

# Under The Oak Tree

## Chapter 71 – Strange Affinity to Magic (1)

Days went by and the construction had finally come to an end. Max and her row of servants took a tour around the great hall, transformed into an unrecognizably beautiful room.

A gold-plated chandelier hung from the ceiling, shimmering with a subtle but impressive glow. It lit up the former room basked in a perpetual darkness, and underneath it was a carpet embroidered in red and gold threads. A long, soft drape was spread over the staircase, which led to the large, fancy banquet hall.

Max admired the hall in all directions. The cold stone floor was replaced with smooth marble tiles, and three gorgeous, silver chandeliers decorated the arched ceiling of the room. On one wall hung a carpet embroidered with Uigru soaring to the sky on the back of a dragon, and wine-colored curtains covered the windows. On the podium were chairs dressed in silk and fur and a unicorn statue made from marble stood on the terrace outside the window.

“How do you like it, ma’am?”

Aderon carefully asked to make sure the lady of the Calypse castle was pleased. Max slowly moved her head up and down as she touched the clear, shiny glass window. The warm ray of sunlight poured through the glass and brightened up the area.

“I-it’s amazing.”

Satisfaction spread on Aderon’s face and Max smiled along with his genuinely happy grin. Although he might be a tout at times, he was not a trickster, that was for sure. He offered high-quality materials and at an adequate price — as well as faithful, hard workers. To show her appreciation, Max invited Aderon for a feast at the castle. With his stomach full of expensive wine and the chef’s special dish, roasted deer meat, Aderon left the castle for the final time as a satisfied man.

“Oh, wow. I can’t recognize this place at all. Sir Calypse sure will be surprised when he returns.”

Standing by the front door, watching the merchant’s couch disappear in the distance, Max turned her head at the voice. It was Ruth, scratching his messy gray hair, coming down the stairs. Max asked with a hint of uncertainty.

“Wi-will he like it?”

“Well, he did ask for a renovation, so there’s no doubt he will be happy at the sight.”

His apathetic response did not help Max feel confident at all. She glared at the sloppy man, lazily yawning, and replied with frustration.

“Do-does it hu-hurt if you give a co-compliment?”

“Ah, it’s beautiful. It’s so spick and span I can’t seem to open my eyes. My mind is completely blown away by the glittering spectacle,” he soullessly recited as he stretched his back.

Max once again stared at him with disdain, but Ruth ignored her walked towards the door. As he was about to leave, he remembered something and stopped to turn and looked at Max and her entourage of servants.

“Hmm... is this the right time?” he mumbled to himself and pulled out a small bottle, swirling with unknown liquid from his inner chest pocket.

“The... *potion* to bring the tree back to life is ready. Do you want to test it now?”

””” ”

“A-already?” Her eyes widened discreetly, aware of the eyes around them.

“I sacrificed my sleep to get this ready,” Ruth said although it was obvious he just woke up from a good long nap. Having seen him sleeping on the library floor a couple times, Max wanted to give a snarky reply, but in the end, she couldn’t resist nodding. It was true that he had gone through extra lengths to help her with the ledger and make the potion...

He turned his steps and walked out to the garden and stood by the lifeless oak tree next to the gazebo. Max stood by him as she watched him uncork the bottle and pour the mysterious liquid over the roots of the tree.

“Oh, the mighty spirit of nature. Take this poor one into your arms and grant your breath of life!” he chanted.

Max rolled her eyes at his loud voice. She herself was frequently treated with spells after being hit by her father often at a young age and was familiar enough with the procedures to know witchcraft can be used with simple commands. She was sure his elaborate monologue was for showing off.

Just as she was wondering why Ruth was exaggerating, Max glimpsed at the servants behind her, full of awe, and realized his intention. It was to show them he was doing his best to bring the tree back to life.

Ruth opened his arms and looked up to the sky as if receiving vigor from the gods above, then brought his hands together by his heart and solemnly closed his eyes. Max

bit her lips to swallow her laughter but soon was wide-eyed when she saw faint waves of light coming out from the outer line of his body.

The light began to accumulate around him, and Max exclaimed with astonishment. Besides being the subject of witchcraft, she had never witnessed a spell in action upfront. The soft light oozing from his hands spun around his body once and slowly surrounded the tree and the ugly, dead oak gently took in the light, as if it were drinking it.

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### Chapter 72 – Strange Affinity to Magic (2)

Watching this charming spectacle, Max stealthily poked the light, shining with a warm glow. Then, the glob of light soaked into her hands like honey. Startled, Max pulled her hands away and Ruth bulged his eyes at the sight.

“How odd,” he said, lowering his hands by his side. After all the light had seeped into the tree, Ruth stroked the rough branches as if to check something and turned to face Max.

“Madam, it seems you have an affinity, although only a little, to mana.”

“A-affinity to m-mana?”

“It is the most basic talent required to practice magic.”

Max stared in wonder. She had what it takes to become a witch? Lost in deep thought, she stared down at her own hands when Ruth shrugged his shoulders.

“It’s only the most basic skill. It’s just like having a bit of agility which can help you become a swordsman. You can’t become a witch or a wizard for only having that.”

“Ah... I-I see...” Max drooped her shoulders at his words, unexpectedly dampened by his words waking her up to reality. Of course, there was no way she had any special skills.

Ruth smiled gently at her disappointed face. “Still, it’s a very valuable skill. There are many surprising sides to you.”

She cocked her head at him quizzically, “Su-surprising si-sides?”

“You can be surprisingly full of rage, you can bluff, you don’t want to lose, and you have an affinity to mana...”

Her face flushed at the unexpected descriptions. It didn’t feel like it was her at all. Yet, the man continued his impression of her, despite the embarrassment that was present on her face.

“The first time I saw you, I thought you were a quiet and weak lady. But the more time we spend time together, the further I get to learn about the timid madam – full of something new and interesting every time.”

Seeing his straight face uttering her compliments, Maxx could only reply, “I-it doesn’t sound I-like a c-compliment.”

“But it *is* a compliment,” Ruth said with a cheeky face.

But the man was ever as sardonic. Even compliments were given with a shrug and an impassive tone. Max pouted her lips and lightly kicked the dark roots of the tree sticking out of the soil.

“Anyways... so i-is it a-alive?” she tried changing the subject, feeling conscious of herself.

””” ”

“There’s no way of knowing.”

“W-what do you m-mean?”

What could he ever mean there was no way of knowing just after he casted the long and fancy mantra of a spell? When she looked at him through narrowed eyes, he nonchalantly shrugged.

“What I have done is inject nature’s mana into the tree. We can see the results when spring arrives. If green leaves sprout, then it has recovered, but if not, then it’s probably dead. I guess you can pluck it out then if it’s the latter.”

She looked up to the bare, dense branches and nodded. Garden landscaping was scheduled in spring anyways. Her eyes then glanced around the garden, picturing the intricate plan she had already made with the gardener beforehand. Max made up her mind to remove the tree if it didn't sprout young leaves in spring and replace it with colorful flowers and young saplings.

?

Completing its renovation, the Calypse castle was now getting ready for winter. The servants placed thick boards around the well to prevent the water from freezing, repaired the horse shed, and restocked the storage with ample amount of forage and firewood. Everyone was working hard to do their share for the upcoming freezing months.

The maids were busy as well. They crouched in the laundry room and washed clothes with their red and swollen fingers, diligently swept the floor, and spurned threads of fabric to practical clothes in the weaving room. They had no time to spare as they had to get the winter clothes ready for the guards before the weather got too chilly.

Rudis, losing his patience at the amount of tasks being delegated, carefully suggested to Max. "Madam, I'm afraid we simply lack the workforce and time to prepare everything for winter. How about we buy the fabric from a merchant?"

Max willingly accepted the idea as she had also seen enough of her maids overworking.

"H-how many do w-we need?"

"We have prepared half of what we need. If we can order the other half..."

Max scanned a pile of fabric folded neatly in the corner of the weaving room. She could already hear the nosy wizard lecturing her for placing a careless order. Her fingers carefully brushed across the parchment as she wrote the amount they needed and closely examined the amount of fabric prepared by the maids.

"I-is this e-enough?"

"Yes, that will be perfect, Madam." Rudis nodded, then continued to list everything else that needed attention. "We also need some leather straps and thread to hold the clothes in shape. Oh, and more needles for..."

"Madam, I'm sorry to interrupt, but we need you immediately. There has been an incident."

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### Chapter 73 – Familiar Fears (1)

Max, whose head was buried in her piece of parchment paper, writing down the list of materials from Rudis, popped her head up and looked at the door. There stood Rodrigo, looking very worried and urgent.

“W-whats w-wrong?”

“A man claiming to be Rob Midahas, lord of southern Libadon, has marched to the village entrance with thirty other knights. But he doesn’t have anything to prove his identity, which has caused a problem.”

“R-Rob... Midahas?” Max frowned at the unfamiliar name. Libadon was part of the allied countries of the west and happened to be the country that Anatol exchanged most frequently out of others. However, that didn’t mean she knew all the names to the lords in Libadon. Furthermore, there was no way Maximillian, who had been isolated from the noble since a young age, was able to identify a person only from a name.

“W-what is the l-lord of Li-Libadon do-doing in A-anatol?”

“He says he has made the long journey for a friendly meet up.”

“B-but w-we can’t just l-let them i-in...”

“We cannot allow an armed group of men to enter our territory without a clear identity,” Rodrigo agreed with her sentiments in a determined tone, which was rare for his gentle personality.

“While it’s frequent for outside merchants and soldiers to request an entrance since many malignant spirits reside near Anatol, some sort of identification to prove their status needs to be presented, no matter what. This is to prevent any thieves or forces from plundering the village during Lord Calypse’s absence.”

All the blood drained from Max’s face. She could feel the maids behind her hold their breath amidst the nervous silence. Her head went blank at the situation that was entirely new to her, but Max soon regained her composure and spoke.

“W-who would d-dare to l-loot a land g-guarded by t-the R-remdragon Knights?”

“We can’t be sure.”

Max turned her head at the sound at the new voice. It was Ruth, who ran inside the room all from the other end of the corridor after hearing the news.

“Everyone knows the Remdragon Knights are attending the King’s banquet. I’m suspicious about how they claim to have come to socialize while the lord is absent.”

Max turned pale. “R-Ruth, d-do you also t-think they have c-come to i-invade Anatol?”

“There is a possibility. Lord Calyspe is the main knight to have successfully suppressed the sect. In recognition of his contribution, he was handed the majority of the treasures of Dragon Lear. It’s not entirely odd for someone to covet this treasure and decide to attack the Remdragons.”

“T-then d-do we f-f-fight?”

””” ”

“If they act tough, it is appropriate for us to forcefully eradicate them. But as Rodrigo said, there are thirty knights...” he said and frowned with annoyance.

“If this man, Rob, really has thirty knights behind his back, it’s going to be a difficult battle. A low-class knight can easily take over ten guards. And if there is a high-class knight, then it’s needless to say.”

Hearing Ruth assumes a full-on battle, Max swallowed hard, anxious.

“And if this man really is what he says he is, then it’s a bigger problem. They might hold the fact that we forcefully turned them away against us and politically retaliate. Although we are part of the seven allied countries of the west, conflict between lords have always been present.

“T-then what d-do we d-do?”

“What do you think we should do, ma’am?” Ruth asked back.

Max flinched and hunched her back. Now with no Riftan around to guide her, Max, the Lady of the territory, had the responsibility to keep her village safe.

“I, I...” Max stuttered and clattered her teeth. She frantically bit her lip and tried to keep herself calm. “I-I’ll g-go to the g-g-gate and t-talk. I-I need to k-know w-what k-kind of p-people they a-are.”

“Fair point. You have to look at them to know who they are,” Ruth willingly agreed with Max.

“Allow me to prepare you, ma’am. You should be guarded in the case of sudden physical conflict. Rodrigo, let Sir Ovaron and Sir Sebrick know, immediately.”

“Y-yes, sir!” said Rodrigo as he ran out of the room.

“And ma’am, follow me if you will,” Ruth said as he quickly spun his body around.

Max handed the paper she was holding to a maid and walked after him. When they arrived at the garden, old man Kunel was leading two horses across the field. Ruth instantly took them by the reins.

“Do you know how to ride a horse?”

“Y-yes...”

To be honest, it was her first time riding a large horse like this, but she nodded, nonetheless. Max stepped in front of the slim mare and Kunel let out his hand to help her on the horse. When she got on the saddle, she tightly gripped the reins and squeezed her thighs to find her balance. After examining Max and seeing she did actually know how to ride a horse, Ruth hopped on to his.

“The soldiers will be lined up in the gymnasium. Follow me.”

And with that, he raced across the garden in a breeze. When Max followed him through a gate, she saw about thirty soldiers standing in an array. An old knight with white hair, who seemed to be the leader of the group, raised his voice at the sight of Ruth.

“So, there’s a guy in the front gate demanding to be granted entrance, huh?” he said while riding a horse and lightly tapping on his sword at the promise of bloodthirst. “Well, the poor guy should be ready to taste some blood.”

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## Chapter 74 – Familiar Fears (2)

Ruth then clarified, “Your job, sir, is not to go to battle, but to protect the Lady.”

“What?” the old knight said and whipped his head around to see Max. She straightened her back and spurred the horse towards him.

“N-nice to m-meet you.”

The old man scratched his cheek with his fingers at her careful greeting and replied.

“There is nothing to worry about, ma’am, as long as I, Ovaron, have your back.”

He then led the army of men through the gate with confidence. Ruth went with them and sent a nod to Max. She also tagged along and crossed the drawbridge, her heartbeat racing with the clatter of hoofs hitting against the stone floor.

As she continued to walk along the path she once took with Riftan on a different occasion, she became more and more uneasy. She pressed her lips together, anxious not to bite her tongue, and went down a steep hill and through the busy village.

She was frightened to death as she had never ridden a horse at such a fast speed. It was some time since Max maintained her tight grip on the rein and chased the soldiers in front of her when she finally saw the rampart. A young guard by the entrance hurried his steps towards the men on horses as soon as he saw them.

“You’re here!”

Reaching the gate, Ruth and the old knight jumped off their horses, and minutes later when she finally caught up with the crowd, Max got off as well with some assistance.

“Where is this so-called lord from Libadon?”

“He is just outside the gate. If you follow me here...”

“Madam, this way.”

Max moved her stiff legs and followed them up the stairs to the top of the rampart. There, she saw thirty-one men on horses on the other side of the wall. They all had fearsome, tanned faces and a long sword on each of their waists. Ruth leaned over and spoke to them, his voice loud and resonant.

“Who is the Lord from Libadon?”

“It is I, Rob Midahas,” said a man on a ginger horse. Max carefully examined him. He was a man in his mid-thirties, sturdy and strong, with light titian hair. The man looked up

to the top of the wall in turn, squinting his eyes to get a better view of the young man asking for him.

“Are you the lord of Anatol?”

””” ”

“I am merely an employee here at Anatol. The Lady here is my lord’s deputy,” Ruth said as he pointed at Max standing next to him. Feeling the man’s glance land on her, Max unconsciously drew back. At the sight of this, the man smiled with a sneer.

“Very nice to meet you. As you’ve heard, my name is Midahas, the ruler of Kaisa, located on the west of Libadon. I have heard impressive words about the dragon slayer in my hometown and have made a long journey to meet him, so I request you to open your gates and allow me with warmth.”

Max took a glimpse at Ruth. His arms were crossed, observing the situation. He didn’t look like he was about to help her. She then cleared her throat and opened her heavy lips and raised her voice.

“I-I heard y-you do not p-possess any s-sort of i-i-identification. I-it is our g-guideline to n-not a-allow, anyone u-unidentified.”

“I lost my identification plate during my journey. If you allow me in, I will immediately bring myself to the parish of Anatol and prove my identity.”

“A-Anatol d-d-does not allow u-unidentified i-individuals through t-the g-gates. T-this is an o-order by t-the lord, t-thus c-cannot be d-disobeyed. P-please go to a p-parish in a d-different t-t-territory to get y-your i-identification plate and v-visit us a-again.”

At her stuttering, yet determined speech, the man grimaced and replied in an irritated tone.

“I can’t understand a word you’re saying. Is there anyone else I can talk to that knows how to speak?”

With the insult thrown straight at her face, Max turned pale as a sheet.

“She is the Lady of the Anatol. I advise you to treat her with respect,” Ruth interrupted to defend her.

“I’m just saying I can’t understand her!”

Max hid her embarrassment and cried back.

“I-I m-made myself c-clear that I-I cannot o-open the gates. Come b-back with an i-identity p-plate!”

“We have travelled over and through the den of demons. Are you insisting on my exhausted men to return back to the dangerous road?”

The man was now speaking in a threatening tone. Max shrunk at his coercive attitude and could only say nothing through her shaky lips. Sensing his victory, the man shouted louder towards the top of the wall.

“Does the Lady of Anatol not have any mercy!”

“I-I...”

“If you say so, the next time I return, you will face hundreds of knights from Libadon! I cannot accept this kind of rudeness!”

“Y-you don’t h-have any i-identity... I-I don’t h-have a c-choice...”

“I told you I can give it to you once I get to your parish!”

His voice became more louder and more intimidating with every word. At his triumphant behaviour she was unable to refute, Max felt completely defeated. She was engulfed in fear – one that was so familiar and that reminded her of her past horrors, as sweat started to trickle down her forehead.

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## Under The Oak Tree

### Chapter 75 – The Lord’s Return (1)

Faced with a paralyzing fear, her body unconsciously froze. And soon, Max broke out into faint shudders. His mocking glare was a haunting, familiar sight for her – enough to crumble her defenses and render her mind blank.

Seeing their mistress shell-shocked, at a loss of what to do, something impatient and fuming surged inside Ruth for the man below them. Simply put, he wasn't able to stand it anymore and came up to support her.

"Stop crossing the line! Why the hell are you blaming her when you're the one who lost your own identification card? How can we trust thirty armed men to come in and not cause any problems?! Are you daft?!"

Yet his outburst was only taken with a pinch of salt, "Pff!" Rob Midahas glanced around his men in jest, "So you're locking the gates because Anatol's security isn't strong enough to deal with thirty men? I guess this place is full of cowards without their lord!" he then spat viciously.

"What did you say?!"

All this time, the knight, Ovaron had been trying to contain his temper behind the flanks when he heard this ridicule. He immediately moved forward, his blades almost singing for bloodlust in their sheath after the brazen words from the incorrigible man.

"Ruth! Open the gates immediately!" He gestured for the wizard in anger, his words magnifying the extent of his fury, "I'm going to b\*\*\*\*y slit these arrogant bastards' throats myself!"

"Sir Ovaron!"

Despite their difference in rank and age, Ruth fiercely glared at the older knight, who had already had his sword out, as a signal for him to be careful of his brash actions. Seeing the other party halt with some grievances, he then quickly whipped his head around and raised his hand high up in the air.

However, before he was able to do anything, a flame, along with a powerful growl, flew towards him without preamble. The scorching flames licked the walls without mercy, causing the stones to tremble violently at the heavy impact. And a scream tore out from Max as the world swayed before her eyes, and her hands frantically clung for life on to the battlement. At this open display of aggression, the guards stood back in confusion.

"Let's see you try!"

Rob Midahas instantly let out a resonating roar as he took out his sword. This was enough to plummet the situation into chaos. Max was only able to crumble down to her knees, astonished at the turn of events. Meanwhile, Ruth quickly snapped out from his shock seeing the bedlam unfurl before him. He swiftly made his way towards the defenseless Max and grabbed her up by the arm.

Max numbly followed after him as they ran down from the confines of the wall to safer grounds... the terror freezing her nerves being the only thing stopping her from

screaming. From the earlier rancorous attack of the flames, the tall gates had been shattered to cinders and the knights openly marched in with sounds of guttural victory.

“Shield!” Ruth yelled with his hand up. And upon his order, it was as if nature bent to his will as a bluish barrier of wind appeared, halting the knights’ advance. But this resistance was only momentary as an opposing knight swung his sword down and ripped the wind barrier apart with ease.

Ruth looked back in alarm. “He’s a high-ranked knight. Sir Ovaron!” he yelled to the older knight.

“Leave it to me!”

Despite a towering display of a wall, Sir Ovaron scaled down the stone walls, landing with an audible sound on the earth. On his descent, he cried and swung his heavy sword towards the battlefield. At the deafening noise of two blades clashing together with immense power, the wind ripped and split into half. Max tried to quickly flee the incoming man, but she felt so terrorized by fear that she tripped on a rock and fell to the ground.

””” ”

“Madam!”

Ruth, whose hands were tied with making barriers and unable to support her, could only look back and yell. Only a few steps from Max, was Sir Ovaron and the intruder in the middle of a ferocious battle.

The wizard and the guards were occupied with blocking the intrusion of the black-clothed knights while simultaneously protecting the civilians. The curious onlookers who had only come to see what was going on, all screamed and ran away at the unexpected battle that came before them.

Unable to muster any strength in her legs, Max barely stood up with the help from a nearby guard.

Ruth then yelled, “Madam! Please take refuge and go to a safe place!”

“Bu-but—” She started. Despite her dread, she knew she had to do something, anything! She was the mistress of this home – a home now being ruthlessly invaded by strangers!

Ruth seemed to see the determination in her eyes, but he could only root her back to reality, “Go, right now! You’re no help even if you stay...” his words suddenly faded at the end. The wizard’s eyes then shifted back towards the battlefield; his vigor seemed to fuel more energy into his spells.

Max trembled all over, feeling out her wits. But then she felt a weird, tingling sensation – a gut feeling – beckoning her to glance into the blue skies. It was right then, a guard shot an arrow into the sky and yelled,

“Re-remdragon Knights! They’re here! The Lord, the Lord has returned!”

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### Chapter 76 – The Lord’s Return (2)

The soldier manning the tower cried out in deference, palpable relief on his features at the arrival of these men capable of turning the battlefield around. And it was as if their entrance signified an ominous presence, as it all suddenly became eerily silent. The sounds of fighting and earsplitting clangs of swords halted, as if it was never there at all.

The protectors of Anatol all raised their heads, expectant and joyous, like a sunflower towards the bright sun as the intruders looked back in alarm and shock.

There, from up the green hills, only the sound of the hooves against earth rumbled against their ears as silver-armored knights stormed towards the castle. And when the face leading the knights came into closer view, all tension in Max’s body bundling her nerves tight immediately disappeared.

He was back. Yet this return was far from their first meeting; it marked a different feeling inside her...

It seemed like months when it had been only short of three weeks that Max had last seen his figure, now dashing down from the slopes as if he was able to overcome any challenge. And she rightly believes it so. While she was observing him close the distance between the gates and his horse, she felt something stir inside her heart.

One that of his presence giving her safety, and the second that of shame at having failed to protect their estate.

“... I guess some guests came over while we were gone.”

Riftan looked over the black-clothed knights from his majestic steed as he arrived near the battle that had ceased. The wind blew at his hair, wisps of dark locks dancing around his eyes that had thinned like a beast... and an inflamed one, about to devour those who stand in his way.

As an uncomfortable silence commenced, he suddenly drawled out, "What are guests that aren't invited called again?" he then held up his hand, and the Remdragon Knights behind him slowly surrounded the enemies in a circle.

One said, "Gatecrashers, leader."

"More like burglars," another spat.

The knights steadily gathered around the dumbfounded intruders while exchanging words, only then did they stop their horses from stepping forward when they had taken their place.

Max silently watched the confrontation from where she was. It was only a few moments ago that these same trespassers were going at them at a frenzy, at the height of their confidence. Now, as if they were overwhelmed by a pressuring sense of oppression from the newly-arrived Remdragon knights, they didn't even move an inch.

"You dare come into my lands and make a mess... then allow me to write, 'Praise to the ignorant and the valiant who didn't treasure their lives' on your tombstones for you."

His words were only softly spoken, yet the wind that brought them to its intended recipients blew chills down their spine. The sound of a sword being slowly drawn, as if he was taking his time, from its sheath, suddenly made the trespassers' face turn pale. The man who had announced himself as 'Rob Midahas' then hurriedly laid down his sword in an effort to diffuse the confrontation and yelled.

"I, I am Lord Rob Midahas, the ruler of Kai'Sa in Libadon!"

"...Lord?" Riftan stopped and cocked one of his dark eyebrows up.

"" "

Seeing Riftan's reaction, Rob was able to regain some of his confidence back and lifted his chin up, defiantly stating, "These men," he started to gesture to Ruth and the knights, "have committed disrespect by questioning my identity and refusing admittance! A small fight happened during the process. That's all there is to it!"

"A small fight you say..."

Riftan's answer came in a gloomy slur as his gaze unhurriedly passed over the injured guards on the ground to the gates that had once stood protecting his estate now on the ground in ruins. Rob's face became noticeably hard.

"I'll apologize for not controlling my anger and my overreaction. So... let's, let's let this one go. Yo-you wouldn't want to... make the situation worse, as well. Therefore—"

"I guess this means war."

His calm voice coldly swept across them. Riftan smiled, barring his teeth like a ferocious wolf as he slowly stirred his steed towards Rob Midahas. The knights steadily moved aside to open the way for their leader and even though he was entering the enemies' domain, there was not a hint of hesitation nor wariness on Riftan's face.

He continued his words ever so leisurely and serenely that it seemed monotonous to their ears.

"You brought soldiers and attacked the castle gate... this is an obvious declaration of war. In return – and after I cut your throat – I'll run to your land, break down the city walls and turn everything I see into shambles."

Rob Midahas felt his heart in his throat. "Are, are you insinuating you're going to break the peace agreement between the seven countries!? If-if you do that, the king of Libadon won't grant you forgiveness!"

"As soon as you broke the gates of my castle, you were no longer protected by the agreement."

At the casual declaration of revenge, even Max felt goosebumps erupt on her body and she unconsciously gripped the guards' forearm tighter. Riftan's face was strangely calm. Yet the serenity before her felt eerie, like the quiet before a brewing storm.

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## Under The Oak Tree

### Chapter 77 – Riftan's Anger



The man named Rob, apparently feeling the same distress to befall on him, hurriedly backed away with his face completely turned aghast. However, before he could retreat further, Sir Ovaron stood right behind him, his sword menacingly pointed at him, cutting off his only escape route.

Being forced into a corner, Rob's face twisted, and he suddenly shouted, "The-there are hundreds of knights in Kai'Sa who have sworn allegiance to me! If you kill me, then it will be war!"

"I look forward to that."

"Lord Calypse!" In the growing tempest, Ruth immediately made his way towards Riftan's side, who had his sword already out into the air. Seeing the wizard approach him, Riftan's dry gaze tilted towards him in question.

"If he really is a nobleman of Libadon, you can't kill him here. Once we take him into custody, we can negotiate with Libadon and sell him..."

"Are you arguing with my decision?" Riftan replied, boring his steely eyes into Ruth's smaller frame.

Ruth stood his ground, looking at him determinedly, "War brings nothing but loss. It's better to just follow the procedures and get some compensation in return."

"I refuse." Riftan spat coldly, the venom dripping from his words, "We can just barge into his land and take everything, who cares about lengthy procedures?"

It was a ruthless tone that conveyed he thought nothing of both the thirty-armed knights before them now and the hundreds of knights stationed in Kai'Sa.

Ruth let out a small sigh, "If you do that then it will cause friction with Libadon and..." he trailed off and suddenly looked back at Max, who was hiding in the back with the help of a guard.

"Must you defile the eyes of the lady even more? Please show some chivalry."

A frown rippled across Riftan's calm face that had been promising war a moment ago. When he glanced towards the back, trying to figure out what the wizard had meant, his eyes opened wide seeing Max unsightly sitting on the floor. Right away, a look screaming b\*\*\*\*y murder, incomparable with his fury from before, appeared on his still face.

He fiercely stared at Ruth and snarled, "Why on earth is my wife in a place like this?!"

"Isn't it natural that when a problem arises in the territory, it's the madam's responsibility to take care of it at the absence of the lord?"

Ruth stayed perfectly calm despite the ferocious aura that made even the knights around him freeze. Riftan gritted his teeth at the former's calm façade, then suddenly pushed his sword right under Rob's neck with lightning speed.

"Drop your weapon and get down from the horse... If you don't disobey, I'll let your neck stay connected to your head."

"Just, just let me go! I'll leave this land right away..."

"" "

"You want me to just let you go after you attacked my estate?" Riftan then cut his horse down violently. "It's either you die here or surrender. Your choice."

Rob's eyes quickly glanced around to grasp the situation. His men were completely surrounded by Remdragon's knights. Maybe realizing there was no chance of winning, he threw his sword away and came down from the horse. His knights, following his lead, also gave up their swords on the ground.

Riftan then signaled his knights with his eyes. "Tie everyone up and throw them into the dungeon."

Max could finally let out a long sigh of relief, her shoulders visibly relaxing. She couldn't believe that after he came, the whole situation had been cleared up in a matter of minutes.

"Ma-madam, are you all right? Are you hurt anywhere—"

"What were you thinking?!"

Max, who was trying to stand up with the help of a guard, felt her back stiffen. When she raised her head, she saw him sitting tall on his horse with his back to the sun. Despite the bright backlight, she could clearly see the anger perceptible on his face.

She stuttered in reply, "I-I heard there was a problem so..."

"What the hell are you saying you could have done?" he snarled, gripping the reins of his horse until his knuckles turned white.

At that moment, Max felt the blood from her face drain. She hastily bent her head down to hide her face white from shock. It felt excruciatingly suffocating, as if all the air from her lungs had fled, to see the person who treated her with such kindness till he left, give her such a chilly look.

"I, I..."

She desperately scrambled for words to defend herself, but nothing came to mind. Because it was as he said – there was nothing she could have done... Max couldn't finish her sentence and could only bite her lips tight she was sure they would bleed.

She suddenly heard a harsh curse ring out from above her, and she felt her body rise into the air. Max stifled a yelp as Riftan snatched her up from the waist and sat her in front of him. When that was done, he then shouted back to the men behind him.

"I'm going to the castle first. Clean everything up."

He didn't even stop to listen for a reply and just drove his horse away like lightning towards the castle. The youths, who had gathered far away to watch, hurriedly opened up the way for them. Max clung onto his bosom, which was wrapped in hard armor, and closed her eyes tight. His forearm, surrounded by a cold bracer, was fastened around her waist so tight it hurt.

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## Under The Oak Tree

### Chapter 78 – One Head for Every Scratch (1)

Frightened she had stepped out of line, Max had immediately cowered in fright, fearing she had made him angry with her. She'd been around angry men, her experiences far too many to keep track of. It was almost second nature for her to begin feeling faint whenever a bigger man would step towards her, threaten her.

But it wasn't just the violence that frightened her right now. It was the fact that someone who treated her so well, cared for her greatly, had now begun to bear his fangs at her. She felt like a dog punished by their owner for their insolence.

She wanted to beg him not to hurt her, hate her. She knew she messed up, but her voice refused to come out, so instead, she only clung tightly onto his cloak in her desperation.

“Come on down,” Riftan told her, shaking her out of her treacherous thoughts, and she realized they finally made it into the castle. He reached out to her, offering her his hand to help her dismount the horse, and Max hesitantly grabbed it.

She slid down gently, until Riftan pulled her close, her body flush to his, hefting her up in his arms and carrying her through the garden. A rush of servants came, bowing in greeting, but Riftan paid them no mind, preoccupied with only one thing.

“Put Talon in the stables,” he quickly ordered them as he finally entered the Great Hall.

Max meekly looked up, watching his expression and studying the details of his face. He barely even spared a glance around the hall that she had gone through extreme lengths to redecorate in weeks’ time. Max feels her body tremble more, the fear growing inside her...

‘He’s angry, really angry,’ she cried silently in her mind, before she gulped down the fear and spoke up, “Ri-Riftan,” she began softly, “I-I’ll walk by my-myself.”

“Don’t talk,” he quickly told her, as he sprints up the stairs, the carpet cushioning his steps as Max flinches at his harsh tone.

Despite the added weight of his armor, and her in his arms, along with running up two flights of stairs, Riftan barely broke a sweat. He quickly entered their room, letting her down finally, and closed the door behind them.

Max was left in the middle of the room, standing idly awkwardly as she waited for her punishment, when Riftan gave her an intense gaze after locking the door.

‘Is this where it starts?’ she fretted, ‘What if, what if he hurts me physically? Why is he so angry? I only tried to fix things like a lord’s wife would do!’

Her knuckles turn white as her grip on her skirt tightened up. When she finally found her voice again, and opened her mouth to speak, something was already covering her mouth.

“Mmph!” she muffled, her eyes widening in surprise.

His hand, still in iron gloves, came up to her face, firmly claspng her head in place as he held her at the back of her head. His chapped lips move against hers, tongue prodding her lips open to enter her mouth.

Max hands came up, resting at his firm hands, gripping it to steady herself.

Her body was painfully pressing up against his armor, her pulled flush towards his, as his stubble rubbed her smooth chin. She let out surprised gasps from time to time, eyes

wavering as she glanced at him. When he finally pulls away, his gaze hardened as he looked down on her in his arms...

””” ”

“What would you have done had I not gotten there on time?” he asked her, his frustration leaking out of his voice, as he cradled her cheeks carefully. Max flinched when the cold metal came into contact, but she eventually relaxed against it.

“I wa-wasn’t ex-expecting they’d be a-able to break through the ga-gates,” she answered him truthfully.

“You shouldn’t have been there in the first place!” he hissed at her, “No matter what happens, you never. Ever. Go out there! Especially when it’s dangerous for you!” he exclaimed in frustration before lowering his tone of voice, “Alright? Do you understand?” he asked her, his concern shining out as he stared into her eyes.

So taken with him, she quickly nodded in assent and relief quickly fills him, the tension rolling off his shoulders and he gave out a deep sigh as he finally calmed down.

After a moment’s hesitation, Max finally reached out to him, her hand resting against his chin, rubbing soothing circles. Worn out, Riftan leaned into her touch, dipping his head as he pulls her face closer, resting their foreheads against each other.

At this proximity, the grassy scent of his hair tickled Max’s nose. She wondered if he had slept on the verdant fields last night instead of a cot or bed.

“When I saw you,” he began, his voice quaking as he spoke, “On the ground, I felt like I was about to lose it, d\*\*n it!” he cursed, his arms tightening around her, as if to keep her close to him, “I came as fast as I could, not even to rest, and when I saw you like that-”

“I-I’m so-sorry.” Max whispeeds to him, but Riftan’s eyes turn grave as he gets lost in his thoughts...

“Had I not been quicker, had arrived a second longer... things would’ve been so much worse, f\*ck it...”

“I’m so-sorry I scared you. I’m re-really so-sorry.” She winced a little bit, pulling at his arm, softly telling him he was beginning to get rough as he rubbed her chin. Remembering he still had his armor on, Riftan finally released her, and proceeded to remove the metal constraining him.

When his gauntlets were gone, and vambraces off, he neared Max and pulled her flush to him once more in an embrace.

“Are you hurt anywhere?”

“No.”

“Let me check.” he told her, quickly pulling away. Max felt like a moth to flame, her eyes mesmerized by his black orbs as he looks over her with concern, “Let me see for myself you aren’t hurt,” he added as Max could feel her heart throbbing painfully against her chest, her breathing echoing in her ears.

She remembered the lonely nights, the endless worry of when he’d return. The cold nights of when she curls around in on herself, hugging herself to sleep in a wide bed all alone, waiting desperately for him to come home.

His calloused hands flitted everywhere on her body. From her tousled hair, to her face, resting on her shoulders, and grabbed her robe, pulling it down abruptly. Max choked back her surprise, her body jolting as the air hit her skin. She could feel the sweat trickle down her neck as he proceeded to examine her body.

As his hands continued roaming, she felt a rush of heat begin pooling, replacing the ice-cold sensation of fear from before. Her eyes followed his hands, watching the way his skin touched hers...

His hands soon went up once more, clasping the pin in her hair, pulling it off and throwing it to the ground in haste. He grabs the back of her hair once more and pulls her close to him.

“One scratch, one head,” Riftan suddenly whispered in her ear.

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## Chapter 79 – One Head for Every Scratch (2) | 19

Max blinked in confusion. “What?” she could only utter in reply.

“Each scratch I find on you, one of their heads rolls down their shoulders,” he clarified for her in another warm whisper, and Max felt goosebumps all over her arms with his words. There was a different kind of intensity when he said it in a hushed voice, much like a silent prayer. She was so used to hearing him shout in anger, like a raging forest fire.

Max trembled beneath his touch like a dragonfly caught in a spider's web.

His deft fingers made quick work of the straps holding her dress together, as she felt them begin loosening up, and pulled down her chest. His dark eyes swept over her figure.

From her pale shoulder blades, to her clavicle, down her b\*\*\*\*s, still covered with a thin cloth. She felt her breath tighten in anticipation...

"One head," he finally said, eyes quickly spotting one scratch before dragging the dress further down to expose more of her skin. When he reached her forearm, he saw the angry discolored skin, and his lips curled into a snarl.

Flustered, Max poorly attempted to cover up her bruise.

"I got this from the li-library." she excused, "When I bumped in-into some-something."

"Don't lie." he snapped at her...

"I-I'm not ly-lying! Nhng!" she murmured as he gently pressed a kiss onto her bruise, the words dying in her throat, watching as he slowly made his way down. After nipping gently at her pulsepoint by the wrist, Riftan straightened up, h\*\*\*\*d one of his arms beneath her knees, and hefted her up effortlessly, with his other arm supporting her back.

In reflex, Max brought her arms to circle around his nape, her clavicle cradled beneath the crook of his neck. He dipped his head, planting a series of gentle pecks as he slowly made his way towards their bed.

"Ri-Riftan, re-really, I-I'm not hurt," she insisted, but Riftan was stubborn, gently laying her down on the bed as he towers over her...

"I said I'd check for myself," he told her, finally discarding her dress, pulling it off from the waist down and haphazardly threw it onto the floor. Feeling utterly exposed with just the quaint cloth covering her chest, Max averted her eyes nervously.

His hands travelled down her legs, stopping by her ankles as he took off her shoe, and then the other, rolling up her underskirt. She couldn't hold back her grimace when he brushed upon the scrape she had gotten when she fell to the ground.

Immediately, Max clammed up, shutting her legs closed.

"This is no-nothing!" she continues, "I o-only fell by my-myself!"

“They’ve sealed their fate with this.” he growls lowly, his eyes glaring deeply at the wound, a dark glint in his eyes. Max reflexively squeezed his arm gently, gaining his attention.

””” . ”

“Re-really, it does-doesn’t hurt. Don’t do that be-because of me.” she begs, and he frowns at her.

“They not only attempted an invasion on my lands, but also hurt my wife. It’s my right to kill them and their blood to make them pay for their crimes.” he tells her, “That won’t even be enough to satisfy my bloodlust. I need to make an example now, to prevent anything of similar nature to occur in the future.” he explains, and Max’s lips tremble...

“But you-you’ve o-only just a-arrived...” her choked sob spilling out as he quickly looked up at her in shock. With a roll of her eyes, Max refused to avert her gaze as she continued on despite the tremor in her voice, “If we go to war, you have to go far a-away a-again. And I will have to be a-alone.”

“F\*\*k,” he curses softly, a hand immediately coming up behind the nape of her neck and pulled her down, smashing their lips in a searing kiss. She could feel his desire for her, his want to devour her, pull her closer than was physically possible.

And despite her best wishes to do so too, her neck was aching along with her body with the awkward way it was currently bending. Sensing her discomfort, Riftan pulls away and adjusts them accordingly, his hand pulling her Schumi down to her waist, and cups her b\*\*t as he lifts her.

She felt her head spin when he lifted her, gasping at the cold metal of his breastplate as she came into contact with it, in contrast with his warm palm. She moaned as his tongue swooped in, tasting every corner of her mouth, tangling around hers before he pulled away with a string of saliva connecting their mouth.

His eyes bore into her intently. “You... what are you doing with me?” he muttered in an anguished tone.

He licked his lips, removing the rest of her clothes and threw it amongst the others on the floor. Max was now curled up comfortable, bare as a newborn babe for him to see. His warm hands immediately came up to her chest, cupping her soft mounds, kneading it before diving in and wrapping her taut nubs into his warm mouth.

Her hands immediately buried their fingers, carding itself around his hair, lightly pulling at it as she elicited a breathy moan.



The feel of her armor against her naked skin was strange. She felt weak, helpless, and vulnerable. Her eyes caught sight of his neck, its sweat glinting as the armor reflected its light, giving his glossy black hair a mesmerizing shine.

Riftan felt his vision blur in front of him as his hunger for her grew intense, his ministrations beginning to get rougher by the second. He felt like he was losing control of his faculties, pulling her flush against him so hard, she feared he would crush her to bits.

She gasped at the increasing sensation of her tips rubbing against the cold iron roughly as an electric sensation ran up her body and she twitched in pleasure...

"You were always in my mind, f\*ck..." he breathed out in that husky tone, planting fierce kisses in every inch of her mounds, "Every day ever since we've parted these past few weeks. It's been so hard."

A gasp escaped from her lips as he kneaded her chest, "It was almost like it's been years since I've last seen you," he tells her as his mouth swallows her other peak.

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## Under The Oak Tree

### Chapter 79 – One Head for Every Scratch (2) | 19

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## Under The Oak Tree

### Chapter 80 – I Want All of Him (1) | 19

Riftan slid his hands down, calloused palms rubbing against sensitive skin as he trails down to the inside of her thighs. He muttered feverishly against her skin, his warm breath spreading jitters as she spreads her legs to accommodate him between her. She let out choked s\*\*s as she also wrestled with the urge to clamp her legs closed due to the pain.

However, the decision was made for her as Riftan gently grips her thighs, spreading them further apart, his head dipped down as he buried his face between her legs. Shocked by his movements, Max squeaked and squirmed her body, twisting it to break away as she flipped her body on its stomach and pulled on the sheets.

Despite her valiant efforts, she could not escape his hands and their grip on her. He pulled her back down, rubbing the pads of his thumbs in circular motions against her skin as he buried his face between once more as he kept her still.

“Ri-Rift.. ngh!” she moaned, her thighs reflexively clamping around his head as she felt him delve into her. Riftan grunted at the sudden interruption, and grabbed her ankles, prying them open to prevent any more interruptions.

Her breaths turned ragged as she lied down, pulling at the pillow and biting at it to muffle her sounds. Her body shook as he continued with his tongue circling gentle strokes on her petals. She still couldn’t believe he would do such an obscene thing.

It wasn't the first time she experienced something like this, but it didn't mean she was used to it. Her body felt so warm – she could feel it betray her as it welcomed Riftan with no hesitation. Max threw her head back, her mouth agape as his stubble tickled her thighs.

She shivered at the sensual feeling she got at hearing his breaths against her skin. It was e\*\*\*\*c.

“Wait a little more,” he breathed out to her in a husky tone, “Then I’ll put it in.”

Her hips thrust upwards, as if telling him to hurry up. In response, his fingers began caressing her, trying to calm her erratic movements as he quickly removed his pants, freeing his hardened member.

It sprang up in full attention, eager and stiff to enter her.

She could hardly find the time to be embarrassed now. Max moaned at the growing sensation building up inside her, the warmth pooling at her gut. Her hands flew to the back of his head, gripping his hair and pulling at it lightly as she pulled him deeper into her.

She could feel his warmth make contact, their nether regions rubbing against each other as they rutted together. She could feel herself lose control as she incessantly rubbed her already moist flesh against his hardened member.

“F\*ck.” Riftan hissed as she grinded against him. His hands gripped her waist, steadying her before he aligned himself and rammed deep into her already wet walls in one swift motion. He groaned at the sensation, of her insides sucking him in greedily. He began to thrust, hips pulling and pushing as he hit her in her sweet spot.

Max sobbed as she clung onto him.

She could feel the slight sting as he moved inside her. It's been a while since they've done it, but it still left her unsatisfied, wanting more of his body. She moved her own hips in a circular motion, meeting with his lunges as he crushed her body into his.

He was still in his armor.

His eyes raked over her body; his lips shivered as he took the pretty way her skin flushed. Dark, beautiful eyes stared at her as if to devour her. Unfortunately, he was the one to be eaten tonight.

”””” ”

She wrapped her legs around his waist tightly, urging him to move. She couldn't believe she'd done such a thing.

“Ugh, what you do to me...” he mumbled softly as Max pulled him closer to her.

“Ri-Riftan...” she looked up at him, her eyes pleading as he desperately tried to control his urges.

*Harder, just like last time, please, lose control...* she begged with her eyes.

With one more pull from her legs, harder than before, Riftan felt a dam broke as his desires grabbed hold of him full force. He felt himself lose consciousness for a moment before he eyed her with deep seated desire.

He picked up his pace, ramming deeper into her...

Harder...

He wanted to break her, turn her into a sobbing mess. He could feel her growing desperation for him as her body writhed with every thrust, her toes curling deliciously as she spread her legs further.

He felt his breath hitch at the sight of her, as he suddenly felt faint.

The sound of the creaking bed had numbed her ears. His armor clanging loudly as sounds of flesh hitting flesh joined the fray. He whispered her name over and over...

“Max... Max...”

He let out a long and drawn out moan.

It made Max feel many different things as she heard it. She found it beautiful, just like how everything about him was for her. Be it his face, the way his eyes were lidded with desire. She insatiably drank in the sight of him as she lightly pawed at his face.

Riftan drew her in by the waist as he dived in for a kiss as he pressed in deeper. But no, it wasn't enough. **Deeper**, Max wanted him to go deeper, impale her to the depths she hadn't known existed.

“Ah, d\*\*n it.” Riftan cursed as he pulled away, finally breaking free of his l\*\*t, “I didn't even take my armor off.” Instinctively, Max clung on to him tightly as he untangled their limbs. She could hardly believe the audacity of her body asking for more.

At the feel of her grip, Riftan looked down on her flushed face, chest heaving heavily and out of breath. He chuckled, resumed to untangle their limbs, rubbing soothing circles along the way on her thighs.

“Just a moment.” He told her, “We'll be at it again in a second.” He finished, as he finally managed to stand up.

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