

Valeonor scrutinized the raised garden bed I had built to her specifications. *Tried* to build. I was no carpenter, so everything was new to me. As such, all I did was purchase wooden planks, nails, and a hammer from a hardware store.

The result? A shoddy construction job.

There were gaps between the boards and nails were sticking out of the corners.

"To put it kindly, my disappointment is immeasurable," Valeonor said at last.

"Of course you're disappointed! What did you expect from someone who doesn't know how to work with wood to begin with?" I sighed and tossed the hammer over my shoulder.

"I was expecting you to accomplish everything I had asked in a competent manner. Though I suppose that was too much to ask for." She walked circles around it, eyes shaming every inch of the poorly made garden bed.

"Normally 'do everything' is told to someone as a joke, but I don't sense any sarcasm coming from you..."

The prototype of my u-shaped, raised garden bed was a bust. We couldn't even reuse the planks because they had become brittle as a result of my poor craftsmanship. At least I could break them down and use them as firewood in the dorm.

We could have saved so much time and effort, but Valeonor was insistent that I not call experts or purchase ones pre-built from retailers.

"Can we just buy some instead?" I pleaded with her. "I'll even put in express, same-day delivery. The poor warehouse workers won't be pissing anywhere other than into their bottles anyway."

"Absolutely not. It must be built before my very eyes and by hands whom I truly approve of." Valeonor had almost said something that sounded like a compliment.

"You were about to say you trust me, weren't you, Val?" I asked.

Despite the dark pigmentation, her cheeks took on a visible shade of red.

"I was not! Also, how dare you continue shortening my name! Thanks to you, the others have also caught on. Refer to me by Queen Valeonor or Your Majesty!" she exclaimed.

"As you wish, Your Majestiest Majesty." I bowed.

"Ugh. You are such a disagreeable caretaker..."

While the two of us were trying to figure out what to do and how next to proceed, Irapesha had returned from a training session with the fire department. She entered the backyard, drawn in by our bickering.

"I find you bicker more often with Valeanor than you do with Ange," Irapesha said of me.

"At least Ange is reasonable with what she wants. Val, on the other hand, would probably wonder why I can't bring down the moon for her!" I took a shot at her spoiled nature, eliciting from the elven queen a long, drawn-out groan.

We explained to Irapesha what we were trying to make, and she seemed to have taken interest in our efforts.

"Actually, several of my coworkers are part of a carpentry club. They even have a workshop in the city. If I ask, they may even help build it for you," Irapesha explained.

"Those firefighter buddies of yours are saving the entire world *and mine*. Only, there's one problem..." I shot Valeanor the stink-eye.

The stickler of a queen threw her arms up in resignation.

"Fine! I suppose it will be better than watching our not-so-handy caretaker fail," she huffed.

We drove out to the carpentry workshop of one of Irapesha's firefighting coworkers. It was a small warehouse packed with evenly-spaced out workbenches, numerous and varied stacks of planks on one side of the building, and a whole lot of sawdust and wood shavings on the floor. My ears were assaulted by the sound of harsh hammering and buzzsaws in action. A few people were in the process of building furniture and others shared their latest work with pride.

Imagine our surprise when we saw Joseph and Cresta there.

"Val, Akira! What are you guys doing here?" The catsassin kicked up a storm of sawdust coming up to us.

"This one wants a garden bed built, so we came here looking for professionals." I pointed to Val. "And I can ask you the same thing. Don't tell me you and Joseph are friends with the folks over at the fire department?"

"Oh, Kerry and I've been friends since I was discharged. Small world this town, huh?" Joseph bellowed a laugh from his worktable, putting together what appeared to be a three-tiered shelf made of red oak.

"I come by sometimes to help them. Watch!" Cresta ran over to a stack of lumber, unveiled her claws, and slashed them into smaller sections from a single swing.

"Cresta! I don't think cutting all their wood down to size is helping!" I pinched her cheeks red as punishment. "What did I say about indoor strength?"

"Uuu... But they asked me to!"

Valeonor got into the personal space of a carpenter who was fixing on the final leg of a four-legged nightstand.

"Hmm. So this is what peasants do for fun?" she asked him.

"Don't call them peasants!" I retorted.

Irapesha placed a hand on my shoulder and nodded. "It's alright. She saves them a lot of time from cutting it herself. They were marked beforehand to be cut that way."

One of the carpenters walked by to give Cresta a high-five, then picked up a couple of freshly-cut planks to use.

"You put the little lady in the wrong line of work flipping burgers," Joseph remarked, picking up a piece of wood and gliding a finger across the cut surface.

"Believe me, it wasn't my choice. Anyway, I came hoping some of you guys could help me build a raised garden bed. I know it's your time off, so feel free to tell me to screw off," I told him.

"Can do," he said, then whistled to the other guys for a hand. "We owe Irapesha and the little lady a lot. It'll be our pleasure to help ya."

They showed Valeonor and I several blueprints from garden beds the carpentry club had already built in the past. There were many kinds, from ones that used metal and were built like a bathtub, and to a circular garden bed made of stone and had a compost bin at the center. Since Valeonor was only looking for a simple build made of wood, that was what they went to work with.

We sat back while the real carpenters got to work. They didn't miss a beat. Every movement was purposeful. The only ones allowed to help were Cresta and Irapesha, mainly because a lot of the tools were dangerous, and neither of them could get hurt by meager means anyway.

Instead of using the many power tools at their disposal, Cresta was asked again to help cut wood to their specifications. They nearly gave me a heart attack asking Irapesha to fire-treat the planks with her breath. Fortunately, she wasn't having troubles regulating her body temperature anymore, and her flames this time around were as controlled as a blowtorch.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure netherfolks will be replacing automation in a few years," I mumbled to myself.

Meanwhile, Valeonor was watching the humans intently in particular. It was almost as if she had little faith they would do well. That doubt gradually diminished as the carpenters repeatedly checked in with her about whether they were doing it correctly and how she wanted it.

Once they had finished, two really nice, u-shaped garden beds were put together before us. They were modular, able to come apart and put back together easily without the need to hammer any nails.

Valeanor was, suffice to say, impressed with what they had made.

The four men that were there even took time out of their day to truck it all back to the dorm, pieced it together there, and helped fill it with the necessary sediment and soil. By the time we were done, the backyard was looking a lot less empty now thanks to the raised garden beds occupying most of the right corner.

Once Valeanor finally gets around to planting her flowers, the place would look a lot more aesthetically pleasing.

"Phew. That was a lot of work. Felt good completing a big project." Joseph wiped the sweat from his forehead as I handed each of the men a glass of water and some snacks.

"Really, we can't thank you enough," I said and nudged Valeanor to do the same.

The elven queen stepped forward and swallowed her reluctance.

"Thank you, gentlemen. Watching you all work was very impressive. I... I also feel as though I owe each of you an apology. I was at first uncertain about whether humans can complete such a task," she said.

"I'm human!" I point to myself. "Where's *my* apology for this morning?"

Joseph dismissed her apology with a shrug. "Don't matter who's who as long as we got the know-how, right?"

We thanked them again with some extra homemade chocolates left over from Valentine's Day before they went home. It was still early in the afternoon, so Valeanor was eager to get to work on her new garden beds.

Irapesha and I helped Valeanor carry some of the flower pots from her room to the backyard. However, as we returned to the backyard, Cresta had sprawled herself out on top of the raised garden beds' mound of dirt. It looked like she could melt into a puddle if she could.

"Fnnh... The dirt is so nice and cool... I'm gonna just take a quick catnap..." Cresta purred, drifting off into slumber.

"Cresta, get off that right this instant!" Valeanor yelled.