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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 2

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The Drab Princess, the Black Cat, and the Satisfying Break-up Volume 2

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Seren

A duke's daughter.
Dubbed the Drab Princess because
she looks plainer than her younger sister.
The hardest worker of them all!

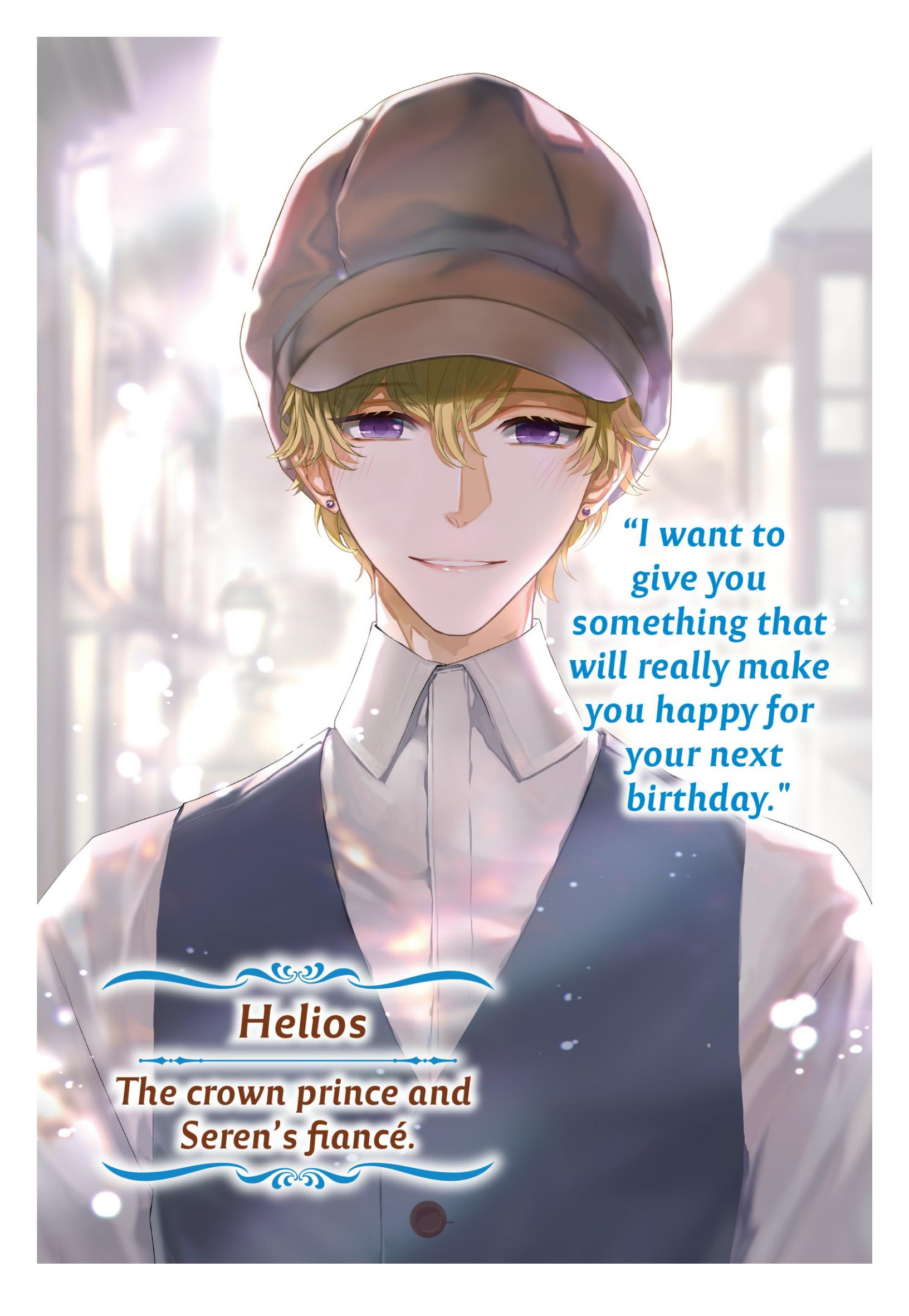
Viol

The Frosty Archmage
of the Third Mage Guild.



Lady Seren let out a squeak of surprise as the air above the container froze over, making my hand and the container sparkle with ice crystals. As Lady Seren watched in astonishment, the yogurt froze in the blink of an eye.





**“I want to
give you
something that
will really make
you happy for
your next
birthday.”**

Helios

**The crown prince and
Seren’s fiancé.**

Seren 9

A New World of Possibilities

"LOOK, what I'm saying is that you'd better make your intentions clear, Prince Helios. Just announce that it'd be better for you to marry Marietta."

"Totally! It's best just to come right out and say it. I mean, if it were me, I'd choose Marietta over Princess Drab any day of the week."

"There's no way I can just come out and say it... If I so much as even suggest otherwise, I could end up being totally disinherited."

Around one month had passed since I'd overheard those words through the doors of the salon. My fiancé, Prince Helios, had been chatting with the other members of the salon, who'd been disparaging me and calling me the "Drab Princess" while they'd extolled upon the virtues of my sister, Marietta. They'd even suggested that Prince Helios have Marietta take on the role of princess consort in my stead.

Up until that moment, I had been completely certain that Prince Helios and I would be wed and would rule together in perfect harmony, with no discord between us whatsoever. Never would it have crossed my mind to suspect that Prince Helios secretly preferred my younger sister instead of me.

The shock of that moment had been undeniable, and I had wept bitterly over it. But now, when I remembered how I'd found out what the prince and his peers thought of me... I actually thought that it was all for the best. Now that I could examine the situation with a more rational mind, I could see that Marietta really *did* have many of the traits considered most desirable for an effective princess consort and future queen. She had the social skills, the great beauty, and all the other inspirational qualities I lacked.

Everyone had been right all along. Marietta was the best choice of bride for Prince Helios.

Up until that moment, I had been giving my all to princess consort training, studying so hard that I'd often forgone sleep. All so that I could serve the people as queen, with no discomfort or embarrassment caused to anyone on my part. But the revelation that had struck me that day had changed me.

When I'd thought of the life Prince Helios must live, how he had been given no choice but to deny his own heart and force himself to marry me, resigning himself to live a lie forevermore... The misery had been too much for me to bear. No longer had my feelings allowed me to stand by Prince Helios's side with a queenly smile on my face and my mind clear of fear or doubt.

And so, I had decided that if Prince Helios could not dissolve our nuptial agreement of his own volition, then I would have to be the one to take decisive action. It would have been nearly impossible, however, for me to go and ask my father—who was a duke—to release me from my obligation to marry into the royal family. Not to mention that my father's position as a royal retainer made him even less qualified to ask for special favors from the king and queen than Prince Helios himself.

With this in mind, I decided to focus on accomplishing a different objective. I would work day and night so that I could pass the examination to become a High Mage.

Those who were able to achieve the title of High Mage were given a special role indeed; one that came with its own accolades and responsibilities. The foremost of those duties was to protect the realm. To that end, High Mages were expected to take shifts maintaining the magical barrier that protected the realm from outside attacks, and to use their prowess in magical warfare to subjugate magical beasts whenever they attacked en masse. In peacetime, High Mages worked on the development of new forms of magic, as well as new types of magical instruments. Only the most skilled of individuals were accepted into their ranks.

High Mages were considered to be treasures of the realm and received many benefits from the crown to ensure that their unique gifts were not suppressed or subject to misuse. They received handsome financial rewards, enjoyed a high status in society equal to that of the aristocracy, and were provided with a free security detail of royal knights if they so requested. In addition, High Mages who put in long shifts maintaining the magical barrier were provided with complimentary food and board at the palace's mage quarters. All to ensure that none of them would be enticed away by third parties who wanted to exploit their gifts for nefarious aims.

On the other hand, those who were able to achieve their goal of becoming a High Mage also had to agree to have their previous social standing and family titles rendered null and void, forever unable to be reclaimed. The same rule held true even if one was to, for example, be closely linked to the royal family itself...

Once I'd remembered that, I'd realized that becoming a High Mage was one of the few ways I could make myself ineligible for my current role as a royal bride. If I managed it, then the nullification of my marriage would become a forgone conclusion, even if neither my father nor Prince Helios could lobby for such a thing themselves.

In other words, if I could only pass the exam to become a High Mage, then I would cease to be the daughter of a duke, and my engagement to Prince Helios would be invalidated as a matter of course.

If an aristocrat, who was already quite comfortable in their current position, risked sticking his or her neck out to become a High Mage and waded their way through a difficult process that included subjugating a dangerous magical beast...Well, that would be quite an impressive feat. Perhaps impressive enough that even the aristocrat's own father could not manage to scold them for their decisions...

To me, becoming a High Mage seemed to be the only way to solve the conundrum I faced without anyone getting hurt. This goal had become the one shining beacon that could light my way out of the darkness that lay ahead of me.

But there was one big, *big* problem.

Perhaps this sounds obvious, but in order to become a High Mage, I would have to pass a punishingly difficult examination. The exam was so difficult that even students of the Magic Academy failed it in huge numbers—and they'd had the benefit of studying under decorated mages for years.

Just three short months from now, this murderously difficult national exam would be held. And I, who had no educational background in magic, was to attempt it. My recklessness apparently knew no bounds.

But no matter what hardships I had to endure, I had made up my mind. I

would become a High Mage. Surely the gods would reward my determination.

I'd happened to run into Lord Viol the same fateful day I'd overheard Prince Helios and his friends gossiping about me in the salon. Lord Viol happened to be a peerless High Mage himself. Meeting him was the catalyst that had led me to take magic lessons.

Naturally, Lord Viol could not tutor me himself, as he was extremely busy. Instead, he'd dispatched a most capable—and quite adorable—magic tutor to assist me in his stead: a little black cat by the name of Vi.

I hadn't known the first thing about magic, and yet I'd been bold enough to proclaim that I wanted Vi to help me become proficient enough to pass the High Mage Examination with less than three months to prepare. The black cat must have been shocked down to his whiskers, but he'd taken it on the chin and made me the most wonderful declaration.

"Lady Seren, I shall show you the way," he'd told me. "Simply trust in me and do as I say."

What courage those words had given me!

True to his word, Vi had been a wonderful teacher. Just one short month had passed since then, and my magical abilities had grown by leaps and bounds. Vi had praised my progress only yesterday! Afterward, I'd learned a brand-new magical discipline under his capable paw.

Just qualifying to take the High Mage Examination was a difficult task within itself; being able to subjugate a dangerous magical beast was an essential prerequisite. But as long as I continued to level up my skills at this pace, I might actually have a shot at being able to take the exam.

This past month had given me the strength to believe in myself.



"UWAAAH..." I yawned hugely, then covered my mouth in a panic.

Oh dear, that was most unladylike.

When Vi had lectured me on the importance of getting a good night's sleep, I'd taken him seriously. But tonight I'd somehow ended up working until sunrise

without even realizing it. I'd been practicing a skill, the first new one I'd learned in a while, and become so absorbed in my work that I'd lost track of the world around me.

The spell I'd learned last night was called True Wind. It was considered to be elementary-level wind magic. The spell itself was simple enough, since all you had to do was conjure wind and move it from one place to another. It was so simple, in fact, that it was used in many practical spells that saw daily use. This meant that it was considered to be a kind of lifestyle magic as well as an elemental one.

True Wind was mostly used for boring purposes, such as conjuring pleasant breezes, blowing away dust, etc., but Vi had revealed to me the spell's endless potential and taught me how to strengthen it so that it became something formidable. For example, the small whirlwinds one could whip up using True Wind could be used as the basis for high-level wind spells like Tornado.

I'd only just begun learning elementary-level magic, so the possibility of me ever being able to use high-level magic seemed like a far-off dream.

All I can do is practice, and practice hard.

That's what I'd told myself last night, at least. But now it was morning, and despite practicing the spell over and over, conjuring even a small whirlwind was proving extremely difficult.

My eyes were dry from lack of sleep, my body felt stiff, and despite the freshness of the morning air, I felt wrung-out and dried-up. Plus, the morning sun was so bright that it felt like tiny needles piercing my eyes.

Ah, I haven't had this feeling in quite a while, I thought.

Thanks to the rejuvenation magic Vi had taught me, I'd been feeling much perkier of late. Even so, it was clear that my years of sleep deprivation were still having lingering effects on my body.

I wondered if Vi was all right. I felt terribly guilty for making him stay up all night with me.

I could picture him now, his jaws clamped firmly together to prevent him from yawning. The image made me want to giggle, but I suppressed it, that gnawing

feeling of guilt rising in me again.

I hope that he'll be able to find a sunbeam somewhere to nap the day away in, like a normal cat.

I had a feeling that Vi didn't have time for leisurely catnapping, though, since I'd heard him remark that he needed to go to bed after one of the times I'd kept him awake all night. Vi was the Archmage's familiar, after all; he was a working cat.

I hope Lord Viol only gives him easy work to do today...



THE entire time I was in class that day, I thought about True Wind.

The spell had none of the devastating power of Wind Cutter, but at the same time, it was also less risky to use. That would make it easy for me to practice during the course of my daily life.

I could use True Wind to kick up a small breeze if I adjusted the output of the spell, but I couldn't do such a thing while I was in a classroom full of people without attracting attention. I was still inexperienced at casting this particular spell; I often lost both my concentration and my control of it. And that wasn't even mentioning how many mistakes I made when trying to adjust the output...

At this rate, it seemed impossible for me to stage a secret practice while I was in such a crowded classroom. So instead, I spent the day thinking about how best to utilize the power of wind, as well as imagining every instance I could think of in which the movement of air had a tangible effect on the world.

If I focused hard, I was able to hone in on minute rushes of air here and there in the world around me.

When I placed my books on my desk, a little breeze lifted the next page.

When I stood from my seat, my flyaway hairs brushed the back of my neck.

When I descended the stairs, dust bunnies swirled in the darkness of nearby corners.

Even while I was simply walking, the hem of my skirt flapped and fluttered, letting me know that the power of wind was active and present. I realized, then,

that the wind's power existed in even the tiniest of things. A breeze could be conjured by the smallest sigh—nay, by the smallest flutter of a blinking eyelash. If I went outside, no doubt I would encounter a plethora of tiny gushes of wind there as well.

I was enjoying my new, sharpened awareness of the world, so I separated from the chattering circle of my friends after lunch was over. I made my solitary way to the gardens and sat down on a bench with a view of the schoolyard.

Above me, tree branches rustled in the sunlight, and before me, young men ran hither and thither playing a game that appeared to involve a ball. A flower bed stretched out over the ground near my feet.

This is a splendid place for observation!

Each rush of the breeze sent the flowers rustling, dancing in their beds of soil. The dancing flowers were a familiar sight, but today something about them felt especially striking. There was no doubt in my mind that once the breeze released them from its grasp, each of the flowers would cease bowing their heads, their stems straightening and popping back to their original positions.

Looking at them, I was reminded that Vi had told me that True Wind could be made more powerful if it sucked up nearby things into its vortex. Perhaps even studying a reaction as small as this could be useful in improving the results of my wind spells.

As I continued to observe, I found that even the dust kicked up by the group of boys who were running around the garden fascinated me. As I watched it rise up into the air, I realized that it could take on various forms, just like the wind could.

The first sort of dust was that which rose up from the earth after the impact of a booted foot; the sort which drifted in the air like smoke. This type of dust curled into itself once it swirled into the air, but it didn't carry any particular properties of its own and was not easily influenced by the wind.

The second sort of dust was that which was kicked up in the wake of a heavy step; the sort which carried a thick concentration of dust particles. This type of dust could possibly have the same effect on an enemy as a stone projectile if harnessed, albeit on a very small scale.

If I was able to manipulate these types of dust effectively with wind magic, I might be able to use them to cause a distraction or even to attack a magical beast.

Next, I watched the fluttering leaves that hovered just above the ground, twirling as they fell. Even they seemed fresh to my eyes.

I wish I could sit here all day, just observing the different types of wind...

I wanted to see them all: the wind which blew straight forward, the soft wind which ran across your skin like a caress, the wind that carried heated air, the wind that fluttered and twirled and carried objects through the air. So many types of wind, each with their own qualities, each blowing at its own specific speed, each heading in its own direction, forever unable to be grabbed in the palm of one's hand.

Never before had I noticed so many different things about the wind. The world truly was rich with things to discover.

I was still absorbed in my observations when the bell rang, the sound filling me with regret that I had to leave so soon.

I was just starting to make my way back to the classroom, still feeling invigorated, when I was buffeted by a sudden gust of air. I clutched at my skirt, holding it down against my body.

Whatever could that sort of wind be? I wondered. It almost knocked me straight off my feet.

Sudden gusts *did* happen now and then, I supposed, including ones that swept in from behind and almost picked you up, carrying you forward several steps. Conversely, some of those gusts would come rushing through the air in front of you, hitting you in the chest and knocking you back a few paces.

Oh! I thought. If you think about it that way, then you could say the wind has the power to aid or hinder someone, depending on its direction.

Following that train of thought, if I used a strong wind attack against an enemy, I might be able to block their path, or cut off their attacks by forming a barrier between us.

Could I use my True Wind to make things dance on the breeze, like the leaves of the tree from just before? Could I *fly*? Such thoughts were fanciful and dreamlike, but they filled me with excitement. All of a sudden, I felt an intense urge to take off running.

Ah, Vi, what you told me really is true, is it not?

When he'd spoken to me yesterday about how truly fascinating of a spell True Wind was, I hadn't quite grasped what he meant. But now, I felt like I understood the true meaning of his words. True Wind had so many potential uses!

Pressing a hand to my beating heart, I gazed at a fallen leaf by my feet and tried to conjure a breeze to blow in its direction.

"It's...floating..."

Last night I'd spent hours attempting the same thing with limited success, but this time I was able to conjure a breeze with ease. I watched as the leaf swirled into the air, fluttering up into the sky as if it was showing me the path that lay ahead. As if it was silently telling me, "You can do it."

Viol 8

The Archmage's Tools

"HEY, Vi," Lady Seren said as she wiped off my paws, "listen to this! Today was *amazing*." Her voice was filled with excitement.

Last night, Lady Seren had barely slept at all, so to see her as she was now, so full of energy...

Ah, the wonders of youth.

To be frank, my energy levels at the moment were practically nonexistent. I was suffering from the same lack of sleep as Lady Seren was, and on top of that, I'd had to complete a full-length dance training session with a smiling Count Blaze. The experience had almost killed me, but I'd still come to Lady Seren's room to train her, as was my duty.

Were it not for the prospect of Lady Seren's happy smile and the delicious sweets that would no doubt be on offer, I would have thrown in the towel. I could have been sleeping peacefully at this very moment, tucked up within the warmth of my own bed.

But, well...I was glad I had come after all. Despite my exhaustion, I was pleased I'd had the chance to see such joy on Lady Seren's face.

She'd spent all of her class time today practicing the True Wind spell I'd taught her last night, she'd told me breathlessly. What's more, she'd spent this time observing the properties of wind as well.

She had only just learned the spell, so for her to dedicate the entirety of the following day to it... Well, that was worthy of praise indeed.

As I listened to her speak, I felt myself beginning to lean in closer to her. My fur started to stand on end, and I even forgot to blink before I finally broke out in full-body shivers.

Lady Seren had only spent a single day studying the properties of wind, and

yet she'd still managed to apply what she'd learned to her magic with exciting results. That wasn't all, however: she also spoke of wanting to learn how to control wind from several directions at once, and of wanting to know how to alter its properties.

"And then..." Lady Seren gushed excitedly, beckoning me closer. "Vi, look at this!" She pointed in the direction of her notebook—which was rather well-used—and a pile of fat magical textbooks.

As I craned my neck to see better, Lady Seren narrowed her eyes and unleashed a small burst of magic toward the magical texts.

"Hm...?" I murmured.

One by one, the pages of one of the texts began to flap and turn.

"Oh, *phew*, it went just as I'd hoped!" Lady Seren said, releasing a gushing sigh of relief.

"You're referring to that spell you just cast, I assume?"

"Yes! I was practicing turning the pages using True Wind right up until the moment you arrived."

The pages began to flap and turn themselves once more.

She makes it look so easy...

Impressed, I watched the magical text's thick pages fold back one by one.

One page turned, then another and another.

The pages began to flip faster and faster. They flashed by at such a high speed it was like looking at a flip-book, vibrating against one another so forcefully an audible shuffling noise filled the room. Finally, the last page turned and the spell heaved the textbook's heavy cover into the air, lifting it up and over before finally slamming it into place with a loud thump.

I huffed, greatly impressed. She had advanced quickly indeed if she was capable of wind magic at the level I had just witnessed.

"How was that?" Lady Seren asked, looking quite proud of herself. It was a rare expression for her, and one I found absolutely adorable. "I think I've gotten

quite good at it!"

The fact that she'd made such a positive assessment of her own work and been confident enough in that assessment to speak it aloud was proof of how much she had grown when it came to practicing magic. It was true, of course, that her natural magical talent had played a part in her growth, but all that time she had spent studying wind magic and practicing the art of how to cast it had played an important role as well. It was those efforts that were currently bearing her such impressive fruit.

There was no doubt in my mind that Lady Seren had what it took to become a great mage. In time, she might even go on to discover and pioneer previously unknown forms of magic; magic the world had never seen before. It appeared that when I'd nudged her onto the path of wind magic, my intuition had been correct.

A past version of myself would have snapped her up immediately as a Mage Captain for the Third Mage Guild, but I held myself in check.

If, at the end of all this, she could not hold her head up with pride and say: "This is the path that I chose for myself," then all we had done would be rendered meaningless.

I had still been a child when I'd become aware of the amount of magical power I possessed, but when I'd decided to become a High Mage, that choice had been mine and mine alone.

When the previous Archmage of the Third Mage Guild had come to me, saying they wanted to select me as their successor, I had decided entirely on my own that it was the path I wanted to follow. When I'd agreed, it was after much consideration and a thorough weighing of all the pros and cons of the position. I'd been fully aware of the difficulties I might face.

It was that strong sense of determination that had stopped me from losing faith in myself when I faced hardship. It was a driving force behind my success.

In Lady Seren's case, there were two main paths laid out before her.

The first path would lead her to become the queen and rule over the kingdom.

The second path would lead her to become a High Mage and use her power to protect the realm.

Both were roles of deep importance.

I was not saying, mind you, that those two paths were the only ones open to her. Lady Seren could go anywhere in life; many other paths lay before her, none of them yet closed. But those other paths... They seemed treacherous and wild to me. Lady Seren's best bet would be to opt for one of the two safer paths: the path of a queen or the path of a High Mage.

Lady Seren would need guidance to choose the path that best suited her, as opposed to the one that best suited those around her. And right now, I was the only one who could provide her with such guidance.

As I listened to her speak of the possibilities magic held with such excitement in her voice, I felt even more determined.

I would do all I could for her so that she could choose her own path, and thus live a life without regrets.

If, in the end, she opted to go on to become queen, I suspected the decision would be met with copious amounts of cake and crying on my behalf. But if that was the path she wished to take, then so be it. If becoming queen was the path that called to Seren, then choosing it would be far better for her than if she chose to become a High Mage and ended up looking back at her choice with regret.

“Vi?”

Goodness. I'd been so lost in thought I'd forgotten to react to Lady Seren's spell. *Do forgive me, Lady Seren.*

I snapped back to reality, raising my voice in praise. “That was wonderful, Lady Seren! I was so impressed, I could barely speak.”

“Hehe. Have I really gotten that good?”

“Your casting was simply perfect. Your mastery of True Wind today is unimaginable compared to yesterday! And your powers of observation are simply splendid.”

I meant it all, every word.

“It is necessary,” I continued, “to focus deeply and to think very intensely about wind and its properties when you cast that spell; otherwise the pages won’t turn, and you won’t get the natural, effortless effect you just achieved.”

Lady Seren’s face lit up.

“You did very, very well,” I told her.

“Oh, thank you, Vi!” she cried, unable to hide her pure joy.

The sight made me smile.

But then, all of a sudden, she began to squirm.

What’s this now?

“As a reward, I wondered if I could pet you a little?”

I wanted to point out to her that she’d petted me many times without permission, but I decided to let it slide this time.

“Your progress today has been astounding,” I told her. “Very well. You may pet me to your heart’s content.”

“Thank you, Vi!”

Lady Seren gave me a dazzling smile as she walked over to me and then proceeded to smoosh me in her arms. Her gentle hands drifted over my furry cheeks. She began massaging my face; my whiskers rotated wildly, following the movements of her hands.

Oh my... I thought. This is...quite pleasurable... But why...? Why does it feel so good when she massages my cheeks like this?! Cat bodies are such a mystery...

People often told me that my facial muscles appeared to be quite paralyzed, but this kind of pampering could probably bring them back to life. How could I protest being petted when it felt like this?

Lady Seren’s hands were so warm on my cheeks that it made me feel like dozing off. If I was in my human form and someone tried to touch my cheeks like this, I’d probably blast them away with a mid-level magic spell, but as a cat, I was willing to allow it. Or maybe Lady Seren was just a special exception to my

blasting rule.

As my thoughts grew fuzzier and fuzzier, Lady Seren moved her hands from my cheeks and up to my ears. She wrapped her fingers around them, the slight warmth emanating from her palms deeply soothing me. When she rubbed her knuckles around the entrance to my ears, I entered such a state of bliss that I no longer cared about anything anymore. I felt like all of my bones were melting.

I had worked hard today, and yesterday as well. I deserved a little treat.

“How’s that?” Lady Seren asked, her sweet voice flowing into my ears and relaxing me even further. At this point, I felt completely blissed out. “Does it feel good?”

“Mm-hm...” I hummed in return.

What ecstasy...

“Hehe, your eyes are closed and your mouth has gone all slack. You’re totally enjoying this, huh?”

I opened my eyes with a start.

Did she just say that my mouth went slack?! How shameful can I be?! How could I allow myself to expose such a loose expression to Lady Seren?! Am I not a grown man?!

“Oh, you didn’t like it?” Lady Seren asked, disappointed. “I borrowed some books on how to stroke cats in ways they’d really like while I was looking for books on wind properties. I brushed up on that too when I was studying.”

What manner of dangerous research materials has this young strumpet been reaching for?

“You see, the book said that if I stroke you right from your little head to the end of your tail, going with the grain of your fur, it’s supposed to feel really good!”

Ahhh! Curses! That was exquisite...! I thought frantically. Please, do not extend your mania for research to such fields! It is against the rules of our agreement for you to even faintly stroke in the vicinity of my neck!

“This spot is supposed to feel good as well.”

Lady Seren's fingertips danced lightly along my shoulder blades and down to my paws, kneading and massaging as they went. It was like she was massaging out all the tension that had built up in my shoulders; it was bliss. I felt the last vestiges of my logical mind crumble away.

I'd had no idea that even cats could enjoy a shoulder massage now and again.

"Oh good," Lady Seren said gleefully. "You do seem to be enjoying that. I kept you up late all last night, so it makes me happy to know that I can at least make up for it a little by making you feel good."

Ahhh, what a heavenly massage this is!

What naughty hands Lady Seren had, bringing ecstasy wherever they roamed. I twisted my body in an attempt to thwart the effect they had on me, but the way her hands ran over my body felt so good that I immediately pressed against her again, hungering greedily for her touch.

My mind did not seem to be working properly.

Finally, unable to deny Lady Seren's magic fingers any longer, I gave myself over fully to the sensation, eyes closing helplessly in total bliss.



"Mmm...?"

What is this? Where am I?

When I opened my eyes, Lady Seren was by my side, sipping tea.

"Are you awake, Vi?" she asked.

I scrambled to my feet in a hurry and darted away. My legs had gone numb. They were tingling.

She gave me a concerned look. "Are you all right?"

"I'm f-fine," I replied. "I simply slept oddly, and my legs went numb."

"So even cats' limbs can fall asleep from time to time, huh?"

Please, don't laugh, I thought desperately. I only just found that out myself.

I must have fallen asleep while Lady Seren had been stroking me. That had

been a massive mistake on my part. I found myself quite relieved that my transformation spell didn't dissipate.

"How long was I asleep?" I asked her.

"Umm, around two hours?"

"But it's almost your bedtime, Lady Seren! Do forgive me!"

"It's okay. You looked so cute! I got to spend two hours watching you sleep, and it really soothed me."

"Be that as it may..."

"Don't worry about it, please," Lady Seren said firmly. "I'm the one who kept you up all last night, anyway. Now, today's dessert is Boule de Neige. You'll have some before you go, won't you?"

"Boule de Neige, hmm...? I've never heard of that dessert."

Lady Seren lifted the dessert from her basket. The Boule de Neige had been arranged on a small plate. They were little white, round, powdered-sugar-coated balls. It was impossible to tell what was inside them under all that powdered sugar.

Are they cookies? Chocolate? Or are they some kind of baked good, like financiers?

Any of those possibilities sounded delicious. And yet...

My ears and tail both drooped despondently.

"I slept our session away, and barely gave you any tutelage," I said, ashamed. "I cannot simply eat dessert and then leave."

"Oh, but they melt in your mouth, just like snowballs!" Lady Seren replied. "They're so delicious, and they've got this subtle nutty fragrance... Oh, what a waste, they're the pâtissier's own special, unique take on cookies..."

"And yet, I..."

"Hehe... Your tail... It's so cute!"

Curses!

My tail was thumping the table as if it had a mind of its own, as if it knew nothing of my torment. I had hit the limit of my self-control. The delicious scent of butter filled my nose.

Oh, the agony... I moaned internally. But oh, when have I ever been able to exercise control during these night sessions of ours?

“Here you go,” Lady Seren said. She held one of the sugary cookies out to me, catching me off guard.

I gobbled it up. I had *no* other choice.

Oh, but it was so delicious. It truly did melt the moment it touched my tongue, just like fresh-fallen snow...

Despite the thick dusting of powdered sugar, the Boule de Neige was only mildly sweet. They were a mature, complex flavor; a faint, surprising hint of alcohol wafted up my nose, along with the scents of butter and nuts.

Lady Seren picked up another Boule de Neige between her thumb and forefinger and held it in front of my nose, just in time for me to finish swallowing the first. Before my brain had the time to grasp what was happening, my jaws had already snapped the cookie up automatically.

It tasted of pure happiness, with a bitter top note of my own self-disgust.



“They’re delicious, aren’t they?” Lady Seren asked me.

“They’re superb... Please pass along my thanks to your pâtissier...and your head chef...”

“Oh, of course I shall!” Lady Seren replied, a satisfied smile dancing across her face. “By the way... Vi, would you mind answering a question for me? Assuming you know the answer, that is. It’s about Lord Viol.”

“Hmm? What is it?”

“What kind of gift do you think would make him happy? What does he like, besides sweets? Accessories? Or maybe stationery? It doesn’t matter what it is, really. Just tell me anything that comes to your mind.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “What’s all this about?”

“Oh, didn’t I mention it already? I just really want to express my appreciation to Lord Viol. I’m so grateful to him for all he’s done to help me.”

“You’re still on about that?” I demanded. “You already gifted him with that dance the other day! I’m sure that was more than enough for him.”

“A dance with me isn’t much of a gift, though,” Lady Seren said softly.

“I’ll have to contradict you on that.”

“But it’s true, really! I was actually so touched and pleased to be invited to dance for the first time by someone other than Prince Helios. I can’t honestly view that dance as a repayment of my debt to Lord Viol when it’s an experience I should be thanking *him* for!”

“Enough of that, now.”

As always, Lady Seren underestimated herself. After we had danced and all the other young men had realized they could ask her as well, they’d approached her one after the other, hadn’t they?

“Anyways,” Lady Seren said, breaking into my thoughts, “I didn’t mean something like *that*. I want to give Lord Viol a gift that he’d really like. Something that would make him happy.”

“Even so...” My voice trailed off.

I was overjoyed to dance with you, Lady Seren.

Besides, I wasn't really interested in anything other than magic and sweets, and I was paid a comfortable salary that allowed me to buy whatever I desired. If Lady Seren insisted on repaying me, though, it would feel most churlish to stubbornly refuse her kind gesture.

I hummed in thought. "If I notice anything my master might want, I'll be sure to tell you," I told her. "But I really don't think you should worry yourself over it..."

That was all I found I could say in response.



AFTER that, Lady Seren continued to make superb progress with her spellcasting.

"Look, Vi! Look! My True Wind has improved so much!"

When I arrived at Lady Seren's chambers the next Voidday morning, I found her waiting for me, beaming innocently.

Once she'd ushered me inside her room, I quickly cast a barrier spell. This barrier spell was not the one I usually cast, however. Instead, it was just like the one I had conjured a few days before while I was trying to explain the functions of the True Wind spell to Lady Seren. I'd wrapped today's barrier spell around a miniature desert filled with sand, rocks, and water. Lady Seren had wanted to be able to throw some sizable magic at the garden safely, so I'd extended the magical protective field all the way to the ceiling.

Now then, I thought. Let's see some results.

I perched on a chair beside the table, paws neatly arranged in front of me.

Once Lady Seren had positioned herself in front of the miniature desert, she took several deep breaths.

She must be nervous, I mused.

Once she'd calmed herself, she clasped her hands together in front of her bosom and closed her eyes, as if praying. I could sense magical energy gathering within Lady Seren's form. After a while, the magical energy finally concentrated

itself in her hands.

The next moment, a small breeze kicked up over the sand of the miniature desert.

I hummed in approval. “Not bad at all.”

I would never have expected such a result from her, not even a day or so before this moment. The conjuring itself was your usual small whirlwind. But the small whirlwind kept growing bigger and bigger, until it was almost as tall as a person.

“I’m going to try incorporating the sand this time...” Lady Seren said. Her eyes were focused and serious as she concentrated on the whirlwind. She lifted her palms, which were still flattened against each other, to her lips.

I felt as though I could almost hear the whispers of her heart.

Little by little, it was saying.

Bit by bit...

I held my breath and watched as sand was slowly sucked up into the whirlwind. Soon it had become a miniature sandstorm.

“This...” Lady Seren paused for a moment. “This is as much as I can do so far.”

Then she pulled her hands apart and blew out her breath, sending the sand scattering back to the desert floor.

“How was that?” she asked. “I couldn’t do it at all when I first started, but I just kept going and going, and now I can make a proper whirlwind!”

Lady Seren is showing such incredible improvement!

Lady Seren had managed to seriously level up during the two days I had been absent from her side to perform barrier duty.

“I don’t know what to say,” I told her. “I never would have dreamed that you could improve so quickly in so short of a time.”

“Thank you, Vi!” Lady Seren beamed, clearly pleased with my praise.

I love how open she is about her feelings.

“Actually...” Lady Seren continued, “there are all kinds of magic I want to try outside, but it’s too difficult to keep my magic practice a secret with so many people watching.”

I hummed thoughtfully. “What sort of magic do you mean? Can’t you practice inside using this miniature desert?”

“I can practice some of my ideas indoors, but others I can’t. Conjuring a bigger whirlwind isn’t really something I can do inside, now is it?”

“Hmm, I suppose not.”

“Plus, the size of my room restricts my ability to move around...” Lady Seren mused, pausing briefly in thought. “I feel like my spells might work better if I could more readily move my body. And I’d heard that a lot of ranged spells—wind spells included—are easier to conjure if you’ve got a lot of space to work in.”

I see... Lady Seren has to practice her new magic skills in secret, so she doesn’t have the luxury of practicing outside like the other Magic Academy students can. In that case, perhaps I should take her out to the plains, away from watching eyes. But I can’t exactly spirit off a duke’s daughter so lightly...

I fell deep into thought. *Still...* I mused, *if we’re smart about it, I might actually be able to find a way to take her to the plains next week.*

At that moment, I made up my mind.

For the next week, I would set things in motion so that Lady Seren would be able to practice her magic outside!

I decided to tell her of my plans straight away. “Lady Seren,” I began, “considering how you’ve improved so far, I think we should leave town next Voidday and try practicing outdoors.”

“S-Seriously?!” Lady Seren cried, her features alight. “Outside?!”

“Indeed. But we’ll avoid going anywhere where we might encounter dangerous magical beasts for now.”

“Should we try going to the Yarlop Plains, perhaps?” she suggested. “It’s out of town and not particularly dangerous.”

I blinked. That had been the very place I had in mind.

“Umm, let’s see... The magical texts said that the area is home to low-ranking magical beasts and the animals and plants they feed on...” she said, reciting the text from memory.

“I see you’ve done your research.”

“I knew we’d go magical-beast hunting at some point, so I’ve been reading up on their habitats,” Lady Seren replied.

I had to laugh.

Her passion for studying knows no bounds...

“I was indeed thinking of going to the Yarlop Plains,” I said. “There’s plenty of space there, so it will be easy for you to practice your magic. It’s well-known for being a good spot to bring adventurers who are still green, as well as for being a good place to spot weak magical beasts. I can think of no place more suitable for our needs.”

Suddenly Lady Seren’s face went stiff. “If we run into any magical beasts, I might end up fighting them, right...?”

“You might,” I told her. “But magical beasts are still magical beasts, even if they’re low-ranking ones. When you fight your first one, it’ll probably hit you how serious you need to be about taking one on. You’ll also get a good idea of the kind of magic that will be most useful to you in battle.”

Lady Seren swallowed audibly. Her expression was absolutely solemn.

“I won’t throw you right into a real battle, of course,” I reassured her. “I’ll fight first, as a demonstration.”

“What?! You’re going to slay a magical beast, Vi? But you’re so little... I guess you could topple any magical beast with no problem, though, with your skills and the way you cast magic as easy as breathing...” Lady Seren nodded to herself, as if answering her own question.

Alas, battle would not be nearly as easy for me as she imagined.

It took a considerable amount of magical energy just to maintain my feline form; using extra magic on top of that would induce considerable mental strain.

I had been practicing using different magical techniques, however, and I was now able to maintain my cat form even while I slept.

I've gotten pretty good at casting this cat transformation magic, if I do say so myself.

As a result, even in cat form, I'd at least be able to fell a mid-ranking magical beast.

As far as I was concerned, the real problem here was a much more difficult thing to tackle.

How am I going to manage to take Lady Seren out of the palace grounds to hunt monsters on a weekly basis?

She was trying to do all her magical training in secret, so she couldn't exactly be honest and say, "Oh, I'm just off out for a spot of magical beast hunting!" My current mission was to find a way around this issue.

"Lady Seren, I believe we will be going on many beast-hunting expeditions in the near future. But you are a duke's daughter. How long do you think you can be away before someone grows suspicious?"

Being of a commoner background myself, I couldn't even begin to guess. As a child, I'd always been free to come and go as I pleased, answering to no one. As long as I returned home by nightfall, my family never thought to worry about me.

Now that I had left home, though, I could be away for days at a time. The only concern I need have was how my housekeeper was to be paid in my absence.

Lady Seren's circumstances were quite different. She'd told me that she had a personal maid, and she would be expected at mealtimes. Her absence would cause quite the commotion. It would be best if her time away could go unnoticed. There would be limits, then, on how far afield we could go, and how much time we could dedicate to beast-hunting.

This was another factor where Lady Seren was at a disadvantage compared to students from the Magic Academy.

One of the qualifications for taking the High Mage Examination was to

subjugate a magical beast ranked B or above and document one's performance on a recording orb. A student's magical abilities and their skill at applying them could then be judged based on how they had fared in battle against the mid-ranking magical beast.

Most of the prospective exam entrants would spend several days traveling to the habitats of the magical beasts, camping nearby before going hunting the next day. This ensured they would be well rested and that their recordings would show them battling at their very best. In this way, students could be assured that their recording orbs would provide definitive proof of their highest level of battle prowess.

Lady Seren did not have the ample time required to do this, which hurt her chances of being able to take the High Mage Examination. But despite our time constraints, I figured that if we had at least five hours, we would be able to get to the land of the magical beasts and back. That was the schedule I had devised, at least.

I'm not completely sure if five hours is enough time for us to travel to the deep forest where the mid-ranking magical beasts dwell, though...

But before I could think on this further, Lady Seren began murmuring something to herself. Then she said something I hadn't expected in the slightest.

"If I leave at the chime of the ninth morning bell and return right before the eighth evening bell rings, no one should notice my absence."

"That is...an unexpectedly long amount of time," I told her.

If we had eleven hours, we could easily make it to the deep forest and back; if we were lucky, we might even be able to fight two different magical beasts.

"Usually when I have princess consort training, I lock myself up in the library all day to do research. And if I ask the day before, the head chef will pack a light lunch for me in a basket. Everyone's used to me doing that now, disappearing from morning until night, so no one will ask any questions. I don't think it will be a problem."

Lady Seren chuckled, then, explaining that her absence from the dinner table

was the only thing that would be deemed unacceptable.

It seems Lady Seren's diligent, studious ways are paying off once again.

The realization made me feel a bit odd.

"If we take a basket with a packed lunch out to the plains, it'll almost be like we're going on a picnic, won't it?" Lady Seren asked.

I looked away, feeling bashful.

What a cute way to phrase it! But, more than that...

"A packed lunch, you say?"

"I'll ask them to add in tons of desserts, okay?" Lady Seren told me with a smile.

Such opulence...

I felt drool begin to puddle beneath my tongue.

Lady Seren looked down at me and stroked her hands through my fur, a big grin on her face.

Suddenly a rush of embarrassment came over me; I quickly changed the subject.

"Hold on a moment, Lady Seren. Do you think you'd be able to take me with you to this library? Depending on its location, we might be able to use it as a place to sneak out for our day trip without raising suspicion."

"Good idea!" she replied excitedly. "The library is on the ground floor, so we should be able to sneak out of there easily."

Lady Seren cuddled me against her chest, carrying me off toward the library. As she opened the door to the corridor, I quickly de-magicked the miniature desert from the table.

Better safe than sorry...

As we made our way down the corridor, we suddenly heard a woman's voice call out Lady Seren's name.

"Lady Seren!"

“Oh! Hello, Rince.”

It seemed the voice had come from Lady Seren’s personal maid.

“I’m surprised to see you out here, my lady. I thought you said you were going to stay in your room all day today?”

“Yes, well, I just thought I’d pop over to the library.”

“You mustn’t push yourself too far— Oh my, is that a cat?”

Gack!

Despite my small size, my presence had been revealed.

“It isn’t a stray, is it?!” Lady Seren’s maid demanded.

Suddenly I found it rather difficult to breathe. Lady Seren’s maid had both of her hands on her hips and seemed prepared to lose her temper depending on her lady’s response. The woman had a rather motherly air about her, despite how young she seemed.

“No,” Lady Seren replied. “It’s someone’s pet, see? Look at how silky his fur is, and how friendly he’s acting! Don’t worry, I wiped his paws down thoroughly before I let him into my room.”

A deep frown was etched onto the maid’s face. She brought her face up close to mine.

“Did you, now?” she drawled, hands still on her hips.

She leaned her upper body even further forward, until her nose and mine were almost pressing together. Her eyes scrutinized every inch of me.

What is this, an intimidation tactic?!

My fur began to stand on end.

Stay back! I snarled internally. This is an intrusion of my personal space!

I wanted to say the words aloud, but of course I could not speak.

As I fought hard to keep the words back, a curious rumbling sound began to emanate from deep within my throat, followed by a sound like escaping gas.

Hisssss!

In my efforts to keep from speaking human words, my feline vocalizations had taken over and sprung forth unbidden...



"It does have lustrous fur," Lady Seren's maid said finally. "But it seems rather ill-tempered."

"Oh, but he's not! Not at all! You just got a bit too close to him all of a sudden. You scared him. Right, Vi?" Lady Seren's arms tightened around me as she looked down at my face.

It was shameful of me to do it, but I nevertheless buried my face in her arms and let my tail and ears droop.

I'm so pathetic! I thought despairingly. *Here Lady Seren is, looking out for me, and I can't even stop myself from making threatening noises at her maid! Now she's all suspicious, too...*

My tail moved without my permission, wrapping itself around Lady Seren's arm and whapping itself softly against her clothes. My tail seemed to have taken it upon itself to express my remorse to Lady Seren in its own, deeply catlike way.

"Oh look," said Lady Seren's maid. "It's nuzzling against you! It seems to have really gotten used to you, Lady Seren."

Lady Seren nodded. "He comes to visit me a lot lately. He's such a sweet boy, and he never makes any messes."

"That's true," the maid agreed after a pause. "I haven't smelled anything in your room or noticed anything amiss..."

I looked up again, only to see that Lady Seren's maid was still staring at me. Her hands hadn't moved from her hips either.

Her scrutiny was hard to bear, but I had made up my mind not to make any further strange noises. I refused to do anything to make Lady Seren's life more difficult.

Rince glared at me a moment more. "Oh, all right, then," she huffed indignantly. "You seem to have grown attached to this creature, Lady Seren, so I shall bring it some warm milk. I believe we even have some special milk for cats."

She turned and walked off, almost as if she had completely lost interest in my

existence.

Goodness, that was tense.

“Did you hear that, Vi?” Lady Seren asked with a smile. “She’s going to bring you some yummy milk! Rince seems strict, but she’s a good egg, really.”

Indeed? I thought skeptically. That’s not how I would describe her, to be sure.



SHORTLY after that, we finally made it to the library, despite many more encounters with maids of a similar ilk to Rince.

I breathed a sigh of relief as Lady Seren put me down on the desk in the library.

“I’m so sorry, Vi,” she said, giving me a sympathetic look. “You must be so tired.”

“No,” I told her. “It is quite all right. You dispatched the help quite smoothly with your quick-thinking. I appreciate you covering for me.”

This mansion seemed like it was filled with cat lovers. Everyone who had seen me in Lady Seren’s arms had approached without a moment of pause, crooning over how cute I was as they tried to run their hands over my head or my body.

Lady Seren had gently stopped the maids from bothering me, telling them: “I’m sorry, but he doesn’t really like to be petted.”

Who would continue attempting to pet me, after hearing such words from an apologetic Lady Seren?

I had been greatly relieved at Lady Seren’s gentle intervention, but even so, the tension of the ordeal had my body all stiffened up.

I put my front paws out in front of me, stretching my back aaall the way from my head to my tail. Once I was done with that, I stretched out my back legs and pointed my tail straight up into the air. I kept stretching until I’d worked out all the tension I’d built up on our way to the library.

I always thought that it looked like cat stretching felt good. Boy, was I right!

Cat joints didn’t pop and crackle in the satisfying way human joints did, but

with feline flexibility, it was quite easy to stretch out one's muscles; it really was quite relaxing.

Now then, time to ascertain our escape route.

I leaped off the desk on light paws, making my way over to the library window.

There was only one window in the room, no doubt to prevent too much sunlight from streaming in and damaging the books. It just so happened that this window was poised over a cozy little nook where one could sit and look out over the garden while enjoying a book and taking in a little sunlight.

What's more, it was perfectly positioned for the easy egress I desired.

"Lady Seren, could you open the window? I want to check the escape route."

Once Lady Seren had opened the window, I leaped onto its ledge. I prepared myself to jump again, then—

"Wait, Vi!" Lady Seren cried softly.

"What is it?"

"The main gates are to the left, but if you go that way you'll run into the guards, who patrol in shifts. The only way to avoid detection is to go all the way to the end of the garden and take the servants' exit on the right, but..."

Lady Seren paused a moment.

"But it can only be latched from the inside, so if we go out and leave it unlocked, it could cause trouble for the servants..."

Ah, I see.

Lady Seren was loath to do anything that might reflect badly on the servants. It seemed she was now attempting to brainstorm a way we could sneak off the mansion's grounds that wouldn't call their actions into question.

I hummed thoughtfully, then told her, "I'll just go and check it out. Let's discuss the matter in more detail once I return."

With that said, I exited the window and went left so I could check out the main gate. Lady Seren had said there was a guard, but I was confident in my

stealth magic.

If we go out the front gate, I should probably cloak Lady Seren as well... Though that depends on how sharp the guards are, of course.

It had never occurred to me that my patented cloaking spell could be useful in a situation like this. I was glad I had spent so much time developing it; it was quite the nifty little spell.

I approached the gate and scanned the scene. There was only one guard; he apparently also served as a greeter when guests came to visit the mansion.

So there's only one guard here, I thought. What a relief.

Just as I had finished surveying the gate, a food delivery cart pulled up, trying to pass through.

The guard wrote something down on a checklist in a business-like manner, then pressed one of the three buttons on the wall. The blue one, if I'd seen correctly.

Moments later, a member of the mansion staff appeared to accept delivery of the consignment of foodstuffs.

Aha! I thought. So it's one of those buttons.

They had been designed by one of our High Mages. I felt a moment of pride as I recognized it. From what I remembered, the buttons came in a set of two. Once one of them was imbued with magical power, pressing it caused the other button to produce a chime. It was a fairly simple setup. No doubt the duke had it arranged so that the other button was located deep inside the mansion, where a servant would hear the chime and be summoned as soon as the first button was pressed.

The duke loved novel inventions and was always purchasing magical prototypes, or so I had heard from my subordinates.

So this is how he's using this one, hmm? A most ingenious application...

I felt the duke begin to rise a little higher in my estimation.

"Hey! It's a kitty cat!"

I had taken my eyes off the gatekeeper for a moment, lost in my thoughts.

No matter, I thought. I'm in cat form right now; there's absolutely nothing to worry about.

But just as I thought that...

“A cat?!”

“Oh yeah, it *is* a cat!”

“How cute!!!”

From the guard room located beside the gate, several hefty gentlemen dashed forth. There was steam rising off their bodies, and they were shiny with sweat.

Were they lifting weights or something?

“No fair! I spotted it first.”

“You have to guard the gate right now. You can’t leave your post, can you?”

“Yeah, we’ll take care of the little kitty.”

“Don’t be scared, puss puss!”

Help!

I immediately began to flee.

The soldiers had been slowly sneaking closer to me, trying not to scare me. I took advantage of their slowness by streaking through the gap between them.

“Oh, no!” I heard from behind me. “The kittyyy!!!”

I paid no heed to their disappointed wails. Absolutely none!

This route will simply not do! It’s a complete and total no!

If we went this way, the only way through would be for me to distract the guards by offering myself up, leaving Lady Seren free to sneak past. That would be incredibly difficult for me to bear.

I ran like a mad cat, and soon found myself back in the garden.

I breathed a sigh of relief. It seemed that the guards weren’t willing to chase

me this far.

Still, I had seen such brawny and muscled forms before. They had clearly been trained at the Knight Academy. I wasn't sure if they were rookie knights or not, but it was clear they used that spot for strength training. Regardless of their status, they were far too dangerous for Lady Seren and me to approach.

At this point, I knew that the main gates weren't a viable means for us to exit the grounds of the duke's mansion, since we couldn't be sure what exactly was going on in the vicinity.

That left us the rear gate. But this escape route was fraught with danger as well.

There was no guard at the rear gate, but it was still quite secure, as could be expected of a duke's residence. The gate had two keyholes and a tumble latch as well; it was clear the only people who could open it were the ones who knew where the keys were kept. Without the keys, we didn't have the slightest hope of escaping this way.

Even if we did manage to swipe the keys and escape using this gate, it would spell trouble for whoever the keys had been entrusted to.

We don't want that at all...

Thinking hard, I looked around for any other possible ways out. I went all around the outer wall.

"Vi!" Lady Seren called from the library window. "Come back!"



ONCE I'd managed to return safely to the window where Lady Seren had laid in wait for me, I sank deeply into thought.

"Going out of the window is simple enough," I told Lady Seren as she carried me back up to her room, "but getting over that high wall is going to be a big problem."

"Yes, I thought it might be. I was wondering if there wasn't some better solution myself..."

"I was able to get a good look at the mansion's grounds when I was out

exploring. I'll come up with something," I said firmly. "By the way, Lady Seren, you will probably need to wear something different when we leave the grounds. You'll need something that's easy to move around in."

"What, I can't wear this?"

Lady Seren looked down at her current outfit, which she most likely considered to be relaxed attire. It was true her clothes appeared comfortable and easy to move about in, but at the end of the day, she was still wearing a dress.

"Absolutely not," I told her.

"Oh dear," she murmured in dismay. "I don't have anything that's more comfortable than this..."

"Do you perhaps own any riding clothes?"

"I don't really care for horseback riding..." Lady Seren hummed in thought. "If I say that I want to go to town in disguise, though, I might be able to get Rince to procure some riding gear for me."

That might work, I thought.

But then I realized that if those riding clothes were found to be missing at the same time that Lady Seren was absent, it might cause a panic.

"No," I said, shaking my head. "I want to do everything we can to avoid causing suspicion. I will prepare an outfit for you."

"Oh my, can you do that?" Lady Seren asked, astonished.

"Hmph. Just leave it to me. Just be sure to wear long underwear, so you can change at a moment's notice."

Dear me, sneaking off like this was proving to be fraught with unforeseen difficulties. How truly tiresome it must be to be a duke's daughter...

Riesz 2

If Only You'd Rely on Me...

I see you...! I thought at the leaf that swirled right in front of the bench where Seren was currently sitting. A slight breeze, undulating with a distinctly magical power, was carrying the leaf through the air. The wave of magical power was emanating from Lady Seren, who was staring intently at the minuscule air current.

I had already noticed that Seren was blessed with innate magical power, and I had intuited that wind power would be her forte. It seems I had been correct. There was no doubt about it—Seren was a Wind Mage.

Perhaps she felt my eyes on her, for she turned to look at me then, our eyes meeting.

“Oh...” she said softly. In that moment, Lady Seren looked guilty, like a student caught napping in class.

That's an unusual look for her, I thought, slightly amused.

“Seren...was that breeze just now of the magical variety?”

“Oh no, you saw me! I had the feeling you'd catch me at it sooner or later, Riesz.”

“It's not like there's any need for you to hide it...” I told her.

“Well, I just... It's embarrassing! I'm still only at the point where all I can conjure is a little breeze.”

I felt a little taken aback. It was rare to see Seren feeling so insecure. But...I felt I'd gotten a glimpse at a side of her others never get to see. I wanted to see more.

I sat down beside her, a nonchalant look on my face.

“Did Archmage Viol teach you that as well? I'm not sure how useful breeze

conjuring is supposed to be.”

“No, that’s not what...” Lady Seren trailed off; she looked unsure of how to respond. For a moment she just gazed out into the distance, eyes filled with hesitation. Finally, she slowly began to speak once more. “When he taught me the rejuvenation spell before, Lord Viol... Lord Viol said that I have an aptitude for wind magic...”

I knew it! Of course it was Archmage Viol again.

My brother had told me that Lord Viol had issues communicating with others, but he seemed to have quite an influence on Seren.

How much power does he plan to wield over her? They don’t even seem like they see each other that often... But maybe they meet up more often than I thought...

A burst of irritation shot through me.

I wish he’d just stay shut up in that magic tower of his!

“So, after he told me that,” Seren continued, “I got curious about wind magic, and I did some research on it.”

“Hmm, well, wind magic has a wide variety of uses,” I said. “You can use it for everything from simple lifestyle magic to spying and attacking.”

Yes, indeed, wind magic can prove useful.

I was an Earth Mage, myself, and I’d always been a little envious of Wind Mages.

I turned to Seren, planning to say as much, but froze when I saw her face. I’d never seen Seren look so unbelievably excited. I was lost for words for a moment, utterly charmed.

“I know!” she trilled. “I’ve read that you can levitate objects by controlling the wind, or use air currents to transmit sound across vast instances, or mute sound entirely by stopping the wind from flowing! There are all kinds of uses... I’ve already jotted down most of the forms of wind magic I want to try learning!”

“I... I see,” I managed to reply. “That’s no surprise. You’re such a study bug.”

“Anyway, I was all excited about wind magic, and I already knew I had some magical power in me, so I thought, why don’t I try it out myself? So, I did.”

“What?!” I cried. “You learned that through self-study?!”

“It was really, really tough, but look! Now I can conjure up a slight breeze!”

Hold on, now. I thought. Just hold on a second. That’s a heck of a lot more than conjuring up a slight breeze!

I was all aflutter.

Wind magic isn’t something that should be attempted by an amateur! It can be dangerous!

As adorable as Seren’s enthused expression was, she’d gone too far. I hated to put a damper on her enthusiasm, but...

In the name of Seren’s safety, I swallowed bitter, sorrowful tears and reproached her for her actions.

“Lady Seren, it would be one thing if you were studying under a magic teacher, but self-studying something like wind magic... It’s far too dangerous.”

“Lord Riesz...” Lady Seren’s eyes widened, as if she was taken aback by my sudden rebuke.

“You struggled with adjusting the output of your rejuvenation magic, didn’t you? What if you were to make the same mistake with wind magic?”

“But...”

“No buts. Listen, Lady Seren. You might seriously hurt someone at this rate. Now, I won’t say another word about it, but you must stop this at once.”

Seren visibly blanched. I felt terrible about it, but everything I’d said was for her own good. Or so I believed.

“Well then, Lord Riesz,” she said softly, “I will make sure to only attempt dangerous stuff like offensive magic under the watch of a magic teacher. But surely I can still practice doing the safer, everyday spells by myself? Or conjuring smaller things, like a gentle breeze?”

“Why do you want to practice this stuff so much?” I demanded. “It’s not like

you have some sort of trouble in your daily life that you require magic to fix. Right?"

"It's true that I... I don't..." A look of terrible sadness flickered across Seren's face.

Oh please, not that face... It's making me feel like I'm an awful person...

"But, Lord Riesz..." she started again, sounding more sure of herself this time. "I... I'm really enjoying practicing wind magic right now. I really, really want to get better at it!"

"It's not like you to be so stubborn," I commented. "Why are you so fixated on wind magic?"

Seren paused for a moment. "Promise me you won't laugh."

"I won't." I nodded in confirmation. She nodded back; from the determination on her face, it was clear that she was about to reveal a large secret. I waited, my chest tense with anticipation.

No doubt, not even the prince himself knows of this...

"It's embarrassing. It's such a silly dream to pursue, but..." She looked at me with such mortification in her eyes, and yet she still smiled. "The truth is... I really want to learn how to *fly*."

How cute!!! How absolutely adorable!

Then it hit me.

Darn it! All she wanted was to be able to fly! What an innocent and pure dream...

I'd always thought that Seren had such a heavy heart. But despite the emotions that weighed her down, she'd always worked hard to apply herself to her princess consort training. To see her smiling so genuinely over such a simple dream...

No doubt this adorable dream of hers was what had been lifting her spirits and motivating her of late. Now I understood why she'd said she wanted to learn wind magic on a practical, everyday basis.

If she managed to master wind propulsion, she might be able to use wind to levitate herself into the air by directing the propulsive power downward and generating lift.

So that's what she was thinking about, trying to study wind magic on her own. To be honest... It sounds pretty fun.

"I see," I finally responded. "I think I might like to fly too, if I ever got the chance."

"Right?!" she cried. "Wouldn't it be wonderful? I'm sure I can do it, if only I can gain some mastery over the wind!"

Lady Seren's vivacious curiosity and unadulterated excitement made me want to switch sides immediately so I could cheer her on.

"Actually, I have one other big, big objective as well," she said, giggling. "But that one's a secret."

Fine, I thought. Fine then. I will stand in your way no more.

If wind magic was what it took to make Seren this happy, then I would offer her nothing but encouragement going forward. In addition, I would do all that I could to keep her safe as she practiced.

At the very least, I want to be there for her if she runs into any trouble.

And so, I shrugged and gently offered her my assistance.

"When it comes to magic, I may be of some use to you. If there's anything you need, Lady Seren, please feel free to come to me for advice."

"Thank you so much," she said, beaming at me. "It's so encouraging for me to hear you say such a thing, Lord Riesz."

I meant it, though.

If only I could be the one she turned to, before anyone else.

Seren 10

Going Outside

OH, I'm so nervous today...

Now that I'd returned to my father's mansion, I was taking a solitary walk around the gardens of our estate while thinking about my conversation with Lord Riesz. I hadn't really told him any untruths, apart from pretending that I was learning wind magic on my own.

I'm so sorry, Lord Riesz, I thought mournfully. Please forgive me.

I couldn't have possibly told him the truth—that I was actually studying magic with the help of Lord Viol and his familiar.

I felt even guiltier when I recalled the earnest look on Riesz's face and how he'd started off by warning me of the dangers of self-studying, but then ended up cheering me on in the end. He'd even gone so far as to say: "If there's anything you need, Lady Seren, please feel free to come to me for advice."

I guess it could be limiting, coming up with ideas for wind magic all on my own. Perhaps I can try and ask Lord Riesz for help if I encounter an issue with my training. A fresh perspective could be quite helpful...

I'd been walking along for a while, deep in thought, when I realized I'd made my way to the back gate. I gazed at the locked door, sighing.

It looked like Vi had been right last night when he'd said it would be difficult to leave the estate this way. As far as I could tell, it would be a difficult endeavor indeed.

If only I really could learn to fly, I thought longingly. I could soar right over those walls.

I looked up at the high walls—which were twice as tall as I was—and sighed again.

It was no lie, what I had told Lord Riesz. I had often dreamed of how it would feel to float up into the sky and fly like a bird. But there had been more to my words than those desires alone—how useful would it be to be able to use the power of flight to sneak out of my room and battle magical beasts?

But being able to fly to that extent in reality would be much more difficult than it had been in my imagination. I had only just recently reached the point where I could levitate fallen leaves! And the only reason I'd been successful at that was because leaves were so light, and their surface area was so flat. I needed to concentrate pretty hard on it, too, or the leaf would tip and begin to spin.

Human bodies were not only far heavier than a leaf, but they were also lumpy and bumpy all over; they weren't at all suited for moving smoothly through the air. On top of that, humans were mobile, while leaves were inanimate. If I made even the slightest change in my posture or the positioning of my body when I was trying to fly, it could easily upset my balance.

I had actually tried to fly several times in my room. It had never gone well.

Perhaps it would be better to try and levitate a person while they are seated on a chair or lying on a bed...

I'd made some progress over my past few days of practice in conjuring both billowing winds that could provide lift from below and surging gusts that could propel an object forward from behind.

A chair would probably work pretty well for my purposes, since it was equipped with a sturdy back surface. I could even add bedsheets for extra lift. The problem was that both objects were bulky; I would draw attention if I tried to bring them outside with me.

Plus, where will I store them after I escape from the mansion's grounds? I chided myself. Hmm... I'll have to use something more portable, then. Like, for example...a tablecloth! That might work well!

Unfortunately, I was still far from mastering the sort of strong and steady breeze that would be necessary to support my weight and make me fly up into the air.

Whatever I bring with me, I need it to be light, I thought. But it also needs to be large enough for me to ride upon, and it needs to be buoyant as well...

I could think of no such object. I had found nothing suitable in my room, at the Royal Academy, or anywhere on my way home from the palace.

Perhaps I can discuss it with Vi when he comes by later today. Though it's possible he may seek to stop me and just warn me of the dangers, as Lord Riesz did earlier.



I was still thinking about flying when the seventh evening bell began to ring. I turned at the sound, dashing back to the mansion in a hurry.

How did it get so late? I thought in dismay. I need to hurry up and eat dinner and take a bath if I want to get more magic practice in tonight.

But as I scurried through the gardens, something caught my eye.

"What's this...?"

Whatever it was, it appeared to be used for carrying things. The object had a thin metal plate, just big enough for two people to fit on, with a large square wooden box placed on top. There were two long handles sticking out from one side, and four wheels had been attached to its lower half. It looked like it could be easily pushed or pulled around.

Now that looks handy, indeed.

My pulse began to quicken as I looked it over. It seemed like it was some sort of gardener's cart, used for transporting flowers and so on.

I got closer, grabbed the object's handles, and gave it a push. It trundled forward easily, with little effort required on my part.

Now I really was beginning to get excited.

Oh yes, this is exactly what I need!

The cart was a little heavy, but not so heavy that I couldn't pick it up and move it, and the iron plate looked very sturdy to my eyes.

If I take this cart with me, I could probably transport it with ease!

Delighted, I looked all around me.

Ah, yes, over there! I thought happily.

I'd been lucky—our gardener, Dan, still had the lights on in his hut. He was no doubt tidying things up in there, getting ready to finish work for the day.

“Gardener Dan, are you in there?” I called out, knocking nervously on the hut’s door.

“Hmm?” a sluggish-sounding voice rumbled.

A few seconds of silence passed before the door slowly slid open. The white-bearded form of our gardener emerged slowly from within.

“Oh hello, Young Miss. I haven’t seen you in a while. Not crying today, then.”

I let out a soft laugh. “Oh, stop it, Dan. That was back when I was just a child.”

When I was younger, I’d often come out to the garden to cry when I’d grown vexed at my inability to pick things up as fast as the other children could. Back then, I’d sit in the garden and just let my tears flow until I began to feel better. When I’d finished crying and gotten up to return to the mansion, Gardener Dan had always appeared and invited me into his hut. He’d always offered me a cup of juice and taken the time to wipe my face clean of tears.

Judging by his teasing comment, it seemed Gardener Dan remembered that time quite well. Now that I thought back on it, I realized that our gardener must have been standing by, patiently waiting for me to be done crying before he came out to talk to me. Then he’d let me hang out in his hut for a while, giving me a place to stay until all the puffiness had gone from my face.

Goodness, what a touching childhood memory.

I’d never noticed or thought to appreciate Gardener Dan’s discretion and kindness back when I was a child. But now, the realization filled me with a warm, cozy feeling.

“So, then,” Gardener Dan said, clearing his throat. “How can I help you today?”

That was when I remembered the situation at hand.

“Well, actually...” I started slowly. “It’s about your cart.”

“Oh, my cart. It’ll be a clear night, so I planned to leave it out.”

“Oh, that’s not quite what I meant. I’m very interested in this, uh, cart. Can I please borrow it, just for tonight?”

Gardener Dan laughed. “It’s been a while since we saw each other, Young Miss, but I see you’ve already gotten yourself fascinated with another strange new thing.”

Indeed, I thought wryly. He must think it quite strange that a girl like me has suddenly taken an interest in his gardening cart. But it fits my specifications so exactly...

He let out a thoughtful rumble. “Hold on just a minute.”

Our gardener disappeared back into his hut. As I waited, the sound of objects being moved leaked through the door. Finally, Gardener Dan reemerged, another cart in his hands. It was the same sort of cart as the one I’d found in the garden, albeit one that looked a lot older and more rustic.

“It’s a bit old, to be sure, but I can lend you this one for as long as you’d like,” he told me.

“Oh, really?!” I cried excitedly. “How wonderful! I’m so thrilled!”

“I was trying to decide whether I should throw it away or not...” he trailed off. “So you want it then, Young Miss?”

“Oh, yes! But is it really okay for me to take it?”

“It was bought with your daddy’s money, so I’d say you’ve a right to it.”

“Splendid!”

The longer I was allowed to keep it, the more time I’d have for some real training! I was so pleased, I wrapped Gardener Dan up in a big bear hug.

“Come now, Young Miss,” the gardener rumbled from within my arms. “You’re not as little as you used to be. Don’t go giving away hugs to fellows as easy as all that.” He gave me his usual, friendly smile, the one that hadn’t changed since I was a child, and continued, “Now, let’s go ahead and give this old thing a wipe-down.”

Gardener Dan picked the cart back up and proceeded to wipe the cobwebs off of it before handing it over to me.

Oh, goodness! This one is even more light and compact than the other one!

“Oh, thank you, Dan! I’ll take good care of it!”

I waved to Gardener Dan, who nodded at me, eyes twinkling, and hurried back to the mansion.

I really must treat this cart with care, I thought. I have to be careful with it, since Dan himself lent it to me.



“I’M sorry, what?” Vi stared at me, an incredulous look on his furry face.

“Like I just said, I want to fly through the sky on this cart,” I told him.

“You want to... The sky... With *what*?”

“Yes, exactly—the sky,” I said, trying to be clearer this time. “I want to fly through it.”

Vi had appeared on my windowsill this evening at his usual time. I’d told him about my plans when he arrived, but he’d refused to get on board. Now I watched as he shook his head, his tail curled almost like a question mark behind him.

“This is a cart meant for transporting cargo, correct?” he asked. “I don’t think a cart like that would be suited to flying.”

“Oh Vi, you’re so knowledgeable! You’re right, it is a gardening cart! I got it from Gardener Dan. He said it’s a small cart used for transporting stuff like saplings and other things of that nature.”

“Right...”

I nodded, confident in the decision I’d made.

“I’m thinking of bringing it with us when we go,” I told him.

“You *must* be joking!” Vi said, his voice appalled.

Whyever would he think that? I thought, a tad confused. I’ve already started practicing with it, and I’ve already gotten quite good!

This was when the perfect solution came to me. *I’ll just have to prove it to him.*

“Watch this, Vi!” I leaped up onto the cart, straddling it, then grabbed hold of its handles. Once I was securely in place, I focused all of my mental energy on visualizing a strong wind blowing from behind my back.

“Yikes!” Vi shrieked, trying to stop me. He seemed rather panicked. “Lady Seren, please! Watch out!”

“There’s no need to get so upset, Vi! Honestly.”

My conjured breeze gradually grew stronger, eventually gaining enough force to propel the cart forward. I was still riding on top of it when it started to trundle over the floor and across the room.

“Ack!” Vi choked. “All right, all right! Just get down from there.”

I looked over at him, then, and saw that his eyes had gone wide with shock and his long tail had wrapped itself around his furry body.

He’s so cute!

I let the wind keep blowing the cart forward, and Vi’s fur stood on end as he watched me go. I knew he was highly alarmed by what I was doing, but I wanted him to watch for just a little bit longer.

I closed my eyes again, this time focusing on conjuring a wind that gusted upward. Moments later, I felt my body begin to float in the air, pushed up by the cart beneath me.

Vi let out a weak noise, sort of a half-scream. I opened my eyes and looked over at him—his ears were laid flat against his skull, and he was watching me with an expression of pure terror.

I couldn’t help but giggle at his expression.

My laughter made me lose concentration on my spell; the cart lost its buoyancy and thudded to the floor with a clatter, bringing me down with it.

A long silence filled the room. Vi seemed too shocked to speak.

It wasn’t like I’d risked any injury from the fall—I’d only managed to levitate a few inches. Overall, I was a little disappointed with my demonstration, but I was otherwise unharmed.

“I’m sorry,” I told Vi, smiling. “I didn’t think you would be so shocked.”

“Just get down from the cart this instant!” he said firmly, his ears and fur sticking straight up. Even his tail was pointed toward the ceiling.

With Vi being so insistent about it, I had no choice but to get down from the cart. He trotted over and got between me and the cart, snorting air out of his little nose in vexation.

“Goodness gracious!” he said, a little breathless. “Of course you scared me! What if you’d gotten hurt? I never would have been able to forgive myself!”

“B-But I was barely even floating...”

“Regardless! If you really want to levitate something, then stand aside and I’ll ride that infernal cart myself!”

Vi jumped up onto the cart and gave me a “Just try it!” kind of challenging glare. I backed down—I had no other choice. I didn’t want to see Vi get hurt.

“Okay...” I said, a bit chagrined. “I-I’ll stop.”

“Why stop now?” he demanded. “Has the folly of this dangerous idea finally registered with you?”

I nodded obediently. Secretly, I thought that I only needed a little more practice to perfect my conjuring. I didn’t say that out loud, though, as I sensed it would only make Vi more angry.

“Lady Seren, why are you always coming up with such harebrained schemes...? Ah, but having said that, it’s really no more than I would have expected...”

Vi muttered to himself for a moment, periodically nodding in response to whatever he was saying. He seemed to be gradually calming down. After a few moments, he at last lifted his head and looked at me.

“I shall conjure a safety barrier as usual,” he said. “And then we will practice as usual. Got that?”

I nodded obediently again.

Oh, well. I thought, my mind made up. So much for that. I’ll just have to

practice flying in secret.



WHEN I woke up on the following Voidday, I was beside myself with excitement. *Today may finally be the day when Vi and I manage to sneak out of town together! We might be able to go and visit the outside world!*

I could feel my anticipation building.

The last time I'd seen him, Vi had told me, "Don't worry about how we're going to get out. Just leave all of that to me."

But just how does he plan to get me safely outside without someone detecting us? Oooh, I'm so excited!

Ever since Vi had gotten angry with me for attempting to fly the cart the previous Voidday, I'd refrained from even mentioning it in front of him. But even so, I'd practiced flying all week long, sneaking off whenever I could find a spare moment. Despite my training, I knew that I still needed more time until I could be confident of achieving stable flight.

Flying really isn't something you can do by half-measures, I realized.

After hearing that I had an aptitude for wind magic, I'd immediately started thinking about how I wanted to learn to fly. But if you looked over the basic forms of magic, flying spells were nowhere to be found. Even after performing in-depth research and doing plenty of fine-tuning, I had only succeeded in levitating myself just off the ground—and I'd been wobbly at that.

I bet a lot of people attempt flying magic and give up before they're actually able to achieve it, I pondered.

I was jolted out of my thoughts by a small clunk from the window. I looked over to find that the source of the noise was a lovely little black cat who was sitting on the other side of the glass. He looked so sweet, peering in at me with his head tilted to one side.

Oh, how I love my adorable, darling Vi!

"Vi!" I cried, opening the window and letting him in. "You came early again tonight."

“I did indeed. I intend for us to depart from the city tonight.”

“You’re really going to take me to the outside world, aren’t you? I’m glad I got our picnic all prepared in advance!”

I held out the picnic basket toward Vi. It was stuffed with our chef’s best packed lunch and desserts. But Vi turned his face away, as if to say, “Don’t put that too close to me.”

“What’s wrong?” I asked, confused by his reaction. It was like he wanted to get as far away from the basket as possible. “You always love the desserts I bring for you. Does it not smell nice or something?”

“It’s not that...” Vi mumbled. He looked like he was feeling very awkward over the whole thing. “They just smell so good... I fear they will distract me.”

I had to laugh. It seemed the chef had truly outdone himself today when it came to selecting foodstuffs that would delight Vi’s cat senses.

“Well, I’ll be careful with it, then,” I told him, scooping him up under my left arm. I carried the basket with my right. “Shall we go?”

I made my way out of my room and into the corridor.

Now, onwards to the library!

I’d told Rince in advance that I’d be sequestering myself in the library, so I was confident that no one would interrupt us.

As we made our way to the library, many servants spoke to us, but none approached. They simply smiled at the sight of Vi, trembling with his head tucked safely under my arm.

After walking for a bit, we managed to reach the library. Once we were safely inside, we locked eyes with one another, and breathed dual sighs of relief.

Although...the toughest part was yet to come.

Now that it was just the two of us, Vi snapped back into action mode.

“Lady Seren,” he said in a firm voice, “you may release me now.”

I burst out into near-silent peals of laughter.

The whole way to the library, Vi had given off some serious “Don’t touch me,

don't talk to me, don't even look at me!" vibes from where he'd been curled under my arm. I'd thought he was absolutely adorable. Now that we were here, he'd immediately reverted back to his ordinary, businesslike self. The abrupt switch had struck me as deeply funny.

Vi's always so serious about upholding his dignity, I thought, amused.

I loosened my grip on Vi, and he leaped lightly down from my embrace, then jumped up onto the window ledge on soundless cat feet.

"Lady Seren, when you sequestered yourself in here for study, you said that you piled books up to help you focus, correct?"

"Oh, yes," I replied. "I typically stack books up on my right, and once I'm done with the book on top of the stack, I move it over and make a new stack on my left."

"Then please proceed to stack some books in your usual manner," Vi commanded. "Now, if you please."

"All right."

I wasn't quite sure what Vi intended by having me do this, but I did as he said regardless. I trusted that Vi would have a very good reason for giving me such instructions.

I went ahead and selected several books and piled them up on the desk in my usual fashion. I chose books I would actually want to read once we got back. I grabbed everything I would need for studying up on magical beasts—books on their proper treatment, books on how to care for them, on how to handle them...

"Stack some of those books on the left as well," Vi said, breaking my concentration. "We want to make it look like you're partway through. And... there. Right, could you sit down the way you usually do and start reading?"

"Oh... Certainly."

I picked up a book from the right stack and started staring at the page. Mere seconds passed before I became absorbed by the contents written inside.

So many different kinds of magical beasts dwelled close to the capital city

where we lived! It was a fact that seemed wondrous to me.

And to think, I'm about to go forth and fight them!

I felt caught between excitement and fear; it was a most curious sensation.

“That’s enough, Lady Seren.”

I gave a little squeak; Vi’s voice had snapped me back to reality. It was always this way when I came out of a period of intense concentration—a jolt would go through me, bringing me back to myself.

I got to my feet, watching as Vi scrutinized the spot where I’d just been sitting with narrowed eyes. He sat nearly frozen, his face and body motionless. The only thing that moved was his tail, which slapped the desk softly a few times. Then, before I could blink, something like a shimmering haze appeared above the chair.

“Huh?!”

The shimmering haze slowly changed in form and color, until it gradually took on a distinct form and shape.

“Is that...me?” I gasped.

“Good, that worked well,” Vi said, nodding and sighing in relief. “I replicated your form from when you were sitting there a few moments ago. Now if someone looks in from the window or through the door, they’ll think that they’re seeing you sitting here, absorbed in your books.”

“That’s amazing!”

Oh Vi, Vi, wonderful Vi! Is there no limit to your talents?!

“You’ve never shown me that type of magic before, have you? Gosh, I’m quite taken aback!” I gushed.

I gazed at Vi, spellbound, but he had curled up on the desk. Now that he’d cast the spell, he looked exhausted. His fur drooped, and he looked generally weak.

“Vi, are you all right?” I asked softly.

“I am fine,” he told me. “But casting a perfect replica of the human form...

Such magic is advanced indeed, and using it can be quite mentally draining.”

So, there are kinds of magic that even Vi finds difficult... But goodness, what an amazing spell that was!

“I just need a quick breather, and I’ll be right as rain again,” Vi continued. “It’s not a spell that drains much of my magical power.”

He stretched before snapping back to attention once again. I watched him greedily; I felt like I would never tire of looking at the beautiful velvet of his fur or the slenderness of his silhouette.

“Thank you, Vi,” I finally said with a smile. “With such a perfect copy of me studying at the desk here, I’m sure no one will suspect a thing.”

“I certainly hope not,” he replied, leaping onto the ledge of the window. His ears and tail stood straight as he turned to look back at me. “Now then, let us depart. Oh, but first...”

A moment passed, then something that felt like a thin veil seemed to fall over me, covering me from head to foot.

“Yeek! Wh-What’s this?!”

“There is no cause for alarm,” Vi reassured me. “I simply cast a simple cloaking spell on you, to make it harder for others to notice you.”

I was so shocked by Vi’s brilliance I couldn’t find the words to speak. It was amazing to me how he kept pulling out such incredible forms of magic, and yet performed them all with such nonchalance.

Magic was amazing. *Vi* was amazing.

And Lord Viol, who had dispatched the amazing Vi to me, was, himself, amazing.

As I stood there, still stunned, Vi jumped lightly out of the window.

He landed softly in the garden, then called back, “Let’s go.”

I quickly hurried after him, but I hesitated in front of the window for just a second before hiking up my dress. With just that slight adjustment, I was able to climb up onto the window ledge.

Ground-floor windows are such a handy means of egress, I thought cheerfully, even for someone in a dress.

This experience had already taught me something new, it seemed.

After checking to make sure I'd landed safely, Vi started trotting off ahead of me; it seemed like he wanted me to follow him. His tail stood straight up, like a guiding flag.

But just where is he planning on going?

Vi didn't even look in the direction of the main gate. He trotted alongside the garden and headed in the opposite direction—toward the back gate. Unsure of what he was planning, I could only follow along behind.

As we walked, I started thinking again about the magic Vi had cast.

"Hey, Vi...about that magic you used before—the type you used to make a copy of me and cloak me from view. What magical discipline does that belong to, exactly?"

"It's water magic," he told me. "You can achieve different effects by altering the way water particles interact with light."

I sucked in a gasp of awe. I had only experienced wind magic and non-elemental magic until now, and was overcome by the thought of all the other magics I still didn't know.

Magic is so complicated and mysterious! To think that each element has its own amazing forms of magic connected to it!

Vi came to a sudden halt. "All right. This should be a good spot," he said, turning to look back at me.

But...we're just at the estate's back entrance...

There was nothing particularly special about this area. It didn't even get any sun, so there was no pretty garden planted here. It was more of a storage area, really.

"This is the best spot to escape if we want to remain concealed," Vi explained.

Ah, yes, that's true. We'll be hard to spot if we leave from here.

And discretion was what we needed, since our mission was to sneak out of the estate unnoticed.

“Stand there, please.” Vi said, nodding at me. Suddenly all his muscles tensed up, and he pressed his body low to the ground. His little cat face scrunched up in concentration.

So cute... I thought, watching him curiously.

All of a sudden, something started to come rumbling up from the ground beside the wall, sending mud spilling everywhere. In the blink of an eye, a set of stairs had appeared—stairs that reached all the way to the top of the wall.

“Whoa!” I cried, staring up in awe.

“All right,” Vi said. “Let’s go!”

He flitted away from my ankles and began to lightly hop up the staircase, his form like a little black shadow in the night. Once he reached the top, he looked down at whatever was on the other side of the wall and nodded with satisfaction.

He turned and looked at me, calling out: “Come!”

I set off at a run, as if a gun had been shot at my feet. I grabbed handfuls of my skirt and hiked it up high, dashing up the stairs toward Vi.

The earthen stairs were sturdy and firm under my feet; they didn’t tremble once, despite the fact that I was running up them. It seemed impossible that they had only sprung into existence a few seconds before.

I made my way safely to the top step, only to realize that there was another set of stairs on the opposite side of the wall, leading back down. I didn’t pause for a moment—I trotted right down the second set of stairs and out onto the dirt at its foot.

Vi popped back up at my ankles; he checked to make sure I was on firm ground before breaking his spell. The staircase behind me vanished as if it had never been there.

“Unreal...” I breathed, feeling at a loss for words. I could only stand and stare at the blank wall where the staircase had been. “That was...just incredible!”

It's all too much! Too wonderful... Too absolutely fabulous! Oh, how stupendously amazing Vi is at magic!

It had been so simple, too—we had traversed the estate's high wall like it was nothing.

"No time for awe," Vi said. "Come! We must run!"

"R-Right!"

I set off at a run, as prompted by Vi. I yanked my skirt up around my waist and did my best to follow the tiny black shadow that zoomed ahead of me. I ran as fast as my legs could carry me.

At some point, I realized keeping pace with Vi was beyond me, so I conjured a breeze behind me for extra propulsion. Without knowing where we were running to or why, I focused on nothing else but following Vi as closely as I could.

"I've just got to...hold on...for a little while longer..." I gasped. My body was protesting far sooner than I had thought it would.

I wasn't going to be able to keep up running at full tilt like this forever.

Oh, to be a nimble cat, running unimpeded!

But though I knew my body couldn't keep pace with Vi, I didn't have enough air left to puff out a protest. All I could manage was a dry croak, which I wasn't confident would even reach Vi's ears.

But Vi's cat feet screeched to a halt, and he turned to look right back at me.

"Lady Seren!"

"I'm...s-sorry..." I managed to say through gasps for air.

Alarmed by the sight of me bending over and clutching at my burning chest, Vi came dashing over.

"My apologies!" he cried. "Don't try to speak! There, now. Can you walk?"

Vi... I'm so sorry...

I felt so pathetic. This sweet, adorable little black cat had pulled out all the stops to help me get outside of my father's estate, wielding incredible magic to

help me achieve my goals...and here I was, unable to run for more than a few minutes without my lungs bursting and my legs turning to jelly.

I need to train harder—I must become stronger, so I'm not held back by my physical limitations. I clung to this thought, swearing to myself that I would heed it.

Moments later, we started off again, this time at more of a walking pace. Vi kept looking over his shoulder at me as we tread on, concern in his eyes.

Soon, we arrived at the destination he had clearly been leading me to—a simple, unpretentious mansion.

"We're here," Vi said softly. "Go ahead and open the door, and go inside."

Viol 9

With These Hands, I Shall Protect You

WHAT am I doing? I thought wildly. Lady Seren's a rich, sheltered girl. What am I dragging her into?

As I watched, I saw Lady Seren stagger, almost falling forward as she struggled to keep up with me. While I was in cat form, I possessed various superior abilities, one of them being increased agility.

How could I have expected any human to keep up with me when I ran at top speed, let alone Lady Seren?!

I suspected that Lady Seren had been leaning on her wind magic for some extra propulsion, but even with the help of her spells, she hadn't had enough stamina to keep up with me. It took careful breathwork to maintain such a high speed over a long distance.

No wonder Lady Seren is staggering like that...

But I couldn't make myself slow down—I was desperate to get Lady Seren to a safe place as soon as I could.

Clearly, I still lack discipline, I thought, feeling rather ashamed of my actions.



LADY Seren was still firmly covered by the cloaking spell I had cast upon her when we reached my house. Clearly, there had been no need for such haste.

What a fool I am, I thought as I guided Lady Seren up to the door of my home.

“Oh, my!” she exclaimed. “Is it all right if we just walk in...?”

“This is my master’s abode,” I told her. “You have permission to enter freely.”

“This is Lord Viol’s...?!”

Lady Seren was at a loss for words and said no more. She reached for the

doorknob, then snatched her hand back and pressed it to her chest. She looked up, then looked down.

What is she doing?

“Hurry up and go inside,” I urged. “I don’t want to draw any attention.”

“Y-You’re right, of course...!”

Swallowing audibly, Lady Seren squeezed her eyes shut and opened the door. She kept her eyes closed as she took a step inside and swung the door behind us.

“Sorry to intrude...” she chirped softly, her voice high and nervous.

“Why are you so hesitant?”

“Well... I mean... I’ve never visited a gentleman’s home unaccompanied before...”

I gasped, thunderstruck.

I was shocked—shocked that such a thought had never occurred to me before this moment! I’d brought Lady Seren here without anyone’s knowledge, thinking that my own residence would be the safest place for her. But this was the absolute worst place I could have brought her, was it not?!

How could I have thought it was appropriate to bring a young noblewoman unaccompanied to the house of a known bachelor?!

“F-Forgive me!” I cried. “I wasn’t thinking! But I swear to you that my master will do nothing untoward!”

Lady Seren nodded. “I have complete faith in that. Lord Viol is a true gentleman, after all.”

Please, milady, place a higher value on your well-being... I begged her internally.

But though I wanted to say the words aloud, I could not. I had no choice but to remain silent. Now that it had come to this, all I could do was limit, as much as possible, the amount of time we spent together in this house.

“More importantly,” Lady Seren asked, “where is Lord Viol? I’ve entered his

home quite unannounced. I must at least greet the man of the house.”

I choked, a horrified noise catching in my throat before I got myself under control. “Ah, just a moment, please.”

My feelings notwithstanding, it would be quite remiss of me not to at least offer Lady Seren some tea after her exertions. There were other things I’d need to personally hand her as well. And this time it wouldn’t be as Vi, the black, feline familiar. It would be as myself. As Lord Viol.

For once, I was actually going to be able to come face-to-face with Lady Seren as my true self.

It was a little wish of mine—to be able to just talk to her, even for a moment, at the same, well...eye level. I’d been hoping to have a chance to bring that little wish to life, but it seemed my hopes had led me to make a rather serious error of judgment.

Impatient with myself and with my own shallow desires, I invited Lady Seren to take a seat on the sofa and wait, while I retrieved Lord Viol for her.

I dashed off to the bedroom, quickly canceling the spell that kept me in cat form once I was inside. I reached out and grabbed the casual outfit I’d prepared for Lady Seren before heading back into the living room.

As I walked through the door, Lady Seren got up off the sofa with a start.

“L-Lord Viol! Please forgive my intrusion!”

“You’re, ah, quite welcome here, Lady Seren. Vi told me everything.” I hung the clothes I’d brought for her on a nearby hanger. “Would you mind waiting there for just a moment?”

She nodded, and I headed to the kitchen to start preparing tea.

Once I had made up my mind to bring Lady Seren here today, I had laid out some light snacks on a table in front of the sofa. All I had to do now was boil the water for tea. I used my magic on the flame beneath the kettle to make it burn a bit hotter, and waited for the water to begin to boil.

Once the water was ready, I brought the tea set back to where Lady Seren awaited on the sofa.

My cat form is far better for running around, I thought, but human hands are so much more dexterous than paws. It's so much easier to cast magic in this form.

I placed the tea set on the table. "Sorry for making you wait."

"D-Don't be! Oh! Um, th-thank you again for sending me Vi... He's marvelously helpful!"

She seems flustered, I thought, softening my expression. I hadn't seen her like this in a while. She never acts like this with me when I'm in cat form.

"Please, there's no need to fret," I said. "You must be thirsty from all that running. Please, catch your breath and have some tea."

"You smiled..." Lady Seren mumbled absently, a glazed look on her face.

"Huh?"

Had I smiled just now...?

Lady Seren's eyes went wide. "I-It's nothing! Nothing at all!"

She looked away and brought the teacup I had prepared for her to her lips. Her cheeks had flushed a flaming red.

I abruptly remembered that someone had told me that I had smiled during my dance with Lady Seren back at the ball.

It seems that being with Lady Seren brings out all sorts of expressions on my face, I thought wryly.

I refocused on Lady Seren. "I have received Vi's report," I told her. "He says your magical skills have been improving at a rapid pace. You're incredibly talented."

"Goodness!" Lady Seren exclaimed, beaming. "Such high praise!"

She looked absolutely delighted.

"As a sign of appreciation for all your hard work, Vi has apparently decided to take you out to the plains. Please enjoy yourself."

"I will!"

With that said...I wasn't sure what to say next.

What should I talk to her about?

I knew I had plenty of things I wanted to discuss with her, but I suddenly couldn't think of anything.

I never struggle like this when I spend time with her as Vi...

Lady Seren also seemed nervous—she wasn't speaking either. The silence that stretched between us suddenly filled me with fear.

Curse it. What am I to do?

Finally, I wrenched some words into order. "Erm... At any rate, have some dessert. This bakery has quite a good reputation."

"Oh, my. I'm so excited to taste a dessert you'd recommend to me yourself, Lord Viol."

"This baker can't quite compete with your chef—or was it pâtissier?—but he's quite respected in town for his culinary craft."

"Oh, thank you," Lady Seren said politely. "You even know about my chef? Vi must have reported everything to you quite thoroughly indeed." She chuckled happily, reaching for the dessert. She looked so adorable as she smiled at me around her first mouthful, muttering that it was delicious.

Lady Seren rarely ate at the same time I did while I was in cat form; she was always too focused on me. She would just watch me eat instead, happiness welling up in her eyes.

I always wondered what was so great about watching someone else eat, but now... Now I can see the appeal.

Sure, it might be pleasant to eat a tasty morsel. But it was even more pleasant to see another drawing joy from that same food.

It was such a simple thing, and yet I had never realized it before.

As Lady Seren ate my dessert, face flushed with delight, I found I could not take my eyes away from her. Her cheeks were growing pinker by the moment, and I couldn't hold back a chuckle at her embarrassment.

"It feels very awkward, eating all by myself..." Lady Seren said meekly.

I'd been staring at her without even blinking, I realized.

"My apologies!" I said, quickly turning my attention back to the dessert before me. "I didn't mean to stare."

The dessert really was beautiful—marshmallows crowned with a variety of toppings were nestled beside each other like gems tucked into a jewelry box. I ran my eyes over them all, catching glimpses of tiny scatterings of shaved chocolate, chopped nuts, and crushed cookies. Some other marshmallows were topped with smears of jelly or jam.

I selected what looked like an ordinary marshmallow, but the first bite sent little tingles of surprise through me.

"They taste quite different than you'd expect, don't they?" I remarked.

"Oh, yes! Plus, all of the toppings are so pretty, and it's fun seeing what's inside the marshmallows."

Lady Seren was right; being unable to see what was inside each fluffy bite of marshmallow really turned eating this dessert into an adventure.

"I've never actually had this dessert myself," I told her, "but it's truly quite splendid."

The taste of rum raisins—soft raisins tinged with the hint of liquor—wafted from the inside of the marshmallow. It went nicely with the innate sweetness of the marshmallow—it kept the flavor from becoming too sweet, and had a pleasant, vibrant fragrance.

"What's inside that one?" Lady Seren asked me curiously. "I'm dying to know."

I cleared my throat. "Rum raisin. I don't much care for liquor, but rum raisin presents a nice balance of bitter and sweet. It's delicious, truly..."

I reached for another, then suddenly froze.

The tables had turned—Lady Seren was now watching me, instead of the other way around.

She was quite right, earlier. This is an awkward feeling indeed...

She smiled at me innocently. “It’s so much more fun watching you and Vi eat desserts than actually eating them myself.”

She looked very pretty as she sat there, a blush tingeing her cheeks and a smile stretched across her lips. I wasn’t sure how to react.

And then, I remembered.

What on earth am I doing?! Wasn’t I in a terrible haste, just moments ago?

I knew very well that I needed to limit the amount of time Lady Seren spent in this house. A young lady of her standing shouldn’t ever be left so unguarded in a bachelor’s house. I needed to get her changed into a different outfit as soon as possible, so we could leave.

Now then...is there anything else I need to take care of before we go? I mused, running my mind down an internal checklist. Something I won’t be able to do once we’ve left?

Indeed, one thing did spring to my mind.

I tended to be quite forgetful when I was around Lady Seren, but it would be troublesome indeed if someone other than the two of us heard me speak in my cat form. Most people were familiar with the basic concept of mage familiars, but few mages were actually accompanied by them. It would not do for rumors to start flying around about a mysterious, talking black cat.

I hummed to myself. I must make sure Lady Seren understands the fundamentals of what I need to tell her before we depart.

I sat up straighter and looked at her. “Lady Seren.”

She grew serious too, no doubt seeing that I meant business now.

“Yes?” she asked, a solemn look coming over her face.

“You will be going out with Vi shortly, but Vi will, of course, not be able to speak in front of strangers. I hope you’ll allow me to discuss the important details here, before you leave.”

“Oh, my. Well, I suppose it’s only natural for familiars to have some

restrictions on their abilities..."

That's not exactly what I meant, but this'll be easier if she thinks about it that way.

"First, you and Vi will go downtown to buy the necessary supplies for your journey, then you will head out to the plains."

"We're going shopping?" Lady Seren asked. "Does that mean that I get to work alongside Vi when he does his familiar duties?"

Why does she look so pleased...?

"Not exactly."

She instantly deflated when I corrected her.

"Let's see..." I began, clearing my throat. "First, I took the liberty of buying you some clothes you can wear to go shopping without drawing attention. I apologize that I don't, well..." I paused uncertainly. "I don't know much about ladies' dress sizes, or what kind of clothes they prefer..."

"You what?!"

I hurried on, ignoring her exclamation. "So, I would ask that you buy the necessary equipment today and put it on before you head to the plains."

"Um, I... I'm sorry," Lady Seren said, flushing. "I didn't bring any money with me today... I'm afraid I didn't think of it."

"Worry not," I told her, placing a purse of coins on the table. "I have gathered plenty for you to take with you."

Lady Seren got to her feet as if a firework had exploded beneath her.

"I cannot accept that money!" she cried. "That's far too heavy of a load for you to bear!"

"Even the best mage needs to be equipped with light underclothing, leather armor, and decent boots," I chided her. "Otherwise, you'll just be placing yourself in danger. Hmm, there are also robes that increase your defense stats magically, would that be more to your taste?"

"That's not the point!" Lady Seren exclaimed, sounding surprisingly angry.

"You're doing so much for me already... I can't have you spend this much money on me too!"

"Why are you getting so upset?" I asked her, confused. "Despite my appearance, I earn a high salary. A spending spree or two isn't going to bankrupt me."

Lady Seren's expression tightened.

"It may not be a large sum for you to lend, Lord Viol, but it's still a huge amount of money that I can't possibly repay."

Ah, now I get it.

For me, these things were necessary purchases for the means of risk reduction. Nothing she needed to buy would strain my budget or shock my wallet. And so, I had focused purely on buying her what she needed, without fear of how such an expense would affect me. The more I thought about it, though, the more I realized Lady Seren had a point. It was odd for me to be the one forking out money for this.

Lady Seren didn't seem to be thinking of it in terms of me footing the cost, though. I'd offered the money to her freely, but she'd grown angry with me over her inability to pay me back.

Well, of course she thinks that way.

Back during my student days at the Magic Academy, I had been a penniless student. Prime Minister Borden, who was then only an aristocrat, had often footed my bills. He'd had plenty of money—his father had been the prime minister, after all.

Back then, whenever Borden had eaten out with friends, he'd always said he figured the one with the most money should treat the others. That he should pay it forward, as it were. I had had similar motivations when I had offered to cover Lady Seren's monetary needs for the night.

I had indulged in Borden's kindness many times, but it seemed Lady Seren's personality would not allow her to do the same. Even if I said it was a gift. She was too focused on having to pay it back in the future.

But at any rate, I had to assuage her fears over not being able to repay me.

I nodded to reassure myself, then cleared my throat.

“Do not fret,” I told her. “You’ll be able to repay me very soon.”

She gave me a doubtful look. “But I don’t have access to my own money; I can’t just go around spending it freely.”

“Once you become a High Mage, you’ll earn a handsome salary and easily be able to repay me.”

“Oh...!”

He’s right, her face seemed to say.

Having taken care of Lady Seren’s concerns in a single sentence, I could now proceed to discuss the topic of how she could earn money. Lady Seren would soon leave her household and begin to live independently, so she needed to know about these things.

“And that’s not all,” I told her. “If you bring back valuable materials to the Guild, like beast pelts, horns, or magic stones, you’ll be paid for them. You’re about to go and hunt low-ranking and mid-ranking magical beasts, so you’ve no need to worry.”

“You mean, I’ll be able to earn money all by myself...?” she asked.

“Precisely,” I replied. “So, you may borrow from me without any concerns at all.”

Finally, she smiled, looking relieved. “All right, then. I’ll accept your generous offer. Lord Viol... Thank you very much.”

I much prefer her smiling face over her upset one, I caught myself thinking.

But there was one more thing I needed to tell her, since she would soon be up against a magical beast for the first time ever.

“There is one more thing, a warning of sorts.”

The word ‘warning’ seemed to register with her. She looked right at me, her face stiff with tension.

“Yes...?” she said slowly.

"It seems you have a desire to fly. I hear you're currently practicing the technique. I want you to put that on hold until I give you my express permission."

She let out a little choked sound.

"Of course, I don't mean that you should put it on hold for very long," I reassured her. "Once the examination for becoming a High Mage is over, you can practice flying as much as you like. But right now, I want you to focus on the essential magical techniques you need to master. That's all I meant."

"All right..." she said softly.

My chest ached to see her so suddenly downcast, like a puppy that had been scolded. But I hardened my heart against her pitiful face.

"I believe you were considering flying magic as a means of getting away from your residence. But that is not safe. It is, in fact, highly dangerous. Your skills are not yet up to the task."

"I... I understand."

"Forget such dangerous schemes. Focus instead on, say, using your wind magic to conjure a small sandstorm and obstruct the guards' view. That level of magic should be well within your capabilities."

"Oh!" she cried out, face lightening slightly. "Y-Yes, you're quite right. I could certainly pull that off if I tried."

"That's what I thought. Now, keep in mind that you are heading out to the battlefield. The slightest error of judgment in combat against a magical beast could lead to your death. You cannot go relying on half-baked magic."

"Yes," Lady Seren agreed. "Yes, of course, you're right..."

"Do not forget that there are countless ingenious applications of magic to be discovered, even if the only techniques you use are ones you've already mastered."

Lady Seren looked up at me, emotion filling her eyes. "Lord Viol... Thank you so much."

Her admiration is quite unwarranted, I thought, a bit embarrassed. I'm only

speaking from my own, personal experiences. To experience something is to know, after all.

“I speak from personal experience,” I said, opening my robe and turning slightly. I tugged away my undershirt, revealing my side to Lady Seren. “See?”

“Yeek!”

Lady Seren went bright red and tried to cover her eyes with her hands, but not before she caught sight of the three claw marks that trailed across my side.

The injury had been so grievous that it was a miracle I had not perished from it. Although I’d managed to survive, the scars had never completely healed because of the poisonous properties of the beast’s claws. Receiving it was one of my most painful memories.

“Don’t think of battle as a place to experiment with magic that you want to test out. You need to keep a cool head and make smart calls. I, too, was reckless. Many magic users have similar tales. But I do not want you suffering a terrible injury like this.”

“Lord Viol...” Lady Seren covered her mouth, her face pale, nodding over and over.

It seemed that my words had really sunk in with her. That was good, though I was a bit worried that I might have gone too far in frightening her right before she was due to set out.

Sadly, it could not be helped. All I could do now was transform back into Vi and offer her the emotional support I could not in my human form. I would do my best to try and make this a good experience that she could look back on with fondness.

“Well,” I said softly. “That’s enough of the dire warnings. I know I sounded quite negative, but I’m certain your first fight against a magical beast will end in success.”

“O-Okay! I’m a little scared, I must admit...but I’ll do my best!”

It sounded like she was trying to convince herself as well as me.

I really did go a little too far in scaring her, didn’t I...?

"You'll be fine; Vi will be there to support you. I shall send him down now. Meanwhile, go ahead and change into the outfit on the hanger over there. Once you are done, please call out and let Vi know."

I gave her my best smile, hoping to reassure her, before exiting the living room.

I felt like I had perhaps said too much. From the way Lady Seren had reacted, I'd half-traumatized the poor girl. For the first time in a while, I felt frustrated with myself and my lack of social awareness.

Once inside my bedroom, I began my transformation back into my black cat form.

I went so far as to invite Lady Seren into my home, and yet I only offered her scant hospitality, I thought dismally. And on top of that, I gave her a lecture! Why did I do that...? But no...perhaps it was for the best...

I couldn't settle on a right answer; I just kept going back and forth with myself.

To the casual observer, I just looked like a lazy black cat who'd curled up on the floor, its tail thumping against the ground in a bored manner. My mind, however, was running a mile a minute.

How should I handle this the next time around?

Lady Seren would always feel nervous at my house. I couldn't keep inviting her here each time we snuck her out of her estate, but she still needed somewhere to gear up and change into commoner clothes. Whatever place I chose would have to be completely private, but...if I rented a room at an inn somewhere, that would only add to the amount of money Lady Seren felt indebted to repay me...

If only there was someone who could serve as a coconspirator of sorts for her.

It would be quite helpful to have additional assistance, but I was reluctant to get someone else involved in our plans. No doubt Lady Seren felt the same; she was trying to keep her plans to become a High Mage a secret.

Hmm. What should I do?

The sound of a light knock came from my door. My ears pricked up.

“Um...” I heard Lady Seren say in a small voice. “Lord Viol, I’m done changing...”

“Ah. Very well, I shall send Vi down. Do be careful out there.”

“Oh, but I...”

Lady Seren’s hesitant voice trailed off as I trotted lightly over to the door.

Why is she lingering outside my room? There must be some reason.

I hummed, intrigued. “What is it, Lady Seren?”

“It’s just... Now that I know we’re leaving, I... I was hoping to say goodbye to you properly, Lord Viol. You’ve been so helpful, and you even lent me money...”

Ah, of course. Lady Seren is nothing if not proper.

It was going to be difficult to be two people at once. But I had no choice.

I returned to my human form and opened the door. Lady Seren stood outside, clad in her new commoner clothes.

My eyes widened as I appraised the sight of her in them.

“That looks shockingly good on you,” I told her frankly.

The simple dress I’d bought for Lady Seren was white with a chartreuse green bodice; there was some basic embroidery woven through its fabric. I’d even bought her some green shoes to match.

Now that I saw her in it, I thought the outfit suited Lady Seren’s sweet, understated beauty quite well. Despite her aristocratic bearing, I could almost picture her out on the plains, clutching a bouquet of flowers. Like a provincial, innocent beauty.

All things considered, I thought she looked extremely charming.

Lady Seren glanced downward at the dress, her cheeks turning a delicate pink. “R-Really?” she asked. “I’m wearing it the right way and everything, I hope?”

“Yes, you’re wearing it just right. I think it looks quite charming and sweet on

you.”

“Th-Th-Thank you... But, um, the skirts feel a bit short. It’s a little embarrassing...”

I only just managed to stop myself from looking down.

That was a close one...

“The young town ladies all dress like that,” I told her. “You should try to get used to it, since you’ll be going into town.”

“Okay...”

“Also, once you get outside the city, a shorter skirt will give you more freedom to run and dodge during battle.”

“Yes, you’re right,” she said. “I’ll just have to adjust.”

I smiled at the way she’d muttered the last few words under her breath.

That determination of hers is truly one of her most charming features.

“Anyways, I’m glad,” I admitted.

“About what?”

“I have no concept of clothes or fashion, so even though I did my utmost to select something I thought would suit you, I didn’t feel very confident about the outfit I chose. Now that I can see you wearing it, I feel reassured. It fits you perfectly. You look spectacular—utterly charming.”

Lady Seren went bright red.

I wasn’t quite sure why she was so embarrassed.

All I did was tell the truth, I thought. Plus, she calls things cute or adorable all the time! Perhaps she’s not used to hearing such compliments about herself...?

Once I managed to pull myself from my thoughts, I said my goodbyes to Lady Seren—who was still blushing—and retreated back into my room.

I quickly transformed back into my cat form and exited the room once more, after which I led a still-embarrassed Lady Seren out of the house and back into the street.

I held my tail high in the air as I walked along the familiar roads. Lady Seren followed at my heels, her movements a bit more hesitant.

We walked that way for a while before we reached the town, which appeared to be quite busy.

I glanced over at Lady Seren; she was still very red in the cheeks.

I was surprised to see that a simple compliment could have such a lasting impact on her.

Ah, but I should have remembered—Lady Seren is not at all confident about her appearance, even though anyone can see that she's a beauty.

Lady Seren knew how popular her sister was in comparison to her; no doubt that awareness had had an impact on her confidence.

I'll just have to make sure to slip her a compliment or two, whenever I can, I thought, determined.

I came to a halt and waited for Lady Seren to catch up to me, still deep in my thoughts.

That was when it happened.

A drawling voice leaked from somewhere in the crowd of townspeople, words directed at Lady Seren. “Hey there, cutie.”

Lady Seren let out a surprised cry.

The sound was quickly drowned out by the jeering tones of a second voice. “Lost, are ya?”

The voices’ owners were a gaggle of young men. As they slowly surrounded Lady Seren, another one of them spoke.

“A lady shouldn’t be out walking alone,” the third voice droned.

“Oh, no, I’m not lost,” Lady Seren answered the man kindly. She didn’t seem aware of the dangers at all—she was far too innocent and trusting. “I know exactly where I’m going, but thank you, sirs.”

“Sirs, she said!”

The men all laughed coarsely.

One of them reached out and grabbed Lady Seren's wrist. "Where are ya goin', girly? We'll escort you there."

All of the blood seemed to drain from her face. "Unhand me!" she cried.

The moment I heard her call out in fear, my paws tensed against the ground.

I let out a feline snarl and sprung up at the men from their ankles, claws flashing and slashing.

"Ouch!!!" one of the men shrieked.

I wasn't quite sure where exactly I'd managed to scratch him. All I knew was that I'd landed a definite hit.

Once I landed back on the ground, I turned and leaped into Lady Seren's arms. She clutched me tightly to her chest. I leaned forward in her grasp, menacing the men with my flashing claws. I bared my fangs and let out a hiss.

Now that the men were distracted, I quickly cast cloaking magic over Lady Seren. "Run!" I screamed at her, flinging myself at the men once more.

The men stumbled away, panicked, leaving a gap open for Lady Seren.

A sigh of relief left me as I saw Lady Seren dart out of the circle on trembling legs.

The feeling was short-lived, though, as the men quickly rallied and turned their violence on me.

The men's thick fists pounded my flesh. The blows landed all over my body—on my stomach, my forepaws, my flanks...

The kicks, though, hurt most of all.

Damn it. Human opponents are the hardest to deal with.

I could not inflict the level of damage I wished to while I was in this tiny body. And now that we were in town, where it would be difficult to cast magic without being seen, I could not blast them away either.

As long as I'm in cat form, I'm powerless against these men, I thought, a wave of vexation crashing through me.

"The heck's wrong with this cat?" one of the men spat.

Another one glanced around, then told the others, “We lost the young missy.”

The whole group started looking for Lady Seren, and I took the opportunity their distraction provided to disappear back into the crowd. Having hidden myself thus, I quickly cast cloaking magic around myself and trotted off in search of Lady Seren.

I quickly detected her magical power nearby. After a short search, I found her hidden down an alleyway that ran between two shops. Lady Seren was tucked away behind an outcropping in the narrow alley’s wall. She was clearly worried for me, her eyes fixed on the location of the group of men.

I started to gallop in her direction, wanting to be with her once more and to offer her my reassurance.

As I drew closer, I could see Lady Seren was shaking, tears spilling down her cheeks. The sight of her in such a state sent feelings pouring through me in a rush.

“Oh, Vi...” she moaned, clearly heartbroken. “My poor Vi... He’s going to be killed!”

I de-cloaked, unable to stop myself from calling out to her. “Lady Seren!”

Lady Seren lifted her head in shock, her eyes finding me.

“Vi!!!” she sobbed.

She ran over to me and scooped me carefully into her arms. She held me as if I was something breakable, stroking shaking hands over the places the men had beaten me.

“Oh, Vi... I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

Lady Seren’s tears plopped onto the fur covering my belly.

No, Lady Seren, I cried internally, overcome by the sight of her crying so wretchedly. I should be the one begging for your forgiveness...!

“It’s those ruffians who are to blame, not you, Lady Seren,” I said aloud. “There is no reason for you to apologize.”

“But... But they beat you so viciously. All because of me.”

Darn it. I should have healed myself before she was able to see my injuries.

I quickly cast a healing spell.

“Lady Seren, I am all right,” I told her in a soothing tone. “I have healing magic. A few kicks and punches are of no consequence.”

“But even so...!”

“It is all right. Please, calm down.”

I reared up on my hind legs, trying to wipe away her tears, but my fluffy cat paws only managed to smear them about her face.

Curses!

Unable to properly wipe her tears, I contented myself by patting her cheek.

“Oh, Vi...” Lady Seren murmured, reaching up to touch my paw lovingly. “You’re always so sweet.”

“No more tears, now.”

“Thank you, Vi...”

But even as she spoke, fresh tears spilled forth and rolled down her cheeks.

It cannot be helped. We must start over from the beginning.

Now that I’d made up my mind, I was all business.

“Lady Seren, I will cast cloaking magic over us anew. I apologize, but would you mind returning to my...” I paused, exasperated with myself. “Would you mind returning to my master’s abode once more?”

A Broad, Dependable Back

“I told you, there’s really no reason to cry,” Vi said gently. “I’m skilled at healing magic. Being pummeled by those ruffians has barely even ruffled my fur.”

Vi kept reassuring me, over and over, but my tears flowed all the same.

I... I thought he was going to die.

Sobbing, I petted Vi’s shoulder and his left forepaw, my fingers stroking over where I’d seen the men hit him. But when I reached to touch his left flank, one of his little paws came shooting out, pushing my hand away.

“I’m fine, really! You’re going to cry those eyes of yours right out!”

“But, I mean... Because of me, you...” I took a breath, fighting through my tears. “I’m just so sorry.”

“No,” Vi said firmly. “I was imprudent. The town isn’t a safe place for a young woman to walk alone. I thought it would be all right, since you weren’t dressed as an aristocrat. I’m the one who should be apologizing.”

Vi placed his furry paw on the back of my hand, which was wet from wiping my tears. The wide, black pupils of his eyes glittered as he looked up at me.

Finally, I was able to stop crying.

My brave, admirable Vi is always trying to make me feel better, I thought, touched. But as I took in how Vi was looking at me, concern in his little black eyes, I couldn’t avoid the truth. I rely on him far, far too much.

“I was the one who let my guard down,” I told him. “You’re always covering for me, Vi. I do understand why it happened, you know. I was looking around far too much, since I’m not used to being in town. Plus, my head was still in the clouds from Lord Viol’s compliment earlier. If I had walked with more purpose, I

would never have been approached like that.”

“Well, Lady Seren...everything takes baby steps. You will get used to it.”

That was all Vi said.

After that, he jumped down from the table and headed into the kitchen without looking back. I wiped the last of my tears away with a finger as I watched his little body trot off.

Oh dear, I thought. My cosmetics are surely running down my face. I must look a fright.

My one saving grace was that Rince had gone light on my makeup today, since I’d told her I would be staying at home. Even so, I knew I must have tear tracks on my face.

Maybe I should ask Vi for a mirror...? I thought, then nodded. I'll fix myself up and then go back to town. This time, I'll walk with purpose and be sure not to cause any further trouble for Vi.

I had just made my mind up about that when a cup of water appeared under my nose, making me gasp in surprise.

Lord Viol stood before me, holding the cup and a handkerchief.

“You cried quite a lot,” he said gently. “You should probably rehydrate.”

“L-Lord Viol!” I cried, leaping to my feet, and immediately whirling around.

“I’m so sorry, Lord Viol!” I said miserably. “Vi got hurt, all because of me.”

I knew I was being rude, but I kept my back turned as I spoke to him. I couldn’t bear for Lord Viol to see my tear-streaked face. I felt utterly pathetic.

Lord Viol cleared his throat. “It’s all right,” he told me. “I understand the situation. Both Vi and I agree—what happened isn’t that big of a deal. Far worse things can happen when fighting against beasts. The odd injury is par for the course.”

“But...!”

“I thought all would be well, since you were only going downtown, so I neglected to cast a proper barrier spell over the two of you. Next time, you

must both be much more careful.”

Lord Viol really didn’t seem to blame me for what had happened; he was speaking to me in such a casual, relaxed tone.

Slightly bolstered by his attitude, I nervously turned around to face him.

Lord Viol smiled kindly and handed me the cup of water and the dampened handkerchief.

“Drink some water and try to calm down,” he instructed me. “Also, please feel free to make use of this handkerchief, if you’d like.”

I felt my eyes well up with tears again.

Why are they both so good to me? I thought, feeling at a loss.

I couldn’t help but want to cry when I thought of how incredibly kind they were.

I have to do better, get so much stronger, for Vi as well as Lord Viol! I have to pass the High Mage exam too.

I gulped down the water Lord Viol handed me, using the damp handkerchief to wipe off the tracks my tears had left on my face. Then I went ahead and asked Lord Viol if there was a mirror I could use. He obligingly led me over to the right place.

Once I was able to look at my reflection in the glass, I saw that I had cried off my makeup. That hardly mattered under the circumstances, though, since I had only worn light makeup today—my face looked nearly the same without it.

I stood there for a while in front of the mirror, staring at myself.

I can do better than this. I know I can.

I knew exactly what I had to do the next time we went into town so this wouldn’t happen again. Those men had sensed my lack of assurance—that’s why they’d called out to me and asked if I was lost. If I walked with purpose, like I knew where I was going, no one would have a reason to say something like that to me. They wouldn’t even think they had the chance.

It also wasn’t lost on me how they had laughed when I’d referred to them as

“sirs.” No doubt my speech and mannerisms seemed odd to the townspeople. If I could master acting and speaking like a town girl, then I’d be able to blend in without being so noticeable.

Yes, that’s it, I thought, determination filling me. There are so many ways I can improve.

I turned away from the mirror and faced Lord Viol. I felt much more cheerful now that I had come to a resolution.

“I will do my utmost to make sure that Vi is placed in no further danger, Lord Viol. Please, give me another chance. Vi worked so hard to get me out of my residence without us being caught. I really, really want to accomplish what we set out to do today!”

“Oh...” Lord Viol said, looking taken aback. “I was planning to accompany you myself, actually.”

It was my turn to look surprised.

“No, no, no!” I cried. “Lord Viol, I couldn’t let you do that! Not when you’re so busy!”

“You... You don’t want me to come with you?” he faltered.

“No, I’d be delighted if you did! But it’s beside the point!”

“I see,” Lord Viol muttered, reflecting upon this. “I’m glad to know you would welcome me, at any rate.”

Lord Viol seemed to suddenly snap out of some sort of haze. He smiled at me.

I let out a little gasp. I couldn’t seem to find any words.

Lord Viol’s smile really is dazzling...

“If you are happy to have me with you, Lady Seren, then you need worry of nothing else. If I was truly busy, I would not have offered to come. So please, don’t be concerned.”

I can’t continue to protest now that he’s said something like that, I thought.

I found I was quite pleased to have him along, but his presence also made me nervous.

"Um," I mumbled, casting my gaze around as I looked for Vi. "So, Vi will be..."

"Vi is presently resting," Lord Viol told me.

"Oh..."

"He has already used too much of his magical and physical energy today. It seems he is no longer quite up to the task. Until he gains a little more strength, I shall pitch in in his place."

Oh, he's resting, I thought to myself, that makes perfect sense.

Vi *had* cast a lot of magic, it was true. And even though he'd claimed he could heal up straight away, he'd still been beaten up horribly by those terrible men. Of course he needed to rest after all that.

So, I thought, Lord Viol is offering to take care of me himself so that his familiar has time to rest. How considerate he is.

I was sorry to trouble him, but I found I wanted to be gracious and accept his kindness.

And so, in the end I found I had no choice but to take him up on his offer.

"Thank you, Lord Viol. I would be most thankful if you offered your guidance to me going forward."

Lord Viol softened his eyes, looking pleased. "I will be happy to give such guidance to you. Just leave it to me."



LORD Viol walked a few steps ahead of me as we strode through town.

How wonderful he looks... I thought, gazing at his back.

I never could have imagined the day would come when I would be strolling down the street like this with Lord Viol, clad in his black robes. The sight of him was so imposing that I found myself sneaking peeks at him without realizing I was doing it.

Despite Lord Viol's impressive stature, not a single townsperson spared him a glance as we walked by. It seemed his special brand of cloaking magic was working wonders.

If Lord Viol was seen walking around with me in town, it would probably cause a lot of problems for him, I thought. It reassured me to know that he was using one of his cloaking spells.

“Initially, I wanted to skip the cloaking magic so that we could enjoy a normal shopping experience. But that wouldn’t do.” He hummed in contemplation. “Now then, which spell should I choose...?”

All he’d done was say a few throwaway words, but they told me so much of what he was thinking. A rush of gratitude filled me at how thoughtful he was. Lord Viol was like Vi in that way—they both spent so much time considering what would be best for me.

Lord Viol hesitated for a moment, then nodded before casting a new form of magic over us both. This type of cloaking spell was strange indeed. It obscured the details of our physical forms and any of the noticeable qualities to our voices.

I’d learned recently that there were many kinds of cloaking magic. There were spells that made someone so difficult to perceive it was almost like they didn’t exist, spells that made a person’s physical form seem to vanish into thin air, and even spells that could call up realistic illusions of things that didn’t actually exist.

There are so many potential uses!

Lord Viol told me that the spell he’d just cast was a form he had invented himself.

“This one is unique among cloaking magics,” he said. “Others are able to perceive your presence, and even exchange words with you. It’s useful when you want to talk to others, buy items, and so on. The other party is dimly aware that they spoke to someone, but they are unable to recall any details afterwards.” Lord Viol looked very solemn as he continued: “It’s very useful for shopping in town.”

He looked so serious that I had to giggle.

To think Lord Viol uses such an innovative form of magic for something as minor as shopping!

When he'd described the spell to me, my first thought was that it sounded like it would be useful for spreading rumors and getting information out of people, or for spying. Nefarious stuff, in other words.

But Lord Viol had a very different view, evidently.

"I don't like people knowing where I shop or what I buy," he said proudly. "I invented it for my own comfort more than anything else."

I giggled again, and Lord Viol glanced over at me.

"Is something amusing?" he asked.

"Oh, um... Not really. It's just, a spell like that has so many other practical applications. I just thought it was really cute that you used it to hide your shopping habits."

"Other practical applications...?" he said, confused. "Oh, I see what you mean! Yes, it would also be very handy at balls and social functions! That way, I can eat a lot of desserts without anyone noticing. I'll have to try it out the next time I have to attend a function..."

Lord Viol's eyes were sparkling.

I couldn't help but laugh. *If using a cloaking spell is what it takes to allow Lord Viol to eat his fill of treats, I thought, I shall not stand in his way.*

Lord Viol was so talented—he'd invented some amazing forms of magic. And yet, he didn't at all seem to think of using his skills for nefarious reasons. He utilized his spells in such pure, innocent ways.

His magic skills are quite impressive, I must admit, I thought. But...I can't help but think he's a bit adorable.

We'd been making our way through downtown as we spoke, but now Lord Viol's stride slowed.

"Ah, here we are," he said.

It seemed we'd arrived at the shop that specialized in magical gear.

The shop's sign had been hung from the building's eaves; it was a cute iron plate with a set of magical gear depicted on the front. We opened the shop's

old wooden door and walked inside.

The first thing I saw was the counter, which was crammed with battle accessories.

“They’re all so beautiful...” I murmured, entranced.

My eyes landed on a delicate double chain that sparkled with colorful stones. I imagined it was used to hold robes closed; I could just see how it would catch the light as the wearer moved.

There were also necklaces, hair combs, bangles, earrings, rings, anklets, and even belts and glasses. So many accessories, each seeming to jostle for an observer’s attention.

“Yes, they are very beautiful, aren’t they?” Lord Viol responded. “Women often eschew heavy armor for accessories like these that have been imbued with the power of divine protection. Armor can be quite troublesome to take on and off, and the protection accessories offer tends to prove adequate enough. If we bedeck you in some of these, Lady Seren, I believe you’ll look absolutely splendid.”

“R-Right...”

Every now and then, Lord Viol said the most embarrassing things without seeming to even notice. I had no idea how I was supposed to respond to something like that.

“Do you see those sample robes to your right?” Lord Viol continued. “Take a look at the clothes hanging just beyond them. Those are undergarments that have been imbued with divine protection. I think you should wear one of them, as well.”

Lord Viol strode further into the store, as if the undergarments were a done deal already. Feeling completely lost, I followed after him, gazing up at his broad, dependable back. I felt rather like a confused duckling waddling after its mother.

Lord Viol cleared his throat. “Us mages fight mostly with magic; protective gear and boundary spells are vital components of our defenses. When it comes to your gear, you can choose whatever you like based on the protective

properties each item has, but I advise against choosing anything with a long hem. We need to ensure that your mobility is not impeded.”

“Ah yes, you mentioned having to be careful not to trip.”

“Right. You might step on the hem as you traverse some stairs, for example.”

“Step on the...” I trailed off as I looked up at Lord Viol, who looked as though he would never do anything so clumsy as to trip over the hem of his robes. Even the concept was funny.

Lord Viol is a human just like anyone else, but...I just can't picture him tripping or stumbling over something.

“What?” he asked.

I flushed. “Ah, nothing. I just can’t picture you tripping over a hem.”

“I’d trip, if it was too long.”

It struck me as funny how matter-of-fact he sounded, and I smiled.

“To be clear, that’s not the only reason for you to avoid long hems. It would look odd for a young lady to be lifting up her skirts all the time, and if you’re going to fight magical beasts, you’ll need both hands free. Truly, I cannot even begin to understand the mentality of people who choose long robes.”

I took in Lord Viol’s outfit. *Ah, I thought. Now I understand why he dresses that way.*

He was clad in black from head to toe, but underneath his robes he wore a loose suit for easy movement, as well as long black boots. The robes reached his knees, but they didn’t look too heavy. I actually thought he looked quite stylish, but apparently his fashion choices were all made out of a regard for functionality.

“Incidentally...” Lord Viol said. “Do you have any preferences as to color and fit?”

I thought for a moment. “I like pale green... As for the fit... I’d prefer not to wear anything that’s too exposed. But that’s all I really care about.”

“Hmm. Your penchant for green may be a reflection of your affinity for wind

magic."

I tilted my head thoughtfully. "That may be true, but honestly, I've never really considered my own taste in clothes. Whenever I had to choose something, I just picked whatever seemed suitable for the occasion."

The criteria I usually adhered to when choosing an outfit were relatively simple. The accessories I wore were always in the colors most favored by Prince Helios—blue or navy. The color of my dress didn't matter as long as it accentuated those accessories and didn't infringe upon the favored color of the ball's host. As for cuts, I typically went for something simple, but still befitting my status as a duke's daughter. To be honest, I mostly just wore the outfits Marietta told me were pretty.

Thus, I had no idea where to even begin when choosing the set of robes and accessories that I would take with me into battle. Thankfully, Lord Viol helped me out by explaining the options.

"These are the robes for women," he said, indicating them with his arm. "As you can see, there's a plethora of different designs and colors for both robes and the clothing that lies underneath. Choose one of each that you like, and then we can pick accessories that go with them. I think that might work, don't you?"

I nodded, but I felt overwhelmed.

This is a lot different than choosing a party dress for a ball...

I ran my eyes over the robes. They were made in bright, pretty colors, with material that folded back and forth over itself in gentle undulations. I could tell that they had been made for women; the fit was slim, and the hems were cut shorter than they would have been for the opposite sex.

"Robes aren't really such a big deal in the scheme of things," Lord Viol reassured me. "You can always boost your magical properties by adding more accessories at a later stage. There are also some wide-brimmed hats you could buy; those will truly make you look like a real mage."

"Really?!"

"Yes. So, for now, don't worry too much about how much protection your

gear gives you. Simply select whichever outfit you would most like to wear.”

That solved one problem, but now I was up against another. Ever since I was small, the clothes I wore around my father’s estate had been selected for me by my maids. My whole life, I’d simply worn what others had recommended. The concept of choosing clothes I personally wanted to wear was somewhat alien to me.

The number of clothing options seemed staggering. I began touching the different materials and scrutinizing the various designs, trying to find a way to decide on just one.

Before I could get myself too worked up, Lord Viol’s arm came reaching out beside me. “You’re doing just fine,” he reassured me. “Just pick up whatever feels right and see how it feels once you put it on. You can try as many as you like.”

“What...?” I asked incredulously. “You can try them on inside the shop?”

“Certainly,” he said, nodding. “Ah, you probably have little experience with this, since aristocrats have their clothes made to order. Most commoner shops have dressing rooms, where customers can try on clothes to see if they fit before they decide to buy them.”

“That seems a good way to make sure they fit well,” I commented.

“It is. When you’re buying from shops like this that sell protective gear, it’s quite important to make sure your clothes are the right size. You should always choose something well-fitting that allows for maximum mobility, you see. You’ll be wearing these items for the foreseeable future, after all.” Lord Viol gave me an encouraging look. “Don’t overthink it, Lady Seren, just go with your gut. I’ll take charge of gauging each item’s defensive properties.”

It seemed that Lord Viol had somehow intuited that I was not used to shopping, for he was gently guiding me through the selection process. But I still couldn’t help but be bewildered by it all.

When it came to balls, all I had to do was pick a dress at random from the pile my maids brought to my room. But this shop had so many different robes! And that wasn’t even considering all the different clothing options I could choose

from to wear underneath.

How am I to choose a favorite from among all these options?!

For me, it was a lot to ask.

“I’ll be looking around over there,” Lord Viol said, pointing to a different portion of the shop. “Take as much time as you need, and select your items at your leisure.”

Lord Viol left my side then, striding across the shop to look at a case filled with magical accessories.

I must look so pathetic, just hovering around here, unable to choose anything... I thought.

I was a little relieved Lord Viol had left; I didn’t want to embarrass myself in front of him any further. But still, all of a sudden, I felt...lonely. It was a strange feeling.

I gave myself a little shake, then redirected my attention toward the options in front of me.

The robes were hanging at my eye level. I began to flip through them just as Lord Viol had done moments before, trying to decide on a color. I was surprised to find that now that I had actually started browsing, I was beginning to enjoy myself. Never in my life had I been given the opportunity to select whatever I liked from such a huge variety of clothing.

This is quite fun!

As I browsed, I came across some clothes that I thought would look great on Marietta or on some other friends of mine, and even a few that might suit a Drab Princess like me. After much deliberation, I ended up with three options.

Lifting them carefully off the rack, I hurried over to Lord Viol.

“Lor—”

I clamped my lips together.

Goodness!

I’d almost said Lord Viol’s name out loud. It would be very dangerous to do

such a thing, even under the protection of his special cloaking magic. I had thought the shop empty, but surely the shopkeeper was around here somewhere.

At any rate, I thought firmly, it is better to be prudent than not.

And so, out of concern for the situation, I walked over to Lord Viol and asked, “May I, um...call you Professor?”

“What’s this, all of a sudden?” Lord Viol asked, looking a bit surprised.

I didn’t answer right away, and realization dawned in his eyes a mere moment later.

“I see...” he said, nodding. “Yes, of course. Indeed, you may.”

“Oh, thank you,” I said. Then, a little awkwardly, I held up the outfits in my hand. “Um, which of these three do you like best, Professor?”

I let out a thoughtful hum, eyebrows pulling together in contemplation. “I don’t really have a good eye for that sort of thing,” he said slowly.

Oh, goodness, Lord Viol, please...

I was really at a total loss here. I wanted him to at least steer me in the right direction.

I plucked up my courage and told him, “I think I’d like you to choose whichever one you like the best.”

He gave me a bit of an odd look. “But you have chosen your own clothing before, have you not?”

“Of course,” I said weakly. “But well... I trust your intuition. And your style... You look extremely sharp, you know. I just need a hint as to which one of these would be best... Couldn’t you help me out?”

“Hmm...”

Lord Viol scrutinized each of the three pieces of clothing with a solemn expression on his face. Actually, it was more like he was looking back and forth between the clothes and my face. No doubt he was imagining what I would look like in each one.

Finally, Lord Viol pointed to the middle option, an air of confidence coming over him. “I think this is your best option. Out of the three, I think it is the one that will suit you the best, and its properties should be adequate for the goal you’re working toward. And besides... I just like that one best.”

“Then I’ll go with this one.”

“But are you sure?” Lord Viol asked hesitantly. “You’ve chosen quite dark colors out of everything that’s on offer. You’ll look quite understated, I think.”

I glanced at the outfit. If I ignored everything but the colors, I could see what he meant. Lord Viol’s choice was made up of a black robe, a black short coat that had a black lace-up bodice that emphasized my waist, and an undershirt dyed a bright, chartreuse green. The undershirt fell to my calves, billowing around me like a cute, floaty dress.

Come to think of it, if I choose this outfit, I’ll be primarily wearing black, I thought.

But even though there was a lot of black, I thought the pop of chartreuse green that came from the undershirt’s bodice and skirt made the outfit look extremely fashionable.

I had never chosen anything so elaborate for any of the balls I had attended, let alone to wear at home.

Lord Viol had pointed out that the outfit I had chosen was the least flashy of the three I had singled out, but to me, this was the one that required the most bravery to wear. By wearing this, I would be debuting an entirely new side of myself. That was why I had selected it.

It’s an adventurous outfit, but Lord Viol agreed that it would suit me. Why should I not just go for it?

With this thought in mind, I smiled at Lord Viol. “You always seem to be in all-black, Professor. It’s only natural for your apprentice to share the look.”

“I see. Let’s go with this one, then,” Lord Viol said, beginning to nod. “Ah, but wait!” He stopped nodding and shook his head instead. “Clothes often look different once we try them on. Since there is a dressing room right here, I think you should try it before we make our final decision.”

“Okay,” I said, nodding. “Then I shall try it on first.”

I don't feel very confident about this, but Lord Viol is insisting that I try it on, so...

Lord Viol guided me to the shop's dressing room. I followed him, then stepped into the small changing room.

I had been practicing dressing and undressing myself in secret, but it still took considerable time. I had laced the bodice only with great difficulty, and by the time I finally stepped out of the room, I was covered in a light sweat.

Goodness, I thought ruefully. I'm breaking a sweat before we've even made our way out of town.

“Um...what do you think?” I asked tremulously, emerging from the dressing room.

Lord Viol stared at me for a long moment, eyes wide, then began to compliment me in a louder voice than he ever had before. “You look amazing! It suits you far better than I expected. It's almost as if it was made for you!”



Being praised so openly made me blush.

I did ask him for his opinion, though...

All of a sudden, I wondered if Lord Viol was only sparing my feelings. After all, I had heard once before that Lord Viol was a cold, stoic man. But that certainly wasn't the version of him I knew. He had always been quite expressive during the times we spent together. And now that I thought about it, he had also openly praised my household's pâtissier and the cake shop in town.

Can I really take his words as his honest opinion, then?

A rush of happiness burst through me.

"You look so splendid, I'd love for the townspeople to see you in it," Lord Viol continued warmly. "But alas, we must continue using the cloaking spell. It seems a shame."

"It's... It's enough just to have you see it, Professor..." I murmured, feeling a little breathless. I was growing more and more embarrassed, but I decided to just let go and give myself over to the feeling.

"All right, so I've got the outfit," I said, smiling at Lord Viol. "But we still need some other things, don't we?"

He rumbled in agreement. "We should buy boots and some matching accessories. I think it would be best if the boots came to around mid-thigh, since if a magical beast manages to injure your legs, you won't be able to run away."

"Okay," I agreed.

"As for accessories... Your clothes already have a color scheme, so we can be a bit freer with them. And once you're wearing an item imbued with the power of divine protection, you should be much safer."

"I... I don't think I'd like to wear too many accessories at once..." I stammered, feeling flustered.

I'd given Lord Viol back the money I had borrowed from him, which he was now holding in his purse. The way he had spoken earlier implied that such a large amount of money was no big deal to him, but I was still afraid to shop

without being fully aware of prices. And he'd said those accessories offered divine protection...

Something like divine protection can't come cheap... I thought nervously. How much are these items going to cost...? Is it going to be a sum that could be easily paid by someone who receives a High Mage's salary?

I had no way of knowing.

When I get back home, I'm going to have to do my own research into the prices.

"Hmm, well, if you don't want to wear too many separate pieces, how about this?" Lord Viol asked. He'd picked up the double chain with the colorful stones that had caught my eye when I first walked into the shop.

"All you need is one of these," he told me, "and you'll be covered by multiple forms of divine protection. See how many gemstones there are? They're quite small, though, so they're not at all too flashy. What do you think?"

I gazed at the chain.

The design looked like something that could be affixed easily to the bodice of my undershirt, and just as Lord Viol had said, it wasn't too flashy. Seen from behind, it would add a pop of color to the black robe. And it would glitter most prettily whenever I moved...

I looked up at Lord Viol and smiled. "I think it's just lovely."

Lord Viol has much more fashion sense than he gives himself credit for.

After that, Lord Viol recommended me boots as well. They matched the rest of my outfit perfectly, and so the shopping trip wrapped up with me feeling most satisfied.

Finally, we're able to leave the shop!

We waded through the crowd of townspeople, who paid us just as little attention as they had before, as we made our way to the large gate that led out of town. I had gotten used to walking by Lord Viol's side by this point, and I found that I was able to calm down and fully observe the world around me.

Shining fruits in all colors of the rainbow were arranged out in front of the

shops, while street carts lined the road, selling fragrant, delicious-smelling foods. Shopkeepers announced their wares in bright, enthusiastic voices, as windows of jewelry shops glittered, their wares on sparkling display. The shopkeepers' lively voices only added to the town's overall lively atmosphere.

Maybe it was just because it was Voiday, but there seemed to be all sorts of people on the streets, from old men and women to little children. Everyone wore big smiles on their faces as they wandered freely from shop to shop. It seemed to me like the whole town was filled with energy.

I listened closely to the conversations going on among the townswomen and the proprietresses as we passed by. All of a sudden, I was reminded of something.

Right! I was planning on studying the speech of the commoner women living in the town!

I listened closer still.

They speak in a louder voice than I would typically use, I noticed, and at a much faster rhythm. Their accents are quite different from mine, too, and they phrase things differently than I do...

Even the way they walked struck me as different.

The commoner women strode down the town streets with wide strides, their heads held high, feet moving with a distinct purpose. Growing up, I had learned that a lady should take small, shuffling steps and try to walk as quietly as possible, but from what I could tell, doing that out here would only hold up the flow of foot-traffic and inconvenience others.

All of a sudden, I realized that my presence here must have seemed very alien to the town's residents.

It's no wonder I drew the attention of that band of ruffians!

I smiled a little to myself.

Just coming to town today has been a highly educational experience for me. And these experiences...they're going to prove vital to me going forward.

And it was all thanks to Vi and Lord Viol that I was able to experience so

much.

Feeling deeply grateful, I worked on purposefully lengthening my stride. My brand-new boots clacked pleasingly against the cobblestone, and I started to feel like perhaps I was starting to blend in, just a little.

We continued walking through town in this fashion for a short while before finally reaching the large gates that led beyond its walls.

It was time for us to enter the outside world.

Viol 10

A Wall You Must Climb Over

I did it! I thought wildly. I actually somehow made it through!

I let out a sigh of relief as we approached the gates.

Ah, how nerve-wracking that was! I can't believe I was forced to make fashion choices for Lady Seren...

I hated to waste time worrying about color combinations, which was exactly why I always wore black. I had zero fashion sense, so for Lady Seren to attempt to leave it in my hands...

She's so daring!

Regardless, I had done my best to help her choose the most suitable outfit. I felt quite exhausted already. My energy was bolstered, however, by how cute Lady Seren looked as she trotted ahead of me toward the gate.

Yes, I thought, feeling most satisfied. That outfit was the right choice.

The dresses and day clothes I had seen her wear so far were all in very simple, plain colors like white or silver. Compared to that, the choice of chartreuse green seemed quite daring, and proved a startling contrast to Lady Seren's pale skin and light brown hair.

Yes, that outfit suits her well indeed.

Even from behind, I thought she looked most charming.

But Lady Seren's cuteness could not hold my attention for long; soon I had fallen into a state of quiet consternation.

While Lady Seren had been inside the dressing room, I had secretly bought her a hairpin and a set of earrings; they were currently tucked away inside the pouch attached to my belt. I had been too nervous to give them to her in the shop, but now that we had left, I wasn't sure how to broach the subject.

The hairpin had a large, white frilly bow with a large green stone in its center. Its tag said that it increased the wind magic ability of the wearer. The earrings were studded with little green stones as well, which I had been told were supposed to help the user keep the output of their magical power steady.

I had figured Lady Seren would need both of those things at her current level of magical ability, so I had gone ahead and bought them while I was waiting for her, not thinking of the fact that I might need to consult with her about making the purchase... She'd even said she didn't want to wear too many bulky accessories, but I'd gone ahead and picked what I'd thought she should have anyway.

But these accessories will give her the best overall protection! I told myself firmly. *I was right to buy them.*

Regardless of what I thought, it seemed very awkward to suddenly reveal that I had bought them, and so I found I could not cajole myself into bringing them out.

But what good will they do in my pouch? I sighed. *Hmm, what to do...*

“Professor?”

Whoops, I thought. I'd begun to drag my feet without even noticing. *Almost got lost in thought there.*

I hurried after Lady Seren with big strides, quickly catching up to her. She stood in front of the gate, a mix of anticipation, excitement, and joy on her face, tinged with a dash of anxiety.

I was well used to going out to the plains, but for Lady Seren, it was all uncharted territory.

The plains were mostly occupied by low-ranking magical beasts. Certain spots were favored for subjugating magical beasts with elementary-level spells; these spots were said to guarantee those who went to them two or three good encounters. Some of the more battle-savvy townspeople would go out on the plains for picnics or to cut wildflowers and herbs. There was no real risk of danger out there, so it was popular with newbie adventurers and mages venturing out on their first quests.

But despite the so-called low risk of danger, beasts still roam here, I reminded myself. It would not do to let my guard down.

I quickly cast a strong barrier spell on Lady Seren.

“Shall we go?” I asked her.

“Yes!”

Our primary objective today was for Lady Seren to observe me fighting a magical beast, so she could get an idea of what such encounters entailed. She was in no real danger, but I wanted very much to err on the side of caution.



“THE breeze feels great, doesn’t it?”

“Indeed, it does.”

We had come out to the plains filled with determination and fortitude, but no magical beasts had made themselves known to us.

In lieu of fighting, we crossed the sloping plains, eventually reaching the summit of a small hill. This area got a good amount of sun; the only shade came from the trees scattered about. The meadow at the hill’s top was scattered with wildflowers.

Everything looked right, though usually, we’d have already encountered one or two magical beasts on the way to this spot. But for whatever reason, today we were out of luck.

Lady Seren and I had settled ourselves under the shade of one of the trees at the top of the hill with the meadow. She opened up her picnic basket, clearly ready for lunch.

At this rate, the only thing we’re going to accomplish out here is having a picnic, I thought ruefully.

But Lady Seren’s smile was enough to stun me out of these thoughts.

“Here you go,” she said, grinning at me as she handed me a sandwich.

I accepted the food gladly, quickly taking a bite.

Mr. Chef! I thought incredulously. Even your sandwiches are delectable! My,

how delicious...

Lady Seren continued unpacking the basket. I leaned forward and peered at the offerings as they were revealed.

"Hmm," I rumbled. "Looks like the sandwiches have all kinds of different fillings on the inside."

"Looks like there are some with meat, and others that are mostly salad-based... Oh, and some have egg, too..." Lady Seren let out a little gasp of happy surprise. "And look at these! They have whipped cream and fruit inside! It's almost like they're a kind of dessert, don't you think?"

"What did you say?!" I demanded, staring intently at the sandwiches.

Lady Seren beamed, clearly enjoying herself. "Would you like one?" she asked.

"I... I..." I paused, sighing. "Perhaps at the end of the meal."

"Okay!" she said cheerfully. "I'll put them aside, then."

I ran my eyes over Lady Seren, framed by the backdrop of the sun-drenched meadow of flowers.

There is nothing in my life that could possibly compare to the joy of sharing lunch with Lady Seren like this, I thought.

Then Lady Seren paused in the middle of her unpacking, staring into the picnic basket.

"Oh dear," she muttered.

"What's wrong?"

"The chef prepared a flask of hot tea for us, but there are no cups." She sighed. "I don't typically need any, as I always have a cup brought to me in the library."

"Ah, I see."

Well, c'est la vie, I thought, amused.

But, of course, there was no way the chef could have anticipated that Lady Seren would take his lunch basket outdoors.

I used earth magic to form two unbaked coffee mugs from the dirt below us. Then I conjured a flame within our magical barrier, using the heat of the fire magic to set the mugs in the same way you would in a mini kiln.

On a normal day, I would have made teacups, but they were very thin and fragile, and overall difficult to craft.

I don't need to go so far as all that, I thought. These will be more than adequate for drinking out of.

"Use this," I told Lady Seren, passing her a mug.

Her eyes widened in astonishment. "M-Magic can even do things like that, huh?"

I hummed in agreement. "Though it depends on how you apply it."

As I'd been crafting the cups, Lady Seren had apparently finished unpacking the rest of the items within the picnic basket.

"What a spread!" I cried in delight.

"I don't usually get this much food," Lady Seren said, "but I asked the chef to pack as much as possible this time. He really went all out!" She seemed as impressed as I was.

It was hard to imagine how such a large and varied picnic spread could have fit in such a modestly sized basket. The chef must have really applied himself to the task.

All of the portions were small, but there were so many different types of food that the variety seemed endless. Each morsel had been nestled into one of many adorably colorful, little containers; small hunks of cheese sat next to delicately cut meats, and miniature salads rested near small piles of egg and risotto.

And that wasn't even mentioning the numerous tiny desserts.

It's like a miniature banquet, I thought, charmed.

"What fun!" Lady Seren cheered, happily diving in.



IN the end, the day's picnic was unbelievably delicious.

Although I should probably credit some of my enjoyment to the mesmerizing sight of Lady Seren's happy smile... I mused.

Now that we were finished eating our excellent meal, we began to tidy up our leftovers and repack the basket. But just as we'd gotten started, I sensed magical power, and not of the human kind.

I froze.

So we are to have a magical beast encounter, after all, I thought. Good. I've been waiting for this.

"Lady Seren," I said softly. "Do not move."

Lady Seren paused, her body frozen in the act of placing a container back inside the picnic basket. I found myself grateful that she did as I asked, despite not knowing what was going on.

My plan was for Lady Seren to face off against a magical beast using the magic she had already mastered. To that end, I was not currently using any enemy-detecting magic. But even without it, I knew when a magical beast was nearby.

I sensed four of them behind us. Based on what my intuition told me, they were probably small magical wolves.

They must have come from the forest on the other side of the hill, I thought.

It was common knowledge that you could find a variety of slightly stronger magical beasts in that direction. There were several thickets of bush between there and here.

The beasts must have used them as camouflage as they snuck closer to us.

"Lady Seren," I said quietly. "Take your hand slowly out of the basket and look behind you. Remember, take it slow."

"Okay..." Lady Seren whispered, looking nervous.

She slowly turned around.

"I... I can't see anything," she murmured.

I hummed in agreement. "You may not see anything, but there are several

magical beasts over there,” I told her. “They’ve been tracking us from over by the forest.”

Lady Seren gasped.

A light breeze blew by, sending the leaves and flower stems shaking. It was impossible to get a visual on the beasts, but I knew they would attack at any moment.

Incidentally, I had suppressed my own magical presence to the extent that, to the beasts, we must have looked like nothing more than weak, easy prey.

My condolences, o’ magical beasts.

“You still need work on your ability to detect magical power,” I told Lady Seren softly, “but at any rate, the magical power emanated by beasts is different from that of humans. It’s difficult to explain, but it should feel like a sort of painful prickling sensation.”

“And that prickling feeling is emanating from over there...?”

“Yes. In just a moment, I will go fight against them. I want you to watch how I go about defeating them. And, if possible, I’d like you to try and sense the power emanating from the magical beasts. When fighting mid-ranking magical beasts, the advantage goes to the one who senses the other’s presence first.”

“Okay!” Lady Seren said, nodding in determination.

“I have cast a strong barrier spell around you,” I told her. “Stay perfectly still, and just watch.”

Lady Seren stared at me, her face going pale.

“Okay,” she whispered, clasping her hands tightly together in front of her chest. It almost looked like she was praying.

We had come here magical beast hunting, so Lady Seren must have known that combat would ensue. Even so, it must have been quite frightening for her to actually be confronted with it.

That fear... It, too, is vital, Lady Seren.

I silently got to my feet.

It was as if the wolves had been waiting for that moment. They ran toward me as one.

I could hear a squeal escape Lady Seren's throat from where she sat within the safety of my barrier spell.

Now then, I thought. It's about time for me to get this fight started.

One's first experience being attacked by magical wolves is often frightening indeed. Magical wolves were just as strong as humans, and much, much faster. Many a beginning adventurer had lost their life when surrounded by a pack of them... And to a man with no battle experience, a single, lone magical wolf could prove deadly.

They were not an enemy to be taken lightly.

Despite this fearsome reputation, magical wolves were quite easy to inflict damage on as long as you were using any kind of elemental magic. This made them a very easy foe to fight for a mage.

I gauged the battlefield. I had been right; four magical wolves were running in our direction. Usually, I would be able to fell them all in a single hit.

“Lady Seren,” I called, “you may be frightened, but do not close your eyes!”

“Okay!!!” she cried.

I glanced back, catching sight of her as she clutched the picnic basket to her chest. Her eyes brimmed with tears as she watched the magical wolves advance ever closer to my position.

That's a good girl.

“The best part about magic is that we can perform long-range attacks,” I told Lady Seren.

I didn't speak another word. Instead, I demonstrated.

I released a twenty-blade Wind Cutter spell, sending blades of wind slicing through the first of the magical wolves.

The wolf gave a dull grunt of pain and went tumbling to the ground.

Lady Seren could use this technique herself—twenty blades was the

maximum number she'd been able to achieve thus far.

The spell continued to rain blades down on the magical wolf's fallen form, slicing into it as it gasped its last breath.

The three wolves that followed were more cunning—they scattered to the left and to the right, dodging the blades.

A shrewd move, I thought approvingly.

"The one on the right is fast, indeed," I called to Lady Seren. "To take him down, I'll need to attack from *this* angle."

I threw another Wind Cutter spell before I even bothered to take another breath. It ripped into the wolf on my right. By the time I turned to the left, the third wolf was only a few feet away. I threw another Wind Cutter in its direction, shredding it.

"Lord Viol!" Lady Seren cried, voice choked. "Look up!"

I let out a bored hum as I looked up at the final wolf, which was soaring down at me from above. I cast a final Wind Cutter spell in its direction.

The final wolf let out a high whine, collapsing to the ground not far from where we stood. Its bright, red blood came raining down on us from above.

I checked to make sure it had ceased breathing, then relaxed, letting my body fall out of its battle stance. I turned to see Lady Seren gazing at me with tears in her eyes, her knees chattering together.

"Blood..." she gasped. "There's so much blood..."

I had expected this. I saw this same scene play out countless times during Mage Academy training. People who had never seen battle before often reacted to bloodshed this way. But...

This is what it takes to become a High Mage, Lady Seren.

One could not be a High Mage if all they cast were barrier spells. Being a High Mage was a difficult, dangerous, dirty job. It was up to us to fight off the magical beasts when their population grew out of control. It was up to us to protect the citizens of our country.

Lady Seren, if you truly want to be the best... Then this is the first wall you must climb over.

“Are you all right?” I asked Lady Seren softly.

I made sure to speak to her in a gentle tone; I had seen many of my mage friends react badly to their first taste of battle. She didn’t reply, just pressed a steady hand against her chest. Her shoulders trembled.

Concern bubbled up in my chest. I could tell she was having trouble regulating her breathing; her breaths came in heaves and gasps.

“Lady Seren are... Are you all right?”

She’s just breathing a bit strangely, right? I thought desperately. Nothing bad is happening to her, is it?

I reached out a hand to Lady Seren, abruptly nervous. I wrapped my fingers around her wrist.

Her eyes narrowed as she glared at me. “The blood...” she moaned.

I looked down at my right hand, the one that had clasped itself around her wrist. It was spattered with wolf blood.

No wonder she has such a look of distaste on her face, I thought, abashed. Who would want to be touched by such a hand?

I pulled my hand away from her wrist.

“I apologize,” I said earnestly.

But now Lady Seren was the one reaching for me. Her pale hand drifted up to my face, her fingertips grazing over my cheek.

I froze up immediately.

I’m not in my cat form. So why...is she...?

I could think of no reason for Lady Seren to fondle my human face. It made no sense to me. But I could not bring myself to brush her off or step back. I gazed at her silently as her brows wrinkled further and further together in distress.

“It’s here, too...” she murmured in a sad voice.

Her fingertips drifted away from my face, and I saw that they were wet and red.

Is that blood...? Some must have splattered on my face when I killed the magical wolves.

“I’m sorry,” I said softly. “Did it spray everywhere?”

I had deflected some blood spatter with the back of my hand after I’d hit the last wolf with my Wind Cutter spell, but I hadn’t noticed that the blood had splashed on my face as well. I could dimly recall opening my robe with my left hand to try and block the spray from hitting Lady Seren—it must have happened then.

I certainly can’t send her home with blood in her hair, I thought. There’s no way we could come up with an excuse to explain that.

Lady Seren was still gazing up at me, her lip caught behind her teeth. As I watched, a teardrop suddenly slid down her cheek.

I panicked.

“Are... A-Are you all right?!” I stammered, horrified.

I could only keep repeating those words, like some sort of idiot.

I knew it, I thought wildly. This path is far too dangerous for a lady like her. But... Lady Seren...if you are to achieve your goal of becoming a High Mage, this is something you must experience and move past! If you don’t, subjugating a mid-ranking magical beast will remain nothing but a remote dream! I know you can get past this, Lady Seren! I know you can!

My heart thumped heavily in my chest, but I said nothing to her beyond the words I spoke within my mind.

Lady Seren’s lower lip had begun to tremble now.

“I...couldn’t attack,” she mumbled quietly.

I blinked, stunned. “What?”

“That magical beast was so huge, and it... It was leaping for your head, Lord Viol, and I couldn’t move! I couldn’t conjure up my Wind Cutter!”

She was trembling, tears spilling down her face.

For a moment, I thought I might have misheard—that was how little I expected her to say such a thing.

“Lady Seren, that, uh... Well, that doesn’t really matter right now. I told you just to watch, did I not?”

“Yes,” she said shakily, “you did. But then the situation played out like it did, and...”

Lady Seren’s words were cut off by a hiccupping sob. She began to sob for real, her face going white as a sheet. She raised the hand she’d run over my face to wipe away her tears, but her fingers were still bloody from touching my face.

“No, don’t!” I cried, grabbing her hand before it made contact.

I didn’t care in the slightest that I had wolf blood splattered all over me, but I somehow couldn’t stand the thought of Lady Seren, with her gentle upbringing, smearing foul liquid across her lovely, smooth cheek.

I conjured a small ball of water to rinse the blood from Lady Seren’s fingers, then conjured another to splash them clean. Finally, I conjured a small breeze to blow them dry.

There, I thought. All nice and clean. You can cry as much as you need to now and wipe your tears freely.

But Lady Seren had stopped crying, as if distracted by my magic.

A moment of silence stretched between us. I couldn’t help but notice the look of displeasure that flickered over her lips.

But why would she be displeased? What is the cause of that fleeting expression?

“Is... Is there something that is to your displeasure?” I asked hesitantly.

There was another moment of heavy silence.

Finally, Lady Seren said, “That last wolf. The one that leaped over your head. You anticipated that it would attack you from above, didn’t you, Lord Viol?”

I blinked. "Ah, well, yes. I was confident I could handle it."

Her eyes narrowed. "Let me fight the next one."

What now?! Her face is still swollen from crying, and she wants to talk about fighting magical beasts?!

I found myself quite taken aback.

"Don't look at me like that, please," Lady Seren said in an irritated tone.

"There's no need to rush, Lady Seren. It's still far too early for you to fight a magical beast. Just observe one more fight, and then we shall get to the real thing."

"But just before... I honestly believed you were about to be hurt! And yet, I couldn't do anything! I couldn't conjure magic!" Lady Seren gnashed her teeth in frustration. "I feel so frustrated! I thought I was going to be forced to watch you die right in front of me! I don't want to feel like that again!"

Lady Seren's eyes settled on me in an almighty glare.

I was so shocked, I felt like laughing.

Here I had been, thinking that she was crying and trembling with fear over the blood. But her tears were not ones of fear—they were of vexation.

How I underestimated her!

"Wh-What's so funny?!" Lady Seren demanded.

I blanched. "I apologize...was I smiling?"

Darn it! I let it show on my face...

People were always saying I was as expressive as a dead man, so why exactly was I so expressive around Lady Seren?

Perhaps I spent too much time interacting freely with her in my cat form...?

I shrugged internally. It was a mystery.

"To be honest, Lady Seren, I thought you were trembling and crying from the sight of all the blood. I'm delighted to see that you have this much gumption, that's all."

“The blood is horrible,” she said fervently. “So were those beasts. The mere sight of them made me want to seize up from terror. To tell you the truth, even looking at their corpses chills me to the core.”

I rumbled in agreement.

She was quite right—a corpse killed by a Wind Cutter spell did tend to look quite grotesque. I, myself, had often vomited after my first few battles.

“But that doesn’t matter,” Lady Seren continued firmly. “I have to get desensitized to it. Otherwise, I won’t be able to take on the really tough magical beasts.”

I felt a thrill of pride. “That’s wonderful, Lady Seren. You’ve got the right attitude.”

“Of course, all the blood is scary. Of course, all the magical beasts are scary. But what *really* scares me is how I froze up just then, and just watched while someone I care about was in mortal danger.”

I nodded. “That’s exactly what you should be afraid of.”

“I want to get so strong that I don’t hesitate,” she said, eyes burning. “So strong that my body just reacts.”

“I see...” I said slowly. I felt the corners of my lips quirk up, just a bit. “Then we should go on and get started.”

My student was far, far more competitive and determined than I had given her credit for. She had made up her mind to do this. All that remained was to go out and get her results.



AS Lady Seren and I made our way back along the path leading to town, we came across a new sort of magical beast called a Ketsy. Ketsy were magical birds that were large in form and were faster at running than flying. They preferred to eat decaying meat and would leave their prey to rot for a while after they killed it, waiting for the optimal time to eat the remains.

A rather strange custom, I thought with a grimace.

The Ketsy stood at about the height of Lady Seren’s shoulder. It cut quite the

impactful figure, and I found myself thinking we were lucky the magical birds didn't attack in a flock.

It wouldn't be a bad option at all for Lady Seren's debut battle... I mused.

And so, I decided to leave it all up to Lady Seren.

The Ketsy advanced on us, screeching.

Lady Seren's face blanched. She discharged her Wind Cutter spell at it, but in her fear, she could only produce seven blades.

It was a weak attack compared to what I had previously seen from her. Consequently, it had little stopping power.

We practiced this spell so many times in training, and yet...

It was clear that Lady Seren was torn between simple fear and her determination to get the battle over with. Her weak attack was a result of her internal discord.

The Ketsy let out a shriek, spreading its wings wide. With its wings extended, it was able to put on an extra burst of speed.

Lady Seren was still trembling.

I decided to give her a quick word of advice. "You still have range," I called to her. "Attack!"

"R-Right..." Lady Seren managed, gasping for air.

From what I could tell, it was fear that impeded her breath. I felt pity for her, but at the same time, I wanted to give her the space to figure this out on her own.

"Don't pause!" I yelled.

The Ketsy kicked off against the ground.

Lady Seren's lips had gone completely white. She stared forward at the Ketsy, eyes wide.

I had made sure she was well protected from the creature's slashing talons and enormous beak, of course. I had cast a protective barrier around her at the beginning of the battle, but she must have forgotten in the heat of the moment.

And yet...I could still see life lurking in Lady Seren's eyes.

"Attack!" I yelled.

Lady Seren's shoulders jerked, and she shot off a Wind Cutter spell, almost as if by reflex.

The Ketsy fell to the ground, stricken by Lady Seren's blow. It jittered around there for a moment before it struggled back to its feet and continued to advance.

"Attack it again! Keep going until it can't get back up!"

"O-Okay..." Lady Seren stammered.

She shot out one Wind Cutter spell after the other, each one directed toward the Ketsy. The magical beast's feet flailed as it finally fell to the ground with a heavy thud, its eyes rolling back in its head.

I had been on the verge of helping her, but I was glad I had held back. I looked down at the motionless Ketsy and breathed a big sigh of relief.

"You did well," I told Lady Seren.

She looked up at me, eyes wild. I could see fresh tears on her face, but she had battled through them.

Her determination's really something... I thought in admiration.

I stared at Lady Seren, feeling deeply moved. But though my eyes didn't drift an inch, her face did. She went sliding downward, out of my view.

"Lady Seren?!"

"S-Sorry..." she mumbled weakly.

She'd fallen to the ground, as if pure adrenaline had been all that was keeping her standing.

"There is no need to apologize," I reassured her. "It was only your first battle, and you managed to fell the beast without my assistance in the end. You didn't give up, and you kept on using your magic. Well done."

"B-But... Even after all that practice, I could only conjure weak, inefficient blades!"

"Those last few attacks had more than ten blades," I pointed out. "All you need to do is practice, and you'll be able to conjure many more during battles, too."

"But the beast just wouldn't go down..."

"But it did go down," I reminded her. "You just needed to shoot it enough times. I'm glad I left it all to you."

Lady Seren's tears had dried for a moment, but now fresh ones took their place.

"I was so afraid..." she said softly. "It... It just kept coming, and..."

I had experienced what Lady Seren was going through many, many times myself. It was normal to forget yourself in the heat of battle, then to suddenly come back to yourself and have to deal with the emotional aftermath. It was an important thing for Lady Seren to experience.

I whipped out my handkerchief and wiped the fresh tears from her soft cheeks.

So many tears shed in just one day... I thought ruefully.

Lady Seren's debut battle had not been stylish, it was true. But she had fought in a way that gave me great confidence in her. To experience such fear and to keep on fighting regardless... That was an experience worth its weight in gold. No doubt she would feel bolstered by it, once what had happened sunk in.

I held Lady Seren tight by her trembling shoulders, gently patting her back. We stayed like that for a long moment before I pulled away.

She gazed up at me, her eyes still brimming with tears. They didn't fall, though—that much seemed to have ceased.

Good, I thought. She's beginning to calm down.

"Lady Seren, my compliments on your fight," I said firmly. "I'm proud of you."

Lady Seren's face flushed instantly in the face of my open praise. Her lips flapped, before she finally choked out: "Th-Th-Thank you..."

I handed her my handkerchief, and she began frantically dabbing her face,

doing her best to conceal her embarrassment from me.

You'll rub your skin off at that rate, I thought, a tad amused.

Judging by how embarrassed she was, it appeared she was finally emerging from the haze of terror that had come over her during her first fight.

I got to my feet, relieved, and plucked the Ketsy's beak from its corpse to serve as proof of her victory.

"We should be heading back soon," I urged Lady Seren gently once I had returned to her side. "Much time has passed."

It was still quite light out, but she'd need time for the tear-induced puffiness in her face to fade before she returned to her residence. We did not have the time to linger.

But despite my words, Lady Seren just looked up at me in confusion.

"What's wrong?" I asked her.

She tried to climb to her feet, but her legs kept folding beneath her weight. "Goodness..." she murmured, her body sinking back to the ground.

She looked up at me again, her eyes troubled.

"I don't seem to be able to stand..." she said weakly.

Goodness, indeed!

Lady Seren stared up at me guiltily as I racked my brains for a solution. Despite myself, I found I couldn't think of a single one.

I was struck momentarily by the thought that this would be a great time to use flying magic, but unfortunately, I could not yet utilize that discipline myself.

I was going to have to carry her physically, even as weak as I was. There were no two ways about it.

I silently cast a spell on myself that would strengthen and fortify my muscles, then leaned down to lift Lady Seren into my arms.

Seren 12

I've Never Felt This Before...

Ahhh! I shrieked internally. *What should I do? What should I do?!*

I was curled up alone in my soft bed, hugging my pillow to my chest. My mind, though, had drifted back to what had happened out on the plains.

I was rather proud of myself for managing to fight that terrifying magical bird, even though I'd never seen one before. That pride was rather dampened, however, by how embarrassed I was over what had happened after. I'd felt completely pathetic when I realized I couldn't walk, and I still felt guilty for essentially forcing Lord Viol to carry me back to town.

My mind skipped past that, wandering back to the magical beast itself. I had never even imagined that a magical bird could be so frightening.

I could see it so clearly—the sharp point of its beak as it came flying at my safety barrier, the slashing claws on its humongous feet... But the thing I'd found scariest of all was how it had continued to come after me despite the number of Wind Cutter spells I'd thrown at it.

I had been so terrified, in fact, that even after the battle was over, I could not stop myself from crying.

Lord Viol had not shied away from my tears—he only held me gently and patted my back. When I'd glanced up at him, his expression had been so kind, and his eyes so compassionate, that my heart had sped up even faster than it had during the very height of my fear.

The sound of my pounding heart had filled my ears in that moment, the kindness in Lord Viol's smile stealing my ability to think. My mind had gone blank, the only exception being the three adjectives that kept flashing through my head: kind, dependable, handsome. Kind, dependable, handsome.

While the fear I'd harbored toward the magical beast had vanished, my

emotions had been stirred into such a frenzy I could not even begin to process them. That was when Lord Viol had spoken to me, a cool look having come across his face.

“We should be heading back soon. Much time has passed.”

A strange emotion had begun to build in my chest. I’d felt lonely, and a little annoyed.

Must he be so calm and collected? I’d thought crankily. *He acts like he gives hugs like that every day. And yet here I am, my heart pounding over a momentary embrace...*

I’d winced internally.

If I keep thinking selfish things like that, I’m at risk of incurring the wrath of the gods, I thought ruefully.

That was when I’d tried to stand and discovered that my legs wouldn’t work.

Huh? I’d thought, incredulous. *No... This can’t be...*

I’d kept trying to stand, but each time my legs had failed me. Finally, I’d been forced to turn to Lord Viol for help.

“Goodness...” I’d said to him weakly. “I don’t seem to be able to stand...”

I’d had to confess—I’d had no other choice.

Lord Viol had looked down at me with a strange expression on his face, before kneeling down and turning around so his back was to me.

“Lord Viol...?”

“Hop on,” he’d said calmly. “I’ll carry you home on my back.”

“What?! But, but, I...”

“There isn’t any other plausible option.”

I’d had no choice but to concede that he was right, though doubt fluttered in the back of my mind.

You’re able to hide the two of us from watching eyes and summon coffee cups out of the earth, but this is beyond your capabilities...? I hadn’t been able to

help but wonder. *Normally you can conjure up a solution to any problem in mere seconds!*

Seconds later, I'd been overcome with guilt. *I don't want to trouble him, though...*

But feeling guilty was not my only problem by any means.

The thought of climbing onto Lord Viol's back had sent my heart pounding just as violently as it had before.

What if it pounds right out of my chest?

My heart had shown no signs of calming—it was still thundering away. If I did end up pressing my body to Lord Viol's, he might even be able to hear it.

Besides, I'm sure I'm too heavy for him to carry all the way back across the plains to town. Why, I found just walking here quite tiring!

“Come on,” Lord Viol had said firmly.

I'd let out a little nervous squeak.

“You’re overthinking things,” Lord Viol had scolded me over his shoulder. “There’s no other option, so just hop on.”

I'd given up then, knowing that Lord Viol could see through me.

I'm going to have to take you up on your generous offer then, Lord Viol, I'd thought guiltily. Just please ignore the thundering of my heart. Better yet, don't notice it at all!

Lord Viol had cleared his throat. “Ah, sorry, would you mind grabbing the picnic basket?” he'd asked me. “It’s quite light now, so it shouldn’t be a problem, should it?”

“Oh, not at all.”

“Also, make sure you hold on nice and tight. We never know when we might run into a magical beast out on these plains. Be prepared for battle at any time.”

“R-Right!”

Lord Viol is always thinking ahead, always making sure to be prepared for

danger, I'd thought.

But then, a new kind of alertness had come over my body, my muscles pulling taut.

If Lord Viol was going to carry me on his back, he might be slow to use his magic. If I scanned the environment carefully, I might have enough fighting spirit left to attack a magical beast if one approached.

And so, I'd remained in battle mode the entire walk back to town.

We hadn't encountered any more beasts though, after all that. We'd managed to return safely to Lord Viol's residence, where I'd rendezvoused with Vi. From there, the two of us had headed back to my father's estate, where we'd managed to sneak back inside.

But when I'd returned to my room to relax after dinner and a bath, I'd noticed that my heart was still pounding away. I'd felt too frazzled to sit quietly in a chair, so instead, I'd resorted to throwing myself onto the bed with a pathetic fervor, hugging my pillow close.

I'd managed to relax after that, one slow degree at a time. But now, I couldn't stop reliving what had happened today. Every time I thought of the day we'd spent together, my chest would squeeze, and a burning feeling would singe my lungs.

What is this feeling...? I thought, perplexed. *It's so strange...*

Thoughts of Lord Viol filled my mind. He'd done so much for me.

He'd prepared me tea and given me such heartfelt hospitality. He'd done his best to help me choose an outfit, even though doing such a thing was outside both his area of expertise and his comfort zone. He had guided me with such care, ensuring that I was safe while giving me the freedom to learn as much as I could.

He'd given me all the advice I asked for, while always making sure to keep my feelings at the forefront of his thoughts. He'd put his trust in me and given me free rein to try all I'd asked. He even praised my efforts. And if I was ever in serious trouble, I knew that I could go to him and that he would accept me and help me.

I had never met a man as wonderful as Lord Viol before.

And, what's more...

His back had felt so warm and soothing against me as he'd carried me home...

I recalled how I'd pressed my cheek against the line of his back, ever so softly. I recalled the feeling of his arms as they wrapped tightly around me, the delicate pats of his hands on my back, and the soothing murmurs of his voice in my ear.

I recalled the way he'd gazed right into my eyes and nodded so reassuringly at me when I'd lifted my head to look into his face. I recalled the sight of his intense, black eyes...

I hugged my pillow, curling up tighter on my bed.

I thought of the severe expression that came over Lord Viol's face when he instructed me, the look of bliss he made whenever he ate dessert, and the slight bashful tinge to his smile.

I love every one of his expressions, I realized. But then why do I feel so confused? Why am I in such turmoil?

...Could it be?

The thought had occurred to me already, but I had pushed it away, continually blocking it.

Could it be that I'm...in love?

If that was what was happening inside me, then I'd finally have an explanation for this surge of emotion I was feeling.

I had yearned for Prince Helios ever since I was a child. But never had I felt anything like this for Prince Helios. Not even an inch of this powerful emotion.

I had always only ever wanted to be useful to Prince Helios. When we were together, I felt happy and at peace. When we engaged in a lively exchange of ideas, I always felt that my mind had been opened to so many different possibilities that I had not thought of before. I had always believed that once Prince Helios and I were married, we would stand together, hand in hand, and keep the realm safe as we built a strong, prosperous family.

And so I knew.

The feelings I had for Prince Helios were much milder and calmer than what I felt for Lord Viol... And now that I was examining them more closely, I could tell they were closely akin to familial love and a deep, abiding sense of respect.



I lifted my hand to my mouth as I struggled to stifle a huge yawn, the first I'd struggled with in a while. I'd had far too much to think about last night, so I'd ended up just lying in my bed, unable to sleep. Before I knew it, night had worn on long past midnight.

I hadn't used up all my magic to cause a dead faint, since I'd known I didn't have enough time to sleep it off before I had to wake up. So instead, I'd had no choice but to attempt natural sleep last night.

It hadn't worked so well for me, so this morning I was extremely sleepy.

Goodness, what was I doing last night? I admonished myself. It isn't like me to lose track of time. I can't afford to keep making mistakes like this; it's important that I exhaust my magic so that I'm able to get a good night's sleep.

All of a sudden, I sensed someone coming up behind me. I quickly snapped to attention and turned to face whoever it was.

"Oh, Prince Helios..."

"Seren, are you all right? You've been staying up late again, haven't you? I thought I told you that you mustn't push yourself."

Oh goodness, did he see me yawning? How embarrassing.

I'd been caught unaware by Riesz only yesterday, and now this...

I really need to get it together...

"There's no need for concern, Prince Helios," I said, smiling. "I stayed up late, yes, but I haven't done that in a long while. Recently I've been doing my best to get a refreshing eight hours of sleep every night."

He gave me a doubtful look. "Well, that's good to hear..."

Prince Helios might have doubted me, but it was completely true. Not long

ago, I had started to exhaust my magic reserves every night, ensuring that I'd sleep the night through. I was actually in better shape than I'd been in years, since I was getting so much more sleep than I used to. I'd been refreshing myself every night with rejuvenation magic too, which was surely helping as well.

Prince Helios cleared his throat. "Incidentally, Seren, I have something I'd like to discuss with you."

"Yes, Your Highness?"

"It's Marietta's sixteenth birthday next month, isn't it? On the 28th?"

I paused a moment. "Yes, it is."

So, Prince Helios has even memorized the date of Marietta's birthday...

On some level, that made a lot of sense to me.

"Mashlo and the others have suggested having Marietta join us as a salon member then," he told me. "What do you think?"

I found myself quite taken aback. "Goodness... Marietta, a member of the salon?"

Usually, salon sessions only involved Prince Helios, who was in charge of things like national politics, and the sons of the aristocracy, who would grow up to be involved in that world when they came of age. These sessions were a way to ensure the men were fully prepared for their future roles; they used the salon as a sort of societal dry run to practice lightly discussing current events, build their critical thinking skills, and so on.

My presence was something of a special exception—I had only been included in the salons because of my role as Prince Helios's promised fiancée and eventual princess consort.

Marietta, however, had zero reasons to be taking part in the salons as an active member. Still, now that I was destined for a future career as a High Mage, it could prove beneficial for Marietta if she could learn a thing or two during the salons.

Yes, I thought. She should start to take her place as a scholar as soon as it can

possibly be arranged.

“What did the others say?” I asked Prince Helios, choosing my words carefully.

“We haven’t actually discussed it yet,” Prince Helios told me. “I wanted to get your opinion first. There’ll be some dissenting opinions, of course, but I think, on the whole, everyone will be on board.”

“I see. Well, I’m in full agreement.”

“Really?” Prince Helios smiled in relief. “Good. You know...” he said slowly. “This might be a good opportunity for me to test some things out. I’ve been wondering if it would be all right to start allowing women to join the salons, should they so choose.”

“Oh my, indeed?” I hadn’t at all expected the conversation would take such a turn, and I couldn’t hide the surprise in my voice.

“These days, capable personages have been cropping up both amongst the regular folk and those who live in the palace, and I’ve noticed that women are quite well-represented amongst their numbers. I’ve come to the realization recently that I just don’t see any need for the salons to be restricted to men.”

I didn’t know that Prince Helios thought about things like that...

“We don’t just discuss light matters during the salon,” Prince Helios continued, “but serious affairs of state as well, so I fear it might be difficult to convince our subjects to get on board with it right away. I was thinking of starting off by inviting women of the aristocracy to take part.”

“I think that’s a lovely idea,” I told him.

“I would be very pleased if Marietta could be the one to get the ball rolling in that regard.”

Goodness, Prince Helios is thinking in such a progressive way! I thought, impressed. And he’s giving Marietta the opportunity to play a very important role here in the salon.

“I hope she does,” I said.

“Thank you, Seren,” Prince Helios said with a broad smile. “Tomorrow I will

speak to Marietta and see what she thinks.”

At that moment, I made up my mind to do my best to assist Prince Helios. I would do my best to help him bring his plan smoothly to life.

The prince opened the door to the salon and walked inside; I followed close behind.

Several hours passed, and I’d just started brewing some tea for a quick break when Prince Helios called out to me from across the room.

“Seren, won’t you come over here and join our conversation?”

I turned to see that all the salon members were sitting in a circle.

Why don’t I go ahead and pour tea for all of them first, I thought.

“Please, start without me,” I called. “I’ll bring the tea over in just a moment.”

I turned back to where I’d been performing my preparations, quickly applying myself to making tea for our whole group. At the moment, there were nine people present in the salon, including me.

Nine cups it is.

Once I was done, I paused and stared at all the teacups. It was going to take a lot of arm strength to carry them all over at once. But before I had the chance to try, Riesz appeared by my elbow.

“It’s too heavy, let me carry it,” he murmured, giving me a helping hand.

Moments like this reminded me what a gentleman Riesz was.

As Riesz and I made our way over to the circle, I could tell that Prince Helios had already launched into the topic at hand. I found myself a little surprised that the discussion had advanced so far, so quickly.

I began to distribute tea amongst the other salon members, surreptitiously scanning the faces of those present as I did so.

Each of the boys were from prominent families. Four of the ones currently at the table were in Mashlo’s group, with Riesz rounding out the rest group along with Andel and Kitz.

The last two boys were sons of counts and the oldest members of the salon.

Both were highly intelligent and knowledgeable, and great things were expected of them in the future. Presently, they served in an advisory role of sorts during our discussions.

Mashlo and the others would no doubt be on board when asked about the inclusion of women, but I wasn't sure about these two. I found myself scrutinizing their faces.

"Widening the salon entrance criteria... It sounds intriguing. I'm in favor of the general idea. These days, even commoners and women perform vital roles within the palace, after all. It makes no sense for the salon to be the only institution still stuck in the old days," Andel said.

Kitz nodded sagely in response to Andel's words.

"I quite agree," he added. "To be honest, I'd rather have capable, motivated women in government rather than having those roles filled by spoiled aristocratic boys. I know which would prove more effective in my eyes."

Kitz spoke in an affable manner, but his words pulled no punches.

"Yes," he continued, "if such a capable person came along, I'd be happy to work with her."

"I agree, as well," Prince Helios said, smiling.

He seemed pleased by Andel and Kitz's reactions. Mashlo and the others seemed to share the sentiment; they exchanged glances, looking just as pleased as Prince Helios was.

"I agree too, of course," Riesz said, "But somehow... I have doubts about Marietta in that role."

It seemed he was to be the sole voice in opposition.

Andel hummed in agreement.

Kitz's reply was quick to follow. "Sounds right," he said.

"Lady Seren..." Andel said slowly, his gaze shifting to me. I'd finished distributing tea by that time and taken my seat. "You are to be queen someday, which is why your presence in the salon is considered a matter of course. We all accept you. But Marietta... If we let her in, it will look like we're favoring your

family too much. To invite both daughters of the Duke of Qumildy into the salon, where no other women are allowed? As I'm sure you can see, people will get the wrong idea."

Kitz nodded. "We'll have to resolve that issue first," he shot in, responding quickly to Andel's concerns. "The first thing we should do is reach out to the Duke of Tyde and Count Hapisery. I hear both have rather talented daughters. Lady Seren, Lord Riesz, I believe they're in the same academic grade as you, are they not?"

The oldest members of our salon have things handled, it seems, I thought, relieved. *They identified the weakest point in our proposition right away, and now they've already started pursuing solutions!*

I was completely on board with their suggestions.

"I was worried about that, as well," I admitted to them. "But I think the daughters of the Duke of Tyde and Count Hapisery will be a perfect fit for us. From what I've heard, both Linde and Ladia are very interested in pursuing politics."

"Are they?" Prince Helios asked, his expression relaxing. "Wonderful! That should speed things along, then. If they have aspirations toward careers as civil officials in the future, then the experience they could get from the salons would be a huge boon. I'm sure if we reach out to them, they'll both be delighted."

I felt a rush of gratitude go through me over how the conversation had played out.

This sounds like a win for Prince Helios, and for Linde and Ladia as well!

Both of the girls had spoken about wanting to be civil officials if they could. No doubt their families would be pleased as well. They'd probably find it quite thrilling to be approached by actual members of the salon.

"I am well-acquainted with them both," I told the men. "I think their personalities are quite pleasant, and they both get good grades at the Royal Academy. They're typically ranked among the top twenty students."

I had often thought that if girls like them ended up being civil officials, they would be of great benefit to me in my position as eventual queen.

I endorsed them quite strongly, didn't I? I thought, amused. Ah, well. I was feeling very enthusiastic.

Andel and Kitz, at least, looked convinced by my words. They both nodded.

"I see," Andel said. "I have heard that there are many charming, career-minded women out there these days, who choose to work instead of getting married. I suppose such women really do exist."

"If we have girls like that come to work here at the palace, that will shake up the makeup of the salons by a great deal," Kitz continued. "And they'll be capable people, so we can count on them making valuable contributions."

Prince Helios nodded. "If that happens, the salon's significance will heighten. All right. Let us reach out to those two, then."

And so, it was decided. Thanks to all of us, the system would begin to change, little by little.

Riesz cleared his throat. "I hate to speak this way in front of Seren," he said, "but the real issue here is going to be Marietta's presence in the salon."

Kitz hummed thoughtfully. "So you think the others might get distracted by her and not get their work done?"

"Perhaps."

Kitz shrugged. "What does it matter? Let her reject these men now, rather than after they enter the palace, when it could cause actual harm to both parties. If nothing else, it will lessen the number of men fighting over her, which will make the human resources officer's job easier."

Irritation sparked over Riesz's face. "Hey! You don't have to speak so openly about it."

"I-I'm sorry..." I broke in.

I'd felt awkward, seeing Riesz and Kitz clash like this. I hadn't known what else to do.

"You don't have to apologize, Lady Seren," Kitz told me. "The blame lies entirely on the men sitting right in front of us." He glared at Mashlo and the others. "Remember the other day when Marietta stopped by, and all of you

stayed late, until around seven? Just so we're clear, I'm well aware of how Lady Seren covered for you, doing all the work you were too lazy to do."

I could understand why Riesz and Kitz held such apprehensions.

If Marietta joins the salon, I'll be sure to scold her and keep her in line, I thought resolutely. If she's going to be Prince Helios's bride someday, I can't allow her to go on dragging people down.

Mashlo sat up straight in his chair. "Even though we're inviting Marietta to join us, once she becomes a salon member, we won't treat her differently from anyone else."

The rest of Marietta's admirers backed him up, one by one.

"Right! We have to show her the best versions of ourselves!"

"Yeah! I mean, we all promised her we'd do our best, after all."

"Don't speak badly about Marietta on our account!"

Then, all four of them turned to Prince Helios, and said as one: "So accept Marietta into your salon, Your Highness, if it pleases you!"

Kitz let out a long hum, as if he wasn't quite sold on the idea.

"Oh, come on," Andel encouraged the prince. "Let's give it a try."

"I'm opposed," Riesz said firmly.

Having heard their opinions, Prince Helios's gaze turned to me. It seemed he sought mine as well.

"If you choose to invite her, I shall handle guiding Marietta," I promised him. "I find I must ask you to give her a chance as well, Your Highness."

Prince Helios looked around at everyone's faces before he finally told us his decision. "I shall invite all three of the women: Linde of House Tyde, Ladia of House Hapisery, and Marietta of House Qumildy."

Mashlo and his friends all cheered. Kitz, Andel, and Riesz watched them with wry expressions, not saying anything.

After a short pause, Prince Helios spoke again. "As to the issue of our working efficiency, once the girls have been admitted, I'll be having words with those

who underperform and whose work has fallen under an acceptable level. If swift improvement is not seen, such individuals will be ejected from the salon.”

All of a sudden, Mashlo and the others got very solemn.

“As it stands,” Prince Helios continued, not even moving an eyebrow, “I have no plans to eject anyone, so please relax. I simply wanted to make myself clear. The salon exists for the purpose of training individuals who can become immediate assets to the palace. If you cannot produce results, we have no use for you. Make sure you’re prepared for that reality.”

“We will!” Kitz said, laughing.

Andel nodded deeply, looking unaffected. “I mean, all we have to do is keep working like normal, right?”

Riesz, however, was gnashing his teeth, albeit through a smile. “Be they man or woman, anyone caught underperforming will be struck off... Ah, I see, that’s easy enough to remember.”



PRINCE Helios was as good as his word. The very next day, he reached out to Linde and Ladia, and then Marietta, inviting them to the salon. When they first arrived, the three of them looked nervous, but once Prince Helios explained his plans to widen the salon acceptance criteria, they seemed satisfied that they really were welcome here.

“So that’s why you reached out to us, huh?” Linde asked.

“Precisely,” Prince Helios said, nodding. “Of course, I’d like to hear your thoughts on it too. There’s no rush, so you can take your time deciding.”

The girls now had the right to participate in the salon, but whether they really did or not was up to them. Now that their options had been explained to them, this reality had become obvious to them.

“So you approve of the plan, Your Highness?”

He nodded. “Of course, I do. These days, the rise of women is obvious even in the palace. This plan of ours received considerable praise for being very with the times.”

Linde gave him a firm nod. “In that case, I don’t expect my father will have any objections. I’d like to participate.”

Ladia smiled from her spot next to Linde. “I’m certain my household will be fine with it as well. But just in case, I had better make sure.”

Marietta had sat in silence as the two girls gave their answers, but now she looked over at me nervously.

I smiled and nodded at her, wanting to lend her courage.

Marietta’s eyes softened and her mouth relaxed, as if loosened by her relief. “I’d like to consult my family first before I give my official answer,” she told the prince.

A very safe answer, I thought approvingly.

Marietta glanced away from Prince Helios and back over at me for a moment, and I nodded at her again. She smiled at me, happiness filling her expression.

This meeting was the first Marietta would have heard of our plan; she must have been quite taken aback. I hadn’t spoken of it to Mother, Father, or Marietta—Prince Helios had instructed me to keep it to myself so that Linde and Ladia could learn of the offer at the same time my sister did. Once Marietta and I returned to our residence tonight, we would no doubt discuss her answer as a family.

I’m so glad Father’s returning from his business trip! I thought cheerfully. What fortuitous timing!

My brain flicked forward, already beginning to plan how we’d handle the situation when we returned to the estate. First, I’d need to hear Marietta’s genuine feelings on the matter. We could go discuss the matter with Mother and Father together after that.

Yes, indeed, I thought cheerfully. That plan sounds like our best bet.

“I would be delighted to welcome all three of you to the salon,” Prince Helios said, signaling the end of our meeting. “Please, think your answers over.”

With those parting words from the prince, the three women left the salon.

Andel and Kitz smiled at each other, looking relieved.

"I've never spoken to any of them before, but they all seem like quite upstanding young ladies," Andel said.

"Indeed," Kitz replied. "I hope this goes well."

Prince Helios gave a happy sigh at their responses. "Ah, good," he said, smiling. "I, too, am relieved."

I glanced around the room, suddenly realizing that Mashlo and the others had disappeared at some point.

Perhaps they did not wish for Prince Helios, Kitz, or Andel to see them speaking to Marietta, I mused.

I went dashing out into the corridor, and...

I was right!

It looked like Marietta was just now saying her goodbyes to Linde and Ladia.

No doubt she was planning on heading home now, while the other two girls would probably head back to the Royal Academy. Riesz and I were not required to go to the academy on salon days, but Linde and Ladia most likely had supplementary lessons to attend.

Marietta finished saying her goodbyes, then lingered in the corridor for a moment once Linde and Ladia had left. Mashlo and his group approached her mere moments later, calling out to her.

I smiled. *At least they showed the proper level of decorum this time.*

Feeling a bit relieved, I turned around and went back into the salon.



AFTER that, I got engrossed in work for a while, my concentration only breaking when Mashlo and the others came back in. Their entrance was quite noisy—I had no doubt it had broken Prince Helios's concentration as well.

I looked up, sighing quietly, only to see Prince Helios leaving the salon. I got out of my seat, planning to take a break myself.

Well, now... I mused. Which tea shall I make?

Tea was highly favored among the members of the salon, so there were many

varieties laid out.

Something with a little sweetness and a good fragrance would be nice, I thought. It'll soothe my brain after working so hard.

I selected a can of peach tea and shook some tea leaves into my cup, then poured some hot water in. A sweet scent rose from the cup, chasing away the tiredness that had settled over me. I breathed in the fragrance for a moment, enjoying the sweet aroma, before turning to head back to my seat.

I took a few steps forward, then froze as I was passing by the window.

Something's going on out there.

I looked down through the glass, catching sight of Marietta's figure. She was smiling happily, chatting away with a second person. The scene was most unexpected, and I blinked, unable to believe my eyes.

My breath caught in my chest as I gazed at the man speaking to Marietta.

I could not see his face, but I knew that golden hair, that build.

Marietta was speaking with Prince Helios.

They did not speak long, perhaps wary of being seen. I hurried back to my seat once they parted, doing my best to hide my shock.

It's all right, I told myself. This is nothing new. I already knew there was something going on between them.

Thankfully, the pain in my chest was much less than what it had been the first time.

Perhaps, I thought ruefully, that's because I've found someone else to take my interest.

At any rate, this was the last time I would allow myself to be shaken.

If Marietta was to join the salon, then it was possible that I would see this sight on a daily basis.

This is all for the best, I told myself firmly. Truly, it is. And I wish them both happiness from the bottom of my heart.

Prince Helios 2

At This Late Stage...

I watched as the three ladies lowered their heads politely and left through the salon doors, releasing a small sigh as I did so. They seemed to have grasped the plan, and my impression of them was quite good.

As Seren had said, Linde and Ladia were both dependable young ladies. I had spoken to both at balls and banquets, and neither seemed frivolous or timid. Indeed, I had seen both of them exhibit moments of great confidence. To women of such character, this situation could provide quite an opportunity.

At any rate, I was pleased with how our meeting had gone.

“I’ve never spoken to any of them before, but they seem like put-together young ladies,” Andel said.

“Indeed,” Kitz replied. “I hope this goes well.”

As far as I can tell, they both seem to share my sentiments. They appear to have accepted Linde and Ladia as well.

Their support made me feel even more assured of my decision.

I smiled at them both. “I’m glad to have your support. They seemed to accept the plan—indeed, they seemed to view it with much positivity. I think we’re all feeling a little relieved.”

When Mashlo and the others had first suggested that I allow Marietta to become a salon member, I’d blanched. I’d told them they were speaking complete nonsense, but now I was glad I’d waited until my emotions settled a bit before I made a decision.

Once I’d thought about it a bit more, I’d realized that bringing Marietta into the fold as a salon member would give me more room to maneuver. Since she’d be one of us, the others wouldn’t be able to act differently around her. I’d be able to keep salon business going at a high efficiency without disturbing the

peace.

Not to mention, if I was able to pull this off, it would push the system substantially forward. Bringing women into the palace to perform various political roles would only elevate men's image of the other sex, and would have the bonus effect of giving us a wider range of choices when selecting candidates for posts.

The women who had begun to enter government service recently were excellent, including Seren. They would not be outmatched by men. If I could just get them used to the political maneuverings inside of the salon, it'd greatly benefit them when it came time for them to take their place in a government service role.

With these thoughts running through my mind, I almost didn't notice when Mashlo and his friends climbed to their feet and left the salon.

Confusion flickered through me.

"Hm?"

Then suddenly, I understood.

Ah, they're hurrying after Marietta, no doubt.

I'd only warned them just moments before, but those four were slow to learn a lesson. Still, as long as they did their work, I didn't feel like lecturing them.

It'll all depend on how much progress they make today.

My mind drifted a bit, settling on Mashlo.

What exactly is Mashlo intending to do, acting like that? I wondered. Despite how he normally acts, I thought he might have feelings for Seren after seeing how he treated her at the ball the other night. But now here he is again, carrying on after Marietta...

I felt my eyebrows furrow together.

Is it possible Mashlo actually has feelings for Seren, even though he treats Marietta like that in front of her? But, even if he does...Seren is my fiancée. Mashlo couldn't pursue her even if he wanted to.

A chill went through me.

Could it be that he's decided to have Marietta as a consolation prize, so he can remain close to Seren...?

I shook my head.

No way. I'm overthinking this. If he wanted to stay near Seren, there's no way he'd act like this. I must be mistaken.

I turned my attention back to my government-related work, but I couldn't stop thinking about it.

Oh, I wanted to get something for Seren... Hmm, maybe I can ask Marietta for help?

Almost half a month had passed since I'd gone into town with Seren.

Now that some time had passed, I was hoping to ask her again. But when I did, I wanted to give Seren a present, something she'd like. But sadly, I had no idea what kind of thing would delight her.

I didn't know her favorite flower or what colors she liked; I didn't know what she was interested in or if there was anything her heart ached to have.

I peeked over at Seren, who was absorbed in her work, and sighed. I had no clue about any of those things, but I owed her something after having left her alone for so long.

It wasn't like I hadn't given her birthday presents each year—I'd presented her with the latest, most fashionable items, and made sure I'd given her gifts well-suited to a duke's eldest daughter.

I'd been most careful to do everything I'd been obligated to as her fiancé. And yet...

And yet...if I was honest with myself, I'd never chosen anything with nothing but her in mind. I'd never just looked for something that would make her happy, something that would make her smile.

I'd never taken a moment to think of her personality or her interests—I'd simply given her what I thought would appeal to a young lady of her age.

I knew that, now.

When Seren and I had gone to town together, I was struck by the way her sparkling eyes had lit up as she gazed at the various goods on offer. If she had ever reacted in such a way to my previous gifts, I wouldn't know—I had never given her one in person. I'd just had them delivered to her home.

This time, when I give Seren her birthday gift, I want it to be something that makes her cheeks flush with pleasure, just like they did when we were in town. And this time, I'm going to hand it to her in person.

I was absolutely determined to do it right this time, but it was not so easy to find out what Seren liked. I couldn't ask her. I could try to pick something up by listening closely to what she said during our casual conversations, but unfortunately, I didn't get the chance to converse with her very often.

The two of us were in different grades, and rarely encountered one another at school. Even our lunches were taken separately. We had never spent our weekends together either.

And if I suddenly ask her to spend time with me on the weekend, no doubt she'll think it quite strange...

I had the chance to speak with her twice a week when we met at the salon, but I'd found I couldn't engage her in much conversation in front of the others. And even though I tried my best to pay attention whenever we did speak, I found myself growing quite nervous in front of her in that setting.

It's like I'm destined to get stymied at every turn...

All of a sudden, an idea came to me.

If I couldn't ask the woman herself, I could gather information from those around her. And as Seren had been able to divulge the items Marietta desired to Mashlo, perhaps Marietta could do the same for me.

Clearly, sisters have access to that sort of information about each other. And if I go find Marietta soon, I should be able to have a quick word with her before she leaves.

I could prepare whatever it was that Seren desired in secret, and then

surprise her with it. I didn't need to wait for her birthday—all I had to do was construct some sort of pretext and give it to her then.

Just then, Mashlo and the others walked back into the salon.

That means Marietta should be alone. If I'm going to speak with her, it needs to be now.

I put on my coat and left the salon.

Viol 11

A Blissful Time

I sat in Lady Seren's room as I had numerous times before, watching as she sent barrage after barrage of ferocious Wind Cutter spells spinning into the boundary I'd cast for her. It seemed the experience Lady Seren had gained the day before yesterday, when we'd gone out beast-hunting, had caused her fervor for her magical training to double.

She worked hard yesterday as well, but somehow, I feel like she's especially fired up today...

Her growth was truly ferocious—the number of Wind Cutter blades she could conjure had now surpassed twenty-five.

"Lady Seren, that's enough for now," I told her. "Take a break."

"Just a little longer!"

"No, no, take a breather. It's better to pause and reflect every so often, so that you can fine-tune your performance."

She didn't reply, just gave me a long, resentful look.

Don't look at me with those eyes, I thought, amused.

But this was Lady Seren I was talking about—no doubt she believed that the faster she charged ahead, the faster her results would improve.

Remember, Lady Seren, rest is always important.

"I understand it will break your concentration," I told her. "But taking a break can give you new ideas—it helps your brain refresh itself. Please, just rest for a moment."

"You're right..." Lady Seren muttered. "Perhaps I'm obsessing over it a little too much."

"It's not bad to be passionate," I reminded her. "Now, let's have some tea."

"Okay."

Lady Seren sighed, easing out of her intense practice mode. Her face relaxed back into her usual, calm expression. She walked over to me, and I watched as

she settled her hands over the back of a chair. She glanced over at me, then suddenly started giggling.

“Hmm? What’s so funny?”

“It’s your tail.” She giggled again.

I glanced down. “Hmph.”

It seemed my tail had begun slapping against the table without me realizing it. It was inevitable. After all, today was the day I could finally eat the cookies I had asked for. Even my tail seemed excited about it.

“You’ve been looking forward to them that much?” Lady Seren asked, smiling at me. “I’m so sorry for keeping you waiting.”

Lady Seren sat down in her chair, looking completely relaxed now. She stroked a hand over my fur, then turned to the small basket next to her. She reached in, eventually producing a cookie about the size of my face.

“Here you go,” she said, holding it out to me.

Ah, what a delectable aroma...

The scent of butter drifting from the cookie intoxicated me. The fragrance spoke of sweetness, the scent making my nose twitch. I bit into the cookie while Lady Seren was holding it, then sat down, steadying the cookie with both forepaws as I feasted.

Ah, what bliss.

My mind flicked back to the first time I’d come to Lady Seren’s room, when she’d allowed me to eat a cookie just like this one. It had been so amazing I’d been hoping to have the chance to eat another one ever since.

I immersed myself in the cookie’s buttery scent and crunchy texture, marveling that such a large cookie could also be as thick as the width of my tail. It was absolutely delicious, and every bite filled me with deep satisfaction.

That was when I realized that Lady Seren hadn’t even attempted to eat one of her delicious cookies. Instead, she was just watching me eat with a happy smile.

What a waste! How can she just drink tea when these cookies are so

fantastic?!

A flicker of dissatisfaction rose up in my heart.

I want Lady Seren to enjoy this deliciousness with me...

“Aren’t you going to eat?” I asked her.

She shook her head. “I’ve gained some weight recently. I have to hold back.”

“You gained weight...? A little more heft to you would only be a benefit, I think.”

Perhaps she has a hard time tying her corsets, I mused. It must be hard being a woman.

But though I felt some sympathy for her, I had something more important to discuss.

“Lady Seren, it seems to me that you trained even harder today than you did yesterday. Did something happen?”

“Oh dear,” she said, laughing. “Am I so easy to read?”

“Indeed, you are,” I told her. “Tonight was the first time I genuinely worried that my barrier magic might not hold up against your Wind Cutter spell. The level of intensity you displayed was quite something.”

“Oh, you exaggerate. But I will admit that something happened that made me even more determined to become a High Mage than I ever was before. Except, well...I still can’t really say much about it.

“I see...”

All of a sudden, Lady Seren clenched her fists, face hardening in determination. “I have to do my best!”

I remained silent, watching her out of the corner of my eyes as I devoured my cookie. The situation to which Lady Seren alluded was no doubt something she did not want Lord Viol to know.

It must be something that is not yet public knowledge, I thought. But if it is something Lady Seren feels she ought not to speak about, then I cannot possibly pry.

I abandoned any thoughts of launching an investigation.

Mysterious reasoning aside, Lady Seren seemed to be all in, in a way she had not been before.

Perhaps we can go ahead and move on to the next phase, then.

“All right, Lady Seren,” I said, straightening my spine. “I have something I wish to speak with you about.”

Her eyebrows rose. “What is it?”

“It is time for us to move to the next phase,” I told her. “Let us begin practicing the next type of magic—barrier spells.”

“Really?!” Lady Seren got to her feet with a clatter.

I inclined my head. “Yes. My master told me that you defeated a beast all by yourself while you were out on the plains. He praised the way you stuck it out and saw the battle through. If you have improved that much, then it makes sense for us to advance to a further stage of your studies.”

“Lord Viol praised me?!” Lady Seren grabbed hold of my forepaws, bringing her face right up to mine.

You are far too close, Lady Seren! Oh, be still, my beating heart...!

I tried my hardest to remain cool, but all I managed to say was, “Oh. Well, ah...”

Lady Seren was unfazed. “For you to have repeated such a thing, Vi, you must have been sure it wasn’t just flattery. Lord Viol...he really praised me, didn’t he?”

“Of course, he did,” I told her. “Do you really think he would try to *flatter* you?”

“But I... I couldn’t even perform my Wind Cutter as well as I usually can... And even after all that practice, I only managed to conjure limp blades...”

“Ah, yes, I heard about that too, but—”

“And I cried like a big baby! My legs even turned to jelly, and he had to *carry* me home. Oh, I was really useless!”

"So... So that's what happened, hmm?"

"I took up the time of an eminent man like Lord Viol...and all I did was cause him endless inconvenience! I feel so guilty!"

The words seemed to pour out of Lady Seren in a gush of emotion, as if she had been upset about what had happened all this time.

So, this is what she's been thinking this whole time? No wonder she practiced as if someone had lit a fire beneath her yesterday. Perhaps I had not praised her well enough...

"You fought against your fear, and in the end, you felled your opponent," I reminded her. "That's wonderful. You should be proud of yourself. And my master really praised you a lot."

"Lord Viol did...?"

Lady Seren let go of my front paws and interlaced her fingers in front of her chest. A flush rose on her face, a dreaminess coming over her smiling expression.

To think that mere praise from me could make her this happy... I sighed. Lady Seren's openness is so cute...

I started in on a second cookie, holding it in my front paws as I looked up at Lady Seren. "He did, indeed," I told her. "My master said he is looking forward to your next excursion."

I'm in cat form, I thought, so I can be honest with Lady Seren about my feelings.

And as I watched joy fill Lady Seren's face, I could not fail to feel some happiness of my own.

"Next time?" she asked, eyes sparkling as she beamed at me. "Lord Viol plans to go with me next time, too?!" She leaned even farther forward in her chair, and I flinched a little, even as I clutched my cookie.

I can hear you quite well already, Lady Seren, I thought, feeling a little flustered. I promise you, you do not need to bring your face so close to mine.

I forced my mind back to the topic at hand, ignoring her closeness. "From

what I remember, Lady Seren, my master said he would be accompanying you for a while.”

“Yes, he did, but... After all the trouble I caused, I thought he was just paying lip-service.”

Oh dear, I thought, mildly alarmed. It seems Lady Seren is taking what happened during the excursion the other day as a colossal failure, even though she did quite well.

But before I could get too worried, she continued, “Thanks to you, Vi, I realize now that Lord Viol truly was praising me. Only...” she trailed off.

“What is it now?” I asked. “Is there something else weighing on you?”

“Oh, it’s just that Lord Viol is such a busy person. I hate to take up the valuable time of a man who’s working to protect our realm.”

“Eh, it’s fine, isn’t it?” I replied, shrugging my feline shoulders. “Think of your excursions as a nice change of pace for him. Anyway, he didn’t look bothered by it to me.”

Lady Seren didn’t seem fully convinced. “But... Is it really okay for him to... indulge me so much?”

“It’ll be fine, just toss him a dessert or two every now and again. I think he’s actually enjoying it. Go ahead and let yourself be indulged.”

“Now, now, if you speak like that, your master might scold you, you know,” Lady Seren said, giggling adorably.

She stroked a hand over my head, and the sensation of her fingers scratching my ears felt so good that I couldn’t stop my eyes from closing on their own.

Lady Seren... Your petting skills have seriously improved, have they not?

I was floating in bliss, eyes squeezed shut, when Lady Seren said, out of the blue, “Lord Viol... He’s really a splendid person, isn’t he?”

A shocked sound caught in my throat. My head snapped up, and I stared up at Lady Seren, momentarily stunned into silence. For her to say such a thing to me all of a sudden...

“What’s wrong?” she asked, catching onto my discomfort. “Your eyes are so big all of a sudden.”

“Ah, well, it’s just... *Splendid*, you say?”

“Yes,” she said, with no hesitation at all. “Your master is a truly splendid man.”

“I... I see...”

I felt myself getting embarrassed all of a sudden. I looked away from Lady Seren and nibbled my cookie. I was pleased to receive such praise from her, of course, but I felt deeply embarrassed. I felt mortified at the strength of my reaction.

If we keep talking like this... Well, I’m not sure I can handle it.

After a moment’s thought, I decided that I wanted to finish up my cookies and get started on magical barrier casting. But before I could suggest we get started, Lady Seren continued to speak.

“When I first asked Lord Viol to procure me a home tutor,” she said, still stroking my fur, “I actually didn’t expect much to come from it.”

Well, that’s fair enough, I thought. *What she wanted was kind of a tall order.*

“I mean, I’d heard from several people that Lord Viol was famous for hating his fellow man, and I knew that he might face repercussions if he agreed to find me a tutor. So I really didn’t expect him to do nearly this much for me.”

It’s true that I’d typically ignore such a big ask, I mused. *Honestly...I don’t even know why I’ve gone this far myself.*

“But despite all that, he dispatched me a wonderful, talented tutor like you! And now he’s even saying he’ll accompany me on my training as well! He’s such a big-hearted man...”

I found I was unable to respond. I just sat there, my tail slapping the table.

“He even worked hard to choose the right clothes for me... And he gave me so much helpful advice... He’s the kind of man you can rely on absolutely.”

“I-Is he, now...?”

“I know you’re ace at magic, Vi, but Lord Viol is also seriously impressive! When he realized we hadn’t packed any teacups, he conjured some coffee mugs right out of thin air!”

“Ah, well,” I said weakly. “That’s faster than purchasing new ones...”

“That’s beside the point!”

“Wh-What *is* the point?”

“Maybe you’re used to it, since you’re Lord Viol’s familiar, but most people wouldn’t think of making their own cups! I mean, making cups isn’t typically a type of magic people would bother to learn.”

“I-It isn’t?”

“Lord Viol is seriously talented, and super smart!” Lady Seren said, voice highly impassioned. “I was absolutely shocked! I thought I was dreaming at first!”

I had no idea that Lady Seren thought so highly of me.

I felt torn between a mixture of delight and mortification. If I was in human form, my skin would have flushed red with embarrassment. I tried to shrug the feeling off, but my tail gave me away. It lashed around, smacking against the tabletop.

“He took on those beasts out on the plains without even twitching an eyebrow, and he spoke with such a relaxed confidence! Everything he did was so cool and calm!” Lady Seren paused. “Although...”

Although?

“Although, when he eats sweets, he looks *adorable*, and when he’s dancing, he looks so dashing and handsome...”

“And...all those things...they make him *splendid*? ”

“Yes, absolutely *splendid*! He’s so kind, and reliable, and cool, and adorable, and he’s such a hard worker... Don’t *you* think he’s just wonderful?”

Me? Think myself wonderful? Is she truly expecting me to agree to that?!

My tail started smashing against the table. *Whap! Whap!* it went in rapid

succession.

“Th-That’s enough,” I finally managed to say. “I think I get it. Thanks.”

“Hehe, how come you’re getting all bashful, Vi?” Lady Seren smiled, stroking the tip of my tail.

Stop that! I wailed internally. My tail is sensitive!

“It’s just...having to sit here while my master is praised so openly... It’s giving me secondhand embarrassment.”

“Oh my, is it?” Lady Seren asked, beaming. “But Lord Viol really is such a wonderful person!”

I could take no more. I was suddenly very glad to be in my cat form.

Lady Seren is saying such great things about me, but if only she knew how pathetic I truly am... I thought, feeling rather ashamed. Well, I'll just have to make sure I never show her that side of me.

The cookie had lost its flavor. I put the one I held down on the table and climbed to my feet.

“We’ve rested enough,” I said firmly. “Let us begin practicing barrier magic.”

“Oh, wow!” Lady Seren rose to her feet, looking somehow refreshed. “I can’t wait!”

Naturally, my star student managed to master barrier magic almost entirely within the course of just one evening.



SOON Voiday approached once again. Against my better judgment, I invited Lady Seren to my home once more. Unfortunately, I had not been able to secure another safe place to take her, so I had no other options. Lady Seren seemed to have grown a bit more comfortable in my home, at least, so the plan was not without benefits.

While Lady Seren was getting changed, I prepared tea. The gesture was my way of showing her my appreciation for the delicious treats she always offered me when I visited her room. As I made it, though, I remembered that Lady

Seren had mentioned that she was watching her weight.

What sort of snack can I make her that isn't sweet but will still delight her...?

Lady Seren poked her head nervously around the kitchen door.

"Lord Viol...?"

I turned to her, having finished up my cooking preparations. "Yes? Ah, you've finished getting changed."

"Yes, I have. Um... What are you doing?"

"Oh, I'm making a dessert," I told her. I stepped past where she stood at the kitchen door, bringing the ingredients I'd prepped along with me to the living room. "Would you like to see?"

"Huh?" Lady Seren's voice rose in surprise. "You're making a dessert...?"

She seemed a bit confused that I'd left the kitchen behind, but I thought she might enjoy it if I prepared the dessert in front of her.

"Lady Seren," I said, "could you bring that tea set to the living room and put it on the table?"

"Okay."

I felt a rush of regret for asking almost immediately.

She's the daughter of a duke! I thought, mortified.

But Lady Seren didn't seem to think my request strange. She started to brew tea without indicating anything was amiss.

Ah, that's right. Whenever I have visited Lady Seren's room, she does the tea preparations herself.

I was not used to preparing refreshments for guests, but it appeared that it was no issue at all for Lady Seren.

"Lord Viol, you can even bake desserts?"

I shook my head. "Goodness, no. I don't have that sort of talent. But all I need to do in order to make this dessert is mix it up."

Lady Seren looked at me in confusion as I showed her the container.

“Have you ever eaten this?” I asked her. “It’s yogurt.”

“Oh yes, I eat it quite often,” she replied. “I’ve heard it’s supposed to be very nutritious and good for your skin.”

“I just need to mix some sugar and fruit in with the yogurt, and our dessert’s almost complete.”

I dropped the other ingredients I’d brought with me into the container as Lady Seren watched.

“Oh, it’s so pretty!” she exclaimed, pleased. “You can see the color of the fruit through the whiteness of the yogurt!”

I put my hand over the yogurt container, then glanced at Lady Seren.

“All that’s left is to chill it,” I told her, quickly conjuring up some freezing magic.

Lady Seren let out a squeak of surprise as the air above the container froze over, making my hand and the container sparkle with ice crystals. As Lady Seren watched in astonishment, the yogurt froze in the blink of an eye.

“Now we cut it and plate it up,” I told her.

I cut a thick slice of the frozen yogurt and put it onto Lady Seren’s plate. Her eyes sparkled as she gazed down at it.

“You can see all the fruits studded inside it!” she cried, charmed. “It’s so pretty!”

“I am glad to see you so pleased. It looks quite good for something I merely stirred together, does it not? And it’s good for one’s health and complexion as well. Will you try some?”

“I absolutely will!” Lady Seren replied. “I don’t usually get the chance to eat frozen desserts. There aren’t many people out there who can freeze things using magic, but you did it as easy as breathing!” Lady Seren giggled, although I wasn’t sure what was funny.

I watched as she ate her frozen yogurt, her eyes fluttering closed in pleasure.

Judging by her face, it looks like she likes it.

“It’s delicious!” she told me once she’d swallowed. “It’s not too sweet, and it has such a refreshing taste.”

Yes, that’s what I like about it, too! I thought. *Sometimes even I feel like eating something light and refreshing.*

“The subtle sweetness comes from the fruit, I assume?” Lady Seren asked.

“Indeed. I used peaches, so that’s probably what you’re tasting.”

She smiled at me. “I can’t believe you managed to whip up such a rare and delicious dessert with your own hands, Lord Viol.”

“I merely threw the ingredients together,” I demurred. “I wanted to offer you something as a thank you for always providing me with such delicious things to eat.”

“So magic can be used for stuff like this too, huh?” Lady Seren asked, staring at the frozen yogurt thoughtfully.

I nodded. “It has many practical uses. I often use magic for doing things like this in my everyday life. I learn all sorts of things by trying to apply my magic to various issues that crop up. I’m able to take that knowledge and use it to invent new magical tools all the time.”

“Oh, that’s right! High Mages invent new magical equipment on top of their other duties, don’t they?”

“Yes, we do. After all, we *are* the best at magic. But rather than invent grandiose things, I find it more fulfilling to create magic that can be used practically to enhance the lives of ordinary people and bring them happiness.”

“Oh, really...” Lady Seren nodded, bringing another spoonful of frozen yogurt slowly to her mouth. She took a bite with clear enjoyment, then turned to me with a smile. “I can see what you mean! What I feel as I eat this dessert—it’s true happiness.”

So cute... I moaned internally.

Abruptly, I felt quite glad that I was so skilled at magic. It felt good to be accomplished at something that genuinely brought happiness to other people.

I smiled at Lady Seren, feeling quite moved.

After that, we both continued to eat our fill of frozen yogurt. Once Lady Seren was done eating, she suddenly began looking all about the room.

“What’s the matter?” I asked her.

“Oh, it’s just, I was wondering where Vi went. He’s been gone for ages; I was just wondering what he might be up to.”

Ah, there it is, I thought. I knew she would ask at some point. I need to be subtle, so she doesn’t keep asking me the same question the next time we swap places.

I gave a little cough. “Vi has taken over my duties in my absence. He’s off doing some very important work.”

Lady Seren’s eyes widened. “Oh, I see. It’s amazing that he can do your work in your place. Vi really is an incredibly gifted familiar, isn’t he?”

I nodded. “He can’t work quite as fast as me, of course, but he is doing his best.”

“Vi’s working hard, huh?” Lady Seren mused. She seemed to have swallowed my story completely. “I need to learn to be more like him.”

“Indeed,” I continued, feeling a little guilty. “He’s a good example for you to follow. While I am out with you, Lady Seren, Vi will take over and handle my work duties, as he is now.”

“Oh... I see. Yes, I know you’re terribly busy, Lord Viol. I’ll do my best not to take up too much of your precious time!”

“Ah, well, just do your best. You seem quite motivated now, so let’s finish up here and head out.”

“Okay!” Lady Seren’s face was filled with motivation and resolve.

I inwardly breathed a sigh of relief. *Looks like I did a good enough job distracting her from the truth.*



SOON after that, we left the house and made our way to the market. Once we got there, I slowed my pace.

Lady Seren hadn't had the time on our other visits to look at the various shops around the market. The first time she'd gotten surrounded by thugs and had to flee, and the second time we'd been running late on our mission to buy beast subjugation gear.

She would frequent shops like these when she became a High Mage, no doubt. It was important that she get used to the atmosphere of the market and the act of shopping in general before then. Otherwise, she would find ordinary life quite difficult.

"Lady Seren," I said, leaning forward. "We have a little extra time today. We should take a stroll around the market and visit any shops that are of interest to you, and perhaps do some shopping."

I reached for my waist pouch, suddenly remembering what I'd brought for her.

"Hold out your palms, Lady Seren."

"Okay."

She turned her palms upward, and I dropped some coins into her open hands.

"This is your payment for slaying the Ketsy. In other words, your earnings. Use it however you would like."

"I... I earned all this?" Lady Seren beamed. "It's the first time I've ever made my own money!" She seemed delighted to have earned the money all by herself —her face lit up with joy.

"Now, there are plenty of shops around here, Lady Seren, so please take a look at their wares, and buy whatever you like."

"Oh... Okay! Ah, what should I do...? My heart's pounding."

Lady Seren clutched her meager sum of money to her chest, her smile nervous. Even though she was a duke's daughter, it was clear she hadn't experienced shopping and browsing by herself.

I pointed around the market, showing Lady Seren the various types of shops.

"There are places that sell food, accessories, a sundry of small goods, and even some larger items. Even just looking is fun, isn't it?"

"Yes!" Lady Seren replied. "When you see it for the first time, it's quite a head-spin!"

I suppressed a smile. "Well, look as much as you like. Window-shop, and when you see something that takes your fancy, stop and look as much as you like. Don't worry about anything else—all you need to decide is whether or not to make a purchase."

"Okay!"

She seems pleased, I thought, and I felt my own rush of pleasure at seeing her so giddy. I hope she finds something she likes.

I walked slowly behind Lady Seren as she browsed the shops. She was clearly enjoying herself—her eyes darting back and forth over the various goods. She'd seemed hesitant at first, but now she was looking around without any hint of nerves. She was even strolling into shops without a moment's hesitation.

I'm glad she's having a good time, I thought.

But despite visiting several shops, Lady Seren did not buy anything.

"You're not going to buy something?" I asked.

Lady Seren's face went very solemn. "I don't have that much money," she replied. "I want to spend it carefully."

My, how impactful. To hear such a thing from a wealthy aristocrat's daughter who could buy anything her heart desired...

But as I watched Lady Seren *ooh* and *ahh* over normal sorts of items, I realized I didn't truly think of her that way anymore. From what I knew of her, she'd probably had few opportunities to shop for herself.

Come to think of it, just the other day, she said something about not having any money that she could spend freely by herself. The meager amount of money she now possessed must seem major to her. The thought made me smile even more.

I remembered being in her position. It would have been easier for her to choose something if she'd had more money, but the earnings from subjugating a low-ranking magical beast could not buy much.

It's fine, I thought from my place at Lady Seren's side. She can deliberate over what to buy as long as she needs. She'll feel awkward if she feels like I'm waiting for her to buy something.

I assessed the folks around us—they seemed to be mostly male adventurers. The shopkeeper was similarly young and rough-looking.

This must be a shop that sells accessories to adventurers.

I took a closer look at the wares and was surprised to find the selection was quite good.

"Oh, look! There are plenty of items with divine protection," I pointed out to Lady Seren.

Alas, it was the shopkeeper who replied. "Oh, sir, you've got a good eye! These ones here all have divine protective properties."

"That is quite evident..." I cleared my throat. "I mean, that's obvious."

I was attempting to alter my speaking patterns to the unfamiliar phrases of the common folk. I found it quite interesting, so far. Though despite my hard work, it was obvious I was speaking more eloquently than they were.

Surely such a trivial amount of extra courtesy will not be a problem.

I leaned forward, examining the accessories the shopkeeper had indicated more closely.

"Ah, I feel their power," I said softly.

Speaking of which, the fastener of my robe has become weak lately. If it came unfastened during battle, that would be a real hassle. It wasn't an immediate issue, though, since I was only fighting against mid-ranking magical beasts. I wouldn't have to move around too much during battle.

Still, I thought, perhaps I should browse for a new robe fastener. This shop does have a surprisingly large selection, and quite a few different designs...

The shopkeeper broke into my thoughts. "Our shop carries many different colors of jewels, so please give a shout once you've made up your mind."

"Will do," I said, nodding at him.

Lady Seren drifted closer to my side. “Um, Professor, which colors do you prefer? I know you favor black, but what about other colors?”

“Me? Favor black?” I asked her blankly. “Ah, I suppose my clothes are mostly black. But I usually only go with black because I hate thinking about combining colors.”

“Really?! So, uh, so what colors *do* you like?”

I thought for a moment, then decided, “I like silver. It’s subdued and classic.”

“Oh yes, I mean, right, uh, yeah?” I laughed as she stumbled over her words, trying not to fall into her polite speech patterns as a member of high society. “Ahem, I remember seeing your embroidery was silver...”

You’ll get used to it soon enough, I thought, deciding to cherish this moment since she would likely adapt to commoner speech at record speed, as she did everything else.

As far as silver embroidery goes... The only clothing I could think of decorated in such a way was the outfit I’d worn to the ball we danced at together. It seemed she remembered it quite well.

Lady Seren leaned forward, looking at the accessories I’d been musing over. “What are those?”

“They’re robe fasteners. My robe fastener has grown weak, and I would prefer it not come loose during battle, so I was thinking of getting a new one.”

“There are a lot of silver ones,” she pointed out. “See, look how pretty! But they don’t have stones on them.”

I shrugged. “I don’t really mind whether they have stones or not. I just care about how strong the protective magical barrier is.” I pointed at one of the fasteners we were looking at. “See how fine the engravings are on this one? You can tell it was crafted by a skilled artisan.”

Usually I dressed in black and spared no thought for things like fasteners, but this one had caught my attention. The engraving on it really was lovely—startlingly so.

“Ah! Your eye has fallen on that one, has it?” the shopkeeper asked in a lively

tone. "This young lady here has a fine eye too, it seems!"

Lady Seren blushed. "Well, it was just so beautiful..."

"I'm delighted you think so! This robe fastener was made using new techniques by a competent craftsman, but we're selling it for quite cheap when you think of the quality. Have you heard of a town called Mincallan?"

"I have," Lady Seren said, nodding. "It's a town in the north famous for its skilled artisans."

I hummed with interest. "Is it, now...?"

So it's a practice piece, I thought. The artisan must be skilled, indeed—I've never seen such fine engraving before.

A feeling of surety filled me. *This is fate. If I don't snap this piece up now, I'll regret it later.*

And besides...I just liked it.

I checked the piece to see how it fastened, and it seemed to work just fine.

I'd like to buy whatever future work this artisan comes out with, I thought idly.

I glanced back at the shopkeeper. "Do you know the name of the artisan?"

"Ah, so you're interested in him, hmm? The artist's a man by the name of Rohto. He's young, but very skilled, despite it. Not bad, eh? He's worthy of the name artisan."

"I'll remember his name," I said, reaching out to pick up the beautiful silver fastener.

But before I could reach it, Lady Seren's hand pushed mine away.

"I will—I'll buy it," she declared.

I waved her off. "Oh, don't worry. This is my own personal shopping that I'm doing."

"I want to," she told me firmly. "I've been looking for a gift for you this whole time, Professor. Shopkeeper, I'll take this one."

The shopkeeper gave her a big grin before winking at me. "Thank you! Ah,

you're a lucky fellow."

"Hey, hey, hold on," I said urgently. "If you buy something like that, all of your precious money will be almost used up!"

Lady Seren smiled at me. "Almost! But being able to buy it for you makes me happy."

I inhaled sharply, shocked, but Lady Seren looked so happy I didn't feel like I could say anything more.

We left the shop after that, and before we left town, I took a moment to switch out my older fastener for the new one. Lady Seren watched me the whole time, a big grin on her face. It was the most satisfied I'd seen her look all day.

"It really suits you!" she said cheerfully.

"Does it? Thank you."

I usually used a black fastener that didn't stand out at all, so I felt this one was a little flashy. But the engraving really was superb, and Lady Seren looked so pleased...

To think that she would use her precious money on me, I thought.

And as I looked down at her satisfied face, I allowed myself a wry smile.



Seren 13

I Like That Way of Thinking

A little ways away from the shop, Lord Viol attached his new silver, engraved cloak fastener to his robe. My eyes couldn't help but be attracted to the front of his neck—the pull was irresistible.

The fastener was made up of two large circles, which were meant to be attached to either side of your robe. Each circle bore complicated engravings and had a chain attached to it which connected it to the opposite side. Several stars dangled from this chain, which made me think the piece must be meant to depict the moon and stars. It looked very beautiful, sparkling against Lord Viol's pitch-black robe.

I'm glad we chose this one, I thought. When you add Lord Viol's handsomeness to the equation, it's very eye-catching.

"It really suits you," I told him.

"Does it? Thanks." He smiled wryly, looking embarrassed, and even that was a sight to behold. "Um... I'm very pleased. I'll treasure it."

Lord Viol gently touched the fastener as if it was something precious, and I felt my chest grow hot. It was just a cheap accessory that didn't even have any divine properties. It had only cost the price of one magical beast; it was far too cheap for someone like Lord Viol, who was the Archmage of a Mage Guild, to wear.

And yet, it made my heart happy to see him treasure it.

It was a measly gift when I compared it with all that Lord Viol had done for me, but it was the best I could do. The thought made me feel a bit sad. I wanted to get him something far better someday, something which would fully express my feelings of gratitude toward him.

"This is the best I can do right now," I told him, "but one day I'll take out a

fearsome beast, and then I'll be able to prepare you a proper token of my thanks."

Lord Viol's face shifted. It was slight, but even I could tell I had said something that had caused him consternation.

"Don't be ridiculous," he said firmly.

All I did was speak aloud what I was feeling, I thought discontentedly. *Why does Lord Viol look so disgruntled all of a sudden?*

For a moment, I was overcome with nerves, but then Lord Viol said something I hadn't expected. He leaned forward and told me, "There is no gift I would cherish more than this."

There's no way that's true, I thought automatically, but the sincerity that colored Lord Viol's eyes had me holding my tongue without realizing it.

"The money that was used to buy this gift was earned by my precious apprentice, who felled a magical beast despite experiencing terrible fear. It was the very first money she'd ever earned from beast subjugation. And she used that money to buy me this gift, which makes it the most precious gift in the world." Lord Viol stared at me, expression intense. "What finer gift could there be?"

I found myself touched by the uncharacteristic passion in his voice.

"Oh, Lord Viol..." I said softly.

He just shook his head. "Besides, this fastener was created with a new technique invented by an artist whose career I wish to follow. That is not something that can be exchanged for money. Right now, do you know what I think?"

"Wh-What?" I stammered in reply.

"I think I have received a gift of the highest caliber."

"Oh, thank you!" I cried, shocked and pleased.

I can't believe he is so happy to receive a gift from me...

Lord Viol smiled too, his expression quickly softening. "You're welcome...but

that's my line. I'm really pleased with this gift. Thank you, Lady Seren."

I thought I might cry. My chest quivered.

"Oh, Lord Viol...!" I gasped.

Lord Viol did not appraise things in terms of price or monetary value. I knew that quite clearly, now.

And I...I liked Lord Viol's way of thinking, very, very much.

"Well, um...shall we go?" he suggested. "If we don't start out soon, we'll start losing some of our subjugating time."

"Yes, let's go! I'll do my best!!!"

Riding on the wave of Lord Viol's words, I suddenly felt filled with power.

On this day, I shall slay a magical beast in a decidedly cool manner! I swear on my slightly blushing, kind, wonderful professor!



WE then headed to the plains, where the tall grasses were undulating in the breeze just as they had during our last visit.

It was very nice out, and the sun and the wind both felt good against my skin. It seemed shocking somehow that beasts could be found in a place as peaceful as this. I could see beautiful butterflies, which seemed more suited to the countryside, flittering about. The sight of them filled me with a sense of peace.

"Oh, how cute!" Lord Viol gave me a puzzled look, and I gestured ahead. "There are butterflies."

"They're not cute," Lord Viol told me firmly. "Those aren't butterflies, either—they're magical beasts."

"Huh?!"

"We haven't gotten close to them yet, so they still look like normal butterflies, but in actuality, they're huge, bigger than if I held both my arms out straight. If we stray into their territory, they'll attack, and their dust is lethal."

I bit my lip as I listened to Lord Viol's lecture.

Darn it!

I had failed to assess the number of beasts once again.

How embarrassing. I should have studied more, so I could be more prepared.

I felt absolutely wretched but was distracted from my feelings by Lord Viol's continued explanation.

"When it comes to those magical beasts, it's better to attack them first, from as far away as possible. Their dust is actually highly toxic, and if we're unlucky, they can actually grab us and drain us of all our blood and other bodily fluids until we die."

I felt my eyes go wide. "How terrifying."

Our opponents still didn't seem to have entered battle mode, though.

If I remain calm, I should be able to unleash my magic on them before they begin to attack.

I sucked in a breath and let it out.

Remaining calm, I prepared for battle by intensifying the force of my magical power and shaping it into blades. I'd be able to fire them continuously on my foes.

Then, I felt the gazes of the magical beasts land upon me.

They were too far away to be sure they were really looking at me, but I felt their presence. And the moment they became aware of me, they spread those huge wings and closed in on us in a rush.

They really are incredibly huge! And what is that...prickling feeling? Is this what Lord Viol meant when he talked about being able to sense the power of magical beasts?

The giant butterfly came closer and closer, but I remained calm, my aim fixed.

Sorry, magical butterflies, but I'm a little different than the typical Seren today. The knowledge that Lord Viol is watching over me gives me a power whose origins I don't fully understand, and fills me with determination not to lose.

I took a big breath. Then, just as I had practiced in my room, I casually unleashed my Wind Cutter attack. Several well-formed blades sprang through the air toward my target.

Ah, good, I thought. That wasn't like what happened last time. This time, I'm calm.

"That must have been around fifteen blades," Lord Viol commented.

"Right?!" I responded, beaming with joy.

That was when the shock hit me. The giant magical butterfly had evaded my blades and was still soaring in my direction, closing the distance between us.

I gasped in horror.

"Don't panic," Lord Viol said calmly. "Just do the same thing you did last time. Repeat the attack over and over."

"O-Okay."

"Those beasts know how to read the wind, though. We'll have to use our heads."

Right, I thought. They are flying creatures, after all.

"This type may be hard to hit with a wind attack," Lord Viol continued, "but if you manage to land a hit, they're the kind of enemy that's quite susceptible to that type of magic. If you conjure a gust they have trouble flying through, you can take out their big wings. That'll make victory easy, right?"

"Understood."

It felt like Lord Viol was telling me, "And figure out the rest for yourself."

If I can't take down one of these magical beasts with the hints he has already given me, then I'm going to be ashamed of myself.

Without taking my eyes off the butterfly as it came ever closer, I gathered all of my strength, even as I dug through old memories. All my memories of butterflies involved me crying in the garden as a child. I was so busy crying back then, I barely even thought to give them a good look.

I tried to piece together those memory fragments as I thought about a plan.

When butterflies fly, they seem to hover in the air, drifting slightly up and down, almost as if they're being carried along by a very light breeze. These magical beasts have extremely large wings when compared to the size of their bodies, so they should be easily swept along by a strong gust of wind... I think.

I pursed my lips tightly in concentration, conjuring two different versions of the True Wind spell. I released them both toward the butterfly, carefully measuring the output so the two types of wind would not intermingle.

It was difficult to manipulate the two blowing winds I'd conjured in order to get them to go where I wanted them to; if I didn't concentrate, I'd lose control of my own spells. In the end, I adjusted the output of each of the spells ever so slightly so that they would hit the butterfly at minutely staggered intervals.

First, the stronger breeze raised up the butterfly's large form from below. As I'd predicted, its big wings were caught by the wind, its body floating upward.

"All right..." I mumbled.

I pulled on the second True Wind spell, calling a wall of wind down on the magical beast from above. Gusts came at it from above and below, catching the butterfly in between. All of a sudden, it seemed to have trouble flying smoothly.

"Now!" I shouted.

I cast a timely Wind Cutter spell, hitting the butterfly with all my power. Caught by my True Wind spells and unable to escape, its wings and body suffered a shockingly accurate barrage of Wind Cutter blades.

The magical beast flailed wildly in the air for a moment before dropping like a stone, falling out of sight.

"Uh..."

"You felled it," Lord Viol told me.

"What, really?" I demanded.

It had happened so suddenly that even I was taken aback.

"Butterfly magical beasts look big when they're flying, but their wings are paper-thin, and their bodies are small. Once felled, they're not so impressive anymore."

“Oh, I see...”

I’d felled the beast from a distance, so I couldn’t even spot the corpse. Nevertheless, I couldn’t quite find a reason to go over there and check.

“That was anticlimactic,” I said, in a confused voice. “I don’t even feel as though I defeated it.”

“You did well, Lady Seren,” Lord Viol reassured me. Those butterflies are a rank below the wolves and Ketsy we faced on our last excursion, so it’s no wonder you feel a bit let down.”

Ah, that makes sense.

On our last trip to the plains, I had hit a magical beast that took the form of a giant bird with Wind Cutter after Wind Cutter, and it still hadn’t died straight away. Compared to that, this felt like nothing.

“Still,” Lord Viol continued, “you kept your cool very well compared to last time, didn’t you? And you increased your number of Wind Cutter blades! Your attack power has really gone up.”

“Really?!” I cried, smiling happily.

Lord Viol nodded. “I would not lie about something like this.”

Oh, I’m so happy. At least I managed to do a much better job than last time.

“All this improvement is a sign that you’ve been training hard. I can clearly expect great things of you today.”

I bowed my head slightly. “Thank you very much.”

“Shall we go stretch our legs and wander beyond the hill now?” Lord Viol asked.

My chest was filled with happiness over the praise he’d just given me, but at these words, a rising fear came to life as well.

“Will stronger enemies appear there?” I asked him.

He nodded. “Yes, most likely. Not to the extent of mid-ranking magical beasts perhaps, but we may encounter pack beasts like wolves, along with some other magical beasts at a high enough level we’ll have to really use our heads to beat

them.”

“I’ll do my best!” I vowed.

“That’s the spirit,” Lord Viol said approvingly. “As you just experienced, the outcome of a fight with a magical beast is greatly affected by who can exploit the other’s weakness better. It’s important to use your head when fighting.”

I looked straight into Lord Viol’s eyes and nodded.

He’s right.

I still felt terrible about neglecting my study of magical beast varieties. Once I got home, I swore to read up on them in the reference books.

“Draw on your battle experience and what you observe about the enemy to fight effectively. That’s the key,” Lord Viol explained. I caught myself thinking that he spoke nearly as succinctly as an academy professor.

I nodded obediently to these instructions.

Lord Viol smiled a little as he spoke again. “You’re good at that sort of thing, aren’t you, Lady Seren?”

If he really thinks that, then...I’m quite pleased. However... I clenched my fists, determined. I have to make sure to live up to his expectations.

“Th-Thank you,” I told him softly.

Lord Viol nodded, then climbed to his feet and began walking. “Let’s hurry. It will take some time to get to the forest beyond the hill.”

He’s walking so fast! I realized. I need to get moving.

I quickly recast my weakening barrier spell and hurried after him.

“You seem to have the aptitude to come up with an effective battle plan, Lady Seren. So the best thing I can do for you is to provide support so that you can rack up experience.”

As we walked, Lord Viol muttered things under his breath, as if he was talking to himself. At last he stopped, turning around and smiling as if to reassure me.

“What I’m trying to say is: leave finding the magical beasts to me. I’ve memorized the spots around here where they usually appear.”

“Okay!” I agreed. “I trust you.”

I stared at his back as he strode ahead of me. I couldn’t help but think it looked very reliable. I felt reassured, looking at him. Lord Viol was a top-class mage—he’d excel at providing support in a battle. As far as I was concerned, Lord Viol was a truly amazing person who could do just about anything.



WE left the plains and reached the summit of the hill by the forest without encountering any more magical beasts. Once there, we decided to sit down for another relaxing lunch on the hill under the bright sun, where we could enjoy the refreshing breeze that swept over its zenith.

Unfortunately, today we did not have the time to linger over our picnic as we had before. After all, we still had a few hours’ walk ahead of us before we would reach the forest.

“I’m glad all the foods the chef packed for us today are easy-to-eat options,” Lord Viol commented.

I nodded in agreement. “I said I’d be holed up in the library all day, so the chef prepared food and desserts that would be easy to eat while studying.”

He must have taken special care with my basket today, I thought. It was filled with various food items pierced through with sticks, little canapes with different fillings, and petite sandwiches—all things that could be eaten easily with one hand. He’d arranged everything so I could focus on studying while I ate with my free hand.

I smiled sheepishly at Lord Viol. “It’s embarrassing to admit, but the reason he prepared the food this way is because sometimes I get so absorbed in my reading that I eat my meals at my desk...”

“Ah, eating while reading,” Lord Viol’s eyes twinkled at me. “I often do the same thing.”

I’d hesitated to admit acting in such a way, for it was considered quite bad manners for a noblewoman to act in that manner, but Lord Viol brushed it off as if everyone did it.

Come to think of it, those reference books and magical texts he gave me showed signs of being read often. I smiled to myself. No doubt he's a passionate researcher like me, who gets so absorbed in reading that they feel they can't stop, even to eat.

Once we'd eaten the finger foods that served as our lunch's main course, it was finally time for dessert.

I could tell that Lord Viol had been looking forward to this—he didn't need to say a word out loud. I'd realized that the moments before he ate desserts were when he smiled the widest, his expression seeming to almost melt with pleasure. Today, too, Lord Viol's body was giving off an aura of anticipation.

"Oh!" Lord Viol cried excitedly. "Wow! They're so petite!"

Lord Viol's voice was normally so calm, but when he saw sweets, he tended to shout a little, which I loved. I felt my heart sing in response to his happiness, and I knew the taste of the sweets would be even better because I was with him.

"They're tiny choux cream pastries, see?" I explained. "Bite-sized, so you can eat them without getting your hands or face covered in cream. I *adore* these."

"Lady Seren, you are truly well cared for," he replied. "I can really get a feel for how much care the chef put into thinking this up."

I nodded. "When I was a kid, I barely had an appetite, so the chef has always taken special care of me."

"He sounds like a wonderful chef, indeed."

I smiled, a bolt of pleasure going through me at hearing my chef be praised so highly.

After that, I had a good time watching Lord Viol eat his dessert. It was fun watching the little choux creams disappear one after another into his mouth. Or at least it was until he noticed my staring and froze.

"F-Forgive me!" he exclaimed, clearly embarrassed. "They're so delicious, I went into a kind of trance..."

I giggled. "It's okay. Don't worry about it, just eat. I already got to enjoy your

special frozen yogurt today, after all.”

Lord Viol waved a hand dismissively. “All I did was mix a few things together and freeze it. These delectable choux creams, on the other hand—it would be a tragedy if you were to miss out on such a thoughtfully crafted dessert made by your chef’s fine hand.”

Lord Viol’s expression was as placid as ever, but I could tell that he really felt it would be a shame if I didn’t eat some of the pastries.

Lord Viol really, really loves sweet things, doesn’t he?

“Besides,” Lord Viol insisted, “your chef made these especially for you, Lady Seren, did he not?”

When he said that, I couldn’t help but picture my chef’s kind face. There was no way I could leave the choux creams untasted with that expression hovering in my mind.

But I’m supposed to be in the middle of a diet... I thought, distressed.

I held out for a brief moment, and then decided to give in to temptation. “Well, just one, then,” I told Lord Viol firmly. “I’m holding back on food at the moment, after all...”

Lord Viol offered me the rest of the pastries, and I picked up one of the tiny choux creams and placed it between my lips.

The fluffiness of the choux pastry filled my mouth. I bit down into it, sending the cream at the pastry’s center sliding over my tongue. They were tiny choux creams, but they were filled with a combination of the fresh, lightness of whipped cream, and the thick, rich creaminess of custard, marbled together in one bite.

Despite the pastry’s small size, the taste had real impact, which was heightened by the addition of just a hint of crushed vanilla bean. The fragrance was sweet and rich, and even one bite seemed to offer premium satisfaction.

Ah, there it is, I thought, filled with pleasure. That’s the beloved taste of the pastries I adore so much.

My chef really *had* outdone himself.

“Delicious...” I mumbled.

“They really are delicious,” Lord Viol agreed. “Every time we eat something made by your chef, I always think that he must be some kind of genius.”

“Hehe, that’s *too* much praise,” I told him. Listening to the effusiveness of his praise, I almost felt like blushing in the chef’s place.

I’ve only treated Lord Viol to my chef’s cooking once or twice, I thought. Isn’t it a bit odd for him to praise his food so much?

But I didn’t question it too deeply. “I always feel that our family chefs, including the head chef, do very well by us when it comes to preparing delectable meals. I am grateful to them all.”

Even though that’s why I end up eating too much, I thought with an inward laugh.

“A skilled chef or pâtissier is a treasure,” Lord Viol said firmly. “You must take good care of them, you know.” He looked so earnest it was hard not to take him seriously.

“You’re quite right,” I reassured him. “And, of course, we shall.”

Lord Viol finished off the last of the choux creams with relish as I sat next to him.

I began packing up once he was done—it was a simple task, thanks to the chef. Just as I’d told Lord Viol earlier, our head chef was always taking pains to make sure I did not have to distract myself for long from my studies. I felt a sense of gratitude toward him wash over me all over again.

I silently put both hands together in my mind in a gesture of appreciation. *Thank you, chef, I thought, thinking of his smiling face. I’d seen that happy expression of his since I was a child, so the image came to me easily. I will have to find an opportunity to give him thanks in person as well.*

Across from me, Lord Viol let out a happy sigh. “That was truly delicious.”

I smiled at him. “I’m glad it pleased your palate.”

Lord Viol climbed to his feet then. “All right,” he said. “Shall we go?”

“Yes!”

After that, it was as if a switch had flipped inside Lord Viol. His expression changed, becoming perfectly solemn. The pleasure-suffused expression he’d worn mere moments before vanished with nary a trace.

I got to my feet too, steeling myself against what was to come as I followed the strong line of Lord Viol’s back. He strode toward the forest with long, unhesitant strides. Seeing how confident he was, I took a deep breath and renewed my resolve.

From here on out, I would have to face off against many different types of magical beasts. Inside the forest we were heading to, there dwelled magical beasts whose appearances I couldn’t even begin to imagine. There was no doubt in my mind that when we encountered them, fraught battles would ensue.

I will not tremble if a pack of magical beasts comes after us, I swore to myself. I will not panic if they manage to close the distance between us. Even if a s-s-spider-type beast appears, I will not panic. No matter what sort of magical beast emerges from the forest, I must fight it.

As we walked ever closer, I tried to visualize the most horrible things I could think of. I tried to keep myself rational, talking to myself and imaging fighting strategies.

Ah, but what am I to do? I can’t help but feel afraid, and we just keep getting closer to the forest...

The butterfly-type beasts I’d fought against just moments ago hadn’t been particularly strong. Was I really prepared to go into the forest, where magical beasts would emerge from the trees in packs?

I’m sure there’s no shortage of terrifying magical beasts in that forest—including the kind that attack in packs, like those wolf-types.

The more I thought about it, the more afraid I became. Soon I was unable to fight it anymore, and I knew I had to say something to Lord Viol.

“Lord Viol, what kind of beasts will appear in this forest? I’m really sorry, but I haven’t advanced my studies into different beast varieties yet.”

Lord Viol came to a stop and turned around. “Hmm, so even you have gaps in your perfect study plan, eh?” he asked, voice surprised. He still looked very Lord Viol-like, though, with his unchanging, stern expression.

“This forest is vast,” he told me. “The magical beasts we’ll find upon our entrance are quite different than those who live deep within the heart of the forest. As for the area we will go to today... Hmm...”

He gazed out at the forest for a moment, as if he was drawing his thoughts together before he began to explain everything to me.

“There will be wolf-types, fox-types, and rabbit, badger, and deer-types... There may be bird or insect-types like you’ve dealt with before, or even reptilian magical beasts like snake or lizard-types. Basically, the types of magical beast in the forest take on the forms of any kind of woodland creature you can imagine.”

Curiosity filled me. “So, how do you tell the difference between magical beasts and other, regular creatures?”

“Simply put, magical beasts are much bigger, and they emanate a distinct magical energy from their bodies, which quickly gives them away.”

“Oh, you mean that prickling feeling they give off, right? That’s their magical energy?”

“Indeed. Some think that magical beasts were all originally normal animals that were hit with magical energy, and became violent as a result, causing them to attack humans indiscriminately.”

I couldn’t hide my shock at this new information. “Really...?” I asked. “They were originally normal animals...?”

Lord Viol shrugged. “It’s just a theory. Scholars are still investigating it, trying to see if it has merit. Anyways, magical beasts have been around for ages now, and have their own complex ecosystems, so it’s difficult to find any conclusive proof.”

“So the beasts have their own successful ecosystems too, huh? Well, that makes sense when you think about it.”

He nodded. “As far as this forest’s concerned, there’s a huge source of magical energy at its center. That’s why the beasts get stronger and more violent the deeper in you go.”

I felt my eyes widen. “I... I had no idea!”

“Most people wouldn’t,” Lord Viol told me. “The hypothesis was proposed by a member of the Third Mage Guild after many years of beast subjugation. We still haven’t gathered enough proof to make an official report to the king, though.”

Ah, I see, I thought. So it’s just a working hypothesis. No wonder I didn’t learn about it during my princess consort training. If something as all-encompassing as that theory had been confirmed, it would have been considered vital knowledge.

The idea that there could be such a dangerous place so close to the capital was a little frightening. Compared to some other countries out there, we enjoyed relative peace. We had a strong magical barrier around our borders and our relations with our neighbors were in fact quite cordial, with no strife to speak of.

And so, I had never even considered that such a dangerous place, one capable of turning animals into magical beasts, could reside so close to our doorstep. Nobody else seemed to have realized such a danger lurked in our midst either.

“Once our research into this forest proceeds a little more, we may be able to announce the reasoning behind where the magical beasts come from, and how to eradicate the source of amassed magical energy,” Lord Viol said, frowning. “But there is no need to go trespassing where it’s dangerous.”

The Third Mage Guild must have been working hard all this time to close in on the threat in this forest, I thought.

I felt like I was starting to get a glimpse of just how difficult Lord Viol’s job really was.

“If we meddle too much,” Lord Viol cautioned me, “we might end up disturbing the equilibrium that has existed here for hundreds of years. Please remember that and keep this information to yourself until I give the okay.”

I gave him a firm nod. “Understood.”

He makes a good point. Our country has always kept our people at a safe distance from this forest.

In peacetime, adventurers would go out and subjugate beasts, gathering their magic stones and reducing their numbers. But if there were reports that the number of angry magical beasts had increased, the Mage Guilds would all go out subjugating together.

Thanks to the Mage Guilds’ efforts, our country had managed to coexist alongside the forest for a long time, with no reports of any attacks attempted on the capital or the palace in decades.

“The thing that brought about our hypothesis,” Lord Viol continued, “is that we started to realize that the magical beasts, which we thought were originally just monsters, had properties like those of birds and insects, and some even resembled plants.”

“Plants?!” I cried incredulously.

“Yes. Though, well, you won’t be seeing many beastified plants unless you go deep into the forest. They’re hard to tell from regular plants unless you can pick up on their magical energy. Naturally, extreme caution is needed when dealing with them.”

“I envy people who have an easy time perceiving magical energy,” I told him.

“All it takes is practice,” Lord Viol said casually. He started walking forward once more.

After hearing Lord Viol’s tale, the forest seemed even spookier to me than it had before. I returned my focus to walking through the forest, trying to keep my scrambled emotions together.



“**THERE** it goes!”

“Got it!”

I released my Wind Cutter spell, but this time I couldn’t land a single hit.

It's so nimble!

The small magical beast I was doing my best to attack resembled a flying squirrel. It was about the size of a human head and not particularly strong. Even my weak barrier spell was able to contain it, so it didn't really pose me much danger.

The problem was, it was so fast that I hadn't been able to land a single hit. At this point, I'd been locked in battle with the magical beast for nearly half an hour, and it didn't seem any closer to giving up.

"This is perfect for training you to fight against the nimbler magical beasts," Lord Viol commented from where he was sitting, leaning against the trunk of a tree. "Do your best to take it down."

That was how un-dangerous this particular magical beast was—Lord Viol was completely in spectator mode.

But still...I didn't feel that I could beat it. I mean, I couldn't even hit the thing! At this rate, all I was going to end up doing was exhausting my magic.

I gave up, releasing the spell and letting my arm droop at my side. Then I reinforced the barrier spell that surrounded the beast and spread my legs, steadyng myself. I conjured up more Wind Cutter blades than ever before, and waited for my opportunity.

After a few seconds, the magical beast realized I had stopped attacking it. It ceased tearing about between the trees, moving slowly toward me to make sure that I really had stopped moving.

I heard a dull sound as the beast's body smacked against my barrier. The recoil sent the squirrel floating into the air, momentarily defenseless.

Now!

I unleashed my Wind Cutter spell.

Finally, I managed to fell the little beast. It was easy to hit it this time.

Lord Viol watched me as I sighed in relief. "Thirty points," he muttered.

"Th-That bad, huh...?!"

“You lack accuracy,” he told me in a firm tone. “As a result, the battle time was lengthened exponentially, was it not?”

“Yes, it was...”

He was right—the magical beast had really given me the runaround. I’d wasted so many Wind Cutter spells... The whole thing had been nothing but a waste of time and magical energy.

“You need to increase the speed of your blades,” Lord Viol told me.

“I’ll do my best,” I reassured him.

“All right. But the real problem actually lies elsewhere.”

“Oh?”

“It is dangerous to use yourself as a decoy, so I do not recommend it,” Lord Viol said harshly. “That beast had low attack power, so this time it was all right. But when we get to the mid-ranking magical beasts, you’ll need a really strong barrier. Otherwise, the beast will just break through it, and you’ll end up as its dinner.”

Lord Viol’s expression had turned severe as he scolded me.

I felt my shoulders slump.

He’s right, I thought. Everything he’s saying is so obvious, and yet...

It seemed the path to successful magical beast subjugation was, as I’d suspected, not an easy one.

Viol 12

Many Problems, and Yet...

I felt a little sorry for Lady Seren. In the aftermath of my harsh lecture, her spirits seemed to be a bit down in the dumps.

But, I reminded myself, this is the stage of her training where her dangerous choices should be addressed and corrected.

The more I pointed out her subpar decisions during magical beast subjugation, the more Lady Seren would be able to discern which choice was the best for her to make. At a certain point, that skill would be critical to keeping her alive and safe.

Lady Seren was usually the type to think before she leaped, so it was best for her to receive instruction now, when she was still out of sorts enough in battle to make all kinds of mistakes. The more mistakes she made, the better she'd understand what was dangerous later.

Besides, that had only been her third battle.

Thirty points is still a decent score, I thought. Perhaps if I tell her that, it might cheer her up.

“Don’t look so down,” I comforted her. “Thirty points is not a bad score.”

“Really...?”

I nodded. “Really. When I scolded you, I was only pointing out the parts where you went wrong. There were good things about your performance too, of course.”

“You really think so?!”

“Of course I do,” I affirmed. “After you’d attacked it over and over, you managed to increase the number of blades you released with your Wind Cutter spell, didn’t you? That last one was over twenty blades. Just being able to

release that many blades repeatedly in battle is a wonderful skill.”

“That’s true...” Lady Seren said slowly. “And that last Wind Cutter spell I cast was practically as good as the ones I cast during practice.”

At this thought, Lady Seren’s face visibly brightened.

As I watched the change in her face, I realized I’d have to be careful in the future to make sure Lady Seren knew what she did right as well as what she did wrong. She had an incredible ability to memorize exactly where she’d messed up, and she used that knowledge to correct her mistakes. But that would all be for naught if she ended up demotivated due to my manner of teaching.

“In addition,” I continued, “you discerned that hitting the enemy would be difficult, and you switched up your method of attack to create an opportunity to hit your opponent. That kind of flexibility is very important when battling magical beasts.” I glanced at Lady Seren; she was staring at me with a solemn expression as I spoke. “I’ve got one last positive thing. I thought it was wonderful that you chose the moment you wished to end the battle and gathered all your magic to finish it off in one decisive hit.”

“Thank you!” Lady Seren exclaimed, her eyes darting from my face and down to the forest floor. Despite her downcast gaze, I thought she looked extremely pleased.

We stood there in silence for a moment, before she finally said, “Um, Lord Viol...”

“What is it?” I asked, tilting my head and making an inquisitive sound.

She lifted her eyes to mine, a beaming smile taking over her face. “I feel like I’ve got a good idea now of what to be careful about during battles. Next time I’ll work harder, so I can get a higher score!”

Her voice was ripe with conviction.

Seeing that smile, it’s hard to believe that she was looking so glum only a few moments ago, I thought, amused.

“I see. I look forward to seeing you improve, Lady Seren.”

I hadn’t thought too deeply about my words, but the encouragement in them

seemed to sink into the heart of my reliable apprentice. Her smile stretched even wider. “I’ll meet your expectations!” she replied.

I found I was truly excited to see what she’d do next. This was Lady Seren, after all. Now that she’d spoken with such conviction, I knew I could expect something impressive from her in our next battle.



LADY Seren had had quite the day. She’d encountered a magical beast on the road, three in the forest, and two more on our way back to the capital. Two trips to the plains, and she’d already subjugated more than ten beasts altogether. At this early stage, that was plenty of battle experience.

And yet, when I’d switched back into cat form and brought Lady Seren back to her residence, she’d asked me to stay with her while she trained. The thought of training after the day we’d just had was enough to leave even me reluctant.

I respect your willpower Lady Seren, but...

“You should take a break,” I told her. “You went subjugating today! You’re working yourself far too hard.”

Lady Seren jumped at the sound of my voice, her hand freezing mid-gesture. “Oh! Yes, Vi, you’re right. I’m sorry.”

She turned to look at me, letting her arms fall to her side. Her body seemed to relax slightly.

Was she so focused on training that she forgot I was here?

I couldn’t blame her—I was sleepy, too. I kept yawning, my tail flopping this way and that.

“You seem more fired up today than ever,” I commented. “What’s gotten you so desperate? I thought you managed to fell a beast already.”

“I’m not desperate,” Lady Seren said firmly.

She walked over to the table where I sat and joined me. She took a sip of some cold tea, breathing out the tension that seemed bundled up inside her. She reached out toward my back, and one look at her face was all I needed to know what she wanted.

"I was just thinking...I really want to get stronger," she said softly, gently stroking my back, her hands moving slowly across my fur.

I made a humming noise in my chest. "But my master said you're getting better at subjugations with every beast... What kinds of magical beasts did you fell today?"

I had seen it all with my own eyes, of course, but Lady Seren seemed so manic about continuing her training that I thought it best to try and change the subject. I wasn't sure what it was she was getting hung up on—she'd progressed in her training more than I'd expected her to at this point in time.

"Oh, well, I fought an insect-type beast and a flying-squirrel-type beast, and some other little magical beasts like the rabbit-type ones. The small beasts were all pretty easy to defeat. The last one I was even able to beat in one hit! It made me think about how much progress I've made. I felt so relieved."

"That's amazing," I told her. "I'm proud of you."

She really had progressed quite satisfactorily. That first flying rat she'd gone against might have given her the runaround, but by the end of our trip, she'd been able to kill the magical beasts easily, even when they attacked in groups.

Lady Seren sighed. "It's only, when I think of magical beasts like those wolves, I worry that it'll be difficult for me to defeat them."

I nodded my furry head. "Wolf-type beasts attack in packs and they are very intelligent."

"Yes, exactly! In the end, I only managed to defeat one of them..." she said despondently.

"At this stage, being able to fell one of them is an adequate result, in my opinion," I reassured her.

But she still looked down.

Is she hung up on not being able to defeat the wolves as skillfully as she'd like? I wondered.

"Yeah, maybe. I just don't like that I was so shocked by the ferocity that I backed off. I knew I was protected by the magical barrier and that their fangs

couldn't hurt me! But my reaction was so slow, I didn't even have a second to evade."

"Ah," I said, "I see you've recognized what strong opponents wolf-types are. That's a good thing."

Lady Seren's eyes widened. "I guess that's one way of viewing it, huh?" she said, smiling a little.

"I think you should be proud of your reaction," I told her. "It's important to run away once you realize you're fighting a battle you can't win. If you felt that way with those clever wolves, then that's a good lesson for you."

I didn't think Lady Seren's fight with the wolves had been bad at all—I truly thought she'd made incredible progress. Despite being besieged by several wolves, with her only protection being her magical barrier, she hadn't run away or gone weak at the knees.

The wolves were faster and stronger than the Ketsy she had felled last time we'd been on the plains—in fact, they were much more dangerous, since they attacked in packs. At Lady Seren's current level, it was no surprise that they had continued to attack her while she'd attempted to defeat one.

Was it not huge progress that despite her fear, her barrier had held firm? She'd stood there, face white and teeth gnashing together, but she had not made a single sound of terror. Instead, she had just looked for an opportunity to strike.

Lady Seren sighed from her place at the table. "Thank you, Vi. I feel a little bit more confident now."

"But why would you lose your confidence at all?" I asked her, puzzled. "You did quite well today at subjugating, from what you've told me."

"Wolves are strong, smart enemies. If they're low-ranking magical beasts, I can't imagine what kind of beasts are classed as mid-ranking. Thinking like that is what got me down."

Ah, now I understand.

After that skirmish with the wolves, she'd realized that the strength of mid-

ranking magical beasts was beyond her ability to imagine. It must have filled her with fear.

But it's right for her to be afraid.

"It's actually good you felt that way," I told her. "You can't envision an enemy's strength when your magical ability is too low. The fact that you can understand that means you've progressed past that level."

"I have?"

"Yes," I affirmed. "So use that fear to grow even stronger. My master and I will help you all we can. Do your best."

"Oh, Vi! I will! I'll do my best!" My cute, adorable apprentice squeezed me as she swore to it.

Hmm, now I'm looking forward to next week's subjugation.



I woke up the next day feeling refreshed after a good night's sleep. I had plans to visit Lady Seren's room tonight, just as I had the night before. This time we would only be training, though, not venturing out onto the plains.

I passed my day doing my High Mage duties and suffering through a session of dance training with Count Blaze, before finally heading to Lady Seren's room.

At this point I'd gotten used to this cycle, and I felt no echoes of exhaustion or tiredness in my body. And so, today I planned to accompany Lady Seren in her training as much as she liked, with no worry about lack of sleep.

I could see Lady Seren in my mind, completely absorbed in releasing a barrage of Wind Cutter spells. After all she had done yesterday, I had no doubt her head would have been full of magic all day today.

I quickened my pace, wanting to get to Lady Seren's side as soon as possible.

When I leaped to the window ledge outside of her room, the window opened right away, as if she had been waiting for me.

"Vi!" she cried out, scooping me up and taking me straight into the center of the room. It wasn't until she'd started wiping my feet off with impatient hands

that I realized she was acting unusual.

Why is she so agitated? I wondered. I arrived earlier than usual today. Even if she's desperate to start practicing, there's no need for her to flutter about in such haste.

“Lady Seren...?” I looked over my shoulder at her, questioning, when she suddenly hugged me from behind. I was too shocked to cry out. I just froze as I felt something soft press against the back of my head. “L-Lady Seren...?”

She didn’t reply, only rubbed her cheeks against the back of my head. She was crushing my ears, and the tickling sensation of it made them flick around uncontrollably.

“Has something happened?” I asked her. “You’re acting odd.”

“No,” she said stubbornly.

But despite her words, she continued to press her cheek against my fur.

Something’s up.

I didn’t state my suspicions out loud, though. I knew if I kept asking her, she would just continue to deny it. Instead, I endured Lady Seren squeezing me for a while. All I could move freely was my tail, as my legs were encircled by Lady Seren’s arms. With no other recourse, I settled for stroking Lady Seren’s arm lightly with my tail.

“I don’t know what’s happened, but cheer up,” I told her, giving her a reassuring pat with my tail.

She gave a little chuckle against the back of my head.

It’s good that she feels happy enough to laugh, I thought. I hope I managed to soothe her a little...

“Thank you, Vi,” Lady Seren said softly, pulling away from me a little.

Ah, my head is free again.

“Your fur really does feel just like velvet,” she said as she stroked me. “You’re skinny but so soft, and silky, and fluffy...so wonderful to touch.”

“Uh-huh,” I said cynically. “But now that you’ve enjoyed the softness of my

amazing fur, I'll have you explain yourself in return. What happened?"

Something must have happened. Lady Seren only acts like this when something's wrong.

"It's not that I'm depressed or anything. I just feel quite confused," she said softly.

Lady Seren's hand went still, no doubt because she was focusing on what she was saying.

I looked up to see her troubled smile. "Prince Helios has invited me on another trip into town."

I knew it. I knew Prince Helios was the cause of this. How much of Lady Seren's emotions does that man need to monopolize before he's satisfied?

Something had told me, deep down, that this had to do with Prince Helios. I'd been so right on the money that it filled me with anger.

I got to my feet in irritation, and Lady Seren gave me another regretful stroke.

"Last time, he said he'd invite me out again, so I suppose it's not unexpected. Only, I didn't expect him to invite me again so soon..." she said.

"Right," I said tightly. "Well, I wonder what inspired him to do so?"

The last time the two had gone out together, Lady Seren had mentioned to me that it had been the first time they'd done such a thing. It shocked me to think that they had been engaged since birth and yet had never been out in public together.

No wonder she's surprised over him asking her out so many times in a row. It's so sudden.

"Last time, I turned him down saying I didn't have time, but I can't keep denying him. I had to accept this time, but... I feel very heavy-hearted about it."

So, she accepted... I thought angrily. Frustration itched under my skin. Ah, so this is what jealousy feels like.

I knew I was being childish. It wasn't like Lady Seren had been in a position to turn him down. I understood, truly, I did. And so, I could say nothing about it.

But that phrase, *heavy-hearted*... It tugged at me.

"You feel... heavy-hearted...?" I mumbled.

"Yes," she said, sighing. "I have already made up my mind to cancel the marriage, so I feel terrible having Prince Helios spend any more of his time on me. And I don't feel it's very fair to Marietta either..."

"Hmm, well, I don't think there is any need for you to feel bad."

"No?"

"I don't really know what to say as far as Lady Marietta is concerned," I said matter-of-factly, "but as of right now, *you* are Prince Helios's fiancée, Lady Seren, not her. The situation cannot be helped. You can resolve everything once the marriage agreement has been dissolved."

Lady Seren nodded slightly.

"No doubt the prince is trying to make up for the way he has neglected you."

"Perhaps..." she said, voice tentative.

"Why don't you think of the whole thing as helping His Highness out in his future endeavors? That might make it easier for you. He's not used to being out in town either, is he?"

"Hmm... Yes, that's true. If I think about the outing in terms of helping him get used to town, so he'll be able to better escort Marietta in the future...it doesn't feel so much like I'm wasting his time."

Lady Seren's face brightened. She seemed to feel better now, having found a more comfortable role for herself to play.

Hopefully, she can move forward now and feel more positive about the whole thing.

What I really wanted to tell her was, "Don't go." But in my current role, I had no right to prevent her from acting on Prince Helios's invitation.

All I could do was help to make Lady Seren feel better about things.

Who would have thought that doing what has to be done would make my chest hurt so much? I thought despairingly. Darn it all.

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EVER since Lady Seren had told me yesterday that she would be going to town with Prince Helios, I had been feeling oddly down. I probably would have suffered a sleepless night if it wasn't for my lucky exhaustion trick. Thanks to it, my magic was recharged and my body was rested, but it did nothing to boost my decidedly low mood.

According to Lady Seren, she and the prince will be going on an outing next Voidday. And the week after that, there's a ball...

Now that I thought about it, I realized we only had around five days left to go on magical beast subjugation trips. And on one of those occasions, we would need to record a satisfactory battle performance on a recording orb...

To make matters worse, I wasn't sure how much longer we could keep relying on the fake-Seren-studying-in-the-library trick to sneak out of her residence. Lady Seren seemed confident in what we were doing, since she knew very well just how much time she spent in that library, but I did not share her sense of calm about it.

I was clutching my head, agonizing, when I heard a knock followed by the sound of my door opening.

“Excuse me, Archmage Viol...”

“What?”

I lifted my head off my desk to see Contard looking at me with a tense expression on his face.

I must be making a scary face again, I thought wryly.

Contard had stopped trembling in response to everything I did these days, but every now and then, he still reacted with tension.

I held back a sigh and rephrased my question. “What is it?”

“Um, Prime Minister Borden is here to see you. If it's a bad time, I can send him away...”

“Hmm, that's unusual. No, send him in.”

It was very unusual for Borden to come all the way to see me—the fellow was incredibly busy.

I should at least hear what he has to say.

And so, having made that decision, I had him shown in.

“Sorry to bother you while you’re busy,” Borden said with that personable smile of his as he sat himself down on the office sofa.

I watched as Contard finished serving him tea and left the room.

That’s when I decided to get down to business.

“So?” I demanded. “What do you want, all of a sudden?”

His smile didn’t budge. “Here, you can have these. They’re just something I got as a courtesy gift, but I thought you’d like them more.”

He handed me a small box, which I opened, revealing some sort of brown confectionary that had a sweet, citrusy scent. Orange slices had been laid over the top of each slice, their tops sprinkled with powdered sugar and a scattering of herbs that served to enhance the color and fragrance.

They looked like brownies—gourmet brownies.

“Ohhh!” I cried in excitement. “These are the orange brownies by Moutlage, are they not?!”

“You really know your stuff when it comes to magic and sweets, don’t you?” Borden said with a smirk.

I took a deep breath, inhaling the brownies’ scent. “I’ve been dying to get my hands on a box of these.”

Borden laughed at me, but I’d meant exactly what I’d said. I’d been trying to carve out some time in my schedule to go and buy some, but I hadn’t had the free time lately.

Oh, the bittersweet tang of orange, the thick, rich taste of chocolate, that delicate little whiff of cinnamon... Such a sophisticated dessert... Such a mature, well-rounded flavor... Oh yes, they are just as delicious as everyone was saying they were.

Recently I had been so spoiled with a certain aristocratic lady's sweets—not to mention the desserts I'd enjoyed at balls and banquets—that I'd worried about developing too expensive a taste. I needn't have worried; these were delicious too.

"You look happy," Borden said lightly. "You haven't changed, at least in this regard."

I scrunched my eyebrows together at him. "Huh? I never change. I may switch up my speech depending on the company, but fundamentally I'm always the same person."

Borden sighed. "That's not what I meant. I was referring to how you've suddenly taken up dancing lessons, and...well, fallen for Lady Seren."

I choked violently on my brownie, letting out a string of gasping coughs.

"Hey! That's disgusting."

"Oh, what a waste of good brownie! You made me do that, saying such shocking things."

I blew half a brownie all over my desk! What a senseless waste... I could have really relished that brownie...

Borden frowned, offering me his handkerchief. I ignored it and whipped out my own to clean up the desk.

Insufferable busybody.

Borden might not be on Lady Seren's level, but he was still the eldest son of a count and the prime minister, to boot. There was no way I could use his expensive, white handkerchief to clean up brownie chunks and spittle.

"You shouldn't say such things out loud," I told him, annoyed. "You never know who could be listening."

Borden waved a hand. "Knowing you, you'll have found a way to prevent our voices from leaking out."

You dare brush off my warnings? We must keep mum on this matter! I thought, glaring at Borden. *Of course, I've cast muffling spells on my door, but that's not the point!*

But despite my annoyance, I had the feeling Borden was about to settle in for a long chat. I decided to give up and indulge him in a bit of conversation.

“Yes, I have muffling spells in place,” I told him. “More importantly, what did you really come here to discuss? You didn’t come just to give me orange brownies, did you?”

“Ah... Hmm... Well, what has happened between you and Lady Seren since we last spoke?”

“Nothing! Not a thing,” I said, thinking back desperately.

After we last spoke...? He must mean the ball.

I was sure I’d left no evidence of meeting with Lady Seren after the ball. Every time I’d gone to her residence, I’d been in cat form. Whenever we went out into town, or out on the plains beast-subjugating, I’d covered myself in cloaking magic.

Everything should be all right. It’s fine. Er, probably.

“Ah, Riesz said something about Lady Seren practicing wind magic. He said she’d really made leaps and bounds in her progress. Seems she’s taken quite an interest in it.”

“Oh, I see.”

So that’s what he meant!

I felt relieved. Lady Seren had already told me of her encounter with Riesz, so I knew my half of the story—I’d only taught her preliminary wind magic.

“Oh yes,” I said, “I taught her a bit of wind magic, for everyday purposes, you know. So, she’s made progress with it?”

“I heard she’s progressed at quite the speed. You don’t know anything about it?”

I shrugged. “I only taught her the basics. She’s got magic power and an aptitude for the craft. And she seems to find it interesting, so no wonder she’s taken to it.”

I kept my expression soft and neutral, but Borden frowned at me.

"Ah, don't worry about it anymore. I apologize for bothering you." Borden stood and made his way for the door, his shoulders slumping for some reason.

"What? That's it? You're leaving?"

I just could not make sense of it.

What on earth did he come here for?

He'd gifted me with some delicious brownies, started a confusing conversation with me, and then just turned around and left. As I watched him go, all I could do was stare at his retreating back in absolute befuddlement.

Seren 14

Even Without Real Feelings

“I can’t win like this,” I said, sighing as I gazed at the notebook in front of me.

For a while now, I had been simulating a battle with the wolf-type magical beasts, scribbling down thoughts and ideas in my notebook, but at this point, victory felt impossible.

How am I supposed to hit several different wolves at once, when they’re so nimble?

Lord Viol had been so nonchalant when he’d subjugated that small pack; it was only now, running the simulations myself, that I began to realize how difficult such a task really was.

From what I remembered, Lord Viol had used Wind Cutter spells to demonstrate how to subjugate the wolf-type beasts. The problem was, consistently casting Wind Cutter at the same level of power as Lord Viol wasn’t easy for me. I was far from his equal, and there was so much to be considered when it came to Wind Cutter—you had to think of the thickness of the blades, the sharpness and speed of them. The truth was, right now I was far from Lord Viol’s level. I couldn’t take all those things into account and hold them steady.

Where Lord Viol had been able to fell the wolves with one hit, I’d struggled to even hit them at all. And even if I was able to land a hit, I couldn’t possibly manage to hit three or four of them at once. That meant I’d have to attack them one at a time, and while I was busy trying to knock down one, the others would continue to attack me. I was protected by my magical barrier, of course, but what if I succumbed to fear and panic? If my barrier failed, it would be all over for me.

Now that I knew all this, achieving a B rank in Magical Beast Subjugation seemed like a far-off dream. How could I manage that when I was having this much trouble with low-ranked magical beasts?

To make matters worse, the number of days I had left for practicing subjugation could be counted on one hand. I wouldn’t be able to go this week because my Voidday had been taken up by my plans with Prince Helios, and there was a ball coming up that would be scheduled on Voidday as well... When

I thought too much about my dwindling practice days, I was filled with trepidation.

With this little time to practice, will I actually be able to subjugate a mid-ranking magical beast in time...? I still haven't even seen one before!

Fighting beasts for the first time made me realize what a difficult thing it was to become a High Mage. I was really starting to understand how right Vi had been when he'd told me my decision was reckless.

Honestly, it might be impossible for me to do this...

But I stood up, trying to brush off my negative thoughts. I drank the tea Rince had put out and tried to calm myself down.

After a while, I moved slowly over to the mirror. I gazed at my reflection in the glass, as I'd done so many times before.

It's all right, I told myself. You can do it for sure.

Even Lord Viol had told me not to be so downcast. He'd said thirty points wasn't that bad! And if he'd told me that, it was true, was it not? Lord Viol would not say something to me that he did not feel in his heart.

Lord Viol is the most skilled of all Archmages out there, I chided myself. If he thinks you have a chance, what reason is there not to trust him?

And it was true that the more I fought in actual battles, the more I hit my target with Wind Cutter, and the more the number of my blades increased. Lord Viol had told me that that was amazing.

He'd also praised my ability to evaluate my enemy during battle, referring to how I'd noticed that I'd been struggling to hit the flying squirrel-type beast, and then decided to wait to cast anything more until it was distracted. He'd praised the decisiveness of my finishing blow as well...

You still have a chance at succeeding, I told myself. All you have to do is believe in yourself and do your best.

When I met my reflection's eyes in the mirror, there was a strong light glowing in her eyes. I almost felt as if she was talking to me as I told myself, *It's all right, you still have the ability to do your best.*

The me in the mirror smiled as if reassured. I nodded at her and moved away from the mirror.

Feeling more confident, I returned to my desk and looked at my notebooks again.

Can I throw my Wind Cutter in several directions at once? was written on the page. Shortly after, I'd written: *Could altering my technique like that increase the power behind each blade?*

I sighed as I looked down at the words. They were all wishful thinking, not realistic at all. The technique that I'd thought of was still beyond my ability to execute. No doubt Lord Viol would have been able to achieve such a feat easily, but for me, it would be too difficult to progress that far.

I'm a fool, I thought despondently. Thinking about things I can't do won't get me anywhere.

Back when we'd arrived at the plains for the first time, Lord Viol had told me to focus on the magic I already knew how to use. He'd told me that if a mage had good ideas, they could be a huge tool in refining the spells they were already able to cast to accomplish their goals.

And if I could change my tactics and use True Wind more effectively, like I had when I'd fought against the butterfly-type magical beast, then couldn't I do the same with Wind Cutter...?

Oh! I've got it! If I do that, I might even be able to win against several wolves at once!

I turned to my notebook in haste, scribbling down everything I could before the idea that had descended upon me could disappear.



WHEN I woke up that Voidday, I was feeling much better than I had after last week's outing. I'd spent the past few days researching the characteristics of beasts I was likely to encounter in the nearby forest and gathering surefire ways to win against the types I'd already encountered.

I wouldn't be going out to the plains today, though—today was the day of my

second outing with Prince Helios.

Unlike last time, we hadn't made any specific plans for our trip. There was no need for us to worry about time, like we would if we were going to go see a play or something. We could simply walk around town and enjoy ourselves.

My mood wasn't quite so despondent anymore now that I'd had some time to calm down. And after I'd had my idea about Wind Cutter, I wasn't feeling so worried about my quest to become a High Mage. There was no need for me to be unduly anxious about my outing with Prince Helios, either—I knew the general atmosphere of the town, now that I'd been there a few times with Lord Viol.

The outfit Rince had prepared for me today was a straight-line dress with fine lace stitched to the waist and around the chest. I thought it was quite pleasant to look at without being too flashy. It was decently sunny outside, so she'd given me white lace gloves to wear.

Rince had tailored my makeup to the sun as well—my foundation had a subtle orange base, which would reflect nicely under the sun and add a cute pop of color to my complexion.

Now all I had to do was choose my accessories so they would match Prince Helios's outfit.

"That outfit suits you, Lady Seren," Rince said. "You look like a merchant's daughter."

"Just the look I'm going for."

Today, like last time, Prince Helios arrived at the tenth morning bell. And, just like last time, he looked very handsome.

He wore a navy-blue vest that flattered his tall, slim figure, with a white shirt underneath. His shining golden hair had been hidden today, though—he'd tucked it away under a hat. It seemed like a bit of a shame to hide such lovely hair away, but clearly, the short-brimmed hat was meant to camouflage him for our outing.

Ah, well. It can't be helped.

I gave Prince Helios a smile and walked over to meet him. Unlike last time, I felt calm and composed as I came up to him.

I really have made some progress, I thought cheerfully.

Once I'd drawn close enough, I said, "Thank you for inviting me today, Prince Helios."

I had only thanked him, just as I had before our last outing, but Prince Helios looked oddly shocked. It was unusual for him to make a face like that, like he was almost embarrassed.

I've never seen him with an expression like that before, I thought as I gazed up at him. So even Prince Helios has times when he's embarrassed.

"You look very beautiful today," Prince Helios said softly.

He looked so bashful as he spoke those sweet words that my entire body flushed with heat.

"Th-Thank you..." I stuttered.

Prince Helios had given me compliments during our last outing as well. The words didn't mean much, though—offering a lady kind words while you escorted her was simply part of a gentleman's refined manners.

Don't get too excited, Seren, I chided myself, trying to calm down.

But still, Prince Helios's words and expression made me so happy, I couldn't stop the curve that shaped my lips.

"Last time you looked very cute," Prince Helios said thoughtfully, "but today you look sophisticated. I guess women really do change their persona depending on the day."

I wasn't surprised that he thought so. I'd had similar thoughts when I'd seen myself in the mirror. Last time, my hair had been in fluffy curls that had shaken slightly when I moved. This time it was all straight and flowing down my back, except for the parts that had been woven into braids.

My makeup was different from normal, too. Orange tinted my eyelids, the curves of my cheeks, and my lips, calling attention to my pale skin. It was certainly quite a different look from my usual makeup, which was typically pink-

themed, with my cheeks shaded rose and my lips rouged cherry. My face itself hadn't changed, but my general aura was quite different.

Rince's touch is like magic when it comes to switching up my appearance, I thought affectionately.

"It's all down to Rince's skills," I told Prince Helios, smiling. "But having you praise my appearance in such a way gives even someone like me some self-confidence. Thank you, Prince Helios."

"Even someone like me, she says..." Prince Helios mumbled, then shook himself. "Regardless, Seren, you look beautiful."

"Thank you very much." I inclined my head.

Right, I thought. I may be a long way off from looking like Marietta, but thanks to Rince's efforts, I look okay. If nothing else, I look better than I did last time. I can probably stand to be a bit more confident.

I smiled brightly at him. "You look wonderful too, Prince Helios. Though, I think you look a bit...more rugged than you did last time."

Since we weren't going to a play or any other fancy event, I'd decided to downplay my look this time, and Prince Helios had evidently been thinking the same thing. Still, even though he'd dressed like one of the ordinary townsfolk, someone as regal as him couldn't help but stand out.

His face was so refined and handsome, and his physique was impeccable. Even the way he carried himself was mesmerizing.

His slim physique might be from all the fencing and horseback riding he does, I thought idly. And his posture could be because of his dance and etiquette lessons...

Either way, there was beauty to the way he moved through the world.

Prince Helios laughed at my "rugged" comment. "Thank you, Seren. I've actually been to town quite a few times since we went last time, just to scope things out. It made it so I could actually choose clothes that would blend in with the other townsfolk this time."

I laughed. "Oh, my. That's so like you, to be so studious about it. Well, you

look amazing.”

“Thank you,” Prince Helios said again. “I’m glad I went to the effort now.”

Prince Helios is always making sure he’s covering all his bases, I thought with an inward smile.

“But...” he continued, “that’s not the only thing I learned while scoping out the town. I found lots of interesting-looking shops. I’m sure you’ll like them as well.”

“I can’t wait!” I told him.

“Ah, well, we’re wasting time here. Shall we get going?”

“Okay.”

I took the hand he offered me and was escorted smoothly into a horse-drawn carriage. This time, there was no awkwardness between us like there had been before.

It seems both Prince Helios and I have gotten more accustomed to this, I thought.

My heart was still hammering in my chest, and I was still nervous, but it was different this time. I was able to stay calm without bubbling over with nerves, letting me be a nice, steady presence at Prince Helios’s side.

“By the way,” he commented, breaking the silence that had fallen within the carriage, “remember how we reached out to those young ladies about joining the salon?”

I nodded. Of the three ladies we’d reached out to, two had already discussed things with their parents and received approval to join the salon—Linde and my own sister, Marietta. We were still waiting on an answer from the last lady, Ladia, who was the most conservative of the group.

Prince Helios grinned. “This morning, I received word that Ladia is to join us as well.”

“Oh my!” I cried, straightening in my seat. “I am so glad!”

“Yes, it’s a relief,” he replied, looking as if a weight had been taken off his

shoulders. “We’ll make preparations for their arrival this week, and inform the Royal Academy and the palace of what is happening as well. With that done, I believe we should have everything ready for them to join us as early as next week.”

“Understood,” I said. “I’ll prepare too. I want to give them the best welcome I can.”

“Please do. Oh, but...it’s the weekend. I shouldn’t be bringing up work. I’m sorry.” Prince Helios’s brow crinkled in consternation, but I just smiled and shook my head.

“It makes sense that you bring it up, if the official response only came this morning,” I said lightly.

It was no wonder he’d felt compelled to bring it up—the matter had taken up quite a bit of his attention for a period of time. It must have been a relief to have everything settled without incident.

“I’m so glad it all worked out,” I told him. “Now the salon can enjoy a breath of fresh air.”

“Yes. I look forward to it,” he replied.

An expression of true happiness settled over his face, and I felt an echo of the feeling rise up within me as well.

This shall be a huge boon to Prince Helios once he graduates from the Royal Academy and begins his official duties, I thought proudly. But the inclusion of Marietta and Linde and Ladia won’t just improve his standing; it will be a benefit to the other salon members as well.

I could imagine the results quite clearly—Linde and Ladia’s fathers would gain a deeper connection to the palace, and all sorts of important matters would begin to go much more smoothly.

I’m so glad Prince Helios decided to do this, I thought, a smile breaking out on my face. I enjoyed being able to help Prince Helios bring such a breath of fresh air to the salon, though it did make me a bit sad to think that I would be leaving before I could see things through to the end. More than anything, though, I was grateful. With a new, strengthened salon, I’d be able to leave my position as

future princess consort without any worries.

There's nothing I can do about it, I told myself. I'll just have to make it so the girls can transition comfortably to their new positions within the salon and be able to do their work as easily as possible.

I glanced up at Prince Helios, commenting, “We'll need to prepare chairs for them all, now that I think of it.”

“Ah, yes, you're right,” he agreed. “I was thinking of asking you to take on the role of mentor. I figure they might have an easier time learning from another woman.”

I nodded. “I certainly don't mind, but if possible, I think we should guide them into paths that focus on their future roles.”

“Their future roles...?” Prince Helios asked slowly.

“Yes. I've heard that Linde and Ladia are aiming to be civil officials, so I thought it might benefit them if we gave them work that focused on that field in particular.”

“I see,” he said, nodding. He was clearly thinking hard, having grasped what I was suggesting. “That's a good idea. It will widen the breadth of the salon's influence and give them the opportunity to increase their human relations skills at the same time. That approach would give us quite impressive results, I think.”

“I shall ask Linde and Ladia about it tomorrow,” I told him. “Marietta doesn't seem to have any aspirations, so I will guide her.”

“Yes, please do,” he agreed.

As we'd been talking, the scenery outside the carriage window had flown by. Before we knew it, we'd reached town.

Prince Helios let out a little hum at the sight. “Why don't we end this work talk here?”

“Hehe, all right,” I agreed. “Though I'm happy to have such a clear idea of what will go on tomorrow.”

Moments later, Prince Helios escorted me down from the carriage. He looked rather regretful that he'd ended up talking about work so long, but I had

actually quite enjoyed it. Not to mention that thanks to our discussion, that wobbly feeling I'd had in my legs had gone away, leaving me feeling quite steady.

I have a very important mission to do today, I reminded myself. This is not the time to get emotional. I have to be a good practice subject for Prince Helios, so when the time comes for him to take Marietta out, he'll be well-versed in the practice. I have to play my part well, so I don't end up wasting his precious time.

I wasn't sure if someone like me would be able to be of much use to him, but I would do my best.

"Let's go," Prince Helios said. "Though we don't really have any plans for today, do we? It seemed like you enjoyed walking around and leisurely perusing the shops last time, so today I thought we could look around as much as you like. We don't have to worry about the time at all."

I felt a little bolt of happiness go through me.

Prince Helios really was paying attention to me last time. And now he's being so considerate!

His kindness meant a lot to me.

"Thank you very much," I told him sincerely. "I'm looking forward to it."

"As am I," he said, smiling. "I've heard that discovering unexpected shops and wares is one of the delights of walking around town."

"I can't wait!"

I glanced around us, taking in the area around our carriage. We'd stopped on a very pretty street, but I could see no stalls anywhere nearby. There were, however, stylish curio shops and cafes tucked alongside jeweler's shops and fashion boutiques. There were lots of couples and small groups of friends walking about, going from store to store. To my eyes, they all looked very trendy and well put together.

Ah, so in this part of town, the shops are more upscale, I thought. That's why there aren't any stalls.

This area of town was so different from the market area where I had gone

shopping with Lord Viol. I found it quite fascinating.

In the market, there were weapons and armories and shops that sold accessories for adventurers, surrounded by tons of food stalls. The air had been filled with delicious smells and the lively voices of shopkeepers. The kinds of shops there drew in a combination of different types of people, from chefs to adventurers—it was a very mixed atmosphere. But regardless, everyone mingled among each other, walking around and enjoying themselves.

I thought both places were very interesting in their own way.

Prince Helios and I started advancing down the street, looking in shop windows as we walked along. The more I looked, the more I realized that my tastes leaned toward specific types of shops. There were so many lined up one after the other, but the only ones I really felt drawn to were the curio shops, book shops, and flower shops.

I was interested in the jewels and food shops as well, but I didn't really feel like browsing or tasting, which I found a little odd.

Prince Helios, on the other hand, didn't show any particular interest in any specific type of shop. He just seemed to be enjoying the atmosphere of the town in general.

"You seem most interested in the curio shops, Seren," he commented.

I nodded. "Yes. I've never been able to browse or buy anything for myself before, so when I see all sorts of different interesting things laid out, it makes me want to touch them all and try them on. Everything is so adorable...!"

It was sweet of Prince Helios to notice such small things. It made me happy to think he was paying such close attention to what I liked.

But Marietta won't be interested in shops like that, I realized suddenly. She'd be more interested in the stores selling cosmetics and perfumes. I should prioritize going into the sort of shops she'd be interested in to better prepare His Highness.

That's what I thought, at least. But there were so many wonderful shops, and they were so distracting, that we didn't make it too far down the street. By the time noon approached, we'd entered countless shops, but it still felt like almost

no time had passed since we'd alighted from the carriage.

I couldn't help but laugh. "Hehe, all of the shops are so splendid; I keep getting pulled in."

"You're right," Prince Helios agreed. "It's interesting—I've scoped this area out so many times already, but it feels different now that I'm here with you. You take an interest in shops and items I never even noticed before. It's interesting getting a fresh perspective."

"It is?"

"Yes, absolutely." His face shone with pleasure. "It's fun walking around with you like this, Seren."

I couldn't help but smile, seeing how much he was enjoying himself. "Well, I'm honored," I told him.

I'd noticed by now that Prince Helios favored chic, uncomplicated designs. All of the things I'd seen him take notice of seemed to be very sophisticated.

No doubt he's naturally drawn to the finer things, I thought.

Just as I was thinking that, I noticed a nearby shop filled with items Prince Helios would no doubt like.

I turned to him, asking, "Do you like leather goods, like the ones in that shop?"

Prince Helios glanced at the store I was indicating. "Ah, yes, I do. They look like they have good quality leather there, and the designs are nice and simple."

I thought so, I thought, pleased.

"I actually took a good look around the shop the other day, so I'll skip it for now," he said. "Still, it's impressive how well you know my taste."

I smiled at him. "I got a general picture of what you like when I thought about the style of the items you typically use, and from seeing what you picked up to look at when we were in the other shops."

He hummed thoughtfully. "You know, the pen case I'm using right now is one that you gave me for one of my birthdays, Seren."

"I know. I'm so glad you like it so much."

He must have been using it for a long time, I thought, staring at it. The leather had changed to a dull amber color. After that, every time I looked at that pen case, I felt warm and happy inside. It was nice to know that I had given Prince Helios a gift he liked enough to use for so long.

"Seren..." Prince Helios murmured, "you chose my gifts based on your knowledge of my likes and dislikes, didn't you?" A troubled, conflicted sort of expression overshadowed his happy one. "Thank you for being so considerate of me."

"You're welcome...?" I said, confused.

What's this about, all of a sudden? Why is he making that face? I desperately wanted to know, but I couldn't ask.

"Do... Do you like the gifts I have given you until now?" he asked me.

"Of course I do! I treasure them all!"

Prince Helios inhaled a rush of air.

"If so, then I'm glad," he told me softly.

"Just knowing that they were gifts from you was enough to make them all my special treasures," I said, smiling.

He looked relieved, but there was really no cause for him to be concerned.

"I see..." he murmured in response.

I couldn't help but think of all the gifts Prince Helios had ever given me. They were all displayed on the bookshelves in my room. Gorgeous bouquets of flowers, popular accessories, adorable teddies... Over the years, Prince Helios had filled my room with lovely little treasures.

Looking at the new treasures on my bookshelf every day was something I really relished. It was only six months ago that I received the last, but just thinking about it brought me right back to that moment.

I looked forward to them so much. Really, I did. And on the days I received presents from him, I was always able to sleep so peacefully and happily.

I suddenly wanted to express to him how grateful I always was, each time he gave me one of those gifts.

I want to tell him, straight from my heart.

"You give me such wonderful things every year," I said. "I just want to thank you so much for each and every one of them. I've always looked forward to your presents."

He gave me a serious look. "I want to give you something that will really make you happy for your next birthday. Like that glass pen. Something beautiful."

"I... Thank you..." I muttered. I knew that day wouldn't come, but all I could do at this point was thank him anyway.

His words made me think of the glass pen he'd given me the other day. It truly was beautiful, and I liked it very much, but I had hidden it on a high shelf in my room so I didn't have to look at it.

Every time I saw that pen, I felt conflicted. A pain would bloom in my chest, and I'd somehow feel both happy and sad at the same time. I couldn't just leave it somewhere where it would catch my eye all the time when it caused me to feel such a tumultuous set of feelings.

I can't even look at the gifts Prince Helios gave me and feel the happy feelings I used to anymore, I thought sadly. It's so depressing.

I was jolted out of my thoughts when Prince Helios smiled broadly at me. "Walking in town like this, getting to know one another... I think it's something that's really important for us to do," he told me.

When he smiled like that, I could see a hint of the little boy he had been peeking through.

All of a sudden, I felt filled with confusion.

Prince Helios had always been my fiancé, but he had never really seemed excited about it. Now here he was, spending time with me and trying to find out about the sort of things I liked and enjoyed. Walking next to him through the streets like this filled me with alternate waves of deep happiness and puzzled guilt.

And anyways, what triggered this sudden change in him? I thought.

It appeared an answer to my doubtful question would be forthcoming, for the prince began to speak.

“Apparently, my father used to take my mother into town a lot,” he said. “He pretended it was for inspecting the capital.”

“Oh, I’ve never heard anything about that before,” I told him.

“I only learned of it the other day myself,” he responded. “But when I heard about it, I realized I shouldn’t spend all my time in my room studying anymore. I need to go out and see more of the realm with you.”

“Oh... I see.”

Ah, right. Everything makes sense now, I thought.

The king and queen must have been worried that, despite being engaged, the two of us had not been out in public much together. They must have stepped in and given Prince Helios a few words of advice.

The prince was a serious sort, so when he’d heard that, I had no doubt in my mind that he had decided to fix the issue his parents had pointed out. I liked the serious way Prince Helios approached his duties, but for some reason, the thought of my becoming just a duty to him filled me with sadness.

“Seren?”

“Yes?”

“Up ahead is a shop I was planning to take you to. It’s famous for its delicate glass-blowing techniques. Would you like to see it?”

I nodded, genuinely interested in Prince Helios’s kind invitation. “Oh yes, very much.”

He probably chose that shop for us to go to specifically when he was scoping out the area, I thought.

It was clear that whatever Prince Helios’s true feeling may have been, he’d decided to do his best to get to know me, his fiancée.

That’s Prince Helios through and through.

I didn't want his thoughtfulness to go to waste, so I decided I would do my best to enjoy looking around the shop. I pushed aside my earlier feelings of sadness and followed where Prince Helios led.



“**WHAT** happened after that?” Vi demanded.

“What do you mean...? That’s it.”

Really, Vi, I thought at the little black cat lying on my table. That’s basically everything that happened.

Vi didn’t answer me—he just continued to look in my direction, his tail lazily slapping against the surface of the table. At the look on his furry face, I cast my mind back to all of the wonderful shops Prince Helios brought me to, trying to describe everything I could.

“Prince Helios took me to some really wonderful, sophisticated stores,” I told Vi. “There were some that had all kinds of amazing blown glasswork, and others with different kinds of amazing tools and interesting items... But we also went to a lot of shops that Marietta would like, such as jewelry, perfume, and hat shops. Oh, and we went to a café that had the most delicious lemon cake!”

This last sentence perked Vi up a little. “Lemon cake on Bake Street? That must have been Rosse Marino, then.”

“Yes, that’s what it was called!” I smiled at him, impressed. “You even know the names of all the shops, Vi...”

“It’s well-known. But never mind that.” Vi’s big black eyes stared right at me. “The shops were wonderful, and the prince was kind, right? So then, why do you look so downcast?”

“O-Oh...” I stuttered, surprised. “I thought I had managed to act normal...”

Vi’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t try to pretend you’re okay after cuddling the life out of me. You only pet me like a mad woman when you’re stressed out.”

“D-Did I do that?”

“Fess up.”

I just stared at him, at a loss. I hadn't thought my downcast mood would show, but Vi had seen through me so easily. The problem was, I wasn't really sure how to answer him. He'd asked me so suddenly!

I mean, something did happen, I thought, at a loss. I just don't think it's something that warrants me feeling this depressed.

"For some reason... I ended up remembering what happened back then," I said softly.

Maybe Vi was right, and I did need to talk about it. But before I could summon the courage, I found myself reaching for Vi's beautiful fur. I brushed my hand over his little head and stroked him behind his ears.

As I pet him, Vi's eyes drifted shut, and his ears began flicking left and right.

Hehe, he's so cute.

My feelings evened out as I watched him, until finally I was able to speak again.

"When Prince Helios and I went out together, I realized something. The reason he's taking me out and escorting me places is because he's really trying to do the right thing as my fiancé."

For some reason, I suddenly found it hard to speak. I had to pause before continuing.

"That made me...feel really sad. Really lonely."

Vi just listened to my words, gazing up at me with a shocked expression.

I mean, it makes perfect sense, doesn't it? Why am I so sad about it?

I couldn't even figure that out myself.

It was just, once I'd come back home and been left alone in my room, filled with these conflicting emotions, I'd found myself recalling what I had thought that day when I made up my mind to break off our engagement.

I'd found myself recalling how, when those voices had been pressing him to make Marietta his bride instead, Prince Helios had said something along the lines of "*I could never say that*" or "*I could end up getting disinherited.*" His tone

had been so full of resignation.

I'd recalled how I felt, realizing that Prince Helios's engagement to me was something he only tolerated. Something that he was unable to speak out against, and so remained silent about.

When I remembered all that, I couldn't help but think of the way Prince Helios had been with me today. While he was with me, he must have been faking his smiles as he brushed off his wishes to be engaged to someone else. He must have just been telling himself, over and over, that he couldn't change anything. And he planned to continue living that way for the rest of his life.

How I had cried and cried the moment I finally grasped that.

All of the birthday presents he had given me, every time we had danced at the balls, none of it had meant anything to him. They had just been pleasantries he had to exchange with his fiancée.

The only reason things had changed now was because the king had had a word with him.

"Prince Helios takes his position very seriously," I told Vi, voice low. "He is trying to be all that he ought to be as my fiancé, and that's the only reason he is attempting to spend time with me or engage me in conversation."

Yes... I thought sadly. *Prince Helios appears every inch the devoted fiancé.*

"But he does all of that...with no real feelings of his own for me."

Now that I'd finally said the words, sadness washed over me. Whenever I thought of how, to Prince Helios, his engagement to me was just something he had to endure, I felt like my emotions were going to swallow me up.

I felt terribly guilty toward him. I did not want to be the cause of his sadness. But at the same time, I felt a miserable sense of bitterness.

If I had not overheard his conversation that day, then I would have kept on knowing nothing, and would no doubt be so happy with these recent developments in our relationship. The way I had been before, I could not have even guessed at the true feelings Prince Helios and Marietta kept concealed.

I would have been the only one excited, the only one who knew nothing. The

thought made me shudder.

“Er, um...” Vi looked awkward, as if he wasn’t sure what to say. “Does the prince really hate being engaged to you that much?”

“He thinks of it as something unavoidable,” I said flatly. “I think he’s given up on any other alternative.”

“But...you haven’t really asked him about it in person, have you?” Vi muttered, his tail and ears both drooping.



Viol 13

The Role of an Instructor

“**DOES** the prince really hate being engaged to you that much, Lady Seren?” I asked, my ears and tail drooping. “You haven’t really asked him about it in person, have you?”

Why am I asking her this? I thought despondently. And yet, I could not stop myself. Lady Seren had never doubted Prince Helios’s reluctance to marry her, and yet I had my suspicions to the contrary.

When I stepped on Lady Seren’s foot at the dance, he had come running over in a fluster. He’d even approached her the very next day and inquired about it, as if still concerned. I couldn’t claim to understand the mindset of the aristocracy, but I didn’t think the level of concern he was showing was just a man being proper toward his fiancée.

If Lady Seren was mistaken, and the prince really did treasure and care for her, would she not regret breaking off their engagement in the future? Was it not better to make absolutely certain of his feelings at this stage?

“Ask Prince Helios directly...?” Lady Seren shook her head. “I could never do something like that.”

“No?” I asked, puzzled. “He doesn’t seem the type to get angry—not like that hot-head redhead, anyway.”

Lady Seren let out a sad little chuckle. “Of course, he wouldn’t get angry,” she said, stroking her hand over my feline back. “I’m sure Prince Helios would remain just as courteous to me as he always is. I have no doubt he’d be polite in his answer. But...there’s no point to it. I needn’t bother asking.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I overheard Prince Helios saying that he doesn’t think it would be possible to dissolve our marriage even if he wanted to. That can’t fail but affect what he says to me.”

He may have said that, I thought, but I’m sure if he lodged some serious protests with his parents, he could do something about their engagement. He is the crown prince, after all.

Lady Seren sighed, continuing, “If you know you have no other choice but to spend your life with someone, you’re not going to say something horrible to them that unduly upsets them, are you? All that would do is damage relations between the two of you.”

“Ah,” I said thoughtfully. “That is indeed true.”

When she puts it that way, I can understand her point of view.

“There’s no point in even trying to engage Prince Helios in the conversation if he won’t express his true feelings to me. And Prince Helios is smart enough to figure out that if he did so, not only would nothing be solved, but our relationship would be affected as well.”

“I see,” I said, nodding.

“What I’m trying to say is, it doesn’t matter whether Prince Helios wishes to remain engaged to me or not—he would answer me the same way regardless. I would never know if he was just being respectful of my feelings or not.”

And if that’s true, there’s no point in asking him about it, I thought. I see where you’re coming from, Lady Seren.

She gave a little shrug. “Besides, when we went out together today, I realized something while we chatted. Prince Helios has zero feelings for me.”

Silence stretched between us. I wanted to ask her what had happened, but I knew no good would come from it. And so I simply tilted my head to the side and listened.

“Hey, Vi...? You know how you said I looked downcast before? I just want you to know, talking to you like this has actually made me feel a whole lot better.”

“Oh...?”

“Until a few minutes ago, I was feeling terribly sad. The fact that Prince Helios secretly resents our engagement, and is only acting in ways that he thinks will make it easier to bear, was making me feel awful. Absolutely *miserable*.”

“Yes...” I replied slowly, “you said as much.”

“But talking to you, I realized something,” Lady Seren continued, her expression calm. “There’s absolutely no reason for me to feel sad about those

things. There's no way I'll allow myself to become Prince Helios's wife. So why should I bother feeling bad?"

"Ah... Well, that is true, come to think of it."

She'll have to pass the exam and become a High Mage to ensure that, though, I thought.

Lady Seren squared her shoulders. "And besides, my feelings for him have changed. Even if he doesn't want to be with me, there's no reason for that to make me feel sad now."

My ears pricked up. "Your feelings have changed...?" I asked.

Lady Seren smiled wryly, rubbing my ears. "Yes," she said firmly. "I no longer feel that I would be able to continue on and become his wife with an open heart, let alone lead the country with him."

I looked into Lady Seren's eyes, but I could not read the emotion that brimmed within them.

"I've already started along an entirely new path, you see," she finished simply.

She clammed up then, not saying another word. She just climbed to her feet and walked over to the magical barrier I had cast. Without warning, she conjured a barrage of blades more numerous and stronger than ever before. She sent them careening toward the barrier, then turned to me with a grin.

"Lady Seren...!"

"Before you started training me, I had no idea magic was this much fun, or that the study of it was so complex. I want to follow this path to the absolute fullest, for as long as I am able." She smiled. "I've done all kinds of research about magic, and I read that all the useful lifestyle magic and magical tools I use on a daily basis were devised by a ton of different High Mages."

"Ah, yes, well, there are many talented High Mages out there..."

"I know it's most likely not possible at my current level," Lady Seren continued, "but if I work really hard, then I might be able to invent new magic techniques or tools one day, don't you think?"

I nodded. "Certainly. That's an important part of a High Mage's job."

“When I think of how High Mages protect the realm by manning the barrier, how they subjugate rogue beasts, and even invent new magical techniques or tools that enrich everyone’s lives on top of that... I can’t help but think, what finer job could there be?”

“Ah, I completely agree with you.”

Uh-oh, I thought. I’m getting a bit carried away here. I’ve started agreeing with everything she says.

“And that’s why,” Lady Seren said firmly, “I want to live my life as a High Mage, *not* as queen.”

“I see...” I said weakly, “Well, that’s very noble of you, but—”

“Thank you, Vi. Oh! You know, ever since you taught me True Wind, I’ve been having all these ideas as to how I can use it. I started studying up on it a while ago, and now I feel like I’ve just been hit with this burning passion for learning about magic. I think it’s all just so wonderful!”

Lady Seren gave a small gesture with her right hand, and a strip of ribbon that had been lying on her bedside table suddenly floated into the air. Once it was airborne, it floated over and wrapped itself around my left front paw, finishing in a little butterfly bow.

“Your progress with True Wind is unbelievable...” I mumbled, amazed.

“I was practicing with it all yesterday and the day before, since I couldn’t see you,” Lady Seren said, giggling.

She flicked a finger, and this time one set of curtains closed.

Her True Wind is perfect, I thought, stunned. I was completely lost for words. How hard must she have focused, to come so far in such a short space of time...?

“At first,” Lady Seren said softly, “I wanted to become a High Mage for Prince Helios’s sake. But now I just want to become one for myself.” She cast her eyes away. “One day, I should really sit down with Prince Helios and explain this feeling...”

Now that she’d spoken the words aloud, it was like they set fire to something inside of her. Lady Seren threw herself back into her studies with a passion that

was almost a fury.



TODAY was Voiday, the day Lady Seren had been waiting for. The two of us were to go out beast subjugating, but I would need to stick a pin in Lady Seren's exuberance and deflate it just a little.

It's the job of the master to make sure that his apprentice does not go blindly into danger, after all, I thought as I proceeded along my usual route to the duke's residence. But how exactly should I go about this?

I hopped my way from roof to roof as I pondered this question, traversing chimney tops and walls as I drew closer to my objective—Lady Seren's window. I'd nearly made it to my goal when I saw the window swing open and Lady Seren's head pop out.

"Welcome, Vi!" she cried excitedly.

"Whoa!" I gasped, taken off guard.

She giggled and scooped me up. "Hehe, I saw you hopping across the rooftops, and I just couldn't wait any longer."

She crossed the room with me under her arm, then settled onto the sofa and roughly wiped off my feet. Once she was done, she grabbed the basket that was lying on the table, hooking it under her right arm and me under her left, and strolled out of her room.

She hurried down the corridor, apparently intending to head straight to the library as usual. I wanted to speak to her, but I couldn't make a sound in case we ended up passing someone on the way.

Lady Seren clearly intends to escape from the mansion without waiting around to have our usual chit-chat, I thought, a bit alarmed. She really is in an overly excited mood.

Once we were inside the library, she released me.

"There, we made it," she said, her voice quite satisfied.

Unfortunately, it was now time for a stern scolding. I had no other choice—overexuberance was one of the leading causes of dangerous incidents for

mages.

“Let’s go, Vi!” Lady Seren said happily, quite oblivious to my mood. “I’ve prepared as well as I can for battle.”

I glared at Lady Seren, who was beaming at me, and began to slap my tail about angrily.

“Sit down over there and wait a moment.”

Lady Seren nervously sat down on one of the library’s chairs, her face anxious. “What’s wrong, Vi?” she asked. “Why are you making such a scary face?”

“You’re too overexcited, Lady Seren,” I said firmly. “You need to rein it in. Getting flustered is dangerous.”

“Oh, I didn’t think I was being that exuberant...”

“You grabbed me and brought me here without even giving me a chance to speak. Kindly cease your excuses.”

Lady Seren stared at me for a moment, mouth open, before muttering, “Sorry...”

I let my tone gentle a little. “It’s fine, as long as you understand why I’m being so serious about this. I believe you were told that getting all excited about testing out the magic you want to try was dangerous, were you not?”

Lady Seren nodded. “Yes, I was. The scar on Lord Viol’s side was really horrible... But wait...Vi, you weren’t there at that time, were you?”

Curses! I thought. But it was too late. I scrambled to think of a way to cover up my mistake. *I must maintain my cover as Vi at least until Lady Seren manages to subjugate a mid-ranking magical beast*, I thought desperately. *As long as I can keep her thinking that I’m a familiar, I’ll be able to keep her focused on the task at hand.*

“Ah, no...” I told Lady Seren slowly. “My master told me about your conversation. But you saw his scar, did you not? You should learn from it.”

Lady Seren’s eyes narrowed. “You’re reminding me of the importance of making calm judgment calls, right?”

“Indeed. It is not necessary to be so excited or so driven over trying out new magic. All those feelings do is bring unnecessary danger to the caster. They will cause you to mistime your attacks or lead you to dig yourself deeper and deeper into a hole.”

“Oh...” Lady Seren covered her mouth, looking alarmed.

I must have struck a chord.

“You’re right,” she said softly. “All I was thinking about was going out and trying out the battle plans I’ve been cooking up.”

I harrumphed. “Simulating battle plans in your head has its uses, of course, but it can also lead to pitfalls. Beasts won’t always act the way you think they will. And if you’re caught unawares by a beast not doing what you expected, then you’ll be slow to react, so sometimes it’s better to make no battle plans at all.”

“Okay...” Lady Seren fell silent.

She must be picturing the scenario in her head, I thought.

I started to worry that I had been too harsh with her. The drive she’d felt wasn’t entirely a bad thing—it was good for her to have done so much mental prep for our trainings, and being fired up for battle was something worth encouraging.

I sighed, feeling trapped between my human emotions and my desire to be a good teacher.

I’m so sorry, Lady Seren. I did not mean to make you so despondent.

I decided to choose my words more carefully and try to get my message across in a softer way. “Ah, well, battle means laying your life on the line. It’s important to stay calm and alert at all times. Don’t think of your subjugation training as a place to try out new battle plans or magic techniques you’ve learned—think of those things as cards you’ve tucked away into your back pocket, and wait for the proper time to play them.”

“Oh, I get it,” Lady Seren said, her frown vanishing. “I was thinking of it far too much in terms of wanting to try stuff out.”

That part was rather obvious, Lady Seren, I thought wryly. You were practically vibrating with excitement.

“The more battle techniques you study,” I continued, “the greater your deck of cards will grow. That’s how it works. I promise you that your efforts will not go unused.”

Lady Seren’s expression brightened once she heard those words. She looked up at me and said, “So...you’re saying that mages have to stay calm and collected so that they can use their tricks most effectively when the time comes?”

“Exactly!” I said, pleased. “And compared to last time, your magical technique and battle prowess has greatly improved. I’m sure you’ll have some good battles today. Now, do your best.”

“Thank you, Vi. I promise I will!”

I watched as Lady Seren fist-pumped the air, and I breathed an internal sigh of relief. Her eyes were filled with determination.

As long as she continues like this, nothing bad will happen, I reassured myself.

I felt relieved as I cast the usual spell to create a duplicate of Lady Seren. I leaped onto the window ledge, leaving the duplicate behind.

“Now then, Lady Seren,” I called over to her, “let us go hunting beasts.”

“Yes, Vi,” Lady Seren said, coming over and gently stroking my cheek. “You really are a splendid teacher.”

Ah, good, I thought. *At least for the moment, Lady Seren seems to be in a calm state of mind. That’s perfect for battle.*



THIS was our third outing, so we were well used to the routine by now and managed to escape Lady Seren’s mansion without incident. I took Lady Seren to my residence to change clothes, as I always did, and then dissolved my black cat transformation spell and reemerged as Viol.

In the time between our last session and this one, I had gone to the Guild and exchanged the magical beast items we had collected. They hadn’t been worth

that much money, but I handed it all over to Lady Seren anyway. Oddly, though, she didn't seem at all interested in purchasing anything she saw as we walked together through town. She looked in the shop windows with clear enjoyment, but it became obvious pretty quickly that she wasn't the type to frivolously spend her money just because she had it.

The scenery of town passed us by quickly, and before long, we were walking out onto the plains.

The tenth morning bell had not yet rung, so if we continued at this pace, we might be able to make it further into the forest today. Lady Seren still lacked the ability needed to go up against a mid-ranking magical beast, but at the very least, I hoped to pit her against some tougher opponents today so she could rack up experience.

"Lady Seren," I murmured. "Let us continue with our cloaking magic active. I want to go deeper into the forest today, and don't want to waste time on the plains."

That was the plan I'd concocted for us today. I'd figured that getting caught up fighting magical beasts as we crossed the plains would waste some of our precious time, so it would behoove us to proceed with discretion. You never knew when magical beasts would appear, after all.

We wouldn't have to worry about the beasts, however, if I kept us concealed with my cloaking magic. We'd be able to increase our speed without drawing attention, and thus decrease the amount of time we wasted crossing the plains.

"We're going deep into the forest?" Lady Seren asked nervously. "Then we might encounter stronger enemies than the ones I've already fought, right?"

I nodded. "Precisely. You're improving right on schedule, after all. Time is short, so we want you fighting higher-ranked beasts each and every time, if possible."

Once I confirmed that my decision had been made based on her skills, Lady Seren's nervousness quickly vanished under a tide of determination.

"Okay!" she said, her voice stronger than before.

I couldn't help but think that the brave expression on her face, brows raised

high and proud, was adorable.

“Let’s hurry, Lady Seren. If we keep the cloaking spell active, we should be able to proceed at a faster pace without the beasts sensing us.”

“Okay!” Lady Seren responded perkily.

She went to head out, then paused and fell deep into thought for a moment.

“Lord Viol...” she mumbled thoughtfully.

“What?”

“Shall we speed up with True Wind? I think I can handle it.”

“I see,” I said, feeling quite pleased with her idea. “A smart plan.”

Lady Seren had many good points, and the ability to follow orders wasn’t the only one. She was able to think and innovate, to come up with the best solution for her. That was a vital skill when it came to researching and inventing.

She’s going to make a fine mage.

“All right, Lady Seren, let’s try out your plan. But when you cast your magic, try and speed me up as well, will you?”

“What?!” She gasped, visibly shaken. “B-But, I’m too afraid to cast magic on another person! Rejuvenation magic is one thing, but to cast True Wind for two people at once while I’m on the move... I’m afraid something would go wrong.”

All of a sudden, her confidence was gone, replaced with stammering and stuttering. But truthfully, I’d expected such a reaction.

“But if you don’t cast it on us both,” I said softly, “we won’t be able to keep up the same pace.”

“O-Oh...” she breathed, her hand covering her mouth.

I could tell she understood my reasoning, but simply lacked the confidence to act on what I’d asked of her. If I was being honest, it would be easy for me to keep pace with Lady Seren myself, but that would not help her training. Casting magic on another person was not like fighting a beast—though it was still a scary thing indeed. But still, I would prefer her to get a taste of what casting

magic on other people was like sooner rather than later.

“But, what if I hurt you or something, Lord Viol?” she asked miserably.

“Do not worry,” I reassured her. “If there is any danger, I’ll stop you.”

“You say that, but...” Lady Seren looked up at me, anxiety written on her face. “Lord Viol, can we do a practice run here, while things are calm?”

Ah, so she wants to feel her way through it, I thought. She probably considers casting a spell on both of us while running a scary prospect, so she’s found a way to take it slowly and make it less daunting on herself.

I rumbled in approval and nodded. “Very well.”

Lady Seren stared at me for a moment, then took a deep breath and began to draw together her magical power. She pushed it against my back, but I could tell how nervous she was by the weakness of the breeze. I could feel it, but the most it did was make my cloak flap a little.

“Good, good,” I encouraged her. “I can feel the breeze against my back. Now cast the same spell upon yourself.”

“Okay...!” Lady Seren exclaimed, her hair and clothing beginning to flap in the wind. She was lighter than I, and the wind had more of an effect on her. She let out a little cry of surprise as it pushed her forward. But despite her surprise, she held the spells steady, and I felt no change in the level of the wind against my back.

Very good, I thought approvingly.

“Good,” I encouraged Lady Seren. “You’re holding the magical energy steady. That’s the way to do it. Push a little harder, increase the magical energy a little more.”

“A-All right,” she stammered, and my hair and clothing began to flap in the breeze as well.

The force was strong enough now that I felt like the wind was about to push me forward. I glanced over at Lady Seren, who was controlling the output of it with a solemn look on her face. The sight made me want to chuckle.

Only moments before, Lady Seren had been the only one pushed forward by

the breeze. But she was tottering on her feet no longer. Now she was adjusting the level of strength of both of her simultaneous spells, adapting them to two different levels to take into account our different sizes and weights.

Hmm, I thought idly. She was able to calibrate her spells far better than I would have ever expected.

“Now,” I told her, “we run. We’re going to try and stay light on our feet, so try and keep the wind calibrated to account for that.”

“O-Okay.”

“Our individual speeds are going to be different because of our physical differences, so make sure you keep things calibrated down to the second, so that we can run at the same pace.”

“Okay!”

We started to run. “Go for it,” I yelled. “Go for it, Lady Seren!”

As we ran, Lady Seren kept the wind pressure at our backs in alternating streams. She did very well, never letting it drop, not even for a second. By the time we reached the edge of the forest, Lady Seren was exhausted.

She cut off her spells and flung herself to the ground, collapsing against the trunk of a tree. She looked like she’d run all-out—she was breathing hard, and her hair was plastered to her cheeks with sweat.

From the look in her eyes, she was feeling deeply weary, and was glad to have made it to the forest at all. I was impressed by her great willpower and concentration. Despite being spent, emotionally and physically, she kept her concentration sharp right until the end, and she maintained a strong buffeting wind to propel us both.

“You did well,” I said, going to stand by her side. I patted her gently on the head.

“You mean it, Lord Viol...?!” she cried, looking up at me with surprise. Our eyes met, and her smile bloomed over her face like a flower.

I had no words. My heart thumped loudly in my chest. The impact of that smile was enough to make a man worry about his cardiovascular health.

A silence passed between us, before Lady Seren said softly, “Thank you.”

Don't smile at me so cutely, please, I begged her internally, trying to ignore my still-pounding heart. You'll shorten my lifespan.

I kept my expression composed as I turned to face Lady Seren, casting a rejuvenation spell over her.

Clearly, I made her push herself too hard, I thought, abashed. The least I can do is offer my help in the form of healing magic.

“It feels so warm...” Lady Seren murmured.

“Your legs would have taken most of the impact. I’ll go ahead and treat them, too.”

I cast the rejuvenation spell over her whole body to help her recover her vitality, making it especially strong from the thighs to the tips of the toes. Running all the way from the town to the forest... If she didn’t have muscle soreness, it would be a surprise.

And yet, those who knew Lady Seren would find it very strange for her to be sore after a day spent doing nothing more strenuous than reading in the library.

I need to make sure there are no ill effects on her.

“Ah...it’s so warm, like a foot bath. It feels so nice...”

Seems like she's enjoying my special brand of rejuvenation magic, I thought, pleased by her clear enjoyment.



“This is a rejuvenation magic technique, right?” Lady Seren asked me. “This feeling...it’s like I’m being warmed right through. It feels so different from my own rejuvenation spell.”

“Ah yes, I tinkered with it a bit,” I admitted.

“Would you teach me? It feels so nice.”

“Sorry, but not yet,” I told her honestly. “You’ll have to master fire magic first.”

My alteration was relatively simple—I just conjured a little heat to add to my rejuvenation spell. Lady Seren would have to increase her abilities with fire before she could cast it, though.

Her face visibly fell at the news.

“It’s still too soon for fire magic,” I told her gently, “but you’ve made stunning progress with wind magic so far.”

“I have?!”

“Yes,” I said, smiling. “You ran at incredible speeds all the way from the town to the forest, and you even managed to cast the same spell on me at the same time with an even stronger output. How could I fail to be impressed?”

“I’m so happy to hear you say that!” She gave a small fist-pump. The sight of it made me want to chuckle.

What had actually impressed me the most was how she’d been able to keep the spell going despite being absolutely run ragged in the process, but I thought that if I mentioned that to her, she might push herself too hard, so I refrained. Mentally, however, I praised her for that as well.

My apprentice’s really top-notch.

“How do you feel?” I asked her. “Has your fatigue lifted?”

“Yes!” she replied. “Thanks to you, I feel much better.”

“Then let’s eat. I’m looking forward to dessert.”

Lady Seren giggled, pure enjoyment in her voice. “Hehe, you and Vi are both such dessert maniacs.”

Good, I thought, a bit relieved. It looks like she's feeling much more energetic.

Lady Seren got lightly to her feet and patted down her clothes, then moved over to open the picnic basket. “Oh no!” she cried in dismay. “Everything got all messed up...”

“It’s no surprise, after all that manic running,” I commented. “How disrespectful to your wonderful chef, though.”

Lady Seren began to take some of the items out of the basket and hand them over to me. A few handfuls in, she said, “Oh wait, it’s actually not that bad.”

One of the things she handed me had a rather odd shape—it was shaped like a loaf of bread would be, but it appeared to be fried somehow. It was quite thick as well, making me think that there must have been something stuffed inside it. It certainly looked filling.

“What’s this?” I asked her.

“Oh,” she replied, “it must be a new creation. I’ve never seen it before. Still, I’m sure it’s delicious. Shall we just try it?”

“Let’s.”

I bit into the fried bread concoction, which was wrapped in paper, probably to stop oil from dirtying the consumer’s hands. Inside, there was a thick sausage. There were mixed greens inside as well, to keep it nutritionally balanced, and grainy mustard to add some heat while whipping up the appetite.

“I was feeling half-starved after all that exercise,” I told Lady Seren, “so I’m glad we’ve got something with some volume to it.”

“Indeed. It’s delicious!”

“However...I do wish we had something to drink.”

We’d forgone bringing premade tea with us today, as it would be cumbersome to carry. The running had left me quite parched, though, so I was glad I’d come prepared.

I pulled out a small parcel from my waist bag.

“Oh my,” Lady Seren said, “what’s that...?”

"Tea leaves," I told her. "After all that running, we need something refreshing."

"You're right. Wait, did you actually bring several varieties...?"

"Ah yes, I often prepare a selection of teas for when I'm out and about," I said. "It's easy to carry and easy to blend."

"It smells great!" she said cheerfully. "I've never had this blend before. I'd love to get the recipe later."

Lady Seren's obvious pleasure made me feel glad to have thought of bringing the tea with me.

As long as I had tea leaves, I was able to make tea whenever I liked. I could conjure up the teacups using earth and fire magic, and I could boil the water magically. Whenever I was out and about and wanted to relax, I'd found the ability to make tea quite handy, and I'd grown quite particular over time about the tea leaves I brought on outings.

A little magic technique and power is all you need to make things a bit fancy.

As I prepared the tea, I added a pinch of ice. It couldn't hurt, after all the running we'd done.

A cold drink always tastes more delicious after some exercise, after all.

Lady Seren took a sip, a delighted look coming over her face. "It's so cold and refreshing! You really can do anything, can't you, Lord Viol?"

I waved a hand. "I tend to get a lot of daily stuff done using magic, so I'm used to using it. To me, using magic is faster and simpler than going to the trouble of using magic tools, or normal household tools."

"Wow..." Lady Seren breathed.

"It's nothing special," I told her. "If you keep applying yourself to your techniques, you'll soon be able to do all the things I can do."

I was sure that if Lady Seren kept practicing, by this time next year, she'd be able to do just as much lifestyle magic as I could.

"I can't even imagine it," Lady Seren said, sighing as she handed me my

dessert—an apple pie.

“Really?” I asked, surprised. “But that True Wind you cast before was really impressive! You even focused on the angle of the wind so that our bodies wouldn’t be pushed beyond their limits, didn’t you?”

I had been a little shocked Lady Seren could make such tiny adjustments at the same time she was running. It was quite the feat. If she could make detailed calibrations like that, I knew she’d be able to master basically any magical technique.

When I tried to express that to her, Lady Seren smiled as if reassured.

“Oh, I’m glad,” she said. “I feel like I might actually be able to do it now.”

“If I may...change the subject...”

“Yes?”

“This apple pie is delicious. It’s an odd shape, though, and quite small. The pastry on the outside is thick and plentiful, while the inside is loose and sloppy like jam. It’s quite a delicate balance—a delightful one.”

Lady Seren nodded. “I heard that our chef used apple jam with pie pastry, so that I’d be able to eat it with one hand while I read my books.”

What a wonderful dish, I thought happily. *That chef really is a genius.*

Each time I took a bite of the pie, my mouth was filled with sharp sweetness, along with the crunch of the still-crisp pieces of apple and the sloppy texture of the jam.

As I savored the jam’s texture, which was still new to me, Lady Seren asked quietly, “Do you really think I could be like you one day, Lord Viol?”

It seemed while I was merely enjoying my apple pie, Lady Seren had begun to think about the future. Her eyes had a faraway, dream-like look as she gazed up at the sky.

“You certainly shall,” I told her. “With the proper training.”

The truth was, someone with Lady Seren’s aptitude and dedication would no doubt one day achieve results that would leave my own in the dust.

Her eyes flicked back to me. "I'll do my best!" she vowed.

"That's the spirit you need for going out subjugating!" I told her.

When Lady Seren rose to her feet, then, it was with such determination in her eyes that I wanted to do everything I could to support her. And so...I decided to make her a promise.

"If you do well," I said lightly, "I'll give you a reward."

"A reward?!" Lady Seren repeated, looking at me in surprise.

I allowed myself a small smile.

She will be very pleased, no doubt.

Seren 15

An Unexpected Reward

I had already been very happy to receive praise from Lord Viol, but then he'd told me that if I did well, he'd give me a reward. I'd been taken aback and overjoyed at the offer. I wasn't blind to the fact, though, that such a declaration meant he was expecting me to subjugate today's magical beasts at a high level of efficiency and skill.

I want to meet his expectations, I thought. From the bottom of my heart, I do.

"Shall we get going?" Lord Viol asked.

I nodded. "Sure!"

"Do your best," he reminded me, "but don't lose your head."

"I won't! And I won't adhere too strictly to the battle plans I came up with either. Does that sound good?"

"It does," Lord Viol agreed, smiling thinly. "I'm glad you've grasped the rules of subjugating."

My spirits soared. I felt so excited to be able to see such a variety of expressions on Lord Viol's face—each subtle change of his countenance seemed to belie how carefully he was taking care of me.

I pressed my cheeks with both hands, squeezing my eyes shut as I tried my best to calm down.

Get it together, Seren, I told myself firmly. Heed the advice Vi gave you and get some good battle results today. That's your mission, right? But first, you need to calm down.

I exhaled and opened my eyes, then looked up at Lord Viol, who was watching me. "Let's go," I said.

He nodded. "Right, let's go."

We packed up our lunch stuff, and I took the lead, striding out in front of Lord Viol. This was *my* subjugation training, after all. *From now on, I'll pretend Lord Viol isn't here and that I have to handle everything perfectly myself.*

The first thing I did as we walked deeper into the forest was recheck my

personal barrier spell.

All right, I thought. It's secure, and nice and thick. For the moment, I don't have to worry about any sudden magical beast attacks.

My next step was to try and sense the presence of magical beasts.

Unfortunately...I couldn't sense a thing.

Lord Viol had told me that the presence of a magical beast felt like a prickling sensation. I'd felt it vaguely before when magical beasts were very close by, but right now, I couldn't feel anything.

Maybe there aren't any magical beasts around? I wondered. Or maybe I just can't sense them...

I mulled over this for a while, but it quickly became clear to me that I was getting nowhere. In the end, I had to lean on Lord Viol.

I turned to him and asked, "Lord Viol, do you sense any magical beasts in our vicinity? I can't feel anything."

"They're here," he replied simply.

My spirits sank as I digested that response.

So there are beasts around, after all... My magic-sensing abilities must be quite weak.

I felt a sudden rush of envy toward Riesz.

"In fact..." Lord Viol said slowly, "from the intensity of the magical energy present, I'd say at least ten beasts are currently close by."

"Ten?!"

"If you use magic-sensing techniques, you can pick up on magical beasts from far off and even tell what type they are. We're still at the stage of practicing magical beast subjugation, though, so how about I do the sensing for you?"

"No!" I cried instinctively. But after a short pause, I amended, "I mean...I guess that would be all right. I just wanted to see if I had the ability to sense them myself. I can still...try on my own..."

Lord Viol gave a rumbling sound of assent. "If you insist," he said. He looked

away, further into the forest.

I followed his eyeline, and then I saw them.

“Wolves...!”

Several magical wolves surrounded us, their eyes glittering with predatory instinct as if they saw me as their prey. If I took a single step forward, they’d no doubt come flying right at me.

The alpha wolf lowered its body to the ground and stared at me, motionless. It looked like it was ready to pounce, so I focused on it.

That’s when all the other magical wolves attacked me en masse.

I gasped, quickly blasting out a wall of wind around me.

The wolves rammed into the wall, yelping in high voices as they fell to the ground.

Curses! I shrieked internally.

I’d been so caught off guard by their attack that I’d panicked and missed my chance to cast a follow-up spell. The moment the wolves fit hit the ground after they leaped after me, my advantage had been lost. My intention had been to hit them with a Wind Cutter spell while they were still airborne and unable to dodge it. I’d also practiced blasting out my Wind Cutter spell in a radius all around me, in case I ever got surrounded and had to defend myself from attacks on all sides.

Alas, I’d failed to be on the alert.

The magical wolves surrounded me, moving slowly as they tried to close the net around me. It would be easy for them to all leap at me at once now, as they’d done moments before.

The wolves were fast. If they came at me, I wasn’t going to be able to hit them all with Wind Cutter at once. They’d just dodge my attacks. They weren’t giving me any opportunity to take the upper hand in this fight.

I narrowed my eyes at the wolves and took a deep breath, gathering my magical energy together. That’s when I released a large whirlwind at the wolves’ feet. The strong gust of air billowed up from the ground, lifting the

wolves upward until they were airborne.

I still didn't have the power to kill with my whirlwinds, but I could float the wolves up in the air as easily as if they were dry leaves. I raised them higher than the treetops, before suddenly dissolving my whirlwind and sending them tumbling toward the ground.

As they fell, they were unable to dodge my attacks, so I hit them with a Wind Cutter spell. My blades tore through their unmoving bodies. The magical wolves fell to the ground with a thump. None of them got back up again.

"Oh...good. I guess I win."

I let out a big sigh, the tension bottled up inside of me since the battle had begun dispersing from my limbs.

My battle plan had been to make it so the wolves were powerless to charge or leap, since I couldn't dodge their attacks.

It seems my strategy was right.

The moment I thought that, it was like all my nerves snapped at once. I flopped to the ground, feeling the earth beneath my hands and soothing myself by watching the calming drift of leaves from the trees.

That is, until a black boot landed on the ground just in front of me.

I looked up to see Lord Viol, who was looking down at me with a small smile.

"Lord Viol..." I murmured.

"That was good," he said firmly. "Ninety points."

"Oh good," I said, relieved. "That's a lot better than last time."

Lord Viol just shrugged. "I guess it is, but it's sort of a shame, though," he said.

He said thirty points wasn't too bad last time, but now he's saying scoring ninety points is a shame? I thought, confused. Clearly, I'm not following his thought process.

"Just so you know," Lord Viol continued, "that battle was leaps and bounds better than the last one. You've really planned out your strategies."

I looked up at him, even more confused, as he offered me a hand to help me

up. I couldn't help but notice that his hand was slim and elegant, and stronger than I had expected—

And those are thoughts you need to keep to yourself, Seren.

I shook away my thoughts. "Th-That's good, then... I'm glad I did better..."

"To offer some comments, as an examiner..." Lord Viol paused a moment, deep in thought. "Let's see, using a wall of wind to block and deflect them instead of relying on your barrier spell, that was good. You got some distance back and damaged the enemy."

I mostly acted on impulse, I thought, but maybe Lord Viol's right.

I felt a little relieved—I hadn't thought that move was something he would appreciate.

"Next," he continued, "you did well using the enemies' movements against them instead of just attacking yourself. Taking advantage of the openings they left by attacking is a good way to turn their efforts back around on them. And you remained calm throughout, which is vital."

"That's good to know!" I said, feeling happy at all the praise.

"And using a whirlwind to levitate the wolves and then attack them while they couldn't escape... *That* was marvelous."

Lord Viol was giving me so many compliments that embarrassment started to rise up in me along with happiness.

But he wasn't done yet—he continued, "If you'd chosen to fight them head-on, you'd have lost points because your subjugation speed would have been low. Your points came out so high this time because your strategy allowed you to take out so many at once. I hadn't expected that you'd be able to do that."

Oh, I'm so happy! I cheered internally. I couldn't stop myself from smirking. *I applied all the things I noticed during my last battle against the wolves to my battle strategy, and it worked!* I found myself motivated by the thought.

"The best part of all," Lord Viol finished, "was how you used your Wind Cutter so decisively at the end. Just letting the wolves fall from that height would have caused plenty of damage, but you used Wind Cutter to take them out and avoid

any risk of them launching a counterattack. I'd like to give you bonus points for capitalizing on that brief window of opportunity."

"Really?!"

"Of course. If you had achieved a perfect score of a hundred, I'd have added on another twenty bonus points, which would have made your score a hundred and twenty points in total."

That deflated my happiness a bit. "So...what you're saying is that I *lost* thirty points somewhere."

"Indeed," Lord Viol agreed. "That's the issue."

I tried to think of what I could've done wrong, but I came up blank. As far as I could tell, I'd only done positive things in my battle with the wolves. I'd wanted to unleash a perfect Wind Cutter spell at them the moment they first leaped at me, but based on what Lord Viol was saying, that hadn't been where I'd lost points.

I decided to ask the question directly. "So, where did I lose points?"

"For one, the level of your magic technique is low. Honestly, that's not something you can change at the moment. I've only taught you elementary-level magic techniques so far, after all. That subtracts around...let's say ten points. You shouldn't worry about those points now, though, since you'll be learning mid-level magical techniques soon."

I sank into thought, feeling greatly shocked. *Losing ten points... That's fairly major. If all I need to improve my score is to improve my magic technique and learn some mid-level magical spells, I want to do it as soon as possible.*

I decided that once Vi took me back home, I would ask him to teach me mid-level magical techniques. Having made up my mind on that point, I tried to focus on what Lord Viol was telling me.

"Basically," he said, "you lost the majority of your points at the end of the battle. Remember how you sat down right after the battle ended? I took off twenty points for that."

"Twenty points?!"

“Yes,” he said, giving me a stern look. “There’s no guarantee that those wolves were the only enemies around. You could have been attacked almost immediately by another type of magical beast. What you did was very dangerous—you didn’t just sit down, you let your barrier slip. You should know, Lady Seren, that you should never let your guard down at the end of a battle. Ever.”

“You’re completely right...” I said, dejected.

“Don’t get despondent,” Lord Viol chided. “Your main takeaway should be that as long as you remember not to do that one thing, you can avoid a big loss of points. And you don’t want to force me to take away points from you over something so basic, do you?”

Lord Viol sounded so pained by this prospect that it brought a giggle to my lips.

Lord Viol really is such a kind person, I thought, smiling.

“Also, if you want extra points,” he continued, “try taking advantage of the area around you. That’s an easy way to show your innovation.”

“So, like, using techniques that utilize the forest setting, you mean?” I asked.

He nodded. “Yes. For example, you could have used Wind Cutter to knock off some branches and then incorporated them into your whirlwind.”

I hummed in thought. “So, you’re saying I should incorporate environmental weapons into my spells in order to increase their lethality, right?”

“Precisely. They teach that technique at the Magic Academy, so you should make sure you can utilize it well enough that you’re not at a disadvantage compared to the students that go there.”

“Okay!” I agreed. “I’ll try and incorporate it into my battle technique next time!”

“I expect great things,” Lord Viol said with a smile.

“I’ll do my best to meet your expectations!” I told him, feeling much more positive now.

It was funny how big of a motivational push I got, just from hearing Lord Viol

say he expected great things from me.



AFTER that, the rest of the subjugating session went really well, and I even managed to earn some extra points. Lord Viol's scores and the explanations for them were easy to understand, and it was simple enough for me to incorporate the necessary changes.

I could tell that my fighting skills were getting better and better, and using Lord Viol's scores, I was able to estimate accurately for myself the places where I could earn extra points.

Vi was a marvelous teacher, but getting practice scores like this helped me in a way I hadn't experienced before. It offered me a real, tangible way to track my progress.

I'm so lucky that Lord Viol agreed to accompany me and give me such vital advice, I thought, feeling quite cheerful.

We'd arrived back at Lord Viol's house in a shockingly short amount of time—Lord Viol had combined his cloaking magic with a type of magic that sped everything up.

Once we'd gone inside his home, Lord Viol looked over at me. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," I replied. "It's odd how we used the same kind of wind-buffeting magic to return, but I'm not actually tired at all."

Lord Viol let out a disbelieving hum. "You may think you're fine, but I'm sure your body is feeling it. Just in case, I'll cast another rejuvenation spell."

He had me sit down on the sofa, then cast rejuvenating magic on me. When he insisted on bringing me tea afterward, saying, "You must be parched," I found I couldn't refuse him. I accepted it gladly.

"You've got dirt all over you," Lord Viol said worriedly, handing me a steaming hot towel. "Go ahead and wipe off your face and hands, at least. I can't possibly tell a young lady to take a bath at my home, but I can offer you this much."

"R-Right..." I stuttered in reply. "Thank you very much."

Pleasure at how thoroughly he was taking care of me fluttered through me as I began to wipe my face with the steaming towel. I had to at least wipe my face and arms, along with any other obviously visible places, before I went home.

Goodness, I really am dirty.

“I’ll be in the back room,” Lord Viol told me. “Once you’re changed and ready to go home, give me a shout.”

“Thank you so much for everything.”

I watched Lord Viol leave the room, then quickly stripped off all my clothes and wiped down my entire body. The more I wiped, the dirtier I realized I was. Soon I was wiping every spot I could reach.

After all that running, I would hate for someone to think that I stunk of sweat, I thought mournfully.

Luckily, there was a sink. Whenever the towel got too dirty, I’d dampen the towel and wring it out and start all over again. I repeated the process over, and over, and over again, until I had finally wiped myself completely clean.

Once I was done and had tied my hair back neatly, I looked almost indistinguishable from how I had looked when I left my residence.

You know, I think it took less time for me to make myself presentable again than last time, I thought idly.

I grinned. *The dressing and hair-arranging practice is really paying off.*

I hung up my beast-subjugating outfit on the hanger, then turned toward the door.

“Lord Viol,” I called, “I’m ready.”

He rumbled in response and reappeared in the doorway.

He’s in casual clothes...

“O-Oh...” I muttered, feeling quite distracted.

Lord Viol wore a black undershirt that fit his slim body well. It had a very loose neck, so I could see parts of him that were usually covered, like his collarbone. His hair was tied back, so the paleness of his skin stood out more. He looked a

little flushed, perhaps from the running.

“You changed too, Lord Viol...” I murmured. He looked so fresh and vibrant—far more than I did, at the very least. I had to avert my eyes.

“Yes,” he agreed. “I found I was quite filthy as well. I wiped off and freshened up a little.”

I felt all flustered inside after seeing him, and found myself blurting out, “Even your casual clothes are black, aren’t they?”

I had just said whatever random thing came into my mind. I was embarrassed, but I had never known a man to be so sensual-looking. I was almost afraid to look at him, I was so uncertain of where to put my eyes.

“Well, if it’s all black, I don’t have to worry about color...” Lord Viol said casually. “Incidentally, Lady Seren, about your reward...”

“My...reward...?”

“Yes! I promised you a reward if the subjugating session went well, did I not? And you did so well today that next time you’ll be able to try out fighting mid-ranking beasts. Your magical technique has really grown by leaps and bounds in such a short time.”

A flush spread across my face. “I don’t need a reward,” I reassured him. “Your praise is reward enough.”

“You think so? Well, that’s too bad, as I was thinking of giving you permission to begin studying up on flying magic...”

I couldn’t help it—I gave a little hop of excitement.

But then I saw Lord Viol’s brow and lip twitched, as if he was...teasing me...

He better not be messing with me!

I pushed aside my doubts, asking him excitedly, “R-Really?! It’s really okay for me to begin practicing?!”

Lord Viol just grinned, as if my exuberance was amusing to him. “Indeed,” he replied. “Your magical control is quite impressive, and your concentration skills seem fine. You can probably handle more complex magic at this point. I’ve

decided you have what it takes to at least begin researching it.”

“Oh, Lord Viol! Thank you. I’ll do my best to improve!”

“Yes, do your best,” he agreed. “But don’t go pushing yourself too far.”

“I won’t!” I promised.

I was so pleased—so genuinely *happy*. I felt like dancing, I was so delighted. But I wasn’t just happy because I could start practicing flying magic. The best thing of all was that Lord Viol had faith in me to let me try.

I’ll make sure not to do anything silly and break his trust, I swore, my mind made up.

When I next looked at Lord Viol, I noticed he looked a little troubled for some reason. “You’re more pleased about this than I expected,” he said.

“Well, of course!” I said cheerfully. “I plan to do my best!”

“Right. Actually, Lady Seren... I have another reward for you, but now I feel awkward giving it to you.”

“Huh?” I gasped, bewildered.

Anything more would simply be too much!

That’s what I thought, at least, but the sight of Lord Viol’s awkward smile kept me silent.

He’s clearly trying to tell me something, I thought.

After a moment, Lord Viol looked away and awkwardly held out his hands, saying: “Um...it’s these.” I couldn’t tell what he was giving me right away, as his hands were closed into tight fists, like he was holding a handful of snow. But as I watched with interest, he slowly opened his hands, his fingers unfurling like a flower come to bloom.

“Beautiful...” I whispered.

Lord Viol was holding a gorgeous hairpin and a pair of earrings in his hands. The hairpin had a big white bow with a large, deep-green jewel in the center. It was a sophisticated piece that would go with any outfit.

The earrings were delicate gold metalwork with little, bright-green stones

dangling from them.



“You see, ah, the stone in the hairpin increases the output of wind magic, and the earrings serve as general stabilizers for magical output. Both of them work well with wind magic.”

It's so like Lord Viol to carefully consider the effects of accessories... I thought dazedly.

“These will assist you with your magic, and also...” He cleared his throat. “Also help you out when the time comes for you to fly.”

I was impressed by the effects of the accessories, but more than that, I was stunned by their beauty. I reached gently for the hairpin on Lord Viol’s palm, then gasped when the green gem in the center of it suddenly flashed brightly.

Is it...reacting to the magical energy radiating from my fingers...? I wondered.

As I watched, a globe-like thing formed above the gem on the hairpin. It was round and cute, like a spring onion flower’s ball-shaped head, and it emanated a soft pulsating light.

“What’s this...?” I asked curiously.

Lord Viol leaned forward and peered at the pulsing globe. “Ah, you and that stone must have an affinity,” he said. “It’s amplifying your magical power.”

“This round glowing thing is amplifying my magic?” I asked, shocked.

He nodded. “Yep. You should see significant improvement in your magical abilities going forward.”

Lord Viol didn’t say anything more for a while after that calm, cool comment. He merely lowered his brows and looked at me for a moment.

Finally, he said slowly, “So...anyway, I bought these for you, and it would please me a lot if you would accept them.”

Lord Viol selected and bought these amazing accessories, just for me? Hot, gushing joy filled my chest.

I reached out and touched the hairpin on Lord Viol’s palm once more, my hand trembling. Lord Viol took my hand softly and placed the hairpin in it.

It looked so adorable sitting on my palm. I cupped both hands around it

reverently.

I looked up at Lord Viol. “I’m delighted!” I told him from the bottom of my heart. “Lord Viol, thank you so much. I... I will treasure them.”

He smiled at my words, looking pleased. “Good, I’m glad you like them. As I’ve told you before, I’m really no good at choosing accessories, so I was nervous you wouldn’t like them.”

So that’s why he looked so nervous, I realized. But how could I not be thrilled to receive such wonderful gifts?

My chest ached at the thought that he’d gone through such unnecessary worry over me, but the pain lessened at the sight of the smile on his face.

At least he doesn’t seem burdened by it anymore, I thought gratefully. Not with that clear, open expression on his face.

“I thought the properties of those accessories should suit your needs, but I also thought they’d look very good on you. The moment I saw them, I had to get them.”

Lord Viol spoke those words so casually, I was a little taken aback.

“However,” he continued, voice cheerful, “once I’d bought them, I didn’t know when it would be appropriate to give them to you. So, I waited for the right opportunity, and a reward for your progress seemed like a good idea.”

Suddenly, a realization seemed to hit Lord Viol. A look of alarm twisted his face, and his hand rose to cover his mouth. The next moment, he looked away, like he was feeling awkward. I couldn’t see his face, but his ears and neck had gone sort of red.

Is he embarrassed? I wondered.

I looked at his red neck, a happy feeling taking up residence in my chest.

Who would have imagined that the Frosty Archmage of the Third Mage Guild could blush so adorably? Certainly not me, when I first saw him on that bench.

“I’m sorry,” Lord Viol said in a rush. “I’m babbling on and on...”

“No, it’s fine!” I said to reassure him. “I just feel bad for causing you

unnecessary worry. I know I don't wear jewelry very often, but it's not that I don't like accessories."

"Really?"

I nodded. "It's just that I don't think a lot of flashy jewelry looks good on me. But even so, receiving such beautiful accessories as these and getting to wear them is incredibly enjoyable for me."

When it came to accessories, I'd found I felt like even the nicest ones looked like too much on me, so they weren't something I liked to go overboard with.

But these accessories from Lord Viol... They're special, I thought.

They were so beautiful and understated and classic-looking; I felt excited to wear them.

I smiled brightly at Lord Viol, telling him sincerely, "Receiving such wonderful things as a reward truly makes me feel like all my hard work has paid off. I couldn't be happier!"

"I... I see," he stammered. "I'm glad, then. If you're happy, I'm happy, Lady Seren."

"Lord Viol..." I said softly.

He was still looking away, but I could see his neck growing even redder, and the sight of it made my heart beat faster.

What should I do?

For some reason, I felt embarrassed.

"Oh, um, can I try them on?" I asked, trying to distract myself from the flush working up my face.

Lord Viol gasped and jumped, turning around all at once. "Ah! Yes, please try them!"

Seeing the anticipation on his face made me feel even more embarrassed. But since he'd gone to so much trouble to buy me these wonderful accessories, I wanted to try them on. If it made Lord Viol happy, then I wanted him to see.

I borrowed a nearby mirror and carefully put the earrings on. The dangling

green stones looked very pretty in my ears. The hairpin I placed on the back of my head, so I couldn't see how it looked myself. I noticed that I could spot the white ribbon fluttering when I moved my head, though, and I thought it looked very cute.

"Good!" Lord Viol exclaimed, "They look just like I imagined! Very cute. They suit your elegant vibe perfectly, Lady Seren."

A blush burst over my face.

How can I not blush, when Lord Viol praises me so openly?!

Somehow, he always seemed to compliment me with exactly the right words. They might embarrass me, but they also made me very, very happy.

Lord Viol had said that I was cute...and that was more than enough.

Viol 14

I'm Glad I Gave Them to Her

“**THANK** you...” Lady Seren said softly, touching the dangling earring as a blushing smile spread across her face. “I’m so happy to hear you say that, Lord Viol.”

Pleasure filled me—the earrings suited her just as well as I’d thought they would.

Lady Seren turned away from the jewelry and looked up at me with glistening eyes.

I couldn’t help but think, *Lady Seren...are you a goddess?*

She was so adorable, she seemed to almost sparkle, though I knew it was just an illusion.

To think she'd be this pleased by my gift, I thought. I'm glad I gave them to her.

I could have stayed there, staring at Lady Seren’s happy face, for quite a while. But that would not do—through the happiness ringing through my ears came the sound of a bell tolling, signaling the late hour.

We spent a lot of time traveling deep into the forest. I need to return her to her residence right away.

I sighed. “Lady Seren, I apologize, but I think it’s time you should be getting home.”

“Oh, you’re right! It is.”

“I’ll have Vi take you. Wait here.”

Lady Seren’s expression clouded over, and a long moment of silence passed between us.

“Um...” she murmured hesitantly.

I gave an inquisitive hum. “What is it?”

She took off the hairpin and held it carefully in her hand, looking up at me. “If it’s not too much trouble, could I keep the hairpin here with the clothes?” she asked softly. “It’ll be something for me to look forward to when I go subjugating.”

I took the hairpin from her hand and nodded sagely. “Ah, indeed.”

No wonder she reacted that way, I thought. There’s no way she could return home with such an eye-catching accessory in hand. It’s a far safer option to keep them here, where they won’t lead to any awkward questions.

“I’ll take the earrings as well,” I said, reaching for the earrings she’d just reluctantly taken off.

“Um, actually...I’ll keep them.” She closed her hand around the earrings, holding them tight. “I’d like to take these home.”

“Are you sure? If you keep them, your maids might ask questions.”

Lady Seren smiled sweetly at me. “They’re small, and I can pierce them through my handkerchief and keep them on me that way, so that no one will notice them. I don’t want to leave them behind—I want to carry this splendid present with me always.”

“I... I see...”

I could only do as she asked—that smile left me no other choice. And, if I was being honest, I’d like it if she took them with her anyway.

However...

“It’s possible they will not be effective if they are not worn,” I warned her.

Lady Seren smiled with amusement. “Hehe, I don’t think I’ll be facing too many dangers in my daily life, so that’s no problem. I just want to have these beautiful earrings that you gave me close at hand, so that I can look at them whenever I like.”

Lady Seren...are you...an angel?

At any rate, I had no protest to make.

And so, I kept the hairpin, and Lady Seren took the earrings.



AFTER escorting Lady Seren back to her residence as Vi, I returned home again so I could eat dinner, have a bath, and rest for a while. Before long, though, I headed back once more to Lady Seren's room. She had no doubt taken care of her own dinner and bath while I'd been gone.

After a day spent out subjugating, it would have made more sense to have a good night's sleep, but Lady Seren did not know the meaning of rest. She had urged me to come back after I took care of whatever tasks I had at hand.

As far as Lady Seren knew, Lord Viol had been the one who'd taken her out subjugating, while Vi the familiar was the one coming to her room to watch her train.

No doubt part of this request is because she wants to spend some time petting a kitty, I thought, amused.

But I could not bear to turn Lady Seren down. I had grown weak to her requests. And so, even though I was tired, I had come.

I'm hopeless.

I fought back the wry smile trying to spread across my furry face just as I reached the window ledge outside of Lady Seren's room. I peeked into the room, then froze with shock.

Lady Seren was running her fingers back and forth across the earrings I'd given her, a soft smile on her face. She looked radiant with happiness.

I could not bring myself to tap on the glass. All I could do was stare at Lady Seren.

She picked the earrings up and sat down at her dresser, holding them up to her face in the mirror and smiling. She hadn't sensed me watching her at all.

A noise burst out of me, a mangled sound of emotion. My heart thumped hard, as if it had taken a direct magical hit.

She just looked so incredibly, unbelievably happy.

To an aristocrat's daughter like Lady Seren, those earrings were mere cheap baubles—and yet she seemed genuinely pleased with them. It filled me with joy to know that I had prepared something for her that she liked so much.

I stayed outside the window for a while, watching Lady Seren, before I remembered with a jolt why I'd come.

What am I doing? I thought, smiling wryly to myself. *I can't just sit out here all night.*

I straightened myself up and tapped on the window. A little sound was all that was needed—Lady Seren jumped and looked around. Once she saw me, she ran over to the window and flung it open.

“Vi!” she cried, beaming. “You came!”

She scooped me up from my perch, then flopped into a chair with me in her arms so she could wipe off my paws. She saw our usual routine to the end, then placed me on top of her bedroom table. Within seconds, she was showing off.

“Hey! Hey, Vi! Look, *look!!!*”

I rumbled at her. “What is it?”

“Look at these earrings! Just *look* at them! The stones and design are so pretty, aren’t they? Lord Viol gave them to me as a present!”

Lady Seren beamed at me, her smile blinding. The sight of it tickled me so much my heart felt like it was going to explode.

“Oh, I see,” I said awkwardly. “Good for you.”

I hadn’t thought Lady Seren would brag to me, so I hadn’t been sure of what to say to her excited proclamations. In the end, I’d just gone with what felt like the most obvious thing to say.

This seemed to have been the right choice, as Lady Seren immediately began talking once again. “That’s not all!” she cried. “He also gave me this hairpin that had a big, fluffy, *wonderful* white ribbon on it. And the ribbon’s got this big, green gemstone attached to it. It’s really pretty, you know? I wish I could have shown it to you too, Vi, but Lord Viol is keeping it safe for me right now.”

“I see.”

“You’re not looking at it properly, Vi,” Lady Seren said with a harrumph. “I just, I never expected to get such a beautiful present. I’m moved to tears!”

“I... I am looking, I promise. The emotion’s lost on me, I think.”

I just couldn’t find the right words to respond to her. But it was enough for me just knowing that she had been so delighted by her gifts that she had been compelled to show them off to a cat. Happiness welled up inside my heart.

“I can see that the gifts have brought you great joy, Lady Seren. I am sure my master would be pleased that you like them.”

A guilty look flickered over Lady Seren’s face.

“I’m sorry, Vi. You’re a cat! Of course, you’re not interested in accessories. It’s just...I don’t have anyone else to tell about this, even though I’m so excited.” She gave me a bashful look. “I got carried away.”

Halfway through Lady Seren’s apology, it had hit me—our circumstances required her to keep the accessories I’d given her secret. But even so, she’d been so bursting with the need to talk about them that she’d decided even an animal would do.

She’s so adorable... I thought, amused. I hoped I wasn’t smirking. I’m glad I’m in cat form.

“I kept you waiting, didn’t I?” I asked her, changing the topic. I stretched my tail out behind me. “Shall we get on to today’s training session?”

Lady Seren made a soft sound of agreement. Her mood seemed to have changed abruptly, a serious look coming over her.

That’s right, I reminded myself. I shouldn’t let myself get too excited over the business with the accessories. My role is simply to provide Lady Seren with the training needed to raise her magical abilities, so that she can fulfill her wish.

“Vi,” Lady Seren said slowly. “I have a request.”

I let out an interested rumble. “Well, ask away.”

“Would you teach me some mid-level magic?”

I blinked at her, surprised. “Mid-level magic? I thought you were about to ask me to help you practice flying. Lord Viol has given you his permission now, hasn’t he?”

“He has,” Lady Seren agreed matter-of-factly. “But I can practice flying by myself. I’m more worried about what Lord Viol said today when he was appraising my subjugation performance—he said that I scored low in Magical Technique, and that I’d lost ten points because of it.”

“Ah, well, that’s neither here nor there.”

“Lord Viol said I could make it up by earning bonus points, but...” Lady Seren paused for a moment, lifting me so that my tiny cat eyes were level with hers. “I’d rather not lose those ten points at all. Bonus points aren’t going to be easy to earn when fighting mid-ranking magical beasts. If I can avoid losing points by increasing my magic skills, then I’m going to do that, no matter how hard it is.”

Having said this, Lady Seren just stared unwaveringly into my eyes, waiting for an answer. Her gaze was deadly serious.

“Hmm...” I rumbled.

It seemed Lady Seren had gone beyond whimsical, adorable dreams, like wanting to fly; she was now focused on things that would increase her chances at success, even if only a little. She understood that she could not afford to make any mistakes, and that practicing a higher grade of magic would decrease the likelihood of her making such a stumble.

I hesitated for just a second, then said, “Very well.”

Faced with the amount of courage Lady Seren was displaying, I had to admit that she could probably manage to learn some mid-level magic.

“However,” I said firmly, “you should know that there is a big difference between elementary and intermediate magic both in terms of difficulty and the dangers involved.”

I thought out my next words carefully, wanting to make sure she would understand. “Until now, you have learned the basics of elementary-level magic, which are the sort of spells they typically teach you at the Magic Academy. But now that you have increased your level of skill, we are coming upon magic that

is considered mid-level. I want you to bear in mind how much more dangerous mid-level magic is when compared to what you have learned before. The things I'm about to teach you will be a huge step forward in terms of your magical education."

Lady Seren squeezed her lips tightly together. "Okay," she said simply.

Based on the look on her face, it was clear she had the necessary level of caution and fear needed to begin studying dangerous magics.

I hesitated, then slowly began to speak. "When someone describes a spell as mid-level, typically what they are indicating is that that spell has a more powerful effect than a similar elementary-level spell. This is not always true, however. Some mid-level spells are considered as such because they combine multiple types of elementary-level magical techniques."

Lady Seren nodded solemnly. No doubt she had already studied up on this and knew what I was talking about.

"In your case," I continued, "you have already learned both of the elementary-level wind magic spells, True Wind and Wind Cutter. There is only one mid-level wind magic spell for you to focus on learning."

"Wind Bomb, right?"

"Precisely," I said approvingly. "You have studied well."

The Wind Bomb spell involved pulling together a clump of pure wind and sending it flying into a foe-heavy area. Upon arrival, you could unleash the bundle of wind, catapulting a barrage of Wind Cutter blades throughout the area of effect. It was rather impressive magic to behold, leaving an impression similar to that of a ticking time bomb. In addition, it was quite handy when it came to defeating large groups of enemies at once, and was good to use when you wanted precise control over the timing of your attack.

The spell should be right in Lady Seren's wheelhouse, I thought, since performing it is so similar to visualizing spells like Wind Cutter, and the wind manipulation portion of the spell uses True Wind.

But that did not mean that the spell was without danger. "If you're not careful, you can end up eating a blade yourself," I warned Lady Seren. "Make

sure your personal safety shield is strong. It's best to cast a magical barrier around yourself as well."

"Okay!"

"Now, unleashing the attack portion of a Wind Bomb spell will not feel the same as it does for Wind Cutter. When you use the latter, you're releasing the blades from your hands immediately; Wind Bomb requires you to release your blades from a central point at a far-away location. It's quite difficult. You'll want to try your best to focus."

At this point, I had explained the entire spell, so I leaped off Lady Seren's bedroom table and cast a simple barrier spell around the area.

It was different from what I normally cast for Lady Seren's practice sessions—this barrier actually had three layers. The first layer ended around an arm's length away from Lady Seren, whereas the second stretched a bit wider. The third layer almost reached the walls of the room.

It would not do for us to go busting up a duke's mansion, after all.

Satisfied that both Lady Seren and the room were well-protected, I said, "All right, now I shall explain the casting method."

Lady Seren gave me an excited smile. "Okay!" she cried.

Looks like it's going to be another late night.



AT ninth bell the next evening, I found myself hurrying to Lady Seren's room as I had the night before.

I was a bit tired, as we had stayed up half the night practicing. At a time like this, it was most inconvenient to not have enough time to do a proper exhaustion and rejuvenation cycle.

No doubt Lady Seren was sleepy today as well...

As expected, Lady Seren had not yet mastered Wind Bomb. It was only natural—mid-level spells were not something you could learn overnight.

If Lady Seren manages to grasp the technique by the end of tomorrow, we'll

be making good time, I thought.

I decided that I'd try to keep us from going too late tonight, so I'd have enough time to get a good night's rest. With this thought in mind, I tapped a paw on Lady Seren's window.

Lady Seren came trotting over quickly, pushing the window open with decidedly good cheer.

"Vi, welcome!" she cried.

There were no signs of tiredness in sight; on the contrary, she seemed quite perky.

That's youth for you, I thought wryly.

"I'm impressed you seem so fresh after working so late last night, Lady Seren."

She bounced merrily on her heels. "The salon today was so much fun! Maybe that's why I've got so much leftover energy."

"The salon, fun? That's unusual."

Ack! I choked internally. I accidentally said what I was thinking out loud...

I really shouldn't have made such a comment—I had no idea what the salons were usually like. Lady Seren and I had only become such close conversational partners in the past few months, after all.

But she didn't seem to mind. She was still smiling as she said, laughing, "We actually had three girls other than me at the salon today."

"You had other ladies at the salon?" I asked, surprised. "I confess I don't know much about such things, but I thought only men participated in the salon, with you as a special exception."

Lady Seren laughed. "Actually, Vi, it seems you know quite a lot."

A terrible awkwardness came over me. I responded without thinking, using the knowledge I'd obtained from the people around me.

But even though I seemed to know things Vi the familiar should not, Lady Seren didn't seem surprised in any way. She simply smiled at me, settling

herself in a chair and then beginning to wipe off my feet.

When I looked up at her, she smiled. “You’re right,” she told me. “That’s the way it’s been until now. You probably know this, since you seem to know a lot, but recently commoners and women have been taking up roles at the palace.”

I nodded. “Indeed.”

“As a result, Prince Helios said he wanted to expand the scope of the salon. He’s started the process by inviting three ladies to join.”

“Huh, how fascinating,” I said thoughtfully.

Not bad, Prince Helios.

I found the prince’s choice quite interesting. If commoners and women could be better represented among the upper echelons, I was certain it would revitalize our realm.

Aristocrats naturally had a wide breadth of knowledge as adults, since they’d received the best education possible since they were born. On top of that, there were some aristocrats, like Borden, who chose to expand even further upon the education they’d been given.

Women and people of common birth didn’t have the same advantages—they had to claw their way to a civil appointment with sheer guts and determination. If I was being honest, such an experience was completely different than the sort the aristocrats went through when attempting to achieve the same position.

Intrigued now, I asked Lady Seren, “Who are the new members?”

She laughed. “I’m not sure a cat would know them, but the first two are named Lady Linde and Lady Lydia. They come from the Tyde family and the Hapisery family, respectively. My sister Marietta is the third.”

I see, I thought, that decision must have taken a lot of thinking.

It was a selection unlikely to incite protest—the Tyde family leaned toward more reformist policies, while the Hapiserys were strict conservatives. Both families were prominent, as was the Qumildy family, from which Lady Seren and Lady Marietta hailed. The Qumildys didn’t have much of an interest in politics other than foreign trade, which left the political balance between the

three women quite level.

It seemed the female aristocracy would be quite well-represented. And if they continued like this, they could open the way gradually for other groups as well. For example, if they had immediately started adding commoners to the salon, there might have been backlash among the conservatives.

I hope that things will progress quickly, so that other commoners like me can have a chance in the salon as well.

Lady Seren gave me a cheery smile. “I think, with a lot of women there, the atmosphere was a lot lighter than usual.”

Ah, I see. So Lady Seren is more comfortable during the salon sessions now, because she isn’t the only woman.

She’d probably felt like she had to be on guard all the time before, since she was in an environment dominated by men. I felt like I could understand how that had felt.

Lady Seren wouldn’t have to worry about such things as a High Mage—they were chosen purely by skill, so there was no real differentiation between the men and the women. As long as you had magic power, gender didn’t really matter.

“Lady Linde and Lady Ladia are both fine women,” Lady Seren continued, “They’re very easy to be friends with. And Marietta did really well today too. I’m very happy.”

“So the reason you seem so happy is because the new setup went well? Am I getting that right?” I asked.

“Yes!” she replied. “They all blended in right away, and the other salon members even seemed like they were feeling more inspired to work. Everything is going *very* well.”

“Well, that’s nice.”

“It is!” Lady Seren said, standing up and grinning at me as she spoke. “Prince Helios seemed satisfied with the outcome too. I’m relieved to see that the new additions will fit in well.”

"Well, that's nice."

"I agree," Lady Seren said. "And now, I can be sure that things will still be okay in the salon even after I leave. So I feel more inspired than ever today."

"I... I see." I murmured.

"Now, let's start the training!" she cried happily.

I leaped down from the table, swept up in Lady Seren's enthusiasm. I cast the same three safety barriers I had the day before, and Lady Seren picked up right where we'd left off yesterday.

As Lady Seren launched her first Wind Bomb, I jumped back on the table and curled up on the cushion she had put out for me the day before. My tail flipped back and forth as I watched her solemn, studious expression.

So, I thought, it appears a breath of fresh air has blown through Prince Helios's salon, too.

It wasn't as though Lady Seren had planned it out this way, but the other ladies' inclusion within the salon meant there was one less obstacle for her to traverse.

Now she can really focus on becoming a High Mage.

With every day that passed, Lady Seren's reckless goal seemed to draw closer and closer to becoming a reality.

Side Story: Borden 2

An Interesting Fellow

THE first time I saw him, I thought to myself, *Now here's an interesting fellow.*

He'd joined the Magic Academy two years after me, this fellow with midnight black hair and onyx eyes. His sheer presence alone had been enough to make him stand out from the crowd.

Mainly, this was because he was highly blessed when it came to magic.

I'd heard the rumors—the ones that whispered of someone with strong magical power who existed within our ranks, who had been scouted due to his natural talent. But when I first passed him, I had been struck by the power contained within him. It had lit him up like a burning flame, even despite his willowy frame. His magical prowess had been so evident to me that I had been sure he was the person from the rumors right away.

I had been—and still was—an ordinary sort, the kind who had so minor a magical talent that I could barely even sense magic at all. But even I could sense what he had. That's how special Lord Viol's magical power was.

After about a year, he'd skipped a grade into the same class as me, though I'd been stuck there for three years by then. That's when I'd realized how incredibly talented he was.

It only took about a month of us being in the same class for me to realize that raw ability wasn't all Viol had.

He'd been an incredibly studious student, choosing to spend not only just his hours in class reviewing their lessons but his break time as well. Even at lunchtime and after school, he could be found out in the field practicing magical techniques. As long as no one talked to him, that is.

It had always taken me at least four attempts to grasp the things we learned in class, but Viol always had it down in one. He'd spent the rest of his time joining other teams or learning other more difficult forms of magic. He'd practice magical techniques he'd learned every day on the school's grounds, and I'd heard he'd even dabbled in all-night study sessions.

Viol may have been born with a huge amount of magical talent, but he'd

never taken it for granted—he'd put in a massive amount of work trying to nurture it.

From what I'd observed of him, I'd been of the impression that he got along well with the people he was paired to practice with, but only when it came to magic. He'd shown no interest in chatting apart from his studies, and he didn't appear to ever smile, or get angry, or even seem happy. It had felt like an impossible task just to read his sedate expressions; I never had a clue what he was thinking.

That was my honest impression of him back then.



TIME had slowly passed by, and while I didn't ever try to speak to Viol, I *had* observed him. Until one day, a big change came.

I'd been struggling with a mid-level spell we'd learned in class. It required a level of ability with earth magic, but it was hard to get the knack of. It was a popular technique when it came to spells affiliated with earth—it involved conjuring soil and forming it into complex shapes. We'd already had three classes on this particular spell, but I hadn't felt anywhere near being able to cast it. I just hadn't been able to get it right.

Viol, on the other hand, had been able to cast the spell just fine—he'd already entered the phase where he was working on perfecting his conjuring of it.

I'd worked up some courage, then asked him, "Excuse me, Viol, but would you mind giving me some tips?"

He'd looked up at me, his concentration perhaps broken by my words. After a long pause, he'd said, "Fine."

Then he'd smashed the complicated castle of soil he'd been working on until it was flat and indicated the chair opposite him with a jerk of his chin.

"Sit," he'd ordered me flatly.

I'd found his attitude refreshing. People liked to say social class didn't matter at the Magic Academy, but it wasn't like everyone could switch modes so easily. As the son of an important man, I'd been used to people always being overly

polite to me. That went for the teachers and the older students as well.

And so, far from taking offense at Viol's brusque attitude, I'd found it a breath of fresh air.

"First, let me see you try it," he'd said once I sat down.

I quickly tried casting the spell, concentrating until I'd managed to call some soil together. Once I'd gotten to that point of the spell, though, I'd begun to falter. I'd struggled to mold the clump of earth into any other shape. Eventually, the soil collapsed onto the table in front of me.

Viol's two years younger than me, but he can do spells I haven't been able to master in three whole years of study, I'd thought. I'm so pathetic.

As I'd stared at the lump of earth before me, I'd sighed in disgust.

Viol hadn't said a word, though—he'd just picked up the clump of soil I'd conjured and squeezed it together with his fingers, watching solemnly as it broke up and crumbled in his hand.

Finally, he'd said, "I see."

"What do you see?" I asked.

He'd blinked. "There's not enough water."

My eyes had narrowed. "You're saying there's something wrong with the earth I conjured...?"

Viol had nodded.

Shock had gone through me.

I never even spared a thought as to the quality of the earth! I'd thought, exasperated with myself.

Viol had silently begun to form a new clump of earth.

Once it was done, he'd held it out to me. "Here," he said simply.

I'd reached out and taken it into my hand, immediately noticing there was something different about it compared to the one I'd conjured moments before.

“Wait a second...” I said, feeling a slight dampness to the soil in my grasp. “But the castle you just made crumbled like sand...”

“That’s because when I destroyed it, I sucked out all the water.”

What a genius! I’d thought. He talks about that like it’s such a simple thing to do! Maybe the rumors are true, and he does have an aptitude for all the magical elements.

“It’s just like working with clay,” he’d continued in a bored tone. “In order to mold it into other shapes, you need a certain amount of water.”

Working with clay...? I’ve never done that in my life.

My thoughts must have shown on my face, because Viol had taken one look at me and coughed.

“Right,” he’d muttered. “You’re an aristocrat. You’ve never played with clay. That’s why commoners pick up this technique faster. It’s easier for us, since we already have the muscle memory built in.”

Until that moment, I’d never really thought about the fact that commoners made up the majority of students who’d managed to master forming shapes. But now that he’d pointed it out, the realization seemed obvious.

I thought that Viol was absorbed completely in his magical studies, but apparently, he pays attention to the world around him too.

“The first thing you’ll need to do,” Viol continued, “is conjure up some soil that feels the same as that one does.”

“Thank you...” I said softly.

I’d rolled the lump of earth through my fingers again, taking in the texture. It had felt slightly damp against my skin, and almost oily.

What an odd texture...

“You should try making something with your hands as well, instead of jumping straight to the magical technique. Why don’t you make a cat or something?”

I’d winced. “I’ll give it a try, but...I’m no good at art.”

I'd tried painting and engraving before, but once I'd compared my work to the apple I was trying to reproduce, I'd given up. The unfortunate truth is, artistic aptitude is either something you have, or you don't.

But nevertheless, I tried making a cat from the soil in my hands. Alas, no matter what I did, it looked the same—just a formless lump of earth.

Viol had nodded to himself. "I see," he said. "So that's why."

"Hold on," I said slowly. "What do you mean by that? What's that 'aha' look about?"

"It's just... I have no idea what you were trying to make just now. You're no good at making things to begin with, it seems. It's not the clay that's the issue, it's *you*."

Who would have thought my lack of artistic ability would be my downfall?



“Why don’t you practice something simpler, like a cup, first? It’s more important to learn the magical technique required for the spell than to make anything in particular. If you just focus on making something presentable, that will probably be enough.”

I nodded. “I’ll try that... You’re good at teaching people things, you know. I’ve noticed people ask you to explain things to them a lot. I guess that’s probably why.”

I’d wanted to offer him a genuine compliment, but he’d turned his face away from me as I spoke.

Is he embarrassed, perhaps...?

Viol hadn’t glanced back at me. He’d just asked, “Is that all?”

The words had risen up like a wall between us. It had felt like he was telling me, “We’re done here, so go away.”

What went wrong? I wondered. We were getting along so well...

But that’s when I’d remembered—Viol often instructed other students, but I’d never seen him chat with a single one of them.

He’s not much of a talker, it seems, I’d thought.

I hadn’t wanted to upset him after he’d been so kind as to instruct me on how to improve my conjuring, so I’d decided to take my leave.

“Thank you,” I told him. “You really helped me out. I must find a way to repay the favor to you later.”

He’d shaken his head. “No. You don’t need to do that.”

“But...”

“If I get something in return for helping you, that’ll make it harder for the commoners to ask me when they have a problem. Not everyone has as much coin as you do, you know.”

I’d been completely flabbergasted by this response.

But, come to think of it, Viol did join us at an odd time in the school year...

If he'd come from a family with money, his goal would have been to enter the Magic Academy at the age of twelve, right after he'd completed his elementary education. It was customary to have one's magical aptitude tested at that time. But I'd heard that Viol was fifteen, the same age as me, and that he'd been scouted off the street. If that was true, that would mean he hadn't gone through the usual magical aptitude tests.

Which meant...he must have been speaking from practical experience.

That had been enough to make me decide to back off. I'd felt a little sad that he wouldn't look at me.

"All right," I said. And then I tried again, "Hey, Viol."

He hadn't replied, even though I'd said his name. He just glanced at me as if to say, "You're not done yet?"

I'd found myself at a loss. He'd been quite a cranky young man back then, and I'd had no idea how to talk to him.

Finally, I'd said, "Can I ask you again if there's something else I don't understand?"

"Of course," he'd replied with no hesitation at all. His tone implied I'd been silly to even ask him such a question. But how was I to know he was such an earnest soul?

"It seems to me that you don't like it when people come up to you," I mused. "But even so, if they do, you'll answer their questions and keep helping them until they understand whatever they're struggling with. Am I right?"

Viol had stared at me with vexation in his eyes.

I hadn't meant to say all that, but it was a little late now. I'd just stared back.

"If they want to learn, then of course I'll share what I know," he'd snapped in reply. "What are you even talking about?"

His response made me smile.

I...genuinely like this guy.

He might have been brusque, but he was also kind. He treated aristocrats and

commoners as if they were no different from one another, and he appeared to believe that as long as he didn't align with either clique, no trouble would come his way. And his magical skills? They were second to none.

He's just a decent fellow all around, really, I'd caught myself thinking.



IT had not been long before Viol occupied the top seat of my list of people I'd wanted to be friends with. And so, soon after he'd helped me with the earth spell, I'd started talking to him more and more.

At first, he'd acted reserved toward me, even almost annoyed at times. And yet, he'd never turned down any of my requests for magical instruction, even when he'd seemed angry with me. Before long, we'd started talking about magical tools and techniques often.

After about a month, I'd figured we'd basically become friends. Though I still hadn't been sure what Viol thought of me. It had been enough for me to launch the next step of my plan. I'd waited until the time felt right and then made my proposal.

"Viol, I wanted to ask you about something... About magical techniques, to be exact."

"What about it?"

I'd been sure he'd listen if I brought up magical techniques.

Thank god he's so predictable.

With his attention thus captured, I'd said in a rush, "Would you come to my home once a week, perhaps on Voidday, and act as my personal tutor?"

"Go to your place? Every week?" Viol's face had twitched. "Just ask me about whatever you need help with at school."

"But you're already helping me out so much! And if I ask at school, I can't repay you at all."

A look of displeasure had flickered over his face. "I told you, I don't need payment."

Despite this refusal, I had not been about to back down.

Oh, Viol, I'd thought cheerfully, I've brought something with me today just for you. Why don't you take a look?

Out loud, I'd said, "Oh, what a shame. I'd even had some new sweets prepared for us from Mist Buns..."

"What...?! Mist Buns?! You mean, the one downtown...?"

I cackled internally. Viol had clearly been shaken by my words—this was the first time I had ever seen his expression change in any substantial way.

"Yeah," I'd continued. "You know, the new cake shop. They have this adorable baked dessert called polvorones."

I'd watched, then, as Viol took a visible swallow.

My father had told me that Viol seemed to like sweet things. I hadn't quite believed him at the time, but it seemed like it was true. My father had heard it from Third Mage Guild Archmage Gregor, who'd tracked Viol downtown and apparently bought him some dessert from Mist Buns. He'd reportedly scoffed it down with excitement.

It had been hard to picture, looking at the Viol back then. He'd tended to skip lunch, and as a result, he'd been very skinny.

I guess you can't judge a book by its cover, I'd thought wryly.

The sight of Viol fighting the sway of his beloved sweets had made me make the snap decision to be open with him.

Will he understand if I explain my feelings this way? I'd wondered.

The truth was, I'd felt bad for always asking him for favors. I'd wanted to do everything I could to even the score between us a little, but I hadn't wanted to drive him away. Viol may have been a socially awkward genius, but I'd known he was a hard worker who would no doubt go on to become a great mage. I'd wanted to remain by his side, if he'd let me.

Maybe it's a little selfish of me, I'd thought, *but I really want him to understand how I feel.*

"Viol," I said sincerely, "this past month I've seen my magic skills really improve. It's all thanks to your advice."

"Ah... Well. I-I'm glad I was able to help."

"I'm so grateful to you, and yet I can't offer you any tangible thanks. I feel terrible about it. So..." I'd taken a deep breath, gathering my thoughts together. "You say that instructing others is just the natural thing to do, but magic isn't something you can coast by with using your natural ability. You're sparing your precious practice time for me, and I believe that is worth something."

Viol had blinked at me. "Worth something?"

"Yes." I'd nodded. "It's wonderful that you think you don't need repayment, and I understand your line of thinking. But if you intend to continue helping me, I simply can't bear taking up your precious time, and all that it is worth."

"That's so dramatic," Viol had said in a flat tone.

But I'd shaken my head. "No, it isn't. I dislike always being the one in your debt. You teach me magic, so I want to repay you with something you'll like. That's only fair, now, isn't it?"

"Well... If you put it like that..." There had been some sort of emotion welling up in Viol's eyes.

The sight had made me smile. Deep in my heart, I'd nodded in satisfaction.

I won.

Or, more accurately, the sweets had won, judging by the look in Viol's eyes. But in that moment, I hadn't cared what had convinced him.

Now that I've secured Viol's magical know-how for myself, I'll benefit greatly from his skills, I'd thought. In the future, the two of us are going to be the ones everyone else wants to beat.



WE'D continued on like that for about a year. Then my father had gotten sick, and I'd had to assist him with his politics, as his aide. I'd thought I'd perhaps return to school, but when I'd learned my father had only a year left to live, I knew I couldn't leave his side. And so, I'd had to give up on my dream to

become a mage and drop out of the Magic Academy.

It had always been the plan that either I or Riesz—whatever didn't make it as a mage—would go into politics. I'd accepted it as my fate, in the end. I didn't have the magical ability of someone like Viol, after all.

A while after I'd dropped out of the Academy, I'd run into Viol.

"Hey," I'd greeted him. "I heard you actually managed to become a High Mage."

"I did," he'd said, nodding.

"I always believed you would."

"They're all treating me like I'm an aristocrat now..." he'd told me in disgust. "But Borden, I actually have a favor to ask you."

It was a rare thing indeed for Viol to ask something of me. He'd looked a bit awkward, so I'd decided to hear him out without teasing him too much.

"I thought...I might try to imitate your fancy way of speaking..."

"Oh." I hadn't been able to help smiling. His words had surprised me a little.

Viol wants to mimic me? I'd laughed internally. *Now that's amusing.* Highly amusing.

"They're telling me I have to go to these balls," Viol had whined. "But I don't know how to dance, or understand table manners... I need to know those things, right? Could you introduce me to a good instructor, perhaps...?"

Ah, it feels good to have someone wanting your help.

After hearing Viol so earnestly ask me for my assistance, how could I do anything but agree?

"Of course, I'll help you!" I'd told him.

Viol and I had only just reached the starting line in our fields. Him as a High Mage, and me as a public official. Part of me had been sad we'd never be able to share the same playing field as High Mages, but I'd known we could still support each other from our different positions in society.

And so I'd quickly drawn up a list of the essential, aristocratic knowledge Viol

would need to learn for his new life, adding the names of the instructors who could help him master each and every thing he'd been struggling with.



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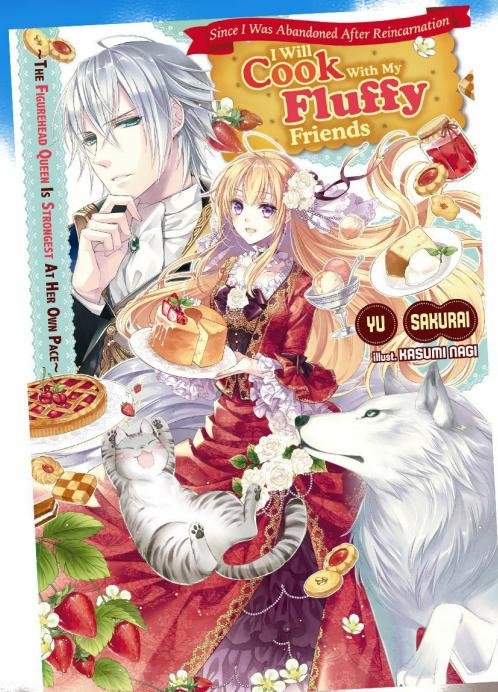
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HAREM! VOLUME 1
STORY BY: KOSUZU KOBATO
ILLUSTRATION BY: HINANO CHANO
SERIES / VOL 1 - 2 OUT NOW

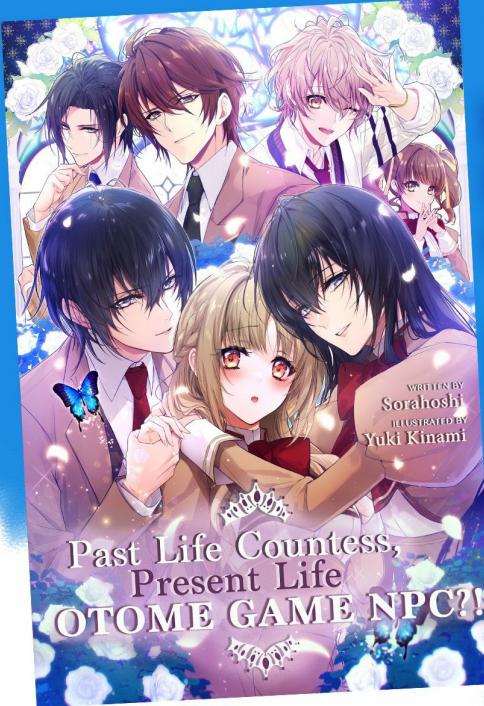
Cats are better than harems! Amy has reincarnated into an otome game world as a villainess, but she's more interested in cats than boys!





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PAST LIFE COUNTESS, PRESENT LIFE OTOME GAME NPC?!

STORY BY: SORAHOSHI
ILLUSTRATION BY: YUKI KINAMI
STANDALONE / OUT NOW

Oh dear, it seems I was reincarnated into a modern otome game from a fantasy world!

HELLO, I AM A WITCH AND MY CRUSH WANTS ME TO MAKE A LOVE POTION! STORY BY: EIKO MTSUHANA ILLUSTRATION BY: VIENT VOL. 1 & 2 OUT NOW

This is the heartwarming story of a shut-in witch and an arrogant, strait-laced knight whose romance starts from a love potion.



THE WEAKEST MANGA VILLAINESS WANTS HER FREEDOM! STORY BY: KAZUKI KARASAWA ILLUSTRATION BY: MASAMI STANDALONE / OUT NOW

Oh, crud, I just realized that I've been reincarnated into my favorite manga as the first boss defeated by the heroine at the start of the story!