

Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 21 – Light Beyond the Haze (1)

“D**n it! What?!”

“Please, open up! See that the sun is up in the sky! How long are you going to fool around in bed?”

From the door came a violent outburst. Riftan threw his fierce gaze towards the man standing outside, as if his vision could cut through the material.

“If you interrupt me a second time, I’ll take your guts out! And if you dare protest, I’ll kill you.”

“We need to leave! Did you forget you still have to go back to the capital after you visit your estate?!”

“It’s not like we’re going to die if we delay for a day, so don’t f**k with me!”

“Leader!”

“Go, go! You’ve been acting up for a little b*****d!”

He shook his head and furiously cried. Max froze; this was the first conversation with nasty swearing she had ever heard in her life. Then, Riftan raised himself up with a troubled face and shouted out at the door.

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“Put the wagon on hold! I’ll get ready and go.”

His opponent outside the door banged away incessantly, refusing to budge. Riftan sighed loudly, looking down at the floor.

“I shouldn’t have brought those children with me..”

“ . . . ”

“Wait for minute. I’ll go out and get some clothes for you.”

With a pale, weary face, she pulled the sheet to her neck and nodded. The man who was standing, and was in the middle of picking up his clothes, looked at her tear-streaked face and frowned.

“What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

”””” ”
.

“ . . . ”

“Spit it out. If you haven’t noticed it yet, I’m in a hurry.”

She hasn’t missed it at all. Her husband, who she was reunited just yesterday, had an extremely fiery temper. She murmured timidly,

“Well, the, the people outside, the people... you know, you know...”

“You know what?”

“Wh-what, what, what we did here...”

“ . . . ”

Her face glowed as if it was set on fire. The man’s mouth suddenly twitched at the corner as he gazed down her blushing face. The next moment, beyond all incredulity, he tossed the garments and went for the sheets.

“Ri-riftan!”

“Oh, you’re driving me crazy.”

He grinned breathlessly as he hugged her body and lifted her unto his lap. Max fluttered her legs in embarrassment. He was laughing so innocently, far from the overbearing man from before and she couldn’t believe it.

“You naïve noblewoman. Of course, my men know what we did. There’s no such thing as a couple, who were reunited after three years of separation, would sleep in one room merely holding hands.”

“Ha, but...”

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of. We’re married, and it’s natural for you and me to do this and that.”

Natural? She knew it was her duty as his wife, but what he shared with her didn’t seem natural. Suddenly Max was surprised at her own thoughts. *Shared?* Was the deed they did last night something of a give and take scenario? She couldn’t figure out why she felt this way. After all, it was all an act one had to endure to have a child...

“You’re red again. Ha, and it’s not just them.”

“ . . . ”

“But don’t be afraid. I don’t have the confidence to finish it before they break in.”

He kissed her playfully on the tip of her nose and lowered her down from his lap. She sat around the sheets like a cocoon in a corner of the bed, rubbing the spot on her nose he had left his touch. Riftan bent down and picked up the clothes he had discarded and began to wear them one by one. She rapidly turned her eyes away from the sight of him unabashedly dressing in front of her with his naked body. He quickly donned his armor and said.

“I’ll stand right outside and wait.”

She nodded her head gently. At first, her legs trembled to the point she couldn’t budge no matter how much she tried. But as Riftan went out of the room with a sword on his waist, she finally crawled towards her bedside to open the window.

Under the pale autumn sky, a dense village unfolded before her. A wide dirt road with clear marks of the wheels of the wagon, five or six wooden cabins, a sparse meadow and a broad orchard... Max, who looked at the simple scenery one by one, suddenly felt a stinging glance and lowered her head. In front of the inn, a carriage has been parked where three of the knights who accompanied Riftan stood tall and looked up at her. She shut the window in a hurry. Although she covered herself with sheets, she was embarrassed to be seen in her unscrupulous state as if she was about to sleep.

‘Perhaps they’ve delayed their departure because of me?’

She bit her lips nervously. It was a long time that passed before she heard another sound; someone knocked on the door. She asked carefully.

“Who, who are you?”

“I brought water to wash.”

“C-come on in.”

She crouched in the corner of the bed with her sheets wrapped around her body. The two maids who came in with a large basin, a water kettle and a white towel exchanged eyes with awkward faces.

“We have been instructed by your husband to serve you, but...”

“Oh, no... my, I can, I can do this...”

“He said you’d need help...”

She turned steaming red like her hair.

“Well, really, it’s all right. I-my, my husband, say I’ll do it.”

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Chapter 22 – Light Beyond the Haze (2)

The women left the room without further admonition, leaving what they had brought on the table. Max remained seated, waiting until they had gone far enough before she got up and closed the door. She then began to soak up the clean towel with the warm water on and wiped her body, that had been overworked all night, with it.

It wasn’t quite a refreshing feeling to feel the wet towel on her skin drenched with sweat and fluid. She wiped away the traces of last night. There were many red marks on the shoulders, forearms, thighs, legs and chest.

Will it be like this? Memories of last night rose in her mind, and her cheeks warmed ember. Even though such marks couldn’t disappear, she soaked up the towel and still rubbed the red spot vigorously.

When she spent the night with him, she only felt embarrassment, but it was not as horrible as the first night. No, she even felt bliss when he hugged and kissed her tenderly, all the while smiling at her softly. No one had ever done such a thing to her.

But her husband, who she always thought disapproved of her—not only did he take himself seriously as his wife, but he even seemed to like her in some ways. She remembered how he said he didn’t want to leave even on the first night.

“Three years ago, I wanted to be with you, I didn’t want to leave. You don’t know how hard it was to get out of that bed.”

She soaked her face in the basin to cool off the soaring heat. It was all like a dream.

Max meticulously took care of her tangled hair like a vine with the soap and squeezed the water out of the towel. Then, she applied perfume evenly and brushed her locks carefully, but then she heard knocking again.

“Madam, your husband has sent you a change of clothes.”

This time, Max opened the door and only received his clothes. It was a rosy dress with golden embroidery. When she unfolded it, the waistband, the breast strap and the thin cloth that appeared to be underwear rolled down. Max’s face glowed red when she saw it.

The underwear was not much different from the nanny had saved. Her face was so hot that she thought it would burn any moment now. In such a simple town, she could only wonder how she could have gotten it. This isn’t his cup of tea... or is it?

She clasped her face in unbearable shame and made a strange sound, yet again she heard a thumping on the door. This time it was a Riftan.

“Maxi, did you get your clothes? Are you all dressed?”

“Oh, not yet...”

“Hurry up, we have to leave quickly.”

“Now, wait a second...”

His impetuous voice made her dress hurriedly in the underwear that seemed to make little difference. She quickly put on some white underpants and the sumptuous dress over her head. It was not easy because she had never worn such clothes without help before. She pulled her sky-high skirt over and stretched it long to her ankles and tightened her belt. But the strings on her back was unrelenting and she groaned for a long time almost having a cramp in her shoulder. It was when Riftan rapped at the door again.

””” ”

“Not there yet?”

“Well, o-over here...”

“What?”

“Who, anyone can help... a person, one person, call for them again...”

“...”

“Oh, the back, behind my clothes...”

“Open the door.”

“Yes?”

“Open the door.”

Caught by his urging, Max opened the door with one hand to keep the clothes from slipping down. Riftan, who pushed his way through, shut the door behind him and carefully scanned her. Max was clueless and apologized hurriedly.

“I’m sorry for being late, I’m sorry—ha, but the clothes are…”

“I’m not angry, so don’t apologize. I didn’t know much about women’s clothes, so I didn’t even think how it would be uncomfortable to wear and take off.”

He said, looking down her skirt and long sleeves. She squeezed her fingers in an awkward silence. Did the fancy dress truly suit her? Maybe it looked ridiculous. While she was hesitating, he held her by the shoulder and turned her around.

“I’ll do it for you.”

“Uh, well, there…”

Then he grabbed the string and began to tie them one by one with cautious hands. The rustling noise made Max nervous. He fumbled with the unfamiliar for a while before he allowed her to turn back.

“It’s done.”

“All right, thank you…”

“I got it from a merchant staying nearby, so I’m afraid it won’t be to your fancy. But for now, you have to put up with this. I’ll give you better clothes when I arrive at the estate.”

She blinked her eyes. She already thinks this outfit is very luxurious, but it wasn’t to him?

It was depressing. Max did not live a life of luxury as he thought. All the descendants of the Duke of Croix were all given to Rosetta. All of Max’s clothes were made by the maids and roughly made from the rest of their fabric. She had never worn anything with such fancy embroidery. Still, Riftan seemed worried that she might be dissatisfied.

Maybe he’s a person who thought she’s used to more beautiful apparel. She swallowed, feeling her throat run dry. She felt fortunate that she didn’t bring any of her luggage and avoid humiliation by revealing her shabby wardrobe. She then spoke with a nonchalant air, pretending to straighten her skirt.

“This… this dress is not bad for me, either.”

She looked into his eyes, acting as if she were haughty, but the man merely hung a robe over her shoulders without any signs of upset. She cast her eyes on the delicate palette of her cloak.

It seemed so strange that a knight like him would be so tender to her.

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Chapter 23 – Unexpected Warmth (1)

“Come on, let’s go out.”

Finally, Riftan, who made her wear leather shoes on her feet, said. She nodded with a blush. They went out of the room came upon a wooden staircase. Taking Riftan’s hand into her own, they went down. The armor-clad knights sat in their seats inside the cluttered tavern, where tables and chairs were closely packed.

“Leader, I thought we were still staying. So we are leaving now?”

One of them grumbled with his arms folded over his chest. But Riftan only took hold of her hand and went outside, completely ignoring them. Then a knight standing by the door chased after him and complained.

“Leader, are you going to continue doing that? It’s not like we’re used to it, but don’t just take it for granted.”

“Quiet! I told you not to say anything.”

Max looked up at the knight that had been talking with a puzzled look. The young man with large build and curly hair shot her with disapproving eyes in return. She hid herself behind the Riftan, daunted by the piercing gaze that was not mixed with any goodwill. The blond man standing behind the knight snorted loudly.

“It’s not funny. Only because she’s the daughter of the Duke of Croix.”

“I told you to shut your mouth.”

Riftan growled vehemently. The men clammed up at his ferocious spirit at once. He turned around again and pushed her into the carriage.

“Don’t mind what they say.”

Riftan, who was then on the wagon, said, and closed the door roughly.

“They don’t look to kindly to your father. But you’re madam Calypse, not Croix anymore. You are my wife. I’ll warn them not to be rude again.”

She couldn’t find a word to answer, only gazing at the back of her hand on her lap. ‘Only because she’s the daughter of the Duke of Croix,’ the words reminded her of how this relationship with him took place.

“Are you offended by my men?”

Seeing her sit quietly, he asked in a nervous tone. She looked up in surprise. Has anyone ever cared about her feelings at all? She smiled unconsciously as she looked at his troubled face. What a strange man, she thought.

“... you know what?”

””” ”

“Yes, w-what?”

“You smiled at me... this is the first time.”

Riftan, who was staring down at her face with an indecipherable expression, slowly reached out and stroked her cheek. Max was caught up in his intense gaze and stopped breathing. The man, whose lips were half open, as if to say something, soon pulled his hand away. Then, he yelled at the men outside, as if nothing had ever occurred a moment ago.

“What are you waiting for? Who was the one who begged us to get going!”

She heard murmurs from outside and soon the carriage rolled. She glanced at his face in an awkward silence. Riftan had his head against the carriage window, closing his eyes as if he was tired. Feeling a little relaxed now, she also leaned her head against the wall.

The carriage shook and tossed, feeling like the rhythm of a cradle. Perhaps, with the tension of several days finally reaching its peak, she gradually fell asleep.

Leaving the village where they stayed on the first day, they traveled through the vast greenery all day long. Running a carriage on a poorly managed dirt road only made them reach a small village near the forest when it was completely dark. After traveling in a cramped space for the first time, Max was beyond exhausted. Riftan, who had gone outside first to identify himself, returned to the carriage to pick up his sleeping bag and lamp from the luggage compartment.

“We’re staying here today. It’s chilly, so hold on to your clothes tight.”

She followed his words, pressing the hood lower over her head. Carefully holding the strap of her coat, she stepped down from the carriage and they strode to where the knights gathered, Riftan’s arm wrapped loosely around her shoulder. One of the knights, who had a long talk with the guard, looked back at him and asked him with an embarrassed look.

“Leader, what are your orders? They don’t have any rooms to accommodate us...”

Riftan picked up the lamp and looked around quickly. Four or five dark cottages were lined up beside the winding dirt road, with their lights out. The knight quickly added an explanation.

“There are five cabins and they are full of serfs who came down for the harvest season. There’s an empty grain warehouse. We can borrow that for a day...”

The knight glanced at Max’s face towards the end of his speech. Riftan’s forehead creased and he looked back to the guard.

“Is there a place where my wife can stay separately?”

“It’s just a shabby cabin built to house the serfs during the harvest season. If you tell me, I can have them leave for you right now... but I’ll tell you now, it won’t be a seemly place for a lady.”

“But it’s better than the warehouse. If you could just clear a cabin for her, I’d like to give you a generous—”

“I’m, I’m fine, It’s all right.”

Max caught hold of his arm in a fit of fear. Not only was it burdensome for the serfs, who had suffered from hard labor all day, to be driven out because of her, but also didn’t want to spend the night alone in these spooky, unfamiliar places. Looking around with frightened eyes, Max grabbed Riftan’s sleeve.

“I, I don’t want to be alone...”

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 24 – Unexpected Warmth (2)

When a strange silence came, she was overcome with astonishment of what she said, and let go of his tunic instantly. The fever went up to the scruff of her neck. Is he surprised with her brazen words? After all, he was entirely mute. She couldn't look straight up at Riftan's face, fearing his expression now and only grabbed the hem of her skirt. The people around them, awkwardly glancing at each other, continued their conversation calmly.

"We'll leave you to it and take a rest first. I'm starving."

"I also want to let the horse rest first. Hey, where can we find water here?"

"There's a stream next to the mill. This way, please."

As the men were busily dispersed, Riftan, who was standing silently, pulled her hand.

"We'll go, too."

"Yes, yes!"

She shifted her gait in a flurry to chase the leading Riftan strolling with his long legs. The ground was uneven, and she nearly tripped several times, but Riftan helped her up by steadying her with his strong arm. Walking along the narrow ditch for some time, a large wooden building appeared in the dim darkness.

The men who entered the room first hung lamps everywhere to brighten the dark interior. Max walked inside along the Riftan and looked around. It didn't seem at all strange if evil spirits came out immediately. Everywhere the light came into contact, a spider's web flashed like a hazy ghost's hair, and the white, dusty floor beneath them squeaked with every step.

She shifted her steps carefully to see if there were rats or bugs crawling on the floor. The men settled down with casual faces, laid their sleeping bags and threw off their

cumbersome defenses one by one. Riftan also spread a thick layer of straw on a corner and spread a sleeping bag over it.

“Come here.”

Although Max felt as if she was about to faint, she couldn't just lie down in place full of fleas. It was quite a large space, but when numerous people were brought in, it suddenly felt cramped.

“It'll be an uncomfortable sleeping experience for a while. Just hang in there until we get to Anatol.”

He took off his breastplate and gloves, pushing it to the side as he released the tension on his neck with a pop. She sat with her knees in her arms and nodded quietly. But Max had never stayed in the same room with such many men, so she could hardly relax. The knights, however, seemed to care less about her existence, and were busy preparing meals with the brazier.

“Leader! We don't have enough left to feed the horses. What are your orders?”

One of the knights who followed the guard shouted, shoving his head into the warehouse. Riftan loosened his leather belt and responded casually.

“Ask the guard if we can buy grain.”

””” ”

“We negotiated it. But all the food in the storage is the property of the Duke of Croix, so they can't handle it as they please.”

She shivered unconsciously at the sudden mention of her father's name. Riftan brushed his head roughly and clicked his tongue.

“He's just asking for a higher price.”

“What shall I do?”

“Give him as much as he wants.”

“I don't think you have to go that far, perhaps we can scare—”

The knight, who gave a casual remark, stopped in his words as soon as he caught sight of Max.

“Well, there's nothing to do with the Duke so far. All right. I'll negotiate for you, so don't scold me about the light pocket later.”

Then he went out of the warehouse again. Max felt the enmity of the knights against her father was stronger than she had expected and shrank. She surmised it was because of their hard feelings that they pretended not to notice her existence.

Would it have been different if she looked as attractive as Rosetta?

She reminisced of her stepsister, who received all kinds of gifts and letters from her admirers who regularly visited the castle that she wasn't able to see Riftan, who had been rummaging through the fire for a long time, returned with a large bowl. She looked up into the bowl, which had been cooked in a bonfire. It was filled with baked potatoes.

"It's hot, so eat carefully."

Even though he said so, he picked up a steaming one with his calloused hands and took it in one big bite. Max took out a potato after him. She carefully grabbed the charcoal-like hot food with her sleeve, and peeled off the tanned skin, revealing the tender flesh inside.

After she had puffed out the steam from the potatoes, and carefully taken off the peel, hunger, which she had not recognized, suddenly surged in. She gulped down the baked potatoes, not caring if the roof of her mouth burned. The potatoes that were slightly under-cooked could not have been more delicious. She quickly ate it all up from her hands.

Then Riftan, who had been watching from beside her, pulled out another potato that had been peeled in advance. She panicked and waved her hands in embarrassment.

"Ri, Riftan, take it. It's, it's fine..."

"Don't mince your words, take it."

He threw it towards her without any second hesitation and took another potato out of the bowl. Then he peeled and bit it with his mouth wide open. She looked down at her potato, which had been peeled clean, blew away the steam that rose and ate it.

When her stomach was somewhat full, she was overcome with drowsiness. She put her head on her sleeping bag, forgetting it might have lice on it. The red light flowed from the brazier, which was placed in the center of the warehouse, and shone softly all over the place. Even the knights, who had finished with their meal, were prepared for slumber on their respective sleeping bags.

She said she would, but... she still felt embarrassed to sleep among strangers, so she pulled the blanket to the end of her chin. Then Riftan, who was sitting at her bedside grooming his sword, lay beside her and hugged her tightly with one arm. Max shoved his arm away quickly.

“Ri, Riftan... the-there’s people here...”

“Nobody cares, so stay calm. It’s cold.”

T/N: Double chapter update for our dear readers <3>

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 25 – Glimpse of Magic

Max felt the heat from Riftan’s body, his chin making contact with her unruly hair as he locked an arm around her neck. She had the strangest inkling: thinking he did it because he thought she was cold, and peeked at him from beneath her eyelashes, at a loss what to do.

True to his words, no one paid attention to their closeness; perhaps they pretended not to. Still, Max wasn’t thick-faced enough to be so close to a man... even if it were her husband.

Her tongue mustered the proper words to say, wary of his possible ire. “I-I’m okay. I, I mean... ju-just be a little further away...”

“You’re troubling her. Please be considerate.”

Max raised her head at the sudden voice that interrupted them. Not only was it an ordinary disruption, but a subordinate berating Riftan, their supposed captain. She found that it came from a slender young man, appearing to be in his early twenties, standing three or four steps away with a small lamp in his hand.

“Don’t be nosy, Ruth. Leave.” Riftan sighed, almost impatiently.

Unfazed by his cold reception, Ruth managed to reply coolly. “How long are you going to keep growling like a barbarian. I’m not going to bother you, so you can cease doing that.”

At such brazen words, Max's eyes opened wide in surprise. The man who relentlessly engaged in speaking against Riftan caught sight of her gaze, and this time his sights turned towards her. Feeling as if he had seen her doing something discourteous, Max stood up in a hurry.

As if held by a string, Riftan followed after her, sitting up reluctantly. "...what's your business?" he finally said, his tone a tad milder than before.

"I brought it," he raised the glowing light, "because I thought you'd be cold." Although the 'you' in question was left unspoken, it was obvious it was Max he was referring.

His hands then dived for the pockets in his sides, rummaging for quite some time before taking it out again. Tiny pebbles that emitted soft lights lit the man's palm. Upon seeing it, Max felt tranquility wrap around her.

The lights grew nearer with the man's steps. "The Manastone of Fire. It's a spell to keep you warm. Here, take it and keep it close to you," he said.

Max instantly felt flustered, "M-me... Sir, this is for me?"

She couldn't keep off the surprise from showing at the unexpected kindness, making the man's eyebrows raise in turn.

"Who else? The people gathered here are strong men who can even stay naked under the resilient frost," he spat out with a careless attitude, not caring one bit if it were a woman on the receiving end of his words.

He then continued explaining, "But you're different. It looks like you don't have much stamina either... In any case, it'll be my responsibility if you catch a cold here. Think of it as a preventive measure."

Upon hearing she could be a burden, Max accepted it into her hands without another word. Warm air gently enveloped her whole body as soon as the stone was in her hands, just as he had explained. For a moment when she was merely staring at the stone in wonder, she soon realized that she had not yet thanked him for his generosity.

"" "

Her head raised in panic. "Th-thank you... S-sir, sir Ruth."

The man's taciturn countenance softened at her mumbled gratitude. "I am not a knight but a wizard. You may call me Ruth," he said.

The man then turned and went back to his seat on the other side, as if finished with whatever purpose he had. Riftan, who had been watching their exchange in silence, laid

back down and pulled her with him. Max could feel the tremor in his touch and the nervousness that came with it.

“You’re tired.” He started, “Go to sleep. We’ll leave tomorrow as soon as the first light of dawn breaks.”

Riftan’s hand then moved to turn off the light from the oil lamp placed by his side. As if the other knights had been waiting for him, the lights in the room extinguished in dominoes, submerging the place in gloomy darkness. Max, who was wriggling uncomfortably in the man’s arms, could not endure the terrible fatigue that came and closed her eyes.

The steady drumming from the chest her cheek was in contact with sounds much of a lullaby. And instantly, her worries of sleeping in such quarters faded, replaced only by a deep slumber.

*

As morning descended, what was once the creepy semblance of the village from last night was gone, replaced by a lively glow. Before one’s eyes, a beautiful panoramic view of the Yudical forest lay beyond the row of huts like a backdrop. Unending golden fields of wheat stretched before her sight, moving like ocean waves on a calm morning.

Max left the warehouse to wash her face with the only stream available. In the early morning, the water was chilly enough almost to freeze her hands. She wet her long, tangled hair like a vine with it, the cool breeze kissing her damp face, and making her spine erupt in goosebumps at the slight wind.

Finding little efforts for grooming could be done, Max returned to the warehouse, carefully wiping the water off her face with the sleeves of her dress. She saw the knights had already gathered in front of the carriage upon her return, ready for departure.

Riftan was the first to catch sight of her. “Hey, don’t go around alone.”

“I-I’m sorry.” At his stern voice, she dropped her head and rushed forward. Riftan then lifted her to the carriage, his frown still in place, as if he still had a lecture for her.

And as expected, he then added, “Don’t ever act on your own. The Yudical woods house a lot of monsters.”

Max trembled, recalling the horrendous beings she had seen on the first day. However, it was her helplessness against their attacks that made her shake in fear.

“Ye-yes, I’ll be careful.”

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Chapter 26 – Decadent Nights

Riftan's face visibly loosened. "All right then. I'm an extra load if I sit inside, so I'll be riding my horse from now on. Call me if you feel uncomfortable." Riftan then closed the carriage door before him.

After some time, of which Max tried to seat herself comfortably, the familiar jolt of the carriage signaled the wheels were moving against the dirt road.

Max glanced at every passing scenery at the window, finding the expansive wheat field drift away from her vision to be replaced by a view of dense, menacing trees. The sunlight crept through the leaves, bathing the place in gold, akin to the soft threads of a woven veil.

Meanwhile, the knights majestically sat on their horses, surrounding the carriage in the middle.

Max squinted hard, expecting another monster to make a sudden appearance from the woods. Contrary to her concerns, the journey this time was smooth and quiet. It was soon her constant apprehension of making sure she wouldn't stumble inside the rocking carriage that drained her physical strength. It didn't help when the road still didn't get better after some time.

Minutes passed by slowly, and it was unknown how much time had elapsed when finally, the carriage that had been moving for a long time stopped. Riftan appeared before her, opening the door and uttering the words she wanted to hear badly.

"We'll take a break here."

Max skipped out of the carriage all too eagerly. In no time, her sudden actions made blood rush to her leg that had gone stiff from sitting. As an unpleasant tingling sensation settled on her legs, she swallowed a groan and bent over to rub some friction on her legs.

Riftan then took off his thick overcoat and placed it over a rock, sitting her on it as if it were a cushion. Without waiting for Max's reaction, of which he knew would be of refusal, he knelt on one knee and began to massage her cramped muscles.

With an embarrassed face, Max hurriedly looked around. Some of the knights who were giving their horses water to drink stood away, their sights on anything but them... but Max could see the unmistakable astonishment on their faces.

Max pushed Riftan's shoulders away, her cheeks turning scarlet red. "Ri-riftan, oh, g-goodness! You don't have to. I-I'm all right..."

"Is it a habit?" he asked out of the blue.

“...What?”

Riftan wrapped her calf around the hem of his shirt, rubbing it lightly against the cloth. With a low voice, he mumbled, “It’s all right... Don’t be afraid to talk.”

Max couldn’t figure out by what habit Riftan meant: her stuttering or the times she always insisted on doing things on her own in fear of being a nuisance. Whatever of the two, warmth blossomed inside her chest.

Unable to find the proper words, her sights trailed down at his strong hands carefully pressing her legs. All the while, she busied herself studying the tendons that ran along the length of his buff arm, yet the question of “Why are you being so nice to me?” couldn’t escape her mind.

Something tickled in her stomach, an uncomfortable sensation as if she was wearing clothing with the wrong fitting.

””” ”

“Oh, now. I’m truly... f-fine.”

Max tried to force her leg out from his hold, Riftan barely moved before she rose from her seat in visible fluster. Her hands pretended to straighten her skirt for no reason.

“...I’ll bring you something to eat, so rest for now.”

The man rose silently from his seat, only returning later bringing bread and dried meat. Max soaked the dry, sturdy bread in water and ate it curiously. After finishing her meal, she carefully glanced towards Riftan, sneaking a wary look towards the bushes behind him some distance away.

The monotonous journey commenced, and Max found herself listlessly counting the passing trees in the rocking carriage from boredom. It came to the point the foliage became thicker that less light could pass. Then when it was too dark to proceed any further, the knights halted and scoured for a place to rest.

Only when they had sufficiently checked the surroundings free from stray animals and wild beasts did Max leave the carriage.

Grabbing a lamp with her hands, she approached the busy Riftan pitching up a small tent near her carriage. Meanwhile, all the other knights laid their beddings on the other side, forming a circle around the bonfire.

“The forest gets submerged in a fog at dawn. So If you don’t want to freeze, you’ll have to put up with this poor roof.”

Upon noticing her presence, Riftan, who was fastening the fabric tightly at the ground, looked back and explained to Max.

Max bent down, examining the insides of the waist-high triangular tent and found that it could fit only one person. She unconsciously said towards Riftan,

“Two—aren’t you, uh, isn’t it too narrow for two people to sleep...?”

Max, with a tilt of her head, casually posed the ‘harmless’ question. The man’s hand, who had been dutifully hammering a stake on the other side of the ground, suddenly stopped. There was a hint of embarrassment on his face as he looked back at her. A faint blush in his cheeks.

“...I’m going to sleep here alone. You are going to rest in the carriage.”

Max’s face suddenly warmed, and in no time, she was as red as a beet. How awkward her thoughts have strayed—even going as far as to think they would lay down on the same bed together.

Max added in a hurry, stumbling on her own words, “O-oh! I, I... sleeping with me, oh no... alone—ah, that’s what I thought you were doing it for...”

“...Look at me. I’ve barely put up with it yesterday.” With a deep sigh, Riftan bowed his head with a troubled face. Then he muttered a curse, and grabbed her hand, dragging her somewhere deeper into the dark forest. Max staggered after him.

Even with just a little distance from camp, the dark that enveloped them was still frightening. The whistle of the passing wind rustled the leaves overhead and the cries of the birds filled the air around them. It all came as a chilling melody in her ears and Max clasped her hands over them in fear, as a futile effort to block out the sounds.

After walking some time, the man then pushed her body behind a large, wooden post, crashing his lips down on hers in haste and pent-up passion.

Max gasped at the unexpected act. Taking advantage of it, Riftan sucked her soft tongue into his mouth, tasting it with an intense longing. As she tried to shake her head away from the strange sensation, he held her face closer and kissed her deeper.

Riftan’s soft hair tickled Max’s forehead, and his large, calloused palms gently swept around her cheeks towards the back of her neck. He twisted her head lower, giving him better access to her mouth as he devoured her. His tongue swept all over the flesh of her mouth—her tongue, her cheeks, the roof of her mouth.

As sticky saliva trickled down their lips, dampening their jaws, Riftan licked it down and mumbled, “I had to suffer this all night.”

He grabbed her hand and placed it on a sacred place on his body. Max immediately felt his bulging manhood under her palms and shuddered. She tried to pry her hands off in a hurry as if scalded, but the arm holding her wouldn't budge with her meager strength displayed.

"Do you know how difficult it is to lie down and sleep in this state?"

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter27 – MysteriousHeat

Riftan poured out kisses as if he were trying to devour Max, pinned between a wooden post and his hard body. He grasped her backside with both hands and pulled her closer, rubbing his swollen groin on her lower stomach. Her body instantly responded, warming to his touch. Fearing her surprising reaction, Max twisted away quickly from his hold.

"No... not here..." she said.

"...You're driving me crazy."

Riftan let out a low moan and leaned his head against the tree in exasperation. Feeling his shoulders soar up and down, Max became nervous. It was apprehension that stemmed from his incoming anger because of her rejection. But contrary to her thoughts, he only backed away, with painstaking effort, from her.

Riftan patted her cheek and said, "...You'll sleep alone in the wagon tonight."

He said as if he were speaking to a naive child. She barely mustered a small nod, feeling embarrassment creep up. The man took her hand in his again and walked her back to the camp. Seeing their return, a giant knight sitting on a rock, who was igniting a fire, grinned.

"Leader, you're faster than I thought. Isn't your sword so old that it's rusted?"

Riftan footsteps halted, and he turned to the man. Although the knight was snickering, there was no hint of any ill will on his face. When he saw this, he leaned his sword against the tree and muttered, contempt present in his voice, “B*****d.”

“How noble is the master of the Rikaido family?” another knight joined in.

“Nobler than yours, that’s a given.”

“What? How dare you speak to me like that? This guy goes behind everyone’s back! Agh! You b*****d!”

The man tried to kick the blonde knight’s legs. He jumped out from his seat, grabbing his sword to rush at him. The latter also drew his sword and casually pointed it at the man’s throat. At the fearsome display, Max was shocked and hid behind Riftan’s back. Riftan wrapped an arm around her shoulder and gave the men a fierce glare.

“You seem to have a lot of energy... So both of you can take turns keeping watch tonight.”

“Leader!” Both objected at once.

Riftan continued walking towards the wagon, pretending not to hear their protests. Max looked over his shoulders and saw the two men threatening to kill each other behind his back. Riftan merely turned her face towards his and said,

“Don’t worry about them. They always fight like this.”

Max nodded her head. She grasped that not all of the knights have a good relationship with each other.

””” ”

Riftan put her in the wagon and started putting up the tent they had left again. As he worked, she sat at the entrance of the wagon with a lit lamp beside her, offering light in the gloomy surrounding. After laying a sleeping bag inside the tent, he sat down on a tree root protruding next to him to started sharpening his sword, as he always did.

A few moments later, two knights who had been scouting around returned with three black birds, both about the size of a goose. They grabbed the wings of the birds and twisted them, tearing them apart and peeling them off their feathers all at once. Max only froze in surprise.

The torn wings laid on the ground, a sickening sight for her, as the knights cut the birds’ leg with a sharp dagger and tossed their feathers in a pile. Max hurriedly ran inside the wagon, trying to hold the bile that rose from her throat. A while later, Riftan brought her some of the roasted meat, but she didn’t feel like eating it.

She refused even one bite and just ate bread with a little cheese. Riftan glanced at her, biting into the lean meat. "It will take a few more days to get out of here. Until then, you must fill your body so you'll have enough strength."

"I... I'm eating well."

Riftan raised his eyebrows as if he wanted to say something. But he just finished eating his meal with a sigh. Meanwhile, Max consciously tried to avoid looking at the feathers piled up near the fire, like darkness on the brown ground.

Late into the night, the air got much colder and denser. As the other knights laid down one by one in their tents, Max laid down on the thick sleeping bag placed on the carriage seat. Occasionally, she would hear the cries of beasts in the night and the rustling of leaves.

Feeling an eerie chill on her back, she opened the door and looked down at the tent where Riftan was sleeping. When she saw his long legs sticking out, her mind was relieved for some reason. She laid her head down again to sleep, but the cries of the birds who seemed to mourn their fallen friend kept her awake all night.

Hehehe Riftan barely managed to restrain himself there...

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 28 – Questionable Behavior

Max, who tossed and turned all night, and only managed to fall asleep at dawn, was awoken suddenly by a loud sound. In the dawning light, the knights were putting on their armor piece by piece. She washed her face and brushed her messy hair back with her hands, as she usually did in the lack of proper commodities. The knights announced their departure while ravenously eating their bread and chugging water. She also ate the simple meal as she sat in her seat, listening to them.

After a while, the wagon began to roll vigorously, and Max's entire body once again rattled uncomfortably in the carriage. The knights, who had been bracing themselves for

incoming monsters, grumbled that they hadn't even seen a common forest goblin. But she didn't want to see any goblins.

They traveled half the day without stopping, and then they stopped for a quick lunch by a small fountain before setting off again. Riftan held her hand tight all day, so she would not lose her balance in the swaying wagon.

Max couldn't even say, "Can't we just take a short break?" So as when night fell, she felt immensely relieved. She hungrily devoured the food Riftan handed her, then fell asleep as soon as she laid her head on the makeshift pillow.

Since Max got a good night's rest, the next day was much better. They moved from early dawn until the sun sunk beyond the Judean forest. She breathed a sigh of relief when she noticed the vibration of the wagon had reduced significantly.

Unlike the uneven terrain and the very rugged Yudical forest, the plains of Anatorium were well-paved. She opened her window and looked at the green grass and white wildflowers covering the gentle hills. Perhaps because she saw nothing but thick, gloomy trees for the last few days, the view of the golden plains was breathtaking.

"Once we pass that mountain, we'll be in Anatol."

Riftan said, then walked to the front of the wagon to speak with the knights who were leading. Max stuck her head out of the window and looked ahead. At the end of the plains, mountain peaks were lined up like fences.

"Hang on just a little longer. We'll be there the day after tomorrow-no! As early as tomorrow evening!"

Max almost started to moan with relief. If she could endure one more day, she could finally sleep in a comfortable bed. She imagined herself filling her stomach with soft bread, thick vegetable soup, jam-filled pie, and liquor after soaking in a hot bath, then laying down on a clean, cozy bed. She needed to hold on a little longer.

The wagon only stopped when the sun began to set. As soon as she got out of the carriage, she tried to search for Riftan. She felt as if she was a lost child among the knights who pretended not to notice her.

Max crept through the crowd of men busily preparing for camp and saw Riftan with the horses by the river. As she walked towards him, he looked back at her with a puzzled look.

"What is it? What's going on?"

Max couldn't say that she ran out here just because she couldn't see him, so she bent down and pretended to wash her hands. Riftan squatted down and followed her,

washing his hands, and the nape of his neck with the cold water. His long, thick nape flashed like copper, reddish in the glow of the sun. She sneaked a peek at how he cleaned his messed up hair with his wet hands, the beauty of this man buried in her heart.

“Hey, your skirt is all wet.”

He suddenly stared at her feet. Max stared at him, astonished. She couldn't change for days, so her skirt was covered in dust and was now dripping wet. Embarrassed, she started frantically wiping the mud off her skirt. Riftan knelt in front of her.

“Let me handle it.”

””” ”

“N-no! It's all right!”

Surprised, she tried to back away, her eyes wide as saucers. Riftan merely grabbed her skirt, soaking the mussy part in the river to rinse it. After washing it as gently as he could, he squeezed the water out.

Max leaned over him, not knowing what to do. Knights valued honor more than life itself. Riftan was a knight who did not bow his head to any king without great allegiance. But here he was, kneeling in front of her.

Did he have no objection to be on his knees before her because he was born on the low class of society? Max wondered if the other knights would tease him for leaning in front of a humble woman like herself.

“You must be cold. Go to the fire and warm up.” Riftan said, washing his dirty hands.

Max dazedly climbed the hill, yet with caution, so that the hem he had cleaned wouldn't get dirty again. A cold night breeze flew west through the fields, making her tie her hood tightly that her hair wouldn't be messed. From a distance, she watched him water the horses and his clothes. Before she knew it, the sun had fallen behind the mountain, and they were surrounded by an ocean of darkness.

Yes the fluff is here!! All hail the fluff!

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 29 – Disobedience to the King (1)

“... I think the rainy season is about to begin.” Riftan, who was about to tether the horses, said, as he looked up at the sky.

The sky was rippling with an ominous pattern of fish scales as if it had become the sea. Riftan nodded his head again knowing that he was right, and the knight who had lightly tossed a log into the fire agreed with him.

“I’m depressed just thinking about it. It’s awful to wander through these mountains in the rain. My armor feels so heavy and useless, and the ground becomes drenched.”

The other knights all took off their armor, grunting as they warmed their hands by the fire.

“We should have arrived at Anatol by now.”

“What difference would that make? Did you forget? As soon as we arrive at Anatol, we have to leave for another kingdom in just a few days,” another knight threw in.

The frowning man snuck a glimpse at Max, who was staring into the fire. “It took much longer because of this horrific wind... Wouldn’t it be funny to anger King Ruben even more by delaying further?”

“Well, the rainy season is about to begin. What can we even do about it?” Riftan tied his horse’s reins to the post and plopped down next to Max. The blonde knight Ricardo was sitting quietly next to his horse with an unmistakably depressed look on his face.

“Does the warrior who defeated the red dragon now refuse to respond to the king’s call because of some rain? You can’t keep your Majesty waiting any longer! We’ve already wasted enough time with this useless work!”

The man’s voice cut across him like a whip on his back. Max’s face turned pale and Riftan’s face turned red with anger.

“Uslyn Ricardo... Be careful what you say to me.” Riftan then added, “Who said I would disobey the king? I’ve just been delayed a bit.”

The man pursed his lips as if he was about to start shouting again, then he suddenly turned his back and heavy silence fell all around. The only sound that could be heard

was the crackle of firewood. One of the knights, known for his impertinent and sometimes thoughtless actions, suddenly spoke up.

"I agree with our leader. I don't want to get wet in the rain like a mangy dog. We've been through this for three years, and I'm ready to go back to our old lives."

"You pathetic b*****d! With this wind-!"

"Lord Ricardo and Sir Nirta both have a point. We should instill the power of the Remdragon Knights on the capital as soon as we can," argued Ruth, who until then had been sitting quietly in the corner. Then, a knight called Hebaron triumphantly stood up.

"Look at that. Even the wizard says that I'm right."

"It's just raining a bit. There may be time before the rainy season truly begins."

"" "

Ricardo looked upset but Ruth looked pleased. He had felt a palpable release in the tense atmosphere and secretly breathed a sigh of relief. With this argument, they still hadn't decided about when they would leave for Anatol and the territory of Croix.

Max recalled a map of the continent of Roviden that she saw in the castle library one day. Riftan's estate in Anatol, was located on a small peninsula, which stretched like a snake's head toward the southwestern tip of the South Sea of Syria. She was told that it was surrounded by rugged mountains and wide-open fields to the south.

Whedon's capital, Drakium, was located to the far northwest, far above Anatol. The fastest route from Aranthal, where the battle against the dragon commenced, to the royal capital was to go straight up the Wiserium River. She had only a flimsy knowledge of geography, but it seemed clear that they were taking the long way around.

'It's all my fault... I brought the king's wrath down on us!' Max inwardly confessed.

Max vaguely understood why Uslyn Ricardo was so nervous. Riftan had refused the king's proposal to marry his daughter. The more she thought about this problem, the more her stomach twisted up in knots.

'No, it's not because of me... there has to be another reason. What other knight in this world would postpone a king's call in order to take his wife home?' But she soon got rid of her dark thoughts. It made no sense to blame everything on herself.

When the central powers are weak, a man with a large tract of land with the military power necessary to maintain and protect it was far more powerful than the king. Whedon was after all more stable than the other six nations.

Moreover, Ruben III is a king who was a strong leader and crucially had the allegiance of hundreds of respected knights. Such a person could not be put on the back burner so easily.

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 30 – Disobedience to the King (2)

“Now, keep up your spirits, and let’s eat.”

The knight assigned to food duty began to evenly cut the chunks of cheese and distribute the simple meal of cheese, cold meat and bread. They ate the stale brown bread washed down with the wine handed out by Riftan. Soon they all drifted off to sleep.

Maybe it was from sheer exhaustion, but Max was too restless to sleep. Tomorrow they would move to a new home. What kind of place would Anatol be? She thought about her fate, and her thoughts wandered in unexpected directions. She was so frightened a few days ago, but now she felt a glimmer of hope somewhere in the corner of her heart.

Maybe you can start a new life in this new place. But she forced herself to suppress any expectations. She was terrified of being disappointed again.

Not only had she survived the crisis of divorce, but she had also escaped her father’s abuse. Her husband, who seemed like a terrible person at first, now didn’t seem to be so cold. No, he is a kind person and she saw small but amazing changes happening every day. She knew that the goddess of luck didn’t smile often.

Max pulled the blanket up to her neck and vowed to keep her mind open no matter what happened.

They reached the foothills the next day by midday. As they entered the valley, Max noticed a small watchtower hidden behind trees. Four guards were sent out hurriedly to greet them. With the guards' guidance, they were able to enter the and sit down to eat.

After eating their first hot meal in weeks of hot stew and baked potatoes, they got on their horses to continue the journey. Max got out of the wagon and rode with Riftan, since they had to travel as fast as possible before sunset. She had never been on a horse before because she had always been too nervous. As she held her saddle tightly with a stooped posture, Riftan held her firmly with one arm and leaned her against his chest.

"We're taking a shortcut, so it'll be a rough ride. Lean against me so you can be a little more comfortable." The other knights stayed in a close group with Riftan as they rode over the unfamiliar, unforgiving road.

"Leader! There are five werewolves ahead!"

As the leading knight shouted, the knights all pulled out their swords in unison. Out of fear, Max grabbed the horse's mane. Riftan shouted and wanted to head towards the battlefield but knew he was encumbered with Max and decided to stay put.

"Don't let them come this way!"

"Don't worry, we'll stand our ground!"

A knight named Hebaron ran forward wildly with a piercing shout. At the same time, the ferocious beasts' cries rang out, Max shivered and held her breath, burying her face in Riftan's chest.

"It'll all be over soon, just close your eyes."

She closed her eyes and covered her ears like a child as instructed. However, she couldn't stop the sound of the sword pounding violently or the cry of the angry beast from piercing her eardrum.

"" "

"Leader! Above us!"

After hearing someone else's cry, she unconsciously lifted her head and gave a shrill scream. A black monster on the branches ran towards them like lightning. But before the creature could reach them, it was sliced in two in thin air. She looked down at the black monster lying on the floor, unable to understand what had happened.

Riftan spit blood from his mouth and it splashed on the hem of his robe.

“Gabel, don’t you know how to count? There weren’t five, but six werewolves.”

The knight retorted, “Black werewolves have stealth powers and can hide easily.”

Riftan clicked his tongue, spurring the horse to move forward and saw monsters with human bodies and wolf heads tangled around the tree roots like snakes. The knights wiped the blood off their swords and got on their horses once again.

Max was amazed by how tough they were. A few years ago, she read about Werewolves in a book. They were clearly described as having bones as hard as iron, and skin as strong and hard as barbed armor, making it impossible to penetrate. How had Riftan killed such a beast so easily?.

“There’s sure to be more of these beasts around here, so let’s hurry.” Ruth looked around at the other knights, and they all nodded in unison.

The horses ran fast as possible and Max grit her teeth to avoid biting her tongue. She overlooked the mountain road covered with rocks and trees as they passed the peaks

Riftan is definitely stalling, Maxi...

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