

Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 161

Proofreader – Nyeria

Max watched Riftan and Agnes argue. It was embarrassing to see them fight in public, but the knights around them seemed used to it, and shook their heads, bored.

“Christ, say your goodbyes and leave already”, Riftan said.

“You started the argument first!”

“Do you plan on leaving after the sun sets?”, he added.

Agnes’ shoulders briefly trembled as if she was trying to hold back a retort, then she sighed. “Yes, unwanted guests should leave.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.”

“R-Riftan!” Max pulled on the hem of his shirt.

Riftan looked down at her before forcing himself to give a fake smile to Agnes. “Please have safe travels.”

“Thank you”, Agnes said dryly, but smiled when she turned to Max. “Maximillian, thank you also for your hospitality.”

“Pl-please stay safe and good luck”.

“I wish you the same”, the princess said before alerting her men.

Her knights yelled in approval before following Agnes across the drawbridge, kicking up dust beneath them. Max waved her hand until she had disappeared from her sight. She had felt uncomfortable having Riftan and Agnes spend time together, but now, a mysterious hollow feeling seemed to replace our anxiety.

“Let’s go back to our room”, Riftan told her.

He hugged her firmly while looking at the castle. Max turned in his embrace to watch him: his arms felt thick and strong like a tree trunk.

Max soon completed her tasks of renovating the gardens and castle. The gardens were now green and lush, depicting full bloom flowers. The sky over the garden became noisy as hawkers trained their birds. In the castle, old furniture was replaced, and every corner was either decorated or clean.

Meanwhile, Riftan was still busy coordinating the road construction. The knights toiled from dawn until dusk around him, keeping the monsters away.

”””” ”

Max soon fell into a monotonous routine. The servants were diligent and competent, needing little supervision. Before, she had studied magic in her free time but was now hesitant to start again. Her apathy towards the subject affected her ability, in fact it took her longer to memorize complex formulae without her past enthusiasm.

In the comfort of her bedroom, she sighed as she touched the book spines lined up in rows on the bookshelf. Agnes had said she had a talent for healing magic, but Max still wasn't quite sure. Should she continue to learn magic, even if Riftan was against it? Her husband had made it clear that he never wanted her help, and Max was too discouraged to follow up after his initial rejection.

White rays of sunlight poured over her through the window and she kept getting distracted by the view outside instead of reading, and she had lost interest in the speech practice worksheet that Ruth had made for her. What was the point in continuing? She laid her head against the windowsill and sighed again.

“What are you doing? Are you sick?”, Riftan said.

Max turned quickly and walked up to him. “W-Why are you here at this time?”

Riftan had left before dawn to supervise the road construction. Max looked at him with worry, wondering if there had been issues. However, he was unhurt and stood tall as always, displaying a confident presence. His hair was shining like a black onyx with strands outstretched here and there at odd angles.

He looked at her methodically, checking for any signs of weakness. After taking off his leather gloves, he rested his hand against her forehead.

“I had to come back to see the blacksmith and stopped by to see you. Do you have a fever?”

“Oh, no. I w-was only looking outside.”

“You were sighing. Are you bored here?” he said, troubled. “Would you like to invite some of the neighboring nobles and hold a banquet?”

Max widened her eyes and drew back in surprise. Although Riftan had the funds to hold a banquet now, the knights didn't have the time to leisurely enjoy their food, drink, and entertain guests. His offer was ridiculous, just like the time he had offered to hold a festival every day of the year. Yet his face showed that he was making a genuine offer,

so she shook her head quickly. Riftan frowned and bent until they were at eye level. His gaze was serious, as if wanting to know what she was thinking about.

“You’ve been making faces since the guests left. If you’re bored from the country life—”

Max cut him off. “No! I-It’s only because the weather has been warm. I w-was drowsy. I d-don’t want to hold a banquet or feast. I do-don’t enjoy those things.”

“At Croix Castle, you didn’t stay at the banquet for long either”, he said thoughtfully. “You only revealed yourself and left after a short while.”

His tone sounded disapproving to Max. Did he want a more social wife?

“I w-want to be a good host and m-make sure our guests feel w-welcome”, she said resolutely. “Bu-but I generally do not enjoy loud events. Even as a child, I’ve never liked them.”

“It didn’t seem that way at the festival. I just want to see you enjoy—”, Riftan winced, noticing that he was raising his voice. His shoulders stiffened. “Then, would you like to take a walk with me now, instead?” he added more softly.

“You d-don’t have to. You’re busy”.

“I’m not busy enough to stop breathing”, Riftan said, annoyed. He picked up Max’s cloak hanging off the wall. “Do you want to avoid spending time with me?”

“No, I don’t d-dislike your idea. B-but Riftan, you’re always working. You don’t have t-time to sleep properly. Instead of a walk, y-you should rest even for a little bit. I-it will be better for you.”

“Taking a nap in bed together sounds nice”, Riftan glanced at the bed before grimacing. “But I’m not confident enough that I can just lay down with you and sleep quietly.”

Max blushed and he laid a hand on her shoulder before fastening the clasp on her cloak around her neck.

“Let’s take a walk. I haven’t seen the gardens you’ve decorated up close”. A fresh breeze entered through the open window and Riftan sniffed, then made a strange face. “The whole castle smells like flowers”.

“Do you dislike it?”

“No, it’s something different”, he said dryly. “I’m used to the smell of dirt, horses, sweat, blood...”

Max felt that perhaps Riftan had more in common with the flowers than she did. He was full of life just like their garden, was familiar with living every day, through hardship or training. He was strong and brave enough to overcome his trials, while she was just empty.

“Let’s grab some refreshments first”, Riftan said lightly, trying to improve her mood.

Max smiled, trying to hide her worries. “A few days ago, I b-bought a lot of fresh fruit. T-there were quality spices on sale. We w-will have a lot to choose from.”

“Good, it’s been some time since I’ve had fresh fruit. Not dried or pickled”.

Riftan looked straight ahead and went out with Max. After stopping momentarily in the kitchens, they left to go outside with a basket of raspberries, mulled wine, freshly baked apples, and bread.

Max squinted when bright sunlight shone over her, making the dew on the flower buds shine like jewels. Compared to the stone floor the servants cleaned and polished every day, the grass felt like a soft carpet that emitted a soft, bluish hue.

“Are you cold?”

“No, I’m v-very warm”. She took his hand and walked slowly. The Uigru tree was now sprouting buds. Max smiled and laughed quietly while she admired the foliage. Ruth’s magic had worked, the tree had finally come back to life.

“What are you smiling and laughing about?”

“The tree here. Do you see? The f-flowers have blossomed”.

“I thought this tree was dead”.

“Ruth said the t-tree may seem dead but t-there was a high chance it was still alive. I-in autumn, he applied his magic”, Max stopped as she saw Riftan become impassive. “Is something wrong?”

“No”, he said bluntly and tugged on her arm. “I don’t see what’s interesting about an ugly tree having leaves. We should look at something else. Let’s go to the garden you’re always looking at from our room.”

“The merchant gave me some recommendations. I p-planted a medley of flowers. I hope you e-enjoy them”.

They walked down a path past the training area gates at a relaxed pace. Max smiled in delight as she saw the sun filter through the foliage and light up her husband’s face.

She loved looking at him and yet feared to disappoint him at the same time. His naturally cruel and sharp eyes, his large and overbearing body that moved lithely, even when he was at ease... She admired all of him and was no longer scared of his appearance.

She didn't understand why such a handsome man felt so passionate about a woman like her. Regardless, her heart seemed to fill with him more and more as the days went by.

"The garden view is even more wonderful up close".

They finally arrived. A medley of colorful flowers were in full bloom and Riftan began to speak.

Note – LN: Lol, Riftan shot down the Uigru Tree legend in three sentences.

Nymeria: Guys, Riftan's reaction to the oak tree... Riftan sus.

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Chapter 162

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"Ah, the scent smells really good."

Max gazed at it with a sense of relief and pride. Bright red buds saturated the area around the small puddle dug by the servants, and the shrub trees that were lined up like little soldiers had bluish-purple flowers sprouting, next to them was a field of various herbs which grew pleasantly and created a wonderful harmony with the flowers. Max placed a handkerchief on a flat chair carved out of stone and sat.

"The p-plants here... all of them can be used as h-herbs and spices."

"You mean you made an edible garden?"

“It’s o-one thing to have pretty flowers in a garden, b-but planting useful plants... I thought that it w-would be nice.”

Max’s words made Riftan laugh gently. “I will instruct the guards to make sure that nothing harms this garden and to keep it intact.”

“Do you l-like... it?”

He looked down at Max who was sitting a step away from the flower garden and then he nodded slowly. An intense emotion flashed over his eyes and then disappeared briefly.

“Yes, I like it.”

The voice that came with his response was oddly strained. Max looked at him with a puzzled glance, when Riftan squatted near her, patting his lips as if trying to hide his feelings.

“A year ago, I never imagined I would spend such a leisurely time in a flower garden with my wife.”

Max grew nervous upon realizing that Riftan was pertaining to the time he went on an expedition.

“I heard that... you have g-gone through a lot of t-trouble during the e-expedition.”

“It wasn’t easy. There were thousands of monsters living in the Lexos mountains and the road to the Dragon lair was surrounded by layers of barriers and labyrinths.”

He replied grimly, rummaging through a basket and taking out an apple. He took a big bite out of it and its fresh juice gently moistened his lips. Max’s face flushed red, sensual memories flashing in her head. Regardless of her wild imaginations, Riftan, who was sitting on the ground eating an apple, seemed free and relaxed; like an innocent boy who was naïve of the cruel world. He took a green apple and offered it to her.

“It tastes pretty good. Try it too.”

””” ”

Max absently took a bite on the apple. There was no taste on her tongue as it was hardened by the tension she was feeling. She had suffered immensely because of her father, which made her so preoccupied with her own misery for the past three years that she had never thought about the hardships Riftan went through. Rather, she even feared that if he came back, he would inflict unimaginable harm on her.

But how can he be so comfortable by my side?. Overwhelmed by the question in her head, Max looked down carefully at Riftan who was enjoying the breeze.

Has he ever blamed me? Max hoped that wasn't the case, but after all, Riftan married her even knowing all the hardship it was going to bring him. Wouldn't any man in the world who faced such misfortune lament? It was a miracle that he decided to keep his wedding vows and was satisfied with her. Her thoughts made her heart feel uncomfortable, so she quickly changed the topic.

"Is the r-road construction...going well?"

"It's going well. It will be completed by the time fall comes." Riftan threw the apple seeds into the bush with an ambitious smile. "I will expand the port as soon as the road is complete. It would cost a lot of money to keep it indestructible by monsters but the traders from the south will be able to dock huge ships and they will reward us handsomely for that. It's going to be extremely profitable."

"Can you make t-that much money... from t-tolls alone?"

"It's not going to be just tolls. Partnering with merchants can make you more money than the king. They share a portion of their income in exchange for protecting their expensive cargo and helping them run their business smoothly. There already are many merchants lining up to cooperate. I won't let you miss the privilege of enjoying rare silks and spices coming from the south at an affordable price." He leaned back and smiled at her. "When the trader brings the ship, I will give you 500 silk clothes."

"I have m-more than enough s-silk clothes."

"It's not enough", he affirmed and laughed. "Hang in there. I will give you countless numbers of the most expensive clothes in the world. Then, I'll put diamond rings that shine brighter than the sun on each of your finger. From your neck to your wrist, to your ankles, I'll decorate you with jewels."

He grabbed her hand and pressed his lips on her wrist. The feeling of the slightly cold, wet lips pressing against the sensitive, pulsing skin made Max shudder. Riftan's dark eyes were deeply satisfied.

"I will make you the most honorable lady in the Seven Kingdoms. I will make you enjoy as much as wealth as the princess of Roem." Riftan caressed her palm and spoke passionately to her. "If the empire did not perish, you would have been treated as the most precious woman in this continent. Someone like me wouldn't have been allowed to even talk to you."

"D-don't say such nonsense. Roem perished a long t-time ago and the Roem family barely maintains their name... now t-they have no power, n-no influence. I am j-just one of the m-many many nobles of Whedon."

"You're being too humble. You are the descendant of the great imperial family who once ruled the empire, and the eldest daughter of the most powerful Duke in Whedon. You

are not just any noblewoman.” Suddenly, a look of cruelty permeated Riftan’s face. “I despise your father, but I don’t intend to disrespect him. The reason the Duke chose me as your husband is because I was useful to him, not exactly because I’m a suitable or worthy groom for you.”

Max’s hand, which was held by Riftan, flinched. Like a hound that instinctively crushes a bird flapping out of his claws, he tightened his grasp.

“I have no noble relatives. Even if I die, I have no brothers who will bother to avenge me. A commoner knight who has the skill and reputation, but no power. It was no big deal for him to make me his acting commander, it wouldn’t be difficult to take care of any matter that may arise. He just chose me to be the man whom he could use, then let die.”

“Th-that’s...”

“He thought I would never come back and continue our marriage.” Riftan emphasized gently but his tone was frightening. “But I came back alive, and our marriage is real. Now that man has no authority over you. I am your family.”

At those words full of possessiveness, she felt a cool breeze sweeping through her heart. She was worthless to her father, it was only Rosetta that the duke acknowledged as his daughter. Maximillian was a failure, a useless daughter, who was married to a commoner knight at a timely opportunity, just to be of use to the Duke, so the fine noblewoman Riftan was referring to couldn’t possibly be her, but Rosetta.

Max bit her lips. The fact that her own father had thoroughly deceived and used her husband gave her a new kind of anger and she felt unbearably sad that she had been the key to that deceit. The Duke of Crox should have given a cherished daughter to a young knight who would risk his life for him, he should have given the beautiful and bright Rosetta to Riftan. He should have been treated with that much. As the emotions rose fiercely in her heart, Max began to speak in a trembling voice.

“I’m r-really... s-sorry.”

All of a sudden, as if all the spite escaped from him, Riftan clasped her face between his palms.

“D**n, I’ve said too much nonsense. I wasn’t trying to blame you, I know you have nothing to do with your father’s evil tactics. You never wanted to marry me, did you?” That was true. He smiled at her bitterly as he looked at her eyes that couldn’t deny what he said. “You are just another pitiful p**n who was forced by your father to marry a lowly human like me.”

“I-it’s not like that. D-d-don’t say it that way-”

But he did not listen to his wife's urgent words. "However, I will make you perfectly satisfied. I will make you feel like marrying me was better than marrying any other noble or royalty."

Unable to bear his words anymore, Max started to speak. "I-I already feel that way. S-so..."

Suddenly she leaned over and wrapped her arms around his neck. Riftan stiffened from surprise, before raising his arms to hug her vigorously. He pulled her head and placed his lips over hers. Max trembled helplessly as his sweet tongue, faintly scented with green apples, gently filled her mouth.

The urge to bury her face against his neck and cry soared. The fantasies he had of her was ridiculously surreal. Max closed her eyes tightly, feeling miserable: no matter how hard she tried, she would not be able to meet his expectations.

They stayed together like that, with their bodies glued to each other, for a long time. When a guard came looking for him, he stroked her cheek and stared at her with a sad expression, then gave her a gentle kiss and reluctantly got up from his seat. Max watched gloomily as she watched him leave to fulfill his duties as a Lord. She was feeling so much guilt thinking that her father had thoroughly deceived him and she just had silently obeyed him. She knew the unchanging past wasn't worth thinking about, but she couldn't shake her own self-condemnation.

Max trudged back to the room and collapsed on the bed. The fact that Riftan treated her like an honorable princess made her uncomfortable to her bones. For the past 22 years, Max was raised like a dog by her father. When the dogs rebelled, her father would raise his whip, but they would at least bare their teeth at him. Max instead just sat down on her knees, bearing the punishment and obeying with tears in her eyes.

She had a deep understanding of how helpless and miserable she was. As she crawled on the floor like a bug and hung on her father's feet, Max couldn't forget what her figure looked like through the mirror in the room. Her skin was all swollen and she wriggled on the stone-cold floor like a worm.

Princess, Duke's precious daughter... all those titles were ridiculous.

Max curled up and buried her face in her lap. The more she thought of Riftan, the tighter her chest became. Was it okay to admit who she really was and how far she was from his perfect wife idea that he had in his mind? However, just imagining herself telling the truth to her husband caused her body to have cold sweats and twisted her stomach.

She was well aware of how the servants of Croix Castle looked at her. Their glances, filled with lukewarm sympathy at a distance, were sometimes harder for her to bear than her father's violence.

It would be better to die than to receive such a look from Riftan. Her husband believed that his wife was the most honorable lady in the world, and she never wanted him to know how miserable she had been living.

Max got out of bed and left the room after she couldn't bear the spiralling depressive thoughts anymore. If she continued to be locked up alone, her own negativity would swallow her whole.

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Chapter 163

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Max needed to make herself busy. Being idle brought memories of her time at the Croix Castle and it made her feel like an empty shell. She then decided to go to the kitchen and supervise the servants to see if dinner was going well. Just as she came down from the stairs and was heading towards the hall, a loud voice called over her shoulder.

“Lady Calypse!”

Max turned her head to the direction of the voice. Sir Gabel Laxion and Sir Lombardo walked through the wide-open door with serious expressions, which made her nervous.

“W-What’s the matter? At this time of the day...?”

“I apologize for calling you so suddenly. There is someone injured, will you kindly take a look at him?” They passed through the servants who were cleaning the hall’s floors and ran straight to her. Max was taken aback and widened her eyes.

Back when she had just started to practice healing magic, she often looked after injured knights and never experienced depleting her mana, but after the last incident such exchanges ceased. Still, it had to be something very urgent for them to decide to request her help. Max felt embarrassed and hurriedly opened her lips to talk.

“How about... R-ruth?”

“The wizard is at the construction site right now. I don’t want to burden you, milady, but I can’t afford the time to go down the town and find another healer.”

They were in a hurry and didn’t wait for Max’s reply as they quickly led her to the door. She almost stumbled in hurry as she tried to keep pace with the knights’ wide strides.

“H-How... Who was injured?”

“Some knights were sent to Libadon for an inspection of the land last winter. It seems that they were attacked by werewolves beyond the territory of Anatol as they were coming back, one of them was bitten and infected with venom...” Gabel lightly clicked his tongue and belatedly glanced at Max with anxiety. “Do you know how to use magic for injuries involving venom?”

“I-I studied the magic formula. Yet I haven’t had the chance to actually practice...”

“You can give it a try this time.”

Gabel spat out without hesitation, then began to slide down the railing of the stairs. Max tried to hurry down to keep his pace, but had to pull the hem of her dress up to one side to prevent her from rolling down.

“R-rather... Wouldn’t it be better to wait for Ruth to return?”

“If we delay it any longer, the venom will spread, and he will be unable to use his right hand for the rest of his life. His life as a knight would be over. We won’t blame you if you fail, but please give it a try first.”

””” ”

Lombardo spat out in a tone that seemed more like a compulsion than a request and Max swallowed dryly. The knights had so far lived trying to hide even the smallest injuries, but now that they were actually coming to her for help in a moment of crisis, she didn’t know whether she was feeling happy or overwhelmed by what they expected of her.

What if I can’t handle it? She followed the knights across the garden, rubbing her damp palms against her skirt to wipe away the sweat. They passed through the doors leading to the training door and then headed straight towards the dorms.

“This way.”

Max stepped in the wooden building to follow them and stiffened as soon as she realized that the inside of the room was very dark: the sunlight was kept outside with

thick curtains. It was only when the knight lit a candle that a desolate space with three or four camp beds came into view. The room seemed haphazardly made to cater just those who were injured during training.

As she followed the knights, she saw a shelf full of medicinal herbs and bottles of unknown medicine, a brazier emitting a faint light, and a boiling kettle. Max looked around and trembled slightly at the strange scenery. When she heard a weak moaning sound, she turned towards it and saw a young knight lying down on the farthest bed. She stepped over to him and frowned.

“It’s dark, so I can’t see the wounds well. C-can the curtains be taken off?”

“Werewolves’ venom makes one’s nerves extremely sensitive. Sunlight exposure intensifies the pain so the struggle will be harder. Here, let me light another candle instead.”

Gabel explained briefly, then lit a candlestick next to the bed and the dim light revealed the knight’s bare torso. Max looked down tensely and when she confirmed that the size of the wound was not larger than what she was expecting, her shoulders loosened a bit. There was a deep bite mark on his forearm, but fortunately the bone didn’t seem to be damaged. However, the infection was serious.

She placed the back of her hand against the young man’s face, her eyebrows furrowing at the heat of his body temperature.

“The antidote... H-has he taken it?”

“He immediately took it when he was bitten, but the monster who bit him seems to be a high-level one, so the antidote is not working.”

Max turned her head at the unfamiliar voice. A young knight with an emaciated face entered the infirmary, carrying a flask. Sir Lombardo quickly took the flask out of his hand.

“I told you to take a break and let the servants do these chores.”

“I am fine. On the other hand, this guy was bitten while he was bandaging me. It’s my responsibility to take care of him.”

The young knight stubbornly replied, grabbing the flask, and approaching the bedside. He then soaked a towel with water and began to wipe the body of the unconscious man. When the cold towel met his feverish body, a weak moan erupted from him. Sir Lombardo stiffened looking at the pitiful scene and turned to Max with urgency.

“Please hurry, if the venom spreads further, his arm will be permanently damaged.”

“I... I’ll try.”

She tilted the candlestick with a tense face, carefully examining the condition of the arm bitten by the monster. She had already seen a werewolf bite before, but that was very different from this. There was a foul odor emitting from the two pitted teeth marks, which were so deep that they looked like they had been nailed with a hammer. The bruise on his arm resembled a dark burgundy stain of paint and it was swelling like a plump sausage.

Can I really heal it? Max tried to recall the magic she had learned from Ruth as she placed her trembling hand on top of the wound. Healing venom-infected wounds consumed less mana than healing magic, but the process and the execution was more complex.

She started drawing out her mana, trying to remember the unfamiliar formula, but controlling mana in that way was not as easy as she had initially thought. She drew the magic formula twice without success and the tension was evident in the faces of the knights who were watching quietly by her side, noticing that she was encountering trouble during the process.

“Is it... difficult?”

“I... I’ll try one more time...”

Max muttered in a creeping voice, her face turning red from the effort she was exerting. She felt regretful, thinking that she should have practiced this variant of magic instead of wasting time struggling with self-pity. She was afraid that if she didn’t succeed in healing that young knight, the trust that was built between her and all the knights would crumble in an instant.

Max aggressively wiped the sweat from her forehead with her sleeve and applied her mana once more. When a hazy blue light was emitted and it wrapped around the knight’s arm, she began drawing the intricate pattern again. The magical power that flowed into the knight’s body purified the blood contaminated with venom and discharged it from the body with the help of the magical formula. Noticing that it was working, Max exhaled a long sigh of relief. After a while, the dark red stain around the knight’s arm and its angry swelling subsided.

“It’s... a-all done.”

Max slowly removed her hand as she felt that the dark energy was completely eradicated from the wound. Gabel picked up a candlestick and looked closely at the knight’s complexion. He then suddenly pulled up the curtains and the bright sunlight flooded in, making Max squint her eyes and furrowed her eyebrows.

“He’s not reacting aggressively to the sunlight. It seems that the magic worked, and the venom’s completely gone.”

“It’s not certain, there may be some v-venom and dark energy left... he’ll need more antidote. Will you kindly boil medicinal herbs?”

“I’ll prepare it.”

The other knight, who had been restless by her side until then, quickly started making tea, putting herbs and leaves into a kettle. Max sat by the window and sighed for a moment as the tea boiled. It had been a long time since she used magic, so she felt slightly tired, but she wasn’t feeling dizzy like it was when she completely depleted her mana.

She weighed her remaining mana and deciding that she could afford to use healing magic, she applied it on the knight once more. As the bite marks on his forearm rapidly healed, the young man’s face started to look better, showing relief.

“We are grateful that you did so much, this is beyond favor. M ’lady should also drink the tea that’s brewing, as the medicinal roots in it also help restore mana.”

“T-Thank you.”

“We have to properly express our thankful greetings to you. Thank you for saving this young knight’s life.”

At Sir Gabel’s polite words, Max’s face turned red. Hearing such appreciative words from others was like sweet rain amidst a drought, a break from the suffrage of dreadful thoughts. She muttered with a shy face whilst sipping the steaming herbal tea.

“It’s a r-relief... that I was helpful.”

“You were extremely helpful. Had it been later, the venom would have spread, and his arm would have been permanently damaged. Sir Ruth wasn’t around, but luckily for this guy, milady is capable of using healing magic.”

Max suddenly frowned and looked at the attending knight. “You shouldn’t have to return to the castle immediately, you should have prioritized going to the healer without delay.”

“We entered Anatol through the front. We decided that it would be better to go to the castle immediately than go down hill and pass by the village. Moreover, he insisted that no matter what happened, we had to go straight to the castle. I didn’t even know that the venom had spread faster than I thought.”

The other knight, who was sweating whilst stirring tea in the kettle, muttered with a preoccupied expression. “And above all, we thought that we had to deliver the news to the Lord as soon as possible.”

“What news?” Gabel asked with a puzzled face.

Then, the attending knight opened his lips, carefully choosing the right words to deliver.

“As you know, the Lord sent us to Libadon to gather information. We stayed there over the winter and investigated the monster movement phenomenon.”

“Did you discover something out there?”

The knight then nodded with a firm expression.

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Chapter 164

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“There seems to be an alliance forming between subracial monsters in the Pamela Plateau, north of Livadon. Highly intelligent lizardmen and trolls formed a large army of monsters that began raiding villages. According to what we heard just before we departed from Livadon, the troll army looted even a fairly vast territory in the north. “

“A large-scale alliance between the monsters?”

Not only the knight’s eyes widened, but Max’s as well at the absurd news.

“Let’s say the monsters did form an alliance. At best, it will be at the level of a small village. In all my life, I have never heard of subracial monsters forming large armies.”

“No one has ever tried going deep into the Pamela Plateau. It is possible that highly-intelligent monsters have achieved a kingdom-scale of civilization, beyond small villages, without us being aware of it.”

Max became pale and felt weak at the young knight’s serious narration. Her body trembled in horror as tremendous numbers of monster armies plundering humans unfolded in her imagination. Even Lombardo’s face hardened, sensing the severity of the situation.

“Is your information reliable?”

“It’s a rumor going around, it hasn’t been confirmed. What’s certain is that a monster army made of lizardmen, trolls, and red goblins have begun to do planned ransacks.”

Gabel pondered, stroking his chin. “Do you think Livadon can handle the situation?”

The young knight anxiously shook his head, his eyes squinting, forming wrinkles on his face.

“I think there is a high possibility that each country in the seven kingdoms will soon dispatch knights.”

“If it comes to that, then it is Whedon, their alliance in the west, which will be first called for reinforcements.”

“You mean... the R-Remdragon Knights will go on an expedition to Livadon?”

Max, who was listening intently to their conversation, suddenly interrupted. She knew that the topic was something she should not intervene with, but she felt impatient and couldn’t help but ask. It was only then that Gabel noticed how pale her complexion was and shook his head quickly.

“The Remdragon Knights barely returned last year after a three-year expedition. Even if there is a call for reinforcements, the extent of it will only be up to the Royal Knights, they’ll be the ones dispatched.

“There’s no guarantee about that. According to the wizards, this phenomenon of large-scale monster migration occurred because of the evil army lurking in Pamela Plateau, which swept the northern area. It’s a serious problem that concerns the western continent. Obviously, even Anatol will be called for reinforcements. We have to prepare.”

””” ”

“We’ll discuss the matter when the Captain comes back.”

Sir Gabel glared at the young knight who wasn't able to read the room. Max realized that he was trying to put an end to the conversation for her sake and got up in a hurry.

"He s-seems to be okay now... I have to get up and g-get going first."

"I will accompany you to your room."

"I-it's okay. I can go by myself."

"I insist. You need an escort even inside the castle."

Sir Gabel firmly responded and quickly walked towards the door. Max instructed Sir Lombardo to tell Ruth to check the patient again when he returned, as there was a possibility that there was leftover venom in his body, then she left the knight's quarters. The sun had set and the sky was tinted with a scarlet-orange shade.

"I heard that milady suffered from excessive mana depletion the other day. Is your condition bad?"

"I-it was nothing. You don't have to worry... I won't pass out again."

Gabel leaned down and carefully examined her face. Only when he saw that her complexion was still rosy, he nodded reassuringly and continued to walk.

As they walked silently side by side, Max gazed anxiously at the distant mountain. After hearing the news of an army made up of monsters wreaking havoc, she could no longer afford to get stuck in the past when there were so many uncertainties in the future. She strongly felt the need to prepare herself for it. Just like today, someone could suddenly be poisoned or fatally injured, and in cases like that it was her that could answer pleas for help. It was her magic skills that saved the young knight from the doom of losing his arms forever.

Riftan had said he didn't need her help, but that wasn't the case today. There is also something I can do. Max clung to that thought desperately. Her father instilled in her countless times the idea that she was a useless human being, but she proved him wrong today.

No. It wasn't only that day. Since she came to Anatol, she had been desperately learning many things and improving herself. If she gave up all of that now, she would never escape her lifelong sense of inferiority. She would just be an incompetent failure for the rest of her life, just like her father said. Max, who was taking her steps with a thoughtful face, had a resolute glint in her eyes.

Riftan didn't return to their room until late. It seemed that they discussed the news brought by the young knight during their expedition in Livadon all night long. She had decided to wait for him to return and ask Riftan's plans for the future, but after long

hours of waiting, she became exhausted from using her mana and could not withstand the fatigue she felt. Max, who laid down on the bed, at some point fell asleep like she had fainted.

By the time she opened her eyes, the sun was high up in the sky. Her shoulders drooped as she saw the empty sheets next to her.

Guarding the territory, road constructions, and even monsters...why can't the world leave my husband alone of its worries for a while? She sighed deeply, grasping her hair that was fluffy as a cloud with her right hand.

"Milady, are you awake?"

"Rudis..."

As always, the maid who was in perfect shape and had not a single hair out of place, came into the room with a tray of food. Max laughed awkwardly, embarrassed that she overslept until noon.

"It's too late f-for me to say g-good morning, right?"

"The Lord had instructed me to be considerate and let milady sleep as long as she needed. He said that milady was tired..." Rudis placed the tray down on the shelf next to the bed with a gentle smile.

All of a sudden, Max became worried about how Riftan would react if he knew that she used her magic to heal the young knight the day before. Would he be against it like he had been so far, or would he reluctantly admit that her magic helped? As she was lost in her thoughts, Rudis presented her a unique-smelling tea.

"The wizard handed me herbal leaves and said that it would help replenish milady's mana."

Max took the teacup and her eyes widened. "Ruth returned?"

"He gave me the pouch containing the tea last night, instructing me to boil it when milady woke up."

Rudis opened a leather pouch, showing dried leaves and well-groomed roots inside. Max was able to learn about medicinal herbs and was immediately aware of what the tea was made of. It was a mix of Mandragora roots and dried herbs.

Max rolled her eyes. It seemed everyone knew about her magic performance of the day before, they must have discussed it together. Just what kind of things the wizard went around telling without her knowing?

"I should say t-thank you to him. Perhaps h-he's still in the castle?"

"The wizard?" Rudis tilted her head, placing one hand on her cheek, as if trying to scan her memory. "I saw him come down to the kitchen this morning to eat, but after that... Shall I go to the library and check?"

"I-it's alright. I'll go b-by myself. I have something I want to ask him..."

She murmured vaguely as she sipped and blew on her tea. After finishing the slightly bitter tea, Max simply filled her stomach with the meal Rudis brought and washed her face. She then headed straight to the library after fixing her hair and wearing a navy-blue silk dress by the seamstress.

It had been a while since she saw Ruth, which made her feel a little uncomfortable. She opened the door slightly with a nervous face, expecting to hear a sarcastic comment about her interrupting him, but the wizard was nowhere to be seen.

She searched every corner, even behind the farthest shelf, to see if maybe he was hiding somewhere sleeping. When she saw no sign of him, even the books were neatly piled up, she sighed; it seemed like he had gone to the road construction site. It was a huge project, crossing the rugged mountain range, so there was no doubt that they would need a wizard to do more than a thing or two.

She gazed at the window with a sullen face and then rearranged her thoughts. Even if Ruth wasn't around, she could still research on her own. She looked through the bookshelf and picked up a heavy a***s, recalling the words from the young knight.

'Pamela Plateau...'

She placed a thick book on top of the desk and flipped the pages, finding the name in the northwestern region. Max then ran her fingertips over a rough map. Pamela Plateau was located at the far end of Livadon, in the northern area adjacent to Balto. She squinted her eyes at the squiggly letters written at the side of the map which were difficult to recognize. The brief description about the said region was that it was an uninhabited wasteland, due to its harsh climate and desolate environment.

Her forehead creased as she scrutinized the next page of the book for any explanation, but to no avail, she resigned and closed the book. In the first place, the young knights said that there was not much known about the place, explaining the reason why there was no detailed description in such an old book.

Max quickly got rid of her disappointment and began to search the bookshelves again. Soon, she was able to find several books about monsters in a corner. She pulled them out, looked inside, and selected an encyclopedia with detailed drawings and sat down again by the desk. As she unfolded the heavy book daunted with an elaborate leather cover, a foul smell crept to her nose. Max went through the faded sheets of paper with

her nose scrunched. She was able to find the names of the monsters she heard yesterday in the second chapter.

‘Troll...’

It was the name of the cannibal monster that was often heard in heroic bard stories. She looked down at the detailed illustration with narrowed eyes. The troll appeared terrifying with its rough skin reminiscent of a toad, giant arched nose, pointed ears, heavy muscular limbs, and a bulging stomach. The monster stared back at her with sunken eyes bent under swollen eyelids. Max, who was looking at the vivid picture, read the description right below.

Max’s shoulder unconsciously tensed as she read the scribbled words. Imagining an army made of strong cannibalistic giants who were intelligent enough to make tools sent shivers down her spine.

‘It’s okay, the distance between Pamela Plateau and Anatol is great, almost to the continent’s edges...’

However, the fact that the rampaging monster army was far from Anatol did not comfort her. After all, it was a situation that might demand her husband to leave for an expedition at a distant place.

Max anxiously bit her lips before turning to the next page. Drawings of goblins and ogres appeared one after another. She was focused reading the descriptions written underneath them when someone suddenly patted her shoulder making her jump out of her chair, taken by surprise.

Note – Nymeria: Last chapter was edited and it has been proofread by me. I’m sorry I couldn’t do it before, I wasn’t feeling good and our lovely LNH admin took over for me and edited it a bit for you guys! Anyway, I feel like this is a pivotal chapter for Maxi’s development.

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 165

Proofreader – Nymeria

“What, what is it? Why are you so surprised?”

Max frowned when she saw that it was only Ruth, who ridiculously shrugged.

“Don’t pretend to be i-innocent... What do you expect when you sneak up on me like that!”

“Gods, who’s sneaking up on who? I walked perfectly normally, didn’t I?”

“You have to at least make a s-sound.”

“Did I have to holler and say, ‘Ruth the Great Wizard has arrived’?”

He retorted unwaveringly and pulled a chair across from her. Max couldn’t figure out whether she should laugh or get angry at Ruth’s rude attitude. Even though they hadn’t seen each other in a long time, Ruth’s attitude remained the same.

The wizard yawned wide, his face gloomy as usual, and then took the book from her hand, skimming through it.

“There are several wrong descriptions. Lizardmen are technically closer to being subspecies of dragons rather than being a sub-racial monster. Their bodies contain mana stones, and they can cast magic spells. There would be better details and explanation in Lord Calypse’s records than this book.”

“Between d-dragon subspecies and s-sub-racial monsters... is there a big d-difference?”

“Of course, there’s a big difference. Sharing a common ancestor with a dragon gives them powerful magical abilities, such as their unique dragon breath. They also have excellent anti-magic abilities, so a lot of magic spells don’t work on them. That is what makes them so difficult to defeat.” He placed the book back on the desk and scratched his head in agony. “Lizardmen are at a much higher level compared to trolls. They are intelligent, can use magic, and have outstanding physical capabilities. Thus, they are hard to kill with either sword or magic. One of them is harder to deal with than ten trolls combined.”

With a new impression, Max’s eyes traced the drawing of a beast that looked like a lizard and a human fused together. It had a reptile-like face, a muscular body covered in scales, and a long tail. The strange beast did not appear as clever as he said. As she squinted her eyes to read the description below, wondering how dangerous of a monster it was, Ruth tapped the desk with his fingertips, as if trying to call her attention.

“By the way, what made you read through the book of monsters?”

“Yesterday... I heard the news brought by the young knights. It made me wonder what kind of m-monsters he was talking about..”

Ruth tapped the tip of his chin with a thoughtful expression and spoke. “I was told that you healed an injured knight from werewolves’ venom using detoxifying magic. You must have heard the news then.”

Max nodded stiffly. “North of Livadon... I heard that t-there is an army of monsters r-ransacking villages. Will the Remdragon Knights...be involved in the e-expedition?”

””” ”

“It’s still too early to be certain. However, there is a possibility they will be called for reinforcements.”

Max felt like all the blood drained from her body. Even though she was half-expecting that response, her heart still tightened at the thought of being separated from Riftan. She bit her lip, recalling the far distance of Pamela Plateau. How long would the expedition take this time around? How many months? Perhaps even years? Ruth, seeing her pale complexion, added cautiously.

“There’s a lot of work left in Anatol which the lord has to oversee. We have discussed it until the wee hours of the morning yesterday and we have come into conclusion that either Sir Hebaron or Sir Uslin will take and lead a part of the troops shall they be called for reinforcements.”

“I-Is that true?” Ruth nodded with a wry smile at Max’s eager question, she was unable to hide the relief on her face. “Unless it is inevitable, Lord Calypse will not leave Anatol for a long period of time. The road construction is a huge income generating project. Moreover, it’s been less than a year since the Red Dragon conquest, we can’t leave the territory empty for several months again.”

“I-inevitable circumstances... Are you saying Riftan will join the expedition in case that happens?”

Ruth hesitated to answer her question but eventually confessed frankly. “If the situation in Livadon takes the worse turn, Lord Calypse will have to come forward. Also, if King Ruben appoints Lord Calypse to join the expedition, it won’t be easy for him to escape his order.”

Ruth fumbled with his fingers, weighing the possibilities, and then sighed deeply. “There are so many bothersome precepts that knights have to follow. ‘Protect the weak, obey the monarch, and fulfill their duties to the way of the sword.’ Lord Calypse is not an

ardent believer of chivalry, however... one cannot ignore these commandments. It would damage the reputation that he has worked so hard to build. “

“R-right...”

Max’s face darkened as she recalled the words of Princess Agnes about the king suspecting Riftan’s loyalty. There was a chance that King Ruben would go to the extent of nominating him to join the expedition just to test him. The agreement made between the Seven Kingdoms was a treaty created for the sake of peace and safety of the continent’s whole population. It was made under the jurisdiction of court laws, even Riftan didn’t have the power to easily defy it.

Max gazed at the drawings of the hideous beasts through the book’s pages and bit her lips ‘til it hurt. Her stomach twisted as she imagined Riftan battling enormous armies of monsters. No matter how tremendously skilled a knight was, there was no guarantee that he would be safe or unharmed in battle. Several times, she had been made aware of Riftan’s recklessness so she was certain that he wouldn’t spare himself in battles, he wouldn’t hesitate to fight like hell in the front lines.

She felt angrily emotional out of nowhere. Riftan was a hypocrite for being obsessively anxious about her safety but not caring a bit for his. What kind of absurd way of thinking did he have? Her lips were protruding due to her disgruntled mood, deeming it unfair that she was the only one who worried to her stomach. Ruth’s calm voice suddenly broke her relentless thoughts.

“I’ll be joining the expedition too.”

Max lifted her head. Ruth, who was staring at the ceiling with his arms crossed, spoke like he was lost in thought.

“A long journey going to Livadon will require a wizard. Whether it’s Lord Calypse or another knight who will take the lead, it’s no doubt that I will have to accompany them. That would mean that Calypse Castle will need more of your magic skills than it does now.”

“My... magic?”

Max’s eyes moved anxiously at his sudden remark. Ruth nodded at her with a serious expression.

“Of course, I’m not obligating you. Currently, Anatol has a considerable number of mercenaries. Surely, there are wizards among them. I can gladly hire one of them, but it’s too much of a trouble to get a mercenary wizard to settle down. In case there’s no finding a skillful wizard, Lady Calypse would be the only one who can respond when an accident comes up just like yesterday.” He continued calmly, but then walked back and forth behind Max with hesitation. “I’m aware that milady suffered a great deal during the

accident. It was heavily my responsibility for not telling you what would happen if you depleted your mana. I wanted to apologize back then, but Lord Calypse had a certain glint in his warning eyes so I couldn't go find you..."

"You don't need to apologize. Ruth, you also had to leave in a hurry because of the wyvern attacks... you couldn't have predicted what would happen."

"No, I knew that there was a possibility of an accident happening because of those monsters. However, I didn't expect milady to go to that extent in helping the wounded."

Max didn't have words to say at his extreme candor. "W-well, that's the reason why I learned magic. To help... in the event of an accident... you taught me magic, right?"

"I did teach you with that intention in mind. But...I didn't expect you to actively do it."

He confessed with a shrug. Max was dumbfounded, her face slowly stiffening. She felt betrayed by the fact that the man who insisted for her to learn magic, did not expect much from her. Max stared at him coldly and noticed how Ruth was unusually timid.

"I apologize for underestimating milady's sense of justice. You don't know how much I sincerely regretted teaching you. When I heard that you lost consciousness, I suffered from a guilty conscience all night."

"Ruth's conscience is not that great... it's not."

"You don't have to say that. I really, sincerely blamed myself for what happened."

Max didn't reply and simply glared at him while Ruth scratched the back of his head in shame, perhaps seeing how she was truly offended.

"I realized again that there is nothing more dangerous than half knowledge. If you will give me a chance, I'll teach you everything you need to be careful with when using magic and how to deal with various crises..."

"You didn't expect much... from me..."

"That's not true. What I meant is that Lady Calypse exceeded my expectations. Milady's response was beyond excellent. It was a bit over the top, although it wasn't that long since you started learning magic, you've helped me as much as you can."

Max looked up at him, scrutinizing whether he was really speaking from the bottom of his heart. Ruth persuaded her calmly, confronting her with a sincere look in his eyes.

"If you're already fully recovered from last time, I want to continue teaching you magic from where we left off. If milady's skills improve from now on, I will be greatly relieved."

Max swallowed dryly at the increasing pressure she was put under. She also felt the need to polish her magical skills. She had been in Anatol for less than a year, yet she had already experienced two major accidents.

During the early days of winter, she took care of large numbers of injured people who were attacked by werewolves at a logging site and recently the attack of the wyverns at the road construction site. There was nothing that could assure her that it would never happen again.

If she faced a situation where she had a lot of injuries to deal with and Ruth was not around, she wasn't confident that she would be able to properly resolve it. Max, who tried to measure her abilities coldly, shook her head. Her mana depleted after healing four or five people, her current skill-level was not enough.

She wasn't sure how many months it would take for her to practice so she could be able to replace Ruth. Max gathered all her confidence and managed to barely utter the words out, like sand slipping off her mouth.

"Alright. If you t-teach me... I'll do my best. Even though Riftan is against it... I still want to k-keep learning how to use magic."

"Then it's settled. Come to the library whenever you have time. I'll be here unless I have to do something in particular."

He grinned with a satisfied expression and tapped Max on the shoulder.

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 166

They wanted to start training right away, but because Ruth's schedule didn't allow it, it was decided that they would have started studying the following morning instead.

Ruth picked up a couple of helpful books from the shelf and headed out with a bunch of parchments. Max, on the other hand, was left alone in the library and began to read a thick, faded book.

The book the wizard had handed her was intermediate geometry. Her head swirled and her eyes grew weary at the book's complexity, its content was difficult to understand. Max, who was earnestly flipping over the pages and scanning the bookshelves, had her eyebrows creased in concentration. After a while, she reached her limit of exhaustion and lamed her neck back.

Without taking notice, the day had already gone by and the sky was tinted bright orange to a pale indigo. She massaged her stiff shoulders whilst gazing at the dark orange sun through the window, then closed the pages of the book and rose from her seat. Her stomach protested as her hunger rushed in.

Thinking of it, she hadn't had any proper meal today, aside from a simple bread and soup. Max came out of the library, rubbing her groaning belly. In the hallway, servants were busy lighting up the candles. She gave them her habitual greeting and then slowly descended from the stairs. As she was coming down a couple of staircases, her eyes caught four servants carrying something beneath the railing. Max looked inadvertently and realized that what they were carrying was a blood-soaked armor, which made her harden her face.

"W-what's going on? Again... Who got i-injured?" As she glided down the remaining steps, the servants who were carrying the heavy armor whimpered and stopped at their tracks. Max hastily spoke before they even got the chance to answer. "Is... is the I-lord i-injured?"

Her eyebrows furrowed as her eyes inspected the breastplate, tassels, and vambraces that were all soaked in dark blood: the pieces matched Riftan's armor. What in the world had happened that his armor ended up like this? Even if it wasn't his blood that soaked it, there sure was a lot of blood.

"Where is the I-lord...right now? Did he go up to the room?" Her face was flooded with confusion. "Why... are you washing all these outside?"

"That's... because... we also don't..." As the servants stumbled upon their words, flustered, Max decided not to wait for their answers anymore and turned around. She had to see with her own eyes what was happening to properly understand and ran out to the courtyard at once.

As she scanned the large, vacant lot, she saw workers splitting firewood, merchants passing by with carts full of thread, and maids pulling buckets of water from the well. Max's eyes narrowed as she saw Riftan standing next to the servants with his upper body completely naked as he was pouring water on his head. When two maids

approached him, handing him a bucket filled with water, he took it and used the water to rinse his blood-stained hands.

A clear gush of water soaked his long, thick nape and rushed down to his sturdy shoulders, smooth back, and slender waist. Witnessing the maids stealing glances at him and exchanging meaningful looks at the view of their Lord, Max angrily ran toward them with her face bright red. Riftan, who was rubbing his neck with his palms, widened his eyes at the sight of her approaching.

“Maxi...?”

“Why in a place like this... you are...”

She was going to reprimand him for washing top-naked in a place where lots of people could see, but seeing him made her lose her voice, as if someone tightened a rope around her throat. Max glanced at his torso that shined like a golden statue in the dark reddish sun, his enormous body was tightly woven with exquisite and delicate muscles, and his golden-brown skin shone dazzlingly with a vibrant hue. She licked her dry lips. Even though she had seen his body a dozen times, her neck felt burning hot.

“I tracked down the monsters who attacked my knights in training and killed them.”

Hearing his voice, Max raised her gaze that was wandering on Riftan’s chest. He swept his jet-black hair, which appeared darker as it was soaked in water, and spoke in a somewhat awkward tone.

“The encounter stained my whole body with blood so I’m washing it off.”

””” ”

“But you can go wash it in the r-room. I’ll ask for a bath to be prepared r-right away...”

“But I was a mess. I’m telling you, I looked like a ghoul.”

He muttered under his breath, then a maid took the canteen he held and refilled it with water, so he poured it again on his head. Max took a step back to avoid the flowing water, while Riftan shook his head like a hound to dry himself off and took a sniff on his forearm.

“D**n, the b****y smell won’t go away.”

“Th-then why don’t you... go up to the room. Clean it with soap, I’m telling you... it will go away.”

She said, lightly wiping her face with the sleeves of her dress. Seeing that, Riftan moved away abruptly, as if burnt by fire. His sudden reaction made Max widen her eyes in response. Riftan's expression displayed irritancy and he spoke with a cautious tone.

"Don't get your clothes dirty for nothing. Werewolves' blood smells revolting."

"It's just c-clothes... It'll be alright once I change."

With her loose sleeves, Max approached him to wipe the dripping water off his cheeks and nape. Riftan flinched, as if he was about to push her off, but then gently lowered his head. She smiled faintly at the way he was acting, like a pet pressing his head against his owner's hand, and swept the dripping hair away from his forehead. Riftan's earlobe seemed to be burning red and she thought it could be because of the sunlight, or perhaps, because he was developing a fever, so Max anxiously touched his forearm and frowned at how cold he was.

"Your body... is cold. It's still cold... in this weather..."

"This doesn't bother me. There was a time in the middle of winter when I broke the ice on a lake to wash my body..."

"Don't be s-stupid. If you get a c-cold what are you going to d-do about it?"

Riftan's eyes widened at Max's aggressive persistence. She timidly looked down, wondering if she had been presumptuous, but he simply picked up a drenched tunic. After wiping the blood off his body several times, he tossed the dingy cloth to the maids.

"Wash and soak it in lye. If the smell still lingers, then just go ahead and burn it."

"Yes, my lord." Riftan glanced at Max as the maids scurried to do the laundry. "Right, let's go inside."

She went to his side and followed him with relief written on her face. Riftan was soaked in so much water that in every step he took, he left a dark puddle on the ground. Looking down at them, Max spoke in a firm voice.

"From now on... come at once to the r-room. Don't do such t-thing outside."

"And what, show up drenched in seven bags of blood and frighten you again?"

Max frowned at his blunt response, but couldn't help feeling embarrassed when she realized he was talking about the time they were attacked by a horde of ogres.

"T-that was my first time... seeing monsters... I was overwhelmed."

“If you say so...” He muttered skeptically. It seemed like he knew what he was talking about and that Max was lying about what she really feared. She anxiously looked from side to side.

“Now... I’m not afraid of seeing blood anymore like before... you don’t have to worry about it.”

Riftan’s expression grew darker at her words, particularly when she said that she wasn’t afraid of blood anymore. He looked down at her with a piercing stare.

“I have no intention of making you get used to that kind of sight.”

Max couldn’t retaliate and kept her mouth shut. She felt a strange tension between them, it seemed like Riftan wanted to say something more, but she avoided his gaze and followed him into the castle.

She trailed hesitantly as he crossed the hall and called a servant on standby.

“Listen, prepare water for a bath and bring it up to the room. Bring new clothes to change into too.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“After bathing, I intend to have my meal in the room. Prepare and bring it on time.”

He bluntly commanded like a military and walked up the stairs quickly. Max grabbed the hem of her dress and hurriedly followed him. Riftan climbed two floors of stairs with wide, marching strides, and opened the door of the room, which was very warm since Rudis had already set fire in the furnace in advance. He carefully stepped inside avoiding the carpet and took off his boots.

“F*cking wolf cubs... making a mess out of my good pair of boots.”

She closed the door behind her and watched as Riftan cursed. There was a faint reek coming off the dripping wet leather boots, which made him wrinkle his nose, and he threw them to a corner. Max picked up a towel and handed it to him.

“D-dry yourself...first.”

“I don’t need it. I’m going to take a bath anyway.”

“You shouldn’t stay wet w-while you wait for the bath water.”

He glanced at the pool of water beneath his feet, sighed, and took the towels from her.

Max walked over to the fireplace and poked the firewood burning in the hearth with a steel rod to raise the temperature, then carefully threw in some more wood.

When she heard some rustling sound behind her, she turned around to look over her shoulder and held her breath as she watched Riftan take off his wet pants. His perfectly shaped buttocks tightened as he bent his slender waist and his long, muscular legs were revealed. She thought of turning her back to be polite, but she couldn't budge, she felt like she had become a statue. Max stared blankly at him, as if her brain had been short-circuited.

For the past few weeks, she barely managed to see her husband's face once a day, she couldn't even remember the last time she had felt his body grind on top of her to fulfill her pleasures. Having thoughts filled with desire, Max's chest pounded, and her cheeks turned hot. At that moment, Riftan turned to look at her, as if feeling her lustful gaze.

Max quickly turned around and picked on the firewood, like there was suddenly something interesting in the fireplace. She felt embarrassed being caught drooling over her husband's nakedness, her ears tinting red.

Please, get it together and don't act like a pervert starved for pleasure! I mean, behave quietly and gracefully, like a woman from a noble family...

As Max scolded herself internally, she heard a tight voice over shoulder.

Note – Nymeria: Guys, first time I can relate to Maxi this much, she's **T H I R S T Y** Imaoo

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 167

"...give me one more towel."

The bass that came with his deep voice sent shivers down her spine and made all the hair in her body stand. Max picked up a towel and handed it to him, struggling to keep her gaze lowered.

Riftan took it in slow motion, soaked the cloth in a basin, and began to lightly wipe his sticky legs. Max turned her back, avoiding his figure, and touched the hem of her dress awkwardly. However, all her nerves screamed for him. Max licked her dry lips.

Her fingertips tingled with the desire to look at him and touch him with all her heart. After moments of pushing down embarrassing fantasies and holding herself back, she thought of how it would feel to touch her husband.

Didn't Riftan say that it's natural for couples to long for each other?

Max impulsively approached behind him and gently placed her hands against his smooth, hard back. Riftan stiffened at the touch and roughly pulled her away.

"...don't be like this."

His growling voice frightened Max, making her take a step back. Thinking that he rejected her, her face almost turned purple.

"S-Sorry..."

As her eyes dropped to the floor, not knowing what to do, Riftan groaned weakly and embraced her in his arms.

"Yesterday, you used up your mana to save a knight. What if you overwork yourself and drop to the ground like before?"

As if he was trying to sooth her, he stroked her hair with his wet palm. Max exhaled with a trembling sigh at the feeling of his hot skin against her thin clothes. A feeling of ecstasy flooded her. His body smelled like fish blood, musk, and horses that couldn't be washed away. It was an odor that would never be associated with being fragrant, but to her, Riftan's smell was fascinating.

"I-I am fine. I didn't consume...that much mana...I had e-enough rest...I've completely recovered now."

Riftan nodded and made a sore sound whilst rubbing his nose against her chest. He muttered impatiently, his fingers fiddling with her braided hair.

"...I have been holding back for a long time, I don't think I can do it gently."

Max tilted her head. Has he ever been gentle? She didn't remember well. At first, he would carefully and slowly pleasure her, but once he connected with her, he would pick

up pace like a lunatic. Reminiscing how insanely pleasurable those moments were, Max looked up at him teasingly.

“...you don't have to do it g-gently...it's okay.”

””” ”

At those words, Riftan's self-control was shattered. He hugged her tightly and, in a flash, ravenously devoured her lips. Max wrapped her fingers in his wet, slippery, black hair. His lips tasted like fresh water. She pressed her wet tongue against his mouth and locked it together with his, pulling his head closer. Riftan groaned weakly, wrapping his hand around her b****s, rubbing the flesh beneath the smooth silk.

At once, a tingling heat rose from her belly. She unconsciously pushed her chest further against his palm. Then, against their gasping, a sigh came out from Riftan's lips which was close to hers.

“D**n it... you are seriously so pretty. I can hardly hold back.”

Max looked up at him with confusion, like he just said that the moon was green. Riftan caressed her cheeks with his lips, pulling down the neckline of her dress and slipped his hand inside her dress. As his rough palm softly rubbed her tender flesh, a thrilling excitement washed over her. She groaned weakly, her lips trembling. As Riftan looked down at her, he muttered ecstatically.

“Every time I touch you, I go crazy. How can someone's body be like this? It's so soft, like it would melt... from your fingertips to your toes nothing's not pretty.”

“I-I'm not...”

Her thoughts ran astray as he pulled her bodice, revealing one of her b****s. He stroked her mound with his cheek and then caressed her rosy breast with his mouth, flicking her nipples with his hot, damp tongue. She clung desperately to his neck, shuddering in pure pleasure. Riftan groped her a*s and positioned her perfectly against his extremely thrilled body. Max, who was shivering to his naked touch, glanced anxiously at the door.

“Ri...Riftan...slowly...the water for the b-bath...it might come...”

“You should have thought of that before seducing me.”

“I-I did not seduce...ah...I did not. I-it wasn't a temptation...”

“You pleaded for me to hug you and stole me as if you wanted to swallow me. If that's not temptation, then what is?”

He loosened the straps of her dress and lowered it down to her waist. Max looked down with a flushed face as he sprinkled tiny kisses all over her flat stomach. Her legs melted away as if the bones in them disappeared. Riftan pulled the dress down to her knees, spread her legs, and buried his head in between. She stumbled, lustfully mewling, and collapsed on his shoulders. Her knees shook and her hamstrings tingled.

He gently rubbed the sensitive area and sucked in the tender flesh inside her thighs. Max's toes curled and she wept like a baby. Her whole body flushed red and pink, and her reasoning was completely burned away by pleasure. She shook her head like crazy and her body trembled helplessly.

He skillfully intensified her pleasure even without pushing his fingers and tongue deep into her. By the time she was about to reach the climax, a sudden knock was heard.

"Master, the bath water is prepared."

Riftan raised his head. Max grabbed him as he tried to get up and smacked him, he shouldn't stop leaving her in that state. Just a bit more and he would relieve her from this tension, but he mercilessly stopped his ministrations and pushed her onto the bed.

"Endure it for a bit, hm?"

"N-no."

"It's been a long time. I don't want to do it hastily just to get the job done."

As if he were soothing her, he gently patted her stomach and brushed his lips against her temple. Max looked up at him with damp eyes, trembling pathetically like a newborn doe. Riftan looked down at her, held his breath, and then kissed her fiercely. Then, as if barely finding the will, he covered her body with a blanket and swiftly put on a nightgown himself.

"Do it quickly."

As he opened the door, the servants came in with a steaming bathtub. Max hid beneath the sheets, her palms against her burning b****s. It felt like hours as the maids adjusted the water's temperature, put extra water by the fireplace, and placed clothes, soap, and towels on top of the cabinet. Riftan also shouted ferociously as if he was as impatient as she was.

"Done, hurry and get out."

"W-we're sorry."

The servants left the room with confused faces, holding empty basins. As soon as she heard the door close, Max rushed to Riftan's side. He grabbed and clung to her, placing

her between his knees. Max flipped his nightgown and wrapped her legs around his bare waist. A hard flesh pushed smoothly inside her and filled her tightly to the brim.

“Uh...”

Her spine tingled. She looked at him with hazy eyes, thrilled by the heat. The man’s face, overwhelmed with passion, looked terrifyingly fierce yet fragile at the same time. He embraced her tightly and trembled like a man who endured terrible suffering. But Max couldn’t wait any longer. She moved her waist and tinkered with his body. Riftan puffed and inhaled heavily, holding her pelvis tightly with both hands, deep creases forming in his forehead.

“W-wait! W-wait a second! Maxi...”

“R-Riftan”

“If you don’t wait...” As he tried to calm her down, he swept her slick back with his palms. “I want to be as gentle as possible. If... If you get hurt...”

Max stared at him irritably. She was sick of him saying that. She bit his lips and lustfully moved her body against him aggressively. Riftan’s body hardened, and soon began to lie down on the bed, thrusting and digging her from the bottom. She sobbed as she clung to his body like a snake, his fiery desire quickly overwhelming her heat. He lowered her head and sucked her chest, moving vigorously.

Max felt like she was riding a stallion on full power, and she couldn’t handle it. Unable to keep up with his speed, a convulsion arose in her thighs, and between her legs, as if they were burning on fire. She completely lost control over her body, twisting and weeping. The moment she thought that it was coming to an end, he would push her up to a higher level of pleasure. Unable to endure the intense pleasure surging through her body, she instinctively struggled to get out of his arms. Then, Riftan bit her earlobe and groaned fiercely.

“No. You drove me this far. You have to deal with it until the very end.”

“W-wait... Wait... I-I can’t.”

“You can.”

He gasped rapidly between his teeth and moved like crazy. For a moment, her eyes rolled back, and her whole body bent like a taut bow. She screamed and her body jerked. Riftan’s back also hardened, and he shivered in pleasure. They embraced each other like one body and waited for the perfect climax to subside, then he muttered with a haft-lost voice.

“Oh, heavens... I don’t even know where I am...”

Max raised her sweaty face with an anxious look. "Did it feel...bad?"

"There's no way it was bad. I'd go and catch another dragon to experience again what I just experienced."

He smiled and gently kissed her on the shoulder. Max reassuringly hugged his head and pressed her face against the nape of his neck. Riftan rose from the bed and laughed as if he were being tickled.

"We can't waste the bath water they prepared."

He then strode over and soaked in the bathtub. Max sighed at the contact of lukewarm water against her scorching skin. He scooped up some water and poured it over her neck and shoulders, then gently sucked her wet skin with his lips.

"Your skin is always soft and moist; it feels good."

"I have a lot of f-freckles...I don't want you to see..."

"It looks as if you're sprinkled with sugar, it's appetizing." As if to prove his claim, Riftan licked the faint brown freckles on her shoulder. Max's throat tightened and her face blushed. He giggled and kissed her cheeks as well. "I like it when you turn red so quickly like a peach."

Max rolled her eyes. As she listened to his words, she really wondered if she somehow managed to look good. Riftan's taste must have deviated from what was generally deemed as beautiful.

"Are you uncomfortable anywhere?"

"N-no. As I said, I'm okay."

He looked carefully, sweeping the hair away from her face. Max sighed as he continued to worry.

"R-really, it's nothing. Back then... I healed a lot of seriously injured people... t-that's why I depleted my mana and fainted. If I do not do as much as back then... It's alright."

Riftan gave her a thoughtful look as she spoke. "Ruth said you did so well that there was nothing left for him to do. The young knight told me that he was so blessed and asked to thank you."

This was the first time that Riftan acknowledged her magic abilities. Max looked up at him with fluttering eyes full of joy.

"I'm glad... that I was of h-help."

“...Yeah, it was a big help.”

While responding so gently, Riftan had a complex expression. Max’s mood subsided quickly at the ambiguous face he had. Would it be okay to tell him that she was learning magic again from Ruth? Max looked at his face and firmly closed her lips. It was useless to bring that up, and she didn’t want to break the intimate air for the time being.

In fact, he didn’t exactly tell her to stop learning magic, so it should be okay as long as she didn’t do anything reckless. As Max rationalized her actions, she set the unpleasant feeling aside. For now, she just wanted to fully enjoy that pleasant time.

Note – Nymeria: Just chef kiss. Both spouses longing for each other without any embarrassment and being comfortable about it, Maxi finally expressing her desire for her husband and Riftan acknowledging her merit with the healing magic. Such a big yes from me.

Announcement: From now on we’ll use Sakura-chan’s spanish translation as raw alongside the original korean to speed up the translation process. We’re grateful to them for letting us use their work! ?

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 168

The next morning, Max ran to the library as soon as she finished grooming herself. Ruth had come back last night and she saw him sleeping next to the brazier. She frowned as she looked down at the man lying like a corpse. There were various rooms where he could sleep comfortably just three floors below the library, but it was too tiring for him to make such an effort, and she felt sorry for the man who slept on the stone-cold floor all the time, looking sad and pathetic.

Max looked around, picked up a kindling on the wall and poked him on the back.

“Ruth, it’s morning... wake up.”

“Hng... “

Ruth grunted annoyed and turned his back to her, wearing his cape all the way to his head. Max continued to poke his back like a grumpy kid pushing a wiggling caterpillar.

“Come on, w-wake up... as soon as I opened my eyes this morning... I came here right away.”

“Ugh... I wish you came an hour later...” He squinted his eyes narrowly and looked up at her with a frown. “Did you just poke me like firewood with that?”

Max quickly hid the kindling behind her back. Ruth opened his eyes like he was fully awake and then leapt up to his feet and snapped.

“I’ve been thinking about it before, but aren’t you treating me so harshly?”

“I can’t just carelessly touch the hair or b-body of a s-sleeping man, right?”

“Can’t you at least do it in a more polite manner!” He looked at her displeasingly and sighed. “Anyway, it’s alright. I’ll prepare for class.”

Ruth began to tidy up the parchment and bookshelves on the floor. Max felt a little sorry and quietly helped him clean up. He gathered parchment papers with dense writing, rolled them up, tied them with a leather string, and threw them into a large box.

“Did you read all the books I recommended yesterday?”

“Only half of them... I couldn’t read the others.”

“Did you finish studying element theory?”

“N-not yet...”

He squinted and stroked his chin. “It’s hard to learn defensive and offensive magic without having a basic understanding of geometry and elemental theory. At the least, you should read all of the books I’ve recommended.”

””” ”

“I will read a l-little more.” Max replied with an interested face. “When I finish reading the books...will I be able to learn how to attack with magic?”

“I thought it would be better for you to learn some basic self-defense magic first.” Ruth shrugged his shoulders. “When you are in a dangerous situation like last time, you should have at least a means to protect yourself.”

Max nodded sullenly as she recalled the wyvern's attacks. Ruth leaned back and looked at the ceiling with a contemplating face, then snapped his fingers.

"Fine. Today, let's train you to master the magic you've learned so far. I have asked the apprentices to collect the necessary ingredients."

"I-ingredients?"

When Max asked with a curious face, Ruth gave a soft ominous smile. "It's a special material that will help greatly improve the lady's skill."

Max had an anxious expression written on her face. Just what in the world is he up to?

She glanced at Ruth dubiously as he packed something into a sack he had placed under the desk and walked straight out of the door. Her steps were reluctant as she followed him.

"Where are we going?"

"We're going to get the materials I told the apprentices to get."

"What kind of i-ingredient is that?"

"You'll know once you see it." Ruth hummed and went out of the castle at once.

Max stopped bombarding him with questions: as Ruth said, she would be seeing it for herself soon. She swallowed the anxiety in her throat as they passed through the long promenade and a wooden building emerged.

Two elm trees towered on both sides of the antique building like gatekeepers. In front of the building were three boys, including Garrow and Yulysion, sparring with wooden swords. Ruth waved one hand at them and greeted them loudly.

"Greetings, everyone."

"Sir Wizard!"

The apprentice knights laid down their wooden swords and turned their heads towards them.

"We were going to visit as soon as we finished the morning training. You asked yesterday..."

Yulysion, who was speaking cheerfully while wiping his sweaty face, found Max standing behind Ruth and his eyes opened wider. He hurried to her and started chatting happily.

“The lady is here too! How are you? It’s such a relief that you have regained your health! You don’t know how very worried I have been. I should have been able to protect you better...Are you feeling well now?”

“Yuly, calm down. You’re embarrassing the lady.”

The teenage boy Garrow looked at her as he called out Yuly for his behavior, then smiled politely and talked with a softer tone.

“Greetings, Lady Calypse.”

“G-greetings. I-It’s been a while... since we’ve seen each other, both of you.”

“But what is milady doing here? Does milady have anything to ask us?” Yuly asked, his eyes shining like lanterns.

Ruth stated his business on behalf of Max, who found herself in a bind. “I’m here to pick up what I asked for yesterday. It’s for the lady’s magic training.”

“Ah! So that was what milady needed! Kindly wait for a moment. I’ll bring it right away.”

Yuly quickly jumped into the outbuilding while Max looked bewilderingly at the dark entrance. After a while, he came out with a large bucket in his hands. Ruth, who received the bucket, lifted the cover and nodded with a satisfied expression.

Just what is that? Max, intrigued by it, looked over his shoulder and into the bucket. Inside the large container was full of something like a reddish piece of flesh. She was terrified and took steps back in response.

“W-what in the world is that!”

“This is a special helper that will be crucial in training you on your detoxification magic.”

Ruth grinned, reached into the bucket and lifted the thing, which had the size of his palm. It was a large reddish-brown toad with black spots on its back. The dead toad’s black limbs drooped down weakly. Max shuddered at the sight of the creature.

“W-what in the world are you going to do... with that?”

“We’re going to do the so-called ‘detoxification magic special training.’ This black spotted swamp toad is very poisonous. If you practice with this, you’ll be able to decipher drawing out most of the poison at once.”

He shook the dead toad in anticipation. Max’s stomach curled at the sight of its swaying, long, slimy limbs. She stepped back and looked at the path she had come. She wanted

to turn back and run away but Yulysion and Garrow were looking so curiously that it was difficult for her to escape from the situation.

Didn't you pretend to be bold in front of them the other day and brag with all kinds of stories? Max bit her lips with a calm face and gulped.

"W-with that frog... What kind of training are you planning to do? P-perhaps... Are you thinking of poisoning someone for an experiment?"

"No way. Who would cooperate with such a foolish method of training?" He laughed lightly and turned his head towards the apprentices. "Someone bring me a bucket of water. It doesn't matter if it's a pot, brass bowl, or basin. Just bring it with plenty of water. "

"I'll bring it."

Garrow looked at him with an excited expression on his face and stepped forward. While he was in the outbuilding getting the water, Ruth counted how many toads were there by placing them on a tree stump one by one. A total of 31 toads were counted. Max was on the verge of throwing up, but the wizard let out a burst of admiration.

"How did you manage to catch so many of these in just one day?"

"I used a dead rabbit as a bait. If you put a rabbit or a bird near the swamp, they will surely flock around it." Yulysion explained with a proud voice. "When the swamp toad had gathered, at that moment, I pulled up the net I had set beforehand and caught them all at once."

"Indeed!" Ruth struck his palm with his fist and poured out endless compliments. Max murmured deeply, saying she didn't want to know much about how to catch a swamp toad.

"Will this be enough?"

While they talked about how to collect toads, salamanders, and various poisonous worms, Garrow returned with a bucket of splashing water. Ruth took the bucket and nodded his head with satisfaction.

"It's perfect."

Max watched his actions with curiosity. He lowered the bucket by the base of the tree stump and picked up a toad. Then, he took a small knife out of his bag and stabbed it deep into the toad's back. Black essence flowed from the opening of the toad's body and fell onto the clear water.

"Now, try purifying this water."

“Here... do you mean I have to u-use detoxification magic?”

“That’s right. It’s a well-known method used by magicians to master detoxification magic.”

Max looked down through the bucket. A goeey liquid from the toad’s body spread like ink in the water. As she hesitantly placed her hands over it and increased her magic power, she felt a faint sense of resistance. Max tilted her head. The feeling was obviously different from applying magic to the human body, and it was vague to know where to draw the magic formula. As she struggled for a long time not grasping the sensation, Ruth, who was watching silently, gave her some advice.

“Try injecting mana in a circular motion, from the edge to the center. Once you’ve got the trick, it’ll be easier than casting a spell on a human body.”

Max followed as he instructed and let her mana flow from the edge of the surface. The blue energy from the palm of her hand slowly began to purify, focusing on the black energy in the water and drawing it into the center, slowly cleansing.

After a long time, the water that had been contaminated with a cloudy tint returned to its clear color. Ruth nodded as he tasted the water with his fingertips.

“Well done. One thing to note is that you’ve wasted too much mana, but you’ll be able to work on that with repeated practice.”

“Are we repeating t-this exercise... over and over again?”

“You have to do it over and over again.” Ruth said firmly and threw the toad’s corpse to the base of the tree stump. “These toads were caught eagerly by these apprentices, so why not make use of all of them meaningfully?”

Max looked at the bucket filled with toads with a pale complexion. Do I have to keep going until they’re all used? Her shoulders drooped unexcitedly while Yulysion, who wasn’t able to read the room, declared proudly.

“I’ll catch them again so milady can use as many as she wants. To serve the lady is a great pleasure and an honor to a knight.”

“Next time, please catch a long-tailed lizard.”

“Please leave it to me! I’ll find you as many as you want, there are plenty of them in the west cave.”

Yulysion exclaimed confidently, tapping his chest with his fist and she smiled stiffly. Before Ruth left for the expedition, it really seemed like he was making sure to improve her skill. Without hesitation, he picked up one more toad. A long tongue hung from the

dead toad's mouth. Max barely swallowed the vomit coming up her throat as he chopped off the tongue with a dagger and held it out in front of her.

“Would you like to try it yourself this time?”

Max's shoulder stiffened, she wanted to shake her head in disagreement, but the apprentices watched her with anticipation so she couldn't show a sign of disgust. She eventually accepted the wet, slippery toad with tightly closed eyes. The cold, soft, texture made goosebumps travel all over her body. It was the worst texture that she had ever touched in her life. Max flipped the body of the toad, holding back the urge to throw it away. Ruth placed a dagger in her hand and pointed with his fingertip on a spot just under the head of the toad.

“Now, with the knife... you can stab this part deeply and cut it long.”

Max hesitated for a while, and then pushed the dagger into the toad's cold body. Its skin was tougher than she had thought, so she had to exert more strength with her harm for it to budge. As her hands rattled and barely slit the toad's back, a black, sticky liquid oozed.

She was in a hurry to throw the toad away and finally reach the end of this experience, but Ruth mercilessly gave the next order.

“Now squeeze the toad. There should be enough poison flowing out.”

The next time she found that wizard sleeping, she swore deeply to her heart that she would poke a hole in his back with a kindling.

Note – Nymeria: Okay I'm vomiting here. Ruth... YUCK!

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Under The Oak Tree

Max was only able to return to her room after Ruth left for the construction site. She was exhausted. She washed her hands thoroughly at the well, but the slimy texture of toads seemed to remain.

The moment she returned to her room, she stripped off her toad-spattered dress and bathed with hot water, scrubbing with soap and sponge from head to toe. However, it still didn't help, her entire body still felt disgusting.

How many more times do we need to do this disgusting training? The wizard did not appear to have any mercy. The following time, he would probably have her practice with poisonous lizards, tarantulas, or even snakes. Max rubbed the goose bumps on her forearms and vowed to do her best to advance on her training as soon as possible. To do that, she had to first master her understanding of basic magic theories.

After rinsing her body clean, Max put on new, comfortable and fluffy clothing, then sat down in front of her desk. She searched through the drawers and took out books, parchment, and ink to start studying. Rudis, who was by the fireplace heating a kettle, approached her with a steaming cup of tea.

“The wizard provided this tea. Please have some.”

She gave the maid a grateful look and took a sip of the hot liquid. The bitter tea had a refreshing scent that seemed to help repel her nasty experience earlier. She drank the tea carefully while reading her heavy textbooks page by page. Although she was terribly exhausted after using a considerable amount of mana and longed badly to rest, Max didn't budge. She didn't want to waste a single precious second. She had planned to convince Ruth to teach her defensive and offensive magic by tomorrow and somehow managed to read all her assignments by the end of the day.

“Milady, it's Rodrigo, may I have a moment of your time?”

Max was three-quarters done with the textbook she was reading when she heard the butler's voice and a soft knock on the door. She raised her head from the page she was reading and gave him permission.

“You may come in.”

Rodrigo opened the door carefully, stepped inside, and bowed with practiced grace. **“I apologize for interrupting your rest.”**

“You d-don't have to apologize...May I know what's the matter?”

“There are guests coming to visit the Lord. They will be staying in the castle for about two days. I thought I should inform milady in advance.”

“Guests...? From wh-where have they t-traveled?” Max asked, her face reflecting her confusion. Rodrigo’s face slightly lit up with embarrassment.

“The Lord did not disclose to me where the guests are coming from. He simply instructed to prepare rooms for three knights, baths and hot meals...”

Max’s eyebrows creased with anxiety. *Could it be an order for reinforcements? A messenger from the royal family? Barely three days have passed since we received the news about the monster attacks...*

“According to the Lord’s orders... he asked for the rooms to be prepared on the second floor. Also, to instruct the kitchen in taking care of the guests’ meals.”

“I see.”

””” ”

As the butler bowed in exit, Max sat by the window and looked out intently over the gardens. Soon after, five men on horseback entered the estate. She could barely recognize their faces in the distance but the two men leading the entourage appeared to be escorts from the Remdragon Knights and the following three were the guests Rodrigo had mentioned.

Max squinted, trying to decipher the emblem printed on the orange triangular flag they were carrying. The emblem on the flag was far from the golden bird representing the royal family, yet looked familiar, so she guessed that it belonged to another noble family of Whedon.

She gave up trying to figure out which family that coat of arms belonged to and stood up. As lady of the castle, she had to welcome them, especially if one of them was a messenger from the royal family. Max called for Rudis to quickly put her hair up in a neat manner and left the room in a hurry. As she flew down the stairs, she saw Riftan enter the castle with the guests. Her eyes trailed his cold, solemn face, and then switched to observe the guests that followed behind him.

Two young men and a burly middle-aged man were looking cautiously around the hall. Seeing their wary expressions, Max gauged that their visit was not for a simple camaraderie. She approached the men with a rather tensed expression.

“Riftan... I heard that there are guests...coming...”

Riftan’s eyebrows creased and he visibly frowned as he saw her figure. He crossed the hall at once and went to her, twirling her still-damp hair.

“You should be resting, don’t let this interrupt you. These men are from Ruigen. They will be leaving in two days; you don’t have to worry about them.”

Max was bewildered at his blatant, inhospitable words despite being in front of the guests. She glanced at their direction but didn't see any sign of them being offended. The middle-aged man approached her with a calm expression and kissed the back of her palm to show his courtesy.

“Greetings, milady. My name is Aaron Levaier. We came under the order of Count Robern.”

“P-pleasure to meet you, Sir Levaier... I sincerely hope your stay here is comfortable.”

Count Robern was one of the king's vassals, he ruled a vast amount of land not far from Anatol. Max eyed them with curiosity as she wondered why the Count sent his knights. At that moment, Riftan's sharp voice resounded.

“Hey, did you travel this far just to flirt with someone else's wife?”

“I was just giving my regards.”

“Didn't you say we have urgent matters to discuss? Don't waste time and go up.”

Riftan turned and walked up the stairs. The knights sighed, bowing politely to Max, and followed him into his office. Max felt dejected for being pushed aside and trudged back to her room.

Riftan did not return to their room until late at night. Max pinched her thighs to keep herself from falling asleep and ran to him the moment he entered the room. Riftan's face appeared weary as he opened the door, his eyes widening as he saw his wife still awake.

“What are you doing, why are you still awake and not sleeping?”

“I was waiting for you to come...b-back. I wanted to know what was going on...”

He frowned as he pulled out a chair to sit on and began to take off his armor. Max hung a kettle over the fireplace and set up a basin for him to wash in. Then, she walked over behind him and placed her hands on his waist to help him undress. Riftan, who was in the middle of unraveling his vambraces, awkwardly pushed her hands away.

“I can do it myself, don't worry about it.”

“... To serve her husband...It is the w-wife's duty...” Max's face heated, wondering if her words were too blatant. There had been countless times he took care of her, yet she had only reciprocated it a couple of times. She spoke again, hurriedly adding to her statement, as if to make excuses. **“You're too busy... you leave early at dawn and come back late after midnight... O-on the other hand, I don't have much to do...”**

Wives have to make sure their h-husbands rest comfortably, I want to take care of Riftan too.”

Max didn't wait for his response and stubbornly took the heavy pieces of armor with her hands. She staggered at the heavy weight and barely managed to maintain her posture as she waddled over to the wall where she hung the chainmail, and propped his breastplate against the wall, placing his greaves neatly on top of it. Although she had traveled only 10 steps, her forehead was drenched in sweat. She wondered how in the world Riftan walked around so quietly wearing heavy pieces of metal in his body.

“Leave it alone.” Riftan quickly dissuaded her when she tried to pick up the scabbard containing his sword. **“You won't be able to lift that.”**

Max looked up and down at the sword that was practically stuck to his waist. Compared to those huge claymores that other knights carry on their back, Riftan's sword appeared to be average in size. His sword stretched to approximately 4 kvets (about 120 cm) and neither the handle nor the scabbard held any ornate leather decoration. It didn't look heavy at all and Max confidently refuted it.

“W-well... I may not be able to swing it... but I can at least lift it...”

Riftan pulled the sweat-soaked tunic over his head. He eyed her slender wrists skeptically and arched an eyebrow.

“You can't lift it.” He said again, his tone filled with certainty.

Max ignored his uncompromising comments and placed her hand around the sword's hilt with a stern expression on her face. However, just as Riftan predicted, with precision, she could barely lift the sword from the ground, let alone carry it somewhere. Surprised by the unexpected heaviness, she desperately gripped the hilt with all her might. Her wrists trembled as if they were going to break and almost dropped the sword to the ground. Her face reddened as she exerted effort, the sword lifting barely a finger off the ground.

“S-see, I can lift it.”

“You call that a lift?” Riftan clicked his tongue and then took the blade from her hands. **“Hand it over to me, you might get injured.”**

He handled the source with light movements and leaned it against his side of the bed like it was light as a feather. Max was stunned as he looked at him with amazement. She wondered how he could easily do that.

“Are... all swords usually that heavy?”

“My sword is much heavier compared to average b***d swords. The blade was made wider and heavier using a special casting method to enhance its power. At first, I also had a hard time wielding it.”**

He explained with a subtle smile as he washed his face in the basin with the water Max prepared and wiped his body with a towel. Max took a change of clothes from the trunk and placed it next to him, carefully choosing her words as she spoke.

“May I ask why... the Count sent his knights...?”

Riftan nodded calmly and rubbed his nape with a towel. **“He sent them to form an alliance. He’s becoming anxious of the increasing monster attacks in his lands.”**

“An a-alliance?”

“He seeks for the help of the Remdragon Knights in subduing the monsters running rampant in his territory. In return, he would pay us generously and actively support the road construction in Anatol.”

Max breathed a sigh of relief, grateful that it wasn’t an order for reinforcements from the royals.

“So... are you planning to accept... the a-alliance with Count Robern?”

“I said that I will think about it. It’s not a bad proposition, but I don’t think it will be worth it to disperse Anatol’s military power...”

“Is it because soon... you will leave for an expedition?”

Riftan, who was washing his hands with soap, paused and turned his head to look at Max.

She added hastily. **“I... I heard that the monsters from the n-north are attacking... and the Remdragon knights... might have to be r-recruited...”**

“Who told you about those useless stories?”, Riftan asked sharply.

Max flinched and hesitantly muttered. **“I... happened to overhear the knights... when I was treating them...”**.

She didn’t dare to add that Ruth had explained in detail what his plans were, it was obvious that it would spark an argument. Riftan sighed, clicked his tongue, and lightly threw his towel on a chair.

“We still have to gauge how the situation progresses before I can decide whether to go or not.”

“If... once the order for reinforcements is issued...” Max swallowed dryly. Even though she already knew from Ruth that they were planning to send another knight to lead, she still wanted to confirm it herself. **“Ri-Riftan... will you be leading the knights...in case that happens?”**

Riftan stared at her intently, as if trying to read the intentions behind her question. Then, he shook his head slowly.

“No. I’m thinking of sending and handing its command to either Uslin or Hebaron.”

Note – Nymeria: lol Maxi was sooo cute this chapter!

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 170

“I... I see...”

Max didn’t realize the relief obviously displayed on her face. Riftan, gazed down at her figure and cupped her cheek with one hand.

“Do you hate it when I leave?”

Max looked up at him with tense eyes. She wanted to tell him the whole truth, but she was afraid that he would be upset by her attachment, so she chose her words carefully.

“If Riftan... stays, everyone will feel safe. The ci-citizens will also feel at ease...”

“...I suppose.”

A flash of disappointment passed over his onyx eyes, but before Max could address it, the subtle expression disappeared behind his usual impassiveness. Riftan tossed the towel hanging around his neck into the sink and said in a slightly sulky tone.

“I also have no intentions of leaving Anatol empty either. I have been gone for a long time, I don't plan on neglecting my duties as a Lord of this land again, I am going to fulfill my responsibilities.”

“Even... even if King Ruben orders you to go?”

“If that man barks and scolds me, it will only be nothing but a little annoying.” He frowned, but soon shrugged lightly. “I have lots of excuses I can make to get out of it. Unless King Ruben is a fool, he knows well of the consequences he will face shall he force me to show my loyalty more than necessary. “

Max felt a cold sweat break out at Riftan's disrespect for the monarch, but honestly, she was more relieved than anything. His determination to remain in Anatol was more solid than she had expected, and her shoulders visibly relaxed.

“That's a relief.”

“Do you feel safe when I'm by your side?”

Max nodded slowly. Looking at her with a thoughtful gaze, Riftan leaned down and gently pressed his lips against hers and her eyelids fluttered. His soft lips lingered and swept her lips sweetly as his rough fingers gently caressed her earlobes

“...Good, you should not worry about anything. I will protect you, no matter what happens.”

At those spoken words, Max felt her heart beating wildly against her chest. Max looked up at him, searching his eyes for confirmation.

“A-always?”

””” ”

“Always”. He held her face and repeated his vow. “I won't let any danger come near you.”

She leaned into his chest and rubbed her cheek against his palm, hiding the moisture that brimmed up her eyes. As a child, she had dreamed of a knight who would one day save and protect her. However, as she grew up, she realized how useless and unattractive she was to others and didn't hope for long. Yet here she was now with Riftan, her fantasies awakening, just like how she always dreamed it would be. In her fantasies, she was a noble lady whom knights longed to protect, to the extent of sacrificing their lives as they worshipped her blindly.

Max wrapped her arms around Riftan's neck as she felt a lump heating up her throat. His breathing hitched, and he suddenly grabbed her, showering her with passionate

kisses. His damp tongue gently sucked on her lips and his calloused palms slowly slid down her spine, tracing it. She ran her fingers through his jet-black hair, which was smooth and soft like the feathers of a raven, then her hands traveled down to his forearm and his slightly stubbled chin. Riftan's face visibly tensed at the contact and his dark eyes grew darker with sexual desires.

"I should be used to this by now..." He frowned, muttering in a muffled voice. Max lifted her eyes, confused as she tried to understand what he meant, but Riftan just sighed over her lips. "Every time I touch you, my whole body feels like it's on fire. And the feeling just gets more intense every time..."

With a shaky smile, Max buried her face against his neck, wiping away the remaining drops of her tears, and gently nipping his skin. Riftan stiffened and nearly crushed her as he embraced her with his rock-hard body. She felt a pleasurable tremor run through her whole body. His warmth, stark, and strength evoked a burning arousal that melted the bones within her, and she had no means of controlling her innate reaction to his touch. She wrapped her limbs around him pulling him close and allowing the heat of their bodies to join

Riftan ran his fingers over the smooth skin of her thighs and calves as he walked to the bed. With Max's breasts crushed against his, he could feel her heart pounding.

"Sometimes I want you so much that it's excruciatingly painful." He murmured in a strained voice as he gently laid her on the bed.

Max reached out and ran her fingers over his face, clouded by the shadows. Grabbing her outstretched wrist, he planted butterfly kisses along the palm of her hand.

"Riftan...", she moaned and closed her eyes as she felt his hands slip into her clothes and dig into her.

The guests were forced to leave Calypse Castle after receiving nothing but a disappointing response regarding their proposal for alliance. The knights who had to cross the rugged mountain paths and survive the forests infested with monsters appeared beyond dismayed, but Riftan didn't even bat an eyelid in their direction. He was determined to have the upper hand in the terms, shall he form an alliance with Count Robern. According to Ruth, no one had ripped off Riftan before. He always came out with a deal that was in his favor.

Max learned that despite her husband's cold and blunt demeanor, he was a brilliant negotiator. He could be a man of few words, but he was good at negotiating, and he knew how to use people to his advantage.

In addition to this, Max also began to learn other fascinating aspects about her husband. First, he was an excellent architectural supervisor, which was evident in the road construction. He was a composed and impartial judge and very adept in building

tools with his hands. Riftan didn't only train knights and supervise the road construction, he was also involved in the creation of new weapons with the blacksmiths, and he dealt with all the issues that came up in the premise. She was amazed at how one person could oversee everything.

But thanks to that, I can continue learning magic...

Max sighed as she looked down at the defensive magic formula she drew on the ground. Her husband had hectic days from dawn until late at night, thus she was able to focus and practice her magic lessons without worrying about being caught.

Is it really okay for me to do this...?

With another deep, wistful sigh, Ruth frowned as he examined the formula she drew.

"You're staring at it too much, it's not like it will fix itself. Stop wasting other people's time, if you're done, let's go ahead and just try it."

At Ruth's incessant persistence, Max shook herself out of her thoughts. This was her first practical application of defensive magic; she couldn't afford to be distracted.

"Then... I'll begin..."

After checking again that she drew the formula correctly, she carefully took her mana out and amplified it as she allowed the formula to transform. The air around her stirred and a blue, transparent barrier formed around her.

Ruth's eyes focused at her barrier with a searching gaze, then gestured for Yulysion, who was standing idly, to take a step forward.

"Alright, now attack the barrier."

The boy flinched as if he had just been hit with a whip.

"D-do I really have to do it?"

"Of course. How else are we going to test the shield's strength?"

Yulysion scratched the back of his head, hesitant on participating in that training session.

"Can't it be someone else instead...?"

"We cannot ask any of the official knights to practice with us. Besides, my attacks won't be useful." Ruth rolled up the sleeves of his robe to reveal his slim forearms as if to prove his point.

Yulysion simply rolled his eyes at his attitude, thinking how the wizard had no masculine pride at all. Although it was true, Ruth was physically weak compared to him and he couldn't care less.

"Hey, stop cowering like that and attack."

"But... how can I raise my sword against the lady? Especially with my strength, equivalent to that of a knight...?"

"That's not even a real sword, it's wooden. It's absolutely safe for the lady. If she was ever in a dangerous situation, this training may save her life."

Yulysion couldn't argue with Ruth's firm point, so he gulped and stood in front of Max.

"Alright. Then, milady... please forgive me for this."

Max nodded nervously, amplifying her mana to fortify the shield. The young apprentice raised his wooden sword above his head and swung it down slightly. Max's eyes widened as she heard a whistling sound from the barrier followed by a loud clattering noise.

Her shield shattered in vain like thin ice. Yulysion didn't have the time to pull the sword back and the wooden sword relentlessly landed on Max's forehead. Her eyes flashed white with pain, she grabbed her head and fell backwards, crumpling on the ground.

"M-milady...!!!" Yulysion screamed shrilly.

The pain was splitting. Max groaned with excruciating pain and kicked her legs as tears streamed down her face in an instant.

"Nghhh...!"

"W-wizard! Please do something! Quickly! The Lady...! The Lady is hurt!"

Yulysion, who was in shock from hitting the Lord's wife, held Ruth's shoulders and shook him from side to side violently. The wizard only looked blankly at the absurdity and sighed, squatting next to Max's huddled body.

"Just a second, move your hands so I can heal you. I will cast recovery magic."

Max exerted great effort to barely manage prying her hands away, revealing her tear-stained face. Ruth cast her a pathetic look, not bothering to hide his feelings and clicked his tongue before casting the healing magic on her head.

Max felt her face redden with embarrassment as she got up from the ground. She wanted to dig a hole and hide in it.

“Are you a-alright? Does it still hurt...?” Yulysion wandered around her uneasily, examining her.

“I’m... I’m fine.” Max replied, pretending it was no big deal and brushed the dirt off her skirt.

“I am so, very, sincerely, truly, sorry for hurting you, milady...”

“N-no, it’s because my magic... was very weak...”

Ruth muttered something under his breath and shook his head disapprovingly.

“You’re right. I had never seen such a weak shield in my entire life. I’d rather make a barrier out of parchment than your shield.”

“It-It’s because this is my first time! Next... next time it will be better.”

She defended herself, but Yulysion simply turned blue at her statement.

“Is... the Lady thinking of trying again?”

“Y-Yes. I’ll practice... until I can do it properly.”

Max answered firmly, nodding determinedly and examined again the formula she drew. She racked her brain trying to figure out where she went wrong. She was able to apply it very well, but why did it break so pathetically?

“The Lady’s shield is ridiculously weak because the mana flow is too slow. She needs to increase the flow three times her current speed to achieve the strength of an average shield.”

“T-three times ?!”

“Either that or double the mana you’re using.”

Max felt like crying. “Both... Both suggestions are difficult...”

“Give it a try. The shield should, at the very least, be as durable as a glass window to even be called a shield. Yours couldn’t even block a Dragonfly’s wings.” Ruth criticized her harshly and waved a hand at Yulysion, who was still blue.

“I don’t think we’ll need Mr. Lovar’s help anymore. You can go now. This should be more than enough.”

Ruth bent down, picked up a thin branch from the ground, and swung it in the air like he was swatting a fly.

“We can consider today’s training a success if you can block this.”

Max nodded, feeling disheartened as she stared at the small branch of the width of a pinkie finger.

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