

Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 61 – Her Unofficial Help (1)

“Th-then this small go-gold coin... How much is o-one de-denar worth in li-lirams?” Max asked about the part she was most confused about.

“It doesn’t come to an exact number. Five lirams are worth three denars.” Ruth answered as he pushed the gold coins from the South and the large silver coin from Roem forward. She quickly wrote his words down on the paper. Five lirams equal three denars. Watching her, Ruth sighed softly.

“I assume you are confused when using lirams and denars together. Soldems are a large unit hence infrequently used; the same goes with derhams because they are too small. Silver lirams from Roem and golden denar from Rakasim serve as the regular medium of exchange between nobles and merchants. For that reason, it’s a real pain as they’re not converted as easily as we would like. It’s not like we can crush the coins into smaller pieces... In the end, we convert all of them into derhams and it becomes easier after that.”

Max nodded gloomily.

“I-I didn’t k-know t-there were... s-so ma-many different ki-kinds of mo-money...”

“This is nothing. There are coins from Balto in the North and Suikan in the East. The purity of the silver and its weight are the same as soldem and lirams, so they’re not used separately like the denar and derhams... but it will be useful to keep in mind the different shapes at least.”

Ruth rummaged through the pouch and frowned.

“I don’t have any gold coins from Balto and Suikan. I’ll try to get them later.”

Max was only terrified at the names of more coins and regions. It was only going to confuse her more if he brought them to her.

“D-do I ne-need to kn-know them if the si-sizes are si-similar to so-soldems and li-lirams? I’ll ju-just need to ch-check the si-size...”

“Recently, there is a growing number of feudal lords producing their coins to show off their wealth and power. But most of them are mixed with lead and copper, so you must filter them out. On the other hand, the coins from Balto and Suikan have high purity, so it’ll be extremely useful to know how to distinguish them. Soon, there will be merchants from the North and East coming into Anatol.”

“O-okay...”

“The coins with high credit are soldem, liram, denar, derham and copper segals used by the commoners and dants used by a few prominent people... That should be enough for you to know.”

“Ho-how m-much is da-dants worth?” Max asked, having never heard of it before.

“Dants are the most valuable coins in this world. It was manufactured during the wealthiest periods of the Roem Dynasty. It’s made of Orihalcon and is the size of a palm, and only 600 exist in the whole continent. I believe Lord Calypse has 160 of them.” Ruth replied with a flat voice.

Max was surprised that he owned 160 of those precious coins.

He then switched to a bragging tone as if they were his. “They were found in the den of the devils in the Osiria Canyon, six years ago. At that time, Lord Calypse frantically hunted after evil spirits and collected their treasures as if he was possessed by something. Dants were one of the precious things he collected. Initially, he found 200 of them but used 40 dants for building a rampart, getting maintenance work done on the castle and installing a road in the village.”

””” ”

“Y-you can d-do all that wi-with o-only fo-forty co-coins?”

“He used twice as much as the estimated cost. He paid the workers several times more to speed up the construction process.”

Ruth explicitly put on a displeased look on his face. This wizard seemed to be strict about money.

“Y-you must have kn-know Ri-Riftan fo-for a lo-long time.”

“I’ve known Lord Calypse since he was a soldier. That was about twelve years ago.”

Her curiosity soared when she heard this. *He would’ve been fifteen then. Was he a soldier since?* She’d heard that he was eighteen when he became a knight. Normally, it took three years of training and a year of serving as a chamberlain to officially receive a sword to become a knight.

“Now, now. Let’s stop the small talk and continue with the ledger. We should finish this before the merchant arrives, shouldn’t we?”

Max swallowed her questions and returned to the ledger at his reminder.

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Upon hearing that Max wanted to cancel most of the orders, Aderon wore a worried look and tried to persuade her with his glib tongue. She almost fell for it but remembering Ruth's glare and how he treated her like an extravagant woman, Max was able to keep her opinion. Realizing there was nothing he could do, Aderon sighed and handed over a new written statement.

Max tried to estimate how much the price Aderon wrote was worth in her head. Imagining the gold and silver coins Ruth showed her in a pile... she was able to grasp that the price she was paying was never a small amount of money. She devoutly signed the paper and left the room.

When she told him that things have gone well, Ruth relaxed his brows a little.

"Can you show me the statement?"

She handed it over.

"Well, this man isn't completely unscrupulous," the wizard finally said after reading the paper top to bottom.

"H-he ca-can t-try to fo-force you in-into bu-buying but he i-isn't a ba-bad person..."

"No one is bad in front of their sacrificial victim." He spat a cold comment which contrasted his rather gentle mien and pulled out a chair in front of him to sit down.

Max also sat across him and rolled her eyes. She had known this before, but this man was extremely ill-tempered and liked to make blistering remarks, unlike his soft and kind looking face. His crooked way of seeing things was somewhat similar to Riftan, apart from his talkative and nose side.

"I'll take a look at it. Try writing it in the ledger."

"O-okay..."

She didn't pose a question on how he'd naturally become her supervisor and merely toed the line.

"Here, the calculation is wrong again."

"Oh, I-I'm so-sorry."

He looked at her numbers and tapped the corner of the parchment paper again, massaging the middle of his brows. She hurriedly corrected her mistake. He then pointed at the section below.

"Here, the unit is wrong."

"I-I'm s-"

"" "

"And it will help to have your statements written in detail. That way, you can avoid any confusion when you tally the accounts in the future."

"O-okay..."

"Here, you have misspelt. This will be a document left for generations, so please restrain from scribbling the words."

The tutor her father had assigned hadn't been this strict. Neither was he patient. The result was what it was now. She wrote the letters clearly, fearing that he was going to point them out again. After she was done, Ruth checked the ledger as if going through her homework.

"This is good enough," he said arrogantly as he closed the ledger. His face looked easy and lax.

"With this, every problem has been solved. Now, I would appreciate it if you stop coming to the library and interrupting my sleep."

Max rolled her eyes.

Was he thinking of continuing to sleep here? Riftan clearly said this man was using the tower in the backyard... No, it was not something for her to interfere. After thinking for a while, she slowly opened her lips.

"W-we de-decided to la-landscape the ga-garden next sp-spring..."

"..."

Ruth horrendously contorted his face. Max pulled out the shamelessness she didn't know she had and pleaded. The hours she spent trying to work out things she had never done before alone flashed before her eyes. She didn't want to go back pulling her hair, unable to make out heads or tails. Since she had already been embarrassed, she thought there won't be any more harm asking for more help.

"A-and the mai-maintenance in the annex..."

"....."

Ruth grabbed his head with regret.

?

After that day, Ruth officially became Max's helper in organizing the ledger. When she quietly approached him sleeping on the floor of the library, he woke up mumbling how he regretted helping her in the first place, but thoroughly went through the book, nevertheless. Furthermore, he advised her on purchases for the castle. It was more of a nag than advice, but they were valuable words. Since then, Max started to ask for advice on even little things.

"I think the servants will be thrown off if you order them to pull out the tree next to the gazebo," Ruth said after quietly listening to her plan on redecorating the garden. She tilted her head to the side.

"I-It's dead a-and do-doesn't sprout le-leaves an-anymore."

"People of Anatol believe that spirits lie in trees. For that reason, people here do not uproot trees simply because they're dead and regard logging as sacred work. The servants will be shocked at your order to remove the tree just because it looks bad.

"Bu-but..." Max was befuddled. She had never known of such a custom back in Croix.

"I-if we te-tell them i-it will b-be used for fi-fire, then wo-would i-it be ac-ac-acceptable? I-I mean, i-it's hi-hideous..."

"They might accept it." He frowned and stroked his chin.

"But I'm worried that the tree by the gazebo is an oak."

"Wha-what about oa-oaks?"

"People here deeply believe in the legend about the first knight who rode a dragon and flew into the sky. The hill where Uigru hopped onto the dragon is the hill right there."

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Chapter 63 – The Legend of the Oak Tree (1)

Ruth pointed towards the steep hill beyond the window. While she knew about the Legend of Uigru, it was still a tale novel to her ears. It was every boy and girl's bedtime story. How, the gods bestowed Uigru a holy sword and he put an end to the dark war while uniting the western world and establishing the Kingdom of Roem. Even after all these years of knowing it, the awe didn't wane the slightest.

In fact, the scene in which he rode a white dragon and flew into the sky was so famous that it served as an inspiration to many a bard and painter. Her eyes glistened at the fact that the celebrated and sacred spot was right in front of her.

"I-is that tr-true?"

It was a curious question on her part, for the epic tale of a bygone era seemed to have come alive before her eyes. She could almost feel the air, the fervor and the exultation as if she were a part of it all.

"People of Anatol believe so, but there is no historical evidence." He added.

And with that, the excitement visibly drained from her face. The legend that she had grown up on, was now a sacrament and Uigru revered throughout .

"Bu-but what do-does that have to d-do with the o-oak tree?"

"You know the part where Uigru, the hero, made love to the spirit of an oak tree. People believe that the spirit still waits for Uigru to return. Women from the village gather around the tree during the spring festival each year and sing the spirit's song of love.

"S-so that's why th-they wo-would ne-never take do-down the tr-tree."

Ruth nodded.

Max considered his explanation. Regardless, the tree was still hideous to be standing in front of the main entrance of the castle.

“Wo-would the se-servants re-rebel i-if I order them to re-remove the tr-tree?”

“Anatolians do worship Uigru quite a lot, so they won’t be satisfied with your decision.”

She frowned at the memory of people calling Riftan as Roems’s Uigru. Ruth deeply sighed at the sight of an agonizing Max .

“I can try bringing it back to life.”

“Ca-can you br-bring a de-dead tree ba-back to li-li-life?”

“A plant’s life is very different from a human’s. It may seem dead, yet, in some cases, it’s just asleep. I can try applying some mana to it...” He slurred, not bothering to go into the details. “I can’t guarantee you, but at least you can say you hired a wizard to bring a tree back to life. If the results aren’t great, you can show the servants that you at least tried.”

””” ”

Max stiffened at his harsh tone.

“D-do you thi-think I thi-think too much about th-the pe-people under m-me?”

“I wasn’t trying to be sarcastic. There’s nothing wrong with a new lady trying to earn her servants’ respect. You’ve just arrived here so I’m sure you have a lot on your mind, ma’am.” Ruth replied kindly, which was a rarity.

But Max wasn’t relaxed. She must’ve become used to the man’s rude and grumpy way he spoke. She rolled her eyes and carefully continued.

“The-then, ye-yes please, I wo-would like tha-that.”

Ruth wore a look of uncertainty. He seemed to be wondering why he kept putting himself into a very tiring position. As if the ledger wasn’t enough, now he had a tree to revive. And he only had himself to blame for that.

I just want this renovation to end and have my quiet life back.

???

The construction went on smoothly. The stone flooring from the banquet floor was replaced with glossy marble tiles, smooth mahogany, greased window sills were fixed.

Following Ruth's advice, expensive crystal glass windows were put up in the banquet hall and the eight largest guest rooms, balt glass went up in the knights' dorm, library and dining room. The other rooms and corridors had processed sheepskin for insulation and an outer door on the window.

With that, the castle had completely transformed into a new building. Even the servants seemed to appreciate the vibrant energy in the newly renovated Calypse Castle. No one complained about sweeping the floors twice a day, which was usually covered with dust from the soles of the workers who rushed to and fro.

"Did you see the new furniture that arrived today? It looks marvelous."

"Oh, and the curtains! I can't wait for the chandelier to be hung. It'll become the most beautiful banquet hall in all of Whedon, without a doubt."

"The hall has never looked this nice before. The wall decorations are going up after all the windows are replaced, right?"

Running up and down the corridor, Max paused at the servant's cheerful talk. Three young servants holding a large basket of laundry were chatting among themselves with excitement. They were the new hands hired through Aderon's recommendation.

"The lord will be astonished, won't he?"

"He will definitely be so pleased. I heard he was shocked at the sight of the castle when he returned last time."

Max felt her heart tremble hearing their joyful chatter.

Would Riftan really like it? What if he thought it was excessive? She immediately put her worries aside. Ruth said it was fine... Although I could tell he was a bit uneasy.

She continued down the stairs to the first floor. Along with the renovation, she had to prepare for winter. There had to be enough firewood and food in the storage, winter clothings for the servants and guards, as well as water and feed for the horses. With Riftan gone, everything became her responsibility as the lady of the house.

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Chapter 64 – The Legend of the Oak Tree (2)

“Madam, the new wall lanterns and brazier have just arrived. Would you like to go through them?” Rodrigo gladly said, carrying a wooden box indoors with other servants. When she nodded, Rodrigo placed the box on the floor of the hall and opened it with a wooden poker. Inside the box were nine glossy wall lanterns.

“There’s a total of fifteen boxes of these, ma’am.”

“O-open all the b-boxes and I-look for f-faulty p-products, and t-then i-install them i-in the b-banquet h-hall and c-corridor.”

“And the brazier, ma’am?”

“T-two in the di-dining room and the re-rest in the knights’ do-dorm and gu-guardhouse.

“Very well, ma’am.”

A train of servants carrying the boxes walked into the corridor. Max turned her steps and left the great hall.

The temperature was dropping, which meant winter was close. She blew her breath into the air to see if she could see it, and headed to the stable, going around the garden and through the trail. She was going to visit the stable, the annex and the blacksmith room to check if anything needed replenishing. When she went through the ledgers from the past, she realized the prior lady of the house went around the castle once every year and kept a record of things in storage.

Reflecting on how she poured all her effort into decorating the great hall, she decided to spend the day taking care of the other facilities. She started by paying a visit to the stable. When she appeared, the horsemen transporting fodder jumped, removed their hat and bowed.

“Madam! What brings you here? You could’ve sent a servant over...”

It was Kunel Osban, one of the first people she was introduced to on her first day at the castle. He ran forward at the sight of her. Max took a deep breath and calmly parted her lips.

“Ev-everyone is qui-uite bu-busy. I-I was ge-getting re-re-ready for wi-winter and was wo-wondering if the sta-stable ne-needed anything. I-I heard there is le-less trade when th-the tem-temperature dro-drops...”

“Oh, thank you for your concern, madam. I was about to inform Rodrigo about those things, so it’s perfect timing.”

Kunel’s face lit up instantly. He opened the door and shone a lamp for her to see inside. Max frowned a little at the stench and stuck only her upper body into the building. Inside, there stood twenty horses chewing on hay in a clean stable that had just finished sweeping. He pointed towards the far end of the room as he continued.

“The partition needs changing, ma’am. The wood is old and there isn’t enough of it, so it has been a problem for some time.”

“The-then shall I or-order more woo-wood?”

“Yes! Ah, and we may need more dry hay for the winter.”

””” ”

“Su-sure. I-is there an-anything else?”

“That is more than enough ma’am. Thank you for your concern.”

The old man beamed. Max smiled along with him. The people who once shuddered with fear around her were now looking her in the eye and talking to her sincerely.

Her tongue was stiff as usual, but thanks to the frequent conversations she had for the past few days, she felt like she was stuttering less than in the past. Proud at her improvement, she walked out of the stable and into the large field. The shadow from the rampart added an extra chill to the air. She tightened the shawl around her shoulders.

A breeze carrying a scent of grass grazed past her hair. She brushed a few loose strands of hair from her face and soon stopped walking when she remembered how Riftan had said he liked the puffiness of her locks, akin to a cloud. When she raised her head, she saw the mountaintop he would’ve climbed over when he left.

Would Riftan have arrived at Drakium by now?

He had gone to the capital of the kingdom to attend a grand feast held to congratulate him. She imagined Riftan, dressed in silver armor, standing tall as he was showered with the praises from the nobles. He would look marvelous, just like the hero from the legend. She was sure nobody was going to ignore him or mention his background now. Even the noblewomen who’d once looked at him with disdain would be captivated.

When Max finished thinking, she felt blue. As she pictured Riftan in a fancy banquet hall, surrounded by beautiful women dressed in fancy apparel, anxiety crept from the bottom of her stomach. There ought to be younger and prettier women there. Riftan

may have realized his mistake by now, upon receiving looks of admiration from the ladies, and started to regret agreeing to carry on with the marriage.

“What are you doing all alone out here?”

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Chapter 65 – The Storyteller and Knights-in-Training (1)

The sudden voice pulled Max out from her unpleasant thoughts. She turned back and saw two boys dressed head to toe in black tunics looking at her curiously. At their gaze, she instantly straightened herself up, realizing that they were apprentices she had seen several times with Riftan before. The two boys politely bowed their heads as a greeting, hands on their chests in reverence as one would expect from a knight-in-training.

“We’re sorry to have taken you by surprise. We were worried about the Madam being alone, so we had to come and talk to you,” the boy explained, looking apologetic.

“I-it’s okay. Tha-thank you for... worrying about me, I...”

Her eyes wandered to the side, her tongue inexplicably finding difficulty with words to address the young boys before her. A boy with stunning silver hair was quick to notice this, and he introduced himself in haste.

“We apologize for the late introduction. I’m Yurixion Lobar. We are knights in training waiting for our knighthood next year.”

The taller boy next to him also opened his mouth to say, “I’m Garow Livacon. I’m going to be knighted on the same day as my friend here,” he gestured to the silver-haired boy.

Max fumbled with her hands, “I, I am Max, Maximilian... Calypse,” her introduction coming out in an embarrassing stutter. Despite having already known her identity, Yurixion flashed her an amicable smile, as if to reassure her.

“You must have been taking a walk alone,” he continued after the exchange of names had come to close.

“N, no... I, I was touring the in-inner facilities,” she answered with some hesitancy, fearing the latter would reprimand her/

The boy’s face turned grave after hearing her answer.

“It is dangerous for the Madam to travel alone even if it’s just inside the castle. There has been frequent outside visitors these days and if somehow a mishap occurs—”

“Mi-mishap...?” She asked back in shock, finding the situation quite nerve-wracking.

Sensing their Madam’s apprehension, the boy hurriedly added in panic, “I wasn’t trying to scare you. I was just worried for the Madam of the estate...” then he added in an afterthought, “Ah! If you don’t mind, may we accompany you, Madam?”

Max hurriedly declined with a fervent shake of her head, “N, No. I-I can’t just take your, pre-precious time...”

“Please don’t say something like that! It is an honor for a knight to serve the Madam. We, we may not have been officially knighted... yet we would risk our lives only to save you from any danger,” the boy heatedly expressed.

At the startling amount of fervor in his words, Max took an unconscious step back. Seeing their madam recoil, the boy next to him stabbed him in the ribs as a warning.

“Yuri, Stop exaggerating your words!”

””” ”

“Exaggerating?! I am deadly serious, I truly would...”

Perhaps realizing his brashness, the boy quickly clammed his mouth shut with some embarrassment. The next time he faced Max, he was a tad calmer.

“Anyways, you can’t go around alone. I can call a guard if it’s specifically my service you find not to your liking,” he gently said.

As much as Max appreciated their efforts, she found it to be over the top to be guarded inside the castle’s safe premises. “It-it’s just in-inside the castle... to-to go that far....”

“Madam, there is no guarantee that the castle is safe! If anything happened to you, Madam, I would be too ashamed to face Lord Calypse on his return.”

The boy's face turned shades of blue with his rapt reply with the idea of their beloved leader scorning them. As soon as Max was greeted with the sight of the young boy's crumpling face as if the world was ending, she immediately felt sweat ooze from her pores.

"We-well if, if it worries you tha-that much... then, please..." she finally acquiesced.

Given her consent, the boy's face instantly lit up. She felt an onset of dizziness at the quick change of expression.

"Where should I escort you to, madam?"

Resigned to her two new companions, she quietly said, "...I-I was on my way to-to the blacksmith..."

"What a coincidence! We were also on our way to the blacksmith. I'll accompany you there."

With that, Yurixion took the lead with energetic steps, a more placid Garow following after him with a shrug of his shoulders. It was only after a moment's hesitation that Max began to trail after them, feeling very awkward. The boy's passionate attitude was something refreshing to Max, and was a contrast against the callous, taciturn countenance of her husband, Ruth's bluntness, and the rest of the knight's indifference to her.

'He's probably 16... maybe around 17 years old?'

"Do you have any special business with the blacksmith?" The boy prompted her away from her thoughts.

"My-my business is... when winter comes... merchants said, the-they would come less often so...I-I'm checking if they need a-anything."

The boy's eyes brightened, "I see! I was on my way to the blacksmith because I broke my sword while sparring," he cheerfully pointed to the pointed blade hanging on his waist.

"It's a bit embarrassing, but this is the second time it broke this month alone. I break it so often that the blacksmith starts nagging as soon as he sees me."

A slight smile tugged at the corner of her lips. She could tell Yurixion was embarrassed by the faint tinge of red on his cheeks, and while his outpouring friendliness was quite overwhelming, Max could see he was a kind and easygoing person.

“I don’t know when I can reach the tip of Lord Calypse’s feet with my labors. No, rather, if I could amount to the furthest tip of the Lord’s feet, it would already be an immense relief.”

The boy beside him who had remained silent throughout suddenly quipped, “We would be conscripted to the Remdragon Knights next year. Isn’t your goal too low?”

“Garow, you still don’t understand Lord Calypse’s greatness.” He replied with a mild shake of his head. “It’s already a tremendous achievement to reach just the tip of the tip of the tip of his feet. Forget even reaching the tip of the tip of his feet!”

“Oh, really.”

The latter replied with a resigned tone and slightly fed up look on his face. Meanwhile, Max felt enthused at the boy’s blind reverence for Riftan and she couldn’t help but join their conversation.

“Ri-riftan... Is-Is he that outstanding of a kn-knight?”

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Chapter 66 – The Storyteller and Knights-in-Training (2)

“Madam, he’s not just outstanding!” The boy looked back at her as if she were describing Riftan with the most austere terms. He then launched to a tirade of Riftan’s outstanding achievements that led to his reputation:

“Lord Calypse is the greatest knight in the continent. There’s a reason why he is called the wise man of Uigru! Across the continent, there are only five knights that are revered as Rossem Uigru! Two out of the five knights were bested by Sir Calypse. It was only six years ago that he beat Libadon’s top knight, Sejour Aren, but he also beat the holy sword of Osiria, Kuahl Leon at the Western Union swordsmanship competition!”

Max only smiled vaguely in return. She had heard about the commander of the Paladin Division many times, a man commended for his excellent swordsmanship—yet, it never

dawned on her that her husband could far surpass a man considered to be an elite knight in the continent.

“I decided to be a knight after seeing Sir Calypse performance during that sword competition. I have admired him ever since,” the boy finally ended his impassioned speech with his devotion to Riftan.

“I, I see....”

Max replied at a loss for words. This, in turn, prompted a stern look on the boy’s cheery face.

“Madam,” he somberly started, “You have no idea how incredible Lord Calypse is, do you?”

She hurriedly countered with her little knowledge on Riftan, “I, I know.... a-about the d-dragon....”

“Even if he did not participate in the expedition, Sir Calypse is still a great knight. Have you never seen him swing a sword before?”

“I, I have!” She interjected immediately, feeling quite defensive. “I saw him fi-fighting a mo-monster....”

Her words trailed to a quiet whisper. She was not sure if her disclosure of the fiasco on their travel had counted as seeing. It was the first time Riftan had wielded his blade in front of her, yet she had passed out, unable to see the spectacle. And on the second time it happened, the fight was over before she even knew it. But Max couldn’t stomach the boys finding out her lack of familiarity with her husband’s feats.

Therefore, she began to spin an exaggerated tale...

“I-I also know,” she started, straightening up her spine, and her nervousness, as she recounted a profligate version of the fight. “I-I saw Riftan cu-cut a gi-giant a-as bi-big as this fo-fort in ha-half! The-there was a to-total of te-ten gi-giants, bu-but he de-defeated them a-all i-in the b-blink of an e-eye.”

She was describing the event shamelessly, even though, in reality, she could not remember how many of the fearsome beasts had appeared. She presumed, at the very least, there would have been ten. Her bluff proved successful, as the boy looked at her with renewed enthusiasm on his naïve face.

“For real? Ten giant ogres...!? What a story! Can you tell us more?”

Max flinched at his enthusiasm. The boy’s incredible excitement for the story caught Max off guard. However, at this point, she could not tell him the mortifying truth that she

could not remember because she had fainted. She quickly remembered a tale she heard from a minstrel and made up an outrageous story, her stutters increasingly becoming evident with the deepening lie.

“Whi-while we we-were on a ca-carriage, we-we su-suddenly he-heard a loud s-screech! I-it was s-so lo-loud tha-that I thought th-the s-sky wa-was te-tearing a-apart. M-my entire bo-body froze be-because I wa-was s-so scared; I-I di-didn’t even re-realize th-that Ri-riftan to-took out hi-his sw-sword. And b-by the ti-time I no-noticed, Ri-riftan had already go-gone o-out t-to fi-fight.”

””” ”

“Sir Calypse’s swordsmanship is the fastest in the world! His enemies always end up with their head decapitated and their bodies split in half bleeding all over the ground before they even notice him taking out his sword!”

The boy yelled with delight. Although she found it disconcerting how the boys enjoyed hearing such a morbid tale, she continued on regardless.

“O-outside, th-there we-were ten gi-giants as bi-big as a fo-fort...! A-all the knights d-drew their s-swords! Ri-riftan we-went ahead of th-them and s-swang hi-his s-sword at the bi-biggest gi-giant! Th-then the gi-giant...”

Max looked up, trying to recall what the boy said had said earlier. Trying to intertwine some semblance of reality in her story.

“Th-the gi-giant’s he-head was decapitated, and its to-torso cut in half a-and b-blood sprouted li-like a fo-fountain! Th-then it d-dropped to the g-ground.”

“Sir Calypse’s sword had even split through the dragon’s breath!” He nodded, convinced, “Hmph! An ogre is only a piece of cake for him!”

Max evoked exhilaration on the boys with her tale. Despite her bothersome stuttering, the boys showed no sign of annoyance and patiently waited, eyes sparkling, as she went on with the story. Their reactions that of pure astonishment served to fuel Max further, her tale increasingly becoming animated as she started to mimic the giant.

“A-another gi-giant sa-saw what ha-happened a-and shouted s-so loud th-that m-my e-ears popped a-and it s-swang a huge ba-bat with a sw-swoosh! Ri-riftan ju-jumped up hi-high like a flying swallow... and do-dodged like it wa-was ch-child’s play.”

She smiled, quite liking her description of him as a sprightly ‘flying swallow.’

“T-the gi-giant was so du-dull that... it co-couldn’t keep up wi-with Ri-riftan’s mo-movement and ke-kept slamming t-the g-ground with its ba-bat! Boom! Bam! So s-strong th-that it fe-felt li-like the e-earth wa-was sh-shaking...!”

She imitated the giant slamming the ground with its weapon of destruction. The boys' shoulders also shook as if they were dying to know what happened next. Max, too, began to feel uncontrollably excited as it was the first time someone had been so engaged in her story.

“Th-then! Ri-rifan swang his s-sword. Th-there was a su-sudden f-flash and then I sa-saw th-the giant's bi-big arm cu-cut off li-like a sa-sausage! Th-then it d-dropped to th-the ground wi-with a loud th-thud and blood....”

She noticed that whenever something gory was mentioned, the twinkle in the boys' eyes became even more dazzling. She raised her arms and yelled.

“B-blood rained li-like a shower! Every ti-time the giant sho-shook its half cu-cut a-arm, black b-blood poured do-down ev-everywhere like he-heavy r, rain...! I had to ba-bathe for half a-a day just to wa-wash out the blood o-on me.”

Max, who was swinging her arm, trying to mimic the giant with a decapitated limb, suddenly froze.

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 67 – Slowly Settling In (1)

As she turned her stiff head, she saw Ruth squatting under a tree carefully scraping the moss between its roots. Soon after, he grabbed his sack and stood up.

“My clothes and armor are stained so black, I wonder if I should change the name to Knights of Hume (Black) Dragon instead of Rem (White) Dragon,” he said with a sour face.

“Mr. Ruth!”

Yurixion, visibly glad to see him, ran towards him.

“What are you doing here?”

"I am making reagents at Lady Calypse's request, to revive the trees in the garden," said he as he lifted up a sack. Fixing his gaze upon her, he continued. "It seems you were recounting the fierce battle you went through during your journey."

Max literally flushed from head to toe. She had been caught bluffing, red-handed, and out of all the people, by the very one who saw her vomit and pass out. All she wished was to turn into dust and disappear.

However, the mood of her audience wasn't affected at the slightest. The boys shook with excitement, not noticing her embarrassment at all.

"Yes! She was telling us how Lord Calypse slayed ten giant ogres in a blink of an eye."

"Ten giant ogres you say...."

As each word drawled, Max's heart pounded tenfold with anxiety. She wondered if she should cut her losses and just get out of here on the pretext of having something urgent at hand. Her eyes darted around like a prey looking to escape.

Like Ruth didn't know what she was thinking! He cast her a sly smile and while sounding completely natural, he said, "You only got that far? There was also a battle in the mountains."

"A battle in the mountains?!" Yurixion exclaimed.

"We were crossing the Anatorium Mountain when we ran into a pack of werewolves. How... how many were there in total? Mrs. Calypse? My memory is a bit blurry off late..."

"I- I also don't..."

"Understandable, I mean there were so many that it was tough to count. The whole mountain was covered with their dark fur, so it probably seemed like someone had put a carpet over the mountain."

"There were that many werewolves on the Anatorium Mountain...?" Yurixion cried in astonishment.

"" "

Max was sweating profusely, as she was unable to agree or deny what Ruth said.

With a gentle smile, the wizard continued. "How about you tell them the story of what happened that day in detail Mrs. Calypse?"

The boys' gazes, suffused with anticipation, flew towards her. Max's face was red-hot, she didn't have nerves thick enough to make up a story in front of someone who was actually there when it all happened. Perhaps taking pity at her current state, Ruth extended her a helping hand.

"We can't just take up our lady's time like that as she is very busy."

"Y-yeah... I-I'm a bi-bit busy.."

She didn't even blink before grabbing on to the helping hand.

However, did she think she'd be let off so easily? Ruth stopped her again...

"Oh, come to think of it, I have news for you, Madam. I was so focused on your story that I almost forgot to tell you.

"Ne-news...?"

She carefully looked back at him, suspicious, wondering if this was another one of the wizard's pranks. But when she noticed him holding a small unfolded sheet of parchment for her to see, she relaxed just a tad.

"This is a telegram that Lord Calypse sent to my tower through the palace's sorcery device. He said he is going to leave for Anatol as soon as the ceremony ends. It would take around fifteen days at most.... No, considering the knights' mobility, they should arrive in ten."

Upon the unexpected news, Max instantly forgot about her embarrassment and beamed. She skipped to him and promptly took a look at the parchment, saw the date of departure and a summary of the route.

Ruth shook his head and let out a deep sigh as if he was helpless.

"Seems like he's really just going to swing by and then return."

"Wha-what's wro-wrong with tha-that?"

"There's nothing wrong with it, but... he might as well reclaim the king's graces while he's there, you know?"

"Sir Ruth, I am sure Sir Calypse is worried about our town's safety. A colossal amount of werewolves had appeared near our land; how could he not be worried?" Yurixion passionately defended Riftan.

As the conversation streamed in a direction she disliked, Max became noticeably nervous and hastily wrapped up the conversation.

“An-anyways... tha-thanks for te-telling m-me. We-well I sho-should sta-start he-heading to th- the sm-smithy, I ha-have some bu-business the-there...”

“Oh, I know very well that you are a busy lady, Madam.”

Max walked away, leaving Ruth and his sarcastic tone behind. Her footsteps were so light that it surprised herself. She wanted to hum but held it back as she was aware of the boys following her.

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 68 – Slowly Settling In (2)

Having completed her rounds of the inner castle, Max returned to her room to sort out the items she had to order. Thus, the rest of the day was spent peacefully in the company of papers and food.

The next day, right at sunrise, she ran to the library with the papers, handing them over Ruth to make sure there were no problems. The wizard, who was lying on a worn-out carpet and sleeping using books as a blanket, frowned at being disturbed. Even so, he quickly straightened himself and started checking the order sheet sans complaints.

Reviewing the list from the top, he dipped a pen in ink and crossed out some spots.

“The butler has already prepared enough oil and candles. I’m sure we have silverware and dishes stored in the warehouse. Also, where on earth are you going to use all these soaps and fragrance oils?”

“I tho-thought the kn-knights enjoyed ta-taking bath an-and sau-sauna so...”

“What the... Do you really think those men would use such luxurious soaps and fragrances? They would all frown if they even get near something with floral scent. It’s enough to just order the amount you need.”

Ruth relentlessly crossed out items from the list. Then, giving it a once over, he spoke as if he was doing her a favor.

“The rest seems about right.”

“S-so sho-should I... ju-just order them no-now?”

“Let’s just add in a few more items.”

Max’s eyes opened wide as it was the first time he had wanted to buy something. She curiously looked at what Ruth was writing down and saw a list of names. Max was taken aback as she thought he was planning on purchasing some slaves.

“Wha-what ex-exactly are you wr-writing do-down?”

“Names of scholars. Please ask the servants to purchase writings under these names as it is.”

Max looked at him blankly.

“A-are y-you trying t-to buy someth-thing you per-personally wa-want right no-now? Mo-moreover, it-it’s an ex-expensive lu-luxury item li-like a boo-book”

“Madam, knowledge is an incomparable asset.”

He spoke with absolute seriousness and solemnity.

”””’ ”

“These writings are not for meeting my desires. They are what this library needs, what I’m trying to say is that anyone can come in and read them freely.”

Max’s jaw dropped at his brazen words. This wizard absolutely hated it when anyone, other than himself, was in the library. He even hinted to her, the lady of the castle, that he was annoyed when she came to the library. Frankly speaking, occupying the castle tower was not enough for Ruth, without authorization he had also taken over the library.

“I-I’ve never seen... an-anyone ex-except for y-you and me use the li-library be-before.”

“There will be more people using it from now on.”

He talked big. Max squinted her eyes, doubting his words. The knights were busy training all day and rarely walked around except to dine at the Great Hall, so what more people. Max was very annoyed by Ruth, who was extremely picky and nosy with items that she planned to buy but was so thick-skinned when it came to things that he wanted.

Max snatched the pen from Ruth and crossed out his list. Ruth flipped out and took away the parchment from her hands.

“I am the wizard of this castle! Improving my skills is not only beneficial for me but Anatol, too!”

“A-as ex-expected! Yo-you’re ju-just trying to order th-them be-because y-you nee-need them! A-and these boo-books.... Th-they’re not e-even wi-wizarding books!”

“Ho-how did you know?”

“Fo-for tw-twenty-two ye-years... I ba-basically lived in a li-library like you. I-I can at le-least re- recognize phi-philosophers like Ge-gerad and Ka-kazaham!”

Ruth’s blue-grey orbs shook violently, he was agitated. There was clearly a mix of books that had nothing to do with magic. Max smiled knowingly.

“Ha-hand it ov-over. I he-heard the-there will b-be a ro-road co-construction ne-next year! W-we ca-can’t manage t-to b- buy thi-this ma-many...”

“Then... then are you fine with your child growing up as a fool who knows no better than how to swing a sword?!” He exclaimed urgently.

Max, who was stretching her arms to take the paper away, turned red as if someone had poured boiling water on her head. It felt like steam was coming off the top of her head.

“Ch-ch-child... Wha-wha-what are you... wha-what are you say-saying!”

To the extremely agitated Max, Ruth said nonchalantly,

“What are you so embarrassed about? It is natural for couples to have children. Unless Lord Calypse goes on another expedition, in the next year or two, the castle will probably be filled with the cries of a child.”

“Ch-ch-child, child....”

She was burning up so much the whole area around her eyes was scorching hot. She wrapped her hands around her face and after much effort cooled off. Her heart started thumping when she’d just thought of hugging her baby with black hair. Ruth grabbed the squirming lady’s hand.

“Don’t you want to raise your child to be smart and intelligent?”

“Th-the ch-child is-isn’t ev-even born yet....”

“It’s too late after he’s born! A child feeds on wisdom to grow! We need to establish the environment in advance!”

She didn’t know what was late, but the wizard’s momentum prevented her from making any counterargument. Ruth quickly wrote down a list of orders on the parchment while she was distracted.

“Okay, finished.”

He handed her the parchment with a face full of satisfaction after he had filled out nearly five lines. Max took it with a sullen look.

“I-if we buy so many books and when Ri-riftan gets angry....”

“Lord Calypse doesn’t care about paltry pennies like this.”

Max gazed at him dumbfounded. Even though she wasn’t that worldly, she knew how expensive books were. If it weren’t so expensive, why would her father keep certain books in the display closet so nobody could touch them? Glass couldn’t even compare. Not only did it take a lot of effort and time just to carefully write line by line on the expensive paper, but it also cost a lot to carefully sew it all together, not to mention covering it with leather and gilding it.

On top of that, it was not easy to get books that weren’t heroic epics about knights, such as poems or romantic novels filled with minstrel songs, as they were written by a small number of authors and even when you did somehow get it the seller could set any price. She protested with a loud voice.

“You’re the one who said sa-save.”

“Madam, you know what is more precious than gold? Knowledge.”

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 69 – Her First Kind Companions (1)

“Madam, knowledge is more precious than gold.”

Ruth announced shamelessly.

The wizard then flopped down to take a seat. The recoil that came due to his sudden movement caused the books that he had earlier piled up to tremble and collapse onto the ground. The knowledge that he said was more precious than gold was now haphazardly lying down under his feet.

Max, who had been watching the exchange had her mouth slightly open, wondering if she should slip in a remark, but instead she ended up sighing heavily. She couldn't take an uncompromising attitude, she wanted to help because she too was receiving a lot of help from him.

“I'll, ask them to try and acquire them....” Max said as she prepared to leave the room.

“I would appreciate it.”

The wizard responded coyly to her remark and opened another book he had just reached out for. She shook her head dismissively at the wizard's gratitude and left the library silently as not to disturb his work.

As she made her way away from the library, she noticed that the hallways were well lit, white from the bright light which poured in from the newly replaced windows. The windows had allowed more sunlight to enter the walls of the castle.

The weather has been unusually clear for the past few days, Max thought this as she looked out and gazed up at the cloudless blue sky from the windows. She basked in its warmth and sprightly walked down the stairs. At the end of the steps, a sturdy, vintage patterned rail was uniformly linked, and a soft carpet greeted her soles.

When she was first asked to decorate the castle, she felt overwhelmed, but now there was an inexplicable sense of accomplishment at the castle which she saw slowly changing before her eyes.

She happily skipped to the banquet hall to give her list of orders to Rodrigo. When she arrived, she saw him carefully supervising his work which was near completion. She approached him carefully.

“R-Rodrigo... are you busy?”

“Ah, Madam, you're here.” Rodrigo looked back at her, his wrinkled face was painted with a bright smile.

With a smile of her own in reply, Max handed him the parchment filled with orders.

"I-I went around the inner facilities... and checked if there is anything we need. C-Could you order what I wrote down? P-Please?"

"Of course." Rodrigo replied.

"A-Also...tell them to get the books that I wrote down on the bottom." Max added.

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"Yes madam, I will." The butler neatly folded the parchment and put it in his breast pocket.

She turned back with a smile, feeling giddy that she had just completed one of her tasks. She was about to open the door and go out again, when Rodrigo called her in a hurry.

"Madam, the apprentices, Yurixion and Garow, went out to the valley early in the morning today and caught four "Oakleys". It's currently getting prepared in the kitchen right now, if you haven't eaten yet..."

"O-Oakley...?"

Rodrigo looked at her confused face in surprise.

"Have you never tried it? It is a clear water fish that lives in the valley. It's very juicy and soft. There's nothing in the world that's as appetizing as a freshly caught Oakley cooked over a charcoal fire."

Max gulped.

The food in Calypse Castle was very tasty, but it tended to be quite meat-oriented. Their affinity for meat was quite extreme that she hadn't eaten fish ever since she came here even though the area was adjacent to the sea. She had been craving for fish so much that her stomach suddenly rumbled at the mention of it.

"B-But the apprentices are the one who caught it so I can't..." Max began to protest but she wasn't able to complete her sentence for Rodrigo cut her off.

"They said that they brought it for you madam. They will be glad if you would go and dine with them."

Max, who was surprised to hear that the fish had been caught for her, flushed at the thought of their consideration and could only nod in reply.

She didn't understand why they did that and she frankly didn't care to find out their motivation for doing so, she just wanted to eat some fish.

So Max hurried out of the banquet hall and headed for the kitchens excitedly, the thought of freshly caught fish made her giddy.

As soon as she arrived near the kitchen, she heard people busily talking to each other and so she peeked inside to see what was going on.

Max spotted the two boys hanging four huge fish, about the length of an adult man's arm, above the drain and cutting it up. The chef next to them was sweating heavily at a loss of what to do with the two apprentices who had begun to tend to the fish.

"S-Sir, I-I'll do it. Please, I'll do it. Please let me do it!" the chef exclaimed in an embarrassed tone.

"It's alright, it's alright. It's also a kind of like our training to get a sense of what cutting something living feels like." Yurixion naively said to the chef, who was on the edge of breaking out in tears.

Next to him, Garow, who was collecting blood by placing a bucket under the cut tail of one of the fish, stood up and said, "This fish has lost all its blood too."

"Give it to me. I'll dismantle this one too," Yurixion eagerly motioned for the next fish.

"I, I can't let your honors do, do this kind of...!" the chef exclaimed in protest but Yurixion gave him a pointed look. This effectively silenced him.

"You're too noisy. Didn't we say this is also a kind of training?" Garow told the chef in a tone of finality and this made the latter step back.

Yurixion nodded in agreement and added, "Yes, yes, we can't leave the fish to be offered to the lady in the hands of servants."

"But why fish? Wouldn't it have been better to hunt foxes or deers as a gift?" Garow suddenly asked Yurixion.

"Garow! You can't harm such a beautiful creature!" Yurixion replied.

Garow shook his head, dumbfounded with what Yurixion had said. "Ah! So, this fish ended up like this because it wasn't beautiful?"

"It's not only that it is not beautiful but it's also tasty, that's why it ended up like this." Yurixion only responded cheerfully.

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Under The Oak Tree

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 70 – Her First Kind Companions (2)

Max was awkwardly standing at the entrance wondering if she should enter or not. She didn’t expect to witness the dismantling of the fish. The half-cut fish’s body appalled her, so she slowly turned around to leave. However before she could take a step to turn away, her eyes met with Garow’s, who had been turning his stiff neck around to stretch it. She stood rooted in place. The boy waved his hand with a cheerful smile.

“Good morning, Madam Calypse.” Garow called out to her.

“Oh, hello Madam!”

Yurixion waved both hands towards her too like a dog wagging its tail. She couldn’t just act like she didn’t see both of them, so Max timidly waved back.

“G-Good morning,” she greeted them.

“You’re just in time! I caught these guys as thanks for you telling us that fun story yesterday. They are the most delicious fish in the Whedon!” Yurixion excitedly told her gesturing at the fish they were busily slicing up.

“Please wait for a minute, Madam. I’ll quickly prepare it and get it on the table.” said Garow, after cutting off the head of the fish.

Max blankly stared at the fish head that rolled onto the floor. She could see a tongue sticking out of it, the sight made her lose her appetite.

“While we prepare the Oakley, would you mind telling us the story about the werewolves?” Yurixion looked at her expectantly as he busily tended to the fish. Garow who was beside him seemed to have read the discomfort painted on her face and quickly turned to berate Yurixion.

“Madam might be feeling discomfort from all the blood, let’s not keep her here.”

Yurixion gave Garow a look of disbelief, “What are you talking about?! Madam Calypse is a courageous woman who even witnessed the heavily raining blood of Ogres! She’s the wife of the world’s bravest knight Sir Calypse!”

The boys then looked at her as if expecting to hear her agreement.

Max barely managed to squeeze out a smile in response when another fish’s head was cut off and rolled onto the floor again, marring the floors with its blood. She consciously tried to not look at it and replied, “O-Of course. T-this is nothing to me.”

“See? Hey, someone bring a chair for the Madam!” Yurixion exclaimed in pleasure and gestured for one of the kitchen servants to bring in a chair for Max to sit on.

There was no way out now, Max grimly thought. She bleakly looked at the chair that the kitchen servant had brought her.

It seemed like she needed to immediately come up with a story about the werewolves while the boys trimmed the fish. She sat on the edge of the chair feeling like she was about to cry.

In the middle of her internal distress, Yurixion had managed to grab and peel the thick and chewy looking skin of the Oakley, removed the fins on its back and stomach, and throw the softly sliced white fillet on the plate. The fish’s skeleton was quickly exposed and was set aside to dispose of later. He paused in his cutting to proudly share to the group what he knew of werewolves.

””” ”

“I’ve also seen a werewolf once. Its head is a vicious wolf and the body is similar to that of a human. And it swiftly jumps around from tree to tree with its two feet!

Yurixion grinned in satisfaction when he saw his companions’ attention on him, “It also has long molars sticking out the mouth like a wild boar. I heard they stuff their head and hang it on the wall of their room in Valto.”

“Why would they hang such a vicious thing on their walls? I just can’t understand the northerners’ aesthetic preferences.” Garow told them.

“Wolves are a symbol of bravery to them.” Yurixion simply replied.

Max eyed the pinkish flesh of fish fillets stacked on the plate that had now begun to look like a small tower. Her feelings of disgust at the sight seemed to steadily fade as the fish’ forms slowly disappeared.

Max shook her head to dismiss the thoughts of the fish and secretly took a deep breath to regain her composure, her companions were expecting a story from her, this is why they wanted her to dine with them. They used that fish as bait.

Just as she let out a sigh she noticed that Yurixion was looking back at her and was wiping the water off his hands with a white cloth.

“Isn’t it funny that they’re showing off how brave they are by catching and stuffing a puny werewolf? Remdragon Knights can get rid of dozens of werewolves in a blink of an eye!” Yurixiom boasted and Garow who was beside him laughed heartily too.

“I’m also very curious how Lord Calypse fought them.” Garow chimed in as he waved the cutting knife he was using to cut the fish in the hair in an attempt to mimic how Lord Calypse must have fought with werewolves.

Max let out a shaky smile at the two.

She had no way around it because she knew they would never be satisfied until she fed their curiosity. So, Max started to squeeze out a story with little tears in her eyes.

The kids joyfully listened to her, their cheeks flushed with excitement. Max concocted a tale where Riftan cut off the heads of three werewolves in a blink of an eye and where the monsters’ heads poured down like black hail as he advanced towards them. Max tried her best to sound enthusiastic and made sure the boys were entertained. It seemed that they were because they were enthusiastically listening to her.

Max soon slowly forgot about the discomfort of seeing the dismembering of the fish because of the boys’ reactions towards her story. Never in her life did she imagine a day where she would joyfully talk in front of so many people. And they seemed to really like her story telling.

“Sir, the sauce is ready.” The group’s discussion was cut due to the Chef informing them of his progress in the kitchen.

“Hurry up and c**k it then. I’m dying to eat!” Yurixion responded back. When that was down his attention was once again casted on Max’ story.

As the story was nearing its end, the head chef dumped the trimmed fish meat in a bowl and started to mix it with a dark sauce. On one side, he was heating an oil-coated pan and on the other side, he was making a salad with thinly sliced onions and herbs. Just like that, Max's feelings of disgust disappeared, as if they had never existed in the first place and turned into hunger. Just as she wrapped up her story the Chef once again informed them of the state of their upcoming meal.

"It tastes incredible when it's grilled and served with salad. Please wait for a moment." The head chef spoke confidently and started to grill the seasoned Oakley on the heated pan.

A delicious smell started to spread in the air as the fish cooked with sizzling sounds coming from it.

They moved to sit comfortably on a table carefully prepared for them by the servants and they sat across each other on the small table. They sat at the other side of the kitchen, and despite this distance they could still hear the head chef arguing with one of the kitchen staff that instead of eating from a silver plate, having it straight out of the grill tasted the best for the dish.

Soon after hearing the slight argument fresh salad and a delicious looking Oakely dish was served before them. The two apprentices excitedly gave her a big chunk of grilled fish and its smell delighted Max.

Max reached out for her silver knife and fork and began to slice a small piece of the steaming hot fish and tried it.

As soon as she popped the fish into her mouth she could not help but let out an excited gasp. The soft meat, full of sweet sauce, melted in her mouth. Max's eyes widened in amazement at its flavor.

"It's de-delicious!" She exclaimed and the two boys looked at her proudly.

"Right? Nothing can compare to Fall season Oakley!" Yurixion said as he too begun cutting his fish and ate their meal happily.

It was delicious, Max couldn't help but exclaim these words in her head each time she took a bite. The soft, tender meat didn't taste much like a fish at all, instead it released sweet juices every time she chewed on it. [2]

She had no trouble finishing two large pieces of fish on her plate. It seemed she finished them so quickly, the fish disappeared in a heartbeat.

Meanwhile, the two boys seemed to have been quicker than her for they had already emptied three servings of fish.

She took another slice and ate it with the crunchy salad.

“It’s really d-delicious.” She told them gratefully, the meal was exceptional.

“I’m glad you’re satisfied.” Yurixion, who had emptied his plates already and had left them clean, grinned at her after he told her his reply. Then with a proud smile, he said, “Next time, I’ll catch another delicious one for you.”

Max got caught up by his friendly grin and laughed along. The goodwill of the two boys made her feel elated and she was honestly touched by their gift.

“I’ll look forward to it, then.” She told them as she took another bite.

Max will not forget the taste of Grilled Oakley – that was for sure.

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