

As the sun rose to signify the arrival of morning for the kingdom of Asteria, Maxim was already preparing for the long day ahead of him. He pulled up the hood of his red-trimmed white robe, slipping his soft, well-cared for feet into a comfortable pair of brown cloth shoes; he finalized his preparations with a triple-checking of his supplies and Catalysts in his satchel, most importantly: his own prized Catalyst: A milky colored orb, the size of a small ball, that contained the mana needed to use his Weaken spell. Necessities for a student of the Magi Academy.

"I have to say you're awfully cute when you're smiling like that," remarked a small voice from his dresser.

It belonged to the infamous great thief-now turned into the mage's plaything: a tiny, pale skinned woman with long, golden hair. Sitting half-naked with undergarments made of cloth on a tiny, makeshift bed of silk and soft straw, Celeste grinned up to her giant-in-comparison dark-skinned, white-haired captor.

Maxim sighed, reaching down with an extended fingertip to jab it into the thumb sized woman, knocking her off of her bed and onto the hard wooden surface of his dresser with a tiny, pained grunt. "You're getting too comfortable to talk to me so casually like that. We're not equals, thief," He replied sharply.

"Ow... ow... that hurts," She mumbled as she slowly rose to climb back onto her bed, before prostrating herself before him, "S-sorry. This still takes some getting used to! Besides," She lifted her head, "I just can't get over how much more handsome you are when you smile, Master," She giggled with a bright smile.

Maxim sighed once more, shaking his head, then gave a smile of his own. He never imagined she'd become so smitten with him, especially after all he had been putting her through since she was shrunk. Stockholm Syndrome perhaps? Or maybe she was a masochist? Or that free spirit of hers was difficult to break. No matter, she was his toy, and he accepted that.

"It's a big day for me. The Scholars have called upon me to join a party to seek out a magical artifact," He giggled with boyish excitement, "This is a big opportunity! I'm so excited I could explode!" He took a deep breath to calm himself down. "I am a bit nervous though. This will be my first time supporting warriors in a non practice setting."

Celeste smiled and stood up on her bed, "I believe in you, Master. After all," She pointed to herself, "I'm living proof of your greatness." She wasn't wrong. She was the product of his first time using his Weaken spell on a human; an act that was not only risky but forbidden. She was his precious little secret

Maxim gave a soft smile, "While I don't know how much weight the words of someone who is

light as a feather can hold. I appreciate that. You've been a useful pet," He took up his satchel after checking it once more, "Well, I'm off," He declared before moving to exit his dorm.

"Don't I get a kiss goodbye?" Celeste asked with a giggle.

Maxim rolled his eyes and turned back to pluck her up from her bed and bring her to his warm lips, to give her eager, needy body a sweet little smooch and promptly dropped her back down onto the dresser, "Satisfied?"

Celeste gave a silly smile from her slumped over position after being unceremoniously dropped onto the wooden surface, "Never better! I'll be waiting for you, Master!"

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Maxim arrived upon the designated meeting place near the entrance of the castle town; quite eager to meet his fellow companions and set out on this adventure; his mind already a-wonder with thoughts of the artifact and what he'd be rewarded with upon his return; maybe he'd be bumped up to a head scholar's apprentice!

He was brought back to attention once he heard all the noise and clamor from a large crowd; the kind of cheering and excitement that comes with festivals or a large party returning from a successful adventure. As he approached, he quickly realized what the fussing and fawning was all about.

The crowd had centered around a single, lone knight. And not just any knight, but one of Asteria's finest champions: The Flame Knight, Katherine.

She was a massive and imposing as the rumors say, standing tall at a whopping 7'4" with a massive great-sword resting upon her back. Her figure was slim, yet there was strength and sturdiness beyond her appearance. Her heavy armor seemed light as a feather, her sword larger than most could wield. She had long, flowing red hair, supported by her namesake, done up in a ponytail. Her face, while stern and commanding, had lovely feminine features; one could easily say she was beautiful.

"And with one swift, mighty stroke, I felled the massive ogre with my blade!" The Flame Knight proudly wrapped up her tale, "I've never been so disappointed! Those big and terrifying looks were all for show!" She laughed boisterously.

The crowd laughed along with her and cheered, showering her with mass adoration while Maxim pushed through the crowd to seek out his assigned party that should have been nearby; uninterested in the celebrity prestige this knight carried with her.

Katherine spotted the mage's robes and turned her attention toward him, calling out to him

over the heads of her admirers, "You there! Mage! Are you're the one who kept me waiting?"

"Huh? Me?" Maxim pointed to himself, looking over, and up, to the knight in confusion, "Uh, no, I'm with the scholar party, I'm just looking for them, they should be around here somewhere."

The large knight removed herself from her spot and effortlessly pushed through the crowd to approach Maxim; stopping in front of him with her imposing frame; utterly dwarfing him. She impatiently rested her gauntlet-clad hands on her hips, gazing down disapprovingly at him, "I **AM** the group," She declared.

"Ah?" Maxim managed a sound of inquiry as lifted his gaze up high to meet the intense eyes of the famed Flame Knight. He heard the tales and songs about her, but this was the first time he had seen her in person... and *this* close. She was as impressive in stature as the stories told, and with her standing over him like this, she seemed even **bigger** than she actually was. "I wasn't uh...I wasn't expecting--"

"Right," She interrupted him with a scoff, "I can only assume those scholars failed to inform you properly. For all the knowledge and magic in the world, they sure are poor at simple tasks. The Magi are just troublemaking pests," She spoke as if Maxim wasn't even there before stepping back through the crowd for a brief moment only to return with a large satchel in hand. "I will be all that's necessary for this task. His highness...and I *suppose* the Magi," She added the last bit bitterly, "Deemed this quest important enough to have me carry it out. Your only purpose is to verify the artifact we're to seek out," She said while tossing the bag towards him, "Carry this."

Maxim caught the large bag with a grunt, struggling to maintain his balance from the heft weight, "Nngh! And what in the world is all this?"

"Equipment, supplies, armor polish, everything I need for a journey," the large knight said bluntly.

"I am NOT your squire," He shot back.

Katherine scowled, her burning eyes narrowing to a sharp glare. She bent her massive frame forward, sticking a pointed finger in Maxim's face, "Look, **magician**," she said with a tone of disgust, "Your role is to support and assist me. I'll have no need for your little magic tricks, so you'd best make yourself useful in other ways. That is, if you care at all about carrying out this quest."

Maxim grit his teeth, choking down his rage before heaving a resigned sigh; hoisting the bag over his shoulders to carry it with a visible grimace. This woman was beyond infuriating, but if the stories are to be believed, her skills and strength would be invaluable. He resigned himself to enduring her, if only to find the artifact. "Fine. However, this cumbersome weight will make

spell casting difficult.”

“As I said, there is no need for your tricks. Now let’s set out,” She ordered.

“Are you positive the two of us will be enough?”

“I’m more than enough, now get moving.”

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It had roughly been about six hours since the pair had left Asteria Castle town; marching down the roads leading toward the neighboring Elf lands, where the targeted artifact is said to be located in a grove within their forests.

“Can we rest?” Maxim asked breathlessly, his face coated with sweat; huffing and puffing from hauling the knight’s heavy bag.

Katherine bellowed with a groan of annoyance, “Again?!” She barked, turning around to face the mage who was trailing far behind her. “You’re already slowing me down as it is and you want to keep taking breaks. Truly, mages are nothing but a burden and only exist to annoy me.” She scoffed before scouting for a suitable resting place, pointing to it, “We’ll take a short rest there. I’ll need to check the map and regather my bearings anyway,” She said before marching ahead to the designated area.

Maxim heaved a sigh of relief, swiftly following behind her to a spot where he could relax once more; setting the heavy pack upon the soft grass and slumping down right next to it, catching his breath. His sharp eyes watched Katherine march back and forth, staring at the parchment that served as their guide. “So,” He said in between breaths, “What does the map say?”

The famous Flame Knight scoffed and paused on her steps, “We would have finished the quest already if a certain spoiled spellcaster weren’t slowing me down!” She yelled.

“For the love of Asteria, what is your problem with mages anyway? You speak as if I’ve given you some grudge to have with me, but we’re meeting for the first time!” Maxim shot back.

Katherine stomped her armored booted once before bending forward and pointing her finger right in his face once again, “You want to know my problem? I’ll tell you. Your kind thinks you’re so special cause of your little tricks, but you’re not. You’re just a bunch of frail little weaklings that just stand behind people like me, looking for protection so you can reap the benefits. Your kind has never swung a weapon in their lives or felt the thrill and pain of battle. You have no great tales of glory, no trophies to claim. You’re merely children that need to be looked after!”

Maxim's dark eyes shifted to a cutting glare while swatting her hand away from his face, "So you're angry because I didn't work to be some kind of barbarian like you?! Sitting in taverns and drinking the night away, telling old stories? You're the child! The Magi have worked hard to make great advancements in the kingdom, and we can do even greater. We work in tandem with the hard working people of the kingdom to strive for better days for all, but all would crumble without us. We're the backbone! The stones that support the structures! Without us, everyone is nothing!" He yelled back, now pointing a finger at her, "And YOU, how many times were your wounds healed? How many times were you protected and enhanced by another magick practitioner, hmm? I'd wager you would have been dead long before glory graced your name."

Katherine's eyes widened and burned with rage, "You little runt! You have some nerve talking to me like that!"

"Oh?! Is that a problem, oh glorious Flame Knight?!" Maxim spat as he slipped a hand into his satchel, fingertips already eagerly caressing the milky white orb kept within. It would have been all too easy. He could cast the spell in an instant, and before she would realize, she'd be half his size and shrinking down even further. That would show her a thing or two.

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But no; it would be bad timing. He still needed her. He still hadn't found the artifact yet.

"This bickering isn't getting us anywhere," Maxim resigned, "Let's just finish this quest and get it over with, then we'll never deal with each other ever again."

Katherine scoffed, turning her back to him and reconsulted the map, "I'm hard pressed to take advice from someone like you, but you do have a point. We're not too far from the grove, keep an eye out for any markings or placements of stone. It's my understanding that the artifact is placed upon a stone shrine of some sorts."

Maxim stood up and took a deep breath, hoisting up the heavy pack once more, "A shrine? I never imagined the Elves to be a worshiping sort. This artifact must be incredible," Maxim mused, practically salivating at the thoughts that ran through his mind. Given the Magi's experiences; the more glorified the location, the more important it is. He had originally thought it would have been something akin to an old tablet written in an ancient language, or a tool or a weapon from a great being long ago like previous scholastic findings.

But it seemed this would be so much more.

The pair trekked further into the mysterious Elven woods; following the map's guidance for over an hour before frustration settled into the tall, boisterous knight. She let out a loud roar

and slammed her armored fist into a tree; leaving an impressive indent in the shape of her hand within the hardened bark.

“Where in Asteria is this stupid shrine? It’s like this map is leading me in circles! I’ve should have found it by now!” Katherine yelled up at the gnarls of tree branches hanging high overhead.

Maxim wiped a trail of sweat from his brow, using the opportunity to set the pack down and observe the area. He had been so focused on his strength on carrying the ridiculously heavy bag that he didn’t even notice that something was amiss. His dark eyes focused on a particular tree root; remembering it’s shape. He raised an eyebrow in confusion, “I think we passed by here before,” He looked around some more; his surroundings becoming increasingly familiar. His eyes then looked toward the ground; noticing repeated spots of flattened grass, “We’ve been actually going in circles!” He concluded.

“What?!” Katherine barked in confusion, “What are you talking about?!”

“Quiet down and let me focus! It’s an illusion spell of some sort. This certainly means we’re close,” Maxim concluded.

“Nevermind that!” The knight yelled, slamming her fist into another tree, “How do we get out?!”

“If you stopped yelling and allowed me to concentrate, I could figure that out. Now if you don’t mind,” Maxim closed his eyes; pressing his fingertips together while drawing in a deep breath. Elven mystical arts were a large part of his studies; he had to learn the ins and outs of their spells, enchantments and incantations. It was painstaking work, but the knowledge he gained was worth all the trouble. He exhaled sharply and thrust his palms out; his eyes shooting open while shouting out an incantation in the Elven tongue. Within moments, the area around the pair began to ripple, distort, and warp wildly until the endless forest faded, revealing that they were quite close to their goal. Within viewing distance was the grove and numerous stone decorations leading towards the shrine they were seeking.

“Just as I thought,” Maxim said proudly, quite pleased in his success of undoing the spell.

“Tch,” Katherine scoffed, “To think I’d find myself in a situation where I’d need a spellcaster’s help,” She grumbled as she started toward the shrine.

“Wait, fool! At least think about the situation first before you start charging ahead!” Maxim yelled out to the Flame Knight, reaching a hand out to her.

But before Katherine could respond in her typical fashion, a throwing axe suddenly whizzed by

the pair; sharply embedding itself into a nearby tree.

One hand already gripping her blade, Katherine whirled around frantically, sharp eyes swiftly scanning the area as she tried to locate their assailant, "Who goes there? Show yourself!" She roared.

As if responding to her command, numerous Elven warriors appeared and mobilized in front of the shrine; bladed weapons weapons at the ready.

"I never imagined humans would be capable enough to break the spell. We were hoping you'd exhaust yourselves and give up. That way we would have to avoid sullyng this place of our ancestor with blood," spoke one of the warriors, taking a step forward and pointing his sword at the pair, "I also never imagined to see such a small group of treasure seekers as well. Only two? You are foolish, overconfident, or met with some misfortunes along the way. Regardless, we are merciful, walk away and we'll have no quarrel, but if you continue pressing forward..." He trailed off in his words, and the other warriors stepped forward as well.

Katherine never faltered; she drew forth her greatsword and grinned with fire burning in her eyes, "If you weaklings are the only thing in my way, I'm going to be rather disappointed. I doubt I'll even break a sweat," She boasted proudly, gladly stepping up to the challenge.

"Are you insane?!" Maxim yelled out to the cocky knight, "You can't hope to take them all on by yourself! But... but with me, this will be over in an instant," He said while reaching into his pack to pull out his own specialized catalyst, that curious white orb he channeled his spells through.

"I'd sooner sink into my grave before I let a mage assist me! Just stay out of my way!" Katherine roared as she charged toward her opponents.

"You would face us alone?! A foolish human indeed!" Shouted one of the guardians as they gladly accepted her challenge.

Maxim stood there mouth agape. To think she would value her pride and her hatred over her life. Still, there was much to back up her boasting. He watched as she charged headfirst into battle, swinging that massive blade as if it were as light as a twig. She moved with such impressive grace and finesse, akin to a dancer or a fencer; Maxim couldn't believe such a boorish brute could move like that. Even faced with multiple imposing foes, she managed to parry and avoid their attacks, but the young mage quickly realized she had little opportunity to strike back.

That was their plan; Maxim suddenly realized. Just like with the illusion spell, these Elven guardians sought to tire them out rather than outright kill them. And there no doubt that more would be waiting to ambush them.

The Flame Knight would eventually fall at this rate.

Maxim clutched the orb. His goal was right in his grasp. Even though he was this close, he still needed her skills, if only just to retrieve the artifact and make it back to town in one piece. He turned his focus to the catalyst, concentrating on the magical energies within it and himself. His personal Weaken spell would see this battle over in an instant; perhaps he may even see some respect from the Flame Knight once it was all over.

After a few more moments, he was ready. His dark eyes then focused on the intense scuffle, looking to direct his spell in the area. He had improved his magic over time, able to cast it over multiple targets instead of one at a time. The only thing left was to get Katherine out of friendly fire.

"Katherine! Step away, I'm going to unleash a spell!" He called out to her.

"What?!" Katherine shouted back while kicking away one of her attackers and parrying the strike of another, "I told you I have no need of your parlor tricks! Just stand back and watch!"

Maxim gritted his teeth and uttered a groan of sheer annoyance, "It's too late to stop! Get out of the way before misfortune befalls you!" He warned her one last time.

"There will never be a day where I take orders from a robe wearing coward on the backline! Know your place!" Katherine yelled back in reply, knocking back one of the guardians with a wide stroke of her mighty blade.

He can't say he didn't warn her.

Without another word, he released his spell. The white orb shined bright with a shimmering light; the powerful energies within combining with Maxim's own magical prowess to unleash a bright light that washed over the Flame Knight and the warriors she fought with.

A chilling smile appeared on Maxim's face.

"Agh! What's happening?!" Katherine cried out; the blinding light temporarily robbing her of her vision, "What have you done?!"

She yelled and screamed frantically as a bizarre sensation began to overtake her. She felt nauseous and feverish, her body hot and uncomfortable. It was as if numerous snakes had coiled around her, squeezing at her body tightly like her hands gripped her blade. Then a powerful, sinking sensation; those snakes having become heavy and dragging her down into the ground she stood on. She tried to yell more, she tried to curse Maxim's name and his accursed magic, but every time she tried, she would choke, as if her throat was gripped as well.

After what seemed like numerous agonizing minutes, but in reality was only a few moments, the light had subsided; leaving Katherine and her opponents on their hands and knees; panting and trying to figure out just what exactly occurred.

“Urgh... mage...” Katherine groaned as she slowly staggered to her feet while using her sword as support, holding back the urge to puke, “You’d best prepare the words to gain my favor...ugh...cause once I’m through with them...you...you have some explaining to do,” She said while raising her blade, “You understand me?!” She yelled, preparing herself for battle once more, but her anger quickly turned to confusion once she noticed the guardians were fighting in the face with horror as they frantically gazed about their surroundings.

“What sorcery is this?!”

“Th...this is impossible! How could this be?”

“What do we do?!”

Katherine growled, quickly annoyed by the actions of her foes and her recovering illness, “Cease this foolishness and face me! What has gotten into...you...all....?” Katherine trailed off in her words as she glanced ahead to the location of the shrine, realizing that the very first step now appeared like a large stone wall that was at least twice her height. “Wh-what?!” She then joined the rest in observing their surroundings. The flattened, crushed grass embedded into boot prints now served as her new battlefield; surrounding it were the standing blades of grass now as big as her own massive blade. The trees were like massive monoliths of bark, stretching infinitely upward. It was impossible! It’s like the world around her had grown massively, how could this have happened?!

Maxim couldn’t have done this, right?

Instantly seeking answers, she turned to face where Maxim was standing and her eyes went as wide as dinner plates at the unbelievable sight before her.

Maxim was marching right towards them, rather, towards the shrine with an amused grin upon his face. To him, his steps were nigh inaudible thumps muffled by the sharp swishes and swashes of grass being trampled under his shoes. To those down below however, his steps were heavy, rhythmic thumps; that despite the grass and dirt, the vibrations were still felt underneath them.

The mage was like a legendary titan before them, at a size far beyond their comprehension.

“Well this worked out nicely, didn’t it?” Maxim’s feet landed right before the group, pausing in his mission to take a look at his handiwork; his voice like thunder towards them. “That leaves

very little," He chuckled as those last two words, "to stand in my way. So if you don't mind, I have more pressing matters to attend to. Move. Or don't, I don't care either way," He said with a warm laugh as he took his next step forward.

For him it was a simple step, but for those down below however...

That one house-sized foot pushed off from the grass and dirt underneath, raising itself high above them; the brown sole of his cloth fabric shoe now hovering overhead, raining down bits of mashed dirt and pieces of crushed grass over the panicking group.

"Mage! Wait! I'm down here!" Katherine yelled up at the brown colored ceiling overhead.

He either didn't hear her, or he didn't care, as it didn't stop his foot from coming down.

"Mother of Asteria!" Katherine cried out as she bolted as fast as her legs would allow, taking a swift running leap to dive out from under the giant's descending foot.

She narrowly avoided the devastating footfall as it came down firm onto the grass; landing with an impressive thud and a small gust of wind that sent her tumbling further than she expected to go. What really caught her attention, was the swift, sudden, wet and loud CRUNCH that occurred once the titanic-in-comparison Maxim brought his foot down nice and firm. Within a mere instant, and with a simple step, he had dispatched her troublesome foes as if they were mere insects.

Katherine panted, looking behind her at the giant's foot; her heart racing from the fact that she narrowly avoided a swift death. She watched as his foot pressed then pushed off the ground once again as he started up the steps toward the shrine; catching a glimpse at the crushed remains of the Elven guardians plastered to the bottom of his shoe. She stared up at the mountainous male in sheer awe, unable to believe the difference between them now. She used to tower over him; her figure and frame both imposing and intimidating, she could have thrown him around like a ragdoll. But now...now...she was like an ant before a god.

Maxim stood upon the final step of the shrine. His goal; a pedestal decorated with runewords in the Elvish tongue, which the artifact sat upon, was a mere few feet away. He anxiously licked his lips, locking his eyes onto his goal. "There's nothing left in my way now," He said to himself, "Even the insects that lay in wait for an ambush, hmm?" He said out loud as he eyes began to dart about the area, locking on the protective guardians that sought to attack the human pair should they make it this far.

Only this time, they were mere fractions of their former size.

Even with their knees shaking, even with their hearts and breaths caught in their throats; they

attempted to carry out their duty. Four minuscule guardians presented themselves before Maxim, their weapons raised and ready; their loyalty the only thing keeping them from running away.

The mage quirked a brow and grinned, "A jest? Beings now smaller than fairies and pixies alike come at me with weapons not even fit to pick food from my teeth. You can't possibly think you can stop me here, do you?"

One rose up to the challenge, readying his spear and unleashing the loudest battle cry his tiny lungs could manage. He charged toward the large brown mass that was Maxim's shoe, eager to give it his all.

The tanned skin titan (in comparison of course) rolled his eyes upon hearing the guttural squeaks of the foolish warrior, not even giving a second thought to kicking his foot forward, slamming it into the puny elf and sending him flying into the pedestal where he promptly splattered on impact. Maxim actually gave a look of surprise before smiling, "Well that wasn't supposed to happen. Looks like I used too much mana for the weakening properties," He glanced down to the remaining ones, "How terrible for you; you're now all equal to scraps of trash, and playing with garbage is no fun for me."

He held out his hand, an open palm facing them, all while grinning, "Don't let the scholars know. Practicing black magic is forbidden at the academy, but I can't let my pursuit of knowledge be stifled now can I?" Seemingly out of nowhere, red lights formed around Maxim's hand, forming arcane circles with words of mystics forming within them. Heat started to build up in his palm, and then there was a sudden red flash as a plume of fire shot out from his hand towards the tiny defenders.

They screamed and cried to the very end as they were quickly burned to ashes, quickly scattered to the winds by the bursts of air caused by Maxim's foot falls as he marched toward the pedestal.

It was the moment he had been waiting for, his eyes focused on the artifact resting upon the well decorated stone surface. It was a golden ring engraved with a mysterious language not even Maxim could recognize, let alone decipher. Embedded with a small, shimmering red jewel, nothing like he had ever seen before. "A mysterious ancient Elven artifact? The scholars will shower me with praise for this one! There's very little on record in regards to ancient Elven history, perhaps even the royals will honor me!" The young mage grinned, and promptly plucked up the ring without worry of any traps or trickery. He was fascinated with it, turning it this way and that among his fingers; running a fingertip over the engravings as he traced around the shape of the ring, gasping once his finger touched the jewel.

It was almost hot to the touch, brimming with intense, mysterious and strangely powerful magical energies. It was like an endless reservoir of magical power. It was no wonder it was so well protected; it wasn't just a mere artifact, it was a powerful product forged by ancients. No doubt the ring in particular was used for war, or to benefit an archmage.

Maxim's grin grew even wider. The powers within called out to him; they've been seeking a new owner for centuries, the ring wanted to give him its power. Numerous thoughts and realizations flooded his head via the ring; all this power would be his, he would be granted thousands of new possibilities, and so much knowledge would be gained. Everything he ever wanted and desired, would be his.

He knew it was a risk. What if the power would be too much to handle? What if it were some kind of ancient being trying to take over his body?

No, the Elves weren't that foolish. The ring would have been sealed away in the depths of their own kingdom if this were the case. No, this was a monument to their ancestor, a treasure they once owned.

Without further hesitation, Maxim slipped the ring onto his left middle finger.

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"One! Two! Three! Hup!" Katherine clambered onto the second step, huffing and puffing as she pulled herself up onto it. She had regained her senses and fought off the nausea, now all she needed was to get the mage to undo his spell. Unfortunately, even for her, trying to climb the steps at her size took was taking far more effort than she had bargained for, and she couldn't even see all the way up to judge how close she was.

Luckily (and possibly unfortunately) for her, she no longer had to worry about climbing the steps as a dark shadow was suddenly cast over her. She quickly looked up, seeing the familiar sight of the underside of that brown shoe again. Squealing and scrambling for her life, she scurried back from whence she came; narrowly avoiding becoming another victim as she fell from the steps and landed back onto the grass with a squeak.

"Oh if it isn't the Flame Knight," the mage said to the tiny Katherine, having been preoccupied with fancying the ring on his finger, "Or maybe the Fire Ant is more appropriate?" He let out a soft chuckle, stepping down on the grass in front of her and taking a seat on the steps.

Katherine gulped and crawled backwards on her hands once he moved just to sit, still not used to seeing something **that** big move **that** quickly. She's felled ogres twice her size, but not even they moved as fast as Maxim's mountainous self. She craned her neck back to look up, up and up at his grinning face resting in his hand, and caught her breath as she noticed the ring, "Is that

the artifact, that ring?" She asked nervously while bringing up a finger to point to it.

"That it is," Maxim replied, "Such a fascinating one too! It was certainly worth the effort."

"S-so the quest is done then. You can return me to normal and we can head back to Asteria."

"Ah, but there's one problem with that," He chuckled, "I have no idea how to reverse the spell yet."

Katherine's eyes went wide as dinner plates upon hearing those words; and the way he said it so nonchalantly as if it weren't an issue. A repressed rage started to build up inside of her, giving her the strength to stand up before the giant, "What...what do you mean you don't know how to reverse it? Why would you use a spell like that?! Are you telling me I'm stuck like this?"

"If I recall correctly, I told you to move out of the way so you wouldn't be affected. But no, your pride and hatred for magic users kept you stubborn. And here you are now, a more fitting size if I do say so myself," He said before leaning forward with a wide, devious smile, "So tell me, what's it like being the puny one for once? What's it like...knowing I could crush you like an insect, and effortlessly snap you in two like a twig?"

Those words cut deep. She was one of the biggest and strongest around! There were numerous praises and songs sung about her! This was an absolute joke!

"What about the Academy?" She asked, trying to force herself to ignore his taunts, "The Scholars, surely they can fix this!"

Maxim laughed, a loud, deep hysterical laugh. The kind of laugh served for the funniest jokes that would bring one to tears, "Seriously?! You! Accept help from magi? My my, the famous Katherine has sunk as low enough to match her current height. You're desperate, aren't you?"

The tiny warrior grit her teeth, her blood boiling for having to suffer this humiliation. "I cannot live like this," She said flatly, "If I have to suck up my pride, then so be it. It's what put me in this situation, I'll swallow it to get out."

Maxim sat up and smiled, running a finger over the jewel of the ring, "You'll have to prove it to me." He dipped a finger down into the mouth of his left shoe, releasing his cute, tan skinned foot from its prison. He gave his toes a wiggle, delighting in the cool air rushing in between his toes. All that walking had sure built up some heat and sweat. He curled them tightly, popping the joints before setting his foot down on the soft grass before Katherine, staring down expectantly at her. "Get down on all fours and kiss my toes. Show me how much you're willing to stow away that pride."

Katherine was taken aback by both Maxim presenting a foot big enough to crush the entirety of

a horse and carriage, and his absurd request...no, that was a command, an order, not a request. She looked to his wriggling, expectant toes and grimaced; both from disgust and from a fearful sense of awe. His big toe alone could have snuffed her out; just the sheer fact he could do her in without a bit of effort was...humiliating, horrifying, and humbling. This was the first time she felt so weak.

She wanted to say 'No.', she wanted to vent her frustrations, but she couldn't. She had to dance to his tune if she had any chance of getting things back to normal. She sobbed; dropping down on all fours and slowly crawled toward his foot, approaching his big toe which was now even larger up close than she previously thought. She could see bits of dirt peppering his flesh, and the glistening shine of sweat. She winced as she moved even closer; the strong scent of sweat, heat and his natural earthly smell, baked into those shoes assaulting her nostrils.

Now having found herself down on all fours like an animal before the toe of this overwhelming giant, she shut her eyes, pursed her lips and leaned forward; pressing her lips to the surprisingly soft and smooth skin of the mage's toe. She suckled lightly at the fleshly wall for a quick brief moment before pulling away and raising her gaze to attempt to meet his, "There! I did it! Satisfied?"

Resting his elbows on his knees, he laced his fingers together and rested his chin on top of them, while smiling down to her, "No." Toying with her was far too much fun, especially after all the abuse she hurled his way, "I'm not...convinced. One, I think that was a little too easy for you, and two, I said kiss all my toes," He curled his toes and relaxed them, wiggling them idly in front of her. It was like she was faced with a giant hydra and its numerous heads. "Here, I want you to lick them. All of them. And do it like you mean it."

"Ggh?!" Katherine groaned in surprise before swallowing down the heavy feeling in her throat. She grit her teeth and grimaced, the kissing was bad enough; even if she could still taste his sweat on her lips, that was something over and done with. Licking was so much more...

She groaned again and looked up at him, "Don't make me do this," She pleaded.

"I'm not making you do anything," He replied, "You're free to do whatever you like, but if you want my help, then submit yourself to me."

Katherine slammed her fist against the soft ground, hanging her head and shutting her eyes tight. This was torture, she shouldn't be treated like this. SHE should be the one in his position. She was the Flame Knight damn it!

She raised her head to the wall of flesh before her, holding back any sobs, holding back any tears in her eyes. This was her own fault. No matter how angry she was at him, this was her

fault. And he was making her pay.

She pressed her face up against his toe; his skin so soft, so smooth and so warm, though slightly damp from perspiration, if things were different, this might have actually been pleasant. *How absurd!* She thought. She parted her lips and extended her tongue, pressing it up against the giant's supple flesh, dragging it upward, lapping at it at an animal; and winced.

Degrading; forced to choke down this salty, earthly flavor over and over as she licked and licked, doing the same to the smaller, yet still overwhelmingly massive toes; going down the line until she finished at the smallest digit.

Her cheeks were wet; not from the sweat of her oppressor, but her own tears. She sobbed, she cried; for someone such as herself reduced to such a state. It was a huge blow, her prideful fire was nothing more than small embers of hope. "I'm....I'm finished," She choked up a reply.

"And that you are," said the mage, withdrawing his foot to slip it back into his shoe.

"Then," Katherine choked with a snuffle, "Then you'll help me, right? You'll get me back to normal?"

Maxim tilted his head to the side, his gaze slipping sideways as his mind began to cloud with thought. He then rose up from his seat, standing to his full height over her and gave a smile, "No."

"N-no?!" That repressed rage began to surface. Tears still streamed down Katherine's eyes, but they were no longer tears of broken humiliation, but newfound rage, "I just did everything you told me to do in exchange for your help! You can't leave me like this."

Maxim brought his looming gaze back down to Katherine, then shrugged his shoulders, "Actually that was the idea. I was simply going to leave you here like this, but you present too much of a risk. You're too famous and valuable to Asteria, they'll send a party to search for you and you're too smart to get trampled underfoot by accident," He took a step forward, his shoe landing with a heavy thump right next to Katherine, forcing her to get blown over onto her side, "Taking you back with me is an even greater risk. I can't guarantee your silence on my forbidden acts, and keeping you secret is also a risk." He stepped over her and took two more steps before turning around to face her again, "That leaves one option. Katherine The Flame Knight, fought bravely and brilliantly against a large force of might and magic," Maxim declared, stepping down in front of Katherine with a smirk, "But sadly, she had fallen while protecting her companion, ensuring he escaped with the artifact."

"Y-you wouldn't...!" Katherine yelled out, "L-look! You have my word! I won't say anything, we can blame it on the Elves, no one has to know the truth! You can't do this! You can't!" She

pleased as he loomed ever so closer, watching the shifts in his foot, knowing he was ready to take his next step...right on top of her. She scrambled and grabbed her sword, rising to her feet, "You can't do this to me! I refuse to be treated like some insect! I'M THE FLAME KNIGHT!" She screamed at the top of her tiny lungs and roared out a battle-cry as she charged right at his foot, swinging her sword with all her might against the toe of his shoe.

"Huh. I feel like this sort of thing has happened before," Maxim said with amusement. The sword had done nothing more than get lodged into the fibers of the cloth, not even close to piercing the magician's footwear. His foot gave a little shake, a simple fidget that slammed into Katherine with the force of a battering ram while dislodging her blade.

Katherine uttered a sharp cry of pain from the heavy impact; once again knocked clear off her feet and sent tumbling across the grass, all the while clutching herself with both arms as her body stung with pain. "Urrck..." She coughed up an air of pain. She was injured; that tiny bump had done more damage than either of them could have expected, worsen still for her. Her armor was dented in against her, her ribs were bruised and there was no doubt one was broken. The coppery iron taste of blood danced over her tongue and dribbled over her lips as she hacked up another cough. She rolled onto her side with a pained groan, the throbbing of the pain consistent with the rhythm of her labored breathing; which was also a painful endeavor. She saw those giant feet move again, but not towards her, just a few steps away from her. She watched the mountain of a magician stoop down to pluck something up from the grass; her sword.

"Now if I just do this," Maxim said to himself, pinching the blade between his thumb and index finger; bending and cracking the tempered steel until he effectively shattered the sword into pieces, "A tiny broken blade is believable. Elven magic can be capable of this," He said while carefully tucking away the pieces before returning his attention to Katherine.

He took one slow step towards her, then another, and another, where he had her right at his feet. "Well then, Fire Ant, this is where we part ways," He slowly lifted his foot and hovered it over her, "You might think of it as a pathetic end, but your legacy will live on," His hovering foot hung back and forth anxiously, eager to step down. "Even though it isn't true, given your hatred for me and my practice, I will speak fondly of you. I'll personally make sure numerous praises are sung about you."

"N-no! I refuse!" Katherine choked out, rolling over onto her stomach and attempting to crawl away, "Not like this! I'm The Flame Knight! I'm...I'm supposed to only die in a glorious battle or from old age! Not from some magic trick!"

"Even in the end, you're still the same, not even an apology," Maxim shrugged his shoulders, and brought his foot down upon her with hardly a second thought.

Time had seemed to slow down for her; every moment felt like minutes. The shadow of his shoe casted wider and darker around her. She looked over her shoulder at that descending brown ceiling; her eyes settling on the crushed bits of her foes. She was going to join them.

“Wait! I’m sorr—” Silenced. The full weight of Maxim’s foot came down without mercy, burying her deep into the soft dirt with a sharp crunch; a one second cacophony of armor flattening like a tin can along with bones being snapped and ground.

Maxim smirked, twisting his foot back and forth; grinding out the flames of the glorious knight into a messy smear into the dirt. “Mmm,” He let out a sound of enjoyment; finding something utterly thrilling about doing away with her; an euphoric joy of wiping away her very being, nothing left but an unrecognizable stain. “Just a memory now,” He said to himself with a wide grin, before looking to the ring.

He turned, and walked away from the shrine; his goals accomplished and Katherine already forgotten. His focus was on the artifact, the ring; eager to study its secrets and its power, so much so that he made a copy of it, one to pass off to the scholars, while he kept the real one for himself.

There were certainly going to be promising ventures in the future for him.