



The Obsessed Mage and His Beloved Statue Bride

She Cannot Resist
His Seductive Voice

Written by Crane

Illustrated by
Hachi Uehara

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Seven Seas Entertainment



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EPILOGUE

Love in the Mage's Belly

Afterword

YANDERE MAHOTSUKAI WA SEKIZOU NO OTOME SHIKA AISENAI
MAJO WA MANADESHI NO ATSUI KUCHIZUKE DE TOKERU

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Illustrated by Hachi Uehara

Originally published in Japan in 2021 by TAKESHOB Co. LTD., Tokyo.

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PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar

VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold

PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 979-8-89160-737-8

Printed in Canada

First Printing: December 2024

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Prologue:

Mage in the Dragon's Belly

“**M**ASTER?” asked the disciple, his voice hoarse with adolescent breakage.

“Yeees, my sweet Alice?”

This response from his mentor elicited an undisguised scowl. “As I keep telling you, my name is not Alice. It’s *Alistair*.”

Naturally, she knew that full well, but she couldn’t help herself—the look on his face as he sulked was just too cute, bless his heart. This exchange was part of their everyday routine, and she loved it almost as much as she loved him.

“Oh dear. My mistake, Alistair! What was it you were going to say?”

“I hate to nag, but it bears repeating: this is a bad idea. I’ve got an uneasy feeling about this.”

“The reward listed on the request form *was* rather high for a low-level monster extermination. There may be more to this than they’re willing to admit.”

This precocious youth was royal mage Lara Bradley’s favorite (and only) disciple: a handsome boy with silky, silver hair that framed a perfectly symmetrical face. His opalescent blue eyes reflected every color of the rainbow, indicative of nigh-bottomless mana. Even with his trademark sour expression, he was now old enough to turn heads every time they walked down the street.

Of course, he wasn’t *just* a pretty face. He was a smart, talented mage in the making, one with uncommon destructive power that gave even the most elite royal mages a run for their money. In terms of raw output, he far outstripped her, despite their relationship being nominally that of mentor and mentee. But because he had not yet learned how to control his powers—and, consequently, had the unfortunate tendency to cause explosions whenever he lost his temper—the Ministry of the Arcane had yet to find any other mage brave enough to take him in. Monster exterminations were dangerous enough *without* adding a

hotheaded disciple to the mix.

When it came to the general principles and mastery of magic, there was still much Lara could teach Alistair. Once he reached her level in those fields, however, he would undoubtedly be regarded as the most powerful mage in the kingdom. He was like a brother to her, and though she would miss having him around, she looked forward to the day he would be recognized as a royal mage in his own right.

The two spellcasters were answering a summons from the local seigneur for an extermination request today. His territory supposedly suffered from an infestation of monsters—vicious pests who attacked humans on sight and whose flesh was so toxic as to be inedible. For this reason, the two populations could not coexist in the same habitat. Furthermore, humans could find safety in only the most desolate of places as monsters were drawn to fertile lands.

Outnumbered as they were, humanity's sole means of defense was knowledge of the arcane. Only a scant handful in each generation were born with this strange, otherworldly gift, but little else had proven capable of slaying the foul beasts.

Three hundred years ago marked the advent of the great Archmagus, who had single-handedly brought about the salvation of the human race by introducing them to magic. It was he who established the kingdom of Falcone, the last remaining nation in the world. Then, he erected a great barrier at the center of the royal capital—one that still endured to this day, long after its creator's death—in order to keep the monsters out.

But the barrier's protection only extended so far. The farther any given village stood from the capital, the more easily monsters could invade it. Thus, unlike the landed gentry and nouveau riche who owned property within the capital, impoverished citizens spent every day in perpetual fear of the next attack on their lives.

It was one such threat that the government had ordered Lara to quell today—a duty of paramount importance.

Following the era of the Archmagus, the previously persecuted minority of magic users went from heretics to heroes practically overnight, newly

recognized as the only thing that could keep humanity from going extinct. Accordingly, the government took great pains to gather mages from across Falcone and train them in combat. Those who served the king were given the title of royal mage. Of those, a distinguished few were permitted to wear the signature black robes with the royal crest. In exchange for this preferential treatment, they were obligated to undertake any orders formally issued to them. No exceptions.

Such was the fate of a public servant like Lara, whose cushy lifestyle was funded by taxpayers.

If the seigneur's report was to be believed, these particular monsters were young and weak enough that even *she* could handle them...or so the higher-ups claimed, anyway. Tragically, her mana and spellcasting were both well below average compared to the many more gifted mages in the kingdom's employ. To be blunt, it was nothing short of a miracle that she had made the cut at all—and she was generally never assigned missions that involved especially challenging combat.

"Your spells are *clearly* not meant for battle, Master. Why would they assign you something so completely outside your wheelhouse?" Alistair grumbled.

"There likely wasn't anyone else available, shorthanded as we are," Lara replied, smiling reassuringly. "Besides, they probably see the two of us as a package deal, don't you think?"

Monster sightings had increased dramatically over the past few years, suggesting the barrier had begun to weaken. Even worse, a young dragon had crossed the border just a few days ago. The ministry had sent an elite squadron of royal mages to fight it off in response. They had won, but at great cost, for though they succeeded in driving the beast out of Falcone, many lives were lost in the process.

Some feared the three-hundred-year-old barrier spell might fail entirely, endangering not just the far-flung reaches of the nation, but every inch of its territory.

"But, Master, I'm not a real royal mage yet."

"True, but you're already more powerful than half of our roster. They know

what you're capable of."

"Ugh. Life sucks when you're naturally gifted."

"Whatever you say, kid..."

Due to the life-threatening nature of the job, only those aged fifteen and above could apply to be a royal mage. Alistair was sure to pass the exam with flying colors, but that wasn't for another three years. *If only he had a better attitude*, Lara thought wearily, remembering her own years-long struggle just to qualify. Her disciple's extraordinary talent had given him an extraordinarily inflated ego, as talent was wont to do.

"In any case, I say we beat a hasty retreat if we deem the task to be beyond our ability. Our lives are too precious to waste."

"Sensible indeed. I like that about you, Master."

And so, teacher and pupil headed deep into the woods named in the mission with good cheer.

In Lara's opinion, death was the worst possible outcome. As long as she held onto life, she could ultimately overcome tragedy or despair. Conversely, Alistair was the pessimistic type, but it was her blithe ignorance that kept him from becoming too jaded, or so he claimed. (Personally, she would have preferred a slightly different word choice, like *happy-go-lucky*.)

"According to the request, the monsters should be right around here..."

They were supposed to meet up with the seigneur's team of hired mercenaries, but they seemed to be alone in the forest. Unsettlingly so.

"We should turn back, Master. Something's not right," Alistair declared, his pretty face twisted in displeasure.

His mentor stopped in her tracks. Beloved as he was by all the faeries of the realm, his gut instinct was probably right on the money. "Do you sense something?"

"That's part of it. Mostly, it's just too quiet."

Lara fell silent, listening carefully. Even in an overgrown thicket such as this, they should at least have heard the chirping of birds. And yet, there was no

sound beyond the wind rustling through the trees and underbrush. Something was indeed off.

“Either they’ve all run off, or they were eaten,” Alistair said stiffly.

Lara nodded. Monsters as weak as the request claimed could not have caused every single animal in the vicinity to disappear into thin air.

“Then...the mercenaries...”

“It’s highly likely they were eaten as well.”

“Gods above...” Much as she wanted to search for survivors, she knew the limits of her abilities. “Let’s report back to the ministry and have them find a different solution.”

“Agreed.”

The moment they turned on their heels, however, they heard the distant scream of a man in mortal danger. Grimacing, Lara whirled back around.

“You’re too nice for your own good...” Alistair growled under his breath. “We need to *escape*, Master. We have no choice but to abandon him.”

“I know, but—”

“If we stay, we’ll only be joining him. Let’s just go back and tell crusty old Lutfel to deal with it. I *refuse* to let this spoil my future plans to marry you and start a family.”

This nonsense again. With all sense of danger summarily dashed, Lara’s shoulders slumped. For some reason, the little preteen had recently gotten it into his head that he wanted to marry her, a woman twice his age.

That aside, he had a point. Even if they tried to save the poor man, they would inevitably die in the process.

Gritting her teeth, she forced her feet to carry her swiftly in the opposite direction.

“I’m sorry, Alistair, but as I keep reminding you, I only like men over the age of thirty! And Ser Lutfel is one of the most powerful mages in this kingdom, so watch your tongue!” she shouted, rebuking her disciple as she ran. While her

love life was admittedly a blank slate, she was only attracted to grizzled hunks and would never be romantically interested in a minor, no matter how hard he tried to make it happen.

“By the time I’m thirty, you’ll be forty-two! I can’t wait that long!”

“Then don’t! I’m not going to marry you! Find someone else, please!”

“It’s too late for that! I already love you!”

Groaning, Lara suppressed the urge to facepalm while running. Surely she hadn’t raised him to be like this. Where had she gone wrong?

“It’s not like any other guys want you, anyway! You might as well give up and wait for me to turn eighteen!”

“No thank you! I like older men, and that’s final!”

As usual, Alistair was being needlessly rude. At least one man was surely interested in her...somewhere...probably...

“If you don’t settle down, the government’s going to assign you a breeding partner, you know!”

“As long as he’s older, that’s fine by me!”

“I don’t know if you know this, but any guy who’s still single in his thirties is single for a *reason*, Master! Do try to be realistic!”

Because those with arcane abilities were legally obligated to procreate—the human race needed as many mages as it could get, after all—they tended to marry young. Most got hitched before the age of twenty.

Of course, not every child born to a mage inherited the gift. Even if both parents were magically inclined, the chances of a mage child still only sat at around 30 percent. Therefore, royal decree stated that every mage was duty-bound to produce no fewer than three children during their lifetime.

This was why it was considered strange that Lara had yet to settle down. Alas, she was so busy with work and trying to parent her mouthy disciple that she simply didn’t have time to look for love. And even if she tried, no man except her boss was willing to come anywhere near her while she had a loose cannon like Alistair under her wing.

Is this kid the cause of all my problems...?

For a moment, she teetered on the verge of an epiphany. Then the troublemaker in question grinned at her so preciously that she couldn't possibly regret taking him in.

Master and disciple ran at full speed to escape the forest, bantering all the while, as if nothing was wrong. Perhaps they were hoping to delude themselves.

"Ugh... It must have heard us!"

They were only a few steps from the tree line when she heard another of Alistair's trademark bratty huffs. She would normally have scolded him for it, but there were more pressing matters at the moment.

The beast released a low, rumbling roar from the depths of its belly, and she recognized it at once.

"A dragon?! Is this a joke?!"

As one of the rarest and strongest species of monster around, dragons weren't typically found in the woods. It shouldn't have been there. And yet, there it was.

"We—we have to go. *Now!*"

Talented as he was, even Alistair didn't stand a chance against a creature this formidable. Not when a single young dragon had wiped out almost an entire squadron of veteran mages just the other day.

The sound of giant, flapping wings met their ears. Everything grew dark as a shadow engulfed them. Then a great, hulking dragon landed right in front of them, the impact deafening.

"*Save mee!*" screamed a man in the dragon's clutches. Judging from his muscular build, he was likely one of the mercenaries they'd been supposed to meet. He didn't seem badly injured, but the dragon reeked of blood, suggesting it had already eaten the rest of the squadron.

Lara's face twisted with horror. "Gods have mercy!"

It was said dragons were once intelligent creatures. In modern times,

however, they had devolved into savage beasts that devoured everything that moved. They gorged themselves until they were fit to burst, leaving carnage in their wake wherever they went.

Eight and a half scutes... We're doomed.

Though dragons remained largely shrouded in mystery, humanity had learned a few things about them. Firstly, you could roughly estimate one's age by counting the horned ridges along its spine, as it took around a decade for each one to grow in. By that metric, this one was eighty-something years old. Secondly, they all lived to be almost exactly one hundred years old. They spent this century gorging themselves on every living creature they could find, growing fatter and fatter, until they finally died.

It was uncanny—almost like the gods had set a limit on how long they could live. And because they generally only had one or two offspring, their population remained steady.

If any of that ever changed—if dragons grew in number, or began to live longer than a hundred years—the world would surely come to an end. The longer they lived, the bigger they got, and the bigger they got, the more ferocious they became. No amount of magic stood a chance against an elder dragon, like this one. They were the one monster that even the Archmagus's barrier couldn't keep out. Every few years, there would be a dragon that showed up and devoured an entire village, like some kind of roiling plague in beast form. The kingdom would have to rally its entire army of royal mages, sacrificing many in the process, just to defeat it.

Incidentally, dragons preferred to eat mages over ordinary humans when given the option. Perhaps those with excess mana were simply more filling. Which meant it was easy to guess where this was going.

Sure enough, the dragon tossed the mercenary aside and made a beeline for Lara and Alistair. Lara flung out a magical barrier on reflex, but the dragon shattered it as easily as if it were thin ice.

"Get out of here, Alistair! I'll buy you some time!"

"Very funny, Master! We both know *I'm* the one who can fight!"

“Yes, but I’m the *adult*, and I have a responsibility to protect you!”

Once again, Alistair growled under his breath, his respect for his mentor seemingly nonexistent. Ignoring her command, he began to entreat the faeries for their aid. His silver hair rippled with arcane energy. No mage alive could surpass him in terms of raw offensive output. Maybe he really *could* fell an elder dragon all on his own.

Meanwhile, the dragon raised a foreleg, preparing to strike. Before it could bring it down, however, Lara’s young disciple combined flame and wind magic to launch a gargantuan fireball.

“*Die!*” he roared.

Praying desperately, Lara watched it fly—watched it make a direct hit. Alas, the dragon barely flinched, its scales only slightly singed. It then slashed through the flames toward Alistair, its claw grazing the boy’s torso as he hastily dodged.

Oh gods, no!

Dragon scales were known for their innate resistance to magic. Sometimes they even deflected spells back at their casters, hence why they were so prized for crafting armor. It was no surprise, then, that Alistair’s fireball had seemingly bounced off.

“Aaagh!” the boy groaned, falling to his knees.

Thinking quickly, Lara pressed both hands to the soft earth and channeled mana beneath the dragon to turn the ground to mud. Its massive weight sank two of its legs into the muck, and thrown off-balance, the creature collapsed sideways with a thunderous quake.

Lara stumbled as she ran to Alistair to get a look at the wound. Luckily, the dragon didn’t seem to have pierced any of his vital organs, but his little body was in danger of bleeding out unless she acted fast. She retrieved a bandage from her knapsack and wrapped it tightly around his stomach.

“You there, sir!” she shouted to the trembling mercenary as she cast medic magic on the blood vessels surrounding Alistair’s wound. “While I act as a decoy, I need you to take my disciple and get out of here!”

“Master—aagh!” The boy in question tried to raise his voice but winced in pain.

Lara gently stroked his silver hair with a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry. I’m not going to die. I promise. I’m as unkillable as a cockroach, remember? I’ll catch up later. For now, you’ll have to escape without me.”

“No! I want to stay with you!”

“Well, you can’t. Like you said, it would only put your life in danger.”

Tears filled his opalescent blue eyes before spilling down his cheeks. “No! I don’t want to go!” he protested loudly, throwing a tantrum like a toddler.

“*That’s enough, Alistair!*” she snapped, raising her voice. It was the first time she had ever shouted at him. Alistair was stunned silent. “The death of a child is the failure of his guardian! You have your whole life ahead of you, and you’re going to live to see it! That’s an order from your master!”

Take me if you must, but please, let him make it out of this alive.

She pressed her lips to his smooth, ashen forehead, then turned and shouted, “Please, sir! Take him and run! Before it’s too late!”

The man clearly felt some sort of obligation to them after they had (inadvertently) saved his life, because he leaped to his feet, hoisted Alistair into his burly arms, gave Lara a salute, and took off running out of the forest.

“Master... Master! *Master...!*”

That tearful young voice screamed for her again and again. It tore at her very soul. Choking down her grief, she forced a smile. If this was to be her final moment as a mentor, this was how she wanted her disciple to remember her.

“Oh, wow! He’s actually crying? That’s certainly a first.”

A rare and valuable sight indeed. Normally, the boy was far too proud to be so openly vulnerable. She would treasure this once-in-a-lifetime moment forever.

Then, she turned around, not looking back at her disciple even once, for there was one final lesson she wished to impart to him.

At long last, the dragon pulled itself back to its feet. Its eyes were focused

solely on her, blazing with rage, as if mortally offended that its body had touched the ground. For a creature incapable of rational thought, it struck her as oddly arrogant.

So far, so good. Now to hold its attention.

“Say, Ser Dragon, why don’t we play a game?” She picked up a fallen twig, smiling brightly, and imbued it with compressed mana.

While Alistair’s fireball had indeed been powerful, it was designed to impact a wide area. All of his spells were simply *too large* and had no sense of direction. Lara, on the other hand, knew how to condense her magic to its smallest and sharpest form, one capable of penetrating even the hard scales of a dragon. Only those who had mastered precise control over their arcane connection could perform such a feat.

Unlike her disciple’s magic, however, Lara’s magic had limited capabilities. It really, *really* wasn’t designed for combat—she was normally only ever assigned to construction work. If she wanted to survive, her only option was to fight dirty.



“Tag, you’re it!”

Entreating the faeries, she shot the twig like a bullet. It pierced the dragon’s hide, just as intended. The creature barely flinched. It had probably felt like no more than a needle prick...but it was enough to draw its ire.

Seeming to forget all about Alistair, the furious dragon set its sights on her instead.

Step one of her plan had been a success. Lara took off running at full speed in the opposite direction Alistair and the mercenary were headed. Each time the dragon came close to catching her, she hindered its progress by turning the ground to mud or blocking its path with a falling tree—anything to lead it as far from the two fleeing survivors as possible. But her stamina and mana were bound to run out eventually, and before long, she found herself cornered on the edge of a cliff. This dragon seemed to prefer its prey fresh, because it opened its maw wide to devour her whole.

Judging from the scutes, it has less than twenty years left to live. In which case...

It was a gamble. For all Lara knew, she might never wake again. But her only other option was death, and *that* was firmly off the table. After all, she had promised that bratty, stuck-up, love-starved little boy that she wouldn’t let it happen.

Dropping to her knees, she clasped her hands in prayer. Then, summoning every last drop of mana she had left, she cast her ultimate spell. It was the first one she had learned to cast in order to protect herself while growing up in an abusive household—a spell reserved only for those favored by earth faeries.

But the dragon didn’t notice, for it had already swallowed Lara whole.

Alistair, on the brink of passing out from blood loss, suddenly snapped back to consciousness. A gasp escaped his lips, followed by a garbled whimper.

He had given Lara a necklace as a birthday present, its gemstone secretly imbued with a geolocation spell so he could track her at all times. Thinking it

merely a gift from her disciple, she wore it everywhere she went. But now, the faerie assigned to that spell had reported back, informing him that the gem had been destroyed.

“She’s...dead...?” he whispered blankly.

Lara Bradley was a ditz and a doormat. She worked ten times harder than anyone else, smiling like it was no big deal all the while. Despite his reputation as a monster, she didn’t fear him. She even coddled him, assuring him that he was loved. She was his one and only.

“Aye, I reckon the dragon got her... Shame. She was a pretty lass,” the merc mused aloud.

Something inside Alistair exploded in that moment. A storm began to rage within his chest.

Lies, lies, lies!

She was his light, his hope, his entire reason to live.

“*Noooooooooo!*” Alistair screamed, the young boy’s despair ringing out into the sky above.

Chapter 1:

Maiden of Stone

“OUR SEIGNEUR IS the most *wonderful* man!”

No matter whom she spoke to, the villagers all said the same thing. Lara concealed her surprise behind her teacup.

Back when she had worked for the kingdom as a royal mage, feudal lords were generally not well regarded by their subjects. Tyrants were common, while saints were unheard of. But to hear these people tell it, the Earldom of Gardiner used to be an infested land until His Lordship came along. The man had used his powerful magic to snuff out all the monsters in the blink of an eye—even the elder dragon in charge—and had erected a warding barrier, turning the tables seemingly overnight. As a reward for his service to the kingdom, he was made earl and given the entire region as a fief. Newly scoured of monsters, the land proved fertile, with a wealth of natural resources. His Lordship’s next move was to welcome the poor and underprivileged from across the nation to become his new subjects.

As far as Lara remembered, this area had indeed been uninhabitable in the past. There were records of previous human settlements in the area, but those dated back centuries, before the monster population had first exploded. Since then, however, this new earl had apparently wrested control back into the hands of humanity.

I guess it really has been twenty years... Evidently, the world had changed quite a bit while she was frozen in time. The thought saddened her a little.

Meanwhile, the villagers continued to gush about how much respect they held for the seigneur. He had supposedly built—among other things—a foster home for the nation’s orphans, schools where all children were educated regardless of social status, and hospitals in every district to ensure all of his subjects received medical care. Every one of his policies benefited the powerless.

He sounds like a visionary, all right.

Even better, the land teemed with previously untouched deposits of gold and jewels, leading to unprecedented levels of prosperity for its residents. The Earl of Gardiner had become one of the wealthiest lords in the nation as a result. But unlike many other nobles, who had a vested interest in staying rich, this earl seemingly had no qualms spending his money on maintaining the land, bolstering anti-monster defenses, welfare programs, and otherwise generally improving the quality of life for every citizen within his domain.

“His Lordship always says he never wants any child to suffer as he once did.”

The man had gone from being a low-born orphan to a noble who owned land and wealth beyond imagination over the course of his lifetime. It sounded like an incredible rags to riches story.

It was only human nature to want to bury the pain of the past once you achieved some level of success. To feel shame and resentment for who you used to be, and subsequently try to erase it from the narrative. It seemed this Earl of Gardiner didn't adhere to that mindset, however. Lara thought he sounded like a fine, upstanding lord.

Naturally, word of his virtuosity had spread so far that crowds upon crowds of people now immigrated from all over Falcone, hoping for a better life. These villagers seemed to think Lara was one of them when, in reality, it was pure coincidence that she had found her way to this particular settlement.

The fact that they were being this welcoming proved they could comfortably afford to think beyond their own survival on a regular basis. For most people, this was only possible once all of their needs were met. Clearly, they were thriving.

“The Earl of Gardiner sounds like a commendable man indeed,” Lara remarked.

The villagers beamed proudly in response—save for one middle-aged woman who let out a somber sigh. “At his age, the only thing he needs now is to find a wife and settle down.”

The smiles vanished from the room.

“If he doesn’t produce an heir, the land will return to the king, right?”

It was thought His Lordship had no living relatives, in which case, ownership of the land would revert to the government upon his death. And it was unlikely they would rule with the same compassion for the poor.

“They say His Majesty’s jealous of His Lordship’s bountiful lands, not to mention his popularity with the people. It wasn’t long ago that the king tried to raise our taxes higher than any other province, but His Lordship saw straight through his flimsy excuses and refused! I hate to imagine what’ll happen the day he passes on.”

“Nothing good. That’s for sure...”

Lara frowned. Why would the seigneur avoid marriage when it obviously made his subjects uneasy?

“Good-looking fella like him could have any woman he wanted, so why won’t he bite the bullet already?”

“Well... I heard one of his servants say that he’s not interested in women!”

“Oh my.”

Lara raised her eyebrows. Being gay was no crime, of course, but the fact remained that the absence of a biological child was a serious oversight. Without an heir, who would stop the kingdom from taking over the province one day? Who would fight off monsters and keep the barrier intact? Once the current ruler was gone, the earldom was going to need another mage of equal skill—and such spellcasters were not easily found. None of Lara’s peers within the Ministry of the Arcane had ever single-handedly defeated a dragon as far as she remembered. This land would have been reclaimed from the monsters much sooner if they had.

There were only two ways to produce a mage: genetics or spontaneous mutation. Given the earl had enough arcane power to take down swarms of monsters—even a dragon!—the kingdom should, by all rights, have forced him into a marriage to pass on those genes. The fact that they hadn’t indicated that they were too afraid of him to make demands, which, in turn, suggested His Lordship was in a league all his own.

Who is this guy, anyway? She hadn't heard of anyone like him prior to her twenty-year stone coma—save for one, of course. Lara dismissed the thought as soon as it came to mind, however.

She had known that boy for many years, and he was most certainly *not* the type to help people in need. Privileged by his natural-born talents, he would sooner turn his nose up at the weak and blame them for their own misfortune. Worse, the brat treated most people with unveiled hostility, often provoking conflict wherever he went. His uncontrolled emotions had gotten the better of him on more than one occasion, resulting in arcane explosions that damaged the surrounding area. Lara couldn't begin to count the number of times she had apologized on his behalf as his guardian. The mere memory made her stomach clench.

I wonder where he is now. Doing well for himself, I hope. As rude, troublesome, and downright frustrating as he could be, Alistair was a good kid at heart who just wanted someone to care about him.

As Lara waxed sentimental, however, the villagers continued to gossip.

“My niece works at the castle, y’see, and they have a beautiful statue of a goddess on display in one of the rooms. According to her, His Lordship has no interest in real women because he’s smitten with the statue!”

At this, the other villagers cringed. Make no mistake, Lara would have as well were it not for the icy shiver that ran down her spine. What would these people think if they knew that she, too, had once been a statue on display in that very castle? She had only just been freed from the spell that had turned her body to stone to protect her from the dragon for twenty years. From the sound of it, they would probably turn her right back into a statue.

Don't be ridiculous. I'm not that pretty! They must be talking about some other statue, she told herself firmly, fighting to suppress the creeping dread. As far as looks went, her childlike face was completely at odds with her curvaceous, fully matured body. Even if it *did* seem to attract a certain subset of men, “goddess” was reaching too far. She didn't have the kind of beauty that could steal some nobleman's heart.

“Apparently, His Lordship adorns her with fine dresses and jewels. He likes to

go and look at her—sometimes even talk to her,” said the man whose niece worked at the castle. A silent *yikes* spread across the faces of everyone present, Lara included, though cringe was outmatched by pure terror in her case. After all, that description sounded terribly familiar.

When she had awoken from her spell after two decades only a few days prior, she had found herself wearing a simple frock made of soft, fine silk. Necklaces and bracelets with large, heavy gemstones—luxuries she could never have afforded on a royal mage’s salary—adorned her. The sight was both confusing and alarming. What in the world had happened while she had been turned to stone?

More alarming still was the place in which she had awoken: an austere chapel of sorts. Beautifully painted murals of the gods adorned the domed ceiling high above her. Intricate stained glass windows lined the walls. Rainbows of light streamed down on the polished marble floor—so polished, in fact, Lara was afraid to set foot upon it. And there she was, seated at the center of it all on what could only be described as a throne.

Suffice it to say, it was deeply unsettling to find oneself suddenly enshrined in a church as if she were an object of worship.

I need to get out of here!

Obviously, she couldn’t make a break for it while naked, so in exchange for keeping the clothes on her back, she left all the jewelry in a pile on the chair and walked out.

Castle security was reasonably tight, but not enough to keep a former royal mage contained. Her joints were stiff after decades of immobility, but she forced them to cooperate as she cast corrosion spells on the door locks. As a mage favored by earth faeries, she could manipulate anything born of the earth, so the wooden doors opened easily. After making it outside, Lara found an iron fence surrounding the property. She corroded that too, making a hole just big enough for her to squeeze through. And so went the story of her escape.

They must be talking about some other statue, surely, she told herself silently. If the earl was as obsessed with statues as these people claimed, then he

probably played dress-up with his entire collection...right?

Incidentally, it was an elderly farmer who had spotted her wandering around barefoot, flagged her down, and brought her here to the village out of concern for her well-being. To avoid drawing attention to herself, she went to a clothing store and traded her silk frock for a more modest outfit: a plain robe, undergarments, and shoes. She feared this would raise a few questions, but the store must have seen its fair share of customers with complicated circumstances, because the clerk mercifully handled the transaction without prying.

Once she completed her transformation into an ordinary villager, she walked out of the store to find the old farmer waiting for her. The next thing she knew, she was mired in the town's idle gossip.

Lara appreciated the free cup of tea, of course, and she generally wasn't opposed to a little small talk with strangers. Thus, she decided to try to make the most of it, and if she managed to learn what had happened over the past twenty years, all the better. She'd also need to find a way to earn enough coin to travel back home to the capital.

These people are so kind. I honestly wouldn't mind working here...

"Well, even if His Lordship *does* have a fetish for statues, he's still a great man. I reckon he must have some other plan for our future."

The villagers nodded in agreement, discussion of the earl's sexual proclivities thus concluded. Evidently, the man was blessed with very understanding subjects. As long as he did his job, his bedroom habits were no one's business. *Live and let live*, as they said.

Just as Lara sipped her tea—

"Trouble afoot! Trouble afoot!"

The impassioned cry for help startled her so badly, she nearly spat out her tea. Frowning, the villagers rose from their seats and sought out the source of the commotion. One of the young guardsmen stationed at the gate came barreling down the street, his complexion deathly pale, shouting to all who would listen.

“The earl’s personal guard have come to the village! They say a bandit broke into the castle, and they want all suspicious individuals turned over immediately!”

All eyes turned in Lara’s direction. Admittedly, yes, she was easily the most suspicious person standing there, given she had turned up out of the blue. But if there was one thing she was confident in, it was her outward appearance of doe-eyed innocence. Sure enough, a handful of villagers had already turned their attention elsewhere, suggesting their suspicions had been cleared.

“What was stolen, then?”

“Word is they took His Lordship’s beloved statue. Has anyone seen someone carrying a large sack, perhaps?”

With that, suspicion of Lara all but evaporated. A woman as short and petite as she couldn’t possibly lift something as heavy as a statue. Instead, pity rose in the villagers’ eyes. They had just been gossiping about the man and his stone girlfriend, only to find she had been stolen.

Lara, however, now knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that she was the culprit. *Dear gods, it is me!* No one would ever suspect that the statue had turned back into a living person and left of its own accord, of course.

“The earl is *livid*, naturally, and wants it back at all costs. He’s even sent his army to close off every road leading out of the province.”

Concern spread through the villagers. The earldom’s prosperity was only made possible by exporting ore and produce to other parts of the kingdom. *Does this man truly treasure me so much that he would threaten the livelihoods of his beloved subjects just to get me back?* Lara had no memory of her time as a statue, as she had functionally been in a coma; she had no inkling of how she had been treated. Frankly, it was depressing to think she might have been more cherished as a lifeless hunk of stone than she ever was as a human being. *That’s life for you, I guess.*

In any case, it was quite clear that these people would suffer greatly if the roads remained closed in perpetuity as the army searched for a stone statue that no longer existed. It seemed she would need to explain the whole story to the earl herself.

The question is, how? “Sorry, but I’m actually a real person, so you’ll have to find some other statue to fetishize”? That’ll only piss him off! And what if he asks me to turn back? I think I would cry!

Nevertheless, she couldn’t bear to indirectly punish the very people who had been so kind to her. Summoning all of her courage, she took a deep breath and rose to her feet.

“Excuse me, but I think I know who took it. Could you take me to see His Lordship?”

The villagers looked on in wide-eyed shock as Lara was promptly arrested and handed off to the seigneur’s personal guard, who took her straight back to the very castle she had only just broken out of.

Said to have been built only ten years ago, Gardiner Castle was designed for form *and* function, with sturdy stone walls and lavish furnishings. This was something she had noticed during her escape, too. The earl had to be *unimaginably* wealthy.

Lara was marched down the hall with her hands tied behind her back, a cadre of guards flanking her every move. The servants did a double take as she passed, probably because she looked identical to the missing statue. No surprise there, considering she *was* the statue.

Soon, she was told the seigneur had agreed to meet with her. When she arrived at the audience chamber, she knelt with her head bowed. She heard the sound of a door flying open with a *bang*, followed by angry footsteps as someone rushed in. Nervous, she braced for the worst.

He’s not going to sentence me to the guillotine, is he? I guess I could always turn back to stone. From what I’ve heard of this guy, he’d probably love that.

A pair of feet clad in beautifully polished leather boots stopped just in front of her. Lara sucked in her breath.

“Raise your head,” said a deep, rumbling voice—likely the earl himself.

What a sexy voice! Lara swooned, despite the circumstances. Perhaps the voice was imbued with a hint of magic, for there was something oddly bewitching about it that made her want to heed his every command. With a

voice like that, even the faeries would notice him.

Gah, don't get distracted!

She couldn't afford to anger him further. Choking back her fear, she mustered the courage to raise her head as requested—and what she saw left her speechless. He was a stunningly attractive man with glossy silver hair and flawless pale skin. His sculpted features were perfectly symmetrical. But most beautiful of all were his eyes.

A mage's eye color was an indication of the element to which they were best suited. Lara's, for example, were as brown as fertile soil. But the earl's slightly upturned eyes were an opalescent blue, reflecting all the colors of the rainbow. This suggested he had won the love and protection of every faerie in the realm. Supposedly, only the most powerful of spellcasters were born with these eyes, like the Archmagus three centuries past. Lara had only ever seen one other pair like them.

Oh no, he's handsome!

He had the mature charm of an adult man, and looked to be somewhere in his late twenties or early thirties. Furthermore, he was tall with a slender build, forcing the petite Lara to crane her neck quite far just to look him in the eye.

No wonder everyone's devastated about his statue fetish. What a waste of a good man, she mused absently as she scrutinized his face. The seigneur's glare softened, and his well-shaped blue opal eyes widened in surprise.

"Master...?" he whispered, his voice suddenly as timid as a child's.

"Yes?" she replied reflexively, the memory of her disciple bringing a smile to her face.

Something gripped her body tightly a split second later, her vision obscured.

"Mmph?!"

What's going on?! All of a sudden, she could scarcely breathe. Once the initial shock subsided, she struggled to escape but to no avail. Something big clung to her, blocking her vision.

"Master... Oh, Master!"

She recognized the resounding voice. *Wait, is this the earl?! What's gotten into him?!* All trace of his composure had vanished, replaced with a tearful warble that reminded her of a boy she once knew.

“Excuse me, but...you’re hurting me! Let go before I suffocate. Please!” she choked out. No sooner had the grip on her loosened than she gasped for breath. Once she recovered, she snapped, “Where did *that* come from?!” No amount of social status gave him the right to manhandle a woman he had only just met.

Tears rolled down his cheeks. “Master? Don’t you recognize me?”

“I beg your pardon?” As she gazed into his mournful eyes, her heart ached with inexplicable guilt.

“It’s me...your disciple, Alistair!”



For a moment, the words didn't register. "What?" Lara asked.

Alistair?

She knew that name all too well. It belonged to the boy who had been like family to her, right up until she turned to stone. Back then, he had only been twelve—foul of attitude, yet so desperate for affection. He was her disciple, and she had watched over him with the patience of an older sister, perhaps even a mother.

She examined the man's face once more, and sure enough, she could see traces of the boy from her past. Alistair was still only a preteen in her mind, though. It didn't seem possible that this grown man could be the same person.

Is this a joke?

Then she remembered that twenty whole years had passed while she was encased in stone. By now, Alistair would be...

"Are you really my sweet Alice...?"

"Yes, Master... I'm your Alice."

Her disciple, once as delicate as a girl, had always despised her pet name for him. But now he answered her in that deep, deep voice, smiling sweetly, as though the name was his favorite thing in the world. Alas, it no longer suited him, for standing before her was a thirty-two-year-old man with enough sex appeal to make a grown woman faint.

No... It's not true... My precious little boy is gone? It can't be... Noooooooooo!

As if to free her from this new reality, an intense wave of dizziness washed over her. Lara's energy was sapped on every level—physical, mental, and arcane—after twenty years spent imprisoned in stone.

"Master? Are you all right, Master?! Pull yourself together! *Master!*"

She felt his strong arms support her as her body slumped sideways. As her consciousness faded, her only option was to entrust herself to him.

Chapter 2:

The Mage's Disciple

IF ONLY SHE HAD AWOKEN to find herself gazing up at the dusty wooden ceiling of her tiny home in the capital. Alas. Against her wishes, she lifted her heavy eyelids and found herself in a large, luxurious four-poster bed swathed in copious amounts of rosy velvet. She was clad in the softest fabric she had ever felt in her life, and when she looked down, she realized she wore a gauzy silk negligée. As someone accustomed to the feel of stiff, over-washed cotton, it was unsettling.

“Uh...”

She had rather hoped it had all been a dream, but sadly, this didn't seem to be the case. Sitting up gingerly in the decadent bed, she let out a long sigh. Twenty years had most certainly passed, and now, her adorable little disciple had returned to her as a hero, as the seigneur of an earldom—as a grown man.

I know I should be happy, but...

The little boy she once knew no longer existed, and she was more than a little heartbroken that she hadn't been there to watch him grow. Lara closed her eyes, yearning for a time long gone. Though she understood that two decades had come and gone while she was encased in stone, it still felt like just yesterday that Alistair had been a boy of twelve. And while she didn't regret the choice she made back then, as it had saved her life, she still wished she could get that lost time back.

When she closed her eyes, she could still see the boy's youthful smile, clear as day.

Lara Bradley had only just celebrated her twentieth birthday when she first met her future disciple, Alistair. After failing on three separate occasions, she had finally passed the impossibly difficult exam to qualify as a royal mage and

officially joined their ranks.

Not long after that, Grand Mage Lutfel called the newbie recruit into his office. Lara had known him personally for years—ever since the day he saved her life as a child. Now that they worked in the same department, she kept her distance, lest she be seen as a nepotism hire. Lutfel must have sensed this, because he hadn't spoken to her directly—until now.

Feeling nervous, she walked through the palace to his corner office and knocked on the door.

"Come on in," he called in his familiar, casual way. She did as prompted.

This stately office was said to have been passed down through generations of grand mages. Massive bookshelves chock-full of arcane tomes lined the walls, stretching all the way to the ceiling.

"Sorry to spring this on you, Lara, but I have a request."

Behind the desk at the center of the room sat Lutfel, the nation's most powerful mage. Beloved as he was by fire faeries, the thirty-something-year-old man had coppery red hair and blazing scarlet eyes. This granted him a rather intimidating appearance at first glance, but in truth, he was warmhearted and kind.

When Lara heard the details of his request, however, her eyes widened. "A disciple?"

"Yes, that's right. It's time you had one."

The position of royal mage was fairly prestigious, and as such, most took on the responsibility of raising the next generation of spellcasters. But Lara had only passed the exam a few months prior, and compared to the rest of this year's new hires, she was well below average. She had no special gift, no surplus of mana—she was just an ordinary girl who had landed her position through sheer persistence. It felt much too soon for someone like her to try to teach anyone else.

"Um... I appreciate the opportunity, but I think I need to focus on myself right now."

As a clumsy and slow learner, it took her all day just to complete the work assigned to her. More than all day—she typically worked late into the night. There had to be someone better suited to the job. And so, she turned down the offer in the gentlest way she could.

“Yes, I know. But you’re the best candidate we’ve got for this kid.”

Evidently, he had a specific person in mind. “I take it there are extenuating circumstances, then. Could you tell me more?”

“To put it bluntly,” he said, grimacing, “he’s a monster. That’s why you’d be the best fit.”

Lara frowned. Lutfel had a solid understanding of her greatest strengths, and he likely wasn’t exaggerating the level of danger inherent to the request. But the fact that he was willing to be upfront about it was what made him so trustworthy in her eyes. And considering he had looked out for her ever since she was young, she *did* want to live up to his lofty expectations.

“Could you meet with him, at least? I’ll be honest with you. If you can’t take him, we may have no choice but to put him out of his misery.”

Startled, Lara drew in a breath. He’d implied this prospective disciple was a child. And they would *execute* him? She couldn’t possibly let that slide.

Tilting her head, she smiled stiffly. “It seems ‘no’ isn’t an option, then.”

The grand mage bowed his head humbly. “Forgive me, Lara. You’re all we have left.”

She had been an unwanted child herself, once upon a time. If Lutfel hadn’t taken her in, she would have died. So great was her debt to him that she felt she had no choice but to oblige.

“Very well. I will meet with this boy and determine whether I can handle him.”

Deep down, she knew she was being manipulated. But her childhood hero beamed at her, and the sight had a funny way of pushing her to do her best. The power of his natural charisma, perhaps.

And so, she was escorted to the basement level of a ministry building erected

at the far edge of the royal palace—a building she'd never even known existed. According to Lutfel, it was a detention center constructed to hold magically gifted criminals. Lara got the sense newbies like her normally weren't permitted inside.

They passed through the heavy metal doors and down the staircase to the lower level, where a surprisingly spacious room greeted them. On the floor was a massive runic circle, every inch engraved with faerie script. At its center was a small boy, sitting with his face buried in his knees.

Now it all made sense. With this many levels of security, even the most powerful of mages couldn't possibly escape.

The boy didn't seem to hear them enter the room. Illuminated by the fire faeries dancing in the lamps, he looked impossibly small, bony, and covered in grime. She thought his dull, frizzy hair might be silver, though it looked as though it hadn't been combed in days.

"Gods above!" Lara gasped, dashing straight to him. He looked so forlorn that she wanted nothing more than to feed him, wash him, and give him a big hug to let him know he was going to be okay. Flinging her arms wide, she reached out to scoop him up—but an invisible force sent her flying before the boy could even move a muscle.

"Aaah!"

"Lara!"

Thanks to the magical barrier Lutfel flung out, she wasn't injured, but it certainly dissuaded her from attempting a second approach. "What *was* that?!"

"Exactly what it looks like. The faeries attack anyone who tries to go near him."

The faeries were defending him of their own volition? It seemed they favored him quite a bit.

"As you know, it wasn't till the Archmagus demonstrated how magic could be weaponized against monsters that they started to treat us magical folk with respect. Here in the city, we're lauded as heroes, but in the countryside, where this kid's from, people still cling to old prejudices against those with the gift."

Lara averted her eyes, wincing. She knew all too well how it felt to be treated like a freak of nature.

“One day, his parents decided they didn’t need an extra mouth to feed, so they took him to the mountains and tried to kill him. And what did he do? Detonated his entire pool of mana. Wiped the whole damned mountain off the map, and his parents along with it.”

Lara’s jaw dropped. She could scarcely believe it. How much mana could one boy possibly possess?

“Obviously, I sent someone to bring him in right away, but the little punk was too powerful. I had to put together a full ten-person team and go out there myself. It wasn’t easy, but we eventually subdued him. And here he is.”

“Wow...” A force fit to battle a dragon all for a single child? Lara was speechless. No wonder Lutfel had called him a monster. “So now everyone’s afraid of him, I take it?”

“Precisely. Hells, even *I’m* scared of him. But with the proper guidance, he could be a national treasure—the most powerful mage in Falcone.”

With enough mana to eradicate an entire landmass at the boy’s disposal, it was easy to imagine why few were eager to risk their lives by keeping him around. At the same time, Lara understood why the grand mage was reluctant to give up on the boy. He had tremendous potential as a future weapon against the monsters. But with a whole cadre of disciples in addition to three young children of his own, Lutfel was far too busy to raise the boy himself.

“Hence why you turned to me.”

“Yes, I think your skill set is a good match for him. If he goes on a rampage, you’ll be able to protect yourself. Plus, I hold your generalized knowledge and mastery of magical regulation in high regard. There’s surely much you could teach him.”

In that sense, yes, she was probably the most compatible mentor for his needs.

“Besides, you like kids, right? He deserves to experience a little kindness and love for a change.”

Lara did indeed have a soft spot for children, which was why she donated a sizable portion of each paycheck to the orphanage that had raised her and visited on her days off, spending time with the residents.

“No matter how powerful his magic is, he’s still just a boy,” Lutfel continued. Those words gave Lara the final push she needed.

“All right, fine. You’ve convinced me, Uncle Lu.”

Her childhood nickname for him put a broad smile on his face. After her parents threw her out, it was Lutfel who found her wandering the streets and arranged for her to stay at the orphanage. And he’d continued to visit her over the years, celebrating each milestone in her growth alongside her. For that kindness alone, he was her hero—and when she learned she had the gift of magic, she decided she would grow up to be a royal mage, just like him.

“I’d rather not frighten him, so...could you give us a moment alone? Also, we’re going to need a meal for two. Something easy on the stomach, if possible.”

“Sure thing, kiddo. I’ll make it happen. You two have fun in here!”

His word choice made it sound as though she and the boy were going on a date, but he acquiesced to her request nevertheless and left.

As soon as they were alone, Lara flopped down onto her stomach and began commando-crawling toward the young prisoner. This time, when she reached the point that had previously sent her flying, nothing happened. *Just as I suspected*, she thought to herself with a smile. She figured the faeries only attacked those who towered over the boy, so by lowering herself to the ground, she wouldn’t be perceived as a threat.

“It’s nice to meet you,” she said once she was close enough to reach out and touch him. “What’s your name?”

Alas, he didn’t even look up, much less respond, though he surely heard her.

“I bet you’re hungry, huh? Will you share a meal with me?”

Again, there was no response—but his stomach rumbled audibly. At least his body was in the mood to communicate. Before she could stop herself, Lara

burst out laughing.

“Why, thank you for telling me, Mr. Stomach! Come, let’s eat something.”

At long last, her insistence bore fruit, and the boy looked up.

“Oh my, what lovely eyes you have!” she exclaimed. Emaciated as he was, his naturally large eyes were all the more pronounced. They were beautifully opalescent, different colors cascading across his blue irises, and Lara found herself instantly captivated. “So beautiful...”

When she leaned in eagerly to admire them, however, the boy recoiled in alarm. He must have been quite perplexed to have this strange woman gushing over him, for he turned away sharply, his cheeks faintly flushed. Nevertheless, Lara was pleased to have gotten a reaction out of him, no matter how slight.

“Awww, don’t hide your eyes! Can I look at them some more? Pretty please?” Lara leaned in even closer, gently cupped his cheek in her hand, and turned his face toward her. He flinched hard, and his opalescent blue eyes widened further. “Oh, they’re so gorgeous. I could sit here and look at them forever.”

Unable to stand it a moment longer, the poor boy caved to the intense pressure and finally spoke up.

“Aren’t you scared of me?”

His voice was timid and small, and Lara was tickled to hear it. “Scared? Not at all!” She couldn’t help but burst out laughing all over again. “Why would a grown-up be afraid of a little kid?” she scoffed smugly, though it might not have sounded so impressive, coming from someone currently lying on the floor.

Granted, her age wasn’t the only thing that gave her courage. Lutfel had chosen her for a reason, after all. As a mage favored by the earth faeries, she possessed the unique ability to turn her body into unbreakable stone in times of imminent danger. This magic had kept her safe throughout her childhood, and she was confident it would shield her from any sudden explosions.

But the boy didn’t need to know about this. She had a feeling he wouldn’t reach out to someone who only ever maintained a safe distance from him. Besides, she didn’t want him to mistrust her any more than he already did. His expression suggested he was uncomfortable, but considering he had yet to pull

away from the hand against his face, she suspected some small part of him still wanted to believe in the goodness of others—just as Lara had, when she was much younger.

“Say, would you like to be part of my family?”

At this point, she was already too attached to let him go. If she couldn’t win him over here and now, she feared he would be sent straight to death row, and that would be a terrible waste. The boy still had a heart, after all.

“Excuse me?” He frowned dubiously.

Realizing she might have worded it poorly, Lara tried again. “I’m actually a royal mage, believe it or not. As it happens, I’m in the market for my first-ever disciple, and I think you would be perfect.” He still looked confused, so she racked her brain, trying to figure out how best to pitch it to him. “If you’re interested, I’ll start by teaching you how to control your magic. That way you won’t have to worry about hurting anyone on accident.”

At this, he looked at her with such hope and desperation that it instantly confirmed her suspicions. This boy had killed his parents, and even if they *were* homicidal monsters, it must have traumatized him deeply.

“To be honest, I don’t have a lot of money, so I can’t pay you very much. I can offer you a warm bed, three square meals a day, and a thirty-minute lunch break, though,” she said lightheartedly in order to avoid frightening him. *Pleeeeeease say yes!* she begged internally. *Let me help you! Please!*

After a long moment of consideration, he asked meekly, “Are you sure you want me?”

“Of course!” she declared proudly. “I most certainly do!”

The faeries’ hostility then faded from the air, and after a moment, the boy nodded his head. It must have taken a tremendous amount of courage to do so; his face was beet red all the way to his ears.

“All right then, it’s a deal! As of today, you’re my disciple. Now, what’s your name?”

This time, he actually answered. “Alistair,” he said in a small voice.

At last, she knew what to call him—and it had such a lovely ring to it, too. An elegant name suited him well. Now it was her turn.

“I’m Lara Bradley. You can call me Lara. It’s great to have you on board, Alice!”

“Not Alice. *Alistair*,” he quickly corrected her with a scowl. Evidently, he wasn’t a fan of nicknames. His angry little face was so adorable, Lara couldn’t help but grin.

“Oh dear. My mistake, Alistair. In any case, I do hope to get to know you better.”

As she spoke, she held out her hand. Alistair reached out slowly, timidly, as though he feared her touch was burning hot. She waited for a while, but eventually grew impatient and took his hand in hers, causing him to flinch.

“Thank you for having me, Master,” he said, his face nearly crumpling into tears.

Lara had never been addressed that way before—but she had also never mentored anyone before, so she supposed it made sense. Still, it was so old-fashioned that she had to laugh.

“Well now, you two look thick as thieves already!” a lackadaisical voice called out from behind them. “I knew you could do it, Lara. Wonderful, wonderful.”

“Guess what, Ser Lutfel? Alice says he’ll be my disciple!”

“Alice?”

“I told you, it’s *Alistair*! Not Alice!” the boy snapped with such verve that it put a smile on the older man’s face.

“I see. Well, to commemorate the occasion, I’ve brought you something to eat. But if I may... Lara, what the hells are you doing on the floor?”

At this, she remembered she was still lying on her stomach and hastily sprang to her feet, lest she be seen disrespecting the grand mage of Falcone. Then she realized she’d gotten dust down the front of her royal mage robes, which was quite noticeable against the black fabric, unfortunately. She quickly dusted herself off, then straightened and began to explain.

“I figured he was afraid of huge grown-ups getting too close to him—I used to be the same, after all—so I needed a way to make myself smaller.” As a child, she shrank into herself whenever an adult drew near, terrified that they were going to hit her. Then she noticed Alistair’s uncomfortable silence and forced a laugh.

“Surely you didn’t have to crawl like a worm! Well, no matter. Now, who’s hungry? Come on, you two,” Lutfel called sternly.

When she walked over, he handed her a bowl of bread porridge made with fresh milk—guaranteed to be gentle on the stomach, just as she had requested. She took the spoon, scooped up a bite, and put it into her mouth to demonstrate that it wasn’t poisoned. The gentle sweetness of the warm milk danced on her tongue. Yes, any child was sure to love this. As a father of three, the man clearly knew his stuff. Scooping up a second bite, she turned to Alistair.

“Say ahhh!”

Her newly minted disciple obediently opened his mouth and took a bite. After chewing and swallowing, he let out a relieved sigh. Lara and Lutfel watched this unfold from start to finish, then turned and smiled at each other. Lara offered Alistair another bite when he was ready. The boy started to open his mouth before realizing he was being quite literally spoon-fed. Blushing bright red, he clamped his mouth shut.

“I’m not a stupid baby! I’m *eight*! I can eat on my own!”

While she was a little disappointed that the cute moment was over, Lara dutifully handed over the bowl and spoon, lest she wound his pride. Together with Lutfel, she watched warmly as their young charge wolfed down his porridge. He must have been very hungry indeed.

Though he claimed to be eight, he looked smaller than he should be, suggesting malnourishment. His speech was a little juvenile for his age too, indicating a lack of proper education. Though he still seemed hungry, feeding him too much all at once would surely upset his long-starved stomach. Seconds would have to wait.

Don’t worry, Alice. Once you’re healthy, you can eat as much as you want.

All her life, she had only ever looked out for herself. But from now on, it was her responsibility as a mentor to raise this boy. Starting today, she was committed to helping him grow up to be just as big and strong as the other kids his age.

“Right then. Ser Lutfel, am I allowed to take him home?”

“Ah, yes, of course.”

Alistair gingerly rose to his feet of his own volition. Alas, he soon lost his balance and fell back down. His legs didn’t seem to be cooperating, their function dulled from inactivity, starvation, or a combination of the two.

“You may not like this, but it’s just for today, all right?”

Sensing what Lara was about to do, he bit his lip in frustration. She felt awful for humiliating him, but crouched down with her back to him, nonetheless. After a moment of hesitation, she felt his bony body latch onto hers. She slowly drew herself back up to her full height. He weighed so little. Tears sprang to her eyes.

“Well, Ser, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Take the day off, Lara. You’ll need time to help him get settled. He’s going to be a national treasure one day, so he’s worth the investment.”

She felt a tiny flinch against her back, so she swayed back and forth to soothe him. “Of course he’s worth it. But not because of his gift—because he’s my first disciple,” she corrected Lutfel. After all, she didn’t want Alistair to think his sole value was in his magic.

At this, the older man grinned mischievously. “Fair point. My apologies. By all means, cherish him like a younger brother, if you would.”

Lara nodded farewell and left the royal palace and began the long walk to her home in the suburbs of the capital. She could feel Alistair shrinking even smaller against her, as if ashamed to be seen in public. *Is he just sensitive, or is it his inflated pride? Both, perhaps?* The thought made her chuckle.

Hoping to ease his nerves, she sang a little tune under her breath—a lullaby her dear mother used to sing for her long, long ago. *Sleep well, my child, and*

may your dreams be sweet. It was the warm, loving lullaby of a mage who wished for her precious baby to have a healthy night's rest. Before long, the boy grew ever so slightly heavier on her back, and she knew the lullaby and the gentle rocking motions had done their job. Smiling fondly, she kept on singing all the way home.

A first-rate royal mage would be able to buy a house in a prime location at the heart of the city. Alas, Lara was still a rookie and could only afford to rent a run-down hovel on the outskirts.

When they arrived, she took Alistair straight to the tub and gave him a much-needed scrubbing. Countless scrapes and bruises peppered his skeletal body. It was all too easy to imagine how he'd been treated prior to the incident that had erased an entire mountain, along with his parents' lives. Each time she ran her fingers over a swollen cut, she envisioned the pain it must have caused him, and tears filled her eyes.

He deserves a better life, she thought to herself as she scrubbed, *and I'm going to give it to him.* Now that she had taken him in as her disciple, she was going to treat him with love so he could finally have a normal, happy childhood.

After taking great pains to wash off every inch of grime, she found an astoundingly beautiful boy underneath. Alistair's skin was like porcelain after being cleansed of dirt and filth, and his smelly, matted hair turned glossy silver. "A job well done, if I do say so myself," she declared, wiping the sweat from her brow. "Looking good, Alistair!"

The boy hung his head bashfully. *So cute! He really is just a normal kid,* Lara thought.

Try as she might, she couldn't see any trace of the "monster" Lutfel had described him as. Still, with magic as powerful as his, the rest of the world would likely keep their distance for the rest of his life. If no one else was going to treat him like a child, she would just have to do it herself.

Nurtured by Lara's somewhat overbearing love, Alistair began to flourish, like a thirsty plant finally given water. He was surprisingly astute for his age—whenever she was swamped with work, he would help with the household chores. Perhaps it was something he was used to doing for his old family.

Before she knew it, he had taken over everything that needed doing around the house, and she found herself returning at night to clean rooms and a fully prepped dinner.

Naturally, she wasn't comfortable with a child doing that much labor. She tried to talk him out of it several times, but failed. "You're so bad at it that it's actually painful to watch. It gets done faster and better if I do it," he insisted.

Despite the snark, however, she could tell that, deep down, he was just trying to do something nice for her after a long day of work.

Alistair was also incredibly smart, learning to read and pronounce new words with ease. While she would miss his cute, childish slurred speech, she kept this to herself, lest it embarrass him.

The boy had gone such a very long time without being given a single gift, or shown an ounce of kindness. His trauma ran deep. Many nights, he tossed and turned, or sleepwalked around the house as if searching for something. Whenever Lara caught him doing this, she guided him to her bed by the hand and slept with her arms wrapped tightly around him.

A child's parents were their entire world—in the best and worst of ways. No matter the abuse they might suffer, they clung to the hope that, one day, they would earn the right to be loved. Prior to the day he was nearly murdered, Alistair had likely felt the same way...right up until the very moment he inadvertently closed that door forever.

"I love you, my sweet Alice," she whispered into his ear again and again. It might not undo the permanent damage, but she hoped it might show him that there was at least one person who was glad to have him around.

And so, master and disciple became a family in truth. When Alistair started smiling on a regular basis, Lara was over the moon. As challenging as it could get at times, she was willing to give him the world if she could.

Lara's eyes blurred with tears as she reminisced about those early days with her dear disciple. While she had been taking a stone nap, that same boy had completely aged past her. *I never imagined I'd wake up and he'd suddenly be*

thirty-two! But...oh, I'm so glad he's alive... He had lived to see adulthood, just as she had hoped, and for that, she was grateful.

On the other hand, she hadn't forgotten what the villagers had told her of his behavior toward her statue. It suggested Alistair still harbored an unhealthy romantic obsession with her, a possibility she hadn't accounted for. After all, she had assumed his affection was merely a childhood crush that would fade over time.

He should have moved on and found happiness with someone else. Her gaze drifted downward as she imagined the many years of grief he must have endured.

Still, she knew she couldn't lie there and hide from reality forever. Lara heaved her leaden body into a sitting position with concerted effort. Then, sensing something strange against her ankle, she lifted the sheet and found that she wore a thin golden anklet that radiated a very familiar magical energy. *What in the world?*

There was a knock at the door as she examined it, however. Startled, she nearly jumped out of her skin.

"Come in," she called out after taking a few deep breaths to calm herself.

With her blessing, the door opened, and in walked the very person she had expected to see—her beloved disciple Alistair, who had matured into a handsome man over the past two decades.

"How are you feeling, Master?"

Alistair walked up to her bedside and peered down at her with a frown. His face had gained a rugged quality since she'd last seen him that was so unmistakably her type. It felt like a cruel joke. *Gods, he's hot! Really wish I didn't have a thing for older men!* At the very least, it surely wasn't right to feel this way toward someone she had helped raise!

"Oh, I...I'm fine. I just exhausted all my energies, that's all," she replied nervously, willing her racing heart to relax before she grew dizzy.

"I see. Well, that's a relief." His usual snarky attitude was nowhere to be seen, replaced with a smile that showed no signs of insincerity. Perhaps it was only

human nature, then, that she found herself missing the old him.

“Say, um...Alistair?”

“Yes? What is it?”

“Can we maybe not do the ‘Master’ thing anymore? Just call me Lara.”

Such deference from an older man was strange and unsettling—especially when said man had defeated an elder dragon, received a title and fief from the king himself, and was now celebrated by his subjects as a hero. In her mind, she wasn’t remotely talented enough to demand obeisance from one as accomplished as he. Besides, he was no longer a mere disciple.

When she explained this to him, he beamed brightly. “Very well then. I shall gladly take you up on it, *Lara*.”

Hearing her name spoken in that deep, sultry timbre was overpowering in a much different way, however. A delicious shiver ran down her spine, her knees going weak. When and where had her (former) disciple learned to be so *bewitching*?

Seeing how red and flustered it made her, he donned a mischievous grin. “Ah, now I remember. You always said you liked your men thirty and over.”

“Oh, um... Did I say that?” She knew for a fact she had indeed told him that. Nevertheless, her eyes wandered in search of escape.

“I turned thirty-two this year, you know.”

“I, uh... Yeah, maybe!”

This didn’t make much sense as a response to his statement, but Lara wasn’t thinking straight. She was too busy trying to figure out how to change the subject before it was too late. Unfortunately, her clever disciple had known her long enough to have a thorough grasp of her thought patterns. Alistair extended a hand to her, a frighteningly sadistic smile on his beautiful face. Sure enough, out came the very thing she dreaded to hear.

“I’m an older man now, just like you wanted. It’s time you gave in and agreed to marry me.”

“Gah!”

Would it kill him to give me a week or two?! she screamed internally. Ugh! I underestimated the degree of his attachment! Never in her wildest dreams had she thought she'd still be rebuffing his advances two decades later!

Lara quivered as Alistair's feverish eyes bore into her. Former disciple or not, she had to admit that he truly was her *exact* type of man, right down to the hint of danger he exuded. But from the perspective of someone who had been a mother figure to him back when his age could be counted on two hands, it felt *wrong*.

"Look, I'm obviously very flattered, but I'm not sure I should marry someone I helped raise."

"Au contraire! If anything, it should be your responsibility to look after me for the rest of my life, don't you think?"

"What are you, my pet?"

"I'd love to be! By all means!"

First he wanted to be her husband, and now *this*? She gave him a dirty look. What had happened to the little boy who would have considered all this an affront to his pride?

Lara scooted backward across the bed as he inched closer and closer. She had a feeling he would pounce and devour her to the bone the moment she let her guard down. It was so nerve-racking, she half wished she could trade him for an elder dragon.

"Try to see this from my point of view, won't you? For me, it's as though you were a child just yesterday!" She hoped he would understand that she needed time to process the many years she had lost.

"Put yourself in *my* shoes, then!" he objected. "I've thought of nothing but you all day, every day, for *twenty years* while you were encased in stone!"

Now *that* was a sore spot. She could imagine just how painful it must have been for him as a child—how lonely he must have been for so long.

"Three years after I lost you, I joined the ministry and slayed the dragon that had swallowed you."

That made him the youngest royal mage in history. *And* he had killed that massive elder dragon? His power was unfathomably frightening.

“I’ve waited since the day we pulled your petrified body from its guts! Waited for years upon years upon *years* for you to turn back! And after all that, you still reject me? Have you no heart?”

In other words, he had spent the past seventeen years living with her statue. Tears sprang to her eyes as she envisioned his loneliness. Alistair knew she was an empathetic person, of course, and he was aiming for that weakness, seeking to exploit her guilt. Indeed, it seemed her disciple was quite the tactician. He understood precisely how to sway her.

“I spoke to your cold, lifeless body every day, even though I knew full well you would never respond. And because I kept talking to you, the citizens spread callous rumors about my supposed sexual proclivities!”

Having heard those very rumors herself, she looked away nervously.

“Now, at long last, I can feel your living, breathing warmth once more. Won’t you at least allow me that reassurance?”

Seeing those damp eyes, Lara simply wasn’t strong enough to reject his plea. With a sigh, she gave in and lowered her guard.

He extended a hand to her cheek, his fingertips warm and imbued faintly with magic. A smile spread across Lara’s lips. Oddly enough, his touch was comforting; if she had to guess, it was a sign that their mana was in sync.

“So soft... So warm... Gods, you really are alive,” he choked in a watery voice.

Her heart ached. It drove home just how traumatized her “death” had left him as a child. It had been the safest plan available to her, so she didn’t regret her choice—but that didn’t change the fact that it had hurt him.

“I’m so sorry, Alistair.”

Overwhelmed with emotion, he suddenly pulled her petite frame into a tight hug. After a moment, she rested her weight against him. Then, he cupped her chin, tilting her face up to look at him—and the next thing she knew, he planted a light kiss on her unguarded lips.

It felt so natural that she closed her eyes and leaned into it. If she truly didn't reciprocate his feelings, the logical thing would have been to stop him...but surprisingly, she felt no objection to it at all. Alistair, meanwhile, kissed her again and again from all different angles, as if experimenting.

“Mmmph!”

Before long, Lara's lips parted in search of oxygen—and that was when he plunged his tongue inside. Unable to breathe, she whimpered through her nose. Meanwhile, his tongue gleefully explored every inch of her mouth, tracing her teeth and tastebuds.

“Mm... Mmmh!”

The unfamiliar sensation of trespass made her tremble. When she was finally set free, she gasped for breath.

“I never thought your lips would be so soft,” he whispered in a tearful voice. Alistair buried his face in her chestnut hair and took a breath.

The sound of him inhaling snapped her back to her senses. A few days had passed since her petrification spell wore off, and she had yet to take a bath.

“Ah, your scent!” He pressed his nose to her collarbone and took a long whiff.

The blood drained from her face. *Is he smelling my body odor?!*

“Th-that's enough, Alistair! Don't smell me!”



Lara pushed him away forcefully, using both hands. He shot her a wounded look. *Ugh, I wish he'd stop guiltting me like that! I know he's doing it on purpose!*

"At least wait until I've taken a bath first," she clarified. After all, she hadn't washed herself in twenty years.

"Oh, you needn't worry! You smell so lovely. They should make a perfume of your scent!"

Why did he look so *excited*? Lara lamented the pervert her little disciple had become. "That's not what I'm saying."

"Well... If you want to take a bath, I can have the servants draw you one," he offered somewhat reluctantly.

Her eyes lit up. Yes, she most certainly wanted to!

"That being said, I can't imagine you're dirty enough to need one, considering I've polished you from top to bottom every single day."

"Come again?"

"I made sure to scrub every inch of your body on a daily basis."

"What?"

Now *this* was a comment that could not go unaddressed. Her petrification spell might have transfigured every cell in her body to stone, but her clothes would have dissolved in the dragon's stomach acid. The mental image of full-grown Alistair scrubbing her naked statue form with a toothbrush made her start to quiver.

"Wha...? *Why?!*"

"Well, I obviously couldn't let anyone else see you in that state, let alone touch you," he replied matter-of-factly.

No, I meant—why polish me?! Do rocks even get dirty?! For once, she was grateful to have been unconscious the entire time. Otherwise, she would have surely died of shame long ago. It was out of anyone's control—Lara understood that—but she would have preferred to spare her disciple the sight of her nude form. That sort of thing was reserved for her future husband.

Unfortunately, Alistair seemed to realize this, because he donned a wicked grin. “Now that I think about it, we’ve already seen each other at our most vulnerable. So we really have no choice but to make it official, don’t you think?”

“Th-thanks, but I’ll pass...”

“While noble of you, this show of restraint is entirely unnecessary. Please, be my wife. I assure you our marriage will be a happy one.”

“I said no thank you!”

What is this, a shotgun wedding?!

“Oh, I know. What if we take a bath together? I am happy to give you a demonstration of my usual methods if it will ease your mind.”

He fixed her with a provocative look, seduction cranked up to full blast. *Nope! Not happening!* She shook her head so hard her brains threatened to rattle around in her skull. “I’m quite capable of washing myself!”

“Come now. There’s nothing to be embarrassed about. While I hadn’t known your touch until today, I’ve known your shape for quite some time.”

Not by my invitation, you haven’t!

“Besides, didn’t you give *me* a bath all those years ago?”

“That’s different! You were eight!”

“Be that as it may, I was saving myself for marriage until you came along and made a plaything of a young boy’s heart. How do you intend to make it up to me, hmm?”

Was he messing around, or was he serious? He took one look at the confusion on Lara’s face and burst out laughing. Meanwhile, she suppressed the urge to slap him. Then, out of nowhere, he grabbed her by the wrist.

“Alas, you are already mine, Lara. I won’t make the same mistake twice.” His opalescent blue eyes bored into hers with an intensity bordering on madness, and her legs were too weak to engineer an escape. “On second thought, I think I *will* have a little taste before your bath.”

In one fell swoop, he hiked her negligée up and over her head.

“Wait! Stop!” She quickly covered herself with both hands.

“I’m afraid I won’t accept that,” he replied with a sadistic smile. “You have no right to refuse me after the way you abandoned me. I suggest you make yourself comfortable.”

The look on his face was one she recognized from his rebellious phase, suggesting he had no intention of listening to a word she said.

“Ah, I love that look of helplessness on your face,” he remarked as he pinned her wrists to the bed. “As I recall, pity was always your specialty, so I’ll make do with that for now. You *do* feel sorry for me, don’t you?”

His smile seemed to conceal a great deal of pain, and Lara wasn’t sure what to say.

“As long as I have you, I shall ask for nothing more. I could never have loved a lifeless statue if I was concerned with having my feelings reciprocated, after all. Now turn your brain off and let it happen.”

The strength drained from her limbs as his deep voice rumbled in her ear. Meanwhile, his eyes gleamed as he scanned her bare body.

“It’s rude to stare, you know,” she muttered shyly, feeling the heat of his gaze upon her skin. He continued nonetheless.

“Then I am rude, for it would be a terrible waste not to admire your beauty. This is the first I’ve seen your nipples. How sweet they are—pretty and pink. Oh, how I’ve longed to see them for so many years.”

To cast the petrification spell, she had knelt in prayer with her hands clasped at chest level. The position of her arms must have inadvertently concealed her breasts. While it hadn’t been a purposeful decision, she commended her past self on her good instincts.

His large palms traveled down the curves of her body until they arrived at the swell of her breasts, his fingers digging faintly yet noticeably into her flesh.

“Aaah!”

First, he squeezed them, to savor the softness. Then, after her nipples had puffed up from the chilly air, he ran the pad of his finger over them. A sharp

tingle of pleasure shot through Lara, who squirmed. From there, Alistair graduated to rubbing, then prodding, then pinching, gauging her reaction all the while. He seemed to have a knack for it, sprinkling in a rougher touch here and there without crossing the threshold from pleasure into pain.

“Haah... Mm... Aaah!”

Peppering her with soothing kisses, Alistair continued his ministrations without pause, nibbling her earlobe and then running his tongue down her neck to her collarbone. The hot, wet sensation, so stark in contrast to his fingers, made her flinch.

“Gods, you taste so good... So warm and soft...”

“Wh-what do you mean, *taste*?!” she yelped, mildly alarmed.

“As a statue, you were cold and hard and tasted of nothing, no matter where I put my tongue. What better way to prove to myself that you are truly alive?” he answered offhandedly, with nary a trace of guilt.

He was licking my statue?! Baffled, Lara shot him a dirty look. What part of me was he even—on second thought, I don’t want to know!

“I mean, it was shaped like you. Obviously, I was going to lick it,” he continued, with zero self-awareness. For a moment, she wondered what he might have been doing with his free hand at the time, then hastily blocked it from her mind. Ignorance was bliss sometimes, and this was certainly one of those times.

Before long, his tongue arrived at her breast and scaled it to its stiff peak, swollen and red from the attention. His soft lips engulfed it, sucking and nibbling lightly. It should have hurt, and yet somehow, her feverish mind converted it to more pleasure.

“Mnnn! Aah... Haah...”

Her loins tightened and burned hot, begging for something more. Were it not for Alistair between her thighs, she would have rubbed them together to try to appease this fever. His tongue traveled farther south, down the gentle slope of her hips, until at last, he used his arms to wedge her legs open wide.

“Hey!” Alarmed by the sensation of open air against her nether region, she tried to slam her legs shut, but he was having none of it.

“What a beautiful pussy. Like a rose in bloom,” he muttered hazily. “Your statue had all your key areas covered, tease that you are. It means so much that I can now see and touch them.”

Once more, Lara found herself exceptionally grateful that she’d had the dumb luck to petrify herself in a modest position. Meanwhile, Alistair’s flawless fingers gently traced upward along her slit.

“Nnhaah... Aah...!”

The direct stimulation made Lara’s back arch, her hips recoiling from the intensity. Alistair tightened his grasp, preventing her escape. Again and again, he traced over her lower lips as they grew damp, until, at last, he pressed in against the sensitive little bud swelling with lust at the top.

“Aaah!”

What resulted was a stabbing sensation almost reminiscent of pain. She dug her knee in against his arm, but alas, her petite frame lacked the strength to stop him. As he stroked and rubbed and pinched, she felt something building inside her. Her lower limbs stiffened and began to shake.



“I’m glad you’re enjoying this, Lara,” he remarked, his forced-casual tone in no way hiding the tension on his face. Evidently, he wanted to play the part of the confident older man for her. It was so cute that she couldn’t help but giggle.

Alistair scowled sulkily in response and strummed her clit even harder.

“Gaaahhh!”

The intense pleasure struck right as she let her guard down, and the metaphorical dam burst, pushing Lara to climax. During the surge, she felt her vaginal walls constrict as a pleasant ache rippled outward like a full-body itch. Watching her body spasm, Alistair smiled in satisfaction and gently slid a finger into her twitching depths. Though it was the first foreign object ever to enter, the generous lubrication aided him greatly.

“Mmh! Aah...aaah!” For some reason, the unfamiliar sensation made her moan.

“Gods, I can imagine how good it would feel to put my cock in here,” he whispered fervently, as if entranced. On reflex, her hips bucked eagerly.

And yet, for some reason, Alistair didn’t actually attempt to sate his own lust. He withdrew his finger from inside her, lifted her limp body into his arms, and carried her off to the bathtub.

“Wh-wha...?!”

“You want to get cleaned up, don’t you? I’m happy to oblige.”

Sure enough, he lowered her into the warm water, rolled up his sleeves, and began to scrub every inch of her. He worked with a practiced hand, suggesting he had indeed washed her statue many times in the past. With no strength left to fight him, Lara simply sat there as he lathered, rinsed, then directed a combined team of wind and fire faeries to dry her off. Once her request had been met and she was clean, he brought her back to the bed. A tiny kiss was planted upon her lips, then Alistair gently stroked her hair and left the room.

Why...?

As she sank against the mattress, the orgasm having sapped her of both physical and mental energy, she could only wonder: Why didn’t he go all the

way? After all, if he had truly wanted to, she likely wouldn't have been able to stop him. And while part of her was relieved that they hadn't crossed that line, another part of her was oddly disappointed.

Gah, what am I thinking?! Snap out of it, Lara!

Of all the men to start thirsting over, did it really have to be *him*?

Chapter 3:

How (Not) to Raise an Evil Sorcerer

WHEN WAS IT THAT SHE had first felt that telltale heat in Alistair's gaze?

On one of their rare days off, Lara had decided to volunteer at the orphanage in the capital's suburbs—the one where she herself had grown up. Granted, her current living situation wasn't exactly the most stable one, but she nonetheless felt greatly indebted to this place. When she explained as much to the headmistress, the woman mercifully relented.

Children are the future, as the saying went. Funny, then, that the kingdom of Falcone didn't seem to have the budget for them. The orphanage had no proper funding and was barely scraping by. Lara knew they needed all the help they could get. She was joined, however, by a rather less enthusiastic Alistair.

"You know, Alice, I hope we may one day live in a world where children don't have to go hungry or live in fear of abuse."

Playing with the orphans had a way of bringing out her idealistic side—her dreams of eradicating sad childhoods like theirs. When Alistair heard this, however, his apathetic shrugs turned to condescending scoffs. "How very unrealistic," he said.

From then on, he refused to sleep in the same bed with her. Yes, it must have been right around then.

The path to adulthood ran through territory guaranteed to give any parent or guardian a head of gray hair—the rebellious phase. Alistair's in particular was so vicious, it was as if everything he had bottled up inside came out roaring.

After he turned twelve, Lara had started bringing him with her to the palace as her assistant. This was far from uncommon among royal mages, though the disciples who served in this capacity were typically a little older. By seeing their mentors in action, they learned the skills necessary to become full-fledged mages in their own right.

Beloved as he was by all the faeries in the realm and aided by Lara's teachings, Alistair had already mastered every system of magic. Though he lacked self-discipline, his spells were powerful enough to rival those of a first-class royal mage. Perhaps it was this prematurely gained confidence that gradually led him to treat his mentor with disdain.

"Alistair, you shouldn't rely solely on brute force when you construct your spells."

"What does it matter as long as I have the requisite mana? Then again, I suppose those with *lesser talents* wouldn't understand."

"Composition is a fundamental aspect of—"

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever you say."

His arrogance was truly saddening. While she knew—or hoped—Alistair would eventually grow out of it, he was impossible to instruct at present. In times like these, her only source of advice was fellow parent Lutfel, who had just been blessed with a fourth child.

"All boys are like that at his age—overly self-conscious in the strangest ways. Hells, I hate to admit it, but even *I* was like that at one point! It's a rite of passage. Give him some grace, and he'll be back to normal before you know it. Even better, you'll have blackmail to tease him with when he's grown if you document it with an archival spell! Ha!"

Naturally, this advice was completely useless, as was the old geezer who provided it.

"Look, just try your best to be patient with him, all right? At the end of the day, I know for a fact that he loves you very much."

"If that were true, he'd say it back when I tell him I love him."

"Aw, don't let a little thing like reciprocation stop you. I'm sure your love means the world to him, deep down."

She was always the kind of girl who wore her heart on her sleeve, so she couldn't have stopped professing her love to him even if she wanted to. He was still her precious disciple, even when he was being a little asshole.

“If you ask me, Lara, his rebellious phase is proof that he finally feels secure. Slowly but surely, he’s testing the water to see what he can get away with—and trusting that you won’t abandon him for it.”

Until now, Alistair had never had the *option* of testing or trusting. Furthermore, his innate affinity for magic put him leagues beyond the other mages-in-training, and that, in turn, inflated his ego. No matter whom he spoke to, no matter their rank or status, he regarded them with ten times the condescension he directed at Lara. Sometimes he even intentionally provoked them into altercations, forcing her to apologize on his behalf. Not a day went by that she wasn’t sick to her stomach with worry.

So when she heard he had almost obliterated a fellow disciple—along with an entire corner of the palace—she all but fainted.

Upon arriving at the scene, she found an older boy cowering in a puddle of his own snot and tears, shaking like a leaf and begging for forgiveness. Behind him was a massive, smoldering crater in one of the palace’s concrete walls. To her great relief, however, the boy himself appeared to be unharmed, suggesting her disciple had obeyed her teachings in at least one regard.

As for the perpetrator in question, he looked down at the boy on the floor, scoffed, and gave him a hard stomp.

“I don’t know what high house you hail from, but you must be pathetic to cower before a *low-born orphan* like myself.” His voice was so icy it sent a shiver down Lara’s spine. “Oh, and *murderer*, was it? Well, I’m afraid they tried to kill me first, so they really had it coming.”

If there was one thing Alistair could not abide, it was the implication of disrespect. This boy had evidently insulted him to the point of bringing his dead parents into it. It was hardly surprising, then, that he had lost his temper.

Lara knew she needed to stop him, but the sheer arcane energy of his rage rooted her feet to the floor. Likewise, the other royal mages in the vicinity seemed too intimidated to approach him. In terms of magical aura, he felt less like a child and more like an evil sorcerer.

“If I had been born a weak little worm, I bet I would have died that day. Hells, my family was so poor they probably would have cooked me for dinner. Good

thing I'm not a worm like you, wouldn't you say?"

It was painfully apparent that this was the narrative he had chosen to tell himself. Lara's heart ached for him.

"In the end, my parents were weaker than me, so they died. Natural selection, plain and simple. If you're too pathetic to protect yourself, you don't deserve to live." Alistair ground his heel into the boy's back. "And *you're* even weaker than they were, so obviously, I intend to weed you out as well. Boy, am I ever glad to be at the top of the food chain!"

The older boy let out a strangled yelp of terror, like a farm animal brought before the butcher's axe.

It was just as Lara had always feared. Alistair hadn't overcome his trauma at all—he'd just gotten better at hiding it. Tears of sadness spilled from her eyes as she finally regained control of her feet.

"Alistair, what are you doing?"

He turned at the sound of her voice, saw that she was crying, and averted his eyes guiltily. "Well, Master, this complete stranger saw fit to insult me out of nowhere."

"That's no excuse to resort to violence."

"Oh, I haven't really hurt him. At least, I don't think I have. And I'll be sure to repair the wall later."

Her shoulders slumped. *That's not the point, Alistair, and you know it.*

He turned back and gave the cowering boy a light kick. "Run along and get out of my sight," he told him in a flat, emotionless voice. "Hopefully, this will teach you to stay well away from me. Otherwise, you might just *accidentally* end up like my parents."

The blood drained from the other disciple's face, and he scrambled away as fast as his feet could carry him. Clearly, he wouldn't be speaking to Alistair again anytime soon. The crowd of frightened onlookers quickly dissipated, and before long, only Alistair and Lara were left.

"Having to deal with every last one of these idiots is exhausting, you know. I

figured it would be faster to show them who they're messing with. Maybe they won't waste my time with their petty jealousy now," he gloated. "Because guess what, Master? Nobody can take things away from you when you're strong."

He wasn't wrong. Flaunting his power *was* a valid strategy, in its own way. People tended to be wary around those who were clearly in a whole different league from them. This way, they would associate Alistair with danger, making those who might wish him ill too afraid of him to get close. It was evidently how he had decided to protect himself.

Still, it was a decision that broke Lara's heart. If he did this, only those at or above Alistair's skill level would feel safe interacting with him, and such people were extremely few in number. He was systematically cutting almost everyone out of his life. She wished she knew what to say to him—how to teach him to value both himself and others—but that was a hard thing to do, and one even she had yet to master.

"That's not what your magic is meant to be used for, Alistair." It was a stale platitude, but it was all she had. More than anything, she didn't want him to choose a life of solitude and turn his back on the rest of the world. "Please don't treat your inferiors like burdens to be cast aside."

After all, the weak far outnumbered the strong. That was why, unlike monsters, humans built societies; it was in order to help each other. Without Lutfel's help, Lara would have died before she made it to double digits. In turn, Alistair would have been executed if Lara hadn't been there to take him under her wing. They were all connected through acts of kindness.

"Someone who's truly strong wouldn't trample the helpless underfoot."

She wanted him to use his power for the greater good, so he'd spend his life being loved and appreciated by those around him. She was not surprised, however, when he once again dismissed this as empty idealism.

"I don't care about anyone else as long as I have you, Master," he scoffed. "I don't need them."

But what if something were to happen to her? Life was hard, and no one in this world was capable of making it *entirely* on their own.

“Listen to me, my sweet Alice. I don’t want to see you get hurt, but I don’t want to see you hurting anyone, either.” It was the honest truth of how she felt as his guardian. Both options were too sad to think about.

Alistair fell silent for a moment. Then, finally, he gave in. “You’re so demanding, Master... Fine.”

Afterward, she and Alistair paid a visit to the other boy’s mentor to apologize directly, but as expected, the disciple in question was so traumatized that he refused to be in the same room. Even the mentor was too intimidated to make direct eye contact.

The aftermath of the incident worked out exactly as Alistair had hoped, for no one ventured to hurl insults at him ever again. As a result, he stopped getting into nearly as much trouble. On the other hand, the other mages now walked on eggshells around *Lara* as well. She received exactly eight hours’ worth of work in her inbox and next to no overtime. Alistair seemed supremely smug about this, as if he had done her a favor.

“Where did I go wrong with him...?”

Once again, Lara found herself in Lutfel’s office to give her regular report on Alistair’s progress and get some much-needed advice. Because the boy had spent his early years in an abusive home, she had chosen a parenting style that leaned heavily on praise.

“I tell him how sweet and handsome and smart and talented he is every day. And I tell him how much I love him, too. I only wanted him to have a shred of self-worth. Instead, it just made him stuck-up!”

Unfortunately, Lutfel was not the most tactful old man, and he responded to her woes by laughing so hard, he almost cried.

In the beginning, Alistair had responded to her praise with bashful delight. Now he seemed to expect it merely for existing. In all fairness, he *was* handsome and smart, and she *did* love him merely for existing. But she was starting to think she might have been a bit too lenient.

Unfortunately, Lara was downright *terrible* at scolding people. Whenever she tried, she inevitably started to empathize with the recipient and ended up

crying. The one time she attempted to discipline Alistair, it made her sob so hard that he ended up consoling her, as if *she* were the one in trouble. She had inadvertently raised a narcissist, and now he had taken to crushing anyone who even slightly offended him.

“I mean, he’s a smart kid,” said Lutfel. “He knows it’s a whole lot quicker and easier to rely on fear and violence than it is to hold out hope for kindness.”

She understood this, of course. Alistair’s plan had worked, and the Ministry of the Arcane had formally acknowledged his potential.

“But if he makes a habit of it like you say, no one will want to be around him,” he continued. Yes, fear could command people, but such authority only went so far. No one would truly respect him. “Besides, you know you can’t stay with him forever, right?”

In exchange for their preferential treatment, mages had one obligation: to produce at least three offspring throughout their lifetime.

Humans could only wield magic through one of two ways: genetics or spontaneous mutation. Lara was of the former category, her late mother having possessed the gift. Out in the countryside where they lived, however, there was still a strong prejudice against spellcasters. Her mother had concealed her identity—even from her own husband—right up until the day she died. Mages had been considered heretics to be eliminated in the days before the government started taking active measures to protect them. In the end, the only person who’d known the truth about Lara’s mother was her own magically gifted daughter, whom she swore to secrecy.

The gift had approximately a 30 percent chance of being passed down. For that reason, mages were expected to have a minimum of three children in order to keep their numbers from declining. Without enough mages, the kingdom of Falcone would lose its one weapon against the threat of monsters, and that was a risk they couldn’t afford to take.

Alistair, on the other hand, was believed to have been born of a spontaneous mutation. While incredibly rare, such people tended to be powerful spellcasters. Even better, they could pass down magic to their children too, creating a new arcane bloodline.

In any case, Lara was already twenty-four. She would need to start thinking about settling down very soon if she were to bear three children.

“I’ve already received a handful of marriage proposals for you—some from fairly noble families, even. A mage’s genes are valuable indeed.”

“I’m sorry, but I’ll have to decline all of them.”

Lutfel paused. “All right then, but be warned. If you don’t make a decision, bureaucracy will do it for you.”

If she continued to avoid marriage, the government would indeed step in and assign someone on her behalf, at which point she most likely couldn’t bring Alistair into her new home. That was why she wanted to wait just a few years more until he was a legal adult.

“Alice needs me right now. I’m the closest thing he has to a family.” Without her around, he would end up alone all over again, and he was already so desperate for love. She dreaded the thought of what he might do if that happened. “Anyway, thank you for letting me vent, Ser. I’ll try to figure something out.”

“Sounds good. Oh, and one more thing, Lara. What’s the deal with that necklace?”

“Pretty, isn’t it? Alice gave it to me for my birthday this year.” Grinning proudly, she held up the pendant by the chain.

Lutfel frowned. He could tell it was imbued with a geolocation spell, transmitting her location back to the caster at all times...though its wearer didn’t seem to realize this. “Well... Eh, I guess it’s fine. Seems harmless. Plus, I wouldn’t want to get on his bad side.”

Lara tilted her head, clueless.

“Y’know, at this point, maybe the two of you should form your *own* family,” he suggested with a smirk, fully aware of bratty Alistair’s not-so-secret crush.

As grand mage, Lutfel was Falcone’s preeminent spellcaster. A handsome man of upstanding character, he was a respectable leader and a devoted husband. But while he seemed perfect at first glance, he had one bad habit: his love of

teasing. And though it had gotten him into trouble on numerous occasions, he still had yet to learn his lesson.

Lara's eyes widened as she clapped her hands together in realization. "What a wonderful idea! You truly are every bit as brilliant as they say, Ser Lutfel!"

Uh oh, he thought to himself. *She's completely misunderstood what I was saying, hasn't she?* Make no mistake, Lara was a sweet and kind young woman, but once she got an idea into her head, she took action at lightning speed.

"All I have to do is form a family with Alistair. I should just adopt him as my son! That would solve everything!"

"N-now wait a minute! I was just joking, Lara! You shouldn't do that. It would be, uh, damaging—"

Unfortunately, she was already deep in thought and no longer paying attention to him. "I'll ask him about it and see what he thinks!"

"You're actually serious?! Listen, Lara, you really shouldn't!"

"Oh, it'll be fine! It's just a little paperwork!"

He buried his face in his hands. She simply didn't get it.

"See you later, Ser! Say hi to the wife and kids for me!"

With that, she rushed from the room as if she didn't have a single second to lose. Lutfel prayed that the subsequent inevitable firestorm would ultimately bring her and her disciple closer.

That night, Lara arrived home with a spring in her step, eager to share Lutfel's idea with Alistair. At the dinner table, she found the courage to broach the subject as they were eating his cooking and drinking his freshly brewed tea.

"Say, Alice, I'd like you to fill something out for me."

"What is it, Master? Incidentally, my name is *Alistair*."

"Oh dear. My mistake, Alistair." After the flawless execution of their running gag, Lara smiled and held up a sheet of paper. "Now, how would you like to be my son?"

To her, it was a brilliant plan. Formally adopting him meant she would be able

to leave him her entire estate in her will. Furthermore, no one would be able to call him a low-born orphan ever again, for the Bradley family held the title of baronet. Granted, their fief was but a tiny plot of land out in the middle of nowhere, and Lara didn't stand to inherit anything beyond her last name after being disowned as a child, but it was still better than nothing.

"...Excuse me?"

"That way, we'll be a real family," Lara continued, beaming brightly as she showed him the government-issued adoption form with all of her information already filled in.

Seeing as neither of them had any other family, they could simply make their own. Only the kingdom's strongest and wisest mage could have provided them with such a perfect solution! This way, she would become Alistair's guardian in the truest sense of the word, and whenever she *did* get married, nothing could stop her from bringing him along. After all, he would officially be her son, not just a disciple.

The color drained from Alistair's face as he read over the paper.

"From now on, you can call me Mom, okay?" Lara spread her arms wide, inviting him in for a hug.

When Alistair finally lifted his gaze from the adoption form, the look on his face was so terrifying that it haunted her nightmares for months afterward. His glossy silver hair rippled and sparked with mana, reflecting his rage.

"You truly infuriate me sometimes," he spat in a low voice.

Lara recoiled reflexively. "What? Why?!" It was the angriest she'd ever seen him.

"You? My mother? Don't be ridiculous. I'd rather *die*!" Alistair snatched the paper from between her fingers, tore it into fine shreds, and threw them into the air like confetti.

His rejection was so vicious, she could only watch in crestfallen silence as the adoption form she'd taken pains to fill out scattered in pieces over the floor. Her shoulders slumped. Sure, she was a bit too young and inexperienced to be a real mother, but she certainly loved him like a mother would. "You didn't have

to be that harsh... I'm doing my best, you know."

"Hmph. It would appear your efforts are sorely misguided," he huffed.

"Stop. You're being rude."

"And whose fault is that? After all we've been through together, why would you think of suggesting something so absurd? Who put this stupid idea in your head?"

"Um..."

"Really, I don't even need to ask. It must have been that old geezer."

"In case you've forgotten, Alistair, 'that old geezer' is the grand mage of Falcone, so you had better watch your tongue. Besides, I thought it was a good idea myself."

Mages were rare, and the government needed them to reproduce. In the case of an especially talented mage, they'd even arrange the marriage themselves. After all, if both parents were magically inclined, it greatly increased the probability that their children would be as well.

For now, Lara was still permitted to prioritize her work. The higher-ups would eventually lose their patience, though, find her a partner of their own choosing, and order her to marry him. At that point, her current life with Alistair would most likely come to an end. All she wanted was to prevent that through the only means available to her, which she explained to him.

"That's why I was trying to think of a way that we could be a real family—so we could stay together. And that way, if anything were to happen to me, you could inherit what little I have."

He let out a long, beleaguered sigh and clapped a hand to his forehead. "Okay. I get it now. Evidently, I was a little too optimistic." After a moment of contemplation, he looked firmly into her eyes. "You should know, Master, there's another way we can be family."

"Is there? And what might that be?" she asked, tilting her head curiously. If he had a better idea, she was all ears.

Gently, he took her ink-stained hand in both of his. His gaze was so intense, it

made her heart skip a beat. He took a breath, and then...

“Will you marry me?”

“Come again?”

It was so unexpected, her brain didn't process it for a moment. Then the gears started turning, and she realized that her twelve-year-old disciple had just proposed. More embarrassing still, it was the first proposal she had personally received in all twenty-four years of her life. She stared blankly in confusion.

“Make me your husband, not your son,” Alistair continued.

“Uhhhh... I see...”

“That would make us family, wouldn't it?”

Her would-be son was asking for her hand in holy matrimony instead. When it finally sank in, she exhaled sharply. “And you called *my* idea ridiculous? You know we can't do that!” she shot back, every bit as exasperated as he had been with her.

“Why not?”

“How old are you again? Certainly not old enough to get married.”

“I turned twelve three months ago, so according to Falcone law, we only have to wait four years.”

“In four years I'm going to be *twenty-eight*! Try to be serious for a moment, Alistair. This is an important conversation.”

“I *am* being serious.”

She took one look at his unwavering blue opal eyes and facepalmed. *This kid actually thinks he can marry me!* Again, she found herself wondering where she had gone wrong in parenting him.

“Sorry, but no. I've never once thought of you that way.”

“Well then, now's a good time to start.”

“Not going to happen,” she declared firmly. After all, she didn't want to lead him on with a soft rejection that left room for doubt. “Even if you *weren't* literally twelve, I prefer older gentlemen.”

“Oh really? You mean like *Ser Lutfel*, for example?” he asked with a smirk.

Lara fell silent. How could he possibly know about her first love?

“Everyone’s heard the story of how you used to be tied to his apron strings as a kid.”

“I... I don’t know what you mean...”

“Well, I’m sorry to say, but Ser Lutfel is very happily married to his wife. He’s had four children with her and everything. You don’t have a snowball’s chance in hell, Master. Move on already.”

Yes, she had once asked Lutfel to take her as his bride when she was a child... but that was before she knew he was spoken for! It was half a lifetime ago—back when she was Alistair’s age—and she had since befriended his lovely wife, Nicole, an upbeat and playful medic mage who was unparalleled in her field. They had been on good terms for many years now. Nicole was currently on maternity leave, though after four back-to-back pregnancies, Lara wasn’t sure she’d be coming back to the office anytime soon. This, too, was a sign of Lutfel’s devotion to her.

“Besides, Ser Lutfel is fifteen years older than you. By contrast, *our* age gap is only twelve.”

“I’m only into age gaps as long as I’m the younger one!”

“How come? That’s not fair. I don’t accept it.”

“I like what I like, okay?!”

This conversation was going in circles. *He’s just scared, the same way I was back then*, Lara thought with another heavy sigh.

When she was his age, she’d been terrified of having to live on her own, away from her mentor and guardian Lutfel. That was why she came crying to him, begging him to marry her so that they could stay together. She had wanted, selfishly, to be able to hide behind him forever.

“I’m sorry, Lara, but I can’t return your feelings. I already have someone special I want to marry,” Lutfel had explained gently, without teasing her or brushing her off.

Once she understood that it wasn't going to happen, she made the decision to stop following him around like a puppy all the time. To this day, she still wasn't entirely sure whether she'd actually had feelings for him, or if she'd just had separation anxiety. Either way, Lutfel never stopped treating her with kindness, and for that, she was sincerely grateful.

"Listen to me, my sweet Alice," she called to him with the same compassion she herself was shown back then.

"Call me Alistair, please."

"You're right. Sorry, Alistair." Straightening her posture, she reached out and gently stroked his hair. "I know you and I haven't had a lot of luck in life. And I know what it's like to cling to what you have because you're scared you might lose it."

Frowning, he sat down beside her. She regarded him with a benevolent smile.

"I know it feels like this is the best you'll ever have, but it's really just a tiny part of the life that's ahead of you." This was something Lara could say from experience. As a child, she was convinced she needed Lutfel if she was going to survive, but she had been wrong. "You may think you don't have a future, but you do! Living with me is just a stepping stone toward something even better. You don't need to cling to me so tight."

She didn't want him to hold himself back. Not when he had so much potential.

Alistair clenched his jaw angrily. "Give me a *fucking break*," he hissed. His words dripped with more venom than she had ever heard from him before—like a sword unsheathed. "You think you know exactly how I feel, but you don't have the first clue!"

Admittedly, she *had* been projecting a little and had no comeback to this.

"I'm sure you're eager to write me off as a poor, confused child, but I'm not going to give up. Not now, not *ever*," he declared, looking her dead in the eyes.

His blue opalescent irises glowed with mana, like they had been set aflame. Lara found herself inexplicably entranced by their beauty, her heart thumping loudly in her chest.

“Mark my words, Lara. One day, you’re going to take me seriously.”

Feeling the morning light against her eyelids, Lara awoke from a dream of the past. It had been no more than a few months ago to her, but to the rest of the world, twenty whole years had passed.

To think Alistair would still feel the same after all this time...

Following the fateful day her underage disciple first proposed, he’d proceeded to shower her with so much affection that it was hard to believe he had been rebellious at all. And now, two decades had passed. She took a deep, steadying breath. Her heart ached with guilt as she imagined how he must have felt.

Well, it’s morning. I should get up.

Her body felt warmer than usual, pleasantly so. This was uncommon for a woman like Lara who tended to get cold easily. It was so cozy, she couldn’t quite find the will to rise. It reminded her of when Alistair had been small and she’d shared a bed with him to help him sleep at night. For some reason—possibly his surplus of mana—the boy was like a space heater.

Subconsciously, she was drawn toward the source of warmth. It was so soft and smooth; she couldn’t help but nuzzle against it. Then, it flinched, and she felt a hot, rigid length press against her thigh. That was the moment her drowsy brain finally realized something was off and forced her to lift her leaden eyelids.

Squinting against the bright, piercing light of day, she saw...skin.

Oh no.

Hesitantly, she raised her head and found a flawless male specimen she unfortunately recognized. Alistair lay in bed next to her, naked, his arms wrapped tightly around her for some reason. His eyes were closed, and he snored faintly.

Oh no!

Though she was locked into position, she managed to squirm just enough to get a good look at her body. To her relief, she still wore her pajamas. Evidently,

her chastity was intact, albeit hanging by a thread. Alistair had been more than happy to get her off, but oddly enough, had made no attempt to insert himself.

Of course, he probably had his reasons. It wasn't like she *wanted* him to ravage her. Obviously.

Lara gingerly attempted to extricate herself from the bed intruder's grasp, but to no avail. If anything, he seemed to latch on tighter and tighter the more she tried to escape, which could only mean...

"Hey! You're not actually sleeping at all, are you?! Knock it off, Alistair! Let me go!"

As she flailed, she felt him quiver against her, as if suppressing a laugh. "Good morning, Lara," he whispered in a velvety voice.

Her knees went weak and all the hair on her body stood on end. It was as if magic was imbued in his every word, willing her to do his bidding. The mere sound of his voice made her heart race and face flush, and she found herself reluctant to leave his comfortable warmth. But as luck would have it, Lara was a royal mage in her own right, and she would not be so easily manipulated.

"Yes, good morning, Alistair. Would you mind telling me what you're doing in my bed?" she asked evenly.

He grinned. "Oh, I haven't the faintest. You know how I tend to sleepwalk."

Liar, she thought, holding her tongue. Assuming he was being dishonest would be unkind after all, and even if he was lying, she had no way to prove it.

"Surely you don't mind, given how you used to share a bed with me in the past—at your own insistence, no less."

"You were *eight*!" Back then, her intention had been to soothe the fragile heart of a child. Now that he was a grown man, there was no innocent interpretation to be had.

"Now, hold on. You said you can't see me in a romantic light because you knew me as a boy. That suggests I am still but a child in your mind—in which case, I fail to see the problem."

Says the thirty-two-year-old man trying to seduce me at every turn! Spare me

your sophistry. I don't buy a word of it!

“Look, you want me to believe you sleepwalked into my bed? Fine. But where are your clothes?!”

“Good question! I must have gotten overheated at some point and stripped them off in my sleep. Oh, but you needn't worry—I still have my underthings on. For now.”

With winter right around the corner, there was no way he could have overheated. The crafty bastard had an excuse prepared for everything.

“I don't suppose I've made you *flustered*, have I?”

That was putting it lightly, considering her pounding heart was on the verge of exploding. Lara had been so focused on raising her disciple that she hadn't had time for romance. She was woefully out of her depth.

“If so, I'm flattered. Hopefully, you'll start to see me in a new light in time.”

In truth, she was already at that point—she just didn't want to admit it.

As Alistair sat up in bed, the sheets fell away, exposing his beautiful, well-proportioned body. When he caught her staring, he smiled lovingly and leaned in.

“Mmmph!” Lara protested against his lips. If only she hadn't gotten distracted, she might have been able to dodge. Alas, with one hand behind her head and the other cupping her chin, she was now locked in place. The kiss deepened. “Mmm! Mmmh!” She tried to push him off, but he wouldn't budge.

Parting her lips, he slid his thick tongue into her mouth. Startled, her own tongue flinched away, but he gave chase, teasing and sucking it. Lara briefly considered biting down, but then imagined how painful it would be for him and couldn't bring herself to go through with it. She could only endure, helpless, as Alistair's tongue ravaged every inch of her mouth, their lips smacking audibly and saliva mingling.

“Mm... Mmmh!” Her labored breaths sounded like moans as they passed through her nose.

Meanwhile, he slid a hand under her negligée, traveling up her curves until he

arrived at the ample swell of her breasts. He gave one a few gentle squeezes, then pinched and rubbed her nipple. A jolt of pleasure shot through her, and her loins ached. Before it got to be too painful, however, he let go, instead faintly tracing over its surface with the pads of his fingers.

“Mmh! Mmmm!” Muzzled as she was by the kiss, she couldn’t tell him to stop.

Lara squirmed impatiently as he trailed over her hardened nipple, wanting more. Then he pressed in hard, over and over, making her hips buck and her pussy clench hungrily. When she was finally freed from the domination of his kiss, she flopped weakly to the mattress.

“Heh! Look at you with your face all flushed. How cute,” he remarked smugly, delight dancing in his eyes. Then he yanked her negligée up to her neckline, slid off her bloomers, and licked at her bare skin.

“Don’t!” she protested. But of course, he wasn’t going to listen.

Her senses were so heightened that she could feel every slightest movement of his hot, wet tongue—and it felt so good, she could scarcely think straight. Was it his arcane aura that filled her with the primal thirst for his seed? His tongue descended lower and lower, prodding into her belly button, sliding down the curve of her stomach, until at last...

“No! Stop!”

Positioning himself between her legs, he grabbed her inner thighs in each of his hands and spread them wide. Now her womanhood was on full display for him, and in broad daylight, no less! She tried to close her legs, but couldn’t compete with his superior strength. When she glared down at him, however, his opalescent blue gaze pierced straight through her. Lara shivered.

Then he pressed his lips between her thighs.

“Hhh... Aaah!”

His tongue pushed between her lower lips, as if to spread them apart. It was so different from the touch of his fingers that her thighs tensed and spasmed. Every time it grazed her clit, a new ache began to build inside her. His saliva mixed with her fluids until every motion was audible in its wetness. Then,

finally, he settled on the ripened bud at the front of her honeypot.

“Hnnn!”

The moment he prodded it with the tip of his tongue, an intense rush of pleasure ripped through her—enough to make her writhe in almost-ticklish ecstasy. Then he pressed his fingers to the narrow, slick opening. She braced herself on reflex, but his lingual ministrations seemed to negate the tension. Slowly, he pushed inside, and the wriggling of his finger made her strangely breathless.

“Haah... Aah...!”

She felt her wet walls being wedged apart by the foreign presence. Just as discomfort began to rear its head, though, he flicked her clit with his tongue. Before she knew it, her body was subconsciously oscillating between stiff and relaxed in search of maximum pleasure. As his finger made circular motions inside her, he sucked hard on her swollen clit. The next moment—

“Nnnnngh!” Her body went rigid as climax overtook her. Her pussy contracted so hard it felt as though she might tear his finger right off his hand. “Aah! Aaahh!” She was struck with wave after wave, spreading from head to toe, until, at last, she went limp.

“Was it good?” Alistair asked smugly.

You already know the answer to that, Lara scoffed silently, turning her head away. In response, he yanked his finger out from inside her, making her yelp.

Once they were finished, he cleaned her up, slid her bloomers back on and pulled her negligée back down.

“What about you?” she asked in a small voice, keenly aware that she was prodding a hornet’s nest.

Beneath the fabric of his underpants, his member looked painfully engorged, suggesting he was holding himself back. Though she hadn’t asked for this, she still felt guilty about it being one-sided. After all, it was only human nature to want to share such an experience on equal terms...though maybe she was just succumbing to his manipulation at this point.

“You don’t owe your captor any compassion, you goody-two-shoes. But to answer your question... Eh, I can wait. I like to think of it as an investment.” Smiling, he embraced her gently.

When he put it like that, yes, he *was* her captor. But when she saw the contentment on his face, it warmed her heart. He was right. Lara knew she was a goody-two-shoes, and so did everyone else, herself included. Besides, it felt as though the trauma Alistair carried with him for all these years was finally being healed.

“Say, Lara, why don’t we go on a date?” Alistair continued as he ran his fingers through her hair.

She looked at him dubiously. “What brought this on?”

“I thought we should get to know one another on a more intimate level.”

“Fine,” she replied after some thought. After all, he hadn’t let her set a single foot outside this castle since the day she turned herself in, and that was quite a while ago.

She still wore that enchanted golden anklet. Unsurprisingly, Alistair had affixed it that day while she was passed out from shock. Whenever she tried to go outside while wearing it, he would hunt her down like an evil sorcerer, wearing a sculpted smile that didn’t reach his eyes, and drag her back inside. Apparently, the anklet reported her location to him. But because he had imbued it with his most advanced magic, she had no way of taking it off.

In the early days of her imprisonment, she was so miserable and had such terrible cabin fever that she once briefly slipped out of the castle with the intention of coming right back. Alistair found her so quickly it was as if he had teleported to her. Then, he threw her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, groping her all the while.

“Perhaps you’d be better off without legs,” he declared.

Horried, she shouted, *“No, I wouldn’t!”*

Though he claimed he was merely joking, the look in his eyes suggested otherwise. Then, as if to punish her, he tossed her down onto the bed and tormented her body without mercy. Evidently, the past twenty years had left

him rather unhinged. She got the sense he would stop at nothing to keep her indoors and had no intention of compromising. Curiosity killed the cat, they said—and Lara, a coward who much preferred to keep her limbs intact, gave up all hope of escape.

Back in the present, Alistair reached over to the bedside table and rang the little bell sitting there. A few moments later, there came a knock at the door, and an elderly butler walked in.

“*Alice!*” Lara shouted.

Alistair was shirtless and she was visibly flushed. They were clearly in no state to be seen. Yet in stark contrast to her horror, the butler scarcely batted an eye.

“How may I be of service?”

“Bring us some breakfast, please. Afterward, Lara and I will be going out. Can you send a team to get her ready?”

“At once, Your Lordship.” The butler bowed deeply. A tiny smile was on his lips when he raised his head and gazed at them on the bed. Then he turned and strolled from the room.

After that, a cadre of maids swiftly carried in a series of dishes for breakfast. As Lara sat there, still reeling from embarrassment, Alistair picked up a spoon, scooped up some soup, and brought it to her lips. She opened her mouth absently and ate it. When he offered a second spoonful, she did the same. Meanwhile, the look on his face was one of abject adoration.

“Heh! It was a mortifying experience when I was on the receiving end, but now I see this is actually quite fun.”

Only then did she realize that their roles had been reversed. A grown man was hand-feeding her like a baby bird. *Oh god, what am I doing?!* When he offered her a piece of bread next, she was too embarrassed to open her mouth again. She could tell he was disappointed, but while she could sympathize, it just didn’t feel right. In her mind, yes, Lara understood she was now eight years younger than Alistair, but it was difficult to come to terms with.

“I’m not a baby. I’m twenty-four. I can eat on my own,” she told him, echoing the protestation of his eight-year-old self.

Alistair burst out laughing.

Chapter 4: Spellbound

SOMETIME AFTER BREAKFAST, the maids returned to the room carrying dresses of every color. They encircled Lara, yanked off her negligée, and set about making her into their very own life-sized dress-up doll. As for Alistair, he had long since finished dressing and was now enjoying the show.

“What do you think of this one, Your Ladyship?”

“Er... I’m not your ‘ladyship’...”

“This wine color would pair perfectly with your light brown hair, milady!”

“Could you please just call me Lara?”

“His Lordship requested these beautiful opals, just like his eyes! He must love you very much!”

The maids swooned dreamily. Lara only frowned. Alistair had ordered them to treat her as his wife, and they were following his words to the letter; it seemed they already saw her as the new seigneuresse, just as he’d planned.

“We’re going to tighten your corset now, milady.”

“Guh!”

As the elderly head maid, Marietta, gave a hearty tug on the corset strings, Lara croaked like a flattened frog, and Alistair snickered. As a plain Jane who’d only ever worn mage robes, this was her first time in a corset. To be fair, the uniform of a royal mage was considered formal wear sufficient for nearly any occasion, and so she’d never needed anything more feminine.

“H-how about we loosen it a little?”

“I’m afraid not! We must tighten the waist in order to emphasize the gods-given bountiful bosom, milady. Think of how happy it will make His Lordship!”

“It...it will?”

She glanced at him timidly. Alistair beamed back. Indeed, the tight corset greatly emphasized her breasts and hips. If he kept staring, he was liable to pitch a tent in his slacks.

“Your clothing options were limited during the years you were encased in stone, so our seamstresses are simply *dying* to make new dresses for you—anything you like, Your Ladyship.”

“I see. Thank you.”

While Lara had been a statue, Alistair had indeed commissioned a few dresses for her. Luckily, the seamstresses were understanding. The frocks were simple, but had finely embroidered sleeves and gemstone buttons at the collars. Every one of his servants had treated her statue with the utmost care, knowing how important she was to him, and he had placed his trust in them in return.

Back when he was young, his dear mentor had always avoided spending money on herself. This was something he had found especially frustrating. But as she looked down at her new dress with a shy smile, she was indistinguishable from any other woman her age. Alistair gazed at her with pride.

“Is that really something a *royal mage* like my master should be spending her time on?” the young disciple asked the ministry official, his voice as cold as ice. “I acknowledge she may be more accepting than most, but I’d prefer if you didn’t burden her with your busywork all the same.”

The one thing Alistair had never been able to tolerate back when Lara had first permitted him to join her on official business was the fact that people took advantage of her softhearted nature to foist their work onto her.

“B-but...”

“It’s fine, sir. Just leave it there, and I’ll take a look at it when I have a moment,” Lara told the man, who trembled under the pressure of her disciple’s death stare.

Relieved, he dropped the stack of papers onto her desk and hurried from the office. Alistair growled under his breath.

“Mind your manners, Alistair.”

“A royal mage shouldn’t be doing this sort of work. A lesser mage would suffice.”

Lara pursed her lips the way she always did whenever Alistair grew angry. “Well, perhaps the other mages are busy.”

“No, they’re just dumping it on you because they know you’re a pushover and a goody-goody! You’re being *used*, Master! Don’t you get that?!”

Her naturally droopy eyes drooped all the more sadly. Cute as she was, however, he needed to be firm with her right now.

“Instead of wasting your time on this nonsense, you ought to be focused on me!”

“Ah, so *that’s* what this is about.”

Lara worked more overtime hours than any other royal mage by a wide margin. If she wasn’t such an airhead, she wouldn’t have this problem.

“You need to grow a backbone, Master. Stop taking on more work while I’m out of the room.”

Alistair had taken it upon himself to reject requests on her behalf. The bastards had changed tactics lately, though, conveniently turning up at her office while he was away running errands.

“But how will things get done if I don’t do the work?”

“Not your concern. You are under no obligation to sacrifice your time for people who don’t even show you proper respect.”

“It *does* concern me, though! If the choice is between hurting someone and getting hurt, or between causing problems and having problems, I’ll always choose the latter! It’s far more stressful to say no to them. It makes me sick with worry, wondering how they’re doing because of me!”

Again, he found himself scoffing under his breath. “You’re always so hung up on other people.”

“It’s the only way I know how to live my life, and I don’t regret it.”

She made so little distinction between herself and others, always quick to feel their emotions as if they were her own. Evidently, this was a trait she had been born with, and it seemed unlikely she could be cured of it.

“I suppose that’s how you got saddled with a problem child like me.”

“Problem child?” Don’t be silly! I love you very much, my sweet Alice. I’m happy to have you in my life.”

Every time she said that with the same sweet smile it made his chest ache. “For the umpteenth time, my name is Alistair,” he recited like usual, turning away to hide his flushed cheeks and damp eyes.

“Oh dear! My mistake, Alistair!” she replied with a giggle.

Thus far, he had never seen her angry, only sad or disappointed. For all the trouble he’d caused, she had never so much as raised her voice at him. She made a point to always ask for his input before making a decision, and if his judgment was lacking, she gave him a clear explanation of the problem without making him feel stupid. The woman seemed to have inhuman levels of patience, especially from the perspective of someone with a short fuse. She was clearly exhausted from carrying an unreasonable workload, though, and he grew so fed up that he asked her about it.

“Master, why don’t you ever get angry?”

Her trademark defeated smile spread across her face. “Anger isn’t something I have a lot of experience with. There are times I get frustrated, of course, but it never lasts long.”

He couldn’t even begin to fathom it. The way he saw it, she would be well within her rights to get upset...and yet, she always kept her composure. That was why he felt safe with her. It was only after she took him in that he discovered peace of mind for the first time in his life.

His parents had abused him as easily as they drew breath. They punched him, kicked him, and withheld his meals whenever they happened to be in a bad mood. Thus, he learned to read their emotions as a means of survival. His siblings joined in on the vile acts, abusing him both physically and verbally. Looking back, the whole family was so miserable and impoverished that bullying

the youngest son with the weird eyes and colorless hair was probably the closest thing they had to a hobby. Nothing he did earned their love; anything he tried was only ever met with a sudden whirlwind of violence.

Without the protection of the faeries, he surely would have died long ago. Invisible to the eyes of others, they healed his wounds and guided him to ripe fruit and potable water. Even so, for some foolish reason, he yearned for the acceptance of his family. Perhaps because he didn't think he belonged anywhere else.

This silly dream ended in vain, of course. Instead of learning to love him, they took him out to the mountains one year when an especially cold winter had killed their crops and they needed one fewer mouth to feed. He still remembered the demonic look on his father's face as he raised his hatchet.

Contrary to the faeries' most earnest wishes, Alistair had fought to contain the mysterious power he knew dwelled within him, for he instinctually sensed its danger. But on that day, he was driven to such desperation that a fraction of it broke loose. The next thing he knew, everything that had surrounded him was no more. The trees, the animals, even the mountain itself—all of it was gone, along with his homicidal parents.

Traumatized, Alistair turned to the faeries for aid, fleeing across the land. Eventually, he was captured by a dozen grown-ups in black robes who brought him to a strange city and imprisoned him in the basement of a large building. Alistair had been prepared to turn against the world entirely when he met his future mentor, Lara. When everyone else recoiled from the eight-year-old murderer in fear, she opened her door to him and did her best to raise him, even if she occasionally stumbled along the way. For the first time in his life, Alistair was shown kindness.

Lara had such an unflappable, even-keeled temperament that it came as no surprise that the timid, conflict-averse earth faeries favored her. To someone like him, who had grown up with unstable and abusive parents, she seemed almost alien, however. It honestly frightened him at times. How could he read her emotions if she wasn't going to scream or strike him? He'd normalized his parents' toxicity to such an extent that its absence was jarring. No matter the situation, no matter how many times she was insulted or forced to apologize

because of his actions, she never got angry. Even when she had to correct or caution him, she never got emotional. Lara only ever wore that defeated smile.

Only once had she spoken harshly to him—perhaps because someone had told her to discipline him more sternly—but that incident ended with Lara bursting into tears while Alistair comforted her, as if *he* were the adult. The mage was truly inept at expressing negative emotions. Part of him wished he could see her angry, so he might know a more passionate side of her. Until then, he decided, he would simply have to get angry on her behalf.

Once Alistair was old enough to assist Lara with her work, he was entirely unsurprised to find that the people around her were bleeding her dry for their own benefit. Why was it that good, caring people always got the short end of the stick?

It infuriated him. From then on, whenever someone tried to take advantage of her kindness, he shattered their hopes and drove them away. Even so, Lara only ever wore that defeated smile.

Lara often spent her days off visiting the orphanage where she'd grown up. On occasion, Alistair accompanied her.

“Now, now, children! You each get *one*, okay?”

The orphans crowded around her as she handed out the candy she'd bought with a sweet smile. They all loved her to pieces. Every time she visited, they fought for her attention. Meanwhile, Alistair watched from afar, seething.

Lara was a philanthropist at heart. He suspected she saw him on the same level as these other children—just another sad, pathetic, unloved orphan. That had been fine in the beginning, but it wasn't enough now. Her impartial kindness had a nasty way of reminding him that he wasn't special.

“I want to help others the same way they once helped me,” she had explained.

That was why she donated the majority of her money to the orphanage and spent the rest on Alistair. This was unimaginably stupid, in his eyes. Surely there was nothing to be gained by such actions. But compassion came naturally to her, and every selfless act she committed enraged him in turn. How could one

ordinary person be so purehearted? The human race would have deserved to go extinct, if not for her.

“Why would you go to such lengths when you don’t have to?” he asked her one day when his patience was at its limit.

For a moment, she looked at him in wide-eyed surprise. Then that defeated smile came to her face, and she gently stroked his silver hair. “Because I was in their shoes once. I was abandoned by my parents, just like them.”

He had suspected as much—that she knew what it was like to be beaten and starved.

“No child deserves to live like that, to suffer as I had. Maybe that’s arrogant of me to say, considering I can barely help them as it is. But it has to be better than doing nothing at all, right?” She continued with a self-deprecating grin. “Life is so beautiful. I want everyone to live as long as possible. We’re on this planet, so we ought to make the most of it!”

That was the reason she had reached out to him that day in the basement—she had wanted him to live. And now here he was, enjoying a happier life than he had ever imagined possible. Lara was the sort of adult who considered it their responsibility to protect every child they could.

That was why she had died protecting him—there was nothing he could have done to stop it. Every ounce of “talent” he allegedly possessed had meant nothing in the face of an elder dragon.

The day Lara was lost, Alistair was brought back to the capital where a medic mage treated his grievous wounds and narrowly saved his life. They told him no one had known the dragon was in the area. As with any natural disaster, he and Lara were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Again and again, he found himself wondering: *Why did she have to die? What did she do to deserve it?* He just couldn’t bring himself to accept it. If the gods were real, then where in the hells were they? There were so many other people in this world who should have died instead. *He* should have died instead.

Alistair’s utter powerlessness had come as a crushing revelation, sapping him of the will to live. A world without Lara had no value to him. And yet, her words

still rang in his ears: *You have your whole life ahead of you, and you're going to live to see it! That's an order from your master!*

It was the first time she had ever been truly angry with him. Her words were like a curse, shackling him to this mortal realm until he came of age.

Apathetic to life and forbidden from death, Alistair spent each day in a haze of despair. Most people weren't brave enough to approach him now that Lara was gone for fear of his explosive temper, but that suited him fine. The only exception was Lutfel, good-natured man that he was, who turned up every few days to force the boy to actually eat something. Perhaps he thought it was what Lara would have wanted.

When he learned that she had died in the line of duty, all Lutfel had said was, "Sounds like she did the right thing by protecting you. I couldn't be prouder."

Alistair watched a single tear roll down the man's face. He found himself wishing Lutfel had screamed at him, blamed him for her death instead. But he didn't. No one ever did.

The wound from the dragon's claw healed in time, turning into a grisly scar. As long as he remained alive, his body would mend itself—much as he might have wished otherwise. Whenever he found himself gazing at the scar in the mirror, he recalled the words of the medic mage who had saved his life.

"The wound will heal, but it'll never truly go away. See that dark bruise? It's called a stigma. Now that you've been marked, you must never, ever go back there. Understand? Dragons are...*persistent* creatures."

At the time, he was too shaken to truly process those words. It was only later that he realized there was one last thing worth living for. If no one was going to punish him, then he would simply have to do it himself.

He had heard that the elder dragon had permanently settled in that area, and the kingdom was forced to abandon it to the monsters. Bit by bit, humanity was losing what little land the Archmagus had won back for them. If nothing was done, they would go extinct altogether. This was scarcely Alistair's concern, of course, but...

It's all because I'm weak, he thought to himself. Lara had once disagreed with

this outlook, but the fact of the matter remained that if he had been stronger, she wouldn't have had to die. *I'll just kill the damned thing myself.*

He envisioned its death at his hand: slow, painful, and as cruel as possible. To that end, he would have to improve his spellcasting. This was precisely the sort of clear goal he needed to move forward in a world without Lara, however. Long months of deep depression came to a sudden end the moment he made up his mind, and he sprang into action.

His first move was to go straight to Lutfel. After convincing the man to take him on as his disciple, he threw himself into his studies like never before. Unlike Lara, Lutfel was a strict teacher with little tolerance for mistakes, but that was what Alistair wanted. He needed to be whipped into shape. He would do whatever it took to gain more power no matter what was asked of him or how many monsters he was sent out to kill.

Three years later, he was finally named the kingdom's youngest-ever royal mage—at which point he shook off all protests of concern and traveled out into the forbidden land to exact revenge on the elder dragon.

Once a dragon had marked its prey, it would never cease hunting them. When someone bearing its stigma came near, the dragon was sure to avail itself of the opportunity it had previously missed. Every time Alistair saw his scar, he reminded himself that luring out the dragon and killing it was his sole remaining purpose in life.

The young royal mage headed into the forest where he had lost Lara, intentionally flaunting his heightened arcane connection. Sure enough, the stupid, murderous beast bumbled out to greet him. The last time they had crossed paths, it had seemed so terrifying in its might, but oddly enough, he felt no fear in that moment.

“Die.”

Alistair condensed his magic to its smallest and sharpest form, just as Lara had demonstrated in her final moments. By carefully directing his massive mana pool, he succeeded in creating blades powerful enough to pierce through dragonscale and into the flesh beneath. Dozens upon dozens of unyielding spears promptly skewered the dragon, piercing straight into the ground. As the

elder dragon choked out one final dying roar, Alistair met the monster with an unfeeling stare.

“That’s it?”

Vengeance had come and gone so quickly. He scarcely believed it. The beast had seemed impossibly large and powerful three years ago. Now that he had learned to control his magic, he had single-handedly crushed it, making him Falcone’s most powerful mage by a wide margin. Having lost the source of its mana, the stigma quietly faded from his stomach.

“Is this a sick joke? My master died because of a weakling like you?”

Lara had tried to dissuade him time and time again from relying on brute force over precision. She had been right all along. Lara might not have died if he’d only listened to her while she was alive.

“I’m sorry, Master. You deserved a better disciple.”

Staring blankly at the dragon’s corpse, he sank to his knees. There was no point in crying over spilled milk, of course. It wouldn’t bring her back.

“Just tell me... How much longer until I’m not a child anymore?”

How much longer would he be forced to continue this worthless life, now that his final objective had been achieved? When would he be allowed to die without casting the shame of failure upon her memory?

Meanwhile, having borne witness to the entire spectacle, the rest of the royal mage squadron and their disciples charged forward to harvest everything of value from the dragon’s lifeless body. Alistair watched them work, all the while wondering how he would find the will to get out of bed the next morning.

“Come quick! We found something strange in its belly!”

Alistair looked up, the shouting dimly registering. In the distance, someone held what looked like a large rock.

“Now what do we have here, fellas?”

“Dragons don’t have lady-shaped kidney stones, do they?”

This was met with raucous laughter. Now that a dragon had been felled, the

whole team seemed to be in a celebratory mood. The suggestion was patently absurd, but it was more than enough to draw Alistair's attention. When he got a better look...

"Get away from her!" he screamed, his voice imbued with magic. Everyone in the vicinity froze, startled, as Alistair ran straight to the statue.

The smooth, pale stone was shaped in the likeness of a naked woman on her knees, her hands clasped in front of her chest as if praying to the gods. Alistair whipped off his mage's robe at lightning speed, bundled her up to protect her modesty, and held her cold, rock-hard body against his chest. She was the spitting image of his beloved Lara, as inexplicable as it was.

"Master?"

It just didn't make sense.

After the team returned home, Alistair reported his success to the king. Then, he took the statue home, where he scrubbed off every last drop of that vile lizard's fluids. The more he looked, the more identical to Lara she seemed, right down to every last eyelash. The statue was so lifelike, in fact, that he'd swear she was only sleeping. Human hands couldn't possibly have carved this amount of detail into mere rock.

What if this was, in fact, Lara herself? What could have caused this? He ran a hand over her but felt only the unyielding chill of stone. Assuming it was merely a statue, what was it carved from? He had never seen anything like it before.

His next theory was thus: What if it was a type of magic that Lara had cast upon herself? Alistair tried every spell-breaking method he could think of, but nothing seemed to work. There was no choice but to consult Lutfel. While Alistair was the superior caster, the grand mage was admittedly wiser and much more experienced.

The old coot must have already received word of the elder dragon's defeat, because it didn't take long for him to turn up at the old, run-down hovel where Lara had once lived. The landlord had tried asking Alistair to move out after she'd died, but in the throes of sentimentality, he had stubbornly refused.

"I'd forgotten what a dump this place is," Lutfel said, chuckling as he walked

in.

Without wasting a single moment, Alistair guided him into the living room where he had placed Lara's statue. He couldn't let the man see her naked, obviously, so he had bundled her in his mage's robes from the neck down. Evidently, that was enough. Lutfel took one look at her face, let out a long sigh, and sank to his knees.

"Gods have mercy... I always knew there was a chance, but I was too afraid to hope."

"Wh-what do you mean?" Alistair pressed urgently.

"This is her, all right. She's petrified herself."

Lutfel's face shone with love, and it ignited a tiny spark of hope in Alistair's chest. *She's not dead... She's not dead!*

His old mentor recounted Lara's childhood to Alistair. She would surely have told him herself, had he asked, but what little he'd gleaned over the years had suggested that her early life hadn't been pleasant. He'd never felt the need to dredge up bad memories.

"Her story's a lot like yours, you know."

All had been well when Lara was very young. She was born the sole heir to a baronetcy in the countryside. Her mother was firm but caring, while her father was generally too busy working to bother coming home much at all. When Lara was nearly ten, her mother died in childbirth, along with her baby brother. Because her father had insisted on a male heir, her mother had overexerted her frail body, and both she and the baby paid the ultimate price.

"If nothing else, Lara remembered her mother fondly. That was why she never lost her tender heart, despite it all," Lutfel explained.

Alistair stared at the floor. For some reason, it brought to mind an old memory of her singing a lullaby as she carried him on her back.

"Anyway, her father still wanted a son, so he took a second wife, and... Let's just say she was a real piece of work."

The woman must have loathed the sight of the young, sweet, doe-eyed Lara.

As soon as the marriage was official, she started physically and verbally abusing the girl on a daily basis. Her father stepped in and put a stop to it at first, but once the woman gave him the son he'd always wanted, concern for his daughter all but vanished. Eventually, he even became an active participant in the abuse. The violence escalated further and further, until Lara's stepmother tried to smash a chair over her head one day, only for it to break and splinter upon impact. Lara had turned to stone.

“They might have been scum, but Lara was too tenderhearted to wish harm on 'em, so she petrified herself instead.”



“That sounds like her, all right. If they were *my* parents, I would have killed them.”

“Yes, I’m sure you would have.” Alistair really *had* killed his parents, after all. But Lara was different. “She was afraid for her life. Stone was the first thing that came to her young mind. And so the earth faeries took pity on her and granted her humble wish.”

After the chair shattered, her father and stepmother were so unnerved that they carried the little statue deep into a forest and left her there. It wasn’t long afterward that Lutfel began receiving reports of a magically gifted girl wandering the woods. Any time something neared her, be it monster or human, she petrified herself in an effort to keep safe. Sure enough, Lara was so frightened of Lutfel when he arrived at the scene that she immediately turned to stone, giving him quite the shock.

“Only a mage who had the favor of the earth faeries could pull off something like that. I’d never heard of anything like it. To be perfectly honest, I’d thought it was bullshit until I saw it for myself,” he continued with a grin.

Alistair thought back to Lara’s dark brown eyes—proof of her affinity with the element of earth. Alas, he could only remember them now, for the statue’s eyes were closed.

“Fairly tame, I suppose, compared to a certain *other* child who peppered me with fire bullets when we first met...”

“Sorry, but we’re very different people,” Alistair answered flatly.

Lutfel’s grin widened. “That’s why I originally asked her to be your mentor. I knew that if anything went sideways, she’d be able to protect herself.”

“I see.”

No wonder she had never seemed to fear him—she had been confident that he couldn’t kill her right from the onset.

“Disappointed?”

“No. I get it.”

When he stopped to think about everything she had given him, he felt

nothing but gratitude, even if she had only reached out to him from a position of safety. Lara had loved him more than she had loved herself—so much so that she had sacrificed her life for his.

“Look, kid... You’re a monster,” Lutfel said after a moment. His tone suggested he knew Alistair possessed some level of self-awareness.

Alistair paused. “I know,” he said.

“That’s why I entrusted you to a woman like her—someone who was practically the embodiment of love and compassion. I didn’t want you to come to hate us all.”

And lo and behold, the plan had worked. Despite everything he’d gone through, the boy had yet to entirely give up on the human race.

“Lara’s a bit abnormal herself, y’know,” Lutfel continued, shrugging.

Alistair’s gaze hardened. His normally high tolerance for disparaging comments was all but nonexistent where Lara was concerned.

“C’mon, you know I’m right! She should have turned into a snotty brat, like you, after growing up in that environment!” Indeed, her childhood hadn’t been much different from Alistair’s. “Instead, she stayed purehearted. I’ve always thought it a miracle.”

Lara was good-natured to the point of stupidity—but it was because of her that Alistair never fully succumbed to despair.

“What happened to her family?” he asked evenly, thinking of all the ways he could make them feel even an ounce of the pain their daughter had endured.

“Oh, don’t worry. They got their just deserts. When they got rid of Lara, the earth faeries left with her, so the fertility of their land went to shit. Before long, they could no longer afford the lavish lifestyle the second wife wanted. They lost their fief, their title, their assets, everything. In the end, the family fell apart, and their whereabouts are currently unknown.”

They’d found out that Lara had been appointed as a royal mage at some point and had the audacity to try to get in touch with her, asking for money. Lutfel had sent them packing every single time.

“They might be dead, for all I care,” he said with a mirthless laugh.

Relieved, Alistair shifted his eyes to the statue of Lara. *“No man is an island,”* she would always say, *“and life is about helping each other.”* She had been grateful to Lutfel for finding her, grateful to the orphanage for raising her, and grateful for what little she had.

“So is she just...stuck like this forever?” He had already examined her for injuries and found none. Regardless, she showed no signs of waking. “Why won’t she wake up, now that the dragon is dead?”

Lutfel set his gaze upon Lara as well. “To tell the truth, I don’t rightly know how the spell is constructed nor do I know how it comes to an end. She could wake up tomorrow, or a hundred years from now.” He paused. “Or she might never wake at all.”

He fixed Alistair with a pointed stare.

“I’m going to stay with her. I’ll wait as long as it takes.”

There was only one answer for Alistair.

In the past, she always dragged him to the orphanage on their days off, never hesitating to lend a hand to those less fortunate because she herself had walked a mile in the same shoes. Alistair had taken up that mantle himself in her absence, visiting and sending donations. He followed in her every lingering footstep in an effort to keep her spirit alive.

The children were devastated when they’d heard about Lara’s death. For the first time, Alistair felt a kinship with them. Their grief meant something to him. He’d always despised being lumped in with them, but he now appreciated that so many people cared about her as much as he did.

“You know, Alice, I hope we may one day live in a world where children don’t have to go hungry or live in fear of abuse.”

Then it hit him. All he needed to do was to make that dream a reality by the time she woke.

“I think I know what I’ll request from His Majesty as my reward,” he mused aloud. In recognition of his victory over the elder dragon, Alistair had received

word that he was entitled to a boon from the king.

“Oh yeah?”

“I’ll take that infested land as a fief.”

Lutfel’s eyes widened in surprise. After all, Alistair had never seemed too interested in wealth or prestige.

“In fact, I’ll take any uninhabitable lands that neighbor it, too. I’ll build the world Master always wished for, brick by brick.”

A kinder, better world. It would be his new purpose in life, as well as his atonement.

A sly smirk spread across the older man’s face. “Good choice. His Majesty doesn’t have much in the way of foresight, so he’ll likely sign it away to you without stopping to think about it.”

Like Alistair, Lutfel was highly attuned to the faeries, so he had probably sensed the true value of those lands. They were a veritable fountain of natural resources, untouched by humans for fear of the monsters. The soil was rich and fertile, and the area would surely prove to be the most prosperous region in Falcone once cleared of its monster infestation.

Lutfel grinned after Alistair had recounted his full plan and gave him a hearty pat on the shoulder.

“I believe in you, Alice. Who knows? Once you’re done, I might just be tempted to move there myself!”

After his mentor went home, Alistair stood in front of Lara’s statue.

“Master,” he said, “I’m going to try to create your perfect world.” That way, she would wake up to a dream come true and live the rest of her life happily ever after. “When you come back, will you promise to be happy? Will you smile and tell me I did well, even if I’m no longer around to hear it?”

Bitter tears rolled down his cheeks. What a loathsome prospect. He wanted so desperately to share her life, even if it wasn’t as a romantic partner.

And so Alistair put his plan into action, with Lara’s future happiness his only goal.

As predicted, the king seemed more than happy to be rid of the infested lands. He probably thought Alistair would be a handy shield between him and the monsters roaming the region, and after seeing how the boy had already outstripped Lutfel as the kingdom's most formidable mage, he might even have been all too eager to send him far, *far* away.

He named Alistair the Earl of Gardiner while he was at it, likely as an unspoken contract to serve the kingdom. This was of little interest to Alistair, but he accepted it nonetheless. He figured he might need the title if he was to rule the land.

When the king later learned just how valuable those lands truly were—both above and below ground—he went berserk. That was none of Alistair's concern, however. It was His Majesty's own fault for agreeing to the deal without doing his due diligence.

After Alistair rid his earldom of monsters, the new seigneur erected a magical barrier to keep them out, just as the Archmagus had once done for the entire kingdom. Then he sought out people suffering from extreme poverty and paid them to move in and help develop their future home. Their labor uncovered mines filled with gemstones and gold, that, in turn, were used to pay for the construction of a new town. The subsequent gold rush brought in waves of new immigrants, who did even more to develop the land. Fifteen years later, the Earldom of Gardiner had become Falcone's most prosperous province.

The locals praised Alistair for his outstanding leadership. How, he wondered, would they feel if they knew he was doing it all to win the approval of a single woman?

Once everything else was in order, he constructed a castle at the center of the earldom as part of a public enterprise. Inside that castle, he enshrined Lara in a sunny room with a domed ceiling. She sat there, frozen in prayer as if she were the statue of a goddess. Alistair couldn't very well leave her naked out in public, of course, so he commissioned a weaver to make a few simple frocks that could be affixed to her immobile body. Any style was acceptable so long as it was made with fine silk and elegant embroidery.

Had she been awake, she almost certainly would have refused to wear

anything so extravagant—but Alistair had seen the way she gazed longingly at the noble ladies in their luxurious gowns whenever they had crossed paths in the palace halls. While the royal mage’s standard robe was stately in its own right, with its silver embroidery and thick black fabric, it wasn’t the sort of design that appealed to young women. Lara must have yearned for the chance to wear more feminine garb, befitting someone her age. If he had to guess, the only reason she hadn’t pursued it was because she had prioritized her work, the orphanage, and raising her disciple.

“You should have put yourself first more often.”

If Lara wouldn’t do it herself, he would simply have to do it for her. Each and every day, he polished her stone self, put a clean dress on her, adorned her with all the jewelry he’d collected with her in mind, and spoke to her.

“You look beautiful today, Master. But then again, you always do.”

As a result, rumors began to spread that he was a statue dress-up fetishist who had no interest in human women. There was no point in trying to deny it. If anything, it helped deter other women from approaching him. He knew he was never going to fall for anyone else—how could he, when his first love was so perfect?

The time he spent cleaning Lara’s body was when he was at his happiest. He would run his hands over the smooth stone, imagining the soft warmth that should have been there in its place, and speak to her. And yes, given that he was a healthy adult man, sometimes he would have her take part in his private time.

“Master... Master...!”

His lust needed an outlet, and so he would rub himself to completion all over her. It felt deeply wrong, but that was what made it sexy. Being around her statue was the only time he felt truly alive.

“Guess what, Master? I built a school. Now every child in the province can get an education, free of charge.” So desperate was he for her approval that he began to report his daily activities to her. “You always said you wanted every child to have an equal opportunity to learn, right?”

“Oh, my sweet Alice, that’s amazing! I knew you had it in you!”

The lifeless stone didn’t actually answer, of course, but imagining her ecstatic response made him feel better.

“Apparently, it’s going to be named after me. I hope you’ll see it and be proud when you wake up.”

Alistair gently embraced her cold, hard body. She had seemed so large and imposing, once upon a time, but now she fit perfectly in his arms. Now that he was an adult, he realized just how small she was—and yet, she had fought to raise and protect him the best she could nonetheless. This, too, was something he could only appreciate as a grown man.

Before he knew it, he had surpassed the age Lara had been when they’d first met. Later, Alistair passed the age she had been when they’d parted ways. She’d barely been an adult when she first decided to take him in. She’d still been extremely young when she’d faced down a dragon to keep him safe. Alistair could only imagine how much courage it must have taken her to make that choice.

“You really loved me, didn’t you?”

No matter what form that love took, it still made his eyes fill with tears. He bent forward and kissed her cold, firmly closed lips again and again, as if warming them up for her, praying that he wouldn’t need to one day all the while.

“I’m going to dedicate the rest of my life to make sure your sacrifice is rewarded. I will make your dreams come true, and when you awaken, you’ll be glad you chose to protect me.”

Alistair was managing his territory well so far. The citizens seemed to respect him, and his subordinates were trustworthy. Every day was hectic, yes, but now that he was living the sort of life Lara had aspired to, he found that the world wasn’t as bad as he’d thought. He felt fulfilled, in a way. And yet...

“It’s really lonely without you, Master.”

His choked sobs echoed against the domed ceiling. With each passing month, he lost a little more hope every time he touched her stone skin. It was starting

to look like he would never feel her warmth again.

Then, one fateful day, Lara's statue vanished into thin air during a narrow window of time in which Alistair had briefly stepped out to survey his lands. A thief had somehow slipped past all of his security measures. The servants apologized profusely, of course, but Alistair could scarcely process it. He was told that the culprit must have used magic on the door to the room where she was kept, for the lock's sudden decay couldn't possibly be natural, and no ordinary human could have physically bent that conveniently person-sized hole in the iron fence, either.

"It's strange, though. They only took the statue. All the jewelry was left behind!"

Strange indeed, assuming the motive was coin. To Alistair, however, this pointed to an altogether different possibility. What if Lara had awoken? He shook the thought away, for he knew he would never recover if that hope proved false. Seventeen years had passed since the dragon was slain—far too long to keep that hope alive.

"Dispatch the troops! Close every road and wall off the perimeter! No one gets in or out!" he ordered angrily.

The servants were so alarmed by this uncharacteristic show of emotion that they leaped to action immediately. As for Alistair, he suppressed the overwhelming urge to run out there himself, choosing the sheer agony of waiting for his soldiers to report back instead. Mercifully, they sent word a few days later that someone claimed to know the whereabouts of the statue.

"Bring them to me at once!"

He was prepared to use any means necessary to learn her location. As handsome as he may have seemed at first glance, he could turn blood to ice with a single look. Furthermore, his voice was like a spell of its own, forbidding anyone from disobeying his commands. Whomever he interrogated would inevitably confess everything they knew out of pure terror.

The person who knelt before him was a woman dressed in shabby clothes. Her head hung low, and her brown hair was an oddly familiar shade. Then he realized that the slender fingers pressed to the cold marble were ones he

recognized. The delicate, trembling shoulders—everything—was a perfect match to the curves he'd traced a thousand times with his own two hands.

“Raise your head.”

Alistair's voice quivered with hope. Slowly, the woman looked up, every last millisecond a far worse torture than he had ever planned to inflict. The next thing he knew, Alistair was gazing into the same sweet brown eyes he had so dearly yearned to see one last time. It was, unmistakably, the face of the woman he had loved and lost.

It quickly became apparent, however, that she didn't recognize the man in front of her as her own former disciple. She stared at him, enraptured—not as a mother figure but as a woman looking at a man. It was unlike any side of her he had ever seen.

Then Alistair remembered he was thirty-two, well within the bounds of her romantic interest, and nearly laughed out loud in delight. All these years, he had never once believed in a higher power. Now, he was tempted to reconsider. The gods had finally seen fit to repay him for his suffering.

“Master...?” he choked out, his voice tinged with desperation.

“Yes?” Her voice was identical to the one so deeply etched into his memory, and she wore her trademark benevolent smile.

He couldn't remember much of what happened after that. The next thing he knew, he was holding her tightly in his arms. Alistair had done this dozens of times with her statue, imagining how soft and warm she would be if she were alive all the while. But now, he *felt* it. This was better than anything he had ever dreamed of. At long last, everything he had taken for granted as a child was within reach once more.

“Are you really my sweet Alice...?” she asked uncertainly—confused, perhaps, by the mature features that no longer suited her favored nickname. Where once he had loathed the sound of those words, they were now music to his ears, particularly her use of the possessive adjective. His younger self had indeed been stupid to bristle at it, for in truth, he had always belonged to her, body and soul.

“Yes, Master... I’m your Alice.”

It seemed the passage of twenty years as a stone statue was too much for her to swallow, for she fainted right there in his arms. An icy jolt of terror shot down Alistair’s spine, but he heaved a sigh of relief after confirming that she was still breathing.

“Prepare a room for her, please.”

The servants snapped to their senses. He didn’t fault them, of course—they must have been stunned to realize that the beautiful woman in his arms was the spitting image of the statue he had loved so dearly.

“Which one, Your Lordship?”

“The one next to mine.”

Marietta, the head maid, lit up in delight. The room adjacent to the master bedroom was the one intended for his spouse—furnished by the servants with the faintest hope that their master might one day take an interest in a human woman. And now, it would finally have an occupant after all this time.

“Right away, milord!” Bunching the fabric of her long skirt in her hands, she spun on her heel and sped from the room.

“Permit me a foolish question, Your Lordship, but...” The elderly steward paused. “Has the statue come to life?”

The servants all knew of their master’s proclivities when it came to that statue—hugging, kissing, licking, playing dress-up. He might be a fine leader, but he was a pervert as well. The servants had accepted him all the same, treating the statue with the same respect they would have afforded his wife. But if that same statue was, in fact, a human woman who had been turned to stone by magic... Well, it raised new concerns about things he had done to her without her consent while rendered immobile, but at the very least, it explained his strange behavior.

“Yes. This is the woman I love,” Alistair explained.

There was nary a dry eye in the room. The tragedy of the seigneur’s eternally unrequited love had broken their hearts, but now that the statue had turned

human, perhaps the Earldom of Gardiner would have its heir after all.

“What is Her Ladyship’s name, if I may?” asked the butler, tears of joy streaming down his face.

He and the other servants were convinced that this woman would soon be the lady of the castle, and judging from the tiny smile on Alistair’s face, he wasn’t opposed to the idea. It was the first time they had ever seen him so at peace, and they were all beside themselves with relief.

“Her name is Lara. She isn’t my wife yet, but it’s only a matter of time. Take good care of her.”

Sure enough, Alistair had already committed to the idea. His happiness was so palpable, the servants all sobbed in gratitude to whatever god had finally shown mercy to their master. As he cherished the warmth of the body in his arms, Marietta returned to report that her room was ready. Alistair gently lifted Lara.

He remembered the day they’d first met, when he had been too weak to walk on his own two feet, and she had carried him on her back. It had been an exercise in sheer humiliation for Alistair. But now that he was big and strong enough to carry her in turn, it filled him with pride. It finally felt real: Lara was alive.

Now, how will I make her mine?

He had no intention of letting her slip away ever again. So, he wrapped a thin golden chain around her ankle, imbued with a permanent geolocation spell. Last time, he had used a gemstone, but that had proven fragile. He had learned his lesson.

When she awoke, he seduced Lara mercilessly, then spoiled her rotten.

In the beginning, she seemed rather unused to being on the receiving end of such pampering. But over time, she came to depend on him more and more, conducting herself not like a guardian but a peer and someone of the opposite sex...

“You look positively radiant, Your Ladyship!” the head maid Marietta

declared, drawing Alistair back from the depths of reminiscence.

Lara stood in front of a full-length mirror, admiring her reflection. Her soft brown hair was neatly braided and fastened with a bejeweled hairpin, and she was now clad in a lovely, wine-colored silk dress embroidered with fine golden thread. The cream-colored sleeves and hems were made of hand-knitted lace that flowed loosely over her arms. All in all, it was a girlish look that suited her youthful, doe-eyed face.

“This is incredible! Why, I can scarcely recognize myself!” Lara exclaimed, twirling her skirts like a child half her age. The maids beamed.

As for Alistair, he was spellbound. It was as if the sight of her had stolen his very soul. She was surely an angel, for no one in the world could compare to her beauty.

“You’re beautiful, Lara.”

“Oh... Th-thank you, Alistair. That’s very kind of you to say.”

“It’s the truth! You are a work of art, and I’ve always yearned to adorn you in finery. Now my childhood dream has come true,” he remarked with a smile.

Blushing shyly, she gazed up at him in admiration. He was glad to see that her perception of him as a child was finally starting to fade.

“Shall we?”

He proffered his hand. After a moment of hesitation, she took it. His hand closed around her slender fingers, as delicate as if she were made of glass.

Chapter 5:

The Maiden's Surrender

LARA CLIMBED ABOARD a horse-drawn carriage emblazoned with the Gardiner family crest with Alistair's assistance. After they set off, she gazed out the window at the brand new castle town. Each block was perfectly symmetrical, divided by large, paved roads. Never before had she seen a city so beautiful, and she had spent years living in the nation's capital. Meanwhile, the passersby on the street stopped to admire the carriage as it passed.

It does seem prosperous here, she thought to herself, reminded of what she'd heard from the residents. If seventeen years had passed since Alistair had been named Earl of Gardiner, then he would have been just fifteen years old when he'd first received the land as compensation from the king for slaying an elder dragon. He had cleared out the monster infestation all on his own, then used the profits from the gemstone and gold mines to build a place for the impoverished to call home. The town grew rapidly after that, and people now flocked to it from miles around, hoping for a better life.

But why would Alistair, of all people, ask for a fief? This question had plagued her for some time now. As a child, his philosophy had always been that the weak and vulnerable were to blame for their own misery and oppression. Why would he suddenly take pity on them?

Her gaze shifted away from the window and toward the man in question. He caught her looking at him and smiled brightly, making her heart flutter.

"Tell me, Alistair. Where are we headed?"

A mischievous smile crept across his face. "Truthfully, I wanted to show you all that I've built."

Their first destination was a children's school. A metal nameplate on the gates read ALISTAIR GARDINER PRIMARY SCHOOL III.

"I wanted every child to have an equal opportunity to learn."

They were welcomed by the faculty, who allowed them to peer in at a class in session. Inside, a teacher was giving a math lesson to a room full of attentive students. Alistair explained that he had built a school like this in each district of his province, so every young citizen could attend. To Lara, this policy was so progressive that it was practically utopian. Even the capital had never attempted this sort of social investment.

“Educating the masses in reading, writing, and arithmetic will help prevent the privileged from taking advantage of them.”

Indeed, such skills were sure to help secure their futures.

Next, Alistair showed Lara the general hospital, as well as the smaller clinics he had established in each district. These, too, were emblazoned with the name ALISTAIR GARDINER. Anyone with mild symptoms was seen at the clinics, while those with serious conditions were sent to the general hospital. Each was entirely tax-funded so that his subjects could all receive treatment free of charge.

Lara couldn't help but gasp. This place was *paradise*. Now she understood why so many people wanted to move their entire families here.

“This is spectacular!” she exclaimed, and he grinned proudly.

The townspeople had told her of Alistair's accomplishments, but they had clearly understated it. Everywhere they went, Alistair was welcomed warmly yet casually, suggesting he came around fairly often.

The carriage ultimately brought them to a large, stately orphanage on the outskirts of town. Dozens of children played in the yard. Each looked happy and healthy, suggesting they were well taken care of. Lara had never seen such a well-funded orphanage, especially on this scale.

“I've been expecting you, Lord Alistair. Welcome to Alice's Home for Children,” proclaimed an old woman as she walked out to greet them. Again, she neither looked remotely surprised to see him there nor did she seem particularly nervous in his presence. If anything, Lara was more shocked to see *her*.

“Headmistress?!”

Though she had aged by twenty years, this was the same strict yet

compassionate woman who had raised Lara at the orphanage on the outskirts of the capital. *What in the world is she doing here?*

“When I decided to build an orphanage, I knew I would need her to run it. So I had her and all of the capital’s orphans move here,” Alistair explained quietly.

The next instant, Lara bolted forward. “Headmistress!”

No amount of wrinkles could disguise those gentle eyes. Reunited with her foster mother, she flung her arms around the woman, tears of joy spilling down her face.

The headmistress looked back at her in disbelief. “Lara? Is it really you?”

“Yes, Headmistress. She was alive all this time,” Alistair informed her.

At this, the old woman shed tears of her own, wiping at the deep creases under her eyes. She, too, must have been devastated upon hearing of Lara’s death. “Praise the gods... Praise the gods!”

Familiar words from a familiar voice. Lara, feeling as though she was a child all over again, cried all the harder. After a long and tearful embrace, the three of them went inside.

With smiling children and plenty of staff to look after them, this orphanage was a dream come true. The headmistress brought them to her office, where she served them her homemade herbal tea. The bitter, nostalgic taste made Lara smile.

“Tell me, what really happened to you all those years ago?” the woman asked.

Lara recounted the tale of her encounter with the dragon—acting as a decoy so Alistair could escape with his life, then turning herself to stone in order to survive being swallowed whole. It was the first she’d spoken of that time since she’d awoken from her spell. Alistair listened with rapt attention.

“Well then, why is it you only returned to us now?” asked the headmistress.

In response, Lara beamed proudly. After all, the spell was her ultimate creation. “I combined my special petrification magic with a timer spell, which is when you have the faeries take action at a set time. I originally created it to

help myself and Alistair wake up in the morning, but I suspected it could be fused with other things, petrification being one of them. So I cast the spell in such a way that it would only end after twenty years had elapsed.”

“Why would you do that?” Alistair asked in a small voice, though Lara didn’t seem to hear the anguish in it.

“I didn’t think anyone could possibly kill a dragon! Judging by the scutes on its back, I estimated it had less than twenty years left to live, so I made sure I wouldn’t wake before then.”

Indeed, a dragon’s natural lifespan was almost exactly one hundred years, as if the gods themselves had designed it to be so.

“I see,” he replied, his voice frigid. Only then did she notice his dark expression.

She could never have known that the dragon would die seventeen years ahead of schedule—and at her own disciple’s hand, no less. Likewise, he had lived every single one of those seventeen years without knowing when, if ever, she would awaken from her spell.

“I told you I wouldn’t die, remember? I just...didn’t want to break my promise.” It had taken her entirely too long, but nevertheless, she had kept her word.

“Right,” he muttered, and though it was far too late, she found herself wishing she could have communicated her plan to him. In her defense, she had been faced with an elder dragon at the time. Lara hadn’t exactly been thinking clearly. For that matter, she hadn’t been completely sure the newly combined spell would even work as intended.

Concerned as she was about Alistair’s soured mood, Lara told the headmistress she would be back and reluctantly headed home to the castle with Alistair. This single day had completely changed the way she saw him, overwriting her mental association of him as a bratty preteen in one fell swoop.

In the carriage, Alistair explained his stance on social programs.

“Welfare shouldn’t depend solely on the kindness and hard work of a few privileged individuals. Every member of society should do their part.”

Orphaned children needed warm beds, meals, and education. The impoverished needed support, both moral and financial, until they were back on their feet. The sick needed treatment. People needed accommodations to survive, and the government—be it local or national—was responsible for enacting them. Only now did Lara realize personal contributions like hers were only ever a stopgap measure, not a solution to all social ills.

“Your donations are still commendable, of course! You helped countless people, myself included, and I don’t mean to invalidate that. I simply believe citizens should not be made to fill the holes left by their kingdom’s inadequacy.”

She wasn’t wrong to open her wallet when she saw children starving in the cold—it was a noble act, if one carried out from a place of privilege. But Alistair had a point. It was the responsibility of the system, not the individual, to guarantee a social safety net for the vulnerable.

He always was a smart kid, she thought to herself.

“Your work is truly incredible, Alistair,” she mused, gazing at him reverently. But then a question occurred to her. “Come to think of it, why do all these buildings have your name on them?” The orphanage, the schools, the hospitals—every major facility in each district was named either Alistair or Alice.

“My people wanted to name them after me, so I allowed it,” he replied matter-of-factly.

This came as an even greater shock to Lara. “I thought you’d hate something like that!”

She had always considered Alistair as someone who had no interest in fame and would sooner shy away from being the center of attention. Then, a sad smile came to his lips. The sight of it made Lara’s heart lurch.

“Well... I didn’t know when you would wake up.”

He had tried everything he could think of to break the spell, but to no avail. Even Lutfel had run out of ideas. For years and years, he waited for her to wake, but after a decade, his hope dwindled. At that point, it seemed increasingly unlikely that the spell would break during his lifetime.

“For all I knew, I would be long gone by the time you woke up. So I asked

myself what I could do for you in the meantime.” The answer he’d found had been to build her a utopia she could experience upon waking. “I wanted to leave something of my life behind for you to find.”

He feared his name would be all that remained after he was gone...but that was fine by him. He just wanted Lara to know the new way of life he had built. He wanted her approval, even if he were no longer alive to hear it himself.

This was her breaking point. She slid to her knees, buried her face in her hands, and sobbed, shoulders heaving.

“I worked so hard, Lara. Won’t you tell me I did well?”

“You’re such a *fool*!”

It was the opposite of what he wanted to hear. Regardless, Lara couldn’t help but curse herself for the damage she had inadvertently inflicted on that young boy. She had never meant to burden him with her dreams, and yet he had broken them down into actionable steps, painstakingly realizing each and every one, as if following a checklist.

“Gods, what have I done? I just wanted you to be happy!” she said, weeping on the floor of the carriage.

Alistair frowned and knelt beside her. “I know. I understand that was your intent.”

“You should have forgotten about me and moved on!”

“You underestimate the magnitude of my feelings, then. I could never have moved on, much as you may have planned otherwise,” he declared with a smirk.

“Oh, Alice, how can I ever make it up to you?”

It had been twenty long years—time enough for a newborn to come of age—and he had spent all that time living solely for her sake.

“If you feel sorry for me, then tell me you’re proud of me. And, if at all possible, I would be glad of your love.”

Once her sobs subsided, she let out a long breath. “Of course I’m proud of you.” Lara’s watery, trembling voice cracked. “I am so *very* proud of you, my

sweet Alice.”

With a trembling hand, she reached up and stroked Alistair’s soft silver hair. His beautiful, opalescent blue eyes shimmered with tears of joy—but her heart ached, for she could never repay his devotion.

“Lara, I can tell you with the utmost confidence that no one loves you like I do. They never have, and they never will.”

She nodded meekly. In the past, she would have brushed him off, but she could turn a blind eye no longer.

“And I do believe I told you that you would take me seriously one day.”

At this point, she had no choice. Contrary to what she had thought, this was not a childhood crush born of a deep-seated fear of abandonment. It was real.

“Now, will you please just give up and be mine already?”

Still she hesitated. Make no mistake—Lara cared about Alistair more than anyone else in the world—but she wasn’t positive those feelings were romantic in nature.

“Your pity will suffice for now. You need only offer it,” he continued, as if to allay her uncertainty. As far as he was concerned, there was no need to label what they had. If they were together, that would be enough. “Of course, I *do* want to win your love eventually, and I shall endeavor to earn it for the rest of my life.”

This sentiment was so characteristically Alistair that she burst out laughing. Yes, this was still the arrogant brat she knew and loved. Fortunately, they had plenty of time ahead of them. And so, at long last, she came to a decision.

“I’ll give you my everything, if you’re sure it will be enough.”

After all, Lara had nothing else with which to repay him. She was not possessed of exceptional beauty, talent, or youth. But if he were willing to settle...

“Of course I am. No one else will suffice.”

Alistair’s happiness was more palpable than Lara had ever seen, and she felt herself relax. His love was so vast that she had no choice but to surrender to it.

“All right. Just...let me know if you ever change your mind.”

“I’m afraid that day will never come, and I would appreciate it if you didn’t trivialize my feelings.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.”

She spread her arms wide, and he accepted the invitation. Together, they shared a tight embrace on the floor of the gently rocking carriage.

“Finally... After all these years, you’re finally mine.”

Lara felt something warm and wet against her shoulder and realized he was crying, too. After a long moment, he looked up at her, his fingers grazing her cheek. Sensing the unspoken question, she dutifully closed her eyes. Soft, feathery pecks fell upon her face—first her eyelids, then both cheeks, the tip of her nose, and her lips—smiling as it tickled her.

The next kiss, however, was not as gentle.

“Mm... Mmmph!”

It was so passionate, it stole the very breath from her lungs. When she parted her lips in search of oxygen, what she got instead was the entire length of his tongue, exploring every inch of her mouth without restraint—licking at her inner cheeks, sucking her tongue, slurping her saliva. Meanwhile, his large palms ran down her body, tracing her curves.

“Mm! Mmmh!”

Before long, he slid a hand under the hem of her skirt and up to her soft thighs. This was much more than a tickle, and Lara slammed her legs shut on reflex, trapping his hand. Alistair pried her legs back open with brute force and moved in deeper. Right as his fingertips arrived at her bloomers, however, the carriage came to a loud, abrupt stop. Snapping to her senses, Lara fought to extricate herself from his grasp. Alas, he didn’t take the hint.

“Control yourself, Alistair! We’ve arrived at the castle!” she snapped at him, but her protests fell on deaf ears as he carried on groping her.

“What’s the harm in a little fun? I’ll tell the coachman to come back for us later.”

Had her former disciple lost all sense of shame? The coachman would know exactly what they were doing! Blushing, she shook her head.

“I suppose it would be strange for a virgin to have their first time in a carriage, but I’m not so opposed to it, personally. It would make for an unforgettable experience.”

At this, she shook her head even harder, tears springing to her eyes. This was one boundary he would *not* be crossing.

“Oh, very well,” he said, sighing. Smoothing her dress back into place, he slid an arm under her knees and gently hoisted her into his arms.

“Hey! I can walk on my own!”

“I know that, but I want to carry you.”

Alistair was in such good cheer as he carried her bridal-style into the castle that she half expected him to hum a little tune. Every servant they passed in the halls met them with a warm smile.

“My apologies, but Lara and I will be indisposed for a while. No one is to enter my private chamber until I open the door.”

At this, they all nodded eagerly. They seemed so supportive of this relationship that Lara felt she might die of embarrassment.

“Slow down, Alistair! Wait!”

“No. I’ve waited long enough.”

Her resistance proved futile, and she was swiftly carried into his bedroom for the first time. It was much larger than hers, with a king-sized bed, furnished mostly in blue.

Knowing what was going to happen here, she tensed. They would surely be going all the way today.

He set her gently upon the bed, cupped her dainty chin, and planted another kiss on her—a light peck, just to show her he loved her. Then he put a hand to her shoulder and slowly pushed her down onto her back. Unlike the tenderness of his motions, however, the expression on his face was pained.



“Um, Alistair?” Lara called urgently.

“What is it, Lara?” he replied, pausing in the middle of removing her dress.

“I take it you realize this is my first time, yes?”

Because mages were actively encouraged to have as many children as possible, many engaged in casual sex and procreation outside of marriage. Chastity was not considered a virtue. Back when she had been a royal mage, Lara herself had been invited on dates a fair few times, but was always too busy with work and raising Alistair. With neither the time nor the money to go out, she’d failed to gain any sexual experience at all.

Smiling, Alistair went back to stripping her dress off. “Of course it is. Ser Lutfel and I made sure of that.”

“What?”

“We informed potential suitors that if they wanted to make a move on you, they’d have to go through me. All the marriage proposals mysteriously ceased after that.”

“*What?*”

This was the first she’d heard of this. Perhaps it had been a mistake to talk to Alistair about the possibility of her getting married, all those years ago.

“Spineless cowards, the lot of them. Oh, and it was Ser Lutfel’s idea, by the way.”

Of all the potential accomplices, she hadn’t expected *Lutfel*. The man had evidently conspired to play Cupid behind her back. Still, most mages couldn’t hope to go toe to toe with Alistair and live to tell the tale (and those who could were already taken). No wonder men had stopped approaching her.

Lara’s romantic prospects had been summarily crushed by her own devious disciple. Truthfully, she would have been grateful for the reprieve...if she had only known at the time.

“In other words, you never had the option of marrying anyone but me.”

It seemed everything had gone exactly as he’d planned. Lara didn’t *object*,

exactly...but something about it didn't sit right with her. Was it because someone else had decided her future without her knowledge? She frowned.

Alistair peppered her with more kisses in response. Then she noticed that he appeared to be struggling with her dress, despite usually being rather nimble.

"Women's clothing is quite complex, isn't it?" he muttered under his breath as he finally arrived at the strings of her corset. Could this be his first time undressing a woman? He seemed to sense the unspoken question in her wide eyes and shrugged. "Yes, I'm a virgin as well. Obviously, no other woman could light a fire in my loins."

Her jaw dropped. She had forgotten a crucial detail. Alistair was widely known as a statue fetishist, much to the lament of the citizens who hoped for him to produce an heir. Despite his good looks, charisma, and superior spellcasting, this man had gone untouched for thirty-two years. *You're telling me a virgin knows how to do all that with his hands?!* Nevertheless, she couldn't help but feel uneasy about the prospect of two amateurs fumbling around.

When he noticed the concern in her eyes, he smirked. "Worry not, for I have the matter well in hand. I am what they call *naturally gifted*."

Sometimes his unshakable confidence was downright perplexing. Was it possible for a person to be innately talented in every single field? This unsettled her even further. "W-well, that's reassuring!" she lied, her voice cracking in terror.

"I've spent *years* envisioning our first time together. I need only act accordingly."

Only now did it dawn on her exactly what sort of...*activities* he had been inflicting upon her statue for all that time. Not exactly a pleasing thought.

After much time and effort, every last article of clothing was stripped away and discarded on the bed. Alistair loosened her neatly braided hair and lowered her onto the mattress *au naturel*. It was his turn to strip his clothes off, the bright light leaving nothing to the imagination. With beautiful proportions worthy of admiration, he would have made a handsome statue himself. It was hard to believe that this same man had once been a starving, skeletal eight-year-old.

When he slid his pants off, the discolored scar on his abdomen came into view, and she winced.

“Don’t fret. The dragon is dead, and its stigma is gone,” he told her.

“But the scar...”

“I don’t mind it much. If anything, it’s a reminder that I’m not infallible,” he explained with a wry grin.

Lara reached out and gingerly traced her index finger over the raised skin. When she closed her eyes, images sprang to mind of her young disciple on the ground, covered in blood. Pushing herself up into a sitting position, she bent forward and kissed the old wound, like a cat lapping at milk. He drew in a sharp breath, then reached out and ran his fingers through her hair.

“You don’t have to feel guilty, Lara.”

She understood that—she merely wanted to soothe whatever pain yet lingered there. His touch felt so nice that she couldn’t help but smile dreamily to herself.

His hand descended to her slight shoulders, sliding gently down the slope of her back, and then he lowered her onto the sheets once more, his long hair cascading down over her like the bars of a sterling cage. Then he leaned in and kissed her, pecking loudly at her lips, until at last she cupped his cheeks in both hands and reciprocated.

At this, he flinched in surprise—then responded with an even deeper kiss, just as she’d hoped. She relaxed, allowing his tongue to enter her mouth, and after a moment of summoning her courage, she offered her own tongue in kind, curling it around his. Again, she felt him quiver against her.

For a moment, she worried that she had done something wrong, but then he drew her tongue into his mouth, as if to indicate that he was very much enjoying it. Reassured, she pushed in deeper, exploring his neat rows of teeth, his warm inner cheeks, and the roof of his mouth. He moaned faintly, suggesting perhaps it tickled, and she found herself smiling against his lips.

And so they consumed each other until they could scarcely tell one mouth from the other. The wet slurping of mingling saliva filled the air, but they were

both too distracted to notice. They were out of breath when they pulled apart, their lips connected by a gleaming strand of spit. A sheepish grin spread across Alistair's face. It was so out of character for him that Lara found it immensely charming.

"I like that it doesn't feel quite so one-sided for a change," he remarked quietly.

Her heart fluttered. This was indeed the first time she had ever returned a romantic gesture, and he had evidently noticed. Overcome with affection for him, she nibbled lightly at Alistair's neck. The pair chuckled, shared another small kiss, then pressed their palms to each other's chests.

Lara could feel his heartbeat, just as he could feel hers. But he seemed more distracted by her curves, because his motions didn't stay chaste for long. *Why does his every touch feel so good?* she wondered, as she watched him squeeze and knead her breasts.

"Mmmh," she moaned as his fingers reached her twin peaks, already red and swollen. He pinched and pressed them, alternating levels of pressure and making her whole body spasm.

"They're so hard. How adorable."

Gripping one breast, he bent down and took the nipple into his mouth, rolling it around on his tongue. It felt so good; she couldn't help but pull him in against her. Taking the hint, he used his free hand to play with her other nipple at the same time. The licking and nibbling steadily added to the heat between her legs. Though his ministrations had yet to travel south, she felt her loins throbbing and growing slick with fluid all the same.

"Mmm... Aah... Aaahh...!"

Every little pinch and rub made her moan. Unable to bear the ache in her depths, she bucked her hips and tried to squeeze her legs shut, but Alistair's body was in the way.

"Shall I redirect my focus?" he asked playfully.

Cursing her body for its baser urges, she nodded, for she trusted him enough to be honest with him.

“Well, well! You’re surprisingly compliant today,” he teased, tracing a finger over her slit. Her wetness was audible. “And it appears you’re *leaking*, you naughty girl.” He scooped up fluid from her depths and spread it upward, then pressed down hard on the sensitive bud nestled at the top of her lips.

“Hnnn!”

The sudden intense pleasure made her back arch sharply, but Alistair had a firm grip on her limbs, preventing her retreat. His fingers switched to gentle circular motions. To her relief, the sensation was far less intense, but she found herself craving more before long. On reflex, she bucked her hips in time with his movements, heightening them. With a throaty chuckle, he gave the swollen button a little pinch.

“Aaaaaahh!”

The next instant, she orgasmed so hard that her knees quaked. Her walls clenched hard, her body spasming over and over.

“You climax easily, it seems,” he remarked with a smirk.

“Is that a bad thing?” she asked hazily.

“No, it’s wonderful.”

Thank goodness, she thought, letting out a sigh of relief. Alistair grinned. Lara still trembled from the fading waves of pleasure when he slid a finger into her pulsing depths—rather easily, in fact, owing to the added lubrication.

“Mnn. Aah... Aaahh...”

Following the orgasm, her walls were so sensitive that his touch left her strangely breathless. As his motions grew more fluid, he added a second finger, and when she winced from the increased pressure, she was placated with a kiss.

“Just relax, Lara. It’s all right,” he whispered soothingly.

Forcing herself to focus, she caught her breath and willed her muscles to release their tension. Around the time she had acclimated to the second finger, however, he withdrew. Something much larger and hotter pressed against her newly emptied entrance. Lara looked down and quickly realized that his fingers would soon be the least of her worries. On instinct, she tried to recoil, but

Alistair's grip on her hips prevented her escape. He leaned forward, his cock spreading her walls to their limits.

"Nnngh!" The searing sensation made her groan in pain. She could practically hear him splitting her in half.

"Haah... You're so tight," he muttered, grimacing as if in pain.

Worried for him, she moved to touch the furrow of his brow, but he grabbed her hand and pinned it to the bed. Then he pressed his lips to hers. The light kiss gradually deepened into something more passionate. The instant she was distracted by the curl of his tongue around hers, he slammed his hips forward.

There came an airy slapping sound, a popping sensation, followed by the warmth of his pelvis against hers. Her vision blurred and her back arched as she let out a strangled scream.

"I'm in," he whispered, his voice awash in emotion.

Her heart swelled. She only hoped this would make up for all the years of grief she had put him through. Wrapping her arms around him, she clung to him tightly.

"Does it hurt?" he asked after a moment.

"Yes," she answered honestly.

He smiled.

Why would this information make him happy? Is he a sadist?! Now she was scared all over again. He lay there unmoving while she breathed deeply to endure the pain.

"You're so precious," he murmured, peppering her with gentle kisses. The pained grimace returned periodically, and he would buck his hips slightly. But for better or for worse, Lara had a bad habit of empathizing with other people's pain, so she wrapped her legs around his hips. After all, her own pain was more easily managed.

"I'm okay now," she told him, planting a kiss on his lips and pulling him in, despite the agony.

Instantly, his eyes flew open. He let out a low grunt, and as his body trembled,

she felt his cock spasm over and over inside her. But through the haze of the pain, she wasn't entirely sure what had happened. Then she looked up at him—and realized he was more upset than she had ever seen him.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing.”

It was very clearly *not* nothing. Then she felt the pressure inside her start to fade, and quickly put two and two together. After all, she had learned about male biological functions while studying to be a royal mage. Realizing that he had prematurely ejaculated, she rushed to reassure him.

“You ended it quickly so I wouldn’t be in pain, didn’t you?” she suggested with a benevolent smile.

In her mind, it was the perfect cover story to avoid bruising his fragile ego. This way, he could play it off without feeling embarrassed. It was their first time, after all—of course it wasn’t going to be perfect. For that matter, she never expected it to be! If anything, she was grateful to have gotten it over with, considering how much it hurt! She would sooner turn herself back to stone than deal with *that* again!

“Impressive how you always manage to misdirect that compassion of yours,” he growled icily.

Lara looked up at him timidly. His smile was beautiful and frightening in equal measure.

“Aaah!”

Having suddenly regained his vigor, he plunged himself deep inside her once more. “Now where were we?”

“We’re not done?!”

“Of course not. I intend to break you in like a pair of new shoes.”

“Aaah!” she screamed in terror. The look in his eyes suggested he was entirely serious.

“But of course, I wouldn’t want to hurt you so badly that you turn to stone again, so I’ll balance it out this time.” He placed a hand atop her pelvis, and her

pain was slowly overwritten with a warm sensation. “I let you feel it on purpose, earlier, since I wanted to drive home the fact that I was your first. But if I’m going to conquer you from the inside out, then I had better make sure you enjoy yourself.”

Alistair had gotten much better at using medic magic since the old days. As his former mentor, it was something to be proud of, but the way he put it to use left a lot to be desired. Once her pain had faded, he resumed bucking his hips slowly.

“Nnng! Aaahh! What’s...happening?!” Without the pain to block it out, the pleasure swept over her all at once.

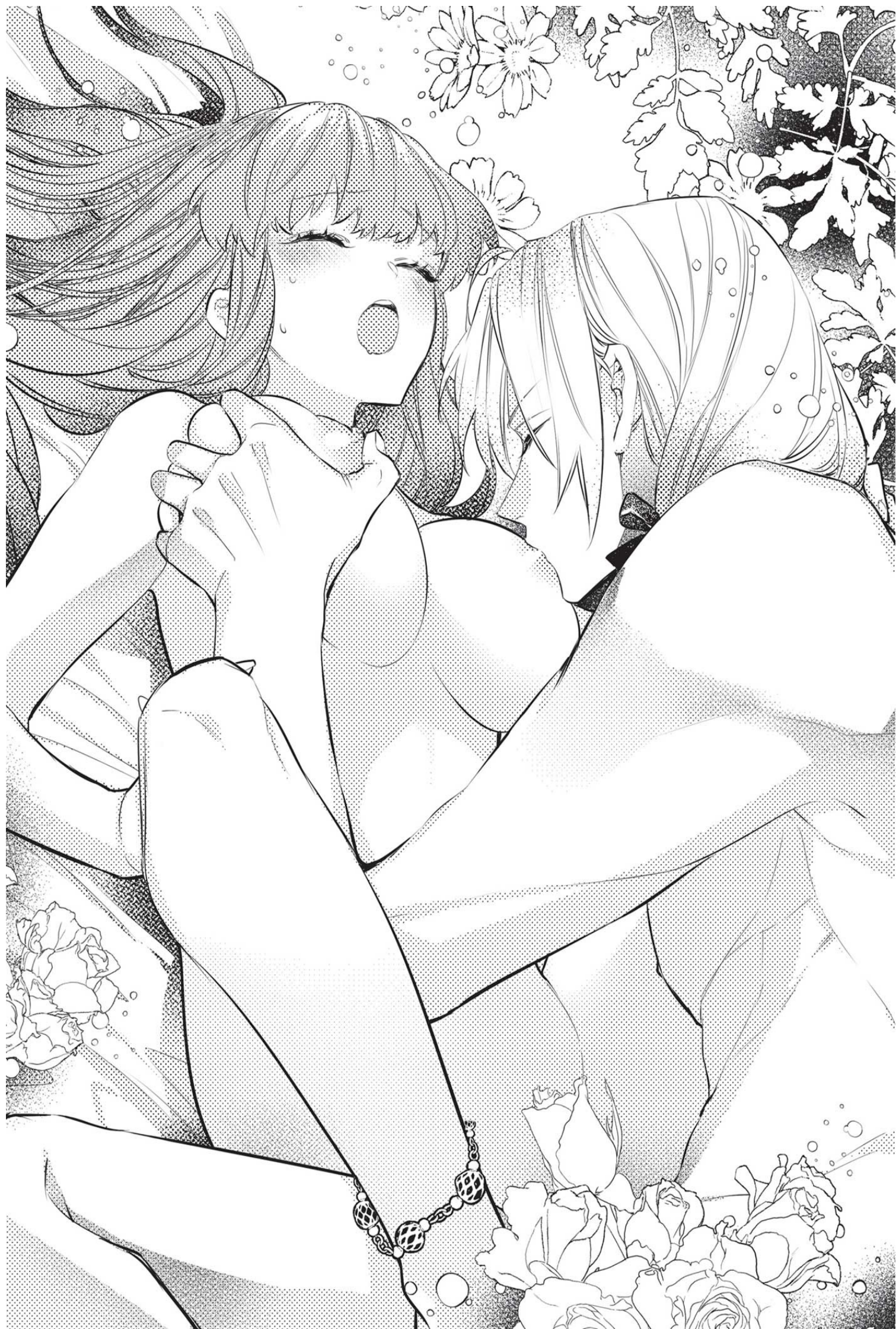
“It seems we’re highly compatible, both magically *and* sexually. You want me so badly. I can feel you gripping every inch of me.” Each thrust was accompanied by a loud squelch.

“Mmmh! Aah... Aaahh!”

The pleasure was so intense, she couldn’t help but arch her back, inadvertently pointing her breasts in his face. He grabbed them in both hands and squeezed.

“Oh gods, have mercy!”

Something was building inside her, the likes of which she had never felt before. The fear on her face seemed to please Alistair’s sadistic side; he took a nipple into his mouth and sucked hard, nibbling lightly.



“Hnn... Aaahh!”

The pleasure traveled straight to her loins, and she clamped down on his cock. His thrusts deepened, as if rising to the challenge.

“You feel so good, Lara...”

“Aaah! Aaaahhh!”

At this point, she was so shaken up—both figuratively and literally—that all she could do was cry out. Escalating things along, Alistair pounded harder than ever, then reached down with one hand and pressed her swollen, red clit.

“Aaaaaahhh!”

Screaming at the top of her lungs, she reached a second climax, limbs spasming wildly. Her lower body clenched around him as the sweet ache broke loose and washed across her from head to toe. Regardless, Alistair continued his thrusting, inflicting wave after wave of pleasure that reduced her to a moaning, trembling mess. It was as though every inch of her body had become a single erogenous zone—or perhaps she was simply drunk on the mana he was pumping into her.

“Nnngh!”

Suspended in perpetual orgasm, Lara’s pulsing pussy clamped down hard on every inch of Alistair’s length. Unable to bear it, he wrapped his arms around her tightly as he spilled his hot seed into her depths. They lay there for a time, locked in a sweaty, throbbing embrace.

“Nnn... Aah...”

Her first sexual encounter had left her in a spasming stupor. It wasn’t until after the intense climax had fully faded that she caught her breath and loosened her grip. Alistair stroked her cheek lovingly as she sank lethargically into the mattress...and he showed no signs of pulling out.

“We... We’re done now, right?” she asked timidly.

“Don’t be silly,” he replied, smiling brightly.

You’ve got to be kidding me! You’re supposed to be a thirty-two-year-old man,

not a horny teenager!

“I waited twenty years for this. I’m afraid you’ll just have to accept it,” he continued cheerfully, much to her horror. She could already tell there was no way out of this. Granted, she understood how he must have felt after all those years of anguish, but as much as she wanted to meet his needs, her stamina had its limits.

Are you trying to kill me?!

Thirty-two consecutive years of virginity had somehow made her former disciple utterly indefatigable in the bedroom. The passage of time was cruel indeed.

“Just try your best, Master,” he told her with a smirk as he hoisted her leg onto his shoulder. Before she knew it, he was erect and thrusting all over again.

“Wait! Aah! Aaahh... Aaaaaahhh!”

And so she was ravaged until her throat was raw and she was so utterly spent that she passed out.

Chapter 6:

True Love's Kiss

"MMM... AAAHH!"

Lara awoke to the sound of her own moaning. Lifting her heavy eyelids, she saw light streaming in through the window and realized it was morning already. Hazily, she pushed herself up slightly—but then she felt a jolt in her loins, accompanied by a squelching sound.

"Eek!" Her legs went limp, and she fell back into the sheets.

"Oh, did I wake you? Good morning, Lara," purred a velvety voice from behind her. Goosebumps prickled up her arms. She didn't know whether its magical quality was innate or a purposeful choice on his part, but either way, she found herself entranced all over again.

"Alistair? Good morn—eek!" A hand reached around from behind and pinched her nipple, making her yelp. Then she realized he was already inside her. "Do you think perhaps you could ask first? At least wait until I'm aw—*aaahh!*"

Her protests were interrupted by a hard thrust and a nibble of her earlobe. "When I saw you lying there, I couldn't help but touch you to make sure you're still soft and warm." Alistair continued his ministrations without pause. "And once I started touching you, I sort of got carried away."

Then tell your dick to conduct itself like a gentleman! she lamented to herself as she moaned.

"I did try to wake you, of course, but you slept through my every touch—even when I was balls deep! Frankly, I was starting to feel inadequate."

Because I was exhausted from last night! And that's your fault!

Nearly a full year had passed since she first woke up in this castle, and Alistair had availed himself of her body on an almost daily basis. Despite this, he still seemed to have twenty years' worth of pent-up lust. Lara sometimes wondered if it were possible to die from too much sex.

As he penetrated her from behind, he reached around and rubbed her clit with his free hand. Instantly, she escalated into a climax too intense for words. Gripping the sheets, she fought to endure the pleasure.

“Heh! Your orgasms feel good for the both of us,” he whispered, his voice ever so slightly strained. She collapsed facedown against the mattress. Not a moment later, Alistair raised her hips until she was in a doglike pose, then carried on thrusting.

“Hnn! Aah! Aaahh!” With the airy slap of flesh against flesh and the wet churning of last night’s semen, even her *ears* felt violated. “Alistair...Alice... that’s enough!”

Her walls throbbed in climax as he pounded into her without mercy. Once he got to this point, he was impossible to reason with. On the contrary, he took sadistic pleasure in disregarding her pleas.



“You want this to be over? Then take my seed,” he growled in a strangled voice.

She nodded emphatically—anything to be freed from this one-sided torment.

“Nnngh!”

With a grunt, he filled her like a pastry. Then, after a few final strokes to wring out the last drops, he collapsed on top of her, his sweaty body pressing her into the mattress. Even then, she could tell he had taken pains to avoid crushing her with his full weight. They lay together as one, listening to each other’s racing heartbeats. With what little stamina she had regained overnight now spent, she suspected she’d be bedridden until lunchtime.

True to his word, the self-professed “naturally gifted” Alistair now knew more about her sexual preferences than she did. The slightest touch made her wet with anticipation, and given how quickly she succumbed to the pleasure, she feared it wouldn’t be long before she was completely addicted.

“Good morning, Alistair,” she croaked in a hoarse voice. Lara felt his stomach quiver with barely suppressed laughter.

“You truly are a pushover, aren’t you? You could stand to be more upset with me.”

“Why should I bother when you never listen?”

“Fair point, I suppose.”

His hands began to wander along her curves once more—imbued not with sexual intent, but gentle medic magic. Lara instantly felt her body regain energy from his mana.

“I just wish you’d exercise some restraint. If I get too frightened, I’ll turn myself back to stone, you know,” she teased.

His hands abruptly fell still. “Please don’t,” he replied in a small, pleading voice.

At this, she quickly regretted her words. His trauma was nothing to make light of.

“If you absolutely must use that spell again, then I only ask that you set it to end a different way. The waiting was torture.”

“Such as?”

“I don’t know... A kiss from your true love, perhaps?”

“Hee hee! Sounds like something out of a fairy tale.”

Now that she had come to respect his feelings for her, Alistair was the only person who could possibly fit that description. Evidently, he had quite the romantic side. Lara spun around to face him and pecked him gently on the lips.

“I love you, Lara,” he whispered between kisses.

“I know.” She wasn’t sure she was ready to return that sentiment just yet, but she could feel something slowly but surely taking root in her heart.

“Now then, shall we make ready? I imagine breakfast has been prepared.”

With that, Alistair snatched his dressing gown off the floor, pulled it on, and went into Lara’s bedchamber next door, which had gone unoccupied following their first night together. He picked out a set of clothes from her closet, then strolled back to the bed and cheerfully dressed her, humming all the while. To an outside observer, it must have looked like a grown man was playing dress-up.

Back when Lara had first woken up, Marietta, the head maid, had been in charge of dressing her. Once Alistair had learned all of the necessary techniques, he had officially taken over. When Marietta complained that he was stealing her job, he insisted that he had been dressing Lara since she was a statue, and it was his favorite pastime.

Alistair’s every motion followed the last with seamless precision. First, he dressed her in a chemisette and corset, tightened the strings, and pulled on her stockings and garters. Then he added layers of petticoats and panniers until she was finally the perfect shape for her overdress. Today, she was given a bright green dress befitting of spring—a lovely complement to her light brown hair.

“I hate to admit it, but His Lordship truly knows how to make you shine, milady,” Marietta had once said. The woman was right—Alistair had good taste.

Truth be told, noblewomen's fashion was so complicated that, at this point, Lara had given up hope of ever dressing herself.

Once she was fully clothed, Alistair set about dressing himself, pulling on a bespoke blue tailcoat over a waistcoat and trousers. After all this time, she should have been used to his beauty, given that she was now familiar with every inch of him. Yet, Lara still found herself captivated by the sight of him tightening his tie. Personally, she didn't think it necessary to get all dolled up if they didn't have plans to leave the castle, but a certain level of grooming was expected of a seigneur, apparently. And she had to admit he wore his nobleman's attire very well.

"People read a lot into appearances by nature. It's hard to command respect when you're poorly dressed. Hence, those of higher status must adorn themselves accordingly," he had explained.

Likewise, Lara was expected to follow suit as "Her Ladyship," which was why she put up with all these fussy dresses day in and day out. At one point in her life, she used to dream of wearing fanciful gowns like a princess, but now that she had actually experienced it, she realized that those feminine ideals were built on the tolerance of misery. The only reason her corset wasn't tighter was because Alistair had taken pity on her.

Once they were both dressed, he led her by the hand to the dining hall.

"Good morning, Your Lordship! Good morning, Your Ladyship!" each servant called cheerfully as they crossed paths in the hallway.

Lara still wasn't comfortable with this term of address, but she had to face the facts: She was Alistair's wife now.

The same day she had decided to accept his feelings, he had quietly filled out all of the necessary paperwork while she was passed out from their vigorous lovemaking. By the next morning, all that remained was for her to wear a white dress and exchange vows with him before the gods. Every weaver in the province rushed to construct their wedding attire at the earl's command. Before she knew it, she was walking down the aisle of a newly built church. It had all happened so suddenly that, in truth, it scarcely felt real.

She was aware that Alistair had all but railroaded her into it, but he seemed

so delighted about it that she found she didn't much mind. As exhausting as their nightly activities were, it was the most cherished she'd ever felt in her life. If he was happy, then so was she.

Their marriage was announced to the entire nation. Lara feared she wasn't fit to be a seigneuresse, but Alistair assured her that no one paid much attention to the conduct of the *nouveau riche*. In the capital, "Lara Bradley" was still believed to be dead, but that seemed to suit Alistair just fine.

"I won't tolerate His Majesty demanding to have his royal mage back," he had scoffed. Alistair had told the public she was a mere commoner instead.

This came as something of a disappointment to Lara, who had put in years of effort to achieve that title. But when she stopped to think about it, she realized she had only pursued that career out of a desire to help people the same way her idol Lutfel did. Now that Alistair had made her dreams come true, she could satisfy those same philanthropic desires as the seigneuresse of Gardiner.

Sometimes she questioned if she truly deserved to be this lucky. Good fortune felt foreign after all she'd endured.

Declining Alistair's offer to carry her, Lara staggered into the dining hall. There, she and her husband ate breakfast and made small talk, as usual—until the steward rushed into the room, his face pale and a letter clutched in his hand.

"Your Lordship! We've received a letter from His Majesty!"

Sure enough, the wax seal on the envelope was engraved with the royal family's lion crest—Lara recognized it from her time as a royal mage. Annoyed, Alistair set his fork down and took the letter. After reading through it, he let out a huff.

"Now, now, don't be rude. What does it say?"

"That he expects to see me at the capital this year. What a waste of time."

Early summer was the season for socializing—the time of year when seigneurs from all over Falcone came together to hobnob. They were also expected to pay their respects to the king while there.

“Ridiculous as it is, it seems I’ll have to at least make an appearance. Inform him that I’ll be coming.”

“At once, milord!” the steward said, hurrying off.

Alistair sighed. Like any other province, the Earldom of Gardiner was subject to taxes and fealty to the kingdom, but thus far, Alistair had used his duties as a seigneur to get out of traveling to the capital. His Majesty had finally run out of patience and ordered Alistair to take his obligations seriously.

“Since when does that old man care if I skip the festivities? He must have some ulterior motive,” he grumbled.

Alistair had a notoriously poor attitude toward anyone in a position of authority, and at one point, that had included his mentor, Lara. Back when she had been a royal mage, the king had seemed a million miles beyond her reach, yet her husband spoke of him as though the man were little more than a belligerent uncle.

“Either way, it sounds like you’ll have to go this time.”

“Yes, I’m afraid I have no choice. Not that I see any point in continuing to serve this country, mind you. It would be less hassle to defect and be done with it.”

Lara wasn’t sure she liked the sound of that last part, so she pretended not to hear it. As usual, her husband was a wild stallion. “Just think of it as doing your duty, both as royal mage and as the earl.”

“Oh, very well... My barrier is so robust it would take a full-grown dragon to break in anyway.” And because there were only a handful of dragons in existence, the likelihood of that was miniscule. “I suppose Gardiner could survive a few days without me.”

“Without *us*, you mean?”

“Terribly sorry, darling, but I cannot afford the risk that they’ll recognize you. You’ll have to stay behind.”

“Aren’t you *supposed* to bring your wife?”

Couples typically attended these social functions as a package deal. Lara

would surely be expected to make an appearance now that the two of them were married.

“Those bastards don’t deserve to see your face. Ser Lutfel least of all.”

Though no one would ever guess from his laid-back personality, Lutfel was a viscount. His presence at this event was hardly surprising. The greater shock was that her husband still resented the man for having been her first love. If Alistair was thirty-two, then Lutfel would have to be nearly sixty, beyond the range of her romantic interest—in theory, anyway. *I wonder if he’s still handsome*, she caught herself thinking. But Alistair seemed to read her mind.

“You’re not coming, and that’s final.”

“Eeek!” His voice and gaze were both so icy, she couldn’t help but sit up straight in her chair. “I was just curious, that’s all!”

“Right. Well, I hate to break it to you, but Ser Lutfel retired last year to spend more time with his grandchildren.”

“Can’t I see him one last time?”

“No,” he answered firmly, his glare frightening.

Did he think her incapable of controlling herself around older men? Obviously, this was not the case. But his stubborn refusal seemed to suggest that Lutfel had aged very gracefully indeed. The more she tried to picture it, the more she longed to see him with her own two eyes. Nevertheless, she knew Alistair would ensure she wouldn’t get any sleep that night if she persisted on this topic any longer, so she changed the subject. “Well, perhaps you shouldn’t have put this off for over a decade.”

“I honestly couldn’t find the time to go. If anything, I’m lucky the barrier’s actually stable now. Of course, I’m sure His Majesty’s list of complaints is a mile long, and he might try to rope me into some new hassle. If he gets to be too much of a bother, I’ll just blow a hole in the castle wall to shut him up.”

“You really haven’t grown up at all, have you?” Lara scoffed. All his life, he was so quick to resort to violence.

Alistair burst out laughing. “Don’t fret, my dear. I *am* the world’s most

powerful mage, after all.”

Six months later, it was time for Alistair to depart for the capital.

“Be a good girl while I’m gone, won’t you?”

“Of course!” While she didn’t appreciate being treated like a child, she was excited to have freedom for the first time in ages.

“Lara? What are you so giddy about?”

“*Giddy?* Don’t be absurd! You know I’m going to miss you terribly.”

Alistair fixed her with a withering look, and she hastily donned a frown. *While the husband’s away, the wife will play*, as the saying went. Not that Lara would ever think such a thing, of course!

“I shall return in ten days’ time. Until then, I ask that you refrain from leaving the castle as much as possible.”

“Th-that’s rather short, isn’t it?”

Social season tended to last for a month or more. But since it would take three days to reach the capital and another three to get home, that meant he would only be staying for three or four days, at most. Rushing his duties didn’t seem like a good idea. Besides, she would have liked more than ten scant days of freedom.

“Is there a problem with that?”

“Not at all! Hurry home, honey!” she lied, smiling brightly. Flustered by the introduction of a pet name, a blushing Alistair pulled her into his arms and showered her in kisses. Evidently, she had succeeded in buttering him up. And so, Alistair headed off, glancing over his shoulder at her multiple times as he left.

Now you may be wondering: *Was* she a “good girl” in his absence, as he requested? Of course not. Accompanied by head maid Marietta, she decided she was going to inspect all the facilities in the neighborhood.

Naturally, she had bought the silence of every servant in the castle. As much

as they respected their master, they seemed to understand that Lara sometimes felt suffocated by his unhealthy obsession with her; likewise, she had grown very fond of them over the year she'd spent living there. Marietta in particular was like a mother figure, always taking care of her.

In the beginning, all was well, but by day five of Alistair's absence, she was starting to feel lonely. It was the longest the two of them had been apart since the day they'd met—by her reckoning, anyway. She had been unconscious during her years as a statue, so she'd never perceived his absence until now.

When she woke in the morning, she found herself missing the feel of his warmth beside her. Her heart ached so sharply, she feared she had grown addicted to him, just as he'd planned all along. She wanted to see him, to touch him, to hear his voice. At long last, it hit her: She was in love with him and had been for a while.

She had thought these ten days would fly by, yet they felt like an eternity. Now she realized she had subjected Alistair to this very feeling for *twenty years straight*.

To take her mind off of him, she decided to keep herself busy, and to that end, she decided to travel outside the castle town to see more of the world he'd built. She was a mage herself. She would be fine.

But she didn't know just how terrible her timing would prove to be.

No matter where she went, the townspeople all sang Alistair's praises, just like the very first village she had visited upon waking from her stone coma. As his wife, she was welcomed with open arms.

"It's incredible," she murmured, swaying with the motions of the carriage.

"His Lordship is a great man," Marietta agreed, grinning proudly.

She and her husband had once worked for a noble family who'd lived in the capital—until Marietta's husband had been arrested for stealing from their mansion.

"Just like that, I was out of a job, and my husband was sentenced to death without a fair trial. Then I heard about this place, and I figured it had to be better than me and the children starving to death on the street." That was

when Alistair had hired her to be his personal maid and teach him how to live as a proper nobleman. “He’s like a son to me. I reckon that’s why I worry about him so much.”

There had been no light in Alistair’s empty eyes back then. He’d worked tirelessly, sometimes forgoing meals or sleep, his sole objective cultivating the land. Alistair had often departed to slay monsters and returned covered in their blood, giving Marietta a nasty fright on multiple occasions.

“The only time he relaxed or smiled was when he was with you. Or rather, your statue.”

The servants had known it was fruitless to love a statue, and yet they’d stood by him regardless. Meanwhile, thanks to Alistair’s devoted, compassionate governance, Gardiner developed rapidly until it had become one of Falcone’s most prosperous provinces.

“But our fear grew with every step of progress. What would become of His Lordship once all his goals were achieved?” No matter how the land flourished, he had still seemed dead inside, like a zombie made to live on against his own will. “That’s why it means so much to us that you’re here with him now.”

By the end of Marietta’s story, Lara was in tears, touched that so many people cared for Alistair as deeply as they did. When he was younger, she was always worried sick that he’d end up alone. It truly warmed her heart that he had built a life for himself surrounded by people who loved him.

Eventually, they arrived at their destination: a settlement recently erected at the far outskirts of the barrier where people dug in search of new mines. By establishing a series of relay points, Alistair had ensured that his barrier would cover the entirety of Gardiner. All lands within his domain were therefore deemed safe for human habitation. As usual, the villagers welcomed Lara with open arms and started showing her around. Until...

“Monster!” a voice cried from the guard tower.

Her eyes widened. *A monster? Inside the barrier? How?!*

The answer, it turned out, was simple: there was only one species of monster that could waltz through a magical barrier like it was nothing.

“It’s some kind of giant lizard!” another guard shouted.

Lara’s blood ran cold. *A dragon.*

“Why? Why *here*, of all places?!”

Time was of the essence. If the dragon reached the village, it would eat every last resident in sight. Lara couldn’t bear the thought of something like that happening to Alistair’s beloved province while he was away.

“Marietta, take charge of the villagers and get everyone to safety! I’ll buy you some time!”

Marietta clung desperately to her mistress, shaking her head, her face as white as a sheet. “Y-Your Ladyship, no! You mustn’t!”

Lara offered her a reassuring smile. “Relax! I was once a talented royal mage myself, I’ll have you know! I may not be as talented as Alistair, but I’m certainly more fit for the task than anyone else here!” This was perhaps an overstatement of her ability, but Marietta didn’t need to know that.

Not even Alistair’s barrier was strong enough to keep out a dragon. The only option, then, was to lure it away.

“What’s it doing right now?!” she called as she ran to the guard tower at the edge of town.

“It looks to be chasing a fellow in black robes!” the guard shouted back.

Of all the humans present, the dragon had set its sights on a single robed individual—a mage, presumably inflicted with its stigma in the course of an extermination attempt. Once it marked someone as its prey, it would stop at nothing to hunt them down.

After unhooking one of the horses from the carriage, she leaped onto its back. Fortunately, she had learned how to ride while studying for the royal mage exam. Using leg pressure the way Lutfel had taught her, she guided the horse forward.

“It’ll eat anything in its line of sight, so prioritize your lives over all else! I’ll do what I can!” she shouted to the villagers. With that, she rode off toward the intruder.

The closer she got, the harder she trembled in fear, but she wasn't the only one; beyond a certain point, the horse refused to go any further. With no other choice, she hopped off and gave it a pat on the rear.

"I'm sure you're no more keen to die than I am. Go on, then. Thanks for the help."

Alone, she watched the horse race off in the opposite direction, then turned and started walking toward the dragon. Soon she heard the rumble of its massive footsteps and sensed the desperate scrambling of its quarry.

"Help me! Please! I don't... I don't want to die!" the man screamed, his face dripping with snot and tears. Lara recognized him as the boy who had once cowered on the palace floor while Alistair kicked him. His sleeve was torn, revealing a dark, bruised wound on his bicep. "This wasn't the plan! You said you'd help me!"

A mage with a stigma—this discarded pawn was evidently intended as dragon bait. In fact, it was eerily similar to the strategy Alistair had used to lure out the dragon that had devoured her all those years ago. But *why*? Was someone trying to wreck his lands while he was away?

As much as she wanted to rescue the man, however, her feet remained rooted to the spot. While the old her would have plunged headfirst into danger with no regard for her own safety, the woman she had become didn't want to break Alistair's heart by risking her life yet again—proof of her love for him. Holding her breath, she crouched down and covered her ears. She had learned where her true priorities lay.

I'm sorry!

Despite her plugged ears, she nonetheless heard his screams followed by a sickening crunch. Now that the dragon had eaten its prey, she hoped desperately that it would lose interest and go home.

Those hopes were dashed when it craned its neck in the direction of the village.

For the first time in twenty years, she channeled an arcane aura. If she stood idly by, this dragon would eat its way through every last one of the people

Alistair had worked so hard to protect and provide for. As a royal mage—and the seigneuresse of Gardiner—she needed to do something to draw the beast away from civilization.

The magic of the barrier was designed to feel unpleasant for any monster, even a dragon. With the stigmatized prey now devoured, it surely had no reason to linger here. As with the last time she found herself in this position, Lara gathered up fallen twigs and condensed her mana into them to create piercing needles.

“Fly!”

She fired them in a single barrage, plunging them into the dragon’s hide with no less skill than she had demonstrated twenty years ago. Given that this one only had five scutes along its spine, it was only fifty-something years old—far younger than the one that had eaten her.

The beast thrashed in discomfort, then turned its head in the direction of the annoyance. Having secured its attention, Lara took off running. Again, she used the same tricks as last time, felling trees and turning the earth to mud to slow it down. Due to her new life cooped up in a castle, however, her stamina was not what it once was, and the taste of blood soon filled her mouth.

Just...a little...farther...!

Right as she hit her physical limits, she sailed through the barrier. Lara’s legs gave out, and she fell to the ground. The dragon closed in behind her, fangs bared.

“I thought these things were supposed to be rare,” she muttered under her breath. “What an extraordinary life I must have.”

And what terrible timing, too.

The beast’s lifespan would last for another fifty years, so if she resorted to the same strategy as last time, it was highly unlikely she would awaken to a world with Alistair still in it. Meanwhile, he would suffer the trauma of losing her all over again—and worse, for the rest of his life.

I know you’ll be angry, but this is who I am. I’m sorry, Alice.

It was their only option. *She* was their only option.

As the dragon's maw closed around her, she shifted into a kneeling position and clasped her hands at chest height, just as before. This time, she felt at peace, for she knew her disciple would be just fine in her absence. He had a whole community who loved and supported him, just as she did.

The last thing she felt was her body growing cold before everything went black.

"You look well," said a familiar voice directly behind him. Alistair ignored it at first, but then he remembered the man's kindness over the years and reluctantly turned around.

"It's been a long time, Ser Lutfel," he replied, his tone just civil enough to avoid giving offense.

There stood his former mentor and romantic rival. He was well-dressed, and his red hair, now peppered with gray, was neatly combed. Though his face bore the wrinkles of a man approaching sixty, he was all the more handsome for them, or so the young ladies liked to say.

No way I'm letting him come anywhere near Lara, Alistair thought. He knew she had a weakness for older men—a fact which he had resented very much back when he was twelve years her junior.

"I'm surprised you didn't bring Lara."

"As if I'd ever be that stupid."

The moment he had arrived at the nation's capital, Alistair was met with a series of assassination attempts. Now that the kingdom could no longer hope to regain Gardiner through his natural death, they had decided to take matters into their own hands before he was able to produce an heir. Welcoming immigrants from all over the country meant he had made enemies of the other seigneurs, who found themselves with fewer peasants to subjugate for their own gain.

To the rich and powerful, Alistair was a threat. It was pathetic, really. They

tried to drag down whoever was at the top like so many crabs in a bucket. Were it not for Lara, he would have plotted to destroy every last human who walked this earth.

“Trust me, it’s harder than you might think.”

On the first day, a cadre of royal mages had surrounded him and bombarded him with offensive spells, but he reflected them straight back at them and nearly killed them all. At the banquet, his entire meal had been laced with deadly poison, so he added an antidote and cleaned his plate just to spite them. Then there was the bomb they had planted followed by the housekeeper who had tried to stab him. When it had finally come time to pay his respects to the king, the man was so horrified to see him alive that he started trembling. All in all, it was quite entertaining. The old fool had hopefully learned his lesson.

“You know a ditz like Lara would die in minutes.”

“Aye, the girl’s just too trusting.”

“And if she died, I would burn this whole country to the ground.”

“Aye, I know you’d go to war for her.” The two men let out matching sighs as they thought of their favorite troublemaker. “Anyway, I wanted to congratulate you on your marriage,” Lutfel continued after a beat.

“Thank you! I’m very happy...mostly that you aren’t in her life anymore.”

“Ha! Insecure much?”

This was exactly why Alistair couldn’t stand the man. He wasn’t proud of it, but yes, even at age thirty-two he was filled with doubt where Lara was concerned, and he knew it wasn’t attractive. Though they had slept together, though they were married, though their life was a happy one, her heart remained ever out of reach. She liked men with effortless self-confidence—men like Lutfel.

“She used to be so cute and precious. Y’know, back when she begged me to make her my bride.”

“Would you like me to send you to an early grave?”

The bastard seemed to have a death wish. Lara had never begged *Alistair* for

such a thing, and he was her actual husband! If he had been born ten years earlier, could he have won her affection?

“What? You jealous?”

“Indeed. Murderously so.”

“A different topic, then. What are your plans for tonight?”

“Now that I’ve paid my respects to His Majesty, my obligations have been fulfilled, so I’ll be retiring to bed.”

“I bet no one would ever imagine that the esteemed Earl of Gardiner was staying at some run-down shack in the suburbs.”

“I did have the plumbing replaced, for the record.”

After buying the deed to Lara’s tiny house, Alistair had hired a property manager to maintain the place. It was his de facto headquarters here in the capital since he didn’t own any other property in the area. He hadn’t set foot inside in over ten years, but it was exactly as he remembered it somehow: cramped, dilapidated, and filled with happy memories. Lara seemed to miss the place. He hoped to bring her to visit one day.

“You’ve taken well to governing, eh? People say your land is a utopia.”

“I’m fortunate to have competent subordinates. That’s all.”

“Well, I’ll be! Spoken like a true leader. You’ve really grown up, Alice, my boy!”

“I’m not Alice, and I’m not your boy, you smarmy old man.”

“Is it true you’re headed home tomorrow?”

“Yes. I’ll be leaving in the morning. Which begs the question...” Pausing for effect, Alistair donned a snide smile. “Are you out to kill me, too, Ser?”

There wasn’t a mage alive who could go toe to toe with Alistair in direct combat, but the one who stood the best chance was the middle-aged man right before him.

“Nah. They asked me to, but I turned ’em down. Told ’em I’d rather live to enjoy my retirement.”

“Glad to hear it. As much as I don’t like you, it would pain me to have to kill you.”

In all fairness, he was grateful to Lutfel for many things, none of which involved Lara.

“Relax, would you? Don’t talk like that to a poor old man.”

“Yes, I’m sure it was *sheer agony* just to drag your *ancient bones* out of bed this morning.”

The two shared a dry laugh.

“If it gets to be too much around here, I’m bringin’ my whole family to your place, just so you know.”

“Certainly. I’ll allow it as long as you stay away from Lara.”

“You need therapy, pal.” Lutfel shook his head wearily, then after a beat, continued in a small voice. “They haven’t given up, y’know. Something’s goin’ on.”

“Yes, I know. It seems this country has no shortage of—hmm?” Just then, Alistair’s face hardened, and his voice turned to ice. “*I beg your pardon?*”

“Alice? What’s the matter? Hey, wait!”

Ignoring Lutfel’s concern, the younger man turned on his heel, broke into a run, and hightailed it all the way out to the stables.

Why is Lara outside my barrier?

He knew she had been taking advantage of his absence to wander freely around the province. Her gold anklet reported her every move to him, after all. Alistair had been thinking of different punishments for this flagrant violation of his request. But now that anklet had traveled out of Gardiner and into uninhabitable, monster-infested territory.

What in the hells is going on?!

Leaping astride his horse, he set off back home at full speed. The journey normally took three full days, but by stopping along the way to trade horses, he arrived back at his castle in half the time.

What he found there was akin to a funeral procession. The mood in the air, once so cheerful after Lara's awakening, was now heavy and foreboding. The servants looked utterly devastated.

Lara's signal was still transmitting from beyond the barrier, so he already knew she wasn't here.

"What happened?" he asked them quietly.

The steward explained everything, tears streaming down his face. How Lara had gone to visit a settlement on the border with Marietta. How a dragon had turned up, and how Lara had lured it away to spare the villagers' lives.

"The dragon didn't return after that, so we've asked the villagers to search for her. But no one has found her yet."

At this, Alistair left immediately and headed straight for Lara's current location as indicated by her gold anklet. He traveled deep into the heart of monster territory, slaying dozens of hostile beasts, until he finally found a single dragon.

This one was much younger than the last dragon he'd killed, but sure enough, the anklet's signal was transmitting from inside its gut. Yes, the reason he'd chosen a gold chain this time was to prevent it from being destroyed like the last one. Not even a dragon could stop him from finding her now.

"Are you the bastard who ate my wife?"

His silver hair rippled with the arcane aura of his rage. The dragon recoiled in fear, sensing that even its legendary might had met its match.

"Then die."

He conjured dozens upon dozens of magical spears and drove them all straight through the beast's body—everywhere but its belly. Reduced to nigh-unrecognizable shreds of flesh, it crashed to the ground with a loud rumble. Then he walked up, sculpted another blade, and sliced open its gut without batting an eye. Plunging a hand inside the bloody incision, he felt around for the source of the signal. At last, his fingers met stone, and he pulled Lara free.

"Lara..."

She was cold and hard and covered in dragon's blood, but it was her. Like last time, she had turned to stone in a position of prayer. Her clothes and shoes had melted away in the stomach acid, leaving only the anklet intact. But there was one other detail that was different this time around.

Her lips were curled in a benevolent smile.

"Why...? Why are you so cruel to me?" For the first time in ages, tears fell from his eyes, and his chest ached until he could scarcely breathe. "If it wasn't for you, I would have destroyed this world...destroyed it all...!"

He wrapped her in his cloak, lifted her, and started walking.

When he arrived back at the village, Marietta took one look at the stone statue and fell to her knees in tears. She apologized again and again, but Alistair didn't say a word.

Back at the castle, he scrubbed her down in the tub, just as he'd done thousands of times before.

"Lara... Why are you smiling?" he spat under his breath.

Was something about this supposed to be funny?



You should have abandoned those people to their fate. No, I should have taken you with me to the capital and kept you safe myself. His regrets were myriad.

The last time Lara had been eaten by a dragon, she'd waited the length of its lifespan to return. If that was the case this time, she wouldn't wake again for another fifty years, by which point he would most likely be dead.

Clutching her statue, he sank to the floor. He might have endured this had he never gotten to experience her softness and warmth. But the year he'd spent living with Lara had been so happy. Alistair couldn't imagine returning to the misery of a life without her—and for more than twice the length of the last time.

"You're so heartless..."

Yet he knew he would keep fighting to preserve her ideal world so it would be waiting for when she woke once again.

Gently, he touched her cheek. The stiff chill tore at his heart. Thinking back to her living skin, he stroked her face, then planted a tiny kiss on those smiling lips. But they, too, were cold. Unable to endure it, he succumbed to despair and crumpled on the spot, sobbing and wailing about his love for his wife.

"I love you, Lara. Please, say something!"

Then, after shedding countless tears, he heard the whisper of a ghost somewhere above him.

"Oh, you poor thing. Why are you crying, my sweet Alice?"

It was the voice of his beloved wife—sweet and unusually high-pitched for her age. Could it be real? Or had he finally lost what remained of his sanity? Timidly, he raised his head.

There Lara sat, human once again.

"Could you fetch me some clothes? It's cold in here."

Summer had not yet begun in earnest, and Lara shivered. Nonetheless, she bent down to meet his eyes, then smiled.

He still couldn't believe it. Shaking, he reached out toward her, brushing her cheek once more. It was so warm, he couldn't help but recoil in surprise. Meanwhile, she looked back at him in confusion.

"How...?" he choked.

How had she returned to human form so suddenly?

Lara pouted. "You're the one who told me to change how the spell ends, remember?" The conversation had taken place in bed after their lovemaking, where he had told her not to make him wait. "I set it to end upon coming into contact with your mana. I knew you'd do weird things to my statue sooner or later."

"Guilty as charged." He was well aware that he had done unspeakable things to her statue over the years. Still, there was an inherent risk in the choice she had made. "What if I had died before I'd gotten you back?"

That was always a possibility. After all, were it not for the gold anklet, it would have been a tremendous challenge to track down a dragon, much less the specific one that had eaten her. And if he had given up hope of her revival at any point, she would have remained a statue forever.

"I would have accepted that," she answered with a sad smile. Then her cheeks flushed pink. "I'd rather stay a statue than wake to a world without you in it."

He stared back blankly for a moment, unable to process the words. In any other situation, he would have easily read between the lines, but he was so used to his feelings going unrequited that he never fathomed they would ever be returned. When it came to Lara, he was especially dense.

"Wh-what I mean to say is... Well..." His failure to take the hint had left Lara adorably flustered. Eventually, she summoned her courage and looked him dead in the eye. "I love you, Alistair," she declared, blushing beet red.

"You love me? *Me*?" he asked, reeling. He found it hard to believe.

Her lips turned down in a scowl. "That's what I just said, isn't it?"

He reached out and pulled her into his arms. "You mean it?" he pressed.

Laughing, she nodded and nuzzled her soft cheek against his chest.

“Lara... Oh, Lara!” Overcome with emotion, his arms tightened around her, and he sobbed like a little boy.

Gently, she stroked his silver hair to soothe him. “There, there. Dry those tears.” They remained in that embrace until Lara’s shivering had turned to shaking.

“Cold?” he asked.

Sniffling, she nodded.

“Then let’s warm you up,” he whispered. And with that, he lifted her into his arms. She must have sensed the implication in his words, because her face stiffened. Yes, she had only just regained her human form, and she was surely exhausted—but he needed the reassurance that she was alive.

The moment he lay her down on the bed, she burrowed under the covers like a woodland creature, making him chuckle. After stripping off his attire, he followed suit, pulling her back into his arms. She fixed him with an exasperated smile—one of his favorites. *I’m going to be such a nuisance tonight.*

Lara closed her eyes when Alistair leaned in. Her acceptance meant the world to him. With these lips, she had told him she loved him, granting him a wish he had thought would never come true. Of course, she probably didn’t love him nearly as much as he loved her, but he was fine with that. She was the kind of philanthropist who felt compassion toward everyone equally. Earning a special place in her heart had been no simple feat.

Her lips had gone pale from the cold, so he sucked on them. When they parted, he pushed his tongue inside, savoring the warmth and tracing over each tooth as if they were pearls.

“Mmh. Hnnn...”

As usual, Lara didn’t know how to breathe while kissing. High-pitched moans passed through her nose, sparking a fire in his loins that made him yearn to pound her into oblivion. But he was afraid she’d turn back to stone if he was rough, so he resisted the temptation.

Once he’d had his fill of her mouth, he slowly pulled away, their lips connected by a thread of saliva that then fell onto her breasts. It was such an

arousing sight that he grabbed them with both hands and squeezed. She didn't seem to realize that there was nothing men found sexier than a woman with big tits and a baby face. She also didn't realize how many of those pests Alistair had personally swatted away in secret.

Her red, swollen nipples practically begged to be sucked, and he pounced.

"Aah! Aaahh!"

He pinned her down as she moaned and writhed, then teased her nipple with the tip of his tongue before biting down lightly. Each motion made her flinch and buck her hips lustily, enslaved to the pleasure he bestowed upon her.

Meanwhile, he relinquished his grip with one hand, choosing instead to slide it down her curves. Each time his fingers grazed a sensitive place, she squirmed—a reaction only possible because she was flesh and blood. He touched her over and over, making doubly sure she was no longer stone. When his hand arrived at her tiny butt, he gave it a squeeze. The resulting squelch informed him that she was soaked.

"It seems someone's *wet*," he whispered into her ear.

Blushing, she flinched away like the words tickled her. They had made love countless times since their wedding day, yet she was still as adorably bashful as a new bride.

Easing his fingers between her legs, he found that, sure enough, she was already leaking onto the sheets. He scooped up the fluid from her slit, gave her a liberal coating, then used the lubrication to slide between her lower lips. There, he felt around for her clit, then gave it a gentle rub.

"Haah! Aah... Aaahh!"

Arching her back, she screamed. Evidently, this was the easiest way to pleasure her. To avoid hurting the precious little bud, he alternated levels of pressure as he toyed with it. Before long, her legs tensed and trembled, and he sensed she was near orgasm. Sliding a finger into her tight, soaking depths, he bent it at the knuckle and rubbed against her bumpy walls. Instantly, her hips bucked.

"*Aaahh!* Oh gods! Right there!"

“Does that feel good, Lara?” he teased. She looked up at him imploringly, her eyes damp with pleasure. As sexy as it was, he wasn’t done torturing her. Again and again, he drove her to the cusp of climax, only to fall still.

“Aah... Aaahh... What are you *doing*?!” she finally spat, frustrated that he was stonewalling her.

“You do realize I’m angry with you, right?” He smiled, hoping to keep the mood lighthearted, but this seemed to scare her all the more. “How many times have I told you not to leave the castle? How could you put yourself in danger like that?”

At this, her expression turned guilty. He knew her well enough to understand that she could never have abandoned the townspeople to save herself. She just wasn’t that kind of woman. But it didn’t change the fact that he was upset with her recklessness.

“Hnnn! I know, but—aaahhh!”

When she tried to make an excuse, he inserted a second finger and pumped them in and out of her pussy while pressing down on her clit with his thumb, making her moan.

“Do you realize how scared I was? Do you realize how hurt I felt?”

“Aaah! Aaaahhh!”

Threading the needle between pain and pleasure, he rubbed her roughly until her body began to shudder.

“I’m sorry, okay? Now stop messing around!” she shouted, eyes full of tears, suggesting she had had enough.

This fed his sadistic side, turning him on immensely. He’d intended to hold out until she promised never to do it again, but at this point, he couldn’t wait that long. Withdrawing his fingers from inside her, he spread her legs wide and stuffed his fully engorged cock all the way into her depths.

“Aaaaaahhh!” The impact of their hips sent Lara screaming into climax, clamping down tightly on his length.

“Nnngh!” He fought like crazy not to ejaculate instantly. The moment he let

his guard down, it would end in a blink. Gritting his teeth, he endured the jolt of pleasure and began to pound her still-twitching pussy.

“Oh gods! Aaahh! Aaaaaahhh!”

Every thrust elicited high-pitched moans and wet squelching. Given that she was bucking her hips into his, he could tell she was enjoying it.

“Hnnn! Aaahh! Aaaaaahhh!”

He pounded against her cervix until she reached a second orgasm. Make no mistake, the sex was good for him, too. Perhaps it was true that magical compatibility directly correlated to sexual compatibility. He wanted nothing more than to put a baby inside her.

“Aaah! Oh gods, Alice! I love you!” Between moans, she professed her love.

“Nnnggghhh!”

Having finally reached his limit, Alistair gripped her hips and buried his full length inside her. Grunting, he flooded her womb with the load of semen he’d been holding back.

The sounds died away, save for the panting of breath. He pumped in and out of her a few final times, wringing out the last drops, then collapsed on top of her.

“Get off me. I can’t breathe,” she complained, though he knew she was just being her usual bashful self.

“Give me a minute to catch my breath, and I’ll cast some medic magic on you.”

As he gently stroked her soft brown hair, she closed her eyes with a smile. Together, they fell into a deep sleep in one another’s arms, as if clinging to each other for dear life.

“Could you have kept your pants on for *five minutes* to let us know Her Ladyship was all right?! Do you know how *worried* we all were?! Where are your *priorities*?!”

When Alistair awoke the next morning, he received a vicious lecture from Marietta, who had dark circles under her eyes and tears streaming down her

face. The other servants likewise gave him dirty looks. But this was nothing he couldn't handle.

After all, Lara was alive and well once more.

"Not so fun when *you're* the one getting scolded, is it?" his wife snickered playfully, but he didn't mind. All that mattered was that she was there with him, warm and breathing. She was his light of hope—his reason for living. She always had been. And she always would be.



Epilogue:

Love in the Mage's Belly

“SER LUTFEL! LADY NICOLE! It’s been so long!”

“That it has, Lara!”

Lara made a beeline straight to her former mentor and his wife, who had recently moved to Gardiner in hopes of a peaceful retirement.

Though Lutfel had just turned sixty, he was still every bit as ruggedly handsome as she remembered. It was unfair, really, how her heart fluttered at the sight of him. His fiery red hair was now streaked with gray, and his wrinkles were more pronounced, but he still seemed young at heart.

Beside him stood his wife, Nicole, beautiful and confident, who had given birth to two more children during the time Lara had been a statue. Despite being a mother of six and a grandmother of three, she still maintained a slim figure. She kept her dark hair short, claiming it got in the way of her work, which afforded her an androgynous appearance. Inexplicably, she had aged even more gracefully than her husband.

Lara gazed rapturously at the two of them. *Marriage goals!*

“You really haven’t changed a bit. Still cute as a button,” Nicole remarked.

“Only because I spent the past twenty years as a statue! What’s *your* secret?!”

Everyone knew the story of how Lutfel and Nicole fell in love. They had originally passed their royal mage exams in the same year. Nicole had put off marriage to prioritize her work, so Lutfel pulled out all the stops to win her heart before the government stepped in to assign her a husband. The woman was so beautiful and talented, Lara had known right away that she couldn’t hope to compete.

As for Alistair, he was being a warm and welcoming host for a change. Perhaps he didn’t feel quite so threatened by Lutfel’s presence as long as Nicole

was nearby. Personally, Lara wished he would learn to relax.

“I really owe you folks an apology. Never in my wildest dreams did I suspect a disciple of mine would ever sink so low.”

“It isn’t your fault, milady!”

Incidentally, it was Nicole who had healed young Alistair’s grisly wound following the dragon attack all those years ago. She was on maternity leave at the time, but when she got the call from a colleague about a dying boy with unusual symptoms, she ran straight to his aid. But one of her disciples had passed the records of that decades-old incident to a group in opposition of Alistair, who then planted a stigma on a willing pawn and used him as bait to lure a dragon into the province of Gardiner in order to wreak havoc.

“They must have gotten their hands on a sample of dragon’s blood during a failed extermination. I suspect they used it to create an artificial stigma in order to lure that specific dragon back out.”

Lara averted her eyes as the memory of the dragon’s victim rose to mind. Whoever these people were, they must have manipulated him into it by offering him the chance to get back at Alistair for the humiliation he suffered as a child. Even so, he certainly hadn’t deserved to die for it.

It seemed the group’s intention had been to make Gardiner seem unsafe and dissuade further immigration. They must have resorted to this after their attempts to assassinate Alistair had ended in failure. The government had denied any involvement, of course, but Alistair was so furious that Lara had been exposed to danger that he leveled the entire ministry wing of the palace nonetheless. In turn, the king was so frightened that he caved to Alistair’s demands and granted Gardiner full autonomy.

Afterward, the former earl came home gloating. “*Power really does solve everything!*” In that regard, he hadn’t grown up one bit, much to Lara’s chagrin.

“Humans truly are stupid creatures, Lara,” Nicole continued.

“You say that, but we’re human, too—you, me, Ser Lutfel, and Alistair. *Human* is too broad of a category to tar with the same brush.” Some people were stupid, yes, but some were good and kind. “It’s not fair to single out one aspect

and decide that's all there is."

"Oh, Lara, you're too pure for this world," Nicole replied, pulling her into a hug.

Lara caught a whiff of something citrusy and smiled dreamily for a moment—before she saw her husband glaring at her from over the woman's shoulder.

Are you seriously jealous of his wife, too?! Grow up already!

Later that night, the new residents were invited to the castle, where the servants prepared for them a marvelous welcoming feast comprised of local cuisine. In preparation for a toast, they passed out goblets of wine sourced from the newly opened vineyard.

"To the continued prosperity of our land and all those who call it home!" Alistair proclaimed.

Their guests cheered and clinked their glasses.

As usual, Lara found herself captivated by her husband's deep, sultry voice. But just as she went to take a sip from her goblet, Nicole reached over her shoulder and swiped it out of her hand. "None for you, my dear."

"What? Why not?!"

Lara was by no means a lightweight when it came to alcohol. Granted, she hadn't been in the mood to drink lately, but she was willing to make an exception for social events.

"Sorry, but you'd better hold off. Here, you can have grape juice instead," Nicole replied, offering her the goblet in her other hand. "Now, why don't we catch up? I haven't seen you in so long. I want to hear all about your adventures!"

The woman's sweet smile gave Lara butterflies in her tummy. To drown them, she took a sip of the juice, then began to recount the long, long story of what had happened since they had last seen each other.

"Well, if it isn't the Earl of Paranoia himself," Lutfel called out as he approached Alistair, who quietly seethed from a distance while Nicole was

putting her hands all over his beloved wife.

“I had hoped your spouse would prove less irritating than you, but it would seem she’s a formidable opponent in her own right.”

He had half a mind to march up and separate them, but his good sense held him back, telling him it would be petty to interrupt Lara while she was reuniting with someone she greatly respected.

“You have my condolences. Trust me, not even I can rein her in.”

“I suppose not. You know, I’m surprised you actually moved out here.”

“The longer I stayed in the capital, the more likely they’d try to put me back to work. I’m old and retired, damn it. I just want to live in peace with my wife.”

“I know the feeling.” Alistair nodded wholeheartedly. He wanted nothing more than to retire early so that he could focus solely on Lara.

This response elicited a chuckle from Lutfel, whose eyes narrowed slightly. “Tell me, Alice, are you content with your life?”

“Of course I am. Why do you ask?” Alistair frowned. Was it not patently obvious how happy he was?

The other man shrugged. “Let’s discuss a hypothetical scenario. Call it a thought experiment, if you like.”

“About?”

“The laws of the world.”

At this, Alistair quirked a brow quizzically. He had always suspected this man had hidden depths, but apparently that was an understatement.

“Suppose that every three hundred years, the gods pass judgment on the human race,” Lutfel continued.

“If this is an invitation to a cult, I’m afraid I’ll have to pass,” Alistair replied on reflex out of sheer confusion.

“Just hear me out, all right? Now, you may not know this, but according to ancient government records, the beasts we call *monsters* only came into being some nine hundred years ago. Before that, humans ruled the earth from the top

of the food chain. But what if the gods sent a messenger...and that messenger yearned for our demise?”

Thus, the monster population exploded out of control, devouring vast swaths of people and driving the rest out of their homes.

“I mean, don’t these monsters seem a little too well-designed? Their characteristics, their lifespans, their breeding rates... Why do they all seem so carefully controlled? Unless, of course, they were created by an arbitrator of the gods as a biological weapon to destroy humanity.”

Then, three hundred years later—that is to say, six hundred years ago—another arbitrator arrived. Like his predecessor, he deemed humanity unfit to survive, and so the great floods wiped out almost all of the world’s countries.

“Seems to me like maybe the punishment varies depending on the type of magic wielded by the arbitrator,” Lutfel continued, shrugging. If the first had been possessed of life-giving magic, then the second was the master of rain and storms. “Then, three hundred years after that, a third arbitrator came down—but this one wished for us to survive. That was when the Archmagus, as we knew him, erected a barrier to preserve our final nation.”

Protected at last from the threat of monsters, the human race began to recover, if only slightly.

“And now, another three hundred years has passed.”

“What are you getting at? You think *I’m* the next arbitrator?”

“No normal human has that much mana. If I were to categorize it, yours is the magic of pure destruction.”

Alistair didn’t respond—just smiled faintly. Indeed, he had long since known the true identity of the mysterious power he held inside.

“When we first brought you in, you gave me a real fright. The Archmagus himself was said to have those same opalescent blue eyes, y’know. Made me wonder if you could be the ‘next arbitrator’ he wrote about before his death.”

Even as a child, Alistair could have eradicated humanity at will, and when they’d found him, he had been teetering on the edge of despair.

“You were a threat. At the same time, we might have incurred the wrath of the gods if we’d killed you before you had the chance to pass judgment. I was desperate to find a way to get you back on our side.”

“So you made Lara your canary in the coal mine.”

Were a good-hearted woman to raise the young arbitrator, he would develop a sentimental attachment to their species as a whole. That was why Lutfel had offered Alistair a makeshift family.

“Correct. Arbitrator or not, you were still a kid, and kids are easily influenced by their environs. Hence, I set you up with the best we had. Never met a more purehearted girl in all my life.” As far as Lutfel knew, no one had been better suited to the task than Lara. “Thing is, I hadn’t expected you to get so damn attached to her. When that dragon devoured her, I thought we were all dead for sure.”

They may well have been, were it not for her final words and a stone statue with the potential of reviving. As a representative of the gods, he decided he would create the ideal world for her to wake up in.

“Looking at it that way, one could say Lara rules the world,” Alistair snickered. “After all, if anything were to happen to her, I might just change my mind.”

He had meant it as a mild threat, but Lutfel didn’t seem bothered. His unflappable confidence was extremely vexing. “By that point, I’ll probably be long gone myself, so it’ll be someone else’s problem.”

“You don’t care about the world you’ll leave to your grandchildren? Spoken like a true geriatric.”

“Ha ha ha! Truth be told, I’m not worried,” the man continued with a smirk. “Have I mentioned that my wife is the world’s leading medic mage?”

“Yes, I know it all too well. She saved my life, as you might recall.”

Meanwhile, Lara smiled dreamily as the woman in question stroked her hair.

Homewrecker!

“She can tell a person’s physical condition from the state of their mana, and she let me in on a little secret about Lara.”

Instantly, Alistair's expression turned to ice. Sparks flew as his silver hair began to ripple faintly. "What did she do to my wife?"

"Relax, would you? You're so touchy. Anyway, it's about Lara's belly."

There was a long pause, during which Lutfel carried on grinning until Alistair finally lost his patience. "Out with it already! What about it?!"

"She's pregnant. Ain't that something?"

At this, Alistair's opalescent blue eyes widened. "Pregnant? With my child?"

"Well, she's not pregnant with kittens, wiseass! She's still in the first trimester, but the fetus is healthy. From one father to another: Congratulations."

It felt like some kind of joke. Perplexed, Alistair looked over at his wife; she saw him looking and waved at him with a smile. In that instant, joy welled up in his chest, and his expression crumpled into tears. Sensing something was wrong, Lara rose to her feet and began walking toward him.

Then one of the waitstaff noticed her empty goblet and offered her a new one, filled to the brim with wine. She reached out to accept it—and the next thing he knew, he was racing over at full speed.

"Lara! Go sit back down! And don't drink anything alcoholic!"

Love begets love, as the saying went. Over the course of his life, Alistair's world would expand to include more people than he could possibly count—and at that point, he would care far too deeply to ever wish destruction upon the human race. As the young man scrambled off in a tizzy, Lutfel couldn't help but chuckle.

Afterword

IT'S NICE TO MEET YOU! My name is Crane. Thank you for reading *The Obsessed Mage and His Beloved Statue Bride: She Cannot Resist His Seductive Voice*, the story of a mage who takes in a young orphan boy, only for him to out-age her, and they live happily ever after. It's a medley of my favorite tropes!

I'd like to thank Uehara Hachi-sensei for the beautiful illustrations of Lara and Alistair. When I saw them for the first time, I started screeching and my soul left my body!

I'd also like to thank my editor and all those involved with the production of this book.

Thank you to my husband, who always pulls me back from the dark side.

And lastly, a big, *big* thank-you to all the fans of this story. Life is a struggle at the moment, but I hope my work can brighten your day.

—CRANE

Story Crane

I’m Crane, and I like to think up story ideas in my free time between juggling work, chores, and childcare. I had a lot of fun writing this mentor-disciple age-gap reversal story, and I hope you had just as much fun reading it.

Illustrations Hachi Uehara

I recently got a cute new phone case, and it’s put me in a good mood.



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