



Muse (Muses of Wespen #1)

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Category: YA&Teen

Description: Enter an enchanting and romantic new world from the New York Times Bestselling author of the Trylle Saga.

Isadore Dellamoussa is a talented muse in a magickal kingdom, chosen to perform at royal festivals. But her life is far from glamorous, overshadowed by her controlling mother and the dark secrets of her past.

When Isadore meets the enigmatic enchanter Soren Tomoleo, sparks fly—both on and off the stage. Together, they create magik unlike anything Wespen has ever seen. But their growing bond defies the strict rules of their world.

As they navigate the treacherous waters of love, ambition, and magik, Isadore must decide if she will follow her heart or adhere to the rigid expectations of her society.

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My mother called for me in the dressing room, and I hurried to fasten my crimson gown around my waist, because I knew she would burst in at any moment.

It didn't matter that we were in the royal palace of the Kingdom of Calida, and I was one of the muses chosen for a prestigious performance. If Adora Dellamoussa wanted to get to me, no doors, no guards, no formalities could possibly keep her away.

"Isadore, are you ready yet?" she asked as she opened the door.

"Nearly, Adora," I said, calling her by her name as she'd requested since I was a child.

"Good," she said, but her piercing gaze was already on the floor-length mirror before me, as if she didn't trust her own eyes to appraise me. "The gown is lovely, but it's a bit... simple for the Balefire festival, isn't it?"

All of the muses performing would wear gowns in the same color and approximate style, but a noble designer had custom-made each one out of lustrous gossamer fabrics. Mine had a long skirt with two slits down the sides rising high on my thick thighs, and the fitted bust was encrusted with glimmering rubies. Thorny black branches were embroidered on the bodice to look like they were climbing up my waist and breasts.

This was, without a doubt, the finest gown I had ever worn. All my other appointments had been at smaller courts – a Lady on her birthday, a village celebrating a particularly robust harvest – but this was the Balefire Spring festival before the Queen of Calida and her entire Court. No expense had been spared. Even

the makeup on my face and the rose blossoms in my dark hair were of the highest caliber.

Balefire was one of the grandest festivals in Wespen. It was a celebration of passion, fertility, and abundance, and it coincided with the planting of the summer crops. Thornbushes decorated with red ribbons and wreaths of red flowers hung on our doors.

"No matter," Adora said since I didn't respond. "It's the woman who makes the dress, now isn't it?"

She stood right behind me, and her hands were on my bare arms in a gesture likely meant to be comforting. However, she gripped too tightly, and her long nails were sharp against my skin. My mother was taller and much slenderer than I, and her long hair was curly where mine was straight, but otherwise, we appeared remarkably similar.

Our skin was heavier on the cream than the peaches, but we had enough color that we didn't look sickly. Our faces were heart-shaped, with dainty chins and full cheeks underneath hooded eyes, and our hair was the same dark umber color as a cinnamon stick.

The intensity in her eyes and the fierceness of her smile truly separated us.

"You will be the star tonight," Adora said in a way that sounded more like a threat than encouragement.

Outside the dressing room door, I heard my friends and fellow muses Briar and Wrenley calling my name in a sing-song way. I let out a breath of relief because they were coming to rescue me from my mother, and they poked their heads in the door, grinning at me.

Both have performed at the Queen's Court before because they were talented and mesmerizing. Briar was blond and blue-eyed, and her midi gown showed her shapely legs. Wrenley's curly dark hair landed just above xer ears, and xe had a perpetually mischievous smile. Xe wore a jumpsuit in the same gossamer fabric as the rest of us, with a deep V cut down to xer navel in the front and wide flowy pant legs.

"Sorry to interrupt, Adora," Briar said, so saccharine sweet I almost believed her. "Isadore is needed elsewhere."

"We need to do one last run-through," Wrenley added, sounding much less apologetic than Briar.

"Oh. Of course." Adora finally released me and gave my friends a sharp smile. "You both look wonderful. Good luck, Isadore, and don't forget to keep your chin up. You don't want to look bloated in front of the Queen."

"Thank you, Adora," I said, and Briar took my hand to pull me away from her.

"Good advice as always," Wrenley said flatly, and then we were gone, hurrying down the corridor away from my mother.

"Where are we going?" I asked since that seemed like a good thing to know.

"Soren wanted us to do one last rehearsal," Briar explained as we walked. "We're to meet him and the other muses in one of the smaller ballrooms since the big one is occupied for the main event."

"Oh, that excuse was true?" I asked in surprise.

"It is, but we would've made up one to snatch you away from Adora," Wrenley said. "Why is she still hovering around you like you are a muse fledgling? You're twenty

years old, for the Matronae's sake."

"Some mothers struggle to let go," Briar said, more gently than Wrenley. "But now, there is no time to talk of such things. We have the Balefire to prepare for!"

"I didn't even know there was a rehearsal beforehand," I said uneasily.

"Well, ordinarily, there aren't any on the day of," Wrenley said, sounding rather ominous. "But this is Soren's first time enchanting the Balefire, and not everyone believes he can handle it, so he's been zealous about practicing."

Adora had muttered something to that effect when she first learned that Soren Tomoleo was the enchanter for the festival, but I had all but forgotten about that since working with him. Soren seemed so knowledgeable and sure of himself – not to mention talented and handsome – it hadn't occurred to me that he might be nervous about all of this.

"That gives you more time to warm up, too," Briar said, doing her best to remain cheery and ease my nerves. "Isn't that serendipitous how it worked out?"

"Yes, serendipitous," I said as we entered the ballroom together.

It was a grand room with marble floors and columns around the edge. Diamond chandeliers hung above us, and a beautiful mural featuring ancient muses dancing in the skies with the Matronae of Muses was painted on the ceiling.

The Matronae were the three goddesses who mothered the original muses ages ago: Brigida, the goddess of beauty, life, and dancing; Mnema, the goddess of knowledge, memory, and music; and Freya, the goddess of love, death, and magik.

The other muses were already there—twelve of us in total, mostly young women but

with a few men and nonbinary. All of them were dressed in their exquisite gowns or jumpsuits, stretching and practicing their magik... and waiting. The enchanter wasn't here yet, so there was little more that anyone could do.

Briar, Wrenley, and I joined the others. We only started stretching when I felt a shift in the air. The hair on the back of my neck stood up, but not in an unpleasant way. Each column had a torch, and the bright flames flickered and turned red momentarily.

Soren had arrived.

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The color of the festival of Balefire was red, but Soren Tomoleo was dressed all in black. His long jacket was an inverted design of the muses, solid black embroidered with red branches, and his shirt was open enough to reveal a hint of his chest and a ruby amulet on a chain. He was tall, but the way he walked – swaggered , really – somehow made him seem even taller. His hair was raven black and pushed back so it curled at the nape of his neck, and his eyes were dark but vibrant.

As soon as he stepped into the room, all of the muses turned to look at him. It was the compulsion of his position since he was our enchanter, but I would've turned anyway. He was handsome and captivating, with fluid movements and a smile that made my heart stop in my chest when he cast it my way.

"Good evening, my amazing muses," Soren announced as he approached, and we made a semicircle around him. You are all stunning, not that there was ever any concern." His eyes were surveying the lot of us as he spoke, but I swear, when his tongue landed on stunning , his gaze held mine for a moment.

"You aren't too bad yourself," Wrenley said in xer deadpan way.

Soren smirked. "Your half-assed sycophancy is both needless and appreciated, Wrenley, as always." Then, to the rest of us, "Can I assume you are all limber enough for a final rehearsal?"

"Is this necessary?" one of the other muses asked. "In the past, we haven't done a dress rehearsal on the morning of the conduction."

"Yes, well, I was not the enchanter in the past. Perhaps their standards weren't as

high as mine,” Soren countered. “Now, shall we get to our places and begin from the top?”

"Yes, sir," Briar chirped in unison with other muses, but I kept my mouth shut and hurried to my position.

The twelve of us made two circles—six on the inner ring close together and six on the outer ring a bit further apart. I was on the inner circle, next to Wrenley, and I started with my arms above my head and my hands subtly splayed in a gesture known as "the rosebud."

Soren stood beyond the outer edge, and we waited, frozen in silence, until our cue. A moment later, he began to sing in a rich baritone that never failed to give me goosebumps on my arms. He moved his hands with a flourish, like someone conducting an orchestra, and it wasn't instruments he commanded but magik.

Music played out from the torches on the columns, and it was the song of the flames—violins in vibrant ecstasy, cellos in deep thrumming, lyres in delicate excitement.

As soon as the music began, we started to move. It was soft and fluid, like a subtle ballet, but none of us stepped out of our ring. We stayed in our place, twirling and dancing, with our hands held above our heads. Sparkling lights traveled out from our fingertips, creating glimmering images in the air above us.

Our magik was the thread that held it all together, creating a beautiful symphony of music, motion, and light.

Our conduction at the Balefire was paramount to the Kingdom of Calida. Conduction was the act of magik being guided between the realms—the ether where it came from and the land where we lived. The magik we put back into the air would become the

magik our kingdom received in the future.

Tomorrow, the crops will be planted after the Balefire, and all seeds will be sown for the summer. This was the kingdom's most important season, and we needed as much magik returned to us as possible.

Muses were born with the magik pumping through our veins, and the enchanters were a subset of warlocks specifically trained to help us harness and release our magik into the world. Soren's song was more than music. It was a transcendent incantation that brought our power to the surface. The muses were the flame, and the enchanters were the match.

Together, what we did was far more than entertainment, although the performances were beautiful and compelling. If we faltered, the fields could be destitute and the harvests abysmal. But if we did well, the kingdom, family, and friends would thrive.

As we danced, Soren stalked around us, studying us for any mistake. My eyes were meant to be cast toward the heavens, but I would steal glances at him whenever I had the chance. His face was unreadable, and the song had an instrumental interlude, so he was no longer singing.

But he had yet to call out an error. We all moved together, perfectly in sync. Our fingertips cast dazzling lights in grand arcs about the room, and even in the midst of it, it was one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen.

“Isadore Dellamoussa!” Soren yelled suddenly, and I stumbled on my feet for the first time.

Everyone around me froze, unsure what to do when I missed my steps. My skin was aflame with embarrassment when I looked over at Soren.

“Isadore, what in all the Kingdoms of Wespen are you doing?” He sounded gentler now, almost exasperated, and he walked between muses on the outer ring, stepping right up to me.

“I-I’m... performing?”

A bemused smile touched his lips, and he arched his eyebrows. “Are you or aren’t you? Are you so unsure of yourself that you don’t even know what you’re doing at this very moment?”

"No." I shook my head. "No, I know." I pulled my shoulders back and lifted my chin higher. "I am performing. I don't think I'd missed a step until you called my name."

“Your steps are fine,” he said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “Your light is much too dim.”

I glanced down at my hands. The lights had stopped emanating from my fingertips when I stumbled, but I could still see the magik glimmering beneath my pale skin.

“Are you holding yourself back? Is it nerves?” Soren asked. “I have seen you in the past rehearsals, Isadore. I know how bright your light can be, so don’t pretend otherwise.”

“I’m not sure,” I replied honestly. “I was focused on my steps.”

"Well, you're doing it wrong then," he said bluntly. "The steps are ancillary, something fun to give the people to look at. But the dance is utterly irrelevant. It is the magik that you put out that is all that counts. If you can only focus on one thing, focus on that."

“I will try,” I said.

“You will do it ,” he instructed, and his dark eyes were somehow intimidating and heartening all at once. Then, louder, because he was talking to everyone else even though he kept his eyes on me, “Everyone, when the music begins, keep your feet still. Move only your hands. Command only your magik. Share your brightest light.”

The music began, and he didn't move. He stood right before me, unwavering, and I had never felt so nervous to conduct magik in my entire life.

I took a deep breath, lifted my arms over my head, and turned my eyes toward the sky. I began with "the rosebud," manipulating the lights from my fingertips so they resembled flower buds on a thorny branch.

“Brighter,” Soren demanded.

I summoned the magik deep within me as I pulled the lights into a blossoming rose, the petals growing more vibrant as I went.

“Brighter ,” he repeated, louder this time.

I grimaced because I didn't know how I could give anymore.

"You pull it from deep within you," he said as if reading my mind, and he stepped forward and placed his hand on my stomach. The unexpected touch almost startled me out of what I was doing, but I never faltered.

His palm was flat, pressed against the bodice of my dress, and the fabric was thin enough that I could feel the heat from his skin. He'd been speaking loud so that anyone could hear, but now he spoke low, barely above a whisper when he commanded, "Draw from here, Isadore. Let your light shine."

I closed my eyes because I didn't need the heavens. I didn't need anything more than

I already had, and focusing on the warmth of his hand, I summoned all the power I had inside me.

“ Yes !” Soren shouted exuberantly, and he removed his hand.

When I opened my eyes again, the lights I painted in the air above me were almost blinding. My roses had never shone brighter, blossoming around us, creating something beautiful and bursting with light.

“There it is!” Soren exclaimed. “All of you do that in the Court tonight. If you can remember the steps on top of this, it will be the greatest show Calida has ever seen.”

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I had never been inside the royal palace for a festival before, and it was rather overwhelming. At the entrance of the opulent ballroom, I was immediately greeted by vermillion ribbons and the sweet aroma of the roses adorning every surface. The walls were draped in crimson velvet, and garlands of red rose and dark ivy were strung across the ceiling.

A large balefire burned brightly in the center of the room, casting dancing shadows across the audience that awaited our conduction. Above it, the skylight was open, letting in the starlight and letting out the smoke. The fire crackled and popped, and the air was heady with the scent of charred wood, fragrant blossoms, and wine.

Sitting on her golden throne, reigning over it all, was Queen Kriselle of House Marin. Her gown was a deep blood-red, and rubies and onyxes adorned the layered chains around her neck. Her black hair was piled high on her head, and her dark brown eyes were amused and calculating, like a satisfied snake that would most certainly strike when it was displeased or hungry.

On either side of her, her Courtiers stood with judgmental eyes and sharp smiles. The ones lined up closest to the Queen were the Princesses of Calida, her five daughters ranging in age from twenty-seven to fourteen, with each of them appearing like smaller versions of the last. In decreasing age and stature, the Princesses were Cosetta, Sylvetta, Flornetta, Danetta, and Anabetta.

Soren led us into the ballroom to begin our conduction. The muses walked two by two, which was a relief because I could cling to Briar's hand for a few moments longer.

Our performance began, and soon, the revelers were singing along with the familiar tune. Their voices joined in with Soren like an inebriated choir. From the corner of my eyes, I saw couples pair off to dance slowly and sensually together.

But I paid them no mind. I kept my thoughts on Soren's voice and the memory of the heat of his hand on my stomach. The magik I conducted into the air shone brilliantly across the ballroom.

As the Balefire burned down to embers, the muses slowed our steps, our movements becoming more languid, until at last, the music faded away, and the ballroom erupted into applause.

Elated and dizzy, the only thing I could think about after we'd finished was quenching my thirst. There had been moments during the conduction I was afraid that I might pass out, but the air was still sparkling and crackling, even after we all stopped projecting our magik.

"You were incredible," Soren said, his voice behind me, and I nearly choked on my punch.

I wiped the juice from my lips and turned to face him. For some reason, without the muses standing around us, he seemed more imposing.

"Thank you," I murmured.

"I am sorry if I was hard on you earlier," he said, and to his credit, his eyes looked apologetic. "I knew you could be better, and I wanted you to be your best."

"I understand the method to your madness, even if it was flustering at the time," I admitted. "But I was already so nervous. You knocked me off balance, and I refocused."

“And when you give your all, you’re nothing short of amazing,” he said with a pleased smile.

I blushed and stared down at my punch glass. "I don't know about that. Perhaps it's just that you are so enchanting."

"Oh, certainly that was part of it," he agreed wryly. "It goes without saying that my enchantment brings out the best in everyone."

“It goes without saying, and yet, you’ve said it,” I teased him.

“When I was born, the Matronae gave me a double helping of talent but none of humility. That is the bane of my existence,” he said with exaggerated sorrow.

"In truth, I should be thanking you," he said, and the sincerity caused me to arch my eyebrow at him. "Your conduction made me look more skillful than I am, and that was more than I could hope for with my first official audience before the Queen."

“Perhaps we bring out the best in each other, and there is no need for gratitude to extend either way?” I asked.

"Or it could go both ways if we're feeling generous," Soren said.

“Are you the generous sort? I hadn’t really pegged you as the type.”

“You’ve hardly seen me outside of rehearsals, and the pressure of the situation may have dampened my deeply charitable spirit.”

"I have been curious. How do enchanters occupy themselves in their free time?"

Since I was six years old, my life had been filled with a regimented training and

practice schedule, which wasn't uncommon for muses. However, Briar and Wrenley had always pointed out that Adora had started me younger than most, and my path was far more intense than theirs had been.

Still, practice was a big part of life for all muses. My little free time usually involved reading or walking in the park.

"A little of this, a little of that," Soren replied vaguely, turning his attention toward pouring himself a punch from the nearby crystal bowl. "Imbibing when I have the chance." He took a sip of his drink, and his face immediately crumpled in disgust. "There isn't a drop of alcohol in this!"

"Muses are to be sober on the night of their conductions," I reminded him of the rules of behavior for muses and enchanters, known as the Regula.

"But now it's over, and you should be free to do as you please." He abandoned his punch glass on an empty table, and his gaze had turned to survey the celebration, presumably for wine or other spirits. "And the sobriety section of the Regula definitely does not apply to enchanters."

A server walked by with a tray of honeyed wine in crystal goblets for guests, and Soren scooped two off as they went past.

"Finally, a proper drink to celebrate," he said as he handed me a glass.

Even though I knew I should decline, the encouragement in his eyes was too much for me to deny. I smiled and took a long sip. I had tried wine before, but never after I had recently performed a conduction, and I was pleasantly surprised with the warm, tingling feeling it sent through me.

"Much better," Soren said after he took a long drink, and he looked over at me with a

strange smile playing on his lips. “You’ve got color to your cheeks again. How are you feeling?”

“Light,” I replied. “Like I could float away if I’m not careful.”

“I won’t let you float away too far. I wouldn’t want you to get lost in the clouds, not when you have such a promising vocation ahead of you.” He leaned back, his whole demeanor had relaxed, and the air between us felt different.

The celebration had created a charged atmosphere, a kind of prickly excitement that bounced between people. But the conduction had drained both Soren and I, and now the honeyed wine had a hazy aura around us.

We were still in a ballroom filled with hundreds of people from the kingdom, but we were tucked back in the corner beside the unpopular punch. Maybe it was residue from the magik, maybe it was the wine, but I felt languid, cozy, and utterly beguiled, hiding away in a quiet little bubble with Soren.

“How long have you been enchanting?” I asked.

“It’s been about ten years since I completed my training, but I was dabbling in it before that,” he explained. “I’ve hosted dozens of festivals since then, but tonight was my most prestigious one. What about you?”

“I’ve never been an enchanter,” I replied sardonically, and he smirked down at me. “I was born a muse, though, and I’ve been performing since I was maybe seven or eight.”

“That’s young, isn’t it? Don’t you all usually start when you’re teenagers?”

“Many do,” I said. “But not all.”

Now, his expression turned mystified. "All that experience, all that talent, and yet you're still uncertain of yourself."

"This was my most impressive conduction, too, so maybe I have cause to be uncertain," I reasoned between sips of my wine. "Otherwise, I would've had better placements."

"You would have better placements if you didn't hold yourself back," Soren corrected me. "I can see the light within you. It wants to break free, but you're too afraid to let it go."

"I wasn't today," I said, although that wasn't entirely true.

I had still been afraid – terrified even – but I knew I had to give my all, or I would disappoint Soren, my mother, and my friends and even hurt the entire kingdom. So I had let go, even when it scared me.

"That's right." A proud smile spread slowly across Soren's face. "And you were magnificent."

"There you are!" My mother's sharp voice cut through the moment Soren and I had created. I blinked, and suddenly, I was aware of the loud noise of the crowded ballroom.

Adora was making a beeline right toward me, and I straightened up, doing my best to look proper even though I wasn't sure I'd been improper. But as soon as she reached me before she said hello to Soren, she took the goblet of wine from my hands.

"You shouldn't be drinking this, Isadore, you know that," Adora chastised me, and then she turned her attention to the enchanter. "I don't believe we've met yet, but I am Lady Adora Dellamoussa, Isadore's mother. You were so wonderful tonight,

Soren! Truly a breathtaking performance.”

"Thank you, but most of that was the muses doing their work," Soren said, giving me a small smile over my mother's head. "Isadore was especially enchanting."

"Only because you pulled it out of her," Adora said, and I had the strongest urge to shrink away. Like a flower wilting in the dark, I wanted to retreat into the shadows. "Which is why I think it would be wonderful if you worked together again. As talented as you are, you must have something lined up already. What is ahead for you?"

“I have some opportunities coming my way,” Soren allowed carefully.

“You don’t have anything on the books?” Adora persisted.

"Adora, he's very busy," I said, embarrassed by her pushy nature. “He likely can’t recall everything he has coming up.”

"Oh, no, of course," Adora said, but she was undeterred. Her gray eyes were locked on him, oblivious to the uncomfortable shift in his body. "But I had heard you were being considered for the Ashoralida?"

"Yes, I am an enchanter for that, actually," he said, and Adora's face lit up. "It's down in the Kingdom of Sudamon in a few months, so I don't have anything officially planned yet."

“Oh my, that sounds exciting though,” Adora enthused. “The Ashoralida is such an extravagant celebration, and I haven’t been to Sudamon in ages.”

“It is still some time off, Adora,” I interjected, futilely trying to temper her zealous attempts at getting me booked.

Soren's gaze had been pulled away from us and stayed out on the crowd. He was looking for a means to escape this conversation. And then, as Adora started asking more intrusive questions about his thoughts on muses and performances, Soren found his break.

"Excuse me," he said, cutting my mother off. "I see my sister Serena over there, and I must speak with her at once." He offered us one final glance. "It was a pleasure talking with you both."

When he disappeared into the crowd, Adora's smile instantly fell, and she let out an annoyed sigh. "Enchanters are always so rude and arrogant. They are the worst part about being a muse." She took a long drink of the honeyed wine she'd taken from me, and I just stared after Soren, wishing I could've followed him.

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A dora and I lived on a small estate a half-hour carriage ride away from the royal palace in Calida. When I was younger, we had frequently hopped between rental flats. Sometimes, we could only let a single room that the two of us had to share. By the time I was sixteen, my work as a muse paid well enough so that we were finally able to afford our home.

Still, it was much more modest than Adora had liked despite being far more affluent than what I'd grown up in. It was a solid two-story home built of stone and timber and surrounded by a high wall of shrubbery.

Inside, the floors were polished stone, and the walls were adorned with tapestries and paintings. My mother carefully chose all of the furniture, which was finely crafted with rich hardwoods and lavish fabrics.

My mother and I each had our private chambers on the second floor. Mine was the smaller of the two, decorated with delicate tapestries and pastel paintings. Adora's chambers were more austere, with golden and ivory flourishes, and she had a large, ornate desk where she could conduct her business affairs.

In any other kingdom, this would certainly be the grand home of a noblewoman, but this was Calida—the capital city, no less. It was a lush land between the deserts and plains to the east and the bright blue ocean to the west. The generous soil had made it a coveted place renowned for its opulence and extravagance.

Nobles and royalty lived in grand palaces, and their clothing was enhanced with precious gemstones. Queen Kriselle was famous for her beauty and charm, and she surrounded herself with a retinue of nobles, warlocks, and enchanters who helped

maintain her power and influence.

Wealth and titles were things that most of her Court were born into, but it was not the only way to obtain a life of abundance. Magik could elevate even the poorest pauper to a level of prestige if one could wield it well enough. Musing and enchanting were often a path out of poverty, albeit a difficult one.

In addition to affecting the magik of muses, enchanters could create illusions, transform objects, and sometimes even control the minds of others.

While often revered for our beauty and grace, muses were much more than that. We inspired creativity, passion, and vitality in the people of the kingdom, and most importantly, we used our magik to entice good fortune from the Matronae.

With all of that in mind, our home, as lovely as it might be, did not speak to a life of grandeur and excess that Adora felt we rightly deserved.

When the carriage pulled in front of our house, Adora sighed, and that was the closest she'd gotten to saying anything the whole way home from the Balefire celebration. I thought everything had gone well, but she seemed displeased. My mind raced to think of a mistake I had made, but all I could come up with was a sip of the wine.

Could that be it? We had left shortly after Adora had pestered Soren, but that wasn't surprising. My mother was never one to stay too long at these celebrations since she believed that indulging too much in anything – be it food, drink, music, magik, even laughter – would turn one into a useless glutton.

It was only after the silence of the carriage that I realized I must've done something wrong.

I followed her into our dark home. As she strode through the entryway, she pulled off

her cloak and tossed it absently on the bench by the door. It would remain there until the morning, when our housekeeper Heloise would arrive. The next time Adora wore her cloak, she would complain of the wrinkles. So I picked it up and put it away in the coat closet, along with my own.

Since Adora still hadn't spoken, I summoned my courage and asked her the most innocuous question: "How was your evening, Adora?"

"It went about as well as expected, I suppose," she said noncommittally, and she lounged back on the couch. "It's a bit chilly, isn't it?"

That was my cue to start the fire in the hearth. Whenever Heloise wasn't here, it was my job to tend to the fire, hang the cloaks, and do all the tasks beneath the Lady of the House.

"Careful so you don't get soot on your dress," Adora said as I cautiously tended to the flame. "How do you think the evening went, Isadore?"

"I thought it was a lovely night," I replied, feeling a twinge of apprehension for telling her how I truly felt. But what harm could there be in admitting I had a pleasant time? So I plunged on, "All the muses performed well, and the Queen applauded when we finished."

"The Queen will applaud at anything," Adora said derisively. "I'm not trying to take away from your night, but merely speaking from experience. When I was in her Court, before you were born, I saw her applaud a monkey that could juggle. Her taste is utterly questionable."

"I know," I said because she'd told me about her days on the Queen's Court a thousand times before. Maybe more.

When other children had bedtime stories about princesses and dragons, my mother told me about the jealousies and backstabbing of social climbing.

“And you got carried away there at the end, didn’t you?” She posed it as a question, but it was a clear condemnation.

So it was the honeyed wine that had indeed upset her. It was a relief, honestly, because I knew how to apologize.

I straightened up from the fire so I could face her fully and she could see my chastened regret. "I am sorry, Adora. I hadn't really drunk anything. Soren handed me a goblet, and I held it to be polite."

“Soren.” She snorted in contempt. “He seemed awfully dull and unimpressive for an enchanter. And the Kingdom of Sudamon for his next placement? What an embarrassing step down for him.” She shook her head. “But he’s the one they’ve put in charge, so it is good that you humored him. No one wants to deal with a defiant muse.”

Adora lay back on the sofa and rubbed her bare arms. I grabbed a blanket from a basket near the fireplace and laid it across her lap.

“Did you make a good impression on him, do you think?” Adora asked.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Soren. Does he think highly of you?”

"I-I don't know," I stammered, confused both by her questions and the fluttery feeling in my stomach when I thought of Soren telling me I'm magnificent.

“It would be good if you performed more conductions,” Adora said. “It’s time you got out of these menial performances, and the way to do that is by making nice with the enchanter. Even lousy ones like Soren.”

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Bryonia Park was a ten-minute walk from my house, or five if I hurried, and today I hurried. Briar and Wrenley were already waiting for me there, but I couldn't leave until Adora was occupied in her afternoon bath. She must've sensed that I had somewhere else to be because she was particularly slow, and I was left running to meet my friends.

The park was filled with towering trees, their branches stretching towards the sky, creating a canopy of leaves that filtered the warm summer sunlight. Manicured gravel trails wound through it, and I followed one down to the babbling brook.

Sitting among the wildflowers with a picnic blanket spread out were Briar and Wrenley. As soon as she saw me, Briar got to her feet and waved her hand wildly as if I wouldn't have noticed them. Wrenley lounged on her back, shaded by a wide-brimmed sunhat, and she was already munching grapes and cheese.

"There you are, Izzy!" Briar pulled me into her arms, hugging me tightly as if it had been years since we'd last seen each other.

It had been three weeks since the Balefire, and though my friends and I usually tried to get together once a week, summer was a busy season for muses. Briar had performed at a wedding on the beach, Wrenley did a prosperity ritual at a vineyard in the southern gardens, and I had conducted a christening for a noble's new baby. And those were only some of our assignments over the last few days.

"Glad to see you finally escaped," Wrenley told me between bites. "But I couldn't wait for you to eat. I'm famished. They had the worst food spread at the vineyard yesterday. And the gardens were lush, so the vintners were simply being stingy."

“So good fortune will not rain down on them this summer?” I asked as I sat between Briar and Wrenley on the blanket.

“Not if I have my say,” Wrenley grumbled.

“Don’t joke about such things,” Briar chastised her but she did it with a laugh. “We do what we do because it is needed, not for the spoils. Our compensation is merely a gift of gratitude on top of our duty.”

“We are muses, not saints,” Wrenley said, then quickly amended, “Well, maybe you and Izzy are, but I am certainly not.” Then he motioned to the food. “Eat up, Izzy. The conduction starts soon.”

Ordinarily, it wouldn't have been an issue that I was late, but today, we had a schedule to keep. Wrenley's younger sister Sparrow was set to perform at the Bryonia Grand Amphitheater on the other side of the park, so Briar had suggested we have a picnic lunch together first.

“We have fifteen minutes, which is enough time to have a good chat,” Briar insisted, and her eyes had a glimmer to them as she settled in beside me for gossip. “Have you worked with Soren again?”

I picked at the sweetbreads so she wouldn’t notice the flutter of my heart at the mention of his name. “No, I haven’t had the occasion to. Why do you ask?”

“He seemed to think you were talented,” Briar replied coyly.

“That’s her polite way of saying that Soren could hardly take his eyes off you,” Wrenley said, and my cheeks suddenly blazed with heat.

“That’s not true!” I protested.

“He did seem taken with you. Because he admired your light and your skill, I’m sure,” Briar clarified. “He’s a rising enchanter, so he would know better than to romance any muses.”

Wrenley sneered. “As if that has stopped other enchanters.”

“It stops the good ones,” Briar asserted. “Muses and enchanters should never be romantically entangled. It ruins the sanctity and vulnerability of our roles. That’s why it is explicitly forbidden in the Regula.”

"It doesn't matter since I am not interested in him," I lied. "I haven't seen or spoken to him since the night of the Balefire, but if I do again, I can assure you it will only be on a professional level."

“You have always been the consummate professional,” Wrenley said, shaking her head in disappointment.

"Enough about me," I said because talking about Soren made me uneasy. "What of you two? Any good news to report?"

“I got my invitation to perform at the Ashoralida before Queen Kriselle’s palace in the southern gardens,” Briar said.

“Me, too,” Wrenley added with a grin, and then they both looked to me.

“Congratulations!” I said as brightly as I could, and I did mean it. It was an impressive conduction, and they must both be excited about it.

Briar frowned sadly. “You haven’t gotten one?”

"No, it's fine." I forced a smile and swallowed my disappointment. I was genuinely

happy for them, and I didn't want my pride and jealousy to get in the way of that. "I will have other assignments."

"Maybe you haven't gotten your invitation yet," Briar said hopefully. "They just went out."

"Sorry," Wrenley said. "If it makes you feel any better, Adora probably would've ruined it for you anyway."

"Wrenley!" Briar gasped. "That's a terrible thing to say!"

"What?" Wrenley asked. "Adora does ruin everything. I'm simply stating a fact."

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My friends filled me in about the lowlights (mostly Wren) and the highlights (mostly Bri) of their summer so far, and I ate my lunch as quickly as possible. Wrenley still ensured that we had cleaned up and gotten on our way with plenty of time to make the quick walk across the park.

Xer father was already seated on the benches surrounding the amphitheater stage. That wasn't surprising, though, considering Sparrow was one of the performers. Since she was only fourteen, Wrenley and Sparrow's mother, Eva of House Calix, was always with her.

Wrenley's father, Robyn of House Pavone, was a lord and somewhat prominent enchanter in Calida. Eva was a retired muse, so they both had an acute understanding of magickal conductions. He sat near the front row while Eva was back with their daughter and the other performers.

"It drives Sparrow nuts because our mother is always hovering around, but she was the same with me," Wrenley explained with a snicker as we made our way down to sit near xer father.

"It is necessary, though!" Briar chimed in, sounding overly concerned. "My dads let me go on one lucenition by myself when I was seventeen, and the enchanter thought he'd be inappropriate with me because I was so young. I smacked him and ran home straight away."

"What did your dads do when you told them?" Wrenley asked since they'd always been protective parents.

“Oh, I never told them. They wouldn’t have let me go out on my own anymore,” Briar explained with a shrug. “But if my children want to be a muse, I will never leave them alone with a warlock or enchanter or even an adult muse. Not until they are twenty-one.”

"You're not even twenty-one right now," Wrenley pointed out, since she had just turned twenty.

“I know,” Briar said, undeterred.

Wrenley's father, Robyn, saw us approaching. He offered us a warm smile, and he stood to embrace Wrenley. Xe was such a blend of xer parents: the lanky build, tall height, and aquiline nose were from xer father, and the dark curls, expressive eyes, and enigmatic smile came from xer mother.

Xer little sister Sparrow was also a perfect blend of their parents but with all different qualities: she inherited her pale eyes, pouty lips, and auburn hair from her father, and petite nose, short stature, and wide hips from her mother.

Xer older brother Larken looked like neither of their parents, except for the auburn hair and expressive eyes. He wasn't here, though, because he was away studying at the Calida Conservatory for Magickal Arts in the southern gardens. He was four years older than Wrenley and an aspiring enchanter, like their father.

Lord Robyn smiled as he greeted us. “Lady Briar, Lady Isadore, it’s always a pleasure to see you, and it is so kind of you to show your support of Sparrow.”

“She’s practically my little sister, too,” Briar said because she and Wrenley had been best friends since they were toddlers.

Technically, they were cousins (second or third once removed), but their relationship

was distant enough that they didn't spend family events together. They also happened to be neighbors, and both went to Ceffyl Isca Academy, the same day school the royal princess attended until they were sixteen.

“And I’m here because I’ve been helping Sparrow practice her steps all week, and I need to see if any of my hard work paid off,” Wrenley said wryly.

We all took our seats as the music started, and a few moments later, a dozen young muses came out in summer costumes. All of them appeared to be aged twelve to fourteen, so they were not exceptionally young, but most major conductions only began hiring muses when they were sixteen or older.

These performances existed outside of the major festivals to give young muses a chance to gain experience and learn how to conduct the magik that was already coursing through their veins.

Everyone in Wespen was born with magik in them, but those that became muses had an abundance of it. Regardless of class or calling, everyone had to be taught how to tap into it and conduct it. Although, again, muses had an aptitude for it and learned quickly.

Magik usually gained full-strength by the time someone hit puberty and that is when most aspiring muses began practicing and performing. To help them learn how to harness their magik, smaller conductions like this one were put on.

The biggest difference between the ones with children like this in the park and the ones I did was the direction that the coin went. Full-fledged mature muses like myself, Briar, and Wrenley were paid to conduct at the festival. Underage aspiring muses like Sparrow—or, more accurately, her parents—were paid to perform in them. They were paying for the opportunities and experiences, the same way they paid for their tuition for the academy until they were sixteen and Larken's

conservatory.

That was also why I had rarely performed in them. Occasionally, Adora would scrape together enough coin so I could because she believed the connections and friendships were invaluable. That was where I first met Wrenley and Briar, although we didn't really become friends until I was sixteen.

These performances in the park were simply meant to teach and entertain. The ones I had done in festivals as a child, so that we could earn coin, those ones had the weight of the kingdom on them.

Finally, the performance of "The Dance of the Hummingbirds" began with bright music, and the aspiring muses ran out onto the stage.

It was a popular piece, especially for this age group, and it was unusual because it had two primamusas. The dual roles of Signy and Otho were a pair of star-crossed lovers kept apart by the curse of the evil Rufus.

Sparrow had gotten the role of Rufus, which she'd initially been upset about until Wrenley told her that the villains always have more fun and get the most dramatic moves.

Most of the children were in brightly colored costumes made of feathers and fluff to mimic the hummingbirds, but Sparrow came out in darker colors with a feathered cloak enveloping her. The look on her face as she danced with a tail of sparkling feathers following her magickally showed that she clearly relished her time on the stage.

When I was her age, I only wanted background roles, preferring to hide in the shadows. I loved the music and the dancing and the magik, but the idea of everyone's eyes on me made me want to crawl out of my skin.

Adora had pushed me out onto the stage, and she was always in the front row, watching me with the most scrutinizing eyes so she could catch even the slightest mistake. Sometimes, the way she watched me so closely made me feel like she wanted to see me falter.

But that wasn't how Sparrow's family watched her. Wrenley sat forward with xer elbows resting on xer knees in rapt attention, and their father watched her with nothing but love and pride.

When the performance ended, Wrenley was instantly on xer feet, applauding and whistling, and their dad was only a moment behind xer. They all hugged Sparrow and congratulated her, and nobody even mentioned anything she could've done better.

With the performance over, I made a hasty departure and hurried home. I was allowed to visit with my friends, but my mother wasn't exactly fond of it. She believed that I should do my socializing through my work, and it was dangerous for young women to be out on their own for too long.

I jogged back home, lifting the length of my summer dress to move faster. As soon as I went inside, I checked myself in the entryway mirror, which was good because some of my hair had come free from the chignon I had it in, and Adora would be appalled if she knew I'd been in public looking so unkempt.

"Good afternoon, Miss Izzy. The Lady of the House is still in the bath," our housekeeper Heloise greeted me. She was a plump woman in her late middle age, wearing her beige tunic uniform and dark headscarf covering her graying hair. "How was your picnic?"

"It was lovely, thank you." I had finished fixing my hair, and I finally looked over at her and noticed the excitement in her barely repressed smile. "What is it, Heloise?"

"While you were out, a message arrived for you," she said, and I glanced down to see a sizeable golden envelope in her hands. Even in the dim light of the entryway, the paper shimmered.

"Is that an invitation to the Ashoralida?" I asked, and my heart was already racing.

"I'm not sure," Heloise said. "You'll have to open it and see."

She handed it to me, and it felt heavy and thick. The seal on the back was made of glimmer wax, so the colors swirled and changed before my eyes. That was the seal of an enchanter.

The parchment itself was as soft as satin, with golden filigree along the edges. The message was written in elegant calligraphy in royal stylization.

"The Grand Celebration of the

Ashoralida

By Commandment of

the King Marcel of House Velt

the Enchanter Soren Tomoleo

is Directed to Invite

Lady Isadore Lucienne Dellamousa

to Present and Conduct with the Muses at the

Royal Palace in the Kingdom of Sudamon

on the Longest Days of Summer”

Beneath all of that, at the very bottom, was a quickly scribbled note in messier handwriting:

Izzy, bring your brightest light. The Kingdom of Sudamon needs you. – Soren

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The Ashoralida was honored all across the continent of Wespen, but each of the six kingdoms held its own festival.

No matter where it was held, it always took place on the longest days of the year, when the sunlight shone the most on the abundant beauty of all that the gods have given us. Muses performed conceptions to share our gratitude but also to plead for a bountiful harvest throughout the rest of the summer.

To celebrate, we decorated our bodies and homes in pink and orange and made altars of flowers and herbs. People danced in the streets from sunup to sundown, and we feasted at dusk.

Calida—the kingdom most renowned for entertainers and enchantments—had the largest and grandest festival. Each year, it was held at the southern gardens in Queen Kriselle's summer palace.

However, Sudamon, as the desert kingdom to the southeast, needed the Ashoralida the most to summon the rains for their crops. The performance was more intensive for the muses, with the movements so physical and extravagant to draw out the most magik. Despite the extra effort required, it received fewer accolades because most of the wealthy and the elite attended the one in Calida instead.

That was why Adora greeted my invitation with a frown and asked, “Is this it then?”

"There is only one page if that's what you mean," I answered.

“No, I mean, there were no other invitations?” She was in her satin dressing robes,

and as she looked down at the parchment with disdain, water from her damp hair left droplets on it.

“Only one arrived, M’Lady,” Heloise explained.

"Isn't this great news, Adora?" I asked, pretending I hadn't noticed the displeasure on her face. "This is what you had hoped for when you talked to Soren at the Balefire."

“I had hoped for placement in Calida," she corrected me. "But I thought Sudamon would do if there were no other offers."

“Well, there haven’t been any other offers,” I replied carefully.

"Now we'll have to travel all the way to Sudamon, and that's a full day's ride by carriage. Not to mention that the dreadful desert air is always so hard on my skin," Adora said, almost muttering to herself. "The gown I planned to wear is more suited for the southern gardens, so I must rethink my wardrobe."

An awful sinking feeling grew in my stomach because it sounded like Adora was about to prevent me from performing in the Ashoralida in Sudamon. But that seemed so unfathomable. All Adora ever wanted was for me to be a muse with good placement, and now that I was finally close to getting the recognition we'd worked so hard for, she seemed to think it wasn't good enough.

“The cost of travel and board is covered,” I reminded her in a desperate attempt to stop her from forbidding me.

“Placement for the Ashoralida pays a substantial amount, too, doesn’t it, Miss Isadore?” Heloise offered up helpfully, and Adora cast her a glare to silence her.

“I know that we don’t want for anything, but the compensation is always nice to

have,” I said, even though it was an obvious lie. Adora wanted for everything , and the coin would be spent on gowns and jewels by the end of summer.

"But that hardly even covers the inconvenience of traveling to the desert," Adora persisted.

"You don't even need to go with me," I blurted out. "Many of the other muses my age travel without a guardian. Briar and Wrenley go together, and that's enough. There's no reason I can't do the same, and you can stay here in Calida."

Adora clicked her tongue and considered it for a moment. "Well, I suppose that if Briar and Wrenley's parents believe it's safe, who am I to disagree? But do you really want to perform at the Ashoralida in Sudamon without me in attendance?"

“It is not ideal, but I can do it, and yes, I would like to do it,” I answered carefully.

Finally, she let out a heavy sigh. "I suppose it is for the best. The only way to succeed as a muse is by paying your dues, and though I feel like you should've paid enough by now, my opinion doesn't count for much these days. Go to the Kingdom of Sudamon, but you need to perform well enough so that you will be placed in Calida next year."

"Thank you, Adora!" I beamed, even though it likely irritated her, but I couldn't hold it back.

"I mean it, Isadore," she said, her tone serious and eyes hard. "You have to stay out of trouble and do your very best. Anything else will be a failure."

I nodded my head fervently. “Of course. I would never dream of doing otherwise.”

It wasn't until she departed, retreating up to her chambers to complete her

correspondence, that I got to truly celebrate with Heloise.

"Congratulations, Miss Izzy!" she said in a fierce whisper, and then she pulled me into a hug, squeezing me tightly. "I am so proud of you!"

I hugged her and blinked back my happy tears. "Thank you. Now I just have to count the days and hope I don't go mad with anticipation."

That was hardly an exaggeration. The three weeks until I got to leave were incredibly nerve-wracking. Not only did I have my excitement to contend with – and the personal note from Soren did nothing to temper my eagerness – but I was terrified that Adora would rescind her permission at any moment. I lived on eggshells, trying to meet her expectations at every turn.

Adora always dismissed Sudamon as a boring desert kingdom, and while much of my journey by stagecoach reinforced that, the capital city was nothing of the sort. In the very heart of the desert, surrounded by dunes and rocky outcroppings, it was a bustling metropolis with sandstone buildings and busy streets.

As we approached, I leaned out the coach window to take in the full opulence of it. The palace towered over sprawling gardens filled with exotic plants and fountains, but it was hard to see when the streets were so busy. On either side were dozens of tiny shops and markets where merchants sold spices, silks, and precious wares.

The stagecoach stopped in the center of town, just outside the sandstone palace. I grabbed my luggage, thanked the driver, and stepped out. The sun burned hot in the cloudless sky, but the gardens and fountains created an oasis around the palace that helped cool the air.

I wasn't exactly sure where I was meant to go since the invitation had only specified the palace. Peacocks with fanning tails in white and gold were walking amongst the

lush grass and prickly cacti. I was admiring them when I felt a familiar electrical charge in the air, and the hair on the back of my neck stood up despite the heat.

"Isadore Dellamoussa, you finally made it," Soren said from behind me, and I turned around to see him approaching the path with a stunning woman walking at his side. He wore a pale tunic lined with golden thread and looked as handsome in the desert sun as he had when I last saw him in the ballroom of Calida.

I smiled as he reached me. "Soren Tomoleo. I'm looking forward to working with you again."

"And you should. We're going to put on quite the show," he said with a wry smile, and his dark eyes moved between me and the woman beside him. She was beautiful, with coppery red hair and ash-brown skin. "Isadore, this is Jessalyn. She's performed at the Sudamon Ashorilida for the past four years and has the role of the primamusa."

The primamusa had the most complicated performance and was the one most featured in what would otherwise be an ensemble. I wasn't surprised to learn that Jessalyn held the title, considering how fluid and elegant her movements were even when she walked and how her skin seemed to glow, even though she wasn't summoning her magik right now.

"Have you been to Sudamon before?" Jessalyn asked.

"Once, but I've never been to the palace," I said.

"I am quite familiar with how things are done here, so I would be happy to show you around," Jessalyn offered.

I smiled up at her in relief. "That would be wonderful, thank you."

"Jessalyn, why don't you take Isadore to the dormitory so she can rest and change before our first rehearsal?" Soren suggested. "We have much to do and very little time to do it."

"Excellent idea." Jessalyn looped her arm through mine and started leading me away when Soren stopped us.

"Here. Let me take your bag." He reached over to take it from me, and his fingers brushed against mine. "I'm not allowed in your room, but I can carry it just outside."

"Thank you, but that's not necessary," I protested weakly, relinquishing without a real fight.

"Let him do the work today. We'll be doing most of it during the Ashoralida," Jessalyn said with a laugh. "The dorms here are very comfortable and chic, and we even have our private courtyard to relax in. Make sure to drink plenty of water and rest often since you're not used to performing in the desert."

"I can handle that," I said.

As we walked through the gardens toward the dormitory building on the western side of the palace, I glanced back over my shoulder. Soren was following a step behind us, my bag in his hand, and when I looked at him, he was watching me with a curious glint in his eyes.

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Jessalyn hadn't been lying about our dorm. Each muse had been given their private chambers, and they were comfortable but still had the flourishes of grandeur expected from a royal property. My room was bright and airy, and the light linens were all warm earth tones. Thick drapes framed the large window for privacy and to block out the intense desert sun.

Unfortunately, I quickly learned that I would spend hardly any time in my room. Since the Ashoralida called for multiple elaborate performances over three days, we had two weeks to rehearse in the Sudamon palace ballroom, and we had to make the most of it.

I had only just hung up the clothing I'd packed in the wardrobe when Jessalyn fetched me for a fitting. For a muse, each festival required different custom attire. Talented garment makers had them mostly complete by the time we arrived because two weeks wasn't nearly enough time to make exquisite gowns, rompers, and pantsuits that could hold up to three intensive performances.

I was whisked down to a dressing room, where a rather short man and a very tall woman flitted about me, taking measurements and poking me with pins. My dress was too small in the middle, which wasn't uncommon since I was on the thicker side for a muse. I couldn't do a proper fitting that day, but the designers assured me it would be perfect when Ashoralida began.

Then, I was immediately pushed out the door and down to the ballroom to begin our first rehearsal. There was a lot of choreography to go over – both dancing and magickal – and Soren wanted to get right down to it.

All the muses took their places in a circle, and Soren stood in the center. For the first rehearsals, he wouldn't sing. Instead, he spoke directions out loud and conducted with his hands in quick, sinuous movements. His words were instructions for our steps, and his hands were for our magik.

We had only been practicing for a few minutes when he snapped, "Isadore Dellamoussa! Shoulders back and focus on your hands."

That would be the first of many, many times he called out my name during rehearsal. Reminders to keep my chin up, my movements smooth, concentrate on my breathing, focus on my steps, and, most of all, to shine my light.

"Light, Isadore!" Soren shouted. "Let it go! Make it bright!"

Finally, in frustration, I snapped, "I am! I can't go any brighter!"

He scowled at me and shook his head, and I was suddenly filled with the most profound regret—not only for talking back but also because I couldn't go any brighter. I was giving it all I had, and where his dark eyes once held a curious respect for me, I only saw disappointment.

"Perhaps we should take a break," Jessalyn interjected. "We're all tired, and it's only day one."

Soren stared at me a moment longer, and all I wanted to do was wither up under the weight of his gaze. When he finally looked away from me, I let out a shaky breath.

"Fine, rest up tonight," he said. "We start tomorrow at dawn and will give it our all."

With that, he turned and stalked out of the ballroom, and I feared that I might throw up.

"The first day is always rough," Jessalyn assured me warmly. "Not just for us, but for the enchanters too. Giving each other a little grace is good, and I know you'll do better tomorrow."

"Thank you," I mumbled, but I didn't feel as confident as her.

She invited me to have dinner with her and some other muses down in the markets outside the palace grounds, but I declined because I didn't want to waste any time or energy. Not when I was struggling so much. I opted for a quick meal in the kitchen and went out to the dormitory courtyard.

The courtyard's centerpiece was an octagonal reflecting pool, which provided a cool breeze. Cacti and pink desert flowers added color to the landscape in garden beds along the walls. At one end of the courtyard, there was a comfortable seating area under a pergola, and at the other end, there was an open patio of smooth stone.

The open space attracted me to the area because it had enough room for me to practice. I hadn't been at it for very long when I felt the familiar tingle that announced an enchanter's presence. I took a deep breath and kept moving, trying not to let Soren distract me.

"Isadore," he said wearily, and I finally gave up and turned around to face him. He stood at the edge of the courtyard, his arms folded across his chest, and he looked at me in bemusement.

"I am practicing on my own right now. You don't need to tell me how I'm doing everything wrong," I told him curtly.

"If you were doing everything wrong, you wouldn't be here, but what's actually happening is far more frustrating." He shook his head again. "Everything you do, it's almost amazing."

"So you think what I'm doing is amazing, yet you constantly yell at me?" I countered dubiously.

"Almost amazing," he rectified. "And I'm not yelling at you. I am correcting you because you are so near to something truly spectacular that you can almost reach out and touch it, and yet you refuse to."

I shook my head, and a lump formed in my throat as I tried to swallow back my embarrassed tears. "I think you are seeing something that is not there. I am giving it all I have, Soren."

"I know that you're not. I've seen you give your all." He stepped closer, only a few inches in front of me, and lowered his voice. "You can do it again, and it's my job to see that you do."

"Why does that sound threatening?" I asked.

"Because it is. A little." He smiled down at me then, and my body flushed with heat. "Start again from the top."

I sighed. "Fine."

I raised my hands above my head, beginning the first movements. Soren took a few steps back so he could better assess my full performance. As he watched, he started walking around me in a slow circle, but the truly strange part was that he wasn't saying anything. He didn't shout my name or bark out various corrections.

It made me nervous, and I tried to focus on my breathing and my steps and the magik that tingled in my fingertips. He disappeared behind me, and I kept my movements fluid and clean.

“Stop.” His voice was directly behind me, closer than I thought.

I did as I was told, my hands still up in the air. I didn't turn to look at him, not even when I felt his arm come around my waist and he pressed his palm flat against my abdomen. My breath caught in my throat, an involuntary reaction to his unexpected (but not unwelcome) touch. There was still a distance between our bodies, so his hand was the only thing touching me.

“You need to draw from here,” he said, his voice almost in my ear. “When you start again, I'll move with you. Do your steps, all your movements, but your focus should be here .” His hand pressed more on my stomach, and his skin felt so warm through the fabric of the light dress I'd worn to rehearsal.

“Okay,” I said.

“Go.”

I began the dance from where I'd left off, and I was surprised that my feet followed through with the choreography because all I could think about was Soren's hand. Magik tingled through my whole body, and my fingertips were soon hot with the intensity of the light that emanated from them.

Soren moved easily with me, and as we danced, he began humming the song he would sing during our conduction. I closed my eyes, letting his enchanting baritone rumble through me, and I felt my body gliding through the performance.

When I finished, I exhaled deeply, and somehow, as my body relaxed, the distance between Soren and me disappeared. He was right behind me, his arm around my waist. I was delighted and light-headed, so I leaned back into him, and he didn't move away.

“Now that was amazing,” he said, low in my ear.

“Thank you,” I murmured.

“We’ll just have to figure out how to get you to perform like that without me.”

“How will we do that?” I asked.

“Practice, of course.”

He let go of me, and when he moved away, I almost fell over, but I caught myself just in time.

“Rest up, Izzy,” Soren said, and he’d already started walking back towards the exit.

“We have another long day tomorrow.”

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For the next two weeks, I spent my days in rehearsal and evenings in the courtyard with Soren as my private tutor. As time passed, my performance definitely improved, leading to positive and negative changes. He was yelling my name in rehearsal less and less, but he was also dancing with me less and less.

I found myself missing the feel of his arm around my waist. The proud smile he had when he watched me succeed almost made up for it. Almost .

By the time of our final rehearsal, he assured me that I would be perfect for the Ashoralida. I had to believe him because the other option was terror and failure.

My gown was finally finished with only hours to spare before our first performance. It was a bright yellow-gold, reminiscent of the sun that beat down on the desert. The fabric was semi-sheer, so light and airy. It was taut across my breasts, but it flowed around the rest of my body like a gentle breeze.

Across the bodice, there was embroidery in shades of blue and gray, in stark contrast to the yellow. The patterns were so detailed that they almost seemed real, as if raindrops were dancing across the fabric.

Once I was clothed, a skilled dresser came in to do my makeup and style my hair. They weaved flowers and ribbons through a soft braid, and they put golden highlights on my cheeks and eyes.

After that, I waited with the other muses until we were called, and then Soren led us down to the ballroom.

Our conduction began with Soren singing, his voice low and full of longing as he called for the rain in an ancient incantation. I stood in a circle with the other muses, surrounding Jessalyn in the center. We all had our arms raised towards the sky, and as the music filled out with other instruments joining Soren's vocals, we began to move in unison, and our fingertips cast a warm glow.

As the dance continued, we moved faster. With each step, we called forth the rain, our fingers reaching towards the sky as if to pull the clouds down to earth.

When the music reached a crescendo, I closed my eyes and focused on drawing the magik from deep within me, the way Soren taught. We spun and twirled—I felt the air moving from all the dresses swirling around me—and finally, the music crashed to a stop, and we all fell to the ground in dramatic unison.

The ballroom erupted in applause, and when I lifted my head, the air was still filled with the sparkling illusion of a thousand raindrops pouring down from the ceiling. Through the skylights, I could see that real rain had yet to fall. But King Marcel was sitting on his throne, smiling and clapping, and we did still have two more performances to go.

Once the conduction was finished, the mood shifted from audience to revelry. A minstrel band played in the corner, and there was a sumptuous buffet of fruits, bread, and sweet wines. Usually, I wouldn't have time for much eating or socializing before Adora would insist that we depart, but tonight, I had nowhere else to be.

Jessalyn invited me to join her and the other muses. With our work done, we had a brief opportunity to let loose. They drank wine and danced together, playfully, without abandon, and Jessalyn took my hand and pulled me onto the dance floor with the rest of them.

As she spun me around, I caught sight of Soren. He walked across the ballroom to

talk to the King but smiled proudly at me. I hadn't even had any wine yet, and already, I felt drunk on the night. I wondered (and hoped) that I would be able to dance with him again.

“Lady Isadore Dellamoussa?” a royal messenger said, interrupting my merriment with the muses.

I stopped and brushed my hair back from my forehead. “That’s me.”

"I have a message for you." He held up a rolled tube of pale paper bound by a ribbon that shimmered iridescently.

That was the ribbon of an enchanted message, one that traveled instantly over great distances. The sender would write the message using a psychic quill and magik, holding it like a wand and composing it in the air. Then, the sender would chant the destination, and a messenger at the location would be compelled to write it word for word on a special pale parchment.

"This is for me?" I asked in surprise, but when I took it from him, I knew it must be from Adora.

“Did you get an enchanted message?” Jessalyn asked. “Is everything okay?”

"Yes, I'm sure it's just my mother wishing me well since she couldn't be here to see the conduction," I said, but the sick feeling in my stomach sincerely doubted that.

Jessalyn laughed. “I know how that can be. My mother would die if she had to miss one of mine.”

I excused myself since reading a note from Adora in the middle of the dancefloor didn't sound ideal. I waited until I was in the shadows of the ballroom to unroll it, and

as soon as I had, I wished I hadn't read it at all.

“Isadore, my dear daughter who I have sacrificed everything for –

I have always trusted and supported you, which is why I allowed you to go off to a faraway and dangerous kingdom on your own. What eased my mind was the knowledge that you were traveling with your oldest friends, both from good families.

So you must imagine my dismay when I arrived at the Ashoralida at the summer palace in Calida, and I was greeted by none other than Briar and Wrenley, your two oldest friends. It took only a quick conversation to learn that they had never been offered the performance in Sudamon, and they knew nothing of your travels or even that you were going alone.

Up until tonight, I would've told anyone that my daughter is not a liar, that she is trustworthy and honest. But I cannot say that now. You have broken something that cannot be easily mended, and you have put yourself in a danger that I can only pray hasn't touched you yet.

It is with that danger in mind, as a single young woman entirely alone in a strange kingdom, that I must command you to come home immediately. Leaving with only one of the three of Ashoralida's performances done will undoubtedly be a dark mark on your record. It will likely lead to worse placements in the future, but that is the unfortunate consequence of your reckless behaviors.

You are supposed to be a muse, Isadore. Someone of impeccable grace, morality, and diligence. Right now, you have none. When you return, there will be many changes to ensure that you get back on the path that you belong on.

I expect you to be on the first stagecoach out in the morning, so I shall see you by the late afternoon, and then we can have a proper talk.

Signed,

Lady Adora Ravenna Dellamoussa”

My hands trembled when I reached the end, and I knew I couldn't go back to the other muses. How could I tell them my mother forbade me from finishing the conduction? How could I tell Soren?

At the moment, I was in no mind to talk to anyone. Never before had I felt so happy and light, only to come crashing down so quickly after. I needed time to compose myself and figure out how to handle Adora's demands.

I slipped out of the ballroom without anyone seeing, and I hurried through the palace to the dormitories. Since everyone was at the celebration, they were silent and dark. I went out to the courtyard, sat on the edge of the reflecting pool, and stared at the stars above.

Truthfully, I wanted to cry, scream, throw up, and yell. I couldn't leave (I would disappoint everyone), and I couldn't stay (I would destroy Adora). I had no idea how to reconcile my responsibilities with my wants.

“Why do you always run from a good time?” Soren asked, and for once, I was too distracted to notice the electrical charge I felt in the air anytime he was near.

"I didn't run," I argued, but I didn't trust myself to look back at him.

I was in no hurry to watch any admiration in his eyes quickly dissolve into disappointment and disgust.

"Is something the matter?" he asked, his voice filled with concern as he approached.

Because I didn't want to explain it to him, I held out Adora's message. He took it from me and read it silently as I stared at the starlight shimmering in the pool.

"This is from your mother?" he asked after he finished.

"Yes, Adora is my mother. She's upset because she thinks I lied to her, but I didn't. I only said that my friends travel independently, and she misinterpreted that to mean they'd be traveling with me."

"Izzy, it doesn't matter, even if you did lie to her. You are a young woman and a talented muse. You do not need her permission to travel across the lands doing the very incredible thing you were made to do. That's utterly absurd."

"You don't know Adora," I replied resignedly.

"I don't have to. I know you." He sat down on the edge of the pool, and when I finally looked over at him, I noticed the bottle of wine in his hands.

"I'm sorry, I must be interrupting something. Were you meeting someone out here?" I asked.

"Yes," he said with a laugh. "You. I saw you slip away from the festivities early, and I was afraid you were punishing yourself with more practice instead of celebrating. So I pilfered the wine and brought it here with the plan to get you to have some fun for a change."

"Unfortunately, I think this will have to be a goodbye drink," I said sadly.

He gave me a stern look as he appraised me, and his dark eyebrows pinched together. "Isadore. I won't tell you not to go because the last thing you need is someone else deciding your choices. I will say that I know the Ashoralida will be better if you are

in it, and I would hate to see you leave. Not before you've had a chance to burn bright."

"You really believe that?" I asked.

"Of course," he replied immediately. "But it doesn't really matter what I think, does it?"

"It matters to me."

He leaned forward and put his hand on top of my knee that was tilted toward him. "What do you want, Izzy? Where do you want to be tonight? Tomorrow?"

"Here. I want to be here. In the Ashoralida," I said, and barely bit my tongue to hold back what I wanted to add, With you .

"Then stay, and this can be your first drink of celebration." He motioned to the wine in his other hand.

"What do I do about Adora?"

"Send her a message, reassure her your safe, and you'll see her when you return after the Ashoralida," he suggested.

"But she'll be so upset." I frowned because the very thought of that made me sick to my stomach. Throughout all my life, the one lesson I had been taught over and over again was that there was nothing worse than upsetting my mother.

"People are upset all the time," Soren reasoned. "They very rarely die from it, though. Do you actually want to be a muse?"

I thought for a moment, and there was very little in my life that I enjoyed more than the moments that I was truly one with magik and movement. "I do."

"Good." He smiled and removed his hand from my knee to open the wine bottle.

"I'm sorry about pulling you away from the party," I said.

"Pulling me away?" He shook his head. "I chose to come after you. If anything, I should be apologizing for bothering you."

"But you're not bothering me."

"And I'm not pulled away."

With the bottle open, he held the wine toward me so I could have the first drink. "Thank you," I said before taking a long sip of the sweet nectar wine.

"I am always happy to share a glass of wine – or a bottle – with a friend," he said with a smile.

As we spoke, we passed the wine back and forth between us, and a warm relaxation was already settling inside me.

"Did you ever struggle standing up to your parents?" I asked.

"Not really. But that's because both my parents had died by the time I was fifteen, so it became a moot point."

I blanched, embarrassed by my blunder. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I had no idea."

"It was a long time ago, and my older sister Serena took care of me afterward. I miss

them, of course, but my life hasn't been all bad since. Although I do find that life is rarely all of anything. Hardly ever all bad or all good, but an awful beautiful mixture of both."

"So you are full of wisdom on top of all your other attributes?" I asked.

"I am a wise and enchanting lush indeed," Soren agreed.

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O ur second conduction of Ashoralida went as well as the first, but still, there was no rain. The King and his Court applauded, and I didn't see signs of any displeasure yet. That didn't completely alleviate my anxiety about my performance, especially not with Adora's angry message yesterday.

Almost as soon as we finished the second conduction, I tried to slip out without being noticed.

"Izzy, you can't be running off again," Jessalyn called after me when I tried to leave. I turned back to face her, and she took my hand. "We've performed so well. We should be celebrating together."

"Thank you, but I am not one for large parties," I answered honestly, gesturing to the crowded ballroom around us.

"That's fine because we have something else planned tonight," Jessalyn said with a wicked smile.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Don't worry about it," Soren interjected, and he appeared at Jessalyn's side. "We're going to have a night of fun and enchantment, and that's all you need to know."

"We?" I echoed, and as my heart fluttered, I realized that I had maybe asked the wrong questions.

"Me, Soren, the other muses," Jessalyn explained nonchalantly. "Come on. You don't

want to miss out.”

There wasn't room to argue, and if I was being honest, I didn't really want to anymore. Jessalyn held my hand, and Soren walked to my side, carrying another couple of bottles of wine. The other muses followed behind us or flitted about, and we left the ballroom and went down the palace's corridors.

About halfway through our journey, I realized Jessalyn was taking us back to the dormitory. We went on through, right out to the courtyard. The sun had set, and the stars were out, but the muses lit a few torches to give us more light. As they did, some of them began to sing, their voices blending together in perfect harmony.

Jessalyn joined in, and she smiled encouragingly at me. It was a folksong with lyrics that spoke of love, friendship, and beauty, and the melody was sweet and bright. I knew the words, and I hesitantly sang along. Soren uncorked the wine, and it flowed through the night as we all laughed, talked, and sang.

Later on, when I was delirious, I spied Soren sitting alone in the corner. He smiled as he watched us, his dark eyes twinkling, and I went over to join him.

"Are you glad you stayed?" he asked as I sat on the bench beside him.

"I am," I admitted as I watched the other muses laughing and dancing.

“I am, too.”

He was looking over at me. I could feel his eyes as he studied me, but I resisted meeting his gaze. The whole night felt so wonderfully magickal, and I was afraid that if I looked at him, if I let myself fall in the exquisite darkness of his eyes, that I would never be able to look away.

"Are you ready for tomorrow?" I asked, trying to slow my heart's racing with distracting conversation.

"Absolutely. We're going to put on a real showstopper tomorrow," he promised me, and somehow I believed him.

Our last conduction and final attempt at summoning the rainfall the kingdom gravely needed brought us out to the town square. The previous ones had all been indoors at dusk, but this was out beneath the setting sun, with the hot, dry air only beginning to cool as we took our places between the sandstone walls.

Since it was the finale, it drew the largest crowd to date, with hundreds of people filling the square. The King's throne was placed in the center of our performance area. Tonight, we were dancing around him, with Jessalyn performing directly at his feet.

We began, our movements graceful and fluid, and Soren's music and chants filled the air, goading us on.

As the conduction continued, the sky began to darken, and the wind picked up, causing sand and dust to swirl around the square. We danced onward, growing more fevered and intense.

Suddenly, a bolt of lightning struck the center of the square, right between the throne and where Jessalyn stood. All the muses were enveloped in a bright light. The crowd gasped in awe as we slowly floated into the air, lifted by magik, our bodies surrounded by a shimmering aura.

Soren continued to chant, and the audience joined in, their voices rising in a crescendo. Thunder crashed loudly, and the sky opened up, pouring rain onto the parched land below.

The other muses and I slowly descended back to the earth, but our magik still filled the air, returning vitality to the desert. The town square had become a beautiful, exhilarating chaos, with everyone drenched and dancing together.

In rapid order, I was separated from the other muses, but I was happy to dance alone in the rain.

I don't know how he found me so fast in the commotion of the crowd, but Soren was suddenly there with me. He pulled me into his arms, lifted me off the ground, and then twirled me around until I laughed in exhilaration.

The rain came down so quickly that I was already soaked, and my dress clung to my skin. When he sat me back on the ground, his arms stayed around my waist, and my hands were on his strong shoulders.

“You did it,” I said, smiling up at him.

“We did it,” he corrected me, then again, in a soft whisper, “We did it.”

We were in the crowded town square, in the midst of laughter, singing, dancing, and rain, and somehow, it felt like there were only the two of us in the whole world. Soren's smile had fallen away, and his eyes were full of longing. His hand went to my face, brushing back a damp lock, and then he cradled my cheek.

His eyes dropped to my lips, and then, all at once, his mouth found mine. He kissed me deeply and passionately and stole the breath from my lungs. His other hand was on the small of my back, pressing me to him, and I wrapped my arms around his neck.

Too soon, the kiss ended. He rested his forehead against mine, breathing roughly, and caressed my cheek with his thumb.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured, and his hand on my waist squeezed me tighter for a moment before letting go.

“Why are you sorry?” I asked as he moved away from me.

My hands had slipped down to his chest, but his arms had dropped to his side. I looked up at his face, but he wouldn't meet my gaze, making my stomach cold.

“I shouldn’t have done that.” He glanced around then. “Not in public. Not ever.”

I took a step back from him and let my hands fall.

"It's not appropriate," he said, still refusing to look at me. "I am your enchanter, and I should never have... I shouldn't even have thoughts about you, let alone act on them." He raked his hand through his thick, wet hair. “You deserve better, Isadore, and I am sorry. I won’t ever do that again.”

"Soren," I said weakly because I wanted to argue, to tell him that he was wrong, that I had wanted to kiss him so badly, that I wanted to kiss him still.

But he was already shaking his head and turning away. “I’m sorry. You truly were magnificent.”

He disappeared into the crowd, and I didn't go after him because I didn't know what to say. Everything happened so quickly. My skin was still tingling from the performance, and my lips tingled from his kiss.

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The stagecoach ride back home from Sudamon was the longest ride of my life. I left first thing in the morning after the Ashoralida, and it was still raining when I passed through the capital city. The revelry had gone on late into the night, with most of the muses staying up to enjoy it, but I had gone to bed early, alone, sad, and confused.

I didn't say goodbye to anyone before I had gone because I didn't want to disturb Jessalyn and the muses, who had likely only gone to sleep a few hours before. I hadn't spoken to Soren or even seen him after our abrupt kiss, and I didn't know if I ever would again.

On top of all that – which was honestly enough misery on its own – I knew I would be returning home to a furious Adora. I had sent a reply to her message, and using Soren's suggestion, I had kept it short and simply said that it was a miscommunication, that I was safe, and that I would see her soon.

She had never replied to that, which wasn't a surprise, but that meant that I would have to listen to all the anger she'd bottled up while I had been gone.

The Ashoralida in Calida had apparently been effective because it kept raining as I passed from one kingdom to the next.

When I finally made it home, Heloise came out to greet me. She hugged me and asked me about my trip, and then she tried to carry my bag inside, but I wouldn't let her.

“How is Adora?” I asked her as we walked toward the house.

Heloise pursed her lips together and shook her head. "The Lady is... well, be careful with her, Miss Izzy. That is all I can say."

I found Adora inside, lounging on the sofa under a plush blanket. All her attention was focused on her embroidering. I approached quietly, and over her shoulder, I could see she was working on a piece featuring a lion overtaking a rabbit.

"Hello, Adora," I said, since she had yet to acknowledge me.

"You survived," she said without looking at me. "I suppose I should be grateful for that."

"Our conduction at the Ashoralida went well. We brought the rains to the deserts of Sudamon." Then, when she didn't reply, I pressed on with a boastful, "We were amazing."

She snorted. "Is that what you believe, or did someone other than a muse actually say it?"

"Soren told us," I said, and his name tasted bitter on my tongue.

"That would be a no, then." She let out an exasperated sigh, finally set down her embroidery, and looked up at me. "You can never trust the word of an enchanter. You know what happened to me the last time I trusted one."

"Of course," I said quickly because I was not in the mood to hear her retread the fateful tale of how Adora was fooled by a manipulative enchanter.

"Because of him, my vocation ended at sixteen," she reminded me. "I used to be able to pretend that it was a happy ending, albeit an abrupt one, because I gained a daughter, but now I am not even sure what's good about that. You have turned out to

be willful and a liar, just like your father."

"Adora, I did not lie," I insisted, and she glared up at me. "I swear it to you. It was simply a misunderstanding. But I am just fine. I stayed in a dormitory with the other muses on the palace grounds, and I was never anything but completely safe."

"I know what you told me, Isadore, and I won't believe you no matter how many times you try to pretend that things were otherwise," she said firmly. "You lied to me."

"I am sorry to have upset you, Adora," I said emphatically. "I never meant for that. I only wanted to perform at the Ashoralida how you wanted me to. With my conduction there, I really do believe that I may have a chance of getting more placements in the future."

"Yes, if you wish to perform in a barren desert." Adora rolled her eyes. "You would've had better luck if you were here with me as a guest at the Calida Ashoralida. I was socializing with Queen Kriselle and her Court. I had the most wonderful conversation with the best warlock and enchanters in the kingdom."

"Are they to be trusted then?" I asked. "The enchanters and warlocks on the Queen's Court?"

"Isadore, when I say never, I mean it," she insisted fiercely. "They are never to be trusted. But they are a necessary evil. Especially the ones here, and you know that. The best placements are in Calida, and you should have been here. I never should've let you go in the first place."

"Word will spread about our performances in Sudamon. When it reaches the ears of Calida, it will lead to more impressive conductions," I told her.

"Word has already gotten out, thanks to me," Adora said. "I considered not saying anything at all with the way that you behaved. But I am your mother, and I love you, despite all that you put me through and the disrespect you show me, and I could not pass up the chance to sing your praises when I had a warlock's ear. No matter how badly you treat me, I will always do what is best for you."

My stomach twisted with guilt, and I lowered my eyes. "Thank you, Adora."

"Your gratitude is nice, but it doesn't change what you've done," Adora said, but she did seem to be softening. "I was worried, Isadore. I didn't know who you were with or what might happen to you. I hardly slept while you were gone. When you sent that hurtful message, I was so afraid that it would be bad news that I had to have Heloise read it."

The hurt on her face made me want to cry, and I knelt on the floor beside her, literally begging for forgiveness. "I'm sorry, Adora. I wasn't thinking, and I was careless. I should've come home when you asked."

"At least it was a lesson learned – always listen to your mother," she said with a saccharine smile. "And now, onto the good news."

"There is good news?" I asked.

"Yes, my conversations at the Ashoralida led to you getting a new assignment," Adora said. "Queen Kriselle is having her Golden Jubilee to celebrate her twenty-five years as a monarch. You will be performing alone as one of the opening acts."

"Alone?" I asked, then I hurried to mask my dismay with forced excitement. "I will truly be able to showcase my talents. Thank you so much, Adora."

"Your perfect presentation will be thanks enough."

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I had never liked performing alone, not that it had ever stopped Adora from booking me solo work. The good news was that Briar and Wrenley were happy to help me choreograph a routine.

Briar lived with both her fathers and younger sister Dahlia in a gorgeous sprawling estate. It had been passed down in her family for generations, and someday, it would be Briar's, assuming she didn't marry someone with a better estate and title. Her home, Cinderwood Manor, was the centerpiece of her family's duchy, Cindwood Hills.

Her father, Basil Floreo, was the Duke of Cinderwood, and his grandmother, Florentina Marin, was the Queen of Calida. This made Briar a distant cousin to the current Queen Kriselle.

Her other father, Adlar Calix Floreo, was no less impressive. His now-deceased grandfather, Crimson Calix, had been the much beloved Warlock to the Queen, and in his own youth, Adlar had been quite a popular muse himself.

Essentially, Briar and her family lived the life Adora had always envisioned for us.

Visiting them always felt a bit strange. In almost every way, it was superior to what I had grown up around; it was all luxurious and historic, yet the atmosphere somehow felt more comfortable and relaxed.

Even though I had often stayed for dinner at Cinderwood Manor, it was a little overwhelming eating in a dining room with a gilded ceiling and a marble table long enough to feed twenty. The family of four all sat at one end of the table, with no one

at the head but all clumped together so they could speak freely. Servants brought out course after course of exquisite meals as they dined and laughed.

At my house, all we had was Heloise, who left supper warming on the stovetop before she left in the evenings, meaning that we ate a lot of stews and biscuits. Briar's family had a whole fleet of servants, and whenever I was over, they were always smiling and joking around.

When I told Briar I needed a gown for my performance at the Queen's Jubilee, she invited me over to borrow one of hers.

Her housekeeper let me in and led me up to Briar's room, where she, Dahlia, and her Lady's maid, Tally, were already waiting for me. Dahlia was only thirteen and sprawled out on Briar's fluffy blankets. An array of gold dresses were already spread around the room: hanging off the ivory wall sconces, laid carefully across the velvet chaise, or draped on the back of a settee.

"Izzy!" Briar rushed over to envelop me in a big hug as if we hadn't seen each other recently. "I had Tally pull some of my dresses before you arrived."

Briar motioned to the young woman, wearing the simple lavender uniform of the Cinderwood house servants, and Tally offered me a shy smile as she held a shimmering gown.

"I thought we could narrow it down a bit before you arrived," Briar said sheepishly.

"Bri has too many dresses," Dahlia piped up. She was a smaller replica of Briar, with honey-blond hair, pale blue eyes, a peach and cream complexion, and a button nose.

"Give it more time, and it will happen to you, too, Dahl," Briar warned. "Especially if you want to be a muse."

Dahlia wrinkled her nose. "I don't want to be a muse. I am going to be a dressage rider."

"Then go play with the horses instead of making fun of my clothes," Briar said. Her little sister huffed, then fell silent, and Briar turned her attention back to me. "Do you have any ideas about what you're looking for? I have something in practically every style."

"My only qualifications are that it's gold, easy to move in, and that it fits," I said.

Briar waved it off. "Oh, don't worry about sizing. Tally's an excellent seamstress."

We were about the same height, but I had always been at least three or more dress sizes larger than Briar. I trusted her judgment, though. If she thought Tally could make any of these dresses work, she likely could.

"There is this one I wore at the Ashoralida two years ago," Briar said as she picked up a gown off the chaise.

The fabric was light and gossamer, with glimmery gold sparkles covering everything. Besides the sparkles, the sleeves were virtually sheer, and the bodice was fitted with a neckline that dipped low on the cleavage. The train was long and frilly, and layers of gauzy material were used to fill it out. A slit ran down all the way from the upper thighs so that the skirt flared to the sides when the wearer walked quickly.

I was instantly smitten.

Briar grinned as she held it up in front of me. "You love it. I can see it all over your face, and I knew you would love this one. You're going to be gorgeous in this!"

"It is stunning," I said, admitting my longing with a bashful smile.

“Then it’s yours!” Briar looked to Tally. “Can you work your magik, Tally? I want it to look perfect for Izzy.”

Tally took my measurements, then went off with the gown, presumably to work her magik. I wasn't sure if Briar had meant that literally or metaphorically, but I knew it would work out either way.

"Are you excited about performing at the jubilee?" Briar asked me as I helped her put the other gowns away. Her closet was twice the size of my entire bedroom, featuring rows of hanging gowns and shelves filled with folded clothing and various accessories.

“I am excited,” I said. “But I’m also nervous. I never like performing solo.”

"Just think of it as a chance to have fun and showcase yourself. You can be freer and more uninhibited," Briar said when I actually felt the opposite. "Do you have your routine?"

“I elevated a few things I did at a wedding last summer,” I explained. “The bride and groom really seemed to like it, but I’m still afraid I might forget a step or freeze up.”

“Just keep on dancing,” Briar said. “The storm will rage, but we dance on anyway.”

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The palace ballroom was an explosion of golden ribbons, ivory tapestries, and gold and diamond adornments. It was a shimmering sea of opulence, and at the center was a grand throne, where Queen Kriselle sat, resplendent in her gown and jewels. Courtiers surrounded her on either side, and the rest of her guests left a semi-circle of open floor for the entertainment to perform.

I wanted to stay at the side of the room, waiting in the shadows until my turn, but Adora kept nudging me forward.

"We should have a place with the courtiers," she whispered.

"I am going to perform any moment, so I don't think that is wise for me," I declined as politely as possible. "You should be with your peers while I stay back here."

"I suppose you have a point," Adora said, reluctant to agree with me.

I gave my performance, a simple but elegant dance with golden roses to represent the jubilee. When I finished, I curtsied low before the Queen.

"You are truly a wonderful spectacle," Queen Kriselle said. I was still bent forward, my forehead low to the floor, in a show of respect, but I lifted my eyes enough to see the smile on her face. "It is always a pleasure to see you, Lady Isadore."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. Long may you reign." I straightened up, and from the corner of my eye, I spotted Adora standing with the courtiers.

After my performance, I meant to disappear into the crowd since Adora would be

busy with the nobles for the remainder of the evening, and that was not a place where I belonged. But instead of disappearing, I walked straight into Soren Tomoleo.

He was obscenely handsome in a tailored black jacket embroidered with golden thread, and it had been left open slightly to expose the ruby amulet lying on his bare chest. We stood face-to-face, neither of us saying anything, and the minstrel band started up again, and the subsequent performance began.

“Isadore,” he said at length, with a strange smile on his lips. “You were excellent, but I have come to expect nothing less from you.”

“Thank you,” I replied, swallowing down the painful confusion in my throat. “I wasn’t expecting to see you here.”

“I am performing a few illusions later on tonight,” he explained. “Are you busy at the moment?”

“You mean, beyond attending the Queen’s Jubilee?” I asked.

“Would you go somewhere with me so we can talk?”

“Yes,” I replied before I could even think about whether or not that would be a good idea.

Soren led me out of the gilded ballroom and down the corridor. As we passed several closed doors, he counted them to himself and stopped at the sixth one. "This is it. I am nearly certain."

He opened the grand doors with a flourish, and we entered a library. It was small compared to the rest of the palace I had seen, and there was a sitting area consisting of only two chairs in front of a fireplace. The walls were lined with bookcases, each

of them stacked from floor to ceiling with hundreds of books.

On another day, I would happily spend the evening perusing the shelves, but Soren had this way of distracting me from anything else. We stood before the mantle, looking at one another, and I clasped my hands nervously in front of my belly.

He broke the silence first. "I meant to talk to you before you left Sudamon, but you departed so early."

"I had to get back home. My mother was worried about me."

"Right," he said, as if remembering. "Did all of that go well with her?"

I nodded. "Yes. She is here tonight."

"I'm glad to hear that all worked out." His smile seemed restrained and uneasy, and he even spoke slower than usual, as if carefully choosing his words.

"What did you plan to say to me before I left?" I asked because I hadn't followed him into this room to talk about my mother.

"I don't know that I really had a plan," he admitted. "I just didn't want to leave things the way we had. I behaved boorishly and ruined what should have been an otherwise wonderful night for both of us."

"Nothing was ruined, Soren. It was only a kiss." That's what I said, but even to me, it tasted like a lie.

"Perhaps," he conceded in a low voice but cleared his throat. "But I was your enchanter and would like to be again. You have to be able to trust me and rely on me, and when that becomes entangled with romance, things can become twisted and

dangerous."

His dark eyes implored, and he finished simply, "When we work together, we create magik, Izzy. I don't want to spoil that."

He was oversimplifying the complications of our relationship. If a romance between us were discovered, we would be severed from our magik. It was a special kind of agony for a muse or enchanter to be cut off from the magik.

"Neither do I," I said quietly.

"So you will accept my deepest apologies then, and we can put all this behind us?"

"You have nothing to apologize for." That part was true, but I immediately and unabashedly followed it up with what I hoped would be a lie, "We both were caught up in a moment, and it is completely behind us now."

"Good, because I would like to continue on as friends." He held his hand out to me, and I tentatively took it.

"Friends it is."

With a handshake, we solidified our new friendship, yet he seemed reluctant to let my hand go. His thumb caressed the back of mine, reminding me of how he'd caressed my cheek when we kissed, and my stomach fluttered in delight.

Maybe that occurred to him, too, because he let go and stepped back, putting distance between the two of us. He leaned his shoulder against the bookshelves and folded his arms over his chest.

"Can I be honest with you?" he asked.

“I would prefer it, yes.”

“I’ve been wanting to get together with you so we can practice,” he said.

While that was not at all the confession I was hoping for, the prospect did immediately thrill me. I loved every conduction I had done with him, and they were the best I had ever given. Not to mention that it meant that I could spend more time with Soren, which is something I’d wanted to do since the moment we parted.

“Do you already have a conduction lined up?” I asked.

"Not yet, but I am certain that something will be coming soon," he assured me confidently. "I thought that with more time and practice, we could create magik unlike anything this kingdom has ever seen."

"How so?" I asked, but I grew more excited as he talked about it.

"You have hardly even tapped into your magik. I can feel it." Then he gave me an awed smile. "And if we can draw it out, we could light up the night sky."

The library doors opened, and a tall woman in a slinky black gown strode into the room. "Soren, there you are."

“How did you find me?” he asked in confusion.

“You weren’t at the bar, and the library is always the second place I look,” she explained.

“You do know me too well,” Soren said as she joined us. “Isadore, this is my dear sister, Serena.”

When she looked at me, I noticed she had the same dark eyes as Soren and long hair the same shade of charcoal black. She was a beautiful woman in her early thirties, and her low-cut gown was incredibly flattering on her hourglass figure.

“You’re a muse,” Serena said after she eyed me up. “Is she the talented one you’ve been talking about?”

“She is,” he answered, and I flushed at the thought of him discussing me with his sister.

“I’m an enchantress,” she told me. “I can see the glow in you.”

“Thank you,” I replied.

“What did you need from me, Serena?” Soren asked his sister.

“Oh, right, of course.” She finally looked away from me. “One of the other enchanters had an accident, so you have been moved up. I don’t think there is much time until you are expected to perform.”

"Oh, thank you. I should go then." He was already moving toward the door but looked back at me over his shoulder. "I will set something up with you later on, Izzy."

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:21 am

Soren lived on a modest yet charming property, nestled in a quiet corner at the edge of Bryonia Park. That made it a quick stroll from my house, and since I frequently took walks there or picnicked with Briar and Wrenley, I had an easy cover. Adora would fight tooth and nail if she knew I was going to an enchanter's house alone to train with him.

His estate was surrounded by a low stone wall, and the house was two-story with a thatched roof and whitewashed walls. The garden of herbs and flowers that lined the front walkway filled the air with the scents of magik. Around the back was a small stable for Soren's horse and what appeared to be an enchanter's workshop.

Inside, the house was inviting but had minimal decorations besides a few elegant tapestries and simple chairs. The sparseness was likely by design since it was easier to practice with ample room.

It had only been a few days since Soren and I started meeting, but it had gone well so far, with a clear focus on conducting. When I arrived on the third afternoon, he was already moving the chairs to the edge of the room so we could have more space. As usual for these practices, he dressed casually, and the sleeves were rolled up on his forearms, revealing his tattoos.

Starting from his wrists, a series of ancient runes wound up his arms, their elegant curves and sharp edges representing the various spells and incantations he had mastered. Whenever he was enchanting, the tattoos emitted a faint, ethereal light that pulsed with his heartbeat.

“Shall we start where we left off?” Soren asked, dispelling any pleasantries to get

right down to it.

"Sounds great," I said, but that wasn't entirely true.

The day before, we had been really exerting ourselves. Or at least I had, and I was still fatigued. Essentially, we practiced until one of us was too tired, and I refused to be the one to say when. I didn't want to disappoint him or hold back, so I gave my all to the point of straining and exhaustion.

Today, we began as we always did: I stood in the center of the room, totally still, as Soren stalked slowly around me.

"Close your eyes," he commanded. "I want you to only react to the sound of my voice."

Soren began his chanting and singing, and my hands moved instinctively as if my body understood his words that my ears didn't. His velvety baritone filled the air and the spaces between.

Several minutes into it, I felt the lightness taking over, and I opened my eyes for a moment. I was floating upward, several feet above the hard floor. My hands were outstretched, tracing intricate designs in the air, the sparkling trails of light mimicking the symbols tattooed on Soren's body.

Then I squeezed my eyes shut and listened only to Soren's voice. My arms tensed as the muscles cramped, and a painful heat burned deep within me as the practice wore on.

But I didn't want to give up or disappoint Soren. He believed that I could do this, and so I must.

I grimaced and forced the magik out through me, letting it sear my veins as it moved within me. In the middle of his chants, I faintly heard Soren saying my name, but I couldn't reply because all my focus and energy went to my conduction.

"Izzy," he said more forcefully, and when I still didn't respond, he shouted, "Isadore!"

I opened my eyes, and abruptly, I fell from the air. Soren was below me, arms outstretched, and he caught me easily.

"I'm sorry," I said breathlessly. "I was trying so hard —"

"You were trying too hard." Soren set me down on the floor and kept one arm around my waist, holding me steady. "Your skin is flushed, you're perspiring, you're out of breath."

"I'm sorry," I repeated, tears stung my eyes.

"No, Izzy, you misunderstood. I wish you hadn't tried so hard because you were clearly suffering and overloading yourself near the end." His dark eyes were worried, and his voice had gone soft and soothing. "How long were you in pain?"

"I don't know. Not that long," I said, even though I wasn't really sure. Once the burning tipped over to agony, it became hard for me to keep track of time.

"From now on, I need you to tell me when you're in pain," he said. "We're trying to build your stamina and strength, yes, but we don't want to run past your threshold and do serious damage. We need to do this gradually, but don't mistake that for failure on your part. Not many things happen quickly, especially not things that are worthwhile."

"Okay," I said hesitantly because that sounded like the answer I should give, even if it didn't entirely make sense. If he wanted excellence from me, I should push until I got it perfect, not quit when it got too hard.

"You're confused," he observed.

"No." I shook my head, then realized I was lying for no reason. "I... I suppose I am perplexed about what you want from all of this."

"I want you to be the best muse you can possibly be and, in the process, catapult us both into a life of luxury and prestige." He said it nonchalantly as if it was all simple and easy to obtain.

"Those are lofty goals that require a great deal of discipline," I pointed out.

"They are, but I think they are achievable. Discipline and hard work don't mean we need to torture ourselves," he reasoned, then his gaze turned curious. "What about you? What do you want from this?"

"Same as you," I said, even though spending more time with Soren ranked higher above luxury and prestige on my aspirational list.

"Good." He smiled and then abruptly stepped back from me as if suddenly realizing his arm was still around my waist even though I was perfectly steady on my feet.

"We do need to end today's practice." Soren cleared his throat and quickly clarified, "You've exerted yourself enough, and you should rest up. I can give you a ride home on my horse."

"No, it's better if I walk," I declined since Adora would accept no explanations if I arrived home on horseback with Soren. The fresh air will help clear my head."

"If that's as you wish," he allowed reluctantly, walking me to the door. "I will see you tomorrow then?"

"Tomorrow," I promised him.

While the practice made me tired, I was happy to have the time to calm myself. It had been a short session anyway, so I had plenty of time for a leisurely stroll down the bustling afternoon streets.

"Hello, Miss Izzy," Heloise greeted me when I came in through the front door of my home. "How was your afternoon?"

"It was fine," I said because I couldn't tell her what I had been up to. "How was Adora?"

"Lady Adora isn't home."

I looked at the housekeeper in surprise. When I had left, Adora had been on the sofa reading *The Calida Post*, the same way she was most days. "Where is she? She didn't tell me she had any appointments."

Heloise shook her head. "I'm not sure. The Lady doesn't tell me of her business."

"Oh." I frowned in bewilderment because it was so unlike my mother to take a spontaneous leave.

"I did notice that the Lady was wearing one of her very nice gowns," Heloise added helpfully. "And her expensive perfume."

My frown only deepened at that. Adora was meeting someone she wanted to impress, yet she hadn't told me about it?

I sat on the sofa and waited for her since that seemed the only sensible thing to do. Heloise kindly brought me a cup of tea to calm my nerves, and then she had one herself because my worry was contagious.

It was nearly supper time when Adora finally came through the front door.

She greeted me with a smug smile. "Isadore, how was your afternoon?"

"Fine. But honestly, I am more interested in yours," I said.

"I was meeting with the great warlock, Herve Chaunter," Adora said with an exaggerated blasé tone, and she sashayed over and sat beside me on the sofa. "I'm certain I told you about it."

"Herve Chaunter?" I echoed. "I don't recall you mentioning that."

In addition to having a chair on the Magik Tribunal, Herve was the Warlock to the Queen. That made him the most powerful warlock and head of all the enchanters in the Kingdom of Calida. I definitely would've remembered if my mother had told me about meeting with him, mainly because that was the kind of thing she usually talked constantly about. It seemed more like a deliberate omission than an accidental oversight.

"I know I told you, Isadore," she insisted. "You've just been so busy lately with your friends . You must've forgotten."

"What were you meeting Herve about?" I asked.

"About you, of course." She slapped my knee playfully. "And it went perfectly . He has set you up with a lucenition for the Samonend performance."

A lucenition was when a muse showcased her power of light and magik for a warlock or enchanter. Based on that, placements in the most significant conductions were given. At this point, I had an extensive enough resume to bypass the lucenitions for minor events, but someone like the Warlock to the Queen would always require them.

“That is fantastic. Thank you, Adora.”

"Now all I ask in return is that you do not squander this opportunity. Perhaps you should double your practices with Briar and Wrenley. I can't have you stumbling before Herve and making a fool of us both."

“Of course, Adora. I will give it my all,” I promised her.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:21 am

While I had never been inside Herve Chaunter's home before, I had passed it many times on my way to the palace. It was nearly right next door to the Queen's residence, and it was a garish estate made of glossy black stone and surrounded by a wrought iron fence.

When I arrived, the warlock's assistant met me at the gate, and he escorted me around the back to Herve's personal performance room. The walls were draped in rich, velvety tapestries depicting scenes of mythical creatures and epic battles, their vibrant colors dancing in the flickering candlelight. Even the floor beneath my feet was a masterpiece, crafted from polished marble inlaid with shimmering gemstones glimmered like stars in the night sky.

A magnificent stage, elevated on an ebony platform, was at the center of the room, surrounded by rows of plush seats.

The warlock's assistant directed me to the stage, and there I waited until Herve graced me with his presence. He was a bespeckled man in his midlife, draped in exquisite robes. They appeared to be made of the finest material in a deep emerald green. Ethereal embroidery weaved patterns of arcane sigils, and they glowed faintly, hinting at the latent power contained within.

Herve had a wide, toothy smile as he approached. "You must be Lady Isadore."

I curtsied before him. "Warlock Herve, it is an honor to meet you."

He waved his hand dismissively and took a seat directly across from where I stood. "We don't need any of those formalities. We're here to tap into the magik and see

what you offer."

"Where would you like me to start?" I asked.

"Wherever you wish. Lady Adora said that you were dazzling, so dazzle me ," he said, as if it were some simple thing.

Soren and I had been practicing nearly every day, but that kind of conduction required an enchanter. However, a few sections of the choreography from the recent Ashoralida could be performed solo, and I began with that.

"Well, that's nice, isn't it," Herve said while I was in the middle of my routine, so I stopped and turned to face him.

"Sir?"

"Did you do that for the Ashoralida?" he asked rather snidely, and my skin burned in shame.

I nodded timidly. "Yes."

"Of course. It was safe; it was expected. You've proven that you can follow a command, and that's something, I suppose, but I want to see magik ." He let out an exasperated sigh.

"Come on down, have a seat." He motioned to the one beside him. "Let's chat and see if we can draw the magik out."

"If that's as you wish," I said, because what else could I say to the man who held my future as a muse in his hands.

When I sat beside him, Herve turned his body slightly toward me so he could look at me fully.

“How long have you been conducting?” he asked.

“Fourteen years.”

Herve clicked his tongue. “That’s a very long time for a rather young girl. And you’ve never had a starring role in any of the festivals?”

“No, not yet.”

“There is a glow to you.” He narrowed his eyes slightly. “But is that enough to sustain you as a muse?”

“I... I’m not sure what you mean,” I said.

"That's all right because I wasn't really asking you anyway. I was thinking aloud."

“Oh.” I lowered my eyes, embarrassed.

“Look at me, girl. Are you a muse, or are you a wilting flower?”

I snapped my eyes up to meet his. “I am a muse.”

He leaned over the armrest, filling my personal space with the tangy scent of toadstools and vinegar. His eyes were milky but intense, and he inhaled slowly.

I felt it before I saw it – an unpleasant prickly sensation of something being pulled out from within me. It colored the air between my mouth and his, glittering wisps of magik.

Instinctively, I flinched and pulled back.

"What are you doing?" Herve asked, which was the exact question I wanted to ask of him. "I need to draw out your magik since you could not show me."

"I... I wasn't expecting that," I replied uneasily.

"And I wasn't expecting to have my time wasted today." Herve grew haughtier and more exasperated as he spoke as if losing his patience with a spoiled child. "Do you want to have a starring role in next season's festivals or not? Are you a muse, or aren't you?"

"I am a muse," I repeated and nodded.

"You wish to continue then?" he asked pointedly.

I wanted to say no. I wanted to leave the lucenition as soon as I sat down beside him, and especially when he began pulling my magik from me.

Magik may have been something I shared with the enchanter and something muses gave to the kingdom during our conductions. But that was it exactly. Magik was something that was given – this was taken .

But Adora would never forgive me, and she would never understand why I said no and ruined my lucenition with Herve.

So, despite my own reservations, I forced myself to say, "Yes. Let's continue."

He smiled and leaned closer to me so his lips nearly touched mine as he drew my magik from me. The warlock's eyes glowed with an otherworldly brilliance as the stolen magik intertwined with his own.

This was not the first time that I had experienced this. Growing up, my mother had been a disgraced muse, and I had been just a child. Neither one of us had a title then – that would eventually be bought and paid for by my work – so to get lucenitions, I had to prove my worth.

For years, this was how we got by. Conductions when I could get them, but more often than not, the gold coin only came Adora's way after a warlock or enchanter drank of my magik. That had continued until my sixteenth year after we'd gotten our titles, and I could finally secure conductions on my own merit.

I thought I would never endure a "lucenition" like this again. As Herve drained the light from me, my stomach twisted in revulsion.

I stood up, abruptly ending the exchange. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to waste your time, Warlock, but... I have to go."

He called after me, sounding angry and annoyed, but I gathered the length of my skirt and hurried toward the doors. The warlock's assistant was waiting and opened them for me, and as soon as I was through, I started running.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:21 am

The tears had dried on my cheeks when I reached Soren's house, and I had managed to slow my heart's racing. I hadn't told him about the lucenition with a warlock beforehand. I wasn't sure how he would feel about me pursuing engagements with other enchanters. But I couldn't deny Adora, so I had simply avoided saying anything about it at all.

Soren answered the door wearing pants and an open kaftan, exposing his bare chest and stomach. On any other day, I would've been excited to have an opportunity to take that in, but today, I felt nothing but the guilty nausea that twisted my stomach since I sat with Herve Chaunter.

"You're early." Soren hurried to close his kaftan and cinch it with a belt.

"I'm sorry. I haven't kept good track of time. I'll leave and come back." I started to turn around, and he put his hand on my arm to stop me.

"No, that was just me apologizing for my attire by way of explanation." He stepped back and opened the front door wider. "Come in."

"Are you certain?" I asked.

"I have never been more certain of anything in my life, Izzy. Please, come into my house," he replied with a wry smile.

I tried to force a smile back, but it didn't feel right, so I slid past him and went inside. I wondered if I should've gone home. I feared how Adora would react if she saw me returning as anything other than absolutely elated, so I needed a place to recoup.

Which meant that I hadn't quite recouped yet.

“Is something the matter? Did something happen?” he asked.

I shook my head and walked deeper into the house, and I tried to keep my back to him so he couldn't see the truth written on my face. “No. Everything is fine.”

He rounded me slowly, and I didn't move away this time. I let him look me over with his dark, worried eyes. “Then where has your light gone?”

“I had a lucenition. Adora set it up for me, and I had to go,” I explained.

“What happened?” he asked.

“He...” My cheeks burned, and I couldn't meet Soren's eyes anymore. A strange mixture of shame and revulsion felt like a painful weight in my chest, crushing down on my heart and lungs, so my breath came out harder. “It didn't go well. My performance was lackluster, so he... needed to draw out my magik.”

Soren's voice was low and horrified when he asked, “He took your magik?”

“It was my fault because I wasn't focused enough on my conduction,” I explained hurriedly. “And he needed to see what I had to offer.”

“Was it Herve Chaunter?” Soren asked.

I lifted my head and looked up at him. “What? How did you know?”

“Because that man is perverse,” he said in a frustrated growl. “No one ever needs to take your magik from you, Isadore, and they never should. I have had lucenitions with dozens of muses over a number of years, and not once have I ever siphoned their

magik."

"Well, it does not matter." I shook my head as if I could shake away the memories of today and make them gone. "It is over, it is done, I am fine. We should get into practice."

Soren looked at me in dismay. "Izzy, we can't practice. You need to recover and replenish. How much did he take from you?"

"Not much. I stopped him before he got his fill," I admitted.

"Good for you, Izzy," he said oddly proud. "Come, sit. I'll make you tea."

He led me to the sliding pocket doors off of the main room, and when he opened them, he revealed a true enchanter's library. All of the walls were lined with shelves, and in between the gaps were tall windows that let in the warm sunlight and offered views of the surrounding yard.

Each shelf was lined with books of all colors and sizes. Some were bound in dark leather, others with patterned fabric. As I walked past and glanced across the spines, the titles implied a wide range of topics, from ancient incantations to histories of long-forgotten kingdoms.

In the center of the room was a sofa made with plump red velvet cushions, and on either side were two small end tables. Soren led me over to the sofa as if I were infirmed. I considered protesting, but his hand on my small back was comforting.

"Lay back and have a rest," he directed me as I sat down. "I will be back in a few moments with some tea."

While he went off to fetch it, I lounged back on his plush sofa as he instructed me. It

was deliciously comfortable, especially compared to what I had at home. Adora made all her purchases based on style, not on comfort.

The books on the shelf were so tantalizing. I wanted to read them all, but without Soren's explicit permission, it felt invasive. There was something so intimate about inspecting another person's bookshelves.

“And here we are,” Soren said as he returned with two teacups swirling with a pale lavender liquid.

When I sat up to take it from him, I realized how weakened I truly felt. Herve may have extracted more from me than I originally realized.

I sat with my back against the arm and had my legs spread out across the remainder of the sofa. Since this was the only place to sit in this room, I started to move them for Soren, but he stopped me.

“You’re fine. No need to move.” He held his teacup in one hand, and with the other, he lifted up my legs slightly. Then he sat down and set them across his lap.

I breathed in the tea before I took a sip, and it smelled floral and sweet. “What is it?”

“This is my personal blend of herbs and potions that I call a Muse’s Elixir. It will heal all that ails you,” he assured me before drinking it himself.

I cautiously sipped it, and it was delicate and delightful. The taste was sweet and earthy, drawing from blooming lavender fields and rich soil. As it went through my body, I could feel it mending fragments of my weary soul, stitching together the frayed threads of inspiration and magik. Almost immediately, I felt more alert.

“Better?” Soren asked with a crooked smile as he watched me gulp it down.

“Yes, sorry, that was not very ladylike. But it was wonderful. Thank you.”

“I think gulping down a cup of tea is a sign of respect in some cultures,” he said, and I set my empty cup aside on the end table. “So I will take it as a compliment.”

"I am truly feeling better now if you still want to practice."

He shook his head. “A restful afternoon won’t hurt you, will it?” Then cocked his head at me. “Or do you even know? How many restful afternoons have you had in your life?”

“Do picnics in the park count as restful?”

“I’ll allow it.”

“Then yes. I often have picnics with my friends.”

To help us relax, Soren picked out a few books for us to read. Once we were comfortable, my legs still spread across his lap, both of us with a book open, I looked over at him in gratitude. “Soren, thank you.”

He gave a shrug of his shoulders. “A book and some tea are no problem, truly.”

"That is all very nice, but I really meant thank you for not being upset with me."

“Why on earth would I be upset with you?” he asked in disbelief.

"For sneaking behind your back with my lucenition with Herve and wasting my magik with him," I explained, even though it seemed apparent.

Soren closed his book and turned to face me, putting a gentle hand on my leg as he

did. "First off, I never considered what you've done 'sneaking around.' You are a muse, and you are allowed to have a lucenition with whomever you wish. Just because you and I are working together does not mean I own you, and I certainly don't own your magik. Only you do.

"Secondly, you didn't waste your magik," he went on, his voice soft but emphatic. "It was taken from you. That is not your fault, and you have done nothing wrong. The only bad actor in this whole situation is that deviant Herve Chaunter. He abused his position as the Warlock to the Queen to steal from you because he wanted to, and it felt good to him."

His eyes held mine as he asked me clearly, "You do understand that you have done nothing wrong?"

"If I haven't done anything wrong, why do I feel so guilty?" I asked him honestly, and I hated the way my voice trembled when I did.

"I wish I could answer that for you, but humans are complicated things, with emotions that sometimes behave in ways that seem illogical to our minds. That is especially true for muses, who feel things so very deeply."

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:21 am

By the time I left Soren's house later that afternoon, I was rejuvenated enough to lie to Adora properly. I assured her I had done everything right at my lucination with Herve. Adora had a chance meeting with the warlock at the recent festival, so I had no concern about her speaking to him anytime soon and finding out the truth from him. Or at least not his version of the truth, which would most likely describe me as the one who had behaved badly.

The only problem was that he would be very unlikely to add me to any of his conductions, but it was never a sure thing to get a placement at a festival. Adora would grumble when I didn't get the best offers, but she would anyway, so there was no real difference for me.

In the following week, Adora was in a very good mood, and I continued my practices with Soren. It wasn't until the week after that Adora began to question how things had truly gone with Herve, and no matter how many times I told her it went very well, she no longer seemed to believe me.

When I came home one afternoon, Adora was bemoaning that other muses had already received their invitations for the Samonend festival, the next large celebration.

"Why didn't you tell me about it?" Adora asked from her perch on the sofa.

"I haven't received an invitation yet," I told her, then glanced at Heloise. The housekeeper was near the fireplace, dusting my mother's decorations on the mantle. "Has one arrived, Heloise?"

“None yet, Miss Isadore.”

“I know that you haven’t been invited yet , Isadore,” my mother said, irritated. “Briar received her invitation two days ago. Why didn’t you tell me about that?”

My blood froze. When I had been practicing with Soren, Adora believed that I was really with Briar and Wrenley. In truth, it had been weeks since I had last seen either of them, and now Adora had discovered news from them that I should’ve already known.

"I was waiting," I said because Adora glared at me, and I had to say something. "To see if I received an invitation."

"Well, I sincerely doubt you will be receiving one now. While you were out practicing for conductions you haven't even been granted, I went to the market this morning and ran into one of Briar's fathers. He told me that all the invites had gone out, and that Briar was disappointed that you would not be joining her in the Samonend. Imagine my embarrassment when I had to learn about my own daughter’s failures from Basil Floreo, the Duke of Cinderwood.”

“I am sorry, Adora,” I told her.

“I don’t want apologies, Isadore. I want to know how this happened. You’ve been practicing so much, and you claimed that the lucenition with Herve went well.”

I twisted my hands together and shook my head. “I don’t know. I did my best.”

Adora stood up and came over to me. Her arms were folded across her chest, and she was imposing as she stared down at me with her probing eyes. “Walk me through it. What exactly happened when you were with Herve?”

"I arrived at his house on time and was led to a performing room," I said. "When Herve came in, I greeted him politely and performed my routine."

"Which routine?" she asked quickly, nearly speaking over me.

"The one from Ashoralida that we talked about. That was the one you told me to do," I reminded her before she could blame me for the poor choice.

"And he loved it?"

"He ... he liked it, I think, but not quite love," I replied carefully.

"What did he say?" she pressed.

Because I was a terrible liar, I finally confessed, "He needed to see my magik, and so he wanted to draw it out."

"So you let him drink of your magik until he had his fill?"

I nodded once. "For a while, yes, but not until he had his fill."

"You cut him off? Isadore !" Adora shrieked my name in rage. "Why would you do such a thing?"

I floundered to find an excuse because the fact that it made me feel gross and uncomfortable was not reason enough. "I have been tired from practicing, and I didn't have the magik to waste."

"It is not a waste! You're giving it to a warlock so that you can ensure your future! It's the least wasteful thing you can do. This is not what I taught you, Isadore," she growled at me. "You do whatever you must to get where you want to be."

“I know, but ...” I licked my lips and tried to summon the courage to defend myself. “When I have gone to lucenitions for other enchanterers and warlocks, they didn’t do that. I thought it wasn’t something I had to do anymore.”

“Oh, Isadore,” she said with such disappointment, it felt like a slap across the face. “You can be such a foolish idealist. Herve Chaunter is the Warlock to the Queen, meaning he’s the one who rules over the entire kingdom of Calida. Overseeing the placements for muses is such a small part of what he does. He advises the Queen, sits on councils with all the most important people in the land, and wields magik beyond any other enchanter. Do you understand how powerful he truly is? And what he must have done to achieve that level of power?”

“He worked hard?” I answered uncertainly.

“Maybe, but many people work incredibly hard and don’t accomplish half as much as he has. He takes what he needs to amass his power. His magik didn’t grow on his own – he got it from muses like you.” She pointed at me then, her long nails painted pale pink and sharpened to a point.

"In turn, you get a better placement, and with that comes more prestige and gold coins and jewels," she went on. "Eventually, you may even be able to land yourself a wealthy duke like Briar's muse father did. But a little bit of magik here and there in exchange for all your dreams coming true, that's hardly anything to give. He wasn't asking for too much, Isadore. You have become spoiled and selfish, and I certainly didn't raise you to be this way."

"I'm sorry, Adora," I said again because that was all I could say, the only thing that might not anger her more. "I was only trying to do what was right, and... and I never meant to ruin everything."

She sneered at me. “You never mean to do anything, Isadore. You are like a newborn

foal, stumbling about with no real purpose. As if you haven't been handed all the tools you'd ever need and been pointed in a clear direction."

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from crying, and a guilt washed over me so thick, I could hardly breathe.

The bell rang at the front door, and Heloise went to answer it, leaving my mother and I standing alone in a tense silence.

"Who was that?" Adora asked when the housekeeper returned.

"It was the postman." Heloise walked slowly, holding a pale envelope in her hands. "An invitation has arrived for Miss Isadore."

Adora brushed past me and took it from the housekeeper, and before I even had a chance to say anything, she tore it open. I stayed behind her, trying to peer over her shoulder as she read it silently.

"Good news," Adora said, her voice dripping so venom that I instinctively cringed back from her. "You've secured your next placement in the Kingdom of Lamida . Their sniveling King Asmond has some bumpkin cousins from the country visiting for three weeks, and he needs a few muses to entertain them."

She looked back over her shoulder at me with a bitter smile. "You traded in a role in the greatest kingdom's autumn festival, and now you get to entertain uncouth hicks while missing out on weeks of well-paying opportunities. Oh, did I forget to mention that? You won't be paid for this. The Warlock to the Queen is sending three of his muses as a 'gift' to a friendly ally."

"I'm so sorry, Adora."

“I can’t listen to another word out of your spoiled mouth!” Adora suddenly shouted.
“Get up to your room and get out of my sight!”

I raced up the stairs because I was glad to be away from her, and I was also afraid of what she might do if I stayed any longer. Tears were pouring down my cheeks, and I felt like throwing up.

The one relief of the invitation to Lamida was that I would have a few weeks away from Adora. Maybe if I worked hard there, it might be enough to get me back in her good graces.

A King of a lesser kingdom like Lamida was still a King, after all, and doing well in his Court would have to lead to better conductions. Maybe I could work my way up on merit alone.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:21 am

For two days, I hid in my chambers hoping, that Adora would calm down, but she never did. I had never upset her this much before, and I could not figure out how to make penance.

My placement in the Kingdom of Lamida was starting soon, and I had other obligations. Heloise let me know when my mother was in her bath, and then I snuck out of the house and hurried over to Soren's. I had to say goodbye to him before I left. And, if I'm being honest, after the shunning I'd been enduring at home, I needed to see a kind face.

I walked up the path to Soren's house, and he opened it before I even reached the door. He leaned against the frame and greeted me with an easy smile.

"There you are, Izzy. I was beginning to worry that something had happened," he said since I had missed our practice the past two days without giving him any notice. "I thought about sending word, but then I worried that might be the kind of thing that would offend Adora."

"Your instincts were, unfortunately, correct."

His smile deepened. "They often are. That is one of the reasons I became an enchanter."

I slid past him into the house and waited until we were both inside before I turned to face him. "I do have some news."

"Good or bad?"

“Both, I suppose. I am heading to the Kingdom of Lamida for three weeks to entertain King Asmond Weiss and some of his royal family.”

“Congratulations,” he responded. “The bad news, I presume, is that we will be unable to practice for a while?”

I nodded. “How do you want to handle today?”

After a moment’s thought, he decided, “In the garden. The jasmines are in bloom, I have rosemary scones and honeyed pears, and I just purchased a sweet rosé from the market.”

“That sounds more like lunch than practice,” I pointed out.

“That’s because it is lunch. You’ve had a rough go of things lately, and you’ll be busy for nearly a month. Why not just relax and enjoy ourselves for the afternoon?”

I laughed. “It seems to me that rest and enjoyment are your solutions to everything.”

"Is there anything that a restful day with good company and delicious food cannot solve?" He leaned in slightly, and his voice had gone quiet and conspiratorial. "Because I personally have yet to find anything."

Since I could not argue with that—or at least, I did not want to—I went about helping him set up an impromptu picnic. In his kitchen, I held a wicker basket while he filled it with a fresh loaf of bread, jams, cheeses, crackers, grapes, and apricots.

“Are you sure this isn’t too much?” I asked.

“We’ll eat our fill, and I’ll save the rest for another day. The jam and cheese will even hold up until your return.” He tossed in one more apricot for good measure.

“But I suppose that is enough.”

He grabbed a blanket, and I followed him out his door and into his yard. Soren pointed to a weeping willow at the back of his estate. "We can have our picnic there, but we have to stop at my workshop to grab the wine and glasses."

The workshop was nestled in the corner of the lush garden. When Soren opened the door, I was hit by the aroma of exotic herbs and incense. Shelves lined the walls, filled with an array of enchanted objects, from delicate trinkets to mighty artifacts. Crystals of various sizes and colors were artfully displayed, their facets catching the light and casting prismatic reflections across the room.

In the center of the shop, there was a large workbench. It was crafted from a charmed wood that pulsed with a gentle energy. On top of it, tools of the trade were neatly arranged, including brushes, carving knives, and vials of shimmering powders and potions.

Then, beside a scattering of dried leaves, I saw an unusual bit of fabric. A particularly unique one that I had seen before. It was deep emerald green embroidered with a specific set of arcane symbols.

“What is that?” I asked.

“What?” Soren asked, but he saw exactly where my eyes landed. “Oh. That is the teabag that I made for an elixir.”

“Is that fabric from Herve Chaunter’s robe?” I asked, even though I knew that didn’t make any sense.

He turned back to face me, the wine glasses in his hands. "I suppose there is no sense in being coy. When you came here after your lucenition with Herve, I made the

Muse's Elixir tea here in my workshop and imbued it with healing properties, as I said. I used fabric from Herve's robe to tie my spells to him. Essentially, I've taken back the magik he stole and returned it to you where it always belonged."

Confused, I shook my head. "But... how did you get the fabric so quickly? You were only gone for ten minutes while you brewed the tea."

"I already had some of Herve's fabric on hand," he explained. "With the way he behaves and his position, I assumed eventually it would come in useful."

"You cursed him for me?" I asked, trying to make sense of what he'd done. "Why didn't you tell me? Were you ever going to?"

"I did not have plans to tell you, but I wasn't opposed to it, either. It just hadn't really come up," he elaborated with a sheepish shrug. "I was trying to make things right... and I thought you might be too timid to avenge yourself."

"Have you truly avenged me if you've done something I wouldn't want you to do?" I countered.

"Fair point," he said with a grimace. "I'm sorry. It's not an excuse, but I couldn't watch you suffer while I knew he was euphoric on what he'd stolen. But I should've talked to you before I did what I did. I overstepped."

"Does he know what you've done?" I asked.

"He shouldn't, and even if he does deduce it was me, it won't lead back to you at all. You won't be caught up in any repercussions, if they were to fall."

"My placement in Lamida likely has more to do with my rejection of him than anything else," I said. "And I am willing to accept your apology on one condition. I

don't want you using your magik on anyone else, not on my behalf. At least not without talking to me first."

He smiled. "Deal."

He grabbed the wine and the glasses, and the two of us strolled toward the pond. The mood had changed since I discovered Herve's robe, and Soren hummed softly as we walked to lighten it.

He spread the blanket out on a soft bed of clover beneath the branches of the weeping willow. We both sat down and pulled out our meal, and by the time we'd finished our first glass of wine, things between us had returned to normal.

"It's going to be strange these next weeks without you, although I am certain you will be living it up in Lamida," Soren commented between munching on cheese and grapes.

"How does one live it up in Lamida? I've never been."

"They have a wonderful garden labyrinth that I had the pleasure to go through on one occasion, and it truly is worth the visit," he suggested. "They also have the fluffiest cotton candy I have encountered, and it actually is quite the delicacy over there."

"Well, I will have to try that then," I said. "Will you miss me when I am gone?"

"Of course," he replied without hesitation. "I'll miss you terribly."

"I think I'll miss you, too."

Soren was looking up at me with his beautiful dark eyes, and there was a hint of a wistful smile on the corner of his lips. The wine had left me lightheaded, but the

warmth in my belly came from him. I was going to miss him desperately .

I leaned over to kiss him but had misjudged my movements and practically fell into his arms. He caught me easily, and my lips crashed into his. For a wonderful moment, we kissed ardently and deeply.

But then, all at once, he stopped and turned his head away from mine. "Izzy. That isn't what this is."

"Oh." I moved away from him and stared down at my lap in confusion. "I'm sorry. I had too much wine, and I wasn't thinking."

"It wouldn't be good for either of us," he explained huskily. "It can corrupt our magik, and I don't want you getting hurt. I am your enchanter, and you are my muse, but that is all we can ever be."

"I'm sorry," I repeated and got to my feet because I couldn't bear the thought of sitting there with him any longer. "I will... I will see you when I return."

"Izzy," he called after me, but I just started running and ran all the way home.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:21 am

My invitation to Lamida ended up being fortuitous in a few different ways. I could use the space from both Adora and Soren (admittedly for vastly different reasons), and my friend Wrenley had been placed with me in King Asmond's Court.

That also meant that we could ride together, and since xer family was much wealthier than mine, I got to ride in a much more luxurious carriage than usual. The frame was made of polished wood, the wheels had golden rims, and it was pulled by four horses with gleaming coats and braided manes.

The interior was most exciting, though. The soft and sumptuous seat upholstery allowed for a very comfortable ride. The doors had arched windows, giving us ample light and views of the countryside.

"Thank you for letting me ride with you," I told Wrenley again as we left Calida behind. I sat on the back bench of the carriage, and xe was sprawled out beside me, resting xer head on my lap with xer feet propped on the wall.

"Oh please," xe said. "This is a long enough journey. I'm happy to have you as company to help pass the time."

"Were your parents terribly disappointed about your placement in Lamida?"

"No." Wrenley looked up at me in confusion. "Why would they be upset? I'm the personal muse to one of the six monarchs in Wespen. Maybe it's not as flashy as being a primamusa in the Ashoralida or even the upcoming Samonend like Briar got. But it's still a notable spot. Besides, not everyone can be the principal. That doesn't mean the rest of us don't have our own light to shine."

“I assumed that everyone saw anything less than the best as a failure,” I said.

“No, that’s just Adora. She was upset with you, I take it?” xe asked.

"She's been upset with me about a lot lately," I admitted wearily, staring out the window.

“It’s because you’re a young woman now, and you’ve already had more success as a muse than she ever did.”

“Well, that’s only because it’s my fault,” I reminded xer. “If she hadn’t fallen pregnant with me, who knows what would’ve happened?”

“It’s not your fault that Adora had you. I don’t know all the circumstances around it, but I do know for certain that a baby can’t be blamed for their own birth. Life is something that is forced upon us, not something we choose,” Wrenley said.

Between us talking and playing a few traveling games like "I Spy," I watched out the window as the landscape changed from the rolling green hills of Calida to the golden plains of Lamida. Wheat and sunflower fields stretched on as far as the eye could see occasionally dotted with quaint villages and bustling market towns.

In the heart of the plains, we finally reached the castle of King Asmond Weis, and even from the outside, it was unlike any other I had ever seen. The exterior walls were a kaleidoscope of vibrant hues, with each tower and turret painted in a different shade – from the whimsical pastels of lavender and mint to the bold, bright tones of orange and turquoise. Perched along the roof’s edge were gargoyles with comical expressions.

“This is certainly going to be an interesting few weeks,” Wrenley said, admiring the architecture as the carriage pulled to a stop in front.

When we exited the carriage, a valet greeted us and took our bags before leading us inside. The facade had obviously shown a fanciful spirit, but I still wasn't entirely prepared for all the color and flamboyant décor that awaited us.

The first room we entered was the grand hall, and all of the chandeliers were made with multicolored glass orbs, casting everything in a playful glow. On the walls were tapestries depicting scenes of mythical creatures engaged in amusing activities, like a unicorn jousting with a peacock or a dragon and a whale playing with wildflowers.

The valet led us to our private quarters for the duration of our stay. It was a large room with two mid-sized plush beds for Wrenley and me. An oversized stuffed rabbit sat on one bed, and a polka-dotted horse was on the other.

There was one large wardrobe in the center of the inner wall, painted with a mural based on a familiar children's story. A bookcase in the corner held a few peculiar trinkets: nesting dolls in the style of a bear, a parrot figurine made of rainbow-colored glass, a mirror with a pressed flower frame, and a whole row of books on unusual subjects: History of Pranks , Folklore of the Mountains, The Art of Juggling , to name a few.

“This is going to be amazing,” Wrenley said after the valet left us, and xe could hardly contain xer excitement. “This might be the best placement I’ve ever had.”

"It definitely seems unique and interesting," I agreed as I took in the eclectic décor of the room. If I hadn't known better, I would've thought this was designed with a young child in mind. "But we haven't met the King yet."

“Anyone who makes his guest rooms look like this can't be all bad." Xe flopped back on one of the beds and picked up the stuffed horse on it. "Do you think we get to keep these?"

“I don’t know. You should probably ask the King.”

“Can I really do that?” Xe looked over at me. “Or would that be rude?”

“Maybe just ask the valet,” I suggested.

The valet left us alone to refresh and relax after our long journey. Based on what I had seen of the castle and what I knew of Lamida, I had no idea what to expect of the King.

Before we could even settle in, a rhythmic knocking came from the door. I was hanging up my clothes at the wardrobe, while Wrenley lounged on the bed, playing with the stuffed horse.

“Come in!” Wrenley shouted, and I immediately waved my hand to shush her.

“We don’t even know who it is.” I cast her a look as I headed toward the door. “You can’t just be inviting strangers into your room.”

“Well, you’re no fun,” xe shot back.

When I opened the door to our chambers, I found a woman in a colorful cloak waiting on the other side. Her face made her look a few years younger than Adora, but her green eyes were youthful and exuberant. Her hair was a coppery brown, and it was held up with a pair of hairpins covered in a vibrant rainbow lacquer.

"I'm not disturbing anything, am I?" she asked, looking down at me. Her lips were pressed into a twitching, nervous smile.

"No, everything's great here," I assured her. "Can we help you with something?"

"No help needed. I only wanted to say hello and introduce myself. I'm Madge Lanceas, and I'll be your enchantress here in Lamida." She grinned broadly, revealing an endearing gap between her two front teeth, and stuck her hand toward me. "You must be Isadore Dellamouse."

I shook her hand and nodded. "I am indeed. It's very nice to meet you."

"Likewise," Madge replied, and then she looked past me, over my shoulder at Wrenley. He had only just now begun to get up and ambled over to greet the woman who would effectively be our new boss. "That would make you Wrenley Pavone."

"Aren't I the lucky one?" Wrenley replied with a smirk, and he pulled their hands from their pockets long enough to shake Madge's hand.

"I look forward to working with you both and getting to know you better over the coming days," Madge said. "We unfortunately don't have much time for all that we need to do, so we'll be starting very quickly. You'll only have a few hours to clean up, and then we'll have a dinner to meet everyone. At dawn tomorrow, our practices will start in earnest. How much experience do you have in silk?"

"Silk?" I echoed in dismay, and I laughed nervously, hoping I misunderstood. "You mean the fabric? I've worn it many times."

Madge chuckled. "No, excuse me, I meant aerial silks for acrobatic performances."

My stomach dropped because, unfortunately, I had not misunderstood. This enchantress really meant for me to do aerial stunts.

When I was growing up, Adora had enrolled me in lessons across all sorts of skill sets to ensure that I was able to handle anything asked of a muse. Aside from the ones focusing on magik, most were about dancing, choreography, and gymnastics.

The one area that Adora drew the line at was aerial acrobatics.

"Nothing but a thin piece of silk to keep my only daughter from plummeting a hundred feet to the cold, hard stage?" Adora had sneered at the very idea. "Not a chance."

That had been enough to put the fear of aerial silks deep inside me. My natural acrophobia didn't help anything, and I felt the blood drain from my face as I gaped up at Madge.

"I have never done aerials," I replied numbly.

The enchantress scowled. "But I specially requested that Calida only send me muses with experience with silks. Why would they send you?"

"She's a fast learner and great with floor acrobatics," Wrenley piped up and clapped a reassuring hand on my shoulder. "I've been trying to get Izzy up into the air for a long time now, and this is the perfect opportunity."

"I don't know about trying it in the King's Court for the very first time is a 'perfect opportunity,'" Madge said with a tight smile. "But since you're here, and we don't have much time, I suppose you will have to do."

"And we will do great!" Wrenley assured her with too much bravado.

"Yes, well, then, I have other muses to greet," Madge said, glancing down the hallway this way and that. "I will see you both at the dinner later on tonight."

"Sounds great," Wrenley said, and he closed the door after the enchantress.

"Why did you tell her that I can do the silks?" I asked her in a fierce whisper.

Xe shrugged. “Because you can, and it’ll be fun.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:21 am

The Kingdom of Lamida was an upside-down place indeed. We'd been here less than a day, and already our roles had been flipped, with Wrenley suddenly the optimist and me the cynic.

The corridors leading up to the dining hall smelled of spun sugar, and my stomach rumbled despite my nerves. Wrenley had spent the afternoon promising me this would all work out, but I couldn't find the same positivity.

A string quartet played a subtly playful tune, elegantly rendering a popular lullaby. It paired well with dinner conversation. The music was low enough that we could easily talk over it but not so quiet that we were forced to listen to one another chew.

The long table was overflowing with pastel-colored pastries and confectionaries. On closer inspection, I did manage to find a few more savory options. Still, even then, they masqueraded as something sweeter. Salted crackers were colored to look like macarons, carrots were purple and white shimmering underneath a honeyed glaze, and beets were whipped into a pink mousse atop a buttery roll garnished with bright green dill.

Placards marked our chairs, with our names written in glittering calligraphy. I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw mine beside Wrenley's.

"At least we can sit together," I said.

"I would've swapped spots even if we weren't," xe replied as xe took their seats.

As I unfolded the napkin across my lap, I became acutely aware of someone hovering

behind me. A young man with blue eyes appeared to be reading over my shoulder.

His expression immediately turned apologetic when he noticed me noticing him, and his cheeks reddened. "Sorry about that. I just wanted to read the card to know who I'm sitting next to."

He picked up the card off the spot next to mine, and he held it up so I could see Rowan Frost scrawled across it. "This is me. Rowan."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Isadore, and this is my friend, Wrenley." I motioned back to her on the other side of me, but she was too busy eating to do more than offer a quick wave. "We're both from Calida."

"Oh, yeah, I heard we had some talented muses coming in from Calida." He had a bright smile as he sat beside me, running a hand through his shaggy brown hair. "That must be you two."

"It's Wren, for sure, but I think there was some kind of mistake with me. I don't have much experience with aerials," I admitted since there was no reason to pretend otherwise. Everyone would quickly realize it once we got out on the silks.

"Well..." He seemed startled by my confession and leaned back in the chair, appraising me. "You were sent here for a reason, and I'm sure you'll bring exactly what we need for the Dandy Days."

"Dandy Days?" Wrenley asked, leaning in and her interest piqued.

"Yeah. That's what we'll be performing it," Rowan explained. "It's a music festival, and we do a conduction at the end. All of it is to celebrate King Asmond's birthday, but the Dandy Days and some of the events leading up to are awesome."

“Are you from Lamida?” I asked.

“No, I’m from New Nottenga, but I’ve performed at the Dandy Days the last few years.” Then, with a smile that quirked between humble and boasting, he added, “I’m one of the best aerialists in the six kingdoms of Wespen.”

“And I’m one of the best in Calida,” Wrenley said. “We’re not as into aerals there, but I’m still pretty good.”

King Asmond walked into the room without any fanfare with his grandmother on his arm. I wouldn't have known either of them were special without the hushed murmurs running around the table.

Madge immediately leaped to her feet, and the rest of us quickly followed the enchantress's lead. "Your Royal Highness." She curtsied low before Asmond and added a deferential smile to his grandmother. "My Lady."

“No need for all that.” The elderly woman waved off Madge’s formalities. “You can call me Nana Peach the same as anyone else.”

“We are not here in royal business, so you can all be at ease,” Asmond added, speaking louder so everyone around the table would hear. “Nana Peach and I have always enjoyed the festivities of Dandy Days, and she is here merely as a fan.”

“And what are you here as?” Wrenley asked, and I elbowed xer in the ribs since it didn’t seem like a good idea to be teasing the King of the Kingdom hosting us.

He turned to look at xer then, his eyes easily scanning over the heads of all the other muses since he was tall. It occurred to me that he looked exactly how one would imagine a young king in a storybook would look: tall and broad-shouldered with a cleft chin, disarmingly honest brown eyes, and dark, wavy hair neatly styled. But that

was precisely why he seemed so out of place in Lamida. The Kingdom was an extraordinary land, and he appeared to be an ordinary King.

Other than the color of his attire—admittedly a bold shade of salmon—he was dressed conservatively. His voice was clear but restrained, and he walked with quiet, unassuming steps.

I cringed behind Wrenley, but I don't think Asmond would've noticed me. His dark eyes were fixed solely on Wrenley since the moment xe spoke up.

"I am also here as a fan, I suppose," he admitted. He broke away from Nana Peach, leaving her to talk with Madge and a few other muses as he approached us.

"A fan? Is that why you're not wearing a crown?" Wrenley asked him. "Were you going incognito? You were hoping that none of us would recognize you?"

"I only wear that for formal events. I considered this a friendly visit, but perhaps I should've brought armor," he said with a wry smile. "I don't think we've been properly introduced."

"Leige Wrenley Pavone. And you are?"

His smile deepened. "King Asmond Weiss."

"Well, since I am a guest in your kingdom, I ought to play nice," xe reasoned. "I think that's what Madge is trying to say with that sour look she's giving me."

"Or you could be nice because it's nice to be nice," the King suggested.

Xe only shrugged him off. "Now you're just being redundant."

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O ur mornings started with strength training in the courtyard at dawn when the air was so crisp our breath came out in plumes. This was followed by a quick but scrumptious breakfast in the dining hall before we were ushered down to the gymnasium.

The first time I saw the space where we'd be practicing the conduction and aerial silks for the next few weeks, my jaw dropped. While ballrooms were always spectacular, gymnasiums were usually very plain. But the gymnasium of the Lamida palace put almost every other ballroom to shame.

It was a massive rotunda with a ceiling looming thirty feet above. In the center was a domed skylight, letting in the bright blue sky and radiant sun. Surrounding the skylight was a mosaic of glittering stones in gradients shades of the rainbow.

The sunlight glimmered on the thick metal hooks anchored into the ceiling beyond the skylight, making them stand out like diamonds. Long ribbons of silk—each in a different color— hung from the hooks, and despite their cheery appearance, they looked like gallows to me as I approached.

The floor was made of sparkling sand the color of a fresh peach. Madge told us to remove our shoes before entering the gymnasium, so I felt it between my toes. It was so fine and soft and warm, like a beach on a summer day.

Madge had us standing in rows a few feet apart so we could begin stretching, but all through the warmup, I could only look at the silk. It was like being in the room with a tiger and trying to focus on anything else.

Finally, we finished, Madge cleared her throat and announced, "All right. I want to see what you all can do on the silks. Line up one by one and show me a half-moon."

"All of us?" I asked meekly, and someone snickered.

"Yes. All of you will do the half-moon, or at least attempt to," Madge said, sounding slightly annoyed that I had even asked. "You have twenty minutes to practice."

Wrenley came over and playfully nudged me with an elbow. "This is good news, Izzy. I've seen you do moves just like the half-moon on the ground, and you're great at that. And we have time to practice. You've got this."

Before we began, we rubbed a pouch of rosin crystals over our hands and feet. The crystals made our skin slightly sticky, improving our grip.

Wrenley took the silk in both hands, wrapping xer dominant leg around the fabric. Xe pulled up with her xer arms, and xer biceps flexed noticeably beyond xer sleeveless top.

"Your grip needs to be stable and firm, and then you can focus on your legs," Wrenley explained as xe moved. "Make sure you put your free foot on top of the other because you don't want all your support on your arms."

Xe repeated the movement a few times until xe was six feet up in the air above me. Xe easily could've kept going higher, but I wouldn't have been able to hear xer if xe had gone up too high.

"So once you get to your desired height, do a single foot lock," Wrenley instructed, and xe wrapped the silk around xer foot with xer toes and heel exposed.

"And now you go into the half-moon." Wrenley separated the silks, then xe used xer

footlock to push in one direction against one silk and leaned back, pulling the other in the opposite direction.

Xe reached up above xer head and gripped the fabric. Wrenley arched xer back, creating the shaping of a crescent moon with xer body.

“And it’s as simple as that!” Wrenley announced proudly.

Xe wasn't wrong in that I could easily do a similar move on the ground or even much nearer to it. Some of the work I'd done at other conductions had required me to master various gymnastics and acrobatics. I regularly did strength and endurance training as well as plenty of stretching.

But the several feet off the ground made it seem impossible.

When it was finally my turn, I managed to do the half-moon a foot off the ground while Madge watched me.

"I believe that you are physically capable of doing all that I need from you, Isadora," she said after I finished. "But you'll never be able to do it if your heart isn't it. Is your heart in it?"

I took a deep breath, and because I hoped it was true, I nodded and replied, “Yes, it is.”

The good news was that I was too tired to cry by the time our training ended for the night. Wrenley and Rowan stayed out with the other muses, but I politely declined and escaped up to my room in the palace. I had made it through the day, but just barely , and every muscle in my body ached.

I looked over at the wardrobe, which I had unpacked yesterday. Now, I wondered if

that act had been too presumptuous since I doubted I'd last another day.

I leaned back against the door and took in my room. The colors and décor that had seemed cheery and whimsical in the bright light of the morning now looked subdued and ominous in the blue moonlight.

I flopped onto the bed, and even falling into the fluffy blankets hurt my aching body. I buried my face into my pillow, planning to mope and spend the rest of the night feeling sorry for myself until I heard a bird singing on my window ledge.

Except it wasn't the usual melody of a bird. It was a near-perfect recreation of the first song I performed with Soren back at the Balefire festival.

When I lifted my head, I saw a mimacaro bird. He was about the size of a robin but rounder and fluffier, like an oversized baby chicken. His cheeks were full and white, while the top of his head was sky blue before shifting into the iridescent rainbow of his wings and tail feathers.

I knew he was a boy because only the males were brightly colored and had the gift of vocal mimicry. They used it to attract a mate, but over time, and with a bit of magik, we've taught them to carry messages between people.

“Are you here for me?” I asked the little songbird.

In response, the mimicaro hopped down from the window ledge and onto my bedpost. He tilted his head to one side, blinking his bright eyes at me, and when he opened his beak, it was Soren's voice that came out: “Isadore, Isadore, Isadore .”

My name was put to a playful tune, but then it shifted to his regular speaking voice.

“I hope you made it to Lamida safely, and I know that you'll do wonderfully there,”

the bird told me in Soren's voice. "I'm sorry about how we left things, and I don't want it to be a dark cloud over your time in such a magickal palace. Have fun, let your light shine bright, and I will see you in a few weeks."

A tear slipped down my cheek, but this time from happiness because that was just what I needed to hear. I thanked the mimicaro and offered him a few welcome chin scratches before he flew off into the night.

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“ The mental part seems like the hard part, but it's really the easy one because basically, you just do it even though you don't want to,” Wrenley told me as I stared up at the silks. The open skylight made it seem like they stretched forever into the bright blue sky and the stars beyond.

"The physical part is harder because you can't force your way through stamina and muscle the same way. Both just take time. But you're already strong and enduring, so really, that means that both parts are easy," xe reasoned with a smile. "Besides, I'll be here every step of the way."

“Wrenley,” Madge’s voice cut through the morning chatter, and we turned to look toward the enchantress. “Come forward.”

Xe went to the middle of the room, xer feet padding softly on the sand to meet Madge. By the way xe stood, with xer hands behind xer back and chin raised defiantly, xe acted like xe was being called front and center for castigation. And honestly, for Wrenley, that was a safe assumption, especially given that Madge had watched xer talk to King Asmond the other day.

“What can I do for you, Madge?” Wrenley asked.

"You will be primamusa," Madge announced. "You will have specialized aerial choreography using hoops, so I will work closely with you."

Wrenly looked back over xer shoulder at me, xer eyes wide with surprise, but I just smiled and mouthed “congratulations” back at her.

Yes, this did throw a wrench in my plan to rely on Wrenley's expertise to guide me through the next three weeks, but this wasn't about me. Xe worked hard at aerials, and xe was damn good at them, too.

Plus, Wrenley was a terrific friend, and I was happy to see xer talent appreciated and given a place to show off xer skills.

Before we finished stretching, Madge ran through the first set of choreography she wanted us to learn. The moves didn't seem that dissimilar to some I had done in previous conductions. The fact that I'd be doing them suspended in the air by a thin piece of silk fabric certainly added a degree of difficulty and terror.

"Just keep on dancing. The storm will rage, but we dance on anyway," Rowan said from behind me when I was only a foot off the ground. "And you'll eventually get where you need to go."

The familiar idiom put me at ease, and Rowan's reassuring timbre didn't hurt either. I took a deep breath.

"Now twist your leg back," Rowan instructed. I carefully turned my body, keeping the fabric snugly around my calf. Put your left hand above the right."

I readjusted my hands on the silk, and he said, "Not quite. Your hand needs to be higher."

He'd been close behind me, but now he moved into my space, so I could see him from the corner of my eye as he leaned and put his hand over mine.

"Is it okay if I move your hand?" he asked, and I nodded.

With that assurance, his fingers wrapped around my hand, and his chest was pressed

against my back as he reached.

“You’re locked in with your right hand and your leg, so just let go with this one,” he said. “And when you fall, I’ll catch you.”

“Did you say when I fall?” I asked.

“Everybody falls sometimes,” he said matter-of-factly. “So let’s do this.”

With my hands in the right place, he let go and stepped away so I could try the trick on my own. I contorted in the air, with my body appearing to float between the ribbons a few feet off the ground. It didn't seem that far, but when all the weight was suspended on the fabric and my grip, it was actually frightening. The sand softened the impact, but it could not eliminate it entirely.

“Excellent form, Isadore,” Madge commented as she walked past, inspecting all the muses. “Now you have to do that about twenty feet in the air and add some magik. But that won’t be for a week or so. I want to be sure that none of you will break your necks when we combine all three.”

I took a deep breath and pushed through the fear. I focused solely on my movements, the fabric between my hands, the precision of my balance, and my body.

From across the room where Wrenley was practicing with a hoop, she gave me an encouraging smile, and I tried to offer one in return.

I made it through the rest of the day without breaking any limbs, but I did have a few fresh bruises from a tangling incident with the silk. I also had a new blister and body aches in multiple muscles I had never used before. But I also had a new sense of pride, and I was doing a halfway decent job despite my severe fear of heights.

I was also learning a new skill, and I wondered what Adora would make of it when she found out that I knew how to do aerials. Probably just rage and disappointment, I assumed.

After practice, the other muses once again all went to hang out. I declined because I was too tired to do anything more than pass out in bed. Wrenley offered to stay back with me, but I was only sleeping, so I told her to go have fun.

It took a full week of practicing aerials before I was finally able to stay awake for a couple hours afterward. Still, I just laid in bed, working my way through the small library of books that came with our room.

It was almost another whole week after that before I finally let Wrenley and Rowan convince me to hang out with them. And it wasn't so much letting them convince me as not taking no for an answer.

The parade was in honor of King Asmond's twenty-third birthday, so he, his family, and the Kingdom were the main themes. Floats were adorned with colorful flowers and sparkling crystals, and one was entirely devoted to the royal flora, the sunflower.

"Why does the float with the hot air balloon look so melancholy?" I asked as the somber float rolled by.

"Well, because it's meant to be melancholy," Rowan said, then lowered his voice as he explained, "The King's father and mother, the late King Edvard and Queen Pippa, went on a balloon ride for their anniversary, as was their tradition. But four years ago, they were caught in an unexpected storm, and they crashed, and unfortunately, they both perished."

I grimaced. "I remember hearing something about that now. How tragic."

“That must have been so hard for the King,” Wrenley said thoughtfully. “Losing both his parents so abruptly and then being thrust onto the throne in the midst of it.”

“He’s done well through it all,” Rowan said. “The kingdom and the people adore him.”

Bannerman carried rainbow-colored flags, but they became overwhelmingly pink as the heads of the towering giraffes came into view. The gorgeous animals walked leisurely, with sanguine smirks, as they surveyed the crowd lining the roads on either side. The long manes that ran down their necks were adorned with colorful ribbons and flowers, and people held up outstretched leaf fronds for the animals to eat as they went by.

The giraffes themselves were part of the procession, with the royal family riding on the backs of the giant animals. Each one had a bespoke saddle and a blanket marked with the rider’s sigil and name. The reins stretched six feet from the saddle to the bit in the giraffe’s mouth, with flowers wrapped around the strap.

The first animal was the smallest, but it was still a giant. Even from the vantage point where Rowan, Wrenley, and I watched from the balcony, the giraffe's head still towered above us.

The King's younger siblings led the procession, beginning with Prince Edwin, who was not yet sixteen, and the King's ward.

Behind him, sharing a single giraffe, were Asmond's younger brother, Spencer, and his new bride, Beatrice.

"They only wed a few months ago," Wrenley explained to me in a low voice as they rode by. "There were rumors that the wedding was rushed because she was with child, but there's no sign of the baby. The King fears that Spencer wants to get his

hands on his duchy, and the only way to do that is through marriage."

"How do you know so much about the Lamida royal family?" I asked xer.

Wrenley shrugged but wouldn't meet my eyes when xe said, "People like to talk. You'd learn things too if you came out more at night."

Following them were a pair of giraffes walking side-by-side, each of them dual riders. The one on the right was the King's only sister, Duchess Karla, with her toddler daughter, Lady Zara, in her lap. The other giraffe carried Karla's wife, Marcella, and their infant son, Lord Lukas.

Finally came the largest giraffe, at least two stories tall, higher than I had dared climb on the silks yet, and the King sat high in his saddle. His smile was wide but frozen, and he waved politely at the crowds below.

Wrenley leaned forward on the railing as he drew closer. Asmond's eyes finally went up to the balconies where we watched. They landed on xer, and I swear, the moment he saw xer was the first time his smile appeared genuine.

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I dug my toes into the sand and stared up at the silk ribbons. I had mastered the routine a foot off the ground, and tomorrow, we'd be adding magik. That left me with today to overcome my fear of heights because tomorrow, I'd need my focus for the magik.

“The nest is safer, but that’s not why birds have wings. They are meant to fly,” Rowan was telling me. “You can’t stay on the floor forever.”

“I know,” I said.

“And we’ll both be here to spot you,” Wrenley added. “At least for the next little while, so if you want me to be the co-spotter for the first time you reach twenty feet, then you better hurry.”

Madge, the enchantress, was helping a couple of other muses who still struggled with the choreography. When she finished with them, she returned to fine-tuning Wrenley's more complicated primamusa performance.

“Right, right,” I said and took a deep breath. I did feel better with Wrenley here, even if xe couldn’t do much to help me from the ground.

I took the silk in my hand and reminded myself that this action was simple. My body could do this if I kept moving, hand over hand, and I kept my eyes on the sky.

As I climbed upward, I couldn’t tell how far I had gone. The sky stayed blue and unreachable, beyond my grasp, and the silk seemed to stretch on forever.

Beneath me, Wrenley and Rowan shouted words of encouragement, and I made the horrible decision of looking back down at them. There were over ten feet between me and the floor, but it might as well have been miles.

My stomach lurched, and I froze. I had a foot-lock so I wouldn't fall, and my hands gripped the silk too tightly to move.

"Izzy, are you doing okay?" Wrenley called up to me. "Or are you panicking?"

"Panicking, I think," I replied.

"Yeah, you're panicking," xe agreed grimly.

"Hold on, Izzy!" Rowan yelled. "I'm coming up!"

"No, Rowan, she has to work through it herself," Wrenley argued.

"She will," Rowan insisted, running at the silk closest to me.

In a flash, he was up the silk at the same height directly across from me.

"Hi." He leaned on the fabric, smiling crookedly at me. "How are you doing?"

"Stuck," I admitted, feeling embarrassed and sick.

"Nah, you're not stuck," he corrected me gently. "You can go up or down or even twirl around whenever you are ready."

"Isadore, what seems to be the trouble?" Madge asked loudly, and I looked down, braving the dizzying peek to see the enchantress standing just below me.

“I need a minute!” I yelled down and squeezed my eyes shut.

"On the first practice together, I told you that I knew you were physically capable of doing this, but that if your heart wasn't in it, you'd never be able to do it," Madge reminded me. "You told me then that your heart was in it."

“It is,” I insisted, but my voice came out weak.

My heart was in it, though. I knew it as much as I knew anything. I loved performing and the connection I felt to the magik and the muses, with the earth and everyone in it.

So why was this so hard for me? Why, when there was nothing I wanted more than to complete this aerial conduction?

I wasn't afraid of falling, at least not as in losing my grip. My hands and feet were secure, and my muscles were holding strong. After all this time, I trusted my body to do what it needed to do.

But there was something so overwhelming about the thought of falling and the unbearable futility of flailing powerlessly in the air as one plummeted to the ground below.

I closed my eyes and pretended I was only a few inches from the ground to slow my racing heart.

“Rowan, you are close enough. Can you help her?” Madge asked, her words heavy with disappointment.

Rowan swung closer to me to grab the silk just above my hand. I felt his thumb gently on the back of my wrist.

“Izzy,” he said, and I finally opened my eyes. “You made it this far all on your own. Why don’t you go the rest of the way?”

I looked up to the sky and then to myself, I whispered, "Hand over hand."

Finally, as if saying the words aloud commanded the action, my hand moved, and I began the climb upwards.

My eyes stayed fixed on the sky and the glittering hook that secured the silk to the ceiling, the goal I was climbing toward.

Wrenley, Rowan, and Madge began shouting in excitement, and that was how I knew I had made it.

But getting up this high was only half the battle. I still had to do my acrobatics and soon add magik, so there wasn’t time to celebrate. I had to keep up my momentum.

I didn’t look down – my eyes stayed fixed toward the ceiling – and I moved my body through the motions into the half-moon.

Then, I took a deep breath and moved on to the next stage of choreography. I didn't stop until I ran all the way through the routine.

I could do this.

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We were in the middle of practice a few days later when King Asmond interrupted. The room was still aglow with our magik going out into the ether, leaving the air crackling and sparkling.

Fortunately, I was near the bottom of the silks, only a few feet off the ground, because everybody froze in place the moment he stepped onto the sandy floor. The King was barefoot beneath a colorful kaftan.

Wrenley was in xer aerial hoop, hanging upside down twenty feet up, and that was the way xe stayed while Asmond spoke. Xer hair hung around xer head like a curly halo, and xer cheeks reddened from the blood rush.

"Your Majesty," Madge said, sounding rather nervous as she bowed before him. "What an unexpected surprise."

"Yes, sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you," Asmond said. "I know you've all been working so hard, which is why I wanted to ensure you have some fun while here in Lamida. As part of the Dandy Days, a fantastic garden labyrinth is behind the palace. It's typically closed to the public at dusk, but we're having a special night labyrinth open only for you and some other performers and servants."

"I know that you have already given so much," he went on. "But I have one more thing to ask of you: that you kindly accept my invitation and attend the labyrinth and that you have a good time."

After that, he left, and all of us devolved into excited chatter. Now that we knew we had something to look forward to, the rest of the practice dragged on. Afterward, I got

ready as quickly as possible so we could get going, but Wrenly did not seem to have the same urgency.

Xe tried on five different outfits, which was really unlike xer. It wasn't that xe didn't care about xer appearance. On the contrary, xe cared a whole lot, but xe was always so confident and certain about xerself, never second-guessing something once xe had put it on.

But after practice, xe rummaged through both our wardrobes. Xe even tried on one of my tops despite being taller and thinner than me, so xe was drowning in fabric.

I'd chosen a colorful tea skirt with crinoline underneath to fill it out, and I paired it with a simple white top that tied around my neck with a ribbon.

"Are you ready?" Rowan asked through our closed bedroom door after he knocked. "It's almost dusk."

I looked to Wrenley for an answer, and xe stood in front of the mirror, turning this way and that to admire xer reflection.

Xe eventually decided on an outfit similar to the one we would be wearing for the Dandy Days performance: a lace top cropped at the navel paired with light palazzo pants in a vibrant fabric.

"Yes. I am ready," xe said finally, raking xer fingers through xer hair.

Rowan had waited for us, but Madge and the other muses had already gone to the gardens. Wrenley slipped on xer sandals and then plucked a clip from the wardrobe. It had a little pink bird on it, and Wrenley put it in xer hair before turning to look at me and Rowan.

“What do you think? Is this too much?” Wrenley asked.

“Too much for what?” Rowan asked in confusion.

“It looks good, but why are you so worried? You look fantastic, like always,” I said, hoping to cheer xer up, but it only made xer scowl.

“I’m not worried. I don’t care. I just want to have fun,” Wrenley grumbled before yanking the clip out of xer hair, and then xe grabbed a floppy sunhat. “Let’s go.”

“At the risk of slowing things down, you do realize that the sun has already set, and you are wearing a sun hat?” Rowan asked xer.

"It's still a hat, and I still have a head, so let's go," Wrenley said, shooin' us out the door.

When I had first heard of the night labyrinth in the garden, I wasn’t exactly sure how it would work. Wouldn’t we get lost in the dark?

The answer became apparent when we went onto the stone patio, raised twenty feet above the garden, and I could see it all clearly. The labyrinth was made of seven-foot-tall hornbeam hedges that served as the walls and dividers along the pathway. Glowing pebbles lit up the path, with small colored lanterns strung on lights along the hedges. Fireflies and fairies glittered in the air, and already, the moon was bright in the starry sky.

Madge and the other muses were just inside the entrance, and we hurried down the steps to join them.

“I’ve never been in a hedge maze before,” I admitted. “Is it easy to get lost if we separate from the group?”

"I've been in this one before. Or at least a variation of this one, since they prune it yearly, so it's different," Rowan explained. "It's fairly easy to find your way through with marked paths. There are a few hidden surprises, but getting back to the main route is easy."

"Technically, this is a labyrinth and not a maze," Madge interjected knowingly. "Mazes have one entrance and a separate exit, while a labyrinth only leads to the center."

Throughout the gardens, woodwind music is softly played, somehow both lively and soothing. The air was filled with the sweet, enchanting aroma of the flowers opening for their night bloom.

The main draw of the night venture was the beautiful flora, like the luminescence of the star violet, the cosmic glow of the night rose, and the shimmering petals of the moonflowers. But there was so much more to captivate the eye beyond the flora.

There were figures carved of marble, carefully manicured topiary creatures, and beautiful art pieces. Giant butterflies made of stained glass and backlit by lanterns cast rainbows across the pathways.

The statues of the Matronae of Muses—the three goddess mothers of muses, Brigida, Mnema, and Freya—had been recreated with stunningly realistic folds in the fabric and dimples in the skin. When the light hit the marble just right, they seemed to move, smirking down at me and shifting their shoulders. But that had to be the light playing tricks because I didn't know of any statues that moved.

There were even a few animals, apparent inhabitants of the garden. A slow-moving tortoise crossed our path, with the night sky shimmering on his shell – a cloaking device that reflected the night above. Snails with glowing shells in blue and green and fluffy bunnies that dove between hedges whenever we got too close.

I crouched to peek at a baby bunny hiding underneath a large toadstool. When I straightened back up, Wrenley had somehow gone. It was only Rowan waiting, watching me with a soft smile as I greeted the bunny, the same way he'd smiled at me when I moved the snails safely off the path.

"Where is Wren?" I asked, and Rowan glanced around as if he hadn't noticed xer absence.

"I'm not sure. Maybe xe went ahead with the others." He motioned ahead, where I could see other muses rounding the corner out of sight.

"That doesn't like xer," I said.

Wrenley had never been the type to hurry, but then again, xe hadn't really been acting like xerself tonight. Maybe xe had hung upside-down too long today.

"Wait a moment," Rowan said, putting a gentle hand on my wrist, but his eyes were on the wall of vines behind us. "I think there's a secret spot on the other side."

"Of the wall?" I asked.

"No, it's not a wall. It's a curtain." He swept the vines to the side and revealed a secret entrance through the hedges.

He held them open so I could see the little koi pond and a bench swing hanging from a cherry blossom tree. The hornbeam hedges surrounded it, creating a cozy, quiet little space.

I crouched down beside the pond, admiring the fish. They were plump with fanned tails and iridescent scales in all the colors of the rainbow. They swam up to the surface, their big eyes imploring me for treats I did not have.

“How did you know about this place?” I asked Rowan.

He languidly strolled around the pond, and he grabbed the rope swing and leaned against it. “I’ve been to a few Dandy Days, so I’ve had my chance to explore.”

“Is the night labyrinth always this lovely?” I asked.

“I actually haven’t been to a night one. I don’t know if they’ve ever had them before, but this is definitely the first time that the King has mandated time off.”

I came over and sat down on the swing beside him. “So how does the night version compare to the day?”

"I'm enjoying it more, but that might just be the company." He smiled at me, and I felt the heat rising in my cheeks.

Romances between muses weren't exactly encouraged, but they were allowed. Which was good because they were actually fairly common, especially among teenage muses.

It made sense, really. We were mostly young, attractive, single people who worked closely together for weeks on end. We were passionate and often shared interests and skills.

But that same combination meant it was not without pitfalls. Forced proximity meant things could get quite dicey if there were disagreements.

It was something that I had tried when I was younger. Mostly nothing more than a few harmless kisses exchanged here and there, but I did have a full-fledged year-long romance with another muse, Baxley Cole. He had been a few years older than me, and I had been swept off my feet before things turned sour.

After we had broken up, I had vowed to avoid dating other muses. Since then, I honestly hadn't even been tempted. Excluding whatever had happened between Soren and me, and that was prohibited anyway. But Rowan was making me reconsider my previous policy.

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Unlike every other conduction I had ever done, muses entered the performance area before the audience in Lamida. This was also the first time our practice space doubled as the performance arena, but that was likely because of the specific needs of aerial silks.

Besides, the gymnasium was gorgeous, with the marble platform surrounding the circular sandpit in the middle, mimicking the ceiling and the domed skylight. During the practices, the marble was left bare, and we used it for exercise and stretching. Now, it was full of cushioned chairs in rows, and I noticed the balcony seating on the walls.

The muses climbed to our first positions. For me, that was starting twenty feet up in a back-balance. My back was arched with my belly up, and my head craned backward, making me a crescent hanging from the ribbon.

It wasn't my favorite position to hold, but my fear had been lessening as time passed. I still threw up after practice, and today, since it was the real deal, I had thrown up beforehand and popped a mint candy before climbing up.

Once we were all in position, with Wrenley in her cropped top and palazzo pants, poised in the aerial hoop, the lights went dark in the gymnasium. Light still came in through the skylight, and a platform slowly moved out from the ceiling and closed it off, so the room was pitch-dark.

The darkness was somehow both disorienting and comforting. I couldn't see the floor or the vast, terrible distance between me and the soft sand.

But the gymnasium didn't stay dark for long. Carefully placed lanterns illuminated the walkways to the seats so the attendees could find their way through.

The muses were so far up on the ribbons that we were invisible in the dark midair.

Someone began playing soft music on a lyre, and the audience began filing into their seats. It didn't take long, but my heart hammered so loudly in my chest that I worried the audience would hear it.

At last, King Asmond and the royal family took their place on the center balcony, so they were nearly at eye level with us.

The moment the King sat was our cue to begin.

Slowly, all of us muses hanging in the silks began emanating light from our fingertips. It was faint at first, only little orbs of light, but as they grew brighter, the music grew louder.

Madge, the enchantress, stood in the center of the room, conducting our magik and bringing forth the music.

Wrenley sat in the ring, one leg dangling off with xer hands on the sides. All around the edge of the hoop, xer magik illuminated sunflower petals – the symbol of Lamida, in pink, the official royal color of King Asmond.

Despite my initial fears, the conduction flew by in the most literal sense. It started with a few simple climbs and balances – like the half-moon – but quickly rolled into spins, flips, and drops. I closed my eyes and focused on my magik, and I felt the wind flying around me as I performed.

Even before we reached the floor, I heard the audience applauding, but I still felt

better when my feet touched the warm sand. From the royal balcony, I heard someone whooping and boisterously shouting praise, but I couldn't tell who.

The moments after the conduction were always so dizzyingly giddy, and tonight, after my last time on the silks, was all that and more so. Now that I was safely on the ground, I felt lighter than ever.

All of the muses were ushered out of the arena to the banquet hall to eat and celebrate with the King and other noble revelers. I lost Wrenley quickly in the crowd, and I reached out and took Rowan's hand so I wouldn't lose him, too.

And because I wanted to.

I knew his hand would be strong and warm because I had already felt it on my wrists, arms, waist, and legs from when he'd helped me with my aerials.

But this time was different. When I took his hand, it felt electric, and his cheeks were flushed when he smiled at me.

The other muses were pushing us along. We were a river of revelry until we reached the banquet hall. There, we all burst free, going our separate ways. Most were drawn to the food or wine, others to the dance floor where a band played.

But I didn't want that. I needed a moment to clear my head. Rowan must've known somehow because he was leading me away from the others and out the door off the back of the room.

We slipped through and went out onto the small balcony. The night air had a crispness that I relished, and fireworks lit up the stars.

Rowan closed the door behind us, muffling the music, and we were alone.

“You did it,” he said with a proud smile, and our fingers were still entwined. “But I always knew you could.”

“I had the smallest, least difficult role, and I never could’ve managed it without your help,” I said.

“You would’ve gotten there eventually,” he insisted.

A firework suddenly burst behind him, illuminating his handsome face and making his kind eyes glow.

I don't know if I kissed him, or if he kissed me, or if we just moved together at the same time. We were kissing, our skin tingling from all the magik we'd conducted.

A chilly wind came up, but that only made the heat from his body more inviting. I pressed myself against him, kissing him deeply, and I wanted to lose myself in his arms.

But I couldn't. Something inside me held me back even when I wanted to give in.

Rowan pulled away when he noticed my hesitation. His eyes were immediately filled with concern. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes," I assured him with a smile, putting my hand on his chest. "I'm a little light-headed, and... I leave tomorrow."

“It’s no good to be starting something only to say goodbye,” he reasoned sadly, coming to the same conclusion that I had.

“It’s not,” I agreed just as gloomily.

He took my hand again. "Let's go inside and have some fun with the others."

Rowan was kind, handsome, and talented. But I was leaving tomorrow, which was certainly motive enough to avoid getting too attached.

I didn't think that was the reason for my hesitation, though. Something else was weighing on my heart that I couldn't quite explain.

The rest of the night was mostly a blur, albeit a pleasant one. I stayed out as late as possible, dancing with the other muses, but I still cut out earlier than most. I wasn't that surprised that Wrenley wasn't in our room when I arrived.

I'd only just started undressing when I heard a mimico bird singing my name. I turned to see the round little guy. When he opened his beak, it was Soren's voice saying, "Congratulations on your wonderful conduction! I look forward to seeing you when you return tomorrow."

And that was when I understood. Soren was the hesitation on my heart.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:21 am

I t wasn't until I woke up and saw that Wrenley's bed was empty and still made from yesterday that I began to worry. I hadn't seen xer much at the Dandy Days after-party, but there were so many people, and I had spent a lot of time with Rowan and Madge.

But now I tried to remember the last time I had seen Wrenley.

As I debated whether I should alert Madge to my friend's potential disappearance, the door opened, and Wrenley burst inside. Xe was wearing xer costume from last night, but it was rumpled, and xer makeup was smeared. Despite all that, xe was smiling and looked utterly happy.

"Wren! Where were you?" I leaped out of bed and rushed to make sure he was, in fact, all right. "What happened?"

"I..." Xe stared off wistfully into space, a contented smile on xer slender lips. "I am in love."

I gasped. "With who?"

My mind raced to think of anyone xe'd interacted with over the past few weeks. Mostly, it had been me and Rowan, and somewhat with Madge, but I hadn't noticed any romantic spark between the two of them. The only person that xe had seemed to have any chemistry with was the King, but that would be...

My eyes widened in disbelief, and xe finally looked down at me.

"Asmond," xe confirmed with a dreamy smile. "I know it sounds ridiculous, but it's

true. We've been sneaking off to be alone together every chance we get, and I really think he loves me, too."

"Oh my," was all I could think to say.

My initial response was to be happy that my friend had found love, but an uncertain fear crept up beneath it. Wrenley was obviously worthy of a King's affections, but he was still a King.

If xe married him, xe would have to move to Lamida and become the Consort to the King. Would xe want to be a monarch? Xe never seemed that interested in politics or social climbing, and xe despised being told what to do.

"I know, I know, I know," Wrenly said with a dramatic sigh and walked over to xer bed. "It is ridiculous. Asmond and I spent all night discussing what we want and how we can be together." Then, with a wink, xe added, "Well, we didn't spend all night talking."

"Are you discussing a future together already?" I asked in surprise. As far as I knew, Wrenley had never been that serious in xer romantic relationships.

Xe shrugged. "We sorta have to. It's challenging for a King to casually date."

"I suppose that makes sense," I relented. "So, how does one go about dating the King of a neighboring kingdom?"

"We're figuring it out. Asmond hasn't dated much in his entire life, and not at all since his coronation four years ago. The next step is him presenting our relationship to his advisors and family, and they..." Xe pressed xer lips into a grim line. "They will decide if I am worthy enough to be a monarch of Lamida."

“So your relationship is going to be decided by a group of strangers?” I wrinkled my nose. “That sounds so unpleasant. I don’t know if I could handle that. How do you think it will go?”

"Asmond's optimistic, and his sister really took a shine to me after the conduction," Wrenley said. Still, xe sounded more uncertain than xe likely wanted to let on. "I'm from a good family, just not a perfect one."

"Wasn't your great-grandmother the Queen of Lamida?" I asked, remembering. "I wish my family had that kind of pedigree, but according to Adora, we come from a long line of prostitutes and dishwashers."

“Yeah, the emphasis on ‘great.’ My grandma was the youngest child of someone who hasn’t been a ruler in decades, and my mom was only a muse.”

“Wasn’t your mom’s father someone important?” I asked.

“It was her grandfather,” Wrenley corrected me. “He was the famed warlock Crimson Calix, but that’s too far removed, especially since he’s from the magik class instead of the ruling one. Maybe if he was my father, it might be something.”

Xe frowned as if realizing something for the first time. "I have a very mediocre pedigree, and I got middling grades in school, and I've been a run-of-the-mill muse."

“You were amazing at the Dandy Days!” I insisted. “You just have to give it your all more often.”

“I do really love the aerial work, and they have the space here for me to really perform.” Xe smiled again. “I think I would be really happy here with Asmond.”

“So that would mean you’re moving?” I asked, letting a hint of sadness color my

words.

"Maybe. Hopefully." Xer lips twitched. "If his family will have me. The plan for now is to return home. He'll talk to his people, and then he'll contact me. And if they approve, I will be moving here."

"Wow," I said with wide eyes. "I am happy for you, but I think this will all take time for me to process."

Xe laughed. "Me, too." Wrenley lay back on her bed, still smiling. "I'm sad about leaving today, and I am very nervous. But I'm also so happy."

Then xe looked over at me. "Sorry about not telling you sooner. But first, it was only a flirtation, and then I didn't really know what to say."

"No, I understand," I said. "And I hate to admit it, but I probably would've accidentally let something slip to Rowan or Madge."

"Oh, yeah, Rowan." Xer eyes sparkled as xe smirked at me. "How did things play out with the two of you? I didn't feel so bad about ditching you so often because you seemed to be getting on with him so well."

"We did get on really well," I agreed. "He's fantastic, but he lives in New Nottenga, so we're keeping things friendly. I did tell him to look me up if he comes to Calida."

"That sounds nice enough," Wrenley said.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:21 am

The long rides back to Calida in Wrenley's gilded carriage gave xer plenty of time to tell me about xer dalliance with Asmond, as xe lovingly called the King of Lamida.

Both of us slept on the last leg of the trip. While the weeks in Lamida had been a wonderful reprieve from the stress of everyday life, it had also been exhausting.

When the carriage finally pulled up to my house, we were both slumped against each other, snoring loudly. Wrenley had been using the polka-dot stuffed horse xe'd taken from Lamida (although, technically, I think it was a gift from xer boyfriend).

It was much later than we'd originally meant to arrive. We'd left late because Wrenley had taken so long to pack, and then we had stopped for lunch. Xe was the direct reason for both delays. Xe ordered three mimosas and dessert as xer mood kept cycling through giddy delight, uncertain terror, and utter sadness at being apart from Asmond.

Still, I didn't mind the delays, and not just because xe paid for the carriage and the extensive lunch.

The last time I saw my mother, we were in the midst of a cold war. Adora had been furious about the way I behaved with the important Warlock Herve Chaunter, and she blamed my recent insolence on my poor placement in Lamida.

I loved Adora dearly and hated to upset or anger her, but she never seemed to believe that. It was as if my every mistake or minor disagreement was a personal attack against her.

The time apart made it easier for me to see how hard it was to relax around her. Throughout my life, I had spent very little time away from her, except for when I was sleeping, taking classes to be a better muse, or practicing.

When I was very young, I never spent any time apart from her. We rented one-room flats and shared a single bed by necessity until I was nearly twelve. She took me to classes and waited for me in the back, or she'd teach me herself, making me practice my letters at the table for hours or reciting sonnets until my throat was raw so I would learn my spelling and diction like a proper lady.

Eventually, Adora was forced to give me more space when enchanters and other muses began loudly commenting on how strange it was for me to be sixteen years old, with my mother following around at my heels.

Still, it wasn't until this year, at the age of twenty, that I traveled without her at all when I went to the Kingdom of Sudamon for the Ashoralida. But I had spent two weeks there and just now three weeks in Lamida. Five weeks, and not only had I not died without her, but I had so much fun and had so many new experiences.

I had missed Adora, but not how I imagined it would be. I still distinctly remember the first time that she had left me alone with a stranger. I was ten years old, and she'd entrusted me with an enchanter who took my magik. She had known he would, and there wasn't anything strange about it.

Starting when I was maybe five or six, she had taken me to meet enchanters, warlocks, and sometimes even other, much older muses. Our clients were often men, but occasionally a woman or enby. When I was small, I would sit on Adora's lap, and the patron would sit close to me and draw my magik from me, pulling it from my body and into theirs, the same way that Herve had done. When I was ten, she began leaving me alone with them, claiming that her chaperoning made our clientele uncomfortable.

Afterward, I had always felt so tired and intensely ashamed for reasons I could never articulate. But Adora would be so nice to me, telling me that I was a good girl and getting me something to eat and buying me a doll or necklace. Before I could get reliable paying work as a muse, that was how we paid for the rent, my education, and our clothing.

For a long time, I had done whatever was needed to survive, and that started changing when I turned sixteen when my options as a muse opened up. I had thought that that would finally make Adora happy, but it only opened new crevices in our relationship. Things with us had been growing increasingly tense ever since, but I never understood why.

The sun had just set when I unloaded my luggage from the carriage. Wrenley promised we'd talk soon, and I thanked xer again for the ride and wished xer well.

When I went inside, the house was dark. I called out, but no one replied. Heloise the housekeeper would be off work by now, but I had thought that Adora would be home.

It was a chilly night in early autumn, so I got a fire going in the hearth. I was warming my hands over it when I felt the hair stand up on the back of my neck, and then there was a knock on the door.

Adora wouldn't knock, and Heloise would've stayed late instead of returning later. My best guess was that I had forgotten something in the carriage, and the driver was returning it.

So I hurried to answer the door with only a glance at my appearance in the hall mirror: my hair had come loose from the travel updo, my dress was wrinkled and dusty, and my cheeks were flushed. In short, I looked affright when I answered the door.

Soren Tomoleo was standing on my doorstep, and he had inexplicably grown more attractive in my absence. His hair was a bit longer, so it curled more. His sharp jawline was clean-shaven, and his eyes were dark and enchanting, framed by long lashes.

The last time I saw him, I made a fool of myself by kissing him, only to have him reject me for a second time. He made it painfully clear that our relationship was purely platonic.

And it wasn't as if he didn't have good reason. He wanted to protect our relationship as enchanter and muse. Romantic entanglements between people in our positions went against the Regula, so there would be serious repercussions if we were involved.

The Regula de Magik: The Laws of Practicing Magik in the Six Kingdoms of Wespen – more commonly referred to simply as the Regula – was the book of rules governing the magik class of the entire continent.

It was a thick book, typically bound with plain leather and a solitary golden R embossed on the front. It contained hundreds of pages of rules, procedures, practices, and incantations. In the most literal sense, it was a book of civil, physical, and magickal laws and a code of conduct for the magik class. Some things could not be done in magik because they were taboo – such as raising the dead or forcing someone to love you – and there were things that could not be done because they were impossible – such as transmuting straw into gold.

The Regula was written hundreds of years ago, after a dark period of war and bloodshed. Magik was being used wantonly, and the lands of Wespen began to rot. Once the six kingdoms were settled, a tense peace was created.

Each of the Kings met on a council with the wisest warlocks, enchanters, and muses. They wrote the complete set of rules, and thus, the Regula was born.

All that knowledge and understanding changed nothing about how I felt when I saw Soren there. My breath caught in my throat, and I wanted nothing more than to fall into his strong arms.

“Izzy,” he said with a soft smile since I was only gaping at him. “Do you mind if I come in?”

I should tell him, It's late, I'm a mess, it's improper, and I have no idea when Adora will return, so no, you cannot come in.

But instead, I heard myself say, “Please come in,” and I stepped back so he could enter.

He slid past me, walking into my house and casting a curious gaze around his surroundings.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I was in the neighborhood,” he said, then he shook his head and turned to face me. “That’s a lie, or at least not entirely the truth. I’ve been walking around, feeling restless, and I stopped because I could see the light in the windows.”

“How did you know that it wasn’t Adora?” I asked.

“Adora’s at the palace,” Soren explained. “Tonight was the big christening of the Crown Princess Cosetta’s son.”

A few months ago, Queen Kriselle’s eldest daughter had a son, Krispen, the first male heir born of the Marin Royal line in generations. Kriselle had five daughters, and her mother had four daughters, and her mother only had daughters, and so on and so forth.

It was cause for celebration in Calida, and I would not have been able to forget if I hadn't been in Lamida.

"Oh, that's right. Were you there?" I asked.

"I performed there." He seemed oddly nervous. "Word had already gotten to them about the spectacular aerial show you did."

My cheeks burned. "I was only a small part of it. Wren was the real start, and Madge Lanceas, the enchantress, choreographed it and coaxed it out of us."

"I'm sure you were all fantastic in your parts," he said. "But Queen Kriselle became enamored with the idea of an aerial conduction, and she asked Herve Chaunter to put on something for Samonend."

"It's a month away. He has time to prepare," I said, but I already felt a tightening around my heart.

"There aren't that many muses in Calida who know how to perform on silks," Soren went on. "And Adora stepped up and offered you to Herve as an expert in aerials."

I shook my head, not because what he was saying didn't sound true, but because I didn't want it to be. "Adora never wanted me to do the silks. She thought they were too dangerous."

"Queen Kriselle was very enthusiastic about the idea, so perhaps that – along with the word of your newfound success with silks – pushed Adora to set aside her previous concerns," he said.

"Is that why you're here?" I asked. "To warn me of my fate?"

“No, I came to see if you would perform with me at the Samonend instead,” Soren explained. “Kriselle has given me a small stage, and it’s not the main event like Herve’s. But I know that we can create something spectacular.”

“And if I commit to performing with you, I won’t be pressured to perform with Herve,” I finished for him.

He nodded. "That is the idea." He stepped closer to me. "And if I am being honest, I'm being selfish, too. I know you'll be magnificent, and I want you to be magnificent with me."

We stood in the sitting room, only inches apart. The glow of the fireplace warmed us, and the front door opened as Adora walked inside.

"What in the world have I walked in on?" my mother asked, haughty and aghast. She stood in the open doorway for a moment, letting the chilly autumn air in around her, and her heavy cloak billowed in the wind.

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“ I’ve offered Isadore a primamusa position in my conduction at the Samonend fest,” Soren told Adora coolly.

I had tried to move back from him, to put more distance between Soren and myself, so it would look more innocent than it was. It didn't matter that it was innocent; I knew how it appeared to Adora.

But when I moved back, Soren stepped forward, angling his body between Adora and me as if he thought I needed shielding from my own mother.

After he spoke, Adora smirked and stepped inside. She cocked her head and slipped off her leather gloves, then kicked the door shut behind her.

"Now, why would you do something like that, Soren?" she asked, her cold gaze fixed on him.

"Because Isadore and I perform well together, and I know we can create something spectacular," Soren said.

“ No , you came rushing over to get Isadore to commit to you because you need her to be ‘spectacular.’” She sneered as she made quotes in the air with her fingers. “Isadore has other opportunities. Better ones with Herve Chaunter.”

“As the primamusa?” he countered.

Adora faltered for only a moment, then she slipped off her cloak and gave him a pitying smile. “Come now. Even with all your hubris, Soren, you must know that the

smallest role in a Herve performance is more prestigious than lead in any of yours.”

“I haven’t agreed to do either conduction,” I interjected, and they both turned to look back at me. “I forced my way through the aerial silks because it was what needed to be done, but that doesn’t change the fact that aerial performance comes with risks I’m not sure I want to take.”

Adora's face quirked because I was repeating her own words back to her. It had initially been her who had forbidden me from trying the silks for that very reason. Although I hadn't even needed to be forbidden since my natural aversion to heights had been enough.

"I am so glad you brought that up because I spoke with Herve as well as Wrenley's parents, Duke Robyn and Duchess Eva, at the christening tonight," Adora explained, her voice all syrup and honey now as she stepped toward me. "They told me all about all the safety measures in place, with the enchanted sand to soften any falls. I'm afraid that in my zeal to protect you, I was very mistaken about the dangers involved with aerials. You have witnessed it for yourself, haven't you, Isadore? Was anyone injured during your time in Lamida? Anyone at all?"

"No," I admitted. "But that doesn't mean performing with Herve is in my best interest."

She scoffed at that. “How can performing with Herve not be in your best interest?”

"Because I don't want to do it," I insisted, using as strong a voice as possible, but she only laughed coldly at me. "Adora, please. Think it through. Herve doesn't like me, and he won't showcase me the way that Soren would. If I am to perform at Samonend, it will not be under Herve's enchantment."

"A bad first impression is easy to remedy," she insisted, closing the distance between

us so she could take my hands in hers. She lowered her voice as if Soren wouldn't be able to hear when he was standing nearly right beside me. "You will show him how sweet and beautiful you are and that you are a quick learner. Herve will forgive you for your rudeness and highlight you."

"Wait ." Soren's voice suddenly cut through, as hard and sharp as a knife. "You think Izzy was rude to Herve? That she was the one who was ill-mannered?"

Adora inhaled sharply through her teeth and glared at him. "You don't know anything about what it takes to be a muse in this kingdom."

"I am an enchanter!" he shot back incredulously.

"Exactly !" She let go of my hands as she wheeled on him. "You are an enchanter and a man. You don't know what a young girl has to do to crawl up out of the muck and earn some damned respect!"

"Young girl ?" Soren's eyes bounced between us, and I suddenly felt nervous and queasy. "Have you been letting warlocks and enchanters siphon her magik since she was a child?"

Hearing the condemnation and disgust in his voice made me feel so gross and ashamed. Even though none of it had been my idea. I had not chosen to be a muse or attend the lucenations or meet privately afterward with enchanters who only occasionally had me actually perform in conductions.

Adora let out a frustrated groan of anger. "Mr. Tomoleo, I can only envy the life of privilege you have been fortunate enough to live without having to make difficult choices and do unpleasant work. But since you so clearly haven't, I suggest you keep your mouth shut about things you can't possibly understand."

“ Ms . Dellamoussa," Soren emphasized his dropping of her title of Lady. "You keep forgetting that I am an enchanter, my sister is an enchantress, my mother was a muse. I know this world better than you because it is all I have ever known. And I am telling you that no decent person of any kind would subject their children to magickal abuse just to get ahead in society."

For a moment, Adora fell silent, and to an inexperienced person, it would be easy to think that her expression – lips pressed tight into a blood-red line, her eyes dark and startingly blank – was one of defeat.

But that would be a mistake.

“Since I have met you, very little about you has interested me at all,” Adora said, glaring up at him with her unblinking gaze. “But tonight, I must admit that there is one thing about you that I am dying to know, Mr. Tomoleo. What exactly is your interest in my daughter?”

“Professional,” he said, meeting her intense stare. “I am an enchanter, and she is my muse.”

“ Your muse?” Adora repeated, and he flinched at the word choice. “Not just a muse. Your muse.”

“You know what I meant,” he replied curtly, but it was too late. Adora smelled blood in the water.

"I'm afraid I know all too well what you meant," she said. "Why did you rush over to my home when you knew that no one else would be here to be alone with my daughter in the night?"

“He’d only been here a few minutes before you arrived,” I interjected, but she never

even looked my way. She just held up her hand to silence me, but I pressed on, “We only talked about the conduction.”

“What does the Regula say about romances or physical intimacy between enchanters and their muses?” Adora asked Soren, ignoring me altogether. “What do you suppose the Queen and Herve will think of you using romance to manipulate an impressionable but very talented young muse away from them for your own personal benefit?”

“Adora, that isn’t what happened!” I shouted in protest, and she finally looked over at me.

“Isadore, I am your mother, and I have always done everything I can for you,” she said. “Enchanters can never be trusted, and Soren has become too dangerous for you. He’s trying to hold you back for his selfish desires, and it’s not good for you. You can never work with him on this or anything else.”

“You don’t get to decide where my musing takes me or who I work with. I am a legal adult,” I said.

“I am still your mother and the Lady of the house,” she reminded me.

My work may have earned the money that paid for the small estate and our titles, but I was still underage when it transpired, meaning that legally, Adora owned it all. I had nothing in my name.

The way she looked at me then, I felt so small, and I wanted to crumple and apologize. And maybe I would have if Soren wasn't there giving me the strength just by his presence, and maybe if I hadn't conquered my fear of silks, and if I hadn't spent so much time away from Adora.

But I had.

"Adora, I appreciate your advice and concern," I spoke slowly, choosing my words carefully, as she glared at me with her arms crossed over her chest. "But I am a grown woman, beyond old enough to make choices about my life. I don't know if I want to perform at the Samonend with Soren, but I do know with absolute certainty that I will not be working with Herve Chaunter, not now or ever again."

Her eyes narrowed slightly, and her nostrils flared. "I will not have you throwing away all that we have worked for because you have allowed some half-wit magikian to scramble your brains when he flashes you a nice smile. I taught you so much better than that, Isadore."

"I am not throwing anything away," I insisted. "I am simply making my own choices."

"No," she replied flatly. "You are not allowed to make this choice. You will accept the offer from Herve."

I shook my head. "You can't force me to perform."

There was such a fire in her eyes that I knew she'd have slapped me if Soren weren't there. He must have sensed it, too, because he moved closer to me.

"I will not have this level of disobedience in my house," Adora said through gritted teeth. "You will perform when I say, or you will get out."

"Adora, you are being unreasonable," I tried.

"Do as I say, or get out," she reiterated quietly.

“I do have a guest flat,” Soren reminded me.

Suddenly, Adora snarled and shouted, “ Get out !”

There was nothing else said. Adora turned toward the fire, her back to us. I put on my cloak at the door, and Soren grabbed my luggage from where I'd left it near the front door.

The whole situation felt surreal, even in the moment. I'd only been home for a matter of minutes, and my mother had thrown me out.

Soren had parked his carriage around the corner, where the driver waited with the horse. As he loaded up my bags, I pulled my cloak more tightly around me and stared up at the fading sky.

“Where shall I tell the driver you wish to go?” Soren asked, and I snapped back to look at him.

“What?” I asked and already tears of despair welled in my eyes. “You... I thought you offered... I don't have anywhere...”

“You are more than welcome to stay in my guest house for as long as you'd like,” he hurried to explain. “But I didn't want to presume anything. I thought you may be more comfortable with Briar or Wrenley.”

“I... I just want to crawl in bed and sleep,” I told him honestly and wiped roughly at my eyes.

"To my house, it is then," Soren said.

After the short carriage ride to his estate, Soren led me through the gardens behind his

house, around the pond reflecting the moon. Leaves crunched underneath my feet, and I could see the green glow of his workshop windows.

A staircase ran along the exterior southerly wall of the workshop, leading up to a second-story guest apartment. Soren went ahead of me, still carrying my bags, and he unlocked the door.

He ducked into the room and hurriedly lit the candles hung on wrought-iron sconces using a quick flame that flicked out of his fingertips. A stone fireplace sat along one wall, and he started it to ward off the chill.

As he did that, I took in the room as much as my tired mind would allow.

"Like I said, it's not much," Soren repeated, the way he had twice before on the way over here. "But I've had muses stay here from time to time if they need it, and it serves its purpose."

A pitched roof with exposed wooden beams limited the floor space. A squat, plain dresser sat under one window, and a narrow desk and chair under the other.

The bed was covered in a violet and blue quilt, and the headboard was made of dark wood with arcane symbols carved into it. On the wall behind it, partially covered by the bed, was a mural of an enchanted forest.

"That's a lovely painting," I commented.

It was the first thing I had since we'd gotten in the carriage, and it was enough to stop Soren in his tracks. He'd been rushing around, getting things in order – starting the fire, closing the curtains, fluffing the pillow.

He dropped the pillow and looked over at me, then glanced back at the mural.

“Yes, it is lovely,” he agreed. “Another muse painted that when they were staying here.”

I nodded, then sat on the bed because I was exhausted.

“There’s a small washroom there.” He pointed to a door on the other side of the fireplace. “And I’ll leave the backdoor to the main house unlocked so you can use the kitchen whenever you want.”

I nodded again.

"And I'll just be in the house if you need anything." He studied me for a moment. "Do you need anything?"

As he'd been talking, he'd been moving backward, standing halfway out on the landing. He'd already put so much distance between us.

But the one thing I needed, the only thing I really wanted was for him to hold me. Not even in a romantic way or desire for more than that. But I just knew that I would feel better with his arms around me.

I could never ask that of him, not when he'd made it abundantly clear that his interest in me was purely professional, and my mother had brought up the Regula to him. It wouldn't be fair to him to even ask, putting him in a position where he could only decline me.

So I only shook my head. I knew I should thank him. He'd already helped me so much. But I couldn't seem to form any words just then.

“I’m sure you’re exhausted after the day you’ve had,” Soren said, and it seemed like he was speaking to fill the silence.

There was something in his dark eyes, something like an apology, and he hesitated in the doorway, with his fingers grazing the handle.

“This is your personal space, and I won’t come up here again,” he said. “You can rest and stay as long as you’d like.”

I nodded again, and he left and closed the door behind him. I listened to the sound of his footsteps going down the stairs. I lay back on the bed, pulling the quilt around me, and I began to cry.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:21 am

I I didn't know how long I slept, but the sun was high in the sky when I awoke. My stomach rumbled because I hadn't eaten since lunch yesterday on the road with Wrenley.

But I was still slow to get out of bed. My body ached all over, and there was a dull feeling inside me.

I couldn't put off today forever, especially since it was already here, so I got up. I pulled the curtains back and peered outside at Soren's backyard. It was a nice view, even if the chilly weather meant that many vibrant summer plants were withered or dead. There were still punches of red and orange in various chrysantha, and the pond was serene under the willow.

Firstly, I cleaned up and dressed, making myself as presentable as I could manage. There was no reason for Soren to see me all haggard again. Once I'd finished, I made the trek through the gardens into the house.

Through the circular stained-glass window in the backdoor, I could see Soren's silhouette in the kitchen. I took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

He opened it a moment later, a bemused smirk on his lips. It must be earlier than I thought because his hair was soft and wavy instead of styled, and he was wearing only his kaftan robe and satiny pajama pants.

"You don't need to knock, Izzy, not while you're staying here," he said as he motioned for me to enter.

“It felt rude to just waltz in,” I demurred as I slid past him and went into the kitchen.

“The teapot on the stovetop just came to a boil, and there’s fruit in a bowl and fresh bread in the breadbox and butter on the counter,” he said.

“Thank you,” I said as I went over to grab a plum and pour myself a cup of tea. “And I don’t mean just for this. I mean, everything .”

It was easier to express my gratitude when I wasn’t looking at him, and I could pretend to be focused on cutting my plum into slices.

“It really is the least I can do, considering I brought this all on you,” he replied, sounding weary and guilty.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

He was leaning against the counter and rubbed at the back of his neck. "I was selfish and greedy, so I rushed over to your house to poach you before Adora convinced you to work with Herve."

“I would never work with Herve,” I insisted, and I wanted to believe that I wouldn’t have given into Adora’s demands if Soren hadn’t been there. But it wasn’t as if I hadn’t caved to her pressure many, many times before.

"I know," he said softly, almost like he believed it. "And that is part of the reason I intervened with you and Adora because I knew you didn't want to be anywhere within his grasp. But if I'm being honest... if it had been someone other than Herve, someone you were dying to work with, I would've behaved all the same." His eyes were full of something dark that I couldn't define. "Because I wanted to work with you."

"Then I am truly sorry to disappoint you because I am not sure I want to perform with silks again," I said.

"I won't ever force you to do anything you don't want to do," he said. "But can I ask why you don't want to do aerials again? The rumors are that you were splendid."

"Well, the main reason is that I'm afraid of heights," I answered.

His eyebrows instantly went up. "And you climbed up the silks anyway?"

"I did, and it was difficult. I'm proud of myself for pushing through as much as I did, but I'm not sure I want to hop right back into it," I elaborated.

He leaned back slightly as if appraising me in a new light. "I don't blame you. How about this then: will you agree to perform with me at Samonend on the condition that it is a total collaboration?"

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

"That we won't do anything that the other isn't comfortable with. All decisions will require two yeses and one no. If I suggest something, and you say no, we don't do it. Simple as that."

"If I decline your collaboration, will I have to find somewhere else to stay instead of the guest flat?" I asked.

He was immediately appalled. "No, of course not! You can stay here as long as you wish."

I studied him, trying to understand. "What are you getting out of this? If I don't perform with you?"

He shrugged and looked away. "I would say nothing, but that's not entirely true. I don't like Herve Chaunter. I don't like the way Adora treats you. I don't like seeing people exploited in general." Then he looked over at me. "I like you, I enjoy your company, and I want to keep working with you."

"So that's what I'm getting out of this," he finished with a crooked smile. "Spiting my enemies and helping my friends."

"So we are friends then?" I asked.

His expression turned quizzical. "Why wouldn't we be?"

"You said we have to keep things professional."

A grin spread slowly across his face. "Professionals can be friends. Your friends with Wrenley and Briar."

"Well, yes, but we're all muses. I'm allowed to date another muse without going against the Regula. My relationship with you is different than that."

"It is," he agreed. "Romance tends to complicate things."

"I suppose that is true," I said and thought back to my relationship with Baxley Cole.

He and I had dated around the time I turned sixteen when Adora and I were working on procuring the estate and titles. I had just snagged my first prestigious conduction, which had put me close to the rising star muse, Baxley.

"When I dated a muse, it started fun and amazing, but by the time things ended...." I trailed off as my thoughts returned to the end of my tumultuous time with my first boyfriend.

“What happened?” Soren asked.

"It was messy," I admitted, but then I shook my head because I didn't really want to talk about it, especially not when my nerves were still so frayed. "But all of that proves your point. If we're going to be collaborating, we should keep things light and friendly."

“So does that mean you want to collaborate with me for Samonend?” he asked.

“If I don’t have to do anything I’m uncomfortable with, then yes. I will.”

"Excellent!" His excitement almost immediately shifted to grave, and his smile fell.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Now I have to plan a routine,” he said.

He ran a hand through his thick hair and offered me a lopsided grin. “I was so focused on convincing you to do the Samonend with me that I didn’t think about how I have to choreograph a whole routine and get it down in a matter of weeks. It needs to be especially fantastic since I made such a scene about poaching you from Herve.”

“What were you planning on before you decided to ask me to join you? Is it something we can modify to include me?” I asked.

“Solo illusions, but honestly, I’d rather build something up around you instead of forcing you into something that wasn’t meant for you.” He stared thoughtfully into space. “Do you have issues with the silks themselves or the acrobatics when performed on the ground?”

“No, those are fine,” I said.

"So silks, ribbons, and scarves are all on the table?"

I nodded. "Yes. What do you have in mind?"

For a moment, he didn't answer and continued staring off. I was about to ask him again when he finally answered, "I have ideas, but I need to get some supplies."

Then he looked at me again. "And you need to rest if you're going to be any good to us by Samonend. You spent so much magik and energy in Lamida."

I didn't even attempt to argue with him. The weeks pushing myself on the silks were physically, mentally, and magickally draining, and the fight with Adora drained me emotionally. Muses needed time to rest and recharge between major festivals and conductions, and with Samonend approaching fast, I didn't have an ideal amount of recovery. That meant that I had to make the most of our limited time.

"I'll have to get some supplies in the market, and I'll make replenishing imbued meals for you," he said, almost absently. "Is there anything you need?"

"I think I'll be okay with what I have."

He straightened up. "I'm going to get ready and head out. Feel free to relax around the house while I'm gone. Read anything you want in the library, relax by the pond. There's paper and ink in the desk drawer in your flat if you'd like to write any correspondence."

When he went to his chambers to ready himself for the day, I slipped out the back door. In my little flat, I sat at my desk and pulled out the paper and ink.

Wrenley had so much going on in xer life with King Asmond, but xe would be upset if I didn't let xer know that I had moved out of Adora's house, even if it was only

temporary.

A cold chill ran over me because I didn't know this was temporary. Obviously, I hadn't imagined that I would live with my mother forever. I had always planned to someday get married and have my own home and family.

But not so soon, and not like this.

Adora's mother had died when she was young, and her father kicked her out when she fell pregnant with me. My own father had disappeared right after she told him, and it had been the two of us against the world for my entire life.

Even though I had enjoyed my increasing freedom from her over the past six months, that didn't mean I wanted her out of my life completely. She was my mother, and I loved her.

If I went back to her today, on my hands and knees to apologize, she would likely allow me back into the house again. But an apology would never be enough.

To get back into Adora's good graces, she would expect penance and strict obedience. I'd have to perform on the silks with Herve, which I wasn't even sure I could do. But beyond that, she would insist that I cut all ties with Soren immediately.

But if my exile from Adora's home wasn't temporary, then what did that mean for me? No matter what he claimed, I couldn't stay in Soren's guest flat forever.

I took a deep breath and reminded myself that I didn't have to solve everything right now. I would stay at Soren's until Samonend, making our practice more convenient anyway.

Right now, I only needed to rest and alert my friends about my change in residence.

Briar, Wrenley, and I needed to catch up soon, but it wouldn't be today. Two brief letters were enough.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:21 am

The three of us sat in the parlor of Cinderwood Manor, Briar, Wrenley, and myself. Tea and cookies were sitting on the glass table between us, carefully around a delicate tea set.

Wrenley and I had just finished filling Briar in on all that had recently transpired: our experiences in Lamida, Wrenley's romance with King Asmond, along with a brief mention of my flirtation with Rowan, how well Wrenley had done in xer primamusa conduction, and how I (somewhat) overcame my fear of heights. Finally, I told them both about the fight with Adora that had resulted in me moving into Soren's guest flat.

"I don't see you for a few weeks, and everything changes," Briar said, her blue eyes wide. "Wren found true love, and Izzy moved out."

"Izzy moving out from Adora's is a long time coming," Wrenley said, steering the conversation away from xerself. Xe still seemed as happy and wistful as when I saw xer last, but xe always got a little squeamish with sentimentality and romance.

"Do you think that you will move back?" Briar asked me.

"Why would she?" Wrenley answered on my behalf. "She's finally free."

"She's still her mother, Wren," Briar argued. "That makes everything more complicated."

"I don't know what will happen with me and Adora, but I don't have the energy to worry about it right now," I said. "I have too much to do before Samonend."

“No kidding. I only have a few weeks to master aerial silks, thanks to you two hotshots,” Briar teased,

As the Warlock to the Queen, Herve Chaunter was set upon doing an aerial performance to rival the one in Lamida. The issue was that I was already working with Soren, and Wrenley had declined. Xe also hated Herve and hoped to get word from Asmond soon, so xe didn't want to make any significant commitments.

Briar had some experience with silks, and she was a talented muse and fast learner. Plus, she was beautiful and from a great family, so casting her as the primamusa in Herve's Samonend had been an easy choice.

I'm not sure if Herve ever took magik from her, the way he had with me because that wasn't something I talked about ever. Not even with my closest friends. But I had always hoped that no one ever did, that her name and lineage protected her in a way that my lack of had left me vulnerable. I also knew that Briar was kind and always stood up for others. She wouldn't tolerate Herve hurting others.

“What are you and Soren planning?” Wrenley asked me.

"I'm not sure yet," I said, hoping I didn't sound as nervous as I felt.

It had been two days since I had been staying with Soren, and he was still insisting that I rest and recharge. He was clearly working on something, spending his days bouncing back and forth between his library and his workshop.

For my part, I spent most of my time reading in the library or resting in my flat. He would stop and chat with me if I was around, but he refused to answer any questions about our Samonend conduction until I was fully rested.

“And when will you be fully rested?” Wrenley echoed my own thoughts.

“Tomorrow, I think,” I said, but that might only be wishful thinking. “Soren can’t give a definitive answer until he sees how I am in the morning.”

“He’s been treating you well?” Briar asked. “He’s being kind and behaving appropriately?”

“He has been the very definition of a gentleman,” I said.

Wrenley chuckled at that. “You sound disappointed.”

"No, I'm not." I blushed and shook my head. "Things are how they are supposed to be." Then I deflected back to xer, "What do your parents think of King Asmond?"

"Nothing yet because I haven't told them anything," xe admitted. "I am waiting until I hear from him before I start making things official."

Xe lounged back on the loveseat, wearing a semi-sheer blouse and wide-leg trousers. Xe toyed absently at xer wild hair and struggled to keep xer expression neutral.

“I’m not exactly monarch material, and there’s a good chance that Asmond will be blocked from seeing me at all. So I don’t want to get my parents all worked up for nothing,” Wrenley explained.

“That’s nonsense!” Briar argued. “You are clever and charming with a good family name, and you’ve received your share of accolades as a muse. What more could a King want?”

“A better family name, a bigger dowry, someone more traditional,” Wrenley replied dismally.

“Yes, because Lamida is such a traditional kingdom,” I said sarcastically, and xe

smirked. "That place was perfect for you."

"I know," xe admitted. "That's why I don't want to get my hopes up. It all seems too perfect."

"There's no such thing as 'too perfect,'" Briar insisted. "Everyone deserves a happily ever after."

"Maybe they do, but not everybody gets one," xe grumbled.

"Oh, speaking of unhappy endings." Briar's blue eyes bounced to me, and they turned apologetic. "Izzy, I wanted to forewarn you. Baxley Cole will be performing in the conduction with me. I know the two of you had a difficult relationship, and I wanted to let you know that you'll likely see him on Samonend."

"Oh, um, thanks," I stammered and averted my gaze. "It was a long time ago, and I can handle seeing him. But thank you for giving me a chance to prepare myself."

Our relationship had come to its rather abrupt end three years ago, and we hadn't spoken or interacted since. He tended to get far more prestigious placements than me, so avoiding him had been easy.

But I had known that I would likely run into him again someday. I still appreciated that Briar had given me a warning because I needed all the preparation I could. The Samonend was stressful enough, and I'd need extra steel in my spine to face Baxley, too.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:21 am

All Soren would tell me was what I needed to wear for our first practice: a light top and loose cotton gauchos so I could move easily.

I did as I was told and put my hair up in a loose bun, then slid on my robe to walk from my flat to the main house. The sky was dark and foreboding, and the wind had an icy sharpness, so I jogged through the gardens.

"I'm in the front room!" Soren called when I came in the backdoor. I don't know if he heard me or if he just felt my presence the way I felt his.

There was a subtle electric current in the air whenever he was near, but it was different than what I typically felt around enchanters. It was more palpable, and the hair stood on the back of my neck.

My arms were covered in goosebumps by the time I reached the front room. All the furniture had been pushed to the side, and Soren stood in the center, his back to me as he toyed with brightly colored fabrics piled at his feet.

For the first time, he was wearing a sleeveless shirt, and his tattoos were on display. Arcane symbols and magik sigils of all the incantations he had mastered were marked onto his skin, all down his arms and shoulders, even on his chest and back.

At first glance, they appeared solid black, but on closer inspection, they were iridescent shades of midnight blue, dark evergreen, and deep violet, shifting between all three. When he conducted magik, they emitted a soft glow.

Soren finally turned to face me, a crooked smile already lighting his handsome face.

“You look healthy and rested. Are you feeling up for a workout?”

I nodded. “I’m good, and I am ready to go. What do you have in mind? Have you decided what we’re going to do?”

“We are collaborating, so I haven’t decided anything yet.” He dropped the fabric and stepped closer to me. “We’re deciding all this together . But I do have some ideas and some questions.”

“Questions?” I echoed.

“You’re afraid of heights, correct?”

“They make me dizzy and nervous.”

“Is that all the time, or just when you’re using the silks?” he asked. “Were you distressed when I used levitation with you before?”

“I’m never fond of heights, but there is a difference between levitating with an enchanter and climbing on my own,” I clarified. “On the silks, I am relying entirely on myself and my own strength. But with levitation...”

Levitation wasn't something a muse could do solo. An enchanter was required to channel magik, which could affect physical reality. Muses worked primarily in illusions, glittering lights, and dazzling spectacles, but nothing with substance. The show was the conduit, transferring the magik of the physical world to the ethereal one beyond ours.

But with a true master of the arcane like an enchantrix, the magik could be guided into a singular force that could affect the physical world. Moving objects, levitating bodies, and the like.

“Levitation is different for you,” Soren supplied when I lapsed into silence. “How come?”

“Because I’m not the one in control,” I confessed. “I don’t trust myself, but I do trust you. I know you won’t let me fall, and if I do, you’ll catch me.”

His smile deepened, and something flickered in his eyes. “That is true, and I’m glad you trust me. But we’ll need to work on your self-doubt.”

“I don’t think we have enough time to tackle that by Samonend,” I said.

"Fair enough. Do you want to hear some of the ideas I have been playing around with?" he asked.

“Yes, please!”

“Aerial silks but with levitation,” he announced excitedly. “You’ll do a scarf dance with magik and lights, and as you dance, I’ll levitate you higher into the air. Not too high, not anywhere near what’s expected with climbing the silks. More like 5-6 feet, just above the heads of the people.”

“Can I keep my eyes closed?” I asked.

“If that’s what you prefer,” he said. “And as long as you keep your eyes open to help me choreograph this.”

“You want my input on the routine itself?” I asked in surprise. Enchantresses usually decided the routines themselves and dictated them to the muses.

“Of course.”

“Okay. So where do we begin?” I asked.

"I usually start with the music." Soren began humming a low, somber sound, and he waved his fingers in the air.

Candles were lit all around the room to combat the morning darkness brought on by the dark clouds. Now, the flames flickered before glowing even brighter, and the air was filled with the sound of an orchestral arrangement of the same tune he'd been humming.

"I put this arrangement together last night, but we can change any part of it," he explained. "Since it's for Samonend, I picked sections of Lupo Paluhart's 'Elegy,' but I tried to lighten it with a playful undertone."

Paluhart's "Elegy" was a piece of classical music that most muses were familiar with. It was a dense composition, with melancholy vocals singing ancient incantations. As it began to play, I noticed the changes that Soren had made to it. Pizzicato strings added a touch of whimsy, and woodwinds introduced a playful melody.

An elegy was traditionally a subdued funeral hymn, which was why it was a good fit for Samonend. The festival honored our ancestors and embraced the impending darkness of the coming winter. But Samonend was still a festival, a celebration of both life and death, of light and dark.

Soren's additions reflected the duality of the Samonend and made Paluhart's legendary piece infinitely more danceable.

While the music played, I closed my eyes and started swaying, letting it flow through me. I felt Soren's hand on mine, which startled me into opening my eyes. He slipped a few long, colorful satin scarves into my hand.

“Keep dancing,” he instructed. “See where this moment takes you.”

So I closed my eyes again, focusing solely on the music and the moment. Even here inside his house, the air felt charged, like a thunderstorm chasing the wind.

Soren began singing, his beautiful baritone soaring through the updated requiem, and I let it carry me around the room. The balls of my feet brushed against the cool floor, and my body felt weightless and free.

I could feel the fabric of the scarves dancing around me like a breeze as I twirled. I flicked my wrist, throwing the scarf high in the air, and with my eyes still closed, the scarves found their way back to my hand at the fevered crescendo.

The music started to slow, and my steps became more deliberate. Finally, I collapsed to the floor on my knees. I tossed the scarves back over my shoulders so they would land on my back like wings at rest after a flight.

“How did that feel?” Soren asked while my forehead was still resting against the floor.

I waited a beat to answer, lifting my head to see him, hoping to get a read on how he thought I had done. But his expression was blank, and his hand rested on his chin as he stared down at me.

“It felt... good ?”

“Was that a question?”

“I don’t know how to answer.” I squirmed, growing embarrassed and certain that I’d done a terrible job. “How do you think I did?”

“Please don’t flip it back on me like that. I asked you how it felt because I want to know how you felt. I can’t answer that for you,” he said. “I only want your honesty.”

Something about that shattered me. There was no response I could give that would make him happy except for the truth. How could I even know what that was when I never trusted my own feelings or thoughts because they were usually wrong – according to Adora, anyway.

But knowing that anything but honesty would disappoint Soren, I could only say what I felt, whatever that may be. I closed my eyes and opened my mouth, and I truly didn’t know what I would say until the words came tumbling out.

"It felt good but rough. I stumbled through tempo changes a few times, and we need to develop a clear transition to keep my momentum. My footwork was indelicate during the piece, but that will get better over time as long as the choreography matches the precision of the music. The crescendo will be perfect for something more complex if we go aerial so that I can incorporate more flips and rolls." I took a deep breath and opened my eyes again to see him grinning at me. "So that's what I thought. How about you?"

“I loved it!” Soren might as well have said I love you for how it struck me. I was suddenly lightheaded and giddy and filled with butterflies.

“And I loved your ideas even more,” he went on. “You’re right that it’s rough, but already, I can see that we can create a real showstopper here.”

"You think so?" I asked, and I didn't even mind that I had a dopey smile on my face.

"Yes, absolutely!" He was exuberant when he took my hand and pulled me to my feet. "Let's try it again, but we'll go much slower so we can label the steps and define it more clearly. But I really liked your instincts, so I'll follow that."

Within a few days, Soren and I had the choreography worked out, but we still needed to incorporate my magik elements. They were always the final addition once everything else was down.

Truthfully, I couldn't believe how quickly it was all coming together. This was my first time working with an enchanter who welcomed input from a muse, and in the beginning, it felt strange expressing my opinion to him like that. It genuinely did seem to make him happy, and it seemed to improve the performance.

I won't deny that my first instinct was to hold back and shy away from expressing myself. But even when we disagreed, Soren made it clear that he preferred that over blind subservience.

The only problem was that I was realizing that maybe I preferred it, too.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:21 am

Near the end of the week, Soren informed me his sister would be visiting sometime soon. He didn't give me anything more precise than that, so I wasn't prepared to see her the moment I walked into the kitchen the next morning. And not only her but also the esteemed designer Zinnia Russo.

I had only met Serena once, and Zinnia never. They were both extraordinarily beautiful and elegantly styled, and they greeted me in my robe with my long, wavy hair lying loose and wild down my back.

Soren was leaning against the counter, drinking tea the way I found him most mornings, and Serena was across from him, perched on the edge of the butcher block, munching on pomegranate seeds.

Neither of them had time to greet me before the diminutive designer rushed to me. Zinnia was hardly over four feet tall, not counting the halo of graying dark curls surrounding her head. Her skin was a medium brown, and she looked in her late sixties. She put on a monocle to inspect me closer and lifted my arm to get a better look at my body.

Fortunately, I recognized her as one of the kingdom's most glamorous and respected working muses. Otherwise, I would've found her intrusive behavior more alarming. While most muses performed conductions for at least part of their lives, many of them went on to work in other creative endeavors, like designing, cooking, and composing music.

“Don’t mind her, Isadore,” Serena said cheerily as Zinnia pulled a measuring tape out of her deep pockets. “That’s just my friend Zinnia, and she’s here to get you ready for

the Samonend. My brother hasn't left us with any time for pleasantries."

With that last remark, Serena cast Soren a disapproving glare, and he gave a sheepish shrug.

"We cannot live in the past, so it does us no good to worry about what could have been. Instead, we shall put our energy in the here and now," Zinnia said almost absently. "We'll make do with the time we have. With that in mind, is there somewhere we can go so you can strip down?"

Soren nearly choked on his tea at that point, and hurriedly, he offered us the library so the designer could get more precise measurements of my body. He closed the curtains, then departed and closed the door behind him, leaving me in relative privacy with Serena and Zinnia.

"Do you want me to leave for this part, or would you rather I stay?" Serena asked as I started untying my robe.

"You can stay," I said because having a buffer felt better than being alone with the intense Zinnia.

Besides, I had been through dozens of fittings. Stripping down to my slip and bloomers as a stranger measured every inch of my body was a part of my life. At least I would have a stunning one-of-a-kind garment on the other end.

For her part, Serena walked around the room, pretending to admire her brother's books so she wasn't staring at me in a state of undress.

"How long have you been a muse?" she asked me.

"About fourteen or fifteen years," I guessed. It was hard to remember exactly when I

had started, since I had been so young.

"Oh, that's right. Soren mentioned you were a child muse," Serena said. "I did some musing when I was younger, but I was still twelve when I started."

"I didn't realize you hadn't always been an enchantress," I commented.

Sometimes, muses moved on to enchanting, but not often. It was a much different skill set, both in terms of magik and performing. On top of that, warlocks and other enchantrices were slow to accept a muse in that position, making it a very difficult transition.

"Nobody is always anything," Serena said dryly. "Our mother was a muse, but she retired when she married our father, who was a wealthy barrister. But he fell ill and died by the time I was twelve. His protracted ill-health had burned through our inheritance. Mother's skills were rusty, and the shine had faded off her star, so I went into musing to make extra money for the family."

Serena gave me a sympathetic smile over her shoulder. "Being a muse is hard work, especially when you're a kid, and I gave it up after only a few years."

Until then, Zinnia had been mostly silent, other than occasionally muttering about inches and numbers, but she let out an audible scoff. "Serena talks as if she were sent off into battle alone and unprepared. Her mother, Lysandra, was fierce."

"You know what creeps some of the enchantrices and royal nobles can be, so demeaning and so demanding," Serena expounded on Zinnia's claims.

"With some of those folks, leaving a baby muse with them is like leaving a lamb in a lion's den," Zinnia went on, talking as she moved around, measuring and remeasuring my body. "And Lysandra Tomoleo was a damn lioness."

“Zinnia was my mom’s best friend,” Serena told me. “But she’s not wrong.”

“I never am,” Zinnia retorted, indignant.

“How did you get into musing, Isadore?” Serena asked. “Was it something you always wanted to do?”

This wasn’t the first time I had been asked this question, but every other time, I had lied and said, Yes, I always dreamed of being a muse .

Instead, I found myself telling the truth: "I never considered doing anything else because I always knew that I would never be able to do anything else."

Zinnia stopped measuring long enough to look up at me, one eye oversized behind her monocle, and she made an indecipherable sound in her throat.

"I've got everything I need," Zinnia said, and she held out her hand, shaking mine brusquely. "It was nice meeting you, and I will be back two days before Samonend for a fitting."

“Thank you,” I said, and she was already starting for the library door.

“Don’t thank me until you see the dress,” Zinnia said.

“I’ll be out in a minute,” Serena said, and the older woman raised her hand absently as she left the room. “Have Soren make you a cup of tea.”

After I got dressed again, Serena came over. She put a gentle hand on my arm, her dark eyes reminding me so much of her brother’s.

“You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to,” she said, her voice low and very

serious.

I had to suppress the hysterical urge to laugh because she was clearly speaking out of concern and kindness. It was just that I couldn't remember anyone saying that to me my entire life. This was my first time working at something because I wanted to, and now , someone was concerned.

“Performing at the Samonend with Soren is my choice. I want to do this,” I assured her.

A smile crept up at the corner of her mouth. “Good. I just had to be sure that Soren wasn’t running over you. He can be hard to contain when he’s excited.”

“What we’re doing is a true collaboration,” I said.

Her smile deepened. "I can't wait to see what you create together."

As soon as both Serena and Zinnia had gone, after gratitude and goodbyes from both Soren and myself, he turned to face me. With an apprehensive tone, he asked, "Serena wasn't too horrible to you, was she?"

I laughed. “No, she wasn’t horrible at all. I think she was trying to look out for me.”

"She tends to do that," he said, but his tension didn't seem to ease. "Did she try to warn you away from me?"

I tilted my head, caught off guard by his concerns. “What would she have warned me about?”

He rubbed the back of his neck, turning bashful. “She thinks I’m bossy and overzealous.”

“You can be both of those,” I admitted. “But you can also be encouraging and confident, and you demand a lot from others because you give so much of yourself.”

“That is true.” His eyes lightened, and he smirked. “I am a very awesome guy.”

I rolled my eyes. “Did you ask me that to trick me into complimenting you?”

“No, that was merely a wonderful side effect.”

Soren’s smile didn’t completely disappear, but a gravity had settled into his expression. “I do want to be certain that I’m not bossing you around or forcing you into things, the way...”

He trailed off, but I didn’t need him to finish to know what he meant: he wanted to be sure he wasn’t treating me the same way Adora had. He was making sure he had my enthusiastic participation in a way that almost no one in my life ever had.

“I love what we’ve come up with for Samonend,” I insisted. “And I don’t mind when you boss me around.”

“That’s good because I plan on telling you what to do a lot today.”

I arched my eyebrows. “What did you have in mind?”

“Are you ready to add the light today?” he asked, barely masking the zeal in his voice.

“Are we ready for that?” I asked uncertainly.

The plan was to learn the footwork, then combine my magik, and finally, incorporate Soren’s levitation. I wanted to move on to the next step but worried I wasn’t good

enough yet.

“I am ready, and from what I saw with you yesterday, you seem ready to me. But I’m not you. If you want more time focusing solely on footwork, we can do that, too.”

"Let's try it with the lights and see how it goes," I decided after a moment of thought, and Soren's eyes sparkled.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:21 am

The weeks flew by. The practices were intensive and bordered on grueling since we had such a short amount of time to perfect the routine. As the muse, our exercises were more physically taxing on me, and Soren was cautious to avoid overexertion. He insisted that I get enough rest, and I went to bed early and slept in late. It was strange to push myself so hard every day and yet wake up feeling so refreshed.

Not only that, but Soren wouldn't let me lift a finger around the house, despite the fact that he didn't even have a housekeeper. Gardeners came out a few times a week, tending to the pond and landscaping even as the season turned the greens to brown and gold.

My days started late in the morning, with a quick breakfast in the kitchen with Soren. He usually made biscuits fresh with honey and fruit he'd get early from the market.

Then, stretching and cardio before rolling into practice. The first round usually lasted a few hours, and Soren ended it based on how tired I seemed. He didn't want me burning out.

After that, we'd have lunch. When the weather was still nice – about half the time, albeit a bit chilly – we would eat outside under the willow by the pond. That meal was something quick but full of nutrients, usually hefty salads with flavorful vegetables and legumes, along with some energizing tea.

The afternoon focused more on the magik, and it was the most arduous part of the day for both of us. I exerted so much effort creating the dazzling lights, giving an illusionary form to ethereal creations. In turn, Soren channeled my magik and created music while levitating me in the air.

That continued until we were sweating, short of breath, and about to collapse. I would've pushed myself even harder because Adora had always told me to go until I literally dropped. Near exhaustion wasn't near enough.

I still felt guilty when Soren would say, "That's enough for the day." Because I knew that I could give more, that I wasn't entirely depleted yet.

"I could go a bit longer," I told him, almost sheepishly. Samonend was approaching, and I didn't feel good enough.

Soren combed his hair back from his face – it was always wild after practice – and his eyes were filled with a strange heat as he smiled at me.

"You are insatiable, Izzy," he murmured, then shook his head. "But unfortunately, I am not inexhaustible. So we must break for the night."

He turned away from me then. "I hope you worked up an appetite because I'm making supper."

My stomach grumbled because he was an excellent cook. I'd never admit this to Heloise, but he was an even better chef than her.

Evenings quickly became my favorite part of the day. I'd get cleaned up, washing the day's salt and dirt from my skin. I'd slip on a nice, comfortable dress and put my hair up in a loose chignon.

When I returned to the main house, supper was waiting on the table, and Soren's hair was still damp from his recent bath. He wore a robe tied loosely, leaving his chest exposed.

We would eat dinner at the table, discuss the day's practice, and eventually talk and

laugh about anything and everything.

Finally, we retired to the library, where the best part of the whole day began. He'd light a fire, we'd each grab a book, and we'd lounge on the sofa, often with my feet across his lap. Sometimes, he'd rest a hand warmly on my bare ankle. It was nice, even if I could hardly focus on the page I was reading.

At night, when my head hit the pillow, I was happy but not content. There was a longing, a desperate desire for something more .

I'd watch out my window at the main house, where Soren almost certainly lay in his own bed, shirtless underneath his blankets. I wondered if his arcane tattoos glowed when he was sleeping, and I wanted to trace my fingers over them.

Sometimes, when I looked at Soren, I wanted him so badly that it felt as if my heart would burst. And then I felt so greedy and guilty. He'd already given and done so much for me, and I still wanted more . He gave as much of himself as he was willing to give, and how dare I ask for anything else.

So I didn't ask. I didn't push or touch. But I still wanted all the same, and I relished all that he gave: the touch of his hand on my ankle, the sound of his voice in my ear when he commanded his movements, the heat in his eyes when he looked at me.

The moments we conducted together were the closest I could get to the intimacy I so desperately craved. Even in our practices, when the magik was more restrained so as not to waste it, we still exchanged magik between us. And I couldn't wait until Samonend when we could unleash our magik completely.

Even with all the anticipation, Samonend came up too quickly. I was worried I wasn't ready yet and about what would happen afterward.

Soren had offered me the use of his guest flat until Samonend, but what then? I hadn't spoken to Adora in so long. I think she was waiting for me to apologize, as I had every other time before.

Part of me still wanted to, honestly. I had this horrible guilt in the pit of my stomach whenever I thought of her. I'd picture her crying on the sofa, listing all her sacrifices for me and how little she asked in return.

But then I remembered the way she had screamed at Soren. And me, too of course, but it bothered me more the way she spoke to him. He didn't deserve any of her wrath.

I just couldn't bring myself to apologize to her when I knew that she was the one in the wrong. So I didn't reach out to Adora, and I focused on what needed to be done until Samonend.

The dress rehearsal was held on the night before the actual Samonend festival. Every one of the performers had an allotted time in the ancillary ballrooms to ensure that everything would run smoothly tomorrow.

Zinnia Russo met Soren and me at the palace in the morning, and I had my final fitting with the designer. The gown she'd crafted was unlike any I had worn before, but it was utterly perfect.

The hem was short, landing at my mid-thigh, and the skirt was made of light gossamer fabric layered on top of each other, reminiscent of the black feathers of a raven. The elaborate lace of the bodice was perfectly contoured to my body, accentuating my waist and lifting my breasts. Small sleeves capped the top of my shoulders.

My hair and makeup were left to me, but I had mastered them a long time ago. A

great way for us to save some coin was if I did my own styling, and naturally, Adora ensured that I was an expert on it.

The Calida palace was already largely decorated for Samonend—lots of black in the ribbons, lacy tapestries, feathered wreaths, and raven statues. But there were pops of orange and blood, mainly in the chrysantha flowers but also in lanterns and garlands made of leaves and branches.

The halls were already crowded with other performers, but everyone was so focused on themselves that it was easy to be invisible.

After I finished getting ready in the dressing room, I came out to find Soren waiting for me. He was leaning against the wall, one ankle crossed over the other, and absently chewing on his thumbnail.

When he looked at me, his face changed subtly. His lips parted, and his eyes widened. His gaze went low, trailing up my bare legs and then lingering on my chest.

It all happened rather quickly – his eyes were only on me for a second or two – but it was a moment I knew I would be relishing long into the cold of the night.

When his eyes met mine, he blinked. “You look... good,” he said finally, and my heart fluttered at the raspy desire of his voice. “Does the dress feel good? Comfortable enough for you to move in?”

“Yes. It feels like I’m not wearing anything,” I admitted, and it wasn’t until the words were out of my mouth that I realized how they sounded.

His eyes smoldered the way they had after the first time we had kissed, during the downpour we had summoned at the Ashoralida. His gaze went to my lips, and I could practically feel the yearning radiating off him.

Relief and happiness blossomed in my chest because I wasn't imagining whatever had transpired between us. We couldn't be together; I understood that all too well. It was still a relief to know he felt the same way, even if we could never act on it.

Soren cleared his throat and looked away. "I think we have the ballroom down the hall reserved for us to practice in."

We started walking that way, and he put his hand on the small of my back, his palm splayed warmly across the fabric.

As we walked, passing through the crowds, I spied Briar with other muses in gowns of red and orange. They were going to be performing tomorrow in the aerial show that I had refused. Briar didn't mind Herve Chaunter, but she had her name and title to protect her. I didn't mind that she worked with him, because I believed that she would be safe.

Briar spotted me down the wide halls, and she gave me an excited wave. I waved back to her when I saw a tall blond man standing behind her, watching with the brilliant blue eyes of a wolf. Eyes that I knew all too well.

It was Baxley Cole, my ex-paramour and fellow muse. Briar had warned me that he would perform with her, so I'd known I'd likely have to see him. But it had been so long, and the shock of seeing his intense eyes made my blood run cold. I was so relieved for Soren's hand, ushering me along.

"Since it's only the two of us, they gave us the smallest room," Soren grumbled.

It was dark when we entered our practice ballroom, but with a wave of his fingers, the candles were suddenly alight. It couldn't have been much larger than his living room, but that was all the space we needed.

I started stretching and closed my eyes, attempting to get into the right frame of mind. But when I did, Baxley's eyes were all I could see.

They were what I remembered the most from our last night together, even though it had been two years ago.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:21 am

Baxley and I had been performing together in what was my highest placement yet – an anniversary party for a wealthy duke and duchess in the southern gardens of Calida. Given the nature of the conduction, the whole event was romantically charged.

Initially, when Baxley and I had been chosen for it, I thought it would be perfect. The two of us stayed in a guest house with four other muses for an amorous occasion at a beautiful locale. Adora had come with me, of course, but lodging was not provided for her, so she stayed at an inn nearby.

As soon as we'd begun practicing, things had gone horribly wrong. Baxley was the only male muse, and he was paired with a gorgeous female muse, Valeria. They spent the days together, making eyes at one another. When I tried to talk to Baxley about it, he accused me of being the one who was flirting with another muse.

All of it came to a head the night of our conduction. The performance had gone well, or so it had seemed to me. The choreography called for me to end sandwiched between two other muses in a romantic but chaste embrace, more implied sensuality than anything else.

In fact, Baxley's final pose was far more explicit, with him and Valeria in a kiss.

I hadn't enjoyed seeing him and Valeria that way. Jealousy twisted sharply in my heart. But I knew he was right. This was just a conduction, meant to put the right kind of magik into the ether to ensure that the duke and duchess who had hired us would have a long, happy marriage.

When the conduction ended, I looked over to see Baxley embracing Valeria with his lips grazing hers. A nauseated wave of jealousy bubbled inside me, but I shoved it down. This was our last night in the southern gardens, and then everything could return to normal with Baxley.

We had performed in a pavilion, and I walked off to greet Adora. She'd only had a moment to tell me about a few missteps I'd made, and then I felt a hand on my upper arm.

To others, it must have looked romantic, or at least friendly, because Adora only smiled when she saw Baxley put his hands on me. But I could feel it before I heard him speak. His anger was palpable in the way his fingers dug painfully into the tender flesh of my arm.

"Can I borrow her a moment, Lady Adora?" Baxley asked, speaking so sweetly to her as his other hand pinched into the fat of my waist.

"Of course," Adora said, smiling brightly up at him and batting her long eyelashes. "You've both certainly earned a break after that splendid conduction."

"Thank you," Baxley said, and he pinched me harder.

I didn't say anything. I must have been smiling as he led me away because everyone only smiled and offered us vague praise as he steered me away from the crowd to a hidden area in the shadows of an outbuilding. The sound of music and laughter barely carried over to us, and we were completely hidden away from prying eyes.

We were alone.

"You sure had everyone fooled," Baxley snarled, and he let go of me with a shove, so I stumbled forward, barely managing to stay on my feet. "Your mother thought that

repulsive display was beautiful.”

"Baxley, I'm sorry, but I don't know what I did wrong." Tears were already forming in my eyes because I never meant to disappoint or upset him.

“Liar!” he snapped at me. “You are a liar and a harlot! The way you threw yourself at those other muses! It was disgusting and embarrassing. Were you trying to humiliate me, or did you just want to disrespect the duke and duchess who have been so kind to you?”

“No, Baxley, I never did —” I started to defend myself, but the anger in him only grew, with his eyes blazing.

“I saw you!” he screamed in my face, and I felt his spittle on my cheeks. “Don’t you dare lie to me!”

I tried to back up, but there was nowhere to go. My back pressed against the wall of the outbuilding behind me.

Baxley was right before me, his body brushing against mine when he took a deep breath. His hands were balled up at his sides. He was nearly a foot taller than me, so he hunched over so his eyes would be level with mine.

They were so beautiful. His eyes were the bluest blue I had ever seen, and the way they sparkled when he told me he loved me, I nearly melted on the spot.

But now they were so cold and sharp, cutting into me with the sheer rage coming from them.

This was not the first time I had seen Baxley’s eyes this way, but usually, I immediately crumbled into apologizing. I would do everything I could so he would

absolve me.

But this time was different. This time, I knew in my heart that I hadn't done anything wrong.

Baxley himself had insisted that playing at intimacy was necessary as a muse. He had defended his brief closing kiss with Valeria.

But more than that, I loved Baxley with my whole heart, and I hadn't considered any other person since we'd been together. While there were feelings of comradery toward my fellow muses, there was no attraction or romantic flirtation.

"I only have eyes for –" I began.

He growled and punched the wall next to my head, and the words died on my lips instantly. The skin split across his knuckles, and bright red blood was spilling down his hand.

"Why do you keep lying?!" he demanded, and in his anger, he hardly even sounded like himself. He hardly sounded human.

"Baxley, please," I said in a trembling voice, futilely trying to soothe him. " Please listen to me. I'm not lying –"

"I don't want to hear another word from your lying lips!" Baxley snarled, and suddenly, his hands were around my throat.

Both his hands were clenched tightly, and he was so much stronger. I clawed at his wrists, and my eyes and lips felt like they were bulging out of my face. My lungs burned, my heart hammered, but mostly, what I felt was panic and disbelief.

How could this be happening? How, by the hands of someone that I love so much?

People were so close. I could hear my mother's laughter carrying over the distant music. The same man who had sworn that he loved me as he peppered me with kisses when we made love was squeezing the life out of me, and I was powerless to stop him.

The only thing I could see were his beautiful eyes full of hatred as my vision went hazy and blotchy.

And then, all at once, Baxley let go and stepped back from me.

I collapsed to the ground, coughing and gasping for air.

"You are a worthless harlot, and you are dead to me." He sneered and spit at the ground where my fingers were dug into the grass.

He stalked off then. I tried crawling after him and calling for him, but I was too weak.

"Baxley, come back," I begged in a hoarse voice, but he didn't stop. I didn't know if he could hear me or if he just didn't care, but he kept going and never looked back.

When my strength finally returned, I got to my feet and slunk to my room in the guest house. I took off my dress since it was filthy from dirt, tears, and drops of Baxley's blood, and I climbed under the covers.

Later in the night, I heard Baxley in the room next to mine with Valeria, making the sounds of lovemaking that sounded all too familiar. I cried so hard that I threw up.

In the morning, I wore a scarf around my neck and long sleeves to hide the marks, and I had not spoken to Baxley Cole since.

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Soren's voice, soft and concerned, pulled me from my thoughts. "Izzy?"

I opened my eyes and shook my head, trying to clear it of any thought of Baxley.

"Sorry. Just nerves." I forced a smile up at Soren, and his brows crunched in confusion.

"Why are you apologizing? You've done nothing wrong."

I shook my head. "I don't know. I'm on edge and not as present as I should be, so I assumed I was making mistakes."

"Well, you're not." He put a hand on my arm, warm and reassuring. "And if you're on edge and need grounding, then we can do some things to calm you."

I took a deep breath. "Okay. What can we do?"

"Let's run through the performance, no levitation or lights. Just moving your body in the space, centering yourself in the moment."

I nodded, and he gave me a soft smile. His hand dropped from my arm, and he slowly walked around until he was behind me.

"Close your eyes," he commanded gently, and his voice was practically in my ear.

I closed my eyes, and his arm wound around my waist. Not touching me, but I could feel the heat from his body through the thin fabric. His arcane tattoos must radiate

heat when he's channeling magik.

And then I felt his hand, splayed flat across my abdomen, the place where I drew my magik from.

"Breathe," Soren said, so I took a deep breath.

The music began, filling the room, and his baritone was low and husky in my ear as he sang.

And then my body began to move as if it had a mind of its own, taking the steps I'd memorized in my soul.

Soren's hand remained on my stomach – neither guiding nor pushing me, but simply telling me he was here with me every step.

The air rushed around as we moved across the ballroom, and I felt the ground disappear beneath my feet. But I didn't open my eyes until the music reached the crescendo. When I did, I wasn't surprised to see the magik sparkling in the air or that we were both floating six feet off the floor.

"You didn't hold back your lights," Soren said.

"And you didn't hold back your levitation," I said.

"How is your acrophobia?"

"I'm feeling good."

The distance between us had somehow disappeared, so my back was pressed against his chest, and his arm was wrapped around my waist, holding me securely to him.

Floating in the air with Soren, I knew I was completely safe.

I didn't know why we were still in the air. Was this meant to desensitize me to heights? But I was too afraid to ask because I didn't want the moment to stop, so I closed my eyes and relished it.

I leaned back into him, and his other arm snaked around my waist, enveloping me. His breath was ragged, and his lips brushed against my neck.

"Oh, excuse me!" a shrill voice suddenly cut through the air.

I opened my eyes to see Cosetta and Sylvetta, the Princesses of Calida, standing in the now open door to the ballroom.

And Soren and I were in the sort of embrace that was definitely not allowed.

"No apologies necessary," Soren said with faux cheer.

His arm was still around me as we descended slowly, and he released me the moment our feet touched the floor. He casually stepped away from me then, trying to play it off as if the embrace was a necessary part of our conduction rehearsal.

"We didn't realize anyone was using this room," Sylvetta said, but her sly smile made me uneasy.

"It's your ballroom in your palace, so you are always welcome," Soren said, smiling broadly.

"We will leave you to finish your rehearsal," Cosetta said. She was the Crown Princess, and she seemed to be urging her younger sister on.

“Actually, we are finished for the day,” Soren announced to my surprise. We’d only run through it once, without all the bells and whistles, so it hardly even counted as a dress rehearsal.

“We didn’t mean to chase you out,” Sylvetta said, still with a strange knowing smile.

“You are much too kind, Your Grace, but we will be on our way,” Soren said, and we slipped by them and out the door.

He didn’t speak again until we were almost out of the palace. Without looking at me, he asked, “Did the dress feel comfortable?”

“Yes. It was wonderful.”

“Good.” He nodded once, then called the carriage to take us back to his estate.

When we arrived, I went straight back to the guest flat to change out of my dress so I wouldn’t damage it. It ended up being quite the struggle because of the tiny little hooks down the side. Usually, I had Adora or Heloise or other muses to help. But I couldn’t ask Soren, not after what happened today, so I managed on my own.

I washed all the heavy performance makeup off my face and dressed again in my casual clothing. A cold chill blew through the drafts in the flat, so I wrapped a flannel cloak around my shoulders. The evening had come in quickly with dark storm clouds, and I could see Soren’s silhouette in the warm glow of the kitchen.

The day's events had left my stomach churning, so I wasn't hungry. But if Soren was making supper, I ought to go down and eat it. And we would have to talk since Samonend was tomorrow.

Soren was sitting in his spot at the dinner table, sipping a full goblet of wine. A place

was set for the both of us, the plates still empty with the roasted quail on a platter in the center.

“Good evening,” I said stiffly as I took my seat at the table across from him.

He cleared his throat and rested his arms on the table, avoiding my gaze as he spoke. “I need to start off by apologizing once again.”

“Soren, you have no reason to apologize,” I said quickly. “It’s my fault for being out of sorts. I saw Baxley and got into my head, and I needed you to ground me.”

His eyes quirked up at Baxley’s name, but he let me finish before saying, “Izzy. Stop. If the Princesses hadn’t interrupted us, we both know where things were heading.”

His gaze flicked to my lips, and my skin flushed with heat, and he quickly looked away again.

"Things had already gone too far," he said finally. "I'm your enchanter, and it is inappropriate for me to have romantic yearnings, let alone act on them. I know better, and you deserve better."

"I don't know how I can deserve better than my own desires," I argued, and I hated how my voice cracked when I tried to declare my feelings. "Nothing has happened between us that I haven't wanted or enjoyed."

The look that flashed across his face then was pure, unadulterated pain, as if I had struck him with all my might.

"It is too easy for emotions to get the best of us when working so closely," he insisted. "Things can get messy. People can get hurt." He exhaled roughly. "I don't want that for you or for us. So we need to remember that it's only magik, and we can

keep things professional.”

I wanted to cry or argue but didn't see the point. Soren's mind was made up, and he might even be right.

It still hurt, though, in a visceral way knowing that he believed what had transpired between us was wrong and a mistake and something that I needed to be protected from.

But I swallowed it down and nodded.

“You understand, don’t you, Izzy? Why it has to be this way?” he asked me, almost entreating me to understand.

“I do.”

He relaxed slightly back into his chair, his shoulders sagging. Then he tilted his head. “What was that you were saying about Baxley? Did you mean Baxley Cole?”

“Yes, that’s him,” I replied tightly.

In the two years since we had broken up, Baxley’s star had only risen, so it made sense that Soren was aware of him. His older brother, Raiment Cole, had married Princess Sylvetta, moving the family even closer to the crown.

“What happened with him?” Soren asked.

“We dated for a while... and things ended badly.”

“Badly how?” he pressed.

“Why are you even asking? Does it even matter?” I shot back at him with tears in my eyes, unable to hold them back any longer.

“Whatever happened between you two, it clearly matters to you. I want to know because you were shaking after you saw him, and I want to help you,” Soren replied simply.

I softened some because I didn't want Baxley to get to me tomorrow during the conduction—or ever again, honestly.

But I couldn't look at Soren, and the explanation came out flat and almost monotone, but that was the only way I could get through it: “He accused me of cheating. I hadn't, so I denied it. He didn't believe me, so he put his hands around my throat. And then he said that I was dead to him, and that was that.”

“Are you okay?” Soren asked when I finished.

“It was a long time ago.”

“That's not what I asked.”

“I'm okay. I'm just nervous around him.”

“I'll make sure to keep you away from him tomorrow,” he promised me, and then he rose to his feet. “Are you hungry? Would you like me to fix you a plate?”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:21 am

It was the morning of the Samonend, and I was on my second cup of soothing tea to calm my nerves. I honestly could've used another, but Soren didn't want me to be lethargic for the conduction.

"We're going to be great," Soren assured me, not for the first time.

"I know," I said because it was the right thing to say, but I didn't feel confident.

A knock at the front door interrupted him, but it was just as well because I didn't want any more pep talks. Soren went to answer it, leaving me on the sofa in the library and holding my teacup with both hands.

From where I sat, I could hear the voices: Soren's distinct baritone and a woman's that sounded familiar.

A moment later, Soren poked his head into the library. "Izzy, there's a Heloise to see you. Do you want me to send her away?"

"Don't send her away!" I leaped to my feet and rushed out to greet her. It wasn't until she was standing in the foyer that I realized how much I missed her.

"Miss Izzy!" she exclaimed with tears in her eyes, and I ran over to hug her.

Four years ago, Heloise started working four days a week, from sunup to sundown, as a housekeeper at Adora's and my estate. Before that, my mother had hired her when she could afford it, primarily for mending, laundry, and cooking. But the relationship had begun even before that when my mother and I were first out on our own. Heloise

had been the downstairs neighbor who taught Adora how to keep an infant alive, and she'd also been the one to watch me whenever Adora had work or other engagements.

I had known her my entire life, and she had offered me far more hugs than Adora had.

"Is everything okay? Did something happen?" I asked.

"No, everything is fine," she assured me. "I missed you, and I wanted to wish you good luck on the day of your conduction."

"I've missed you, too!" I gave her another squeeze, then released her so I could get a better look at her. "How are you? Have you been well?"

"I am always well. You know me," Heloise replied as she appraised. Her hand went to my cheek. "You look happy and healthy."

"I am," I agreed, even if my nerves were frayed at this particular moment.

Heloise's gaze flitted over to Soren, who lingered uncertainly at the edge of the room. She lowered her voice when she asked, "Is he treating you well?"

"I am very comfortable in the guest flat," I told her.

Her smile deepened in relief. "Good."

"How is everything back home?" I asked because saying Adora's name aloud felt like summoning trouble.

"Everything... everything is as it was," Heloise answered carefully. "You should know that Lady Adora still plans to attend Samonend today. She has been invited to

sit with the courtiers.”

My heart skipped a beat, but I knew that this was a possibility. Adora never missed a chance to rub elbows with Queen Kriselle and other nobles.

"I hope she enjoys the performance," I said.

Heloise squeezed my hand and gave me a pained smile. "I know that she will."

She left shortly after that because she needed to work at Adora's for the day, and I did not envy her. My mother's moods were always unpredictable on festival days, and I had to imagine she would be especially volatile given all that was happening between us.

But I didn't have time to worry about her. There was too much that needed to be done.

We had to leave Soren's estate early because the streets were always a madhouse during festivals. I watched out the carriage window at the black ribbons and skeletal effigies hanging from the kerosene lampposts. Bright orange and red chrysanthemum blossoms remained steadfast despite the chilly air. All around, I could hear the music and sounds of Samonend.

It was a festival to honor our ancestors and a last hurrah before welcoming the impending winter darkness. The fall harvest was behind us, and the kingdom felt free for a few days.

When we finally pulled in front of the palace, Soren got out first, and he turned back to take my hand and help me out of the carriage. Both of us were already dressed in our conduction regalia because there was no way we could reserve a dressing room today. Those went to the most prestigious performers, nobles, and any of those with

enough coin. Soren and I were none of those, and he barely had enough clout to secure us a short opening slot.

Zinnia Russo made Soren's clothing, too, and designed it to match mine. He wore a long jacket, where the fabric transitioned to the same gossamer feathers of my dress. Underneath, he wore only a fitted brocade vest, so his red amulet lay on his bare chest. His hair was longish, making it a little wavy even when slicked back, and his dark eyes smoldered whenever he looked at me. His hand that took mine was adorned with heavy rings.

As soon as my feet touched the walkway up to the palaces, Soren let go of my hand and moved to the more chaste crook of his elbow. All around us were other attendees and performers arriving and the pesky moscazzi buzzing about.

The moscazzi were small fairies, no larger than a fly, who worked in gossip and information. They lingered around the royal palace and popular events, and they sold their stories to local papers and curious sidelined nobles.

I felt like throwing up, and I was already scanning the crowds for Adora and Baxley. I knew they would be here, but I would feel so much better if I could see where they were. If I had certainty about what places to avoid.

“I’m here with you.” Soren’s voice was low enough that only I could hear it. My left hand was in the crook of his right arm, and he put his free hand over mine, caressing the back of it with his thumb. “I will be right by your side all night long.”

And somehow, that did settle my nerves. Not entirely, but it felt a bit easier to breathe and think.

We made our way to the ballroom, which served as a holding room for all the acts. Fortunately, everyone was so focused on preparing that no one wanted to chat. That

was perfect because neither did I.

There was an overabundance of varying acts. A tiger was sleeping in the corner while her handler watched over, and there were different muses, jugglers, and enchanters.

Herve Chaunter and his flock muses in their fluffy, brightly colored feather costumes came in as show time grew closer. They'd likely been practicing in a large room while I tried to stretch in a tiny spot next to Soren.

Briar waved at me from across the room, and she was practically drowning in crimson feathers. They covered her chest and her hair, so I could hardly even see her. But then I saw Hereve looming behind her, speaking to Baxley Cole, who was all dressed in yellow.

I smiled and waved at Briar, and then I looked away. The moment I did, I felt Soren's hand on the small of my back, subtle but so reassuring. I wanted to lean into him, to feel his arms around me. But now was definitely not the place, even if that kind of thing wasn't forbidden.

Finally, it was mine and Soren's turn to perform. We walked out of the holding room to the main ballroom, arm-in-arm. On the dais, Queen Kriselle was on her throne, with her daughters Cosetta, Sylvetta, Flornetta, Danetta, and Anabetta on her right side, and her various other courtiers on the left. Among them, I saw my mother's eyes, but I kept my expression even and my head high.

Across from the dais, the audience formed a semicircle around the crescent-shaped stage. The floor-level attendees were comprised of the wealthy elite of Calida and whatever other citizens could buy their entry or find a way to sneak in.

Soren and I walked to the center of the stage, smiling and bowing before the royal family. Just before we parted, he whispered in my ear, "Close your eyes and

remember it's only me and you.”

I took my position in the center while Soren moved off to the side as my enchanter. I held an orange scarf in one hand and a red one in the other. They were the only bits of color in my costume, at least until I brought out the magik.

The conduction began with the sound of a raven, and then the elegy began playing. I closed my eyes and let my body move the way it knew how. I thought of Soren's hand pressed on my abdomen, and I pushed my magik out with all my might.

Soren's emotive baritone enveloped me, consuming me, so it was only his voice and the air whipping around me. The ground had disappeared beneath me, and I was twirling through the ether, dancing scarves and filling the air with glittering lights of ravens and roses.

At the decrescendo of the music, when I hit my final pose, I opened my eyes and could see the remnants of the magik crackling through the air. The crowd was staring in wonderment, but my eyes searched for Soren because he was the only opinion that really mattered to me.

He smiled at me with pride and delight as he lowered me back to the ground. Before my feet even touched the ground, the audience began to applaud.

We bowed before the Queen and her court, forcing myself to be polite even when I had an irresistible urge to run off the stage.

At last, when we were able to escape into the dark corridor away from prying eyes, I leaned back against the cold wall and let out a laugh.

“You were magnificent, Izzy,” Soren said, his eyes full of heat and energy.

“ We were magnificent,” I corrected him. “Do you think we made our ancestors happy?”

“You made everyone in the whole damn kingdom happy,” he said with a wicked smile. He moved in closer to me, and my heart pounded in exhilaration. “But no one more than me.”

He'd removed his overcoat during the conduction, so he stood sleeveless in his vest. The tattoos that covered his arms glowed faintly, and so did his eyes.

“Izzy!” Briar suddenly shouted in excitement, and I looked over to see her rounding the corner and racing toward me. “There you are!”

Soren immediately moved away from me, practically jumping back as if burned, but I don't think Briar noticed.

“What are you doing? Why aren't you waiting with the other muses?” I asked.

“We don't go on until after the tiger who jumps through the rings of fire, and she's still asleep, so we have time.” She waved it off, her wrist adornments leaving trails of tiny glittery feathers in the air. She shed them everywhere she went.

"Everyone was watching through the door, and oh my gosh, Izzy, you were so amazing!" Briar beamed at me, then looked over at Soren. "And you, too, Soren! You blew everyone away! Herve is looking nervous."

“He did go overboard on those costumes,” Soren commented.

"I can't wait until I can change out of this," she agreed with a laugh. "I should be getting back before Herve knows I'm gone. But I wanted to tell you how much I loved your conduction in case you left early. Are you staying for the after-party?"

"Um...yes. I think we might," I said because happiness was infectious, and I was still riding the high from the conduction. For a short window afterward, I felt nearly invincible.

"Yay!" Briar squealed and kissed my cheek. "See you later!"

"You want to stay later then?" Soren asked me as I watched my friend's retreating figure.

"Yes. If you don't mind," I said and looked up at him.

"Why would I mind? It sounds fun." He smirked, and he reached forward and gently rubbed his thumb across my cheek where Briar had planted a kiss. "Briar left my lipstick on your face."

After he finished wiping away the smudge, his hand lingered, cradling my face, and his eyes were the only things I could see in the darkness.

I had never wanted to kiss anyone more than I wanted to kiss him. It was a desperate need clawing out from the heat in my belly. I would've given nearly anything to feel his lips against mine at that moment.

But I was too afraid to move, too afraid that if I leaned in, he would only pull away. So I stayed frozen between him and the cold wall behind me.

"We should go," he said at length. He dropped his hand, leaving my cheek suddenly cold without his touch, and he offered me his arm so we could walk out together in a respectable fashion. "We don't want to miss the tiger perform."

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:21 am

I had never stayed until the end of a festival in Calida before because Adora had never let me. She considered it unnecessary indulgence after a certain point. That was another comfort: if Soren and I hid in the periphery long enough, Adore would leave before I had a run-in with her.

Although it did end up being harder to stick to the shadows, because people kept running up to congratulate both Soren and me. We had utilized magik and combined it with aerial acrobatics and ribbon dancing in a way that no one had really seen before. None of the parts were especially groundbreaking, but we put them all together in a spectacular, unique way.

Eventually, Soren and I managed to break away from the crowd, and we went up to the balcony, where a dozen or so folks were enjoying the show without all the madness of the floor. From there, we leaned over the railing and watched Briar outdazzle the muses during Herve's conduction, despite her cumbersome costume.

When she finished, I whistled and clapped, but the audience's enthusiasm did seem more lackluster than it had been for mine and Soren's conduction.

Queen Kriselle stood up before her throne, and everyone fell silent. Her gown was slinky and glittering, with feathers adorning the long train. She stepped off the edge of the dais, and her two eldest daughters joined her on either side – the heir apparent, Cosetta, on the right, and Sylvetta, on the left.

Both of them looked like slightly smaller, younger versions of their mother.

Cosetta wore a red gown that was a more elegant, structured version of the one that

Briar had performed in. The feathers were clearly of a higher quality, all clean and bright down her hips and into the voluminous train. Meanwhile, Sylvetta – and the three younger sisters who remained back on the dais – wore a variation of slinky, glittery, black gowns. Sylvetta's had two slits that went high up her thighs.

The obvious clash of Cosetta's gown and her sisters' didn't make sense, until I remembered that her husband, Tarian Chaunter, was the nephew of the warlock, Herve. Cosetta and Tarian had chosen to match the muses' performances instead of following the family trend.

The one area where Queen Kriselle matched all five of her daughters was in the crimson lipstick and the royal jewels they wore on their heads. As reigning monarch, Kriselle's was the largest of the tiaras, adorned with diamonds and onyx, and then they decreased in size to the tiny one on her youngest daughter, Anabetta.

"Thank you for attending and performing," Queen Krisille announced in her commanding, elegant voice. "I know our ancestors are watching over us all with great pride. Let us celebrate tonight in their honor!"

The crowd let out a cheer, even us up in the balcony. The minstrel band began to play, and the party started in earnest. Hors d'oeuvres and drinks were being passed around the main floor, and I could see Briar dancing with her sister, Dahlia. Wrenley ran over to join them, so all three were dancing together.

"Come on!" Without thinking, I grabbed Soren's hand and pulled him toward the winding stairs down to the main floor. "Let's go dance!"

This was my first time genuinely joining the revelry in Calida. My performance was behind me, Adora was gone, and I was ready to let loose and have fun.

I made my way through the crowd with Soren behind me. He let go of my hand when

we hit the main floor, moving his hand to the small of my back. I could see Briar and Wrenley laughing and having a good time.

But I never even reached them.

Baxley Cole appeared out of nowhere – despite the fact that he was well over six feet tall and wearing a costume made of bright yellow plumage – and he blocked my path.

“Isadore.” He smiled down at me, his bright blue eyes eclipsing everything else around us. “I wanted to tell you that you seemed amazing tonight.”

I couldn’t move and didn’t speak, but I felt Soren’s hand sliding around my waist to hold me protectively against him.

"Let us by. We don't have time to talk," Soren said firmly.

Baxley looked away from me, and his eyes flickered with confusion and annoyance as he eyed Soren behind him.

“You were great, too,” Baxley told him with a tight smile. “But Isadore was the real star of the show. No disrespect.”

"Move so that we can get by," Soren said, more forcefully now, and his arm around me was the only thing that kept me from trembling.

“I’m not blocking you from going anywhere,” Baxley insisted with exaggerated innocence. He gestured vaguely to either side of him, where people were crowded around so close there was no clear path. “There’s just a lot of people having a good time.”

“Right,” Soren replied, and he started leading me to the side.

“Isadore,” Baxley said, and when he grabbed my upper arm to stop me, I recoiled into Soren.

“Get your hand off her,” Soren growled. He moved deftly, sliding my body behind him, knocking Baxley’s hand free in the process, and he put himself between me and Baxley, so I had to crane my neck to see him.

“What is wrong with you?” Baxley asked, glaring up at Soren. “I only wanted to talk to her.”

“She doesn’t want to talk to you,” Soren snapped at him.

Baxley tilted his head, trying to catch me with his blue eyes, but Soren immediately moved, shielding me from him.

"Why aren't you letting her talk?" Baxley asked, his voice growing louder as he spoke. But not like he was yelling in anger; instead, he was clear and calm, like he wanted to be sure that he would be heard. "Just because you are an enchanter and she is a muse doesn't mean you get to control Isadore. She doesn't belong to you."

The noise around us had begun to soften as the crowd switched from revelry to onlookers. Soren's attention was fixed on Baxley, but the muse was playing for an audience now.

“Leave her the hell alone!” Soren yelled at Baxley, and that’s when the band fell silent.

Soren finally looked around, noticing all the faces watching us.

"Let's go," I murmured. I put my hand on Soren's elbow because I didn't want to be here a moment longer, not so close to Baxley or with all the prying eyes. All of the

earlier joy and lightness had evaporated entirely. I just wanted to get away and get out of here.

"What was that?" Baxley craned his neck around to see me, and he held his hand up to his ear like he was trying to hear me better. "Was Lady Isadore permitted to speak?"

Soren scowled, seething with barely contained rage, and he grudgingly stepped to the side, allowing me a sightline to Baxley. It would be much better if I told him off myself, even though I felt like vomiting at the thought of it.

Then suddenly, Wrenley came bursting out of the crowd, pushing xer way through with the grace and patience of an angry bull, and xe was pulling Briar along with xer.

"What is going on?" Wrenley demanded to know.

"Are you okay, Izzy?" Briar asked.

Both Briar and Wrenley had known that I had dated Baxley and that our relationship ended abruptly with his incorrect accusations of infidelity on my part. But I had never told them about how he put his hands on me and left me discarded in the dirt. I had never told anyone that before Soren.

"I'm fine," I said, but my voice was too quiet and weak. I cleared my throat and, more loudly, declared, "I am fine. But I am tired, and I want to go home."

"You deserve a rest after that conduction," Briar said brightly, trying to lighten the tension. She looped her arm through mine and announced jovially, "Let's get you somewhere nice."

"I still haven't had a chance to talk to Isadore," Baxley persisted as if anyone cared about his opinion.

Briar was leading me away while Wrenley watched from the sidelines with wary eyes. Soren remained planted where he was, glowering at Baxley.

Abruptly, Baxley's long arm bolted around Soren, and he latched onto my bare arm, his fingers digging into my flesh hard enough to bruise. I knew it was because it wasn't the first time – or even the second or the tenth – that he'd left marks on me after he'd grabbed me.

Before anyone else could do or say anything, Soren lunged at Baxley. His fist collided against Baxley's face, and because he was an enchanter, his violence was imbued with magik. A bright green light flickered through the room each time Soren punched him – once, twice, three times.

By then, Baxley's head lolled backward, but Soren's left hand was knotted in the front of Baxley's outfit, holding him up while he punched him with his right hand.

When Soren raised his arm for a fourth time, Briar said, “That’s enough.”

Soren stared down at Baxley’s bloody face, and he let out a ragged breath before dropping him to the floor.

“Nothing to see here,” Wrenley announced and held up xer hands, shooping the crowd away. “There was a little misunderstanding, but it’s over now, and we should probably get a medic to check him out.” Xe kicked at Baxley’s leg gently with xer foot.

Briar ushered me toward the exit, and the crowd slowly parted for us.

“What was the misunderstanding about?” an onlooker asked.

“Well, the unconscious fool on the floor misunderstood basic decency and thought he

could touch whoever he wanted, and he can't," Wrenley replied, and then xe gave Soren a shove with xer shoulder. "Let's go."

Briar kept her arm through mine, and we hurried to where the carriages would pick us up.

"I'm sorry about pulling you away from your fun night," I apologized to Briar and Wrenly as soon as we stepped out into the night. "You can go back in if you want. I don't want to ruin your night."

"Oh, you never ruined anything." Briar wrapped her arms around me and hugged me. "Are you okay?" I nodded, but the way her eyebrows crinkled, I knew she'd seen the pain and confusion in my face.

"You know it's never a good time until there is some bloodshed," Wrenley said, and xe watched as Soren flagged down our carriage driver with new appreciation.

"Do you want us to come over?" Briar asked, and then her eyes bounced over to Soren. "Or do you want to come over to my house? Me, you, and Wren can have a slumber party like we used to."

"No, thank you." I shook my head. "I do want to rest, and I don't want to spoil any more fun. You and Wren should head back inside."

"Are you sure?" Briar asked uncertainly.

I smiled tiredly and nodded. "Yes, I'm sure."

"Let us know if you need anything," Wrenley added. "And you were great tonight, Izzy."

“Thanks.” I smiled as I watched my friends reluctantly head back into the palace.

Soren stood with his back to me, watching for the carriage, and I walked over to join him.

“How are you?” I asked.

“Fine.” He let out a rough sigh. “I’m sorry about making a scene like that.”

“Baxley is the one who made a scene,” I corrected him.

He looked down at me. “How are you?”

"I want to cry, and I want to laugh," I admitted. "But I did like watching you knock that smug look off his face."

He smirked. “Me, too.” His hand was flexing and unflexing at his side, and I noticed blood all across his knuckles from punching Baxley.

“You’re hurt!” I gasped.

He glanced down, then shook his head. “It’s mostly his.”

"I can see that your flesh is torn and puffy around his knuckles," I said. "Let me have a look."

I reached down to take his hand, and he let me. His hand felt hot in mine, and the familiar charge whenever we touched. I used one of the satin scarves to wipe away blood, and he was right that most of the blood was from Baxley.

I slowly wrapped the scarf around his hand, and then I bent over and kissed his hand

over the satin.

“Thank you,” he murmured.

The carriage pulled around for us, and I let go of his hand and climbed in. Soren followed after, and soon, we were on the road, riding through the darkened streets to Soren’s house.

The windows were open, and it smelled like bonfires from celebrations around town. An icy wind whipped through, and I shivered.

“Are you cold?” Soren asked, and he was already slipping out of his overcoat.

I would’ve declined, but he draped it over my shoulders. His hand brushed against my arm, and he said in dismay, “You’re freezing!”

He wrapped an arm around me, pulling me close for warmth, and I rested my head against his shoulder. I closed my eyes and sunk into his arms, where I felt safe and content, no matter what else went on around us.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:21 am

The fatigue I had spoken of was not an exaggeration, and I ended up passing out in bed in the guest flat. Soren had walked me up to the door, making sure I got through the dark gardens safely. I handed him his overcoat, muttered good night, and fell on top of the bed, fully clothed.

I could've used help undoing my gown. I delighted in imagining Soren's warm, rough hands running over my icy skin as he undid the hooks, but I was too afraid to ask. If he had said no, his rejection would devastate me, and if he said yes... As much as I yearned to get lost in his arms and forget about everything else, I was afraid that if that happened, he would be devastated.

Soren had been so resolute about the boundaries of our relationship, and I didn't want to push him into something he'd regret.

More than that, I never wanted him to regret me .

So I let him leave in the night. I was too tired to fumble with my fasteners, so I fell onto the bed and into a deep slumber.

I awoke in the late morning, chilly under my blankets. The fire was nothing but embers, the wind was howling, and my dress was still so thin.

My body ached, and my mind felt sluggish. I had given my all during the conduction, and that confrontation with Baxley had taken more energy and emotion than I had to spare. But I refused to let myself think of Baxley, even when I noticed the bruises he'd left on my arm.

I hurried to clean up and pulled on a warm, long-sleeved dress. Nobody needed reminders of Baxley today.

My stomach rumbled with hunger as I stared out my window at the main house. I was ravenous and would love a cup of tea with Soren.

But Samonend was behind us, and Soren seemed to be struggling to keep me at arm's length. To protect himself – or protect me – he'd likely be sending me packing. Our professional relationship may have run its course, and he'd never allow for a romantic one, so where did that leave us?

I couldn't hide in the guest flat all day, especially not as hungry as I was. Besides that, if Soren did want me out, I wasn't doing either of us any favors by staying.

I took a deep breath, pulled my wool cloak around me, and I made my way across the gardens in a swirl of autumn leaves.

Usually, when I came in the morning, Soren would be in the kitchen, but since it was much later than normal, I wasn't surprised to find the kitchen empty.

I closed the door, practically slamming it against the gust of wind outside. It was loud enough to rattle the windows but didn't summon Soren. I took a few tentative steps into the house and called for him, but he didn't respond.

My foot crunched on something, and I noticed a scrap of paper that had blown off the countertop when the wind had blasted in through the door.

“ Had to take care of some errands. I'll be back later.”– Soren

I set it back on the counter, made myself a cup of tea, and stared out the window. My thoughts were swirling around like so many leaves in the wind.

When someone knocked on the front door of Soren's house, I almost jumped out of my skin. I actually dropped my cup of tea. The liquid was mostly gone, but the cup shattered on the floor.

As I crouched down to clean up the mess, the person at the door kept knocking. I wasn't sure if I should answer it since this wasn't my house, but I knew I didn't want to leave broken glass on the floor.

And then I heard the familiar shrill voice, "Soren Tomoleo, I will not let you keep my daughter from me any longer!"

A shard of the teacup accidentally dug into my palm, and I barely even noticed the blood pooling in my hand.

Adora was here.

I balled up my fist to stop the blood and steel my spine. Adora was still shouting and knocking, even as I opened the door.

She stood frozen mid-knock, her eyes wide with surprise when she saw me standing there. When she ran at me, I flinched, expecting a slap, but instead, she hugged me, throwing her long arms around me. Before I could react, she pressed me into her thick fur cloaks, almost smothering me in them.

"Oh, thank the Matronae, you are all right!" Adora sobbed into my ear.

I untangled myself from her. "Of course I am."

I wasn't sure how Soren would feel about her being in his house, but I didn't feel right about throwing her out, either. Especially if she really was concerned.

“You saw me perform last night,” I reminded her.

"I know, but I left before that horrible incident with Soren and Lord Baxley Cole." Adora used his full title with reverence, and I felt the bile rise in my throat. "The Calida Post called it a bloodbath!"

“The newspaper reported it?” I asked, aghast.

“Only a few lines, but yes,” Adora said. “But I learned even more talking at the market this morning. Everyone is so worried about that violent man taking you hostage!”

“I’m not held hostage, and you know it,” I told her sharply. “You’re the one who kicked me out.”

She looked wounded by accusations of the truth. “I assumed you would stay with Briar or Wrenley, somewhere safe. I never imagined that you would shack up with the exact kind of enchanter I had always warned you about.”

“We are not shackled up together!” I bristled. “I am staying in the guest flat out back in the gardens.”

“Then why do you look so comfortably lounging around his house?” Adora shot back. “Or is he having you be his maid?”

“I was making myself a cup of tea. There is no kitchen in the flat,” I explained.

"Hmpff," Adora huffed as if she didn't believe me. "It is no matter really because the damage has been done. After what everyone witnessed at Samonend last night, it's clear that Soren has become far too possessive and controlling of you."

I shook my head. “He’s neither of those things. He was defending me last night.”

“From Lord Baxley?” she asked with a dubious eyebrow. “That boy is a kitten, but he is only a small part of the issues. Many eyewitnesses say that Soren has been incredibly inappropriate with you, Isadore, and magik charges are being brought.”

My heart stopped. “What ?”

“Where is he, by the way?” Adora suddenly began looking around, her prying eyes taking in every detail of his sparsely decorated home. “Do I need to worry about Soren putting his hands on me?” She asked it in a lilting voice, like it was a humorous joke.

“He’s not home,” I replied, but I was still reeling from what she’d said about magik charges. “What... what eyewitnesses?”

“You mean besides a ballroom full of people?” she asked, all sarcasm and honey. “The Crown Princess, Lord Baxley, Warlock Herve, King Marcel – ”

“King Marcel?” I cut her off in my surprise. “From the Kingdom of Sudamon? I haven’t seen him since this past summer at the Ashoraldia festival.”

“Well, he had eyes even way back then, so he must’ve seen something ,” Adora replied with a smug smile.

“You weren’t concerned about me at all,” I realized, and a sick feeling twisted in my stomach. “You came here to gloat.”

“What reason would I possibly have to gloat, Isadore? You are my daughter, and I only want what’s best for you.”

“You have never known what’s best for me,” I snapped. “I think you should go now.”

Her smile faltered. “I’m not leaving without you. You can’t stay here if magik charges are brought against Soren.”

"Where I stay is no longer your concern," I reminded her coolly.

Adora gaped at me in shock for a moment, then she hurried to correct course. "Isadore, be reasonable. If you care about Soren at all, you truly cannot stay here any longer. It will only make him appear even guiltier before the Tribunal."

"Then I will find somewhere else to stay," I said, hating that she might have a point. "None of that is of your concern. I'm a grown woman, and I am a muse. Go back home, and let me sort it out myself."

She seemed too flabbergasted to respond, so I seized the moment to usher her out before she had her wits about her.

“Isadore,” she argued weakly, but I just opened the front door and motioned for her to go. “It doesn’t need to be this way.”

“Maybe not, but it is this way.”

My mother seemed to want to say more. I could almost see her biting her tongue behind her carnation pink lipstick. But she pulled her plush fur coat more tightly around her and stepped out into the wind.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:21 am

By the time Soren got home late that afternoon, I had nearly worked myself into a panic. I cleaned up the mess in the kitchen, and then I paced a circle in front of the hearth.

Soren opened the front door, and I froze in place. I was so still, he didn't even notice me right away. He slipped off his jacket, and then his hand went to the back of his neck – where his hair stood up, same as mine when he was near – and he finally glanced around the room and spotted me.

“Good afternoon, Izzy,” he said with an unreadable expression.

“Good afternoon, Soren,” I replied, clipped and polite, and my hands were clasped in front of my abdomen. “How were your errands?”

“They were fine.” But he wouldn't look at me as he said it.

“Adora stopped by,” I blurted out, and his head snapped up.

"She did?" He glanced around as if she was hiding somewhere in the room with us.
"Are you okay?"

"Yes. She didn't come here for me, not really. At least not to help me. She wanted to gloat about the rumors that you're being brought before the Tribunal."

He licked his lips and kept avoiding my gaze. “It is no rumor. Queen Kriselle has summoned me to appear before the Tribunal.”

I gasped. “You’ve already been charged?”

He walked over to a chair and gripped the back of it with his hands, leaning against it while his head sagged. “The arraignment will be in a few days. The official charges will come down then.”

“But you haven’t done anything wrong!” I rushed over to him in a panic, as if my protests could somehow undo what had already been done. “You were only protecting me from Baxley! I’ll tell them how he kept bothering me, and you did what you had to so that we could leave. Neither of us went into the ballroom looking for trouble.”

“I didn’t have to hit him three times,” he said quietly. He let go of the chair and took a few steps away, putting more space between us again. “It’s not about Baxley. They’re unhappy about that, but that’s not the crux of the Magik Tribunal’s issues with me.”

“Then... then what is the issue?” I asked, but my racing heart feared I already knew the truth.

“The Princesses Cosetta and Sylvetta saw us practicing in the ballroom,” he reminded me brusquely.

“But we weren’t doing anything,” I argued weakly, but the look he cast me was enough to make my skin flush. I could still feel his lips brushing against my neck, his arms wrapped around me, and there was no denying it.

“And she’s not the only one,” Soren went on grimly. “The King of Sudamon saw us kiss during the Ashoralida.”

“That was months ago! Why is he saying something about it now?” I asked.

"I don't know." He gave a glum shake of his head and collapsed back into a chair on the far side of the room. "Maybe because the Tribunal started the inquisition, and others were coming forward."

"Others?" I asked. "We've only kissed a few times! How can there be so many witnesses?"

"Most of it is just rumors that my sister heard about. But I am certain of four names: Cosetta, Sylvetta, King Marcel, and Adora."

"My mother?" I asked, and it hurt even if it wasn't a surprise.

Then, I took a fortifying breath and strengthened my resolve. I stepped closer to him. "What can we do? You spoke with Serena. Does she have any ideas on how to fight this?"

He shook his head, defeated. "There is no fighting this."

"But you haven't hurt anyone, and I'll speak on your defense," I insisted.

"The Regula makes it explicitly clear what the boundaries are supposed to be between enchanter and muse."

"We've abided by them as much as we could," I persisted. "We used restraint and only slipped up a few times."

"The fact that I had to use restraint is the issue!" Soren argued. "I was supposed to sever our relationship the moment those feelings came up."

"Can't we say they just came up and sever now?" I asked hopefully, as if cutting Soren out of my life was preferable.

"I'm not permitted to lie at the Tribunal," he reminded me with exasperation.

The Magik Tribunal cloaked the accused in a truth spell so they were physically incapable of lying. No matter what was asked of him, Soren was compelled to be honest during his arraignment.

His voice was low when he said, "They're going to ask me if I'm in love with you and if... if I have a physical desire for you." He hung his head in shame. "I won't be able to lie, Izzy."

Had Soren just confessed that he was in love with me? It was a dizzying realization, compounded by the fact this might be the ruin of us both.

"There's no fighting this," he repeated in sad resignation.

"You're right. There's no point in fighting any of this anymore." I put my hand tentatively on his shoulder, and he lifted his head and looked up at me with his dark eyes full of conflicted desire.

Without saying anything, he put an arm around my waist and gently pulled me onto his lap. I slid my arm around his neck, and one of his hands went to my thigh, gripping it through the fabric of my dress.

I stared into his beautiful eyes. I ran my hand along his jawline and brushed my thumb over his full lips. "I'm sorry for complicating your life so much."

He smiled crookedly. "Don't ever apologize for coming into my life. It's infinitely more full with you in it, and regardless of how this turns out, I'm so happy to know you."

"I love you, Soren." I pressed my lips to his before he could say anything more.

His hand moved up my back, pressing me against him, and then he threaded his fingers into my hair to pull me in more deeply for the kiss.

I slid my hand down his chest, finding his bare skin and feeling his pulse thrumming underneath my palm.

“We should slow down,” he murmured against my mouth, but he held me against him, and his hand gripping my thigh had started pulling up the length of my skirt.

“Why?” I asked him, honest and desperate.

I felt his laugh before I heard it – the warm rumbling in his chest – and I felt the smile on his lips as we kissed.

“Because we don’t know what we’re doing,” he argued huskily between kisses. “I don’t want to ruin your reputation.”

But his hand was still bunching up my skirt, and the air chilled my exposed leg. He'd finally moved it enough so his hand connected with my bare thigh. He gripped me desperately and kissed me ferociously.

“Isadore .” My name on his lips like a prayer, and I was filled with a desire so intense and demanding, I was afraid that I might die if I didn’t satiate the aching heat inside me.

As my fervor only rose, he suddenly went still. His hand released my thigh, and when I stopped kissing him, his hand went to my face, cradling it as he looked into me with his smoldering eyes.

“I can’t,” he said. “I want you so much I can hardly breathe. But not like this. I won’t bring you down with me.”

“Does it matter that I want to go where you go, even if it’s ruination?” I asked.

"It means something to me," he admitted with a sad smile. "But I wouldn't be worthy of being with you if I was willing to let you do that."

“What are you saying, Soren?” I asked, and tears were already forming in my eyes.

“That I am completely, irrevocably in love with you, Izzy, and I think I started falling in love with you the very moment I met you. But –”

I closed my eyes and felt a tear sliding down my cheek.

“– I can’t be with you until this is all sorted,” he went on. “I can’t risk hurting you more than I already have.”

He wiped away my tears, and he pulled me into his chest. He held me close and kissed the top of my head.

“I am sorry it has to be this way,” he murmured into my hair.

I squeezed my eyes shut, relishing the safety of his arms and the sound of his heartbeat in my ear. “Where do we go from here?”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:21 am

It was sleeting when I arrived on the doorstep of Wrenley's family estate Warwick Hall with my luggage in tow. A butler opened the door, but Wrenley was immediately there, sending him away so he could see me in herself.

"Welcome home, Lady Isadore," Wrenley greeted me with a crooked smile and opened the door wider.

"Thank you so much for letting me stay with you," I told her for the tenth time since she'd agreed to take me in.

"We have a whole wing of guestrooms." He waved me off and readjusted the suspenders of her wide-leg trousers. "No one would even know you were here if I didn't tell them."

"Well, thank you all the same," I said, and he rolled her eyes.

He sent the butler to my room with my luggage and she told him to air out the room.

"I don't think that's necessary," I tried to decline, but Wrenly took my hand and tugged me in the other direction.

"Enough fussing about everyone else. Bri's waiting in the parlor, and we all need to talk about what's happening with each other."

"Briar's here?" I asked, letting her lead me through the house.

"She heard what was going on with you, and there was no way she could stay away,"

Wrenley explained.

Before Wrenley's mother Eva married and began having children, she – like most other muses – retired from musing. Pregnancy, infancy, and children required so much energy and magik they didn't have enough left for conductions. But – again, like most other muses – Eva still needed a creative outlet, so she had turned to design and art.

This was very evident as I walked through Wrenley's house. It was dramatically styled with pastel colors and whimsical art pieces. The corridor walls were papered with elegant designs of flowers and rabbits.

The sitting parlor had walls of powder blue marked with white moldings. The chairs and sofas were plush but elegant, and bouquets of pale roses, in vases here and there, perfumed the room.

Briar was sitting on one of the sofas, her knees folded beneath her and her empire-waisted dress flowing around her. A book was open on her lap, and she toyed absently with her honey-colored hair as she read it.

“Have you found anything yet?” Wrenley asked, and xe flopped on the chaise across from her.

"Not yet," Briar replied sadly, smiling up at me. "Izzy! How are you?"

“My entire life has been turned upside down, and I am heartbroken,” I told her honestly.

“Oh, love, I'm sorry you're going through this.” She patted the spot next to her. “Come sit with me.”

When I complied, she set aside the book, and I noticed the embossed R on the front. It was the Regula, the book of laws and procedures regarding magik all across Wespen.

"Mostly, I just feel so guilty and sad and confused," I said. Briar put her arm around me, and I rested my head on her shoulder.

"It's a sad and confusing situation, but we'll sort it all out," she insisted optimistically.

"You keep saying that, but we haven't found anything to help me with Asmond," Wrenley grumbled.

"Have you heard anything from him?" I asked.

Things had been so intense with me lately, I hadn't had much time to check in with xer and see if xe'd made any progress with xer romance with Asmond, the King of Lamida.

"His advisors want him to meet a few 'more appropriate' spousal options." Wrenley smirked to mask xer hurt. "Asmond insists that he has the final say on who he marries, and he'll just keep saying no to all of them until eventually they let him marry me so we can hurry up and make some heirs."

"That sounds like a plan," Briar said, so full of cheer and optimism.

"Izzy and I are in the midst of a perfectly indulgent pity party, and Bri's still at a summer picnic," Wrenley teased.

"Just because life is often cruel and sour does not mean we need to be. That's what Papa always said," Briar declared, unabashed. "The storm will rage, but we dance on

anyway is what Dada says. So I try to be kind and keep moving onward."

"That's not a bad way to live," Wrenley allowed. "But have you tried smithing your enemies?"

"What enemy would you even be smiting?" Briar asked. "Royal bureaucracy? Classism? Both seem kind of strange when you hope to be a monarch of Lamida after only spending three weeks there."

"Oh, wow, Bri, kick me while I'm down." Xe pretended to be wounded, but xe actually looked impressed.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Briar's cheeks reddened with shame. "I didn't mean to be harsh."

"No, I know I shouldn't be wallowing and that Asmond and I still have so much to figure out." Wrenley sighed. "I wish we could just say 'the heart what the heart wants' and be free to marry as we wish."

"Monarchies and magickal tribunals never care anything about love," I said sullenly.

"Usually, Tribunals won't involve themselves with matters of love at all," Briar said. "They even have a whole doctrine about it."

I straightened up when I remembered the words that Adora made me read over and over again as a child. Every time I misbehaved, Adora would set me at a desk with a copy of the Regula, and she would make me copy whole pages in my perfect calligraphy. Mostly, she chose sections that focused on obedience and service, but other times, she'd have me run straight through. And suddenly, a passage sprung into my mind.

"The Doctrine of the Heart's True Course," I said.

“That’s night. It says we can’t do love spells to make someone either fall in love or out of love with anyone else,” Briar said.

Wrenley sat up. “No, that’s not exactly what it says. That’s the interpretation, maybe even the intent, but those are not the actual words?”

Briar looked between Wrenley and me, her blue eyes narrowing in confusion. “What are you two thinking?”

Wrenly grabbed the Regula and hurriedly flipped through it, searching for the right passage. Then xe sat on the sofa, squishing between me and Briar.

"What do you think?" Xe pointed to a section labeled The Doctrine of the Heart’s True Course . “Does any of this pertain to your situation, Izzy?”

I let out a shaky, hopeful breath. “I hope so.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:21 am

The royal palace of Calida was divided into three wings: the center for ceremonial duties with the throne room and various ballrooms and dining halls, the west wing for the private quarters of the royal family, and the east wing for the civil duties with offices, courts, jail cells, and tribunals. Until Soren's arraignment, I had only been to the ceremonial areas, and the east wing was different than I imagined.

The exterior was the same as the rest of the palace. With beautiful stone carved into ornate moldings, it had the same austere appearance as classical architecture from the Golden Age of Wespen, when the kingdoms had been founded and the Regula had been written.

Despite that, the interior of the civil wing was much more modern and imposing. The walls were covered in slick black marble, and the floor was made of iridescent tiles in a mosaic of arcane symbols. It reminded me of Herve Chaunter's private studio, which did little to ease my nerves.

The arraignment hall itself was a large room with a dais at the north end and a gallery of seats at the other. A half-wall made of raw-edged obsidian separated the two, and a large empty space in the center was where arguments would be made.

On the dais were nine chairs, with the largest in the center – presumably the Queen's – and four chairs flanking either side. Those were the seats of the tribunal.

I was sitting in the gallery with Regula on my lap, and Briar and Wrenley were on either side of me. We weren't the only ones here, though. A surprisingly large amount of the seats were taken by strangers, but there were plenty of faces I did recognize.

One of Briar's fathers, Adlar Floreo, sat beside Wrenley's parents, Robyn and Eva Pavone. Jessalyn – the primamusa I'd met at the Ashoralida – was sitting beside a bearded man, and based on the sigils on his outfit, I surmised he was an emissary for the King of Sudamon. Soren had told me that King Marcel was to be a witness, but he was still a reigning monarch, so sending an emissary to witness in his place wasn't uncommon.

I recognized a few heralds and courtiers in attendance, but the only notable others I saw were my mother, Adora, and our housekeeper, Heloise. Adora must have brought her for emotional support.

The double doors at the entrance opened as the final gallery members arrived. Queen Krislle's four youngest daughters—Sylvetta, Flornetta, Danetta, and Anabetta—walked in a single file line. All of them were wearing simple black sheath dresses, with their long black hair laying straight under simple, jewel-encrusted tiaras.

Following up behind them were the Queen's sons-in-law. They all took their seats in the front row, with Sylvetta between her sister's husband, Tarian Chaunter, and her own husband, Raiment Cole.

As soon as they were seated, a herald told us to rise as the tribunal came out in order of least prestigious to most.

Edwing Harrigan, a handsome Lord in his mid-20s and one of the most popular mages working today

Adelheid Collis, a beautiful Lady in her late 40s who successfully returned to musing after having children

Vorden Calix, an esteemed, elderly Lord and revered enchanter, and he was also Briar's and Wrenley's great-uncle

Basil Floreo, a prominent Duke with good connections, and he was also one of Briar's fathers

Eliette Coteau, an elegant Duchess in middle-age and a close friend to the Queen

Fannie Danotta, a warlock in her mid-30s who, was the most influential female Warlock in Calida

Herve Chaunter, the cruel Warlock to the Queen, was a man in his mid-60s and likely hated me

Cosetta, the Crown Princess and eldest daughter to the Queen, and she was also a witness to Soren's behavior

Kriselle, the Queen who also served as the magistrate and final say in all things relating to the Magik Tribunal

Everyone on the tribunal wore simple black clothing, with Cosetta wearing the exact same dress and tiara as her younger sisters seated in the gallery. The Queen's dress was similar, except it had long sleeves and a more voluminous skirt. On her head, Kriselle wore a unique halo crown with silvery protrusions poking out from around her head like sun rays.

Once everyone was seated, Kriselle sat with her hands on the arms of the throne. Staring straight ahead, she announced, "Bring in the accused."

The entrance opened again, and everyone in the gallery turned to watch Soren stride into the court with his head held high. He looked handsome and unflappable, and I wish I was half as brave and bold as him. My mouth was dry, my heart was racing, and my stomach was twisting.

His sister followed behind since she'd been waiting with him, and she marched in the

same way he did. The Tomoleos had more confidence and swagger than most.

Neither Soren nor Serena looked at me as they walked past, and Serena stopped and sat in the front row across the aisle from the Princesses.

As Soren passed through the gate in the obsidian half-wall from the gallery into the court, the air seemed to ripple slightly. That was the magik that would compel him to tell the truth, and it also prevented him from being able to channel dangerous magik to hurt anyone in the court.

“Soren Tomoleo,” Kriselle said, her voice sounding unusually ominous and booming. “You have been called before the Magik Tribunal because you have been accused of breaking the 11th tenet of the Enchanters’ Oath from the Regula.”

The herald stepped forward with a scroll in hand, and he unrolled it and read the pertinent section aloud: The enchanter, enchantrix, or enchantress, once upon being accepted into service to their kingdom and their tribunal, will forfeit all physical, romantic, or sexual relationships or activity with any and all muses, regardless of age, gender, orientation, or subordination. If an enchanter, enchantrix, or enchantress engages in any such practice, they should be immediately stripped of their title and banished from service across all the kingdoms of Wespen forever. The muse may also be deemed unfit, and he, xe, or she can be stripped of their titles and banished from service across all the kingdoms of Wespen.”

None of that sounded like a death sentence, but for a muse and enchanter, it might as well be—especially ones like Soren and me, who didn't have much in the way of inherited wealth.

Being unable to serve the kingdoms meant being severed from magik. That in and of itself was described as an unparalleled agony and heartbreak by those who have experienced it.

Without magik, I would have no way to bring in coins. How could I support myself without skills or education and carrying around a tarnished name?

"Soren of House Tomoleo, you have been accused of being romantically involved with a muse under your charge," the Queen said. "In addition, there are allegations that you have not allowed others access to this muse and that you have been attempting to keep her to yourself. I do not prejudge any accused, but it is harder to keep objectivity when my daughter is one of the witnesses against you."

"I saw the accused kissing his muse the day before he assaulted Lord Baxley of House Cole for talking to her," Cosetta added, and the Queen held up her hand to silence her.

"There will be time for that testimony later," Kriselle said. "Right now is the chance for the accused to speak. What do you have to say about these charges, Soren?"

"I have never prevented any muse from performing in a conduction with anyone else," Soren said. "That claim is patently false. I enjoyed working with Lady Isadore of House Dellamousa and want to work with her because she is talented. However, she is free to perform with whoever she pleases whenever she pleases."

"So you deny the charges?" Kriselle asked.

"Not all of the charges, but that particular one about not permitting Isadore to work with others," Soren clarified. "That part is not true. But the rest of it, that is true."

There were gasps and murmurs in the court, and I even saw Adora snicker. I stayed still, and Briar squeezed my hand.

"You are admitting that you have broken the tenets of the Enchanters' Oath?" Kriselle asked, and though she generally tried to keep her expression unreadable, she didn't seem to even try to hide her surprise.

“Yes,” he said, louder this time, and even more rumblings came from the gallery until Kriselle silenced them again.

“Elaborate, Soren,” Kriselle commanded.

“The first time Isadore and I kissed was at the Ashoralida, when my emotions got the better of me, but I was already falling in love with her before then,” Soren explained. “I also kissed Isadore before the Samonend, the incident that Princess Cosetta referenced. I assume any other witnesses you call will allege they saw something romantic happening with Isadore and myself, and they are likely telling the truth.”

“Why are you admitting to all this when you know the punishment awaiting you?” Kriselle asked, trying to understand his confession.

“For the same reason that I could not resist her, even knowing what the punishment would be: because I love Isadore,” he said simply.

I jumped to my feet, my heart hammering in my chest, and I loudly declared, “And I love Soren.”

There was more chattering from the gallery, but this time, I only focused on Soren. He smiled back over his shoulder at me, and suddenly, I wasn't so afraid. Even if this didn't work, if we were both severed and banished, we would still have each other.

“Quiet!” Kriselle shouted, sounding irritated, and everyone was quick to comply. “No outbursts are allowed from the gallery, especially irrelevant ones. Now, to continue with the matter at hand. The accused has entered no defense –”

“Pardon, sorry, Your Majesty,” Soren interrupted. “I do have a defense.”

“Since you have not denied the majority of the charges, what exactly would your defense be?” the Queen asked.

“It is as I already said. True love .” He motioned back to where I stood in the gallery, holding the Regula. “Do you mind if I grab a book? It’s the Regula, and it is my only evidence.”

“Fine,” Kriselle said.

He rushed over to take the book from me. I passed it across the obsidian wall, and he flipped to the page we'd marked. He carried it over to the herald.

"Would you be so kind as to read these passages aloud?" Soren asked the herald.

Magik can never create love, destroy love, or otherwise stand in the way of true love. For the purposes of the Regula de Magik, true love is defined as an unwavering, unbreakable, and undeniable devotion to another that is more profound than mere attraction or friendship.

When the herald finished reading, Cosetta’s expression had turned into a sour pucker. In fact, there were a few frowns on the tribunal.

“That doctrine was meant to forbid love potions and the like,” Herve tried to wave it off.

“No, that’s what you think it means.” Fannie – the other warlock on the tribunal – interjected. “What it actually says is that magik, and by extension the tribunal, are not to interfere with true love.”

“I always liked that Doctrine,” Adelheid commented, smiling.

“Come now!” Herve blustered. “You know that cannot be what the Regula writers meant!”

"We don't know what the writers' intentions were because they have been dead for

over two hundred years," Basil Floreo said. He'd been sitting silently, watching it unfold with the same clever blue eyes that Briar had. "We were appointed to the tribunal because of our experience and knowledge so that we can interpret the words of the Regula. It's preposterous to pretend that the written word exists so perfectly that no interpretation is needed when you are on a tribunal to do exactly that."

"Love has always seemed to have its own sort of alchemy, and it is a type of natural phenomena much like magik or gravity," Edwing Harrigan said. He leaned back in his chair, one leg crossed over the other, looking regal and aloof. "But unlike most other phenomena – excluding perhaps death – the Regula specifically forbids interference with love. That says something in and of itself."

"How did the tenet even make it into the Enchanter's Oath if it contradicts the Doctrine in the Regula?" Cosetta asked in growing exasperation.

"The Enchanter's Oath was only added 75 years ago because of some... incidents in the kingdoms," Basil explained. "I would surmise that this is the first time that true love has been brought as a challenge."

"A physical relationship can be forbidden between an enchanter and a muse if it's one based on mild affection down to pure hatred," Fannie the warlock clarified her position. "It is only true love that we cannot interfere with."

"It seems that what this all comes down to then, is how do we determine if this is true love or a ploy to avoid your punishment?" Kriselle asked.

"Because I cannot lie in the tribunal." Soren motioned around to the magik in the ether that bound him to the truth. "My feelings for Isadore have only grown since we met, and I risked everything just to kiss her. I love her with all that I am, and no matter what you decide here today, I plan to spend the rest of my life with her. If she'll have me."

"I will!" I shouted because I couldn't stay silent any longer, and my heart felt as if it might burst.

Soren had been facing the dais, but he smiled back at me.

"Was that a proposal?" Briar asked.

Soren turned to face me fully, and his smile suddenly turned uncertain. "I hadn't planned on doing it today, or this way, with everything, and without a ring... but here we are." He took a deep breath. "Izzy, will you marry me?"

"Yes!" I answered without hesitation, leaping over the wall and running to him. He caught me in his open arms and held me to him.

"Stop this!" Adora suddenly shrieked. "This is a travesty, and someone has to stop this! Your Majesty! You can't let her throw her life away on slime like him!"

"Enough!" Kriselle shouted. "There will be no more outbursts from the gallery. Isadore, you may stand with Soren because I am ready to pass judgment on you both."

The room was utterly silent as the Queen appeared to deliberate, and Soren's pinkie hooked through mine as we stood in judgment.

"The Doctrine was written far before the Enchanters' Oath, and as such, it is the superseding law of the land," she said. "Soren of House Tomoleo and Isadore of House Dellamousa, you have been found to have true love. The tribunal gives our blessing on your upcoming union and wish you a happily ever after."

Wrenley and Briar cheered and clapped, and I dimly heard Adora crying. But for a moment, I blocked it all out and kissed Soren.