

Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 41 – Welcome Feast (1)

Shortly, another maid arrived to say, “The lord is on his way, madam.”

As she looked out the window, a familiar voice came from the other side of the room. She turned her head, half expecting to see Riftan, but it was Rodrigo who walked inside the room, dressed in his formal attire.

“All the knights have already arrived. Please follow me, madam, the lord is waiting.”

Max descended the stairs alongside Rodrigo. Upon reaching the entrance to the dining hall, the din inside was immediately apparent. She stood still at the door, some hesitancy in place as she stole a peek, she hoped was furtive, inside. Under the twinkling lights, some fifty men sat along the tables stretching towards the ends of the room. Heartily eating, loud talking, and drinking with clamor.

A warm ambiance was prevalent as a golden fire burned brightly in the fireplace, the legs of the table groaning with the weight of the scrumptious feast. Steaming meat dishes, glasses full of red wine, bowls of potatoes, varieties of fruits and bread, all placed evenly across the table.

Max felt ostensibly like an outcast, a peeping tom where she shouldn't be. Only men and the maids serving them were littered inside the hall. Was it genuinely adequate for her to barge into the room meant for the knights?

“Lady? Do you not want to go inside?”

With Rodrigo's inquiry, Max gathered whatever courage she had and stepped into the room, the sounds of her footfall announcing her presence. The once noisy interior quieted as the dozen pair of eyes were instantly fixed on her. She found their scrutinizing gazes disquieting.

She was even more uncertain where to place herself in the throng of strangers.

“Maxi, come here.”

Riftan gestured to her, a gesture she found warming, like a lighthouse guiding her. Max straightened her posture, emboldened inside her as she swiftly crossed the room to seat herself next to him. As soon as her b*m hit the chair, the maids were quick to serve her some wine and bread.

“Everyone, I would like to introduce my wife, Maximillian Calypse.”

She glances at the knights' faces before her nervousness probably disclosed by her face at the moment. They didn't look hostile, nor was there joy in their faces—it seemed disinterest was the only prevalent welcome to Riftan's declaration.

Thinking her introduction was over, Riftan unexpectedly addressed the assembled group in a somber voice.

"I hope that you will treat her well and with respect."

As if a spell had been broken, they all raised their glasses towards Max, clapping and cheering loudly. She tried to mumble her thanks to everyone, but her tiny voice was quickly drowned in the sea of baritones. With the pleasantries over, the knights soon returned to their meals and conversations about women and the battlefield.

Max looked down at the food on her own silver platter that had been precariously piled high with different meats and potatoes of sizes—the sight making her lose her appetite quick. She surmised she wouldn't be able to finish more than a fraction of the heaping meal.

"" "

Riftan poured some wine into her glass.

"Why are you just looking at your plate? Aren't you going to take a bite? Or is there something wrong?"

"Oh, no... I'm sure it's d-delicious."

"So dig in, then." He urged her, stabbing a chicken's leg with his fork and placing it on her already full plate.

And then Riftan turned his attention back to his own platter. He tore off a large chunk of meat and ate it in one big mouthful, at the same time grabbing another piece of chicken with his other hand. He drank his wine like water, looking pointedly at Max as if teaching her how to eat her food properly.

She timidly cut the steamed meat pie with some sweet sauce poured over it using a knife and popped a small piece into her mouth. With her picky palate, Max tried to balance the oily meat with some pickled vegetables, also finding the beef well seasoned but tough to chew.

Still, the food here was far superior to that served at castle Croix—it was merely inimitable in quality.

"Try this too. It's delicious." Riftan, who had been silently watching Max eat, wanted her to try some of his favorite dishes.

She hesitantly took a bite of the unknown meat glazed in a reddish sauce, finding it too fishy for her taste. But seeing Riftan's gaze trailed on her, she tried to finish it. But the man wasn't finished pampering her yet, as he took beans and potatoes after another her, taking the maid's responsibility to serve her.

"Now, try this too."

"I c-can't eat thi-this much..."

"But you haven't even eaten anything yet?" He raised a brow and nudged the food on her platter with his fork, "Try more of this too."

Why on earth was he trying to plump her like a chicken? Max looked like she was on the verge of tears, Riftan's only bemused. She couldn't help but feel nauseous just thinking about eating more greasy meat.

"A sparrow would eat more than you."

"Th-that's not true. I-I ate a l-lot..."

Riftan roared with laughter. And Max felt how naïve her statement was upon seeing the bones piled on his plate. Compared to her husband, she really hadn't eaten anything. It was so that her appetite was inferior to all others in the hall.

"Th-then how much food is e-enough?" she asked him.

Riftan chewed and looked down at her. He replied loudly, swallowing the food in his mouth. "Aren't you supposed to eat a whole chicken?"

"F-for a woman, I d-don't think so..."

"The women I knew ate that much."

The dismissed the past as insubstantial, yet the words still marred her for some reason. Who did this particular description belong to? Does he have a predilection for women with hearty appetites?

Her sight unconsciously lowered down to her slim body. Men are always in need of healthy wives to produce able-bodied heirs. Max closed her eyes tightly and tried to force a little more food into her mouth.

"You should try eating a bit more. You already look so weak."

She nodded, her attention shifted to the home-baked bread instead of the meat. In the end, she was unable to resign herself. On her side, Riftan was now talking to an old knight and drinking a large goblet of wine with him. She took a sip of the red liquid filling

her cup, admiring the coalescence of sweetness and sourness as she watched their interaction.

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Chapter 42 – Welcome Feast (2)

In addition to the knights who had accompanied them on their trip, new and strange faces were present. In the middle of the long table, young knights were talking and drinking exuberantly as two older knights in their forties chatted with Riftan, even going as far as to challenge him to a drinking contest.

Max continued to sip her wine, her lack of conversing partner, making her unwittingly eavesdrop on their stories. Training progress of the apprentice knights, crop yields, amount of minerals mined, the latest and most effective weapons... and of course, lurid accounts of their latest exploits.

Subjects she had never encountered were bantered about, and she didn't even understand the vocabulary they used. Suddenly the youngest knight in the group stood up and cried out

“Sir Calypse, is it really true that in the final battle of the Lexos Mountains, you stopped Dragon Breath with *your* sword?”

All the knights who had been chatting and drinking now focused their attention on the boy. He was an apprentice knight with shiny white-blond hair, who had until then just become one of the many other energetic young knights-to-be.

“I heard that Dragon Breath is the most powerful magic in the whole world! How did you stop the huge flames that can blow up a whole mountain?”

The over-excited boy's questions visibly annoyed Riftan.

“My sword has unique qualities.”

“The captain’s sword has a unique attribute that absorbs external magic and turns it into own. The stronger the opponent’s power, the stronger is the captain’s power,” explained Hebaron, whom Max distinguished as one of the knights that had accompanied them on their trip.

“Well, even if we ignore the fact that he was born ridiculously strong, our captain is the best swordsman! He wasn’t given the highest position amongst Oshira’s divine knights for nothing!”

“...It’s not ‘captain’, but *leader*.”

The blonde knight Uslin Rykaido, who had been quietly drinking, pointed out.

“Whether it’s captain or leader... it doesn’t matter. How long until you quit being a mercenary anyway?” Hebaron laughed loudly.

The white-blond apprentice knight continued with his questions, “Is it true that Sir Calypse competed with Leon Quahel of the Divine Knights? Isn’t that something to be boasted to the apprentice knights? I would be proud of the fact that I knew two of the greatest knights had had a duel.”

The blonde knight Rikaido said poignantly. “They kept the confrontation a secret. A lot of fights happen among knights. But we were there to slay a dragon—not to point our swords at one another.”

“Still! It’s such a waste that no one knows about the duel between the two most famous knights on the continent! It must have been a sight to see!”

“It was enough that the dragon was defeated.” Riftan, who was still listening to the conversation, finally said in a dry tone.

””” ”

“And the confrontation at that time was not even a duel. Because we were amid the subjugation of the dragon, neither of us could show our skills... For the dragon to be subdued—the sole reason for the success was because of my mana absorption, not my swordsmanship.”

“Why are you acting so humble?” A young knight, who sat near the fireplace, said with some irritancy.

“Winning is winning. The terms were the same, and it was a duel done in a constrained scenario from the very beginning. It was fair, no matter how you look at it.”

“Lord Raxion! I want to hear more about the duel!” The apprentices all looked at him with glistening eyes, filled with excitement.

Gabel shrugged, “Are you more excited about this fight than the battle with the dragon?”

“Of course, we should also listen to the story of the expedition! The story of the dragon slayer!”

The boys’ enthusiastic attitude made the knight grin with a pleased look on his face. Max also got swept up in all the exhilaration. She had overheard minstrels singing the great stories of knights, but she had never heard of their adventures first hand.

The young knight moistened his lips with the golden ale from his cup and began to explain in great detail what had happened. Gabel was an excellent storyteller. From the day Riftan had subdued a group of ogres and trolls, to the story of him entering the Lexos Mountains, the struggle with the three Basilisks, Max’s eyes were shining as brightly as those of the young boys.

But when Max actually saw the monsters, she had been terrified.

So why was it all so exciting now? Perhaps it was Gabel’s eloquence on weaving the story. As she quietly admired his vivid descriptions and enjoyed the words that seemed to come to life, a fluttering touch was suddenly at the back of her neck.

Quite startled, she turned her head to the source, the man who had gone quiet beside her.

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Chapter 43 – I Am Thirsty For You (1) 19

Riftan cradled her head on one of his hands, before his free hand trailed to the necklace that rested around her neck.

“Wha- why are you...”

Max gasped, her words trailing off as his hand had moved down further from the necklace to touch the bare skin above the plunging neckline of her dress. She looked

around in embarrassment. Thankfully, everyone was too engrossed in their own conversation and not a single person had looked their way. She let out a shaky sigh of relief, before pushing his arm away, but he would not budge.

Riftan fixed her with a deep look, the blaze from the embers reflected in his dark eyes. He toyed with the few strands of loose hair that had flown down the back of her neck, lightly caressing the area around her shoulder bone with his fingertips.

Her body trembled at the electric feeling she was experiencing, from her back down to her toes. His hand slowly wined down, from her back then to her waist, wrapping his arm around her. Max felt her face flush at the softness of the skin contact, Riftan's gaze never straying far from her face.

"Ri, Riftan..." she stuttered at him, and he let out another small smile.

"My wife seems to be tipsy so I shall take my leave first." He said to the knights who were fully absorbed in conversation.

The knights who were chatting just a moment ago looked at the two and gave them a look of understanding, if their knowing glances and suggestive winks sent their way were anything to go by. Max was certain her face was dyed a deep red and felt she could die on the spot from the sheer embarrassment she was feeling.

"Let's go." He whispered at her ear before he began to pull her away from the crowd and towards the entrance, ignoring the encouragement, catcalls, and whistles the knights gave them as they left.

Max stumbled out of the dining hall after him as he pulled her away, her wrist grasped in his hand. They passed through a lavatory, cleaning their soiled hands from the feast before Riftan's footsteps rushed out again. She couldn't help but look around the change in scenery as they continued to walk away. Despite the wall lamps shining light onto the outside hallway, some parts were still too dark for her to clearly see. She blinked her eyes as she tries to adjust at the lack of brightness. Even the moonlight wasn't able to shed some light, thanks to the opaque glass of the windows.

Still, it wasn't able to shelter her from the natural chill the night brought within the halls, sending shivers up her arms.

"Ri- Riftan... just, just a bit slo-slower..."

Max stuttered, but he didn't seem to be listening to her, as she still kept on tripping with him unashamedly keeping up with the fast pace. When it was clear he wasn't listening to her, she attempted to yank her arm away from his grip before she felt the air knocked out of her as her back hit the wall!

She stifled a gasp as she saw Riftan trap her with his body. They stopped by the staircase, and Max could feel her quickening breaths, before she felt the air leave her body once more as Riftan connected their lips.

The kiss was wild, full of teeth and biting, and possessiveness. She felt herself beginning to lose herself in the kiss, her grasp tightening on his arm, her nails digging into the cloth. It wasn't their first kiss, she'd tasted him a number of times, but it still left her reeling with the rush of a first kiss every single time they would.

Riftan moved from her lips, trailing wet kisses on her jaw, down to the side of her neck. He suckled on the soft skin, before he went back to her own mouth once more, and their tongues began to battle for dominance.

"I've been thinking about this all day," Riftan muffled between kisses, "Every time I saw you look at some other guy instead of me, I can barely contain myself in marking you for mine."

"" "

He growls at her, a feral sound in her ears. Max barely held back a moan as she felt the vibrations rumble at his chest.

She was certain that by now her heart was beating so hard against her own chest, threatening to burst. His calloused hands moved up to the nape of her neck, pulling her further into him, if that was any more possible.

He moved them up the stairs, taking one step at a time, still taking the sweet time to kiss her senselessly, never once breaking contact. She clung on to him in desperation and ecstasy, fear of falling and the promise of tonight making her head spin. Why is it that everytime he would touch her, she can't seem to think properly?

Even when she knew he was once someone that made her uncomfortable, someone that made her scared?

"D**n it, why are the stairs so long." He groaned in frustration, before his hands went up her skirt, caressing her thighs. Max let out an involuntary shriek at the touch.

"No! I don't—I don't want to... in, in a place like this..." she whined, gasping at the building sensations inside her, before her words were drowned in a searing kiss.

Her arms clung on to his neck, her body shivering not entirely due to the chilly night air anymore. His fingers trailed up further her thighs, reaching the edge of her underwear, before slipping past it, finding her sweet spot.

She could hear his ragged breaths right next to her ear. Her heart was thumping so loudly, it hurt as she felt more and more wanton by the second.

“I want to go inside like this.”

She clung to his shoulder, digging her fingers deeper as she let out puffs of hot breath. She fiercely struggled, making herself flush deeper into his chest. Somehow, she was still lucid enough to fear someone could be watching them as they're hidden by the shadows.

Another shiver went up her spine, whether from fear or passion, she could not tell anymore.

His hot lips went back and forth her earlobes, neck and clavicle while his firm fingers slowly rubbed on the tender skin. She moved as he had taught her ever since day one before Riftan clamped his teeth on her skin and suckled hard till it hurt. He moved like a starved wolf who couldn't wait to eat the first prey he caught in ages.

“I can't bring myself to resist,” He mumbled against her skin, “Even if I die, I'll want to do this tonight.”

With his last bout of strength for the day, he leaped up the remaining flight of stairs with great haste, as Max held onto his torso for dear life.

As soon as they reached their room, he yanked the door open, before closing it almost immediately, tearing into her clothes, until her peaks were exposed clearly in the bright room. She muffled a scream as she stared at her heaving chest, all flushed and taut before he dived down, devouring her perk tips into the warmth of his mouth.

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Chapter 44 – I Am Thirsty For You (2) | 19

Max felt her mind going mush at the sensation, his hot tongue flicking the tip, swirling around it, grazing his teeth with great expertise. He suckled like a newborn babe, making her gasp as familiar heat pooled in her stomach.

“Rif-Riftan...” she gasped, hands unconsciously reaching out to grasp his head, uncertain whether pushing him closer or the opposite would cease the fire inside.

“Don’t say you don’t want it. Say it. Say you want me.”

He demanded callously, staring at her with a gaze full of ardor that seemed to devour her. She felt her heart skip a beat under his intense orbs.

“I, I...”

“Let me fill you up,” he continued, sounding as if he was purring at her, “Let me feel the warmth of your insides. I am like a man in a desert, dying of thirst. I’m thirsty for you.”

The desperation in his tone wasn’t forgotten as he dove in for her lips once more, and her arms wound automatically around his neck, as they both fell onto bed in a heap of tangled limbs and scattered clothes.

Shame, excitement, fear, and ecstasy swept through her heart. Max was buried under sheets that surrounded her, making her feel as if she was floating up in clouds as she hazily accepted his lips.

He pulled out her hairpin, undoing her hair that she elaborately put up, her locks cascading down her face like waterfalls. When that was done, he moved down and pulled her skirt off of her.

When the cool air brushed against her flushed, vulnerable body, she felt her come back to her senses and began to sit up.

“First, first we have to wash up...” she excused, but he stopped her from sitting up further, and pushed her back down.

“So you can fall asleep again? Not a chance.”

He cut her off any further excuse with another searing kiss and grabbed one of her peaks, his palms causing trembling sensations. The wet, soft lump of flesh was being squeezed, as he continued kneading the plump peaks.

“I’ll wash you later so...” he tells her as he continues to mold her body to his specifications.

She couldn’t help but go along with it, following every sensation as she turned putty before his very eyes. She gasped in pleasure, limbs struggling to take a hold of the sheets as she tried to anchor herself to reality.

He didn't stop his ministrations, relentlessly pulling and twisting the sensitive nub of her paks as she keened. She rubbed her thighs together, feeling something new making way into her gut as the heat intensified all the more.

"Fee, feels... wei, weird..." she murmured

"" "

She was flailing harder than usual but she couldn't care less to feel embarrassed of how she writhed beneath him.

Riftan moved his other hand, stroking her behind her ear, cradling her face, placing himself between her thighs and wrapped her legs around his waist. He hovered over her, his body dwarfing her petite frame, his hips moved closer to her nether regions, before his clothed member rubbed against her entrance.

Not right, something was missing.

"I feel like I can't breathe."

With his free hand, he swiftly untied his pants and kissed her again, pulling his pants down to his ankles and pushing them off. Their tongues gently entangled around each other as they kissed, battling for dominance.

Max lost herself in the burning passion as the tip of his raw member rubbed against her already wet entrance ready for him. Unconsciously, her legs widened, making his descent a little easier as he pushed himself inside in one slow thrust, fully sheathing himself in her.

She writhed at the sensation. Her nails dug into his flesh, forming half moons as she clung to him. Riftan's body felt tense as he entered her. He let out a groan as he felt her warmth clamp from all sides around him.

"D**n... don't tighten so much..." he tells her, almost pleading.

"Sor-sor-sorry..."

"Breathe, let out a long breath... yes, just like that..."

She could taste the wine on his tongue, smell it on his breath as he continued to overwhelm her. She felt like a fish out of water, gasping for air at the fullness in her. She could feel his member begin to throb inside with every thrust.

"Would dunking your body into hot cream feel like this..."

His sweet words did not match his face, which had a grim look, almost as if he was getting tortured. Max tried her best to somehow adapt to the feeling of him inside her, her hips moving. The slightly coarse fabric was somehow constantly stimulating her already sensitive skin.

Unable to resist any longer, Riftan began moving his hips.

“Ah, ah!”

His throbbing member thrust in her, pulling out until only his tip remained before moving back in an almost excruciating manner. Never had she felt so wet and hot inside, and he melted with every thrust. Max on the other hand felt the passionate sensation sweep her body to oblivion.

He bent down, suckling on her abandoned chest, and she felt that burning sensation intensify at the added action. Her body shook incessantly, her thighs slicking as her legs pushed herself further, deeper into Riftan with every thrust.

Very close. She could feel herself getting close to her own zenith, and so was Riftan from the slight pressure she could feel from his hands around her, grabbing her dearly for life.

“Don’t, don’t want...” she gasped out in alarm as she began squirming beneath him, but her body wasn’t listening to her as it kept squeezing him in acceptance.

And just like that, she felt herself get lost in a bright white light as she was pushed over the edge. Her heart thumped against her chest. As she was still reeling, she realized Riftan hadn’t stopped yet.

She felt like crying at the over stimuli, she clung onto him harder as she felt losing herself completely over the pleasure. And as he pummeled into her with the same need to extinguish the heat in his body, she felt like drowning closer into him.

Max didn’t know it was possible to feel both pleasure and pain simultaneously.

Her body wracked as he kept moving, picking up the pace, bringing them closer if it were any possible. The decadent sounds of his lower region slapping against her thighs filled her ears. She couldn’t bear it any longer. Just as she was about to move away, Riftan lifted her up and sat her on his lap, thrusting deeper into her than before. Her legs straddled him, widening as she sank down further, taking his length in as he hit her cervix.

“Ah, ahh...” There was a pause as he filled her to the brim, and her hips unconsciously twitched at the electrifying stimulation at their intertwined bodies at the core..

He grabbed her curved backside and mumbled. “A little more... feel me a bit more, Maxi...” And then he slowly moved her against him, slick, warm skin rubbing over skin.

Max desperately clung to his neck, thrilled at the position that he entered her insides. An embankment once broken had no way to stop — every time he dug in and closed their bodies, her waist shook by itself and squeezed his length as if to demand something.

Right when she couldn’t stand the heat and stimulation any longer, he stopped his movements, a rough exhale coming from his lips. She closed her eyes tightly as she felt something lukewarm spread deep inside her belly and a drop of sweat rolled around her eyes, trickling down her cheeks like a tear.

“I thought I was gonna die.”

He mumbled as he licked down the drop of sweat. Max, still unable to recover her self-control, looked up at his flushed face with a hazed vision. His black pupils were burning up and down through his now messy hair, as if he wasn’t still satisfied with his feast.

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Chapter 45 – Devoured Till Morning (1) | 19

“Hey, wake up, we’re not finished.”

Riftan murmured from beside her as he began to caress her hips with his thumbs, and began to lean in over her, suckling on her bottom lips lightly. Max’s eyes fluttered open, her mind still in a haze as she gazed up at him.

He moved her into a more comfortable position, her back against the bed as he hovered above her. He sat up in front of her, hefting his shirt up, throwing it over his head and left it on the floor. Their bodies pressed up against each other, making her shiver with pleasure—which seemed to please him some more.

He grabbed her ankle gently, pulling her leg up until it propped against his shoulder, his hands resting on her waist before he moved his hips. Max let out a moan of pleasure, the sweat glistening against their naked skins.

The sight of the two of them together was unbelievably e****c. Her breathing turns ragged as she thought of what people would think at what they were doing? She remembers seeing a priest, who preached about the proper conduct of a virtuous wife. Was she living up to it? However, all thoughts faded from her mind the moment Riftan rocked his hips into her, her mind turning into mush as the pleasure began building up once more from deep within her.

“Uh... uhh...”

“Look at us.” Riftan groaned as he rocked faster, harder. His hand gripped the leg on his shoulder, while the other reached out to grab her chin and force her to look at their conjoined regions.

Her breath shudders at the sight. It was so foreign, and so frightening, yet intoxicating at the same time. He pushed until he was hilt-deep within her. Her stomach bulged along with every thrust moving up and down her stomach as his member pressed at her walls. She could feel the heat pooling up once more...

She began to writhe beneath him, trying to find somewhere to cling to.

“Uh, Ugh...!” she gasped, and squeezed her eyes shut, when the grip on her chin tightened.

“No, Don’t close your eyes and look. That I am inside you... that I you... ughh...” Riftan groaned, pleasure overriding his senses for a moment as his pacing began to feel ragged and irregular.

He pressed harder with every passing second, sending her closer and closer to the edge every time he pressed against her womb. She moaned wantonly in his hands. Riftan’s veins bulged out his neck as he kept up the rough lovemaking.

Max wanted to push him away, make him stop, but at the same time, she wanted to feel more of him pressing deeper, further inside. Riftan gritted his teeth as he could feel the sensation building up, his member stiffening with the sensation against his sensitive muscle.

Max felt herself being split open as he kept up the pace, it was rubbing her insides, causing sweet friction to fuel up the ecstasy she was feeling. She was squeezing him with every thrust. And Riftan moved like he wanted to break her open, make sure she was molded perfectly for him, and only him.

Max let out a sob, and covered her face with her hands as she began to feel her climax happening so close now...

So, so close.

Last she remembers was a blinding white light, and the sweetest sensation washing over her before she blacked out.

”””” ”

Their rough love making continued all throughout the night.

???

When she woke up, the first thing she registered was the light pitter-patter of the rain hitting the window panes. Max's eyes fluttered open, blinking the sleep off her eyes, and watched the water cascade down, blurring her view of the outside. The chilly air hit her skin, making her shiver, and pulled the covers tightly around her body, all the way until it covered her nose, snuggling in its comfort. It was only until then, she realized something else, aside from the blanket, was wrapped around her.

Riftan shifted in his sleep, his arm draped around her stomach, before pulling them closer together. He pulled until she was flushed against him, her bare back touching his bare chest.

Max felt her cheeks begin to flush at the intimate contact, and felt it flush some more when the hand that was on her waist, began trailing upwards, cupping one of her b****s. His leg, which was tangled between hers also began rocking, rubbing against her sweet spot.

Thinking he's stirring awake, Max turned to look at him, but saw him still deep in sleep, as the ministrations continued in a lazy manner, soft snores coming from him as he was burrowed in his pillow.

He looks so innocent like this, Max thought.

“Innocent...?” She blinked at the unexpected thought that crossed her mind. She'd never thought she could ever associate such a word with the man beside her.

He was the definition of its opposite.

Still, she found herself mesmerized as she stared at his peaceful expression. He was always so stern, his eyebrows always furrowed, face crinkled in serious thought when awake. But now in his sleep, nothing but a slight wrinkling of his nose was present. He truly looked like a young man still fresh in his twenties.

She freed one of her hands on its grip of the blanket, and casually brushed her palm over the fringe of his hair. Riftan shifted, murmured something indecipherable, which made her freeze, thinking he would wake up.

She waited a few more moments, and then nothing else.

“Phew...” she whispered.

Suddenly she was struck with the urge to touch the smooth skin of his face. Her fingers twitched, hovering near his face, when she fought the urge down. Her heart was beginning to beat fast at their continued proximity. Any longer, and she might do something embarrassing.

“Ri, Riftan... st, stop now, we have to wake up...” she stuttered, trying to wake him up.

She looked out of the window. The rain was still coming down, which made it impossible to see the clear skies, but she could tell they’ve been here for a long time now.

Very carefully, as to not wake him up, she twisted out of his grasp and got out of the bed. Riftan murmured something indecipherable once more, still stuck in sleep, as she got out of his hold. She had to hold back a whimper when she rubbed against him.

The entire room was filled of the scent of musk and s*x. The sheets were soiled, their clothes littered all over the floor. It also didn’t help to quell the growing heat in her stomach also.

She breathed shakily, tucking her legs beneath her, before plopping back down on the bed. She was too sore to get up. Every part of her was tingling with their rigorous session last night. She bit her bottom lip, remembering the way they touched, every sensation.

It was only after a few more moments, did she finally realize that the lump behind her had disappeared. Which only meant one thing.

Riftan was awake.

“Ri, Riftan...!” she exclaimed, but squeaked when she was pushed back to lie on her front.

She felt big calloused hands come in contact with her b**t cheeks, kneading them, making her squirm. The hands squished and pulled, opening up her b**t, presenting her other entrance. Her face was pressed on the pillows, her b**t raised in the air, feeling the intruding sensation prodding at her, rubbing against her small hole. Her knuckles clenched on the fists as he prepped her. Spreading her until she opened up so nicely for him before pushing in.

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 46 – Devoured Till Morning (2) | 19

Max gasped at the filling sensation, she didn't think she could feel any more full than last night.

"This place makes me feel as if I'm melting..."

His breath tickled the back of her ear as Max buried her face in the sheets. He reached around her hips, twisting her body and then placing her with her back against the bed. His hands rested on her peaks, before he began moving in her once more.

"Ah..." she gasped with every thrust. The sensation was remarkably different than last night.

"Ugh, uh..."

Her arms went up around his neck, her nails digging into his back as she clung onto him with every whimper she released. One of his hands released her chests, moving down to rub against her sensitive nub on her nether regions.

With the current sensation she was feeling, coupled with his incessant rubbing, she could feel herself buildup quicker than before. She tipped her legs out to a stretch as he pushed deeper within her, twisting her once again until her face laid against the sheets.

He bent over her, his chest making contact with her back, trailing kisses from her shoulder blades to the back of her neck. She let out another gasp of pleasure when she felt the sharp sensation of him biting her neck.

Even though it was something she experienced numerous times last night, the feel of him pulsating inside her walls, growing bigger was unbearable. She began to convulse, her body trembling at the build up.

"It's still morning, and you are already driving me crazy." Riftan murmured.

He gave her one last peck at her sweaty back and slowly pulled himself out with a satisfied sigh. She let out a choked sound at the odd sensation.

“Wait for a second.”

Riftan yawned loudly, running a hand up his disheveled hair and suddenly jumped out of the bed. She watched him go across the room naked and pulled up his pants in one swift motion. He, who made her feel crazy so early in the morning, was only so carefree and calm. She could liken him to a nonchalant cat.

“Bring bath water and a change of clothes,” he ordered as he swung the door outside to tell the maid.

She was still reeling from the aftershocks of their love making. Riftan turned, and saw her still in bed. He stared down at her with his dark lidded eyes, then sat on the bed and kissed her shoulder blades and back, making a smacking sounds all over her skin.

“Ti—I’m tired...” She mumbled in fear that he might come into her body again and the man slightly frowned. He picked up the towel on the bedside table and began wiping down her body that was wet with bodily fluids.

“Are you sick?” he asked her with concern laced in his tone.

””” ”

“A bit, I’m a bit... so-sore.” She stuttered quietly resisting the shame she felt. She watched as his brows furrowed deeper.

“I must have gone too far.” He mumbled as he ruffled his hair.

Max only blushed in response.

Moments later, the maids came in with a bathtub containing hot water and a towel. He chased the maids away, saying he didn’t need to be attended to, before he picked her up in his arms carefully lowering her into the bathtub.

Max groaned gently as she felt her throbbing muscles loosen up at the warm waters. He took off his pants and inserted himself behind her. The water swished and sloshed around a little, some spilling to the floor.

He felt her tensed up as he pulled her to lean against him and sighed.

“Relax,” he chastises her, “I know when to stop.”

The man sat with his long legs wide open and gently embraced her tightly stiffened shoulders. Max was curled up and watched him soap his face and head. After washing

his hair, he poured fresh water in the bathtub and washed her hair. She was embarrassed that she was being washed like a child, but she couldn't rebel because she was exhausted.

"The fluffiness reminds me of red clouds." He said, twirling her hair that reminisced a red jellyfish floating at sunset. Max opened her eyes wide. It was just amazing that he referred her dark, unruly, ugly hair to such a contrasting euphemism.

"It al-always gets ta-tangled up by it-its own... it's di-disturbs me." She suddenly said out of the blue, finding his praise far too disjuncting.

"I find the curls really adorable."

She widened her eyes. This man has an odd taste.

"Keep it down when you're with me. I like the way it looks when it falls down your shoulders. Including the way it touches your skin."

He hugged her waist from the back and rubbed his nose over her shoulder. Max dipped her body till the water was up to her chin and smoothed her hair. They thawed their bodies out in the water till their fingers and toes wrinkled up, they then got out of the bathtub and wiped themselves dry. Riftan sat her in front of the fireplace and dried her hair with a towel. She also wiped his hair in return.

"Stay in bed and rest for today. You won't be able to go out because of the rain anyways."

He said, as he wore the pants and put on a white tunic that was brought by the maid over his head. Max didn't have the courage to dress in front of him, so she nodded her head while wrapped around in the towel.

The white tunic, embroidered with gold thread around the neck, suited him so perfectly. He looked like a painting. He put on his long boots over his starched stiff trousers and tied them tightly with a leather strap.

"A-are you go-going outside the ca-castle?"

As he wore his protective gear on top of the tunic and carried his sword and robe, Max looked curiously at him. Riftan, who was wearing a sword at his waist, gave a light smile as he looked back at her.

"Do you not want me to leave?"

Max only wetted her lips as she did not know what to say. He put his robe around his shoulders and continued to speak in an impertinent tone.

“I’ve been away for a long time, so I have lots to do. I’m going to inspect the grounds all day today. If anything happens, send a guard.”

“Bu-but it, it’s raining a lo-lot...”

She looked at the heavy rain knocking against the window. He shrugged as if it was no big deal.

“I once wandered through the mountains in the middle of a storm. Walking around the grounds is nothing to me.”

Then he clipped his hood around his shoulders, and strode towards the door. Before leaving, he turned back to her. “I’ll be back.”

“Al-alright...”

He nodded at her before he opened the door and went out.

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 47 – Refurbishing Castle Calypse (1)

At last, she stood on her trembling legs and wore the underskirt prepared by the servants. However, a dress to wear over those was missing. She rang the bell that always lay on her bedside. A moment later, Rudis entered the room to help her dress up.

“Would you like me to put up your hair, just like yesterday?” Rudis asked.

“J-just neatly in a braid, please.”

Rudis swiftly tied her hair into a single braid with a ribbon at the end. Wearing a simple and comfortable dress, Max sat by the fireplace and ate a bowl of warm chicken soup and a piece of cornbread. She looked out the window and watched the rain patter against her window, while she placed her hand on her pleasantly full stomach. Max

resisted herself from falling asleep to the sound of the calming rhythm of nature and called Rodrigo instead to continue their tour.

Although her legs ached with every step she took and her nipples were still sore from all the rough caresses from last night, she didn't want to lie in bed all day.

I just arrived at the castle...

Max didn't want to give the servants the impression that their new master was an indolent woman. She walked all the way to the living room in the annex, and finally returned to her room after receiving a ledger listed with previously purchased goods. However, it was difficult to distinguish which of the listed purchases were essential or not.

To start with, Maximilian had never purchased an item before. All she knew about currency was that Soldem was gold and Liram was silver. But the ledger before her was full of currencies she had never heard. Frustrated, Max started to sweat.

Denar, Derham, Dant. She recognized they were currencies of the southern continent but did not know much of their worth. Max scanned through the ledger skimming through the few purchased items of weapons, food, clothes, oil, candles, firewood, and the like. Besides these items, the number of products purchased and the total cost was written in crisp detail.

Max recalled her little knowledge of sums and subtractions from her tutor when she was still a child to estimate the value of each currency. Unfortunately, she hadn't used her brain for arithmetic for a long time, and thus, this oversight made her only grew more flummoxed.

Ultimately, Max closed the ledger shut and lay face down in her bed with resignation. She wondered if she had to ask for Rodrigo's help. But she soon remembered her father's all too knowing words—a master must show dignity to their servants at all times.

“Any servant is bound to ignore a master who is oblivious and incompetent,” her father would say.

She shuddered as she thought of the indifferent servants at castle Croix. They weren't openly rude, but she could feel the disdain for her in their looks. She wasn't aware when the servants of castle Calypse might change their attitudes to her. Nothing was permanent, after all.

I still have some time. Max tried to calm herself.

Riftan returned late at night with his knights, drenched in the cold rain. The servants urgently led them to the sauna room where the men warmed themselves in the hot

steam in bliss and enjoyed a massive meal with alcohol. When Riftan finally came back to their bedroom, he started to polish his sword and armor.

Max watched his skillful hands running over every inch of the metal, asking why he didn't have the servants to take care of it.

"I grew up doing this since I was fourteen, so the work is insubstantial to me. I don't want anyone else touching this guy anyway," he answered with a shrug of his shoulders.

"" "

He held up his sword against the light. It was rubbed and shined to the point it was icy blue, not a characteristic silver of some of the familiar swords she had seen—it was different from the panache ones her father would carry at the girdle when he entered a banquet. There were no sophisticated patterns carved in at the handle, but the blade was wide and long with an edge as sharp as a steeple.

It looked simple, yet she thought it was more majestic than any of the swords her father owned, littered in jewels and gold.

"I-it must be a one of a kind, that sword."

"It was a prize I won from a sword-fighting competition. It's one the most valuable swords in all seven nations combined," Riftan said, unable to hide the pride from seeping into his voice.

Max had never been to a sword-fighting competition. Rosetta often went as a spectator with her father to show appreciation to the knights that endearingly referred to her as their dear lady, but she would always return complaining how much the event was too uncivilized and raucous for her liking.

"D-did you win?"

"Of course," he replied without hesitation as he put the sword back to its case. Gazing at it blankly, Max suddenly blurted without preamble.

"I-I often hear the w-winner gets a k-k-kiss from the m-most respectable l-lady..."

She slurred the end of her sentence. Max was startled at her own words and dropped her gaze immediately. What was I thinking? Sensing Riftan's disquieting look, she blurted out an excuse.

"A l-long time a-a-ago, I read a s-story about a k-knight and p-p-princess. T-the knight won a h-horseriding c-c-competition... and t-the queen o-offered a-a kiss and l-l thought i-it was q-quite r-romantic..."

The more she spoke, the more shame grew overwhelming inside her. Instantly, as she could feel the stirrings of a past come to life, she could hear her father yell about her damned habit—never knowing when to keep her mouth shut.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, but it wasn’t romantic at all,” Riftan replied in a level-headed voice. She was expecting his displeasure, but surprisingly, there wasn’t any.

“I didn’t want to get a kiss from a stranger.”

His words should be enough compromise, an honest recollection of a past she was no part of. Yet Max couldn’t help but find herself rousing him further, trying to get some truth from him she believed was just sweet nothings.

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 48 – Refurbishing Castle Calypse (2)

“A k-kiss from a-a n-noblewoman is t-the h-highest honor a k-knight can r-r-receive.”

His reply came a beat later, sereneness still on his features. “I come from a humble background, so I never had many feelings for such old-fashioned stories. Furthermore, I wouldn’t feel any honor in getting a kiss from a woman who would’ve frowned at my unbearable stench as I stepped closer to her.”

Max was taken aback by his apathetic response and remained her eyes fixed on the floor, her gaze enough to burn a hole into them any moment.

Riftan leaned his sword on the wall and laid into the bed with her, showing he had no intention of being sarcastic for her queries on his personal life, and her predilections surrounding it. Noticing Max tense up automatically at the second presence beside her, Riftan let out a wry smile as he rolled on to his side.

“Don’t worry, I won’t tease you tonight. I hear you were sore.”

Max nodded her head, far quick to be considered normal, her neck flushing. As Riftan grabbed and pulled her to lay beside him, he placed the lid on the lamp, extinguishing the fire glowing beside. Darkness slowly engulfed the room. And she listened to his steady heartbeat beginning to relax, thoughts forgotten.

Another day went by castle Calypse in this manner.

The musk of earth filled the castle as the downpour continued for days.

Despite the weather, Riftan had gone around inspecting the village, the mine, and farms. Wanting to be responsible as well, Max had asked for permission to use the library freely. She was struck with uncertainty with all the books, overthinking she might damage them, but soon her fear had turned to awe as she scanned the bookshelves.

Max found a ledger written by Knight Roem, who had once ruled Anatol nestled between the parchments.

She restrained herself from digging into books on poetic literature from the Roem era and instead opened a book on mathematics. She wasn't trying to learn anything too grandiose. What she needed to do first was to strengthen her rudimentary knowledge on currency and basic arithmetics.

But without some guidance, her efforts were all for naught—it was much of a tumultuous challenge for someone without proper education.

“Madam, the president of the merchant guild, has come to visit you.”

Max shut the book she was reading and walked out of the library. When she followed Rodrigo into the living room, a man in his mid-thirties stood up from his seat to greet her.

“It is an honor to meet you, Madam Calypse. My name is Aderon Thoner.” The merchant bowed his head in deference.

Max could barely place a smile on her face. She was informed the merchant would come to her, now that the rain has eased, but facing him made her extremely nervous. But perhaps it was more so because of the decisions that were to fall on her hands.

Max held her breath shortly before opening her mouth. “T-thank you for c-c-coming through t-the r-rain.”

””” ”

“It’s no trouble, madam. I apologize for not visiting you soon enough,” the merchant replied, smiling generously.

Max sat in front of the table across him. As soon as she seated herself on the plush cushioned chair, she still felt too anxious to initiate a conversation. Despite having enough chance to talk after being reunited with, rather than the hushed silence her father demanded from her—she shouldn't be too nervous now. But she couldn't help but feel on edge.

“I heard you are planning to renovate the castle. Do you have a specific place you want to start with?”

The merchant spoke before Max, who couldn't quickly bring herself to talk.

“W-well, I-I want t-to c-change t-the windows f-first. T-the hallways a-are t-too d-dark and a-a-a lot of r-rooms have b-b-b-broken w-w-windows.”

“Changing all the windows in the castle to new ones will considerably raise the cost. Are you thinking of balt-glass?”

Max pictured the clear windows inside castle Croix. She didn't know there were different types of glass.

“The price varies highly depending on the type of glass. Balt-glass is the cheapest while crystal-glass from the southern continent the more expensive variant. If you would like, I can prepare some samples to show you next time.”

“Y-yes, I-I would I-I-like that v-very m-much.”

“Any other things you would like to change?”

“W-we need c-curtains for t-the w-window and a c-chandelier f-for the b-banquet r-room. A-also d-decorative c-carpets f-for the floors a-and w-walls...”

Realizing this might be a massive business for him, the merchant grinned from ear to ear. On the other hand, Max felt her throat tighten. Riftan did say he would pay whatever price, but did he really mean any amount? Still torn whether to continue with this large, not to mention ambitious project of hers, the merchant had started to rush with her plans. Eager to put it to life and pocket the exorbitant coins.

“It takes some time to order all the items you've listed. I will come back with samples as soon as possible at whatever time suits you. If I may, can you show me the floors and walls that you intend to decorate, madam?”

Max glanced at Rodrigo with a slight tilt of her head. The merchant would know what the castle needs better than her.

The two left the living room and walked to the largest banquet hall in the castle. Rodrigo, an older servant, and two guards followed them from behind. When Aderon,

the merchant, looked around the room, he soon made a long speech about which part of the room needs what and what items they would need to order more.

Max tried her best to remember every word he mentioned; avant-garde, he said, each exotic piece he listed promising exuberance to the dreary interior.

“What do you think about changing the stone tiles into marble?” he suggested, looking at the ground with disapproval.

“W-we s-s-should work on our p-priorities f-first...” Max started, trying not to get too caught up on too much detailing.

But the merchant continued waving his hands around the room, his words rapid-fire and a contrast to her floundering words.

“I think the marble tiles on the floor and a mural – the walls will need redoing with limewash – will look fantastic. Obviously, I’ll make sure only of excellence will be used in the refurbishing.”

“I-I’ll have t-to t-think a-about it,” she answered with an awkward smile.

“I think there is a need to go extravagant and elaborate. This is the castle of the continent’s greatest knight! Don’t you agree that he deserves to live worthy of praise as his title?” The merchant impassionately replied, making Max freeze, her perfunctory smile turning almost crooked.

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 49 – Am I Dreaming (1)

He had a point. Aderon told Max to think it through and left the banquet hall to investigate the hallway and other rooms. He then fluently listed the items that each room needed. It sounded excessive, but Max did agree on his opinion on changing the stair handrail and the window frames. It was an issue of safety, she thought.

After a while, the merchant left the castle and Max returned to her room and looked through the ledger. On one of the pages was the amount of money Riftan has given her to renovate the castle, but Max had no idea how much it was worth. Although she was treated like an insect by her father, she was still a family of a Duke. She had never even held a coin in her hand.

I should be asking for help... But who did she have to ask? Riftan may realize his wife was an idiot and start treating her like her father did. And the servants? They might talk behind her back, how their stuttering Madam didn't even know the most basic things. Max began to get paranoid.

It might be the best idea to just go along with the merchant.

Max settled on the simplest solution. He must've been to many different castles, so he must have enough experience in how these things work. She may get a bit overcharged, but Aderon's words were very convincing and he sounded like he knew what he was doing.

Riftan did tell me the money wasn't the issue.

After coming up with a decision, she felt calmer, walking out of her room in more resolute steps. The rain had died a little, sprinkling lightly onto the Earth. She missed the fresh air, after spending a couple of days indoors. Max went to the terrace extending into the garden and looked up at the gray sky and the moist garden.

The bare tree branches by the gazebo were soaked in the rain, appearing black, adding to the spooky atmosphere. The smell of wet grass struck her nose. Max reached beyond the terrace roof and felt the cold-water droplets fall to her hand. The drizzle soon soaked her sleeves.

"Why are you outside?"

Max looked into the garden. It was Riftan, walking across the empty garden. With his big strides, he jumped up the stairs within a couple of seconds.

"And you're dressed lightly."

"I-I just wanted s-some f-fresh a-air..."

The eyes hiding under the hood of his cloak squinted. He removed the wet strand of hair poking into her eyes with his cold hands. Max wondered if she should do the same; sweep his wet hair out of his face. It seemed normal that he touched her, but she felt she needed his permission to touch him.

"At least put on a robe if you want fresh air. You might catch a cold."

“I-I’m sorry...”

Riftan reached for her shoulder to cover her, but soon realized he was wet and lowered his arm.

“We should head back inside.”

””” ”

She followed him into the castle. He left a long track of muddy footprints on the cold stone tiles. While she thought of placing a brush by the entrance to wipe off the mud on the shoes, she noticed a handful of wildflowers in his hand. She looked at the flowers, puzzled. Feeling her gaze, he quickly pulled down his cloak to hide his hand.

“...It’s nothing.”

Perhaps she wasn’t meant to see it. Alarmed by his stern response, Max immediately looked away. An awkward silence lay between them. They continued to walk in silence when Riftan cursed lowly.

“D**n it,” he said. He held up the thing that was in his hand. “I saw some in the garden.”

Max’s eyes bulged with surprise. It was a bunch of wildflowers, still wet in the rain. Looking down at his own gift, Riftan frowned like he was angry.

“It looked quite pretty in the empty plain... Now that I see it properly, it’s just a shabby bunch of grass.”

Did he pick them himself? Max looked at the flowers, then at him. Riftan, hesitating at her blank reaction, handed it over to her.

“You can throw it away if you don’t like it.”

Her eyes widened. “I-I would n-never throw it a-away.” It would be too much of a blunder to throw the first gift she has ever received in her life.

As she slowly took the flowers into her hands covered in small droplets of rain, as if they were fragile, the scent of rain and grass struck her nose. She carefully stroked the tiny petals.

“It’s b-b-beautiful.”

She was being honest. But although she mumbled the words with her shaky voice, the man didn’t look entirely happy. He must’ve thought she was simply being nice. Max opened her mouth to say something but closed it again. She didn’t know how to express her current feelings in words. Instead, she took the wet flowers into her face and

breathed in their flowery scent. The wet and droopy flowers in front of her had never looked so lovely before.

Just the thought of someone crouching in the rain to pick flowers for her was tremendously touching.

“T-thank you,” she uttered as sincerely as she could.

Riftan’s cheekbones slightly flushed. He turned his body away to hide this, continuing his steps forward.

“Let go to our room. I want to take a shower.”

Max delicately held the flowers by her heart as she quickly caught up behind him, a warm feeling spreading inside her.

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 50 – Am I Dreaming (2)

The next day, Aderon and a couple of servants came to her with an armful of samples. She listened to him explain for a long time. A bumpy glass with a greenish-glow, a smooth and clear glass, a coarse but beautiful glass with silvery light... Describing their own pros and cons, Aderon soon moved on to fabrics.

“It’s better to use thick fabric for the curtains in the banquet hall. How about mahogany? Imagine mahogany curtains with rose patterns embroidered in gold thread. I think it would make the banquet hall look very luxurious. You can also opt for the gold silk curtains. Gold curtains would even fit comfortably into the banquet hall of a royal palace. It’s fancy, yet modest and elegant.”

Max hectically scanned through the numerous pieces of fabric. Rudis cautiously put down the tray of tea as she looked at the samples Aderon brought over. She decided to seek some help from a fresh pair of eyes.

“R-Rudis, w-what do you t-think?”

“...Unfortunately, I don't have quite the artistic taste, madam”, she replied.

Seeing her puzzled expression, Max couldn't ask her more questions and fixed her eyes on the table. After a moment of thought, she finally chose the mahogany curtain with rose patterns. The curtains had gold tassels on the end and complicated embroidery in the middle, making it pretty expensive.

After choosing the curtains, everything was fairly easy. On the floor, she decided to place a red carpet to go along with the curtains, and a tapestry of a legendary knight, Uigru, riding a white dragon, to hang over the walls.

“Have you given a thought on the floors, madam? Would you like to change them to marble tiles?”

“I-it will l-lead to a big c-c-construction, s-so I need m-more time to t-think about i-it.”

“No need to be haste, madam. It will take some time for the materials to be delivered from the city anyways, so do take your time thinking about it.”

Max nodded her head, glad to have not been pushed into the decision.

Next, the merchant pulled out a miniature model of the chandelier. When she made an exclamation at the tiny thing, the size of a palm, he arrayed several models made of marble onto the table. A unicorn standing on its back legs, a dragon with its wings spread out wide, a knight of armor riding a roaring lion... Max admired the figures modeled with extreme delicacy when there was a knock on the door. When she ordered the person to enter, Rodrigo appeared behind the door.

“Madam, the tailor called in by the lord is ready for you.”

“A t-tailor?”

She tilted her head. She remembered Riftan promising her to get her a new dress made for her. Max turned her head with discern to the merchant, but Aderon was already putting his samples away.

“I will come back later in the week, madam. Ah, I will leave the figures with you to decide.”

“I-I'm sorry to have w-wasted your t-t-time.”

””” ”

“Oh, please! It is not a problem, madam. I can come back whenever it suits you.”

When the merchant left the castle, she walked to the dressing room with the servants. Amidst a pile of fancy fabrics, colorful skein of thread, and a weaving frame, there stood a skinny man in his forties and a woman in her thirties. The two straightened up and bowed respectfully to Max as she entered.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, madam. My name is Roan Serus. This is my wife, Linda Serus. We were given the honor to sew you a dress."

"N-nice to m-meet you," Max mumbled in reply.

"The lord has ordered us to make whatever the number of beautiful dresses that suits you, no matter the price. Do you have any style you prefer?"

"I-I don't have a-anything specific i-in m-mind."

"Then we will gladly show you what is in trend right now."

The tailor pulled out a scroll from his bag and held it to her. Max looked at the drawing on the yellow parchment paper, certain she was dreaming. Although she didn't understand what the scribbled figurines, she found herself growing more excited by the minute.

She saw Rosetta surrounded by tailors and seamstresses many times, but she had never stood in the middle of that before.

Max listened to the tailor explain, while she had herself measured, study the different fabrics and tried on a hats, veils, and belts. When she looked into the mirror, she saw a lady with sparkling eyes, truly looking like some semblance of a proper lady. She was wearing a pointy hat, tall enough to touch the ceiling and various overly fancy accessories; she thought she had never looked so silly before.

"I-I think a smaller h-hat would be b-better," she said as she gently took off her hat.

The tailor nodded his head and wrote something on the parchment. After deciding to make three dresses, she left the dressing room.

The flurry of activities had taken most of her time and it was no sooner that sundown was on them. Max immediately returned to her room after her duties were over. A sense of overwhelm still tingling over her heart on accomplishing things she has never done in her life.

She sat on the chair and massaged her exhausted shoulders, tensed up all day from being nervous.

Her gaze flitted around the room and landed the inconspicuous small vase by the window. The flower buds have bloomed a little more than yesterday. The image of Riftan appeared on her mind as she kept gazing at the flowers.

A weird man, he is...

The first time she saw him, he did not strike as a person that would be picking wildflowers in a field for a woman. The man she saw standing in the middle of a hall in castle Croix with an emotionless face didn't look like a visiting guest, but rather an intruder. Who would have thought that cold man had such a... gentle side in him?

He's been so kind to me... It's too good to be true.

Her face clouded over. The flowers, the dresses, polite people, a kind husband. It was quite unnerving that everything had changed so much in a day. She feared she would wake up the next moment, back at the cold tiles of castle Croix, her father's crane looming over her.

Max held her shoulders in a shaky grip, a sliver of hope coalescing into her usually jumbled thoughts.

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