

Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 81 – I Want All of Him (2) | 19

“No, I...” Max began protesting as she closed her legs once he was gone almost immediately in embarrassment. Riftan’s deep gaze refused to move away from her as he made quick work of his armor, throwing the breastplate, shoulder pads, greaves, boots and his tunic haphazardly to the floor.

On his back glistened the thin sheen of sweat, as the sunlight poured in from the window. His muscles flexed as he moved, much like a skintight golden armor. Max found herself enamored with the sight of his naked torso.

It used to be the sight of a man would cause her so much terror. However, with Riftan, it made her feel all warm and fuzzy inside, so unlike with their enemies who would tremble at the sight of him. She could feel her heart thundering against her chest...

She wanted to touch him.

“Come here.” He whispered as he tossed his pants off and sat on the edge of the bed, fingers moving in come hither motion. “Come sit on top of me.”

“Ri-Riftan, I-”

“You’re not satisfied yet, aren’t you?” he asked her, quirked up a brow in her direction, “I’ll make you full again.” He said, his hands moving to grab his member. She hesitated for a moment, before doing as he told, watched in a sensual thrill as he pumped his hands on his length, making it go hard as she moved to straddle his hips.

His free hand gripped her soft thigh,s guiding her as he steadied her on his lap. She tried to stand up again, her embarrassment getting the best of her, but his grip on her waist prevented her from escaping.

He drew her in, slowly, mouth quickly wrapping itself around her chest as he scraped his teeth around her perked nubs. She moaned as she felt him rubbing his now hardened member against her petals, the touch teasingly light. Her arms snaked around his head to pull him closer.

It was as if she was possessed – her finger wound themselves around his hair, pulling at him, hugging him closer to her peaks. It was as if her body was demanding for him to be closer. She buried her face, inhaling the scent of his hair as she rubbed her smooth cheek against it.

He gave one upward thrust, and entered her until he was fully sheathed inside. Max shuddered in pain and satisfaction simultaneously. Their limbs entwined around each other’s like snakes coiling around during mating season.

“You, you... you were about to go crazy without me too, right?” Riftan breathed out, his desperation leaking out of his voice as he stared at her. Max stared at him with hooded eyes, her body warm as it was wrapped around his, heart pounding hard against her chest.

It felt like it would burst.

“Hey, tell me.” He prodded once more, “I’m not the only one going insane, right?” he repeated in a low growl and Max moaned.

“Yes, I was a-about to go cra-crazy.” She admitted as she mumbled her words, her mind muddled with pleasure.

He gritted his teeth as he continued to pound against her, his hips thrusting in deeper strokes as her body shuddered with the force and intense pleasure. Her nails dug into his skin as her hands found purchase on his neck. And with every deep thrust, her wetness clung to his skin, driving him mad.

Her inner walls scraped against his hot, throbbing length, wracking her nerves with endless desire as she rolled her hips in tandem with his. Despite their skin already rubbing against each other, she still wanted to pull him closer, bury him deeper into her.

””” ”

Max cried out, the slick of their sweat made it harder for her to hold on.

More, just a little more, she chanted inside her mind. The heat coiling around her gut...

She wanted to swallow him whole, devour every last inch of him.

Mine, take me... her voice echoed inside her thoughts as she hugged him tighter, clinging onto him for dear life...

“Max... Max... ngh...” he moaned against her ear, his warm breath hitting her earlobes.

Max pulled away as she opened up her eyes to look at him.

So beautiful, she thought.

To think such a specimen would look at her with such desire, filling every crevice of her body with want and satisfaction...

Staring at her as if she was the only one for him.

The floodgates opened as he filled her as promised and Max felt like crying.

The cackle of the fire as it danced on the wood, and the rattling sound woke Max up from her slumber. Before she knew it, the day had ended, and now it was dark outside.

She blinked a few times, her eyes adjusting, before she pulled herself up as quick as she could when she spotted him. Riftan stood in front of the fireplace, his gaze trained intensely onto the burning logs.

Despite her efforts, her legs were stubborn, unmoved as the strength from her body left her. She let out a soft groan in protest, when Riftan quickly spun around to see her trying to get up.

He must've heard her.

He was already dressed comfortably, a black tunic with wet spots all over, indicating he had taken a bath shortly before.

"You're quite the light sleeper, aren't you?" he told her, his eyes glinted with amusement as he let out a low chuckle. Max shook the sleep away from her mind.

"I di-didn't e-even know you washed up." She told him, and he hummed at her, suddenly walking towards her.

"I wanted to wait until you woke up to take a bath together, but I needed to ask some questions." He informed her, planting a soft kiss on her bare shoulder blades. She felt her cheeks flush, as she looked up at him with nervousness.

"So, you in-interrogated them?"

"Yes." He sighed as he stared back to the fire, "I even summoned the clergy to verify on of their status."

"So there's, he was re-really an a-aristocrat..?" she asked, as Riftan grew silent.

The frown he gave her for her question made her tense up.

Why was she asking so carefully?

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Chapter 82 – A Bold Kiss (1)

Riftan answered in a slightly disconcerted tone, “That’s right. He was a nobleman from Libadon.”

Max suddenly felt faint with Riftan’s confirmation. Did I do something wrong again? There was a nagging suspicion alight in her mind that perhaps things wouldn’t have gone astray had she acquiesced to the man’s demands and offered him a peaceful entry to Anatol...

Seemingly sensing the worries from her scrunched face, he replaced his hands towards her disheveled hair, curling his fingers around her locks carefully before pushing her to him so he could place a chaste kiss on her cheeks. It was a gesture meant to comfort her anxiety. He then proceeded to vanquish any sort of overthinking in her,

“But he wasn’t a feudal lord as he claimed. He was only the son. He wasn’t too favorable of his father choosing his half brother as the successor to the family. Lo and behold, he stole his family treasure and escaped with it to Whedon.”

Riftan softly unbundled the knots in her fiery mane as he continued, “He’s been wandering around the country with the knights who followed him, and then caught a whiff of a rumor that I seized rare treasures from the dragon expedition.”

Max’s eyes widened at this information. “Then... di-did he came here to hu-hurt Riftan?” she replied in a worried tone.

When this question reached his ears, the fingers playing with her locks froze momentarily. For a while, his gaze was only trailed upon her in scrutiny – but very much out of fascination. Max found his steady gaze bewildering and almost retreated from his touch when he suddenly burst into laughter.

“He’s not that insane.” He said, a small smile on his lips, “He just never thought I’d cross the land from Drakium to Anatol in eight mere days. He got his timing wrong, it was far off.”

Come to think of it, Max did remember Ruth telling her that Riftan would be able to shorten the travel from 15 to 10 days should he hurry. For him to be able to curtail that to two more days – he must have been traveling in great haste.

“Or... was it I who got the timing well? Had I been a day or two late... it would have been terrible...” His words suddenly trailed off as he went deep in thought. “He had three men with him that were high-ranking knights. Rob Midahas himself wielded a

powerful magic device. It would have been difficult – maybe even impossible – to stop his troops with the remaining soldiers in Anatol.”

“Ma-magic... tools?” Max asked with some uncertainty. The realm of magic and their nuances still came as a strange existence and knowledge to her.

“It was the family heirloom that he stole. A magic tool capable of conjuring a high level flame spell. It’s what turned the gate to cinders.” At the memory of the blown off gate, his face suddenly hardened.

“With Remdragon out of the territory, he might have thought he probably had the chance of winning. In fact, it would have been a struggle to locate him had he robbed our vaults and fled to Libadon by the time I got here.” He growled in anger at the thought, like an awakened beast ready to fight.

Seeing him become more heated, Max anxiously grasped his arm. While she knew his fury was with reason, there still lies the fact that he wouldn’t be able to avoid damaging conflict should he recklessly harm someone of nobility. Even if that said noble did something senseless.

When Riftan looked down and caught sight of her anxious eyes, he only smiled bitterly, apparently aware of this fact as well.

“I was meant to cut his head off and hang it on the wall. An example for those who want to invade our walls. But... it truly would be devastating to engage in a war.”

Max knew Riftan was stubborn to his roots, therefore when she heard the man speak of a compromising tone, she was quite taken aback. “The-then...?”

””” ”

“At the break of dawn tomorrow, I will be contacting his father. And then I’m going to yell at him to discipline his child after I tell him to compensate for the damage.”

Faced with an answer that spoke of little violence, saved, possibly, for some minor cussing, Max sighed in relief. Riftan was quite satisfied with the idea, even more so seeing that his wife was contented with it. Finally, finding a conclusion to the dreary matter, he began to move his lips to her shoulders, placing soft kisses on her skin as a small smile formed on his lips. His kisses tantalizingly moved towards her décolletage and then to her warming cheeks, and as he moved closer to her Max could smell a fragrant scent from his damp hair.

Suddenly, Ruth’s words came to mind, that of him telling her Riftan would probably pout if he urged him to use scented soap to be more satisfactory in the Madam’s eyes. She couldn’t help the laugh that bubbled out from her chest. This, in turn, prompted a curious look from the oblivious watcher.

“Why are you laughing?”

“Well, the, the scent of ro-roses... from yo-your hair...” she frankly began causing a faint blush to cross his cheeks.

“I only thought.. you’d like it more if it smells good...”

Watching him smooth his wet locks hurriedly in embarrassment, Max felt heart tighten.

It was only some time ago when she first met him. Back then, with his menacing words and towering figure, she had surmised he would be as fierce as her father – if not, even worse... Yet she never thought it actually would be the polar opposite. A man that was unlike his external appearance could be so kind to a fault...

And she never thought she would now find him so lovely, this husband of hers whom she had been so afraid of once.

“Um... am I not manly enough?” he suddenly murmured, breaking her off from her trail of thoughts. As he sniffed the lingering scent of soap on his body, something compelled Max to slowly rose despite her drowsy body and softly press her lips over his cheeks. At the soft touch, his reaction was instantaneous: body hardening like a stone.

Realizing her brazen actions, her head felt faint as a searing blush crept to her face. Yet she was resilient on placing one more kiss at the tip of his chin – she might as well go all the way.

“Oh, no. It-it smells go-good. And Riftan, yo-you are... always manly.”

Riftan, who had been struck silent all along finally uttered, “... Then I’ll use this soap for the rest of my life.”

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 83 – A Bold Kiss (2)

The next moment his lips were on hers as his hands snaked around her waist to pull her flush against his chest. Something tingled inside her as he gently caressed her soft mounds in ardor. At the unexpected way her body reacted to his touch, Max began to slip from his grasp in embarrassment.

“Oh, you, you already...” she tried to fumble for words and ultimately ended up gesturing to his damp hair as if trying to say she didn’t want to mess it up.

“What are you talking about?” His gaze intensely bored into her, leaving her no room for escape from his clutches. “You seduced me first.”

The latter only widened her eyes at this. “No-not se-seduce...no...”

Indeed, she had kissed him boldly – a first of hers – yet she had done it out from the sweetness that sprung from inside her... though it necessarily didn’t mean she wanted to pull him back under the covers! Yet it seemed her futile reasoning was only drowned by his intense affection for her. One that she felt lost in the more she dwelled on it.

His top was suddenly off, and his naked, beautifully sculpted torso decadently shined in the light, bringing a thrill to her blood. He rushed at her without another second, encasing her lips in a hard kiss, rough and desperate.

“You’ve earned it yourself, Maxi.” He whispered like a drunken man as he pushed her under him with little strength.

Only his voice, like a sickeningly sweet bass, rang out through her ears as the hours burned. Like a succubus, he drained the strength out from her body in fervor – she was only his and he was only hers. The satisfaction of their joint bodies was much greater than the initial pain and she eventually succumbed to his persuasion and needs, her arms locked against his neck as the night gently cradled them to a world only theirs.

The next day, Max woke up only after midday. As per routine, she washed and dressed with the help of a maid. Despite having stayed up all night, Riftan was already gone as soon as dawn broke, having went out to deal with the intruders. Having remembered he had traveled a long way, she felt sorry he wasn’t able to rest properly.

“Madam, are you uncomfortable anywhere... ?” Rudis, who was diligently brushing her tangled locks, asked in a worried tone, a hint of anger on the maid’s usually cool face. Max immediately shook her head.

“Oh, no... I’m-I’m all right.”

“The wizard said he’d take care of the wound...” The maid persisted, concern becoming more evident on her face, “Should I bring him in right now?”

“Oh, it’s ju-just a slight injury... it’s no-nothing.”

The older woman was currently fussing over a wound she had gained from the battlefield – yet to Max, it was merely a little scratch on her leg when she fell. Max shifted her eyes down, touching the fresh wound from yesterday that stretched on her shin. Compared to this meager wound, the guards must have suffered more severe injuries from the enemies' sword. She shook her head fervently, not wanting to fuss with such a little scratch.

"It's o-okay, you do- don't have to do...."

"Oh, no. It could become a scar later on...." Rudis, who rarely spoke strongly, soon clamped her mouth shut, thinking her attitude was becoming presumptuous. After some time, she finally said, "Then, I'll get some ointment."

"Wi-will you?"

"" "

Max answered back, feeling apprehensive at the thought of a scar forming. Rudis hurriedly went out from the room and came back bringing a round bottle of medicine and some clean bandages. While it wasn't a wound that required bandages, Max obediently applied the medicine under Rudis' insistence and wrapped it with the clean cloth to prevent it from being contaminated.

"Tha-thank you," she softly said after the ordeal was done.

The maid straightened up, brushing her skirt straight. "I'll bring the meal to your room."

"Oh, no. I'll e-eat at the ha-hall and do the re-rest of things I didn't do ye-yesterday..."

"The Lord told me to let you stay in the room and rest today."

An awkward look crossed Max face at Rudis' words. While it was true she was quite weary from the several rounds of love-making they did throughout the night... it wasn't to the point where she wanted to just curl up and let the day pass. Besides, didn't she only wake up at noon? She didn't want to be stuck around doing nothing in the room, and alone, while he was already out and working without proper rest.

"I-I'm a little surprised from ye-yesterdays' fuss but... I'm not sick," she began.

"But the lord told me...."

"I-I will tell hi-him."

With her stubborn firmness, Rudis no longer refuted and answered with a quiet nod. Max then left the room with a thick shawl draped around her shoulders to shield herself from the chilly afternoon breeze that was even pouring in from her open shutters. She

walked down the hallway, sweeping her sights down the clean, newly washed window frames and laid out carpets.

“B-By the way... Di-did Riftan say so-something about.. the ca-castle?”

At the question, Rudis became embarrassed. She hesitantly replied, “He couldn’t afford to look around because of the commotion yesterday.”

“Ah... ye-yes.”

“However, the knights were stunned.” Rudis added hurriedly as soon as Max looked dejected. There was an unusually bright smile on the face of the taciturn maid.

“They arrived at the Great Hall for dinner late into the night yesterday, and the first time they arrived at the castle, they praised it for the astounding changes.”

Max perked up hearing this. “Re-really?”

Rudis nodded again at her query. They then stepped down the stairs though the hallway, Max footsteps bouncing with every footfall. As soon as she appeared, the maids cleaning the hall’s windows would straighten up and bow politely towards her.

When she finally entered the hall after exchanging greetings with the other servants, Ruth and three of the Remdragon knights, who were eating, raised their heads towards her. Fixed with their gazes, Max suddenly halted where she stood.

Unless it was a special day, the knights usually ate their breakfast and lunch at the hall as accommodated by the castle. It was the first time she had encountered them without Riftan by her side, therefore her eyes flitted to and fro, uncertain with her next action.

“Are you all right? You fell pretty bad yesterday.”

Ruth broke the awkward silence that lingered in the hall. His hair was disheveled, as if he had just woken up from sleep as usual. He yawned, ignorant of the tension in the room and looked Max up and down. “I thought you’d broken bones since Lord Calypse was acting so desperate towards me. But it looks like you’re all intact.”

“... It-it’s only a li-little scra-scratch,” she muttered softly in return.

“I thought so.” He flatly replied and pulled out the chair next to him. “Sit down first. Bring the madam her lunch too,” he then gestured to the servants, the latter bowing without another second thought.

Max cast a quick glance at the face of other knights, which didn’t betray a trace of their emotions, and resignedly sat herself down in front of the table. It seemed too awkward and improper to just leave. Yet even when she was already seated, uncomfortable

silence still prevailed. Max waited impatiently for the meal to come, and when she couldn't stand the silence, she finally opened her mouth.

"Whe-where is Riftan...?"

"Lord Calypse is outside repairing the gate. He called in blacksmiths and engineers to hang steel doors this time." Ruth grumbled, ripping the bread in half and placed it grumpily inside his mouth.

"It seems that he wants a defensive barrier to be set up. He's already a maniac with defenses and now that d**n nobleman just had to turn the gate into ashes and make him more jittery that he already is."

"It-it's good to be sa-safe."

Max deliberately replied in a lively voice, relieved to have something to talk about. Ruth, however, merely frowned and exclaimed as if such request would drain the life out of him.

"From now on, I'll probably break my bones just to deliver his request."

Just in time, the maid came in bringing soup with chicken, salad and freshly baked bread and placed them on the table. Max's eyes bulged at the appetizing scent of the warm soup that wafted into her nose. She didn't know exactly how magic tools were created, but from the wizard's grumbles, she surmised it must be daunting and troublesome.

Ruth grabbed his head and continued to moan throughout their meal. Then, as if a brilliant light bulb hit him, he raised his head and asked Max, "Come to think of it, you can do basic math, Madam, can't you?"

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Chapter 84 – A Constant Blame (1)

Max swallowed abruptly that the food almost went down the wrong pipe. The man before her stared at her with a peculiar gleam coming from his blue-gray eyes, which until now, have always seemed to be full of sleepiness.

Cold sweat started to break out on Max' forehead.

If she says she could not do it, then it will seem as if she was willing to be considered as a fool in front of the knights who have been ignoring her as if she were a complete stranger to them and unworthy of their time. If she says she can do it, however, she feels that her future here will be full of hardships.

Max could not decide on either courses of actions as both seemed equally grim, so she instead decided to avoid his eyes and hoped they would change the topic by pretending to be distracted by the soup she was eating. However, Ruth reached out and blocked her view of the food. At that moment she was caught again as his slender eyes pierced hers.

"... Is it okay to pay back like this?"

"I-I'm not good enough to help you..." Max truthfully confided to him.

"I know. I wouldn't ask you if it wasn't a situation that I could handle on my own." He responded as he looked down.

Max felt a faint desire to help him, seeing the wizard look so pitiful before her. As she looked at him with forlorn eyes, it was as if he sensed her stares and looked at her then too. Having been caught, Max straightened her back and feigned indifference.

"You haven't forgotten that I helped you both materially and spiritually, have you?" The wizard suddenly spoke and Max placed her spoon down.

"N-No. But I really can't..." Max started to protest – she could not help him even if she wanted to. Not only did she lack the ability to, but she also doesn't know what kind of hell she would have to face if she was going to do so. The wizard's fastidiousness was truly unusual, and quite alarming. Max avoided looking at the wizard's face, while Ruth moved closer to her like a leech.

"All you need to do is organize simple records and calculations. It's a very easy thing to do, even for you." The wizard told her and Max sighed.

"Hey, wizard... Don't go too far. It's disrespectful to the madam."

The knight with them, who was pretending not to hear any of their conversation and was only interested in eating, finally joined in.

Max thought that if she refused the wizard, she would be condemned as an ungrateful person and would hear this snarky label whenever she encountered him. She was sure that was what this eccentric wizard would do to her if she refused him.

Moreover, she thought that sooner or later she would have to bite the bullet and would not be able to avoid it forever. Out of her wits, she finally responded with a nod and the frown on Ruth's face turned upside down upon seeing this. He then reached out to take some of his potatoes and deposited those on her plate as a sign of goodwill.

"I won't forget this grace." The wizard told her gratefully. Max answered him with a tight lipped smile.

"... You guys must have gotten quite close to each other during the times you have spent together." Hebaron, the bulky knight who was still listening to their conversation, suddenly remarked. He then reached out to scratch the back of his head as if waiting for the implication of his words to sink in. Max hesitated and answered carefully and turned to address Hebaron.

"" "

"H-He gave me advice on decorating the castle."

"Aha..." Hebaron responded almost fumblingly as he took a big bite off the bread and gave them a thoughtful look. Max dismissed her anxious thoughts at Hebaron's almost nonchalant attitude towards her and tried to finish her meal in peace. But the silence surrounding them was once again broken when Hebaron spoke up.

"The castle has become quite pleasing to look at." He told them, and Max laborously swallowed her food before responding.

"Ah... Th-Thank you."

The man flitted his eyes around the room as if trying to take in the view. His deliberate acts of scrutiny looked awkward to Max, and she too was starting to feel uncomfortable with him. It's been a long time since Max and Hebaron knew of each other, but even so, they had never formally exchanged introductions and only ever seen each other in passing.

Max did not feel comfortable to talk with Hebaron so casually – they were still strangers after all, so Max decided to just follow his gaze as he still looked around the room. For some time they remained in an agonizing silence. Soon, the knights who had finished eating their food had begun to leave their seats, one by one they came before her and bowed their heads in respect, then departed from the restaurant.

Max looked down on her soup bowl, it seems to her, the food looked rather sad.

“The Remdragon Knights were unfair. Even with that attitude, I could not help but think.” Max was startled by Ruth’s declaration and turned to look at the latter. Ruth seemed to not have noticed this and continued the speech in a sour manner, while dipping the bread in the thick soup.

“This expedition was the opportunity to throw the weight of the Remdragon Knights across the continent if the result was favorable, but had it erred on the opposite site, they would have taken a devastating blow to their pride.”

Ruth’s eyes then clouded, as if he were currently trapped in some place far away. “The Red Dragon was that terrifying. Three or four knights would have been killed without Lord Calypse. In fact, there are those who were very close to death back then. One of them was Lord Calypse himself, as he fought on the front lines and crossed paths with death several times.”

Max began to stiffen despite Ruth’s calm and monotonous voice, as if he were telling only a trivial story.

“The Duke Croix has passed on such a difficult and dangerous expedition to Lord Calypse. Even the daughter didn’t do the least to defend her husband, who had been pushed to death on behalf of her father.”

“I-I was...!” Max begun to protest but Ruth spoke out.

“That’s what the knights who followed Lord Calypse have been always thinking.” Ruth placed his spoon down and talked with an expressionless face.

Max just let her lip quiver in response. She wanted to argue that it was she who was thrown out. And it was her that had been ignored all this time by them. The man took her by force, and then left her without saying anything. She even thought before that he didn’t want nor cared for her at all.

What could she have done? Why was the blame always placed on her shoulders?

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Chapter 85 – A Constant Blame (2)

But soon, self consciousness sank in and she was well aware that could be only an excuse. Max however, could not say a word and she felt her face grow white by the second.

“I-I didn’t know he was going to take me to the castle,” Max whispered as if it was an afterthought.

“The knights who went to the Castle Croix to take you were treated badly.” Ruth told her in his still dull tone, as she uttered in a faint voice.

“I-I haven’t h-heard.”

“Didn’t you think that you would come to Anatol with the knights of Croix?” Ruth asked her, the intensity of his voice making her flinch.

She couldn’t say that there were no one to accompany her on that journey, nor could she deny that her father would not allow for her to travel a long way there. Max could not even argue with him that even the idea of visiting her husband was impossible for her.

In the end, she couldn’t find anything to say that would seem reasonable to him, and something he would accept, so, she shook her head instead. Ruth shrugged beside her as if the issue was of no consequence.

“There’s no point in looking back on what’s already gone. No matter how the knights treated you, the fact that you are the wife of Lord Calypse remains unchanged. Don’t mind what they do or say unless they become too rude,” Ruth told her and Max meekly nodded.

Whether it was an act meant to provide Max comfort or to further irate her, the wizard had already stood up from his seat and said his parting words.

“Then, I believe you’ll come to the library to help me soon.” He told her, and Max responded by nodding feebly at his indifferent attitude.

With that, the wizard paid his respects and went out of the great hall while stretching his shoulders. Max remained behind, as slowly the others began to file out of the room, soon leaving her alone in the room.

By now her soup had already gone cold and unappetizing but Max still stirred it aimlessly, round and round the bowl in an unending circle. She felt like she was in a very lonely and anxious situation with no way out.

Maybe other people were feeling the same way as she was. Perhaps her reputation as the wife, who had pushed promising knights to their deaths and caused faithful allies to turn away from her husband, was what she will forever be known as, and now, Max thought that they might be thinking of her only as a pampered mistress now that she was showered with Riftan's riches.

Her mind then went back to the time wherein she was blatantly ridiculed by the man named Rob Midahas in front of the gate, and in front of her own people... this memory still served to break even the slightest confidence she has managed to build up over the past few weeks. Everything had faltered badly in one instance.

Would Anatol's residents be proud of their hostess who showed such a pathetic face?

She couldn't stand the melancholy feelings inside her heart any longer and Max finally gave up and stopped eating her food. She turned to leave and went out of the restaurant in silence.

"Madam!" Max turned around to look at the source of the voice. Perhaps her precarious mood was too much that Rodrigo was able to spot her walking across the hall. His polite voice came to greet her from behind, and so she stopped walking and waited for the older man to come close to her.

"" "

Rodrigo was walking through the gate with a large box in his arms.

"The Lord has commanded me to ask you that you go to him," he then told her while shifting the box in his hands.

Max looked at him in surprise. "I-I heard he went to the north gate."

"He just came back and is now in the garde-" Rodrigo responded.

Max started to run out of the door before his words were over. As she passed the pavilion and stood in front of the stairs, she saw the servants busily carrying luggage in the spacious garden. Her eyes suddenly widened at the sight: there was a huge cart led by five horses, and the servants were constantly taking out small boxes off of it and were carrying them into the castle in delicate movements.

Max passed by them and went down the stairs gingerly. In front of the wagon, Riftan stood talking with two men who seemed to be merchants from the South Continent. He turned his head towards Max when he spotted her.

"Maxi." He greeted her and Max tried to give him her best smile in reply.

She then quickly hurried towards him, like a puppy called by its master. Riftan smiled faintly and took the horse rein from the merchant and slightly pulled it forward. The mare, so breathtaking that it enchanted the people around, began to walk forward, slowly but gracefully. Finally, Riftan and Max met halfway.

“Here.” Riftan told Max as he gently patted the long, graceful neck of the horse and proffered its rein. Max’s eyes were blankly staring at the creature, unable to read his proposal.

“Don’t you like it?” He asked her again in a slight teasing tone.

“E-Excuse me?” Max replied as she didn’t understand what he meant. He instead, grabbed her hand and forcibly let her hold the rein.

“I said I’ll buy a gift for you when I come back, didn’t I?” Riftan reminded her.

Max glanced at his calm face and then at the meek horse. He pulled her out of her dazed look and led her to touch the horse’s face. She timidly stroked the golden mane with a trembling hand and in response to her touch, the mare gently rubbed her nose in her palm.

“All of my horses are big and ferocious, so I don’t think they’ll suit you. This mare is still young but well trained. So it won’t be hard to handle her.” Riftan told her as he noticed Max warming up to the horse.

“S-so pretty....” Max breathed, and Riftan smiled contentedly at her reaction.

“Now it’s yours.” Riftan declared.

“I-I’ve never s-seen.... such a wo-wonderful g-gift.” Max told him.

The mare rubbed its face in the palm of her hand with a charming pout. Max mildly stroked its mouth and nose and gazed at the wonderful gift he had given to her once again. The long slender legs and waist, rich golden mane, and clever black eyes were the picturesque mare. The balanced body shape and glossy fur show that it is of an excellent breed.

“C-can I take it...? Really?” Max excitedly asked.

“I said it’s yours.” Riftan assured her and he replied with a slight frown. “No one but you can ride on such a fine fellow.” He added.

The horse squirted its breath vigorously as if it had understood their exchange. Max laughed and stroked its ears.

“Do you like it?” Riftan asked, tilting his head and looking down at her.

“I I-love it.” Max replied. But to be honest she had more than a mere liking towards the horse and so Max decided to give her answer carefully.

“I re-really a-appreciate it... I-I really do.” Max exclaimed after clearing her trembling voice that was filled with emotions, she had wanted to speak more confidently about how much she appreciated the gift.

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 86 – Trying Her Best (1)

“Thank you so much.” Max repeated, and as soon as those words escaped her lips, Riftan who had been looking down on her, dipped his head and kissed her.

Riftan’s sudden action took Max by surprise and she instinctively took a step back. Riftan on his part acted as if nothing had happened and begun to casually address the merchants around them, as if he had not just kissed his wife in front of the party.

“My wife seems happy. I’ll give you an additional 50 percent as a token of gratitude. I thought it would take you a day or two more for you to deliver it, but it arrived earlier than expected. Therefore, I also thank you for hurrying up.” Riftan told the merchants, and the latter seemed to be in disbelief at his generosity.

“Oh, dear God! It’s not a big deal sir. It’s what you asked us to do sir, of course we had to cater to your request as soon as possible, it is only natural for us to satisfy our clients!” One of the merchants told Riftan.

Max listened to their small exchange while hiding her red face behind the horse’s neck.

She felt embarrassed because of the way Riftan nonchalantly expressed affection towards her in front of so many people. Max looked around anxiously to see if anyone might have seen their sudden display of affection and felt scandalized by seeing it, thankfully it seemed that no one seemed to have minded the gesture as the servants continued on their tasks.

After some time, Riftan finally ended his conversation with the merchants and the latter turned to leave. Just as they had begun to pack up and leave, Riftan approached Max and draped one of his arms over her, and hugged her to his side.

“Let’s go to the room, so you can look more clearly at the things I bought for you. You might find something you would like.” Riftan told her with a gentle smile.

“I-is there more...?” Max asked in surprise and Riftan nodded before replying.

“All the boxes the servants are carrying now are your gifts.” Riftan then pointed to the pile of boxes still in the cart.

Upon seeing it Max’ mouth fell wide open. She estimated that there were roughly enough boxes to fill one of the castle’s guest rooms.

“I told them to move it to the room. So let us go in now.” Riftan whispered to Max’s ear as he handed the halter to a nearby servant and then led Max towards the Great Hall of the castle.

Max allowed him to lead her inside. As they walked Max could not help but feel as if she was walking on clouds. She couldn’t believe she felt so depressed and anxious a while ago, it was as if those worries vanished because of Riftan’s arrival.

“So, be-because of the gate re-repair... aren’t you bu-busy?” Max asked shyly and Riftan shook his head.

“I’ve already delegated the task to several people and have left them instructions on everything that needs to be done. The knights have decided to take turns in guarding the gate until it’s completed, so there won’t be any intruders coming into the compound and making a disturbance even if I don’t stand guard.” Riftan told her and Max bit her tongue to prevent herself from responding.

The truth was that Max did not ask Riftan because she was worried about the castle’s security, rather she wanted to voice out her concern that since Riftan had only a bit of free time, she might be disturbing him in the midst of his busy schedule. Max however decided not to correct his understanding of her question. The two of them continued to climb in comfortable silence until they arrived at the newly structured hallway she had been working on.

The sunlight came pouring in from the windows and was sprinkling beautiful golden rays on the red carpet. Riftan, suddenly turned his head to look at her.

””” ”

“Come to think of it, I haven’t properly complimented you on the fact that the castle has become very nice since you redecorated it. The butler said you went through a lot to make it this beautiful.”

Because of Riftan’s sudden praise, Max found herself blushing at him.

“Do you like it...?” She asked him meekly.

“I like it. I was surprised when I came down the stairs in the morning. For a moment I thought I had moved to another castle overnight.” Riftan answered her in a slightly teasing manner and Max breathed a sigh of relief.

“Ye-yesterday you di-didn’t say a-anything.. I was wo-worried.” Max confessed as she recalled how worried she was the day before. Suddenly, Riftan’s eyes narrowed at her.

“Yesterday I could not exactly say to you ‘By the way, the castle has gotten so nice, you’ve done a great job’ in the midst of my anger. In the first place, the one that caught my attention was seeing my wife in that mess. Do you think I would have seen the state of the castle at that time? Even if you had plated gold all over the castle, I wouldn’t have noticed any of it, not at that moment.” Riftan explained with his brows deeply furrowed and Max dropped her gaze, wondering what to do now that he looked at her with his cold eyes as if he was incensed just thinking about it.

As if sensing that she had grown depressed by his answer Riftan let out a small sigh and patted Max’ head reassuringly.

“I don’t want to be angry anymore, so don’t bring it up. Let’s go see your presents now.” Riftan told her gently with a smile and Max nodded her head in understanding as they set off again.

Once the two of them entered the room, Max saw the servants cleaning up the mountain of boxes and arranging them neatly at the corner of the room.

Rudis was standing guard at the corner and was supervising the servants carefully. She kept her eyes locked on them and was making sure they did not drop the boxes, while throwing constant reminders to be careful with them.

Finally, one of the maids saw Max and Riftan and hurriedly bowed her head when she saw them. The rest of the servants followed suit and greeted them. After exchanging pleasantries, Riftan approached Rudis.

“Did you finish moving all the luggage in the room?”

“Yes, it’s all thirty-two boxes sir. Would you like to check their contents?” Rudis asked and when Riftan nodded, the servants began to open the boxes one by one with the wooden poker.

Max stayed at the sideline and stared blankly at the endless pouring of gifts that was happening in front of her.

From the Southern Continent, Riftan bought her high quality silk and glamorous pattern fabrics. There was also glossy fox fur, a waistband made of snake skin, a gold threaded shawl, silver hand mirror, and a hairpin decorated with pearls..

The piles of gifts reminded Max of those that Rosetta had received.

She recalled seeing Rosetta buried in a luxurious gift countless times, but it was the first time she found herself experiencing it. Max reminded herself to remain calm.

“Is this all my pre-presents?” Max asked Riftan, her mouth slightly trembled as she did so.

“Why? Do you not like it?” Riftan asked her in a worried tone.

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 87 –Trying Her Best (2)

Max shook her head hurriedly when she saw him frowning.

Max’s half-sister didn’t bat an eyelash even after receiving a pile of jewels. It would be strange from Riftan and the others to see that the Duke’s favorite daughter would shrivel at this. Max kept her face indifferent and recalled Rosetta’s haughty demeanor.

“N-no. I I-like.. it.” Max answered simply. Riftan looked relieved at her answer and gestured at one of the servants to open the boxes near them.

Max tried to stay reserved like all those wealthy princesses in stories. However, she couldn’t stop her mouth from opening like a fool each time a new gift was unboxed.

As another box was opened, Riftan approached it and took out an emerald hairpin from a jewelry box and carefully inserted it over her ear and completed her look by adorning her neck with a sparkling diamond necklace.

Max looked down at the extravagant jewelry resting on her collarbones and found herself be lost for words. Riftan pressed his lips on her cheek with a pleased face, he seemed to be liking what he was seeing.

“It suits you well just as I thought.” He told Max proudly.

“T-thank you...” Max answered.

She muttered these words with a flushed face. Max then gently ran her fingers through her hair in order to feel the ornament that was stuck between her curls. She glanced slightly at the mirror that hung on the corner wall and looked at her reflection. For a moment, she was struck with awkwardness seeing herself being adorned by so much jewelry.

Riftan was treating her as if she were the most precious royal daughter in the world. It was both pleasant and uncomfortable. To be honest, Max felt like a clown wearing a mask that didn't fit her.

“Why such a face? You don't like it?” Riftan asked her after noticing her somber expression.

Max hurriedly straightened her face.

“N-no. It's really pretty. Y-you must have been busy... When d-did you find the time to buy a-all these presents?” She asked Riftan and the latter shook his head dismissively at her worries.

“You left all the jewelry and clothes you used in Croix Castle because of me. Of course, I have to make time to make it up for you.” He answered with a grin and Max hurriedly hid her blushing face. But the inside of her chest hurt as if there was a thorn in it.

“T-thank you for y-your consideration.” She told Riftan sincerely.

Riftan seemed happy with her reaction and told the servants to organize the presents now that she had seen them all.

As he busied with the servants, Max stood behind Riftan trying to erase the strange feeling of guilt from her mind. Especially since she didn't tell a lie, but even with these thoughts she could not erase the uncomfortable feeling inside of her.

”””” ”
.

Riftan, after confirming that all the gifts were complete and secured immediately went out to check the state of the prisoners.

After he left, Max began to fill out an unfinished textile order she wasn't able to complete due to the disturbance yesterday. After careful consultation with the maids, she decided to head down to the kitchen in order to make sure that preservation of the winter meals was going well.

Any castle is bound to be busiest during the times of late fall to early winter. As these were the occasions when temperatures began to drop rapidly, and when it will become more difficult to get fresh vegetables.

The price of meat was bound to double or more during this season as well, therefore the kitchen servants had to work without a break in order to prepare long-lasting dried meats, pickled fruits, smoked sausages, and large amounts of flour from the mill, and other stocks in order to prepare food for livestock.

Max went to search for Rudis in order to get an update on how the preparations were going. Rudis then began discussing to her what they have been doing.

"In winter, it becomes difficult to find grass for the livestock, so we slaughter most of them and only keep alive those we could feed. We take the slaughtered cows and pigs from the butcher's shop, drain the blood, trim the guts and send it to the castle, the meat in the kitchen is smoked and stored, and the intestines are washed clean and used to make sausages." Rudis told her as they walked along the kitchens to check on the preparations.

Max listened to Rudis's explanation and looked all around her, she could smell the heavy scent of oil around them. She was used to the kitchen being full of bustle and busy staff, but for the last few days it almost looked like a battlefield.

On a large table set up on the corner wall, three or four servants were making sausages with large basins and plates surrounding them, while on the other side a large chunk of meat was being cut into small pieces using a saw and a pool of blood was flowing from it.

The smoky smell of fire stung the tip of her nose. Max turned her head away from the direction of its source, and pinched the tip of her nose bridge. Outside the wide-open door, she saw four temporary fire pots made of stones. Five or six servants were putting a large wire net on it and smoking a chunk of meat over it. She felt exhausted seeing the enormous amount of meat.

"I have ne-never seen so much meat be-before." She told Rudis.

"We've prepared enough food to last us for a while. However, we can't keep the smoked meat for too long, so most of the neat things we have are going to be made of dried.

Beef jerky is also very useful for the knights when going out on a three or four days expedition.” Rudis informed her.

“I-is this all g-going to be made into d-dried meat?” Max asked Rudis, eyeing the large pile of freshly slaughtered meat.

Max looked curiously at the meat hanging on the wall. In the record sheet given by Rudis, the weight of food stored each year and the weight of food to be stored this year were meticulously written.

“As the knights return from the expedition, we need to prepare twice as much as we did last year. Actually, I should have prepared it before the temperature dropped..”

“D-does it t-take a lot of time?”

“The meat should be salted and drained for several days, then sliced thinly and dried in the shade for another few days. It takes a lot of work.” Rudis replied and Max felt suddenly embarrassed because it seemed that the preparations for winter had been delayed because of the castle decorations she had been doing.

Rudis seemed to have sensed Max’ guilt expression and hurriedly added, “But with more hands, we’ll be ready before the temperature drops further.”

“I-it is good t-then!” Max then glanced around the kitchen staff and noticed that they indeed needed to hire more people.

The sight of the sweaty working servants filled her with worry. It was the role of the hostess to supervise the household of the castle, and based on what she had seen, she knows that the workload of the servants has been enormous.

Perhaps she should ask Riftan if he could hire more servants, for in addition to making food, the servants of the castle were already working so hard all day long, making winter clothes for soldiers, taking care of livestock, sweeping and polishing the castle that they may not complete their winter preparations.

“T-tomorrow I will a-ask Aderon i-if he can a-arrange the w-workers...” Max began to tell Rudis, but before she could finish her sentence she heard that there was someone calling out to her.

“Madam!”

Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 88 – Concerns (1)

Before Max could finish her words, a powerful voice cut her off guard.

Max then turned her head at the source of the bustle, and her eyes widened in surprise when she saw six knights in training standing up next to the meat-grilling stove, their faces were shiny with sweat, but their expressions were lively. Standing at the front of the group was Yurixion Lobar. When he saw her, he came running towards her, his face was full of relief and gladness. When Yurixion was finally near her, he hastily asked Max his questions.

"I heard you went through a lot yesterday. Are you hurt anywhere? Is it already okay for you to be out like this? When we heard what those jerks have done to you...!" Yurixion began rambling, and with each second his voice rose an octave higher, and Max felt grateful for his apparent concern.

"I a-am fine..." Max told the young knight in training. Just as she said this, Yurixion's best friend Garow, came to stare expectantly at her as well.

Garow's eyes sparkled in astonishment at Yurixion's incessant questions, and let out a small sigh at his best friend's actions.

"Yuri, calm down, please. You are making the lady feel embarrassed." Garow told Yurixion.

"But Garow... when I heard what happened I've never felt more sorry for not being knighted yet." Yurixion whispered back.

The sulking expression Yurixion wore made Max smile. It reminded her of the image of a big puppy who was dropping its tail and sulking towards his master. He looked adorable.

"Th-thank you for yo-your concern... bu-but I was fi-fine. T-the soldiers were hurt, but... yo-your Lord a-arrived just in ti-time." Max told the boys to reassure them.

"I have heard that story, too. I heard that those cowardly jerks were terrified by Lord Calypse's spirit and surrendered right away? They are pathetic cowards! Well, those mice of Libadon will not be a match for Lord Calypse afterall!" Yurixion excitedly exclaimed. It was obvious that the lad had thought highly of Riftan.

Max casted her eyes on the ground as she felt her cheeks heating up with embarrassment. The boy could hardly stop once he had begun to sing praises to Riftan. It's not that Riftan was unworthy of praise, which was why she felt like rolling her eyes when Yurixion started reciting about all of Riftan's merits and good deeds but because Yurixion always idolized Riftan that even Garow, who standing next to him, was already shaking his head as if he was tired of his best friend's daily habit of talking about their lord.

Max gave them a resigned smile and carefully cut off the excited boy's words by throwing them a question.

“B-by the way, what b-brings you to the kitchen...?”

It was only after Max asked the question that the boys seemed to snap back to their senses. Yurixion looked back at other knights in training standing behind him.

“We can not stand the smell of grilling meat. We slipped out during training.” Yurixion replied and Max nodded.

That’s why everyone looked so troubled when they saw her. Max smiled meaningfully to reassure the boys who were afraid that the hostess might tell on their leader that they skipped on their training.

“W-we are boiling sa-sausages now. Chef, ca-can you give them a p-plate, please?” Max told the boys as she gestured for the young lads to come closer.

””” ”

The chef, who was stuffing the cleanly washed pig intestines, raised his face and smiled broadly.

“We are grilling over there on the fire pot now. Hey! Fill up a plate of sausages and bring it here!” The chef screamed at a kitchen staff and the hungry boys hurriedly ran towards them like a swarm of bees.

Max then decided to slip away when the boys began eating so that they could enjoy the snack comfortably. When she came out of the kitchen, she saw servants were lighting up the candle holders all over the hall.

If they did not light the lanterns in advance, the entire castle would become dark in the instant the sun rested and so it was customary for them to do this. In the instance of emergencies, it was vital that the central hall and stairs had to be lit from early hours.

The castle was twice as bright now than earlier when she passed its hallways as the newly ordered lanterns were placed everywhere, but the servants were also twice as busy. She spoke with a determined face as she walked through the hall.

“I wi-will immediately get more wo-workers for to-tomorrow.” Max told Rudis.

“You don’t have to...” Rudis replied to her while shaking her head.

“N-no. It takes more se-servants to manage such a large ca-castle. T-there are a lot of people ne-need to be served. I t-think we need at le-least 30 more t-than we do now. Will there be e-enough residences for them?” Max asked.

“Yes. There are plenty of empty rooms left on the first floor for the servants.” Rudis answered.

“T-then I will talk to the L-lord sometime t-today.” Max was resolute, they had to hire more people if they wanted to be ready for winter.

For her last rounds, Max looked around the barn and when that was finished, she returned to her room to write a simple journal.

In order to manage a large castle like the Calypse Castle, it was necessary to grasp what was going on in every corner of the palace, in order for her not to miss what problems they had or will have and she had to fix those soon for there were a lot of people depending on them.

Suddenly a knock came from her door – it was one of the castle maids.

“Madam, Lord Calypse is likely to be late, and he has sent me a message for you to have dinner first. Shall we set it up at the dinning hall?” The maid asked her.

Max told the maid that she will have dinner at the hall and followed the latter out. When she arrived at the place and was served the food, she decided to eat slowly, hoping that Riftan would come home soon and find her there.

How long she was sitting in front of the table, Max could not tell but she must have sat there for more than an hour because everything felt cold.

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 89 – Concerns (2)

Rudis, who had been out for a while had also now returned, and called her attention with a cautious voice.

“Madam?” Rudis began while Max still sat, and she wanted to ask how much longer she planned to stay at the dining hall.

Max glanced out at the window. It was all dark outside.

Was Riftan still outside until this time? No matter how tough a man he was, Max was worried. She wished he could take a break for a while and come home. Finally, Max knew she could not keep the rest of the servants waiting for she, too, would worry them. Her food also had grown cold.

“Bring it to the room, please.” Max finally answered a curious Rudis and got up from her seat.

She looked at the flames burning in the fireplace, flaring up the firewood meaninglessly one last time before starting her way up to her room. The day at Calypse Castle was both very long and short. It felt difficult when she was busy, but she was satisfied here compared to when she lived in her father’s castle as if she were a dead person.

Was Riftan also satisfied living here? Max wondered.

Recalling Rudis’ words during the day, Max scrunched her face in deep thought. Through observing the attitude of the knights alone, Mac could tell how unfairly Riftan was treated by her father. He had no choice but to blame himself. But he was trying to do better somehow and gain her father’s approval.

Frankly speaking, she didn’t quite understand why he was acting that way. No matter how much she thought about it, she didn’t have an attractive side to entice other people. She had neither a dazzling beauty, nor any extraordinary talent, nor was she full of wit.

The only best thing to claim was that she was descended from Duke’s eldest daughter. But even that was not a big deal if she stood side by side with a princess. What part of her did he like so much for him to go through such lengths?

‘Whatever the reason is... It must be a lot of luck for me.’ Max thought absentmindedly and let out a sigh.

She admitted bitterly what her father had said. She thought that the sum of her father’s violence had become an unexpected luck for her because it led her to Riftan. Max firmly prayed to make sure that this happiness would not pass away.

“Hmm...” Max stirred as she felt a sudden chill enveloped her body. Her long and firm fingers gently wrapped around her chest in an attempt to warm her skin.

Max awoke from her nap and looked at the faint morning dawn that was leaking from the window. It seems to her that she fell asleep while reading a book after dinner.

With her shoulders curled up against the chilly dawn air and her stiff eyes blinking faintly, Max suddenly felt a strong forearm tightening around her waist.

Max was startled by this and turned her head behind her to look. She saw Riftan sleeping next to her.

When did he come back?

”””” ”

He was lying on his side, wearing only a pair of bottom trunks. She glanced doubtfully into his face.

‘Is he pretending to be asleep..?’ Max thought

She had been fooled by him several times, so she squinted her eyes and looked at him for a long time wondering if he was truly asleep.

But Riftan only breathed slowly, lay still and didn’t budge. When she pushed his hand carefully because she thought he was really asleep, he unexpectedly loosened his arm.

Max turned around carefully so that her husband wouldn’t wake up.

‘Are you... tired?’ Max asked Riftan in her head. He was in deep sleep and she could not help but wonder at how tiring the previous day was for him.

Max gently touched his finely sculpted face, which was covered by the bluish light of dawn that filled their room. His hair that had grown long was disheveled like a bird’s nest. She saw his forehead wrinkled when the hair poked and tickled his eyes, so she pushed the strands over. At this moment he looked so vulnerable that Max slipped a smile.

She did not know what’s going on inside her head. She couldn’t fathom her love for this man, who was at least 1 kvet (about 30 centimeters) taller and twice as big as she was.

However, Max crawled impulsively into his arms and buried her face against his firm chest. When it seemed certain that he had fallen asleep deeply, the urge to take a more daring action soared within her.

She put her face near to his neck and took a deep breath. A mixture of masculine body odor and fragrant soap, and the remains of intense sunlight, gave off an inexplicably sensual fragrance to her. As she inhaled the smell deep into her lungs, a mysterious heat trickled through her stomach.

Max carefully touched his chin. Riftan was indeed a dazzling presence to behold.

His firm, and yet smooth skin seemed to glow faintly even in the dark, and his face, with his long eyelashes, looked innocent and lovely while he slept.

‘I think my head is getting weird...’ Max thought to herself as she stared at Riftan’s sleeping face.

Only a few months ago, Max had never dreamed of using the words naive or lovely to describe Riftan Calypse.

But now, she was feeling the strange urge to rub her face deeper in his arms, as if he was a soft cotton pillow. However, she was holding back the crazy impulse to do so.

Not only did she have no courage to do so, but she didn't want to wake him up from a deep sleep she knew he deserved after a long time of not being able to rest properly.

Max slipped out of bed so he could rest well without interruption, picked her robe and left the room.

There was a chill of dawn that greeted her in the corridor.

She put on a thick robe over her thin woolen dress and went straight down to the kitchen. When she arrived at the place she thought happily that she was right, indeed there was as much warmth in the kitchen as she thought.

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 90 – Lessons on Defensive Sorcery (1)

The head c**k was kneading bread in front of a long table when he noticed someone pushing the door open. His eyes widened in surprise when he realized it was none other than Madam Max who had entered the kitchen.

Max smiled awkwardly at the head c**k as she moved to the fireplace while rubbing her palms against her shoulders.

“madam, what could be wrong at this early hour that you are here?” The head c**k asked Max, the former's face was full of concern and Max shook her head faintly before replying.

“Well there is no-nothing wrong. I just woke up su-suddenly. I did not want to di-disturb the lord while he re-rested, so I came out qu-quietly...Can I stay here for a mo-moment? Will it be o-okay?” Max asked.

The c**k was caught off-guard when he heard the lady ask for his permission to stay in the kitchens.

He fervently nodded his head in response. His actions were so abrupt and stront that he feared his skull would crack due to the force.

“Of...of course! I have prepared freshly baked bread and rabbit soup just now. Would you like to have a taste?” The c**k offered Max and she smiled at him in turn.

“Well, ma-maybe just a li-little bit. I will eat some. But, be-before that...I want to wash my face...Could you bring me wa-water and a to-towel?” Max asked.

“Yes of course! Please wait one moment, madam.”

The head c**k immediately grabbed a clean basin off the shelves and poured hot and cold water in it in order to get the right temperature that would suit the lady of the castle. When he was done he quickly handed Max a crisp, clean cloth along with the lukewarm water.

Max received them gratefully and then proceeded to sit at the table in front of the fireplace to wash her face more easily.

She carefully dipped her fingers in the water and then ran her wet palms through her tangled locks. After she did this, soon a maid entered the kitchen premises and began helping the c**k to set the table. It was also this same maid who brought and served her hot thick soup, as well as steaming fresh and white bread.

Max moved the basin to one side, and then grabbed the warm loaf, and split it in half. The golden crust crackled as she pulled at it. White steam also rose from its soft, creamy, white flesh and carried its warm scent.

Max then proceeded to spread a small dollop of butter, on it and then took a bite. The sweetness of freshly baked bread melted in her mouth, and its heat also slightly burned her tongue. It went deliciously well with the salty rabbit soup and her palate was soothed by the glass of goat’s milk with honey that was also provided for her.

Max enjoyed filling her stomach with the delicious meal in front of a roaring fire, and she felt quite satisfied. When she was finished with her meal she started to leave the kitchen feeling drowsy.

“What’s the matter this morning?” Max asked herself as she debated whether to crawl back into bed, or start her day early since she was already awake.

However, before she could decide on what to do she heard a familiar voice behind her call her name. Max spotted Ruth walking at the hallways that led to the kitchen; his face was clouded with frustration.

””” ”

He approached her swiftly and blocked her way.

“You must have been enjoying your early breakfast. That is a relief. Unfortunately, since I was carrying out important work for the lord, never mind breakfast, I haven’t eaten since the day before yesterday.” Ruth complained sarcastically at Max.

Max’s mouth stiffened at his speech

“Ye-yesterday, I was bu-busy...” she began to explain to him, but she was cut off when Ruth started talking again.

“Yes, I heard that Lord Calypse bought a tremendous number of gifts for you. You must have been busy opening presents all day long, correct?” Ruth told her biting and Max furrowed her brows at his words.

“No! The work that I had in the ca-castle kept me o-occupied...it was more than I thought!” Max tried to explain to him.

Certainly, it was true that she did spend quite a bit of time opening gifts, but Max was obstinate of mentioning that.

Ruth however kept on glaring at her with his sunken eyes full of dismay. Max did not want to show in front of the servants how flustered and pitiful she was because of this man. With his high-handed attitude, he always made her feel like a bad child being scolded by their teacher.

“Of course, you must have much work to do. However, as the Lady, you have to prioritize the safety of the house above all else. What could be more important than setting up the magical equipment defenses around the castle wall to keep out intruders? The only person who can help me is you Lady Calypse since you are proficient at math.” Ruth whispered to her.

Max squinted her eyes at the implication of his words. She would have bet her life that the wizard did not think she was talented at math and he was only nitpicking on her.

“Of course, sa-safety is im-important. But...it is no less im-important to pre-prepare for the wi-winter. As soon as I’m fi-finished with my work...” Max began to reason out but Ruth spoke again.

“To Lord Calypse, the safety of his residents is more important than anything else. As his wife, if you help me finish the task quickly, the lord will also feel more at ease.” Ruth snapped at her.

Ruth’s words were testing Max’ patience but it also piqued her interest.

“Re-really? Do you re-really think that?” Max looked up to the wizard in curiosity.

“Absolutely.” Ruth told her, his voice was full of confidence.

Max was so consumed with the thought that Riftan would consider her a capable person if she did manage to protect his people, that she did not detect Ruth’s coercive way of speaking towards her.

She secretly glanced at the servants, who were pretending to work and enjoying eavesdropping on their conversation and let out an unavoidably lengthy sigh.

“Al-alright. I will make he-helping you my full pri-priority. Are you sa-satisfied n-now?” Max told Ruth.

“It would be more satisfying if you could lend me your hand immediately.” He replied.

Max could see that his lean face was weary from exhaustion.

“There is a mountain of formulas that must be organized. Originally, there are supposed to be two or three assistants to take care of this, so it’s too much for me to do alone.” He told her as they began to walk towards the kitchen once more.

“O-okay, I u-understand. For now, you should eat.” Max answered as she led him to a table and asked a kitchen maid for food to be served.

“This is enough.” Ruth said dismissively, waving his hand at the kitchen maid, implying that the latter did not have to do Max’ bidding. He instead picked up a piece of bread that was placed on the table and had just come out of the oven and took a rather large bite from it.

He also walked over to a sack placed in the corner of the kitchen and took out one apple from it, and then deposited it into the pocket of his robe. He turned back to face Max, as if telling her to follow him while he chewed on his bread and Max gave him a nod.

When Ruth began to leave, Max told the maid to find her in the library if there was any urgent business for her to attend to. After doing this, she followed Ruth’s footsteps and left the kitchen area.

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