him a feathered hat made by the dressmaker, Riftan had regarded it with such disdain that Maxi hid it away. He had agreed to wear the thing for her sake, but it was apparent that he did not wish to.

Riftan valued practicality above all else, and so avoided embellishments that were designed only to impress. Instead, he favored simple clothes made of durable fabrics that allowed him to move unencumbered.

He had a penchant for liquor and greasy food, but he never demanded rare delicacies or complained about food like the nobles Maxi had met at Croyso Castle. Years of knighthood seemed to have ingrained a love of efficiency in him, and he only gave the servants orders that he deemed absolutely necessary.

Contrary to this austerity, Riftan lavished luxury upon Maxi. He liked to see her in extravagant dresses and adorned with glittering jewels; he wished for her to live a life of comfort, her every need attended to by servants. Riftan despised the vanity and empty formalities of the nobility, yet seemed determined to see that Maxi had the exquisite life of an aristocrat. All of this seemed to be the result of his desire to prove he was worthy of a duke’s daughter.

Maxi could not quite understand it, but Riftan seemed to both envy and loathe the nobility. She tried her best to play the part of a refined noblewoman so he would not be disappointed, but it was only a poor imitation of her sister’s prim and elegant manners. It was only a matter of time before Riftan discovered the truth.

Maxi frowned as she studied the basics of geometry. When spring arrived, nobles would visit Anatol, and Riftan would quickly notice the difference between his wife and the proper noblewomen he hosted.

She tapped anxiously at the desk with her fingertips. Perhaps she should give up geometry and study etiquette. Maxi had never attended a grand ball, let alone hosted one, and was sure to fail miserably when one was expected here at Calypse Castle.

"Please focus," Ruth said sternly, frowning in irritation at her tapping.

Ludis had joined Maxi in the library today as a chaperone, and she turned to the mage with a sharp look for his tone. Ruth ignored her.

"Once you finish this book," he said, "you'll have learned all the basics, so please try to focus. You must master these theories before we can move on to runes."

"I-I'm t-trying my best. I-I'm just a-a little t-tired …."

Ludis placed a cup of honey ginger tea in front of her. "Please have some tea, my lady."

"Th-Thank you."

Ludis gave her a soft smile, then placed another cup in front of Ruth with a noticeable clang and a stony expression. Maxi shook her head helplessly.

Since learning that Riftan disliked her spending time alone with Ruth, Maxi had made sure to have Ludis present for her lessons. Ludis, however, did not get along with the sorcerer. The maidservant disapproved of his brash manners and blunt words, especially when he directed them toward Maxi.

"How is your mana cultivation going?" Ruth asked, ignoring how aggressively Ludis served his tea.

Maxi clutched her cup in both hands. "I-I'm afraid th-there hasn't been m-much progress."

After blowing on his steaming cup and taking a sip, Ruth knitted his brows. "I must admit, I am surprised. You seem to have an innate ability to absorb mana, so I assumed that you would grasp it quickly."

"An innate a-ability? D-Do you mean t-to say that m-my body is r-receptive to m-mana?"

"Do you not recall absorbing my magic at the oak tree? Your body is primed for mana absorption. Usually, to be capable of that, one must train from a very young age to build up a mana pathway."

Maxi frowned. The mana pathway referred to the narrow passages in the body through which mana was absorbed.

"H-How do you develop y-your mana p-pathway?"

"A high-ranking mage must periodically infuse your body with magic—you would need to be their apprentice. Being exposed to magic from a young age naturally helps the apprentice develop his or her mana pathway, priming their body for stronger mana absorption."

Maxi nodded silently, clenching her jaw as an unwelcome thought occurred to her. Could her mana affinity be the product of years of magical healing? She stared at her palms. That the one remarkable thing about her could be the result of her father's cruel discipline left an unpleasant taste in her mouth.

Seeing her face grow dark, Ruth said, "There's no rush, my lady. I am sure you will improve with practice."

Maxi forced a smile. Perhaps it did not matter how she had acquired her ability. The question now was how she would use it. Pulling herself together, she resumed her study of magical theory.

She did not look up again until hours later when the library door flung open and Riftan entered. It had become his habit to burst into the library, searching for Maxi, after he finished his duties for the day.

Ruth let out an exasperated sigh. "Is training over already?"

"Training the sentries in this cold will only bring down their morale," Riftan said. "I'll allow them a day or two of rest." He approached Maxi and bent down to kiss her forehead.

Maxi blushed as he stroked her hair affectionately.

"Have you been cooped up here since morning?" he whispered.

"Y-Yes, I stopped b-by the s-stables, then came here."

Riftan frowned. "You spend more time in here than in our bedchambers."

"Th-That's not t-true. I've spent p-plenty of time there …."

Indeed, Maxi was spending far more time in their room since Riftan's return from the raid. Thinking about how she now spent every night in his arms made her face burn.

Riftan sighed and wrapped his arms around her shoulders. "I must disagree."

"Please save your displays of affection for when you're alone," Ruth said with a disgusted groan. "I cannot stomach it any longer."

"Then look away."

"Why don't you return to your room? All I'm asking is for you to recognize the difference between a library and a bedchamber."

Maxi buried her burning face in her hands.

Riftan clicked his tongue. "Very well. We'll return to our room. Get up, Maxi." He grabbed her arm.

"R-Riftan …" Maxi gripped the desk and remained seated. She was not so shameless that she would follow him to their room so early in the day. "H-Have you f-finished attending t-to all your d-duties?"

"I've ordered another knight to take over the rounds. Come, now."

As Riftan tugged at her arm, she tightened her grip on the desk. She enjoyed spending time with him, but spending the rest of the day in bed seemed indecent. What would the servants think? Her eyes darted from Ruth to Ludis, then landed on the books before her.

"I-I haven't f-finished r-reading …"

"You can read some other time."

"I-I intend to f-finish these t-today."

A crease formed on Riftan's forehead. "What is it?" he asked, flipping through the book that was open before her. "What's so compelling about these books?" Riftan stopped on a page filled with intricate diagrams and passages written in the ancient tongue. His frown deepened. "Are you trying to learn magic?"

"Didn't you know?" Ruth asked. "Her ladyship has been under my tutelage for several weeks now."

Riftan's head snapped up. "What?"

"Did you not inform him?" Ruth looked at Maxi, one brow raised in surprise, before turning back to Riftan. "Her ladyship seems to have

magical potential, so I've been instructing—"

"With whose permission?!" Riftan slammed the book closed.

Maxi flinched. She had not told Riftan because she was not confident that she would actually be able to perform magic. She had thought the news of her studies would make him happy and she worried about getting his hopes up, only to disappoint him. Mages were valuable assets, after all. In recent years, the demand for them had surpassed the number of skilled mages available. Maxi had heard that even low-ranking mages were now treated like royalty. Yet Riftan did not seem pleased in the slightest.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Riftan glowered at Ruth, his tone as severe as if the mage had committed a crime.

"Well, you were away on a raid when the lessons began …" Ruth trailed off, seeming to struggle for words. He looked uncharacteristically flustered as he continued. "She won't be learning anything difficult. Would it not be helpful if the lady of Anatol mastered basic defensive and healing spells?"

"*Helpful?* I don't need help!" Riftan's shout echoed through the library.

Maxi bunched her skirt in her fists, frightened by his tone and hurt by his words.

Seeing her face go pale, Riftan muttered a curse and wrapped his arms around her shoulders. "I didn't bring you here because I needed your help," he said, his voice softer now. "I just … I wanted you to live in comfort. Performing magic is draining—more than you might think."

"I-I'm not t-trying to do a-anything d-dangerous. I j-just want t-to be helpful—"

"Did you not hear me? I don't need your help!"

She flinched again, shocked by his vehemence. Looking unsure of himself, Riftan anxiously caressed her face.

"Don't look at me like that," he said. "I'm not saying no. I just …" He trailed off and bit his lip.

A heavy silence fell over the library. Riftan glanced between Maxi's crestfallen face and Ruth's sullen one, then ran a hand through his hair.

"Do as you please," he said, his mouth twisting bitterly.

With that, he turned around and strode out of the library. All Maxi could do was watch him go.

DARKNESS FELL, BUT RIFTAN DID NOT RETURN. MAXI paced around her room, glancing out the window each time she passed it. According to Rodrigo, Riftan had ridden out of the castle grounds after leaving the library and was unarmed.

Maxi was sick with worry. Sensing her distress, the kittens awoke from their slumber by the fireplace and began to mew at her feet. Maxi scooped them up and sat on the bed, placing them on her lap. For a while, she stroked the kittens, but eventually lay down and slowly closed her eyes.

Riftan's outburst confounded her. Did he think her impudent? Or was he disappointed that she had kept her magic training a secret? She should have discussed it with him first, but she could not understand why her lessons had upset him ….

As Maxi was lost in thought, the door opened. She opened her eyes at the sound, then quickly closed them. She could tell it was Riftan just by the sound of his footsteps. With her back toward him, Maxi pretended to be asleep—she did not have the courage to face him.

Riftan approached the bed and stood quietly over her for a moment, then gently picked up the kittens and placed them inside their basket one by one.

Maxi strained her ears to follow his movements. She heard him set the basket by the fireplace. After removing his cloak, he returned to the bed and sat down to remove his boots. She waited, unmoving, for him to lie down next to her, but Riftan remained where he was.

Her heart clenched painfully, and Maxi buried her face in the pillow. Did he despise her so much that he no longer wished to share a bed? She had only wanted to help—he was the one who had said that he detested incompetent fools.

Maxi bit her lip. She had been convinced that he needed her. To hear him say otherwise was painful. Curling up into a ball, she clutched the sheets and hid her face.

A calloused finger grazed her skin as, with faltering hands, Riftan caressed her cheek and brushed aside a few stray strands of hair. Maxi held her breath. Even without opening her eyes, she knew that he gazed at her, intense as the flames in the fireplace. He grazed the back of his hand along her cheek, then placed the tip of his finger on her lips. She reflexively shrank away, and he must have thought she spurned him because he slowly withdrew. Maxi grabbed his hand, stopping him.

"R-Riftan …" Maxi searched his face, unsure of her next words.

He seemed unsurprised that she was awake; he must have known that she had only been pretending. His ink-black eyes gleamed softly beneath his disheveled hair as he watched her silently. Maxi's heart withered under that impassive gaze. Perhaps she had angered him so badly that he had come to hate her. The thought terrified her.

"I-I am s-sorry. P-Please forgive me …." She did not know what she was apologizing for, but the words left her mouth before she could think about them.

Riftan inhaled sharply and took her into his arms. "Don't apologize. You did nothing wrong. I just …" His hand slid through her hair before coming to a stop at the back of her head.

Burying her nose in his chest, Maxi breathed shakily, her shoulders trembling.

Riftan stroked her back reassuringly and murmured into her ear. "You can learn magic or anything else you want, so please don't be afraid."

"I-I am not a-afraid."

"That's a lie. I can feel you shaking—damn it! I finally managed to make you smile, but now we've gone back to the way things were at the beginning."

"I-I'm really not s-scared." Maxi bit her trembling lip. His gentle embrace and assurances had eased her fears, but the anguished feeling of being useless to him still threatened to drown her. She clutched his tunic and pressed her forehead against his chest. "But you s-said you d-didn't need me …."

Riftan's arms tightened around her, and he shook his head vigorously. "That's not what I meant."

"I-Is my w-wanting to help an in-inconvenience?"

"That isn't what I said."

"I-I just wanted t-to do s-something, anything w-within my abilities …"

"You don't have to do anyth—" Riftan stopped mid-outburst and sighed in frustration. He eyed her for a moment, then abruptly pressed his lips to hers.

When Maxi cupped his face and kissed him back, his jaw quivered, as if he might melt beneath her touch. She felt him swallow hard before he pushed his tongue into her mouth with slow intensity. Maxi shuddered lightly as Riftan's knee pushed into her skirt.

"You can do as you wish," he mumbled, gently sucking on her lip. "So, please, don't look at me like that."

His pleading tone tempted her to give in, but she pressed on. "Y-You f-flew into a ttemper."

"Forgive me. It won't happen again."

He stroked her back as if trying to pacify a small, fearful creature. Through her thin chemise, Maxi could feel the calluses on his large hand. She relaxed and nuzzled in his neck.

"Maxi …" A shiver ran through his body as he spoke.

"Y-Your skin feels cold. W-Were you outdoors th-this whole time?"

"I needed to cool my head …." His voice trailed off like a candle sputtering out as Maxi stroked his chest with her fingertips.

Blushing, Maxi pretended not to notice his arousal pressed against her thigh. Perhaps she was being too bold, but he did not object, so she continued to nuzzle at him.

"B-Because you were a-angry with me?"

"It wasn't you I was angry with …." His voice shook with his desire.

After hesitating briefly, Maxi reached down to touch him over his trousers. Heat rose to her head, and she was overcome with a need to see Riftan come undone. She was sure the day's distress had done something to her; she would never be so bold as this otherwise. As she slid her hands inside his tunic and caressed his narrow, finely muscled waist, Riftan sucked in a breath as if he had been kicked in the gut.

"Maxi …"

Ignoring the agitation in his voice, Maxi traced the muscular lines of his abdomen with her fingertip. He was hard as a rock under her touch. Fascinated, Maxi pressed gently against the tense muscles, then teased the flesh around his navel.

Riftan stifled a moan, his face tense with longing. "Do you know what you're doing to me right now?" A deep line appeared on his forehead, and his lips quivered.

Maxi raised her head to kiss the corner of his mouth, and Riftan began to paw hungrily at her. As his hands slid through her hair, she moaned and tugged at his tunic pleadingly. Riftan grabbed her fumbling hands and guided her down to the hard heat of his desire. A burning flush crept up to the tips of Maxi's ears as Riftan impatiently pressed himself into her hand and his breath grew ragged.

"Ah …"

Maxi's ears burned with the sound of his shuddering moan, and she cautiously began to move her hand, stroking him through his trousers. Riftan trembled under her touch, and the sight of her imposing husband quivering like a wounded beast enraptured her.

"A-Are you in p-pain?"

"Yes … It's killing me." Riftan pulled her into his arms and muttered something inaudible.

Summoning her courage, Maxi undid the straps of his trousers. After a moment of hesitation, she touched him as gently as he did when he touched her. He was so surprisingly smooth and warm she found it hard to believe that this was the part of him that had once caused her agony.

"M-Maxi …" Riftan breathed her name raggedly and grabbed her shoulders.

Spellbound, she watched his face as she touched him. His eyes clouded with desire, and he clung to her, trembling with his need. Maxi realized she had started something she could not contain but did not know how to proceed.

"Don't stop," Riftan begged her. "Just a little more, Maxi …"

"W-What should I d-do?"

Riftan pressed the back of his hand to his forehead, briefly overcome by her naivety, then guided her hand until it was wrapped around him.

"Move your hand up and down … Slowly … Yes, just like that …"

His face was flushed with excitement, and Maxi gazed into his feverish eyes as she began to stroke his length. Her heart pounded painfully inside her chest, and her breath became as uneven as his. It was all too much to bear.

All thoughts of shame had disappeared. Maxi kissed his Adam's apple and began moving her hand a little faster. Riftan's breath caught in his throat. Having reached the limits of his patience, he quickly removed her hand and positioned himself between her legs. Maxi readily opened herself to him and, in one swift motion, he pushed her chemise up and thrust into her.

"Ah …" Maxi gasped; it was difficult to breathe under his weight.

Joined together, their bodies quivered, but Riftan seemed to sense that she was not ready and slid out of her. He stroked her hair and thrust into her again, more slowly this time. Maxi's thighs trembled as they clenched around his hips, and she held on to his arms. It felt as if she were embracing a ball of flames.

"R-Riftan …" she moaned.

Droplets of sweat trickled down his forehead and disappeared into his long lashes. He blinked them away as Maxi watched him in wonder.

Riftan could carry her up multiple flights of stairs or ride for hours at a time without breaking a sweat, yet she had driven him into a breathless frenzy. Greed and a wicked, sensual pleasure stirred within her.

She drew him closer, and Riftan moaned. He began to move with greater urgency, and all she could feel was pleasure shivering relentlessly through her. Maxi moaned softly and dug her nails into his sweat-slicked back. Sweat soaked her chemise and the fabric clung to her skin as their bodies pulsated wildly against each other.

She rocked her hips, her body burning feverishly as she beseeched him for more. Riftan had the look of a half-crazed man, and Maxi was thrilled to see him so overcome with primal need. She wanted

to bind him to her body so he could never again say he did not need her, so he could never turn his back on her or leave her.

With overwhelming desire surging through her, Maxi clung to his shoulders. Riftan drew her to him by the neck and hungrily claimed her mouth, trying to devour her with his tongue.

"Maxi …" He gasped for air, his brow furrowed in something like anguish.

His expression puzzled her. She was the one who feared that he might one day grow bored with her. What did he have to fear? Why were his eyes so full of sorrow?

"You're driving me crazy," Riftan murmured and thrust more deeply into her.

He already filled her completely, yet he drove himself in deeper, seeking a greater satisfaction. Maxi could no longer comprehend his words. The sharp pleasure raking her insides overwhelmed her senses and curled her toes. She wound her legs around his waist.

Riftan's body shuddered and he kissed her roughly, his wet tongue entwining with hers. They were careless in their passion and a faint taste of blood trickled into her mouth, but Maxi ignored it and abandoned herself to pleasure.

SOMETHING COOL TOUCHED THE SKIN BETWEEN MAXI'S legs. With a jolt, she opened her eyes and found Riftan wiping her swollen flesh with a wet cloth. She released her breath and muttered sleepily.

"It's still dawn," Riftan said when she stirred. "Go back to sleep."

When he finished, he gently tucked the blanket back around her. Maxi realized that he was already dressed, and she blinked at him in a daze. It was already morning?

Riftan swept her hair back from her forehead. Her eyes were still heavy with sleep, but he seemed perfectly awake. As always, Riftan's face betrayed no emotion, as though nothing had happened the night before. It perplexed her that he could look so collected after such an intense encounter.

"I-I should g-get up," Maxi said and hastily tossed back the covers.

"I told you to get more sleep."

His stern tone made Maxi hesitate with one foot out of bed. Was he still angry?

Riftan's lips twisted into a bitter, knowing smile. "I meant what I said. You can do as you please, so don't look at me like that."

"B-But …"

"Though why you'd want to learn something so useless is beyond me."

Maxi's shoulders slumped. It seemed Riftan had not taken her seriously when she said she wanted to be of help.

"But," Riftan added as he finished tying his boot laces. "I suppose it *would* be useful if you knew a few defensive spells. I would never allow a situation that would require you to use them, but it wouldn't hurt."

"I-I …" Maxi clenched her mouth shut. She wanted to learn magic to help him, not to protect herself. But she had never done anything to suggest that she could be depended on. It was no wonder Riftan doubted whether she could become a capable sorceress. He had, after all, seen her faint when faced with danger, and so he pacified her the way he would a child throwing a tantrum. Asking for his confidence was too much to demand.

Trying to hide her disappointment, Maxi nodded. "Th-Thank you f-for letting me s-study magic."

Permission was a start. She was certain that he would think of her differently if she could become a skilled sorceress. For now, all she could do was study harder.

Riftan planted a kiss on her forehead, then rose from the bed. "Tell me immediately if Ruth tries to drag you into strange experiments," he said with an ambiguous expression.

"Y-You shouldn't worry a-about that. H-He's been a g-good teacher."

She had intended to reassure him, but his face grew dark with her words. Maxi tensed, fearful that she had said something wrong, but Riftan left the room without another word.

Maxi sat in bed, listening to his fading footsteps as the faint light of morning streamed in through the window. With a sigh, she flopped back into the pillows and pulled the blankets over her head.

Everything should be all right now. Shouldn't it?

She closed her eyes, overcome by fatigue.

FROM THAT DAY ON, RIFTAN DID NOT MENTION HER studies with Ruth again. He even stopped barging into the library. But this change only made Maxi more anxious. It seemed like Riftan wished to disregard the fact that she was learning magic.

Maxi struggled to understand why he found the matter so disagreeable, but she was optimistic that he would come around once she mastered a useful spell. No lord would be opposed to having another mage under his command. Even the princess of Wedon had become a sorceress after she showed magical affinity.

Even if Maxi could not become as skilled as Princess Agnes, she could still help Anatol with simple healing magic. Riftan would surely acknowledge her abilities then.

Maxi leafed through her book impatiently, her brow furrowed. She wanted to learn magic as quickly as possible, and her lack of progress frustrated her. Ruth, who had been scribbling something on a map, looked up from across the table.

"Haste has little value when studying magic," Ruth said. "It takes time to learn magic, and you've only just finished learning the basics."

Maxi looked at him sheepishly, certain the mage must have a pair of invisible eyes, for he always seemed to notice the moment she lost her concentration.

"B-But I s-still don't know a s-single spell," Maxi grumbled, tucking her hair behind her ears.

"That's to be expected. You cannot perform magic with theoretical knowledge alone. You must accumulate an adequate amount of mana first."

Maxi pressed her lips together. The truth of his words stung. She feared she was incapable of accumulating enough mana, and she still struggled in her practice sessions with the magic stone. Her shoulders slumped as her confidence dwindled.

"I-I practice w-with the stone e-every day, b-but I don't s-seem to be i-improving."

"Then it could be that you are not compatible with the stone. It's attuned to the fire element." Ruth fiddled with his quill, frowning as he considered a solution. "I propose a change of location. The concentration of mana varies from place to place, so practicing somewhere new could prove helpful."

Maxi's expectant hope sputtered out. Could such a thing really work? She narrowed her eyes at the mage. "W-Where would you s-suggest?"

"Well, I admit that there isn't a *significant* difference between places, but the concentration of mana is greater in areas abundant with natural matter—plants, wind, soil, and water."

Maxi looked out the rattling window. Beyond the glass and its mahogany frame, the winter sky loomed bleak and gray. The sight alone was enough to make her shiver.

"Y-You expect me t-to go outside i-in this c-cold?"

"You won't freeze to death in just a few minutes. Think of it as a short stroll through the gardens. You've been cooped up in the castle far too long anyway."

"Y-You are the l-last person wh-who should accuse m-me of that."

Ruth was the only person who spent more time in the li brary than she did. At least Maxi did her rounds of the castle once a day to oversee the servants, but the sorcerer never set foot outside the library. Indeed, he hardly ever moved from the spot he was in now. He probably took fewer than twenty steps a day. Maxi stared at his scrawny limbs pointedly.

Ruth scowled and crossed his arms. "I couldn't leave the library even if I wanted to. I'm responsible for investigating the monster migrations and designing runes for a monster detection device Sir Riftan wants installed on the ramparts. If only I could split myself in two, I could complete the work twice as fast!"

"Y-You're w-working on another m-magical device?"

"Indeed. Monsters took advantage of the heavy fog to sneak over our walls in the dead of night. To ensure that never happens again, these detection devices will be installed in locations where monsters frequently appear. It's still in the planning stages, but I'm making

good progress.” Ruth rubbed the back of his neck and yawned loudly.

Maxi suddenly noticed the dark shadows under his eyes and could not help feeling a little guilty. In her haste to learn magic, she had failed to notice Ruth’s fatigue.

“W-Would you like help?” she asked. “I could assist you in o-organizing the e-equations.”

“That would be wonderful, but I must refuse,” Ruth said and sighed. “Sir Riftan glares daggers at me every time our paths cross, and that’s simply for teaching you magic without his permission. I shudder to think what he’d do if he discovered I was making you work as my assistant.”

Was it obvious to others in the castle that Riftan was opposed to her learning magic? The thought made Maxi anxious again and, feeling despondent, she cast her eyes down.

“It is kind of you to offer, my lady,” Ruth continued in a lighter tone. “But I’d rather you focus on your studies for the time being. That would be of greater help to me.”

“I-I understand.” Maxi closed her book and stood up.

Ludis had been quietly sewing a short distance away, but when she saw Maxi preparing to leave, she promptly gathered her things as well. When Maxi reached the door, she turned to look back at Ruth.

“Th-Then I shall leave you t-to your work.”

Ruth waved half-heartedly. “Thank you. Please enjoy the fresh air for both of us.”

“I-I’m only g-going to collect mana,” Maxi grumbled.

As she stepped out of the library, Ludis hastily followed and draped a cloak over her shoulders.

“Th-Thank you,” Maxi said.

“Would you like to stop by your room for a warmer cloak?”

“N-No, th-this will do. C-Could you bring this b-book to my room?”

“Allow me to carry it for you, my lady. I cannot leave you unattended.”

“Th-That won’t be n-necessary. I-I’m only going f-for a walk.”

“But …”

"A-And I find that I can c-concentrate better w-when I am a-alone."

Seeing that Maxi had made up her mind, Ludis dutifully took the book and bowed.

Alone, Maxi made her way down the corridor, headed for the gardens. The shutters had been opened for the first time in days, airing the castle and allowing the bright sunlight to flood in. With the shutters open, it was colder than usual, so Maxi turned toward the kitchen, planning to warm herself by the fire before going outside. She walked briskly, pulling the cloak closer to her body.

When she arrived at the kitchen, however, all desire to rest there evaporated. More servants bustled about than usual—preparing ingredients, lighting fires, and moving buckets of water here and there. Maxi hovered by the door, observing them.

"Fools!" shouted the cook. "Are you trying to burn the bread? Take the loaves out of the oven at once!"

"Sorry!"

Two young lads grabbed a wooden spatula and removed pumpkin-sized loaves of bread from the oven. Their faces had gone red from the cook's scolding. While the youths were busy stacking the loaves onto a clean wooden board, eight maidservants stuffed crescent-shaped pies with minced onion, diced sausage, and spices. Five cauldrons simmered inside the fireplaces along the kitchen walls, and the place rang with the chatter of the servants as they grilled meat, mashed turnips, and boiled potatoes and eggs.

The kitchen was always busy near mealtimes, but this was excessive. Curious, Maxi approached the cook.

"D-Did his lordship r-request something that I-I'm unaware of?"

"My lady!" The cook bowed hastily. "Please forgive me for not noticing your presence."

Maxi waved her hand dismissively. "It's all right. I-It just seems th-the kitchen is b-busier than usual."

"Yes. His lordship has informed us that he will be holding cavalry training today, so he has asked us to prepare extra food."

"C-Cavalry training?"

"When the knights have mock battles on horseback at the training grounds," the cook said. "It's quite a spectacular sight." Realizing he had forgotten about the oil pot, he gave a cry and rushed to remove the crisply fried pies. After sprinkling cinnamon powder and pouring syrup over them, he gave Maxi an apologetic look. "My apologies, my lady. The pies burn quickly."

"No, it's m-my fault for disturbing you. Please c-carry on."

"Did you need something, my lady?"

"N-No, I was just p-passing through."

Not wanting to disrupt their work, Maxi left the kitchen through the back door. Outside, laborers cut firewood and loaded bundles onto a cart in the open courtyard. When they saw Maxi, they removed their hats in greeting. Maxi nodded to the men before heading down the path to the gardens.

Within a short distance, everything grew calm. Maxi threw her head back and took a deep breath. Pale winter sunlight shivered through barren tree branches like charred bones. The wind was biting, but it was a rare sunny day. After several weeks inside the stale, dimly lit library where it smelled of burning wood, Maxi found the crisp winter air invigorating.

I was reluctant to come out, but now I'm glad I did.

Maxi was so busy poring over her books that she had even neglected her riding practice with Rem. As she slowly made her way to the back garden, she noticed how strangely quiet it was. This was the time of day when the squires could usually be heard drilling their marching cadence, but Maxi did not hear a sound. They must also be at cavalry training, which meant that she would be able to train in peace.

Would she make progress this time? Maxi could not help but worry as she settled down in a sunny spot and pulled the magic stone from her pocket. The surface looked almost transparent under the bright sun. Turning the stone over in her hand a few times, Maxi gripped it tightly and closed her eyes.

She focused on the stone in her hand, waiting for the surface of the stone to heat up. Just as she feared, nothing happened. After

making several more unsuccessful attempts, she looked up at the sky and sighed.

Perhaps I don't have the talent after all ….

Maybe Ruth was mistaken about her potential to become a mage. Frustrated, Maxi kicked at the dirt. The long hours she had spent reading those incomprehensible books had come to naught. She despaired of her ineptitude—it was foolish to have dreamed she could ever become a mage—and raised her hand to hurl the stone to the ground. At the last moment, she stopped herself, instead crouching down, crestfallen.

In the distance, she could hear the sounds of the blacksmiths hammering their anvils and the lumberjacks chopping firewood. Maxi buried her face in her knees, feeling utterly useless. She was the only stagnant being in the entire castle.

"What are you doing here all alone?" a voice asked sharply.

Startled, Maxi turned to find Riftan standing a few steps behind her. He was still armored and had likely just finished training. She wondered how he had crept up on her in full armor.

"Do you feel unwell?" Riftan asked, approaching her.

"N-No. I-I was just r-r … r-resting." Flustered, Maxi hastily got up.

Riftan frowned. "When I went to the great hall, a servant told me that you had gone outside without an attendant. Where is Ludis?"

"I-I wanted to g-get some air." The half-truth slipped from her mouth easily. She was almost certain that Riftan would be angry if she told him she was practicing magic.

"You may be inside the castle walls," Riftan said, his face hard and his voice stern. "But that doesn't mean you're safe. What if something were to happen in this secluded place—"

He stopped as Maxi shrank away from him, then continued in a gentler tone. But his voice still held an edge of concern.

"There are hundreds of people in this castle, and some of them could have ill intentions. The lady of the castle shouldn't be unattended."

"I-I'm sorry …" Maxi had no argument; he was right.

Riftan's expression softened at her apology. He swept her wind blown hair back from her face and took her arm. "I'm worried about

you, that's all."

With that, he began to walk back, leading Maxi like a dejected puppy. Though he usually tried to match her pace, he took his naturally long strides now, practically pulling her along. She was so busy stealing glances at his face, hoping to gauge how angry he really was, that she did not immediately notice he was leading her away from the great hall.

"A-Aren't we g-going back to the c-castle?"

"You said you came outside for some air," he said, leading her toward the stables. "I told you before that I'd take you to the lake when it got warmer. Well, it's sunny today, so we should go for a ride."

Maxi beamed, but her smile faded when her eyes fell on his armor. "I-I heard y-you had an intense t-training session today. Sh-Shouldn't you rest?"

"You underestimate how boundless my stamina is," Riftan said, shaking his head. "I could march for three days straight without rest and be perfectly fine."

Recalling the relentless passion that he had shown her almost every night, Maxi blushed. His stamina was indeed extraordinary. Fanning her face with her hand, Maxi followed Riftan into the stable.

Inside, the servants stopped sweeping the floor to greet them with a soft chorus of "My lord, my lady."

Riftan waved dismissively and walked directly to Talon's stall. While Riftan saddled his horse, Maxi looked in on Rem. The mare stuck her head over the stall door and pawed at the ground in excitement.

"H-How are you, R-Rem?" Maxi said with an apologetic look as she patted the mare's neck.

Rem snorted and nuzzled Maxi's shoulder. Laughing, Maxi gently stroked Rem's thick mane. Qenal, the stablemaster, appeared with a bundle of fodder on his shoulders and promptly walked over to Maxi.

"Good morning, my lady. Will you be riding with his lordship today?"

Maxi nodded. "W-We plan to go to the l-lake."

The stablemaster put down the bundle of fodder and deftly saddled Rem, then handed the reins to Maxi. She led Rem outside and met Riftan, who hoisted her onto her horse.

"Don't ride too fast," he said. "The wind is cold today."

With that, he leaped onto Talon and rode toward the back gate. Maxi followed after him, her heart racing in anticipation. She recalled their ride through the meadows and immediately felt her melancholy dissipate.

"W-Where is the lake?"

"Down this path, to the west." Riftan pointed to the winding path through the forest. Surrounded by bare but densely packed trees, it did not look like an easy ride.

After a brief hesitation, Maxi cautiously steered Rem onto the rough, winding track. They were surrounded by entangled branches, but she managed to keep her balance atop the horse.

Riftan smiled. "You look far more graceful than before."

"I-I practiced w-whenever I could."

"Well done."

Maxi blushed, feeling like a child who was rarely praised. Riftan looked over his shoulder several times, and when he was satisfied that she could keep up, he urged Talon to a slightly faster pace. Maxi tailed closely behind as they galloped down the winding path.

As they rode on, the path grew wider. Soon, a glistening silver lake came into view and Maxi gasped. The mirrorlike surface of the circular lake vividly reflected the bright blue sky and rust-colored mountain peaks. Pine trees lined the lake's edge like clusters of spears, their dense branches thick with lush, dark green needles. Between the dense trees flitted winter birds, and wild animals drank along the shore.

Maxi had not seen such abundant greenery in a long while, but their horseback approach shattered the picturesque stillness. A stag poked its head out of a bush and darted away, startling a flock of birds into flight.

"I expected the lake to have frozen over, but it looks like I was wrong." Riftan tapped Talon lightly with his heels and rode to the edge of the water.

"C-Can such big lakes f-freeze over?" Maxi asked as she followed on Rem.

"In the north, lakes even bigger than this freeze solid in the winter. The ice is so thick that people can walk over them."

Maxi's eyes widened in disbelief. She had seen only thin layers of ice form in buckets of water that had been left outside. For such an immense body of water to freeze was unfathomable to her …. She looked at Riftan dubiously, thinking he might be poking fun at her ignorance.

"H-How can that be p-possible? W-What if the ice c-cracks and you f-fall in?"

"People do drown from time to time," Riftan said, as unconcerned as if he was discussing the weather.

Maxi frowned, shaking her head. "Th-Then why would p-people w-walk on the ice?"

"It's perfectly safe if the ice is thick enough," Riftan said. "Winters are harsher in the north, so unless a colossal monster like a hydra is hiding below the ice, chances of it breaking are slim."

"H-Have you w-walked across a lake before?" Maxi asked, astonished.

"Not a lake, but something similar. On a monster raid in Balto—I was still a mercenary then—we had to cross a giant glacier to pass through the Tranoa highlands. It took three days."

"G-Glacier?"

"Glaciers are blocks of ice larger than that mountain over there."

Maxi was awestruck. Riftan had experienced so many astounding things in his twenty-eight years of existence. Not only had he defeated the Red Dragon—the most powerful and ferocious monster on the continent—but he had even walked across an ice mountain.

Maxi, on the other hand, had never set foot outside her father's castle before coming to Anatol. The simple maintenance of the castle and the most basic magical studies overwhelmed her. Riftan's feats filled her with wonder. How magnificent and full of possibility the world must be in his eyes. To Maxi, he seemed to be an entirely different species.

"H-Have you been t-to all seven k-kingdoms?" Maxi asked.

"I haven't been to Arex or Sykan," Riftan said, considering the question. "But I lived in Livadon for about two years when I was mercenary. I ended up as far up as Balto, chasing commissions.

"The money was good there, but the place was practically uninhabitable for humans. So I decided to go down to Osiriya. I was there for three months and participated in a tournament held by the central church in the Osiriyan capital. That's when it was suggested that I join the Remdragon Knights." Riftan cocked his head, reminiscing. "After I returned to Wedon and became a knight, I spent most of my time in Anatol and Dristan."

"W-Why were you in D-Dristan?"

"Because of the dispute between Southern Dristan and the Duchy of Croyso."

Located in the southeasternmost part of Wedon, the Duchy of Croyso stretched into Dristan's territory. Because of this, there were often armed conflicts on the duchy's eastern border. The King of Wedon and the central church in Osiriya always sent knights to mediate, wishing to prevent the conflict from undermining the armistice between the Seven Kingdoms. Riftan must have been among those knights sent to mediate.

"So th-that's why you visited C-Croyso Castle so often." Maxi tried to recall scraps of overheard conversations about the Dristan conflicts. Feeling Riftan's gaze on her, she tilted her head quizzically. "W-What is it?"

"I was just trying to remember if I visited that often."

"You v-visited at least once or t-twice a month."

Riftan shifted his gaze away from her. It seemed he did not remember. Maxi watched his expression, worried that she might have offended him. He looked distant, as if he were standing alone in some far-off place. Why wouldn't he share his thoughts with her? Did he find spending time with her tedious? The simple act of his turning away made her uneasy.

Something cold dripped onto the bridge of Maxi's nose. Startled, she frowned and rubbed it away, then looked up for signs of rain. Just moments ago, the sun had been shining bright. When she saw white flakes drifting down from the silvery sky, her eyes grew wide.

"I suggested coming out here because the weather was good, but it looks like it's going to snow." Riftan clicked his tongue in disappointment.

Maxi turned to him with a bewildered look on her face. "Th-This is snow?"

"Have you never seen snow?"

"I've seen s-sleet, but I've n-never seen proper snow. It's s-so white."

Maxi stared as snowflakes floated down like flower petals in a breeze and stretched her hand out to catch them.

"Sit up straight," Riftan said, frowning. "You'll fall off your horse."

"I know, d-don't worry."

Maxi closed her fingers over the snowflakes that fell on her palm, surprised to feel how light and delicate they were. In the blink of an eye, they melted, leaving small droplets on her skin. That a substance resembling dandelion puffs could transform into water delighted her. She examined the droplets in wonder, then lightly tapped Rem into an exhilarating gallop.

Rem dashed around the lake at a breathtaking speed, releasing the pent-up energy from weeks inside the stables. Maxi grew giddy as her thighs moved in rhythm with the horse, and she laughed into the wind like a child.

The light, feathery snow soon grew heavy, obscuring Maxi's vision, and she fell into a trance. It was beautiful, unlike anything she had ever seen before. She tilted her head back, enjoying the sensation of the cold snow brushing against her face.

Sunlight broke through the wispy clouds, and the flakes glistened silver in the light. A pair of birds dove toward the lake's dark surface, then took off into the forest like arrows.

Maxi took in everything, trying to sear the moment into her memory. When she looked back at Riftan to thank him for showing her such an exquisite place, the words froze on her lips. His face looked stern, and he was visibly tense. There was a deep furrow in his brow, and his dark eyes flickered violently like the ocean in a storm.

Growing anxious, Maxi tightened her grip on the reins. She had no idea why Riftan was looking at her that way. He opened his mouth as if to say something but closed it again without speaking. For a brief moment, he looked lonely.

"We should return to the castle before the snow gets heavier," Riftan said, returning to his usual purposeful self. He turned Talon around, his face impassive. "The clouds are gathering. Let's hurry. You'll grow cold quickly in this snow."

As he made his way back up the path they had come down, Maxi hurriedly followed after him on Rem. An uneasy silence fell between them. Maxi wondered what she had just witnessed—Riftan's unspoken words, his lonely expression. She shifted her gaze from his broad back to the calm surface of the lake. A faint reflection on the deep blue water showed her Riftan's face, and the bleakness there chilled her heart.

It can't be …

Riftan was the strongest and most daring of knights. It was absurd to pity him. But what was this desolation she saw in his expression? As Maxi hastily tried to get such thoughts out of her mind, an eastward wind swept Riftan's dark hair back and stung her eyes. Maxi squinted against the gust. In the distance, snow enveloped the mountains in a white haze.

Paxias, the coldest season of the year, wore on.

CHAPTER 11



THE SNOWFALL LASTED UNTIL EVENING AND covered everything in a thick layer of white. According to Ludis, it had been nearly ten years since Anatol had seen so much snow. Though the sight filled Maxi with wonder, Riftan was not overly pleased. Early the following morning, he left the castle with his knights to inspect the land for damage.

The servants worked hard to clear away the snow, meticulously sweeping steps and paths, and covering stores of firewood and horse fodder. The sentries, too, busied themselves sweeping their patrol routes all morning.

As Maxi strolled in the garden admiring the snow, she noticed that the servants' faces were red from the cold, so she asked Rodrigo to provide them with extra firewood before returning to her room. She considered going to the library, but she could not muster the motivation to read after yesterday's discouraging attempts.

Instead, she spread a blanket in front of the fireplace and played with the kittens. They had gained weight after weeks of devoted care and tumbled about energetically. Maxi picked them up one by one and placed them on her lap, tickling their bellies as she warmed herself by the fire. Laura and Ron mewed indignantly and quickly escaped, but Roy, the black kitten, purred and snuggled into her lap. Maxi laughed at the adorable sight.

"Shall I warm up some milk, my lady?" asked Ludis as she stoked the fire.

Maxi smiled and nodded. Ludis placed a kettle of milk in the fireplace and, as the pleasant scent of milk wafted through the room, the kittens slowly approached Maxi and crawled up into her lap. Even Laura, who usually ignored anyone who called to her, stealthily crept toward her.

"D-Didn't they eat just a l-little while ago?" Maxi asked, laughing as the kittens clambered over her, mewing hungrily.

"They had a bowl of fish porridge, but they are still young. Their appetite knows no bounds." Ludis shook her head but smiled.

Once she heated and then cooled the milk to a lukewarm temperature, Ludis poured it into the kittens' bowl and the tiny creatures plunged their noses in, soaking their whiskers as they drank. Soon, the bowl was empty, but Maxi poured them some of her own milk and looked on fondly as the kittens devoured that too.

A knock sounded at the door, followed by the voice of a maidservant.

"Forgive me for interrupting, my lady."

"W-What is it?"

"The mage is here to see you. Shall I let him in?"

Maxi's face fell. Had Ruth come because she had not gone to the library? Or had there been some sort of accident?

She grew tense as she stood, but when she opened the door, she was met with the sight of Ruth yawning, looking as disheveled as ever. Her shoulders sagged in relief.

"W-What is it, R-Ruth?"

"Good morning, my lady." Ruth yawned again and performed a satisfying stretch.

It was well past noon, but Maxi did not correct him.

"I just thought of a good training method," Ruth said. "Would you care to come outside with me?"

"A g-good t-training method …?"

Ruth nodded vigorously, an earnest expression on his face. In spite of her disappointment yesterday, Maxi felt a glimmer of hope rise in her chest. She hastily threw on a robe.

"T-Tell me about th-this method."

"I shall accumulate the mana for you. You aren't able to collect it on your own, but you have an impressive ability to absorb it. Given that fact, I'm almost certain this method will work."

Maxi grew anxious. How could he possibly infuse her with mana? She recalled Riftan's warning about Ruth dragging others into dangerous experiments and gave the mage a dubious look.

"A-And is th-this safe?"

"Of course! It's completely safe, I assure you."

Maxi remained skeptical, but she followed Ruth out of the castle. After surveying the options, Ruth chose a spot in the garden that had been cleared of snow. Using a stick, he drew one of the basic magic runes she had been studying on the ground.

"I am going to activate this rune," Ruth explained, "which I assume you've already memorized." He retraced the lines of the rune using the stick as he continued. "I shall circulate the mana through this route. Here, I shall divert its flow to your mana pathway. The mana will travel from the palm of your hand to your core, then back out again and into the rune, completing its circuit. In other words, you'll become part of the magic rune!"

Maxi rolled her eyes at his overly enthusiastic explanation. "And that's s-safe?"

"Your mana pathway should have developed enough to handle it. This is an expedient solution, but I am certain it will help you learn how to manipulate mana."

Maxi was still uncertain; after all, this was the same man who had handed her impossible equations and expected her to solve them without trouble. But she was tired of practicing with the magic stone in vain, so she nodded.

Ruth held out his hands, palms facing up, and flashed a self-assured smile. "Hold out your hands like this."

Maxi hesitantly stretched out her palms. "L-Like this?"

Ruth nodded and positioned his hands above hers, hovering close but not touching. As she tried to anticipate his next move, she felt a slow heat flow down from his palms and flinched in surprise.

"You must focus," Ruth chided. "I'm creating an artificial flow of mana. Remember this feeling."

"I-I understand."

Hearing his serious tone, Maxi concentrated on the tingling heat seeping into her hands. It felt as if she had immersed them in warm flowing water. She became absorbed in the gentle palpitations of energy. Eventually, she felt an invisible thread pierce her skin and enter her body, and she shuddered at the odd sensation.

"Maintain focus," Ruth said.

Breaking into a cold sweat, Maxi focused her attention on the flow of mana. The delicate thread slithered its way up her forearm, passed her elbow and armpit, and then shrouded her heart before leaving through her other arm. Once it left her body, the thread of magic traced the complex paths of the rune.

If one imagined mana like a finely woven fabric, magic was a loose thread. Performing magic was like removing strands of thread from the larger fabric, winding them around inside one's body, and weaving them into a new pattern.

Maxi finally understood Ruth's repeated explanations. She stared at her palms in awe as magic swirled inside, pooling in her hands. The magic began to radiate an intense heat and emitted a pale burst of light.

"They say that the first thing God created was light." Ruth smiled as he looked at the light in Maxi's palms, fainter than the glow of a firefly. "Remember. This rune is the foundation for all magic runes."

"My hands f-feel hot, and I'm a little ou-out of breath."

"If that was enough to exhaust you, we've got a problem. Mages circulate mana at double this speed when they perform advanced magic."

Maxi nodded, trying to catch her breath. She was starting to understand why Ruth always looked so weary after using magic.

"Now," Ruth said, "I shall slowly remove my hands. Try to keep the mana circulating on your own without losing speed."

Ruth moved his hands away, and Maxi found herself at a loss for what to do. She tried to steer the mana along the lines of the rune and was able to sustain the speed for a few moments, but the current soon became erratic. The heat that had collected in her hands began to slip through her fingers like sand. She desperately

tried to hold on, but the last few rays of light faded away. Her shoulders slumped in disappointment.

"Don't be so disheartened," Ruth said. "You did well for your first try."

"R-Really?"

"Have you ever heard me give empty compliments? If you did poorly, I would tell you so."

Maxi did not doubt it. She smiled wryly, amused to find solace in the mage's insolence.

Ruth smiled back and rolled up his sleeves theatrically. "Now then, shall we have another go? You'll begin to grasp the process after a few attempts."

"A-All right."

Following Ruth's instructions, Maxi did her best to harness the mana on her own. After seven attempts, she managed to sustain a faint ray of light for about a minute. Elated, she turned to show Ruth and he clapped his hands. It was somewhat embarrassing to show pride in such a trivial accomplishment before a great sorcerer, but she could not suppress her excitement. Though the light she generated was too faint to illuminate even a single room, her heart swelled as if she had managed to re-create the moon.

"Once you've grown accustomed to controlling mana, I'll teach you healing magic. Until then, keep practicing with this basic rune. It should help you progress with your mana accumulation."

"I-I don't think I can d-do it on my own."

"No harm in trying. I'll gladly assist if you find that you're unable to." Ruth rubbed his nose, which was red in the cold.

They had been outside for quite some time, but Maxi noticed the cold only now. She had been so engrossed in her task that she hadn't paid attention to anything else.

"Let's go inside now. My nose is running."

"Sh-Shall we go to the k-kitchen for a warm bowl of soup?"

"Excellent idea, my lady. I've hardly had anything to eat today. I'm starving."

Ruth hugged his arms around himself and strode toward the great hall. Maxi followed, smiling to herself. She was shivering with the

cold, but her steps felt as light as a feather.

OVER THE FOLLOWING DAYS, MAXI DILIGENTLY PRACTICED magic as Ruth had instructed. He needed to guide her twice at the beginning, but after that, she was able to create light on her own. The more she practiced, the brighter the light she could manifest. Soon, she was conjuring enough light to rival a candle.

Though her progress was slow, she was unmistakably improving. Once, in her excitement about her improved mana accumulation, Maxi overexerted herself and collapsed onto the bed before sundown. The incident exasperated Riftan, and he threatened to forbid her magical studies if she continued to exhaust herself.

After that, Maxi practiced in moderation, careful not to overextend herself again. She spent her afternoons studying runes in the library, then took a late lunch before giving in structions to the servants and writing in her daily log. In the evenings, she practiced magic in her room until Riftan returned. Though repeating the same schedule every day was tiring, she pressed on.

Meanwhile, Riftan was busy preparing weapons and training soldiers to deal with the monster migration into Anatolium. Each day, two dozen carrier pigeons arrived with news from across the continent. They flew in and out of his study, seemingly without end, while the knights and sentries trained in the freezing conditions until sunset.

Maxi did not want to be the only person living at ease. Fighting off sleep, she worked to memorize the complex magic rune in the latest book Ruth had assigned her. The mage observed her quietly and then made a suggestion.

"Why don't we practice what you've learned?"

"P-Practice?"

"You have yet to use magic on another person," Ruth explained. "It's worth a try now that you're more or less familiar with the healing rune."

"B-But my control is s-still unstable. W-What if something g-goes wrong?"

"Even if you fail, you won't cause any physical harm. Repeated practice is key to developing precision and speed."

Maxi nodded. In truth, she was eager to try casting a real spell. "B-But who should I p-practice on?"

"Mentors usually create a small wound on their body for their pupil to heal, but I don't have a particularly high tolerance for pain." Ruth rose from his seat and wrapped his robe around himself tightly. "Fortunately, Calypse Castle is full of men just begging to get hurt. Shall we head outside?"

Realizing that the sorcerer intended to go to the training grounds, Maxi hesitated. Riftan still did not approve of her learning magic. Though he allowed her to pursue her studies, he remained doubtful of her ability. If he saw her fail, he might assume that his worry had been correct.

"Sir Riftan is training the squires today," Ruth said reassuringly. "He won't be at the knights' training grounds."

Maxi blinked; it was like he could read her thoughts. But she nodded and they rose from their seats. Ludis, sewing by the brazier, promptly picked up her cloak and made to follow them, but Maxi dissuaded her. After explaining that they were only going to the training grounds, Maxi and Ruth left the library and headed downstairs. When they stepped outside the castle, the sunlight was blindingly bright.

Maxi squinted as she looked out at the stark garden. The snowfall had been intermittent the past couple of days, and a layer of snow dusted the flower beds, sparkling like diamonds. Bare tree branches creaked forlornly in the wind.

Together, Maxi and Ruth hurried across the bleak landscape. Once they were beyond the gate that enclosed the garden, they could hear clanging swords, clopping hooves, and bellowing voices.

"It seems we will have to wait awhile, my lady," Ruth muttered as they came to the entrance of the knights' training grounds.

Maxi peered around Ruth's lanky frame. Hundreds of mounted knights faced one another in eight long rows. All were clad in heavy armor, and each held a lance taller than a man. The air contained a

palpable tension that made Maxi hold her breath. A red flag was raised, and the mounted knights bellowed as they charged forward.

Maxi gasped and covered her eyes with both hands. The cacophony of metal striking metal, whinnying horses, and thunderous roars seemed unending. So fierce was the fray that the stones trembled beneath Maxi's feet.

"More aggressive than usual today," Ruth commented, emitting a low whistle.

When calm fell over the training grounds again, Maxi slowly removed her hands from her eyes. The knights had returned to their formation and dismounted, pulling off their helmets.

Ruth took Maxi's arm and led her down the steps. "Come, my lady. I'd wager that there are more than a few bruised men down there."

Flustered, Maxi stumbled after Ruth, feeling rather inelegant. Sir Hebaron noticed their approach and looked surprised.

"Mage Ruth," the knight said, putting down the gear he was tending to. "What brings you to the training grounds?"

"I came to see if anyone was injured during practice."

"Well, well," said Hebaron, tossing his helmet unceremoniously to the ground. "What a pleasant surprise. I thought you didn't want us calling on you for anything less than a crippling wound."

Perhaps it was the adrenaline from the joust, but Hebaron appeared more intimidating than usual. He cut an imposing figure. Maxi hid behind Ruth, but the sorcerer would not entertain such childish behavior, and nudged her toward the knight.

"*I* would never volunteer to do such a thing, of course," Ruth said. "Her ladyship will be doing the healing."

A handful of knights had gathered now, curious, and their eyes grew wide as they realized the hooded figure behind Ruth was the lady of the castle. Maxi gave them an awkward smile. She had thought she had grown accustomed to facing these men, but she was so nervous standing before them in their full armor that her hands shook. Maxi tugged her sleeves to hide her trembling and forced herself to speak.

"A-Although I am not s-skilled, I-I would like to t-t-t … to o-offer my help in t-tending to any injuries …."

The knights exchanged puzzled looks at Maxi's stumbling offer, and an awkward silence ensued. Elliot Charon, the knight standing at the front of the group, spoke first.

"We are grateful for your offer, my lady, but you do not need to trouble yourself. Minor injuries are easy enough to treat ourselves."

Being so decidedly rejected by one of the few knights she knew robbed Maxi of her courage. Seeing her frozen in silence, Ruth stepped in.

"Her ladyship is currently learning magic, and she requires volunteers to practice healing spells on. Your cooperation would be much appreciated."

Hebaron gulped water from a waterskin, then shot Maxi a surprised look. "Magic?"

The other knights also turned to her, wearing equally shocked expressions.

"You know how to use magic, my lady?" one of them asked.

"I-I have just st-st-st—just b-begun learning, s-so I cannot c-claim to b-be capable …"

The knights glanced at one another, unconvinced.

"Mage," said Hebaron, looking troubled as he scratched at his sweat-slicked curls. "The intention is a fine one, I grant you that. But if there were to be any unexpected effects … Our training regimen is grueling enough as it is."

"It's healing magic," Ruth said. "There would be no unwanted effects, even if she failed to cast the spell properly. You need not worry about that."

The group of knights continued to exchange furtive glances, and Ruth crossed his arms, glowering at them.

"I'm sure I do not need to remind you of the importance of healers," Ruth said. "For the sake of Anatol and the Remdragon Knights, I am currently sacrificing all my time, and my sleep, to teach her ladyship magic. Yet you refuse to offer the smallest assistance because you are afraid?" He scoffed. "And you call yourselves knights!"

"Hell, there's no need to harp on like that," said Hebaron. "Who said we wouldn't help? I simply do not have a scratch on me to

offer." He turned to the gathered knights. "Oi! Anybody hurt?"

"Her ladyship has yet to accumulate enough mana," Ruth said. "So she will not be able to heal significant injuries, only minor cuts or scrapes."

"Aren't you hard to please," grumbled Hebaron. Then, as if remembering something, he stopped and motioned to a knight watering his horse some distance away. "Ricaydo! Didn't you scratch your cheek during the joust? Why don't you volunteer?"

The blond knight frowned and shot them a sharp look. Maxi reflexively hunched her shoulders, shrinking under his gaze. Out of everyone here, why did Hebaron have to pick Ursuline Ricaydo? He was always hostile toward Maxi.

"I would think *you* would be more fitting," Ursuline shouted back at Hebaron. "Surely the blow from my lance must have left you a sizable bruise."

"Ha! Bruise, you say? Nothing more than a flea bite. I'm afraid I am unscathed."

"A commendable denial, but I saw you teetering on your horse like a scarecrow."

"Sounds to me like you hurt your eyes as well, Ricaydo!" Hebaron turned to Maxi. "My lady, make sure you treat him thoroughly."

Troubled, Maxi eyed Sir Ursuline's cold expression.

Impatient with the two knights' bickering, Ruth heaved a sigh and stalked over to Ursuline Ricaydo. "I see you have a cut on your cheek, Sir Ursuline," he said. "The wound is something her ladyship can heal. It will not take long, so please grant your consent."

"There is no need. Such a small scrape will heal right up on its own."

"Wouldn't you rather be rid of it quickly? It might scar your handsome face."

"I would rather it scar than risk healing by an incompetent mage."

Ursuline's harsh words aroused a determination in Maxi to prove him wrong. There was no reason for him to refuse so vehemently. Even if she failed, he would not be harmed.

Maxi swallowed hard and spoke shakily. "I-I assure y-you, I-I have had p-p-practice. I sh-shall not f-fail, s-so p-please a-allow m-me to

…” Her words shriveled on her tongue when she saw the disgusted look on Ursuline’s face.

“Are you even capable of reciting the spell?” Ursuline spat contemptuously.

Mortified, Maxi felt an intense flush flare through her from head to toe, causing her ears to burn and her eyes to sting. She wanted to give the knight a biting retort, but her tongue lay frozen. Feeling like a fool, she hung her head.

It was best to appear unfazed if she wanted to preserve what little dignity remained to her, but she could not meet Ursuline’s icy gaze.

“Th-The spell—” Maxi was about to say that the spell did not require verbal recitation when a hand fell on her shoulder. Startled, she turned to look behind her.

Riftan stood there, his eyes ablaze as he glared at Ursuline Ricaydo. He gently moved Maxi to the side, then grabbed Ursuline’s collar.

“You dare speak to my wife with such impertinence?” Riftan growled, yanking so forcefully at Ursuline’s collar that he almost lifted the knight off the ground.

Strangled by his cape, Ursuline’s face began to turn red and he tried to break free, but Riftan’s grip was like a vise. The other knights rushed to intervene.

“Commander! Please, calm down!”

Two knights grabbed at Riftan’s arms, but even their combined strength was not enough to quell Riftan Calypse. He shook Ursuline like a doll, then threw him to the ground. Ursuline choked and coughed, his face beet red, as his fellow knights helped him to his feet.

Riftan observed them coolly, then whirled back to a petrified Maxi and pulled her to him. “Come,” he said. “Let’s return to the castle.”

As he led her away, Ursuline’s indignant voice rang out from behind them.

“Have you no pride, Commander?”

Riftan froze and turned back. Ursuline rubbed his neck, his expression dark.

“Does it not anger you?” Ursuline said. “After everything Duke Croyso has done to us, how can you stand by his daughter? She is nothing but—”

Riftan slammed a fist into Ursuline’s face, sending the knight staggering back. Maxi screamed as Riftan raised his fist again, but the other knights grabbed his arm in a panic.

“C-Commander! Please, restrain yourself!” one pleaded.

“Goddammit,” Ursuline said, wiping his torn lip with the back of his hand. “Are you itching for a fight, Commander?”

“That’s enough, Sir Ursuline!” Hebaron snapped. “You are out of line!”

Though Ursuline boldly returned Riftan’s glare, sweat beaded on his brow as his commander drew threateningly close.

“If you ever speak about my wife that way again,” Riftan spat out each word with blistering menace, “I will slice you open from mouth to groin.”

Though the threat was not directed at her, a shiver ran down Maxi’s spine. Riftan held his glare against Ursuline’s defiant gaze for a long, breathless moment, then shook off the knights restraining him. He returned to Maxi and grabbed her arm before striding off.

Still shaken, Maxi glanced back at the knights as Riftan led her away. She had to scramble up the steps to keep up with him, nearly running to match his long strides. He marched past the gate and hastened them through the garden, not bothering to slow to her pace as he usually would.

“R-Riftan …”

The sound of Maxi’s breathless voice finally halted Rif tan’s bounding strides. Maxi did not know what to say; her mouth parted, but no words came forth.

The shame crept in as the shock wore off. How could she have allowed herself to be so humiliated in front of him? In his eyes, at least, she was an elegant and dignified lady, but now she had surely ruined that perception.

She ducked her head to hide her welling tears, but Riftan saw it all.

“Why on earth did you have to go and—”

Maxi shrank back, and Riftan's throat bobbed as if the words he swallowed were a ball of flames.

He dragged his palms down his face and spoke with a strangled voice. "I'm sorry that you were exposed to such slights."

Taken aback by the unexpected apology, Maxi looked up at him with teary eyes. Riftan swore under his breath and cupped her face in his hands.

"I'm sorry. Please don't cry." He leaned down to rest his forehead against hers.

It was a clumsy attempt at consolation, not unlike a large dog nudging against its dismayed owner, but his tenderness sent Maxi over the edge. She whimpered and clutched at his tunic, choking on a wave of tears.

Panicked, Riftan wiped at her wet cheeks with his thumbs. "Don't cry. I swear to you, he will never speak to you like that again."

It was not Riftan's fault that Ursuline had slighted her; the blame was entirely on Maxi's own actions. The knight had simply seen her for what she truly was—insecure, stammering, dim-witted, lumbering Maximilian—and had scorned her as she deserved.

Maxi's heart ached. If she were a worthy lady, Riftan would not have fought with one of his own. If he had married Princess Agnes, he would have garnered the unquestioning respect of his knights. She was utterly ashamed.

Though Maxi had always hated herself, that hatred felt sickeningly palpable for the first time. She buried her face in his chest and squeezed her eyes shut.

"I-I am a-all right now," she lied. "Y-You should return t-to your d-duties."

"Your eyes are red."

"I'll r-request a cold c-compress from Ludis. Y-You mustn't w-worry …"

"How can I not?"

Maxi gave him an apprehensive look. After sobbing like a babe in his arms, she was too embarrassed to meet his eyes. As they entered the Great Hall, Rodrigo called Riftan away for something,

and Maxi was inordinately grateful to have a natural way to end the conversation.

"I-I was just … a l-little embarrassed," she said to Riftan. "I-I'm a-all right now. T-Truly."

"I'll make sure he never disrespects you again."

Flustered, Maxi shook her head. "Th-That really isn't n-n … n-necessary. Y-You n-need not w-w-worry about m-my affairs."

"It is my *duty* to worry, Maxi," Riftan said, an edge in his voice. "You are the one person in this world I must worry about. I know you're upset, but don't tell me not to worry for you."

Maxi studied him apprehensively as he walked her to their bedchamber. He had misunderstood her. Maxi only wanted to prevent another confrontation with his knights by trivializing how much the incident had hurt her. If Riftan continued to worry about it, he might have another disagreement with Ursuline.

Inwardly, Maxi smiled a twisted, bitter smile. A truly dignified noblewoman would demand that her husband make Ursuline Ricaydo pay for his insults, but Maxi was unworthy of such efforts.

She smiled brightly to conceal her dark thoughts and forced calm into her voice. "I-I'm sorry. I-I won't d-do it again."

"Stay here and rest," Riftan said when they reached their door. "I'll be back soon."

"A-All right."

As if unconvinced by her assurances, Riftan studied her face for a while before turning back down the hall. Maxi watched him go, then entered the bedroom and sat in front of the fireplace, staring numbly into the crackling flames. The kittens stopped playing with the tassels on the rug and crept into her lap. They rubbed their heads against her stomach, purring, and Maxi distractedly scratched their backs. She sighed.

Her past shames clung to her like oily residue, congealing in her heart. Had she really thought playing the grand, noble lady could change her true self? No matter what she did, she would always be the useless, stammering Maximilian.

Overwhelmed with helplessness and self-loathing, Maxi curled up into a ball. Despondency shifted into anxiety. The person she had

pretended to be since arriving in Anatol was crumbling like a sand castle at high tide.

Riftan might not be ashamed of her yet, but he would be eventually. And he would grow tired of her when that happened.

This twisted frame of mind appalled Maxi the most. How could she so persistently doubt the man who had showed her nothing but kindness? Distressed, she buried her face in her hands.

Suddenly, a last-ditch, desperate solution came to her, and she leaped to her feet. When she burst out of her room, the servants lighting the corridor startled, then bowed their heads. Maxi distractedly nodded to them, then bounded up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

Ruth was in the library, despite Maxi's worry that he might not be. Ensconced among the books as usual, it seemed unimaginable that he would be anywhere else.

"I didn't think you would come to the library again today, my lady," Ruth said, looking up from his books. "Is something wrong?"

Maxi shook her head, catching her breath. Though she had rushed there to see him, she did not know what to say now that he was in front of her. Seeing her falter, Ruth gave her a smile and pointed to the seat across from him.

"Why don't you take a seat first, my lady? I was just thinking of calling on you, but I stopped myself after realizing Sir Riftan would turn me away at the door." Ruth let out a long sigh. "Has he calmed down?"

"A-A little."

"That is reassuring."

"W-Was Sir Ursuline b-badly hurt?"

"Considering who hit him, not really. He could easily have ended up with a broken jaw, but he's only badly bruised. Sir Riftan must have held back."

Maxi looked away and gazed at the crimson sky outside the window. She wanted to ask the sorcerer something, but the question felt like a fish bone stuck in her throat. Glancing back to his gaunt face, her eyes flitted to the messy piles of books on the desk.

"I apologize for earlier, my lady," Ruth said into the silence that enveloped them. "I should never have taken you there without first informing the knights. They have been more accepting of you recently, so I assumed it would be all right. It was careless of me."

"N-N-No." Maxi waved her hands, flustered by his unexpected apology. "P-Please do not b-blame yourself, Ruth. I-I am all right. I-It is not as if I w-wasn't aware of how the knights f-felt about me. I w-would have been s-skeptical too if I w-were in their p-place."

"Regardless, Sir Ursuline was out of line. The other knights have reprimanded him for insulting you so publicly. He knows that he took it too far, and I'm sure he regrets his actions."

Maxi smiled awkwardly. Recalling the open hostility on Ursuline's face, she found Ruth's words hard to believe.

Ruth smiled ruefully. "You might think it unbelievable, my lady, but Sir Ursuline is not a bad person. He may be demanding, but he's a steadfast knight who has always been loyal to Sir Riftan. In fact, no other knight follows Sir Riftan so blindly. But ever since the incident, he's voiced his objections every chance he gets."

"I-Incident?"

The sorcerer hesitated, remaining quiet for a long time. When he finally spoke, his voice was resigned. "When Sir Riftan refused Princess Agnes's hand in marriage."

That name, uttered so unexpectedly, made Maxi's spine stiffen.

Ruth studied her expression, then added flatly, "Sir Ursuline Ricaydo is from a prominent noble house. He has frequented Drachium Palace since he was a child, so he's well acquainted with the royal family. He shows more fealty to them than any other knight in the order, and the day he was knighted he even swore a geas to Princess Agnes."

A geas was the highest pledge of devotion, deference, and adoration that a knight could make, and it could only be sworn once in his lifetime. If Sir Ursuline had pledged his geas to Princess Agnes, then his enmity toward Maxi was understandable. Maxi wilted.

"D-Did he wish for R-Riftan to marry P-Princess Agnes?"

"Frankly, yes," Ruth said. "If I am honest—and I only say this because it's all in the past now—everyone in the order hoped Sir Riftan would marry the princess. Not only were they a great team in combat, but they were widely considered a good match. Everyone thought their engagement was an unspoken truth. You can imagine our surprise when he turned down the marriage offer …." Ruth trailed off, watching her reaction.

Maxi wanted to feign indifference, but she could not stop her discomfort from showing on her face.

Ruth cleared his throat. "Apologies, my lady. It seems I've said too much. But there is a reason for Sir Ursuline's hostility—the commander he swore fealty to spurned the woman he pledged a geas to, and then married the daughter of the man he most despises. Considering that, Sir Ursuline's behavior is not so surprising."

"I-I see …" Maxi nodded somberly. The possibility that Riftan would have been better off marrying the princess was a fear that weighed heavily on Maxi's mind. Hearing Ruth confirm that fear made her heart sink.

By marrying Maxi, Riftan had earned the ire of the royal family and the animosity of his men all at once. Distraught, she stared at the edge of the desk, searching for courage.

"D-Do you think … th-this could cause a rift among the knights?" she asked.

"You have nothing to worry about there, my lady," Ruth said. "The bond the Remdragon Knights share is stronger than you think and, excepting Sir Ursuline, they don't hold any ill will toward you."

Feeling slightly reassured, Maxi nodded again. Ruth always spoke his mind, so she was sure he was telling the truth now.

"Still," Ruth added thoughtfully, "it would be a great help if you could placate Sir Riftan, my lady. This bleak atmosphere is not doing anybody any good."

"I-I shall try," Maxi said, her tone doubtful.

Ruth sighed heavily, as if understanding what an impossible task placating Riftan was.

Maxi's mouth went dry as she recalled the reason she had come running to the library. She swallowed hard and managed to speak, though her lips seemed glued shut.

"Um … O-on a-another matter …"

Ruth looked at her expectantly. Maxi avoided his gaze and rifled absently through the books on the table. Her heart pounded dizzyingly as she prepared to dredge up the most shameful part of herself.

"I-I w-w-w … was j-just ccurious …"

Ruth furrowed his brow, confused by her sudden hesitation. "What is it, my lady?"

Maxi mustered her courage. "D-Do you think y-you could … f-fix me … w-w … w-with your m-magic?"

"Fix you?" Ruth blinked, not understanding until Maxi's face flushed red. He sighed. "My lady, magic cannot heal inherent disabilities."

It was a truth Maxi already knew. If her impediment could be cured by magic, her father would have taken care of it long ago. But in her recent magical studies, she learned of great sorcerers who could create new spells and had begun to nurse a secret hope that Ruth might be such a sorcerer.

Her cheeks blazed, but she refused to let this small hope sputter out. "I-I am a-aware of that b-but … a-are you not c-capable of c-creating new spells? I-If you could f-find a way …"

"Finding a solution might be possible with enough research—there are many mages currently researching new runes to treat afflictions like blindness, deafness, and crippled limbs—but none have been proven effective yet. Even if I were to focus all my efforts on a cure, it would take decades."

"I-I see …"

Maxi wanted to conceal her disappointment, but her shoulders slumped reflexively. Attempting to keep some semblance of composure, she began to smooth down her frazzled hair.

"I-I thought as much," she said. "I-I only a-asked … t-to be sure."

An awkward silence stretched between them once again. Maxi shifted uncomfortably, then slowly rose from her seat.

"W-Well then … I-I shall t-take my leave. R-Riftan said he would be b-back soon."

"M-My lady, wait—" Ruth stood abruptly.

Maxi stared, surprised to see the sorcerer flustered.

He cleared his throat and murmured in a deflated voice. "Ending our conversation here makes it feel as if I have done you a great wrong."

"Th-That wasn't my intention."

"Please, sit. Why don't we mull it over together?"

Maxi glanced about the room, seeking an excuse to flee, but Ruth's insistent tone rooted her to the spot. She sank back down into her chair. The mage seemed at a loss for words. He crossed his arms and stared up at the ceiling in silence.

"Have you tried overcoming the impediment yourself?"

Maxi glared at him, shocked by his insensitive question. "D-Do you think I-I speak like this b-because I wish to?"

She had endured lashings that ended in torn and bleeding skin, all in the name of correcting an impediment that grew only worse over the years. Maxi's face flushed as she recalled the shame and humiliation, as if Ruth might be able to see her memories.

"No offense intended, my lady," Ruth said, his hands held up in a warding gesture. "I only ask because articulation and speech may be improved through training."

"I-I have had s-speech training e-ever since I was a-a child! B-But it proved f-futile."

"What kind of training?"

Maxi hated the memory—reading aloud in front of her father and receiving a lashing for every stutter. She offered Ruth only a sliver of that truth.

"I-I recited poems o-or read scriptures a-aloud … o-or Roemian literature."

"Heavens, you practiced with archaic languages while struggling with day-to-day conversations?"

Maxi looked away from him, wishing she had not brought up the subject at all. The flaw she had always tried to ignore was now on

full display. Her eyes darted to the door, but Ruth had no intention of letting her leave.

"Would it not be better to practice with daily conversations?"

"I-I have … t-tried that as well b-but … m-my tongue refuses t-to cooperate."

"On the contrary, my lady, I think you have improved quite a bit lately."

Maxi's eyes widened and Ruth gave her a wry smile.

"Have you not noticed?" he asked. "Apart from when you're extremely flustered or nervous, you've been expressing yourself with relative ease. Why don't you try speaking slowly and focus on articulating as much as you can? With repeated practice, I'm sure it will greatly improve your speech even if it cannot remedy it completely. And that would be faster than relying on magic."

"P-Please do not speak a-as if it is a s-simple matter o-of practice! I-It's not that I haven't t-tried—I-I have! B-But nothing I do e-ever helps. Th-That's why—" Maxi cut off her outburst as Ruth frowned at her. He had merely offered her advice, and she responded with heated words. Embarrassed, Maxi hunched her shoulders.

"I-In any case," she continued, "I-I appreciate y-your counsel. I-I shall c-consider it."

Ruth opened his mouth as if to respond but closed it again without a word. Maxi swiftly rose from her seat and hurried out of the library.

Once alone, however, she felt uncertain. In truth, she *had* noticed that her speech was improving somewhat. Perhaps Ruth's advice was not as hopeless a solution as it had first seemed. Maxi stalked down the corridor and came to a halt at the stairs.

Her father had never let her speak in front of others—Maxi's lessons were usually held in a private room with only her tutor. Even after her father had given up and she was freed from her strict education, Maxi had spoken only when necessary. She had not wanted to seem a half-wit, but rarely speaking was also the best way to avoid the looks of exasperation when her words came out stuttering and slow. She had once gone several months without

saying a word just to avoid those looks and the baffled requests to repeat herself.

But speaking had become less daunting since she arrived at Calypse Castle. Maxi even found herself enjoying it. It was a startling change, one that she could hardly believe.

Did the impediment grow worse during the time I refused to speak?

Maxi bit her lip. It was possible that her father had crushed any potential she may have possessed. After insisting to Ruth that she had tried, she now was not sure that she truly had. What if all she had ever done was give up?

Even if that were the case, I'm sure it's too late for me to fix it now.

Maxi wavered, afraid that she was once again clinging to false hope. She thought of Riftan, of his rage on her behalf when Sir Ursuline insulted her. She could not allow him to resort to violence at every slight she encountered. More than that, she did not want him to become the subject of ridicule among the nobles for having a stammering wife.

Maxi stared hard at the floor below the banister, her skirts bunched in her fists.

THE NEXT DAY, AFTER MUCH DELIBERATION, MAXI RETURNED to the library and was relieved when Ruth greeted her as if nothing was amiss.

Maxi took her seat at the desk and opened a book on magic, glancing cautiously at Ruth. After her angry outburst yesterday, she was too embarrassed to bring up the topic of her stutter. She found herself staring at the same page for a long time before finally managing to speak.

"A-About w-what you said yesterday …"

"Pardon?" Ruth looked up from his work with a baffled expression.

Maxi swallowed hard and continued. "Y-You said … s-said that m-my speech could improve i-if I practiced. I-I was wondering if you could e-explain."

"Oh, that," Ruth said with a nod. "I could look into efficient training methods if you'd like. For now, I suggest conversing in a

comfortable environment as much as possible."

"C-Converse with p-people?"

"Practice makes perfect. Try to speak as much as possible and focus on maintaining your composure. You tend to speak faster when you're nervous, and it worsens the stutter. I think gaining control of your nerves will help most in your case, my lady."

Maxi looked down, embarrassed to have her flaw spoken of so openly. "I-I understand. W-What else do y-you suggest?"

"Hmm, let's see … I think taking your time to articulate each word will help, even if you end up speaking slowly. The goal is to improve through repetition."

Maxi could feel the heat rising in her cheeks and burning at her ears. Her eyes shifted awkwardly as she forced her rigid tongue to move.

"I … understand. Do you mean … like this?"

"Yes, just like that. You tend to needlessly rush yourself when you speak."

"Do … I?"

Ruth nodded. "If these methods prove ineffective, I shall look up other techniques. I'm sure if we try different approaches, something is bound to help."

Maxi's face fell. She had hoped Ruth might have a special solution for her, but it was unreasonable of her to expect a single perfect answer. Ruth was incredibly intelligent, but that did not make him omnipotent. Quashing her disappointment, Maxi hid her face behind her book.

Ruth stroked his chin, musing over something as he watched her. "That reminds me, you were unable to practice magic yesterday. Let's give it a try today."

His calm observation made Maxi grow tense with anxiety.

"I … do not w-wish … to cause t-trouble … by going there again."

"We won't go to the training grounds today. The knights are not the only inhabitants of this castle. I'm sure we can find a servant or two in the kitchen with some minor ailment."

"That's true … but …"

As soon as Maxi trailed off, Ruth leaped in.

"Practice is vital to learning magic, my lady. What is the point of having all those theories and runes in your head if you do not know how to apply them?"

"I-I know that … b-but … I-I do not wish to p-practice on people … who are u-unwilling."

"I am sure the servants wouldn't mind. They are too busy to look after minor scrapes, so they might even be grateful if you offered to heal them."

Ruth was right. If she wanted to learn magic, she would need to practice healing on someone. But the bitter rejection from the previous day made her falter. After a long moment of hesitation, Maxi reluctantly rose from her seat.

Like a lamb to the slaughter, Maxi dragged her heels as she followed Ruth to the castle's kitchen. What would happen if she failed in front of the servants? Would they laugh at her?

Wallowing in her gloomy thoughts, Maxi shuffled into the kitchen. She did not know whether to be relieved or disappointed when she saw that it was quiet today. Inside, the cook whistled as he stirred a cauldron.

"My lady," he said with a smile as she and Ruth entered. "May I be of any assistance?"

"N-No, I'm not here for anything," Maxi mumbled.

Ruth, standing behind her like a warden, nudged her with his shoulder. Maxi frowned at his impertinence but sighed in resignation.

"I-I was … w-wondering if a-anyone was … i-injured."

The cook scratched his large head, puzzled. "Injured, my lady?"

Ruth nudged her again. Maxi turned to glare at him before looking back at the cook.

"I-I mean things like cuts … or b-burns … or s-sprains."

"That, we have an endless supply of, my lady," said the cook. "Especially with Clumsy Crom over there. The lad is all thumbs—there's barely a day where he doesn't hurt himself. He burned his hand just now taking the bread out of the oven."

Maxi turned to look at "Clumsy Crom." The servant was a slight young man, no older than sixteen, with a deeply tanned face. He was carefully chopping vegetables, one hand wrapped in cloth.

Taking a deep breath, Maxi said, "C-Could you … c-call him over for me?"

Though the cook seemed surprised, he promptly bellowed for the young man. "Crom! Over here, lad! Her ladyship wishes to see you."

The boy jolted as if struck by lightning, startled by the cook's booming voice. He immediately obeyed and scampered over to Maxi.

"H-How can I help, m'lady?" he asked, his face white with fear, clearly worried that he had done something wrong.

The cook watched Maxi curiously. It must have seemed strange to him that she would ask after an injured servant.

Maxi cleared her throat and spoke in her most dignified voice. "I-I heard that … you hurt your … hand. Would you mind … if I take a look?"

"M-My hand, m'lady?" Crom blinked at her, bewildered, but he quickly unwound the cloth covering his hand. The flesh beneath was red and raw.

Maxi could tell the burn was painful just by looking at it. She felt a little guilty—as a servant, Crom could not protest and simply had to endure the whims of Lady Calypse. Know ing that explaining her objective would only add to his fear, she offered no explanation as she gingerly placed her fingers on the wound.

Crom's shoulders jerked in pain, but Maxi took a deep breath and summoned her magic. As heat gathered in her palm, Crom's burn slowly began to heal and fade. The boy's eyes grew wide as he watched. After infusing the wound with sufficient magic, Maxi withdrew her fingers. Crom's hand was as good as new.

Exclamations rose around her as the cook and the kitchen servants gathered around to see the results, but no one was more astonished than Maxi herself. She had not expected to succeed on her first attempt. After staring dumbly at Crom's healed hand, Maxi spun toward Ruth and bounced excitedly.

"I-I did it! I r-really did it!"

Ruth smiled proudly and thumped her on the back. "Well done, my lady! An exceptional first effort!"

Bolstered by her success with the healing spell, Maxi turned to the servants and spoke with more confidence. "I-I've been learning

healing magic for the past … few weeks, a-and am in … need of volunteers to p-practice on. I-Is anyone else … injured?"

"We would like to volunteer, my lady."

Maxi whirled toward the unexpected voice. Sir Hebaron, Sir Elliot, and a young knight she had seen only a handful of times stood in the doorway. Seeing the knights outside of the training grounds at this time of day was unheard of, and Maxi was so shocked that she felt ambushed.

"Please forgive us for startling you, my lady," Elliot said courteously when he saw how flustered she was.

"I-It is all right."

"To think we were so ungracious to you yesterday when you are this skilled."

Maxi waved him off. "I-I cannot say that I-I am skilled."

Hebaron's giant frame slouched through the doorway as he stepped into the kitchen, sheepishly scratching the back of his head. "Could I trouble you … to take a look at this injury?" he asked and showed Maxi a small cut on the back of his hand.

Her eyes darted back and forth between the injury and the knight's face, confounded by his sudden change in attitude.

Hebaron's expression grew rueful. "As expected, you are still upset about yesterday's events, my lady."

"N-No! I am … j-just surprised. P-Please have a seat o-over here. I-I shall tend to your wound i-immediately."

The servants promptly procured chairs for them, and the knights formed a line before Maxi, each attempting to look as pained as possible.

"I sprained my wrist, my lady," said one.

"It's my shoulder for me," said another.

"I-I will … gladly take a look." Maxi swallowed hard, worried she might fail this time and make a fool of herself.

Ruth chuckled. "You need not be so nervous, my lady. They're only here because they wish to make amends for yesterday."

Hebaron scowled. "What hogwash!" He pointed to the cut on his hand, which looked insignificant even to Maxi. "Can't you see that I am bleeding?!"

Ruth clicked his tongue. “One would be lucky to squeeze a drop out of that.”

Maxi giggled as the burly knight fussed over such a mi nuscule scratch. Feeling more assured, she collected herself and cast a healing spell on Hebaron’s hand. The cut disappeared before their eyes.

Hebaron heaped praises on Maxi as if she had just performed a miracle. His flattery was so overblown that Maxi burst into laughter.

“My lady,” Hebaron said, smiling when she laughed. “That scoundrel Ursuline lashed out in spite. Please do not take what he said to heart.”

“I-I did not.”

“Then I am glad.” Hebaron grinned and rose from his seat.

Maxi healed the two knights with the injured wrist and shoulder, then turned her attention to the servants who needed healing. With the exception of Crom’s burned hand, all the wounds Maxi treated were minor and hardly required a healer. By the end of the day, however, she still felt physically drained.

Pleased with her work, Maxi smiled and wiped the sweat from her forehead. It was by no means an extraordinary feat, but she had been able to help others, and that filled her with joy. Since childhood, Maxi’s uselessness had been hammered into her mind as an indisputable fact. Now for the first time in her life, she thought that perhaps her father had been wrong. Tears stung her eyes and threatened to overwhelm her.

As the knights prepared to leave, Hebaron turned back to Maxi.

“If it suits you, my lady,” he said, “please come to us if you are ever in need of more volunteers. And I will be sure to let the others know.”

Maxi nodded, giving him a timid smile.

AFTER THAT DAY, MAXI FREQUENTLY VISITED THE kitchen to heal the servants. Occasionally, she would also stop by the training grounds to tend to the knights.

Maxi’s skills gradually improved as she continued to heal five or six minor injuries each day. Soon, she was able to heal even severe

injuries. Her speech impediment, on the other hand, showed no signs of improvement.

Her daily routine included time shut away in her chambers to practice her articulation, and she made conversation with servants she passed in the halls or in the kitchen whenever she could. But despite these efforts, her tongue only seemed to be growing heavier.

Trying not to feel discouraged, Maxi practiced relentlessly. She read phonetic symbols or recited lyrical poetry, but she was secretive about these sessions. Working on her speech alone had surely slowed her progress, but she did not want Riftan or the servants to see her in such a pathetic light.

All this was more than enough to keep Maxi busy, but there were still her duties as the lady of the castle, which she could not neglect. Work on the gardens would start once Paxias ended and the world turned to spring. She was already buried in paperwork for the planning and budgeting with Rodrigo and Aderon. As the end of winter neared, Maxi's list of tasks grew so long she began to wish there were more hours in the day.

"You look tired," Riftan said to her one night. Freshly bathed, he stroked her cheek as he spoke.

Maxi smiled awkwardly. For the past few weeks, she had awoken at dawn alongside Riftan and stayed up late into the night, waiting for him to come to bed. She was overwhelmed by the number of tasks that required her daily attention, but forcing her body to match the daily routine of an athletic knight had taken its toll and dark circles shadowed her eyes.

Riftan frowned and brushed his thumb beneath her eye. "It's because you're overextending yourself with magic, isn't it? I know you've been healing any and every injury. If that's the reason—"

"It's not," Maxi said as steadily as she could while holding Riftan's gaze. "I w-wouldn't be able to improve … if I didn't practice. I-In fact, I am the one … troubling everyone. The wounds I h-heal … are minor s-so … they d-don't require much m-magic."

Riftan worked at least three times harder than she did, but his face showed no signs of fatigue. How did he not yawn, even after

only a few hours of sleep? She looked up at him, feeling a little envious.

Every day, Riftan met with blacksmiths to discuss the creation of new weapons, and he trained the sentries and squires. Recently, he had also begun plans for the construction of a new road, which was set to begin on the eve of Aquarias, the spring season. Yet Riftan was always brimming with energy. Maxi was certain that, even if she split herself into three, she would not be able to handle half of his workload.

Riftan scooped Maxi up and placed her on his lap, then began to massage her neck and the backs of her ears. "Has anyone else been disrespectful toward you?"

"N-No."

"Is anything troubling you?"

"N-No, nothing is … troubling me."

"I know you have always been a woman of few words," Riftan said, an edge to his voice. "But all you seem to tell me recently is that you're fine."

"B-But … I-I really am fine. And everyone *has* been nice …" Maxi trailed off, unsure of what else she should say to convince him.

Riftan leaned back and studied her. "I heard that you're working on the new landscaping for the garden."

"Y-Yes … I thought it would be b-best … to make it presentable … before guests arrive in the spring."

"Are you sure you're not overworking yourself? Managing the servants alone must be exhausting." Riftan's voice was heavy with worry.

Maxi smiled wryly. If anyone was overworking themselves, it was him. "C-Compared to the things you do … my work … can hardly be called exhausting."

"Maxi, that's not a fair comparison. My body has been conditioned for hard labor my whole life, so I have a great deal of stamina—more than most knights. But you are more frail than most women."

"I-I am not frail. I-I would say that I am … rather strong."

Even when her back was torn and bleeding from her father's lashings, Maxi had never once fainted. She might have lost

consciousness during the ogre encounter on their way to Anatol, but she still considered herself tougher than the noblewomen who screamed and fainted at the sight of mice.

Riftan snorted. "So says the woman who has spent all her life inside a castle." He grabbed her waist with his large hand, and his forehead creased with worry. "See? Hardly a handful. You're so thin I could fit two of you in my arms."

"Y-You are the one who … is too big …. I-I am ordinary."

Riftan gave another snort. "None of the women I know are as skinny as you. I worry just looking at you."

His genuine concern bewildered Maxi. It was true that she was slim and not exactly tall, but she did not think it was anything to cause worry. Maybe he only knew tall and voluptuous women. Princess Agnes had participated in the Dragon Campaign, so she must certainly be tougher and more robust than Maxi.

She imagined the imposing and beautiful princess by Riftan's side, and it felt like a knife to the heart. The princess suited him better in every possible way.

Maxi could not pinpoint exactly when the change had occurred, but the ghost that fed her insecurity was no longer her half-sister—it was Princess Agnes. Why she tortured herself with comparisons to a woman she had never met was as incomprehensible to her as Riftan's concerns about her constitution.

"You … exaggerate. I-I am not … that s-scrawny."

Overcome with emotion, Maxi's voice came out colder than she intended, and Riftan's hand flinched where it rested against her back.

He frowned and replied in a self-deprecating tone. "But I even worry about the winds blowing at you." Tightening his arms around her, he rested his chin on top of her head.

Maxi lay against his chest and listened to the beating of his heart. Sleet rasped mournfully against the window, and a strange tension swelled between them in the silence.

A small rift had formed in their relationship. Riftan cared for Maxi to an excessive degree, making every effort to show her kindness and love, but she was never trusted with his in nermost thoughts. It

sometimes felt as though the only thing he truly wished to share with her was their bed.

But Maxi could not resent him for the very thing she found difficult to do. She could only hide herself around Riftan, forever fearful that he would find her true self wretched.

Maxi was always the most nervous, the most cautious, in front of Riftan. She feared nothing more than his disillusionment. It was ironic; the more she cared for him, the higher the wall she built between them. And now that wall seemed insurmountable.

Maxi wanted to believe that there was no better relationship in the world than theirs. They shared a bed and she lacked for nothing. Riftan protected her, and she managed the castle and would one day give birth to his heir. That was all a marriage required—and theirs was an arranged union, forced upon them by her father. To expect anything more was greedy of her.

"Just relax," said Riftan, rubbing her tense shoulders. "We don't have to do anything if you're tired."

He had misread her anxiousness as reluctance to perform her marital duty. Maxi nearly protested—she *did* want to be with him, but she was too embarrassed to insist. And in truth, she was incredibly exhausted.

Riftan brushed his lips against her forehead. "You need to rest," he said, then stood and laid her down on the bed.

After blowing out the bedside lamp, he crawled in next to her and slid his arm under her head. Maxi snuggled up against him, inhaling his sweet yet masculine scent. Riftan shifted, as if uncomfortable, but simply sighed and rubbed her shoulder. Though she could feel his hardness pressed against her thigh, he lay still. Maxi savored his gentle touch and slowly drifted to sleep enveloped by the tranquil warmth of his embrace.

THE NEXT DAY BEGAN WITH WINTER RAIN. MAXI WAS enjoying a late lunch in the dining hall, absorbed in a book on magic, when a group of drenched knights flooded into the hall. The downpour had cut their training short.

Maxi greeted them as they stomped about, shaking their hair free of the icy water. Their interactions had become more frequent recently, and not just because of the occasional healing session. The once brusque knights now spoke to her without prompting whenever they crossed paths, and Maxi was elated by the change.

After greeting the knights, she launched excitedly into praise for the soup, which she thought was exceptionally delicious today, and how the freshly baked bread melted in her mouth. The knights rubbed their empty bellies and complained about being famished.

As the banter continued, Maxi spotted Ulyseon trailing in behind another knight. With horror, she realized the young squire's face was covered in blood.

"Ulyseon!" Maxi said, rushing over to him. "A-Are you all right? H-How did this …"

In spite of his ghastly condition, Ulyseon greeted her with his usual upbeat tone. "Good afternoon, my lady."

Stunned, Maxi gawked at the squire's bloodied face, then ordered the servants to bring her a clean cloth and hot water. As the servants left, Gabel entered the dining hall and sighed when he saw all the fuss.

"The training grounds were muddy thanks to the rain," Gabel explained. "And today just happened to be the day of the squires' equestrian training. Rovar here fell off his horse during the charge."

"Not only did he fall," muttered Sir Elliot, rubbing his face. "He so efficiently broke rank that he caused additional casualties."

Ulyseon scratched his bloody head, embarrassed. "I should have been more careful. My sincerest apologies, Sir Elliot."

"I've only ever been unseated three times, boy," Elliot grumbled before walking away to dry himself by the brazier.

Maxi frowned, a little annoyed that the knights were being so cavalier about the squire's blood-soaked condition. "U-Ulyseon," she said, "you mustn't touch your head! Y-You're bleeding. Come sit. I-I shall … tend to your wound."

"You don't need to trouble yourself, my lady. It's not as bad as it looks, and the bleeding has—"

"D-Don't … be foolish … and come sit down."

Maxi pulled Ulyseon to a chair near the brazier and forced him into it, ignoring the squire's look of surprise. The boy reminded her of a wounded stray dog, too eager to please to notice the severity of its injury. She bent down to get a better look at his head.

Gabel handed her a clean towel, soaked in hot water. "I think he tore his scalp. His helmet was too big for him. I don't think he broke any bones, but the wound is deep. Won't it be difficult to heal, my lady?"

"My … magic should be … s-sufficient," Maxi said as she gingerly wiped away the blood and inspected the long gash beneath the squire's blood-slicked silver hair.

Placing her hand above Ulyseon's head, Maxi drew on her magic. Her daily practice accumulating mana had paid off, and the speed of her healing magic now matched Ruth's. When she finished, Maxi swept back the clumps of hair that clung to the squire's clammy forehead to confirm that the wound had completely healed.

"Are you … h-hurt … anywhere else?" she asked him.

"N-No, my lady," Ulyseon said, a flush coloring his normally pale, blemish-free face.

Realizing that her hands in his hair might be making him uncomfortable, Maxi quickly pulled back. Ulyseon was slight and fair enough to be mistaken for a woman, but he was still a knightin-training who would one day join the ranks of the Remdragon Knights. It was inappropriate for her to treat him like a child.

Maxi smiled awkwardly and handed him a fresh towel. "Y-You should … c-clean off the blood."

"Oh! Thank you, my lady." Ulyseon gave her a wide, youthful grin as he took the towel and began scrubbing at his face.

Sir Elliot left his spot near the fire and walked over to Maxi. "May I trouble you to heal a bump as well, my lady?" he asked, motioning to the back of his own head.

Maxi promptly healed Sir Elliot's injury while the other knights finished drying off and began to feast on the food laid out by the maidservants. After healing Sir Elliot, Maxi joined them for the rest of her meal.

The knights usually took their lunch in their quarters, which were adjacent to the training grounds, while Maxi spent her afternoons cooped up in the library. It was rare for them to dine together at this time of day.

Sitting shoulder to shoulder, the knights squeezed their hulking frames around the table, and Maxi watched them while she sipped at her cooled soup.

"H-Has … the lord … left the castle?"

"The commander is in the council room," said Sir Elliot. "He's deliberating with Sir Hebaron, Sir Ursuline, Sir Remus, and … the sorcerer."

"D-Deliberating?"

"They are probably planning the monster raid that we'll carry out once Aquarias comes."

"The order places an emphasis on hierarchies, my lady," Gabel chimed in from across the table. "So the most competent knights have the most say. The commander frequently convenes with those three and the sorcerer at the end of winter to discuss future plans. With the news of monsters migrating from the north, I reckon they're discussing countermeasures."

Ulyseon stopped devouring his lunch to join the conversation. "Do you think I will be able to participate in the next raid?" he asked, his eyes bright.

Sir Elliot scoffed. "After the terrible equestrian skills you exhibited today, we'll need to push your knighting ceremony to next year."

"I must agree with Sir Elliot," Gabel teased. "I heard you took quite the tumble during the last goblin raid. How do you expect to pass the initiation ceremony with such carelessness? I doubt you could catch a fire lizard, let alone a drake."

"I shall not repeat my mistakes!" Ulyseon shouted indignantly. "Let me prove it to you! I could catch two—no, *three* drakes if you give me a chance!"

Maxi found herself glancing back and forth between the speakers, unable to follow the entire conversation.

Sir Elliot, eating quietly next to her, explained it to her in a deferential tone. "The initiation ceremony of the Remdragon Knights

requires initiates to hunt and bring back a monster of the dragon race. They must acquire a dragon stone to be accepted for the knighting ceremony. It is a ritual unique to our order."

"Actually," a young, dark-haired knight said enthusiastically, "the type of the monster is irrelevant as long as it carries a magic stone. But drakes are a good choice for beginners. Bringing back a fire lizard would make you a laughingstock, while wyverns, hydras, and basilisks are too dangerous for fledgling knights to hunt alone."

"W-What kind of m-monster is … a drake?"

"They are similar in appearance to dragons, and they're usually twenty to thirty kevettes tall—if you lined up three or four horses, nose to tail, that's how tall a drake is. They are scaled beasts with sharp fangs and claws. But unlike dragons, they don't have wings, and they can't use Dragon's Breath."

Other knights began to chime in, attempting to scare Ulyseon.

"They should not be taken lightly, though," said one. "Drakes make up for their inability to fly with sheer speed. Once a drake starts chasing you, you can't outrun it, even full speed on horseback. And they have a keen sense of smell, so hiding from one isn't an option either."

"What's more," said another knight, "is they are highly resistant to magic, so most magical offensives are useless."

"The most dangerous thing about them is that they move in packs," said the dark-haired knight. "They're not so smart on their own, but in a group, they will relentlessly chase down their prey, sending signals to each other. They are not to be trifled with, especially by greenhorn knights."

"Ah! I can see it now," one of the knights cried dramatically. "Fumbling Rovar charging recklessly at a drake and meeting his tragic end by becoming monster lunch!"

"Lunch, you say? More like an appetizer. He's so puny I bet he'd be swallowed whole."

Maxi was the only person who looked frightened by their teasing. She eyed the squire's innocent face and willowy frame, and worried. Surely this was too harsh a test for a boy of seventeen?

"Y-You … won't be … d-doing it alone … will you, Ulyseon?"

From the end of the table, Garrow Livakion spoke for the first time. "I shall be joining him, my lady. Uly and I are the only squires being knighted this year."

Maxi could not believe her ears. Garrow was only a year older than Ulyseon. Even though he was taller and broader than his friend, he had yet to shed his boyishness.

"J-Just … the two of you?" she asked with grave seriousness. "Won't … that be too dangerous?"

"They don't deserve to join the ranks of the Remdragon Knights if they're incapable of taking on such risks," Sir Elliot said firmly. "Besides, with their skills, Rovar and Livakion are more than up to the task. So long as they don't bungle it like today."

"I suppose I'll have to haul back the biggest drake I can find if I want to restore my honor," Ulyseon said, lifting his chin. "Just wait and see. I'll use its scales to make new boots for you all."

"Ha! Just try not to become its toothpick."

The knights snickered and burst into laughter. Maxi was dismayed by their callous jokes, tossed about with such nonchalance. Were they not worried about sending these youths into danger?

Maxi frowned at them. Gabel, doubled over with laughter, stopped when he saw her face, and the smile slowly faded from his lips.

"Oi!" he shouted at the other knights. "Enough with the undignified talk. We're in the presence of her ladyship."

Maxi did not point out that "Oi!" was not exactly the height of polite speech either. Instead, she continued to express her concern for the squires.

"Th-There … will be someone … to watch over them … won't there?" she asked. "Ulyseon and … G-Garrow are still so young. Sh-Shouldn't someone … accompany them … to make s-sure that they don't—"

"My lady, we are not children who need to be looked after," Ulyseon said. "The initiation ceremony is a rite of passage we must go through to be recognized as full-fledged knights. We do not require a guardian!"

"He's right," said Garrow. "Your words wound our pride, my lady."

Both squires sounded a little petulant as they voiced their objections, and Maxi stared at them in stunned silence. Were they not afraid of getting hurt or dying? She was in awe of their undaunted confidence. She was four or five years older than they were, yet she did not possess even half of their courage.

"I-I did not … mean to offend you. I was … only worried."

"You have nothing to worry about, my lady," said a new voice. "They might not look it, but those two are exceptional swordsmen."

Maxi's head snapped up to see Hebaron and Riftan striding into the dining hall.

"They may lack experience," Hebaron continued, "but, in skill, they are a match for any knight. Especially Rovar over there. The lad has talent that could rival Sir Riftan's."

Ulyseon leaped up from his seat. "Preposterous! A squire such as myself could never hope to compare to Sir Riftan!"

"If only he could do something about that quick temper," Hebaron added with a sigh.

Riftan ignored the exchange and walked straight over to Maxi. He sat down in the chair next to her as the servants brought out more food.

Maxi smiled timidly at him. Despite looking as alluring as the devil of the scriptures in a black tunic and gold belt, he gave off a forbidding air of icy disgruntlement. Ever since the incident at the training grounds, Riftan became tense whenever Maxi was around the knights. Like a warden guarding the gates of hell, he was on the lookout for anyone who dared repeat Ursuline's impertinence.

"I hope they didn't make you uncomfortable while you were having your meal," Riftan said.

"N-No. Th-They were … telling me … about the initiation ceremony."

"Rovar and Livakion will complete their initiation before the knighting ceremony," Gabel said with a casual smile, unfazed by Riftan's chilly demeanor. "What better time than Aquarias, when the drakes come out from hibernation?"

Riftan stroked his chin, considering. "You have been training them for monster raids, correct?"

"As often as we can," said Elliot with a nod. "But I think it would be valuable for them to gain as much field experience as possible before the knighting ceremony. As it stands, I doubt they'd make adequate knights."

Ulyseon pursed his lips, clearly displeased with Elliot's assessment, but the moment Riftan's gaze fell on him, he sat up straight and wiped the petulant look from his face.

Regarding the two squires with piercing eyes, Riftan came to a decision. "Both of you are to participate in the next reconnaissance mission," he said. "Monster raids are different from standard battles, so there's always something to be gained from firsthand experience."

"Yes, sir!" Ulyseon and Garrow said in unison.

A smile tugged at Riftan's lips. The squires looked at him with awe, respect, and admiration, and he seemed to reciprocate their fondness in his own way.

Maxi found herself feeling jealous of their bond. Although she sat among them, she was not part of their world. Ulyseon and Garrow would join the ranks of the Remdragon Knights in a few months, and they would be the ones by Riftan's side when he faced countless dangers. It was lonely to think that everyone might be capable of growing closer to Riftan but her.

Riftan's brow furrowed when he noticed that Maxi's spoon had stilled. "What's wrong? Is the food not to your liking? Should I ask the servants to bring you something else?"

Maxi shook her head. "N-No, I have … had my fill."

"Have some more."

"I-I really am full." She flashed him a smile and picked up her book. "But I … am a l-little tired, so … I shall … take my leave now."

"But you haven't finished your meal."

"I-I ate q-quite a lot. Truly."

Riftan searched her face, but eventually sighed and nodded.

Maxi slowly made her way out of the dining hall, lost in her thoughts. Once winter was over, Riftan might be sent on another campaign. She would be left all alone again, anxiously awaiting his return. Her heart ached at the thought, and she bit her lip.

If she could master powerful magic, would he take her with him?

The desperate hope quickly evaporated. Riftan had been adamantly against Maxi joining him on campaigns. If she was honest, Maxi doubted she had the courage to go with him even if he were to allow it.

She ran a hand through her messy hair and breathed an exasperated sigh.

THE STORY CONTINUES IN VOLUME 2 …

Seven Kingdoms Handbook



RIFTAN CALYPSE

A lowborn knight who was forced into the deadly Red Dragon Campaign by Duke Croyso after he married the duke's daughter Maximilian. However, Riftan returns three years later as the most renowned knight on all the continent. He is the lord of Anatol, an estate located in southern Wedon, and the commander of the Remdragon Knights. Belligerent and cynical in nature, he may be gruff, but he tries to be gentle to Maxi.

MAXIMILIAN CALYPSE (NÉE CROYSO)

Duke Croyso's stuttering elder daughter, whom he has abused since she was young. Maxi finds it difficult to interact with people and is self-conscious about her looks because she was often compared with her beautiful and poised half-sister. She changes little by little as she falls in love with Riftan.

KNIGHT ORDERS OF THE SEVEN KINGDOMS

REMDRAGON KNIGHTS

EMBLEM: A WHITE DRAGON ON A BLUE BANNER

This independent order was founded in the eastern region of Wedon by a group of young knights to fight against the tyrannical Count Borgan. After their uprising, the king bestowed Sir Bylon, the first commander, an official title and placed the order under royal command.

However, true to their origins, the Remdragon Knights are known to be unpredictable. This has caused the Royal Guards of Wedon to question the knights' loyalty, and they are often denounced as mercenaries.

The Remdragon Knights hold their commander's orders above those of the king, granting the commander of the knights significant influence and power. Because of this, commanders are chosen through strict evaluation within the order. If all members do not acknowledge a candidate's merit, skills, and leadership, that knight will not be recognized as the commander even if the king appointed them to the position. Once chosen, the commander will be the Remdragon Knights' undisputed leader until the next one is chosen.

Although the Remdragon Knights have been long recognized as a formidable order in Wedon, they have never gained prestige because of the nobility's animosity toward their unconventional independence. However, when Sir Riftan Calypse became the new commander, the order gained widespread fame across the continent as the strongest order of knights.

Despite his humble origins, the current commander, Sir Riftan, earned the right to be called "Rosem Wigrew" for defeating Sektor, a savage dragon hibernating in the Lexos Mountains. Riftan's unmatched bravery and skill are recognized by all knights who participated in the Red Dragon Campaign, including those from

Dristan, Osiriya, Wedon, and Livadon. Because of this, he swiftly gained the title of greatest knight.

BOLOSÉ ROYAL KNIGHTS

EMBLEM: A RED LION ON A GOLDEN BANNER

As the First Cavalry of the king's orders, the Bolosé Royal Knights are the kingdom's most powerful order. Their official name is the Royal Knights of Livadon. Only squires with the best lineage, swordsmanship, and education have the opportunity to join the order.

Both the common people and the nobility of Livadon admire and adore the knights of this order.

The current commander, Sir Sejuleu Aren, is the second son of the Grand Duke of Aren and is a genius swordsman. At twenty-five, he saved Livadon from ruin by suppressing a revolt in the western region of the kingdom. He earned the right to be called "Rosem Wigrew" as the savior of Livadon and the defender of the Seven Kingdoms' armistice.

TEMPLE KNIGHTS

EMBLEM: A SILVER SCALE ON A BLACK BANNER

The order of Temple Knights is under the command of the Church of Osiriya. Dating back to the Roemian Empire, the Temple Knights have the most extensive history in the Western Continent. They are also called the "Guardians of the Western Continent" because they protect the High Priest. Due to the church's support of the Seven Kingdoms' armistice, the Temple Knights are always present when conflicts arise between the kingdoms.

All members of this order must adhere to strict regulations. Like monks, they lead a life of abstinence and poverty. Most knights enter the order between the ages of six and twelve. Such youths are

expected to study religious doctrines and proper etiquette as well as undergo rigorous training to become knights. Through this training, the knights of this order eventually become paladins (prelates). Most high-ranking members can use holy magic.

The current commander, Sir Kuahel Leon, is a descendant of Sir Leon, one of the twelve knights who served Darian the Monarch, first ruler of the Roemian Empire. This lineage makes Sir Kuahel a member of a prestigious noble family.

When Sir Kuahel was six years old, he was sent to the monastery to become a paladin. As if determined to prove his illustrious lineage, he displayed great skill and became the youngest paladin at sixteen. He has participated in various conflicts and campaigns against magical beasts, and people across the continent call him "The Holy Sword of Osiriya." When he turned twenty-two, he earned the right to be called "Rosem Wigrew." He is also a favorite of the High Priest of the Church of Osiriya.

KNIGHTS OF PHIL AARON

EMBLEM: A SILVER WOLF ON A DARK GREEN BANNER

The Knights of Phil Aaron are the greatest in Balto. The order was founded by Sir Aaron Breston, one of the twelve knights of Darian the Monarch, first ruler of the Roemian Empire. The current commander is Sir Geyhart Breston, who is also the oldest knight to be honored as the reincarnation of Rosem Wigrew. Even at forty-seven, his tenacity, prowess, and outstanding swordsmanship can still overpower the younger knights. He is considered a legendary swordsman across the continent.

Before the Seven Kingdoms' armistice, Sir Geyhart sided with the church in Balto. He is a stout believer of the old faith and ruthlessly fought those who opposed the peace agreement. He is credited as the knight who led the establishment of the Seven Kingdoms because he unrelentingly removed traitors who instigated

insurrections. Other knights cowered in the face of his ferocity and his opponents were the first to call him "Rosem Wigrew."

Unbeknownst to others, he is currently concerned about his eldest son, Richard Breston. Despite inheriting his father's great talents, Richard is always causing trouble with his arrogant and aggressive nature.

MAGICAL CREATURES

AYIN RACE

A race of magical humanoid creatures. They are usually two-legged (though creatures like Sirens are an exception) and are intelligent enough to use tools. They are social creatures and typically live in groups. Creatures of this race have their own unique languages.

1. FOREST GOBLIN

These mountain dwellers are approximately 4 feet in height with greenish-brown skin. They have distinctive ears, which are large and floppy and shaped like morning glories, and hooked noses. Their posture is usually hunched, and they move in a low stance to keep themselves hidden. They carry a rusted sickle or axe to hunt humans and animals.

2. RED GOBLIN

Approximately 55–60 inches tall and with dark burgundy skin, red goblins are bigger and stronger on average than forest goblins, but they behave similarly. They live in groups in burrows, caves, or crevices.

Red goblins are known to kidnap women more frequently than forest goblins because their desire to reproduce is stronger. Of the Ayin race, red goblins have average intelligence. They usually steal tools from humans but occasionally improve stolen tools or create their own.

3. KOBOLD
Kobolds are a type of goblin similar to red goblins in size and nature, but their skin is lighter and covered in dark fur. They are slightly smarter but physically weaker than red goblins. They dwell in mountains and plains.

4. OGRE
These man-eating giants are approximately 10–12 feet in height. They have flat, piglike noses, round faces with drooping cheeks, fangs protruding from their lips, and dark gray skin.

Although they are stocky, overwhelmingly strong, and magic resistant, ogres are slow and have fairly low intelligence. They act on instinct and are prone to fierce violence. They destroy everything in their path and, when starving, will hunt whatever they can.

Ogres typically attack without weapons, but they occasionally use bats fashioned from uprooted trees. Their use of tools is mostly limited to throwing rocks they pick from the ground.

They are solitary creatures who often kill one another or resort to cannibalism when starving. However, sometimes ogres can be seen living in groups of five or six.

5. GIANT OGRE
Giant ogres are approximately 14–17 feet tall and can occasionally be seen in mountainous regions. They are considerably larger than regular ogres and are believed to be a product of mutation. Their skin is as hard as stone.

They are less intelligent than ogres and rarely stray from their territory. To sustain their enormous size and conserve energy, they are typically inactive. However, when they do go on the move, they always leave a trail of destruction in their wake. Giant ogres are more persistent and brutal than regular ogres.

6. TROLL
Trolls are approximately 7–8 feet in height. Their green skin is covered in warts like a toad’s, and they have large hooked noses, sparse long hair, and sharp jawlines. They are muscular creatures

with a brutal temperament and remarkable re generative powers that allow them to reattach severed limbs. They live in groups of thirty to fifty and are considered extremely dangerous because they methodically raid human villages.

Although trolls are not as powerful as ogres, they are smarter than goblins and can use more tools. Trolls are enthusiastic about weapons and often create their own. Their favored weapons include axes, swords, and iron clubs. Occasionally, trolls will also use leather to fashion clothes.

7. WEREWOLF

Werewolves are approximately 5–6 feet in height and are prone to eating humans. They have the head of a wolf and a body covered in stiff gray fur, with skin as tough as chain mail.

Werewolves are bipedal creatures that use their poisonous hook-like claws and sharp teeth as weapons. However, they occasionally wield other weapons when attacking.

They are not the smartest creatures, but they live in packs in the forest and show excellent cooperation. Agile and swift, they are able to leap from tree to tree.

Black werewolves have darker fur than regular werewolves and can use dark magic to instinctively cast concealment spells on themselves.

DRAGON SUBSPECIES

These creatures are reptilian and hold a magical stone within their body. Mercenaries often hunt them for their skin, scales, bones, and magical stones, which are precious items of high value. Some of the more intelligent creatures of these species can use magic.

1. BASILISK

These creatures are approximately 50–60 feet in length. They have a dragon’s body and tail, a rooster’s head and wings, and an eagle’s talons. As a subspecies of red dragons, their bodies are covered in

red scales. They have powerful magic resistance and can breathe fire.

Basilisks are not very intelligent but are astute, swift, and keen of hearing. They are territorial and will attack any trespasser.

Because their feathered wings are too weak to carry their bulky dragon bodies, they cannot fly. However, their wings allow them to jump high or to create a strong gust. They have a magical stone in their bodies.

2. DRAKE

Approximately 20–26 feet in length, drakes look like dragons but lack wings. They run on two feet and have sharp scales and teeth, and each drake can have up to three horns on its head. They live in groups of six to ten.

Drakes are unable to breathe fire, and they are lighter and faster than dragons. They carry small magic stones within their bodies and are frequently targeted by adventurers because drakes are easier to hunt than basilisks or wyverns. The bigger the drake, the stronger its magic.

3. SALAMANDER

These red lizards are approximately 5–6 feet in length, including their tails. Without their tails, salamanders are less than 3 feet. Their skin is typically burning hot, and their bodies blaze when they get excited. In dire situations, they can transform into gas and become a mass of flames. Salamanders usually dwell around volcanoes, deserts, or mines.

4. WYVERN

Wyverns are approximately 32–40 feet in length and resemble dragons more than any other member of the dragon subspecies. Unlike dragons, wyverns do not have forelegs, but instead have wings that function as arms. Wyverns are also only a tenth of a dragon’s size and cannot breathe fire.

Wyverns have low intelligence and, like other dragon subspecies, carry magical stones within them. They live in groups as small as ten

or as large as fifty. Wyverns dwell in mountainous regions, where they prey on humans and animals alike.

5. LIZARDMAN
Lizardmen are approximately 5–7 feet tall and covered in scales. They have a dragon's head and tail and a humanoid body. They are considered a dragon subspecies as well as a member of the Ayin race. Most Lizardmen can use simple fire magic, and all of them have magic stones within their bodies. Occasionally, Lizardmen are born with powerful magic affinity.

Lizardman numbers are few because females are rare. Although Lizardmen dwell in small villages in the mountains or forests, it is uncommon to encounter them, but they are known to be aggressive.

MAGICAL BEASTS

This term refers to all magical creatures that do not belong to the Ayin race or the dragon subspecies. These beasts vary in intelligence, and most are not unlike common wild beasts.

1. KELPIE
Kelpies resemble horses with a scaled tail like a fish. They usually dwell in streams, lakes, or rivers, though they are occasionally found at sea. When they do surface, kelpies lure humans with their beautiful appearance, then drown and devour them.

2. HARPY
These eagle-like creatures are 9–10 feet tall. Although harpies—regardless of gender—have the head of a woman, they are not considered a part of the Ayin race. It is believed that their form is meant to scare humans. They usually feed on carcasses or vagrants traveling alone. Harpies sometimes appear on battlefields to feed on the corpses.

3. KRAKEN
Krakens are giant squid-like creatures approximately 100–200 feet in length. They reside deep under the waters of the North Sea and rarely come near the surface. However, they do come up during their breeding season and attack ships from time to time.

4. GORGON
Gorgons are giant one-eyed bulls, 10–13 feet in size, that prey on livestock and humans in the northern plains of Arex and Sykan. Gorgons are covered in black fur and have long pointed horns and sharp canine teeth. They can paralyze any creature that stares at their eye for three seconds or more.

DRAGONS

Dragons are approximately 165–195 feet in height and are the strongest beasts in this world. Not many are left, and most are believed to be hibernating. Such hibernations can last for hundreds of years because it is difficult for dragons to sustain their enormous size.

Though legends portray dragons as friendly toward humans, most seem to be apathetic or hostile. They possess an infinite amount of magic and can use Dragon's Breath, a destructive magic attack capable of destroying mountains. They can also control the weather with their cries and create mazes or protective barriers in and around their lairs to keep themselves safe during hibernation.

Dragons' scales rival adamantine in toughness, and their bones are harder than orichalcum. They are smarter than humans and can live for millennia.

HOLY DRAGON

Covered with soft feathers, the holy dragon has the wings of a bird and the horns of a water buffalo. Gentle and peace-loving, this legendary dragon descends only when commanded by the gods.

The next chapter ...

What started out as an arranged marriage between two strangers has bloomed into passionate love between Maxi and Riftan.

But when Riftan is called to war against a vicious monster horde, Maxi refuses to be left behind. She's desperate to prove her worth as a mage and stand by his side, despite his concerns.

Now these two are at odds not only with monsters, but with each other. Can she follow her heart without breaking his?

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First published in the US by Inklore in 2024
First published in the UK by Inklore in 2024

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Originally serialized in Korean as a webnovel entitled Under the Oak Tree on the RIDIBOOKS platform (Seoul, Republic of Korea: RIDI Corporation, 2017).

With thanks to:
MANTA Team:
Project manager: Chisoo Kim, Dohoon Kim
Editor: Inhwa Park
Localization: Gyuyoung Jo, Sydney Thompson Penguin Random House Team:
Editor: Logan Balestrino
Production editors: Jocelyn Kiker, Christa Guild
Production manager: Erich Schoeneweiss
Case design: Bones Leopard
Managing editor: Paul Gilbert Case art: Yuumei
Map: © RIDI, Changkyum Kim ISBN: 978-1-911-72101-7

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