AUTHOR:
AGEHA SAKURA
ILLUSTRATOR:
KURODEKO



# LADY BUMPKIN AND HER LORD VILLAIN

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# Prologue

That day was an absolute nightmare for me, Agnes Evantail.

A crowd of young nobles had gathered in Count Lugre's beautiful flower garden, mingling under the clear autumn sky. Fancy tables were lined up on a wide patio paved with flat stones, and servers dressed in refined attire brought over a wide variety of cakes and drinks.

I lugged my cumbersome white dress to a corner of the garden and did my utmost to erase my presence by becoming one with the tables. Since the tablecloths were also white, I wouldn't stand out as long as I remained still. I felt that if I simply kept hiding until this long, agonizing time was over, it would all end without anyone calling out to me.

*I want to go home right this instant*, I thought.

As I held my breath, trapped in a vortex of negative emotions, one of the young women chatting happily within the crowd fixed her gaze on me. Her lips shifted into a malicious grin, as if she'd just discovered isolated prey. I didn't like where this was going.

"Well, well, well! I thought I was looking at an awfully misshapen table at first, but if it isn't Marquess Evantail's daughter, Lady Agnes! You look *absolutely stunning* in your distinctive makeup and voluminous dress, just like always of course! You're such a bright white that I almost didn't notice you," she said amid chuckles.

Lured by her words, other nobles started looking at me one after the other. A young man jumped on the bandwagon shortly thereafter.

"Are you absolutely certain you should be standing around over there instead of hounding Lord Yalata like you were earlier? I heard this rumor that the House of Evantail has sent a proposal regarding an engagement between you two," he said.

"Oh no, poor Lady Agnes. Her beloved Lord Yalata Lugre seems to be smitten with the viscount's daughter over there, doesn't he?"

"Now that you mention it, when Lady Agnes tried to talk to Lord Yalata earlier, he ran away from her as fast as possible. Her love

must be unrequited, ha ha ha!”

I bit my lip in frustration as everyone around me loudly laughed at me.

*This is precisely why I didn’t want to draw any attention.* With nothing to say in response, I turned on my heel and walked away at a brisk pace to escape the situation. *I have no feelings for Lord Yalata. My* parents *were the ones who told me to go talk to him.*

I made my way to a different table and once again erased all signs of my presence, hanging my head at my pathetic, hopeless self.

“You are to attend the engagement-announcement party the House of Lugre has organized in response to the proposal sent by our House of Evantail.” That was what my parents had told me when they’d ordered me to come here. This event held by the House of Lugre was supposed to be an occasion for announcing the political engagement between me and their son. However, I’d felt uneasy for the longest time since the House of Lugre had never sent us their approval of the engagement. My ominous premonition turned out to be right on the mark: the House of Lugre had never intended to accept the proposal and take me in.

During the party, the count’s son, Lord Yalata, displayed a clear aversion to me and avoided me like the plague; I couldn’t even talk to him. Count and Countess Lugre wore vague smiles and simply spouted platitudes such as “We’d like to respect our son’s wishes.” It was increasingly obvious that there’d been no point in me coming all the way here by carriage from our faraway mark.

Then, to my shock and dismay, as the party was nearing its end, Lord Yalata took the hand of a different woman and loudly announced their engagement. Because the proposal sent by the House of Evantail had become the subject of a widespread rumor, the venue was in an uproar.

“So he’s getting engaged to the viscount’s daughter? Just as I suspected.”

“I understand him wanting to run away from Lady Bumpkin. I felt truly sorry for him.”

“The same goes for me. We all know how unseemly Lady Agnes is.”

“She looks like a ghost with that deep-blue eye shadow and bright-red lipstick on that pale-white face. Her makeup is from a

century ago. And that dress! No one wears such heavy, cumbersome attire nowadays. Her hairstyle too! It coils around so much that it makes her head look gigantic. It's as if she jumped straight out of an old painting!"

"Lord Yalata made a clean getaway. I imagine his parents must be relieved too. They had no choice but to hold this party since they couldn't directly reject the House of Evantail, but now that their son is engaged, the original proposal is bound to be forgotten."

"Even if Marquess Evantail is of a higher rank, his house is in decline. There's nothing to gain by associating with that outdated, obstinate pain of a house. There would be some room for consideration if Lady Agnes had a talent for special magic, but she can only use the ordinary kind."

Derisive laughter echoed across the garden once more. I was left to wallow in my unease alone, feeling like I might be blown away by the unanimous storm of congratulations directed toward Lord Yalata. I was miserable.

After the party was over, Lord Yalata's parents approached me while wringing their hands. Countess Lugre had an awkward smile pasted on her face—clearly an attempt to appear gracious.

"You see how things stand, Lady Agnes, so we'd like it if we could all pretend the matter regarding your proposal never happened. I'm truly sorry."

"My sincerest apologies, but I also wish happiness for my son," the count said as he nodded along with his wife's words. "I consider a wedding of love to be very important."

I managed to suppress the emotions I was on the verge of screaming aloud, kept my facial muscles still by force of will, and remained outwardly composed.

*Stop messing with me!*

What had been proposed was nothing but a standard political marriage between nobles; love and happiness were secondary. At the very least, that was what I had resolved to go through with when I came here all alone.

*If you had a reason to call this off, you should have just declined in the first place!*

My family's mark was quite a distance from this county. Riding a carriage all the way here in this suffocating dress had been quite

the ordeal. I endured my rising dissatisfaction and held my tongue, prompting the count to continue in a soft tone.

“Therefore, could you deliver this message to Marquess Evantail, Lady Agnes? We’d like for all of us to carry on as if we had never received his proposal.”

“Could I ask you to formally address my father via writing, Lord Lugre? I believe it imprudent to inform him of today’s events via my word alone,” I said.

It would be a different matter if the two houses had still been at the stage of discussions, but the House of Evantail had sent me to attend this party under the assumption that the engagement would become official. And now, after rejecting that engagement, Count Lugre was asking the woman he had just publicly humiliated to verbally relay that message herself? Calling him out for his complete lack of common sense would be entirely justified here.

“I beg of you, we really need your help! Talking to the marquess myself is really difficult under these complicated circumstances.”

“That is quite the predicament you’re putting me in. If you can’t do it face-to-face, you could at least send a messenger.”

Sending an official messenger would only help barely avoid a breach of etiquette, I figured. But then he uttered an even more astonishing line.

“I do have a letter for the marquess right here. Would you deliver it to your father, Lady Agnes?”

Holding a letter he must have written beforehand, the count approached me with a distinct lack of composure in his stride. Using me as a messenger was a preposterous thought, but unfortunately, he only saw me as “Lady Bumpkin,” someone to look down on just like everyone else did. The count forced the letter onto me and escaped into his mansion.

“Oho ho ho! Now then, if you’ll excuse me as well,” the countess said before hurrying after her husband.

I was left completely alone in the vast party venue, with no ally in sight. In the end, there was nothing I could do.

*Maybe I don’t want to go home after all.*

A drawn-out sigh escaped my lips, and my shoulders slumped feebly as I gazed up at the pale-orange sunset; I was at my wit’s end.

***

My suffering continued even after I returned home.

“You worthless daughter!”

A powerful blow to my cheek sent me tumbling backward into the hard, stone wall. I’d returned to the Evantail estate a few days after departing from Count Lugre’s party. My father had turned red with rage the moment I showed him the count’s letter of rejection. I staggered as I slowly rose from the floor and hurriedly distanced myself from my apoplectic father.

“Why do you think I went to the trouble of sending you to such a faraway territory? I outrank the count, yet you couldn’t even win his son over. Do you have any idea how much money I’ve spent on you these past seventeen years?! You’re nothing but a parasite leeching off this house!”

As I massaged my swollen cheek, I noticed a red stain on my wrist. The taste of iron spread across my tongue, likely from a busted lip.

“You have my deepest apologies, father.”

I calmly retrieved my handkerchief and wiped my lips as I observed my bellowing father for any sign that he would again turn his wrath on me. No one in this house would cover for me; I had to protect myself. Even my mother, who was watching the scene from afar, had zero intention of helping her daughter.

My delusional father remained fully convinced that I could win the heart of a noble’s son, despite the fact that anyone who gave the matter even a little thought would realize it was impossible. Lady Bumpkin—that was the epithet my peers in high society used when gossiping about me.

I tottered toward my room to escape my father. Staying here was dangerous.

“Hey, I haven’t finished talking yet!”

My father’s shouting continued to thunder from beyond the door, but he was bound to calm down eventually. Further injuries to my face would be an issue for me as a noble lady. Given a little time, my father would weigh his two options—inflicting lasting scars on his daughter that would make her useless in the world of politics or letting go of his anger—and surely come back to his senses.

*A political marriage should still be possible if we aren't too selective with my partner.*

As an aside, the maids and servants of this house weren't on my side any more than my parents were. They voiced clear displeasure when they saw me running down the hallway.

"Lady Agnes is getting scolded again."

"She probably did something to defy her parents, as usual. She's the most useless member of her entire household. She's voiced countless complaints about the House of Evantail's traditions, so maybe it's that again."

For generations, the people serving the House of Evantail had faithfully abided by its principles. Ever since I was little, they had scolded me for being rebellious and given me all sorts of warnings because of my doubts about our house's policies. At any rate, I was tired after returning from the count's party, so I ignored the fussy servants, dusted off my hand-me-down dress, ran into my small room, and shut the door behind me.

"I'm truly exhausted. The count's estate was so far away," I said with a short sigh.

The world outside my window was already dyed dark, and I could hear the cries of owls somewhere in the distance. I strained to lift the hem of my weighty dress, then ran over to the sofa without a care for appearances and plopped myself down on it. However, I was still far from feeling relaxed.

After a short while, I heard a loud knocking on my door.

"Who is it this time?"

In lieu of a response, the door was violently flung open, and a boy in white tights and round glasses, with his hair styled like a mushroom cap, barged into my room. He was my younger brother, Paul Evantail, who was turning twelve this year. He was wearing a codpiece over his formfitting tights to cover his crotch, an outfit from our great-grandfather's time; no noble boy would dress like that nowadays.

*His crotch stands out so much, it's embarrassing.*

Back in the day, wearing a large codpiece had been considered masculine, so my father, among others, had large ones custom made.

With a wrinkled-up nose and disdain evident on his face, my brother spoke in a refined manner.

“I’ve heard everything from mother, elder sister. It would appear you have failed *yet another* marriage interview.”

“It wasn’t a marriage interview. It was a party to announce our engagement…or it should have been, at least.”

“It doesn’t matter either way. I would ask you to refrain from bringing any further disgrace to our household. Why can you not succeed at a single engagement after all this time?”

“It’s not that simple.”

It would take nothing short of a miracle for a member of the House of Evantail to get married to someone of a different family. Our parents were a completely different matter, since they had stayed within the extended family to find a spouse.

*He’s still ignorant of the way this world works, but I’m sure Paul will come to understand once he gets a little older.*

My brother was still young and had attended parties only alongside our parents. Since no one had ridiculed him to his face, he didn’t yet realize just how odd he was. He would make his debut into high society before long.

“Goodness gracious, I’m embarrassed to have you as my sister. Your looks are below average, you have no special talent to speak of, and you aren’t particularly skilled in magic either. And let’s not forget your interminable rebellious attitude toward father and mother. You’re the black sheep of our venerable household.”

“Yes, yes, whatever you say.”

The House of Evantail was called venerable thanks to the achievements of my great-grandfather, who had served as the right hand of the prime minister of the time. Back in his day, our house had been powerful and respected by many people as the model of the ideal noble family. However, when my grandfather succeeded his father, he had arrogantly misused his authority, which had brought scorn on our family and degraded us into provincial nobles who lived mostly off of managing our territory.

Even to this day, our family took pride in its lineage and was endlessly envious of our house’s great prosperity during the good old days of my great-grandfather’s time. We had completely abandoned a time-appropriate lifestyle and ventures, instead obsessing over old-fashioned values. Other nobles perceived us as antiquated fossils with no appeal. It was as if time itself had stopped for our family, and we lived our present stuck with the

same values as my great-grandfather's generation, stubbornly thinking that things would turn out all right as long as everything stayed the same as in those prosperous times.

Needless to say, our house's policies were firmly ingrained in me as part of my education as a daughter of this family. I'd been forced to dress like a venerable lady of the good old days ever since I was little, and I'd been thoroughly educated in the same way as children of that time. Were I to show even the slightest interest in anything modern, I would be strongly rebuked.

Under these conditions, I naturally couldn't keep up with the conversations of other girls my age. They were uninterested in the old-fashioned topics I was familiar with, which left me isolated and made me a laughingstock whenever we met. And it wasn't only the girls—boys my age also made fun of me. In fact, they were even crueler. They would look straight at me with mocking smiles, "confess their feelings" to me as the punishment for losing a game or bet, and eventually give me disgraceful nicknames like "Lady Bumpkin."

Incidentally, "bumpkin" was a derogatory term for countryside people, meant to indicate they were unfashionable and unrefined. While our territory was indeed in the countryside, that was clearly not the only reason behind the nickname.

I wanted to escape this environment.

"Either way, I implore you to bring us no further shame. I would be troubled if my reputation were damaged because of you." My brother finished speaking his mind before turning around and promptly leaving my room.

With the storm finally over, I collapsed onto the sofa. I soon felt myself drifting off into a light nap, unable to fight against my accumulated exhaustion.

*I have to get changed first, but...I don't have the strength.*

My consciousness floated toward a pure-white world, almost as if I had just fainted.

A distorted world filled my vision. I could see a little girl—a younger me—complaining about something.

*"Why don't you understand, mother? No other kids live the same way as the House of Evantail. Why do I only get to wear my grandmother's used clothes?"*

My mother—looking much younger than she was now—replied with a frown on her bright-red lips.

*"Dear me, Agnes. You must not speak such accursed things! Your dresses and shoes are leagues better than those cheap modern outfits! You should consider yourself fortunate to have a figure so similar to your grandmother."*

*"But the other kids make fun of my dresses. They call them ancient and shabby. We aren't poor, are we?"*

*"Such insolence! You shouldn't take what those children say seriously. Those who can't appreciate the value of vintage articles are vulgar and crude people not worth associating with."*

When my mother was finished, she quickly faded from view and was replaced by my father when he was younger.

*"Father, why am I the only one who doesn't eat sweets? All other kids have snack times at their houses."*

*"Quiet! Don't bother me with such drivel! Your meals aren't lacking in any way. You have no need for sweets. Stop concerning yourself with those ignoramuses and just stand boldly! Fretting over every little thing is unseemly!"*

My father's figure with his fist raised overhead vanished from my mind. The next one to appear was my strict old private tutor.

*"Come now, Lady Agnes, can you not even do something so simple as this?"*

*"But is there a need to learn this nowadays? The book says it's an archaic custom that was only mainstream a century ago. And there's also—"*

*"Cease your impertinent attitude and listen to your elders! I will be the one scolded if you can't do it!"*

I cried as my arm was repeatedly whipped as punishment. The tutor's visage also disappeared before long, taking me to yet a different scene. I was now at some kind of party. I looked older than before, so this must have been around the time of my first social outing.

*"Look at her! What is she wearing? She looks like a circus clown! Her dress has yellowed, and her makeup is totally out of date, isn't it? Someone should go try talking to that bumpkin."*

*"No way! What if she thinks I'm interested in her? She looks more like a monster than a clown. I'm too scared to approach that thing!"*

My peers were laughing at me. I had come with the faint hope

that I would be able to make some friends, but I ended up crying and going home. It was a very bitter memory.

After that, I talked to my parents again and again about improving my appearance and conduct, but we never saw eye to eye. My complaints went in one ear and out the other; not once did they have an earnest discussion with me. Reliving those memories soured my mood, until my past self gradually disappeared. Strangely enough, I could tell that I was waking up from my dream.

When I opened my eyelids, I could see my room's ceiling. I felt even more tired than I had before my nap, thanks to the unsettling contents of my dream. My irrational daily life had continued since childhood, with me harboring constant doubts about the differences between me and other nobles. Eventually, I'd come to realize that the House of Evantail was simply bizarre.

"I'm sick of this. I want to join the Convent already."

This country had an institution called the Convent, where noble ladies could find shelter. Many women who couldn't get married for whatever reason spent the rest of their lives there as nuns. The nuns lived in honorable poverty, but I felt like I could adapt fairly easily since my lifestyle at the House of Evantail wasn't exactly luxurious. I had to wear my grandmother's hand-me-down dresses and timeworn accessories. My mother practically forced them on me, claiming that they were of high quality and exactly my size. My coats, bags, and even shoes were my grandmother's; I didn't have a single personal possession.

According to my household's values, the heavy and bulky dresses of a century ago were of good quality, while the lightweight modern dresses were flimsy and of poor quality. As a result, I'd been dressed in my grandmother's clothes for several years now. The same was true for the dress I'd worn during Count Lugre's party. The bulky dress's formerly white silk had yellowed over time—possibly due to improper storage—making its old age apparent at a glance.

Moreover, while my grandmother's hair had been black, mine was a shade of silver close to white, and my complexion was also on the lighter side. As one might imagine, dressing in white with my natural features left me looking like a pure-white statue. When I'd stood among Count Lugre's brand-new tablecloths, even

someone who paid close attention would have barely noticed me, and only because my dress's yellow tint was slightly out of place. I was the odd one out in the gathering of brilliantly dressed ladies. Anyone putting a little thought into it would have realized there was no chance a count's son would choose such a dowdy woman as his future partner.

By the way, before being told to court the count's son, I'd been forced to participate in the contest for the position of the second prince's consort, but I'd been knocked out without even getting to speak to the prince in question. The memory still left a bitter taste in my mouth. I didn't want to go searching for a marriage partner ever again. I just wanted to stay holed up inside.

*Please just send me to the Convent, I beg you.*

However, my father—whose pride was the one thing he had an endless supply of—would never give up on getting me engaged. Even if I stayed single, he'd consider sending his daughter to the Convent a disgrace to our house.

*What's the big deal? My brother will succeed him as marquess no matter where I end up. Don't expect anything from your worthless daughter.*

The maids arrived some time later to change my clothes and remove my makeup. It took several of them to carry the heavyweight dress I'd been moving around in all by myself.

"I'm sick of dealing with engagement turmoil. I only make miserable memories no matter where I go."

With my body now unencumbered, I lay down on my bed and opened the book I'd left by my pillow. I enjoyed reading because it helped me escape my unpleasant reality. I'd read every last book on the bookshelves. The one I was reading at the moment was a bulky magic tome I'd ordered from the town bookstore.

In this country, everyone could use exactly one kind of magic. Many nobles got an appraisal at the church at an early age. Appraisal was a type of magic that could determine what kind of magic others possessed. People who could use that magic were called appraisers and were recruited by the church. They were guaranteed an above-average lifestyle in exchange for examining visitors' magic.

Our territory had a small, old church in it. When I was little, my parents had taken me to the appraiser there who'd apparently

said, “Her magic is one that can reinforce things,” after looking at me. I had little memory of the event, but in any case, my magic was called “matter reinforcement.” It was unusual yet plain and deemed not particularly useful. My household was generally apathetic toward magic, and although my magical education had been neglected, I could at least reinforce the objects on my person. Magic that could change someone’s size or let them transform into other people or animals was highly valued, while magic that could manipulate nature itself was said to be the most outstanding. According to legend, healing and purification magic beyond our understanding used to exist too.

While I was running away from reality by immersing myself in the magic tome, the door opened and a woman with thick makeup—just like the kind I’d had on earlier—walked briskly into my room. She was a woman in her prime, wearing a grim expression and glasses with pointy silver rims—my mother.

*I’d appreciate it if you at least knocked.*

Unfortunately, my mother had never once respected my wishes. She glanced around my room, cramped with large furniture, and marched in front of the old sofa where she struck a daunting pose. Having my tall mother towering over me was awfully intimidating.

“Good grief, I can’t believe you simply backed down all dejected after the engagement was rejected, you pathetic excuse of a daughter! Show some more grit!”

After my father, the servants, and my younger brother, it was my mother’s turn to unload a pile of complaints onto me. It was generally the same kind of lecture every time, so I ignored her and reviewed what I’d just read in my head.

*She’s still talking, huh? Does she never get tired?*

A short time later, my mother finally came to a conclusion as she desperately gasped for air.

“Therefore, you are to participate in the princess’s upcoming engagement celebration, Agnes. You have to find a suitable partner this time, understand?”

“Come again?” The conversation had taken an unexpected turn while I was off in my own little world. I should’ve been paying attention. “You said this will be Her Highness’s engagement celebration, right? Isn’t that a rather inappropriate place to search

for a partner?”

“Silence! We can no longer afford to take our time. The eldest noble sons your age are finalizing their engagements one after the other. At this rate, all the good marriage prospects will be snatched up, merely because you’re so gutless!”

If she really wanted me to get married already, the least she could do was help a little—primarily by updating my wardrobe and makeup style.

*But if I raise a complaint with my mother, she’ll return it* thirty*fold.* I decided to keep that thought to myself, since I wanted my mother to leave my room quickly.

“So, which noble son should I aim for this time?” I asked.

“Viscount Brie’s son! His rank might be low, but their house is rich, so our House of Evantail would like a relationship with them.”

“Understood.”

I could easily predict a future where the viscount’s son got engaged to me because of my rank, then cheated on me after our wedding, but I had no right to refuse. I simply nodded to avoid displeasing my mother further, all the while thinking how much I wanted to join the Convent.

“You’ll go dressed in another of your grandmother’s dresses. You should still have plenty of them.”

While I indeed had many such dresses, all of them had been designed around a century ago.

*No matter how you look at it, going to Her Highness’s party dressed like that is a bad idea.*

Nobles from around the country would be gathered in the royal palace. I didn’t want to show up dressed like a bumpkin.

“Um, those old dresses are really heavy and cumbersome, so I’d like a new one. Also, grandmother’s shoes are too small for—”

My mother interrupted me before I could even finish my sentence.

“Such vile words! What foolishness is this? You would go out dressed in one of those flimsy, cheap dresses? Preposterous! Your grandmother’s dresses are invaluable articles that you couldn’t even get your hands on nowadays. And if the shoes are a little small, you just need to bear with it. It certainly beats wearing those flat, soft ones they make these days!”

I listened to my clueless mother prattle on, and I heaved a deep

sigh. Her words were certainly true—dresses like those of my grandmother were impossible to obtain now. Of course, there was a simple reason those “invaluable” dresses had all disappeared.

*They wouldn’t sell because they’re too heavy!*

As for shoes, the reason the fashionable ones were on the softer side was because they’d been improved to be more lightweight, and they were slightly wider to better conform to the shape of the wearer’s feet. The heels had also been adjusted to a more reasonable height.

*Whenever I wear my grandmother’s shoes, I get horrible blisters, and sometimes they even end up bleeding.*

Ever since my high society debut, I’d constantly been forced into my grandmother’s old clothing. She’d passed away at a young age, but all of her belongings remained in this house.

*The people in my grandmother’s time were incredible to constantly endure wearing those heavy dresses and torturous shoes! Their stamina and willpower must have been otherworldly!*

I’d grown rather sturdy myself, but I didn’t think I could hold a candle to the women from back then.

Anyway, since parties were long affairs, I wanted to at least be a little more comfortable.

“May I adjust the skirt to be lighter, mother?” I decided to aim for a compromise. If I reduced the number of fabric layers stacked atop each other, I would have a much easier time moving…or so I thought.

My mother simply frowned at me.

“Would you drop that nonsense already, Agnes? Do you really think such tomfoolery would be permitted?! Those dresses are priceless heirlooms for you to pass down to your own children.”

I’d already decided that in the unlikely event that I ever had children of my own, I wouldn’t abuse them by forcing those hefty dresses on them, and instead I would simply buy them new ones.

“At any rate, make sure not to fail to get engaged this time, would you?! We’ve already spoken with his parents.”

I felt my heart grow heavy upon hearing that.

“I’d just like to confirm—you mean you’ve received a proper reply to the proposal this time, right?” I’d hate to find myself in the same situation as I had at the count’s party, so I made sure to ask my mother.

“Ahem, as I said, we’ve discussed the matter,” my mother replied, suddenly becoming evasive and losing her earlier vigor. I wondered why.

*Did they only send a proposal and get no meaningful reply again?! Don’t put me in such a tight spot!*

I was the one to get hurt every single time. My parents kept going on about engagement this, marriage that, but they didn’t lift a single finger to help. They had both originally been members of the House of Evantail—cousins, to be precise—so they’d shared the same values and hadn’t experienced any hardships in their engagement. They couldn’t understand the hell their daughter was going through, showed pure apathy to my hurtful “Lady Bumpkin” nickname, and only made absurd demands of me.

*Why can’t they understand that the viscount is putting off his reply because he has no interest in this engagement?! Open your eyes already!*

Ordering Lady Bumpkin to capture a man’s heart with no support whatsoever was practically impossible and a massive pain in my rear. And now the pain had spread to my stomach too. The overly formal and old-fashioned House of Evantail was already shunned by other nobles, and my ridiculous appearance only served to worsen their impression.

*Nooo, I don’t want to go!* But no matter how much I protested in my mind, my trip to the royal palace was unavoidable. I could only wait for the day to approach, all the while trembling in fear.

# Chapter 1: The Antiquated Lady Bumpkin

Desnim was an old monarchical country situated on the western side of the continent. Its territory stretched a long way from north to south and was filled with steep mountains. Its peaceful existence had continued for a long time, with no conflicts despite bordering foreign countries to the south and east. Both our mark and the royal capital had a relatively warm climate with four annual seasons, but I'd heard that the southern frontier's climate was different—not that I'd ever been there.

It was currently winter. Though our country was generally warm, at present it was a bit too chilly to be walking around in a sleeveless dress like mine. I alighted from my carriage upon arriving at the palace in the royal capital and shook like a leaf as I held my exposed arms. The day of Her Highness's engagement celebration party had finally arrived.

*Why did she decide to hold a party in this season? The capital is at a high altitude, so it's even colder here than elsewhere!*

The gloom I was already feeling almost doubled. My family and I had been staying at our secondary residence in the capital for the past few days. As usual, I'd been dressed in an unfashionable gown, caked in copious amounts of makeup, and stuffed into a carriage. Every instruction I'd given the maid who helped me change had fallen on deaf ears.

*"Please apply less makeup on me. Don't twirl my hair so much either; I'd prefer to just let it down."*

*"This much makeup is still very thin, Lady Agnes. Please take a look at your mother. Her pure-white face epitomizes the beauty of the House of Evantail's traditional makeup! I'd actually like you to be on that level too."*

My mother's face was so white, one might think she'd smeared an entire cream cake on it. Her hair was also curled thrice as much as mine and rose above her head like a tower.

*She does look incredible…in a way. She's certainly captured the gaze of everyone around us.*

Ultimately, the maid had refused all of my requests, and I had

been dragged out looking as much a bumpkin as ever. And as if that wasn't enough, after I had finally arrived at the palace as commanded, my mother sprang some unbelievable news on me.

"Your father will join me later, and we'll go around exchanging greetings. Meanwhile, you are to have a good talk with the gentlemen here."

"What?" Her words hit me like a bolt from the blue and I instinctively clung to her. "Please don't leave me alone, mother! We're at the royal palace! Yes, there are a few young women moving around alone, but most of them have a chaperone."

"You're a daughter of the House of Evantail, for goodness' sake! You can't still be depending on your parents at seventeen! Now off you go to the banquet hall, chop-chop!"

"Nooo!"

My mother slapped me on the back and I staggered into the banquet hall.

*The pressure is too heavy, just like my dress. I want to go home!* But my family would never allow me to do that. *If I leave now, my parents will be incensed.*

My mother's scolding was one thing, but I wanted to avoid being on the receiving end of my father's powerful fists at all costs. The swelling I'd gotten from the last time he'd sent me flying had yet to completely recede, leaving a bruise on my face even now. He had thoughtlessly injured my face while also ordering me to go find a husband; his words and actions were completely at odds with each other.

I trudged through the banquet hall with my vintage dress trailing behind me. The party venue was decorated in violet cloth, the same color as the princess's eyes, and cuisine in small portions that was apparently popular with women was arranged atop the white tables.

*Everything looks and smells amazing, but I can't eat with my corset so tight. Life is unfair.*

A crowd had already gathered in the hall, where various conversations were taking place.

"Look, Lady Bumpkin has arrived."

"Oh, she really has. She looks as garish as ever. She must have nerves of steel to come here alone so confidently."

Some young women standing nearby snickered as they

watched me. It looked like I'd have no one to talk to this time either.

*This is making me nervous.* A short sigh escaped my lips.

The banquet hall was filled to the brim with nobles. Finding Viscount Brie's son in this crowd was impossible. As one might expect from a major occasion such as the princess's engagement celebration, the number of guests was astronomical. I rushed to a corner of the room to become as inconspicuous as possible, but—

"Eek!"

I felt a tugging sensation which caused me to lose my balance and take a big tumble. With heels as high as these, I couldn't regain my posture once I started stumbling. I placed my hands on the floor and surveyed my surroundings until I noticed that my dress had gotten caught on a table decoration. The nearby nobles only giggled at me, without a single one offering to help, which further increased my gloom. This was *exactly* why I'd wanted to avoid coming here. Irritated, I struggled to pull my dress free, when—

"Are you all right?" said a charming voice right next to me.

"Huh?"

When I turned my head, I saw an unbelievably handsome young man looking at me worriedly. He had carefully groomed bright-red hair, beautifully clear amber eyes, a straight nose, and lips as captivating as a woman's. His looks were so perfect, they were honestly making me nervous. His impeccable ensemble and mannerisms made it clear he must be a noble of considerably high rank.

"Yes, I'm fine. My dress just got caught on something," I said, hurriedly tugging on the hem of my gown.

"Hold on a moment. You're going to tear it if you treat it so roughly." The man approached the table, crouched a little, and dexterously disentangled my dress from the ornamentation. "You should be fine now. No harm came to your dress either."

No man would gain anything from interacting with me, Lady Bumpkin. He could easily have turned a blind eye to my predicament, just like every noble around him; the fact that he hadn't was a testament to his kindness.

"Th-Thank you very much." I expressed gratitude from the bottom of my heart, earning a bright smile from him before he

walked away.

*He was such a nice person.*

I was sure the woman to marry him would be happy. Of course, he was obviously far beyond my reach, so I wasn't getting my hopes up. While I was immersed in my little moment of happiness, I heard some nearby nobles talking, a different group from the ones who'd been laughing at me earlier. It was an elderly man and woman who looked like the type to enjoy gossip.

"I wonder what Her Highness's fiancé is doing here."

"He's one of the stars of this party! What's he doing talking to Lady Bumpkin?"

I caught every last bit of their conversation.

*So* that *was Her Highness's fiancé.*

It made sense. He was a flawless individual in every conceivable way. The princess's fiancé hadn't been widely announced yet, but a certain duke's second son was said to be the most likely contender. I now fully realized that the handsome man emitting an extraordinarily refined aura was truly in a league of his own.

The gossiping nobles continued their conversation and I casually listened.

"But have you heard the rumor? Despite being engaged to Lord Nazelbart—Duke Florescruz's son—Princess Mia is very attached to Master Robin, Baron Levbition's illegitimate son. I imagine Lord Nazelbart is feeling uneasy about it. What exactly could Her Highness be dissatisfied with? Her fiancé is an outstanding man."

"He's certainly an exemplary noble, but he's so perfect, it feels like he's lacking in humanity."

"I think I more or less understand what you mean. The way he nonchalantly does everything with such a beautiful face makes him look like some kind of animated doll."

I tilted my head in confusion. *So his name is Lord Nazelbart. He seemed like a genuinely kind person to me.*

Among all the people laughing at Lady Bumpkin for falling down, he'd been the only one to offer me a helping hand. While he was indeed beautiful to the point of perfection, I'd never compare him to a doll.

"I also wonder what Lord Nazelbart is looking forward to in his life. There's another rumor that our uninhibited princess found him overly serious and unpleasant to be around, so they may

already be on bad terms with each other."

"I wonder if that's true. But theirs is a political marriage decided all the way back when they were kids. Her fooling around should stop after today's party."

"I agree; Her Highness wouldn't abandon her duties."

I walked away from the table with mixed feelings.

*How can she cheat on such a wonderful fiancé?*

A short time later, the aforementioned princess appeared at the front stairs with grand musical accompaniment. She was today's leading actor, looking simply breathtaking in a daring, light-purple dress. Her blonde hair was adorned with precious gems the same color as her gown.

*This is my first time seeing her in person. She's one sexy woman.*

Her outfit emphasized her ample bosom and completely exposed her back; only someone with absolute self-confidence would wear something like that. She and Lord Nazelbart would surely make a perfect picture when standing side by side. The two of them were now supposed to take center stage and announce their upcoming wedding to the whole world.

I'd grown interested in this whole affair, so I decided to watch from a distance.

However, things took a completely unexpected turn. Instead of approaching Lord Nazelbart, the princess took another man's hand and walked to the center of the stage with him. Her unforeseen behavior caused an uproar in the party venue.

The same gossiping nobles from earlier started providing commentary, leaning forward as they watched over the development. Thanks to them, I could understand what was going on. Just what was Her Highness thinking, causing such a scene when she already had the ideal fiancé?

"That man is...yes, Master Robin, Baron Levbition's illegitimate son."

"Which would make him Her Highness's lover. What is she doing, taking another gentleman's hand at her own engagement celebration?"

I had to agree with them. Going to her lover during her own engagement party, of all times, was imprudent, to say the least.

Her Highness and Master Robin stood intimately at the center of the venue. Now that I took a look at him, I could tell that Master

Robin was quite the handsome man, very much like Lord Nazelbart. But whereas Lord Nazelbart's looks were delicate, like a work of art not of this world, Master Robin's aura was more approachable and mellow. He had tanned skin, finely chiseled features, and charming, drooping eyes.

After gaping at Master Robin, the gossiping nobles became even more excited.

"What is Lord Nazelbart doing?"

"He's over there. Ooh, it looks like he's going to confront them."

When the princess and Master Robin noticed Lord Nazelbart approaching the center of the stage, they linked arms and flashed him daring smiles. Their intimate behavior naturally riled the gathered nobles.

"What's going on now? They're practically sticking to each other."

"This is going to be a bloodbath."

The gossiping nobles observed the situation nervously. Even I edged a little closer to the center of the room.

"What is the meaning of this, Your Highness? Who is he to you?" Lord Nazelbart asked the princess directly, a stern frown on his face and his lovely brows knitted.

Affectionately linking arms with a man other than her fiancé in public was quite scandalous of the princess. Anyone should know something that obvious, which meant the princess was doing this on purpose.

*But why?*

The princess arrogantly spread her folding fan open in response to the bewildered Lord Nazelbart's question.

"Whatever could you mean? It's exactly what it looks like." She then gave Master Robin a kiss on the cheek before making a shocking announcement. "Nazelbart Florescruz, I hereby annul our engagement! Robin is my new fiancé!" Her loud voice echoed throughout the entire party venue.

*Whaaat?!*

You could have heard a pin drop. The nobles couldn't immediately grasp what had just happened and stood still as statues in sheer confusion. I was in the exact same state myself.

*What's going on? Is she allowed to make such a declaration?*

Lord Nazelbart himself was also baffled. It was evident that this

had come as a huge shock to him too.

"Even if you suddenly declare such a thing, Your Highness, His Majesty would never allow it. Do you intend to abandon your royal duties?"

However, the princess ignored Lord Nazelbart's question and instead censured him.

"I know everything. Robin has informed me of all your misdeeds. You've repeatedly harassed him, haven't you? I never thought you were capable of such horrible behavior."

"Excuse me?" It was as if Lord Nazelbart had just spoken for every guest present. His expression of sheer wonder betrayed he had no memory of ever committing these alleged acts.

"Robin can wield invaluable, sacred magic. He has abundant mana, can use more than one kind of magic, and has the greatest magical potential of anyone! In other words, he's the most talented mage in the entire country! His lineage is valuable beyond measure!"

Everyone looked at the princess in silence as she raved on and on about Robin. The king and queen were currently on a diplomatic tour in a foreign country, so there was no one who could keep her in check.

"I no longer need you as my fiancé now that I have this outstanding man by my side."

"Do your parents share your opinion?"

"Who knows? But they understand Robin's value, so I'm sure they'll allow it."

It would seem that the princess had called off her engagement without her parents' permission. But things had gotten so serious that even His Majesty would have trouble putting everything back in order.

*Won't Lord Nazelbart's house be outraged too? If I remember correctly, the House of Florescruz is one of the two most prominent noble families in the whole country, and Her Highness's mother, the queen, came from their house. Their influence must be substantial.*

While I was lost in thought, the princess continued ranting.

"When father and mother learn of your rotten character, of course they will approve of my actions! Driven by jealousy, you pushed Robin down the stairs, hired hoodlums to attack him, and even tore his clothes to pieces!"

“You speak of my character, but I have no recollection of these alleged misdeeds. In the first place, my schedule is packed down to the last minute. I have no time to carry out a campaign of harassment. You are aware of that fact, no?” Lord Nazelbart replied.

“But Robin told me you did. Also, I’ve met the ruffians who were arrested after assaulting him. They all testified that it was your doing.”

“That’s impossible!” Lord Nazelbart’s countenance gradually turned grimmer, though his bewilderment never faded.

*Lord Nazelbart didn’t seem like the kind of person to commit such villainy.*

It would be truly lamentable if these accusations against him were false. I could readily imagine how much it would hurt to be in the same situation. These proceedings also left me with a terrible impression of the princess.

*Even if she wanted to call off her engagement, this wasn’t the place to spring the news on him. All she had to do was follow the proper procedures.*

Lord Nazelbart resolutely faced the princess on his own.

“Up to this day, I have undergone all kinds of education to be a consort worthy of you. Will Master Robin be fit to take my place when he is uneducated in such matters?”

“There will be no problems if he starts studying now. Besides, I’m already carrying his child. Our engagement is set in stone.”

The guests were shocked to their very core.

*What?! Her Highness had relations with another man before her engagement announcement?*

Everyone present was at a loss for words, Lord Nazelbart included. Well, everyone except Princess Mia, who instead made yet another preposterous statement.

“In other words, you have brought harm upon the father of this country’s future king. Guards, remove this criminal from the venue at once!”

Lord Nazelbart attempted to dissuade the princess with sound reasoning.

“Please, wait a moment, Your Highness. I am innocent. I cannot accept such a one-sided conviction with no evidence. The truth needs to be investigated anew in an appropriate venue.”

*That's right, Her Highness's word alone about hearing testimony from the ruffians isn't very convincing.*

The princess, however, turned red with rage and started shouting.

"Shut up, shut up! You always, *always* spout your stupid logic with a straight face. You really *do* lack basic human feelings! Argh, so revolting! I won't allow you to talk back to me in that manner!"

The approaching guards shoved Lord Nazelbart away, and he just so happened to land on his backside rather close to me. Though he reacted quickly enough to soften his landing, he still looked to be in pain from the impact with the hard floor. However, no one made an effort to help him. They were all afraid of getting caught up in the incident and incurring the princess's wrath.

*Her Highness and Master Robin are clearly the ones in the wrong here. I can't simply watch this anymore.* Lord Nazelbart alone had treated me with kindness. I couldn't bear to be a mere spectator at his conviction on dubious charges. *I'm just Lady Bumpkin anyway. It's not like much will change if my reputation gets a little worse.*

I raised my head straight, walked up to him, and offered my hand.

"Are you all right? Can you stand?"

His pretty, almond-shaped eyes opened wide and his amber pupils focused on me.

*He looks surprised. Does he find talking to Lady Bumpkin unpleasant, after all?*

I helped the trembling Lord Nazelbart up from the floor and lent him a shoulder to support his unsteady body.

"Thank you, I'm all right now," he whispered to me in his beautiful voice, prompting me to hurriedly distance myself from him.

*Staying next to Lady Bumpkin for long would only further tarnish his good name. I know my place.*

As I was trying to quickly get away, I accidentally made eye contact with the princess, who had a sinister grin on her face.

"Wait a moment," the princess said.

I couldn't defy an order from the princess herself, so I halted as she commanded, cringing inwardly.

"An old-fashioned dress and overly thick makeup, hmm? You must be the rumored Lady Bumpkin, Agnes Evantail."

I turned to address the princess.

“I am, Your Highness.”

I was on guard about what she would say next. I had the feeling that she had something more in mind than simply venting her spleen because I’d given aid to the target of her enmity.

“This is perfect. Let me announce your punishment, Nazelbart!” the princess declared.

“What punishment?” I muttered.

“You will be exiled to the frontier and take the unsightly Lady Bumpkin as your wife! Aha ha ha!” The princess dropped a bomb on both Lord Nazelbart and me.



*As his w-w-w-w-wife? Me?!*

The venue instantly got noisy and everyone looked at me with inquisitive eyes. The gossiping nobles began yet another merry conversation.

“How horrible. Married to Lady Bumpkin, she says? What a riot.”

“I can’t help but feel sorry for Lord Nazelbart. His married life is looking bleak.”

I discreetly observed Lord Nazelbart, but I couldn’t read a single thing from his expression.

*Hold on, is getting married to me* really *such a terrible punishment?* The thought was quite depressing. Be that as it may, I couldn’t disobey the princess directly, so I remained silent no matter how sorry I felt for Lord Nazelbart. I believed His Majesty would surely do something about this debacle.

# Chapter 2: Lady Bumpkin Is Disowned

“You disgrace!”

As soon as I returned to our residence in the capital, my father’s fist came flying at my cheek. I couldn’t escape in time and was once again violently knocked back, slamming against the wall.

*Ugh, it hurts so much. I got a cut in my mouth.*

Rather than help me, my mother was giving me an earful; she agreed with my father completely.

“Did you not hear me before, Agnes?! I told you to approach Viscount Brie’s son! How did you end up in an arranged marriage with the criminal who treated Her Highness with such disrespect?! Truly unseemly!”

If she was going to complain, she shouldn’t have left me alone in the first place, but I knew that if I voiced that thought now, my father’s fist would come for me again, so I held my tongue.

At some point, even my brother joined the conversation with his usual snide remarks.

“Would you please not make *everything* worse for me, elder sister? Unlike you, I have the responsibility of shouldering the entirety of the House of Evantail in the future. Could I ask you to refrain from bringing us shame atop more shame?”

The maids and servants also scowled at me from a little farther away. I had no allies.

My incensed father continued raking me over the coals.

“This all happened because you butted in where you didn’t belong! I can’t believe you were ordered to get married in such a public setting. No household will consider a marriage with you now.”

*Then you should have helped me before it came to this!*

My family’s complaints put me in an awkward spot when they came too late to do anything about them. Besides, there weren’t any households willing to consider a marriage with me in the first place. Perhaps my ill-informed parents had only learned this today, but the House of Evantail’s Lady Bumpkin was the laughingstock of high society.

*They don't care the slightest bit about the way their daughter is perceived in high society.*

My parents kept trying to force me to conform to their ideals, but when I went out into society, I was the one who always paid the price. Sadly, my parents only had eyes for obsolete customs or their own profit.

*Reprimanding your daughter yet again won't change anything.*

While I was objecting in my mind, my father hit me with some shocking words.

"Agnes, you are hereby disowned from the House of Evantail! Get out of here at once!"

"Wh-What?"

I was so stunned I could barely manage a response. It was already late at night, not to mention I was still in my dress. I would also need time to prepare my luggage and think about what to do with my life from now on.

"Please wait a moment, father. At least allow me some time to get changed and pack a few things."

Ideally, he would cool his head in the meantime and rescind my disownment. However, my expectations were betrayed spectacularly.

"Silence! You're no daughter of mine. Leave my sight right now!" My father grabbed my arm, his face burning crimson, and started dragging me out of the estate. I felt like my arm might break off with how much strength he was exerting.

"Surely you can't be serious. Ouch! You're hurting me!"

My dress got covered in dirt as a result of this violence, but my father didn't care in the slightest. He turned a deaf ear to my pleas and handed me over to a gatekeeper.

"Throw her out!" my father ordered.

The mansion's gatekeepers were at a complete loss when they were suddenly entrusted with me.

*Right, I understand their confusion. I* am *the daughter of this house...more or less.*

However, my father continued yelling with his usual sullen expression.

"What are you standing around for?! Do as I said or lose your jobs!"

The gatekeepers panicked at my father's threat and began

escorting me out; I wasn't strong enough to resist them. They abruptly and literally threw me outside the gate, and I landed on my hands and knees with a pained cry.

"Aaah!"

The heavy iron gate was heartlessly closed right before my eyes. Reentering the mansion was impossible for me now. Even if the gate opened again for some other reason, the gatekeepers wouldn't allow me onto the premises. My father was obstinate and strict at moments like these, so I knew lingering outside the mansion would do me no good. He was serious about this.

*What do I do now? I was kicked out empty-handed, still in my formal dress, to boot. I can't go to any of my relatives because they're all far away in their territories, not to mention they share the same opinions as my parents, so they'd just drive me away too.*

I was at a loss as I wandered the dark streets in my grandma's excessively high heels, all the while dragging my heavy dress with me. The blisters on my feet were killing me, and my cheek was swollen where my father had hit me.

*At any rate, the streets are completely empty, huh?* As the temperature rapidly decreased, my bare arms suddenly felt chilly. *It's so cold! What should I do?*

I honestly knew almost nothing about the capital. I'd been to our secondary residence here several times, but I'd never explored the city because of the House of Evantail's policies. No one in my family thought of the rare times we came to the capital as opportunities to go out and about. Quite the contrary, in fact; they all said that such frivolous activities were unbecoming. In addition, the young people of the capital were all really stylish, so I'd have felt terribly awkward and out of place walking around the city in my outdated outfits. Consequently, I had been unable to ever muster the courage for an outing.

*I don't have a single close acquaintance here in the capital. Though to be fair, the same is true back in our mark too.*

I had no friends, acquaintances, or kind relatives. There was no one who would take in someone at the center of a scandal like me. My future was looking bleak.

"I have absolutely no idea what to do from now on."

I aimlessly roamed the city under the moonlight and eventually found myself at a large plaza considered to be the very center of

the capital. I couldn't even remember what path I'd taken to get here.

*There's no traffic at the moment, but there should be people passing through come morning. I've heard that public order in the capital is good, so I'll wait here and try to look for someone to help me after the sun comes up.*

I sat at the edge of a fountain and gazed up at the sky above the quiet, sleeping city. I had this strange feeling that the golden stars and silver moon were somehow watching over my hopeless self.

*It really is cold, though.*

My white breaths vanished as if swallowed by the night sky. I let the vague anxiety rising within me drain out and decided to endure until dawn. I was rubbing my arms with both hands to get even a little bit warmer when I heard footsteps on the cobblestone street.

*Hmm? Who could be out at this hour?*

I turned around and saw a beautiful apparition standing there in the darkness. I could just barely recognize who it was thanks to the moonlight.

*What is* he *doing here so late at night?!*

At first I thought I must be mistaken, but I became convinced of his identity thanks to his high-class clothing.

"Lord Nazelbart?" I asked timidly.

He nodded with a gentle smile.

"Greetings, Lady Agnes. I was looking for you."

"What? Looking for *me*, you say?"

"But of course. After today's events, I went to the estate of the House of Evantail, wanting to apologize for getting you involved in such a troublesome matter. But by the time I arrived, I was told that you'd already been disowned and driven out of your home, so I started combing the city, looking for you. I am certainly glad that you were so easy to find."

To avoid seeming rude, I hurriedly rose from my seat on the fountain's edge and walked closer to him.

"I sincerely thank you for your consideration. However, I can no longer return to my parents' residence and as such am unworthy of your attention."

Since I wasn't a marquess's daughter now that I'd been

disowned, I was no longer of an appropriate standing to have any dealings with Lord Nazelbart.

"You needn't concern yourself with that. I will take you to my home. Leaving a woman alone so late at night is simply unacceptable. It's cold out here, so let us go now," Lord Nazelbart said before offering me his hand.

*How should I respond? I've had an inkling since the party, but is Lord Nazelbart perhaps…an awfully considerate individual?*

He was simply someone who did everything so efficiently that it was hard to notice his emotions. I was certain that it was thanks to his kindness that he was smiling to reassure me right now.

"I am now a mere commoner after being disowned. Would it really be appropriate for me to visit a duke's manor?" I asked.

"Everything was originally my fault, so you shouldn't worry about that. There's a chance I will be exiled to the frontier soon, but until that time, I can use my father's residence here. I'll take full responsibility for your livelihood."

While I was thinking completely irrelevant thoughts, like how Lord Nazelbart sounded more assertive when it was just the two of us compared to when we'd been in the public setting of the party, he suddenly switched to a highly formal tone.

"I deeply apologize for getting you involved in the scandal concerning my annulled engagement. My own inadequacy is to blame for everything."

"Whatever are you talking about? The woman who is with another man's child despite already having a fiancé is clearly to blame. Everyone is too afraid of Her Highness to speak up, but I'm certain that's how they all feel."

When I spoke my mind, Lord Nazelbart rapidly blinked, his eyes framed by his long eyelashes, and he seemed to observe me with curiosity.

"Do you not bear a grudge against me? You were expelled from your home because you were ordered to marry me, the criminal who brought harm upon Her Highness's fiancé," he said.

"I don't intend to take that false accusation at face value and blame you for this outcome. While it's true that the fault isn't my own, I wouldn't place it on you either. In fact, I feel sympathy for you for being unjustly framed for this crime and being ordered to marry Lady Bumpkin."

“I’m sorry, lady who?” Lord Nazelbart looked at me with a blank expression. His reaction made me realize a certain possibility.

“Are you perhaps…unfamiliar with my reputation?” I asked.

“I’m sorry. Work has been so busy that my social life has been suffering lately.”

Perhaps that was the reason he’d been so kind to me during our first meeting and disregarded the people around us.

*As he’s been ordered to marry me, I think it’s better to tell him all the gossip involving me to avoid any unpleasant surprises.*

I came to a swift decision and explained everything about my nickname to Lord Nazelbart.

“I am a laughingstock of high society. That is why Her Highness thought to use marriage to me as a punishment.”

“How cruel.”

“I wholeheartedly agree. Having to marry Lady Bumpkin is indeed far too cruel a punishment.”

Lord Nazelbart pursed his lips and shook his head with a stern expression.

“That’s *not* what I meant. The way people look down on and disparage you is what I consider cruel.”

“Huh?” I looked up at him in surprise. I’d been ridiculed as Lady Bumpkin for several years now; this was my first time seeing a reaction like this.

However, Lord Nazelbart paid no mind to my bewildered state and again held out his hand like a gentleman.

“Let us go. Staying outside for long is ill-advised when you’re so lightly dressed.”

“Oh, uh, yes.”

My grandmother’s dress covered more skin and was made of thicker fabric than modern dresses, but I was still pretty cold with my shoulders and arms exposed. Lord Nazelbart and I strode through the dark streets hand in hand to reach his carriage. My blistered feet were killing me as I continued walking in my high heels. My grandmother’s shoes were just slightly too small, yet I had no choice but to endure the pain as we moved—until Lord Nazelbart came to a sudden halt.

“Do your feet hurt, Lady Agnes?”

“My apologies, was I walking too slowly? But everything’s all right. I can keep going.”

“I wouldn’t call anything about this situation ‘all right.’ And I wasn’t blaming you. Excuse me for one moment,” Lord Nazelbart said before nimbly picking me up in his arms.

“Eep!”

“The carriage isn’t far, so please bear with me for a little while.”

That was easy for him to say, but this was my first time being carried like a princess, not to mention the one doing it was a duke’s scion—Lord Nazelbart.

*This is extremely embarrassing, but it’s supposed to be a dreamlike scenario for a noble lady.*

We arrived at the carriage while I was lost in thought. A duke’s carriage was incredibly elegant, and while the design wasn’t showy, its construction was sturdy. I could tell it was expensive at a glance. I sat down on a high-quality cushioned seat, with Lord Nazelbart sitting opposite me. The carriage started moving before long and the sound of hooves echoed in the quiet city.

I was frozen in place from nervousness when Lord Nazelbart addressed me gently.

“I’m the only one here with you. You can make yourself at home, Lady Agnes. And…” He paused for a moment, looking like there was something he wanted to say as he worriedly looked down at the carriage floor—no, at my feet. “I think it would be best to remove your shoes if you’re injured.”

“No, that’s…”

I hesitated when it came to removing my shoes. A woman showing a man her bare feet used to be considered a grave breach of etiquette in our country. There was no such custom in the present day and many women dressed in ways that exposed some skin, but things were different when it came to the House of Evantail. Ever since I was little, I’d been taught that a lady taking her shoes off in front of the opposite sex was an unbelievably shameless act. I knew intellectually that I shouldn’t care about this archaic notion, but when it came to actually putting that belief into practice, my family’s teachings rushed through my head and I became unable to take off my shoes.

*I know Lord Nazelbart doesn’t have any untoward interest in my feet and is just worried about me.*

I finally mustered my resolve, rolled up my dress out of the way, and energetically pulled my shoes off. Some of my blistered skin

was peeled off along with them, and my bloodstained feet came into full view.

"Aah... I knew it, they bled," I remarked calmly.

Despite my tone, Lord Nazelbart puckered his handsome face and looked flustered.

"Those blisters are awful. We need to have them treated as soon as we return to the estate."

"Oh no, I think you're exaggerating." They would heal on their own even if left untreated, so no one in the House of Evantail had ever made a fuss about them. I didn't have to attend parties all that often, so I somehow managed.

"Are those shoes the wrong size for you?"

"That's correct. My grandmother's shoes are a little too small for my feet. They just barely fit if I force them on, and so my parents expect me to wear them for occasions like the party. I have no choice but to obey since I don't own any other shoes."

"Is the House of Evantail struggling financially?"

"No, my parents just have an extreme fondness for older things. They dislike how the latest fashions look."

"Come to think of it, I've heard that the House of Evantail is reputed to be fastidious."

The carriage stopped during our conversation and the coachman informed us that we'd arrived at the Florescruz estate. Lord Nazelbart instructed the coachman to bring my shoes later, then alighted from the carriage with my barefoot self in his arms.

"Excuse me, but I can't do something as disrespectful as entering a duke's manor barefoot!" My nerves weren't that strong. My heart was already so strained that I felt like I'd lose consciousness if I decompressed even a little.

"Don't worry, we're headed to a detached building. You won't meet anyone, so you can relax."

"Easier said than done," I muttered. The princess carry had put me on the verge of a heart attack.

His arms must have been burdened by my heavy dress.

*You have my sincerest apologies.*

The ducal estate's garden was perfectly cared for, with orderly lines of rose bushes taller than me.

*I feel like I'd get lost immediately if I went in there.*

While I was stressing over the whole ordeal, we soon arrived

before a rather plain, detached building. It looked to be new and was made out of wood, with a warm atmosphere about it. It was bigger than a commoner's house but too small to be called a mansion; it felt like a workshop.

"Here we are. You may stay here for the time being," Lord Nazelbart said. As he cheerfully entered the building—with me still in his arms—there was a lightness to his steps indicative of the sense of security that comes from being home.

I, on the other hand, was trembling from the unfamiliarity of a new place as I anxiously looked all around.

*I don't see any servants. I know it's night, but it's strange that no one came to greet the duke's son. I wonder why that is.*

"There's nothing to worry about, Lady Agnes. You can relax here." Lord Nazelbart removed his coat, giving himself a somewhat casual aura that contrasted with his impeccable visage when we'd met at the castle.

*Elegant as ever. That's Her Highness's former fiancé for you.*

Within the building's wooden walls was a brand-new interior with stylish, modern furnishings. It was a relaxing space devoid of ostentation. Lord Nazelbart entered a spacious room and gently set me down on a sofa with a luxurious quilted cover. He then knelt down next to me and started treating my blisters. Letting a duke's son kneel before me was the height of discourtesy.



“Allow me to formally introduce myself. I am the second son of the ducal House of Florescruz, Nazelbart Florescruz.”

“I am the eldest daughter of the marquessial House of Evantail, Agnes Evantail. I would like to offer you my gratitude for taking me in when I have nowhere to go.”

“I am the reason you were driven out of your home. You might find my meddling unwelcome, but I wish to at least offer you my protection.”

“Unwelcome? Perish the thought. I’m truly grateful to you!”

If I’d stayed at that plaza, I’d have been chilled to the bone before the sun came up and most likely suffered frostbite or even hypothermia. Lord Nazelbart was a real lifesaver for finding me when I’d been out alone in the cold.

*To be honest, I never imagined a duke’s son like him would worry about me.*

After finishing treating my blisters, Lord Nazelbart looked at my feet with a pained expression.

“Please take it easy and rest for today. The guest room is on the second floor—I’ll lead you there.”

“Thank you for even providing a room for me.”

“This might only last for a short while, since I could be sent to the frontier, but I hope we can get along. I’ll be on the lower floor, so feel free to call for me if you need anything.”

“Very we— Hmm?” I suddenly came to my senses and tilted my head as I thought about the current situation. “Excuse me, but will you be staying with me in this detached building, Lord Nazelbart?”

“Yes, I will. I can’t enter the main residence since I’m officially considered a criminal at the moment. My parents are planning to negotiate a lighter punishment with His Majesty. The final verdict will be issued in a few days.”

“So that’s how it is.”

The king and queen would hopefully make a composed decision regarding Lord Nazelbart, but no matter what their verdict was, I doubted my obstinate father would allow me to return home.

*I have to consider my life from now on.*

I was anxiously thinking about what lay in store for me, when Lord Nazelbart apologetically spoke again.

“There’s a possibility you’ll have to join me on the frontier, Lady

Agnes."

"That's certainly true; Her Highness did call for your exile."

Lord Nazelbart replied with a solemn nod. The unreasonable decision the princess had made during her engagement party had yet to be overturned.

"The frontier is a truly rural area. Manabeasts are also pretty common," he observed.

In this country, animals with no mana were typically called beasts, while those that possessed mana were given their own classification: manabeasts. Naturally, manabeasts were far more dangerous.

"My family's mark is also rural, so I doubt the frontier will be any worse."

Perhaps concerned by my carefree reply, Lord Nazelbart worriedly placed both his hands on my shoulders.

"You might get exiled too because you got caught up in *my* engagement annulment. Do you really not blame me for that?"

"I don't. I was surprised when I got kicked out of my home, but I'd already wanted to join the Convent, so being disowned doesn't bother me an awful lot."

Lord Nazelbart looked taken aback.

"Why would you want to join the Convent?"

"Surprising, isn't it? I suppose I was tired of my life."

"Tired? When you're still so young? You're only seventeen, if I'm not mistaken."

Even under these unusual circumstances, it would seem that Lord Nazelbart had done some digging into me since he'd been ordered to take me as his wife.

"The House of Evantail is…overly strict."

"It's a famous topic in high society. I've heard of your house's many peculiar rules."

My family religiously adhered to the rules and cultural norms from my great-grandfather's era, without a single adjustment for the changing times. Not even the slightest deviation was permitted, so our house was perceived as austere.

"My parents kept ordering me to get a fiancé as soon as possible, so I was forced to make advances to men I had no feelings for. I was always prepared to be turned down from the start. No one would want to get married to *me*, after all."

My heart could no longer endure the horrible ways I was treated every time I approached the opposite sex.

"I…don't think that's true," Lord Nazelbart said with a complicated expression.

However, I was long past the point of finding comfort in such kind words. I'd grown sick of being verbally abused both at home and outside, day in, day out. The only difference between my current situation and my original plan was that I'd be heading to the frontier instead of the Convent.

"As I said once before, I actually feel more sorry for you, Lord Nazelbart. I am unworthy of you no matter how you look at it."

I was far below Her Highness in social standing, influence, and beauty. I was indeed a dishonorable lady fit to bestow upon someone as a punishment.

"Losing your engagement must have hurt you, Lord Nazelbart, but I believe His Majesty will somehow resolve the matter. Her Highness will surely regret her actions too. You're a wonderful man, after all."

Princess Mia was expecting, which certainly complicated the situation. Nevertheless, I gave Lord Nazelbart my encouragement because I didn't want him to be in low spirits. He was far kinder and far more gentlemanly than Master Robin.

*Her Highness might be caught up in the passion of her illicit affair, but even she should realize Lord Nazelbart's virtues eventually.*

Still, Lord Nazelbart wore a somewhat troubled smile.

"I think there may have been a misunderstanding. I don't have any feelings for Her Highness. Our engagement was decided when we were children, and I simply acted with respect toward that obligation. For the benefit of this country, I've endured many years of strict education to prepare me to support the future queen."

"Oh, I understand now. Even so…"

The uninhibited princess was expecting the child of a baron's illegitimate son. It was easy to imagine Lord Nazelbart—her *former* fiancé—finding that intolerable. To make matters worse, he'd also been falsely accused in front of a large crowd.

*He's far too pitiful!*

At a loss as to what to say next, I awkwardly averted my eyes.

*Although we've only spent a little time together, I can tell he's not*

*the kind of person who'd do such things to Master Robin.*

There were too many oddities in Her Highness's allegations to accept them at face value, not least of which was that Lord Nazelbart had nothing to gain by harassing Master Robin in the way she had described. The most plausible motive would have been jealousy, but Lord Nazelbart claimed to have no feelings for Her Highness, which raised doubts about that possibility. And as he'd said—and the princess hadn't disputed it—his schedule was so regimented that he didn't have time to bully Master Robin. It seemed quite likely that a proper investigation would prove his innocence.

"You were the only one at the party to offer me a helping hand when I was in trouble, so I believe you, Lord Nazelbart. I highly doubt that someone who'd help Lady Bumpkin—a truly selfless act—would commit such a crime. Not even a child would do something as silly as pushing Master Robin down the stairs or tearing his clothes apart."

Everyone was simply too scared of Her Highness to say anything during the party. The other nobles would undoubtedly realize Lord Nazelbart's innocence after they gave the matter some thought.

"Lady Agnes..." Overcome with emotion, Lord Nazelbart called my name and gently reached out his hands, hesitantly grasping my fingers. Warmth slowly spread across my still-freezing skin. "I dragged you into this, but I swear to protect you no matter the circumstances."

"I'm most grateful," I replied, nodding. I didn't think he needed to feel responsible for this, and I'd never received such kind words before, so I was unsure how else to respond.

I accepted Lord Nazelbart's proposal for the time being and headed for my room on the second floor. I wasn't at all worried about spending the night in the same building as a member of the opposite sex. Any improper conduct was highly unlikely when one party was Lady Bumpkin, so I could sleep soundly. When I went up the stairs, I saw a beautiful maid standing next to the wall by herself.

*She looks like she's my age, or perhaps a little older?*

She was a neat and tidy beauty, standing expressionless with her straight, chestnut-colored hair tied in a ponytail. She was

honestly a little intimidating.

Lord Nazelbart possibly sensed my nervousness because he smiled to reassure me when he saw the maid.

“I’ve charged her with your care, Lady Agnes. Don’t worry, she’s trustworthy.”

The maid bowed politely, so I hurried to respond in kind, while Lord Nazelbart watched the exchange.

“Good night, Lady Agnes,” he said, sounding somewhat satisfied.

“G-Good night to you too, Lord Nazelbart.”

His handsome face looked a little more relaxed after my awkward salutation, and he descended the stairs.

*Every last one of Lord Nazelbart’s mannerisms is elegant. I can feel my heart pounding.*

After I saw him off, I turned back to the maid and greeted her.

“My name is Agnes Evantail. I’ll be in your care for now.”

“My name is Kelly, and I’m the head maid in charge of this detached building for the House of Florescruz,” the expressionless maid replied politely.

“It’s nice to meet you, Miss Kelly.”

The maid blinked a few times in surprise before replying.

“I would ask you to drop such formalities with me, Lady Agnes. It must have been cold outside. I have prepared a hot bath for you, so please enter.”

“I sincerely appreciate everything.”

Miss Kelly—or rather, just Kelly—seemed unexpectedly fond of me, despite my infamy as Lady Bumpkin. She was beautiful but not all that expressive, so she came across as cold at first glance, but her behavior didn’t show a hint of condescension toward me. She’d even prepared a warm bath for me, though that might have just been under Lord Nazelbart’s orders.

She was so kind, I honestly felt moved.

I couldn’t remember a single time a woman my age had been nice to me. The maids obedient to the House of Evantail mocked me as an ill-mannered lady because I complained about our house’s strict traditions. Outside the house, everyone looked down on me as the unsightly Lady Bumpkin. I knew that they only treated me that way because I looked so utterly peculiar, but I couldn’t openly defy my parents and oppose our family’s rules, so

it was virtually impossible for me to get my hands on any ordinary, modern clothing.

“This is your room, Lady Agnes. Welcome.”

“Oh, yes.”

Kelly opened a wooden door to reveal a carefully maintained, refined room. It lacked flashiness and cuteness, but it had beautiful furniture anyone could tell was high-class at a glance. The sofa and table were covered in calming, light-blue cloth. The bedcover was similarly a combination of light blue and white with a lovely floral pattern embroidered into it. A vase was filled to the brim with pale-pink flowers.

“Oh my, what a wonderful room.”

There was a world of difference from my room in the Evantail estate, which had massive wedding cabinets in gloomy colors crammed into every corner.

Our country had an old custom where a bride would take a complete set of furniture with her when she got married—including wedding cabinets. The House of Evantail still followed this outdated custom. The cabinets themselves were magnificent, just as my parents claimed. The craftsmanship was of high quality and showed strong attention to detail. However! With my ancestors bringing new cabinets into the house generation after generation, we now had about thirty of them. Every bride came as a set with three or so cabinets. There were even some who came with as many as five or six—my grandmother being one example. Since the cabinets were sturdy and never broke, their numbers just kept increasing. Ten of them surrounded my bed. If there had ever been an earthquake, I’d have been flattened in seconds.

*See?! The Florescruz estate has neat and tidy rooms!*

This room didn’t have the same suffocating atmosphere as my old one. Although it was currently dark outside, I could still tell that the wide window would offer a lovely view of the estate’s scenery.

While I was looking around restlessly, Kelly opened another door.

“Let us go to the bathroom first, Lady Agnes.”

“Oh, right.”

“I shall also remove your makeup. Right this way.”

The guest room I would be staying in was also connected to a

bathroom. I noticed a lovely smell as soon as I stepped inside. It felt like a mix of lavender and apple, sweet and fragrant. The bathtub had golden-colored cabriole legs, and the water's surface was covered in sizable bubbles. Kelly rolled up her sleeves and skillfully undressed me before urging me into the bathtub, then started silently washing my body. Unlike the maids back home who scrubbed my skin violently, she was much more careful.

"Oh my…" Kelly frowned slightly when she looked at my arms and feet.

*I wonder if she reacted like that because my foot blisters look horrible. As for my arms, it might be because of the whipping scars.*

My private tutor at the House of Evantail had whipped me mercilessly when I was younger. My parents had never put a stop to it, and in fact, there had even been times when they'd endorsed corporal punishment for their worthless daughter. The scars remained to this day.

"Do your injuries not hurt, Lady Agnes?"

"I'm fine. The scars on my arms don't bother me anymore, and I'm used to the blisters on my feet."

"I…see."

Kelly thoroughly removed my heavy makeup next. Like they did when bathing me, the maids back home handled my face roughly, but Kelly was gentle from beginning to end. Eventually, she stopped and stared at me.

"Dear me…" This time Kelly reached for the injury on my cheek. "Does this injury not sting either?"

She touched my cheek on the spot that had swollen up after my father had hit me. The thick makeup had concealed it, but now that it had been removed, the injury stood out. I'd grown used to being struck, so it had never bothered me until now.

"It does hurt a little, but I think the swelling will recede soon," I replied.

"I shall treat it as soon as we return to your room."

Finally, Kelly rinsed the bubbles from me with hot water, dried my body, and put a fluffy bathrobe on me.

"Wow! It's so soft and light!" I remarked.

Kelly tilted her head at my reaction, as if confused about why I would say that about an ordinary bathrobe.

*You don't understand; the bathrobes at home were stiff and heavy.*

I exited the bathroom and sat down on a soft chair. Kelly brought over ointment without a moment's delay and began tending to my injuries; she even prepared a cup of hot chocolate for me.

"Thank you very much."

This was the first time I'd received proper treatment after a beating, and I'd only ever had the chance to taste hot chocolate when away from home. My family valued living in honorable poverty; sweet things were seen as frivolous luxuries and were forbidden. My body had thoroughly warmed up thanks to the bath and the hot chocolate. Even though I'd been driven into a situation that didn't leave much room for optimism, I felt happy at the moment.

I brushed my teeth and got ready for bed, then sat down on my soft dome bed; I could finally relax. Kelly smiled when she saw me like that. She wasn't one to show much emotion, but I could still tell she was smiling at me. I was relieved that we seemed to be getting along well with each other despite the short time we'd been acquainted.

"Rest well, Lady Agnes. Good night."

"Good night to you too."

Kelly turned the lights off and left the room. I restlessly lay down in the middle of the bed.

"Isn't this bed a little too big?"

It was big enough for three people to comfortably lie down on it. A ducal estate was certainly impressive; even a simple detached building like this one was incredible. Wrapped up in the comfortable bedding, I soon drifted off to a peaceful dreamland.

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The next morning, I woke up, refreshed, to find an impeccably dressed Kelly by my side. She dexterously helped me get changed while informing me of today's plans.

"Good morning, Lady Agnes. I have prepared a change of clothes for you, and you will join Lord Nazelbart for breakfast later."

My eyes sparkled when I saw the clothes she had prepared for me.

“What is this adorable outfit, Kelly?”

“These clothes were ordered for you on short notice, Lady Agnes. Due to the lack of time, they’re only off-the-shelf products rather than tailored, but I assure you nothing is lacking about their quality.”

“Huh? You went to the trouble of preparing such wonderful clothes for me?! Am I in heaven?!” I instinctively spoke my thoughts out loud.

*They’re much cuter than anything I’ve worn before and light as a feather too!* There was no way I could rein in my excitement. *They feel nothing like the clothes assigned to me according to the House of Evantail’s absurd standards.* It didn’t matter that they were only off-the-shelf.

As I restlessly moved back and forth in front of the mirror, Kelly addressed me in a serious tone.

“Your injuries still require medical attention, Lady Agnes. I need to reapply the medicine. The swelling on your cheek has decreased considerably, but your bruises remain.”

“It’s just a matter of time. Give it a few weeks and it’ll be fine.”

“I understand,” Kelly said after a short pause.

She looked like she wanted to say something more, but she swiftly finished my treatment and led me in front of the dresser. She did my hair for me and started applying makeup with practiced movements.

“I’ll take the appropriate measures to hide the injury on your cheek,” she said.

Her eyes sparkled and she looked fully motivated, as if her lack of expression until now had been a lie. She periodically looked at the mirror while she applied makeup to my face and repeatedly nodded in satisfaction.

“Mm-hmm, it’s just as I thought. She’s a diamond in the rough! I need to pay attention not to negatively affect the injury, but I can’t wait to put my skills to use. Just the right amount of face powder here, and then some eye shadow that blends with the skin. How about a pink-brown lipstick? Of course we won’t go overboard with the blush and turn your face bright red; a little goes a long way.” Kelly worked while rapidly muttering something or other, and my face quickly moved in a great direction.

“Wow, it’s like I’m a different person.” My voice trembled with

emotion when I looked at myself after Kelly was finished. A beautiful woman was reflected in the mirror, a far cry from Lady Bumpkin.



*I've always had a bright-white face, deep-blue eye shadow, and bright-red blush and lipstick. Those, plus my hair tightly curled into the shape of a tornado, were my trademark.*

But that no longer seemed to be the case. I saw light-silver hair gently flowing down, makeup that wasn't too gaudy, a stylish, modern outfit in a tasteful brown, and shoes big enough for my feet to be comfortable, with flat bottoms that made it harder to slip and easier to walk.

Kelly nodded behind me with a soft, satisfied smile.

"I knew my eyes weren't deceiving me. You need to show Lord Nazelbart at once."

Urged by Kelly, I left my room and cheerfully headed to the dining room. Lord Nazelbart, immaculately dressed as always, was already awake and sitting at the table. His bright-red hair was carefully styled, making his flawless looks a dazzling sight this early in the morning.

"Good morning, Lord Nazelbart."

His amber eyes opened wide when he saw me.

"Good morning, Lady Agnes. You have a completely different air about you, compared to yesterday."

"Kelly changed my clothes for me and expertly did my makeup."

"That's great; it all suits you well. You look beautiful," he praised me gently. Even if he was just being polite, I'd never been called beautiful before, so I was delighted.

"Thank you very much. I owe it all to Kelly." I was so happy a smile naturally formed on my face. Kelly was standing by the wall with her usual neutral expression, but she somehow looked kind of proud.

"Kelly used to be a stylist for Her Highness, so her fashion sense is refined. Your heavy makeup yesterday made it impossible to tell, but you must be a natural beauty."

"I m-m-most certainly am not. But what was that about Kelly being Her Highness's stylist?"

"Thanks to her excellent fashion sense, she was partially in charge of Her Highness's outfits despite being just a maid."

*Why was such an outstanding person dressing me up?! Her skills are wasted on me!* I wondered in a panic.

Lord Nazelbart's next words were the answer to my unspoken question.

“However, she was fired because of Her Highness’s unreasonable behavior.”

“Huh? Why was she fired?”

“Royal stylists need to prepare exemplary formal outfits of a higher standard than those worn by ordinary nobles. Kelly and her coworkers were aware of that and proposed outfits appropriate for the time and place, but Her Highness had a problem with that. She wanted gaudier ceremonial outfits or sexier clothes that exposed her back and chest more. She made all sorts of unreasonable demands.”

“That certainly sounds inappropriate.”

“When Her Highness’s demands weren’t met, she complained to her stylists, and Kelly—the one with the lowest status—was made the scapegoat and lost her job. I happened to witness the scene, so I decided to hire her.”

Judging by the bold outfit I’d seen at the party, no one must have given Her Highness any further fashion advice since that incident.

*Lord Nazelbart is a truly kind person.*

I was glad that someone of Kelly’s caliber wasn’t left destitute. Apparently, Her Highness had acted rashly and fired servants time and again; it would seem she was a much more selfish person than I had imagined. It would be prudent if I kept my distance from now on.

“Incidentally, I expect the royal palace will issue a verdict about yesterday’s events before long, but depending on the result, you might suffer consequences, Lady Agnes. I’m truly sorry; everything is my fault. I intend to arrange things so you’ll be inconvenienced as little as possible.”

“You don’t need to apologize.”

“No, that is simply unacceptable. My actions have changed your entire life.”

I thought that Lord Nazelbart didn’t need to hold himself so responsible, but he was a very earnest individual. Be that as it may, he’d been awfully kind to me, so I didn’t want to cause him any further trouble.

“Then could I ask that you give me the clothes I’m wearing right now? I don’t have any clothes of my own; I’ve always worn my grandmother and great-grandmother’s hand-me-downs, and now

I no longer have even those. If I could please have just this outfit, I'll somehow manage on my own after that."

"That's out of the question."

"Begging for clothes was greedy of me, wasn't it? Forgive me, I got carried away."

Even if my clothes were ordinary ready-made goods, they had been given to me by a ducal house; they could be very expensive.

"That's not what I meant." Lord Nazelbart looked bewildered as he breathed a short sigh. "At any rate, I will try to negotiate so you can have a peaceful life, Lady Agnes. I will also contact Marquess Evantail and ask him to accept you back."

"Thank you, I appreciate it."

I couldn't imagine a member of the obstinate House of Evantail retracting their word, but I nodded obediently for now.

***

It was the middle of the night. Nazelbart was alone in the study on the first floor of the detached building, lost in contemplation.

*How did things turn out like this?*

With his unthinkable blunder thrust before him, he yet again lamented his own powerlessness.

"If only I'd been able to stop Her Highness beforehand."

He'd been too busy to attend to everything, but failing to notice what was going on had been a grave mistake.

*I never imagined she'd get pregnant with another man's child.*

The incident had come completely out of left field, and he'd made a pathetic display at the party venue.

The second son of the ducal House of Florescruz, Nazelbart, had been brought up from an early age being told he was outstanding. He also worked hard in order to meet the expectations of the people around him. As a high-ranking noble, he had a lot of responsibilities placed upon him, the most extreme of them all being his engagement to the princess. Their engagement had been decided when he was ten years old. Princess Mia was unbelievably selfish and equally arrogant, and she had no self-awareness as royalty. He still remembered the astonishing words she'd uttered during their first meeting.

“Hmm, so this is my fiancé. I suppose his face alone gets a passing mark.”

The very first thing she’d said was nothing short of an insult; it left the young Nazelbart speechless. He didn’t think he could come to love the haughty princess, but their engagement had been decided by royal decree. He set his personal feelings aside and started undergoing the strict education of a prince consort in order to become a spouse worthy of royalty. He was confined to a room in the royal palace and made to study relentlessly from morning till dusk, except when he participated in the knights’ swordsmanship and horsemanship training. He was also occasionally sent to the frontier or foreign countries. He believed it was all necessary for him to support the country in the future.

The king had other potential successors…but the first prince was frail and spent most of his time bedridden. As for the second prince, his mother was a commoner, so he had no political backing whatsoever, and he never demonstrated any determination to fight for the crown. That left Princess Mia, the queen’s outspoken biological child, to be endorsed as the future ruler.

Princess Mia spent all her time idling around with her entourage and ridiculed Nazelbart for studying so zealously to become the ideal prince consort. She continued to show zero self-awareness as the future queen no matter how much time passed. Nazelbart believed that even if the queen was unreliable, everything would be all right as long as he was levelheaded and didn’t let the country come to ruin. To achieve that goal, he devoted even more time to his studies, reducing his opportunities to spend time with the princess. People around him watched dispassionately from a distance as he studied and worked and criticized him for having no humanity and the like, but he had no time to entertain their insignificant opinions. Robin, Baron Levbition’s son, likely took advantage of that opening to deepen his bond with the princess. By the time Nazelbart noticed anything, it was already too late.

*I was naive. But I wonder, what was the right way to handle that selfish princess?*

He’d greatly underestimated Princess Mia’s recklessness; that was undeniably his mistake alone. He had baselessly believed that while she was uninhibited, there had to be some line she wouldn’t

cross.

*This was too much for me to handle from the start.*

Agnes had said that His Majesty would do something about it, but Nazelbart thought the prospects were dim. Everyone present during the party had heard the princess's statement that she was already pregnant with Robin's child. She fully intended to have that child, and there was no room for Nazelbart there. He'd endured all sorts of hardships because this engagement had been one of obligation, but he didn't want to return to being Princess Mia's fiancé now, not after what she'd done to him. In fact, a part of him was relieved to finally have that weight off his shoulders.

*I've failed as a prince consort.*

His only concern was that he'd dragged the unrelated Agnes into this mess. He'd been unaware of the rumors surrounding her, but the eldest daughter of the House of Evantail was apparently infamous among young nobles as an unfashionable woman, mocked as Lady Bumpkin in high society. The first time he'd seen her, she'd been wearing a cumbersome dress, and her hairstyle and thick makeup were the kind he'd only seen in portraits of people from several generations ago. He'd felt sorry for her as he'd watched her lug her dress around, and he'd ended up instinctively helping her when the hem of her dress got caught on a table. The nearby nobles had only laughed at her; not one had offered a helping hand. He'd been unable to simply remain indifferent and had called out to her, but that had been a mistake. Agnes had a strong sense of duty, so she'd helped Nazelbart when he'd been pushed down by the guards, earning her the princess's attention. As a result, she'd been publicly ordered to marry Nazelbart.

*Getting engaged to a criminal is a terrible dishonor for a young lady like her.*

Having been placed under such an order, she'd surely be unable to find a marriage partner in the future. Nazelbart had been worried that Agnes's future was ruined because of him, and when he'd gone to meet with her, she'd already been disowned. Such treatment was far too horrible for a sheltered young lady, and he'd experienced unbearable pity when he thought how she must have felt. He'd started searching for her right away and miraculously took her under his wing. However, despite everything she'd been through, Agnes didn't blame Nazelbart for a single thing and had

told him not to worry, even saying that she felt sorry *for him* having to marry her.

*I can't believe she would worry more about me than herself in her situation.*

When he looked at Agnes, he felt a pain in his chest and was seized with the strange feeling of wanting to protect something precious. This was the first time he'd experienced anything like this. She called herself Lady Bumpkin in self-deprecation, but underneath the thick makeup was a seventeen-year-old beauty. She had both great looks and personality, so he wanted her to have more self-confidence. He'd left Agnes in the care of Kelly, his trustworthy maid. She was the only maid who'd followed him to the detached building because of the fiasco surrounding his broken engagement. She'd done that despite having nothing to gain, as a servant of the House of Florescruz, from siding with the house's second son who might soon be sent to the frontier.

"For the time being, I suppose I have no choice but to await His Majesty's verdict before I can make any moves."

The House of Florescruz was divided right in half concerning this matter. Nazelbart's father and older brother called him a disappointment, while his mother and younger brother stood up for him and took offense at the royal family's duplicity. Nazelbart had moved to the detached building voluntarily as a way to take responsibility. Taking Agnes in had been completely unexpected, but there was a spare room, so he intended to offer her what protection was within his power. He couldn't leave a young woman alone in the capital during the night.

Agnes had said that she was fully intent on joining the Convent, but he didn't want her to end up in a place like that because of his blunder. The Convent was an institution supported through donations by the royal family and nobles and was also home to unmarried noble children who'd been temporarily entrusted to the Convent to keep them free for political marriages. It was greatly influenced by the royal family's whims, so there was no telling how Agnes, someone at the center of a scandal, would be treated if she went there.

Nazelbart brushed his bright-red hair upward and breathed a long sigh. Kelly returned from taking care of Agnes at that moment. She had been looking after Agnes since yesterday. Agnes

put on a brave front in front of Nazelbart, but he was worried that maybe she was pushing herself too hard.

“Lord Nazelbart, Lady Agnes has peacefully retired to bed tonight as well.” Kelly was under orders to report Agnes’s condition to Nazelbart each day.

“Thank you. How is she doing?”

“She’s surely anxious, but she acts surprisingly calm. She’s even courteous to a maid like me; she has a kind heart.” It would appear that Agnes was a deeply considerate person. “There is one slightly concerning matter though. When I removed her makeup, I saw a bruise caused by internal bleeding on her face. Her makeup was covering it when she first arrived here so I didn’t immediately notice. I adjusted her makeup this morning to hide it again and see if it would get better, but the bruise was still there tonight.”

“So she has injuries besides those blisters on her feet?”

“Correct. The bruise on her face isn’t the only one either. She also has scars from whipping on her wrists, though they were somewhat older. Of course, the blisters you treated were awful too, Lord Nazelbart. Her big toes are also bent, likely as a result of routinely wearing overly small shoes. And her skin has suffered discoloration from the repeated blisters.”

“Any other external injuries?”

“I was worried about deformities on her ribs because her old-fashioned dress came with a tight corset, but there doesn’t seem to be anything abnormal on that front. However, if she continues that kind of lifestyle, it will eventually harm her body.” Kelly was being awfully talkative, much more than one would expect from her usual behavior. Her fury toward the House of Evantail must have been substantial.

“Lady Agnes’s clothes and shoes seem like downright abuse. Was that the reason she looked particularly interested in her dress and shoes this morning?”

Nazelbart felt sympathy for Agnes’s circumstances and unconsciously covered his face. The House of Evantail was ridiculed in high society for adhering to century-old values, but they’d never caused any incidents and were trusted as nobles who earnestly managed their territory, however awkwardly they behaved. Yet there might be deeper darkness than he’d imagined lurking in that house.

“I believe there is merit in also looking into the cause of Lady Agnes’s facial injuries,” Nazelbart said.

“I agree. She has large bruises on two different parts of her face, so I find it unlikely they were caused by her bumping into something.”

“Then let’s investigate deeper. I might need to reconsider my plan to persuade the House of Evantail to withdraw her disownment and take her back.”

“I am of the same mind, Lord Nazelbart.”

Kelly was cold to everyone because of her experience with being fired at the royal palace and the characteristics of her magic, but it seemed like she was fond of Agnes—likely because Agnes was endearingly genuine.

“Can I ask you to take care of Lady Agnes again tomorrow, Kelly?”

“Of course. Please get some sleep soon yourself, Lord Nazelbart.”

It was late at night, so Nazelbart listened to Kelly. He entered the corridor and glanced toward the upper floor where Agnes’s room was, then headed to his own room with tired steps. He’d decided to protect her no matter what kind of verdict the king delivered. But if he were being honest with himself, he felt like throwing everything away.

***

The next morning, I had another delicious breakfast courtesy of the House of Florescruz. I was told that I could freely read the books in the detached building’s study and left the dining room in high spirits. My life here was like a dream come true, but as I was just a freeloader, I made sure to behave. I wanted to avoid disturbing Lord Nazelbart. Kelly led me to the study, where there were many books on magic. Lord Nazelbart had more mana than the average person and had diligently studied the use of magic. There were signs that he’d studied here for many years.

*I can’t help but feel terribly sorry for his current circumstances after he worked so hard.*

After I finished reading several simple books, I decided to return to my room. I would enjoy taking a walk outside, but it

would be very awkward if I happened to come across anyone from the House of Florescruz. I opened the door to head to the second floor, where I'd been staying since I'd been taken under Lord Nazelbart's protection, when I heard a loud voice from the drawing room.

*It's a man's voice but not Lord Nazelbart's. Who could it be?*

I headed toward the voice as if drawn to it and found that the drawing room's door was open. While I felt kind of guilty about listening, I was also curious, so I stealthily approached the room, hiding my presence, and strained my ears. I could hear the specifics of the conversation very clearly.

"I've told you so many times! I'm opposed to the royal family's methods! This situation is too unfair to you, elder brother!"

"And I've told you I'm all right. Besides, we haven't received the official verdict from the royal family yet."

"I know, but that doesn't mean you can afford to be blindly optimistic! If things continue like this, you'll be married off to Lady Bumpkin and get sent to the frontier! Why should you, who's worked harder than anyone, have to suffer like that?!"

I gulped and moved even closer to the door. Judging from what I'd heard so far, it had to be Lord Nazelbart and his younger brother inside. Lord Nazelbart's brother was on his side, and it was a relief to know that he was free to act in support of his brother—unlike me, who was effectively confined indoors.

"You'll be the laughingstock of high society if you marry Lady Bumpkin! That woman is a poor fit for you!"

*Yeah, that's the expected reaction.*

I was a little shocked to hear him say it so openly, but I also fully agreed with him on this matter. Lord Nazelbart and I had far too many differences. I was completely worthless in terms of status, looks, and ability. He had nothing to gain from getting married to someone like me.

"Lady Bumpkin is staying here now, isn't she? You should kick her out before any weird rumors start circulating!"

*Lord Nazelbart's brother is...making a fair argument!*

Interesting as the conversation was, I knew eavesdropping was wrong. I turned around to quickly head back to my room, feeling down. However, I stopped in my tracks when I heard Lord Nazelbart's response.

“I won’t allow you to insult her like that. And I have no intention of driving her out of here,” Lord Nazelbart resolutely told his brother.

“Why?! Taking in that woman will only bring you trouble. I’ll kick that ugly, conceited woman out myself right now!”

“Wait, Julian!”

*So his younger brother is called Lord Julian*, I mused just as the door opened and something crashed into me.

“Argh!”

Violently blown away, I rolled across the floor and crashed into the wall. I could hear several footsteps and Lord Nazelbart sorrowfully shouting, “Lady Agnes!”

*I can’t hold on anymore. I’m feeling dizzy and can’t stand up.*

I started losing consciousness and finally heard a loud thud as my head bumped against the wall, completely robbing me of my senses.

I felt a sudden chill and opened my heavy eyelids to be greeted by an extravagant bed canopy. I could see the black of night beyond the lace curtains, and wind was blowing from the slightly open window.

*I need to get up.*

I remembered what had happened earlier and restlessly sat upright. My head hurt and I could feel a large bump on the back when I touched it.

*I passed out in the corridor; someone must have carried me to my room on the second floor.*

When I got out of bed and stood up, an uncharacteristically flustered Kelly hurried to my side.

“Lady Agnes! Are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine now. I’m sorry for making you worry.”

While Kelly was usually expressionless, she was a very kindhearted woman.

“Lord Nazelbart was also greatly worried about you, Lady Agnes. After he carried you here, he was unusually shaken up.”

“What, really? Oh no! I’ve caused so much trouble for him!”

I had to apologize, so I hurried to the first floor where Lord Nazelbart was. I found him not in the drawing room but in the dining room, sitting down with an unfamiliar red-haired boy. I’d

never seen his face because I'd fainted, but I assumed this was Lord Julian. When he noticed me, Lord Nazelbart vigorously got up from his chair and rushed over to me.

"Are you feeling all right, Lady Agnes? You shouldn't push yourself."

"I'm doing fine now. I apologize for all the trouble I caused you, Lord Nazelbart. And I'm very grateful to you for carrying me to my room."

"Wait, you don't have anything to apologize for. Julian is the one at fault for rushing out of the room without checking if anyone was there first," Lord Nazelbart said as he scowled at his brother.

Lord Julian looked at me timidly before speaking.

"I, well, I'm sorry. But this has to be some kind of scam. Are you really Lady Bumpkin?"

Lord Nazelbart picked up a thick book that was on the table and wordlessly threw it at his brother after he asked that question. The book hit Lord Julian right in the face and knocked him off his chair.

*That sounded pretty loud. Is he okay? And did the meek Lord Nazelbart just* throw *a book?*

Lord Julian looked calm despite the sudden attack; Lord Nazelbart also looked the same as usual.

"I apologize for my brother's discourtesy, Lady Agnes. I'll be sure to teach him some manners later."

"Um, you don't need to worry about me. Is Lord Julian fine though?"

"He's a sturdy boy, so he'll be all right. His magic is impact mitigation."

"I-I see."

Lord Julian swiftly stood up while I was still bewildered and approached me.

"I am the third son of the ducal House of Florescruz, Julian Florescruz. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"My name is Agnes Evantail, although I've been disowned. I owe a great deal to Lord Nazelbart."

"I heard about the situation from my elder brother. I'm truly sorry that you got caught up in our house's problem."

"No, I'm the one who should be apologizing. Her Highness's order for Lord Nazelbart to marry me has caused great trouble for the House of Florescruz."

“Well, that’s…”

Lord Julian averted his eyes, but I’d heard his true feelings before I’d passed out; moreover, I wholeheartedly agreed with him. However, the nearby Lord Nazelbart vehemently denied my claim.

“I don’t feel troubled by you.”

“Huh?”

“Let’s take a seat for now, Lady Agnes. I can’t make a lady who was just bedridden stand up for so long. And a messenger from the royal palace arrived while you were asleep, so I’d like us to discuss His Majesty’s verdict.”

“Very well. The message came surprisingly fast, didn’t it?”

Prompted by Lord Nazelbart, I took a seat, while Lord Julian picked up the book from the floor and placed it back on the table in front of me.

“This is the document the messenger brought. It details Her Highness’s conduct, the false charges against my brother, and Robin’s actions; His Majesty apparently commissioned a thorough investigation. It also describes the cover story that will be officially announced to the public, as well as how you and my brother will be treated,” Lord Julian said.

“It’s a rather hefty document,” I observed. I had a bad feeling about this.

“I will summarize the document’s contents for you since it’s far too long, Lady Agnes,” Lord Nazelbart said.

“Thank you very much. Please, continue.”

Lord Nazelbart started explaining as he flipped through the document’s pages.

“First of all, His Majesty has acknowledged that the charges against me are false. There are apparently multiple eyewitnesses for Her Highness’s improper conduct and Master Robin’s repeated romantic advances. The people who testified that I attacked Master Robin were paid by him and Her Highness.”

“That means the two of them have been found complicit and you innocent, right?!”

Despite the good news, Lord Nazelbart didn’t look happy and continued in an indifferent tone.

“Her Highness is already expecting Master Robin’s child, and many nobles have now heard of that. It’s a fact that can’t be kept

secret.”

“True, nothing can be done regarding Her Highness’s pregnancy.”

It would likely be difficult for Lord Nazelbart to go back to being Her Highness’s fiancé at this point.

“That’s why the public will be given the following story: ‘Her Highness has decided to give birth to the child of a man with sacred powers—Master Robin—for the sake of the country.’ They say it will be in the form of a royal decree.”

“But why?!”

I didn’t like it one bit, but this country often hid the truth from the public. Even so, it was still odd to completely overlook Master Robin and Her Highness’s criminal behavior of hiring those false witnesses.

“It’s to hide the scandal surrounding the royal family, of course. Publicly, the matter of my alleged crimes will be left vague. But I was told that if I decided to return to being Her Highness’s fiancé, I would be openly declared innocent.”

“Meaning that you would become Her Highness’s husband for the sake of appearances?”

“Indeed. Moreover, Master Robin will be welcomed as her lover. And if their child is a boy, he’ll be the next king.”

“That sounds like utter nonsense!”

How much would the Desnim royal family hurt Lord Nazelbart before they were satisfied?

“I agree with you, so I refused. As a result, my exile to the frontier stands. It seems like His Majesty didn’t expect me to accept in the first place, and he likely thought that forcing Her Highness to marry me wouldn’t go well.”

“Even His Majesty himself chose to cover up their scandal instead of doing what’s best for the future of the country?”

“I wonder. It appears that the king and queen don’t see eye to eye. Master Robin is apparently already causing all sorts of problems in the castle. His Majesty might even be considering handing over the throne to the second prince.”

“You mean that since the first prince is in no condition to handle government affairs, the second prince is the runner-up, yes?”

Before all this happened, Her Highness had been due to

become the next queen under the condition that she got married to Lord Nazelbart. Since she hadn't spent a minute studying how to deal with government affairs, the future of the country was currently in jeopardy.

"A series of disputes have made many nobles start taking action. The question is whether to support Her Highness or the second prince."

"The decision would normally be up to His Majesty, correct? Does he currently have any plans for how to make Her Highness the next ruler?"

"His Majesty is in a complicated position. The current queen is my aunt, and she's descended from my grandmother who married into our house from our country's other ducal family. This means that the heads of the two ducal families are on Her Majesty's side."

Our country had two ducal houses, each highly influential. The first was Lord Nazelbart's House of Florescruz, while the second was the House of Addamsgomes. The current queen was originally a member of the House of Florescruz, and she also had the blood of the House of Addamsgomes running through her veins. Lord Nazelbart had been a prince-consort candidate largely due to his house's influence.

"My father and other members of my house believe they will be able to control Her Highness's child for their own benefit, but I am opposed to their idea. Making the country's king into their puppet is preposterous, no matter the blood relations."

Perhaps the members of the House of Florescruz thought that Master Robin would be much easier to manipulate than Lord Nazelbart.

*Maybe that's why they're staying silent regarding Lord Nazelbart's banishment.* Nevertheless, this verdict was horrible. *It's completely unfair that Lord Nazelbart alone is bearing the consequences of so many things outside his control, like Her Majesty's ambition to have one her children inherit the throne, Her Highness's selfishness, and both ducal houses' ambitions.*

The royal palace was already taking measures to spread their cover story to the public. If Lord Nazelbart wasn't formally vindicated, many people would mistakenly assume he really was a criminal. When he saw my indignant expression, he smiled, looking a little troubled.

“It’s already decided. The risk of the truth coming to light will increase if I stay nearby, and that would be very inconvenient for the royal family. I think that’s why they want me to move to the frontier.”

“That’s truly selfish.”

There was nothing I could do about it, but the situation was still far too irrational to stomach. Why did such a kind, hardworking person have to be exiled to the frontier and have his whole life uprooted?

“I’ll be all right. I’m more concerned about you, Lady Agnes. In the next part of the document, it states that should I decline to marry Her Highness, I will have to get married to you as originally ordered and go rule over the frontier region of Sutrena as its margrave.”

The Margravate of Sutrena specified in the document was located near the country’s border. Its ruler had passed away a few years ago and a steward dispatched from the royal capital was currently in charge. Between the frequent manabeast attacks and an ongoing labor shortage, it would be a rather difficult area to manage. The frontier would surely benefit from the outstanding Lord Nazelbart’s leadership, but the people there might be wary of him since there were rumors of him being a criminal. The future awaiting him in Sutrena might very well be one of hardship.

Lord Nazelbart watched me ponder everything as he continued speaking.

“I was originally planning to persuade the House of Evantail to take you back. But now, I’m not so sure that’s a good idea. Your face is injured, right, Lady Agnes?”

“Yes, it is. The bruise has faded somewhat, but you still noticed, didn’t you?”

Lord Nazelbart closed his amber eyes and silently nodded.

“Don’t worry, they always disappear after a month or so,” I assured him.

“‘Always,’ you say?” Lord Nazelbart suddenly opened his eyes and leaned toward me with obvious concern.

“Um, my father…routinely beats me because I’m incompetent.”

“You will *not* be returning to the House of Evantail,” Lord Nazelbart muttered. He seemed worried, but somehow his profile looked dashing.

“Excuse me, Lord Nazelbart, but I think I’ll be joining the Convent.”

I again told him of the destination I’d decided on beforehand, but he fervently shook his head and immediately rejected my plan.

“I’m opposed to the idea. If you go there right now, you’ll most certainly have a difficult time because of the disgraceful rumors surrounding you.”

“At such a peaceful institution?”

“The Convent operates thanks to subsidiary aid from the country, meaning that the country’s views—that is, the royal family’s views—have great influence there. Someone like you who’s being treated so unfairly by the country will only find cruelty waiting.”

“Oh no…” I hung my head in disappointment once I realized I couldn’t expect anything good from my intended destination.

*I don’t want to return home, and I can’t go to the Convent, which would only leave…*

I wouldn’t be discouraged yet. I raised my head and looked at Lord Nazelbart’s handsome profile.

“Then I’ll accompany you to Sutrena. As long as you aren’t opposed to the idea, of course.”

“I don’t know what kind of life awaits us at the frontier.”

“Even so, I think it’s the best option.”

Continuing to stay at the ducal estate would of course be better, but that would be impossible after Lord Nazelbart left. I also didn’t have the confidence to go out and enter the workforce. The part of the royal decree about us getting married was certainly an issue, but if he was seriously opposed to the idea, a sham marriage was very much possible. I didn’t think he would treat me heartlessly.

*I’m fine with him having children with whomever he has feelings for. I won’t meddle one bit!*

It was a great honor for me—Lady Bumpkin—to be Lord Nazelbart’s wife, even for a short time or in name only.

“Are you really sure?” Lord Nazelbart asked me.

“Of course, as long as it’s all right with you. Oh, but you wouldn’t want to get married to Lady Bumpkin, would you? I don’t mind us having a fake marriage. There’s no escaping the marriage itself since it’s a direct order from His Majesty, but please tell me when you find a woman you like, and I will gracefully step aside.”

Lord Nazelbart was the benefactor who'd picked me up from the streets. I didn't want to cause him any trouble whatsoever.

"I apologize for being far inferior to Her Highness as a partner," I said.

"No, compared to taking Her Highness as my wife, you would be—" Lord Nazelbart started mumbling something in a quiet voice, but I couldn't quite hear the whole thing.

*Oh well.*

Amid this conversation, the nearby Lord Julian slammed his hands on the table and stood up.

"I'll accompany you too, elder brother. Our father and house's way of thinking is wrong."

I wondered if he was saying this because I'd said I wanted to go with Lord Nazelbart. Lord Julian started talking with a serious voice about going to the frontier too, but Lord Nazelbart rejected his offer.

"I'd like you to protect our house, Julian."

Lord Julian fell silent, biting his lip and looking troubled.

"I can't stay at the House of Florescruz anymore. I leave mother in your hands, Julian."

Lord Julian looked frustrated and I imagined he was displeased with this state of affairs, but he nodded at his brother.

"And could you go check up on father and elder brother? They should have also been informed about the investigation's findings and the decision regarding my case."

"Very well," Julian replied after a short pause.

After Lord Nazelbart confirmed that his brother had left the room, he turned toward me, knelt down, and took both of my hands in his.

"Lady Agnes."

"Yes, what is it?"

"Will you marry me?"

His words held such tremendous destructive force that my brain stopped functioning for a moment. It took me a moment to comprehend what he'd just said. I stared at him.

"Was that a proposal? Did you just *propose* to me?!" I shouted.

Lord Nazelbart nodded at my astonished words and voiced his feelings with an earnest expression.

"That's right. Lady Agnes, I'd like you to become my wife and

come with me to the frontier.”

He’d probably sent Lord Julian away so we could have this conversation in private.

“You must be talking about a fake marriage. Of course, I will accompany you anywhere.”

Lord Nazelbart looked discontent when he heard my reply.

“No, I’m not. The woman is the one to suffer after a fake marriage is canceled. You really will have nowhere to go if that happens. I don’t want to do anything that would make people criticize you behind your back. I’d like us to have a real marriage, as long as you also agree.”

“Aren’t you being a little too kind, Lord Nazelbart?”

“May I hear your reply to my proposal, Lady Agnes?”

“My answer is yes! But are you sure you won’t regret this?! I’m Lady Bumpkin, a woman who doesn’t even begin to measure up to Her Highness!”

“There is no way I’ll regret this. I’m honestly relieved I’m getting married to you and not Her Highness.” Lord Nazelbart then kissed the back of my hand. “I don’t care that I was ordered to marry you; I will still treasure you, Lady Agnes. Although to be honest, you might face a lot of hardship at the frontier.”

“Bring it on, I say.”

I replied to his proposal boldly, my head filled with excitement far past the recommended dosage.

*I can’t believe I’m getting married to such a wonderful man. I feel like my nose might start bleeding any moment now.*

Lord Nazelbart looked ever so slightly happy, but it was probably my imagination; I knew I shouldn’t get conceited. He looked at me, disoriented though I was, with a soft yet intense smile.

“I hope we get along from now on, Lady Agnes.”

“Likewise. I might be incompetent, but I hope we can get alyong.”

The excessive stress made me fumble my words; I was so embarrassed I could die. Lord Nazelbart didn’t seem to mind though. He actually looked somewhat satisfied as he let go of my hands.

And so my marriage with Lord Nazelbart was decided with no hiccups.

***

Kelly silently watched over Nazelbart and Agnes, who'd just decided to get married.

*I'm so happy for you, Lord Nazelbart.*

Kelly had noticed that her master had started having special feelings for Agnes. It was something he'd never gone through during his engagement with the princess. The man bound to his duty was becoming more human—in a good way. It was unlikely anyone looking at Nazelbart now would say he lacked humanity.

Kelly was the eldest child of a large commoner family living in a suburb of the royal capital. All of her younger siblings were brothers. Other than her slightly special magic ability, she was an ordinary girl of the sort you could find anywhere. When she passed the age of ten, she decided to look for employment in the capital proper; nominally, this was to help provide for her brothers. Some adults sympathized with her, and though her parents tried to stop her, she was actually relieved to get out of that hellish home where the piles of housework and constant babysitting didn't leave her with any time for herself. Kelly knew that her parents weren't worried about her. They just wanted to continue taking it easy and foisting their parental responsibilities on her, no matter what they said to the contrary. They'd made Kelly a second mother and forced her to look after her unrefined, violent brothers.

When Kelly forcefully secured employment and practically ran away from home, her mother was clearly disappointed and criticized her daughter, but she was barking up the wrong tree. Kelly's parents had made the decision to have many children, knowing full well how difficult it would be to take care of them. They couldn't complain about the heavy load of housework and childcare when it was the direct result of their choices. But Kelly was different. She had only happened to be born the eldest daughter in such a large family. The role of mother had been forced upon her at an early age simply because she'd been born first and a girl. What was so wrong about wanting to run away from all that? She figured her departure would be a good chance for her parents to teach her spoiled younger brothers—who only

had a knack for violence—how to do housework.

Although Kelly still had to work as a babysitter after leaving home, it was obviously preferable to look after fewer children and actually get paid for it. Even she knew that her decision was drastic. Children didn't usually leave their homes so young, but Kelly had her magic ability to support her, so she had departed with no hesitation.

Not wanting to go back home, Kelly desperately pursued employment opportunities in the capital. She started out as a babysitter, but her success widened her job options, and she took each opportunity to advance toward higher goals. Perhaps it was because she'd been surrounded by only boys at home, but Kelly liked taking care of girls. She came to genuinely enjoy fashion and dressing up after coming to the capital and found joy in making the girls she babysat happy by prettying them up. She even felt like this was her life's calling.

After losing their free babysitter, Kelly's parents found themselves at a complete loss and interfered with her work on countless occasions to try and force her to come back home. Over and over again she found herself facing troubles at work. The reason she could continue working even under those conditions was thanks to the help of a certain someone she'd coincidentally met during her work. She was given a job in the royal palace where she was tasked with looking after women of high social standing.

Eventually, the princess took notice of Kelly's great fashion sense and employed her as a stylist. After the events that led to her firing, Nazelbart saved her, and now she was currently responsible for taking care of his future wife, Agnes. Agnes was different from any of the noble ladies Kelly had taken care of before, but Kelly liked her.

*I haven't felt such pure goodwill since Lord Nazelbart.*

Kelly's magic allowed her to peek into people's hearts and get a sense of how they felt toward her. Specifically, it could tell whether someone was friendly or malicious and whether they were speaking the truth. She mostly just got vague impressions of others' attitudes and intentions, but she received a great shock whenever someone directed outright malice toward her. As a

result of trying to stay composed during those times, she had eventually started spending her days with an indifferent demeanor. Her parents' words were full of lies, and the princess and her coworkers were full of scorn for a commoner like her.

But what Kelly felt from Nazelbart and Agnes was genuine kindness. And after all was said and done, dressing up Agnes was more than worth it. She'd been dismissed as Lady Bumpkin so far, but she was a diamond in the rough that would shine brighter the more she was polished. That was why Kelly had decided to accompany these two to the frontier, even if she had to force the matter. They occupied first place inside her heart.

*Life on the frontier doesn't seem as bad as I thought. I will accompany them wherever they go.*

Kelly's lips unknowingly loosened as she looked at the exchange between Agnes and Nazelbart.

*I'll spare no effort to help you enjoy a happy marriage.*

Life in a new land would have its difficult aspects, but Kelly decided to protect their smiles no matter what.

# Chapter 3: Lady Bumpkin Goes to the Frontier

Henry Billket, the government official in charge of the Margravate of Sutrena, listened to his subordinate with a frown. He brushed back his bluish-black hair, pushed up his glasses, and looked over a thick stack of documents. Three years had passed since he'd been dispatched from the capital following the previous margrave's death, but the number of manabeasts in Sutrena had yet to go down, and the labor shortage remained pressing.

The one who'd come to report to him was Connie, a low-ranking official and Henry's subordinate. He was a slightly boorish seventeen-year-old with frizzy, deep-brown hair and light-brown, freckled skin. He looked at Henry, who was silently working away, and addressed him worriedly.

"How about you take a short break, Master Henry? You're looking kind of pale."

"I'm doing fine. Continue with your report."

People around Henry often said that he looked unhealthy or overworked because of his pale skin, but he'd been born looking like that. Life out on the frontier wasn't very difficult for this self-proclaimed healthy man in his thirties. In fact, he felt that it suited him much more than the hive of scheming that was the royal capital. The only problem was that his work here kept him so busy that he didn't even have time to sleep, since he didn't have anyone to fill in for him. However, signs of improvement had started coming within sight even under these adverse conditions. His fervent request, ignored for so long, that the king appoint another supervisor to share the workload had been approved—or so he'd thought until he listened to Connie's report and lost all hope.

"And there you have it, Master Henry. When you asked the royal capital to do something because we're understaffed, they sent over a duke's criminal son and Lady Bumpkin. The guys at the capital are such jerks. Why are they harassing us like this?"

"You don't need to editorialize. Just deliver the report, Connie."

"But isn't this too cruel? This isn't a garbage dump for criminal

scum."

"We can't do anything about whom they decided to send. We don't have the authority to send them back."

News from the royal capital arrived at the frontier with a short delay. According to rumors, the past misdeeds of the duke's son had been exposed during the celebration of his engagement to the princess, and so their engagement had been annulled. As punishment, he'd been forced to marry the famously hideous Lady Bumpkin, the pariah of high society. If he was coming to the frontier, she would be coming with him.

"Oh man, I wish a hot woman would come instead. I've heard Lady Bumpkin looks hideous," Connie continued complaining.

"You shouldn't say things like that about women, Connie."

"The rumors say Lady Bumpkin has a pure-white face, deep-blue eye shadow, and bright-red blush and lipstick. She ain't just scary for a lady but for a human being in general. We're already swarming with manabeasts and now we're also gonna get the dreadful Lady Manabumpkin on top of that? Gimme a break."

"Stop calling her that. Her name is Agnes, formerly of the House of Evantail."

Connie was a hopeless young man in some respects, but Henry found him useful because he was a skilled manabeast exterminator, if nothing else. His magic was suited for offense, so he was a reliable presence in Sutrena.

"At any rate, we have to make preparations to welcome them from the capital," Henry said.

"Lady Bumpkin will probably be useless, so we're essentially only getting one extra helper. What do we do if the duke's son is an incorrigible scumbag?"

"We'll deal with that when the time comes. In any case, someone has to meet them at the town of Loa, the midpoint of their journey. There are no roads between here and there fit for a carriage. Go and welcome them, Connie."

"Oh come on, you want *me* to do it?"

"That's right, you'll get there the fastest. They'll be arriving at Loa in ten days, so get ready and stay on standby."

Connie looked very clearly displeased, but he followed the orders of Henry—who'd now finished looking over the documents—and obediently left the room.

“Nazelbart, the second son of the House of Florescruz, is it? I just hope he turns out to be harmless.”

Henry’s other subordinates watched him nervously as he heaved a heavy sigh and pressed down on his forehead.

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After he finished speaking with Henry, Connie headed to Sutrena’s manabeast breeding farm. Mountbeasts—manabeasts used for transportation—were raised and trained there. Just like different animals could be friendly or hostile to humans, so did manabeasts’ personalities greatly differ between individuals and species. The mountbeasts in this breeding farm were gentle and could fly faster than horses could run. The use of mountbeasts around the capital was forbidden by Desnim law, but they were an indispensable means of transportation out here, where paved roads were uncommon.

Connie’s magic was fleetfoot, a type that allowed him to move much faster than ordinary humans. It was the ideal magic for delivering messages, picking up and dropping off people, and exterminating manabeasts. The downside was that his mana wasn’t very high, so he could move fast only for short spurts.

“Man, this sucks.”

Connie wasn’t fond of authority figures. He had even been wary of Henry at first, who was just temporarily in charge of this frontier region. Naturally, he didn’t think well of a criminal being dispatched there.

“This is all such a drag. We’ll be lucky if he does nothing, but if he turns out to be some weirdo with a passionate sense of duty and he starts acting as he pleases without caring about the circumstances here, we’ll be in deep trouble. Who do you think’s gonna clean up the mess afterward, huh?”

All of the nobles sent from the capital to manage Sutrena before Henry had been horrible people. They established unnecessary policies one after the other for their own self-satisfaction and abused their authority to mistreat Connie and the other people of the frontier. They all eventually said they were sick of life on the frontier and returned to the capital, or else tried to line their pockets by taxing everything like morons only to realize

the less affluent residents of Sutrena couldn’t afford it, at which point they’d start engaging in robber-like activities. Every last one of them had been terrible.

“Gimme a break already.”

But if Connie acted however he felt like, it would cause trouble for Henry. It was best to shut up and listen to him here.

“But it’s still so irritating.”

Connie entered the sturdy wooden barn and was about to take a mild-mannered manabeast out when a malicious idea suddenly came to his mind.

“A noble like him can surely ride even something like this. All right, change of plans.”

Connie prepared a wyvern, a type of manabeast notorious among mountbeasts for being difficult to handle.

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Lord Nazelbart and I soon filed the appropriate papers and officially became a married couple, then began preparations to leave for the frontier. When Kelly said she was coming with us, we declined at first because life there would be arduous, but we eventually gave in.

On another note, all sorts of developments took place at the royal palace while we were still living in the detached building. Master Robin, now the future prince consort, apparently started living at the palace and began studying for his new role. However, he wasn’t very good at memorization and showed no signs of seriously studying, so his education was off to a rough start.

The weather was surprisingly calm on the day we were to set off for the frontier. We rode in a large carriage meant for long-distance travel and leisurely departed the capital. I felt at ease with two trusted people next to me. We first had to make a ten-day trip to a provincial town. We would then use a different means of transportation from the provincial town to get to a town near the border. I enjoyed our pleasant trip, dressed in light, comfortable clothes. A long trip like this would probably be harsh on an ordinary lady, but I’d ridden a carriage all across the countryside in heavyweight dresses more times than I could count, so I was a tough cookie.

*Heh heh heh, traveling in light, flexible clothes is so much fun!*

I still had plenty of stamina left. The problem was that Lord Nazelbart, now happily my husband, rode in the same carriage and was constantly really close to me. Every time his amber eyes turned my way, my heart skipped a beat. Handsome, kind, brilliant, the perfect son of a duke—he was a saint who was friendly even to me for some reason.

"Now that we're married, I want you to call me Nazel, Lady Agnes. That's what those close to me usually call me."

This truly challenging request suddenly came my way, but I wanted to fulfill it for the person who'd done so much for me.

"Of course, Lord Nazel. Please also call me simply by name."

"All right, Agnes."

*Hnnngh! Be still, my beating heart!*

Hearing him call me that in person proved to be almost fatal and I writhed in my seat. I emptied my mind and started reviewing our destination in order to regain my composure.

"Lord Nazel, we'll be going to the Margravate of Sutrena at the southern tip of the country, right? I've heard that it's a place with abundant nature; there's a forest and also the seacoast."

"That's correct. But it's exactly because it's surrounded by nature that many manabeasts inhabit it. It's by far the area with the most manabeast attacks in the entirety of Desnim. Sutrena's army and knights from the capital are permanently stationed there and protect the people from the daily manabeast attacks. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they stop the manabeasts from invading the country's interior."

"It also borders a foreign country, right? Sutrena has the ocean to the west, a forest to the east, and Polpystan to the south. Zazame and Hihime are the regions of Desnim to the north."

Polpystan was a large foreign country with a neutral relationship to Desnim. The first prince, who was rumored to be bedridden, had apparently married a Polpystani princess.

"Indeed. Zazame and Hihime lie to the northeast and northwest, respectively."

"Sutrena's main industries are fishing and forestry, and apparently people often go into the forest to gather food."

"There's also hunting, because their harvests are poor despite the flourishing vegetation."

“Is the soil the cause?”

“I don’t know much about that. I’ll have to investigate more on-site.”

“I’ll do anything I can to help.”

The serious conversation helped return my heart to normal. Things were going well.

“Incidentally, what kind of magic can you use, Agnes?”

Lord Nazelbart was well-versed in magic—there were a lot of tomes on magic back at the detached building too. He was probably the kind of person interested in magic itself.

“My magic is matter reinforcement. It’s plain and has no utility, but I could use it to make old clothes or bags sturdier back home.”

“That’s quite the interesting magic. It sounds like it could have many applications.”

Lord Nazelbart had kind words for me as usual, but I couldn’t imagine my magic having much use now that I’d received new clothes.

“Since you brought the topic up, what kind of magic can you use, Lord Nazelbart?”

“Call me Nazel, Agnes.”

“Ah…”

I wasn’t used to calling him by a pet name yet. Lord Nazelbart—or rather, Lord Nazel—then told me about his magic.

“My magic can make plants grow or move. I want to put it to use cultivating crops on the frontier.”

Magic that could be used on nature was highly valued in Desnim. It was easier to apply than other magic and was typically powerful and effective in a wide range of situations.

“I brought along some seedlings that I grew with my magic back home. If they turn out to be useful in agriculture, Sutrena might produce enough food to be self-sufficient and become more stable.”

“That’s incredible.” He was nothing like me, who’d only thought about stopping my clothes from deteriorating.

We discussed this and that as the carriage peacefully continued along the gently sloping path. After a ten-day journey, we arrived at the town of Loa. It had significantly fewer people and stores than the capital, and it was where we would be changing our mode of transport on our way to the frontier. Regions far away

from the capital didn't have highways, so it was impossible to travel there by carriage. Instead, we would be riding manabeasts that could walk across narrow paths or fly.

Manabeasts that could be ridden were called mountbeasts. They received special training and many of them were friendly to humans. There weren't any mountbeasts in my family's mark, so this would be my first time seeing one in person. I had seen shops all around town that sold or rented mountbeasts as well as businesses that transported people and cargo on mountbeasts. The most common mountbeasts were pegasi, winged horses that could gallop across the sky; they were popular because they handled similarly to regular horses. There were also mountbeasts that could run fast on land, such as large birds with long legs, as well as reptilian or lupine creatures. Our mounts would apparently be brought here by the people of Sutrena. I'd never even ridden on a horse, much less a mountbeast, so I'd have to ride with someone.

"Have you ridden a mountbeast before, Lord Nazel?"

"Of course. I've been to all sorts of territories as part of my prince-consort education. I was trained in riding mountbeasts back then. There's no demand for the skill in the capital, but knowing how to ride them is still valuable," Lord Nazel replied, perfect as always. He never failed to impress.

We observed the town while we waited for our escort at the designated location. Warm sunlight poured into the tidy waiting room. A brand-new wooden table and chairs were placed in one corner of the room.

"You can ride with me, Agnes."

"Thank you very much. I can't ride a mountbeast, so I'm relieved to hear that."

Lord Nazel got perfect marks in consideration too.

After a short time, a gruff-looking, freckled young man rushed into the waiting room. He had tanned skin, characteristic of the frontier, and brown hair that verged on orange. He blinked the moment he saw us, then approached with quick steps.

"You must be Lord Nazelbart."

"Yes, I am. Are you our escort from Sutrena?"

"Yes, my name is Connie Phon. Now..."

For some reason, Connie glanced around the waiting room and

looked back to Lord Nazel in confusion. He looked like he was searching for someone.

"Excuse me, but where is your wife?"

The waiting room fell silent.

*I'm here, right in front of you.*

Lord Nazel cleared his throat, then reached out his hand to my back and embraced me. I was completely stunned by that sudden action.

"Allow me to introduce you. This is my wife, Agnes."

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Agnes. I appreciate you coming to pick us up," I greeted Connie while smiling awkwardly.

*I'll be all right; Kelly took care of my clothes and makeup as usual. He shouldn't want to make a run for it as soon as he sees my face!* Kelly was a magnificent stylist after all.

Connie stared at me with his mouth hanging open and looked like he had no idea what was going on. Lord Nazel smiled at him, his hand still supporting my back.

"I'm truly lucky to have her," Lord Nazel said.

*Eep! You flatter me too much!*

He probably didn't mean anything special by it, but I still almost had a heart attack.

Connie recovered while I was all flustered and guided us to two massive mountbeasts, one red and one blue. The mountbeasts screeching in front of us were reptilian, with sharp claws growing on their hind legs, wings spreading out wide, and small forelegs at the tips of their wings. Their tails were long, and each had a triangular spine at the tip.

"Wh-What are these?"

I was brimming with curiosity since this was my first time seeing a mountbeast up close, but Lord Nazel looked like he wanted to say something.

"They're wyverns."

"Why...barns?"

I'd never seen such a large manabeast before, but many lizards lived in the garden of the Evantail estate.

*They're just bigger and have wings, right? I'm so glad they aren't some really bizarre kind of manabeast!*

I'd once read about slimy, mud-like manabeasts or others that looked like plump caterpillars, so I'd been worried.

“Um, will you be okay, Agnes?” Lord Nazel asked with concern while I stared at the wyverns.

“Okay with what?”

“I thought we’d be riding pegasi. Women are often scared of wyverns.”

“I’m fine. Can you ride mountbeasts beside pegasi, Lord Nazel?”

“Yes, I can ride wyverns too.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Let’s go, then.”

This would be my first time riding a mountbeast, so my heart was beating like crazy. Our wyvern was beautiful, with deep-blue skin and emerald-green eyes. When the light shone upon it, it reflected off of its skin and made it change colors like an aurora. The docile wyvern stared at us with curious eyes. A grin reflexively formed on my face.

“There, there, who’s a good wyvern? You are! Yes, you! Aw, what a beauty! I actually love animals like this,” I said.

“Huh? Really?” Lord Nazel looked at me with genuine surprise.

“Yes. But I wasn’t allowed to keep any pets at our estate; my parents were opposed to it.”

Many small beasts lived in our garden, and sheep were raised in my family’s mark, so there were sheepdogs around too. I could also remember cows, chickens, goats, and cats. I would sneak out of the mansion in the middle of the night to go and pet the nocturnal animals. Unlike humans, they didn’t criticize my appearance and couldn’t hurt my feelings.

“I’ll be getting on first, then,” I said.

After I finished petting the wyvern, I placed one foot in the metal stirrup and smoothly crawled up onto its back. The clothes Kelly had chosen for me were very easy to move in and didn’t flutter at all. When I sat down on the saddle, I could directly feel the wyvern’s slightest movements.

“Will you be riding in front of me or behind me, Lord Nazel?”

“The back is more dangerous, so you should sit at the front, and I’ll support you.”

“Understood.”

I slowly inched forward and Lord Nazel nimbly jumped onto the back seat.

*He’s stylish and dashing in everything he does!*

Connie had a very complicated expression; I wondered why.

*Oh well.*

It was just Lord Nazel, Kelly, and me heading to Sutrena after this. Kelly mounted the red wyvern with Connie. The wyverns flapped their wide wings and took flight, moving unbelievably faster than our leisurely carriage ride here. I thought that it would have been better if we'd ridden on one of these from the get-go, but then I remembered that the use of manabeasts was forbidden outside this region.

"Mountbeasts are incredible, Lord Nazel!"

I was on cloud nine riding a mountbeast for the first time. Mountbeasts were trained to create a magic barrier that acted as a windbreak, allowing them to negate air resistance and fly at high speed.

"It takes more skill to ride a wyvern, but they're considerably faster than pegasi. Aren't you afraid when we're flying so fast, Agnes?"

"No, I seem to be fine."

"That's incredible. People who aren't used to riding often have a hard time with wyverns."

Lord Nazel looked pretty relaxed. He'd said that he'd learned how to ride mountbeasts as part of his prince-consort training, but he shouldn't have ridden one all that many times.

*And yet our flight is perfectly smooth. That's Lord Nazel for you.*

Connie had been riding in front of us for quite some time, but he kept glancing back toward us, looking uneasy for whatever reason.

After a few hours of flying, a town—presumably our destination—appeared below us.

"Have we reached central Sutrena?"

A desolate town that didn't even begin to compare to the capital stood at the heart of Sutrena. The roads were unpaved, wooden buildings were scattered here and there, and there was an old stone fortress in the middle of the public square where people gathered. Finally, a building that looked like a noble's mansion towered some distance away. The population seemed low and there were hardly any stores. Loa was only a rural town, but it was still clearly more prosperous than this place. Beyond the grassland that spread out to the south of the town, a large river flowed. It served as a national border; the land beyond it was

apparently Polpystan.

Connie's wyvern started descending on the fortress while I was taking in the scenery.

"I'm going to land now, so hold tight, Agnes."

"Yes, Lord Nazel!"

I clung to the wyvern while Lord Nazel held me tightly. Come to think of it, he had also held me close to him when we first took off.

*Aah, he's so manly, and he smells so nice. This feels like a dream!*

The wyvern landed on the rooftop while I was daydreaming.

*The landing wasn't scary either.*

Connie and Kelly were already on the ground. Lord Nazel dismounted swiftly and turned toward me with his arms spread wide.

"Come here, Agnes."

"Um, you don't mean…"

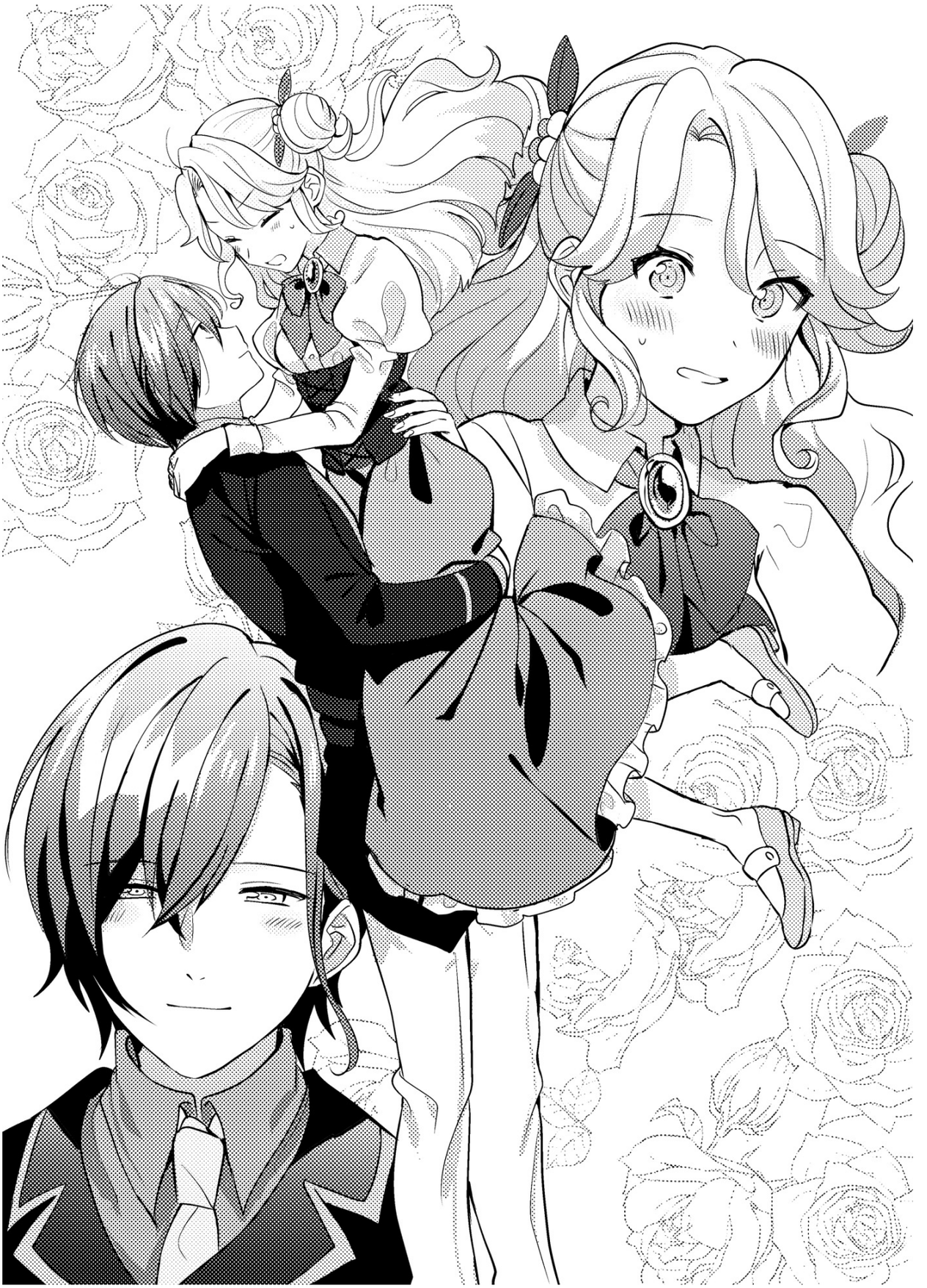
"It's okay; just jump right at me."

*That really* is *what he meant! Diving into his arms is too much for me!*

While I sat there bewildered, the wyvern started squirming impatiently.

*Eep! I'm going to fall!*

I lost my balance, so I accepted my fate and jumped toward Lord Nazel with all my strength. I soared through the air with great force, but he easily caught me. He was quite strong despite being slender.



“You’re pretty light, Agnes.”

Lord Nazel smiled as he held me in his arms and didn’t show any signs of putting me on the ground. I was afraid he might notice my pounding heart when we were so close.

“Your heart’s beating really fast, huh?”

*He noticed right away!*

He looked somewhat happy, even though I was all flustered.

Meanwhile, a new person came out of the building. He looked like some kind of government official with glasses and a pale complexion—and he turned even paler when he saw the two wyverns.

“Connie! Why did you use wyverns?”

“Oh shit!” Connie exclaimed before trying to run away, but we were on the roof, so the only way off was by riding a wyvern or using the door behind the official.

The man looked at us and spoke in a trembling voice.

“You have my sincerest apologies! My subordinate seems to have mixed up the mountbeasts. He was *supposed* to bring pegasi.”

“It wasn’t a problem, since I can also ride wyverns. I had a pleasant trip across the sky with my wife,” Lord Nazel cheerfully replied. He’d switched to a more businesslike tone of voice.

The pale-faced man captured Connie and dragged him along as he guided us into the building. We were led to a comparatively tidy room where he addressed us once more.

“Welcome to Sutrena. My name is Henry Billket, and I serve as the regional administrator.”

“I’m Nazelbart, and this is my wife, Agnes.”

I bowed in greeting.

*Mister Henry looks pretty pale, so I think it would be best to finish our talk quickly and let him have some rest.*

But he still had much more to say.

“As you might already be aware, Sutrena has been without a margrave, so I was assigned by the capital to act as deputy lord of this frontier.”

Mister Henry explained that he was the third son of a viscount house. He used to work at the royal palace but had been sent to the frontier because of a disagreement with a superior.

*I wonder if working at the frontier is seen as punishment.*

Was Sutrena really such an awful place?

"I've heard the main points. The last proper margrave and his family were killed by manabeasts. His replacement didn't rule for long, opting for a quick retirement, and is apparently living in the capital at the moment," Lord Nazel said.

"That's right. The margrave who died from manabeasts along with his whole family obviously had no heir, so a noble relative of his was sent from the capital to take his place. However, it wasn't long before the replacement margrave fell seriously ill, so he named his unmarried son as his successor. And then that third margrave also lost his life in a manabeast attack. At some point, a rumor started circulating that the position of Margrave of Sutrena is cursed."

The last margrave's death had apparently been pretty gruesome. That was most likely the reason no one wanted to accept the position. Mister Henry had been placed in charge of all sorts of affairs until the next margrave was appointed. Perhaps because he'd been doing an unexpectedly good job so far, he'd been told that the next margrave would be chosen *very* carefully, and the post had been left open until now.

*Did the royal family think this was the perfect opportunity to force this cursed position onto Lord Nazel? Are manabeast attacks really so frequent here?*

Lord Nazel looked calm, however, and replied with no hesitation.

"I was exiled here from the capital, but as I'm now this land's ruler, I intend to work as hard as I can for it."

"Thank you very much, Lord Nazelbart. You must be tired for today, so allow me to guide you to your estate. I will brief you on your job in detail tomorrow. We are relatively short-staffed, so please forgive us for being unable to tend to everything."

"You don't need to worry about that. Thank you, Henry. You also look tired. It might be difficult because of your position, but I'd like you to rest when you can."

It seemed that Lord Nazel was also concerned about Mister Henry's pallid complexion. His burden would probably lighten if we headed to our estate straightaway.

"Guess I'll head home too," Connie said nonchalantly. He then tried to leave the room with us but was promptly stopped.

“Wait, Connie. I need to *talk* to you. You aren’t getting away,” Mister Henry said with a grim look as he grabbed Connie’s suntanned arm.

I wasn’t sure why, but now Connie also looked pale.

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After we left the fortress, Lord Nazel and I—with Kelly in tow, of course—went to the nearby margrave’s estate. The spacious property where the previous margrave’s family had lived for generations would now become our home.

“It sure is big,” I said.

It looked like a lot of money had been spent on this building, more than one would expect for an estate on the frontier. The outer walls were relatively new and there were many weird decorations in the garden, apparently the result of a previous margrave’s remodeling. I gulped as I turned around and took in the scenery.

“Look, Lord Nazel, there’s a waterfall running down the outer wall. Incredible, isn’t it?”

“I’ve never seen an estate like this before either. Does the waterfall connect to the artificial stream in the garden?”

“There are many colorful fish in there. The flowers of the plants coiling around the building are also large and pretty. And there are petals floating down the brook.”

But I’d heard that the frontier wasn’t particularly affluent. Why was the margrave’s mansion so extravagant? As I tilted my head in confusion, Lord Nazel called me.

“Agnes, Kelly, let’s go inside.”

We all went through the large door together and found another amazing spectacle awaiting us.

“Whoa, the interior design is so gaudy,” I blurted out, instinctively gasping and making my true feelings known. “These decorations look expensive, and there’s another stream flowing in here.”

“Yes, it’s quite the sight. It really looks like it’s been barely maintained at all. I wonder if it’s mostly the same as it was when its previous owner was here,” Lord Nazel said. Like me, he observed our surroundings with bewilderment.

“It looks like this place needs some thorough cleaning,” Kelly declared before rolling up her sleeves, ready for battle.

“You don’t need to push yourself, Kelly. This is beyond what one person can clean alone, not to mention you’re also tired from today’s traveling,” Lord Nazel cautioned.

“Then I will limit myself to the highest priority, which is the state of your rooms, Lady Agnes, Lord Nazelbart,” Kelly replied, then rushed deeper into the manor alone.

“We’ll need servants to take care of the cleaning at the very least, though I think it will be hard to secure anyone capable out here on the frontier,” Lord Nazel said.

“I agree. This place is on a completely different scale from the detached building.”

“Such a large estate is unnecessary for just three people.”

“How did the previous owner manage?”

While I stared off into the distance for a moment, Kelly returned.

“Only the kitchen, dining room, bathroom, master bedroom, and one servant’s room have been properly cleaned. They’ve really been doing the bare minimum in terms of upkeep. It will, however, be acceptable for you to stay here for the time being.”

“Thank you, Kelly. You may also rest,” Lord Nazel said.

“But…”

I jumped onto Lord Nazel’s words and also suggested she take a rest.

“Don’t worry, we only need to rest for today, and I can get changed on my own. Mister Henry has apparently arranged for our food to be brought later too.”

“Then I will simply assist you with your bath later.”

Kelly bowed politely, then picked up her luggage and saw us off. Lord Nazel and I headed to our room. Mister Henry’s subordinates had carried our luggage over while we’d been talking to him.

*The master bedroom, huh?*

I timidly walked down the garish corridor. Living in the same room as Lord Nazel would probably make my heart stop.

“Something wrong, Agnes? Let’s go.”

While I was dawdling, Lord Nazel held my hand tight. I’d held hands with him before, but I was still a little nervous. I’d thought

Lord Nazel was a wonderful person ever since I'd met him, and spending time with him like this made me overjoyed.

*But I doubt he feels the same way.*

I knew that he didn't hate me, but there was no way he was deeply in love with me or anything.

*He's only accomplishing his duty.*

He was a good person, so he was trying his best to act like a couple would. We spent some time chatting in our room, took our baths, then sat down next to each other on the large bed Kelly had made for us.

*It's like we're a real couple.*

Faced with this novel development, my heart pounded violently inside my chest.

*Come to think of it, what* do *newlyweds do?*

I tried remembering what my home tutor had taught me.

*If I'm not mistaken, in the fourth lecture on how to be a good wife and wise mother, I was taught something along the lines of "Newlywed couples share a bed, but the wife should be obedient in the bedroom and let her husband handle everything." Oh no, so what do I do? I only just realized that I never learned anything specific.*

I started getting nervous.

*Come to think of it, there was a book called* A Newlywed Couple's This and That *in my father's study. I think I remember it having a lot of indecent pictures of a naked man and woman intertwined.*

When I remembered the book's contents, steam rose up from my entire body.

*O-Oh dear, no! I don't think I can do that.*

Did all newlywed couples do things like that? I didn't really know. I was panicking all by myself when Lord Nazel quickly got under the covers.

"Good night, Agnes."

"Hmm?"

Maybe he was really tired; he closed his eyes right away. I'd been stressing over nothing because it didn't look like he intended to do anything.

"G-Good night."

I hesitantly crawled into the covers as well and stole glances at Lord Nazel, but he showed no signs of moving. Perhaps the travel fatigue had gotten to me, because I also fell asleep soon after, as if

drawn into dreamland.

My second day in Sutrena dawned. I'd been nervous about sleeping in the same bed as Lord Nazel, but morning came without anything in particular happening.

"Lord Nazel was sleeping next to me, but now I don't see him anywhere."

He must have already gotten up, because the only traces of him left were the wrinkled sheets.

"I…didn't oversleep, did I?"

Kelly got my clothes ready for me, and when I asked where Lord Nazel was, she told me he'd already headed out. I hadn't overslept; he'd just gotten up really early and was apparently now working with Mister Henry at the fortress.

"All right, I have to work hard too!" As the lord's wife, my job was to manage the household. "First, I need to get a good grasp on the entire estate and hire more help, since you seem to be the only one here. Hold on, isn't it strange that there's no one else?!" This situation was ridiculous.

"It seems that no one showed interest when they tried to recruit servants. Working at the margrave's estate is apparently quite the unpopular job. We might have to raise wages substantially in order to attract people," the nearby Kelly explained with her usual neutral expression.

"But why?! Working for nobles wasn't stigmatized in the capital, was it?"

"I'm not familiar with all the specifics of this situation, but it may be related to the previous ruler's exceedingly poor reputation. I believe we aren't very welcome either."

"Really? Is it the previous margrave's fault?!"

"Most likely. Choosing wyverns as our mounts yesterday was almost certainly a form of harassment. I believe the main intention was to make Lord Nazelbart lose face. After all, many nobles who can ride pegasi do not know how to ride wyverns. Although, even if it was meant as harassment, the wyverns' speed was incredible, almost intoxicating." Kelly complained indifferently about Connie's behavior, but while her tone was calm, I could feel quite a bit of resentment in her words.

*I really enjoyed our wyvern ride, but to think it was actually*

*harassment…*

I'd been exposed to such intense malice as Lady Bumpkin that I'd failed to even notice this relatively minor affront from Connie.

"I wonder if Lord Nazel is doing okay at work. But I can't exactly go to bother him at his workplace, so let's at least clean the inside of the house so he can relax when he returns. Kelly, I will help you clean as much as I can!"

We'd been allotted almost no funds upon coming to the frontier. We had to do our utmost to refrain from wasteful spending now so we would be prepared for future emergencies.

"How admirable of you, Lady Agnes. I shall also work to the best of my ability."

For starters, Kelly and I went around to examine the large mansion, but it was all in unacceptable condition.

"It's a wasteful display of excess," I declared.

"Yes, there is too much oversize garbage. Tasteless ornaments, incomprehensible paintings, and furniture with such intricate designs that it has no practical use. There's even an indoor fountain."

It was painfully obvious that this estate had cost an obscene amount of money.

"Let's go take a look at the garden."

"Yes, Lady Agnes."

The two of us moved to the garden next. An artificial stream flowed around the estate and into a pond.

*The water starts from the pond and ends up back in it. The whole thing is pointless.*

The beautiful rose hedges were untended and covered in overgrown thorns, making it impossible to approach them. A little farther away, a neglected field spread out before us.

"Oh, there's even a field?"

"It appears so. Or it used to be a field, at least. There's also a sturdy-looking stable over there."

"It's awfully large. Did they use to keep manabeasts, perhaps?"

When we looked inside, it was completely empty. Kelly and I exchanged glances.

"Let's start working inside the manor to increase the number of usable rooms. We'll sell everything we can and use the money to hire servants and gardeners! We can't hope to get this whole place

in order without more helping hands!"

"Understood, Lady Agnes." Kelly replied in a disinterested voice, but I could feel her eyes burning with motivation.

*Please look closely, Lord Nazel. You might be dissatisfied with me since this is a forced marriage, but I will do a splendid job managing the estate as your wife!*

I fired myself up to immediately begin cleaning the estate with Kelly. But when we found the cleaning tools in the servants' quarters, she asked me something unforeseen.

"Incidentally, have you ever cleaned, Lady Agnes?"

That question made me realize I had no experience with housework.

"No, I haven't, but I'll manage one way or another."

"I expected as much. Please don't push yourself."

I'd never cleaned back at the House of Evantail, but I *had* seen the maids at work.

*I only learned by watching, but it will all work out when I give it a go...I hope. Let's take this opportunity to acquire a new skill!*

Kelly and I started cleaning the most important rooms.

"Phew! That takes care of the kitchen and washroom!" I said.

"It's a good thing the kitchen was more modest—more reasonable—than I expected based on the mansion's first impression. However, it seems like the servants' quarters are barely furnished."

"Yes, it feels like the absolute minimum. On the other hand, our bedroom is full of garish decor."

"I hear many lords like that sort of thing. At least the kitchen equipment is still in working condition."

"Well, now we have a clearer idea of why it's so difficult to employ servants here. But it's already evening, and we only cleaned two rooms, huh?"

How long would it take for the two of us to clean this entire estate?

"Let's stop cleaning for today, Kelly. We should get ready to welcome Lord Nazel home."

"I agree. Let me take care of dinner."

"You can cook?"

"No. I will buy something ready-made like I did for breakfast. I once cooked a meal back at the detached building, but Lord

Nazelbart gave me strict orders never to cook again."

"Huh? What kind of order is that?! Just...what exactly did you cook, Kelly?"

"We really need a chef." She blatantly evaded my question and went into town to get food.

Meanwhile, I stayed behind and set the table. I would most likely be fine as long as I copied what I'd seen the maids at the House of Evantail do.

"I wonder if Lord Nazel drinks alcohol."

There'd been some bottles of wine with the food Mister Henry had prepared for us yesterday.

*Lord Nazel drinking wine...sounds nice! It would suit him so well! I'm not sure if he drinks, but I'll get some ready just in case.*

In the meantime, Lord Nazel returned from work. Although he was probably tired, he still looked as pleasant as ever when he opened the dining room door.

"Hello, Agnes. I'm home."

"Welcome back, Lord Nazel. Good work today. Kelly will be bringing our food shortly."

He looked as impeccable as ever, but I kind of got the feeling he was lacking his usual energy. He clasped both of my hands in his, let the ends of his eyebrows droop like he was troubled, and smiled at me.

"I'm sorry for making you suffer like this, Agnes. This is all happening because I brought you with me to the frontier."

"What's with the sudden apology, Lord Nazel? I'm having a *much* better time here than I ever did back home. *That's* where I was constantly suffering."

The cumbersome dresses and ill-fitting shoes were just the beginning. Whenever they saw me, my parents would criticize me about still having no fiancé; I'd had to attend parties where everyone disliked me; and I would get beaten whenever I failed to secure an engagement.

*Ugh, now that I think back on it, my life there was truly awful!*

My current life was surprisingly peaceful compared to that.

"You don't need to worry. Compared to my time at the House of Evantail, none of this is much of a bother. Leaving that aside, would you like a drink before the meal? Mister Henry provided us with some fine-looking wine."

“Yes, I’d like some.”

I picked up the bottle, hurriedly poured some wine in a glass, and offered it to Lord Nazel.

“Thank you, Agnes.”

He emptied the glass in a single gulp with a lovely smile.

*Lord Nazel’s manner of drinking is splendid. But is that the way you’re supposed to drink wine?*

He elegantly moved the glass away from his lips, and his gaze drifted to me.

“May I have another glass?” he asked.

“Oh, yes. Here you go.”

Lord Nazel had a second glass, then a third, one right after the other. His cheeks were slightly flushed, undoubtedly because he was now intoxicated. I realized it would be best if I didn’t serve him any more.

“That’s enough wine for now, Lord Nazel. Let’s enjoy the rest on a future date.”

I quickly hid the wine bottle away on a shelf and sat down next to him. He’d never drunk alcohol back when we were at the House of Florescruz’s detached building.

*Something terrible must have happened at work. My father always drank when he was frustrated!*

My father got drunk and took out his anger on everyone around him. Lord Nazel was commendable for not doing the same.

“I can lend you an ear if you’d like, though I doubt I’ll be of much help.”

He was acting more absent-minded than usual, probably because he was tipsy. Little by little, he talked to me with a hurt expression. He probably wouldn’t talk to me about his work normally, but the wine seemed to have made him a little more talkative. That was how I came to know the reason he’d become like this.

“Uh-huh, I understand. So that’s what happened.”

The drunk Lord Nazel’s words ended up meandering, so I had to piece together the story in my head. Just like Kelly had told me, the people of Sutrena were hostile toward us, and the same held true for his workplace. When he’d gotten to the fortress and tried to start working hard for the good of the frontier, he’d been

apparently asked not to do anything. On top of brushing aside his efforts to help, they had told him he could just go and live an elegant life in his estate, like the previous margrave.

*Did the last margrave do absolutely no work at all? Just what luxuries was he enjoying in his estate?*

I knew that Lord Nazel had studied about Sutrena back at the capital. He'd even made advance preparations to help improve this place, but it had all been for naught.

"Getting no cooperation no matter what you do is hard, isn't it?" I said.

His lethargic amber eyes turned toward the floor.

"It is. I have to…think of something."

*I wish I could work together with Lord Nazel.*

The old-fashioned House of Evantail only taught its daughters how to be proper wives and mothers. After being disowned, I had started to study by reading Lord Nazel's books, but…I couldn't be of much help yet; it was vexing.

*But that doesn't mean I shouldn't do anything. That would make me a failure as the lord's wife.*

I couldn't simply ignore him right now.

"Lord Nazel, the seedlings you selectively bred for possible use here on the frontier are in our luggage at the moment, right? Why don't you try planting them now? You mentioned that you want to investigate if they'll grow here, didn't you?! We found a field along with the estate's garden!"

Plowing the entirety of that vast field was surely impossible, but we could manage enough for one or two plants.

*I think the fertilizer piled up in one corner of the garden is still usable. I don't know all the details, but mixing it in should work, right?*

I dragged the drunk Lord Nazel to the garden as it was starting to get dark outside. It was precisely then that Kelly returned from buying dinner and ran toward us.

"What are you two doing outside?!" she asked.

"You have perfect timing, Kelly. I'm planning on tilling the field and planting the seedlings Lord Nazel prepared."

"That neglected field?"

"Don't you think we can till a small area and plant one or two of them?"

"That much should be possible. I will join you."

With three people working, we would be done before long. I led Lord Nazel and Kelly by the hand along a small garden path. There was an open terrace right next to the path, with a needlessly extravagant, disused set of a table and chairs lined up. They were comparatively clean, so it looked like we could use them right away if we wiped them off a little.

"Should we have dinner outside, Lady Agnes? Everything is ready-made, so we could dine anywhere."

"Yes, let's do that."

"Incidentally, I've noticed Lord Nazelbart has been acting odd since I returned."

"I'm sorry. I offered him some wine and it looks like he got drunk."

"Listen, Lady Agnes. Lord Nazelbart can't hold his liquor in the slightest."

"Oh no. He drank it normally, so I poured him a lot."

"He should be fine after some time passes."

We did some light cleaning on the lavish table and chairs which faced the garden.

*There are flower beds around here, so I wonder if the prior margrave hosted refined tea parties here.*

The previous inhabitant's lifestyle had been exhaustively lavish and extravagant.

"Have you worked on a field before, Lady Agnes?"

"I haven't, but I read about farming in some books back at the detached building."

"Allow me to explain any parts you don't understand. It might not be apparent, but I have agricultural experience."

We enjoyed our meal in the open area while talking about the field. I didn't usually eat outside, but this was a wonderful experience. The only problem was that the drunk Lord Nazel had been sticking to me for quite some time and I couldn't keep my composure.

"O Agnes, Agnes, you're truly so lovely."

"Thank you very much, Lord Nazel."

"Haah, you're so cute…"

We sat side by side on a bench and he relentlessly scooted closer to me, giving me a different kind of embarrassment from the time we'd ridden on the wyvern.

“Hey, Agnes? Turn this way.”

“Whoa!”

He suddenly picked me up from my seat and placed me down on his lap.

*Eek! My behind is right on top of Lord Nazel’s thighs!*

Contrary to my panicked behavior, Lord Nazel was simply smiling peacefully.

“You’re so light and adorable, Agnes.”

I looked at Kelly for help, but she only said, “What a heartwarming scene,” wearing her usual blank look, and kept watching over us.

*Heartwarming in what way? My heart’s beating so fast it could jump out of my chest!*

I ended up stuck on Lord Nazel’s lap until we finished dinner.

*Phew, that was so embarrassing I feel exhausted.*

When dinner was over, we all headed to the field together. Lord Nazel had yet to regain his sobriety and was now clinging to my back.

“You’re so cute, Agnes. And you smell so nice.”

“Please don’t sniff me! It’s embarrassing.”

I wasn’t used to such close proximity yet.

“I will use this hoe to till the soil, Lady Agnes. My home has a field, so I’m used to gardening with my little brothers.”

“Oh, so you have siblings?”

“Yes, I’m the eldest child, with five younger brothers who— One moment, Lady Agnes. That fertilizer bag is heavy, so allow me to carry it.”

“It’s much lighter than my old dresses, so I’m fine. I can just spread this around, right? Here goes!”

Kelly, with a hoe in her hand, screamed when she saw me scatter the fertilizer all over the place. Meanwhile, the drunk Lord Nazel quietly picked up a hoe and started skillfully tilling the field.

*He really* can *do anything.*

However, his eyes were still vacant, and he would only reply with “Agnes is cute” when called out to. We somehow eventually succeeded in preparing a small part of the field, then dug holes and planted Lord Nazel’s seedlings.

*Diligently doing farmwork in a gloomy field as a group of three was somewhat fun.*

Lord Nazel's magic wasn't limited to selectively breeding existing seedlings. It could also grow plants from nothing. However, plants grown in this manner continually consumed mana for as long as they existed, so they weren't suited to being raised in a field long-term.

*I want to see all sorts of aspects of his magic.*

For now, I prayed for the seedlings to grow strong and healthy as I watered them. When I was done, we all returned to the house with light steps.

By the next day, Lord Nazel had lost all memory of getting drunk the day prior. After I saw him off to work, I immediately went to check up on the field.

*Heh heh heh, I get to go do the morning watering.*

But the seedlings we'd just planted last night were in poor shape for some reason.

"Huh? They're wilting. They might even wither at this rate."

I was really flustered as I watered the seedlings. I'd been told that Sutrena's soil made raising crops very difficult, but the roses and weeds in the garden were growing just fine. Perhaps it was only edible plants that were hard to grow.

*Please get healthy again. Hang on one way or another.*

Lord Nazel was already in low spirits; I didn't want to cause him any more disappointment.

*If he learns that his seedlings withered, he might be overcome with grief. I don't want to see that happen.*

Filled with desperation, I used my matter reinforcement magic on the weakened seedlings and went back to the house. It probably wouldn't have any effect on the plants, but it made me feel a little better to at least do *something* for them.

*What should I tell Lord Nazel?* I thought with a sigh.

I entered the estate feeling depressed. Kelly and I did some cleaning like yesterday while also collecting all the unneeded ornaments. Our plan was to sell them and use the money to hire more servants.

"But there isn't any trader at the frontier who'd buy this stuff, right?"

If possible, it would be great if we could find a trader who understood the value of these tacky items and bought them for a

high price.

Kelly moved her gaze around as if thinking intently while she worked.

“I believe there probably is someone. I will make the arrangements.”

Kelly didn’t share the specifics, but she said it was possible, so I decided to leave it to her.

“Thank you! But you shouldn’t push yourself if it turns out to be impossible, okay?”

We affixed notes to all the glitzy ornaments, marking them as necessary or unnecessary; the vast majority fell in the latter category.

*I want to be even a little useful to Lord Nazel.*

He was my benefactor who’d taken me in when I had nowhere to go and saved me from my hopeless situation. He could have come up with a reason to avoid our marriage when going to the frontier or even forced me to return home. However, he’d gotten married to Lady Bumpkin and brought me with him to the frontier. If possible, I’d like to hear him say he was glad he had brought me along.

I restlessly moved around to improve the environment inside the estate and also accompanied Kelly to go shopping in the afternoon. The market of this frontier town was small, completely unlike the capital’s market I’d seen from inside a carriage. Only the bare minimum of meat and fish, edible wild plants, mushrooms, and fruits gathered in the forest were on sale. There were also some vegetables and grains, but only a few withered ones.

*The food production situation does seem to be very poor.*

Kelly had lent me a maid outfit, so no one at the market could tell I was Lady Bumpkin and they instead thought I was just a maid working at the estate. An old lady manning one of the stalls called out to us when she saw us. Perhaps it was obvious that I was a stranger here, but people often started talking to me as I walked around the market.

“You two work for the new lord, don’t you? I heard he’s really handsome, so I’d like to see him myself.”

Word of Lord Nazel had already spread among the older women at the market.

“But I’m concerned because we have no idea what kind of

person he is. The previous lord was a real piece of work, let me tell you," another woman said.

"What kind of person was he?" Since the topic of the previous margrave had come up, I decided to ask them some questions. I was also still worried about what Lord Nazel had told me yesterday.

"He was a preposterous man. For generations, all of the lords who've ruled this land have been worthless, but the previous one was especially awful."

"I only came here recently, so I don't know that much."

The gossipy women jumped on the opportunity to explain.

"He collected taxes and spent them on luxuries like a fool, made the people build his weird mansion for free, carried off any cute girls he found to his home, and eliminated anyone he didn't like. He even had a ferocious manabeast as a pet—definitely not the kind that can safely live alongside humans."

So all of the things in the estate had been paid for with the people's taxes.

*After we employ more servants with the money we get from selling those decorations, we should spend any remaining money for the good of the territory.*

Lord Nazel would surely put the money to good use if we handed it over to him.

"He was violent and didn't think us commoners were people like him. Many folks were relieved when the manabeasts got him. We're truly thankful for getting the sober Master Henry next. Sorry to say this, but my expectations for the new lord are pretty low."

Everything the old ladies told me was disappointing.

*Lord Nazel is going through a horrible experience because of his predecessors' misdeeds.*

I could only wish that everyone came to trust him.

"We should return to the estate soon, Lady Agnes," Kelly told me discreetly, so I quietly followed after her.

"You sure are amazing, Kelly. You were already brilliant at the capital, but you immediately adapted to the frontier too."

"Oh no, you praise me too much. I am but a mere maid, blessed with an excellent master."

Compared to her previous master, Princess Mia, most people could probably be classified as nice, but Lord Nazel was a

genuinely great person.

The two of us chatted as we returned to the estate, where we found Lord Nazel already home.

“We’re home, Lord Nazel. I was out shopping with Kelly.”

“Welcome back, Agnes. You look great in the maid outfit… But forget about that—something serious has happened.”

“Is something wrong?”

My heart filled with anxiety when I saw how uncharacteristically flustered Lord Nazel was acting.

“It’s about the seedlings in the garden.”

Lord Nazel didn’t remember anything from when he’d been drunk last night, but this morning we’d told him that we’d planted the seedlings together.

“Did… Did something happen to the seedlings?”

Alarm bells were ringing in my head as I spoke. This had to be terrible news.

*Did they really wither?! Oh no, why was Lord Nazel the first one to discover that?! What a cruel fate!*

I felt a chill down my spine as I imagined how miserable he must be feeling, even if he didn’t let it show.

“Just come see, Agnes.”

Lord Nazel took me by the hand and quickly led me toward the garden. Before long, an astonishing scene filled my eyes.

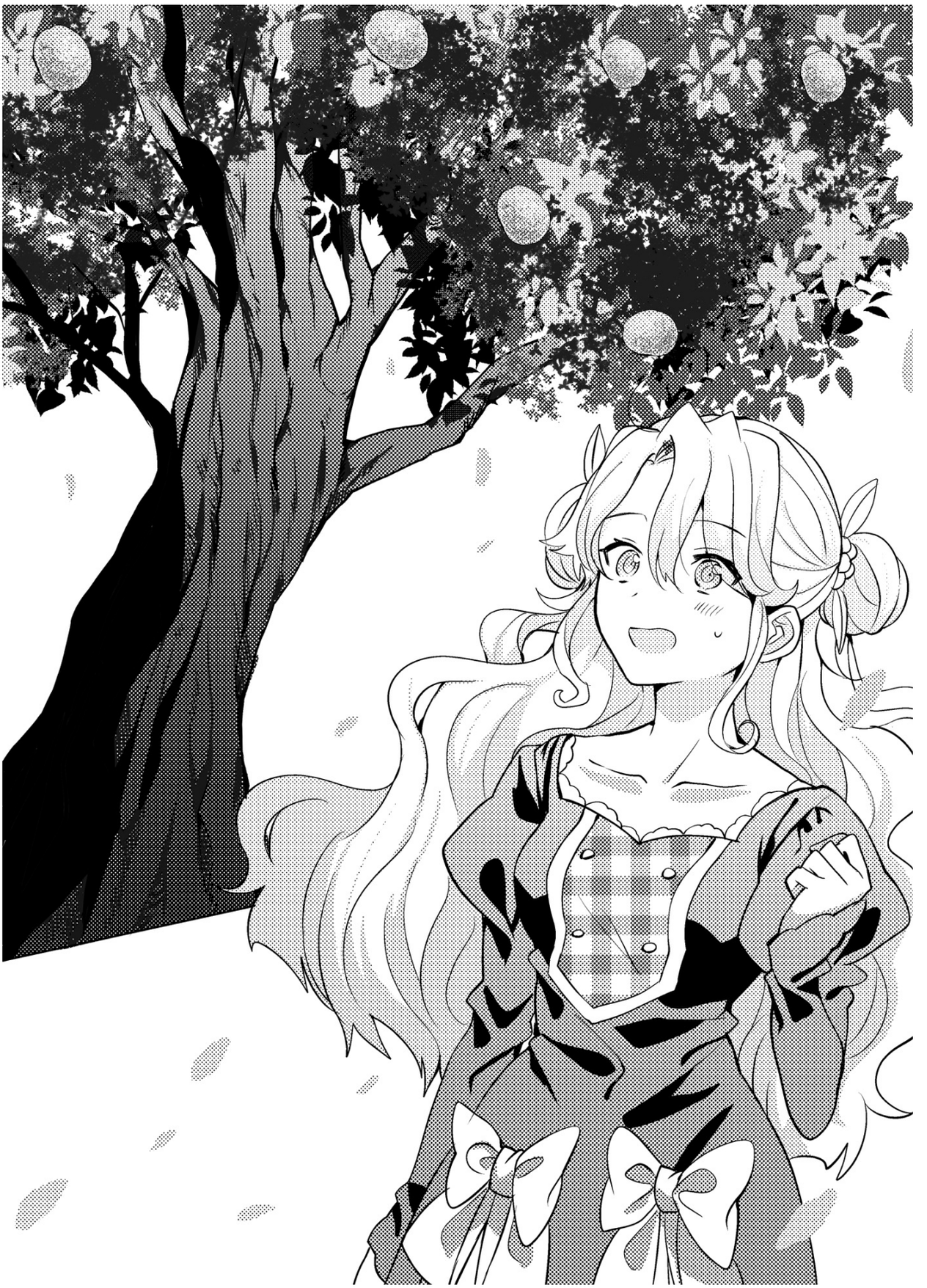
“The seedlings! They…” No other words could come out of my mouth. I simply stood there, wordlessly flapping my lips.

The plants towering before me *should* have been the seedlings we’d planted yesterday, but their forms were now drastically different. They were *much* too big to be called seedlings anymore. The feeble, wilting plants I’d seen this morning had grown taller than the mansion itself, with massively thick trunks.

“What kind of plants did you say these seedlings are, Lord Nazel?”

“They should be regular violaberry trees, if I’m not mistaken.”

Unique to this country, violaberries were a kind of fruit similar to blueberries and were said to grow in warm regions. They were big and sweet, normally with a diameter roughly the equivalent of an adult’s thumb. However, the fruits currently hanging from these massive trees were about as big as an adult’s head.



“What could have happened? They grew far too quickly and far too large. I couldn’t find any signs of tampering on them when I investigated either,” Lord Nazel explained. He observed the plants —now way past the point of being called seedlings—with a curious expression.

I started panicking as I looked at him.

*Don’t tell me…*

I had an idea of what was going on. I’d been shocked upon seeing the wilting seedlings this morning and had carelessly used my reinforcement magic on them as a last-ditch attempt to help them flourish. It would be a serious matter if that was responsible for this situation.

“Eep…”

Had I perhaps done something truly outrageous?

“Agnes? Do you know something?”

Lord Nazel immediately noticed my reaction and abruptly turned to look at me.

*Oh no…*

He peered at my face with an eyebrow raised as he stood right next to me.

“Agnes?”

When he gazed at me with his amber eyes, fully displaying his great looks, I frantically averted my eyes.

“Well, um, your face is too close, Lord Nazel!”

“I’ll stay like this if you don’t tell me what you know, Agnes.”

Then, of all things, he held my face between his hands and locked me in place. The handsome face approaching me was far too stimulating!

*Whoaaa!*

I threw in the towel within seconds and honestly confessed to Lord Nazel everything about using my reinforcement magic on the plants.

“I understand now. Who knew your magic could have an effect like that?”

“Yes, it completely surprised even me. I’ve only used it to reinforce clothes and bags so far.”

We experimented by planting the remaining seedlings in the garden and using magic on them, and they grew enormous in around half a day, and they also produced fruit. They completely

ignored the fact that it was winter and bore fruit regardless.

"I wonder if there was some additional factor, like nutrition, that was responsible for the first violaberry trees growing particularly large," Lord Nazel remarked.

"Could it be…because I scattered all that fertilizer around?" I asked.

Lord Nazel would later teach me that the fertilizer in our garden was supposed to be mixed with the soil little by little in many batches, not all at once. Just what had I been thinking, enthusiastically spreading such a large quantity all over the place?

"Kelly told me about that. That would normally be too much fertilizer, but since your magic accelerated their growth, they seem to have absorbed plenty of nutrients and ended up quite healthy."

"Then I should scatter a lot of fertilizer just like last time, right?!"

"Hold on, Agnes! That bag is heavy!"

I grabbed a bag of fertilizer from the pile left in a corner of the garden and emptied it onto the tilled part of the field.

"You're quite strong, Agnes."

"Am I?" Perhaps it was just a result of "training" by wearing such heavy dresses for all those years.

"We have violaberries, emerald cherries, and pink silvervine. I've improved all of them with magic to make them grow more easily and bear more fruit, but the results are beyond my expectations," Lord Nazel said. Although he'd modified these plants himself, even he hadn't expected them to grow this large and bear so much fruit.

"I'm so happy we can gather delicious fruit now. Even Kelly should be able to peel and cut them. I found a book on making jam in the manor, so I'll consult it and make some in the future," I said.

"You should have Kelly watch over you at first. Her cooking skill aside, she's used to handling tools. I'd like to try making something too, once things settle down."

Lord Nazel and I took a stroll around the garden hand in hand. The estate's vast garden had plenty of flower beds, in addition to the untilled field.

"Thank you, Agnes. You've been a great help in the middle of such adversity," he muttered as we walked. He'd said the same back when he'd been drunk, so it must have been weighing on his

mind.

“I don’t find our situation adverse in the slightest; it’s actually pleasant. I’ll say it again and again: I like living here.”

I couldn’t act so freely when I’d been living under my parents’ roof. Our house’s policies were of course to blame, but I’d also lacked self-confidence and been too scared to go outside. But now I had Lord Nazel or Kelly to come with me, and no one made fun of me as Lady Bumpkin out here; I was happy like this.

“Thank you for taking me with you to the frontier, Lord Nazel.”

“Agnes…”

Lord Nazel softly reached his hands toward me. I stood still, unsure of what he was trying to do, and then he hugged me tight.

*Eep! Lord Nazel has gone mad! He’s so warm, he smells nice, and his chest is so sturdy…*

My heart started beating twice as fast, and my thoughts raced at full throttle, then dispersed. He was unaware of his own charm.

“I should be the one thanking you, Agnes. I’m truly glad I have you.”

Lord Nazel inched even closer to me and gently placed his lips on my cheek. The slightly chilly sensation jolted me, and I reflexively leaned backward.

*H-Huh?! Did Lord Nazel just kiss me on the cheek?*

He’d kissed the back of my hand back when he’d proposed, but I felt like he was gradually getting bolder. His lips had only lightly touched me for an instant and quickly moved away, but I was so dazed that I was frozen in place.

*Why are you going to such lengths for a woman you were merely ordered to marry?*

An emotion I couldn’t quite put into words rose and faded inside me, like I wanted to ask what he’d meant by that but I was also afraid to hear it. While I was trapped in my worries, my face hot, Lord Nazel moved away from me with a wide smile on his face.

*Ugh, I’m such a coward.*

He looked at me with a gentle expression; I couldn’t sense the slightest hint of agitation from him.

“I suggest we look deeper into the matter of the seedlings and inform Henry. This could lead to improved food productivity for the territory,” he said.

“You’re right. It would be great if these seedlings spread across the frontier. If my matter reinforcement magic is necessary, I will use it as much as I need to.”

“We’ll be counting on you when the time comes.”

The southern territory of Sutrena was adjacent to a forest and the ocean, so even if crops were hard to grow, it was possible to scrounge up enough food to get by. That was only the case under normal circumstances though. As we’d heard before, injuries from manabeasts were common in this land. When many manabeasts appeared at once or a particularly ferocious one was discovered, going to the forest or the ocean became impossible and there was a food shortage. There had apparently even been unlucky periods where people couldn’t safely walk outside for more than half a year.

In such times, the people were faced with a painful choice: either brave the danger and gather food in the forest or ocean or prioritize safety and stay inside. Purchasing food from other territories was also possible, but as the prices were high—more taxes had to be paid for every territory the goods passed through—and transportation was difficult, it wasn’t a very practical option.

But if we were to grow more of Lord Nazel’s seedlings, we might make it so that food could be safely gathered at any time. There were still plenty of logistical considerations to work out, like where to plant them and where to find the manpower to harvest them, but many people would likely be saved if these magically enhanced plants became widespread. There was even the possibility of exporting rare ingredients to other territories.

Lord Nazel later informed Mister Henry about the seedlings, and it was decided that he’d soon come to the estate. The locals couldn’t ignore Lord Nazel like before when the prospect of plants that could solve their food crisis was on the table.

*I hope this will help Lord Nazel become accepted here.*

***

My mansion management was also progressing. A reliable source had led Kelly to a trader who would purchase all the unnecessary items from our mansion, so the plan to hire more

servants was starting to look hopeful. She brought in a young merchant called Bert, a man who did business throughout the region. He looked to be around the same age as Lord Nazel. He was a very pleasant person with blond hair, green eyes, and teeth so white they reflected the light. He had such a colorful air about him that his mere presence felt like it made his surroundings blurry.

*I feel like he's kind of suspicious.*

Bert bought unnecessary items and sold them to those who needed them, so we promptly invited him inside the mansion. He'd brought many personnel to carry the luggage, and they all worked briskly. Though he was young for a merchant, he seemed used to giving instructions and leading others.

"Hmm, the mansion of the margrave with a shady history. It's a terrific place in multiple meanings of the word. Exceedingly extravagant and very gaudy," Bert declared as he appraised the lionlike or turtlelike ornaments at the front of the house.

*Did he honestly just call this place gaudy?*

Bert noted down the results of his appraisal without a shred of shame.

"These ones are also tacky, but they have value. The gems embedded in them are extremely rare," he explained.

"What about the ornaments themselves?"

"Hmm? All of them are bizarre and worthless, or perhaps even worse than that. They actually detract from the gems' beauty considerably. I can't help but doubt the aesthetic sense of the one who designed them."

*I can't say I'm surprised.*

There were statues with limbs growing out of weird places, and even one that looked like a misshapen ball of mud. A painting of a nude woman hung on one wall; it reminded me of the illustrations in the book hidden in my father's study.

"Please take this painting too," I said.

"Ooh, would you look at that! This could fetch a high price among a certain group of people." Bert's true nature came out for just a moment, but he smiled brightly and quickly returned to a polite tone. "As you wish. I'm acquainted with a noble who collects many paintings like this one. I also know of a lady who appreciates decor like the kind over there."

“There are many people with strange tastes out there, huh?”

“Indeed there are. It’s truly beyond comprehension.”

Was it appropriate for a merchant to say something like that about his customers?

*While his manners are excellent, I find him oddly suspicious and not very merchantlike*, I thought as I looked at Bert, who gave me an awkward smile, as if my thoughts had somehow leaked out.



“I’m not a suspicious person, not at all. I’m a respectable merchant.”

“Is that so?”

Setting aside his somewhat sketchy comments, Bert had been brought here by Kelly—someone who was definitely reliable—so he could probably be trusted.

We then took a stroll around the mansion. Bert was apparently well-connected and familiar with many nobles, so he talked about potential buyers for various items. I enjoyed listening to him, even though the topic was bland.

“You’re a very amiable person, Lady Agnes.”

“Am I?”

“My apologies, you are just different from the kind of lady I was expecting. Your husband is a lucky man to have such a beautiful and fascinating wife.”

“I certainly hope that’s true.”

Bert was apparently one of the people who knew the rumors surrounding me and the “Lady Bumpkin” epithet. After he finished appraising the questionable works of art, he started issuing orders to the porters.

*Once all the junk is removed, the mansion will be so tidy, it will hardly be recognizable.*

Bert was a peculiar merchant, but he paid a fair price for everything, so he wasn’t a bad business partner.

I’d been so busy dealing with all sorts of work that I had barely noticed it had gotten dark outside.

“I’m going out to buy dinner today, Kelly. I won’t even be leaving the neighborhood, so I’ll be fine as long as I dress like a maid.”

Kelly shook her head in disagreement. She was busy cleaning up now that all the unneeded furniture had been removed.

“You shouldn’t, Lady Agnes. I won’t be able to look Lord Nazelbart in the eye if something were to happen to you.”

“But the closest shops are only a short distance from the estate. I’ll be quick. Or would you rather I do the cleaning instead?”

“There are piles of dust wherever the furniture and odd ornaments were sitting. You shouldn’t approach, Lady Agnes.”

“I will only go to a nearby store. That should be fine, right?”

Lord Nazel would be coming home soon, so I wanted to have dinner ready. Kelly gave me permission to go outside alone under

the condition that I make absolutely no detours. I felt like she was being overprotective; the store I intended to visit was very close.

"This is my first time running an errand alone. I can feel my heart beating faster."

I hid my excitement and rushed out of the estate in my maid outfit with the money tucked away inside my purse.

"I have to hurry or the store will close."

Stores closed early at the frontier, so I ran across the estate's garden, opened the large gate, and set out. Since the estate was a little distant from the town center, there wasn't much pedestrian traffic around it. Even so, there were several stores that sold food close by. The Sun Hall sold fruits, nuts, berries, and mushrooms gathered in the forest. Pearls Before Ham was a stall that offered simple side dishes. Finally there was a small diner called the Flower Mole that also did takeout.

I headed to the last of those three. If I remembered correctly, it had the latest closing hours. I opened the wooden door lit up by warm-colored lamps, and the jingling of a bell echoed across the room. Inside the quiet store were a few customers as well as the owner and his wife, a couple in their prime.

"Welcome! Must be hard working so late, huh? Hey, they aren't treating you too poorly at the estate, are they?" the owner said. He and his wife were worried about me. I'd been here with Kelly before, so it seemed that they remembered me.

*You don't see many maids around here, after all.*

The previous margrave had apparently been a horrible employer, so everyone was worried about Kelly and me wherever we went shopping. I felt very strongly about correcting that misconception.

"No, it's not a bad work environment at all. The margrave is a wonderful person. We're fed, clothed, and have a roof over our heads, and on top of that, the wages are high. Oh, that reminds me."

I rummaged inside my purse and took out a piece of paper. It was a recruitment flyer Kelly and I had made.

*Now that we have the funds, it's time to execute our plan to employ more servants!*

I unfolded the flyer and held it out toward the couple while I explained what was going on.

“Please take a look. This is a flyer for recruiting more servants at the estate.”

We were afraid people wouldn’t be interested, so we had to offer prospective servants here at the frontier better conditions than the ones they’d find in the capital.

“Dear me! I’ve never seen such a great job offer around here,” the owner’s wife said loudly, and he nodded in agreement. “In addition to clothing, room and board are provided, but you can also commute if you’d like. Your schedule is negotiable. Little or no overtime required. Regular wages, plus various allowances and bonuses. Aren’t these conditions a little *too* good? Honestly, it’s a bit suspicious.”

I told the surprised couple that we had just begun our first effort to recruit new staff. I also passionately emphasized that the lord was a brilliant and magnanimous person. I’d been preaching about Lord Nazel’s magnificent qualities all around town lately.

“Um, would it be too much to ask to let me put this up on your store’s wall?”

Many other recruitment flyers hung on the wall. I decided to give it a try and ask if I could add mine to them, and the two of them readily gave me permission; they were good people.

“Thank you very much!”

After purchasing the food I’d come for, I left the Flower Mole and headed back to the estate in a contented mood. I was walking down the twilit street when I suddenly saw something squirming off to the side.

“Hmm? Could that be a manabeast?”

Manabeasts mostly inhabited the forest and the ocean, so it was unusual to see one in the middle of town, but there were always exceptions. I uneasily approached to better observe the situation and found out that it wasn’t a manabeast but a human, specifically a man. He looked to be crouching down by the edge of the street, perhaps feeling unwell, so I ran up and called out to him.

“Are you all right? Is something wrong?”

The man slowly raised his head, and his eyes widened when he recognized me.

“Oh, you’re…” he said.

“Ah!” I cried out in surprise. The collapsed man was someone I

knew. “Mister Henry!”

“L-Lady Agnes, why are you…dressed as a maid?”

Oh no! I’d changed into a maid outfit so I could casually walk around town.

“Uh, well, I have my reasons.” I tried to change the subject with a smile on my face. I didn’t want Mister Henry prying into my incognito activities, and I was also worried about his health. “Why are you in a place like this, Mister Henry? I could call for some help if you’re feeling ill.”

“This is nothing you need concern yourself over. It is only the usual dizziness and anemia; I’m used to it by now,” Mister Henry replied, flustered.

“What?! Both dizziness *and* anemia?!” This sounded serious! His illness was completely foreign to me, so I had no idea how to deal with it. “I-I should carry you to the mansion first. It’s very close by. Yes, let’s do that.”

I arrived at a quick conclusion and had Mister Henry lean against my shoulder. I had to drag him along the ground a bit, but it was surely better than leaving him on the street. I could handle this much; my strength had Lord Nazel’s seal of approval, after all.

*I wonder if it’s because of all the heavy dresses I wore back home. Perhaps those old-fashioned dresses weren’t without their upsides. Not that I’m wearing one ever again.*

“What are you doing, Lady Agnes?! Please stop this!” Mister Henry offered a feeble resistance, but I didn’t give in. I lugged him back to the mansion while he desperately tried to stop me. Kelly was there to greet me upon my return.

“Welcome home, Lady Agnes. I am glad to see you arrive safely. Excuse me, but who is that?”

“I picked him up.”

Kelly gave a small scream, very uncharacteristic of her, and ran to prepare the guest room with great haste. Luckily, it looked like she’d already finished cleaning. I had just laid the exhausted Mister Henry down on the bed when Lord Nazel arrived.

“What’s going on, Agnes?” Lord Nazel entered the room we were in and made a doubtful expression when he saw Mister Henry lying there. “Why is Henry in our house?”

“I found him collapsed on the street, so I brought him here. He said he felt dizzy and anemic.”

“I think it would be better if we didn’t move him. We need to let his family know where he is and call a doctor. Our lack of manpower is a real problem at times like this.”

Having no one to rely on was certainly an inconvenience.

“I’ll go, so can you look after Henry, Agnes?”

“Of course! It’s gotten dark outside, so take care, Lord Nazel.”

“I will. I’ll be back soon.”

Mister Henry’s home was near his workplace. Fortunately, the doctor’s home wasn’t that far away either.

Lord Nazel returned with the doctor before long. The diagnosis was overwork and Mister Henry was told to recuperate for a few days, but he refused to accept it and tried to get up every chance he got.

“I can’t afford to take a break from work,” he insisted. However, he ended up collapsing to the floor on hands and knees whenever he left his bed, and Lord Nazel and I carried him back every time.

“We’ve contacted your family, so please take a rest, Mister Henry. You look pale,” I said.

“No, I was born this way.”

“All the more reason not to push yourself, then. The doctor gave you some medicine to improve your blood circulation, so please take it after you have dinner. The Flower Mole’s stew is delicious.”

We also finished our meal together.

“Oh, there’s something I’d like to ask you, Lord Nazel.”

“What is it? I will do anything you ask of me.”

“When we hire more servants, I’d like to appoint Kelly as my head handmaiden. She’s eminently trustworthy.”

As Kelly wasn’t a noble, it would normally be impossible for her to become my handmaiden. But since we were at the frontier, there were unlikely to be any other candidates for the position, so she could become my handmaiden as long as Lord Nazel permitted it.

“Does Kelly herself accept?” Lord Nazel asked.

“She was hesitant because she’s a commoner, but she gave in when I told her I want her for the job no matter what.”

“Then there isn’t any problem. I’ll respect your decision.”

“Thank you so much! I’d like to hold interviews for the other servants soon.”

“I’m sorry for leaving the management of the estate entirely to

you.”

“No, this is my responsibility as your wife and Margravine of Sutrena.”

Even if Her Highness’s order had been the impetus, I intended to fulfill my duty now that this had become my role. Perhaps satisfied by my reply, Lord Nazel looked happy.

Mister Henry recovered the next day, but he only did some simple work at the mansion because he wasn’t supposed to push himself yet. As a result, his inspection of the seedlings happened sooner than we’d expected. Lord Nazel led him to the garden and explained the fine details about the seedlings. Mister Henry seemed deeply surprised, and their discussion shifted toward various practical applications for the plants.

“That would end up solving all of our food problems. However, it’s likely to cause dissatisfaction among those who have up until now braved the danger of venturing into the ocean and forest in order to gather food. They would go out of business,” Mister Henry said.

“It’s thanks to people like them that you’ve somehow escaped starvation up until now, isn’t it?” Lord Nazel said.

“Correct. There are those who specialize in fishing, hunting, and gathering. Of course, their goods jump in price because of the accompanying danger.”

“They will need to be compensated. Perhaps we could give them some kind of special privilege in connection with harvesting the new crops.”

It looked like their conversation was proceeding smoothly. Kelly and I exchanged glances behind them.

“But I must say, I’m surprised that these seedlings grew so large in Sutrena,” Mister Henry remarked.

“It wasn’t my power alone. Agnes helped me out. If we want to plant them elsewhere, her cooperation will be necessary.”

“Your wife’s help, you say? Does this mean her magic played a role in this?”

“Yes. It seems her magic can accelerate the plants’ growth. Only through our powers combined can we make the crops grow, though once the plants have grown, no more magic is necessary.”

“I understand. Let us discuss all the specifics.”

“Yes, I’d like this matter to proceed while you’re still here at the

mansion. Also, please let me take on any of your work that I can. It should lighten your burden."

The two of them still had a subtle distance between them, but it would be nice if this became an opportunity for Mister Henry to open up to Lord Nazel. I thought about that while using my reinforcement magic on the garden's flower beds, since I had nothing to do.

Several days later, Mister Henry recovered and his discussions with Lord Nazel about reforming the territory proceeded. His complexion had also improved a little, and it looked like he would be able to return to his job at the fortress the following day.

*It seems the two of them recognize each other as work partners. Kelly and I have put in our share of work too. The new servant interviews are today.*

I changed into a maid outfit and headed outside the mansion alongside Kelly to go and meet the applicants gathered in front of the gate. I wanted to put a lot of emphasis on the applicants' personalities when conducting the interviews, so I had disguised myself as a maid to oversee the process. Our cover story was that I was the head maid, while Kelly was the head handmaiden. For some reason, Lord Nazel was fond of this maid uniform and even called it cute.

*Ooh, I'm so nervous.*

By now, all our interviewees should have been gathered outside the gate.

"It's finally time for the interviews, Kelly."

"Indeed it is, Lady Agnes. I wonder if many applicants have gathered."

"I don't know, but we've done everything we could. All that's left for us now is to judge them carefully and hire the best ones!"

The two of us went through the gate and saw many more people than we'd expected, despite the early hour.

*The favorable employment terms must have worked.*

This time, we were hiring servants for the positions of chef, maid, and gardener. We were hoping to gradually fill in the rest of the positions in the future.

I turned toward the applicants and greeted them. "We apologize for the delay. Thank you all for gathering here today. We will be conducting the recruitment interviews now, so please step

inside.”

For the first stage of the interview, the applicants for each position would give a short self-introduction, while the second stage involved looking into their characters. Sixteen applicants had gathered for the maid position, but none had for the chef and gardener positions. What a pity. We’d arranged two vacant rooms we’d finished cleaning as a waiting room and an interview room, and we had the applicants enter in groups of four.

“Please introduce yourselves starting from the first person.”

Kelly and I sat down as the woman sitting furthest to our right started talking.

“I’m Mocha. I collect medicinal herbs in the forest. I’m eighteen years old and can do housework and mix simple medicine.”

“I’m Patty. My family breeds cattle. I’m sixteen years old and can do housework and take care of livestock.”

“I’m Mather. I worked in a diner’s kitchen. I’m thirty-two years old, and cooking is my forte.”

“I’m Laurie, a housewife. I’m forty years old and can take care of babysitting and housework. I also have experience as a maid.”

I asked each of them some simple questions and didn’t get a bad impression from any of them. I also started to wonder if we could employ Mather as a chef. Anyway, everyone in this group passed the first stage.

“All right, let’s call the second group in.”

“As you wish, Lady Agnes,” Kelly whispered.

We thought the second group’s interview was proceeding as favorably as the first one, but there was one disagreeable woman in the mix. She wore flashy clothes and had a flamboyant hairstyle; she stood out starkly from the others.

“Excuse me, how long are you planning to keep me waiting?!”

She looked considerably angry, so I apologized right away.

“We are deeply sorry for the delay.”

“What an insensitive maid. I’m a handmaiden applicant! The least you could do is provide me a separate waiting room from the other applicants.”

Handmaidens were personal attendants for women of high standing. They performed chores and took care of their lady’s personal needs. In our estate, Kelly had both the role of a handmaiden and a maid. Lower-status servants had to address

handmaidens as “lady,” effectively treating handmaidens as if they were the same rank as the lady of the house. Likewise, during visits to another noble’s estate, the servants there had to address the handmaiden deferentially as “lady.” Daughters of noble families often served as handmaidens, so declaring that she was a handmaiden applicant most likely meant she was from a good family.

*But this interview is for* maids*, not handmaidens.*

We weren’t recruiting handmaidens at the moment, so it would cause problems if she tried to force her way in. Kelly had become the head handmaiden, which was sufficient at the moment.

“We aren’t hiring handmaidens today,” I told her.

“I know that!” she snapped, leaving me utterly confused. “The margravine doesn’t have a handmaiden yet, right? So I thought to take the position for myself,” she declared in an arrogant tone after getting in my face with no hesitation.

“No, she is the head handmaiden of the house.” I gestured to Kelly. She had only been promoted recently, so perhaps this candidate’s information had been outdated.

“*She* is the head handmaiden? Are you a noble?” she asked Kelly.

“No, I’m a commoner,” Kelly replied honestly.

In response, the woman started speaking in an even more confident tone.

“Then I, a baron’s daughter, will be the head handmaiden henceforth! The madam was called Lady Bumpkin back at the capital, yes? She might improve a little now that I’m here, though she probably won’t amount to much with such a poor foundation. Aha ha ha!”

“O-Oh, is that so?” I continued pretending to be the head maid even as I shuddered before her momentum.

“The lord is a total hottie! My goal is to become his mistress! I’m going to work for that bumpkin woman as a pretext to get close to him!”

I was at a complete loss for words before her shockingly brazen declaration.

*Her goal is Lord Nazel?*

Before coming to the frontier, I’d thought that if Lord Nazel found a woman he loved, I’d quietly step aside. But now that this

scenario was before me, I found the very thought unpleasant.

*Huh? Could that mean…*

The days I'd spent with Lord Nazel up to now had been delightful. The time we'd been together had been peaceful and tender, something I'd never felt back home. My feelings for him had grown stronger in the short time we'd been at the frontier.

*I love Lord Nazel—so much that I don't want to accept a mistress.*

Feeling concerned about me trembling in my seat, Kelly addressed the woman in a dispassionate tone.

"I would first like everyone here to introduce themselves. Those are the rules of this interview."

"Know your place, commoner! You will face dire consequences if you reject me!"

"I will be sure to relay that to my lady. Now please, introduce yourself."

There was no need for her to actually relay anything, since I was right there, but I stayed quiet since I was supposed to be the head maid at the moment.

"Hmph! It's only commoners here anyway. I will obviously be chosen as handmaiden."

"Please introduce yourself," Kelly repeated with a straight face. She was incredible for being able to keep a calm face even at a time like this.

"I'm Rebecca, the third daughter of Baron Kigyonne. I'm nineteen years old."

The other applicants were clearly put off by Rebecca's behavior, but they continued one after another.

"I'm Neilis, an apprentice housekeeper. I'm twenty-seven years old."

"I'm Marilyn. I work as a waitress at a pub. I'm thirty years old."

"I'm Molina, a hunter. I'm thirty-seven years old and excel at hunting, butchering, and cleaning."

The second group's interview ended, but the other three seemed to be cowering pitifully, intimidated by Rebecca's display. We conducted the third and fourth groups' interviews in the same vein and finished without any problems.

"Good work, Lady Agnes. The second stage of the interview comes next. Let's begin by announcing the successful applicants from the first stage."

I nodded and was about to start calling out the successful applicants when my attention was suddenly drawn to the other side of the door.

*Uh…huh?*

Lord Nazel and Mister Henry were peeking at me through the slightly open door.

*Were they worried and came to see how things are going? It's a little embarrassing.*

With renewed motivation, I went on to announce the successful applicants who would continue to the second stage of the interview; the rest were expected to leave.

"The applicants who have passed the first stage of the maid recruitment interview are Mocha, Patty, Mather, Laurie, Marilyn, Molina, Minnie, and Pansy. There will be a second stage to your interview, so please remain in this room. If your name wasn't called, it unfortunately means you were not selected this ti—"

"Just a moment! What is the meaning of this?!" I was interrupted by Rebecca, the baron's daughter, who quickly approached me. I'd thought so earlier too, but she exerted a lot of pressure. "What about me? You'll be hiring me as a handmaiden, right?"

"Today's interview is for the position of maid. We aren't hiring handmaidens at the moment."

"Are you kidding me?! A mere maid can't order me around! Just hire me as a handmaiden already. Did you forget I'm Rebecca, Baron Kigyonne's daughter?!"

*Uh… You're only putting me on the spot by saying that.* My words weren't getting through to her no matter what. I was getting tired at this point.

"As I've already said several times, I cannot do that."

"Silence. Let me meet that bumpkin at once! To begin with, why hasn't she shown up for the interview when a lady of my status came here in person? I suppose if she looks like a bumpkin, her brain is also a bumpkin."

This was the first time I'd heard anyone call my brain a bumpkin.

*Argh, what should I do?*

Rebecca didn't show any intention of giving up.

"What a half-witted maid! If you won't listen to me, you deserve

this!” Rebecca raised one hand high in the air. I expected she would hit me, so I reflexively closed my eyes.

*It’s all right, she shouldn’t be as strong as my father.*

But no impact arrived no matter how long I waited. I timidly opened my eyes and saw Rebecca frozen in place with her arm still raised and Lord Nazel holding tight to her wrist while standing between us to protect me.

“Though you are an applicant, I cannot overlook an act of violence in this estate,” he said.

“Y-You are…” Rebecca’s eyes shot wide open when she saw Lord Nazel. She probably had a rough idea who he was. But then, she pointed at me with her other hand and said, “I was trying to punish that half-witted maid! A mere commoner like her dared pompously give *me* orders! You should fire her right this instant! Won’t you hire me as a handmaiden, my lord? I’m sure I will be able to satisfy you.” She flapped her long, black eyelashes intensely and looked up at Lord Nazel suggestively.

*The way she treats the two of us is like night and day.*

Lord Nazel looked down at Rebecca with a cold glint in his amber eyes. “I’m sorry to say this, but you can’t be a handmaiden.”

“Wha— But why?! I should be head handmaiden instead of that commoner!” Rebecca shouted while pointing at Kelly this time.

Lord Nazel remained calm.

“No matter their social standing, I can’t trust someone who would so easily raise their hand against another. The same applies to those who would insult my wife.”

Rebecca started trembling slightly when she realized she’d been heard calling me a bumpkin, but she immediately recovered and tried to appeal to Lord Nazel while twisting her body seductively.

“I’m confident I can satisfy you much better than your wife. So please keep me by your side, won’t you?”

“I refuse. I love only my wife,” Lord Nazel immediately replied and hugged me tenderly.

*Eeeep! Wait, this isn’t the time for that.*

It was clearly strange for the lord of the house to hug a maid. The rest of the applicants, being unaware of my true identity, looked flabbergasted.

“Please hold on, Lord Nazel.”

“I’m sorry, Agnes, but I was at my limit. I couldn’t bear to watch

you get hurt any more than that."

There was a commotion among the applicants when they heard my name.

"Isn't the madam also called Agnes?" one of them said.

"Wait, could she be…?" mumbled another.

The cat was out of the bag. The one most shaken by this revelation was the person right in front of me, Rebecca.

*She tried to slap me right in front of Lord Nazel, of all people.*

She'd been caught red-handed, so she couldn't even make any excuses for herself.

"Th-This can't be true. How can the head maid be the margravine? I didn't know that. She's nothing like the rumors! This isn't my fault!" Rebecca stepped back, her face pale as a ghost.

"You are rejected. I know of Baron Kigyonne. I've been thinking of going to *greet* him in the near future. I have some *concerns* regarding where he's getting his funding," Lord Nazel told her in a cold tone. His expression as he spoke was crueler than any I'd ever seen him make. His handsome features significantly added to his intensity.

The expressionless Kelly then stepped in front of Rebecca and swiftly opened the door. "The exit is this way."

Rebecca feebly staggered out the door, looking even paler than Mister Henry.

The maid interviews had been surprisingly tumultuous. I'd thought I would play the role of a proper interviewer, but I had really let things get out of control. And there was another thing bothering me…

"Excuse me, Lord Nazel?"

"What is it, Agnes?"

Lord Nazel had protected me and hugged me, but he'd yet to let go of my arm.

"We'll be holding the second stage of the interviews now, so could you please let go of my arm?"

"Oh, my apologies. It was a subconscious action when I saw my adorable Agnes suffering," he replied, his every word dripping with honey.

*I became fully aware of my love for Lord Nazel earlier, so this proximity makes me feel like I might faint.* The maid applicants were also staring at us, making me all the more embarrassed.

“I won’t get in the way, so could I watch over the rest of the interviews with you, Agnes? I’m worried,” Lord Nazel asked right next to my ear.

I could only nod in agreement.

*Lord Nazel’s voice is lovely.*

I pulled myself together and started the second stage. *We should be able to decide the final hires if no more problems arise.*

We called the applicants to a separate room one by one. The interviewers’ side now had the addition of Lord Nazel…and Mister Henry, for some reason. It would appear he’d had nothing else to do after Lord Nazel came here. The applicants looked shaken when suddenly faced with two more interviewers.

“Um, the first one is Miss Mocha, right? Allow me to introduce myself again: I am Agnes, the Margravine of Sutrena. I apologize for deceiving you by pretending to be the head maid earlier. I wanted to see how you usually are.” I had never expected the situation to devolve into such carnage. “What kind of housework are you experienced in? What is the extent of your skill in mixing medicine?”

“I have experience in cooking, laundry, and cleaning. I can make salves, digestives, remedies for boils, and skin lotions. My family makes a living by collecting medicinal herbs, but the number of manabeasts has increased lately, so we can’t enter the forest.” Mocha explained that she’d decided to look into other lines of work in order to earn even a little more money.

Lord Nazel had some questions next.

“What’s your magic and where is your home?”

“My magic is desiccation. Since I don’t have a lot of mana, I can only dry a small quantity each day, but it’s enough for preserving medicinal herbs or food. My home is near the forest on the east of Sutrena, so I’d prefer a live-in job if possible.”

The recruitment flyer did indeed say that both commuting and living at the estate were options. Mocha must have happened to see the flyer when she’d come to sell herbs in town.

“Very well. The results will be announced at the end, so please move to a separate room for now,” I said.

By the way, the rejected applicants were told that they would be notified of the results on a future date and were then escorted outside through the rear entrance without passing the waiting

room. Rebecca had been intense, to say the least, but the other applicants were sensible.

Up next was Patty, whose interview also finished without incident. After her was Mather, the one who had experience working at a diner. Given her previous career, I decided there was no harm in asking her about the chef position.

“You said that cooking is your specialty. Would you like to be hired as a chef instead of a maid?”

“Huh?” Mather blinked several times in confusion. “But I was merely hired help, not to mention all I can cook is home cooking like you’d see at a diner for commoners. My food wouldn’t suit a noble’s tastes.”

“Incidentally, which diner did you work at?” Mister Henry asked this time.

*You certainly fit the role of interviewer, but you’re not a member of this house, are you?* But he had a serious expression and was definitely the one who looked the most like an interviewer among us.



“The Wild Blue Strawberry, near the fortress.”

“The incredibly popular diner that’s been the talk of the town lately? There’s always a line during lunchtime. I often buy food from there, and it tastes incredible!”

“Thank you very much,” Mather replied in embarrassment.

“Very well. The results will be announced at the end,” I said, finishing her interview.

After all of the interviews were over, we moved to the room where the successful applicants were waiting.

“Thank you all for waiting. The ones to be hired as maids will be Mocha, Laurie, and Marilyn. Mather will be hired as a chef if she agrees to it.”

Since Laurie had children, she opted to commute to work. Marilyn was a single mother and chose the live-in option. Mocha’s house was far away, so she would also be a live-in maid. After some hesitation, Mather agreed to be hired as our chef. I’d been a little afraid of how things would turn out, but the interviews safely concluded for now.

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The maids started work at the estate the following week. Nazelbart also helped with various preparations. The women were still leery of the household because of the rumors surrounding the previous margrave. According to the townsfolk, the previous margrave had routinely assaulted his servants, made them perform heavy manual labor, and also been stingy with their pay.

Through their actions, the new lord and lady tried to communicate “You won’t be treated like that here.” They could only make the new servants understand this message gradually.

Kelly, the head handmaiden, was in charge of educating the new hires. Since there was only one capable person available to train any servants, they’d only hired a few maids at the start. The plan was to steadily hire more once the first ones got used to their job.

Mocha would be in charge of the cleaning and garden departments, Marilyn would be in charge of the kitchen and serving departments, and Laurie would be in charge of the laundry department. But since there were only a few of them at

the moment, they all had to work together to finish their work. Agnes said she planned to have Mather learn a wide variety of recipes. Fortunately, the previous margrave had been a gourmet, so there were plenty of recipe books in the mansion.

The new servants all worked diligently and the mansion rapidly became cleaner and cleaner. Nazelbart couldn't hide his surprise at the transformed entryway and corridors. The mansion had been full of uncanny ornaments when they'd first arrived, but things were being put in order now and the number of tidied rooms kept increasing. Furthermore, the drawing room had started being furnished with easy-to-use, tasteful furniture of Kelly's choice that she'd acquired *somewhere*. A merchant named Bert had apparently provided it. He was also helping them out by purchasing all their unnecessary items.

Since they were still short-staffed, Agnes herself changed into a maid outfit and helped with cleaning or occasionally went to buy groceries nearby. According to her, she could freely walk outside when dressed as a maid, but the clothes suited her so well it was concerning. Kelly said that Agnes was incredibly popular with the men in town because she gave her utmost in everything she did and was a little softhearted. Agnes became healthier and more beautiful by the day, perhaps because her lifestyle had improved after leaving her parents' house. That was probably another reason for her popularity.

*Won't she attract the attention of other men like that?*

Along with the new maids, Henry started visiting the estate regularly for some reason. Of course, he always had some work to justify his visits. Thanks to his cooperation, the low-ranking nobles, starting with Baron Kigyonne, were brought to justice for their illicit activities. Because of the difference in social status, Henry alone hadn't been able to do anything to hold them accountable, even if he'd had proof.

However, it was plain as day that Henry's main goal in visiting was the food. Mather had been working at the diner he frequented but was now the estate's chef. He would always get to enjoy her lunches when he worked at the mansion and discussed the territory's affairs with the margrave while eating. While he appeared to be an overly serious man completely devoted to his work, he was also a gourmet and could be willful.

Meanwhile, Agnes was learning how to make jam from Mather in the kitchen. She'd tried it before after reading a book on it, but all she'd managed to produce was a burnt pot.

*Though that's still cute in its own way*, Nazelbart thought. He wanted to be with his wife, but he had too much work to take a break. He continued looking over the current state of Sutrena with Henry, among other tasks. There was no end to the list of things he had to do.

"Lord Nazelbart, since the start of this year, the fences we use for livestock, especially the ones for mountbeasts, have suffered significant damages from manabeasts. We haven't managed to keep up with the repairs because of budget and labor shortages," Henry said.

"Is it because the fences have deteriorated with age?" Nazelbart asked.

"That is part of the reason, but once the manabeasts tasted livestock, they learned that they can obtain prey more efficiently by destroying fences in human settlements rather than by hunting in the forest, so they've been appearing much more frequently than before."

"I understand the problem now. Most of the fences in Sutrena are made of wood. It would be great if we had metal fences like the ones used in the capital, but the problem is the budget. We have a severe lack of funding."

Because of the previous margrave's extravagant lifestyle, the financial situation of Sutrena was dire. Measures to deal with that issue were also currently underway.

"It is exactly as you say, Lord Nazelbart. We are working to acquire sturdy fences, but there aren't enough of them for everyone."

"I see. In that case, Agnes and I might be able to do something. Could you make a list of the hardest-hit locations?"

"Of course, my lord."

As Nazelbart's relationship with Henry improved, he was also becoming more accepted at the fortress. He didn't feel as uncomfortable there as before. After he finished his meal and sorted out some documents, he went out to the garden and saw a smiling Agnes in front of the field along with Henry. She'd come to check on the crops after she was done making jam and moved

around the field with her eyes sparkling.

“So after overusing my reinforcement magic, we got this really hard vegetable, Mister Henry. It doesn’t look edible.” Agnes was showing Henry an enormous, glossy turnip she’d just pulled out of the field.

“There might be other uses for it. I will look into it,” Henry replied.

“Incidentally, what’s your magic, Mister Henry?”

“It can change the color of objects. It isn’t useful at all. All it changes is the color; the material itself remains the same.”

“In that case, could you perhaps change the color of our mansion’s walls with your magic? There are many grotesque walls and floors, thanks to the previous owner’s tastes. Gaudy, dazzling mixes of primary colors and gold.”

“You wouldn’t be able to calm down surrounded by that. I will lend you my aid when I have the time.”

The topic had moved from the crops to redecorating the mansion.

Before coming to the frontier, Agnes had had very few connections. The harmful influence of her house’s policies had made it impossible for her to be on the same wavelength as her peers, and she’d tended to be avoided in high society. That was why she was happy to be able to talk to all sorts of people since coming here. Henry had also had a soft spot for her ever since she’d helped him when he’d collapsed on the side of the street.

“Lord Nazelbart and you, Lady Agnes, are truly nothing like the rumors say. I’m ashamed of myself for letting mere hearsay mislead me and not seeing the truth.”

“Rumors? What rumors?”

“We received word calling you two ‘the man who had his engagement with Her Highness broken off after he committed a crime and the unsightly lady who defended him.’”

Nazelbart went stiff. He didn’t want Agnes to hear something like that. However, she tilted her head to the side curiously before replying to Henry.

“That’s blatant misinformation. Setting the part about me aside, everything about Lord Nazel is complete lies—rumors spread to cover up the royal family’s scandal.”

“Just as I suspected.”

“We can’t say this loudly in public, but everything was caused by Her Highness’s selfish behavior. Lord Nazel is an innocent victim in this. Letters from the castle are censored, so reports that went out were likely rewritten in a way convenient for the royal family.”

“That’s a satisfying explanation. Thank you, Lady Agnes.”

As Nazelbart was closely observing the two of them, Agnes suddenly turned toward him; he’d been spotted.

“Lord Nazel! Have you finished your paperwork?”

Agnes rushed over to Nazelbart with a smile as lovely as a flower in bloom. She looked so cute that he instinctively reached out both arms to embrace her, startling her and making her go red in the face. The sheltered Agnes was completely unaccustomed to men but also strong and robust despite being a noble lady.

*I love that about her!* Nazelbart thought. He felt like everything would work out well when he was with Agnes. He was now truly thankful his engagement had been called off.

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The lives of the people of Sutrena had dramatically improved recently. Their food supply had seen the most remarkable change, largely thanks to the new margrave and margravine exiled here from the capital. One of the maids working at their estate, Marilyn, took a look at the state of the town while she was out shopping. The streets had become much livelier. This area used to always have a dark ambience about it. Manabeast attacks, heavy taxation, the lord’s tyranny—the people had endured long days of unending suffering.

Marilyn had been just like them. She’d had to raise her young kid in a ramshackle wooden house—more like a hut; the word “house” was too generous a description—while waitressing at a pub every night for little pay until she was ultimately fired. The overfamiliar pub’s owner had gotten sick of her for rebuffing his advances and kicked her out. Her husband had disappeared, leaving her to live alone with her child in destitution. Grasping at straws, she’d decided to participate in the interviews to work as a maid at the lord’s estate. She’d left her kid under the care of a former pub coworker and headed to the estate, knowing full well how lacking her qualifications were. And yet here she was now.

“I never imagined I would pass.”

Moreover, she’d been permitted to stay at the mansion rent-free along with her kid, and they could spend her break time together. Marilyn was currently learning the ropes of maid work under the instruction of Kelly, the head handmaiden. The tasks she’d been assigned at the moment were shopping for foodstuffs, assisting Mather the chef, and serving during meals. Even so, she still wondered why she’d been hired.

*There were younger applicants without kids.*

Laurie, one of her coworkers, apparently thought the same. She was married and also had kids and had once quit her job to start her family. *“Did they perhaps hire people who struggle in their lives?”* Laurie had wondered, and Marilyn had thought the same upon hearing her.

A shopkeeper greeted Marilyn in a friendly voice during her shopping trip. “Oh, you’re one of the new maids, aren’t you? Is your job going okay? The other girls say they’re doing fine, but I’m a little worried because of the previous margrave’s behavior and all.”

Curiously enough, Marilyn was asked the same thing everywhere she went. She made sure to always reply with a smile on her face.

“I’m fine. Both the lord and his wife are kind people, the head handmaiden is impartial, and the pay is good too. This is the best job in the world.”

Being employed at the lord’s estate would later become an incredibly popular occupation, but that’s a story for another time.

# Chapter 4: Lady Bumpkin Debuts at a Party

Lord Nazel and I were currently riding a blue wyvern to inspect a village in the eastern part of Sutrena. It was a bit far from the central area of Sutrena where the town with the fortress and our estate was located. A pasture for livestock or mountbeasts extended below us. Many people here made a living by raising livestock. A manabeast-inhabited forest lay beyond the pasture, so of course this was another place that had suffered heavily from manabeast attacks. Here and there, fencing and even some of the houses were visibly smashed, clawed, gnawed, or otherwise damaged.

"It's all forest and pasture as far as the eye can see, Lord Nazel."

"Sutrena is pretty much the only place in Desnim without fields for crops."

Sutrena was in the southern part of the country and had a relatively warm climate. Although it was difficult to grow crops here, weeds thrived. This made the land ideal for pastures. Lord Nazel was currently developing plants intended to improve the quality of the soil itself.

We were visiting a village where they raised pegasi as mountbeasts. It had suffered severe damage from manabeasts in recent times, with a seemingly never-ending string of incidents involving the mountbeasts being attacked. Mountbeasts were valuable and sold for high prices, but raising them was time-consuming and costly. They were one of Sutrena's most valuable commodities, often being sold to nobles or the government, so it was vital to protect this precious source of income.

"There, there, thank you for getting us here. You're such a sweet little wyvern!"

When the wyvern landed, the villagers all gathered together to greet us.

*It's so embarrassing when Lord Nazel catches me in his arms every time I get down from a wyvern. I've gotten used to mountbeasts, so I really think I can mount and dismount them normally now.*

The pegasi paddocks were enclosed by wooden fences, with

fine nets strung overhead to keep the mountbeasts from flying off. The fencing was damaged in many places, likely by the manabeasts of the forest.

One of the villagers talked to us while we were inspecting the fences.

“We used to have someone capable of using weight reduction magic, so we could transport lumber to make repairs, but that person has now grown old and has no replacement. There’s no one else here with magic that would be useful in repairing the corrals. Our village is nothing but the elderly and lacks the manpower necessary to maintain things. We don’t have the money to hire outsiders either.”

The villagers had continued making repairs as much as possible, but as the fences were so old and worn-out, they were reduced to rubble almost as soon as they were fixed. The repair crew just couldn’t keep up.

“Is it true that you’re going to provide sturdier fences, my lord?”

“Yes, my wife and I will have the fences repaired by the end of the day. The barns too, of course.”

And so, we immediately got to work. Lord Nazel grew sturdy, magically enhanced plants where the fences needed to go, while I applied my matter reinforcement magic to them.

“Grow big and strong!” I called out.

The vine-like plants rapidly extended toward the sky and formed a mesh fence. The plants had few leaves, so sunlight could get through easily, and ventilation was also good. We reinforced the fences in various places with the same technique and were finished a little past noon.

We spent a few days going from place to place like this before finally returning to our estate. Kelly and the rest of the servants greeted us with smiles as soon as we stepped inside. The mansion got cleaner every time I saw it.

“A letter has arrived from the royal capital, Lord Nazelbart,” Kelly said before handing an envelope to Lord Nazel, whose expression clouded.

“It’s from the royal family,” he muttered. He then took me by the hand and led me to his workroom. I obediently followed while tilting my head in confusion.

The workroom had been thoroughly cleaned and made ready

for use. It used to be a storehouse for a large number of mysterious portraits. There were all kinds of them, from cartoonish to nude ones, all depicting the same person. Kelly and I wondered if they were portraits of the previous lord. When we discussed them with Lord Nazel, he called them unsightly, and I had been forbidden from entering the room until they were sold off.

*If I remember correctly, they sold for a high price because of their surprisingly expensive materials.*

Lord Nazel swiftly opened the envelope and looked over the letter. He didn't say a word, but his expression somehow felt cold.

"This concerns you too, Agnes, so I will reluctantly inform you of its contents."

"I'm listening." I was a little afraid to hear the rest after such a preface, but I vigorously shook my head to calm myself.

"This is an invitation to the second prince's garden party. We are invited to attend as a couple."

"A royal party? Excuse me, but is it really all right for us to even be invited?"

Although Lord Nazel was innocent, he was still considered a criminal in the capital. I worried that inviting him to a party could incur the king's displeasure.

*But the party's organizer is the second prince. Does this mean what I think it does?*

I raised my head and conveyed my thoughts to Lord Nazel.

"Have Her Highness and His Highness the second prince formed their own factions? His Highness has always appeared indifferent to the throne up to now."

The second prince didn't want to get involved in the power struggle and gave a strong impression of keeping a low profile. When I'd attended the party meant to search for his fiancée, he'd spent most of the event with the daughter of a baron who held no influence at all.

*I thought perhaps he had feelings for her, but there's been no report of relationship progress since then. So I suppose it was all just a front.*

The daughter of the Addamsgomes ducal family was said to be the most likely contender to become the second prince's fiancée, but according to rumors, the two of them didn't seem to be very

close.

*The House of Addamsgomes might be trying to distance itself from the second prince because of Her Majesty's opinion too.*

Her Majesty hated all royal children that weren't related to her by blood, so she had shunned the second prince.

"His Highness is either being instigated by someone or he has some scheme of his own. At any rate, we won't know unless we meet him. It seems that the party will take place not at the royal capital but at the estate of a noble acquaintance of his."

"Will you attend the party, Lord Nazel?"

"It's a given that I can't ignore a summons from the second prince himself. But you don't have to force yourself, Agnes. Some of the attendees will no doubt be people you don't want to meet."

"No, if you go, I will accompany you." Lord Nazel and I both had embarrassing memories from attending a party. I wouldn't be a coward and run away by myself. "Because I'm your wife," I added with a smile.

Lord Nazel then got up, moved behind my chair, and locked his arms around me tightly.

*Hasn't he been embracing me a lot lately?*

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Flowers swayed in the wind amid orderly rows of trees. Immaculate white tables stood on the freshly cut lawn, with delicious-looking cakes and fruits placed upon them. The estate's garden was full of people dressed in fancy attire and enjoying themselves.

"Ugh, this is *so* awkward."

My body trembled a little as I peered into the venue from its entrance. The day of the party organized by the second prince had finally arrived. The venue was located between the capital and Sutrena, and of all places, it was the home of a certain count's son who'd once heartlessly rejected me. I'd heard that he'd since gotten married to the lady he'd spent the entire party with.

*I can't blame the second prince for not knowing this is where I was so ingloriously repudiated, but it's still unpleasant to be back.*

As I stood frozen in place, Lord Nazel called out to me.

"Are you okay, Agnes? You may rest in the carriage if you'd like."

“No, thank you. I feel fine, Lord Nazel.”

Kelly had chosen a wonderful dress for me specifically for this day. There hadn’t been enough time to get one custom-made, but I still looked a million times better than I used to. I had no confidence in my own looks, but I fully trusted Kelly’s skill.

*I have to show that I’m not as much of a bumpkin anymore in order to clear even a little of the stigma from Lord Nazel’s name.*

He was currently being ridiculed among high society for taking the unsightly Lady Bumpkin as his wife.

“Shall we get going?”

“Of course, Lord Nazel. I’m ready for anything.”

We passed through the reception and set foot in the venue with arms linked.

*All right, onward like a married couple!* I fired myself up. The moment we stepped into the venue, a number of gazes focused on us.

“People are staring at us, Lord Nazel.”

“Don’t let it bother you, Agnes. Let’s keep going.”

We were attracting quite a bit of attention. Everyone was looking at us and whispering to each other.

*I don’t know if it’s because they aren’t trying to hide anything or because my ears are good, but I can hear everything they’re saying.*

The two chatty, gossip-loving nobles from Her Highness’s disastrous engagement celebration were also here. Back then, they’d commented on practically everything as it was happening, and they seemed to be doing the same now.

“Look, it’s Lord Nazelbart. I knew that he was invited, but he actually came?”

“He was exiled to the frontier as punishment for his disrespect toward Her Highness and Master Robin, right? Rumor has it that he’s governing Sutrena now.”

“That’s a fact. I heard His Highness the second prince was the one who invited the disgraced margrave and his wife today. This party is a gathering for His Highness’s faction. ‘The enemy of my enemy is my friend,’ as they say. Perhaps that is why Lord Nazelbart was invited.”

I grasped Lord Nazel’s hand tightly and continued moving toward the center of the venue.

“Putting that aside, who is that beautiful woman Lord Nazelbart

has with him? I've never seen her before."

"Didn't he get married to the infamous Lady Bumpkin? The one with a pure-white face, deep-blue eye shadow, and bright-red lipstick?"

"Which would make that woman his lover?!"

Their comments had turned a little outrageous.

*No, I'm his wife; you're looking right at her.*

Cutting into some strangers' conversation was a delicate matter, so I stayed quiet and kept walking. The two of them continued talking loudly.

"Of course he would be unsatisfied with Lady Bumpkin!"

"But to think he would bring his lover to His Highness's party like this! Where is his common sense?"

"Even so, she sure is a beauty. I'd love to be introduced to her and learn who exactly she is."

*Urgh, what should I do?*

Their misunderstanding was growing increasingly out of control, but Lord Nazel didn't show a hint of caring about the strange things they were saying. He took me to the center of the venue, where the second prince was. The two of them were acquaintances, so upon spotting us, the prince also started moving toward us. Lord Nazel had tutored the prince in the past, and they'd been talking to each other ever since.

Prince Leonardo was eighteen years old. He was a handsome man with short, evenly cut blond hair. However, the gaze from his blue eyes was cold, and it was difficult to figure out what he was thinking. That was my impression of him, at least.

"It's been a while, Nazelbart," His Highness said in an indifferent tone. Lord Nazel greeted him politely and I followed suit. "The matter with my older sister caused you a lot of trouble. The palace is also troubled by losing another excellent individual. Incidentally, is your wife not accompanying you today?" he said while staring at me.

*Here. His wife is right here. Excuse me, Your Highness, but we've even met before.*

I fidgeted back and forth and pleaded with my eyes, until Lord Nazel cleared his throat and suddenly embraced me.

"Whatever do you mean? The woman next to me *is* my wife."



Silence fell over the party venue in an instant, and then commotion washed over everyone like a tidal wave.

"Huh? What does he mean? That's not his lover?"

"But his wife is Lady Bumpkin. I haven't heard anything about them getting divorced!"

"Hold on… Now that I think about it, doesn't that woman have the same hair color as Lady Bumpkin?"

"It *is* a pretty unusual color. It couldn't be…"

It very much could.

"I'm Agnes. I've…changed my makeup," I timidly told His Highness.

Shrieks erupted everywhere in the venue. The men who'd rudely rejected me in the past and the women who'd made fun of me were all screaming.

"Hold on, is that actually Lady Bumpkin?"

"She's like a completely different person! Lord Nazelbart might have truly hit the jackpot here."

"Meanwhile only bad rumors have been surrounding Her Highness lately."

"Not to mention Master Robin— Whoa now, let's drop that subject. I wouldn't want to commit lèse-majesté. In any case, all of the men who've been running from Lady Bumpkin all this time can't take their eyes away from her now."

"The biggest fish is always the one that got away."

His Highness's eyes shot wide open for a moment as he looked at me, but he immediately regained his composure and smiled—behavior truly befitting a prince.

"I apologize for my discourtesy, Lady Agnes," His Highness said. He hadn't even glanced my way when we'd met at the royal palace, but his blue eyes were now staring right at me, and I couldn't settle down. "I knew that Nazelbart would never neglect his wife, no matter who she is, but I'm relieved to see you getting along much better than I expected. Hey, stop glaring at me. No one is trying to take your wife away from you."

"I'm not glaring at you, Your Highness. But it is true that I'm getting along swimmingly with Agnes." Lord Nazel put his arm around my waist and grinned at His Highness.

*The atmosphere seems pretty relaxed.*

I was a little relieved to see that His Highness bore no ill will

toward me—Lady Bumpkin. And thanks to him, Lord Nazel now felt a little more comfortable here.

"I'd love to talk to you again, Nazelbart."

"I would be happy to talk to you any time."

The two of them continued smiling at each other.

*Maybe it was just my imagination, but I got the sense their smiles held some deeper meaning. But we're surrounded by a large crowd, so they are likely restricted to harmless and inoffensive pleasantries like this for now.*

The two of them were being subjected to endless, passionate gazes from the women around them. His Highness had other people he needed to greet, so Lord Nazel and I linked arms again and left. We had been wandering around the venue for a while, when Count Lugre's son—who'd provided the location for this party—approached us, with his wife beside him. In the past, he'd publicly ignored and humiliated me. That was but a bitter memory now. Incidentally, his wife was a viscount's daughter renowned for her beauty.

"If it isn't Lord Nazelbart. Welcome to my humble abode. Are you enjoying the party?" Lord Yalata said before turning his eyes to me, his face a little red. He kept stealing glances at me the whole time.

*It's only natural I'd notice when you look at me so much.*

Lord Nazel also seemed to be bothered by the constant glances. I'd told him that I'd been very rudely spurned by this man.

"Thank you very much for facilitating this wonderful party, Lord Yalata. I would also like to congratulate you on your marriage." Lord Nazel had an amiable smile as he offered his congratulations. He'd lost the tense aura he used to have back at the capital and now exuded a soothing calm.

*I should also congratulate him. It won't do to cling to the past.*

I focused on comporting myself in a manner becoming of Lord Nazel's wife and smiled stiffly.

"Congratulations on your marriage."

Lord Yalata looked like he wanted to say something and had a complicated expression.

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

"No, it is nothing you need be concerned over!" he hurriedly replied, his face still as red as before.

*Why is he being so formal?*

Lord Yalata kept stealing glances at me as he talked to Lord Nazel, his wife scowling at him all the while.

*I wonder what's wrong.*

"Shall we get going?" Lord Nazel asked me a little later, then took me by the hand and walked away while embracing me. "Excuse us, Lord Yalata."

"Urk… Yes, I hope you have a lovely time."

Lord Nazel moved even closer to me than before and gripped my hand tightly.

"You're far too popular. I'm worried I will be getting a large roster of romantic rivals," he muttered.

"No, no, no, that won't happen. I'm Lady Bumpkin, the woman who's failed countless marriage interviews."

"Haah, your complete lack of self-awareness is also making me worry."

We left the suspiciously acting Lord Yalata and headed toward the tables with all the food. There were fluffy sponge cakes, colorful macarons, thick chocolate fondues, and jiggling gelatin. The temptations were too numerous to count.

"You love sweets, don't you, Agnes?"

"I do. I couldn't have any when I lived with my parents, so this could be like a type of backlash."

"Then let's go sample them."

"Certainly!"

Being together with Lord Nazel was very reassuring. I happily went to the tables with all the desserts.

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Yalata Lugre, Count Lugre's son, was experiencing painful feelings of regret. He'd once turned down an engagement with a certain lady and pretended the proposal itself had never happened, but now she'd appeared before him as a complete beauty. It was like she was now someone else entirely.

"*That's* Lady Bumpkin? This has to be some kind of trick."

The House of Evantail was an old-fashioned and obstinate noble family disliked in high society. All of their women wore such thick makeup, they looked like ghosts—eerily pure-white faces,

deep-blue eye shadow, and clownish red lipstick. They could be easily identified by their trademark old, yellowing dresses. No matter how high their social standing, getting married to one of them would turn you into high society's laughingstock. Such a fate was to be avoided at all costs. Yalata had kept dodging Agnes during the party ostensibly meant to seal their engagement, and he had hurriedly gotten engaged to a reasonably beautiful and agreeable viscount's daughter. He'd been happy he'd managed to evade Lady Bumpkin—until today.

"The fish that got away is far too big." Yalata lowered his head in disappointment and looked at Agnes intimately walking away with Nazelbart.

*Be that as it may, I never imagined Lord Nazelbart would be so taken with a specific woman that he'd bother to warn me off.* When Yalata couldn't take his eyes off Agnes and kept glancing at her, Nazelbart had threatened him with a deadly serious smile. *He used to give the impression of a stoic man with no interest in the opposite sex, but now... Did she really change the doll-like Nazelbart?*

Likely having watched the entire scene, Yalata's wife approached him from behind and pinched his buttocks.

"Excuse me, darling? What was that all about?!" she demanded.

"I-I'm sorry, it's nothing."

"Stop looking so lecherous! What's wrong with you, ogling her like that?!"

They'd gotten married hastily, and Yalata's wife had turned out to be extremely willful, wasteful, and, above all else, scary. Her goal had been to marry him for his status, so she'd seemed nice as she'd cozied up to him, but he now knew the truth. However, he was stuck with her now and had no choice but to submit to his wife.

*On the topic of Lady Bumpkin,* those *people are also here today, aren't they?*

Yalata averted his gaze from his oppressive wife and remembered the conspicuous family dressed in old-fashioned attire. Just one of them had been hard enough to deal with, but their intensity became staggering when they were in a group.

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Lord Nazel led me by the hand as we continued going around and greeting the other party attendees. Nobles who loved scandals continuously called out to Lord Nazel.

*How malicious! It's painfully obvious they're just trying to get the latest bit of juicy gossip from him.*

But Lord Nazel evaded them effortlessly, always with a smile on his face. He had a special presence about him that showed he was no ordinary person. I could practically feel his sense of composure.

*At any rate, men have been excessively praising my looks for some time. Is it sarcasm? I dislike being used as a mere pretext for starting a conversation.*

I was feeling fed up as I conversed with my fellow nobles over and over again, when I noticed a person I was familiar with quietly approaching me—a short boy with hair and eyes the same color as mine, dressed in a close-fitting and heavy coat with formfitting, pure-white tights below. He moved by making his body hover with magic. He glided through the air until he was right in front of me, then stared at me with the same reddish eyes I had. I could feel his hostility and put myself slightly on guard.

"I noticed a *shameless* woman was the center of attention, but to think it was my elder sister, Agnes."

"So, Paul, you're also attending this party."

The boy who had thrown that snide remark at me was none other than my little brother, Paul Evantail. He was the eldest son of the House of Evantail and was presently twelve years old, an appropriate age for him to have a fiancée by now. Paul was thoroughly dyed in our house's strictures and despised his worthless sister, who had always challenged the house's policies. He always spoke to me in a scathing manner. It bore mentioning that he of course knew what I looked like without makeup, so he could recognize me even as I currently was.

"I see you weren't satisfied with embarrassing our house at Her Highness's party and getting disowned, so you've appeared in public in this frivolous and immodest state. What manner of crude, shallow excuse for makeup is this? And that shoddy dress! Even after mother repeatedly warned you against this very thing?!"

*I think the one floating in the air wearing white tights that cling to his skin is far more embarrassing. You even have padding at the center of your tights.*

My brother's loud voice once again attracted everyone's attention.

"You are the very opposite of a lady! You are the shame of the House of Evantail!" Paul pointed at me with a smug expression. He looked so satisfied with himself he was practically screaming, "I told you so!" Every noble around us looked put off by his behavior.

"Paul, I have been disowned, so I have nothing to do with the House of Evantail anymore." I told my brother the simple truth, but he still looked dissatisfied.

*I don't care if you call me an embarrassment or any other insult. I'm not going back to what I looked like when I was mocked as Lady Bumpkin.*

A few moments later, my parents appeared behind my brother. The entire House of Evantail was now present. They stood out so much that everyone around us couldn't help but stare. My father believed that women were better off being ignorant, so I'd been raised without being taught a single thing about politics, but after spending time with Lord Nazel, I'd had the chance to learn all kinds of things about noble society. As a result, I more or less knew where the House of Evantail currently stood. They were part of the second prince's faction, not Her Highness's, which explained why my parents had encouraged me to become His Highness's fiancée in the past.

*It's perfectly natural for the House of Evantail to be attending this party.*

My brother backed away a little, still hovering in the air, and my parents, dressed in their outdated clothes, stepped in front of me. My mother wore one of my great-grandmother's yellowing dresses, while my father wore the same kind of formfitting white tights as my brother. The padding at the center was noticeably bulkier in my father's case—quite exaggerated, in fact.

"Agnes, you miserable daughter. Are you here to disgrace us again?!" My father wagged a finger at me, his face beet red from rage.

*At least this is better than suddenly getting hit.*

"My goodness, Agnes! What a vulgar dress! And your makeup is so thin, people can see your natural face! Know some shame! It's unbecoming of a lady to draw so much attention from the gentlemen!" my mother shouted in a hysterical, high-pitched

voice.

I believed that Lord Nazel was the real cause of all the attention, and besides that, I found makeup that completely hid your face to be even more problematic, but they wouldn't understand even if I told them. My parents and my brother were all neck-deep in the House of Evantail's traditions. Instead of adapting our customs to fit the times, they'd stopped thinking and clung to the old ways out of habit. The result was a family so out of touch with society that everyone treated them like eccentrics.

*The House of Evantail really* is *weird.*

I had encountered a completely different world after going outside our house. I had been abnormal back when I'd been called Lady Bumpkin. I'd been unable to defy my parents' orders and would always go outside in the clothes they'd picked for me, no matter how much I disliked and complained about them.

*There might have been other ways to go about it.* I'd been ignorant, flailing aimlessly without trying to learn what the world was like. *But I won't repeat that mistake.* I was myself, not a convenient tool for the House of Evantail to use, especially now that I'd been kicked out.

"Lord Evantail, Lady Evantail, as you have disowned me, I have no relation to your house. I would ask you to leave me be."

But my parents and brother weren't the kind of people to quietly withdraw now. Although I'd been disowned, facing defiance from a former family member—a woman, no less—seemed to have made them extremely angry.

"Drop the self-important talk, Agnes! Shut up and obey your parents!"

"Indeed, elder sister! You couldn't even find a fiancé on your own!"

*No, no, no, it was precisely because I was following the rules of the House of Evantail that I spent my days with so many fiancé candidates running away from me—it should have been obvious how abnormal it was. And you still want me to obey you after you disowned me? Isn't that a little too convenient for you?*

When they paused to take a breath after running their mouths, I retained my presence of mind and used the opening to reply to them calmly.

"Father, mother, you have my gratitude for raising me to this

age. However, please don't interfere with me anymore. You are disgracing yourselves with these hysterics," I said, hoping they would stop fussing over their daughter's appearance and go away somewhere, but to no avail.

*Oh no, did I mess up?*

It looked like my words had only resulted in my father's face turning an even deeper crimson.

"You damn brat! How dare a woman like you engage in such sophistry?! You picked up all sorts of useless knowledge from uncouth outsiders, didn't you?!"

*What should I do? I can't seem to have a proper conversation with my former family. You're the ones who kicked me out of your house in the first place!*

"You impudent daughter. Time to discipline you so you never speak like that again!"

By this time my father had finally completely lost his cool. He paid no mind to the large crowd around us and raised his arm high.

*He's going to hit me!*

I remembered all the violence I'd been subjected to and flinched. My body clearly expressed all the fear it had felt since my childhood.

"That's enough!"

Someone instantly appeared before me, his back to me, and my father's powerful fist came to a halt before it could reach me.

"Huh?! Lord Nazel?!"

Lord Nazel, who had leaped forward to protect me, faced my father with a grim expression.

*I can't believe Lord Nazel blocked my father's punch that easily. Does that mean he's actually pretty strong?*

Lord Nazel had been pushed down during Her Highness's engagement celebration party, so I'd thought he wasn't very good in a fight, but perhaps he excelled in martial arts more than I'd realized.

After his attack was prevented, my red-faced father lashed out at Lord Nazel.

"Lord Nazelbart, I would appreciate it if you didn't interfere. This is a problem concerning the House of Evantail!" My father was acting as self-important as usual, but he really ought to have first

apologized to Lord Nazel, the person he'd just thrown a punch at.

*An act of violence against the lord of another territory at a party organized by the second prince is a major scandal.*

Even so, Lord Nazel remained calm. He replied to my father in a soft yet gentlemanly manner.

"Then that would mean Agnes has nothing to do with this, no? She's already been cast out from your house and is now my wife. She has the right to live a happy life away from her former home."

I was moved by Lord Nazel's words. However, my father still wouldn't withdraw and instead became even more incensed.

"That might be so, but I used to be this *thing's* guardian. I cannot allow it to keep causing us shame upon shame. It has a duty to heed to the guidance of our house!"

My father was calling me a "thing" now. My parents cherished my brother, their heir, but they thought of me as nothing more than a tool to use in their political games. As I was overtaken by a gloomy feeling, Lord Nazel addressed my father again, his voice calm yet cold as ice.

"You are the ones who cast Agnes away before, aren't you?"

"So what if we are?"

Lord Nazel moved his eyebrows slightly, flung back my father's fist, and continued speaking in a frigid monotone. Perhaps it was because of his great looks, but his words felt significantly more weighty than my father's.

"Agnes was loitering around the city, cold and worn-out, still wearing the same old dress she'd worn during the party. She would undoubtedly have been in great danger if left alone like that. Someone like you who would drive out a lone woman into the dead of night has no right to so brazenly assume the role of her guardian."

After having his faults repeatedly pointed out, my father couldn't back down even if he'd wanted to and finally snapped back.

"Silence! A foul criminal like you can't order me around! You shouldn't have appeared here in public in the first place!"

This was a party organized by Prince Leonardo, and he'd invited Lord Nazel here himself, so I thought it would have been better not to shout something like that.

"And I would ask you not to insult my dear wife." Lord Nazel

offered a sound rebuttal without faltering in the slightest, despite all the unreasonable words coming his way.

"I can freely decide what to do with our house's defective spawn!"

The light faded from Lord Nazel's eyes as he looked at my father ranting, and I could tell he was far angrier than before.

*When someone as handsome as Lord Nazel snaps, they become truly unapproachable.*

I couldn't stop myself from yelping and backing away, only to find His Highness standing nearby. It appeared that he'd gotten worried about the commotion and come to intervene.

Lord Nazel continued confronting my father.

"I can't simply let that remark pass. Are you saying that you mercilessly hit Agnes because you think she's *defective*?"

"It's necessary discipline!"

"When I took Agnes in, she had large bruises on her cheeks. You have been violent with her before, haven't you?"

The onlookers stirred when they heard Lord Nazel's resolute words.

"Did he just say that Lord Evantail hit his daughter so hard that she got bruised?"

"And on the cheek, no less. Did he not consider that it could leave a scar on the face of his then-unmarried daughter?"

"Was that heavy makeup perhaps intended to hide her bruises?"

"Oh, the humanity!"

That makeup was simply a custom of the House of Evantail, but a false-yet-plausible-sounding rumor regarding its supposed true purpose began to spread among the nobles. It appeared that Lord Nazel had the upper hand in their argument.

"I already told you it was all discipline! Don't interfere with our house's policies, you greenhorn!"

Next to my father, my mother grew pale as she realized the crowd was turning against them, but my father talked on and on without any care in the world. He had lost himself in his anger, as he so often did.

"I only hit this thing back then because it was ordered to get engaged to a criminal!"

"The bruises on her cheeks weren't the only issue. Because

she'd continually been forced to wear secondhand shoes that didn't fit her, the skin on Agnes's feet had been rubbed off so much that it was bleeding. She'd also apparently worn an archaic type of corset—the use of which was retired when it was deemed detrimental to one's health—ever since she was little. I don't believe the House of Evantail is in poor financial condition, but for some reason Agnes was only given old, impractical clothes to wear."

"Yes, our house is doing just fine financially! We don't do this to save money! The clothes and shoes we gave to Agnes have an old and honorable origin, unlike those shoddy rags you've dressed her in!" my mother shouted.

"Such drivel," Lord Nazel said, flatly dismissing her complaint.

The nobles listening to their conversation got even noisier.

"It seems Lord Evantail really did try to hit her earlier, which makes sense if he routinely abused his daughter. And making her wear only secondhand clothes goes far beyond 'discipline.'"

"I always thought the women of the House of Evantail wore those old-fashioned dresses because they were being frugal. But if they aren't hurting for money, they should at least buy one or two new ones!"

"It goes without saying that the violence against her was abuse, but so was refusing to buy her any clothes."

More and more of the nobles around us joined the rapidly spreading consensus of condemnation.

"Were those old corsets he mentioned the ones they say can deform your bones? I believe the royal palace's doctors even made an announcement about it some years ago."

"And they're still trying to force their disowned daughter to dress like a member of the House of Evantail at this point? Poor girl. Especially when she's so beautiful without that thick makeup."

Voices all around me were of the same mind on the topic.

*It looks like there is an awful lot of sympathy for me.*

My father realized that the situation was unfavorable for them, so he shouted at the other nobles to stop staring at him and tried to grab Lord Nazel, his perceived enemy. However, Lord Nazel easily evaded him and my father's momentum caused him to continue charging forward. Unluckily for him, there were a few tea tables in his path, laden with cakes with plenty of cream, as well as

glasses of various drinks. His white tights became dyed by the colorful juices. His Highness looked down at my father silently.

"Are you injured, Lord Evantail?" Prince Leonardo sounded utterly indifferent as he asked this.

My father hurriedly stood up and straightened himself. He might have acted arrogantly toward me or Lord Nazel, but even he had to be courteous before royalty.

"N-No! I am doing perfectly fine, Your Highness!" His attempt at formality was undermined by the ample cream smeared across his face.

*His complete one-eighty is honestly off-putting.*

Perhaps my father thought that His Highness's appearance was a good opportunity, because he started complaining to him.

"That foul criminal embarrassed us!" he shouted as he pointed right at Lord Nazel.

*Oh my gosh! You don't understand anything, do you, father? Lord Nazel was invited by His Highness himself!* Complaining about Lord Nazel's presence was tantamount to criticizing His Highness.

His Highness spent a short time in thought, then stepped in front of my father.

"I am the one who invited Nazelbart. Do you have any objections to that?"

"Most certainly not!" my father replied, shaking his head vigorously. But it would seem that he couldn't go without expressing his discontent. "However, he *is* the criminal who showed great disrespect to Her Highness!"

*Father, people would typically call that an objection*, I pointed out in my mind.

"Lord Evantail, Nazelbart is innocent. As for who the real culprit is... I believe some of you already know the truth. It was my intention to inform you all of that today."

The noisy, rumor-loving nobles gradually became quiet. Prince Leonardo started speaking slowly amid the quiet venue.

"The royal palace is currently under the control of Her Majesty; my sister, Mia; and her future husband, Robin. However, their ability to perform their duties properly seems to be...lacking."

"It's just as His Highness says!" many nobles shouted in agreement. The ones who worked at the palace were particularly emphatic as they nodded. Their work was apparently often

obstructed by the misconduct of the royal family, resulting in them having to pull long hours of overtime to make up for it.

"Nazelbart, my sister's former fiancé, was held responsible for a crime he had nothing to do with and exiled to the frontier as punishment. Furthermore, many noble houses are currently being inconvenienced because of Robin's rash behavior. Despite being the princess's partner, he routinely approaches other ladies and tries to engage in illicit relationships with them. It's a real nuisance to those ladies' fiancés."

The party's guests made another stir, with many men strongly voicing their assent. Naive ladies with strict upbringings were apparently very easily charmed when a handsome man with an exotic hair color whispered sweet nothings to them. That was why their fiancés considered Master Robin a pest.

"I've been carefully observing the state of affairs so far and have come to the conclusion that the country could grow unstable if things continue this way. Therefore, I would like to prepare for a possible emergency in place of my bedridden older brother."

*A possible emergency*. Depending on the circumstances, could this mean that Prince Leonardo would take power from Her Majesty or Her Highness?

"Lord Evantail, you are hereby banned from appearing in public events!"

"Wh-What?! Why am I being punished?!"

"Do you *really* have to ask after causing such a commotion at a party organized by royalty?"

"I was only disciplining my daughter!"

Following my father, my mother also started protesting in a shrill voice.

"That's absolutely right. Such treatment toward your loyal retainers is far too cruel, Your Highness! That criminal and Agnes should be the ones banned, no?"

My brother even joined in on the protests.

"Precisely! The House of Evantail are your allies, Your Highness!"

My father's self-confidence and arrogance grew after he saw his family was on his side.

"Indeed! Agnes and that husband of hers should be banned! Please come to your senses, Your Highness. They're nothing but an ill-mannered daughter and a criminal!"

However, His Highness wasn't of the same mind. He heaved a sigh as he addressed the members of the House of Evantail in an exhausted manner.

"Are you still saying that? You are all banned from attending all public functions and events for the foreseeable future. Don't show your faces before me."

As I nervously watched over the events unfold, His Highness turned to Lord Nazel.

"Nazelbart, get your wife some rest. Yalata will deal with the rest."

I saw the nearby Lord Yalata, the one who'd provided the venue for this party, hurrying to act after his name had been suddenly called.

"Your Highness, such an affront to our House of Evantail will not be tolerated! You will surely regret this!"

"Guards, escort them outside."

"Stop this, stooop! Let go of me! Just who do you think I am?! Your Highness, please reconsider!" My father didn't stop shouting for a moment. Lord Nazel and I were taken to a room inside the count's mansion, while my rampaging father was forcibly removed from the premises by His Highness's guards. He never once showed any sign of learning his lesson.

*He kept screaming and making excuses to the end, but he obviously couldn't remain at the party acting like that.*

I looked over at Lord Nazel as I took a breather in the small room.

"Thank you for saving me, Lord Nazel. I was about to get hit again."

"Protecting my wife is only a matter of course."

Just like he said, he always saved me as if it was only natural. I had been truly happy when he resolutely stood against my ferocious father at the party venue. My body was still shivering from the mental strain of meeting my family face-to-face, but when I was with Lord Nazel, I felt reassured that everything would turn out all right.

"I'm glad you weren't hurt, Agnes. I didn't want to confront your family, but they were far more unreasonable than I imagined. I only wish things had gone a little better."

"You did plenty. It's already incredible that you could block my

father's fist."

"The people of the House of Evantail never yield on their beliefs, do they? It must be difficult for an entire family to stick to the same principles generation after generation."

"My parents are cousins. They both grew up in the House of Evantail, so they faithfully follow its policies. If my mother had come from a different family, she might have been able to give me some support."

Since my parents were relatives with similar upbringings, their marriage had been an easy one with few conflicts. Nonetheless, I wished they'd stop imposing the same values on their daughter.

*I'm glad I failed to find a fiancé, though. I ended up meeting Lord Nazel as a result.*

I averted my eyes from Lord Nazel's sorrowful profile.

"My parents have always acted like this, so you don't need to worry about it, Lord Nazel."

Back when I'd been at my family home, any form of resistance was futile. I'd felt an emptiness from being unable to even have a normal conversation with my family, and in the end I'd given up completely and simply followed their orders. I hadn't known how to do anything else.

"Agnes. You did great enduring everything in that house until we got married. You struggled all on your own, with no one to even ask for advice… I wish I'd met you earlier." He pulled me toward him and lightly patted me on the back to comfort me. "Everything's all right now. I will protect you."

As I was enveloped in his warmth, I became so overwhelmed with emotion that I was almost brought to tears. Unknowingly, I was clinging to Lord Nazel tightly.

*I really do love him with all my heart.*

I'd thought he was a wonderful person when we first met, so I hadn't been opposed to us getting married. During the maid interviews, I'd realized that I didn't want him to take a mistress. I was glad that Lord Nazel was my husband and I wanted us to stay married forever. When I was with him, I felt completely at ease.

I lifted my head and looked at Lord Nazel, who gently narrowed his amber eyes.

"Hmm? What's wrong?"

"Um, I just…think you're dashing, Lord Nazel," I confessed while

holding back my tears. Lord Nazel merely blinked as he stood there silently.

*Did I say something strange?*

When I took a closer look, I felt like his face was a little red.

“Excuse me, Lord Nazel?” I timidly asked.

“...belov...” he mumbled quietly as he pressed down on his cheeks.

“Huh?” I couldn’t quite hear what he’d said.

Lord Nazel then averted his amber eyes and shyly embraced me.

“You’re my true beloved, Agnes. You’re so adorable I feel like I’ll lose my mind,” he tenderly whispered to me. His words wrapped me up in an odd sensation that made me feel dizzy.

“Y-Your beloved? You mean that...you love me as your wife?” Ah! What a stupid question that was!

*Obviously he’s just talking about his duty as my husband.*

The more I thought about it, the emptier I felt, so I struggled to quickly get out of his embrace, but he held me tighter to stop me from running away. He then placed a finger on my chin and stared into my eyes.



“That’s right. I love you as a woman.”

His utterly unexpected reply left me frozen in place as I gazed at him.

“Our marriage is simply one ordered by the Crown, right?” I asked.

“It was, at first, but as we spent time together, I found your optimism charming. Before I realized it, I was following you with my eyes everywhere. I was convinced I was expressing my affection through my actions.”

“I-I never realized.”

The game of love was far too difficult for someone like me who’d never had any luck in romance.

“Besides, my impression of you has been good from the start,” Lord Nazel continued.

“When you say from the start, do you mean when we met during Her Highness’s engagement celebration? I’m pretty sure I had thick makeup on and was wearing an old, yellowed dress at the time.”

“You were the only one who helped me out at that party, even though it was clear to everyone that nothing good would come from opposing Her Highness. And despite being exiled to the frontier because of me, you gave your all to cleaning up our mansion, cultivating the crops—and on and on. Being close to someone with such a positive attitude filled me with vigor too.”

Lord Nazel looked somewhat happy as he spoke. As I gazed at his gentle expression, I gradually understood that his words were genuine, making my heart beat faster.

*If Lord Nazel loves me, does that mean our affection was mutual all along?*

In that case, I wanted to convey my feelings to him too.

“Um, Lord Nazel?”

“Hmm? What is it?”

Lord Nazel’s voice was sweet as he brushed his hand against my cheek, and I grew even more restless.

“I, uh… I’m…”

But before I could put what I was feeling into words, there was a knock on the door, causing me to stiffen in shock and close my mouth.

“His Highness is entering,” Lord Yalata announced from the

other side of the door.

*I was about to tell Lord Nazel I love him. What's with this horrible timing?!*

As His Highness and Lord Yalata entered the room, Lord Nazel and I quickly moved apart and greeted them. Apparently the party was over and His Highness had finished greeting all the guests, so he'd come to check up on us.

"Is your wife feeling all right, Nazelbart?" His Highness asked.

"Yes, she is. Your consideration is greatly appreciated," Lord Nazel replied.

I bowed my head along with Lord Nazel.

"I was utterly surprised to learn that Lord Evantail is that kind of person. He always appeared like such a taciturn and diligent worker," His Highness said as he shifted his gaze to me.

"You have my sincerest apologies," I promptly replied. "Whether he was any good at it or not, my father has always been committed to his work. He just has times where he loses himself in his rage. It seems that he got carried away today, perhaps because he'd been drinking."

"Please raise your head. I'm not blaming you for anything."

Lord Nazel put his hand around my back in a protective way.

"We should continue this conversation sitting down."

We all sat down on chairs around the room. I thought it would be better if I left, but Lord Nazel kept me there.

"Now, what does Your Highness, someone usually so indifferent to politics, want with a mere frontier lord?" Lord Nazel asked straightforwardly.

"I naturally couldn't continue watching my sister's recklessness."

"How many years do you think I've known you? You've always ignored the affairs of the royal palace before now, so I doubt you would act out of your concern for good governance. There is someone else behind the scenes, isn't there?"

Lord Nazel's tone was unexpectedly confident. As I gazed at him in wonder, His Highness looked at me with a troubled expression. The two of them seemed familiar with each other from outside formal gatherings.

As I analyzed the situation, His Highness suddenly took Lord Nazel's hand.

"Won't you join forces with me, Nazelbart? I promise you won't

lose out."

"You arbitrarily call me here and want me to lend you a hand without revealing all the details? That's awfully convenient for you. I have a duty to protect my territory and my family. I can't readily agree to something that could expose them to danger."

"Just as you said, I'm receiving directions from a certain individual. I'm forbidden from disclosing the specifics at the moment. But I can tell you that there's been progress in the palace toward getting my sister and Robin condemned for their actions, and Her Majesty has started feeling threatened. If things go poorly, they might call you back to the palace to use you for their own convenience. We are trying to prevent that."

*Meaning they'd call him back and pretend the engagement was never broken off in the first place?*

I grew worried and looked at Lord Nazel next to me.

"What is His Majesty's stance on this topic?" he asked.

"My father is carefully observing the state of affairs. Both ducal houses are on Her Majesty's side, so he can't afford to be careless."

"I see. Well, I have no intention of returning to the palace."

His Highness silently nodded in response to Lord Nazel's words and turned to me this time.

"I will have the House of Evantail monitored for the time being. I must apologize to you, Lady Agnes, but I imagine they will make the perfect bait."

*Bait, huh? In short, His Highness expects my father will betray him and join Her Highness's faction. So, he intends to catch my father in the act and seize the chance to gather evidence that could be used against Her Highness?*

However, the House of Evantail was inflexible and earnest to a fault, so even though they'd been banned from parties, I didn't think they would abandon their allegiance and switch sides to Her Highness. They shouldn't have been *that* rotten. Consequently, it would make no difference no matter how long they were kept under surveillance.

"Very well, I understand," I replied, despite my lingering questions.

"My apologies. You won't be held responsible for anything they may do, as you've been disowned. I assure you that you don't have to worry about that."

Even with His Highness's guarantee, I had a hunch that we would be getting caught up in the royal capital's affairs sooner or later. I couldn't help but think that I would have liked us to continue living peacefully in Sutrena.

On the way back, our carriage took us all the way to the town of Loa, but we had to stay there for the night as it was getting late. Night had fallen around us and the locals were returning to their homes. I looked down from our room on the second floor of the inn, gazing at the streets that were only illuminated by the moon and the faint lights gleaming out the windows. The best room in this tidy inn was exclusively for important customers, so it had comparatively expensive furniture. A large bed for two people was right in the center.

*I'll be all right since I'm used to sleeping next to Lord Nazel in our mansion at Sutrena, but it still makes my heart beat faster.*

The two of us dived under the covers together. Lord Nazel had never laid his hands on me until now, but now that I knew how he felt about me, I grew restless and couldn't settle down.

*I also love him.*

It was a testament to Lord Nazel's honorable nature that he didn't do anything even while lying down next to a woman at night.

"Lord Nazel?" I timidly called out to him.

"Yes?" he replied in a rather sweet tone.

"Well, you see..."

"Are you wondering why I don't lay my hands on you?"

He had hit the nail right on the head. My breath got caught in my throat for a brief moment. Now that he'd said it straight to my face, I felt twice as embarrassed.

"I might appear composed, but I'm going to great lengths to hold myself back."

The room was rather gloomy, but the soft chuckle in his voice made me feel a strange mix of reassurance and excessive nervousness.

*I need to let him know how I feel too. But if I do that in this time and place, all sorts of* things *might end up happening.*

My brain was overloaded by obscene yet rosy fantasies, and I took a deep breath to cool down.

“May I get a little closer, Agnes?”

Lord Nazel moved to my side without waiting for an answer and placed his arms around my waist and back. I’d been at the complete mercy of his actions today.

*Is it possible he’s already figured out my feelings for him?*

This was my first time lying on a bed with someone else so close to me. Lord Nazel simply watched me quietly as I lay there confused and unable to move. His whole body was warm and I could hear the sound of his quick heartbeat through his clothes. When I thought that he must have felt as nervous as I did, a lovely, soft sensation overcame me. I gingerly stretched out my hands to hug him back, but I suddenly heard him breathing in his sleep and stopped.

“Are you asleep, Lord Nazel?”

A lot had happened today. Although he appeared fine at a glance, he must have been straining himself. My emotions were all over the place as I resigned myself to my fate in his embrace, my arms the only thing I could move freely.

“Good night, Lord Nazel.”

I thought about the joy of being able to head toward the future with my beloved as I gazed at his handsome, sleeping face illuminated by the moonlight before softly closing my eyes too. The night wind blew vigorously outside the window as if to erase all of my worries.

After staying in Loa for a few days, Lord Nazel and I flew back to Sutrena by wyvern. As I looked down at Sutrena from the sky, I got the feeling of being back home.

“We’ve arrived.”

“Yes, we’ll be at our estate soon.”

Our large mansion and the gigantic plants growing everywhere in the garden were now in view. Our garden now had a large number of plants—all growing regardless of season—with plenty of glossy, delicious-looking fruit on them. Lord Nazel dismounted the wyvern and turned toward me with both his arms spread wide, just as he always did.

*I can’t get used to it no matter how many times he does it! And now that I know his feelings for me, I’m even more embarrassed!*

I yet again mustered my courage and jumped off the wyvern,

falling right into Lord Nazel’s arms.

# Side Story 1: Madam Bumpkin and a Small Trip

A short time after Prince Leonardo's party, when Lord Nazel and I were back in Sutrena, we decided to go on a trip together. We didn't need any guards with us since Lord Nazel was so strong. There had been almost no time to take it easy after we'd come to the frontier following the scandal surrounding Lord Nazel's broken engagement, so I felt happy about this opportunity.

*Lord Nazel has been working constantly, while I have been rather overwhelmed with my new duties as the margravine.*

We borrowed a blue wyvern and headed to one of Sutrena's most popular date spots: a flower field at the foot of the Novio Mountain Range. While it was difficult for crops to grow in this land, there were plenty of flowers.

"Heh heh, this will be our honeymoon, Agnes." Lord Nazel moved his face closer to mine as he looked down at the scenery from the sky and controlled our mountbeast.

"Y-Yes, it will." I nodded in response while my heart was in utter chaos.

*Oh no, Lord Nazel is even more dashing than before!*

Ever since I became more aware of him at the party, my cheeks would immediately flush crimson at the slightest thing.

Unaware of the turmoil in my mind, Lord Nazel easily guided the wyvern to our destination. The sight of small blue and yellow flowers completely covering the slope was breathtaking.

"They're beautiful."

"You can't see something like this in the capital."

"True, this scenery is unique to places full of nature like this one."

The air was perfectly clear and the breeze felt nice. Lord Nazel once again caught me in his arms as I alighted from the wyvern and I safely landed on the ground. I walked around the field feeling a little restless. The wyvern stretched out atop some flowers and started dozing off. Our plan was to spend the night at a cottage at the foot of the mountain that used to belong to the

previous margrave. Lord Nazel had apparently sent people in advance to get it ready for us. He was as meticulous as ever.

“Oh, there are rabbits!”

Several fluffy little animals were hopping around in the flowers.

“Agnes, I understand that you love both regular beasts and manabeasts, but you’ll get lost if you run around on your own.”

“I’ll be fine. I’m not a little kid.”

I frolicked in the flower field for a while, but then water started dripping on us from above. The rabbits immediately vanished without a trace. In the blink of an eye, light rain began falling down on the earth. It was a cool and pleasant drizzle.

“Let’s get inside the cottage, Agnes. We wouldn’t want to get sick.”

“O-Of course.”

Lord Nazel used his magic to create a leaf as large as a parasol and held on to its straight stalk. He embraced me and we walked across the flower field in the rain.



*This…might be a little romantic.*

Naturally, our wyvern was also with us. The rain had disturbed its sleep, so it was now following us while playing by tearing flowers to pieces. Its skin repelled water, so it was just fine even when it got wet.

Thankfully, the cottage was nearby, so we managed to take shelter before the rain turned into a downpour. After taking the wyvern to a shed, we entered the building and wiped our bodies with the soft towels therein.

"That was some very sudden rainfall."

"Indeed, but we can't do anything to change the weather."

Lord Nazel looked vexed that our highly anticipated vacation was being disrupted.

"This is a great chance to just rest and take it easy. You work all the time, Lord Nazel."

"I've been very busy ever since coming here, but in truth, my mental fatigue was far greater when I was in the capital. Managing my interpersonal relationships back there was a major headache."

"That's certainly true."

The faces of Her Majesty, Her Highness, and Master Robin appeared in my mind one after the other.

The cottage was divided into two rooms: a dining room and a bedroom. We decided to get changed out of our wet clothes in separate rooms and then meet again in the dining room. Though we were married, our relationship was still a chaste one, so changing clothes together was embarrassing.

*Thank goodness Kelly added a change of clothes in our luggage.*

I got changed into a dress with blue frills and hurried back to the dining room. I didn't have many different outfits, so Kelly had ordered some light clothing for me, things that were easy to move in and felt pleasant to wear. A single person owning several personal outfits was an unthinkable extravagance for the House of Evantail, so I felt like I was living a dream.

"Welcome back, Agnes. Those clothes are adorable." Lord Nazel had already finished changing and was sitting down waiting for me.

"Kelly picked them out for me."

The cottage had a kitchen area too, so I boiled some water and made black tea with leaves we'd brought with us. Our maids had taught me how.

"Oh, I just remembered that Mather gave us some snacks. We have violaberry cookies and emerald-cherry tarts," I said. I loved both the small cookies and the tarts topped with ample fruit.

"Are they inside our luggage? Let me get them ready for us," Lord Nazel said.

We split up the work between us and set everything we needed on the table, which was covered with a red-and-white plaid tablecloth. Although Lord Nazel wasn't usually involved in serving tea and snacks, he was quite skilled at it.

It was still raining outside, and the rain was even heavier now.

*It's a good thing we sought shelter so quickly.*

We sat across from each other. It was now time to enjoy our snacks.

"Mm-hmm, it's delicious."

Lord Nazel's cheeks relaxed into a smile as he watched me taking a bite of a tart.

"You look so cute when you're enjoying your food, Agnes."

"Hwaeh?!" I was blindsided by his sudden compliment and made a weird sound. My face had probably turned so red even a bystander could notice it.

"Wh-Where did that come from?" I asked, utterly confused.

Lord Nazel looked at me fondly with his amber eyes before replying.

"My love for you hasn't been conveyed properly, so I thought I would express it with my words on top of my actions."

*You already do more than enough!* I shouted in my mind. Any more would seriously go over how much I could handle. My seventeen years of experience as Lady Bumpkin had caused me to have an extremely low tolerance for romance. Since I also loved Lord Nazel, I became all the more unsettled.

*Although I have been unable to tell him yet. Wouldn't it be better if I also told him how I feel soon?*

I'd been interrupted by Lord Yalata and Prince Leonardo the last time, but this could be my best chance to confess. I gulped down some tea and stared at Lord Nazel.

"Is something wrong? You make me want to kiss you when you

look at me so intensely."

"Hwaeh?!"

I was staggered by his fierce counterattack, but I couldn't stay silent here. Women were full of courage!

"Um, Lord Nazel!"

But the moment I finally resolved myself to tell him I loved him, there was a bright flash outside the window, and loud thunder echoed through the cottage, drowning out all the courage I'd mustered. It seemed that lightning had struck fairly nearby, causing many thunderous roars and rattling the building's windows. I'd completely lost the timing to make my confession because of it.

"Wow, it's pitch-dark outside. Are you okay, Agnes?"

"Y-Yes," I said, frozen stiff. I was actually scared of lightning.

Long ago, my mother had locked me in a shed during a thunderstorm. She had said it was because I was being defiant, and she had kept me in there the entire night.

I'd endured a terrifying night in the total darkness of our garden storeroom. The traumatic event remained in my heart to this day. While I understood that I was safe inside this cottage, the memories of that time resurfaced and my body froze.

"You aren't okay at all."

Lord Nazel quickly stood up and embraced me from behind while I was still sitting down. My heart skipped yet another beat.

"Are you afraid of lightning, Agnes?"

"Urk, yes. You see..."

I shared my childhood memories with Lord Nazel, who breathed a long sigh at the end.

"Good grief. I don't want to speak ill of your family...but the House of Evantail really is full of difficult people."

"I'm so sorry. Only little kids are scared of lightning."

"You have nothing to apologize for. Lightning is legitimately dangerous."

"Urk, but I'm still pathetic."

"We're a married couple, so I want to spoil you more."

And so, Lord Nazel stayed with me until the thunder stopped. Eventually, the weather improved, things got quiet, and I regained my composure.

"Um, thank you very much, Lord Nazel. I'm okay now."

“Your ‘okay’ is an unreliable metric.”

Lord Nazel lit a lantern, then held me in his arms and moved me to a nearby sofa. Empty plates and cold tea were left on the table.

“Let’s stay together for the rest of the day, Agnes.”

Lord Nazel sat down on the sofa and moved his face closer to me, eliciting a weird sound from me yet again.

“Hwaeh?!”

“Heh heh, you’re cute no matter what you do.”

Lord Nazel’s sensibilities were incomprehensible to me. How could he find a bumpkin’s strange shrieks cute?

*Wait, are we going to stay like this all day long? That’s impossible!*

Just hearing his sweet voice made my head overheat and my heart ready to burst out of my chest.

With this and that, I spent the rest of the day and the entire night with Lord Nazel, swooning over him all the while.

*I couldn’t do it yesterday, but* today *will be the day I confess to Lord Nazel.*

On the way back the next day, I steeled my resolve as we were flying on the wyvern.

# Side Story 2: Paul Evantail's Venerable Day

Paul Evantail, son and heir of the House of Evantail, got up early each morning because merely getting dressed took him an awful amount of time. It would have been even worse if he'd been a woman rather than a man; his mother took over two hours to get ready.

After waking up and washing his face, Paul sat down in front of a mirror and had the maids style his shiny, silver hair. They used a flat iron to straighten his terrible case of bedhead. A short time later, he emerged with the traditional hairstyle that resembled a puffed-out mushroom.

*Indeed, my hair looks as spectacular as always. It's truly befitting the Evantail name.*

Paul headed toward his closet as he nodded to himself in satisfaction about his glossy hair.

"Help me get me changed, Sebastian."

"As you wish, young master."

This time, a butler, a man in his prime, removed Paul's sleepwear and changed him into his day clothes. Naturally, Paul's outfit was in the traditional Evantail style: a short coat and formfitting white tights. His tights also used padding to emphasize the groin area.

*I'm not fond of this padding, but I have to abide by the House of Evantail's traditions. I mustn't complain about this.*

During his great-grandfather's time, it had been said that the more padding one had in their tights, the more appealing it was.

"What kind of padding would you like today, young master?"

"Go with the usual, the small one."

"Hmm. I believe it's time you switched to a bigger one. You're already twelve years old. Your father recommends one about as big as this here. You will set a bad example if you continue using such small padding."

The butler gestured toward a massive piece of padding, as big as an adult's fist. It stood out quite a bit.

"But the bigger ones are a little..."

Paul wasn't a little kid anymore. He felt embarrassed with his groin standing out so much.

*No, this padding follows our house's style! I can't feel embarrassed about it!*

He roused himself and addressed the butler again.

"I've decided to use the one you recommended, Sebastian!"

"As you wish, young master. You truly deserve to be the heir to the House of Evantail."

Paul certainly didn't mind the compliments from those around him. Just like the butler recommended, he wore his tights over the fairly conspicuous padding.

*It feels quite unpleasant around— No, I shouldn't think about it! The heir to the House of Evantail has to get used to wearing padding! Father's is twice the size of mine!*

After scolding himself, Paul put his coat over his shirt and looked in the mirror.

"Good, a perfect, traditional appearance, as usual."

"Indeed. I'm sure your parents will be delighted with your growth." The butler was also smiling in satisfaction.

Paul headed to the dining table, where he was joined by his parents, who'd each finished getting ready. His father also wore the traditional hairstyle and garments and generally looked the same as Paul. The main difference was that his father's groin padding was more than twice as large.

*Hmm? It feels like father's padding got bigger again.*

Recently, his father had been ordering large paddings incessantly. It had to be an expression of his reverence for tradition.

His mother wore a refined, heavy dress, while her hair was snugly curled. Her white face, blue eye shadow, and red blush and lipstick were also customary. They had been passed down since Paul's great-grandmother's time and apparently considered the epitome of beauty for women.

*And yet, my elder sister* always *complained about her appearance.*

His disowned sister, Agnes, was a worthless woman who had complained about everything from her clothes, to her hair, and even her makeup.

*How can someone born in the House of Evantail not understand the*

*merits of tradition? I can only imagine something is terribly wrong with her.*

After the entire family was at the dining table, they started conversing. They talked about politics during Paul's great-grandfather's time or complained about the incident that had recently taken place during the second prince's party.

*I'm also angry about His Highness's decision.*

Incidentally, they often used to complain about Agnes instead of the second prince. After all, they had countless reasons to reprimand Paul's incompetent sister.

"I think it's about time we start searching for a fiancée for Paul," his father suddenly said.

Paul's mother nodded deeply from the seat next to her husband.

"I agree. He's already twelve years old, just the right age for an engagement. Unlike Agnes, Paul is outstanding, so I'm sure he'll quickly find a wonderful lady. Please leave her education as a bride up to me."

"Yes, the sooner she is taught the ways of the House of Evantail, the better. She will have to be thoroughly taught everything, from clothes to makeup."

"Heh heh heh, I'm looking forward to teaching Paul's future wife."

His parents were talking in high spirits, so Paul smiled with them. But a few moments later, he came to a sudden realization and returned to his senses.

"Father, mother, His Highness has prohibited us from appearing at formal events. Wouldn't searching for a fiancée be impossible under these circumstances?"

Paul's mother looked utterly displeased and his father couldn't hide his frustration.

"What an irritating state of affairs," Paul's father grumbled. "But don't worry. After His Highness issued his verdict, we were informed that you would be permitted to attend parties to search for a fiancée, Paul. As you are still a youth, he said you would be exempt from our house's punishment."

"Is that true?"

"Yes, why would I lie about that?"

A bright light shone inside Paul's heart. He absolutely hated the

thought of remaining unengaged for years on end, like his sister had been.

"It goes without saying that you will be going dressed in keeping with our venerable traditions, Paul."

"Of course, mother!"

"Heh heh, a wonderful reply."

None of the nobles outside the House of Evantail understood the value of vintage items. According to Paul's parents, those nobles were dressed frivolously and shabbily. Paul had to take the initiative in showing them the true elegance of proper attire.

*This is my duty as the future head of the House of Evantail!*

Paul was burning with determination as he got ready to search for his fiancée.

## Side Story 3: Madam Bumpkin Sells Violaberry Pies

One quiet, sunny afternoon, the dining room in the Margrave of Sutrena's estate was unusually crowded with women. Today, Kelly, the maids, and I would be tasting the new menu our chef, Mather, had made.

In order to increase Sutrena's income and give its residents more stable lives, Lord Nazel and I were working on ways to raise money. Now that we'd solved the food shortage, the next item on the agenda was raising the margravate's prosperity.

For my first step, I wanted to popularize sweets made with the large violaberries you could only find here. The fruits in our domain were of truly unusual size, so they could be generously used for cooking. Moreover, thanks to my matter reinforcement magic, the trees grew big and strong, so they continued bearing fruit regardless of the season. Regular violaberry trees produced only a few small fruits, not to mention that more than one kind of violaberry tree was necessary to produce anything at all.

*There are trees that bear fruit and trees meant for pollination.*

The different kinds of violaberry trees had to be planted close to each other for them to be pollinated. They also had a narrow window for harvesting, so other territories had never been all that successful with growing them. That was what I intended to take advantage of. We would popularize desserts using Sutrena's large violaberries, which would in turn spur widespread demand for our territory's produce.

*Heh heh heh, I'm sure they'll sell for a high price. No, I'll make them sell! I will live up to my title as the margravine!*

Sweets had been really popular in the more affluent regions of the country recently. The capital was no exception, and its noble ladies were particularly eager to try the latest delicacies.

The violaberries we would be using this time were a variety Lord Nazel had selectively bred, specialized for making confectioneries. They had less juice than the other varieties and were sweeter.

“Well then, we will now begin the tasting. I’d like to hear everyone’s opinion on these desserts made with Sutrena violaberries,” I said.

Everyone looked reserved at first, but the anticipation of getting to try new sweets eventually manifested in their sparkling eyes. Mather described each dessert as she set down the trial dishes on the table.

“The right plate has a pie baked with the violaberries specialized for desserts. I also used plenty of violaberries for the crust, cream, and decorations.”

Just like she said, the purple pie had lots of cream mixed with mashed fruit as the filling, and plenty of fresh violaberries packed on top of it.

“Wow, that looks delicious!” the maids exclaimed happily.

“But wait, there’s more,” Mather announced before gesturing to the plate next to the first one. “The middle plate has Lady Agnes’s favorite: violaberry cookies.”

The small, purple cookies were both sweet and sour, with a mellow texture.

“Finally, the left plate has violaberry doughnuts. That’s all for the desserts, but there’s also violaberry bread and violaberry juice.”

After dividing each dish so everyone got a portion, we began tasting them without delay.

“Mm-hmm, the violaberry pie is incredible!”

“I want to take these cookies home with me.”

“I’d like the taste of fruit to be a little more prominent in the doughnuts. How about using dried violaberries?”

“Dried violaberries should also be a good choice for the bread!”

The maids chatted merrily. Everyone was peacefully sharing their opinion. The staff of the Sutrena estate were all gentle people, so things were always this peaceful.

In the end, we decided to market violaberry pies, cookies, and juice. As a side note, Mister Henry intruded in the middle of the tasting and ate all the remaining sweets.

*Where did he fit such a large quantity of sweets in that slender body?* It was a complete mystery.

Afterward, the sweets were sold on consignment at a store in the central town of Sutrena, and the violaberry products became

highly popular. Violaberry pies were in especially high demand, and nobles who heard rumors about them even sent retainers to Sutrena in secret. Just as I'd planned, the large violaberries sold like crazy, and people who could use magic for preservation or storage delivered the fruits to many different locations. Bert, the merchant, also came to happily purchase a large quantity of violaberries.

Desnim experienced a pie-making revolution as people created all sorts of pies, and along with the spread of pies, word of Sutrena's large, high-quality violaberries traveled far and wide. Although other territories had started making their own pies now, the sales of Sutrena's violaberry pies only continued to increase, and they were valued as the original product. Of course, violaberry pie was often served during teatime at the lord's mansion. It was very popular in our house, and the maids loved it too.

There were rumors that Mister Henry bought pies en masse from the confectionery close to the fortress. Since he also ate pie every time it was served at our mansion without fail, there were also rumors that he'd been getting rather plump recently.

The large violaberries had successfully been popularized as a local specialty of Sutrena, so I began working on a proposal for the second stage of my plan.

*Emerald cherries, white mangoes, and rose oranges are all delicious.*

I spent another day working hard as the margravine as I thought up new marketable products with Mather.

# Afterword

It's nice to meet you. I'm Ageha Sakura. I would like to thank you for purchasing this volume of *Lady Bumpkin and Her Lord Villain*. This is a story about the meeting of two people: a noble lady who had her family's traditions pushed onto her and was ridiculed as a bumpkin, and a nobleman who seemed cold and aloof and was kept at a distance because he was "too" perfect, then had his engagement to the princess broken off. These two people become a couple and live freely at the frontier.

Agnes is a young woman of marriageable age who's suffering because of her family's values. Her mental resolve is strong, but she's in low spirits because of the repeated failed engagement attempts. Nazelbart is a duke's son who gives off the impression of being flawless and unapproachable. The princess treats him like a villain, but he's actually kindhearted and pretty much the ideal partner.

The scenes I especially liked writing are the ones where the eccentric members of Agnes's family show up. The women wear heavy dresses, while the men wear formfitting white tights with certain bulges. If you'd like to learn more details about what the men's clothes mentioned in the side story look like, you should look up the words "hose" and "codpiece." I've changed them up a bit since this is a fantasy series, but you'll see an example of what I used for reference, ha ha.

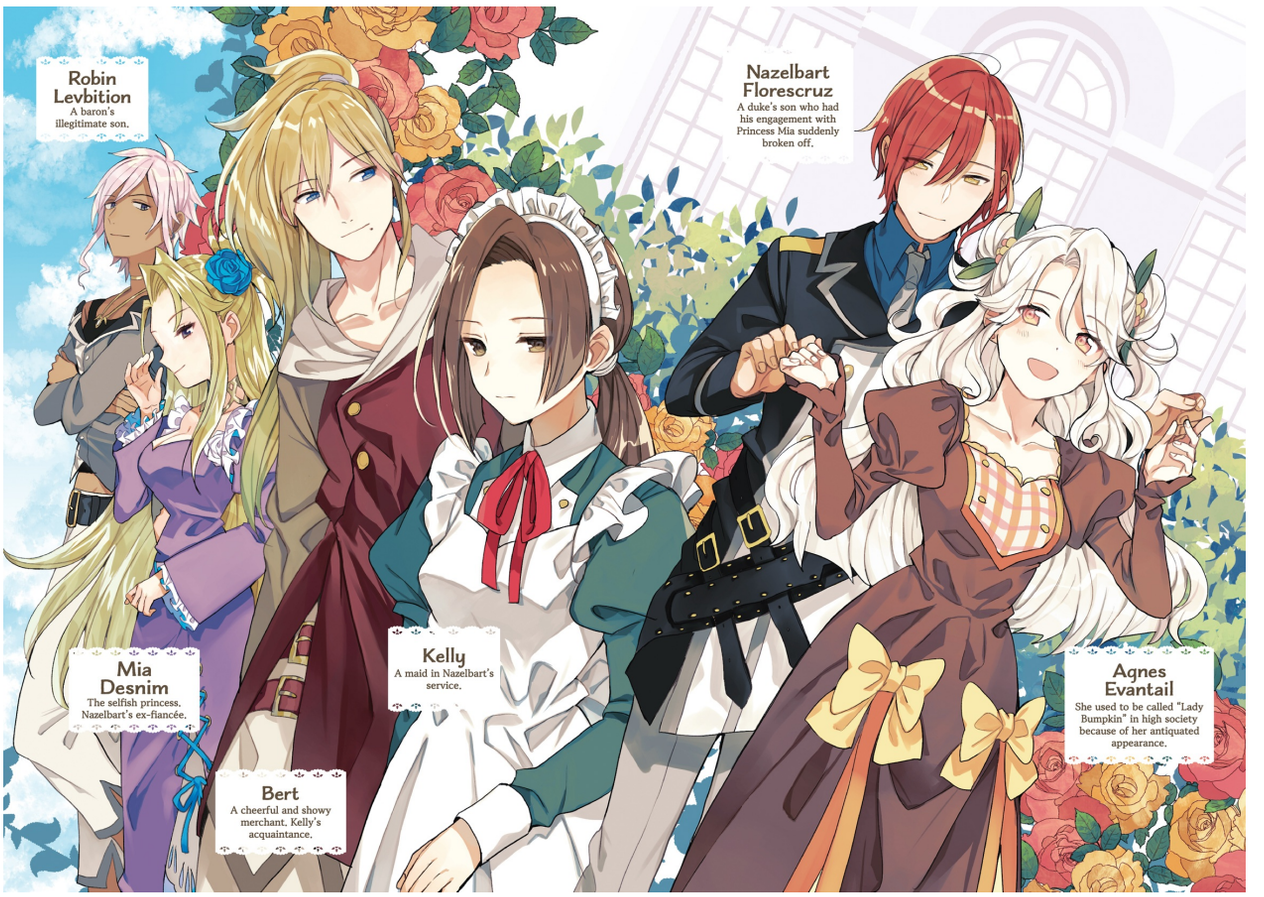
I always look forward to checking the illustrations. Kurodeko is the person behind them. Agnes looks natural and cute on the cover, while Nazelbart is sexy and handsome. I also couldn't stop grinning when I looked at Robin's flashy illustration. The flirty Robin was popular in the web novel for whatever strange reason. I received much more feedback than usual whenever he showed up, ha ha.

I got to expand the scenes of Agnes and Nazelbart flirting in the light novel version, and I even added a side story where they go on a date, so I think that the romance aspect of the story is definitely improved with this version.

Lastly, I would like to thank my editor for approaching me for this novelization and for making this wonderful book! I would also like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to everyone involved in this book's publication and marketing, as well as to all the readers who purchased this book.

Ageha Sakura


"Will you marry me?"


Robin Levbition
A baron's illegitimate son.
Nazelbart Florescruz
A duke's son who had his engagement with Princess Mia suddenly broken off.
Mia Desnim
The selfish princess. Nazelbart's ex-fiancée.
Kelly
A maid in Nazelbart's service.
Agnes Evantail
She used to be called "Lady Bumpkin" in high society because of her antiquated appearance.
Bert
A cheerful and showy merchant. Kelly's acquaintance.


"Aren't you afraid?"
"No, I seem to be fine."
The Flight to the Frontier



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Lady Bumpkin and Her Lord Villain: Volume 1
by Ageha Sakura

Translated by Vasileios Mousikidis
Edited by Jonathan Engel

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