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4



THE Drab Princess, THE Black Cat, AND THE Satisfying Break-up

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The Drab Princess, the Black Cat, and the Satisfying Break-up Volume 4

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The Drab Princess, the Black Cat, and the Satisfying Break-up Volume 4

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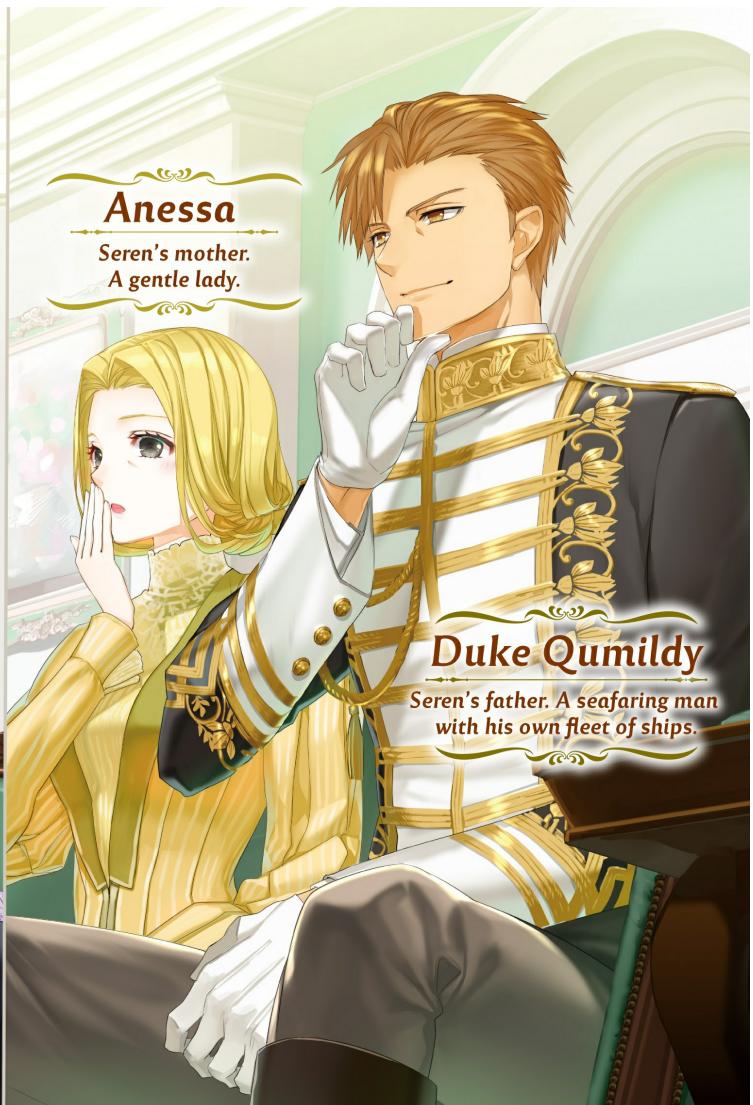
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"I'm in love
with Lord Viol.
Yes, I am."

"Oh,
Sister...!"

"Well!
I knew it!"

Marietta

Seren's gorgeous
and lively younger sister.

Ladia

The daughter of a conservative count.
She deals with sea trade in the salon.

Linde

The daughter of a reformist duke.
A member of the salon.
She's a gallant lady.

"The vows are made."

Seren stared intently at the silver ring being put on her finger, then looked up at me and gave me a reassuring smile.

The moment the ring finally slid perfectly on that slender finger, Seren smiled with such joy.



Every Day Is So Much Fun

ABOUT ten days or so have gone by since I passed the High Mage Exam. Now I'm finally working in the Mage Tower. It's been so hectic I've almost made myself dizzy.

After the announcement at the ball, it was publicized to the whole country that my engagement with Prince Helios was officially off. The public was also informed that I would now work as a High Mage and would soon move out of my father's, the Duke of Qumildy's, mansion and live independently. They even showed that recording of me defeating the giant bear.

Since I was now officially a High Mage, I would have to drop out of the academy. Father also thought it would be best if I no longer participated in the salons, so Lady Linde, Lady Ladia, and my sister Marietta had been visiting my new residence frequently so that I could give them all the info needed for a smooth handover. I enjoyed these visits tremendously, of course, but they did take up quite a lot of time.

Every day was so frantic that I didn't even have time to practice magic.

But from today on, my life as a High Mage would finally begin.

I would go to my post in the mornings, receive instructions from Lord Viol, tour the Mage Tower, and eat meals at the special cafeteria (Mages are a forgetful bunch, so this is to make sure we eat). I'd finally started to relax and get used to things. Me and the other three newbies, that is.

"That's all for today. Starting tomorrow, we'll begin introductory training. If there's anything you don't understand, don't just sit in silence. Ask questions until you have no more questions left to ask. Though you may be new, you are all already High Mages. If you do a sloppy job, the country will suffer.

Remember that.”

“Understood!”

“All right. Dismissed!”

When the severe-looking instructor left the room, we all sighed in unison.

“Phew. That was nerve-wracking.”

A young man—maybe around the same age as me—was the first to speak from his position slumped over his desk. He had shoulder-length, straight blond hair and wore glasses with thin silver frames. He looked intelligent. I think he said his name was Lucien. He was on track to graduate from the Magic Academy this year, but passing the High Mage exam expedited his graduation.

Shocked by this news, the other two had gasped things like, “Wow, fast-track entry?! You really must be good!” Indeed, it was rare for someone still in the Magic Academy to pass the exam. He must have worked very hard.

“Seriously. I haven’t been in an environment this severe in, well, ages.”

The adorable girl, with bright orange hair and freckles, stretching her arms was Arles. She was perky and seemed easy to talk to. She always smiled at everyone, including me, and she’d worked as a magic tutor for three years after graduating from the Magic Academy.

“You’ve all got the endurance for this stuff,” she continued. “Whether it’s at school or actual work, you’re used to sitting at a desk. Me? I get exhausted if I sit still for too long. Ah, my shoulders are killing me.”

“Er, are you going to be all right? If you get that tired from sitting, you won’t be able to do Wall Duty for those long shifts.” Gil, the oldest of us successful candidates from this round, had been the one to point this out while cracking his neck loudly.

During his self-introduction, he’d smiled brightly and confessed he’d passed seven years after graduating from the Magic Academy and that passing the exam had been an obsession for him. During the time he’d been trying, he’d been honing his skills as a paid adventurer, so he no doubt had the most experience of us all when it came to subjugating magical beasts.

"You're not wrong," Arles responded. "But I guess since I've finally made it as a High Mage, I'd better try to acclimate as quickly as I can."

To me, they all seemed like superstars.

From a young age, they'd all gone to the Magic Academy intending to become High Mages. And even after graduating, they'd gotten through the entrance exam by continually improving their skills and never losing sight of their long-held ambitions.

Now I could understand how Marietta always felt. When she joined the salon, everyone else was so far ahead of her, and she felt left behind and inadequate. She'd pushed herself but was never quite able to close that gap. She couldn't help feeling stressed and insecure, but the only way to catch up was to put in the effort needed.

"Hey, hey, since we're here, why don't the four of us get a bite to eat on the way home?" Arles suggested.

"Oh, that sounds like fun." Gil broke into a smile at Arles's proposal.

I breathed a sigh of relief, glad that everyone was so friendly. That's when Gil narrowed his eyes and scrutinized me. Gil had an outgoing, almost crude way about him, but his smile lines proved he had a warm soul.

"Now you... Weren't you the one who invented a new form of magic during your exam?" he questioned me. "That's super interesting. I have a heap of questions I'd like to ask you."

"Oh..."

Taken aback, I gasped a little. Yes, during the exam, I pioneered a new form of magic. Although, if I'm honest, I wasn't particularly trying to do that. It was sort of an accident. Still, I couldn't deny that it was more or less what I'd done.

The test involved casting a personal protective wall of a specified thickness and strength around me and then holding my magical power and output steady without wavering, no matter what was thrown at me.

I was informed that I could do whatever I wanted during the exam, so, as I was still inexperienced with using magic, I thought I would take the opportunity

to review some of the basics. At the same time, I'd learned a spell called Wind Lance as well.

Wind Lance, which the examiner showed me, gave me the idea to create a whirlwind out of the Wind Lance spell. I thought that doing so might increase its destructive power. Anyway, that's what I tried to do. I had no idea I was inventing an entirely new form of magic!

And Gil must have been observing me.

During the exam, I was so absorbed in what I was doing that I didn't glance at anyone else's work. It impressed me that Gil had enough confidence to do so.

"Right, right, I was curious about that, too! Seren, the battle record you submitted was made public, right? I was amazed to see you fighting while flying at the same time! How did you do that?"

It was Arles's turn to lean forward in interest. I suddenly felt self-conscious in the face of all this attention, but Lucien, sitting in the seat next to me, reined the two of them in, saying, "Now, just calm down. I have a lot of things I want to ask, too, but Seren... Can we call you Seren? You're the daughter of a duke, aren't you? Are you allowed to go out for a meal with us...?"

"Oh, right."

"Of course, I forgot about that."

"Oh, no, it's okay," I blurted. "I'm no longer officially part of a duke's household. I'm in the same position as everyone else, so there's no problem with us spending time together. And yes, please do call me Seren." I spoke awkwardly, worried about my phrasing.

My previous way of speaking like a high society lady kept leaking out, much as I tried to suppress it, though I knew it would be better to change my vernacular. I wanted to confidently use the kind of casual speech I'd heard the town girls using when I'd gone out with Lord Viol.

"Huh, so regardless of background, we all have the same status as High Mages?" Gil asked. "So not only can the lower classes elevate themselves by becoming High Mages, but a duke's daughter will lose her previous exalted position?"

“Y-Yes,” I said. “It’s to prevent misuse of a High Mage’s powers.”

“Heh, well, it sounds like a bit of a waste to me,” Gil sighed. “Still, it’s all right as it is, I suppose. Now we can go out to eat together and speak as we like. You can enjoy a little of the common flavor! We can teach you all sorts, I bet!”

“Right?” Arles said, beaming, and my spirits soared. Nothing would make me happier than if we could become friends.

“Yes! Thank you very much!” I exclaimed.

“Great! Let’s go, then,” Gil said. “Come on, Baldy. Get it together, or we’ll leave you behind.”

“I’m not bald.”

Just as Lucien jumped up in response to Gil’s urging, the door to the Guidance Room flung open.

“Wait, wait!” Vellia, the examiner in charge when I took the High Mage exam, came clattering in. And behind her came several more men and women. Some looked familiar, but I couldn’t say for sure that I’d seen them before.

“Ah, Vellia! Thank you for all your help during the exam,” I said in greeting.

“Oh, please. It was all you. You all passed with flying colors. But to think! Someone abandoning an engagement to become... Oh, whoops!” Vellia stopped just short of finishing that statement.

“Um...” I wasn’t sure how to respond.

“You were all just saying how you’d like to go for a bite to eat, weren’t you?” Vellia asked. “What would you say to us joining you?”

Us four newcomers exchanged glances in response to Vellia’s unexpected suggestion. The more senior High Mages who’d come in behind her spoke up.

“Actually, we came here to invite you to a meal ourselves.”

“We’re all curious about the new blood, you see.”

Gil and the other two looked at the senior High Mages and started whispering, “Oh, from the exam...” From this, I surmised that some must have also served as examiners during the High Mage exam.

"Oh, that would be great! I'd love to hear all of the old-timers' stories! Right, everyone?" Arles beamed, and the other two smiled, looking pleased.

"Right? Sounds like great fun," Gil agreed. "And why not go someplace where we can drink, too? Baldy, Seren, you can drink alcohol too, right?"

"Yes. But Gil, don't disgrace yourself in front of our senior peers, got it?" Lucien warned.

Everyone laughed, and I found my lips curving into a smile. I was glad that my peer group and the older seniors all seemed to be such friendly people. And today was such a special day... The day I officially became a High Mage. I ended up enjoying the welcome party to the fullest.



AFTER much conversation and feasting on rare delicacies, I returned to my new residence in high spirits. Relaxing in my room after a bath, I heard a gentle tap at the window. When I looked out the window, I saw a familiar, supple little black form tapping away.

Delighted, I ran over to open the window.

"Vi! You came!"

Even after I'd moved to this new residence, Lord Viol always visited me in his Vi form. He worried it wouldn't look good for a man to be seen visiting my residence, even if he was technically my boss. Especially after I had just broken off an engagement to another man.

He had made up his mind that he would not visit me in human form for at least three months.

"Lady Seren, today was your first day of work as a High Mage, so I had to see you. I wanted to come earlier, but there are a lot of meetings and arrangements and such on days like this."

"That sounds like a lot to deal with," I said. "But it's okay; I just got home and had a bath. The senior Mages invited us all out for a meal and drinks."

"Oh, indeed? Did you have fun?"

"Oh yes, very much so! I got to hear all about the Mage Guild and what they

do and discuss all sorts of things with the new Mages who passed the exam at the same time as me... It was all fascinating and invaluable!"

"Well, splendid." Vi breathed a sigh of relief. "The Third Mage Guild isn't a united group, per se. We prefer it if everyone goes their individualistic way."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes. When I was a new member, the prevailing feeling was that being dragged along to dinner and drinking events with your boss was the pits," Vi said.

"Oh. Yes. Some people do feel that way," I nodded.

"More people than you'd think! So, when I attained the position of Archmage, I changed things up so that everyone had free reign to go drinking and eating only if they'd like, at only the restaurants they would like to go to. As long as it was an official get-together of Mages, everything would be fully subsidized."

That was classic Lord Viol. I had to smile. I could imagine he was one of the group representatives who abhorred dinner and drinking parties with colleagues. For those who want to broaden their circle of friends and deepen their mutual understanding, gatherings of that type are gold. But I could appreciate how some people might feel it wasn't the best use of their precious time.

I enjoy things like balls and dancing, but even though I always knew it was part of my role to network and chat with all kinds of people, I'd be lying if I said it wasn't exhausting. His changes might be the best setup for those who'd like to do something without pressuring those who'd rather refrain.

"So, how was it?" he asked. "Do you think you can get along well with everyone? ...Although I suppose there's a limit to how well you can grasp the situation on the first day."

"Oh, it was wonderful!" I said with vigor. "The other new High Mages were all so friendly and easy to chat with, and the seniors were all so kind! Although they did ask me a lot of questions that were difficult to answer."

I smiled through my response, and Vi beamed as if enjoying my enthusiasm.

"It can't be helped. If I were in their shoes, I'm sure I'd have plenty of things I'd like to ask you, Lady Seren."

"You would, Lord Viol?"

"Mm-hm."

"...There's a woman called Arles in my group," I began. "Guess what she said? She said it was fascinating enough that I gave up being a duke's daughter and the prince's fiancée to become a High Mage, not to mention that I flew during my exam and invented a new form of magic on top of it all. She said any person worth their salt would be curious about me, and she herself wished she could stay at my place for three days and nights to learn every last thing about it!"

"Hahaha, well, she's quite right," Vi laughed. "And on top of all that, you never even attended the Magic Academy. You're quite the enigma. An enigma that anyone would love to uncover!"

"Goodness, it's no joking matter! I mustn't say too much. What if I blurted out the truth about the secret tutoring you gave me, Lord Viol? You'd be in trouble then, wouldn't you?"

"Indeed, I would." But Vi seemed relaxed and at ease. "Still, you'll be fine, Lady Seren. After all, unlike a commoner like me, you come from an aristocratic background with years of experience in grueling social situations, right? I have complete faith that you would never carelessly let anything slip."

"Oh, Vi!" I gushed.

"You'll be just fine."

When he gives me those kitty-cat eyes and rubs that tiny face against my hand...it makes me want to agree with everything he says. Not that I was going to say so, of course. But it was obvious his charm was working on me.

"Still, I'm glad everything looks to be shaping up well," he said.

"Yes, I'm sure it'll be fine," I agreed. "I'm more worried about whether or not I'll be able to catch up to the others. The others have extensive experience serving as magic tutors and adventurers before becoming High Mages... But me... Well, compared to them, I'm lacking in fundamental experience...!"

“I’m not overly concerned about that. I’ve already prepared a curriculum for you that will cover all the basics. And I know your magic style and approach. Indeed, I foresee no issues.” Vi gave me his stamp of approval.

“Really?”

“I never exaggerate when it comes to magic, nor do I offer insincere platitudes.”

“Right... No, of course not.”

Vi’s strong assurances were finally putting me more at ease.

“Good, there’s that smile,” he said happily.

“Thank you, Vi.”

Vi’s satisfied kitty smile was always so adorable. Nothing was more soothing. Chatting like this, I felt all the anxiety seeping out of me. What with today being the first day and meeting the others for the first time... I was nervous.

I was certain Vi came to visit me because he anticipated that.

He said he had meetings of all sorts. Even though he must be busier than I could ever imagine, the fact that he made time to come and see me made my heart beat faster.

As I stroked his glossy back, he stood and stretched. Stretching every vertebra in his whole spine and the tail looks satisfying. I’m always fascinated when Vi does it.

“You have work again tomorrow, right?” he said. “Now that I feel reassured about how you’re doing, I should head home.”

“Oh, you’re going already? In that case, just one second.”

I rushed out of the room and headed to the kitchen.

I got so caught up in the chat I was glad I thought ahead and asked Jean, my personal chef, to make me a cookie with a long shelf life. Now that I’m no longer a duke’s daughter, I can order things like this and fetch them myself without having to get servants involved.

One of these days...if I ever had a little more time, it would be fun to ask Jean

to teach me how to make sweets myself. Maybe Lord Viol would like to make them with me. After all, he did make that homemade frozen yogurt that one time.

My heart pounding with all kinds of delightful imaginings, I ran into the kitchen.



TWO months have gone by since I started working as a High Mage at the Mage Tower.

My days have flown by in a chaotic blur.

Unlike the other newcomers, I didn't go to the Magic Academy. On top of everything else, I needed to learn the fundamental magic I ought to have at school. So, no matter how much time I have, it's never enough.

Luckily, the senior Mages are very kind and explain things to me with patience, even if it's something basic I'm oblivious to. I always apologize for the extra trouble, but all I can do to make it up to them is study hard and repay their kindness by being an effective High Mage in the future.

Everyone else in my group is already educated in the development of magical devices and spells, and learning that they've already advanced to the practical stage makes me feel panicked and rushed. Still, there's no way I can learn the techniques the others have mastered over the years in just a matter of days.

Or so I told myself as I carried out my tasks for the day.

I was scurrying along the corridor of the Mage Tower, desperate to put into practice some new magic I'd just been taught—being careful around the corners. Yes, I was rounding a corner at a sedate pace, reminding myself to *take my time, take my time*, when...

“...Ah.”

I gasped without thinking. Then I clapped a hand over my mouth and darted behind the cover of the corner.

Slowly, I poked my head out.

“Lord Viol...” I muttered in a small, soft voice. My chest felt at once both soft

and warm.

As a rookie who'd only just joined the Third Mage Guild, I had few opportunities to see Lord Viol, the leader of the guild himself. But catching glimpses of him here and there felt like a rare treat. I loved these little coincidences.

We couldn't speak to one another, but I could still look at him, and every time I did, my heart pounded!

Indeed, I hadn't seen Lord Viol's face up close in person for quite a while. He often visited my residence in black cat form, of course, but sometimes I hankered after the sight of Lord Viol as a human.

He didn't notice me at all, though, and continued conversing with someone else with a stern expression.

No doubt he was listening closely to a verbal report, but he radiated an unapproachable aura and looked so very stern... The kind of sternness I basically never see whenever he's with me.



Lord Viol muttered a few words, his face completely static, and the face of the man he appeared to be consulting with suddenly brightened.

...Oh.

There was the slightest hint of change.

Lord Viol's eyes crinkled just a little. His lips, as he looked down with a gentle gaze, seemed to loosen up slightly. Yes, there was a definite loosening. No doubt, some issue had just been resolved. Lord Viol looked pleased, too, seeing the relief on the face of his conversation partner.

Seeing Lord Viol's stern face... The stern face I could only ever see at work, coupled with that characteristic Lord Viol kindness... It felt as though my chest suddenly filled with warmth. I felt as though I'd been given a quick burst of invigoration and imbued with a renewed feeling of motivation.

"I have to do my best, too," I whispered to myself.

I would work hard as one of Lord Viol's subordinates, as a High Mage, and do my best to soak up Lord Viol's strict instructions. *No more relying on his kind and patient assistance...!*

I clenched my fists behind the wall where Lord Viol couldn't see and renewed my resolve.



"...**ALL** right, good work."

That evening, when the workday was drawing to a close, Vellia looked over my work with a smile.

Since beginning my work as a High Mage, Vellia has given me the most instruction. I heard that amongst Wind Mages, she was one of the most skilled. According to Lord Viol, the day after it was announced to the whole country that I would become a High Mage, she planned to guide me.

No doubt she was giving me special attention because I had mentioned during the exam that I had never attended the Magic Academy and had only read fundamental magic texts.

I really appreciated her guidance.

“Indeed, if you continue at this pace, I don’t foresee you having any problems,” she said. “You can develop your fundamental-level magic through practical application, and your understanding of the classroom lectures is outstanding. In just two months, you’ve made it to the beginning of the third level of the mid-level magic curriculum. Never could I have imagined your progress would be this swift!”

“Oh, really? I’m so glad...! I know I’m quite a bit behind compared to the others, so I’ve been doing my best to catch up,” I said.

Vellia looked a little taken aback for some reason. “You know... I think this is something you’re not aware of, so let me explain... The schedule we’re on is already so tight that it’s considered quite insane. But you’re keeping up with everything. You’re rather amazing, you know?”

“...Thank you very much.”

Vellia insisted on complimenting me, but it made perfect sense that I’d be succeeding. After all, the seniors at the Mage Tower gave me almost one-on-one guidance, and on top of that, Lord Viol frequently visited my new residence in black cat form, giving me patient advice whenever I was stuck. It’d be terrible if I couldn’t keep up despite getting all this extra help.

“You still don’t seem aware of it yourself... Well, never mind.” Vellia smiled wryly, but I couldn’t explain myself to her. All I could do was smile vaguely. “Oh yes, Seren. I almost forgot. Next week, you will be meeting with a magical device inventor. I’m sure you’ll enjoy that.”

“Goodness! Really?!” I perked up at once.

“Oh, you do look pleased. Are you interested in magical devices, Seren?”

“Oh, yes! After I was accepted as a High Mage, my father showed me his collection of wonderful magical devices! There are so many inventive and innovative ones out there! Even people without much magical power of their own can benefit from magic through the use of those ingenious devices!”

“Ah, yes. Your father is the Duke of Qumildy, isn’t he? No doubt he has quite the collection of them.”

“Hehe, yes, he certainly did seem to have a lot.”

Father was rather famous for his love of magic devices, after all. That’s what Lord Viol always said, anyway. And judging by what I’d seen of Father’s collection, the rumors were well-founded.

How fun it would be if I could invent a device that would be handy for people to use in their everyday lives!

“I’m looking forward to it!” I said with much enthusiasm.

“Right...” For some reason, Vellia groaned a little at my new show of exuberance. “I’ll have you see the magical device engineer, Old Man Euleho. Now, he’s something of an old crank, but his skills are second to none. No doubt you’ll come up with some outlandish ideas, Seren, but if anyone can put them into practice, it’s Old Man Euleho, if you ask me.”

“Oh... Really? Well... Thank you...?”

I said thanks, but I wasn’t sure whether or not this was something I should be happy about. It was a little intimidating to learn that I was to meet an eccentric, genius engineer and expected to come up with “outlandish” ideas.

At the salons, I was always spoken of as someone cautious, the type to look before she leaps. When it comes to magic, I’m working hard on the fundamentals and trying to take on everything everyone has told me as I progress carefully.

The prospect of finally being able to work with magical devices made my heartbeat quicken, but I hung my head as I headed home, weighed down with vague concerns.



“**HAHAHAHA!** I see! Yes, Vellia certainly knows how to pick them!”

“It’s not funny...”

But Vi was guffawing.

His adorable tail whacked against the table busily, and I couldn’t help finding it distracting. It was like a fuzzy cat toy, and I was the cat entranced by it. I wanted to touch the adorable floofy tail so much that I could hardly stand it.

Ever since I started work at the Mage Tower, both Lord Viol and Vi—whom I was now seeing every day—had become much more expressive. The little gestures each made were, to me, the very height of adorableness.

I was pleased to see Vi laugh, but I wasn't quite sure what was so funny, so I had no idea how to react.

"I apologize, Lady Seren," he said, trying to get his laughter under control. "Of course you don't get it because you haven't yet met Old Man Euleho."

"I haven't. Is he oh so very strange?"

"Well, he's a stubborn old goat who doesn't compromise on his craftsmanship. So if you try to goof off around him, he'll come down on you like a ton of bricks, regardless of your age or gender."

"He sounds quite frightening."

"I rather like the old codger. He's just a stickler, that's all. And despite his age, he's more excited about new inventions than anyone else I know of. He's fairly open-minded, too. He's someone you can rely on, someone who will work with you when it comes to new development."

"Well, that all sounds good to me," I said, not getting the issue.

"...It's more that he's got a rather severe face and a sharp tongue, which puts some people off."

Then Vi chuckled and said something about how he was one to talk, being a severe and sharp-tongued person himself. Seeing him chuckle, I immediately felt more at ease.

"Well, I'm sure I'll be fine. After all, I already know you, Lord Viol, with your fearsome reputation, and I know how kind you truly are inside." I stroked Vi's soft throat, and he stretched his chin out for easier access, narrowing his eyes in pleasure. "Besides, thanks to you, Vi, I already know that Old Man Euleho isn't the type to get angry over unreasonable things. So even if he scolds me a little, I'll be fine."

"Old Man Euleho makes newcomers cry quite often," Vi warned.

"Well... I might cry, I suppose, if he yells at me and his face is very scary. But

he's not going to say anything outright malicious or mean, is he? So I can handle a few tears. I've been through something similar many times before, after all."

"That's right, Lady Seren. You went through rigorous princess consort training. You became a formidable young lady, the type to elicit sighs of approval from intimidating foreign dignitaries and the like."

"A formidable young lady? I assure you, I blubbed often." I laughed, and Vi stroked my arm with his soft tail. His fur was velvety soft, and I found myself grinning like a loon. Unable to resist any longer, I pressed my cheek against Vi's supple body. It was so comforting to feel the soft fur against my cheeks! "Thank you, Vi. You're so kind."

"Well, it's all I can do... How are things at the moment? Nothing too taxing, I hope?"

"Oh, not at all!" I yelped my response.

Not only was I free to immerse myself in learning as much magic as my heart desired, but I was also receiving daily tutoring and so much help from my learned seniors. And I got to see Lord Viol daily in the form of Vi! Yes, every day was filled with such fun and happiness. Taxing? Not a bit!

"I'm very happy right now," I told him. "It's fun to learn new magic, and everyday life in the city is somehow so fresh and fun."

Living in the city was another major factor in my current happiness. My little house was certainly much smaller than a duke's mansion. I had only four servants: Rince, my maid, originally assigned to me by Father; Jean, my cook; Albert, the house steward; and Greer, the footman. I knew them all from their tenure at my family home and trusted them all completely.

I lived in a small two-story building that was once a merchant's house, not far from the Mage Tower... Right, a house, not a mansion. It had only eight rooms, including the guest bedrooms. Compared to the estate I'd grown up in, it was practically minimalist.

It almost felt like being at home with family still... Perhaps because the staff and I were so used to one another. But it meant that, unlike when I lived in my father's residence, I could go shopping in the city, ride in horse-drawn carriages,

purchase and eat food from street stalls... I could do so many things I'd never experienced before so easily!

My coworkers advised that I do as much. Knowing how the common folk live can be invaluable when thinking up new ideas for spells and magic devices. It made perfect sense to me.

Now, one of my big goals was to learn more about the lives of the townspeople, so I'd been actively stopping by the town on my way home from the Mage Tower every day.

Yes, I was enjoying my new life immensely.

Of course, I was sad that I couldn't see my family as often, but that aside, I was still absolutely thriving in my brand-new life.

Viol 24

I Want to Be Together, in Human Form

“SEREN, this one next.”

“Okay!”

“Ah, Seren. Here. The papers you submitted yesterday.”

“Also, we’ll be training in fundamental magic starting this afternoon. I’ve rearranged the schedule, carved out the time, and reported it to the division commander, so don’t worry.”

“Oh, thank you!”

I breathed a secret sigh as I watched Lady Seren busily mingling with her seniors at work and responding with big smiles.

Good grief. It’s only been two months since she joined the Third Mage Guild, but Lady Seren has become surprisingly popular.

Although, it’s fine this way. Good, in fact. Obviously. It’s just that I was clear when I declared to the King and Lady Seren’s father that I would take responsibility for her education. And despite that, I’d done nothing.

The day after it was announced to the whole country that Lady Seren would become a High Mage, my subordinate, Vellia, submitted a plan she called “Seren’s Educational Curriculum.”

Lady Seren has exceptional wind magic abilities; really, she’s at the top of the heap when it comes to wind attribute specialists. So, I had no justification for blocking this plan or rejecting the curriculum that had been painstakingly put together.

Vellia, the proctor in charge of Lady Seren’s exam, was, together with the other exam proctors for this round, playing a central role in launching an

association known as the “Raising Up Seren Association” behind the scenes.

Lunacy! ...is what I’d love to have said. If such an association existed, surely I, of all people, should be its president.

...But, all jokes aside.

It remains a fact that, during her exam, Lady Seren distinguished herself by developing a new form of magic on the spot. I could hardly expect Mages to witness that and not froth with excitement.

Also, the fact that she never attended the Magic Academy or studied fundamental magic officially might be a concern in the face of her overwhelming talent.

Should she be afforded a basic education through the proper channels? Of course, she should.

Once Lady Seren began her formal education, she showed such diligence it was hard to believe she’d spent her life before as a high-ranking aristocrat’s daughter. What educator could fail to be excited by such an apt, dedicated pupil?

As a result, after a mere two weeks, Lady Seren had already become the focus of everyone’s special attention. The “Raising Up Seren Association” was only the tip of the iceberg.

But my concern was that she might be being distanced just a little from her peers who joined at the same time as her. Her specialized curriculum was different from theirs, meaning they had few opportunities to mingle. And she often ate her meals with whoever was instructing her that day, too. I often caught sight of people trying to engage her in conversation, fascinated by her performance in the exam, but Lady Seren was so busy with work that it appeared she never had much time to chat.

If you ask me, the people who joined the last few years before her looked rather annoyed.

I understand how they feel, so I haven’t intervened, but I’ve been concerned that there may be some tension.

Tonight, I planned to do some digging.



AFTER finishing the day's work, I changed into my black cat form and headed straight to Lady Seren's new residence. I say "residence," but perhaps "house" would be more accurate. It's certainly not as gorgeous as the duke's mansion. That said, it's not as cramped as your average house. More of a moderate mansion, perhaps.

She has four servants in total, which makes it a rather large household... But perhaps that's not considered that many servants for an aristocrat? The residence has only two floors, with Lady Seren's room on the second floor. In terms of location, it's much closer and easier to access.

I was prowling lightly onto the grounds of the residence when...

A head, like that of a yellow chick, popped out of the servants' door and started looking about restlessly.

Wait, could that be...

My eyes met those of the chick-headed man.

"Ah! Good! I thought you were due to make an appearance! Come on, kitty!" He called out to me in a cajoling voice, like one would use on a pet cat.

Ugh, I might have stumbled into the clutches of someone most vexing.

"I have something to discuss with you. Come, come along," he cooed.

Hmm. This doesn't sound like something I want to be a part of. Should I flee? While I was hesitating, the chick-headed man picked up on my reluctance and began tempting me.

"Look, I have some delicious muffins, too. Today's have jam inside. Incredibly sweet."

Guh! The whispers of a devil!

Come to think of it, this fellow was Lady Seren's resident cook and pâtissier. I've eaten desserts at this new residence several times already, and even though he's still an amateur when it comes to desserts, he's as good as any

head chef. I believe she said his name was Jean. I mean, Lady Seren said, of course.

Perhaps just a bite or two... If I stayed too long chatting with the chef, Lady Seren would be wondering where I'd gotten to.

I trotted over to Jean, who tried to stroke my head in an overly familiar way. I ducked and avoided his hand.

"Ooh! Shy, are you? After you were rubbing all over Lady Seren, too!"

Jean looked dissatisfied, but I didn't care to be stroked by anyone other than Lady Seren. I hadn't even wanted to be spotted by anyone in the first place. Jean should be grateful I'd even approached him.

Now then, he said he wanted to chat? Get to the point.

I looked up, transmitting that sentiment with my eyes. It can be inconvenient at times like these to be unable to speak. I could meow, I suppose. But how embarrassing!

With no other recourse, I spurred him on with my eyes.

"Oh, right, right. Um, you can drink soup, right?"

I nodded, and he rushed off to somewhere in the mansion and ran back with a small plate and a muffin.

"I prepared soup and muffins for tomorrow. The muffins are certainly delicious... And the soup shouldn't be half bad... Er... I suppose I'm not quite so confident about the soup..." Jean scooped up a ladle-full of soup and dripped it back into the bowl repeatedly as he muttered.

Perhaps he was trying to cool it down for my cat tongue. How considerate. But wasn't this a bit odd? Inviting a cat to taste soup?

"I can't show my lack of confidence in front of the others after the head chef recommended me... Now, he tells me that, though you're just a cat, you're quite the gourmet." Jean approached, bringing the spoon of soup close to me, his brow knit with worry.

Well, he's got me there. I've been to pretty much every patisserie in town, so if one wanted to call me a gourmet, they'd be justified. Still... I don't think I have

an especially sophisticated palate or anything.

For starters, I was born a commoner, and while a housekeeper cooks for me now, it's not as if I request aristocratic dishes. I wasn't sure I'd be able to make a shrewd assessment for Jean.

Still, I understood how he must have felt.

He'd prepared a prototype for tomorrow's meal. No doubt he'd taste-tested it himself many times. Still, he was uneasy and would go so far as to ask even a small black cat for a second opinion. Jean struck me as a diligent young man.

I gazed at the soup on the spoon with a vague desire to cheer Jean on. It appeared to be some sort of creamy potage. Rather orange in color, with a cute little pumpkin in the center. It must be some kind of pumpkin potage. It looked very smooth.

I took a lick. It was the sweetest and most delicious pumpkin potage I'd ever eaten. I looked up at Jean's face in surprise, then lapped up the rest of the spoon with enthusiasm, wanting to show how delicious I found it. How silky it was! The texture was so smooth; the taste, sweet and delectable!

"Oh! Do you like it?" Jean happily scooped me another spoon, which I lapped with gusto. Jean watched me with a satisfied look on his face. As fast as he scooped, I lapped. I knew my enthusiasm would make him happy.

"You're eating it with such enjoyment! That fills me with happiness!" Jean's frown broke into a huge smile.

No doubt, believing he was conversing with a mere cat, Jean had decided to let his defenses down. He looked thrilled. My chest grew warm and fuzzy inside.

"Pumpkin flesh is sweetest and most delicious around the seeds. This potage is made out of that part exclusively, so it must be especially sweet. You like sweet things, don't you?"

Woah!

He tried to pet me, so I slunk away from his hand. I shouldn't let my guard down while eating.

"Hmm, you've got your defenses up, kitty."

You think you can get me so easily? Jean looked rueful as he handed me a muffin. I was just biting into it when I heard a familiar voice from overhead.

“Oh, my, is that you, Vi?”

Ah... Lady Seren.

Whoops. I almost spoke aloud.

“Hehe, I was wondering what was keeping you,” she giggled, her voice like bells. “So you took a detour to the kitchens, did you?”

“I... I do apologize! It was me that held him up.”

When Lady Seren laughed mischievously, Jean leapt to his feet, apologizing. He reached for me as if to pick me up. Perhaps he planned to hand me to Lady Seren. I ducked under his arm and fled.

I may have been a cat, but I would not stand for manhandling.

“Well, never mind. Vi does so love his sweet treats,” she said. “There’s no way he’d be able to avoid one of your amazing concoctions, Jean.”

Please, Lady Seren. Do not laugh so sweetly.

I, too, was regretting my sweet tooth. I dashed up a tree in the garden and dove through the window of Lady Seren’s bedroom. With a soft thunk, I landed on the windowsill. Lady Seren reached for me, stroking me from head to tail in a loving manner.

“Jean, next time you have something tasty, please offer it to Vi, as you did today. I’m sure he’d love that!” Lady Seren called down to Jean with a smile, reassuring him, then picked me up, closed the window, and carried me into the room. As usual, she dutifully wiped my paws and placed me down on the table. “Those muffins you were eating certainly did look good.”

“Yes. And soup, too,” I said. “He said it was a prototype of sorts, but I thought it was top-notch. He’s a diligent young man.”

“Yes, he is. Our head chef recommended him highly. I heard he’s very promising. Not only does he create beautiful desserts, but he’s a wonderful cook all around.”

"Hmm, perhaps he would appreciate it if you gave him your impressions..." I suggested.

"Huh? I do. Every day, I tell him everything is delicious, but..." Muttering, Lady Seren paused for a moment, then smiled. "I'll try to be more specific in the future."

No doubt she'd picked up on what I was implying.

My apologies, Jean. I'm better at straightforward advice. I'm not so good at the aristocratic method of casually suggesting something.

"Anyway, Vi, you've been coming here almost every day lately. I'm delighted, of course, but I worry that it's a burden..." she said, sounding worried.

"No, actually, I love having the opportunity to meet like this. But you're the one doing new and unfamiliar things every day, Lady Seren. You're the one who ought to be tired. Should I hold back on coming?"

"Hehe, just petting you like this recharges me. Don't worry."

Her smile was pure happiness. Pure earnestness. I took a second to feel relieved, then cut straight to the chase.

"You seem to be busy every day. How are you finding the Third Mage Guild?" I started with a light prompt.

Or at least that's what I meant it to be. Lady Seren brought her face in close and spoke in an emphatic tone.

"It's a lot of fun! Everyone is so kind and explains things to me carefully, and learning magic from the fundamental level is a whole different kind of fun! Every day is so exciting!"

"I see. I wanted to instruct you in all kinds of things myself, but the proctors for this year's exam submitted their educational curriculum first... Still, their curriculum is comprehensive. No cause for complaint there."

"Yes, the examiners are all amazing. But it's surprising to hear you praise them so much, Lord Viol."

"Well, I have many excellent subordinates. But that also means I have difficulty speaking to you at work, Lady Seren." I made it sound like a grumble,

and Lady Seren chuckled.

“I was looking forward to your tutoring as well, Lord Viol... But learning from different people may lead me to make new discoveries, I think.”

“Indeed?”

“The fundamentals should be the same, but each person has their own approach towards magic, and seeing the subtle differences is fascinating. Everyone has such different styles. It’s almost like... like dancing,” she said thoughtfully.

“Ah. Yes, I see. It is rather like dancing, perhaps.”

What a fascinating comparison Lady Seren had drawn. But I was relieved she was enjoying the workplace and the work itself.

“By the way, Lady Seren...” I began.

“What is it?”

“This special curriculum is because you never attended the Magic Academy, right?”

“Yes. I feel terrible for causing everyone so much trouble.”

“No, no, they appreciate that you passed the entrance exam anyway. If I’m worried about anyone experiencing trouble, it’s you, Lady Seren.”

“Hmm? I’m not experiencing any trouble, though?” She tilted her head cutely.

“Oh, uh... To be frank, you don’t have time to eat with the other newcomers who joined when you did, do you?”

“It’s true that I don’t have much time for that.”

“I worry that you’re isolated or might be troubled by the special curriculum. I suppose... What I mean is, I worry that you might be feeling uncomfortable, Lady Seren.”

I cut straight to the chase and stopped beating about the proverbial bush.

My previous encounter with Jean had shown me that I’m no good at making roundabout statements. And anyway, Lady Seren could always see right through me. There was no point in trying to hide what I meant.

I tipped my head back and looked up to find Lady Seren gazing down at me with calm eyes.

"You were worried about me... Thank you, Vi. I mean, Lord Viol." Lady Seren gently stroked me with a soft smile and leaned her cheek against my shoulder. The soft touch of her skin was both comfortable and ticklish. "But in that sense, I haven't had any problems so far, so it's okay."

Hearing those words made me feel relieved.

Thinking back on how she's been until now, I don't get the sense that she's hiding anything. I'm sure it'll be fine.

"It's true that it's hard to find time to eat together or to learn together, though," she admitted.

"I thought as much."

"But, sometimes people chat with me after work, you know?"

"Indeed?"

Frankly, I was a little surprised by that. I'd never seen it... But I could well imagine it.

"I see. You're all still new and leave around the same time, so I suppose you see one another then."

"Yes, the ages of those who become High Mages are all different. Even though they took the exam the same year, many have already experienced other occupations, so their stories are entertaining," she said with a smile.

"It's quite difficult to acquire the ability needed to become a High Mage while attending the Magic Academy or even immediately after graduation," I added. "A lot of people take on the challenge again after gaining a bit of experience first through various jobs."

"I heard that from my peers as well. It's good that they're all so nice, and the seniors too. Although I wouldn't blame them if they became jealous of me."

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

"I knew it was difficult to become a High Mage, but as I listened to everyone's

stories, I realized it was much more difficult than I thought.”

That's only occurred to her now? I wondered, but no doubt Lady Seren's sentiments were sincere. After all, she'd gotten there in only three months of effort.

“That's right. For many people, it's a high-level profession they can never reach, no matter how they yearn for it,” I said.

“Everyone put in so much effort. For me to have become a High Mage in such a short time...from the perspective of someone who has worked hard for so long, it seems unfair of me,” she said with a frown.

“Hmm. Well, there was an element of luck involved for you, but you're here because of your hard work and effort. I don't think you need to worry about all of that.”

“It's not that I'm worried about it. Since the others have a lot of experience, they're so much more mature than I am. And rather than getting jealous, they've taken a genuine interest in me instead.”

“I see...”

Somehow, it made sense. Those who pass the exam are, after all, the ones whose efforts paid off. It made sense that they'd favor encouraging another over being jealous of them. Their curious nature facilitated their intense study and helped them over the finish line to becoming High Mages.

I was feeling much better about the situation after hearing that.

“Well, that's splendid,” I said. “One less thing to worry about.”

Ahhh, I thought, stretching my whole body. It feels amazing to have a long cat body to stretch all the way out. It's almost worth being a cat just to feel it.

After stretching from nose to tail, I felt refreshed. Lady Seren beamed and stroked my silken fur.

“Hehe, you feel so nice. Oh Vi, imagine you being so worried about me.” She giggled.

“Well, how could I not be? You entered the Mage Tower under the scrutiny of the whole country, the former daughter of a duke, a former princess candidate,

someone who never even went to the Magic Academy. It'd be odd if you didn't draw a lot of attention."

"When you put it like that, it feels like a lot."

"Capturing the people's attention doesn't always mean capturing only the positive attention. Naturally, I worry." I spoke from experience. Knowing how people are.

"Yes, I understand. I've been under public scrutiny since I was a child." Lady Seren smiled sadly.

Yes, of course. Lady Seren must have faced scrutiny like this from a younger age than I ever had. Just the fact that she was once a princess candidate alone would be enough to garner attention.

"...That's certainly true."

"Yes, so you see, I'm used to it. But Vi... Lord Viol... Having you worry about me... Well, it makes me feel very well cared for."

She put her soft hands on my cheeks and used them to smooth my whiskers back as she massaged my fur. Being stroked like this... I couldn't help closing my eyes in bliss.

Such ecstasy...!

Lady Seren, ever the student, had studied the correct method of cat petting. The techniques she came up with every day constantly blew my tiny cat's mind. The exquisite warmth of Lady Seren's hands contributed to my bliss, calming me and making me doze off.

When Lady Seren's fingers crooked around the curve of my cheek and began to rub the base of my ear, my body almost melted, all my stress and tension being soothed away... But I had come today to console her, not to be consoled.

"Hehe. You look like you're enjoying that, Vi."

When I opened my eyes slightly, Lady Seren's face was close to mine.

Usually, I would jump away in surprise, but Lady Seren's stroking technique completely relaxed me. I bopped her nose with my own.



Lady Seren's eyes widened in surprise, and as she reared back, I, too, was startled. I looked at her to see her unusually red face and trembling slightly.

Goodness, what had I just done?

"I'm so sorry! I forgot myself..." I rushed to apologize.

"No, no, I was just a little surprised! It's fine...!"

But she didn't look fine. She looked as though steam was about to shoot out of her ears. No doubt I would have been bright red, too, if in human form. Thank goodness for this thick, black cat fur.

"I'm sorry. I unconsciously imitated what my mentor did...!" I explained.

"Your... Your mentor?"

Pinching the bridge of her nose, Lady Seren looked confused.

"Yes, the stray cat..." I supplied.

"Oh, of course, the stray cat you studied to learn cat mannerisms?"

I nodded. "Last time we met, when I reached out my hand to stroke him, my feline mentor nudged me with the tip of his nose. It warmed my heart. I'm afraid I imitated that by pure reflex..."

At first, my master wouldn't let me touch him, let alone come close to me, but he eventually approached me on his own, booped my fingers with his nose, and even purred loudly. I must have repeated that action unconsciously because it left such a happy impression on me.

"It's sort of a greeting, isn't it?" Lady Seren said.

"A greeting?"

"Yes, it was written in the books. If I remember correctly, it's one of their special expressions of affection, a way for a cat to express their love..."

Lady Seren blushed even redder, realizing the implications of what she was saying. Honestly, I was about to burst into flames of embarrassment myself.

And that book... It was certainly right on the money. Because I do love Lady Seren.

"Ah, um, just now, I was talking about regular cats, though, you know?"

"Y-Yes, of course."

Lady Seren spoke to spare my blushes. But I was the one who'd thoughtlessly imitated cat behavior. It wasn't her job to make excuses for me.

"I'm... I'm so sorry. I'll be careful not to do something like that again in the future, so please don't worry," I said.

"It's... It's just a greeting. It's fine. Please don't worry about it."

But she was still blushing bright red.

Lady Seren restlessly got up from her chair with an uncharacteristic clatter and dashed to the bed. She returned with a basket of desserts.

"L-Let's have a snack," she said.

"Y-Yes, please."

"Today, we have Crepes Suzette... Lightly cooked crepes with orange sauce. See? Isn't the... the scent of the oranges and liquor quite wonderful? They look delicious, don't they?"

She was rambling.

It was adorable how she was trying to divert the conversation. I felt bad for unconsciously imitating such a disrespectful act, but my affection for Lady Seren only grew stronger.

Her engagement has only just been nullified, so if we began openly dating, rumors would circulate. The only way I can be with Lady Seren right now is to be a cat. Ah, how frustrating it all is.

I slapped the table restlessly with my tail even as I gobbled up the Crepes Suzette.

Being able to spend peaceful moments like this together isn't all bad, I suppose, but I wanted to be with Lady Seren as a proper human as soon as I could.

And tonight, I felt that more strongly than ever.

Seren 28

A Happy Confession

THE weather had been nice since morning, and the sunlight streaming through the window was mellow. At this time of day, when it was already past noon, I was so comfortable I could doze off at any moment. But I was sitting in my room around a small tea table with three beautiful women.

Lady Linde, Lady Ladia, and Marietta—salon members and my sister. They visited me at my residence weekly to discuss the handover of the salon's business. Once they'd finished updating me on everything, we would relax together, having tea and chatting. I always found it such a relaxing and pleasant time.

"Wow, Lady Linde, you've already begun work related to the country's finances?" I replied. Lady Linde's rapid advancement had impressed me, and it showed through in my tone.

"I have," she said. "But it's sort of a low-key job, one that's all about numbers and figures. Lord Kitz told me it would be better to get used to it little by little, so he secured permission for me to get involved right away."

"That's amazing," I praised.

"Oh, now, not really."

To my surprise, Lady Linde spoke as if it was nothing significant. Even if it was a low-key job, being entrusted with the vital work of the national treasury...you need a certain level of credibility to even be considered for something like that.

In finance, mistakes are not permitted.

I've heard some people fail in the first year, don't even make it through the training period, and fade out.

"And Lady Ladia, you've already entered the shipping business, haven't you?" I prompted.

"Yes, but we're lacking in manpower," she responded. "Lady Seren, with your father developing new trade destinations and routes at an astonishing speed,

we're scrambling to secure enough personnel. At least, that's what Lord Andel says."

"Well, it sounds like Father is certainly working hard." I had to chuckle. That sounded like Father.

After seeing me safely move out of the mansion into my residence and beginning my duties with the Third Mage Guild, Father sailed out to sea in search of new trade partners.

"Working too hard if you ask me," Lady Ladia said. "New trading partners create extra work since they bring a mountain of applications submitted by enterprising business traders that we need to personally evaluate and approve."

"Oh, don't complain about that," Lady Linde interrupted. "His Grace is simply fulfilling his duties. He should be praised for his achievements, if anything."

"Hmm, well, if you think that way, you should at least try to make things run more smoothly on your end..." Lady Ladia gave Lady Linde a cutting look. "Ships cost a huge amount of money, even for simple repairs. Finances aren't willing to approve the budget."

"Oh dear, it's a conundrum all right," Lady Linde responded. "The national treasury is limited, so it can't be helped. Everyone wants a generous budget, don't they? I know it's not the full amount, but the basic budget and planned number of days plus half a month's worth of voyage expenses should have been paid for shipping."

"But it's not just the hardships of pioneering new routes that haven't been established yet. We also have the forces of nature working against us. We need to secure funds for safety, too," Lady Ladia argued.

"In fact, we spend more money on shipping than anywhere else," Lady Linde shot back.

"Hehe."

Watching the fierce verbal battle between the two, I couldn't help looking over at Marietta and laughing. Naturally, Lady Ladia gave Marietta and me a scolding glare.

“It’s YOUR father we’re talking about here, ladies.”

“Yes, I know. It’s just that the two of you sound exactly like Lord Andel and Lord Kitz,” I pointed out.

“You think so too, Sister?” Marietta piped up. “I feel like the things they say are becoming more and more similar by the day.”

As we both chuckled, the other two looked at one another, blushing.

“As you become deeply involved in your professional work, your choice of phrasing tends to change along with your position, doesn’t it?” I said.

“Really...?” Lady Linde asked.

“Oh dear. That sounds like an occupational hazard.” Lady Ladia shivered.

They both chuckled ruefully as Marietta and I laughed. The sound of mirth filled the room. The evening bell tolled, signaling the end of this happy time. When I looked out the window, a faint vermillion tinted the sky, signaling dusk was approaching.

“Oh, look at the time. We’d better head back, or we’ll be scolded,” Lady Ladia said.

“You’re right. Fun times go by in no time. It’s a pity, but it’s time to go home,” Lady Linde agreed.

The ladies got to their feet together. All were daughters of high-ranking nobles, so I couldn’t hold them back any longer. It was sad, but there was nothing I could do about it.

I went to the front hall to see them off. That’s when I noticed Marietta’s eyes on me.

“Sister...even after taking over the salon’s business, can I still visit you like this from time to time?”

How could I deny such an adorable request from my sweet little sister? Suppressing a grin, I reached out to gently stroke Marietta’s hair.

“Of course. I’ll be waiting for you anytime.”

“Thank you, Sis.”

Seeing those eyes sparkle and that smile...filled me with happiness. *Recently, Marietta has been smiling more. Seeing that makes me happy.*

Lady Ladia, watching this exchange, tilted her head and fixed her gaze on me. "Is it okay if I continue to bother you as well? I'd love to come and unload my complaints on you now and again, Lady Seren. And this mansion somehow calms me down."

"Goodness, really? I'd be delighted," I said with a smile. "I can't treat you like I did at my previous residence, but I think I can prepare a lot of delicious desserts."

"The desserts are certainly delicious, but more than anything else, the unpretentious atmosphere calms me down the most, I think." Lady Ladia spoke so kindly and without any hesitation. "It's odd. I can relax more here at your place, Lady Seren, than at the academy, salon, or even my own home."

"That's because, Ladia, you can never relax at your own home," Lady Linde pointed out.

"Who could relax in that awful place that puts men before women?" Lady Ladia huffed.

Lady Linde and Lady Ladia were having a lively exchange. *It's great that they're still on such good terms.* I smiled while watching them, and Lady Linde smiled right back.

"I wonder if I'd be able to impose on you from time to time, too?" she asked. "I'd like to talk about various things with you, Lady Seren. Everything about being a High Mage sounds fascinating."

"...I'd be delighted. I'm looking forward to it. Please feel free to visit me often in the future." I was so happy that I almost burst into tears.

If I wished, I would easily be able to meet with Marietta, Mother, and Father. But I worried that becoming a High Mage would mean not seeing Lady Linde or Lady Ladia anymore. If I used my aristocratic lineage, I would probably be allowed to attend balls, yes, but I thought it would be difficult to meet with them privately. It was something I'd been steeling myself for.

"Thank you," I said emotionally.

“Hahaha, we’re the ones who should be thanking you.”

“Right. Please, let us take a breather here now and then.”

I tried to hold back, but my vision was starting to swim with tears.

“Oh, Sister...”

No doubt she was worried about me. But even Marietta’s comforting smile filled my heart with joy.



TWO nights later, while stroking Vi’s back, as he hadn’t been by in a while...I told him about my tea with the ladies. Vi listened quietly, giving occasional nods and grunts.

I love Vi’s quiet kindness and the way he calmly listens to me like this. I was sitting there, entranced by his beautiful fur, when Vi raised his face and looked at me.

“I’m glad, Lady Seren. The friends you made when you were in school are irreplaceable. If you can keep those relationships going, there’s nothing better.”

“Yes, talking was so much fun that I forgot the time. If I could continue chatting with my friends from now on, nothing would make me happier.”

“I see.”

“Hehe, do you have this much fun talking with Prime Minister Borden, Lord Viol?” I asked.

“Fun? It’s more...relaxing. Of course, we discuss our work to our mutual benefit.”

“Certainly, the two of you can give each other good advice. Incidentally, I only just realized how interested everyone is in the work of a High Mage, and new magical devices in particular,” I mentioned.

“Well, it’s a vocation shrouded in mystery, after all. Anyone with a strong desire for knowledge would be interested in hearing about it.”

“The thirst for knowledge is strong in them,” I grinned.

“From what I’ve heard of Lady Linde and Lady Ladia, I can believe that.”

We laughed together. Then Vi suddenly grew serious.

“...I’m sure you’re used to using discretion, Lady Seren, so I’m not overly concerned, but please be careful about who you talk to and how much you divulge,” he warned.

“There was a lecture on that during orientation, so I know better,” I assured him.

But no wonder Vi...or Lord Viol...was stringent about that. After all, a High Mage has too much information to keep secret. Of course, what they do in regards to guarding the magical wall, which is the cornerstone of national defense, is top-secret information, and the development of new magic and magical devices is also highly confidential.

However, the same applies to the information handled at the salon, and most of it is strictly confidential and should not be leaked to the outside. Of course, I always exercise caution with the things I say.

“Well, I certainly trust you,” he stressed.

“Thank you.”

Vi narrowed his eyes in relief as I served today’s treat. I knew Vi would be coming today, so I asked Jean to prepare something special.

“Vi, how about a treat?”

“Absolutely!” Vi got to his feet, his eyes shining like obsidian. “Something’s smelled good for a while! Is it cheesecake today?”

“Yes, it’s Double Fromage.”

“I don’t believe I’ve heard of it.”

“Well, Jean says it’s his impression of a new product released at the patisserie in town. A baked cheesecake, covered with a layer of raw cheese cream.”

“Two types of cheesecake in the same dessert?!”

“That’s right. How exciting, isn’t it?”

From the dessert basket, I produced a small cheesecake the size of my palm with a lovely fluffy sponge that looked like it had been sprinkled with snow. It

looked adorable and mouth-watering.

“Oh...! That looks delicious...!”

Vi’s eyes sparkled as I cut the cake and put it on a plate. He sniffed deeply, his nose almost touching it. His tail flopped this way and that charmingly.

“Hehe, if you stick your nose in it like that, you’ll inhale the sponge.”

Vi reared back in panic, and the sight made me giggle. He’s usually so mature and calm, but he can never resist when confronted with something sweet. And I can never resist his adorable reactions.

I scooped up a forkful of Jean’s delectable Double Fromage and held it to Vi’s mouth. A fluffy sponge cake would be difficult to eat with a cat’s small, clumsy paws.

As soon as Vi took a bite of the Double Fromage, his expression almost melted. His tail stretched, trembled, and then drooped in ecstasy.

“Is it good?”

“It is exquisite...!!!” Vi moaned in rapturous tones, and after indulging for a bit, he finally gulped loudly and looked up at me with sparkling eyes. “It melted in my mouth in an instant...!”

Oh! So adorable!

Vi continued to describe the taste with sparkling eyes, oblivious to my state of adoration. “Lady Seren, it’s amazing! It melts in the mouth quickly, but then a rich, milky sensation spreads across the tongue! It has a subdued and elegant sweetness, but the bottom layer is a layer of baked cheese that feels quite rich.”

Vi’s little chest heaved. He seemed deeply moved.

I smiled wryly as he urged me to hurry up and taste it. I separated a small forkful of Double Fromage and brought it to my mouth. It trembled on the fork, and I knew it would be as soft as air. All at once, my anticipation doubled.

I popped it into my mouth. The sponge melted away, and the fluffy cheese spread across my tongue.

Did Jean use Mascarpone cheese? The moist, delicate sweetness and flavor of the milk hit my nose, followed by the richness of the lower layer. I wondered if this was what Vi was talking about.

“It’s delicious...!” I exclaimed.

“Right? The balance between the mouthfeel and the taste is exquisite, isn’t it? Jean is a genius, especially for one so young!”

I had to suppress a burst of laughter after seeing Lord Viol bandy about the term genius when he’s usually so strict about aptitude and accolades. These little dessert sessions brought me such joy, even more so to see Vi indulging his great desire to indulge himself in sweets.

“By the way, Lady Seren...”

Vi dropped his small paws onto my arm as I sat in a sugar coma from the exquisite Double Fromage. Goodness, his little black toes were so cute.

“Yeees?”

“Are you free this coming Voiday?” he asked.

“Yes, I have no particular plans.”

“Indeed...” Vi muttered, then suddenly straightened up and gazed at me with those beautiful black eyes. “Lady Seren.”

“Yes.”

Now I was getting nervous.

“It has been three months since you became a High Mage. I’d like to visit this mansion in human form this weekend. Would that be acceptable?”

“!!!”

Seeing my eyes widen in surprise, Vi’s own eyes swam with anxiety. His ears drooped slightly, and I hurriedly agreed.

“Of course! Of course! I’ll be waiting!”

I also wanted to enjoy seeing Lord Viol’s face to my heart’s content in a location other than my workplace.

"Well, good."

With a sigh of relief, Vi curled his spine. Then he muttered, almost as if he was talking to himself. "The day has finally come..."

His voice seemed to come from the heart, imbued with deep emotion.



YAY! YIPPEE! WEEEEEEEEE!

Squealing internally, I rolled around on my bed, all alone.

My promised date with Lord Viol, on Voiday! Recalling all the things that had happened that day, I was writhing with a mixture of joy and embarrassment.

Lord Viol came to my residence at precisely the promised time. It was his first time visiting my new residence in his human form, and I was so nervous that my maid, Rince, was worried about me.

After all, in the Mage Tower, bosses and subordinates had to respect each other while working. It had been a long time since I'd talked to Lord Viol in person outside of work. So I couldn't help but feel nervous.

But in the end, we stayed at the mansion only for a moment before hopping aboard the cart and flying to the plains to relax in a more secluded place.

My heart pounded so loudly!

I couldn't take my eyes off Lord Viol's face. His gallant gestures and frank words had me in a tizzy. The time passed in a heart-pounding blur! Even if I had spare hearts to take up some of the strain, it wouldn't have been enough!

Lord Viol's lustrous black hair fluttered in the wind every time a refreshing breeze blew in the meadow, and the afternoon scenery was bathed in bright sunlight. I was content gazing at Lord Viol's gentle profile as he lay with his eyes closed, enjoying the wind and sunshine out on the plains.

I've seen Vi sit in a cute cat loaf form many times, so why does the sight of Lord Viol dozing and basking make my heart pound this much? I smiled wryly at myself. I was so easily swayed by cuteness. And Lord Viol knew it and indulged me in my whims.

Telling me he was happy just being by my side and giving me those dashing little smiles. Whispering how much he wanted to spend as much time as possible with me. Saying that he's jealous of others who share my time...while he hugs me close and gives me a gentle kiss right at the corner of my eye.

Just remembering it made my heart palpitate like an alarm bell, and my entire body grew hot and feverish.

After rolling around in bed for a while, I sat up and clutched my chest, which was pounding so fast it seemed like it was about to explode.

Just one kiss on the edge of my eye was enough to make everything blurry and immobilize me. But Lord Viol was so beautiful, I couldn't look away.

I mean, the look on Lord Viol's face was something I had never seen before. And his smile was so dazzling, it felt like I couldn't get any air, no matter how deeply I tried to breathe in.

His pitch-black eyes were so mysterious that I felt like I was being sucked into them.

"I've been waiting for this day for the past three months." Lord Viol spoke solemnly, his words imbued with his feelings for me. Then he held me tightly and whispered these words into my ear: "Lady Seren, I adore you..."

My heart soared when I heard those words for the first time. I had no idea how powerful those three little words could be.

My lips trembled, and I couldn't get my words into order, but I wanted to convey my feelings to Lord Viol, so I tried my best to squeeze something out.

"I... I admire you greatly, too, Lord Viol!"

Lord Viol seemed reassured by my response. "You do?! Oh, I'm so glad...!!!"

I was delighted, too. Overwhelmed with emotion.

Lord Viol hugged me tightly while I struggled to hold back my tears. I found myself captivated, enveloped in his warmth, listening to the sound of his heartbeat.

And...

As I stood there, mesmerized by the sensation of his large, warm hand stroking my hair, he dropped another bomb on me.

“I wish we could live together right now... With your permission, of course. But we can’t very well get married and do that without a sensible relationship or engagement period first.”

Get... Get married...?!

“It will probably take a while to avoid tarnishing your reputation, but I feel I ought to try to secure the right to cohabit with you now in case you change your mind. Perhaps I will consult with Borden.”

I wasn’t listening, too stuck on the word marriage, but Lord Viol continued muttering things, smiling at me with a soft expression and hugging me.

“Lady Seren. If the situation allows, will you be my wife?”

Those lightly spoken words were too dreamlike to be real.

“Um... Um, I...”

I looked up at him, wondering if he was serious. His expression was solemn and a touch uneasy. *Oh, he is serious*, I thought and smiled with relief. Lord Viol’s cheeks creased, too.

“Please make me your wife, Lord Viol.”

“Oh, Lady Seren...!”

Lord Viol held me even tighter.

The heat of his gaze was so intense that I could hardly bear it. I screwed my eyes shut. Then I felt Lord Viol’s gentle kiss fall on my slightly open lips, and it was all I could do to remember to keep breathing.

And having recalled that much, I swooned on the bed again. I squealed like a little girl.

He... He proposed!

Three months have passed since I became a High Mage, and even though I was just happy to finally meet with Lord Viol in human form... I can’t believe he spoke such words of love... And I can’t believe that he proposed!

I was beside myself with happiness yet filled with disbelief... And I could hardly breathe!

"Goodness...! Goodness, I'm so happy..."

I have work again tomorrow. Could I remain calm if I encountered Lord Viol?

With my special curriculum, I'm always on the move. And though I never got the chance to interact with Lord Viol, I usually spotted him several times a day. Normally, those sightings delight me, but if I saw Lord Viol tomorrow, I wasn't sure how I'd react!

What to do?

I wanted to see him, of course... But the embarrassment was overpowering. Filled with happy turmoil, I gripped the sheets and exhaled a hot, excited breath.

Viol 25

Finally, I Said It!

“I finally said it!”

After returning home and deploying soundproofing magic, I shouted at the top of my lungs.

Good job, me!

I’d gotten carried away and proposed, but luckily, Lady Seren was on board with it, so all turned out well. Good job, me, indeed!

Just thinking back on it had me grinning. Lady Seren is always adorable, but today she sparkled. Her response was completely different from when I was with her in cat form. Her response was so adorable, in fact, that I must confess, I went all out in soliciting her reactions.

I suppose I’ve been rather lonely since Lady Seren became a High Mage because we spend less time together.

Originally, I planned to tutor Lady Seren myself. However, since my talented subordinates took the initiative to tutor her with their special curriculum, I didn’t have much opportunity to interact with her at work. I consider myself lucky to catch a glimpse of her face as we pass.

Now that she’d become a High Mage, there was no need for me to visit her room anymore, but not seeing her is torture, so I’ve been coming by almost every day in the form of a cat.

Feeling so unsettled simply because I could not be with someone... I had never experienced such a feeling in my life before, and I was honestly perplexed.

But, well, when I went to see Lady Seren at her new residence, she seemed so

delighted. She convinced me she needed my support with her new learnings and that interacting with a cat would greatly soothe her. So, I convinced myself that the visits had genuine merit and saw her as often as I could.

Sadly, however, when I visit her in Vi form, Lady Seren sees me as merely a cat. ...It is vexing.

In the Mage Tower, I rarely see her, but when we meet, she treats me only as an adorable pet. Now, I've started thinking about how much I would like Lady Seren to treat me as a man.

That said, I have never felt like this for anyone before. I have no knowledge of fancy techniques used to bring a relationship to the next level. I knew I had no choice but to tell her straight that I wished to court her, but I could never find the right opportunity.

Moreover, Lady Seren was previously the fiancée of the crown prince. It would not be good for her if I approached her too hastily. I planned to express my feelings for her three months after Lady Seren's engagement had reverted to essentially a blank slate.

Now, those three months have finally passed. Not only was I able to express my feelings, but I also got an unexpected acceptance of my marriage proposal.

And in my exuberance, I shouted aloud. *Calm down, me.*

I changed into black loungewear and poured some coffee into a warmed-up cup, hoping to relax a little. The warm steam and mellow aroma soon calmed me. Enjoying the distinct taste of the coffee, I started thinking about the future.

Right. Now isn't the time to go getting all overexcited.

Lady Seren had agreed to marry me, but from an outside perspective, she and I were practically strangers. News of our engagement would take people by surprise. If only I'd been able to take over as her tutor as I planned, things wouldn't have seemed so abrupt.

Still, I couldn't interfere with the special curriculum now. Lady Seren was advancing nicely, and having a pupil as bright and dedicated as her would be only a boon to her instructors.

It might be better to consult with Lady Seren and discuss the possibility of going out on dates after work. I would be able to see Lady Seren more and more, and the public would get used to the idea of us as a couple. It would be like killing two birds with one stone.

Should I go and meet with her father and mother? Should I attend an evening soiree or ball as Lady Seren's escort?

I should have studied the ways of the nobility more. I'd like to consult with Borden, but discussing things with Lady Seren was a higher priority.

No doubt Lady Seren would be able to make the right decision regarding all that. *Tomorrow... Ah, but no, tomorrow I have Wall Duty. The day after, then.* I would talk to Lady Seren the day after tomorrow...



I hadn't seen Lady Seren for two whole days.

My Wall Duty relief came late, so I was up there until daybreak the next day. Even with my plentiful stores of magical energy, I become as exhausted as anyone else if I spend too long casting the protective barrier wall.

I returned home dizzy, fell asleep, and woke up in the middle of the night.

I couldn't intrude on Lady Seren's abode at this late hour. I knew that well enough, so I suppressed my overwhelming desire to see her while I waited for morning.

Filled with anticipation, I finally made my way to the Mage Tower. Goodness, the place was lovely today. A crowd was at the research booth. I moseyed over to see what was what and found Lady Seren and Vellia in the center of the circle.

Vellia was the examiner in charge of Lady Seren during her final exam. She'd correctly noticed Lady Seren's abundant talent and was now the main person in charge of her education and development.

In other words, she'd secured the position I wanted for myself. I can't deny that it was a little frustrating.

"What's going on?" I snagged an onlooker and asked them what the fuss was

about.

“Oh, Archmage Viol. You know, there’s that new form of magic Seren developed during the final exam, right?”

...Seren. No, “Miss Seren” to these people. I was a little bit taken aback. Should I say impressed...? Not so long ago, she was a duke’s daughter.

But the new form of magic Seren developed during the final exam... Yes, I recall hearing of that.

“...It’s something to do with using a Wind Lance in the form of a whirlwind, isn’t it?” I answered.

When I first heard about it, I’d smiled wryly to myself, thinking how typical it was of Seren, who was always coming up with the most outrageous ideas. And it was especially Seren-like of her to have attempted it during the final exam.

“Yes, yes, that’s it. Apparently, it’s good to go, right to the practical testing stage!”

“Really!”

No doubt this meant other Wind Mages had been able to replicate the spell.

“Well, there aren’t any big battles right now, so it might not be used in actual combat.”

“Right. It sounds like a risky spell; they’ll need to try all sorts of things during the practical testing. Including the actual amount of magical energy the spell consumes. But it looks like it might be useful magic indeed,” I said.

“Seren’s amazing, isn’t she?” he responded.

“Right,” I agreed. “She’ll be a formidable fighting force soon enough.”

“W-Wow! You smiled!”

He stared at me in shock. Whoops. I let the corners of my mouth rise a little.

It warmed my heart to hear Lady Seren being spoken of so highly. I couldn’t help smiling. How incredibly lucky I am to have this irreplaceable talent among my flock!

Who could blame me for smiling?

But letting my emotions show through so sloppily was a little embarrassing. I was just thinking it would be better if I left when I made eye contact with Vellia.

“Archmage Viol!” She called out loudly to me, and the whole crowd turned as one to look this way. Ah, curses. I’d missed my chance to escape.

I let my gaze slide away from Vellia, meeting Lady Seren’s eyes. She turned bright red and dropped her gaze.

Odd. I have no idea why Lady Seren would have blushed like that. I raised my voice and spoke to Vellia, hoping this would draw attention away from Lady Seren. “It seems that research on the new spell is progressing.”

“That’s right!” Vellia said. “As I reported before, the spell Seren came up with in the final exam can now be stably reproduced by other Mages. I’m thinking of moving on to the practical experiment stage!”

“It’s really powerful!”

“It’s just a combination of simple magic. The power of innovative thinking.”

“None of the rest of us have even been considering low-level spells.”

Hearing Vellia’s breathless report, the surrounding group members chimed in, one after another. The discovery of a new form of magic, composed of low-level magic and fundamental-level magic.

“Well, good,” I said. “It’s wonderful to be able to proceed with the practical experiments at this speed.”

“Wow, a compliment from you! Exciting!”

Vellia laughed lightly in that way she had, and as always, I had no idea if she was serious or joking. Vellia is good at lightening the mood. It’s a sort of gift, I suppose.

“Compliments are, in this case, well-deserved,” I said. “Not only has Lady Seren created a new spell, despite being a newcomer, but the rest of you are rapidly advancing the research and bringing it to the practical application stage. Keep up the good work.”

“Th-Thank you very much!” Lady Seren exclaimed.

“I think we can bring it up to the practical use stage within a month while minimizing the amount of magical power expenditure.”

While Lady Seren blushed and beamed, Vellia casually informed me of her plans. It was refreshing, somehow, to see this combination of an enthusiastic new Mage and a capable, seasoned Mage working in tandem.

“Oh, how unusual! A smile!” Now it was Vellia’s turn to point out my expression.

I’ve become much more expressive than before. Any way you slice it, that’s Lady Seren’s influence.

“Archmage Viol, please look at the progress of the other newcomers.”

I lifted my face when Vellia said that. Of course, as our guild’s Archmage, I was most interested to see how this year’s newcomers were getting along. In addition, I was curious to see what Lady Seren’s peers were like as people.

“Oh, I definitely want to see that.” As soon as I said that, I could tell that a few men and women near Lady Seren grew instantly nervous.

Aha! There’s the three in question, I thought, smiling internally. No wonder they were nervous. After all, I suppose, I AM the guild Archmage.

“You don’t have to be so nervous,” I said. “Please, relax.”

...But me saying it won’t do all that much good, I suppose.

“Now, Archmage Viol may be a beautiful man with a scary, immobile face, but he’s not particularly cold-hearted or anything, so there’s no need to be nervous.”

How kind of the others to back me up with such reassurances!

“All right, all right. Newbies, go back to your desks. I’ll give a brief overview of what you’ve all been up to, and then you can each do a demonstration. Prepare something you’re particularly proud of that you’ve learned over the past three months.” When Vellia said that, the newcomers looked troubled.

“D-Demonstration?”

“Magic, magical devices, barriers, theory—anything is fine,” she said. “All you

have to do is show Archmage Viol your best example of what you've learned."

That sounded incredibly simple and incredibly complex at the same time. After delivering this instruction, Vellia quickly spirited me away into the back room. Before the door closed, I caught a glimpse of the faces of the three new recruits. One looked flustered, one confident, and the other panicked.

Indeed, after three months of High Mage work, each ought to have had ample opportunity to figure out where his or her strengths and interests lie.

We all, myself included, share the duty of maintaining the Magic Wall on a rotating basis, but other major tasks are assigned based on the wishes and aptitude of the individual in question. Better results can be expected when operating within one's sphere of interest and aptitude, after all.

I wondered what aptitudes and preferences this year's newcomers would have.

I'm looking forward to this, I thought, sitting down in the chair Vellia indicated. Then she launched into her report. Nodding along, I listened as she explained how each was doing, posing questions of my own here and there.

This happens each year, and I enjoy it every time.

The newcomers passed a difficult exam to get here. All are, generally, highly talented and enthusiastic. It's exciting to directly observe how their educational process is going and how each is developing.

...Although the newcomers often seem far too nervous to enjoy it as I do.

"And so, as you see, each has passed practical exams in spell development and magical device development, and each has crafted a simple magical device of their own," Vellia said. "This year's batch is progressing smoothly, especially compared to recent years."

"Well, good. No major incidents, then."

"We support them closely so that there are never any incidents. After all, incidents could lead to danger and casualties. We are very well aware of that." Vellia, usually so lighthearted, sounded oddly stiff.

Most Mages who've gotten as far as becoming High Mages are well aware of

the many benefits of magic, but at the same time, they understand the disastrous power that magic also holds. No doubt Vellia had seen some incidents in her time.

“Thank you,” I said. “You’re all vital human resources. The last thing we want is any accidents.”

“Well, you can count on me as far as that’s concerned.” Vellia grinned as she responded. “Oh, and... Lady Seren is going through basic education in tandem with the main curriculum, so she’s still in training to make magical devices. It may look like she’s progressing slower than the others, but she’s learning years of fundamentals people usually learn at the Magic Academy at the same time. It’s amazing she’s even to the stage of creating magical devices already.”

“Yes, much faster than expected. A wonderful talent, isn’t she?” I said.

Vellia looked slightly relieved to hear me sing Lady Seren’s praises for some reason.

“What?”

“Ah, nothing. It’s just that you’re such a genius, Archmage Viol. If you saw Seren as a run-of-the-mill student, I’d feel terribly for her.”

“Naturally, I can well understand how rapid her progress is. How many years do you think I’ve been doing this, seeing how the new blood develops? Why, I never even learned at such a rapid pace.”

To be honest, I didn’t think Lady Seren was exceptional in terms of magical power and attributes. In those aspects, she was on par with her peers. No, where Lady Seren excelled was in quickly grasping concepts.

“Ahaha, my bad,” Vellia laughed. “Well, in that case, feel free to go ahead and praise Seren. She doesn’t seem to realize how exceptional she is. She seems to enjoy the work but also has an inferiority complex.”

I widened my eyes.

Vellia was sharp. Perceptive. I’ve noticed how quickly newcomers tend to develop under Vellia due to her efforts in carefully observing each individual.

“...All right. I shall. Any other newcomers of particular note?” I inquired.

“Oh, yes. This year, we’ve seen little hesitation or confusion among the new blood. They’d love to receive your frank and candid opinion of them, Archmage Viol. Perhaps a compliment or two their way might also be appreciated. Ah, with a smile, if possible.”

At this list of instructions, I could hardly keep from smiling.

“Ah, yes! Just like that! A nice smile!”

How emphatic she was being.

A smile, eh? A smile...

I’ve never thought of smiling on purpose, but perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad. The young ones were still feeling a tad unsure. And weren’t they, too, challenging themselves by doing new things every day? I could surely do it if I tried. Like that infernal dancing I always hated so.

“I see. I’m not sure how good a job I can do, but... I’ll try,” I said.

“Please do! Well, let’s get back to the newcomers then.”

“Yes. I’m looking forward to it.”



THE demonstrations given by the newcomers gave me a good grasp of their progress so far.

Lucien, still a young man, seemed interested in making magical devices. And his fire spells, though of a fundamental level, were powerful. Arles had an affinity for water-based innovation. I had to smile as I listened to her enthusiastically explain the project she was working on.

Gil, the oldest, seemed interested in one of the more special roles we have in the Third Mage Guild. Perhaps because he had been an adventurer for several years after graduating from the Magic Academy, he said he wanted to investigate a huge pool of magic power deep in the forest as his main mission.

However, this was not an official national matter but something that the Third Mage Guild has been investigating independently.

A pool of magical power lies in the depths of the forest where many magical

beasts live. Since many powerful and heretofore unseen types of magical beasts can be found around it, we theorized that it is a kind of birthplace for them. To be honest, the whole project is shrouded in mystery.

"It would be reassuring if someone like you, with your adventurer background, would participate in the forest survey," I told him. "But, to be frank, this role wouldn't give you much hope of either glory or career advancement."

I had to speak plainly, as I did not want him to be disappointed later. However, Gil merely laughed and said, "Becoming a High Mage is already glory enough for me. I need no further honors."

"Indeed."

Yes, of course. I, despite obtaining the title of Archmage, have no particular lust for glory either. I understood the sentiment that becoming a High Mage might be an achievement enough for some.

"Actually, I'm also good with a spear, and when I go out on quests, I usually specialize in magic defense, so most of my attacks are by spear," Gil said.

"Oh, you can wield both magic and spears? Most useful," I nodded, impressed.

"Thank you. High Mage work doesn't involve too much physical movement. Especially not when it comes to Wall Duty. So if I don't get out in the field regularly, I'm afraid I'll get rusty." Gil's eyes sharpened. "Besides, I'm on board with the hypothesis that the magic pool has some ability to turn ordinary birds, animals, and plants into magical beasts. As an adventurer, it's a mystery I burn to solve."

What an emphatic speech!

To begin with, we Mages don't tend to have much physical strength or brawn. We train in beast subjugation, of course, but it's more efficient to attack with magic and save one's physical energy for other tasks. Those who can successfully fight beasts in combat are considered very valuable within the Mage Guild.

Especially now when we've been getting reports of magic-resistant magical

beasts appearing close to the magic pool. Those beasts are said to be difficult to subjugate. Gil's strength on the field would come in handy.

"And finally, we come to Seren."

At Vellia's voice, I shifted my gaze to Lady Seren. Our eyes met, and she blushed again and looked away. *Goodness, what is the matter with you today, Lady Seren?*

"...Can you do it?" I asked.

She looked worried, so I just wanted to be sure, but to my question, she lifted her head rapidly and responded with an emphatic "...Yes!" Her face still looked a touch flushed, but there was no longer any hesitation in her eyes.

Ah, and we were back to the usual Lady Seren. Good.

"I will... I will demonstrate some Water Magic."

"Huh?" My voice cracked.

"I actually only managed to cast a successful Water Ball spell yesterday, but —"

"Huh? Hold on a second..." I interjected.

But as I stood there, taken aback, Lady Seren conjured a perfectly round ball of water in the air.



"BUT what a surprise! When did you start practicing water magic?"

That night, I visited Lady Seren's new residence, all excited, and those were the first words out of my mouth. Honestly, could Lady Seren BE any more filled with surprises?

"Hehe. Well, it's been since last week," she said. "There was to be a test of magical capacity and elemental attribute affinity, and I learned that I have a slight affinity for water and that my fire affinity was starting to develop just a little."

"Ah, yes, the preliminary test of elemental attribute affinity and magical capacity..."

"Yes. I learned with hard work, I might be able to use Water Magic, so I was secretly practicing to surprise you, Vi."

Curses! In the face of that mischievous, adorable smile, what emotion could I have but pure adoration?

"You don't mean you've been pursuing this, self-taught?" I asked.

"Yes! It did take me some time to learn. I thought it'd all be fine because it just involves outputting the same amount of magical energy, but the difference in attributes is quite notable."

"You always surprise me, Lady Seren."

"I heard that when developing new spells, it's common to combine magic with different elemental attributes. So, I thought that if I had the aptitude, I could develop my Water Magic as well. You originally had the aptitude for each elemental attribute, didn't you, Lord Viol? How I envy you."

"Certainly, I think I was lucky in that regard. However, as long as one continues the training, most will develop the aptitude for sub-attributes eventually. One day, you too may be able to wield magic of every elemental attribute, Lady Seren."

"Well, that would be wonderful."

"Although it does seem that it's most difficult to wield the opposite element from the one an individual starts strong with. That means you may struggle quite a bit with Earth Magic, Lady Seren."

"Oh, well, that's the attribute that Lord Riesz is especially good at."

"Riesz...? Ah, yes, Borden's brother. Both brothers are Earth Magic wielders, as I recall," I said.

"Oh, Prime Minister Borden is also an Earth Magic specialist?" Lady Seren asked.

"Oh, yes. He's quite good. He can create clay humanoid figures and then use them as decoys or to attack with them. It's most handy."

"Hehe. Your point of view on that matter must have influenced you to master magic quickly, Lord Viol."

“Maybe so. But it’s the same for you, Lady Seren.”

She would enjoy creating new magic with even more vigor than myself.

“Yes, it’s very interesting to develop magic with a single attribute, not to mention magic with various attributes. Besides, I’m currently being taught how to make magic devices, so this is all most fascinating!”

It made me smile inside to hear her discuss her education with such enthusiasm.

As the Third Mage Guild’s Archmage, I was naturally most pleased. And I was delighted to know that she enjoyed the work that I, too, cherish so much. Above all, though, I was pleased to see that Lady Seren was truly enjoying her new life.

Since she never attended the Magic Academy, she’d had a late start compared to her peers. But as long as she enjoyed her work and remained ambitious, it wouldn’t be too long before she caught up to the others and even overtook them.

Flopping my tail around in extremely high spirits, I stretched luxuriously.

Seren 29

This Is Reality

HOW comfortable Vi looked reassured me.

Seeing Vi soothes me, and with him, I can converse normally. But whenever I catch a glimpse of Lord Viol's face around the Mage Tower, as I did today, I can tell that my face turns bright red.

I recalled Lord Viol's voice, whispering that he adored me.

I saw his smile as he asked me to be his wife.

I was incapable of preventing my heart from pounding a mile a minute.

I didn't encounter Lord Viol yesterday or the day before, so I could work calmly. It wouldn't do for me to keep getting all flustered, as I did today.

But with him in cat form...I can converse so naturally. I cupped Vi's tiny face in my palm and then stroked it.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Hehe, it's nothing."

Staring back at me with those black eyes, I could make direct eye contact with Vi like this.

"Hmm, well, that's fine. By the way, Lady Seren, I've been doing some thinking."

"Goodness, about what?"

"Henceforth, I'd like to go out with you to eat or shop now and then after work. Properly, I mean... In human form. And without cloaking magic, of course."

"What?!" I said in a shrill voice.

I was delighted, but the thought of going out in public with Lord Viol... Until now, he had always cast cloaking magic over us so we could stroll about without worrying about what people would think. But now...well, Lord Viol was such a striking individual, no doubt we would draw attention.

I didn't worry about being seen in public when I went out with my coworkers, so I think I've gotten used to being social in town by now. Hmm, I seem to recall Lord Viol telling me that he often uses cloaking magic, even when he goes out into town alone.

"Are you sure you'll be all right without cloaking magic?" I asked.

"I will. To be honest, one of the aims of this venture is to familiarize people with the sight of you and me spending time together, Lady Seren. So the point is to be seen."

"You want to familiarize people with the sight of us together...?" I asked.

"Precisely. If you and I are to be married, we must lay the essential groundwork first, or people will be shocked," he explained.

"...!"

Suddenly, the topic of marriage came up, and I held my breath. I could feel my face suddenly turning red.

But it's as Lord Viol said. With things the way they are now, no one would imagine that Lord Viol and I might ever get married. The time we've spent together has been so intense, and both Vi and Lord Viol have become indispensable to my life, but it's only been about six months since we met.

"That's certainly true," I agreed.

"Until now, I've refrained from going out with you publicly because I'm worried about disgraceful rumors spreading about you, Lady Seren. But I want to spend more time with you in human form. And, of course, I'd like to ward off any other potential suitors," he said with all seriousness.

"Goodness, Lord Viol..." I fanned my face.

He looked like an adorable cat, but today, he was giving off strong Lord Viol vibes. Perhaps it was because marriage was our topic of discussion.

Looking embarrassed, Vi averted his little cat face most adorably.

"Thank you. I'd... I'd love to do just that," I managed to say.

"Well, actually, I proposed on the spur of the moment, but when you

accepted, Lady Seren, I was transcendently happy. And I'd like to make it a reality as soon as possible," he confessed.

"Oh, my."

I'd been so delighted that I'd spent an evening rolling around in bed squealing. Meanwhile, Lord Viol had been considering all sorts of aspects involved in marrying me.

"I'm... I'm so happy," I told him.

"Are... Are you? Well, good."

How cute! His ears were standing right up.

"Your feelings are what's most important, after all, Lady Seren." His tail flopped about happily. "I want to go out on public dates with you and officially greet your mother and father. It might also benefit us to attend a ball together. I've considered various things... But first, I thought I had better consult directly with you, Lady Seren. That is why I came here today."

"Y-Yes, that's true. All of that matters when it comes to marriage..." As I said that, I tilted my head. "I wonder what would be best, actually. I'm no longer a member of a duke's household, so I wonder if I'll be able to decide for myself as the de facto head of my own family."

"Well, you might have all the authority to make the final decision now, but I think it would be quite unreasonable to marry without first speaking to your parents. You may be a High Mage, but you're still their daughter, and I know how much they care for you."

"I'm happy to hear you think that way too," I said. "I would hate not to have them involved."

"Indeed. Just because you are a High Mage now, that doesn't mean you can't go and speak to family about your personal matters."

Hearing that, I felt a flood of relief. I still didn't know what distance I should keep from my father and other family members, and sometimes I got confused. *It might be better to ask my High Mage coworkers with aristocratic backgrounds how they've managed their relationships with their families post-independence.*

And I also wanted to tell my family about my relationship with Lord Viol.

"Well, it seems Father is out trading now, so I'll try to get some time with him when he comes back," I said.

"Yes, please do."

"I'd also like to greet your family, too, Lord Viol."

"Of course."

"Hehe. It seems like a dream, but all of a sudden, it's going to become reality... I'm going to be Lord Viol's wife!" I declared dreamily.

"...!"

Suddenly, the fur on Vi's back stood up.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Ah...the word wife. It sort of struck me. It's a little embarrassing."

Now that he pointed it out, I was starting to blush, too. But Vi rubbed his face against my hands, and his cuteness won out over my embarrassment.

How joyful to think that I could be the wife of such a sweet person who thinks about me so seriously.

Oh, I couldn't possibly be happier...

I really, really couldn't.



AFTER that conversation, I thoroughly discussed the future with Lord Viol, and we've agreed we will follow the path to marriage step by step.

First, we'll start by going on multiple dates and getting the people around us used to the idea of us as a couple. Then, after Father returns, we will meet with my parents together. We will also consult with them as to whom else we should inform, perhaps at, say, a ball or evening event.

Normally, Lord Viol and I should be expected to decide these things for ourselves, but we're still inexperienced. I know I personally couldn't guarantee I would make the right decision. And Lord Viol doesn't know the ways of the

nobility. So we thought it would be better to consult with our elders.

Whenever we discuss this matter between ourselves, we both get bashful.

These past few days, I've just been on cloud nine over being proposed to. But talking with Lord Viol like this... It makes me realize how he and I will be a partnership from now on. And I love that idea.

Come to think of it, while Lord Viol has always guided me, he's always respected my intentions. What's more, when he notices an area where he lacks, he earnestly asks others to explain. What a kind and gentle person he is.

Filled with pride over the thought of being a wife to someone like that, I headed to the Mage Tower again today for work.

Today, after work, Lord Viol and I had plans to go shopping in town and have a meal together, so I couldn't help but feel light on my feet and most excited.

Oh! I absolutely couldn't wait!

Walking with a spring in my step, the cool wind caressing my cheeks...it felt amazing. The breeze rustled the young leaves in the trees, and as I allowed my gaze to drift above them, I could see the Mage Tower rising up ahead.

"I have to do my best," I said to myself.

Today was the fourth day of instruction on magical devices. Mr. Euleho, a magical device engineer, was going to present a magical device based on a design and mechanism he'd explained to us during a meeting the other day. Today, the plan was that I would try to activate it and see if I could get it working properly!

The first lecture was on the importance of magical devices to this country and how they are used. During the second lecture, we were taught how magical devices are designed and developed, how High Mages factor in, and the kind of testing procedures and distribution channels that are in place before a product hits the market.

The third lecture was all about putting what we'd learned into practice. We were to try making a magical device called a Fan, the first kind of magical device made by wind-attribute Mages for this kind of training.

It has four legs propping up a round sphere. The area around the belly of the sphere pops open, and the wind blows out from there. The lower part of the air outlet is equipped with a space for a magic stone, which we imbue with magical power. Then, when you press the button on the surface, magical power flows into the magic stone and activates the fan.

It's a simple design, but various aspects can be optimized, like adjusting the size of the space inside the sphere, changing up the functions of the buttons, and even changing the appearance.

This workshop sought to teach the procedure for making magical devices. So, our task was to improve on a simple, established magical device while consulting with real-world magical device engineers.

Once we learned how to construct a magical device, our task from then on was to think about what kind of magical devices could be made using various types of already-established magic and work with magical device engineers to learn how to bring a prototype to a completed stage.

When I learned about how magical devices are circulating in ordinary households and how they make ordinary people's lives easier and more convenient year by year, I began to feel even more proud of my work.

On the fifth floor of the Mage Tower, in the farthest room from the stairs, I sat in front of my magical device, my eyes shining. All around me, the air resounded with banging and pounding.

"Goodness...! This is the exact magical device that was described last week!" I exclaimed.

"Yes. I made it to your exact specs. The buttons are as you designed, but I made them require a stronger press than your design. It's less likely to malfunction that way, see?" Mr. Euleho picked up the magical device and explained it, blinking his eyes behind his thick glasses.

I'd heard he was a rather difficult person, but he seemed surprisingly easy to talk to and rather laid-back. The language he used was a little rough, perhaps, but he didn't say anything odd or brusque.

"Yes! It's so neat... And the buttons are exactly the right firmness. But they're

also big, making them easy to push, so I think it'll be easy to use!" I said.

"As expected of a former duke's daughter. Compared to the rough requests of men, it takes more work, but the finished product is delicate. It will be popular with nobles and women."

"Thank you!"

"Well then, let's put some magic into it." Mr. Euleho opened the small door at the base of the magical device to reveal a small magic stone inside. "The breeze will be generated by the magic imbued in this magic stone. It must be fully charged. This device is meant to circulate air around a wide room. Make sure to put enough energy into it."

"Yes, sir!"

Picturing a refreshing breeze blowing throughout a wide room, I imbued my wind magic into the magic stone. Creating the right level of wind was important. I had to ensure it wasn't too strong so it wouldn't send blankets and small items flying. It was much trickier than summoning a simple, destructive storm.

"Ah, it's finished," Mr. Euleho said. "After that, you can adjust the wind power with this knob. The wind power you just put in is the maximum level, so you can adjust it from full blast to gentle breeze. With this performance and appearance, it would be suitable for a noble's room. It might sell for a high price, actually."

"Oh, good!"

"Incidentally..." Mr. Euleho tipped his glasses down his nose and stared intensely at me. I saw the deep furrow between his brows grow. "I heard you developed a new form of magic for the final High Mage exam."

"I feel like I came up with it by chance, but yes... Right now, Vellia and the others seem to be conducting practical experiments on it," I said.

"A wind lance as a whirlwind, wasn't it? I'd like a demonstration."

"Huh?! But it's much more powerful than I thought. I think it's dangerous to show it in a room like this," I hesitated. "I'm sorry, but I still can't control my

barrier spells reliably..."

"That's all right. We have magical devices that cast a secure barrier."

I was in a fix.

Vellia warned me not to use this magic because it was still too dangerous. To be honest, I didn't have enough experience to know whether the barrier created by the magical device could withstand the power.

"I'm sorry, but..."

"Hey, Old Man Euleho. Don't go stressing out the innocent newbie."

Just as I was about to apologize and refuse, I heard a voice that had become familiar to me over recent weeks.

"Ah, Vellia," Mr. Euleho greeted. "I wasn't stressing her out. But if there's a new spell, it might be incorporated into magical devices somewhere along the line. I just thought I would take a look for the sake of future study."

"I know how enthusiastic you are about your work, Old Man Euleho. But magic that is still being researched cannot be demonstrated. Seren can't whip it out just like that. You should know better than to ask," Vellia tutted.

Yes, the new magic shouldn't be shown to just anybody. Whether it be spells or magical devices, new projects under development by the Third Mage Guild are meant to be top-secret information.

"Hmph, very well," Mr. Euleho conceded. "Now, Seren...your father is out on a trading haul right now, yes? When do you expect him back?"

"I think he will return in about a month," I said. "It depends on the weather and the progress of the trading situation."

Father's schedule can easily change when trade negotiations grow difficult or when he gets a sniff of new information about a new trading partner and goes off on a wild tangent. As I responded to Mr. Euleho, Vellia raised an eyebrow and looked quizzical.

"I wonder, Old Man Euleho, why do you care about such matters?"

"Hmm? Ah, yes, well, I asked Duke Qumildy for a bit of a favor."

“What sort of favor?”

“Since he goes to a lot of undeveloped lands, I asked him to keep an eye out for an area that produces good-quality magic stones.”

“Hmm, the stones you use in your magical devices? What, you have a shortage?” Vellia questioned.

“No, I have enough for normal use. But, you know, we need stronger stones for bigger, more imaginative magical devices. On a broader scope and scale. For the Archmage’s ideas,” Mr. Euleho explained.

“Aha, so they’re for a device Archmage Viol has in mind, are they? Well, I look forward to seeing it,” Vellia said.

“Look forward all you like, but powerful stones are difficult to find. I’ve been asking for a while, but finding a stone that has the kind of sustained-release power we need... Now, that’s a tall order.”

As I gazed at Mr. Euleho’s wry smile, I got the feeling that he was desperate for those stones. But what possible device could require such rare stones... Stones so rare that even my father, who traveled the seas, couldn’t find?

“Well, I can wait,” Mr. Euleho said. “But once that device is finished, it’s going to make things easier on you High Mages.”

“Then I’ll look forward to the finished product. By the way, Old Man Euleho...” Vellia began.

“What is it now?”

“This magical device... Was it constructed based on Lady Seren’s design?” Vellia pointed to the magical device on the desk. The fan, which had just been imbued with magical power.

“Yeah,” he nodded. “Not bad, eh?”

“Yes, it’s splendid. She’s got a shrewd eye for this work.”

“This year’s newcomers are fifty-fifty,” he commented. “That lanky young man and this girl here have a shrewd eye. The other two can make passable devices, but they’d be better off sticking to the stuff they’re good at.”

“Well, thank you for that. I’m sure they’re aware,” Vellia said.

“Well, good.”

The stuff we’re good at, huh? I was secretly delighted to find that I had the aptitude for making magical devices. It would be amazing if I could make an innovative device that could help my father and his colleagues with their work one day.

But every aspect of a High Mage’s work was interesting. I wondered which role I would be best suited for. Spell development and magical device development both seemed fascinating. I didn’t particularly like subjugating monsters, but it felt good to fly around freely outside. And above all, protecting the people was an important job.

I wondered what kind of work I would be mainly tasked with after the training period was over. I was filled with expectations and a little nervousness. However, I felt certain no matter what my main job was, I’d be able to do it with a sense of real purpose.



AT the end of the day, I nervously headed to Lord Viol’s office.

Oh dear. My heart’s pounding. Am I really about to go on a date with Lord Viol? The closer I got to the office, the faster my heart beat. Finally, I stood in front of the door, but I didn’t have enough courage to knock.

After taking two or three deep breaths, I finally knocked. It opened with a heavy creak. Lord Viol’s assistant, Contard, welcomed me with a friendly smile.

“Yes? Ah, Lady Seren. Yes, I’ve already been informed. Please, come inside.”

I went in, but I couldn’t see Lord Viol anywhere. I sat on the sofa as prompted and was just sipping the tea Contard prepared when the door opened with another loud creak.

“My apologies, Lady Seren! My meeting ran long...!”

Lord Viol must have come running. He looked frazzled, not like his usual self, and somewhat disheveled. Not to mention being out of breath.

“I don’t mind,” I said. “Rather, I’m sorry for rushing you.”

“Can you wait just a little longer?” he requested. “I have only two documents that must be dealt with today.”

“Of course. I’ll study, so don’t worry about it.”

I could understand that Lord Viol, our guild Archmage, had many duties that couldn’t possibly be postponed. I silently practiced the water magic I’d just learned until Lord Viol finished his work.

“Lady Seren, my apologies for the delay,” he said after a while.

“Oh, it’s quite all right,” I said. “I was actually able to concentrate rather well, and I’ve shaved some time off my speed when conjuring Water Ball.”

“...Always so eager to learn.” Lord Viol’s gaze softened. His face was always so kind. I couldn’t stop myself from swooning. “It’s getting late. Shall we go?”

“...Oh, yes.”

“Contard, you can go home now. Sorry it’s so late,” Lord Viol apologized.

“Not at all. I took the liberty of changing your restaurant reservation so that it’s an hour later,” Contard said. “I thought it would be nicer for you both to have the time to eat a leisurely meal.”

“Goodness. Thank you; I never even thought of that. That’s most helpful.”

Contard smiled, looking pleased by Lord Viol’s words. It’s wonderful to have someone to rely on this way. Just like how I rely on my most helpful maid, Rince.

“Well then, off you go. Take care.” Contard watched us go with a gentle smile, and Lord Viol and I exited the office.

Walking side by side with Lord Viol like this was something new. It was the first time for us to be doing this since I had become a High Mage. I was so nervous; it was all I could do to respond to the topic Lord Viol came up with. *This won’t do*, I thought, and decided to come up with a topic myself.

“Incidentally, I was talking to Mr. Euleho today, and he is looking for a high-quality magic stone for some device you’ve been considering, Lord Viol,” I said. “It would be nice if my father managed to find something like that in a foreign land.”

"I agree. Unfortunately, our country's magic stones won't quite cut the mustard."

"What kind of magical device needs such a special magic stone? If it's a magical device of your design, Lord Viol, it must be fascinating. I'd love to hear about it, if I may," I prompted.

"Certainly, I don't mind telling you. It's not like it's something I'm trying to hide. I'd like to create a magical device that can maintain the magic barrier of this country for a certain amount of time. Any Wall guard would love to have such a device."

"The Wall?!" I cried.

"Yes, but it's not as simple as it sounds."

The project was so much bigger than I had imagined that I shouted.

"Right now, it takes a few people to maintain the Wall, right? I was thinking it wouldn't matter if it was just for one person or just for a few hours... If there was a magical device that could take over, even for a while, then the burden would be lightened," he explained.

"Certainly..."

"Nowadays, manpower is limited, so one person has to cover quite a long shift. Many report being exhausted by the end of their shift, unable to even move a finger."

Come to think of it, everyone seemed exhausted after Wall Duty. The burden seemed so great.

"I'd love to make things easier for people, even if only a little..." Lord Viol lapsed into contemplative mumbling.

I couldn't help but smile when I glanced at his profile.

As his subordinate, I was pleased and reassured that our Archmage had those kinds of sentiments. And for me personally, despite my nerves, I was grateful for this opportunity to secretly enjoy Lord Viol's handsome profile.

I wondered if I would eventually get used to sneaking glances at him like this.

But then, the more I looked, the more I wanted to look again. Before long, even lifting my head became embarrassing, so I let it hang instead, sensing my cheeks flush.

Walking along, my heart pounding, I suddenly realized something. We were about to pass through the corridors and exit the Mage Tower soon, but... Why hadn't we encountered anyone?"

"What is it?" Seeing me scan my surroundings, Lord Viol sensed my confusion right away.

"It looks like we're about to leave the Mage Tower, but we haven't encountered a single soul..." I said.

"Indeed. I wanted to project the image of us casually spending time together, but more than an hour has passed since our scheduled meeting time."

"The others don't strike me as the type to leave work on the dot, though..."

"No, not really. Perhaps they're engrossed in research and have lost track of time. Many do stay at their desks until morning. Yes, that could be it." Lord Viol nodded, seemingly convinced by his logic. I didn't quite follow, and I'm afraid I must have looked quizzical. Seeing my look, Lord Viol gave a wry smile. "I guess everyone who's still here at this hour has shut themselves up in their room and is currently doing their research."

"I see..."

As I recall, once the training period was over, each of us would be given a private room for research. I heard that the High Mages have a sort of meritocracy because, as long as we produce a certain level of results, we can be flexible in our working styles. Well, for all tasks except Wall Duty, that is. Many people come to work late but stay all night when they're at an important stage in their research. Soon, I could see myself doing the same. But if I returned late to my mansion, I would be scolded by Rince and Vi.

As I walked along, fretting about the future, Lord Viol sighed lightly. "It's a pity. I was so eager to have everyone see me in your company, Lady Seren."

With a light tone, Lord Viol smiled at me. Seeing that natural smile of his up close thrilled me.

“Hehe, well, I feel like I’m fine with things the way they are.”

“Hmm. Indeed?”

“Yes. Just walking by your side like this is exciting, Lord Viol. Perhaps I would prefer others to see us once I’ve gotten used to this first.”

“Oh, so it’s like that?”

“Yes, it is.”

“I see. Then we must get you used to it as quickly as possible.” Lord Viol’s eyes seemed to soften, and the corners of his mouth quirked up happily.

The smallest change in his features excited me. Getting used to this would take... Well, it would take some getting used to.

Contard 2

No One Is More Curious

WHEN I opened the door to the sound of knocking, I found Lady Seren waiting there with her pretty face.

Good heavens! How delicate her features are!

I couldn't help blushing.

At this moment, no one I can think of is more curious than Lady Seren. To someone like me, who spends all day in attendance to the glacially beautiful yet expressionless and sour-tempered Frosty Archmage Viol, Lady Seren is an enigma.

I even have suspicions that she might be someone for whom Archmage Viol has...tender feelings.

Even among High Mages, I have a special ability to sense magic. That handy ability helps me anticipate Archmage Viol's needs without express instructions.

If you ask me, a sort of thorny magic always cloaks Archmage Viol that seems to cry, "Don't come near me! Don't speak to me! Don't touch me!" Perhaps he is a misanthrope? That's my impression, anyway.

It is only with Lady Seren he appears to let down his guard. Whenever she is near, that thorny magic seems to melt away... To be replaced by a wider dome of thorny magic meant to encapsulate them and block out the world outside.

Why? Is it a sign that he does not wish to be disturbed? That's the impression I get.

Until now, I'd believed Archmage Viol was thorny with everyone and simply chronically shy. But only with Lady Seren is he different. Only she is allowed in.

No doubt, he is in love with her. But sadly, she is engaged to Prince Helios, so my boss is out of luck. Poor Archmage Viol... That is what I always thought, but now I have heard that her engagement is off and that she is a free woman.

More incredibly, it transpired that Lady Seren came up with a surprisingly enterprising bit of magic during her final High Mage exam... And this despite

never attending the Magic Academy! Moreover, she is so humble. There have been rumors... Could such a genius really be human?

Such an enigma! How could I fail to be utterly fascinated?

After letting my thoughts run away with me, I dropped my gaze to Lady Seren. Though she was only about a hand's width shorter than I, she gazed up at me with earnest eyes.

Good heavens! How adorable!

Her flaxen-colored hair and amber eyes, which looked average from a distance, were beautiful with a glossy shine when I looked at them up close.

As one might expect from the daughter of a duke!

But unlike before, she and I are of somewhat similar status...

As Archmage Viol's personal assistant, my work differs from my peers. But, just like everyone else, I, too, am a High Mage and a member of the Third Mage Guild. In fact, I am something of an elder to the likes of Lady Seren and the other newcomers.

An elder... Yes, I like the sound of that! I beamed at Lady Seren.

"Yes? Ah, Lady Seren. Yes, I've already been informed. Please, come inside."

I welcomed Lady Seren into the office, offered her a seat on the sofa, and prepared tea. Archmage Viol had told me that he and Lady Seren would be going out upon her arrival, but he had not yet returned from his meeting. I wasn't sure how long it would last, but at the very least, I had a duty to keep Lady Seren entertained.

As I was thinking about that, the heavy door opened with a heavy creak.

"My apologies, Lady Seren! My meeting ran long...!"

Archmage Viol. Good, he's back sooner than I'd been expecting. But that thought made me grin a little internally. Who was this man who'd come bursting into the room in such a fluster and a hurry? Sweaty, hair a mess, out of breath... Good heavens, I'd never seen him like this before.

Usually, he's so expressionless, it's maddening.

Lady Seren quickly got to her feet and gave him a soft, reassuring smile. "I don't mind. Rather, I'm sorry for rushing you."

Ah, she was so adorable! She even looked slightly apologetic as she spoke. How cute!

Archmage Viol seemed to share my sentiments. His downcast eyes lifted, and his eyes widened. "Can you wait just a little longer? I have only two documents that must be dealt with today."

Ah, he remembered! Indeed, there were documents to be done. If the meeting had ended on time, he would be finished with them by now. But now he would have to keep Lady Seren waiting for another half an hour.

If Archmage Viol had forgotten about them, I would have been forced to remind him. And I would not have found that task pleasant.

I wondered how Lady Seren would respond to being asked to wait longer when she had already been waiting. But she merely smiled and said, "Of course. I'll study, so don't worry about it."

Goodness. No hint of anger despite the inconvenience.

Archmage Viol headed straight to his desk and started reading his materials, and, just as she'd said she'd do, Lady Seren began mumbling incantations to herself.

If you're familiar with magic, you can cast it without an incantation, but it's more efficient to use them when you start learning. I thought it might be some kind of magic that she had just started to learn, but the spell she was practicing seemed to be Water Ball.

Water Ball, right after becoming a High Mage? Then again, Lady Seren is a wind user. Maybe she's challenging herself with a whole new element, I thought, smiling to myself.

I was worried she might get bored waiting around for Archmage Viol, but she was so focused she didn't even notice when I exchanged the teapot for a fresh one. I suppose I needn't have worried.

Sensing a fair amount of time had passed, I contacted the restaurant where

Archmage Viol had made his reservation, thinking I should change the time just in case. Then, Archmage Viol seemed to have finally finished up his work.

“Lady Seren, my apologies for the delay.”

Before I knew it, he was all ready to leave.

Despite Archmage Viol’s apology, Lady Seren said things like, “Thanks to you, I was able to concentrate” and “I was able to get the hang of it.” Apparently, she had made good use of the extra time.

How amazing.

“...Always so eager to learn.” Archmage Viol narrowed his eyes happily and praised her.

Ah, yes, I thought to myself.

Archmage Viol loved to see Lady Seren working hard.

An aura of soft, warm magic, a kind I had never seen, emanated from Archmage Viol’s form, enveloping Lady Seren.

Good heavens. He was dying to embrace her. That’s what his magic told me. Just knowing it made my cheeks grow hot.

“It’s getting late. Shall we go?”

“...Oh, yes.”

The easy way they smiled together... Were they already dating?! Gosh, I’d love to just ask!

But tsk. They are in a world of their own. I was sulking, and Archmage Viol came to a sudden stop. Turning, he looked at me directly.

“Contard, you can go home now. Sorry it’s so late.”

Oh, so you haven’t forgotten me after all? But I had to respond with the proper decorum.

“Not at all. I took the liberty of changing your restaurant reservation so that it’s an hour later. I thought it would be nicer for you both to have the time to eat a leisurely meal.”

"Goodness. Thank you; I never even thought of that. That's most helpful." Archmage Viol looked taken aback for a moment before thanking me. He may be expressionless generally, but he can be very good about his manners.

When I first became his attendant, I was so terrified of Archmage Viol's prickly magic, his way of spurning people, and his poker face that I often felt like bursting into tears. But over time, I got used to him, and now things are relatively friendly between us. Basically, he was a good boss who showed concern for me as his employee and always thanked me for my work.

Good heavens.

I was going to go bright red any minute.

Standing beside Archmage Viol, Lady Seren wore a beautiful, saintly smile. She even gave me a delicate bow of the head, expressing gratitude towards me for my courtesies.

Then Lady Seren and Archmage Viol looked at one another again with those joyful smiles.

Yes... Yes, they do make a stunning couple.

"Well then, off you go. Take care."

After seeing the two off and making sure the door was fully closed, I sighed deeply.

Good heavens. What a pair.

I mean...

That sweet, magical aura...

It made even me grow red-faced and fidgety.

Archmage Viol's soft magical power, which had enveloped them, grew prickly spikes around itself the moment the two exited the door.

I understand from it that Archmage Viol wanted to protect Lady Seren.

And the happiness in Lady Seren's eyes as she gazed up at the Archmage... It was so touching. So sweet as to give one heartburn.

When I witnessed the two dancing at that ball before, I felt sorry for the

Archmage, believing that Lady Seren was Prince Helios's fiancée and thus far outside of his reach. But now look. The two, off on a date, walking side by side.

...Well, I hope it all works out.

Even though he's blessed with talent and has a handsome face, Archmage Viol is insanely shy and has trouble communicating. As a result, he is often misunderstood.

If someone like Archmage Viol, a wary stray cat of a man who isn't good at being around others or communicating, could have a special someone he could trust, that would be wonderful.

And if that person is to be Lady Seren, then I hope she will accept him into her heart.

Archmage Viol had grown used to me and even shared his smiles with me. I wanted happiness for him. *Good luck*, I thought, and started preparing the office for the following day with just a little more attention to detail than usual.

Viol 26

It Was Meant to Be a Simple Meeting, Yet...

“HUH? What did you say?”

Borden frowned, glaring up at me.

I think Borden’s demon stare has only gotten more intense since he became Prime Minister. In his student days, he was a mild-mannered fellow who always wore a smile, but lately, I feel like I only ever see him looking irritated, worried, or astonished. It’s rather sad.

“You’re always in such a bad mood these days,” I remarked.

“No, I’m not. It’s because you always come to me bringing such trouble!” He rubbed the deep wrinkles between his brows as if he were aware of them, then sighed heavily before glaring at me once again. “Well?”

“Like I said...I wish to marry Lady Seren,” I said. “As quickly as possible, in fact. And I need your help.”

“I heard you right the first time, then,” he groaned. “Would you mind telling me where all this is coming from?”

“You asked me once before yourself... If I was in love with Lady Seren. Thanks to your question, I realized I was,” I told him.

“Ah. Yes. Well...”

Borden was the one who’d asked. But he made a face like he was sucking a lemon. Why, I wonder.

“I already waited for three months since the dissolution of Lady Seren’s engagement to prevent any negative gossip,” I continued despite the look on his face. “I think it’s high time we get on with it and begin taking steps towards marriage.”

“Wait, wait, wait! Just hold on right there!”

Borden interrupted me in a fluster. Why was he being so negative? Why this, why that? Wait, wait, wait. Wait for what?

“Listen here. Marriage is all about your partner’s... Lady Seren’s wants and wishes,” he lectured. “And you’ll need the approval of her household. Now, I’m assuming you haven’t used the fact that Lady Seren is now independent and the fact that you’re her boss as an excuse to pressure her. But if you act willy-nilly without observing the proper decorum, the duke will raise hell against you.”

“Well, that’s rude. Lady Seren has expressed her desire to marry me, too.”

“...Huh?”

Why was he pulling that face? That incredulous face. It hurt my feelings a little.

“I intended to spark up a formal relationship initially, but I got carried away and ended up proposing instead. And then Lady Seren unexpectedly agreed. I’m eager to meet with Duke Qumildy and announce to everyone that she knows that we—”

“Wait, wait, wait!” Borden squawked like a parrot.

“What? What *IS* your issue?” I sighed.

“I mean... Just hold on. Wait a minute. Let me get this all straight in my brain.”

As I watched Borden clutch his temples and groan, I indulged myself in the array of sweet treats in front of me. Borden knows all about my sweet tooth. As we talked, he’d been busy setting out a tray of tea and treats.

Today’s offering was something easy to pick at and nibble. Nuts, enveloped in chocolate. It’s a common confection, perhaps, but because it was Borden doing the choosing, he’d gone for a variety, from white chocolate to bitter dark chocolate, some dusted with caramel powder and others with cocoa powder.

“Never stopping to consider others’ feelings; just doing whatever you like...”

I heard the resentment in Borden’s voice and lifted my eyes, seeing that same resentment clear in his eyes.

“These are delicious. Especially the ones mixed with rock salt,” I said in return.

“I don’t care about the sweets,” he huffed. “Seriously, Lady Seren also said she wanted to marry you?”

His disbelief was somewhat overblown, wasn’t it? Now, I was getting a little annoyed.

“Of course. What reason would I have to lie about that?” I cocked an eyebrow at him.

“But I mean, what foundation do you two even have for a relationship? I can’t imagine a modest, hardworking, thoughtful Lady Seren would agree to marry so lightly.”

“Lady Seren most definitely IS smart and hardworking, but she is also strong-willed, I find. If she were not, she never would have decided to become a High Mage.”

“Right... IS that right?”

“It IS right. But just as you are confused now, Borden, so too will be Duke Qumildy and Lady Seren’s other loved ones when we announce our engagement out of the blue,” I said.

“Well, of course they will. I mean, I can still scarcely believe it myself.”

“Hurry up and get around to believing it fully, then,” I demanded. “I’ll bring Lady Seren here to verify things herself if need be.”

“...Well, you should tell her that it is high time she attended another ball.”

“Still so skeptical. All right. I’ll tell her. Actually, I was thinking I might escort her to a ball myself. That would start getting people used to the idea, no doubt.”

“Wait, wait, wait. It’s still too soon for that,” Borden chided.

“All you keep saying today is wait, wait, wait,” I sighed.

“You’re much too hasty in everything! Judging from the situation as it stands now, Duke Qumildy still doesn’t know anything, does he?”

“No... I want to tell him, of course, but it seems he is delayed back from a

trading jaunt.”

“A blessing in disguise, perhaps... Well, first off, you’d better leave frivolous ball attendance aside until AFTER you’ve had a meeting with the duke,” Borden said. “You’ve encountered him, haven’t you? You’ve seen what an intimidating man he can be.”

“I know; that’s why I’ve come to consult with you first. I don’t understand all this aristocratic pomp. I thought to myself, ‘Surely Borden of all people will be able to give me some sound advice.’”

Borden clutched his temples once more.

When he gets like this, Borden can be very much in his head. It would be uncouth of me to get in his way. Silently, I picked my way through the chocolate-coated nuts. It was most delicious to savor a rock salt-encrusted one after eating a few sugary ones.

At length, Borden finally lifted his face. He had a somewhat tired expression, but light filled his eyes. “...Okay, okay. If Lady Seren *has* indeed chosen you as her partner, I have no choice but to get on board, too. I’ll do my best to make you both happy.”

“Thank you, Borden! I just knew you’d say that!”

“Always the smug one.”

But there was no more hesitation in Borden’s wry smile. I was certain of my victory.



“**LORD** Viol, look at this cake!” Lady Seren said. “The apricots are so lovely and look so delicious!”

“Oh, yes, it all looks so fresh and delicious,” I agreed.

“Shall we stop and eat something?”

“Hmm... No, I think I’m good. This store is so feminine, I honestly hesitate to enter. I’ve never seen a man eating there, either.”

“Hehe, yes, you might stand out a bit. But I’ll go and order something to take

home. Which would you like?"

Well, now I was in trouble. Every single cake on display looked beautiful and exquisitely delicious.

After umming and ahing about it, I asked Lady Seren to order two types of cake. She went into the shop with bouncing steps. Seeing her go in, I felt my face instantly relax.

Today was the first time I had come to town with Lady Seren in a while.

It had been three weeks since I'd last walked around the town with Lady Seren exposed like this. At first, I was thinking of going out together more often, but when I consulted with Borden, he gently suggested we exercise caution.

It wouldn't look good for me to be seen on frequent dates with Lady Seren and cause all sorts of rumors to swirl before first obtaining Duke Qumildy's consent. He said the same about attending balls, too. And from this, I grasped that it was essential to talk to Lady Seren's father first.

And the meeting with that extremely important father was scheduled for tomorrow.

Last night, I was so nervous that I couldn't sleep, but now that I'd gone so far beyond nerves, I was quite calm. It seems even I can be pretty determined when I put my mind to something.

"I bought them!" Lady Seren said with a triumphant smile upon her return.

"Thank you. I've been wanting to try this shop out for a while. Now I can find out how the cakes taste. I can't wait to dig into them."

"Oh, yes. It's a very fancy shop, to be sure. The interior was so charmingly decorated, and, as you said, only female customers were inside."

"Just as I thought."

"If there are any other shops you hesitate to enter, I'll gladly do the buying for you from now on, so please don't hesitate to ask," Lady Seren offered with a beaming smile.

"Well, thank you very much."

“I, too, am delighted to be able to eat delicious treats and to get to know so many wonderful shops! It’s lots of fun!”

“You are too kind, Lady Seren.”

“Am I? It doesn’t seem that way to me...”

It seemed she was unaware of her generosity. It’s odd how talking to her like this always makes me feel so calm. I think I feel able to be myself without putting on a front precisely because she handles things like this in a positive light.

“I’m a lucky man to be able to have you as my wife, Lady Seren.”

Lady Seren turned bright red instantly. “Wh-Wh-What... I mean... Why say that in such a public place?”

“Hahaha, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you panic so much.”

“Hmph...!”

Since her face was cast downward, I couldn’t tell what kind of expression she wore, but her red ears and neck were most charming.

I thought again how lucky I was to be able to marry Lady Seren.

Yes, but to officially make her my wife, tomorrow I had to get Lady Seren’s father, Duke Qumildy, to approve the marriage.

“It’s finally tomorrow.” When I said that to her, Lady Seren lifted her head in surprise.

“Yes... I’m nervous.”

“I’ve come full circle and calmed down,” I said. “We’ve reached a point where you say you are happy to be my wife. I’m not very good with words, but I’ll do my best to win your father over.”

“Lord Viol...!”

“By the way, I also prepared a gift for him.”

“A gift? I don’t think Father is the type to be overly pleased by gifts,” she said.

“It’s a newly developed magical device.”

Lady Seren's jaw dropped. "Well, he might like that. I've always thought that Father's magical device collection was extensive, but I've seen so many more fantastical devices since becoming a High Mage."

"Your father's love for magical devices is unparalleled."

"He has a lot of things from other countries, too."

"I'd like to see them."

"I think the two of you would have a lot of fun talking about his funny magical devices."

Seeing Lady Seren smile happily, I felt more at ease. This might actually work.

"Your nerves seem to have dissipated," I commented.

"Yes, I think I'll be able to talk freely with Father tomorrow."

"I see, that's good. Let's both do our best."

"Yes!"

Lady Seren beamed. I vowed to do my best tomorrow so I could enjoy seeing that smile close-up forevermore.



HOWEVER...the next day, when I visited the duke's residence as promised, Lady Seren's father, the most important factor in this, was not in attendance. He had been summoned to the royal palace early in the morning and had not returned.

"Just when he'd finally returned from a long sea journey. It sounds like Duke Qumildy is having a rough time, too," I said.

"Yes. And this kind of thing only ever rarely happens."

Lady Seren looked worried, too. She had not been informed about what was going on. So, I took that to mean that it probably wasn't anything too terribly serious. Nothing on a national scale, anyway.

"If Father hasn't returned after the noon bell has passed, it might be better to reschedule for another day," she said.

"Agreed. It's a pity, but he might not be in the mood to listen closely to what we have to say when he finally makes it home," I said. "And I hate to impose. Perhaps we can ask him for a meeting another day. Once things have calmed down."

Just as Lady Seren and I were discussing the matter...

A flurry of footsteps came from the hallway. Next, the heavy door flew open.

"Sorry! It seems I kept you waiting!"

Lady Seren's father, the most un-duke-like Duke Qumildy, entered in a hurry.

"It's quite all right," I said. "We were informed an urgent issue came up. We were just talking about changing the date."

The duke smiled cheerfully. "No, no, it's fine. We received word that the last ship in the convoy hadn't made it back to port. I had to decide whether to send a rescue ship."

"Oh dear, is everything all right?" Lady Seren sounded so concerned that the duke's expression grew solemn to match.

"Hmm. There will be a further delay of a few more days, I'm afraid. This time around, there have been quite a lot of problems in general, and it's taking longer than usual. Food will be tight soon. I want to send a rescue ship, but it's a difficult choice."

"So that's why you were delayed, Father."

"Yes. Our ship was in the lead, so we still had a slight breeze carrying us along, you see. But the following ship was a week behind us. When it finally reached the coastal waters, there was an ongoing calm on the ocean. So the ship hasn't made much progress at all." The duke sighed and continued with a conflicted look. "We have a certain amount of fuel on board for such occurrences, but this time, they appear to have run out of even that, so now we're really at a dead end."

Hearing that, I knew what to do. "Is the place where the ship is stranded very far away?" I asked.

"Yes. If we DID decide to send a rescue ship, it's far enough away that it would

require a lot of fuel. Even if we could supply enough fuel and food, it would be difficult to resupply both ships enough for them to be able to reach home.”

“What are you going to do?” I asked.

“We can’t just leave them. If we could just get the ship a bit closer, that would buy us more options... It’s a risk, but ultimately, I believe we will be forced to send a rescue ship.”

“Goodness, Father, was it all right for you to come back home in the midst of such a difficult situation?” Lady Seren asked.

“Right now, I have people in the process of arranging a ship that can sail. I have some time.”

“Oh. Okay...”

Lady Seren looked relieved. I felt calmer, too.

“Of course, you can rest assured that we will deal with it properly. But more importantly...” The duke looked at me and lowered his head again. “I’m sorry to have kept you waiting when we had a firm appointment, Lord Viol. What kind of business do you have today? Is there an issue with our Seren?”

With a slight hint of worry, the duke glanced at Lady Seren and then returned his gaze to me.

“The very thought is nonsense!” I was flustered. “Lady Seren is very talented. Since she didn’t attend the Magic Academy, we have put together a special curriculum for her. But she has already completed a series of training lessons in magic development and magical device development.”

“Seren! You’ve learned to make magical devices?!” the duke asked in a booming voice.

“Well, I can only do simple things at the moment.”

Lady Seren’s reticence in the face of her father’s enthusiasm for magical devices eased my nerves. Yesterday, I’d thought I’d gone beyond nerves, but seeing the duke had me feeling more on edge than I’d thought.

“Well, we’ll talk about that later,” he said. “So, Lord Viol, if there’s no problem with Seren, what kind of business do you have today?”

The duke looked at me with a slight smile on his lips. I swallowed loudly.

I could feel sweat burst forth on my brow.

I could not make eye contact.

My mind went blank.

"A-Actually, I would like you to allow me to court Lady Seren," I blurted.

"Indeed?"

For some reason, the duke sounded intrigued.

"Well, after borrowing your wisdom regarding the timing, if possible, I would like you to allow us to get married..." I continued, my mouth parched.

The duke's face suddenly went blank, and I was so panicked that I stared at him in concern until he started guffawing.

"It's so soon... I mean... Forgive me..." Confused, I bumbled over my words, but the duke kept laughing.

"No, no, it's not that! I was expecting this but never thought you'd bring up marriage this soon."

So the duke had been expecting this to some extent after all. Perhaps I'd been too obvious, or this was the common thing to expect among the aristocracy when requesting a meeting with a parent. I had no way of knowing.

But even so, the fact that it exceeded the duke's expectations meant that I was clearly trying to do something out of the ordinary.

"I do understand that it may be a bit hasty, but..." I said awkwardly.

"No, no, well, what about you, Seren? What do you think? The fact you're here together implies that you're fully on board with this as well, I would guess?" the duke asked.

"Yes. Lord Viol is very sincere, and..."

"Oh, hold on. It sounds like you're enthusiastic about this too, Seren?"

"Y-Yes." She nodded.

"Then please wait a little longer. Marriage is such a major thing to discuss. I

can't hear you out without my wife here, too."

I nodded.

According to Borden, in the case of aristocrats, the head of the household has the power to decide on engagements and marriages. The bride-to-be in question and the rest of the family are usually only notified after everything has been decided.

Although the prearranged marriage system has long since become obsolete, the conservatives, in particular, still decide to marry almost arbitrarily to strengthen the relationship with the family that is most profitable at that time, especially when the person involved reaches a marriageable age.

I thought it was a distasteful system, but the Duke of Qumildy wasn't that type of person.

After that, the duke made some arrangements, and we were once again seated with Lady Seren's mother in attendance. Now was an extremely tense time as I again entreated permission to court and marry their daughter.

Even I, a man said to possess little emotion, was dripping with an unpleasant amount of sweat.

Sitting diagonally in front of me, next to the duke, was Lady Seren's mother. It was the first time I'd seen her so close, but she looked more like Lady Seren's sister.

The duke smiled at the gentle-seeming woman in a caring manner.

"I apologize for how sudden this is, Anessa," he said to her. "The reason why Lord Viol came to visit me is more serious than I'd thought. I want you to hear it, too."

"Goodness, with you speaking so solemnly, I wonder whatever it could be about...? I do hope Seren hasn't been causing any trouble...?"

The mother looked worried, but the duke smiled, showing off his white teeth.

"Now, now, don't think like that. Lord Viol, let us hear it directly from you."

Ah, I was expecting this to be rough sailing... I glanced at Lady Seren by my side. She was also looking at me, and our eyes collided. Seeing her gazing at me

and nodding gave me courage, and I finally opened my mouth.

“I apologize for taking up your time so out of the blue. I’m here today to ask you both to allow me to court and then marry your daughter.”

I said it all in a rush, then took a deep breath.

I said it.

I did it.

I took shallow breaths and suddenly realized that Lady Seren’s mother hadn’t reacted. When I raised my eyes in trepidation, this time I made eye contact with the duchess herself.

The duchess seemed to have stiffened up as well, but after making eye contact with me, she finally exhaled.

“...I’m sorry. I was just taken aback,” she admitted.

“Well, it makes sense. Suddenly bringing up the topic of marriage. I was surprised, too.”

“Um, this is awkward, but...” The duchess raised her eyebrows awkwardly and looked back and forth between me and Lady Seren. “Have you two been... together for a long time? Is that why you wanted to cancel your engagement to Prince Helios...?”

“Aha! The vital question!” Duke Qumildy laughed.

“Goodness, no!!!”

The duke, amused. Lady Seren, mortified. And me, frozen up.

But the duchess had reason to suspect so. Breaking off the engagement, then announcing plans to marry someone else three months later... Anyone would think the same. Perhaps we were too hasty after all.

“There was no trickery in me breaking off my engagement or anything of the sort,” Lady Seren said. “However, Lord Viol encountered me in a moment of sadness and showed me kindness as well as taught me magic. I fell for him naturally from then on.”

“Oh my...” the duchess said.

"There is no doubt I started to care about Lady Seren around that time," I said. "But it took me quite some time to realize I was in love with her. I've never felt that way before... I never thought I could fall in love with someone."

"Oh, Lord Viol..." Lady Seren said beside me.

"Oh, my. How...romantic."

"Yes, yes, the excitement of youth!"

The duchess blushed, hands on her cheeks, while the duke smiled wryly. Lady Seren was also blushing and fidgeting. Most adorable.

"Well, we will need to approach the royal family carefully," Duke Qumildy said. "It's all still too soon. You may date, but I would like you to spend a little more time together before an engagement to make sure your feelings don't change."

After this stern advice to Lady Seren and me, the duke turned to his wife.

"Anessa, Archmage Viol may be clumsy and rather unfriendly, but I don't think he's the kind of man who would betray anyone. If neither of their feelings changes, I would like to bless their marriage. What say you?"

"Hehe. Well, if you and Seren both trust him, then there is no way I can be against him."

"Indeed?"

"Father, Mother...! Thank you!"

"But this is a private blessing," the duke warned. "If you two can continue to build your relationship without changing feelings, I will give you my official blessing to marry."

"Lord Viol, please take good care of Seren," the duchess said. "Our daughter is very hardworking, but she often loses sight of things as a result of trying too hard. I'd appreciate it if you would give her your guidance."

Realizing that both parents had accepted me, at least provisionally, I was flooded with relief. Considering the timing, I had been half expecting a no. This was indeed good news.

“Yes... Thank you.”

And I meant those words sincerely.

With the relief, the tension in my whole body melted away until I remembered something important.

“Ah...”

With everything going on, I’d gotten distracted from my original plan for how the proceedings would go. As a result, I forgot to hand over the gift I had prepared for the duke, the newly developed magical device.

Hmm. But now that everything had seemingly been resolved, it seemed awkward to produce it.

What to do...? While I was at a loss, Lady Seren tilted her head and looked up at me.

“What’s wrong?”

“Ah... It’s just... I forgot to hand over the...”

“...Oh!”

Lady Seren seemed to understand perfectly... After all, we were only discussing it yesterday.

“What’s wrong?” the duke interjected as Lady Seren and I muttered together. Well, now, at least, I had an in. I took out the magical device I’d brought with me.

It was a small magical device, about the size of a pen. But it was a powerful and, I think, an interesting one.

“Ah! Is that a magical device?!?”

The duke’s eyes began to shine just like a young boy’s. He was just like Lady Seren whenever she saw a new type of magic. They certainly were father and daughter. Rather amusing.

“My apologies; I was originally planning to hand it over to you as soon as we met,” I said.

“No, no. I suppose there wasn’t much time for that. But never mind! What

kind of magical device is it? Can you give a quick demonstration?"

"Whoops!"

The duke suddenly reached for the device, and I quickly pulled it out of his reach.

"Hmm!"

"It's dangerous to just grab it like that," I warned.

"Dangerous? A little thing like that? Why, it looks like a pen."

"The power inside is what makes it dangerous," I explained. "This magical device contains lightning magic. You can adjust the output with a press of this button."

"A magical device with lightning magic?" Duke Qumildy looked at it with awe.

"Lightning is difficult to handle, so this is probably the first time I've seen it used in a magical device. I thought you might use it to show off your skills when negotiating with new trading partners, and if you push the button hard, beyond this stopper, it can also be a weapon."

"How convenient."

"If you press it just a little, like this, it produces a faint blue light and a crackling sound." I pressed the button, and blue lightning bolt sparks shot from the tip.

"What if I touch it?" he asked.

"It'll give you a shock, but it won't do any serious harm."

"Let's give it a try." With a curious face, the duke slowly reached out while licking his lips. As one might expect of a sea adventurer, he was a fizzing ball of curiosity.

I have touched lightning many times. A weak spark will inflict the same pain as the static shock you feel when you take off your clothes in the winter. Not much of a problem at all.

Duke Qumildy touched the sparks with his fingertip, and there was a small bang.

“Ouch!”

He quickly pulled his hand away and glared at me while flapping it in the air. I thought I’d explained that he would get shocked, so why did he look so...shocked?

“It hurts a lot more than I thought. That’s the weakest setting, is it?” he asked.

“Yes. The highest setting can bring down a high-level magical beast.”

“I see. Let’s save that one as a last resort, then.”

“I hoped you’d accept it as a present if you like it... What do you think?” I said.

“I like it! Thank you; what a wonderful gift. You really are a man who defies all expectations.”

The duke seemed so cheery. He wasn’t much like a duke at all.

Borden seemed quite wary of him, but I couldn’t see why. I knew he was a high-level trade negotiator, but I wasn’t sure why that meant I ought to be on my guard around him. I had no choice but to treat him like anyone else.

The duke was fiddling around with the magic device with a smile. When the conversation settled down, I unintentionally reached out to the plate of financier cakes that was put out in front of me.

Being exhausted physically and mentally from nervousness and impatience, the gentle sweetness and rich butter scent grabbed me. The financier cakes Jean makes are excellent, of course, but I suspected these cakes were made by the duke’s head chef. They were moister and more delectable.

“The gentle aroma of butter and milk... and the taste! Heavenly.”

Yes, heavenly sweets that heal all the tiredness of the day. The head chef had done it again. As I sank my teeth into the pure happiness I held in my mouth in cake form, my mind began to whirr. All of a sudden, I was thinking about the duke’s shipping predicament.

Perhaps Lady Seren and I could find a way to solve it...

“...Incidentally, Your Grace...” I began.

“Yes?”

“Would you mind telling me specifically where the ship you mentioned earlier is stranded?”

“Certainly... But why?”

“Well, I thought that maybe Lady Seren and I could save the rear ship quite efficiently,” I offered.

“M-Me?!” Lady Seren squeaked.

“What do you mean? Tell me more.”

The duke’s expression suddenly became serious as Lady Seren panicked. I spoke my thoughts calmly, explaining myself.

“Lady Seren, who has enough mastery of the wind to be able to fight while flying, should be able to propel the ship with wind power.”

“Ah...” Lady Seren gasped. From the look in her eyes, I knew she’d realized herself that this was within her ability.

“If magical energy is an issue, I can transfer mine to you, and I can also increase the firepower of the ship,” I said. “If anything untoward happens, I can counter it with the opposite elemental magic. Any danger could be neutralized swiftly.”

“I see, I see...” The duke nodded thoughtfully.

“However, even though Lady Seren and I have plenty of magical energy, it’s not an inexhaustible amount. If the lagging vessel is a considerable distance away, it might be best to send a rescue boat anyway,” I said.

“So that’s why you wanted to know the location of the stranded ship,” he mused.

“Yes. If we can bolster it with wind and firepower, we might be able to close the distance between the stranded ship and the rescue ship. And we can preserve our physical and magical strength more than if it were just us flying.” Having said that, I turned my attention to Lady Seren. “It would be easier to take frequent rests somewhere you can land, right?”

Then, to my surprise, Lady Seren put her finger to her lips and seemed deep in thought.

“...Hmm, I wonder,” she said. “It’s hard to tell without looking at a map. If islands are dotted about here and there, it might be better to send just Lord Viol and me in the usual flying cart rather than trying to transport a large ship.”

Another bold suggestion from Lady Seren. Yes, it made sense. But what worried me was that Lady Seren might be unconsciously putting herself on the line to solve the problem.

If so, as her boss and her future life partner, I would have to save her from herself.

“Wouldn’t that be too much of a burden for you?” I pointed out. “Flying requires fairly complex magical adjustments. I’m sure it’s tiring, and if you push yourself beyond the limit, you may lose buoyancy and fall.”

“Well, if that happens, you can imbue me with recovery magic as needed.”

“Hey, hold on!”

“I was mostly kidding with that, but transporting just you and myself, Lord Viol, would take up less magical energy than transporting a large ship. And the necessary magical adjustments for flying would be simpler and quicker. As I recall, there is a lighthouse on the inland sea, right? I can certainly fly from here to the lighthouse in one go.”

“Seriously...? It’s quite a distance from here to the sea,” I said.

“It’s all right. If there are islands around, we can take frequent breaks. And with only two people involved, it’ll be cheaper and safer.”

“Wait a minute.” The duke interrupted us, looking stern. “Seren, the ocean is much wider than you think, and there are fewer landmarks than on the ground. If you lose your sense of direction, you won’t be able to locate the islands. It could be a disaster.”

I had the same thought. Which is why I thought we should use the ship with a crew that knows the seas inside out.

“...A little risky, perhaps. But viewed from up in the sky, you can see a much wider range, you know. Sticking near coastal waters, I think it might be all right, but...”

“Hmm.”

She gazed up at me, her bottom lip protruding slightly, and I felt I could not deny her suggestions when she looked at me like that. But being swept up by her plan would not be good. Here I was, just a few moments ago, reminding myself to save her from herself. How easily swayed I am.

I took a deep breath and gave my honest opinion.

“Lady Seren... you may be right.”

“Huh?!” The duke was flustered, but I had no intention of doing anything dangerous.

“We could go to the lighthouse today and come back. Could you lend us a map?” I requested. “We shall check if the method Lady Seren suggests is possible.”

“Oh, Lord Viol...!”

“Lady Seren, can you fly us to the lighthouse and back?”

“Yes! Oh, but can you wait just a little? I have something good I can prepare!”

“Hey, Seren! I haven’t given you MY permission yet!” Duke Qumildy shouted.

“Oh, do you want to come too, Father?” she asked.

“...Say what?”

“Hehe, only kidding. If it seems dangerous, I promise I won’t overdo it. Would you let me try it?”

Faced with Lady Seren’s beaming smile, the duke screwed up his face before nodding. Lady Seren leaped up.

“I’ll be right back!”

As I watched Lady Seren dash out of the room, I suddenly realized something worrying.

Left alone in this situation, without Lady Seren, what exactly was I supposed to say to her father and mother? Talk about awkward...

“Archmage Viol.”

“...Yes?”

Turning timidly, I found the duke staring at me with a more severe look than any he’d worn so far today.

“I apologize for my shrewish daughter. She presents as quiet and docile, but she’s got guts, and once she makes up her mind about something, there’s no dissuading her. It seems even I didn’t know how determined she can be.”

Hmm, how interesting. Lady Seren had her father wrapped around her little finger, a man Borden himself seemed frightened of. She certainly was a splendid shrew.

“It’s okay. For a High Mage, that level of unpredictability is useful when it comes to research. Besides... Lady Seren’s proactiveness, her mentality, and her never-say-die attitude are all the aspects of her I find most charming.”

“Well, good. Please take care of her.” He grabbed me by the shoulders, looked me in the eye, and spoke solemnly. “I entrust my daughter to you.”

“Just leave it to me.”

This could be my big chance, I realized, and I made up my mind to do my best to watch out for Lady Seren.

Seren 30

We Can Do It Together

I ran out into the garden, borrowed a cart from Gardener Dan, and soared into the sky. As I flew toward my new residence, I reveled in my joy. Father and Mother had accepted me and Lord Viol as a couple. Even though it was provisional, Father had promised me that he would allow the marriage after enough time had passed.

With Lord Viol, no matter how much time passes... No, I'm sure that the more time goes by, we'll appreciate each other even more. After all, even though he was clearly terribly nervous, he was the kind of man who'd immediately thought about helping Father.

I wanted to do my best to be useful to Father and Lord Viol.

I descended into the garden of my residence and ran into the house.

"Lady Seren?!" Seeing me rushing in, Rince's eyes widened. "Didn't you go to His Grace's house with Lord Viol today?!"

"Yes! But I have to hurry back! I'll tell you all about the situation when I get home later tonight!" I said in a rush.

Dashing into my room, I opened the window wide and jumped on board my luxury padded cart, the special one I'd had made just the other day.

"Lady Seren?!" Rince cried, aghast. "Whatever are you doing?!"

"I'll be back soon!"

I shouted back to Rince, who'd chased me to the room, and jumped out of the window. On the way out, I snagged Gardener Dan's cart from where I left it at the front door, then flew off at top speed with it attached to the back of my brand-new cart.

Flying steadily with a strong wind, I would reach Father's mansion in no time.

After descending to the garden and returning the cart I'd borrowed, I approached the window of the reception room.

"...Lady Seren?!"

While I was hovering outside the window to get the attention of those inside, Lord Viol noticed me. He rushed to the window and opened it wide to let me in.

“Woah! What’s this new cart?” he asked.

“Hehe, I thought a more comfortable flying cart might be nice, so I bought a bigger one with my salary. Now we can sit in comfort as we fly, see?” I showed it off.

When mobility is vital, such as when subjugating monsters, the small cart is better because it can turn around in a small radius. But for a leisurely flight with Lord Viol, I wanted to sit and relax. I thought a wide cart with enough space for comfortable seating would be nice.

Now Lord Viol and I had a nice, large cart where we could sit on fluffy cushions and stretch our legs out in luxury.

My ability to control the wind had increased considerably, so I could levitate a larger cart without major issue, and with Lord Viol’s cloaking magic, we didn’t have to worry about being seen by anyone. I was looking forward to more comfortable air travel but never thought it’d be so useful in a situation like this.

“See? It’s soft, padded, and comfortable, so I’m sure we won’t get tired even during long-distance flights,” I explained.

“Indeed... It’s certainly something.”

Lord Viol’s eyes widened slightly in surprise, and I smiled at him. It would be nice to enjoy the rushing breeze with him as Lord Viol or clutch him on my lap as Vi while we soared through the sky. However, on this particular excursion, speed was of the essence, and there was no time for a leisurely flight.

“If things go well, we’ll be able to rescue Father’s sailors quickly,” I said. “I will do my best to make that happen. Lord Viol, please lend me your strength, for my father’s sake.”

“That was my plan,” he said. “Let us do our best together.”

“Please climb aboard,” I offered, and he did as I said.

“It really is plush,” Lord Viol observed. “It seems wrong somehow to step on it in shoes.”

“Oh, it’s still got room for further optimizations,” I said with a smile.

Joking around with me, Lord Viol got aboard the cart.

“Okay then, we will return as soon as possible.”

For some reason, Father grimaced when I said that. “...Wait.”

“Hmm? What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I’m going too,” Father said. “There should be at least one more person on board.”

“...Pardon?”

“This is my sailors’ ship we’re talking about here,” Father said. “Besides, I can understand maps and nautical charts better than you.”

“Well... That’s certainly true,” I said.

“It might be a tough flight for you, though... Lady Seren flies long and far,” Lord Viol told Father.

“Even so. I have a responsibility. As the person in charge and Seren’s father. If there’s the chance to gauge the situation, I should go and gauge it myself.”

And so, with Father’s unexpected announcement, the three of us decided to take flight together.



“**ALL** right, Mother. We’re off.”

“Be careful. Seren. Don’t be too reckless, okay?”

After Mother saw us off, worry etched into her features, the three of us floated up high into the sky. I felt for Mother, but I had to prove how well and securely I could fly. And I needed to go at a quick pace.

“I will bring you both home safely, too,” I vowed.

With that, I flew higher and higher and higher.

“Your Grace, can you show me the map too?” Lord Viol asked. “When it’s time for the rescue mission, I’m the one who will need to consult the map as we fly.”

“Oh, all right. I’ll show you how to calculate the right direction, too, and... Woah!” Father’s voice suddenly grew hoarse. When I looked back at him, he was frozen, staring down at the scenery below. “I’ve never looked down from such a height before... Despite the weightlessness and the rushing air, we barely wobble at all... Which is in itself discomfiting.”

“It doesn’t sway because Lady Seren has high wind control skills,” Lord Viol explained. “But you feel strange because probably, as a sailor, you are used to the rough swaying of a ship in motion.”

“I see... It’s awfully high up here, but you look as cool as a cucumber, Lord Viol.”

“Ah, I’ve grown well accustomed to it. And this cart is one you can sit comfortably on.”

It appeared that the sudden altitude was quite difficult for my father to stomach. Even so, Father spread a map between Lord Viol and himself and began to carefully explain it, even though his face had turned deathly pale.

Lord Viol listened to the explanation while nodding along, asked a few questions, then picked up the map and stared at it with a serious expression. Then he suddenly lifted his head, his eyes wide.

“Your Grace, please sit down and hold onto the railing.”

“Huh? Oh, all right.”

“Lady Seren, please proceed in the direction of that clock tower. And since the duke is aboard, please go at a steady pace.”

“Roger.”

The way he phrased that made me wonder if my accelerations were too harsh. Mulling that over, I increased the cart’s speed with more care than usual.

“Oh! Amazing! The wind feels splendid! And it’s much faster than going by ship!” Father yelped in an excited voice I’d never heard from him before.

“Is it all right if I speed it up a little?” I asked.

“It goes even faster?!” Father asked in shock.

“It goes ever so much faster than this.”

“That’s no good; you’re holding back on speed simply because I’m aboard,” Father tsked at me. “Please fly as you usually do when it’s just you and Lord Viol.”

“Your Grace!” Lord Viol frowned and looked as though he wanted to dissuade Father, but I had to disagree.

“Lord Viol, reaching the destination as quickly as possible is of paramount importance right now,” I argued. “We must do it to discern whether or not this attempt is a viable one.”

“Yes, of course...”

“It’s not like how it is during beast subjugation. I won’t need to make tight circles or zig-zags. I’m sure it will be fine.”

“Guh... Yes, perhaps, but...”

“I’m perfectly fine, I assure you. I’ve had some dangerous experiences of my own at sea. I don’t want you to worry about me.” Father spoke in a joking tone, and Lord Viol gave up. He sighed heavily and nodded.

“I’ll put up a Wind Shield. I need to measure the time and distance, so speed up.”

“Roger.”

“Woah?!!!”

Father yelped in surprise. A sudden wind buffeted us from ahead, but the Wind Shield cast by Lord Viol instantly protected us.

“I... I thought we were about to be tossed overboard...” Father sounded slightly and, uncharacteristically, terrified. I felt a sting of pity for him.

“I apologize; I was a split second late in my casting.” Lord Viol lowered his head apologetically.

“If it weren’t for your magic shield thing, we wouldn’t even be able to handle this much wind, would we?” Father asked.

“Speed is, of course, of the essence,” Lord Viol said. “If you look down, you

should be able to see the scenery flying past.”

“Urgh...”

Prompted by Lord Viol, Father leaned over the edge, looked down, and let out a small yelp. I understood how he must be feeling.

When I first started flying, I was afraid of speeding up.

But I grew accustomed to fast flying over time, and I know I can always adjust the speed myself if need be. But Father had no prior experience with speeds this fast and had no control over the cart. No wonder he was frightened. Still, in our current situation, we had to fly as fast as possible.

Hang in there, Father.

“Please let me know if you feel unwell,” I called out to him, but Father shook his head and insisted that he was fine, even though his complexion was a little pale.

“I just never expected it to be quite this fast,” he admitted.

“There are no obstacles in the sky, so we can increase our speed as much as we want. I could go faster, but then again, we’re barely carrying any weight at the moment,” I explained.

“You, my dear, are quite exceptional.” Father sounded astonished, but people are surprisingly adaptable. Flying no longer seemed out of the ordinary to me at all.

“Judging by how long it takes to reach the lighthouse and how tired I am when we get there, we’ll be able to tell if I’ll be able to reach the ship like this, right?” I asked for confirmation.

“Certainly. It also depends on whether I can properly assist in the navigation,” Lord Viol said. “I can see the mountain range on the right, and the way ahead has opened up. It seems that we are proceeding to the harbor without any problems.”

“Good...”

“We should be able to proceed like this for a while. You should relax a little, Lady Seren.”

“Right.”

I took a deep breath. Then I leaned back on the plush cushions on the cart, raised my arms, and stretched. Yes, I’d been quite nervous about this, after all.

Today, the wind was calm, and our speed was nice and steady. And if we were already on course, there was less need for adjustments.

“Are you okay?” Lord Viol asked me.

“Yes. I’m not tired at all yet.”

“Good. Wait a minute.” With that mumble, Lord Viol cast earth and fire magic in a way I’d never seen before. He conjured up a tray of glasses in front of us, then poured water into them using water magic. He even went to the trouble to put some ice in, too.

Such impressive magic! Being able to use every element looked so useful.

“Unfortunately, I don’t have any tea leaves, so I’m afraid it’s just plain water,” he said apologetically.

“Thank you.” I accepted the cup.

“And for you, Your Grace.”

“You two really are... something else,” Father said.

“By the way, Your Grace, according to this map and the charts, it seems that if we go in a straight line to where the ship is stranded, it won’t be all that far after all.”

I looked at Lord Viol in surprise. “Oh my, is that so?”

“Yes, it’s about ten times from the duke’s residence to the lighthouse. It’s closer than I thought.”

“Assuming we travel in a straight line,” Father noted. “But there are islands and a lot of areas with shallow waters. Places where it’d be difficult to navigate through if the wind’s too strong. Please keep the wind flow steady if you don’t mind.”

“Lady Seren, would it be possible to float the ship and carry it back to port?”

“What?!”

Such an outrageous thing to suggest... I was stunned beyond words. But then, I was the one who said it would be better to fly via cart rather than try to power the ship with my wind power.

But even carrying a cart with three people on board made me nervous. And yet, I was now being called upon to float a much larger and heavier ship with many people on board and transport it...?

I wondered if such a thing was even possible.

"It would be difficult and time-consuming to make adjustments, and she would have to coordinate the wind output in tandem with the helmsman in charge of steering the ship," Father said.

"That's true..." I agreed. "Also, considering how big it is and how many people are aboard, it would be rather scary to let it float too high."

"So such things scare you too, Lady Seren?" Lord Viol asked.

"It'd be a different story if it were just me or if it was something I'm confident in handling, but when it comes to a whole ship..."

"Hmm. Well, you don't have to overdo it. However, if you could float it even a little above the surface of the ocean, we wouldn't have to worry about treacherously shallow waters. And there aren't many islands, in truth. We can shorten the distance considerably. See?" Lord Viol said, showing me the map, and I groaned.

True, there were only a few islands. And little ones at that. It would be much faster and easier to fly if I didn't have to worry about a large amount of invisible shallow water or avoiding multiple islands.

"I see your point..."

"Well, if it's difficult to levitate it, why not just power it with your wind?"

"I'll try."

Lord Viol was so determined. I felt I had to say yes.

Right. I had to at least try.

Just as I was making up my mind, Father suddenly brayed with laughter.

“Bwahaha!”

“Father...?”

“I thought Archmage Viol was under your shrewd thumb, but he gives as good as he gets, doesn’t he? You two might be a surprisingly good match!”

“Th-Thank you...?” I said, confused.

“Still, I’m rather relieved,” Father continued. “You two can communicate and get along well.”

“I’m glad you think so, Father.”

I didn’t understand, but I was happy to know Father had faith in us as a couple. I snuck a peek at Lord Viol. The corners of his mouth were slightly raised, too. I was sure he was feeling just as pleased as I was.

“...Lady Seren, judging from the topography, it’s almost time for the lighthouse to come into view. How are your fatigue levels?” Lord Viol asked.

“I’m all right. I don’t feel like my magic power has decreased by much.”

“...It’s true; I can see the lighthouse. That’s the darndest thing! It barely feels like any time’s gone by at all.” Father stared at the lighthouse with a stunned look.

“It must be this fast because I can fly in a straight line without being bound by roads,” I said.

“At this rate, it will take a whole day... Two days would be more than enough time to perform a rescue and return,” Lord Viol calculated. “And since we have this cart, we can pack a simple meal and a sleeping bag or blanket just in case.”

I nodded in response to Lord Viol and gazed at the cart. I never thought it would be useful for such a thing, but there was enough room for three people to sit, so it should be easy to load it up with some luggage. Even if we slept outdoors, we still might be able to sleep warmly with these fluffy cushions and blankets.

“If possible, it would be better not to push yourself too hard until you reach the ship on the first day,” Lord Viol advised. “Then you can take a nap on the ship to recover your magic power and concentration, and we can perform the

retrieval mission the next day.”

“In terms of not overdoing it, it would be easier for me to increase the speed from the start and finish the journey in a short time,” I said.

“You plan to fly even faster?!”

Father was surprised, but I’d never carried three people on the cart for such a long time before. I’d been told not to strain myself, but there were few dangers between home and the ship, so I’d rather fly as fast as I could and get there ASAP.

“When I was out subjugating magical beasts to qualify for the exam to become a High Mage, I flew around all day while dodging magical beast attacks, and depending on the situation, I sometimes had to increase my speed even more,” I told him. “And anyway, with Lord Viol’s Wind Shield, I could probably double my speed if I simply flew straight.”

“Incredible...”

“She’s a real talent.”

Father muttered, dumbfounded, and Lord Viol praised me. It made me feel happy inside.

Lord Viol isn’t the type to flatter. Being called talented by Lord Viol... there was no higher honor.

“Perhaps it would be better to take the plunge and head out on the rescue mission today,” I suggested.

“Well, today is a day off, and it certainly would make it easier to coordinate the rescue effort,” Lord Viol agreed.

“...That’s true.”

“And you can buy whatever you need at the port there,” Lord Viol said. “Weather is a concern, of course, but the skies are stable, and conditions are good for flying. So it really might be a good idea to go today.”

“Honestly... the two of you are just a bundle of surprises.” Now Father sounded slightly exasperated, though.

"I'm sorry, Father. Is it all right with you if I embark on the rescue mission now? Mother might be worried, so I'll drop you off at home before we leave."

"No, I'll go too," he insisted.

"B-But I'll be going extremely fast... Will you be all right, Father?"

"I feel I've gotten accustomed to flying now. And these are my sailors you're going to save. All I want is to rescue them as soon as possible. I shall send word to Anessa while you two buy the needed supplies at the port there. And I suppose I should ask the rescue ship to hold off for now."

...And so, unexpectedly, it was decided that all three of us would embark on the rescue this very day.



"WOAH! Hahaha! This is exhilarating!"

Father was guffawing.

"Good lord, flying is fun! Viol, my friend! I want to feel the wind a little... Do you mind?"

"Well... I can certainly accommodate that..."

"That's too weak! I want it stronger!"

"How about this?"

"Ah, now that feels good! Nope, I don't feel like I'm going to be blown away at any moment if there's no rushing wind!"

Father had lost his mind...

On top of the casual way he was speaking—and I have never heard Father speak like that before—he kept making unreasonable requests of Lord Viol. He'd even dropped all honorifics when he spoke to him.

"I'm so sorry, Lord Viol," I said.

"No, no, he seems to be having fun. Your father is a seaman, after all, Lady Seren."

Even though Father was scared at first, he seemed to have gotten used to

flying now, and in fact, he seemed to be having the time of his life. Not so long ago, I'd longed to experience the miracle of flight myself, but this was a bit much. Still, as someone who'd dreamed of flight, I could understand Father's exuberance.

"Still, it'll be most convenient to have your father accompany us. He can direct the operations," Lord Viol said.

"That's right. It's only possible for us to fly at these speeds because we have Father navigating," I agreed. "And your Wind Shield, of course, Lord Viol."

"And you're amazing yourself, Seren!" Father bayed. "If we continue at this pace, we'll rendezvous with the Angelica before sundown!"

Angelica seemed to be the name of the ship we were heading out to rescue.

The cart was a bit heavier now that we'd loaded it with as much fresh fruit and vegetables as possible for the crew of the Angelica, who had been adrift on the ocean for quite a long time.

"Lady Seren, are you not tired?" Lord Viol was looking at me with concern.

"Not at all. There are no magical beasts to fight, you see."

"But even though you rested on the island when we stocked up, you've still been flying for nearly three hours. Don't overdo it," he said.

"I was much more nervous when I was flying around subjugating those magical beasts. It's okay."

"Well, if you're sure..."

"And what about you, Lord Viol? You've been maintaining that Wind Shield for a long time, haven't you?" I asked, equally worried about him.

"That's true, but I'm used to sustained magical deployment since I work on the Wall."

He wasn't concerned about himself, only about me. I couldn't help smiling wryly.

"Hehe, well, it's hard to get fatigued when I'm flying while enjoying delicious tea and talking leisurely with my loved ones," I said. "It's almost like taking a

casual stroll through the skies. It's a lot of fun!"

"Certainly," Father nodded emphatically. "I never thought I could enjoy elegant meals and teatime while flying. I can feel the true power of the High Mages."

"The sweets we ate while flying over the sea were especially delicious, too. And I loved the aroma of that tea you poured for us, Lord Viol." I was quick to agree with Father's words of admiration.

When I got a little tired of flying, Lord Viol warmed up the desserts we'd bought at the port town and brewed flavored tea that went well with the sweets, making the air trip feel almost luxurious.

"Yes, that shell-shaped cookie was most unusual, not to mention delicious," Lord Viol said. "The cream inside had just the right amount of sweetness and was very moreish. And a hint of salt brought to mind the faint scent of the sea. I could have eaten two dozen and not grown tired of them."

I wanted to express to Lord Viol that this time in the sky was very enjoyable, but Lord Viol was only filled with thoughts of delicious cookies.

How typical of Lord Viol!

"Hahaha, I didn't know you liked sweets so much, my boy," Father said.

"Well, I don't broadcast it," Lord Viol said tightly.

"Hmm, could it be that the Frosty Archmage doesn't like it being pointed out how much he clearly likes sweets?" Father was in high spirits, clapping Lord Viol on the shoulder.

Lord Viol looked embarrassed and adorable.

"All right, all right, all right. How's this? From now on, I'll bring home rare sweets from each country I visit for my future son."

"Really??!!!"

Lord Viol straightened up, his eyes sparkling, and leaned in close to Father.

Father's eyes flew wide with surprise, then he burst into laughter, tickled by Lord Viol's rabid enthusiasm. I knew how Father felt.

"Hahaha! It's true, I promise. I'll bring home the best delicacies from every land I visit," Father vowed. "So you can look forward to that."

"Your Grace! Thank you so much!"

Lord Viol wore no further trace of embarrassment or nerves. Seeing Father and Lord Viol interact so warmly and joyfully made my spirits soar.

This morning, we were off to visit Father to get his permission to marry, and now here the three of us were, flying over the sea. It was unexpected, but we were all enjoying it so much, and really, that was all that mattered.

With the moderate sea breeze blowing in my hair, I gazed at the sea glittering in the sun, dodging the occasional seabird as I flew. Then, I spotted a white sailing ship on the ocean below.

"Lord Viol! Father! I see a ship! Is that the Angelica?"

"Yes! It's the Angelica!" Father pointed at the ship. We'd found it safely and would now be able to rendezvous with the Angelica and facilitate their rescue.

"And it's not even sundown yet."

When I turned around, I saw Lord Viol standing astride the cart, his black hair and cloak fluttering in the sea breeze. He looked so brave, so dashing.

"You worked hard, Lady Seren."

His smile filled me with pride.

"Thank you. It was all worth it." As I thanked Lord Viol, I blushed. Beside him stood my father, who was grinning.

Somewhat embarrassed, I turned my gaze back to the front and aligned us with the rapidly approaching Angelica. We were flying closer now. Perhaps they'd be able to spot us from the deck soon.

"They'll get a big surprise," Father said. "I bet they never would have imagined that help would come from the sky. I can just see their faces."

"I was wondering, but isn't there a possibility of us being attacked?" Lord Viol asked. "If I remember correctly, the trading ships were also equipped with gun ports?"

I was taken aback by what Lord Viol was suggesting. Yes, the ship certainly did have some splendid gun ports.

"Ah, yes, you can bet that ship's loaded up with anti-piracy measures," Father said. "It might be dangerous. Seren, I don't want them to have to waste any cannonballs shooting at us. Can you get us there quickly?"

Before Father had even finished with his overly casual request, I accelerated.

I purposely flew in an arc instead of a straight line so that I could dodge any oncoming projectiles, but somehow, I got us close to the ship before getting shot down.

The sailors on board panicked when they saw us suddenly appear from the sky. Many were pointing their weapons at us.

Father called down to the sailors to calm them.

"Hey! We're here to help!"

Putting his hand on my shoulder, Father leaned forward, waving.

"Huh? What? Isn't that... Isn't that the duke?!"

"No way... How?!"

"And isn't that the duke's daughter?"

"What? Wait... It is!"

"She's a pretty one!"

"Wait, isn't she that hero girl that flew through the air and slayed a bear...?"

"That's her! Wow, she is good at flying!"

"I'm glad I didn't shoot!!!"

Oh dear. Everyone really does think of me as the girl who took down that bear...

I couldn't help but let out a small sigh.

Viol 27

A Flying Ship

“IT sure is lively.”

“Hehe, for sure.”

Lady Seren and I, finally free from the men of the sea, looked at each other and laughed.

When we appeared in the sky, the sailors trembled in surprise and raised their weapons, but thanks to the duke calling down to them, we landed on the ship without causing any major ruckus.

The sight of an object approaching from the sky at such speed... It was only natural for them to have thought it was some brand-new, never-before-seen magical beast. But when it approached, they realized people were aboard, and one of those people was their boss. They must have been incredibly taken aback.

The sailors who'd surrounded us after we disembarked the cart had bombarded us with questions but were now all sharing the fruits and drinks we'd brought them. The vegetables, too, had been quickly whisked off to the kitchen.

Considering the number of people on board, we couldn't load up all that much produce on the cart, but the sight of fresh vegetables thrilled the sailors. ...In particular, leafy vegetables with high water content and fruits that spoil quickly tend to be sparsely available when a long sea journey is drawing to a close—no wonder the sailors clamored for the fresh produce.

The duke watched the sailors with relief.

I presumed he was relieved to find that his subordinates, who'd been sailing for a long time, had no illnesses or injuries and that, despite their clear exhaustion, they were energetic enough to grab food.

I was planning to ask the duke to explain tomorrow's amazing rescue method that involved levitating the ship and flying it across the surface of the ocean. But I figured he would be tied up until he'd seen that every sailor had finished

eating and was comfortable.

Seeing the duke's concern for his sailors made me feel more benevolent myself.

"They look happy, don't they?" I noted. "Everyone's smiling."

"Yes. Fresh food is a wonderful thing, after all. I'm glad we could cheer them up," Lady Seren said.

"It's all the result of your hard work, Lady Seren."

"Thank you very much."

Lady Seren smiled happily. It was a bright smile that looked great out here on the vast, sparkling ocean and the exact opposite of the slightly sad smile she'd worn when we first met.

"But you know, it might have been my magic that made it fly, but it was thanks to your Wind Shield, Lord Viol, and Father's instructions that we arrived so quickly," she reminded me. "This result is from us all working hard together."

"Certainly. You're quite right."

Such a Lady Seren-esque thing to say, I thought, smiling. Being humble is one of her finest aspects, but she should learn to clap for herself a little more.

To be frank, I'd like her to realize, even a little bit, how amazing it is that she can perform something as complex as flying, something many other wind mages wouldn't even think of trying. And on top of that, she can fly for sustained periods over great distances.

"Completely without flattery, let me just say that your wind manipulative skills are surprisingly high," I informed her. "It's impressive."

"Thank you very much. I'm happy to be praised by you, Lord Viol. Since I became a High Mage, I can practice magic all day long, and I've realized how much my wind manipulation skills have improved."

"Being a High Mage really must have been your life's calling, Lady Seren."

"Yes! I think so, too. Um, so..."

"Hmm?"

"I think we have a little more time until the sun goes down, so I was thinking of moving us as close as we can get, through the inland sea, during that time."

"Huh??!!!" I yelled from the diaphragm. She wanted to fly more today?

"You don't have to be so surprised," she pouted. "I've been flying for a long time, so I'm fully warmed up and in the groove. It'd be safer for me to try to float the ship and move it now rather than suddenly do it tomorrow morning."

"...Is that how it works?"

"Yes."

Lady Seren's smiling face was calm, and I couldn't sense any misplaced urgency or overenthusiasm. She'd thought rationally about this and believed it to be a sensible course of action.

Well, if you think about it, it's common when learning magic with a high degree of difficulty to practice with low-level magic before challenging yourself. No doubt Lady Seren had done the same.

"What about your magic energy levels?" I asked.

"I still have plenty to spare. I didn't need to use any offensive spells today, after all," she grinned.

"Okay, then let's move to the bow," I said, approving the plan. "I'll be watching out for any danger."

"Thank you!" Lady Seren's face brightened.

Without daring to speak to the duke, who was still busy talking with the sailors, Lady Seren and I moved to the bow of the ship.

After making sure that Lady Seren was well underway with concentrating and increasing her magical power, I deployed a magic barrier large enough to surround this vast ship.

There was no sign of any other ships, and the waves were calm. All seemed well. But even I, not being a seafaring man, had heard that ferocious creatures were in the ocean. Still, with a barrier spell in place, even if something unexpected happened, it should be possible to protect the ship and keep Lady Seren's concentration from breaking.

And, well, when Lady Seren took the main High Mage exam, her protective wall didn't loosen or crack, even though she was being attacked by intermediate-level magical spells. So it was doubtful she'd lose her concentration over small matters.

However, we couldn't risk a ship this size, much less one with twenty crew members aboard. We needed to give this everything we had.

I also cast a special sound barrier spell to envelop the duke and the sailors as they conversed. With it in place, the noise of us moving the ship would not interfere with their conversation.

When I nodded to Lady Seren, she nodded right back. Her spine was straight, and her brows and lips were drawn tight.

Showing her nervousness, she gulped loudly. "...Let's go."

"Right. Be careful."

The ship rose slowly from the waves. It didn't even feel like we were floating. It was shockingly smooth.

"...Just amazing."

Words of honest praise slipped from my lips.

As the ship rose from the sea, a large volume of water dripped from the bottom, causing a colossal splash. It was rather frightening—such a roaring noise.

I knew we were floating due to that sound, but the ship had risen free of the water without a sensation of floating at all. Then, it slowly moved towards the inland sea. Presumably, none of the sound-obscured sailors had noticed that the ship was moving.

"Phew," Lady Seren said and took a deep breath. Sweat glistened lightly on her forehead.

Even Lady Seren, with her tough mind, must have been somewhat afraid to hold the fate of such a heavy ship and the lives of so many people in her hands. But it was right that she should feel that fear and respect it.

I was certain it wouldn't come to that, but in the case of a crash, it would be

better to fly near the surface to minimize the damage caused.

“Lady Seren, there are no waves, so this height is fine,” I told her. “Keep going straight for a while. But be careful not to overstrain yourself.”

“All right.”

The ship moved forward slowly and carefully. The flight was so gentle that I couldn’t even feel the wind on my cheeks. But what I could feel was the absolute precision of Lady Seren’s wind manipulation techniques. She was amazing.

But...was it just my imagination? It felt almost as though we were picking up speed.

“Lady Seren? Are we speeding up?” I asked her.

“I’m getting accustomed to it.” Lady Seren interlaced her fingers over her chest and closed her eyes tightly as the ship rose steadily into the sky.

“W-Woah, Lady Seren! You’re flying too high!” I cautioned.

“It’s okay! This ship may be bigger, but its mechanics are the same as the cart! Rather than moving forward slowly, picking our way between the islands, I think it’d be safer to ascend to a height where we can hop right over the island and keep up our speed. Lord Viol, could you cast a Wind Break, please?”

“...All right. I suppose I’ll have to take your orders.”

Dusk would come soon.

The faster we went, the harder it would be to avoid those small islands. Just as Lady Seren said, it might be safer to fly high enough to go over any islands in our path.

Of course, this came with the slight possibility of a crash.

However, I ought to do everything in my power to help. With my mind made up, I cast my Wind Shield. I had to cast a very large one to cover the vast size of the ship.

After confirming that my Wind Shield was protecting the entire ship, Lady Seren quickly increased her speed.

“Guh?! What’s wrong with the sea?!”

“The surface of the water seems far away...?”

“No way! What the heck is going on here?!”

The sailors had picked up on something unusual, although they still didn’t realize they were floating above the sea. At first, they clamored with confusion but gradually looked down over the sides of the ship with excitement.

Pushing through the sailors, the duke rushed over in a panic.

“Hey! The moving process was supposed to happen tomorrow!” he barked at us.

“I’m sorry, Father. But I felt it would be better to carry on today, just as we have been doing.”

Lady Seren sounded apologetic, which mollified her father, who closed his mouth. Even the duke, rumored to be something of a wild man, seemed weak when it came to his daughter.

“Father, look, I can move it very smoothly.”

“Woooah! Hold on, Seren, aren’t you going too fast??!!”

But the clamor of the excited sailors drowned out the duke’s concerned wails.

“I can’t believe it, the ship’s flying!!!”

“Wow! Amazing!”

“Woah! This is crazy! The island is getting closer and closer!!”

“It’s flying! It’s really flying!!!”

“It’s too high!!! I’m scared!”

I don’t think any of them had ever ridden in something that moves so fast.

Even I was, quite frankly, freaked out when Lady Seren first started her crazy schemes. I understood how they felt—these strong men of the sea were as excited and frightened as small children.

But after multiple flights with Lady Seren, I felt neither that much excitement nor fear.

I find flying pleasant and fun now.

And today was our first flight over the ocean. Moreover, the sun was finally starting to set, coloring the sailing ship and the sea with bright gold. Even the sails were sparkling. It was most beautiful.

“Lady Seren, at this rate, we should be able to get about a quarter of the way home before the sun sets,” I said.

“Good! Let’s get some miles behind us!”

The sailors looked up at Lady Seren, who was beaming. A second later, they all burst out laughing.

“This is simply something else!”

“Duke! Your daughter’s quite the spitfire, isn’t she?”

“She does the craziest things with that docile face of hers!”

“It’s lucky for us all that your daughter is such a capable sort!”

As I watched the sailors laugh with the duke and slap him on the shoulders, I realized what a good relationship he had with his subordinates. It all seemed so easygoing and simple, and I felt rather envious.

The young sailors, meanwhile, blushed and openly admired Lady Seren.

“Lady Seren... is, surprisingly... really cool.”

“Right? I thought she was some sort of demure, quiet girl, but clearly not.”

I wondered what Lady Seren was making of those kinds of comments, but she seemed busy concentrating and looking straight ahead from the bow.

“You’re brilliant.”

Lady Seren turned slightly when I muttered that.

As our eyes met, her cheeks pinkened. How amazing she looked, performing spectacular magic there in the twilight.



THANKS to the efforts of Lady Seren, who immediately turned forward and started concentrating on moving the ship, we had smooth sky sailing after that.

By the time the sun had set, we'd covered about a quarter of the way back, as predicted.

There was, of course, a party that night.

"Cheers to Lady Seren!!!"

"Cheers to our goddess of salvation!!!"

The bloated men held their cups high with big smiles on their faces. At the center of them, of course, was Lady Seren, who'd flown us through the sky on this ridiculously huge ship.

I agreed that Lady Seren was a goddess, so I held my sake cup high, too.

Even though it was called a banquet, there wasn't much food left on board, so the dinner was simple, but everyone was enjoying it anyway. The sailors were happy enough with the small amount of vegetables we'd brought.

Of course, I offered up all the desserts and pastries we had left. The sailors must have rationed all the food and drink they'd had available on the sea all this time, and I only regretted that I hadn't brought more.

Based on the progress Lady Seren had made today, we were on track to dock at the port tomorrow, but then again, you never know what might happen at sea. We couldn't let our guard down.

After enjoying the atmosphere of the banquet for a while, I quietly left the circle. With one eye on the excitement inside the ship, centered around the duke and Lady Seren, I began casting a protective barrier.

If both Lady Seren and myself failed to get a good night's sleep, tomorrow's flight would be adversely affected. I also wanted to avoid any problems with the ship during that time. It would take a bit of work, but there was nothing better than setting up a fixed-type barrier for a situation like this.

When I was just taking a breather after casting a very solid barrier spell, I noticed someone walking slowly over from the other side.

"Viol, my boy, what are you doing out here alone?"

It was the duke.

Since I was standing out here alone, he must have been worried about me.

I gave a brief answer to hopefully reassure him.

“Ah, Your Grace. Just in case, I’ve cast a barrier that can be deployed automatically all night.”

“...! Well, thank you. You High Mages are something else.”

“No, more amazing are those who cross the oceans sailing with the power of the wind, visiting unknown countries, and bringing back new technologies and goods.”

“...Thank you.” The duke smiled, looking unusually shy. It seemed a little odd since he was usually so casual and confident about everything. “A little more to drink?”

When I nodded, the duke handed me a glass and poured some red wine.

We clinked our glasses and drank. From what I’d seen so far, the men of the sea seemed to be heavy drinkers. I was willing to bet that the duke liked his alcohol, too.



Frankly speaking, I neither like nor dislike alcohol.

It doesn't make me happy like sweets do, although that's not to say I don't like it. But I never seem to become drunk, so to be honest, I don't understand why everyone pays so much money to drink it.

"Aha, you're a man who can take a drink."

"Yes... Thanks."

After some chit-chat, the duke sat down beside me.

We sat in silence, pouring wine for one another now and then.

The moon was beautiful. There was no sound of waves, as the ocean was as still as glass. The reflection of the moon was visible on the surface, and all was quiet.

I wondered why the duke, a party animal, was sitting out here with me. I thought it was strange but didn't know what to say, so I just looked at the moon.

"Viol."

"Yes?"

The duke finally spoke. When I turned to him, he wore an unexpectedly serious expression, and my back instinctively straightened.

"Since the two of us have this moment to talk quietly, I would like you to tell me your true feelings," he prompted.

"Certainly."

"What is it you like about my Seren? You don't strike me as the type to be interested in other people."

"What do I like about her...? I'm at a loss as to what to say..."

Being asked that out of the blue, I wasn't sure how to respond at first. I'm no good at expressing myself, to begin with, so explaining my feelings for his daughter to a man who doted on her... It was beyond my capacity.

Thinking of all I'd seen of Lady Seren so far—her gestures, her mannerisms—I

tried to put my feelings into words.

“...I like that she never gives up, even when she’s in tears. I like that she hates to lose and she’s a hard worker. I like her ability to take action and make her outrageous ideas a reality. I haven’t known Lady Seren long, but there is so much to admire and respect about her.”

As I spoke, I tilted my head fondly.

The duke tilted his head right back at me with a puzzled look.

“Oh, so then it’s not like that...?”

“No, sir, it very much is...”

Of course, I liked that I could respect her as a person, but I also cared about Lady Seren in a way that was even more difficult to put into words.

“For some reason, I don’t know... I feel so happy and calm when we’re together,” I said. “It’s fun to talk to her. It feels comfortable just to be together, even without talking.”

“Indeed?”

“I want to be with her forever... I’m always happy whenever Lady Seren smiles. I’m charmed by her smile.”

“Pft!” Then, for some reason, the duke spluttered with laughter. “Hahaha, yes, yes, I understand now.”

Just as it sank in that the duke was in a jovial mood, he slammed his glass against mine, then knocked it back in one gulp. I still felt like I hadn’t expressed myself well, but the duke seemed pleased, so I guessed I’d passed, at least for now.

“Man... Just when I was surprised you were actually conversing... You go and start rhapsodizing...”

“...?”

Was that rhapsodizing? I wasn’t sure, but I didn’t have the courage to ask.

“You know, you’ve made me blush. But I understand that you care about our Seren. Thank you.”

I breathed a sigh of relief when the duke said that; his expression was pleasant. I hoped I'd been able to express myself, if only a little.

"I'm glad you fell in love with Seren. It hasn't been that long since she broke off her engagement, so we need a bit more time. But when the time comes, please make her a happy woman."

"I will. Thank you."

The duke went for a handshake, so I clumsily grabbed hold. It was the palm of a man of the sea—not aristocratic at all, but rough and callused.

The duke threw his arm around my shoulder with a cheerful smile. I wasn't sure how to deal with that since I'd never been this close to someone in a casual setting. But of course, I couldn't shake it off, so I had no choice but to sip wine quietly with his arm around me.

"Well, I'm glad I came to talk to you. Seeing you out here alone, frowning, I worried I might have been intruding," he said with a laugh.

"Oh, that... I was just ruminating, really."

"Ruminating, eh? Is there anything we should be considering right now?"

"It strikes me that there are a few things that could be done to improve a trading ship before taking the drastic measure of having me cast a barrier like this while Lady Seren floats and transports it with her magic. Setting up a magical device to send wind power directly to the sails, another magical device to help with setting up a sustained barrier, one more to increase firepower—a lot that can be done."

"That's what I was thinking, too."

"Lady Seren..."

Lady Seren appeared by my side, suddenly joining the conversation.

Thanks to her sitting in front of us and smiling, the duke's arm slipped away from my shoulder. I felt a rush of relief.

"I was talking to the sailors earlier, and it seems that this area of the sea is particularly difficult to maneuver," she said. "The other day, I made a fan device to cool a room. I thought that if I could create something similar, I might be able

to make it easier to maneuver the ship by sending wind to the sail from any direction. Something with adjustable output, of course.”

“I see. We could certainly whip something like that up,” I said. “I’ll discuss it with the other Wind Mages, so you have a chat with Old Man Euleho, and let’s see if we can get started on it right away.”

“I will! I’m so excited!” Lady Seren exclaimed.

“Uh, you two...?”

The duke sounded surprised, and both Lady Seren and I turned to look at him. When our gazes met, however, the duke broke into another big grin.

“You two really are amazing.”

“Hm?”

“I feel like you two can do anything,” he said.

“Oh, not at all! I’m still just learning to make magical devices,” Lady Seren denied.

“Hahaha, of course, I know that.” The duke looked fondly at Lady Seren. “But if the two of you can put your heads together and come up with ideas like that, I’m sure we’ll be able to solve all kinds of difficult problems and overcome all kinds of hardships, though it may take a little time, of course.”

I nodded in response to the duke and said, “Indeed.”

Come to think of it, when I discussed my ideas with Lady Seren like this, she often added something extra, and the result ended up being better than what I originally had in mind. And we certainly made fast brainstorming progress when we bounced ideas off one another. I, too, felt like I could do anything as long as it was with Lady Seren.

“I think so, too.” And that was my answer. “I feel like I can do anything as long as it’s with you, Lady Seren.”

Lady Seren looked up at me with surprise, turning red. She covered her cheeks with both hands and looked down.

“Hahaha, so even the Frosty Archmage can smile,” the duke teased.

Was I smiling again? It seems I really have become more expressive lately.

“But you mustn’t say things like that. You’ve embarrassed poor Seren here.”

I had no idea what he meant. The duke stood up and patted Lady Seren on the shoulder. Then he turned his back to us and started walking away.

Then, all of a sudden, he stopped, turned, and winked at Lady Seren. “That’s right, Seren. Viol here seems to be seriously in love with you.”

She gasped.

“Ain’t that just grand?”

The duke grinned, and Lady Seren blinked at me in surprise, her face growing redder and redder. I nodded firmly, confused by why that would be news at this point, as the two continued to look at me.

It should have been obvious to both of them... Why point it out?

“Hahahaha! I can’t tease you two without cracking into a grin!” The duke, belly-laughing, suddenly grew solemn and gazed at Lady Seren. “Seren, be happy, my dear daughter.”

“I will...!”

“I can also stay on land for a while once this matter is settled,” he said. “In the meantime, it would be nice if the two of you could attend a ball together. I will stand up for you both, no matter what happens.”

After returning to his usual dukelike demeanor, he returned to the sailors who were still making merry.

“Ah, Your Grace! Where’s our sweet Lady Seren?”

“I want to go and chat with her, too.”

The duke returned to join the banquet, where the drunken sailors showed great interest in Lady Seren, but the duke raised his voice.

“Stay away, you fools! From now on, that man there is a son to me. Those who get in the way of that happy couple shall have me for an enemy.”

Ah, having the duke in our corner would be such a boon.

Lady Seren and I exchanged smiles, pleased to have her father in our corner.

Seren 31

A Calm Night Aboard the Ship

“**FROM** now on, that man there is a son to me.”

Hearing that from my father, I was shocked and at a loss for words.

I’d noticed that Lord Viol and my father were talking to each other just now, and I wondered what had transpired between them. I tried to sneak a peek at Lord Viol, but he merely gave me a soft smile in return, and I lost the will to question him.

Anyway, if Father likes Lord Viol enough to say he’s “a son to me,” and if Lord Viol doesn’t mind him saying that, that’s enough for me. Actually, that makes me incredibly happy.

As I watched Father toast with the sailors, Lord Viol stood up and leaned against the ship’s side. Then, he reached out to me.

“Lady Seren, please come and stand next to me.”

It’s like being invited to dance, I thought, my heart pounding as I took his hand. I naturally stood beside him and we gazed out at the sea together.

We were standing so close. I was a little embarrassed when my arm touched Lord Viol’s, and I felt his body heat through our clothing. Whenever he was in Vi form, I found him so soft and irresistible that I couldn’t help touching him too much, but in human form, just the brush of his arm was enough to make me blush.

As usual, Lord Viol’s killer looks were immensely affecting me.

“The moon reflected on the water is really beautiful,” Lord Viol muttered in a low voice.

In my embarrassment, I lifted my head. Just as Lord Viol said, the moon’s

reflection on the water was indeed beautiful.

“You’re right. It’s so beautiful.”

But to be honest, Lord Viol was even more beautiful under that moonlight.

His black hair shone faintly in the light of the moon. His skin seemed to glow. And his obsidian eyes, reflecting the moon on the surface of the water, were mysterious and beautiful.

As I feasted my eyes on Lord Viol’s close-up profile, he continued to stare at the moon’s reflection. Then he suddenly turned his gaze towards me.

For some reason, he fixed his eyes on me without saying anything.

Being stared at by those mysterious eyes in the moonlight, my cheeks gradually grew hot, and Lord Viol seemed to smile just a little.

“Is... is something amiss?” I asked.

“No. I was just thinking about how happy I am.”

Knowing that his faint smile was a smile of happiness, I felt a soft warmth spread through my chest.

“Now that we have permission, would you like to attend the next evening ball together?” he invited.

“Yes, of course!”

I didn’t even have to think about it.

Fascinated as I was by Lord Viol, I’d answered yes almost on reflex, but had I just agreed to go to a ball? It had been a long time since I’d been to an evening party, and I wondered how I should act.

It would be all the people I hadn’t seen face-to-face since announcing I was breaking off the royal engagement, and I had no idea what to say should someone speak to me.

Oh, but I was no longer Prince Helios’s fiancée, so no one would be interested in talking to me. Besides, as a member of a duke’s family and as Prince Helios’s fiancée, I used to have to stay at the evening parties from start to finish unless there was a good reason not to. But from now on, I could leave as soon as I got

tired, just like other people.

That thought calmed me down.

That's right. For me, the evening balls used to be events with strict rules. Now I remembered that it was supposed to be a place for chatting and dancing as I liked, and I wondered if I could even dance with Lord Viol again...

"I'll do my best to practice my dancing so you can leave yourself in my hands," he promised.

"Oh... Yes! I'm looking forward to it."

Right.

I'm with Lord Viol. This time, we could use the floor to its fullest and dance to our hearts' content. And it might be fun to cast cloaking magic and gorge ourselves on cute and delicious sweets together.

"With you, dancing and eating sweets will surely be a lot of fun, Lord Viol."

Lord Viol narrowed his eyes so happily, and I felt so excited and joyful that I thought my heart would dance.



THE following morning...

I woke up just in time for the sunrise.

I had the sailors tell me when the sun would rise, and I used my well-rested trick to lose consciousness. With that trick, I would automatically wake up eight hours later. Adjusting when you wake up can be easy with magic!

When I got ready and left the cabin, Lord Viol was emerging from the cabin on the other side.

"Good morning," he said.

"Good morning!"

Lord Viol's impassive face fascinated me more than ever. Perhaps he wasn't a morning person?

In contrast to Lord Viol, who seemed a little sluggish, the sailors didn't seem

to be feeling any lasting effects from the previous evening's alcohol and quickly hoisted the anchor and inspected the sails.

When I moved away from a dazed Lord Viol to look out across the sea, I caught sight of Father, back to me, looking down at the water from the gunwale.

"Father! Good morning."

"Ah, you're awake. You seem to have slept well."

Since I'd safely fallen into a coma, of course, I'd been able to sleep soundly for eight hours. I smiled brightly.

"Yes! I slept well. Lord Viol's already awake, too, so I thought we'd fly a little before breakfast."

"You're as dedicated as ever. But please wait a while before flying."

"All right."

Just as I wondered whether Father intended to stop us, he grabbed the gunwale of the ship and called for me to come. I went over, and Father leaned over the side and pointed down at the sea.

I saw glittering silver somethings in the water.

"How beautiful. Are those fish?" I asked.

"Yes. I threw down some breadcrumbs earlier, and they came really close."

"Hehe, just for breadcrumbs?"

Father seemed so different at sea from how dignified he appeared at home. His eyes sparkled like a schoolboy's, and he looked in his element.

"Hey, Viol, my good man! Come over here!"

Now Father was calling Lord Viol over.

"Is something amiss?"

"Look, look! I was thinking of using this!"

"Ah, the magical device I gave you yesterday..."

"Yes. I named it Raijin," Father said.

“Ah yes, the God of Thunder.”

“Don’t you think I can easily catch a fish if I shoot lightning at that school of them?”

“Most assuredly. Is that why you’ve got that net?” Lord Viol was looking at the large net with the long handle propped up beside Father.

“Absolutely. I was thinking of scooping up all the stunned fish!”

In contrast to Father, who seemed to be having a lot of fun, Lord Viol narrowed his eyes a little and raised the corners of his mouth.

“I’m glad I spent the time developing it to see you enjoying this magical device so much, Your Grace.”

“Hehe, yes,” I said with a giggle.

“All right! Go, Raijin!” Father shouted, and a dazzling thunderbolt flew out from the small penlike magical device.

“Surprisingly small thunderbolt, isn’t it?”

“Well, fish are small, so this should be enough.”

“It’s good that you can adjust the output. It wouldn’t do to electrocute the whole ship with a misjudged lightning bolt.”

As Lord Viol agreed with Father’s idea, several fish floated to the surface.

Amazing. It was certainly easy to catch fish like that.

“Oh!!! Awesome! Just as I planned it!” Father yelped in delight, then turned, yelling: “Hey, sailors! Come on over!”

As soon as Father’s voice finished echoing, the sailors came out from all over the ship and surrounded us.

“Here, take a look.”

The sailors peered down at the water at Father’s instruction, then cried out with surprise.

“Whoa, those fish are dead!”

“What’s happened to them?”

“Hmm? Could it be poison?”

Of course, the sailors, who didn’t understand the situation, thought something terrible was happening. Father smiled wryly.

“Fools! Fish won’t willingly eat poison. Look here! Viol gave me a magical device that can make lightning bolts.”

“A magical device? That little thing?”

“Right! Take a closer look, why don’t you?” Father fired a stronger thunderbolt into the sea this time, and several more fish, bigger than before, surfaced.

“Amazing!!!”

“They were shocked to death!”

“More likely, they’ve just been paralyzed. Get the nets!”

The sailors scooped up the fish with their nets in a fluster, and a mountain of fish quickly flooded the ship.

“Take them to the kitchen!”

“I can’t carry all this!”

“Well, they’re immobile, so they ought to be easy enough to carry.”

They must have been excited to have a big catch. Father watched the sailors dash inside, whooping and hollering over the fish, spinning the magical device between his fingers.

“I never expected it to be used that way. This has certainly been a learning experience.”

Father flashed his white teeth when Lord Viol said that and smiled cheerfully. “Not only can it be used in battles, but it will also enrich our lives on board. Thank you for the wonderful magical device, my boy!”

“A magical device can be used to enrich life or end it, depending on how it is used. Now I understand why inventors strive to make their prototypes public as soon as possible.”

Well, I knew Father was a fan of magical devices, but it made me especially

happy that he had such a good relationship with the High Mages and our work. I, too, was planning to make a magical device that would send wind power to a ship's sails. It might not be a bad idea to ask Father for advice.

"It's easy to use. Next time, I think I'll put in an official order."

Seeing my father and Lord Viol laughing together made me feel warm inside. And I was filled with motivation.

"Father, may I take us on a short flight before breakfast?" I asked.

"Ah! That's right. But it's probably already time to eat."

And that was when the call for breakfast came. As the sun was still rising, we all sat down to enjoy a chat and breakfast prepared by the ship's cook. The sailors were exhausted and worn from being stranded for so long, but they still gave us the finest hospitality.

I was humbled by the strength of the crew.

"Here, another dish!"

"It's those lively fish that the duke just caught!"

"Sashimi, sauté, marinade, steamed... we have it all!"

"There were a lot of small fish left over, so I made deep-fried fish, too."

"Wow, how simply gorgeous!"

"This is an absolute feast!"

"Is it okay to eat this much?"

"Your Grace, please, eat your fill!"

"Right! Eat, eat!"

Eating delicious, freshly fried fish and filling up on soup left me feeling warm and energized.

"Hehe, it's delicious. I feel quite full of energy now," I said.

"Wow, if the daughter of the duke says it's delicious, then that's given me enough motivation to do my best cooking for another ten years," the cook said.

"I'm overwhelmed with emotion!"

Not only had the sailors made delicious food, but they were heaping praise on me, too. Well, I had no choice but to do my best after that!

“To thank you for the delicious food, I’ll do my best to fly today!” I vowed.

“Wow!”

“Thank you.”

“We’re all in your debt, milady.”

“Are you going to fly again today? I’m looking forward to it!”

And those words made me feel even more motivated.



AFTER a delicious breakfast, it was finally time to leave for port.

“Lord Viol, Father, let’s do our best.”

“Yeah.” Lord Viol nodded slightly. That small nod was all I needed to feel instantly at ease.

“Leave it to us.” Father pounded his chest firmly, but the sailor next to him raised his eyebrow.

“Will Your Grace and the Archmage be doing something, too?”

I’d noticed this sailor talking closely with Father since yesterday. He looked around the same age as Father, and it looked like the two had worked together for a long time.

“Yes. Seren will be flying, but as we pick up speed, the wind buffets us something awful. So Viol here will cast a barrier to protect the ship and its passengers.”

“Intriguing...”

“By the way, he secretly set up a barrier around the ship last night, even though I didn’t ask him to. A highly capable fellow.”

“Hmm. He certainly does seem the capable sort,” the sailor said.

“Well, yeah,” Father agreed. “By the way, I just read the map and navigated, so it’s not like I do anything you couldn’t do yourself.”

“Haha, don’t be salty,” the sailor quipped.

“Oh, be quiet. Seren, let’s be off soon.” Lightly rebuffing the sailor who’d teased him, Father looked at me.

“Certainly! Lord Viol, are you ready?”

“Ready when you are.”

“Then let’s go!”

I gathered up my magic and slowly lifted the ship.

I’d thought about it yesterday as well, but when a ship rises from the sea, the sound of water dripping from the bottom is so loud that it’s a little scary. There’s no such sound when the cart rises in the air, and it brought home to me that the massive ship was floating.

“Woah! This is scary!”

“When you see it going up, it feels amazingly real!”

“The sound of the falling water is so loud.”

“Did it make that same kind of sound yesterday...?”

The sailors’ comments struck me as strange, but Lord Viol muttered, “Right... I soundproofed it yesterday.”

“You can even do that, Viol?!” Father cried.

“Yes, it’s not that much of a hassle. Yesterday, when we started to fly, you were just explaining the plan to everyone. I didn’t want your voice to be drowned out, so I did some soundproofing.” Lord Viol answered Father as if it were no big deal at all.

Father opened his mouth wide open for a moment, then smiled wryly.

I knew how Father felt. Because Lord Viol had mastered every elemental attribute, he could do all kinds of magical things. And he could do them as easily as breathing.

“No, no, I can’t go getting gobsmacked over every new thing. Viol, my boy... Remember when we first flew, and I asked you to adjust the Wind Shield thingy so I could enjoy the sensation of flight? You can do that easily, right?”

“No problem.”

“Hahaha, I knew it. Then, again, please.”

“Certainly.”

I stared straight ahead, stifling my laughter over the exchange between Father and Lord Viol.

“Then, let’s go!”

The floating ship slowly moved. Moving that big hull so abruptly was a little scary, so I carefully inched forward as my hair and the hem of my skirt fluttered.

“We’ve started moving...!”

“Woah! Amazing!”

The sailors did not need to steer the ship while it was flying, so they all watched it fly from the deck. I wondered if they looked so excited, even though they’d already seen it yesterday, because this time they were watching from the exact moment when it took flight.

“I’ll gradually increase the speed.” After calling out to everyone, I sped up in increments.

I’d only just floated the ship yesterday and flew quite a distance, so once I started flying today, it was surprisingly easy for me to increase our speed.

“Woah, woah, it’s speeding up.”

“It’s windy, isn’t it?”

“Ouch! The wind’s stinging my face.”

Immediately, the sailors’ clothes billowed, and everyone covered their faces with their hands, feeling the strong wind.

I was confused. I didn’t feel any wind.

On closer look, only Lord Viol and myself had neither our clothes nor hair fluttering. All I felt was a pleasant breeze that occasionally made us bob in the air. *Hang on*, I thought, looking at Lord Viol. Yes, he was grinning a little.

No doubt, he’d cast Wind Shield only on himself and me.

Truly, Lord Viol and I were in charge of the safety of this ship. So, if a strong wind were to wobble us and affect our magic control, we would be in big trouble.

Reliable Lord Viol, making sure to take steps against potential danger.

I was relieved I could speed up without issue, so I decided to go as fast as possible without hesitation.

We still had a long way to go to reach port. If we didn't fly at a high speed, we might not arrive until the afternoon. I had to do my best. I closed my eyes and further increased the magical power in my body, increasing the wind power I was projecting.

"Lord Viol, I'll increase our speed even more! Please strengthen the Wind Shield accordingly!"

"Leave it to me!"

"Here we go!"

A strong breeze blasted us for a moment.

"Woah!!!"

Buffeted by the strong wind, the sailors let out a scream.

"????!!!"

"Huh? What...?"

"What is this...?"

However, the buffeting wind lasted only an instant and changed to something more akin to a refreshing summer breeze. The sailors looked all around and at each other, not knowing what had happened.

"Lord Viol is protecting the ship from the rushing wind!"

The exhilaration of the ship going steadily faster and faster made me speak louder than I'd intended.

"Everyone, please take a look! The island is getting closer and closer... It's so exhilarating!"

The sailors stopped looking at each other and gazed forward in unison.

“Oh, this is amazing!!!”

“The island is getting very close!”

“What object ever moved so fast?!”

All the sailors seemed to be having a great time!

And I was enjoying myself, too.

Before I knew it, the sun had completely risen. The sky was pure blue, no magical beasts were in sight, and there were no strange crosswinds, so it was easy to fly!

“It feels so good! Viol, my boy... A little more wind, perhaps?” Father requested.

“Yes. It certainly feels good.”

Lord Viol relaxed his Wind Shield slightly, and the strong breeze teased his hair. Looking back under the deep blue sky, Lord Viol’s black hair and cape fluttered. He looked stunning.

The mystical atmosphere of a moonlit night suited him well, of course, but seeing Lord Viol bathed in sunshine and wind reminded me of our beast subjugation jaunts. I liked it.



"Even so, I never thought such a huge ship could be flown so easily. Lady Seren, you have stunned me." Lord Viol sounded so impressed, but until yesterday morning, I never thought I could fly such a big ship with the power of wind, either.

Now, though, I was sure that in half a day, we could safely transport everyone to port and rescue them. I was happy to be able to say that with confidence.

Until I met Lord Viol, no matter how hard I tried, I always felt like something was missing. I lived with a vague, baseless anxiety.

I must have lacked confidence. That was why I was so, so glad I had such confidence now. I knew I was still a kid when it came to magic. There were still many things I couldn't do, and my peers were all so far ahead of me. Still, thanks to Vi and Lord Viol, I've become more confident in my capabilities.

I wondered if it was down to Lord Viol's careful magical tutoring. He'd told me plainly where I was doing well and where I needed more work. I was scolded, but I received a lot of compliments, too, and I think that's why I've come to be able to have the confidence I have now.

"It's all because of your guidance, Lord Viol," I said.

"It's because of your hard work, I'd say, Lady Seren." Lord Viol spoke so solemnly. I wanted to assert with all my might how much I trusted him and how grateful I was, but as expected, I couldn't do that in front of so many people.

Being in the public eye at times like this can be a hassle.

When the time came to talk alone with Lord Viol again, I wanted to tell him how much I believed in him and Vi and how much I cherished them both.

While staring at him with so many unspoken feelings in my heart, he tipped his head to one side quizzically.

I knew it was just an illusion, but I could almost see the cute black cat ears on his head. And I could even see the black tail wrapped around his body in the shape of a question mark.

I had it bad.

Suddenly, I was desperate to enjoy Lord Viol in all his cool charm without

worrying about other people watching us. Just imagining myself relaxing and eating delicious sweets alone with him... made me happy.

Right. Yes.

Due to sudden developments, we were now on a voyage at sea. But originally, we planned to be eating tasty desserts together around this time. Father and Mother had permitted me to date Lord Viol. We should have been having a tea party to celebrate our relief and joy over delicious desserts.

I glanced at Lord Viol, who tilted his head in the opposite direction with another question mark in his eyes.

...Oh, I wanted to talk with him at our leisure, in some private setting.

Well, all I could do was do my best.

It was up to me how quickly this ship could return to port.

I mean, hadn't I gotten up at sunrise, wanting to get the exhausted sailors, who'd been at sea so long, back to port as soon as possible?

Safely, yes.

But most of all...*quickly*.

And so, I used all my magical power and the technology we had at hand to fly the ship home at top speed.

Borden 4

A Premonition of Trouble

I sighed when I heard the news of Viol's sudden visit. It's something I've never done before—sighing over my best friend visiting me. But these days, Viol brings me all sorts of trouble and annoyance, so it was only natural that I would need to brace myself.

What kind of trouble does he have for me this time? I wondered.

When I entered the drawing room, my mind awhirl with these sour thoughts, Viol leapt up from the sofa. He strode over to me, grabbed my shoulder, and broke into a huge grin.

"Borden! Thank you! This is all thanks to you!"

Hey, hey, what was this? I hadn't seen this kind of bright, beaming smile on his face since our student days.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Yesterday, Duke Qumildy gave me permission to court Lady Seren."

"Yesterday? I would have thought the duke was far too distracted yesterday. What with the last trading ship in the fleet not having returned..."

"Oh, all that's fine now; don't worry. Lady Seren and I rescued her."

"...What?"

I had no idea what he was on about.

What was I misunderstanding here? Who had they rescued?

I had no idea, but I was talking about Duke Qumildy's trading ship. After a difficult voyage plagued by bad weather, the duke's ship returned safely, but the rear ship was stranded in the nearby sea.

That's why yesterday, although it was Voidday, Duke Qumildy came to the palace to discuss whether or not to dispatch a rescue ship. Surely, he wouldn't have had time to talk about anything else.

I urged Viol to calm down and take a seat, at least.

As soon as he'd sat down, Viol stared at me with a strange look. "What do you mean, 'What?' I'm talking about the same trade ship you're talking about. Haven't you gotten the report yet? Lady Seren, Duke Qumildy, and I went yesterday to rescue her and brought her safely back to port."

"Don't make stupid jokes just because you're in a good mood. Considering the ocean and the distance, a rescue mission would take around a month. Even a layman like me knows it's impossible," I said, exasperated.

When he was a student, he wasn't the type to make jokes like this. ...Was it possible that he was suffering from some disease that made him want to make odd jokes due to his age...?

Viol... Poor fellow.

"Why do you look so skeptical?" he asked, sounding hurt. "It's true, you know? Lady Seren levitated the ship and flew it home."

"Come again...?"

"That big trading ship, flying through the blue sky. It was exhilarating!"

"What? No. No way."

Viol's face was so very, very serious that I started to wonder if perhaps he wasn't just pulling my leg. Then I heard a soft knock.

Knocking? Knowing I was in a meeting with Viol? It must have been urgent business.

"What? Enter."

When I called out, Asia, my secretary, opened the door and entered.

"Sorry for the interruption. Duke Qumildy was just here."

"The duke...?"

Speak of the devil... I looked at Asia's face and then Viol's face alternately, wondering what in goodness was happening now.

"When I told him that Lord Viol was here, he left a message and left. I tried to stop him, but he said that no doubt Lord Viol would fill you in, so he had no further need to see you."

“...Well then, let’s hear the message.”

“Yes, sir. The Angelica has been rescued, so there is no need to arrange a rescue ship. Lord Viol seems to know the details.”

With one ear to Asia’s report, I stared blankly at Viol before me.

“What’s with the funny look? See, I was telling the truth,” he huffed.

“...I see now. Asia, I’ll go over the details with Viol. Thank you for your report. You can go now.”

“Excuse me.”

Asia disappeared, closing the door silently behind her.

I closed my eyes and fiddled with my monocle. Then I rubbed the wrinkles between my eyebrows, which I was sure must have grown deeper, and let out a big sigh.

“...Viol.”

“What?”

“It appears to be true, after all. Would you mind telling me more about what’s going on?”

The story I heard from Viol after that was like something out of a fantasy.

If Duke Qumildy hadn’t sent me the news that the Angelica had been rescued, I’m sure I wouldn’t have believed Viol’s story.

“That area of the ocean is a difficult place to traverse, with many shallows and a high risk of running aground. As I said earlier, I thought it would take a month to rescue them. But to have done it all already in just one day...” I said in awe.

“The duke and the sailors said the same thing. But you know, difficult seas mean nothing when you journey by air.” Viol let out a little laugh. “Besides, once she gets used to it, Lady Seren can achieve tremendous speeds. By the end of it, those hardened seadogs were clinging to the gunwale and whimpering. Now, that was a funny sight.”

Lady Seren, some sort of speed maniac? People aren’t what they seem, are they?

"Thank you for saving the sailors in the shortest possible time," I said. "Yes, thank you, but you and Lady Seren are completely crazy. Is this what happens when two magic geniuses collide...?"

"I just deployed a Wind Shield to lighten the wind pressure," Viol shrugged. "It was mostly all Lady Seren's work."

"...But without you, I don't think Lady Seren would do such a dangerous and reckless thing."

"Yes, she would... Or maybe not..." Viol tipped his head to one side as if he wanted to say I was wrong and yet had found my words to ring true.

My intuition told me the man didn't have a leg to stand on.

Lady Seren and Viol were elements that are "dangerous if mixed." They needed to be handled with care.

"I suppose I was the one who suggested it," Viol finally said.

"Uh-huh."

He's been this way for a long time. Perhaps because he can use all the elemental attributes, he's quick to use magic to come up with solutions most people wouldn't even think of and easily implements them, too.

While I was busy trying to lay the groundwork, he often solved the problem at hand on his own.

A free spirit, in the good sense of the word. And the bad sense, too...

"When I visited His Grace's residence to ask for permission to date Lady Seren, I heard about the dispatch of a rescue ship, and I thought Lady Seren might be able to speed up the rescue," Viol explained. "...Still, I didn't expect the rescue to be completed in just one day."

It was unexpected because of the literal human projectile known as Lady Seren.

Very useful, yet hard to control.

I'd thought Lady Seren might temper Viol, but now I worry they will do something even more outrageous together.

“Borden, can we get back to the point?” he asked.

“Huh? What point?”

“What I’m telling you is that Duke Qumildy has allowed me to court Lady Seren.”

“Ah... Oh, yes. That’s right.”

I’d forgotten all about that, distracted by the amazing rescue of the Angelica. Still, you could hardly blame me. My throat was bone dry from the surprise. I took a sip of black tea to moisten it.

“I was told I could escort Lady Seren to the next ball.”

“???!!!”

I spat tea all over the desk.

“Disgusting! ...That’s not like you.” Viol gave me a disgusted look.

“Sorry, I was just so taken aback.”

Wiping up the mess with my handkerchief, I silently cursed.

What was the duke thinking?

It had only been a little over three months since her engagement with Prince Helios was annulled. Even I, convinced as I am that Viol is in love with Lady Seren, thought it was too soon.

“Since the duke will stay on land for a while, it might be good if we could attend a ball during that time. Moreover, the duke said he would protect us no matter what,” Viol informed me.

“Hmm... Did Duke Qumildy really say that?”

“Yes. I hadn’t expected His Grace to support me to this extent, either.”

Apparently, Duke Qumildy was quite fond of Viol.

Viol is shy and hopeless at small talk, but he’s kind and has a good personality. Originally a commoner but now serving as the head of a Mage Guild, he’s practically perfect in terms of social status and ability. And he doesn’t belong to any particular political faction. From the duke’s point of view, he’s not a bad

option to entrust his daughter to.

Thinking that far, I shook my head.

But this was the eccentric duke we were talking about here. So maybe he just took a personal shine to Viol.

“I am happy he offered, but I have no intention of bothering the duke. So...”

“So you’re here to bother me instead?” I sighed.

“I’m sorry. I feel like I’m always relying on you for something or other.”

I was being snarky, but Viol apologized so frankly, it completely deflated me. Looking at the apologetic expression he wore, I felt like a worm.

I almost forgot. This man was as honest as they come.

“...It’s fine. I’m happy to have you rely on me. And when I was a student, I was the one who always relied on you, Viol.”

“Thank you, Borden. I really am sorry.”

“But Duke Qumildy said that he would protect you, so he must have some kind of plan...”

But what was his intention? It was a conundrum.

After all, just over three months had passed since the engagement with Prince Helios was annulled. It wouldn’t look good for Viol and Lady Seren to have fallen in love so quickly.

Since Lady Seren became a High Mage and left the duke’s household to become independent, we couldn’t explain it by saying the duke had taken a shine to Viol and wanted him to marry his daughter.

How could it be spun so that Viol could proudly escort Lady Seren to a ball and have everyone else accept it?

Then it hit me.

“Ah...”

Now I had it.

There was a perfect situation that would explain the quickly deepening

courtship between the two. A situation that would also explain why Lord Viol had so quickly gotten into the duke's good books.

"What is it?" Viol asked.

"It's just that I know what the duke is trying to do."

"I knew you'd figure it out. I haven't got the slightest idea myself."

Viol, never any good at processing such intel, seemed genuinely impressed.

He hasn't changed since our student days, I thought wryly. Even though he's an Archmage, it's almost impressive that he's remained this naïve.

"Typical," I said. "Anyway, the next ball is two weeks from now."

"Right."

"I think if you stay hands-off, everything will work itself out. In the meantime, the duke will probably be busy spreading the tale."

"...? I don't follow. What tale?"

"You just told me that Lady Seren, Duke Qumildy, and yourself rescued the ship, didn't you? THAT tale," I stressed.

"Okay, but what's the point of telling everyone about that? It's nothing notable. After all, anyone would do the same if there was a ship in need of rescue."

"Hahaha, is that right?"

I couldn't hold back my laughter. What a blundering fool!

"Spread the tale, and your public image will suddenly change. Everyone will know that you and Lady Seren are now close, and the duke acknowledges and accepts you."

"I see..."

"There's no way he'll miss this chance. And there's no risk to you, Lady Seren, or the duke himself this way. Anyway, he's an influential person to have in your corner. You don't need my assistance. You can leave it all to him."

After I reassured him, Viol went home looking pleased.

I was glad I'd been able to put him at ease, at least.

I sighed, watching him go.

The next ball was going to be a dramatic one.

Riesz would cry. As his older brother, my heart hurt when I thought about it.

And Prince Helios wouldn't have expected to hear rumors about Lady Seren this soon. As a member of the royal family, he must have accepted that Lady Seren had set her mind to being a High Mage, but whether or not he was able to discard his new feelings for her after all this time was a mystery.

It still wasn't public that they intended to get married, so the news of Lady Seren and Viol getting close would cause trouble. I was concerned for Lady Seren, of course. But I could hardly approach her to discuss it. Anyway, I had larger concerns... Ones closer to home.

My best friend Viol, my younger brother Riesz, and the future king, Helios... All three were important to me. But if there were animosity between any of them, it would not be good.

So there was only one thing for me to do.

I was fully aware that Viol wasn't the type to lie, but there have been times when he made assumptions.

At the next ball, I would directly ask Lady Seren about her feelings and do my best to support her relationship with the person she had true feelings for. Based on the current situation, I would probably end up supporting Viol.

I let out another huge sigh.

Forgive me, Riesz. Forgive me, Your Highness.

Viol 28

The Best Possible Gift

TWO weeks after rescuing the trading ship. I was heading to Lady Seren's private residence to attend the ball.

Frankly speaking, I was more nervous than ever. Although no one would bat an eye now if I showed up as Lady Seren's escort.

As Borden predicted, less than a day after the fact, the story about Lady Seren, Duke Qumildy, and myself rescuing the trading ship had gotten around. It had caused quite a stir, and we were all praised.

The duke had a hand in it, of course, but the sailors on the ship at the time had also been excitedly talking about their adventure. And because we flew relatively close to the port city, the residents there had noticed the ship, too, so rumors were already spreading from that source as well.

So, I shouldn't have been worried about the ball at all.

However...

I WAS nervous. About the simple fact that I was going to escort Lady Seren.

This was the first time in my life that something like this had happened.

Until now, all I thought about was how not to stand out, so I was fine with wearing my one and only black tailcoat. But there was no way I could escort Lady Seren in such a casual outfit. Looking back, I felt certain Prince Helios changed his outfit for every ball.

I felt guilty about it, but I went to Borden again and had him give me a quick rundown of the basics of escorting a lady to a ball. I found it hard to wrap my head around it. As a token of my gratitude, I gave him an antique pocket watch that he'd had his eye on for a long time.

Accordingly, I was wearing a new black tailcoat tonight. The fabric was also good quality, suitable for standing next to someone like Lady Seren, and the vest was a shiny silver color that made me look slightly different from how I usually did. The silver embroidery was intricately scattered with small amber

beads the same color as Lady Seren's eyes.

Uncharacteristically, I worried about whether or not Lady Seren would like it and whether it was the right thing to wear around her. And even more than that, I was fretting about Lady Seren's dress.

Actually, on this occasion, I presented Lady Seren with a dress as a gift.

According to Borden, it's gallant for the escorting man to present his partner with a dress and to wear something that matches well with her style. Of course, this was all second-hand information from Borden, so I wasn't sure if it was true. But since I knew nothing, absolutely nothing, I had no choice but to believe everything he said.

It was my first time, and I'd never even thought of buying a dress before. With no fashion sense of my own, I had no clue about the latest trends, or well, trends in general.

However, I was determined not to cause any embarrassment to Lady Seren. After worrying and worrying, I decided to present her with an adorable, puffy dress that was mostly white. It was a pretty dress, like a white carnation, with light lace layers like cotton candy. It reminded me of the white hair bow I'd given her when we went out beast subjugating together.

It wasn't the sort of dress I'd seen Lady Seren wear before.

Lady Seren always wore a well-fitting, demure type of dress. Of course, that also suited Lady Seren and her vibe well. However, it seemed to me that Lady Seren hankered to cut loose and use the whole dance floor, and, of course, I felt the same way. Instead of a dress made for graceful movement, a dress that allowed for wide steps and light footwork seemed like a much better choice to me.

I thought as carefully as I could about it and chose a dress I knew would suit her. And on the bodice, I attached a beautiful, big, green jewel. It was the same color as the green magic stone with the white ribbon she'd worn before.

I also wore a white cravat and a tie pin with a green gem, just like Lady Seren's, so everyone would know we were a pair. Or at least, I hoped.

I've come to realize how difficult it is to be aristocratic. I was exhausted from

thinking about things I wasn't used to even considering, but I'd done what I could.

I hoped Lady Seren would be pleased...

Still uneasy, I touched the shiny silver clasp on my chest. I only wished I could have given her something to match this wonderful item that Lady Seren had bought for me.

I was half-praying in my mind with nerves as the carriage rocked and rattled, leading me to Lady Seren's place.



“OH my, Lord Viol! You look wonderful!”

Eyes sparkling, Lady Seren gave me a gushing compliment. But I did not have it in me to respond.

How beautiful she was!

Lady Seren had run out dressed in the dress I'd given her. Her soft hair bounced as she ran, and her dress swayed lightly like flower petals caught in the breeze. There was none of that demure, discreet aura she'd worn about her at the balls I'd attended so far.

I'd seen Lady Seren lit up with smiles, enthusiasm, and excitement before, though... When she was studying magic under me and subjugating magical beasts.

Lady Seren shone as if light emanated from inside her body.

I stood there stunned by her as she ran up close enough for us to hug, and I realized part of the reason why she seemed to be emitting light. Her white skin was even more luminescent than usual, perhaps reflecting the whiteness of her dress.

...But no, it seemed as though small particles were shining on her skin and reflecting the light. Women's cosmetics do seem, to me, to be a kind of magic. The faint redness of her cheeks, her small, lustrous lips, and her amber eyes staring straight at me—she was so charming that I felt bewitched.

As I stared silently at her, Lady Seren beamed.

“Look, Lord Viol!”

I held my breath as she did a twirl in front of me.



“That hair accessory...”

“Yes! I knew that I had to wear it with this dress!”

The fluffy white bow I’d given her adorned Lady Seren’s flaxen hair. Although it was rather pretty, it was something I’d bought at an armory shop. It wasn’t fancy enough to be worn at a sophisticated evening party where royalty and high-ranking aristocrats were to be in attendance.

However, Lady Seren added fresh flowers, pearls, and lace to make it look gorgeous and luxurious.

“Rince and I did some work on it!” she said. “I think it turned out really nice, if I do say so myself.”

“Yes... It’s quite surprising. I’d never have thought a plain bow could look that gorgeous.”

“Oh, I’m glad you think so! Thank you, Lord Viol. I am so happy to receive such a lovely dress as a gift...!” Lady Seren smiled and blushed.

Adorable.

I was half on the verge of a swoon.

“...I’m glad you like it.” I finally squeezed out a response.

The hair bow was on my mind when I chose the dress. Pure white suits Lady Seren well, and I felt the soft swaying hem also represented her soft and kind nature. Since she looked so lovely in the hair bow whenever she wore it, I felt a dress in a similar theme would surely bring out her charm.

“Lady Seren, you look truly wonderful.”

“...Oh, I’m so glad.” For some reason, Lady Seren looked greatly relieved. “It’s been a while since I’ve worn a dress as whimsical as this, so I was a little worried it wouldn’t suit me. I so hated the thought of disappointing you.”

“Disappointing me?!”

I was shocked. She was seriously concerned about that?

Now that I think of it, Lady Seren often wore dresses in subdued colors with figure-skimming silhouettes. Those sorts of dresses suited a more demure Lady

Seren, one who smiled gently and walked gracefully one step behind Prince Helios.

But to bring out Lady Seren's newfound charm and enthusiasm for life...only a dress such as the one I'd purchased for her tonight would do. Because that dress looked marvelous on her, no mistake about it.

"Lady Seren, I think the dresses you've worn until now have showcased your understated beauty well," I said. "But this dress... I think it suits the new Lady Seren... That is, the Lady Seren I have come to know."

How could I convey this feeling to her? I frantically went through my limited vocabulary, trying to express myself.

"You are even more precious than I envisioned when choosing this dress."

I was never going to be eloquent, but I hoped that my sentiments were coming across at least. I gazed firmly into Lady Seren's eyes and spoke from the depths of my heart.

"You are exquisitely beautiful."

"Oh, Lord Viol..." Lady Seren, looking up at me with her eyes wide open, suddenly turned red and hung her head. "Th-Thank you..."

Lady Seren's voice was a faint whisper. I realized that the ears poking through her loose, wavy hair were bright red. The sight made my heart pound even faster.

"If you like it, Lord Viol, then I'm happy with how I look tonight, too..."

"..."

"Now, now, you two."

I jumped as Miss Rince's voice rang out. Goodness, Lady Seren was saying such seductive things that I almost grabbed her and pulled her into my arms...

"Isn't it about time you two should be leaving?" she urged.

"Th-That's right!"

"Uh, shall we go?"

We looked at each other and laughed, then headed to the carriage, hand in

hand.



“I'M so nervous.”

“Me too.”

After Lady Seren and I signed in, we stepped into the ballroom lobby. Man, it had been a while. Beyond the open door, men and women filled the ballroom, enjoying themselves and dancing.

The quadrille had already ended. It was now time to freely enjoy dancing and talking. Lady Seren and I had taken our time meeting up and getting over here.

“It's as hot and stuffy in here as ever,” I remarked.

“It really is. But it's been a long time since I've experienced this kind of atmosphere,” Lady Seren said.

As I took Lady Seren's hand and we advanced to the dance floor, people noticed and stared at us. They showed mild surprise when they saw me but did double-takes when they clocked Lady Seren.

The reaction was palpable.

The ballroom was awash with whispering, but this was expected. After all, we wanted the news to get out. I was here today to let people know that I was the one who would be escorting Lady Seren from now on.

“Lady Seren, let's dance,” I invited. “I haven't neglected my training, so I should be able to lead you confidently.”

“Oh, yes! I've so been looking forward to it!”

I put my arms around Lady Seren, hoping to fend off those hovering like they wanted to talk to us. I wanted to dance a little before all the talking happened. I looked down at Lady Seren, and she looked up at me excitedly, like when she was practicing a new spell.

She was looking forward to dancing. It made me smile a little.

“With this dress, you can dance to your heart's content, can't you?” I said. “Today, let's use the floor in its entirety and really cut loose.”

"Hehe, yes, that's what this dress is made for, isn't it?"

"I don't know much about women's dresses, but this one seems made for movement indeed."

"Certainly. It's light and swingy. Just perfect for spinning around on the dance floor."

Yes, when I gazed at Lady Seren's smile, I realized I'd become calm and relaxed. Until a little while ago, I'd felt lightheaded each time I looked upon Lady Seren's face and was stricken by embarrassment, but it was odd... Looking at her now seemed to have a calming effect. I felt sure I could dance without getting nervous and stepping on her feet again.

We moved slowly at first, step by step, in time with the music.

It had been a long time since I'd danced with her like this, and I found myself gazing at her, delighted to look at her this closely and from this angle.

"That outfit... It really does suit you."

The more I looked, the better the dress and hair bow looked on her.

I also liked the way she looked up at me with a shy smile on her face. It was very Lady Seren-esque. Many young ladies were dancing in gorgeous dresses, but to my eyes, Lady Seren shone brighter than any of them. She was the star of the ball.

While savoring the joy of being here as Lady Seren's partner and being able to share the first dance with her, I tightened my hand around her little one.

"All right, Lady Seren. Shall we cut loose?"

"Yes!"

The finest of answers.

We made eye contact, and I saw the enthusiasm in her eyes. Then we looked over to where we were heading. Both of us realized that there was a large open space there, ripe for our use.

Together, we took a big step forward, and then we were swinging across the space, the breeze blowing us. Before, I was never sure how to move my body,

but now the rhythm of the music felt natural and incredibly fun.

And Lady Seren was right with me the whole time, her step light and joyful, so the more we danced, the more fun I was having.

The men nearby were staring in amazement. But I only noticed them for a fleeting moment. The next moment, they were gone, and Lady Seren and I were swinging across the room together.

“This is so fun...!” Lady Seren gasped with delight.

“I agree!”

“It’s like zooming across the plains with you!” she exclaimed.

“Hahaha, it certainly does remind me of flying.”

Lady Seren laughed joyously. Communicating with my gaze, I casually guided her in the direction I wanted to go, using the light touch of our hands and my hand on her back to keep us close together. This kind of wordless, physical communication felt so intimate as we cut through the crowd.

I didn’t mind the stares, either. Not when I was dancing with Lady Seren.

It was a new feeling for me.

Her white lacy dress swirled and fluttered, and she was as light and lovely as a fairy. I wanted to stay like this forever, but the music was coming to an end. Lady Seren’s cheeks were also slightly red, so if she danced any longer, she might grow sweaty.

“You see, women don’t like to sweat, especially at balls and other sophisticated gatherings.”

The teachings of Count Blaze ran through my mind.

Showing elegant and gallant consideration for your partner. It didn’t come easily to me. Seeing Lady Seren happily dancing with her shining smile made me want to keep dancing. But at the same time, I didn’t want to make her feel unpleasant.

“The song is almost over. Shall we slow down?” I suggested.

“Yes... That was wonderful. I had so much fun!”

“Me too.”

When the two of us finally took a breather and huddled close together, a feeling of fulfillment different from anything I’d felt before seemed to fill me.

“It’s nice to be able to dance with you again.”

Lady Seren lifted her head in response to my whisper and smiled like a flower coming into bloom.

I sensed bated breath all around us. And the prickle of watching eyes. I hurriedly deployed sound-cloaking magic so no one would be able to make out our conversation. Lady Seren seemed accustomed to looks and didn’t seem to be paying any attention to them. With a smile on her face, she spoke in a whisper.

“I am also very happy that this evening has come. ...There was a time when I thought I might never attend a ball again.”

“That’s surprising.”

“Because I broke off my engagement and opted to become a High Mage. It takes courage to participate in a ball after that...”

Lady Seren’s expression was tense. It made me realize just how heavy a decision it must have been for her to break off her engagement with Prince Helios and pursue becoming a High Mage.

But the expression was only fleeting, and then she smiled again.

“...I thought it would be fun if you and I could sneak in and covertly sample the desserts,” she said in a conspiratorial whisper.

“That does sound like fun.”

I pretended not to notice the change in Lady Seren’s expression. She had chosen to change the subject.

“But dancing with you like this was so much fun. Lord Viol, let us attend another ball together in the future.”

“Yes, of course.”

While we were talking, the eyes of watching men pricked the back of my

neck. Looking up, I noticed some familiar faces.

Right... When I thought about it, our dancing display on the floor highlighted the fact that we were attending this ball together.

"I would have loved to sneak desserts with you, Lady Seren. But perhaps we can save that particular pleasure for the next occasion." As I sighed, Lady Seren looked at me in curiosity. "Familiar faces are gathering around us. I believe we are in for a barrage of questions."

"Hehe, to be sure."

Of course, she'd noticed. Still, seeing that she hadn't flinched in the slightest, I'd have to guess that she was expecting it.

"Well, our purpose behind attending tonight's ball is to spread the word about you and me. I suppose a few questions are par for the course," I said for both our sakes.

"Yes. I'm prepared."

There wasn't even the slightest hint of hesitation from Lady Seren, who was still smiling brightly.



"THEN is it true that Seren rescued the trading ship?"

Borden's younger brother sounded surprised.

As soon as our dance was over, all the salon members, including Borden's younger brother, surrounded Lady Seren and me. Just like that, I was whisked off to the seated area with Lady Seren, and we were being lightly interrogated.

Also present were Lady Seren's lady friends, that redhead, Prince Helios, who'd been dancing up a storm, and even Lady Seren's younger sister. A glittering display.

Finding myself surrounded by Lady Seren's friends, whom I had no real relationship with, was rather uncomfortable. But, since I was to be Lady Seren's male companion, I couldn't exactly run off now.

"Yes. I knew Father was in trouble, and Lord Viol suggested the plan." Lady

Seren had named it as my achievement, so everyone's eyes turned to me at once.

But in truth, it was Lady Seren who'd saved the ship.

"It's true I suggested it, but it was Lady Seren who saved the trading ship," I corrected. "By floating the ship and flying it home in a straight line, she brought it back to port in just one day."

"Yes! That's right!!!" Borden's brother said loudly. "My brother was so surprised. He thought it would take a month to rescue!"

"But what a surprise... The Angelica. She was delayed, and Lord Andel and I were most worried. I never would have dreamed that Lady Seren would save the day just when they were finally ready to arrange a rescue ship."

A soft-spoken young woman was the next to speak after Borden's younger brother. Judging from the way she spoke, it seemed likely that this girl was born into a conservative family and had become a civil servant. ...Moreover, she was clearly interested in shipping, which was dominated by the revolutionary faction. Even though she appeared easy-going, she must not be so on the inside. A complex young woman—exactly the type Lady Seren would have as a friend.

"Seren, you're amazing! I never would have dreamed that you could pilot a ship."

"I've heard a lot about it at the Academy and around the palace. Both my father and mother were very pleased and extremely grateful for the speedy rescue of the Angelica."

After the sharp-faced young woman spoke in a manly tone, Prince Helios, who was beside her, was next to speak. He was nodding, with an ambiguous look on his face. Was he pleased or concerned? I could not tell.

"The king and queen were...? Oh, thank you...!" Lady Seren positively beamed.

Knowing Lady Seren, she had feelings of lingering guilt towards the king and queen for going against their hopes for her and deciding to become a High Mage.

"Seren, you really were destined for a career in magic, huh?" Prince Helios said.

"Yes, I sincerely think so, too." Lady Seren smiled back at Prince Helios.

"...I look forward to witnessing your continued success," he said.

"Yes. I will do my best for the development of the country." Lady Seren nodded firmly.

Prince Helios stood up and turned his attention to me. Sensing that he was about to say something, I also stood up to appear respectful.

"Archmage Viol... I heard that you were instrumental in this rescue effort. My gratitude to you."



I never imagined the crown prince would thank me personally. I bowed low before him. When I raised my head, Prince Helios smiled a somewhat lonely smile.

“As for Seren... Please watch over her. She tends to push herself too hard.”

Of course. I understood that as well.

I understand it all so well now. In his own way, Prince Helios must have been watching out for Lady Seren, too. He truly cared for her.

“Yes. I promise.”

I bowed my head deeply again, thinking I had some idea now about how Prince Helios must be feeling.

Riesz 3

My Position Is Lacking

FOR some reason, I felt a slight twinge in my chest as I looked at Archmage Viol deeply bowing before Prince Helios.

As her former fiancé, it made sense for the prince to ask the Archmage to look out for Seren, who had recently joined the Third Mage Guild. Even so, the sight made my chest tighten.

But let me be honest here.

Just minutes before, Seren and the Archmage had been dancing across the entire dance floor as though such a thing was perfectly natural for them. That alone was enough to cause me consternation. But now, on top of that, it almost sounded like the prince was entrusting Seren to Archmage Viol.

What a fool I am. I know Prince Helios doesn't have those kinds of feelings for her.

But I wasn't the only one who picked up on the subtext here.

"Come on, that's enough chatting!" Mashlo leapt to his feet beside me and thrust a hand out towards Seren.

Hey, hey, hold on. It's my turn first. I got to my feet in a hurry, too.

"You came all the way here to party, didn't you? Seren, let's dance."

"B-But, Lord Mashlo..."

"I've practiced my dancing. I think I've gotten pretty good at it."

"Wait."

Just as Mashlo tried to grab Seren's hand, Archmage Viol slipped between them. He moved smartly, speaking in a composed tone.

"What do you want? I mean, uh..." It seemed that Mashlo had remembered that he was speaking to an Archmage. "B-But, Archmage Viol, you've already danced with Seren. You have no right to refuse another man the chance... Er, do you?"

“But Lady Seren had not yet said yes. You shouldn’t be so pushy,” Archmage Viol cautioned.

“Grrr!”

Mashlo’s face distorted with frustration. If it hadn’t been Archmage Viol who’d just checked him, but someone closer to his age and rank, he would have undoubtedly unleashed a torrent of abusive language.

“...Or at least, that is dance etiquette as I learned it. Unless I’m mistaken?”

Archmage Viol sounded uncertain, but Mashlo only grew more annoyed. Archmage Viol’s words implied that Mashlo himself did not know the correct etiquette of dance. Although I wasn’t sure that was what Archmage Viol had intended to say.

Still, I had no right to scoff at Mashlo.

I, too, wanted to ask Seren to dance. I wanted to take her away from this crowd, even if I had to tug her by the arm.

“Mashlo, you were completely in the wrong.” Prince Helios scolded Mashlo with a stern expression. He brought his face up close to Mashlo’s and made direct eye contact with him, muttering in a low voice so as not to be overheard by others. “Mashlo, I think I warned you to stay away from her. Yet here you are, trying to dance with her... I should have kept you away, to begin with.”

His expression didn’t change that much, but Prince Helios’s eyes were colored with sadness and frustration. Since Seren left the salon, Prince Helios had started being a lot harsher with Mashlo and his ilk.

Mashlo looked hurt, but as Prince Helios said, Mashlo was in the wrong.

“I don’t want to have to raise my voice. Please apologize to Seren and Archmage Viol for being disrespectful, and leave this place before things get any worse.”

After being on the receiving end of Prince Helios’s stern instruction, Mashlo bluntly apologized to Seren, who was peeking meekly around Archmage Viol’s side.

“Sorry. ...My bad.” Then he lifted his gaze and apologized to Archmage Viol as

well. It was rare to see Mashlo apologize. I found it refreshing.

Then Lady Ladia's laid-back voice rang out. "Oh good, I was worried that Lord Mashlo had forgotten he was in public. Shall we talk a little more?"

"Right. Everyone wants to hear more about Seren and Archmage Viol's story."

The crowd nodded eagerly when Lady Linde said this. Then, the crowd parted to reveal a familiar face.

"Hello, Lady Seren. It has been far too long since I last made your acquaintance."

"Oh, my. Prime Minister Borden... It's been too long, indeed!" Seren sounded startled and delighted.

My brother...!

I was surprised by his sudden appearance.

Was he in the crowd? He doesn't usually come over to chat like this, so he must have heard Seren and Archmage Viol were attending this ball for the first time in a while.

While I was wondering what brought him over, my brother smiled at Mashlo.

"Mashlo, you're quite brave," he said. "Ah, but maybe it's better to say that you simply don't understand your position. If I were in your shoes, I wouldn't think of forcing Lady Seren to dance."

His smile was intimidating.

He was angry, no doubt about it.

My brother is usually kind and caring, but when he gets angry, he can be scary. It's not like he gets violent or anything. It's just his smile. It's terrible.

Even though I wasn't the one being scolded, I felt a chill in my heart.

Apologize, Mashlo.

Do it quickly, man!

My wish was in vain, and Mashlo kept his mouth shut tight, making things worse.

"Young Prime Minister, leave well enough alone. You're wasting your breath."

Behind him, an even more unexpected figure appeared.

Wow, even Duke Qumildy has appeared. As always, he looked strong and deeply tanned.

"What are you doing here? Have you forgotten? I thought I told you to stay away from my daughters." Duke Qumildy's tone was cold. Mashlo went pale.

Right. After Seren became a High Mage, Prince Helios and Duke Qumildy secretly summoned Mashlo and the other boys.

Seren gave up on becoming a queen based on something Mashlo had said. In other words, when it came out that Mashlo and the others were the catalyst for the current situation, they were told to stay away from Seren and Marietta in the future. Mashlo had come to my room crying after that; I'd rolled my eyes over what an idiot he was.

In the excitement of realizing that Seren would be attending another ball, I'd forgotten about that. But Mashlo had been warned off by Duke Qumildy directly. How could he have been so brazen to ask Seren to dance after that?

Either he was firm in heart, or... he was a complete fool.

"I'd heard that you'd stopped talking to Marietta outside of work at the salon, so I'd thought you were at least a little remorseful, but now this..."

I could sense anger waves coming off Duke Qumildy. Those cold eyes fixed on Mashlo made even me, an onlooker, tremble.

"What do you mean by not only participating in the conversation but also inviting my Seren to dance?"

Mashlo bit his lip and hung his head. I snuck a peek at his face. His eyes were red.

What an idiot! If he'd wanted a chance to interact with Seren, he could have made his move when Duke Qumildy was away on a trading trip.

Sure, who knows when that chance will come, but to push his luck like this... It was so risky.

"Well, even if I waste my breath talking to you, it won't resonate. It seems you won't be participating further today, but I will consult with your father and take appropriate measures. I imagine it won't reflect well on your household." Duke Qumildy smiled.

My brother sighed and rubbed between his eyebrows. "Mashlo, you should leave now. We'll arrange a carriage for you. Just go home for today."

Mashlo nodded silently, his eyes filled with tears.

When Mashlo left, looking depressed, the atmosphere was flat.

Lady Ladia spoke up in her laid-back voice, dispelling the tension. "Well, I'm not sure what that was all about, but never mind. It does seem to have thrown rather a damper on things, though."

Then Lady Ladia laughed and Duke Qumildy broke into a wry smile.

"Trouble on land as well as sea, eh?" he said. If you were watching from a distance, you wouldn't even think there had been any awkwardness at all. "At first, I thought of keeping quiet since the rest of you were speaking up, but considering the future, I thought it would be better to say my piece."

In truth, it was a private affair that Mashlo and the others were summoned by Prince Helios and Duke Qumildy. So maybe Duke Qumildy was wondering whether or not he should have stirred things up like this at a ball attended by so many people.

"Prince Helios, I apologize if I said too much," he said.

"No, it couldn't be helped. Don't worry about it." After smiling wryly, Prince Helios looked at Duke Qumildy and my brother with a slightly puzzled look. "However, it's rare for the two of you to be here at the seating area. But since Seren is here at a ball for the first time in a while, I suppose you came to pay your respects?"

"Yes, you're exactly right." My brother smiled at Prince Helios, then turned to face Seren. "Viol and Duke Qumildy have informed me about Lady Seren's activities in detail. I wanted to express my gratitude to her directly. Thank you for rescuing the trading ship."

"No, it was all because of Lord Viol and my father—I mean, His Grace."

"Hey! Seren! Don't call me 'His Grace' like that. So cold. You may be independent now, but you'll always be my child. Call me father, as you always have."

Duke Qumildy caressed Seren's head lovingly. They still seemed close, even after she had left the duke's house. I felt secretly relieved to see it. Next, Duke Qumildy turned his attention to Archmage Viol.

"Viol, my boy. Good to see you. You escorted Seren to the ball as planned. And thank you for sticking up for my daughter."

"Not at all. Thanks to you, I was able to have a great time. Thank you very much."

My gaze went back and forth between the faces of Duke Qumildy and Archmage Viol. What did he mean by saying the Archmage had escorted Seren?

Could it be that the two had come to the ball...together?

And Duke Qumildy approved of this? What did this mean?

And why was Duke Qumildy affectionately calling Archmage Viol "my boy?"

Confused and at a loss for words, I looked to my brother for help, but for some reason, he looked away awkwardly.

Next to him, Duke Qumildy showed his white teeth as he spoke to Seren. "Seren, it's your first night out in a long time. Did you enjoy yourself?"

"Yes, Father! Thanks to Lord Viol, I had a lot of fun."

After answering Duke Qumildy, I was shocked to see Seren looking up at Archmage Viol and blushing a little.

Seren... Wh-Why are you looking up at Archmage Viol with such a happy expression...? Seeing the cutest, brightest smile I've ever seen directed at a man who wasn't me...made me feel faint.

"Oh, Lady Seren, I just knew Archmage Viol was your escort tonight! Your dress gives off a very different impression than usual. I was wondering if it was the Archmage's choice." Lady Ladia smiled softly.

"Ah, yes, I thought so as well because they're wearing the same green stone," Lade Linde added. "And they both looked great out there on the dance floor!"

Lady Ladia and Lady Linde accepted it quite naturally, but unexpectedly, Marietta had a slightly dubious look on her face.

"And, you know..." With a smile, Lady Ladia peered at Seren's face. "Despite it being said that you don't let your emotions show, Archmage Viol, you seem to be having a good time. While it looks like you're both having a lot of fun, do you mind if I ask why you're Lady Seren's escort this evening?"

She cut straight to the chase. Go for it, Lady Ladia.

After all, I was curious, too.

"Um..."

"It was my idea." Just as Seren was about to say something, Duke Qumildy spoke in a clear voice. "Of course, I already knew that Viol was an excellent man, but when I heard from Seren he was a good instructor and a kind person who'd helped her out in her hour of need, my curiosity was piqued."

Prince Helios's expression grew bitter as he listened. Like me, he didn't relish hearing how another man had assisted Seren.

Come to think of it, Seren had said that Archmage Viol taught her magic, so I wondered if that's what he meant. Or was it something that happened after she began working as a High Mage?

I'd have no way of knowing.

After all, for the past four months, I hadn't been able to see Seren, let alone talk to her.

The academy, the salon, balls, and evening parties. As soon as those three points of contact disappeared, I had no way to encounter Seren. I always wanted to see her, so I went to every single ball, hoping she would finally show up, and now she had...but I wasn't expecting any of this.

"It happened the other day, during the rescue of the Angelica," Duke Qumildy said.

"Right now, it's all anyone seems to be talking about," Lady Ladia responded.

"Archmage Viol suggested that the two should fly through the sky and rescue the ship. The crew of the Angelica was so grateful. They've been talking about it too. I heard the whole story from Lord Andel."

"Ah, you're Lady Ladia, aren't you?" Duke Qumildy said. "You wanted to work for us, as I recall? Well, the best of luck to you."

"I will pass the exam for sure, and once I am officially a subordinate of yours, I will not need any extra luck."

That was just like Lady Ladia, to curry favor with the higher-ups in the career field she was pursuing. But Duke Qumildy was laughing away happily, so her approach must have succeeded.

"Seren and Marietta are indebted to you and Lady Linde," he said. "I hope you will all remain good friends."

"Of course," Lady Ladia nodded. "Lady Seren's new place is where we all go to relax and unwind."

"I plan to visit often from now on, too," Lady Linde joined in. "Marietta has also gotten used to working at the salon and is now very reliable. With us three as salon members, we will do our best to fill the gap left by Lady Seren's absence."

"Thank you; I'm certain I can rely on you all." Duke Qumildy beamed.

Marietta was also smiling at Lady Linde and Lady Ladia. Even from my limited point of view, the three seem to get along well, with the initial awkwardness now absent.

During the early days at the salon without Seren, work didn't proceed as smoothly as before. It was quite troublesome. Some work that would normally have been sent to the salon even had to be returned. But finally, things were starting to turn around, little by little.

The situation would have been even worse if the women hadn't become salon members. I'm not Duke Qumildy, but even I thought these three women were very capable.

But that was not what I wanted to hear about right now.

While I was thinking about such things, Lady Ladia and Lady Linde got back to the topic. They must have been interested in Duke Qumildy's story as well.

"I would like Lady Seren to concentrate on her work as a High Mage," Lady Ladia said. "We will do our best to make sure she can. Seeing Lady Seren with Archmage Viol... Well, she seems to be enjoying her new career. It's good to see."

"That's right, saving a trading ship is hardly an easy feat. But Lady Seren did it!" Lady Linde smiled and nodded.

"Come to think of it, I heard that Your Grace also accompanied them on the rescue mission...?" As Lady Ladia turned to him expectantly, Duke Qumildy nodded, puffing out his chest a little.

"Oh yes. Seren and Viol were on this rescue mission, so I joined them. I couldn't just leave the rescue of my men to these two kids, could I?"

"You should have left it to them," my brother groaned. "There was no need for you to go and risk yourself..."

"I'm back safely, so the sermon can come later. More importantly..." Brushing off my brother's complaints, Duke Qumildy leaned forward and began to speak. "Viol here is such a thoughtful man despite his poker face. He truly took care of me during our flight."

"Huh?" I grunted inadvertently. How surprising when the man seemed to pay so little attention to others. I peeked at my brother. He was nodding. ...So it was true then.

"Thanks to Viol's attention to detail, it was surprisingly comfortable during the flight, both going there and coming back," Duke Qumildy continued singing his praises. "And while we were all eating dinner, Viol went off by himself... only for me to discover that he was deploying magic that would protect the ship without even having to be instructed to do so."

"Oh my... I didn't even notice," Seren said, sounding genuinely surprised.

"No matter how calm the seas might have been, there is always a risk of monsters attacking. It was just an extra security measure." Archmage Viol responded to Seren's surprise as if it were no big deal. It must have been a

natural move for him.

“Well, I was impressed,” Duke Qumildy said. “And during my chat with Viol, I was pleased to find out that he liked our Seren.”

“Whaaat?!”

“Huh?!”

“Oh!!!”

“Oh, my!”

“Y-Your Grace!!!”

My brother scolded Duke Qumildy in a reproachful tone, but of course, Duke Qumildy wasn’t the type to be reined in.

“What’s the harm? It’s true, after all! Right, Viol, my boy?”

Duke Qumildy winked mischievously, and Archmage Viol nodded without even twitching an eyebrow. Seren turned bright red and shyly lowered her head.

Her expression...was so joyful.

Prince Helios and I stared at Seren. No doubt I was as pale as him.

“I knew it...!” Marietta murmured in a small, subdued voice, and the other women turned to the pair; their eyes sparkled with excitement.

“The Frosty Archmage and our Lady Seren? This is sensational!” Lady Ladia cried in delight.

“What a surprise... I thought he wasn’t interested in other people,” Lady Linde said.

“I was surprised, too,” Archmage Viol blushed. “It’s the first time I’ve ever been so moved by something other than magic, and I was honestly confused myself.”

To my utter frustration, his aquiline features were only that much more handsome when he was flustered.

“Eee! My heart’s pounding, too, for some reason!”

“Hahaha, this is going to make women squeal all over the land.”

The women seemed excited by the talk of romance. I wished they’d stop squealing. It would only draw extra attention.

If Archmage Viol’s feelings confused him so, then I’d rather he’d never noticed them in the first place. Besides, this was the first time I’d ever seen him talking to someone other than my brother.

Duke Qumildy was smiling fondly at Archmage Viol. He was exuding an aura of warm affection, like a parent. It looked as though he really, really liked him.

Then Duke Qumildy laughed and slapped Archmage Viol on the back. “This fellow is a little too shy, but he’s more considerate of others than I thought. And he’s flexible enough to roll with Seren’s wild ideas. It’s a good combination, him and our shrew, so we don’t have to worry about either of them. He’s a man who’s up to the job.”

“I’m a shrew...?” Seren looked somewhat hurt.

“Hahaha, you became a High Mage by blowing away magical beasts without anyone even knowing it. You’re absolutely a headstrong, difficult shrew of a woman!”

“All right, I admit it, but you don’t have to say it out loud...”

Seren still looked displeased, but Duke Qumildy showed no heed, and after looking calmly at Archmage Viol, he turned his attention to the others present.

“As long as Viol’s a good man, and I believe that he is a good match for Seren, then I have no choice but to support him, right?”

“B-But, it’s still too soon!” My brother raised his voice in a flustered manner, and I finally felt like I was freed from my state of shock.

“Th-That’s right,” I jumped in to agree. “Besides, the age difference is too much.”

Archmage Viol ought to have been about the same age as my brother, an age difference of about ten years. And he was technically Seren’s boss. Wasn’t there a conflict of interest there?

And yet...

"Age difference? I don't care. Ten years isn't too big of a difference for adults."

Duke Qumildy spoke bluntly, and both Seren and Archmage Viol looked blank for a moment. Then they looked at each other and smiled.

What? They agree with him, too?

"We're not quite at that stage yet. But what I'm saying is if going forward, Seren decides she wants to marry Viol, I won't have any objections," Duke Qumildy stated.

"Oh, Father..." Seren beamed at the duke, looking surprised and pleased.

I didn't know much about the duke until now, but it was plain to see that he cared about Seren.

"I will do my best to make Lady Seren want to marry me."

Archmage Viol's response was quick, and I felt like kicking something.

It wasn't fair. After all, Archmage Viol worked in the same place and could see Seren whenever he wanted. Meanwhile, I had no opportunity to engage with her. My position was lacking.

Unaware of my feelings, Lady Ladia happily spoke to Duke Qumildy. "Duke Qumildy, I've become more and more interested in Archmage Viol now! As a friend of Lady Seren's, I would like to hear so much more about him. If that's all right?"

"Hmm. What do you want to know?"

"Earlier, when you went to rescue the trading ship, you said the journey was surprisingly comfortable thanks to Archmage Viol's attention to detail. Can you explain?"

"Oh, yes, it was very comfortable."

"I want to hear all about that. Right, Lady Linde?"

"I also want to hear more about that story. I'm quite interested in magic, too, and so I'm fascinated by the mysterious Archmage...!"

I had to nod. I was interested, too.

After all, for me, it felt like he'd suddenly gotten one or two steps ahead of me. It was frustrating. And though it couldn't be helped, I at least wanted to know my enemy.

"I see, I see..." Duke Qumildy looked at the two women and me, chuckled, then rubbed his chin and began talking. "That's right. When you become as strong as Viol here, you can use magic to do unbelievable things without even the twitch of an eyebrow." Duke Qumildy beamed with pride. "There were a lot of things, but the one that surprised me the most was when Viol made a cup of tea on the spot and served it to us in the air. Ah, but it would probably be easier just to show you. Viol, a demonstration, please."

Archmage Viol raised his eyebrows and silently stared at the duke, but the duke just smiled back. After a long moment of smiling and glaring, Archmage Viol finally sighed.

"I'm so sorry, Lord Viol..."

"It's all right. I'll try to do something small-scale that won't attract attention..."

Seren apologized to him, but Archmage Viol smiled faintly and put the fingers of both hands together to form a small circle above the table.

"It's a barrier..." I found myself muttering, and Archmage Viol glanced at me quickly before looking back at me again and staring with those black eyes.

"You've got a good eye." He muttered back to me, then looked at first to Seren, then my brother, before nodding. "Yes... Borden's younger brother. You do have a good eye. I've heard about you from Lady Seren, as well."

"Huh?"

Seren told Archmage Viol about me...?

I wondered what she'd said. For some reason, I felt quite pleased.

"Borden, I hear your brother is quite skilled with magic. Since your father passed away early, both you and your brother have had to change your original career plans..."

Archmage Viol's unexpected words made me and my brother gasp. His

expression was impassive, but I could tell by Archmage Viol's tone that he empathized with us. Now, I wasn't sure how to feel about him.

To be honest, I felt rather pleased that the genius, well-known Mage Guild Archmage had just described me as "quite skilled with magic." And I was touched by his kind words about what we had been through, my brother and me.

But I couldn't be all that pleased because I'd already identified him as my rival in matters of the heart. If only I could dismiss him as a bad sort like Mashlo, I could hate him to my heart's content.

"Yes, I think Riesz was always more talented at magic than I was."

My brother looked a little sad. Still, it was what it was. My brother became Prime Minister, so I, too, would go into politics. I couldn't leave everything up to our mother, now could I?

Archmage Viol stared at me as if he wasn't quite sure what to say. Then, he finally averted his eyes and concentrated on the barrier in his hands.

I couldn't help but be captivated by those hands.

I was surprised, yes, but I could sense the others sucking in big gasps, too.

Clay swirled between his hands, forming a well-shaped teacup as we watched. Red flames flared around it and then faded away to reveal a perfectly baked, beautiful white ceramic teacup.

"No way..."

"Amazing..."

"Unbelievable..."

Everyone murmured in disbelief. It seems when people are truly surprised, they tend to get quiet.

Of course, I was surprised, too. I'm an earth attribute, so I could probably conjure up clay like that. But I certainly couldn't whip up a teacup and bake it into ceramic that easily.

I'd never even thought of making something like that in the first place.

“Isn’t it amazing? See, he whips up teacups out of thin air, then conjures hot water and serves tea. And if you order it, he can even make ice.”

For some reason, Duke Qumildy sounded extremely proud. Just as he finished speaking, small ice cubes appeared in the air and fell into the cup with a clinking sound.

Everyone present was stunned by Archmage Viol’s abilities.

“He’s in a league of his own...” I couldn’t keep myself from saying it.

“I had no idea magic could be used for things like that!”

“No, no ordinary Mage can do this kind of thing.”

“That’s right, it’s probably because Lord Viol is a master of all the elemental attributes.”

“Ah, what a sight to have witnessed!”

Despite being stunned at first, the group began to bubble over with words of admiration for Archmage Viol and his amazing magic. The whole crowd, in fact, was bowled over by him.

The excitement of seeing high-level magic seemed to have made everyone immediately warm up to Archmage Viol.

“Incidentally, Archmage Viol, you never seemed to attend balls, did you? But these days, it feels like you come more often.”

“And today, he’s here as Lady Seren’s escort...”

“Well, that’s true...”

“You two make a pretty couple...”

Just as everyone started to murmur about Seren and Archmage Viol, Duke Qumildy stirred. “Come on, Seren, Viol. Time to be going, I think.”

“...Yes, of course.”

“...”

The two were a beat slow to respond, which made me think this wasn’t something the three had planned.

Were they planning to leave so soon? But no.

“Prince Helios. I think Seren, Viol, and I will go and speak to the king and queen. Please excuse us.” With a smile, Duke Qumildy addressed Prince Helios.

“...Yes, you should go and see them. I’m sure they’ll be pleased.” Prince Helios smiled as he responded. “Seeing Lord Viol’s magic in person for the first time was wonderful. With Lord Viol and Seren working together, I’m sure the land will be blessed with amazing magical developments soon.”

Prince Helios smiled and moved away from our table.

I watched him as he danced with the first of the young ladies, who had been impatiently waiting. He was smiling softly.

I’d known him a long time, so I could tell.

I could tell Prince Helios must have felt as helpless as I did.

Even though I was finally able to see Seren, Duke Qumildy and Archmage Viol stuck so close to her that I had no chance to speak with her privately.

It saddened me to realize that Seren had again become an unapproachable woman. At this rate, all I could do was roll over and concede defeat to Archmage Viol.

Wasn’t there any way I could strike up a conversation with Seren?

I sighed, watching as Seren walked over to the king and queen, flanked by her father and Archmage Viol.

Seren and Archmage Viol looked at each other and smiled gently. And Duke Qumildy smiled at both of them. There was no opportunity there for me at all.

...I let out another deep sigh. It seemed, after all, impossible.

I Believe I May Be in Love

THE week after the ball—during which all sorts of fun and embarrassing things had happened—I had a tea party at my house with my usual three guests.

As I sat down, Lady Ladia spoke.

“So, Lady Seren, what’s really going on?”

“What do you mean?” I responded.

“That’s right,” Marietta jumped in. “I couldn’t ask my sister how she really felt when there were so many people there. How frustrating!”

“Indeed. I don’t know if I should support Lord Viol’s efforts or casually keep him in check,” Lady Linde said. “Since we need to know how to react in the future, could you tell us honestly how you feel, Seren?”

I was taken aback by what they had to say.

During the ball, the girls had been laughing and happily participating in the conversation, all the while they were wondering whether they should be for or against it.

“Oh yes, please be honest with us. If his advances are unwelcome, just tell us, and we’ll scare him off!” Lady Ladia laughed. “Or we could go to Prince Helios and ask for his help?”

“No! Oh goodness no!” I panicked. Bothering Prince Helios! The very thought!

And to begin with, I loved Lord Viol. But it was embarrassing to speak frankly about it. I didn’t know what to say.

“Um. Er... His advances aren’t... aren’t unwelcome. I mean...” I hesitated.

“Yes...?”

“I’m... I’m rather thrilled, actually...” I could feel my cheeks growing hot.

“Interesting... Then, Seren, you really do like Archmage Viol?” Lady Linde grinned.

“Yes...”

“What is it you like about him?” Lady Ladia asked. “It’s got to be that beautiful face of his, right?”

“But if it’s faces we’re talking about,” Marietta interjected, “Prince Helios has a beautiful face, too...”

“That’s right, Marietta, your beloved Prince Helios has a gorgeous face,” Lady Ladia responded.

“But Archmage Viol has a refined sort of beauty,” Lady Linde pointed out.

“Prince Helios is also fond of swordsmanship and the equestrian arts, so he has a dashing figure,” Marietta said. “And he’s also wonderfully good at dancing.”

“Yes, yes, I know, Marietta, you’re infatuated with Prince Helios,” Lady Ladia waved her off. “But right now, it’s more important to find out about Lady Seren’s feelings, isn’t it?”

“Exactly. So, Seren, what attracted you to Archmage Viol?” Lady Linde pressed.

“His face is undeniably beautiful, I think... But it’s not just his face...” I said.

“Does he have some charm to him that can only be understood by interacting with him?”

When Lady Linde asked me that, I became even more embarrassed.

Father advised me not to reveal my feelings too early because of Prince Helios, but Lord Viol had stated his feelings clearly in public. He’d said he’d do his best to see that he and I were married. I, too, wanted to convey my feelings properly to the people I knew best.

I raised my head and spoke while looking everyone in the eye. “I think what I

like so much about him is that he's kind but also strict." When I said that, everyone looked puzzled for some reason. "Hmm? Why do you look surprised?"

"I mean... none of us expected you to say that you really liked him..."

The other two nodded when Lady Linde said this.

"...Well, I'm surprised too. It's the first time I've ever been so quick to like a gentleman." I turned to Marietta, who was frowning. "You know, I've lived my life believing that I thought most highly of Prince Helios, but..."

"Sister..."

"I think you probably know this, Marietta, but when I was a child, I was bad at reading comprehension and memorizing things," I admitted. "Every day, I worked hard so that I wouldn't bring shame to Prince Helios."

Marietta nodded slightly.

"Prince Helios is a very hard worker, and I respect him. When I saw Prince Helios working hard, I felt like I had to work hard, too, so I put a lot of effort into my princess consort training," I said. "I have always thought I wanted to be a good wife to him."

"Oh, Sister..."

"I did my best."

"Yes. I take off my hat to you," Lady Ladia said.

"However, when I met Lord Viol, I realized those feelings I had towards Prince Helios...weren't love," I finished.

"Oh my! Oh my, oh my! You're in LOVE with Lord Viol?" Lady Ladia fanned herself.

"Ladia, calm down," Lady Linde warned. "You're getting overexcited."

"Well, how could I not get excited about this?!"

Lady Linde smiled wryly, and Lady Ladia looked at me with sparkling eyes. I swallowed hard and pressed a hand against my chest. I could feel my heart pounding away. I was about to reveal a most important secret.

"So, what's the real situation, then?" Lady Ladia leaned in, and I took a deep

breath, preparing to make myself clear.

“I’m... I’m in love with Lord Viol. Yes, I am.”

“Well! I knew it! This is more than just being fond of each other, isn’t it?!” Lady Ladia gushed.

“Oh, Sister...!”

“Woah, she really said it.”

Lady Ladia got to her feet with a clatter. Marietta clasped her hands silently to her mouth. Lady Linde smiled wryly once more.

As for me... Now that I’d said it out loud, I felt somewhat relieved. Maybe it was because I’d been carrying so many secrets by myself.

“Still, it hasn’t been that long since you started talking to Archmage Viol, has it? What was it that made you fall for him initially?” Lady Linde asked.

“Well, at first, I just felt like I respected him a lot,” I said. “It was wonderful that he had so many innovative ideas and such amazing magic.”

“Oh, yes, we were all stunned by that,” Lady Ladia said.

“No wonder he’s called a genius,” Lady Linde agreed.

“Anyway, he’s such a reliable person,” I continued. “His teaching method is polite and easy to understand. Whether he praises me or scolds me, I always understand exactly what he means.”

“He sounds like a good boss,” Lady Linde said.

“I understand all that, but I want to know why you fell for him, not how he is as a boss,” Lady Ladia insisted.

“Ladia loves those kinds of juicy details,” Lady Linde sighed.

“I sure do love them! I love romance! Who can blame me at this age? Anyway, Lady Marietta agrees with me, don’t you?”

“Yes, of course. But my sister and I have never really discussed this before... It’s quite fun!”

“Hehe, that’s true,” I agreed. “It’s a refreshing change!”

"Hahaha, it's like being back in the academy," Lady Linde said.

"That's right, it's fun to laugh with Lady Seren like this."

I had to nod. Lady Ladia was right.

Preparing to become a High Mage had distanced me from everyone else, so the fact that I could now talk casually like this and laugh with the others made me incredibly happy.

"So, Lady Seren, tell us all about Lord Viol," Lady Ladia demanded. "And NOT about how he is as a boss."

"Hahaha, Seren, if you don't answer properly, Ladia will keep on asking you forever," Lady Linde teased.

"Right, well... Let's see..."

When I thought about the exact moment I fell for Lord Viol... several popped into my mind.

The face he makes when he's eating sweets. The delight he shows when casting magic. The mysterious way he keeps to himself. It means so much more than he's opened his heart to me.

He's a hard worker, and even though he said he wasn't any good at dancing, he trained hard and became great at it. And he is kind to animals, referring to a stray cat as his "master."

Of course, I also liked how relaxing it was to be with him as Vi, and I loved the way he flapped his tail on the table and how his ears twitched to match his emotions.

And I loved how considerate he was towards me and how he was always giving me advice, both as Lord Viol and Vi.

But the thing I liked most of all was...

"I like how he tells me exactly how he's feeling," I decided.

"Interesting..."

"When he needs to be strict, he doesn't hold back," I explained. "But when he praises me, he *really* praises me. He was raised as a commoner, so he doesn't

mince words, and I can always trust what he says. He opens my eyes to a whole new perspective.”

“That’s surprising. Archmage Viol doesn’t normally talk much, does he?” Lady Linde noted.

“I wonder if it’s just that he’s shy. Once he gets to know you, he speaks as much as anyone else.” Then I laughed, my head full of thoughts of him. “But it’s true that he’s quite expressionless. Although he actually has many expressions you might miss if you don’t look carefully.”

When I said that, Lady Ladia blushed and opened her fan. “Ooh, stop it, Lady Seren. You don’t even realize what kind of sappy face you’re making right now, do you?”

“What?!”

Wh-What kind of face was I making?! A sappy face? Was I really? Of course, there was no way I could tell just by touching it.

“Uh, um, was I making a strange face?” I asked.

“Hahaha, it’s a happy face,” Lady Linde chimed in.

“It’s certainly the first time I’ve seen your face look like this, Sister.”

“Ahhh, I want to have a burning kind of love, too...” Lady Ladia opined.

With the three of them sighing dramatically, I felt even more embarrassed.

“It... It doesn’t feel like a burning kind of love to me...” I murmured.

Yes, I thought my feelings for Lord Viol were strong, but they didn’t fit the descriptor of “burning love,” at least for me.

I’m happy when I’m with him, I love eating desserts with him, and I get excited when we talk about magic. With Lord Viol, we respect each other, and being together feels safe.

“If anything, being with Lord Viol makes me feel at ease, but also excited and more than anything, happy,” I confessed.

“You feel excited and happy being with that unsmiling man...?” Marietta made an expression of disbelief. “If it were me, I would feel uneasy if the other

person wasn't smiling."

"Yes, but if you look closely, it's possible to tell if he's feeling happy or sad," I said. "Lord Viol doesn't show his emotions easily, so it's easy to misunderstand him. But he has a cute side to his personality, and he's very open-minded and kind."

"Surprising," Lady Linde said.

"If you say so, Sister, then he must be a wonderful person. And Father certainly seems to think very highly of him." Marietta smiled at me.

"Ahh, I want to find someone I can speak about in that kind of way, too..." Lady Ladia lamented.

"That's right, so far we've been doing nothing but providing cover for Prince Helios," Lady Linde sighed.

I felt a little guilty when Lady Ladia and Lady Linde said that. Since the engagement between me and Prince Helios was annulled, he had been dancing first with Lady Linde, Lady Ladia, and Marietta at every ball and then moving on to dance with the other ladies.

Now that he no longer had a fiancée, it was only natural that the number of young women aiming to become Prince Helios's wife would increase. However, Prince Helios was not yet at the stage of clearly deciding on a partner, so to avoid getting the hopes of any young ladies up, he danced first with his reliable female friends from the salon.

"Sorry..."

"You don't need to apologize, Seren," Lady Linde said.

"That's right. It's just a matter of Prince Helios deciding on the next one quickly. Although I know it won't be that easy. But if he could only announce that he has no plans to find a wife soon, that would make things so much easier."

"I will advise him to do as much," Lady Linde smiled at Lady Ladia with a wry smile. Marietta had a somewhat troubled expression on her face. "Putting Prince Helios aside for now, I'm glad I was able to understand how you're

feeling, Seren.”

“That’s right.”

The two ladies seemed to have regained their composure quickly.

“If Seren says she loves Archmage Viol, then we must rally around her,” Lady Linde declared.

“I concur,” Lady Ladia said. “Leave it to us! At the ball the other evening, Archmage Viol’s popularity skyrocketed. We’ll spread the word about the happy couple, and that will keep any other bothersome hopefuls at bay!”

“Hehe, thank you,” I said. “But, Lady Ladia, Lady Linde...do you not have your eyes on any gentlemen at the moment?”

I knew Marietta’s crush, but I didn’t remember hearing anything about the other two ladies.

“...There’s no point, even if I did fall for someone.” Lady Ladia spoke sadly, pouting.

“In your household, your father decides, right?” Lady Linde said. “I sympathize with you, Ladia.”

“Right! That’s why I’ve decided to live vicariously through the romantic entanglements of others!” Lady Ladia spoke with such emphasis, but it didn’t sit right with me.

“That’s not like you, Lady Ladia,” I said.

“It’s not like me...?”

“Even though you were born into a conservative family, you never gave up on your desire to become a civil official and worked hard until you were able to demonstrate your competency at the salon, right? Lady Ladia, I feel sure you’re the type to go after your dreams of your own will.”

“Yes. I have a lot of respect for you.” Marietta backed me up strongly. Lady Ladia turned red in a blink of an eye.

“Wh-What’s all this about, all of a sudden...”

“Hahaha, how unusual!” Lady Linde roared with laughter. “Ladia is

embarrassed."

"Well, I mean... I'm not used to being praised outright like this. At home, all I get is disparagement, never praise," Lady Ladia pouted.

"Oh, I know. But I also think you're a hard worker and an amazing person," Lady Linde told her.

"Y-You too, Lady Linde? What's gotten into everyone..."

"Anyway, you've already experienced success in your career," I continued, thinking about how adorable Lady Ladia was when she was embarrassed. "If you don't give up, the path will open before you. And even if it doesn't, you can create one yourself."

"Coming from you, Lady Seren, a woman who forged her own path in becoming a High Mage... That's very persuasive," she said.

"I think you're the type of person who can create her own path, too, Lady Ladia," I insisted.

"Yes... Yes, I wonder if I can..."

"You can!"

"You can do it, Lady Ladia!" Marietta backed me up, her eyes shining. Then, smiling at Lady Ladia, she said something outrageous. "Besides, I feel that you already have someone in mind, Lady Ladia!"

"Whaaat?!"

"Who? Who is it?"

I was taken aback, but Lady Linde grinned.

"Now, now, I can't be the one to tell you, you know. Lady Ladia would be most annoyed with me." Marietta giggled, and Lady Ladia turned bright red.

"Oh my goodness, what an adorable reaction!" Lady Linde exclaimed.

"Don't! Don't look at me!"

"Come on, you can tell us. We'll support you, you know?" Lady Linde pushed.

"No. Just leave it alone. If I caused trouble for him, I'd simply die," Lady Ladia

said.

"I see. Well, all right. If you want to become a civil official, Ladia, then all you have to do is impress Duke Qumildy, and you'll be in. Then you can be free with your feelings without worry." Beaming, Lady Linde looked at Lady Ladia, her tone dropping to a serious register. "But tell me if you feel like it. I'll always help you."

"Please don't forget us either," I said. "We also want to help you, Lady Ladia."

Marietta nodded emphatically, silently backing me up. She looked so cute, hands clasped together, her expression so earnest. In the last four months, Marietta had come to really care for Lady Linde and Lady Ladia, too.

"And that goes for you too, Lady Linde." I turned to Lady Linde now, speaking clearly.

"Me? What do you mean?"

"You're just as important to us as Lady Ladia is. If you ever need our assistance, Lady Linde, you have only to ask."

When I said that, Lady Linde looked blank for a moment, then beamed.

"Thank you! I will. I'll ask you for help whenever I'm in trouble."

Lady Linde smiled, and this time Lady Ladia started questioning her.

"Well, Lady Linde? You've asked me personal questions, so of course you're going to confess too, aren't you?"

"Me? Hmm, there are still several men I'm interested in. I haven't narrowed it down."

"Whaaat?! How unexpected..."

"Definitely. I thought Lady Linde was the type to focus on one person only."

Lady Ladia and Marietta looked surprised.

I was more surprised to hear that Lady Linde was interested in anyone at all. Maybe because she didn't show much interest when the other young ladies were talking about matters of the heart, and with her androgynous aura, I just hadn't thought of her as someone who'd have romantic feelings.

“By the way, would you mind if I asked who are these men you have your eye on?” Lady Ladia probed.

“Hmm? Well, right now, I think there’s a lot to admire about Prime Minister Borden and his younger brother, Lord Riesz, as well.”

“Oh, my! Oh my, my, my! I never would have thought it!”

“Me either...”

“Hahaha, maybe it’s because, for me, it’s just still at the level of, hmm, he’s not bad,” Lady Linde said.

“So, incidentally, what do you like about them?” Lady Ladia asked.

“Hmm? Well, for Prime Minister Borden, it’s just pure admiration. After joining the salon, I sometimes have the opportunity to talk with him. So I’ve come to understand, albeit only slightly, how skillfully he handles government affairs.”

“That’s certainly true.” Lady Ladia nodded in agreement.

With my princess consort education, I’d had a lot of opportunities to talk to Prime Minister Borden at the palace. But ordinary students rarely have the chance to talk to the prime minister.

Lady Linde and Lady Ladia must have had the opportunity to talk with Borden for the first time and to experience his work style and personality only after entering the salon.

“I think it’s cool that he’s dealing with political heavyweights at that age, and although he’s strict about his work, he’s kind and never turns his back on people in trouble, right?” Lady Linde said.

“Hehe, that’s certainly true,” I agreed. “He’s often helped me out, too. Lord Viol says he consults with Prime Minister Borden whenever he needs advice.”

“And with Lord Riesz, he’s quite open-minded and a very balanced individual,” Lady Linde continued. “Compared to Prime Minister Borden, he’s not as dependable because of his age, but he’s easy to talk to and kind to women. I bet he would help his partner with anything. Don’t you agree?”

“I see...” Lord Riesz was kind. He always helped me at the salon and even gave

me advice on magic. "I think those two men are good candidates, as well."

"By the way, I think it's wonderful that Prince Helios has changed his behavior recently," Lady Linde went on. "You can see his effort. And I think that Lord Andel is hardworking and impressive, too."

"What? Not Prince Helios, please!" Marietta interrupted. "I can't compete against you, Lady Linde...!"

"Hahaha, Marietta, you have a one-track mind when it comes to Prince Helios." Lady Linde laughed lightly. "And, of course, Lord Kitz is also rather appealing. He may come across as a touch insincere, but he's a solid person. Though he deals in calculations, his way of teaching is a bit scattered, but his figures are always exact, and I feel I could respect a man like him."

"Hmm, I see your reasoning, Lady Linde, but it certainly seems different from love," Lady Ladia noted.

"Well, I think so too," Lady Linde agreed.

Maybe it wasn't love right now, but...

"But... Lady Linde, you're good at seeing the positives in each person. No matter who you build a family with, I'm sure you'll be happy," I said.

"I hope so. I still don't know what it feels like to have special feelings for someone, though."

"Now that I think about it, I was like that too. Now, I can clearly say that I have feelings for Lord Viol, but in the beginning, I just really respected him," I said. "I don't think anyone can say what specifically will spark romantic feelings." Saying that, I felt a little shy. "...It's kind of embarrassing, but it's also really nice to talk like this with everyone."

"Exactly. I thought this was the kind of conversation you'd only hear cute girly girls whispering about in excited voices," Lady Linde said.

"I'm happy to be able to talk like this with women I look up to," Marietta said.

"Am I the only one who's sweating?" Lady Ladia asked.

We laughed, enjoying the conversation very much.

It was a very happy day.

Viol 29

The Possibilities of Magical Devices

“I see, so that’s why you look happier than usual today.”

When I looked up, Lady Seren was wearing an adorable smile.

The salon ladies had come by today and enjoyed chatting over tea. Talking with friends around the same age can help relieve stress and increase one’s vitality for daily life. Lady Seren always says talking with me is fun, but talking with female friends must be a different dynamic.

“Yes, it was a lot of fun.” Lady Seren slowly stroked my throat.

I purred; I had already given myself up to her. Lady Seren was getting better and better at petting every day. I couldn’t be expected not to purr.

“And they all said they would support our relationship. It’s very reassuring.”

“I see, that’s good. It’s reassuring to have good friends in your corner.”

Lady Seren’s hands felt so good. I closed my eyes and stretched out on the table. Under the rhythmic sound of my tail hitting the table, I heard Lady Seren’s faint laughter, and my ears twitched.

“What is it?”

“Of course, the support of my friends is reassuring, but since Lady Ladia and Lady Linde offered actual help, I have a feeling they’ll do something. Their words strongly implied as much.”

“Hmm... In other words?”

“In other words, if you and I are dating and planning to get married, they’ll use their connections to spread positive news and lay the groundwork so that everyone else will be on board, too.”

“That would be amazing!”

“Father will take care of the upper echelons of the nobility, and Mother will handle the wives, but Marietta, Lady Linde, and Lady Ladia can get through to the other young ladies, I think.”

I was so surprised I got to my feet.

“Women truly are amazing.” After saying that, I suddenly realized something. “No, not just the women. The nobles, in general. Borden is probably doing the same thing for us. I went to him for advice, you see. I knew he’d be able to do something.”

“That’s why Prime Minister Borden came to see us at the ball,” Lady Seren hummed in understanding.

“Yes, I think so.”

“We are very lucky to be blessed with so many wonderful people around us. We must be grateful,” she said.

“Right. That’s certainly true. Let’s be happy together to honor the support of those around us.”

“Yes! Hehe, let’s be happy together.”

“Why are you laughing?” I asked.

“Hehe, because you’re a cute, fuzzy cat, and yet you’re saying such sweet things to me.”

I jumped. I’d forgotten I was in cat form!

“Sorry. Even though you’re cute, you’re also very cool,” she appended.

“Bah! It’s too late to backtrack now.” My tail fell limply onto the table. “Now that we’ve shown our faces in public together at the ball, I’d like to start visiting you in human form.”

“Father has also been telling us to gradually increase our visits.”

Not only did I want to be stroked and loved, but I also wanted to hug Lady Seren tightly. Seeing Lady Seren’s happy smile made me think, *Ah, what harm could there be in having those feelings?*

All we had to do was get married quickly so we could always be together.

“Lady Seren...”

“What?”

“I was thinking about the magical device we discussed when we rescued the trading ship. I’m thinking of developing it as soon as possible.”

“Well, that would make Father and the crew very happy,” she said.

“Yes, and I understand that it’s a matter the country should prioritize.”

“The king and queen also said as much.”

Indeed, at the ball, I was taken by the duke to visit the king and queen, and while we were talking about the rescue of the trading ship, my proposed new magical device came up in conversation.

Our country has increased its strength with magic and magical devices so advanced that other countries cannot catch up with us. And we also strengthen ourselves by trading our inventions with other lands.

However, until now, we had not placed large-scale magical devices on trade ships. It’s a waste of an opportunity. If we could achieve faster sailing speeds, we could travel farther and farther afield. And, if voyages could be completed in a shorter time, not only would the results be delivered to the country quicker, but also the expenses and burden on the physical and mental health of the sailors would be reduced.

“I think that you and I, being two people who know the situation on board the ships, will be the main people in charge of development,” I said. “Is that all right with you?”

“Yes! Of course!” Lady Seren answered cheerfully and then said, “Ah.”

“What’s up?”

“It’s just that I’m still learning magic so I can catch up with the others. I should consult with Vellia about how best to allocate my time.”

“Hmm. Yes, we need to make our intentions clear. But neither you nor I have much time. We need time to consult, plan, and visualize. And Old Man Euleho will actually create the device.”

“Yes, Mr. Euleho is the magical device engineer in charge, right?”

“Of course. If we’re going to move that big ship, we need someone we can entrust our lives to,” I said. “Old Man Euleho is the best, and he’s been involved

in big projects many times before, so he's experienced. And he's also acquainted with your father, Lady Seren, so he's the best choice."

"Certainly. When searching the globe for high-quality magical stones, the ship should be fast, so I'm sure plenty of effort will go into the development."

"Without a doubt."

Lady Seren and I looked at one another and laughed. Old Man Euleho and Duke Qumildy were the type to spare no effort for their purposes. If I explained what we were trying to do in detail, I was sure Old Man Euleho would do his best to make it a reality.

"Anyway, like you said, if we use an existing magical device that directs wind energy as a template, we should be able to shorten the production period considerably," I said.

"Yes, it's much faster to improve on something than create something new from scratch."

"Adjusting the wind power and scale of the thing will also be something we need to consider," I pointed out. "But it all depends on where the magical device will be installed, so it might be better to go and look at a ship together with Old Man Euleho."

"I wonder if we can make it so the wind power can hit the sail from any direction." Lady Seren's out-of-the-box thinking had me widening my eyes.

"As usual, Lady Seren, you have the most outrageous ideas."

"Is it so outrageous?"

"I think it's interesting, and anyone who wanted such a device would appreciate that feature. It'd be easier to use if it were fixed in the same place, not to mention easier to adjust the angle where the sail catches the wind. A most innovative iteration."

After I said that, Lady Seren thought for a second, then grinned.

"Yes, you may be right. We should continue in the direction we've been heading."

"Hmm. Well, I think it's best to try a light experiment on the ship and ask the

opinion of a likely consumer of the device,” I suggested.

“Indeed. I should have asked more questions of the sailors while we were on the ship.” Lady Seren let out a slight sigh of disappointment.

But, since Lady Seren has been the one flying the ship all this time, I didn’t think she had anything to worry about.

“Maybe now is better,” I said.

“You think so? Why is that?”

“At the time, the sailors must have been exhausted. But now that they’ve rested on land, they will be able to listen to what we have to say with much more composure,” I explained.

“...Yes. I shouldn’t have gone bending the ear of those exhausted from being stranded at sea for so long.”

“Precisely. Now, the magical device engineer Euleho and the captain in charge of the ship will be able to advise us on how to make exactly the right kind of device.”

“If I ask my father, I’m sure we can use an actual ship to conduct tests. I wonder if I could borrow an existing magical device that utilizes wind power...” Lady Seren hummed in thought.

“There’s no need to bother ourselves about borrowing one.” I slinked out from under Lady Seren’s hands, padded over the table, and placed my paws atop a round, silver magical device with intricate workings. “This device you made during your magical device training the other day should more than suffice.”

“Impossible! After all, Mr. Euleho said the device must be filled with the maximum amount of magical power. This one only contains enough magical power to transmit a breeze across a good-sized room. It’s just not strong enough.”

“Most of the wind-producing magical devices are like that. They’re used to keep houses cool and dry hair and clothes. They don’t contain much magical energy.”

“Certainly, it would be a problem if there was a storm in the house.” Lady Seren chuckled adorably. It was pure eye candy to observe her like that.

“Although some magical devices are imbued with powerful wind magic, they are all weapons,” I pointed out.

“Weapons! ...Goodness, we can’t borrow one of those,” she said at once.

“No, it would be quite impossible. Anyway, the wind power imbued in this magical device is enough. I will do something with amplification magic on the spot.” When I said that, Lady Seren’s eyes widened.

“Lord Viol, it’s like you can pull anything off with the greatest of ease!”

“I think you will be able to do it yourself relatively soon.”

I pressed the switch on the device, and a gentle breeze emanated from it. As it spread throughout the room, it sent Lady Seren’s hair floating softly. I amplified the breeze just a little, setting the curtain flapping.

Good. Yes, I can see that it will work.

“You’re amazing, as ever,” Lady Seren said. “Oh, I’m so looking forward to it!”



THREE days later.

Lady Seren and I were aboard a huge ship.

After I approached the duke, he arranged for an on-ship test. Moreover, instead of the Angelica, he wanted us to use his personal ship, the Berangere. The ship was bigger than the Angelica and had a larger crew.

Such consideration.

“Amazing! This is my first time on such a big ship!”

“I’m looking forward to seeing how the tests go.”

“Ahhh! It’s so much better to be out on the sea than stuck in a stuffy building!”

We had Lady Seren’s three fellow Mage recruits with us, so it was quite a large group.

When hearing of the proposal, Vellia's eyes lit up. "This will be a valuable lesson," she'd said. "So please take the other newcomers with you. All you have to do is show them what you're doing."

"I'm glad the weather's nice today! The sky is so beautiful and blue!"

Lady Seren and the newbies looked like they were having fun, so I supposed there was no harm.

Just as Vellia said, seeing how magical devices go through research and development would be a good learning experience for the new blood.

With a nod, I decided to concentrate on today's purpose. "Hmm. The sunshine is comfortable and refreshing, yes. And the weather is calm, so it's the perfect situation for testing."

In these conditions, we could easily judge how the ship would move, how much wind power was needed, and where the best place to install the device was.

"I'm done setting up the device."

Turning at Old Man Euleho's voice, I saw the device firmly fixed on the right side of the bow. Euleho always worked fast. Even a little wind buffeting didn't deter him.

"Thank you. But are you sure we should be installing it on the front?" I asked.

"Yeah. I said before that wind power coming from the middle would move an object forward well enough, but when it comes to a ship, it'll move more vigorously if it's getting the wind diagonally from the front."

"Well, that's a surprise."

Old Man Euleho nodded at Lady Seren, who seemed quite taken aback.

"If you don't ask, you don't learn. Well, anyway, I've installed it for the time being, and I guess we won't know until we try."

"Yes, shall we try?"

When I turned around to talk to the sailors waiting at my post, I saw a most unexpected individual rushing to the ship from the harbor.

“Hey!!! Sorry, I’m late!”

“Duke Qumildy?!”

“Er, Father?!”

Since Lady Seren looked as surprised as I felt, she probably didn’t know he was coming. He dashed over incredibly fast... Just how old was he, anyway? And what kind of duke barrels along at an all-out run?

“Was the duke planning to join us?”

When I asked the sailors waiting by the sail, they shook their heads. But they didn’t look surprised. They looked like they were holding back laughter.

“We didn’t hear anything about him coming.”

“Not a peep.”

“Nope.”

“How could he stay away when this is all so fascinating?”

Indeed, the sailors, who lived with the duke for months on board, weren’t surprised at all by his actions. But that was Lady Seren’s father for you. Always so full of surprises.

“I’ll go and pick him up,” Lady Seren said.

“Right. Go ahead...”

As soon as I agreed, Lady Seren lightly jumped on the cart we’d loaded onto the ship and flew to her father in no time.

“The duke’s daughter is just like her old man.”

“Both alike in madness.”

The sailors laughed and joked, but I agreed with them. The apple didn’t fall far from the tree.

“I’ve seen it in action a few times now, but it still beats me how it gets off the ground.”

“The amount of magical energy balancing it must take... It’s almost inhuman.”

“But it looks like it feels amazing to fly!”

The Mage newbies all looked a little stunned. I agreed with them. Even I had never once thought of flying before all this.

“She looks so demure, but she’s a firecracker.” Old Man Euleho muttered a little. His face was mostly expressionless, though, so I couldn’t tell what he was thinking. Still, I leaped to Lady Seren’s defense.

“I thought that Lady Seren would be able to propose new kinds of interesting magical devices, so I assigned you to take her under your wing.”

“Oh, I know. And she brought an interesting proposal almost straight away. Something I like to see.” Old Man Euleho laughed, his crows’ feet crinkling. “Look, they’re already back. Both father and daughter look like they’re raring to go.”

Oh, good. I had no reason to worry. Old Man Euleho might have been curmudgeonly, but he greatly appreciated go-getters and free-thinkers. Since Lady Seren falls under both categories, there was no way the two wouldn’t get along. Right, no cause for concern at all.

“Euleho! Thank you for your support today!” the duke said in his booming voice.

“No worries. You can leave it to me.”

“If this experiment succeeds, we may be able to travel to far-off countries faster!” the duke exclaimed. “I might even find a place that produces those magic stones you asked for!”

“All right, all right. I’ll show you something impressive. Just watch.”

Old Man Euleho spoke casually to the duke, suggesting the two had known each other for a long time. It made me realize all over again how much the duke loved his magical devices.

“Viol, I’d appreciate it if you’d whip up a working prototype quickly. I never thought I’d be able to make this kind of progress before I set out on my next voyage,” the duke said to me.

“If we improve on an original magical device, it will be possible to shorten the development time considerably,” I responded.

“Ooh! I can’t wait!”

“We’ve brought a suitable device for testing today,” Lady Seren said. “It’s a magical device to create and circulate a breeze within a room.”

“Duke, this is the first magic tool your daughter designed. Shouldn’t you take a look?” Old Man Euleho raised an eyebrow at the duke and pointed at the magical device he’d installed with his thumb.

“Oh! This is the one? Beautiful workmanship!”

“Would you expect anything less from your daughter?” Old Man Euleho retorted. “I’m sure she’s seen many excellent devices, so she should have a good eye. I’m the one who made it, though, so I can assure you, it functions perfectly.”

“Magical devices are all about functionality, of course, but beauty is also important,” the duke said. “Seren, you can rely on Euleho’s practical skills. There’s nothing to be afraid of, so keep dreaming up exciting prototypes.”

“I will!” Lady Seren smiled happily.

I felt proud, too, seeing how her father appreciated the growth Lady Seren had gone through since becoming a High Mage.

Relieved, I decided to restate the purpose of today’s testing for the duke.

“Now then, let me explain what we’re testing today.”

“Ah, yes, please do.” The duke grinned, and the sailors watched with smiles as I cleared my throat.

I didn’t have the courage to raise my voice. I secretly amplified it with wind magic instead. “I will now amplify the wind generated by this magical device. First, I would like to verify whether this method is possible, so please tell me how strong you’d like the wind to be.”

“Leave it to us!” the duke said.

“I’ll leave the operation of the sail up to you,” I said. “First, we’ll check if it’s possible to navigate using the wind generated by the device. Then we’ll move to the next stage.”

"The next stage, eh? Continue."

"I'm trying to find the best place, location, and direction to install it by moving it around from where it is now. Right now, it's on the starboard front, but it might be better to install it so as to have the wind hitting the mast." Then I suddenly remembered what Lady Seren had said. "...Come to think of it, when I was talking with Lady Seren, we discussed making it portable. So, I wondered whether it would be easier to use if it was fixed or if it was portable and used in tandem with the natural wind... I would like to have your opinion on that as well."

"I see."

"By the way, if it's fixed, we can also fix the windflow, so I'd like to find the most efficient windflow location today," I said.

"Oh, right... It's surprisingly complex, isn't it?" the duke responded.

"After that, we have to decide how much maximum output to include. We will also check how much wind we can handle and whether we can navigate comfortably."

"You're in a hurry. Still, I have no complaints if you want to go all out and do it all at once. If you can make this magical device a reality, sailing will be much easier. We'll give you our full cooperation." The duke smiled wryly, and the sailors nodded eagerly. Still, it shouldn't take much time.

"Your sailors have given us a full day, so that will be enough," I said. "Besides, it won't take as long as all that. I calculate a half-day of testing."

"That's all?" the duke asked.

"Yes. Now, let's get to work," I said. "If all goes well, I believe we'll be able to have a working model knocked up by the end of the month."

"Impressive... But is it realistic?"

"If possible, I would like to complete the device in about a month, try it out on a ship as we're doing today, and see if we can get all the kinks worked out in time for the next expedition," I explained.

The duke's mouth fell open. Then he looked at Old Man Euleho as if to say,

Can you believe this?

“Is that possible?” he asked him. “Isn’t it too quick?”

“Not really,” Old Man Euleho shrugged. “My boss said it’s not that difficult as long as we’re working off an existing device. As long as we figure out all the angles today, it’s well within the realm of possibility.”

“Wow... The Third Mage Guild is full of crazy mavericks.”

Old Man Euleho grinned when the duke muttered that.

“Amazing, eh?”

The duke grinned back.

“Amazing, all right.”

“My boss’s projected delivery dates are surprisingly reliable. The next voyage will be easier. Trust us, and leave it in our hands.”

I was struck speechless.

I never expected Old Man Euleho to praise me like that. I was touched to hear it from someone much older than me, who had so much experience, and from whom I was always learning.

As I stood there, stunned, someone tapped me on the shoulder.

“Yes, Your Grace?”

“People really trust you, don’t they?” He spoke with such kind eyes, and I felt pleased and embarrassed. “Okay, let’s start the tests right away. Viol, if you please.”

At the duke’s command, Old Man Euleho silently moved over to the magical device.

When I looked around, I realized the sailors of the Berangere were also looking at me. They were ready, even if we were buffeted by the strongest winds. Lady Seren and the newbies were watching over the progress with sparkling eyes.

It certainly seemed like a good experience for them.

“Then, let us begin the tests. Euleho, give us full power.”

“Roger.”

Old Man Euleho pushed the switch on the device, and a refreshing breeze blew across the ship. The sails swelled gently with the wind, and the ship slowly left the harbor and moved offshore, little by little.

“It’s working!”

“Slow as a slug, though!”

The sailors were jubilant. Of course, a small room fan device wouldn’t move such a big ship quickly. But knowing that the mechanics of it were sound was a huge plus to begin with.

“We have proved that the ship can move under the power of the device. Next, I will amplify the wind power,” I announced. “The breeze will get stronger, so please hold on tight.”

“Right!”

“We’re on it!”

In response to the excited voices of the sailors, I deployed my amplification magic. The wind rose, and the sails inflated with a bang.

“Wow! Amazing!”

“A good breeze!”

“Lord Viol! It’s progressing at great speed!” Lady Seren looked at the sails, then back at me with sparkling eyes.

The ship moved forward, powered by the wind.

I’d still only cast the lightest amount of amplification magic. All the possibilities this magical device would bring lifted my spirits.



THE test was a resounding success.

As planned, we confirmed most of the necessary conditions for development in about half a day, but it would have been a waste to just go home when we

still had time.

The duke, the sailors, and we, the members of the Third Mage Guild, rarely had this kind of opportunity to talk together. So we discussed whether any other aspects could be improved.

It was a fruitful discussion. The questions and concerns of the newbies had us analyzing things from all different angles.

It all started with a simple question from Miss Arles.

“Is the magical device you’re making now meant to be used when there’s no natural breeze, like today?” she asked.

“No, I want it to be used as much as possible. That will speed up our expeditions. There’s no problem with using it extensively, is there?”

The duke looked at me and Old Man Euleho for an answer. But all we could do was vaguely nod. Seeing that, Lucien scratched his chin.

“This magical device is based on a fan, isn’t it? It must be pretty tough going, using it for prolonged periods. And anyway, whenever you press the switch, it takes a lot of magical power, doesn’t it?”

He was sharp. He was young, fresh out of magic school, but he had a lot of promise. That’s the result of serious study. I heard from Old Man Euleho that he had an aptitude for making magical devices. He must have known that was his strong point, too.

“It’s a little more expensive, but we can always load in another magic stone,” Old Man Euleho said. “You have to use decent magic stones that circulate magic efficiently.”

“Ah, yes... So that’s how to make a device more functional...” Lucien murmured with fascination as Old Man Euleho turned his attention to the duke.

“Even if it costs a bit, it’ll be worth it when you consider the huge profits you’ll make on foreign trade.”

Right. As Old Man Euleho said, *You can increase the functionality by adding more resources.* The problem is that you need a certain amount of magical power to keep the device running.

“Even after creating the device, if you want to continue generating a large amount of wind energy, you need a lot of magical power. And if we want it to operate continuously, then, as Lucien says, we need extra magical power. Why not keep a Mage on hand to supply it?” I suggested.

“Certainly. We should consider hiring Mages to accompany the device,” the duke said. “If we can increase the speed and safety of voyages, we can easily recover the cost of a Mage’s pay.”

“Yay, that’ll create more job opportunities for Mages!” Arles cheered.

“I can introduce you to some skilled fellow adventurers I know,” Gil offered.

Gil was a skilled adventurer himself, not to mention brave. And he had a wide network of contacts. Adventurers were hardy, too. Just the sort to get along well with rough sailors.

I watched from the sidelines as the sailors enthusiastically joined the debates. Just then, the duke casually approached me.

“I heard from Seren earlier that those young ones joined the Third Mage Guild when she did. They’re certainly doing well and proving themselves, aren’t they?”

It was unusual for the duke to single any Mage out for praise. I was happy to have the duke praise my protégés.

“Yes, and Lady Seren says they are good friends of hers, too,” I said. “They’ve all learned well together and pool their efforts.”

“I see... That’s a relief. I apologize for being an overly involved father, but I’m curious about my daughter’s work environment. It was great to see her working with talented individuals today.”

I didn’t realize that the duke had those kinds of concerns. I was glad Vellia had insisted on bringing the newbies along.

“It seems I’m relying on you for so much.” The duke smiled, showing off his white teeth. I was sure he was a lot older than me, but he gave off such an aura of vigor. “I trust you, Viol. Please take care of Seren and the ship.”

I bowed deeply as the duke walked back to Lady Seren and the others.

Of course. I would give it my absolute best effort.

Seren 33

For Us to Be Together

“LORD Viol! Sorry I kept you waiting!”

As usual, Mr. Contard let me in, and I entered Lord Viol’s office. Lord Viol lifted his eyes from the documents before him and smiled at me as he removed his glasses. I thought he looked dashing in the glasses, so I was sad to see him take them off.

“Shall we go?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m sorry I’m late. I got caught up with learning new magic.”

“That sounds like you. But don’t worry. I wasn’t waiting so long, after all.”

Lord Viol was as kind as ever. He packed his things, unbothered, and after saying a few words to Mr. Contard, he joined me.

Ever since Lord Viol publicly escorted me to that ball, we’d been gradually increasing the number of outings we went on together. Now, we go out almost every day after work.

Of course, we don’t always go out for long periods of time.

Sometimes, we go to shops selling magical devices and miscellaneous goods. Sometimes, we enjoy shopping and eating at the market. But lately, we tend to go straight back to my new house to enjoy a private meal and conversation.

“The food and desserts served at your house are far more delicious, Lady Seren.”

That was what Lord Viol always said, but I think that’s only part of it. Most of the time, Lord Viol is a homebody.

I said a quick goodbye to Mr. Contard and walked out into the corridor with Lord Viol. We left the Mage Tower, saying goodbye to the more senior Mages as we went. They looked like they were packing up to leave, too. It had already become a well-known fact that Lord Viol and I left together every day, and people had stopped seeming surprised by it almost entirely.

“What shall we do today?” I asked.

“Today, I’d like to go shopping together.”

“That’s unusual for you to suggest. Shall we head towards the shopping district?”

But then I paused, thinking, *Oh, wait...*

“Is this because...”

“Yes. We have another meeting with your parents scheduled for this weekend. If possible, I would like to bring a small gift.”

“I don’t think it’s necessary... They already understand your sentiment,” I said.

“I’m sure a magical device would be well-received, but bringing a magical device every time seems... unsophisticated.”

“Hehe, then maybe something a little unusual would be good. Father always says he likes things that are a bit twisted and unusual.”

“That sounds like him. But what about your mother and sister?”

“Mother likes tea and Marietta... Come to think of it, she said she wanted a paperweight.”

“I wouldn’t have expected that.”

“She wants to use it for her work.”

“I see. She’s doing her best, isn’t she?”

“Yes... By the way, Lord Viol, where are you taking us?”

Entering the narrow alley from the usual shopping district, we arrived at a road I’d never been on before. Cramped shops lined it that were darker inside than the ones on the main street.

Each one, however, looked interesting and unusual.

“Didn’t you say that your father likes unusual, miscellaneous goods? Then this is the best place to go.” Lord Viol pointed to a shop that looked like an ordinary house at first glance, without even a sign outside.



THAT weekend, Lord Viol and I went back to my parents’ house, the Qumildy

Estate, with the presents we had bought together.

“And yet again, I feel nervous,” Lord Viol said.

“Me too,” I agreed.

Even though this house had been my home as recently as just six months ago, I was so nervous that my breathing had become shallow. But I was more distracted by the waves of tension coming off Lord Viol, sitting next to me. It made me smile a little.

“It’s all right. I’m certain they’ll be accepting,” I assured him.

“Hmm...”

As we whispered, a crisp knock came at the door, and we held our breath. We got to our feet, backs straight, as Father entered.

“Hello. So, what’s today’s meeting about?”

Father cut right to the chase, which helped to dispel the tension a little. I was even more relieved to see Mother, who entered the room next, smiling.

“Well, sit down,” Father said.

“Ah, um, since we’re taking your precious time, we brought you a present.” Lord Viol stammered, unable to hide his nerves. Silently, I cheered him on.

You can do it, Lord Viol!

Father looked at Lord Viol with an amused smile. “Oh, thank you for that. But what is it you’ve brought?”

I blinked at Father in surprise. It never occurred to me that he might ask what was inside the wrapped present. However, Father gave me a light wink, and I realized what he was up to.

“Well, for you, Your Grace, we have brought a Puzzle Box...”

“Oh! A Puzzle Box, eh? What’s that? Never heard of one!”

“The shopkeeper said it’s a small box where you can store important things.” As he explained, Lord Viol took out a small, beautiful box with delicate workmanship.

"Oh! Never even seen one of these before." Father picked it up and examined it with interest, tilting his head. "I can't open the lid."

"Touch the sides," Lord Viol advised.

"Hmm? Something's moving."

"You have to press the sides in a particular order to open it," he explained. "It won't open unless the sequence is correct. I have the sequence on this slip of paper."

"I see. I'm going to try it without looking at the paper first," Father declared.

"I brought a rare black tea from the southern land for your wife and a paperweight for Lady Marietta," Lord Viol said. "Lady Seren and I chose them together, so I hope you'll like them."

"Thank you. I'll enjoy tinkering with this box later."

"I hope you do, Your Grace."

Lord Viol took a deep breath. Looking at him, I finally figured it out. Father had purposefully distracted him from his nerves by asking questions about the presents. His thoughtfulness warmed my heart.

"So, Viol, what brings you here today?" Father asked. "The other day, I heard the crew trialed the new device onboard the ship and confirmed there were no problems. I think we're now on track to unveil it to the king and queen next month, yes?"

"Yes. The device seems to work perfectly. During the trial, we discovered a few minor issues that need improvement, so we're currently working on those," Lord Viol said.

"Hmm, then why are you here?" Father grinned sideways at me. I realized he already had a good idea of why we were here.

I glanced at Lord Viol, who glanced back at me. I nodded a little to encourage him.

"...Once again, I ask for your permission to marry Lady Seren," Lord Viol said.

"Hmm, you're in a bit of a hurry, aren't you? It's only been about three

months since you came to me last time,” Father reminded him.

“Yes. But it has been six months now since the engagement to Prince Helios was annulled,” Lord Viol countered.

“Hmm. Yes, word of the two of them as a couple has gotten out. And I heard that the two of you have been seen out and about in town a lot. Perhaps the timing isn’t so bad now,” Father mused, rubbing his chin. “You know, I thought you were working rather fast with the device’s development. But this was your goal, eh? You’re a shrewd one.”

“As regards the device, I simply wanted it operational so that it could be put to good use right away.” Lord Viol spoke crisply, but then he fell silent before continuing awkwardly. “...However, since both the king and queen will be present at the ceremony to unveil the magical device, I thought it would be the perfect timing.”

Father exploded with laughter. Lord Viol’s frank honesty tickled him. “I see, I see. It seems rather silly to hide my true thoughts now.”

“...Hm?”

Father grinned wryly, and Lord Viol looked confused as to why he was laughing. But Father seemed to have made up his mind.

“Okay, after the ceremony, I’ll arrange for you to have an audience with the king and queen,” Father announced.

“Th-Thank you very much!” Lord Viol sputtered.

“Father...! Thank you.”

“I’m happy for you two. As your mother, I’m excited to have such a wonderful son-in-law.” Mother smiled, too.

Wait...we’d gotten their permission to marry? And they were going to arrange it so that we could report it to the king and queen directly? Had I gotten that right?

Lord Viol and I looked at each other and laughed.

I was so happy.

So! Incredibly! Happy!

“Seren, it would be better for you to handle the social obligations once you get married,” Father said. “Viol’s honesty is a virtue, to be sure, but it doesn’t seem like he’d be well suited to dealing with how cutthroat some of the nobility can be. Whereas you, Seren, have been raised and educated in the aristocracy.”

“Yes. I’ll try my best.”

“I’m not worried. I saw how he had that young prime minister running around to help him. You’re a fascinating fellow, aren’t you?” Father teased.

“I don’t remember making him run around... I mean, certainly, I do rely on his advice a lot...”

Father laughed again while Lord Viol knit his brows thoughtfully.

Mother and I watched, both of us smiling.

Father told us to wait a while, but we still wanted to live together as soon as possible. So Lord Viol and I talked a lot about this meeting leading up to it. That said, I couldn’t sleep last night, and Lord Viol and I had both been too nervous to do much discussing today beforehand. Despite that, I never expected Mother and Father would be so accommodating.

Thankful and happy, I looked over at Lord Viol, who still seemed to be puzzling out what Father had just said. Secretly, I smiled.



THE week after that conversation was the day for the big unveiling of the new magical device.

We left the Mage Tower together and came to the port via flying cart as usual. The magical device had already been installed, so all we had to do was wait for the royal entourage, including the king and queen, to arrive.

The Mage who’d been newly hired for the upcoming voyage would demonstrate the device. All Lord Viol and I had to do was stand by and watch.

Even so, my heart was pounding. Not only was I about to show the king and queen the very first magical device I’d ever been involved in developing, but once that was over, we were going to be making an announcement that would

change our lives. It would have been weird if I wasn't nervous.

Six months had passed since my engagement to Prince Helios was annulled.

As Father said, the timing was still on the early side. I was especially nervous about the reaction of the queen, who was the most saddened when I opted out of becoming Prince Helios's future bride.

I felt awful because she'd been so kind to me. But even if it would make her sad, it wouldn't stop me from wanting to be with Lord Viol.

And I wanted things to be out in the open.

Ever since I was educated as a princess consort, I've had to keep many things to myself, and I always had to be extremely careful when talking to the people around me. Still, it comes with the territory, I always thought. And the number of secrets I had to keep only increased once I started trying to be a High Mage.

However...

While spending time with Vi and Lord Viol, I must have changed. I realized just how happy I was to be able to put my feelings and thoughts into words. I now knew how natural and easy it could be to express myself.

My family, community, and the king and queen were all very important to me. I want to speak honestly in front of them without hiding my feelings.

"Are you okay?"

Lord Viol's voice startled me out of my thoughts.

"Yes, I'm fine."

"I see. You looked deep in thought. Are you nervous?"

I smiled and shook my head at Lord Viol, who peered at me with a worried expression. "No. I was very nervous until a while ago, but I've loosened up quite a bit."

"I see. I'm still pretty nervous," he confessed.

"Hehe, you showed me the importance of being honest with my feelings. I was thinking about how I should make sure to express myself in front of the king and queen."

"I showed you that? Surely, it's more that I'm no good at social decorum."

"No, Lord Viol, I think your straightforward honesty is appreciated by everyone."

"Hmm... Is it? I always felt that it annoyed people."

As we chatted, several royal carriages arrived at the port.

"Ah, they're here."

I got up from my chair and faced the carriage. More than a dozen people, including the king and queen, Father, and Prime Minister Borden, emerged from the carriages. The soldiers guided them to the ship, and they came aboard.

The king and queen noticed us, and the king spoke. "Archmage Viol, it seems you are going to show us a groundbreaking magical device today."

"Yes. This should greatly improve the safety and efficiency of future trading journeys."

"Not only did you save the stranded ship, but you also drew inspiration from the situation and spun it into a new technology that may prove highly beneficial. High Mages truly are our national treasure."

"You honor us. However, it is due to Lady Seren's innovative imagination and Mr. Euleho's skill that we have made such quick progress. Not to mention, we have received much assistance from Duke Qumildy and the sailors. Everything has gone very smoothly."

"I see. I'm looking forward to seeing the results." The king smiled and waved at the sailors as well. Beside him, the queen gave me a gentle smile.

"Seren, dear. You've jumped straight into magical device development. You're really working very hard."

"...Yes, I am!"

That one brief exchange thrilled me to bits.

After the king and queen passed by, the court officials slowly went past. I spotted Father in the procession, which made me feel relieved. Father gave me

a pat on the shoulder as he passed. He didn't say anything, but the gesture was reassuring and encouraging.

Once the participants were all seated on the chairs lined up on the deck, Father went to the front and announced the beginning of the ceremony in a loud voice. At that moment, the crew members lined up on the deck scattered all at once to their posts.

Goodness, I was so excited.

Up above, the masts towered high against the deep blue sky. But the god of wind wasn't smiling on the ship today. The sails were limp, clinging to the mast.

"Begin!!!"

At Father's brief command, the Mage imbued the device with their magical power.

Moving a ship of this size requires considerable magical power. And that power must be imbued into the device. Accordingly, a powerful Mage is a must.

The Mage pressed the button, and a refreshing breeze blew across the deck. The breeze caught my hair and sent it flying. The pure white sails began to swell with the wind.

The ship began to move slowly, gradually leaving the port.

"Woah...!"

"It's moving!"

"Even though there's no wind today."

"It's amazing...!"

"We could sail anytime like this without being restricted by the seasons."

Sighs of admiration, all over.

The white sails were so beautiful against the deep blue sky. The movements of sailing ships are restricted by ocean wind currents during trade missions. From now on, there will be no need for careful weather reading.

"Increase speed!"

“Roger!”

The deep and powerful voices of the sailors responded to my father’s order.

“What? They can even adjust the speed...?”

The ship lurched ahead faster as if showing off in response to the royal entourage’s shouts.

“Amazing...!”

“It’s quite fast. Can you avoid islands and rocky areas like this?”

“We are still only traveling at a moderate speed.”

“What?!!!”

After that, Father demanded more speed, wanting to show off the device’s capabilities. My hair and the queen’s hair were both blown up by the wind.

Lord Viol looked alarmed and quickly cast his Wind Shield.

Oh, good. If the wind got any stronger, our hair would be messed up, and fixing it would be no easy feat. I was grateful to Lord Viol for his consideration.

The queen glanced at me. Nonchalantly, I pointed at Lord Viol and nodded. Of course, the queen understood right away. She always did.

“...All right, slow down a little!”

“Roger!”

Father, seemingly satisfied at last, made the order to slow down.

Good, I was starting to get a little worried.

“Return to port. Steer off!”

The wind eased, and the ship slowly turned its bow towards the harbor. Once the change of direction was complete, it accelerated again. The Mage in charge seemed to have practiced quite a bit, using just the right amount of magical power with none wasted.

“Such freedom...”

“I never thought the day would come when ships would be so easy to use.”

When the ship docked back at port, the king stood up and looked at Lord Viol and myself. We got quickly to our feet.

"Wonderful! Archmage Viol, Seren, well done. Great achievement. And Duke Qumildy, I was able to see with my own eyes the true proficiency of a sailor."

Both Lord Viol and I bowed our heads deeply at his kind words. In the corner of my eye, I could see that the sailors looked very happy.

"With the introduction of this magical device, combined with the sailing skills of your sailors, future voyages will be shorter and more fruitful."

I was happy and proud to hear the king's excited words and see the impressed looks of the court entourage.



AFTER the ceremony ended safely, we were taken to a special room on the ship. The room was built to entertain guests while trading with other countries and was indeed very luxurious. Before, I would have wanted to take a closer look around, but right now, I was distracted.

The king and queen were sitting on the raised seats, and my father was sitting right in front of us.

Finally.

The time had finally come.

"So? What is it you wanted to discuss?"

The king spoke to me directly, and my shoulders twitched with nerves.

Father had told us that he would pave the way for this conversation and that we should leave it to him. I waited for Father to speak, feeling like my heart was about to pound out of my chest.

"The other day, these kids came to me and said they wanted to get married, and I agreed. I have already met with Viol's parents."

The king and queen's eyes widened, and they gasped. Certainly, Father had been very direct.

"...What news."

“I never would have thought...”

The king and queen were uncharacteristically shocked into silence. I was especially surprised to see the king so taken aback because he was such a gentle but easy-going person.

“Seren, are you serious?” The queen looked at me with concern. I gave a clear answer.

“Yes. Lord Viol and I have discussed it, and we have both made our request to my father.”

“It’s only been six months since you broke off your engagement to Helios,” Her Majesty said. “You don’t have to rush to decide the direction of your life. You have plenty of time to think.”

I was warmed by their concern for me, but that only made it more important to make sure I got my feelings across.

“Yes. But I have thought about it a lot and want to spend my life with Lord Viol.”

“Well... Seren... Are you saying you have romantic feelings for Archmage Viol?” Her Majesty asked.

“...Yes. I am in love with him.”

I wished that Lord Viol wouldn’t look so surprised. I never intended to express my feelings for him so clearly in front of the king and queen, but at the same time, I wasn’t ashamed of my love for Lord Viol.

“Truly?”

“Truly,” I nodded. “It’s true that it hasn’t been long since I started talking to Lord Viol. But spending time with him has made me realize I want to be with him always. He can be strict, but he’s kind and honest, and that’s why I fell for him.”

I sincerely expressed my feelings to the queen, who seemed to be having trouble believing me. But I tried not to gush in deference to Lord Viol’s reputation. Engaged to her son only six months before, I did feel somewhat ashamed to say all this to the queen. But it was always going to be an awkward

conversation.

“Do you really love Archmage Viol?” she asked me again.

“...Yes.”

“...Yes, I see. It might be better for you, Seren, to be with someone more... tolerant.”

“Tolerant...”

For some reason, Father was grinning.

Excuse me.

I may not be able to show it much in front of my father, but when I’m with Lord Viol, I can feel at ease. Whether he’s tolerant or not.

“Incidentally, if you ask Viol here, he’ll tell you the same thing,” Father said. “That he’s completely head over heels for our Seren. The two are certain of their feelings, so I saw no reason to stand in their way. When it comes to feelings this strong, I don’t think time matters so much.”

Father was really in our corner here. The king nodded slowly.

“It’s just, we’re both taken aback by Seren.”

“Because of the ship incident, I’ve had plenty of time to get to know Viol,” Father continued. “As my daughter said, he is an honest man. I would like to ask you both to approve their marriage. That is why we requested this meeting with you today.”

“Hmm, what do you think?” The king turned to the queen, and she smiled softly.

“Seren, I thought you would be my daughter. Now you’re marrying some other family... Honestly, I feel very sad.” After a long pause, the queen continued, “I will support you anyway. If you believe you will be happy with this man, then I will put my full trust in you both.”

“I concur. Archmage Viol’s skills and personality are top-notch. I never thought of him as someone who’d want to marry, so I confess I’m surprised. But I can understand why a man would fall for a young woman like Seren.” The king

regained his usual generosity and nodded with a smile. “Let us approve the marriage of these two.”

Lord Viol and I looked at each other in joy and then bowed vigorously before the king and queen.

“Thank you...!”

“Mm-hm. Be happy.”

They had given us their blessing.

I was overwhelmed with tears of relief and joy.



“**BY** the way, we should prepare for the wedding to be held in about two months. Since you two created this wonderful magical device, the next sea mission will be done in just one month. One full month after that should give us ample time to prepare a suitable ceremony to get you two started as a married couple,” Father said when we saw him home.

After that, the two of us finally returned to my own home to relax.

The other day, I bought a soft, two-seater sofa since I was getting more visitors lately. Both Vi and Lord Viol loved it and often relaxed there. Every time I saw that, I thought, “I’m so glad I bought it.”

“I was so nervous...” Lord Viol said.

“Hehe, you can turn into Vi and really stretch out if you’d like? No one’s here to see, after all,” I said.

“I’ve gone to great lengths to be able to be with you like this. Today, I’ll proudly spend time with you in human form.” Lord Viol’s brows drew together as he spoke, and I laughed.

“When we’re tired, we need something sweet, don’t we? Today, we have Melty Half-Baked Castella.”

“Melty half-baked...?”

“Yes, it seems you eat it by scooping it with a spoon.”

The dessert Jean had provided came in a cute little cup. Although it was

unmistakably Castella sponge cake, it wasn't like any Castella I'd ever seen.

"Woah. It's so fluffy." Lord Viol grunted in appreciation as he pecked at the surface with a spoon. He always got so excited about desserts. It was adorable. "What's inside...? It's gloopy!"

"Oh, you're right. I thought it was cream, but it isn't."

"Hmm. The dough is extremely soft. It's not overly sweet, but you can taste the egg. And this texture! It's so novel!" he exclaimed.

"Even though it has a smooth and chewy texture, the sweetness is not overpowering. I love it."

"Me too."

Spending time together while eating delicious sweets. I still couldn't believe how soothing it was.

"When I spend time with you like this, I feel like all the tension and fatigue of the day are gone from my body, and I just feel pure joy," I said.

"I, too, feel healed when I'm with you. In two months, we will no longer have to worry about parting. I'll be able to spend time with you like this forever."

"I can't wait..."

After tidying away the empty cups, I sat next to Lord Viol. Then, I casually rubbed my cheek against his shoulder.

"...!"



When I looked up, Lord Viol's cheeks were slightly red, and he was moving his mouth weakly.

"Wh... What?"

"Hehe, it's an expression of affection."

"An expression... Of affection?"

"When you're Vi, you sometimes rub against me like this, don't you? It always makes me so happy... Whenever you come close to me, all I want to do is scoop you up in my arms."

Upon hearing that, Lord Viol hugged me with all his strength.

"I absolutely understand!"

"All the fatigue just vanishes into thin air."

"Into thin air...!" Lord Viol repeated my words joyfully, and I put my arms around him, my heart pounding.

Embarrassed, I closed my eyes, but Lord Viol had fallen silent, so when I opened them again and looked at him, I saw that those obsidian-like eyes were glistening with tears.

So handsome.

I thought I'd gotten used to being with him, but staring at each other from such a close distance like this, I was captivated by him.

I really, really love Lord Viol.

"Lady Seren... I love you."

Those words, whispered in a hoarse voice as small as a sigh, made me no longer able to hold back my swelling feelings for him.

Now that our marriage was officially decided, I'd been expecting things to calm down...but I never expected an even greater rush of love for him.

"Me too... I want to become your wife as soon as possible."

We kissed, pressing tight against one another.

I wondered if my feelings would calm down after the wedding in two months.

At the mercy of a passionate emotion that was a mix of love and deep affection, all I could do was tighten my arms around Lord Viol.

I wondered if Lord Viol would be as happy as I felt I would.

Basking in the warmth of the person I swore to spend my life with, tasting the sweetness of his lips, I prayed that the day would soon come when I would become his wife.

Maurice 1

Extra Story: A Young Lady Came to Our House!!!

GREAT! Amazing! Unbelievable!

My big brother came home after a long time, and when the whole family got together, the first thing he said was:

“I have someone I want to marry.”

A moment of silence fell on the spot.

And then, right after that, bewildered shrieks came forth from everyone’s mouths. No doubt, we annoyed the neighbors. But blame my brother for that!

“Don’t lie. Brother, you’ve been terrible at keeping in touch. We’ve heard all these embarrassing rumors around the village, like that you go by Frosty Archmage Viol or something now.”

“That’s right! Even I don’t have a girlfriend, you know?”

“It’s okay; you don’t have to force yourself to marry just because you’re the eldest son, all right? Some people just aren’t suited to some things.”

I showed my skepticism first. Then, our younger brother, Bart, and our even younger brother, Michel, joined in. Viol has a reputation for being the best Mage in the country. He’s a High Mage, even. And he pays all our tuition. We’re proud of him, but he’s never been good at getting along with the villagers.

And he doesn’t have much common sense, either. My brother’s daily life is possible because he has enough money to hire as many housekeepers as he likes.

“I’m not pushing myself too hard,” he said. “I’ve found someone I love, and

she also loves me.”

“Oh, really? Well, good for you, Viol! I always thought there would be someone who would understand your good points!”

“I see. I might be able to greet my grandchildren sooner than expected.”

Ma and Pa were celebratory, but wait a minute...!

“This might be a ruse!” I cried. “Viol is unsociable, but he has *money*. What if she’s a gold-digger? He’ll be robbed and cast aside!”

“She is also a High Mage, so money shouldn’t be a problem,” Viol said.

“Then she must be into your looks! Are you sure about her? What if she just sees you as arm candy? What if she dumps you when she gets bored of your face?” Our youngest brother, Michel, seemed concerned about that possibility.

My older brother is honest despite his surly demeanor. It was easy to imagine him being used and hurt.

“Sometimes she dotes on me as one would a cat, yes,” Viol said. “But she respects me well enough. It’s all right.”

Doting on such a tall, imposing, and slender man as if he were a cat? What kind of nerve did this woman have, anyway?

“Well, wait. What is this girl like?”

When Pa asked that with an amused look, Viol groaned a little and said something even more outrageous.

“Everyone probably knows her face, and I think you must have heard the rumors about her. It is Lady Seren, who recently ended her engagement with Prince Helios and became a High Mage. Her battle record was projected into the sky. You all saw it, didn’t you?”

“Eh? You mean that flying girl?”

“The bear-killer...?”

“That’s right. She is an excellent High Mage.” Viol nodded at my other brothers.

“But... But Lady Seren...”

I looked to Ma and Pa. I wanted their help, but they were both pale in the face.

"S-Speaking of Lady Seren, isn't she a duke's daughter...?"

"Yes, but since she's now a High Mage, she's been excluded from the Duke's family," Viol said flatly.

"Y-You... You didn't do anything dastardly, like steal away Prince Helios's fiancée, did you?" Pa accused.

Y-Yikes! No, no, couldn't be!

There's no way my brother would have the courage to steal the fiancée of such a dashing prince as Prince Helios.

"I would never do such a terrible thing," he said. "The other day, I went to the duke to formally greet him, and he kindly gave me his approval, so I don't think there is any need to look so worried."

Oh, phew, I thought, breathing a sigh of relief. I didn't want to go making enemies of the royal family.

"Listen, Viol, there are plenty of good girls in the village and town, you know? They're not classy girls, but..." Ma was sounding timid now. But I understood how she felt. "I don't know how to talk to a young lady who grew up in a duke's household. Couldn't you have picked someone more... down to earth?"

"I can't imagine what it must be like to date the daughter of a duke." After I unintentionally agreed with Ma, Viol lowered his eyebrows a little.

"Both His Grace and Lady Seren are friendly people. Far friendlier than you would expect of aristocrats..." he said. "But I think it would be quicker if you met them and saw for yourselves. My residence would be fine... What I mean to say is, would you like to meet Lady Seren?"

"...What do you think, dear?"

"Hmm." Pa thought it over for a moment, then grinned. "No, bring her here. It's a run-down house, to be sure, but this is where you grew up, Viol, and it's still our home. She can see where you came from, and if she still insists she wants to marry you, then we will have no objection. All right?"

I thought it was reasonable, myself.



PA said we should act like normal, but that was never going to happen.

Ma'd been cleaning the house for days and cooking and preparing all sorts of things. And we'd helped Ma out by tidying up, wearing neat clothes, and arranging our hair more neatly than usual.

"I wonder if the duke's daughter will really show up."

"Oh, help. I don't feel like making small talk."

"Well, I'm looking forward to it!"

Then Pa came in and whacked us all lightly around the heads. "I told you! Stop fretting about it! Now look, let's go to the fields. Help me out a little."

"Oh, but we're wearing our newest clothes."

"We're just going to pick some fresh fruits for Lady Seren. You won't get that dirty."

"Roger."

"Oh, all right then."

"Sure, why not?"

We four men left the house together, split up to the adjacent fields and orchards, and harvested the ripest vegetables and fruits. We didn't need many, so it was quick work.

Just as I looked up, though, I saw something unbelievable.

"Is... is that..."

"Huh?"

"Over there! In the sky! Look at the sky!!!"

It was small, like a bean. But it was approaching with great speed. While I was still exclaiming, it grew close enough to make out what it was.

"It's Viol...!"

“And in front of him is... Is that Lady Seren?!”

“Wow, she’s really flying!”

A beautiful woman, her skirts fluttering in the wind, was flying this way, chatting away to our older brother with a big smile. Somebody, please, make it make sense.

“Ma! Viol’s here!” Michel yelled into the house, and Ma rushed out. Pa and Bart also gathered in front of the house, back from the orchard.

Then Viol descended softly and landed right in front of us.

“I’m home. Lady Seren, are you okay?”

“Oh, yes.”

Well. This was a surprise.

Viol casually got off the cart first and grabbed the girl’s hand. She landed on the ground and bowed her head to our family.

“Um, um... It’s a pleasure to meet you!” she greeted.

Woah! C-Cute!!!

Her cheeks were a little red, and she looked nervous, which somehow made her look even cuter.

A noble lady? Blushing and stammering before the likes of us? Was this real?

On closer inspection, she had pure white skin that looked so soft that it made me think she’d never worked in the fields in her life. She looked like an aristocrat, but my first impression of her was more that she looked friendly and sweet. She didn’t give off unapproachable vibes at all.

“This is Lady Seren, whom I’ve already told you about,” Viol introduced her. “She’s no longer the daughter of a duke. Around the Mage Tower, she’s just called Seren or Miss Seren. So you don’t need to stand on ceremony around her.”

Wait, though, even High Mages command a certain respect, don’t they?!

I wanted to sass my big bro, but I held back in front of Miss Seren. Viol’s a genius—or so people say—so he easily passed the exam to become a High

Mage. But even now, I don't think he understands what other people think of High Mages.

"Thank you very much. Feel free to call me just Seren."

Seeing how the young lady bowed her head so politely once more put Ma at ease. Her stiff expression melted a little.

"Well, may I call you Miss Seren, like the other High Mages do?"

"Yes! Please do."

Looking at Ma's happy smile, I felt like I understood now what Viol had been saying. This young lady was unpretentious.

Ma seemed to feel the same way. She was smiling. "We can't stand around in the yard chatting. Please come on in."

"Oh, thank you!"

The two women went quickly into the house. We men looked at each other and laughed before following them. Ma had decided Miss Seren was the type of girl she could get along with.

In the house, Miss Seren's voice trilled.

"Goodness! This looks delicious!"

"I just whipped up a little something with our freshly picked vegetables and fruits, and I thought we could talk over a cup of tea."

"How delightful!"

The table was crammed with Ma's famous apple pie, a carrot cake, and a peach compote. Maybe Ma went a little overboard.

"The scent is wonderful. I've never smelled such fragrant fruits," Miss Seren said.

"Ah, ours are cultivated and picked at peak ripeness, so they taste and smell better than ordinary fruits."

"Cultivation... Yes, Lord Viol told me about that. I had no idea the difference was so great. It's an appetizing scent."

"I'm so glad to have a girl in the house!" Ma exclaimed. "It's worth the extra effort to see such a lovely smile."

"So Lord Viol loves desserts because of his mother's baking!" Miss Seren noted.

"I don't know about that. When Viol was a child, I wasn't able to bake so often, and it wasn't until Pa's cultivation started paying off that we harvested such good fruits so reliably."

"Enough chattering! Why don't we sit down first?" Pa smiled wryly, interrupting the women's talk.

Right. None of us had even had a chance to speak yet.

"That's right. Miss Seren, would you like to sit next to Viol? I'll make you a cup of the special tea I picked in our field."

"Thank you. I'm looking forward to it."

After that, the conversation was surprisingly harmonious.

You wouldn't think a duke's daughter and a farming family would be able to get along, but we got on like a house on fire. She listened to everything we had to say with great interest. Perhaps the lives of the common people are fascinating to nobles. Or she was being polite since we were Viol's family. I wasn't sure where the truth lay, but it was great to talk and have her listen with those sparkling eyes.

She was intelligent, too, able to keep up with Pa's and Bart's talk of crop cultivation. And she didn't just listen passively to Michel talk about school or what I had to say about the shop I worked in but responded and asked insightful questions.

We'd heard rumors that the prince's ex-fiancée was smart. They were clearly true. I wondered why such a beautiful, kind, smart person would want to marry my older brother.

"I'm really glad to see that you're such a splendid young woman, Miss Seren. But if I might ask, what is it exactly about our Viol that would make a girl like you want to marry him?" Ma asked.

Miss Seren, who had been laughing happily, turned bright red. “Ah, um, well...”

“Oh, sorry! It was indelicate of me to ask that.” Seeing her face, Ma apologized. “I apologize. If you truly want to be with our Viol, and if we can all get along as well as we do today, that’s enough for me. I’m sorry.”

As for me, I already knew from the look on her face that Seren was really in love with my big brother. And if she started getting gooey about it, I’d probably expire from embarrassment.

“S-Sorry, it was just so sudden, um...” Even so, Miss Seren opened her mouth, clearly about to somehow put it into words. Then suddenly, a horse whinnied outside.

“Huh?”

“What was that?”

“It sounded like a horse... neighing?”

“I also heard the sound of a carriage. Perhaps the duke and duchess have arrived.” Viol dropped the biggest bomb of the day on us, and we could only sit there confused.

“The duke?! Here?!!” Pa exploded.

“Yes. I was expecting them around this time,” Viol said.

“Viol! You didn’t tell us!!!” Pa shouted.

“Huh? You didn’t?” Miss Seren looked back and forth between Viol and Pa. She probably thought we knew about her family coming. This was my brother’s fault.

“I didn’t tell you because I thought that telling you would only make you all more nervous,” Viol said simply.

“Are you stupid or something?!” I yelped involuntarily. But it seems I wasn’t the only one who thought so.

“What were you thinking, idiot son?!” Ma yelled.

“If I knew both families were meeting today, we could have done extra

preparation! As it stands, I have prepared nothing!!!” Pa shouted.

“But His Grace said today was just a brief visit to say hello, so there shouldn’t be a big problem,” Viol shrugged.

“It’s a huge problem! Huge!!!” After slamming his fist against the table, Pa got up and dashed to the front hallway.

We all got up and stared at the entrance while trembling. I never imagined that a duke would come to our house.

But where was he?

Pa went to greet them, certainly, but he hadn’t come back.

Pa must have gone outside.

What’s up? Was there a problem? I got worried and went outside, but to my surprise, Pa and the duke were talking seriously about something while pointing at the vegetables in the field in front of the house.

...Why vegetables?

The duke’s clothes gave the impression of an aristocrat, but he was deeply tanned, and when he smiled, his white teeth showed. He was a noble, but he wasn’t like most nobles at all.

The demure person next to him looked like a duchess, and behind her stood a girl who looked like a princess. Both had the same shining blonde hair and beauty. Bart came out behind me, and his jaw dropped when he saw the two ladies.

I felt like my face was on fire, just making eye contact. They seemed so unapproachable. I thought, *Yep, those are noble ladies, all right.*

“Dear! Never mind the vegetables! It’s hardly the time!”

The duke (I’m assuming?) was scolded by his wife.

“I’m sorry, it’s just that those are cultivated crops and look like they could be used for trade.”

“Talk about that later.”

Watching, I realized something.

Nobles and commoners aren't so different. The duke was as henpecked as Pa was.

No doubt Miss Seren was eccentric since she wanted to marry my brother, but the duke (I'm guessing?) was also weird.

I was relieved seeing the duke (probably?) getting scolded by his wife. Our social statuses might have been different, but I had an inkling we'd be able to get along somehow.

Our lively family-to-family meeting was just beginning.

Viol 30

Extra Story: A Gorgeous Wedding

THE morning of a wedding is like a battlefield.

I understand that now.

“Ma! Whose suit is whose?!”

“That one’s mine!”

“Maybe I should wear something else...”

My family was already flustered by the formal attire they weren’t used to. Well, I couldn’t blame them. After all, we were genuine farmers, just ordinary common folk.

“Don’t panic, for goodness’ sake! There’s a complete set for each person, isn’t there? Viol has already arranged for someone to dress you up, so there’s nothing to fret about.” Ma barked impatiently. Compared to my father and younger brothers, Ma’s preparations were the most complex.

In the case of aristocratic weddings, the families usually prepare in their own residences, and the groom prepares in a separate room attached to the royal palace. But I was commoner-born, and my residence is rather small.

And, of course, I don’t retain the kind of servants who could dress me appropriately for such an occasion.

Duke Qumildy was concerned, so he arranged for someone to come and dress us all in formal clothes. He’d even arranged for a tailor to make us all a custom-made set of clothes suitable for the ceremony. Of course, I paid for it, but left to my own devices I’d have had no idea what kind of clothes the groom’s family should wear. I felt extremely grateful.

Everything that needed to be arranged was. All that was left was to get

dressed. The whole family would gather in a separate room the royal palace had prepared for me, all getting dressed together. Right now, everyone was restless.

“These kinds of clothes don’t suit me,” Ma fussed.

“Nonsense, woman. You’re beautiful. That’s why I married you. I can’t wait to see you all dressed up to the nines.”

Pa sounded happy. He was usually gruff and reserved about his compliments, but it was true that Ma was a beautiful woman, popular in the village.

Sure, she wasn’t very refined, but her face was as pretty as any noble lady’s. The outside would look the part well enough.

“I’m looking forward to it, too!”

“And me!”

“Me too!”

As we were talking, I heard a modest knock.

“Come in.”

“Excuse me.”

The gentleman and lady who opened the door and entered were classy. They looked older and quietly confident.

“Eep...”

I heard a small squeak. My youngest brother, Michel. I knew how he felt. I was surprised myself. I’d thought that someone more like a maid would come.

“Congratulations on your happy day. The weather is beautiful, foreshadowing a most fortuitous union.”

“Thanks.”

“We will be responsible for the hair and makeup.”

“Oh, thank you very much. You’ve probably heard already, but we don’t know anything about all this. We’ll entrust everything to you. Please do what you can so we’re not an embarrassment to the duke and duchess.”

“You can leave it all to us.”

The old gentleman smiled softly. Half a step behind him, the older lady beamed as if to say that we were in safe hands.

“This way, please, Mother of the Groom.”

“R-Right!”

The older lady guided Ma to another room. No doubt to give her some privacy to dress, even though we were all family here.

“Shall we begin?”

The old gentleman clapped his hands together, upon which the door opened, and several maids bustled in.

My younger brothers jumped, straightening their spines.

“Ack! Hold on!”

“I... I can undress by myself!”

“Please, don’t!”

I heard weak protests from behind, but they would have to deal with it. I found it daunting, too, at first. For us commoners, having our clothes stripped off and put on by young girls, our hair messed with, and makeup patted onto our faces is nothing short of embarrassing.

I always hated that, so I got ready for the balls and such myself. But today, I couldn’t do that. I couldn’t risk causing embarrassment to Lady Seren and her family.

The old gentleman took care of me, and despite his elegant gestures, he quickly dressed me in a tuxedo as if by magic. Professionals are something else. It felt so different from when I dressed myself. For some reason, nothing pinched or bunched, no matter how I bent or stretched.

The clothes hung better, too, and I looked like I was standing straighter. I wondered how he did it.

As I was looking at myself in the mirror, I suddenly heard a wretched scream from the next room.

“Gahhh!!! I’m dying! I’m being killed! Help meeeeeee!”

“Oh no!”

“Ma?!”

“What happened?!!!”

Naturally, we were all alarmed. Pa slipped out of the reach of the maids and ran to the door.

“There is no need for concern.” The old gentleman left my side and was with Pa in a flash, holding his arm.

“Let go! What did you do to Verna?!” Pa shouted.

“Please, there is no need for concern. It’s what a lady needs. Sometimes it takes a little pain to be beautiful.”

Then it came to me.

“A corset?” I guessed.

“That’s right. A woman’s waist must be slim and beautiful.”

“Screaming like that over a corset?!” Pa yelled, his face pale. If it hadn’t been for the old gentleman holding his arm tightly, I was sure he would have dashed into the next room.

“Pa, it’s okay,” I said. “Calm down. I’ve heard that aristocratic women are squeezed into their corsets by the force of two people.”

Pa was raging, so I tried to placate him. I saw my brothers in the corner of my eye, looking pale. Poor saps. I hoped this wouldn’t traumatize them.

“That’s why noble women are so... Er... hourglass-shaped?”

“I thought those waists were unnaturally slim.”

“Ma’s gonna be killed!”

I could hardly blame them for being worried after a scream like that.

“I’m sorry, but my mother can’t wear a corset that tight,” I said. “Can’t you just skip that step?”

“That’s right, she’ll feel sick during the ceremony.”

"Hmm... I see. I am sorry that this was not taken care of in advance. Our top priority is to see you all looking your very best. Let's stop."

"Yes, please do."

"My internal organs are going to pop out!!!"

From the next room, Ma was still wailing about how she was being killed. I wanted to rescue her, and fast. I held my breath and watched the old gentleman leave the room. Soon, the next room became quiet, and we all sighed in relief.

"Good. She's stopped shrieking."

"Man, it must be tough to be a noble. Is Ma okay?"

"Sounded super scary!!!"

"And that Miss Seren has that done to her every day?! How is she still alive?!"

Father looked relieved. My brothers still looked frightened. They'd all seen the darker side of aristocratic glamour.

The old gentleman reentered the room, looked around at us, and smiled kindly. "I have instructed the maids to adjust to a looser fit so that your mother will be able to eat unimpeded. Please rest assured."

"Thank you."

"Verna... Is my wife okay?" Pa asked.

"Yes, don't worry. She was pleased to learn that we would be using a looser fit. Your wife is already in good shape. That should be enough."

"Oh, thank the heavens! Ma's going to live!"

"We've frightened you. Please forgive me for not being more considerate." The old gentleman wiped away the tears on Michel's cheeks with a pure white handkerchief. And then he spoke quietly and encouragingly to him. "There is nothing to fear anymore. Please leave it to us. Now, we've lost precious time. Let's finish up at once."

At those words, the waiting maids all got back to work at once.

I, too, had my hair tied back with a slim bow.

I wondered if Lady Seren was also busy with these kinds of preparations. Thinking that, I let out a laugh.

No, no.

No doubt she was busy getting ready, but I doubted there was this kind of fuss going on.

What would my bride look like? I couldn't help but feel excited to see her.



"WOW... This is the Great Hall of the Royal Palace..."

"Amazing, it's so sparkly."

"Can I step on this carpet? Hey, are you sure it's all right?"

My younger brothers were overexcited again. No wonder. Until today, they couldn't have even imagined the Great Hall of a royal castle decorated for a ceremony.

Today, our wedding venue was the Royal Palace, and we would exchange our vows in front of the king and queen and all the high nobles.

High Mages are high-ranking aristocrats, but since they come from various backgrounds, the form of their wedding ceremony is not clearly defined. It was clear that if I was called upon to have a wedding ceremony on par with that of a high-ranking aristocrat, it would cause a great burden on my family.

The general consensus is that since the main purpose of a wedding is for the two involved to swear themselves to one another and celebrate their future, it is better for the couple and their families to celebrate comfortably. I agreed.

At first, we planned to hold a small wedding ceremony at the church in the city with just our families.

I don't like flashy things to begin with, and Lady Seren's background couldn't be more different from mine. It hasn't been long since she and Prince Helios broke off their engagement, either. So both of us thought it would be best to have a small, inconspicuous wedding.

The duke considered how my family would feel, having no concept of an

aristocratic wedding. So, he initially arranged that the wedding would have a simple feel.

“Ah, you appear to have a visitor.”

The old gentleman drew my attention to the door, where there was a discreet knocking. When I nodded at him, he nodded crisply back and answered the door. The duke appeared, wearing a cheerful smile.

“Oh, here’s another fine set of gentlemen!”

“Your Grace!”

“Good morning!!!”

“...Morning.”

“Ah, hello. And good morning.”

“Good morning. How are you all?”

My younger brothers were oddly fascinated by the duke, who’d come all the way to our house the other day to say hello. It must have been interesting for them to observe the un-duke-like duke and hear his talk of all the countries they’d never seen.

“Gosh, I’m sorry! I should have come by to greet you!” Pa said.

“No, no, it must be difficult with all these unfamiliar preparations. I’m sorry it ended up like this.” The duke bowed his head apologetically as Pa panicked.

When the duke informed the king and queen that we planned on a quiet wedding at the church in town, they wouldn’t hear of it. They lamented that they would not be able to watch Lady Seren get married after thinking of her as their own daughter for so many years. According to Borden, who was present at the time, the queen was particularly adamant.

I knew Lady Seren was loved, but not to that extent. If I couldn’t make Lady Seren happy, I might be exiled. No, no, I knew too much confidential information. They couldn’t risk exiling me.

“Unfortunately, there is no saying no to the royal family,” Pa lamented.

“Well, I understand how they feel,” the duke said. “I just worry that it will be

nerve-wracking for you all.”

“Yeah, my heart has been pounding since this morning.”

“My balls have shrunk back inside my body.”

“Personally, I’m looking forward to it!”

“I see, Michel. You’re tough.”

Michel didn’t seem to mind being praised by the duke. The two older boys looked like Pa and had masculine faces, but Michel had a delicate face like Ma. Since he was a lot younger, he still had a childlike innocence. However, perhaps because of his young age, he seemed to have the courage to be the least nervous in situations like this. I hadn’t known that about my youngest brother before now.

“Well, Viol and Seren are the main players today,” the duke said. “All you need to do is enjoy the ceremony and the feast. There’s no need to be nervous.”

“We can’t just focus on the food. I’ll be praying for the happiness of the young couple.”

When my younger brother, Maurice, spoke those words with a sassy grin, the duke widened his eyes and then burst out laughing, saying, “That’s right. Well, I’ll be off now. And please, do pray for the happiness of the bride and groom.”

With that, the duke dashed out, saying, “See you later.” We, who were left behind, looked at each other and laughed a little.

“I wonder if he thought we were nervous and came to see how we were doing.”

“I guess. He’s a decent fellow, isn’t he?”

When Michel said that, Pa nodded thoughtfully. The duke truly is a kind man.

The duke’s visit had helped to calm my family down. Hopefully, I wouldn’t have to worry about them anymore.

“Ma’s taking a long time, though.”

“I hear women need more time to get ready than men,” I said. “Hair and

makeup also take more time.”

After I answered my brother’s question, the old gentleman who’d dressed me appeared and gave me a lecture on how the ceremony would go. He laid out each stage and the specific actions to be taken. Naturally, my particular parts in the proceedings were hopelessly numerous.

Well, if I got lost, Lady Seren would help me. On the other hand, if Lady Seren got lost, I’d have to try to cover for her.

Just like we always did.

When I thought about it that way, I suddenly felt relieved.

I’d never experienced anything like this in my life, but with Lady Seren... Well, I was sure it would all work out.



“...!”

When I saw Lady Seren, I was speechless.

She appeared in a black wedding dress.

Of course, there’s no stipulated color for wedding dresses, but at the weddings of my staff that I was invited to, many dresses were overwhelmingly bright and gorgeous colors. I’d never seen black before.

...But I would be remiss to describe it as merely black.

It had a large diagonal silver design from the chest to the hem, which was impressive. And from the waist down, there were layers of black, silver, and white chiffon so that every time Lady Seren moved, it shimmered lightly, making it look even more fantastical.

Moreover, she wore many layered necklaces with gems of various sizes.

“...You look beautiful.”

“Thank you.”

The words just came out, and Lady Seren smiled shyly. She was unspeakably beautiful.

"Black suits you the best, Lord Viol, so I wanted to do my best to match you," she said.

"I never knew black could be so gorgeous and make you stand out so much, Lady Seren. It suits you very well."

She wore a glittering silver tiara adorned with colored gems and a veil in the same fluffy chiffon material. She looked demure, classy, and stunning.

"Incredibly beautiful..."

"Amazing..."

"Miss Seren, you look amazing! So pretty! So cool! And kinda... I mean... sophisticated looking!"

"Hehe, thank you."

My younger brothers also seemed taken aback by her beauty. Lady Seren smiled happily at my youngest brother's honest compliment.

"Sister, you look really beautiful," Lady Marietta said. "Black looks elegant on you."

"Yes, Seren... You look beautiful," the duchess said. "I was a little worried when you said you wanted a black dress, but it really paid off. Whilst the three of us, including Marietta, worked to have it made, all we could talk about was how it would showcase the best of your charm."

"Thank you, Mother, Marietta. This is all down to you."

"Yes, she's really beautiful," the duke sniffled. "My amazing daughter..."

"Now stop that, dear. It's too early to cry," the duchess chastised him. "Please try to stay strong."

"Mm-hm... It's about time to begin."

The duke was already in tears. But as he said, the time for the ceremony was approaching.

"Well, we can't keep the king and queen waiting. Everyone, please get in place."

Everyone became very serious as the old gentleman ordered us to get ready.

In no time, we'd formed a double row in front of the hall.

In the lead, Lady Seren and I slowly exchanged glances.

Lady Seren looked up at me and smiled happily. After the ceremony, this lovely creature would officially become my wife. We would return to the same house and spend the rest of our lives together.

Whenever I'm with her, I feel calm and relaxed. And from today onwards, I could spend as much time with her as I wanted.

I was beyond overjoyed.

“...Lord Viol. Let us make each other happy.”

“Yes. I swear I will cherish you, Lady Seren, for the rest of my life.”

Even though I said it seriously, for some reason, she smiled as if amused. But her cheeks were faintly red.

“Please make that oath during the ceremony.”

“Ah, that’s right.”

“In addition...”

“Yes?”

“From now on, please just call me Seren.”

“...!”

I felt like my face was about to burst into flame.

But yes. Yes, of course. Though it was merely a matter of course, I couldn’t help blushing when she blindsided me like that.

“Uh... Um, yes. Of course.”

Seren looked at me as I stammered and smiled even more happily than before.

At that moment, a solemn bell rang.

The ceremony was beginning.

After making eye contact with Seren, I slightly bent my left arm. Almost at the

exact moment that Seren's hand lightly rested on it, the door to the large hall opened.

A bright red carpet edged with gold led straight down the hall. The king and queen were standing at the end of it.

And for some reason, Borden was also waiting like a shadow beside the king. I wasn't expecting him to come and see us off, too, so I blushed a little, but seeing a familiar face made me feel a little calmer. It was good, in a way.

Ready to start walking, I looked at Seren. She looked back at me and smiled. She seemed much calmer than I felt.

I had to get it together.

From there on, there was no more hesitation.

I walked slowly, and Seren kept pace with me.

And then came the duke, his wife, and the younger sister, a few paces behind us, followed by my family. I hoped I wouldn't stumble and trip out of nerves.

On both sides of the large hall, many musicians played a gentle wedding march.

As I walked along the bright red carpet arm in arm with Seren, enveloped by the music, it hit me that I was really about to marry her. I was secretly touched by the warm feelings welling up in my chest.

As we proceeded, the faces of the king and queen came into close view.

The solemn music ended about three steps away from them, and we took that as our signal to stop. Then, kneeling in front of the king and queen, the ceremony finally began.

"...Finally, the happy day has arrived."

The king's calm voice descended from above. I marveled at how calm and casual he sounded, even during an intense wedding ceremony.

"We are deeply moved by the fact that the day has come when Seren, who we have always thought of as our own daughter, would find a lifelong partner. Even better it should be a High Mage who brings so much to our country and its

prosperity... I can think of no occasion more joyful."

I never expected to receive such eloquent words, and my heart vibrated with gratitude as I kept my head bowed.

"Both of you, lift your heads."

When I looked up, His Majesty had a gentle smile. And Her Majesty had tears in her eyes.

"I wanted to celebrate this occasion with the two of you. Sorry for the selfish request."

"Not at all. Your words honor us."

"...Now, let us perform the oath ceremony. Viol, Seren, hold this chalice together."

I took hold of the golden chalice, which was about the size of a wine glass, and the king poured some alcohol into it. Our wedding rings glimmered at the bottom of the clear alcoholic liquid.

The moment I held the cup in my hand, I felt a faint magical power and narrowed my eyes slightly.

"As expected, our Archmage seems to have noticed. This is a magical device that has been pledged to the royal family. It is a sacred object, used at all royal wedding ceremonies."

I didn't know there was such a thing. I guess there are still many magical devices that even I don't know about in this country.

"Now then, Viol. Do you swear to love Seren for the rest of your life?"

"...I swear. Lady Seren... I mean, Seren... I swear to love you for the rest of my life."

When I swore the same thing to Seren earlier, it seemed to come out naturally, so why was it somewhat embarrassing to swear it aloud here? I wondered if Seren felt the same way.

"Good. Then, Seren. Do you swear to love Viol for the rest of your life?"

"...I swear. Lord Viol, I swear to love you for the rest of my life."

I felt a mixture of surprise and joy to hear Seren make her vows without even the slightest tremble in her voice. Seeing the intense look in her eyes as she swore herself to me made my chest grow hot.

“Good. Now, the kiss to make the vows sacrosanct. Keep your hands on the sacred chalice.”

The kiss?

In front of everyone...?

There was no way for me to know if this was because we were aristocracy or if this was a normal part of most weddings. At least it was new to me, who had only ever attended wedding receptions.

My hands suddenly became sweaty. When I awkwardly faced Seren, she looked up at me, her cheeks bright red. Seeing that gave me strength.

I had to keep it together for her.

When I nodded slightly at Seren, she smiled lightly and quietly closed her eyes as though she were relieved. I placed my other hand around Lady Seren’s, where she held the chalice, helping her to hold it steady.

Seren’s eyelashes were fluttering out of extreme nerves.

I slowly put my lips on those lovely lips. At almost that exact moment, the chalice burned with a bright light. The light was so strong I could feel it even with my eyes closed.

Perhaps the golden cup had reacted to our oath and our kiss.

Surprised by the light, I involuntarily flexed my fingers. As a result, I squeezed Seren’s hand a little tighter. I hoped I hadn’t hurt her.



“The vows are made.”

At the king’s loud announcement, the band began to play again, and the royal choir, who’d been waiting in the wings behind, honored us with a celebratory hymn of joy.

At the urging of the king, Seren and I drained the golden chalice, and as proof of our pledge, we took out the wedding rings from the cup and placed them on each other’s ring fingers.

The rings were custom-ordered. The silver clasp that Seren bought for me after the first beast-hunting jaunt. The two of us went back to hire the skilled craftsman who’d made that wonderfully elaborate clasp so the rings had a sentimental meaning behind them.

They were beautiful rings, delicately engraved.

However, putting the ring on Seren’s slender, white finger was difficult. I couldn’t help but be nervous, and my hands were shaking.

Seren stared intently at the silver ring being put on her finger, then looked up at me and gave me a reassuring smile. The moment the ring finally slid perfectly on that slender finger, Seren smiled with such joy. She looked so happy, and her smile was so adorable that I honestly thought my heart would stop.

“Now, with your signatures and those of your families, upon this marriage certificate, the two of you will be husband and wife.”

Following the king’s instructions, first me and then Seren signed, and then each of our family members was called to sign as well.

My family signed their signatures in front of the king, looking pale. This was a once-in-a-lifetime event. I felt a little sorry for putting them through this.

Eventually, all the signatures were signed, and the certificate was safely placed in a glass case. The king smiled softly and nodded at the two of us.

“Congratulations. With this, you two have officially become husband and wife. Let us arrange an evening soiree hosted by the royal family this weekend, whereupon your marriage will be announced.”

“Th-Thank you.”

A soiree on top of all this?! I thought, but I couldn't refuse the royal family's generosity. As I stood there, surprised, the queen gently reached out to Lady Seren.

"Seren, live life your way. And please be happy."

"Thank you...!"

"Viol, I trust you. Please take care of Seren and support this country always."

"I will."

All I could do was nod in response to the king's words. Of course, I intended to cherish Seren forever, but I wasn't sure I could say with confidence that I could support the country.

Gazing around, a little worried, I met Borden's eye, and he grinned wryly at me. His nod told me that my response had been appropriate. That was good enough for the time being.

"I officially announce that the wedding ceremony is complete and that you are husband and wife. Please treasure one another for the rest of your lives."

With the king's closing words, the tense wedding ceremony was over.

All that remained was to return to that red carpet and pass through this hall safely.

While I was slowly walking back along the carpet with Seren, feeling greatly relieved, she suddenly looked up at me.

Goodness, she was transcendent.

Eyes, shining. Cheeks, flushed. Lips, trembling slightly.

"I'm sorry... Now it's all over; I'm just suddenly hit by a wave of happiness..."

Don't say things like that right now. You'll only make me want to sweep you up in my arms.

"I'm really your wife now, aren't I?"

Tears welled up in Seren's eyes, and I fought to control myself. I adored her too much.

“Oh, Seren!”

When I gasped her name, overcome with passion, this time Seren suddenly turned as red as if she were on fire.

“M-Maybe you could keep calling me Lady Seren for a bit longer...”

The sight of her fidgeting and saying such things made me almost pass out.

“My wife, you are simply too cute. I want to be alone with you as soon as possible.”

I brought my face close to hers and whispered. This time, she seemed to have reacted to the word “wife,” and she was blushing so much that I felt like steam was about to come rushing out of her ears.

How exquisite she was!

I wanted to get on with the business of loving her right away.

I wanted it to be just the two of us as soon as possible. Of course, you can hardly blame me for being in a hurry.

To Be Continued in Volume 5



Third Loop: The Nameless Princess and the Cruel Emperor

By Iota AIUE

Illust Misa Sazanami

In all three of her lives, Princess That never received a name from the cruel emperor. But this loop, she has the support of dragons and tigers on her side!



A Young Lady Finds Her True Calling Living with the Enemy

By Syuu

Illust Fujigasaki

A young lady with a hidden talent for business finds herself married off to a general known as The Battle-Crazed Savage. Misunderstandings and negotiations kick off their enemies-to-lovers romance!



The Abandoned Heiress Gets Rich with Alchemy and Scores an Enemy General!

By Miyako Tsukahara Illust Satsuki Sheena

A feisty alchemist gets a tsundere enemy general to help her collect resources! Will she be able to tame him and his dragon?!



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