

Carol stood. Her legs were haunched now like a wolf's, but she seemed to have gained enough extra height that it didn't change the elevation of her eyes. She realized belatedly just how...*much* she had changed. She cast her eyes down over herself: soft, fluffy fur, a beautiful silvery greyish white color, with a poofy tail...she felt her ears twitching. They could do that now, apparently. She examined her hands. The magical words had taken the form of glowing patches of fur now. The fronts of her hands had paw pads, and instead of nails she came with claws. Experimentally, she tried to flex her fingers to see if those claws were retractable. As it turned out, they were not.

"So..." Carol asked, her voice wispy with disbelief, "I'm your pet now, I guess?" The blond shrugged and chuckled. He had a powerful, easygoing confidence in his eyes that wasn't unlike that of Carol's owner, but the familiar was confident that it looked better on Maria.

"Hell if I know," said the blond dismissively, "You're not *my* anything, you're Maria's." He looked around for a little while and seemed perplexed that he wasn't finding whatever he was trying to. "Question: where did the Sunflower Widow go?"

"Could have gone anywhere," Carol answered honestly. "Nobody's really sure where they eat or sleep. They're just...kind of there. They give me the creeps, honestly. I try to give them space."

"Interesting," muttered the boy. He started walking towards the exit. Carol scurried after him and her heart- as well as her thoughts- raced.

"Wait up!" She pleaded with him. "I...who and what are you? What do I call you?" That seemed to get his attention. He stopped and stood still for a moment, facing away from her. He sighed heavily and turned to face Carol. Again, he shrugged.

"I don't really...have a name, honestly. I've never interacted with anyone besides Maria before...outside of a physical scrap or something, anyway. You can call me whatever you like."

"No," insisted Carol. "No, I can't do that! You're...I think you and her are equals? You're certainly more equal to her than I am, so- please, give me a name!"

"Why would I do that?" He teased with a shit-eating grin. "I'm not your owner. If anybody gets to give you a new name, then it's not me. It's Maria. Ask her for a name, if you must."

"No, I meant a name to call YOU!" Whined Carol. Her whimpering sounded much more like a saddened dog than she thought her vocal cords should have been capable of. "Please, I want to be able to call you by name. You don't need to tell me *yours*, if that would be demeaning, but give me something to call you!" He tilted his head. Pity and affection waltzed across his face. He eventually sighed.

"Fine, just...call me Prince, if you must. That's a serviceable name, I suppose. Prince Knight, in full."

"Prince...Night...?" Repeated a skeptical Carol. "That...you know that sounds really close to-"

"I'm well aware, sweet little lapdog," said Prince with a playful sneer. "After all, the runes on my hand designate that beneath the regal facade I'm naught but a devil, no? Prince of Darkness, at your service." The boy performed an elaborate bow, complete with a broad sweeping motion performed with one arm. When he stood back up it was with a toothy grin. "But I suppose you probably want to spend more time with your new owner?"

"I..." Carol looked down and away. She didn't want to mistreat the boy who had intervened in the duel, saving both Carol and her owner. She owed Prince perhaps even more than she owed Maria, something she wasn't yet ready to try and grapple with. "If...that's okay with you."

"It is, my fluffy mademoiselle," snarked Prince. His hair turned pink and grew longer, his face softened, the rich red of his eyes gave way to a much softer blue. In an instant her owner had returned to her. Carol's heart soared and she felt a pounding wave of majesty radiating from her owner like the glorious light of morning. Carol dropped in deference to all fours, something that her new body made...extremely comfortable. Her tail, not that she was telling it to, swung rapidly back and forth with delight. Her face felt warm, her heart felt warm, everything was gold and red and sunny.

"Mistresssssss," Carol gr- moa- sai- whimpered. Her ears stood straight up with happiness. This was her *owner*. All of her insecurities fell away like scabs peeled away by the gentlest healing spell ever cast by a human tongue. She felt *right*. She felt *wanted*. Even looking at her mistress felt like being curled up on a warm rock on a sunny day and winding down for a long comfy snooze. Everything was going to be alright. She didn't need to worry about being good enough, or being abandoned, or making her owner look bad and incurring their wrath.

Carol fought the urge to crawl forward and bury her fa...her fac...her snout in the soft skin draped around her leg. She didn't have permission to touch her, and while Maria clearly didn't require it- not for things like holding her to help withstand getting caught in the thrall of a powerful emotional fit, at least- Carol nevertheless decided to require it of herself anyway. She couldn't ask for it, though, that would be imposing herself-

"WHO'S A GOOD GIRL!?" Maria squealed, kneeling next to Carol and throwing her arms around the pet's shoulders. Carol's owner yanked Carol into a soft and loving embrace, the kind which she hadn't EVER felt in the lengths that her memory was able to reach. Her mistress' arms were soft and comfortable, and being cradled in them was like being in a safe cocoon of love and affection. Carol's tail began swishing with such force that it started to make noise. Utter, mind-melting *euphoria* exploded through her brain and rushed across every inch of her body until each and every last nerve became supercharged with electric bliss. Maria started petting and nuzzling Carol's snout and ears with manic joy. Carol yipped happily and nuzzled back in. Her entire body vibrated with enthusiasm.

Unfortunately, their play had to be cut short. An ominous bell rang out from somewhere on the campus, and its chilling reverberations sliced into Maria and Carol alike. They froze and listened silently to its chimes, which carried with them a chill not unlike the sensation of suddenly realizing one was in mortal peril. A voice hissed magically into both of their heads.

*"All first-year members of the student body are expected to gather in front of the Telltale Tree in one hour! Failure to do so will carry with it grave consequences!"*

"The...Telltale Tree?" Asked Maria, confused. "What's...that?"

"You don't know what-" Carol felt a pit in her stomach. Right, Maria had absolutely no clue how even the most basic fundamentals of *magic* worked. This school's specific bullshit and complexities, then, would all be news to her. It was only logical to conclude from there that it would be her job to explain them to her Mistress. She was...useful! "My apologies Mistress! The Telltale Tree is a big apple tree in the center of campus." Carol trotted in a circle around Maria as an emotion she didn't recognize warmed her. "Come on, I can lead you there!" This got her an affectionate giggle from Maria, which set her tail wagging furiously again.

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Maria walked with a skip in her step. Carol was in front of her, leading the way on all fours. Lots of students seemed to drop what they were doing to stare, to gawk, to whisper. None of the attention was positive. It was not hard for her to tell. Now, the jeers and whispers of the upper crust were not, to Maria, remotely new or unfamiliar. She was well acquainted with the gaze of those who looked down on her, and she had mostly learned how to take them in stride. What pierced her skin, though, was when those same sorts of comments were employed to disparage Carol.

"Imagine getting owned by a first year," snickered a girl in a green vest. "And, GOD-she made the poor girl a fucking furry, too! Can you *imagine* how humiliating that must be!?"

"Oh my god!" Cackled another at the sight of Carol. He whipped out a camera and took multiple photographs of her.

That was...the general tone. Carol was trying not to show it, but the old fervor of her movements had ceased. Her tail swished back and forth still, but it was a mechanical motion, one her brain was consciously performing. To Maria, the difference was stark, bright as day, clear as crystal. She could feel Carol's new warmth being depleted, and to feel that filled her with indignant rage. She wanted to grab these jerks by the shoulders! Knock them around!

*Dry them in the sun and break them to pieces!*

Maria had to bite down the urge to scold her partner for that one. It did almost make her laugh, though, which helped shake her from her emotional retreat a little bit. She accelerated just enough to be walking side by side with Carol and extended a hand downwards for the wolf girl to take in her own. It seemed to Maria like she could use a little bit of having her hand held. Almost stubbornly, Carol stayed on all fours. She drifted sideways slightly, closer to Maria, and seemed to take comfort enough in that. Maria decided to accept it and the two kept walking in spite of the constant looks and unkind words. They weren't walking long when they got there.

"That's the Telltale Tree," Carol said in a plain voice. She sat up like a cat and pointed her eyes at a giant ashen-grey tree that seemed to be impossibly wide. Its branches were many, as were the dents and holes in its bark. Maria had noticed that the school's campus was huge already, but this still boggled her mind. To have such a massive thing there, and not even visible from everywhere on the site...!

"Second tallest thing on the campus," Carol elaborated, "after the headmistress' tower."

"The headmistress has...a tower?"

"Yes. Wizards have towers. Haven't you ever heard a story?" Oh, Maria thought as she chuckled and her face turned bright red, that made sense. Of course the headmistress lived in a tower.

Other first-years started to file in. They stood aimlessly about and chattered amongst themselves, many forming into friend groups that were likely pre-existing from their outside lives. None of them seemed interested in Maria, though Carol continued to garner strange looks. The hour's conclusion drew closer and Maria started trying to find people to talk to. None of her efforts bore any fruit. She could feel Carol grow frustrated at seeing her peers snub her-

*Good Carol!*

Carol perked up and made a happy expression. Wait-

"You could hear that!?" Maria crouched next to Carol and took a seat.

"Uh, yeah. Even inexperienced mages and their familiars can speak over short distances without having to talk out loud."

"But- but that-"

"It was Prince, not you. I could tell."

Prince?

Oh, he picked out a name!

Maria's heart swelled with pride!

Prince!

"Oh-okay! Neat!"

"Buuuuut, to be able to do it with absolutely *zero* experience, tools or training whatsoever means one of two things," said Carol as she proudly puffed out her chest. "You're either *EXTREMELY* innately powerful or SUUUUUUPER in synch with me!" Carol was practically glowing, such were the positive emotions with which she overflowed. Maria smiled wide.

"Aw, you're-"

Something caught Carol's attention and she snapped to face it. Maria jumped to her feet and so did every other first-year who had taken a seat.

The headmistress was here.

And she brought a panther.

She stood straight in front of the tree, her skin almost porcelain white in stark contrast to the gold of her eyes, the black of her hair and clothes, and the long, bright, bloodred nails that adorned each of her fingers. A big tricorn hat cast shade over her tall, toned body and a matching coat-dress covered her head to toe. She had a noticeable bust, thick lips even redder than her nails. In one hand she drummed her nails, which were long and thick and bright, on an apple.

"Sixty tw...Hundred n..." she murmured under her breath. She seemed satisfied and smiled, and took off the hat. A majestic fluffy mane of a ponytail fell to her shoulder blades, and two bits of her hair stuck out to the side in masses vaguely shaped like triangles.

"Good morning, first years," she said with a friendly smile. "Welcome to Academia Utopia! It's a silly name, we know, but what magician doesn't love a little whimsy?" She did some kind of hand motion and the apple in her hand was replaced by a mouse. "I take it some of you are just as eager to get the school year underway as your teachers are, but it's always good to have a moment of orientation. As I'm sure you all know, this school is...peculiar. All magic schools are, naturally. After all," she repeated the hand trick and was once again holding an apple. "Wizards are often fonts of whimsy, and who doesn't *thrive* on that?" She took a big crunch out of the apple and giggled to herself. "Now, let's get your dorms assigned shall we? And you two." She pointed two fingers into the crowd. One at Maria, one at another girl.

"Not one but TWO first-years claiming a familiar before orientation even started!? And one of them was from the student council no less! Let's give a hand to these promising lesbians, shall

we?" Applause. Most of it was awkward, some of it was given with admiration, some with...*uncomfortable* amounts of enthusiasm.

Maria looked to see if the other girl looked as uncomfortable as she felt.

By all accounts, they were basking in it. The other girl was glowing with pride and her eyes beamed with an emotion that was by all accounts positive. Maria tried not to let her mind get carried away by theories or hunches- after all, she'd never been good at them anyway. She waited awkwardly for the applause to die down, which of course it eventually did. The headmistress casually reached back with one hand to stroke the great black cat which had accompanied her here. Perhaps it was her familiar- whether it was one with the same background as Carol, or a more traditional magic spirit shaped into an animal. Maria was unversed in magic but even she knew what familiars were.

The magical upper crust was a hierarchy based on power and reputation and obligation. The familiar was an extension of the mage, assimilated into them through conquest or submission. To be a familiar was to pledge one's very self to another being entirely, to give oneself in service without exception. It was a beautiful thing, the stories said, of trust and mutualism. The sense of purpose and simplicity offered to one's familiar ensured a life of fulfillment, while the owner's benefits were more self explanatory. A mage could shape their partner in mind and body alike however they chose, as well, to aid in achieving this purpose.

The headmistress once more began to speak.

"It is customary," she said with a warm, easy smile, "for first years to offer their hopes and dreams to the Telltale Tree on their first day. It is an old magical tree, you see, and rumors claim that it gives good luck. So! Those of you who'd like to add yourselves to that tradition, do line up single-file in two or three lines to offer it a few words." The other first-years mumbled to themselves and started to shuffle into position. While some of them were unsure whether to take part and others swiftly opted out, Maria immediately chose to do it. In fact, she chose that she was going to be the first. She confidently strode up to the tree and placed both of her palms against its grey, soft bark. She leaned in and placed her mouth next to one of the many dents in its surface.

"I want to change the world for the better," she whispered delicately into the old apple tree's dented bark. It felt so...vulnerable to be putting the words out there like that. Perhaps it was foolish of her to say out loud, or to want, or even to dream. Nevertheless, it was her heart's greatest wish, and wishes took power in honesty. What good was pleading for a miracle without admitting how much you needed it? She pushed with her hands and straightened her back to stand back up.

"Splendid!" Said the headmistress. She took her hat off and pressed it against her breast. "What courage, such showmanship! The CONFIDENCE! Simply marvelous!" She placed the hat back on its spot atop her head and grinned. "Now then, move along, move along! The others need a

turn too, you know." Maria moved out of the way and felt flustered. Carol trotted up to her, snout held high and tail going absolutely berserk. She pressed her head against Maria's hip and was rewarded with gentle scratches behind the ear.

"So..." Maria asked awkwardly. "What...what's the rest of orientation I-"

The headmistress leaned over playfully and her breasts swayed a bit with the motion. She was suddenly standing rather close, and Maria couldn't help but notice that the woman was...to put it simply, breathtaking. Her lips became even more striking up close, and there was a glint of intelligent mischief in her eyes that almost dared an observer to enjoy them. A tongue swiftly darted out from her mouth to wetten those lips a little bit, then retreated behind a wall of perfectly white teeth.

Then she leaned back, and returned to her previous easy smile.

"Oh, we give out slips and keys for your dorm rooms." The headmistress flipped her hair with her hand. "Speaking of, you get a special dorm room on account of the outreach program. Consider it...a gift from those of us eyed less unfavorably by fate." The lines of first-years went through, each of their members taking a moment to lay things bare to the tree. For a while, it seemed to Maria, the headmistress' attention belonged to her and her alone. Before long everyone with intent to speak to the tree had done so and the headmistress turned to face away from them.

"Come, come, first years! This way, to where you'll be given the keys to your dorms!"