5

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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 5
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The Drab Princess, the Black Cat, and the Satisfying Break-up Volume 5
©Rino Mayumi 2020
First published in Japan in 2023 by
Futabasha Publishers Ltd.
English translation rights arranged with
Futabasha Publishers Ltd.

English translation ©2025 Cross Infinite World

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Cross Infinite World
contact@crossinfworld.com
www.crossinfworld.com

Published in the United States of America

Visit us at www.crossinfworld.com
Facebook.com/crossinfworld
Twitter.com/crossinfworld

crossinfiniteworld.tumblr.com
First Digital Edition: February 2025
ISBN-13: 979-8-88560-159-7


"Who knew he was so passionate?!"
Ladia
The daughter of a conservative count. She deals with sea trade in the salon.
Seren
The Drab Princess who broke off her engagement to the prince and became a High Mage.
"Yes. No one is finer than Seren, as a High Mage or as a wife. I swear I will cherish her for the rest of my life."
Linde
The daughter of a reformist duke. A member of the salon. She's a gallant lady.
Viol
The beautiful yet unapproachable Frosty Archmage.


"I wish I could
become a cat, too."


"Hello, Lady Ladia.
What a surprise
to bump into you here."
Borden
The kingdom's prime
minister and Viol's friend
since their Academy days.

Seren 34

An Amazing Wedding

SEVEN months had passed since my engagement to Prince Helios was nullified and I had officially become a High Mage. Since then, preparations had been underway for my wedding to Viol, Archmage of the Third Mage Guild and head of the High Mages.

Lord Viol was my magic master and tutor as I strove to become a High Mage, and he had taught me with strictness, kindness, and plenty of care. I respected him very, very much.

When he transforms into the black cat, Vi, as he often does to avoid people's attention, he becomes a soothing and adorable presence. But in human form, his masculine beauty takes my breath away. Just looking at him makes my heart beat faster. As much as I love his appearance, who Viol is on the inside is what really attracts me to him.

He always listens to me with such focus and attention, and is always so considerate. His imagination is so rich, and the dashing way he uses various types of magic as easily as breathing never fails to impress me. When he instructs me in magic or combat or introduces some new piece of knowledge, he is precise, and I can trust everything he says.

Above all, though, I love how honestly and directly he communicates what he thinks to me.

The more time we spent together, the more I realized I was increasingly drawn to him. Just seeing him, chatting with him, was the ultimate happiness. Yes, that's how I felt. And when I found out that Lord Viol felt the same way, I thought I'd burst with joy! When we confirmed our feelings to one another, I was so filled with bliss that I thought I'd ascend to the heavens on the spot.

Indeed, I was stunned beyond words when he followed up on his confession with an immediate proposal. Before I knew it, I heard myself saying, "Yes!" such was my love and adoration for the man.

We discussed our intentions with my father, but he advised us to hold off on the actual getting married part for a while since it hadn't been that long since my previous engagement had ended. But both Lord Viol and I wanted to live together as soon as possible.

After that, various things happened, but we got Father's blessing. And then, just the other day, the king and queen gave us the OK as well, and now we're well and truly on the path towards marriage.

"...What's wrong?"

Since it wouldn't be proper for a man to openly visit a young woman before getting officially married, Lord Viol had come to see me today in the guise of a black cat. Now, he was looking up at me curiously. I was thrilled with how his supple feline body moved so gracefully, and the playful arch of his tail struck me as extremely cute.

"Hehe," I giggled. "I was just getting lost in the moment. Thinking that I'm really going to be marrying YOU, Lord Viol!" As I spoke, softly stroking that velvety back, Vi narrowed his eyes blissfully and nuzzled his cheek against my hand.

Incredibly adorable.

"Indeed... I want to spend time with you like this in my human form, though, Lady Seren. As soon as possible."

"Me too."

Back when I couldn't possibly have dreamed that Vi was Lord Viol in disguise, he would get haughty and embarrassed by my attempts to pet him and pick him up. But now, he doesn't scold me for it, so I pet him constantly whenever we're together.

Suddenly, a mischievous thought occurred to me.

"Hmm?"

I picked up the little cat and snuggled him in my arms, eye to eye with those big, dilated black pupils, and then I rubbed my cheek against his. A shiver went through the little body, and the tail went pin-straight.

"Lady Seren...!"

"I can snuggle you like this without any embarrassment. And I just love you in your cat form, too!"

"..."

As I continued squishing and cuddling Vi, he stopped mewling in protest and calmed down. Though he'd complain at first, he always let me have my way.

"...Lady Seren."

"Yes?"

"Our wedding is less than a month away."

"Indeed! I cannot wait!"

"I have something to discuss with you."

"Oh, whatever could that be?" Something to discuss. It sounded so serious. I looked down at Vi in my arms. "Something to do with the wedding?"

Vi shook his head. "Ah, no, to be more accurate, it would precede that. I mean more in terms of preparing people for the news... I suppose I had better tell everyone at the Mage Tower about it in person, shouldn't I? Usually, I would have announced it when we decided to marry, but I thought I had better consult with your father first, you know."

"Oh, right..."

Indeed, it had been on my mind as well. In an aristocratic family, the family head would handle such matters. Usually, the word would be spread casually at an evening soiree, and then the couple would be officially unveiled at a post-wedding function.

But according to Lord Viol, commoners hold a big ceremony in a church in front of friends, relatives, colleagues, neighbors... Then, they have an informal party with lots of food and drinks and chatting. They don't have soirees or balls. So, the new couple is unveiled organically during the wedding festivities.

Since guests have to be invited to the wedding, that's usually the point where people find out that two people are to be married.

The differences are interesting, but it's hard to know what to do in our case.

Now that I've become a High Mage and broken with my father's household, I feel like Lord Viol and I should handle things ourselves. But neither of us is particularly savvy when it comes to such matters. As Lord Viol said, the safer route would be to consult with Father and Mother about how best to make announcements and so on.

"Right. Okay, the next day we have free, let's go together and seek counsel about it," I said.

“Right.” Vi nodded, looking satisfied, then suddenly stretched in my arms and pressed his cheek against my neck.



Blood rushed to my cheeks like fireworks exploding.

Vi had never been this cuddly with me before. Realizing that he was openly showing affection towards me flustered me, and I couldn't help blushing.

Seeing the embarrassment on my face made Vi look triumphant. I felt as if I could see Lord Viol's face superimposed over Vi's, and that only made me blush all the more.



IN the midst of these talks with Lord Viol, I was also busy with other preparations.

Right, I'm talking about my wedding dress.

"...Are you QUITE sure this is what you want?"

I believe those were the exact words Mother used.

Still, I suppose one can hardly blame her. After all, even I've never heard of anyone having an all-black wedding dress made.

But I still wanted the black one.

I mean, black goes best with Lord Viol's vibe. That jet black hair, those obsidian eyes, so beautiful, so exquisite. In a black tuxedo and cloak. Yes, that look suits him best. I love him in deep black, like Vi's velvety black fur.

I want to look perfect on his arm. I want our wedding to be black, black, black, totally Lord Viol.

"But there are so many other, more vibrant colors to choose from..."

But despite what Mother said, I was determined that black would be the base color for our nuptials.

Still, I don't know anything about dress design. Ultimately, I decided to rely on Mother, who usually negotiates with the designers when ordering dresses for us. I also turned to Marietta, who knows all about the latest fashions for young ladies.

I knew they'd be able to steer me toward better results rather than if I muddled through it on my own.

"I've never even heard of a black wedding dress before. It's going to be exciting to see what the finished article looks like." Marietta tilted her head to one side and narrowed her eyes at me.

“But what’s with all the black, Sis? Is it to match Archmage Viol and his goth aesthetic?”

Honestly, being asked that outright was a little embarrassing.

Seeing that I was clearly blushing, Marietta laughed with delight. “Oh, you really love that frosty archmage of yours, don’t you, Sis? But don’t worry, I understand. We’ll put everything into making you the blackest, most beautiful wedding dress ever made.”

“Right. It’s Seren’s big day. We need to make sure she has a dress that will make her utterly radiant!”

My heart filled with joy when Marietta and Mother agreed to go with my desired aesthetic.

“Hmm, usually when I order tailored dresses for soirees, we have the tailor come to the house. But this time, I don’t think that will quite do.”

“Indeed, Mother. We need to see the actual samples in person to choose the design and appraise the texture and luster of the different fabric options. And if we go to the tailor shop directly, Sis can try on different styles and see what really suits her.”

Mother and Marietta nodded enthusiastically to one another.

“Two pieces of black fabric can be totally different from one another, after all. Let’s have Seren try on different materials so we can choose the fabric that comes closest to what she has in mind as her ideal dress.”

“Yes, and the tailor shop will have all the latest fashion designs. If we’re going to have an all-black dress, I think a little whimsy in the design is called for. After all, a wedding dress must be glamorous, even if it’s all black!”

“Then, this weekend, let us all go to Arvalwein’s together.”

The name of the shop Mother mentioned sounded familiar.

“Isn’t that the tailor you order our ball dresses from?” I asked.

“Yes. I have connections with a few good places, but I think Arvalwein’s is the best option for an occasion like this.”

“Right, that’s the shop everyone’s been talking about, where that eclectic designer works.”

Apparently, Marietta knew all about it. Undoubtedly, the tailor shop was the famous one often mentioned at balls and soirees.

“If you want the newest materials and cuts, Arvalwein’s designer is the person to see,” Mother said. “All right, so she’s a bit

of an odd duck, but I bet the prospect of an all-black wedding dress will delight her. I'm sure she'll make the most beautiful dress for our Seren."

Mother beamed, and I knew I could trust her opinion.



THE awaited day off finally came.

The three of us were to visit the tailor shop that would make my wedding dress.

We'd reached out to the shop in advance, so they were expecting us when we arrived. As soon as we entered the building, the middle-aged gentleman who always handled our orders welcomed us. He was accompanied by a petite woman with bright red hair, about a hand shorter than I was. She had a perky upturned nose and a very cute manner about her.

"We've been waiting for you! I've prepared lots of black fabric!"

Racal, the red-headed designer, beamed as she ushered me into the shop without any formalities. I let her lead me past rows of evening dresses until we reached an anteroom separated by heavy curtains.

"My...!"

"Amazing."

"Spectacular."

We were met with rows and rows of black dresses. More than I could have imagined.

"I went around all the local shops and borrowed all their black dresses!" Racal effused. "I figured we'd need plenty of samples to narrow in on the right design!"

"Thank you so much. This is very helpful." I was grateful for Racal's thoughtfulness. This would be much easier than looking through drawn designs in a book.

"Oh, boy, a black wedding dress will be the ultimate test of my skills!" she exclaimed. "See how even when every dress is black, there's still such variety in the design?! See this one? A tight silhouette, very elegant, but THIS one has a low-cut neckline and

an open back for a sexy vibe! Oh, and THIS one has a sort of poofy silhouette with ribbons and lace for maximum cuteness!”

Racal rifled through the dresses, explaining each one with enthusiasm. *Wow. She really loves her job.* No doubt any dress she made me for my wedding would exceed expectations in every way.

“So, then!” Racal finally turned around and made eye contact with me. “What kind of dress do YOU want, Lady Seren? I know black, but what do you picture in your mind when you think of your perfect dress? I heard that your husband-to-be is that famous Frosty Archmage. Is the black dress his idea?”

“No, no, I’m the one who wanted a black dress,” I stressed.

“Oh, then, perhaps you want to match his vibe? I’m not sure I’ve ever seen him in anything but black.”

“Yes, I mean… I just think that he looks amazing in black…” I admitted.

“Hmm, we don’t often hear of a bride who wants to match her dress to the groom’s vibes, but it’s kinda nice. Now, your fiancé’s evening tuxedo has silver embroidery, right? A pitch-black suit with silver accents.”

“Yes! I’d like a dress that’s chic but memorable like that.”

“I see! Will your fiancé be dressed like that for the ceremony, too?”

“Yes. He will be wearing all black.”

“Hmm, but two people side by side in all-black outfits might give off a bit of an oppressive impression. We could use black as the base, but then add a lighter color as an accent, or perhaps embroidery… Or limit the total amount of black coverage with an off-the-shoulder or sleeveless dress to balance the skin tone and material…”

It was amazing. She instantly grasped what I wanted and fired off great suggestions for me to choose from. She must be one of those outspoken young women. Even in front of my mother, a duchess, Racal spoke her mind freely without any sense of reserve, and she was straightforward and to the point. It kind of reminded me of chatting with Lord Viol.

“We could also have long sleeves or bell sleeves, with lace, like this, which can give a sophisticated vibe.” She indicated a dress with a similar design to what she was saying.

“Indeed, that would be splendid,” Mother chimed in. “Seren, this mermaid-cut dress with the long sleeves is very ladylike. I think it would suit you well.”

The dress Racal was holding up had an understated design, and as Mother said, it did look very ladylike. It made me think of something a devoted wife would wear. It was both elegant and beautiful.

“Yes, it’s lovely. The lace is very delicate and beautifully made,” I said.

“Yes, isn’t it great? See, you can make it look sexier or cuter if you change up the lace pattern. It’s totally customizable! And choosing lace patterns is tons of fun. Of course, we have plenty of lace to choose from!” Racal beamed and proudly pointed to a wall covered in cubbyhole shelves containing an astonishing number of reams of black lace, among other fabric samples.

Thinking about how long it would take to go through them all made me grimace.

“Oh, but how about this? See, very short sleeves, just enough to cover the shoulders, really, projecting an impression of loveliness and modesty. We could add a little lace around the shoulders without going too far with it. This sort of design might suit a young, fresh-faced bride like yourself better, Lady Seren.”

“Oh, yes...! This is perfect! It would look amazing on you, Sis!” Marietta gazed at the dress, her eyes sparkling.

I was captivated by the dress. “It’s lovely...” I sighed in awe.

The upper part had cap sleeves just covering the shoulders with a simple silhouette. But if we added some eye-catching silver embroidery, it would look really glamorous. The skirt part, in contrast, was poofy and voluminous. The contrast was eye-catching.

“Why don’t you try on a few dresses that you like the look of?” Mother suggested. “Once we’ve decided on the basic cut, we can refine it to suit you perfectly, Seren.”

“...Okay!” I nodded without hesitation at Mother’s suggestion.

I examined multiple dresses as Racal painstakingly talked me through their designs. Whenever I found one I liked the look of, I’d try it on. The dresses were made loose, especially for fittings, so they were easy to slip on and off, and I tried quite a few.

“...I think this is still the one.”

I had tried on various styles, but in the end, the dress that Marietta had said looked good on me earlier was the one that I liked the best.

“Your fair skin will shine like pearls in this pitch-black dress, Sis. I’m sure even the famously expressionless Frosty Archmage will crack a smile. Can’t wait to see it!”

Right… Yes. Will this dress please Lord Viol? I pictured myself wearing it, standing by his side, and my cheeks warmed.

“You’re too cute, Seren! Especially with that flush on your cheeks. Lord Viol will no doubt be charmed.”

“I… I hope so…? Do you think he will?” I asked, uncertainty tinging my voice.

“Of course!!!” Racal nodded emphatically in the face of my hesitance. In fact, she had tears in her eyes… And was wringing her hands… *Why?* “Oh, you’re just too cute!!! I’m so happy to be able to make a dress for such a lovely bride! Oh yes! It’s going to be a showstopper of a dress!”

“Th-Thank you…”

Racal grabbed my hands in hers and, caught up in her enthusiasm, I nodded along. Then Racal went to grab a stepladder, placed it beside me, and stepped up onto one of its rungs with one foot.

I looked up at her in confusion. Racal gave me a jaunty smile, showing her pearly teeth. “How tall is this fiancé of yours, anyhow?”

“How… How tall is he?”

“He’s pretty tall, right? Imagine you’re looking up at him. About what level is your face at?” she asked.

I tried to picture Lord Viol in my mind and raised my eyes to the level where his face would usually be… Whenever I looked up at him like this, his eyes would narrow just a little, and he’d smile ever so faintly. The thought made me blush all over again.

And just as I was thinking that…

I made eye contact with Racal, who’d gone a few quick steps up the ladder.

“Ah, about this height? I see, I see, yes, very adorable!”

How could she tell?!

“What’s most important is for the bride to look delectable to her soon-to-be husband! Just as Lady Marietta said, your white

skin surrounded by that puffy black skirt… It will be magnificent!”

So that’s why she got the stepladder, I thought, impressed. Racal seemed to be meticulous about every aspect of dress design. I wasn’t sure how I’d look in Lord Viol’s eyes, but… I hoped that he would find me cute… Or even beautiful.

“Hmm, but…” Racal grunted, tipping her head to one side. “I think pure black is a bit too strong, after all. Since you have such soft vibes, Lady Seren, I think it would be better to change the skirt material to give it a softer, airy impression. Also, layering a bit of white or silver to create a gradation effect might help to soften up the look, too.”

Now that she pointed it out… The fabric for this dress seemed a bit severe, maybe. *I like the fit of the bust and waist; the material has a nice sheen, and the overall dress is comfortable. But maybe a lighter and softer skirt part would be good.*

“What do you think, Seren?” Mother asked.

“I think the upper bodice would be good with this fabric and design and some major-scale embroidery work, but as Racal said, I’d like the skirt to be softer and fluffier as well…” I said.

“Right! Using firm tulle as the bottom layer will add volume, and then we can layer on some chiffon for a soft, flowing look. There’s a ton of fabrics we could try! Just choose what you like the look of, and I can fit it to the dress!” Racal vowed.

“…Okay! Thank you!”

“Just picture your happy wedding with your husband while making your selections!”

Everything Racal said made me think of Lord Viol’s soft, faint smile, and I blushed even more.

“Aw, Sis, you’re so cute…”

“It makes me smile to see her like this, too,” Mother said. “Seren… Let’s pick the perfect dress and make Lord Viol happy.”

I was too embarrassed to look up at my mother and sister. Still, imagining Lord Viol’s happy reaction when he saw me in my dress filled me with indescribable joy.



THE day of my wedding finally arrived.

I dressed in my completed wedding dress and looked at myself in the mirror. Then, I let out a small sigh.

Ah. It's the perfect dress. Perfect*. Far too good for the likes of me.*

Through multiple fittings, several prototypes, and numerous revisions, we finalized the design about ten days in advance. Things were getting tight with the deadline, and I was sure I'd caused Racal a lot of stress.

But, thanks to her hard work, the finished dress was so beautiful and striking, even with the all-black theme.

The bodice had a simple silhouette, with a large diagonal silver pattern from the waist to the bust. The embroidery was chic but memorable, like Lord Viol's evening tuxedo, and the workmanship was exquisite. Just looking at it made me sigh all over again.

In contrast, from the waist down, the dress became much softer in impression. The skirt consisted of multiple layers of black, silver, and white satiny chiffon fabric, with the diagonal silver embroidery in effect here, too, providing a touch of refinement that kept it from looking too whimsical.

The dress was white, black, and silver, but my accessories all involved bright colored stones, making the overall look glamorous. I had several strings of necklaces set against the exposed decolletage, each emitting a colorful glow, shimmering and sparkling gorgeously each time I moved.

"Oh! Oooh! You're truly beautiful, Seren! I'm moved to tears!"

"Right? I knew bright, glam makeup was a good idea. It works with the dress. Super beautiful!"

Mother teared up joyfully, looking like a young girl herself. Marietta and my maid, Rince, had been fussing over my makeup for a while now. What would I ever have done without them all?

"I'm so glad… Really, I owe all of this to you, Mother, and you, Marietta. Thank you for all of your advice and support," I told them.

"No doubt if your special man saw you right now, Sis, he'd be stunned by your beauty."

"Do you think so? That would be… really nice."

"Of course!"

As I pictured Lord Viol, my heart thrummed with excitement.

Once I went through those doors and headed to the royal palace, I'd finally see Lord Viol. Wearing a dress made especially for him… I would become… Lord Viol's legally wedded wife.

Just the thought of it was enough to have me in heaven.



NOT long after finishing my wedding look, I stood taking deep, quiet breaths in front of the door that led to the royal palace's grand hall.

Goodness, my heart is pounding! Once I opened this door… I would find Lord Viol on the other side. I mean, I could already faintly hear his brothers chattering through the door.

Why was I so nervous? I'd seen Lord Viol—spoken to him—just yesterday.

I need to calm down, I told myself, but when I thought about vowing to spend the rest of my life with Lord Viol… It made me almost swoon, and I couldn't force myself to relax.

Before I had time to compose myself, the doors leading to the hall creaked slowly open.

On the other side of the door, I saw Lord Viol's family, dressed in formal attire… And Lord Viol himself, looking even more dashing than usual.

He's amazing…

I almost gasped that out loud!

Just like I'd hoped, he wore an all-black suit in his usual style but with exquisite embroidery around the collar, lapels, and sleeves. It had clearly been made to order and fit Lord Viol's slender body to perfection. He looked more beautiful than ever before. His hair was neatly tied back, exposing every inch of that handsome face that brought me so much joy to behold.

It seemed unfathomable that such an amazing man was to become my life partner.

I managed to smile so that, hopefully, he wouldn't notice my palpitations. Trying to calm myself, I looked into Lord Viol's midnight eyes, and he returned my gaze in kind.

I couldn't look away. We stared at each other for a few long moments.

Then, Lord Viol's lips curved into a gentle smile. "…You're exquisite."

Such praise!

"Thank you." I croaked out a response. "Black suits you best of all, Lord Viol… I… I wanted to look like the perfect bride for you."

Overcome with joy, I struggled to put my feelings into words.

"I had no idea black could be such a lustrous color… It brings out your beautiful features, Lady Seren. I mean it… You look absolutely perfect in black."

When Lord Viol said those words, that smile on his lips… I felt like all the hard work had paid off. *Oh, I'm so glad I went the extra mile!*

"Incredibly beautiful…"

"Amazing…"

"Lady Seren! You look great! Super pretty! And cool! Kinda like… Grown-up and sophisticated?"

Lord Viol's younger brothers praised me one by one. Like they were trying to reassure me. I always feel like such a plain Jane around Lord Viol, and now, with him sparkling brighter than ever, I felt unsure of myself… So their words helped.

Lord Viol's family was filled with such kind and wonderful people.

"Ehehe. Thank you." I found myself giggling.

Lord Viol's family members are always frank and straightforward, leaving me no doubt where I stand with them, and it gives me a warm feeling inside.

Okay, Lord Viol's younger brothers aren't immune to roasting their older brother from time to time… But their unpretentious ways have endeared me to them.

"Yes, she is stunning. I couldn't be prouder to call her my daughter."

When Father said those words, seemingly overcome with emotion, I felt myself welling up as well. I could see something sparkling in the corners of Father's eyes.

On the day I informed Father that I planned to become not a future queen but a High Mage, he'd been surprised to be sure. But he hadn't gotten angry. He'd heard me out.

After that, he encouraged me AND did what he could on his end, using his influence to help facilitate my dreams.

When I informed him of my desire to marry Lord Viol, he'd told me it was too soon. But he was the one who, in the end, arranged for me to meet with the king and queen to discuss it. He made it clear he was on my side.

Without Father's help, would I ever have been able to train to become a High Mage? Would I even be here, having this wedding ceremony with Lord Viol?

So when I saw the tears shining in the corners of Father's eyes, I felt my chest swell with emotion.

"Oh, stop it, dearest. It's too soon for tears yet. Pull yourself together."

"Yes, yes, of course… It's time, isn't it?"

Mother smiled and gently dabbed at Father's eyes with her hanky. I hoped that Lord Viol and I could be like them… Staying close throughout the years ahead.

"Well then, we can't keep the king and queen waiting. Everyone, take your places, please." The elderly priest's tone kept my tears from welling up.

…Right. The ceremony's about to begin. I took a deep, slow breath.

Realizing that as soon as those next doors opened, the ceremony would start, I suddenly felt so nervous I could barely get any air.

I glanced up at Lord Viol, whose gentle eyes gazed back at me.

Right. Everything's fine.

Suddenly, I felt relieved, and a smile spread across my face.

There was no need to be nervous. As long as I was with Lord Viol, everything would be fine. This renewed conviction made all of my tension and anxiety instantly evaporate.

"…Lord Viol, let us be happy together."

"Yes. I promise to cherish you for the rest of my life, Lady Seren."

My words came out unbidden and clumsy, but Lord Viol's response was smooth and sounded like music to my ears.

How is it, I wondered, *that Lord Viol always knows exactly what I want to hear? He's always saying he's terrible at conversation, but his words are like joyful gifts. It's odd, really.*

Now that I was feeling less anxious, happiness seeped in… And I beamed at Lord Viol.

How lucky am I to become this man's wife?

"Please, promise me that during the ceremony itself, too," I said.

"Ah, right, of course."

"And…"

"Yes?"

"From now on, could you just call me… Seren?"

"…!"

Once the ceremony was over, I'd officially be his wife, after all. But my request made Lord Viol's cheeks blush a deep red. Seeing his response made a wave of embarrassment wash over me.

"I… I… I can certainly do that."

Lord Viol gazed into my eyes, and despite a slight stammer, he promised to fulfill my request. That swell of happiness rose up in my chest again.

…This is pure happiness.

As I savored the imminent joy of becoming this man's wife, my ears rang with the clamor of bells.



THE heavy doors slowly opened before us.

Lord Viol and I beamed at one another, then slowly walked into the grand hall. The king and queen awaited us at the end of the gold-trimmed crimson carpet.

They were both so good to me, but I chose a different path from the one they wanted for me. I chose another man and not Prince Helios—their son. Seeing them here, now, ready to send me off this way… Their compassion and kindness made me experience a mixture of gratitude, regret, and all sorts of confusing feelings.

No doubt they must have had certain feelings about my choices, too.

I had no idea how to thank them for arranging this ceremony for us. A splendid orchestra, and even Prime Minister Borden, was there.

With each step we took, I could see the faces of the king and queen more clearly. They watched us approach with composed expressions.

Finally, we stopped in front of them, and together, we knelt.

"...Finally, this blessed day has arrived." I heard the king's calm voice above my head. "To think that today is your wedding day, Seren... We have thought of you as our own daughter all this time. We are both so deeply moved to be able to give you away."

"..."

"And to know that you are marrying Archmage Viol, head of the High Mages who protect this land... Well, we could not be happier."

When I heard them say those things with utter conviction in their voices, I felt the same wave of emotions I had when my parents agreed to our marriage.

"Raise your heads, both of you."

I lifted my head to see the king smiling down at me with a gentle, warm gaze. Then, when I saw the tears in the eyes of the queen standing beside him, I lost all my composure.

"We both wanted to offer you our blessings. I apologize for making it about us."

"No, thank you for your kind words."

"..."

Lord Viol was the one who responded. I couldn't speak. All I could do was choke back tears. In the end, it was my selfish whims that had led me away from the path of becoming a future queen. I had strayed from the path that would have led me to being their daughter-in-law. It meant everything that they still blessed my marriage.

One day, I wanted to return the kindness they'd shown me.

"Now, to the exchanging of the vows. Archmage Viol, Seren, please hold this chalice between the two of you."

I managed to take hold of the golden chalice with only a small, awed gasp. It wasn't huge, about the size of a regular wine glass, but it was an exquisite treasure of an item.

Beautiful, truly...

As I admired the chalice I held, Lord Viol gently curved his fingers around mine so we both grasped the cup between us. The warmth of his fingers soothed and reassured me.

Then, our delicately engraved wedding rings were dropped into the chalice, which was filled to the brim with a clear, alcoholic liquid.

For some reason, Lord Viol's hand twitched around mine, and the king, spotting this, chuckled knowingly.

"Just as I expected, Archmage Viol, you noticed. Yes, this is a magical vow-binding device passed down through generations of the royal family. It is used in every royally sanctioned wedding."

A magical, vow-binding device…

I didn't know such a thing really existed!

I looked up, surprised, and found the king smiling sadly. He closed his eyes slowly, paused, then looked at Lord Viol and addressed him solemnly.

"Now, Archmage Viol. Do you swear to love Seren for the rest of your life?"

"Yes. I promise to love and cherish Lady— Cherish Seren for the rest of my life."

Surprised by Lord Viol's choice of words, I lifted my gaze.

I mean… He just called me… Seren.

Though I was the one who'd asked him to, hearing Lord Viol say my name like that… It made me blush, and my heart swell with happiness. I loved how diligently he'd set about putting what I'd asked for into practice.

"…Very good. Well, then, Seren…"

I looked at the king, who repeated his question very slowly as if to make sure I was serious.

"Do you promise to love Archmage Viol for the rest of your life?"

"I do."

I answered without hesitation.

To express my feelings in front of Lord Viol, the king and queen, our families… There was no better moment. I held my head high and spoke with all the intention of my heart.

"I swear to love only Lord Viol for the rest of my life."

The king's lips twitched in a smile, and the queen nodded slightly beside him.

"Very well. Now to seal your vows with a kiss. Hold on to the Vow Chalice."

My heart pounded loudly.

I knew that weddings involve sealing the vows with a kiss, of course. But now that it had come to that moment, I felt painfully shy about it all. I mean, right in front of the king and queen? And if I turned around, I'd see all of my family AND Lord Viol's family, all watching.

I awkwardly faced Lord Viol, raised my eyes, and made eye contact. Heat prickled my cheeks.

Ah…

Lord Viol smiled… And gave me a small nod, and in that moment, I felt reassured.

I can leave it all to Lord Viol. I have nothing to worry about. The thought centered me, and I lifted my face toward Lord Viol's, closing my eyes.

Lord Viol's warm fingers closed around mine, and I felt another fleeting rush of nerves. I could sense Lord Viol's face moving closer. Then, there was a warm, soft touch on my lips.

At that moment, it happened.

A flash of light so bright I could see it through my closed lids.

Lord Viol must have been taken aback as well. His fingers tightened even more around mine. I blinked my eyes rapidly as the king declared, in a solemn voice:

"The vow is sealed."

The orchestra and the royal choir struck up as the king spoke, performing a joyful piece of music. It was ceremonious but warm and filled with joy and promise, and it made me feel incredibly blessed.

Listening to the wonderful music, Lord Viol and I drained the liquid from the chalice, and our wedding rings—the symbol of our commitment—appeared at the bottom.

Every time I see our rings, I'm struck by their beauty. The intricate engraving work makes me think of going with Lord Viol to order them. It makes me smile every time.

The silver cloak clasp that I'd given to Lord Viol to celebrate when I defeated my first-ever Magic Beast.

Both Lord Viol and I had fallen in love with that silver clasp the moment we laid eyes on it. Its craftsmanship was so beautiful and intricate. Lord Viol wears it daily, and every time I see it, I get a little hit of dopamine.

I wanted our wedding rings—vital jewelry that we would each wear for the rest of our lives—to be made by the same artisan who'd crafted that cloak clasp.

Lord Viol had inquired about the artisan's name at the shop where I'd bought the clasp, and it was relatively easy to find their workshop. Together, Lord Viol and I visited Minkrana, a village in the north known for its artisans, and made our request directly to the artisan in question, a young man by the name of Rote.

He looked around the same age as Lord Viol, but he had a passion for his work that was at odds with his young age. He listened intently as Lord Viol and I described what we were after, and then he started drawing up sketches and designs on the spot.

Sweet little flowers intricately intertwined around a moon. The design was beautiful and in the same style as the clasp that Lord Viol wears daily. And the finished rings were even more beautiful than the design.

Each petal, leaf, and steam were intricately carved, making the flowers pop against the rays of moonlight. Rote had upped his game even more from the time he'd crafted Lord Viol's cloak clasp.

The rings featured engraving work that was even more detailed than the clasp. The linework was amazingly thin and delicate, indicating radiant moonlight. Such elegant work. Something I'd like to gaze at for the rest of my life.

I heard myself sighing with awe again as I looked at them.

As Lord Viol picked up the ring, I noticed his fingers trembling slightly. *Oh… Even Lord Viol is nervous,* I realized, but then he regained his composure.

Are you all right? I looked up at him and smiled, hoping he'd know what I was thinking.

Whenever I was overtaken by nerves, froze up in fear, or felt despondent and struggled to move forward, Lord Viol always encouraged me and made me feel brave.

Lord Viol was someone I could rely on. I could overcome anything with him by my side.

I wanted to be that for him, as well.

When his eyes met mine, Lord Viol's fingers stopped shaking. Now that his hands were stiller, I could see the beautiful moon and flower engraving as he slipped the ring onto my fingers.

Oh. Oh… I'm so happy.

I picked up Lord Viol's ring and slid it onto his slender, bony finger. Then I looked up at him, bursting with joy. I could see his midnight-black eyes glistening.

He's just as happy as I am… That's what he's thinking right now, isn't it? My eyes crinkled up as a smile overwhelmed my features.

Both of us grinning large enough to burst, we signed our marriage certificate together, then looked on as our families and the king and queen added their signatures. Then, the certificate was placed in a glass case, and with that, we were officially husband and wife.

I was so overwhelmed that I was on the verge of tears. I tried to hold them back, but I couldn't help sniffling.

"Congratulations." The king offered us his sentiments in a soft tone. "Now, you two are finally husband and wife. There will be a royal ball this weekend to celebrate your marriage."

The king's statement took me off-guard, and I could only gaze up at him in shock.

"Th-Thank you." Lord Viol sounded surprised, too. Well, who would have imagined I'd be officially announcing my marriage to Lord Viol at an actual royal ball?

In the first place, I wouldn't have even dared hope to have the king and queen blessing our marriage like they were today. And yet… As I gazed up at the king in shock, my eyes no doubt bugging out, a warm hand cupped my cheek.

It was the queen.

"Dearest Seren. Live your life on your own terms. Be ever so happy."

The queen's eyes were warm, and I could see tears welling up therein… An indescribable emotion filled me.

Even though I'd broken off my engagement to Prince Helios for selfish reasons and chose to part with both the king and queen for my future…

Why, still, did they continue to watch over me so warmly?

"…Thank you…!"

It was all I could do to choke down my emotions and hope that my words conveyed the depth of my appreciation.

"Archmage Viol. You have my full trust. I ask you to continue to look after both Seren and the safety of this kingdom."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Hearing the king and Lord Viol speaking together, I struggled to blink back the tears that threatened to spill forth.

“So… The wedding ceremony is completed without incident, and a new couple has been forged in this world. Please support one another always and live long, happy lives together.”

I nodded with enthusiasm. The king’s words were so kind.

I wanted to be like the king and queen. Like Mother and Father, too. I wanted Lord Viol and I to become a steadfast, loving couple who always supports one another.

Lord Viol took my arm to head for home even as I continued struggling to control my tears. As I clung to his arm, it felt so strong and secure, and when I gazed up at him, he looked back down at me with infinite softness in his eyes. I felt a swell of relief and happiness fill every inch of me.

Everything would be fine with Lord Viol by my side.

“I’m your wife, now, Lord Viol, aren’t I…”

“Oh, Seren!”

I’d found myself burbling my happy thoughts aloud, and when Lord Viol responded, it was to call my name… The first time he’d called me by my name while looking into my eyes. I was suddenly happily embarrassed.

“P-Perhaps it will take a while to switch from ‘Lady Seren’ completely… However…”

I couldn’t look him in the eyes a second longer! I bowed my head, but Lord Viol leaned in close and whispered in my ear.

“How adorable you are…my darling wife.”

“…!!!”

It felt like my cheeks were about to burst into flame! I never thought Lord Viol would say something like that…!

Apparently, Lord Viol found my tomato face amusing. He grinned and sighed.

“I can’t wait to get you alone.”

“…Eee…”

His breathy voice in my ear… It was so stimulating that I couldn’t let out more than a squeak. My husband… is a far naughtier man than I’d ever have imagined…

Viol 31

An Announcement at the Ball

“LORD Viol, what do you think? Is it too flashy?”

Seren did a twirl in front of me. The dress she wore was fitted but flared out at the knees in a graceful manner, bringing a touch of sophistication to her understated beauty.

“It’s absolutely beautiful.”

“Oh…! Well, I’m pleased to hear you say that, but… Is it quite appropriate for a married woman?”

“For a married woman…?”

What a delightful question. I fought to suppress a grin.

Just like the king had promised on our wedding day, there was to be a royal ball this weekend, where our marriage would be announced to the public.

Truly, I was filled with gratitude.

Seren’s dress showed very little skin beneath the lace covering her neck and wrists, and her hair was pulled back into a loose and dreamy braided updo. The dress was pure white like the one she’d worn to the previous ball, but this one gave an entirely different impression. The other dresses had been soft and cute with some volume, but this one was more of a slender silhouette, something called a “mermaid cut.”

Yes, this outfit was more sophisticated than those she’d worn previously. But the large white roses adorning her hair combined with the fluttering embroidered hem of her dress matching that of my tux gave her an aura of added glamor.

No matter what angle you look at her from, my wife has never looked more beautiful.

“I apologize. I don’t know much about fashion or customs or what married women wear, but I do know that you are the most beautiful woman in the world in my eyes.”

Seren instantly blushed.

Beside her, her maid Rince chuckled. “Lady Seren, don’t ask Lord Viol about such things. It isn’t fair to him. And anyway, I’ve already checked with your mother, so you can rest assured.”

“R-Right… Well, if Mother says it’s all right, then I suppose there’s no issue…”

Seren looks adorable when blushing, too.

After our wedding, we began living together at Seren’s residence. The best thing is that we can be together all the time when we’re not working, and we can chat about this and that before events like this ball.

It’s nothing significant, but it’s so nice and a lot of fun just to be together.

“Tonight, we will announce our marriage to a public forum,” Seren said. “Everyone will be looking, whether we want them to or not. As Lord Viol’s wife, I don’t want to disgrace him with my appearance…”

“I see, so that’s your concern… Well, you should hold your head up high. As I’ve been saying, you look absolutely stunning,” I assured her.

“But the thing is, Lord Viol, you have never looked more dashing than you do tonight…”

“Indeed? Well, I certainly hope so.”

Seren’s beauty is undeniable, and her deportment and manners are impeccable. On her side, there is nothing to worry about. In fact, I’m the one who’s more likely to bring negative attention.

Albert, the butler sent by Seren’s family to serve us, had dressed me to perfection, so I was fairly confident I was looking sharper than I’d looked at any previous ball. But honestly, I wasn’t confident I’d be able to behave like an aristocrat.

And besides, while my tux is mostly all black as usual, it has a sort of pattern to the fabric, something I’ve never worn before, and I feel it’s rather flashy. It’s hard to relax, wearing something like this.

“To be honest, though, I’ve never cared too much what others think of me…” I admitted. “From today on, I will officially appear in public as your husband. I want everyone to agree that I am a man worthy of your hand.”

Seren’s eyes grew big and round.

Well, a statement like that… I'd surprised even myself. Who'd have thought I'd be having feelings like this? I guess that's what happens when you find someone you want to cherish forever.

"Shall we go?"

"Yes, let's!"

I crooked my arm and offered it to her, and she linked her arm around mine. As she gazed up at me, I led her to the carriage that would take us to the ball.

Pre-announcement jitters had us arriving too early, far before the ball was due to begin. On arrival, we were ushered into a waiting room. I'd never experienced anything like this before and found myself taken aback. But it seemed like this was the first time for Seren, too.

Nervous, we stuck close together and waited, and not long after, there came a knock at the door, followed by the arrival of Seren's mother and father.

"Father! Mother!" Seren dashed over to them, looking quizzical. Her father smiled and explained what was going on.

"They are having you wait for the king and queen to arrive. Since tonight your marriage will be announced to the entire royal ball, it's better to keep you sequestered from the other guests to avoid awkward conversations before the actual announcement."

"Oh yes, that makes sense…" Seren nodded.

"Once the people learn that the king and queen not only approved of your nuptials but were in charge of the ceremony, any potential fuss should be avoided. No doubt the king and queen have arranged things this way for your protection. Isn't that kind of them?"

Indeed, I sighed a little, moved by the king and queen's kind consideration.

I'd been wondering why they'd go to all the trouble of announcing our marriage at an official royal ball, but I never imagined it was to protect us.

"The king and queen truly loved you, Seren…" I muttered that without thinking, but Seren's father chuckled knowingly.

"Yes, that's a major factor. As her father, I believe the queen feels a motherly love towards Seren… But as for the king, I believe he's thinking more practically about this as well."

I frowned, confused about what he meant, and Seren's father grinned.

"It shows how much he respects the power the both of you have."

"The… power…?" I repeated.

"Not only did you save my subordinates the other day, but you also developed a magical tool that will greatly improve our trading ships, right? That, alone, is already a huge achievement to be proud of."

"Oh, right… Yes, thank you…"

"Hahaha! Such a big accomplishment, yet you still play it so cool."

Seren's father laughed, but… Really, we were just doing our duty.

"His Majesty has a deep awareness of the power High Mages wield. Viol, you're an Archmage and leader, embodying all that the title entails, and Seren, you're a promising golden child in that field. A budding national treasure, as it were. Together, you will lead this nation to great prosperity. I have to say, without any parental bias, I fully agree."

If that's true…then I'm honestly happy they think that way.

"So, to prevent either of you from being distracted by silly rumors, the royal family seems to want to send a clear message that you have their full support."

I was still taken aback.

Royalty and nobility… It's still hard for me to figure all of it out.

When the ball officially began, Seren and I were brought up on the dais to join the king and queen. Naturally, the other guests had no idea what we were doing standing up there with the royal family and gazed at us curiously.

"Thank you all for coming today."

The king, in his usual kingly manner, addressed his subjects, expressed his gratitude for their attendance, and announced a few matters pertaining to the running of the country. Gradually, the gazes focused on us shifted to the king.

"…And now to the final order of business…"

Just when it started to feel like a regular ball, the king got down to the business of announcing our marriage.

“There’s a reason why I asked Archmage Viol and Lady Seren to stand up here today. In fact, just the other day, the two were officially married.”

A ripple went through the crowd like a stone thrown into a pond.

Confusion.

That’s the closest word to describe the expressions of the people who had gathered for the ball.

They looked at me and Seren, then back at the king and queen, then at Prince Helios, then at Seren again, me again, the king and queen again… Then, the crowd exchanged glances amongst themselves, their confusion plain to see.

I felt an urge to look at Prince Helios. He wore his usual princelike expression. I couldn’t get a read on any emotion from him. Whatever Prince Helios thought of our marriage would remain a mystery to me.

After waiting for everyone to stop glancing around in confusion, the king cleared his throat. “I understand that you are all surprised. However, the recent rescue mission of the trading ship Angelica and the important discovery and development of our new magical invention has, it seems, brought this pair closer together.”

The king looked at us as he spoke, and we both nodded emphatically. He smiled at us, then faced the guests once more.

“This marriage, between two high mages, who carry the future of this nation on their shoulders, has been officially blessed by the queen and myself. As proof of this, a royal wedding was held, using the magical oath chalice, to which we both bore witness. Tonight, we hold this ball to announce this news to you, the people, and so that we may all celebrate the union of this most eminent couple.”

Suddenly, there was a murmuring throughout the crowd, with the nobility all exchanging surprised glances. Apparently, a wedding to which the king and queen bear witness is a big deal amongst the aristocracy.

The king beamed then as if the shock of the crowd and my own confusion did not faze him. “Good citizens, I call on you to assist me in celebrating the happy couple, and please enjoy tonight’s feast.”



“I was quite nervous, you know.”

I sighed a little, making sure to keep my eyes fixed only on Seren. She looked up at me, narrowing her eyes a little and smiling.

After the announcement, we watched the king and queen perform the quadrille from our spot on the dais, and then we were free to dance together. Dancing was a nice distraction from the ongoing curious looks we were getting from all around.

I did get to exchange a few words with Prince Helios first, but it felt like everyone was staring at us instead of watching the king and queen and their quadrille. That was very uncomfortable. But I suppose I can’t blame them.

Prince Helios, of course, smiled warmly and even offered us his congratulations. Indeed, there was no way for me to figure out how he might really have been feeling about everything. I took my cue from Seren, who bowed deeply and said a simple thank you.

Prince Helios smiled sadly and said just one more thing, “Please, be happy together.”

That was enough for the nobles at the venue.

Their gazes, narrowed and focused on us, instantly softened. I realized that Prince Helios had done this on purpose—he had come over to speak to us specifically to mollify the crowd. Though he was much younger than me in years, I found a newfound respect for him when I realized that.

“Prince Helios… No doubt he’ll be a fine king one day,” I muttered without thinking. Seren blinked at me in surprise before she broke into a smile.

“Yes, I think so, too.”

“We owe a great deal to him… To the prince, and the king and queen.”

“One day, we’ll see that we repay them for their kindness.”

“Right. If we work together, I bet we can achieve some decent results.”

Seren and I exchanged smiles. Our path to becoming a married couple was only made possible through the help of

others. The king and queen, Prince Helios, and Seren's family. Without them, we wouldn't be where we are today.

"But you know, Lord Viol, I think your dancing has gotten even better."

That realization seemed to have come to her in the moment, leading to an unexpected compliment.

"Yes. Count Blaze has been training me regularly for the past six months. Usually, I'd like to use the entire dance floor, but tonight, I fear a few too many people are watching."

Since this was a ball to celebrate our marriage, I couldn't use my usual stealth magic and go incognito. With so many people around, I felt like I couldn't even enjoy conversing with Seren in our normal manner, either.

Missing out on the chance for a whirling dance with her was a little disappointing, but I suppose it couldn't be helped on tonight of all nights. Anyway, there will be plenty of opportunities to dance with my lovely wife at balls in the future.

I looked down and found her smiling back up at me happily. Seeing that smile made me feel truly satisfied.

From now on, I no longer had to worry about things like stifling balls and failing to converse. When I returned home, I would have that beautiful smile all to myself, and we could talk as much as we wanted. Being dissatisfied now, in light of that, seemed rather childish.

"Seren!"

"Lady Seren!"

As soon as the dance ended, rather familiar-looking women surrounded Seren.

If I remembered correctly, these were ladies I'd recalled seeing flock around Seren at the previous ball. Among them were Ladies Linde and Ladia, who worked with Seren at the salon as well.

"Marriage, all of a sudden?!"

"Tonight was the first we heard of it!"

"Now you have to tell us everything."

Ah, well, that makes sense, I thought to myself, wryly smiling as I watched my wife being ushered away. Then Lady Ladia turned and gave me a sharp glare.

“And, of course, we’ll want to hear from you too, Archmage Viol.”

From me, too?

I’d like to flee, but the tight smiles flashed in my direction by the ladies indicated I couldn’t escape so easily. I had no choice but to trail along after them to a long table that seemed to be filled with Seren’s school peers, judging by their young ages. Terribly awkward, of course.

I sat down obediently, and that’s when I felt a set of eyes piercing into me. Lifting my head, I saw a young man glaring at me and looking rather pale in the face.

He had familiar brown hair and a face that looked oddly familiar, too.

Oh, right, this is Borden’s younger brother. The red-headed bratty youth who usually accompanied their group was apparently not in attendance tonight.

But… Why was this young man looking at me with such resentment? Had I done anything to invoke the wrath of Borden or his younger brother?

I mean… I accept that I’ve caused a lot of fuss and trouble for Borden, but…

“So, Seren, getting married without telling us first… Isn’t that a bit rich?”

“Right. I mean, I didn’t even hear any rumors.”

Oh dear. While I was distracted by Borden’s scowling brother, the ladies had already begun to shower Seren with probing questions.

“I’m sorry, but due to my father’s trade business, the time between us deciding to get married and actually having the ceremony was short,” Seren responded apologetically, but of course, it was just an excuse. The truth was we had done everything we could to prevent rumors from spreading.

When we had consulted Seren’s father about the whole issue, he had lectured us, saying it had only been just over six short months since Seren and Prince Helios’s engagement was called off. If we followed the usual procedure of allowing rumors to spread, things might be blown out of proportion. But if the wedding were already a done deal, carried out with the full

support and participation of the king and queen, then nobody could turn up their noses.

That was the advice we received, so we kept everything under wraps…until tonight.

All of this fuss arose because I couldn't wait to usher Seren down the aisle.

Never had I imagined that I would receive the full support of not only Seren's family, but of the whole royal family. I did feel bad, of course, that Seren had to keep such a happy secret from her closest friends for so long.

"But what a surprise. You're suddenly married! You can hardly blame us for being shocked."

"Ever since you became a High Mage, you've certainly spoken highly of Lord Viol, Seren. But I never expected that you two were going to get married."

Lady Ladia and Lady Linde were teasing Seren with big smiles.

"And a royal wedding in front of the king and queen, too… How fantastic!"

"Yes. Especially since she doesn't officially belong to the duke's family register anymore."

"The royal wedding surprised us too," Seren said. "We originally planned to have a small ceremony at a quaint church in town, so it was a great blessing that the king and queen offered to perform a royal ceremony for us."

As Seren spoke, eavesdroppers spoke in hushed whispers nearby. Bored, I used wind magic to gather some gossip from the venue while Seren answered her friends' questions.

"The royal family brought the idea to you…?"

"I wonder why."

"Well, High Mages are considered high-ranking nobles, so it's not all that strange."

"But marriages between High Mages have happened before, right?"

"But she's a duke's daughter, and he's an Archmage presiding over all the High Mages. No doubt that played a big part in it."

I could hear people saying things like that, amongst other expressions of confusion and surprise.

Seren's father was right on the money. Having the wedding officially sanctioned by the royal family was a big factor in keeping any potential backlash subdued.

I was impressed by Seren's father's social savvy. Goodness knows I'd never grow to master it. Seren truly was blessed to have such wonderful people in her corner. No doubt, the bonds and trust she'd forged with others since her childhood had paid off for her in early adulthood.

Along with feeling grateful to those around me, I also felt respect for my partner.

"Even so, Archmage Viol…"

"Yes?"

I was startled to be suddenly spoken to. When I looked up, Lady Ladia and Lady Linde were looking straight at me.

"I've been quiet about this for a while now, but there's something I've been dying to ask you."

"Well, whatever could that be?"

"Weren't you in a bit of a hurry? You need to give some consideration to Lady Seren's position, you know."

"Right. It sort of sounds like you were a bit reckless."

The two of them were admonishing me… But I suppose I deserved it. After all… I HAD been in a hurry.

"Yes, I apologize. I certainly lacked due consideration. Seren was drawing such attention in the Mage's Tower and was always inundated with requests to dance during balls. I'm afraid I got a little anxious."

The honest answer from me drew a series of gasps and coos.

Seren blushed and looked down, and I could hear people saying things like, "Did you ever imagine THAT Lord Viol would say a thing like that?" but I wasn't trying to look cool here, so I just shrugged.

"Hahaha. Well, if you're going to be so earnest about it, it takes away all the fun of teasing you."

"Right? But it's obvious how devoted he is to Lady Seren."

"Yes. No one is finer than Seren, as a High Mage or as a wife," I agreed. "I swear I will cherish her for the rest of my life."

"L-Lord Viol, please…"

Seren's eyes begged me to spare her, so I had no choice but to hold my tongue from then on.

“Who knew he was so passionate?!”

Lady Ladia and Lady Linde laughed together. But they stopped badgering me after that, so it seemed I’d managed to satisfy their expectations.

Riesz 4

What the Heck…!

“JUST the other day, Archmage Viol and Seren were officially married.”

The instant the king’s words sank in, I said the only thing I could think of saying… Which was “Huh?”

…Huh?

…HUUUUUUUUH?!

No, no, no, no, that couldn’t be true. After all, it had only been six months since her engagement with Prince Helios was called off.

That’s what I tried telling myself, but the king didn’t correct himself. On the contrary, he reiterated that their marriage was real and ended his speech with the words, “Good citizens, I call on you to assist me in celebrating the happy couple, and please, enjoy tonight’s feast.”

…This had to be a joke, right?

Despondent, I looked to my brother, standing behind the royal family. He quickly looked away.

I pushed through the crowd surrounding the king and queen dancing their quadrille and approached the royal seats. I was planning on asking what exactly was going on, but…

But when I saw Prince Helios smiling and congratulating Seren and Archmage Viol, all of my gumption drained from me in an instant.

Yes, he was smiling… But I knew how he felt.

Even Prince Helios was offering his blessings to the happy couple while concealing his true, uneasy feelings. His eyes, usually filled with such strength, looked cloudy and sad.

Yes, there was Prince Helios, suppressing his feelings and giving his blessing to them. The king and queen, too, had entreated the crowd to look warmly at the happy couple. But what about me?

Feeling defeated, I went back to my room, collapsed into bed, and buried my face in the pillow.

Oh man, this is the worst.

I'd never imagined that Seren would get married so soon. I'd never imagined the Frosty Archmage, known for being such a terrible communicator, would act so fast.

This was the worst.

The absolute worst.

I was so upset I couldn't make myself feel sleepy at all. I sat up, thinking I'd pour myself a drink or something.

BANG! BANG! BANG! Someone hammered on my door.

...Uh-oh.

I had a bad feeling, so I pretended not to be home.

I slowly pulled the covers over myself and curled up, holding my breath so as not to make any noise. *Sorry, but I'm not in the mood to entertain anyone right now.*

Or so I thought.

There was a click, and the door opened.

"Oh... It wasn't locked after all."

Darn it! I'm such an idiot!

I'd been so bent out of shape about Seren getting married that I'd forgotten to lock the door, and now someone had just walked in.

"Oh, Riesz! You're home, after all!"

Just great. Of course, it's the red-headed idiot who's barged into my room.

Mashlo strode over to my bed without a shred of decorum, threw off the covers I'd burrowed under, and thrust his face right up next to mine.

"Hey, is it true that Seren's gotten married?! Can't be, right? Tell me it's not true!"

"Get out. I never gave you permission to enter."

"I'm not leaving until I hear everything. Come on, wake up."

Wow, what a jerk. He even closed and locked the door behind him.

Guess he's serious about not leaving until we talk. Boils my blood.

"So, this thing about Seren getting married..."

"It's true," I grunted. "You heard it from someone, right, Mashlo? Otherwise, you wouldn't be here. She's married to

Archmage Viol. All right? Now, you can get lost."

"But how…"

"How should I know?" I sighed heavily. "I don't know how. Or why. But I do know that the king and queen officially blessed the marriage. And even threw a ball in their honor."

"Why would they do that…?"

"And what's more, Prince Helios offered his personal congratulations."

"No way. Why would he do that?!"

I wish he'd stop asking why this, why that! I'd like to know why, too…!

"Well, if Prince Helios has signed off on it, then there's nothing we can say against it now," I insisted.

"But he's ten years older than us. He's an old man! Seren must have been somehow forced…"

"She was *smiling*. She looked happy," I said.

Yes, Seren did look happy. That was what made it even worse.

I sighed and got up. Getting rid of Mashlo seemed like too much effort all of a sudden. I grabbed two glasses and a bottle of the good stuff.

"Drink this. I'm opening a decent bottle today."

I poured two drinks and mixed them with a little ice and water. Mine was a bit stronger of the two. I chucked it back in one gulp. I wanted to get as drunk as I possibly could.

Wallowing in disbelief, denial, or something like that, Mashlo was still bleating away. "It's not true; it's just not true," he muttered, sipping at his drink.

"Down it. It'll help you forget." I sloshed more alcohol into his still-almost-full glass.

Mashlo sniffed, then knocked his drink back just as I'd done.

"That's right, drink up, drink up."

I poured myself another. Yeah, I was pretty upset, too.

"Yeah, let's drink until the sun comes up. The academy is closed tomorrow anyway."

"Right, right."

"Prince Helios doesn't even talk to me anymore," Mashlo lamented. "My parents are furious with me, I could get axed from the salon at any moment… Seren's married… Ah, man. I want to forget my entire life."

Most of that's your own damn fault, I thought. But I decided not to say anything about it.

"Drink up. I wouldn't blame you."

"That'd be a first."

After that, we drank ourselves silly. At first, I'd wanted to get rid of him, but thinking about it, I doubted I'd be able to sleep anyway. And I didn't want to stay up alone all night, agonizing.

Normally, I couldn't stomach Mashlo's presence, but today, it seemed better to be in his company than my own. I even got out some tasty snacks I don't usually offer guests. I guess the events of the day really did a number on me.

After we'd made our way through most of the bottle, Mashlo was properly drunk. He began whining and complaining even more.

"Damn it all to heck! Why did it have to turn out like this? Just when it was looking like she was a free agent!"

Yeah, that's what I thought, too.

But wow... Mashlo was still clinging on to a shred of hope, then? He never learns. But his endless positivity... That was a good quality, one I'd like to emulate.

To begin with, Seren doesn't seem to like Mashlo. And her father, Duke Qumildy, and the royals all seem to share a distaste for him as well. I seriously doubt he'd have been able to make a comeback from such a disadvantaged position.

"You're done for as far as she's concerned anyway. Your social stock was in the toilet," I said.

"Shut up, I know that. But it just doesn't make sense for her to get married so suddenly."

Seriously. I didn't expect it to happen out of the blue like this, either.

"Darn it! Seren! I love yooou!"

You dolt. I'm the one who's always loved her the most.

"..."

"Hmm? What?"

I realized that Mashlo was staring at me, a gormless look on his face.

"Why are you crying?" he asked.

"What?" I touched my cheek... And my fingers came away wet.

Pathetic.

Seren's marriage shocked me so much that I started crying without even realizing it.

"I… I loved Seren, too," I admitted.

"Huh?! This is the first time you've mentioned it!"

"What was the point of saying it? Seren was engaged to Prince Helios."

"Yeah, but…"

"Unlike you, I'm mentally normal." I snorted and took another glug of my drink. "She always works hard… She's tough on herself but kind to others… Always smiling sweetly… Saying adorable things like how she dreamed about flying. I mean, anyone would fall in love with a girl like that, right?"

Since we're the same age, I feel like I know Seren better than anyone else at the salon. She and I have always been peers…

"Having her snatched away by some random guy… It's frustrating. Obviously."

"Riesz."

Hahaha, Mashlo looked like he had no idea what to do or say to me. I must really be a mess if I've got this socially ignorant guy in a flap over my precious feelings.

"But you know…"

"Y-Yeah?"

"Seren… She looked… happy."

Mashlo's brows shot up when I half-whispered that.

"Wow, you're saying that for real?"

"Dancing, talking… She looked radiantly happy, yes, but it was more than that… The way they were with one another… It just seemed… effortless."

I'd been scowling at the pair of them the whole time. It was horrible to witness.

The mood between them. Calm, secure, filled with quiet trust. I felt like a complete idiot for having such dark feelings. Even now, the casual glances and little smiles they exchanged are burned into my mind.

Just remembering it made my chest ache.

"I've never seen a more beautiful smile from her…" I gulped down another full glass of booze. "There's no way I could interfere with something like that."

"…"

I no longer cared about Mashlo’s disgruntled face or the tears that threatened to spill forth from my eyes.

Tonight, I was gonna drink myself to sleep. I mean, what else was there left to do?

Seren 35

A Happy Report

THE day after the big ball.

At last, I had the opportunity to announce to everyone in the Third Mage Guild that Viol and I were married.

After Lord Viol discussed the matter with my father, they concluded it would be better to keep things under wraps until the wedding was safely over and we could make an announcement officially at the ball.

The Third Mage Guild itself counts among its number quite a few of the aristocracy. It wouldn't have been possible to swear everyone to secrecy. Father thought we should try to avoid rumors spreading at all costs. Until now, the only person we'd confided our secret to was the deputy division commander, Disto.

Today we could finally announce the news of our marriage to the others in the Guild.

At the end of the Third Mage Guild-wide monthly morning assembly, I held my hand to my chest and anxiously waited for Lord Viol to speak.

"...I'm sorry to bother you with personal matters, but there's something I want to tell everyone." Lord Viol cleared his throat and looked around at the others as he spoke. "This may come as a surprise, but... Seren and I have... Actually, we've gotten married."

"...Huh?"

Following Lord Viol's report, an odd silence hung heavy in the air.

"Whaaat?!"

"Huh? Eh? Come again?!"

"What the? Is this some kind of joke?"

"Lord Viol... Makes jokes?"

"No, no, no, it can't be..."

Voices filled with shock and confusion... Lord Viol looked taken aback, too.

“I do joke sometimes… But this isn’t a joke…”

Lord Viol looked at me like he was seeking my consent. So I smiled and nodded. Seeing my reaction, the others looked a bit less skeptical.

“Huh…”

“No way, really?”

“No, no… I mean, really?”

“Seren, is it true…?”

I looked around at the group, barraged by questions on all sides.

“It’s true. I’ve been blessed enough to become Lord Viol’s wife,” I said in a loud and clear voice.

“Whaaat?!!!”

“No way!!!”

“You’ve gotta be kidding, Seren!”

“Lord Viol…? I thought he was a lifelong bachelor!”

The morning assembly hall erupted in a fresh round of excited murmurs.

Lord Viol and I exchanged glances and smiled wryly at each other. He and I had been going out on dates after work more often recently and had even gone to balls together, but despite all that, no one expected us to actually get married.

Everyone seemed so surprised that I felt a little guilty, so I bowed my head toward the group.

“I apologize for surprising you with this news so soon after joining the Guild. However, I will make sure that my work is not affected in any way, so please, uh, I mean, I hope you’ll continue to look warmly upon me…”

As I finished speaking, the room fell silent.

“…Huh?”

“…What?”

“But, I mean, what about the honeymoon?”

“You’re going to take some time off following your wedding, right?”

Now, the room filled with restless murmuring. Vellia stepped forward from the crowd and leaned in to speak to me. “Seren! You’re taking some newlywed leave, right? I believe I explained that we all have the right to newlywed leave?”

“Yes, I was informed about that, but since I just joined the team and this is an important time, I’ll wait until things have settled down,” I said.

“She’ll never get around to taking leave…” I heard someone mutter from the crowd. Vellia’s shoulders slumped.

“I mean, I’m so far behind the rest of my peer group… I can’t allow my personal affairs to delay my development any further…” I muttered.

Vellia got a scary look on her face and whipped towards Lord Viol. “Archmage Viol! What are you thinking?! You have to take a firm hand here! You must insist on both of you taking newlywed leave. Poor Seren!”

“What? No, I mean… Well, I was just going along with what Seren wanted…” Lord Viol, finding the finger of blame pointed at him, opened his eyes in surprise and gasped when Vellia looked down, shoulders hitching in emotion.

“Wow.”

“Total boss fail.”

“Total husband fail, more like…!”

“That sounds like Frosty Archmage Viol, all right.”

I heard the whispers all around and was taken aback. Was this really something worthy of such criticism?

At that moment, Lord Viol and I looked at each other, wondering what to do.

“You dunderhead!”

A loud, scolding voice shattered the moment.

Vellia was… angry. She was always so easygoing and laid-back… I always figured she was a person with few extreme emotions. Sort of like Lord Viol, but in a different way.

My shoulders trembled in surprise, and Lord Viol blinked.

“Seren is a work-minded girl; of course, she’d insist on not taking time off! It’s your job to persuade her otherwise, Archmage Viol!”

I gulped. I never imagined my actions would have landed Lord Viol in hot water.

“H-Hold on… But when I joined the Guild, I was told newlywed leave was completely optional… It was my choice not to take it, not __”

“Vellia knows that, Seren. That’s the whole point.”

Three more people stepped forward one by one from among the others. They were the most talented people in the whole Guild, taking the top spot for skill in the fire, earth, and water categories.

“See, we know Archmage Viol. He keeps to himself. He keeps his private matters under wraps, and everyone understands that it’s simply how he prefers to live his life. When it comes to opinions on magical matters, no one has more weight than Archmage Viol. We all trust his word completely.”

“Right. But there is one thing we have to say. The newlywed period of life—that sweet, fleeting time—you’ve got to enjoy it to the utmost! You should go and kick back and enjoy yourselves, enter the love bubble, and cast aside all other concerns for a while!”

“We can cover for Lord Viol for a week or so. Seriously, there’s no reason to worry about a thing.”

Well, what could either Lord Viol or I say when faced with such a chorus? Behind the three of them, the other members of the Mage Guild were all nodding away.

Lord Viol and I looked at one another again, and Vellia smiled broadly.

“So I’ll go ahead and submit your application for newlywed leave.”

“Th-Thank you…” I stuttered. “And sorry… I mean, uh, thank you.”

Vellia’s smile broadened even more. She pushed up her glasses, still grinning. “No problem. If the big cheese doesn’t take his newlywed leave, then none of the smaller fries will feel comfortable doing so, either. Archmage Viol, of all people, needs to take the leave allocated to him.”

“I, I see, right. That may well be true. Sorry, I wasn’t considerate enough.”

Vellia smiled wryly at seeing Lord Viol’s brows lowering a bit in remorse. Then she muttered in a faint voice, “The man’s surprisingly earnest when it comes to things like this,” and, despite her scolding, my heart filled with warmth.

I felt some residual guilt over Lord Viol getting scolded because I declared I wanted to prioritize work over everything else.

I would have to apologize to Lord Viol later. But just as I thought about that, Vellia turned and faced Disto, the man in charge of conducting this morning's assembly.

"That said, Archmage Viol is really sort of uninformed about these things. He needs you to give him a proper lecture, Commander Disto." Vellia dropped a jokey wink and said, "Counting on you!"

Disto replied in a dry tone, "I know."

Uh-oh. Now, even Disto was getting put on the spot. I felt SO guilty.

"We hadn't yet gotten to the point of talking about newlywed leave. There was no need to worry. I was always going to make sure they took it," he said.

"Well, good then."

"Great! Did you hear that, everyone? You all need to make sure to take the leave that's allocated to you, too!" Following Vellia's nod, the best Earth magic user in the Guild, Rupi, had looked around the room and then loudly spoke. The entire morning assembly broke out in cheers and smiles.

"Anyway! It's a surprise, sure, but a happy one! Well done, Lord Viol!" Rupi laughed and slapped Lord Viol on the shoulder.

"That's right," Vellia continued. "Who would have thought that springtime would come to the life of Archmage Viol so soon? All right, everyone, I think this warrants a round of applause!"

"Congratulations!"

"Happy marriage!"

"Blessings to you both!"

"Congrats!"

"Darn it, he pipped me to the post!"

"Ah, but what happy news."

Vellia's call for applause led to a cacophony of cheers and well-wishes, along with some enthusiastic clapping. Everyone was smiling. The cheers, the congratulations... They were earnest and heartfelt.

I never expected to receive such hearty congratulations. Joy brought tears to my eyes. I tried to hold them back, but they welled up anyway.

"Seren, you have about a week of newlywed leave, so go and enjoy yourself, and you can catch up on your training once you get

back.”

“Yeah, have fun!”

Vellia and Rupi encouraged me, followed by the rest of the assembly. I was filled with gratitude and happiness. *I’m so lucky*, I realized.



“LORD VIOL, I’m sorry about today.”

As soon as we returned to the mansion and I was alone with Lord Viol in our room, the first thing I did was apologize.

However, he tilted his head to one side as if he didn’t understand. “…Is there something you need to apologize for?”

“I was selfish, saying that I wanted to focus on work… And you ended up getting scolded. I’m really sorry.”

“Well, I didn’t think anything of it. Vellia was saying that, as the Archmage presiding over our guild, I should set an example for everyone and take my allotted leave, right? There was nothing you needed to apologize for, Seren. I’m the one who should reflect on my actions. I was… inconsiderate in many ways.”

“Goodness, no!”

“Well, perhaps we can share the blame equally between us? Either way, there’s no need to worry so much. The others helped me fix my mistake before it was even made, so… No more issues, right?”

Well, when he put it that way, he had a point. And now that he’d spoken so frankly, I’d run out of steam to keep apologizing.

“But more importantly… It was great how everyone congratulated us. For me, that was all I could have hoped for.” Lord Viol stretched, then lay down on his favorite sofa like some kind of irresistible force drew him in. He yawned softly. His eyes glazed over like he was fighting back sudden sleepiness.

Seeing him look so happy made me realize there was nothing to worry about.

Right. In the end, no harm was done. And if Lord Viol was happy with things, then maybe it wasn’t a big deal after all.

As I watched him with his eyes closed, looking so comfortable, a sense of happiness washed over me, and the guilty

feelings I'd been wrestling with melted away.

Drawn to him, I went over to the sofa. Lord Viol looked so content. Like he was about to fall asleep any moment.

Eyes closed, lips slightly open, utterly serene and calm. In a tight-fitting black undershirt, he looked so relaxed… Almost exactly like Vi when he's lolling around. A thought that made me grin.

"Hehe." I chuckled, and Lord Viol's eyes snapped open.

"…Did you just chuckle?"

The corners of his mouth quirked upwards in satisfaction. The sleepy look he gave me made my heart skip a few beats.

Sleepy Vi was adorable, but Lord Viol wasn't just sleek and beautiful, he was… sexy. Which just made things a heck of a lot more inflammatory for me.

"Seeing you smile makes me happy."

And seeing him smile made me feel happy, too. I took another instinctive step towards the sofa. Gently pushing Lord Viol's legs aside, I sat next to him.

"I was just thinking the same thing."

I leaned against Lord Viol's leg, his raised knee, and pressed my cheek against it.

"…!"

Lord Viol's knee twitched. I wrapped my arms around his knee and closed my eyes, leaning my weight against him.

"If everyone is congratulating me, and you're happy, Lord Viol, then that's all I need…"

"Really… Well, I'm glad."

Stroking Vi's soft fur is always soothing. But leaning against Lord Viol like this is so warm. It truly makes me feel at ease. We've only been married a few days, but it's just so lovely to snuggle up against him like this and share time together.

Lord Viol shifted, and I opened my eyes… And as he sat up, our eyes met. He smiled softly, reached out, and gently stroked my hair.

That feels so good.

"I'm glad we got married."

Now he cupped my cheek, stroking my face like I was a cat.

His hand felt so good that I wanted to fall asleep right there. I closed my eyes again… And then I heard him mutter, "Seren…"

When I opened my eyes, Lord Viol looked troubled.

“Lord Viol?”

“Don’t fall asleep. Not when I’ve just sat up.”

I giggled. “Sorry. I’m just so happy being with you like this.”

“Yes. I’m feeling sort of tired today… And being like this is soothing.”

“For me, too.”

Lord Viol gazed at me. And I gazed back. I felt like I was being sucked into those deep eyes. Black, like the night sky.

As I stared into the dark, twinkling depths of those beautiful eyes, Lord Viol’s soft lips touched mine.

“This is happiness.”

“It is…”

I couldn’t imagine a night any more perfect than this.

Linde 2

White Lily Soliloquy

THAT day, when I went to the salon as usual, I found Prince Helios alone, silently going about his official duties. Normally, Seren or Prince Helios would have been the first to arrive, but now that Seren was no longer a salon member, it was always just Prince Helios.

In the past, sometimes Prince Helios would stroll in a bit later, chatting leisurely with Lord Mashlo and the others, but recently, he hasn't said two words to Lord Mashlo or anyone at the salon. Not unless it's to discuss work matters. The atmosphere at the salon has become quite gloomy.

I've been a little worried about whether or not Prince Helios is even finding time to relax.

After saying hello and going to make a cup of coffee for His Highness, I set about my work. But every now and then, Prince Helios would let out a deep sigh, which I found unnerving.

Lady Ladia was out today, delivering some documents to Prime Minister Borden. So it was just me and Prince Helios in the salon. In this quiet space, with just the two of us here, I couldn't help but overhear Prince Helios's hushed sighs.

I'd pretended not to notice them for a while, but I felt guilty about ignoring someone in turmoil. So, I spoke up.

"...You seem to be sighing quite a bit today."

Prince Helios brought a hand to his mouth in surprise, and I felt the need to suppress my grin. "Sorry, I didn't mean to disturb you."

"No, it's okay... It's hard to notice one's own sighs, isn't it? But what's wrong? Is it because Lady Seren got married?"

Prince Helios's face was solemn, and I realized I'd hit the bullseye.

Perhaps I'd better not press him on the matter. But then again, a man of Prince Helios's status... Where else would he find

someone he could safely confide in?

And luckily, there was no one else around at the moment. I'd be glad to listen as he spilled his soul if he'd have me.

That said, I wasn't going to be pushy about it. I remained silent as Prince Helios hung his head, and I continued busily working on my calculations.

"...Yes, it might be that." Prince Helios's voice was faint.

I stopped what I was doing and turned my attention toward him. It seemed he was thinking out loud, so I refrained from responding.

"I never thought Seren would get married this soon..."

I nodded slowly. Silently.

I was surprised, too.

Despite her demure looks, Seren is a woman of pure determination. Once she makes up her mind, there's no stopping her.

"Yes, there's the shock aspect of it, of course..."

Ah, yes, no doubt he was shocked.

I was surprised to learn that the two of them had never been on any real dates. Then, when Seren told me she'd been for a stroll around town with him, I'd wondered if he'd begun to have genuine feelings for Seren rather than focusing only on his official duties all the time.

Still, that aside, it must be a bit shocking when the woman you planned to spend your life with up and marries another man. I could certainly understand his reaction.

"And to think... Archmage Viol, of all people," he sighed.

"Indeed, it's hard to wrap one's head around. And Archmage Viol is a notorious misanthrope, I thought. Honestly, I've been quite shocked by it all as well." I chuckled, but Prince Helios pouted.

"I knew something was weird when he suddenly invited Seren to dance. Now when I think about it, he must have already had feelings for her back then."

"It seemed like even Seren was surprised at the time."

"Was she?"

Prince Helios looked a little relieved. Well, good. Obviously, Seren hadn't harbored any ulterior motives. It was good that he knew that, too.

“Back then, I don’t think she really ever interacted with Archmage Viol much… But she did say something about how much she respected him after she became a High Mage,” I said.

“Respect… I suppose some people get married based on mutual respect, don’t they?”

“It’s probably an important factor… I mean, I’ve still never experienced falling in love with anyone, so it’s not really for me to comment on.”

Prince Helios’s eyes widened a little in surprise when I confessed that. “You haven’t? I thought all young ladies knew all about the ways of romance.”

“It depends on the person. I’m not much of a romantic. I certainly have my crushes, but when everyone at the Academy talks about love and so on, I’m one of the ones who are just listening along.” I chuckled, and Prince Helios looked relieved for some reason.

“I see. So you don’t focus on all that kind of stuff, do you, Lady Linde?”

“I plan to become a civil servant. There’s no rush for me to fall for someone. Maybe in a decade, if I still haven’t found anyone to get interested in, I’ll start to worry a little.”

“You’re very strong-willed, Lady Linde.” Prince Helios muttered like he was surprised by it. But really, I was just saying what I thought.

Am I so strong-willed? True, in a decade, I’d probably be a bit too old to marry by society’s standards. By that time, my parents would have probably given up on the prospect. I don’t think I’d mind that.

“I wish I could be as cool and composed as you, Lady Linde.”

“Well, I wouldn’t advise taking things to my extremes. But why not shelve all that for a while and take it easy?”

“If only I could.” Prince Helios frowned, looking troubled. “Since my engagement with Seren was called off, I’ve been getting constant engagement offers from parents and approaches from other young ladies. To be honest, it’s exhausting.”

“Oh, I suppose that would be an immediate problem. I do sympathize with you.”

I’d seen it myself, at the balls and soirees. The competition for Prince Helios was extremely fierce.

Whether at evening events or the Academy, the question of who Prince Helios would choose now was often the hot topic of conversation. I'd wondered myself if Prince Helios wasn't feeling a bit stressed out by it all.

"I'd rather not think about marriage for a long while… After all, I'm too busy for all that at the moment."

I chuckled a little at the prince's effort to justify his disinterest. No doubt, he was a busy man. But it was also obvious he wasn't interested in the idea of marriage right now.

I shrugged, pointedly avoiding eye contact as I spoke next. "You don't have to think about it, do you?" I glanced up at Prince Helios, who looked confused, and cleared my throat. "No doubt the king and queen think the same. Seren said Her Majesty told her there was no need to make hasty life decisions so young."

Seren had made her decision anyway. But if Prince Helios asked for more time, I had no doubt the king and queen would not protest.

"The only ones to complain would be those desperate to take Seren's place. They're not thinking of you," I said. "They're just thinking of what THEY want. There's no need for you to worry about THEIR feelings, though, is there?"

Prince Helios's eyes widened. And then he smiled, the first real smile I'd seen from him in a while. "You're not wrong there."

"Surely, you can think about marriage and all of that once you find the right person."

"Indeed… Yes, of course." Prince Helios chuckled.

Oh good. The gloomy atmosphere of the salon seemed to have lifted.

"Ah… I feel so much better now," he said.

"Well, I'm glad."

"Thank you. I had all these confusing feelings that I couldn't even begin to unpack by myself, so I didn't feel like talking to anyone about it."

"Well, I think I more or less understand. If you'd like, I'm always available to listen," I offered.

"That would be helpful. You're very easy to talk to, Lady Linde. Maybe it's because you're so straightforward."

His cheerful smile was so different from how gloomy he'd been of late that I was a little taken aback. In fact, since we mostly

discuss work at the salon, I'm not sure I've ever seen such a smile from him before.

Prince Helios's solemnity and his sense of responsibility are to his credit, but everyone needs to take a break sometimes. No one carries a heavier burden of responsibility than the crown prince, so perhaps it can't always be avoided… But I'd like to see him smile like this more often.

"Yes, sometimes people say I speak as if I were a man," I said. "But if that makes me a good conversation partner, then I guess I'll take it."

"Well, please lend me your manly ear from time to time then, if you would."

"Certainly. Anytime."

I smiled brightly, and Prince Helios smiled back. It was a carefree smile, like the kind you might show a close friend you haven't seen in a long time.

After that, we were able to focus on our work.

There was no more heavy sighing coming from Prince Helios. No doubt what he'd said was true… Talking to me really made him feel better.



And from that day onwards, Prince Helios consulted with me from time to time.

My advice probably isn't worth much, but I made Prince Helios smile and laugh a little. So, I credited myself with being at least a little helpful.

Though he's younger than me, he'll have to shoulder the heavy responsibility of carrying the future of this nation. So I thought he really should kick back and relax now and then.

In fact, I was starting to think that it was what he needed more than anything else…

Viol 32

A Relaxed, Enjoyable Honeymoon

THE forest below was passing at an incredible speed. Of course, that was because we were hurtling through the sky in the cart flown by Seren.

“Refreshing, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it’s been a while since I’ve felt such a nice breeze.”

A month after our wedding, Seren and I finally embarked on our honeymoon.

Though Disto had ordered us both to take leave, I still had a number of important matters to attend to first. Only natural for an Archmage such as myself. I rearranged my schedule to be able to take a full week off, and finally, Seren and I were able to head off.

“It’s so convenient to be able to fly there,” I remarked.

“Yes, and now that the cart has been expanded, it’s a comfortable way to travel,” Seren replied.

“And it’s great that we can travel together, of our own accord, without worrying about anyone else.”

Yes, that was the best part.

Our destination, the village of Mincallan to the north, would usually take a week’s ride by horse and carriage. We’d need to take a detour around the forest, after all. And that’s just the distance going one way. It would take up our entire vacation just to get there. And having to travel for a whole week in a communal coach, packed into a tight space with strangers, eating shared meals, and sleeping in the same space… personally, just the thought makes me break out in stress hives.

But now it was just Seren and me, enjoying the pleasant breeze instead of being rattled around in a coach. And we could fly right over the forest. The trip to our destination would take less than a day.

When Seren said she wanted to learn to fly, I never imagined she would become so skilled at it, so at home in the air.

“I’m looking forward to seeing that beautiful sunset again.”

“Me too. We’ll be staying at a lakeside inn close to the forest. No doubt we’ll see even more beautiful scenery than last time.”

This time around, we were visiting the village where we bought our wedding rings. We didn’t have the luxury of spare time last time, but the scenery was beautiful, and the village had some delectable confectionery shops. Both Seren and I loved the place.

The artisan who made our wedding rings, Rote, is a friendly type, and it was arranged for us to order a matching hairclip for Seren on our next visit.

I’ve heard you can buy all sorts of high-quality and powerful magic stones in Mincallan. A hairclip with stones imbued with powerful protective magic would make for a special piece.

Suddenly, I sensed a strong magical energy radiating up from beneath us. I looked down and saw that we seemed to be right over the deepest part of the forest.

“What’s wrong?” Seren asked, sensing me shift.

“Nothing… I just sensed some strong magic. But then, we ARE passing over the heart of the forest.”

“Oh, right… Yes, you’re right. We ought to be right over the central part.”

“I suppose the magical energy concentrated there is so strong, it can even be felt from the sky.”

Seren and I had been to this forest many times for monster hunting, but we’d never gone past the start of the deepest part. My hunch is that there’s a huge reservoir of magical power further in, right in the heart of the forest.

“Lord Viol, can you see that area there, with the particularly lush, thick trees?”

“Yes. I can sense a strong magical power from where the treetops rise. That area might be a reservoir of great magical power.”

The deeper you go into this forest, the more powerful the magical beasts. And previously unseen plant-type beasts have also started appearing lately. The Third Mage Guild, in charge of beast subjugation, believes there’s a reservoir of magical energy deep into the forest generating these creatures. Although, that is just our hypothesis.

I narrowed my eyes and focused on where I'd felt the magical energy coming from. Then, I recoiled.

Wait a minute. I hadn't been able to stop myself from peering with curiosity, but I was on my honeymoon. I should really refrain.

"Goodness… All done looking?" Seren asked when I stopped leaning forward.

"Yeah. We can go and do some scouting in the forest when we return. Today, I want to focus on being with you and cherish our time together, Seren."

"Hehe. You're making me blush."

Seren blushed and smiled. The cutest sight imaginable. I felt an urge to reach out and touch her hair, which only made her blush even more.

Though over a month has passed since we started living together, it still feels so fresh.

When I'm in Vi form, Seren kisses and fondles me like you wouldn't believe. But when I'm in human form, she gets embarrassed.

I tried my best to keep a composed expression, though I felt like grinning whenever I looked at my blushing bride.



"OH my…! It's so beautiful!"

Seren's cheeks flushed as she sighed in admiration. It was an astonishingly beautiful sight.

We parked our cart and headed to our lodgings. Even from up in the air, we'd seen it was in an amazing location.

A large lake was on a grassy plain between the forest and the village, its surface sparkling with reflected sunlight. By the shore of the lake was a many-storied inn with bright white walls and contrastingly pitch-black pillars and window frames. The reflection of the inn on the lake was a stunning sight to behold as well.

What appeared to be a cowshed was next door, with cows grazing within the spacious compound. It was a fairly major-scale inn, it seemed.

"Lord Viol! Cows! Grazing cows!"

"Yes. This place seems very well set out."

“I’ve never in my life seen grazing cows before!”

Seren looked excited, just like a child. I was born in the sticks, so I was used to seeing cows wandering about. For me, it wasn’t anything out of the ordinary. But no doubt, it seemed novel to Seren. Horses trotted around the palace and city, of course, but perhaps Seren had never really seen cows in the flesh before.

“They seem to be raising the livestock themselves. I expect we can get fresh milk and cheese here. If you ask nicely, you might even get a milking demonstration,” I suggested.

“…! M-Maybe I WILL ask!”

Seren gulped with excitement. Yes, she’d certainly ask. I was pleased to see how much she was enjoying herself already.

“There seem to be some chickens in the back as well?”

“There does… So, the eggs are homegrown, too. I can’t wait to see what the food is like here.”

“Amazing…”

Seren seemed taken aback by the little farm ecosystem set up here. With that lake right there, I bet the fish were local as well. No waste. Wonderful.

“But, with it being so close to the forest, I wonder about attacks from magical beasts,” I pondered.

Thinking about things like that comes with the job I do. And in fact, the grasslands near the forest back in the royal capital are prime hunting grounds for magical beasts. So, it’s only natural to assume that the local beasts would come out of the nearby forest to hunt for food.

“That’s true. Maybe you should ask the people at the inn about it,” Seren said.

“Right. I should. Either way, we’ll be staying here for a while. I’ll be able to observe for myself.”

“Hehe, that’s true. Let’s take it easy and enjoy ourselves.”

“Absolutely.”

We exchanged grins.

We’ve both been working hard. We deserve to kick back and enjoy this trip. We decided to spend the entirety of the first day just lazing around at the inn.

Planning to enjoy a relaxing trip at our own pace, we slowly pushed open the inn’s front doors.



“LORD VIOL! Lord Viol! Come and see this!”

“What is it?”

After parking our cart at the inn and venturing into the nearby village, Seren stopped in front of one of the shops, her eyes sparkling.

We had grabbed some shortbread cookies from the village’s general store before we settled into our room. But Seren had immediately spotted something else of interest.

“Remember those desserts you said you like? They have some more different varieties!”

“Say what?!” I had to dash over. “Wow…!”

There were more varieties available than last time.

When we last came, they had two varieties of crunchy shortbread, plain and mixed nuts. The nuts were gathered from an area near the village, apparently. And such a rich, buttery aroma. No doubt the local milk and eggs were involved.

But THIS time, there were even more flavors. Shortbread with whipped cream mixed in. Dry fruits. Sugar-frosted. All kinds of options!

“Ah! It’s you two again!”

The perky shopkeeper greeted us with a huge grin. Apparently, she remembered us. We’d been to the village several times to discuss the rings with Rote. And on each occasion, we’d stocked up on cookies.

“I’ve been hoping you’d stop by! You know, each time you shop here, I hear you remark about what kinds of flavors you thought would be good, and well… I did some experimental baking, and when I put out what I’d made for sale, they flew off the shelves! I wanted to offer you some as a thank you!”

“Goodness, really?”

“Absolutely! Look, you can have a bag of each variety. Try them and tell me what you think, okay?”

“Oh… Well then, let us…”

“No, no, no payment! Thanks to you two, I’ve been making bank on my cookies recently!”

“But…”

“Seren, let’s accept graciously.”

“But Lord Viol…”

I quickly stopped a fretful-looking Seren from protesting. Back at the Magic Academy, Borden taught me that sometimes it was more polite to graciously take people up on their offers of hospitality.

I thanked the landlady with an embarrassed smile. “Thank you, that’s wonderful. We already love the original shortbread. I can’t wait to try out these new flavors.”

The shopkeeper looked at me in surprise. “Goodness, when you smile, you look even more manly and handsome. Your wife must have her work cut out for her.”

Seren blushed right along with me and nodded her head hard. I understood that the shopkeeper had complimented my looks, but why would that mean more work for Seren?

“I’m just happy my cookies will be eaten by a couple with such appreciation for my baking! I do hope you’ll continue to frequent our shop.”

“Oh, yes…! Well, this time, we’ll be staying in town for a bit. We’ll certainly be back to buy more!”

Seren accepted a bag of each new variety from the shopkeeper, exclaiming with delight. Indeed, we both like this shop’s shortbread so much that I can’t imagine us ever growing tired of it. We’d definitely be back to buy more.

After exchanging a few more pleasantries, we left the shop.

Seren and that shopkeeper hit it off and enjoyed their interaction to a mutual degree. In fact, while courting Seren, I’d noticed that older people seemed to take an instant shine to her. Perhaps it was her earnestness, her humility, that endeared her to them.

On the way back to the inn, I was charmed to see how excited Seren seemed by everything.

A village like this isn’t exactly the kind of place modern young ladies would get excited over. But, typical of Seren and her temperament, she seemed to be having a whale of a time.

This village, due to its location close to the vast Kichul forest, is known for its production of magic stones, colored gems, and various types of ore. The locals are almost all artisans, blacksmiths, or craftspeople of some type or other.

Many merchants travel here to buy wares, but since it's about a week's carriage journey from the royal capital, the village doesn't get too many casual sightseers.

As a result, the local restaurants all serve only cheap, filling fare that men seem to prefer, with a wide selection of alcohol. The only desserts are those baked in-store, like at the general goods store earlier. The village has a real old-school charm to it, I think.

"You look like you're having a lot of fun," I remarked.

"I certainly am!" Seren grinned back at me. Yes, she was having a great time. "Well, we got our shortbread, so I guess it's back to the inn by the lake, right?"

"That's right."

"The sunset here was beautiful last time we came. I can't wait to see it again tonight."

"It certainly was stunning. Those streaks of red and purple."

"Right! And won't it be even more beautiful reflected on the lake's surface...?" Seren giggled. "Just being able to visit here again with you, Lord Viol... I am so happy."

"Oh, Seren..."

What else could I say to something like that other than "I adore you?" Since we married, Seren has become more and more direct with her feelings and is constantly flustering me with delight.

"It's almost time for the sunset. Perfect timing for us to return to the inn."

"Indeed. I hope the sunset will be a beautiful one today, too."

It was getting darker out as we chatted. With the setting of the sun, the sky seemed to change from moment to moment at surprising speeds.

"Let's hurry a bit. The sunset will look more beautiful by the lake."

"...Right! It would be such a shame to miss it."

We quickened our pace a little, and soon, the inn and the lake came into view. The sky was just starting to take on a faint red hue. We sat together on a bench by the lake and looked up at the sky, which was still rapidly changing color.

The blue of the sky gradually darkened, changing to a transparent purple. The clouds dotted here and there provided

different-colored purple patches, changing shape as the wind blew them across the sky.

As time passed, the purple turned to dark indigo, then navy blue, with streaks of gold.

“It’s… Just so beautiful,” I commented.

“It is…”

Soon, the sky was lit up with gold. The surface of the lake sparkled with gold. Even Seren’s face was golden. Seeing Seren gazing up at the sky, captivated… It was almost magical.

I savored this joyful moment, being able to watch this amazing sunset with Seren as my wife.

The sunset was still changing up its colors, minute by minute. Gold mingled with orange, then turned to a fiery red, then the brightness disappeared, and deep darkness descended.

The lake changed colors, too, right along with the sky. The forest grew dark. I watched Seren’s side profile as she raptly followed the progression of the sunset, gazing intently at the sky.

I felt so moved, seeing her this way.

Then we were surrounded by darkness, only the moonlight and the light of the inn left to illuminate the surroundings. In the dark, it was hard to make out Seren’s features now as she turned towards me.

“That was so beautiful.”

“Yeah.”

Seren smiled. The light of the inn was just enough for me to make out Seren’s pale cheeks taking on a pink hue in the darkness.

“I was completely captivated.”

“Yes. But look, it’s gone pitch black without us even realizing it.”

After chuckling, for some reason, Seren stared at me intently.

“Hm…? What is it?”

“I’m so happy.”

“I can see why. You were looking forward to that sunset.”

I nodded, and Seren smiled again.

“The sunset WAS beautiful… But more than that, I was thinking about how lucky I am to be married to someone like you. Someone to enjoy such a wonderful sunset with.” Seren chuckled, and I felt a warm fuzziness envelop me.

Seren and I had barely spoken… We'd just silently enjoyed the changing scenery together until the sunset was all finished. Honestly, I was surprised by how much of an enjoyable experience it had been.

"I have to admit, this is the first time I've ever taken the time to enjoy the changing colors of the sky. I never thought it could be so beautiful," I confessed.

"Actually, me neither."

"You neither, Seren?"

"Nope. Until now, I've always been short on time, always in such a rush. It's moving to think how much beauty there is in the world to appreciate if we only take a little time to stop and take it all in."

"I see…"

That reminded me of when Seren was learning how to control her wind magic. How she learned to observe the motion of the wind in a swirl of dust, how she realized that the world is so full of discoveries to be made, accessible simply by changing the way one looks at things.

And I felt a rush of sympathy for her, the owner of this gentle heart, who could be so moved by things like a gentle breeze or a sunset but who had never had the time to notice such things until now due to a punishing schedule.

"You've been too busy up until now, Seren. From here on out, you should take your time and do more things you enjoy… Being a High Mage is tough work, yes, but we have an ample supply of annual leave."

But I still felt a little regretful, even as I tried to reassure her. For a while now, I've been troubled by the grueling work that comes as standard with being a High Mage. For Seren and the other guild members, I'd like to do something to improve the situation.

"Oh, yes. But actually, I already have much more free time these days," she said.

"…You do?"

"When I was in princess consort training, I studied day and night with almost zero free time. Looking back now, I can see that I was pushing myself beyond my limits out of a sense of obligation."

Seren smiled self-deprecatingly, and I felt guilty. The beautiful sunset had moved her so, and here I was, reminding her of things that didn't need to be dredged back up.

"Well, anyway, you should try not to overdo things from now on," I stressed. "Developing new magic and magical devices, guarding the wall… These are things we cannot do alone. You need to borrow the strength of others and find ways to work as efficiently as you can."

"Right."

"You're good at timesaving, aren't you, Seren? I mean, take today. We flew a route that would normally take a week in just a half day, and as a result, we could relax and enjoy that gorgeous sunset."

"Yes, you're right." Seren giggled, and relief washed over me.

"Really, thanks to you, watching that sunset just now was an amazing experience," I said.

"Yes. It was kind of out-of-this-world." Seren smiled again, no doubt reliving the sunset.

"Yes, the sunset was beautiful… But to be honest with you, I think I spent more time gazing at you as you watched the sunset…"

My confession made Seren blush instantly, so much so that I could see it even in the dark.

How adorable.

I leaned in and kissed her, unable to resist. She responded eagerly, and it melted my heart all over again.

Though we were outdoors and in public, I felt like I could absolutely steal a quick kiss in darkness like this.

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"LORD Viol! Lord Viol!"

"What is it?"

Since we arrived, Seren keeps drawing my attention to things in this excitable way. But it's adorable. I don't mind at all.

Smiling to myself, I went to join her and realized that the chickens that'd been out back yesterday had come out onto the

lawn and were now so close we could almost pet them. Several small, yellow, fluffy birds were chirping away there, too.

“Chicks… Look, chicks!”

“Oh, yes, I see them.”

“Adorable!!!”

It certainly was very cute, the way the chicks hopped around unsteadily in their parents’ tracks.

No doubt this was the first time Seren had ever seen an actual chick. She was gazing at them with a smile in her eyes and color on her cheeks. Odd how she was gazing at the chicks with such adoration but didn’t stoop to pet them.

Looking around, I spotted the innkeeper working in the nearby cowshed. I slipped away from Seren’s side and approached him.

“Excuse me, my wife has taken quite a shine to your chicks. Would it be all right if she petted them?”

“Oh, well, certainly… Where is your wife?”

The innkeeper strode over to Seren and the chicks, with me hurrying after him. Our arrival startled the chicks a little and made them scatter. But they soon came back and began calmly pecking for food again. Seizing the opportunity, the innkeeper scooped up one of the chicks in the blink of an eye.

“Oh my…!”

Seren’s eyes widened in surprise. The innkeeper smiled indulgently at her. The tiny chick looked somehow tinier in the strong, tough hands of the innkeeper. It was oddly amusing.

“Here, miss. Hold out your hand.”

“Like this?” Seren thrust out her hands, and the little chick plopped into her snowy-white palms.

The innkeeper watched as Seren cooed over the fluffy yellow thing in her hands, a satisfied smile on his face. Then he winked at me.

“It’s tough to catch chicks; there’s a knack to it beginners don’t know. Well, when you’ve had enough, just put it back where it came from.” That said, he gave me a light pat on the shoulder and then strode back over to his cowshed. An efficient fellow indeed.

“Thank you.” I remembered my manners and called out my thanks to the man, who raised one hand casually.

“Wonderful…! It’s a real, live chick!”

Seren’s voice was trembly with emotion. I looked at her... And saw that her hands were trembling as well, the chick cupped in them. Her eyes sparkled with delight.



“What do I do? It’s moving in my hands!”

Though Seren looked somewhat panicked, she was smiling, and it was clear she’d fallen completely in love with the little creature. Her hands continued to tremble as she cupped the little chick, careful not to drop or squeeze it too hard. She was absolutely delighted but also absolutely flustered at the same time.

“Here.” I held out my hands, and Seren nodded, depositing the chick in my open palms. The chick settled down and began to doze off.

“Wow… It looks so content.”

Seren looked at the chick, then at me, her mouth agape. I lifted my hands, still cupping the chick, so that Seren could see that the chick’s legs and feet were poking out between my fingers.

“If you hold the chick like this, with its legs between your hands, it feels safe and won’t move around. See?”

“You’re holding it so lightly, but it’s not trying to get away at all…”

“Do you want to try it?”

“…I… I want to, but I don’t want to tire it out. I’ll have another try again later.”

“I see. Well then, when you let it go, make sure you bring it close to the ground first and then release it gently.”

“Lord Viol, you seem to know a lot about chicks…?”

“Oh, my neighbors kept chickens. When I was a kid, I used to handle them like this all the time.”

“How surprising!”

Was it, though? Seren had been to my family home. I’d always thought it was pretty rural.

“Hehe, this is kinda nice.” Seren started giggling.

“Hmm? What is?”

“I’m looking forward to getting to know more about this unexpected side of you, Lord Viol.”

My word, was there any limit to her cuteness?

Seren 36

Having Fun Our Way

THANKS to Lord Viol encouraging me to pet the chicks that morning, I felt relaxed and soothed.

Last night, we got to enjoy that gorgeous sunset as well. And just being with Lord Viol, just us two, here at the inn… This trip has been so much fun since the first day.

I can't possibly take a long vacation right after I became a High Mage… That's what I thought. But now that we're here, on this trip together, I'm really glad we came.

"You seem to be in a good mood."

I felt a little embarrassed when Lord Viol pointed it out. Am I so easy to read?

"I'm in a good mood because I'm here, spending time with you, Lord Viol."

I went for earnest, and Lord Viol responded with a happy smile. Even our little chats like this filled me with joy. And I'm in an especially good mood right now because we're on our way to see the artisan Rote, just like we planned.

"Hmm? What is it?" Lord Viol caught me sneaking a look at the shining robe clasp on his chest.

"Ah, nothing… I was just thinking how lovely that piece is."

It was the gift I'd given to Lord Viol to commemorate slaying my first magical beast. The clasp shining away on Lord Viol's chest had an intricate design depicting the moon and stars inside a circle, with stars dangling on delicate chains from the main piece. It really was lovely. We both loved the piece so much that we asked Rote to make our wedding rings as well.

I smiled down at the silver ring shining away on my finger. The intricately carved fretwork depicted tiny flowers intertwined around the moon. It seemed to symbolize all the happiness that awaited us in the future.

"…Hmm? Oh, my clasp?" Lord Viol looked down at his clasp.

“Yes. I love how the stars sway back and forth with every step you take, Lord Viol. It makes me happy just to watch them.”

“I see. Then, should we ask for that again when we put our order in today?”

Just thinking of potential designs was so wonderful! And we would soon have even more matching items between us.

Thinking of Lord Viol’s black hair being tied back with a silver hair accessory with silver stars dangling from it… I couldn’t stop myself from getting all excited.

Even I could tell that my steps had grown light and bouncy.

“I see. So, Viol, you want a hair cuff, and Seren, you want a barrette. Both in matching designs with stars like the ones on that clasp,” Rote repeated our order.

“Exactly,” Lord Viol said.

“And, you want silver again this time, too?”

“Yep,” I said.

Our meeting with Rote was going swimmingly. It seems when someone is passionate about their craft, they have this knack of picking up exactly what their clients want, and they make sure to get all the little details just right. I notice the same trait when speaking to magical device engineers, too.

“And what about the design? Your wedding rings were all about moons and flowers, right?” Rote asked.

“Yes, we already made up our minds before coming. Both Seren and I love the design of our wedding rings. We want to continue along those lines.”

“Well, I’m delighted to hear that.” Rote looked up at us and grinned. Then he got up from his seat and returned carrying something from his workbench. “Since you both like my work, I was wondering… Would you like to take a look at this?”

“Wow…” Lord Viol said. “There’s no framing around it; it’s all open carving… It looks so delicate.”

“It does. It looks so light. I love this style,” I agreed.

“Aha, I thought you might like it.” Rote smiled, looking pleased. “I made this to see what it would look like without the frame, and it looks pretty good, don’t you think?”

When Viol and I nodded vigorously, Rote smoothly sketched a design. “Well then, how about something like this?”

The design had flowers and ivy around a crescent moon, in the same style as our wedding rings. But there was no outer frame around the flowers and the ivy, which made it look lighter and more modern somehow, a totally new design.

And, as requested, a star was dangling on a thin chain from the bottom of the crescent moon, making it look even more elegant. The design was so wonderful that Lord Viol and I both fell in love with it at first sight.

“Wonderful…” I said in awe.

“Agreed… It’s really nice,” Lord Viol agreed.

“I’m glad you like it.”

“You’re always trying out new designs, aren’t you, Rote?” Lord Viol’s voice was filled with admiration.

Rote chuckled. “Well, you know how it is. I get bored of making the same things over and over again. Being able to use a variety of techniques in my work broadens my catalog and pleases my customers like you.”

“I see. So you’re having fun and improving your craft at the same time. We’ll certainly continue to make orders from you for a long time. Right, Seren?” Lord Viol said, turning to me, and I nodded emphatically.

Rote beamed. I knew Lord Viol and I would always look forward to his new designs with anticipation.

“Okay then, I think I can deliver the finished design in about a month. If you want to see the progress along the way, just visit me again, and I’ll incorporate any small changes you might want me to make.”

“Oh, no, we trust your vision,” Lord Viol said. “I can’t wait to wear it.”

“Thank you. Ah, Viol, you’re good at giving compliments, aren’t you?” Rote said.

“You’re the first person to say that.” Lord Viol looked like he didn’t understand how that could be, but I was in total agreement with Rote. Lord Viol is earnest and generous with his compliments when genuinely impressed by something.

“Well, I’ll do my best to meet your expectations,” Rote promised.

“We look forward to it.”

“Thank you very much!” I said.

With those words, we left Rote's workshop. In just one month, we'd be taking ownership of some beautiful hair accessories, far more gorgeous than even the initial designs had indicated.

"The consultation ended sooner than I thought it would," Lord Viol said.

"Yes, it really did. It's odd, isn't it? People who are passionate about their work, like Rote, never waste time with lengthy consultations, yet the finished products are always so impressive."

"Indeed. But what should we do with this extra time we have?" Lord Viol chewed his lip thoughtfully. Mincallan wasn't the biggest of villages, so we might not have all that many choices.

I'd be fine just sitting side by side like we did yesterday, taking in the lakeside scenery. But perhaps Lord Viol would find that boring.

After thinking for a moment, I spoke up. "We could visit the shops and workshops… Or maybe we could take a walk in the forest near the inn."

"In the… forest?"

"Yes… You're curious about what's in there, right, Lord Viol?" I turned to Lord Viol, whose eyes were shining with curiosity. "You said something about wondering if monsters from the forest ever came into the village… And then we heard that there was a barrier around the inn. Don't you want to know more about that barrier…?"

The people at the inn had told us there was some kind of barrier in place to protect the inn, although they didn't know much about it. Lord Viol seemed to have been silently pondering that barrier for a while. No doubt, he'd love to find out more for himself.

"…Can we go and… take a look?" he asked.

"Of course! You and I haven't gone forest-venturing for a while! I'd love to!" I gave him a big smile to reassure him.

Our original plan had been to kick back, take it easy, and not follow any kind of fixed itinerary. Except for ordering hair accessories from Rote, of course. But now, Lord Viol and I had free time on our hands. Why not follow a whim and see where it leads us? After all, we were on vacation.

"And it's not like we have any other plans in place. Why not go where the mood takes us?" When I said that, Lord Viol smiled

softly at me.

“Right. You’re exactly right, Seren.”

“Incidentally, since we have the cart and all, I thought it might be fun to ride it to another town a little farther afield and go around its confectionery shops!”

I made it sound like it was just a passing thought, but I’d been training hard at my flying even before we set out and thinking about a confectionery tour since yesterday when we flew over the forest. Lord Viol and I ought to enjoy ourselves. After all, this was our honeymoon.

“That sounds wonderful to me…! And you know, a lot of traveling merchants are staying in this village. We could ask them what kinds of sweets are only available in this region,” Lord Viol suggested.

“Oh, yes! We might get some tasty info that way!”

“Today, we have plenty of time to take a stroll through the forest and then gather information from the merchants at the inn at night.”

“Let’s do that! …Oh, but is there anywhere else you’d like to go to, Lord Viol?”

“Yes, there’s one more place. That is, if you’d be interested, Seren.”

“Well, where is it?”

“Apparently, Borden’s lands are not far from this village. He told me he has a huge library in his mansion, with quite a few rare books on magic. I thought you might like to see them, so I had Borden write me a letter of introduction.”

“Magic books…?! I’d love to go!” I exclaimed.

“Good. I was wondering what kind of thing would please you… But I’m not the best at this sort of thing, and the books were all I could come up with. If you’re pleased, though, that’s all I could ever hope for.”

Just knowing that Lord Viol had thought of me made me incredibly happy, and I couldn’t stop the smile from spreading across my face.

“Hehehe. Looks like we won’t be getting bored on this trip!”

“Oh! I forgot. One of our main objectives was to take things easy.”

“No, no, let’s go. It would be a waste otherwise! Anyway, we took it easy yesterday. I feel mentally refreshed. I’m dying to sample some regional sweets and pore over magical tomes!”

“Me too.”

“By the way, I can’t wait to see your reaction when we have those sweets and when we see those magic books.”

“Wait, that’s my line.”

Chuckling together, we returned to the inn. We would eat lunch, then hop on the cart and head out to explore the forest. That was the plan we came up with.



AFTER enjoying some sauteed fish just caught in the lake, we immediately took to our cart and headed together to the forest. As we floated gently over the forest, we both sensed something that seemed to be tugging us back.

“It’s a barrier,” Lord Viol noted.

“Yes, I thought so too… I feel like something’s weighing on us.”

“Your magical perception has heightened, Seren.”

The unexpected praise filled me with happiness. Detecting magical energy has been a weakness of mine. I’d be pleased if I’ve improved at that, even if only a little.

“Seren, can we go a little higher?”

“Yes, of course.”

We rose higher, and Lord Viol turned his head to gaze out over the village.

“Seren, I want to get a feel for the barrier’s boundaries. Could you please fly in a zigzag pattern toward that mountain?”

“Roger!”

“It’s stronger over there… A little more to the left.”

As I flew where he directed me, I realized that the barrier existed to separate the forest from the village. And it seemed like Lord Viol had even sniffed out the source of the barrier’s magic.

“One on this side… Another on this side… With the barrier cast in between those two magical devices.”

“That’s a very handy tool,” I said.

“Yeah… Seren, could you set us down here?”

Following Lord Viol’s instructions, I took us down into the forest to the exact spot he wanted. Eventually, we discovered a magical barrier device wedged into a rock.

Lord Viol examined the device without handling it since doing so would disturb the barrier. He nodded as though confirming his suspicions. “It appears to have been made by the Third Mage Guild before I joined. It was probably made by Old Man Euleho himself. If we ask him, I’m sure he’ll be able to tell us more about its construction and the history behind it.”

“Oh, how fascinating.”

“The composition is quite simple. One magic stone seals the barrier in place, and five magic stones strengthen it.”

“Five reinforcements is a lot.”

“You need this much to protect an area this large. But you’re right, it is a lot. The magic stones used to cast this barrier are among some of the largest I’ve ever seen. It must have taken quite some work to procure them.”

“An amazing magical device, indeed. But it’s odd that the barrier starts here, quite deep in the forest, instead of between the forest and village,” I observed.

“Odd, indeed… Shall we take a look around the forest?”

“Let’s. I’m a little curious about what’s in here.”

“Then please cast a protective wall around yourself. I’ll cast a barrier around us both, too.”

“We haven’t done this together for a while, have we?!”

I found myself getting excited. Even casting protective walls seemed like a thrill. It made me think of happy times monster-hunting in the forest with Lord Viol.

“I think it’ll be all right, but let’s first check that the barrier is functional.”

“Okay!”

I was on board with Lord Viol’s level of caution. I certainly wasn’t here to stick my neck out. I proceeded with a flight path that was as safe as possible. Flying through the forest led to many more discoveries than simply flying over it.

The forest had seen human intervention at some point. The sunlight filtering through the trees was stunning. For a forest, it

was surprisingly bright and cheerful inside, and even somewhat tranquil and relaxing.

Perhaps because of the sunlight, there were many wild strawberries and fruit-bearing shrubs and flowers in bloom here and there. It was pleasant to fly slowly through such a beautiful forest with Lord Viol.

As we went deeper into the forest, the trees became denser and darker, and we began to see more mushrooms, moss, ferns, and the like. Markings on the trees here and there were signs that someone had been by.

After flying for quite some distance, I was surprised to see a large cliff with caves that seemed to cut through the forest.

“From what we’ve seen, I think we can guess that the range of the barrier has been cast to afford the villagers to enjoy what the forest has to offer, to a certain extent,” Lord Viol noted.

“It seems that way. There are signs that people have been here, and then there’s the small spring and those caves… You could definitely camp out here.”

“The caves… Those might be mines, you know, where colored gems can be found.”

“Oh, wow…!”

“I still have some things I’d like to confirm… Would you be up for exploring beyond the confines of the boundary line? Of course, I’ll make sure you’re safe, Seren.”

“I would absolutely love to…!”

Could there be any more reassuring words?

I have defeated a mid-level magical beast before, but that was just to qualify for the exam. I don’t have much combat experience overall, and I haven’t even been monster-hunting in quite a while. I seriously doubted I’d be able to face off calmly against any beasts, unlike Lord Viol. So it was reassuring to have him with me.

“When we were flying to the village, we spotted that dense area of trees, right? And I said there might be a reservoir of magical power there, remember?”

“Oh, yes.”

“This village is quite close to that magical center. Not like the capital. This is just my guess, but based on the proximity, I’d say

there’s a high possibility of mid-level magical beasts living just beyond the barrier’s perimeter. We should proceed with caution.”

In an instant, my body tensed up.

Beyond the barrier, we might find a habitat for mid-level magical beasts. The thought was terrifying. Perhaps that was why the barrier was constructed… to cordon off this dangerous area, where mid-level magical beasts could lurk, ready to attack the village at any time.

“Okay. Let’s go.”

“…All right.”

I took a deep breath to steady myself, then slowly urged the cart forward. I was the one driving. I had to be careful to stay in full control. Or, so I kept reminding myself.

We passed through the boundary line, deeper into the forest.

At once, the atmosphere in the forest was so different that even I could feel it. There was tension in the air, as if the magical energy was denser here, and I could sense powerful magical beasts prowling nearby.

“I think we’ve reached the heart of the forest,” I said. “To think such a wild place exists so close to the village.”

“Indeed. Without the barrier, they’d be cooked. Before the barrier was set up, they must have dealt with great danger on a daily basis.”

Just thinking there had once been such a terrifying time made my heart sink.

Here I was, with protective barriers and magic to fight with, and I was still frightened of even low-level magical beasts. I couldn’t help but feel sorry for the women and children who had no way to fight back and had to live in such a dangerous environment. I was glad that the magical barrier had eventually been set in place.

“Seren.”

I heard the tension in Lord Viol’s voice, and a wave of nervousness washed over me.

He was warning me of a magical beast, no doubt.

I reinforced my protective wall around myself, and I could feel the magical energy of the beast make my skin prickle. The prickle soon escalated to a constant humming pain.

Then there was an air-ripping roar.

I was afraid.

“A mid-level beast, incoming.”

A mid-level one!

Sensing the presence of a magical beast after so long… I felt overwhelmed by my fear.

“Escape skywards!” Lord Viol ordered.

“…Roger!”

I automatically took us higher, just as a golden-colored magical beast pounced onto the spot where we’d just been hovering.

GROAAAR…!

It roared in displeasure over its thwarted attempt to kill, then shook its head angrily, its golden mane swaying spectacularly.

“I’ll take it out.”

Lord Viol wasted no time unleashing his magic. He shot out blades of wind, one after another, which slammed into the golden beast’s throat. Multiple blades converged on one small area, slicing through the beast’s windpipe and taking away its last breath, with almost no other damage inflicted. It was an amazingly efficient attack.

The beast collapsed with a thunderous rumble. It was an abrupt end that happened all in an instant.

“Amazing! Wind Cutter, in a pinpoint attack…!”

“Mid-level and higher beasts have tough outer hides, so this is the fastest and most effective method,” he explained. “Wind Cutter is useful for beast hunting, but it does a lot of damage, which can be kind of gruesome. A pinpoint attack is less… splashy.”

He was right.

“I certainly learned something today!”

Lord Viol looked at me, chewing his lip. “This wasn’t quite what I had in mind for our honeymoon…”

“Oh… Right. But you know, Lord Viol… The ease with which you dispatch mid-level beasts is impressive… It kinda makes me a little jealous.”

“You flatter me. Anyway, I’ve got years of experience on you. Still, if you learned something, I hope you’ll make good use of it if the opportunity ever arises.”

“Absolutely!” I nodded enthusiastically, and Lord Viol smiled wryly.

“This has turned into a lesson, hasn’t it? I could cast a powerful stealth spell to avoid us having to get into it with any other magical beasts…”

“You mean we can use stealth magic to bypass them completely?”

“To a certain extent. However, more powerful magical beasts have a keen sense of smell, so there is a chance they may notice us. I don’t want to put you in any danger on our honeymoon. This isn’t the time for hard training, after all.”

“Hmm, you’re right.” I wanted to explore a bit more, but what Lord Viol said was true. “I think we’d better head back.”

“Right. But, ah… Could you wait just a minute?” he asked.

“Sure. But why?”

“That magical beast is quite high-ranking, even among mid-level beasts. It might have dropped a high-quality magic stone. I’d like to try to get one while we’re here.”

“A magic stone…! I read that only very high-ranking magical beasts drop magic stones useful to humans… That beast must be very high-ranking indeed!” My excitement crept into my voice.

“It MIGHT have dropped one. I can’t say for sure unless I look.”

“That amazing golden mane… And it looked really strong. Though you defeated it so quickly, Lord Viol, it was hard to see how strong it really might have been.”

As we talked, Lord Viol cut open the beast’s heart and removed a sparkling red magic stone.

“This is quite special.” Lord Viol looked pleased, which was adorable to see.

The magic stone in his hand radiated a good deal of magical power. How surprising to find such a splendid specimen of a magic stone.

“You said that that beast was mid-level, right? And yet…it had such a magnificent magic stone inside it. Now I wonder how amazing high-level beasts must be,” I mused.

“It’s not easy to defeat them, though. And anyway, not all monsters drop powerful magic stones. The amount of magic

power within them varies depending on the species, and even within a species, as well."

"I see."

I almost said, "I certainly learned something today!" again, but stopped myself.

"Whoops, the sun's going down," he said. "Let's get out of this forest before it gets dark."

I looked up at the sky through the gaps in the trees and noticed the sky was stained lightly with red.

I didn't like the idea of flying at night through a forest populated by mid-level magical beasts, either. I took our cart skywards, high above the forest. Glancing down, I saw that we were still quite a ways away from the area where the magical energy seemed to be concentrated.

My heart raced at the thought that even more powerful magical beasts might be there.

"Well then, let's head back."

We picked up speed and headed back towards the village.

Lord Viol hugged me tightly from behind, nuzzling my neck. "My apologies. I dragged you on quite a journey today."

His husky whisper surprised me.

"Don't apologize! The forest was so beautiful and soothing, and then there was that thrilling encounter...! It's been a while for that sort of thing. I had fun."

"But it wasn't very honeymooney, was it? I'm sorry."

I really did have fun. Absolutely no complaints here. And having Lord Viol hug me from behind like this was more than okay with me.

Then, suddenly, I remembered something.

"Lord Viol?"

"Yes?"

"Maybe there is one thing you could do... A bit of a selfish request of mine..."

"What is it? Not that it matters. I'm always willing to indulge any request of yours, Seren, no matter how 'selfish...' In fact, I absolutely must insist on hearing it now."

"Hehe, well, good. Okay then, I suppose I'll let you indulge me, Lord Viol...!"

"Indulge..."

“Yes. I want to return to the inn and watch the sunset together… Holding nothing back… The ultimate indulgence.”

Ever since I was a child, I’ve been worrying about holding myself in check, and I’m not the best at relying on others to indulge my wishes. But what I want now is for Lord Viol to give me his smiles, his gentle touch, his embrace, and… maybe even his kiss.

“That’s what I want, too. Now we’re married… Or what I mean is… I’d like to indulge you as much as you want, whenever you want…”

“Right, but… At home, the servants are there… And even when it’s just us in the room, I feel embarrassed…”

“I can kind of understand that. It’s a bit embarrassing, that’s for sure.”

We arrived back at the inn before we were done talking. Once we entered our room, the afternoon sun was already pouring in through the window.

“The sunset is already starting…!”

“Yes… Beautiful colors.”

“It’s going to be a beautiful sunset tonight, too…”

I leaned out of the open window, and a fresh breeze blew in. My half-up hair swayed in the wind, and it felt so good. Like being enveloped by the sunset. Then, I felt a warm touch on my back.

“Lord Viol…”

Lord Viol was with me, gazing at the sunset from the same window as me. We both watched the sunset, which was redder than yesterday. Never once growing tired of it.

“It’s very beautiful today too.”

“Yes. No matter how many years pass, I’m sure we’ll remember the sunset we experienced together tonight.”

“That’s… wonderful, isn’t it?”

“I agree. And the sunset reflected on the lake’s surface is beautiful in a whole different way when viewed from above.”

Yes… From our vantage point in the special suite on the third floor, the lake below shone like an orange mirror, reflecting the setting sun. As it got darker and the outlines blurred together, Lord Viol and I continued to gaze out at it.

I loved these quiet moments together.

We looked out over the lake until it got dark, then had dinner and our baths… After that, there was nothing else to do but relax. The only entertainment in the village at night was drinking at the bar. And outside, it was all pitch dark, save for the moonlight. A quiet night, where the only sound was the chirping of insects.

Sitting on the large, fluffy bed, drying each other's hair with wind magic… I was soaking up every joyful moment.

"There, it's nice and dry now."

"Your wind magic is warm, Lord Viol!"

"I mixed in a little fire magic."

"…I keep noticing the discrepancy in our skill levels…" I pouted.

"Well, it can't be helped."

"I'd like to become adept at fire magic, too…"

"All you can do is keep working hard."

It was a frank reply, typical of Lord Viol, without baseless promises or flattery.

"By the way, Seren… Didn't you want to be indulged?"

"I feel like I'm already being indulged quite a bit."

"Really? But you haven't made any demands or anything."

Now that he mentioned it… I hadn't. But for me, it was enough to be with Lord Viol. However, since it was such a special opportunity, it might be a waste not to make a request different from the usual.

After I thought about it for a while, Lord Viol smiled gently and opened his arms to me. "Anything is fine."

"…!"

From the look on Lord Viol's face, he really meant *anything*. My heart pounded. I swallowed hard and looked up at him.

"Maybe you could… cradle my head in your lap?" I ventured.

"All right… Although I'm not sure it will be very comfortable."

"I think it would feel wonderful if you petted me like a cat."

"I see. So, like a cat and its owner, right? I can do that." Lord Viol nodded with an understanding expression. "Come," he whispered, patting his knees, and I happily lay my head on his lap.

Okay, it was a little bony, but I was also pretty sure no other human alive had ever been able to lay their head on Lord Viol's lap. It made me feel special.

I closed my eyes and waited for the petting when I heard a chuckle from above, and a large hand gently stroked my head. The warm hand moved slowly, fingers gently dragging through my blow-dried hair.

I was so blessed to be with such a kind man.

When I opened my eyes, Lord Viol was gazing at me with his obsidian eyes. His eyes and face were so beautiful that I instinctively reached out my hand.

“I wish I could be a cat too.”

Out of a desire for even more physical affection, I blurted that out, and Lord Viol smiled softly.

“Really? But I’d much rather you remained Seren.” Lord Viol caressed my cheek lovingly and lowered his face to mine.

I closed my eyes and gave myself over to my beloved’s kiss.

Viol 33

Do You Want to Be Indulged?

OUR relaxing honeymoon was over before we knew it.

We hadn't even originally planned to take a honeymoon. But after arriving at the inn, we had so much fun that time flew by. We accomplished our initial goal of ordering matching hair accessories, and after that, we flew around in the cart, letting our whims guide us. We had all kinds of experiences.

In the forest, I saw a magical barrier device from a bygone era… Something I've never seen before. And at the inn, we got to pet some chicks, milk some cows, and even do some fishing.

And, we went to Borden's demesne and locked ourselves up in the library, poring over books to our heart's content. Oh, and when we had a spare moment, we went all around the neighboring villages and towns, sampling all kinds of new confectionery.

Our trip was full of new magic, magical disciplines, and local sweets made from local ingredients. A fun and fruitful trip that was completely and totally "us." And, throughout the whole trip, Seren was way more affectionate than ever. It inspired me to be a lot more touchy-feely than I'm used to, too.

I mean, it's not like I was withholding affection beforehand or anything, but I was indulging her on a whole other level on this trip.

Like Seren said, she'd lived her life holding back and thinking of others. Seren has a good deal of self-control, and I think she never really felt free to allow herself to be spoiled by anyone.

Now that she had no more reason to worry about what others thought, she had started asking to be pampered, loved, and to have her head on my lap. Seeing her placing such trust in me in such an uncomplicated way… It was so beautiful.

I want to dote on this woman for the rest of my life.

But such a perfect honeymoon couldn't last forever.

Needless to say, a huge amount of work awaited us when we returned from our honeymoon.

Well, we DID take a whole week off. I knew it would happen, and I had no complaints. But I had gotten so used to spending such a sweet time with Seren on our honeymoon that I felt lonely having less time together each day.

“Sorry about all of the overtime these days. When you’re newlywed and all.”

Disto looked truly apologetic. Although I didn’t think an apology was warranted. Disto’s a highly capable sort, with twenty years experience on me, but when we got back from the trip, he suddenly seemed to have grown a lot of gray hairs.

While I was away, Disto had probably sorted out most of the troublesome issues.

“No, I’m the one who should be apologizing,” I said. “You’ve clearly been putting out fires while I was away. Thank you, I really appreciate it.”

“Of course, I handle what I can. But there are still some issues I’d like to ask you to take care of.”

“Of course. What issues are those?”

“Well, namely, the accumulation of magical energy located in Kichul Forest, which we’ve been investigating for some time now.”

“Ah, yes! I was curious about that myself.”

We even flew over that magical pool a bit on our honeymoon, which made me even more curious.

“It seems that the plants there are turning into magical beasts. And now, much more powerful beasts are being spotted in that vicinity than ever before.”

“So, in essence, both the flora and the fauna are changing?” I asked.

“Yes, and also, individuals of certain species seem to be increasing in strength.”

“Fascinating.”

“We’d like to get closer to that magical hot zone to investigate further, but the beasts are too dangerous, and it’s too risky. Using stealth to get as close as possible seems the right call, but magical energy needs to be preserved to make the journey back home safely as well,” Disto explained. “So, you see, I’d like to borrow your strength, if I may.”

“It sounds truly interesting.”

Disto always knew how best to make use of me and my magical skills. Occasionally, he’d direct choice missions like this my way.

“Your magic is highly effective, and with your assistance, we could avoid most battles. That way everyone on the expedition can preserve their magical energy as we investigate the source of the concentrated energy.”

“I see. But, if that’s the case, I think it would be better to bring Seren along as well,” I suggested.

“Indeed?”

“The other day, on our honeymoon, we flew over the forest. There was a spot with a cluster of abnormally large trees, and judging from the strength of the magical power radiating from there, I think that area might be where the reservoir is located.”

“You flew over the… forest? You can really fly so high?”

“And at incredible speeds. And with enough strength to pull a huge trading ship. No doubt, we could carry an entire expedition team.”

“That is truly unconventional…” Disto sounded taken aback.

“I think so, too. But we can’t keep Seren’s power of flight just for us forever.”

“Aha. So then, what do you have in mind?” Disto grinned as he stroked his goatee. He undoubtedly already knew what I was thinking, but he still wanted me to say it.

After discussing things briefly with Disto and deciding on a strategy, I immediately gathered the necessary members.

The survey team, all the wind mages, and Seren. However, even though Disto enthusiastically vouched for Seren’s participation, the others were unanimously against it.

“Just because you’re the Archmage doesn’t mean you can mix business and pleasure and bring your wife on an expedition just cause you’re going.”

“It’s… It’s not like that!”

It was a female member of the team who said that to me, her eyes narrowed, and I rushed to try to explain myself. I hated the thought of being misunderstood in that way.

“That’s the reality of being a newlywed.”

“Don’t be so mean. This fellow’s barely so much as danced with a girl before this.”

Low-pitched voices, but definitely audible…!

I couldn’t stand it if Seren heard this.

“It’s not like that,” I repeated, stronger this time. “You have it all wrong. In the forest, there are magical beasts that attack in swarms, like Killer Ants and so on, and even some beasts that are impervious to spells. There’s no telling what kind of beasts will appear in the forest depths. With Seren’s help, we can fly over the forest right to the research site. We won’t have to waste our magical energy fighting our way there. And, if things go south, we can escape easily into the sky. The mission will be so much less dangerous this way.”

At the end of my breathless explanation, I realized everyone’s shoulders were shaking.

I blinked, realizing they were all turning their faces to the side, trying to muffle their laughter behind their hands. Even the female team member who’d complained directly to me seemed to be grinning mischievously for some reason.

“Wh-What…?” I stammered in confusion as everyone burst out laughing.

I didn’t get it. I was sure I hadn’t said anything odd. As I looked around at everyone, trying to gauge their reactions, Vellia spoke, still spluttering with laughter.

“We were joking! We all understand the situation, anyhow.”

“Yes, we understand that you’re talking about safety and increasing the chances for the expedition’s success, Archmage Viol.”

“Indeed, the investigation will no doubt be faster and safer with Seren on board.”

“Being able to fly everyone there will be a huge help.”

Getting this from all sides, I was stunned. “Then why would you…?”

“Ahaha! Sorry, it was just too cute seeing you get all wound up!”

“Adorable. Now I know what Seren sees in you.”

“I don’t see how this is amusing…” I sighed.

I looked around sulkily at everyone. Was this an apology or another tirade against me? I still didn’t understand, but we were

getting nowhere like this. I shook my head and tried to get back to the plan and to make sure everyone was on board.

"I don't get your humor, but ultimately, we're all in favor of Seren's participation, right?"

"It'd be great to have her."

"It'll save a ton of time."

"And make for a much more comfortable trip, too."

"Conserving magical power is always a good thing."

I've got whiplash from the 180 this conversation has taken… But eh, never mind.

"All right, so it's decided. We will use flying to travel to and from the inspection site." I turned my attention to the wind mages led by Vellia. "And I'd like to consult you about something, Vellia."

"Yes, certainly." Vellia grew solemn, pushing up her black-rimmed spectacles.

"As previously stated, it gets dangerous close to reservoirs of magical energy. Though Seren is very adept at flying by now, it's risky to put all our eggs in her basket, so to speak."

"Ah, I was thinking the same thing. It's about time the other wind mages got serious about acquiring flying skills, isn't it?"

Good, we were on the same page.

"Right. If we can fly with four to five people per cart, we can easily split into teams, and this method will reduce the amount of risk, effort, and time spent for everyone."

"Yeah. It's much easier to transport people by cart than by levitating them and trying to keep them balanced." After muttering that, Vellia glanced at Seren. Seren cocked her head in response, and Vellia smiled wryly. "We were thinking of learning to fly, too, just as soon as you were done with your basic magical training, Seren. The timeline has just been pushed forward a little."

"You were…?!"

"Well, any wind mage worth their salt takes an interest in flying, sooner or later. Most try to go it alone at first but quickly give up once they realize how difficult it is to master."

"Is that so…?!"

"But I'm not as naïve as my younger days, and my magic is far more polished now. I think if I attempt it now, I'll do nicely. Either way, it's going to be fun giving it a go." Vellia grinned. Seeing that grin reassured me, too.

“Well then, Vellia, everyone… Please do your best to learn to fly,” I ordered. “Everyone here is an exceptional magic user, not to mention skilled at wind magic. I believe that once you get the hang of it, you will definitely be able to master it.”

“Well, how can we do anything but give it our best shot after such encouragement? And anyway, after years of upholding the magical boundary wall, I’d better have something to show for it.” Vellia winked. She was the casual type, but never failed to keep a promise.

“I know we can count on you,” I said.

“You can rely on me,” Vellia reassured me with a smile. Then Vellia met Seren’s eye. “Seren, today’s curriculum has been postponed. Would you come along with us instead?”

“Certainly.”

“Division Captain, Arshtag, I have a proposal for our future plans.”

“Go ahead.”

“Sure thing.”

Arshtag nodded. He was the captain of the survey team, a strong-looking fellow with the sturdy build of a knight. The Third Mage Guild had a lot of stringy, unhealthy-looking members, so Arshtag stood out, but his magical skills were second to none. But fieldwork suited him best. He seems delighted to have been assigned to lead a survey team into the Kichul Forest.

“All wind mages assembled here will now commence learning how to fly,” Vellia said. “I’ll assess everyone and give you all a practice target to shoot for. Then, we should plan out the research mission based on everyone’s level. Okay?”

A dependable mage indeed. A good communicator who doesn’t waste a second and is highly efficient. Vellia’s skills are the best among the younger set, if you ask my opinion.

“Certainly, that will make it easier for us to plan out our mission.”

“And please let us know how many will be along for beast subjugation. On our end, we’ll plan out the research fields for each squad and handle everything related to camping out, too.”

Arshtag and I both nodded.

Looking back, I saw that behind Arshtag, the rest of the survey team also looked highly interested.

“Wow, actual flying!”

“It sure sounds different from past research missions! I can’t wait!”

“Conserving our magical energy will be a good thing.”

I was glad to see that they had high expectations of this mission. That would keep all the wind mages motivated.



THAT night, after getting ready for bed—just me and Seren in the room—I casually asked her how things were going.

“So, how did it go? Flight training, I mean.”

“Well, of course everyone grasped the basic concepts quickly. It won’t be long until everyone’s airborne.”

“Indeed?” I felt relieved, but at the same time, a little jealous. “Seren… I couldn’t say this out loud in front of everyone, but…”

“Yes?”

“Actually, I want to fly, too.”

“Oh, my.”

Seren looked at me, wide-eyed. It wasn’t like it was such a big deal since Seren was always happy to fly me around in the cart, but seeing her fly so freely through the air made me want to try flying for myself. Surely that’s just human nature?

“Could you teach me?” I asked.

“Of course. I don’t think you need my instruction to learn to fly, though, Lord Viol… But it might cut down on the amount of trial and error involved in learning independently…” Smiling, Seren walked over to the cart sitting in the corner of the room. Or, more like looming in the corner.

With a light step, she was aboard, then floating in the air in front of my eyes. I could only admire her skill.

“Okay, now I’ll get down, so after that, please climb aboard, Lord Viol.”

“Ah…I’m a little nervous.”

“You get nervous, Lord Viol?” She sounded truly surprised.

“Learning new magic is always exciting and a little nerve-wracking, but always fun.”

“Oh, yes! I completely get that!” Seren nodded vigorously.

I clambered onto the cart while Seren moved to stand in front of me, and she looked up at me somberly.

“So, here is how to float.”

“Right.”

“The cart has wheels, so there’s a gap between the bottom of the wooden box and the floor, right?”

“Yes, there is.”

“First, we begin visualizing a light wind. Direct the airflow into the gaps on all four sides to make the cart float. Adjust the airflow so that it’s even underneath.”

“Whoa…”

Spreading the airflow evenly underneath was difficult. If I didn’t balance it perfectly, the cart would tip this way and that like a ship bobbing on the waves.

“And direct another gust of wind from above, pressing down.”

“Ah, I get it. That stabilizes it. It’s stopped lurching about.”

“To float, all you have to do is balance the airflow coming from above and below. Then you focus on balancing on the cart yourself.”

“I get it now. You’re a good teacher, Seren.”

“When I first started researching how to fly, I used all kinds of strong gusts and toppled out of the cart multiple times.”

I pictured Seren tumbling out of the cart. Such a tomboy move. Unexpected of a duke’s daughter. Although, it didn’t seem so strange to me now that I knew her. Hearing about her early tumbling failures surprised me, but what surprised me more was how good Seren was at instructing.

“You explain thoroughly, and that handy tip about wind stabilizing makes it hard for me to make any egregious balancing mistakes. Maybe you’d do well as a magical instructor.” When I praised her so earnestly, she blushed a little.

“Thank you… Well, shall we move on to the next step?” Seren seemed embarrassed by my praise as she continued with her instructions. “Now direct another gust of air at your back. Just like how we use wind magic to boost our speed while running, you know?”

“I don’t just direct the wind gusts at the cart?”

“That’s easier with slow-speed flying. But if you start going fast, the wind will push your upper body back. So I found it’s better

to direct airflow at your back as well."

"I see. So, traveling is the same concept as just floating, but you need to stabilize yourself and use wind gusts at your back to counter the wind flow pushing you back, right?"

"Exactly!"

Seren looked pleased, but I sighed a little.

This is all quite nerve-wracking, indeed. Right now, it's all right since we're indoors, but outside will be a different story. Outside, all kinds of wind currents are blowing around. Making fine adjustments to my own wind gusts while accounting for random gusts… was going to be an extremely difficult task.

When I tried pushing the cart from behind a little harder, the cart started moving easily and smoothly.

"Oh! It's moving quite a bit!"

"Great job, Lord Viol!" Seren's earnest praise filled me with joy. "It looks like you've got the basics down, so as a final lesson, let's try changing directions."

"All right."

"The general concept is the same, but when turning, you need to be aware of the wind blowing from a diagonal direction. When turning to the left, the wind hitting the left side is weaker in front and stronger behind. The opposite is true for wind hitting from the right…"

"Whoa…"

"It's quite wobbly until you get used to it, so you have to figure out at what point you'll start losing your balance and then make adjustments taking that into account."

"Yikes… Even just rotating on the spot at one height is difficult."

"But your balance is improving every minute… You're doing so good!"

"But I'm moving at a snail's pace."

"Well, it's harder indoors, but out in the open sky, you can easily swoop and rise and weave between trees just by adjusting the wind."

"I don't think 'easily' is the right word to use here." As I spoke, I glanced up at the ceiling. Since I'm definitely floating, it figures that the ceiling would be quite close. "This might come in handy for cleaning."

“Oh, yes.”

Even as we were talking, I was flying slowly in circles around the room. Then, I realized that if I had more vertical space, I’d be able to practice much easier.

“Right. I’m standing up, so I’m running out of space here.”

I sat down on the cart and tried to float upwards. Going up and down vertically was relatively easy, but I couldn’t get the hang of going up and down while rotating the cart at all.

“I understand the concept, but it’s surprisingly difficult. I don’t think I’ve got it down yet.”

“If you mastered it right away, I’d be feeling pretty down on myself… It took me ages and countless falls before I got the hang of flying. So, please try a little harder for my sake.” Seren smiled mischievously.

“Countless falls, you say…?” I shot her a sharp look, and Seren blinked in alarm for a moment before shrugging.

“Just a few falls. And only from a low height. It really didn’t hurt all that much.” She was muttering excuses in a small voice.

“I suppose it’s par for the course when it comes to developing one’s magical techniques… But don’t push yourself too hard,” I stressed. “As your superior… And, I mean, as your husband, of course… I don’t want you ever getting hurt.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“All right, I trust you.”

“Thanks!”

“That bright smile makes me feel uneasy, though…”

“I’m smiling because I’m happy. I never thought the day would come when I would be able to teach YOU magic, Lord Viol!”

Typical Seren. Brushing aside my worries and beaming away with uncomplicated joy.

Is it really so exciting? Instructing me?

Since I have an aptitude for all elemental attributes, I can generally perform all types of magic to a functional level. But there are actually quite a few types of magic that only mages who specialize in a particular attribute can truly master. So I often outsource instruction from others, like right now.

For me, there’s still an infinite amount to be learned from other mages. But for Seren, still so new to magic, being able to teach a superior of hers was probably quite the thrill.

“All that’s left now is to practice until you can fly while using other types of magic.” My instructor beamed, and I nodded thoughtfully.

Right. Seren flew with total control, while also casting magical attacks. She was speaking from a place of experience.

Seren did it with such a confident, unhurried air that I’d underestimated her. But her precision was amazing. No wonder even seasoned wind mages acknowledged her skills.

And this sort of thing was more than one could ask of a wind mage who’d only recently learned how to fly.

For the survey we were going on, it would be more logical to have the wind mages focus on transporting the team via flying while the other members focused on defense and fighting off monsters. Originally, we planned to have one wind mage carry several people, but we should probably avoid having unseasoned pilots carry too many people at once until they’d gained more experience in the air.

Trying it out myself gave me a better understanding of what was involved.

“Thank you, Seren. Thanks to you, I feel like I can fly if I just practice.”

“Hehe, I’m sure you’ll be a pro in no time, Lord Viol. Maybe it would be good for us to try flying in separate carts sometime. It would be fun to compete.”

I hadn’t thought of that. Ah, Seren really knows how to have fun.

“Trying it out myself gave me a good idea of how difficult it actually is. I think we can divide up the survey team responsibilities most efficiently.”

“Oh, I’m glad.”

“It was a great lesson. I’d expect nothing less from MY wife!”

My tone was jokey. Seren blushed a little and looked up at me.

“So… Is there a fee for this lesson?”

“Hmm, is there… Perhaps you want to be indulged once again?” I ventured.

“No, today I want to indulge YOU.”

“…Hmm?”

Seren smiled brightly, a very lovely smile. It was a smile that I’d seen somewhere before.

…A few moments later, I had transformed into a small black cat. It seemed that Seren was in the mood to pet Vi. I looked up at Seren's smile as she held me against her chest and allowed her to cuddle me.

But then…

"Guh…! Your petting skills have gotten even better!" I lamented.

"Hehehe! This softness! I haven't felt it in a while!"

Laughing naughtily, Seren stroked and petted my body. Then, her warm hands parted my fur and tickled my skin beneath. Yikes, it felt so good.

"I can't… I can't even think about resisting."

"Well, good. I haven't been able to pet you in so long. I've been reading books and visualizing instead."

"Please, no weird visualizations…" As I spoke, my tail unconsciously flapped against Seren's arm.

Now that I could openly be with Seren in human form, I'd been Viol since our marriage. But it seemed from this display that Seren had been craving the touch of Vi. If it makes her happy, I don't see any reason why I shouldn't let her have some playful fun with me as Vi once in a while.

…And it feels pretty darn good.

I planned to let Seren pet me until she was satisfied, but we both ended up falling asleep that night.



ABOUT a month later, we were finally ready to mobilize our survey team to the Kichul Forest.

Our basic plan was to fly above the tree line, but there was a good chance we'd end up flying through the trees at some point. Accordingly, the survey team was made up of ten people divided into pairs to allow for greater maneuverability. Incidentally, the carts had also been improved by the magical device technicians, especially for our team.

Arshtag was the team captain. He'd been investigating Kichul Forest the longest, so I thought his quick decisions would be more valuable than mine.

Vellia was, of course, his pilot. None of the young wind mages could match Vellia's abilities and leadership skills. It was unsurprising that Vellia had improved the most at flying in such a short amount of time. With these two leading the squadron, there was nothing to worry about.

We would fly in a V formation with them at the front and Seren and I bringing up the rear so we would have a good view of everyone. If anything happened, we could easily swoop in and rescue people.

The survey team and the wind mages are all reliable, seasoned veterans. And Gil, who just joined this year along with Seren, will be joining us too, spear in hand. I haven't seen his fighting style yet. I'm actually a little excited to see it.

"Everyone… Tomorrow, we will finally begin our investigation. Now, we're gathered here today to conduct some preliminary flight training."

Everyone nodded along solemnly as I spoke.

"All the wind mages have been undertaking flight training, but the other survey team members have little experience of being airborne. Today, I'd like you to acclimatize to the sensation of flying outdoors. We'll need you to master balancing and shifting your weight in response to sudden changes in speed and sharp turns so that you can work smoothly in tandem with your partner."

I explained the purpose of the day's training briefly, then left the rest to Arshtag. Arshtag stepped forward, his bulk imposing, and raised his voice.

"Okay then, everyone… Get into position!"

"Roger!"

The group responded to Arshtag with great enthusiasm. I hopped on the back of Seren's cart. It's been a while since we've ridden a smaller-scale, compact cart like the ones prepared for today.

"Amazing, Vellia, you're so stable it's hard to believe you're even floating."

"Right? It's been so hard to get to this point, though," Vellia responded to Arshtag's earnest praise jovially.

"Wow, amazing!"

"It's really floating!"

"It's a bit scary not having your feet on the ground."

The rest of the team was exclaiming with surprise and excitement.

Well, of course they would. I had a similar reaction the first time I flew.

“Survey team members… I can assure you that we’ve been fully trained, so please don’t hesitate to step aboard.” Vellia grinned good-naturedly.

Meanwhile, I called out to Arshtag, riding behind Vellia. “Arshtag.”

“Listening.”

“Since this is the first time the survey team’s going to be flying, I think it’d be a good idea to do a little test run first so they can get used to it.”

“Understood. Vellia, let’s try a little flying.”

“Okay. I’ll move slowly, but hold on tight.”

“Right.”

After making sure that Arshtag had a firm grip on the cart rails, Vellia moved forward slowly.

“Whoa.”

“Are you okay?”

Interesting… Despite his brawny physique, Arshtag seemed a little unsteady.

“Fine… But it feels strange to see the scenery moving even though I’m not moving myself,” he said.

“Right?”

“Moreover, I seem particularly aware of the wind pressure on my back.”

“Ah, just bear with that. The cart’s motions are controlled by wind pressure coming from various directions.”

“That’s how it works? Baffling.”

“Shocking, right? But if the person riding behind shifts their weight, that affects the way the cart controls as well. Things might get a little unsteady.”

“’Scuse me?”

“I mean, since your physique is quite different to the other mages, Arshtag, it’s just a bit more noticeable.”

As I digested what Vellia had just said, I glanced over at Seren, who nodded emphatically.

“It’s the same as when we use wind gusts for assisted running. Different people with different physiques and running abilities would require different amounts of wind gusts, right? It’s the same principle.”

Thinking about it, that may well be true.

“Wind mages really need to fine-tune things that much?”

“Mm-hmm. I’d like to work on some fine-tuning myself, but things are a bit tight here. I’d rather we fly to the plains, as steady as we can, then meet up near the big tree there. Once we’re there, we can swoop and glide to our heart’s delight.”

“I see. Then let’s all meet at the big tree on the plains! Safety first, don’t push yourself!”

“Roger!”

“Well then, Vellia, let’s go.”

“All right! Make sure you hang on tight.”

“Whoa!”

With great speed, Vellia and Arshtag zoomed out of the window.

“Hey! Arrgh! What happened to safe flying?! Oh, heck!”

“Ahaha! It’s so unusual to see you lose your cool, Arshtag!”

We could still hear them from afar. It looked like Vellia had a need for speed that matched Seren’s… Yikes. I guess, though, when a person gains superspeed for the first time in their life, they’re going to want to test it out.

“Uh… Everyone… Please slowly make your way to the meet-up point,” I addressed the remaining team members. “As Arshtag said, safety comes first.”

“Sure thing.”

“Got it.”

“Vellia’s having a lot of fun.”

The remaining wind mages set off on the test flight with wry smiles, consulting with their survey team partners riding behind them as to what was a comfortable speed for both.

Naturally, perhaps, none had the ease of Vellia’s flying, and some of them seemed to be struggling with carrying a passenger and the adjustments involved. They swayed and wobbled around the room a few times before finally gaining the confidence to exit through the window slowly.

“We should go, too. I think we’d better take up the rear,” I said to Seren.

“Right.”

We’re hanging back to monitor the others, but I’ve already told Seren that we won’t get involved unless something really dangerous happens. If we swoop in to help them too often, they won’t improve, and we can’t hold their hands during potential battles in the forest. We need a strong squad of pair teams who help each other out and keep each other balanced.

I hope today’s training will help each pair build a relationship of solid trust.



WE arrived last at the large tree in the plains, having been monitoring those flying ahead all the while. Vellia stood there waiting for us, smiling and waving big, but Arshtag was sitting down at the foot of the tree, looking worn out already.

“You all right?” I asked him.

“...Yeah.”

I’d dropped my voice so the others wouldn’t hear. Arshtag looked at me with a dour expression. His short, straw-colored hair looked like it’d been through a storm. Vellia had no doubt been directing a few air gusts at it.

“I went a bit too fast. I think he got airsick,” Vellia explained, looking a little bit remorseful. I nodded and began to generate my magic.

“You should consider your partner’s feelings when flying.” After I lightly healed him with water magic, Arshtag’s complexion improved immediately.

“Ah... Sorry.”

“You’re the captain, after all. I just want everyone to be in top condition for today’s training.”

I tried my best to smile so I wouldn’t sound too stern. Naturally, Vellia did look surprised... But a lot of people have seemed surprised by me lately. So I suppose it’s normal.

As long as Arshtag could make the most of the training to follow, then there should be no issue.

“Join us once you’re feeling better,” I said, and then I strode off to get on with things.

Seren 37

The True Form of the Magic Source

“ARE you all right?”

I watched Lord Viol walk off after casually casting a healing spell on Arshtag.

Arshtag stopped staring at the retreating Lord Viol and turned to look at me with a blank expression. Then, his eyes focused.

“Mrs. Seren…” Still not used to being addressed that way, I blushed. Arshtag simply gazed solemnly at me. “What kind of magic spell did you cast on your husband?”

“Huh? Um, well, nothing in particular…”

“Oh, come on.”

I had no idea what Arshtag was referring to.

“I’d heard he’d softened up around the edges a little lately, but… To this extent? He’s practically *friendly*. Pleasant, even.”

“Oh? But Lord Viol has always been gentle and kind,” I insisted.

Arshtag raised a doubtful eyebrow. But I’d never seen Lord Viol as anything other than kind, gentle, and calm. I’m not sure I’d say he was overly friendly, though.

Arshtag looked like he wanted to say more but thought better of it. He got to his feet, and Vellia laughed, clapping him on the shoulder.

“The power of a wife, eh?”

“It’s something else, all right. It makes me want to get married, myself,” Arshtag said.

I inclined my head to one side, not following the conversation. Then I noticed Lord Viol looking my way.

“Seren! Can I have a minute?” he called.

“Sure!”

I jogged over to Lord Viol, and Gil—someone who’d joined the Third Mage Guild at the same time I did—was with him. Clad in

flexible clothing, he looked every inch like a former adventurer, especially with his muscular build.

“Hello, Seren. It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

It’s always good to see Gil’s smiling face.

“Gil! Long time no see!”

“I was surprised to hear that you got married. I was just giving my congratulations to Archmage Viol here.”

“Thank you!”

“Here, a wedding gift from all of us who joined the same year.” Gil took out a cute, small glass vial from his pocket. “Lucien crafted this magical device from a magic stone I procured. And Arles imbued it with magic. I’m not the best at this kind of thing, but Arles and Lucien added all kinds of bells and whistles to it. We’re all pretty proud of how it turned out. Hope you enjoy using it.”

“Th-Thank you…!”



“It’s something for a couple to make use of together. It’s pretty fun to use it at night in a dark room.” Gil shot me a saucy wink, bowed politely to Lord Viol, then quickly left.

“He may look free-spirited, but he’s a very considerate fellow, isn’t he?” Lord Viol observed.

“Yes. I never imagined everyone would work together to make a present. I’ll have to thank them all later.”

“Right, but I was referring to how he handed over the gift in my presence to avoid any misunderstandings. He was telling me earlier that he had something to give you.” Lord Viol smiled a little. “Now there’s a person who understands the way people think. I’d like to emulate him.”

“Oh, yes, indeed. But you understand the subtleties of human emotions as well, Lord Viol. Like before… You casually cast that healing spell on Arshtag, didn’t you?”

Lord Viol made a “But anyone would have done the same” sort of face. *He IS, though. A considerate person, I mean.*

After thinking for a moment, Lord Viol looked at the magic device I was still clutching and smiled a little. “You have so many kind people in your orbit, Seren.”

“Recently, I’ve felt grateful for my relationships. I only hope I can repay everyone in kind.”

“Indeed. Seren, may I borrow that magical device for a moment?”

“Certainly.”

“Your coworkers worked together to make you this, right? We should get as much use out of it as we can.”

I handed it to Lord Viol, and he immediately cast a small magical barrier spell around the vial-shaped device. Indeed, it would be a right shame if it broke during our flight training.

“Thank you…! Oh, I can’t wait to try it out!” I took it back and tucked it safely in my pouch. I couldn’t wait to use it the moment we got home.

“Gather round!”

Our group of ten came together at Arshtag’s summons. He looked around at us all, then, in a clear, deep voice, he briefly outlined the training session about to commence.

“We will now begin full-fledged flight training. I’d like everyone to master balancing during normal flight and maneuvers. Also, I want everyone to master accelerating and decelerating and to practice engaging in combat while in active flight.”

“Yes, sir!”

“There’s every possibility that we’ll be fighting mid and even advanced-level magical beasts tomorrow. So, we must practice combat in flight training today.”

Internally, I was a little surprised we were already starting combat training. But it might make everyone feel safer to be more prepared. The first time I battled while flying, it was nerve-wracking.

“Today’s training program will begin with a demonstration by Lady Seren and Archmage Viol. The wind mages should have a good grasp of flying by now, but I’d like you all to be as aware as possible of the survey member riding behind you as your passenger.”

“We’ll start off flying normally at first, but we’ll also throw in some weaving through the branches of the tall trees…” I whispered to Lord Viol beside me. “Do I have that right?”

“Exactly right. The hardest part of forest flying is navigating through the trees. I’ll be casting magic from the back, so you just focus on flying.”

“Got it.”

“Oh, but I’ll explain the Wind Shield first, so give me a minute.”

“Okay. Yes, that sounds like a good idea.”

After our quick brainstorming session, we exchanged nods. I felt a lot calmer now. Lord Viol’s advice would be invaluable to everyone.

Arshtag continued addressing the group and explaining things. “After the demonstration, we’ll move on to individual training. Once Lady Seren and Archmage Viol are satisfied that you can all fly competently, we will enter the forest and practice having the survey members cast offensive spells while navigating through the trees. Finally, we will reach the deep forest and train in battle against mid-level magical beasts. This ends the explanation.”

“Roger!”

“Now, Lady Seren, Archmage Viol… Please, show us how it’s done.”

On Arshtag’s signal, I levitated the cart gently and floated over to him.

“Before the demonstration, I’d like to briefly explain some points to bear in mind.” Lord Viol magically amplified his voice and began a calm and clear explanation. “The person in the back should try not to obstruct the pilot, and when turning, should lean their body in the same direction to maintain balance. Also, the pilot should do their best to warn the passenger about any sudden maneuvers.”

Even I was surprised by what a passenger had to bear in mind. Come to think of it, I’d never paid much attention to that sort of thing. It seemed the others were also surprised and exchanged nods and glances.

“Incidentally, if you fly too fast, it will be hard to hear one other, and the wind will also hurt your eyes, so it’s a good idea to put up a Wind Shield. That should be no problem for you wind mages.”

“Ah, I see.”

“That’s true.”

The wind mages muttered and began immediately casting Wind Shields.

“By the way, if you cast it in a sort of bubble shape that’s narrower at the front of the cart, you can cut down on wind resistance.”

“That makes sense.”

“Yes, that does make a lot of sense.”

I smiled to see the others trying out the trick Lord Viol had just suggested to immediate effect. Lord Viol’s advice was always so useful.

“As for the rest, practice will make the best teacher… Seren, do you have anything to add?”

“Nope. Let’s fly.”

“All right.”

“Let’s do it!”

Quite determined, I floated up high in the sky. At first, I simply rose straight up, spun around in a figure eight, then suddenly rose and fell, going through a full range of movements,

before flying straight up towards the large tree. Just before hitting the trunk, I made a sharp right angle and shot up along the trunk. Then, I threaded through the gaps between the branches and emerged from the top of the tree.

Some branch damage was, unfortunately, unavoidable like this.

“That was a bit rough. I’ve got some leaves in my hair,” Lord Viol muttered softly behind me.

“Sorry. I’ll brush it out for you later. Now then, I’ll fly to the center of the forest at super high speed and then come back at medium speed, so could you cast some magic spells at the end where everyone can see?”

“Leave it to me.”

I nodded and then accelerated to the max.

“Whoa… aren’t you going too fast?” he asked.

“I wanted to demonstrate top speed.”

Talking back and forth, we flew right to the center of the forest. I looked down at the trees from high in the sky, then looked back… The whole survey team looked tiny, like little bean humans.

“Now we return,” I announced.

“Ready.”

We zoomed back at high speed, the others getting closer and closer.

“I’ll cast magic now.”

“Okay!”

Lord Viol unleashed several spells at my go-ahead.

“Whoa!”

“Amazing…!”

A little way off from the group, offensive magic spells rained down but somehow caused no damage to the ground at all? It seemed Lord Viol had first cast a barrier, then aimed attacking spells at it.

“That should do it.”

I heard Lord Viol’s steady voice, slowed down, circled the group once, then glided to a smooth landing beside Arshtag.

“How’s that?”

For a moment, there was silence. I looked around to see everyone looking at us with inscrutable faces.

“Er…?”

“No! I mean! We expected something amazing, but…!”

“It’ll take a lot of training to match that… But what a display.”

Arshtag looked impressed… Beside him, Vellia had raised an eyebrow.

“In a real fight, there will be real monsters… You’ll need to be even more flexible, even more agile. Do your best, everyone.” Lord Viol’s sobering words of advice made everyone gulp back their nerves.

“Okay, I think everyone gets the idea,” Arshtag said. “Now, each team will begin their individual training!”

“Roger!”

At Arshtag’s command, the small carts all rose up at once and scattered in different directions. The individual training, which began with each group keeping a moderate distance from each other, went great at first.

They spun around at the same height, went up and down diagonally, and slowly leaned their bodies in the same direction while flying in figure eights, seemingly testing their balance as pilot and passenger.

“Oh, that’s risky…” Lord Viol muttered softly. I looked where he was looking and saw Gil’s cart tilting quite far over. “It looks like he was trying out an attack with a spear. Unlike casting magic, it takes more arm movement. And then there’s the recoil from hitting a magical beast. Or from being attacked. It’s difficult to maintain balance with a melee weapon like that.”

“Indeed. Ah, Vellia and Arshtag’s team, too…” I pointed out.

“Yes, Arshtag’s using a sword. He’s quite agile, as expected. But Vellia’s got it held steady.”

The other teams were gradually learning to work together by practicing increased speed and turning while avoiding the branches of the large trees.

After watching the training for a while, Lord Viol muttered, “Just watching feels like a waste.”

“Really? But it’s amazing to watch the others. I’m enjoying it!” I said.

“I still need time to acclimate to flying. You can advise me just as well in the air, can’t you? I think I’ll take this opportunity to join the training myself.”

“What?”

“Seren, jump on the back. I’m going to fly us.”

My eyes widened. Lord Viol didn’t waste time.

“Hehe. Okay, then, I’ll see how things feel back here!” I said.

“Please do. And if you have any advice, let me have it.”

“Okay!” I clambered up onto the back, and Lord Viol gently levitated the cart.

“It’s been a while… I’m a little nervous,” he admitted.

“You’re doing good, though.”

“I’m still not very steady. Please hold tight.”

ZOOM! The cart glided forward. It was more than a little unsteady.

“Whoa, hold on! What’s Archmage Viol doing?” Vellia yelped in surprise to see us in flight.

Yep, I could understand the surprise…

“I just wanted to try it myself,” Lord Viol said.

“Wow. All-element mages are all like this…” Vellia sounded exasperated but amused and quickly upped her speed. “All right, let’s fly! I’m not losing to our Archmage there. As a proud wind mage, I won’t have it!”

Vellia and Arshtag’s cart picked up speed rapidly. Good old Vellia. She was flying at lightning speed, almost matching us.

“Gaaah! Wait! Vellia! Stop! Waaait!” Arshtag bellowed in terror at the sudden height and speed.

“It’s fine, it’s fine! Just trust me!”

“Argh!!!”

Vellia’s delighted shrieks and Arshtag’s wails of despair grew increasingly farther away.

Wow, I can hardly hear them anymore, I thought, but then they went into a big figure eight, going slower on the loops, even throwing in a somersault! *Yikes, that DOES look scary. I can’t hear from here, but Arshtag must be screaming his head off.*

In contrast, Lord Viol flew safely, with deliberate movements. He seemed to have adjusted to having me ride behind him. He was very steady now. Nodding to himself after trying out each different maneuver. Under the bright blue sky, it was exciting and fulfilling to witness the others training so well, too.

After a little flight training, everyone had gotten a lot better. Both pilot and passenger moved in perfect unison, and now, when

they accelerated, decelerated, or turned suddenly, there was no danger of anyone over-balancing.

And, of course, Lord Viol's flying skills were improving at a rapid pace as well.

"I think I'm getting the hang of it," he said.

"Yes! You really are, Lord Viol."

"Everyone's flying skills seem to have improved quite a bit."

"They have. Now, I think we can definitely handle fighting off a few beasts while flying!"

Just as I said that confidently, Vellia and the others flew towards me at incredible speed from the sky above the forest. In the blink of an eye, they were close enough for me to see their faces.

At the same time, Arshtag's screams also came closer and closer, and I couldn't help but feel sorry for him.

"Wow! Everyone's piloting skills have improved immensely!" Vellia was beaming with enjoyment. Arshtag looked exhausted and was clinging white-knuckled to the railing. I'd never seen Arshtag, usually so brawny and sturdy, look so weak and shaky.

"All right! I think it's safe for everyone to head into the forest now!"

When I said that, the trainees turned towards me. Privately, I had my doubts about whether "everyone" actually included Arshtag...

"But maybe it would be better if we all took a break first..." Feeling bad for Arshtag, I added that, and he looked visibly relieved.

"...Good idea." Beside me, Lord Viol muttered a spell, lifting both hands.

"Ah..."

Lord Viol's special skill.

Using earth and fire magic, he conjured a large mug, then filled it with ice water using his water magic. Then, he smoothly offered it to Arshtag.

"Drink."

"Th-Thanks...!" Arshtag looked incredibly grateful. Around him, the others muttered.

"That's amazing."

“So that’s what it means to be able to conjure all the elements.”

“Me too! I want a drink, too!”

“And me!”

“How nice! Looks so refreshing!”

The crowd was split between those longingly gazing as Arshtag chugged back the water and those gazing at Lord Viol with envy.

Eventually, everyone was looking at Lord Viol. Caving in to peer pressure, he ended up serving everyone mugs of ice-cold water. *So kind, so like Lord Viol. This is just one of the many reasons why I love him.*

Under the clear blue sky, our group thoroughly refreshed themselves with the delicious ice-cold water, and after that, they completed their hunting training in the forest without a single injury.



NATURALLY, that night, I was quick to try out the magical device that Gil and the others had gifted me. Both Lord Viol and I were excited and taken aback by what it could do.

Although it looked like a small, cute glass bottle that resembled a perfume bottle, it was actually a highly functional magical device from which small floral light flecks slowly emerged, and it even emitted a soft floral scent and delicate music at the same time.

Seeing it at work in the dark made the atmosphere so romantic… I could gaze at it for hours. I was also fascinated to find out how it worked. But we had to suppress our excitement, and both agreed to take a closer look at it the following day.

After all, tomorrow was the big day… Going into the forest to investigate the source of the magical energy. We needed to sleep well to be in tip-top physical condition. Saving something fun for later only prolonged the excitement. Filled with anticipation, I fell into a happy sleep beside my husband.



THEN, the next day came.

Our research team loaded our carts with food and water, just in case, and headed towards the Kichul Forest. Today, Vellia was driving very safely, and Arshtag, riding in the rear, had his arms folded and was taking command with dignity.

Apparently, when the High Mages go out to survey things, they usually do so on foot, going from the plains into the forest and defeating monsters as they go. It takes considerable time to progress, especially from the deep forest onwards, where there are many powerful beasts.

The team will investigate the magical beasts they encounter, searching for plant-origin beasts and evaluating their strength while also searching the forest depths for the mysterious magical energy source.

“If there’s a place with a high probability of magical energy accumulation, let’s direct our search there first.”

That was what Arshtag had decided. So, we set off and were now leisurely sailing across the sky, heading for that particularly large tree we’d seen before.

According to Arshtag, we would need to eventually investigate the number and level of any magical beasts we could find, but if we could pinpoint the location of the magical energy source, we could focus our investigation there, which would be extremely efficient.

“It’d be great if that giant tree really is the source of the magical energy.”

“But, until now, we’ve been going bit by bit, by foot, progressing deeper into the forest, y’know? It’d be a bit too easy if we just found it that easily now, yeah?”

“Hmm, well, you’ve got a point there.”

During the flight, I heard two of the survey team members, Gyle and Yukka, discussing the mission. No doubt these two, who’d been working on this project long before I’d ever joined, had their own feelings about the mission.

“But, we never had even the faintest inkling where the source might be. If we find it now… Well, it’s high time, I’d say.”

“Well, I suppose it’s better than just searching aimlessly.”

“Speaking of which… Take a look below.”

Yukka's comment caught my attention, and I looked down, too. Below, the deep forest seemed to stretch on endlessly. And, in the distance, one giant tree rose above the rest.

"Viewing from above, you can notice points of interest much more easily, eh? It definitely looks like something's there. Yeah, I'd bet money on it. And I can sense magic… strong magic… in a sort of haze."

"Yeah… Couldn't tell from down on the forest level. Even though we went quite a way into the deep forest ourselves. This is a huge leap compared to the tiny mouse steps we were making in OUR investigation. It's sort of depressing."

"It'd take us ten days, more or less, to get this far on foot. Being able to fly here… It's pretty amazing."

"We'll be reaching our destination soon! Everyone be on your guard!" Arshtag's voice filled the air, and everyone stiffened up in anticipation. The giant tree was already quite close. But I couldn't see the aforementioned haze of magical energy at all.

"Gyle, Yukka, you go and do a reconnaissance," Arshtag ordered. "Feel free to cut away some branches to make it easier for the rear flyers to make their way through. Open up a nice path for us to conduct our investigation."

"Roger!"

As the two yelled out to acknowledge the request, the cart they rode upon suddenly swooped down towards the giant tree. Truly, what smooth movements. Proof that all that time working on getting the teams to work together on flying had been well spent.

Since those two were both veterans from the survey team, I was sure they'd return without any issues, but I noticed Arshtag glaring at the giant tree with a stern expression.

"Arshtag… You look concerned…?"

When I called out to him, Arshtag muttered under his breath, never taking his eyes off the giant tree. "If that giant tree really is the source of the mysterious magic, then we can expect the beasts living in its vicinity to be more powerful than any we've ever encountered. Those two haven't just been sent on a simple scout mission. If they run into any magical beasts, they could find themselves in great peril."

“Hmm, we’ve made it this far while taking careful stock of the magical beasts we’ve encountered along the way, but to suddenly descend upon the nest of the beasts, so to speak… Yes, it could be dangerous indeed.” Vellia was also staring severely down at the forest. My breath caught in my throat at the danger.

“They’ll be fine.” Lord Viol patted my shoulder reassuringly from behind.

I let out a breath I didn’t even know I’d been holding.

“Gyle and Yukka know this forest. Gil’s got muscle and a history as an adventurer. The Arshtag is a powerful warrior mage himself. And we have a full complement of talented wind mages,” Lord Viol said. “This survey team has the best possible people for the job. We’re well-prepared to directly enter the vicinity of this concentrated source of magical energy.”

“Right. We can handle a few magical beasts,” Vellia reassured me.

Right. Of course. These people had already proven their worth in Lord Viol’s eyes. There was no reason at all for me to be concerned.

Also… Even if some fearsome beasts did appear, I had Lord Viol at my back. I could think of nothing more reassuring. *My job today is to fly the cart. I should focus on that so Lord Viol and the others can do their best at their jobs.* Rationalizing like that made my anxiety and fear fade away.

“This really is a strong team, isn’t it?” I remarked.

“It is,” Lord Viol nodded. “And their judgment can be relied upon. Let’s just wait for their report.”

“Right.”

Then, just as we finished our discussion…

“That’s odd…” Arshtag muttered under his breath.

“What’s wrong?” Vellia frowned, pushing up her glasses with a long finger.

“The magic I’m sensing… It’s not simple magic, such as would be needed to blast a path through tree branches. Not at all… Everyone… Prepare to move.”

Everyone did as Arshtag ordered and braced themselves for action.

Out of nowhere, a huge fireball seemed to set the entire forest on fire. A cart came zooming up out of the trees.

“Super advanced level beast! Yukka is currently engaging it! Quick! We need backup now!” It was Gyle and Yukka’s cart!

“Let’s roll!”

“Aye, aye!”

“I’ve been dying for a fight!”

Just as I was about to act, Arshtag, seconds away from zooming to join the fray, turned and yelled over his shoulder.

“Archmage Viol, Lady Seren, stand by! Don’t engage!”

“What?!”

Stand…by?

A super advanced level magical beast… That had to be something with an insane level of strength! And we were supposed to stay here? I looked over my shoulder at Lord Viol, who nodded firmly.

“I’m not always available for surveys like this. My hunch is that they want to see if they can handle it on their end first,” he said.

“Oh, I see…”

Yes, that made a lot of sense.

“Still, I hadn’t expected to encounter a powerful beast while aiming for the magical energy source from the air. It looks like this investigation will be more difficult than we thought.”

While we were talking, I could hear massive explosions down in the forest. The battle was an intense one. I felt so frustrated sitting there doing nothing while everyone else was fighting so hard.

“Would it be okay if we went closer?” I asked.

“I’m sure that would be fine. Descend until we can see what’s going on. But don’t get involved. Remember, we’re on standby. We have to follow the captain’s orders, after all.”

“Understood…”

“Based on the magical energy I can sense below, everyone’s all right for now. Though the enemy does seem to be very advanced, it looks like our eight elite fighters are more than a match for them,” Lord Viol reported.

“You can tell all that?”

“Yes… Of course.”

“Lord Viol, you really are extraordinary…”

“As are you, Seren.” Lord Viol gazed at me earnestly, but seriously… I’m nothing in comparison.

Until now, being able to fly was the one thing I could do that few others could. But now, everyone else had gotten the hang of it. It was no longer such a remarkable feat.

“I have no idea what’s going on down there, so I guess I am still a bit worried… But I’ll just get us a little bit closer and see,” I said.

“All right. Just make sure you don’t get in the way.”

“Okay.”

The spells being cast below were so extravagant that I wasn’t sure how close I could get before we were “in the way.” Nonetheless, I plunged into the forest.

As I brought us towards all the clamor, chopping off any branches that impeded our path, I realized I could make out a vague mass through the branches and leaves.

“Is… Is that a magical beast?”

I realized my voice sounded tremulous.

I could see it, even from a distance. A huge mass resembling a gigantic rock, with fallen trees and animal bones all clumped together. An extremely bizarre sight…

Viol 34

A Fascinating Beast

“FASCINATING.” The word slipped from my lips. “Never have I seen such a beast before.”

“Even you’ve never seen one, Lord Viol..?”

Seren frowned at me. To reassure her, I hugged her lightly from behind. Human touch is, after all, most reassuring.

“Indeed, until now, most of the beasts I’ve encountered have been derived from animals or plants. This… This is like a bad approximation of a cat made of clay by an earth mage. Borden used to make things very much like that. No artistic vision.”

Yes, it reminded me of the sculptures Borden made with earth magic when he was a student at the Academy and how it was impossible to tell what exactly they were meant to represent. This beast was like that. A meaningless conglomeration of rocks, trees, and bones all clumped together.

From what I could see, Arshtag and company were having a tough time battling it, too. Honestly, I’d love the chance to fight such a fascinating beast myself.

“It has four limbs, so it’s probably an animal… If I had to compare it to something, then perhaps a golem, a creature I’ve read about in books,” I said.

“It looks like Arshtag’s team’s attacks aren’t working very well. Is it okay for us to just wait like this?”

“Yes. Stand by.”

Seren looked annoyed, but nothing could be done about it.

“I want to fight too, but it’s important to trust in our teammates and wait,” I stressed.

“Okay…”

“Opportunities like this are rare. We should observe the battle closely and carefully determine what attacks will be most effective.”

The beast truly was fascinating.

To begin with, its body was made up of rocks and other matter clumped together, so magic and physical attacks had limited effect. Furthermore, shattering the rocks with explosive magic didn't work, as they were simply reabsorbed back into its mass. Dealing a fatal blow seemed implausible.

The rotten wood clumps it contained seemed easily damaged by fire magic, but a good deal of firepower was needed. A great drain on our magical resources. Moreover, it was a lot more agile than it looked, and if we weren't flying, the whole battle would have been doubly harder still.

"Gah! Gil...!"

The beast's rock-encrusted tail hit the cart carrying Gil's team with a direct blow. The wind mage flying the cart managed to hang on to the cart's handlebar, but Gil, who was wielding his spear, was thrown from the cart.

Then the beast's tail came lashing down. Gill was hit squarely by the tail, his body slamming hard into the large tree. Gil's protective wall had been broken by the superpowered magical beast's attack. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth. And, as he brought his hands to his face and coughed, more blood stained his hands.

Seren made a sudden movement to help, and I grabbed her shoulder, yanking her back.

"He'll be fine. Watch," I instructed.

Of course, the other members of the survey team knew just what to do.

While Arshtag distracted the stone beast, Gyle cast healing magic on Gil, and Yukka quickly cast him a new protective wall. Gil stopped groaning, wiped his mouth, regained his grip on the spear, and stood up, cracking his neck.

"That hurt. Haven't taken a hit like that in a long time."

Despite this complaint, Gil's eyes were still shining—his fighting spirit had clearly not been dampened in the slightest. As I'd said... He was fine.

Gil's partner wind mage had also remained calm and kept his balance. He immediately swooped around in the air and scooped up a reinvigorated Gil. Amazingly coordinated movement.

I heard Seren let out a sigh of relief.

I gazed at her, and spoke in a calming tone. “It’s true that when fighting magical beasts, a single moment of carelessness can be fatal. But every member of this team is an elite High Mage, qualified to cast the protective barrier wall that safeguards our country. Wall guards are as strong as any adventurer. Even a superpowered magical beast would not be able to inflict fatal damage upon them.”

“Yes… I see that now.”

“Gil sustained some damage, true, but he was able to rally quickly. See… We need only have a little faith, and continue to observe.”

“I’ll try…”

The rock beast, distracted by Gil, was once again hit by a barrage of explosive spells… And then…

“It’s got a weak core!” Arshtag yelled. “Yukka, cast another explosion spell at the same spot! Gil, the moment the rock part explodes, stab the red glowing core with your spear!”

“Roger!”

The following events played out in mere moments.

A loud explosive boom.

One of the carts went barreling into the strong protective wall, not even trying to avoid the flying rock shards. Gil thrust hard, and then a large bone of some kind, with a red stone embedded in it, was ejected from the rock.

Another cart zoomed towards the bony stone, and Arshtag leaped off, cutting it into two with a swift blow. At the same time, the big cluster of rocks and other debris split and crumbled apart.

“Is it… over?”

“It’s over!”

“Amazing! We won…?”

“Of course we won!”

“All right!!!”

Everyone cheered.

“That was certainly impressive.”

I called out to our teammates, who were all celebrating their victory. Everyone was beaming, filled with the confidence that comes from felling an unknown magical beast. It was, indeed, a splendid victory.

“You identified the enemy’s weakness and finished it off with excellent teamwork. I’m proud of you,” I said.

“Thank you!”

“Being able to fly really does give a huge advantage.”

“Eh, we were always gonna be able to win!”

“Glad we went with the team approach this time! I could leave the defense and evasion to the pilot, and concentrate on attacking! Talk about efficient!”

“That’s right. If there hadn’t been a division of labor, we might not have been able to defeat a beast of that level.

I was pleased to hear their evaluations. This mission was sure to end up being a valuable experience for everyone.

“Archmage Viol, here’s the beast’s core.” While everyone was celebrating their victory, Arshtag was inspecting the corpse. Then he looked up and called over to me, a very serious look on his face.

“Thanks. A most fascinating beast it was,” I replied.

“You can say that again… Gil?” Arshtag called over to him.

“Right here?”

With the tip of his spear, Gil lightly poked the magic stone that had served as the beast’s core. The attached bone that seemed to have been expelled, along with the magic stone, shifted with it as well.

“Hmm… So was that bony beast somehow formed AROUND this magic stone?”

Hearing my muttering, Vellia also sat down and began peering at the magic stone and the bone. “Ah, I see. After a high-level magical beast died, its magic stone, already imbued with its energy, turned the surrounding rocks and trees into a new form of magical beast… or something like that. I guess such a thing is possible.”

“Judging from the bone structure, it appears to have once been a large wolf. Based on how agile that big beast was, it may have inherited the characteristics of the magical beast it was based on.” Arshtag was in agreement with her assessment.

Arshtag has been investigating this forest for a long time and has fought many magical beasts. That was no doubt the reason why he could identify the original magical beast based on the structure of its bones.

“But even I’ve never seen such a beast as this one. Well, of course no one has ever delved this deep into the forest before… And, as expected, there are bound to be strange magical beasts near a strong accumulation of magical energy.” Gil sounded amazed and a little incredulous.

Many adventurers hunt animals and gather materials in the plains and in the forests, and act as bodyguards for people traveling between towns, but even so, they never usually delve this deep into the woods. And anyway, even our team of elite magic users would need to be careful in an environment where such powerful beasts dwell… beasts that require entire teams to defeat.

“But still… Gathering nearby rocks to form a new body? That’s the craziest thing I ever heard.”

“A new form of magical beast, indeed.”

Behind Gil, who was laughing in amusement, I could see Gyle furrowing his brow as he inspected the rocks and clumps of wood that had fallen off the beast. There was something off about his expression.

“Gyle, what do you see?” I called out to him. Gyle had the sharpest eyes of anyone on the team. Though not as perceptive as my assistant, Contard, he could see magical energy in a visual sense, and he excelled in combat magic. He was a vital member of the survey team.

“I think it’s likely the concentration of magical energy is nearby. The magical power I’m sensing… I’ve never felt anything like it.” He sounded much more subdued than when he’d been joking around with Yukka earlier.

“So? What’s the issue?” I prompted him, casually.

Gyle thought for a moment before speaking. “I mean… Yes, I sensed a stunning amount of power emanating from the magic stone that formed that monster’s core… But I’m also sensing a sort of magical energy haze coming from the rock formations not far off…”

“Ah yes, in magic stone mines, the rocks and soil in the vicinity often have some magical energy in them. You think the magic stone transferred some of its energy?” I asked.

“I think, when magical energy is TOO concentrated, it starts radiating to the surrounding environment. The rocks have more energy in them than the chunks of tree stuck in that beast we

defeated. It appears some materials are better vessels for magical energy storage…”

“Amazing…!” Seren gasped in admiration.

People who can’t visually see magical energy must find Gyle and Contard’s ability amazing.

“Your speculation is interesting,” I said. “I’d like to place various substances next to this magic stone and experiment to see how much of a transfer effect the magic has… but I might not see any results in my lifetime.”

Compared to enduring natural objects like rocks, human life is too short. It’s really too bad.

There are two main methods of procuring magic stones. You can dig them out of underground caves, much like ore, or you can extract them from the stomachs of mid and high-level beasts, like this one. Low-level magical beasts have magic stones, too, but they’re far smaller and too weak to be used in magical devices, so there’s no demand for them.

The magic stone from the super-leveled beast we just defeated was huge. No wonder it was able to attract rocks and branches to it and form such a huge secondary body. What’s more, it was such a high-quality magic stone, it could be used to make a rather large-scale magical device.

If the rocks near the magic stone were to take on that property and eventually turn into magic stones of the same level, it might be possible to intentionally propagate high-quality magic stones.

“Well, since we’re here, we should try to gather some magic stones,” I said.

“Good idea. Archmage Viol, please take charge of this one.”

“Well, all right.”

While Arshtag and Vellia forced the stone into my hands, the others were reboarding their carts and preparing to depart.

“Incidentally, Gyle, Yukka… Did you manage to locate the source of the magical energy?” Arshtag’s question made Gyle and Yukka exchange glances.

“We haven’t been able to pinpoint it yet,” Gyle said. “The giant tree we saw from the sky does have the most magical energy of anything around here. The beast attacked us on the way to the

base of the tree, so we haven't yet been able to investigate the area around it."

"Despite being made of rock, it was very agile… and had incredible jumping ability."

Vellia nodded.

"Gyle, lead the way. That battle took up quite a bit of our time, so we should split up and begin searching for the energy source in earnest now."

"Roger!"

Gyle nodded briskly, then his cart rose into the air and sailed off into the deep forest. Arshtag, Yukka, and Gil all took to the air as well. They no longer showed any unease or hesitance about flying.

"Let's go!"

Naturally, Seren was quick to follow them with a fluid motion. Despite the density of the forest, we'd blasted a flat area around us with all that explosive battling.

"That explosive magic certainly was incredible!" Seren said.

"Yes… As for wind magic alternatives to that spell, the Tornado spell also has enough power to do the same thing," I said.

"But it seems like the addition of fire magic makes it stronger… I wonder if I, too, could one day wield that type of magic…?"

"In another two or three years, I think you could. Right now, you're experimenting with water magic, aren't you? I think you'll have both wind and water magic mastered before long."

We continued flying and chatting, and then we entered a clearing, the trunk of the giant tree before us, looming like an immense wall.

I was at a loss for words. Even from the sky, it appeared to be an exceptionally large tree. So I was expecting something big. But up close, its absolute strangeness really struck me.

The trunk was knobbled all over with whorls and lumps, an oddly textured bark that immediately set it apart from other trees. Here and there, it was covered with moss that emitted a faint, otherworldly glow.

"Incredible…" I heard a soft murmur, and I looked to my side to see Seren also admiring the tree.

"It looks very unusual, doesn't it?" I said.

“Yes…”

“The faint light emanating from this tree… It’s sort of greenish. A rare color for magical energy to be,” I noted.

“A rare color for magical energy? There’s really a light coming from the tree?”

Right… Seren’s eye for magic isn’t so sharp. She can’t see it. Well, everyone has their strengths and weaknesses. Still, it feels a little lonely, not being able to share this mystical sight with her.

“Yes. A soft, pale green light, emanating from the trunk. This great tree may contain an immense amount of magical power.”

The survey team pairs were flying around the tree in their carts. They looked so tiny in comparison, it made the tree’s size stand out even more. I wondered how long it had taken for this tree to grow to such a size.

“Everyone! Come here a sec!” Gyle yelled out from the other side of the vast trunk.

“Did you find something?”

Everyone flew over to join Gyle’s team.

With magical energy this concentrated, it’s difficult to pick up on even more concentrated areas… But no doubt Gyle was able to see more than I could.

We went around the big trunk, and spotted a big, white, mass.

“Ugh…” Lady Seren blanched.

“What is it?” I looked over her shoulder and saw a big cavity in the trunk of the giant tree—the bones of many magical beasts piled up inside. “You all right?”

“Oh, yes… Sorry. It’s just, I’ve never seen this many bones in one place… I think I’m okay now, though.”

“Don’t go pushing yourself beyond your limits.”

“Okay.”

Seren smiled at me, the color returning to her cheeks. I patted her shoulder and tried to give her my best smile in return. Her own smile brightened. Adorable.

“Archmage Viol, a moment?” Arshtag called out to me, pointing to the tree’s hollow with a serious expression. “I’m wondering how many bodies were piled up here. A giant magic stone seems to have formed on the floor of this hollow.”

“It’s incredible. I’ve never seen a magic stone of such size and obvious quality before,” I said.

Up until now, the biggest magic stone I ever saw was about the size of a fist. The magic stone here was on a completely different level in terms of size and quality. The part visible above ground was practically the size of Arshtag himself. No telling how much of it might be buried below the surface, though.

“With this… perhaps…”

“Aha, Archmage Viol. You’re thinking a stone like this would be strong enough to be used as a magical device for casting our great barrier wall… Aren’t you?”

“Hmm… Oh? But I don’t remember ever discussing our need for new magical devices with you, Vellia, did I…?” I asked.

“No, but I was chatting with Old Man Euleho about it. He said he was waiting for some good magic stones, but since you’ve become a family man and all, Archmage Viol, he was saying it would be better to reduce the burden on the wall guards as much as possible… Preferably by finding a suitably strong magic stone sooner rather than later.”

“Vellia, I…”

“When two High Mages get married, it’s hard to do shifts on wall duty, especially when you factor in children…”

Vellia was married, too. And actually, it’s not that uncommon for High Mages to marry one another. We spend a lot of time in close proximity and naturally have a lot in common. However, wall duty takes up a lot of time in the form of shifts, and it can make things difficult for two spouses who are both in this line of work.

“Right… Wall duty hours are long to begin with. And it’s tough work, physically, mentally… Honestly, it’s a lot for everyone. The sooner the problem can be resolved, the better.”

“When I heard you were working on a potential magical device… I wondered if it was for us mages. But seriously, though, you newlyweds should enjoy your couple time together. If wall duty could be cut back significantly, I’d be all for it.”

“Right… You’re happily married, Vellia, so no doubt you know what it’s like.”

When I said that, Vellia laughed like I’d said something really funny. And I couldn’t help grinning too.

“For Seren’s sake… I hope you complete this hypothetical device quickly,” she said.

“Right. Well. I’ll do my best. For Seren, and for everyone else as well.”

“Please do.”

I nodded to Vellia, then turned to look at Seren, intending to make this declaration directly to her as well… But she was staring at the ground in embarrassment. Her ears and neck were red as well. No doubt she’d overheard the whole thing.

With renewed determination, I faced the giant magic stone. “This might work well for a magical device. I’ll chip a bit off and take it back with me.”

“Good idea. I’m sure you can find a ton of different uses for it.”

“Er…” Seren cleared her throat, joining my conversation with Vellia.

“What is it?”

“I mean… If we each take a bit in our cart, we can bring home quite a large amount of it, can’t we? I mean, since we’re here, and there’s a lot of us, why don’t we bring back as much as we can right now?”

“I see. Yes, that does make sense, but I don’t think we should do that on this occasion.”

“Okay.” Seren nodded right away, but I went on to explain my reasoning.

“If we bring back too much, we don’t yet know the ramifications. This magic stone might be the source of the concentrated magical energy. If we remove it, who knows what that will do to the forest and the magical beasts that dwell here.”

“Oh… Yes, of course.”

“And, if we bring a large amount of magical stone back to the capital, the capital itself might become a new hotbed of concentrated magical energy.”

She gasped.

“We should exercise extreme caution when it comes to retrieving magic stones,” I said.

“I just never thought…” Seren looked a little pale, so I gave her a reassuring smile.

Or what I hoped was a reassuring smile.

“We’ve been wondering about this forest and the concentrated magical energy here for some time now. We only have theories about the potential dangers that may be involved. But you know, the more I look at this magic stone, the more amazing it seems to me,” I muttered, rubbing my chin.

Arshtag nodded emphatically. “There’s no doubt that this is the source of the energy. The question is, how did it form?”

Yes. That *was* the question. But even using Identify Magic on the surroundings yielded nothing eye-catching. Although I was secretly relieved about that.

“Right. Anyway, it doesn’t seem like there’s any other magical energy sources or traces in the vicinity.”

“Good.”

“What do you mean?” Seren frowned, curious about the exchange between me and Arshtag.

“If this place formed naturally… A graveyard for magical beasts that turned into a concentration of magic… That wouldn’t be a big issue in itself. But what if someone created this place… Created it for nefarious purposes?” I posed.

Seren seemed to grasp the seriousness of that. Her face instantly tensed up.

“Well, anyway, we’ve fulfilled our initial objective and identified the source of the magical energy,” I said. “We’ll report back to His Majesty, then a conference will be held to decide what to do about it. Everyone, great work today. Because of you all, we’ve been able to achieve our long-held desire to identify the source of this mysterious energy.”

The others looked in high spirits. Well, they HAD just solved a fascinating, lengthy mystery, after all.

“Thanks to all the survey team members who’d worked so hard on this case… And thank you also to the wind mages who mastered flying for the sake of this mission.” I lowered my head. “But just in case, let’s set up an extended-length recording orb in the hollow of the giant tree. And we’ll want to have the forest patrolled regularly by individuals with Identify Magic. We’ll need to continue surveying the magical beasts around here, after all. Once we’ve reported our findings to the king, you’ll get word about the follow-up.”

The rest of the survey team nodded solemnly. I would have to make sure I handled my end of things carefully. It would be terrible if any of their hard work went to waste.



NOW that I'd seen to the discovery of the magical energy source—something I'd been curious about for quite some time now—and had discovered a huge chunk of what seemed to be a high-quality magic stone, I was feeling in high spirits when I exited my office. I'd put in my request for an audience with the king, and would be able to report our wonderful findings early next week.

I was thinking of going back to my mansion, but then I had a sudden idea to stop by Borden's place.

Borden's aide ushered me into the office. "He looks to be finishing up any minute now," he'd told me, but it was clear that Borden was deep in concentration.

Eh, business as usual.

"Sorry... It seems I've caught you in the middle of something. But I have something to discuss..." I said.

"Could it wait until tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow's a non-work day. I wouldn't mind... But are you sure you want to see me on a weekend, Borden?"

"I actually have something to give you. I was planning to bring it to your mansion personally. Is that all right?"

"Of course. Anytime in the afternoon is fine."

"Right. See you tomorrow, then."

And then Borden ushered me out.

It looked like he was really pressed for time. My bad.

I guess I'll just stop by the market and head home. With that thought in mind, I left the palace. If Borden was going to go out of his way to visit me, I wanted to at least prepare some good liquor to welcome him with.

On my way home, I stopped to buy Borden's favorite tipple.

It was nice to be on my way home before dark, for the first time in a long time. The walk home was pleasant. For some reason, the cool outside air felt gentle and comforting.

Arles 1

Unfathomable Genius

“ARLES!”

I heard a voice from behind me, and when I turned around, I saw a familiar face. As soon as she saw me, she beamed and ran over. It was Seren—a fellow High Mage who joined at the same time I did.

Incidentally, she’s a duke’s daughter and was once engaged to the crown prince. But she’s also a genius who passed the exam to become a High Mage even though she never attended magic school.

What’s more, just the other day, she announced her sudden marriage to the incredibly handsome Archmage Viol, a mage of great renown. It’s certainly made her the subject of a lot of gossip. No one can quite figure her out.

“It’s been a while! Thank you so much for the magical item you sent me as a wedding gift the other day.” She beamed at me, so cheerful, like she was oblivious that she was considered something of a miraculous enigma.

“You’re welcome. So, what do you think? Did you like it?” I smiled back, internally thinking how adorable she was.

To be honest, at first, my reaction to her was envy… Even jealousy.

As soon as she joined the mages, she was the center of attention. Naturally, the veterans gave her all of their focus. So, I admit that irritated me. And maybe I was a bit jealous that she was getting singled out for special treatment.

I mean, even before this girl joined the mages, she’d taken out a monstrous beast while FLYING. No one had done that before. And she’d even invented a new type of spell while she was taking the High Mage exam! It was like, who the heck is this genius?

But just so you know, all of us mages are pretty special individuals. I mean, we're all worthy of the title of genius.

But… This girl… She's a little above and beyond. It's kind of annoying.

But, once I actually talked to her… I found that Seren was surprisingly normal. A little shy at first, but chatty once you get to know her. It's hard to believe she's the daughter of a high-ranking noble family and a magical prodigy.

"Oh, yes! The magical device was gorgeous! The lights, the sounds, the scent…! So wonderful in every way! Lord Viol liked it too."

"Oh, I'm so glad it brought you joy!"

"But how exactly does it work?"

I had to chuckle. Seren's eyes sparkled with curiosity. Even when I was working as an in-home magic tutor, I never met anyone as enthusiastic as her. Like I said… adorable.

"So, actually, it uses three magic stones."

"Three of them?!"

"That's right. There's a magic stone inside the round ball inside the bottle, see, and when you press the button, that magic stone containing fire magic is the first to activate."

"Fire magic…" she hummed with interest.

"Yes, and when the temperature inside the bottle rises, the other two magic stones are triggered and start spinning around and releasing the light and sound energy that's been concentrated inside them. At least, that's Lucien's explanation."

Lucien was in charge of the mechanism behind the device, so I didn't know the exact details. But I think he said something along those lines. Anyway, fire magic was the trigger. And some fiddly work was done to imbue the other magic stones with various light and sound effects and so on, which would be activated by the fire magic.

"Amazing…! So many steps to it," Seren said.

"Yeah, it's amazing. Lucien's pretty good at developing magic devices, so that's the direction he's hoping to go in. He was the most gung-ho about giving you a magic device for a wedding gift, too."

Lucien's pretty solemn and serious, but he gets more fired up over stuff like this than anyone I know.

“Gil’s specializing in magical research, right? What about you, Arles?” Seren asked.

“I guess I’ll go with magic development. Magic is the most interesting thing, after all.”

“…Wow, everyone’s already made up their minds…” Seren looked down, frowning.

Despite being so perky a moment before, she now seemed very melancholy. Hmm, maybe it’s because she’s a little younger than the rest of us. But I see her as something akin to a little sister. Or like one of the younger kids I used to tutor. It made me feel protective of her.

“Haven’t you picked something yet, Seren?”

“Every specialty seems so interesting, I just can’t decide…”

“Well, true. But I hear that some of the mages don’t specialize in anything. They keep it loose. Anyway, I don’t think you need to be in such a hurry.”

“Really…?”

“Well, yeah! Anyway, you’re still studying the fundamentals, right? There’s no need to rush things. Take your time. Think things over.”

“I feel so guilty for holding everyone up…”

“Don’t be silly. Your performance makes up for any gaps in knowledge. You should be proud of yourself. Being too humble all the time can make you start seeming insincere, you know?”

I meant it as a joke, but Seren looked aghast.

I think she probably really does see herself as a burden to others. But objectively, Seren’s achievements have already been monumental. How could anyone mind at all?

Since joining the guild, she’s created some amazing magic, rescued a trade ship, and recently even taught flying magic to some wind mages. It’d be fair to say that her contributions have been greater than anyone else’s.

Yet she still saw herself as a burden. That was shocking.

Now that we’ve known each other for a few months, I can see that she severely underestimates herself despite her obvious abilities. But in our workplace, which values ability and results, being too humble comes off badly. As an older colleague, I wanted to impart this bit of advice to her.

“More importantly, Seren, you’ve improved your water magic recently, haven’t you?”

“…Oh, yes! Speaking of which, I just remembered I wanted to ask you something, Arles.”

“Oh, indeed? What?”

What could that be? I got a little excited and curious. But what Seren had to say was nothing like what I’d been expecting.

“Um, so actually, I only have a little fire magic, but it seems like I’m starting to develop an aptitude for it. But it’s still so minor that I’m incapable of doing anything advanced with it.”

“Wow, that’s great! But if you show early aptitude for one thing, your sub-attributes tend to lag.”

Though, I don’t know if that general rule applies to this genius young lady.

“Yes, well, it’s not like I want to cast any super-strong spells or anything, only…”

“Yeah?”

“Um, I want to give the fatigue recovery spell something like a heat effect.”

“A what now?” I squawked.

“Well, the other day, Lord Viol warmed me up to help me recover from my fatigue, and it felt really nice. He said he mixed in a bit of fire magic.”

“…”

A genius?

No, THAT guy was the real genius.

“I wanted to learn it as well, but I was told I didn’t have the right attributes at the time. So I’ve been studying in secret to surprise Lord Viol…”

Well, ain’t she cute?

I was stunned into silence. Her explanation for why she wanted to do it was so cute. Learn fire magic from me, in secret, all to help that stone-faced Archmage relax. Adorable.

I wish I had a spouse that cute.

“Lord Viol is so busy. I just want to do anything I can to help him relax. So if you’re not terribly busy, Arles…”

“Oh, sure, no problem. I have plenty of time to waste. And I am a pretty good teacher. You can rely on me, Seren. I was an in-home tutor, after all.” When I said that, Seren’s face lit up.

“Oh, thank you very much!”

“But you know… It’s surprising! Geniuses really think differently. Using fire magic to add a thermal heating effect to a recovery spell… I never would have thought of that.”

“Yes. I was surprised, too.”

“Yes… It sounds nice, though!”

“Oh, it is! It’s a blissful sensation, like sinking into a hot bath…!”

I laughed. The way she phrased that was so cute. “Hahaha, then I’ll have to help you out. So your husband can enjoy a nice relaxing bath. Or the equivalent.”

“Oh, thank you!”

Ah, what a great smile.

“But you know… Good magic requires hard work and grit!”

I have to make that clear right from the start, I thought, giving Seren a stern look.

“When you learn from me, you don’t quit until you’ve mastered the subject.”

My personal teaching philosophy. My students say I’m like some sort of demon teacher, but Seren beamed from ear to ear.

“Okay! I’m certainly ready to prove I’ve got grit!”

Ah. How admirable.



But… do nice young ladies even need grit?

I wasn't sure… But either way, I had the feeling this arrangement would work well.

She seemed ready to learn the techniques behind spells. And she was brimming with the confidence required to try. Even this girl, not confident in who she is as a person, is prepared to do what it takes to become a great mage.

You can build confidence through hard work and applying yourself, even in areas where you naturally lack confidence. I smiled wryly. Yes, Seren was a talented and promising young mage. There was certainly no need for me to have any concerns.

Looking at Seren, who is about the same age now as the students I've previously taught… I feel filled with an urge to encourage her. I don't know what magical discipline she'll go on to choose, but magic development would be a good fit. Her ideas seem unusual, so it would be fun to develop magic together.

"Well, let's get to it right after work today," I said.

"Great! Oh, thank you!" After bowing low, Seren ran off.

Ah, the vigor of youth!

I grinned, watching her go. I never imagined I'd be able to have Seren as my pupil. This was going to be fun.

Gentle warming magic to go with a rejuvenation spell, eh?

I started coming up with a lesson plan in my head that would make the best use of my unique skills. Just thinking about it was unexpectedly most enjoyable…

Seren 38

Magic and Magical Devices are Amazing!

ON my way out the door to go home, I ran into Arles and said a personal thanks for the amazing wedding present. Now, I was on my way back to my residence in high spirits.

I was glad I'd been able to say thanks and excited that Arles would be teaching me fire magic. I'd been learning wind and water magic from my peers but was told it was still too soon for me to start on fire magic.

I've just about completed intermediate-level wind magic and only just started learning water magic.

That was my current level. So, it was decided that it would be better for me to strengthen my skills in those areas before I started on fire magic, which I hadn't even shown any special aptitude for yet.

At the time, I agreed. I was struggling enough as it was with water magic. I never even thought of trying out fire magic. But now, I had this burning desire to try fire magic as well.

I mean, I wanted to be of assistance to Lord Viol.

Ever since our honeymoon ended, Lord Viol has been coming home much later than me almost every day. He often came home even later than the hour Vi used to visit my room.

Lord Viol said it was because he was taking care of work that had piled up while we were away. But according to his assistant, Contard, he used to stay even later in the past.

"Now that he's a newlywed, he's been leaving earlier than ever." Contard laughed when he told me that. I wondered if this meant Lord Viol might be coming home even later sometimes…

That made me want to find some way to help Lord Viol feel less tired out by everything. Of course, fatigue recovery magic can help restore the body, but it would also be nice to provide some sort of treatment effect… something soothing to the soul.

Then I remembered that warm healing magic Lord Viol used on me before. That same soothing heat that had healed me, mentally and physically, when I'd been in that state of fear. That would, no doubt, make Lord Viol feel happy, too.

Once the idea had occurred to me, I was desperate to try it out.

I felt a little awkward asking the older mages, so I went to Arles instead. And I got a yes! I was going to practice hard so that one day soon, I could show Lord Viol. I couldn't wait to see his look of surprise!

What kind of skills would I need to be able to cast good fire magic?

I was excited to try out a new magical attribute as well. I found it hard to stay calm. I was practically skipping as I walked!



"OH, Lord Viol… You're a little early today!"

I met Lord Viol at the door when he came home. He was holding what looked like an expensive bottle of liquor. Odd. I don't drink myself, so I can't claim to know much about it, but it didn't look like ordinary dinner wine or anything. Just from the design of the bottle and the label, I could tell it was something very top-shelf.

"Yes. I had to see Borden about something, so I left work early… But Borden was busy with something. He's going to visit me here tomorrow."

"Oh, Prime Minister Borden is coming?"

It's nice that the two of them are such good friends. I should stay out of the way if they're going to discuss something important… But still, I should at least pop my head around the door and say hi.

"Lord Borden has done so much for me. Is it okay if I show my face and say hello?"

"Of course. Borden would like that."

"Oh, good." I beamed, and Lord Viol's expression softened. "Is that bottle for Lord Borden…?"

"Yes, it's his favorite tipple. Albert?"

“My lord?” Albert, our butler, who’d opened the door, softly smiled as he took Lord Viol’s robe and the liquor bottle.

“Albert, would you mind serving this when Borden comes tomorrow? We haven’t decided on a time yet, but he should be coming sometime in the afternoon.”

“Certainly. But, Lord Viol…”

“Yes? What is it?”

“In the future, we servants will prepare whatever refreshments you require. Simply let us know the desired product. You’re a busy man… We can handle those sorts of arrangements.”

Lord Viol looked surprised by the idea. “I see. I hadn’t thought of that.”

Classic Lord Viol.

“Thank you. I’ll probably be making a request like that of you all in the future,” he said.

“Certainly, my lord.” Albert smiled, and Lord Viol’s eyes crinkled a little at the corners. I had to fight back a huge grin of my own.

Until we got married, Lord Viol lived alone. Since we started living together in this house, Lord Viol has been navigating the unfamiliar nature of having staff and servants. Lately, though, he’s been getting the hang of it.

“Then, I shall have a light meal prepared for Lord Borden’s visit tomorrow. Incidentally, do you know what his likes and dislikes might be?” Albert inquired.

“Borden’s not all that picky. He doesn’t appreciate sweets like I do, but he’ll indulge now and then.”

“Understood. I’ll let Jean know.”

“Thank you. That’s very helpful.”

Lord Viol thanked Albert, who disappeared briskly into the kitchen with a look of satisfaction. From the quietly assured look on Albert’s face, I was sure that he and Jean would be able to provide a comfortable welcome to Lord Borden.



AFTER having dinner with Lord Viol and taking our baths, the two of us could relax together in our usual manner.

I immediately picked up the magical device that was lying beside the bed.

Lord Viol wandered back into the room, softly towel-drying his wet black hair. When he saw what I was holding, he smiled a little.

“Ah, your magical device from Gil and company?”

“Yes. Actually, I ran into Arles on my way home. I was able to say a personal thank you!”

Of course, I was going to learn the fire magic in secret from Lord Viol. I was going to get really good and surprise him soon!

“I see. Well, good. I’d like to thank them all personally as well for this amazing magical device.”

“It might be difficult to find the time to do so, but it would be very nice of you.”

I was pleased that Lord Viol felt the same way I did. He gazed at the magical device I was holding and narrowed his eyes a little with a smile.

“...Such a fun little device. Especially pleasant on a clear night like this one.”

“I agree. These kinds of magical devices are great for when you need to relax.”

Just make the room dark, magically activate the device, and press the button. So easy to use... But this magical device was packed full of wonderful effects that were so soothing.

“Okay, I’ll push the button now.”

“Um, should I turn off the lights?” he asked.

“Oh, please do.”

As soon as the room darkened, I pushed the button.

Then... *WHIRRR*. I heard small gears moving inside it.

“The light is so soft and beautiful.”

The round ball slowly rotated inside the slim, beautiful glass vial, emitting a beautiful light. The floral engraving on the glass vial sent little flowers of light dancing all over the walls of the room. Then the glass lid slowly lifted, and a gentle floral scent wafted out as a music-box-style melody filled the air.

I’d last used it only yesterday, but I was struck all over again by how lovely it was, how soothing.

“Light, sound, and scent. I wonder how they actually do all of this,” I said.

“Hmm? Didn’t you ask Arles..?”

Lord Viol looked at me curiously, though I hadn’t intended to muse about the device out loud. I smiled a little wryly.

“Yes, it was explained to me, but… I still didn’t quite understand it.”

“Hmm. So then, what were you told about how it works?” Lord Viol, now seated beside me, examined the magical device with intrigued eyes.

“There are three magic stones inside the vial… When you press the button, the magic stone containing fire is activated first.”

“Hmm, then perhaps this round ball starts spinning because of the heat generated by the fire magic.”

“Yes, I think so… Then, when the temperature inside the vial rises, the other two magic stones start to rotate as well, releasing the light and sound inside them.”

“Then the scent is connected to the fire magic as well.”

“Yes, it seems that way. It made sense to me at the time… But when I think about it, I can’t understand how the light and sound stored inside it is reproduced…”

“I see.” Lord Viol chuckled. “First, this round ball emits light, begins to rotate, and then the lid rises up, right? There must be some kind of spell stored within the three magic stones and the vial that works in conjunction with fire magic.”

“Wow, they can do all sorts of things, huh?”

“Yes. It surprises me, as well. Incorporating different magics, in tandem, in one magic device… That’s fairly complex and advanced stuff.”

“It certainly sounds so. I haven’t even started learning any of this yet.”

“Well, of course. But that’s why I’m surprised. Those newbie High Mages producing a device of this quality for a gift…? I wouldn’t have expected that.”

“Hehe. Everyone really works hard.”

I felt proud, somehow, to hear Lord Viol praising my peers.

When I thought about how everyone had worked together to create such a wonderful magical device for Lord Viol and me, happiness and gratitude overwhelmed me.

“It really is a splendid magical device,” I said.

“Yes, I think so as well. I have to be honest… I’d be lying if I said I wouldn’t love to take it all apart and see exactly how it works. But I won’t.” Lord Viol paused after saying that typically Lord Viol-esque thing… then he seemed to snap out of his obsession and come back to the real world. Adorable. “I think the three who made this would prefer if we just enjoyed its effects. The light, sound, and scent… Rather than fixating on how it’s put together.”

Lord Viol has a greater fascination for magical devices than anyone else I can think of, but he’s also inherently kind, able to consider the specific feelings of the people who’d gifted us this special item. I really love that side of him. Every time I notice it like this, I smile all over again.

“Well then, let us enjoy this wonderful device for what it is out of respect for those who gifted it to us.”

Lord Viol reclined comfortably on the sofa and beckoned me to join him.

I snuggled up against him, and we lay there and watched the lights flicker against the walls, both enjoying the special, soothing moment.

Viol 35

Borden’s Visit

WHEN I woke up the next day, it was already almost midday.

On workdays, I lack sleep, so I tend to sleep in on my days off to around midday. The mansion staff seem to have gotten used to my habits. It’s kind of them to let me sleep in.

I got up and rang the bell, and Albert brought me a cup of morning coffee.

“Lord Borden is visiting today, is he not? I have laid out some clothes for you, my lord… But what would you like to have for refreshments?”

“Something light, please. Thank you, Albert.”

“The bath is filled, incidentally, my lord.”

“Hmm. I think I’ll have a quick wash, then.”

“Then I will prepare the refreshments in the meantime.”

“Thanks, Albert.”

After the arrangements had been hashed out, Albert had some surprising news. Apparently, Seren had an unexpected guest of her own. A young lady friend of Seren’s. Since Borden, the prime minister himself, was due to arrive later, Seren’s guest was being entertained in the dining room.

It occurred to me that I ought to go and greet Seren’s guest as well, but I was still half-asleep… It would be rude to show my face like this.

I quickly took a bath and changed into the clothes Albert laid out for me. I used wind magic to dry my hair and was having breakfast—or rather, lunch—in my room when Albert came to inform me that Borden had arrived.

Surprisingly, he was early. So I wouldn’t have time to greet Seren’s visitor after all. That was a shame.

Borden had already been shown to the parlor, so I headed straight there. To the public, Borden is the Prime Minister—a venerable man. But to me, he’s just my good friend of many years.

I didn’t find him in the least bit intimidating. And I didn’t want to waste a good brunch, so I took it with me on a tray to the parlor.

“Borden! Thanks for taking the time to visit me at home.”

“…You don’t change, do you? Not even now that you’re married to Lady Seren.”

“Why would I?”

For some reason, Borden was smirking wryly at me. I had no idea why. I blinked at him, confused, but he sat down in front of me and reclined in a relaxed way.

“Ah, never mind. Anyway, the reason I’m here today… Well, here it is.” Borden slapped a box of considerable size down onto the table between us. “My mother sent me a few things she wanted to give you.”

“Your… mother?”

“Yes. You visited our demesne on your honeymoon, didn’t you?”

Borden’s mother… That set the old cogwheels turning. Yes, on our honeymoon, Seren and I were well taken care of at the estate where Borden’s mother lives. You could tell she was Borden’s mother because she had an affable way with people and a permanent smile on her beautiful face. But compared to Borden, she was a bit more perky and gregarious.

“Well, you wrote us that kind letter of introduction,” I said. “And Seren was keen to check out the magical tomes in your library. We stayed a full two days.”

“Yes, I heard.”

“Truly, some very interesting tomes in that collection. We were very well catered to, as well.”

“Well, any friend of mine and all that. Anyway, I heard you two made yourself useful to my mother in return.”

I blinked, a little taken aback. “We didn’t do much… Seren and I were able to read many fascinating books in the library, and we even received a few as gifts. So we did a few chores to express our appreciation.”

“Maybe it didn’t seem like much to you. But to an ordinary person… Well. My people were amazed at how quickly you cleared out the forest.”

“Well, I’m glad if we could be of service.”

“Anyway, those are gifts from home. A rare assortment of sweet treats procured through our connections.”

“Really?! Can I open it?”

“Of course. Good, you seem pleased.”

I opened the box, and my eyes fell upon an assortment of brightly colored fruits.

The brightness of the colors hit me first. But on closer inspection, I realized I was looking at a roll cake cut into slices, all topped with thick cream and studded with fruits, jelly, and candied decorations.

A roll cake is a familiar dessert item, but the way a variety of colors and textures decorated this one made it seem special indeed.

“Amazing…!”

“You like it, then?”

“You can say that again! I can’t wait to eat this. Please give my kindest regards to your mother…” I was still distracted by the dessert when I heard a knock at the door. Those must be the refreshments and the liquor I’d bought for Borden. “Ah…”

Oh, right. I forgot because of the amazing dessert, but I’d asked Borden to come around in the first place because I had something specific to discuss with him.

“Oh… Now, this is some quality liquor,” he said.

“I heard it was your favorite, so I procured a bottle. I admit, I wasn’t expecting you until later, but… would you care for a midday drink?”

“Why not? Every now and then won’t hurt. Thank you. These snacks look tasty, too.”

Borden smiled warmly. Whenever we’re together, I feel like I’m back at school, somehow. The only trouble is that I tend to forget myself and get a bit TOO relaxed.

“The chef in our employ is a very skilled fellow. Please, dig in.”

“Oh, thanks. Incidentally, Viol, what exactly brought you to my office yesterday?”

Oh, phew, Borden tactfully steered us to the subject himself. A good fellow.

“Well, the thing is… I have something to discuss regarding the Kichul Forest.”

“The Kichul Forest, you say? Is there some problem?”

“I’m not sure how to explain… The Third Mage Guild has been paying close attention to it for some time now, in fact. More and more powerful magical beasts appear there every year. And even plants have started turning into beasts. We’ve been conducting a top-secret investigation into why this might be.”

“What…?!”

“No real harm has been done yet. It’s all just speculation at this point. I was planning to report our findings and consult with the king the minute we found out something we could be certain about.”

“Working in secret… You… Well, never mind. So, then, you found something?”

“Yes. A cluster of concentrated magical power with a vast magic stone at the center of it. We believe its powerful magical energy is influencing the surrounding area, turning animals and plants into magical beasts.”

I took out the recording orb I’d prepared and played back the images in front of Borden. I was glad I’d thought to make a record. It would make explaining things to people much easier.

“This is… But… What’s this white thing? Bones? Why so much bone, all concentrated in one place?” Borden asked.

“Those are the bones of magical beasts. I suspect the hollow of this giant tree became a graveyard of sorts for them. But it’s not the bones I want you to look at. Look underneath, at the magic stone layer.”

“So that glowing thing is a magic stone? It’s huge.”

“And it’s of fine quality, too. I’ve never even heard of a magic stone this vast or pure before.”

“This is incredible…” Even Borden, always so calm, looked stunned. He had his eyes glued to the bizarre sight.

“So, here’s where I need your input,” I began.

“What now?”

“So the thing is, I’ve been thinking about the concept of a certain magical device for a while now…”

“Wait, why are we suddenly talking about magical devices?”

“It’s directly related.”

Borden looked skeptical but shrugged in an “Okay, let’s hear you out” type of way. Good old Borden.

“The magical barrier around our land is maintained by multiple High Mages working in tandem on a shift basis. That is a huge burden on us. As the head of the Third Mage Guild, I’ve been wondering if there’s a way to use a magical device to do the job for us.”

“Ah… Well, I can get on board with that. Constantly casting a magical barrier strong enough to protect our kingdom… That’s not exactly small potatoes.”

“Right. And we have no idea how long we can keep this up… How long will we have the right manpower? So I’ve developed a magical device I believe can greatly reduce the burden on us as mages.”

“You *what*?”

Borden often looks confused when in conversation with me. He gets this “What are you on about, man?” look, but if I take him through it step by step, he usually gets what I’m trying to say. From prior experience, I knew Borden could follow my clunky explanations. So, I took it bit by bit.

“Coming up with the idea behind the magical device was the easy part. That didn’t take long. The issue was that I couldn’t find a magic stone of sufficient size or purity to make the device run stably.”

“Well, of course not. No existing magic stone can output the amount of stable magical power that a seasoned High Mage can…” Borden stopped and gasped, his brows rising.

“Exactly, yes. If we use a big enough chunk of that huge magic stone we recently found… I think I’ll be able to run my device.”

“I see…!”

“I also think we need to remove as much of that magic stone as we can to weaken the beasts that prowl the forest. If their power is allowed to grow unchecked, the forest might soon become far too dangerous for us to enter.”

“I see that, as well. It’s important to keep things maintained on a stable field.”

“I’ve requested a meeting with His Majesty to report on the concentration of magical energy we’ve found and its source. I also intend to ask his permission to bring back as much magical stone as we can to use in the magical device development. So…”

“So…?”

“I thought I’d discuss it with you first, Borden, because… Well, I’m not the best at explaining things. I knew you’d understand me, though, even if my explanation was a bit bumbling and rambly.”

“Indeed…?”

Borden’s shoulders slumped. I feel like I’ve been making Borden make that face a lot lately. I felt guilty about it, but what could I do?

“I’m sorry for always bringing you issues like this.”

“Well… I can certainly help you get your message across, Viol.”

“Borden, old boy! Thank you!”

Borden smiled weakly. “Your request is something that’ll benefit the country, ultimately. I mean, all you’re asking is that we move to suppress the Kichul Forest monsters… And that we attempt to reduce the manpower needed to cast our protective wall barrier. Right?”

“Yes, that’s it!”

It’s amazing how succinctly Borden can summarize what takes me so many words to say.

“Right. Well, you can count on me.”

“Borden, my friend! I always DO count on you!”

“Ah, you’re in fine spirits, aren’t you, Viol?”

Borden gave me that wry smile again. But I meant it.

Sometimes, when I have to discuss things in parliament, I get tongue-tied because the politicians ask me all kinds of stupid questions. But Borden always understands what I’m trying to say in the end. He’s come to my aid many times.

I could not thank him enough.

“I mean, as long as you don’t come to me with some crazy request, I’ll always help you out. You’ve helped me a lot, after all. You and I… We help each other out.”

“Thank you.”

“No problem. By the way, these snacks are good. I like ’em.”

“They’re made by our young chef, Jean… Newly employed by us, but previously of the duke’s household. He’s all about innovation. He’s got a promising culinary future.”

“I see… So it seems you’ve gotten used to living with servants, then. That’s a relief.”

It surprised me that Borden would be concerned about something like that. I cause my friend a lot of trouble, don't I...?

"Incidentally, is the lady of the house not here today?"

Borden grinned and winked at me when he said, "Lady of the house." I knew he was trying to tease me, so I adopted a nonchalant air.

"My wife wanted to see you as well, Borden, but as it transpires, she had an unexpected visitor of her own."

"I see. I was rather hoping to see Lady Seren. It's been a while. Oh well."

After that, we chit-chatted about this and that. The magical tomes I'd discovered at Borden's family home, the magical devices Seren's peers had come up with, all about the flying training sessions, and so on.

Borden listened to me talk with a calm smile, but then I realized he wasn't talking about himself much.

"And what's new with you, Borden?" I prompted.

"Hmm, well, I can't really discuss work... And that's about all I do. Work, go home, fall into bed." Borden smiled wryly, and I nodded emphatically. That's about how my life was up until lately, too. "I mean, it's not like I don't have concerns of my own, it's just..." Glancing at me, Borden shrugged and sighed. "It's not something you talk about to a newly married man."

"What is it? I'm curious now."

"No, I won't say anything. Just enjoy your current happiness to the fullest."

"Hmph."

I was curious, but Borden wasn't going to share. I considered pressing the issue, but he just chuckled and rolled his eyes.

"Seeing you two so happily married... It makes me feel like I'd like to get married, too. But I don't even have a special lady in my life. See how ridiculous I sound?"

I was flabbergasted. "You want to get married? I thought you weren't that interested."

"That's true. I was so busy with my job as prime minister that I never had the time, or even the inclination, to look for a life partner."

Wow, Borden was really opening up. I nodded emphatically again.

“But you know… You were the last person I ever thought would get married. And now here you are, so happy and fulfilled. It makes a fellow think.”

“It does?”

“You’re not easily influenced by others, so you probably wouldn’t understand… But just take my word for it.”

Borden chuckled and got to his feet. True, I couldn’t quite understand that sort of sentiment. It also felt weird to imagine Borden getting married someday as well.

“Hahaha, it was worth coming today just to see that gormless look on your face.” Borden clapped me on the shoulder and headed for the door with a jaunty step. “I’ll be back for another visit sometime.”

And with another chuckle, Borden exited the parlor.

Seren 39

Wishing for Happiness Today

“INDEED, Lady Ladia?”

As soon as I woke up to the fresh morning light, I discovered I had an unexpected request for a visit from Lady Ladia. Speaking of which, Lord Viol would be hosting Prime Minister Borden today. I’d be left with nothing else to do, so it would be nice to chat with Lady Ladia.

We could enjoy a nice lunch together, as well.

I quickly sent a response that I would be delighted to receive her, and Lady Ladia arrived close to lunchtime.

“I’ve been waiting anxiously for your visit!”

“It’s been a month, I think, hasn’t it? I’ve been eager to see you, too, Lady Seren. I actually have some information to exchange with you today. And I’d like your advice on something as well.”

It was unusual for Lady Ladia to come to me for advice. Speaking of unusual, Lady Ladia was also dressed differently today. She looked more mature than she usually did. Her vibe was quite different.

Before she wore a lot of cute outfits, things with puff sleeves and so on, but today, she wore a ladylike dress with three-quarter length sleeves in a mermaid cut that hugged her curves. The pale blue-and-white dress was paired with a choker that offset Lady Ladia’s soft, pinkish-blondish hair.

“Lady Ladia, your outfit today is lovely. It gives off a more mature vibe than usual, but I adore it.”

“Oh, thanks! I’m trying to change up my image a bit.”

We enjoyed our meal while chatting about this and that. Perhaps because Jean had heard that our guest was a young woman, he had decorated each plate with flowers, and we enjoyed their bright hues as we chatted.

Lady Ladia, a member of the salon who was mainly in charge of shipping work, had come over to tell me all about what was going on with the trade voyages.

The first voyage using the stable wind-propulsion magical device Lord Viol and I developed went smoothly, and the ships were now sailing at speeds never seen before. As a result, the ships have started sailing to even farther-off destinations.

“Well then, it seems the magical devices installed on the ships are proving useful,” I said.

“More than useful! Your father has been beside himself with excitement over the prospect of visiting more distant lands and islands!” Lady Ladia smiled wryly. I could picture Father standing at the bow of a trading ship, happily sailing off to an unknown land.

“That sounds just like Father, yes.”

“We can now plan our voyages out much more precisely than before. No wonder he’s so excited. We’ve been planning out more and more trade voyages and making all kinds of arrangements on our end as well.”

“And you need to get approval from parliament and the royals.”

“Yes… but we can secure new trading partners, and there’s far less chance of shipwrecks occurring than before. And missions are shorter, so we can see the results much faster. Who could stand in opposition to any of that? It’s all great news for the country. Voyages are being approved smoothly, without issue.”

“It sounds like everyone’s in favor of it. But protracted sea journeys might make the crew start to complain a bit,” I pointed out.

“Oh, actually, they’re the most excited and motivated about it. Now, they can sail much more safely than ever before and visit all these unknown lands! Reports have it that morale among the sailors is at an all-time high.”

“…Hmm, yes, I can imagine that as well.”

When we went to rescue that trading ship in distress a while back, the crew seemed exhausted at first, but they were very kind to us, even though we had suddenly turned up out of the blue. We had great fun drinking with them in the evening, and they cheered us on with great enthusiasm when we floated the ship during the rescue.

It wasn't hard for me to appreciate that sailors might be a positive bunch in general. Even with all the mental and physical stress of being stranded, they kept smiling and showed great fortitude. Yes...they seemed a very motivated and adventurous group.

"Once the ship gets back, I'm going to be extremely busy," she lamented.

"Hehe, I wonder what kind of magical devices will come back with the ship. I'm looking forward to seeing them!"

"Oh, don't... You sound just like your father." Lady Ladia laughed. "Oh, right, I meant to tell you. Something interesting happened at the salon."

"What's that?"

"But keep it a secret, won't you?" Lady Ladia came close and whispered to me. *She feels the need to whisper it here? In the mansion?* I thought. "To tell you the truth... I suspect Prince Helios and Lady Linde are getting along rather well."

I couldn't help staring wide-eyed at Lady Ladia. "Really?"

Marietta hadn't said anything about that. But then again, she and I live in different households now, and don't get to see each other every day. Maybe that was why.

"So this is just my hunch, but I think Prince Helios has been feeling secretly a bit down ever since you got married, Lady Seren. But recently, he's started looking much more fresh-faced."

Secretly down? Goodness, that makes me feel guilty... I knew it. The time between the engagement with Prince Helios being called off and my marriage to Lord Viol was so short it must have hurt his feelings...

Lady Ladia grinned mischievously, seeming not to notice me wincing with guilt. "Anyway, one day, I had to stop by the salon late to tend to some business, and I happened to spot the two of them chatting. Since then, Prince Helios has been much more smiley, and Lady Linde seems quite comfortable conversing with him now."

"Goodness..."

"They still seem to be just friends. Friends that are quite chatty together. But I actually think the two of them would make a lot of sense as a couple." Lady Ladia chuckled as if tickled by the thought. Then she suddenly peered at me. "I know about Lady

Marietta's feelings, of course, but… If it comes to it… I hope you won't mind if I cheer Lady Linde on from the sidelines?"

I nodded slowly.

"…Unfortunately, this kind of situation can't have a happy outcome for everyone. And it's not something that can be forced… At least, that's what I think…" I was trying hard to choose my words. "I'm not in a position to say this, but… Now that Prince Helios is free of the custom of arranged marriage, I'd like to see him spend his future with the person he loves. And I also want both Marietta and Lady Linde to be happy…"

What was I trying to say? I wasn't sure. All I could do was gaze at Lady Linde and frown.

"It's difficult… I want everyone to be happy, ultimately, but if Lady Linde and Marietta both love Prince Helios… Then I'm not sure what's to be done… Prince Helios has his own feelings, too. It's tough. I'm not sure I can pick one to cheer for over the other."

I was a little envious of Lady Ladia. It was easy for her to take Lady Linde's side. I wasn't sure I could be that decisive. I sighed, feeling suddenly very heavy, but for some reason, Lady Ladia was smiling at me.

"That's just the reaction I expected from you, Lady Seren."

"What do you mean…?"

"I love that you're so honest, Lady Seren. It means I know I can trust you."

I was surprised and happy to hear such unexpected words. I may have even blushed a little.

"Well, no matter what others think, in the end, you can't change other people's feelings. Love is tough," Lady Ladia muttered, looking a bit sad. I asked her something that had been on my mind.

"Incidentally, Lady Ladia, you said you had something to discuss with me, right?"

Lady Ladia lowered her head and remained silent for a while.

Was it something she was having difficulty talking about? There seemed no need to rush her, so I just sipped my after-lunch coffee and savored the aroma while I waited for her to get her thoughts in order.

She was quite adorable, the way she kept looking at me, then away from me, and fidgeting, interlacing her fingers. I smiled over

how cute she was as I kept one eye on her... Until finally, she piped up in a tiny voice.

“Um... Lady Seren... How is it that you came to be close to Lord Viol?”

“What do you mean...?”

“You can’t have crossed paths much... And he’s ten years older, isn’t he? You only ever shared a few dances at balls... I was wondering what brought you together? And how?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer that question. After all, Lord Viol and I had mostly developed our relationship in secret from everyone around us.

“...Yes, that’s a good question...”

But, since Lady Ladia had been brave enough to ask, I wanted to at least answer as honestly as I could.

“Magic acted as a bridge between me and Lord Viol. Yes, it all started when he tutored me in magic, you see.”

“Yes, I knew about that... So that was the start of it then...”

“I became a High Mage with little basic magic knowledge, right? Lord Viol sort of took me under his wing. When I had trouble learning simple magic, he tutored me very gently... and he even took me out to see the market since I wasn’t used to life in town.”

“Lord Viol approached you, then.”

“Yes. As we started to talk about all sorts of trivial things, I realized that Lord Viol was an honest and trustworthy person, and my feelings for him gradually changed from respect to, well, something deeper.”

“I thought so... Yes, spending time together is important after all...” Lady Ladia heaved a sigh.

Come to think of it, Lady Ladia had said before that she had a crush on someone. It’s only natural to want to become closer to the person you like. But perhaps she was having trouble closing that distance, so she had come to me.

“Is it difficult to talk naturally with the person you have your eye on, Lady Ladia?”

“We just don’t have that much contact, is all... Maybe the odd dance. He always seems so busy... so it seems like it would be hard to even start a conversation.”

“So it’s not someone at the Academy or the salon, then… Yes, that certainly sounds more difficult.”

Someone she danced with at balls… That must mean the other person was a nobleman. But since the dances didn’t sound very frequent, and that was all there was, then striking up a conversation sounded even tougher still.

Lady Ladia’s far more in touch with the subtle complexities of the human personality than I am… So, if she was having trouble, this was something difficult indeed.

An aristocrat who rarely danced.

Someone so busy that it was difficult to even strike up a conversation with them.

That had to mean… Someone Lady Ladia had at least some contact with in her life, either professionally or personally.

But he wasn’t from the salon or the Academy.

Someone Lady Ladia might worry about inconveniencing with her feelings…

Someone maybe ten years older than she and I…

“Lord Borden…?”

“What?!!!”

When I mumbled Lord Borden’s name, Lady Ladia reacted as if shot. I looked at her, startled by her reaction, and realized her face was bright red.

“Wh-Wh-Why would you say him?!” she squeaked.

“Oh, I’m sorry… I just thought perhaps he was the one…?”

“Guh!!!” Lady Ladia gazed at me, looking stricken. Her pinkish-purple eyes glistened in a rather adorable sort of way. “How…? How did you figure it out…?”

“I mean, he fit your description… And when I tried to think of what kind of man would be worthy of your attention, Lady Ladia, I just suddenly pictured Prime Minister Borden… I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be so presumptuous…”

“It’s okay… Actually, I was debating whether to tell you myself or not…” Lady Ladia spoke weakly, then looked down and started fidgeting again, wringing her hands. I didn’t want to speak out of place again, so I remained quiet and waited for her to say more. “So… You know how Lord Viol and Lord Borden are friends, right…?”

“Oh, yes. They’ve been friends since their days at the Academy.”

“I was wondering if Lord Viol might know what Lord Borden is into… I was thinking, if I’m going to engage him in conversation it might help to choose a topic he’s interested in?”

“Lord Viol still often consults with Lord Borden when he needs assistance. It seems they have a very deep friendship. I’m sure he’d know all about Lord Borden’s interests.”

“That’s good to hear. So the rumors that the two are close friends seem to be true.”

“Why, yes, during our recent honeymoon, we were kindly invited to stay at Lord Borden’s family estate and read the magic books in his library.”

“Oh, how nice. I’d love to go there myself.”

“Of course, Lord Borden was busy and didn’t come to his family territory himself, but his mother is a splendid person, and the area was very prosperous. The people were cheerful and friendly, too. It was a lovely place,” I said, recounting my time there.

“His father, a former prime minister, his mother, a splendid lady in her own right…” Lady Ladia murmured in admiration. “Also, just from what you’ve said so far, I can see how good of a relationship he and Lord Viol have…”

Lady Ladia’s eyes sparkled. But then her face suddenly fell, and she looked down.

“What’s wrong, Lady Ladia?”

“On second thought… Yes. Please, act like you never heard what I said today.”

“But why?”

“The truth is… I know it’s impossible,” Lady Ladia muttered quietly. “It’s because… Because of his political neutrality. He won’t support any one faction. No matter what I do… It’s hopeless from the start.”

It’s true that Lady Ladia’s family is extremely conservative. And as Lady Ladia said, Lord Borden doesn’t side with any faction and remains neutral. Because, as prime minister, he places great importance on maintaining a stable country.

In that sense, what Lady Ladia said was quite correct. That realization must have come to Lady Ladia many times before,

forcing her to suppress her feelings.

But a part of her still couldn't give up. Wasn't that why she'd come to me today?

"But, Lady Ladia, you're not going to give up that easily, are you?" I spoke softly, and Lady Ladia blinked in surprise and looked at me. I slowly smiled at her as she gazed at me with uncertain eyes. "Even though there seemed to be almost no chance of you becoming a civil official, you continued to study in secret and eventually seized the opportunity when it came along. And now, you came here today looking for a way to somehow still get the chance for what your heart desires."

"Oh, Lady Seren…"

Impossible.

And yet…

Yes, impossible…

But also impossible to give up on.

No doubt she'd gone back and forth over it… Many times.

But it wasn't like Lady Ladia to give up.

"I mean, to begin with, you've been losing your image of being a complete conservative lately, right? Yes, your family is conservative, but volunteering to work in the shipping industry, which is known as a hotbed of reformists, takes quite a lot of determination, doesn't it?" I pointed out.

"That's because I wanted to teach my wily old father and my empty-headed brother a lesson. They never could believe that a female civil official could work comfortably in an industry so populated by conservatives!"

"But wouldn't that actually be more reassuring to Lord Borden?"

"Reassuring? How so?"

"I mean, if he was to marry you, Lady Ladia, and you yourself took a neutral stance… Then there would be no conflict of interest with either side, would there?"

"Surely…"

"Although even if Lord Borden did marry into an earl's family, I don't think he's the kind of person who would let that color his judgment."

Nor do I think he's the type to waver from the path he believes is right.

Lord Viol is the type to blithely move forward with his own convictions. But Lord Borden is more the type to smoothly convince those around him to get on his side.

“That’s true.” Lady Ladia smiled very gently. “I really like that about Lord Borden.” Then she smiled so dreamily that I blushed just seeing her. “He’s still young, but he has the heavy responsibility of being prime minister… And he has to deal with so many tough individuals like my wily old stoat of a father. Yet he always treats people with such calm understanding… While never yielding on his position, you know?”

I nodded emphatically. I was in total agreement.

Lord Borden’s polite to the elders, but he isn’t the type to just do whatever he’s told. And when it comes to dealing with young people like us, he’s kind and polite to those who do their jobs properly but like some kind of terrifying demon towards those who slack off or have the wrong approach towards work. In my opinion, he’s a balanced individual.

“He listens carefully to both sides and makes shrewd decisions that capitalize on both to get the best possible results… He’s flexible and fair, and I respect him a lot, but his hard-working nature also tickles my maternal instinct.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at Lady Ladia’s choice of words.

“Hehehe, Lady Ladia, you really have spent a lot of time studying Lord Borden, haven’t you?”

“Of course. I can’t tell anyone else, so you’re the only one I’ll tell this to, Lady Seren, but I’m attracted to people who look very ordinary but are actually very smart.”

“That’s just like Lord Borden.”

“Right?”

We laughed together as we continued to chat about Lord Borden. Lady Ladia was so cute with her big crush on him. I so wanted to support her in her romantic endeavor. But I just had one question.

“Umm, Lady Ladia, I wonder, would it be okay if I told Lord Viol about this? I’m not sure how else I can subtly ask him about Lord Borden’s interests.”

“I suppose if there’s no other way to get his assistance… As long as Lord Viol promises not to say anything weird to Lord Borden!”

“I can guarantee that it will be fine. Lord Viol’s someone who can keep a secret.”

He’s straightforward and doesn’t like to lie, but he kept my secret until the very end. If I tell him he absolutely mustn’t say anything about it, then I know he won’t.

“You’ve reassured me, Lady Seren. But please, don’t tell anyone else! If people found out about this, I wouldn’t be able to look Lord Borden in the eye ever again…”

When she said that, with her face all red, looking like she was about to cry, I had no choice but to promise. Seeing how adorable Lady Ladia was, I couldn’t help but hope that their relationship would go well.

“Oh, by the way…”

All of a sudden, I remembered what was going on today. My conversation with Lady Ladia had been so full of unexpected revelations that I’d gotten completely distracted.

“Speaking of Lord Borden, I think he might be here now.”

“What?! Wh-Wh-What do you mean?”

Lady Ladia looked so flustered, it was like seeing a whole new side to her.

“Lord Viol wanted to discuss something with him, and they made plans for him to visit our house this afternoon.”

“Oh no, oh no, what should I do?! Lord Borden is really here?!”

She went red, then deathly pale. I’d never seen Lady Ladia so discombobulated.

“I’m sorry. I was having such a good time talking with you, Lady Ladia, that I completely forgot. But I don’t think they agreed on a time… He might not even be here yet. Shall I check and see if he is?”

“No, no! I’m going home now…!” Lady Ladia shook her head so hard that it seemed in danger of falling off. “If I run into him without preparing myself first… I think I’ll have a heart attack. Usually, I make sure to fully prepare myself if I think there’s a chance I might encounter him.”

Lady Ladia rose to her feet and hurried towards the door. Perhaps she was even more in love with Lord Borden than I’d thought.

“Wait, Lady Ladia.”

Lady Ladia fled through the door, ignoring my attempts to stop her.

“Lady Ladia, calm down…! We haven’t even called for your carriage home yet!”

“I can’t stay calm!”

I leaped up and chased after her as she dashed towards the entry hall, but she ignored everything I said and kept yelping in a panicked voice.

“I think… After having confessed everything to you, Lady Seren, if I were to run into Lord Borden now, I would simply die of embarrassment and wouldn’t be able to face either one of you…!” Still wailing, Lady Ladia emerged from the corridor into the spacious entrance hall, where she skidded to a halt. “Oh…!”

I caught up with her as she stood frozen, and I gasped as well.

What bad timing. Standing there was Lord Borden, getting ready to leave, Lord Viol, who seemed to have come to see him off, the butler Albert, and the footman, Greer.

I saw Lady Ladia’s face turn pale, and I hurriedly stepped in front of her.

“Oh, Lord Borden, I didn’t know you were here already… It’s been too long since I last saw you!” I greeted him with a curtsy.

“Yes, it has been a while. My mother gave me a gift for you as thanks for helping her tend to our territory. I came to deliver it today. My mother was very pleased. Thank you so much.”

“Oh, we didn’t do anything important.”

“That’s what Viol said. You truly are a pair of High Mages, aren’t you?” Lord Borden narrowed his eyes in amusement. “You and Viol might lack a little in the thoughtfulness department, but your average mage can’t do things like fell forest trees in one swoop or dig up roots and cultivate vast swathes of land.”

“Well, it was mostly Lord Viol who did that. But I’m glad if we were able to be of assistance.” I smiled, and for some reason, Lord Borden made an exasperated sort of face… Then he shifted his gaze from me to Lady Ladia.

“Hello, Lady Ladia. What a surprise to bump into you here. It’s nice to see you again today. Have you come to visit Lady Seren?”

“Oh… Well, I’m delighted to have run into you as well…” Lady Ladia blushed and greeted Lord Borden with a soft sort of smile.

A perfectly normal exchange… But I had to wonder if Lord Borden had heard Ladia's wailed lament just before. I doubt he'd have admitted to it if asked. But no doubt a hint of irony in his words would let us know if he'd actually heard.

I'd love to know, but I couldn't read his poker face.

"You're dressed very nicely today. You look quite lovely. It's a refreshing change from how you look when you're in 'work mode.'"

"Th…Thank you…"

Lady Ladia blushed and beamed over what Borden said. Hmm, come to think of it… Ladia did say she'd been switching up her appearance to change her public image a bit. Maybe she was trying to become the sort of woman who'd suit a more mature man like Lord Borden?

Lord Borden looked at Lord Viol, then at me. "I wondered what was going to happen once Lady Seren became a High Mage and left the salon. But Lady Ladia and the other ladies have been doing a wonderful job. Thanks to them, things are running smoothly. I can rely on them for anything."

Lady Ladia's head whipped up.

"I see… Wow, for you to say that without any prompt, Borden, Lady Ladia must be a capable woman indeed," Lord Viol chimed in.

"Hahaha, you're strangely perceptive." Lord Borden laughed in amusement over his friend's words.

"I was fascinated to hear that the daughter of the Hapisery family wanted to work in shipping… but I must confess, I am impressed," Lord Viol said.

"Yes, I thought the same, but she has certainly exceeded my expectations." After answering Lord Viol, Lord Borden smiled at Lady Ladia. "You've got the strength of your convictions and the courage to speak up, Lady Ladia. That is your greatest strength and virtue. I hope you'll continue to demonstrate your abilities in the workplace to the fullest."

"Y-Yes…! I'll… I'll do my best…!" Lady Ladia became emotional upon hearing those words from someone she not only respected but had strong feelings for.

The familiar emotion made my heart feel fuzzy and warm.

Lord Borden seemed to really appreciate Lady Ladia's strengths and was able to articulate them fully. I couldn't help

hoping he would go beyond being just a great boss to become someone very special in Lady Ladia’s life.

Viol 36

This Will Change the Country’s Future

AFTER seeing off Borden and Lady Ladia, I talked with Seren and discovered a shocking truth: Lady Ladia was in love with Borden.

“That’s surprising.”

When I said that, Seren smiled with relief. “I’m guessing you didn’t hear what Lady Ladia said coming down the hall, then?” she asked.

“No, I heard her… But I didn’t realize that was what she meant.”

According to Seren, Lady Ladia didn’t state her feelings clearly in the hall, but Borden might have still picked up on it.

I then shared with Seren the news that Borden had also expressed a recent interest in marriage and told her about what sort of topics Borden was interested in these days.

Since Lady Ladia wanted to keep her feelings a secret from Borden and others, that was all I could do to help them. After all, you can’t force these things. It’s better to let them unfold naturally.

Seren said that she wanted to support her friend’s feelings, and I thought that if Borden, who hadn’t had any particular romantic relationships up until now, could be happy with her, well, that would be great for everyone.



ONCE the new week began, I had a rather hectic few days.

Sitting around waiting for an appointment with the king seemed a waste of time. I thought I ought to have Old Man Euleho see the magic stone for himself, so I convinced him to go there with some of the survey team members, although Seren and I wouldn’t be joining them. The team seemed confident they could

handle themselves after defeating that powerful magical beast the other day.

I'd like to have gone, too, of course, but a mountain of work had piled up while I was on my honeymoon. So, instead, I stayed and got on with my work. The survey team returned that afternoon. They'd gotten the job done fast.

They were due to come and give me a report. It was Old Man Euleho and Arshtag who arrived at my office as representatives of the team. It was a relief to hear that there had been no incidents during the short mission.

"That was quick. Good work," I said.

"We didn't encounter any magical beasts today," Arshtag reported.

"Flying is amazing. I never thought I'd be able to fly to the top of the magical energy source, see the magic stone, and then make it back home in such a short time!" Even Old Man Euleho seemed excited. "Ahh, things like this make me realize I've lived a long life! You know, I heard it was all due to a magic technique that young girl came up with! Your wife… she's an incredible young lady. A mad wife for a mad mage, ahaha!"

Old Man Euleho guffawed. It was rare to see him in such jovial spirits.

"You seem to be in a good mood," I remarked. "Did the magic stone meet your standards?"

"Ah, that it did! It's amazing. That stone is just humming with magical energy! A great big lump of it! It lit a fire under me, that's for sure!"

"How much should we take for the magical device?" I asked.

"Based on the purity of it… Hmm, Arshtag, can you make a circle with your hands?"

"Like this?"

"Right, right. About that much. Polish it up a bit, and it'll do nicely."

"I see. If that's the case, I think we can harvest three or four chunks and still keep the energy source intact. We should start by harvesting one piece first and trying it out in the magical device. That's the request I plan to make of the king," I said.

"It's happening, isn't it?"

“Excuse me, what are you talking about? What magical device does the guild want made?” Arshtag looked curious but confused. Oh, right. I never explained.

“Actually, we’re trying to develop a magical device that can amplify the power emitted by our great barrier wall. We can’t continue casting the spell at this level for much longer with the manpower we have. But, with this magical device, we can maintain the barrier at the same level of strength even with a greatly reduced number of mages involved.”

“That’s wonderful news…!”

“Relying only on a magical device to cast the barrier for us might be risky, though, so the goal is for it to be maintained by just two or three mages at a time. Either way, it will greatly reduce the burden on everyone.”

“Well, I don’t know as much about these things as Old Man Euleho, but it sounds like a dream come true to me,” Arshtag said.

“Doesn’t it? As soon as we can get the approval of the king and parliament, we can send your team to retrieve some of that magic stone,” I said.

“Try to extract the stone from the bottom of the mass, if possible,” Old Man Euleho instructed. “The lower down, the purer it is.”

“You can count on me for that.”

Arshtag sounded confident and ready to carry out what Old Man Euleho and I were asking of him.



“INDEED? Do tell me more.”

I was doing my best to try to explain the situation to the king.

I’d started by explaining that we’d been independently investigating the Kichul Forest and that the types of magical beasts seen there had been changing of late. It was difficult because I had to explain all of that before I could even start to bring up the main reason for this meeting.

The king doesn’t let anything slip his notice, so he constantly interrupted me with questions and requests to clarify things. Borden knew all about my plan now, so he occasionally came to

my aid when I was floundering, and I was getting through it somehow.

If we could only convince the king, getting it through parliament would be smooth sailing. If I got tongue-tied in front of parliament, Borden and the king could help fill in any gaps.

This was a lot tougher than when I'd explained things to Borden, and I stammered and flubbed my words a lot, but the king was as patient as always and listened attentively.

"I see. So, in other words, the beasts of Kichul Forest have expanded their roaming territory… And there are now new types of beasts that have transformed from plants?"

"Yes."

"And the Third Mage Guild, tasked with magical beast subjugation, has long suspected that there's a concentrated source of magical energy in the forest which transforms ordinary creatures into magical beasts… Correct?"

"Yes. Nowadays, the magical beasts are breeding and multiplying in many areas, so it's difficult to prove anything concretely, though."

"You were concerned that the beasts' territory was expanding… And suspected that the magical energy concentrated in the forest was increasing… So you carried out an investigation to confirm your theory."

"Yes."

"Hmm, I'd have preferred it if you'd come to me with your hypothesis before acting, but let's just hear what you have to say in full for now. Surely, you're here making this report because you've finally identified what you think is the source of this mysterious power, right?"

The king admonished me, but very lightly. Still, I reflected on my actions. I would be sure to report sooner next time.

But I also felt relieved that we could finally get to the point.

"Yes, here's a recording of it."

"…Aha, I see. This oddly colored, shining part of the mass is magic stone, isn't it? I've never seen so much in one place."

A pile of magical beast bones, with a huge lump of magic stone ore underneath. As the king gazed upon this sight, his eyes filled with surprise and expectation.

“Our belief is that this became a sort of natural graveyard for magical beasts and, over time, developed into a source of magical energy,” I explained. “At the moment, we haven’t detected any traces of malicious magic, and it does not appear that an individual with nefarious intent created this place, but we’re continuing to monitor it, just to be on the safe side.”

“Indeed?” The king’s expression softened around the eyes like he was relieved to hear it.

“Now, I’d like to ask for your advice, Your Majesty,” I began.

It was the moment of truth. I leaned forward a little and got ready to do battle.



IMMEDIATELY after the parliamentary meeting ended, I returned to the Mage Tower as fast as I could sprint.

In the Mage Tower’s small conference room, the survey team members, along with Old Man Euleho, were waiting for me.

When I threw the door open, everyone looked up at me.

After quickly confirming that everyone was present, I bellowed: “Approval granted!”

Withdrawn though I may be, I couldn’t hide my excitement.

Of course, explaining myself in parliament wasn’t as easy as when I’d spoken to the king. They asked a lot of sharp questions. But with the help of Borden and the king, I managed to get approval. Ultimately, it ended up being a total victory.

“Approval for what?” Vellia grinned knowingly.

“Various things. Everything. First of all, the continued investigation of the Kichul Forest and the management and conservation of the magical energy source. They’ve both been approved as government projects.”

“Yes!”

Arshtag and the other survey team members lit up.

“You can make a report to the king on everything you’ve achieved so far, and you’re to receive an official commendation and reward, as well,” I informed them.

“Wow! Archmage Viol, that’s incredible news!”

“All RIGHT!”

“It was Borden’s suggestion, not my own,” I said.

“All hail PM Borden!”

“I’m sure glad the prime minister is our Archmage’s best friend!”

Everyone seemed delighted. And, yes, from now on, this would be an official government project, which would make the planning and operation go much smoother. Incidentally, the main objective going forward would be to preserve the magic stone mass that served as the source of the magical energy exactly as it was, preventing it from being misused or growing too large.

It was also made clear that this would become one of the major duties of the Third Magic Guild, along with the four other missions of magical barrier maintenance, magic development, magical device development, and monster subjugation.

“We’ve also gotten approval to harvest magic stones for use in various magical devices, including devices for the maintenance of our great barrier wall.”

“Well, naturally.”

“There’s a good possibility we can greatly improve our national defense system. There was some debate, but in the end, we got the go-ahead to experiment with the magic stone cache we found to see how we can improve and enhance our magical devices, assuming the initial trials are a success… Of course, making sure that we don’t upset the balance of the existing magical source,” I said.

“Excellent work. Hey, Arshtag. As soon as you bring back those magic stone chunks, I can finish this magical device I’m working on. I’m counting on you.” Old Man Euleho grinned and heaved himself to his feet. “I’m off to my workshop. This is big! Even an old man like me’s all excited. I’ll go tinker with the device while I wait for you to return.”

“Right, if the device succeeds, it’s going to lift the burden on everyone else by an incredible degree. I’m counting on you as well, Old Man Euleho,” I called after him.

Without looking back, Old Man Euleho raised a hand in the air and exited through the door. He may have been old, but he walked with a straight back. I knew I really could rely on him.



THAT same day, when I returned home, my eyes widened when they saw the delectable array of food and desserts laid out on the table.

“Incredible…” I muttered to myself in awe. Seren came trotting into the dining room. Albert and Jean followed close behind with a smile.

“Lord Viol! I just heard from Vellia! Your proposal has just been approved by parliament based on the results of the recent investigation, right?”

“That’s right.”

Smoothly obfuscating the sensitive particulars of the proposal in question… Very good, Seren.

“The survey team members told me they’d never seen you so happy, Lord Viol! I thought… I thought we should celebrate, so I asked Jean and the other staff to put out a spread!” Seren said.

“That’s why there’s so much food?”

“I couldn’t have done it all myself, so I enlisted the others’ help,” Jean said. “Thanks to the extra hands, I made more dishes than I’d been hoping. I do hope it will serve to satisfy you, my lord.”

“We discussed it, and we figured you’d prefer a wider choice of desserts as opposed to more main dishes, Lord Viol. We went for small portions but a larger selection,” Seren said.

“Well, thank you…! This is… This is really something. I’m quite moved.”

When I confessed my honest feelings, Jean, Albert, Rince, and Greer all looked surprised for a second before they smiled happily.

Seren was smiling bigger than anyone else, though, as she led me to the table.

“Come on, let’s eat!”

“Ah, but it would be a waste for just us to eat such wonderful food. Why don’t we all eat together?”

Albert and the others exchanged glances when I said that. But then they nodded, and all took seats. Seren was still beaming away adorably.

“Well then, Lord Viol… congratulations!”

“Congratulations!”

“Thank you…!”

How sweet of Seren to want to celebrate with me. How kind of her to consult with the staff to prepare a special meal filled with desserts just for me. And how kind of the others to come together to prepare such a special spread.

That meal became one of the most special and happy memories of my life.



ABOUT ten days later.

The day had finally come to test the magical barrier with the magical device in question—the Barrier Amplifier.

Magic stone harvesting finished the next day, and the device was finished just as swiftly. But, obviously, we couldn’t just experiment with it for the first time on the main barrier that protected the entire country.

When we brought the existence of the new device to the people in charge of the barrier and requested their cooperation, they all agreed without hesitation.

After that, we swapped people in and out and experimented with casting a barrier wall similar in size and scale to the national one, performing repeated tests.

The minimum number of people required to ensure stable operation.

A risk-free transition method for the initial operation of the Barrier Amplifier.

A technique to prevent the magical barrier from wavering when replacing the members that make up the barrier.

A method of use that places minimal strain on the Barrier Amplifier during continuous use.

What to do if a malfunction occurs with the Barrier Amplifier.

We identified many other areas of concern, big and small, devised countermeasures, and repeatedly tested them. And now… here we are.

I knew things would be fine after such extensive testing, but I still felt nervous now that we'd come down to the real thing. Of course, when operating a magical device of this magnitude, we have to be careful about who is present.

The king and other important dignitaries were to be protected by multiple layers of protective barriers, and measures were taken to ensure a high level of safety, even in the event of a massive explosion.

It surprised me that Prince Helios was present for the occasion. No doubt to facilitate his later reign. It was the prince's first visit to the room where all those involved in barrier casting were gathered. He was looking around with a curious expression.

He was an important figure. The future of this country. Of course, several sturdy barrier spells were cast around Prince Helios's person as well.

In addition, all of the members of the Third Mage Guild were present to handle anything unforeseen. If this worked, the tough working conditions involved in barrier casting would be alleviated, so everyone present was highly invested. Even if something bad happened, I was confident we'd be able to handle it with the manpower present.

As I looked around at everyone's hopeful faces, I noticed Seren looking at me encouragingly. When our eyes met, she smiled and nodded as if to say, "It'll all be okay."

...Right. Of course it would. There was nothing to be afraid of.

I took a deep breath, then stood in front of the Barrier Amplifier. "Okay. I will now activate the Barrier Amplifier. As we practiced, please remove your spells one by one as I increase the output. Let's keep things as steady as possible to avoid big fluctuations."

"Roger!"

Nervous excitement filled the room. I turned and spoke in a loud voice. "Activate the Barrier Amplifier!"

"Yes, sir!"

While Old Man Euleho supervised, an up-and-coming magical device maker known as Yarko flipped the switch.

WHIRRR... With a muted sound, the Barrier Amplifier started up.

No issue at all.

Just as it had done in the tests, the Barrier Amplifier quietly carried out its purpose with only a slight humming noise. A steady stream of high-purity magical power emanated from the magic stone installed in the large candlestick-like object that stood about waist-high to a person.

“It’s stable. Mifa, you can leave the formation.”

“Carefully, though.”

Mifa gradually reduced the magical energy she’d been sending to the barrier and slipped out of the formation without a hitch. We use this method during our usual wall duty personnel changeover operations as well. Mifa was used to the procedure, so there were no worries there.

“Let’s increase the output.”

Old Man Euleho gave this direction in a quiet voice, and Yarko turned the knob smoothly. There was a muted click, and the next person slipped out of the formation. We repeated the same procedure until three people had left the circle of eight spellcasters.

“...It’s stable.”

“Yes, it’s quite stable.”

Everyone present sighed with relief.

Strangely, I don’t feel a sense of euphoria like I get when I defeat a monster. Just a sense of relief, like, *phew*. But we’re still just testing things out, so maybe that makes sense.

Using a magic megaphone, I clarified things for the benefit of the king and the watching assembly members. “As you can see, the Barrier Amplifier is working as desired. Even though three High Mages have left the formation, the Wall is still as strong as ever.”

“Wow...!”

“Unbelievable.”

“This is unprecedented!”

“So you’re saying this device can essentially replace three whole High Mages?”

“That can’t be, can it?”

The country’s leading figures were in a state of shock over how smoothly the Barrier Amplifier was working. They seemed surprised that our great magical barrier wall, which had been in

place for the last two hundred years and cast continuously by elite mages, could be supported by a magical device.

"If the barrier works without issues for the next three months, we plan to install another identical Barrier Amplifier. Once that happens, we'll only require two, maybe three persons to operate it, freeing up time and manpower for other research. This will, of course, allow us to develop new magic and magical devices far more quickly than ever before," I explained.

The crowd murmured in surprise again.

The king stepped forward, silencing the assembly. "High Mages."

The room fell silent.

It was rare, even for us High Mages, to be addressed directly by the king. The mages gazed at the king with a mix of anxiety and excitement on their faces. The king looked around at the assembly and smiled benevolently.

"Though I regret we have not had many opportunities to meet face to face, like now, Archmage Viol is always making reports to me about the splendid magical techniques and devices you all are always so busy making, and it is clear how dedicated you are to your work. I believe the Communicators, Sound Amplifiers, Sound Recorders, Water Overflow Canisters, and Incineration Boxes were also your inventions…?"

The king reeled off a list of the magical devices we'd developed.

"In just the past few years, you have created amazing magical devices that have changed people's lives, as well as powerful magic techniques that other countries dare not compete with."

Everyone looked pleased to have their efforts directly praised by the king.

Who could fail to feel satisfaction when their creations are praised and concrete examples given as proof? I felt proud and pleased, too, to see how the king appreciated everyone's efforts.

The king smiled more broadly and continued as he looked around at the parliament members in attendance. "Furthermore, in regards to the recent discovery of the great magical energy source and the vast magic stone at the heart of it… I was surprised to learn that this came as a result of your long efforts in suppressing magical beasts. Through fighting against dangerous

beasts without regard for your safety, and through your careful study of the phenomena that exist out there, you have produced truly worthy results. High Mages are truly…”

The king paused and looked around the room slowly.

“You are truly our national treasure.”

He seemed to be making eye contact with each member of the guild and addressing them personally. That seemed to resonate with them, and I could hear them sighing and murmuring.

“With the introduction of this new magical device, we will be able to spend less time and manpower on maintaining the great barrier wall. You, then, will have more time to dedicate to your important magical research. I hope you will continue to use your intellectual curiosity to the fullest and develop many fascinating technologies that will advance this country and the world itself.”

In other words, the king expected great things from us. With that message conveyed, the king and the other officials left the room.

Ah, what a wonderful day. When the mages lifted their heads, their faces showed renewed motivation.

The king was expecting great things, so great things we must deliver. If this magical device we were rolling out today was an ongoing success, it would greatly benefit the country and our guild. We would have more time for research, yes, but we’d also have more time to have lives outside of work.

With renewed vigor, I gave instructions to my most capable subordinates. “All right, the first phase has gone off without a hitch. As originally planned, from here on, we will begin full-scale operations while continuing to monitor closely for any issues. We will commence shift work on the Wall, and please, be sure to report even the tiniest of anomalies.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Please make sure to use the extra time this device affords us in profitable ways and remain vigilant to attend to any crisis.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Well, then, this concludes our preliminary roll-out. Thank you for being here, everyone. Wall Guards, remain on duty. Everyone else, please disperse and return to your usual tasks.”

Everyone clapped, and the atmosphere in the room grew casual and jovial. Seeing everyone's bright smiles warmed me.

How wonderful if this success could be ongoing.



AFTER parting ways with everyone, I hurried to the audience chamber. I was actually just about to return to my office when Contard called me back and said I had been summoned to the audience chamber. That meant a summons from the king. I felt a touch nervous. Apparently, Seren had been summoned as well. I hoped to meet up with her just outside.

As I walked, I thought about the future testing plan.

Ultimately, the goal was to construct three magical devices, one of them a spare, but only if we could do so without upsetting the power output of the magical energy source. We would have to be careful and constantly testing at every stage. Otherwise, there might be an imbalance.

I was still thinking hard about that when I reached the audience chamber.

Was Seren already inside? Should I go in or wait for her? I wasn't sure what to do, but then Seren came around the corner.

I'd walked here faster. I was glad she hadn't gone ahead of me.

"Lord Viol!" Seren spotted me and came trotting over, looking relieved. "I wonder what this summons is all about."

I shrugged. *I have no idea either, Seren.*

"I'm not sure. If it had just been me summoned, it would probably have been about today's magical device. But with you as well, I can't say…"

"Indeed…"

"Well, we'll find out once we're inside. We shouldn't keep the king waiting. Let's go."

"Yes, of course."

Seren smiled. We approached the audience chamber doors, which were opened to welcome us. Only, the throne was empty. Instead, Seren and I were led to a small anteroom.

We entered the small room when the door was opened for us, but I stiffened with surprise. Unexpected guests were present with the king—Prince Helios and Borden.

“Are you surprised?” His Majesty laughed mischievously.

Sitting comfortably next to His Majesty was the former head of the Third Mage Guild, Master Kenrude, a man whom I greatly respect.

“Master Kenrude… it’s been such a long time,” I greeted.

“Oh, I’m retired now, so you can just call me Gramps like you did when you were just a sprout, Viol, my boy.”

“Please, don’t bring that up…”

Master Kenrude was my mentor when I was just a young farmer boy. He noticed my magical power and scouted me for the mages. He would often give me candy and treat me like a grandson, and I saw him more as a kindly grandfather than as the elite man he was. I was very attached to him and always called him Gramps.

Now that I think about it, it was quite disrespectful of me.

“You’re like a grandson to me, Viol, my boy. I’d prefer it if you called me Gramps, as always.” With a teasing smile, he beckoned me closer. When I approached, he placed a small box in my hand.

“Can I open it?” That friendly, cheerful smile… It brought back fond memories. Feeling a warmth in my chest, I opened up the little box. “Oh…!”

Inside were bite-sized, colorful, round marshmallows topped with a variety of colorful decorations… So brightly colored and sweet smelling.

“My grandson is mad about these. He said they’re called raw marshmallows. He described them as squishable and wobble-tastic. Weird words to that effect.”

“Wow…”

“Ah, I’m glad you like them. I’ve heard you’ve been working hard, my boy, so I thought you deserved a reward.”

“A reward…”

Master Kenrude’s words took me by surprise.

Seren 40

Forever and for All Time

IT'S adorable how Lord Kenrude treats Lord Viol just like when he was a little boy.

This kind-looking old man with a charming smile was the head of the Third Mage Guild before Lord Viol. His pure white hair and beard make him look like the textbook definition of a mage. He'd led the Third Mage Guild for many, many years, long before even Lord Viol or I was born. He's pretty much a living legend. The people say that the modern conveniences we enjoy are due in large part to Lord Kenrude's life works.

From what Lord Viol had told me before, the only reason he decided to become a mage was because he was scouted by Lord Kenrude. He was Lord Viol's mentor. Lord Kenrude also seems very fond of Lord Viol. He must be kind-hearted indeed to know about Lord Viol's fondness for sweets and bring him that tasty-looking gift.

Lord Viol's eyes sparkled as he drooled over the cute array of tasty-looking raw marshmallows.

The king chuckled, watching Lord Viol, and then explained: "The other day, Lord Kenrude came to visit and told me many amusing stories. I, in turn, told him all about the magical energy source and the development of a magical device that could replace the Wall casters. Lord Kenrude was delighted to hear it and wanted to celebrate, so we set up this little meeting."

"I heard that today was the roll-out of this new magical device. I wonder, could I take a look at it later?" Lord Kenrude requested.

"Of course. I'd be delighted to have you look it over. And perhaps if you notice any areas that could be improved…"

"You don't need my wisdom anymore, my boy." Lord Kenrude chuckled happily. I could sense how much trust existed between them. The sight of them together warmed my heart, too.

His Majesty and Lord Borden looked most pleased, while Prince Helios appeared surprised as they all observed the interaction between Lord Viol and Lord Kenrude. Prince Helios didn't know about Lord Viol's sweet tooth, and he probably never dreamed Lord Viol had a cute side to him, so one could hardly blame him for being taken aback.

"Well then, please have a seat." Half-laughing at Lord Viol, who was taken in by the marshmallows, the king invited us to sit. He looked quite at ease as he lightly sighed. "I never thought we could create a magical device strong enough to perform the same barrier-casting work as multiple High Mages."

"See, what did I tell you? What he lacks in people skills, he more than makes up for in magical advancements that can benefit this land." Lord Kenrude spoke as if Lord Viol's achievements were his pride and joy. I was so pleased to see how highly he thought of my husband.

Then, Lord Kenrude directed an intense stare my way. As our eyes met, I blinked in alarmed realization. The pleasantries so far had been so jovial and natural that I'd completely missed my chance to greet him.

"I'm so sorry, I should have greeted you sooner..." I bowed my head low, and Lord Viol's chin snapped up in a panic.

"No, no, I'm so sorry, my fault... I was engrossed in those sweets..." Lord Viol muttered softly so that only I could hear, then he gently placed his hand on my shoulder and turned to face Lord Kenrude.

"I'm sorry for the late introduction. This is my wife, Seren. She's a talented High Mage working hard on research with the rest of us in the Third Magic Guild."

"I'm Seren. It's a pleasure and an honor to meet you." I was both happy and embarrassed that Lord Viol was introducing me to his mentor as his "wife," and I felt my cheeks grow warm.

"Oh yes, of course, you're Arthur's daughter; I know about you."

Arthur is my father's given name. Surprisingly, it seemed Lord Kenrude knew my father well enough to refer to him by name.

"Yes, Lady Seren... You're a talented lady known throughout the land. Still, it's amazing to think that the daughter of Arthur, that magical device maniac, would give up her position as princess

consort to become a High Mage. But I have seen your battle projection in the sky. You are indeed talented. I look forward to observing your future career." Lord Kenrude chuckled with amusement.

He seemed to know a lot about me, including that I was once Prince Helios's fiancée. He looked me straight in the eye, nodded firmly, then turned his gaze to Lord Viol and grinned.

"I never thought Viol here would get married... Let alone to such a fascinating young lady. But how cruel that he didn't even bring you to visit me. I couldn't control my curiosity any longer, so I thought I'd visit the king and bring a little gift."

"I'm... I'm terribly sorry!" Lord Viol looked truly apologetic.

Lord Kenrude grinned, the wrinkles around his eyes growing deeper. "Lady Seren, as you can see, he's not the most socially savvy of men. Please, do take care of him."

"I'm still young and inexperienced in many areas, but I'll do my best to be a good wife," I said.

"Don't go losing patience with my boy here, all right?"

"I'll do my best!"

Lord Kenrude looked at me and Lord Viol, then nodded, satisfied. I wondered if I'd passed his evaluation. I was a little anxious since he obviously saw Lord Viol as a grandson. But Lord Kenrude seemed to move past the whole issue smoothly and was now switching up the mood. The calm, guardian-like demeanor disappeared, and his face lit up with curiosity, like a young boy's.

"Of special note, Lady Seren..."

"Yes...?"

"That flying magic was excellent stuff."

"Thank you very much."

"Since the days of my generation, we've been wondering about having wind mages achieve flight, but we always dismissed it as an impossibility, and none would volunteer to try. To think that a girl who didn't even go to the magic academy would manage to do it... You never do know what's going to happen in this world."

"It's not that I discovered it or anything..." I said. "It's just that until now, it was considered too much trouble and inefficient, as so many magic output adjustments need to be made. But we worked

on perfecting it to better investigate the magical energy source, and as a result, everyone learned to fly."

"The important thing is to take that first step. In fact, it may have helped that you didn't attend the academy, Lady Seren. You had no preconceptions."

Perhaps that was true. If so, perhaps there were other spells and magical devices that I could develop because I'd lived a different life from a typical High Mage.

I know I cause a lot of trouble and hold-ups for people because I didn't go to the academy and learn the basics of magic. If I could turn that into something that helps others, that would be wonderful.

"Magic output control difficulties aside, if humans can utilize the power of flight, it will dramatically increase the scope of what is possible for us. When I saw the videos of the flight… I thought… Gosh, they've finally gone and done it! I was quite struck."

"Indeed… A lot of people dream of developing flashy attack spells, but this kind of everyday-applicable magic is much more useful to everyone." Lord Viol nodded, agreeing with Lord Kenrude.

Come to think of it, even though I wanted to learn intermediate-level magic, Lord Viol encouraged me to master everyday-applicable wind magic instead. I'm sure he had the same idea in mind.

"Hmm, well, earlier, His Majesty was bragging about all sorts of stuff, like how you flew a rescue ship to the aid of a trading ship manned by Arthur's sailors. And how you flew over the vast forest and reached that magical energy source in the blink of an eye. It all sounded like dream talk to me at first."

"Master Kenrude, I was as shocked as you, but it's all true."

"Ah, Prince Helios."

Prince Helios smiled at Lord Kenrude, who looked even more taken aback.

"You wouldn't think something as big as a trading ship could fly, but it can."

Just like Prince Helios said, even I didn't think it was possible to levitate something that big at first. But as it transpires, sometimes things do work if you just try.

"I was also blown away when I heard that Archmage Viol and Seren rescued that trade ship in just two days when it was deemed

the effort would take a month at least. That sparked their development of a magical device to help the ships navigate the oceans more smoothly. While we were all still reeling from those accomplishments, they discovered the source of concentrated magical energy and developed a device that would work to prop up the barrier wall. They've been breaking down barriers and shattering conventional wisdom in rapid succession." Prince Helios smiled at me and Lord Viol. "I now see why High Mages are known as our national treasure."

I was so happy that Prince Helios thought of us that way. It made me feel really seen and warm inside.

"Seren."

"...Yes?"

Prince Helios suddenly turned to me, and I jerked in my seat. He looked me in the eye and said, "I heard the flying magic you developed played a major role in discovering the source and retrieving the magic stone ore. I think that you becoming a High Mage was the best possible choice you could have made."

"Thank you...!"

The wind mages learned to fly by themselves. All I did was observe. I really didn't do anything special this time. But I sensed Prince Helios wasn't talking about small things like that. The warmth in Prince Helios's eyes as he spoke filled me with happiness.

Though I knew he'd made peace with our relationship, I've never shaken the feeling that I behaved disloyally towards Prince Helios and the king and queen. I thought I would carry that feeling with me for the rest of my life.

But now, I could feel the true kindness in Prince Helios's heart... In a way that I never saw when we were together. Internally, I bowed my head low before him over and over again in gratitude.



"TODAY turned out to be much more intense than I expected," Lord Viol muttered softly.

I was in complete agreement. And it felt like it had been even more intense now that we were back at home, sitting on our bed in our room, relaxed and ready to go to sleep. In the darkened room, the magical device my coworkers had given me continued to whirr away. It had become an indispensable part of our daily lives.

Calm music.

Pleasant fragrance.

Undulating waves of light.

Being in such a relaxed and happy environment makes the hustle and bustle of the day feel even more intense.

Then, something suddenly occurred to me. Maybe now was the perfect time to bring my efforts to fruition…?

I swallowed hard and made my suggestion to Lord Viol.

“Lord Viol, you must be tired today… I’d like to cast a spell on you to help you recover from your fatigue.”

“Hmm? Thank you. Yes, I should probably cast some healing magic. But I can do it myself…”

“No. I want to cast it for you. Please, lie face down on the bed.”

“All right.”

Convinced by the confidence in my voice, Lord Viol lay face down on the bed. I carefully brushed aside his black hair, which flowed loosely behind him, then placed both hands on his broad back.

Slowly, carefully, I cast my spell to recover fatigue on Lord Viol’s back. Then, just like Arles taught me, I extracted only the heat from the fire magic and slowly applied it to the main spell.

“Hmm…? It feels… sort of… warm.”

“Yes. I enjoyed it when you did this for me before, so actually, I’ve been practicing it secretly.”

“Secretly… You mean… You actually learned fire magic?!”

Hehe, yay. He was even more surprised than I’d thought he might be. All my hard work paid off.

“I still don’t have much aptitude for fire magic, so I can’t say I’m fully capable of using it. This is pretty much the only spell I can cast so far.”

“But I haven’t had any reports on it.”

“I told Arles to keep it a secret because I wanted to surprise you.”

“…You always, always surprise me.” I could hear the wry smile in his voice. Still, my answer seemed to reassure him. He laid down again and closed his eyes. “It feels good. You must have trained a lot.”

“Yes. I wanted you to feel really soothed, so I worked hard and practiced a lot.”

“I see…”

A comfortable, muffled voice, heavy with sleepiness.

I was happy that Lord Viol was trusting his body to my magic. As I carefully cast fatigue recovery magic on his head, shoulders, arms, waist, and legs, he let out a happy sigh.

I would so love to be a healing presence for Lord Viol.

“…Still… I’m glad it all worked out today,” Lord Viol muttered. He must have still been thinking about the events of the day.

“Yes. The Barrier Amplifier worked without a hitch, and I was also ecstatic to be able to greet Lord Kenrude.”

“Hmm. Really, I should have been the one to go and pay a visit to him first. What was I thinking? Or maybe the problem was that I wasn’t thinking?”

“Hehe, Lord Kenrude really loves you like a grandson.”

“He does. He always treated me to lots of sweets.”

It was so typical of Lord Viol to see gifts of sweets as a sign of affection. I couldn’t help smiling. I was sure Lord Kenrude was always rooting for the little boy he scouted, doing his best away from his mother and father.

“But I feel relieved about what happened for you today, too, Seren. I never imagined Prince Helios would speak about us with such pride.”

“Me too. I was so moved, I almost cried,” I confessed.

“I see.” Lord Viol stirred and turned over, lying on his back with a large pillow propped behind him. “Thank you, Seren. I’m fine now. I already feel so much better.”

Then he opened his arms towards me, and I snuggled against him. The fatigue recovery magic I had cast on his whole body must have been working well, as all the tension seemed to have left him, and he was as limp and floppy as a relaxed cat.

I followed Lord Viol's example and relaxed my body, and he put his arms around me and hugged me gently. It was so warm, so comforting…

Lord Viol gazed at the lights coming from the magical device and reflected on the ceiling, his face beautiful in profile.

"Prince Helios, huh…" Staring at the ceiling, Lord Viol muttered to himself, "Before I got to know you, Seren, I never really encountered Prince Helios and didn't know much about his personality. To be honest, he didn't interest me."

Come to think of it, I only encountered Lord Viol a few times as a princess consort in training. And that was just in passing. We never spoke. No doubt it was the same with Prince Helios.

"After I got to know you, I initially thought the prince was a disagreeable sort of fellow, but after hearing what he said today and seeing how he's been lately, I'd like to do my best to produce good magical research for the sake of Prince Helios, the future leader of our country, as well."

"Oh, Lord Viol…"

Just as I'd noticed how kind and wonderful a man Prince Helios was turning out to be…maybe Lord Viol had noticed the same thing.

If Lord Viol, renowned as a rare and exceptional mage, could use his powers to the fullest, then surely this country would flourish under Prince Helios's reign. That was a reassuring thought.

"That's so true. I feel the same way," I said. "Anyway, the Barrier Amplifier started up without any problems today. If we can get two Barrier Amplifier devices running properly, we should be able to stably defend the country with a minimum number of people, right?"

"Yes. That's the best thing of all, really. That's what makes me truly the happiest."

Lord Viol did sound truly happy. I opened my eyes and looked up at him. He felt my gaze, and our eyes met. His eyes were like obsidian pools… Drawing me in. I loved those eyes.

"Of course, I'm happy to be able to protect my country, but… You've heard this too, right, Seren? When two High Mages become a couple, they have a hard time coordinating Wall duty with raising children."

“Yes, Vellia said something like that…”

“Right. Originally, I wanted to create this magical device to lessen the burden on the Wall Guards and make sure the country stays safe, but after hearing what Vellia said… I was more determined than ever to make sure it was a success.” Lord Viol removed his arms from around me and gently stroked my hair. I felt so soothed, so cared for.

I felt like closing my eyes and drifting off, but Lord Viol’s mysterious eyes were fixed on me, and I couldn’t take my eyes off him, either.

Lord Viol gave a little “heh” and smiled softly. His sudden, gentle smile made my heart skip a beat.

“My wife is an incredibly hard worker.” As we gazed at each other, Lord Viol’s hand gently stroked my hair. “I knew that, with you being such a hard worker, the day our child is born, you’ll undoubtedly push yourself to the point of collapse… I swore to myself that I would make the endeavor a success, both for my lovely wife and the children we will someday have.”

“Oh, Lord Viol…”

I can’t believe he thought of something like that.

Unlike me, concerned only with the immediate future, Lord Viol seems to be thinking long-term about the country and me as well… And that had led him to this great project.

Children, though…

I hadn’t even pictured it yet. But any child of Lord Viol’s would be adorable. When I imagined a little cherub with black hair, black eyes, and plump cheeks trying their best to use magic, I couldn’t help but smile.

“What are you thinking?” he asked.

“Ah, I was just getting excited thinking about what our child would be like. I wonder if they’d be magically inclined or not.”

“They say magical power is hereditary, especially if both parents have a lot of it, but there’s no proof either way. And I’m sort of like a mutation in the gene pool anyway… Although my family is made up entirely of commoners… Maybe it’s just skipped a few generations.”

Come to think of it, that made sense.

Even in my family, only a few ever became High Mages. Marietta, for example, didn’t have any special magical powers.

That's why High Mages are treated as high-ranking nobles… Usually, they only come once a generation.

"Magic power doesn't really matter, does it?" Lord Viol's voice was very steady. "It's not like their lives will be lacking without magic. If they're interested, we can always teach them magic. You and I may have become High Mages, but both our fathers have had fulfilling careers even without magic. I feel as though it doesn't matter so much whether they have inherent magical powers or not."

That's true… Father doesn't have any magical powers, but he seems to be enjoying life just the same.

It was good for Lord Viol and me that we just so happened to have magical powers and enjoy the practice of magic. But that doesn't mean everyone else feels that way. Like Lord Viol said, it didn't really matter. It was more important that our child follow his or her heart.

"Yes. You're so right."

"Anyway…" Lord Viol hesitated for a moment and gave a wry smile. "I know I was the one who brought up the topic of children, but it's not like I want to have kids right away or anything."

"Oh, you don't?"

"Nope. We've finally gotten to spend real time together. I want to cherish my time with you, Seren. I don't think there's any need to rush into having children."

"Well, indeed."

Lord Viol was blushing as he said that, and it tickled me so much I had to giggle. "These kinds of things happen when the time is right. Surely the gods will give us children when it pleases them, won't they?"

"Hehe, well, I'm sure they will."

A very Lord-Viol-like way of thinking.

There's certainly no need to rush. Like Lord Viol said, we should enjoy our time just the two of us and then enjoy the child-raising years when the right day comes.

"Still, I can't help thinking all about it now… What if I gave birth to a boy exactly like you, Lord Viol? It will be so fun seeing you run ragged by a boisterous little boy and a sassy little girl… Oh, how fun it would be to ride the cart as a family and go on picnics!"

“You really have thought about it in detail.” Lord Viol looked a little surprised but then burst out laughing happily. “I don’t want to be run ragged, but a picnic sounds like fun. I could conjure up a sandpit with earth magic… Or cast a rainbow with water magic. The children would like that. I’m sure I can come up with infinite ideas for things to delight both you and the children.”

“That’s wonderful. I’m sure you’ll be a great father, Lord Viol.”

“Hmm. Yes, if we have a child, I’ll do my very best to be a good father.”

“I know you will, Lord Viol. I can’t wait to see it.”

“But before that, I want to try my best to be a good husband to you, Seren.”

“You don’t have to try that hard. I mean, I’m already very happy right now.”

“I see.” Lord Viol smiled, looking reassured.

“Since I met you, every day has been busy and full of fun, and I never have a spare moment to get bored. A lot of surprising things do happen, but every day is filled with something new and exciting.”

“Oh, Seren…”

“And today, I realized that dreaming out loud about the future like this is fun, too. I’ve imagined all kinds of things… But no matter what kind of future we have, I know it will be a happy one with you by my side.”

I mean, in all my thoughts of the future, I always have a big smile. Lord Viol said he wanted to be a good husband and father, but I’ve got dreams, too, now… Dreams of the happy future we’ll make together.

“First of all, I want to study hard and become a great High Mage so I can be your most reliable partner. And, now that we’re husband and wife, I’d like to have lots of babies and become a feisty lady of the house just like your mother, Lord Viol.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” Lord Viol smiled blissfully. Just seeing his smile made me feel happy, too. I really love Lord Viol so much.

“Lord Viol…” Looking up at him, I whispered softly, “Above all, I… I want to be the kind of wife that makes you want to be together forever.”

“Oh, Seren…” Lord Viol held me tight. In response, I wrapped my arms around him and squeezed tight.

Pure happiness.

I looked up at Lord Viol, my feelings bubbling over, and saw that he, too, was gazing passionately at me. I was the only thing reflected in those obsidian eyes, and all my desires felt so fulfilled.

I love you, Lord Viol.

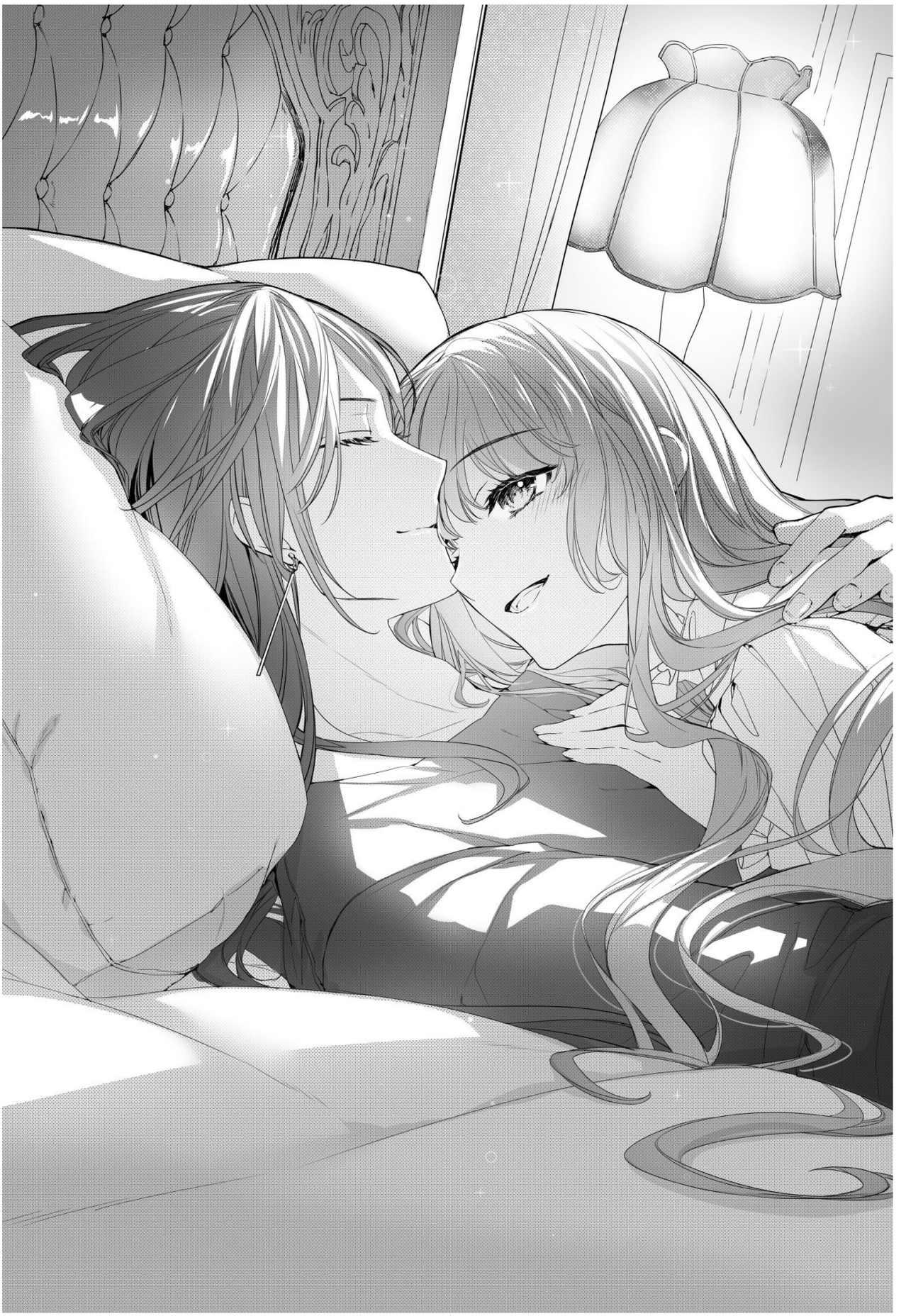
"I… I love you too, Seren. Let us walk the path of life together, forever."

The words I was murmuring inside my heart turned into words I'd said out loud. And Lord Viol had responded. At that moment, it was like we were saying our wedding vows together all over again.

In response, I continued to gaze up at him, then closed my eyes slowly.

As if on cue, Lord Viol's lips slowly descended, gently touching my cheeks and eyelids. He was gentle, as if touching something fragile and precious. Every kiss we'd exchanged since our marriage —this kiss right now—all served to convey the depth of our feelings.

May Lord Viol and I share these passionate embraces, these tender kisses, forever and ever and ever.



Side Story: Riesz

There’s No Way I Could Compete

“RIESZ, do you have any plans for next week’s day off?”

“Nothing in particular.”

It was unusual for my brother to summon me, and his question was equally unexpected. There was a restaurant I wanted to go to, but I wasn’t in a hurry. If my brother wanted to see me, he must have a good reason. I was prompt with my reply.

“I’m sorry this is out of the blue and all, but I thought I’d go back to our family territory for the first time in a while. Would you like to come with me?”

My eyes widened at his unexpected invitation.

That reminds me: the other day, Seren and Archmage Viol apparently visited our territory. They even cleared and reclaimed a significant portion of land for us.

For their honeymoon, my brother gave them a letter of introduction, saying, “Stay at our country estate and feel free to read as many books as you like from our library.” And they really did, even though they were on their honeymoon and all.

Our land’s fairly well-developed, but compared to the royal capital, there’s not much to see, so I wondered what the attraction could be for them. But it turns out they spent a lot of time in our library.

When I heard that, on their way back, they cleared a large area of land as a thank you, I wondered how much of that was true. Even now, I’m still not sure what’s true and what’s just rumor.

Of course, I’m curious about the state of things in our territory, but unfortunately, it takes two weeks to get there and back by stagecoach.

“Sorry, but I can’t take that much time off.”

My brother vaguely smiled when I responded in the negative. “As for that… It seems a day trip is possible. But it would be a lot of traveling for one day. I was thinking of staying overnight.”

“What are you on about? That’s not possible.” I laughed, thinking it was a rare joke from my brother, but he continued with a completely serious expression.

“I mean, it’s still hard for me to believe it myself… But Viol assures me it’s possible.”

So Archmage Viol’s involved in this craziness? That made sense. No wonder my brother had such a mixed expression on his face.

“Don’t give me that look.” My brother lowered his eyebrows at me in a frown. Even so, I couldn’t help but have mixed feelings about Archmage Viol.

When Prince Helios and Seren’s engagement was unexpectedly called off, I was overjoyed, thinking that Seren was a free agent. I was genuinely shocked when Archmage Viol quickly snapped her up. And I never expected that she’d be so quickly married… A situation that was both final and irreversible.

But I couldn’t allow myself to wallow in resentment.

When I saw her at the ball, Seren looked so happy. And Archmage Viol, who I always heard was a misanthrope with communication issues, seemed to treasure her genuinely. So, yes, it was frustrating, but then again, I’d never seen Seren look that happy. And I couldn’t imagine trying to get in the way of that happiness.

Furthermore, Archmage Viol doesn’t seem like a bad guy.

So now, whenever I think of Archmage Viol… Well, I’m not quite sure what to think. Maybe if I could curse his name in the style of Mashlo, I’d feel better about things, but nope.

“…So what kind of crazy magic has the Archmage cooked up that’ll let us pull off something as unbelievable as a day trip to our territories?” I knew my voice sounded somewhat dry with suspicion, but I should at least be forgiven for that much.

My brother looked somewhat relieved as he said, “Well, you’ve heard about how they got there, right? We fly.”

“*Fly*? …Like how Seren flew, you mean?”

Flying… Did that mean Archmage Viol could fly, too? And was flying really all that much faster? I had a ton of questions, but my brother spoke again before I could voice any.

“Yes, right. Viol said the treats Mother sent as a thank you the other day were excellent, and he wanted to see her in person and

express his thanks.”

“A thank you for a thank you gift?”

“Yes. Polite, isn’t he?”

My brother laughed in amusement. Normally, you’d just send a thank-you note. Very polite of him, indeed.

“I said no at first, thinking of how long it would take and what a waste of time it would be… But Viol said those treats were so good he was desperate to buy more, AND it would only be a day trip if we flew. So he asked me to ride along with the pair of them, husband and wife both.”

“Husband and wife…”

Those words hit me where it hurt. Okay, so Seren would be flying, right? I got that much. It’s just the husband and wife phrasing I was caught up on.

“Ah…” Realizing he’d said something insensitive, my brother covered his mouth, but the damage was done. “Er… Actually, maybe we’d better not go. Although I think Mother would be delighted to see us.”

“No, no. I’ll go, too.”

My response was prompt.

I’ve been feeling conflicted ever since the ball the other day.

Filled with regrets.

Incredibly sad.

But Seren looks so happy.

I know that, but I still feel wretched.

I shouldn’t. Hasn’t even Prince Helios given his blessing?

I know, I know all that, it’s just…

The emotions that I usually banish from my heart suddenly well up and torment me multiple times a day.

I think it’s about time I put an end to these feelings…

🐈🐈🐈

AND so the appointed day arrived. As I was waiting for Seren and Archmage Viol in my brother’s office—he was working up until the last minute, of course—there was a knock on the window.

Whoa…

What I saw outside the window rendered me speechless. Seren was waving with a happy smile.

“What the… But we’re on the ninth floor…”

“How many times do I have to say it? We’re flying. It doesn’t matter what floor it is. Open the window, would you?”

My jerk brother grunted at me, refusing to peel his eyes away from his paperwork. I went over and opened the double windows, each one bigger than I am, and a large cart glided into the room.

“Hello, Lord Riesz! Goodness, it’s been a while!”

“Oh, yeah, it has been…”

Seeing Seren’s smile up close for the first time in a while left me a bit flustered. After all, it’s rare to see her smiling so radiantly. She never smiled like that at the salon, the Academy, or even balls…

She wasn’t wearing a proper dress either. She was decked out in light, adventurer-style clothes. She looked cute, like a town girl. The bright colors offset her smile and made it even more dazzling.

She was still so adorable!

“Sorry, did we keep you waiting?”

“Not at all, just finishing up some urgent work.”

I blinked. It was Archmage Viol, jumping lightly down from the cart behind Seren, casually exchanging a few words with my brother.

Right… Of course, I knew Archmage Viol was coming, too. It was just that I’d forgotten all about him. I was too captivated by Seren.

“I suppose I never properly introduced you, did I? This is my brother, Riesz.”

My brother introduced me, so I had to smile and make pleasantries as well as I could. Lack of people skills aside, Archmage Viol was still a working adult, so he greeted me politely as well. But for some reason, he kept staring at me.

What? What’s your deal? That’s what I was wondering, but somehow, I was afraid to ask.

After a short pause, Archmage Viol nodded slightly and said, “Yes… I remember now. The one with the sharp eye. You’d have made a fine mage. But then, I thought the same thing about you, Borden.”

“Sharp eye…?” I repeated.

“Seren said that a while back, she was casting magic at the Academy, and you noticed it. You must have quite a sharp eye to be able to see the flow of magical energy in action,” he explained.

“You never mentioned that to me…?” My brother looked at me with interest.

Come to think of it, that did happen. I nodded to my brother, a little happy that little personal moment had stuck out to Seren as well.

“I’ve always been able to see magical energy… So it was obvious to me when Seren suddenly started casting magic,” I admitted.

“That was when I wasn’t very good at keeping my magical output steady for a prolonged period… I was embarrassed when I was caught in the act!” Seren blushed and smiled.

I thought back on the incident again…

True, her magic was unstable then and fluctuated all over the place. But now, just six months later, her casting has become extremely competent and highly stable.

“It was wavering a lot and even cut out at times. But you quickly learned to sustain it enough to master flying for long periods… Of course, part of that is down to your hard work and practice, Seren, but… Fundamentally, you have an outstanding aptitude for magic.”

When I said that, Seren blushed and smiled even more, looking pleased.

“Thank you for saying so.”

“It’s true that Seren’s aptitude for magic is outstanding. She’s already highly regarded even within the Third Mage Guild, which is made up of only High Mages.”

“Oh, please! Lord Viol, you don’t have to…”

“I’m not trying to be polite, and I’m not trying to flatter you.”

“Right? Viol never flatters.” My brother watched with amusement as Seren looked flustered and Lord Viol looked impassive.

It’s true, though. Seren is mega-talented. Talented enough to make a superstar mage like Archmage Viol heap praise on her. But, thinking of it that way… It’s easier to understand why Seren suddenly chose the path of becoming a High Mage.

“I’m not exaggerating when I praise Seren’s skills. Nor am I exaggerating when I praise Borden’s or yours, Borden’s brother, I mean… Riesz. Being able to see magical energy is an advantage in both magical development and magical beast combat. It’s one of the skills you want to have to become a mage.”

My brother’s face clouded over when Archmage Viol said that. “Hmm, that may be true, but not much we can do about it. Somebody’s got to take over the family business, after all.”

“Yes, you’re nobles, after all. I understand it’s unavoidable. And anyway, upholding the family name is an important and honorable job as well. It just comes down to priorities, I suppose.”

My brother’s bitter frown unfurled a little as Archmage Viol mumbled this. But he still looked a bit despondent.

“I… I wanted Riesz to choose his own career path, as well. So I can’t say it’s not regrettable.”

I was surprised to hear that my brother thought like that.

But either way, no one expected our father to die so soon.

And my brother never expected to find himself becoming our nation’s prime minister. In fact, the abrupt change in both our futures was no one’s fault. It was just an unavoidable set of circumstances.

Though it was comforting to hear Archmage Viol’s praise, I still don’t think I have the magical know-how it takes to become a High Mage. I mean, when I look at Seren and Archmage Viol casting spells, from my perspective as someone who’s studied magic…well, it seems as though they’re pulling off actual miracles.

Still, I was happy that my brother wanted to let me choose my career freely. It was the first time he’d ever said something like that in front of me.

I suddenly noticed that Archmage Viol was smiling kindly at my brother, who still looked sad. Archmage Viol, smiling…!

“I know.” And he even patted my brother lightly on the shoulder!

Maybe he sensed his unspoken feelings and was trying to comfort him?

Seeing him be there for my brother without wasting a lot of words… I was taken aback, my mouth hanging open with shock. It seemed Archmage Viol was a lot more sensitive than people say. And much closer with my brother than I’d thought.

What must it be like to have a friend who cares for you like that…? I felt a little envious. I blinked, taken aback by how different Archmage Viol seemed to the rumors. Then suddenly, my eyes met Seren's. She was smiling brightly, and it hit me…

Right. Maybe knowing this side of Archmage Viol's personality was why Seren had fallen for him in the first place. That was the impression I got.

"Sorry. I got a bit maudlin. Can't show my face in front of my mother acting like this. I'd better pull myself together," my brother said.

"You said it."

"Shall we go now?"

"Sure."

Archmage Viol and my brother nodded at one another, and Seren gently lowered the cart to the ground.

"All aboard then, please."

Today, I, too, am going to fly through the skies, I thought. I couldn't help getting rather excited.



***THAT** breeze! It's unbelievably refreshing!*

"Amazing…!" I exclaimed.

"Isn't it? The scenery goes by so fast it's incomparable to riding by carriage. The breeze is amazingly refreshing, the way it brushes your cheeks." My brother muttered this in surprise, and Seren laughed gaily.

"The wind's gentle because Lord Viol cast a Wind Shield!" she explained. "A lot of people enjoy just a gentle breeze, so he's probably calibrated it for maximum enjoyment."

"You can do that? That's amazing." Beside me, my brother seemed genuinely surprised. Then, he rubbed his chin as if in deep thought. His eye twinkled behind his monocle, and he said something crazy. "What's it like without the Wind Shield, then? I'd like to try it."

"I mean, it's possible, but… It's an acquired taste."

"Everyone wants to see what it's like, don't they? Well, hold on to anything that might fly away and grip the handrail tight."

“All right.”

“What? You’re seriously going to do it?”

Clearly knowing what to expect, Seren gestured towards the bag I’d brought with me, and I grabbed it tight in one hand and the handrail in the other.

“All right, then. Borden, that monocle of yours will go flying for sure,” Archmage Viol warned.

“Oh, right.”

“Here we go.”

All of a sudden…

“Whoooa!!!”

“Wow! This is amazing!”

We were smacked in the face by a solid wall of pure wind.

I couldn’t keep my eyes open!

Though I knew it was just wind, it felt like I was being pushed and held hard against something solid and impenetrable. The pressure was unbelievable. The clothes I wore flapped noisily behind me. It was like I was being tugged backward. My hair was blowing all over. Fronds of it whipped against my face hard enough to hurt.

“That’s… Enough! No more, Borden!” I cried.

“Right! Yes, I’ve had enough!” he agreed.

“Roger.”

I heard Archmage Viol’s flat voice, and suddenly, the wind barrage stopped like it had never been there.

“Th-That was… incredible!”

“My gods, that was something else! I haven’t felt this refreshed in ages!”

My brother laughed with glee. I hadn’t seen him like that in years, and I felt my heart soar. I felt…relief.

“Maybe you’ve been letting your stress get too pent-up, Borden?” I pointed out.

“Maybe… I have to deal with a lot of annoying people.”

“Sorry,” Archmage Viol apologized for some reason.

“But that wind just blew all the cobwebs away.”

“Well, good. But your hat flew away,” Archmage Viol said.

“What?”

My brother put his hand to his head, and everyone turned to look at him with his windswept hair.

“Your hair’s a mess, brother…” I said nothing about the fact that his hairline was receding a little.

“Looks a bit younger, somehow,” Seren observed.

“Reminds me of the old days,” Archmage Viol noted.

“I’m not at work right now, so who cares if my hair’s a mess? And I can just buy another hat. Ah man, that was good fun!”

I hadn’t seen my brother laugh so carefree like that since before he became prime minister. I felt so happy… It was like having him back again. I wasn’t going to say anything about it, though. My brother has to deal with a lot of older people in his work at the palace. I mean, people the same age as our parents and grandparents. That must be nerve-wracking. That kind of thing would age you.

“If you get stressed out again, I can do this for you anytime.” Archmage Viol seemed to be thinking along the same lines as me.

“Lord Viol can fly as well, now.”

“He can?”

I was surprised to hear Seren say that… I looked back and forth between her and Archmage Viol as she smiled proudly.

“We had an intensive training course the other day,” she explained. “Lord Viol is adept at wind magic, of course.”

“I’m still a little scared to fly with passengers, though.” Archmage Viol spoke offhandedly like it was no big deal, but even I could tell how amazing a feat that was, and I wasn’t adept at wind magic or anything.

“He really is a genius…” I muttered.

“I know. Whenever I look at him, I think… So real geniuses do exist.”

It was rare for my brother to throw around a word like “genius.” I looked up in surprise… And saw the depth of trust in my brother’s face. Although, there was something else there, too. A hint of regret? But it only lasted for a moment, and then my brother quickly looked ahead in the direction we were flying again.

“Ah, but that was a strong breeze! With speed like that, it makes sense that we could arrive in the countryside in only a half day’s worth of travel,” he said.

“Hmm. Well, Seren can go faster than this, but… this speed is fine.”

Now Archmage Viol looked proud of her. Both of them… They tend to downplay their own achievements but uplift each other.

I envy that…

“Indeed. At our current speed, we can avoid any obstacles that may suddenly appear ahead,” Seren said.

“Obstacles?”

“Birds, or magical beasts. It wouldn’t be good if we collided with one, would it?”

Typical, kind Seren.



FOR the rest of the day, Seren flew at breakneck speed, which, in my opinion, was far too fast to spot, let alone avoid any “obstacles.” Archmage Viol took over after a certain amount of time for short periods, but he flew much slower. A sort of safety-first approach.

Even a genius mage like him has to fly slower than Seren. Still, I was impressed. He clearly didn’t feel any need to show off.

We stopped for a bathroom break at the peaceful little village where Seren and Archmage Viol had honeymooned. In my jealousy, I grew quiet and moody, which seemed to worry the others as we continued on our way.

It’s been almost a year since I’ve been able to visit home.

It still amazed me and seemed unbelievable that I could be here in only half a day’s travel with none of the discomfort or aches of a long, bumpy carriage ride.

“You should be able to see it ahead,” Seren said cheerfully, showing no signs of fatigue.

I’d never seen my home from the sky, so I wasn’t sure if she was right… But I looked over the side of the cart anyway. “Wow…!” In the distance, I could see the familiar castle and its fluttering flag. A vast forest. And fertile farmland.

It was from the sky—this was our beloved hometown, where my brother and I were both born.

“Amazing, it’s getting closer and closer.”

“Once you see the castle, you’re almost there.”

My brother exclaimed in delight, and Archmage Viol nodded in a relaxed sort of way. But, just as he said, the castle was soon upon us, and before I could blink, we had entered its grounds. However, the closer we got, the more I could see of the building and its environs, the more confused I grew.

“I thought the forest was closer to the castle.” I turned to my brother, who was also frowning.

“It was. Did you… Did you and Seren reclaim that much land, Viol?”

“Lord Borden, where shall we disembark?” Seren asked. “Perhaps the gates of the castle would be best?”

As we looked down at the castle in disbelief, Seren giggled. My brother looked up in shock, then seemed to regain his composure in an instant before nodding.

“Yes, I think that would be a good spot.”

“Well then, I’ll take us down.”

And with that, Seren landed smoothly in front of the castle gate.

The soldiers guarding the castle gate did a double take but realized what was going on and came running over to us.

“Lord Viol, Lady Seren! Thank you for the other day— Lord Borden?!!!”

“And Lord Riesz, too?! What…?!”

When they spotted the cart, they must have known that Seren and Archmage Viol were here, but they seemed flabbergasted to see my brother and me aboard, too.

Well, yes, it probably was quite unexpected.

“S-Sorry for not properly greeting you, my lords!”

“Don’t worry about it; we’re just here for an impromptu visit. I thought about sending a messenger ahead by horse, but of course, we’d arrived long before the horse did. Can you let us through?” my brother requested.

“C-Certainly!”

“Please tell Mother that we’ve returned. I want to see her as soon as possible.”

My brother spoke in a soft and amiable tone so as not to make the already embarrassed soldiers even more intimidated. He’s so good at handling people. I should learn a thing or two from him.

We rode through the gate in the cart, watching as one of the soldiers sprinted inside the castle to announce our return.

“Lord Borden, where should we put the cart?”

“I’ll prepare a room for you to stay in later, but why not just leave it in the gardens until then?”

“If you’re looking for the gardens, they’re beyond that arch on the right,” I said.

“Thank you, Lord Borden, Lord Riesz.”

I miss that about Seren… How she would thank you so genuinely for the smallest of things. It felt lonely to realize that our conversations would be few and far between in the future.

“We’re the ones who should thank you for the ride. Thank you, Seren. Thank you, Archmage Viol.”

“You’re very welcome.”

Behind the smiling Seren, Archmage Viol was also faintly smiling?!

I had to do a double-take.

Yes, that was definitely a smile. A faint one, but the corners of his eyes were crinkling, the edges of his lips upturned…

I was honestly surprised that he’d have a smile for me. Let alone that he was smiling at all.

Still, I’ve spent the good part of a day in the man’s presence. So, the subtle change in his face was clear to me. Otherwise, it was so slight I might not have noticed it.

People say he’s handsome but a bit expressionless. Well, certainly, he seems to have few facial expressions, but it’s not like he doesn’t show emotion at all. That’s what I found myself thinking.

“I know we were told it would take only half a day’s journey, but I had no idea it would be so smooth and comfortable a ride, or so fast! It’s leaps and bounds better than any carriage ride.” My brother sounded deeply impressed.

Seren stopped and mulled that over for a second. “I think it’s because we can go to our destination in a straight line. We’re not bound by roads and can fly smoothly without any rattling from rough ground. And Lord Viol’s Wind Shield cuts down on wind resistance. We can go as fast as we like under those conditions.”

“If given free rein, I worry about how fast you’ll fly,” Archmage Viol said.

“Hahah, without you there to stop her, you mean. Anyway, I have to say I’m hugely impressed. Thank you both,” my brother said.

We were all laughing together as our head butler, Oxe, emerged from inside the castle. He must have heard about our return and Seren and Viol’s visit.

“Master Borden! Master Riesz! Welcome home!” His smile was gentle, familiar, and reassuring. He’s something like a grandfather to me. Strict but kind and very wise. My brother seemed pleased to see Oxe, too.

“Oxe! Long time no see. Let’s head inside.”

“Yes, everyone is excited by your sudden return. Thank you, Lord Viol and Lady Seren, for coming.”

“Come on, I don’t want to keep everyone waiting. Let’s go inside.”

And so we finally arrived at our home castle after a very long time.



“OH my, oh my! You’ve finally come home!”

As soon as we entered the audience chamber, my mother ran up to me and gave me a tight hug. So strong!

“Hello, Mother. I appreciate the welcome, though it’s a bit embarrassing…”

How humiliating to have Seren see me treated like a child…

“Oh, I’m sorry. I was just so happy to see your face after so long. You look well, Borden, Riesz! Oh, it’s such a relief.”

“Sorry I couldn’t visit sooner,” my brother said. “I’ve been so busy. Viol and Seren brought us here from the royal capital in just a half day’s journey, you know.”

“What? Half a day? You two really are amazing! I can’t thank you enough for bringing my boys to me. Ah, that reminds me, I’ve been buying up all kinds of sweet treats I thought you might like, Lord Viol, Lady Seren. Please eat all you can!” Mother was in exuberant spirits, rambling away. We couldn’t get a word in edgewise.

“Mother—”

“Oh, there’s so much I want to discuss with you two! I’m so happy to see you again so soon. And so happy to see my sweet boys!”

My brother tried to interrupt, but no one could stop Mother in full swing. At least, if my brother couldn’t manage it, then there was no point in me trying. I stayed silent and observed.

“Oh, I’m so sorry! In my delight, I quite forgot to offer you somewhere to sit down after your journey. There are some treats in the lounge, along with some mildly flavored tea that won’t overpower the taste of the sweets. Let’s talk while we eat.”

“Thank you…!”

Archmage Viol took a step forward and thanked Mother in a sprightly tone, which made me do yet another double take.

Then, when the stoic man took his first bite of Mother’s treats…

His eyes opened wider than ever before, and a look of pure happiness took over his face.

“Amazing! I’ve never eaten such fresh, crisp frit before… The flavor is unique, sweet, and refreshing, and it brings out the sweetness of the fresh cream and white chocolate beautifully.”

“Right? I just knew you’d like it. It’s a type of pot pie made with Anlu, a variety of rare fruit that only grows in our lands.”

“Anlu, is it? Yes, it’s part of the apple family. It’s quite tart. That’s what really brings the dessert together.”

Archmage Viol nodded earnestly after Mother and my brother explained about the dessert and the fruit involved.

“Yes, indeed! It’s not too strong; the balance is just right. It would be great served warm, as well. A subtle type of sweetness.”

Hold on… What is this guy, some kind of dessert critic?

I couldn’t follow the fevered dessert discussion going on right now.

Mother likes her sweets, yes… But what was with *Frosty* Archmage Viol? He was practically drooling with excitement. My brother didn’t seem surprised at all, though. Almost as if this was normal behavior for the man.

Seren was smiling along as well.

“Do you… Do you like sweets, Archmage?”

Archmage Viol looked at me and blinked.

A wrinkle between the brows…? But then he sighed as if in defeat.

“Well, I suppose you are Borden’s brother… You’d have found out eventually.”

“Right. You’ve already bonded with Mother over sweets. It was only ever a matter of time,” my brother laughed.

Bonded with Mother over… *sweets*?

“Lord Riesz isn’t the type to gossip,” Seren interjected. “I don’t think you need to worry at all.”

“Oh, I see, that’s good.” Archmage Viol seemed reassured by Seren’s comment. Then he looked at me, brows lowered slightly. “The thing is… Yes, I admit, I do love sweets… It’s a bit embarrassing, though, so I’d appreciate it if you could keep it a secret.”

A weakness!



This man I'd thought so brazen, with a face chiseled by the gods, was asking me a favor and looking so worried…

And beside him stood Seren, smiling sweetly. So unfair!

Still, it's not like I'm the type to get a kick out of spreading rumors about Archmage Viol being a dessert fancier in the first place. But that handsome face, so earnestly entreating… Yikes.

"Of course, I won't tell anyone," I promised.

"I see, thank you. That's a relief."

"Lord Riesz keeps a tight lip. You don't need to worry."

Seren's trust in me warmed my heart and saddened me at the same time. An odd feeling.

"…Incidentally…" As if suddenly remembering something, Archmage Viol looked at Mother. "I'm sorry. The sweets were so amazing that I almost forgot to say it, but the roll cake we received the other day was so delicious that I wanted to come and thank you in person."

Oh yes, my brother mentioned the thank you for the thank-you gift. Archmage Viol really does love sweets. He seemed delighted by Mother's choice of gift.

"Oh, my! I'm so glad you liked it. That cake is called a Cortile Roll and is very popular among dessert lovers."

"Not only was it delicious, but each one was so gorgeous that it was almost a shame to eat them." Seren smiled happily, too.

"Right? A dessert's appearance is important as well." Archmage Viol nodded firmly.

"Not only could we browse your wonderful book collection, but you treated us so well and even gave us that lovely sweet treat as a gift… Words cannot express our gratitude," Seren said.

"Goodness! The pleasure was all mine!" Then Mother jumped to her feet and hurried to the window. "Look at the scenery outside! That is what you two have given to us!"

We all exchanged glances, then went over to the window and looked out. The view outside was quite different from what it had been a year ago.

To the west of the castle, it had previously been forest as far as the eye could see. Now, it had all been cut down and turned into farmland, where our workers were busily working, and many small saplings were already sprouting.

Really? Archmage Viol and Seren reclaimed that much land?

“I felt like I witnessed the true power of magic. In just a few hours, the forest was transformed into farmland,” Mother said.

“Ah, typical of your work, Viol. But how did you do it?” my brother asked.

“I used wind magic to cut down the trees, used earth magic to till the soil and soften it while digging up the roots, used fire magic to burn the roots, used wind magic to scatter ashes on the soil, and finally used water magic to put out the fire and water the land.”

All I could do was gape in disbelief.

“You really are incredible.”

My brother didn’t seem surprised at all. He was smiling wryly, but I was speechless. And Archmage Viol spoke of it as if it was no big deal… As if it wasn’t close to a miracle. Archmage Viol’s mastery of all the elements was the only thing that had made such a feat possible.

He was like four mages in one. Any normal mage would have run out of stamina and magical energy halfway through the job.

“But Seren did all the intricate work, like collecting and stacking the cut trees to use as lumber and controlling the wind direction so the fire wouldn’t spread. I only did the easy stuff.”

“You’re both completely unbelievable…” I found myself muttering aloud… But I was just so amazed!

“Since the land started out as forest, plenty of leaf mold had accumulated, and the soil is rich in nutrients,” he said. “If you mix that with ash, it makes excellent land for farming, right?”

“They also loosened the soil so it was soft and easy to handle,” Mother added. “Our workers have been delighted!”

“So, the reclaimed land is being used just like normal land…?”

“Of course! We’ve been able to plant crops without issue. Everyone’s been amazed by it.”

“Has anything else happened here lately?” Archmage Viol asked.

“Just farming. With this much more land, everyone’s been busy!”

“I see, that’s good then.” Archmage Viol looked relieved for some reason after hearing Mother’s answer. Seeing this, my brother tilted his head.

“What? Are you worried about anything?”

“Ah, well. I had a few teensy little concerns.” Archmage Viol’s way of speaking had grown more casual. He’d clearly relaxed.

“What concerns?”

“My father also grows vegetables and fruit, and I thought hearing about what we did here might be useful to him, so I told him. And he told me that if you suddenly do large-scale farming, the climate can change, so it’s better to be cautious.”

“Ah, I see… That might well be true.”

“The trees were cut down so they could be used for lumber, so it wouldn’t be called slash-and-burn farming, but the roots were collected and burned, and most importantly, a wide area was developed in one go, so at the very least, the vegetation of the area and the scope of the animal territory would be affected, right? Minor issues are one thing, but it wouldn’t be good if something like a drought were to occur, so it’s better to evaluate the situation regularly,” Archmage Viol explained.

“So that’s why you both came all this way? To evaluate?” Brother asked.

“Well, of course, my main purpose was to thank your mother in person for the sweets, but I also wanted to see the area with my own eyes and explain things to her so that she could keep an eye on the progress.”

“Thank you, Viol. But you don’t need to worry so much. We were the ones who asked you to cultivate the area. You don’t need to feel so responsible.”

“Hehe, Lord Borden, I’m sorry to have worried you, but we’re mostly here for sweets shopping,” Seren said. “We just thought it would be a good idea to fly up here now and then for a change of pace.”

“Anyway, I’m relieved there doesn’t seem to be any problem for now,” Archmage Viol said. “After this experience with land clearing, I started wondering if we could use High Mages to expand farmland. But I’ve also been thinking that we need to be careful when it comes to manipulating nature.”

Seren and Archmage Viol looked at one another. No doubt they were worried about making us feel overly indebted to them. I’ve always known that Seren’s a good sort, but I’d never imagined that blunt and brazen Viol would be so considerate.

As I stood there surprised all over again, Archmage Viol smiled softly. I was getting used to him smiling, though.

“Caution is still needed, but if the farm workers are happy, then that’s great. Now, could you possibly tell me where I can buy the delicious treats we had earlier?”

“…Tsk. We’re no match for you, are we, Viol?” My brother laughed and rolled his eyes.

Seriously.

How could I possibly compete with this?

All right, it might be true that Viol was shy and had issues communicating. But, get to know him better, and you’ll find a man who’s earnest, kind, and responsible.

No wonder Seren fell in love with him…

Even my brother claims he’s no match for him. What hope do I have?

Mashlo called Archmage Viol an old man, pointing out he was a decade older than Seren. And I felt the same way. But now I think I’ve seen what an extra ten years can do to a person, how it can strengthen them and make them wise.

Perhaps in ten years, if I worked hard, I could approach Archmage Viol’s level.

To be honest, I’m not sure.

I sighed softly. It was great that Archmage Viol was so invested in our territory. But it also made me feel sort of useless.

“Viol’s big plan directly correlates to increasing our power as a nation, but it would certainly be better to verify it a bit first,” my brother said. “I’ll observe the situation in our territory for a few years and then propose it to the king.”

“By then, the magical device we recently developed will be well installed, and our mages will be free to focus on other tasks. Perfect,” Archmage Viol said.

“It may be best to start slowly and not go too big at first.” When Seren quietly stated her opinion, my brother nodded vigorously.

“Yes, that’s true. If we roll this out as a national plan, there will be dissenting voices and various issues.”

“Such fun. If we expand your land, Borden, you’ll have more space to grow that fruit we ate today… Anlu, was it? Ah, I’d love to be able to eat that every day,” Archmage Viol said in a surprisingly excited voice.

“It’s difficult to cultivate. It’s susceptible to disease. And insects go crazy for it.”

“So why not try improving it? Lord Viol, this fruit might be something your father’s interested in cultivating,” Seren pointed out,

“Right… That may be true. Well, it depends on what Borden and the others think.”

The conversation continued, regardless of how conflicted I was feeling. I forced myself to cheer up despite feeling left behind.

Right… I didn’t have the luxury of moping around. Seren was giving her opinions. Surely, I had something of value to contribute as well.

I shouldn’t be standing here feeling frustrated, thinking about how I can’t compete. I should say something to Archmage Viol and Seren, who were showing such interest in our territory.

“I think selective breeding is interesting,” I chimed in.

“Riesz?”

“I think the Anlu’s only flaw so far has been that its production volume has been too inconsistent.”

“Exactly.” My brother looked pleased. “Mother, could you get some seedlings?”

“Of course! I’ll have it taken care of right away. They should be ready tomorrow!” Mother seemed to be enjoying herself as well.

I still didn’t have a lot to say, but I wanted to honor their kindness by engaging in the discussion. I could do that much, at least.

Yes… This day, these revelations… they certainly made me feel that way.



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