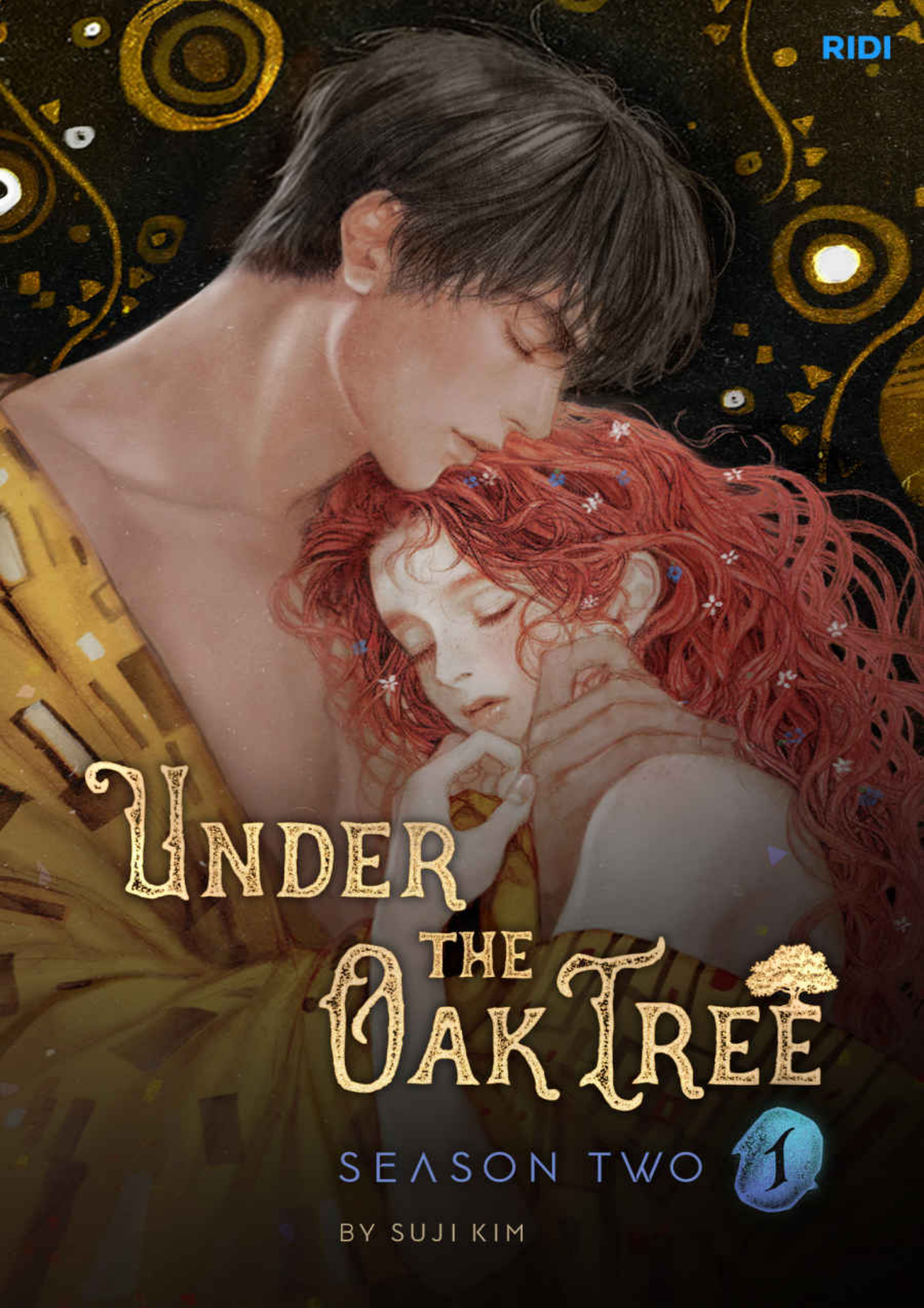


RIDI



UNDER
THE
OAK TREE

SEASON TWO



BY SUJI KIM

UNDER THE OAK TREE

Season 2 (1)

Suji Kim

RIDI

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Chapter 1: Prologue

The banquet hall rang with the parrot-like chatter of Wedon's nobility. As soon as Riftan Calypse entered, silence descended on the crowd. The Lord of Anatol strode through the tension in the room, exuding authoritative power.

Avid curiosity, fear, and admiration mingled on the faces of the noblewomen as they darted glances at his cold exterior. Hiding their blushes behind fans, they whispered in each other's ears while the men held their breaths in equal parts terror and awe.

When he had first stepped foot in Drachium, these were the same aristocrats who had staunchly opposed the uncouth beast encroaching on their territory. Now, the tables had turned, and those who had once openly mocked him were forced to hold their tongues.

In only a few years, Riftan Calypse forged strong alliances with the southern nobles, emerging as a formidable force within Wedon. He was now expanding his influence to the north and west. The zeal with which he pursued the endeavor had startled even the eastern nobles — his greatest adversaries — into throwing their hands up in defeat. The younger lords would hover around him whenever he made an appearance, hoping for the chance to talk to the legendary knight. The more conservative noblemen would discreetly slip away to the outskirts.

Riftan himself was indifferent to their reactions. He marched to the arched doorway at the end of the hall, not sparing a glance at the gossiping crowd nor to those lingering for a chance to sweet-talk him.

He reached the door and addressed the attendant stationed outside. "Inform His Majesty I wish to seek an audience with him."

The attendant scurried into the room. He was granted permission to enter not long after, and he strode in with his auburn cape fluttering behind. Inside, King Reuben III was lounging on a velvet chair.

“You are late,” said the king with a crooked smile. “Is this your way of showing you are above currying favor with the crown?”

Riftan swept his eyes over the congratulatory gifts piled next to the king’s seat and smiled sardonically. “I believe your other vassals have paid homage to the crown’s honor well enough without me, Your Majesty.”

“That does not mean you can neglect your duties,” King Reuben grumbled with a sour expression.

He tilted his chin toward the chair in front of him, motioning for Riftan to be seated. As soon as Riftan obliged, an attendant offered him a full goblet.

King Reuben promptly emptied his drink first and continued like a disgruntled child, “Today is the last day of the celebrations. I was beginning to think you would not make an appearance.”

“I thought it would be best if I did not, Your Majesty.”

King Reuben cocked an eyebrow at his apathetic response.

Gazing down at his goblet, Riftan added in a deadpan manner, “I wished to avoid certain company as much as possible. We could not have the celebration of your first grandchild be marred by bloodshed.”

The king shook his head at the threat in Riftan’s words. “Good heavens, are you still not content after plucking the duke’s fangs?”

Leaning back, the king heaved a long sigh.

“I believe you have sufficiently crushed the man’s spirit. Your influence is now enough to pose a threat. The duke’s, on the other hand, is not what it used to be. He is older, more domineering and ill-tempered. His health is failing as well.

Makes the man look almost pitiful. He would no doubt refuse to admit it even at knifepoint, but he is terrified of you. Though, I suppose that is not entirely surprising considering how you have been twisting his arm. I was told you recently gifted him a chest of severed heads.”

“They all belonged to the assassins he sent to kill me,” Riftan replied dryly. “I merely returned his sentiments.”

“What you are doing is slowly terrorizing the man out of his wits.” The king smiled crookedly again as he poured himself more wine. “It might have been more merciful had I allowed you to execute him two years ago.”

Sparks seemed to flare in Riftan’s dull eyes at the king’s sarcastic remark. For Riftan, who held a grudge against the royal family for preventing him from waging war against the duke, it was not a jest that landed lightly.

Gripping his goblet to suppress his rage, Riftan said menacingly, “I did not know you held him so close to your heart, Your Majesty. Have you not spent the last decade resorting to all sorts of schemes to put the duke in his place? Or use my wife, despite her grave injuries, as a weapon to wound his pride? Why should Your Majesty show any sympathy for him now?”

King Reuben slammed his goblet on the table, the smile vanishing from his face. “You intend to hold that against me for a long time, don’t you? Would you have me kneel before you and beg for forgiveness?”

“Your Majesty, I only ask for one thing,” Riftan said through gritted teeth. “That you do not intervene in my conflict with the duke. I do not think I will be able to stand by while the crown acted mediator again.”

“Is that a threat?”

“I am imploring you.”

King Reuben’s eyes blazed with fury for a moment before he abruptly heaved a sigh. “You need not growl so menacingly. I have no intention of getting between you and the

duke ever again. I should also like to spare myself the bother. As long as you do not force my hand by bandying about threats of war or a trial, I shall turn a blind eye to your feud.”

With that, he downed his wine and studied Riftan’s stony face.

“However, it would be a different matter entirely if your animosity toward the duke were to make you shirk your duties to the crown. You are now the preeminent lord of the south. Any lack of loyalty to the royal family on your part will affect the other nobles, not to mention the knights who worship Wigrew’s reincarnation.”

Riftan remained silent.

“From now on,” King Reuben continued, “many will endow all kinds of meaning to your words and actions. Your reluctant, delayed arrival to the celebration of my grandchild’s birth is cause for concern.”

“Your Majesty... I have never kept you waiting before,” Riftan replied with a sardonic smile. “Dare I say, you are being overly harsh. I do not wish to ever go against the crown. If that is what worries you, I will let it be known now. No matter my influence, I am forever your vassal, knighted by your own hand. Nothing will change that.”

The king’s golden eyes bored into Riftan’s face as if to seek his true intentions. After a moment of tense silence, he returned to his languid posture and let out a dry laugh.

“Then make the whole kingdom aware of it. Go, show everyone that you are over the moon at the birth of my grandson.”

Riftan let the silence build again before offering a reply. “I will do my best.”

Not reassured by his less than sincere answer, King Reuben raised an eyebrow before clicking his tongue and waving him off. “Very well. You may take your leave.”

Riftan bowed and left for the banquet hall, where the bustling activity instantly became subdued. Ignoring the furtive glances, he hurried through the arched doors at the other end into a circular hall overlaid with an intricately-patterned carpet. Nobles decked out in silks and furs were huddled in conversation. Princess Agnes seemed to be leading discussions in the middle of the group, but she paused when she spotted Riftan.

“Sir Riftan. You came,” she said, her face lighting up.

“What a long time it has been, Your Highness.”

Princess Agnes excused herself and gracefully made her way over. Riftan gazed at the unfamiliar sight of the princess in a flowing gown before turning to the person accompanying her. The young man bore the same handsome features as the princess’s, except with golden eyes. He was looking back at Riftan with keen interest.

Introductions were not necessary. Riftan bowed in respect.

“And even longer still, Prince Elias.”

“Indeed, Sir Riftan,” the prince replied, extending a hand in welcome. “I was but a child when we last saw each other. Thank you for coming all this way.”

“Please forgive me for not being here sooner. I bring four warhorses from Lakazim as gifts. I hope they will be to your liking.”

“From Lakazim, you say?” Prince Elias said, a bright smile lighting his features.

Riftan regarded the crown prince’s boyish face with a peculiar expression. The willowy, pale-skinned Elias Reuben looked too young and naive to be a father.

“May I ask what breed they are?” Prince Elias inquired excitedly. “What about their coats? I do not doubt their pedigree if they were selected by you, Sir Riftan.”

Princess Agnes shook her head in exasperation. “You seem more pleased by the horses than your firstborn.”

“Abel is adorable, of course,” the prince gushed as though bragging about a puppy he had been gifted. He then added with a grin, “But he is much too small for me to ride.”

“I cannot believe you.” The princess shot her younger brother a glare before turning back to Riftan. “Thank you for coming. The child is in that room. Would you like to see him?”

Riftan bobbed his head. Though it was clear the prince was dying to see the horses, he led the way to the baby at his sister’s urging.

Thick drapes covered the entrance to the room at the end of the hall. The prince drew them aside and stepped through. The new mother, Rosetta, lounged on a long couch with her maidservants in attendance. She looked up at them as they entered, her eyes apathetic. Dressed elegantly in a rose-colored dress, her silvery blonde hair coiled in a bun, the crown princess looked nothing short of regal.

“Rosetta, Sir Riftan has come to congratulate us on the birth of our son,” the prince announced with enthusiasm as he approached his wife.

Rosetta’s gaze fell on Riftan, a question behind her turquoise eyes. His face hardened. She opened her mouth as if to say something before apparently changing her mind and looking at her husband once more.

“Please lower your voice. The baby has just fallen asleep.”

Rosetta accepted the infant from one of her ladies-in-waiting. The prince shrugged, clearly unaffected by his wife’s icy tone.

He turned to Riftan with a mischievous smile. “Abel is a little devil when he’s awake, you see. You should hear the lungs on him. I’m certain he’ll grow up to be a tyrant.”

The prince bent down to his son. In contrast to his flippant tone, the prince’s eyes as he gazed down at the sleeping infant were brimming with affection.

A sigh of relief escaped Agnes's lips. In the years they had been apart, her younger brother had grown into a sly man comparable to their father. Since he had taken to hiding his true intentions behind a comical mask, she had been worried that he might treat his own son in the same manner. She was relieved to see that was not the case.

He seems to have grown quite fond of Rosetta too.

Contrary to the rumors that the crown prince did not get along with his wife, the pair seemed to be on amicable terms. Agnes smiled as she watched them. They seemed as beautiful as the couples one would find in paintings.

Turning away, she noticed Riftan standing by the door, his expression dark. She was about to invite him to take a closer look at his nephew when her breath hitched in her throat. Though he kept his distance, the agony on his face was stark, as if there were a dagger lodged in his heart.

Startled by his palpable pain, Agnes touched his arm. "Riftan, are you all right?"

He flinched and pushed her hand away, immediately drawing all eyes in the room to them.

Agnes directed a reassuring smile to the watchers and addressed Riftan in a gentle voice. "You look tired, Sir Riftan. You must be weary from your long journey. Please, take some rest for the day."

Riftan cast his eyes down, hiding his emotions, and nodded slowly. "The hour is late. Excuse me, Your Highnesses."

As if sensing the strange shift in the air, the crown prince did not say a word. He granted Riftan his leave with a nod. Riftan gave the royals a perfunctory bow before whirling around and leaving the room.

Agnes chased after him. "Are you truly all right?"

"Why should I not be, Your Highness?" he replied flatly, keeping his gaze fixed ahead.

The princess pursed her lips at his frigid demeanor. They walked in silence until they reached a secluded corridor, where Agnes once again attempted conversation.

“It appears the Mage Tower has been communicating with the church recently. It is impossible to know what they are discussing, but I suspect they are exchanging information regarding the recent resurgence of monsters.”

Riftan froze.

Agnes studied his stony face before cautiously adding, “Once the Mage Tower opens correspondence with the church, regulations within the Tower will be eased as well. When that happens, the novices should be able to freely communicate with the outside world. If you wish, I could take a letter to Maximil—”

“Stay out of my affairs,” Riftan snarled, whirling to face her.

Agnes instinctively took a step back. Fixing her with an ice-cold stare, Riftan spat the words one by one through gritted teeth.

“Your meddling is not welcome. I will not stand for any interference in my marriage again.”

Hearing his voice break at the end, Agnes clenched her jaw. Riftan turned on his heel and strode down the corridor, leaving her sighing at his obstinance.

After Maximilian Calypse had left for the Mage Tower, Riftan had poured all of his attention into consolidating his power, going to astonishing lengths to win over the southern nobles. Not shying away from employing shrewd political maneuvers, threats, or imposing economic pressures on his targets had allowed him to bring the western nobles into his fold as well. The frightening determination with which he achieved all this had caused quite the stir within the walls of Drachium.

Agnes bit her lip. She had known that sending Maximilian to the Mage Tower to prevent the trial would inevitably earn

his rancor. What she had not anticipated was how long his resentment for her would persist.

The princess looked at Riftan's receding figure one last time before listlessly turning away.

Chapter 2

Awakened by a loud knock at the door, Maxi groggily raised her head. She had stayed up all night studying books on magic until her eyes were bloodshot, and the tiredness now weighed on her. Not wanting to get up, she lay curled under the blanket for a while longer before drawing back the thick curtains.

The brightness of high noon was blinding. Groaning, Maxi rubbed her throbbing eyes. The banging on the door grew impatient, and she slowly sat up.

“A m-moment, please!” she stammered.

Despite her request, the knocks did not cease. Maxi pulled her slippers out from under the bed and put them on. When she flung open the door, she found herself face-to-face with an irritated Miriam.

“Have I not warned you I would skin this wretched creature if it ever entered my workshop again?” Miriam snarled, dangling a black cat between them.

Jolting awake, Maxi let out a shriek. “Roy!”

Holding the cat by the scruff, Miriam yanked him upward out of Maxi’s reach. Roy let out a sharp yowl, but the evil witch did not bat an eye.

“Nice try, but I’m going to cook this furball into stew this time!”

“G-Give him back!” Maxi implored, hopping up and down. “Y-You’re hurting him!”

“And what about the trouble he’s caused me? Did you know he made a complete mess of my workshop?”

Standing on her toes, Miriam pushed Maxi’s head down with her free hand. Maxi’s face flushed with embarrassment.

With her tall stature and long limbs, it was something Miriam did often.

Shoving the woman's hand away, Maxi glared at her. "I-It's because your little insect of a fairy keeps provoking Roy! It always—"

"So? Are you saying it's perfectly acceptable for your furball to wreck my workspace?"

The venom in Miriam's eyes drained all the fight from Maxi.

"Isn't an apology warranted?" Miriam continued acidly with a look of disdain. "Or is our noble lady not familiar with the custom? Or, could it be that you think your pet is more important than my workshop?"

The harsh reproof made Maxi flush again.

"I... apologize for the trouble my cat has caused. I-I shall make sure he doesn't get out of my room again. So, please... overlook it just this once."

Miriam's lips twitched as if to launch into another tirade. Instead, she clicked her tongue and tossed the cat into Maxi's arms.

"This really is the last time. If I ever see that horrid creature lurking in my room again, I'll skin its fur and make slippers out of it."

Miriam blew her messy bangs to the side and whirled around.

"You'd better tidy up my workshop!" she barked as she strode away.

After watching her leave, Maxi heaved a sigh and looked down at Roy. The cat was purring with his head buried under her arm. Maxi stroked his soft fur soothingly and plopped down on her bed.

Roy had unwittingly hitched a ride to the Mage Tower in her luggage. While she had been flustered upon discovering

him after boarding the ship, it had felt nice to have a friend with her in an unfamiliar place.

However, that was before she realized how much of a troublemaker the little rascal could be.

“I told you... to stay away from that woman’s room. The evil witch will eat you, you know.”

The cat drooped his ears and let out a pitiful purr. Frowning, Maxi noted his singed tail. After lowering him to the floor, she yanked back the curtain and discovered a half-bent latch lying on the window sill.

She ground her teeth. Her hunch had been correct. There was no doubt Miriam’s fairy had snuck into her room to lure Roy away. Though she very much wanted to seek out Miriam and tell her that she ought to manage her familiar properly, she knew she would only make a fool of herself if she took the woman on without irrefutable evidence.

In the end, Maxi sighed in resignation. She used a fork to fashion a makeshift latch for the window and prepared for the day. She had to hurry if she was to clean Miriam’s workshop before lessons started. Pouring water into a basin, she hastily washed her face, dressed, and swept her tangled hair into a ponytail. She was about to leave the room with a broom and rag in hand when she caught her reflection in the mirror.

She was the image of a fledgling maidservant — a shabby dress and hollow eyes in a pale, haggard face. What would Riftan say if he saw her in this state? After gloomily assessing her appearance, Maxi ran her fingers across her neck in an unconscious gesture, grazing the copper coin she had made into a necklace before leaving Anatol.

Her heart twisted painfully. At some point after arriving at the Tower, she had begun to experience a sharp pang in her chest whenever she thought of Riftan. She caressed the scorched coin for a moment before biting her lip and pushing him from her mind. There was no hope of getting through the day otherwise.

Steeling herself, Maxi stepped out of her room. She had chosen to come here despite knowing how much it would hurt him. There was no time to be moping around. If it would help her return to Anatol even a minute sooner, she had to do her best each day.



The Mage Tower was comprised of five structures. At the heart of the island stood the cone-shaped tower, Urd. The fire tower, Kabala, stood in the west; the water tower, Undaim, in the south; the wind tower, Sigrew, in the east; and in the north, the earth tower, Nome Hall.

As a general rule, mages who had yet to specialize in a particular element were free to study at any of the five. However, this rule more or less existed only as a formality, as most mages settled on which tower to study at while they were still apprentices. As such, the Mage Tower did not foster an environment where novices could freely learn a variety of elemental magics.

Maxi sighed as she recalled her recent lesson at Kabala. Fierce competition existed between the mages of each tower, and this was especially true between those affiliated with Kabala and Nome Hall. They could not seem to stand each other. Maxi felt as though she were walking on eggshells whenever she attended lessons there.

And I haven't even settled on studying at Nome Hall yet.

For some reason, people already regarded her as an earth mage. She gazed despondently up at Nome Hall, which rose above the dense olive tree forest.

The earth tower resembled a massive fortress. The dark structure stretched horizontally as if pressed down by an invisible force. A pulley with a giant cage about six kevettes^[1] high was installed next to its arched iron doors to lift people up to the higher floors. Iron chimneys dotted the walls like lint, plumes of smoke issuing from each.

The black tower's exterior held many more strange devices still — a complicated web of cast iron pipes, clockwork machinery that screeched unpleasantly, transport pulleys of various sizes, and a massive, spinning windmill at the top. Maxi was gazing uneasily up at the cluttered, seemingly haphazard fortress when Roy squirmed in her arms.

“N-No, I am not letting you out of my sight today.”

Pulling the cat closer, Maxi quickened her steps. As she wound through the stout trees and reached the tower's entrance, the clanging of hammers assaulted her ears.

Roy yowled, frightened by the loud noises, and began to struggle more violently. Maxi moved as quickly as she could while trying to soothe the scared cat. Though she had wanted to leave Roy in her room, she knew that Miriam would not go easy on him if he were to slip out and cause trouble again.

“It can't be helped until I can set up a device on the window to keep that fairy out,” Maxi whispered to her cat, almost pleading with him. “I-I will give you a treat later, so bear with it until then, all right?”

She was about to enter the main section of the communal workshop when she heard a lively voice behind her.

“What're you mumbling to yourself?”

Maxi flinched and turned around. Two identical boys with round, ruddy faces looked up at her, each with a large sack hoisted on their shoulders. Both were less than five kevettes^[2] tall. Maxi quickly hid Roy inside her cloak and pulled an awkward smile.

“H-Hello, Alec... Dean...”

“Were you practicing your speech for the competition at Urd?”

The twin brothers of the Umri tribe cocked their heads in unison. Maxi took a surreptitious step back and let out an uncomfortable laugh.

“I, um...”

She was trying to think of a credible excuse when Roy shot out of her cloak and darted for the workshop's entrance. Maxi called after him, but the cat paid her no heed. He bolted across the hall and out the door. Right then, Anette Godric, who was entering the tower behind her brothers, snatched up the fleeing creature by the scruff.

“Roy!”

Chapter 3

Maxi rushed over to Anette, who was staring at the cat with bleary eyes.

The girl cocked a dark brown eyebrow at Maxi. “Is this for today’s experiment?”

“N-No! He’s mine.”

Aghast, Maxi hastily took Roy into her arms.

Anette’s round face crumpled into a scowl. “Now look here, Max. Even if the senior mages are too busy with their Advancement Exams to supervise the workshop, it’s still not an open invitation to bring your pet.”

“P-Please let him be here just this once. My window latch got damaged... so I couldn’t leave him alone in my room. He already snuck out this morning and made a mess of Miriam’s work—”

“Miriam’s?” Anette said abruptly.

Her eyes darted to the cat again, and a pleased smile spread across her sullen face. She ruffled Roy’s head with a large, calloused hand and roared with laughter.

“I’m impressed, Max. How clever of you to use your familiar to meddle with the competition.”

“R-Roy is not my familiar! He’s just an ordinary cat. A-And it was never my intention to disturb—”

“All right, all right. If you say so.”

Anette gave a conspiratorial wink before sweeping past, marching away on her muscular legs. Maxi stared after her incredulously. Though it was well-known that mages were not the best listeners, the Godric siblings were on a tier of their own.

With a sigh, Maxi trailed Anette into the communal workshop. It was a space mainly used by the novices of Nome Hall. Inside, the first thing she saw was the huge furnace spitting out flames. The Godric brothers were busy tossing charcoal and firewood into the chute. A man, who was fairly tall for someone of the Umri tribe, vigorously worked the bellows beneath the structure. Next to the furnace, four other novices of short stature were hammering away at a steel plate. They all seemed to be working on a magical device.

Maxi lowered her hood over her head to block the stifling heat and sought a relatively quiet corner. She flung her bag on an old desk by the window and gently lowered Roy to the floor. The cat crawled under the desk and curled himself into a ball, escaping the frightening and unfamiliar place.

After stroking the cat's back with a comforting hand, Maxi took out the drafts of the magic runes she had organized the previous night. The Godric twins promptly stopped what they were doing and rushed over.

"Are these the runes you'll be presenting at the competition?" Dean Godric asked with avid interest.

"Let me take a look," said Alec Godric, extending a plump, soot-covered hand. "I'll check over it for you."

Maxi hastily backed away. "W-Wash your hands first!"

"Ah, you nobles, always fussing over the silliest things."

Pursing his lips, Alec wiped his hands on his grimy apron and snatched the drafts out of her grip. Maxi yelped. The Godric brothers thumbed through her presentation, not seeming to care about the sooty prints they were leaving along the edges of the parchment.

"Nome Hall's reputation rests on the outcome of this competition. If you're submitting flimsy spells, I *will* object to your participation. We have to put those Kabala bastards in their place once and for all!"

"You keep forgetting... but I'm not a mage of Nome Hall yet. I'm currently learning fire magic at Kabala as well."

The brothers, inspecting Maxi's runes with big, bright eyes, jerked their heads up at her reminder. All around the workshop, the other novices stopped hammering, the jetting sparks from their anvils dying out as they turned hostile gazes on her. They all stared as though she were a traitor. Maxi could not help but shrink back.

Taking pity on her, Alec clicked his tongue and said, "You still haven't given up? Maximilian, you have absolutely no talent for fire magic."

"He's right," cut in Anette, who had just pulled out a wyvern-shaped steel device from the kiln. She made an opening in it with her bare thumb and forefinger. "Your affinity to fire magic is practically non-existent. Why don't you aim for water magic instead? At least you have an affinity to that, albeit minuscule."

"My affinity to water magic... is not minuscule!" Maxi exclaimed.

"Then why have you not taken a single class at Undaim this semester?"

She pressed her lips together at Dean's teasing question. It was obvious to everyone that her mana affinity leaned heavily toward earth magic. Though she displayed some aptitude for water magic, it was, as Anette pointed out, minuscule at best.

Water and earth magic were polar opposites. Thus, she had been dubbed "Sludge" while taking the basic courses at the water tower.

Anette scoffed and took off her gloves. "Just give it up, Max. You're painfully unsuited for fire magic, and you don't fit in with the water mages either. The senior mages already believe you will receive the earth rune."

"That's right. And wouldn't you rather be The Giant of Nome Hall than The Sludge of Undaim?" said Alec with an impish smile.

Feeling despondent, Maxi swept her gaze over the fifteen novices of Nome Hall. All of them were of short stature, with

round faces and bushy hair. The majority of the earth mages remaining at the Mage Tower were from the Umri tribe. As descendants of the ancient dwarves, the Umri were blessed with strong affinities to fire and earth magic, as well as exceptional talents for smelting and crafting magical devices.

Studying with them had allowed Maxi to master a variety of spells at pace. However, she felt that she was growing further away from the mage she dreamed of becoming the more time she spent at Nome Hall. Strictly speaking, earth mages were closer to craftsmen than spell-casters.

Maxi heaved a dejected sigh as she recalled how easily Princess Agnes had summoned flames. When she first arrived in Nornui, she had dreamed of becoming a fire mage just like the princess. She had been willing to do anything to become a powerful wielder of magic that Riftan could rely on. However, the results of the mana affinity test had dashed those hopes. As it turned out, she was thoroughly incompatible with fire magic.

“Mages with earth affinity usually have varying degrees for fire magic as well, but you, strangely, have an affinity to water. It’s a peculiar combination,” Dean remarked, shaking his head.

“Still, you show exceptional talent with earth magic,” Alec chimed in. “You’ll have a much easier time if you would just give up on fire.”

“But,” Maxi retorted, looking discontented, “I wish to learn offensive magic. An earth mage... no matter how talented, can only offer support from the rear during battle.”

“Well, that’s unavoidable since earth magic is more suited for defensive spells by nature,” Anette said flatly, inspecting the wyvern-shaped piece. “If you want to learn offensive magic as an earth mage, you’ll have to work your way up. You can learn forbidden spells if you become a mage on the upper floors.”

“I-I don’t want that! I wish to leave this island as soon as possible, but high mages... are forbidden from leaving Nornui as they please.”

“And what’s so terrible about that?” Dean said, shrugging. “I don’t see why you prefer the outside world with all those monsters running free. And at worst, you could even get sent to stand trial before the Holy Tribunal. A lifetime of studying magic within Nornui sounds better than living with heresy inquisitors breathing down your neck.”

“Such things... rarely happen now. Mage persecution is in the past.”

“True, for ordinary people like you. But mages with non-human lineage like us would fall prey to heathen hunters the moment we left this island.”

Tired of repeating the same argument they always had, Maxi heaved a weary sigh. “Times have changed. Even His Holiness cannot send the Tower’s mages to the Holy Tribunal without just cause, and the rulers of each kingdom dare not offend Nornui.”

Anette snorted, but Maxi appeared to have perked Alec’s interest.

“Is there a shortage of mages where you’re from as well?” he said, his eyes bright with curiosity.

“Of course. There is a shortage of mages all over the Western Continent,” Maxi replied. “The landed nobles of each kingdom are desperate to have more in their employ. And they are treated much better than they used to be.”

Suddenly pensive, Alec stroked his round chin. “You said you’re from the south of Wedon, didn’t you? Do you perhaps know anything about the Lord of Anatol?”

Chapter 4

Maxi stiffened at the unexpected question. She was floundering for what to say when Dean chimed in.

“The Lord of Anatol? The Dragon Slayer? What about him?”

“I heard he has an adamantine sword and orichalcum-plated currencies in his possession,” Alec said, his nostrils flaring with excitement. “Can you believe it? They say his cellar is filled with divine ores! You know my lifelong dream is to be able to craft with orichalcum. If I became the Dragon Slayer’s mage, I could make that come true.”

“What hogwash. Have you forgotten the deserter is in his service?”

Anette’s grave voice made Maxi flinch. After wordlessly inspecting the steel wyvern model flapping its wings, she turned a stern gaze on Maxi and the twins.

“Keep such thoughts to yourself if you don’t want to rankle the senior mages. It still very much grates at the Serbels whenever the topic arises.”

Alec grew somber at the mention of the mage clan that dominated the upper echelons of Urd. Maxi surreptitiously gulped. As it turned out, Ruth Serbel’s notoriety within the Mage Tower was far worse than she had ever imagined. The high mages of Urd accosted her whenever they could with less than savory things to say about her friend, and even the exceedingly solemn Serbel clan were known to fling a damning insult or two whenever his name came up.

Thankfully, none of the other novices knew where she was from. If they were to learn she had been taught by the traitor himself, she was certain they would never let her hear the end of it. Ruth’s desertion was the reason the Mage Tower had tightened its rules, and the majority of the novices loathed him for it.

Maxi hastily changed the subject. “I-I think we should stop the idle chatter here! We have much to do... to prepare for the afternoon classes.”

“I haven’t finished looking through your drafts yet. The reputation of Nome Hall is at stake!”

“He’s right! Not to mention, you’re competing against Kabala’s Miriam. That girl is a nitpicking fiend! You’ll be thoroughly humiliated if you submit something slapdash.”

Maxi swept a critical eye over the brothers. “Shouldn’t you be working on your own tasks... instead of worrying about mine? You’ll both fail the Advancement Exams if you don’t hand in your ancient text translations in time.”

The Godric brothers looked as though they were going to be sick. Snatching the drafts out of Alec’s grip, Maxi rolled them up and shoved them in her bag.

“As for these,” she continued, “Master Landon has agreed to review them for me, so you needn’t worry.”

Anette, who had returned to looking at her creation with a pleased expression, jerked her head up. “Master Landon?”

Master Landon of the Umri tribe was the head mage of Nome Hall, infamous for his fastidious and grouchy nature. Everyone knew he viewed novices as nothing more than minor annoyances.

Anette raised an eyebrow. “What’s gotten into that mulish old man?”

“He appeared to be... quite invested in the competition,” Maxi said, keeping her tone deliberately indifferent.

In spite of her efforts to shake off the pressure, she still felt it weighing on her. Not only would she be representing the novices of Nome Hall, but the results of this competition decided whether or not she would receive her elemental rune next year.

Novices were required to finish a four-year course of study before they were granted a rune. However, if they showed

exceptional skill, a novice could receive one in just three years. Maxi spent her days and nights studying the theoretical courses required to become a high mage, and her exemplary grades were evidence of all her hard work. If she received a good evaluation in the upcoming competition, she would be able to leave Nornui by next spring.

Then I can go home.

Her heart pounded. Waves of sorrow and longing washed over her whenever she thought of Anatol. Struggling to keep from being swept up in her emotions, she pulled out the desk chair and sat down. The most important thing at this present moment was the competition.

“I need to prepare for class, so I bid you return to your tasks as well.”

“Just...” said Anette, eyeing Maxi’s dark circles, “don’t push yourself too hard.”

Anette patted Maxi’s shoulder before returning to her table. The Godric brothers followed their sister. Maxi slipped her hand beneath the desk to stroke Roy’s chin, then flipped open her textbook.

Thanks to Anette’s generous offer to create a device to trap Miriam’s fairy familiar, Maxi was able to leave Roy in her room the next day. She gave him a few farewell pats while he lounged on the window sill before she left. Descending the stairs, she was pulling out the notes for her debate class when a cheerful voice trilled behind her.

“Max!”

Turning around, Maxi saw a girl with lush brown hair skipping toward her, her long braid bouncing behind. She smiled warmly.

“Good morning, Sidina.”

“Good morning. Ready for the debate today?”

“I think so.”

The girl groaned. “No fair! You promised not to prepare in advance!”

“I don’t recall doing anything of the sort,” Maxi said primly, then snapped her attention back to her notes.

Sidina began howling like a wolf, trying to break Maxi’s concentration. Maxi gave her a disapproving, sideways glare. Blessed with natural eloquence, Sidina was usually at the top of the class with little to no study.

Maxi, on the other hand, had to prepare at least three days in advance if she wanted to avoid public humiliation. Though two and a half years of effort had mostly corrected her speech impediment, her tongue still froze when she was flustered or nervous. Ignoring the racket her classmate was making, Maxi sank into her debate preparations by muttering the more difficult pronunciations under her breath.

Having moved on to squealing an Osiriyan folk song, Sidina cried out, “Oh, you’re a right scholar, aren’t you?”

“I’m... doing what I must to keep up.”

“You’re doing more than just keeping up! Do go easy on the rest of us, Maximilian. I have to speak right after you, you know. My already subpar argument is going to sound all the more lackluster following yours. Do you not feel sorry for me?”

Maxi snorted. “You are exaggerating. Everyone knows you have a silver tongue.”

“I’m no good at improvising! Master Lorraine already gave me an earful about it the other day.”

“Then you should have prepared.”

Sidina pursed her lips. Maxi tuned out the girl’s whining as she leafed through her notes. Before she knew it, they were walking into the wide garden that led to Urd.

Just outside the lecture hall, Maxi remembered that she had to return the books she had borrowed from the library.

Changing course, she asked Sidina to save her a seat. The girl grumbled but gave a reluctant nod.

Maxi began climbing the staircase adjacent to a massive arched entrance, dashing up the steps two at a time. It was unladylike behavior, but this island was the one place she did not have to keep up appearances. She made her way down a long corridor bathed in the bright sunlight of early fall and reached the nearly seven-kevette^[3] library door. An untold number of books filled her vision as soon as she stepped through.

She wove through the neat rows of packed shelves and stopped in front of the librarian's ancient desk. A petite old woman with a hooked nose blinked up at her.

"May I help you?"

"I'm here to return some books," Maxi said in a small voice, pulling them out of her bag.

The librarian frowned as she inspected them. "These are long overdue."

"Y-Yes, I forgot yesterday..."

The librarian appeared not to hear her. She recorded the return and said in a monotonous voice, "You are hereby stripped of your borrowing privileges for two weeks. Any required reading may be done on the premises."

"B-But... I require numerous reference materials for the upcoming competition. If you would overlook my tardiness just this once, I'll make sure to return—"

"Rules are rules."

The librarian's sharp interjection seemed to conclude the matter, and she buried her nose back in the book she had been reading.

Maxi considered imploring her further, but meekly turned around when she remembered how uncompromising the old woman could be. Just then, a booming voice echoed behind her.

“Maximilian!”

Startled, Maxi turned to look in the direction of the speaker.

Chapter 5

A young man in a flowing gray robe marched down the narrow aisle, his usual air of fastidiousness about him. It was Ranulf, the high mage in charge of novice affairs. Paying no heed to the librarian's disapproving look, the man stomped toward Maxi.

"I'm glad I ran into you here. Saves me a trip to your lecture hall."

"I-Is there a problem?"

"Do you truly not know?"

With his hands on his waist, the high mage gave her an imperious look. Though Maxi could feel the curious glances of the other mages reading by the window, Ranulf seemed disinclined to show any discretion. He pulled out a thick bundle of parchments from his robes and shook it in Maxi's face. Her vacant, blinking eyes widened when she realized it was the letter she had spent many a sleepless night writing.

The high mage rubbed his temple and heaved a sigh. "Have I not told you countless times that novices must keep their letters short and simple because they are inspected prior to being sent? Were two rejections not enough for that to sink in?"

"B-But I really did keep it as short as possible this time!" Maxi shrieked, afraid of a third rejection.

Novices were only permitted to send communications twice a year, and as the high mage had said, hers had been rejected both times. Aggrieved, Maxi glowered at him.

"Y-You told me not to go over ten pages... a-and I complied."

"Complied, did you?"

Practically on the verge of tears, the high mage extracted a folded page from the bundle and flattened it. Maxi shrieked and hastily tried to cover the letter's contents. Ignoring her distress, Ranulf dangled the parchment — about the size of a tablecloth — in front of her eyes.

“You call this complying?! These are parchments meant for outlining large magical devices, and you filled them with your tiny writing! My eyes nearly popped out! I endeavored to slog through because I truly did want to allow you a letter this time, but it proved impossible!”

Ranulf snarled, pointing to his bloodshot eyes.

“Is this some sort of torturous experiment you're conducting? Last time, you confounded me with a letter as thick as the Holy Scripture, and now this ludicrous—” He seemed to struggle for the right word before bellowing, “Do you have no regard for the person who has to check these?! Do you understand the torture of being forced to read a love letter this long-winded?”

“I-I-It is not a love letter! I was m-merely letting my husband know how I was doing! We are only allowed to send letters twice a year... s-so of course I'd have much to say!”

The high mage raised his chin and snorted loudly. “You should be glad I rejected them. It would have been disastrous had they been allowed to cross the sea. Believe me, those pathetic letters of yours would have scared your husband away!”

Shock drained the color from Maxi's face. How could he say such a terrible thing when she was out of her mind with worry?

Forgetting they were in a public space, she shouted, “You're wrong! M-My husband... is not a heartless man like you, Master Ranulf!”

“Enough. Just rewrite it,” the high mage said through gritted teeth.

With that, he pulled out a parchment a single kevette^[4] long and waved it at her.

“I am giving you one more chance. The letters are going out in two days, so you have until tomorrow to write another. The parchment should be this size...”

Trailing off, Ranulf walked over to the librarian’s desk and snatched the old woman’s quill from her hand. He quickly scribbled a sentence on the parchment.

“And your writing like this, no smaller. Keep it within five pages.”

“B-But it was ten pages last—”

“Five. A page more, and I will immediately stamp it as rejected, so keep that in mind as you write.”

After driving home his point, Ranulf whirled around and stalked out of the library. Flabbergasted, Maxi stood stone-still as she watched the man leave. Someone cleared their throat behind her. It was the librarian, directing an angry glare at her from behind the desk.

“Anyone who raises their voice in here is banned from entering for a week.”

Maxi blinked at her.

“As those are the rules,” the librarian continued, “you are hereby barred from entering the library for one week, Maximilian. Please remove yourself from the premises at once.”

Close to tears, Maxi turned to leave.

Despite being in a daze, Maxi was able to successfully complete her debate class. Still miserable, she trudged back to her dorm, fidgeting with the letter she had spent months carefully composing. Whenever the yearning became impossible to bear, she had poured that emotion down on parchment. It was true that her letters ran too long, but a few pages were simply not enough to contain everything she wanted to tell him.

I really did try to keep it short this time.

Maxi walked into her room with a forlorn expression. Roy sprang up from his curled position on the bed to rub himself against her leg. After feeding the cat, Maxi sat at her desk and morosely gazed down at the bundle of parchment. Suddenly, all her suppressed anxiety and sadness erupted like pus bursting from a wound.

If you leave, I'll no longer wait for you.

Maxi bit her lip. All the worries she had pushed to the back of her mind began to plague her. Had he truly meant those words? Had she already lost her place by his side? What if he did not need her anymore? What would she do then?

Struggling for breath, she took out a fresh piece of parchment and began to scrawl like a person possessed. Despite having little to write about since accounts of life in Nornui were forbidden, the words kept pouring forth, and she found it impossible to stop. They fell short of fully expressing how much she thought of him, how much she missed her time in Anatol, and how it broke her heart whenever she recalled the day she had left him. How could five pages be enough when not even a thousand could contain her yearning?

In the few pages she had been allowed, she made every effort to convey all the emotions in her heart. She barely managed to stop short of begging him not to forget her. Skimming over it after she had finished, Maxi realized she had failed miserably in articulating everything she wanted to say.

Her face fell as she stared bleakly down at the yellow parchment. What was the use? Riftan may not even want to receive a letter. Perhaps he had already forgotten all about her. The thought tore at her heart. She covered her face with her hands and desperately tried to hold back her tears.

A sigh escaped her lips. It appeared she would never be able to shake the terrible habit of imagining the worst. Despite her utmost efforts to reinvent herself during her time in Nornui, her fundamental nature proved difficult to change.

After wearily gazing at the sunset, Maxi dipped her quill in ink. Even if Riftan no longer needed her, she still needed him. All she wanted was one more chance to regain his heart. Collecting herself, she wrote a brief passage on how she was doing and that she was trying her best to return to Anatol. She hesitated before scribbling a final line.

I miss you so much I could die.

As she stared down at the words, the tears she had kept bottled up came bursting out. Wiping her cheeks, she sealed the letter inside a leather envelope. Roy, startled by her sobs, slinked over to her and rubbed against her skirt. Maxi gathered the cat in her arms and buried her face in his soft fur.

“You... miss home too, don’t you?”

Roy purred and licked her cheek with his rough tongue.

She sniffled. “I miss it too.”

A knock at the door interrupted the quiet moment.

Jerking her head up, Maxi murmured, “Roy... what did you do this time?”

As if escaping her accusatory look, Roy wriggled out of her grip and darted under the bed. She glared after him before walking over to the door.

“Wh-Who is it?”

“It’s me.”

When she swung the door open, she found Anette waiting for her, lantern in hand.

Baffled, Maxi said, “What brings you here... at this hour?”

Anette Godric resided in the Umri tribe’s village and was thus rarely seen in the dorms.

“Master Landon sent me. He wants to see you in his office. He says there’s something he wishes to discuss with you regarding the runes you asked him to review.”

Chapter 6

Apprehension washed over Maxi. Was there a problem with her drafts? She hastily threw on her robe before rushing outside, where the sky was tinged a dark blue. She and Anette hurried across the shadowy forest path illuminated in the soft glow of twilight.

Turning up the brightness of the lamp she was carrying, Anette looked up to study Maxi's distressed face. "Do you know what Master Landon wants to talk to you about?"

"N-Not at all."

Nervously fidgeting with her sleeve, Maxi turned the rune she had devoted months to over in her head. She had forgone sleep and food in order to finish it in time for the competition. Despite her efforts, the senior mage might well have discovered a grave flaw that she had overlooked.

Anxiety quickened her steps, and her heart began to shrivel in her chest. When they finally reached Nome Hall, Anette pointed to the massive, birdcage-like iron crate attached to the outside of the tower.

"Master Landon should be waiting for you in his office. I'll be in the communal workshop, so come find me if you need any help."

"Thank you."

After waiting for Maxi to step in the crate, Anette closed the door and yanked down the adjacent lever. The contraption began to rattle as it rose up the wall. Maxi clung to the iron bars and forced herself not to look down. The dark forest spread like a carpet beneath her feet as she rose.

Soon, the grayish-blue ocean expanded beyond the forests' edge. She gazed longingly at the distant waters and only tore her eyes away when she felt tears welling. The pulley came to a halt with a resounding clank. Maxi carefully stepped from

the crate on unsteady legs and entered the tower through an opening on the side of the building. She crossed through a cluttered hall and stopped before a wooden door.

At her soft knock, a gruff voice called from inside the room.

“Come in.”

Maxi entered a spacious office littered with stacks of books. A pot-bellied old man sat reading by a blazing fireplace.

“I apologize for calling you here at such a late hour,” he said, snapping shut his book. “I did consider waiting until tomorrow, but I thought it best to speak with fewer ears around.”

“May I ask what you wish to speak about, Master Landon?” said Maxi, looking uneasy.

Landon pointed a plump finger at the empty chair across from him. “Please, be seated first.”

The head mage extracted a bundle of rolled-up parchments from a pile of books. Maxi immediately recognized it as her rune drafts. He unfurled them in his lap and silently regarded them for a while.

“I gather you know why I’ve called you here.”

“Is there... a problem?”

Landon shook his head. “Not at all. Quite the opposite, actually. This rune of yours is rather ingenious. So ingenious, in fact, I find it hard to believe it was conceived by a third-year novice.”

Maxi’s eyes widened at the unexpected praise. Though she had dedicated significant time and effort to creating the rune, she had not dared to hope for such approval from the head mage of Nome Hall himself. Having her abilities acknowledged made her heart swell with joy, but apprehension swiftly crept in again when she noticed Landon’s pensive face.

“Then... why...?”

“It is *too* exceptional,” Landon replied, tapping the parchment with a broad finger. “I’m positive you will be elevated to senior mage the moment you present this rune.”

“S-Senior mage?” Maxi said, her eyes growing even wider in astonishment.

Landon nodded, his face grave. “As I’m sure you’re aware, should you be made a senior mage, you will receive Nornui’s backing and be granted the freedom to study various types of magic. In exchange, you will be bound to the island, prohibited from leaving without permission.”

The blood drained from Maxi’s face. She looked back and forth between Landon and the rune in horror. Her breaths became shallow as though she were being strangled.

“I-I don’t understand. I did indeed work hard on it, but to think it was that impressive... I-It’s rather simple compared to advanced magic...”

“A complicated rune does not always equate to exceptional magic. In fact, a simpler rune is easier to use, and this one is a masterpiece in that regard.”

Picking up the parchment, Landon marveled at it for a moment before he creased his brow.

“But I doubt it will ever be put to use. More likely, Urd will add it to its list of forbidden spells. What a shame that such astounding magic must rot away on this island because the Tower is too afraid of being in the church’s bad graces.”

Landon heaved a sigh in dismay, and Maxi sat in stunned silence. Was her rune truly that incredible? She could not do much more than blink.

Noting her dazed expression, Landon clicked his tongue. “Did you not consider any of the dangers of creating a golem? The church would never condone the existence of such magic. Any spell involving monsters is strictly banned.”

“B-But a golem is not a monster! I was told that a golem is a type of magical device. A-According to historical records...”

golems were created in large numbers during the golden age of the Roem Dynasty to fight monsters.”

“And the golems created back then are now indiscriminately attacking humans. That is why the people outside this island consider them monsters, which has become the general consensus.”

Landon shook the parchment.

“To put it plainly, the rune you have designed is a spell to create a monster. How do you think the church would react if they were to learn that such magic existed?”

Maxi was too horror-stricken to say anything. The graveness of her predicament finally dawned on her, and she snatched the draft from the head mage’s hands. She paid no mind to his jolt of surprise and shoved the parchment into her robes.

“I-I am going to pretend this never existed. So please... forget you ever saw it, Master Landon.”

Landon gaped in disbelief. “Then, what of the presentation?”

“I-I will come up with a new rune, so please disregard this one. I-I have not told anyone what the rune is for... so it should not pose a threat if we never speak of it again.”

Suddenly, she remembered the Godric brothers inspecting the drafts in the communal workshop. Still, with the twins’ abilities, she doubted they would have gauged the rune’s purpose in such a short time. Even if they had, she knew they would not tell a soul if she asked.

“I-I do not intend to remain at the Mage Tower,” Maxi said, her tone beseeching. “I have been devoting myself to my studies... so I c-can return to my husband’s side as soon as possible. So, I beg you... please keep this between us.”

“If you do not wish to stay, why work on such a rune when you could have chosen any number of things?”

“I... became interested in the idea while researching the ancient mages,” Maxi muttered, a flush coloring her cheeks.

She could not bring herself to admit that she had decided on the rune after days of mulling over ways to help Riftan in battle. Landon regarded her with his amber eyes for a long time before sighing softly.

“No need to look so uneasy. Had I wanted to force you into presenting that, I would not have called you to my office at such a late hour.”

“Th-Then...?”

“Is there anyone on this island who doesn’t know how desperately you wish to leave this place?” Landon said peevishly before leaning back in his chair. “Even so, I wanted to be sure it was truly what you wanted. That rune would guarantee you a place in Nornui. I must admit, I was tempted to not bring this matter up with you at all to ensure that spell could see the light of day.”

He gave Maxi a bitter smile when she pursed her lips.

“Evidently, I have since reconsidered. Doing so would have ensured Nornui its second deserter.”

“It’s... not that I am unhappy here,” Maxi said cautiously. “I simply want to return to my family. Learning magic is certainly rewarding... but I cannot imagine a lifetime of studying magic in this tower. I wish to be with my husband.”

Chapter 7

Stroking his bushy beard, Landon heaved a resigned sigh.

“If that is your wish, then there is nothing I can do. You may return to your quarters with your drafts. I shall find another novice to take your place.”

Maxi’s eyes widened. “You are... removing me f-from the competition?”

“What choice do I have? Since you have no intention of presenting that rune, I will have to find another candidate.”

“I-I can work on a new—”

“Now you are being hoggish,” Landon said, furrowing his shaggy brows. “I cannot let a rashly conceived submission ruin Nome Hall’s reputation. Either you present your golem rune or withdraw.”

Maxi bit her lip. When she thought of all the sleepless nights she had invested in the hopes of being selected, the dejection she felt was beyond words. Why had it not occurred to her to make sure her chosen rune was not against the church’s doctrines? Her eyes burned with tears. Even so, she knew Master Landon was right. It would not do for her to be willful about this.

She hung her head. “I shall... withdraw from the competition.”

A novice by the name of Armin Dolph was chosen to present in Maxi’s stead. The twenty-five-year-old lad was rather tall and striking in appearance for a mage of the Umri tribe. He was well-known among the novices for his skills and for being a man of little words.

Maxi had caught his baffled glance when Landon had petitioned him. Half a second later, Armin had seized the opportunity with his signature stony expression. Maxi let out a

bitter sigh. She only had herself to blame. After all, it was her poor judgment that had put her in this situation.

“What on God’s green earth happened?” said Anette, approaching Maxi. “Did you do something to anger Master Landon?”

Looking embarrassed, Maxi hastily concocted an excuse. “There was... a serious flaw in my rune. Master Landon and I discussed it at length, and we both decided it would be better if I dropped out.”

“But you’re the best out of all of us at runes. What was wrong with it? Let me have a look. I’m sure it’s not unsalvageable.”

“N-No!”

Startled, Anette’s eyes widened.

Maxi ran her hand over her haggard face, struggling to appear calm. “Master Landon already took a good look for me. I would... rather not talk about it anymore.”

Anette’s cheeks quivered before she spun around. Though it was obvious she was upset, Maxi was already having a hard enough time getting ahold of her own emotions without having to concern herself with anyone else’s.

Lost in her thoughts, she slipped out of the communal workshop for her next class. Her head felt muddled. What was she to do now? To be granted an elemental rune early, one had to achieve a significant accomplishment. The surest way for a novice was to showcase their talent in the rune or dueling competition held at Urd every year. Maxi had already lost her chance at winning the rune contest, and she would not dream of competing in combat. Offensive magic was not her strong suit, to say the least.

She gnawed her lip. No matter the cost, she had to find a way. She entered the hall on Urd’s ground floor just as Sidina was coming down the stairs. The girl rushed over to her as soon as she spotted her.

“Max, what happened? Is it true you withdrew from the rune competition?”

Maxi half-heartedly repeated the explanation she had given Anette. Though Sidina did not look convinced, she refrained from prying further when she saw Maxi’s crestfallen face. The others, however, were more tenacious. The moment Maxi stepped foot inside the lecture hall, fifteen or so novices flocked to her and demanded to know why she was no longer competing. Parroting the same excuse over and over drained all of her energy.

It was an immense relief when the lecturer finally entered the room and started the lesson. Maxi tried to concentrate on the soft voice that filled the classroom as she took notes on a small stone tablet. However, her agitation made it impossible for her to focus, and she ended up spending half the lesson correcting her misspellings. A violent urge to hurl her tablet across the floor took hold of her.

Why was she such a mess? Half a year wasted on a rune she was not allowed to present, and now she could not even keep up with a lesson.

When the class ended, Maxi trudged out of the lecture hall, utterly despondent. Though some of the novices attempted conversation, she was not in any mood for idle talk. After responding rather coldly, she rushed past them and headed down the corridor.

At the bottom of the stairs, she was about to leave the tower when she spotted a group of novices looking out at the nearby garden. She followed their gazes to see five men in black robes marching in single file through piles of red leaves.

Maxi squinted to study them closer. Though their faces were concealed beneath their hoods, it was evident they were outsiders.

“Are they new mages?” one of the novices whispered.

“Merchants, more likely. Here to purchase mages or magical devices.”

“That’s unusual. It’s not time for the ships to arrive.”

It did not take long for Maxi to realize their assumptions were incorrect. The silver pattern embroidered on the hem of the strangers’ robes looked familiar, and it took a second for her to place it — only the paladins of the Temple Knights were allowed to wear that motif on their persons.

How did they manage to enter the island?

The Mage Tower kept innumerable secrets from the church. Their library was filled with controversial books on magic and radical publications from the south, and their workshops housed numerous instruments that would no doubt be considered suspicious by the church.

She observed the men from afar, wondering if they were here for an unannounced inspection. Her speculation was soon put to rest when she saw the mages of Urd shuffle out to greet the paladins. It was evident from the calm way the mages welcomed the guests that their visit was not a surprise.

Though the sight dampened her apprehension somewhat, another question arose. What business did the Temple Knights have with the Mage Tower? For what purpose had the Tower’s mages permitted this visit?

That is no concern of yours.

A bitter sigh escaped her lips. She was not in any position to worry about such matters. The future of the Mage Tower was for the high mages to stew over. Maxi pried her eyes away and started toward the dorms.

Time flowed like water, rushing toward Paxias^[5]. Maxi’s anxiety grew as it slipped by. Following the failure of her plan to impress the high mages in the rune competition, she visited the workshops of the senior mages to offer herself as their assistant.

Unfortunately, she was not the only novice vying for the favor of the high-ranking mages. The fierce competition ensured she never had the opportunity to prove her abilities.

Her only chance now was a recommendation from Master Landon. However, since each tower had an overabundance of talent, she wondered if the head mage's endorsement alone would be enough to give her an edge over the others in receiving an elemental rune within the year.

Every novice in Nornui shared the same goal. Not only would such a rune enable them to store five to ten times more mana within their bodies, but it would also allow them to freely cast spells they currently only practiced in theory. Most of all, it would elevate their rank within the Mage Tower.

Though Maxi knew it would take more than a good evaluation to outshine her competition, she could not think of a way to get the senior mages to take notice of her. She brooded over the dilemma while staring into the blazing fire inside the furnace. If she failed to come up with a plan before the conferment ceremony, she would be forced to stay on this island for another year. Just the thought alone was enough to drive her mad. Come spring, she would have been here for exactly three years. How would she be able to endure one more when the others had been so unbearable?

Tears welled in her eyes, and she hastily wiped them away on her sleeve. Her longing to see Riftan weighed on her like a physical pain. She missed nestling against his broad chest and hearing his low, gruff voice in the mornings. She missed the feel of his lustrous hair wrapped around her fingers and the way he gently caressed her face and back.

Such was her desperate need to see him that she even missed the times he was furious with her. She crouched in front of the furnace and buried her face between her knees, hiding her red eyes. Just then, a loud voice called from behind.

“Max!”

Chapter 8

Startled, Maxi turned to see Anette striding into the communal workshop. She approached Maxi and leaned close so she could hear her over the clanking of the gears.

“Master Landon is looking for you!” Anette yelled at the top of her lungs. “He wants you in his office now!”

As soon as the girl’s ear-piercing message sank in, Maxi felt her tears instantly dry up. Standing up, she looked at Anette in trepidation.

“W-Why?”

All Anette could offer was a shrug. Sighing, Maxi left the workshop. What reason could the head mage have for wanting to see her this time? She hurried through the hall to the massive steel cage. After asking a passerby ferrying firewood to activate the pulley for her, Maxi opened the door and stepped inside.

Soon, the steel crate rattled and clanked before slowly rising off the ground. She rearranged her ruffled dress and disheveled hair as she climbed to the upper levels. Since she would someday be requesting a recommendation letter impressive enough to earn her the approval of Urd’s mages, she wanted to secure the head mage’s good graces as much as possible. She was aware of Master Landon’s high opinion of her skills, but it was still possible he would favor the mages of his tribe over her. Maxi did her best to flatten any stray strands of hair.

Before long, the pulley came to a halt. She gingerly opened the door and stepped out. When she knocked on the arch-shaped entrance, Landon’s voice came through, inviting her in.

“Good evening, Master Landon,” Maxi said as she slowly entered.

Inside, Landon was sitting opposite a lanky man. Maxi's eyes widened. She had been expecting him to be alone. The stranger had his back to Maxi, but he looked over his shoulder as she walked in, regarding her with blue-gray eyes.

Maxi froze as she recognized him. It was Calto Serbel, a mage she had once heard described as one of the elders of the Tower. His influence was considerable within Nornui. Thinking she had come at an inappropriate time, she took a step back.

"I was told... you wanted to see me. I did not mean to interrupt..."

"Come, have a seat," Landon said, pointing to an empty chair.

Maxi studied Calto Serbel's face before tentatively sitting down. Seeing her nervousness, Landon smiled at her as if to lighten the mood.

"I didn't call you here to admonish you, so there's no need to be so tense. There is a proposal I'd like you to consider."

"A proposal?"

It was Calto Serbel who answered. "Allow me to explain."

Maxi flinched and turned to look at him. His age was impossible to guess. Though the mage had the taut skin of a youth in his twenties, his neatly tied gray hair was flecked with white. Barely visible age spots dotted the back of his bony hand clutching the armrest. Those were the only indicators that the man might be much older than he appeared.

Calto's keen eyes observed her before continuing. "The Mage Tower intends to conduct an expedition to the Roviden Continent in the near future, and we are currently in the process of recruiting mages apt for the task."

Maxi blinked vacantly.

After allowing the silence to stretch on, Calto added, "We were hoping you would join us."

“M-Me?”

He slowly nodded. “Master Landon tells me you are proficient in the ancient tongue and quite accomplished with runes. I understand you took an interest in that field early on and have been focusing on it since. The expeditionary party is in need of mages like you.”

“B-But... I have yet to finish my training...”

“It would indeed be a tad premature, but if you were to join the expedition, you would be conferred with an elemental rune. On the condition that you will carry out your task until its completion, of course.”

It was such a shocking offer that Maxi nearly leaped to her feet to shout that she would do whatever they wanted. The very problem she had been brooding over would be solved if she joined the expeditionary party. Not only would she receive her elemental rune and become a high mage, but she would be able to leave the island a lot sooner. Even so, it would not be prudent for her to agree without knowing what the task entailed.

Striving to be as level-headed as possible, she asked, “What... is the purpose of the expedition? What could the Mage Tower possibly want with a novice like me?”

Deep lines creasing his forehead, Calto stroked his beardless chin with a bony finger before saying somberly, “The matter of the expedition is only known among the few high mages who have already agreed to join it.”

“Are you saying you cannot tell me what the mission is... unless I agree first?”

“No, it is not my intention to coerce you without any knowledge of what you are getting yourself into. However, until the Tower officially makes the announcement... I ask that you keep what you are about to hear to yourself. We would not want to cause unnecessary unrest.”

That meant the expedition involved matters of grave significance. Biting her lower lip, Maxi slowly nodded. “I

understand. I shall not... tell a soul.”

Calto regarded her intently as if to gauge how much she could be trusted before explaining in a monotonous voice, “I’m sure you know of the monster invasion three years ago. An army comprised mostly of trolls wreaked havoc across the entire northwestern region after forming an alliance with the monsters of the Ayin race, instigating a terrible war.”

Maxi’s face darkened at the unexpected topic. She wondered how many of the mages in the Tower knew more about the war than she did. Even now, the horrors of that time still haunted her dreams.

She nodded. “Yes, I know it well. Before I came here... I served as a healer on the battlefield during the war.”

“Ah, yes, that’s right.”

Knitting his brow, Calto swept his eyes over her as though seeing her in a new light. The story of how she had come to Nornui was something of a legendary tale among the few high mages privy to it.

Calto wrinkled his nose, deep in thought. “Many things about the war are rather dubious. The monsters were well-equipped and fully armored, and they had an army with a surprisingly organized chain of command. Do you understand the implications of that? It means someone spent a long time turning thousands of monsters into soldiers. It is likely these monsters formed a highly advanced civilization in the regions beyond the Pamela Plateau. Fearful that remnants of this civilization may still exist there, the church relentlessly pursued the scattered army, but it seems the region’s arid and rugged terrain made reconnaissance difficult. Hundreds of monsters vanished like ghosts, while the Osiryan forces found themselves in a territory they knew nothing about. As you can guess, their mission was no different from finding a needle in a vast desert. Only now have they found some leads.”

The unexpected disclosure of this mind-boggling news left Maxi stunned. The thought that a vast monster civilization

might exist in a mysterious region where mankind had never ventured made her shudder.

She gulped and asked cautiously, “Is the Mage Tower... sending the expeditionary party to investigate this lead?”

“Correct. The church has privately requested your help, and after much deliberation, the Mage Tower has decided to cooperate with them on the reconnaissance of the Pamela Plateau.”

Maxi furrowed her brow when she recalled the five paladins who had visited the Mage Tower last month. Though both sides tolerated each other at present, the church had a history of ruthless persecution against mages. The Tower itself had been created to protect mages from heathen hunters.

When the Age of the Armistice began after the fall of the Roem Dynasty, the church and the Mage Tower had implicitly entered a truce as well. Even with this peace, however, the zealous adherents of the Orthodox Church were still ill-disposed toward magic. Why would Osiriya ask for the Tower’s assistance knowing full well it would spark strong opposition?

“What exactly is this lead... they discovered in the Pamela Plateau?”

For the first time since their conversation began, Calto appeared hesitant. When he continued to stew in silence, his face uneasy, Landon stepped in.

“The ruins of a small town were discovered in the eastern part of the Plateau. Records written in the ancient tongue were also found.”

Unable to comprehend all the implications of the head mage’s words right away, Maxi blinked. When the significance finally dawned on her, she hunched her shoulders against an eerie chill that crawled down her spine.

“A-Are you saying... they discovered traces of a human settlement?”

“Yes,” Landon said, his voice grave, “and we believe the people who lived there were the dark mages the church banished to the north after their failed revolt.”

Chapter 9

Maxi hugged her forearms as her skin broke out in goosebumps. Her nursemaid used to tell her tales about the wicked occultists who were banished to the north after suffering a terrible defeat in their war against the church. The mention of their exploits made her stomach churn in fear.

“Do you mean to say... the banished dark mages were behind the war?” Maxi asked in a hushed voice.

“We can’t be sure. Though the remnants found in the ruins suggest a settlement of dark mages, it is evident they left a long time ago. All the same, it appears the records and relics are well-preserved. The church wants us to examine the findings. They no doubt believe this discovery contains clues to the monsters’ whereabouts.”

“This is a serious matter indeed,” Calto said gravely. “If the dark mages truly were behind the war, it may spark another mage persecution. To prevent such an atrocity, the Mage Tower has decided to fully cooperate with the church.”

“W-Why would you... enlist a novice for such an important task? Would it not be better... to have more experienced mages?”

“As I’m sure you’re aware, the current restrictions make it difficult for high mages to leave Nornui. At present, the only high-ranking mages from Urd who are allowed to leave the island are Celric, Anton, and myself. The others are either too old to endure the long journey to the Plateau or have adamantly refused to leave the island. Excluding those names, that leaves only around ten high mages across all the towers — far too few a number for an expeditionary party. Hence our decision to bring along some of our more qualified novices.”

“We are especially in need of earth mages,” Landon said with a heavy sigh. “All the ones on the island are from the

Umri tribe and staunchly unwilling to leave Nornui. What's more, I doubt the church would accept anyone of mixed race.”

“I see... That's why you want me,” Maxi said, nodding.

Though she had no intention of talking herself down, she was well aware that the Mage Tower had an abundance of mages with skills far exceeding her own. It was the main reason she had been stunned by their offer.

“We wouldn't have asked you had we thought you were not up to the task,” Landon said, evidently not pleased with her summation. “Though we plan to recruit more novices if possible, we decided you were the most suitable candidate. After all, you are one of Nome Hall's best students.”

Maxi blushed. The head mage's high regard for her filled her with astonishment and joy. She recalled how impressed Master Landon had been at her golem rune, despite it not being appropriate to present.

“Now then, will you give us an answer? Will you join the expedition?” Calto said, leaning back in his seat as though the long conversation wearied him.

Maxi hesitated. The mission sounded dangerous, and reaching the Pamela Plateau would take at least two months. However, if she refused, she would have no choice but to spend another year on this island.

Biting her lip, she chastised herself for her selfish desire to see Riftan even in the middle of this grave discussion. Her desperation to see him would have her swim across the sea had she been able. With the passing of each day, her anxiety grew as she imagined she was losing her place in his heart a little more.

After a long moment of hesitation, Maxi finally replied.

“I will... join the expedition.”

A week later, Maxi found herself climbing to Urd's seventh floor to receive her elemental rune. Anette Godric, Armin Dolph, Miriam, and Sidina were there too. Also present was a

quiet boy named Kiel, whom Maxi had only ever spoken to a few times, and two male novices from Undaim she was not familiar with.

After greeting Miriam, who barely acknowledged her, and Sidina, who hailed her cheerfully, she walked over to where Anette and Armin were seated, slightly removed from the others.

“Are you both going on the expedition as well?” said Maxi, surprised that the Umri tribe novices had been convinced to leave Nornui. “We will be traveling with the Temple Knights to the Plateau... Are you all right with that?”

“The Tower was strapped for choices,” Armin replied flatly. “As I’m the tallest in my tribe, I doubt the clerics will twig my heritage unless told.”

“I fall on the tall side as well. Besides, there are non-Umri women my size too, no?” Anette said, pointing to the top of her head with a grin.

At around five kevettes^[6], Anette was taller than most of the men in her tribe, while Armin was a fingerbreadth taller than Maxi. Whilst their large frames seemed disproportionate to their heights, no one would doubt they were full-blooded humans.

“We’re more concerned about you. Do you think you can handle the journey with that frail constitution of yours?” Anette scoffed, giving Maxi a once-over.

Maxi glowered at her. “I-I happen to be the only mage in this room with campaign experience!”

Anette, Armin, and all the other mages a short distance away stopped their chatter to stare at her. Though Maxi felt herself shrinking back from their skeptical looks, she hastily covered her shame with false confidence.

“Please do not liken me to greenhorns such as yourselves.”

“Golly, is that so?” Anette retorted.

Maxi was about to give an indignant reply when the door at the opposite end of the room opened to admit Calto Serbel and four assisting mages.

When the novices rose to their feet, Calto said solemnly, “Welcome. You are all here to undergo the procedure that will create a new mana pathway within your bodies. By accepting this rite, you also pledge to live as a member of the Mage Tower for the rest of your lives.”

He swept his eyes over the faces of the gathered novices before continuing.

“Once the conferment ceremony is over, your names will be engraved on Urd’s pillar. As long as you observe our rules, you shall have the protection of the Mage Tower, and we shall readily come to your aid upon any injustice meted against you. Now, it is your turn to commit to the rules of the Tower.”

The novices swore their allegiance to the Mage Tower, that they would never do anything against the interests of its mages, and that they would follow its rules and ethical standards. As they concluded the oath, the four assisting mages behind Calto inscribed their names on a small stone tablet and led them into separate rooms according to their chosen element.

Maxi ended up in a small room divided by thick hangings, where she was to await her turn. One by one, each novice would stand in the center of a room arrayed with candles to receive their rune.

The procedure was a lot more painful than she had anticipated. Two mages tattooed each of her wrists with the outlines of the rune and infused them with magic to create a new mana pathway. The rapid expansion of the pathway struck her with a terrible bout of dizziness. She clenched her jaw to stop herself from whimpering. It felt as though they were infusing her veins with fire. By the time the pathway connecting her hands to her heart was complete, she was drenched in sweat.

“It will take two days for the rune to fully settle. With proper utilization, you should be able to store mana of unparalleled purity,” one of the mages explained as he wiped off the ink with a towel. “You should rest for the remainder of the day. It will take some time to get accustomed to the sudden increase of mana in your system.”

“Th-Thank you.”

When it was over, Maxi staggered out of the room. The other novices looked equally as drained. After taking a moment’s rest in the waiting room alongside the others, Maxi returned to her quarters, where she promptly dropped off to sleep. Just as the mage had warned, it seemed she would need time to get used to her new mana pathway.

She lay moaning on her bed for the rest of the day. Come evening, still not feeling any better, she barely managed to drag herself up to feed Roy his dinner.

Chapter 10

Maxi's migraine did not start to alleviate until the next day. After a simple breakfast, she left the dorms to browse the small market near the harbor. The last campaign had taught her the necessity of weapons, sturdy boots, and a durable leather belt and bag.

When it came to weapons, she could always request one from Nome Hall's master craftsmen, but she would have to procure her shoes, hat, and weather-resistant clothes from the market. Maxi made sure to purchase everything she needed using the stipend provided by the Tower, as well as the gold coins Rodrigo had handed her as she left Anatol. Despite her efforts to only buy the essentials to keep her bags as light as possible, the bulky winter garments made it difficult.

The small donkey-driven cart she had borrowed from the Tower was laden with luggage by the time she left the market. She climbed the steep hill for half an hour before the dorms came into view. Once she had moved all her newly purchased goods to her room, she headed to the shrine connected to Urd to convene with the other party members. About twenty mages were already waiting.

All of the high mages present were draped in robes of deep russet, while the fledgling mages, including Maxi, were dressed in casual attire.

Sidina spotted her at once and waved. Maxi walked over to stand next to her while discreetly studying the others. A total of sixteen people were gathered in the room: three from Kabala, three from Sigrew, two from Undaim, and the eight freshly inducted mages. Including the three members from Urd, who were not yet present, the expeditionary party numbered nineteen. Maxi narrowed her eyes. It was a much smaller group than she had anticipated.

“I suppose none of Nome Hall’s high mages will be joining us.”

Hearing her mumbled remark, Armin heaved a sigh.

“Didn’t we expect as much? All of Nome Hall’s high mages are studying forbidden magic. Not only are they restricted from leaving the island, the Mage Tower probably has reservations about sending them to work with the church.”

“I don’t think it’s as simple as that,” Anette interjected in a hushed voice. “I heard the majority of Urd’s elders were against the expedition. The Serbels are greatly opposed to any entanglement with the church. And... there are rumors. They say most of the dark mages banished to the north were descendants of the elven race.”

Surprised, Maxi took in a sharp breath. “W-Weren’t elves... known to be good? Why would they choose to become...?”

“I’m sure saying this will have the heathen hunters after my head, but what we call dark magic is not as evil as people think. The banished mages were only branded as ‘wicked dark mages’ because they rose against the church. During the Massacre, the Serbel clan split into two factions. One led mages and people of mixed race to the south, creating Nornui, while the other remained and fought in the Roviden Continent until they were exiled north.”

“And... that’s why the Serbels are against going after the dark mages?”

“Well, as of now, we can’t confirm the dark mages still exist. I suppose you could say the clan still holds a grudge against the church. Some of the elders witnessed the atrocities of the Massacre firsthand, so it’s not surprising. Calto Serbel might have pushed through with the expedition, but the opposition was fierce. I heard even gathering the manpower was in itself a challenge. That’s why they had to recruit novices like us.”

While Maxi was engrossed in this startling topic, Calto entered the assembly room.

“Quiet down, everyone!”

Maxi straightened in her seat. Stepping onto the platform at the front, Calto swept his eyes over the room to check that all members were present before laying out the plan.

“We will depart as soon as our ship arrives at port. That should give us approximately one week to finish all preparations. Though I plan to hire extra hands to help with the luggage once we reach the continent, you will have to continue taking care of most tasks on your own.”

“And what of security during the journey? Offensive magic will not be of much use against magic-resistant monsters. A group of mages traveling by themselves sounds dangerous indeed.”

“There is no need for such concerns. We will be under the protection of the Temple Knights from the harbor. The church has also agreed to fund our journey and supply us with all the necessary equipment.”

Calto paused to see if there were any more questions.

Taking the opening, Maxi threw her arm in the air. “How will we be... traveling to the Plateau?”

“We will make port at Anatolium Harbor and travel to the Plateau by land.”

Maxi’s eyes widened, exhilaration rushing through her. She had assumed the party would likely choose a northern harbor for safety reasons. Biting her lip, she tried to recall the length of the journey from Anatol to Nornui. If the winds were favorable, they would be there in a few weeks. Her heart began to race wildly.

Miriam’s brusque voice rang out, “Why Anatolium? Won’t it be faster for us to dock in Levan? Why waste our time and resources to travel across the continent?”

Seated behind her, Maxi shot daggers at the back of her head. Though this was not the first time she wanted to give the loathsome woman a good smack, the urge had never been this

intense. She anxiously shifted her gaze to study Calto. Much to her relief, the elder adamantly shook his head.

“We will be calling on the basilica in Balbourne, so entering Roviden through Anatol’s harbor will be the fastest route.”

Though Miriam still seemed baffled by the plan, she did not ask anything else. Maxi furtively breathed a sigh of relief.

After answering a few more questions, Calto talked at length about how they were to conduct themselves around the Temple Knights. Gnawing her nails, Maxi did not hear any of it. The only thing on her mind was the possibility of reuniting with Riftan in a few weeks. Her heart pounded with trepidation. She would have to depart for the Pamela Plateau before they could even bask in the joy of seeing each other again, and she wondered how he would react.

Would he be furious with her for rushing headlong into danger again? Perhaps not. By that time, he may no longer care about what she chose to do. The thought made her heart shrivel inside her chest.

“What’re you wracking your brain about now?” Sidina asked, waving a hand in front of her face.

Snapping out of her thoughts, Maxi gave her a reassuring smile. At the same time, she strove to steel her heart. She had made her choice, and no amount of worrying would change anything.

At long last, the day of their departure arrived. Maxi gathered her bags the moment word came of the ship’s arrival. As if sensing she was headed off on a long journey, Roy refused to leave her side, mewling mournfully by her feet. She spent some time trying to calm him before changing into the warmest woolen dress in her wardrobe, under which she layered two pairs of socks. The weather had cooled significantly in the last few weeks. After wrapping herself in a thick robe, she pulled on her sturdy boots and hauled her luggage downstairs.

Though it was still too early for them to depart, the other mages were busy loading their things into the carriages. After spying Miriam meticulously checking her bags, Maxi slinked away to the last carriage. She crammed her luggage into the storage compartment and hastily climbed into the coach with Roy. Evidently feeling cold, he stopped squirming and burrowed into her robes, where he pressed himself against her stomach.

I did tell Anette I'm bringing Roy, but...

Maxi flicked a glance at Miriam through the window. Though she doubted the other mages would mind, she was certain the woman would not take kindly to the cat's presence. Maxi hunched as low as she could. She had no idea how long she remained like that before she saw Anette waddling toward the carriage with a bag that seemed to equal her weight.

Maxi waved out the window. "Anette, over here!"

With a drawn-out yawn, Anette trudged over to the carriage. Behind her, the Godric twins carried similarly huge packs. The grumbling pair skittered toward Maxi with their short legs as soon as they spotted her.

"Morning, Max. Have you got everything you need?"

"You've been going on about how you want to leave this island, and here you finally are," Dean said with a mischievous sparkle in his eyes.

Maxi blushed when she recalled all the indecorous things she had done until now.

"Don't just stand there! Load the bags!" Anette barked as she rammed her bag into the compartment.

Pulling faces, the brothers hurried to the end of the carriage. After throwing their bags in after Anette's, they circled back to the coach door and handed something to Maxi.

"Take this with you. They say this winter is going to be especially cold. You can already see the frost on the ground."

Chapter 11

Maxi reached out to accept the firestone hand warmer.

Alec bashfully rubbed the tip of his nose and said, “You don’t plan on ever returning, do you? Think of it as a parting gift.”

“Thank you, Alec,” Maxi said awkwardly.

It only occurred to her then that farewells were in order. Seeing her at a loss for what to do, the twins grinned and patted her shoulder one after the other.

“Be well, and stay safe. Write to us if you ever get the chance.”

“I will. You must... take care of yourselves too. And thank you for everything.”

“As long as you know,” the twins said arrogantly.

They then proceeded to nag their sister to no end. Meanwhile, Maxi exchanged short farewells with the other novices who had come to see them off.

Soon, the carriages began to move. Sticking her head out the window, Maxi took in the manicured gardens, the vast courtyard lined with peculiar devices, and the massive tower which loomed above them like a pillar of white fog.

She had thought that leaving this place would fill her with elation. Surprisingly, a part of her felt forlorn and empty. It appeared that her efforts to keep her distance from this place out of sheer guilt for leaving Riftan had ultimately failed.

As she vacantly stared out at the rapidly shrinking tower, she ruefully murmured, “Thank you.”



Their voyage to Anatolium Harbor was uneventful. Though violent waves rocked the ship on the first day, causing a bout of seasickness, the sea was surprisingly calm by nightfall. Walking onto the deck, Maxi watched the swirling mist and white foam churning over the dark water. After a while, she returned to her cabin and passed the time reading books on magic.

Though this was her first respite since the start of her training at the Mage Tower, it gave her little joy. The closer they got to their destination, the more her stewing anxiety boiled to the surface. Not too long ago, she had been willing to do anything to see Riftan again. As their reunion grew closer, however, she was gripped with the desire to flee.

She recalled their final conversation. It was not until much later that she realized how vulnerable he had made himself to stop her from leaving, to which she had turned her back and left the room. That was the last time she had seen him. Her heart broke whenever that memory resurfaced.

His expression, his eyes, his voice — they were all imprinted in her mind's eye as if it were only the other day. While she was filled with dread at the fear that he might never forgive her, a part of her resented him for not understanding why she had no choice but to leave.

“The clouds are gathering.”

Roused from her thoughts by Anette's bleak voice, Maxi looked up. Sitting on her bed, an ashen-faced Anette was fiddling with a bowl of porridge. She looked out at the sea through the porthole and heaved a sigh.

“I think it will snow soon. There's something unusual about this year's Paxias^[7]. We're in southern waters — it shouldn't be this cold out here yet, but we're already seeing sleet.”

Following her friend's gaze at the overcast sky, Maxi asked, “Do you think the waves will get rough?”

Anette scowled as though the thought was enough to make her shudder. “I sincerely hope not. If we get more waves like

the ones on the first day, I'd rather jump overboard and swim to Roviden.”

Anette lowered her barely touched porridge and slumped on her bed. Perhaps it was because their ancestors usually dwelled in underground mountain tunnels, but Anette and Armin were having a hard time adjusting to life at sea. Ghastly white, Anette began to murmur a prayer.

By evening, it became evident that her pleas were not answered. Angry waves began to toss the ship. Anette lay sick under her covers, moaning ceaselessly, while an anxious Roy refused to come out from under the bed.

The dismal weather continued for another few days. The sea was calm one moment and violent the next, and the wind grew more tempestuous by the day. It got so bad that even Maxi, who had grown accustomed to life aboard the ship by then, felt sick. As her dizziness worsened, she gave up on reading and sat huddled on her bed, praying for calmness over the waters.

There was a silver lining to the stormy weather, however.

In the morning, one of the sailors knocked on the cabin door and jovially announced, “We will arrive at Anatolium Harbor by noon. Please prepare to disembark.”

“A-Already?”

Maxi had been sleepily rubbing her eyes but jolted awake at the news.

Appearing amused by her expression, the sailor replied cheerfully, “The strong winds helped our speed. We'll reach Anatol a week earlier than expected. Should be a record. God must have blessed your party of mages.”

Lying limp on her bed, Anette grunted in disagreement.

Maxi smiled wryly and handed the sailor a silver coin. “I'm sorry, but could you help us move our things to the deck?”

“It would be my pleasure,” the young sailor replied.

He hoisted the bags piled in the corner and left the cabin. After using the water in a kettle to soak a clean towel, Maxi wiped her face and changed into the cleanest dress she could find. She took out a small vial of fragranced oil she had brought with her. After applying a few drops to her hair, she combed her brittle locks until they shone.

Anette, who had barely managed to crawl out of bed to get dressed, clicked her tongue. “Going somewhere fancy? What’s the point of getting all dolled up?”

“Oh...” Maxi said, blushing. Then she said primly as she began coiling her braid into a bun, “I just wanted to look nice today.”

Cinching her belt, Anette strapped all sorts of magical devices to it before throwing on a thick robe. As if that were not enough, she also pulled on a woolen hat, gloves, and a pair of fur boots.

Though Maxi was not as warmly dressed, she wore her thickest stockings and a fur coat. The temperature had dropped in the last few days. Even inside the cabin, their breaths fogged with each exhale, and Maxi had spent the nights huddled with Roy under her blanket.

She slung a small leather sack on her shoulder beneath her coat and nestled Roy into it so she could carry the cat on her side.

Noticing this, Anette furrowed her brow as she tied one last pouch to her belt. “I wasn’t going to say anything, but you do know it’s impractical to bring that runt along, don’t you?”

“O-Of course! I don’t plan on bringing him all the way to the Plateau. I intend to find someone who can look after him for me here.”

Knowing how fond Maxi was of her pet, Anette arched a skeptical brow but did not ask who this someone would be.

Soon, they climbed to the deck. Though fierce winds battered the ship, it was a cloudless day. Walking past the sailors busily moving cargo, Maxi cut across the landing and

stood against the railing. Beyond the shimmering horizon was a magnificent harbor lined with dozens of ships.

She blinked as she got a better view of the harbor. When she had left, Anatol's only port had boasted a few large buildings, a warehouse, and a single, wide dock. It had been a busy place back then, but the path had been unpaved, and it had lacked any lodgings for visitors.

The Anatolium Harbor that stood before her now looked to be of the same magnitude as the port in Levan. Doubting her own eyes, she pried them away from the horizon to stop a passing sailor.

“W-Wasn't this ship... bound for Anatolium Harbor?”

“Correct. This is Anatolium Harbor,” the sailor answered with a grin.

Bewildered, Maxi gazed out again. When they finally reached the dock, the crew moored the ship and lowered the gangplank. Maxi took in the sight as she disembarked with the other mages.

In truth, she had never doubted that Anatol would one day become the leading trade city in Wedon. It was a land full of possibilities, and no one had advocated for it as fervently as Riftan. He had restored the land to its former glory. Still, it was the speed at which this had been achieved that shocked Maxi. It had been only two years and three seasons since her departure.

Waddling with her bag beside her, Anette remarked with a whistle, “Impressive. I did hear of Anatol's revival, but this is surprising indeed.”

Dozens of stone buildings stood along the pier. The pavements bustled with people clad in exotic garments, and baggage wagons lined the road. Maxi took it all in with a stupefied expression. She could not believe that so many merchants were here despite the chilly season.

Overwhelmed, she browsed the queue of ships anchored at the docks. Though most appeared to be from the Southern

Continent, a few of them flew the flags of Livadon, Dristan, and Arex. Cargo from the northern ships was being loaded onto vessels from Lakazim, while goods from the south found their way to the vessels headed for the various kingdoms of the Western Continent.

Merchants sat around fires inside a spacious, three-walled structure. The sounds of their fervent haggling carried over the bustling pier. Once a bargain was struck, a tax collector came to collect the tariff. The mages watched, wide-eyed, as exorbitant amounts of gold changed hands.

Calto observed them for a moment before approaching to inquire if they would be willing to sell him a wagon. One of the men, who appeared to be an Anatolian native, gladly provided them with a wagon and a few hired hands.

With their luggage loaded, they showed the city custodian the small medals identifying them as mages of the Mage Tower. Soon after, they slipped out of the crowded harbor.

Chapter 12

The road was crowded further still. The mages followed the wide cobblestone path until they found a quiet tavern where they ate a late breakfast. Seated around a long table, they had their fill of warm stew while Calto Serbel deliberated with his two aides over the party's itinerary.

After much discussion, he approached the others and announced, "The Temple Knights were supposed to arrive before us, but thanks to the whims of the wind, we are a week ahead of schedule. We will have to wait for them in Anatol. For now, I intend to call on the clerics of the Anatolian parish. They should provide us with accommodation until then."

A scrawny senior mage named Ben politely inquired, "And how will we get to Anatol? I heard it is an hour's ride from here."

Calto turned to the mage. "We will join a merchant group who are on their way there. While it is a short journey, and the road is known to be relatively safe, it is always prudent to travel with an escort."

Her attention drifting, Maxi looked out the window. The road was a hubbub of wagons and carts ferrying wares back and forth. The tariffs from this traffic alone would surely generate huge revenue. She was in awe of what Riftan had accomplished in such a short time. Be that as it may, a part of her felt empty knowing she had not been able to support him during a period of such significant change. How wonderful would it have been to have witnessed the land flourish before her eyes?

Maxi watched passersby through the window while she fed Roy cuts of meat from her stew. Every one of them was dressed in fine garments and had healthy complexions. It was obvious that the tenants of the land lived in comfort.

She was absorbed in the sights and sounds when Sidina, who had been wolfing down her meal, jabbed her in the ribs. “Max, look!”

Maxi turned her head questioningly, and Sidina whispered excitedly in her ear, “That dashing man over there!”

Knitting her brows, she looked to where Sidina was pointing. A lithe young man in a dark blue cloak had walked into the tavern, two equally strapping men behind him. Her eyes grew wide. As Sidina had giddily exclaimed, the youth was indeed comely. His neatly tied silver hair and delicate features were beautiful enough to be carved into the pillars of a basilica, and his porcelain skin appeared to glow. In contrast to his fair appearance, the youth’s empty gaze lent him an inhuman air.

“He must be a noble. Do you think he’s one of Anatol’s knights?” Sidina whispered.

Maxi was about to reply that the young man was not a Remdragon Knight when she stopped herself. It would only draw questions as to how she was privy to such knowledge. Still, it was evident that he was no commoner. His clothes were made of plain but quality fabrics, over which he wore light armor and carried a sword at his waist. It was possible he was a new member of the order. She watched closely as his gaze roamed about the tavern.

The young man intoned somberly to the room, “The city custodian informed us of mages from the Mage Tower entering our port. If you are here, we would like to have a word.”

“What business have you with us?” Calto asked, turning toward him.

The young man approached the mage and said calmly, “I am Ulyseon Rovar, a knight who serves Sir Riftan. The clerics of our parish have asked us to provide the guests from the Mage Tower the best accommodations upon their arrival.”

Pausing, the knight haughtily swept his eyes over the people seated around the table in a manner typical of nobility. Doubting her ears, Maxi gazed dumbly up at the youth. She was seated behind a pillar at the other end of the long table, and he had not yet noticed her.

Ulyseon returned his gaze to Calto. "You arrived earlier than expected. If you would come with us, we shall escort you to Calypse Castle."

"Thank you for the offer, but we must decline," Calto said with a resolute shake of his head. "We have no reason to impose on your hospitality. Since the church has already promised to house us, that is where we will stay."

Ulyseon frowned subtly as though taking offense to the rejection. "I'm afraid Anatol's parish won't be able to accommodate a party of your size. In fact, some of the clerics are staying at the castle due to renovations at the parish. There is a guest lodging on parish grounds, but it is a rundown structure already filled to capacity with vagrants seeking alms. As for the inns, you will find most of them full. Many of the big merchant guilds come to Anatol around this time."

Calto's face turned pensive as he glanced at the mages seated around the table. Though it was apparent he was disinclined to accept Calypse Castle's hospitality, the elder appeared conflicted over the fact that his mages would be sleeping on the streets after their arduous travels.

A brief silence passed, and Ulyseon shrugged lightly as if to tell them he had no intention of begging them to accept the offer. "If you are against the idea, I will not press further. However, I will inform the castle's sentries to allow you entry in case you ever change your mind. Well then, I shall take my leave."

The young man froze as he was coldly turning away, and Maxi got a clear view of his face. His purple eyes gleamed in the pale winter light streaming in through the window.

“U-Ulyseon,” she murmured, still unsure despite hearing his name.

Ulyseon looked as though he had seen a ghost. As soon as she spoke, he broke out of his trance and strode toward her. A bright smile took over his stony demeanor, revealing the guileless face of the youth she knew well.

“My lady! You’ve returned!”

“I-Is that really you, Ulyseon?” Maxi asked, her gaze traveling all the way to his boots in disbelief.

Her mouth dropped open of its own accord. The willowy youth who had only measured a head taller than her was gone, replaced by a statuesque young man well over six kevettes^[8]. He tucked his chin to look down at her.

“I was aware that mages from the Tower were coming, but I never expected to find you among them! It’s not yet three years. I thought there was no hope of you returning until next spring, and yet... You truly are amazing, my lady!”

Oblivious to her stunned silence, Ulyseon continued his excited chatter.

“Everyone will be delighted to hear that you are back! Let us hurry and—”

“H-Hold on! Ulyseon, I am not back for good—”

Though Maxi hastily tried to correct the misunderstanding, Ulyseon was not listening.

“What are you waiting for?” he angrily barked at his subordinates waiting by the door. “Lady Calypse has returned. Pay your respects and prepare to escort her back to the castle!”

“Lady... Calypse?” Sidina’s eyes darted back and forth between Ulyseon and Maxi in confusion. Then, she exclaimed shrilly, “Your surname is Calypse? As in, Riftan Calypse?!”

Maxi’s expression grew troubled. Sidina was not the only one gawking at her. Every eye in the tavern, from the mages to the sailors warming themselves over breakfast, was fixed on

her. The sudden attention made her face flush crimson. People began whispering to each other that the Lady of Anatol had returned, and some even craned their necks to catch a better glimpse.

Calto let out a heavy sigh at the commotion. "I doubt we will be able to stay here now. If your offer still stands, I would like to accept."

"Of course! Why on earth would it not?" Ulyseon replied enthusiastically.

He then ordered his men to prepare carriages for the guests at once. Picking up Maxi's bag as though he were her personal aide, he seemed almost bursting with eagerness as he asked, "My lady, could we have a moment until the carriages arrive? There are so many things I wish to tell you!"

Maxi gave Calto a hesitant glance, to which the elder responded with a resigned nod.

"Very well," said Calto. "It has been a while, so I am sure you have much to talk about."

"Th-Thank you."

Maxi left Roy with Sidina and followed Ulyseon out of the tavern. On the road, two men with self-assured airs who appeared to be Ulyseon's subordinates stood next to five sterling steeds. That was when she finally noticed Ulyseon's armor beneath his cloak and the Remdragon crest peeking through.

Her face lit up in a grin. "You have been knighted! I should address you as Sir Ulyseon now."

"It was not long after you left," Ulyseon replied bashfully, a blush coloring his cheeks. "But I ask that you continue to use my name, my lady."

"What about Garrow?"

Maxi looked around in search of the squire who was normally joined at the hip with the young knight.

“He was knighted as well,” Ulyseon said with an impish smile. “He now serves as Sir Hebaron’s aide, and he tells me the job is a nightmare.”

The familiar names were a delight to her ears. Her awkwardness melted away, joy rising in its place.

After a hesitant pause, she asked cautiously, “A-And... Riftan? Is he well?”

Maxi’s heart sank as she watched Ulyson’s face fall.

Chapter 13

“I-Is he... hurt? Or ill?”

“Heavens, no! No sword on earth could touch Sir Riftan in battle. The commander is in good health,” assured Ulyseon. His excitement seemed to snowball the more he talked. “In fact, he has been astonishingly active! Just look at this harbor. Sir Riftan has managed to turn Anatol into the biggest trade city in Wedon. You’ll be in for a surprise, my lady, when you hear of all the changes that have occurred since you’ve been gone. Anatol is all set to become an earldom. His Majesty has promised to confer upon the commander the title once he returns from the campaign. That means you will soon be a *countess*, my lady!”

Stunned, Maxi stared up at the young knight. She said shakily, “Riftan... has left to fight in a campaign? H-He’s not here?”

Dismay crossed Ulyseon’s face. He rubbed his nape with a gloved hand and said in a deflated voice, “He departed for Livadon last month following a royal decree. It is Livadon that provided troops for Wedon last year to aid in the conflict in our northwestern region. Now with monsters invading eastern Livadon, His Majesty is repaying the debt by sending our best knight. He likely wanted to flaunt to the world that Wigrew’s reincarnation is under Wedonian command.”

“And... Riftan agreed to the earldom as his dues for his loyalty?” Maxi mumbled, looking stupefied.

Her certainty of their reunion was shattered, and the disappointment she felt was beyond words.

“When do you think... he will return?”

“It is not a large-scale campaign, so it should not be long. The latest report said he is expected before spring.”

Maxi bit her lip. The expeditionary party would only remain in Anatol for about a week at most. They would likely depart for the Pamela Plateau the moment the Temple Knights arrived. Everything seemed a shade darker knowing she would have to leave for a long journey without seeing him.

“Please do not look so discouraged. I shall send word to Sir Riftan as soon as we arrive back at the castle. Once he hears you are here, I’m certain he will vanquish those monsters and return as soon as possible.”

Ulyseon’s attempt at solace did nothing to improve her mood. She doubted Riftan would rush back for her. Besides, the fastest route from Livadon to Anatol would take over a month. Even if he were to make all haste after receiving the message, she would be gone by the time he arrived.

“I have not... returned for good,” Maxi said, shaking her head sadly. “I was supposed to stay another year at the Tower... but an allowance was made, and I received an elemental rune in exchange for joining the expedition. I must depart for the Pamela Plateau in a few days with the other mages.”

“The Pamela Plateau?”

It was Ulyseon’s turn to be surprised. Gaping, he looked down at her with a stunned expression. He was about to say something when their conversation was cut short by his subordinates returning to the tavern with four carriages in tow.

Following the other mages, Maxi climbed into a carriage. Though it was clear Ulyseon had more he wished to discuss, he reluctantly took the reins of his pedigree steed his men handed him.

From horseback, he poked his head through the coach window. “Let us talk more once we get to the castle, my lady.”

With that, he trotted to the head of the procession. Sidina had taken the seat next to Maxi, waiting for her chance to pounce. As soon as the knight was gone from view, she began to bombard her with questions.

“Max, are you really *the* Lady Calypse? How could you go this whole time without saying anything?”

“Might I remind you... the rules of the Tower prohibit mages from revealing their status or which house they come from.”

“That doesn’t stop friends secretly telling each other! I thought that’s what we were.”

“I-I’m sorry, but it was difficult for me to bring it up.”

At Maxi’s flustered apology, Sidina stopped glaring and breathed a deflated sigh. “Well, I can understand why. The Remdragon Knights may be legendary, but the traitor also resides in Anatol, so... had you made it known you were Sir Riftan’s wife, I’m sure everyone in Nornui would have given you a hard time.”

“Now that you mention it, we will soon meet the traitor. How do you think Master Calto will react?” Anette asked with a glint in her eyes.

She seemed more interested in Ruth Serbel than the warrior who had slayed the Dragon.

Maxi’s lips curled up into a wry smile. “I’m... not sure if we will find him at the castle. It is likely he also left for the campaign.”

As she answered, her deep sadness from earlier seemed to return. Thanks to Sidina unleashing a barrage of questions about the Remdragon Knights, however, Maxi found a brief reprieve from the shock of not being able to see Riftan. Doing her best to forget her disappointment, she began narrating an overblown account of her husband’s accomplishments to her friends.

They passed the time with lively chatter, and before they knew it, the carriages were nearing the walled city of Anatol. The three women fell silent and looked out the window as they passed the gates.

The sight rendered Maxi speechless. Had she been away for thirty years instead of three? If the harbor's transformation was surprising, the city's was jaw-dropping. The hill that used to serve as a grazing pasture for sheep was now packed with stone houses at least three stories high, and buildings she had never seen before dotted the streets. She could make a rough estimate of the size of the market by how the passing carts and wagons were laden with wares. The population would no doubt have increased exponentially as well.

"To have such a bustling market even in winter... Anatol must be an immensely prosperous city," Sidina exclaimed in awe as she observed the crowded street.

Maxi felt a strange mixture of pride and anxiety. Though seeing the city flourish made her happy, it also felt as though she were in a foreign place. Had the world become a completely different reality while she had been cloistered away on the island? What if Riftan's feelings for her had changed as much as Anatol?

As the carriages traversed the square and made their way to Calypse Castle, she began a vain effort to spot a familiar sight.

"Tell us about Calypse Castle."

"You will... see it for yourself soon," Maxi replied tentatively, afraid that the castle would be entirely different from how she remembered it.

The carriages soon crested the hill and crossed the moat. Much to her relief, Calypse Castle appeared as it always had, apart from two new wooden buildings and a watchtower. The crude walls and the knights doing drills on horseback in the vast training grounds were reassuringly familiar.

Not long after she stepped out of the carriage, she realized that the grounds were full of people she did not recognize. The staircase leading to the great hall bustled with finely dressed guests, and she did not know most of the knights resting with their helmets off.

“There are many new faces,” Maxi said to Ulyseon as he dismounted.

Ulyseon swept his eyes over the training grounds. He was almost glowing with pride as he said, “When Sir Riftan allied with the southern nobles, they sent their children here to train as squires under him. Though most will likely succeed their fathers, about half of them hope to join our order.”

“A-An alliance?” Maxi asked, trying to count the newcomers.

There were at least thirty. What did it mean for so many nobles to entrust the care of their children to Riftan? Maxi felt feverish at this deluge of news.

“The other knights are away attending to their duties. You should be able to meet them upon their return. Please head inside for now, my lady.” Ulyseon then turned to address the other mages. “You must be tired from the long voyage. I shall have rooms prepared so you may rest as soon as possible.”

Calto turned away from inspecting the castle and said indifferently, “I would like to see your cleric.”

Ulyseon nodded. “The cleric is currently staying at the main castle. I shall inform him of your arrival.”

The group started toward the largest building. Though the glaring winter sun beat down on them, the wind was stingingly cold, and frost clung to the flowerbeds. Holding a shivering Roy close beneath her cloak, Maxi cut through the garden she had landscaped herself and climbed the staircase to the great hall.

A familiar sight greeted her as soon as she stepped through the castle’s double doors. She looked around the hall, awash with a strange emotion. Light poured in from the hundreds of glass windows, and the scent of baked bread and meat wafted out of the corridor leading to the kitchen. It appeared that most were gathered in the dining hall. Here in the great hall, there were only a few sentries and young servants carrying firewood.

“Lady Calypse has returned! Have maidservants attend to her at once,” Ulyseon instructed the sentries, his voice ringing with authority.

The men chatting to the side of the hall turned to look at the newcomers in surprise before scurrying toward the kitchen. Shortly after, five servants came rushing out. Maxi broke into a smile when she spotted a familiar face.

“Rodrigo! Have you been well?”

“My lady! You have returned.”

The steward’s wrinkled face lit up like a child’s as he greeted her. Ludis was not far behind him.

“And you, Ludis?” Maxi said brightly. “How have you been?”

“Very well, my lady. I am pleased to see that you are also in good health.”

The maidservant gave Maxi a fond smile and gently held her hand. Their warm welcome eased her tension. After exchanging pleasantries with the rest of the maidservants, she introduced Calto Serbel and the other mages, who were lingering absentmindedly nearby.

“These... are guests from the Mage Tower. They are all exhausted from the journey, so please prepare them our best rooms.”

“As you wish, my lady.”

Anette, who was sniffing the aroma wafting over from the kitchen, abruptly said, “I, for one, would like to eat. Thickly sliced bacon and good ale would be a dream right now.”

Calto shot her a stern look as if to remind her to show some decorum. Anette seemed not to notice and turned to Rodrigo expectantly.

The steward bowed and said, “While you warm yourself with a bath, I shall have food delivered to your room.”

The servants began lugging their things up the stairs. Though it appeared Ulyseon wanted to keep conversing with Maxi, a sentry held him back. He reluctantly left with the other men.

Maxi and the eighteen mages ascended the stairs. Ludis led her to her bedchamber, just as she used to. Since she was here as a member of the expeditionary party and not as the lady of the castle, Maxi wondered about the propriety of occupying a room better than the one offered to the party's leader. Calto, however, did not seem to mind.

The servants showed him to the guest chambers while Maxi tentatively stepped into hers. She looked around at yet another familiar sight. The room was dim and chilly but otherwise exactly as she had left it.

“Shall I prepare a bath and a change of clothes, my lady?” Ludis asked as she drew the curtains and deftly lit the fireplace. Extracting the cat from her cloak, Maxi nodded and lowered Roy to the floor. He shivered and darted toward the fireplace, where he curled himself into a ball.

Ludis looked surprised. “My word, I’ve been wondering where this one went. How on earth did he end up with you, my lady?”

“He snuck into my luggage.” Maxi regarded the cat with pity, knowing that his tumultuous experiences on the island had made him timid. “Would you... also bring something for Roy? He did not eat much on the ship.”

“I shall bring some milk with your bath. It won’t be long.”

When Ludis left the room, Maxi took off her heavy cloak, draped it over a chair, and slowly walked over to the bed. The sheets were clean but cold and had the musty smell of fabric that had not been used for some time. She ran her fingers over the elaborately embroidered cover before turning her gaze to the empty armor and weapon stands. She had been hoping to find a trace of him, but there was not even a strand of hair.

Maxi stood stone-still in the middle of the room, feeling like an intruder in someone else's house. Though she was finally in the home she had yearned to return to, the warmth it had once provided was no longer there. She slowly turned, her face forlorn, when something caught her eye.

A finely crafted chest she did not recognize sat on the shelf. Did it belong to Riftan? Unable to contain her curiosity, she picked it up and cracked open the lid. Inside were a few pieces of worn parchment. It seemed to be where Riftan stored contracts or other important documents.

Disappointed, she was about to shut it when she froze. She knew that seal stamped on one of the parchments. Pulling it out and unfurling it, she immediately recognized the handwriting. It was the letter she had written from Nornui two months ago. As she blinked down at it, her throat tightened with hope and anguish. Why did he keep this at his bedside?

He had likely thrown the letter in without much thought, or it could be the work of Ludis or another busybody maidservant. Afraid of the inevitable disappointment, Maxi strove not to put much meaning to it. Her hands, however, trembled slightly as she pulled out the other letters.

Taking a deep breath, she slowly leafed through the bundle. There were more than thirty pages, meaning that all the communications she had sent starting in her first year at Nornui were also here. Maxi ran her gaze over the words she had written as though seeing them for the first time. The sentences she had struggled to pare down were surprisingly formal and dry in tone. Not knowing what to write, she had ended up sending long-winded passages essentially saying she was well. Her face slowly contorted as she stared at the letter.

Her heart pounding, she wondered how Riftan had felt while reading these when she herself could not bear to. She was about to place everything back inside the chest when she noticed another piece of discolored parchment camouflaged on the darkly painted bottom. It lacked the seal of the Mage Tower, which meant it was not one of hers.

After a moment of hesitation, Maxi plucked it up. It took her a while to realize that it was from her, one she had sent him from the monastery in Levan. Kuahel Leon, the commander of the Temple Knights, had delivered it to him upon her request all those years ago.

Maxi silently stared down at the contents of the old letter, barely remembering what she had written. Her eyes stung with tears, and she hastily pressed her sleeve against them. The fact that Riftan had held onto this piece of the past tore at her heart. At the same time, the knowledge that he yearned for her as she did for him was an immense relief.

She clutched the tattered parchment to her chest as though it were the most precious thing in the world.

Chapter 14

By evening, the knights flocked to the castle to see Maxi. She was dining with the other mages when Ursuline Ricaydo strode into the dining hall, accompanied by Ulyseon. She greeted them with an awkward smile as they approached.

From Ursuline's grave expression, Maxi surmised that he had already heard about her impending journey to the Plateau. Ignoring the mages' curious gazes, Ursuline stopped before Maxi and executed a respectful bow.

"My lady. It has been too long."

Maxi gulped her mouthful of food and nervously mumbled, "I-Indeed, Sir Ursuline."

Why did it have to be him? Of all the knights, he was the one she was most uncomfortable around. She glanced at the door. Explaining the circumstances to Hebaron or Gabel would be easier. Unfortunately, the only knights in the room she recognized were Ulyseon and Remus Baldo.

"Rovar has briefed me on the situation. It appears you have gotten yourself involved in another perilous endeavor."

When Maxi glared at Ulyseon for his betrayal, the young knight frantically shook his hands, looking aggrieved. "I said no such thing! I merely told him I was concerned for—"

"What in God's name were you thinking?" Ursuline interjected, cutting Ulyseon off. "You are leaving for the Pamela Plateau when you've only just returned? Do you not know how the commander will take the news? I cannot allow you to put yourself in such danger. How could you even think about joining another campaign after what you went through last time? You are too reckless, my lady. Think of the commander, and—"

"If you attempt to detain her against her will," interrupted Calto, looking up from the meal he had been quietly enjoying

by the fireplace, “we shall leave this castle at once.”

Ursuline’s keen eyes flew to the elder.

Calto remained unfazed by the knight’s imposing gaze and continued calmly, “Maximilian Calypse is currently here not as your mistress, but as a mage of the Mage Tower. She has given us her word that she will participate in the expedition until its completion. The party currently needs every mage it has.”

“Are you the man in charge?”

“Indeed. I am Calto Serbel, the leader of this expedition, and Maximilian Calypse is a mage under my command. Until our mission is over, she must follow my orders.”

“She is Sir Riftan’s wife!” Ursuline barked.

Even faced with the knight’s fury, Calto did not back down. “The mages of the Mage Tower must abide by the Tower’s rules. Nobles and even royals are no exception. She is one of us and has sworn fealty. If you attempt to hold her here against her will, you will be guilty of forcibly confining a mage of Nornui.”

Calto paused as if to assess the knights’ reaction before adding, “If that is your plan, I will not stand for it.”

Ursuline’s aristocratic features grew cold. Glaring at Calto, he said stiffly, “And what would you do, exactly?”

“I will report your crime to the Mage Tower. Anatol would no doubt receive harsher sanctions than the ones already in place,” Calto said icily, then turned his gaze to look at the immobile Maxi. “No mage would ever be allowed to stay in Anatol.”

In essence, she would be prohibited from becoming Anatol’s mage even after completing the expedition. The air inside the hall instantly turned hostile. Seeing the men’s faces clouding over with fury, Maxi shot to her feet and placed herself between Calto and the knights.

“E-Everyone, stop!”

Ursuline's dark blue eyes seemed to scream his protest. Maxi wet her lips and determinedly met his gaze.

"Master Calto is right. I have already promised to go to the Pamela Plateau as a member of the expeditionary party. Nothing you say will stop me from going with my comrades, Sir Ursuline."

Taken aback by her resolute manner, Ursuline's eyes widened. He regarded her for a long moment before turning his head to Calto.

"What is the purpose of your mission to the Plateau?"

Though Calto kept his mouth firmly shut, Ursuline continued to press for answers.

"I am aware that the Temple Knights have been tracking down the remnants of the monster army. Have they uncovered something?"

"I'm afraid I cannot divulge that information."

After studying the elder's face, Ursuline laid out the conjecture he had formed from the intelligence he had already gathered.

"The undead have grown exponentially throughout the continent of late. Three years ago, during the war, the monster army had a necromancer capable of powerful magic. Could it be that the monsters that fled to the Pamela Plateau are conspiring once more?"

Maxi grew wide-eyed at the news of the undead spreading. She recalled the battle at Eth Lene Castle; Hebaron's cursed wound that refused to heal, ghouls crawling out of the ground, and the lizardman that had wielded terrifying fire magic.

It was possible that all of this was somehow connected to the banished dark mages. Maxi studied Calto's face, which did not look surprised.

"I cannot comment on that," Calto replied, his tone indifferent. "Nothing has been confirmed."

Ursuline seemed to take his response as answer enough. His expression grew even more grave.

“I cannot let you get involved in such a dangerous affair, my lady,” said the knight, turning to Maxi once again. “If we did nothing to stop you from going to a place full of unknown danger and something were to happen—”

“The Temple Knights have agreed to protect us. Nineteen high mages and the guardians of the Western Continent will be on this expedition. I see no need for concern,” Calto said, clearly annoyed by the circular argument. “Furthermore, I do not think you have the right to meddle in our affairs. We may have accepted your hospitality, but that does not mean we must comply with your whims. As I have previously made clear, if you insist on taking one of my subordinates, we will immediately leave this castle.”

As if to show that he meant what he said, Calto shot to his feet. He turned to the nearby mages who were watching the argument while sipping the finest wine Calypse Castle had to offer.

“All of you,” Calto barked, “rise at once and gather your things.”

The mages protested in unison at having to cut short their feast. However, faced with the elder’s determined expression, they reluctantly rose from their seats. They headed to the main entrance, by all appearances readying to leave then and there. The knights’ faces grew troubled.

Noticing Maxi hesitating, Calto said sternly, “What are you waiting for? I asked you to pack.”

When Maxi meekly turned around at his reprimand, Ursuline called out, “Very well! I shall say no more on the matter.”

Calto turned and eyed the knight skeptically.

Glowing at the elder, Ursuline said with a tight jaw, “Lady Calypse has not been home for three years. I ask that you permit her to stay at the castle until your departure.”

Calto appeared to consider this, then said in a show of benevolence, “Very well. We shall stay. However, as I mentioned, we will depart when the time comes.”

Though Ursuline appeared to be fighting the urge to retort, he conceded with a nod and glanced at Maxi’s pale face.

“As you please.”

The moment the knight relented, the tension within the hall melted away. The mages returned to the table to resume their meal, while Maxi left with the knights upon receiving Calto’s permission. Guilt flooded her when she saw how anxious the knights looked.

“Forgive me for making you all worry,” she said, hunching her shoulders, “but... I wanted to leave the island as soon as possible. And... I thought I would be of help on the expedition.”

“Please do not apologize, my lady. No one here blames you,” Ursuline replied, his tone softening slightly. “After all, you only agreed to enter the Mage Tower to save Sir Riftan and Anatol. Frankly, it was I who was out of line. It was not my place to criticize a decision you made to expedite your return. I am merely...” he trailed off with a frown before saying, “worried about how Sir Riftan will take it.”

“H-Have you... already sent word?”

“I have, my lady,” Ulyseon chimed in, scratching the back of his head. “I thought it best to inform him of your return straight away.”

Maxi gulped past her parched throat. She wondered how Riftan would react. Their parting had been painful, to say the least, and they had not seen each other for so long. Maxi was still anxious despite discovering the letters he had kept.

Her voice almost hoarse, she mumbled, “I’m not sure... if I’ll still be here when he receives the message.”

“How long will you be staying in Anatol?”

Maxi hesitated for a moment before answering Ursuline's question. "About a week... but that may change. All I know is that we will depart as soon as the Temple Knights arrive."

Remus Baldo stood by the wall, towering like a totem pole. He said in a soft voice, "I have received reports that the Temple Knights have been investigating the eastern regions of Arex and Dristan recently."

Ursuline stroked his clean-shaven chin, deep in thought. "They should not take long, then. Arex and Dristan are not far."

Up until now, Maxi had felt herself walking on eggshells around him. She finally managed to ask, "Are Ruth and the others... with Riftan in Livadon?"

"The sorcerer, Nirtha, and Charon are with the commander. Lachzion and a few others have been tasked with safeguarding the mine."

"Th-The mine?"

"The Anatolium Mountains are no longer a den of monsters, though goblins sometimes make an appearance. We have annexed the area through extensive raids, and we are now free to use the mountains' resources as we please. It is the main reason Anatol has flourished in such a short time."

Chapter 15

Maxi gazed pensively out the window. Anatol was encircled by mountains rich in stone and trees. If it were not for the monsters, they would have been able to procure as much material for the construction efforts as they wanted.

“So many things have changed. I initially thought we had docked at the wrong place.”

“We likewise find it difficult to believe, my lady,” Ursuline replied, a proud smile lighting his face. “Throngs of merchants from the south came to the city as soon as the port opened, in far greater numbers than we expected. Buyers from all over the Western Continent also flooded in, opening shops and building houses. All the construction attracted master masons to the city in search of work. The carpenters, masons, and laborers they hired settled in Anatol as well. The market flourished, and that in turn drew in more merchants. It was like watching a snowball gathering speed.”

Then, cold cynicism flashed across the knight’s face.

“This caused frequent friction with the eastern nobles as they suffered considerable losses when the peasants of their lands began abandoning their farms in search of better opportunities down here.”

Maxi stiffened, pulling her gaze away from the dark mountains. “Did... my father... cause trouble again?”

“As you well know, he is not one to forget a grudge,” Ursuline said with a shrug. “He employed every foul means he could think of, including petitioning the king to place sanctions on Anatol and cracking down on merchants that traded with us. His efforts, however, were in vain. Rather, his actions worked against him, and his tyranny only spurred more peasants to leave his estate. He belatedly tried a more conciliatory approach by lowering rent and promising autonomy to the merchants, but many of the major merchant

guilds had already moved their businesses to the south by then. If one thing is certain, it's that his coffers have had to pay for his mistakes.”

“M-My father... would never put up with such injury,” Maxi remarked anxiously. “I'm certain... he will resort to scheming again. He is a tenacious and vindictive man. I shudder to think what he will do next...”

“My lady, the man no longer has that kind of power,” Ursuline said, firmly shaking his head. “The duke's influence comes from the wealth generated by the duchy's fertile lands, and all of Sir Riftan's efforts have been leveled at chipping away at it. He's financially ruined the duke's vassals by stealing their peasants and craftsmen and curtailed their influence by strengthening the alliance among the southern nobles. Anatol's burgeoning trade also played a part, as estates no longer had to rely on the east for food. The duke's reach is certainly not what it used to be.”

Gazing down at Maxi, Ursuline continued in a somber tone, “There is no need to be concerned, my lady. The duke is no longer in any position to challenge Sir Riftan. All his efforts so far have failed, while the commander's influence has been growing by the day.”

“I have heard... that Riftan will soon be made an earl.”

“It was long overdue,” Ursuline muttered bitterly. “It was only made possible because the conservative nobles no longer had the power to object to the king's decision. Once he returns from the campaign, Sir Riftan's standing will no doubt be solidified even further. The duke is no match for him.”

A tingle ran down her spine. Though she did not fear her father as much as she once had, she was well aware of the immense influence he wielded. And yet, Riftan, a mere vassal knight, had managed to overpower the Lord of the East.

“What of... my sister, Rosetta?” Maxi asked, her voice quivering. “Ever since she turned eleven, it has been my father's wish that she marry into the royal family.”

Sir Edon Crude, who had been quietly listening to their exchange, answered her question with his signature aloofness. “That is one thing he has managed to achieve. Your sister married the crown prince a few months after you left, and she has recently borne him a son.”

Maxi stared at Edon in surprise. “R-Rosetta had a child?”

Rosetta was now a mother. Anguish gripped her heart as her mind conjured the image of her sister holding an infant.

A moment later, her face flushed. It had not been long at all since she had found out Rosetta was also fraught with emotional wounds. Recalling her sister’s dour eyes during their last meeting, Maxi felt a stab of guilt for envying her motherhood.

“What kind of man... is the crown prince? Is he... in any way v-violent?”

Hearing the concern in her voice, Ursuline quickly replied, “His Highness would never raise a hand against a woman.”

His reassurance, however, lacked conviction.

When Maxi looked at him skeptically, the knight added with a sigh, “He has grown ill-tempered during his time at the university in Osiriya, but he is a gentle person by nature.”

“Do you... know him personally, Sir Ursuline?”

“I was once his riding instructor when he was young. He is quite mischievous and frighteningly intelligent.”

Knowing how staunchly loyal Ursuline was to the royal family, Maxi furrowed her brow. While she found it difficult to trust him completely, if the prince was anything like his sister, she did not believe he would be cruel to Rosetta. The tension eased from Maxi’s shoulders.

“Thank you for telling me. You must... all be exhausted from a hard day’s work. I fear I’ve taken up too much of your time.”

“Not at all, my lady!” Ulyseon exclaimed. “Should you wish, we would gladly spend the night conversing with you.”

Maxi took a step back. She had no intention of talking out here all night. She gave the knights a polite smile and said, “Your supper awaits. I... should like to rest now.”

“Of course, my lady. I am sure the long voyage was tiring,” Ursuline said with a low sigh. “We shall take our leave as you wish. Please, rest.”

As soon as the knights left, Maxi went up to her chambers. She knew rejoining the mages would only subject her to more unwanted questions. She changed into her nightdress and slipped into bed. Both physically and emotionally drained, she no longer felt like talking to anyone.

Roy lay splayed before the fireplace. When Maxi pulled the blanket up to her chin, he seemed to take it as a signal to leap onto the bed and snuggle up to her beneath the covers. Smiling, she pulled the cat into a firm embrace. She lay curled for a while when the memory of using Riftan’s arm as a pillow rose out of nowhere. She silently gazed at the cold, empty space next to her.

Though the day’s fatigue weighed on her, Maxi found she could not fall asleep.

The next day, Maxi carried out an inspection of the castle with Rodrigo. The steward showed her the ledgers and outlined to her in detail the many changes to the estate while she had been gone.

About twenty male and female servants had been hired over the course of the past three years, and the stables and smithy had been renovated to twice their original size. A small chapel was currently being constructed on castle grounds, and a newly built bakery stood next to the guardhouse. Lastly, the weaving room had been converted into a storage space for tools and equipment.

“The dressmaker couple who made your gowns started a textile business in the village. Since we agreed to source our

fabrics from them, the maidservants no longer have to labor away in the weaving room. It has freed up more hands to work on other tasks.”

As she walked down the corridor, Maxi took note of the polished floors and spotless windows. The castle was immaculate and clearly well-managed.

She felt a curious mix of emotions. When she had first come to Anatol, Calypse Castle had been in shambles. Now, it appeared the steward had finally grasped the best way to manage it efficiently. After greeting the passing maidservants with a nod, she directed a question at Rodrigo.

“How is Melric? Is he well?”

“The healer took an orphaned boy under his wing last year. The lad is rather bright and diligent. He’s been doing an excellent job of tending to your herb garden. Thanks to the boy, Melric has had more time to rest.”

“I am glad to hear it. I was worried... that Melric would fall ill from pushing himself.”

“The servants have been helping him from time to time. Melric is a generous healer who gladly tends to even the most minor illnesses of the staff. Everyone feels most grateful to him.”

The steward began showing Maxi the well-organized storage room when he appeared to remember something. He abruptly turned to look at her.

“Which reminds me, a few guests have asked if they could tour the smithy. What should I tell them, my lady?”

Maxi’s brows knitted. It was not a leap to assume who those guests were.

“Have someone give them a tour. I’m certain that my saying no will not stop them from barging in there anyway.”

“Also... a few of the other guests have asked to see Mage Ruth’s chambers,” Rodrigo revealed, looking troubled.

Maxi breathed a deep sigh. The mages no doubt felt that they were visiting a famous landmark.

“Please inform them... I cannot allow anyone inside Ruth’s tower without his permission.”

“As you wish, my lady.”

After thoroughly touring the main castle, Maxi started toward the great hall so she could see the newly renovated stables. She was almost there when she heard a cheerful voice cry out behind her.

“My lady!”

Maxi smiled when she saw Ulyseon bounding up the staircase.

“Good morning, Ulyseon.”

“Good morning, my lady. You are looking lovely today, as always.”

Embarrassed, Maxi pulled an awkward face. “Th-Thank you. May I ask what brings you—”

“Could you spare us a moment of your time, my lady?” a somber voice cut in.

Startled, Maxi turned her head to see Ursuline Ricaydo ascending the stairs. Her eyes widened at his appearance. Having always seen him in armor, she was taken aback at his uncharacteristically humble attire of a tunic and leather trousers that seemed ill-suited for the cold weather. His longsword hung from a simple belt at his waist. While she stood gawking, Ursuline strode over to her.

“Are you perhaps busy, my lady?” he asked curtly, glancing at the ledger in her hand.

Maxi shook her head. “N-No... I was inspecting the castle. I am not particularly busy otherwise.”

“Then, please change into something more comfortable and meet me back here.”

Nonplussed by the sudden instruction, Maxi did not move.

“If you intend to go to the Pamela Plateau,” said the knight, giving her a stern look, “you should at least know how to defend yourself. I will train you in self-defense until the day of your departure.”

Maxi felt her entire body grow rigid as if struck by lightning.

Chapter 16

When Maxi did not move, Ursuline motioned with his head to urge her on.

She swallowed dryly and said, “A-Are you not... in charge of the castle while Riftan is away, Sir Ursuline? I could not burden you with such a task... when you’re already so busy.”

“I can spare a few days, my lady. And when I am unable to, Ulyseon here will oversee your training.”

The young knight’s head whipped to stare at Ursuline in surprise. “M-Me?”

“Will that be a problem?”

Ulyseon hastily shook his head, but Maxi could tell from the queasy look on his face that he was not entirely happy with the plan. Mortification prickled through her. He was likely recalling how he had bashed her on the forehead, as well as her complete lack of physical agility during her dagger training with Riftan.

Ursuline arched an eyebrow. “My lady, please, make haste and change into something more suited for physical activity.”

“Y-You... really do not have to trouble yourself, Sir Ursuline. If there were to be a battle, I would be in the supporting forces at the rear. I wouldn’t be fighting—”

“Anything can happen during a battle, my lady. I am sure you’re more than aware from experience. You might be ambushed by monsters or find yourself in a situation where you are unable to use magic. It is always better to know more ways to defend oneself.”

Unable to refute his sound logic any further, she reluctantly entered the great hall once more.

A short while later, she found herself nervously standing before Ursuline, her flowing dress replaced with a knee-length

woolen smock over baggy trousers. After appraising her attire from head to toe, the knight placed his fingers on his chin.

“We should first fit you with some protective gear.”

Cocking his head, Ulyseon looked down at Maxi, who stood more than a head shorter than him now. “Do you think we’d be able to find anything in her ladyship’s size?”

Maxi glowered at him. “I-It is not that I am small! It is you knights who are excessively tall. And might I remind you... y-you were my height just a few years ago!”

“My lady, that is not true!” Ulyseon said, practically hopping in protest. “I was already much taller than you when we first met!”

“Much?” she said, gaping at him.

Ulyseon’s face flushed as though he were truly upset. “I was at least a half-hech taller.”

She was about to disagree when Ursuline cut in. “We have no time for squabbling. We should head to the smithy at once. I am sure some of the squires’ armor will fit.”

Maxi heaved a sigh and reluctantly followed Ursuline’s lead. They circled the castle and walked down the forest path cast with web-like shadows from the canopy of stark branches. Soon, the clanking of hammers reached them.

When they stepped through the smithy’s wide-open door, the brawny master blacksmith, who had been chastising the apprentices with his booming voice, turned to look at the visitors. The man had a thick black beard and large, bright eyes. A hint of annoyance crossed his face.

“Might I ask what brings you here?”

“We’ve come to find armor for her ladyship,” Ursuline replied nonchalantly, striding in as though used to the blacksmith’s brusqueness.

Following him, Maxi glanced at the blazing furnace and the sacks of sand and equipment piled haphazardly against the

wall. More than ten blacksmiths were hard at work. Among them, she spotted Anette and Armin. It was amazing to see how naturally they had integrated with the blacksmiths in just a few hours. Anette, engrossed in conversation with one of the smiths, gave Maxi a big wave when she saw her.

“Max! There are some excellent candidates over here! Why don’t you choose from these?” she said as though she owned the place.

The blacksmiths around her looked incredulous at her audacity. Anette did not seem to pay them any mind. She picked up a helmet from one of the stands and began spinning it in her hand.

“All of them are superbly made!” she exclaimed. “This one might be crude in design, but it’s well-polished and astonishingly light.”

The helmet’s creator gave her a pleased smile. “You have a good eye, miss.”

Anette tossed the helmet aside and plucked up another. “It limits your vision, though. This one ought to be better.”

“Hold on, what about this black one?” suggested Armin. “It won’t reflect any light, so there’s no chance of it giving her away when she needs to hide. It also looks sturdier than that one.”

“That thing is needlessly heavy. I’ve already tried it. Whoever made it must have wanted to break the wearer’s neck.”

The faces of the blacksmiths grew a deeper shade of red as Anette and Armin’s exchange continued.

Tearing his gaze away, the master blacksmith said to Maxi, “I was told they were your guests, my lady. Could I ask that you escort them someplace else now? They are disrupting our work.”

“W-Well...”

Maxi looked back and forth between the smiths and the Umri mages, her face troubled. While she stood floundering, Anette and Armin finished selecting a set of armor for her.

“Try this on,” Anette said, handing her a breastplate. “It’s the smallest one here. It should fit you well enough.”

Ulyseon’s face hardened. “That belongs to me.”

“Isn’t it rather small for you?”

“I wore it when I was a squire.”

“Gosh, ordinary humans really do grow at a frightening speed. He went from this to that,” Anette said in awe.

Armin reproachfully nudged her on the shoulder, a subtle warning about her use of the phrase, ‘ordinary humans.’ Ulyseon, however, did not seem to find anything strange about her statement and merely regarded his old breastplate dolefully. He looked so disheartened that Maxi attempted to console him.

“Don’t let it bother you, Ulyseon. Y-You’ve grown so much, after all. I was truly surprised... when I first saw you at the tavern. I scarcely recognized you.”

Ulyseon’s face instantly brightened. “I have, haven’t I? I am taller than Garrow now! And soon enough, I’ll match Sir Ursuline and Sir Elliot!”

The young knight stood straighter next to Ursuline to prove his point. Though a subtle scowl took over the older knight’s face, Ulyseon did not seem to notice. Jauntily swinging his hand from the top of his head to Ursuline’s, he smiled widely.

“I am a little taller already.”

When neither Maxi nor Ulyseon answered, the young knight continued his exuberant chatter.

“Still, I don’t think I will grow much more. If I couldn’t get to the same height as Sir Hebaron, I was hoping to at least match Sir Riftan’s. Sadly, I have been at this stage for months.

I suppose I must be content with my lot, as I am still one of the ___”

“Rovar,” Ursuline interjected in a low voice.

Ulyseon turned to look at him with an innocent expression.
“Yes, Sir Ursuline?”

“Do shut that mouth of yours.”

“Yes, sir!”

Ulyseon made a show of clenching his mouth. Shoving the young man aside with an annoyed look, Ursuline took the armor from Anette.

“Come closer, my lady. Allow me to help.”

He deftly strapped the breastplate around her chest, then encased her wrists and legs with protectors. Maxi teetered under the weight of the metal. As Ursuline stood back to assess the fit, Ulyseon waved to indicate that he wished to speak.

Ursuline sighed and glared at him. “What is it?”

“Should we not also get her ladyship chain mail? Her abdomen is completely unprotected.”

“A breastplate will be sufficient.”

“What if a spear or an arrow comes at her? And short monsters like goblins tend to aim for the lower abdomen!”

Persuaded by Ulyseon’s argument, Ursuline began searching for chain mail. Lumbering behind them, Maxi felt like an animated armor stand as she added on the pieces of gear they kept handing her.

“She should have shoulder protectors as well.”

“They would be too heavy. With her ladyship’s stamina, the weight would easily tire her out during the journey. It would be best to keep to the bare minimum.”

“But a helmet is essential! What if a monster ambushed her from behind with a club?!”

As if Ulyseon's anxiousness were catching, Ursuline began encasing her entire body in armor. Half crushed under the steadily increasing weight, Maxi looked to Anette and Armin for help, but the pair seemed to have lost interest. They were bickering with the blacksmiths in front of the furnace.

In the end, unable to curb the knights' worries, she lumbered out of the forge fully armored. It only took her ten steps to realize she would not be able to go anywhere with so much steel weighing her down. After seeing the pleased looks on the knights' faces, however, she could not bring herself to tell them so.

Oblivious to her distress, Ulyseon said cheerfully, "It might feel uncomfortable now, my lady, but you'll soon get used to it. I also found wearing armor heavy at first. Give it two days, and it will start feeling like any other piece of clothing."

Maxi stared at him as if he were a strange creature. How could she possibly get used to this? Ursuline, by contrast, appeared skeptical. Despite his doubts, he stood back and observed her struggling to walk as if to see how far she could get. When they reached a clearing near the forge, Ursuline began his lesson by tracing something in the dirt with a branch.

"Although it is always best to start with the basics, we shall skip ahead to some practical techniques since we are short on time. You must make up for your lack of stamina by catching your enemy off guard. Aim for a critical blow. A knife to the chest is always effective, or a strike between the ribs, aiming for the heart or lungs. Either will be instantly fatal. However, that requires both strength and skill, and it would be difficult with monsters of the Ayin race that are more often than not wearing breastplates. Since your enemy will be more guarded if you fail on the first try, you must strike where a fatal blow is most likely. Aim for visible vital points. That would be the eyes, throat, and abdomen. Even if the blow doesn't kill your enemy, it should give you enough time to escape or protect yourself."

As he explained, he used his skillfully sketched outline of the human body to indicate the various points.

“The monsters of the Ayin race have quite similar anatomies to humans, including locations of the organs. Attacking the liver or the spleen should cause heavy bleeding, as will large arteries on the inner parts of joints. A deep slice into the hamstrings should do the trick too. All this requires a lot of strength, though, and it would be difficult for anyone other than a trained knight to make a big enough cut. If these areas are the only ones open, aim for a stab instead of a cut. Hold the dagger with both hands and use all your strength to drive it in as deep as possible. Then twist the blade like this before pulling it out to open the wound.”

Maxi listened to the lecture in a daze. She bobbed her head when he paused, made all the more difficult by her heavy helmet. Ursuline narrowed his eyes as if to determine whether she was listening before continuing with the lesson.

“The techniques I’ve explained so far only apply to low-grade monsters such as goblins and kobolds. It’s unlikely, but if you ever run into a troll, do not attempt to fight it. Trolls possess formidable regenerative abilities. Since most wounds would heal instantly, the only way to kill a troll is to behead it. The best way to attack would be fire magic. The monsters of the Ayin race are not as resistant to magic as the dragon subspecies, and magic will be effective against them.”

“I-I... specialize in defensive magic. I cannot cast such powerful fire magic.”

When she saw Ursuline’s face growing dark, Maxi hastily added, “But... I am confident in my defensive magic skills! C-Concealment spells are my strong suit.”

“We shall see how you do first, my lady. Since a longsword would be too heavy for you, a baselard should be a suitable option.”

Ursuline drew a dagger the size of a forearm from his belt and held out the hilt.

“It is one of the most commonly used daggers. Its blade is longer than most, which makes it easier to land a fatal blow at close range.”

The weapon looked similar to one Riftan had given her a while back. That dagger had been lost in the chaos of the war. She stared blankly down at it, then gripped the hilt with both hands. After wordlessly observing her for a moment, Ursuline stepped forward to show her the proper way to wield it.

“Holding it this way lessens the burden on your wrists. Remember to keep your wrist aligned with the blade when driving it in. That way, you can focus your strength on your arms more effectively and mitigate the strain on your joints.”

“L-Like this?”

After silently assessing her stance, Ursuline nodded.

“Yes. Very good, my lady. Now try attacking. I shall correct your stance as we go.”

Maxi frowned at him. He was not wearing a shred of protective gear.

“Didn’t you... just teach me to aim for the vital points?! What if I were to hurt you by accident?”

“Then you could heal me with your magic, my lady,” Ursuline replied dryly.

With that, the knight took a few steps back. A strange sense of déjà vu washed over her. She wondered if all knights were so sure of themselves. Narrowing her eyes, Maxi glared at his impassive face before raising the dagger with a sigh.

To be fair, even she did not think she would be able to wound any of the Remdragon Knights. She would no doubt make a fool of herself again. However, the knowledge that she would never be able to land a blow did nothing to lessen her trepidation. It was still difficult to summon the courage to run at the knight, aiming for his eyes or throat.

After a moment of hesitation, Maxi squeezed her eyes shut and charged. Right away, her legs gave out. She had not even

taken three steps when the weight of her armor had her toppling to the ground. Though she had half expected something like this to happen, she still felt her face burning with embarrassment.

She tried to scramble to her feet, but the clunky armor made it impossible. After flailing like an overturned turtle, Maxi tearfully called to the knights.

“A-A little help, please! I can’t... b-breathe!”

“Allow me, my lady!”

Ulyseon dove and hoisted her to her feet.

Seeing her dangling in the young knight’s arms, Ursuline heaved a heavy sigh. “We should change your armor first, my lady.”

Chapter 17

In the end, they settled for a light, wyvern-skin breastplate and a pair of arm and shin guards. Though Maxi found these heavy and uncomfortable as well, they were more manageable than steel.

She was convinced that knights were not ordinary people. How on earth did they move so freely in armor multiple times heavier than the one she had worn? Her grueling training with Ursuline only solidified this conviction.

“My lady, I cannot stress enough, do not close your eyes when charging! You must observe your opponent’s movements at all times! And maintaining your balance is vital. It is the lack of attention to your stance that makes you stumble whenever you’re required to move with any haste. No, no! You must coordinate your arms and legs when you run. That is precisely why you keep losing bal— Break your fall with your hands! Why do you crash head first?! It can only be a lack of natural reflexes.”

Over and over, Maxi stumbled to the ground, enduring a barrage of criticism each time. She was a terrible student, just as she had feared. Sir Ursuline turned out to be a more relentless instructor than she had expected. Despite it being abundantly clear she had no talent in the art of combat, he pushed her until she could execute each move perfectly. His patience and tenacity were frightening. After a few days of such torture, it got to the point where she was grateful for the knights who had given up on her so quickly during past trainings.

Ulyseon accused Ursuline of being too hard on her and was promptly banned from the sessions. Just once, Ursuline had entrusted her training to the young knight to attend to other matters, and his return had unfortunately coincided with her break. He had found her idling in front of the dining hall

fireplace, after which he never again handed off her training to anyone else.

His determination to teach the world's most hopeless student must have moved the heavens. In a feat that could only be described as a miracle, Maxi eventually learned to thrust a dagger into a vital point with vicious precision. For the first time, Ursuline must have felt somewhat content with her progress. He nodded approvingly, a small smile tugging at his lips.

“As you have pointed out, my lady, there is no reason for a mage to wield a sword unless they are in dire straits. Even so, an unexpected battle might force the mages to join the fray. Though I pray that nothing of the sort will happen... if you ever find yourself facing an enemy while depleted of mana, you will have one chance to strike while your opponent is off guard. The techniques I've taught you are meant for stealth and assassination; they will not help you win hand-to-hand combat.”

Surprised by the knight's admission, Maxi stared at him with a stunned expression, gasping for air. Did he not say he was teaching her self-defense? Had the man been teaching assassination techniques to a mage all along? Though she very much wanted to voice her chagrin, Maxi held her tongue.

She nodded and said, “I-I shall keep that in mind.”

After looking up at the sky to determine the time, Ursuline picked up the cloak he had shrugged off. “We should return to the castle now. Please have a cleric cast restorative magic on you and try to get enough rest. Tomorrow, I shall show you how to apply the techniques to—”

“Sir Ursuline!”

Scowling, Ursuline turned around to see who was interrupting. It was Ulyseon, sprinting down the forest path toward them.

“The Temple Knights have arrived!”

Maxi had been slumped on the ground, exhausted. She sprang to her feet at the news.

Ulyseon approached her and added dolefully, “Calto Serbel is assembling the mages. I’m sure you are wanted as well, my lady.”

Ursuline’s face hardened. He regarded her with a grim expression and said curtly, “Then, let us head back, my lady.”

They left the clearing and started for the main castle. The fact that she would have to leave Calypse Castle once again felt like a weight pressed on her heart.

I have to go without seeing Riftan.

She peered up at the partially clouded sky. Though the hour was not late, the winter day meant short afternoons. She silently hoped she would be allowed to spend one more night at the castle so she could say farewell to the servants.

Those hopes were dashed the moment she stepped foot in the great hall. The mages were lugging their things down the staircase as if intent on leaving at once. Maxi watched in utter dismay when she heard Sidina cry out from the second floor.

“Max! Master Calto wants everyone ready to depart!”

“R-Right now?”

“I think he wishes to set out immediately, the Temple Knights obliging. He went on and on earlier about how we had to get to the Plateau before it grows colder. You should hurry!”

Maxi excused herself and hurried up the stairs. True to Sidina’s words, Calto was growing visibly anxious at the delays. Even if the Temple Knights wanted to rest in Anatol for a day or two, they would not likely refuse if the elder insisted on leaving right away.

Back in her room, she swiftly changed out of her dirty training garments. She then strapped on the protective gear the knights had chosen for her and left with the luggage she had packed beforehand. Most of the mages were congregated in the hall when she arrived.

Maxi glanced about as she came down the stairs. “Where are the Temple Knights?”

“They’re in the chapel,” Sidina said with a shrug. “It is apparently tradition to receive the blessing of the parish cleric as soon as they arrive in a new city.”

Sweeping her gaze over the gathered mages, Maxi asked, “And Master Calto?”

“Also at the chapel. He seemed to be in a hurry to discuss the itinerary with them.”

Maxi suppressed a sigh. The man was clearly bent on departing within the day.

Sure enough, Calto soon joined them and announced in a solemn voice, “The Temple Knights are waiting for us at the castle gates. Bring your bags and follow me. We are to depart before sundown.”

Grumbling, the mages gathered their belongings. Maxi could only afford a hasty wave to the servants as she followed the others out of the great hall. It seemed the knights had gone somewhere, as she could not see any of them in the castle.

She anxiously searched for them as they cut across the garden. Were none of them coming to see her off? She craned her neck to look over the shoulders of the expeditionary party for any sign of Ulyseon or Ursuline.

“Max, look,” said Sidina, nudging her with her elbow. “It’s the Temple Knights.”

Maxi turned to look in the direction Sidina pointed. In a spacious area up ahead, about thirty mounted knights were waiting in formation. She unconsciously held her breath.

The Temple Knights exuded a much more somber air than she remembered. They all wore dark robes over dark gray armor, and their faces, shadowed beneath their hoods, were devoid of emotion. Maxi hunched her shoulders. Dread winding through her, she wondered how many months she

would have to spend in their company. The thought was enough to make her tense up.

The other mages seemed to share her sentiment as several groans erupted from the group.

“Looks like we’re in for a pleasant journey,” Anette said, descending the stairs to the training grounds with a sigh.

Following behind, Maxi silently agreed. Several wagons laden with tents and provisions stood in line next to the knights. She was hoisting her bag onto one of them when she heard a familiar voice.

“Lady Calypse. What a long time it’s been.”

Maxi’s face lit up. “Sir Gabel!”

Looking bashful, Gabel Lachzion scratched the back of his head. “I apologize for coming so late, my lady. I should have rushed back as soon as I received word of your return.”

“No need for apologies! I know everyone has been busy with Riftan away on the campaign. I was worried I would depart without seeing you, so... I’m glad I got this chance before I left.”

“I was informed you are headed for the Pamela Plateau.”

Gabel’s smile waned slightly, and Maxi grew nervous. She worried that the knight would object just as Ursuline had done. His next words, however, caught her by surprise.

“Be rest assured, my lady, the Remdragon Knights will be there to protect you. Sir Ursuline is negotiating an agreement with the Temple Knights as we speak.”

After blinking vacantly at him, Maxi swiveled her head to the city gates to see Sir Ursuline Ricaydo and Ulyseon Rovar conversing with a man in a black robe. Her jaw dropped in disbelief.

“W-What on earth do you think you’re doing?!” she yelled, darting toward them.

Ursuline stopped talking and furrowed his brow. “My lady, are you all set to depart? I hope you have not forgotten your protective gear and weapon.”

“I have not!” Maxi shouted, aghast at the knight’s drastic behavior. “More importantly... what are you up to, Sir Ursuline? I am participating in this expedition as a mage of the Mage Tower. I do not need... the Remdragon Knights’ escort! Did it not occur to you that you are putting me in a difficult situation?!”

“I understand your position, my lady, which is why I am not objecting to your going,” the knight said brazenly as though he had forgotten all about his heated dispute with Calto. “However, you must also consider mine. Sir Riftan has left me in charge in his stead. Therefore, I cannot let you travel into the Pamela Plateau without sending any of our knights. Sir Riftan would have my head if anything were to happen to you.”

Ursuline’s irritatingly calm response left Maxi speechless, her mouth opening and closing like a fish. Soon after, she found herself trembling in anger at his treachery.

“After putting me through that g-grueling training—” Outraged, Maxi’s voice rose. “You clearly do not think I can defend myself!”

“My lady,” Ursuline replied with a low sigh, “our training over the past ten days has completely shattered what hope I had. I absolutely cannot let you go without personal guards to protect you.”

Chapter 18

Maxi stared at Ursuline in disbelief. Had he instructed her with such bull-headed persistence while believing she was a lost cause? She was so livid that she was tempted to use her newfound knowledge on the knight.

“I-If you thought me so hopeless, why did you insist on the training? You could have spared me the muscle aches and effort!”

“I thought it better for you to learn *something* than go in blind. However, I doubt you’ll be able to employ only ten days’ worth of combat practice. I continued with it as an act of prayer—”

Ursuline cut himself off when he saw Maxi’s eyes blaze with rage. The knight turned his head to look at the man in the black robe to show that he had no intention of getting into a verbal spar with her.

“In any case, there is no need to take exception to this plan. You shall be free to fulfill your duties while we fulfill ours — that is, as Sir Riftan’s knights. Our presence will not be a burden to the expeditionary party.”

“Nor would it be a welcome addition.”

Maxi tore her furious glare away from Ursuline at the vaguely familiar voice. Glinting green eyes stared down at her from beneath a black hood. She instinctively flinched and backed away, in part because of the man’s intimidating aura, but also because of the painful memories that struck as she recognized him.

Her face fell as she recalled being limp on Ulyseon’s back while he ran up a mountain slope. Those green eyes were the last thing she remembered before passing out. Kuahel Leon, the commander of the Temple Knights, seemed to remember her too. He did not seem as inclined to acknowledge their

acquaintance; he merely looked down at her as though he were making an observation before turning back to Ursuline.

“The Temple Knights can protect the mages without your aid,” he said indifferently, “and I do not wish to draw attention by expanding our party.”

“Even without us, people will take note once word spreads that the Temple Knights are traveling north with the mages of Nornui. I doubt our presence will cause much more of a stir.”

“We are not easily recognized by the people of Wedon, but I cannot say the same for the Remdragon Knights. Your presence will only draw troublesome inquiry.”

Kuahel cocked his head, the gold flecks in his irises flashing. He regarded them with his mystifying eyes before adding disparagingly, “We are not so desperate for your help that we would willingly take on such inconvenience.”

“Ha!” cried Ulyseon. “That is a bold statement indeed when the Temple Knights have been known to request aid from all over the continent whenever they’re faced with a problem. You make it sound as if people think paladins do every—”

“Uly! Enough!” Ursuline barked. Looking back to Kuahel, he said calmly, “The Pamela Plateau is a bleak and dangerous place. Would it not help to have more men join the reconnaissance effort?”

“If we need more men, we may petition Balto or Livadon. Simply put, we see no need to march an army from the opposite end of the continent.”

Ursuline’s face slowly contorted at Kuahel’s cold response. He took a deep breath as if summoning his patience and said evenly, “Then, what if we were to compensate the Temple Knights for any issues that might arise from our joining the expedition?”

Pointing to the mage onlookers, Ursuline added, “We shall pay for their horses and wagons, as well as additional provisions and equipment if needed. I was told the church was shouldering the burden of the entire endeavor. If you allow us

to join, the Remdragon Knights will gladly extend its resources.”

The unprecedented proposal appeared to get through to the commander. He stroked his smooth chin with a pensive expression. After a moment of tense silence, he turned to Calto Serbel, who was standing nearby like a spectator.

“What do you think of this offer?”

“I would like to refuse,” the elder said without hesitating. “We mages also have a hierarchy. I cannot condone preferential treatment for a single mage.”

The expressions on Ursuline, Gabel, and Ulyseon’s faces stiffened. After calmly meeting their hostile gazes, Calto sighed.

“However, there is no question that the mages would be safer. And I am sure the financial support will lessen the burden on the church. Taking into account all the practical advantages, it would be prudent to accept the offer.”

He looked resigned as he ended with, “I am fine either way. I will leave the decision to the Temple Knights.”

As soon as the elder said those words, Ursuline pressed Kuahel for the verdict.

“Well?”

The commander of the Temple Knights said nothing for a while, then glanced at Maxi. She hunched her shoulders.

The commander held her in his icy gaze before saying in his typically dry tone, “Very well. I shall allow one of you to join us.”

Ursuline scowled, but before he could say anything, Kuahel added, “We will accept nineteen horses for the mages in exchange.”

“Are you not being—”

“You are free to refuse if you deem it unreasonable. It makes no difference to us. We have enough funds to see us to

the Plateau even without your aid.”

His tone made it clear there would be no further negotiations. Ursuline was not ready to back down.

“One is insufficient! At least allow six of our knights to join you. Six men should barely be a noticeable addition.”

“One is more than sufficient,” Kuahel snapped. “Your priority will be the comfort and safety of one individual. As the mage has already pointed out, preferential treatment can lead to internal strife, and I wish to take this group to the Plateau without unnecessary discord. I will allow one, and only one, Remdragon Knight to join us. If you are unwilling to accept my terms, I can always rescind the offer.”

Ursuline nibbled his lip, thinking.

“Very well,” he said eventually, realizing there was no room for further negotiation. He nodded weakly. “Then, allow one of our—”

“W-Wait!”

Unable to listen any longer, Maxi interposed herself between the two knights.

“You have been... completely ignoring me w-when this is clearly a matter that requires *my* say! I have already made it clear... that I do not need personal—”

“I shall go!” Ulyseon cried before Maxi could even finish protesting. “If only one of us is allowed to protect her ladyship, I wish to take on the task. I will not take no for an answer!”

The lad declared his intention so fiercely that even Maxi was briefly left speechless.

“Please, allow me the honor,” Ulyseon entreated Ursuline.

“Look here, Uly,” Gabel chimed in. “It is not that I doubt your competence, but if only one of us can go, it should be someone with more experience—”

“I currently rank sixth in the order!” Ulyseon snarled, turning on his fellow knight. “Stop treating me like a child! I am more than qualified. Besides, both you and Sir Ursuline have important duties in Anatol, while I am only charged with protecting the harbor, a task which can be easily delegated!”

“W-Wait!”

Furious at the knights’ continued disregard of her opinions, Maxi stamped her foot.

“Have you all g-gone deaf? Was I not clear when I said I do not need p-personal guards?!”

“Do you... find me so unreliable, my lady?”

His earlier fervor gone, Ulyseon looked at her with puppy-dog eyes. Maxi froze, and Ulyseon hung his head.

“I’m aware... that I have failed you in the past. I put you in harm’s way numerous times after declaring I would risk my life to protect you. And you were gravely injured on my watch. No one can blame you for thinking I am untrustworthy, my lady.”

“Y-You misunderstand, Ulyseon! It’s not that I find you unreliable... I merely wished to make it clear that, as a mage, I can take care of—”

Her flustered efforts at reassurance did not seem to alleviate Ulyseon’s dark expression. Anxious, she continued trying to correct the misunderstanding.

“Y-You never failed me, Ulyseon. I’m scared to even think about what could have happened... if you and Garrow had not been there. You both protected me with immense bravery! It truly is not because I don’t trust you. I merely—”

“It is decided, then,” Ursuline interrupted. “Since your ladyship has so much faith in our young knight here, we will respect your wishes and allow Ulyseon Rovar to accompany you.”

Maxi glared daggers at the knight, almost flying into a rage at his inability to let her finish anything, before catching sight

of Ulyseon's face. His glassy, doleful eyes made it impossible for her to object. She groaned and slumped her shoulders.

"Allow us this much, my lady," Gabel said, patting her comfortingly on the back. "If we had it our way, all of us would accompany you whether or not we had the Temple Knights' permission."

"Please... spare me that, at least," Maxi said, aghast.

Gabel gave her a wry smile. "Please know that we are making a lot of concessions as well."

After looking up at the knights, Maxi slowly nodded. Ulyseon grabbed her hand as a wide smile lit his face.

"Thank you, my lady! I will not fail you this time!"

Maxi fought back a sigh. Kuahel Leon, who had been quietly observing their argument, spoke up once more.

"If you have made your decision, then let us make haste. We must be out of Anatol before sundown."

The Temple Knights' commander mounted his chestnut horse, and the expeditionary party promptly readied to depart. Maxi furtively studied the mages while the others went to the stables to fetch their horses. She spotted Miriam sneering at her from a distance.

A flush rose in Maxi's cheeks. The woman liked to deride her for being a high-born at every opportunity, so there was no doubt this incident would be added to her repertoire of jibes. Maxi sighed. Fortunately, the other mages did not seem to mind. Most of them had appeared to enjoy the spectacle as if it were a stage play, with Anette blatantly chortling out loud.

"It must have been stifling, being surrounded by such overprotective men," said Anette. "I'm amazed they even sent you to the Tower in the first place."

Maxi had not told anyone the full story, so she merely smiled bitterly in response. When she thought back to past events, it was not difficult to understand the knights'

perspective. After watching them busily help with the expedition preparations, her lips tugged into a resigned smile.



The wind was unusually fierce. Seated on a pile of dead monsters, Riftan tore off a piece of jerky with his teeth. He looked up at the overcast sky, furrowing his brow. Gray clouds were gathering above the dark pine forest.

It would likely snow soon. Slowly chewing the jerky, which felt tougher than a plank of wood, he studied his surroundings with detached interest. Dozens of knights and Livadonian clerics were piling monster carcasses to one side to be burned. Near the battlefield, almost two hundred soldiers were building a defensive wall using lumber cut from the forest.

He counted their remaining men in his head and considered the number of monsters that had fled through the trees. It would take no more than two weeks to wrap up this campaign. He shoved the last piece of jerky into his mouth and grabbed the swordbelt resting by his feet.

Chapter 19

Riftan had been in the Gaisa Mountains for almost a month. When Livadon had discovered a sizable troll settlement in its easternmost region, they immediately dispatched a raid party, only to find that the monsters numbered far more than their predictions. They were soon overpowered. The trolls managed to push Livadonian forces out to the nearby villages, prompting the royal family to request reinforcements from its ally, Wedon.

It was a thoroughly excessive appeal. Livadon could have easily dealt with a settlement of this size with its royal knights. Mindlessly tapping a severed troll's head with his foot, Riftan irritably furrowed his brow. Ever since the war three years ago, the monarchs of each kingdom panicked at every troll sighting in their territories. More fearful still were their subjects, who worried that a monster army would once again invade their homes.

His liege believed that a show of might would allay the nation's fears, resulting in Riftan participating in three raids this year alone. King Reuben no doubt planned to take full advantage of him in exchange for granting him an earldom.

Twisting his lips into a wry smile, he pulled a flask from a leather pouch. He was taking a few swigs of ale when a familiar voice — one that grated at his nerve endings — called up to him.

“I'm surprised you can stomach anything in such a place.”

He looked down from the pile of troll corpses. A man in blackened armor beneath a purple surcoat was winding his way toward him.

After draining his flask, Riftan coldly replied, “Piss off, Aren. I am in no mood.”

“As if you ever are,” Sejuleu Aren grumbled, removing his helmet and tucking it beneath his arm.

The man's flippant tone was at odds with his position as commander of the Livadonian royal knights. His symmetrical features visible beneath disheveled curls exuded refinement, hinting at his noble lineage.

Sejuleu swept up his tousled hair with one hand and gave Riftan a lazy smile. "Have you not had enough after your monster-slaying frenzy? I will offer myself as your next opponent if you wish."

"Enough of the cheap talk," Riftan said icily. "Just tell me what the hell it is you want."

A faint crease formed on Sejuleu's comely forehead. It was not that the Livadonian commander was offended, but rather that he seemed to be considering his next words carefully. After stewing something over for a while, Sejuleu opened his mouth to speak.

"What is your opinion on the recent resurgence of monsters?"

"What are you asking?"

"I'm asking if there is any connection with the monster army from three years ago."

Riftan's brows knitted together. "And you think this because...?"

"Because it is probable. Most of the monster army's remaining forces fled into hiding up north. For all we know, they could have come down to set up strongholds all over the continent without any of us noticing."

"So it's speculation, then."

After a frosty dismissal of the knight's concerns, Riftan hopped down from the pile of monster carcasses and began marching to the frontlines. Sejuleu hastily followed behind him.

"Oi, I'm not done yet!"

"Then get to the point."

“You haven’t changed one bit, have you?” Sejuleu said, sighing. “Very well. My point is this. The Temple Knights’ movements have been rather suspicious of late.”

“The Temple Knights?”

“The very same. I’ve received reports that their paladins have been investigating isolated regions across the continent, with several sightings in the northern regions of Balto and Livadon. They seem to be desperately searching for something.”

Riftan pensively regarded the other knight. “And you think that something is the remnant of the monster army?”

“It is still speculation,” Sejuleu said, shrugging, “but what *is* certain is something strange is afoot, and the church is keeping tightlipped about it.”

Riftan shook his head. “You’re reading into it too much. What reason would Osiriya have to hide information about the monster army?”

“The Orthodox and Reformed factions of the church are currently locked in a fierce rivalry to put forth the next pope. They would hold back information if they thought it could affect the papal conclave.” Sejuleu’s lips curled into a cynical smile. “Livadon has already asked Osiriya about this several times, but all we’ve gotten back are vague answers. Our king has grown quite suspicious of the church, and we have decided to form our own investigation to track down the monster army.”

Sejuleu regarded Riftan with a solemn look before adding, “What say you? Will the Remdragon Knights join us?”

Halfway to the defensive line, Riftan stopped in his tracks. When his face twisted into a skeptical look, Sejuleu hastily said, “You’ll have to fight anyway if there’s to be a war. We might as well wipe them out before they become a threat.”

“I would be inclined to agree if there was a threat,” Riftan pointed out with a sardonic smile. “But as you’ve said, everything is still just speculation.”

“It might be too late once we’re certain. We should find out the truth of the matter before—”

“Then make all haste,” Riftan snapped coldly as he untethered Talon from a tree. “If you want my cooperation, send an official request. I see no reason to do so without my liege’s command. I’m here to deal with the trolls in this region. Nothing more.”

Sejuleu’s face soured into a fierce scowl. The Livadonian commander was that particular breed of knight who took the code of chivalry with utmost seriousness. He no doubt considered it his duty to carry the peace of the whole continent on his noble shoulders.

Scoffing under his breath, Riftan mounted Talon and trotted away. Sejuleu appeared to give up and did not pursue him. Riftan was relieved; had the Livadonian commander continued his pestering, he would have found a fist flying at his jaw.

Riftan wiped the pointless proposal from his mind and rode to where the soldiers were setting up the perimeter wall. If they did not hurry, it would be dark before they completed their defense line. After commanding the men to work faster, he slowly walked Talon along the outskirts of the forest.

Gallop ing hooves sounded in the distance behind him. Riftan turned his head. Elliot Charon was racing toward him at a frightening speed, his face grim.

“What is it?” Riftan said, growing still.

After reining to a stop a short distance away, Elliot breathlessly cried, “We received a message from Anatol! I thought it best to bring it to you immediately.”

Riftan walked over to him and accepted the parchment. The matter must be grave indeed for Elliot to seek him with such haste. He opened it, his jaw tensing. Catastrophic possibilities flashed through his mind — fire, pillaging, mine accidents. As it turned out, the contents of the message were far more shocking. Forgetting to breathe, Riftan read and reread the words.

A moment of heavy silence passed. Finally, Elliot cautiously asked, “Are you... all right, Commander?”

Riftan angrily crumpled the parchment in his hand. After staring down at his fist with blazing eyes, he yelled at one of the soldiers.

“You there! Where is Sejuleu Aren?”

The startled soldier stared dumbly back at him for a moment before pointing to where the barracks were being set up. Sejuleu was among his men, busily setting up the tents. When Riftan rode toward him, he looked up at him in surprise.

“Is something the matter? I thought you were done talking to me.”

“I have changed my mind.”

Sejuleu’s eyes widened in surprise. “Why the sudden change?”

“I...” said Riftan, then gritted his teeth, “now have reason to go to the Pamela Plateau. We should deal with the trolls here as soon as possible and be on our way.”

Sejuleu looked baffled. “What?”

Not bothering to reply, Riftan whirled away and barked at Elliot, “Find Hebaron! We’re having a strategy meeting!”

“Yes, sir!”

Elliot obediently left with all haste. While the knights were being summoned, Riftan paced the length of the defensive wall, fidgeting with the message. He did not know if this overwhelming emotion was anger or joy. What felt like incomprehensible exhilaration thrilled through him, and he was staring at the ground when something cold brushed his cheek.

He looked up at a flurry of sleet swirling in the fierce wind. His eyes blazing, he stared up at the sky. The cold did nothing to quell the fire raging inside him. Soon, he spotted his men racing toward him, and he turned Talon around.



The expeditionary party made their way north without much trouble. In the lower parts of the continent, dragon subspecies such as drakes and wyverns were much more prevalent than monsters of the Ayin race. With these monsters entering hibernation in the cooler months, travel in this region was relatively safe.

Their biggest problem was the weather, which grew colder with every passing day. Despite being early winter, the ground was already frozen, and frost clung to the dead grass in the hills. Though they had been spared from sleeping outdoors in the northeastern part of the kingdom thanks to the odd village along the way, this kind of travel would only last until they crossed the border.

Her cheeks red from the cold, Maxi pulled the hood of her robe down even further and plodded along on Rem. Her teeth chattered, and she stiffened whenever the icy wind swept through.

Ulyseon was riding alongside her, and he looked over with a worried expression. “Are you well, my lady?”

“O-Of course.”

Maxi attempted a confident nod, but her assurance sounded unconvincing even to her own ears. Sniffling, she glanced around to check how the other members were doing. If there was any consolation, it was that everyone also seemed to be struggling to cope with the frigid weather.

Most of the mages looked half-frozen as they trembled atop their mounts. Even Calto Serbel was a sorry sight to behold. His face had a bloodless, ashen look to it. Maxi eyed him apprehensively.

He's not dead, is he?

Chapter 20

An alarmingly pale Calto sat on his horse as though frozen in place. After flicking worried glances at his rigid form and purple lips, Maxi rose closer to Sidina, who was the only one who seemed unaffected.

“A-Are you... not cold, Sidina?”

“Phooey, this is nothing,” Sidina said, cracking a wide smile. “I’ve never told you, but I’m actually from the north. Where I’m from, it’s not Paxias until boiling water freezes over in a blink.”

Maxi’s face fell. They would likely have to camp out at the Plateau for more than a month in even harsher conditions. She wondered whether she would be able to handle it. Resigned sighs broke out all around as though the others had similar fears.

In front of her, Anton looked up at the sky, his face drawn. “This year’s winter is especially cold. I fear it will snow soon.”

“Why don’t we start distributing the firestones?”

“Not yet,” Calto said adamantly. “We must conserve as many of them as possible to last us through our time in the Plateau.”

Though he was clearly in need of one, Calto Serbel was not one to break a rule he had set himself.

Holding in a sigh, Maxi braved through the gale as the party made its way across a desolate field. They kept on in silence, the only sounds coming from the rattling wagons, clomping hooves, and howling wind. Their seemingly endless procession finally came to a stop when the dark outline of the Rhea Forest came into view.

At the head of the group, Kuahel Leon steered his mount around and announced, “We will have to make camp here for

today. We must set up a temporary stable and the tents before nightfall, so I ask that everyone do their bit.”

The Temple Knights promptly dismounted and began unloading equipment. The mages also clambered off their horses, some going to collect firewood and others splitting off to light campfires. Armin helped with the stable while Anette and Maxi clumsily assisted the knights with the tents. Though they were new to the task, they picked it up fairly quickly thanks to the countless hours spent crafting items in their workshops at the Mage Tower.

Maxi was connecting the poles of the barracks with chafed hands when Ulyseon spotted her. He rushed over, abandoning his task of tending to the horses.

“Please, my lady! Leave such things to me.”

She waved him off. “Ulyseon, I want you to go over there and help the knights.”

“But I am here to attend—”

“Don’t you think I would be safer if you cooperated with the Temple Knights? They seem to be short on hands. Why don’t you go see?”

Maxi pointed toward the forest, where some of the knights were scouting the perimeter to check for lurking monsters and setting up traps. Ulyseon reluctantly turned to look over at the men before begrudgingly going to help them. With the young knight out of her hair, Maxi began working in earnest.

She and Anette drove wooden poles into the ground, then stretched a tar-coated cloth over them. They finished by draping the barracks with leather and securing the covering with pegs to prevent the wind from tearing it away. When all the tents had been erected, the knights distributed straw mats.

“Here. This should help you keep warm.”

Maxi spread the mat on the floor of the tent and placed a blanket over it. While she made her bed, the others watered the horses at a brook and prepared their meal.

Thanks to the efficiency of operations, the expeditionary party finished setting up camp before nightfall. Exhausted, Maxi slumped in front of the fire. Swaddled in a blanket, she accepted a bowl of hot stew from the knights. Though her stomach gurgled, her weariness made it difficult to work up an appetite, and she found herself dozing off while sipping at her bowl.

Out of nowhere, a hand grabbed her nape. Maxi jerked awake to find Kuahel Leon's emotionless face looking down at her.

"Return to your tent if you wish to sleep."

Maxi blinked vacantly. When she realized he had saved her from falling face-first into the flames, her cheeks flushed in mortification.

"Th-Thank you."

Kuahel let go of her robe when he spotted Ulyseon returning with more firewood. He tilted his head toward the wagons.

"There are braziers in one of the wagons. Go and get them."

"I do not take orders from—"

Ulyseon stopped when he saw Maxi's exhausted face. Looking annoyed, he tossed the firewood aside and did as he was told. When he returned with several iron braziers, the mages filled them with lumps of burning coal. Maxi, who had stayed huddled by the campfire for warmth despite the violent wind, breathed a sigh of relief.

Though the tents offered protection from the elements, camping in the wilderness was no easy feat. Having a brazier at least made it bearable. When Ulyseon placed one in the middle of the barracks, Maxi moved her mat as close to its circle of warmth as possible and buried herself beneath three layers of blankets. Anette and Sidina lay huddled on either side, providing additional warmth. Miriam settled in the spot across from them. Pulling her blanket over her head, Maxi tried to fall asleep.

The next day, they set out at dawn. Light snow began to fall by noon over the increasingly rugged path. Rem snorted irritably as Maxi carefully led her around jagged rocks and conifers, stroking the mare reassuringly as they went.

Traveling without rest, it only took half a day to reach the other side of the mountain. By then, the mages were breathing heavily like overworked draft horses. Kuahel Leon noted their condition and ordered the knights to stop. Relieved sighs burst out from all around.

“I hope we’re not camping out two nights in a row,” Armin grumbled as he clambered off his horse.

Ulyseon was helping Maxi dismount. He shook his head and looked over at the mage.

“There is a small village not far from here. We should be able to reach it before nightfall.”

Maxi said a silent prayer. Enduring the cold was difficult enough without having to set up camp after a day on horseback. She tried to muster the dregs of her energy by imagining a blazing fireplace and a warm bed.

As soon as they finished a simple meal of hard wheat bread and cold bacon, they mounted their horses once more. Though the terrain was smoother, the increasingly brutal gusts quickly exhausted the mages again. Maxi bent low in her saddle to shield herself from the wind and walked Rem close to the horse in front.

They galloped through the blustering weather for what seemed like an eternity before they reached a small village at the base of the foothills. It was a settlement of twenty or so cottages clustered together, far too small to accommodate a party of fifty. Finding a place to stay would not be easy.

After inquiring for about fifteen minutes, Kuahel Leon returned to the group and announced, “The parish here is not big enough to house all of us. They say they will only be able to host twenty people at most. Vinther, Cedric — you and your

men will rest there for the night. The mages and I will lodge at the inn.”

“Does the inn have enough rooms?”

“The unexpectedly cold weather seems to have kept visitors away. The innkeeper told me they can take thirty people.”

“I see. Then, we shall see you in the morning, Commander.”

The knights split into two groups, one headed to the church and the other to the inn. The mages followed Kuahel to a dilapidated establishment on the village outskirts. The inn’s stable hands were out front, craning their necks in anticipation of their guests. They scurried to relieve the mages of their horses as soon as they spotted them.

“That’ll be fifty shekels per steed.”

Kuahel produced a leather pouch from his robe and handed over a few silver coins. As the boys grinned at the silver and cheerfully led the horses into the stables, the mages hurried into the main building to escape the wind.

The innkeeper was a woman of impressive proportions. She rubbed her plump hands together as they filed in.

“Welcome, welcome! I’m afraid it’ll be a while before your rooms are ready. Why not have something to eat while you wait?”

“Very well,” said Calto, still pasty-faced from the journey. “Please prepare us a meal.”

When the elder bobbed his head, a dark-skinned boy scurried forward and led them to a table near the fireplace. Once the mages were seated, the innkeeper returned with a basket of freshly baked bread and a sizzling pot of stew. She portioned out everyone’s share, which they began hungrily devouring. Maxi was no exception. Almost dipping her nose into the bowl, she gulped at the steaming liquid. The heat warming her stomach was the most gratifying sensation she had experienced in a while.

Ulyseon watched her wolf down her meal with a look of pity. “Have some of mine as well, my lady.”

He spread a thick layer of butter on his portion of bread and handed it to her. Readily accepting his offer, she took a huge bite.

A few tables over, a traveler was darting curious glances at them. It was not until the middle of their meal that he spoke up.

“Where are you people headed in this freezing weather?”

Kuahel Leon had just stepped into the inn after making sure the horses were safely in the stable. He curtly replied, “To Balbourne.”

The traveler studied his attire and nodded. “You must be pilgrims. We are also on our way to the basilica. Word is, there is to be a grand banquet with many nobles attending.”

Chapter 21

“A banquet?” said Calto.

He turned away from warming himself by the fireplace and shot Kuahel Leon a puzzled look. Unsurprisingly, there was a hint of disapproval on the elder’s face. Terrible forces could be controlling the allied monster army from the shadows at this very moment. One would have hoped the church would spend its resources preparing for a possible war instead of such frivolities.

Maxi looked up at the Temple Knight with reproof, but he paid them no mind. He strode to the traveler’s table and took an empty seat.

“Who is hosting the banquet?” Kuahel asked the man.

“I heard it is the high priest, Garis. He plans on inviting the nobles to this grand event to celebrate the Holy Feast Day. We started out from Arex as soon as we heard the news. We’re hoping to find work there, you see.”

The traveler pointed to the mandolin hanging on his side.

So he was a bard. Maxi noted the people who appeared to be the man’s travel companions sitting at a neighboring table. The six young men and women all carried instruments on their backs. Clubs and daggers hung from their waists, likely for self-defense. The band raised their tankards in unison and flashed genial smiles at the mages.

“My friends and I are a musical troupe. With winter coming so early this year, the nobles have been holding fewer banquets, likely because of the bad harvest. We were desperate for work when we heard things were better in Osiriya, so we decided to make the long journey there.”

“Did you travel through Dristan?” Kuahel asked, stroking his chin with a gloved hand. When the bard nodded, the knight waved a server over. “Bring me some ale.”

He turned his gaze back to the troupe.

“Would you care to join us? I’d like to hear about the situation in Dristan. I’ve heard more monsters have been spotted there recently. Did you encounter any on the way?”

“We had a run-in with a pack of gorgons, but we managed to survive because we were with a merchant band until we reached the border. Still, I’ve heard stories of ghouls in the southern regions. With more people moving northwest, the food shortage has only worsened.”

The musical troupe seemed more than happy to join tables with the expeditionary party, and Maxi listened with avid interest as they began sharing various tidbits they had picked up on their travels. It was common for nobles to invite troupes to their castles for entertainment. Though she had met countless bards and jesters at Croyso Castle, conversing with them at the same table was a first.

They gave a colorful account of their journey with great eloquence. Maxi learned that Dristan’s royal family was facing a succession crisis and that the food shortage problem had reignited territorial disputes in its western regions. The other mages appeared to be listening with keen interest as well. Having been cloistered away on an island for so long, they were all hungry for news.

Among the travelers was a woman in her late thirties. She said glumly between sips of beer, “Dristan is in a state of turmoil. Political strife, food shortages, and now monsters. The mercenaries say the number of undead has increased threefold since last year. All those corrupted corpses had to have come from somewhere — I’m sure they’re from the war three years ago. Imagine those tens of thousands of bodies buried without being purified, roaming the world as monsters.”

Maxi bit her lip as she thought back to the Battle of Eth Lene. Recalling ghouls clawing their way out of the ground and the ensuing chaos was enough to make her back prickle

with cold sweat. Had she been unlucky, she could have ended up as an undead herself.

Even now, it was still a possibility. Should she meet a tragic end and be buried in the desolate wasteland of the Plateau without the proper funeral rites, her soul would wander the underworld in eternal torment. She grew cold as the danger she had gotten herself into fully dawned on her. The other mages grew still as though they, too, were gripped with fear.

A heavy silence settled over the group, evidently annoying Anette. Pausing from tearing apart a chunk of lamb, she clicked her tongue and said, “Enough of this doom and gloom. You’re ruining my appetite. I’d rather not have to think about such things when we’re finally enjoying some rest with a roof over our heads.”

“Ah, my apologies. We have dampened the mood,” said the bard. He ruefully scratched the back of his head. “May I make up for it with a performance? Consider it an apology, and a thanks for the ale.”

With a gentle smile, the bard extracted his mandolin from the leather pack on his shoulder.

“We might not look it, but we are quite well-known in the eastern regions. Name a song you’d like to hear, and we will play it for you.”

Sidina, who was eating at a table near the wall with the wind mages, called out excitedly, “I would like a heroic epic! Something about the adventures of Wigrew and Darian’s twelve knights, if you please. Preferably one with lots of dashing men!”

Noting Sidina’s ale-flushed face, Maxi furtively looked over at the Temple Knights. Was it not improper for them to get so intoxicated in front of these men of the cloth? The Temple Knights remained silent, and Kuahel Leon kept his pensive gaze on the crackling fire, his head leaning on the wall.

The flickering flames cast a shadow over his face, and Maxi wondered what he was thinking. Throughout the journey thus

far, the Temple Knights had not spoken unless necessary, and the mages had been equally as reluctant to strike up conversation. Both groups had kept their distance as if they were strangers on the same path by sheer coincidence.

Though Maxi had certainly not expected the mages to get along with the paladins, she wondered if they would even be able to work together when the time came. Her face was clouding with concern when lively music began to fill the room. She turned her gaze to the bard, surprised by the man's skill in playing the mandolin in the dim light of the inn.

The man was a virtuoso. Nimble plucking the strings, he began singing a song of ancient heroes. His companions joined him on their flute, tambourine, mandolin, lute, and rebec. The sudden festive atmosphere melted Maxi's worries. When the song reached its climax, a drunk Sidina pulled Kiel, another wind mage, to his feet and drew him into a spinning dance.

Anette howled with laughter at Kiel's miserable face as he was hauled around. A few of the mages joined them and stamped their feet in time to the music. When the eight-verse song finally ended, the exhilarated mages promptly requested an encore.

Royald and Joel, two mages of Undaim, waved their tankards and exclaimed, "One about a beauty this time!"

Everyone was so inebriated that they had forgotten about the ten clergymen sitting among them. Maxi flicked an anxious glance at the Temple Knights' impassive faces. The men were quietly eating their meal as though completely uninterested in the merriment happening around them. Maxi shifted uncomfortably in her seat. She was about to admonish her peers when the bard's cheerful voice cut through.

"Ah, if it's a song about a beauty, how about The Scarlet Lady?"

"Is that a famous one?" Sidina asked.

"Have you not heard it?" said the bard, cocking his head. "It was written by Valrog, only the greatest bard in the Western

Continent. It is a piece beloved by many.”

Tuning his mandolin, the bard added, “Valrog fought in the war three years ago. He almost lost his life but was saved by the Scarlet Lady. When the war ended, he composed this in her honor and sang it all across the continent to express his gratitude. It is currently one of the most popular songs in Roviden.”

“Oh my, how romantic.”

Ever the enthusiast for a good love story, Sidina clapped her hands, her eyes sparkling. “A song about the love between a bard and a noblewoman, transcending social classes!”

“Alas, it is not meant as a romantic tale. The lady is already spoken for. Valrog wrote it out of pure admiration for her.”

The bard’s lips curled into a wide grin.

“And her husband is none other than Sir Riftan, the greatest knight in the continent.”

Maxi almost sputtered beer through her nose. When she bent over into a coughing fit, Ulyseon shot to his feet and began patting her back.

“My, are you all right, miss?” the bard said, startled by her reaction.

“Y-Yes—” Maxi choked out, waving her hand to show that she was fine.

She heard Anette’s wry voice chime in.

“So... it’s an ode to the Dragon Slayer’s wife?”

Maxi flinched, her shoulders stiffening.

Seemingly oblivious to the odd silence that had befallen the mages, the bard jovially replied, “That is so. I’m sure you have heard about the Lady Calypse as well. She is the mage who rescued Eth Lene Castle from the besieging monster army and helped us win the war. According to the soldiers there, Lady Calypse is a woman of angelic beauty with stunning, fiery-red

hair. Because of her story, young women have even taken to wearing red wigs to imitate her.”

Her cheeks growing hot, Maxi slowly pulled her hood over her head. She wanted to give the source of these spurious rumors a good shake. She felt that the original composer might have written the song more out of ill will than admiration.

She was desperately looking for a place to hide when Ulyseon muttered, “Rumors usually tend to be exaggerated, but stories about you have been strangely understated, my lady. How could they not add that you are lovelier than a nymph, wiser than a sage, and braver than a lion?”

An overwhelming urge to clamp the young man’s mouth shut surged through her, and she ground her teeth. Fortunately, the bard appeared not to have heard Ulyseon over all the noise.

After watching Maxi with glee, Anette said with a smirk, “I’d love to hear such an amazing song.”

“I shall play it to the best of my abilities.”

The bard cleared his throat before his baritone voice began to fill the room.

Oh God, hear our cries of terror;

Sable monsters stand beyond our walls,

Swinging their spears of steel.

Ah, deliver us before the end.

Was she the deliverance?

Your answer to our prayers?

The Scarlet Lady climbed the mountain alone,

The Scarlet Lady broke through the darkness.

Her valor became the iron mace

That crushed our enemies from above;

Cries of victory shook our walls

As we witnessed deliverance unfold before our eyes.

Ah, even as the sun fades and darkness engulfs the world,

We shall not fear

For we know that when dawn arrives,

The flame-haired angel will bring us the flag of victory.

The delicate melody gently resonated around the inn. Maxi waited in tortured silence for it to be over. To her great dismay, the song was four verses long. Breaking out into a cold sweat, she did not dare raise her head to look at the faces of her companions. It was not until she was close to fainting from the shame that the bard finally played the last note.

Chapter 22

The onlookers erupted into thunderous applause. The bard bowed, a pleased grin lighting his face.

As Maxi breathed a sigh of relief, she heard Ulyseon grumble, “The lyrics are subpar. It is clear the composer did not know—”

Maxi stomped on his foot with all her strength. She met his baffled look with a glower, warning him not to say another word.

Blinking in confusion, he asked, “Are you unwell, my lady? Was there something wrong with the food?”

Kuahel Leon, who had been silently resting his head against the wall with his eyes closed, chose that moment to speak.

“I suggest you all get some rest now.”

Maxi felt her cheeks burn when the knight’s stony gaze briefly met hers. She would have been less mortified had he teased or laughed at her like the mages. But, as always, the Temple Knight’s face was almost spitefully indifferent. Opening a leather pouch, Kuahel tossed the bard a coin before rising from his seat.

“For entertaining my companions.”

“Thank you, sir!”

As if their objective had been payment all along, the bard got up immediately. He went upstairs with his troupe, coin clutched in hand. Maxi had been waiting for a chance to flee. She shot to her feet at the opportunity.

“I-I shall excuse myself as well. I’m feeling rather tired.”

With that, she hurried up the stairs, Anette following closely behind. When Maxi turned warily to look at her, Anette slapped on an innocent expression.

“There are only nine rooms, so you and I will have to share. Sidina and Miriam will take another.”

“I-I was hoping to share with Sidina.”

Maxi dropped her gaze past the banisters, where Sidina was as drunk as a fiddler. She debated whether to haul the inebriated girl to bed or to endure the teasing of the mischievous Umri mage. While she was tossing up which option would be worse, Anette hustled her up the remaining stairs.

“Now, now, off to bed we go. I really must get some sleep.”

“...”

“On another note, I had no idea the Giant of Nome Hall was such an extraordinary mage. No, wait. Should we call you the flame-haired angel from now?”

Maxi clutched her forehead. No doubt the song would be fodder for Anette’s teasing for at least a month. She heaved a sigh at the thought.



The expeditionary party’s journey continued smoothly, so much so that Maxi questioned if monsters really were growing in number. They reached the old capital of the Roem Empire earlier than expected. The bard had been right about the banquet; long queues wound from the city gates, and merchants crowded the streets.

Maxi took in the sights and sounds as they passed through. Balbourne was a majestic city, an ostentatious vestige of the old empire that had once ruled over the entire Roviden Continent. Feeling as though she had entered a legendary land, her eyes roamed over the clean road and towering buildings. Though every structure was remarkably sophisticated in design, none came close to the basilica, which stood at the heart of the city.

They passed through an arched entrance and onto an immaculate, shrub-lined road. The sight of the grand basilica at the end left Maxi awestruck. It stood nearly twice as large as Drachium Castle. Over a thousand stained glass windows adorned its imposing stone walls, contrasting with its impeccably white pillars and brilliant blue-tiled roof.

Maxi gazed up at the church that Darian the Monarch, the first emperor of the Western Continent, had dedicated to God. The Basilica of Osiriya possessed an ethereal beauty different from the Mage Tower. As she was marveling at its design, clerics in black habits filed out to welcome them.

“What a great journey you have made. His Holiness has been eagerly awaiting your arrival for days.”

“Father Lugias. It has been a long time.”

Kuahel Leon dismounted and bent to one knee before the slight, elderly cleric. Maxi’s eyes widened when he reverently kissed the cleric’s wrinkled hand. Since paladins were knights as well as high-ranking clergymen, the elderly cleric was at least a high priest for the commander of the Temple Knights to show such reverence.

“I am sure coming here was no easy feat,” Father Lugias said, turning to the mages with a benevolent smile. “Please allow me to introduce myself. I am Lugias Talleman, a servant of our divine master.”

Prodded on by Anton, Calto Serbel dismounted from his horse and replied in a curt but civil tone, “Thank you for your welcome. I am Calto Serbel, leader of this expedition, and these are the mages under my command.”

The cleric studied each of their faces and nodded. “I thank you all for coming. His Holiness has been looking forward to meeting you as well.”

Maxi glanced back and forth between their leader and the high priest with keen interest. It appeared that the Mage Tower and the church had come to some sort of agreement before they had formally joined forces for this expedition. Though

she was not privy to the details, she could hazard a guess that they must have reached an understanding. It was the only explanation for being able to work together after years of animosity.

By joining the expedition, the mages would not only protect their reputation, but they would also get information on the dark mages. What did the church stand to gain from this partnership? Maxi was mulling this over when Kuahel spoke in his usual dry tone.

“I heard His Eminence, Father Garis, is holding a banquet. Does he have His Holiness’s approval?”

Maxi saw grim concern flash across the elderly cleric’s face. His reaction seemed to suggest Father Garis was a source of headache for the church.

“The Orthodox Church greatly opposed this expedition,” Father Lugias said with a sigh. “As such, concessions had to be made to placate them.”

“That may cause problems in the future.”

“It cannot be helped,” the cleric said resolutely before turning to the mages with an apologetic smile. “Dear me... I have kept our guests standing in the cold. Please allow the clerics to take your horses and follow me. I shall show you to your rooms.”

“We shall alert His Holiness of our arrival.”

Without a second glance at their traveling companions, the Temple Knights entered the basilica. Maxi watched them leave before following the high priest. He led them through the chapel to the right and into a large building that appeared to be a school for novitiates. The spacious arcade, connected to a vast garden, was full of noblemen and darkly-robed clerics.

Maxi’s eyes widened in surprise. Though she had known that the best university in the continent was located in the basilica in Balbourne, she had not expected it to be of this magnitude.

“The University of Osiriya teaches theology and a variety of other fields,” said one of the young clerics, his voice full of pride. “Not only to hierarchs and Temple Knights capable of divine magic, but also to the scions of the Seven Kingdoms’ noble houses. Commoners may also study here if they so wish. A true repository of knowledge.”

There was a subtle stiffening of movement around him, and Maxi nervously studied the faces of the senior mages. Calto shot them a warning look before they could speak. Starting many days prior to their arrival, the elder had ceaselessly reminded them to guard their tongues. But, of course, one could not expect the mages of the Mage Tower to submissively follow orders.

“A school where anyone can learn?” Albern muttered cynically. He was a senior mage of Kabala. “How astonishing. Do you accept mages too?”

Their guides’ faces darkened, and one of them coldly regarded Albern. “If they wish to study here, they may indeed. God’s teachings are open to all.”

“Seems we won’t be bored during our stay,” Anette said lightly.

Maxi jabbed the girl in her side. Though their displeasure was clear, the clerics pretended not to hear and continued walking. The atmosphere remained chilly even as the mages were shown to their rooms. Maxi opened the door to her assigned chamber, thoroughly spent. She had just trudged over to the bed when Ulyseon spoke.

“My lady,” he said, hovering by the doorframe. “I must leave you for a while to send word to Anatol. Do you think you will be all right on your own?”

“Ulyseon... I am not a child who needs a guardian. Besides, what could possibly happen to me inside the basilica?”

In a rare display of doubt, Ulyseon gave her a skeptical look. “But you seem to get yourself into trouble the moment I take my eyes off you, my lady. I specifically requested the

room next to yours so I could be near at all times, but I was told men and women are not permitted to stay in the same building. I will likely be in the knights' quarters. I beg you, my lady, please be careful."

"Y-You seem to keep forgetting, Ulyseon... that I am five years your senior!" Maxi exclaimed incredulously.

Ulyseon shook his head. "This has nothing to do with age, my lady. I am here to protect you in Sir Riftan's stead."

With a smug look, the young knight turned to leave.

"Try not to be alone if you can help it, my lady. Stay with the other mages once you've changed. I will be right back after meeting our informant."

All Maxi could do in response was silently open and close her mouth as she watched him go. She had initially thought only his outer appearance had changed, that he was still the same seventeen-year-old boy from years ago. Nowadays, she found herself occasionally rendered speechless by his arrogance.

She closed the door with a sigh. If the Remdragon Knights insisted on treating her like a child, she would have a difficult time functioning as a mage even after her return to Anatol. Feeling deflated, she threw her bag aside and started massaging her calves and thighs, which were stiff from a full day's ride.

Shortly after, the female clerics brought her a hot kettle and burning brazier. Maxi removed her dirty robe and heavy armor and wiped herself with a wet towel. Though she tried to groom whenever she could, maintaining a neat appearance while traveling was next to impossible.

She furiously scrubbed herself clean, shivering from the cold, and washed her hair as best as she could with the remaining water. Looking presentable was the least she could do if they were to have an audience with the pope. After changing into the cleanest clothes she could find, she carefully

combed her hair. A knock came at the door just as she was finishing.

Maxi hastily pulled on a robe and cracked the door open. Standing in the corridor was a woman with an impish face, tanned skin, and short, boyish hair. She did not immediately recognize her. As she tried to place the vaguely familiar features, the woman, who appeared equally as stunned at first, smiled brightly.

“I doubted my ears when I heard you were at the basilica,” she said, grabbing Maxi’s hand and hopping in excitement. “Yet, here you here! I can hardly believe it! To think we would meet here... What an amazing coincidence!”

Maxi’s eyes widened.

“I-Idsilla? Is that you?”

Chapter 23

Gaping, Maxi looked her guest up and down. The woman was half a hand span taller than her, with slender limbs and slightly upturned eyes and lips. Memories of the young Livadonian noblewoman who had braved the war by her side three years ago reawakened in her mind.

“W-What are you doing in Osiriya?” Maxi asked, still in shock.

“I have been studying medicine at the university since last year. Selina is also here, training to become a hierarch.”

Maxi could not stop gawking.

“M-Medicine?”

“I intended to follow your example at first and learn healing magic, but it turns out I’m not cut out for it. That’s when I switched to herbs and medical treatment. My family was vehemently against it, but even my father gave up when I cut off my hair.”

Idsilla pointed to her short locks with an impish smile.

“I persuaded Father to use my dowry to buy back our land, and to let Elba keep the money he received for fighting in the war for his wedding. After that, I ended my engagement and came to Osiriya. And I didn’t come alone. The female clerics who were in the support unit with us are studying here as well with the monastery’s funding.”

As though overcome with emotion, Idsilla abruptly stopped her excited chatter.

“I’m sure everyone will be happy to see you,” she said, her smile softening. “You are a living legend, after all.”

Maxi’s face turned crimson as she recalled the nightmare that was The Scarlet Lady. Her back began to break out in a cold sweat.

“Y-You exaggerate... I am no—”

“But it is the truth. You should visit Levan if you ever get the chance. Your story was even made into a play there.”

“A-A play?”

Idsilla chortled when she saw Maxi’s face blanch in horror.

“It was put on as a charitable venture to help the shelter there, but it unexpectedly became a massive success! Once your story became famous, the court jesters added to the play and even performed it during a royal banquet. In Levan, your fame rivals your husband’s.”

Maxi firmly resolved never to set foot in Levan for as long as she lived. It was absurd that people had romanticized her to such a degree at their wanton discretion.

Noticing Maxi’s teary mortification, Idsilla attempted to console her. “Don’t be so embarrassed. I make an appearance too, you know. I’m the villain who coaxes you to go to the battlefield. Elba was incensed when he saw it at the royal palace, called it a disgrace to our family.”

“I-It’s not something to laugh about, Idsilla.”

“I, for one, have no problem with it. After all, I can now live as I wish, thanks to it ruining my marriage prospects.”

Grinning, Idsilla shrugged and pulled Maxi by the arm.

“But no matter. Let’s not waste time here. We should find the others. Everyone was sad they didn’t get to say their farewells when you left.”

For a moment, Maxi hesitated as she wondered if it was appropriate to leave her room when she could be summoned to meet the pope at any moment. Still, she could not send her friend away when they had only just reunited. She came to a decision and knocked on the adjacent door belonging to one of the senior mages. Elena, the only woman senior mage on the expedition, readily agreed to Maxi’s excursion.

“You may,” Elena said with a nod. “Only the senior mages will have an audience with His Holiness. We were told that his ill health prevents him from meeting too many people. There was much deliberation, but it’s been decided that Master Calto, Master Anton, Master Albern, and I will meet with him. You are free to spend your time however you wish. We will update you and the others after the meeting.”

After that, Maxi followed Idsilla to the students’ quarters with a light conscience. Pale winter sunlight streamed overhead while the cold breeze tousled their hair. They arrived at a spacious hall filled with a hundred people gathered for lunch, and Maxi’s eyes immediately honed in on Selina and the Livadonian female clerics. The women rose from their seats as soon as they saw her, their faces lighting up with joy.

“I thought my eyes were deceiving me,” Selina said excitedly, leading Maxi to an empty seat. “It *is* you, Lady Calypse! I went out when I heard there were mages. You cannot guess how surprised I was when I saw you.”

Maxi sat down with a bewildered smile. “I also... did not expect to see you all here.”

“After the war, the female clerics who served in the support unit were granted permission to learn divine magic,” Selina explained with a pleased smile. “So here we are, studying to become hierarchs. The church is currently low on clerics who can perform purifications to deal with the increasing number of monsters, so they are likely trying to fill the shortage with female clerics. You could say it has unexpectedly opened doors for us.”

She sounded so smug that Maxi had to stifle a laugh.

“That’s... wonderful.”

“And we have you to thank for it. We wouldn’t be here if Eth Lene had fallen that day.”

The other women all nodded in agreement. The admiration in their eyes settled like an uncomfortable weight on her

shoulders, and Maxi looked troubled. Taking a sip of wine, she hastily changed the subject.

“I heard... the basilica will be hosting a grand banquet. You must be busy with the preparations.”

Selina ducked closer to the table and whispered, “It’s only the Orthodox clerics who are preoccupied. Strictly speaking, this is a political campaign masquerading as a feast. At the moment, the high priest Garis, the Orthodox Church’s candidate, and the high priest Cassius, the Reformed Church’s candidate, are vying for the papacy. The banquet planned for the Holy Feast Day was Father Garis’s idea. No doubt he plans to gain the support of the influential nobles of the Seven Kingdoms he has invited.”

Being a member of the Reformed Church herself, she was clearly not pleased by this. She furrowed her brow and sighed.

“I don’t understand why His Holiness allowed this. I believed he had chosen Father Cassius as his successor.”

Maxi tried to recall the short exchange between Kuahel Leon and the elderly Father Lugias. The papal conclave might have had something to do with the sudden partnership between the church and the Mage Tower. If it turned out that dark mages were behind the war three years ago, it would affect the Reformed Church’s influence, leaving room for the Orthodox faction to take over once again. The Mage Tower would want to prevent that from happening at all costs.

“Which leads me to ask... Do you think the Mage Tower sent you all here to offer their support to Father Cassius?”

Maxi snapped out of her thoughts and turned to look at Selina.

“I was wondering,” Selina continued, “if Father Cassius was trying to gain the Mage Tower’s support, just as Father Garis is trying to get the nobles on his side.”

“I-I’ve only recently become an official mage... so I’m afraid I’m not privy to such information.”

Though Maxi tried to brush it off with an ambiguous smile, she silently agreed. If the existence of dark mages were to become known, the papacy would likely go to the Orthodox Church. And if worse came to worst, Calto's warning about the return of mage persecutions could prove true.

Maxi hunched her shoulders. A heavy dread settled in her heart at the thought that she might have gotten herself involved in something far more serious than she had bargained for.

"Do you all... support Father Cassius as the next pope?"

"Of course! The thought of Father Garis becoming pope terrifies me," Idsilla exclaimed. "I'm sure you'll understand what I mean if you ever get to meet him. Father Garis is a monster carved from the ice and steel of the north. He would start a reign of terror if he became pope. In his eyes, adherents of the Reformed Church like us are all heretics."

"Lady Idsilla!" Selina said, aghast. She glanced around to make sure no one was listening. "Please mind your tongue. Whatever the case, he is still a holy minister of God. You could be punished for blasphemy for what you just said."

Idsilla snorted. "Why be scared when the worst he could do is confine me in a solitary cell for a day?"

Maxi shook her head incredulously. "I see... you still hold little regard for rules, Idsilla."

"As you know, people don't change that easily. Even my family has given up on me," Idsilla quipped.

Selina gaped at her in disbelief before sighing up at the ceiling. Soon, the female clerics rose to attend their afternoon classes. As the novitiates' schedules were packed from morning until evening, it was difficult for them to make time for much else.

When the women departed after exchanging reluctant goodbyes, Maxi went out to the garden with Idsilla. They talked while strolling around a secluded pavilion.

Idsilla told Maxi about her brother and Alyssa's beautiful wedding ceremony, and Maxi recounted an exaggerated version of her bizarre experiences at the Mage Tower.

After listening to her story with twinkling eyes, Idsilla cautiously asked, "And your husband... is he well?"

Maxi froze in the middle of her happy reminiscing.

Realizing she had made a mistake, Idsilla bit her lip. A moment of awkward silence passed, and she fidgeted with her hair before hastily adding, "I've been worried about you since Eth Lene Castle. When they brought you back wounded that day, your husband..."

Unable to find the right words, Idsilla trailed off. She gulped and seemed to struggle to finish her sentence.

"Sir Riftan... looked as though the world had ended. I've never seen such despair. If something terrible had happened to you back then... he probably would have—"

Idsilla had a grim look fixed on the flowerbed at her feet. She abruptly stopped talking and began waving her hands, embarrassed.

"Oh, do forgive me. I've let my mouth run away with me again. It's just... when I heard you'd left Anatol, I feared those events might have strained your relationship."

"Th-That is not why I left," Maxi quickly reassured her. "There were circumstances... that forced me to leave."

Idsilla went to say something but stopped when she saw Maxi's pale face. A cold breeze brushed past.

She looked up at the dry branches before whispering in a choked voice, "As Selina said earlier, we would not be here if it weren't for you, Lady Calypse. I wanted to tell you how grateful I am."

Maxi was about to wave off the sentiment out of habit when it struck her that her friend was right. Not only had she saved Idsilla's life but also the lives of countless more. She grew still as the truth rattled her core. After a lifetime of believing

herself useless, it was difficult to recognize the extent of her impact on so many people. Still, it did not change the facts.

She unconsciously clutched the coin hanging from her neck. Her memories of that time were a mire of helplessness, anguish, and guilt, but now she felt a new light dawning on them. After quietly meeting Idsilla's solemn gaze, Maxi nodded.

The expeditionary party stayed at the basilica for two days to prepare for the journey. They would be venturing into the most dangerous place on the Western Continent. As such, their knight escorts doubled, and they ended up with eight wagons loaded with provisions, tents, horse feed, weapons, and other necessary equipment.

Their travel plans would take them north through Balto. The weather was bound to be colder the further they pushed, which also meant a higher probability of certain monsters. To prepare for this and their prolonged stay in the wilderness, the mages packed every herb and firestone they could source. Some even purchased cold weather-proof clothing, such as long boots made of wool and fur.

As soon as preparations were complete, the expeditionary party gathered at the basilica's entrance.

Chapter 24

Idsilla came to see Maxi off.

“I had thought you’d at least stay for the banquet,” she muttered sadly.

Maxi paused from securing her bags to Rem’s saddle to give her friend a rueful smile. Most of the basilica’s pilgrims seemed to believe the mages had come to keep the Orthodox faction in check. Having expected a dramatic clash, they were clearly disappointed when the mages made preparations to depart so soon after arriving. Meanwhile, the Orthodox clerics watched them with a mixture of distrust and relief.

The reason Calto gave for their visit to Osiriya was that the mages were there to help the church investigate the recent proliferation of monsters. Of course, no one believed this. Even Maxi did not consider it a credible explanation as to why they were traveling north in the middle of winter.

“Why not wait until Aquarias^[9]? Don’t you know the cold snap will start in a few weeks?”

“It’s safer to travel now when monsters are less active.”

Idsilla flicked a skeptical glance at the shivering mages. Though Sidina and other northerners seemed unaffected by the cold, those born and raised on warm southern isles were already struggling.

“I think you should worry more about the cold than monsters,” Idsilla whispered into Maxi’s ear.

Forcing aside her trepidation, Maxi did her best to give a matter-of-fact reply. “We are braving the current conditions to conserve our firestones. We’ll start using them once the cold snap comes, so that should make it bearable.”

Even as she spoke, she silently wondered why the party was in such a hurry to move on. Calto had insisted on a hasty departure, claiming they were more likely to get embroiled in

the church's political conflict the longer they stayed. Maxi questioned whether this was the real reason. Perhaps the ruins in the Pamela Plateau were not the only sign of dark mages.

Maxi hunched her shoulders as the wind grew increasingly fierce. It was daunting to think that a terrible secret might be hiding somewhere in the north.

“In any case, I am grateful for your concern.”

She concealed her fear behind a brave smile and hopped onto her horse.

Idsilla rummaged in her bag for something. “Please take this with you,” she said, handing Maxi the item. “It’s a pouch of heated sand. I use it to keep warm during morning prayers, but I would like for you to have it. It’s rather heavy, so discard it when it grows cold.”

“Thank you.”

Maxi gladly accepted the gift and slipped it into her robe, where she felt its heat quickly warm her side. She sighed in contentment.

“Please be careful,” Idsilla said, her voice full of concern. “You can be quite reckless sometimes.”

“Idsilla... you are the last person I wish to hear that from.”

Idsilla chuckled at the irony. “We’ll meet again, won’t we?”

“Of course,” Maxi replied, smiling warmly. “Come visit Anatol... if you ever get the chance. You will always be welcome there.”

After asking her to give her regards to the female clerics, Maxi walked Rem to the expeditionary party. The earth mages had been assigned to ride next to the wagons. In the event of an attack, it was their duty to cast a barrier to protect the supplies.

As she led Rem to the last wagon in line, she studied the somber, black-robed knights in her periphery. With their gray armor swathed in dark robes and their cold, hooded faces, they

looked almost demonic. If war ever broke out between the Mage Tower and the church, these men would not hesitate to ruthlessly root out heretics.

Maxi quickly pushed the terrifying thought from her mind. Even if that were true, they were currently working toward the same goal.

Kuahel Leon soon finished his inspection and signaled for their departure. As the knights began to file out of the city gates, Maxi searched for Ulyseon. He was usually at her side, refusing to let her out of his sight, and yet she had not seen him all morning. She began to grow worried that something might have happened to him when she spotted the young knight leading his horse out of the stables.

Maxi trotted over and gave him a questioning look. “Where did you run off to so early in the morning?”

“I went to see our informant, my lady,” he replied, mounting his steed. “I thought it best to update Anatol on our route so they can contact us if necessary.”

Narrowing her eyes at him suspiciously, Maxi said slowly, “They won’t... try to come up with an excuse to follow, will they?”

“No, my lady,” Ulyseon said, looking flustered. He avoided her gaze as if something was pricking his conscience before professing with a sigh, “By working with the merchants, Anatol has managed to create a vast intelligence network. As long as the place has a market, you can expect to find one or two of our informants there. In the event of an emergency, we can use that network to ask our allies for assistance. Our affiliates can make the necessary preparations to deal with whatever may arise if they are aware of our route.”

“But we have the Temple Knights. Even without help—”

“I do not trust the Temple Knights completely, my lady,” Ulyseon replied stiffly. He tilted his chin toward the head of the procession, where Kuahel and Calto were deep in discussion. “Just look at them. They’ve been whispering to

each other throughout the journey. It is most definitely suspect.”

Though Maxi rolled her eyes, she did not argue. Ulyseon’s worries were bordering on paranoia, but she could not deny that her suspicions were growing too.

“Well,” he said, steering his horse around. “We should hurry, or we’ll be left behind.”

To Maxi’s surprise, the knights were already out of the city, and it was now the wagons’ turn to pass through the gates. She looked over her shoulder one last time before following them out. Idsilla stood among the clerics who had come to see them off, waving enthusiastically. Maxi returned the gesture with equal vigor before spurring her horse on.

The expeditionary party left Balbourne and made their way north of Osiriya. Having been the heart of the old empire, Osiriya’s developed cities were closely connected by well-paved roads. It made for a relatively pleasant journey. They spent whole days riding at a brisk pace, stopping only at night to rest at an inn, then departing at daybreak. As they neared the border, the settlements grew sparse. Once again, they were forced to begin making camp in the evenings.

“We will start distributing the firestones tonight. Come, take your share.”

Celric began handing out quail egg-sized stones to the mages busily setting up camp. The magic stones appeared to be of poor quality as they only contained a sparse amount of mana. They were just powerful enough to lessen the chill.

When Maxi infused her stone with a bit of mana, warmth seeped into her body. She breathed a sigh of relief as life returned to her rigid hands. The cold had frozen the ground in the span of a few days, and the mages had been dreading the prospect of camping out in such conditions.

From then on, they were allotted low-grade firestones every three or four days. Maxi offered one to Ulyseon, but the young man scowled as though she had wounded his pride. Like

Ulyseon, the Temple Knights also withstood the biting cold with nothing more than blankets, coats, and the campfire. Maxi was astounded by their endurance.

Noticing her staring at the knights in fear and awe, Armin said in a flat voice, “They are warriors who push their bodies to the limit. Their mana pathways expand rapidly once they reach a certain level. Us mages, we artificially develop our pathways by repeatedly infusing mana. On the other hand, knights train their bodies to absorb mana not as magic but in its unadulterated form. Once enough has accumulated, it enables them to use blade aura, which can even cut down monsters with powerful magic resistance.”

Armin pointed a stick toward the knights, who were tending to the horses and patrolling the area without any signs of exhaustion.

“Simply put, seasoned knights are beings who possess greater life force than your average human. There is no need for you to worry about them.”

Maxi tried to recall some of her lessons with Ruth. If mana was the energy that maintained the order of the natural world, magic was pure elemental energy resulting from extracting a specific element. In short, mana was divine will itself, while magic was the power derived from its willful distortion. Magic was no match for forces that used mana in its purest form — divine magic and blade aura.

“But... seasoned knights also die from illness or injury, don't they?”

“And that's why we're here,” Anette replied blandly, tossing some of the kindling she had gathered into the fire. “It's our job as support mages to heal the knights when they get wounded and make it possible for them to keep fighting. We must conserve our mana and energy until then. If you have time to worry about them, I suggest you spend it monitoring your own condition.”

“I-I am already doing that,” Maxi retorted sullenly.

She turned her attention to the pot dangling over the fire, stirring its contents with a wooden paddle.

The mages finished their supper before nightfall and rested inside their tents while the knights took turns standing watch. The next day, the expeditionary party finally crossed the border into Balto. Maxi's breath misted out in a constant stream as she rode through a grove of frozen birch trees. After a night of snow, icicles dotted the bleak branches like diamonds, and frost clung to the ground.

"It is eerily quiet," Ulyseon mumbled, studying their surroundings.

Maxi had noticed earlier too. The usual woodland sounds of chirping birdsong or rustling wind were missing. A chill ran down her spine.

"Do you think... there are monsters nearby?"

"I do not detect movement, but please be prepared to cast a barrier just in case," Ulyseon replied, resting his hand on the hilt of his sword.

Maxi gulped and nodded. Tensing in her saddle, she was riding through the shadowed forest when something cold landed on her forehead. She looked up to see snow falling from the hazy sky.

"Should we not set up camp before the snow gets heavier?" one of the mages cried.

At the head of the group, Kuahel Leon reined his horse in and glanced up.

"We still have time before sundown. There is a village on the other side of this forest. Let us make haste."

The Temple Knights followed their commander as he spurred his mount forward. The rest of the mages were forced to keep up. A fog began to form around them as they rode on, and Maxi nervously glanced about the dark trees.

Her lungs felt close to exploding each time she took a ragged breath, and her ears throbbed as if she had taken a blow

to the head. Still, she had no desire to sleep in such an eerie place. She used restorative magic on an exhausted Rem and tried to encourage the mare to keep up with the knights' warhorses.

After galloping on for what seemed like hours, they finally arrived at the edge of the Armund Forest. Maxi's face broke into a wide grin at the thought of sleeping under a roof again.

Just then, those riding ahead abruptly halted their steeds. A shocked silence fell over the party, and some even gasped in horror. Baffled, Maxi pushed past the knights blocking her view. At the foot of a gentle slope, dark smoke billowed from the charred remains of a village.

Chapter 25

Maxi felt her skin crawl. Frozen in place, she tried to make sense of the horrific sight before her. Nearly half of the wall surrounding the village lay in ruins, and dying flames still flickered among the charred debris. Without thinking, she spurred her horse toward the village, only to be blocked by Ulyseon.

“There is still smoke, my lady! The attack was likely recent. The enemy may be lurking nearby.”

“B-But... if the attack was recent... there may be survivors.”

A sudden gust forced Maxi to rein back her horse. Her stomach churned as the acrid smell of smoke filled her lungs. Above the ash-black village, pure white snow flurried along winds that seemed to be blowing stronger. Kuahel Leon trotted his warhorse forward, breaking his silent assessment of the nightmarish scene. He seemed startlingly calm.

“Vinther, scout the area. The enemy might have hidden in the vicinity. Cedric, you will come with me. As Lady Calypse has pointed out, there may be survivors.”

Kuahel glanced at Maxi before turning to Calto.

“How many of you can use tracing spells?”

“That would be all of our wind and earth mages,” Calto replied, his voice grave.

Before the commander could even request it, Calto addressed a short, portly mage named Nevin.

“Take the Sigrew mages to aid the reconnaissance. The others will follow Sir Kuahel to the village.”

“We should send a messenger to the nearest city at once,” Ulyseon interjected. “If they were able to raze a village of this

size, we are likely dealing with a large band of monsters. We must request reinforcements.”

Kuahel Leon fixed Ulyseon with an ice-cold glare, nettled that someone other than the pope had the gall to give him orders. He furrowed his brow but soon conceded.

“Harman! Take Luke and Abett with you. Go west, inform Viscount Sevron of what happened, and ask him for aid. Warn the villages on the way to prepare themselves for a possible raid as well.”

“Yes, Commander!”

The darkly tanned knight took off like the wind alongside two others. Maxi wondered whether it was wise to only send a group of three. She was watching them leave, a look of concern etched on her face, when Kuahel Leon started down the hill with the remaining Temple Knights. The mages swiftly followed them toward the ravaged village.

“Stay close to me, my lady,” Ulyseon said, keeping a vigilant eye on their surroundings.

Maxi nodded and tried to ride as close to him as possible. At the same time, she summoned her mana in case she had to cast a barrier at a moment’s notice.

The Temple Knights climbed over the ruins of the fallen wall first and entered the village. A mixture of fear and nerves had taken over Maxi, making her forget about the cold. As she led Rem across the blackened soil, she warily swept her eyes over the houses turned to rubble. There was an arched stone entrance ahead, miraculously intact. They passed under it to find themselves on a desolate street littered with scorched wood. As they rode along, she realized in horror that the dark lumps strewn all over the village were the charred remains of its inhabitants.

Forcing down the urge to scream, she pulled Rem to a stop. The gruesome sight made her stomach turn.

“Could you use a tracing spell to search for survivors?” Kuahel Leon asked in an eerily calm voice.

When Maxi met his gaze, the detachment in his eyes seemed to quell her raging emotions. She steeled herself, trying to stop her legs from shaking, and dismounted.

“A-Anette... you search west. I will take the east.”

“All right.”

“I’ll cover the area around that church,” Armin said brusquely before walking toward the wreckage of a building with only a single wall standing.

Tugging Rem’s reins, Maxi cautiously made her way through the still-smoking rubble. When she reached a suitable spot, she began the tracing spell. It was a magic that essentially worked as a temporary contract between the caster and a gnome, an earth spirit. This would allow the caster to glean information within a set distance.

As soon as a gnome accepted her request, her mana pathway connected to the mana flowing underground. She felt her senses sharpen. Veins of mana spread out like a closely-knit web, allowing her to perceive nearly everything touching the ground. However, no matter how much she searched, she could not find any traces of human life. Maxi reluctantly stopped the spell.

“Th-There are no survivors... in this area.”

Anette strode over with her horse in tow and said grimly, “It is the same over there.”

Clinging to a shred of hope, Maxi looked to Armin, who was coming down the slope. He shook his head with a gloomy expression.

“We’ve searched the entire village but found no survivors. The ransackers also seem to be gone.”

Armin gravely looked up at Calto Serbel and Kuahel Leon.

“What do you intend to do now?”

As the de facto leader of this expedition, the commander of the Temple Knights was the one to reply. He surveyed the

remains grimly.

“We cannot leave. We must take measures to purify the deceased, or this place will soon be teeming with the undead.”

“Then, we will have to camp here tonight,” Calto replied calmly.

Fear clouded Maxi’s face. The thought of spending the cold, pitch-black winter night amidst a horrific heap of burned corpses sent chills down her spine. Still, she was well aware that they had no other choice.

The party promptly lit fires all over the village and began gathering the dead. Snow still poured from the sky, and darkness was beginning to take over. Though they were exhausted from a full day’s ride, everyone worked without a moment of rest.

The mages managed to find a church that was still standing and, after sweeping away the ashes, set up their tents inside. Some even prepared a makeshift stable within a stone structure next to the church. Meanwhile, the Temple Knights purified the gathered bodies and buried them once they had conducted the rite.

Despite their efforts, the sheer number of casualties made gathering the dead before sunset next to impossible. When night eventually fell, they were forced to halt the purification and congregate inside the crumbling church to rest.

The knights returning from the reconnaissance stepped in, their faces grim.

“It appears the raiders have escaped north.”

The mages who had accompanied the knights added, “From the traces we found in the forest, we suspect it was a horde of red goblins. It’s winter, and early at that. They probably came to plunder food.”

Maxi, who sat hunched by the fire in a stupor of shock and fatigue, muttered, “But... but what about the burned sheep on

the east side? Cows, swine, and horses, all burned alive as well. If it was food they were after... why do such a thing?"

"The carnage probably sent them into a frenzy," Miriam retorted contemptuously. "Monsters are no better than beasts. You can't expect logic from them. They are only capable of destruction, defecation, gluttony, and procreation."

Maxi wanted to refute Miriam's statement. Her experience in the war three years ago had taught her how shrewd and manipulative the monsters of the Ayin race could be. However, she was too tired to argue, so she simply pressed her lips together and pulled her blanket over her head in reply.

Throughout this exchange, Ulyseon had been seated on a nearby window sill that gave him a clear view of the outside. He addressed Maxi as he polished his sword.

"I shall stand guard, my lady, so please try to get some sleep."

Maxi did not protest and lay down on a nest of straw. She had worried she would be unable to fall asleep in the middle of what was essentially a giant graveyard. That concern was quickly rendered moot as exhaustion took over her, and she soon found herself slumbering as deep as the dead.

There was no telling how long she slept, but she was eventually awakened by a shake. When she managed to open her dry eyes, it took a moment for her blurred vision to regain focus. Ulyseon's ashen face came into view.

Maxi propped herself up on her elbow, a strange sense of déjà vu washing over her.

Ulyseon shook her by her shoulders. "Wake up, my lady! Monsters! We are surrounded!"

"W-What?"

Instantly awake, Maxi shot to her feet. The other mages clambered up as well, pulling on boots and grabbing defensive weapons. Maxi hastily strapped on her protective gear and ran out of the building, only to be met by a chilling sight.

The sea of charred corpses in the dirt had staggered to their feet and was now tottering toward them. Maxi fought down a shriek.

“Ghouls...”

In just the span of one night, the corpses they had been unable to purify had mutated into these creatures. Faced with hundreds of glowing red eyes flashing in the dark, Maxi found herself trembling.

Calto came running up behind her. He cried out, “Move the horses! Cast a barrier at once!”

Snapping back to her senses, she hurried to the makeshift stable and led the horses out. Sixty knights were already in position at the bottom of the hill, ruthlessly cutting down the ghouls moving in on them like a swarm of ants.

Chapter 26

While the knights held the monsters back, the mages rounded up the horses and wagons to one spot and cast a barrier around them. The ground split open as walls of earth sprang up, and mages capable of long-range attacks climbed up to assist the knights. However, against the undead that were unaffected by magic, the mages' aid was virtually pointless.

"The ghouls' source of magic should be around here somewhere! We must locate it," Calto cried while casting restorative magic over the Temple Knights.

Maxi crawled up the barrier's steep slope. The scene below was a sea of undead dotted with flashes of light as the knights held them back. Ghouls crumbled into ashes around Kuahel Leon with each swing of his sword. The knights continued to push forward under his command. Every time they cut through, however, more undead would pour forth. Calto Serbel was correct — something was feeding these monsters with magic.

As soon as she realized, Maxi cast a tracing spell and sensed tangles of mana in the northwest, east, and south of the village. She could not detect any signs of life, which meant it was not a necromancer controlling the ghouls.

She immediately clambered back down the earth barrier and sprinted to Calto. When she gave her report, Calto carefully scanned their surroundings, reading the flow of mana.

"It is as you said," he confirmed, nodding. "The village is surrounded by a barrier distorting the flow of mana. All three of the runes must be dealt with. I will ask the knights to open a path. Fire and earth mages are to go in pairs to destroy the runes around the village. Ghouls are attracted to life force, so you will be able to slip out easier if you move in smaller numbers."

Ulyseon had rushed after her.

“Hold on!” he cut in, “Why should her ladyship take on such a dangerous task?”

Maxi gave him a stern look. “Tracing magic... is a specialty of wind and earth mages. As the wind mages are needed here to assist the knights with long-range attacks, the earth mages must go.”

“But—”

“I have said this before, but I am here as a mage and a member of this expedition. If you insist on being a hindrance, Sir Ulyseon, I won’t wait for Master Calto to send you back to Anatol. I shall do that myself.”

Ulyseon stared back at her woodenly before biting his lip. “I understand. Then, please allow me to accompany you.”

Maxi briefly hesitated before nodding. In truth, she was secretly terrified. Pushing away her swelling fear, she made all haste to convey Calto’s commands to the other mages. Elena, a senior mage, chose the three pairs. It was to be Maxi and Miriam, while Anette and Armin were each paired with senior mages Albern and Lucain respectively. With their partners assigned, the groups saddled their mounts and created a small opening in the barrier. They galloped through in unison.

The cannibalistic monsters stampeded forward when they caught the scent of living humans. The Temple Knights acted fast and managed to hold them off. When they opened up a path for the mages, Maxi thundered past the howling ghouls.

The monsters stretched out their shriveled, twiglike hands, and one of them managed to grasp the helm of her robe. Clinging to Rem’s neck, she barely managed to shake off the ghastly hand. She spurred Rem on like a madwoman.

Just then, a ghoul broke through the knights’ tight defense. As it lunged for Rem’s neck, Ulyseon’s sword sliced off its head.

“Go faster, my lady!”

At his urging, Maxi whipped the reins like a riding crop. Agitated, Rem reared up and kicked the monster blocking the path on the chest. Her gait picked up speed, and they leaped over the swarming ghouls.

The heavy impact of the landing nearly unseated Maxi from the saddle. She somehow managed to regain her balance, and when they were safely out of the monster horde, Miriam created a wall of fire behind them to keep any from pursuing. They rode on through the ravaged village without stopping to catch their breaths.

Soon, they reached the outskirts. Maxi halted Rem in front of the toppled ramparts. Though the area was relatively quiet, there was no knowing when more ghouls might come at them. Maxi hopped down and swiftly cast the tracing spell. It did not take long for her to locate the rune that was supplying the ghouls with mana.

Tugging Rem's reins, Maxi darted toward the rune's location. A dark red light glowed beneath the rubble of the wall.

"Well? Do you think you can destroy it?" Miriam said urgently, casting a shield around them.

Maxi touched the ground and tried to read the flow of mana, but the rune was too complicated for her to make sense of it. Fortunately, she did not have to understand how it worked to cut off its mana flow, negating its effects.

"I-I think I can," Maxi replied with a nod. "Just buy me some time."

"You best hurry, then! I'm low on mana as well," Miriam cried out as she eyed the ghouls slowly gathering around them.

These were monsters that kept coming despite dismemberment. Maxi knew Ulyseon, who was currently fending them off, could not do so forever.

Biting her lip, Maxi focused her attention on destroying the rune. It contained an unusual pattern she did not recognize even from her time at the Mage Tower. When she infused her

mana into it, she immediately felt strong resistance. She disrupted the flow by forcibly pushing her own energy into the rune, causing sparks to shoot from it and fizzle out. Maxi wiped the sweat on her forehead and let out a long sigh.

However, ten minutes later, her relief was shattered. There was an ear-splitting roar that seemed to shake the earth to its core. She jerked her head up. Out of the forest now covered in the bluish light of dawn charged three giants, their footsteps thumping the ground. The burly monsters were gray-skinned and towered at least sixteen kevettes^[10].

Frozen in shock, Maxi could not even scream.

Next to her, Miriam was staring at the monsters with an equally stunned expression. Snapping back to her senses, she cursed, “Goddammit! Quick, on your horse! They’re giant ogres!”

Maxi grabbed her reins and hopped onto her saddle. A spooked Rem reared up, promptly flinging her back off. She fought down a cry of pain as she hit the ground. Just then, an ogre came charging at her.

“My lady!”

Quick as lightning, Ulyseon abandoned his fight with the ghouls on the other side and was standing before her. A deafening roar rang over the field. Still slumped on the ground, Maxi dragged herself away a few paces. She could hardly believe what she was seeing.

With only a slim sword, Ulyseon had blocked the ogre’s steel club, which seemed to be as big as he was.

“Run, my lady!” he yelled.

Gripping Rem’s reins, Maxi mounted the agitated horse once more. She clenched her thighs around the mare so she could not throw her off again and yanked the reins with all her strength. As she had been trained to do, the mare shot forward like an arrow.

Her escape was soon intercepted by another giant. Maxi managed to summon a barrier before the ogre could slam down its iron mace. Impeded by the towering earth wall, the monster let out a roar and furiously swung its weapon. The barrier cracked easily under the monster's sheer power.

Before it could be destroyed completely, she formed a second barrier right in front of it. She tried to slip away as soon as she was done, but she turned to find a horde of ghouls blocking the other path.

“Out of the way!”

Miriam shoved her aside and summoned a massive flame. Maxi instinctively pulled her horse away from the searing heat. This time, she galloped away to the right to escape the undead that were pushing through the blaze. Unfortunately, another giant waited for her.

Ulyseon almost flew to protect her, but he was too late. Maxi felt the shadow of the massive iron mace over her head. She tried to summon a barrier, but the ogre was faster. Terrified, she squeezed her eyes shut.

Just then, she heard the sharp sound of something whizzing through the air, followed by a roar like a raging bull. Rem reared up in fright, and Maxi pulled at the reins to keep from falling. The ogre's colossal body fell backward with an incredible thud. For a moment, Maxi could not comprehend what had happened. Her breaths came ragged as she broke out into a cold sweat.

The dust cloud that had shot up from the crumbling barrier cleared to reveal a giant javelin lodged in the ogre's skull. After staring down at it in shock, Maxi slowly looked up when she heard clomping hooves. A black horse appeared through the dust. Stupefied, she stared at the rider's silver armor glinting in the dawn light and dark blue, fluttering cape.

In that moment, she swore that her heart stopped beating. Even with his face covered by a visor, she recognized him right away. He yanked the chain at the end of the javelin,

dislodging it from the ogre's head, then pulled on his mount's reins. The brawny warhorse reared almost vertically before bringing its powerful front legs down with great force.

As soon as the horse's hooves hit the ground, the huge javelin that stretched ten kevettes^[11] long hurtled down like a beam of light and pierced another charging ogre through the chest. It looked to be a clean strike straight through the heart.

Maxi held her breath as the giant collapsed onto the ashes with an earth-shaking thud. After silently watching his second kill, the knight's head swiveled to her. She trembled as she met his black eyes that seemed to burn through the slit in his visor.

The painful silence stretched on, searing her nerves. Finally, he turned his horse toward Ulyseon.

“Take her to safety,” he said, drawing his sword.

Only then did Maxi notice the knights speeding across the plain toward them. A white dragon on a banner of dark blue fluttered wildly in the wind. Flooded with intense relief, she let out a shaky sigh.

It was the Remdragon Knights.

Riftan was here.

Chapter 27

The Remdragon Knights surged toward the village center like a tidal wave, their spears and axes sending the undead flying in their wake. Now surrounded by both knightly orders, the monster horde began jostling each other in confusion before tumbling in a heap. The knights rode their horses over them, mercilessly crushing the charred ghouls beneath clomping hooves.

Maxi shuddered as she watched the scene from afar. The undead flailed their mangled bodies before finally crumbling into dust. Before long, she received news that both Anette and Armin's pairs had succeeded in destroying the remaining runes.

Having lost their regenerative powers, the ghouls disintegrated as the knights struck them. The loss of mana seemed to have made them noticeably more sluggish as well. In what seemed to be the blink of an eye, the battle was over.

"It should be safe enough to rejoin the others now," Miriam muttered while chewing on a piece of mana-replenishing mandrago root.

Still in a daze, Maxi nodded. Her mind still felt muddled, but she could not determine what it was that had her so flabbergasted. Was this emotional panic due to her brush with death? Or because of the unexpected reunion with Riftan?

She anxiously bit her lip. The most pressing thing on her mind was going to see him at once, but at the same time, the uncertainty of how he would react made her want to hide. Stuck in indecision, she was clutching her reins when a few Remdragon Knights rode over to her.

"Lady Calypse. It has been too long," greeted one of the knights.

He tilted open his visor, and Maxi's eyes widened in surprise as she recognized him.

Elliot Charon grimly scoured her for any injuries before asking, “Are you hurt anywhere, my lady?”

She suspected her aching bottom and back from being unsaddled earlier meant she was bruised. The pain was not unbearable, so she shook her head. Elliot breathed a sigh of relief and steered his horse around once more.

“The battle is over. Please allow us to escort you back.”

After watching his back for a moment, Maxi calmed Rem’s snorting by caressing her neck, then slowly walked the mare out from behind the stone wall. The knights formed a shield around her as they rode through the ravaged village to where the Remdragon Knights were gathered.

Maxi nervously wet her lips. Her heart pounded painfully against her ribs the closer they got, and her stomach twisted in anxiety. Gripping her reins as if they were a lifeline, she desperately searched for Riftan among the knights, to no avail.

She felt her anxiety swell even more. Why had he not sought her out as soon as the battle was over? Had he not longed to see her? She pushed the thought away by calling up the memory of the letters he kept by his bedside with great care. He would not have rushed to get here if he wanted nothing to do with her.

They were almost at the hill when she heard someone bellow, “My lady!”

The group of knights turned their heads to her in unison. Though she knew most of their faces, there were a few unfamiliar ones. Reining in her horse, she gave them an awkward smile when a giant knight strode out from the group.

Instantly recognizing him, Maxi cheerfully cried out, “Sir Hebaron!”

The knight pulled off his helmet and beamed at her. With his carrot-colored hair a tangled mess and an unkempt, bushy beard taking over his face, he looked like someone who lived in the wilderness.

“Long time no see, my lady. It’s funny how we tend to run into each other in the most unexpected places.”

With that pointed barb, Hebaron returned his attention to Ulyseon, who was trotting behind her. He aggressively tousled the young knight’s hair with his large, armored hand.

“A job well done, you little scamp. We wouldn’t have found you so easily had you not sent word through the informant.”

Maxi’s eyes widened as the pieces clicked into place. It was not Anatol Ulyseon had sent word to, but the Remdragon Knights campaigning in Livadon.

The young knight had been strangely silent for some time until Hebaron’s rough jest. Irritably shoving the knight’s hand away, he yelled, “Stop treating me like a child!”

“Blimey, when did you get so short-tempered? Have you finally reached your rebellious phase?”

“Think of how the others will see me if you keep treating me thus, Sir Hebaron!”

“Bahaha! Our boy’s all grown up now, I see. Worried about keeping face and everything!”

As his superior doubled over in laughter, Ulyseon’s face crumpled into fury.

“I’ll be sure to beat you in the next ranking match, so laugh all you want. You will not be doing so for long.”

“Oh, I’m shaking in my boots. How am I to live with such dread? Why are so many people vying for my position?”

Though Ulyseon appeared genuinely vexed, watching their bickering helped ease some of Maxi’s tension. A few of the other knights she knew also approached her. Relaxing her shoulders, she tried to put on a more natural smile.

“It has... been a while.”

She was exchanging greetings with them when a powerfully built knight removed his helmet and said brusquely, “Are you unharmed, my lady?”

The knight seemed vaguely familiar. As Maxi vacantly regarded his face, he sheepishly scratched the back of his head.

“Do you not recognize me, my lady? I am Garrow Livakion.”

An astonished gasp escaped her as she ran her eyes over his angular face and robust, well-proportioned body.

“Y-You’ve grown... into a fine young man, Garrow. I was surprised when I saw Ulyseon... but I could not even recognize you at all.”

“Three years is a long time,” Garrow replied, looking embarrassed.

Maxi’s heart stung, and her chest tightened. The squires’ growth was a painful reminder of how long she had been away from Anatol. She wondered if Riftan had changed as much as they had. Anxiety bubbling inside her, she glanced around the knights once more.

Hebaron finally realized who it was she was searching for. He grumbled loudly, “Hells, where did that madman run off to after making us ride for days without rest?”

“The commander is currently talking with the commander of the Temple Knights,” Garrow said, pointing to the church.

Maxi instantly tensed. What could he possibly have to discuss with Kuahel Leon? Just as she was about to ask, Miriam, who had been looking incredibly bored by all the proceedings, shouted impatiently from her saddle.

“How long do you intend to stay here? Should we not be reporting back to Master Calto?”

Some of the knights scowled at her rude tone, but Maxi raised her hand before they could say anything. She turned to follow Miriam to the church. At the top of the hill, mages were healing the wounded horses. Anette was already there, and she waved when she spotted them.

“Are you both all right? Any injuries?”

“We are unharmed. How... about you?”

“In one piece, as you can see.”

Contrary to her blithe reassurance, Anette was covered in ashes as though she had only just managed to escape the horde of ghouls. It suddenly occurred to Maxi that her appearance must not be any different. She rubbed her cheek, and her hand came away covered in soot. When she reached up, she found her braid unraveled and hopelessly tangled. Her clothes, too, were unkempt from sleeping outdoors for the past few days.

Maxi furtively tugged her hood over her head. She would have to meet her husband after nearly three years apart looking like a vagrant. It was unthinkable. What was even more upsetting was how he had appeared in a beam of dazzling light.

“By the way, your husband is quite the formidable figure,” Anette remarked out of the blue, pointing her thumb toward the church. “The commander of the Temple Knights is intimidating, but I’d say your husband is much more terrifying. They’re currently talking in there. Both are hailed as reincarnations of Rosem Wigrew, yet they don’t seem to get along, do they? The air between them was so cold that even those who gathered to watch ended up sneaking away, completely unsettled. I just hope neither of them freezes the other.”

Anette chuckled as she pointed to the mages standing outside the church. Maxi’s face fell. Her back prickled with cold sweat when she recalled how Ursuline had argued with Calto to have her removed from the expeditionary party.

Leaving Rem with Anette, Maxi hastily darted into the church. Riftan was deep in talks with Kuahel Leon, but he turned his head toward her as she entered.

She froze at the door. A dizziness came over her, and her breathing became labored. In a daze, she stared at his sculpted face silhouetted against the light. He was ten times more intimidating than the Riftan she remembered. Having lost

weight, his features had a sharpness to them, making his masculine aura staggeringly more potent. He looked more mature with his thick, blue-black hair swept slightly back.

Maxi's throat felt parched, and she swallowed dryly. When he ran his dark eyes down to her feet, her whole body seemed to turn numb. How she had longed to see him. He had not been exaggerating when he said a day felt like a year, and a year an eternity.

She bit her lip to calm her surging emotions. He appeared to be filled with a similar, intense emotion. A palpable tension had his whole body in a vice-grip. Either he would bellow in rage or pull her into his arms for a passionate kiss.

Riftan did neither. The fiery intensity in his eyes vanished, and his gaze grew cold as if the heat she had seen had never existed. His voice was indifferent as he addressed Kuahel Leon once more.

"I take it, then, you agree to go to the Viscounty of Sevron?"

Kuahel glanced at Maxi and Riftan in turn, then slowly nodded. "Very well. Let us follow your suggestion this time."

With their conversation over, Riftan picked up the cape he had taken off and brushed past her as he left the church. Stunned, Maxi hurried after him. She could not believe he had completely ignored her.

"R-Riftan..."

Riftan turned his head to look at her as he took Talon's halter from a squire. Maxi felt her heart shrivel. Though she had expected the possibility of him being distant, seeing him regard her with such an icy gaze turned her tongue to stone.

His eyes narrowing, he said in a deep voice, "What is it?"

"I-I... um..."

Was this his way of telling her she must now have a reason to talk to him?

Panicking now, Maxi managed to blurt out, “H-Have you been well? I have—”

In a heartbeat, Riftan’s indifferent mask twisted into a fierce scowl. She hastily closed her mouth.

“You wish to know... if I’ve been well?” he hissed in a voice like grating steel.

Maxi felt the blood drain from her body.

Chapter 28

Riftan glared menacingly and whirled around. Gripping his saddle, he grew stone-still as if taking a moment to keep his emotions from exploding.

He leaped onto his horse and announced, “The monsters that attacked this village may return. We must set out for Sevron Castle before nightfall. Go and make preparations to depart.”

Maxi looked confused. “Are you... going with us?”

“Was it not your expedition that requested reinforcements?” he replied with a sardonic smile. “The Remdragon Knights are the reinforcements.”

“But—”

She cut herself off when she saw a dangerous look flash across his face. He looked down at her grimly, then steered his horse around and descended the hill to join the Remdragon Knights. Devastated, she watched him trot away. Perhaps she would not have felt so miserable had he flown into a rage instead.

She hugged herself beneath her cloak as the bitter wind seeped into her bones.



The plan to head to Sevron Castle was met with unexpected opposition from Calto Serbel. He insisted they had to remain in the village for a few more days to investigate the evidence of dark mages.

“There are runes on the outskirts of the village, ones that supply magic to human remains. That means this was a deliberate attempt by someone to create undead monsters.”

Frowning, Kuahel Leon stroked his chin with a gloved hand. “And you think this someone could be a dark mage?”

“Who else would do such a thing?”

Calto raised his sharp chin as if to warn the knight against accusing one of his mages.

“The Mage Tower has never created such runes. Any magic involving manipulation of the dead is strictly forbidden.”

“I certainly have never seen a rune like that before,” Armin commented as his ghoul bite was being tended to. “It was nothing like the magic we use.”

He turned to Maxi.

“What do you think? Did you notice anything unusual?”

Maxi had been sitting in a daze until then. She snapped her head up to look at the mages around the brazier, then at Kuahel Leon and the Temple Knights. They all looked back at her expectantly.

“I-I’m sorry,” she said, her face flushing, “what were we discussing?”

“We wanted to know if you found anything strange about the rune,” Anette said, clicking her tongue.

Weakly mumbling an apology, Maxi rifled through her memory.

“It was too complicated... I could not grasp how it worked. However... i-its two pathways... reminded me of ancient magic.”

“Ancient magic?” Kuahel asked, his brow furrowing.

Worried that she might have said something she should not have, Maxi nervously looked to Calto. The elder was staring at Kuahel with a chilly expression while fiddling with the magic stone embedded in the head of his cane.

“The Mage Tower has been studying some aspects of long-buried ancient magic,” Calto told him. “As I recall, it is an

endeavor the Tower has already informed the church about.”

“Could you explain what kind of magic it was in more detail?” Kuahel asked, his eyes fixed on Maxi.

She began sweating profusely. It was certainly not an option to tell him she had spent countless days studying the intricacies of ancient magic to create a golem rune. She anxiously shifted her eyes, her face troubled.

Leaning on a wall off to the side, Miriam chimed in with a change of subject.

“Thinking back on it now... those three giant ogres were all after Maximilian.”

Maxi grew wide-eyed. She had been so terrified during the chaos that she had not noticed.

Shrugging, Miriam added, “They were probably after the person who touched the rune.”

“But nothing happened to us,” Anette remarked skeptically, wrinkling her nose.

Miriam sneered at her. “You were safe because you were terribly slow. The Dragon Slayer had already dealt with the ogres by the time you and Armin destroyed your runes.”

“Excuse me?”

“Stop it, both of you!” Calto yelled, striking his cane on the ground.

Both women pressed their lips together at the same time. After a moment of uncomfortable silence, Kuahel, who had been silently listening to their exchange, addressed Calto.

“As far as monsters of the Ayin race go, ogres are the least intelligent. It is highly unlikely they made a conscious decision to protect something. Do you suppose this is linked to the dark mages as well?”

“It is very likely,” Calto replied after a pause. “I heard ogres made up the majority of the allied monster army. We can only

assume they know magic that allows them to control monsters.”

A chill ran down Maxi’s spine. Turning a large number of the dead into ghouls for an attack was a tactic used by the monster army during its siege of Eth Lene Castle. It was not a stretch to assume that monsters were covertly rebuilding their army for a second invasion.

She was brooding over this possibility when Kuahel’s cold voice cut through her thoughts.

“I understand your reasons, but we cannot remain here.”

“The purpose of our expedition is to investigate traces of the dark mages!” Calto protested. “Now you want us to leave when we’ve finally found a possible—”

“We do not know where the attackers have gone. Should we fail to eliminate them as soon as possible, other villages could meet the same fate.”

Kuahel’s tone turned grim.

“The situation is far more serious than we expected. If it’s true that these monsters are deliberately creating ghouls... that is all the more reason for us to take action.”

“And by take action, you mean...?”

“That we can no longer keep the existence of the dark mages secret. We must alert the Seven Kingdoms at once and prepare for war.”

A heavy silence fell over the church atrium. Kuahel slowly swept his gaze over everyone before continuing in a heavy voice.

“We must go to the Viscounty of Sevron to officially request aid and send word to all the cities to muster their defenses. We cannot waste time investigating runes.”

Calto’s face stiffened ever so slightly as if offended by the easy dismissal of his opinion. Regardless, he was forced to concede that Kuahel was right.

“Very well. We will follow your plan.”

“Everyone, prepare to set out.”

The mages promptly gathered their belongings, loaded them on the wagons, and saddled their horses. Maxi walked out of the church to retrieve Rem from the storehouse. The mare seemed irritable from fatigue, and Maxi soothed her before securing the saddle and her bag. All the while, her eyes kept drifting to the foot of the hill.

Riftan and his knights were already waiting in formation. She anxiously stared at the head of the group where he was stationed, his visor drawn over his face. He cut such an imposing figure that he almost felt like a stranger.

Maxi bit her lip. The distance between them pained her heart. She was debating whether to approach him again when Anette abruptly spoke.

“Max, did *he* not come too?”

Maxi knitted her brows and looked over her shoulder. “Who?”

Anette stood on her toes so she could whisper into Maxi’s ear. “The traitor.”

Only realizing then that she had not seen Ruth, Maxi swept her eyes over the knights.

“I-It appears not.”

“Maybe he hid the moment he saw Master Calto,” Anette suggested. She pointed to the elder with her thumb. “He seemed set on seeking him out as soon as he learned the Remdragon Knights were coming. The traitor might have found out and fled. I’m told Ruth Serbel is as slippery as an eel.”

Maxi could not help but feel awkward. Though she was well aware of Ruth’s infamy among the mages, she was slowly growing worried. She studied Calto’s stern face. In the eyes of the Tower, Ruth was an outlaw who had broken its rules by leaving the island without permission. Calto could very well

be bent on using this opportunity to drag the sorcerer back to Nornui.

Worry pricked her at the thought of her old friend getting into trouble. The thought was soon followed by the realization she was in no position to be concerned about anyone else. After a three-year separation, her husband was giving her the cold shoulder. If she should be worried about anyone, it was herself.

As she trudged down the hill, she mulled over how she could assuage his anger.

Anette watched Maxi in silence for a moment before asking, “Did you quarrel with your husband?”

Maxi froze, then shook her head. If only they had. She would not be feeling half as dejected then.

Seeing her morose face, Anette smiled bitterly as if to say she understood. “Well, I heard we’ll be in Sevron by evening. Try to sort things out with him at the castle.”

Maxi looked down at her woefully. “H-How?”

“You’ll have to do something about your appearance, first of all. You look like a vagrant.”

Anette shook her head as she scanned Maxi from head to toe.

Maxi frowned and pulled her hood even lower. “Th-The same could be said of you!”

“I don’t have a man I wish to please, unlike you,” Anette replied with another shake of her head. “Request a bath as soon as we get to the castle. Scrub yourself clean, and get yourself in the Dragon Slayer’s bed. That usually solves most marital problems.”

“A-Anette! You’re being obscene!”

Maxi frantically glanced around to see if anyone had heard. Anette snorted as if she found Maxi’s reaction preposterous.

“What’s a married woman acting so chaste for? Getting into his sheets is better than doing nothing, don’t you think?”

Maxi’s face flushed crimson. “B-But... how could I... do such a thing... in the middle of an expedition?”

“We don’t know when this expedition is going to be over, and I’ll wager you won’t get another chance if you don’t do it tonight.” Pointing to the sky, Anette added, “Do it while we’ve got a roof over our heads. If anyone’s petty enough to take exception to a man and his wife having a private moment together after three years apart, I’ll give them a good knock about the ears.”

Mortified, the only response Maxi was capable of was opening and closing her mouth like a carp. As she stood frozen, Anette smacked a hearty pat on her back before heading down the hill. Maxi snapped awake and hurried after her.

The expeditionary party was already waiting in orderly ranks at the bottom of the slope. Maxi slipped past to take up position right behind the Remdragon Knights. Some spoke to her, but her mind was too much of a mess to register what they were saying. Growing increasingly anxious, she surreptitiously peered past the knights toward Riftan.

The sight of his formidable silhouette mounted on Talon made her entire body feverish. Her heart began to race as she recalled how his large, calloused hands had once caressed her so passionately. The heat of his lips and the fervor with which he had filled her — it was all coming back to her in vivid waves. She gulped, wondering if seduction was even possible when he had turned so cold.

Startled by her thoughts, Maxi furiously shook her head. What sordid fancies was she entertaining while in the presence of sixty clergymen? Of course, nobody was capable of reading her mind, but she still blushed as shame washed over her.

It was all Anette’s fault. She was shooting her friend resentful looks for filling her head with such nonsense when

the Temple Knights gave the orders to depart.

Chapter 29

The knights soon fell into an orderly march. Flicking Rem's reins, Maxi followed the procession. She caught glimpses of Riftan up ahead, appearing and disappearing among his men. It only made her antsier.

How could he not look back even once? Surely he was aware of where she was. Had he not yearned to see her as much as she had?

She was wallowing in despair when a lively voice called to her.

“Max! Max!”

She looked up to see Sidina giving her a small wave. Slowly, she trotted up to the girl with a puzzled expression.

“Max, where's the deserter?” Sidina asked in a low voice when Maxi was near. “Isn't he supposed to be with the Remdragon Knights?”

Maxi heaved a sigh. Sidina was not the only person waiting on her answer. Their fellow mage, Kiel, and a few senior mages were also looking at her with intense curiosity. They seemed more interested in Ruth Serbel than the Remdragon Knights.

Complicated emotions swirled within Maxi as she said halfheartedly, “He... probably stayed behind at Sevron Castle. I-I heard the Remdragon Knights set out immediately when they received our request. Since it required them to ride through the night, I'm sure they thought an easily-tired mage would only slow them down.”

She was about to turn to look in Riftan's direction again when Sidina made a strange nasally sound and walked her horse closer.

“You're going to burn him.”

“Pardon?”

“You haven’t taken your eyes off your husband once. There’ll be a hole in the back of his head soon.”

Sidina scrunched her lips, pretending to whistle. Maxi’s face flushed. Had she been that obvious? She could feel her ears burning. Still, was it not natural to be restless when she had not even had a proper conversation with her husband after three years apart?

Sidina giggled at Maxi’s sullen expression and attempt to avoid eye contact. “It’s not that I don’t understand you. Who wouldn’t feel the same with a husband like that? I must say, Sir Riftan is far more dashing than I expected. Not to mention his physique...”

Sidina outlined a broad chest with both hands, a sly smile spreading across her face.

“I am positively green with envy. Built such as he is, I’m sure whatever’s between his legs is not slight either.”

“S-Sidina!” Maxi shrieked. “A maiden shouldn’t speak of such things!”

The Temple Knights flanking the mages turned to look at her, their faces impassive. Flinching, Maxi pulled her robe up to cover her face. It seemed both Anette and Sidina were bent on mortifying her today.

She furtively gritted her teeth. Though she knew Sidina sometimes held book readings for stories of a more risqué nature in her room with the other female novices, she never imagined the girl would be so brazen as to speak indecently in the presence of clergymen.

Lowering her voice, Maxi said in as stern a tone as she could muster, “Please... keep your mouth shut, and do hold onto your reins properly.”

“I meant it as a compliment. Why are you angry?” Sidina quipped, pouting.

When Maxi gave her a warning look, Sidina shrugged and picked up the reins. Her silence did not last long.

“By the way,” said Sidina, her curiosity getting the better of her, “does Sir Riftan happen to have any brothers?”

Maxi’s mouth remained resolutely closed as she pretended not to hear. Anette, who was riding near them, chose that moment to chime in.

“But what about the commander of the Temple Knights? Were you not raving about his good looks just the other day?”

“What use are fine looks? It’s no different from a feast in a painting.”

Maxi nervously studied the faces of the Temple Knights. Whether they did not hear or were merely pretending not to, the knights kept their eyes fixed ahead and rode on with blank expressions. Oblivious to her discomfort, Anette howled with laughter.

“What about Max’s personal guard, then? That one’s comely too.”

“Hmm, he’s a bit...”

Sidina glanced to where Ulyseon was riding with the Remdragon Knights.

“I was charmed at first,” she said, shaking her head, “until I saw how silly he acted in front of Max. A shame, really. If only he’d kept his mouth shut.”

“Then, what about the golden-haired knight we met in Anatol? He was pleasing to the eye, was he not?”

“He was indeed, but I imagine he’s the sort that would constantly be in your ear.”

Maxi walked Rem forward to escape their appraisal of the various men they had met. Ulyseon, who was riding in the last row of knights, turned to look at her with an innocent smile.

“Are you not tired, my lady? You have not had a proper rest since yesterday.”

“I-I’m fine. I’m sure the knights are more tired from fighting all night.”

“We are accustomed to it.”

She would have to improve her stamina if she wished to become a mage for the Remdragon Knights, she silently told herself. Determination alone seemed insufficient to overcome the fatigue that was weighing her down.

Maxi rubbed her increasingly heavy eyelids. Her exhaustion was understandable. After a full day’s ride to reach the border, they had come upon the devastated village. Tending to the dead had taken up much of the night, and when they finished setting up camp to rest, chaos had ensued. On top of that, her brush with death at the hands of an ogre and Riftan’s cold shoulder meant she was emotionally and physically drained.

Elliot rode down the formation to the mages. Noticing Maxi’s haggard face, he asked with concern, “Are you all right, my lady?”

Even as she nodded in response, she struggled to keep her eyes open.

Elliot watched her for a moment before saying tentatively, “May I suggest you ride double with me, my lady? You could get some rest by leaning on—”

“No, allow me, my lady!” Ulyseon cut in. “It is my duty as your personal guard!”

The young knight looked afraid of being supplanted from his post. Maxi bit her lip. She was sorely tempted to accept the offer, but she knew she was not the only tired mage. Though she was by no means a star contributor to the expedition, she did not wish to be seen as inferior or lagging behind either. With that thought in mind, Maxi stubbornly shook her head.

“Th-that would only tire your horses more quickly. And... we would also need someone to lead Rem. I can ride by myself, so please don’t worry about me.”

“My steed can handle it, my lady. It once carried three men with no—”

“We’ll rest here a while.”

A deep voice interrupted Elliot’s argument. Up ahead, Riftan had turned his horse around to the knights.

“Charon! Take some of your men with you and scout the area.”

“Yes, sir!”

Elliot and a few of the knights promptly rode away. Maxi only just managed to slide off her horse with Ulyseon’s help. Her buttocks and thighs ached as though bruised from the long ride, and her back and waist felt as if they would snap.

Lowering herself onto a tree stump, she assessed the conditions of the mages. They were all slumped on boulders or the ground. Even Anette and Sidina, who had kept up a lively chatter throughout the ride, looked drained as they silently quenched their thirst with ale.

All Maxi wanted was to lay her head down and sleep, even for just a moment. However, Rem was also on the ground with exhaustion, and she knew the mare would need tending to. She plodded over to her horse. Using the dregs of her energy, she unsaddled Rem, then plopped herself down by the mare’s back. Rem kept brushing her moist nose against her cheek as she sat, but Maxi was too tired to push her away.

Soon, she began to doze. She did not know how long she slept when she was startled awake by something landing on her lap. Jerking her head up, she met Riftan’s black eyes.

“You should eat. You won’t last until supper if you don’t have a bite while you can.”

After looking up at him in bewilderment, Maxi slowly bobbed her head. On her lap was a fist-sized ball wrapped in dried leaves.

When all she did was stare blankly at it, Riftan said impatiently, “What are you waiting for?”

“Oh... uh...”

Why bring her food after being so cold to her? Maxi was flummoxed. She looked up at him again to gauge his intention, but his aloof face silhouetted against the light revealed nothing. After muddling in indecision for a moment, Maxi carefully picked up the ball and unwrapped the leaves, revealing the smoked meat beneath.

“Do you have anything to drink?” Riftan asked brusquely.

“I-I have... some wine with me.”

Finally realizing he was trying to be thoughtful, Maxi hastily pulled out her flask from her saddlebag. She glanced up, intending to ask him to join her, but he was already gone. She gave a dejected sigh. Had she ruined her chance to speak to him when he had made the effort to approach her first?

At least it doesn't seem like he's completely lost interest.

Reassuring herself with this thought, she stared down at the chunk of meat before taking out a loaf to have with it. She then took a short nap by the campfire, and by the time she woke up, she felt slightly reinvigorated. Mustering her strength, Maxi saddled Rem once more and nimbly got on the saddle.

Soon, the expeditionary party set off through the dense forest. The scarlet sky gradually turned purple as dusk descended. With their path growing dim, the knights began to light torches one after the other.

It was completely dark by the time they reached the viscounty. When the knights approached the pitch-black ramparts made of vertical logs, the sentries called down from the watchtower.

“Identify yourselves!”

“The Remdragon Knights. We have returned with the Temple Knights and mages of the Mage Tower.”

A moment later, the gatekeeper opened the peephole next to the entrance. He opened the door after checking their armor.

Maxi glanced around as she followed the knights through the gate. Torches flickered down the road, and armed sentries stood guard along the walls. It appeared the viscounty was on high alert for a possible attack.

Just then, a brawny man in armor stepped out of a two-story stone building that appeared to be the guardhouse.

“You’re back.”

Chapter 30

Maxi studied the man closely. From his steel plate armor and the dense plume of feathers attached to his helmet, she determined he must be a knight of noble lineage. It was common for men of high birth to embellish their armor with such adornments. This man, then, must be the Viscount of Sevron.

“What of the monsters that attacked the village?” the viscount inquired.

He raised his visor, revealing a thick mustache under a distinct, aquiline nose.

“The undead have been dealt with, but the attackers seem to have gone north,” Riftan replied, approaching him.

The viscount grunted in disappointment and tapped the hilt of the sword at his waist.

“I suppose that means they won’t be coming here anytime soon. I must admit, I was looking forward to seeing some action with this fellow.”

“The monsters might decide to change course, so I suggest you keep your defenses up for the time being. Have you sent word to the other lords?”

The viscount nodded. “Of course. I sent messengers to the lords of the surrounding areas at daybreak. I’ve also alerted the capital, and Balto should be organizing their own campaign party soon.”

Maxi frowned, and the other mages exchanged worried glances. The current monarch of Balto, Heimdall VI, was well known for being an adherent of the Orthodox Church. She wondered how wise it was to inform such a man about the existence of dark mages.

As she was eyeing the Temple Knights with apprehension, Kuahel Leon walked his steed forward. “We have been

fighting through the night. Could you offer us respite at your castle?”

“Certainly. It would be an honor to host the apostles of God within my walls.”

“We are much obliged.”

As soon as it was decided, the viscount waved over his soldiers in the rear.

“Take our honored guests to the castle and instruct the steward to provide them with everything they need.”

The soldiers lit additional torches and walked in formation around the guests, guiding them to Sevron Castle. The expeditionary party slowly rode along the narrow road packed with dilapidated cottages. Even in the gloom, Maxi could see the squalor of the village. A stench awful enough to chase away her drowsiness filled the air. Though she spotted a few relatively sturdy stone houses in the village center, even they appeared neglected.

It was clear that the viscounty of Sevron was not prosperous. Maxi looked uneasily past the castle gates visible above a gentle hill. It was too dark to see clearly, but she could tell the castle did not seem particularly large. She wondered if it would have enough rooms to accommodate a party of two hundred.

While Maxi was fretting over this, Viscount Sevron’s men finished the verification process and lowered the log drawbridge. The party crossed the bridge and rode through the garden. After passing a butchery, bakery, and smithy, the main castle finally came into view. They entrusted their horses to the soldiers and filed into the great hall.

The dim lighting revealed a shockingly filthy interior. Instead of stone tiles, the floor was overlaid with fetid rush mats that appeared not to have been changed in years. Gnawed bones left behind by hounds scattered the floor. A large tapestry hung on one of the walls, its colors so muted with grime that it was impossible to make out the original image.

Maxi drew back, aghast. The musty air made it difficult to breathe.

A gruff voice called through the hall.

“Who’s there?”

Maxi’s head whirled toward the sound. She realized the servants had been sleeping beneath blankets by the fire. One of them sluggishly sat up and regarded them with bleary eyes.

“Have the guests returned?”

“That’s right. Have food and rooms prepared for them.”

The middle-aged man who had awoken from his nap appeared to be the steward. He grumbled under his breath and began waking the other servants. Maxi anxiously glanced back and forth between Riftan and Kuahel, desperately hoping one would object to sleeping in such a pigsty, but neither seemed to care about the squalid conditions.

“I’ll forgo the food. I’d rather drown myself in ale,” Hebaron said with a wide yawn.

Standing next to him, Garrow heaved a sigh. “Have you still not had your fill? You nearly drained all their liquor just the other day. Do you have any idea how anxious I was that you would fall off your horse when we set out this morning?”

“Good grief, you worry too much. A few barrels of ale aren’t enough to—”

“Are there enough rooms?” Riftan said brusquely, cutting off their bickering.

Narrowing his eyes, the steward counted the guests, then shook his head with an apologetic expression.

“We have rooms available, but not enough for everyone. You and the clergymen may take the beds. I’m afraid the rest will have to sleep in the hall.”

Maxi blanched as she stared down at the putrid mats, thinking she would rather sleep outside than lie on the soiled floor. Her eyes darted over the other mages to gauge their

reactions. Though some appeared just as appalled, most of the mages seemed to have lost their sense of smell from sheer exhaustion. Calto, barely supporting himself with his cane, bobbed his head as though he were too tired to care. The rest were already nodding off on their feet with their arms crossed.

Maxi felt distraught, but she knew she would be seen as the finicky noblewoman if she were to complain.

“Is something the matter, my lady?” Ulyseon asked as if sensing her distress.

She hesitated, then stood on her toes to whisper in his ear, “Do you not think... this place is too filthy?”

Ulyseon bent one knee to hear her better. He blinked and glanced about the hall.

“I suppose it is a little.”

“A-A little?” she said, looking up at him in disbelief.

She was surprised someone who seemed so meticulous could be that oblivious to his environment.

Ulyseon shrugged. “We sleep next to corpses during wartime, my lady.”

Rendered speechless, Maxi pressed her lips together. He certainly had a point. Sleeping here might be better than among charred remains. She was trying to steel herself with this thought when she heard Riftan’s voice.

“Let the women take the guest room. We will sleep in the hall.”

“Allow the mages to use our room as well,” Kuahel added.

The steward looked as if he were about to protest. With a resigned sigh, he instructed the servants to show the guests to their rooms. Full of gratitude to the knights for their consideration, the mages trudged upstairs.

Maxi deliberately stayed behind and lingered around Riftan. After nodding to the steward’s offer to heat the sauna, Riftan turned his head to meet her eyes. His harsh gaze made her

shrink back. For some reason, he seemed to be in an even fouler mood.

“What are you still doing here?”

“I...”

Just as she was about to suggest that they talk, she noticed the knights’ curious gazes. She blushed, unable to continue.

“N-Never mind.”

With that, she darted up the stairs. A servant showed her to the guest room, which was comparatively better than the great hall, though it was in no way clean. Maxi warily surveyed it, noting the large bed, and walked over to the window. She opened the shutters to let in some fresh air.

The maidservant who had been placing a cot by the wall frowned. “Heavens, why would you open the window in this weather? Are you trying to catch a chill?”

“I-I am airing the room,” Maxi snapped rather sharply. “I won’t leave it open for long.”

She then took off her robe and protective gear, placing them by the bed. Anette pulled off her boots and tossed them next to Maxi’s things.

“Would you be so kind as to bring us enough water and towels for us to bathe?” Anette said to the servants. “I would hate to dirty your sheets.”

As if to emphasize her point, she shook her ash-covered robe and held it up for them. The maidservants pursed their lips, clearly disgruntled at the additional work. Maxi supposed the castle must not have a mistress to discipline the staff.

Grumbling, the maidservants left and returned with a tub full of water. Miriam, Elena, Sidina, and Anette took turns washing behind a partition.

Maxi, meanwhile, mulled over Riftan’s actions while poking at the embers in the fireplace. Try as she might, she could not understand him. First, he gave her the cold shoulder

after rushing to her rescue. Then he brought her food, after which he donned his icy demeanor again. Maxi gnawed her lip. Though she was exhausted, she was oddly clearheaded.

I suppose... it would be difficult to get him alone tonight.

Though she had absolutely no intention of following Anette's advice, now that she was here, she could not help but feel disheartened. She hastily wiped away both her disappointed expression and thoughts.

What on earth are you thinking?

As she was furiously shaking her head, a freshly bathed Anette saw her and asked, "What's wrong with you?"

"I-It's nothing."

Tossing the poker aside, Maxi grabbed her soap and a change of clothes and scurried behind the partition. She slipped out of her dirty garments and meticulously wiped her sweaty, soot-covered face with a wet towel. She was so grimy that the towel soon turned black.

With a groan, Maxi soaped every surface of her body and furiously washed her hair. When she finally finished scrubbing herself clean, the others were fast asleep. She briefly mulled over what to do as she dried her hair. No matter how inappropriate, she did not want their reunion to end like this. At the least, she wanted to thank him for coming to her rescue.

She cracked open the door to the guest room and peered down the dark corridor, then made her way to the stairs. When she reached the great hall, she found Riftan sitting at the table before the fireplace with Kuahel, Hebaron, and Calto. They appeared to be in a heated discussion about the movements of the monsters as there was a map spread before them. As soon as she saw them, shame over entertaining such indecent thoughts washed over her. Backtracking quietly, she meekly climbed up the stairs and crawled into her bed.

The next morning, Maxi awoke as the fire was dying out. After huddling beneath the blanket from the draft winding through the room, she got out of bed to toss more wood into

the fireplace. She then worked the bellows until the flames were blazing again. Soon, the guest room grew warm once more.

After thawing her body in front of the fire, Maxi walked to the window to peer outside. The Viscounty of Sevron looked much better in the brightness of day than it had in the gloom of night.

She stretched while gazing over the glistening roofs and lush fir forest. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Riftan, clad in a black coat, walking toward the stable. Her eyes widened. She flew into action, hastily washing her face and combing her hair. Awakened by the noise, Sidina raised her head from the pillow and yawned.

“Is it morning already?”

“It is still early. You can go back to sleep,” Maxi said imploringly.

She wanted to be free from any interference. Sidina smacked her lips and dropped her head back down on her pillow.

With a sigh of relief, Maxi threw on her cloak and slipped out of the room. When she descended the stairs, she saw that the great hall was even more appalling in broad daylight. Pinching her nose with one hand and tugging her hem up with the other, Maxi scurried out of the squalid hall. Once outside, she finally took a breath.

I hope we won't stay for too long...

Shuddering in revulsion, Maxi made her way to the stable. She circled the castle and entered the dense fir forest. After some time, the large building became visible through the trees. She began sprinting toward it when something made her stop abruptly. It was Riftan, sitting nearby with his legs stretched out before him. Maxi's eyes widened in surprise. He had his arms crossed and his eyes shut as he lay on Talon's back.

“Riftan? What are you do—”

Riftan's warhorse, Talon, was basking in the sun. When she tried to approach, he snorted loudly as if to warn her not to wake his master. Maxi shut her mouth. She held her breath for a moment and stood as still as a statue. When Riftan did not stir, she inched closer and crouched in front of him.

With his long lashes drooping down and his mouth slack, he looked startlingly fragile and tired. Maxi felt her heart clench as she slowly took in the details of his face. He looked so cold and alone that all she wanted to do was to pull him into a warm embrace. Hugging her knees, she heaved a frustrated sigh.

A gentle breeze ruffled his hair. Strands of it now pricked his eyelids, and a faint crease formed between his brows. After hesitating for a while, Maxi cautiously reached out. His warm breath tickled her wrist as she brushed the strands away.

She flinched and stared down at his straight nose, then at his shapely lips beneath. On impulse, she leaned forward and gently kissed him.

Riftan's eyes opened, and Maxi froze. His black pupils boring into her were as lucid as if he had been awake all along. Faced with his inscrutable expression, Maxi felt a heat rise in her cheeks. When she tried to draw back, his large, leather-gloved hand latched onto her nape.

Maxi moaned as his hot tongue pushed into her mouth. He pulled her onto his lap and deepened the kiss. His arms coiled around her waist like steel chains, pushing her breasts gently against his muscular chest. Captivated by his dark eyes, all she could do was gasp for air. It was as if she were holding a ball of fire. Relief, desire, and longing coursed through her veins as scorching heat.

Clutching his clothes, she yanked him closer with all her strength. At that moment, she locked eyes with Ruth staring at them open-mouthed from behind Riftan.

Chapter 31

Maxi felt as if a pail of ice water had been upended over her. Mortified, she tried to break free from Riftan's crushing embrace, and for a moment, he refused to budge.

As soon as he reluctantly drew his lips away from hers, Maxi pulled back. Her face burned as if scorched by the sun. Though she wanted nothing more than to flee, her legs felt too weak to fully support her. She was frantically glancing back and forth between Riftan and Ruth, struggling for words, when the sorcerer spoke.

"I-I didn't mean to interrupt! Please, carry on! Don't mind me!"

He spun on his heels and promptly tripped over a tree root, emitting a strange yelp as he tumbled into the dirt. Riftan eyed the pathetic sight of the sorcerer heaped on the ground with a stony expression. He clicked his tongue and got up, and Talon followed his master to his feet.

Stroking the warhorse's thick neck, Riftan asked, "What is it?"

Ruth flinched and stared up at him. He heaved a sigh and handed over the parchment clutched in his hand.

"It's from Sir Sejuleu. I rushed to bring it to you because I thought it urgent." Ruth glanced at Maxi and added, "I was not expecting to find you occupied. I did not intend to interrupt anything."

Maxi was nearly purple from the embarrassment of it all. Riftan gave Ruth a warning look and snatched the letter from his hand. The contents must have been dire, as Riftan's face darkened.

"Where is Hebaron?"

"How should I know? Wasn't he with you?" Ruth answered sullenly.

The sorcerer rose to his feet, dusting off his robe. Riftan shoved the letter in his pocket and rather brusquely helped Maxi up.

She teetered before regaining her footing. After gazing grimly down at her, Riftan straightened her clothes and swiveled his head to Ruth.

“Go back to the castle and assemble the knights while I return Talon to the stable.”

With that, he led his horse away. Maxi stared after him in bewilderment. She was disoriented as if plunged into water, while he was as calm as though nothing had happened. It made her wonder if their brief meeting had been a daydream. She was brushing her fingers to her slightly swollen lips when Ruth spoke in a grave voice.

“My cursed luck.”

Startled, Maxi flung her hand away, eyes flying to him.

Ruth scratched the back of his head and said awkwardly, “I apologize for unintentionally ruining the moment.”

“I-It’s fine!” Maxi practically yelped.

She then started for the castle as though fleeing. Ruth trudged behind her.

“Do you think I wished to witness such a thing?” he grumbled. “If there is a question of who was most affected, it would be me and my poor, sullied eyes. I’m sure you missed each other terribly, but please consider the time and place.”

Maxi shot him a glare. Three years later, the sorcerer was exactly as she remembered.

Glowering at him in disapproval, she retorted, “Is that what you have to say... after all this time?”

“Now that you mention it, I suppose it has been a while,” he replied nonchalantly, sweeping his gaze over her. “You have not changed a bit, my lady.”

“I could say the same for you.”

Maxi let out a sigh.

Could there be a more anticlimactic reunion?

“Where have you been?” she said. “Don’t tell me... you’ve been hiding from the mages.”

Ruth winced and yelled, “Why on earth would I hide? I stayed at the guardhouse under the pretext of standing watch after Sir Riftan ran off to your rescue, abandoning me in this cesspit. I simply could not bring myself to sleep in that pigsty.”

“Was he... truly in that much of a rush?” Maxi asked out of a desperate need to reaffirm the revelation.

Ruth scowled and bent down to bring his face closer to hers.

“Do you see this?” he asked, pointing to the purplish bags under his eyes. “Do you know how hard he drove us upon learning you were traveling to the Pamela Plateau? He decimated a troll settlement in two days with an absolutely unhinged strategy, then made us ride north without rest. We practically did not get any sleep until we got here.”

“R-Really?”

Ruth shook his head when he saw her face light up.

“Please, do not look so happy! What on earth have you gotten yourself into this time?”

Hearing the reproof in his voice, Maxi snapped back, “Don’t... make it sound as if I deliberately caused trouble. The Mage Tower asked me to help with the investigation of the Plateau... because they thought highly of my abilities.”

“And you accepted?” said Ruth, snorting at her smug tone. “Did you not consider how furious Sir Riftan would be?”

Maxi winced and clutched her dress. “Was he... very mad?”

Ruth’s narrowed eyes seemed to say, *What do you think?*

She felt deflated. Riftan’s cold demeanor now seemed to take on a different light. Was he maintaining his distance to try

and keep his temper in check? Though she had once hoped he would express his anger instead of ignoring her, now imagining him unleashing his rage made her shrivel. If she thought about it, whenever his temper was truly at its limit, his demeanor was akin to the calm before the storm.

Then... what was that kiss about?

While she was trying to make sense of it, Ruth continued complaining.

“We are headed to the continent’s northernmost point in the middle of winter. Once this is over, I am not stepping a foot out of Anatol for the next five years. I have had it up to *here* with campaigning.”

“Y-You can be rest assured, then,” Maxi replied, feigning nonchalance. “I am a high mage now. I shall take your place... and accompany the Remdragon Knights on their campaigns.”

Skeptical, Ruth looked over at her before he set his jaw determinedly. “My lady... you must promise me that. Please.”

It appeared the past few years had been difficult for the sorcerer. Over the course of their walk to the castle, he kept asking her to swear that she would succeed him. Maxi shook her head as she stepped into Sevron Castle.

“I will be sure to keep my word, so you must remember to help me convince Riftan when the time comes.”

“I believe you will do just fine without my help,” Ruth muttered.

Cotting on to his implication, Maxi’s face flushed red. She was about to chide him when a cold voice interrupted.

“What a long time it has been.”

The blood drained from Ruth’s face. Turning his head stiffly, he met Calto Serbel’s gaze. It was as if he had locked eyes with a ghost. The elder stood in the middle of the squalid hall while the other mages trudged down the stairs behind him, headed for breakfast. They stopped in their tracks to watch the scene before them with avid interest.

Maxi slowly backed away when she sensed the grim air between the two Serbels. Soon, Ruth sighed heavily.

“Uncle.”

Maxi gaped in surprise. Having likewise been in the dark as to how close on the family tree these two were, the mages all froze on the staircase. Only Anton and Celric, who were standing next to Calto, looked unsurprised.

“You seem to be doing well,” Calto remarked, his tone chilly.

Ruth blinked as though he could still not believe his eyes.

“I cannot say the same for you, Uncle,” he said in a daze. “Your hairline has greatly receded since I saw—”

Gasps went up all around the hall as Calto lunged with startling speed.

“You wretched child!” he bellowed, grabbing his nephew by his collar and yanking it back and forth. “Is that any way to speak to your uncle after sixteen years?!”

“*Kergh!* U-Uncle!”

“As you have astutely observed, my hair has indeed thinned, and it is all thanks to you! Does that make you happy, you blasted brat?!”

Though Anton and Celric tried to stop him, Calto’s grip was surprisingly firm. He maintained his hold on his nephew and bombarded him with every obscenity he could think of. When he ran out, he began cursing in Elvish. Maxi gasped in shock. She was nowhere near proficient in Elvish, but she knew enough to recognize that the words spewing from the elder’s mouth were grossly indecent.

“Master Calto!” Anton implored, tugging Calto’s arm. “I understand your anger, but please, remember your station!”

As soon as the two senior mages managed to pry Calto off, Ruth ducked behind Maxi.

“Don’t you think that’s a slight overreaction to a jest?” the sorcerer called out.

“A *jest*? You dare make jests at me?!”

Still fuming, Calto broke free from Anton and Celric and lunged again. Grabbing Maxi’s shoulders, Ruth pushed her forward like a makeshift shield.

“W-What are you doing?!” Maxi shrieked in horror.

“I should ask you!” Ruth yelled back at her. “What sort of horror have you brought with you?!”

“You damned weasel! You dare refer to your uncle as a blight?!”

“Ahhh!” Ruth cried out in pain as Calto grabbed a fistful of his hair. Wedged between the two men, Maxi began shrieking when Riftan’s icy voice echoed around them.

“What the devil is going on here?”

The air inside the hall seemed to freeze over. After a moment of solemn silence, Calto mustered his composure and released Ruth’s hair. Ruth scurried away, this time taking shelter behind Riftan.

“Didn’t I ask you to assemble the knights?” Riftan hissed menacingly through gritted teeth, showing no inclination to protect him. “What is this ruckus?”

“I-It was not my fault!” Ruth cried, pointing to his uncle. “That man attacked me out of no—”

He abruptly cut himself off when he saw the murderous look on Calto’s face. After coldly eyeing the elder, Riftan strode over to him.

“It’s a good thing you’re here. I have something to discuss with you.”

Riftan gave Maxi a sharp look, silently telling her to be on her way, and handed Calto the message. The elder’s face had returned to its usual solemnity. His gray brows knitted together as he stared down at the parchment.

“And this is?”

“A message from the north. It appears the Bolosé Royal Knights have uncovered something unusual in their investigation of Eth Lene Castle.”

Chapter 32

Calto regarded Riftan with unconcealed suspicion before accepting the parchment. Maxi nervously watched the elder's face turn grim as he read the letter.

"And how exactly do you wish me to respond to this?" Calto asked wearily, folding the letter in half again.

Riftan crossed his arms, and his voice was icy when he spoke.

"I want to know your reason for going to the Pamela Plateau." When Calto did not answer, he continued, "What do you intend to do there? I suggest you tell the truth, for we've our own intelligence on the matter."

"I would very much like to know what that is."

Everyone's eyes flew to the entrance. Kuahel Leon had entered the great hall with the Temple Knights. Maxi surmised they must be returning from the castle's chapel, as it was common knowledge that the Temple Knights visited the church of any village or city they stayed in. They silently walked across the hall and stopped in front of Riftan in an almost confrontational gesture.

Cocking his head, Kuahel Leon asked, "So, tell me, what have you uncovered?"

"Sejuleu Aren discovered a secret chamber in the dungeons of Eth Lene Castle," Riftan replied flatly.

Kuahel's brow wrinkled in a slight furrow.

After gauging the Temple Knight commander's reaction, Riftan nonchalantly added, "If memory serves me right, it was the Temple Knights who were in charge of investigating the labyrinth. I don't recall ever hearing about a secret chamber."

Kuahel did not respond.

“Don’t try to deny it,” said Riftan. “Aren and his men found indisputable evidence that a purification rite was performed there.”

Maxi’s eyes widened in surprise. An underground labyrinth? Looking confused, she tried to grasp what Riftan was talking about when a memory sprang to mind. Her face blanched.

She recalled hearing that the monsters had hidden beneath the rock face before their eventual ambush of Eth Lene Castle. Were there more secrets hidden in this labyrinth? She studied Calto closely but could not read anything in his demeanor.

A tense silence filled the room.

Finally, Kuahel spoke. “It’s not something we should discuss here. Let us move this conversation somewhere more appropriate.”

Conceding to his fellow commander’s reluctance to continue the interrogation in such a public place, Riftan turned around and led them away. The dining hall fireplace crackled as they entered. Elliot, Hebaron, Garrow, Ulyseon, and another knight named Kyle Hager took their seats. Maxi noticed that sometime during the migration, Ruth had slipped away.

Since it was not an exceptionally spacious room, Kuahel Leon only had four immediate subordinates with him. All the mages were present except Sidina, Kiel, and the two high mages of Undaim, who were still asleep.

It appeared Maxi was not the only one with questions; the other mages also wore similar looks of suspicion. As usual, Kuahel Leon remained relentlessly calm despite the hostile atmosphere. He clasped his hands on the table and began talking.

“First, I ask that you do not inflate the facts to make it seem as if the church is orchestrating something. We kept the secret chamber confidential because we did not wish to cause unnecessary panic in the Western Continent. We thought it best to gather more information before bringing this to light.”

“Don’t you think that a rather feeble excuse for hiding something for three years?” Riftan said sardonically.

The pointless back-and-forth finally got to Hebaron. He barked impatiently, “Hells! Stop beating about the bush and just tell us what was in this chamber already!”

“A strategy map belonging to the allied monster army.”

The dining hall went silent at the revelation. A chill shivered down Maxi’s spine. Even the dark mages creating such a map would be cause for concern, but this discovery meant monsters were now capable of human-like communication and distribution of intelligence.

When the mages began to murmur among themselves, Kuahel added, “I should be clear. It is presumed to be a strategy map. A mural that appears to be for military use, fairly elaborate, with the geography of the Western Continent drawn in detail. It even has the population of each city and the number of soldiers. We could not decipher all of the text, but the map also seems to detail the Seven Kingdoms’ political situations.”

An oppressive silence fell over the group. As the implications sunk in, Maxi’s face turned ashen.

“That means the monsters have the means to gather all this information,” said Elliot with a low sigh.

Kuahel nodded. “Which is why we had to act with caution. As you can infer from the mural, the monsters of the Ayin race have managed to advance their civilization beyond our expectations. Moreover, they now have an intelligence network that exceeds our own. To turn the tide, we must locate their main base. If we do not eradicate them once and for all, the Seven Kingdoms will be in constant danger of another invasion.”

Kuahel sighed, stroking his chin. “We have been scouring the continent for their base and only recently came upon a lead.”

“So am I to understand you’re trying to locate this monster base, which you think is somewhere north, with a party of less than a hundred people?”

Maxi flinched, her shoulders drawing inward. She could sense the repressed fury behind Riftan’s stony face. After giving Kuahel a vicious glare, Riftan shot daggers at Calto and Maxi. A cold sweat pricked her back. She could almost hear him lambasting her for getting involved in this situation.

Though she wished to explain that the mages were only going to the Plateau to investigate the ruins, she was unsure if that was something she could disclose. Not knowing what to do, she shuffled behind Albern, who had the largest frame among the mages.

Clearly displeased by her evasion, Riftan clenched his jaw. Maxi was afraid he would start bellowing at any moment. Instead, Kuahel’s cold voice cut through the room.

“Then, was I supposed to lead an army of ten million?” he sneered. “I’m sure you have already realized that these monsters are preparing for a second invasion. The church plans to locate and ambush them before that can happen. For this to work, we must avoid drawing attention to our movements at all costs.”

“Ha! Do you not think it’s already too late?” Ulyseon jeered. “The monsters have started their invasion. No doubt about it, the fiends that attacked the village are part of the allied monster army. The war has begun. Thanks to your Temple Knights wasting three years, not only have we lost our chance at an ambush, but the monsters have launched one of their own.”

“The monsters have yet to attack in a full-scale invasion,” Kuahel snapped. “The enemy has been sending groups to raid small villages and working to increase the number of undead. They likely suffered heavy casualties during their defeat three years ago. With their already meager forces scattered across the Western Continent, their main base would be relatively

unprotected. We can easily root them out if we succeed in attacking first.”

“That is if you find this base,” Riftan retorted cynically. “What makes you think you can locate it when you have failed to do so for the past three years? Especially since we have no leads.”

“But we do. We were able to construct a map while investigating the topography of the Pamela Plateau.”

Kuahel extracted a crumpled piece of parchment from his robe and spread it on the table. Maxi craned her neck to get a closer look. Even at a glance, she could tell it was poorly drawn.

After carefully studying the map, Riftan furrowed his brow. “There are too many blank spaces.”

“It is better than no map at all.”

Acknowledging the map’s limitations, Kuahel leaned back in his chair.

Riftan had been tapping his finger on the table. He finally said, “What is the lead?”

“We have found evidence that points to the dark mages being the force behind the allied monster army. It is why we are going to the Pamela Plateau.”

Hebaron clasped his hands behind his head and gave a low whistle. “Dark mages, eh... That certainly makes things more interesting.”

Riftan shot him a barbed look before glaring at Kuahel. Another moment of heavy silence passed.

Then, slamming the table as though coming to a decision, Riftan announced, “The Remdragon Knights will aid your investigation.”

“And why would you do that?”

The Temple Knight commander seemed disinclined to accept the offer. He sat crookedly in his chair as he continued,

sounding distinctly sardonic, “I do not see why you would offer us assistance when you have not received any decree from Reuben III, nor does this matter directly affect your fief. I never took you for a righteous man.”

“If the church’s plan fails, the Remdragon Knights will have to fight in the ensuing war regardless,” Riftan said through gritted teeth. “If all you’ve managed to uncover in the last three years is this lousy map and dubious-at-best evidence of dark mages, I think we can safely assume what the outcome will be. It’s also in my interest to settle the matter before it becomes a bigger mess.”

“I suppose that is better than admitting you wish to keep trotting around after your wife.”

Maxi flushed with anger. To think he would have the gall to mock Riftan so openly! He was far from the decent man she had thought him. While her shoulders shook in rage, Riftan, on the other hand, did not bat an eye.

“Cut the drivel and make up your mind. Do you accept the offer?”

“What if I refuse?” Kuahel said, deliberately provocative.

Riftan’s lips curled into a soft, ominous smile. “Then I suppose we’ll have to act independently. I will inform the Council of the Seven Kingdoms of my findings and have them dispatch a large coalition to the Pamela Plateau. With a whole army scouring the north, I’m sure we’ll come upon something.”

It was a veiled threat to foil the Temple Knights’ plan. Kuahel’s face twisted into a vicious scowl.

As if to remind the commander that he held the knife, Riftan repeated placidly, “Well, what say you?”

There was a pause, then Kuahel answered, his voice lower than usual. “Very well. You and the Remdragon Knights may come with us to the Plateau.”

Though Kuahel spoke as though he were being magnanimous, Riftan did not seem to care. After rising from his seat to signal the end of the discussion, his cold gaze briefly landed on Maxi.

Then, turning to Elliot, he said, “Inform the knights waiting outside to prepare to leave for a campaign. We are to depart as soon as possible.”

Chapter 33

Riftan picked up his coat and threw it on. Seeing he was about to leave with his knights, Maxi hastily rose from her seat.

She was tempted to go after him, but what would she say? She could already tell from his walk how furious he was. She knew she would have to explain herself at some point, but she could not gather the courage to face his rage just yet.

After anxiously watching him leave, she turned to Kuahel. When she regarded the Temple Knight commander with a look that conveyed she had much to say, a light crease formed between Kuahel's brows. After glowering at him, Maxi looked away to address Calto.

"Master Calto... were you aware this whole time... that uncovering the secrets of the past war was not this expedition's sole purpose? Why keep such details from us?"

"I would also like to know," Anette chimed in. "Frankly, I feel deceived."

As if displeased at the accusatory atmosphere that had formed around the elder, Celric came to his defense.

"Though we admittedly have not explained everything, there was no deception! When we were still forming the expeditionary party, the chances of war were slim. We only learned of the monsters' unusual movements after we arrived at Anatol. As nothing was set in stone, we thought it best not to disclose anything to avoid causing a panic."

When Anette moved as if to shoot back an angry retort, Celric quickly added, "The situation is indeed far more serious than our original brief, but our primary objective remains the same. Our task is limited to investigating the traces of the dark mages to locate the allied monster army. Anything beyond that is the Temple Knights' jurisdiction."

“Are you saying our role is concluded once we find the monster army’s main base?” Nevin, a senior mage of Segrew, asked with a look of relief.

Miriam gave a loud, exasperated snort. “What cowardice. If war breaks out, hundreds and thousands of lives will be endangered. It’s only right that we fight as well!”

“But that was not the original agreement!” Nevin said heatedly. “No one told me we’d be charging into monster territory!”

“You needn’t worry about that,” Kuahel said calmly. “Once we locate the monster army’s base, high mages with campaign experience from across the Seven Kingdoms will join the coalition army. Your task is nothing more than going to the Plateau to help us locate the monster army.”

Ben, who was known for being the most prudent of the mages, cautiously asked, “Would it not be better to create a new party with more seasoned mages?”

Calto shook his head. “It was unclear how the monsters were gathering their information, so we had no choice but to select from those who were left at the Tower. Had we summoned our mages currently deployed across the continent, the lords they serve would have gotten wind of the situation...”

Lucain, a Kabala mage, broke his silence to finish Calto’s sentence. “...And that would have affected the upcoming conclave.”

He was a man of a shy and particular nature, known only to talk to Albern, with whom he shared a workshop. His thin face set into an irritated scowl directed at Kuahel.

“Let us speak plainly. Concealing your plans from the monster army was not your only concern. You wanted to keep it hidden from the nobles lest it completely shift the outcome of the conclave. Is that not why you sought a party of mages with no connections to any noble houses?”

A faint sneer formed on Kuahel’s lips at the accusation.

His green eyes glinted as he spat derisively, “Even if that were true, would that be so detrimental to your cause? I should think the mages would also wish to prevent the Orthodox faction from winning the papacy.”

Unable to refute the knight’s point, Lucain pressed his lips together in displeasure. In an attempt to take the wind out of the hostile air, Geoffrey, another mage of Sigrew, frantically waved his hands.

“Now, now, there’s no need to get testy. At the end of the day, we are in the same boat. We must thwart the dark mages to prevent another persecution, and Reformed Church must deal with the monster army and curb the influence of their Orthodox brothers. We share a common interest. Such hostility is entirely unnecessary.”

“But if the mages of Urd and the Temple Knights continue to withhold details,” Armin interrupted woodenly, unfolding his arms, “we cannot blindly follow orders for long. You must share all new information in a timely manner. If we’re to be ready for anything, we need to have a clear understanding of the situation. I would rather not be thrust into danger again so unprepared.”

“That was a lapse in judgment on my part,” Calto readily admitted. “I give you my word. I shall not withhold anymore.”

With the discussion concluded, the mages filed out of the dining hall. Having rushed to the courtyard, Maxi found it bustling with activity, meaning the viscount had returned from his night watch.

Her head swiveled this way and that through the crowd of knights. Soon, she spotted him talking to the viscount. She silently watched from a distance until his head jerked in her direction. His gaze was so cold that it made her freeze over, draining all her courage. She hunched her shoulders. When he eventually turned back to the viscount, Maxi became unstuck and fled.

It would be better for her to wait until he approached her first, she reasoned. With the Remdragon Knights traveling with them to the Pamela Plateau, there would be more opportunities to talk. Maxi tried to console herself with the thought.

The next day, the party departed from Sevron with all haste. Though the viscount made it obvious he wanted to host the illustrious knights in his castle for a few more days, no one in the party wished to stay a day longer. Even Ruth, as sick to death of being on the move as he was, appeared thrilled that they were leaving.

“The stench is finally gone!” he cried in uninhibited joy.

The other mages all turned to look at him. Even as they set off, whenever he opened his mouth, they continued to eye him as though he were a fascinating creature.

Feeling pressured by the attention, Ruth tugged his hood lower and whined, “Though I fear I’m now in a worse hell.”

“You brought it on yourself,” Maxi replied harshly while keeping her gaze glued to Riftan, who was riding ahead.

She was still sulking over being ignored earlier in the day. What was even more galling was that, owing to the needlessly sunny weather, he looked even more magnificent under the brilliant sunlight. He was helmetless today, his lush, raven hair and chiseled face on full display.

Maxi felt a pang of annoyance when she caught Sidina glancing at him. She watched as the girl turned to whisper gleefully into Anette’s ear. Though she knew Sidina was merely keeping herself entertained with a favorite pastime of hers — observing handsome men — it still made Maxi simmer with anger.

She eyed Kuahel Leon scornfully. If only the man would lower his hood, then Sidina would have someone else to drool over. Though Riftan was undeniably the more dashing of the two, Maxi was aware of her friend’s preference for men with a

more youthful beauty like the Temple Knight commander. He would undoubtedly draw her eye away from Riftan.

Right at that moment, Kuahel looked over his shoulder to give a warning.

“This area is rampant with owlbears and man-eating wolves. Be ready to cast a barrier at any time.”

Shamefaced, Maxi hastily dropped her gaze. This was no time to be wallowing in jealousy. She shook off her tumultuous emotions and prepared her magic to be unleashed at a moment's notice. As it turned out, the rest of the day passed with no wild beast nor monster sighting.

By sunset, Maxi felt deflated as she dismounted and began setting up camp. It was the mages' turn to cook supper that night. She prepared a thick stew by mixing flour, butter, bacon, potatoes, dry vegetables, and herbs into a pot of water Armin had collected. Meanwhile, Kiel and Sidina sliced the bread and cheese, and the rest of the mages distributed the food once it was ready.

As Maxi was serving the stew to the knights, she spotted Riftan tending to his horse a short distance away. She promptly grabbed the biggest bowl and filled it to the brim with hot stew. She forced the ladle into Miriam's hands and walked over to Riftan, being careful not to spill anything.

“R-Riftan...” She paused to clear her throat, then continued in the steadiest voice she could muster. “You must be hungry. Here, I brought you—”

Her breath hitched as he slowly turned around. Bathed in the glow of sunset, his skin glistened from gold to bronze, and his windswept, blue-black hair was tinged an otherworldly purple. It was hard to believe that such a beautiful man was her husband. The year she had spent with him was now a distant memory. Had everything merely been her delusion? Even the passionate kiss they had shared at Sevron Castle felt like a dream.

“I can get my own food. You should take care of yourself first.”

His curt tone snapped Maxi out of her thoughts. Though her face momentarily grew warm from the rebuff, she did not give up. She pushed the bowl into his hands.

“Mine is ready as well... so you take this.”

Riftan scowled but accepted the bowl. Maxi scurried back to the pot to ladle out her share. Before hurrying back, she grabbed a few loaves of bread and cheese.

She found him in front of the Remdragon Knights’ tent, already eating the stew. When she cautiously walked over, Elliot quietly rose to leave. Hebaron and Ulyseon were not far off, waving enthusiastically as they made their way over to join them in front of the tent. Elliot grabbed the pair and dragged them away.

Maxi shot him a look of gratitude before taking a seat next to Riftan.

He did not look up, opting to keep his gaze on his bowl and shovel stew into his mouth. When she realized he was not going to meet her eyes, anxiety got the better of her, and she spoke first.

“Do you like it? I made it.”

Riftan’s hand paused for a moment. Maxi silently waited for any reaction from him, but he resumed eating without saying a word. Hiding her embarrassment, she began chatting enthusiastically.

“D-Do you... remember the last time we ate stew together like this? It was raining... and you made it by boiling herbs and sausages in a flask. D-Don’t you think this tastes similar? I sometimes found myself missing that flavor, so I came up with this recipe after several attempts. People... generally seem to like it whenever I make it for them.”

“ ... ”

“I did my fair share of cooking at the Mage Tower, you see. The novices take turns... and I struggled in the beginning since I’ve never cooked in my life. I don’t think... I have a natural talent in the kitchen. The others would prepare remedies for ill digestion in advance whenever it was my turn. Still... I think I’ve improved quite a bit. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Maxi tried to laugh off her embarrassing experience, hoping it would lighten the mood. To her dismay, Riftan’s face grew even colder. Attempting to draw even a hint of a smile, she continued her story.

“The mages are rather inconsiderate... One of them even hawked digestion remedies next to me while I served the meal. It’s thanks to them that I got into cooking a lot more, and each time, my friend over there — her name is Anette — would taste them for me. Anette has younger brothers who are twins, and they often—”

“Aren’t you going to eat?” Riftan said woodenly, cutting off her rambling.

Maxi flinched and closed her mouth.

He lowered his empty bowl and leveled his icy gaze at her. “We are to ride again at daybreak. I suggest you eat and sleep instead of this chatter.”

“I-I was only hoping to talk to you for a little—”

Before she could finish, Riftan picked up his sword, rose to his feet, and marched to where the knights stood guard. After blankly watching him go, Maxi’s face twisted into a tearful expression, and she began to wolf down spoonfuls of the tepid stew.

He didn’t even notice I gave him the biggest piece of meat.

Holding back her tears, she hurriedly finished her meal and retreated to her tent.

Chapter 34

The expeditionary party traveled north without rest. Though the terrain grew increasingly rugged and the temperature dropped with every passing day, the experience itself was not as fraught as they had anticipated. Despite initial hostilities, Riftan and Kuahel formed quite the team.

Both men valued efficiency above politics. Though there was still the occasional battle of nerves, one would always concede if they thought the other's judgment sound. As a result, they managed to reach the northern region of Balto without much trouble.

Maxi's anxiety swelled every day that Riftan ignored her. She stroked Rem's mane as she cast an apprehensive eye over the back of his head. So far, all her attempts at conversation had been met with a reserved manner and the barest minimum of words. It sometimes felt as though he found her mere presence intolerable.

She recalled the letters by his bedside and that he had rushed to her rescue, but those reassurances no longer did anything for her deep sadness. His cold shoulder was slowly eroding her confidence.

"I sense something ahead," said Nevin, who had been surveying the land with magic.

He cocked his head from atop his horse. Since wind mages could scout the terrain, they had been taking turns checking for signs of monsters.

Riftan stopped the knights as soon as he heard Nevin's warning. Maxi pulled her reins and glanced around. Dark pine groves surrounded them, and the sky was overcast in a white haze.

Peering into the shadowy, snow-covered trees, Riftan said stiffly, "Can you tell what kind of monster it is?"

Nevin shook his head after a moment, looking embarrassed. “There is definitely something there, but it feels foggy. A spirit or a monster, perhaps, with strong magic resistance.”

Kuahel immediately drew his sword.

“And the distance?” said Riftan.

“Less than one thradion^[12] south. It’s not moving, but I sense powerful magic.”

“Most likely a hibernating dragon subspecies,” Riftan muttered.

The knights drew their weapons in unison, preparing themselves for battle. For a high-grade monster like a basilisk, a thradion was not far at all. Such a creature could cover that distance in the blink of an eye. If the expeditionary party was not vigilant, they could be taken by surprise.

Maxi summoned her mana in case she had to unleash a spell at a moment’s notice.

Tearing his eyes away from the sky, Riftan turned his mount around. “We should head down the mountain. It will take longer, but it’s the safer route.”

“Is that really necessary?” Hebaron argued, scratching his bearded chin. “It’ll be sluggish if it’s hibernating. Slaying it should be a breeze.”

Riftan pinned him with a cold glare. “We don’t know what kind of monster it is or how many there are. Evasion would be wiser.”

“It’s too late to turn back,” Kuahel said, pointing to the baggage wagons. “The snow is coming. If we don’t clear this mountain by tonight, it will set us back days. We are already running out of time.”

Due to the cold arriving early, most of the northern regions had been struck by food shortages. They had been unable to procure enough food or fodder in the last city they had stopped in, leaving them with a third of what had once been a veritable mountain of provisions.

Pulling his robe tighter, Ruth chipped in, “Why don’t we head east to a big city first?”

All the mages turned to look at him. Being the thick-skinned man he was, the sorcerer seemed to have grown accustomed to the attention in a matter of days.

“I don’t see why we have to put ourselves at such risk,” he said calmly. “Why not hunker down in a city until the blizzard passes?”

“No city in this area is big enough to feed and accommodate almost two hundred soldiers for weeks,” Kuahel said bluntly. “And even if there were one, we would find ourselves in the same predicament once we resume. I’d rather not waste the time.”

Riftan’s expression turned icy at his obstinate reply. “Are you saying the Temple Knights consider the task more important than the safety of its party members? What a shocking lack of compassion. A real stain on your name as Guardians of the Western Continent.”

“Well, Mago, you fall shamefully short of your moniker as well,” Kuahel retorted. “You wish to flee because of a few hibernating beasts? You’ve grown rather fainthearted since I saw you last.”

The mages exchanged glances as the two commanders’ hackles rose yet again. After eyeing them nervously, Maxi took a tentative step forward.

“Sh-Shall I try... a tracing spell? They often reveal more details than what wind magic can deduce. If I try hard enough... I may be able to determine the type of monster.”

Riftan scowled, but Kuahel cut in before he could object.

“Please, go ahead.”

Maxi promptly leaped off her horse, her heart racing in anticipation. She had been itching for a chance to showcase her skills in front of Riftan. Even so, she could not help the nerves creeping in just as she was about to start the spell.

Was she being presumptuous? Could a fledgling mage do something that had eluded even her senior?

She took a deep breath to dispel her fears, then circulated her mana along the pattern of a rune. Soon, her mana pathway connected to an earth spirit's, and her senses sharpened.

She turned her search in the direction Nevin had pointed out. Before long, something caught at the edge of her mana web. She flinched. Whatever it was, it was closer than the wind mage had estimated. As soon as she realized a massive creature was charging this way at an alarming speed, she hastily broke off the spell.

“I-It’s coming this way! We must cast a barrier now!”

Anette and Armin flew into action, and a barrier rose around the wagons. In nearly the same breath, the earth shook violently before something came bursting out of the snow-covered ground. The sudden upheaval overturned one of the wagons. The horses’ whinnies rang out over the trees, and Rem leaped into the air as the ground began to fracture.

Maxi pulled on the reins to steady the mare, then cast a shield around the other mages and herself. Right at that moment, the monster crashed against the barrier with a heavy thud. Sensing a crack in the walls, Maxi increased her mana circulation. A beast big enough to swallow a baggage wagon clawed out of the ground, swinging its thick, scaly tail like a whip.

Maxi poured more mana into the barrier. The earth shook as the monster’s tail struck. Realizing she could not maintain the defenses on her own for long, she looked over her shoulder for help.

“It’s a serpend!” Calto cried, casting another barrier in front of Maxi’s. “Those capable of defensive magic are to assist the knights!”

Unlike Maxi’s, Calto’s shield seemed to withstand the monster’s attacks. Sighing in relief, Maxi removed her helmet. The knights already had the monster surrounded. They lodged

their hooks into the serpend's skin and coiled chains around its limbs. Once the beast was retrained, Maxi got a clear view as the knights retreated.

A dragon's head atop a serpent's body — it was one of the highest-grade monsters of the dragon subspecies.

“Move back! We will cast a fire wall!”

The knights stepped away at the mages' warning. Soon, the mages of Kabala had the monster trapped within a towering wall of flame. As magic was not effective against the dragon subspecies, the mages exploited the serpend's aversion to fire by restraining it rather than a direct attack.

Pierced by dozens of spears, the monster raised its head and cracked its jaws open wide. Maxi felt the hairs on her body stand. Blue flames formed inside its reptilian mouth. When its throat expanded as though it would spew forth fire at any moment, Maxi raced out from behind the shield.

She was scrambling to throw up a barrier when Riftan blocked her path. She looked up at his majestic profile in a daze. Drawing his sword, Riftan kicked Talon forward. The ebony warhorse charged at the monster like an arrow.

What followed was the most horrific scene Maxi had ever witnessed. She screamed his name. She could not comprehend why no one was stopping him. When she tried to give chase, Ulyseon, who had raced after her, stepped in her way.

Before she could order him aside, she saw Riftan leap straight at the serpend's mouth. Tilting its head low, the monster's jaws opened wide and spewed forth a column of fire.

What happened next was more unbelievable still. Riftan's blade flared dark red, snuffing out the flames in an instant. A heartbeat later, he swung his sword and sent the monster's head flying. Maxi could not comprehend the sequence of events, though she had seen it with her own eyes. She could only stare at Riftan's back in stunned silence.

The serpend's massive body toppled to the snow with a dull thud. The noise jolted her back to her senses. After calming her agitated horse, she galloped over to Riftan.

By then, Kuahel was already casting divine magic over the serpend's severed head. He scowled when he saw her.

"Serpent blood is poisonous. I advise you not to come any closer until the purification is over."

"I-It's all right. I know detoxification magic."

Though it was clear the Temple Knight had not finished talking, Maxi trotted past him. Riftan paused from wiping his bloody sword when he saw her approach. His face darkened into a dark scowl.

"Were you not told to stay back?"

Ignoring him, Maxi slid off her horse. "A-Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

Walking right up to Talon, she looked up to examine Riftan from head to toe. She still could not believe he had charged straight at the serpend's mouth. Though she had heard the incredible story of how he had rushed head-on into Dragon's Breath, witnessing it in person was utterly different.

Nearly frantic with worry, she thoroughly examined his armored limbs. Riftan, who had grown rigid beneath her groping hands, swore under his breath and dismounted. He grabbed her by the arm and led her away from the monster.

Staggering, Maxi cried out, "R-Riftan, you were hit by the serpend's flames. You might be hurt. Let me treat—"

"I told you, I can absorb magic. I did it years ago with Dragon's Breath, albeit temporarily. This was nothing by comparison."

When they were at a safe distance from the serpend's carcass, Riftan stopped and released her. His eyes skimmed the length of her body. Had it been any other time, she would have been elated by this. In that moment, however, nearly out of her

mind with worry, she did not register the way he was looking at her. She frantically yanked at his cloak.

“E-Even so, let me heal you, just in case. Take off your armor. Absorbing that amount of magic at once would have put a strain on your body. We should first—”

“That’s unnecessary.”

“I-It will not take long. I need to be in contact with your skin to be able to—”

“I don’t need healing!” Riftan barked, smacking her hand away.

Maxi froze in shock. The blood drained from his face as she looked up at him, her eyes full of hurt. His jaws clenched as if clamping down on his emotions. Soon, a familiar blank mask settled over his face.

“Stop trying to waste your mana. Take care of yourself instead.”

With that, he turned and strode toward the knights. Maxi’s faraway look crumbled as she watched him leave. How many times had he turned his back to her over the past few weeks? Was he really turning away so stoically after giving her the fright of her life?

Her pent-up emotions burst forth like an erupting volcano.

Livid, her eyes roamed the clearing before landing on a fallen pine cone. In one movement, she picked it up and hurled it at him.

It was as if he could see through the back of his skull. Whirling around, he caught the incoming object with one hand. He looked down at the pine cone, then back up to glare at her, silently demanding an explanation. Ignoring him, Maxi began grabbing and flinging more forest debris, one after another.

Riftan winced as a pine cone hit him squarely on the forehead. “What the devil—”

“Y-You petty man!” Maxi yelled, scouring the area for a larger projectile.

When she found none, she gathered a lump of snow and threw it at him. He caught the hurtling snowball with his other hand. Not giving up, Maxi furiously packed more snowballs and began slinging them at his face. The incoming blizzard eventually caused Riftan to snap.

Pushing back his hair to dislodge the snow, he was in front of her in just two strides.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he snarled, grabbing her wrists.

“I-I would like to ask you the same! How long are you going to ignore me? Why can’t you... tell me what you’re so upset about? You petty man! You’re a fool and an idiot!”

When she began kicking and trying to twist her arm free, Riftan clenched his jaw and turned his head toward the spectators they had drawn. After giving the others a cutting glare, he picked Maxi up with one arm and carried her into the forest. Dangling at his side, she struggled like an angry colt while hurling abuse.

“You... arrogant fool! Narrow-minded clod! Have you no... no consideration for how it must have been for me? Do you have any idea how hard I studied so I could return to you as q-quickly as possible? I-If you were just going to ignore me... why did you even follow me here?!”

“*And you?*”

He lowered her to the ground beneath a huge tree. Maxi pressed her back against the trunk as he leaned close.

“Do you have any idea... how the last three years have been for me?”

Chapter 35

Maxi glowered at him through her teary vision. Riftan's dark eyes blazed beneath his disheveled front locks, damp from the bombardment of snow earlier.

"What exactly do you want from me?" he said, his jaw tightening.

With one hand clutching the tree trunk behind her, Riftan leaned in until their noses were almost touching. She could feel his arm trembling ever so faintly.

"Do you want me to act as though you never left me, as though I was never abandoned? Like I haven't lived the past three years in despair? Is that it? Do you truly think me capable of that?"

His broad shoulders heaved as he suppressed his flaring rage.

Losing the battle, he shouted bitterly, "How can you be so calm?! Why are you unaffected by any of this? Do you not see me barely holding myself together through this madness? *Goddammit*. Is that why you test my patience at every corner? Because you're truly unaware of my torment?"

A thud resounded above her head as his gauntleted fist smashed against the tree.

"Do you have any idea how—"

Maxi recoiled as he clenched her forearm. Riftan promptly released her, looking deeply ashamed. After scrubbing his face as if scraping up the last of his patience, he backed away from her. She could see him trying to smother his emotions again.

Maxi latched onto his cloak. "S-Stop hiding! I truly hate it when you do that!"

His eyes desperately searched her face.

Tightening her grip so he could not escape, she cried, “Can you not simply talk to me?”

Her voice took on a desperate plea as she went on.

“Explain... s-so I can understand! Even if it’s resentment... I would r-rather... you tell me your true feelings. I hate... being ignored like this.”

Riftan’s lips quivered. He took in a ragged breath, and his next words seemed to tumble out.

“What do you want to hear from me? About how miserable I’ve been? How much I resented you and loathed myself? Is that what you wish to hear? You have no idea how much I—”

He stopped abruptly, his face flushing at the embarrassment of having revealed his inner thoughts. She watched as he stubbornly tried to withdraw again. At that moment, she realized the last three years had hardened the walls around his heart.

Riftan raked his hair back and gazed down at her, his eyes shining with resentment. “Did it have to be this way? Could we not have reunited by another means? I kept telling myself, when you came back, I would not speak things I’d regret. That I’d never again let you leave my side. And to make that possible... I...”

He trailed off, clutching his forehead. He glanced at the ground before looking back at Maxi.

“Why is it that you always push me to my limits?”

Maxi faltered when she saw the hurt in his eyes. Had he only expressed anger, she would have fought back. Against his pain, however, she was utterly powerless.

“Th-This is... not what I wanted either,” she managed to strangle out. “If I had known it would be this dangerous... I wouldn’t have agreed to join the expedition. I did not mean to drag you into such an arduous journey. I-I merely... wanted to leave the island as soon as possible...”

Feeling a lump in her throat, Maxi squeezed her eyes shut.

“I missed you so much... it was killing me.”

A gust swept past them. She gazed up at his pained face through her curtain of billowing hair. He reminded her of a confused and vulnerable child. It surprised her how such a huge, brawny man like Riftan could be rendered completely defenseless.

He cupped her cheek with a trembling hand. Paying no mind to his coarse leather gloves and cold metal gauntlet, Maxi placed her hand over his and rubbed her cheek against his palm. That seemed to shatter his self-control. With a low moan, he lifted her off the ground and pressed her against the tree trunk.

Maxi clung to him, winding her arms around his neck. Though being crushed between the trunk and his hard, armored body made breathing difficult, she did not care. Supporting her head, he filled her mouth with his hot tongue. She responded with the same passion, caressing his muscular yet sculpted neck. He deepened the kiss as though he wanted to absorb her.

Though her vision was beginning to turn hazy from the lack of air, Maxi made no move to stop him. She could not bear the thought of breaking away from him now.

Riftan slid an arm beneath her buttocks, raising her even higher. Sucking on her tongue, he squeezed her breast with his free hand. Then, realizing his gauntlets prevented him from feeling her fully, he swore and yanked down her bodice.

Though half her chest was exposed to the chilly air, Maxi did not feel the cold. He rubbed his hot lips on her ample breast, then grazed his teeth against her taut nipple peeking above her woolen tunic. She choked out a sob and clutched his luscious hair. Each time he sucked and nibbled, her stomach clenched, and her body shuddered in titillating pleasure. Desperate for more, she wrapped her arms around his head.

His teasing lips slowly made their way to her other breast. Suddenly, he stopped, frowning. She tensed when she realized

he was touching the delicate chain of her necklace. His fingers slid down the chain and, after fumbling for the coin concealed in her clothes, tugged it out of the way.

At that moment, a piercing, hawk-like cry rang above them. Riftan froze, then lowered her to the ground. He gripped the hilt of his sword.

Wobbling, Maxi leaned back against the tree to stop herself from sinking. Her heavy breaths misted out in white vapor that clouded her vision. It only occurred to her then that the sound was the expeditionary party's alarm indicating danger.

Riftan stood protectively in front of her as his eyes searched the trees. Determining they were safe, he turned around and helped adjust her robe. Though his face was flushed from unquenched desire, his gaze was calm. Gripping her arm, he led her through the trees with quick steps.

Maxi practically ran to keep up with him, her eyes darting wildly over the shadows. Flurries of snow fell overhead, and the forest was now shrouded in a frosty mist. The eerie atmosphere sapped all the heat from her body. She stuck close to Riftan, her shoulders hunched.

“W-What’s happening?”

“The alarm means a monster sighting,” he replied grimly. “Be prepared to cast a barrier.”

Maxi looked up to study his face. The passionate lover was already gone, replaced by the stoic and unfeeling knight. He vigilantly scanned the trees as he hurried her back to the others. Maxi swallowed the words on the tip of her tongue and quietly followed.

When they finally burst out of the forest, Elliot came running toward them as if he had been waiting.

“Commander!”

“I heard the signal. What’s the situation?”

“Man-eating wolves, sir,” Elliot said grimly. “We’ve eliminated the pack that assailed us, but we sounded the alarm

as there could be more lurking nearby.”

Having stumbled out of the forest behind Riftan, Maxi looked up to see a shocking scene. The white snowfield was soaked dark red with blood, and eight wolves the size of calves lay dead near the limp carcass of the serpend. Kuahel Leon yanked a bloodied hook from the largest wolf and turned to Riftan and Maxi.

“I apologize for the interruption,” he quipped, wiping down his weapon, “but we cannot delay any further. We must leave before the blood draws more of these creatures.”

“Have you retrieved all the magic stones?” Riftan asked.

At his question, Ruth shrugged in a gesture that said, *Of course*.

“I collected them all,” he went on. “Stones belong to the person who makes the kill.”

The sorcerer swept his gaze over the Temple Knights as if daring anyone to contest his claim. The knights continued putting away their weapons as if they had not heard.

Riftan led Maxi past, toward where Rem and Talon were tethered. Wolf carcasses littered the ground around them. As she glanced nervously over the creatures, Riftan hoisted her up and placed her in Rem’s saddle. She hastily called out as he turned to his steed.

“R-Riftan... what we were talking about earlier...”

“Later,” he said brusquely. “Now is not the time.”

Maxi’s face flushed bright red. It finally dawned on her what a sight it must have been earlier. Mortified, she glanced around before looking back at him with the most unbothered expression she could muster. She nodded. He mounted Talon right away, then swept his eyes over her as if to check how she was doing. Evidently satisfied, he turned around and trotted to Hebaron.

She saw Sir Hebaron snicker and playfully say something to him. Abashed, Maxi hurried Rem over to the mages. As her

anxiety began to grow again, she glanced behind her shoulder at Riftan once more. He had been on the verge of opening up to her. It scared her how quickly he could freeze over.

It can't be helped until we're out of this.

She was silently reassuring herself while gnawing her lip when Anette approached on her horse.

“He didn't admonish you physically, did he?” she said, her voice full of concern.

Eyes widening, Maxi furiously shook her head. “O-Of course not! R-Riftan would never do such a thing!”

“Good.”

Anette furrowed her brow and looked Maxi up and down. Terrified that her friend might guess what she and Riftan had been up to in the forest, she yanked her hood over her head. Her lips were still numb, and her breasts throbbed from unsated desire. These physical responses filled her with shame. Was she too lustful?

She was caught up in her embarrassment when she realized the mages were watching her. Quickly adjusting her expression, she mumbled an apology.

“Anyway... I-I am sorry for causing a scene earlier.”

“Well, it was bound to happen,” Anette chuckled, patting Maxi on the shoulder. “It was worth it if you got everything off your chest. Bottling up your feelings can cause illness, you know.”

Maxi responded with an awkward laugh. Just then, Miriam's irritated voice interrupted them.

“If you're finished with your stage play, then let us get on. I have no desire to make camp in monster territory.”

Feeling properly admonished, Maxi trotted to the rest of the party. When the Temple Knights finished purifying the monster carcasses, they promptly set out over the mountain.

She turned Riftan's words over in her head as she rode through the wind, which was growing fiercer by the minute. Her decision to leave may have cut him deeper than she thought. She suddenly recalled the tragic story of his mother.

Riftan had sworn to himself he would never end up like her. Could it be that he still believed Maxi would drive him to the same fate as his mother? Staring silently at him from afar, she shook off her swirling thoughts.

Everything will be all right. He said we would talk again later.

They had much to discuss, so she had to be patient. The only thing that should be on her mind now was safely completing the task at hand.

Chapter 36

Though the expeditionary party managed to descend the mountain before the night deepened, the village they had chosen to stop in was empty. It seemed all its inhabitants had migrated south a long time ago. After poking around the broken-down fences and decrepit homes, they patched up some of the cottages that were in relatively better condition.

In no time at all, the Temple Knights set up makeshift lodgings by covering the dilapidated roofs with leather sacks and adding planks to the walls. The mages cleared rats and spiders from a barn to feed and water the horses. Riftan and his men mended the battered fences and lit fires around the camp, keeping an eye out for possible monster attacks.

“Is all this really necessary for one night?” Ruth grumbled as he drew a temporary barrier rune around the fences.

Brushing off the thick snowflakes that clung to his face, Riftan glowered at the sorcerer. “If you don’t want tonight to be your last, do as you’re told.”

“There are nineteen other high mages here! Why must it be me?”

Hebaron was sipping wine further down from them, resting against the fence.

“You’ll have to take that up with your uncle,” he said, smirking. “The mages of the Tower act like they don’t hear us when we talk to them. Whose fault do you think that would be?”

Ruth winced and pressed his lips together. He meekly resumed etching the rune on the ground. However, he soon broke his silence as the wind picked up speed and the snow began to pour.

“Good grief!” he said, yanking at his hair. “What kind of torment is this?”

After wailing at the dark sky, he whipped his head toward Riftan as if suddenly recalling something.

“Come to think of it, Lady Calypse received her earth rune. She most certainly would have studied all sorts of barriers at the Mage Tower. We could finish this in no time if we asked her ladysh—”

“Ruth Serbel.” Staring into the dark forest, Riftan took a swig from his flask. His voice was soft as he said, “Is it your wish to die?”

“I had a feeling you wouldn’t agree, but I thought I’d ask.”

“I let you keep the serpend’s magic stone, so shut your trap and get to work.”

With that, Riftan picked up a torch mounted by the fence and set off to patrol their defense line. He trudged through the dark, inspecting the ground up to the canopy for any signs of monsters. Hebaron sauntered up behind him and swung an arm around his shoulders.

“Commander,” he said in a hushed voice, “we found a cottage in not-so-bad condition near the camp. I had Garrow tidy it up.”

Riftan stopped in his tracks. Hebaron stroked his shaggy beard, which was starting to sprout from his cheeks after several days of no grooming.

“I’ll make sure to keep prying eyes away,” he said in a conspiratorial tone.

“If you have time for such nonsense, use it to search the area more thoroughly.”

Riftan shoved Hebaron’s arm away and resumed his patrol. However, his thoughts now scattered, he found he could not register anything. He cursed silently and raked back his hair. Hebaron continued to grate his nerves as he trailed him at a languid pace.

“I only do this because it pains my heart to see you bound, Commander. This situation is too cruel for a man who

faithfully waited for his wife for three years.”

“Must I crush your jaw for you to stop talking?”

Hebaron raised both hands in defeat. Riftan glared at him and turned away. As he carried on, however, the knight’s words kept echoing in his head.

He quickly scoured the rest of the pitch-dark forest and returned to the abandoned village. The snow was turning into a blizzard, and though the knights appeared undaunted, he knew they were tired.

With the squall threatening to blow out the fire, Riftan pointed the torch along the perimeter in search of Ruth. The sorcerer was warming himself by the campfire, his back against the fence. A firestone was apparently not enough to keep him warm, as he looked much paler than usual.

Riftan silently studied his face before saying brusquely, “I take it you’ve finished drawing all the runes?”

“Yes, so do stop carping,” Ruth snapped like an angry cat. “As long as this place isn’t teeming with dangerous monsters like the serpend, we should be safe for the night.”

“Good.”

With that, he walked over to Elliot, who was directing the others as they installed pointed iron bars around the fence. Though useless against large monsters, the sharpened tips would prevent man-eating wolves or hungry beasts from scaling their defenses. After watching the knights drive the bars into the ground, Riftan turned to Elliot.

“That will do. Ruth has the barrier in place, so have a small number keep watch while the others retire.”

“How many men should I assign to the night watch?”

“Have the men take turns in groups of three.”

“Leave the night watch to us.”

Riftan turned his head toward the interruption. The commander of the Temple Knights was slowly walking toward

the barricade with six of his subordinates in tow.

“The task is originally ours. I would rather not be indebted to you,” said Kuahel, his glinting green eyes appearing almost reptilian in the dark.

Riftan furrowed his brow. “You need to get off your high horse. I’m sure you need rest after using up your divine magic.”

“Come again?”

Kuahel’s narrow brow twitched and arched upward. Riftan knew that, unlike his facade of indifference, the Temple Knight commander was a belligerent and prideful man. For some reason, he seemed especially sensitive to every word today, and it was beginning to get on Riftan’s nerves.

Conceding, Riftan shrugged and turned to Elliot. “You heard the man. The Temple Knights have volunteered for the tedious task, so you may all rest.”

“Yes, Commander.”

Riftan turned in the direction of the makeshift lodgings. It appeared the mages had all retired to their cottages. Light spilled from the windows into the night, and he glanced over them as he walked by. He came to a halt when he spotted a petite figure in the distance.

It was Maxi, carrying an armful of firewood. Though Rovar was pestering her to let him take over, she seemed to be ignoring him. After silently watching her march away, Riftan roughly scrubbed his face with one hand.

The damn bastard...

He cursed Hebaron in his head and willed himself to turn around. He feared he would snatch her up and drag her away with him if he did not.

Shaking off the fierce temptation, he retreated into the cottage farthest from the one she had entered and settled in front of the brazier. A junior knight promptly came to attend to him. Waving away the lad’s attempt to help him remove his

armor, Riftan asked for ale instead. He usually abstained from drinking during a campaign, but with his self-restraint stretched as taut as it was, he did not think he could get through the night in a sober state of mind.

When the junior knight brought him a tankard, he gulped down the cold liquor until he felt woozy and swiped his mouth with his sleeve. He had hoped it would dull her scent and taste from his mind, but the recollections only became sharper.

He tossed firewood into the flames and anxiously rubbed his forehead. A memory rose, unbidden, in his mind. It was the one where he was caressing her as they huddled in front of a fireplace one snowy night.

He vividly recalled the feel of her naked body, slick with sweat. She sat in his lap as he traced his fingers along her smooth waist, back, shoulders, and round hips. The sensations were burned in his mind: the way her curls draped over him like a cotton blanket, her soft breasts, rosy nipples, and even the delicate texture of the hair between her legs.

His lower abdomen tightened in hopeless longing. With a desperate groan, he leaped to his feet, startling the junior knight who had just walked in bearing a plate of food.

“Are you leaving, Commander?”

“I’m going to patrol the perimeter again,” Riftan replied curtly.

He strode out of the cottage without his coat, straight into the snowstorm raging outside. He welcomed the stabbing cold against the fire searing his skin. He stood in the snow, staring at the dimly lit cottage. Even just knowing she was near made him feel as if he were being burned alive.

All this time, he had fought to keep his thoughts from straying to her. Even the simple memory of her smile was torment enough. He thought of her cheerful voice, infuriating stubbornness, and reckless behavior that, more often than not, drove him to the brink of madness.

It was better not to feel anything at all. Yet, whenever he tried to smother his emotions, she always managed to shake his resolve with no effort at all. It frustrated him to no end.

Will I be able to contain myself until this expedition is over?

He scrubbed his face again and paced near the cottages. What reason was there for him to reject Hebaron's suggestion? Maximilian was his wife, and he no longer wished to be separated from her. He wanted to hold her tight, to kiss her to his heart's content. He wanted to make love until they were both exhausted. He wanted to fall asleep with her under the sheets, lulled by her voice, and be greeted by her face in the morning.

But he knew giving in to his desires would completely break his willpower. Even now, he could barely contain the urge to whisk her back to Anatol. He stared at her cottage in a kind of silent penance before trudging away.



The expeditionary party continued north along the Rongel Mountains, which separated Balto from Livadon. They suffered two further monster encounters along the way. However, thanks to the combined might of the Remdragon and Temple Knights, there were no grave injuries. They eventually reached the northern plain on the other side of the mountain valley.

A strange sense of awe filled Maxi as she gazed over the vast, glistening snowfield. She felt as if she were standing on a blank parchment made for giants.

Kuahel Leon swept his eyes across the barren silver ridge.

“The Pamela Plateau lies on the other side of this plain.”

Chapter 37

As Kuahel tugged his chestnut warhorse's head to the side, it emitted an angry snort. Maxi watched the Temple Knight firmly rein in his testy mount and nudge it in a slow walk over to them.

"The horses are tired. We will take a brief reprieve."

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, the mages slid off their mounts. Maxi gladly leaped down from Rem as well. They had spent more time on horseback than the ground over the last few weeks. She had grown quite skilled at riding, though it did not mean she was any less sore after hours of balancing on a galloping creature.

She massaged her throbbing thighs, then untied her bag and saddle from Rem's back. Ulyseon hurried over to attend to her, heaving a disgruntled sigh as he got close.

"You are making it very difficult for me to do my duties as your personal guard, my lady."

"I'm sure maintaining vigilance at all times is hard enough. Let me take care of the menial tasks on my own."

Before the young knight could say any more, Maxi put her pack aside and led Rem to a wagon. Ulyseon followed her, mumbling under his breath.

They pulled out a sack of fodder to feed the horses, then proceeded to rest behind the windbreak the knights had erected. Though the day was freezing, beads of sweat formed on Maxi's forehead as she tended to the horses. Traversing the barren northland in the middle of winter, when both grass and water were hard to come by, was far more difficult than she had anticipated.

Royald was thawing himself by the fire. He called out, "Sludge, enough of that. Come rest."

When Ulyseon gave him a sharp look, the mage coughed and said more courteously, “We’ll be setting out again after lunch. You mustn’t exhaust yourself.”

It appeared the mages were still coming to terms with the revelation that their peer they had wantonly deemed “Sludge” was, in fact, a high-born lady and the wife of the greatest knight in the continent. After bobbing her head at Royald, Maxi tethered Rem in front of the windbreak and settled by the fire. Ulyseon reappeared not long after bearing their food rations.

“My lady,” he said indignantly. “Why do these people keep calling you Sludge?”

“Because... of the magic properties I can use. I’m an earth mage, but I also have a modest affinity to water. It’s considered a rare combination... hence the harmless teasing.”

Though she had always hated the name, Maxi tried to sound unbothered so as not to cause a fuss. She was worried Ulyseon might start a fight with the mages. Placating him with a smile, she began eating the thick stew he had brought her.

The sensation of the hot liquid warming her stomach was euphoric. After the cold weather had frozen their bread, meat, cheese, and butter, making everything impossible to even bite through, they had dumped it all into a boiling pot. Despite the lackluster culinary effort that had gone into it, the resulting stew was rather savory.

“Have you seen Riftan?” Maxi asked, chewing a piece of meat. “Do you know what he’s doing?”

Whenever the expeditionary party stopped its march, the knights did not rest. Instead, they set about retrieving and lighting braziers, erecting windbreaks, searching for much-needed water, and scouting the area for monsters. Only after that did they finally sit down to eat.

Worried that Riftan might be skimping on sustenance, Maxi eyed the group of Remdragon Knights.

“The commander is over there butting heads with the Temple Knight.”

When Maxi turned to face Hebaron, the burly knight was chomping on a cut of frozen jerky. He pointed away with his thumb. Maxi squinted over to see Riftan and Kuahel seated at opposite ends of a table with a map spread between them. Though they were quite a distance away, she could tell they were indeed engaged in a battle of nerves.

Arriving after Hebaron, Garrow shook his head. “They are arguing about which route to take. It’s rather terrifying to watch. I had no idea they were so ill-disposed to each other.”

“It is that Temple Knight who’s trying to pick a fight with Sir Riftan,” Ulyseon retorted, leaping to Riftan’s defense. “I would wager he’s still angry about his defeat all those years ago. He is a petty man, that fellow.”

Maxi flushed as she was reminded of the obscenities she had flung at Riftan, though she knew Ulyseon had blurted out the word without much thought.

He added darkly, “It’s usually the beaten dog that barks the loudest.”

“Again with the biting remarks,” Hebaron said. He shoved the remaining jerky into his mouth and clicked his tongue. “Go easier on the man. It’s not as if the Holy Sword acts that way without reason. It’s a clash of personalities, to be sure, but we all know our commander refuses to listen to anyone if he thinks he’s right. Three times the paladin’s been driven up the wall after the Remdragon Knights broke an agreement with some crazy antic.”

Hebaron raised three fingers.

“Of course, our commander was right in all three instances, but as the man in charge of this expedition, the wayward Remdragon Knights can only be a thorn in his side.”

“That proves how petty he is,” Ulyseon said with a cynical snort. “He dared to question Sir Riftan’s judgment. *That* is

where he went wrong. He should have simply followed our commander's instructions from the start."

Maxi rolled her eyes. It seemed Ulyseon's loyalty to his commander had turned into blind obedience while she had been away. He genuinely seemed to believe that no greater knight existed.

Though she wholeheartedly agreed, she did not think it prudent to flaunt such an opinion when they were bound to cooperate with the Temple Knights for the next few months. The paladins warranted respect simply by virtue of being God's representatives.

She was about to tell Ulyseon this when Hebaron spoke.

"If we do nothing, I bet they'll keep this up until we set out again. What do you say to dissuading them, my lady?"

"M-Me?"

Maxi faltered. While Riftan no longer blatantly ignored her, he had yet to show her the same level of affection as he once had. He responded when she spoke to him, but he still held her at arm's length. That was somehow more hurtful.

Was he still angry with her? Or had his affection for her diminished? She was wallowing in these heavy thoughts when Hebaron spoke in a coaxing tone.

"I'm sure the commander will listen to you, my lady. If you don't hurry, he might miss his chance to eat."

Hebaron's final words made Maxi get to her feet, and she ran over to where Miriam was distributing rations. She asked for another bowl of stew and watched the mage wordlessly fill one for her. After staring down at it for a moment, she pushed the bowl back.

"Please add more meat and vegetables."

Looking irritated, Miriam ladled more into the bowl. Maxi carried the stew to where Riftan sat glaring at Kuahel, his arms crossed. His brow furrowed as he saw her approach.

Why does he always frown like that whenever he sees me?

“I heard you hadn’t eaten... so I brought you some food.”

“I’m fine. You have it. We’re still talking,” Riftan replied brusquely before returning his attention to Kuahel.

Maxi followed his gaze, glancing at the Temple Knight, before stubbornly setting the bowl before Riftan.

“Y-You can resume your conversation later. I’ve already eaten, so go on and eat as well. You’ve been up since dawn and going about on an empty stomach. You must be starving.”

“I said I’m fi—”

“If you will not have it, then allow me,” Kuahel cut in.

Dumbfounded, Maxi looked at the Temple Knight, who was staring tauntingly at Riftan. His eyes swung to her, and his tone was awkwardly polite when he spoke.

“Would that be all right?”

She nodded, unable to bring herself to say no. Just as she was about to hand over the bowl begrudgingly, Riftan grabbed her arm.

“I changed my mind,” he growled. “I’ll have it.”

Looking embarrassed, Maxi glanced at Kuahel and moved the bowl back to Riftan. She silently chided herself for not bringing two servings with her. The Temple Knight seemed indifferent to the stew as he rose.

“Seeing as you need to eat, let us end this fruitful conversation here.”

“We have yet to agree on—”

“My answer remains the same. I have no intention of changing course. If you cannot accept that, you and your men are free to take whichever route you wish. I must say, for someone who was an unwelcome addition, you certainly have a lot of demands.”

“You bloody—”

Riftan bit back his outburst and looked at Maxi, the corners of his mouth still twitching with suppressed obscenities. After quietly gazing down at him, Kuahel left to join his knights.

Maxi watched as Riftan glared after the Temple Knight commander. As soon as he felt her eyes on him, he dropped her arm as though he had been burned. He picked up the bowl and walked over to the Remdragon Knights.

An anxious explanation tumbled out as she trailed him. “I apologize... for interrupting... w-while you were having an important conversation. Sir Hebaron informed me you hadn’t eaten, so I—”

“It’s fine. We weren’t discussing anything important.”

After throwing Hebaron a barbed look, Riftan dragged a pail in front of a campfire to sit on. Maxi quickly brought another one and seated herself close to him.

“Would you like me to bring you some beer? Th-They’re also roasting bread and bacon over there. Would you like some of that too?”

“This is plenty.”

“But... you usually eat more than that.”

“I tire more easily if I’ve had too much. It’s better to eat in moderation while on the move.”

“Oh... I see.”

An awkward silence passed between them, and Riftan kept his gaze fixed on his bowl as he ate. It was almost always like this when she did not make conversation first. Maxi cast her eyes to the ground to hide her disappointment. She scraped the snow with her boot, then looked up at him once more. In that short moment, a lock of hair had slipped down over his eyes.

After a brief hesitation, Maxi reached out and swept his hair aside. Riftan lurched back from her, startled. It was as if she had threatened him with a knife.

Stunned by his overreaction, she sat and watched as he raked his hair back with a stony expression. He continued eating without another word. It was clear he was trying to finish the stew as quickly as possible so he could take his leave.

“Um... I think I will go over there, s-so take your time,” she said, keeping her voice upbeat to mask the hurt.

Not far away, Hebaron had been observing the pair. For whatever reason, the knight burst into laughter as Maxi rose. She scowled at him before making her way to Rem.

Riftan’s ambiguous treatment of her continued even after that day. Though he did not seem to be purposefully avoiding her any longer, he still kept his distance.

Maxi’s patience was slowly wearing thin. She followed him around and tried to attend to him whenever she could, but despite her efforts to close the rift between them, his face only grew more and more austere. She could not understand why.

If she had the courage, she would have asked him outright. However, given that she was too scared of his answer, she could not say it aloud. She strove to be more agreeable while inwardly hoping that his treatment of her would naturally improve over time.

Once, she even mustered the confidence to offer to heal him. He had not responded with words, only with a look that said, *Don’t be ridiculous*. Her face had flushed immediately.

She knew he had no need for healing or restorative magic, but she could not stop thinking up excuses to be physical with him. Riftan had not so much as brushed her pinky since their kiss, and he never allowed himself closer to her than necessary.

The tables had turned, and she was now the one burning with passion. She was so desperate to touch him that she even began to harbor a wicked hope that he would sustain a minor wound.

Chapter 38

“The mana concentration is oddly sparse.”

Maxi had been lost in her thoughts when she jerked her head up at the gruff voice.

Wrapped in a fur coat, Armin Dolph was looking around the misty terrain, holding what appeared to be a gray pearl dangling from a chain. Maxi regarded the object with curiosity.

“What is that in your hand?”

“It’s a mana gauge made of fairy egg.”

Armin moved the thumbnail-sized orb closer to Maxi.

“Fairy eggs have mana-absorbing properties, so they’re often used for this purpose. This one’s made with an unfertilized one, but it still retains those attributes. Do you see how pale it is? Normally, it’s a rosy pearl, but it turns vivid red when the mana concentration is high. This color means there’s little here.”

“We’d best conserve our reserves, then,” Anette remarked with a sigh. “Though I guess we haven’t needed to use magic thus far anyway.”

“That’s going to change,” intoned a hoarse voice.

Maxi looked back to find Albern scribbling into a yellow parchment with a charcoal stub.

Shoving the parchment into the leather bag at his side, he said flatly, “Our magic will be indispensable during the investigation. As powerful as divine magic is, its use is limited to purification, healing, and fighting. We, on the other hand, are capable of more diverse and specialized magic.”

Albern then pulled a map from his bag. Maxi surmised that he must be recording their route as they went.

“We will be required to use more magic from now on, and I’m sure we will rely heavily on your tracing spells. No one can investigate a terrain better than the mages of Nome Hall —”

A violent gust stirred the heavy fog across the path, blocking their vision. Maxi pulled her hood lower and nervously glanced around. Soon, bright flames flared all around them as the Temple Knights lit torches to illuminate the way. Kuahel raised a blazing torch in the air and calmly urged the party to continue their march.

“We are almost at the Plateau. We will keep riding.”

As she rode faster, Maxi glanced in Riftan’s direction. Only his pitch-black hair and blue cloak were visible as a shadowy figure in the distance.

She spurred Rem on so as not to lag behind. The wind was growing increasingly fierce. To make matters worse, it had begun to snow. The firestone nestled in her chest did nothing to stave off the bone-deep cold. She wished for a place they could take shelter, even for a short while, but the vast emptiness stretched as far as the eye could see.

She blew into her gloved hands and tried to warm her freezing ears and cheeks. Just then, there was a deep growl, and a massive creature burst from the fog.

The knights drew their swords. A beastly grumble and the sharp sound of steel mingled in the howling wind.

“W-What is it this time? What’s attacking us?” Royald cried out shakily as he cast a barrier.

Maxi hurriedly cast a shield as well, her eyes darting around in panic. Though she could make out hazy shapes surrounding them, the misty conditions made it impossible to discern what they were.

The knights appeared unruffled, dispatching the beasts with cold proficiency. They swung their swords as the beasts came hurtling toward them like cannonballs. One of the monsters

crashed to the ground in a spray of dark red blood. It was only then that Maxi was able to see their attackers.

The monster splayed on the ground was a massive wolf the size of a bull. Its front leg was twisted, and she watched in horror as it writhed in pain. It did not look like a man-eating wolf. Long, pointed horns protruded from its enormous head, which was covered in brittle gray fur. Its eyes were crimson like two pools of blood.

When it gave a ferocious growl at Kuahel, the Temple Knight ruthlessly hurled his chained hook and finished off the monster.

“They are fenrirs!” Riftan’s voice echoed through the mist. “Be careful of their breath!”

At the same time, the wind picked up, and the white tendrils around them converged into a denser fog. It dawned on Maxi that this strange weather was the product of the monsters’ magic. A chill ran down her spine. All at once, the monsters surrounding them lunged. The intensifying blizzard reduced them to blurry outlines.

Maxi strengthened her shield, growing increasingly anxious as she listened to the agitated cries of the horses, the whizzing blades, and the knights’ bellows. The monsters growled and barked like cracking thunder in a deliberate attempt to scare the horses. She struggled to calm a terrified Rem when she tried to flee.

Suddenly, golden flames shot up around them, lighting up the fog. Maxi turned her head to the source of the spell. With one hand flung above his head, Ruth drew a golden rune in the air. The flames blazed as he infused more mana into the rune. Suddenly fearful, the monsters retreated and disappeared into the blizzard.

Maxi finally let out the breath she had been holding. When the dense fog magically melted away, she saw seven massive wolves strewn over the ground, spewing blood.

Riftan dislodged a spear from one of them. Maxi scrutinized him from head to toe as he took stock of the situation. Despite her previous hope, intense relief flooded her when she saw that he was unharmed. Just as the tension finally eased from her shoulders, a distraught voice called out from behind.

“Damn it! The wagons!”

Maxi’s head whirled around. Four of the eight baggage wagons had toppled over. The mages closest to them hastily dismounted and tried to salvage the sacks of food and partly smashed water barrels rolling on the ground. However, the spilled food was the least of their problems.

Maxi frantically glanced around with an ashen face. “W-Where are the horses?”

“Carried off by the fenrirs, most likely.”

Kuahel’s calm answer came from nearby. While the Temple Knight inspected the wagons, Calto laid into the mages.

“How could you have let this happen?!”

“I cast a shield!” said Nevin, who had been at the rear. His frantic tone died into a whisper the more he went on. But... it must have been too weak... due to the sparse mana around here.”

A heavy silence fell over them. They had lost eight horses in one fell swoop. A feeling of devastation had begun to set in when Maxi heard someone click their tongue.

“They crept up on the wagons in the blizzard while our attention was focused on the skirmish at the front. How cunning,” Hebaron remarked, scratching his chin.

Elliot, who was right behind him, heaved a sigh. “Now’s not the time for marveling, Sir Hebaron. What are we going to do with all these supplies?”

Riftan trotted to them on Talon and said evenly, “Load as much as you can into the remaining wagons, and have some of the men ride double so their horses can be used to pull them.”

“Will that be all right when the horses are already tired? We don’t know how much more we’ll have to ride.”

“There is a place not far from here where we can rest,” Kuahel cut in. “The men will only have to share their steeds until then.”

The Temple Knight pointed to a rock face that rose above the white ridge like a castle wall. Maxi could only vaguely make it out from this distance. As she studied it, her eyes grew wide. The monsters’ dense fog had wholly obscured the entire structure.

“Then let’s get moving before the monsters return for the rest of our horses.”

Hebaron nimbly hopped down from his warhorse and easily raised one of the toppled wagons with one hand. Maxi was briefly stunned by the knight’s unbelievable strength before she dismounted to help move the supplies.

Two of the four fallen wagons were unusable, their wheels having been splintered into pieces. They had no choice but to abandon them and divide the supplies among the remaining wagons. It was also decided that the female mages, who were lighter than most in the party, would ride with the knights to free up the horses.

Maxi gazed expectantly at Riftan, hoping he would ask her to ride with him, but he only stared at the rock face with his lips pressed in a thin line.

After flicking baffled glances at his commander, Ulyseon raised his hand and walked his horse forward. Much to Maxi’s relief, Hebaron grabbed the young knight by the nape and clapped a hand over his mouth. Pretending not to notice their small scuffle, Maxi continued to look at Riftan imploringly.

“Ruth, you’re to ride with me.”

Maxi was stupefied. Ruth, in the middle of a huge yawn, jerked his head to look at Riftan with an expression that said he was imagining things.

“I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“We need horses to pull the wagons. I want you to offer yours and ride with me.”

There was a warning in his voice that very clearly told the mage not to make him repeat himself. After blinking several times, Ruth’s face twisted into a scowl.

“We would be a right eyesore of a pair! Could Lady Calypse not ride with you?”

“Her horse isn’t strong enough to pull a wagon,” said Riftan calmly.

Ruth’s head swiveled to Maxi’s slender mare. Though the elegantly proportioned horse had powerful legs and exceptional speed, it was true that she lacked the build to pull a heavy wagon.

Acknowledging Riftan’s point, the anger seeped out of Ruth’s voice as he said, “Then, I shall ride her ladyship’s horse, and she can ride with you. That would certainly be easier on Talon as well.”

“You’re not much heavier than her, so cut the drivel and get on!”

Maxi gaped in shock. She simply could not let the remark slide.

“H-How could you say such a thing? I am *m-much* lighter than Ruth!”

Riftan ignored her and continued to glare at the sorcerer. Finally giving in to the pressure, Ruth dismounted and trudged over to Talon with a disgusted look on his face. Paying no mind to Maxi’s fuming, Riftan helped the sorcerer settle into the saddle behind him, then trotted to the head of the party. Maxi watched them go in disbelief.

Hebaron clicked his tongue. “That ailment of his is worse than I thought.”

When she gave the knight a baffled look, Hebaron shrugged as if to say it was nothing.

“Well, the pairs have all been decided. We should hurry before the day is out.”

Sensing his evasion, Maxi narrowed her eyes. Still, she had to acknowledge that he was right. She spurred Rem onward. The party set out for the rock face when they finished loading their luggage onto the wagons. Though their destination had appeared to be fairly close, the sky was dyed indigo by the time they reached it. Exhausted, Maxi looked up. The rock face towered so high that she could not see the top, even with her head bent back.

“It is this way,” said Kuahel.

He led them to an opening in the rock wall. The mages lit the way with small balls of light in their palms while the knights kept a vigilant eye out for signs of danger, their weapons drawn. They carefully wound through the ravine before the path eventually widened. Soon after, they found themselves in a spacious area within the chasm. Kuahel gave the orders to halt.

Chapter 39

“We will make camp here for the night.”

As soon as the words were out of the Temple Knight’s mouth, Ruth leaped off Riftan’s steed. Sidina chortled, evidently finding the sight comical. Maxi, on the other hand, did not feel amused at all. After sullenly staring at the back of Riftan’s head, she climbed down from Rem and surveyed the ravine.

The rock walls on either side arched inward as they rose, almost obscuring the sky completely. The narrow passageway leading out blocked the violent gusts raging outside. Though it felt cramped for a party of nearly two hundred people, the fact that it sheltered them from the wind and snow was enough to make it a lavish sanctuary.

“Maximilian, can you check for monsters hibernating underground?” Anton yelled as he helped Calto dismount.

She sensed Riftan turning to look at her. Pleased by his disgruntled expression, she made a point of ignoring him and nodded happily.

“Yes.”

“I’ll help,” Armin said, hopping down from his horse.

While the pair scouted the ravine with tracing magic, the knights and the other mages began setting up camp.

Maxi extended her mana web as wide as possible and did not rest until she had scoured deep into the earth. By the time she sat down to rest by the campfire, her hands felt frozen solid. She was holding them up to the flames to thaw them when Sidina, who was on dinner duty that night, shoved a large bowl of stew in front of her.

“Here, this is for Sir Riftan.”

Maxi instinctively accepted the bowl and was about to take it to him when she came to a halt. Why bother with someone who had chosen a prickly nettle of a man as his riding partner over her?

Returning the bowl, Maxi grumbled, “W-Why are you giving me his ration?”

“Why? Because you always take his food to him.”

“Well, not anymore,” Maxi replied, raising her voice loud enough for Riftan to hear. She pretended to poke the fire with a twig.

Rolling her eyes, Sidina shrugged and called for Ulyseon, who was securing a tent to the ground. She handed the bowl to the young knight, who promptly rushed off to deliver it.

Maxi watched Riftan out of the corner of her eye. He accepted the bowl, his face impassive, and settled near his tent. The sight quelled her boiling anger, and a strange sense of sadness took its place.

Once upon a time, he would have been beside himself trying to appease her. Maxi’s throat tightened as she recalled his tortured face after a few days of her refusing to look at him. Perhaps too much had changed in three years. She stared forlornly into the crackling fire for a while before fetching her supper and shoveling it down by the spoonful.

From that day on, Maxi stopped trying to close the distance between them. She did not wish to pine after someone who made it abundantly clear he did not want her company. On the odd occasion they ended up interacting, she could see him forcing his replies. It was so painful to watch that she endeavored to keep out of his way as much as possible.

Noticing the change in her, Hebaron quietly approached and said teasingly, “My lady, have you given up chasing around the commander like a duckling?”

At Maxi’s glare, Hebaron theatrically hunched his shoulders and pretended to be intimidated.

“My word, it seems you’re livid with him this time.”

“Sir Hebaron... You seem to be finding this situation incredibly amusing.”

The knight’s grin waned slightly at Maxi’s barbed tone. Scratching the back of his head, he said sheepishly, “It was not my intention to tease, my lady. I genuinely wish for the two of you to—”

“How much longer do we have to go?”

Riftan’s sharp voice cut through whatever Hebaron had been about to say. Looking ahead, Maxi spotted the back of his head, which rose above the group of knights. Though he was some distance away from the Temple Knight commander, she could tell he was angrier than a wild dog stung by a bee.

“We’re nearly out of firewood and food,” said Riftan, his icy voice echoing around the ravine. “We’ll be stranded out here if the snow gets heavier.”

“We are nearly there,” Kuahel said, sounding annoyed. “We should be at the Plateau before the day is out.”

Hebaron heaved a sigh as he watched them. “I fear swords will be drawn if this continues. Our commander has been more irritable than usual lately.”

He gave Maxi a meaningful look as if to blame Riftan’s ill humor on her.

She could not help the doubt creeping onto her face as she replied, “He must be on edge... because the path is becoming more perilous.”

Riftan was not the only one in less than high spirits. After an all-day trek through the winding ravine, a rocky mountain path covered in sleet had awaited them on the other side. Following the Temple Knights’ lead, the expeditionary party had climbed the steep slopes while navigating the wagons through the uneven terrain. It was no surprise that the mages were visibly worn out.

To make matters worse, they had been forced to use firewood to melt snow so they could water the horses, burning through their supply much faster. Since food and firewood would be difficult to come by at the Pamela Plateau, the mages and the knights were becoming increasingly concerned over their dwindling supplies. Hence Riftan's displeasure was understandable.

"I do not wish to trouble him further..." she said listlessly, "when I'm the reason he joined this grueling expedition in the first place. And... I'd rather not cause another scene."

Hebaron opened his mouth to say something but stopped himself. Maxi pulled her hood down and urged Rem forward.

The sky was overcast, and snowflakes mingled with the wind. Another heavy snowfall was on the cards. After gazing up in dismay, Maxi swept her eyes across the steep mountain slopes — which looked as if they had been chiseled into formation — the bottomless ravines, and the snowy summits.

Gauging distances within the fog that carpeted the mountainside proved incredibly challenging. Some summits, seemingly far away at first, turned out to be much closer, while others were further than they appeared. It felt as if they were lost in a vast maze of snow, ice, and rock.

After riding for some time, Kuahel stopped at the edge of a steep valley. "We must descend here."

Maxi's eyes widened as she peered over. Though thick fog obscured the base of the valley, she could tell it was a long way down. How were they supposed to descend such a sheer slope? She was turning to the Temple Knight commander in apprehension when she heard Riftan's incensed voice.

"Are you out of your mind?"

"We could circle the mountain, but that would take fifteen extra days. This is the fastest route," Kuahel replied irritably, then turned his head to the mages. "Can you lower the wagons with magic?"

“That won’t be too difficult, but if we were to be attacked by monsters on our way down...”

“You can scout the area with magic and take your time with the descent. The Temple Knights will make sure the way ahead is clear first.”

Calto scanned the faces of the other mages with a hesitant expression before nodding. “Very well. We shall lower you and your men now.”

“No, we can get down on our own. We will await you at the bottom, so lower the wagons to where the lights are.”

Maxi stifled a shriek as Kuahel Leon launched down the slope that was not much different than a cliff. The Temple Knights galloped into the shrouded valley after him. Her jaw dropped of its own accord at their unfathomable riding skills.

“It’s nothing the Remdragon Knights can’t do, my lady,” Ulyseon grumbled.

When the young knight rode closer to the edge to prove his assertion, Riftan promptly stopped him.

“The mages will go first. We will descend once everyone else has reached the bottom.” He then turned to Ruth, who was riding with Garrow, and barked, “You will go down with the mages.”

“Why would they need another when there are nineteen of ___”

Riftan’s frightening glare cut short Ruth’s complaint. Sighing, the sorcerer slid off Garrow’s horse.

The mages began lowering the wagons when the Temple Knights’ fires flared to life at the bottom of the valley. Levitation was a simple spell, but they were forced to use more mana than normally required because of the scarcity in the area. The mages took turns in an effort to conserve their energy.

When all of the horses and wagons were safely at the bottom, the mages descended the valley in groups of four.

Maxi ended up in Lucain, Kiel, and Ruth's group. Just as she was about to set off, someone grabbed her shoulder. She looked up to find Riftan bending over on Talon.

"You will go down with me," he said woodenly as though commanding a subordinate.

Maxi blinked. Why would he ask her to ride with him after barely acknowledging her presence for days? A hint of nervousness rose on his face when she only stared back wordlessly.

"What are you waiting for? Get on."

His grip on her shoulder tightened. She frowned, too upset with him to readily accept his offer. Taking a leaf out of his book, she gently pushed his hand away and kept her tone somewhat cordial.

"Th-Thank you, but I shall have to refuse. I can... make my own way."

Riftan stiffened ever so slightly. For a brief moment, she regretted rejecting him. She slid on a mask of indifference and turned away. Soon after, she climbed down the valley with the other mages. Even though Lucain summoned a ball of fire to light their path, it was still not enough to pierce through the haze. Maxi began to feel a creeping fear as the fog thickened to the point where they could not see their own hands in front of their faces.

Again, regret at not taking the ride with Riftan pricked at her, but she quickly pushed it from her mind. She slowly picked her way down, trying her best not to slip.

At long last, her foot touched the bottom. Her whole body felt tense from the nerve-racking descent, and she sank to the ground in exhaustion. When she finally looked up after catching her breath, she saw Kuahel Leon mounted on his chestnut horse, a blue flame burning in his hand. He regarded her briefly before returning his gaze to the valley.

After confirming that all the mages had reached the bottom, the Remdragon Knights began their descent. Despite being at a

safe distance from the landing spot, the mages still leaped back in fright. The sight of dozens of knights galloping down the slope at an earth-rumbling speed was frightening to behold. They rode down in five to six successions of twenty men, and Riftan was the last to charge through the fog.

He looked around to make sure everyone was whole, then asked, “Where to now?”

Kuahel pointed up ahead. “We’ve arrived.”

Maxi squinted, but she could only vaguely make out gray boulders and sheer walls through the fog. Where were the ruins? Suspicion began to creep in. The Temple Knights stepped forward one by one and started lighting fires around the valley floor. Eventually, the flames revealed the hazy outline of a disintegrated stone structure.

A pillar carved from stone lay on the ground, bricks scattered around it. Calto walked over to the rubble to study it closer.

“Are these... the ruins left by the dark mages?”

“Part of them,” Kuahel replied calmly before spurring his horse forward.

For a moment, Maxi was struck dumb. The Temple Knights’ flickering lights revealed dozens of white stone buildings around a large reservoir that glistened like jade.

She was taking in the unexpected magnitude of the ruins when Riftan dismounted. He crouched down on one knee in front of the reservoir. Removing his glove, he dipped his hand into the water.

“It’s a hot spring.”

Chapter 40

Riftan surveyed the reservoir, where steaming jade water trickled out of a small canal and into each of the stone houses.

He nodded as if coming to a conclusion. “This natural source of heat is likely what made it possible for them to survive in such a desolate place.”

“I understand how they kept warm, but... what about food?” Ulyseon asked, cocking his head.

“What else could they hunt in such a wasteland but monsters?” Riftan said cynically.

Maxi hunched her shoulders. The consumption of monster blood or flesh was considered an abominable sin even by the Reformed Church. Maxi nervously studied Kuahel’s emotionless face. The Temple Knight pretended not to hear Riftan and calmly steered his horse around to Calto.

“There’s a particular place we’d like you to investigate first,” Kuahel said, nodding in the direction.

As they followed the Temple Knight, the mages’ eyes were alight with curiosity. Maxi trailed behind on Rem, taking in the glimmering, mist-shrouded ruins. Eroding debris was strewn over the ground, and the remnants of a stone wall hemmed the reservoir. Most of the stone buildings had flat roofs with walls of stone and clay, similar to the architectural style seen in the time of the Ancient States.

When they had passed about ten of the stone structures, Kuahel halted his mount. “Through here.”

Maxi turned to face the front. They had stopped before a towering rock wall. Within the chasm splitting it stood two pillars around a wide, arched entrance.

Kuahel dismounted and illuminated the gloomy interior. “Inside, you will find dozens of rooms intricately connected like an ant nest. Each chamber contains what appears to be a

magical device and a mural of ancient text. We were unable to enter those that were sealed with powerful magic, but the highly unnatural mana flow we detected from them point to there being magical devices in them as well.”

“Where would you like us to start?”

“Please follow me.”

At Kuahel’s beckoning, the Temple Knights lit torches and secured them to the cave walls. Maxi got down from her horse and carefully peered in. The ceiling was higher than it appeared from the outside, and with numerous stone pillars lining the periphery, the enormous space looked stable. There was no doubt a talented mason had been among the dark mages who had lived here.

Overcome with awe, Maxi was examining one of the entrance pillars when someone grabbed her shoulder. She turned around.

Riftan had walked up behind her without her knowing. He surveyed the arch with a stony expression, then pulled her back and strode in first.

“We should clear the area first,” he said.

“They will be accompanied by dozens of paladins, including myself. There is no need for such caution,” Kuahel said flatly, looking irritated. “If you truly can’t find yourself something to do, you may stand guard out here to make sure nothing gets in.”

“You want me to leave this to you and your men when we have no idea what might be—”

“It appears there’s been a misunderstanding,” Kuahel said icily, his voice low. “I may have begrudgingly allowed you to join us, but *I* am the commanding officer of this investigation. That means you have no say in this matter.”

Riftan’s face became dangerously still. Worried they might brandish swords, Maxi gulped, feeling the tension reach a boiling point.

Calto gave a deep sigh. “Both of you, please, stop. The church promised to keep us safe during the investigation, and we agreed to undertake this perilous journey because we believed them. And yet, look at yourselves. How can we rest assured of our safety when the people who should be working together to protect us are at each other’s throats?”

Kuahel’s impassive mask slid into place at the elder’s reproof, and a tense silence fell over them. Maxi nervously studied the three men. Just then, Ruth elbowed his way through the mages and placed himself between the two commanders.

“Master Calto is right. Nothing good will come of us being divided in this wasteland.”

Calto shot daggers at his nephew, silently warning him it was not his place to interfere.

Ignoring the elder, Ruth calmly went on, “Both of you should know well the destruction of internal strife. Let’s not waste energy on this pointless power struggle and aim for a compromise. Since the Temple Knights are familiar with the layout, it is right to have them lead the search. In exchange, the Temple Knights should allow a few Remdragon Knights to join. I see no reason any paladin should be against this solution.”

A faint crease formed between Kuahel’s brows. Seemingly tired of arguing, he nodded his assent. “Do as you please.”

The Temple Knight commander then spun on his heels and stalked through the arched entrance. The mages, who had so far been silent spectators, followed suit.

Maxi searched Riftan’s face as she tentatively walked in. Though he was clearly unhappy, he begrudgingly ordered his men to explore the desolate village, then entered the cave with Ulyseon and a few other knights. With a sigh of relief, Maxi chased after the mages.

The ruins encompassed a greater area than they had ever imagined. After going down a long passageway, they found

themselves in a vast, circular hall that could comfortably fit hundreds. Dotted along the opposite end of the hall were eight passageway entrances. Kuahel pulled out a folded map and spread it open.

“This is a map of the rooms at the end of each passageway. Please refer to it during your investigation.”

“What are these rooms marked in black?”

“Those are the sealed chambers we were unable to enter.”

“We will start with them.”

“We would like to see what’s written in the murals first,” said Elena.

They split into smaller groups to investigate different rooms. Maxi and Anette were tasked with looking through one that contained a magical device. Ulyseon, Riftan, and the paladin Vinther accompanied them.

Anette snuck up behind Maxi as they walked. She leaned close to whisper, “Have you not reconciled with your husband yet?”

Fearing that Riftan might have heard, Maxi forced an awkward laugh.

“Th-There is no problem at all. You don’t have to worry about us... so please concentrate on our task.”

Anette went to say something before closing her mouth. During the awkward silence that followed, they arrived at a room that stretched ten kevettes high^[13] and thirty kevettes wide^[14].

When Kuahel illuminated the space by securing a torch next to a small vent, Riftan and Ulyseon searched for any lurking monsters. Meanwhile, Maxi and Anette began their inspection. There were complicated runes and ancient characters etched onto the floor and ceiling. One of the walls, however, was entirely covered in a peculiar magical device.

Geometric shapes carved from hundreds of bones were intertwined in a tapestry. Stones, presumably magic in nature, were embedded into the tips of some of the protruding bone pieces. Maxi decided to start her search there.

She probed the stones but could not feel any magic from them, their mana long exhausted.

“What do you think this is made of? I don’t think these are serpend bones,” Anette muttered as she studied the pieces.

Maxi ran her fingers across the dusty surface, knitting her brow. “If not serpend... then they must be worm or wyvern bones. I read once that a large number of them dwell up here in the north.”

“They’re basilisk bones.”

Maxi snapped her head to the sudden voice. Having snuck up behind her again, Riftan reached out to touch an elaborately carved bone in the shape of a snowflake. He brushed away the caked dust and traced his long fingers down the carving’s length, feeling its texture.

“Only basilisk bone gives off such luster. Still, I wasn’t aware any subspecies of the Red Dragon could be found in the north.”

“Have you ever hunted a basilisk, Commander?” Ulyseon asked excitedly.

Riftan slipped his gauntlet back on and said flatly, “I dealt with them frequently in the past. They fetch the highest price among the monsters.”

“But I heard basilisk bone is like steel,” Anette remarked, gazing up in awe. “It must have required extraordinary skill to carve such detail.”

Though the ancient relics did not inspire the same level of awe in Maxi, she still felt intrigued. Removing her glove, she probed the inner workings of the magical device by infusing some of her mana into the stones. She soon realized the structure was too complex for her limited knowledge. Her

expression turned grim. With the device installed deep within a cave, she doubted it was meant as a weapon. It most likely served a defensive purpose or some other type of magic.

She rummaged in her bag for a scrap of parchment and charcoal and began tracing a rough outline of the device's mana circuit. Anette's question echoed down to her from the opposite side of the chamber.

“Found anything?”

“Only that this device... hasn't been used for at least a century,” Maxi replied, shaking her head. “The mana circuit is mostly blocked... so it's difficult to make out the entire structure.”

“Well, its placement alone is a telltale clue of its purpose.”

“It is...?” Maxi said, looking at Anette in surprise.

“It's a record, most likely. The contraption looks similar to magical devices that store and emit light, albeit a thousand times more complicated.”

“So we could learn what the dark mages recorded if we can somehow activate it.”

Maxi's eyes glimmered with excitement as she regarded the hundreds of interlocking bone pieces covering the wall.

Anette clicked her tongue. “Repairing this thing will take longer than a day, that's for sure.”

Vinther, who had been lingering like a shadow along the walls, suddenly spoke. “There are six or so more rooms with similar devices.”

Maxi looked at him in shock, and Anette groaned.

“This expedition isn't over yet.”

They examined the devices until their torches were almost out, after which they were forced to leave the room at Riftan's insistence. When they stepped out of the cave, they found the knights and the other mages preparing supper, the camp already set up.

Calto was listening to the other mages' findings. He spotted Maxi and called over in his solemn voice, "Were you able to learn anything?"

Maxi showed him her illustration of the mana circuit and described the room to him. After studying the sketch closely, Calto motioned with his head for her to rest. She let out a tired sigh and looked behind her. Riftan, who had stuck close to her like a shadow within the cave, had already rejoined the Remdragon Knights. He was currently listening to Elliot's report.

After sneaking glances at his grim face, Maxi settled by the fire with her supper. She was filling her empty stomach with baked sausages and potatoes when Sidina came running toward her.

"Max! Anette! Guess what I found!"

Maxi chewed through a mouthful of potato, eyes bright with curiosity.

Across from her, Anette furrowed her brow. "Did you make some grand discovery?"

"A bath! I found a bath!" Sidina exclaimed, clapping her hands. "There's a large spring bath inside that building over there!"

She flung her arm in the direction of the stone structures by the reservoir. The mages and the knights, who had been expecting a more startling discovery, looked deflated as they resumed their meals. The only one who seemed to match Sidina's excitement was Maxi. To her, the discovery could not have been grander.

Though she had made do with melted snow and a towel throughout the journey, lately, she had not been maintaining herself as frequently due to the freezing weather. After having given up on staying clean, the prospect of a warm bath was music to her ears.

Swallowing dryly, Maxi glanced about. No matter how enticing, however, she still felt averse to the idea of stripping

bare so close to all these men. She nervously searched the faces of the mages and knights.

“I had a look around. It was fairly clean,” Sidina said eagerly, coaxing her on. “You’re dying for a bath too, aren’t you, Max? Come, let’s take one together!”

“What’re you fretting over? Come, come,” said Anette, picking up her bag without a hint of hesitation.

The temptation finally won. Maxi followed Sidina, a change of clothes and a bar of soap tucked under her arm.

The bath was in better condition than she had expected. The building was relatively clean, and the large, stone-tiled tub was filled with hot spring water that trickled in through a small waterway. The women quickly slipped out of their dirty garments. A blissful sigh seeped out of Maxi as she submerged herself up to her chin.

“I wouldn’t mind staying here until Ignisias^[15],” Sidina murmured contentedly. “We’ve never had such lavish baths, even at home.”

“But... there might be another war if we don’t locate the main base of the monster army as soon as possible,” Maxi reminded her despondently. “And it’s not as if we have infinite supplies to last us until summer.”

“Ugh, you wet blanket.”

Looking deflated, Sidina splashed her. Maxi grimaced and retaliated with a bigger splash. After more playful carryings-on and bathing to their hearts’ content, the idea of climbing out was almost painful. Eventually, her overwhelming drowsiness made her haul herself out of the tub. She hastily pulled on her clothes to prevent the chill from setting in. Meanwhile, Sidina and Anette opted to stay a little longer.

Maxi stepped outside to find it snowing. Whiffs of vapor seeped from her mouth as she hurried back along the reservoir. With her firestone choosing that moment to die out, she had no way to fight the cold. Trembling, she was glancing around in

search of her tent when something warm and heavy fell across her shoulders.

She whirled around. Riftan, dressed in nothing but a woolen tunic and black coat, was wrapping a fur cloak around her.

“The women have decided to take that house over there,” he said curtly, pulling the cloak’s hood over her wet hair.

He raised his chin toward a small stone building that looked relatively sturdy. Securing the cloak around her, he began leading her to the house.

She studied his blank face as they walked. His hair was slightly damp, as though he had also taken a bath. She stuck close and surreptitiously breathed in his masculine scent, which smelled faintly of soap and musk. It was how he smelled when they bathed together.

Her heart began to pound painfully as the memories came flooding back. The tip of her fingers tingled with the urge to run them through his damp hair. She longed to fill her lungs with his scent and caress his smooth, taut skin. She leveled an imploring gaze at him, begging him to take her somewhere they could be alone.

However, Riftan escorted her to the house where Elena and Miriam were resting and left for the knights’ barracks without so much as a word goodnight. Her face shadowed in the hood of the fur cloak, Maxi stared resentfully at his back as he walked away.

[1] Approximately 180 centimeters.

[2] Approximately 150 centimeters.

[3] Approximately 210 centimeters.

[4] Approximately 30 centimeters.

[5] The season of repose, equivalent to winter.

- [6] Approximately 150 centimeters.
- [7] The season of repose, equivalent to winter.
- [8] Approximately 180 centimeters.
- [9] The season of water, equivalent to spring.
- [10] Approximately 4.8 meters.
- [11] Approximately 3 meters.
- [12] Approximately 185 meters.
- [13] Approximately 3 meters.
- [14] Approximately 9 meters.
- [15] The season of fire, equivalent to summer.

Also by Suji Kim

There is a mouse in my house (in Korean)

Crime of Crime (in Korean)

Twilight Poem (in Korean)

A Lukewarm Couple (in Korean)

Bongru (in Korean)