

Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 191

They followed the guard into the village. Looking around the bustling roads from atop Rem, Max marveled at the unexpected size of the village. Rustic wooden cabins lined both sides of the road, and goats, pigs, and donkeys were scattered, peacefully grazing the vegetation.

Max wrinkled her nose at the stench of the barn. The road was stained with droppings from running cattle. The merchants had their stalls set up along the road, and there were piles of lumber everywhere, while the carpenters worked diligently on the houses. There were also armed men here and there, who looked like swords for hire. Riftan frowned as they waved across the sea of people.

“There are quite a number of people here.”

“Isn’t it because of the sudden increase in monsters? Many small towns were attacked by half dragons, goblins, and goblins. It has become increasingly common in recent months with people fleeing their homes and settling here.”

“Is there a food shortage?” Riftan asked.

“We are better compared to the other villages, as many armies and wizards pass through here before heading to Livadon. Ah, we arrived.” The soldier pointed to the three-story wooden inn located at the end of the narrow path. “The knights are staying at that inn.”

“Thank you for guiding us.” Riftan tossed him a silver coin.

The soldier bowed and quickly ran to the inn to call some workers to attend to them. After the soldier fulfilled his duties, they headed inside.

Max walked over to Riftan and looked around the dimly lit entrance. The gentlemen, who were all huddled in the dining room filled with wooden planks and chairs, immediately stopped talking and jumped out of their seats when they saw them.

“Commander, you got here faster than we thought!” Hebaron grinned and stroked Riftan’s armored shoulders harshly.

Riftan ended up ignoring him, and walked over to the innkeeper to ask for a room. Despite being so coldly ignored, Hebaron continued to smile and turned his attention back to her.

“I’m glad you’re okay, ma’am. I knew he’d find you but I was worried it would be too late. Are you hurt somewhere?”

“I’m fine. Sorry... for worrying everyone.”

“No, don’t apologize. We should be the ones to apologize for not protecting you properly. I thought d**n Gabel would be competent enough but... Thank God the Commander was able to find you on time. Nothing compares to his tracking skills.”.

Max looked around the room with a solemn smile. “By the way... I don’t see everyone... did all the knights arrive safely?”

“They all arrived last night. Gabel has gone out to look for supplies, And the others are gathering information from the mercenaries who are in the village. You can say hello later, you must be tired. Go rest in the room.”

Hebaron examined her and lightly clicked her disheveled appearance, as if he were personally responsible for her current state. Max blushed and touched her nest of hair. She didn’t even have to look in a mirror to know how terrible she looked now.

””” ”

Shyness and shame suddenly surged within her, and she quickly hunched her shoulders to try to hide her appearance and went to Riftan, who was beckoning her to follow him upstairs. He led her to the room at the end of the hall on the third floor and he carelessly tossed her bags into a corner of the room.

Max wanted nothing more than to collapse on the bed, but she didn’t want to mess up the blankets and sheets. When she started to remove her wet boots and socks, Riftan, who was watching, turned to leave.

“I have ordered them to prepare a bathroom sleep after you wash.”

“W-what about you Riftan?”

“I need to watch and there are updates from Livadon.”

“We just got here... maybe take a little break...”

Before she could finish her sentence, Riftan opened the door and left. Max lowered her eyes at his continued coldness. She doubted he had slept a wink last night, so how could he not be tempted to lie on a bed even for a moment?

She wanted to chase him down and tell him he needed to rest too, but she knew it was useless and sighed in resignation. A knock snapped Max out of her thoughts and a restless woman entered with a wooden barrel full of water and a hot kettle.

After the woman left, Max locked the door and threw away her cold, dirty clothes. For several days, she was covered in sweat and dust, so the feeling of warm water and

soap couldn't be more heavenly. She scrubbed her body thoroughly with the soap twice and then rinsed off with clean water. She carefully washed her tangled hair and when she was done, she used the leftover water in the kettle to wash off the soap. With all the dirt gone, her pale, white skin absolutely glowed. She felt like a newborn baby. With a happy face, Max got out of the tall barrel and dried herself with a clean towel.

But now she had another problem. Looking at her bag, she frowned: only one pair of clean underwear remained. All of her other clothes had either been dammed by the rain or were already dirty with her sweat. There was no time to wash everything and wait for it to dry, so the only option left was to put the wet, smelly clothes back on.

Maybe I should wash it quickly and let it dry as much as it can... Max frowned.

She was smelling the acidity emanating from her clothes, when a soft knock suddenly interrupted her. She quickly wrapped the towel around her body and stuttered in an embarrassed tone.

"Wh-who is it?"

"Your husband has told me to bring you a change of clothes."

The voice belonged to the woman who brought her the bath water. Max went to open the door, and after making sure the hallway was empty, she quickly took the clothes from her hands and went back inside. It was an old robe that felt rough against her skin, the shirt was too big on her as it stretched down to the ankles, but she was just happy to be able to wear clean clothes.

Max adjusted a belt around her waist and handed the dirty clothes to the woman outside when she asked for them.

"Can I bring your food to your room?"

Max shook her head. She wanted to know what Riftan was doing and check the other knights in case someone got hurt. She borrowed a pair of slippers from the woman and headed down the hall.

The gentlemen went to sit around the tables and enjoy their meals. Yulysion was the first to see her, and immediately jumped out of his seat to approach her.

"Milady! I heard you were back! I'm so glad you're okay!!" The normally cheerful boy was almost on the verge of tears.

Garrow, who came towards them, shook his horrified face sadly. "I have failed the Lady... I didn't even realize the Lady was gone... I'm not qualified to be your guard."

“Y-you two, don’t say that... B-Because a goblin suddenly landed on Rem... and R-Rem fled in a frenzy... I-it’s because I couldn’t control my horse...”

She did her best to comfort them. The two boys exchanged glances at each other and looked at her in embarrassment. Gabel came up behind them and spoke with concern in his tone.

“Are you hurt somewhere?”

“I’m fine... are you hurt? Does anyone need treatment...?”

“Everybody’s fine. Don’t stand there, come sit down. I’ll get you some food.”

He pulled out a chair for her at an empty table and called for a worker. Then in a brief moment, a young woman with carefully braided hair placed freshly baked bread, oven-roasted goose, and a turnip salad in front of her.

Max gulped down the food and looked around the dining room. Gabel, who was sitting across from her, immediately realized that she was looking for Riftan.

“Lord Calypse is talking to the merchants. We need to make sure we have enough food and water before we leave tomorrow. “

“A-are we leaving tomorrow?”

“The horses are too tired to leave today. Also, there will be no other town between here and the port from this point on, so we have to make sure we have enough supplies for the journey. Even today’s schedule is tight.”

Max nodded in understanding as she sliced the meat and ate it. Riftan did not return until she finished her meal. She watched him argue with the other gentlemen about the next schedule, then retreated to the bedroom and collapsed on the bed.

The sheets and blankets were unmatched by fine silk and woolen blankets at home, but it felt like she was laying on a pile of clouds after days of camping in rugged, cold dirt terrain or uneven rocky cave terrain. Max buried her face in the pillow and immediately fell asleep. When she opened her eyes, everything was completely dark.

“How many hours did I sleep...?”

Max sat up quickly and then froze when she saw a large, dark lump resting next to her. She narrowed her eyes, trying to get a good look in the dark. It was Riftan. His back was facing her as he laid there motionless, his long legs stretched out.

Slowly adjusting her vision to the darkness, Max slid carefully out of bed and rolled over to the other side and stood in front of him. Riftan was a light sleeper, but this time he

was lying there, completely still as she approached. Feeling relieved, Max laid down beside him and slid gently into his arms. His body smelled of soap and his cool, dry clothes smelled of hay. Max buried her face in his broad chest and inhaled his comforting scent.

Riftan stirred a little, but did not open his eyes. He seemed to be trapped in a very deep sleep. Max looked at his smooth, chiseled face, and slowly fell into a dream, listening to his heartbeat.

The knights were preparing even before dawn. Max woke up to the noise outside and crawled over to wash her face and brush her messy hair, which seemed to have doubled in thickness, into a graceful braid.

Fortunately, all of her clothes had been washed and dried thanks to the sunny weather. Max pulled on her freshly laundered trousers and tunic and slipped her feet into her boots. She quickly packed her change of clothes and headed downstairs, only to see the gentlemen busily running and carrying boxes of supplies outside.

Max followed them out of the inn and immediately found Riftan, standing tall in the crowd.

“Ri-Riftan! When did you wake up? I didn’t realize it at all...” Max jumped up happily, but stopped quickly when she saw that he was talking to someone.

Riftan shot her a quick glance and then turned to the man in front of him. He pulled out some Derhams from his leather pouch that had been tied to his belt and handed them to the man.

“Good. I’ll buy these carts.”

“Thank you very much. I will cover it with tarps immediately.” The man put the coins in his pocket and pushed the two large carts under a tree.

Max followed the man with wide eyes. “C-can we take cars with us?”

“From here on, everything is flat terrain. We will be going over a small mountain, but it is nothing as rugged and steep as yesterday.”

Max smiled cheerfully at the revelation. She was sick of climbing mountains.

“So... h-how much longer will it take?”

“We will be able to reach the port in about a week. From there we will travel to Livadon by boat.”

◀ Previous Chapter

Next Chapter ►
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Rate this Chapter

Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 192

After making sure the man loaded the barrels of water and troughs onto the carts, Riftan finally turned to look at Max.

Max tilted her head away at his hardened expression. His piercing eyes looked like they were full of annoyance and he sighed lightly as he led her to where the horses were standing by. Then, he pulled something out of the bag he had tied to his saddle.

“I bought this yesterday. I chose the lightest one there was, so be sure to carry it around even if it is cumbersome.”

Max’s eyes widened, looking at the dagger a little over a kvet long (30 cm). Riftan carefully fastened a sturdy belt with a scabbard around her waist and hung the weapon at her hip.

“I didn’t really intend on giving you such a hideous thing, but...” He frowned as he gazed down at her with a complex expression. “When I heard that you got lost in the mountains alone, without a single weapon, my whole world went dark. You should have at least a dagger.”

“Th-thank you. I’ll make good use of it.”

“I’m not giving it to you with the intention of using it. This is just a precaution.” He said sharply but soon added with a groan. “But still, I’ll show you how to use that later.”

Max nodded her head looking grateful. The fact that Riftan had given her a weapon, despite treating her as an extra finger on this expedition, made her feel gleeful. He looked distraught at her reaction, but he simply shook his head and led her back to the inn. They quickly finished their simple breakfast and left the village right away.

Max rode her horse with ease over the vast plains, surrounded by the knights. The endless plains around them were much easier to traverse compared to the uneven mountain roads. The smooth dirt road covered with thin grass made her feel like she

was riding on clouds. Max looked up at the clear blue sky, free of clouds, then turned to see two rolling carts, swaying and rattling behind them. The two extra stallions that were brought from town to pull the carts managed to keep up with the war horses, despite carrying carts that were full of hay, barrels of water, food, and firewood.

“Do we really need that much water... and hay?”

Gabel, who was riding his horse real close to her, looked up at the sky and answered. “Although there’s a stream running near the road, the chances of finding grass or a puddle of water will be near impossible as we continue further on. And it probably won’t rain for a few days from the looks of it. Even what we have is not enough to keep all the horses going.”

Hearing that, Max became a little concerned since the rain was not a welcome participant in an expedition: boots and clothing would soak through, making the movement very unpleasant, not to mention herbs and food which often ended up ruined.

Yet, riding across the empty, desolate plains without a single tree to shade against the intense summer sun was another form of torture. Max squinted at the blazing sun and wiped away the beads of sweat that had already started to trickle down the bridge of her nose. That heat would only get worse when midday hit.

And just as she feared, when the sun rose above their heads, the blazing heat began to scorch their skins. The horses whinnied and snorted, and even the knights, whose faces remained impassive, were drenched with sweat. They traveled across the empty plains without even a hint of shade, eventually stopping to take a break near a stream.

While the horses gulped down the water voraciously, the men ate a simple lunch of bread and dried meat and as soon as they finished, they immediately started moving again. Max never thought she would miss the mountains in just half a day of travel. She missed the shadows of the trees and the icy springs of the mountains. Sighing, she looked ahead at the dry plain that didn’t have a single blade of grass in sight. Her scalp tingled from the sun burning just above her head, while the sweat on her back dripped endlessly.

When they finally stopped to set up camp in an area scattered with large rocks, Max felt like a spinach pickled in vinegar. Max, covered in sweat, awkwardly got off her saddle. She was deeply upset that the bath she had taken so sincerely the day before had gone to waste in just one day. It was probably best to scrap the idea of hygiene during an expedition.

She trudged to where the knights were gathered to help feed the horses. Yulysion tried to stop her, but she felt uncomfortable seeing everyone working tirelessly while she was left alone, completely out of place. Walking to the supplies in the carts, Max scooped up a pile of hay, placed it in buckets, and carried it to the horses. She also filled buckets with water to help the drink.

However, Riftan, who went with a couple of knights to survey their surroundings for monsters, frowned upon seeing her.

“Don’t bother with these useless chores and rest.” He grabbed her arm and pulled her toward the tent that was set up. “Lie down and rest until dinner is ready. That would be more helpful than anything else.”

Max looked at him with a dissatisfied expression but nodded helplessly, she knew arguing with him would be pointless. She was not as exhausted as before now that her body had adapted to traveling and camping, but her strength was still incomparable to the stamina of the knights, who trained rigorously every day.

Like Riftan said, it was better to focus on regaining her strength as often as possible. Crouching near the entrance to the tent, Max looked out over the wide meadow, now stained red by the setting sun.

Riftan placed food on a tray and brought it straight to the tent. She satisfied her hunger with barley bread and stew made with salted meat and potato as she watched the sunset. She ate everything without leaving a single drop or crumb.

“Do your thighs still hurt?”

“It... it doesn’t hurt that much anymore. I’m used to riding a horse for long periods now..”

In fact, her inner thighs and shoulders still ached, but Max tried her best as she could to look honest. Riftan stared at her for a while, searching her body with his eyes, as if trying to detect any lies in her words, then stood up.

“Good, I’ll show you how to use the dagger before you go to bed. Come with me.”

“N...now?”

“Is it too hard for you?” Max quickly shook her head and got up from her seat to follow him. Riftan took her a little further away from the tent. “Now, try pulling out the dagger.”

She looked around and felt the discomfort increase as they stood in full view of the knights, who were sitting near the campfire, staring at them curiously as they ate their meals.

She coughed awkwardly, then reached for the dagger that was secured in a scabbard tied around her waist. She wanted to remove it in one smooth motion to avoid embarrassment herself, but the blade remained stubbornly stuck in the leather sheath.

Humiliated, Max gripped the sheath with her hand and forcefully moved the blade inch by inch and finally held it in front of her. Riftan's eyebrows furrowed as he watched her intently with arms crossed.

"You're holding it upside down. That side of the blade shall be facing up."

He pointed at the curved part of the dagger. Max quickly turned the dagger around, however, Riftan's brow furrowed even further as he examined her wrong posture.

"A dagger is a weapon meant for stabbing, not wielding like a sword. It shouldn't be held like that, here, like this..."

He held her hand and adjusted the weapon so it leaned horizontally.

"Good. Now stab me with that."

Riftan took three steps back and said nonchalantly. Max just stared at him blankly, not knowing if she heard correctly.

"W-what do I do?"

"Try and stab me with the dagger."

"W-what if I hurt you?"

The corners of his mouth twitched in amusement seeing her startled at his instructions. "There is nothing under this sky that can hurt me with that. Now stop worrying about useless things and attack me with that."

Max blushed. Of course, she couldn't land a scratch on the strongest knight in the continent. However, his overbearing arrogance was a bit excessive. She glared fiercely, then squeezed her eyes shut and charged.

However, after taking two steps, her foot caught on the edge of a rock and her body spun forward. She lost her balance and flapped her arms wildly, and her dagger flew from her hand and over the heads of the knights, who were watching the thrilling show in interest. They ducked as they held their bowls filled with stew.

Riftan ran quickly forward to catch her before she fell and sighed audibly. "Why did you close your eyes while coming at me? Shouldn't people look straight at their opponent while attacking..."

Max's ears burned with mortification. "It's because this is my first t-try. It will be different...next time."

Riftan looked at her and raised a questionable brow. He took the dagger then stepped back again.

It was soon revealed that she had no talent in combat, and her coordination skills were practically non-existent. The dagger continually struck his gauntlet, and with her weak wrist, it bounced off pathetically, missing every time.

Riftan took his time patiently explaining how to correctly hold the dagger and effectively stab vital points but the results never improved even after several attempts. She simply had inherently slow reflexes and uncoordinated movements.

Max turned her sore wrist and looked at him. She grew anxious that he could deepen his prejudice that she was a weak and delicate noble lady.

“This is not working. We will have to be more vigilant.” Hebaron shook his head and muttered as he chewed on a piece of dried meat.

He was probably speaking to himself, but his voice was simply so loud that Max heard every word. Feeling discouraged, she dropped her shoulders in defeat. Riftan also seemed to agree with Hebaron, but he, at least, didn't say it out loud, instead he picked up the fallen dagger and sheathed it back at her waist.

“That's it for today. You must be exhausted, go and get some rest.”

Max was anxious that he had already given up teaching her. “To-tomorrow might be different. Will you teach me... tomorrow?”

“Depends on the situation.” He answered vaguely and led her towards the tent.

Max looked at him with confusion. “What about you, Riftan? Aren't you coming in the tent?”

Riftan's lips tightened and he gave her a hardened smile. “I'll go later. Go to sleep first”.

Maybe he was thinking of going back to sleep outside the tent. Max looked at him doubtfully, then walked into the tent alone. After a whole day baking in the sun, and the training now, she really had no energy left. She massaged the tingling on her wrist, then removed her boots and set them aside.

Max desperately wanted to wash off the dried sweat, but she knew that water was going to become a scarce resource that could not be wasted for unnecessary comforts. She untied her belt and placed it on one side, crawled under the blanket, and set her bag as a pillow.

The sun had completely gone down and the heat had been replaced by a cool breeze, but she still flung around uneasily at the unpleasant sensation of her clothes clinging to

her sticky body. Just before falling asleep, Max prayed fervently that they would find a stream or small creek the following day.

Note – Nymeria: UUGGGHHH the second-hand embarrassment is killing me

◀ Previous Chapter

Next Chapter ▶

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Rate this Chapter

Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 193

However, the heavens seemed to unfortunately not hear their prayers. After five days of traveling under the scorching sun, there was not a puddle in sight, let alone a creek. There were occasional trees and thorny bushes scattered sparsely, but it was extremely difficult to find water. Most of the barrels of water that had been piled up like a mountain in the carts, rapidly ran out. Naturally, washing their bodies was out of the question.

The expedition moved all day through the desolate land without a single blade of grass. They were all covered in sweat and dust, and so far, they had two more monster encounters. Once, three half-dragons pounced on them when they were passing a rocky field, and the next day, all the wagons they were carrying were almost burned to ashes by a salamander hidden among the rocks. Max was terrified by the giant lizard that spewed fire, but the knights were glad to have obtained a precious fire mana stone from the salamander's body. She had now grown a stomach hard enough to withstand watching monster corpses being taken apart, but there was no other option anyway.

In fact, over the past few days, they have encountered several monsters and she had often seen knights clean the animals that they had hunted for food. That made her fine and sensitive nerves break, she no longer smiled brightly when they found a cute b***y between the crevices of a rock. Instead, she would have a bleak thought about it being an ingredient for the stew that dinner. She couldn't tell if this change in her was good or bad.

“Commander, there isn't much water left. We have to find at least a puddle today.”

Evan called as they took a break to feed the horses. Riftan, sitting on a rock and chewing on a piece of dried meat, looked over his shoulders to see the only barrel of

water left in the cart. Max could see the crease forming between his eyebrows. He looked around for a moment, then replied calmly in a clear voice for everyone to hear.

“We can reach Caldical Forest by noon. We just need to last four more hours.”

She looked at him curiously, wondering how he could predict routes so accurately. There was nothing around him but rocks and thorn bushes, but Riftan always knew exactly which direction to go and how long it would take to get there. He always led the expedition with great leadership and unwavering conviction, and the knights never doubted his judgments. It was his skills and prudence that were the foundation of the absolute trust the knights had offered him.

After their rest, they set off once more on horseback. They rode for hours without stopping, and soon, as Riftan said, a misty field of green began to emerge from the horizons. Max instantly forgot about the exhaustion that weighed down on her shoulders and led her horse to gallop vigorously towards the forest. A few moments later, the expedition reached the dense forest full of thick trees. Max exhaled deeply as soon as they took refuge under the dark shade provided by the tall foliage.

The air around them was still cloudy from the heat, but thanks to the lush leaves that covered the sun, it made the heat much more bearable. However, after moving for a while into the forest, there was still no water in sight, not even a small puddle. Max became more and more anxious. She wouldn't probably be able to stand it if she wouldn't be able to wash herself today. Please... she begged as she looked around, hoping for even a glimpse of a narrow, mottled spring. Then, Riftan suddenly stopped moving and announced to them.

“We will set up camp here. Rain will fall soon. “

Max looked through the leaves at the clear sky. The sun was shining high above them, and the air was suffocatingly muggy. She wondered if it was really going to rain, but got off her horse without saying a word. The knights were already pitching their tents among the trees and meticulously covered the wagons with bitumen-lined cloths to keep their food and firewood from getting drenched. Max led Rem through the busy knights and tied the reins around a large tree, then removed the saddle. She walked to her tent with her bag in hand, when Riftan suddenly came up behind her and took the burden from her hands.

“Come with me.”

Max followed him away from where the knights were gathered and onto a large tent that was set up under a tall, thick, leafy tree. Riftan tossed her bags inside and held the flap open for her to enter. Max crawled inside and sighed as Riftan shot her a scathing look, as if telling her to be good and stay put, before leaving her.

The floor was covered with bitumen-lined cloths and thick blankets, which made the floor quite soft. After spending all day in a saddle, she was grateful for the plush blankets that cradled her aching behind. She took off her boots and set them aside. She wanted to remove her clothes that were soaked with days of sweat, but she was left with only a clean tunic. If possible, she wanted to change it after taking a bath. But will they be able to find a spring today?

As she debated whether she should venture into the woods in search of water, the sound of raindrops started to pour audibly. Max poked her head out of the tent, startled. All of a sudden, thick raindrops began to fall from the now pale, cloudy sky. Max lifted the flap on the tent all the way up to see where Riftan was taking refuge, but she saw him rubbing his face and neck just a few steps from her tent. She blinked, unable to understand what he was doing. Riftan turned and gestured for her to come out and get under the heavy rain.

“Maxi, come here.”

Suddenly, Riftan took off his armor and laid it on the ground. His tunic instantly got soaked with rainwater, and it wasn't just Riftan. With the exception of those who stayed armed as they had to stand guard, all the knights removed their armor and allowed the rain to wash away dried sweat and dirt. Everyone was acting like children who got excited while playing in the water, some even started washing their hair, and Hebaron shamelessly took off his shirt and began rubbing every inch of his torso. Max watched them with a puzzled look.

””” ”

“Come here. If you don't wash yourself now, there may not be another chance to wash up.”

“B-But...”

Like that there was no way of washing her body modestly outdoors. She wanted to flatly refuse, but she was dying to cleanse her body of the filth that clung to her. Max looked at the knights enjoying the rain with envy, and finally, the desire to wash away the grime overcame any personal reservations she had. She grabbed the soap in her bag and crawled out of the tent. The thick raindrops instantly soaked her entire body and Max groaned at the refreshing sensation of the cold water hitting her face. Although she couldn't take off her clothes like the knights, she could at least hide behind a tree to wash her hair and face, so she walked behind the tent and quickly lathered her hair before the rain stopped, but Riftan followed her and grabbed her arm.

“Come this way.”

Max followed him, stepping over the wet blades of grass without knowing why. Riftan led her away from the crowd, to a place swarmed with thick bushes and trees. Riftan

brought her behind a huge rock boulder, then took out a cloth and tied it to the tree branches, instantly creating a private space just for her.

“I told them not to let anyone come near here, so relax and wash to your heart’s content.”

Max wiped the rain from her eyes, then turned to look at the direction where the knights were gathered. Even though she couldn’t see them as he created this enclosed space just for herself, and there were thick trees and bushes between them, she still felt extremely uneasy. However, it was not the time to think deeply about it. She had a burning desire to take a bath and there was no knowing when the rain might suddenly stop.

Max glanced at Riftan’s face over the tarp, then he took steps back as if to stand guard. She then hurriedly removed her clothes. The raindrops hitting her bare skin made her shudder, it was a strange feeling. Then, she hung her clothes on a nearby branch and rubbed every inch of her skin with the palm of her hands—rubbing away the accumulated sweat and dirt.

What if a stranger suddenly jumps out from behind the bushes, or a wild animal, or a monster suddenly attacked? Even though she trembled from her worries, Max lathered soap all over her body, cleaned herself thoroughly, and washed her hair haphazardly. Fortunately, the rain continued to pour and gradually began to fall heavier. It fell so frighteningly strong that the surroundings almost became a hazy white. Her vision clouded as the thick curtain of rain fell and her anxieties began to wither away as a strange smile erupted out of her lips: never in her life did she imagine that she would bathe under the rain in a forest like that.

Max laughed and tilted her head back, allowing the water to wash the soap from her hair and face. Satisfied with the cleanliness she achieved, she turned to pick up her wet clothes, when suddenly, she realized that the division between her and Riftan was gone. Max took a step back and looked around in confusion. The ropes that supported the bitumen-lined cloth seemed to have been unable to withstand the force of the pouring rain and loosened. The cloth now drooped helplessly on the ground, dangling from a single branch.

Riftan stood stiffly on the other side, motionless like a statue, and Max froze at the expression she read in his face. His burning gaze swept over her wet shoulders, her hair that drooped over it, then lingered long on her b****s. His thick neck convulsed and tensed. Max felt her throat burn as his gaze continued to move to her flat abdomen, her pale thighs, then her white feet lined with blue veins, then went back to her eyes. A strange sense of helplessness washed over her. He was gazing at her with such a look of enchantment, as if it were the first time he had seen her naked, that his reaction to her only made her embarrassment grow.

Max felt herself turning red and quickly grabbed her clothes to cover her chest. However, Riftan approached her with one wide stride and grabbed her hand. His rough fingers, cold from the rain, intertwined with hers.

“Don’t.” His voice was breathless, barely a whisper against the heavy sound of the rain. “Let me see for a little more. Do you know how much I’ve...”

He couldn’t even speak his words properly. Max looked up at him, he was trembling like a bird caught in a trap, begging for something. A suppressed moan escaped out of Riftan’s lips, and his body trembled as if his self-control was hanging by just a thread. He reached out and brushed his hand against her body, unable to resist the temptation in front of his eyes.

Note – LF: Get your tickets for the *wink wink* ride >>> {[not for the faint of heart ticket]} (>///<)/Nymeria: HERE WE F*IN GOOOOO

◀ Previous Chapter

Next Chapter ▶

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Rate this Chapter

Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 194

Max staggered backwards, her back hitting a rough tree trunk. Riftan immediately closed the distance between them, and grabbed her b****s, pressing his lips against hers. His strong, warm tongue entered her mouth and moved ravenously.

It was the rawest and most savage kissing experience they ever shared. The heavy rain continued to fall on their faces, shoulders, and back mercilessly. The leaves drooping from the tree branches scratched and clung to their cheeks. Riftan drew back, kissing her cheeks, chin, and eyelids.

It gave enough room to Max’s chest to heave breathlessly. The smell of rain and the sweet scent of wet leaves filled her lungs with each deep breath. Riftan leaned over and licked the raindrops dripping down the tips of her b****s, then proceeded to rapidly s**k her mounds greedily. It was as intense as being trapped under a fierce storm. Max clung to his drenched clothes so tight that they were at the point of tearing.

Riftan took turns caressing her b****s while pouring kisses, then pulled his soaked tunic over his head. Max's eyes trembled as she gazed up at him. Raindrops bounced off his broad, marble-like shoulders, creating a faint halo around his tight naked torso.

An electrifying tingle ran all over her skin. Max wrapped her arms around his thick neck and Riftan lunged to spill ravenous kisses, then slipped one hand between her legs. Max's whole body trembled as if her entire body was simply struck by lightning when his hand began to graze her sensitive area.

Unable to resist the overwhelming surge of pleasure, Max struggled to escape from his tight grip when a growling sound erupted out of Riftan's throat.

"Don't. I can't hold back any longer." Riftan's face was earnestly distorted as if he was enduring extremely terrible pain. "Really...I've reached my limit."

Max shuddered as she looked into his helpless eyes. He was submerged in the same desperate impulse as her. No, probably deeper than her.

His fingers slipped inside her depths and began his gentle ministrations. She crashed her lips against his shoulders, letting out intermittent moans. Her arms and legs seemed to melt, her nerves were so tight that her whole body jerked at his slightest stimulations. As if having had all his patience burned by her sensitive response, Riftan pulled down his trousers and sheathed himself straight into her.

She let out a suppressed moan when she felt her tight secret area accepting him. It was like a ship being hit by a burning fireball. She struggled from the sudden overbearing pressure, but he held her securely around her arms, like a mouse trapped by a snake's body.

Max took a deep breath and groped his body tightly. His sturdy thighs pressed hard against the inside of hers and his smooth stomach lined with his muscles clung gently against her soft belly. Soon, Riftan held onto her waist and began to move rapidly. She bobbed up and down, clutching to him for support. Every time he dug into her, her body shuddered, and her lungs swelled like it was about to burst. Her vision was blurry as the rainwater seeped through her eyelashes and ran down her cheeks. Perhaps it wasn't just rainwater, but tears flowed out as well from the intense passion. Max shook her head as if she was about to go crazy.

"Ri-Riftan..."

Riftan leaned her against the tree trunk, digging deeper and ramming faster into her depths. Her body was thrown to the edge and convulsed, unable to handle his movements. Max clung desperately to him, then he grabbed her hand and intertwined his fingers tightly against hers. Not long after, his body turned rigid, and she felt something tepid spread inside her. Max shuddered at the sensational experience, the sharp o****m mincing her whole body.

“D**n it...”

Riftan held her in his arms as they gasped heavily for their breaths. She rested her cheeks against his shoulder, drooping from all the energy that was drawn out. Her thighs still shuddered from the feeling and there was no strength left in her legs. He carefully pulled himself out of her and hugged her to soothe her sobbing state. Then, he pulled up his pants with one of his rough hands and draped his tunic over her to cover her body.

The rain had subsided to a thinner sheet and now gently fell against their skin. Riftan hoisted her up and strode to the place where he had set up their tent. Max only then finally regained her senses and anxiously looked around. Fortunately, all the knights seemed to have finished washing themselves and had entered their tents, so there was no one to see them.

Riftan crawled into the tent on his knees and laid her down against the bed he made for them. It seemed like he didn't care whether the beddings he had prepared were ruined by the wet rain. He came towering above her as he tossed the wet tunic off her body.

””” ”

“Just one more time...”

Max stared up blankly into his black orbs, that were burning with passion. He then caressed her b****s with his mouth and positioned himself between her thighs again. A large flesh impaled deep into her body at once, earning a pathetic sob from her. Despite the o****m having faded away from their climax, her private part still felt extremely sensitive at the stimulations, making sparks fly over her vision

Riftan leaned over, his elbows positioned beside her shoulders and began to pull in and out slowly. His huge, stone-like body pressed heavily against hers. Max sank her teeth tightly into his forearm to suppress the moans that were about to escape her lips. Riftan trembled as if the pain she inflicted even aroused his pleasures.

“F**k...”

He soon began to drive her like he had let go of all the restraints he had been keeping. The pleasure that seemed to boil her brain into a muddled mess felt unending. Max couldn't suppress the feeling of being at the edge of a strong climax, scratching and pounding on him like an angered feline.

Riftan continued to ram rapidly inside her, pouring kisses all over her lips, cheeks, and eyelids as if to soothe her, prolonging the time before they finally reached the top of their climax and ended his movements in a powerful thrust. Max's head tilted back at the force that he inflicted on her body, like she was about to be broken.

Her lungs swelled up like they were about to burst, and her head spun, muddling from the sensation. Max glanced up at the dim tent's roof with a blurry vision and her body drooped, with her eyes slowly closing. Drowsiness came over her and soon, the darkness engulfed her. Max fell asleep as if fainting beneath Riftan's body.

Max squinted her eyes open at the sensation of a wet towel wiping her body. The night's darkness had surrounded them before she knew it. She tried to sit up as she listened to the sound of rain pouring over the tent, groaning at the touch she felt between her thighs. Riftan pushed her gently to lay back down and wiped her burning private area with a wet towel.

"Lift your legs, I'll dress you up."

Looking up at his figure outlined against the dark, Max slowly lifted her legs, allowing him to put on a clean pair of underwear. Then, he lifted her torso and pulled a clean tunic over her head like she was a little child. Max lowered the tunic down to her knees and leaned back on the covers. She heard Riftan turn and rummage through the bags.

"We couldn't c**k any meals as the rain continued pouring. Eat this for now."

Max carefully accepted the food he handed her, which was an apple the size of a fist. She crunched on the apple while lying down on her stomach, not caring about proper etiquette anymore. Riftan pulled apart a stale bread into small pieces and gently pushed them in her mouth like he was feeding a bird.

"We'll spend the night here. As soon as the rain stops, we'll start moving again." Riftan sat next to her with one leg outstretched. He looked at her hesitantly, then finally opened his lips and asked. "Does your body feel alright?"

Max shifted her body to check for any discomfort, but quickly buried her face in the blankets with a groan. Her lower back was throbbing painfully as if she had been stabbed, and the sensitive area between her legs was sore and raw. Riftan seemed lost on what to do and caressed her back with a sigh.

"Did I hurt you?"

"N-no. it doesn't hurt. Just... it's a little... hard to move..."

Riftan cursed and groaned loudly. "D**n it, I have been holding it back ever since... I didn't mean to do this. All of a sudden, I have lost control of my reins..."

"You have been h-holding back... all this time?"

A moment of silence passed through them, as if Riftan was surprised by her question. He remained motionless in the dark, then suddenly reached out and pinched her cheek.

“How can you be so oblivious to a person’s sufferings?”

Max dropped her mouth in shock at the accusation of her being ignorant to Riftan. She always thought that she was the one who had always been the delicate and sensitive one and that Riftan was an insensate man who had no slight knowledge about women. Max gaped at him, feeling the tingling on her cheek.

“Riftan... you are weird! Suffering all day... how am I supposed to know you fe-felt that way? On top of that... I didn’t appear... attractive.”

She didn’t know how to describe her mortifying appearance to him without embarrassing herself. Her hair was sticking out everywhere thanks to the wind, her clothes were covered in dirt and her face was stained with sweat. Who would assume that he would l**t over a woman who appeared as such?

However, Riftan seemed to have a completely different way of seeing things from his point of view. He rubbed his forehead roughly with his calloused hand and replied.

“With your face flushed, your eyes shining vividly, your clothes clinging to your body’s figure from sweat, and your hair loose...” He moaned and turned to stare blankly at the ceiling. “This is the hardest expedition I had in my entire life.”

“I... I didn’t know you were having a difficult time...” Max muttered under her breath.

She had a good knowledge about his energy when it came to intercourses, but It was shocking to hear him admit that he was holding back his lustful desires despite them being under a straining march. That may be the reason why he had been sleeping outside the tent all this time. Riftan sighed and pulled the blanket over her as she stared up at him blankly.

“But still, I was planning to endure it until the end. I know you’re overwhelmed just following the expedition. I should have let you rest a little more...” He said and cursed softly. “I have lost my mind.”

“It’s n-nothing... I didn’t dislike it. It just surprised me... and... it was great...”

Max said without thinking and immediately turned red, but she didn’t say it just to comfort him, she was ecstatic that he was losing his mind because of his desire for her. Max would never forget the gaze he gave her under the rain for the rest of her life.

For the first time in her life, she felt like a breathtakingly beautiful creature, although it terrified her that such an exhilarating moment would never happen again in her lifetime. Max reached out and touched his arm.

Riftan laid down next to her and embraced her tightly. “Don’t say things like that. Do you really want to make me lose my mind?”

He grumbled and rubbed his cheek caressingly against her shoulder. Max giggled at the warmth of his breath tickling her nape. She was utterly exhausted, but she was content and exalted more than ever. Max burrowed into his arms and fell asleep again while listening to the sound of rain.

Note – LF: The wink wink ride is extra steamy HAHA. Meanwhile, the knights probably be like: /(>//n//<)"

Nymeria: Haha, I'm satisfied. He hot, she cute, they even talk. 10/10 ?

◀Previous Chapter

Next Chapter▶

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 195

The rain continued all night and barely abated at dawn. The Knights crawled out of their tents before the sun had risen, preparing a bustling breakfast. Since no one had properly eaten last night, they wanted to prepare a hearty meal before leaving. Nothing was more important in surviving an arduous expedition than getting a good rest and eating well.

Max blew the steam off the bowl of the potato stew that Riftan brought her and got dressed right after she finished it. Just as the sun peeked out from behind the flat plains, the expedition prepared for departure right away.

Max secured the saddle on Rem's back, and just as she was about to climb on it, Riftan came up behind her and grabbed her arm.

"As for you, you'll be in this."

Max turned her eyes as he lifted the bitumen-lined cloth from the wagon.

"Ride this thing for today."

Max blushed when she realized he was worried that he might have hurt her from last night's activities. "It's f-fine. I can ride...a horse."

“It doesn’t matter if you can ride, half of the supplies we brought have been consumed anyway. Conserve your strength as we travel on flat roads.”

“Please do as the Commander says. You have to regain your strength.”

The other knights actively agreed, expressing their opinions. Max was mortified to realize that everyone probably noticed what happened last night, but played innocent and nodded her head.

As soon as she got on the wagon and sat, the knights immediately lined up and began to drive their horses through the lush green forest. Max watched as Rem graciously followed while being pulled by the reins held by Yulysion, then sat back down on the thick layer of hay lining the bottom of the wagon.

The wagon rattled a lot, but it was much more comfortable than riding a horse. She laid her back down on the bed of hay and earnestly dozed off. Fortunately, they didn’t experience any monster attacks until they left Caldical Forest. Max was also able to rest soundly on the wagon for half a day and when sunset came, her strength had remarkably returned.

Max eagerly went around to help prepare dinner. Although Riftan was displeased to see her roaming around to help with the work, he didn’t bother preventing her from doing so. She helped the apprentices boil the bean soup in a large pot over the fire, while the knights roasted four lumps of rabbit meat in skewers over the campfire. After the meal had been prepared, everyone sat around the fire and enjoyed the simple but sumptuous meal.

Thanks to that untroublesome day, Max was able to move more agile than ever the following day. The expedition crossed the wide fields like a raging wind and passed over a small meadow full of wildflowers in a short time. Finally, the port appeared before them. Max’s eyes widened at the magnificent scene unfolding at the bottom of the hills.

The deep blue sea shone as if it were filled with gold, as the sun shone on it from the west. The docks were packed with ships and boats and stretched out in a crescent curve towards the calm sea. Max was impressed at the sight of the sea before her, then turned to look at the large city nestled comfortably within secure walls.

Looking at the compacted multi-level buildings lined with intricately roads, she concluded that the population inhabiting the city was at least two or three times more than that of Anatol.

Seeing the huge city, Hebaron cheerfully exclaimed. “We can finally take a breath. I’m desperate for Ale.”

”””” ”
.

Riftan did not respond to his outburst and simply led the expedition down the hill in an instance. Once they had arrived, they went through the identification routine at the city gates and entered the city.

Max roamed her eyes around, turning her head left and right curiously. There were countless taverns and inns lined up along the main street lit by torches. She could see drunken sailors and mercenaries and women with half of their b****s baring through the wide-open doors.

Some of the women even leaned out the windows and blew kisses at the knights. Max hunched her shoulders, taken aback by the drunken laughter erupting from the ladies.

Gabel came to her side to warn her. "A lot of low-class people live near the port. It may be too indecent for the lady's eyes, so it is best not to look around."

Max quickly turned her attention to the road in front of her. As if he had been there before, Riftan crossed the plaza and headed straight for the pier without looking around or asking for directions. Soon, Max saw the great ships and boats docked by the water.

Riftan stopped in front of a crowded building facing the pier. "Evan, go announce our arrival and have servants come."

Evan Crude immediately jumped off his horse as soon as he was ordered and entered the building. After a few minutes, several servants who were carrying lanterns, ran out to welcome their arrival.

Max dismounted from her horse and looked curiously at the three-story stone-built building. Riftan suddenly approached her, putting his arm around her shoulder as if to protect her and walked towards the entrance.

"We will be staying here tonight."

As they walked into the building Max's eyes wandered at the smooth slate flooring, carpeted staircases, and tidily plastered white walls. The lavishness of the interior was incomparable to the cheap inns she saw along the way.

"W-What is this place?"

"This property is owned by the Verden family." Riftan explained as he led her up the stairs knowingly. "The Verdens manages several merchant ships owned by the royal family. It is headed by the king's cousin, Duke Verden, so they don't expect hefty grants and accommodate large expedition groups like ours. We will be chartering one of their ships."

The servant guided the knights to their respective rooms, and Riftan led her to a luxurious room occupied by a large bed. One by one he took off his heavy armor and

laid it on the floor. Max went to open the windows and gazed out at the sea, which had turned red as it got engulfed by the setting sun.

The piscine scent from the sea breeze tickled her nose, and the harsh crash of the waves against the pier sounded vividly. Looking out into the infinite horizon, Max's heart filled with incomprehensible emotions. The sea was much more impressive and glorious than how it was described in the books.

"I have ordered the servants to bring a bath. Do you have clean clothes left to change into?"

Max shook her head as she looked up at him. After removing all of his heavy armor, Riftan walked towards her and swept back the locks of hair away from her face.

"Then you will have no choice but to sleep naked tonight." Her cheeks flushed at the sexual implications behind his words, but Riftan simply cupped her cheeks in his rough hands and planted a soft kiss on her lips. "Are you exhausted?"

"I'm f-fine". In truth, Max was extremely drained but if she said that to Riftan, he would have left immediately and returned only after midnight.

Wrapping her arms around his waist, Max rubbed her face against his sturdy chest. Riftan stiffened and blinked blankly at her sudden boldness, then sat down by the windows next to her with a smile. He then carefully released her tightly braided hair and ran his fingers carefully through the loosened strands. Max leaned into him, enjoying the feel of him combing his long fingers through her tangled hair. Riftan stroked through the tangles for a while, then moved to massage the tightly knotted muscles on her shoulders with his palms.

By the time her shoulders relaxed, the servants arrived with bath water and clean towels. They took off their clothes and sat closely together in the bathtub, washing each other's bodies. She lathered his hair generously with soap and he gently rubbed her back and shoulders with a towel. After cleaning themselves thoroughly, they dried off and lay down on the bed, bringing their lips together, sharing a long, passionate kiss.

Now that they had reached their destination safely, Riftan acted much gentler and more relaxed than he had during the expedition. He took his time, touching every inch of her skin, preparing it before entering her body and moving slowly like gentle waves. Max was absolutely lost in his embrace. His hands became more skillful as time passed by. She adored his powerful body crushing her, the hot lips trailing her skin, the feeling of him filling the entrance between her legs and the sensual tingles it gave her.

They did it again and again until they were utterly exhausted, collapsing on the feather bed. They filled their stomachs with plenty of fruit and hearty meals seasoned with spices, until they were languid. They slept with their limbs intertwined like vines: it was a sweet and relaxing time spent after a course of a few weeks.

However, that peaceful moment came to a terrifying end at the light of the next day. Riftan returned with a solemn face and quickly donned his armor while Max packed up the clean clothes that the maids washed last evening.

Their journey wasn't over, it had just begun. For the next 7 or 10 days, they would travel by ship to Levan, the capital of Livadon. And after that, the Remdragon Knights would head into a long battle against the army of trolls awaiting them. Max's face clouded as she remembered what happened to the expedition team that had gone before them. It wasn't the time for her to feel relieved just because they had safely reached the port. A more difficult journey was bound in the future.

Max came downstairs with Riftan for breakfast, then they headed to the dock with the knights. Huge ships lined the wharf, and on board were soot-covered sailors rushing up and down to move barrels of goods. Some of them inspected the mast, ropes, and sails.

Max couldn't take her eyes off the bustling, noisy harbor full of people. Riftan went to speak to the captain in front of the ship anchored at the far end of the dock. According to Hebaron, having a competent captain was the most vital condition when traveling out at sea. That is why it was important to take time making sure that the captain was a trustworthy man. The captain responded with calm professionalism to each and every one of Riftan's tenacious and meticulous questions, not showing any hint of displeasure.

"All preparations for departure have been completed a few days ago. Before the princess left for Livadon, she had ordered for everything you will need to be prepared so that the Remdragon Knights could board the ship the moment they arrive."

Max's eyes widened at the mention of the word princess. Princess Agnes also went to Livadon?

Unlike her, Riftan remained calm, as if he had expected that. "When did the Royal Knights leave?"

"They arrived here about four days ago and immediately went to Livadon."

"Any news from Livadon?"

The captain shook his head grimly. "It seems that there has been no one able to escape since the enemy's capture of Louiebell Castle. No one knows about the details about the situation other than that there is a battle raging on to retake the lands conquered by the monsters."

Riftan's face hardened, and the knights' faces darkened as they listened from behind. The captain grew nervous at the sudden grim aura that hovered over them.

"If you wish, we can set sail immediately. There is already plenty of food and water loaded on board."

“Is there enough room for the horses?”

“Of course, the stables on board are also well-maintained.”

Riftan took with him some of the knights and went on the ship to inspect its condition, then concluded that they could set sail immediately. The knights brought their horses out of the lodge and boarded them to the ship’s stables. Max got on board and allowed a sailor to handle boarding Rem, in case the horse got spooked by the new surroundings and ran wild.

As soon as she stood on the deck of the ship, her heart began to pound with fear and strange excitement. Max inhaled deeply and gazed far out at the calm sea that glistened under the sunlight.

“Maxi, don’t stay so close to the railings.”

Riftan, who was supervising the boarding of the horses, beckoned her over. She felt embarrassed for acting like an excited child when they were going to head into battle. Regaining her composure, Max walked over to him.

Note – LF: It’s embarrassing how Riftan is so nonchalant about the knights knowing they did it but he’s such a caring husband ?

Nymeria: It was about time for them to have a tender moment like this!

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 196

Riftan wrapped his arm around her shoulders like he was gripping the reins of a foal.

“I’ll show you the room where we’ll be staying in.”

Max followed him down the stairs and glanced up at him.

“Will it be fine for you not to make sure the h-horses...entered the stables?”

“The knights will handle that.”

He replied reassuringly as they walked down the hallway which was glistening with wax like it was polished with oil and opened the most secluded room.

Max peeked curiously inside the cabin from Riftan’s side and observed the dimly lit room. The room cannot be compared to their room at Calypse Castle, but it was spacious and luxurious enough.

She hurried in and plopped on the fluffy bed while Riftan lowered their luggage from his shoulder to the side of the bed with a sound of a thud.

“All the sailors here are men. There are no female servants around to serve you, so if you will be needing anything, tell me.”

He said as he opened the small porthole next to the table, the sunlight seeping through it casted a glow on his face.

“Don’t wander around alone either. No one would dare to do anything to you knowing that you are my wife, but it is better to be cautious regardless.”

Even without his undue concern, Max doubted anyone would pay attention to her, but she just nodded without saying a word.

After a while, they climbed back to the deck when the ship began moving away from the dock. The sailors were busy running around the deck, fulfilling their designated tasks. As the ship moved away from land, the sailors pulled the ropes that hung from the mast, letting dozens of sails unravel.

Max stood by the railing and watched the enormous ship sail into the rough seas. Whenever a strong wave hits the hull, a subtle rocking motion could be felt beneath. Then, the winds began to pick up and the sails inflated like the clouds, the wind blew hard enough to feel like someone was pushing their backs.

Max clung to Riftan’s side as she tried to adjust to the strange sensation of sailing on water. And as if he wanted to reassure her that everything was fine, he gently stroked her back.

“This is your first time on a boat, it is possible for you to feel dizzy. Avoid looking down at the waters until you’ve adjusted. Don’t focus on the rocking motion either as you might get seasick.”

Max was already feeling a bit dizzy, so she took his advice and stepped away from the railings.

She looked over the stern and watched as the city grew farther away from them. Soon, it became a mere hazy dot and they floated lonesome in the middle of the sea. After feeling the sea breeze for a little more while with Riftan, she went back to their room to retire.

Their first day on the ship has gone by very peacefully.

Although Max did feel nauseous for hours when they sailed, she felt better enough after a nap and was able to eat properly when evening came. She went to the dining room with Riftan, ate, and went to bed early. Despite having a nap, her body was heavy, and her limbs felt languid. Perhaps, all the fatigue that had accumulated were crashing to her at once.

As soon as her head hit the pillow, she fell asleep. The next day, she did not get up until the sun was in the middle of the sky.

“How’s your seasickness?”

Riftan approached with a cup of water as she dazedly sat up. Max gulped down the lukewarm water and looked at her husband. Riftan wore a pair of casual cotton pants paired with a simple white tunic. Not donning an armor, Riftan looked much younger and refreshed.

“Do you still feel nauseous?”

“N-no. I think...I’m fine now.”

“Don’t strain yourself, stay here and rest. You don’t have to worry about treating the injured nor ride horses while we’re onboard. Do you want me to bring you some food?”

“I would like to...w-wash my face...and change my clothes first...”

Riftan immediately left to instruct the servants to bring food and water for a wash. Soon, a boy no more than sixteen years old brought the water and Max used that to clean her face then combed her hair, gathering it into a loose braid. As she was rummaging in her bags for a change of clothes, Riftan handed her a box.

“I made a favor to get this.”

Max’s eyes widened when she saw an indigo blue dress revealed inside the velvet box. Riftan looked over her outfit with a disapproving look.

“Now, change from those d**n pants.”

“What’s wrong with...p-pants.”

Max muttered with a pout but pulled the dress meekly out of the box. It had been so long since she had felt the velvety smoothness of silk that she couldn’t help but have her face light up from the feeling.

Max spread the dress over her body to see the fit with an excited expression. Riftan went and closed the door to the room tightly, then turned to her and stretched out his hand.

“I’ll dress you, turn around.”

“I-I can put it on myself.”

Max hugged the dress to her chest defensively, and Riftan narrowed his eyes at her reaction.

“I’m not planning to do anything foolish until you’ve completely adjusted on living in a ship. So, don’t worry about anything and hand me your clothes.”

Max narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously, but finally relented and handed over the dress. Riftan pulled her tunic over her head and loosened the strings to her trousers, pulling it down to the floor. He paused to stare at her body for a moment with his jaw clenched, then placed the dress over her head.

Max inserted her arms through the long sleeves, gleeful at the feel of cool silk cascading gently over her skin.

With great restraint, Riftan pulled the hem of the dress down to her ankles. Then, he gently pulled on the intricate laces at the back and tied them in a knot.

“Great. It looks good on you.”

He turned her around and ran his eyes over her from head to toe. Max blushed when she felt the subtle heated aura around them, but contrary to her expectations, Riftan took a step back and bluntly turned his head away.

“You seem to be feeling better now so let’s have breakfast at the dining hall. Let’s go, it’s better to leave the room before my mind changes.”

Max followed him silently out of the room without asking what he meant. They went a level down and entered the dining hall where they ate a late breakfast before climbing up to the deck. The sky was clear and blue and not a single cloud was in sight.

Max ran to the railing and gazed out at the deep blue sea with linings of white waves. Riftan walked over to her and leaned his elbows against the railing.

“If the weather stays like this, we can get to Levan in a week.”

“How far is the battle... from Levan?”

“About three to four days away. When we arrive in Levan, we shall first pass through the central temple. If our timing is correct, we can join the Holy Knights sent from Osiria and leave with them for battle.”

Suddenly, tension spread across his face. “You shall stay at the temple. I will arrange for you to stay at the monastery.”

Max stiffened. When she didn't reply at once to his statement, he stood up and anxiously placed his hands on her to face him.

“If you don't want to stay in the monastery, I can speak to the Livadon royal family and they can provide you with a place to stay in the palace.”

“I... I don't want to be left alone... in an unfamiliar place. If I come along with you, Riftan...”

Max quickly closed her mouth when she saw her husband's face distort into a chilling frown. Riftan then spoke calmly but it was scarier that way.

“It was already an incredibly difficult decision to bring you along all this way, so enough with that.”

“B-but... the knights need a healer...”

“There are plenty of arch mages and high priests in Livadon, so there is no reason for you to go into further risks.”

Max's head dropped depressingly. She learned from time that the calmer Riftan is when he argues with her, the more dangerous it is than when he raised his voice. She swallowed dryly then replied in a dejected tone.

“I understand. Then...I'll stay at the monastery.”

Riftan's shoulders visibly relaxed at her consent. Then, he gently stroked her cheek as if to soothe her.

“Don't worry about it, I'll make sure your stay there will be as comfortable as possible. Levan Monastery is massive and luxurious, it wouldn't be a bad place to stay at.”

Max let out a sigh. Did he sincerely believe that she would be able to live comfortably knowing that he was going to be in the face of danger?

If staying by his side meant she had to ride horses all day until her hips broke, or sleep every night on lumpy dirt grounds, then she will sign up without hesitation. She came so far, struggling and undergoing many hardships, but she never regretted a single second of it.

She was truly upset, but she turned and looked out to the sea to hide it. Riftan embraced her silently from behind. When she felt his warm and strong body against her back, she felt even more helpless.

Once the ship docked again, she would have to see him off. She felt a gloomy wind blow against her heart, thinking that she would have to stay in the monastery alone until the battle is over.

Max leaned her head back weakly against his chest.

Their voyage continued without a hitch. The ship's hull would rock violently while sailing through strong winds and large waves but held steady on course.

Max was very nervous at first, now she didn't even blink at the ship's slight rocking. However, Max would pretend to be afraid because every time the ship swayed, Riftan would hold her tight and assure her that everything would be alright.

Life at sea was monotonous, but she didn't feel bored at all. Riftan was almost always with her except when he would go to the ship's controls. Max was more content than ever, she would beg Riftan to teach her how to use the dagger he had gifted her or learn to play a game of dice that the knights most enjoyed.

No matter how much she bothered him, Riftan never showed a hint of irritation or annoyance. And although she won the dice game against Riftan a lot of times, he would only smile genuinely at her and rip off the gold buttons on his clothes and give it to her as the prize. Then when night came, he would wash her and brush her hair, like a loyal servant.

Sometimes Max even read books to him. When she was too sore for any love activity, they would sit together on the bed and she would read aloud tales of epic ancient heroes or romantic poetry written by bards. He would rest his head on her lap and close his eyes as if he was listening to a sweet music. No matter how bad her stuttering was, she never felt pathetic or foolish when it was around him.

Their time together was so precious that Max even wished the ship would be lost at sea forever. But every time she thought about that, she would be racked with guilt at the thought of Ruth and the other knights with their lives hanging by a thread.

Of course, she was worried about them, but her heart felt like she was being engulfed in flames just thinking that Riftan would leave for such a dangerous place.

Max clung passionately to his arms to ward off anxiety every night and Riftan would reciprocate by lovingly caressing every inch of her body.

He would only take her when he couldn't hold it back anymore, and Max reacted more intimately at the sensation of their connected bodies. However, after their intense passion, all she could hear were the lonely waves amidst a gloomy silence.

Note – LF: Once again, my standards for men went higher because of Riftan. HE'S THE BLUEPRINT.

◀ Previous Chapter

Next Chapter ▶

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 197

Whenever she laid on top of Riftan's chest, she felt so close to him, as if even their souls merged to become one. His soft breath tickled the top of her head, and the pounding of his heart against her chest felt as if it was her own. At that moment, Max realized that she could no longer live without him, her heart desired to possess him completely. She needed Riftan, much like a newborn chick, blindly chasing its mother hen. However, to her dismay, the moment of goodbye drew closer with time.

"Don't leave the room tonight."

Riftan, who returned from the deck after speaking with the captain, instructed her with a serious expression. Max was sitting on the bed, reading a book, and looked up at him in surprise.

Riftan walked over to the where his armor was sitting for days now and wore them piece by piece. Max grew more and more agitated at the sight.

"W-what happened?"

"It's nothing, I'm just preparing for possible danger."

"D-Danger?"

Riftan tightened his belt and fastened the cuirass, then turned to her and frowned when he saw her. He sighed and touched her face which had a pale complexion.

“The ship will sail through a cove of sirens. If we aren’t fortunate, a battle might erupt.”

Max swallowed hard and her throat felt tight. Sirens were monsters infamous for wrecking ships and drawing the souls of sailors with their seductive voices. She had completely forgotten about monsters, given how peaceful things had been lately.

Riftan fastened his scabbard around his waist and left the room again, so Max was left alone. She anxiously rummaged through the bookshelves and peered out of the porthole. On the silver horizon, a thick veil of mist slowly crept up.

Are we passing through the Siren’s Cove right now? Max wondered as she looked up at the tall ivory rocks covered in moss. Her spine shook and she closed the porthole. Contrary to what they feared, there were no sirens that appeared even as the ship passed between the rocks of the cove.

Max relaxed a bit and sat back to read her book; however, she could not focus and understand the words she read. For a long time she flipped through folk tales, which she read twice passively. She was overwhelmed with the need to see what was happening and slipped out of the cabin. Then, she heard faint voices singing from somewhere.

Nervous that it might be the tantalizing calls of the sirens, she walked towards the sound. As she got closer, the song became clearer, and her tensed shoulders relaxed. It was the voices of the sailors singing. Unable to overcome her curiosity, Max hurriedly made her way up to the deck.

The roaring voices of the sailors echoed loudly over the reddish sunset lit deck. The men carried large buckets of water and were busy pulling ropes and adjusting the sails while they sang in chorus, briskly stomping their feet to a rhythm.



Hey-ya, hey-ya, row the oars.

”””” ”

Through the waves high as Mt. Taesan, we’ll sail to the end of this sea.

To the place where the sun sleeps,

To the end of the shining horizon where Adrina’s Paradise might be.

Though a typhoon hits, no one can stop us

Hey-ya, hey-ya, row the oars.

We'll sail to the end of this sea!



Max was puzzled at the booming voices that filled her ears. A young knight in armor who was patrolling the railings spotted Max and strode towards her. She recognized him, he was a young knight named Jacque Briman. He looked at her with a serious expression and calmly reprimanded her.

“Lady Calypse, you shouldn’t be wandering alone.”

“I-I know. It’s just... I heard the s-singing and... I was wondering w-what was going on.”

The knights squinted at the singing sailors. “It is said that this is the most effective way to drown out the songs of the sirens and prevent sailors from being enchanted and ramming the ship into the reefs. They will be singing all night long until we pass safely through the siren’s territories.”

“All... all night?”

Max’s eyes widened and the young knight smiled bitterly. “I understand it’s very loud, but please endure it. We must put safety as our top priority. It is said that if they continue singing loudly, not only sirens, but mermen as well won’t approach near our ship.”

“I s-see.”

Max gazed out at the bright red sea that sparkled gold, as she listened to the roar of the men echoing over the rippling waves. As the young knight explained, with such powerful voices the captivating songs of the sirens would unlikely be heard.

Max returned to her cabin while the sailors continued to sing even after the sun had set. She ate the food one of the servants brought her as she listened to the loud singing. The song was crude and could never be called sweet, but the sailors’ lively voices meant that everything was safe. Soon, the singing served to calm her.

After finishing her meal, Max went to lay on the bed and tried going to sleep. However, as she sank deeper into the night, her mind only became more and more anxious. She tossed and turned all night, and when the bluish glow of dawn peeked in, she immediately jumped out of bed and ran onto the deck.

The sailors still sang to the melodies played on shawm and mandolin. However, they were so exhausted from staying awake all night long that they didn’t sing as loudly as

the day before. Max quietly listened to the melodies echoing in the dark and turned around from the deck and headed to the ship's stern.

There, she saw sailors sitting in the middle, forming a circle and using overturned wooden crates as chairs. The knights, on the other hand, guarded the railings and had quivers strapped to their back, filled with long arrows.

Max looked around and saw Riftan among them, then walked away. However, as if Riftan had felt her presence, he turned his head around and frowned when he saw her, then followed Max.

"Why are you already out here? It's still not safe yet."

Max was startled with his sudden approach, then snuggled closely next to him. She squinted her eyes, looking out at the dark sea. At a distance, above the roaring waves, were high rocks surrounded by a thick mist.

"Even if... we're this far... it's still not s-safe?"

"There's no way to know if we are safe. There are rare cases when ships get chased..."

"Don't be so uptight, Commander. Even if they do chase us, there will be no problem as long as we drown the siren's singing with ours."

Hebaron, who was leaning against the railings, suddenly intervened. He yawned loudly and indiscreetly, and smiled mischievously at Max.

"I have been listening all night to the loud voices of men, my head hurts. Doesn't the lady have something to say? I need to clean my ears with the lady's gentle voice."

"Stop with the *bllsh* and get lost."

Riftan grunted unpleasantly and bared his teeth, but Hebaron didn't even flinch. "Don't be so prissy, Commander. You should know, a man's heart must be as wide as the great, vast seas..."

"Shut your mouth before I throw you into the sea."

Riftan replied with a bark and placed a hand on Max's back, leading her towards where the knights and sailors gathered.

"We made a meat stew to eat as replenishment for the energies we lost from staying awake through the night. While you're up here on the deck, have a bowl of it too."

As they approached the large cauldron, a sailor poured the thick steaming stew into a clean bowl and handed it to Max. She gratefully accepted the steaming bowl and sat on

a large crate. Riftan sat next to her with his own bowl, and they sipped their meals. She stirred the soup with her spoon and looked at the sailor's faces.

After a long night, everyone seemed exhausted from singing all night. Most of their faces were gaunt, but some of the sturdier sailors continued to hum tunes near the stern. A young sailor playing a mandolin approached Riftan while she was gazing at them.

"Great Knight, may I offer to play a song for your beloved wife?"

Max's eyes flew up at the sudden request, and Riftan, who was drinking soup, stopped and scowled at the sailor. The sailor continued politely.

"It's sickening to repeatedly hear the songs of the sea we sang all night... If there is a particular song the Lady wishes to hear, then I will put all my heart into singing it."

Riftan looked at him silently and then turned to Max. "Is there a song you would like to hear?"

Suddenly, all the sailors and knights turned to look towards her. Max shook her head. "N-nothing in particular..."

"I am well-versed with a lot of folk songs as well. I'll play any song that the lady will request."

Max looked at the sailor's face, full of anticipation. She couldn't refuse, her face scrunched to a difficult expression as she tried to think. When she was still at Castle Croix, there were many songs performed by the bards, but when asked directly what song she would like to hear, nothing occurred to her. Max searched her mind, looking side to side. Then suddenly, she remembered the song performed during the Anatol Spring Festival.

"I don't know its title... but it's a song I heard at a village festival..."

"Does the Lady remember the lyrics?" The sailor tilted his head at her vague request.

She hummed some verses she remembered hearing, as she struggled to search her memories. Then, the sailor's face lit up with a wide smile as if he recognized it.

"That is Adelian's poetry. It is a folk song that has been sung since the founding of the Roem era. It is also my favorite song. I shall sing and play it well for the lady."

The sailor adjusted his posture and began to strum the mandolin in his hand. Max smiled as the familiar tone restored her warm nostalgia for spring. The tempo was slower compared to what she heard from the festival, and Max was taken aback by the melancholic melody.

Soon, the young sailor's charming baritone voice resounded softly.



The knight kissed the nymph's face

And flew far into the distant sky

The oak tree he loved

Left alone on the hill

Amidst the wind

Its delicate branches swayed

Please dragon,

take his shattered broken body

to the land of eternal rest

From this chaotic land

Darling, far away

Aah~

Darling, I will love you

Until the day I breathe my last breath.”



Max leaned on Riftan's shoulders as she savored the resounding delicate tune of the mandolin. It wasn't that long ago, but the moment when she was dancing on the fields felt so far away.

Note – LF: Hebaron scoring points again hahaha. The legend is bothering me though, I feel like it has a deep connection to the story and its yet to be revealed. HMMM

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 198

The knights who were leaning against the railings all applauded after the performance. Even Max clapped her hands and praised the sailor.

“It was a p-pleasing performance. But compared to the song I heard back in the festival...I think it’s a little different.”

“The lyrics and verses of Adelian’s poetry slightly vary from region to region. That was the second verse of the song that originated from Gillian, the capital of Roem. Didn’t the lady find the lyrics to her liking?”

Max quickly shook her head. “It was a very... beautiful song.”

“I’m glad the Lady says she enjoyed it.”

The sailor’s mouth widened into a gleeful smile. He placed an arm in front of his belly and bowed politely. Riftan, who was silently sipping his soup next to Max, searched his pockets and threw a denar at the sailor.

“It’s a reward for making my wife happy. Whenever you have spare time, play her the songs she requests to hear.”

“It will be a pleasure.”

The sailor smiled, delighted at the generous reward that is a gold coin. Riftan set his empty bowl aside, then urged Max to finish hers as well. When she finished her stew, the pale glow of dawn was approaching. She watched the silvery white rays of sun that shone over the dark blue sea, then Riftan escorted her back to their room. He stood by the doorway and gently caressed her cheek.

“Get some more sleep. We’ll get out of the dangerous waters at noon.”

“Riftan... are you not tired?”

A faint smile was seen on Riftan’s lips at Max’s worried expression. “This is nothing. Don’t worry about me and be at ease.”

Then, he lowered his head to place a kiss on her forehead and closed the door. Max smiled bitterly. Riftan didn't seem to be aware that it was impossible for her to do what he says, to not care about him and put her feelings at ease. Max trudged to the porthole and gazed out at the turbulent sea. The ship sailed forward vigorously through the waves and for a long time, only the sounds of the waves were heard amidst the suffocating silence. Soon, the towering rocks that were dimly seen at the other side of the sea grew out of sight.

When they had sailed completely out of the Siren's territories, the weary sailors descended from the deck to eat and sleep properly. The knights also removed their armors and went to rest. Only Riftan climbed up on the bridge, discussed with the captain of the ship, and held his vigilance. The sun was already setting when he finally returned to the room to take off his armor and eat a proper meal.

"The captain said that by tomorrow morning at the latest, we will be able to reach the banks of the Crisamt River. Then, we'll reach Levan after sailing through the river for half a day."

Max's eyes widened, her heart beating loudly and sinking at the same time. Riftan gulped down some ale and continued to speak in a blunt tone.

"It was a usually bustling and noisy city, but the situation may not be as pleasant, as these days there's a possibility that an army of trolls would lurk to strike their heads. Don't mind it if people seem to appear a little wary."

"" "

"Is it possible for dangerous situations to ha-happen... in the capital?"

"That will never happen." He finished the meal set on the table in an instant and asserted coldly as he munched on an apple. "The monsters won't travel further south. We will reclaim the castle they have captured and rescue the expedition team that went before us. You will stay in the monastery for only a few months."

He threw the apple seed out of the ship and licked the fruit's juice off his fingers. Although he appeared like a relaxed tiger resting on top of a rock, there was a determined glint in his eyes. "I will put an end to this war before the wind season arrives and take you back to Anatol. You'll only have to wait for a little more."

Max felt her heart pounding loudly against her chest and her throat tightening. The fire season had barely begun and even Riftan, who was usually confident, expected the battle to last at least months. She licked her parched lips, then Riftan pulled her to his lap and embraced her. She was trembling with the fear of their upcoming separation and burrowed herself deeply into his arms, like a child who had just woken up from a nightmare.

She couldn't let it sink in that tomorrow he would go away from her. Max wrapped her arms around his neck, embracing him tightly enough to the point that it strained their breathing. Riftan took a deep breath and buried his face in her hair. Then her nape, which was cold in the night air, suddenly heated up from Riftan's hot breath. Max muttered in a trembling voice against his shoulder.

"You must... hu-hurry and come back to me."

"...I will."

Riftan's body also faintly trembled, he enclosed her in his arms and laid her against the bed. Max gazed up at him, her eyes shaking as she felt her blood rushing quickly. Riftan caressed her mounds over her thin robe and spread feathery kisses on her temples down to her nape. His damp lips wandered in the dip of her collarbones, then moved to the valley between her b****s. He lifted his head and captured her lips with his and Max closed her eyes, lost in the heat that made her feel like it was melting her whole being.

The next day, Max woke up to the sound of the seabirds. She rose from her bed, approached the porthole, and looked out to see birds soaring over the glimmering waters, flapping their wings. She was staring dazed at them, when Riftan also woke up and stood from the bed to follow and embrace her from behind.

"What are you looking at so interestingly?"

"I heard the sound of b-birds. There have been no s-seabirds in sight... until now."

"Birds are usually only seen when it's near land. Rarely do they fly out to the middle of the sea." Riftan traced the bridge of his nose against Max's nape and gazed out at the sea with his dark eyes. A weak sigh escaped from between his lips. "It seems like we'll reach our destination earlier than we have planned to. We must prepare to board off the ship."

He then slowly pulled his body away from hers. Max used all of her self-control to keep herself from clinging onto him. They washed their bodies in silence with the clean water brought by one of the servants and changed into tidy clothes. As always, Riftan took care of putting his armor on his own and went out of the room, Max then followed shortly after and went up to the deck. As Riftan had said, land then began to slowly appear from the far edge of the horizon.

"All sailors, go down and man the oars!"

At the captain's command, the sailors rushed down the stairs to the oars. Soon, the ship cautiously approached the land, avoiding reefs as it drew closer inland. Shortly after advancing through the rocky interior, a wide triangular estuary linking the emerald waters of Crisamt River and the West Sea came to sight. The sailors pulled up the sails and tightened the ropes, then rowed vigorously up the river. The knights who were

dressed in full armor went down to the stables to place saddles on the horses and load their luggage. Yulysion and Garrow took Max's luggage and placed a saddle on Rem.

Max looked intently at the few cabins and other ferries lined up along the riverbank amidst the intense shaking and rocking, consequences of navigating through the river. Waterfowls were plunging their heads into the wide river to s****h a fish, before flying back into the sky. She also saw small merchant ships passing by, loaded with plentiful goods. As they sailed upriver, the number of ships and boats increased and soon a large pier lined with huge ships appeared. Placing a hand on the railing, Riftan spoke.

“That's Levan, the capital of Livadon.”

Max stared at the huge harbor in amazement. There were dozens of giant ships and tall white buildings stacked evenly throughout the city. It would be unfair to simply call Livadon a neighboring country when the sheer exotic atmosphere exuded from its appearance. All of Levan's buildings were either square or vaulted, completely straying away from the traditional architectural style of ancient Roem, whose building roofs were pointed into spires. The buildings in Levan were also incredibly pure white.

“That is the monastery where you will be staying.”

Riftan pointed to the huge temple perched beside a mountain. Looking at the white structure surrounded by ivory pillars with a curious gaze, it appeared completely different from what Max had expected. Just the outside alone was different from the desolate, restricted monasteries she knew.

“I-Instead of a monastery... it looks more like an a-ancient temple...”

“As you can see, all the buildings follow the pre-Roem era style. This is because Livadon preserved the ancient era architectural designs and lifestyles. Most of the country, except for the northern regions, follows the Protestant doctrine.” It wasn't surprising that Riftan knew so much history given the amount of time he spent in Livadon as a mercenary. “It's not as restrictive as you think, the people are much more free-spirited here.”

Max felt a little relieved. Ever since she was a child, she had been educated harshly by a cold priest, who was adamant about the doctrines of the Catholic Church, so she secretly worried about staying in a monastery where the lifestyle is usually strict.

As their ship drew closer to the harbor, the sailors ran busily around the deck, tossing out thick ropes, lowering the anchors and tying the ship tightly to the dock. Seeing Whedon's flag fluttering in the wind, a curious crowd gathered near their ship. The sailors quickly lowered the gangplank and fixed the sturdy board firmly to the ground, before the knights led their horses down in a single file.

As soon as the people of Livadon realized that the strongest knight in the world had come to rescue Livadon from the crisis, they began to chant loudly in unison.

“Rossem Uigru de Calypse!”

The warm welcome was extremely enthusiastic, so Max’s worry of needing to be vigilant was washed away. She climbed onto Rem and followed the knights through the overwhelming crowd. Riftan’s strong aura emanated immensely as he led the knights at the forefront. His strong, masculine perched face, on top of his large black horse, gave off an authoritative air as he looked straight ahead, something that nobles could only wish to possess. Paired with his broad, powerful shoulders and long, thick legs that were in perfect control of his warhorse, he radiated a restrained power.

The people of Livadon, who gathered around the harbor to see the knight who vanquished the dragon, seemed completely enchanted by him. Wherever the Remdragon Knights passed, they showered them with colorful flowers and waved their white handkerchiefs enthusiastically.

“You persevered and came all this way, Whedon’s strongest knight, Sir Riftan Calypse. Thank you for coming to Livadon’s aid.”

Knights bearing the seal and white flag of the Livadon royal family approached after they passed through the main road and marched to get to the great hall. Max poked her head from behind and saw about thirty knights, clad in silver-gray armor, standing in the middle of the boulevard. And at the head, a middle-aged man greeted them atop a reddish-brown warhorse. Riftan moved towards him and spoke bluntly.

“... It’s been a while, Grand Duke Druick Aren.”

The Grand Duke gave him a wide smile and his formal tone immediately changed as if he was addressing an old friend.

“I’m honored that you remember my name. It’s been six years... no, another year has already passed...so it has been seven years since you gave my younger brother a good beating.”

Max started sweating profusely at the nobleman’s words. She wondered if this nobleman had hostility towards Riftan. However, contrary to her concern, the man simply led his horse to Riftan’s side, and with a friendly smile, extended his hand towards Riftan.

“I heard that you’ve become greater of a knight than you already were back then. It’s surprising how manly you have become. Sejour will surely become furious once he discovers your physique has grown more significant than his.”

Note – Nymeria: Such a bittersweet chapter T.T I don't want my Riftan boi to go! I know we held a grudge against him a bunch of chapters ago, but now I just don't want him to leave ๕_๕

◀ Previous Chapter

Next Chapter ▶

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 199

“Is Sejour Aren in Louiebell?” Riftan asked while lightly clasping the outstretched hand of the Archduke.

Archduke Aren's smile faded from his lips and he nodded calmly. “He's trying to rally the scattered allied forces to face the Troll Army.”

“How many additional reinforcements have been deployed?”

“3500 in total, including the knights.” The Archduke replied in a concise tone, then continued. “Whedon's royal family sent 1500 troops and Balto sent 2000. As soon as they arrived, they immediately left for the battlefield.”

“Have the Holy Knights arrived?”

“The Knights of Osyria are traveling inland, so it will take them some more time before they get here.” The Archduke turned his horse and rode alongside Riftan. “Let us head to the royal castle first. We have prepared a welcoming banquet for the Remdragon Knights.”

Riftan shook his head. “I don't intend on wasting time. We have already eaten and drank our fill on the ship. We shall stop by the central temple, prepare the ranks, and leave for Louiebell immediately.”

“Still as impatient as ever.” The Grand Duke sighed. “If that is the Sir's wish, then I shall guide you to the central temple. “

He motioned for the Royal Knights of Livadon to follow him and the men drove their horses to follow his direction, then began to traverse the main road. The crowd paved the way for them, immediately splitting left and right to clear the road. Max and the Remdragon Knights rode their horses in an organized line. The streets were lined with rows of green fresh laurels, and crude stone buildings lined either side of the wide road made of flat stones in perfect symmetry.

They marched for quite some time before a large, open courtyard with a fountain appeared; in the middle, there was a wide stone staircase that led to the Central Temple. The Grand Duke stopped in front of the stairs and began to give a brief explanation.

“The building at the top of the stairs is the Central Temple. The sanctuary and infirmary are on the right side behind the chapel, and the guards’ post are on the left. The knights’ lodgings are located just behind the guards’ post.”

Max stared in amazement at the splendor before her. The temple exuded a certain sense of calm with its rustic yet elegant appearance. Six ivory-colored pillars stood tall to support a huge circular turquoise ceiling carved in marble. Roem’s first emperor, Darian, could be seen along Uigru, the first twelve knights and the celestial dragon, defending the men. While looking at the surprisingly detailed and delicate image, Yulyson gently approached her.

“M’lady, I’ll help you descend from your horse.”

Max hurriedly lowered her gaze. Soon, Riftan and the Remdragon Knights got off their horses and headed towards the stairs. She also swiftly came down from Rem with the help of Yulyson. As she followed the men who were heading to the stairs, priests in monastic robes appeared out of the temple. The knights then entrusted their horses to them and went inside the temple. Max stroked Rem to calm the horse, who was unfamiliar with the surroundings then handed the reins to one of the priests. Afterwards, she walked into the temple’s entrance.

Livadon’s temple exuded a sensual atmosphere, so unlike the church buildings in Whedon. The temple’s arched ceilings were covered in ancient paintings and colorful rays poured out of the stained glasses that filled the huge windows. The priests’ robes were also far from pretentious, they were made of stiff dark brown cloth that reached their toes with a twisted rope as a belt.

An elderly man, who seemed to have the highest authority among the priests, stepped towards Riftan and Archduke Aren.

“Welcome to the Lord’s resting place.”

”””” ”
.

“These precious guests came from Whedon to aid Livadon. Will you allow them to stay in the temple until they leave for Louiebell?”

As the Archduke spoke, the elderly priest’s pale blue eyes flew towards Riftan and the Remdragon knights.

“Of course, I shall tend to them with hospitality. Please tell me if you need anything.”

“We won’t be staying for long. We shall leave immediately once we have gathered enough supplies and armory, we’ll also be needing a high priest who could accompany us on our journey to Louiebell.”

The old priest, who was looking into Riftan’s eyes, nodded slowly and whispered an instruction to the priest standing on his right. The priest who received the instructions immediately left the line to do the tasks.

“I shall immediately call for two high priests. We shall also provide the supplies you will be needing.”

“We’ll help prepare and replenish your weapons and armory. Three hundred elite knights of Livadon are to accompany the Remdragon Knights.” Archduke Aren declared and pointed to the line of knights who stood outside of the temple. “Leave the preparations to us, the guests shall rest and relax until everything is ready for departure.”

As soon as they finished exchanging words, the priests split into two groups to guide the knights. They passed through the arched doors, then through a cast garden doused in sunlight and through an orchard densely populated with pomegranate trees. A grayish white building, surrounded by beautiful cypress trees, soon appeared before the stone paths. The knights followed the priest and entered the building that had a cozy atmosphere. Before them appeared a large two-story hall that could accommodate at least 800 people.

“This is where pilgrims come to rest. We will prepare a meal right away, please rest comfortably in the meantime.”

When the priests left, the knights let out a long sigh as they slumped on the thick padded chairs or opened the even partitions and laid out cots. The apprentices ran hurriedly towards them to help them remove their armor, all while looking curiously around the room. Max also wandered her eyes, looking at the paintings on the wall and the intricate carvings on the pillars. She was only pulled out from her daze when Riftan called out to her. He was sitting across the Archduke on a long table, waving his hand at her.

“Maxi, come here.” He beckoned her.

She hesitated for a moment then walked towards him. The Archduke's curious brown eyes flew to her. Riftan placed his large hand on her small back, as if claiming her as his own, and spoke.

"This is my wife, Maximillian. I would like to ask a favor from the Archduke, to take care of her in my absence."

"Your wife?"

The man exclaimed as he gawked at her to the point that it embarrassed Max. She struggled not to hunch her shoulders, then the man stoked his neatly arranged beard and tilted his head to the side in disbelief.

"Of course, I will do my best to ensure her safety and comfort, but I don't understand... Why did you bring your wife on such a dangerous expedition?"

"Lady Calypse is an excellent healer." Hebaron, who was hunched over in his chair at the end of the table sipping wine, chimed in. "Since the wizard of Remdragon was sent with the troop that went before us, Lady Calypse had no choice but to take his place."

"... I see." The Grand Duke's face softened as he looked at her. "It must have been very difficult to come along all this way. I will arrange a place in the royal castle for the Lady right away so she can live comfortably."

"I intend for her to stay in the monastery." Riftan immediately corrected him. "I heard that there are plenty of Livadon's noble ladies who are currently staying in Levan's great temple. Could you arrange for her to stay there?"

"That wouldn't be difficult for me to do... but wouldn't it be better for her to stay in the castle?"

"I don't want my wife to get involved in any political matter."

Riftan's statement could be interpreted as rude, especially when the person he was addressing was an Archduke, but all Max could do was stiffen at the impudence of her husband's attitude and stare at the man; however, he simply burst out laughing, not in the least offended.

"I heard that Elnuma Reuben III is keeping an eye on you right now. Are you worried that having your wife stay with the royal family at Livadon will fuel his distrust?"

"There's no guarantee that she wouldn't be approached with ulterior motives if she stays in the castle."

“...I suppose.” The Archduke sighed, and his short, dark brown mustache fluttered slightly. “Considering your current position, it would certainly be best if you stayed at the monastery. I understand, I shall ask the High Priest to take you in.”

Max straightened her sitting posture, holding Riftan’s hand under the table, while her fate was being decided upon. Feeling her touch, he gazed down at her anxious face and clasped her hand tightly. The Archduke quickly briefed them on the situation in Louiebell before leaving them to supervise the preparations.

After a while, the priests entered with baskets filled with all kinds of food, wine and fresh fruits. Max sat with a grim expression as she ate her last meal together with the knights. Even the men around her were more tense than usual as they calmly discussed the itinerary for the next few days.

She longed for some time to spend with Riftan and to bid farewell properly, but he was also busy discussing with the knights, so she didn’t dare bother. Then, the knights of Livadon came to inform them that the preparations for the battle had now finished.

“Wagons filled with food and weapons are ready, and are standing by the square.”

“And the priests?”

“There are two high-ranking priests ready to leave.”

Riftan and the knights immediately wore their armors back on. Every move they made felt like a shovel digging into her heart. She knew it would be painful to let him go, but the reality was much more difficult than she had imagined. Unable to say goodbye to the knights, much less Riftan, Max stood there like a honey-fed mule and watched them leave the temple. Riftan stood in the doorway, speaking to Archduke Aren, then turned to her.

“Maxi, the Archduke will introduce you to the High Priest. Come.”

Max followed him out and, after crossing the garden and into the main temple again, she saw a middle-aged priest with curly grayish blonde hair waiting for them. He bent his knees stiffly in a curtsy to show proper due respect.

“I am Ma-Maximillian... Calypse.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. This faithful servant of the Lord is Shem Mordecai, I have been told that you will stay with us for a while. Please make yourself at home.”

“Please take good care of my wife.” Riftan bowed his head politely toward the priest.

Max’s heart felt like freezing to the corner of her chest. Are we saying goodbye here?

Then, he straightened up and turned to her. “If any problem arises, let Archduke Aren know. He’ll take care of it for you while I’m away.”

Max couldn’t answer, she pursed her trembling lips. Riftan looked down at her silently, his face remained impassive and cold, like steel armor, devoid of any emotion.

“Take care.”

Note – Nymeria: What?! That’s it?? Dude, you won’t see her for god knows how long, say goodbye properly!! I hope next chapter he will :C

◀Previous Chapter

Next Chapter▶

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 200

Max felt her throat tightening. She couldn’t believe those were his parting words to her; so plain and cold. It was as if the time they spent on the ship was a whole lie. Riftan turned, his face calm and collected as he walked away from the chapel. The knights beside him lowered their heads toward her and followed the commander.

“We will be back soon and take the Lady back to Anatol, so don’t worry too much.”

Yulysion said confidently before turning around, and Max went out with the priests to see them off. Dozens of wagons and armed knights filled the courtyard beneath the stairs. At the forefront were the elite Knights of Livadon and the Remdragon Knights. Max’s heart pounded violently inside her chest as their flags fluttered from the wind blowing from the west.

She watched with inexplicable heaviness as Riftan mounted his horse. He soothed Talon, who whinnied and led him through the lines to make sure everything was in order. Then, he urged his warhorse towards the front of the line. The knights all began to move and follow Riftan’s lead.

Max watched the entire scene with a grim gaze when, suddenly, Riftan came to a halt. The knights who followed him stopped with him and began talking among themselves about what was going on. Riftan yelled something at Hebaron and didn't seem to care about the commotion, then jumped off his horse and started striding back to the temple.

“Just a moment...”

He hurriedly ran up the stairs and grabbed his wife's forearm. Before she could respond, he led her under a beautiful, large tree located next to the chapel. Max struggled to keep up with him, stuttering, unsure of what to say.

“Ri-Riftan... all of a sudden, why...?”

“Although I know this is dn foolish, but...”**

He turned around and gazed down at her as he muttered incoherently. Max was puzzled by the conflicted expression on his face. He stood stiff and awkward for a long time, before pulling something out of his pocket and holding his hand out. She looked down blankly at the thing in his hand. In the middle of his palm was an unevenly discolored piece of shekel that was slightly dented along the edges.

“Take it and keep it.”

Max felt unsure and blinked at it. It was a simple copper coin used by commoners. She had never seen or touched one in her life. Unaware of his intentions, she looked at him in confusion and noticed that his face was noticeably tense. Without saying another word, he took her hand and handed her the coin.

“You must keep it with you at all times.”

“W-Why...?”

Riftan's mouth twisted, as if hesitating, and finally relented with a sigh. **“I received it after completing my first quest when I joined the mercenaries. They say that it brings good fortune to carry it around. Even though it's just a stupid superstition among mercenaries, I couldn't bring myself to throw it, so I kept it...”**

Riftan blurted out the last sentence as if he was embarrassed to have dwelled on such superstition. **“It's true that I rarely get injured when I have this, so I carried it around with me ever since.”**

Max quickly returned the coin back to him as if she was burned by it. **“Then if that's the case... Ri-Riftan, you should keep it!”**

”””” ”

“I don’t need such a thing as luck now. I’m confident that I will make it out alive without relying on such things.” Riftan’s long fingers intertwined tightly with hers, then his eyes dimmed heavily.

“You have no idea how difficult it is for me to leave you. Although it is a foolish superstition... I want you to at least have this.”

“I don’t see it... as foolish. If this does b-bring you luck... I want Riftan to carry it around. You are the one going to a d-dangerous place.”

“I prefer this.”

He lowered his head and brought her fist that grasped the coin to his lips. He pressed his lips against the back of her hand, his bangs glistening and tickling her skin sweetly.

“My worries will be more at ease if you at least have this with you.”

“But... M-my heart will burn all black with worry for you.”

Max muttered resentfully, her voice trembling. He lifted her head and looked into her eyes that brimmed with tears. His face was filled with an indescribable intense emotion. Riftan held her face between his palms and wiped Max’s tears away with his thumbs.

“...It will?”

She couldn’t bring herself to speak and simply nodded her head. Riftan inhaled a short breath and lowered his head to press his lips against hers. Max’s eyelids fluttered as his soft breath brushed against her lips. Riftan’s gaze was seething but, on the contrary, his touch was delicate and short.

“I’ll be alright.”

“Can you promise to... come back to me without a single i-injury?”

“...Yes, I promise.” His neck convulsed as if he had just swallowed a bundle of Rock. Riftan leaned in again and kissed the back of her hand once more. **“Please, I hope that nothing bad happens to you... may everything that falls upon you be all good...”**

Riftan murmured in a whisper, like he was praying, then straightened his posture again. He gently caressed her cheek softly. Max looked up at him with sadness in her eyes.

“I really have to go now.”

Max nodded, keeping her lips sealed, as she knew she wouldn’t be able to prevent her tears from falling, and simply nodded her head again. Riftan stood tall. His legs

immobile, as if they had turned into iron. Slowly, he stepped towards the courtyard. He didn't look back again as he trudged down the stairs and mounted his horse again.

The knights waited in silence for their commander to lead them, and when he spurred his horse forward, the army moved in perfect unison. Max stood at the top of the stairs with the priests as they watched them leave. She wanted to see her husband to the end, but her vision kept blurring with her tears. Gripping the coin tightly with both hands, she swallowed back her tears.

When they finally disappeared from their sight, the High Priest, who was standing behind her, gently approached and turned her around to go back inside.

“We shall head back inside now. I will be showing the room that the lady will be staying in.”

Max quickly wiped the remaining tears with the sleeve of her dress and walked back to the temple. At that moment, a hollow wind gently blew across her back and Max turned to look behind her one last time, before following the High Priest inside.

The monastery where she would be staying appeared after a long flight of stairs, past the main garden, auditorium, small vegetable garden, and a tiny chapel. Max gazed up with a surprised look at the four-story stone building. The structure was perfectly symmetrical, like the rest of the buildings in Livadon, and it was as magnificent as any other part of the temple, but somehow, it had a sullen atmosphere.

The priest guided her through the convent and briefly explained the facilities inside. **“That area is where the sisters who are training to become priestesses live. There are also noble ladies who are staying in to pray for their brothers or husbands to return safe and sound. Most of the people spend their time in their own rooms. However, everyone usually gathers to pray in the morning and evening. You shall be able to meet other ladies then.”**

Max tried to hide her discomfort at the idea of interacting with noble women from Livadon. She had no desire to meet them, not only because she was not confident in social settings, but she was afraid of being ridiculed for her stuttering. However, instead of rejecting the priest's offer, she simply nodded.

The priest escorted her to a clean and spacious room on the second floor of the convent. **“This will be the madam's room.”**

Max looked around as she entered the exotic but grandiose room, which had a large glass window. It wasn't over the top luxurious, but decent enough. The bed was wide and the sheets on it were fluffy. There was also a varnished mahogany table and a large wardrobe against the wall to keep her clothes.

“The servants will bring your meals everyday to your room at your preferred time. If you wish, you can dine in the dining room with the priestesses and sisters. You may go anywhere you wish within the temple grounds, but kindly refrain from entering the north annex, as it is the residence of the priests. If you wish to leave the temple, you must notify the priestess in charge of this monastery, and we will provide you with an escort. Does the Lady have any questions?”

Max could only shake her head slowly at the avalanche of information thrown at her. The strict-looking young priest stared at her for a while, then turned around.

“If you have any questions later on, please let me know. I will instruct a servant to assist you immediately.”

Then, he closed the door and left. Max, completely exhausted, flopped down on the bed, and that was how her life in the monastery began. Like the other ladies, she spent most of her time idle in her room. During the day, she walked in the garden, but she never went out of the temple and hardly spoke with others.

It was rare for priests and priestesses to approach her and engage in conversation; if they did, it was usually about the rules within the temple. Even when she ran occasionally into the noble ladies of Livadon in the halls, they would only share small nods as they passed. The atmosphere in the temple did not have any reluctance against guests from other Kingdoms. First of all, Max didn't expect her days at the monastery to be filled with vibrance and liveliness, as she expected the lifestyle there to be reclusive and abstinent, but Livadon was currently facing a war against an army of monsters.

The faces of priests and priestesses were solemnly hardened with heavy fatigue from all the preparations they had to do for worship and everyday burials. Even the noble ladies who were condemned to wait for their family to return alive or as a corpse, were also dark. Max knew her expression was the same as theirs. When she saw herself in the mirror, a woman with a grim, pale face and dark circles under her eyes looked back at her.

Every night, Max would toss and turn, worrying about Riftan. And when she opened her eyes in the morning, she would sob with longing for Castle Calypse. She wanted nothing more than to return to Anatol as soon as possible with Riftan, Ruth, and the Remdragon Knights.

She attended morning services every day, praying for fate to side with them and to hear news of victory in retaking Louiebell Castle. However, the news that the messengers brought them were always the same. The fortress created by the army of trolls was tougher than expected and could not be easily penetrated. It was difficult to bring them to a confrontation as it could result in an all-out battle.

Oftentimes, nobles who would visit the temple would be making all sorts of wild speculations that this war wouldn't end until next year, if the situation continued like that. When she heard such talk, Max felt like her stomach was bloating and turning. The other noble ladies' faces also clouded darkly. After spending ten days in such a grim atmosphere, Max entered the temple with her usual gloomy expression. However, the air was different than usual, she was puzzled. The nobles of Livadon and the noble ladies who stayed at the monastery were strangely bright and excited. Unable to overcome her curiosity, Max carefully asked the lady sitting next to her.

“E-excuse me. Was there perhaps... good news from Louiebell?”

The young woman, who appeared to be roughly the same age as her, stared back at her with a surprised expression and replied in a friendly tone.

“The Holy Knights from the Great Temple of Osyria have arrived. They are going to pay their worship in the central temple this afternoon and head for Louiebell right after.”

Note – LF: Aw dang, I wish they didn't have to part

It's so heartbreaking to see this lovely couple separate. I guess in the next chapter we'll see the handsome holy knight? Hehe ?

Nymeria: *This is stressing me out so much D:*

◀ Previous Chapter

Next Chapter ▶

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