

## Chapter 8: Cutie-Cutie Burst

Five hours.

Five hours of lecturing, diagrams, books, dense theory, jargon that Jack couldn't even begin to comprehend, and examples that didn't help at all. Ezala might as well have been speaking a foreign language for all the information that Jack actually managed to take in. He was pretty sure, at some points, she actually was.

How was he supposed to know what a mana field was? Sure, some of the words he recognized from video games like "ritual" and "reagent" but others he just had no clue about. And she was too busy talking to bother actually explaining any of it. He was just forced to sit there and sheepishly try to take as many notes as he could.

Between the pile of books he was awkwardly carrying and the emotional burden of recognizing that, unlike school, his tests might be actual life and death. There was no homework, no guidance, just an expectation that he'd figure it out.

Or maybe Ezala just wanted to keep him busy and out of the way for a month. Yeah. Maybe that was it. He could just keep his head low, maybe he wouldn't be sent out, and everything would be fine.

...But how would he make it without the perfume? He had maybe two days left. And he had to survive for a month. There was no way this was going to work out.

Lost in his own thoughts, he didn't notice the maid that turned the corner. He bumped right into her and dropped the large tomes he was carrying everywhere. "Oh! I'm so sorry!" the maid squeaked in a comically high pitched voice. She frantically started picking up the books. "Sorry, sorry, sorry, I really wasn't paying attention to where I was going and--" the maid looked up at Jack and stared.

"Oh, no, it's okay! Don't worry!" Jack said as he tried to take the books from her. "Is there something on my face?" he asked.

"Well, you just look..." the maid shook her head. "Sorry, just. Rude thoughts," she said with a little laugh. "I mistook you as a man."

Shit.

"Though, the more I look... May I ask where you're from?"

The blonde, overly feminine slip of a woman in front of him might as well have been the most imposing thing in the world. Her pale, near porcelain white skin looked almost artificial. The

elaborate, curly blonde hair and the frilly maid dress should *not* have been as threatening as they were.

Jack couldn't answer. She was human. She was probably from Earth. The perfume was barely working, and she'd see straight through him if he spoke again. He just shook his head and tried to pitch up his voice as much as he could. "Igottago!" he blurted out as quickly as he could before he took off running.

"But you left your book!" the maid called out to him.

He didn't turn around. Crap. He was glad it was so late. If his cover was blown and there were more people around, he would've been caught. Hell, that maid was probably going to be suspicious from now on. He'd have to avoid her.

He quietly opened the door to the room, fully expecting Lilah to be asleep this late at night.

"Welcome back!" she chirped in that ever happy voice. She was on her bed in her PJs -- a silken chemise that was almost see-through and some thigh-high stockings, all a light mint green color -- writing in some book. "I was wondering when you'd get back! What happened to your friend? Oh! And your scrying orb was going crazy earlier," she pointed over to his bed.

"It was? At least she didn't entirely ditch me," he sighed. "I can't believe she just vanished like that. What am I supposed to do?" he walked over to the bed and put some of the books down on a nearby nightstand. He looked over the orb.

"Oh! I remember those books!" Lilah hopped out of the bed. "Are you going to practice magic? I can help! I'm a natural!" she flexed an arm and grinned.

"I ran into a maid."

"Uhuh?"

"I think she knows I'm a guy."

"Uhoh."

Jack turned to look at Lilah. "Why should I practice magic? There's no way I'm getting out of this. I'm almost out of perfume and then what?"

"Maybe we can just use magic to make you more girly!" Lilah beamed.

"That's not--" Jack's face turned red. "Lilah."

“Well, you need a disguise, so why not?” she smiled. “Plus, you already have breasts. Why not go a little further?”

“Because I’m a guy!” Jack huffed. “I can’t just be a girl!” he hesitated for a moment. “And it’s not like I’d even know where to begin.”

Lilah tilted her head. “Mm. Well. *Anyone* can be a girl. There’s all sorts of body shapes and sizes and stuff.”

“If everyone were as accepting as you, I wouldn’t have to change myself,” he rolled his eyes.

“Well, okay. What do you think would make you more girly that you’re comfortable with? Like, if you had a girl’s body, what would you want it to look like?”

Jack’s face reddened once again. “I don’t know. I guess cute. I mean, I’ve thought about what I would look like as a girl. Or if I’d been born a girl. How much different people would treat me, and the sort of stuff I’d get up to. Haven’t you ever wondered what your life would be like if you were a guy? Or have you ever felt the urge to be one?”

Lilah crossed her arms and walked back to her bed. “What would I look like as a guy.” She tilted her head.

Jack could already see it. With her athleticism and how pretty she was, she’d fit right in as the handsome lead of some fantasy series meant to draw women in and inadvertently getting a harem.

“I guess I’d wanna look the same! Just without boobs, I guess!” she beamed. “Huh? Why are you pouting? Was that a strange answer?”

Jack couldn’t help it. He had an idea of how he’d look. How he’d sound. Everyone had these thoughts, right? Everyone fantasized about it and thought about it! Did she really not? Then again, she was an entirely different species from an entirely different world. “It’s what I should have expected from you.”

He sighed and took a deep breath. “Okay. We have two days to…” the blush returned once again. “Make me more girly. I guess. Between having…” he laid back in the bed and groaned. “Having *cuteness affinity*, whatever the hell that is, and being stuck here, I should try and work on something.”

“Oh! Wow! That’s so lucky!” Lilah chirped. “You can do lots of fun stuff with that affinity! I’m okay at it, but, like, it’s just cause I’m naturally so cute I think! Lots of people just can’t get into the right headspace and stuff to ever really use it! Having a natural affinity for it should make it really easy?”

Gibberish. All gibberish. "I don't even know what an affinity is," Jack groaned.

"Oh. That's easy! See, everyone and everything makes mana! But the type of mana you make is, like, determined by a bunch of different things. Species, where you're from, how much you practice with types of spellcasting, all sorts of fun things!"

"And mine is cuteness."

"Yep!"

"What can I do with cuteness magic? How is that supposed to help?"

Lilah giggled. "Well, I've learned a little myself. I'm attuned to nature, and I can mix cuteness magic and nature magic to, like, make my nature magic stronger on cute animals and stuff!" she beamed. "And flowers! That hair removal spell I used on you is one of the very basic cuteness magic things!" she nodded eagerly. "Mm! Would you like to try to cast a spell?"

Jack sighed. "Might as well."

"Great! I'm going to teach you a super easy one that's great for, like, saving time in the morning. Come on, stand up! You're gonna need to copy my movements, okay?" Lilah hopped up and grabbed Jack's hands before pulling him to the center of the room.

"Am I going to have to make weird hand signs or chant something?"

"Well, if you want to, you can! But I don't know any of those schools of magic, so just do what I do!" Lilah shook herself loose and beamed. "Okay, this is nice and easy. Just watch first. Then try to do it! We'll do it one part at a time!"

Lilah took a half-step back away from Jack and pushed herself onto the toes of her right foot as she performed a quick, elegant pirouette. "Think you can do that?" she asked.

"...ballet?" Jack winced. "Lilah, look at me. Do I look like I can do ballet? Come on. I'm overweight and will just come crashing down. I'd probably break my toes if I even tried."

"Awww! Come on, won't you give it a try?" Lilah pouted. She clapped her hands under her chin and pouted her lips, flashing the pretty blue puppy dog eyes Jack had ever seen. She almost looked like she was about to cry!

Jack had to stop himself from just grabbing the display of cuteness in front of him and giving her a hug and some headpats. "Fine. Fine. I'll try it. Just. Don't look at me like that again. That's really not fair."

“Hee, works every time~” Lilah giggled.

Jack sighed. “Brat.” He stretched for just a moment before he tried to copy Lilah’s movements. How hard could a pirouette be? Children did it every day. He just needed to get on his tiptoes and twirl about. Easy!

But as he kicked off the ground and tried to bring his leg in, he felt something he really didn’t expect. A fluidity and grace suddenly came over him. He barely noticed Lilah’s gasp of surprise as he twirled perfectly. His body was on auto-pilot, and he didn’t even realize what he was doing before it was too late.

He stopped by sliding his foot across the floor. He brought his hands right over the center of his chest and formed a heart shape with the two of them. Words sprang to mind, and he was compelled to speak them. “Cutie-Cutie! Revitalize!” he cheered with genuine delight and sincerity, even if he didn’t feel in control.

His heart thudded inside his ears. A brilliant pink light coalesced around him like the petals of a flower gently closing to protect him. Soft, silky smoothness ran across his whole body. And then a strange tightness. The pink cocoon squeezed him tighter and tighter, but as he swore he was going to break, he could feel his body changing.

His chest gave way first. His burly, barrel chested frame was shrinking, becoming slender. His shoulders narrowed, though slightly, as his weight practically melted off him. He opened his mouth just to feel the strange, silky smoothness in his throat.

The cocoon burst with a bright flash of pink light, and Jack stood completely confused.

“Wooooooow!” Lilah squealed before jumping onto Jack and giving him a hug. Why did she feel so much heavier all of a sudden? “That’s so neat!”

Jack stumbled backward and into the bed with Lilah still on top of him. “What just happened?” he said. Or. He thought he said it at least. It didn’t sound like him. There was another voice in his ears when he spoke. “And what’s--? Oh... Wait. Is that?” Jack’s eyes widened. “Mirror, Lilah, mirror, please, now!”

At least he managed to be polite.

“Of course!” Lilah giggled and grabbed him by the hands. Just a few moments ago, his hands dwarfed hers. Now his fingers felt slender.

Jack stared into the mirror of the vanity. His heart beat faster and faster the long he looked. In the mirror, looking back at him wasn’t the big, somewhat masculine man parading around in

drag and depending on the perfume just to get by. Now there was... well. He wasn't sure. A guy, yes. He still *looked* like Jack. By scrawny. Slim. Almost lithe.

"What...?" and his voice. It was higher pitched. "What happened to me?" he asked.

"I think your magic kind of got, like, out of control a little!" Lilah giggled and smooshed her face against Jack's, eagerly nuzzling cheek to cheek. "You're so cute, now! You could be either a guy or a girl!"

"A guy or a girl..." Jack echoed.

His face was red. He felt like he should be upset, but staring into the mirror, he couldn't bring himself to be. The happy half-elf and the clueless human looking back at him through the mirror made sure of that.