

Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 171

It took Max five attempts to finally be able to repel the thin wooden branch. However, it was still not up to the mark for actual use, so after a long and bitter practice, they decided to explore another method of defensive magic. Max, who had been struggling for days memorizing formulas and theories, had her shoulders sag in disappointment, but Ruth was adamant. He did not want to cling to an incompatible method. He didn't bother for a break and immediately jumped to another lecture, drawing a new magic formula on the ground.

"There are two types of defensive spells when it comes to the universe of magic. The first one is an abstract shield and the other one is a physical barrier. Since your shield is practically useless, we have no choice but to learn the other type."

"Then... Do I need to learn a new formula? It... took me a whole week just to memorize the last one..."

"The basic formula is almost identical, so it shouldn't take you long to learn it. Also, this barrier type requires only a quarter of mana compared to the last one."

Max narrowed her eyes and glared at him. "T-then why... didn't you teach me this type of shield in the first place?"

"The magic formula used for abstract shields is less complicated. Unlike a shield that it's formed with the use of pure mana, a physical barrier transforms tangible elements around you to create a shield. Since it involves the manipulation of matter, it involves complex calculations and formulations more difficult than abstract shields."

Ruth explained as he continued to write down formulas on the ground using a wooden stick. Max looked at the overly complicated drawings and her face began to contort in horror.

"What... What if I practice building the abstract shield more? I... I can get better with time."

"That's possible, if the lady will be able to build up her mana pool. But that will take at least a year to happen. The lady needs to learn magic that you can use anytime now. It would be better for you to learn as much magic as possible before I go."

Max looked at Ruth, pulling her eyes away from the complex shapes that made her dizzy when she stared at them.

"Did you... perhaps... receive a royal order to I-leave for the e-expedition?"

“It won’t be long now. I received a message from Livadon yesterday, saying that the situation is getting more serious. The high priests of Osyria are already discussing countermeasures.”

If Osyria was involved, then the obvious conclusion would be to gather reinforcements from each of the seven countries. Max looked anxiously at Ruth.

“How... how long does it take... to get to Livadon?”

“About a month. It would take two weeks on horseback, with no breaks, to reach the border northwest of here. From there, you would have to travel for another ten days by boat. If there are monsters encountered on the way, it will take longer.”

Max’s mood clouded and she sighed just imagining the terrible journey.

“It... it must be a tough journey...”

””” ”

“It really is. Traversing the Lexos Mountains was more than enough for a lifetime of suffering, but now another d**n expedition had to happen! To be honest, I want to be stuck in Anatol for at least ten years.”

Ruth’s shoulder slumped as he lamented. Max was a little worried about the man who couldn’t even be bothered to travel to his room to sleep, and yet would be forced to go on such a long journey. Every corner of the world had monsters lurking and the journey to Livadon would certainly not go smoothly.

“Will it r-really...be alright to take just a few knights...for the expedition...?”

“We can’t take all the knights and leave Anatol unprotected to save Livadon, can we?” Ruth responded sarcastically and quickly finished the formula. “Besides, we are not the only ones responding to Livadon’s call. As we move northwest, knights sent by other countries will join us.”

“Knights... from other countries...?”

“Lord Calypse isn’t the King’s only vassal. On behalf of the King’s command, each Lord shall send his own knights and a large-scale army will be formed. This is the common procedure when reinforcements are sent to allied countries.”

“I... I see...”

“Troops will be dispatched from Whedon, Balto, and Osyria, so no matter how many monsters unite, we can settle the matters by late fall this year.” Seeing his confidence,

Max was able to relax a bit. "When this is all over... I will be able to return to Anatol not later than the start of winter."

"I sincerely hope that will be the case."

Finally finishing the magic formula, Ruth dusted his palms and straightened his back.

"In the meantime, the lady will have to take over my role somehow."

"O-of course... I'll do my best."

Her shoulders hunched with the burden Ruth had placed on her.

"But... there may be situations when it will be difficult for me to handle on my own... before Ruth leaves, shouldn't we get at least... another healer?"

"If I could, I would have already." Ruth sighed and crossed his arms on his chest. "All the magicians are gathering in Livadon because of the chaos the monsters are inflicting. Therefore, the pay for wizards almost doubled, so every wizard is determined to go there. Moreover, the demand for wizards is steep, so no one will be willing to settle in Anatol unless the compensation is beyond generous."

Max's face reflected pure anxiety, the world was more chaotic than she thought. Ruth gave her a serious look.

"That's why we have to work on improving your magic skills as much as possible before I leave. That way, I can have a little peace of mind when I depart."

"I-I'll try." Max replied helplessly as she gazed at the complicated magic formula that spanned out like a spider's web.

Patting her shoulders to cheer her up, Ruth began to explain step by step the principles behind the magic.

Just as Ruth predicted, the royal family's order for reinforcements arrived ten days later. Riftan was the one who received the imperial decree from the royal messenger. He quickly flipped through the contents and immediately summoned the knights to discuss it. Max nervously paced in the room, anxiously awaiting Riftan's return: she needed to know what was the final decision in their response to the order.

He made it clear that he had no intention of leaving Anatol unattended and would order another knight in his place, but depending on what was written in the royal order there was a possibility for him to change his mind. King Ruben could have made it impossible for him to refuse the order.

She clasped her hands, praying. The thought of him leaving her for so long gnawed at her and seemed to burn her nerves. It felt like an eternity before the bedroom door finally opened. Max turned her head to the sound of the door and Riftan entered, looking exhausted. She immediately went to him like a blow of wind.

“What-what... was the decision? What was written in the decree? You-you don't plan to leave Anatol, do you?”

“Hey, take it easy.”

He grabbed her by the shoulders, surprise evident on his face at her sudden outburst, but she grabbed his forearms and advanced nervously.

“Are you leaving for Livadon?”

“I told you I don't plan on doing that.”

A faint smile danced on his lips. Riftan gently removed Max's grip, released the sword tied to his waist and placed it against the bedside. She ran after him and continued hurling questions in his direction.

“Then...what was decided on w-who will go in your place?”

“Uslin Rikaido will lead the expedition.”

Riftan collapsed into a chair and massaged his stiff neck.

“Nirta and Rikaido were barking at each other for the opportunity so much that the knights grew tired. I had to listen to them scream for three hours. My ears are paralyzed from their noise.”

Max gave him a sympathetic look as she remembered how those two knights acted like each other's mortal enemies. If they had been fighting, then their screams would have been thunderous.

“It looks like...Sir R-Rikaido won this time...”

“Nirta was at a disadvantage from the beginning. Allied knights from around the world are merging. A commander with a mercenary background will invite nothing but backlash. Rikaido on the other hand is from a prominent family, it would be most favorable for him to stand as the representative.” There was a hint of mockery in Riftan's tone at the words 'prominent family', but he just clicked his tongue lightly and continued. “Nirta's arguments were strong, but I finally managed to convince him that nothing good comes from internal conflicts. In the end he's a rational person, it doesn't fit his bear-like physique.”

Max nodded as he remembered how meek Hebaron always seemed. “Who else is leaving?”

“Elliot Caron and Lombardo will be assisting Rikaido. There will be ten other knights, twenty apprentice knights, thirty more men on horseback, and a wizard... It has been decided that a total of sixty-four men will depart for Livadon.”

“I... is there anything I can do to help for the p-preparations?”

Riftan frowned slightly at her suggestion. “You don’t have to worry about anything. They are going to pack their own luggage and they are all used to these kinds of tasks.”

“Still... if there is anything they n-need, I’ll have it prepared. They are going on a long journey... There must be s-something I can do to help. “

“Then, tell the servants to prepare an extravagant dinner.” He smiled bitterly.

“The preparations for the expedition will be finished by tomorrow. They are going to leave at dawn the next day, so tomorrow night is the only time for a send-off dinner.”

Max evaluated his expression carefully and acknowledged that he was reluctant to part with his men. She understood him. The bond between them was forged through blood and fire, no one could happily send his knights, who have followed him loyally through life and death, to war. She nodded vigorously, determined to inform the chef to use the best ingredients, expensive spices and the highest quality aged wine for dinner tomorrow.

“I’ll tell them... to prepare only the best and most delicious dishes...”

“Please do.”

With a slight smile, he removed his thick leather boots and untied his tunic-tight waistband. Max took his boots and carefully placed them against the wall and ordered Rudis to prepare a bath.

Meanwhile, Riftan stood in front of the open window and allowed the refreshing night breeze to cool his body. He gazed at his land, covered in the night’s darkness. Max opened the trunk and pulled out a new set of nightwear and paused to look at Riftan’s figure.

His wide back seemed stiffer than usual, and there was a darkness to his sharp features. Her heart sank painfully knowing he was tired and annoyed by all the burdens piling up on his shoulders. Duty to the king, duty as lord, duty as commander of the knights... so many responsibilities. Even a man made of steel would be beaten at that point.

Max hesitated, but then slowly approached him and wrapped her arms around his waist. Riftan turned slightly and looked at her with a soft smile.

“What is this? Are you trying to seduce me again?”

“It’s j-just... you look sad and tired...”

Her face turned red as she pretended to brush dust off his tunic. A light laugh escaped Riftan’s lips. He wrapped her tightly around his strong arms and planted a kiss on her head.

“You’re growing more appealing with each passing day. It turns me on.”

Max buried her head against his broad chest, feeling relieved that the somber atmosphere clouding him had disappeared. She felt sorry for the knights but was overwhelmed by the joy of knowing that Riftan would not be leaving for such a dangerous place.

Note – Nymeria: HOW CUTEeee omg such a nice couple they’ve become! My heart is satisfied <3

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Chapter 172

“Your hair smells good.”

He let out a satisfied moan and buried his face against her shoulder. A red tint spread across Max’s cheeks, glad she applied a few drops of rose-scented oil on it earlier. Savoring the scent, Riftan rubbed the bridge of his nose against her voluminous hair, then slipped an arm under her hips and lifted her so he could embrace her better. Max closed the shutters and leaned closer to his arms as she felt his rough palms caress her nape.

She was floating in complete ecstasy from being so intimately embraced by his large stature. His smooth hair gently tickled her forehead and nose, and his sturdy steel-like arms tightly captured her with a force that didn't inflict her any unease. He brushed his slender fingers against the back of her ear, tucking a stray lock of hair. Max reciprocated, caressing his head, a slender moan escaped from Riftan's lips and their bodies felt like melting at the burning sensual contact.

Max was deeply intoxicated with the scorching heat when they heard a careful, gentle knock on the door, pulling them out of the moment.

"My Lord, the water for the bath is ready."

Riftan let out a long sigh, caressing her b****s with one hand, then planted a kiss on her exposed pale shoulder.

"... I knew this would happen. Our servants seem to always have great timing." He grumbled and carefully placed her back on the floor. "Come in."

The door opened at his command, and the servants went inside carrying a bathtub. Riftan approached the bath and pulled his tunic over his head, looking at Max and smiling seductively.

"It's been a while since we bathed together. Shall we?"

"I... I already washed up..." Max murmured in a whisper as she glanced at the servants pouring cold water into the tub to adjust the water's temperature.

"You can wash again, come here."

He dipped his fingers into the bathtub to check the temperature himself then roughly beckoned the servants to leave. Max approached reluctantly, pretending to be hesitant as the servants rushed out of the room. Riftan gave her a satisfied laugh as Max began to loosen the ties on her dress.

The preparations for the expedition began early at dawn. Max woke up to the commotion outside and leaned out the bedroom window. Servants and knights moved busily to and from the spacious manor soaked in the bluish light of dawn. In the distance, the sound of horseshoes pounding against the stables and horses neighing could be heard.

Max rubbed her dazed eyes at the scene, then turned to find the side of Riftan's bed empty. Needless to say, his armor was also gone. She sighed and called Rudis to help her get ready for the day.

Riftan said she didn't need to worry about the preparations, but Max's conscience could not allow her to send men into battle without doing something for them. She wore a blue

blouse, braided her hair on the sides and twisted it up. As soon as she was done, she headed straight out of the great hall, going towards the stables where she saw dozens of horses lined up, and knights examining the horses' physiques and horseshoes one by one.

Max found a familiar face amongst them and immediately approached the said knight. Sir Caron, who was in the middle of a conversation with Rodrigo, turned and smiled courteously.

"Good morning, Lady Calypse."

"" "

"Good... morning. A-are you p-preparing to leave for the expedition?"

"Yes, I was gathering supplies necessary for the trip."

He explained and pointed to the leather bags full of supplies and food stacked against the castle wall. She narrowed her eyes and tried to count how much there was, but either way, she estimated that it wouldn't be enough food to last sixty-four men to Livadon. Seeing her puzzled expression, Sir Karon kindly added an explanation.

"We cannot bring too much food with us as it will only slow us down. We need to make room for other necessities like weapons, sleeping bags, and pots to c**k. We will be able to pass through the villages on the way and buy what we need so we can conserve as much load as possible."

"I...I see."

Princess Agnes said the same exact thing said before leaving for a journey. Max looked around at the bustling atmosphere and looked at Sir Karon sheepishly.

"I-Is there anything... I can do to help?"

"The Lady?"

He asked, surprised as a troubled smile spread across his lips.

"It's fine, we can handle this ourselves. This is our duty. But thank you, for your sincere intentions to help. "

Max was not disappointed; she was half expecting for him to decline her offer anyway. She composed her expressions and asked another question.

"Riftan... The lord... w-where is he?"

“He is currently giving instructions to the knights with Sir Rikaido in the training grounds. Is there anything you need from him?”

She hurriedly waved her hands to signal no. “N-no. It’s just that I didn’t see him around yet...”

“Sir Caron! Should we now take the horses to the training grounds?”

Sir Caron looked over his shoulder to look at the knight who called him. Max, realizing that she was getting in his way, shyly backed away.

“F-for stealing your precious time... I’m sorry. D-don’t mind me... please continue with your work...”

“My apologies milady. Then, please excuse me”

He bowed apologetically and went to the where the knights had gathered. Max turned around and headed back to the gall. Although it was not necessary, the least she could do was prepare clothes and food for the knights.

She went straight to the kitchen and handed the keys to the spice cabinet to the chef and instructed him to be generous on the ingredients and prepare a ton of luxurious meals. Afterward, she ordered the maids to provide the knights with clothes and sleeping bags.

She made sure to have them checked carefully and repair the damaged ones. She also asked them to pack the newly purchased pots and bowls for use on the trip. As she busily ran through the castle, a familiar voice called out to her. Max turned to see Ruth running down the hall toward her with his long, slender legs.

“There you are. I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

“W-what’s...the matter? I thought you w-were busy preparing for the expedition...”

“I have completed all the necessary preparations. Rather, there’s something I need to show the lady before I leave.

“What is it?”

“You will know if you follow me.”

He gestured for her to follow and turned to walk away without further explanation. Max followed him at a whim, no knowing what was going on. Ruth strode down the stairs and went out of the castle at once.

“Just w-where are we going?”

“To my tower”.

Max looked at him with surprise and quickly looked around. Max remembered that Riftan warned her not to dare approach that place. According to him, Ruth had created all sorts of strange magic spells around the tower. She stood as close to Ruth as possible, wary of any mana disruptions from the surroundings.

“What’s in the t-tower...?”

“We’re almost there, please wait a bit longer.”

He answered halfheartedly, as he was too tired to explain things one by one, and quickly walked along the winding path. After a while, they reached the entrance to the tower, hidden behind giant green elm trees.

Max looked around curiously at the gray tower embraced by vines of red ivy. Perhaps due to the lack of human interference, the walls were covered in weeds and moss. Ruth roughly scraped the moss off then took keys from his pocket and unlocked the tower doors.

“Come on in.”

She stood by the doorway, poking her head to see what was inside: it was a fortress shrouded in darkness. Water dripped from a hole in the ceiling, dampening the floor below. There was a stone staircase that spiraled up like a conch shell. Ruth entered without hesitation.

“What are you doing, aren’t you coming?”

She gave up waiting for a proper explanation from him and followed him in resignation. They climbed almost three-quarters of the tower before Ruth finally spoke again.

“Here we are.”

He said, pulling the old doorknob against the wall. Max looked warily inside and frowned. A strong burnt smell, the smell of bitter medicines, and musty old parchments pricked her nose.

“I-it smells bad in there.”

“What do you have against someone else’s sanctuary, are you disrespecting it? I just wasn’t able to air it out in a while so it’s a bit dusty.”

Ruth grumbled and walked over to open a window to let the sunlight pour into the dim interior. Max blinked at the sudden change of lighting. It was just how she imagined what a wizard’s lab would look like. Strange tools and models cluttered the floor, and old

books were tucked into the book shelves against the wall. Cabinets were stacked with jars and jars of medicine.

Ruth beckoned to her and pushed the mess on the floor aside.

“I have compiled some magic formulas for the lady to study while I’m away. I tried to organize them in a way that is easy to understand... but I’m not sure if you will be fine with it...”

Max walked carefully towards him, doing her best to avoid stepping on anything. Ruth took a pile of parchment and handed them over.

“Take a look at it and tell me right away if there is something you don’t understand.”

“Did you drag me all the way here... to give me t-these?”

Ruth nodded. “You are also free to read all the books in this room while I am away. But as much as possible, please don’t bring them out of the tower. All these books are too valuable compared to those in the library, you’ll be in trouble if any of them gets lost.”

Max squinted at the white dust gathering on the sprawling pile of books. For something so valuable, it sure was treated like garbage.

“If those books are so precious... you should treat them with m-more care.”

“They are good as long as they’re readable.” He answered sarcastically and picked up a few books, placing them on his desk. “This one will help the lady with learning magic. Read it when you have time. This one is about herbal medicines. There are also anatomy books from the south. It is not translated, but if you study the illustrations and become familiar with the structure of the human body, it will help you cast your healing magic better. Medicine in the south is much more advanced than here, so these would be very helpful.

Once he was done frantically arranging the books, he went on to explain each and every bottle lined up in the cabinets.

“This red jar contains wound ointment. If you apply it after thoroughly cleaning the wound, it will heal much faster. The syrup in this bottle helps relieve swelling, and the leaves in the bag over there are for bringing down fever and detoxifies poison and venom. These dried roots help replenish mana. Oh, and it also helps restore energy. Now this...”

“W-wait a minute! Please explain it slowly...” Max quickly interrupted and searched for a feather pen and parchment from Ruth’s desk to jot down his explanations.

Note – Nymeria: Don't lose the books, they're so precious! What, I'm treating them like c**p? Well, as long as they're readable... Imaoooo Ruth I'll miss you so muchh come back soon!

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Chapter 173

“The lady is familiar with this powder. This powder that can stop bleeding is made from grinding the leaves and roots of dried cucumber, mixed with a little flour and a variety of herbs. I made more than enough, but if it runs out, you may craft it using this recipe. You must be accurate with mixing them so use a scale. Also, I have written other recipes for simple medicines, please read them from time to time.”

Ruth placed a dense parchment, small scale, and a small mortar and pestle used for grinding herbs on the desk. Max, who was scrambling to jot down his instructions with an inked quill, glanced at him with an anxious face.

“S-so...we need that m-much medicine?”

“We never know. As you may have already experienced, healing magic can only be used up to a limit. It's wise to prepare for anything ahead of time.”

Ruth shrugged lightly and began to teach her how to use the scale. Max tried to write down his explanation on the parchment in as much detail as she could. She knew that Ruth's responsibilities were vast, but this was beyond her expectations. The pressure to fill his vacancy weighed heavily on her shoulders.

“I think I've explained everything. Now, I'll leave the keys to the tower with you.” Ruth, whose arms were crossed across his chest, looked up at the ceiling and took the key out of his pocket. “There is nothing particularly dangerous here, but if possible, avoid touching anything other than the herbs and books.”

“I...I'll be careful...”

Max took the key carefully from him, then there was a strange silence for a moment. Ruth scratched the back of his bushy head and made an awkward expression.

“Please take good care of Sir Riftan and the other knights. They all think that they’re immortal, so they don’t hesitate in doing anything reckless. I’m anxious about leaving them behind, but I won’t be worrying too much since you’re here.”

Max smiled gently. She was well aware of how much Ruth did for Riftan and the knights. He took precious time to teach her various magic spells because of his dedication to Anatol and its people. She responded in the brightest voice she had, to try easing his concerns.

“Don’t worry about us... take care of yourself and come back safely. I’ll work hard and do my best... because we’re all rooting for you, R-ruth.”

“You should.”

Only then Ruth’s shoulders sank, like he suddenly remembered his situation. “I won’t be able to sleep in a bed for a while starting tomorrow.”

“You never sleep in a b-bed to begin with.” Max shook her head in a curious manner.

“At least... s-sleep in a warm bed today. Also, for dinner... I told the chef to prepare a special and grand feast so don’t skip it... make sure you’ll come down to eat in the dining hall.”

“I was thinking of doing that anyway. I won’t be able to have a proper meal for a while, so I need to eat when I can and grease my stomach. Now, let’s go, we shall head back.”

Ruth responded giddily and turned towards the door. Max collected her parchment and gazed pitifully at his back as he left the room. She felt sorry for Ruth who was embarking on a rough journey. Moreover, it was going to be difficult to get through various mishaps on her own in the future. Only then did she realize how much she depended on the nosy wizard. Max spoke in the softest tone possible.

””” ”

“I sincerely really thank you...for e-everything. Because of Ruth’s help... several crises...”

“W-Wait, Hold on! Stop saying such ominous words.” Ruth glared at her and jumped up and down like he just heard Max utter a bad omen. “It’s like you’re sending me off for forever.”

“W-w...what I’m just trying to say...”

“Anyway, it feels so awkward, so stop it. Saying a simple farewell will be enough.”

She bit her lips. She was just trying to express her genuine gratitude, but Ruth’s attitude was not having it.

“F-fine. Then... farewell and come back soon. Is that good enough?”

“Yes, that will do. I hope the lady will stay healthy and well.”

Ruth muttered some stuff while going down the stairs and sighed in a muffled manner, when he suddenly sent a mischievous glance to Max over his shoulder.

“Also, when I return, I’m looking forward to hearing the good news.”

“N..news?”

“I’m just saying it’s not long until we hear news of the birth of Calypse II.”

Max’s face turned beet red. Seeing her reddened face, Ruth giggled and eventually burst into laughter. Max glared at him with an indignant look and stomped down the stairs.

Really, it’s impossibly hard to even bid a sincere farewell!

That evening, the dinner served was the most grandiose they ever had. Roasted swans and whole piglets gracefully lined up the center of the tables, dozens of dishes seasoned lavishly with cloves, nutmeg, cumin, and pepper were served at a plenty. The knights exchanged farewells while they enjoyed sumptuous food and quality wine prepared carefully by the servants. None of them reflected any grimness or anxiousness in their faces.

As Max watched the knights exchange mischievous jokes and slander like they were going to see each other again the following day, she wondered if one day she would also need to send Riftan off for a long journey with a smile. Right now, it seemed unimaginable to her. Just the thought of exchanging farewells with him made her feel like her body would split in half.

She looked up at his face wrapped in the soft candlelight glow and thought about how important of a figure Riftan had become in her existence. She wouldn’t be able to bear it, shall he be away from her for half a year. Things would have panned out great if Riftan was an ordinary lord of a land in the countryside rather than a knight, but if the circumstances were as such, she wouldn’t have been married to him in the first place.

She sipped wine and secretly soothed her troubled heart. She wanted to utter plausible words of encouragement to the knights who were leaving, but failed to say a word, like she was a mute.

The next day, the knights set out for the expedition before dawn. Dozens of giant warhorses with loaded supplies strapped to their hips and armed knights on saddles, crossed the gates in an organized row. Max climbed the wall and watched as the knights crossed the moat. Sir Rikaido led the way, driving his horse down the road that glimmered dark blue against the early dawn's light, following him closely there were Ruth and Sir Caron. The rhythmic pounding of horseshoes against the earth continued for a long time.

She waved her handkerchief in the damp, cool morning breeze until they were out of sight. Riftan who was standing in front as he sent the knights off with a hardened expression, turned his head toward her.

"You may go back in now. The wind is blowing strangely, rain might pour in a while."

Max anxiously trailed the knights with her eyes as she watched their leaving figures that were now the size of ants.

"W...Will they be fine?"

"They will be fine. When it rains, the chances of encountering monsters decrease so it would favor them better. But... I hope it stops before evening comes..." Riftan frowned and looked up into the dark skies. An annoyed sigh escaped his lips. "There is an expedition as it is, but I'm more worried about the road construction. I have to leave the castle before it rains."

He gently pulled her face closer to his and planted a kiss on her cold forehead with a soft smile. Recently, she could see Riftan oftenly flashing smiles like that. When he displayed that boyish smile, the crease from his face smoothed out and he appeared ten times more attractive and handsome.

"Your face is cold. Don't wander around and go back to our room to rest."

He rubbed her earlobes and whispered in a tone someone would use to a young child. Max blushed and grumbled with a dissatisfied expression.

"I... I am not a little child..."

"Be good and listen to me."

Riftan kissed her eyelids once and playfully pinched her cheeks with his fingers. The roughness of his fingers and the soft warmth of his lips felt pleasant. She looked up at him eagerly. She wished that he would give her more of his soft caress and kisses, but he appeared content with just that light kiss and gently led her back into the castle, telling her to hurry. Max could do nothing but swallow her disappointment and trudged back to the room.

Just as Riftan had predicted, it started raining steadily around noon. Max gloomily watched the shimmering raindrops pour like mist over the lush garden. The colorful flowers seemed to have lost their vibrance as they drooped and even the deep blue leaves seemed to be dyed with black as it dulled and soaked with water from the rain.

The strong, chilly wind rattled and shook the windows, deepening her worries for the knights. She felt sorry as it was only their first day of expedition, yet they already had to travel the rugged mountain path in this weather.

“It doesn’t look like it’s going to stop anytime soon.” Even Rudis, who was sitting by the windows while sewing quietly, sighed.

“I-it seems that way...”

“I can’t believe it rained just when the knights left for the expedition....”

Rudis rubbed her cheek lethargically and put down what she was sewing to get up from her seat and light the fireplace. Max looked out the wide window, listening to the raindrops pat against the windows.

Will the road construction be fine?

When it rained, there was a decreased occurrence of monsters appearing, so there was a low chance of accidents happening. For a moment, her head jumped from one worry to another. Max shook her head.

This isn’t the time to waste on helpless worries. Instead, I should improve my skills enough to fill Ruth’s place as soon as possible.

Max started by taking out the pile of parchment Ruth had handed her and sorted them. There was no order, it was a complete mess, like it was arranged by a hopeless person with no talent for organizing. Information about herbs, magic, healing, and medicine recipes were all mixed together. It was also noticeably lacking as there were incomplete sentences, like some information was missing. She suspected a few parchments were left back in the tower.

I have no idea if this is being meticulous... or being chaotic.

She decided to visit the tower later, first to study what she understood and then to find the missing information. Max took out new pieces of clean parchment and simplified her magic formulas. There were two kinds of magic that Ruth had arranged for her. One was to accelerate the speed of her mana flow to increase her magic power and the other was to double the amount of mana she exerted.

Max secretly expected that there was a powerful magic spell written on the parchments, like the flame magic of the royal princess, but her shoulders only sunk in

disappointment. Even if she learnt such powerful kind of magic, she would only be able to barely make a flame the size of what's on a candle with her current mana pool. All she knew how to do was to cast healing, detox, and recovery magic. Other than that, her magic was limited and stagnant. If she attempted to learn a new kind of magic, it was obviously not going to go the way she wanted it to.

It would be better to focus on working and strengthening the magic that she could cast. Max began to study the structure of the magic formulas as she convinced herself of the judgement she had come up with. With her thoughts set, she began memorizing magic formulas. Fortunately, Ruth left her with detailed explanations so she could easily understand how it worked.

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The problem is practice...

She was worried about how she could learn to apply a new magic formula by herself without Ruth's help, but she had no choice but to try. She concentrated eagerly and memorized the complex structures of the magic formula.

For a long time, she was immersed with her studies, when she suddenly felt a heavy pain in her lower abdomen. Max, who was dipping her quilt in the ink, felt something dripping between her legs, and her face stiffened.

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 174

The unpleasant visit that had repeated since she turned 17 had come again. Max scrambled out of her chair in her attempt to save her beautiful satin dress which the seamstress had intricately sewn for two full weeks.

As soon as Max asked Rudis for help, the servant immediately brought her hot water, a clean linen cloth, and a new dress. Max frowned in disgust, wiping clean the blood between her legs with a hot wet towel, then wore a thick linen-lined cotton underwear,

turning to look in front of the mirror several times to see if there were any stains on her hips that she had missed. She didn't particularly like wearing the underwear as it made her hips look big like a duck's.

The uncomfortable feeling of her sore lower abdomen felt like there were cold pebbles housed in it and it annoyed her. The thought of having to endure this for a minimum of five days made her sigh.

"Don't be too disappointed, milady."

Max turned at Rudis with a puzzled expression at the sudden words of comfort. The maid then continued to speak in a cautious manner.

"Some couples take more than three years to bear their first child. If you wait with an eased heart, God will grant you the most beautiful child when the right time comes."

Max blinked blankly. Only then it occurred to her that the inconvenient phenomenon she was experiencing meant that she was not pregnant with a child. Max spoke slowly as anxiety took over her.

"Isn't it strange... t-that it came... s-so late?"

"It's just that the timing isn't right." Rudis reassured her with a tender smile. "Milady's expectations must have been set high, since it came at the end of the month. It's normal for it to come late at times... do not worry so much Madam."

Ironically, Rudis seemed more disappointed than her when the words flowed out of her mouth. Max didn't even realize that she was late. In fact, her cycle had been more regular after staying in Anatol. Before, she had her period once every two or three months, and there were times when it wouldn't come for even five months.

She bit her lip, confused. Did other women bleed more often than her? What about Rosetta? She squinted her eyes and groped her hands trying to focus and search in her memories, but nothing came to mind. The two sisters weren't close enough in the first place to exchange such private matters.

Thinking of the possibility of not being able to conceive a child because she happened to have a big flaw, a cold sweat ran down her spine. Her mother's haggard, lifeless face flashed on her head. Max turned around, trying to hide her agitation and nonchalantly ordered.

"I want to drink a w-warm tea. A herbal tea...can you brew some for me?"

"Of course, madam. I'll prepare it right away."

As Rudis went out of the room, Max collapsed helplessly in front of the desk and clasped her face. She wanted to tell Rudis the truth and ask for advice, but she feared that she would tell Riftan about it. How would he react if he finds out that there might be something wrong with his wife?

She was well aware of how important it was for men to have an heir, it was no question that Riftan would desire a son to pass on the castle and the territory. Her throat felt like there was a thorn stuck inside it. Will he still cherish and care for her even if she happens to have the same fate as her mother?

Max flipped through the parchment nervously. However, as the pain in her stomach grew worse every second, even if she was able to gather her thoughts momentarily, it was immediately shattered. She stared aimlessly at the swimming letters on the parchment before throwing her quill in frustration. That made the ink splattered, creating a messy stain on the desk. Max stared at the mess silently, then lowered her head against the desk as she listened to the raindrops hitting the windowpane.

””” ”

Just why do worries chase my life? Her eyes darkened at the thought that a fatal one could add to the list of her dozens of flaws.

Stop overthinking. Rudis is right, it's just not the right time, she thought to herself desperately. That wasn't an old habit of her, torturing herself with the worst and most grim future she could possibly have.

She had the perfect husband who was beyond what she thought she deserved; there were more people whom she could talk to; she had a safe and comfortable place she could call home; she was beginning to overcome her stutter bit by bit; she was even learning magic!

Max desperately drove herself away from the worries trying to eat her mind. If God was indeed merciful, she believed that surely one day he would grant her the blessing of having a healthy heir.

Riftan returned to their room drenched and soaking from the rain. His robe was heavy with water and drooped like seaweed, revealing the shape of the armor he wore underneath and his shoes were covered with mud. Max got out of bed and placed a towel over his head. His cheeks were wet from the rain and cold as ice.

“All this time... have you been under the rain?”

“We had to stop the soil and mud from flowing down the road. I can't let the hard work we did for the last two months go to waste.”

He pushed the door close with his back and took off his muddy shoes and soaking robe on the spot, avoiding soiling the expensive carpet on the floor and threw them into a basket.

“Is it raining...t-that much?” Max asked, a little surprised by all the considerations he needed to take into account.

“I don’t think it will pour much heavier. The problem is that the ground has been weakened by monsters. Also, the summer monsoon will begin in a couple of months, so it is better to be prepared ahead for it.”

He took off all his armor and wet clothing. Max led Riftan in front of the fireplace and handed him a towel large enough to wrap around his body. While he briefly warmed his body in front of the fire, the diligent servants brought a bathtub filled with hot water into the room. As always, Riftan asked for the two of them to take a bath together, but Max only stood stiffly with an awkward expression plastered on her face and announced to him that she was ‘unclean.’ He looked at her with a puzzled face.

“If your body isn’t clean then you can come and wash with me.”

Max was a little startled that a man who was capable of doing anything would say something so unthoughtful. Since she came to Anatol, she had only had menstruations four times: once when he was away, and the other three when he was rather busy, therefore there hadn’t been any need to explain such an embarrassing situation. Max stuttered, abashed.

“It’s t-that day...”

“That day?”

Max looked at him with tears in her eyes. Her husband, who she thought was the most perfect man in the world, wore a stupidly clueless face. Her eyes darted from side to side, thinking of how he could be so clueless. How on earth was she going to explain her circumstance without losing her dignity?

“What I mean is...from today until the end of t-the week... we can’t... do m-marital duties... because of my c-condition.”

“What on earth are you talking about?” Riftan’s face stiffened. “Don’t talk in riddles and explain it clearly. Are you rejecting me right now?”

Max’s jaw dropped blankly at his questioning tone. It seemed like she had no choice but to explain in blunt words for him to understand. She exclaimed with tears in her eyes.

“There’s blood in m-my thing... it’s f-flowing!”

The blood from Riftan's face drained in an instant. Max's eyes widened at the sight of his chiseled, tanned face turning white as a piece of parchment. He walked over and proceeded to check every corner of her body with evident shock and anxiety.

"Blood is flowing... where on earth is it? How did you hurt yourself? Show me where, we have to get you treated right away!"

Max felt terrified that he would really check where the blood was flowing from, but Riftan seemed even more frightened than she was. Max desperately dissuaded him, who was trying to strip her of her clothes to identify where she was bleeding from.

"I-it's n-nothing like that! I wasn't h-h-hurt! I'm not hurt!"

"You said you're bleeding!"

Heavens. He really didn't seem to have a single clue about what women have to regularly go through. Max didn't know whether to react by bursting into laughter or scream in frustration. She decided to calm him down first and explain as composed as she could.

"In t-this world... all women at m-marrying age... b-bleed regularly. It's a very... natural occurrence. My n-nanny said... to be able to bear children... that is the p-proof."

"Are you sure? Aren't you sick or hurt?"

Max nodded with conviction. Riftan's eyes frowned slightly, looking at her in disbelief and suspicion, and asked.

"Where on earth are you bleeding from then?"

Max turned red as a beet. She never dreamed of ending up in such an embarrassing situation. Did she really have to explain everything to him by herself? She hesitated for a moment, then whispered in his ear even though there was no one else around. They may encounter the same circumstance in the future, it would be better for her to explain everything properly than to be subjected any longer to such an embarrassing situation.

"Is that... true?"

After hearing her explanation, Riftan's eyes drifted down to her, his eyes widening in disbelief. The color in his face still hadn't returned.

"Are you sure? Down there... it's normal for blood to flow?"

"It's-it's perfectly normal! It's something that all w-women have to g-go through."

"This must have happened before. Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

“Because I thought... you k-knew... f-for sure.... Usually this doesn't need to be explained.... My nanny said... if I tell it indirectly... you would k-know...”

To her surprise, Riftan's cheeks blushed a little red. Riftan raised his voice and said his excuses, trying to justify his ignorance.

“Maxi, I grew up in a mercenary full of men. After I was knighted, I have been on expeditions and battlefields all my life. What on earth would I know about women? All I know is that women have b****s, there's no way of knowing what they're thinking, and that they may bear children!”

Max looked at him doubtfully. He made it sound like he had never had an intimate lover before who could have taught him everything there is to know about women. She was skeptical as she scanned with her eyes his angular, masculine face, intense dark orbs, and his chiseled body; everything was in symmetry. He was too perfect and handsome to claim that he doesn't know much about women.

Even if Riftan didn't actively seek out mates, he still would have women flock around him. Max remembered the two brazen women at the festival who flirted with him. It was unlikely that a man having vigorous desires like Riftan would have been able to resist such aggressive temptations. She glared at him sharply with jealousy.

Note – Nymeria: I was a bit angry in the first part tbh. Maxi's irregular cycle back in the duchy was most certainly due to her being malnourished... Ugh, that sorry excuse for a father! And the poor child doesn't know anything and thinks it's another “flaw”... Oh sweet baby! ?

But then Riftan lighted up the mood and made me laugh so hard, oh boy, I had to stop reading for a moment there because I was laughing soo much lmaooo

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 175

“You must kn-know more than just that...you knew what to do... with me...”

“What about you?” He arched an eyebrow interrogatively.

Max bit her lips, hesitating to utter the words that wouldn't normally come out of her mouth.

“B-before I got m-married to you, Riftan... I didn't know... w-what couples do with th-their bodies. But Riftan... k-knew how. You knew h-how to do that... to m-me... everything I know, I l-learned from you...”

Max was so embarrassed that she stuttered so bad, almost biting her tongue. It sounded like she was accusing him of using techniques that he must have learned from other women on her, but at the same time she didn't know where else in the world he had learned that from. She couldn't figure out why she was being so bothered and asked him about this topic. Riftan seemed more confused than she was as he did not understand the intent of her question. Then, he opened his lips to speak, embarrassed of his slow-wittedness.

“Well, 90% of what the mercenaries say is lewd. When those men open their mouths, they brag about their techniques on how to pleasure women. I've been hearing those kinds of things since I was fourteen. All I know are the basics, not to mention they've probably exaggerated more than half the facts.” He explained with an uncomfortable expression and looked at her nervously. He quickly cleared his throat, trying to get away from the embarrassing conversation. “Anyway, I'm glad you're not injured. Does anything hurt?”

“My stomach hurts a little... and I feel lethargic... but it is tolerable.”

“You look pale and tired.” He caressed her cheek and sighed, before turning back to the tub. “I'll bathe on my own, so lay on the bed and rest.”

Max silently obeyed and crawled under the covers. She curled up on the bed and fought the throbbing pain as he bathed. For a long moment, all she heard were the gentle splashes of the water from behind her. When he was finally warmed up, he pulled on some cotton pants and slid in beside her. He dug under the covers and pulled her close, holding her tight as he rubbed soothing circles on her aching belly with his warm palms.

Max let out a long groan at the pleasant relief. His heated body behind her gently melted her tense muscles. Riftan pushed an arm under her head and rubbed his lips over her shoulders and cheeks.

“I hate that you have to go through this. How often does this happen?”

“Um... it's irregular.” Max answered vaguely.

His ignorance was in some way welcomed, as she didn't want him to know that she was spotty compared to average women. She felt both relief and guilt when she buried

herself in his arms. She inhaled his unique scent and trembled sweetly. Riftan buried his face in her hair and took in her scent as well, as if he wanted to possess her completely, then let out a sigh.

“I hope it ends soon.”

She could feel that he really hated when she was in pain, and not because she was not available to satisfy him carnally. Riftan continued to draw soothing circles on her tight abdomen and caressed her pale cheeks, as if she was a delicate flower bud that could wither at the slightest pressure. Max rested her head on his forearm and slowly fell into a deep sleep next to him.

The soft, light rain continued for several days in a row, sprinkling the green leaves like dew. Sometimes the golden sun peeked from behind the thin rain clouds and softly smiled over the garden. The serene beauty of nature warmed Max's heart as she sat by the window, studying the magical formulations Ruth left her.

As soon as the pain in her abdomen subsided, she planned to collect some herbs, stop by Ruth's tower and study how to formulate herbs for medicinal use. She was desperately trying to learn all that Ruth left for her in case of emergencies. Everything had been peaceful and quiet in Anatol, but there was no guarantee that it would last. However, it was not an easy feat to learn many new things on her own without guidance.

””” ”

Anatol was a land full of monsters, therefore subjecting her and her people to turbulent changes. New problems, big and small, crop up everywhere amid their busy lives. In just her nearly half a year of her stay at Anatol, Max had encountered more changes than in her twenty-two years. From these experiences, she learned how valuable it was to always be prepared. She couldn't afford to waste time strolling leisurely.

Max woke up as early as she could in the morning, studying magical or medicinal herbs. In her spare time, she would go to the infirmary and treat the wounded just as Ruth would have. When she started, the soldiers were uncomfortable and tired of the presence of The Lady of the Castle in the infirmary, but now they accepted her as if it was her natural place.

Max always made time to visit the infirmary and apply healing magic to at least five to ten wounded men. Subsequently, she would treat common ailments like colds, headaches, and insomnia with various herbal remedies. With her devoting so much of her time and strength to this job, there was no way she could keep this a secret from Riftan any longer.

That day Max stopped as usual by the infirmary to treat the minor injuries of the guards and soldiers when suddenly she felt an ominous chill behind her. She slowly turned

around and saw Riftan, his tall and commanding body completely blocking the narrow entrance to the infirmary, staring at her.

Seeing the cold, hardened expression on his face, Max swallowed nervously. Hebaron was standing behind him shaking his head as if he knew what was coming, and Gabel just kept his mouth shut and hunched his shoulders as if weighed down with guilt.

Riftan approached her like a predator tiger.

“Would you mind explaining what’s going on here?”

“... A soldier was i-injured. I’m h-here to heal him...”

Max moved her eyes around nervously and when she found the soldier with the broken leg, she quickly cast a healing spell on him. Riftan’s expression hardened even more as he narrowed his eyes further at her. She quickly straightened up and smiled stiffly at him.

“Now... I think I did e-everything I could here... I have another job to attend to.”

She tried to sneak away but of course Riftan wasn’t going to let her go so easily. He growled as he grabbed her arms, hard.

“I heard it’s been a while since you started pretending to be a healer here. Why am I finding out about it only now?”

“You are always so b-busy. I... I didn’t want to bother you... with something so unimportant...”

Riftan’s rage only intensified at her half-hearted excuse. “Cut the bullsh*t! You deliberately hid it from me!”

“I didn’t h-hide it I...I just didn’t say anything...”

“Is that all you have to say? D**n, I just didn’t know what my wife was doing all day. I feel like a fool! How could you do this behind my back knowing how much I care about you?!”

Max, who was sweating profusely and trying to think of something plausible as an excuse, suddenly frowned. Why in the world was she hearing these accusations from him? As the thoughts of her efforts flowed through her head, Max began to get angry.

She looked into his eyes; her expression full of rebellion. “W... what did I do wrong?”

“...What?”

"I only healed the...wounded k-knights. Is that a-a bad thing? Is that something... to be scolded for?"

"D**n it, don't change the subject! You promised me last time that you wouldn't overdo it again...!"

"I'm n-not overdoing it! For the past two weeks I haven't d-depleted my mana and I haven't felt dizzy o-once." She argued.

She refused to not stand her ground and when Riftan's face showed a slight tremor, Max continued her assault. "And I'm not doing anything d-dangerous. I was only taking care of the wounded m-men... inside the castle where it is s-safe."

"D**n it! You are the Lord's wife, my wife! Why are you playing at being a healer?"

"Because I c-can do it!" Max gave a reprimand, startled at her boldness.

She had lived the entirety of her life bogged down with the obsession of being a useless stutterer who couldn't do anything. The nanny constantly reminded her that the words of a husband are law to a wife. You must unconditionally obey and accept everything you do. But here she was now, disobeying and arguing with her husband. Had she gone mad?

Calming down a bit, Max spoke in a softer tone as she swallowed the lump caught in her throat. "Now... there is no o-one except me who can use healing magic in this castle. I won't work too hard and... I have more mana now... so you don't have to worry about me getting sick again."

At her docile tone, Riftan also calmed down and tried to speak comfortably to Max. "I'll hire a healer as soon as possible. I hate the idea of you doing this. Why do you insist on trying unnecessarily?"

"Why... why can't I work hard too? Riftan... Ruth and all the knights... do all kinds of difficult tasks every day... why am I the only one who can't?"

"D**n it! you are different from us, you are the daughter of a duke!"

In his outburst, Max turned red. For the first time in her life, she was overwhelmed by the need to hit someone.

"W-what does that mean? Princess Agnes... can do all kinds of dangerous things. What's so special about a duke's daughter?!"

Riftan was speechless. He couldn't find the words to refute her argument. Hebaron, who was looking to the side with his arms folded, whistled slightly.

“Has the commander been pushed to a corner?”

Riftan glared at him before turning his attention back to her. “The princess is a high-level wizard who has accumulated years of experience since childhood! How do you compare to her?” He spat and breathed heavily.

Even Hebaron, who was watching the couple quarrel with a smirk, covered his forehead with his palm at the sheer stupidity of his commander’s recklessness.

Max looked up at Riftan and lowered her head in defeat as her eyes prickled with tears. She couldn’t argue because she knew it was true, but did he have to shout out her incompetence in front of everyone? She felt her pain increase.

“D**n... what I meant was...”

Max swatted the hand that landed on her shoulder. Riftan stiffened in shock at her unseen act of rudeness, but Max just looked at him before walking out and slamming the door.

“For the time being...I d-don’t want to see you!”

Note – Nymeria: YOU GO MAXI! Tell this dork what you can do! She’s not *pretending* to be a healer, she is a healer! Girl I wanted to hit someone too? (Also, as always Hebaron is the most relatable character, love him!!)

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 176

Although Max said that she did not want to see his face, that was impossible since they shared the same room. Seeing him was inevitable. That was why Max decided to take the childish approach: the silent treatment.

“Maxi, let’s talk.”

Riftan, who retired to their room earlier than usual, paced near the bed anxiously. Like a caterpillar, Max simply lay motionless on the bed with the covers over her head. Riftan reached out and tugged at the covers, but she held on with all her power with trembling fingers. She even made snoring sounds, like she was trying to give him a hint.

“D**n it, I know you’re not asleep. Get up.”

He was probably getting more agitated as the force pulling on the blankets grew harsher, but Max just squeezed her eyes shut, doing her best not to lose the coverage that the blankets offered. She heard a rustling sound on the bed’s spot near her.

“Are you really going to keep doing this? A while ago I was...” Riftan’s voice suddenly switched to a weaker tone. Then, as if he had given up, the pulling of the covers stopped and she felt them sink into the bed as he sat next to her. After a moment of heavy silence, he spoke again in a cold voice. “Fine, do whatever you want.”

Riftan took off his shoes and lay down next to her. Max, feeling resentful, squirmed as far away from him as possible and snuggled up. She didn’t want to talk to him, but when he gave up so easily on trying to reconcile with her, she actually felt upset. What the hell did she want anyway? Did she want him to hold her, to comfort her? And apologize for harsh words? Either way, Max felt betrayed by his cold-hearted attitude.

The cold war continued the next day too. Max hid under the covers until Riftan reluctantly left her alone. Only then did she get up and go to hide in Ruth’s tower. She spent the day reading and grinding herbs as usual, but Riftan’s harsh words kept repeating in her mind and she could hardly concentrate.

Max slumped on the desk and bit her lip. No matter how hard she worked and how accomplished she became, Riftan didn’t recognize her. Furthermore, skill wise, she couldn’t even reach the tips of the toes of the beautiful royal wizard that could have been his wife.

She knew she was thinking irrationally, but she couldn’t help it. Riftan made it clear that he had no intention of including her in his life outside of the bedroom, which was practically limited to five hours a day. Max was like a pet cat, sitting in the room all day to only receive an occasional pet at his convenience. Yet why did her heart hurt so much? She was used to being rejected and living as useless.

She couldn’t focus on her work because these self-deprecating thoughts consumed her. Usually at that time of day, she would stop by the infirmary, but she hesitated for a long time. Just the day before she had such a heated and embarrassing screaming fight in front of everyone, she wasn’t sure if she had skin thick enough to face everyone. But the idea of not showing up hurt her pride, everyone would believe that she was defeated by his verbal attack.

Max frowned. She didn't want to be known as a shy and weak-hearted woman. She was afraid of being compared to the energetic and brilliant princess. After a prolonged infighting, she finally went to the infirmary, with a bag full of prepared herbs. As she walked towards the knights' quarters where the infirmary was located, as expected, the knights looked at her with uneasy eyes.

She wanted to make excuses, saying she was only there to restock the medicine cabinets. When she reached the entrance to the training ground, she hid behind the large iron gates and looked around to see if Riftan was near, then quickly ran towards the knights' quarters.

As she sneaked into the infirmary through the side door, she saw a gentleman with bandages around his wrist. He immediately straightened up and bowed politely to her when their eyes met.

"Greetings, Lady Calypse. I didn't think you were coming today."

"I came to replenish the herbs... the pain reliever is r-running out..." She uttered almost incomprehensible words and looked at his wrist. "Did you h-hurt your wrist? Would... would you like me to cast a healing spell on it?"

"I'm fine. I wove a bandage around it so the impact doesn't hurt my joints when I wield my sword." The knight smiled kindly and waved his hand dismissively.

"" "

Max sighed, relieved. She was concerned Riftan had given strict orders forbidding her to enter the infirmary, but based on the gentleman's attitude, that seemed not to be the case. She relaxed at the desk by the window and began sorting out the herbs she brought. The knight bowed quickly and left. The sound of swords clashing echoed in the background as Max arranged the herbs in wooden boxes, when suddenly a loud voice coming from the door broke her concentration.

"Oh, have you already reconciled with the commander?"

Max turned and smiled ambiguously. "G-greetings, Sir Nirta."

"Greetings, Lady Calypse." Hebaron entered and greeted her with a low, exaggerated bow.

"Are you feeling any better?"

"I d-don't feel particularly bad." The truth was, she felt like a complete disaster.

Max slammed the lid shut to close the medicine box. Seeing her grim face, Hebaron grinned knowingly as if he understood the whole situation from her expression.

“Ah, I see. You two are still at war.”

“No-No, I’m not at war.”

Max glared at his rudeness. However, Hebaron, whom she knew was the type to tease and pick on others, didn’t even blink at her display of ferocity. Max just sighed and changed the subject.

“What... what brings you here, are you hurt?”

“As you can see, I’m perfectly fine. A couple of us are on our way to subdue nearby monsters, so I’m here to collect some emergency supplies.”

“O-On that shelf, I put the hemostatic medicine... poison antidotes, and healing salves in that bag there...”

Hebaron walked over to the shelf and grabbed the sack and left the infirmary with a leap in his footsteps. Max spent the rest of her time sitting by the desk and reading about southern medicine. She needed to get back before the sunsets. It was early, but Riftan could come back early again and she didn’t want to meet him. Returning, she quickly ate dinner and got into bed.

This time, he returned only after she really fell asleep. Max was being diligent in avoiding him. Every day she went to bed early and started the day late so, after being completely ignored for three days, Riftan’s patience finally ran out.

Max was in the infirmary tending to the knights’ scrapes and bruises when Riftan suddenly appeared. Hebaron and a couple of other gentlemen sneakily followed behind him, not wanting to miss a single second of the pair’s fighting spectacle. She looked at them briefly and quickly lowered her head before pretending to jot down notes on a parchment. Riftan walked over to the desk and looked down at her with a grim expression.

“Maxi, talk to me.”

He begged, but Max didn’t even bother to lift her head, while her quill moved against the parchment. She could feel his fierce gaze piercing the crown of her head.

“Maximillian Calypse, can’t you hear me?” Riftan uttered word per word.

“Sir Nirta.”

Max turned to Hebaron, who was leaning against the wall. The knight leaped to his feet and looked at her in confusion, while ignoring Riftan who was persistently staring at her.

“Can you tell the person in front of me... that I have n-nothing to say?”

There was an eerie silence. Hebaron looked between her and Riftan before hesitantly opening his mouth.

“Commander... your wife has nothing to say to you.”

“I heard it!” He gritted his teeth and hit the desk so hard Max was sure it would break. “I have something to say.”

“Sir Nirta.” Hebaron looked at her with obvious discomfort on his features, but Max simply pretended she hadn’t noticed and continued. “Please tell the person in front of me... that I don’t want to h-hear what he has to say...”

“Commander... your wife said that she...”

“I have ears too!”

Riftan screamed through gritted teeth, then lowered his head and held her face in his hands, trying to force her to look into his eyes. But Max stubbornly fought to avoid it. Desperate and agitated, he was completely lost.

“Don’t pretend I’m not here. Look at me and talk to me!”

“N-no... I don’t want to...”

Riftan inhaled deeply at her answer. He opened his mouth to speak, his tone completely broken.

“Maxi, I spoke wrongly last time. I never wanted to demean or ignore your achievements.” He continued to desperately appeal to her even as she continued to avoid gaze. “I was just worried about you. I don’t want to be a burden to you! If you are faced with this role, people will not stop pestering you to heal them. One day you may get into a situation like before. D**n it, I don’t want you to suffer from that!”

“Do you... do you think I can’t h-handle that... Riftan?” Max, whose gaze was still fixed on the wooden desk, managed to mutter in a suppressed voice. “Probably it’s because you think... I can’t be as good as Princess A-agnes. That’s why... you’re s-so worried.”

“Why does that name keep popping up? D**n it, forget about Princess Agnes!” Riftan ruffled his head in defeat. “Maxi, please. Look at me. Look at my face and talk to me.”

The desperation in his tone was similar to that of a pitiful child. Unable to resist, Max slowly raised her head. Riftan groaned in pain at the tears gathering around her eyes.

“Really, I didn’t mean to offend you.” He panicked and grabbed her face with his big hands again. “I just want you to live a comfortable life.”

“Even if I-I... don’t want that?” She murmured in a very tight tone and looked at his surprised expression, as if her words had just stabbed him in the heart. She forced herself to speak and her voice came out trembling. “Riftan... I don’t want to live comfortably... I... want to do something I’m capable of. Learning new things... using m-magic... it’s amazing and fun... and rewarding... when you tell me you don’t want me to do a-anything... it breaks my heart.”

Riftan pursed his lips and lowered his head in complete defeat. His expression was full of despondency.

“I understand what you’re saying.” He muttered helplessly. “If you really want to be a healer, then do it. Just please don’t look at me with that face. Never avoid me.”

Riftan was like a sobbing child pleading for his parents’ love. She was the one hurt by his words, so why did he look like someone who had been tortured for days and days? Max looked into his eyes doubtfully. When she realized he was waiting for an answer, she gave a slight nod of her head. Riftan’s shoulders, rigid with tension, dropped visibly with relief and he pulled her tightly into his arms.

At that moment, the knights who were silently watching their fight broke into applause for the satisfying conclusion. Max’s face turned beet red as she realized she had such a childish fight in front of an audience, but Riftan only growled violently at the intrigued knights.

“Get out of here if you’re done watching.”

Note – FL: this is one of the funniest chapter to me XD I love how Maxi involved Sir Nirta HAHAHA

Nymeria: SOOO we had actual communication here! That’s so fricking rare, I’m satisfied T^T Hopefully they can start to develop a more mature relationship from now on, as equals! Also, Maxi is so cute when she’s angry, I keep being reminded of my red cat hissing when I p**s him off lmao (And we all know that the one who started the applause was Hebaron, right?)

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 177

“Aw, I guess the nice show is over?” Hebaron languished on the sidelines.

The knight standing next to him punched him in the side with an elbow, warning him that his commander was staring at them shooting daggers from his eyes. Riftan’s menacing expression was so cold that the knight’s grinning faces vanished in an instant.

“By the way, whose turn is it to go out and patrol the construction site...?”

“Haha, is it already time for that? Let’s get out of here, Sir Nirta.”

The knights rushed out of the infirmary as if pushed by an invisible force and dragged Hebaron with them. Max discreetly looked at her husband’s face, wondering if she had damaged his pride in front of his men, but Riftan simply looked at the retreating knights with a blank expression. Then he turned to her and lowered his head. Warm, soft lips glided gently over her skin, leaving feather-like kisses on the way and Max’s nose turned red in embarrassment.

“Don’t k-kiss me. I’m...still angry.” Max turned to avoid it.

“You sure know how to torment a man.” He gently wrapped her closely with one hand, wearing a wry smile. A low sigh tumbled down her hair. “But really, please, end it now. You have tormented me more than enough for three days.”

Max narrowed her eyes at his ridiculousness. She only ignored him for three days, and yet there he was behaving as if she had tortured him. Max then gave him a coy look.

“I didn’t mean to i-intimidate you.I... I was angry.”

“It was really terrifying.” Riftan, who was previously being playful, suddenly had a serious glint to his eyes. “Maxi, like I said, if you really want to be a healer here, do it...But I shall soon find another healer.”

Max couldn’t hide her disappointment. “I-is it because you don’t trust me... enough?”

“I know you have talent.” As if he wasn’t happy with the fact that she was, one of his eyes wrinkled. “Everyone’s talking about how well you’re doing and that’s how it appears to me too. But you’re only been learning magic for a few months, no novice wizard can handle the healing of hundreds of men. You need someone to assist you.”

“...We won’t know that until I t-try...”

Riftan's face hardened at her glum retort. "Don't be stubborn. You can't stay here all day to heal and treat people."

Max gave him a dissatisfied expression, but Riftan was right. If a serious accident happened like last time, she would not be able to handle it alone. She had no reason to object to having another healer present, so she nodded reluctantly and Riftan stroked her cheek soothingly.

"I'll get another healer. Don't try to carry all the burdens on your shoulders."

Max sighed in resignation. The fact that Riftan conceded to her that day meant a lot, it was a far step from his usual attitude. He was the kind of person who couldn't stand still watching a grain of dust fall on her shoulders, let alone such a heavy weight, so she decided to settle for his permission as for the moment. After making sure she was no longer upset with him, Riftan left the infirmary and made her promise not to go to sleep today without waiting for him.

"" . "

Thus, Max was now the official healer of Castle Calypse. With Riftan's permission, the knights who hesitated to receive treatment from her due to their fear of the commander now came freely. They came with bruises, cracked heels and torn palms, all from training incidents. Sometimes even servants and blacksmiths passed by to get treatment. Max piled magic books in the infirmary so she could simultaneously study magic and attend to the wounded. The number of wounded gradually increased; doubling, now tripling to the point that she ran out of medicines. Max secretly begged for a healer to come soon as her work piled over.

However, finding another healer was not as easy as she thought. All the wizards who came to Anatol to purchase magical items left a long time before for Livadon. The small number of wandering wizards, who belonged to guilds or mercenaries, were also hired or commissioned by other territories and the northwest.

After running around and using his connections, Riftan was able to obtain an elderly wizard in his seventies from Count Robern, in exchange for a forced military alliance the Count had wanted.

"This is the first time in my life that I have been ripped off like this." Riftan was disgusted by the fact that he formed an alliance with beyond unfavorable means in return for a mere wizard. "I just hope to God this wizard isn't that old. I just need him to live long enough to serve Anatol well."

However, contrary to his hopes, the wizard was a slim old man, who appeared to be in his eighties, escorted by six assistants. Max, who came out to greet the guest, looked at the thin old man in surprise, and was very curious how such a frail person could survive the journey through the Anatol mountain range. The old wizard's clothing was baggy

and unkempt, his back was almost bent into a question mark, his old gray face was covered in wrinkles, and his scattered beard resembled that of corn silk. He entered the great hall with slow, wobbly steps, as if he might fall at any moment and bowed politely to them in greeting. Riftan groaned in exasperation.

“My name is Medrick Aron. To be welcomed by the most renowned knight in Whedo-”
The wizard was cut off by his own sporadic coughing.

“Dear Lord...” Riftan looked at him in disbelief and asked calmly. “How old are you?”

“This humble man turned... sixty-eight this year.”

Max was surprised. The wizard didn't look his age at all; he probably subtracted at least ten years from his actual age and it seemed that Riftan was also thinking the same thing. It was clear that Count Robern had ripped them off, but instead of venting his anger out at the poor old man, Riftan ordered the men to take him to his room and immediately called for a messenger

“Are you... going to c-confront the Count about this?”

“Of course, we should complain. There is nobody in this world who should dare deceive me and get away with it so easily.” Riftan growled like a beast, then rubbed his neck in annoyance. “But it will be difficult to send that old man back. From the looks of it, I don't think he can handle the journey through Anatol again.”

“He may be so tired from traveling... that he appears more haggard t-than usual. After he rests and regains his energy... I'm sure he will be a fine healer.”

Riftan looked at Max who was trying to console him and herself. “I hope I didn't add more patients to your list.”

Max laughed awkwardly at his words, not sure whether it was meant to be a joke or truth. But contrary to Riftan's concerns, Medrick was visibly rejuvenated after a good meal and two days of sleep in a soft, luxurious bed. After confirming that he was healthy enough, Max guided him through the infirmary located at the training ground. The old man looked pitiful and frail, but his eyes glittered with decades of extensive knowledge in the healing arts.

After examining the medicines in the infirmary, Ruth's salves and potions, he untied the leather pouches wrapped around his waist.

“The variety of medicinal herbs here is limited. I have over 60 herb seeds here for medicinal uses. Could the servants prepare a nearby field to plant these?”

“There's an h-herb field... behind the great hall, but there may not be enough room for... more than 60 seeds...”

“My herbs will grow well even in a rough soul. If I could have a small field that I can plow and prepare, it would be great.”

Max smiled at the old man’s ambition and motivated attitude. “I’ll tell the servants... to prepare it. Please d-don’t do it yourself.”

“I may not have the strength to plow the fields myself, but I can still sow the seeds. As long as the soil is taken care of, I can cultivate the harvest myself.”

Eager to prove his worth at the castle, Medrick began his work on the new herb garden immediately. With the help of the servants, a new field was plowed, and fences were erected according to his instructions. And as the magician said, he personally planted each seed.

Max stood next to him and asked questions about each herb and he answered each of her questions patiently. From her brief interaction with the old man, she learned that while Medrick did not possess strong magical abilities, his medicinal knowledge far exceeded Ruth’s. Additionally, he developed his own psychedelic magic to calm psychiatric conditions and various other magic to accelerate the growth and health of vegetation.

Max soon learned that Medrick was also knowledgeable with the use of illusory magic to calm patients, had mastered healing magic and had developed magic formulas that made plants grow faster and healthier. However, he was not interested in treating wounds with magic. He enjoyed applying herbs, poultices, and plasters that he made himself. The reasoning was because the excessive use of healing magic could lead to dependency.

“If the wound is not serious, it is better to let the body heal itself. After all, the human body is built to rejuvenate itself.”

“Why? P-perhaps... are there any... side effects from receiving long-term treatments using healing magic?”

“There are no physical effects, but eventually, the human mind will become dependent; they will lose their rationality and self-awareness, that as long as magic exists to heal them, they will believe they are capable of anything. Their pain tolerance will wear down and they will be increasingly dependent on wizards. The best thing for men is to endure pain and learn from their wounds.”

Medrick looked at her carefully as he advised. “M'lady, you must not cast magic for everyone who prompts for it. Mana is a part of our soul. Consuming too much mana has long-term effects on the body. Train your eyes to capture the severity of injuries so you can judge who needs what kind of treatment. The moment you fall into the well of healing everyone in sight, your life as a healer will be filled with frustration and suffering.”

Medrick's teachings were very different from Ruth's and Max was immensely fascinated with this new way of thinking. Ruth would never give her such advice. He was an avid admirer of magic and he never hesitated to use his powers at any time. Compared to him, Max noted that Medrick was more cautious and wiser, and she immediately recognized that the man's healing method suited his feeble magic abilities much more.

He immediately earned their respect and became her second advisor. From him, she learned the efficacy of various herbs, how to deal with different types of injuries, and tips on magic. While Medrick was not as good with complex magic as Ruth was, his knowledge of magic was still valuable. Under the direction of a new teacher, Max's skills also improved remarkably. Now she could successfully launch barriers using the earth as her medium. She was also able to improve her mana acceleration. Now, unknowingly, she was reborn as a much more competent wizard and healer.

Anatol's prosperity was also increasing. With the construction of the road almost completed, ranks of merchants from the south visited Anatol with their priceless cargoes. Seeing that the road construction was promising, they generously offered their endless support for the next project with the goal of expanding the port. It was a considerable investment for the fastest path to the western continent, the payoff would be great. Their territory rapidly evolved into a city from a small rural town. It was bustling so busily that it was unbelievable that a huge battle against monsters transpired in the northwest.

If it weren't for Livadon's messengers, Max might have completely forgotten about the countless armies of trolls. However, once every ten days, such terrible news arrived; castles were capsized by monsters and villages were devastatingly ransacked. To make matters even worse, the extremity of the situation and the magnitude of the monster army against the reinforcements dispatched from Whedon was much larger than they had expected. It would most-likely ensue to a longer battle.

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 178

The knights frequently discussed the monster's movement in every spare time. There were countless speculations flying around the castle, starting from why Balto and Livadon were, until now, ignorant of the formation of a troll army so large it could crowd the highlands, and even theories that there was a greater evil pulling the strings.

Max listened to their discussions with a mix of terror and anxiety. As her visit to the infirmary became a regular occurrence, the knights, who were wary of their conversations around her at first, began to discuss more openly. According to recent news, there was a high possibility of both Osiria and Whedon sending additional reinforcements.

"During the Red Dragon expedition, Livadon sent troops to help. If Whedon does not reciprocate, the other six kingdoms will not follow suit, no matter what happens to Livadon in the future."

"But... Whedon has already s-sent sufficient reinforcements."

"If it were enough, then the situation should have been improved by now. Yet the innocent citizens of Livadon continue to suffer and tremble in fear. This is a matter of exercising chivalry for us knights! Don't you think the six countries should be more active in suppressing the situation?"

Max immediately realized that the knights were eager to leave Anatol and join the brutal war in Livadon. The younger knights seemed to burn with passion to jump into danger. She couldn't agree or refute their argument, so she only smiled vaguely. She thought that maybe Riftan also yearned to leave like them, but at the thought of him leaving her, she felt as if the ground beneath her was melting away.

Max looked out the windows of the training ground's infirmary: the sun was setting, dyeing the surroundings with a hazy red, and the great protective wall around them cast a dark shadow. A flock of black birds soared into the sky, crying mournfully. The knights undergoing harsh training under the reddish sky had a different wretched look to their faces.

Looking up at the sky, Max wondered if any of those flying birds were messengers. Since the reinforcements left for the expedition, never did any of the messengers have brought good news. Or would good news regarding the situation improving be brought this time? She thought as she followed the flap of the birds' wings, her anxiety and expectations colliding.

"Madam, kindly return to the great hall. The Lord will not be pleased to find out that you stayed here 'til evening."

Medrick spoke as he transferred a pot of boiled ointment into a small jar. The two young knights who were sitting next to her quickly smeared the ointments on their bruises and rose from their seats.

“Please allow us to escort you.”

“T-there’s no need to, it’s fine.”

“No matter how tight the security check is for visitors, an occasional thief can get through. We won’t be able to rest easily unless we see the Lady safely return.”

Max couldn’t help but smile at their enthusiasm. The knights no longer treated her like a guest who would one day leave. Some even actively expressed their favor towards her. Seeing this change warmed her heart. She felt as if she had finally been accepted into the tightly knit relationship that Riftan had with the knights. Max shyly accepted their offer.

“Then...p-please do.”

They smiled brightly and carried her heavy books in their arms. Before she left the infirmary, Max reminded Medrick not to work until late. The old wizard moved to the bedroom located next to the infirmary. Due to his weak knees, it was difficult for him to climb the steep stairs every day, and not long after, he arranged a sturdy cabinet and a huge bookcase into his room. Max wanted to make sure that the new member would adjust well to the castle. Upon arriving at the great hall, she immediately instructed a maid to bring a nourishing dinner to Medrick’s room and make sure he didn’t sleep too late. Medrick was a motivated and diligent worker, but he wasn’t in his top health, so she was concerned that he could collapse one day from exhaustion.

“Is that wizard doing his job properly?”

””” . ”

Riftan asked as soon as he got back to the bedroom, late as usual and stripped off his armor. Max took his coat and hung it on the rack, her eyes opening wide at his question.

“O-of course. He’s working hard... you don’t have to w-worry.”

“Then why do you spend more time in the infirmary than before? When I asked Rodrigo, he said that you are there from morning ‘til night...”

“Because... I’m learning a lot about h-herbs and magic from Medrick. H-he does most of the work. There’s nothing... that Medrick doesn’t know when it comes to medicine and healing techniques.”

Riftan looked at her thoughtfully. “How is his health? Is he fit to travel?”

“T-travel?”

Max looked confused. Was Riftan planning to send him back to Count Robern? Her heart felt heavy at the thought of the enthusiastic old man pouring out his heart at his work. From what she had gathered, Count Robern was not a good master; he sent off an old man on a dangerous journey to Anatol, visibly tired and exhausted. Max quickly shook her head and tried to look steady.

“He... has bad knees. It’s hard for him to climb up and down the stairs. But he’s really working hard! Even though Medrick isn’t young... he’s very knowledgeable... you-you can’t send him back.”

“Calm down. I have no intention of sending off that wizard. I was just asking how he’s doing.”

Riftan sighed and waved a hand and Max studied his dark face with curiosity. It seemed like there was something he was contemplating on.

“Is... there something worrying you?”

“It doesn’t concern you.”

Max closed her mouth at his cold words that immediately silenced her. She knew that this was his method of drawing the line, and that she should never cross it. Feeling her heart ache and a little bitter, she stormed away. Riftan looked at her and arched an eyebrow as he wiped his sweaty body with a wet towel.

“Why is my lady sulking again?”

“I’m not s...sulking.”

“Your lips are pouting.”

He smiled mischievously, then pressed his hands to her cheeks and playfully rubbed her protruding lips. Max glared at him with a flushed face. Riftan trailed kisses from her earlobes to the bottom of her neck and wrapped her in his arms, gently caressing her. Her heart, which felt heavy with unease, melted helplessly. It was alarming how easily he could control her emotions.

“Get d-dressed. You will catch...a cold.”

Riftan frowned and muttered as he held her face closer with one hand. “I’m not wearing clothes, and so should you.”

His long fingers deftly unwrapped the laces that held her dress. His hands slipped through the opening in the hem and gripped the sensitive tip of her chests. Wasting no more time, he quickly undressed her and laid her on the bed. His copper-colored torso completely overshadowed her nudity. Her breath hitched as she felt his blood pound

through their pressed bodies, rapidly increasing the heat between them. Riftan erotically stroked her inner thigh and murmured in a low, husky voice.

“Nothing good happened today. Let me at least end the day on a pleasant note.”

His eyes were wrapped in a dark shadow. Max wondered if there was any bad news that had arrived, and her chest suddenly became tight. She wanted to know what he was thinking, but she couldn't reprimand him for not divulging everything to her. Even she couldn't tell him everything about herself and true feelings.

“Don't think about anything else. Just focus on me.”

Riftan's dissatisfied voice pierced like a needle through her thoughts that were tangled as a thread. He stared down at her, devouring her body with his eyes like a starved beast and swooped down to overlap their lips. Their hot, humid breaths mingled as they shared each other's taste, and all thoughts dissolved like sand in the wind. Max sighed exhilaratingly and wrapped his sturdy marble-like shoulders.

A week later in the afternoon, Max finally found out what was causing Riftan's concern. On an exceptionally hot day, three men, a messenger, and two escort knights, arrived at the castle. Max was grinding herbs in the infirmary when she heard murmurs from outside and went out to see what the commotion was about. One of the messengers sat on his giant stallion holding a banner with the emblem of the royal family yelled.

“In the name of King Ruben, I have brought a royal decree for Riftan Calypse, Lord of Anatol!”

Max's heart sank. For a message to be delivered at that time, it surely spelled bad news. While she stood not knowing what to do, Sir Obaron, who was supervising the training of the knights on behalf of Riftan, stepped forward and greeted the messenger.

“The Lord left for duties outside of the castle. Please allow me, Dominique Obaron, to receive the royal decree on behalf of our Lord.”

The messenger narrowed his eyes and carefully scanned Sir Obaron, then took out a scroll hidden in his robe.

“Defeat falls upon the battle in Livadon. The knights gathered by alliance were shattered.”

A chilling silence fell over the usual noisy field at once. Sir Obaron asked with a serious and hardened face. “Were they slaughtered?”

The messenger shook his head. “Half of them were forced to scatter as they continue to battle against the monsters; the other half are trapped in Louiebell Castle. We are not

certain of the current situation as the monsters have set up a siege around the castle walls but if the troops are not rescued as soon as possible, they will all be slaughtered.”

“Do you know what happened to the Remdragon Knights sent from Anatol?”

“Since the Remdragon Knights were placed in the front lines, they are probably all trapped inside Louiebell castle.”

Max felt weak and stumbled backward. If not for Medrick, who caught her shoulders, she would have collapsed on the ground. The faces of Ruth, Sir Elliot Karon, Lombardo, Uslin Rikaido, and all the other knights and soldiers flashed before her eyes. If she was feeling so shocked by the news, she couldn't even imagine how the other knights felt. Max looked around and saw the knights' expressions turn cold and stern. Despite the heavy atmosphere, the messenger continued to deliver the imperial order with a solemn face.

“In accordance with the Treaty of Peace between the Seven Kingdoms, requests for additional reinforcements are to be sent from each kingdom. As Whedon's most powerful knight, Lord Riftan Calypse, shall obey the king's command and lead his Knights to Livadon!”

“Go and bring back the Lord this instance!” Sir Obaron commanded the surrounding men and looked at the messenger with the dignity of a knight. “We need to know more about the situation. Please come inside the castle.”

The messenger and the escorts dismounted from their horses and rushed towards the conference room located in the knights' quarters. Max paced around like a lost child. She also wanted to know the details, but it was obvious that it's not her place to intervene. She wandered aimlessly through the infirmary before finally giving up and returning to the room at Medrick's insistence.

After a while, Riftan returned to the castle and immediately entered the conference room with the other knights. It was painful to not know what was going on. Max bit her lip and promised herself that no matter what happens, she would get a detailed answer from Riftan.

No one else probably knew but Ruth was a very dear person to her. He was her teacher and her first friend. Tears welled up around her eyes when she remembered how he got mad at her, saying goodbye as it felt like an ominous greeting. The critical situation of the knights sent for the expedition gave her a nerve-racking anxiety, but more than anything else the thought of Riftan having to leave for such a dangerous place seemed to break her heart into pieces

For how long will we not see each other this time? A few months, or even half a year? There was also the possibility of never seeing each other again.

The situation didn't offer a certain outcome, even the knights they sent for reinforcements did not foresee its gravity. That only meant even Riftan himself would not be safe from such danger. Max stared out the window desperately. She couldn't resist her worries and bolted out of the great hall.

Note – LF: Oh my goodness

Nymeria: Hello dear readers, please read! We just want to say that our schedule is Monday, Wednesday and Friday. We're trying to keep the rhythm of three chapters per week, but when personal problems won't allow it we'll notify the delay in the comment section of the last chapter posted. Posting on Saturday or Sunday is supposed to be a plus, when we can do it we will, but if we can't we won't notify you, since it's not a scheduled update. Thanks for understanding ?

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 179

Max passed the gates leading to the training grounds like a ghost carrying a lamp and the soldiers standing guard were taken aback at her arrival, but Max headed straight for the conference room without even looking in their direction. The moment she reached the front of the faintly lighted building, loud voices arguing pierced her eardrums.

“We can't wait that long! We must leave tomorrow at once! My point is, even if we hurry, it will take us at least twenty days!”

“Calm down, Sir Nirta. The Commander is right. There are only three to four small towns on the way to the border. It's hard enough to find necessities, let alone finding a village with a proper guild of wizards. It will be too dangerous to travel to Livadon without a wizard. especially with the rise of monsters everywhere.”

“All the wizard guilds headed to Livadon! Everyone’s aware of that. And due to the rise in monsters, all the Lords cling to their wizards, so how are we going to get a wizard in such a short time!”

“We can send a request to Osyria. They can lend us a high priest who is skilled in healing magic.”

“Hah! Don’t you know how tight-fisted they are? It will take months before we can get a high priest from them.”

“The Central Temple is also sending additional reinforcements, we can travel with them...”

“Joining the Holy Knights will take at least three weeks of wandering around trying to meet with them in the middle! F**k that! Get rid of those useless suggestions! It doesn’t matter if we have a wizard or not. We have fought in much more dangerous situations than this! Have we not, commander?”

Max froze on the spot and felt her heart sinking, in fear that Riftan would agree with Hebaron. The terrifying illustrations and descriptions of monsters that she read flashed through her mind. Monsters with poisons powerful enough to melt bones in an instant, sub-racial monster species with strength six times that of humans, and dragon subspecies with powerful magical attributes... No matter how strong the Remdragon knights were, they would not be able to survive the long journey unscathed. Max held her breath as she waited for Riftan’s decision.

She didn’t have to wait long before hearing his low baritone voice. “It’s unreasonable to leave immediately tomorrow. Wait a little. In four days... no, in three days, I’ll get a wizard.”

“This is a waste of time! You’ve been trying to acquire a wizard for months, but the only one you managed to get was that 80 year-old wizard! What more in two days...?”

Hebaron, who had been shouting violently, suddenly became quiet.

Should I keep eavesdropping like this?

Max restlessly stood and leaned against the door, unaware that the voices had suddenly stopped. At that moment, the door swung open and Hebaron’s huge figure protruded out.

“Who the hell has been rudely eavesdr-“ the knight muttered menacingly, but his eyes widened to find Max in front of him.

“Lady Calypse? What are you doing here at this hour?”

“I... I...”

”””” ”

Max, who stiffened in surprise, took a step back. The other knights poked their heads out from behind Hebaron, looking at her curiously. Max blushed, feeling embarrassed to be caught red-handed.

“I’m sorry for d-disturbing. I’m so anxious to know what’s going to... h-happen...” She muttered in a slurred voice.

Riftan passed Hebaron and came out of the door. Max’s shoulders sagged in fear of Riftan’s chillingly hardened expression. Was he angry that she was wandering around the castle alone so late at night? He continued to glare, staring at her with anger evident in his eyes, and yelled an order over his shoulder.

“Gabel, take her back to her room.”

It was obvious that the order was addressed to dismiss her. Max’s lips trembled.

“Ri-Riftan... I didn’t mean to interfere. I... I’m just worried about everyone... I wanted to know what you and the knights were planning to do...”

“And what can you do about it?”

Riftan cut her off bitterly and Max looked at him with a broken expression, hesitating to speak.

“Maybe there is something I-I c-can do...”

“Gabel!” Riftan yelled fiercely, purposely interrupting her. “Are you deaf? Take her back to the great hall right this instant, what are you doing standing around?!”

Max pursed her lips as she realized that the knights behind him were uncomfortable with the situation. Hesitating, Gabel left the conference room and approached her. Riftan grabbed the doorknob and said in a chilling voice directed at her.

“Don’t wait for me, go to sleep.”

Then he closed the door, preventing her from speaking any more. Max reluctantly turned around. Gabel, who stood, took the lamp from her hand.

“Everyone is sensitive because of the bad news. Please forgive shall they speak harshly. They’re all on the edge...”

Max grinned at Gabel to ease his mood but it came out forced and rigid. "It's f-fine. Rather, I should... apologize for bothering you. I just couldn't wait a-a little longer..."

He raised the lamp so they could see the steps in front of them and looked up at her with a softened expression. "Milady had a close friendship with the wizard. It's not unreasonable for you to worry."

They climbed the stairs in silence for a while. Max had too much on her mind. Riftan's intimidating attitude and his arguments in the conference room were constantly replaying in her head. It was only when they crossed the garden, that she carefully opened her mouth to ask.

"Do you really need a magician... for the e-expedition? When... you left for the capital the other time... you went without Ruth."

Gabel paused for a moment and let out an awkward smile. "The route to Drakium is lined with large towns and cities. There are countless guilds on the way, we can get treatment, or even hire a temporary wizard from the city's mercenaries. However, there are no such things between Anatol and Livadon. If we get injured, there will be no place to get treatment, so traveling without a wizard would be burdensome."

"Me..." Max barely squeezed the courage out when they reached the top of the stairs. "How about taking...me?"

She could feel the scrutinizing gaze of the knight, even in the total darkness of the night. She wanted to look confident, but couldn't hide her trembling hands. Finally, Gabel responded after a while.

"... the Commander would never give his permission."

Max shut her mouth at the obvious fact, but after retiring in the bedroom, the idea did not leave her mind. She snuggled into the bed, pondering ways to persuade Riftan. She noticed the looks on the faces of the knights. They also considered it a possibility, but no one dared to speak her name out.

Her heart pounded anxiously. There was no way Riftan could go to a place full of monsters undefended. She couldn't allow them to go without a healer to take care of them; even if they had the most perfect defense, even if they were the best knights in the world. She bit her lip as she waited for Riftan to open the door. No matter how angry he got, she vowed not to back down. She would not tolerate her husband being sent to the battlefield defenseless.

Max waited all night, but Riftan never came back even as the dawn broke. She fell asleep for a moment, and was woken up with the sound of Rudis opening the door. When she saw her milady lying uncomfortably at the foot of the bed, still wearing

yesterday's clothes, her eyes widened. Max immediately jumped out of bed and ran over to her.

"Ru-Rudis... Did Riftan leave already? I fell asleep for a while, I didn't see him..."

"The master slept in the knight's quarters last night."

"Where is he...now?"

"He's in the drawing room meeting a merchant."

Max quickly rubbed the sleep from her eyes, which she closed for barely three hours, and quickly brushed her messy hair with her fingers and ran outside. As she descended the stairs, she saw Riftan and the merchant Aderon, sitting face to face in an antique, well-decorated drawing room. Max paused four steps from the bottom of the stairs. Their calm voices conversing echoed quietly in the hall.

"It's not easy to get a wizard from anywhere at the moment. The only way to acquire one is to hire from the Wizard Tower, but it's not easy as there are rules established amongst them, and even if we pass over that hurdle, it will take at least ten days."

"I can't wait that long. How about contacting the nearby territories...?"

Riftan trailed off when he noticed her. Max unconsciously backed away, but quickly regained her resolve and entered the room. There appeared a sharp tension on his face.

"We're still talking. Get out."

"Rif-Riftan... I also want to listen. Are you still trying to get a wizard? If that's the case, I..."

"I told you to get out."

Riftan's voice became low and grim. Max looked at him and then turned to Aderon.

"Is... is it possible to hire a w-wizard three days from now?"

The merchant's eyes darted from Riftan's rigid face to Max's wretched one, with a bewildered expression, and responded as calmly as possible.

"Sorry to say this, but... it's practically impossible. The only nearby territories are Count Robern and Baron Luvein. As you already know... Count Robern is not willing to lend his wizards while Count Luvein only has one wizard so he cannot be sent on an expedition."

“You mean it’s i-impossible then?”

“Maximillian!” Riftan’s patience completely exploded as he yelled furiously. “This is not a matter for you to dwell in! I told you to get out.”

Max hesitated at his commanding attitude, but she looked him squarely in the eye without meaning to back away.

“I... I am your wife. Why is it n-not a matter for me?”

“This has nothing to do with you.”

She felt as if her heart was being stabbed by a thousand needles. Max felt like a child rejected by her parents and clenched her hands into a fist.

“It does matter to me! I... I’m a wizard! Riftan is aware of that right? I...”

“Shut your mouth.”

His roar was similar to that of a fierce beast, and Max’s entire body froze in an instant. There were several times that she experienced his anger, but this was the first time that he looked at her with such threatening and vicious eyes. Riftan looked coldly at Max, who flinched in fear, then turned to Aderon.

“I want one of Count Robern’s wizards. It doesn’t matter how much gold it takes. Can you give it a try?”

“We have contacts in Count Robern’s land... so we can try to contact one of his wizards by using an informant. However, if we are caught doing that, then our credibility...”

The merchant blurred his words, as if there was no need to explain the consequences, but Riftan threw a heavy leather bag at him, which landed with a heavy thud.

“If you make it happen, I will pay you ten times more. Persuade them by saying that whoever takes the deal will get five times of what Count Robren gives them.”

The merchant took the heavy pouch and put it in his hand, then nodded with a sigh.

“I will do my best, but don’t get your hopes up too high. The wizards who serve the count are like his vassals and have served the Robern family for generations. Therefore, it will not be easy to convince them.”

“Convince them, whatever it takes.” Riftan’s tone was as sharp as a knife. He rose from his seat and Aderon followed suit, shoving the leather pouch into his arms.

“Then, I will report in two days about my progress”.

The merchant bowed his head to both of them and left the drawing room. Max stood still and weighed the expression on Riftan's face. He picked up his cloak without meeting her eyes and went out. Max rushed after him, but Riftan's steps only became faster. She almost had to run to catch up with him.

"Riftan... please... please listen to me."

Note – LF: Riftan's too harsh on this chapter even though he's just trying to protect Maxi

Nymeria: Riftan has to calm the f down or I'm ready to throw hands! I take back what I said in the POV note?Jk, we know he's only concerned about her safety, but that's too much

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 180

Proofreader- Nymeria

Riftan kept walking and looked straight ahead as if he heard nothing. Max ran to catch up with his wide strides.

"Ri-Riftan!"

She screamed, almost begging, but he didn't even turn to look at her. Max glared at his back as she rushed and ran down the stairs. When she finally reached him, she tugged at his cloak. Riftan stiffened in surprise and pushed her hand away.

"W-wait, listen to... m-me... please!"

Max stumbled, but before she could finish, the hem of her skirt twisted around her legs and her whole body rocked forward. If it weren't for Riftan and his sharp reflexes, who

reached out to grab her waist, she would have rolled down the stairs. Max clung to his arms with a pale face, then heard a curse pronounced harshly above her.

“D**n it... what the hell were you thinking?! You almost got a big injury!”

Riftan grabbed her by the shoulders and scolded her. Max’s shoulders hunched in fear, but she glared at him with defiant eyes.

“It’s because... R-riftan... was ignoring m-me.”

“D**n, why can’t you just let me go? Why the hell do you keep doing this? I don’t want to hear those absurd thoughts going through your head!”

Max lowered her eyes so as not to show him how devastated she was by his cruel words. But she couldn’t whimper in this situation; she needed to show that she was not the weak and delicate noble lady that he believed her to be. Riftan would not hesitate to use her weakness to completely defeat her: she knew that he was determined not to take her with him out of Anatol, so she kept her emotions under control and spoke as calmly as she could.

“How... how do you k-know it’s ridiculous... without even listening to what I have to say? Listen to me... then d-decide...”

Riftan’s lips tightened into a thin line. Looking at her with eyes of burning coal, he released her and folded his arms over his chest and spat coldly.

“Fine. Go ahead.”

No matter how reasonable and convincing she was, his body language clearly screamed “no” for whatever she was going to propose. Max swallowed dryly.

“The journey to Livadon...is very difficult, I heard. On such a journey... it would be dangerous to go without a w-wizard...”

“I’ll take care of it myself and get a new wizard.”

””” ”

“You... you may not be able to! A-Aderon said it may be i-impossible.”

“It’s none of your problem. it is mine and I will deal with it myself.”

Max couldn’t find words to say in response to his curt demeanor. Seeing that the conversation was over, Riftan turned to leave again, but Max clung desperately to his arm.

"I... I know that Riftan c-can't trust me. But... I studied really hard and I have more mana now. If you can't acquire a wizard in time... then... I-I'll take on the role of Ruth and...!"

"That's enough!" Riftan lost his patience and raised his voice. "Do you think this is some leisurely trip? As you said yourself, the road that leads to Livadon is difficult, yet you want me to bring you along a journey like that? I would rather die!"

His thunderous voice echoed down the hall. He swept his hair and ruffled it violently. "It doesn't matter if you know magic. So, stop this now and don't bother me with this nonsense again."

Then, Riftan fastly strode down the stairs and Max failed to hold on to him. She just stood there blankly and watched him disappear from her sight. At the end of the corridors, the servants poked their heads out and looked to see what was going on. Max blushed and hurried off. Her heart sank heavily with grief, his cold rejection made her confidence crumble down.

She returned to her room, depressed, and defeated. As the shock gradually subsided, the sadness was replaced by anger. An anger she had never felt before bubbled up from deep within her. Riftan would rather die than take her to a dangerous place. How can anyone be so selfish!? How could he force her to stay still in the castle while he leapt casually into danger? How could he not consider how she was feeling?

Max nervously massaged her head. After the way their conversation ended, she was sure she wouldn't be able to sleep well that night.

What was going to happen if he got infected with monster venom? What if he suffered from a fatal wound that couldn't be healed with mere medicinal herbs? If she were left behind, these thoughts would haunt her for months. Was this the comfortable life he was obsessed with giving her?

Max stared at the dark, empty corner of the room, then stormed off again. Even if she argued with him for a hundred days, it was all useless. First, she needed the knights on her side. She knew that Riftan's iron will could not be shaken, but the knights were in a different position. If they sided with her, they could pressure Riftan and persuade him for her. Max ran toward the training ground, clinging to her last bit of hope.

The generally spacious training ground was packed with people. The Knights had already started preparing to leave for Livadon and the servants were rushing to help them. Max squeezed between the knights who were checking their weapons and horses that stomped their feet restlessly. She was afraid she would bump into Riftan, but luckily he was nowhere to be seen. He must have gone to give instructions to the construction site before leaving it. She looked around for a familiar face and quickly saw Hebaron sharpening a sword that was as big as her.

She ran straight to him. "Sir Nirta... may I speak with you for a moment?"

Hebaron, who was sitting on a wooden chair and tending to his sword, raised his head. "What is it?"

He rose to his feet, towering over her small frame, his annoyance clearly indicated in his darkened features and Max felt a little intimidated by it. Hebaron had lost all his usual optimism at the news that his colleagues were in danger.

"About y-yesterday... I have something I want to say..."

"Say it."

Max looked around, a little flustered by his cold demeanor. Some of the other knights looked their way, but not everyone seemed to pay much attention. They were all busy checking their weapons and horses and tuning their swords. Max tried to sound as confident as possible as she fidgeted with the hem of her dress.

"I heard that a wizard is needed for the trip to Livadon... I... would like to take on that role..."

Hebaron's eyes widened in shock at her request. He straightened up and gave her a thoughtful look. "Milady, thank you for the offer, but... but did you get permission from the Commander?"

Max's face turned red. "Riftan... he won't even listen to m-me... I wanted to k-know what the knights were thinking..."

Hebaron hesitated and couldn't answer her right away. "The commander said he's trying to get one of Count Robern's wizards. So the Lady doesn't have to put herself at risk."

"If you can't get a w-wizard... what will you do?"

"If that's the case, we'll go by ourselves..."

"Can you say... with certainty that everyone can get to Livadon without o-one person being hurt?"

Hebaron's strong jaw clenched. He didn't have to give her an answer; his expression was already an answer, so Max continued to speak in a firmer tone.

"As Sir Nirta k-knows... since I started working in the infirmary... My skills have improved a lot... Even Medrick says I-I'm better than the... clumsy h-healer they had when... he worked for the mercenaries."

“Lady Calypse.” Hebaron cut her off, looking a bit embarrassed. “The lady is definitely talented. Everyone else was also surprised by your progress, and to be honest, it’s not like we didn’t think about the Lady taking Ruth’s place. But madam, this journey will not be easy. I won’t be able to get a carriage for the Lady like last time. The Lady will have to travel on horseback all day and camp until we reach a town or city. You will be exposed to countless dangers and monsters... besides, the lady knows no other type of magic than healing.”

“T-that’s not the case! I also I-learned defensive magic.” Max raised her head high and countered. “I can make barriers... strong enough. Although it’s difficult to build a big one... but at least I-I can protect myself.”

The truth was, she never tested the strength of her defenses, so she couldn’t be sure, but Max continued to wear a confident facade. It was more important to her to be with Riftan than her own safety. If he was willing to risk his life recklessly, so was she.

“I-I won’t be a burden. So...”

“This journey is difficult even for experienced knights, let alone the Lady...”

Hebaron meticulously studied her physique as if evaluating a prized stallion.

Max frowned at his rudeness. “What about m-me?”

“The journey may be too much to handle, given the Lady’s stamina.”

“B-But... didn’t Ruth leave for the expedition?”

Ruth was taller than her, but he was thin compared to other gentlemen. And since he used to stay up to read at night, he always looked pale and weak. At least she was more active than the wizard.

“I... I’m healthier than Ruth and I have more energy. If Ruth can do it, I-I can do it too... Of course, I don’t have Ruth’s years of experience. But for a-anyone... there’s always a first time for everything, right?”

“...that’s very persuasive.”

Max didn’t know if Hebaron was smiling or frowning. She realized that he was in conflict based on his ambiguous expression. He stroked his chin for a moment as he finally raised his hands like he was defeated.

“Fine. If we can’t get a wizard in two days, I’ll try to persuade the commander.”

“Th-Thank you!”

Max smiled brightly, but Hebaron simply shook his head with a faint smile.

“Don’t say thank you just yet. The Commander may refuse ‘til the end.”

“T-that could happen...”

Max’s momentary glee faded when she remembered Riftan’s terrifying expression. Even Hebaron wasn’t entirely sure about how he could deal with him, based on his darkened features. After a long, drawn-out silence, Max grew more anxious about his expression. She wondered if she was causing him too much pressure.

“Would it... Would it be helpful if I-I went with all of you?”

Hebaron looked around, as if he didn’t know how to answer her, then he finally groaned and confessed.

“Of course, it would be helpful. We even thought about dragging that old wizard with us.”

“Me-Medrick is not well enough... he’s not in a condition to travel.”

“I know...” He gave out a long sigh. “It would be great if the Lady could join us, but expeditions are really difficult. Please don’t think lightly about it and carefully consider...”

“I’m not taking it I-lightly. I’m determined. If I stay in the castle... I’ll just w-worry. I would rather be t-tired. And...”

Max kept rambling on with a smile, but quickly caught herself, thinking that it was strange for her to try to convince him that she could bear hardships too. Hebaron studied her carefully with his green eyes, as if trying to uncover any hidden intentions. When he found none, he gave her a broad smile.

“That is reassuring.”

Note – Nymeria: How many times have I said Hebaron for the win now?

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